

# INTRODUCTION AND COMMENTARY FOR F. A. HAYEK'S "THE OVERRATED REASON"

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*The translation titled "The Overrated Reason" is based on the German text "Die Überschätzte Vernunft," by Friedrich Hayek—a lecture that Hayek gave at a symposium at Castle Kleßheim in early 1982.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

According to Caldwell (2004), the work on Hayek's *The Fatal Conceit* (1988) started in the late 1970s, and the first manuscript was presented at a conference in Oberurgl in August 1982. James Buchanan later reflected: "I reveal no secret when I state that the participants were skeptical, even after two-days discussion, about prospects for the circulated material to be transformed into a publishable book," and he expressed surprise about how well it turned out later (Buchanan 1988–89, p. 3). The Oberurgl manuscript has circulated among various scholars (Caldwell 2004, p. 318, n. 36). According to Ebenstein, Hayek "largely discarded his first version" of the book (Ebenstein 2003, p. 230), and he continued working on the manuscript until 1985 when he fell ill (Ebenstein 2003, p. 224) and was thereby prevented from further editing the book. Subsequently, his editor Bartley worked on it until it was finally published in 1988.

The translation titled "The Overrated Reason" is based on the German text "Die Überschätzte Vernunft," published in German in *Die Anmaßung von Wissen* [Kerber, ed. 1996], a book containing various essays. This specific essay represents a manuscript of a lecture that Hayek gave at a symposium at Castle Kleßheim in early 1982, before the Oberurgl meeting. The existence of this translation would be much less remarkable were it not for the controversy that surrounds Hayek's last book, *The Fatal Conceit* (Friedman 1997; Caldwell 2004; Ebenstein 2003, 2005). Caldwell stated that "it is not clear how much of the book should be attributed to Hayek and how much to Bartley" (Caldwell 2004, p. 317). For example, according to Friedman, some of the

notes he had prepared as Bartley's research assistant appeared in the final version of the book (Friedman 1997, pp. 463–464). Furthermore, according to Ebenstein, Bartley revealed in a letter to Leif Wenar that he had massively edited the original version (Ebenstein 2003, p. 229). Caldwell (2004) says that *The Fatal Conceit* contained “a number of novel ideas (novel, at least coming from Hayek) regarding evolutionary themes,” and which he suspects to be derived from Bartley's own work.

First, we will summarize the main arguments for a suspected inauthenticity of parts of *The Fatal Conceit* (*FC*). We shall then discuss these claims, using evidence from the essay “The Overrated Reason.” We conclude by suggesting that the claims of inauthenticity have been overstated.

1. “Hayek [1988, p. 10] offered a ringing endorsement of evolutionary epistemology” (Caldwell 2004, p. 317). Similarly, Ebenstein writes that “Hayek's major point was epistemological limitations rather than the epistemological evolution of Bartley, who followed Popper and Donald T. Campbell,” and “When Bartley ... characterized Hayek's approach as an ‘evolutionary epistemology’—Bartley's own favored term—it is likely that he overstated these elements in Hayek's thoughts” (Ebenstein 2003, p. 225).
2. “He also claimed that his intent was to develop an evolutionary ethics ‘parallel, and supplementary to, yet quite distinct from the already well advanced development of evolutionary epistemology’” (Caldwell 2004, p. 317; compare Hayek 1988, p. 9).
3. “Hayek asserts that our morals are not rationally justifiable, a position that clearly derives from Bartley” (Caldwell 2004, p. 317; Hayek 1988, ch. 5).
4. In addition, Ebenstein also mentions another suspected irregularity: “Emphasis on Hayek's agnostic religious view was not as prominent in Hayek's own version” (Ebenstein 2003, p. 224).

We believe that the essay “The Overrated Reason” can shed new light on these questions. While Bartley changed the original manuscript, it can be shown that the major themes in *The Fatal Conceit* already existed in the essay from 1982. Thus, they are Hayek's own ideas, not Bartley's, even though the latter did perhaps change the order, style, and references of *FC* in a disruptive fashion. In addition, all references in “The Overrated Reason” can be found in the published version of *FC*, revealing its importance in analyzing the development of Hayek's thinking.

It should be noted first that this conflicts with the standard account of events, in which Hayek mostly discarded the Obergurgl version. Secondly, since the three main ideas that were attributed to Bartley can also be found in the essay from 1982, this renders Bartley's role less problematic, albeit there remain doubts about the extent of his editorship.

## II. EVOLUTIONARY EPISTEMOLOGY

Every human being possesses knowledge; otherwise, knowledge would not exist. Evolutionary epistemology is the claim that knowledge is the product of an evolutionary process. Hayek (1982) argues that knowledge exists in the form of traditions. He suggests that “man acquires intelligence because there is tradition which he can learn,

and this tradition has its origin not in the ability to interpret observed facts" (pp. 3–4). Thus, without understanding, individuals learn to follow rules that are subject to selection pressures. Only after rules of conduct have been acquired can individuals develop understanding, which brings about knowledge. "Learning behavior is not a result of understanding but rather its source" (p. 3). His implicit definition of the word "intelligence" seems to be the ability to understand, to draw causal connection, which creates knowledge. "Culture as well as intelligence is not a genetically transmitted attribute of the species homo. The single individual is only endowed with the capability to acquire skills through learning" (p. 15). Hayek illustrates this point with the argument that higher intelligence, or understanding, depends on the existence of language, a set of rules, "which we have learned, and which was certainly not planned by our intellect" (p. 15). Thus, "intelligence is not the source of order, but order is the source of intelligence, ... reason is itself one of the grown, ordered structures that provide the individual with a kind of model or map of the world in which he moves, and which enables him to interpret the various events which act upon his senses" (pp. 20–21). The discussion of how knowledge came into being is identical to his remarks in *The Fatal Conceit* where he writes that "most knowledge is obtained not from immediate experience or observation, but in the continuous process of sifting a learnt tradition" (Hayek 1988, p. 75).

In the absence of the now available text, earlier commentators had reason to be suspicious about the sudden emphasis on evolutionary epistemology in *FC*. The 1982 statements concerning this matter are indeed stronger than in the brief remarks at the Hoover Institution, given in November of 1982 (Hayek 1984), where he simply stresses the limitations of reason in the design of morals, rather than the claim that knowledge itself is the product of an evolutionary process.

### III. EVOLUTIONARY ETHICS

To the extent that rules of conduct are normative in nature, Hayek's work is not only an endorsement of evolutionary epistemology but also of evolutionary ethics. He states that "The foundation for the existence of humankind in its current size and structure is the tradition of norms" (p.4) It is the "interplay of men, dictated by morality, which made possible the emergence of our reason" (p. 23), and "it was certainly not the case that his intelligence enabled him to discover the morality which brought forth the extended society, but the greater structure enabled him, through the morality to which he subjugated himself, to acquire knowledge.... Cultural development formed what we now call reason" (p. 20). In accordance with earlier writings, he focuses on a group-selection process (p. 12). As the transcribed oral amendment shows, Hayek regards religion as one of the most important collections of such normative rules.

### IV. MORALITY AS NON-JUSTIFIABLE

We turn to the claim that a moral code is not rationally justifiable in the way constructivists demand. According to *The Fatal Conceit*, traditional morals are unscientific in

that they are followed by the agents without fully understanding all their implications, and are therefore seen as dogmatic, from a rationalist perspective. Socialist rationalists and constructivists, says Hayek (1982), aspire to redesigning moral traditions in a more purposeful and just fashion. He opposes this view because any moral code, including designed ones, cannot be fully understood; i.e., it is impossible to trace all future consequences, thereby violating the requirements of constructivist ideals. Traditional rules can be understood only retrospectively, in a process of rational reconstruction, or conjectural history, an explanation of how the system “might have come into being” (Hayek 1988, pp. 66–70).

The statement that “*nothing* is justifiable in the way demanded” (Hayek 1988, p. 68) cannot be found in the original essay from 1982. However, a slightly weaker argument is presented: “I am willing to argue for the somewhat heretical thesis that all of our morality is based on the fact that the behavioral practices that have asserted themselves were the ones that have supported multiplication of those groups that have adopted these practices” (Hayek 1982, p. 26). Furthermore, he writes,

The tendency to disregard tradition as rightful source of our values, and the claim that reason can serve our wishes directly without the mediation of a tradition of morality became, although descending from the constructivist rationalism of René Descartes, the dominant motif of ‘progressive thinking’ only because of the great anti-moralist and seducer Jean Jaques Rousseau. (Hayek 1982, p. 23)

Hayek stressed the same argument in his speech at the Hoover Institution in 1983 when he said:

that our morals are therefore a human equipment that is not only a creation of reason, but even in some respects superior to it because it contains guides to human action which reason alone could never have discovered or justified, explains why the value of traditional morals as an autonomous equipment is unintelligible to those intellectuals who are committed to a strict rationalism or positivism. (p. 320)

It is not too far-fetched to infer from the previous sentences that Hayek was convinced of the impossibility of a humanly designed and rationally justified morality, in the sense that it would not lead to civilization. He calls Rousseau’s general will a ‘conceit’ that “has led to the belief that man, like the famous Baron Munchhausen, is capable of pulling himself out of the swamp of tradition by pulling his own tuft” (Hayek 1982, p. 24).

## V. A PERSONAL AGNOSTIC STATEMENT

In contrast to Ebenstein’s concerns, the oral amendment in the essay from 1982 does also contain a statement very similar to the agnostic statement in the *FC*.

In summary, the main themes of *The Fatal Conceit* can be found in the essay from 1982. Although the question of to what extent Bartley’s editorship did or did not affect the content of the manuscript he received in 1985 cannot be conclusively answered, it is possible to lessen the charges brought against him. While it is, of course, possible that Hayek moved away from these ideas between 1982 and 1985, in which case the 1982 article represents only a preliminary stage of his thinking, we can show that all of the three major themes suspected of being the result of Bartley’s overly ambitious

editorship either exist or have definite roots in Hayek’s original paper from 1982. We conclude with Ebenstein: “The essential body of even the published *The Fatal Conceit—The Errors of Socialism* was mostly Hayek’s. Bartley’s dross was veneer, though it obscured the jewel beneath” (Ebenstein, 2003, 228).

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