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## HAYEK ON MIND AND ANTI-FOUNDATIONALISM

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*Abstract:* Hayek's *The Sensory Order* provided a proto-connectionist theory of mind that is linked to a fallibilist and evolutionary concept of knowledge. According to Hayek's cognitive psychology, human knowledge presupposes what Gadamer calls a «shifting horizon», i.e. a selective standpoint that is conditioned temporally. Because of his theory of the historical finitude of mankind that is linked to his cognitive psychology, Hayek rejects any kind of foundationalism. His criticism of foundationalism, which has not been studied extensively, matches well the view developed by enactivist cognitive scientists such as Varela, Maturana and Thompson.

*Keywords:* Hayek – Popper – Gadamer – Foundationalism – Sensory Order

### **1. Popper on Foundationalism<sup>1</sup>**

According to Popper<sup>2</sup>, foundationalism is a particular aspect of epistemologies that deny the uncertainty and selective nature of knowledge<sup>3</sup>. These epistemologies maintain that we «can intuit or perceive the essence or the true nature of a thing»<sup>4</sup>. Foundationalism is intended to resolve the infinite regression problem in epistemology. According to foundationalism, beliefs are justified based on basic, certain and invariable beliefs that do not need support from other beliefs because they are self-evident. Truth, meant as absolute truth, is rooted in these foundational beliefs from which all the other beliefs can be explained by inference<sup>5</sup>. Foundationalism argues that reason can grasp and know in detailed and clear terms the ultimate and invariable ground «of all forms of

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<sup>1</sup> This article directly draws from sections 2.15 and 2.16 of my book *Cognitive Autonomy and Methodological Individualism: The Interpretative Foundations of Social Life*. Springer, Berlin and New York, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> K. Popper, 2002, 3-27.

<sup>3</sup> See also F. Di Iorio, 2015, 44.

<sup>4</sup> K. Popper, 2002, 16.

<sup>5</sup> F. Di Iorio 2015, 44; see also G. Boniolo, 1990, 40 ff.; D. Antiseri, 2010, 45 ff.

knowledge»<sup>6</sup>. Foundationalism can meaningfully be defended in fields such as logic and mathematics, but regarding empirical science and ethics, foundationalism looks weak.

Regarding empirical sciences, Popper argued, like Gadamer, that «foundationalism is rooted historically in two main variants. Curiously, these variants have often been *wrongly* considered to be antithetical to each other. Both are expressions of what Gadamer calls “the Method”, i.e. scientism»<sup>7</sup>. One of the two variants is Bacon’s empiricism. According to this variant, the «ultimate source of all knowledge was observation»<sup>8</sup>. In other words, Bacon assumed that the foundational bricks of scientific knowledge could be acquired through sense data. He believed «that experience provided the basic and absolutely certain beliefs that justify all other beliefs»<sup>9</sup>. The other variant of foundationalism is Descartes’ rationalism or intellectualism. According to Descartes, the indisputable source of the foundational self-evident truths «was the intellectual intuition of clear and distinct ideas»<sup>10</sup>.

For Popper, both these variants of foundationalism are inconsistent with the idea of human fallibility. «Observation cannot imply certainty. It is the same for intellectual intuition»<sup>11</sup>. According to Popper, «Intellectual intuition and imagination are most important, but they are not reliable: they may show us things very clearly, and yet they may mislead us»<sup>12</sup>. In addition, Popper argued «that the idea that there is an exclusive and privileged source of knowledge defended by both empiricism and rationalism is equally mistaken. This is because the way human beings acquire knowledge can be very different. Sometimes the source can be a direct observation, whereas at other times it can be something else, such as a post on an internet blog or the discovery of an inconsistency in a scientific article»<sup>13</sup>. Popper also pointed out that both Bacon’s and Descartes’ variants of foundationalism are part of an «optimistic epistemology»<sup>14</sup>. At the roots of the teaching of these thinkers, there is «the doctrine that truth is manifest»<sup>15</sup>. This means that «truth, if it does not reveal itself, has only to be unveiled or discovered. Once this is done, there is no need for further argument»<sup>16</sup>. For both of these philosophers, errors depend on «our sinful refusal to see the manifest truth»; or on the fact that «our minds harbour prejudices inculcated by education and tradition», or on «other evil influences which have perverted our originally pure and innocent minds»<sup>17</sup>. For Popper, the «theory that truth is manifest ... is the basis of almost every kind of

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<sup>6</sup> B. Wachterhauser, 2002, 69.

<sup>7</sup> F. Di Iorio, 2015, 45.

<sup>8</sup> K. Popper, 2002, 4.

<sup>9</sup> F. Di Iorio, 2015, 45.

<sup>10</sup> K. Popper, 2002, 4.

<sup>11</sup> F. Di Iorio, 2015, 45.

<sup>12</sup> K. Popper, 2002, 37.

<sup>13</sup> F. Di Iorio, 2015, 45.

<sup>14</sup> K. Popper, 2002, 7.

<sup>15</sup> Ivi, 8.

<sup>16</sup> Ivi, 9.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*.

fanaticism»<sup>18</sup>. It leads to misleading conclusions such as: «only the most depraved wickedness can refuse to see the manifest truth; only those who have reason to fear truth conspire to suppress it»<sup>19</sup>.

According to Popper, both Bacon's and Descartes' variants of foundationalism were rooted in Plato's essentialism. Plato argued that, to understand the essence or nature of things, i.e. the absolute truth about things, it was necessary to recover a kind of forgotten knowledge that the human soul «possessed in its pre-natal state of omniscience» – a knowledge about «the unchanging world of eternal reality»<sup>20</sup>. Consequently, Plato maintained that it was necessary «to destroy prejudices, false beliefs which are often traditional or fashionable beliefs»<sup>21</sup>. According to Popper, this idea – the idea that people need to purge their minds of *tradition* or *prejudices* in order to grasp absolute certain truths – contains the germs of both Descartes' intellectualism and Bacon's inductivism<sup>22</sup>.

## **2. Gadamer on the historicity of knowledge**

Gadamer argued that both Bacon and Descartes did not understand that knowledge presupposes a historical horizon, i.e. a selective interpretative standpoint that is temporally variable<sup>23</sup>. This horizon is a shifting horizon because of human fallibility and also because the metaphysical assumptions of research (e.g. value-judgments) are historically variable. According to Gadamer, humans are limited by a «historical finitude»; this is because a «closed horizon is an abstraction»<sup>24</sup>. Life is inevitably characterized by a «historical movement»<sup>25</sup>. It «is never absolutely bound to any one standpoint, and hence can never have a truly closed horizon»<sup>26</sup>. The hermeneutical horizon «is, rather, something into which we move and that moves with us»<sup>27</sup>. As a consequence, «others after us will understand in a different way»<sup>28</sup>. Given the historicity of our knowledge, «all dogmatism, which proceeds from the soaring desires of the human heart, reaches an absolute barrier»<sup>29</sup>. Both foundationalism and anti fallibilism more generally are afflicted with «historical short-sightedness»<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> Ivi, 11.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>20</sup> Ivi, 15-16.

<sup>21</sup> Ivi, 16-17.

<sup>22</sup> Ivi, 17-19; see also F. Di Iorio, 2015, 45.

<sup>23</sup> See F. Di Iorio, 2015, 46.

<sup>24</sup> H-G. Gadamer, 2006, 302.

<sup>25</sup> Ivi, 303.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>28</sup> Ivi, 366.

<sup>29</sup> Ivi, 331.

<sup>30</sup> Ivi, 369; see also C. Lawn, 2006, 123-124.

Gadamer also pointed out «that foundationalism cannot be accepted because it does not take into account that our basic beliefs are linked indissolubly to a set of intuitive and tacit skills. Because it is impossible to make perfectly explicit all implicit knowledge, the basic pillars of science cannot be explained in a clear and detailed way. The tacit presuppositions of our consciousness can neither be completely articulated, nor justified as *more geometrico*, i.e. in a geometrical manner»<sup>31</sup>. These presuppositions are composed of «practical» skills rather than logical and theoretical skills<sup>32</sup>. Human beings use a «kind of knowledge» that «lies outside the rational concept of knowledge», i.e. outside the Cartesian theory of knowledge<sup>33</sup>. According to Gadamer, the basic presuppositions of scientific reasoning are necessarily vague<sup>34</sup>.

As stressed above, Gadamer, like Popper, also criticized ethical foundationalism. In his opinion, there are no basic moral values that are absolutely correct and historically invariable. This view is also shared by Popper. Two points must be considered. «First, no moral principle can be treated as a tautological truth»<sup>35</sup>. In addition, «ethical views cannot be found in experience». As stressed by Popper, Hayek and others, this is a consequence of Hume's law<sup>36</sup>.

According to Hume's law, «which is implicit in classical logic, a moral conclusion cannot be inferred validly from statements of fact»<sup>37</sup>. It is true that «at least in principle, we cannot rule out the possibility of conceiving a different kind of logic that could allow the inference of choices of values from statements of fact. However, even this alternative logic would not enable us to defend a foundationalist conception of ethics. Even if we conceive inferential rules that allow us to deduce values from descriptions of reality, this deduction would not imply something absolutely indisputable – because facts are not essences but rather fallible and selective constructions. They are not noumena, but phenomena. If we had rules enabling us to deduce moral conduct from facts, we would have rules allowing us to deduce moral conduct from a partial and relative standpoint»<sup>38</sup>. The same fact can be analyzed and built from infinite alternative hermeneutical horizons, i.e. standpoints. «Because of this, and because our knowledge is fallible, we could not demonstrate that the truth of any deduction is implied by the certain and absolute knowledge of the fact informing our deduction»<sup>39</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup> F. Di Iorio, 2015, 46; see also H-G. Gadamer, 1981, 1 ff.

<sup>32</sup> H-G. Gadamer, 2006, 19; see also F. Volpi, 2003.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>34</sup> See F. Di Iorio, 2015, 45.

<sup>35</sup> F. Di Iorio, 2015, 46; see also G. Boniolo, 1990, 107, 117-118.

<sup>36</sup> D. Antiseri, 2010, 45 ff.

<sup>37</sup> F. Di Iorio, 2015, 46.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*; see also G. Boniolo, 1990, 105-106.

### 3. Hayek's Criticism of Foundationalism

In *The Sensory Order* (1952), Hayek develops the idea that mind as an apparatus of interpretation and provides one of the earliest connectionist-type theories of mind<sup>40</sup>. According to Hayek, «every sensation must ... be regarded as an interpretation of an event in the light of the past experience of the individual or the species»<sup>41</sup>. In his opinion, knowledge presupposes what Gadamer calls a historical horizon, i.e. «a sort of accumulated knowledge»<sup>42</sup>.

Hayek's theory of mind supported a fallibilist and evolutionary approach that matches well Gadamer's and Popper's criticism of foundationalism. Hayek argued that the sensory order is linked to an «incessantly changing»<sup>43</sup> interpretative horizon. This undermines Baconian foundationalism. If perception cannot be reduced to invariable sense-data, the assumption that we can acquire basic and invariable beliefs by means of perceptive experience must be rejected<sup>44</sup>. Hayek's theory destroyed «the concept of elementary and constant sensations as ultimate constituents of the world»<sup>45</sup>. He criticized theories such as Russell's «neutral monism». According to Russell, the world consists of just one type of substance «which is both physical and psychical»<sup>46</sup>. For Hayek, this view must be rejected, because it «is explicitly based on the assumption that sensations are what is common to the mental and the physical world, and that their essence is their independence from past experience»<sup>47</sup>. Russell's view «seems to be based on entirely untenable psychological conceptions»<sup>48</sup>. The sensory qualities «will remain variable and...the distinction between them will be modified by new experiences»<sup>49</sup>.

To criticize the Cartesian variant of foundationalism, Hayek emphasized the evolutionary nature of human reason. He rejected Cartesian dualism, i.e. «the conception of an independently existing mind substance which stands outside of the cosmos of nature» and which man is endowed with «from the beginning»<sup>50</sup>. For Hayek, since this theory neglects that reason is the product of both a biological history and a cultural history, it «is contrary to all we know about the evolution of man»<sup>51</sup>. «Because every aspect of cognition is linked to both of these different histories, and because those

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<sup>40</sup> See W. Butos, 2010.

<sup>41</sup> F. Hayek, 1952, 166.

<sup>42</sup> Ivi, 167.

<sup>43</sup> Ivi, 175.

<sup>44</sup> See F. Di Iorio, 2015, 47.

<sup>45</sup> F. Hayek, 1952, 176.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>49</sup> Ivi, 175.

<sup>50</sup> F. Hayek, 1973, 17.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*.

histories are still playing themselves out, both perceptive and intellectual skills are based on presuppositions that are meant to change»<sup>52</sup>.

Moreover, like Gadamer, Hayek also criticizes Descartes because he neglects that all knowledge is linked to tacit and practical skills that cannot be made completely explicit<sup>53</sup>. According to Hayek, Descartes' view that we do not have «to accept anything as true which could not be logically derived from explicit premises» which are «clear and distinct, and therefore beyond possible doubt» is based on mistaken assumptions<sup>54</sup>. For Hayek, making the tacit dimension of knowledge completely explicit is impossible because objectivism is wrong, i.e. because it is impossible to put the interpretative horizon represented by human consciousness aside «in order to reach a perfectly neutral standpoint»<sup>55</sup>. Since we are always and necessarily linked to a certain a priori perspective, our reason is intrinsically limited: «There is ... on every level, or in every universe of discourse, a part of our knowledge which, although it is the result of experience, cannot be controlled by experience, because it constitutes the ordering principle of that universe»<sup>56</sup>. «In this regard, Hayek spoke of a Gödelian limit; according to Hayek, some basic or ultimate interpretative categories cannot be fully explained because they are the presuppositions of all the others. They are prior to any meaning, so they have no place in the order of meanings that they create. To get around this problem, Hayek argued, we should place ourselves outside our own mind by reaching an absolute standpoint»<sup>57</sup> which is impossible<sup>58</sup>.

Hayek's view is similar to that developed by heterodox cognitive scientists such as Varela, Maturana and Thompson who linked the hermeneutical criticism of foundationalism and the connectionist theory of mind. The view supported by these cognitive scientists is called *enactive* or *neurophenomenological* paradigm and is an improved and more recent version of Hayek's theory of mind. These cognitive scientists «argued that the Hayekian-like theory of mind matches the hermeneutical concept of the *historical finitude* of humankind»<sup>59</sup>. In their opinion, since human knowledge depends on common sense, and since common sense is nothing more than a biological and cultural tradition, foundationalism is wrong: «what we took to be solid ground is really more like shifting sand beneath our feet»<sup>60</sup>.

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<sup>52</sup> F. Di Iorio, 2015, 48.

<sup>53</sup> See P. Nemo, 1988, 60-61.

<sup>54</sup> F. Hayek, 1973, 10.

<sup>55</sup> F. Di Iorio, 2015, 48.

<sup>56</sup> F. Hayek, 1952, 169-170; see also F. Hayek, 1967, 60-63.

<sup>57</sup> F. Di Iorio, 2015, 48.

<sup>58</sup> F. Hayek, 1952, 184-190; see also P. Nemo, 1988, 60-61; G. Boniolo, 1990, 116-127; P. Heritier, 1997, 42-43; R. Koppl, 2010, 3 ff., 2008, 115-118; V. Fano, L. Graziani, 2011; J. Birner, 1999, 2013.

<sup>59</sup> F. Di Iorio, 2015, 48.

<sup>60</sup> F. Varela *et al.*, 1991, 217.

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