

# Spontaneous Order and the *Imago Dei*<sup>1</sup>

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**Key Words:** spontaneous order, Hayek, *Imago Dei*

Murray Rothbard once wrote that production, among other things, is “essential to man’s prosperity and survival” (Rothbard, 1998, p. 35). To produce, it is implied, is to survive. The idea that one’s labor is a marketable commodity assumes this consequentialist notion of production: a person’s labor and subsequent productivity contribute to the organization, economy, and society, and the value created through the production mechanism is compensated accordingly in the free-market system. Given production’s importance, it is often accompanied by varying degrees of deliberation, planning, and organization. However, and perhaps in a counterintuitive fashion, contexts do arise where effective and efficient production occurs outside the presence of planning mechanisms. Moreover, the spontaneous “order” that develops tends to be sustained because it works.

It is natural to inquire how optimal arrangements with implicit order, cooperative engagement, and efficient productivity can come about without planned direction, without a guiding presence. With this said, I suggest that the Christian faith tradition may offer insight into how we understand such a phenomenon.

In this short essay, my aim is to offer a Christian perspective of creative activity, with attention to related notions of human nature and order. Specifically, I will seek to draw a relationship between Hayek’s notion of spontaneous order and what it means to co-create as one made in God’s image. This comparison is not meant to imply statements about Hayek as a Christian (or a non-Christian) or attempt to locate the Christian faith tradition within a rigid sociopolitical or economic context. I do, however, hope to draw common ground between the Hayekian and Christian perspectives on what it means to create, produce, and relate and to give consideration to the implications of this relationship.

## From Questions to Answers: Following the Trajectory of an Idea

It is often difficult to trace an idea as it relates to its net effect on society. However, upon inspection, many

ideas can indeed be traced back to an original question. A notable example comes from the German philosopher Hegel. Upon taking account of the Genesis narrative, Hegel asks, “If God is all-sufficient and lacks nothing, how does he come to release himself into something so utterly unequal to him?” (Cohen, 2000, p. 83). In other words, why did God create a world — and a people to inhabit this world — if he is indeed all-sufficient?

The late political philosopher Gerry Cohen provides a lucid exposition of the various answers to this question. An important answer, he says, came from Hegel himself, who suggests that God is insufficient without a creation to confer his *god-ness* upon him: “Without the world,” he writes, “God is not God” (Cohen, 2000, p. 83). Implicit in this account is the acceptance that man is created in God’s image. That is to say, “God is the subject and man is the predicate”—one of the orthodox points established in Genesis and found throughout the biblical narrative (Cohen, 2000, p. 93). However, it is this very point that would eventually be challenged by Ludwig Feuerbach, one of Hegel’s more prominent students. In contrast to the notion that creation is subsequent to a creator, Feuerbach asserted that humans are not made in God’s image, but rather, God — or the idea of God — is made in the image of humans. Thus, liberation from alienation — asserts Feuerbach — will occur when mankind reclaims its human essence instead of projecting it upon a fictitious god. This idea held for many, including a young Karl Marx. While Marx ultimately disagreed with some of Feuerbach’s major tenets, he found the idea of alienation compelling. Beyond the subject and study of religion, Marx gave attention to economic and political alienation — considerations central to his influential writings on human labor.

While the exploration of this question provides an interesting thought journey from Hegel to Marx, there are other answers to consider, particularly from believers who subscribe to the Genesis account. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to fully address all answers, or possible answers, emanating from what might be considered

a more orthodox theological tradition, I do here offer one possible response. Specifically, instead of directly asking “why” God created the world and mankind to inhabit it — we might better get at the truth by inserting “what” into the inquiry. That is, in God creating the world and human beings — *what* does this tell us about God? *What* does this tell us about his nature? For in answering the “what” we may gain new clarity and perspective as to the question of “why.”

With this said, we might appropriately remark that in creating, and moreover, in creating the world and humans — this act tells us something specific about the nature of God. That is, it is in His nature to create and to relate. Therefore, among other things, we might say that the Genesis narrative reveals two important characteristics about God: He is both a *creator*, and He is *relational*. Relationships and creation are, in contrast to the Hegelian explanation, an overflow of God’s nature, giving us insight into who God is. Moreover, if one should accept this line of thinking, this in turn provides insight into who we are as His image-bearers (*Imago Dei*).

Beyond this response to Hegel’s initial inquiry, we here concern ourselves with the implications for man in society. More specifically, this provides insight into how we consider work and production. For as we create, as we relate, we find ourselves participating in the creation narrative and co-creating with God. Thus — work, creativity, and production — are not merely understood for their extrinsic value (i.e., the nature of what is produced), but also for their intrinsic value (capitalizing on the attributes of God inherent in our being).

### **Creating Space for Innovation — Hayek and Spontaneous Order**

In his influential work *The Road to Serfdom*, Hayek writes against the socialist mentality pervading much of the modern world in the early to mid-20th Century. His aim is to continue the fight for “freedom to shape our life according to our own ideals” (Hayek & Caldwell, 2007, p. 60). Hayek posited many arguments against collectivist planning, and his broad range of work continues to demand attention today. It is one specific aspect of Hayekian philosophy, however, that I wish to give attention to here, and that is his idea of spontaneous order.

The notion of spontaneous order has been described as “a self-generating and self-maintaining order, an abstract, purpose-independent pattern (system, structure) of stable and predictable relations that emerges as an unintended consequence of the regular, rule-governed

behavior of the individual elements forming it” (Raeder, 1998, p. 522). Here we concern ourselves with a social spontaneous order, of sorts, or institutions and practices that “are the result of human action but not the result of some specific human intention” (Norman, 2002). As Hayek himself asserted, there exists an infinite variety of applications to such a principle (Hayek, 2007, p. 71). However, my intention is to contrast the creative forces at work in what might be understood as a socially spontaneous setting with those forces operating under a “made order” whose primary feature is “deliberate arrangement” (Raeder, 1998, p. 523).

Economist Robert Sugden provides a helpful example of spontaneous order:

In a fishing village on the Yorkshire coast there used to be an unwritten rule about the gathering of driftwood after a storm. Whoever was first onto a stretch of the shore after high tide was allowed to take whatever he wished, without interference from later arrivals, and to gather it into piles above the high-tide line. Provided he placed two stones on the top of each pile, the wood was regarded as his property, for him to carry away when he chose. If, however, a pile had not been removed after two more high tides, this ownership right lapsed (Walmsley, 1932, pp. 70-71). The writer who describes this “first-on” rule does not tell us how it came into existence. Probably its origins had been long forgotten. Nor does he tell us why people obeyed it, only that they did. But we can be sure that the inhabitants of a fishing village would not have appealed to law courts or police to enforce a custom about driftwood. Somehow this rule was self-enforcing. The first-on rule is an example of what Friedrich Hayek (1960, 1979) calls “spontaneous order.” (Sugden, 1989, p. 85)

Sugden notes that this “first-on” rule is one of many rules — or conventions—that could address property rights as it relates to driftwood (Sugden, 1989, p. 86). For example, we might imagine systems that invoke fairness and impartiality such as arbitrarily distributing the wood based upon last names, a lottery, or even a prohibition against driftwood for all village members. Further, we may envision a village life where the democratic mechanism is utilized to assess the needs of its members and attempt to allocate driftwood based upon its appraisal of said need. Perhaps perceptions of individual-merit should be the distributive mechanism for the driftwood, where members earn their keep through some pre-determined

means. Irrespective of the means (fairness, need, or merit) to organize the use and distribution of driftwood, this does little to explain why a system where no planning occurred produced — it can be argued — an optimal mechanism for efficiently mobilizing individual and group industriousness and allocating scarce resources (i.e., driftwood) throughout the village. In other words, without the presence of conscious deliberation and decision-making, how did the “first-on” rule come to exist and remain? Summarizing the issue, Sugden writes: “My concern is to try to explain how rules regulating human action can evolve without conscious human design and can maintain themselves without there being any formal machinery for enforcing them” (Sugden, 1989, p. 86). In other words, as we survey the fishing village of Yorkshire and the “first-on” rule, how is it that we can come to work, create, and relate — in an efficient and appropriate way — without the explicit presence of conscious deliberation?

This question can be a puzzle, and without alternatives the answer risks acquiescence to evolutionary theories. Such views, in many ways, mirror Hayek’s own position on social evolution, which in turn influenced how he understood and promoted the moral and legal foundations of a healthy society. As Birner and Van Zijp (1994) suggest, Hayek’s cultural and socio-economic evolution “[focuses] on the emergence of rules of conduct, morals, and traditions that govern human interactions and that induce an order in culture, society, and the economy likewise” (p. 182).

This lends itself to the suggestion that our social prescriptions are merely relative in nature. This potential problem finds a cogent expression from Barry Norman (1982):

The danger here, however, is that the doctrine of spontaneous evolution may collapse into a certain kind of relativism: the elimination of the role of reason from making universal statements about the appropriate structure of a social order may well tempt the social theorist into accepting a given structure of rules merely because it is the product of traditional processes (Norman, 2002, p. 4).

With consideration to our questions earlier about God’s nature and as a function of this, our own nature, I shall now attempt to relate the conception of mankind as God’s image-bearer (*Imago Dei*) with Hayek’s notion of spontaneous order.

### Redemptive Notions in Spontaneous Order

Oxford Economist Donald Hay (1989) once wrote: “From creation we derive three elements. Man is personal,

with the capacity for making real choices and for entering into relationships. Man is a steward of the creation, to care for it, and to obtain from it those things which he needs for his existence. Man exercises his stewardship through work” (p. 122). Indeed, the Genesis narrative — creation, relationship, and the *Imago Dei* — asserts fundamental features about human beings which provide insight into how they act within and upon the world around them.

Might there be opportunity here for developing an epistemology of order whose spontaneity derives not from a socially understood evolutionary mechanism but rather from a creation-based conception of mankind? Is it possible that the efficiency arising from the Yorkshire fishing village originates from the Creator’s stamp upon mankind as both creator and relator? Contrary to evolutionary spontaneity, the creation narrative offers a more morally substantive perspective of spontaneous order where “[w]ork is a social activity in which men cooperate as stewards of their individual talents” and productivity is a means to express meaningful satisfaction when God-given attributes are properly and appropriately utilized (Hay, 1989, p. 74).

With this in mind, and with respect to Sugden’s attempt to “explain how rules regulating human action evolve without conscious human design,” I humbly submit that human action is inspired, directed, and driven not by the forces of social evolution but by a “spiritual DNA” that compels us to create, to innovate, to produce, and to relate and concern ourselves with the affairs of others. It is who we are because we are image-bearers of who He is.

To conclude, I here offer two immediate implications. First, this conception invites us to think of production as not only being valuable for what is being produced, but to also recognize value in the producing. In other words, we make a valuable contribution in creating and producing, but we may also think of our labor activity as honoring God and reflecting His attributes (i.e., co-creating with Him).

Second, this has implications for how we think about planning and social organization. While a planning mechanism is relevant in various aspects of our social and political lives, we must be clear on what we expect from the planning process. In addition to Hayek’s expressions of concern as they relate to social coordination, Cohen — who was raised in a Marxist and anti-theistic home — makes a remarkable statement worthy of note. Toward the end of his life Cohen questioned whether imposed order can truly produce the equality, justice, and social unity necessary for a functional society. What, then, is required? He writes:

I now believe that a change in social ethos, a change in the attitudes people sustain toward each other in the thick of daily life is necessary for producing equality, and that belief brings me closer than I ever expected to be to the Christian view of these matters that I once disparaged. (Cohen, 2000, p. 3)

In other words, coordination, planning, and the construction of just arrangements may only take us so far. Social change does not begin in planning; change begins in the personal. As image-bearers of our Creator, we are invited to think of and express Kingdom attributes through our daily interactions in social institutions without the presence of coercion but as a function of who we are because of who He is. Indeed, the impetus to work, create, produce, and relate may appear as a spontaneous phenomenon, but I submit that such orderly and efficient spontaneity actually reflects the image of a Creator, and His nature stamped upon mankind.

This suggestion is not meant to imply that capitalism — or a free market structure — is God’s blueprint for an economic arrangement. Further, a full accounting of the creation narrative would appropriately account for original sin and its implications for humanity.<sup>2</sup> These points aside, this paper has endeavored to invite us to consider our attributes as bearers of God’s image as well as the nature of the spontaneity behind what appears to be natural order in society. When these seemingly natural instances of spontaneous order occur, whether in the market or in our personal lives and social institutions, we can attribute their presence, and moreover their sustentation, to more than mere evolutionary randomness. Such a perspective allows us to stand behind an array of Hayekian themes, redeeming them under the creation narrative.

#### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This submission won top prize for the CCCU Free Market Forum Essay Contest in Houston, Texas — Fall 2012.
- <sup>2</sup> Hay emphasizes the important point that the doctrine of the fall was a part of the creation narrative, and the implications as such must be accounted for as well. He writes: “[Our] analysis of human behavior needs to encompass *both* the aspect of creation and the aspect of fallen man” (Hay, 1989, p. 122; italics his).

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