Spontaneous Order Theory in a Heideggerian Context

JOSEPH ISAAC LIFSHITZ
Shalem College
3 Ha’askan Street
Jerusalem 9378010, Israel

Email: isaacl@shalem.ac.il
Web: http://shalem.ac.il/en/personnel/isaac-lifshitz/


Abstract: Spontaneous order theory may be better understood in the context of its philosophical background, whether Hayek himself was aware of it or not. Social connections, interpersonal relations or intimacy are the bases of spontaneous order. In this paper, social connections are discussed as regards their influence on the German romantic school and its effects on philosophers such as Martin Heidegger. Heidegger’s ideas of perceiving society holistically and of understanding human interactions as the basis of human society helped to generate a theory that is related to spontaneous orders in the social sphere. Understanding spontaneous order theory in the context of Heideggerian thought generates an appreciation of the role of regulation in the market, given its spontaneous nature. Assuming spontaneity does not presume a rejection of intervention but rather a negation of the analytic approach, which assumes that one can take apart the market and put it back together in a new order. Instead, the Heideggerian approach suggests intervention by adjustment and judgment.

Keywords: Being-in-the-world; egology; empathy; emergence; Heidegger; Husserl; spontaneous order; with-bound (mithalten).

Friedrich Hayek’s concept of spontaneous order has attracted attention both for its economic implications and for its philosophical ramifications. In this paper, I would like to suggest how the philosophical understanding of spontaneity can help clarify its implications for economics. Spontaneous order is often perceived as a sort of “chaos theory.” Many interpret the spontaneous order as just a fact of life, a fact that gives us confidence that from some “blurry” state, some mixture of social events, an order emerges more or less miraculously. This is not my view. Instead, I would like to side with those who perceive spontaneous order theory as a specific type of social theory, that is, as a theory that points to social connections. With this perception, interpersonal relations or intimacy is the basis of the emergence of a spontaneous order. Such a theory of spontaneity will privilege economic solutions that take social bonds into account, and will reject economic solutions that ignore social needs and communal relations.¹

There are many who connect spontaneous order to non-rational processes. Hayek himself connected spontaneous order to theories of complexity. That is probably the reason that—until the last decade the theory of the twentieth century—spontaneous order was all but eclipsed in the social sciences (Barry, 1982).

For much of the twentieth century the idea of spontaneous order—the idea that most things that are of general benefit in a social system are the products of spontaneous forces that are beyond the direct control of man—was swamped by the various doctrines of “constructivistic rationalism.”

According to Barry, it is the success of a certain approach in the physical sciences which limited the appeal of the theory of spontaneous order:

No doubt the attraction of this rival notion of rationalism stems partly from the success of the physical sciences with their familiar methods of control, exact prediction, and experimentation. It is these methods which have an irresistible appeal to that hubris in man
which associates the benefits of civilization not with spontaneous orderings but with conscious direction towards preconceived ends (Barry, 1982, p. 7).

In Barry’s account, as the natural sciences began to take considerations of randomness, chaos, and complexity seriously, the idea of a spontaneous order also gained acceptance. While agreeing with Barry from a historical point of view, I would like to suggest that it is not only the changes in the physical sciences that paved the way for greater acceptance of the theory of spontaneous order, but also major developments in philosophy. Saying that, I do not (of course) try to suggest that knowledge of the relevant philosophy was necessary for the acceptance of the theory. Rather, borrowing Thomas Kuhn’s term, a paradigm of spontaneity in human thought and action which began to challenge the doctrine of “constructivistic rationalism” also played a role here. This paradigm, as we shall see, has its roots not only in social thought, but in a more general intellectual paradigm. To put the matter in terms of schools, I would like to suggest that although the theory of spontaneous order originated in the Scottish and Austrian schools, it cannot be accepted fully without the insights provided by the school of German Romanticism.

In his The Roots of Romanticism, Isaiah Berlin (2001) interprets this movement as a German attempt to overcome the hegemony of the rationalist tradition. He points out the romantics’ rejection of the cold calculations and rigid categories of philosophy as it existed in their time. He praises their acceptance of irreconcilable conflict and their denial of the tidy, reasonable solutions promised by Enlightenment thinkers. Berlin perceives it as a preference of the local over our arrogant pretensions to universal truth, and describes the Romantic Movement as “the greatest transformation of Western consciousness, certainly in our time” (ibid., p. 12). Berlin notes the development of this thought through the works of Hamann, Herder, Goethe, Fichte, and Schiller. In Berlin’s account, it is this movement which led to Nietzsche and Heidegger later on. The Romantics may have enabled Western thinkers to realize the limitations of analysis and calculation, but it was not until Martin Heidegger that an intrinsically spontaneous epistemology was developed.

I want to single out the importance of spontaneous order for Heidegger, who pointed to interpersonal empathy as the basis of the social order. He rejected the idea of society as an amalgamation of inherently solipsistic individuals. Instead, he contended that society and its members function on a foundation of interpersonal connections which give public meaning to their actions and perceptions. Later, we shall examine more carefully his unique phenomenological account of perception.

My suggestion, to connect the theory of spontaneous order to epistemology, is not new. Quoting Barry (1981, p. 12) again, it was David Hume who “maintained that tradition, experience, and general uniformities in human nature themselves contain the guidelines for appropriate social conduct.” But Hume did not develop a rational tradition which may be used to regulate human conduct. On the contrary, “Hume argued that a pure and unaided human reason is incapable of determining a priori those moral and legal norms which are required for the servicing of a social order” (ibid., p. 12), and that “the Humean argument is that rationality should be used to ‘whittle down’ the exaggerated claims made on behalf of reason by the Enlightenment philosophers” (ibid., p. 12). Barry claims later that

Hume is insistent that those things which are for the public benefit are not a product of rationalist calculation. The happiness of a community is not promoted by trying to instill a passion for the public good in people but by animating them with a “spirit of avarice and industry, art and luxury” so that the same result comes about indirectly (Barry, 1981, p. 52).

In other words, according to Hume, the rational tradition is limited and cannot be used to direct human society. But Hume was not an anti-rationalist. The reason that he left room for spontaneity was his empiricism, his emphasis on experience rather than calculation. As we now know, there is no doubt that the German Romantics traveled along the path of non-rational and non-calculated thought which Hume had paved.2

As I claimed, it was not until Heidegger that an intrinsically spontaneous epistemology was developed. In his “The Second Road to Phenomenological Sociology: Socio-ontology and the Question of Order,” Patrik Aspers (2010) analyzes the theory of spontaneous order in the context of the dispute between Husserl and Heidegger, which he couches as a dispute between egological epistemology and social ontology. For Husserl, the world, including the social world, is perceived as if by a spectator. In what Husserl calls “bracketing,” he reduces the world that is relevant to a human being into what appears to the subject:
I am no longer a human Ego in the universal, existentially posited world, but exclusively a subject for which this world has being, and purely, indeed, as that which appears to me, and of which I am conscious in some way or the other, so that the real being of the world thereby remains unconsidered, unquestioned, and its validity is left out of account. (Husserl, 1962, p. 8).

As Aspers (2010) describes, “the world is experienced and known by the transcendental subject in isolation—the Ego … The mental becomes the foundation, rather than the external world of objects, as in the objectivistic tradition.” Husserl (1960, p. 155) himself contends that “[i]n respect to order, the intrinsically first of the philosophical disciplines would be the “solipsistically” reduced “egology,” the egology of the primordially reduced ego. Only then would intersubjective phenomenology become possible, which is founded on egology.

Aspers (2010) continues by claiming that according to Husserl, man is not inherently social, but is capable of becoming social (an idea that he shares with Max Weber). But this position is subject to the sort of critique Heidegger later leveled at Descartes and Leibniz: that in being a deontic phenomenology become possible, which is founded on egoology.

For Heidegger, by contrast, man is “always already” a social entity. He is born into society, and his perspective on the world never comes from his subjectivity as opposed to the world, but rather arises from within the world. Any knowledge of the world is grounded in man as he lives among other men:

On the basis of this with-bound (mithaften) being-in-the-world, the world is already the one that I share with others. The world of Dasein is a with-world (Mitwelt). Being-in is being-with (mitsein) others. The innerwordly being-in-itself of others is Dasein-with (mitdasein) (Heidegger, 2010, pp. 115-16).

Human beings are conditioned by their past, by history. Man is from the very beginning part of a larger whole, of society and its various worlds. He is conditioned not only by his immediate surroundings but also by the larger culture of which he is part. The society whose influence is so profound expresses itself not merely in conversations or theories, but also in material objects such as tools and buildings. What is most important for our purposes is that, for Heidegger, man is never alone. Man can only be with others—even lonesomeness is a negative way of being with others—so that “being-with” is an ontological characterization of man. Assuming that human beings are social entities of this sort additionally implies that society is an organic entity. In Heidegger’s perception, society is not organized through a conscious contract among solipsistic entities, but instead is generated organically through the intricate subconscious connections of its members.

A similar approach is offered by Max Scheler (1954, p. 260), another member of Husserl’s phenomenological movement. He claims that we perceive one another neither by analogy to our own feelings and experiences nor through the application of a theory. Instead, such interpersonal perception arises through empathy in an almost subconscious awareness of what the other feels. Our perception of the other is not purely mental. As Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi explain it:

We can perceive the joy, sadness, puzzlement, eagerness of others, or that they have a question or a concern, etc., in their movements, gestures, facial expressions and actions, and without necessarily going beyond that in order to infer something about their mind (Gallagher and Zahavi, 2008, p. 182).

Perceiving Heidegger’s understanding of the social through Scheler’s empathy, we understand why an egological perception of the world is merely an illusion.

Contrasting Husserlian and Heideggerian phenomenology, Aspers (2010) draws a sociological conclusion. His two roads to a phenomenological sociology are paved differently, and the differences are not only epistemological. For him, Husserl’s account of human relationship truly begins from the solipsistic. Husserlian egology is thus not only a way to describe human perception of the world but also a descrip-
tion of how humans relate to one another. Empathy is the only way by which human beings can reach one another. For Heidegger, on the other hand, social ontology is not only the way that human beings perceive the world; it is also a description of how they relate to one another. In other words, what seems to be an ontological disagreement is indeed a sociological dispute as well.

After presenting these two phenomenological approaches to society, Aspers (ibid.) applies them to a new understanding of the foundation of spontaneous order theory. According to him, both spontaneous order and organizational order are founded on egological presuppositions. The relation of solipsism to organizational order is relatively clear; the pretension to re-organize human society is a arises from the assumption that each human being is an isolated individual; it then makes sense to appeal to some social engineer to organize them into a social complex. But the idea that society is ordered in a spontaneous way, Aspers believes, is founded on the same egological theory:

The discussion of social order, as presupposed by many economists, starts with an egological approach. Man is alone, and pursues essentially non-social ends that eventually can produce something that is social. Though ends may in some way be social, man's knowledge and meaning (including for example preferences) are independent of others. A sociological approach, in contrast, starts with the assumption of man as inherently social. The distinction between an egological and sociological approach, thus, is not merely that one stresses organized and the other spontaneous order, but the different assumption of man (Aspers, 2010, p. 14).

Aspers contrasts the egological approach with a sociological, Heideggerian, one:

That man is already in the world means that one cannot think away the life-world. The order of things is already there. Order does not have to be decided by people, nor is it merely a result of a spontaneous process. When we talk of spontaneous order this is often less "spontaneous" than some may think or hope; there is no way out of this inherently social world, as long as we are men. This is not say that everything is planned, but it means that "spontaneous" orders are always the result of historically contingent conditions, and most fundamentally on the life-word—the world in which we already are (Aspers, 2010, p. 14).

Here we come to my disagreement with Aspers. He seems to think that any approach to spontaneous order which relates it to an organizational order (even in opposition to it) is bound to understand spontaneous order within the context of the egological. While I accept his account of the egological foundations of organizational order, I believe a Hayekian account of spontaneous order may begin from Heideggerian foundations. Unlike Aspers, I do not think that spontaneity must be purely subconscious in order to be perceived as spontaneity. While it is true that "spontaneous order" is often less "spontaneous" than some may think or hope, our awareness of spontaneity does not "contaminate" it so that it must be redefined as an "organizational" relation. Assuming spontaneity in social organization is assuming an organic element which should be respected and treated as such.

As I suggested above, some take the theory of spontaneous order to suggest a nearly mystical conception of an “invisible hand.” The order of society not only cannot be accounted for on its “retail” level—such as what price each item commands at each place and time—but even on a “wholesale” level there is neither need nor room for accounting for the possibility of social order. It is, after all, spontaneous.

This, I believe, is a mistake. For Hayek, the order arises from something identifiable and comprehensible: the networks of human interaction, which both directly and indirectly enable society to organize itself. These networks are founded within a society which is thus seen as a holistic organism into which we are all born together, with one another, relating to one another. We use tools which express a common meaning; we relate to public monuments from which shine forth the shared civic and religious ideals and faiths. This is a Heideggerian view, and Hayek too sees society as an intricate organic development. Hayek's rejection of societal organizational order is essentially a demand that we respect this organic process of development.

Some of the confusion here may be due to the very word "spontaneous." An alternative I would like to explore is the word "emergent," a term that seems especially relevant in connection with Hayek's (1952) work the Sensory Order.
Both Gerald Gaus (2007) and Edward Feser (2007) point out that Hayek insisted on linking the notion of spontaneous order to an evolutionary analysis. Gaus (2007, p. 232, n. 2) claims that Hayek repeatedly referred to “the twin ideas of evolution and spontaneous order,” as these are the main tools for dealing with complex phenomena, including human interactions in general.

Feser (2007) also discusses Hayek’s concern with complexity—as opposed to mere “spontaneity”—in the way different sensors in the structure of the sensory system function. Feser claims that Hayek understands perception as well as the perceived as emerging from a neural structure which is already present in the perceiver’s mind:

If a given perceptual experience—of an orange, say—is possible only once the relevant concepts have been acquired by virtue of the formation of neural connections corresponding to the various properties of the orange, then one’s conscious, explicit knowledge of the orange presupposes in Hayek’s view something implicit and unconscious (Feser, 2007, pp. 300-301).

Feser (ibid.) continues with the following quote: “Mind is not a guide but a product of cultural evolution, and is based more on imitation than on insight or reason.” In other words, the power of perceiving and understanding does not simply “arise spontaneously,” but rather emerges from an extremely complex development which combines biological evolution (senses and neural anatomy) with the culture one acquires through imitation and one’s own personal experience. The many details of this story cannot, in general, be cashed out in “retail,” but this does not mean we are dealing with an invisible hand about which we can only admit our ignorance. Rather, on the “wholesale” level we can point—precisely as Hayek does—to the various evolutionary, cultural and individual influences from which the sensory order emerges.

Similarly, the spontaneous order of society needs to be understood as the emergence of order in a complex system. How this order comes about, we can probably never know in detail. But that does not mean that we cannot grasp the overall rationality of the process of emergence. The complexity of human interactions is parallel to the evolved physiology and organs of complex organisms. Ordered conduct in society is founded on an intricate web of relationships, interactions, and traditions. There is usually no way to analyze how these foundations yield social order. For theoretical purposes, this emergence is equivalent to spontaneity.

IV

So must we be policy nihilists? Does the fact that we cannot predict or analyze social behavior with precision force us to give up any attempt to legislate or regulate social structures? Hayek clearly did not see society as simply chaotic. Indeed, he did not believe that useful regulation could be derived analytically. Instead, we need to remember that, as we regulate a complex system, the new order that emerges depends on a detailed chain of actions and reactions, just as it did in the system’s original natural development. We cannot deduce medical treatments from an analysis of the evolutionary pathways that formed our physiology, but this need not make us medical agnostics. Trial and error is perhaps the safest way to make progress here. There is no room for a systematic overall treatment based on some a priori analysis. An excellent example of this is Hayek’s treatment of law as a means for regulating society. Hayek did not see law as the product of a single act of legislation, but instead, the result of a process:

[However carefully we may think out beforehand every single act of law-making, we are never free to redesign completely the legal system as a whole, or to remake it out of whole cloth according to a coherent design. Law-making is necessarily a continuous process in which every step produces hitherto unforeseen consequences for what we can or must do next (Hayek, 1973, p. 65).

Despite the organization-like practice of law-making, Hayek took the whole legal system to be a spontaneous order. The step-by-step procedure of legislation is thus an example of an order that is sensitive to its own spontaneous character. Hayek admits that law is not usually perceived in this way, but insists that it is a tacit theory which underlies the whole system:

In this process the individual lawyer is necessarily more an unwitting tool, a link in a chain of events that he does not see as a whole, than a conscious initiator. Whatever he acts as a judge or as the drafter of a statute, the framework of general conceptions into which we must fit his decision is given to him, and his task is to apply these general principles of the law, not to question them. However much he may be concerned about the future implications of his decisions, he can
judge them only in the context of all the other recognized principles of the law that are given to him (Hayek, 1973, p. 66).

The law, which many see as the regulator of society, is seen by Hayek as itself the product of a complex process of emergence. Although law-making is not the product of an a priori analysis, it is nonetheless a deliberate attempt to regulate human society. The procedure, however, is not all-at-once, but step-by-step; that is, it is emergent.

Hayek’s attitude toward judgment is presented more clearly in his explanation of the function of the judge. Hayek claims that a judge often functions as an institution of a spontaneous order:

The distinct character of the rules which the judge will have to apply, and must endeavor to articulate and improve, is best understood if we remember that he is called in to correct disturbances of an order that has not been made by anyone and does not rest on the individuals having been told what they must do. In most instances no authority will even have known at the time the disputed action took place what the individuals did or why they did it. The judge is in this sense an institution of a spontaneous order. He will always find such an order in existence as an attribute of an ongoing process in which the individuals are able successfully to pursue their plans because they can form expectations about the actions of their fellows which have a good chance of being met (Hayek, 1973, pp. 94-5).

To conclude, spontaneous order theory is a theory that should be understood in the context of its philosophical background, whether Hayek himself was aware of it or not. Social connections, interpersonal relations or intimacy are indeed the basis of the spontaneous order. Social connections might have been taken seriously even without the influence of German Romanticism and its effects on philosophers such as Martin Heidegger, but the two notions of perceiving society holistically and of understanding human interactions as the basis of human society helped to generate a theory of spontaneous order in the social sphere. This is because for Hayek, the order arises from something identifiable and comprehensible: the net of human interaction, which both directly and indirectly enables society to organize itself. This net is founded on a society which is thus seen as a holistic organism into which we are all born together, with one another, relating to one another. With this Heideggerian view, which I believe that Hayek shared, society is an intricate organic development. Hayek’s rejection of organizational order is essentially a demand that we respect this organic process of development.

Understanding spontaneous order theory in this context enables us to appreciate the role of sociological and psychological factors in addition to microeconomic ones. It also enables us to appreciate market regulations, provided they are of a spontaneous nature. Assuming their spontaneity, we do not have to reject intervention. What we must negate is instead an analytic approach, or the assumption that one can take apart the market and put it back together as a new “organization.” Instead, what is suggested by the spontaneous approach is intervention by piecemeal correction. What the economist is required to do is to use his judgment rather than attempt to effectuate a complete change. He may suggest adjustments to new situations, or propose better solutions to market failures; he should however avoid proposals that transform the economic system. He has to attune himself to social processes, and to adjust the economy accordingly.
NOTES

1 For further reading about intersubjectivity in Hayek's thought, see Dupuy (2001) and Hodgson (2001). I am grateful to David Andersson for pointing out these two references.

2 See, for instance, Kant's Preface to the Prolegomena: "Since the Essays of Locke and Leibnitz, or rather since the rise of metaphysics as far as the history of it reaches, no event has occurred that could have been more decisive with respect to the fate of this science than the attack made upon it by David Hume" (Kant, 2004, p. 7).

3 Another critic of Husserl's view of the social is Alfred Schutz (1966).

4 The notion of man as a social animal should be attributed to Aristotle: "Hence it is evident that a city is a natural production, and that man by nature a political (social) animal” (Lord, 1984, 1253a2-3).

5 It seems that according to Alfred Schutz, this perception is already implied in Husserl's writings: "even in the natural standpoint, a man experiences of his neighbors even [when] the latter are not at all present in the bodily sense…” (Schutz, 1967, p. 109).

6 Geoffrey Hodgson (2001, p. 211) contends that Hayek analyzes the economy from a universalistic perspective: “Hayek assumed that the 'basic economic problems' of choice and scarcity could be realised through the operation of the market and private property only.”

REFERENCES


