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A "Social Theodicy": Rosmini and Spontaneous Order

Valentino Pellegrino[1,2]

[1] *Philosophy and Theology, Salesian University Institute of Venice (IUSVE),*
[2] *Philosophy and Cultural Heritage, Ca' Foscari University of Venice*

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This article examines the connection between Antonio Rosmini's thought and the concept of spontaneous order developed by Friedrich A. Hayek. It argues that Rosmini's political and economic liberalism is internally bound to his theistic and providential metaphysics, and that the middle term between the two is an "imperfectism" grounded in creaturely finitude rather than in the noetic effects of the Fall. Read in this way, Rosmini supplies a realist—as opposed to a merely conventionalist—foundation for the spontaneous-order tradition: Human reason is limited, and so incapable of designing a perfect social order, yet it remains competent to know the just. So construed, classical liberalism and a theistic worldview prove mutually intelligible rather than mutually exclusive.

Introduction

In the past century, Friedrich A. Hayek's politico-philosophical work has revived a tradition rooted in classical natural law theory and further developed within the Scottish Enlightenment—one fundamentally anchored in the concept of spontaneous (social) order.[1] Drawing on a well-known definition originally formulated by Adam Ferguson, Hayek characterizes spontaneous orders as those social structures that emerge as "the result of human action but not of human design."[2] From a Hayekian perspective, such orders manifest across various domains, including the economic, political, ethical, legal, and linguistic spheres. The economic and political dimensions, which Hayek examines most extensively, are the focus of what follows.

1 Hayek's theory of spontaneous order, already present in embryonic form in F. A. Hayek, "The Use of Knowledge in Society," *American Economic Review* 35, no. 4 (1945): 519–30, is developed more extensively in Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, 3 vols. (Routledge, 1982). See also Christina Petsoulas, *Hayek's Liberalism and Its Origins: His Idea of Spontaneous Order and the Scottish Enlightenment* (Routledge, 2001).

2 Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, 1:20. See also Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (London, 1782), 205: "Nations stumble upon establishments, which are indeed the result of human action, but not the execution of any human design."

Hayek's theory posits that complex social and economic systems emerge not through centralized design but as the unintended result of individual actions. The core of the argument is epistemic. The "data" from which the economic calculus starts, Hayek observes, "are never for the whole society 'given' to a single mind which could work out the implications, and can never be so given"; the knowledge relevant to social coordination "never exists in concentrated or integrated form, but solely as the dispersed bits of incomplete and frequently contradictory knowledge which all the separate individuals possess."[3] The difficulty confronting any central planner is thus one of principle: The relevant information nowhere exists as a whole, and no procedure of collection could make it so. In the economic sphere, market prices function as a decentralized information system, allowing individuals to coordinate their activities efficiently without requiring comprehensive knowledge of the whole.[4] Prices thereby put each agent's local knowledge at the service of all. Politically, spontaneous order manifests in the evolution of legal and institutional frameworks through customary practices rather than deliberate construction. This bottom-up process fosters stability and adaptability, as institutions that prove effective persist while ineffective ones are naturally abandoned.[5]

Competition itself, within this framework, is a "discovery procedure": Its value lies precisely in bringing to light knowledge—of scarcities, opportunities, valuations—that no participant possesses in advance, and its results are correspondingly unpredictable.[6]

Recently, some critics have challenged Hayek's theory, accusing it of inappropriately "secularizing" a philosophical doctrine that was not originally grounded in purely epistemological assumptions—such as those underlying Hayekian spontaneous order—but rather in a metaphysical, and even theological,

3 Hayek, "The Use of Knowledge in Society," 519.

4 Hayek, "The Use of Knowledge in Society," 526.

5 Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, 1:72–93.

6 Hayek, "Competition as a Discovery Procedure," in *New Studies in Philosophy, Politics, Economics and the History of Ideas* (Routledge, 1978), 179–90. For occasional references to this argument in the literature on Catholic social teaching, see for example Philip Booth, "Taxation and the Size of the State," in *Catholic Social Teaching and the Market Economy*, 2nd ed., ed. Philip Booth (St Pauls, 2014), 170–214, esp. 177–78; and Dennis O'Keeffe, "Education and the Catholic Church in England and Wales," in Booth, *Catholic Social Teaching and the Market Economy*, 361–88, esp. 378.

framework centered on the idea of divine governance through Providence.[7] On their account, the theory of spontaneous order is tenable only within such a theistic and providentialist perspective. Their aim was to refute Hayek's arguments by tying them to a worldview they regarded as outdated and untenable. The attempt, however, does not succeed: It offers no substantive refutation of Hayek's claims about spontaneous order as a matter of social theory and political economy, nor any reasoned account of why a providentialist perspective should no longer be considered metaphysically viable.

These critics, however, deserve credit for drawing renewed attention to the theoretical connection between Hayek's politico-economic perspective and a theistic worldview. This insight provides the basis for examining the connection through the work of Antonio Rosmini (1797–1855), an Italian Catholic priest and philosopher whose encyclopedic work spans metaphysics, ethics, politics, and theology. Beatified in 2007, he is named in John Paul II's encyclical *Fides et Ratio* as an example of the fruitful engagement of faith and reason.[8] In addition to sharing many of the political and economic ideas characteristic of Hayek's classical liberalism, Rosmini explicitly develops a theistic and providentialist metaphysics.[9]

This article isolates an overlooked aspect of the much-discussed relationship between metaphysics and ethics in Rosmini's philosophy:[10] the internal link between his theism and his defense of an unplanned social order. It reads Rosmini's liberalism as a political consequence of his providential metaphysics. The argument turns on his account of creaturely finitude: No created intellect can encompass the social whole or order it by deliberate design, though reason retains its capacity to discern what justice requires. Rosmini thus offers the spontaneous-

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7 See Lars Cornelissen, "The Secularization of Providential Order: F. A. Hayek's Political-Economic Theology," *Political Theology* 18, no. 8 (2017): 660–76; and Tim Christiaens, "Hayek's Vicarious Secularization of Providential Theology," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 45, no. 1 (2019): 71–95.

8 John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio* (September 14, 1998), no. 74.

9 The scholarship on Rosmini is largely, though not exclusively, in Italian; for his works I have used the published English translations where available, and otherwise my own. All other translations from Italian in this article are also mine. For an introduction in English, see Denis Cleary, *Antonio Rosmini: Introduction to His Life and Teaching* (Rosmini House, 2001), and Denis Cleary, "Antonio Rosmini," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Fall 2020), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/antonio-rosmini/.

10 Among the most relevant studies are Michele Schiavone, *L'etica del Rosmini e la sua fondazione metafisica* (Marzorati, 1962); Michele F. Sciacca, *La filosofia morale di Antonio Rosmini* (Marzorati, 1968; 1st ed., 1938), esp. 45–98; Paolo Gomarasca, *Rosmini e la forma morale dell'essere* (Franco Angeli, 1998); Fernando Bellelli, *Etica originaria e assoluto affettivo* (Vita e Pensiero, 2014); Alberto Peratoner, "Il radicamento ontologico-metafisico della teodicea rosminiana," in *Rosmini e le due città*, ed. Markus Krienke and Samuele Francesco Tadini (Mimesis, 2019), 187–98.

order tradition a realist foundation, and recasts its theistic background as a philosophical resource rather than an embarrassment. The following section establishes the substantive convergences between Rosmini's liberalism and Hayek's; the final section develops the theological divergence within which the "social theodicy" announced in the title does its work.

The Convergences Between Rosmini and Hayek

That spontaneous orders are not the product of human design does not mean that they are not designed at all. From a theistic perspective, such orders can be understood as the outcome of a divine design, providentially realized through human actions. This view is explicitly articulated in the epilogue of Frédéric Bastiat's classical liberal essay *The Law*:

> God has implanted in mankind also all that is necessary to enable it to accomplish its destinies. There is a providential social physiology, as well as a providential human physiology. The social organs are constituted so as to enable them to develop harmoniously in the grand air of liberty. Away, then, with quacks and organizers! . . . And now, after having vainly inflicted upon the social body so many systems, let them end where they ought to have begun—reject all systems, and try liberty—liberty, which is an act of faith in God and in His work.[11]

A similar thesis appears in the work of a near-contemporary of Bastiat who did not share the French economist's liberalism: Joseph de Maistre. He opens his *Essay on the Generative Principle of Political Constitutions* by stating that "one of the gravest errors of a century which embraced them all [i.e., the eighteenth century] was to believe that a political constitution could be written and created *a priori*, whereas reason and experience agree that a constitution is a divine work."[12]

The most explicit statement of the connection between a spontaneous social order and the providential order established by God comes with the example of the English constitution:

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11 Frédéric Bastiat, *The Law* (Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2007), 55.

12 Joseph de Maistre, *The Generative Principle of Political Constitutions: Studies on Sovereignty, Religion, and Enlightenment*, ed. J. Lively (Routledge, 2017), 147.

> Consider, now, any political constitution whatever, that of England, for example. Certainly it has not been made *a priori*. Never have statesmen gathered together and said: Let us create three powers, balance them in such and such a manner, and so on: no one has thought this. The constitution is the work of circumstances, and the number of these circumstances is infinite. . . . However, since these elements, so cast into space, have fallen into such meaningful order without a single man among the multitude who have acted on this huge stage knowing what relation his actions had with the whole scheme of things or what the future was to be, it follows that these elements were guided in their fall by an unerring hand, superior to man.[13]

It is unsurprising, then, that Hayek cites de Maistre with approval, as one of those thinkers who, unlike most other modern theorists, "did show an understanding of the meaning of spontaneously grown institutions."[14]

De Maistre belongs among the formative influences on Rosmini's early political writings, even if the mature Rosmini progressively distanced himself from the reactionary cast of Restoration thought.[15] What Rosmini takes over is the anti-aprioristic insight that a constitution is not made but grows. On this point, and in virtue of Hayek's own acknowledgment, de Maistre serves as a *trait d'union* between Rosmini and Hayek who, despite their distance in period, context, and intellectual formation, developed two forms of political liberalism with substantial points of contact. Systematic attempts to compare Rosmini's political thought with that of Hayek have already been made.[16] The discussion that follows focuses on the main convergences between them.

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13 De Maistre, *The Generative Principle of Political Constitutions*, 152. Note the correspondence between the "unerring hand" mentioned here by de Maistre and the "invisible hand" popularized by Adam Smith.

14 F. A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty: The Definitive Edition*, ed. Ronald Hamowy, The Collected Works of F. A. Hayek 17 (University of Chicago Press, 2011), 522.

15 On this development, see Francesco Traniello, *Società religiosa e società civile in Rosmini* (Il Mulino, 1966), 15–134; Evandro Botto, "Rosmini interprete della Rivoluzione Francese e di Rousseau," *Rivista di Filosofia Neo-Scolastica* 81, no. 4 (1989): 559–75; Giorgio Campanini and Francesco Traniello, eds., *Filosofia e politica. Rosmini e la cultura della Restaurazione* (Morcelliana, 1993); Gioele Solari, *Rosmini inedito. La formazione del pensiero politico (1822–1827)* (Edizioni Rosminiane Sodalitas, 2000); Gianni Xodo, "Storia e politica negli scritti giovanili di Antonio Rosmini," *Dialegesthai* 13 (2011).

16 In particular, Salvatore Muscolino, *Persona e mercato. I liberalismi di Rosmini e Hayek a confronto* (Rubbettino, 2010); Salvatore Muscolino, "Giustizia sociale e libertà individuale. Antonio Rosmini e Friedrich August von Hayek," in *Rosmini e l'economia*, ed. Francesco Ghia and Paolo Marangon (Università degli Studi di Trento, 2015), 283–99. See also Alberto Mingardi, "Property and Liberty: The Development of Antonio Rosmini's Political Thought," foreword to Antonio Rosmini, *The Constitution Under Social Justice* (Lexington Books, 2007), xxix–xlv.

The most obvious is that both authors advocate a morally conservative form of liberalism, grounded in the centrality of the family and the inviolability of legitimately acquired private property.[17] Their liberalism is "conservative" here in a substantive sense: Anti-revolutionary and anti-utopian in temper, it defends inherited moral norms as worthy of deference. In this regard, both authors engage in a thorough critique of the progressive and utopian socialism of Saint-Simon.[18] In Rosmini's case, the label "conservative" should not be taken in its nineteenth-century Italian party-political sense—alignment with Austrian rule and opposition to national unification—since Rosmini engaged with the Risorgimento debate and drafted constitutional projects for a unified Italy.[19]

For the purposes of this article, the parallel that matters most is their shared endorsement of the virtues of spontaneous market order in the economic sphere.[20] Here, the common intellectual source is unmistakably Adam Smith.[21] What each takes from him follows in good part from historical distance. Rosmini, writing some decades after the *Wealth of Nations*, engages Smith first of all on the questions of applied political economy where that work then stood at the frontier; Hayek, at a far greater remove, takes up the anti-constructivist lesson of the "invisible hand"—the coordination of individual actions into an order that none of the agents intends—together with the "true" individualism whose modern development he traces through Hume, Ferguson, and Smith himself.[22] Both arrive

17 On family and property in Hayek's ethics, see F. A. Hayek, "Our Moral Heritage," in *Knowledge, Evolution and Society* (Adam Smith Institute, 1983), 45–57, esp. 46–48. On property in Rosmini, see Antonio Rosmini, *The Philosophy of Right*, vol. 2, *Rights of the Individual* (Rosmini House, 1993), nn. 312–43, 91–97, and nn. 1677–83, 440–45, and *The Constitution Under Social Justice*, 49–102. On marriage and the family as foundations of civil society, see Antonio Rosmini, *The Philosophy of Politics*, vol. 1, *The Summary Cause for the Stability or Downfall of Human Societies* (Rosmini House, 2010), nn. 23–38, 29–40, and vol. 2, *Society and Its Purpose* (Rosmini House, 2010), nn. 406–13, 200–203.

18 See Antonio Rosmini, *Frammenti di una storia della empietà e scritti vari* (CEDAM, 1977), 59–95, and F. A. Hayek, *The Counter-Revolution of Science: Studies on the Abuse of Reason* (Free Press, 1964), 105–88.

19 On Rosmini's Risorgimento engagement and constitutional projects, see Luciano Malusa, *Antonio Rosmini per l'unità d'Italia: tra aspirazione nazionale e fede cristiana* (Franco Angeli, 2011).

20 The leading scholar of Rosmini's economic thought, Carlos Hoevel, explicitly uses the term "spontaneous order" for Rosmini's theory of the market; see Carlos Hoevel, *The Economy of Recognition: Person, Market and Society in Antonio Rosmini* (Springer, 2013), 141–46.

21 That Smith is among Hayek's primary influences is no mystery; see F. A. Hayek, "Individualism: True and False," in *Individualism and Economic Order* (University of Chicago Press, 1948), 1–32; Andrew Gamble, "Hayek on Knowledge, Economics, and Society," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hayek*, ed. Edward Feser (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 111–31. On Smith's influence on Rosmini, see Alberto Mingardi, "Rosmini's Liberalism and the Shadow of Adam Smith," *Journal of Markets & Morality* 21, no. 2 (2018): 271–95; and Carlos Hoevel, "Rosmini: A Philosopher in Search of the Economy," *History of Economic Thought and Policy*, no. 2 (2014): 111–44.

22 Hayek, "Individualism: True and False," 4.

at structurally analogous accounts of the market order. The affinity between Rosmini's economic thought and Hayek's is most immediately apparent in the way Rosmini describes the price-formation mechanism:

> What, then, are the elements that constitute this price, or this evaluation of things? There are two: 1. The search for the same things corresponding to the needs one has for them, taking the word need in its most general sense, in which even artificial needs, or desires in short, are included. 2. The suitability that things have to satisfy these needs, taking into account the ease of acquiring them, their quantity, their respective duration, and so on. One must clearly understand that this price of things, precisely because it results from the relationship between the total needs for them and their suitability to satisfy those needs, is not established by any particular person (except in the case of monopoly), but by society as a whole, in which the evaluated things are in circulation.[23]

Consistent with this conception of the market, Rosmini assigns the state a noninterventionist role, in the *laissez-faire* tradition. The best government, he argues, is one that "has no intention whatsoever of usurping and abusing nature for its own ends" but rather "is content to remove the obstacles to the development of its seeds." The role of government "is a task of negative rather than positive action; good government does not impede but encourages as much as it can all good undertakings."[24] Exercised "according to rational Right"—that is, within the juridical bounds of property and justice—free competition is central to a just society:

> I think it is possible to find a simple formula that would express the unique principle of universal means which, applied correctly, renders civil society immune from every injustice. I would propose

23 Antonio Rosmini, *Della naturale costituzione della società civile* (Rovereto, 1887), 107–8. Compare these lines with the "price system" as described in Hayek, "The Use of Knowledge in Society," 525–26.

24 Rosmini, *Society and Its Purpose*, n. 628, 324.

> the following: "If civil society maintains inviolate the principle of universal free concurrence, according to rational Right, it will avoid every injustice."[25]

His work also shows explicit traces of the Smithian individualism that would later be inherited by the Austrian school, as when Rosmini speaks of that general principle, "confirmed by general experience, and resulting from the nature of things and of mankind," according to which "generally speaking, every person or corporation is the sole true judge of its own necessities," since "it sees things with the keen and watchful eyes of self-interest."[26]

The deepest convergence, however, concerns the limits of social calculation. Rosmini holds that the calculation of social utility—that is, the planning of society—"is beyond human intelligence: the calculation of causes and effects is lost in the infinite. Hence, so often, the calculations of the utilitarians are found to be mistaken and confounded by unforeseen and even unforeseeable events."[27] This is almost to the letter the problem Hayek would later place at the center of his social theory: "How can the combination of fragments of knowledge existing in different minds bring about results which, if they were to be brought about deliberately, would require a knowledge on the part of the directing mind which no single person can possess?"[28] Rosmini locates the impossibility in the infinity of causal connections and in events no calculation can anticipate; Hayek in the dispersion of knowledge across many minds, and equally in the knowledge that competition has yet to bring to light, since what a discovery procedure discloses cannot be known before the procedure has run. Where Hayek derives from the limit an epistemic theory of social coordination, Rosmini inscribes it within a metaphysics of created finitude—the move examined in the next section.

One apparent exception to these convergences remains: Hayek was famously hostile to the notion of "social justice"—the second volume of *Law, Legislation and Liberty* is subtitled *The Mirage of Social Justice*—and he attributes the

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25 Antonio Rosmini, *The Philosophy of Right*, vol. 6, *Rights in Civil Society* (Rosmini House, 1996), n. 2271, 285. See also n. 2142, 242, where the task of government is "to remove everything that impedes free concurrence for all goods that can be objects of right."

26 Antonio Rosmini, *Of the Five Wounds of the Holy Church* (London, 1883), n. 114, 264–65.

27 Antonio Rosmini, *Progetti di costituzione* (Fratelli Bocca, 1952), 270.

28 Hayek, "Economics and Knowledge," in *Individualism and Economic Order*, 54.

popularization of the term to Rosmini.[29] Yet, as Muscolino observes, "social justice" in Rosmini must be read "in the exact opposite sense to socialist claims": namely, as a juridical principle securing individual freedom rather than as a distributive standard—a sense Hayek could have accepted.[30] The divergence is therefore terminological rather than substantive.

Spontaneous Order and Divine Providence: Rosmini's "Social Theodicy"

The two authors part ways most significantly over the role that God plays in their respective philosophies. In the postscript to *The Constitution of Liberty* Hayek writes that the liberal "is very much aware that we do not know all the answers," and that he "differs from the conservative in his willingness to face this ignorance and to admit how little we know, without claiming the authority of supernatural sources of knowledge where his reason fails him"; yet on the same page he adds that "there is no reason why this need mean an absence of religious belief," and that, "unlike the rationalism of the French Revolution, true liberalism has no quarrel with religion."[31] Hayek's agnosticism, thus understood, consists in the refusal to assign supernatural knowledge a foundational role within political theory, joined to an openness in principle toward religion and to the recognition of its function in supporting traditional morality, and thereby social order; it is neither atheism nor hostility to religious belief.[32] Theology, by contrast, was Rosmini's primary concern, and the rest of his thought—political and economic philosophy included—follows as a corollary of his reflections on God.

How Rosmini's "theocentrism" grounds his political and economic conclusions has been shown above all by Pietro Piovani's classic *La teodicea sociale di Rosmini*, from which the title of the present article is drawn. It is Piovani who highlights the place that political reflection occupies within Rosmini's theodicy: The Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment eras fostered a heightened sensitivity

29 Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, 2:176n8.

30 Muscolino, "Giustizia sociale e libertà individuale," 289. See also Robert P. Kraynak, "The Origins of 'Social Justice' in the Natural Law Philosophy of Antonio Rosmini," *Review of Politics* 80, no. 1 (2018): 3–29; and Philip Booth and Matias Petersen, "Catholic Social Teaching and Hayek's Critique of Social Justice," *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 23, no. 1 (2020): 36–64.

31 Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, 528.

32 See Hayek, "Our Moral Heritage," 48. See also Roger Scruton, "Hayek and Conservatism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hayek*, 208–31, esp. 218–26.

to social ills (or those perceived as such) and socioeconomic disparities, which any renewed "justification of God" must address.[33] On Piovani's reading, indeed, the problem of evil is the common denominator of Rosmini's entire production: Even the epistemological inquiries are not ends in themselves, but serve to explain the origins of human error and thus reconnect to "the evaluation of the problem of evil, considered as an evil of the individual capable of transforming itself, through a series of connivances, into an evil of society."[34]

There is accordingly no autonomous "political thought" in Rosmini: Politics and jurisprudence stand alongside psychology, logic, and ethics "in the search for a unitary explanation of the *raison d'être* of man's existence."[35] Nor is Rosmini's theodicy an optimism of the Leibnizian type: What distinguishes it, on Piovani's account, is the difference "between a mechanistic universalism and a universal vision concerned not to destroy particular individuality," within which evil retains a moral—not ontological—positivity as an "unforeseen collaborator" and "producer of good."[36]

A second Piovanian thesis completes the link between theodicy and political philosophy: Divine government is the archetype of every government. Rosmini speaks of Providence throughout the *Theodicy* in the language of government, and the principles by which he judges human governments are the very principles whose supreme instance is the providential governance of the world. As Piovani observes, the demonstrations of good government scattered through Rosmini's political works acquire their full sense only in light of the *Theodicy*, where the best of all governments is at issue.[37] Here the present article takes one step beyond Piovani: Precisely because the providential calculus exceeds every finite intelligence, deference to the order that no human has designed, rather than the ambition to replicate God's government by deliberate construction, is the political posture consistent with Rosmini's theodicy.

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33 The theme runs through the whole of the first part of the work; see Pietro Piovani, *La teodicea sociale di Rosmini* (Morcelliana, 1997), xi–49.

34 Piovani, *La teodicea sociale di Rosmini*, 3–4.

35 Piovani, *La teodicea sociale di Rosmini*, 4–5.

36 Piovani, *La teodicea sociale di Rosmini*, 19. On the centrality of individuality and freedom in this account, see also 20 and 27–29.

37 Piovani, *La teodicea sociale di Rosmini*, 47. See also Antonio Rosmini, *Theodicy: Essays on Divine Providence*, trans. Terence Watson (Rosmini House, 2009), n. 14, 16–17, and n. 357, 357–58.

A central element of the theistic worldview is the "ontological difference" between the perfection of the infinite (the Creator) and the imperfection of the finite (the creature). This ontological difference is a logical corollary of Creation: "If God, in creating the universe, could not make a repeat of himself, the universe and everything in it had to be limited: limitation is in the nature of all things outside God."[38] Hence Rosmini's famous critique of so-called "perfectism" (*perfettismo*), that is, "the system which believes in the possibility of perfection in human affairs."[39] It is absurd to demand perfection from that which is imperfect by its very nature.

The imperfection of the creature extends to human reason itself, which cannot assimilate the information that the construction of an ideal society would require.[40] This limitation is not, for Rosmini, a defect to be remedied but a structural feature of created being. His position may accordingly be described as an "imperfectism":[41] the recognition that worldly reality, and human reason in particular, are inherently limited; the refusal of every attempt to engineer, through political design, a perfect social order; and the corresponding esteem for the orders that emerge spontaneously from the free interaction among persons. On the reading proposed here, this stance is reinforced by the conviction that behind the seemingly impersonal mechanism of such orders lies the will of a provident and omniscient God.

The source to which Rosmini traces human cognitive limitation separates his position from a superficially similar one. He does not derive human limitation from original sin: Following Aquinas, he holds that the Fall wounds the will—inclining it toward lesser, finite goods—without destroying the intellect's capacity to discern good from evil.[42] This limitation is creaturely as such: It would characterize man even in an unfallen state, for it follows from finitude rather than

38 Rosmini, *Theodicy*, n. 189, 132.

39 Rosmini, *The Summary Cause for the Stability or Downfall of Human Societies*, n. 115, 73. See also Giuseppe Goisis, "Rosmini critico del comunismo utopico e del socialismo perfettistico," in Campanini and Traniello, *Filosofia e politica*, 201–34.

40 On human limitation and the constraints of reason in Rosmini's *Theodicy*, see Giuseppe Rizzo, *Il problema del bene e del male e la "Teodicea" di Rosmini* (Spes-Marzorati, 1965), esp. 51–69; and Ferruccio Déchet, "Il limite ontologico come condizione della libertà in Rosmini," *Rivista Rosminiana* 62 (1968): 238–46.

41 "Imperfectism" here renders the term *imperfettismo*, already current in the Italian literature on Rosmini's politics: See Tito Perlini, "L'imperfettismo rosminiano," in *Qualcosa precede lo Stato*, ed. Paolo Pagani (Rubbettino, 2004), 125–42.

42 See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 83, a. 3; and Antonio Rosmini, *Dottrina del peccato originale*, in *Opere dell'abate Antonio Rosmini-Serbati*, vol. 12 (Naples, 1844), 1–186, esp. §§31–39, 43–54. See also Paolo Gomarasca, "Il 'peccato originale' in Rosmini," *Rivista di Filosofia Neo-Scolastica* 97, no. 3 (2005): 407–25.

corruption. Whereas a broadly Pascalian line ties the chastening of politics to the noetic effects of the Fall—so that, justice being inaccessible to fallen reason, the social order can rest only on custom and convention—Rosmini's imperfectism leaves reason competent to know the just.[43] His deference to spontaneous order is therefore not the skeptical resignation of one who despairs of knowing the good, but the realist's recognition that no finite mind can survey the whole. Hume marks the point at which the Hayekian inheritance diverges decisively from Rosmini's position. Hume's conventionalist account of the rules of justice, which Hayek takes over, secures the same restraint on political reason, but by way of doubt about what reason can attain, and so leaves the justice of the emergent order itself beyond appraisal.

Rosmini's politico-economic theory asserts that the free actions of individuals—each pursuing his own self-interest within the constraints of his relative ignorance and in adherence to the property rights of others—produce a more stable and prosperous social order than even the wisest of human rulers could construct. Only within that framework can he justifiably claim, in response to the apparent social ills tolerated by a free society (such as differences in personal wealth), that "every complaint against Providence, every moan, proceeds from a narrow mind, incapable of sufficiently understanding what it is complaining and moaning about."[44] Even more significantly, he contends that "irregularities and inequalities in the distribution of the goods of nature and of grace in no way detract from a sublime Providence—on the contrary, they demonstrate its wisdom and exquisite goodness."[45]

Only a belief in the governance of divine Providence, moreover, can fully justify the quasi-religious faith sometimes required to trust the benefits of spontaneous order rather than the promises of planned systems. These benefits often fail to materialize in the short term, while the disastrous consequences of planned or illiberal arrangements usually become evident only in the medium and long run. We also lack the counterfactuals needed to reassure us that a given state of affairs is, after all, preferable to its planned alternative. Furthermore, as Hayek

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43 On Rosmini's critique of Pascal's conflation of *limit* and *misery*, see Antonio Rosmini, *Della speranza* (Milan, 1840), bk. 1, chap. 8, n. 1, 35–36; and Valentino Pellegrino, "Cenni sul peccato originale nel pensiero politico di Pascal e Rosmini," *Rivista Rosminiana* 117, no. 4 (2023): 93–100, esp. 97–98.

44 Rosmini, *Theodicy*, n. 240, 160.

45 Rosmini, *Theodicy*, n. 927, 926.

himself concedes, "the generally beneficial effects of competition must include disappointing or defeating some particular expectations or intentions,"[46] and those whose expectations are disappointed are seldom willing to grant the virtues of an order that has not favored them. This may help explain why Hayek and his mentor Mises had such difficulty persuading their contemporaries of the desirability of secular liberalism.[47] Hayek's critics were therefore right to perceive a providential horizon behind the theory of spontaneous order, though not to treat that horizon as a refutation of it.

Conclusion

This article has set out the parallels between Rosmini's political and economic liberalism and that of Hayek, the thinker widely credited with reviving the tradition of spontaneous order. In light of his conception of the state and the market, Rosmini can be firmly situated within this lineage.

The comparison between the two authors can now be drawn in full. Rosmini and Hayek share the substance of a position: the endorsement of the spontaneous order of the market, a noninterventionist conception of the state, the critique of utopian social engineering, and the conviction that the limits of human reason constitute the decisive datum of political philosophy. One apparent divergence—over "social justice"—has already proved to be a matter of vocabulary. The real divergence is metaphysical, and it concerns not the existence of the limit but its ground and its scope. For Hayek the limit is epistemic: Knowledge is dispersed among many minds, and the liberal admits how little we know and declines to ground political theory in supernatural sources of knowledge. For Rosmini the same epistemic limit rests on an ontological one, the finitude of every created intellect. A skeptical foundation leaves the goodness of the spontaneous order itself a matter of convention or evolutionary success; the creaturely foundation preserves reason's competence in matters of justice, and thereby allows the goodness of the order that no one designed to be affirmed

46 Hayek, "Competition as a Discovery Procedure," 180.

47 See David F. Dieteman, "F. A. Hayek's Missing Piece: Christianity," *Catholic Social Science Review* 20 (2015): 87–98. Hayek observed the converse phenomenon: In *The Mirage of Social Justice* he remarks that a large section of the Christian clergy, "while increasingly losing their faith in a supernatural revelation, appear to have sought a refuge and consolation in a new 'social' religion which substitutes a temporal for a celestial promise of justice" (*Law, Legislation and Liberty*, 2:66). Where the argument above suggests that belief in Providence sustains confidence in an unplanned order, Hayek's observation records what follows when that belief recedes. Whatever its fairness as a description of Christian social teaching, the remark diagnoses a secularization of religious hope to which Rosmini's "social justice" stands as a counterexample.

rather than merely presumed. Rosmini’s theism leaves Hayek’s account of the knowledge problem intact while supplying it with a deeper foundation than Hayek’s own premises provide.

If this analysis is correct, theism and an imperfectist liberalism stand, respectively, as the metaphysics and the political theory of a single philosophy. The “social theodicy” of the title is the thesis that the refusal to force perfection by design is itself the political form of the creaturely condition. For Rosmini the ultimate end of human life is secured by grace and fully attained only in the world to come; no earthly order may be mistaken for it. His work thus reminds contemporary classical liberals that their defense of spontaneous order is best grounded in an explicitly theistic metaphysics.

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