Friedrich Hayek is one of the most influential political philosophers of the twentieth century. A 1974 Nobel Prize winner for Economics, Hayek argues for the superiority of the free society over totalitarian, planned societies. Although Hayek arguably hit his target, he missed the bull’s-eye, because he failed to explain government and its prudent limits with reference to a complete view of human nature. This is partly because he failed to recognize that Christianity is the essence of Western civilization.

INTRODUCTION

Friedrich A. Hayek (1899–1992) won the Nobel Prize for Economics in 1974, in part for his contributions to economic science in the explanation of monetary and business-cycle theory. Hayek was a polymath who contributed to multiple fields, including not only economics and political philosophy, but theoretical psychology as well. He was a cousin of Ludwig Wittgenstein, and, by his own account, “probably one of the first readers of Tractatus.” However, for most of his seventy-year intellectual career, Hayek’s free-market economic ideas were politically out of favor, and so Hayek devoted his energies to the project of reconstructing the philosophy of freedom. He devoted himself to this project as a man of his times, that is, as a veteran of the Austro-Hungarian army of the Great War, an Austrian noble who witnessed the collapse of his society, and an expatriate watching his English friends unwittingly adopt the views which had led the National Socialists to power in Germany. Moreover, despite the Cold War waged between the West and the East, Hayek perceived that many of the denizens of Western civilization did not understand the essence of the Western civilization that they were ostensibly defending. He saw the need for a case for freedom, and he made the case passionately for nearly fifty years. It may be argued that Hayek succeeded admirably at this project, at least in some sense, as his first foray into the field, The Road to Serfdom (1944), was a best seller in the United States in the 1940s (indeed, it was reprinted as a Reader’s Digest condensed book in April 1945), influenced the Thatcher and Reagan revolutions in Britain and the United States, and
was again a best seller in America, from 2008 through 2010. In 1981, Margaret Thatcher recommended Hayek in the British House of Commons:

I am a great admirer of Professor Hayek. Some of his books—*The Constitution of Liberty* and the three volumes of *Law, Legislation, and Liberty*—would well be read by some honourable members.5

In Prague, after the fall of communism, “Friedrich Hayek was a god.”6 Today, Hayek is influential in China among those who seek to explain the failings of the Communist bureaucracy.7 In other words, Hayek’s ideas have enjoyed both widespread commercial success and political influence at the highest levels in the West. As Edward Feser opens his Introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Hayek*: “Friedrich August von Hayek was almost certainly the most consequential thinker of the mainstream political right in the twentieth century.”8 High praise, indeed.

However, more important than his success measured in terms of influence, it will be argued herein that although Hayek hit his target in the sense of powerfully making the case for the free society, he missed the bull’s-eye, in that he failed to develop a sufficiently robust political philosophy, one that explains government and its prudential limits with reference to a complete view of human life and human nature. In chief, this is because he failed to sufficiently recognize that Christianity is the essence of Western civilization.9 Numerous authors have concluded that Christianity is responsible for, *inter alia*, capitalism, political freedom, the idea of human progress, international law, science, and charity, as well as, rather obviously, the university.10 Flowing from the error of failing to recognize Christianity as the essence of Western civilization, Hayek failed to found his project on the rocks of the Western tradition, namely, St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, and instead built his case for the West on sandy, unstable modern philosophy, namely, Kant and Mill. Etienne Gilson puts it this way:

As early as his first encyclical, *Inscrutabili* (April 21, 1878), Leo XIII had expressly declared that “the cause of civilization lacks a solid foundation if it does not rest on the eternal principles of truth and on the unchangeable laws of right and justice.” To attempt a political and social reformation without having first ascertained its doctrinal foundations, such as are found in the Christian philosophy of St. Thomas, would therefore be tantamount to erecting a baseless structure. Catholics should not hope to restore any Christian political and social order on any other foundation.11

In other words, Hayek, at best, only worked through some of the issues required for a full and complete solution to the philosophical and practical
problems he was addressing. At worst, by ignoring Christianity, Hayek was doomed to get the wrong answer.

So what precisely does Hayek have to say about political philosophy?

**HAYEK’S CLAIMS**

Hayek’s political philosophy is focused on the nature of the state. The substance of Hayek’s views in political philosophy may be boiled down to two related claims, namely, that: (1) attempts at centralized control of a society have unavoidable, undesirable consequences; and (2) human beings have limited reason and knowledge, such that it is impossible to ever possess enough information to succeed in any plan to consciously control a society. The state, therefore, should be limited under the law. As these claims go, they may be described as prudential claims about human society based upon human experience and logic. The main argument of Hayek’s first major work, *The Road to Serfdom*, is that government intervention in the economy (“planning” or “central planning”) inevitably leads to totalitarianism. As Hayek put it in one of his later works (published in 1979):

> We ought to have learnt enough to avoid destroying our civilization by smothering the spontaneous process of the interaction of the [sic] individuals by placing its direction in the hands of any authority. But to avoid this we must shed the illusion that we can deliberately ‘create the future of mankind’, as the characteristic hubris of a socialist sociologist has recently expressed it. This is the final conclusion of the forty years which I have now devoted to the study of these problems since I became aware of the process of the Abuse and Decline of Reason which has continued throughout that period.12

Thus, thirty-five years after the publication of *The Road to Serfdom*, the essence of Hayek’s position had not changed. His general contention remained that the conscious direction of human society, even if attempted with the best of intentions, simply cannot succeed. The specific arguments that Hayek used to support that general contention, however, shifted over time, making a systematic assessment of Hayek’s project something of a challenge. As MacIntyre remarks of contemporary moral theory, one finds in Hayek’s political philosophy “an amalgam of fragments from past moral attitudes and theories.”13 Moreover, the volume of secondary literature on Hayek is so great, that to paraphrase Hayek’s knowledge problem, it is a Herculean, if not Sisyphean, task to ever review enough literature to succeed in any plan to comprehensively evaluate the works of Hayek (or, at least, the works on Hayek).
In his economics, Hayek argues for a moderate laissez-faire position. Hayek defends human freedom to interact in the marketplace, i.e., a view that might generically be referred to as capitalism. To quote Rodney Stark:

Although I am fully aware that it might be good strategy to let readers supply their own meaning of “capitalism,” it seems irresponsible to base extended analysis on an undefined term. Therefore: Capitalism is an economic system wherein privately owned, relatively well organized, and stable firms pursue complex commercial activities within a relatively free (unregulated) market, taking a systematic, long-term approach to investing and reinvesting wealth (directly or indirectly) in productive activities involving a hired workforce, and guided by anticipated and actual returns.14

This is fundamentally Hayek’s view.

Hayek also argues that government intervention in the marketplace is proper when the market fails to provide certain goods (so-called “public goods”). As Hayek writes in describing his own views: “It is important not to confuse opposition against [socialist] planning with a dogmatic laissez-faire attitude.”15 While Hayek consistently placed himself in the former camp, rather than the latter, the adoption of Keynesian economic policies (i.e., policies which favor government intervention in the economy) by Western governments led Western power elites and politicians to disregard Hayek’s arguments for nearly forty years.

In his political philosophy, therefore, Hayek attempts to articulate and defend what he calls an “evolutionary view of society” against “constructivist” and “positivist” social philosophies which attempt to create social stability by direct or authoritative command (i.e., totalitarian theories).16 In writing of an “evolutionary account of social order,”17 Hayek means that the evolved customs and traditions of human society, such as the common law, ought not to be lightly altered, in part because they embody generations of experiential knowledge, and in part because no one person could ever possess sufficient knowledge to construct a rival system. “[I]ntermediate formations and associations,”18 such as the Roman Catholic Church, are therefore essential elements in the Hayekian conception of the proper functioning of a free society.

According to Hayek, the state can and must legislate according to moral principles, but it ought not by threat or by the use of coercion legislate that some particular set of moral or religious ideals must be accepted beyond what might be referred to as the “lowest common denominator” of morality. Hayek does not clearly explain or define the “moral principles” that he has in mind, other than perhaps as the “rules of just conduct.” For Hayek, to coerce is to influence the citizen by threat of force to act accord-
ing to moral or religious ideals which are not his own. For government to do so is to use one person as a means to another’s end. Historically, the abuse (or, we might say, the unjust use) of the coercive power of the state has led to tyranny; the Nazi, Soviet, Maoist, and Ottoman regimes are but four examples from the twentieth century; Oliver Cromwell is an example from the seventeenth century. Furthermore, Hayek contends, no agreement on public policy exists among those persons who claim an understanding of morality. Even religion “does not give us definite guidance,” contends Hayek, with reference to the many controversies between and within the many Christian denominations regarding matters of public policy. Hayek concedes that “the declining influence of religion” is a likely factor in the decline of Western civilization (although he fails to explain why), and he maintains that even a religious culture requires a “generally accepted principle of social order . . . a political philosophy which goes beyond the fundamental, but general precepts which religion or morals provide.”

This principle, Hayek claims, “is implicit in most of Western or Christian political tradition,” and is referred to by Hayek alternatively as “individualism” or “true individualism.” Hayek’s individualism, it will be argued, is not a distorted or artificial individualism (“false” individualism, to use Hayek’s term), such as homo economicus, but rather a methodological starting point of valuing individual human beings, which Hayek couples with a genuine (although defective) recognition of the importance of the common good. Indeed, Hayek regarded “the ‘symbolic truths’ of Christianity as having ‘been indispensable conditions of the growth of civilization.’” But after 1945, we do not find Hayek equating the Western tradition with the Christian tradition in his major works of political philosophy, other than in a footnote in *The Constitution of Liberty* (1960). His concluding work, *Law, Legislation, and Liberty*, published in three volumes from 1973 to 1979, is silent on the topic.

Unfortunately, Hayek himself only imperfectly understood the essence of Western civilization. Rather than finding its true essence, namely, Christian culture founded upon the inheritance of the Greeks and Romans, Hayek focused upon its mutated descendants, i.e., the Enlightenment and the secularized, post-Enlightenment West, and thus missed the mark in his political thought. Hayek committed what Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical letters find to be “the fundamental error” shared by the positions rejected by the Church, namely, “the refusal to recognize the existence of God, of a supernatural order, and of the duty we have to submit to it.” The practical effect of Hayek’s washing his hands of religion because of public policy disputes between and within Christian denominations is that relativism wins by default. The fact that there are such disputes is not seriously in
question. As remarked by Hayek’s contemporary, John Courtney Murray: “Civil discourse would be hard enough if among us there prevailed conditions of religious unity; even in such conditions civic unity would be a complicated and laborious achievement.”

Disagreements about particular courses of action are to be expected. It is a *non sequitur*, however, to jump from the fact of disagreement among Christians to the conclusion that Christianity may be practically ignored in the course of a project seeking to philosophically justify free, Western society.

Hayek views government as indispensable for the maintenance of a social order, but “only to protect all against coercion and violence from others.” Hayek, in other words, views the state as a traffic cop. Coercion and violence, if unjustified, are clearly contrary to the objective goods of human nature. The practical (or prudential) difficulty which Hayek seeks to confront, and which contributes to the tension in his writings, is the fact that once “government claims the monopoly of coercion and violence, it becomes . . . the chief threat to individual freedom.” In order to avoid tyranny, then, Hayek argues that government must be bound to act according to “long-term rules,” from which government itself derives its authority. Consistent with the idea that the state must be restricted, peace, freedom, and justice are negative ideals for Hayek, characterized by “the absence of certain evils rather than the presence of positive goods.”

A state that strove (as many contemporary states do) to affirmatively provide goods in the name of peace, freedom, and justice could not remain limited in any meaningful way. Hayek also argues that in order to avoid tyranny, “the highest authority must in normal times have no power of positive commands,” and “its sole power should be that of prohibition according to rule.” In other words, the state should provide for general situations, and not play favorites. Also consistent with the idea that limits on the state are necessary, Hayek approvingly quotes Lord Acton’s statement that a “higher law above municipal codes is the highest achievement of English thought.”

But Hayek’s understanding of a “higher law” is problematic at best, because as a consequence of his decision to ignore Christianity, the “higher law” does not turn out to be either higher than human laws or very law-like. Despite the nominal belief in what looks like the natural law, Hayek essentially ignores the biblical and Augustinian roots of the idea of a law higher than human law, and likewise lacks a robust theory of natural law (and, consequently, of justice) as is found in Aquinas (and in the works of Hayek’s Thomist contemporary, Jacques Maritain). Indeed, St. Augustine captures Hayek’s one great political insight and does it better than Hayek. As Augustine writes in *City of God*, “Without justice, what else is the state but a great band of robbers?”
Chandran Kukathas, in explaining Hayek’s liberalism, writes that the Hayekian rejoinder to [the socialist] critics of liberalism amounts to a claim that the emergence, and survival, of the good society requires, not institutions which serve a shared or common understanding of the good for man but, rather, institutions which recognize that man in society is constantly engaged in the pursuit of that understanding. His defence of an individualist theory of justice rests on the argument that knowledge of the nature of the good is not ‘given’ to human understanding and, indeed, cannot be discovered without institutions of justice which leave people free to seek it.31

Such liberalism is greatly problematic. Hayek believes it is true that the West is good, otherwise he would not argue for the superiority of free, Western society over enslaved, centrally planned, state-run societies, i.e., socialism and communism. Hayek suffers from a similar problem as John Rawls, namely, the argument is a parlor game, a purely academic exercise.32 For all of Hayek’s claims about how (as Kukathas correctly puts it) “knowledge of the nature of the good is not ‘given’ to human understanding,” in order to make such a claim, Hayek must either ignore human history, and particularly the Christian roots of the institutions of Western civilization (the bedrock of the liberal society defended by Hayek), or else he must squarely address such history and find it lacking (which he does not so much as attempt to do). In the Old Testament, knowledge of the nature of the good is literally given to humanity by God via the Ten Commandments. Aquinas makes much of this in his own philosophy of law, and of the related ways that “knowledge of the nature of the good” is literally given to mankind directly via divine revelation, and indirectly via the human ability to know reality (as ably expounded by the pagan Aristotle). The Thomistic account of the natural law is an account of authoritative command in the social order that is neither constructivist nor positivist, for which Hayek, like so many modern and contemporary thinkers, fails to properly account. This is egregious given: (a) that it is the philosophical and religious tradition (Catholicism) which in the past nourished (and today sustains) the remnant of Western civilization; and (b) Hayek’s reverence for the English legal system. The equity courts, organized and administered by the bishops of the Roman Catholic Church, were courts of conscience (i.e., fairness and justice), and are the roots of the modern laws of corporations, equities, and much of business.

Moreover, Hayek’s conclusions are contrary to the roots of his own theory. His account of the rules of just conduct, he relates, grew from Aristotle, the Spanish Scholastics (i.e., Thomism), and Kant (who, in
turn, sought to present a purely rational version of Pietist Lutheranism, i.e., Christianity without the Christ). The rules of just conduct that Hayek defends grew from European civilization, and that civilization grew from institutions leavened and formed by Christianity. The notions of good and justice that Hayek defends (i.e., his liberalism) arose in the Christian West and nowhere else on earth. Hayek seeks (perhaps inadvertently) to divorce his liberalism from this Western, Christian culture while at the same time claiming that we only discover “the good” via institutions. In short, Hayek’s arguments are contrary to his own theory. On Hayek’s view, with Christian culture having given us “the good” and its related institutions, we can now jettison the Christian religion, and, ultimately, its morality, in the name of “justice,” (or, more properly, an evolutionary seeking after justice that can never arrive at a final destination), and somehow this will not result in the destruction of Western institutions and civilization. We must not coerce over faith or ethics, on Hayek’s view, and so, in time, it would appear that the decadent, self-hating West is doomed to be overcome successively by self-confident Nietzschean nihilists and non-concepting Muslims. Indeed, since Hayek’s death in 1992, we have arguably witnessed the accelerating decomposition of Western institutions and civilization caused, in part, by the cultural surrender that Hayek unwittingly advocates.

John Gray condemns Hayek’s spontaneous order as “a value-free explanatory scheme which accounts for the character of complex phenomena found in nature and society but lacks any definite moral content.” Gray is correct. It is a net loss by Hayek, and rationally indefensible, if this is the end result of the history of Christendom. It would be absurd to contend, for example, applying Hayek’s arguments, that the Catholic Church is merely presenting “one conception of the good,” because to make such a claim is to ignore what the Church itself claims, i.e., that it is in possession of the truth about the good for man, and that it is rationally understandable by all human beings. Even if one disagrees with the Church, one cannot ignore the Church’s claims about its own teachings, i.e., its truth-claims. As Kukathas explains, “Hayek makes clear . . . that political philosophy must see man not merely as a utility-maximizer but as a being who is engaged in the pursuit of knowledge of the good life.” That is, unfortunately, unless that pursuit involves ethical or religious claims, or actually achieving knowledge of the good, because, on Hayek’s view, we must not ever get there, or, if we do get there, we cannot coerce others on account of such claims. In which case, one would appear rather stuck with maximizing utility, or, as Pope Benedict XVI and Alasdair MacIntyre have observed, instrumental rationality and a utilitarian social order.
As previously noted, Hayek never explains why “the declining influence of religion”\textsuperscript{36} is a likely factor in the decline of Western civilization. Tocqueville, however, does: Religion is needed “in democratic republics most of all” because “the freedom that characterizes such political orders can easily become destructive unless it is constrained by morality (i.e., the shaping of the soul that Plato spoke of)—and that for most people requires religious faith.”\textsuperscript{37} Orestes Brownson makes the same argument: “religious sanctions are essential to the safeguarding of freedom and justice; it is only through them that men’s passions, which lead to the threatening of freedom and justice when they are unleashed, can be held in check.”\textsuperscript{38}

Hayek’s work, then, is in tension, insofar as he simultaneously: (1) desires the general guidance provided by religion and morality; (2) acknowledges that religious and moral authorities disagree on political questions; and (3) seeks to push religion and morality out of a substantive role in the public sphere. How to escape this confusion?

In this article, there is only space to point toward a possible fix for Hayek’s flaws: the Thomistic Aristotelianism of Jacques Maritain. Ralph McInerny briefly but instructively summarizes Maritain’s political philosophy as follows:

Maritain provides a brilliantly succinct account of natural law and the way in which it grounds the rights of man. This is one account of human rights among others, but it is the true one. When this is coupled with the suggestion that modern talk of rights, modern theoretical justifications, are parasitic on classical natural law and, more importantly, on the influence of the Gospel, we begin to see what Maritain is suggesting. First, on the practical level, agreement can be reached on a list of human rights as long as we don’t look into the diverse justifications of them. Second, inadequate theoretical justifications bear the stamp of what they sought to replace: the persistence of the recognition of rights is due to the influence of the Gospel even when it has been overtly rejected. Does this mean that Maritain can reflect on modern views and see them as a way back into a medieval or classical government? Not at all. History cannot be wished away; the sacral civilization of the Middle Ages cannot be reestablished. What Maritain is describing, it emerges, is a transitional period prior to the establishment of what he calls a new Christianity.

Man has two ultimate ends: one temporal and terrestrial, the other eternal and heavenly. The medieval system broke down when the relative autonomy of the terrestrial common good was realized. Modern political theories, preceding and following revolutionary events, have sought to pursue the terrestrial common good in total separation from man’s supernatural end. The new society that Maritain
intimates is based on a recovery of Christian faith. Far from ushering in a new version of a sacral society, Maritain argues, citing Cardinal Manning, that the religious faith of the majority of the citizens is the best guarantee of tolerance and pluralism. *Man and the State* thus provides a later version of the argument of *Integral Humanism*.\(^9\)

A more detailed comparison of Hayek and Maritain is a topic for another day.

**CONCLUSION**

Hayek’s greatest failing is that he perpetuates the Enlightenment’s exclusion of revelation, despite his reliance upon (a) the social fruits of Christianity, i.e., Western institutions; and (b) Aristotelian Thomism via the Spanish Scholastics.

Hayek acknowledges that his work is not without defect, and expects that it will be carried forward. A sympathetic but critical reading of Hayek leads one to think that Hayek’s good insights (his prudential claims about the limits of the power of the state) can be incorporated with the Thomistic Aristotelian tradition. Hayek, however, perseveres in affirming the necessity of a thoroughly secular, morally neutral political and social order, and does so at the price of sacrificing that order. This is something that he manifestly did not desire; hence the tension in Hayek’s thought, which he failed to resolve.

In political philosophy, Hayek was first and foremost attempting to influence the practical order. The fact that Hayek wrote not only to clarify the theoretical order, but also to better the lot of mankind in the world, deserves praise. Indeed, in one respect, Hayek deserves high praise: he was an amateur in philosophy, a Nobel prize–winning economist writing prolifically outside of his field for nearly fifty years, and he created a towering, influential, and long-lasting achievement. Politics and philosophy, however, cannot escape answers to questions about the nature of man and the universe, and thus cannot escape truth-claims in the religious sphere. Hayek and Kant share an error: the rejection of all revelation in the name of philosophic autonomy.\(^{40}\)

**Notes**

1. Any detailed discussion of Hayek’s economic views is beyond the scope of the present examination. It is worth noting, however, that Hayek shared the 1974 Nobel Prize with an intellectual opposite, the Swedish socialist Gunnar Myrdal.


6. R. Emmett Tyrell, The American Spectator, July 1996, 32. As Tyrell continues: “The Czech interpretation of his work brought in a heavy dose of Catholic morality. The mix startled me, though perhaps it should have been anticipated.”


8. Ibid, 1.


10. Ibid.


17. Ibid.


19. Ibid.
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23. Gilson, *The Church Speaks to the Modern World*, 7. Hayek’s critique of social justice is also flawed; however, the present article does not afford space for a meaningful critique.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid, 131.
28. Ibid., 130.
32. Kukathas reports in a footnote that Hayek wrote in 1982 that he agreed with Rawls’s “essential point,” and saw their disagreement as “more verbal than substantial.” Ibid, 209n7, citing the preface to the single volume edition of *Law, Legislation, and Liberty*, xvii.
33. See note 9 above.
35. Ibid, 128.
38. Krason, *Liberalism, Conservatism, and Catholicism*, 18n11, quoting Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot* (7th rev. ed) (Chicago: Regnery, 1986), 245–50. Indeed, Brownson goes so far as to claim that “without the Roman Catholic religion it is impossible to preserve a democratic government.” Orestes Brownson, “Catholicism Necessary to Sustain Popular Liberty,” October 1845. The bases for Brownson’s claims are that Catholicism unchangingly sees the vanity of this world, and “that it is the only religion, which, in a popular government, is or can be exempted from popular control, and able to govern the people.” Ibid.