

La Teoría del Conocimiento en Hayek, Lao Tse y Luis de Molina: una conexión entre la antigua y moderna filosofía libertaria

How is the Ancient and Modern Libertarian Philosophy Connected Together? A Knowledge Approach on Friedrich Hayek, Laozi, and Luis de Molina

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Resumen: Friedrich Hayek es un autor de referencia para muchos investigadores sobre el pensamiento liberal clásico o la corriente más libertaria de la Escuela Austriaca. Por otra parte, en los últimos tiempos está creciendo el interés por la filosofía de Lao Tse que, en opinión de Hayek y de otro gran autor austriaco, Murray Rothbard, resulta muy cercana a los principios liberales. Así, resulta de gran interés comprobar que muchas respuestas a los problemas económicos de la actualidad se encuentran en la sabiduría de Lao Tse hace dos mil años, junto a la enseñanza de los doctores escolásticos españoles de los siglos XVI y XVII. En este artículo vamos a comparar las teorías sobre el conocimiento y el orden espontáneo de Hayek, Lao Tse y Luis de Molina, buscando demostrar cómo esos tres grandes filósofos pueden ayudarnos a conseguir una sociedad más próspera y libre.

Palabras clave: Hayek, Lao Tse, Daodejing, Luis de Molina, ética libertaria.

Abstract: Friedrich Hayek has been a topic of considerable interest, especially among classical-liberal/libertarian scholars and societies. And the studies of Laozi's philosophy have also drawn increasing attention worldwide. Hayek and another great libertarian philosopher Murray Rothbard also considered that Laozi's philosophy matched the libertarian principle. Increasingly, classical liberals/libertarians seek answers to current political, economic, and social questions within Laozi's wisdom from over 2000 years ago and the Spanish scholastic's teaching since the 16th century. By comparing and integrating the knowledge approach theories of Hayek, Laozi, and Luis de Molina, this paper uncovers new insights into how the integrated version of the above three great philosophers can benefit modern society for peace, prosperity, and liberty.

Keywords: Hayek; Laozi; Daodejing; Luis de Molina; libertarian ethics.

The studies on the School of Salamanca have surprisingly increased in recent years, mainly from economics and political thought. After some seminal publications by Grice-Hutchinson (1952) and Schumpeter (1954), more and more works appeared in the same direction. Rothbard (1995) paid particular attention to it from the libertarian point of view, later completed by an exciting compendium by Azevedo and Moreira (2012). The Spanish reissue of Grice-Hutchinson (2022) includes, for example, an updated introductory study by L. Perdices that summarizes the literature related to this topic.

On the other side, Laozi's philosophy in *Daodejing* (Laozi 1980, 1993) has received considerable attention from many libertarian philosophers, including Rothbard (1995) and Hayek (1966). Rothbard considered that Laozi might be the first libertarian on earth. At the same time, Hayek treated Laozi's philosophy of *wuwei* (non-action) as thinking that can relate to his spontaneous order theory. The specialists in *Daodejing*, Feng (2014), and Long (2003) also reckoned the pro-individual liberty elements of Laozi's philosophy. Wang and Carames-Sanchez (2019) also provided an initial comparison and first-hand transition of *Daodejing* to discuss the similarity between the philosophy of Hayek and Laozi.

In this regard, there is a fascinating question that we might need to answer, what is the similarity between the Spanish scholastics and the ancient Chinese philosophers? As few previous studies link them, it would be beneficial to find a bridge that has observed the two sides at least briefly. Fortunately, the observation mentioned above from Hayek provides the possibility. This paper uses Hayek's philosophy of knowledge (1937, 1945, 1988) as a benchmark and understanding to connect the Salamanca School represented by Molina and the ancient Chinese Hundred Schools of Thought pictured by Laozi. It is concluded that in addition to Laozi not mentioning the price, the three

philosophers compared the difference between government intervention and non-government coordination in other related topics.

The structures of the paper are the following. Section 1 provides the research background and methodology. Section 2 is the primary analysis. Section 3 concludes.

1. RESEARCH BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

Due to the evolution of languages', long history, it is necessary to understand ancient content through modern languages' representation and translations. In this paper, we also use academically recognized translation and interpretation. Moreira (1992), Gomez-Camacho (1981), and Azevedo and Moreira (2012) provided us with a modern understanding and translation of Luis de Molina's theory, both in Latin, modern Spanish, and English. Graham (1989), Heshangong (1993), B. Wang 1980, Qian (1988), Slingerland (1998), Zong (2003), and W. H. Wang and Carames-Sanchez (2019) provided mandarin-Chinese based interpretation to analyze the contents of Laozi. In the following sections, we will discuss in depth our research topics. Besides, by making both Spanish and Chinese-speaking readers search for the references, we also provide some translated bibliography in Spanish and original Chinese texts in footnotes. In this paper, Laozi's quotations were translated by W. H. Wang and Carames-Sanchez (2019), a previous related research project that one of the authors did.

2. MAIN ANALYSIS

From section 2.1 to section 2.3, based on Hayek's philosophy of using knowledge and spontaneous order, we separately analyze Laozi's understanding of *zhi* and *de* and de Molina's theory on just prices.

2. 1. Hayek's PHILOSOPHY OF THE USE OF KNOWLEDGE

As we have mentioned, as the philosophical understanding of Hayek on knowledge and spontaneous order (Hayek 1937, 1945) is a bridge to connect Luis de Molina and Laozi, it is essential to review the above Hayekian philosophy and understanding of knowledge and spontaneous to his theory of knowledge.

Hayek (1945) connected his understanding of spontaneous order and the use of knowledge.¹ For Hayek (1988), knowledge is vital for formulating prices and markets, and spontaneous order is a better way than central planning to generate more knowledge, morality, and wealth in human society. In a Hayekian sense, spontaneous order was defined as any kind of order without systematic coercion, such as any state interventionist or centrally planned constructivist policies in both social and economic life (W. H. Wang and Carames-Sánchez 2019). Hayek writes:

[B]y following the spontaneously generated moral traditions underlying the competitive market order [...] we generate and garner greater knowledge and wealth than could ever be obtained or utilized in a centrally-directed economy whose adherents claim to proceed strictly in accordance with 'reason.' (Hayek 1988, 1973)

As we will see below, Hayek based his non-constructivist theory of knowledge on the Greek concepts of *Physei* (nature) and *Thesei* (positive laws). Nevertheless, Hayek also analyzed two social and economic institutions: *Cosmos*, with a spontaneous foundation, and *Taxis*, when an imposition from top-down coercive intervenes, making the social and economic orders artificial. These considerations were written in the first chapters of *Law, Legislation, and Liberty* (Hayek 1973), becoming a foundation of the latter scholars to develop the Hayekian philosophy to other fields, including inquiring and connecting the Hayekian approach to other spontaneous order-based philosophies, such as the British classical liberalism and the scholastics' insights. Recalling the invisible hand of Adam Smith, Hayek concludes that:

It would be no exaggeration to say that social theory begins with and has an object only because of the discovery that there exist orderly structures which are the product of the action of many men but are not the result of human design. (Hayek 1973, p. 37)²

Therefore, Hayek not only opposed centrally planned constructivist policies but was also against for social scientists to provide any theoretical

¹ Huerta de Soto (2010, p. 40) considered that the Hayekian concept of knowledge has the characters of being subjective, creative, tacit, practical, and dispersed.

² For the citation in the Spanish version of *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, See Hayek (1994, p. 73).

base that can be used to support any top-down interventionist policies. The next question is, how to link the Hayekian perception with the Chinese Hundred Schools of Thought? The following section 2.2 might provide a perspective.

2. 2. LAOZI'S UNDERSTANDING OF *ZHI* AND THE HAYEKIAN CONCEPT OF KNOWLEDGE

As mentioned above, Hayek also quotes Laozi's words on non-action (*wuwei*).³ Hayek considered that there is a connection between his theory of spontaneous order and Laozi's concept of *wuwei*. Hayek's translation of Laozi's words on non-reaction follows:

Is this all so very different from what Lao-Tzu says in his fifty-seventh poem:
If I keep from meddling with people, they take care of themselves.
If I keep from commanding people, they behave themselves.
If I keep from imposing on people, they become themselves. (Hayek 1966)⁴

It is considered that Laozi's concept of *zhi* and Hayek's concept of knowledge are analogous (W. H. Wang and Carames-Sanchez 2019).⁵ *Zhi* in Literary Chinese means "understanding" or "understanding things independently" (Zong 2003, p. 1032). And *knowledge* is defined as "understanding of or information about a subject that you get by experience or study, either known by one person or by people generally" or "the state of knowing about or being familiar with something." (Mcintosh 2013). In this regard, *zhi* and knowledge are conceptually similar.

Further, Laozi defined a positive perspective on *zhi*. He argues that real *zhi* is *de* virtue (virtue).⁶ He argued that *de* emerged in nature, guiding people to become moral, and false knowledge is the values the ruler defines and imposes on people to execute.⁷

³ *Wuwei* in Chinese is written as 無為.

⁴ The original texts are: "我無為而民自化，我好靜而民自正，[...]我無欲而民自樸。" (Laozi 1980).

⁵ *Zhi* in Chinese is written as 智.

⁶ In Chinese, *de* (virtue, 德) means the ability of an individual to become an example for other people. For more about the explanation of *de* in traditional Literary Chinese, see Graham (1989, p. 13) and Qian 1988 (p. 25, p. 27).

⁷ Heshangong (1993, p. 73) argues that "the ruler who has knowledge despises virtue and valuable words and despises essence and valuable refinement. The people from the lower

Further, Laozi provided a detailed negative connotation of *zhi* (knowledge). Laozi's understanding of the negative notion of *zhi* relates to the rulers' top-down constructivist centrally planned policy (W. H. Wang and Carames-Sanchez 2019). For Laozi, that perception of the negative aspect of *zhi* is a deception as the rulers can indoctrinate its citizens, converting the real concept of *zhi* and *wuwei* (non-action of the state) into a false and constructivist idea of knowledge onto people. He stated:

The more *zhi* emerges, the more deception it would create for people. (Laozi 1980, p. 43, translated by W. H. Wang and Carames-Sanchez (2019)⁸

Apparently, this side of *zhi* can be considered state propaganda in a modern sense. Not only criticizing the rulers' compulsive information to the people. Furthermore, Laozi suggested people should not act by following the negative *zhi* (Laozi 1993, p. 75).⁹ He stated:

If people reject knowledge, then they will benefit a hundred times [more than if they do not reject knowledge. (Laozi 1980, p. 45, translated by W. H. Wang and Carames-Sanchez (2019)¹⁰

Additionally, sinologist (B. Wang 1980, p. 23) understood that, for Laozi, if people do not have real knowledge of virtue, they will not become competitors or threats to the rulers; thus, the rulers try to keep ordinary people ignorant of the real knowledge of virtue. Such an explanation can be found in the following words of Laozi:

Can you love the people and govern the state without any knowledge? (Laozi 1980, p. 23, translated by W. H. Wang and Carames-Sanchez (2019)¹¹

classes then reply to the rulers by creating great deception, betrayal, and lies." (Translated by). The original texts of his commentary in traditional Chinese are: "智慧之君賤德而貴言，賤質而貴文，下則應之以為大偽姦詐。"

⁸ The original texts of this sentence in traditional Chinese are: "智慧出，有大偽。" The English word "deception" is similar to the Chinese word *dawei* (大偽).

⁹ The original texts of Heshanggong's commentary in traditional Chinese are: "棄智慧，反無為。"

¹⁰ Translated by W. H. Wang and Carames-Sanchez (2019). The sentence's original texts in Chinese are: "絕聖棄智，民利百倍。"

¹¹ The original texts of this sentence in traditional Chinese are: "愛民治國，能無知乎？"

In this regard, Laozi’s separation between the positive and negative parts of *zhi* cooperates with Hayek’s separation between *Physei* (nature) and *Thesei* (positive laws) concepts.

2. 3. LUIS DE MOLINA’S PRICE THEORY AND HAYEK’S SPONTANEOUS ORDER CONCEPT

Completing the concepts of spontaneous order, prices, or knowledge, which we have related between Hayek and Laozi, we now add a reference to the Jesuit theologian Luis de Molina (1535-1600), considered a late member of the Salamanca School.

In Volumes I and II of *Law, Legislation, and Liberty*, Hayek argued that human activities result from human action but not from (centrally planned) human design (Hayek 1973, p. 20). For libertarian economists, this subtle difference is central to their understanding of economic science. Especially for the Austrian school scholars, economics is a scientific branch that does not follow the inexorable laws of physics or mathematics (Huerta de Soto 2008). Instead, it is precisely subject to the processes of freedom, decision-making, success, or error that all human acts have.

On this issue, as we discussed briefly in section 2.1, Hayek criticized the constructivism in knowledge as a “false dichotomy” between the natural (*Physei*) and the artificial (*Thesei*). For Hayek, it is not always necessary to speak of strictly rational or “positive” decisions in everything related to human action. For Hayek, a third level of behavior forms the basis of the social sciences. And the behaviors are the results of individual human activity but not from the (centrally planned) human design (Hayek 1973, pp. 20-21).¹² The rationalist drift, denounced by Hayek, was to assimilate the concept of reason to that of natural law so that positivism consolidated the theory that any law is always a deliberate construction of human reasoning. By citing John Locke’s understanding of the natural law, Hayek concludes

Reason does not so much establish and pronounce this law of nature as search for it and discover it. [. . .] Neither is reason so much the maker of that law as its interpreter. (Hayek 1973, p. 151)¹³

¹² Fort the reference in the Spanish edition, see (Hayek 1994, pp. 46-48). A more complete explanation that is related to Molina’s understanding of individual activities and centrally planned designs can be found in Moreira (1992). For more about the introduction of the Salamanca School, see Sánchez-Bayón, Urbina, and Castro-Oliva (2022).

¹³ Fort the reference in the Spanish edition, see (Hayek 1994, pp. 258).

Returning to the background of his theory of spontaneous order, Hayek refers to the Scottish philosopher Adam Ferguson as the great inspirer of these ideas in modern times, who wrote about these issues in his work *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* ([1767] 1995).¹⁴ However, Hayek points out that their first antecedents are found in Luis de Molina and in his explanation of how prices are formed in the market. It follows the scholastic expression *communis aestimatio* (common estimation).

This would be a perfect example of that phenomenon, “the result of human action, but not of human design.” Indeed, price adjustment as an open and competitive system cannot be planned by any governing mind or all-encompassing body. It is produced by the free action of buyers and sellers (as long as there is no *fraud or deceit*). Therefore, from both a moral and a *technical* point of view, it is a *fair price*.

To corroborate this statement, Hayek refers us to one of Molina’s *Disputes* (disputationes) in his *De iustitia et iure* (1593-1609). In this case, in number CCCXLVII, Molina said:

The price determines whether the purchase sale is fair or unfair. For this reason, we will examine the existing price classes in this dispute and, in the next one, those elements that will help us judge more quickly if the price is unfair.

Things have a fair price set by the public authority by law or public decree... Most doctors, together with Aristotle (5 Ethic. c. 7), call this kind of price legal or legitimate, meaning that it is a price set by law. Indeed, the legal price is indivisible, so if in exchange for the merchandise sold more than said price is received, the sale would be unfair, and the excess should be restored. What we have just said must be understood from when the law establishing the legal price was fair, which we will see later.

Another price is what things have by themselves, regardless of human law or public decree. Aristotle and many other authors call this price natural in the cited place. They call it that way not because it does not depend to a large extent on the esteem with which men tend to appreciate some things more than others, as happens with specific precious stones, which are sometimes estimated at more than twenty thousand gold coins and more than many

¹⁴ Ferguson said, “nations stumble upon establishments, which are indeed the result of human action, but not the execution of any human design.” (Ferguson 1767, p. 187) For the equation in the Spanish edition, see Ferguson (1974 p. 155).

others. Something that, by their nature, is much better and more useful; nor do they call it that because said price does not fluctuate and change, since it is evident that it varies; but they call it natural because it arises from the same things, independently of any human law or public decree, but depending on many circumstances with which it varies, and on the affection or esteem that men have for things according to the various uses for which they are served. Because this price not only obeys the nature of items but also depends on multiple circumstances with which it varies and, even more critically, on men's free affection and esteem towards things, it is characterized by not being indivisible. And to present a certain margin within which justice is served, even when considering all the circumstances that occur in the market". (Gomez-Camacho, 1981, pp. 159-160, own translation)

Hayek considers that Molina is describing here that "type of phenomena that is not the product of the deliberate creation" of man, but the result of his action, as we say that economic processes are.¹⁵ We end with a second quote from the Jesuit on this same price issue, which seems relevant due to its surprising proximity to the most current microeconomic theory on supply and demand.:

It should be observed, thirdly, that many things cause the price of items to fluctuate up or down. Thus, for example, the scarcity of goods due to bad harvests makes the fair price rise. Abundance, however, makes it decrease. The number of buyers who attend the market, sometimes more significant than others, and their greater desire to buy also make it rise. Likewise, the greater need that many have for some particular good at a given moment, assuming the same amount of said sound, causes its price to increase. [...] Similarly, the lack of money in a specific place causes the price of other goods to rise. It goes down, and the abundance of money increases the price. The smaller the amount of money in a place, the more its value increases; therefore, you can buy more things with the same amount of money. (disp. CCCXLVIII). (Gomez-Camacho 1981, p. 169, own translation)

¹⁵ For the reference in Spanish, see Hayek (1994, 47).

2. 4. DISCUSSION

The following Table 1 shows the similarity and differences between the three philosophers. Our research found that perhaps because the age is too long, in addition to Laozi did not mention the price, in other related topics, the three philosophers all compared the difference between government intervention and non-government coordination.

Table 1. The similarity and differences between the three philosophers.

	Hayek	Laozi	Molina
Knowledge	It has subjective, creative, tacit, practical, and dispersed characters. Constructivism in knowledge is a false dichotomy between the natural and the artificial.	<i>Zhi</i> (knowledge) has two sides. 1) <i>De</i> (virtue) emerged in nature, guiding people to become moral. 2), and false <i>zhi</i> are the values rulers define and impose on people to execute.	Common estimation vs artificial estimation
Spontaneous order	Coercive central planning and human design vs any social and economic order without systematic coercion (i.e., state-interventionist or centrally-planned constructivist policies)	<i>Wuwei</i> (non-action) is a principle for the rules to govern more efficiently. vs <i>Faling</i> (state legislation) has a compulsive character. ¹⁶	Natural orders vs public decree
prices	Central planning with state-set prices vs	He did not mention the price.	Legal prices set by the government might be neither just nor trustworthy (as it

¹⁶ For more on *faling*, see W. H. Wang and Carames-Sanchez (2019).

price coordination (price adjustment as an open and competitive system cannot be planned by any governing mind or all- encompassing body)	was not formalized by supply and demand). vs Natural price generated by the free action of buyers and sellers (as long as there is no fraud).
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Source: Own elaboration.

In addition, we also need to pay attention to the limitations of this study and related investigations. First, the interpretation of relevant literature must involve relevant content of hermeneutics, which may lead to different or opposite interpretations of the exact text. Secondly, related research spans multiple languages and time and space, so understanding concepts needs to be based on the research team’s mastery and reading of the first-hand language as much as possible.

We make some prospects for possible future extension research based on the above research limitations. First, it is necessary to use an interpretation more in line with the original meaning as much as possible. Secondly, the investigation of relevant issues should cover the philosopher’s background as much as possible to make a more comprehensive inspection of his thoughts as much as possible. Finally, the comparative study of Spanish scholasticism and ancient Chinese liberalism will help modern people have a deeper understanding of ancient philosophy regarding freedom and the market.

3. CONCLUSION

By using Hayek’s philosophy of knowledge as a benchmark, this paper inquires about the similarity between the Spanish scholastic Luis de Molina and the ancient Chinese philosopher Laozi. We found that Hayek’s point of view among these three authors is relatively straightforward.¹⁷ The second is Molina because he has a reasonably systematic exposition of legal price, natural price, supply, and demand. For Laozi’s interpretation, we adopted the

¹⁷ This has a lot to do with him as a contemporary scholar, although his writing is sometimes not as good as his mentor Ludwig von Mises another colleague Murry Rothbard is more logical unambiguous.

textual interpretation of one of the authors in a previous study. In addition to Laozi not mentioning the price, in other topics involving knowledge, and social order, the three philosophers all compared the difference between government intervention and non-government coordination, showing a strong similarity.

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