

# THE COMPATIBILITY OF HOPPE'S AND ROTHBARD'S VIEWS OF THE ACTION AXIOM

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## A COMMON MISCONCEPTION

A sizable number of examiners of Austrian economics have come to hold a mistaken view that Hoppe's and Rothbard's stances on the nature and status of the action axiom are fundamentally incompatible. Brian Drum, a poster on the Mises Economics Blog, writes:

For what it's worth, it is not true that Rothbard shared the same neo-Kantian epistemology as Mises and Hoppe. Rothbard subscribed to an *empirical* (in the broadest sense) basis for the statement "Humans Act." His stance was much more in line with the style of thought of Aristotle/Aquinas/Menger than Kant/Mises/Hoppe. (Drum 2006)

Mr. Drum's comments indicate that the misperception extends beyond the realm of academic discourse; it has entered everyday conversations about Austrian economics on Internet forums. Some contemporary academicians also hold this view. Dr. Edward W. Younkens, in an otherwise most thorough and rigorous analysis, invokes the unnecessary dichotomy between the views of Rothbard and those of Mises (and, by implication, Hoppe) multiple times. Dr. Younkens writes:

Mises's praxeological thought has been continued and furthered by his student, Murray Rothbard, who contended that the law of human action could be viewed as a law of reality instead of as a law of thought. According to Rothbard, Aristotelian metaphysics and epistemology are consistent with Mises's action axiom and are able to provide a superior foundation for Misesian praxeological economics. As a consequence, a person would derive the action axiom through induction and deduce the principles of praxeological economics from that axiom. (Younkens 2005a, p. 5)

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Murray N. Rothbard . . . agrees that the action axiom is universally true and self-evident but has argued that a person becomes aware of that axiom and its subsidiary axioms through experience in the world. A person begins with concrete human experience and then moves toward reflection. Once a person forms the basic axioms and concepts from experience with the world, he does not need to resort to experience to validate an economic hypothesis. Instead, deductive reasoning from sound basics will validate it. (Younkins 2005b, p. 77)

Mises considered the action axiom to be a law of thought and thus a categorical truth prior to *all human experience*. Rothbard, working with an Aristotelian, Thomistic, or Mengerian tradition, justified the praxeological action axiom as a law of reality that is empirical rather than a priori. (Younkins 2005c, pp. 341-42)

Professor Younkins's intentions here are noble, and I agree with him that praxeology is fundamentally consistent with Aristotelian metaphysics and epistemology. By implication, I also accept as valid and valuable Younkins's characterization of Rothbard's view of the action axiom as a "law of reality." Yet Younkins errs in positing a dichotomy between a "law of reality" and a "law of thought" or a "law of the mind"—an unfortunate dichotomy that presumes that "laws of thought" are outside reality itself and hence do not really exist.

Unfortunately, Rothbard's own writings may have been responsible for instilling the view that his own ideas on the action axiom fundamentally clashed with those of Mises and Hoppe. In his essay, "In Defense of 'Extreme Apriorism,'" Rothbard sets up a needless contrast between his views and Mises's:

Professor Mises, in the neo-Kantian tradition, considers [the law of human action] . . . *a law of thought* and therefore a categorical truth *a priori* to all experience. My own epistemological position rests on Aristotle and St. Thomas rather than Kant, and hence I would interpret the proposition differently. I would consider the axiom *a law of reality*, rather than a law of thought. (Rothbard 1957, p. 315; emphasis in original)

I would consider the axiom [of action] *a law of reality* rather than a law of thought, and hence "empirical" rather than "a priori." But it should be obvious that this type of "empiricism" is so out of step with modern empiricism that I may just as well continue to call it *a priori* for present purposes. (Rothbard 1957, p. 318; emphasis in original)

Academics like Professor Younkins and other examiners of Austrian economics like Mr. Drum did not form their ideas on the apparent dichotomy between the Misesian-Hoppeian position and the Rothbardian one arbitrarily. Both have read the writers in question extensively and have tried to represent their views as accurately as possible. Yet both have also succumbed to the "law of reality"/"law of thought" dichotomy posited by Rothbard. This is a dichotomy Rothbard himself wrote about to counter

orthodox Kantian idealism—which indeed considers there to exist “laws of thought” independent of reality and imposed by the mind thereon.

The “laws of thought” or true synthetic *a priori* propositions as conceived by Kant are not psychological laws, of which human beings are immediately aware and which hence do not require extensive effort to discover. Furthermore, psychological laws—unlike “laws of thought”—might not be universal. On the contrary, according to Kant, “true synthetic *a priori* propositions are propositions about how our mind works and must of necessity work”; furthermore, “it is usually much more painstaking to discover” such laws than it is to find out empirical facts (Hoppe 1995, p. 18). Yet these propositions are also, according to Kant, self-evident because “one cannot deny their truth without self-contradiction; that is, in attempting to deny them one would actually, implicitly, admit their truth” (*ibid.*).

Kantianism in its original form, however, runs into the problem of idealism. Hoppe explains the issues that puzzled Kant and inclined his original philosophy to succumb to this problem:

How can it be explained, for instance, that reality conforms to the principle of causality, if this principle has to be understood as one to which the operation of our mind must conform? Don't we have to make the absurd idealistic assumption that this is possible only because reality was actually created by the mind? (Hoppe 1995, p. 19)

Under this idealistic assumption, the mind does not use the laws of thought to perceive reality as it actually is or things as they really are; rather, the mind artificially construes reality to fit it within the structural framework of the mind's own necessary laws—which the mind cannot transcend or escape. A reality so interpreted is not a representation of anything “out there,” but rather a creation of the mind itself. Kant himself failed to offer a satisfactory way out of this dilemma.

What Rothbard, Younkins, and Drum do not recognize, however, is that they are attacking a view that neither Mises nor Hoppe subscribe to. Mises and especially Hoppe go to great lengths to refute Kantian idealism via their formulation and description of the action axiom as a bridge between the mind and reality and therefore a law pertaining to *both*.

There is nothing wrong with the positive ideas of either Rothbard or Younkins on the action axiom, and their attempts to ground it in a firm, realistic metaphysical-epistemological framework can only be applauded. I will show that their project faces even less opposition than they think—since a Misesian-Hoppeian view of the action axiom fundamentally agrees with theirs.

#### HOPPE'S VIEWS

Professor Hoppe sees economics as “pure science, a science that has more in common with a discipline like applied logic than, for instance, with the

empirical natural sciences” (Hoppe 1995, p. 8). Economics is a sub-branch of praxeology—the “logic of action”—“whose propositions can be given a rigorous logical justification” (ibid.). Hoppe thinks that economics is *not* an empirical discipline in the way that physics or chemistry are empirical.

### 2.1 What Hoppe Means by the Term “Empirical”

It is important, however, to see precisely what Professor Hoppe means by the term “empirical.” Hoppe states that an empirical science “develops hypotheses that require continual empirical testing” (Hoppe 1995, p. 9). By this definition, economics is certainly not an empirical science, because its truths do not need to be tested for us to know their validity. Hoppe cites and reaffirms Mises’s insight that economic laws

are not subject to verification and falsification on the ground of experience and facts. They are both logically and temporally antecedent to any comprehension of historical facts. They are a necessary requirement of any intellectual grasp of historical events. (Mises 1998, p. 32)

By “empirical,” then, both Mises and Hoppe mean “contingent on historical facts.” An “empirical” economic law would be one which could only be obtained by looking at *some particular historical fact or some set of particular historical facts*. Only after examining that set of particular facts will one be able to say, “Aha! These observations suggest that the following economic laws exist.” Then, an “empirical” economist would have to think, “These particular facts seem to verify or suggest that this economic relationship exists, but perhaps some other particular facts will falsify this relationship. I should run tests to determine whether or not the relationship can be thus falsified.”

Of course, an “empirical” economics would never be able to *conclusively* verify or falsify anything. Empiricism implies that no statement pertaining to reality can ever be established with certainty. The statement will forever remain falsifiable by future experience. Neither verification nor falsification can ever definitively *prove* anything, because anything verified can be falsified in the future and anything falsified does not necessarily deny a causal relationship; some other circumstance might have intervened to prevent the “falsified” relationship from existing (Hoppe 1995, p. 9).

Even if strong evidence against a hypothesis is found, that might be a reason for doubting the hypothesis—but it would not be a conclusive refutation under a consistent empiricism. For instance, if someone advances the hypothesis that all swans are naturally white in color and a black swan turns up, this presents a challenge to the hypothesis, but does not conclusively disprove it. The claim that the swan in question is black must itself in principle be falsifiable in order to be admitted as a valid “empirical” claim under empiricism. Such a claim might be false if, for instance, it were discovered that the swan had been painted black or that it was a mirage or that it was a member of a closely related but different species which cannot interbreed with white swans. Thus, the blackness of the swan and the refutation of the hypothesis

that all swans are white are not guaranteed by the observation. If some observation were made to falsify the blackness of the swan, that observation—to be validly “empirical” under the empiricist definition—would also have to be falsifiable, and so on *ad infinitum* without ever reaching a state of full certainty as to the truth or falsity of anything.

Furthermore, we cannot know causality with certainty under empiricism. According to the empiricist, everything can influence anything, and only historical experience shows us what influences what, but this is never a definitive verification (Hoppe 1995, p. 31). Of course, genuine economic science could not exist under such premises; it would have nothing to say. It is possible to correlate numerous phenomena with numerous others by means of statistical analysis, but this only tells us about what happened in the past; it cannot be extrapolated into the future with certainty. The empiricist criterion of predictability of the future as an indicator of a theory’s correctness fails, because there is no way to know in advance whether prior statistical correlations will hold on subsequent occasions. The consistent empiricist can never rely on any aspect of his economic theories, since they can say nothing incapable of being falsified at any future moment. The empiricist remains perpetually ignorant of the ultimate truth or falsity of even his most basic assumptions.

In refuting the entire empiricist paradigm, Hoppe uses *the empiricists’ own* definition of “empirical” and shows emphatically why economics is not “empirical” under that definition. Hoppe presents empiricism as stating that “empirical knowledge must be verifiable or falsifiable by experience” (Hoppe 1995, p. 33) and proceeds to refute this basic proposition as absurd and self-contradictory. The empiricists think that all statements are either analytical—i.e., tautological and vacuous manipulations of definitions—or empirical—i.e., contingent statements about something real. So, Hoppe wonders, what about empiricism’s basic proposition? Is it analytical? In that case, it is not knowledge about anything real; it is neither verifiable nor falsifiable, thus not empirical. Hence, it does not say anything about reality as such.

Or is empiricism’s basic proposition itself empirical? In that case, it remains a mere hypothesis, capable of falsification. *On what grounds, then, could it be verified or falsified? What is the criterion? Empiricism offers no such criterion.* The best that empiricists can say is, “all heretofore scrutinized propositions fall indeed into the two categories analytical and empirical” (Hoppe 1995, p. 34). Future (or past) experience could still yield propositions that are both a priori and relevant to reality.

Clearly, then, under Hoppe’s view, the very term “empirical” is an absurd one, fraught with contradictions. Indeed, in the way the empiricists use it, the term “empirical” cannot convey any certain knowledge whatsoever. It cannot even be classified as one of the two types of “valid” ideas the empiricists themselves recognize. The term fails to meet the empiricists’ own criterion for a knowledge-conveying idea. It is sensible, then, that Hoppe rejects any talk of economics’ basic propositions—such as the action axiom—being “empirical.”

Hoppe furthermore argues that even the “natural sciences” would fail if built on consistently empiricist premises. For example, to the empiricist, “the successful applicability of arithmetic in physics is an intellectual embarrassment” (Hoppe 1995, p. 73). As I wrote in an earlier treatise, “Praxeology and Certainty of Knowledge,”

Hoppe explains that the key to arithmetic is repetition—a repetition of a given action. In order to count an object, one must act. In order to count yet another object of the same type, one must act again in a manner fundamentally similar to the last. Arithmetic refers to an action being repeated in this manner as having been done *twice*; since the action referred to distinct entities—and each repetition of the action counted one entity—arithmetic can say that *two* entities were registered via the counting procedure. The existence of action can be arrived at a priori. Because it is possible to repeat a given action in reality, the counting numbers—the foundation of arithmetic—must, too, be examples of true synthetic a priori knowledge. (Stolyarov 2006b)

Physics and all the other natural sciences cannot be built on perpetually falsifiable foundations—as the empiricist would like them to be—if apodictic certainty is the bedrock of arithmetic, a discipline required for formulating even the simplest physical law.

Hoppe’s use of the term “empirical” is synonymous with “historically contingent” or “positivist-empirical”—since the empiricists, positivists, and historians Hoppe criticizes do not equate the “empirical” with *all observation*. They confine the term to *specific, testable, verifiable and/or falsifiable observations*. “Empirical” used in this sense does not mean “pertaining to the external reality” or the even broader sphere encompassing the entire realm of real facts. It only applies to the narrow range of facts testable via specific experiments.

Yet while Hoppe’s views of economics’ status are true and consistent with his (and the empiricists’) definition of the term “empirical,” such a definition is not the only one used for that term. There are other far broader definitions of the “empirical” which—as we shall later explore—are consistent with Hoppe’s view of the status of economics. One such definition—among the broadest—is held by Rothbard.

## 2.2 How Mises and Hoppe Interpret Kant

Professor Hoppe regards both himself and Ludwig von Mises as practitioners of Kantian epistemology. It cannot be sufficiently emphasized, however, that *their Kantianism differs radically from Kant’s Kantianism*. Mises and Hoppe are Kantian insofar as they accept the terminology describing two principal Kantian distinctions: between *a priori* and *a posteriori* propositions and between synthetic and analytic propositions. Professor Hoppe explains his understanding of these classifications:

On the one hand [propositions] are either analytic or synthetic, and on the other they are either a priori or a posteriori. The meaning of these distinctions is, in short, the following. Propositions are analytic whenever the

means of formal logic are sufficient in order to find out whether they are true or not; otherwise propositions are synthetic ones. And propositions are a posteriori whenever observations are necessary in order to establish their truth or at least confirm them. If observations are not necessary, then propositions are a priori. (Hoppe 1995, pp. 17-18)

For Hoppe, the distinguishing mark of a Kantian is the recognition that “true a priori synthetic propositions exist—and it is because Mises subscribes to this claim that he can be called a Kantian” (Hoppe 1995, p. 18).

Kantian epistemology is oft equated with idealism: the notion that people’s knowledge is not knowledge about reality, but rather only about the structure of their own minds, which the minds superimpose upon reality. Kant himself might have held this view, insofar as he suggested—as Hoppe cites him—that “[s]o far it has been assumed that our knowledge had to conform to observational reality”; instead it should be assumed “that observational reality conform to our knowledge” (Hoppe 1995, p. 20).

However, this is not the view of knowledge that either Mises or Hoppe hold. Indeed, Hoppe views idealism not as a distinguishing mark of Kantianism *per se*, but rather as a “challenge” that Kant presented for future thinkers—an invitation to discover how it is that our knowledge is knowledge of something real (Hoppe 1995, p. 19). For Hoppe, idealism is a symptom of a problem in orthodox Kantian philosophy—and bridging the mind and the external reality is needed to solve this problem. The question is not *whether* we can know truth a priori, but rather *how* we can do so. Hoppe is confident that “Mises provides the solution to this challenge” (Hoppe 1995, p. 20).

Like Kant, Hoppe adheres to the *a priori/a posteriori* and synthetic/analytic dichotomies. Like Kant, he recognizes that true synthetic *a priori* propositions exist. Unlike Kant, however, Hoppe can fully refute the belief that such propositions are mere assertions about the workings of the human mind and nothing else. Kant himself thought that synthetic *a priori* truths—such as the truths of mathematics—might actually describe the world; Kant, however, did not have a full explanation of this, though Hoppe recognizes that

Kant had hinted at this solution. He thought mathematics, for instance, had to be grounded in our knowledge of the meaning of repetition, of repetitive operations. And he also realized, if only somewhat vaguely, that the principle of causality is implied in our understanding of what it is and means to act. (Hoppe 1995, p. 21)

Synthetic *a priori* truths are truths about the mind’s operation, but they are also truths about much more: about the nature of external reality itself. Here is where Mises and Hoppe part ways with Kant: “Mises adds one more extremely important insight that Kant had only vaguely glimpsed” (Hoppe 1995, p. 19)—the sturdy link that action provides between the mind and the body and between the mind and the external world. Hoppe explains the full epistemological implications of Mises’s discovery in his analysis of the status of action itself.

### 2.3 Action as True A Priori Synthetic

At the core of praxeology lies the incontrovertible proposition that humans act. Action is the purposeful employment of means to achieve ends in accord with the actor's values. The existence of action is axiomatic; the very attempt to deny it will result in its affirmation. (Stolyarov 2006a)

I will examine Hoppe's analysis of the action axiom's irrefutable status and show that Hoppe considers the action axiom not only a "law of the mind," but also an irrefutable *law of reality* necessary for man's very knowledge of the existence around him. Hoppe shows that the action axiom is undeniably true:

[T]he proposition that humans act, fulfills the requirements precisely for a true synthetic a priori proposition. It cannot be denied that this proposition is true, since the denial would have to be categorized as an action—and so the truth of the statement literally cannot be undone. (Hoppe 1995, p. 22)

This also implies that the action axiom is a statement about a fact of reality. Even though an individual might *try* to deny the axiom, his *real behavior* attests to its existence. Action is the deliberate employment of means for attaining ends. In this case, the actor's end is the denial of the action axiom. His attempted means is the statement, "Humans do not act." While his endeavor is bound to fail, he still acts so long as he *thinks* that the means he employs will arrive at the end he seeks. (Stolyarov 2006a)

If one were to merely observe the behavior of humans in the external world, one would not be able to induce the existence of purposive action from it; all one would observe would be certain outward movements of human bodies. Sensory observation of others alone does not allow one to conclude that action exists. (Stolyarov 2006a)

In this sense, Hoppe disqualifies human action from being *a posteriori*—requiring some particular observation or set thereof to be arrived at and understood. Hoppe argues that

it is not psychologically evident nor is it observable that with every action an actor pursues a goal; . . . it is neither evident nor observable that in order to achieve his most highly valued goal an actor must interfere or decide not to interfere; . . . it is neither self-evident nor can it be observed that these means must also have value for an actor; . . . [it] is not automatically clear or observable that as a consequence of having to choose and give preference to one goal over another . . . action implies the incurrance of costs; . . . [and that] it is not plainly evident or observable that at its starting point every goal of action must be considered worth more to the actor than its cost and capable of yielding a profit. (Hoppe 1995, pp. 23–24)

Nor is formal logic sufficient to arrive at a proof that action exists. While it is necessary to reason logically about action to derive praxeological insights from it, there is no set of starting premises from which action can

be strictly deduced. Rather, any logical analysis of action already presupposes its existence. (Stolyarov 2006a)

In that sense, action cannot be analytic—by Hoppe's definition of "analytic" as sufficient to arrive at using logic alone. One has to *be* an acting being in order to understand what action is—and one who does not act cannot grasp action's meaning.

By Hoppe's reasoning, the action axiom cannot be known a posteriori, so it must be knowable *a priori*. The action axiom is not analytic, so it must be synthetic. Hoppe has shown that if the action axiom is true, it is an *a priori* synthetic truth.

#### 2.4 Hoppe's Recognition of the Necessity of Experience to Arrive at the Action Axiom

It is important to note that Hoppe does not deny that *some sort of experience* is necessary to arrive at the action axiom. It would be absurd for anyone to suggest that any knowledge could arise in an absolute experiential vacuum—devoid even of experience of one's own self. After all, how could a person think if he has nothing to think about? According to Hoppe, "the truth of a priori synthetic propositions derives ultimately from inner, reflectively produced experience" (Hoppe 1995, p. 19). This is not "empirical" experience in the empiricists' sense of the term, but experience by a broader definition—which can be best phrased as *the mind's identification of facts about actually existing entities, including the identifier himself*. Inner, reflectively produced experience is not testable, verifiable, or falsifiable—but it does not need to be. We know it to be true without experimentation. The tools of positivist science are far too specialized to address such a broad and fundamental experiential category.

While Hoppe does not consider the action axiom to be "empirical" under the positivists' narrow definition of the term, he does see it as *experientially-derived*. This, as we shall later see, is also precisely Murray Rothbard's view.

#### 2.5 Law of the Mind and Law of Reality

It is mistaken to interpret Hoppe's view of the action axiom as a "law of the mind" as opposed to a "law of reality"—an interpretation this author has encountered multiple times. Such an interpretation is an implicit concession to the idealist strain of Kantianism—which views the mind and reality as separated by a wide chasm and presumes that it is possible for there to exist laws of the mind which are *not* laws of reality—and are by implication "superimposed" by the mind on reality. This is precisely the mindset Hoppe wishes to refute in claiming that action is a *bridge* between the mind and reality and thus belongs to both. An implication of this idea is that the mind belongs to reality as a part thereof—and that, consequently, every law of the mind is *also* a law of reality. The mind, after all, cannot act in reality if it is not itself real. A mind "outside" reality would be an *unreal* mind and would not even exist. It would certainly be incapable of action—as no nonexistent agent can ever

engage in existent actions. If the mind is capable of acting in reality, it must be a real mind.

The way Hoppe resolves the problem of idealism in orthodox Kantian epistemology is by recognizing that “our mind is one of acting persons. Our mental categories have to be understood as ultimately grounded in categories of action. And as soon as this is recognized, all idealistic suggestions immediately disappear” (Hoppe 1995, p. 20). This implies the recognition that all action is action in reality—that it is action with respect to something that exists.

The fact that we can act on existing entities—be those our own organisms or entities external to us—implies that we can know something about those entities, enough to act on them. The fact that some of our actions are successful—i.e., the means utilized have indeed achieved the ends aimed at—means that some of the knowledge of external reality we used has indeed been correct. “[I]f no human ends—including basic survival needs—were met, all humans would be long dead. We know that many humans exist and routinely remedy dissatisfactions; therefore, much of their action and argumentation must be correct” (Stolyarov 2006b).

It is not mere luck that enables men to survive and flourish, but a deliberate understanding of their own natures as acting beings, capable of discerning and harnessing principles of cause and effect in real entities. Reality is clearly such that some means are better than others for achieving given ends. If one’s ends are survival and proper nourishment, some means—e.g., eating bread—will fulfill them, while others—e.g., eating nails—will not. If a man, hitherto entirely ignorant of causality and of the connection of any means to any of his chosen ends, stumbles by pure chance onto the proper means for the fulfillment of his ends and sees that a given means (say, eating bread) has fulfilled his end (say, nourishment), he will then form a hypothesis regarding a causal relation between bread and nourishment. If he ever tries eating bread again, it will not be simply due to random chance, but because he has observed that his prior eating of the bread has led to his nourishment. Thus, he will eat the bread explicitly *because* he desires nourishment and has discovered that bread can bring it about. Such a man might initially *discover* any given causal connection through pure luck, but any *subsequent successful reliance* on it indicates that his actions—to the extent that they are systematically and repeatedly successful in attaining any given end—cannot be based on luck alone; they are based on an explicit acknowledgment of a causal relation. Humans repeatedly use means of the same sort to successfully attain ends of the same sort; thus, their success is not due to pure chance.

The existence of action implies not only that we can have true, certain knowledge about what is real, but also that action itself is real—not merely imagined or “superimposed” by our minds.

Acting is a cognitively guided adjustment of a physical body in physical reality. And thus, there can be no doubt that a priori knowledge, conceived of as an insight into the structural constraints imposed on knowledge qua

knowledge of actors, must indeed correspond to the nature of things.  
(Hoppe 1995, p. 70)

Our action is itself a phenomenon of the real world that we can definitively know and meaningfully analyze. Indeed, Hoppe's Kantianism begins to look remarkably similar to Aristotelianism, Thomism, and Objectivism in asserting that there is an absolute reality that we can know, that we are a part of that reality, and that we can use our minds—our knowledge and reason—to act efficaciously in that reality. Hoppe uses Kantian terminology to arrive at conclusions that Aristotle, Aquinas, Rand—and, as will be further shown, Rothbard—would have agreed with, though these thinkers defined their terms differently.

### 2.6 Hoppe's View Summarized

For the purposes of later comparison with Rothbard's views of the action axiom, it is fitting here to summarize what Hoppe thinks on its status:

- (1) The action axiom is not dependent on historically contingent facts or observations of some particular external data.
- (2) The action axiom is not experimentally testable, verifiable, or falsifiable—and it does not need to be, because we can know its truth without doing experiments.
- (3) The action axiom cannot be arrived at through logic alone; we need to ourselves be acting beings and use introspection to grasp action's existence. Experience—in particular “inner, reflectively produced experience”—is required to grasp the action axiom.
- (4) The action axiom is irrefutably true; even the very attempt to deny it will implicitly affirm it.
- (5) The action axiom is a bridge between the mind and reality; it is what allows the mind and reality to make contact and comprise the same existence. The mind, by implication, is a part of reality.
- (6) The action axiom is an irrevocable law—both of the mind and of reality.

### ROTHBARD'S VIEWS

All examiners of Hoppe's and Rothbard's writings on praxeology will recognize clearly and without a doubt that the two thinkers agree on the epistemological status of all praxeological propositions *derived from* the axioms of praxeology. *Once* the axioms of praxeology have been established, the conclusions of praxeology follow logically therefrom. Rothbard asserts this explicitly: “since praxeology begins with a true axiom, A, all the propositions that can be deduced from this axiom must also be true. For if A implies B, and A is true, then B must also be true” (Rothbard 1997, p. 59). For both Rothbard and Hoppe, praxeology is undeniably an axiomatic-deductive science.

Where some have argued that Rothbard diverges from both Hoppe and Mises is in his view of *how the action axiom itself is arrived at*. But does he, really, or is this divergence only a perceived one? Rothbard's own words suggest that he considers himself to disagree with Mises's position on the action axiom's epistemological status. I will show that, insofar as Rothbard disagrees, he disagrees with a position that Mises did not hold. In all matters of substance, Rothbard concurs with Mises and Hoppe—properly interpreted.

### 3.1 Rothbard's Misinterpretation of Misesian and Hoppeian Kantianism

Rothbard states that he perceives “a difference of opinion within the praxeological camp, particularly on the nature of the fundamental axiom of action” (Rothbard 1997, p. 63) between his own views and that of another group of thinkers—including Mises. Rothbard describes Mises's view as “assert[ing] that the concept of action is a priori to all experience” (ibid.).

I claim that Rothbard misinterprets Mises when claiming that Mises thought that action is *a priori* to *all* experience. Indeed, the evidence Rothbard gives for this—a quotation from *Human Action*—does not justify his interpretation: Mises writes that the concept of action is part of “the essential and necessary character of the logical structure of the human mind” (Mises 1998, p. 34). Rothbard then commits a *non sequitur* when he claims the following about the aforementioned passage: “I would deny, as an Aristotelian and neo-Thomist, any such alleged ‘laws of logical structure’ that *the mind necessarily imposes on the chaotic structure of reality*” (Rothbard 1997, p. 63; emphasis added).

How does it follow—just because there is an essential and necessary character and a logical structure of the human mind—that the mind must necessarily *impose* this structure onto reality or that reality is otherwise *chaotic*? (This is not to mention that a “chaotic structure” is a contradiction in terms.) Surely, what Mises wrote and Rothbard cited does not justify such a leap—from a logical mind to an illogical reality on which the mind must “impose.”

Rothbard misinterprets Mises because he misinterprets the nature of Mises's Kantianism. Rothbard refers to Mises as “an adherent of Kantian epistemology” (Rothbard 1997, p. 63), but fails to distinguish between Mises's Kantianism (which Hoppe explains in depth) and orthodox Kantianism. In describing Mises's views on “laws of the logical structure . . . of the human mind” (ibid.), Rothbard proceeds to merely describe the orthodox Kantian view—which Hoppe shows that Mises did not share.

The orthodox Kantian might believe that laws of the logical structure of the human mind are prior to *any and all* experience. Indeed, in his *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals*, Kant wrote of logic that it “is concerned only with the form of the understanding and of the reason itself, and with the universal laws of thought in general without distinction of its objects” (Kant 1785). In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant wrote of such universal laws of thought: “If, on the other hand, a judgement carries with it strict and

absolute universality, that is, admits of no possible exception, *it is not derived from experience*, but is valid absolutely *a priori*" (Kant 1781; emphasis added). It is evident that Kant does not consider experience *of any sort* to contribute to the derivation of universally valid laws of thought—of which the action axiom, had Kant recognized it, would have been an example. But Mises and Hoppe do not hold this view. Indeed, in a treatise devoted to explaining Mises's system of praxeology, Hoppe claims unambiguously that "the truth of a priori synthetic propositions derives ultimately from inner, reflectively produced experience" (Hoppe 1995, p. 19). Surely, "inner, reflectively produced experience" is *some sort of experience*.

What Mises *did* write is that the action axiom is "not subject to verification and falsification on the ground of experience and facts" (Mises 1998, p. 32). But it is one matter for a proposition to be *derived from* experience and another matter entirely for it to be *verifiable or falsifiable* on the grounds of *some particular experience*. For example, any human being can rightly claim that because he is human and because he has sensory experience of the world, he knows with certainty that all material objects have three and only three spatial dimensions. But no *particular* experience is needed to verify or falsify this proposition. One does not need to observe any *particular* material objects to know that all such objects are three-dimensional. Nor can any entity that exists or can be observed ever falsify this truth. Indeed, two people can spend their entire lives—each person observing only entities that the other has not seen—and both would still have more than ample evidence to assert unwaveringly that all entities are three-dimensional. So long as they observe *something* (including their own three-dimensional bodies) and are fully logical in their analysis of it, they will come to the same conclusion.

Indeed, what Mises's and Hoppe's views of the action axiom imply is that (1) it is not *testable* via *specific facts* (i.e., it is not historically contingent) and (2) that it is a necessary part of the mind's proper logical function. As Hoppe shows, neither of these points is a concession to Kantian idealism—but rather a conclusive *disproof* thereof—a bridging of the mind and reality via the action axiom.

Rothbard is right, of course, in his assertions of his own views. He correctly recognizes that the mind does not *impose anything* on reality in the act of perceiving or analyzing reality. Rather, the mind can accurately perceive and analyze *what is*. But there is no reason to claim that Mises and Hoppe would disagree with Rothbard on this; rather, all three seem to strongly reject idealism and any notion of an inseparable mind/body schism.

### 3.2 What Rothbard Means by the Term "Empirical"

Certainly, Rothbard uses terminology with which Hoppe would take issue. Most significantly, Rothbard claims that the action axiom is "broadly empirical," while Hoppe's writing seeks to demonstrate how the action axiom is *not* "empirical" as Hoppe understands the word—and, indeed, how the term

“empirical” presupposes a deeply self-contradictory empiricist-positivist outlook.

Yet the difference between Rothbard’s and Hoppe’s views on the status of the action axiom is *not* a difference in *substance* or a *disagreement* between them. Rather, it is primarily a difference in their *definitions*—especially of the word “empirical.” Here, we shall examine what precisely Rothbard means by this term.

Rothbard asserts that “the fundamental axiom and subsidiary axioms are derived from the experience of reality and are therefore in the broadest sense empirical” (Rothbard 1997, pp. 63–64). So, Rothbard *admits* that he is using an extremely broad definition of “empirical”—which encompasses anything “derived from the experience of reality.” This is a far broader definition than Hoppe’s—which equates the “empirical” with the historically contingent or the positivist-empirical. Hoppe would not disagree with Rothbard that the action axiom is derived from the experience of reality. Indeed, the “internal, reflectively produced experience” Hoppe mentions *has* to be experience of reality—if it is conceded that the subject who is doing the experience actually exists and is real. After all, how could he have *any* experience of himself if he did not exist?

Nor would Rothbard disagree with Hoppe that the action axiom is not historically contingent. Rothbard explicitly repudiates the empiricists’ definition of “empirical:” “I would agree with the Aristotelian realist view that [praxeology’s] doctrine is radically empirical, far more so than the post-Humean empiricism which is dominant in modern philosophy” (Rothbard 1997, p. 64). Rothbard asserts—correctly—that *his definition of “empirical” is better than the empiricist one*. Hoppe accepts the empiricist definition and then proceeds to repudiate it as meaningless and self-contradictory. Rothbard, on the other hand, tries to salvage the term “empirical” by saving it from the empiricists’ fallacies and properly defining it to encompass the axioms of praxeology.

Rothbard emphasizes that the “broadly empirical” foundations of praxeology are not testable by any positivist criterion:

they are so broadly based in common human experience that once enunciated they become self-evident and hence do not meet the fashionable criterion of “falsifiability” . . . they are therefore a priori to the complex historical events to which modern empiricism confines the concept of “experience.” (Rothbard 1997, p. 65)

Rothbard, like Hoppe, recognizes the absurdity of stating that knowledge of anything as true or false can only be ascertained after experimentation.

### 3.3 Rothbard’s View of Inner Experience as Necessary to Arrive at the Action Axiom

Furthermore, Rothbard agrees with Hoppe about exactly what sort of experience is needed to arrive at the action axiom. Rothbard states his view outright: the action axiom rests “on universal *inner* experience, as well as on

external experience, that is, the evidence is *reflective* rather than purely physical” (Rothbard 1997, p. 65). Rothbard would agree with Hoppe that, if we were to account for external experience alone, we would obtain no evidence of action—only of physical movements. In order to arrive at the existence of purposive action, we have to *ourselves* be purposive actors and be able to reflect on that fact.

Furthermore, the external component to the experience required to arrive at the action axiom is the fact that action is action in reality—the fact that our mind is not separated by an unbridgeable chasm from entities external to it. Indeed, many parts of our bodies are such entities. For example, the human leg is not the human mind, yet the human mind may purposively act using the leg. Hoppe acknowledges that action is what bridges our minds and external entities. For one to understand this, one first has to be a physical entity whose actions can affect other physical entities. Thus, external experience of oneself as a physical entity necessarily complements introspection of one’s mental abilities to produce an insight about the existence of action—an insight that links the mind to the physical reality.

### *3.4 Rothbard’s Essential Agreement with the Synthetic A Priori and Irrefutable Nature of the Action Axiom*

This essential agreement between Rothbard and Hoppe on the nature of the experience required to arrive at the action axiom also means that Rothbard *implicitly acknowledges* the synthetic *a priori* status of the action axiom—as Hoppe defines “synthetic a priori.” That is, Rothbard recognizes that external experience *alone* does not suffice to arrive at the action axiom. Thus, the action axiom is not *a posteriori*. Furthermore, Rothbard would be the first to reject the claim that the action axiom is a mere “analytic” statement—obtained from manipulation of more fundamental logical axioms. Hence, it follows by process of elimination that Rothbard indeed sees the action axiom as *a priori* synthetic—though he would not use those words to describe it.

Moreover, Rothbard acknowledges a principal validation of the action axiom as irrefutably true: the fact that any attempt to deny the action axiom is self-contradictory, being an action itself. Like Hoppe, Rothbard explicitly supports this view:

The action axiom, in particular, should be, according to Aristotelian philosophy, unchallengeable and self-evident, since the critic who attempts to refute it finds that he must use it in the process of alleged refutation. Thus, the axiom of the existence of human consciousness is demonstrated as being self-evident by the fact that the very act of denying the existence of consciousness must itself be performed by a conscious being. . . . A similar self-contradiction faces the man who attempts to refute the axiom of human action. For in doing so, he is *ipso facto* a person making a conscious choice of means in attempting to arrive at an adopted end: in this case the end, or goal, of trying to refute the axiom of action. He employs action in trying to refute the notion of action. (Rothbard 1997, p. 68)

Rothbard thinks that the action axiom can be derived neither purely from observation nor purely from logic, but it is irrefutably true and cannot be consistently denied. In all these ways, he concurs with Hoppe's view of the action axiom as a true synthetic *a priori* proposition.

### 3.5 *Mind and Reality Unified—Again*

Rothbard certainly and correctly denies that the mind has any laws of logical structure it *imposes* on reality. But does he deny that the mind has any laws of logical structure *at all*? By no means. Quite the contrary, a consistent application of logic to Rothbard's already cited statements will demonstrate that not only does he recognize the existence of such laws of the mind, but also the action axiom's status as precisely such a law.

Rothbard explicitly acknowledges that the action axiom is a "law of reality, which the mind apprehends from investigating and collating the facts of the real world" (Rothbard 1997, p. 63). Yet Rothbard—by acknowledging the truth of the axiom of consciousness—admits that the mind is a part of reality. Furthermore, in explaining the necessity of introspection and reflective experience for arriving at the action axiom, Rothbard acknowledges that action is inseparable from the mind of the actor. Hence, the action axiom is a law, it is a law of reality—of which the mind is a part—and it is inseparable from the mind. The mind is necessary for action to take place and for its existence to be arrived at. There is no difference between a law *inseparable from* the mind and a law *of the* mind. By demonstrating the action axiom's irrefutability, Rothbard further implicitly acknowledges that it is a law of the mind. After all, the mind *has* to operate by this law—whether it wants to or not. The law of action is as binding on a functioning mind as the law of gravity is on a body.

Again, we have arrived at an essential agreement between Hoppe and Rothbard: a rejection of the false dichotomy between "laws of the mind" and "laws of reality"—a breach justifiable only under the severely flawed system of Kantian idealism. Rather, all laws of the mind are also laws of reality—with the action axiom among them.

### 3.6 *Rothbard's Views Summarized; His Essential Agreement with Hoppe*

Now, let us review Hoppe's principal views on the action axiom as stated in section 2.6 and see whether Rothbard agrees with them:

- (1) The action axiom is not dependent on historically contingent facts or observations of some particular external data.

Rothbard concurs here in full. His extensive explicit repudiations of the empiricists' overly narrow definitions of "experience" and "the empirical"—cited and analyzed in 3.2—suffice to confirm this.

- (2) The action axiom is not experimentally testable, verifiable, or falsifiable—and it does not need to be, because we can know its truth without doing experiments.

Again, Rothbard agrees. Section 3.2 highlights Rothbard's rejection of the empiricist mentality that all valid insights are attainable through particular experimentation and must be verifiable or falsifiable.

- (3) The action axiom cannot be arrived at through logic alone; we need to ourselves be acting beings and use introspection to grasp action's existence. Experience—in particular “inner, reflectively produced experience”—is required to grasp the action axiom.

Rothbard quite explicitly agrees here—as shown in 3.3, where Rothbard's views on the need for introspection to arrive at the action axiom are presented.

- (4) The action axiom is irrefutably true; even the very attempt to deny it will implicitly affirm it.

Rothbard not only agrees with this claim, but devotes an extensive passage to supporting it; it is reproduced and analyzed in 3.4.

- (5) The action axiom is a bridge between the mind and reality; it is what allows the mind and reality to make contact and comprise the same existence. The mind, by implication, is a *part* of reality.

Rothbard affirms this, too. This is what he means by stating that there must be components of *both* internal reflective *and* external experience in order to arrive at the action axiom. After all, the acting human is both a physical and a mental being. See 3.3 for a discussion about how this understanding necessarily links the mind and reality.

- (6) The action axiom is an irrevocable law—both of the mind and of reality.

Rothbard is in full agreement here as well—as shown in 3.5. If he acknowledges that the mind (consciousness) exists in reality and that the action axiom is a law inseparable from the mind, then logic dictates that he acknowledge that the action axiom is both a law of the mind and a law of reality.

## CONCLUSION

I have shown that Rothbard and Hoppe agree fully in the *substance* of their views on the nature and epistemological status of the action axiom. They both see the action axiom as prior to any comprehension of historical facts, not subject to empiricist criteria of verification and falsification based on particular tests, irrefutably true, understood via a combination of internal reflective and external experience, a bridge between the mind and reality, a refutation of philosophical idealism, and a fundamental law of the mind and of reality.

Granted, the two thinkers' positions are different in their use of terminology—which is understandable, given that they adhere to different *philosophical*

schools. Rothbard would naturally use Aristotelian terminology, while Hoppe would use Kantian terminology; the two can thus be expected to differ substantially in their use of certain words—especially the term “empirical.” But their *conclusions* on the action axiom’s nature—as well as on the status of the rest of the body of praxeology—are identical in essence. Hoppe and Rothbard use different means—Kantianism and Aristotelianism, respectively—to arrive at the same end: an apodictically certain, logically impregnable science of human action which can illuminate our understanding of the real world. Contrary to the opinions of some, there is no contradiction between their views on the action axiom. One can agree fully with the positions of both Hoppe and Rothbard without holding conflicting viewpoints.

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