

Rather than pursuing a dogmatic view of an ‘ideal’ European Union, we should cultivate greater debate about the nature of Europe and our place within it.

Blog Admin

For many, Europe appears to be on an inevitable path towards greater integration and federalism, with the UK looking more and more for a way out of the EU. [Simon Glendinning](#) takes an in-depth look at the philosophical underpinnings of the contemporary debate over European integration, arguing against those who take a ‘dogmatic’ view of the march towards an idealised federal union. Instead, he writes, we should resist these harmonising ambitions and work towards ‘unity in diversity’: a Europe whose peoples have the freedom to debate and choose their own ends.



In a recent article in the [Telegraph](#), Peter Osborne draws the debates over Britain’s future in the European Union into relation to an age-old philosophical quarrel: “The problem is that European and British leaders tend to come from rival intellectual traditions”:

“In Britain, empiricism – most closely associated with Hume, though its roots can be traced back to William of Ockham and others – is the native inheritance. Empiricism insists that all knowledge of fact must be based on experience. Most European schools of philosophy claim the exact opposite, namely that ideas are the only things that truly exist. This school of metaphysical idealism can be traced back through Hegel (for whom history itself is the realisation of an idea) and Kant to Plato. Anglo-Saxon empiricism and the idealism found on the Continent therefore prescribe directly opposite courses of political conduct.”

Osborne’s attempt to align contemporary European politics with traditional European philosophy is fascinating. And while I don’t think his distinction between empiricists and idealists will do the trick, I do think that significant philosophical differences are lurking behind political disputes around Europe today.

First, a correction. The distinction Osborne draws between a British “empiricist” tradition and a Continental “idealist” one mixes up two standard distinctions in philosophy. Empiricism is usually opposed to rationalism. This is a distinction in epistemology concerning the foundations of knowledge. And idealism is usually opposed to materialism. This is a distinction in ontology concerning the fundamental nature of reality.

The distinction between empiricists

The distinction between empiricists and rationalists is a good one, and there is some justification for thinking the former is more commonly found in British philosophy and the latter more commonly in French and German philosophy. The distinction between idealists and materialists is also a good one, but it is not clear that this lines up philosophical nationalities at all. Hegel is a paradigm idealist, Marx a paradigm materialist, both are German.

However, there is another philosophical distinction hovering around Osborne's mixing things up, and this one is exceptionally important for thinking about different approaches to European union today, though like the distinction in ontology it is not clear that it follows nationally configured contours. I will give labels at the end, but for the moment will describe the distinction without them.



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The distinction at issue grows from rival European views of human history. Both of these views understand the trajectory of world history as involving a transition from a primitive condition to an increasingly civilised one. However, one of these views regards that transition as having a universal appropriateness for humanity: the process of civilisation is understood in terms of progressive advances in *learning how to live together* that move societies ever closer to an *ideal* form of individual and social life for Man.

In his essay [“Two Concepts of Liberty”](#), Isaiah Berlin draws a distinction between those who hold this kind of view of history and those who find such grand narratives of emancipation and progress both unbelievable and dangerous. The former group (and Berlin does not divide Europe or even the West on this, and includes here “German historicists or French theocrats, or neo-Conservatives in English-speaking countries”) can be said to be inclined towards what Berlin calls a “metaphysical view of politics” because their views are governed by an *a priori* idea of Man and the proper end of Man. The latter group, by contrast, are those who hold what Berlin calls an “empirical view of politics,” claiming to take men as they find them. On the empirical view, Berlin suggests, we come to see that “the ends of men are many, and not all of them are in principle compatible with each other.” A thinker who subscribes to this view will conclude that “the possibility of conflict – and of tragedy – can never wholly be eliminated from human life, either personal or social.”

Those who hold an empirical view of politics thus deny that there is an ideal arrangement of human affairs. Instead, they urge us to heed “Burke’s plea for the constant need to compensate, to reconcile, to balance; and Mill’s plea for novel ‘experiments in living’ with their permanent possibility of error.” Berlin is aware that this sort of view “may madden those who seek for final solutions and single, all-embracing systems, guaranteed to be eternal.” Nevertheless, he is convinced that “it is a conclusion that cannot be escaped by those who, with Kant, have learnt the truth that ‘Out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made’.”

At issue, then, is a distinction between those who hold that there is a universally ideal condition for man, and so insist on a “monism of values,” and those who see in experience many ends of men, and so insist on accepting a “pluralism of values.” Thinkers of the latter sort do not have to give up on ideas of emancipation and progress, nor the idea of more and less historically primitive forms of human society. Nevertheless, they will not see these things in terms of a historical movement of Man towards a final end of history. Berlin concludes:

“It may be that the ideal of freedom to choose ends without claiming eternal validity for them, and the pluralism of values connected with this, is only the late fruit of our declining capitalist civilisation: an ideal which remote ages and primitive societies have not recognised, and one which posterity will regard with curiosity, even sympathy, but little comprehension. This may be so; but no skeptical conclusions seem to me to follow. Principles are not less sacred because their duration cannot be guaranteed.... ‘To realise the relative validity of one’s convictions,’ said an admirable writer of our time, ‘and yet stand for them unflinchingly is what distinguishes a civilised man from a barbarian.’ To demand more than this is perhaps a deep and incurable metaphysical need; but to allow it to determine one’s practice is a symptom of an equally deep, and more dangerous, moral and political immaturity.”

It is in these terms – and on Berlin’s side – that I think we should approach the philosophical distinction underlying Osborne’s discussion of European quarrels. It is not a contrast between idealists and empiricists, but a distinction between two ways of rejecting scepticism about values: between those, on the one hand, who cleave to an ideal in which everyone is free to make his or her own “experiment in living,” and those, on the other hand, who cleave to an ideal of a single and finally adequate form of individual and social life for Man. The contrasts here are, to give them nicely post-Kantian names, between *Skeptics*, *Experimenters* and *Dogmatists*.

How might this trinity of positions be applied to European politics today? The contemporary French Maoist philosopher Alain Badiou is a [polemical](#) Dogmatist, insisting that human societies must always be “measured” against a single “principle of principles”; namely “the principle of equality.” However, I think all sides in the European debate might agree with Badiou that the fundamental problem facing today’s European framework is that it lacks “popular impetus” and is “without subjective force”; it is not – except perhaps in the small world of the Brussels’ bubble – run through with personal commitments and attachments. Moreover, I think all sides might also agree with Badiou’s sense that, beyond Europe’s objective situation in global affairs, it is finally “that subjectivity that interests us, that solicits us.” The question then is how to respond to that solicitation. Does it demand today the sort of “great creative gesture” that Dogmatists like Badiou wish for, in his case “the fusing of Germany and France into a new unity”? Or, is it imperative today precisely to resist this sort of “great creative gesture”?

On this point *Skeptics* and *Experimenters* are at one against *Dogmatists*. *Dogmatists* are those who understand “ever closer union” in Europe as a movement towards the radical elimination of “conflict and tragedy” through the approximation of European society to an ideal form of social life for all humanity: a cosmopolitan political project with a rationally ideal end, viz. the final “fusion” of states. *Skeptics* about European union resist this because they think that the absence of “subjective force” behind the European project is more or less inevitable: the “subjectivity that interests us” resides primarily in the rootedness of people in nations, and there is no prospect nor any advantage in seeking to forge a political unit beyond that form. *Experimenters* resist the harmonizing ambitions of the Dogmatists too. However, unlike Skeptics, they cleave to an ideal around which a not-merely-national “we” might form, and, today, will contribute to discussions concerning “ever closer union” among European peoples in these terms. For Experimenters, what we need to move towards is a Europe to come that ‘stands unflinchingly’ for the ideal of freedom to choose our own ends (including all sorts of collective ends at different levels); a condition where people increasingly feel themselves the author of their own lives rather than subjected, in imperious fashion, to Dogmatic ideals of a single end for all.

How the Experimenter’s point of view might inform work dedicated to EU multi-level institutional design is a fascinating question – and one that is way beyond this piece. However, we might still ask whether there is a “great creative gesture” comparable to Badiou’s call for the fusion of Germany and France that might give impetus to the Experimenter’s cause. In the 1920s and 30s the French poet and thinker [Paul Valéry](#) called for something of this sort in the context of the development of the League of Nations. In his contributions Valéry insisted that an organ of international co-operation cannot depend only on the work of *minds especially dedicated to government*. It needs in addition the co-operation of “*minds especially dedicated to the mind*”: not just co-operation between people who work on treaties and constitutions, but also among people who work on our self-understanding, our understanding of who we are.

The goal here is not the achievement of a single European mind that will help draft some future single European act. As an Experimenter Valéry insists that the point is precisely *not* “to establish among minds the harmony of uniformity”. Far from it: “That [uniformity] would doubtless be monotonous, and certainly undesirable. It is right that ideas should differ according to men, their ages, conditions, and surroundings, and there is more than one art of thinking. This very variety is a natural and necessary condition of vitality.” On the other hand, Valéry did not think, as a Skeptic might, that such differences are rooted in national traditions that create insurmountable “obstacles” to a developing harmony: they do not need to “harden in isolation and become inaccessible to exchange.”

Cultivating this condition of *harmony without harmonisation* in Europe is, surely, as close as one could wish for the idea of “unity in diversity” that the European project has always put at the foreground of its movement of “ever closer union among the peoples [plural] of Europe”. If we want to move towards the kind of League of Nations in Europe that Experimenters since Kant have anticipated, we do not need “polemics” on “the only rational steps” towards the fusion of states, but the development across our continent of forms of “correspondence” and “exchange” that can forge a new “Republic of Letters.” Valéry concludes: “The League of Nations presupposes a league of minds.”

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About the author

Simon Glendinning – LSE European Institute

Simon Glendinning is Reader in European Philosophy at the LSE’s European Institute and Director of the Forum for European Philosophy.



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