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The Compartmentalization of Moral Inspiration

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Let's start with the bad news. On paper, at least, the future of Europe looks bleak. The proposed Constitution of the European Union was decisively defeated last year. Many European birth rates are well below the level of repopulation. State social programs, which were already financially unstable, appear to be facing economic disaster in years to come if demographic trends continue. Expanding domestic and pan-European bureaucracies have kept economic regulation high, albeit with increasing uniformity. The cost of doing business in Europe is among the most excessive of modern industrialized contexts, and often simply prohibitive for small, local, and family enterprises. Meanwhile, the populations that do grow within Europe are generally immigrant ones, particularly Muslim. Amongst these, certain strains of radical Islam appear to be taking root and even nurtured under the protective securities provided by western civil life. Thus another political problem faces European countries, namely that of dealing with sometimes violent cultural difference while maintaining the commitment to freedom and human rights so central to modern civilized life. The bombings in London and Madrid press this issue, and they are unfortunately likely the beginning and not the end of this problem. As this essay was crafted, with the French riots still in recent memory, Palestinian gunmen surrounded European Union offices in the Gaza Strip demanding an apology for cartoons run in many major European newspaper depicting "disrespectful" sketches of the prophet Mohammad. And, of course, Europe continues to suffer from all those social ills we have long associated it with: high unemployment, drug use, alienation, and what the English conveniently summarize in the term "anti-social behavior."

On the other hand, the news is not all bad. In the last decade Europe has achieved a monetary union that has drastically reduced transaction costs as well as integrated financial markets. The European Union has established bureaucratic institutions, which-

although much beleaguered- have brought uniformity to policy in some areas where it was needed. What's more, and this can hardly be taken for granted given the history of the last few centuries, European states no longer fight or threaten to fight amongst themselves militarily. Granted this has, perhaps, come at the price of making European militaries irrelevant- but not a bad bargain on the face of it. So if we were to step back and appraise the strengths of European integration today, surely we would find that Europe has devised important political and economic institutions that provide a framework for prosperity and security *among* European states.

However, the inadequacy of this arrangement, in light of the problems mentioned at the outset, comes from that fact that it is not European states, indeed not even European representatives, but rather European *people* who constitute the fundamental unit of economic, political, and social action. We will return to the question below as to whether there is such a thing as *a* European people. At any rate, whatever the institutional arrangements that may be in place to negotiate claims between states, governments, and the public sector, these do not, and likely cannot, resolve the questions of desire, meaning, and inspiration that ground human action. Economic and political security, by themselves, may be a necessary and *yet very insufficient* condition for true social flourishing. But what is the importance of such an admission in our reflection on the European Union and its member states and people?

It hardly has to be noted that there continues to be much difference within that body that is called Europe. Indeed this difference extends to the self-conceptualization of various individuals and communities as well as the aspirations that guide their daily imagination and the standards of achievement they embrace. Some regions are more vibrant than others, and certainly there are institutional factors that account for some of this variety. However, despite all the talk of "western civilization" the reality is and has always been that Europe contains various cultures and ways of life, and these are strongly rooted historically and geographically. What the philosopher Hegel called *Sittlichkeit* – the ethical universe one encounters in daily life – is inexorably local; and, even for Europeans

always on the move, although *Sittlichkeit* may translate they do not always travel. So if we want to inquire into what inspires European people – why do people do what they do, what are the goods they aspire to achieve and the common objects of love they hold dear – we might expect that the answer will be more complex and less universal than we would hope.

Furthermore, this recognition may then reflect negatively on the conditions of European integration. What exactly is the basis for the unity of this thing called “Europe?” If lowering economic transaction costs were the only basis and goal, then the political implications would be limited. But clearly what is envisioned by the European Union project is more than that; it is political and social, and not without good reason. However, we might pause to consider the recent reflections of an English moral theologian regarding the basis of this unity, namely: “The danger of dreaming up abstract schemes of political union on paper – a danger never far from the European Union – is that they do not accord with the way the member-peoples actually conceive their practical engagements (O’Donovan, 154).” And in the face of real diversity it is not clear that one political union could accord with a multiplicity of *Sittlichkeit*, all in various tensions with one another. Thus far, it may be objected that I have not named these differences, and may be taking them for granted and failing to realize the substantial basis of consensus among European peoples, like respect for human rights, liberty, self-expression, and contractual agreements. To this brief objection let me, at this point, offer the suggestion that perhaps it is this belief in the settled and thus passé nature of moral reflection that provides the most hostile challenge to particular communities with further ethical allegiances. That is to say, the position that no interesting moral questions remain that cannot be suitably settled by better institutional designs may be just one more ethical conception – central to the ideology of EU bureaucracy, but in conflict with many other particular moral allegiances among the European peoples.

I wish to juxtapose this line of reflection with an interesting thesis, made all the more interesting because of its author, the man now called Pope Benedict the XVI. In an

article shortly before his election he wrote, “The security we need as a basis for our freedom and dignity cannot, in the last analysis, come from technological systems of control, but can spring only from man’s moral strength (346).” Of course the Pope has lamented the conspicuous exclusion of Christian references in the EU Constitution and has suggested that Europe’s self hatred of its own religious past is nothing short of pathological. So there is little doubt about the particular moral allegiances he has. However, this larger thesis I have noted is interesting because it seems to reconcile two divergent strands of thought that I have been tracing. One of those would suggest that because of the manifest diversity and inexorable locality of *Sittlichkeit*, there can be no real unity in a European ideal. The other suggests that unity comes from technocracy that can provide the determinates of social flourishing without moral inspiration. Benedict, however, seems to suggest that there can be a real unity among difference that secures freedom and dignity, and that this security arises precisely out of moral inspiration. I am aware that grand statements about moral inspiration are vague, however, and some may object that this particular claim derives from the rhetorical opportunism of a religious figure. Consider, though, a concrete example of the light this may shed on a contemporary problem central to European economics.

Analogous to the inexorably local nature of moral formation is the phenomenon of “local knowledge” – information obvious to those familiar with an environment, but which is costly to obtain for those at more remote distances. Economic success is driven by local knowledge, because such success ultimately rests on delivering particular things for particular needs. In his famous essay, *The Uses of Knowledge in Society*, the Nobel Laureate Friedrich Hayek argued that the virtue of the market price system is that it enables the communication of local knowledge. The price of, say, steel contains information about its scarcity and demand, which makes it possible for particular people to decide if it is worth using for their particular projects. Thus, seen in light of the importance of localized knowledge, we can understand why economic regulation enacted by distant, centralized bureaucratic bodies presents such a problem in principle – for how could such bodies ever

gather all the information necessary to make good general regulations when such regulations will impact so many different, particular circumstances?

Why, then, are regulations needed in the first place, if it is so difficult to get them right? Although not universally the case, many regulations are needed because individuals have incentives to lie, cheat, and shirk in their economic dealings. Another way to put it is that regulation is a substitute for morality. But given the importance of local knowledge, relying on regulation rather than morality results in enormous economic loss, because of the activity and innovation that regulations needlessly prohibit in many circumstances. When regions and their “mentalities” enjoy moral health, they are able to best capitalize on their economic possibilities. However, when assimilated into larger geographies governed by wider administrations, they are burdened with new and, from their point, senseless regulation necessitated by other regions whose particular moral standards were not as salutary. Thus the logic of regulation combined with increasing the geographical jurisdictions of government might result in a vicious circle that ironically leads to *an economic as well as moral leveling* of healthy communities, as their practices come to be reshaped by intrusive regulations originally devised for corrupt, distant regions. And on top of this problem, we can add the always-pertinent concern as to who regulates the regulators at the end of the day.

If this dynamic holds a kernel of truth, it seems to suggest one reason why the EU project is so difficult as it is presently conceived. From the perspective of the people, particularly small businessmen, regulatory integration is alarming because they have clear reason to distrust the technical competence of centralized bureaucrats to promulgate regulations that are sensitive to the particular local realities across Europe. Furthermore, any local community has no reason to believe that in the compromises of representational politics the commitments they hold dear will be reflected in the judgments emanating from such a diverse congress. From the other side, bureaucrats cannot trust local authority and moral traditions because they do not guarantee results across the board. Thus the EU appears to institutionalize the classic “prisoners dilemma” in which neither party trusts

the other because of the way the game is set up, although both do stand to benefit from the other if the situation could be resolved differently.

What, then, would be the character of a better way forward, and what role do our reflections on difference, morality, and locality have to play. The hope is that the moral inspiration of Europe could both provide a concrete agenda with which bureaucrats could be trusted as well as alleviate the need for regulation on a vast scale. But that is perhaps impossible, because as I have suggested we do not have at hand, in the diversity of regional ways of life *and* moral disagreements, the conditions for such a unified moral purpose. This is, in part, because there is no “European people.” As my English theologian explains, “When the Italian who moves next door is not a foreigner, but merely from out of town; when it requires no comment or explanation that the chief of police for Northern Ireland is hired from Denmark, or a Spaniard heads an elementary school for the children of Prague, and everyone automatically speaks English, then a European people is at hand (153).” It is not at hand yet. So, the aspirations for European political unity must be correspondingly minimal. However, despite the empirical reality that moral inspiration begins on the local level, it would be a mistake to compartmentalize it there. What the European ideal can accomplish in the absence of a European people will be, first and foremost, a product of its moral debates in public, philosophical, and even cultural arenas. This is a task beyond governmental institutions, and requires that Europe reject the false belief that moral reflection belongs at the periphery of its social thought.

Works Cited

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