

HegelForum Studien

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Perfektionismus der Autonomie

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Spontaneity, Autonomy, and Perfection

Historical and Systematic Considerations

Douglas Moggach

German Idealism from Kant onwards achieves a revolution in ethical and social thought, introducing new concepts of freedom and personhood,¹ and reconfiguring the domain of political debate; but this revolution has deep historical roots. In the German territories, political theories of Kantian inspiration emerge in the eighteenth century through a long process of engagement with the heritage of Leibniz, represented especially by Christian Wolff and his school. These debates are framed by the opposition between the contending political aims of perfection and freedom. The decisive question is the extent to which the state ought authoritatively to prescribe, and impose, a substantive vision of the good life for its subjects. Wolff's theory of political perfection is broadly inspired by Leibniz, and is reminiscent of Aristotle's doctrine of *eudaimonia*,² or happiness as fulfilment of natural capabilities. On this account, the state must actively promote the felicity or thriving of its members, including their material needs, and also their higher intellectual and spiritual aspirations. The Kantian criticism of Wolff rejects the paternalistic state and its theoretical basis in the ethics of perfection, in favour of spontaneous, self-determining activity; and it derives the idea of a juridical order which upholds the principle of free, rightful interaction. Kant's strictures constitute a decisive repudiation of the previous tradition, and the effect of this shift in orientation is to disempower political perfectionism of the Wolffian kind.

As this volume illustrates, political thought in the Germanic lands pursued this critical path throughout the 1780's and 1790's, and well beyond. And yet in the process of distancing from the older perfectionism, a renewal and transformation of perfectionist ethics occurs, and it occurs among Kantians themselves. What is at stake is the development of a new approach, which focuses not on the substantive goods toward which human nature putatively tends, but rather on the perfection of autonomy itself. Its starting point is the new concept of rational self-legislation which the Kantian account of practical reason

* The author gratefully acknowledges the support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for this project.

1 Jaeschke (1990), 2.

2 Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I; Kenny (1977), 25-32.

Søren Kierkegaard's Critique of Eudaimonism and Autonomy

Roe Fremstedal

1. Introduction: Eudaimonism and Autonomy

This article focuses on how Kierkegaard criticizes both eudaimonism and Kantian autonomy for failing to account for unconditional obligations and genuine other-regard. Like Kant, Kierkegaard argues that eudaimonism makes moral virtue contingent on prudence. Kierkegaard views eudaimonism as an anthropocentric and self-regarding doctrine, which he contrasts not with Kantian autonomy but with theocentrism and proper other-regard. Kierkegaard then criticizes Kantian autonomy in much the same way as he criticizes eudaimonism. Whereas eudaimonism makes morality contingent on prudence, autonomy makes morality contingent on revocable decisions, he argues. As a result, human autonomy can account for hypothetical imperatives but not for categorical imperatives. This line of reasoning seems problematic, however, since Kierkegaard takes Kantian autonomy to not only represent a form of moral constructivism, but also a form of moral relativism and decisionism. Still, Kierkegaard's critique of autonomy indicates that morality and practical rationality need unconditional commitment towards what is objectively good.

2. Kierkegaard on Eudaimonism – The Kantian Heritage

We begin by exploring Kierkegaard's explicit criticism of ethical eudaimonism in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846) and his *Journals and Papers* from the 1839-54 period.¹ In these texts, Kierkegaard offers a Kantian critique of ethical eudaimonism (while seemingly accepting psychological eudaimonism,

¹ Other writings, notably *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* (1847), also deal with eudaimonism, although less explicitly. Since the criticism of eudaimonism is essentially the same in the signed writings and in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard appears to share Climacus' views on eudaimonism in the *Postscript*. See also Matthew Mendham (2007); Carson Webb (2017).

the view that we generally act with happiness in mind). Kierkegaard can be seen as radicalizing Kant's critique of eudaimonism, so that it amounts not just to a critique of egoism (and instrumentalism about moral virtue) but also to a critique of autonomy. This radicalization of Kant's critique of eudaimonism has not attracted much research attention, although it provides an informative example of Kierkegaard's ambivalent and eclectic attitude towards Kantian philosophy.²

Kierkegaard was familiar with Kant's critique of eudaimonism from his studies at the University of Copenhagen.³ In *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, Kant describes eudaimonism as a form of moral egoism that is motivated by personal happiness and utility instead of moral duty.⁴ Kant thinks that ethical eudaimonism involves *instrumentalism* about moral virtue, since virtue is conditioned on pre-moral notions of self-interest and personal happiness (in a wide sense that includes sensuousness). Eudaimonists therefore view moral obligations as hypothetical imperatives based on personal happiness. Additionally, normative moral reasons are seen as being subjective and partial rather than objective and impartial.⁵ This is something to which both Kant and Kierkegaard object because they think that it undermines the proper role and authority of morality. Like Kant, Kierkegaard takes morality and prudence to represent *categorical* and *hypothetical* imperatives, respectively.⁶

In the marginal notes of his personal copy of *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard writes that "To choose oneself is no eudaimonism."⁷ Kierkegaard thus contrasts eudaimonism with the famous existential choice of oneself, a choice that is identified with the choice of the ethical by Judge William in the second part of *Either/Or*. Clearly, Kierkegaard denies that the position of William – the ethical stage – involves eudaimonistic ethics.

2 Like some of his German predecessors, Kierkegaard uses some Kantian ideas to break with the historical Kant, following the spirit instead of the letter of the critical philosophy. Unlike some of the German Idealists, however, Kierkegaard never claimed to be a consistent Kantian. Rather, he viewed Kant as an exemplary philosopher who provided a prolegomena for Christian faith. See Roe Fremstedal (2015a) and (2014), ch. 11. To some extent, the discussion of eudaimonism and autonomy in this article draws on my earlier work, including Roe Fremstedal and T.P. Jackson (2015); Roe Fremstedal (2015b).

3 *B&A* 1, 10 / LD, doc 12, 10; Green (1992), pp. 7f. I use the standard abbreviations for Kierkegaard's works.

4 Irwin (1996) (referencing Kant: *AA* VII, 130; cf. *AA* 6, 377f.).

5 For this distinction, see Parfit (2012), chs. 2-6.

6 Cf. *SKS* 9, 123, 133f., 194f. / *WL*, 119f., 130f., 195f.; *SKS* 22, 78, *NB* 11, 131 / *JP* 1, 975; Knappe (2004), chs. 3-5.

7 *Pap.* IV A246 / *JP* 5, 5636.

Like Kant, Kierkegaard (and William) does not appeal to prudence in order to justify morality. Nevertheless, this leads to a *dilemma* about how morality can be justified. The first horn of the dilemma understands being moral as requiring that we act for moral reasons, something that is circular and unconvincing to an amoralist or a practical moral skeptic (aesthete in Kierkegaard's terminology).⁸ The second horn, takes the form of being moral for non-moral (notably prudential) reasons, something that appears self-defeating, because it implies instrumentalism about virtue (or *self-regard* instead of *other-regard*) and legality instead of morality. Indeed, Kantians and eudaimonists tend to agree that morality requires not just the right actions but also proper motivation.

Neither Kant nor Kierkegaard consider it problematic to ascribe a secondary role to prudence, in which prudence provides normative reasons for actions that are constrained and limited by morality. Both Kant and Kierkegaard are *non-eudaimonists* rather than *anti-eudaimonists*. Non-eudaimonists hold that "we have sufficient reason to pursue virtue above all other goods or advantages even if it conflicts with happiness or it does not affect it either way."⁹ Still, happiness is important for morality in other respects, because it can provide reasons for action and a second defense of morality. Anti-eudaimonists, by contrast, hold that "any thought of the benefits one gains from" virtue to be "entirely out of place, and incompatible with" virtue.¹⁰ Virtue should therefore not be seen as a means to, or part of, personal happiness or self-interest.

In Kierkegaard's early work (1843-46), he views the relation between virtue and happiness as contingent in this life (as opposed to the afterlife),¹¹ whereas the late Kierkegaard (1847-55) suggests that there is an inverse relation between virtue and happiness in history. More specifically, in his later works, Kierkegaard claims that Christian virtue, which is ethical and religious, requires following Christ, something that involves suffering, martyrdom, humiliation, and crucifixion in this life.¹² Despite this, both the early and late Kierkegaard

8 Reflected aesthetes only seem to allow moral considerations insofar as morality is secondary to non-moral, aesthetic concerns. Kierkegaard takes the aesthetic in the original sense of *aesthesis*, as perception from the senses, but associates it with sensation, sensibility, and sensuousness more generally. The aesthetes then prioritize sensuousness above morality, even if they act morally on occasion.

9 Irwin (2011), 289.

10 Irwin (2011), 549. Irwin views Kant as a non-eudaimonist and Kierkegaard as an anti-eudaimonist.

11 *SKS* 4, 123, 156 / *FT*, 27, 63; *SKS* 7, 126 / *CUP*1, 134.

12 *SKS* 20, 249, *NB* 3, 11 / *JP* 1, 954; *SKS* 20, 293, *NB* 4, 13 / *JP* 1, 956; *SKS* 27, 486, *Papir* 407 / *JP* 1, 958; *SKS* 21, 152, *NB* 8, 17 / *JP* 1, 964; *SKS* 8, 220, 319-431 / *UD*, 119, 217-341; *SKS* 12, 170 / *PC*, 167; *SKS* 25, 370, *NB* 29, 107 / *JP* 3, 2908; *SKS* 13, 307 / *M*, 251.

think that the theological virtues and the second use of the law prepare, or contribute to, personal salvation and eternal happiness (the highest good). Instead of ruling out the idea that God may save unbelievers, Kierkegaard presents Christianity as demanding faith, hope, and charity. Indeed, these theological virtues seem to partially anticipate the happiness or bliss that we may later enjoy eternally.¹³ Hope, for instance, expects the good for oneself and for one's neighbor alike. And neighbor-love, which appears to anticipate the kingdom of God, involves loving both yourself and your neighbor (in the right way). Instead of viewing eternal happiness as incompatible with virtue (or denying that virtue contributes to eternal happiness), Kierkegaard is a non-eudaimonist.

Kierkegaard's general approach to eudaimonism seems broadly Kantian. Consider this passage from 1843-44:

The transition from eudæmonism to the concept of duty is a leap, or, assisted by a more and more developed understanding of what is most prudent, is one finally supposed to go directly over to virtue? No, there is a pain of decision which the sensuous (the eudæmonistic), the finite (the eudæmonistic) cannot endure. Man is not led to do his duty by merely reflecting that it is the most prudent thing to do; in the moment of decision reason lets go, and he either turns back to eudæmonism or he chooses the good by a leap.¹⁴

First, this quote aligns eudaimonism with the sensuous, the finite, and with prudence. On this account, prudence is not only something that serves personal happiness and self-interest, but ultimately something that serves sensuousness and inclination. This involves a very broad understanding of prudence (and happiness) that seems Kantian.¹⁵ For instance, a radically evil fanatic may not be prudent in the sense of rationally pursuing personal happiness and self-interest. Still, he could be prudent in the broader sense that he follows sensuousness and his inclinations rather than moral duty.

Second, Kierkegaard describes the transition from eudaimonism to virtue, duty, and the good as a leap. This is significant as it clearly shows that, for Kierkegaard, there is no gradual transition from eudaimonism to morality, because they represent different normative domains. Kierkegaard here points to a much-discussed problem, namely how to get from self-concern to genuine (non-instrumental) other-concern. The eudaimonist is initially concerned with personal happiness and only later develops other-regarding virtues such

13 Cf. Fremstedal and Jackson (2015); Fremstedal (2014), chs. 4-6.

14 SKS 27, 277, *Papir* 283, 1 / JP 3, 2349.

15 Cf. Irwin (1996); Fremstedal (2014), chs. 2-4.

as justice. Nevertheless, on this account virtue seems to require *self-effacement* which undermines the very self-concern that eudaimonists view as initially motivating the development of virtues.¹⁶

Kierkegaard expands upon this idea in his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, where he describes the relation between morality and prudence as follows:

[T]here actually are not two [different] paths, or there are two [similar] paths of pleasure [*Lystens Veie*], one of which is a little more sagacious [*klogere* – prudent] than the other; just as when climbing a mountain to enjoy [*nyde*] the view it is more sagacious not to turn around too soon – in order to enjoy it all the more. Then what? Then the sensualist [*Vellystningen* – the libertine] (the eudaimonist) is not only lunatic because he chooses the path of pleasure [*Lystens Veie*] instead of the path of virtue, but he is a lunatic sensualist [*gal Vellystning*] for not choosing the pleasurable [*lystige*] path of virtue.¹⁷

This passage associates eudaimonism with hedonism, libertinism, and sensualism.¹⁸ Like Kant, Kierkegaard understands eudaimonists as relying on pre-moral notions of happiness that are in principle accessible to amorlists and instrumentalists about virtue. Of course, this is something most virtue ethicists – or self-described eudaimonists – would deny, since they take virtue to be constitutive of happiness.¹⁹

The passage above suggests that prudence supports libertinism and vice. This clearly indicates *conflict* between prudence and morality.²⁰ Nevertheless, in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard denies that this conflict is total:

All worldly wisdom is indeed abstraction, and only the most mediocre eudaimonism has no abstraction whatever but is the enjoyment of the moment. To the same degree that eudaimonism is sagacious [*klog*], it has abstraction; the more sagacity, the more abstraction. Eudaimonism thereby acquires a fleeting resemblance to the ethical and the ethical-religious, and momentarily it can seem as if they could walk together. And yet this is not so, because the first step of the ethical is infinite abstraction, and what happens? The step becomes too great for eudaimonism, and although some abstraction is sagacity, infinite abstraction, understood eudaimonistically, is lunacy.²¹

16 Cf. Justin Clark (2016), ch. 7.

17 SKS 7, 367 / CUP1, 403. Pleasure and enjoyment seem identical in the original, although the Danish uses both "*Lyst*" and "*at nyde*".

18 Elsewhere Kierkegaard also interprets eudaimonism in hedonistic terms. Cf. SKS 20, 223, NB 2, 211 / JP 2, 1510. See also Mendham (2007).

19 Cf. Irwin (1996); Annas (1993).

20 Cf. SKS 7, 313 / CUP1, 342f.

21 SKS 7, 387 / CUP1, 426.

Kierkegaard (Climacus) here distinguishes between mediocre and abstract eudaimonism. The former is concerned with "the enjoyment of the moment," with short-term egoistic pleasure, whereas the latter has a broader focus, referring to enlightened self-interest or an enlarged or idealized form of prudence. Although he does not spell it out in detail, the abstract eudaimonism seems to be concerned with long-term interests instead of those relating to the present moment, or with other prudential values (or goods) than mere pleasure. Perhaps it even includes the interests of some other human beings. Kierkegaard (Climacus) therefore concedes that this abstract eudaimonism resembles morality to some extent. Conflict between morality and prudence (or eudaimonism) is not total, and idealized forms of prudence may partially resemble morality.

In the 1847-54 period, Kierkegaard repeatedly criticizes Christian eudaimonism for being egoistic.²² In 1848, for instance, he attacks the Danish congregation and cultural movement established by N.F.S. Grundtvig:

[T]he Grundtvigians imagine they are the only true Christians [...] They must be reproached for [...] that they do not do anything to communicate Christianity to other men. It is a kind of eudaimonism [...] to live on enjoying Christianity, to keep it for themselves [...].²³

The Grundtvigians focus on their own salvation, instead of the salvation of others. Kierkegaard suggests that this 'kind of eudaimonism' involves sectarianism, parochialism and group egoism that is incompatible with the universalistic and egalitarian character of Christianity. He objects to the self-regarding nature of sectarianism, which lacks proper regard for humanity as a whole.²⁴

3. Anthropocentrism and Kierkegaard's Radicalization of Kantianism

Kierkegaard goes a step further than Kant by viewing eudaimonism as an anthropocentric and self-regarding doctrine, which he contrasts with theocentrism and proper other-regard. He contends that the starting point of eudaimonism is irreducibly anthropocentric and self-referential, because

22 SKS 20, 223, NB 2, 211 / JP 2, 1510; SKS 26, 248f., NB 33, 5 / JP 6, 6927; SKS 25, 376, NB 29, 114 / JP 4, 3878; SKS 25, 390, NB 30, 12 / JP 4, 3881-3882.

23 SKS 20, 336, NB 4, 106 / JP 5, 6122. The translation leaves out Kierkegaard's description of this position as "*en Art Utroskab mod det Christelige*," as "a type of betrayal of what is Christian" (my translation).

24 Kierkegaard also accuses the Grundtvigians of confusing Christianity with Danish national identity. See Backhouse (2015).

it concerns individual-striving for personal happiness or flourishing. Even if eudaimonia involves moral excellence or virtue, eudaimonism still starts from the individual desire of permanent possession of eudaimonia or the highest good.²⁵

By contrast, Kierkegaard's Christian ethics in *Works of Love*, starts from God's descent to us, not from our ascent to God. More specifically, the second ethics is based on the acceptance of divine grace (after the collapse of pre-Christian ethics). Its starting point is not personal interests (or interest in personal salvation) but rather the theological virtue of agape, in the dual sense of loving both one's neighbor and God. Kierkegaard denies conflict between loving neighbor and loving God, since we can only love God by loving our neighbor. For this reason, in *Works of Love*, he develops a Christian ethics that is simultaneously theocentric and other-regarding. This ethics is based on the imitation of Christ's selfless concern for all human beings. Kierkegaard emphasizes that Christian charity requires willingness to sacrifice personal interests (including happiness) for the sake of other humans who are in need. This is what Kierkegaard means by following Christ, something which he associates with the experience of suffering in this life.²⁶

4. Evaluation of Kierkegaard's View of Eudaimonism

Recently, eudaimonists have developed responses to Kant's critique of eudaimonism, which argue that this criticism has limited validity, because it mainly holds for hedonistic and instrumentalist forms of eudaimonism.²⁷ Much the same may apply to Kierkegaard's (related) critique of eudaimonism, even if the latter goes beyond Kant's own.

First, even if Kierkegaard were right about philosophical ethics, he may not be right about theological forms of eudaimonism. Thinkers such as Augustine and Thomas Aquinas combine the eudaimonistic framework of classical ethics with Christian revelation (by viewing the highest good as the key to both ethics and soteriology). It is not clear that these types of theological eudaimonism need to be anthropocentric or subjective in any problematic sense. Within the perspective of theological eudaimonism, the human starting point (which Kierkegaard criticizes) is not invalid or mistaken as such, because this (albeit limited) starting point partially leads to the kingdom of God and salvation.

25 Fremstedal and Jackson (2015), 3.

26 See note 12.

27 See Annas (1993); Irwin (1996).

Virtue and happiness are not only good from our (limited) perspective, but also good for God. In other words, virtue and happiness are objectively good and there need not be a fundamental conflict between anthropocentrism and theocentrism (or a conflict between mere reason and faith), at least not if we understand both correctly.

Second, it is not completely clear that Kierkegaard's point holds for philosophical forms of eudaimonism which do not rely on divine revelation. Like Kant, Kierkegaard suggests that eudaimonism wrongly understands morality as relying on hypothetical imperatives instead of on categorical ones. Because virtue is contingent on the agent's desire (or even his strongest desire or inclination), the contention is that eudaimonism involves a problematic form of subjectivism about morality. Nevertheless, as Terrence Irwin argues, this is problematic as an interpretation of eudaimonism. Irwin quotes Bishop Butler who writes "my reason for pursuing my happiness justifies my inclination to do it, not the other way around".²⁸ It is not the case that I only have reason to pursue my happiness, or to look after my interests, if I happen to care about happiness or self-interest in the first place. For it does make sense to criticize someone who ignores their interests or their happiness. Our lives would be better than they otherwise would be if we are happy or achieve human excellence and virtue. A happy life is better than an unhappy life, and human excellence and virtue is preferable to vice, even if the agent involved fails to realize it. Whether we recognize it or not, personal happiness and self-interest can therefore represent objective goods that benefit us.²⁹ Eudaimonistic reasons for action can therefore hold independently of an agent's given desires. As a result, these reasons can be objective rather than subjective and categorical rather than hypothetical (although they need not always be overriding).

Third, we can debate whether eudaimonism needs to involve substantial egoism or instrumentalism about virtue. Virtue can be constitutive of happiness, so that no happiness is to be had unless one is virtuous. The Stoics see virtue as necessary and sufficient for happiness, whereas Aristotelians see it as necessary but not sufficient (since external goods are also needed). Nevertheless, there are forms of eudaimonism that are more vulnerable to the criticism of Kierkegaard and Kant. This is especially salient in the case of hedonistic eudaimonism (although any type of eudaimonism that does not see virtue as constitutive of eudaimonia is vulnerable). Hedonists (Epicureans) may insist that virtue leads to happiness, but is not clear why that must be the case, since the connection between virtue and happiness seems contingent

28 Joseph Butler quoted from Irwin (1996), 76.

29 Haybron (2010), 187. Cf. Parfit (2012), chs. 2-6.

and empirical. As long as happiness is not at least partially defined in terms of virtue, but in terms of pleasure (or anything non-moral), the charge of instrumentalism and substantial egoism seems valid. More specifically, if personal happiness by definition, or necessity, requires other-regarding virtues such as justice, there need not be anything problematic about pursuing this happiness (even if it involves formal egoism that is concerned with personal happiness).³⁰

Nevertheless, the broadly Kantian critique of eudaimonism found in Kierkegaard is reconstructed and defended by J.J. Davenport. He discusses various cases that clearly indicates that if I were to lose self-interested motives for action, I could still have an other-regarding motive left. But this implies that an other-regarding motive is operative alongside self-concerned motives. Other-regard and self-regard, then, represent two independent motives that may conflict. The intrinsic role of virtue, its role as a final end, cannot serve as a mere means to happiness because happiness is at best an unintended by-product of genuine virtue.³¹ Acting for the good of a friend, for instance, may involve personal benefit as a side-effect, but it may also require personal sacrifice. Nevertheless, eudaimonism rules out self-forgetfulness or moral purity that does good *only* because it is good. Unless it contributes to personal happiness, therefore, eudaimonists cannot rationally sacrifice anything significant for the sake of others. Non-instrumental other-regard then seems incompatible with the eudaimonistic focus on the agent's happiness as the highest good.³²

In cases of conflict, we must prioritize either morality or prudence. For instance, someone may sacrifice his career in order to adopt a child, or he may lose his job and social standing by refusing to side with a culture of racism, sexism, or corruption. Moral sacrifices like these are difficult to reconcile with eudaimonism because eudaimonists ultimately deny conflicts between morality and prudence.³³ One exception to this, however, would be a eudaimonism which requires that morality be prioritized *above* prudence at the level of particular actions, local deliberations and motives, while still maintaining that prudential considerations justify morality (primarily) at the global level of life as a whole.³⁴

30 See Annas (1993); Irwin (1996).

31 See Davenport (2007), chs. 5-7. This argument is developed independently of Kierkegaard, although Davenport is a MacIntyrean Kierkegaardian. Davenport does not discuss Kierkegaard's "highest good," a concept that makes happiness (a) second to virtue and (b) something that only results from divine grace. Cf. Fremstedal (2014), chs. 4-6.

32 Still, eudaimonism can overcome this problem by denying individuality. See Davenport (2007), chs. 6-8.

33 See Fremstedal (2018).

34 See Clark (2016).

5. Kierkegaard's Critique of Autonomy

Although it has not attracted much scholarly attention, Kierkegaard criticizes autonomy in much the same way as he criticizes eudaimonism. Both here and elsewhere, Kierkegaard radicalizes Kantian ideas to the point that they almost become unrecognizable.³⁵ In 1850, he writes:

Kant was of the opinion that man is his own law (autonomy) – that is, he binds himself under the law which he himself gives himself. Actually, in a profounder sense, this is how lawlessness or experimentation are established [...] If I am bound by nothing higher than myself and I am to bind myself, where would I get the rigorousness as A, the binder, which I do not have as B, who is supposed to be bound, when A and B are the same self.³⁶

If I can bind myself, I can also unbind myself at will. In 1847, Kierkegaard writes:

[T]he adult is simultaneously master and servant; the one who is to command and the one who is to obey are one and the same. [...] It can so easily happen that the servant meddles in the deliberation about the task, and conversely, that the master pays too much attention to the servant's complaints about the difficulties in carrying out the tasks. Then, alas, confusion develops; instead of becoming his own master a person becomes unstable, irresolute, vacillating [...] Finally [...] all his energy is expended in thinking up ever new changes in the task [...].³⁷

Like the German Romantics and Idealists, Kierkegaard points to a *dilemma* inherent to autonomy.³⁸ The first horn of the dilemma takes the form of self-determination based on reasons that are *antecedently* valid and therefore have authority prior to self-legislation. In this case, autonomy is constrained by standards that are not self-imposed, something that appears to involve *heteronomy*.

By contrast, the second horn only recognizes the authority of self-determination. It insists on setting all the rules of conduct itself. Indeed, it also sets the rules for setting the rules (and the rules for setting these rules again) and so on. Nevertheless, any given rule would *contingently depend* on a decision that creates normative content. Because there are no external constraints or antecedent reasons that limit it, any self-imposed decision would be valid.³⁹ Norms or rules are only authoritative if self-imposed by contingent *fiat*. This

³⁵ See note 2.

³⁶ SKS 23, 45, NB 15, 66 / JP 1, 188.

³⁷ SKS 8, 389f. / UD, 294f. See also SKS 11, 182f. / SUD, 68f.

³⁸ The Kantian paradox of autonomy is one of the key topics of Pinkard (2010). See also Stern (2012).

³⁹ Kierkegaard refers to a "constraining [...] factor," see SKS 23, 45, NB 15, 66 / JP 1, 188.

amounts to a *decisionism* that accepts any self-imposed decision, irrespective of normative content.⁴⁰ Any normative content is valid, contingent on a relevant decision (or perhaps contingent on a dominating decision). Since there is nothing that prevents a change of will, the normative content could *change anytime*, and is therefore only *provisionally* valid. Arbitrary change of normative content cannot be ruled out, except by a contingent principle that is itself only provisionally valid.

On this picture, autonomy collapses into a *motiveless and arbitrary* choice that is fundamentally *groundless*. It is possible to justify derived content in terms of more fundamental content, however, just as a theorem is derived from an axiom. But there can be no justification for the fundamental normative content – or axiom, in the analogy – itself; for there is no higher authority or principle that could ground or support it. The autonomous normative source must then constitute itself through a bootstrapping operation that is groundless, motiveless, and arbitrary.

The lawgiver is *identical* to a subject that is finite, fallible, and imperfect. Moreover, this lawgiver and subject is prone to whims and moods, on the one hand, as well as laxness, procrastination, and corruption on the other. For this reason, Kierkegaard suggests that the motiveless choice of the lawgiver can be affected by whims and moods. Worse still, the choice of the lawgiver can be unduly influenced by the special interests of the subject. The subject can influence the lawgiver to change or lessen his obligations instead of fulfilling them (something that can be quite demanding). Indeed, one can constantly change one's mind about what to do, by lazily concocting new tasks instead of realizing given tasks.⁴¹ Instead of acting morally, one deliberates about what one's obligations are or what they could and should be. Autonomy, then, facilitates an unrestrained reflection that is self-consuming, something Kierkegaard associates with late modern European society.

Kierkegaard is criticizing a subjectivist form of autonomy that is anti-realistic and relativistic. In this way, his notion of autonomy is closer to Jena Romanticism and Sartre's notion of radical choice than anything that could be found in Kant (or Hegel).⁴² Although Kierkegaard seems to focus on individual

⁴⁰ For a contemporary defense of a similar meta-ethical position, which claims that it is possible to reject rational agency and by doing this to become insane or to die, see Cohen (2008).

⁴¹ SKS 8, 389f. / UD, 294f.

⁴² See Pinkard (2010); Stern (2012); Fremstedal (2014). We may ask why Kierkegaard associates this form of autonomy with Kant. Although Kant specialists discuss whether Kant is a meta-ethical realist or constructivist, many have taken autonomy to involve constructivism that creates valid norms by following valid procedure. Not just Rawls and

autonomy, the points I have made above would also largely apply to collective autonomy. Indeed, Kierkegaard makes similar points about moral autonomy and political democracy, suggesting that they overlap insofar as both represent modern subjectivism in which normatively speaking everything is up for grabs. Unless restricted by antecedent moral or legal constraints, both favor a never-ending, self-consuming reflection instead of moral action or political action. Kierkegaard's diagnosis of late modern European society in *A Literary Review* indicates that democratization and autonomy, together with the public sphere and mass media, contribute to unconstrained reflection, levelling, nihilism, and secularization. Still, he views these modern phenomena not just as problems, but also as benefitting us insofar as they indirectly contribute to religious faith at the individual level.⁴³

Despite his critique of Kantian autonomy, Kierkegaard is concerned with a form of personal autonomy that allows us to take responsibility for ourselves as agents who shape our ends and priorities. John Davenport comments:

Formal autonomy involves volitional identification with some first-order motives and alienation of others [...] Caring about first-order ends rationally commits us to caring² [second-order caring] that the putative values to which we respond in our central commitments, relationships, and life goals are objectively or intersubjectively sound [...] [and] mutually consistent [...].⁴⁴

Moral agency requires a capacity for strong evaluation of first-order motives that presuppose evaluative judgments that must be capable of being (more or less) objectively correct. We can only shape our identity in a substantially rational manner if we can make ourselves better or worse by standards *external* to our wills. In order to examine our higher-order cares and commitments in a rational manner, therefore, we need the idea of the good, in an objective or realist sense, at least as a regulative ideal.⁴⁵

Habermas, but also Kierkegaard and some German Romantics and Idealists associated Kantian autonomy with constructivism. See Fremstedal (2014), ch. 10; Pinkard (2010), 59f., 115, 162f., 187-89, 207, 277.

43 Conway (2015).

44 Davenport (2012), 117.

45 Rudd (2012), 91-95, 112-116. In meta-ethics, Kierkegaard is a non-naturalist cognitivist who is interpreted either as a moral realist or as a divine command ethicist. Even the latter interpretation, however, tends to view Kierkegaard as a moral realist, one who typically denies that the whole content of morality is contingent on God's will. On this interpretation, God's commands explain not so much the content of morality as its strictly obligatory form, which goes beyond what is merely good for us. For divine command ethics, see Evans (2014); Evans (2006); cf. Stern (2012), chs. 6-7. For realism, see Rudd (2012); Davenport (2012).

Kierkegaard insists that wholeheartedness, or consistency, requires unconditional moral commitment, since immorality is parasitic on morality and therefore involves double-mindedness or despair.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, this does not prevent autonomy from playing some kind of role beyond the formal autonomy analyzed by Davenport. Kierkegaard writes: "[I]n the world of spirit, precisely this, to become one's own master, is the highest – and in love to help someone toward that, to become himself, free, independent, his own master, to help him stand alone – that is the greatest beneficence."⁴⁷ Kierkegaard maintains, however, that we only become free and independent by loving our neighbor. By relying on commanded love that loves all humans without exception, we avoid being dependent on specific human beings. Charity makes us free, for "without law, freedom does not exist at all, and it is law that gives freedom."⁴⁸ This suggests that autonomy is a moral virtue of independent-mindedness rather than a source that creates moral obligations.⁴⁹

6. Conclusion

For Kierkegaard, there is a deep similarity between eudaimonism and autonomy. Eudaimonism views moral obligations as hypothetical imperatives based on personal happiness, whereas autonomy views obligations as hypothetical imperatives based on contingent decisions (that may or may not relate to our pursuit of personal happiness). Eudaimonism allegedly views normative reasons as given by sensuousness or even the strongest inclination or desire. Autonomy, by contrast, views these reasons as given by human freedom (in the form of the strongest decision). The type of freedom involved here, however, is not Kant's notion of the will (*Wille*) as practical rationality. Instead, Kierkegaard takes autonomy to rely on *Willkür*, the power of choice. As such, autonomy involves arbitrariness rather than pure practical reason. It may be instrumentally rational but not substantially rational. Moreover, both eudaimonism and autonomy are susceptible to change. Eudaimonism puts virtue second-place to desires, which may change; whereas autonomy puts

46 SKS 8, 138ff. / UD, 24ff. This assumes that it is impossible to be morally indifferent in general.

47 SKS 9, 272 / WL, 274.

48 SKS 9, 46 / WL, 38f. The reference to the law here probably includes the two great commandments of Christian ethics.

49 See the distinction between independent-mindedness in the theory of virtue and meta-ethical constructivism in Adams (2016).

laws second-place to arbitrary decisions, which may also change (particularly if influenced by the all-too-human subject).

Kierkegaard argues that neither eudaimonism nor autonomy account for categorical reasons or unconditional imperatives. Neither can they account for normative reasons that are objective and impartial. Instead, eudaimonism and autonomy are special cases of subjectivism and special interests. This argument seems to hold for extreme forms of autonomy based on *Willkür*, but not moderate forms of autonomy based on *Wille*. In the case of eudaimonism, a Kierkegaardian critique of egoism and instrumentalism about virtue seems defensible, even if it is rather contentious.⁵⁰ Kierkegaard may be right to suggest that eudaimonism *can* involve subjectivism, anthropocentrism and hypothetical imperatives. But it is not clear that eudaimonism *must* be based on any of these, since it can be combined with objectivism, theocentrism, and categorical imperatives instead.

The argument sketched above can *either* be taken to count in favor of eudaimonism and (extreme) autonomy *or* against them. Although some readers have associated Kierkegaard with the former view,⁵¹ we have seen that he clearly opts for the latter view. More specifically, he consistently interprets moral obligations as being categorical or unconditional.⁵² Additionally, he identifies the good with the divine,⁵³ describing the moral demand as the “infinite ethical requirement”⁵⁴. Finally, he also seems to view moral (ethico-religious) reasons as being categorically overriding, although this is controversial (due to what he calls the “teleological suspension of the ethical” in *Fear and Trembling*). In any case, he distinguishes between the first and second ethics, between philosophical ethics and Christian ethics, respectively. The former is seen as the default position that collapses internally and by doing so necessitates Christian ethics. On my view, this means that the first ethics is replaced (at least partially) not by an amorism or immoralism but by Christian ethics.

Kierkegaard's relation to the post-Kantian debates on perfectionism and autonomy is generally ambiguous. Kierkegaard could be considered a perfectionist, concerned with the development of capacities of intrinsic and supervening value that are neither eudaimonist nor Kantian. Rather than being concerned with (mere) human self-perfection, he is concerned with how morality leads to guilt-consciousness and thereby prepares divine assistance. For Kierkegaard,

50 Cf. Davenport (2007), chs. 5-12.

51 E.g. Cohen (2008).

52 Cf. Knappe (2004), chs. 3-5. Kierkegaard appears to view moral obligations as objective, overriding, and partially universal. See Evans (2006), 15.

53 Rudd (2012), 45f.; Evans (2006), 88, 105, 183.

54 SKS 7, 455ff. / CUP1, 502ff.

our highest perfection lies in the acceptance of divine grace. In particular, he is concerned with the theological virtues (faith, hope and charity), and the re-interpretation of Christianity after eudaimonism, Kantianism, Idealism, and Liberal theology.

For Kierkegaard, the final end is not eudaimonia, but he thinks of the highest good in broadly Kantian terms, comprising virtue, happiness, and the kingdom of God.⁵⁵ Obstacles to perfection are mainly original sin and the corruption of the Christian church (although liberal theology, secularization, democracy, and the modern press are also viewed as hindrances). Kierkegaard believes that the church should teach, preach, and minister in this world, even though the realization of the kingdom of God belongs to the afterlife, when humanity will broadly be redeemed. He is wary of all historical collectives and emphasizes the inner transformation of the person, not the outer reformation of society: “Christianity does not want to make changes in externals; neither does it want to abolish drives or inclination – it wants only to make infinity's change in the inner being.”⁵⁶

Kierkegaard warns against the “disastrous confusion of politics and Christianity,” but he is still concerned with what he regards as the rightful place of politics and Christianity, understood as external reforms and religious inwardness, respectively.⁵⁷ He strongly denies that the divine and transcendent can be identified with a worldly order without being corrupted.⁵⁸ For this reason, Kierkegaard is opposed to privileging religious citizens, and against the very idea of Christian states and state churches. He also repeatedly criticized contemporaries – Hegelians and Grundtvigians – for confusing Christianity with politics, culture, civilization, patriotism, nationalism, and national identity.⁵⁹

55 Fremstedal and Jackson (2015); Fremstedal (2014), ch. 4-6.

56 SKS 9, 141 / WL, 139. Still, Kierkegaard's attack on the Danish state church (1854-55) arguably involves an increasing dissatisfaction with this strict inner versus outer divide. The kingdom of God has not yet come, and no temporal institution is redemptive as such, but the visible church, like the singular individual, must be responsible to and for the salvific truth of the Gospel here and now (Fremstedal and Jackson (2015)).

57 SKS 14, 112 / COR, 53. Kierkegaard is concerned with politics in a wide sense that includes formation of identity, common life, social morality, establishment, political communication, populism, patriotism, nationalism and national destiny. He is concerned with ideology, assumptions and actions that affect public welfare and the understanding of social life. See Backhouse (2015).

58 Evans (2006), 7, 329.

59 See Backhouse (2015). Kierkegaard supports Danish absolutism, while criticizing the 1848 revolution, communism, populism, and the Danish state church. Kirmmse argues that Kierkegaard went from being a conservative aristocrat to an egalitarian liberal, whereas

Nevertheless, Kierkegaard's contribution to political theory seems negative rather than positive. Indeed, it is not even clear if he rules out a normative political theory or not, although he has a basic social ontology that emphasizes the social formation of individuality and how the self takes responsibility for a traditional (conventional) identity that it transcends.⁶⁰ Even though his social ontology is conceived of in normative, ethico-religious terms, politics still has a somewhat unclear normative role in his theory. Partly as a result of this, and partly as a result of his support of absolutism, Kierkegaard seems more relevant as an existential, ethical, and religious thinker than as a political thinker.⁶¹

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Hannay thinks that Kierkegaard should side with the social democrats against the conservatives. See Hannay (1991), 297; Kirmmse (1990), 4, 264.

⁶⁰ See Tilley (2015). Tilley emphasizes Kierkegaard's claim that social unity lies behind us, not ahead of us. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard still seems to believe in the communion of the saints in the afterlife and the invisible church in this life (Fremstedal (2014), ch. 5).

⁶¹ Thanks to Attila Tanyi and the Ethics Research Group, at University of Tromsø – The Arctic University of Norway, for comments on earlier versions of this article.

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