

EUDAIMONIA IN THE THEORIES OF SOEREN KIERKEGAARD AND GREGORY OF NYSSA

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Eudaimonia, the basic human end and, parallel with it, the human factor in the explanation of all created nature is often an obstacle, if not a potential curse. This is because happiness in its philosophical perspective cannot always provide an explanation for the deeds of the human being nor for all its innumerable quests. That is why occasionally a study on *eudaimonia* has to focus on its psychological prerequisites. Basically, in such a frame, happiness is the tool, the lever that lifts upwards, still on the level of the Idea or of the wanted thing. Kierkegaard and Gregory of Nyssa are Christian thinkers who perceive life in a combined manner. To be more precise, they understand life philosophically but at the same time they penetrate and evaluate it in some of its psychological aspects, on an attempt to guide the reader or the listener more profoundly than they would have done with the aid of reasonable ideas.

Kierkegaard is preoccupied with the blurry image of subjectivity in Christian thought and thus he discovers it in individuality. By referring to the individual he refers back to his subjective link with the Creator. If one pays attention to his own existence, then he can learn about eternal happiness.¹ Kierkegaard, though, detaches and liberates the function of *Eudaimonia* from the human end. He interweaves it with the divine end. Thus given, the concept of *eudaimonia* changes deeply in its repercussions as well: it does no longer support the man in a practical sense but in a spiritual one. Aristotle noted that in order to be *eudaimonistic* one needs to enjoy the practical benefits of life, such as good health, wealth to live by, friends and also wisdom. In this way, he recognized the value of the everyday things that construe reality. The Danish thinker goes quite further: the everyday things are not to be taken into consideration; they exist before the real need for happiness.

A key term in Kierkegaard's thought on *eudaimonia* is reconstruction. A human being needs to be fully reconstructed in order to be a person, in other words, in order to have a self. But how is one reconstructed once he already possesses a self which naturally proves itself by protruding in a social frame? The Danish philosopher replies that this is not actually so: the self we seem to have in our everyday lives is a self deprived of spirituality and not only this but also a self deprived of the deep and essential reality of freedom. What we ought to pursue, on a constant basis, should be the establishment of a relationship with the self, knowing that the self is

¹ Kierkegaard 2002, 44–45. There he comments that a person's existence must have the capacity to interpret the relation between eternal existence and the person. If we know the way one exists, then we realise if this person is referent to happiness or not.

not static but dramatically dynamic. This is how freedom is practiced then: through a personal affirmation that leads to internalization, an affirmation that also regresses to the personal, real self.

Perhaps we should attempt a few questions in order to clarify the connection between the self and eudaimonia in Kierkegaardian thought. That is because there must be something solid that has the capacity of becoming eudaimonistic. So, what is actually the self? How is something recognized as having its own identity? Finally, is the self the prerequisite of eudaimonia? As Kierkegaard puts it, man is the synthesis of the finite and the infinite. As such, he has an irreplaceable and unavoidable relationship with God, not only with personal reference to Him but also through certain Fear and Despair that follow him through life and constantly negate his tendency for a solely material self. Even if man forgets about the end, God does not let him forget, by means of a cosmological and psychological mechanism that leads him back to the effects of his disobedience. On the face of it, man is trapped in a situation of cosmic self acceptance or, otherwise put, in the situation that we should all accept God in order to earn happiness. However, Kierkegaard is quite blunt on this point. He doesn't accept that God's willingness to dominate human life is a matter of superficial impressions. Nor even, in this case, a conflict of existences. Human reference to divinity is an inescapable manner of totality in each person's individual status of being. Salvation is a desire, not a task. Following the path of the individual is a process of completeness, not of giving in. Under these premises, truth becomes eudaimonia, the eternal end, since truth is the end.

It is important to remember that man was given the terms of understanding truth, in its entire metaphysical horizon, but he lost it on the way. That is how man can become non-truth and can be scandalizing freedom: when he is trapped in a vicious circle of recreating sin. By discovering truth, there is reconstruction. There are two pillars that support the new reconstructed man: subjectivity and internalization. God, as a subjective being, does not exist in objectivity. He exists in the unstoppable passion of internalization. Hence, He is proven because there is a need for the person, who is moved by the passion for the infinite with determination, to render God proven. The Absolute can never be an objective truth, nor can it be served externally. Therefore, the official church does not ensure our way to Paradise; on the contrary, it obstructs it by having become an external institution. All truth is existential truth, also a subjective one, an Idea to live or die by, as Kierkegaard would have wanted it. Eudaimonia, as well as truth, require infinite passion, for nothing can ever reconstruct the reality of existence without passion.

In this manner, a new dialectic is created in his writings. This new dialectic comprises existence and passion and bravely, not blindly, goes beyond Reason. Why is that? Due to the fact that all is a matter of faith, man must abandon himself to the Paradox inside him. This dialectic abolishes slavery to Fear, Despair or Death by freeing man through self-abandonment to Faith. Changing oneself to a spiritual being means changing the very ground one stands on. An aftereffect is that man becomes self-sufficient. No one can be saved along with others. This direction to eu-

daimonia requires a solitary course. A course with anguish and fear, during which the individual will discover the enticing capability of freedom. Faith in the Unreasonable will make feasible this leap to the Eternal. Faith is the voice of eternity inside our existence in time. Nothing can happen without someone to save us from too much certainty, too much general, fruitless knowledge. That is the role of Christ as a savior: to lead us to *αὐτογνωσία*, self knowledge, that lasts forever and brings about immortality. The revelation of the divine word is the means to liberation. Even if one is not spiritual or not spiritual enough, the anguish inside him will guide him through to the salvific procedure of individual faith. “The anguish can take you everywhere you want”, says Kierkegaard. Not in the sense of hedonistic desire and relief but in the sense of the internal force which will look after the person. Everyone is given an opportunity to self liberation but not as an every-one rather than as a One. This is the core of Kierkegaard’s eudaimonistic theory: man can recognize unity in the self and proceed to the synthesis of the new being only alone, solely by means of his own concession. Otherwise, the opposite of freedom and, simultaneously, the opposite of happiness will be guilt.

Everything in life is dominated by death. Every single moment of joy has an imminent ending to it. Eudaimonia, in its worldly dimension, has an ending to it, too. How, then, can we ensure, as temporary beings, an everlasting happiness? The only means to achieve that is by means of our inner relationship with the Creator. Conventional life is no more than a joke, something that Kierkegaard laughs at.² Conventional life, in its true dimension, has nothing spiritual in it. Here arises the issue of choice; and happiness, eudaimonia, macroscopically transforms itself into a matter of options but also into choice without conditions. If man chooses in favour of his inner relationship with God and is based constantly, without hesitation, on the “fortunate passion of faith”,³ then he achieves his goal of eternal happiness. Eternity, in this sense, is not a single achievement; it becomes a repetition since it repeats the human relationship with divinity.

According to Gregory of Nyssa, eudaimonia is meant only on the premises of man’s being with God. Moreover, eudaimonia is, undoubtedly, the goal of a virtuous life.⁴ Everything we want to achieve must have a goal and must be referent to something else. Medicine is about health and agriculture is about producing food, so in the same spirit, acquiring virtue is about eudaimonia. This is called fulfillment. God is the end of the route, the divine purpose inside and beyond human reality because it is He who created all reality. In this sense, eudaimonia is a kind of regression. At the end God becomes everything.⁵ Therefore, eudaimonia is the reconstruction of

² Kostaras 1974, 79–80.

³ Kierkegaard 1998, 112.

⁴ Gregory of Nyssa 1988b, 19–23: “τέλος τοῦ κατ’ ἀρετήν βίου μακαριότης ἐστίν”, (the goal of a virtuous life is blissfulness).

⁵ Gregory of Nyssa 2004, 469, 19–20: “ἀλλά πάντα γίνεται αὐτῷ ὁ θεός”, (but God becomes everything to him).

nature into its former state. The primary form of life was the truly eudaimonistic one: at that time, man was not deceived and suffered from no malice or evil influence. Beatitude, as Gregory describes eudaimonia, is nature which lies beyond everything.⁶ Participation, communion to the being and resemblance (omoiosis) to it is the definition of beatitude. Beatitude, a state of blissfulness, is principally a penetration of the finite, of man, into the infinite, into divinity. Death is the solution that God has worked out in order to stop evil from reproducing itself and from establishing itself in human life.⁷ Death, under this pretext, is a friend not a foe.

For Gregory also, truth is the pure essence of the divine being. Truth is what we shall be faced up with, when we leave behind the obstacle of the flesh. Then, we will be reconciled with the truth, see it, speak with it, be in it,⁸ or be with it at the same time. In fact, truth is a very ancient psychological element.

In his commentary on *Ecclesiastes*, Gregory affirms that the proper use of the right reason is the prerequisite for that kind of wisdom that will elevate us to the divine sphere. The right reason will convince the mind to go beyond the senses, to liberate itself from their tyranny. Actions that take place under the influence of the senses are vain and vanity is an enemy to the beneficial. A vain life is deprived of happiness, because it is inessential and truly inexistent. That is because the senses themselves are inessential and inexistent in the long run. But how can one acquire Goodness? The answer is: Only by means of knowing It. Knowing and understanding what always remains the same means having it.⁹ Knowledge and awareness, “epignosis” as he calls it, is a height that has to be reached. This awareness works both ways: one knows God and at the same time knows or recognizes his own intrinsic value, his own self. But that always comes from a certain thirst in the human heart, a sincere and forceful desire to reach the divine being.

Life is characterized by a catholic trait. This trait is the dialectic of the opposites: nothing remains unchanged. Youth, wealth, beauty, glory, all is ephemeral. This fact should teach us the way to the stable characteristics that the virtues possess. Virtues do not change ever. Periodical occupations and human actions that rotate around life’s common things and pursuits are in vain and leave no trace of influence. All en-

⁶ Gregory of Nyssa 1988b, 20–21: “ἡ τοῦ παντός ἐπέκεινα φύσις”, (nature which is beyond Everything). Also, he adds that it is a kind of methexis, communication with the Eternal essence, like in Plato.

⁷ Gregory of Nyssa 2004, 472, 1–4: “οὐδέ γάρ ἄλλο τί ἐστιν ἐπ’ ἀνθρώποις ὁ θάνατος, εἰ μὴ κακίας καθάρσιον” (death is nothing else to people but a wiper of evil).

⁸ Gregory of Nyssa 2004, 454, 12: “αὐτοπροσώπως ἐντυγχάνει τῷ θεῷ”, (He co-exists with God face to face).

⁹ Gregory of Nyssa 1988, 304–305: “κτῆσις γάρ ἐστι τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ τούτου ἢ εἰδησις”, (To have the Good means to know it). Knowledge of the being is a key term in the philosophy of the being. However, this knowledge is often served in silence since the Essence of God cannot be described nor God can be narrated. Also see *ibid*, 342–343, where he comments that knowledge makes it easier for one to judge and understand the superior thing. But knowledge means labor; it is not an easy process.

joyment that man can derive from such works will not last because it is subdued to matter and thus it will eventually end. When it ends, man will be left alone with consciousness, without matter and the joys that derive from it.¹⁰ Virtue has a quality of truthfulness and eternity inside it: if one follows virtue, avoids malice and clears himself from the material factors that keep him infected, then he will be the picture of God and bear true resemblance to Him and, as a result, avoid all vanity.

The pain that we experience in life does not come from God: God produces no evil. He produces only goodness and blissfulness. On the contrary, life's pain is a result of human self-determination, volition. Volition is a present, but man made bad use of it, got carried away and he was drifted and enticed by his natural drives. A hedonistic life does not equal with a eudaimonistic life. As a matter of fact, hedonism and the quest for pleasures debilitate the strength of the intellect and the soul. But with the aid of wisdom, the riot of the senses is prevented. The person who is stuck in the depth of the matter is lost forever since he cannot realize that material things are what he should turn against in order to be eudaimonistic. Pleasure and carnal desires lead to an animal state of being, not a human one.¹¹ Real pleasure, pleasure which comes from the divine Face is a light felt in the heart. It is the ultimate exhilaration, which is not conceived in the nature of the senses.

Gregory parallelizes the Divinity with archetypal beauty.¹² God is the beautiful end of the human way. In his fourth speech in *Ecclesiastes* the bishop proves that God is the only human way. When man disobeyed, he made a riot against his free nature. Therefore, by returning to Him he gets his freedom back and he becomes consistent again. Man has made the mistake of exchanging his original nature with that of the material things. What is then the way back to freedom? Where is the world that houses true existence and immateriality? The true way of eudaimonia consists in crushing down the pleasures of the senses, avoiding all passions, except the one that consolidates faith. One cannot master virtue while being a slave to pleasures and desires. By turning face from them one can escape evil and escape slavery.¹³ The start of blissfulness is the separation from all evil.¹⁴ Death then, according to what he says in the *Paramithititous Logous (speeches of consolation)*, can be the start of eudaimonia, even though Gregory is not pessimist and does not deny the immensity of the value of life. What he does is subtract the quality of eudaimonia, which is wrongly attributed to it due to the fact that people cling on the material

¹⁰ Gregory of Nyssa 1988, 314–315.

¹¹ Speech C is against material things (Gregory of Nyssa 1988). Their prosperity is not an everlasting one, also not one free of pain. He, who clings on them, loses the opportunity of creating his path to God through wisdom, faith and deeper understanding.

¹² Gregory of Nyssa 1988, 362–363. See also his *Logos stous Kekoimimenous*, 42. 19–22, where he points out the fact that we were initially formed within that archetypal beauty. The same idea is discussed in 66. 1–7.

¹³ Gregory of Nyssa 1988, 396–397.

¹⁴ Gregory of Nyssa 1988, 404–405: “ἀρχὴν μακαρισμοῦ τὴν ἀπόστασιν τῶν κακῶν ἐποιήσατο”, (God made it so that the start of blissfulness is the parting from evil).

pleasures and bear the illusion that they will last. He generally admits though that the flesh is dissipation of the soul (*perispasmos tis psihis*¹⁵), meaning that the flesh distracts the soul from its true character.

He then turns to another characteristic of his theory that regards mind and matter. Mind here denotes the compilation of thoughts that constrain the irrational drives of the natural being. By constraining the natural drives, *nous*, the mind, is a master of its situation leaving out all unnecessary thoughts and desires. Then the virtues emerge: prudence (*sophrosyne*), wisdom (*sophia*), justice (*dikaiosyne*), apathy (*apatheia*), jubilation (*euphrosyne*). *Euphrosyne* comes from the εὖ φρονεῖν, meaning “thinking well”. These factors contribute to man being liberated from material slavery and evil and being elevated to the world of eudaimonia. Faith, as well as love for goodness,¹⁶ is a strong desire that will lead to it eventually. Love has its own dialectic: what you love is an adversary to something that you hate. When you love Good, for example, you hate evil and you alienate yourself from it forever. Love is a key element in the philosophy of the bishop of Nyssa, much deeper actually than in Kierkegaardian thought. For Kierkegaard it is subjective constancy of purpose, for Gregory love, but for both it is liberation from the wrong nature.

The true Being is Self Goodness.¹⁷ Whatever lies out of it is not real, does not exist in the being, it is non existence. Whatever lies out of God is out of the light, out of life, out of all meaning. The connection to this Being is made by means of volition again. God is neither understood nor realized through reason, or through speech and thought; He cannot be a matter of words or syllogisms. He can be perceived in silence, in the accomplishment of Faith.¹⁸ Knowledge of Ontology can be achieved only in the silent chamber of Faith.

Gregory claims that we are burdened by the aesthetic criteria we use in our material life. So how can we hope to understand in depth the real essence and presence of the eternal? Sin is, simply, the result of wrong judgement. By correcting the judgement and keeping out the bad desires, by good volition as well, we can be eudaimonistic. The route to perfection is the route that brings us to God. It requires though, crossing our inner land, the inner person we are. The soul must abandon its dependence on the material world, on all sensible things and return to itself, know itself and the image of the divine archetype that exists in it. After it is morally clean, the soul enters the invisible and inconceivable in order to see the Divinity. Virtue has no limits. The divine nature is the only nature that has room for virtue and for that,

¹⁵ Gregory of Nyssa 1988, 418–419: “τό δέ διά σαρκός σπουδαζόμενον περισπασμόν ψυχῆς εἶναι καί ματαιότητα”, (the desires of the flesh are a distraction to the soul and also they are vanity).

¹⁶ Gregory of Nyssa 1988, 470–471 and also 504–505.

¹⁷ «Αὐτοαγαθότητα» in the Greek text.

¹⁸ In speech Z (Gregory of Nyssa 1988) the bishop suggests that it is impossible for Creation to narrate itself, let alone describe what is beyond it.

it is limitless.¹⁹ We must be reborn in self-determination as new beings. Practising the virtues guides us to ontological knowledge, light is shed on the human soul, and thus we conceive who we really are.²⁰

Conclusively, the two thinkers share a number of similar opinions as regards eudaimonia and its acquisition. Gregory claims that flesh is the factor that keeps us bound in this earthy situation, meaning that the desires coming from it lead to a strictly material way of existence. Kierkegaard agrees with that by saying that the person who is aesthetic cannot be spiritual. Nonetheless, they are not hostile to the flesh but to the obsession with it. Kierkegaard even believes in sexuality. Marriage, for instance, is the right justification of the sexual relationship between man and woman, whereas Gregory in *Logos stous Kekoimimenous* (speech to those who have slept) maintains that it is wrong to be against our nature of flesh because the cause of evil is not connected with it and moreover we should love our own body but not the rust that comes from it before it is cleaned. Nevertheless, these pleasures of the everyday life, however justifiable, do not approach the heights of the eudaimonia found in Christian salvation. For both, Eternity is our real home. Gregory claims that man cannot be happy outside eternity and the Danish philosopher believes that man should penetrate the infinite and be one with it. They also establish the criteria for a dialectic that characterizes their belief: the world is a place where things change and cause suffering when one clings on them or makes one live without truth and freedom while there is this world of the infinite which is everlasting and knows of no change.

A major difference between the two is that Gregory views the virtuous life as the opposite of sin while Kierkegaard views faith as the main opponent of sin and urges that we understand this deeply in order to overcome anguish. Eudaimonia is, for the bishop of Nyssa, the goal of a virtuous life and of knowing God while, for the philosopher of Copenhagen, eudaimonia is the goal of faith and of knowing God. Furthermore, Gregory uses passion mainly in a negative manner, as something we should dispose of, whereas Kierkegaard uses passion as a pillar to existence in man's way to the Eternal. Therefore, the role of passion is central in his philosophy with reference to eudaimonia. Perhaps, the deepest difference of all is the parameter of morality or moral cleanness: the Greek thinker maintains that moral cleanness brings to God and blissfulness but the Danish thinker affirms how inadequate and inferior the moral state of a person is, compared to his religious state of being. They put great emphasis on the issue of volition and self-determination: Man can choose his return to God in the same way he once chose his parting from Him. Sin, our

¹⁹ Gregory of Nyssa 1990, 148–149: “Οὐκοῦν οὐ διεψεύσθη ὁ λόγος ἡμῖν ἀμήχανον ἐπὶ τῆς ἀρετῆς εἶναι τὴν τῆς τελειότητος περίληψιν λέγων. Ἐδείχθη γάρ ὅτι τό διαλαμβανόμενον πέρασιν ἀρετῆ οὐκ ἔστιν”, (my saying was not proved wrong, that it is impossible to confine virtue inside perfection. Because it was proved that what is confined within limits is not a virtue).

²⁰ Gregory of Nyssa 1990, 194–197.

abandonment of the Creator, is not a fallible deed of the ancestors; it is a repetitively re-invented route. Each man separately is held responsible for his decision of committing sin. They both accept the fact that happiness is experienced near God, whereas material things or dependence on them should be avoided. But that means nothing else than full reconstruction. A total change from the inside to the outside that will make the person self-sufficient near the Divinity, in a positive relationship which is not restricted in time. For Gregory as well as for Søren, truth and awareness of the divine nature lead to happiness and identify with eternity and freedom.

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