

Review

Douglas Moggach, Nadine Mooren and Michael Quante (eds.), *Perfektionismus der Autonomie*. Paderborn (Germany): Wilhelm Fink/Brill, 2020. ISBN 978-3-8467-6284-4 (e-book). ISBN 978-3-7705-6284-8 (hbk). Pp. 413. €83.18.

This collective volume offers a refreshingly original reading of the German tradition of modern political thought by presenting the compelling argument that perfectionism, which is the enhancement of the subject's capacity for free and rational self-determination, is the dominant tradition of thought from Immanuel Kant to Theodor Adorno. This *fil rouge* is exposed by Douglas Moggach in his introductory essay, where as the leading scholar in research on Young Hegelianism he identifies a new approach to perfectionism after Kant, and among Kantians themselves, which focuses on the perfection of autonomy. Autonomy here is not restricted to Kantian moral self-regulation but rather deployed so as to mean, more broadly, free rational agency able to transform the social and political sphere. This approach is of particular interest to historians of political thought, indicating as it does an understanding of the process of history in association with practical reason. Here the role of social and political institutions is to maintain the conditions of free agency, thereby reforming the juridical order; economic, political and social relations therefore have to evolve historically. This appears to be the key feature of German political thought.

This approach begins with Leibniz's concept of spontaneity, by virtue of which each individual (monad) is capable of being a self-initiating cause of change, rather than being determined by external causes. Perfectionism lies in the realization of this inner-directed activity. Christian Wolff would then offer a particular reading of this perfectionist paradigm, which prevailed in the German lands in the eighteenth century and at the heart of his theory of enlightened absolutism. Originally influenced by Aristotle but with a strong Leibnizian inflection, Wolff's perfectionism recalled as the natural goal of the state the promotion of Aristotle's *eudaimonia* or happiness of its subjects (3–7). This form of classical perfectionism refers to a political theory that envisioned the role of the state as being to promote, actively and intentionally, objectively valuable conceptions of the good and the physical, intellectual and spiritual development of the individual. An absolute paternalistic state is the political consequence of this theory.

This traditional (metaphysical) perfectionism is criticised by Kant because it denies the maturity of subjects or their free capacity to act. The book under review is chiefly concerned with a specifically Kantian and post-Kantian approach to perfectionism. Kant strongly criticizes Wolff's form of perfectionism, but does not rule out any possible perfectionism, as long as it does not take a specific fixed image of the human good as the end to be promoted. An approach of this kind shifts the classical framework in such a way that it is not happiness that is the objective, but rather freedom itself and the improvement of the conditions under which subjects' rational free agency is exercised. This new approach assumes that social interests are opposed to rather than complementary with each other and it therefore associates happiness with freedom. Post-Kantian idealism assumes that if there is a contradiction between reason and the objective forms of existence, the practical imperative is to modify the objective forms until they are aligned with the idea. The consequent reform of political, social and economic relations represents the progress of self-consciousness. This post-Kantian perfectionism is the common feature of modern German political thought, and the edited volume showcases various responses to the questions as to how the tensions between the limited finite modern state and its contribution to infinite human flourishing might be resolved, and as to what role individuals might play in realizing rational self-determination and the freedom of the will.

The transformational labour of objectivity through rational and universal criteria is the characteristic of the critical and historical idealism that engages with post-Kantian perfectionism. It is indeed with Kant that the contributions to this volume begin. Maximiliano Hernández Marcos outlines the historical trajectory of Kant's idea of perfectionism as it evolved from *Grundlegung der Metaphysik der Sitten* (1785) to *Zum ewigen Frieden* (1795) by placing it in the context of German political and philosophical reactions to the French Revolution. He also discusses the divide between republican Kantian juridical perfectionism, based on his transcendentalism, and the conservative empiricism represented by contemporaries such as Christian Garve, August Wilhelm Rehberg and Friedrich von Gentz (29–30). Kant's self-legislated perfectionism is also at the heart of Luca Fomesu's essay, which deals with the search for unity that characterizes Kant's system. It engages in particular with the teleology that underlies the perfectionist project, analysing the tension between the finite moral will and the infinite human tendency to cultivate self-improvement. Post-Kantian perfectionism is therefore preoccupied with this teleological tension, one that presents, as in Johann Gottlieb Fichte, perfectionism as the process of reaching the moral destination (*Bestimmung*) that is an infinite approximation to the absolute identity of reason with itself (79–81).

The next three essays engage with the various different approaches to perfectionism provided by Johann Gottfried Herder (Stefanie Buchenau and Douglas

Moggach), Friedrich Schiller (Eva Schürmann), and Fichte (Dean Moyar). Self-improvement in Herder has to be understood in terms of the relation between perfection and perfectibility. Perfectibility is indeed the external manifestation of the inner activity of spontaneity and its indirect expression, whereas perfection is the objective to achieve although it is one that can never be fully realised by finite individuals. The ethical consequence of this metaphysical structure is a variety of diverse life plans that human beings self-shape, which might sometimes be in conflict, in an infinite effort towards the ideal of perfection (90–91). The separation between the internal and the external activity of subjects has different consequences in Schiller's aesthetic, where freedom is achieved gradually in an infinite determination towards the ideal of perfectionism, yet it is still an act of the autonomy of the will (118–19). Fichte's 'civic perfectionism' is for its part presented as the core of his ethical theory, where perfection is an ideal endpoint that orients moral action in the present, an ideal that should reconcile the external and the internal dimension of freedom within an ethical community. The political and economic theory that emerges from this theoretical approach is therefore a form of civic perfectionism inasmuch as it directs the State towards a distribution of well-being throughout the nation (144–48).

The next group of essays addresses the connections between perfectionism and autonomy in Hegel (Loughlin Gleeson and Heikki Ikäheimo) and the Young Hegelians. This part of the volume challenges Kantian perfectionism in a number of different ways, setting out to prove the validity of the main argument of the volume regarding the relevance of perfectionism of autonomy as a category illuminating modern German political thought. Hegel's perfectionism is presented as lying within the framework of post-Kantian perfectionism only in so far as the good that has to be achieved is considered as freedom in itself. The authors however highlight a specifically Hegelian interpretation of perfectionism as 'evaluative essentialism' and seek to differentiate the several dimensions of 'concrete freedom', considered variously as 'essence', as 'concept', or as 'essential determination', and to show how they interact as a guiding meta-principle for a collective autonomy (164–65).

The sheer variety of approaches to the perfectionism of autonomy adopted by the Young Hegelians is striking: while Eduard Gans (Norbert Waszek) focuses on social progress as republican participation in the ethical dimension of the public sphere (183–85); Bruno Bauer (Michael Kuur Sørensen and Douglas Moggach) dwells on the philosophical understanding of rights as well as the transformational labour collectively exercised when social freedom intervenes in institutions (205–6); and Arnold Ruge (Tim Rojek) for his part insists on the autonomy of self-consciousness when it addressed political praxis (233–34). Karl Marx's account of the development of the essential forces of species also seems to feature certain aspects of post-Kantian perfectionism (Michael Quante), with

labour being defined as a spontaneous activity linked to freedom and satisfaction (250–51), while Max Stirner (David Leopold) is less easily contained within this theoretical framework, although his approach could be considered a ‘non-essentialist perfectionism’ (272–73).

The next three essays engage with the thesis that in German political thought the subject is a spontaneous and inner-directed activity that transforms its external context. Søren Kierkegaard’s case (Roe Fremstedal) is exemplary because the subject seeks to develop an interior selfhood (autonomy), and yet his account focuses on the interaction between morality and eudaimonism (303–5). The case of John Stuart Mill (Simon Derpmann) is interesting as it provides an example of the articulation of perfectionism elsewhere in Europe, although he recognizes his debt to Wilhelm von Humboldt in shaping his understanding of individuality and liberty (311–13). Friedrich Nietzsche’s perfectionism (Maria Cristina Fornari) is here identified with the idea of the ‘authentic individual’, whose self-improvement serves the development of the new human ‘type’ that he envisaged (346–47).

Closing this edited volume are two essays that trace the legacy of the perfectionism of autonomy into the twentieth century, discussing the reunification of spontaneity and rational autonomy proposed by the neo-Kantian Hermann Cohen—following Nietzsche’s rupture of the relationship between the two terms (Myriam Bienenstock). However, Cohen separates autonomy from self-determination, the former in his view encompassing the collective political and legal context, and the latter being concerned with individual activities (352–53). This long journey of post-Kantian perfectionism concludes with the Frankfurt School, and Theodor Adorno in particular (Samir Gandesha). Although there must be many reservations as to whether Adorno’s critique of reason could ever make him a suitable candidate for the proposed theoretical framework, his preoccupation with ‘the good life’ demands of perfectionism that it answers questions about the failure of the revolutionary forces of 1848, the unification of Germany and the Franco-Prussian war, the First World War and the rise of Nazism up to the Holocaust. Adorno’s theoretical framework reaffirms the interconnection of theory and praxis and rethinks autonomy as central to the development of a negative dialectic (394–95).

This cogent and consistently engaging volume not only contributes to the wider debate on perfectionism and its ethical and theoretical structures by reflecting on the concept of autonomy and self-regulated freedom, but also advances new and sophisticated reflections that will influence contemporary scholarship on German political and moral philosophy, providing a contextualized vocabulary through which to understand one of the main features of post-Kantian philosophy. Moreover, for historians of German political thought this work is an exemplary

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investigation of how the understanding of metaphysical systems is key to the contextualization of ethical and political ideas, and by the same token to the exploration of historical change.

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