AKRASIA IN THE EARLY MODERN THOUGHT

Risto Saarinen, *Weakness of Will in Renaissance and Reformation Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), ISBN 978-0-19-960681-8, pp. vi+248

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Medea's famous words "I see the better and approve it, but I follow the worse"[1] fully illustrates men's paradoxical way of acting known in the ancient Greek under the name of *akrasia*. Aristotle's seventh book of *Nicomachean Ethics* put forward a subtle philosophical analysis of *akrasia* or the weakness of will, which became a standard reference for further discussions on this issue in antiquity. Largely interpreted as one person's acting against his or her better judgment, *akrasia* continued to be a topic of interest in the Middle Ages, where started to be translated as 'incontinentia' (hence 'incontinence' as one of its English correspondents). However, not too much has been said of the history of this term in the Early Modern period. The most recent book of professor Risto Saarinen, *Weakness of Will in Renaissance and Reformation Thought,* aims at filling this gap. Although the novelty of the study consists in the discussion of some selected thinkers of the Renaissance and Reformation, the book equally deals with the ancient time and some of the echoes Reformation had in modernity. The historical account of *incontinence* is based here on a discussion of an extended list of authors, running from Socrates to Shakespeare.

Thus, we find out that the problem of how one can act against one's better judgment finds its first answer in that side of Plato's thought which favors the dominance of desire or passion over the rational or better part of the soul. The akratic is that person who's rationality is overcome by the appetitive part of the soul. A powerful desire sometimes can succeed in driving the action even against one's sound judgment. Saarinen (p. 8) points out that Plato also allowed for a different interpretation, which further had an influence on Aristotle. As concerning the Stagirite, Saarinen draws on his previous study *Weakness of Will in Medieval Thought: From Augustine to Buridan*[2] for providing us with three possible interpretations of the well known practical syllogism meant by Aristotle to explain how rational deliberation works. The last of these interpretations is somehow favored by Saarinen here, the reason being that it makes justice to the emphasis put by Aristotle on the fact that the akratic has a good choice before deliberating between different alternatives of acting: "the propositional conclusion and the good choice are formed in the mind of the akratic, but for some reason they remain imperfect and therefore cannot prevent the emergence of the passionate act contrary to choice" (p. 12).

The analysis of Stoic and Christian elements and further of Augustine's view upon the weakness of will uncovers a slightly different type of approaching the issue. The aim of this new interpretation seemed to be the provision of a middle ground between intellectual Aristotelianism and the overestimated role of desire in Platonism. The Stoics endowed emotions with some embedded judgmental content, while Augustine stressed the decisive role of one's personal consent to act. For Augustine, *akrasia* is represented by the conflict of two wills, one external and the other one, internal. According to this view, a plurality of impulses drive the internal tendencies of man but the external act only depends on one's consent to one of these sensual impressions. Concupiscence and sin however echo a stronger Stoic influence upon Augustine and Saarinen points out that there are passages in Augustine's works which "affirm the view of

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concupiscence as judgment which in itself already involves consent. They break the twofold sequence of desire and consent, and claim in a genuinely Stoic manner that the awareness of some desires already involves proper judgments and assent" (p. 24).

This last Stoic component of Augustine's thinking strongly influenced Luther's interpretation of the Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans and accordingly, Luther's specific understanding of sin and concupiscence as inherent to human nature. Thus, I think that Saarinen's discussion of Augustine in chapter one could be read in parallel with his analysis of Luther's approach presented in chapter three. The author provides us with a careful analysis of Luther's theory of sin along several pages (see esp. pp. 119-125), which ends with an overview of the different currents of thought (Platonist, Aristotelian, Stoic etc) that occur in Luther's opinion, the final conclusion stating the impossibility of akrasia in Luther's thought (p. 125).

Saarinen's attractive analysis however reaches its peak when dealing with the Renaissance period. The author selects eight important thinkers for examination: Francesco Petrarch, Donato Acciaiuoli, John Versor, Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples, Jose Clichtove, Francesco Piccolomini, Virgilius Wellendorffer and John Mair, the last two being systematically discussed almost for the first time in the literature. For example, Virgilius Wellendorffer (1460-1534) proves to be a close follower of Walter Burley, Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas and implicitly of Aristotle' intellectualist approach, his answer to the problem raised by *incontinence* being that "the akrates reaches the good propositional conclusion of the practical syllogism at least to some extent, but fails to put it into practice" (p. 71).

However, in comparison with Müller's account[3], Saarinen's approach seems to be less interested in a wide disclosure of the philosophical subtleties of *incontinence*. This is not meant to say that conceptual analysis is lacking. On the contrary, it systematically and suitably joins the different historical views of *akrasia* listed in the book (cf. for example pp. 23-5, 80-2, 149-52, 188 etc). However, it seemed to me that the book better performs in mapping the historical influences and connections between different interpretations occurring in different ages than in revealing the philosophical assumptions of the different theories of *incontinence*. This however forms one of the major virtues of the book, the intricate influence of ancient currents upon medieval explanations of *incontinence* or the impact of the former or of the last too upon the Reformation thought being unraveled with great proficiency. Moreover, every chapter and section is followed by a short summary of the discussion with two different schematic but suggestive overviews occurring at pages 42 and 217. Therefore, it becomes evident that the book fully accomplishes one of its major aims, namely to show that "the classical problem of weakness of will was the source of lively debates and significant innovations during the Renaissance and Reformation" (p. 3).

A bit difficult for the reader could be the evaluation of the book's second intention, namely the use of *akrasia* as a key tool to unwrap "the general understanding of the human condition during the formative period between medieval times and early modernity" (p. 3). It seems to me a bit hard to discern the passages where this topic is directly addressed, with the exception perhaps of the analysis of the Reformation. The text is also very dense and this makes it very difficult to detach rich discussions of the human condition as an issue stemming from the conceptual puzzles raised by *akrasia* itself. My suggestion is that a graphic representation of the net of the theological ideas listed in the book would have helped the reader to better grasp the relationship of the different interpretations and of their relevance for the discussion of the human condition. Moreover, Bejkzy[4], unreferred to by Saarinen at all, seems to be a better candidate at fulfilling this second major task of Saarinen's study.

However, the book compensates with a detailed presentation of many original texts on *incontinence*, thus becoming attractive for the general public but first and foremost for students or specialists wishing to undertake a serious study of the phenomenon called weakness of the will.

Finally, it remains us to ask: where can we still look back in the past for finding new insights into the interpretation of *akrasia*? Although Müller[5] (2009, pp. 285-91) makes an effort to cover on few pages the Patristic contribution to this discussion, I think many and still interesting suggestions can be found in this literature. And to my knowledge, there is no better study to start with than Frede's[6] analysis of the originality of Saint John of Damascus' interpretation of will and rational deliberation.

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References

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[2] Saarinen, R., *Weakness of Will in Medieval Thought: From Augustine to Buridan* (Leiden: Brill, 1994).

[3] Müller, J., *Willensschwäche in Antike und Mittelalter. Eine Problemgeschichte von Sokrates bis Johannes Duns Scotus*. Ancient and Medieval Philosophy 40 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2009).

[4] Bejczy, P. I., *Virtue Ethics in the Middle Ages. Commentaries on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics 1250-1500* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

[5] See Müller, J., (2009), 285-291.

[6] Frede, M., "John of Damascus on Human Action, the Will and Human Freedom", in *Byzantine Philosophy and Its Ancient Sources*, ed. K. Ierodiakonou (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 63-95.