THE APOSTLE PAUL'S CREATIVE USE OF A COMMON PHILOSOPHICAL TOPOS: THE *AKRATES* OF LAW (ROM 7,14-21)

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Abstract

This paper will examine the figure of the *akrates*[2] of law (Rom 7,14-21) in light of brief passages taken from two ancient philosophical texts: Plato's early dialogue, the *Protagoras* and Aristotle's magnum opus, the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Socrates, Plato and Aristotle all studied the problem of *akrasia*, namely the divided will in the moral subject. In chapter seven of his Letter to the Romans, St. Paul also addresses this ethical problem and proposes his own creative use of what had become a common philosophical topos in both the classical and Hellenistic world. He summarizes the moral conundrum of the "I" in this way in Rom 7,19: "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." How then is such a major split between the cognitive and the ethical possible? How is it possible for good people to recognize the good yet do evil instead? Even in our own day scholars of ancient ethics continue to examine this fascinating and still relevant moral dilemma.

Keywords

Akrasia. Law and ethics. Law and theology.

Summary

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[2] *akrates*: one who displays the character flaw of weakness of will, i.e. *akrasia*.

1. INTRODUCTION

New Testament exegetes have always appreciated the importance of the Apostle Paul's Jewish background as the primary source of material for his groundbreaking understanding of the Christ event. But what influence, if any, did Greco-Roman thought have on him? For centuries, the prevailing attitude among Pauline scholars has been that the pagan world had very little impact on his theology. Over the past few decades, however, this overarching consensus had been breaking down bit by bit. Of late, some biblical scholars have published important research that clearly shows the influence ancient philosophers had on St. Paul's rhetoric, philosophy and theology.[3] After all, the Apostle of the Gentiles was a diaspora Jew, a native Greek speaker, one in constant touch with both his fellow Jews from both the diaspora and Israel as well as with innumerable Gentiles from every corner of the Roman Empire.

A clear definition of *akrasia* will certainly help our reflections, and the brief entry in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* suffices for our purposes. *akrasia*, also spelled *acrasia*, Greek term for weakness of will. *Akrasia* is a character flaw, also called incontinence, exhibited primarily in intentional behavior that conflicts with the agent's own values or principles. Its contrary is *enkrateia* (strength of will, continence, self-control). Both *akrasia* and *enkrateia*, Aristotle says, "are concerned with what is in excess of the state characteristic of most people; for the continent abide by their resolutions more, and the incontinent less, than most people can" (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1152a25-27). These resolutions may be viewed as judgments that it would be best to perform an action of a certain sort, or better to do one thing than another. *Enkrateia*, on that view, is the power

[3] ALETTI 1996, 77-95; ENGBERG-PEDERSEN 2000; ENGBERG-PEDERSEN 2002, 32-57; WASSERMAN 2008, 387-415.

(*kratos*) to act as one judges best in the face of competing motivation. *Akrasia* is a want or deficiency of such power[4].

In light of this useful and concise definition, I will now undertake my own examination of this significant ethical question by dividing my paper into three parts. Firstly, I begin with a brief study of Plato's presentation of Socrates' teaching on *akrasia* as recorded in his dialogue the *Protagoras*. Secondly, I turn to Aristotle's instruction as developed in the opening chapters of Book VII of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.[5] Thirdly, I analyze the Apostle Paul's own approach to this moral problem as he articulates his complex rhetorical argument in Rom 7,7-25. Since I am a New Testament scholar, I will obviously devote the bulk of my conference to the Letter to the Romans. Lastly, in my brief conclusion, I will compare and contrast the various positions of these great thinkers so as to appreciate St. Paul's own novel treatment of the problem of *akrasia*.

2. PLATO, PROTAGORAS

Plato deals with the problem of *akrasia* in several of his dialogues, and so we may conclude that this cognitive and ethical dilemma was very important for his moral philosophy. Is it possible for philosophers to teach virtue and, if so, how? What is the connection between true knowledge—

[4] MELE 1995, 14.

[5] My take on the development of the Greek philosophical treatment of *akrasia* restricts itself to the standard presentation one learns in introductory courses to philosophy. Since I am not a professor of philosophy, I freely admit the limitations of this rather cursory approach. Many philosophers today continue to examine the subtle nuances and intellectual evolution first developed by ancient ethicists in Greece, especially in Athens, in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C., thus appreciating a far richer and more detailed tableau. For further study of the theme of *akrasia*, I recommend the excellent monograph of collected articles presented in BOBONICH; DESTRÉE 2007.

how it is imparted and learned—and right action? If someone knows the good, will he necessarily always do it?[6] Scholars agree that Plato's earliest treatment of our topos is found in the *Protagoras*, and for this reason I selected a brief extract from this text for our consideration. In this important dialogue, which treats the topics of education and ethics, Plato recounts an important conversation between Socrates[7] and the famous philosopher from Abdera, Protagoras, who has just arrived in Athens. History records in fact that Protagoras, the first sophist, lived in the fifth century B.C., so he was obviously a contemporary of Socrates (who was born in Athens in 469 B.C. and was put to death there in 399 B.C.). In addition, we know of Protagoras only through two sources: from Plato's dialogue of the same name and Diogenes Laertius. He is especially famous in the history of philosophy for the doctrine known as *homo mensura*, i.e. "Man is the measure of all things (*pántōn chrēmátōn métron estín ánthrōpos*)"[8].

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[6] "At the root of P.'s anthropologically based ethics are two radically new beliefs: that our ethical responsibilities are not limited to the brief period of human life (Resp. 608c-d, Phd. 107c) and that it is always worse to do wrong than to suffer wrong (Gorg. 469b ff.). P. disparages as 'popular' or 'civic virtue' [...] the thoughtless 'virtue' of an ordinary citizen that stems merely from habit; true virtue is knowledge, recollection of the ideas of the virtues perceived beyond this world (Phdr. 247d; 250b). Such knowledge leads directly to the right action: 'No one does wrong voluntarily' (cf. Resp. 589c, Grg. 488a, Men 78b)". SZLEZÁK 2014, 346.

[7] "The real tradition of ethical thought in antiquity began with Socrates: he abandoned natural philosophy and paved the way for discVussion on the nature of the good life. His concentration on the best possible state of the soul brought with it the risk of an individual's conflict with the values of a larger social group and even of his family [...] Socrates preferred to ask how one was supposed to live than to inquire into the correctness of individual actions" INWOOD 2014, 83).

[8] "...most scholars share the interpretation of this fragment suggested by Plato in *Theaetetus* (152a-160e), i.e. that it expresses radical cognitive relativism based on the validity of individual sensory experiences" GARTNER 2014, 64.

Let us begin our analysis with Socrates famous description of what the many (*hoi poloi*) believe can happen to human beings.[9]

> One asserts that most people are unable to do what is best, even though they know what it is and are able to do it, but do other things instead [...] One says that those who act that way do so because they are overcome by pleasure or pain or are being conquered by spirit or love or fear (*Prot.* 352d6-e9).

This brief extract provides us with an excellent description of *akrasia* according to Socrates. Even if people do not usually act that way, the simplest way to describe their uncharacteristic behavior is to assert that they have been temporarily conquered by pleasure or pain, i.e. by some strong feeling that forces them to lose control of themselves. Shortly before in the dialogue (cf. 352c1), Socrates had already pointed out that the knowledge of such people is similar to that of a slave who must obey his master. In this case, then, reason or knowledge is powerless. Since people in this condition are overwhelmed by strong feelings (by pleasure, pain, spirit, love or fear), they are now unwilling or unable to do what they ought to do. Hence, according to the many, strong feelings win over knowledge and thus force the individual to act out of powerlessness against his or her own values and principles. The moral subject is thus clearly divided—the very definition of *akrasia*.

But so much for the opinion of the many (*hoi poloi*). Socrates for his part categorically denies the existence of *akrasia*. He forcefully and consistently rejects the possibility of the weakness of knowledge and the weakness of desires. In the *Protagoras*, Plato relates him teaching that knowledge (*epistêmê* or *phronêsis*) cannot be ordered around (cf. 352c1), and

[9] For this brief summary I am indebted to the clear and succinct presentation of BOBONICH; DESTRÉE 2007, xvi-xvii.

thus the person with knowledge cannot behave like a slave. Socrates' forceful denial of *akrasia*, moreover, springs from his categorical rejection of the idea that somebody could ever act against his own knowledge or belief. If a person decides to do y instead of x, it is due to the fact that he has now changed his mind and now believes that y is better than x. In short, according to Socrates, all human beings do what they think to be good or best when they do it (cf. 358d1-2). Thus, nobody errs willingly (cf. 358c) or, in other words, nobody does evil with full knowledge.[10] The human will, hence, can only be directed to the good. Therefore, for Plato—entirely faithful in this regard to his teacher Socrates—the purpose of philosophy is to indicate the good and to teach people to achieve it in their lives. Moreover, once human beings know what the good is, they will consistently choose it and live it out. Thus, for Socrates (and for the young Plato[11]), weakness of will is impossible.

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[10] Cf. Gorg. 468c; 509e; Resp. 382a; 413a; 589c; Tim 86d-e; Leg 731c, etc.

[11] Later in life Plato was to challenge Socrates' denial of *akrasia* in Book IV of his *Republic*. However, a detailed examination of the nuanced evolution of Plato's thought on this theme goes beyond the limits of our brief conference. Here I limit myself to a cursory summary of Plato's presentation of Socrates' teaching on *akrasia* as found in the *Protagoras*. "It is difficult to distinguish Plato's contribution to ethics from that of Socrates. The most important differences derive from Plato's having committed himself to separate ideas as the basis of knowledge (including moral knowledge) and having divided man's soul into three parts (reason, motivation and desires). This tripartite division conflicts with Socrates implicit theory of unity. Plato was also more convinced than Socrates of the immortality of the soul, and of the possibility of reward after death and of reincarnation. Whereas Socrates had an ambivalent attitude towards hedonism, Plato rejected enjoyment/pleasure (*hēdonê*) as an essential part of a happy life. Finally, he conceded the existence of elements that transcend man's nature: in maintaining (Tht. 176b), that 'assimilation to god' is worth man's striving for, he is explicitly expressing the theme of transcendence found in his dialogues. This passage was to become a source of ethical doctrine for the later Platonic tradition". INWOOD 2014, 83.

3. ARISTOTLE, NICOMACHEAN ETHICS

Since in his ethical works[12] Aristotle also investigated the vexing problem of *akrasia*, we next turn to his classic treatment of the matter as presented in Book VII of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Born in 384 B.C. in Stagira, Aristotle was sent to study at Plato's Academy in Athens at the age of seventeen, shortly after his father's death. Scholars agree that his subsequent life can be divided into four principal stages: 1) study at the Academy (367-c.357 B.C.); 2) teaching at the Academy until Plato's death (357- 347 B.C.); 3) travel years (Assus in Asia Minor from 347 to 345 B.C., Lesbos from 345 to 344, Pella at the Macedonian royal court as Alexander's teacher from 343 to 340 B.C., Stagira from 340 to 335 B.C.); 4) teaching again at Athens, but now at his own school, the Lyceum (335-322 B.C.). While we have sufficient information to sketch a basic outline of Aristotle's life, it is very difficult to reconstruct with accuracy, however, his intellectual biography. For example, we simply do not know how much contact Aristotle had with Plato during his years as a student at the Academy (Plato himself was away from Athens for long stretches of time, teaching in Sicily from 367 to 364 and again from 361 to 359). The physical separation of these two great minds, even during the period of Aristotle's studies as a young man, in some ways prefigures the approaching distancing and separation between their two distinct schools of thought. Aristotle's ethics, in fact, would eventually deviate from Plato's in many important ways. The fundamental teachings of Aristotelian ethics are founded on the thought processes developed in the *Nicomachean*

[12] "Of the three ethics traditionally associated with A., two are named after their ancient editors: the 'Eudemian Ethics' (*Ethica Eudemia*, seven books) after his friend and fellow scholar Eudemus, and the 'Nicomachean Ethics' (*Ethica Nicomachea*, 10 books) after his son Nichomachus. The 'Nicomachean Ethics' is generally seen as the later, more mature version; it is questionable, however, whether the common middle books (Eth. Nic. V-VII) originally belonged to the Eudemian or the Nicomachean Ethics. The third treatise bears the misleading title of *Magna Moralia* (two books); in quality, it is noticeably inferior to the other two ethics; it is disputed whether it is an earlier work by A. or the transcript of a lecture, written by one of his students". FREDE 2014, 1142.

Ethics, Book I, his best-articulated interpretation of eudemonism. Aristotle presents the thesis that the good life is an active life in harmony with human nature and the natural functions of human beings. Appreciating man's nature allows the understanding of his characteristic advantages (i.e. the virtues). The soul is made up of both rational and non-rational parts. The rational part can realize the intellectual virtues, which can be split into practical and theoretical, while the non-rational part can abide by the dictates of practical reason and constitutes the principal seat of the virtues of character. Much of Aristotelian ethics involves an analysis of the virtues, both intellectual and moral. Other significant themes include the role of friendship in the good life and the balance between the private and the official. In short, the connection between theoretical and practical activity constitutes the most disputed question in Aristotle's ethical theory.[13]

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle clearly challenges Socrates' denial of *akrasia* by asserting that weakness of will is indeed possible, thus rehabilitating the theme as a matter of continued philosophical inquiry. In fact, Aristotle openly claims that Socrates' denial goes against the observed phenomena.

> For Socrates was entirely opposed to the view in question, holding that there is no such thing as *akrasia*; no one, he said, when he judges acts against what he judges best— people act so only by ignorance. Now this view plainly contradicts the observed facts, and we must inquire about what happens to such a person; if he acts by reason of ignorance, what is the manner of his ignorance? (*Eth. Nic.* VII 2, 1145b28).

The founder of the Lyceum then begins his own detailed treatment of the problem of *akrasia* by distinguishing between two different kinds: the

[13] For these fundamental teachings INWOOD 2014, 83.

"precipitate *akrasia*" where the agent does not deliberate at all and the "weak *akrasia*" where he does. To Aristotle, only the latter represents a true case of *akrasia*. He then goes on to describe the case in a very detailed way: the weak *akrates* has in fact reflected and thought the matter through. Hence he knows full well that he ought to do x and yet—fully aware of this knowledge—still opts to do y instead.

Book VII of the *Nicomachean Ethics* presents many other texts that identify the existence of a conflict between two opposing and simultaneous desires (x and y).[14] In short, Aristotle's complex presentation constitutes a more comprehensive analysis of *akrasia* as was recognized by Socrates and taught by the young Plato. Indeed the lack of self-control now becomes an almost constant feature of the *akrates*' character, hence one that is very difficult to treat and to overcome. In the well-known yet puzzling chapter 3 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Book VII, Aristotle presents his two famous syllogisms (cf. *Eth. Nic.* VII 3, 1147a1-1147b5). It seems that contemporary scholars are still divided between two possible interpretative choices with regard to this chapter. Some hold that the akratic person does not arrive at the conclusion of the good syllogism (and so he does not understand that the cake should not be eaten—this interpretation is in line with that of Socrates, thus denying the existence of *akrasia*[15]), while others say that he does in fact reach such a conclusion (and so he does understand that the cake ought to be avoided but still eats it due to the lack of desire to resist it—this interpretation defends the existence of *akrasia*, thus opposing Socrates' position[16]). Three insightful articles on Aristotle's ethics in the

[14] For a more detailed treatment of this topic, cf. BOBONICH; DESTRÉE 2014, xix-xx.
[15] This represents the "cognitivist interpretation of the weak akrates" CHARLES 2007, 194.
[16] This represents the "Human interpretation of the weak akrates"; cf. CHARLES 2007, 194.

recent monograph by Bobonich and Destrée[17] propose diverse approaches to the problem. Moreover, in an even more recent article by L. Radoilska, we read his opinion that the Aristotelian account of *akrasia* is a primary failure of intentional agency in contrast to a phenomenon he refers to as "ordinary weakness of will". Hence, Radoilska maintains that "ordinary weakness of will" is best understood as a secondary failure of intentional agency.[18] In short, thanks to our brief overview, we may safely conclude that the animated discussion between contemporary philosophers on the problem of *akrasia* in Aristotle's thought continues with much verve and vigor even in our own day.

4. THE APOSTLE PAUL, ROM 7,14-21

We now arrive at the third and final part of my essay, i.e. our consideration of Paul's presentation of the *akrates* in chapter seven of his Letter to the Romans. The topos describing weakness of will is clearly articulated in Rm 7,14-21.

> "[14] We know that the law is spiritual; but I am carnal, sold into slavery to sin. [15] What I do, I do not understand. For I do not do what I want , but I do what I hate.[16] Now if I do what I do not want, I concur that the law is good. [17] So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. [18] For I know that good does not dwell in me, that is, in my flesh. The willing is ready at hand, but doing the good is not. [19] For I do not do the good I want, but I do

[17] Cf. DESTRÉE 2007, 139-165; M. ZINGANO 2007, 167-191; CHARLES 2007, 193-214.
[18] Cf. RADOILSKA 2012. 25-50.

> the evil I do not want.[20] Now if [I] do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. [21] So, then, I discover the principle that when I want to do right, evil is at hand (Rom 7,14-21)."

Firstly, we will study these verses and their arrangement in their literary context in order to appreciate their rhetorical function in Paul's overall argument. To do so, we need to examine this pericope's place in its wider literary context (Rom 5– 8) in the letter's doctrinal section and then in its immediate literary context, namely Rom 7,7-25. In this way, we can appreciate better the Apostle's creative use of *akrasia* in his teaching on human beings, sin and the law. We will then be able to consider an important theological question: the identity of the "I" (*egó*) in this significant chapter.

4.1 ROM 7,14-21 IN ITS LITERARY CONTEXT

Although Rom 7,14-21 presents the moral dilemma of the *akrates*, these verses do not constitute a distinct pericope in themselves; as a result, they must be understood as making up part of two interconnected micro-units. Before we delimit this Pauline text, however, let us first zoom out for a moment in order to appreciate the wider literary context, i.e. Rom 5–8. Almost all New Testament scholars today agree that these four central chapters constitute the second part of the letter's doctrinal section (Rom 1–11). In Rom 5–8 Paul develops his argumentation with the help of a figure of speech that dominates his thought in these chapters: *comparatio* (in Greek, *synkrisis*[19]). The first example of this figure is found in Rom 5,12-21 where

[19] "La *synkrisis* consiste à comparer systématiquement des personnages, des action ou des événements, en montrant leurs points communs, mais aussi leurs différences, la supériorité de l'un sur l'autre, etc. [...] Cf. aussi Rm 5,15-19 (entre Adam et le Christ)" ALETTI 2005, 85.

the Apostle compares Adam to Christ. In the following chapters, he goes on to compare and contrast unbaptized persons who are still subject to the law and remain under the power of sin and death (and as such are descendants of Adam) to baptized persons who have already been freed from sin, death and the Mosaic law through faith (and as such are descendants of Christ). The letter- sender develops his argumentation with the help of *synkrisis* in order to convey the eschatological situation of all those who have been baptized in Christ and thus enjoy a new fellowship with him. Thanks to their life-giving relationship with the Lord, Christians have received a new personal freedom and a new ability to life the moral life, since they are now being led by the Holy Spirit towards the fullness of future glory. The following outline of Rom 5–8 will help us to appreciate better these examples of *synkrisis* and the meticulous ordering of the various rhetorical units.[20]

> – 5,1-11 Introduction to the macro-unit chapters 5–8
>
> – 5,12-21 *Synkrisis* of Adam and Christ as a preparation for *probatio*, ending with a brief *propositio* in vv. 20-21 that presents the topics to be treated (relationship between grace and sin, law and grace, law and sin)
>
> – 6,1–8,30 *probatio* in three stages
>
> A. (positive) 6,1–7,6 the baptized who have died to sin in Christ cannot remain in sin (with brief *propositiones* in 6,1.15)
>
> B. (negative) 7,7-25 the law, while holy, is at the service of sin and cannot free from weakness (with a brief *propositio* in 7,7)

[20] For this outline, ALETTI 1996, 92-93; ALETTI 1998, 1571; BRODEUR 2013, 232-241.

> A'. (positive) 8,1-30 God frees in Christ Jesus and gives the Spirit of adoption to Christians (with brief *propositiones* in 8,1.18)
>
> – 8,31-39 *peroratio*

The principal purpose of this three-chapter long *probatio* is to explain and elucidate the *propositio* of chapters five through eight:

> But law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom 5,20-21).

This outline of the *dispositio* of Paul's discourse in these four chapters allows us to appreciate better the wider literary context of 7,14-21, the verses marked by the moral problem of *akrasia*.

We now briefly consider the more immediate literary context in part B of the *probatio* presented above, namely Rom 7,7-25. Most exegetes today adopt this general delimitation of the passage thanks to their study of lexical, syntactical, rhetorical and stylistic criteria. The composition of the text appears clearly after one identifies the author's two *subpropositiones* in vv. 7 and 13.

Hence 7,7-25 can be subdivided into three distinct sections, as presented in the following outline.[21]

[21] ALETTI 1996, 78-79.

– vv. 7-13: although the Mosaic law is not sin, it is used by sin, which is the subject of the verbs "to deceive" and "to kill"; the "I" is described as dead

–v. 7a: *subpropositio.*

– vv. 7b-12: sin has manipulated the law to trick and to kill the "I"
– v. 13: a hinge verse since it concludes this micro-unit (by explaining what sin and law are) and introduces the next topic (thus it is another *subpropositio*): sin shows its evil through the holy law

– vv. 14-23: sin is at work in the subject; the "I," manipulated by sin, is the subject of both the action and the cognitive verbs

– vv. 14-20: description without moral overtones of a subject who does what he does not want to do (vv. 14-17), followed by a description of a moral subject who wants to do the good but does not do it, achieving instead the evil that he does not want (vv. 18-20)

– vv. 21-23: the intervention of the law causes a negative cognitive acquisition; evil remains present; the fragmented "I" is aware of its captivity to sin which now rules its members

– vv. 24-25: *peroratio*: the call for help and the divine response

This detailed structure of the *dispositio* of Rom 7,7-25 helps us to recognize just how much the topos of the *akrates* in vv. 14-21 dominates the central section of Paul's argumentation on sin and sin's slavish manipulation of the fragmented "I," ever conscious of its condition as an impotent and

wretched prisoner. The definition of *akrasia* from *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* clearly applies to the wretched "I" of vv. 14-21: "*Akrasia* is a character flaw [...] exhibited primarily in intentional behavior that conflicts with the agent's own values or principles."[22]

4.2 AN IMPORTANT THEOLOGICAL QUESTIONS RAISED BY THE PERICOPE

Who then is the "I" that is so vividly portrayed in Rom 7,7-25? Much ink continues to be spilled by exegetes today on this intriguing exegetico-theological question. Given the brevity of this article, we have only enough time to consider a brief overview of the various hypotheses presented by contemporary scholars, who defend three distinct possibilities.

– Paul before his conversion

Those who support this hypothesis believe that the "I" is in fact biographical: Paul, the letter writer, is alluding to his life as a devout Pharisee before his conversion to the cause of Christ. For example, R.H. Gundry opines that Paul's *akrasia* is caused by an internal conflict caused by his sexual desire.[23] Others make reference to Phil 3,6 where the Apostle mentions his external observance of the law and his own personal blamelessness.[24] Others still claim that the pre-Christian Paul was truly fervent in his observance of the Mosaic law, but also simultaneously unaware of being in such a desperate situation. Thus, according to this opinion, the inner moral conflict portrayed by the *akrates* of Rom 7,14-21 would describe Paul's anguished inner conflict between himself and the law or between Paul's personal search for justification and the law.

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[22] MELE 1995, 14.
[23] GUNDRY 1980, 228-245.
[24] Cf. LAMBRECHT 1992, 76-78.

– The Christian Paul and his present life as an apostle

Even if it is still held by a few scholars today,[25] the rhetorical and lexical indices in Rom 7,7-25 clearly exclude this hypothesis: Paul cannot be describing his present life in Christ. All of Rom 6 as well as Rom 7,5-6 make a sharp contrast between the believers' past life in sin before accepting the Gospel and their present grace-filled life in Jesus Christ. My presentation of the figure of *synkrisis* in chapters five through eight ought to have provided convincing enough proof for us to reject this hypothesis. If the Christian Paul were the "I" in question, then his argumentation in chapter seven would be riddled with inconsistencies and contradictions. The next example of *synkrisis*, i.e. the contrast between Rom 7,7-25 and Rom 8,1-17, ought to settle the matter definitively: in chapter 7 sin dwells in the conflicted "I" while in chapter 8 the Spirit dwells in believers in Christ.

– All humanity, Jews and Gentiles alike

If Paul is not describing his own situation, either pre- or post-conversion to the cause of Jesus Christ, then perhaps he is referring to all people in general, both Jews and Gentiles. This in fact is the hypothesis accepted by most exegetes today and the one that best explains these dense and difficult verses. I also accept this position without any reservations. In Rom 5 in the *synkrisis* between Adam, the first human being and Christ, the new Adam, the Apostle grounds his complex reasoning with anthropological and christological proofs so as to include all humanity, Jews and Gentiles alike. This all-inclusive approach to humanity's slavery to sin and death and subsequent redemption and justification by Jesus Christ is already spelled out in the letter's main *propositio* (= main thesis statement) in

[25] Cf. GARLINGTON 1994, 110-143; DUNN 1975, 264-273.

Rom 1,16: "For I am not ashamed of the Gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." More specifically, in Rom 7,7-25 the Apostle to the Gentiles focuses exclusively on the case of the pious and believing Jew who knows the Mosaic law and sincerely wills to live according to its statutes and commands.[26] Such a Jew would hold that the law, since it is from God, would in fact protect him from doing evil. He would indeed know God's will by means of the Mosaic law; he would thus know the good and be able to live it out through the practice of good deeds in his daily life. Hence, in Rom 7 Paul presents the best-case scenario of the devout and practicing Jew. If due to *akrasia* the situation of such a virtuous Jew is so desperate and wretched, then that of everyone else (non-pious Jews and all Gentiles who, by definition, have not received the Mosaic law and so do not know the living and true God) is even more so!

In sum, if even the good and law-practicing Jew is an *akrates*, then by extension all humanity is too. Again, this important point had been previously made by Paul in chapter 3 of this extraordinary letter: "For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Rom 3,22b-24). The moral conflict so poignantly described by the "I" in these verses encapsulates the tragic and pitiful condition of humanity, dominated and subjugated by sin and death, without the Lord Jesus Christ.

5. CONCLUSION

I have attempted to present an interdisciplinary approach to the problem of *akrasia*. Paul, a diaspora Jew and the Apostle to the Gentiles, was indeed profoundly influenced by Greco-Roman thought as shown by

[26] ALETTI 1996, 91-92.

his able mastery of ancient rhetoric, his skilled expertise as a first- century letter writer and his obvious familiarity with this significant classical topos so dear to ancient Greek and Hellenistic philosophers. In this paper, I have intended to present only a summary introduction to the thought of the three great pillars of western philosophy (Socrates, Plato and Aristotle) as well as to the insightful ruminations of St. Paul on this matter. Our analysis of several brief excerpts from the *Protagoras*, the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the Letter to the Romans—in spite of its rather perfunctory nature—still leads us to the following sound conclusions.

For the ancient Greek philosophers, *akrasia*, a passing phenomenon, is caused by something inside the moral subject. The *akrates* experiences a temporary conquering of self due to pleasure or pain or some other strong feeling, and his or her weak condition is uncharacteristic of human beings. For Socrates, no one errs willingly (cf. *Protagoras* 358c), no one does evil with full knowledge.[27] Aristotle later addresses the topic of the irresolute and divided moral agent in Book VII of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. By means of his meticulous reasoning, he also looks for the solution to *akrasia* inside the thinking moral subject who can be taught to dominate his or her instincts and passions. For Aristotle, too, the answer to the problem *akrasia* lies in increased understanding of the good. As a result, for these ancient Greek thinkers, philosophy can indeed help people to grow in virtue and thus overcome their lack of self-control.

For the Apostle Paul, however, *akrasia* is caused by the internal presence of sin whose origin lies outside the moral subject: "Now if [I] do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me" (Rom 7,20; cf. 7,17). For him, then, indwelling sin enslaves human beings and compels them to do evil. In chapter 7, Paul insists on the tragic condition of all humanity without Christ caused by sin's subjugating dominion. This tragic condition is a permanent characteristic of all human

[27] Cf. Gorg. 468c; 509e; Resp. 382a; 413a; 589c; Tim 86d-e; Leg 731c, etc.

beings, Jews and Gentiles alike, before the coming of Christ. For the author of Romans, all human beings dwell in the sphere of the flesh (*sarx*), i.e. the sphere of influence dominated by sin and death and thus opposed to God and his holy will. The Mosaic law is powerless to help because, due to the overarching power of sin, it cannot save. For humanity, the only way out of this miserable state is through salvation in Christ. Only by faith in him, the savior of the world, can believers be transferred from the sphere of the flesh and indwelling sin (which leads to condemnation and death) to the realm of the Spirit and divine grace (which leads to justification and life). The transfer from the realm of the flesh to the realm of the Spirit occurs at baptism, as Paul had previously explained in Rom 6,1-14. Thus, for the Apostle Paul, the wretched situation of the *akrates* in Rom 7,14-21 can only be vanquished by faith and baptism in Jesus Christ and the free gift of justification that comes from him alone. Weakness of will is overcome by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, who the Father has given to all who believe in his Son.

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ABBREVIATIONS

Eth. Nic.	*Nicomachean Ethics*
Gorg./Grg.	*Gorgias*
Leg	*Laws*
Phd./Phdr.	*Phaedrus*
Prot.	*Protagoras*
Resp.	*Republic*
Tht.	*Theaetetus*
Tim	*Timaeus*