

The Fall of Humanity: Weakness of the Will and Moral Responsibility in the Later Augustine

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I. INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEM

Akrasia (or, weakness of the will), often defined as “the moral state of agents who act against their better judgment”—a definition first given by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, depicts one of the most human of predicaments.¹ We know what we ought to do, and we try. But, for one reason or other, we sometimes choose to act contrary to our better judgment.²

Due to his widely read *Confessions*, St. Augustine of Hippo is often regarded as the champion of the doctrine of weakness of the will.³ There

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1. Risto Sarrinen, *Weakness of the Will in Medieval Thought: From Augustine to Buridan* (New York: E. J. Brill, 1994), p. 1. Similar definitions can be found in, e.g., Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* VII, 1045b10–15; Donald Davidson, “How is Weakness of the Will Possible?” in *Moral Concepts*, ed. J. Feinberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970) p. 93; William Charlton, *Weakness of Will* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), p. 1.

2. Being influenced by Socratic reasoning, some philosophers have argued that, in principle, one cannot freely and intentionally choose to act against one’s better judgment, if (1) one rationally judges what is best for oneself, (2) one prefers to act according to one’s rational judgment, and (3) one is free to make one’s own choice. See, e.g., Davidson, “How is Weakness,” pp. 93–113; and R. M. Hare, *Freedom and Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 78–79. Despite the logical difficulty, many believe that weakness of the will is a fact.

3. An interesting discussion of weakness of the will can be found in Books 7, 8, and 9 of the *Confessions*. Many commentators agree that the *Confessions* should not be read simply as Augustine’s psychological autobiography. Rather, it is a description of the fall and the ascent of the human mind. See, e.g., Gerald Bonner, “Starting with Oneself: Spiritual Confessions, 4: Saint Augustine’s Confessions,” *The Expository Times* 101 (1990): 163–67; Robert O’Connell, “The Riddle of Augustine’s

has been an increase of interest in recent scholarship concerning Augustine's teaching on this issue. James Wetzel's 1992 book, *Augustine and the Limits of Virtue*, and John M. Rist's 1994 book, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized*, are two examples among many. Rist's book is especially interesting in its keen comparisons of Augustine and other ancient thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, and the Stoics. Rist's discussion of Augustine's *concupiscentia* and Aristotle's *akrasia* is especially thought-provoking:

Augustine's original interpretation of our human condition is that we struggle and fail to do what we want to do and know that we ought to do—the classical problem of weakness of will or *a/k/rasia*. But typically *a/k/rasia* is thought of as a special problem which we face from time to time. We recognize *a/k/rasia* in ourselves—as does Leonteus in the fourth book of Plato's *Republic* (439E6–440A3) whose eyes 'liked' looking at corpses dangling from a gibbet—and in others; but it is an *a/k/rasia* which is tied to specific weakness; the man who yearns for vodka, and who tries and fails to limit his vodka-intake, may have no serious difficulty in avoiding over-eating. But *concupiscentia*, as the later Augustine saw it, is all-pervasive.⁴

Some forty pages later, Rist adds:

It is helpful, as we have seen, to think of Augustine's account of human weakness in terms of the standard classical descriptions of weakness of will or *a/k/rasia*, above all that of Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle thinks that some of us are *a/k/ratic* some of the time, and a few of us may be *a/k/ratic* all the time (at least about something), while Augustine's position is rather that all of us are *a/k/ratic* all the time, and that while we may think we have overcome a particular moral weakness, there is always the real possibility that it will return. To this, however, we should add that his identification of the main feature of the morally good act as loving rather than as some sort of knowing makes such an analysis much more convincing.⁵

Since Rist has not supplied a working definition of *akrasia* anywhere else in his book, it seems reasonable to infer that according to the context of these two passages, he is using the classical definition of *akrasia* as supplied by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 7. But if this is so, then

Confessions: A Plotinian Key," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 4 (1964): 327–72, and *St. Augustine's Confessions: The Odyssey of Soul*, 2d ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1989). For the literature on this subject, consult Richard Severson, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine: An Annotated Bibliography of Modern Criticism, 1888–1995* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), chap. 8.

4. John Rist, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 137.

5. Rist, *Augustine*, p. 184.

certain difficulties would emerge from such a reading. That is, without further consideration of the possibility of two different working definitions of *akrasia* between these two thinkers, such an analogy between Augustinian weakness of the will and Aristotelian *akrasia* could be defective and misleading to readers familiar with Aristotle's work but less acquainted with Augustine. For from the Aristotelian point of view, an akratic agent is morally blameworthy for choosing to act against his or her better judgment. Following upon that, Rist's reading seems to suggest (though Rist himself may not intend to suggest such an implication) that since Augustine thinks that *everyone is perpetually akratic*, and since *akrasia* is morally blameworthy, then Augustine apparently commits himself to the notion that *everyone is always morally blameworthy*. Many years ago John Burnaby described Augustine's later works as "the work of a man whose energy had burnt out, whose love had grown cold," a comment that has turned many away from Augustine's later works.⁶ Could Augustine's later theory on weakness of the will constitute a further evidence supporting Burnaby's judgment? The situation warrants further investigation.

I will demonstrate here that there is a considerable difference between Aristotle's and Augustine's account of weakness of the will. This difference is sufficient to free Augustine from the difficulty that Rist's reading might have (perhaps inadvertently) brought upon the saint. Furthermore, I will discuss Augustine's position on the akratic agent's moral responsibility.

I will limit myself to Augustine's anti-Pelagian works for the following reasons. First, Rist's remarks concerns only Augustine's later works. Second, Augustine's view on the power of the human will went through several considerable changes. The encounter with Pelagian teachings especially made him reconsider his position with regard to the degree of weakness that the fallen humanity suffers, and the active function that grace plays in each act of the human will.⁷ As a result, in the last twenty years of his life, especially in the anti-Pelagian writings, Augustine presented his most complete and mature view on human weakness.⁸ There-

6. John Burnaby, *Amor Dei: A Study of the Religion of St. Augustine* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1938), p. 23. Peter Brown, in his influential book *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), seems to hold similar view. See Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, p. 384.

7. For good discussion on the doctrines of Pelagianism, consult the following important works by Gerald Bonner: "Augustine and Pelagianism," *Augustinian Studies* 24 (1994): 27-47; "Pelagianism Reconsidered," *Augustinian Studies* 27 (1993): 237-41; "Pelagianism and Augustine," *Augustinian Studies* 23 (1992): 33-51; *Augustine and Modern Research on Pelagianism* (Villanova: Villanova University Press, 1972); "Refinus the Syrian and African Pelagianism," *Augustinian Studies* 1 (1970): 31-47; and Chaps. 8 and 9 in *St. Augustine of Hippo: Life and Controversies*, 2d ed. (Norwich, UK: The Canterbury Press, 1986).

8. Augustine's anti-Pelagian works include: *The Punishment and Forgiveness of sins and the Baptism of Little Ones* (*De peccatorum meritis et remissione et de baptismo parvulorum*) (hereafter, *PeccMer*), *The Spirit and the Letter* (*De spiritu et littera*) (here-

fore, we will be more likely to generate fruitful results by investigating these works.

II. CONCUPISCENTIA

Since the notion of *concupiscentia* is essential to Augustine's doctrine of weakness of the will, and Rist draws an analogy between Aristotelian *akrasia* and Augustinian *concupiscentia*, we shall examine this notion first. Augustine refers to those inordinate desires that are not controllable by the mind *without grace* as concupiscence.⁹ During the later phase of his anti-Pelagian writings, mainly in response to the criticisms made by Julian of Eclanum, Augustine carefully distinguished spiritual concupiscence (*concupiscentia spiritalis*) from shameful concupiscence (*pudenda concupiscentia*).¹⁰ While spiritual concupiscence for Augustine refers to an orderly desire for righteousness, shameful concupiscence refers to inordinate impulse or desire that prompts us to sin, what we usually understand by the term "concupiscence" today. For the purpose of this article, my discussion will center on "shameful concupiscence."

For the sake of clarity, it should be noted that shameful concupiscence is discussed by Augustine in three different contexts: concupiscence as inherited guilt, concupiscence as inherited defect, and concupiscence as inherited defect accompanied by consent.¹¹ Augustine holds that as a result

after, *DSL*), *Nature and Grace (De natura et gratia)* (hereafter, *DNG*), *The Perfection of Human Righteousness (De perfectione iustitiae hominis)* (hereafter, *DPI*), *The Proceedings Against Pelagius (De gestis Pelagii)* (hereafter, *DGP*), *The Grace of Christ and Original Sin (De gratia Christi et peccato originali)* (hereafter, *DGCP*), *The Nature and Origin of the Soul (De natura animae et ejus origine)* (hereafter, *DNAO*), *On Marriage and Desire (De nuptiis et concupiscentia)* (hereafter, *DNC*), *Answer to the Two Letters of the Pelagians (Contra duas epistolas Pelagianorum)* (hereafter, *C2EP*), *Answer to Julian (Contra Julianum)* (hereafter, *CJul*), and *Unfinished Work in Answer to Julian (Contra Julianum opus imperfectum)* (hereafter, *OpImp*).

9. For an introduction to the notion of concupiscence, see, e.g., Gerald Bonner, "Libido and *Concupiscentia* in St. Augustine," *Studia Patristica* 6 (1962): 303–14; F. J. Thonnard, "La notion de concupiscence en philosophie augustinienne," *Recherché Augustiniennes* 3 (1965): 259–87; P. J. Burnell, "Concupiscence and Moral Freedom in Augustine and Before Augustine," *Augustinian Studies* 26 (1995): 49–63; G. Schlabach, "Friendship as Adultery: Social Reality and Sexual Metaphor in Augustine's Doctrine of Original Sin," *Augustinian Studies* 23 (1992): 125–47; Rist, *Augustine*, pp. 135–40.

10. For good discussion on this subject, see Bonner, "Libido and *Concupiscentia*," p. 308; J. Van Oort, "Augustine on Sexual Concupiscence and Original Sin," *Studia Patristica* 22 (1989): 385; Ugo Bianchi, "Augustine on Concupiscence," *Studia Patristica* 22 (1989): 209; and Rist, *Augustine*, pp. 323–24. For texts where Augustine makes such a distinction, see *DNC* II, xxx, 52, *CJul* IV, xi, 57, *C2EP* I, xv, 31, etc.

11. For example, in *CJul* V, iii, 8: *PL* (abbreviation for *Patrologia cursus completus*,

of Adam's sin, every human being, except Christ, inherits original sin at birth.¹² The penal effect of original sin is manifested through both the inherited guilt and inherited defect of concupiscence.¹³ Although the inherited guilt can be removed by baptism, the defect of concupiscence remains with a person in this life, not as "actual sin,"¹⁴ but as "weakness

series Latina) XLIV, 787, Augustine says: "In the same way, concupiscence of the flesh against which the good spirit has its own desires is a sin because it involves disobedience against the rule of the mind. It is a punishment of sin, because it is retribution that the disobedient deserve, and it is the cause of sin by reason of the failure of one who consents or the infection of one who is born. [ita concupiscentia carnis, adversus quam bonus concupiscit spiritus, et peccatum est, quia inest illi inobedientia contra dominatum mentis; et poena peccati est, quia reddita est meritis inobedientis; et causa peccati est, defectione consentientis vel conagione nascentis.]"

In *PeccMer* II, iv, 4: *CSEL* (abbreviation for *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*) LX, 73–74, he says: "Concupiscence, then, remains in the members of the body of this death as the law of sin. It is present in the little ones at birth, though its guilt is removed when little ones are baptized . . . it remains in the meanwhile for the combat that is life, until death shall be swallowed up by victory. Then, when peace has been achieved, there will remain nothing more to be conquered. It will do no harm whatsoever to those who do not consent to it regarding what is forbidden. But it holds guilty those who consent to it regarding what is forbidden. [Concupiscentia igitur tamquam lex peccati manens in membris corporis mortis huius cum paruulis nascitur, in paruulis baptizatis a reatu soluitur, . . . , ad agonem interim manet non sibi ad illicita consentientibus nihil omnino nocitura, donec absorbeatur mors in uictoriam et pace perfecta nihil quod uincatur existat. Consentientes autem sibi ad illicita reos tenet . . .]"

Unless otherwise noted, the English translation of Latin texts in this article come from *Answer to the Pelagians*, The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century, pt. I, vol. 23, trans. Roland J. Teske (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1997) or vol. 24, trans. Roland J. Teske (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1998).

12. See *PeccMer* III, iv, 7; *DNC* I, xx, 22. One might wonder what Augustine's view is with regard to Mary's presumed sinlessness. Augustine's position on this matter is not explicit. For one particularly relevant message on this matter, see Augustine's *De natura et gratia* xxxvi, 42. For helpful comments on this passage, see Roland J. Teske, intro., *Answer to the Pelagians*, 23:214, and 223 n.39.

13. See, e.g., *PeccMer* II, iv, 4; *DNC* I, xix, 21. In addition, Augustine also holds that original sin itself is transmitted through concupiscence. For further discussion on this, see Van Oort, "Augustine on Sexual Concupiscence," pp. 382–86; Bianchi, "Augustine on Concupiscence," pp. 202–12.

14. See *DNC* I, xxv, 28; *CSEL* XLII, 240, where Augustine clarifies some common misunderstanding of concupiscence (his primary target here is the Pelagians): "[C]oncupiscence of the flesh is not forgiven in baptism in such a way that it no longer exists, but in such a way that it is not counted as sin. Although its guilt has already been removed, it still remains until all our weakness is healed, . . . until that day when the exterior self puts on incorruptibility. [dimitti concupiscentiam carnis in baptismo, non ut non sit, sed ut in peccatum non inputetur. quamvis autem reatu suo iam soluto manet tamen, donec sanetur omnis infirmitas . . . in diem cum exterior induerit incorruptionem.]"

toward sin," a defect in the will that all have to struggle with.¹⁵ The devastating pervasiveness of concupiscence in fallen humanity is not simply an arbitrary thought on Augustine's part. There is, Augustine argues, indisputable empirical evidence supporting his claim when we observe closely the disobedient movement of our sexual organs. For Augustine, the inordinate movement of our genitals, though not the only sign, is the most visible exterior sign of concupiscence and its dominion over fallen humanity.¹⁶

Being controlled by the over-powering force of concupiscence, a person's character does not undergo a complete change immediately after baptism, especially when bad habit (*consuetudo*) reinforces the power of concupiscence.¹⁷ Augustine calls bad habit "necessity" or "second nature," meaning that it is a psychological compulsion that weighs down the soul. The strong bond formed by concupiscence and bad habit renders it difficult for a person to consistently follow the lead of right reason.¹⁸ Therefore, to lift up one's heart (namely, to withhold one's consent to concupiscence) is always a life-long struggle.¹⁹

Consequently, none should boast to have a pure heart: as long as we are in this life, even the virtuous cannot be free of internal conflict.²⁰ All

15. See *DPI* vi, 12; *CSEL* XLII, 11, where Augustine says, "the concupiscence of the flesh is indeed blameworthy and defective and is nothing but the desire to sin." [cur ergo concupiscentia carnis—quae utique culpabilis atque uitiosa est nihilque est aliud quam desiderium peccati.] Moreover, "it [concupiscence] does not, after all, remain as a substance, . . . rather, it is a particular sort of bad quality, like a disease" (*DNC* I, xxv, 28; *CSELL* LXII, 240: "non enim substantialiter manet, . . . sed affectio est quaedam malae qualitatis, sicut lanquor"). So too, he says, in *C2EP*, II, ii, 2: *CSEL* LX, 461: "it is not a nature, but a defect." [non natura, sed uitium est.]

16. Augustine indicates that the disobedient movement of genital organs applies to both sexes, although it is less apparent in the female sex. See *CJul* VI, xiii, 62; *PeccMer* II, xxix, 48; *DNC* I, vi, 7, I, xxiv, 27, II, xxxi, 53; *C2EPI*, xvii, 35. For good discussion on this subject, see Rist, *Augustine*, pp. 321–27.

17. See *PeccMer* II, xxvii, 44.

18. See, in particular, *Sermones* 151, 4; *OpImp* I, 105, and VI, 41, where Augustine explains how bad habits strengthen the power of concupiscence. Since his early writings, Augustine has consistently emphasized the far-reaching effect of bad habits on a person's character. See, for example, *To Simplician—on Various Questions* (*De diversis quaestionibus ad Simplicianum*, hereafter, *Ad Simp*) I, i, 10: *CCL* (abbreviation for *Corpus Christianorum*, series *Latina*) XLIV, 15, where Augustine says, "[t]hese two things, nature and custom [i.e., habit] conjoined, render cupidity strong and unconquerable." [Quae duo scilicet tamquam natura et consuetudo coniuncta robustissimam faciunt et inuictissimam cupiditatem, . . .] English translation of this particular passage is from J. H. S. Burleigh, *Augustine: Earlier Writings* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1980). See also *Ad Simp* I, i, 11 and *Confessiones* VIII, ix, 21.

19. See *C2EPI*, xiii, 27, III, vii, 18; *DPI* xi, 28.

20. See *C2EP* I, xiii, 27; *DPI* viii, 19, and xv, 36. Note that in *DPI* xv, 36, Augustine also differentiates the upright heart from the pure heart. The upright heart is a heart which loves God, whereas the pure heart is a heart which has the total perfection of charity, a heart free of any impurity.

are saddled with concupiscence—living a life as a divided self with disordered loves, though relative to different things and to different degrees. Augustine does not simply hold the position that as the wage of original sin, we are constantly facing temptation and the liability to sin. Rather, based on the tenet of the Lord's Prayer (all are asked to pray *daily* to God not only "Bring us not into temptation," but also "forgive our debts as we forgive our debtors"), Augustine contends that, even with grace, all commit sins and consent to concupiscence daily.²¹ Even the apostles are not free from personal sins, Augustine argues.²² Augustine's subtle distinction between the notion of "without sin (*sine peccato*)" and the notion of "without reproach (*sine querella*)" makes his theory more convincing than otherwise. He says:

[I]t is one thing to be without sin; [S]cripture said this exclusively of the Only-Begotten in this life. It is something else to be without reproach; that could be said of many righteous persons even in this life. . . . And yet, since they truthfully say, *Forgive us, as we also forgive*, they declare that they are not without sin.²³

He adds,

[T]hose people are not unreasonably said to walk spotlessly who are not already perfect, but irreproachably run toward this perfection, not having offenses that deserve condemnation and taking care to remove even venial sins by almsgiving.²⁴

21. See my article, "Does Augustine contradict himself in *Contra duas epistulas Pelagianorum*?" *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 78 (1999) : 407–18.

22. This thesis was first suggested, arguably as early as 412, in his first anti-Pelagian writings. In *PeccMer* II, xv, 24: *CSEL* LX, 96–97, Augustine clearly rejects the Pelagians' use of St. Paul as an example of sinless human beings. Augustine contends that Paul was not without sin, because: "there still remained for him so great a battle, . . . It was necessary for the perfection of this great man that the angel of Satan not be taken from him . . . so that he might not become proud on account of the greatness of his revelation. Will, then, anyone dare to think or to say that a person subjected to the burden of this life is completely free of every sin?" In *PeccMer* II, xv, 25: *CSEL* LX, 98, Augustine says the following about Moses, Aaron, and Samuel: "Each of them truthfully says of himself, *Forgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors* (Mt 6:12) . . . none of these people dare to say that they are without sin." For other texts related to the same theme, see *PeccMer* II, vii, 8; *DSL* xxxvi, 65; *DPI* ix, 20, and xi, 24; and *C2EPI*, xiv, 28.

23. *DPI* xi, 24: *CSEL* XLII, 25: "sed aliud est esse sine peccato, quod de solo in hac uita unigenito dictum est, aliud esse sine querella, quod de multis iustis etiam in hac uita dici potuit." See also *C2EPI*, xiv, 28.

24. *DPI* ix, 20: *CSEL* XLII, 20: "ingredi autem sine macula non absurde etiam ille dicitur, non qui iam perfectus est, sed qui ad ipsam perfectionem inreprehensibiliter currit, carens criminibus damnabilibus atque ipsa peccata uenialia non neglegens mundare elemosinis."

For this reason, a person is without reproach (*sine querella*) if he or she does not consent to concupiscence so as to commit serious offense (*sine crimine*), whereas a person is without sin (*sine peccato*) if he or she is free of every venial and serious sin.²⁵ The apostles and the virtuous, Augustine argues, have lifted up their hearts to the standard of “without reproach,” but none is “without sin” in this life even with grace.

But, does this mean that Augustine commits himself to the notion that everyone is always *akratic* and therefore morally blameworthy?

III. A DIFFERENT THEORY OF WEAKNESS OF THE WILL

On Free Choice of the Will (De libero arbitrio) is probably the first of the earlier works in which Augustine discusses at considerable length the moral predicament that fallen humanity faces. Ignorance (*ignorantia*), lacking “the capacity to know what is right,” and difficulty (*difficultas*), lacking the power to carry through a good will, represent the two penal effects of original sin. Both are defects that cannot be overcome without grace. In his anti-Pelagian works, Augustine uses the term “infirmity” (*infirmitas*) much more frequently than the term “difficulty.”²⁶ On my view, this change signals a deliberate attempt to revise his earlier view. The most obvious change is that in his earlier works such as *De diverse quaestionibus ad Simplicianum*, Augustine held that although all human beings inherit concupiscence, only those who are “under the law and not yet under grace,” that is, only non-Christians, would consent to it and make akratic choices.²⁷ He later corrected himself in the *Retractationes*, stating that even the faithful can fail to carry out their good wills.²⁸ And, none can carry out a good will without the assistance of grace. Thus, every human being, Christian or non-Chris-

25. See *C2EPI*, xiv, 28; *CSEL* LX, 446–47.

26. See, e.g., *PeccMer* I, xxxvii, 68, I, xxxix, 70, II, xvii, 26; *DPI* ii, 1; *DNG* xxx, 34; xxxv, 41; *DNC* I, xvi, 18; *C2EPI*, iii, 7.

27. See *Ad Simp* I, i, 11–12; *CCL* XLIV, 15–16, where Augustine comments on *Romans* 7:18: “‘To will is present with me, but to do that which is good I find not.’ . . . These are the words of a man set under the law and not yet under grace. He who is not yet under grace does not do the good he wills but the evil which he does not will, being overcome by concupiscence . . . There is nothing easier for a man under the law than to will to do good and yet to do evil. [VELLE ENIM, inquit, ADIACET MIHI, PERFICERE AVTEM BONVM NON. . . Sed istae nunc uoces sunt sub lege hominis constituti nondum sub gratia. NON ENIM QVOD VVLT FACIT BONVM qui nondum est sub gratia, SED QVOD NON VVLT MALVM HOC AGIT superante concupiscentia . . . Quid enim facilius homini sub lege constituto quam uelle bonum et facere malum?]”

28. In *Retractationes* (hereafter, *Retra*) II, i, Augustine corrected his earlier view. See also *C2EPI*, xiii, 27–xiv, 28, in which Augustine discusses why the baptized are not without sin.

tian, both suffers inherited weakness and often chooses to do what he or she does not want to do.

Augustine invokes two scriptural commands—"Do not desire inordinately (*non concupisces*)"²⁹ and "Do not go after your inordinate desires (*post concupiscentias tuas non eas*)"³⁰—to illustrate the mental state of such an agent. The command "Do not desire inordinately" refers to the complete elimination of the inherited weakness so that one does not experience the presence of concupiscence at all. Although the statement "Do not desire inordinately" takes the form of an imperative, Augustine interprets it as an indication of "the goal at which we can arrive in th[e] blessed immortal life."³¹ As such, "Do not desire inordinately" is not a moral duty in the present life. Thus, the fact that after baptism a person cannot live according to that perfect state does not make a person morally culpable.³² Nonethe-

29. See *Ex* 20:17.

30. See *Sir* 18:30.

31. See *DNC* I, xxix, 32; *CSEL* XLII, 244, where Augustine says: "After all, people do much good in carrying out the words of Scripture: *Do not go after your [inordinate] desires* (*Sir* 18:30), but they do not fulfill the words of Scripture, *Do not desire [inordinately]* (*Ex* 20:17). The law says, *Do not desire [inordinately]*, so that when we find ourselves stricken with this disease, we seek the medicine of grace and so that we might know from that commandment both the goal toward which we ought to strive to make progress in this mortal life and the goal at which we can arrive in that blessed immortal life. [multum enim boni facit, qui facit quod scriptum est: post concupiscentias tuas non eas, sed non perficit, quia non inplet quod scriptum est: non concupiscas. ad hoc ergo dixit lex: non concupisces, ut nos in hoc morbo inuenientes iacere medicinam gratiae quaereremus et in et praecepto sciremus, et quo debeamus in has mortalitate proficiendo conari et quo possit a nobis in illa immortalitate beatissima perueniri.]"

32. See *DSL* xxxvi, 65; *CSEL* LX, 225–26, where Augustine says: "After all, even if the love of God cannot yet be as great as that full and perfect knowledge deserves, it should not be counted as sin. After all, it is one thing not yet to attain total love; it is another not to go after one's lust. . . . [T]his is the way we should picture the human soul in this corruptible body. Though it has not yet swallowed up and destroyed all those stirrings of earthly lust by that supereminent perfection of love, it does not, nonetheless, in this lesser righteousness assent to the same lust out of any inclination to do something forbidden. Hence, the commandment, . . . You shall not desire [inordinately] (*Ex* 20:17) pertains to that [immortal] life, but you shall not go after your [inordinate] desires (*Sir* 18:30) pertains to this life. To seek nothing more than to remain in that perfection pertains to that immortal life; it pertains to this life to do one's task and to hope for the perfection of that life as a reward. [neque enim si esse nondum potest tanta dilectio dei, quanta illi cognitioni plenae perfectaeque debetur, iam culpa deputandum est. aliud est enim totam nondum adsequi caritatem, aliud nullam sequi cupiditatem . . . uerum ecce iam talem constituamus animam humanam in hoc corruptibili corpore, quae etsi nondum illa supereminentissima perfectione caritatis dei omnes motus terrenae libidinis absorbuerit atque consumperit, tamen in ista minore iustitia ad inclicitum aliquid operandum eidem libidini nulla inclinatione consentiat, ut ad illam uitam iam inmortalem pertineat: . . . non concupisces, ad istam: post concupiscentias tuas non eas, ad illam nihil amplius querere quam in ea perfectione persistere, ad istam hoc quod agit in opere habere et illius perfectionem pro mercede sperare, . . .]"

less, since we were born with the defect of concupiscence (even though its guilt has been taken away in baptism), the generic make-up of our will in its fallen state is ontologically inferior to the original state of Adam's will before the Fall. I will call this state of innate weakness of the will the case of suffering evil reluctantly, or case (1) of weakness of the will.

Differing from the commandment "Do not desire inordinately (*non concupisces*)," "Do not go after your inordinate desires (*post concupiscentias tuas non eas*)" indicates a moral duty of refraining from consenting to concupiscence. In this life, there are many instances in which a person strives to live a moral life yet at times yields to the impulse of concupiscence and sins reluctantly.³³ Consider the case of a resolute recovering alcoholic who decides to refrain from drinking. The person has made a conscious rational decision, has preferred, and still prefers, to act in accordance with his or her decision. That conscious decision is still in the person's mind even when he or she reluctantly gives in to that familiar old impulse when pressured to taste the best liquor in the world at a friend's New Year's Eve party. I will call this the case of doing evil reluctantly, or case (2) of weakness of the will.

Worse still, an agent, persuaded by the sweetness of what is forbidden, yields to concupiscence somewhat willingly by taking delight in his or her wrongful action. An adulterer, for example, who feels guilty and resents the fact of an extramarital affair, still enjoys the time spent with the lover. I will call this case (3) of weakness of the will.

In addition to the above distinction, Augustine advances another new point in his anti-Pelagian works. He now comes to see that the corruption of human nature is much more severe than what he had earlier thought. In addition to his initial belief that none can carry out a good will without the assistance of grace, Augustine now also holds that none is able to have a *truly* good will without grace.³⁴ A will is not *truly* good unless it is based on *faith*, and none can have faith unless the gift of grace has been given to him.³⁵

33. See, e.g., *DPI* xv, 33 and xxi, 44; *DSL* xxxvi, 64; *C2EPI*, x, 18; *Retra* I, xiii, 5.

34. See *PeccMer* II, xviii, 31; *CSEL* LX, 102, where Augustine says: "Our turning away from God is our own doing, and this turning is an evil will. But our turning toward God is something we cannot do unless he rouses us and helps us, and this turning is a good will. [Quocirca quoniam quod a deo nos auertimus, nostrum est—et haec est uoluntas mala—quod uero ad deum nos conuertimus, nisi ipso excitante atque adiuuante non possumus—et haec est uoluntas bona.]"

35. See *C2EPI*, iii, 7; *CSEL* LX, 429, where Augustine writes: "Nor can a person will something good unless helped . . . by the grace of God through Jesus Christ our Lord. For *everything that does not come from faith is sin* (*Rom* 14:23). And for this reason a good will, which withdraws from sin, is the will of a believer, because *the righteous live from faith* (*Hb* 2:4; *Rom* 1:17). But to believe in Christ belongs to faith, and no one can believe in him, that is, come to him, unless this gift has been given to him. No one, then, can have a righteous will unless he has received true grace without any preceding merits, that is, grace which has been gratuitously given from on high. [Nec potest homo boni aliquid uelle, nisi adiuuetur ab eo, qui malum non potest uelle, hoc est gratia dei per Iesum Christum dominum nostrum; omne enim quod

Augustine is convinced that a free will in itself, without faith and the help of grace, is unable to choose to do the right thing whole-heartedly. Without faith, a person's will is influenced by concupiscence and its act necessarily stems from an impure motive—for example, out of pride, vanity, or fear—rather than from true charity, which can only come from faith. In *De spiritu et littera*, commenting on the importance of a right motive, Augustine says:

For this reason it brought God's anger upon them, and sin, which was being committed by people with knowledge, became more abundant, because those who did what was commanded without the help of the Spirit of grace did so out of a fear of punishment, not out of a love of righteousness.³⁶

They, in fact, did not keep those commandments, but thought they kept them. For they did not have the faith which works through love, but earthly desire and carnal fear. . . . For this reason they are guilty interiorly in their very will which God who gives the commandment sees.³⁷

Therefore, a seemingly morally good choice or act (almsgiving), if done with a wrong motive (for one's fame), is not a truly good act. In fact, Augustine argues that virtue without faith turns into vice. To make this point clearer, Augustine uses the example of chastity in *De nuptiis et concupiscentia*. He says:

When those without the faith have this obvious good [i.e., chastity], they turn it into an evil and a sin, because they make use of it without faith. . . . Since all the virtues, even those whose actions are carried out by the body, reside in the mind. . . . One should not, then, call it true chastity, whether in the case of married people or in that of a widow or of a virgin, if it is not in the service of the true faith. . . . So great is the

non est ex fide, peccatum est. ac per hoc bona uoluntas, quae se abstrahit a peccato, fidelis est, quia iustus ex fide uiuit, ad fidem autem pertinet credere in Christum et nemo potest credere in eum, hoc est uenire ad eum, nisi fuerit illi datum. nemo igitur potest habere uoluntatem iustam, nisi nullis praecedentibus meritis acceperit ueram, hoc est gratuitam desuper gratiam.]”

See also, *C2EP* III, viii, 24, *OpImp* VI, 41.

36. *DSL* viii, 13: *CSEL* LX, 165: “unde illis iram operabatur abundante peccato, quod ab scientibus perpetrabatur, quia et quicumque faciebant quod lex iubebat non adiuuante spiritu gratiae, timore poenae faciebant, non amore iustitiae.”

37. *C2EP* III, iv, 9: *CSEL* LX, 495: “immo non seruabant, sed sibi seruare uidebantur; neque enim fides in eis per dilectionem operabatur, sed terrena cupiditas metusque carnalis . . . ac per hoc in ipsa uoluntate intus est reus, ubi ipse qui praecipit inspicit deus.”

value of the faith of which the apostle says, *Everything which does not come from faith is sin* (Rom 14:23).³⁸

The new development of Augustine's discussion on the inherited human weakness is that he now takes into account the sincerity of a person's consent to a right act and what constitutes such sincerity. Without faith, Augustine argues, the motive of a right choice cannot be truly innocent. A person in this state demonstrates a certain kind of weakness of the will—namely, the inability to choose to do the right act sincerely without grace. This is case (4) of weakness of the will.

To recapitulate, Augustine's discussion of human weakness leads us to conclude that in his view, weakness of the will can be divided into the following four cases:

(Case 1) An agent cannot, by his or her will power, eliminate the inherited weakness of concupiscence. One feels powerless in resisting its enticement.

(Case 2) An agent yields to concupiscence *reluctantly*, choosing to do something morally wrong.³⁹

(Case 3) An agent yields to concupiscence somewhat *willingly*, choosing to do something morally wrong.⁴⁰

(Case 4) An agent chooses to do the right act but with a wrong motive.

Two further conclusions immediately follow. First, according to Augustine's account, the degree of weakness or strength of a person's will varies in proportion to the degree of influence that concupiscence has on

38. *DNCI*, iv, 5: *CSEL XLII*, 215–16: “hoc tamen evidens bonum cum infideles habent, quia infideliter utuntur, in malum peccatumque conuertunt . . . uera igitur pudicitia, siue coniugalis siue uidualis siue uirginalis, dicenda non est, nisi quae uerae fidei mancipatur . . . tantum ualet fides, de qua dicit apostolus: omne quod non est ex fide peccatum est” Cf. *DCD XIX*, 25. For discussion on Augustine's belief that pagan virtues are not genuine virtues, see Rist, *Augustine*, pp. 168–73, and Donald X. Burt, *Friend and Society: an Introduction to Augustine's Practical Philosophy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 50–53.

At this stage, Augustine no longer holds that non-Christians are the exclusive class of sinners. Christians commit sins as well. But, he still holds the belief of a moral hierarchy: good Christians are superior in their work because of their faith in Christ.

39. The term “doing” is used here in its broadest sense, so as to include acts of will, thoughts, words, and deeds.

40. At first sight, one may have the impression that case (3) is not a case of weakness of the will, but a case of perverse will. Case (3), however, is intended to describe a certain kind of inner struggle that a weak-willed agent experiences, the situation that after yielding to temptation (see the example of extramarital affair mentioned earlier), the agent actually takes some delight in what was done, although with some slight guilt. A perverse will, on the other hand, is often understood as deliberately doing something morally wrong without any compunction or scruple. Case (3) of weakness of the will clearly involves regret and some sort of inner struggle. It is, therefore, not a case of perverse will.

that person's will.⁴¹ The degree of weakness caused by concupiscence can be lessened by the improvement of character. Moral progress consists in the growth of the good will, that is, when one can, with the assistance of grace, have more control over concupiscence by reducing the severity and the frequency of *akratic* cases (2), (3), and (4). Second, in Augustine's account, "being weak-willed" in case (1) is only a claim about the conditions of fallen human nature in that we all suffer from concupiscence (the inherited weakness) and the insufficiency of our own strength in controlling it. Quite clearly, this is something far beyond the scope of Aristotle's discussion of *akrasia* in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 7. For Augustine, however, case (1) of weakness of the will precisely describes the kind of inherited weakness that is foreign to Aristotle's theory but is unavoidable for all of us. It should be remembered that this inherited weakness is twofold: before baptism, it makes one guilty as a punishment for Adam's primordial sin; after baptism, it exists in a person as weakness to temptation—it, in itself, is not morally blameworthy unless one consents to it for illicit acts.

Differing from case (1), cases (2), (3), and (4) are, on the contrary, actual *akratic* choices or acts.⁴² It follows that in Augustine's theory, weakness of the will has equivocal meanings: it describes both the ontological condition of fallen human nature and actual *akratic* acts. One can clearly see that case (1) of weakness of the will does not entail cases (2), (3), and (4). This being the case, according to Augustine, "being weak-willed" is not necessarily equivalent to "being morally blameworthy." Although insofar as case (1) is concerned, all human beings are weak-willed all the time. But, this does not mean that everyone is always *akratic* in the Aristotelian sense, and thus always morally blameworthy (as it would be from the perspective of Book 7 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*). Rather, it means that an inherent defect or weakness is always present in the human will in its fallen state—i.e., we are always weak-willed in an ontological sense, but not necessarily in a morally culpable way after baptism.

Consequently, the Aristotelian definition of weakness of the will ("the moral state of agents who act against their better judgment") differs from the Augustinian definition. If we sum up the four cases mentioned above, the derived Augustinian definition of weakness of the will can be paraphrased as "the moral state of an agent in which concupiscence or one's consent to concupiscence is present." As a result, the analogy between Aristotelian *akrasia* and Augustinian *concupiscentia* does not fly as well as Rist

41. See *PeccMer* I, xxxix, 70; *CSEL* LX, 71, where Augustine describes the varied degrees of weakness as follows: "[I]t happens that through ignorance or weakness we do not exert all the powers of our will against it [viz., concupiscence], and we give in to it more seriously and more often to the degree that we are worse, and we give in less seriously and less frequently to the degree that we are better. [fit ut per ignorantiam uel infirmitatem non exertis aduersus eam totis uiribus uoluntatis eidem ad illicita etiam nonnulla cedamus, tanto magis et crebrius quanto deteriores, tanto minus et rarius quanto meliores sumus.]"

42. "Acts" here includes both internal intentions and external acts.

has envisioned. Moreover, as mentioned before, Rist's analogy could also mislead (perhaps inadvertently) the readers into thinking that Augustine holds that everyone is always akratic and thus always morally blameworthy (as from the perspective of the *Nichomachean Ethics*). To avoid the possibility of such a misconception, a distinction of these two thinkers' working definitions of weakness of the will is thus crucial.

IV. AKRASIA AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

Augustine's emphasis on the universal need for the continuing assistance of grace in cultivating a person's ability to overcome concupiscence affirms the observation made by William E. Mann that Augustine is skeptical "about the universal applicability of the principle that 'ought' implies 'can'."⁴³ That is, for Augustine, "one ought to do x" ("one ought to refrain from following one's concupiscence") does not entail "one can do x by one's own effort" ("one can refrain from following concupiscence by one's own effort"); rather, it entails that "one can do x only with divine assistance" ("one can refrain from following concupiscence only with the assistance of grace").⁴⁴ This entailment immediately raises the following concern. It seems that Augustine's strong emphasis on the indispensable need for grace in overcoming one's concupiscence would force him to concede that an *akratic* agent is excused from moral responsibility before he or she is fully rehabilitated. For if a person is not fully capable of refraining from doing an act by his own power, should that person be morally culpable for his action at all? Would God be so insensible in commanding something that no one has the ability to accomplish? This is *precisely* the question raised by Pelagius in *On Nature*, in his letter "On the Possibility of not Sinning," and by Caelestius in the *Definitions*.⁴⁵

43. William E. Mann, "Dreams of Immorality," *Philosophy* 58 (1983): 379. At Augustine's time, the Pelagians hold the belief that "ought" must imply "can" absolutely and simply. They argue that otherwise moral codes are not justified. Since we are commanded by God to follow the moral law, the Pelagians argue that we must have the complete natural capacity to fulfill those commands. See, for example, Pelagius's "On the Possibility of not Sinning" (*De possibilitate non peccandi*): *PLS* (abbreviation for *Patrologiae Latinae supplementum*) I, 1457–1462, trans. B. R. Rees, *The Letters of Pelagius and His Followers* (Rochester, NY: Boydell, 1991), pp. 164–70. See also Augustine's work *DPI*, which contains extant passages from Caelestius's *Definitions* (Caelestius is a disciple of Pelagius).

44. See Gareth B. Matthews, "On Being Immoral in a Dream," *Philosophy* 56 (1981): 51–52.

45. See Pelagius's "On the Possibility of not Sinning" (*De possibilitate non peccandi*). Pelagius's *De natura* is unfortunately lost except for a few fragmented citations. In *PL* XLVIII, 599–606, however, J. Garnier offers a reconstruction of the work. We also do not have the whole of Caelestius's *Definitions*. For the parts that survive, consult Augustine's work *DPI*.

To preserve divine justice, Augustine has to walk a fine line in both refuting the Pelagian accusation that he holds a pessimistic view of the human condition (or, as Julianum of Eclanum would like to charge, a Manichean view) and defending the active function of grace in every human action along with the dire consequences of original sin. Only after we are able to appreciate the delicate situation that Augustine is in, does his reply to the question begin to make sense and become interesting. His reply stems from the distinction of the aforementioned four cases of weakness of the will. As mentioned earlier, Augustine holds that once baptized, one's inherited weakness without consent to sin is no longer morally culpable.⁴⁶ One's guilt arises from failing to acquire the proper facility (that is, the assistance of grace) to correct one's own weakness. To put the same matter in another way, what holds an *akratic* agent guilty after baptism is the voluntary negligence in not seeking out remedies for one's inherited defect and subsequent *akratic* choices. Augustine presents this thesis as early as in Book 3 of *De libero arbitrio* (c. 392–395) and he re-affirms it some twenty years later in *De natura et gratia* (1xvii, 80–81), an anti-Pelagian work specifically written against Pelagius's *De natura*.⁴⁷ (In this work, Pelagius cites a passage from Book 3 of Augustine's *De libero arbitrio* as evidence indicating that the Bishop of Hippo is also in support of the Pelagian position that "ought implies can" and sin is avoidable by one's own will power without grace.) To acquit himself, Augustine says the following in *De natura et gratia*:

He [Pelagius] says, "So too, bishop Augustine says in his books on *Free Choice*, 'Whatever this cause of the will is, if one cannot resist it, one yields to it without sin. But if one can resist it, let one not yield to it, and one will not sin. Does it perhaps deceive those who are not careful? Let them be careful then so that they are not deceived. Or is the deception so great that it cannot be avoided at all? Then there are no sins. For who sins in a matter that can in no way be avoided? But sin is committed; hence, it can be avoided'." I acknowledge them; they are my words. But let him now be so kind as to acknowledge everything which I have said above. We are after all, dealing with the grace of God which comes to our help as medicine through the mediator; we are not dealing with the impossibility of righteousness. One can then resist that cause [of the will], whatever

46. A brief text from *DNC* I, xxiii, 25: *CSEL* XLII, 237 should refresh our memory. Augustine says: "Concupiscence itself, after all, is not now a sin in those who have been reborn, provided they do not consent to it for acts that are forbidden and the mind, remaining sovereign, does not hand over the members to it to carry out those acts. [nam ipsa quidem concupiscentia iam non est peccatum in regeneratis, quando illi and illicita opera non consentitur, atque ut ea perpetrent a regina mente membra non dantur.]"

47. Although Augustine has changed his mind on various issues from his earlier works to his later works, apparently he has not changed his view on this particular issue.

it is; one clearly can. . . . Sin can be avoided, but it is avoided with the help of him who cannot be deceived.⁴⁸

Moreover, he continues:

Since some people raise a complaint in the name of justice over the defects of this ignorance and difficulty that have been passed and transmitted to the offspring of the first human beings, we reply as follows: "Our answer to them is brief. They should quiet down and stop muttering against God. They might have a just complaint if there were no human conqueror of error and desire. But he is present everywhere . . . he teaches those who believe, consoles those who hope, exhorts those who love, helps those who try, hears those who pray. Hence, it is not counted against you as sin that you lack knowledge against your will, but that you neglect to seek out what you do not know. Nor is it counted against you that you do not bandage your wounded members, but that you hold in contempt the one who wants to heal you [*De libero arbitrio* III, xix, 53]."⁴⁹

By placing moral blame on voluntary negligence and on subsequent *akratic* choices but excusing a person's post-baptismal non-consented inherited weakness, Augustine is able to escape the dilemma by arguing that if we take into account grace, these two beliefs, (a) "ought" does not necessarily imply "can" and (b) we are still morally responsible for our *akratic* choices, do not conflict. The fault of the Pelagians lies in their unwillingness to believe in the enabling power of grace.

48. *DNG* lxvii, 80: *CSEL* LX, 293–94: "item, inquit, Augustinus episcopus in libris DE libero arbitrio: quaecumque ista causa est uoluntatis, si non potest ei resisti, sine peccato ei ceditur; si autem potest, non ei cedatur, et non peccabitur. an forte fallit incautum? ergo caueat, ne fallatur. an tanta fallacia est, ut caueri omnino non possit? nulla ergo peccata sunt. quis enim peccat in eo quod caueri nullo modo potest? peccatur autem; caueri igitur potest. agnosco, uerba mea sunt; sed etiam ipse dignetur agnoscere superius cuncta quae dicta sunt. de gratia quippe dei agitur, quae nobis per mediatorem medicina optulatur, non de impossibilitate iustitiae. potest ergo ei causae, quaecumque illa est, resisti, potest plane . . . potest peccatum caueri, sed opitulante illo, qui non potest falli."

49. *DNG* lxviii, 81: *CSEL* LX, 296: "hinc iam hominibus de ipsius ignorantiae difficultatisque in prolem primi hominis traiectis uitiiis atque transfusis uelut iustam querellam deponentibus ita responsum est: *quibus breuiter, inquam, respondetur, ut quiescant et aduersus deum murmurare desistant. recte enim fortasse quererentur, si erroris et libidinis nullus hominum victor existeret; cum uero ubique sit praesens, . . . , doceat credentem, consoletur sperantem, diligentem adhortetur; conantem adiuuet, exaudiat deprecantem, non tibi deputatur ad culpam quod inuitus ignoras, sed quod negligis quaerere quod ignoras; neque illud quod uulnerata membra non colligis, sed quod uolentem sanare contemnis* [my italics]." Note that the emphasized portion is from *De libero arbitrio* III, xix, 53.

V. CONCLUSION

In this article, I have argued that for Augustine, weakness of the will has equivocal meanings and it is manifested in four ways. Consequently, Augustine's theory of *concupiscentia* cannot be adequately captured by Aristotle's concept of *akrasia* as presented in Book 7 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Thus, although Rist's analogy is thought-provoking, it needs careful qualification.

With regard to the moral responsibility of an *akratic* agent in Augustine's system, I have concluded that, after baptism, what is morally culpable is the agent's voluntary negligence to seek out remedies for the inherited weakness and the subsequent *akratic* choices (not the post-baptismal concupiscence as defect without consent). So understood, Augustine's moral philosophy on human weakness is less pessimistic than some have alleged. Our nature is indeed seriously wounded by the original sin, a nature that needs constant healing of grace even after baptism, but we are not completely forlorn—a thesis Augustine desperately emphasizes again and again in his anti-Pelagian works.