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On *Akrasia* in Petrarch's Secretum

Saint Augustine of Hippo's belief in the possibility of *akrasia,* or weakness of will, came directly from his own life experience; in a well-known section of his *Confessions*, Augustine relates the story of how he stole pears simply because "it was forbidden" (Clanton). Thus it is no surprise that Francesco Petrarch in writing the *Secretum,* a work that centers on man's condition in the world, the state of his will, and his potential for akratic action, chooses to include Augustine as one of two main speakers in the dialogue. Over the course of the dialogue the two figures of Augustine and Francesco, both in some ways alter-egos of Petrarch, take up opposing positions on the question of whether akratic action is possible. Francesco feels powerless in his situation; he believes that he is suffering from a form of depression, *accidia*, because he is unable to put his true desires, those towards salvation and the eternal life, in front of his worldly concerns. Augustine on the other hand, in a surprising move given his character's namesake, dismisses akrasia, directing Francesco that "he who wishes to free himself from his misery, as long as he wishes it truly and fully, cannot fail in his desire" (Petrarca, 15). Francesco finds this account hard to believe, as all of his life he has attempted, and failed, to overcome his earthly burden. Saarinen in his book, *Weakness of Will in Renaissance and Reformation Thought*, offers an interpretation of Petrarch's philosophy on akrasia based on the *Secretum*. Saarinen's view is that Petrarch takes up a definition of akrasia that follows from the Stoic-Augustinian tradition, in that Petrarch does not view the will as subordinate to anything else and that it is necessary to freely consent to sin in order to

experience akrasia. In the following argument, I offer an alternative interpretation of Petrarch's *Secretum*, emphasizing man's postlapsarian state, his inability to escape from human desires, and God's grace as a prerequisite for salvation to present a definition of akrasia that is default in the human condition and places limits over the power of the will.

Philosophical discussions over the exact nature of akrasia and the possibility for true akratic action have a long history in the western philosophical tradition, dating back to at least Socrates and Aristotle. Akrasia is commonly defined as an action done freely and intentionally, but contrary to better judgement, where better judgement is a process that identifies the best action to take all things considered (Stroud). Socrates does not believe that akratic action is possible (Stroud). His argument is simply that man will always choose to take the course of action that he most desires. Of course, Socrates does not think that all action is taken towards the good, as base desires may override reason, but he believes that even in this scenario man is simply mislead by base passions into believing something false, and man's actions still follow whatever he believes to be best. Aristotle on the other hand does believe in weakness of the will (Stroud). While Socrates holds that actions toward the bad can only occur due to a break in syllogism, Aristotle instead views akrasia as correct syllogism that reaches an incorrect conclusion due to mistaken assumptions in its logic. Aristotle identifies two main forms of akrasia: in *astheneia,* akratic action occurs after deliberation, but the actor is unable to follow through with his will because of some competing desire, while in *propeteia* there is no deliberation and the underlying desire results in action that preempts reason. Saarinen uses this line of argument passed down by the ancients to center a medieval school of thought that he refers to as Stoic-Augustinian, which he uses to help locate the ideas of Petrarch's akrasia in

a larger tradition. Specifically, Saarinen draws our attention to the Commonplace Augustinian and Voluntarism models, which he claims relate most closely to Petrarch's views on the subject. The Commonplace Augustinian model requires "a clear distinction between inevitable desires and free consent: the judgmental nature of desires remains in the background while merit and sin are consequential to the consent", while the Voluntarism model holds "the self-determining will as the supreme ruler: the will represents the most noble part of the soul" (Saarinen, 42).

Saarinen identifies what he calls "the root cause of Akrasia" in Francesco as a "plurality of impressions", or passions, which "disturb and weaken the mind" (Saarinen, 46). In this confusion, effective deliberation is rendered useless as Francesco cannot decide on any one course of action, which directly leads to his feelings of accidia. Saarinen is careful to point out that any akratic action of Francesco is not due to his ignorance, but is rather a result of the "overload of conflicting impressions" (Saarinen, 47). Saarinen considers Augustine's attempts to help Francesco a sort of "cognitive therapy", where self-examination of death can help to clear the mind of these passions (Saarinen, 48). This sort of therapy works, Saarinen argues, because the akrasia that Francesco experiences is based on a deficiency in his will power, but man has the power to correct that weakness: "The person freely chooses the wrong option. This choice is not caused by ignorance or disorder, but brings about disorder and ignorance in will and intellect as its immediate consequence" (Saarinen, 47). Saarinen notes how Augustine is able to get Francesco to admit to having deficiencies in his own will-power, ultimately convincing Francesco that "if [he] examined his conscience, he would realize that his wishes remained half-hearted and feeble" (Saarinen, 46). Over the course of the dialogue, Augustine is able to show Francesco that his desire towards heaven hasn't been strong enough, and Francesco disavows

some of his earthly ties, most prominently his love for Laura. Saarinen uses this to claim that Augustine's therapeutic session has worked, and that Francesco has been salvaged by the end of the narrative as, "free will remains the cause and master of all things" (Saarinen,50). Although Saarinen uses this account to explain the majority of the *Secretum* and provide a description of Petrarch's feelings on akrasia, he is unable to factor the ending of the *Secretum*, where Francesco refuses to give up glory, cleanly into his theory. He goes so far as to call the ending a "small footnote", a caveat where the fall of man limits the ability of the will, but plays down the importance of this episode in the grand scheme of Petrarch's philosophy (Saarinen,50). However, Saarinen's dismissal of the *Secretum's* ending results in a limited reading of Petrarch's philosophy in which the power of the will is overvalued and man's fallen state is not properly taken into account.

In Saarinen's account of Petrarch's akrasia, he downplays the role of ignorance and instead focuses on the "overload of conflicting impressions" that attack Francesco. However, if we examine the *Secretum* more closely, and Petrarch's philosophy on a more holistic level, it appears that this division is almost nonsensical, as ignorance and passions are inextricably linked for Petrarch. To see this, it is crucial to understand Petrarch's position on the body-soul divide. Trinkaus, in *The Poet as Philosopher*, argues that Petrarch's thoughts on this issue are directly related to those of Saint Augustine. Trinkaus puts forth the hypothesis that Petrarch inherited the idea of a "double consciousness" from Saint Augustine, where the body and the soul each play a role in deciding the actions of a person (Trinkaus, 46). Saint Augustine in his *Confessions,* "most clearly saw that there can be dual modes of knowledge deriving from sense perception and interior illumination" (Trinkaus, 48). Trinkaus argues that in the *Secretum*,

Petrarch "[seeks] a wholeness and integrity for the self" by unifying these two opposing forces (Trinkaus, 48). Saarinen is aware of this duality, but views the two forces as operating antecedent to the will; they combine in man's interior and amalgamate into one unified will. Yet, under this interpretation there cannot be true akrasia at work in Petrarch's philosophy as man only follows what he most wants to do, so in a similar vein to Socrates's argument Saarinen admits that the "intellectualist descriptions of akrasia thus appear to be illusory and false" (Saarinen, 49). Instead of unifying these forces, I would like to offer an alternative reading that places these two wills in opposition to one another: where the will directed by conscience and reason is a *true* will, aligned with the self, and the will informed by uncontrollable desire is a *false* will, which opens up the possibility for akratic action.

Saarinen explicitly separates the conscience from the will, calling it non-operative, but he does admit that it influences the process of deliberation (Saarinen, 55). In the *Secretum,* we see Augustine connect conscience to rationality and knowledge, "it is the best interpreter of virtue, an infallible and truthful evaluator of our thoughts and deeds" (Petrarca, 31). For Petrarch, conscience is the birthplace of reason – it is the direct lifeline to a higher power that offers man the ability to choose between right and wrong. Saint Augustine calls conscience an "interior truth" (Trinkaus, 45), and adds that thought is able to reach this truth whenever the will itself is unperverted. So even if conscience does not play an active role in deliberation for Petrarch, it is the foundational point for all actualizations of reason. Moreover, as Trinkaus explains, Petrarch's conception of reason is inseparable from the will (Trinkaus, 55). Thus we can conclude that any sort of valid or true will that is aligned with the soul must find its basis in the conscience.

Of course, this will based in conscience cannot hold the entire explanation for human action, as evidenced by the admittedly sinful nature of Francesco's life. While the will that stems from the soul and conscience leads man towards truth, there is a dual will that originates in the body and the senses that takes man away from the eternal. Saarinen identifies this will as constituting the violent impressions that confuse Francesco and corrupt his will throughout the dialogue. However, instead of corrupting Francesco's will directly, it is more appropriate to view these passions as forming a separate and opposed will in Francesco. This interpretation is best supported by the *Secretum's* constant allusion to Francesco's act of self-deception which causes his accidia. With one unified will, constituted from both the good and the bad, it is hard to imagine how one can deceive oneself. Operative will must be aligned with one's self-conception, so any action that results from the deliberation of a unified will cannot surprise the self because man is conscious throughout the process of deliberation. In contrast, the process of self-deception where there are competing wills feels intuitive. Man is aligned with his true self, a self that stems from his conscience, rationality, and God, and whenever he is led astray by his false will, which originates from earthly desire and passion, he experiences a form of self-deception.

Augustine refers to Francesco's earthly influences as a "fog" that "occludes" the mind, clearly distinguishing between Francesco's true self and these distracting passions (Petrarca, 13). These desires have the ability to limit Francesco's access to his inner-truth, "just as I won't deny that your soul was given its first shape from on high, so you shouldn't doubt that it has greatly declined from its original nobility because it has been infected by this body in which it is enclosed" (Petrarca, 57). Yet Augustine also makes clear that this infection is not permanent or

irreversible; the infection is a result of the combined effects of Francesco's two wills, it is not a deficiency of the inner-truth held in Francesco's conscience. The will that originates from the body is described as merely a prison that entraps the more robust will, it causes distress in the mind that make "[Francesco] vacillate hither and thither, never complete and never entirely [himself]" (Petrarca, 61, 79). By meditating on death, Augustine claims that Francesco can rid himself of his earthly ties and limit the power of his false will, reaching a state where he "no longer [has] anything in common with [his] bodily senses"(Petrarca, 35). Clearly, if these passions draw Francesco away from himself, then we cannot view these two wills as coalescing into a single entity that constitutes a true version of Francesco, as Saarinen suggests, but rather as merely two forces that affect action, where one force has internal origins and the other has external origins. As Augustine later in the dialogue expands on, desires affect resulting actions but do not have influence on the self or the true will of an individual, as those are determined by a higher power, "[the passions] induce one to forget God and oneself at the same time" (Petrarca, 183). The will that results from Francesco's mortal pulls is able to obscure access to his own inner-truth, not change it. Saarinen's previous claim that any akratic action of Francesco's is not due to ignorance now seems off: the passions that take man away from his own soul create a sort of partial ignorance, a partial coverage, in man's relation to the *good*. If man had unimpeded access from his *true* will to his actions, then akratic action would be impossible. Thus it seems that ignorance is a necessary result of the conflicting passions that are operating in Francesco.

From this vantage point we can also re-evaluate Saarinen's claims that there is no true intellectual akrasia at work in Francesco's account: that any appearance of akrasia turns out to

be only illusion. If we rely on Saarinen's formulation of Petrarch's dual-wills into a single entity consistent with the self, then such a statement may hold true. But if we instead follow the discussion above, where one of these wills is *true* in that it is aligned with the higher capacities of man and his internal soul, and one of these wills is *false* in that it takes man towards the transient, then it seems there is room for intellectual akrasia that is similar to Aristotle's in the case of *astheneia*. Namely, that the *true* will performs deliberation and chooses a course of action, but the *false* will intercepts this process before it can be actualized, causing the body to respond in a different way. So when Francesco laments that he wills himself towards heavenly pursuits, but finds himself caught up in earthly fame anyway, we can view this a true case of weakness of will, in which, Francesco in his soul desires to perform *good*, and yet his opposing will overcomes his deliberation and his actions are led towards the *bad*.

Now that we have reworked Saarinen's definition of Petrarch's akrasia, let us re-evaluate his position that Francesco reaches a level of salvation by the end of the *Secretum:* "Francesco is healed in this sense, since he is no longer ignorant, but realizes that the conduct reflects the preferences of his will, not his powerlessness"(Saarinen, 49). Saarinen views the dialogue between Francesco and Augustine as an effective cognitive therapy session, in which Petrarch's voluntarist stance allows Francesco to ultimately see that "the will does not fundamentally lack the power to do good", that it can overcome its propensity towards akrasia (Saarinen, 49). Leushuis in *Dialogue, Self, And Free Will,* agrees with Saarinen's interpretation of the dialogue, claiming that in talking with Augustine, "[Francesco discovers] this state of a self this is integer and torus" (Leushuis, 88). However, I believe that these interpretations misread

crucial parts of Petrarch's philosophy in that they place no limits on the ability of the will and disregard the importance of grace in man's salvation.

Petrarch, in his larger philosophical tradition and in the *Secretum*, places strict limits on the will's effective power. Saarinen brings up the possibility that the will might not be omnipotent, but does not view it as representative of what he calls Petrarch's larger "voluntarist picture" (Saarinen, 50). However, I believe that Petrarch considers the limits of the will to be a foundational point in his conception of how the world operates. Francesco's character seems to be drawn to the earth, towards transient passions and away from eternal goals, precisely because of his fallen state. From the Encyclopedia of Religion we find the following description of Saint Augustine's views on predestination and free-will: "[Augustine] stated that God created humans with the free will to choose between good and evil. By choosing evil they lost their free will fully to do God's will, and thereafter needed God's grace to be saved and to live righteously" (Free will and Predestination). Throughout the *Secretum,* Petrarch echoes this sentiment by presenting the critical notion that Francesco cannot overcome previous sin. Towards the end of the dialogue, Francesco confides in Augustine that he wishes that Augustine "had told [Francesco] at the start [about his self-deception and the transient nature of fame], before [he] devoted [his] mind to these pursuits" (Petrarca, 253). Moreover, in the concluding scene, Francesco refuses to give up his desire for earthly fame and Augustine responds that this response could not "be otherwise" (Petrarca, 257). Thus we see that the previous action has set a standard of behavior, and that this behavior has created a condition that limits the future action of Francesco; he is unable to carry out his will to its fullest potential.

Crucially, this sin is not limited to Francesco's person and therefore cannot be corrected by him internally; it is sin that exists in man as a result of Adam's fall. Francesco thus experiences akrasia as a necessary result of his postlapsarian state. Trinkaus comes to a similar conclusion stating that, "Francesco's inability to attain happiness is now conceded to be a consequence of this general human condition" (Trinkaus, 65). The most compelling evidence for this point is in Petrarch's insistence that God's grace is required for man to reach salvation. In his larger philosophy Trinkaus argues that Petrarch "time and again [repudiates] the classical notion… that man's virtuousness is in his own hands, whereas we must thank the Gods, or fortune, or providence" (Trinkaus, 24). This sentiment is also conveyed by both Augustine and Francesco throughout the *Secretum*. Francesco expresses his lack of faith in his own will, "I have nothing to hope for in myself; my hope is in God" (Petrarca, 65), and Augustine does not try to cure Francesco completely all by himself, he rather tries "to reveal to [Francesco] what that is, so that if with God's help you can rid yourself of it… you will then be able to shake off the ancient yoke of servitude which has so far weighed you down"(Petrarca, 55). The ancient yoke of servitude is none other than man's fallen state, and in order to overcome this state it is not enough to merely will it, it requires the grace of God himself. In Augustine's own transformation, where he does manage to rise above the passions of earthly desire, Francesco even calls the episode a "miracle" (Petrarca, 29).

Petrarch holds that man cannot guarantee his own salvation; the strength of his clouded will only allows him to put himself in a position where God can save him. Yet man also cannot remain in this state of pre-salvation for long, "every time a mind, however noble, embarks, if it can, upon this meditation on death, and upon others that can lead to life … it does not have the

strength to remain there" (Petrarca, 63). Nevertheless, in preparing man for salvation it is clear that this experience of self-reflection is not without effect, but it is more limited in its potential than Saarinen and Leushuis suggest. Furthermore, it is unclear if Petrarch believes that man is even capable of having this intense self-introspection without initial grace from God. Saarinen, by way of calling it a form of cognitive therapy, locates it as a process based in the human sphere, but there are situational elements of the dialogue that call into question this assertion. The most pressing point resides in the fact that the dialogue seems to take place in a very non-human, almost otherworldly plane. Petrarch experiences the dialogue, so he relates, while not in a dream, yet in a sort of meditative state. Beyond the expectation that Petrarch should be sleeping instead of discussing his life with Truth and Augustine, the reader is offered no expository information. There is no description of the surroundings where this dialogue takes place: there is no action, no eating, no drinking, and no movement except for sleeping, which seems to serve only a rhetorical purpose to split Augustine's argument up into three distinct sessions. Thus one explanation for why Petrarch is able to reach the insights he does in the dialogue, when he had previously been unable to grapple with the same questions in his everyday life, is that the dialogue takes places in a world separate from the physical one we inhabit, where the passions and desires that confuse Petrarch on a regular basis are absent. If we take this to be true, then the potential power of the will seems to be weakened even further, as man can only reach the hope of salvation in a realm divorced from the realities of the human condition. It may also be poignant that the character of Francesco does not play an active role in initiating the dialogue: he is merely a passive observer as Truth and Augustine

berate him for his life decisions. Thus even to start this conversation it appears that Francesco requires non-human intervention that stems from exterior sources.

Petrarch is often regarded as the father of humanism, a figure who affirmed human action outside of a spiritual or religious realm, but the view presented in this paper so far seems to run contrary to that view. If Petrarch views man in a state of almost universal akrasia, where only the select few overcome this impediment through God's grace, is there any optimism left to be found in the non-spiritual sphere? Although Petrarch views man as degraded because of his postlapsarian state, there is a way in which his necessary baseness in fact frees up his potential for actions in ways that are not at first clear. In *The Refusal to be Judged,* Strier looks at Petrarch's lyric poems and comes to the conclusion that Petrarch, "accepts the soul-body divide of Platonism but refuses to give the soul an absolute priority, and to dismiss and devalue the body" and at times Petrarch "seems to accept the perversion of his will, his inability to desire what he knows to be the highest good" (Strier, 73, 74). It seems that there is a similar interaction between these two extremes taking place in the *Secretum.* Augustine's principle accusation towards Francesco in the *Secretum* is that his love of Laura and his desire for earthly fame have drawn him away from God and caused his accidia. While Francesco is eventually convinced to give up his commitment to Laura, he is unable to let go of his desire for fame claiming that "as a mortal I desire nothing other than mortal things" (Petrarca, 231). Surprisingly, although Augustine admonishes Francesco that this transient fame holds nothing to the eternity of God, he seems to forgive Francesco's transgressions in a way not seen in other parts of the dialogue, "I would never advise you to live without fame" (Petrarca, 243). Augustine's chief complaint with Francesco lies in his partitioning of time between his pursuit of

fame and more spiritual occupations, “what makes me indignant is that you should divide up your time so badly” (Petrarca, 95). It seems that as Francesco cannot escape his human condition, he cannot be reasonably expected to give up all of his earthly pursuits.

Therefore in a certain way, Francesco's inability to overcome his akrasia gives him a greater freedom. As discussed earlier, Petrarch views man’s path towards salvation as a cycle of continual attempts in pursuit of attaining a pure will, and the inevitable fall to impurity that follows. Francesco cannot hope to rid himself of all of his sinful action, thus in his fallen state he is given implicit permission to seek mortal desires. If Francesco is at one point in the future graced by God, and undergoes a similar transformation to Augustine’s, then he must focus solely on his spiritual life and give himself over to God’s will. Yet, as long as he is kept rooted in mortal soil by bodily passions he is excused in his desire for human glory, so long as he also makes attempts, in the right proportions, to cleanse his mind of those very impulses. This is not to say that Petrarch dismisses spiritual concerns. The *Secretum* can be viewed as Petrarch’s mental enactment of receiving divine grace: it in some ways acts as a plea to God, a claim that Petrarch has reached a full understanding of his human condition, and is therefore ready to experience an act of real grace. Yet Petrarch knows that this salvation cannot be counted on, God’s will is unknown to man, thus as he at once prepares his own soul for its ascension he also realizes that attempting to avoid all of his earthly passions would be nothing more than a futile attempt to refute the nature of man and disavow the human condition.

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