

The Weak Will as Cause in Acts of the Incontinent: A Response to Bonnie Kent

Daniel Lendman, STL, M. Theol., MA Phil 

Abstract

This article has three parts. The first two explore contemporary philosopher Bonnie Kent's important contributions to the role of the weakness of the will in actions of the morally incontinent in Thomas Aquinas' treatment of human action. While Kent's treatment gives many important insights, nevertheless, she fails to recognize that the weakness of the will does in fact have a role in the actions of the morally incontinent. Kent is correct that, for Aquinas, the passions cause the incontinent act to act as such. She fails, however, to recognize that the role of the passions does not exclude the weakness of the will as a cause, and even a principal cause. The third part takes up the criticisms of Gary Watson to which Kent's remarks were meant as a reply and shows that even with the causative role of the weak will, Aquinas' account does not fall prey to Watson's criticisms.

Keywords

Akrasia, Incontinent, Ethics, Morality, Thomas Aquinas, Will, Weak Will

I. Introduction

Thomas Aquinas' exposition of moral theology is commonly regarded, even by his critics, as a great achievement, bringing together Aristotelian insight and the Patristic and Scriptural traditions of his day. However, as with every treatment of ethics, and especially one with such a teleological structure, some of the most difficult questions involve moral and ethical failings. Of particular interest in this paper is the nature of the moral failures of "the incontinent".¹ Thomas follows Aristotle in setting up a division of human moral

¹ Incontinent is typically how the term *akrasia* is typically rendered. Aristotle, *The Nichomachean Ethics*, trans. Hippocrates G. Apostle (Grinnell, IA: The Peripatetic Press, 1984), Bk. VII.

agents. There are the virtuous who habitually act well; the continent who act well, but must work to do so; the incontinent who struggle to act well, but fail to do so; and the vicious who habitually act with wickedness.² As with so many things, the extremes are relatively clearly defined. It is the middle cases that prove the more challenging, and here it is the case of the incontinent that provokes a number of difficulties and questions.

Common parlance often characterizes moral failures in terms of weakness. Often, this weakness is ascribed to the will. “Being weak-willed” therefore, is usually considered the source of moral failings on the part of the incontinent. Contemporary scholar Bonnie Kent very capably addresses this question in Thomistic terms in her article, “Aquinas and Weakness of the Will.”³ Her analysis is principally in response to criticisms levied by Gary Watson who, according to Kent, “contends that the incontinent’s culpability lies not in her failure to exercise this capacity (for self-control) but rather in her failure to develop or maintain the normal capacity for self-control.”⁴ Kent maintains that Aquinas when asking why the incontinent fails,

[N]ever answers “because her will was weak,” or “because she is a weak person.” In saying that such a person sins “from weakness” he only describes her behavior. He does not mean that weakness, let alone weakness of will, explains her behavior.⁵

Kent wants to maintain that Aquinas holds a robust account of culpability for actions, even on the part of the incontinent, and therefore “weakness of will” cannot finally be a cause, since this would of necessity diminish culpability. Accordingly, Kent maintains that efforts on the part of those who wish to insist on weakness of will is a cause for Aquinas of moral failings of the incontinent are misguided.⁶

Broadly speaking, this paper agrees with Kent’s analysis. That is to say, Kent is correct in maintaining that Aquinas insists on the culpability of the incontinent in failings that arise from weakness. Consequently, I wholeheartedly support her efforts to argue against Watson’s position on the culpability of the incontinent. Where this paper parts ways with Kent is that she wants to attribute the cause of the moral failings to passion, and not to weakness of the will.⁷ While I must agree with her that sins of weakness are sins of passion

² Habit, in this case, means *habitus*.

³ Bonnie Kent, “Aquinas and Weakness of Will,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* LXXV, no. 1 (July 2007): pp. 70–91.

⁴ Kent, 72; Gary Watson, “Skepticism about Weakness of Will,” *The Philosophical Review* 86, no. 3 (July 1977): pp. 316–39.

⁵ Kent, “Aquinas and Weakness of Will,” p. 71.

⁶ Kent, p. 72.

⁷ Kent, p. 73.

for Aquinas,⁸ I must disagree with her that weakness of the will plays no part in this. Due to the unity of human actions and the potency of the will with respect to created goods, to deny weakness of the will as a cause of moral failing on the part of the incontinent is to fundamentally undermine a Thomistic anthropology, as well as insufficiently account for experience.

This paper has three parts: first I will give a brief examination of Kent's analysis of Thomas Aquinas' teaching on this question. Following this, I will briefly show from Aquinas' text, contra Kent, the manner in which the weakness of the will is in fact involved in the moral failings of the incontinent. Finally, I will take up Watson's objection as dealt with by Kent and show that, even with a causative role of the "weak will", Aquinas' account of the incontinent does not fall prey to his criticisms.⁹

II. Kent's Analysis

The ultimate source of Kent's paper and her argument is Donald Davidson's famous article of 1969, "How is Weakness of the Will Possible?"¹⁰ Kent understands Davidson as arguing that there is no account of weakness of the will in Aquinas' description of the incontinent.¹¹ Rather, it is simply a battle between reason and passion. Davidson contends, as Kent recounts, that a more cogent account would hold that reason and the passions are contending, and will enters in as an arbiter between the two. The strong will sides with reason in the fight, the weak with passion.¹²

Kent rightly rejects Davidson's account of Aquinas' position. The will, is essential for all human actions, and accordingly has a role in the moral failings of the incontinent. Her disagreement is precisely with the notion of a "weak will". She maintains that weakness of the will hardly enters into Aquinas' moral doctrine at all, and that it

⁸ *Summa Theologiae (ST)*, I-II, Q. 77.

⁹ Gary Watson, "Skepticism about Weakness of Will," *The Philosophical Review* 86, no. 3 (July 1977): pp. 316–39.

¹⁰ Donald Davidson, "How Is Weakness of the Will Possible," in *Moral Concepts*, ed. Joel Feinberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 106. Curiously, as will be shown, Aquinas' position is strikingly close to Davidson's. For an interesting response to Davidson from a Cartesian perspective cf. Sergio Tenenbaum, "The Judgement of a Weak Will," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* LIX, no. 4 (December 1999): pp. 875–911 Ultimately, Tenenbaum's appeal to our common experience of being weak-willed supports the conclusions of this essay, even as his analysis is in tension in many other ways.

¹¹ Kent, "Aquinas and Weakness of Will," p. 70.

¹² Kent, p. 70.

never has a role in explaining moral failing.¹³ She bases her argument on two questions in the *Summa Theologiae*, I-IIae Q. 77, and II-IIae, Q. 156; the only two, according to Kent, that deal with moral weakness.¹⁴

Before reviewing Kent's analysis of those questions in particular we should briefly take note of a linguistic peculiarity. In Aquinas' writings on human action he uses the terms *habitus* and *dispositio*. These two terms prove difficult to translate because of the peculiarities of Aquinas' meaning versus the common meaning of the English cognates of those two terms. Although, I do not see that there is any real loss of meaning in translating *dispositio* as disposition, Kent prefers "condition" as a translation. She reserves the word disposition as a translation of the word *habitus*.¹⁵ I do not intend to quarrel over translations here, but this paper will simply leave the term *habitus* untranslated.¹⁶ For clarity I will follow Kent's custom of translating *dispositio* as condition, but I will note the Latin word in parentheses.¹⁷

Following Aquinas, Kent equates sins of weakness with sins of passion.¹⁸ Kent understands Aquinas' analysis of weakness as a way "vetting excuses" and separating out the culpability of sins of weakness from those of greater and less culpability.¹⁹ Sins of weakness, therefore, arise from a vehement movement of the passions. This takes a middle ground between a sin from obstinate wickedness, and a sin from simple ignorance. Accordingly, sins that are executed with dispassionate reasoning, do not fall under the category of sins of weakness, as Kent rightly indicates.²⁰

Turning to the second question on weakness, Kent addresses *ST* Q. 155, a. 3 directly, which, *prima facie*, seems to undermine her position. Kent is not unaware of this and addresses this difficulty directly.²¹ In the article in question Aquinas argues that moral continence is in the will as a subject, since both the incontinent and the continent suffer vehement desires.²² Similarly, reason is the same in both, since both the incontinent and continent can have right reason

¹³ Kent, p. 71.

¹⁴ Kent, p. 72.

¹⁵ Kent, p. 78, fn. 20.

¹⁶ Cf. Romanus Cessario, *The Moral Virtues and Theological Ethics* (Notre Dame/London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), Ch. 2.; Cf. also, Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. Sr. Mary Thomas Noble (Washington, D.C: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995), p. 225.

¹⁷ Cf., Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, p. 225.

¹⁸ Cf. *ST* I-IIae, Q. 77, a. 3.

¹⁹ Kent, "Aquinas and Weakness of Will," p. 75.

²⁰ Kent, p. 74.

²¹ Kent, p. 76.

²² Q. *ST* II-IIae, Q. 155.

about what ought to be done. Continence, therefore, resides in the power of choice, since the difference between the continent and incontinent is that the one chooses well, the other does not do so.²³

In view of this text from Aquinas, it seems that those who wish to posit weakness of will as a cause in Aquinas have a very strong position. The continent is one who has, relatively speaking, a strong will that is disposed to act well, the incontinent are those who have a relatively weak will. Despite this straightforward argument, Kent contends that it is merely specious and does not bear up under scrutiny. She points out that Aquinas maintains that the “first mover” in the continent is reason.²⁴ In the incontinent, however, the first mover is appetite. Consequently, she insists, weakness of the will does not enter in to this consideration.

Turning to the next question, Kent points out that Aquinas’ argument regarding the incontinent in comparison with the “self-indulgent” makes it clear that while the self-indulgent chooses to act in accord with his passions, the incontinent’s will is “inclined by its passions” and accordingly, he does not choose, properly speaking.²⁵ She maintains that there is no contradiction here, because while the incontinent does choose to follow his passions, he does not *sin* from choice, since he regrets his action.²⁶ Consequently, while it is true that continence resides in the will, it does not necessarily follow that incontinence does so as well.²⁷ Continence, for Aquinas, as Kent shows is a *habitus*. Incontinence, however, is not thus characterized. Rather, incontinence seems to be precisely a lack of *habitus*, rather than as a *habitus* to act in this way or that.²⁸ Accordingly, Kent concludes, “On the whole, Aquinas treats incontinence in the same way that he does other kinds of moral weakness: as a condition liable to recur but one that soon passes, not as a disposition (*habitus*).”²⁹

II. Weakness of the Will in Aquinas

On the whole, Kent’s analysis is quite sound. She gives a careful reading of the key texts, and rightly draws a distinction between incontinence and continence. The objections I have to Kent’s analysis,

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Kent, “Aquinas and Weakness of Will,” p. 76.

²⁵ Aquinas, *ST Q.* 156, a. 3.

²⁶ Kent, “Aquinas and Weakness of Will,” p. 77.

²⁷ Though, as I will show below, Aquinas contradicts the claim explicitly.

²⁸ Bourke’s treatment of *habitus* as a kind of mean between potency and act is helpful, here. Vernon J. Bourke, “The Role of *Habitus* in the Thomistic Metaphysics of Potency and Act,” in *Essays in Thomism*, ed. Robert E. Brennan (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1942), pp. 101–9.

²⁹ Kent, “Aquinas and Weakness of Will,” p. 78.

however, do not stem so much from her reading of Question 77, and Question 155, as they do with understanding these questions in the broader context of Aquinas' treatment of human action and its relationship to these articles. It seems that Kent is principally concerned with maintaining that the incontinent is still culpable for his action, even as he is moved by passion.³⁰ I agree with this, and I think that Kent is correct in maintaining that Aquinas sees the incontinent as culpable for his action, though less so than the vicious, and more so than the one wholly ignorant or incapable. Still, there are certain anthropological presuppositions that stand behind Aquinas' work in these articles, as well as Kent's analysis, and these seem to be fundamentally opposed. Consequently, in order to respond to Kent's arguments, we must first look at some other key texts about the will and its role in human actions, and see how they illumine the question at hand. Upon examination of these texts, it becomes clear that the will and its relative strength and weakness do in fact have a role in sins of weakness, or passion.

First of all, we should make a few general remarks about the *Summa Theologiae*. One of the difficulties with reading the *Summa* is that it proceeds by individual articles that are asking very precise questions. Thomas, rightly, answers these questions with succinct formality. There is very little "extra", and hardly any elaboration. Consequently, when taking up one article about one particular question, we must be very careful that we do not separate this from Thomas' underlying principles, or from the whole of his teaching. It is precisely this mistake into which I believe Kent has fallen. Her analysis of the particular articles seems sound, but fails to adequately take into consideration what Aquinas says elsewhere.

Aquinas gives a general account of the weakness of the soul saying, "weakness of the soul is when the soul is hindered from fulfilling its proper action on account of a disorder in its parts."³¹ Consequently, it is enough for Aquinas to say that any disorder in the will qualifies as a weakness of this same power. Now, it is true that the will cannot err with respect to its proper object, insofar as the will is only moved by an object insofar as it is seen as good. However, the object of the will as seen, or perceived is determined by other powers.

When beginning his consideration of human action Aquinas invokes the principle that the final cause is the cause of the agent cause causing, and thus is the first of the causes. The final cause of human action is the end (*telos*).³² Ultimately, we may speak of an

³⁰ Kent, p. 77.

³¹ *ST*, Q. 77, a. 3.

³² In general, I strongly agree with Long's teleological understanding of human action. Steven A. Long, *Teleological Grammar of the Moral Act*, Rev. edition, Introductions to Catholic Doctrine (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia Press of Ave Maria University, 2015).

end towards which all of one's actions are ordered toward, but here the focus is on a particular act and the proximate end that is sought. This proximate end is the first and *proper object* of the will, and though it is the object of the will, it is not called the object of the moral act, but rather the end of the moral act. This end, since it is the object of the will, is some perceived good since this is how the will is known and distinguished.³³ Any perceived good can be an end.

In treating the will's movement we must note a compound character of the movement of the will whereby it is moved and moves. This is already implied in our account of the end as a "perceived good". By perceived, I am following Aquinas who says that the end is presented to the will by the intellect. The intellect then moves towards this end and this is called intention.³⁴ The movement is elicited from the will, but the will moves according to its nature toward a good and is a self-mover (having first been moved by God).³⁵ When speaking of the way the will stands to the end, we use the word *intentio*. As Aquinas says, "Hence, intention first and principally pertains to that which moves to an end, whence we say the architect, and everyone in command, by his command move others to the which he intends."³⁶

While the end is the proper object of the will and is accordingly intended by the will, still the moral object of the external act likewise falls under the will as an object, and this in two respects. First of all, it falls under the will as an object of *choice*. However, while the *ratio* of choice is *substantially* an act of the will, it is nevertheless most formally an act of the intellect.³⁷ The intellect, instigated by the will, initiates the deliberative process and considers the object and the relevant circumstances according to its power. This belongs to prudence and the practical intellect.³⁸ The intellect, having deliberated and considered various possibilities that are able to be ordered to the end then, as it were, presents the object to the will.³⁹ The will then moves to this object as a good under the *ratio* of choice.

³³ *ST I Q. 80, a. 2, c, I-IIae Q. 8, a. 1, c.*

³⁴ *ST Q. 12, a. 1, ad 4.*

³⁵ *ST I-IIae Q. 9, a. 1, c.*

³⁶ *ST I-IIae Q. 12 a. 1, c.* This is also called the interior act of the will. Cf. *ST I-IIae Q. 18, 6 c.*

³⁷ *ST I-IIae Q. 13, a. 1 c.*

³⁸ It is important to note that Aquinas adopts an Aristotelian anthropology where the human soul has, as it were, three parts, the rational, sensitive or appetitive, and the vegetative. The rational part has both a speculative and practical aspect. The "speculative intellect" has as its object universal truths, whereas the practical intellect deals with those things that pertain to the here and now. Knowing, in the strict sense, is said only of the speculative intellect. The practical intellect is only able to make judgments. The habit of making good judgments is the virtue of prudence.

³⁹ This object is clearly "something to be done."

Consequently, it is the nature of the will to be dependent on other powers for its proper object. Thus, when Aquinas speaks of the passions as being the first mover of the will in the case of the incontinent, this does not imply that the will is not “weak” since as Thomas argues above, it is enough for there to be a disorder in the will in order to call the will weak. If, however, the will moves to an object that is not an honest good, then there is a disorder in the will, and accordingly, a weakness. Thus I am in full agreement with Kent when she says

When he (Aquinas) says that the incontinent does not sin from choice, he means that the incontinent’s sinful act does not arise from his own moral disposition. In contrast to the self-indulgent person, the incontinent does not habitually indulge his appetite for physical pleasure, and he later regrets his bad behavior.⁴⁰

However, she wishes to take from this that a weak will is not involved in the incontinent’s act. It seems as if Kent’s claim is that it is unfair to “blame the will” for this weakness, since it was simply moving to the object as perceived, and it is not strictly speaking “disposed” (in the sense of *habitus*) to incontinence.

First of all, Kent simply has failed to note that Aquinas argues that both continence and incontinence are in the will as a subject. Thus,

The will stands between reason and the concupiscible, and may be moved by either. In the continent man it is moved by the reason, in the incontinent man it is moved by the concupiscible. Hence continence may be ascribed to the reason as to its first mover, and incontinence to the concupiscible power: though both belong immediately to the will as their proper subject.⁴¹

Now, it is wrong to think of “lack of virtue” as neutral in Aquinas. Rather, to lack a virtue is a failure on the part of human nature. With the virtue of charity we possess all of the virtues as infused, and thereby merit salvation. Without the virtue of charity, there is no salvation, and only the narrow possibility of possessing naturally acquired virtues.⁴² For Aquinas, then, it is the presence or lack of a virtue that determines one’s salvation or damnation. Thomas’ teleological understanding of human nature means that for the nature to attain its proper end, it must possess virtues. Lack of a virtue, therefore, is a disorder in the soul, which is, as seen above, a weakness. However, incontinence implies a lack of virtue, and consequently a

⁴⁰ Kent, “Aquinas and Weakness of Will,” p. 77.

⁴¹ *ST*, Q. 155, a. 3, ad. 2.

⁴² I acknowledge that Kent’s paper is not in regard to infused or theological virtues. I bring in charity only as an example for clarity of the necessity of virtue for humans to obtain their proper end.

disorder in not only the appetites, the proper subject of the moral virtues,⁴³ but also a disorder in the will, and therefore weakness.

Now, it can be reasonably objected here that, while I have shown that according to Aquinas the will might be described as weak, I have not shown this as a cause of sins of weakness. Rather, the weak will seems to be something that merely occurs with the weak action that arose from the vehement passion that overpowered reason and sound judgment. For, it seems that the only virtues that are to be found in the will are theological virtues,⁴⁴ and these are beyond the scope of Kent's consideration.

There are two replies to this objection. First of all, we see that, inasmuch as the incontinent lacks continence, it is precisely a defect in the will, that causes the incontinent to act thus. Thus, while it is correct that moral virtues do not reside in the will as in a subject, still, it is necessary to hold that the will of the incontinent is defective, since the habit of continence is not present. Consequently, since incontinence resides in the will as a subject, there is a disorder and therefore weakness in that power. Moreover, that weakness is in fact the cause of the moral failing of the incontinent, since otherwise the incontinent would be able to resist the vehement passion. Rather, since it is weak with respect to the movement of the passions, it chooses to follow the passions rather than reason. Reason, after all, is presenting the proper object to the will of the continent and to the incontinent in the same way.

Furthermore, while it is certainly true that one can provide an analysis or moral action without reference to the supernatural order, it is not at all clear that that is what is occurring in the *Summa Theologiae*. There are certainly truths that can be taken from the *Summa* about the natural order that area in not dependent on the order of grace, but principally, the *Summa* is a theological work. Consequently, underlying Thomas' treatment of human actions is the theological "given" of a fallen human nature. There are then two ways that this manifests the place of the weakness of the will. First of all, weakness of the will is a cause of our fall. Secondly, the result of The Fall is a weakening of the will.

The first sin, according to Aquinas, was pride.⁴⁵ Pride, according to Aquinas, belongs to the irascible appetite, but not simply speaking. Rather, there is a sense in which what is characteristic of the irascible appetite is also predicated of the intellectual appetite, that is, the will.⁴⁶ The first sin, however, could not have arisen from the irascible appetite, properly speaking, since human nature at this time was full

⁴³ *ST* Q. 56, a. 4.

⁴⁴ *ST*, Q. 56, a. 6.

⁴⁵ *ST*, II-IIae Q. 163, a. 1.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, Q. 162, a. 3, c.

integral, as Aquinas argues.⁴⁷ Consequently, the sin consisted in an sinful failure of the will to accrue to its proper object. This disorder, however, is a weakness, as we have seen. Therefore, it is weakness of the will that is the cause of our fallen state.

Further, according to Aquinas, as a result of The Fall, among other things we have lost our integral nature.⁴⁸ This means that our passions now rebel against the order of reason. The result is that we are subject to passion. Aquinas explains what happens in these instances back in I-IIae, Q. 77, a. 1. There he is explaining the way a passion of the sensitive appetite can move the will. He argues,

First, by a kind of distraction: because, since all the soul's powers are rotted in the one essence of the soul, it follows of necessity that, when one power is intent in its act, another power becomes remiss or is even altogether impeded in its act both because all energy (*virtus*) is weakened through being divided . . . and because in the operations of the soul, a certain attention is requisite.

In this way it is abundantly clear that the unruly passions directly cause a weakness in the operation of the will.

From the above arguments, it becomes clear that the weak will is a real part of the account of the sin of the incontinent. Nor is this weakness of the will merely something that arises in “the occurrent sense,” as Kent seems to allow.⁴⁹ Rather, as has been shown the weak will has a very important and causative role in sins of incontinence. Upon reflection, this cannot be too surprising a conclusion. The operations of the intellect and will are the principal operations of a human agent, and accordingly, every other truly human act, must proceed from the will. While it is true that the will cannot err with regards to its object, generally speaking, it can err insofar as the object does not completely satisfy the will. Any created good, as Aquinas shows, fails to completely satisfy the will.⁵⁰ Consequently, it is not until the beatific vision, where there is no created species between ourselves and the Divine Essence, that our will is perfectly satisfied, such that there is no potency, and no possibility of failing to adhere to God Himself as our true and everlasting good.⁵¹ Therefore, until we enter into beatitude, our will is susceptible to succumbing to disorder and weakness.

⁴⁷ Ibid., Q. 163, a. 1.

⁴⁸ Ibid., Q. 164, a. 1.

⁴⁹ Kent, “Aquinas and Weakness of Will,” p. 82.

⁵⁰ *ST* I-IIae, Q. 2, a. 8.

⁵¹ *ST* I, Q. 12 and I-IIae, Q. 2, a. 8.

III. A Brief Reply to Gary Watson

By undermining Kent's position on Aquinas' teaching regarding weakness of the will, I have created an unfortunate difficulty, namely, I have now undermined one of Kent's arguments against Gary Watson, with whom both Kent and I disagree. The upshot of Watson's argument is that he wants to maintain that agents who fail through weakness are not culpable in any way, at the time of the action.⁵² Rather, for Watson, the only thing for which a weak agent culpable is having neglected forming virtuous habits during his evidently misspent youth.⁵³ Such an opinion certainly runs counter to Aquinas' account of the actions of the weak. Further, it does not seem to really coincide with our experience. As Kent rightly points out,

[I]n interpreting sins of weakness as actions performed exclusively by persons lacking the necessary capacity for self-control, one either radically limits the number of acts we are justified in calling "weak" or radically expands the number of persons presumed to be incapable of acting on their own better judgment. In either case, this account diverges much farther from ordinary usage than Aquinas's does.⁵⁴

There is simply a disconnect with common experience and how Watson seems to want to interpret human actions.

Furthermore, Kent's second principal argument against Watson is as follows:

Watson's account cannot explain why the agent acts counter to her better judgment only now and then, not consistently, as both the self-indulgent person and the compulsive do. Is the capacity for self-control supposed to be one that comes and goes? If so, it appears to be an unilluminating ad hoc explanation.⁵⁵

This critique likewise seems to be spot on. Watson's account simply fails to explain the full realm of our experience regarding the actions of the weak.

It is Kent's third argument against Watson that depends on her denying that the will can be weak. The reasoning seems to be that a weak will might be reasonably construed as effectively rendering the agent incapable of acting otherwise. If such is the case, we have given the game to Watson and we have no grounds for maintaining that the weak agent is still culpable for his actions.⁵⁶ It is certainly

⁵² Watson, "Skepticism about Weakness of Will," July 1977, p. 338.

⁵³ Watson, p. 339.

⁵⁴ Kent, "Aquinas and Weakness of Will," p. 88.

⁵⁵ Kent, p. 88.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* Although it must be admitted that Kent's article ends rather strangely. She seems to so greatly qualify her remarks that one wonders what the point was of her exegesis of Thomas' work, above.

the case that Aquinas considers the weak person culpable, there is no disagreement with Kent on that point. However, given that, as has been shown, weakness of the will does play a role in Thomas' account of actions done out of weakness, it remains to show how Thomas maintains that the weak agent is still culpable.

Thomas does allow that passion, i.e. weakness, can diminish the culpability for a sin when it precedes the act.⁵⁷ The reason for this is that for a something to have the full account of sin it must be voluntary. Insofar as the will is moved by vehement passions, however, the act has less the character of voluntariness and accordingly there is less culpability.⁵⁸ This should not be understood as diminishing the culpability to the point of the act no longer being a sin, however. In the subsequent article Thomas takes up this question precisely and introduces several important distinctions. He first observes that

An act which, in its genus, is evil, cannot be excused from sin altogether, unless it be rendered altogether involuntary. Consequently, if the passion be such that it renders the subsequent act wholly involuntary, it entirely excuses from sin; otherwise, it does not excuse entirely.⁵⁹

If the act is involuntary, it is no longer a human act, and therefore it falls outside the question at hand. It is the next distinction Thomas makes, however, that is crucial,

In this matter two points apparently should be observed: first, that a thing may be voluntary either "in itself," as when the will tends towards it directly; or "in its cause," when the will tends towards that cause and not towards the effect; as is the case with one who willfully gets drunk, for in that case he is considered to do voluntarily whatever he does through being drunk.⁶⁰

Thus, when considering the culpability of an act, the voluntariness can appear in a very attenuated manner in the act in question. Further, Aquinas then notes that a thing can be voluntary either directly or indirectly. It is voluntary directly when the will moves toward the thing directly; indirectly when the will could have, but did not prevent it.⁶¹

Taking these distinctions into account, Aquinas gives the very reasonable answer to the question arguing,

Accordingly, therefore, we must make a distinction: because a passion is sometimes so strong as to take away the use of reason altogether as

⁵⁷ *ST I-IIae Q. 77, a. 6, c.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, a. 7, c.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

in the case of those who are mad through love or anger; and then if such a passion were voluntary from the beginning, the act is voluntary in its cause, as we have stated with regard to drunkenness.

In this way, we see that Aquinas might agree with Watson that, in some instances at least, it is possible that the weak agent is incapable of acting otherwise. If, however, there was voluntariness in the beginning, the act is sinful in its cause. In this way, it may well be the case that unreformed alcoholic cannot but drink once he is in the bar, however, he might very well have voluntarily placed himself near the bar, or even voluntarily entered.

Aquinas then goes on to excuse wholly from sin those who act according to their passion where the cause is wholly involuntary, either through illness or something of the sort.⁶² This of course makes sense and is utterly consistent with what Aquinas teaches and with experience. The final part of his reply, however, deals with the difficult case where things are not simply clear, but there is a kind of gradation of voluntariness. As Aquinas argues,

Sometimes, however, the passion is not such as to take away the use of reason altogether; and then reason can drive the passion away, by turning to other thought, or it can prevent it from having its full effect; since the members are not put to work except by the consent of reason . . .⁶³

In such cases, Aquinas concludes, the passion mitigates but does not excuse from sin. The reason is that, if the will is well ordered, it will directly turn to another thought. However, if it is not so ordered, even if it does not turn to the passion directly, it may simply allow the passion to take effect without stopping it. In both ways there is culpability.

In the light of Aquinas' distinctions, it seems clear that his account accords with experience, and seems to not suffer from Watson's objection. It is simply true, as Aquinas argues, that the weak agent was culpably insufficient in his resistance to the passions. As we just saw, Aquinas makes adopts the position explicitly. If one wants to push further and ask what this person failed to resist the movement of the passions, rather than just say that it is ultimately inexplicable, as Kent seems inclined to concede,⁶⁴ we can say that there are a whole host of reasonable answers, but ultimately it is due to potency. No created good is finally proportionate to the will such that it can irrevocably adhere to it. Consequently, until our wills encounter such an object, there is always the metaphysical possibility that they go astray. "Our hearts our restless until they rest in Thee."

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Kent, "Aquinas and Weakness of Will," p. 90.

IV. Conclusion

Underlying Kent's analysis of Aquinas, seems to be a rather mechanistic understanding of the will. Given that the will moves, necessarily, to the good as such, Kent seems to understand all dynamism and potency to arise merely on the side of the passions, or perhaps on the failure of reason. I am not sure, but it seems to me that Kent has yielded to the temptation of taking Aquinas' treatment of this question as the expounding of a "system". However, while it is true that he is *systematically* proceeding through moral theology, he is by no means developing a system. To make a bold, and perhaps overbold claim, the principal referent for Aquinas in all of his writings is not some *a priori* system, but rather is *things* and our *experience* of things. Accordingly, it is the experience of the dynamism of our will and our struggle to make it conform to right reason that underlies Aquinas' doctrine of the weakness of the will. Fundamentally, two principles undergird this doctrine. The first is the unity of operations in humans as stemming from the intellectual part of the soul. The second is the existence of potency in the will with respect to any created object. It is in virtue of these two principles, the one proper to moral theology, the other to metaphysics, that Aquinas must attribute a causative role to weakness of the will in the actions of the incontinent.

Daniel Lendman, STL, M. Theol., MA Phil
Ave Maria Univeristy

dlendman@gmail.com