

## Self-Discipline as a Condition for Life in Christ: Paul of Tarsus' Notion of ἐγκράτεια

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There have been many studies on the neo-Stoic influences on the thought and writing of Paul of Tarsus. One of the oldest was an article by Frederick Clifton Grant, who noted the close similarities between Paul and Seneca and Epictetus, among others; he made note of the similar concepts, culture in which they were active, and even the similar time of their activity.<sup>1</sup> Of all of Paul's writings, the Epistle to the Romans has been most suspected of having the strongest Stoic influences,<sup>2</sup> as has the Epistle to the Philippians in recent decades.<sup>3</sup> Although researchers have diligently emphasized that Stoic elements are clearly evident in Paul's writings, the Apostle to the Nations himself was not a Stoic. In his philosophy (or, rather, theology), he went one or even two levels above Stoicism, if Philo of Alexandria<sup>4</sup> can be situated before Paul.<sup>5</sup>

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- 1 Cf. F. C. Grant, *St. Paul and Stoicism*, "The Biblical World" 45 (1915) no. 5, p. 268–281; D. A. Desilva, *Paul and the Stoa: A Comparison*, "Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society" 38 (1995) no. 4, p. 549–564.
  - 2 R. M. Thorsteinsson argues against Paul's Stoicism ascribed to him on the basis of Romans 12 in the article *Paul and Roman Stoicism: Romans 12 and Contemporary Stoic Ethics*, "Journal for the Study of the New Testament" 29 (2006) no. 2, 139–161, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0142064X06072835>; do tekstu odnosi się T. Engberg-Pedersen, *Paul's Stoicizing Politics in Romans 12–13: The Role of 13. 1–10 in the Argument*, "Journal for the Study of the New Testament" 29 (2006) no. 2, p. 163172, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0142064X06072836>.
  - 3 Cf. T. Engberg-Pedersen, *Stoicism in Philippians*, [in:] *Paul in His Hellenistic Context*, ed. by T. Engberg-Pedersen, London–New York 2004, p. 256–290.
  - 4 Cf. G. Reale, *Historia filozofii starożytnej*, vol. 4, przeł. E. I. Zieliński, Lublin 2012, p. 287–288; F. C. Grant, *St. Paul and Stoicism*, op. cit., p. 280.
  - 5 However, this view has been challenged in Pohlenz's groundbreaking article. In it, Pohlenz identified Paul solely with the Jewish world, using the Epistle to the Romans to show that Paul had nothing in common with Stoicism. He only used Greek concepts to present Jewish ideas to the Hellenized world. Only Philo found a more perfect bridge between the Greek and Jewish worlds – cf. M. Pohlenz, *Paulus und die Stoa*, "Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der Älteren Kirche" 42 (1949) no. 1, p. 69–104, <https://doi.org/10.1515/zntw.1949.42.1.69>.

A reflection on the unique expression of new life in Christ, which is expressed in the noun ἐγκράτεια and its morphological family, requires clarification, which in this case we understand as “new life.” Since we are dealing with an epistle coming directly from Paul, we cannot present the idea of new life differently than the apostle himself did in Romans 6:3–14, for example, in which he understands new life within the context of baptism. According to Paul, new life is synonymous with death to be absolved from sin in imitation of Christ and in unity with Him (Romans 6:5). Although it is born inside the person, its practical realization is clearly demonstrated in the everyday decisions of the witness to Christ (see: Ephesians 5:8–20), who tries to be like his Master (Colossians 3:5–17). Although such a description of the concept of new life is, naturally, brief, it is an appropriate point of departure to describe such a unique and difficult to properly interpret topic as self-control not so much in the concept of σωφροσύνη, as ἐγκράτεια. What, then, is ἐγκράτεια and what role does it play in the life of the “new person”?

Its derivation, which is easy to deduce, tells us much about the concept itself: ἐγκράτεια is a term consisting of two elements: the preposition ἐν (“in,” “among”) and κράτος (“strength” or “power” and the accompanying “authority”).<sup>6</sup> Thus it is unsurprising that it is presented within the framework of “self-control,” whose source is man’s intellectual and volitional control over his own desires. Such an approach to the question of self-control frequently leads to the levying of harsh accusations against the Apostle to the Nations. This ἐγκράτεια can be unsettling for several reasons. First, this is because it can initially be associated with asceticism, which in fact is a partially appropriate association. However, asceticism should not be understood in the Gnostic spirit, despite the presumed presence of this spirit in the community in Corinth.<sup>7</sup> If we were to bind together the teaching on asceticism with Paul’s

6 The very term κράτος is etymologically tied to the Sanskrit *Kṛātu-*, which contains within itself the ideas of “(magical) power,” also meaning “will” and “thought.” The Greek ἐγκράτεια would then, on the one hand, be directed externally through the preposition ἐν and, on the other, through κράτος concentrate on a person’s external authorities – cf. R. Beeks, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek*, vol. 1, Leiden–Boston 2010, p. 772–773 (Leiden Indo-European Etymological Dictionary Series, 10.1).

7 For more details: Y. Khiok-khng, *Rhetorical Interaction in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10*, Leiden–New York 1995; W. Deming, *Paul on Marriage and Celibacy. The Hellenistic Background of 1 Corinthians*, Cambridge–New York 1995; however, suspicions of widespread Gnosis in Corinth were not always met with approval – cf. T. E. Klutz, *Re-Reading 1 Corinthians after Rethinking ‘Gnosticism’*, “Journal for the Study of the New Testament” 26 (2003), no. 2, p. 193–216, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0142064X0302600204>.

teaching on marriage, such as that in 1 Corinthians 7, we could easily fall into the erroneous trap of finding proto-Gnostic tendencies in the apostle's thinking; I will discuss this again later. Second, the Greek philosophers, primarily the heirs to the thought of Zeno of Citium, frequently dealt with the concept of "self-control," devoting much attention to this topic. They considered ἐγκράτεια to be one of the virtues subordinate to σωφροσύνη, which was understood as common sense or moderation.<sup>8</sup> Are the similarities significant enough to consider Paul to be a Stoic?<sup>9</sup> The concept of ἐγκράτεια, undoubtedly not without impact on philosophy, finally functioned in the sports dictionary and was strictly tied to training, especially long and tiring training for the Pan-Hellenic Games.<sup>10</sup> In light of such diverse concepts of self-control, we cannot leave aside this critical topic without appropriately responding to the question of what the concept of ἐγκράτεια in the Pauline Epistles meant. Can we protect it against accusations of being prone to proto-Gnostic influences on the one hand, and of its ties to Stoicism on the other? Does the literary context of the use of this specialized term not determine its meaning, allowing for an interpretation without reference to the meanders of philosophy? For what reasons is ἐγκράτεια considered a trait of the new person, finding its place in the catalogue of virtues in Galatians 5:22–23, among others?

## 1. Only ἐγκράτεια?

Since we have already noted the presence of ἐγκράτεια in the dictionary of concepts of the philosophical Stoics, we should emphasize that an exhaustive treatment of this topic in this article is impossible and, furthermore, doing so is not its overriding purpose. Thus, our interests will be limited to those characteristics of self-control that are found in the Pauline Epistles. At a later

8 Seeing them as equivalent would be a major mistake. Thompson, who considers ἐγκράτεια to be equivalent to σωφροσύνη, is wrong – cf. J. Thompson, *Moral Formation According to Paul. The Context and Coherence of Pauline Ethics*, Grand Rapids 2011, p. 104.

9 The famous Alexandrian Philo also mentioned ἐγκράτεια. He identified it with control over government, which sheds a slightly different light on the idea itself, which is an unusually vibrant and universal idea in the world of philosophy; it is impossible to narrowly limit it to just one philosophical system.

10 Cf. R. Metzner, *Paulus und der Wettkampf: Die Rolle des Sports in Leben und Verkündigung des Apostels (1 Kor 9, 24–7; Phil 3, 12–16)*, "New Testament Studies" 46 (2000) no. 4, p. 576, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0028688500000333>.

point, neither will it be a probing exegetical study, as the overriding purpose is to sift through the theological-literary realization of a very specific idea: ἐγκράτεια.

The easiest way to become better acquainted with this virtue is to analyze its antithesis, the flaw that in the case of ἐγκράτεια is ἀκρασία (“a lack of self-restraint”). Generally speaking, Ἐγκράτεια and ἀκρασία were petty virtues and flaws, respectively. In Stoic thought, virtues and flaws were seen in the categories of knowledge and ignorance; self-control and restraint are rational, because they are a science. A lack of self-restraint (intemperance) is also somewhat rational, but in the negative sense, because it is ignorance,<sup>11</sup> willful opposition to virtuous reason. Ἀκρασία, which can be overcome only with the aid of practicing self-control, is therefore nothing more than obeisance with regards to indulging in all bodily stimuli. It was seen in the categories of a major threat leading to a loss of control over one’s body (or irrationality), including that which Paul writes about in 1 Corinthians 7:5 in the context of adultery.

Reducing ἀκρασία and ἐγκράτεια to the English language equivalents of “self-control” and “a lack of restraint” is insufficient; it is worth asking about the definitions of both these terms. To achieve this goal, it is worth referring to Jean-Baptiste Gourinat’s excellent study devoted to the problem of the dichotomy of ἀκρασία and ἐγκράτεια.<sup>12</sup> Because of the secondary importance of research on ἀκρασία and ἐγκράτεια in various authors, I will make use of Gourinat to use what the famous German philologist Hans von Arnim described using the words *doctrina generalis Stoicorum*, or a form of standardized stoicism.<sup>13</sup> This is the same form of Stoicism that Paul might have encountered; they are presented in a similar way in textbooks written between the first century BC and late antiquity,<sup>14</sup> as well as the works of such philosophers as Gaius Musonius Rufus and Epictetus.

11 Cf. J.B. Gourinat, *Akrasia and enkrateia in Ancient Stoicism. Minor Vice and Minor Virtue*, [in:] *Akrasia in Greek Philosophy. From Socrates to Plotinus*, ed. by C. Bobonich, P. Destrée, Leiden–Boston 2007, p. 231 (*Philosophia Antiqua*, 106), <https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004156708.i-308.55>.

12 Cf. J.B. Gourinat, *Akrasia and enkrateia in Ancient Stoicism...*, op. cit., p. 216.

13 Cf. *Stoicorum Veteris Fragmenta*, collegit H. F. A. von Arnim, vol. 1: *Zeno et Zenonis discipvli*, Stuttgart 1964, p. V.

14 Gourinat devotes part of his study to a presentation of the views of Chrysippus and Cleanthes, who considered ἐγκράτεια to be among the cardinal virtues. Abandoning the presentation of these two Stoic scholars has no great importance with regards to an analysis of the Pauline Epistles – cf. J.B. Gourinat, *Akrasia and enkrateia in Ancient Stoicism. Zeno et Zenonis discipvli*, Stuttgart 1964, p. V.

## 2. Self-Control in Philosophy

The problem of a lack of restraint in Greek philosophy has been presented many times. Although he was not a Stoic himself, we can use the words of Aristotle himself in his *Nicomachean Ethics*: “He who does not exercise control over himself (ἀκρατής) commits evil deeds under the influence of passion, knowing that they are evil, but he who does control himself (ἐγκρατής), knowing that lust is wrong, does not yield to temptation thanks to his reason” (1145b, 13–14).<sup>15</sup> Thus Aristotle notes what we have already mentioned about rationality and a lack of restraint, and self-control. Although the concept of ἀκρασία did not play as prominent a role as it did in Aristotelian ethics, it was nonetheless present in it. However, the neo-Stoic Gaius Musonius Rufus, a contemporary of Paul, dealt with this topic, asking: “How can one be restrained if he did not set a goal of defeating one’s desires, or how could someone who lacks discipline teach self-control to others?” (*Diatr.* VIII, 10, 13–15).<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, Epictetus, a pupil of Gaius Musonius Rufus, comments: “Whenever you indulge in bodily lust, do not consider this to be your failure, but know that you have also fed the lack of restraint (τὴν ἀκρασίαν) and that you have also strengthened it” (*Diatr.* II, 18, 6).<sup>17</sup> In part on the basis of the referenced texts, Gourinat defines a lack of restraint as follows: “It is a flaw that results from the inability to decline the charms of pleasure and the constant tendency to yield to temptation.”<sup>18</sup>

With regards to ἐγκράτεια, its definition was preserved in two classic but rather late (relative to the times of the New Testament) lists of Stoic virtues and flaws: in Diogenes Laërtius (first half of the third century) and in Stobaeus (first half of the fifth century).<sup>19</sup> According to Diogenes, “it is staunchly living by the rules of virtuous reason or tenaciously resisting temptation” (VII, 93, 1),<sup>20</sup>

15 Arystoteles, *Etyka nikomachejska*, przeł., oprac. i wstępem poprzedziła D. Gromska, Warszawa 1956, p. 237.

16 C. E. Lutz, *Musonius Rufus. The Roman Socrates*, New Haven 1947, p. 62 (tłumaczenie własne).

17 Epiktet, *Diatryby: Encheiridion z dodaniem fragmentów oraz gnomologium Epiktetowego*, przeł. i oprac. L. Joachimowicz, Warszawa 1961, p. 169.

18 J.B. Gourinat, *Akrasia and enkrateia in Ancient Stoicism*, p. 230.

19 If we are to believe the sources, Stobaeus' text is a recap of the doxography of Arius Didymus, an Alexandrian Stoic who lived in the first century BC – cf. J.B. Gourinat, *Akrasia and enkrateia in Ancient Stoicism*, op. cit., p. 217.

20 “Τὴν δ' ἐγκράτειαν διάθεσιν ἀνυπέμβλητον τῶν κατ' ὀρθὸν λόγον ἢ ἔξιν ἀήττητον ἠδονῶν” (translation mine, using: Thesaurus Linguae Graecae. A Digital Library of Greek Literature, <http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu>, 04.03.2016).

to which Stobaeus responds: “Restraint is an unsurpassable (ἀνυπέρβλητον) study of what is clearly in accordance with virtuous reason.”<sup>21</sup>

Thus, for the ancients (including Socrates, Aristotle, and Stobaeus), self-control was one of the most important virtues, as it made possible control over one’s lust, which barred one’s access to knowledge. The difference introduced by Stoicism was the rationality of both a lack of restraint and of restraint. Since we already know how ἐγκράτεια was defined, we now have to answer the question of what specific area of life it pertained to. What does this ἡδονή, which tried to control it, encompass? The authors limited it to two main areas of life: first, sexuality, and second, intemperance in food and drink. The first aspect is gracefully described by Epictetus in his *Enchiridion*:

Remember in every adventure you experience to pay attention to yourself and study, looking for the strength you have in you in order to resist this adventure. If you see a beautiful boy or a beautiful girl, you will be able to resist with restraint (πρὸς [...] ἐγκράτειαν).<sup>22</sup>

This topic is also dealt with by the skeptic Sextus Empiricus (late second and early third centuries) in his critique of the Stoics (at the same time giving us insight into neo-Stoic thought at that time). He writes:

Restraint (ἐγκράτεια) “is tenaciously clinging to the principle of virtuous reason or uncompromisingly resisting pleasure,” or “a virtue (ἀρετή) that gives us an advantage over things that it seems are difficult to resist.” To be restrained, as they say, does not consist of resisting the charms of an old hag<sup>23</sup> with one foot in the grave, but the restrained one is he who has the opportunity to make use of Lais of Corinth or Phryne or one who looks like them, but does not give in (Sex. Emp. *Adv. math.* IX, 153)<sup>24</sup>.

It seems that the Hellenistic Jews have a similar understanding of restraint. In the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, Naphtali says: “There is a time to grow intimate with one’s wife and a time for self-control (restraint) for the

21 Ἐγκράτειαν δὲ ἐπιστήμην ἀνυπέρβλητον τῶν κατὰ τὸν ὀρθὸν λόγον φανέντων (za epitomatorem Stobajosa Ariuszem Didymusem, *Liber de philosophorum sectis* 64, 2, 30, tłumaczenie własne).

22 Epic. *Ench.* 10, 1.

23 Gr. γραῦς jest barbaryzmem – cf. *Etymological Dictionary of Greek*, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 285.

24 Ἐγκράτεια γάρ ἐστι διάθεσις ἀνυπέρβατος τῶν κατ’ ὀρθὸν λόγον γιγνομένων, ἢ ἀρετὴ ὑπεράνω ποιοῦσα ἡμᾶς τῶν δοκούντων εἶναι δυσαποσχέτων· ἐγκρατεύεται γάρ, φασίν, οὐχ ὁ θανατιώσης γραῖος ἀπεχόμενος, ἀλλ’ ὁ Λαΐδος καὶ Φρύνης ἢ τινος τοιαύτης δυνάμενος ἀπολαῦσαι, εἴτα ἀπεχόμενος (tłumaczenie własne za: Thesaurus Linguae Graecae. A Digital Library of Greek Literature, <http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu>, 04.03.2016).

sake of personal prayer.”<sup>25</sup> Philo speaks similarly of Abraham, writing that he slept with Hagar only until the moment when she conceived Ishmael (*De Abr.* 253). The philosopher is not entirely immune to stereotyping, reducing the Israelites to those who are ἐγκρατής and θεοφιλοί, as opposed to the pagans – φιλοπαθής and ἄθεοι (*Quis Rerum Divinarum Heres Sit* 203; see: 1 Thessalonians 4:5; Romans 1:26), suggesting that the pagans are naturally lustful, while attributing to the Jews sexual abstinence. On the basis of this, Katy E. Valentine’s work, which leaves much to be desired, makes an interesting observation regarding the “class division” of ancient society; she makes use of concepts from post-colonialism, which is still popular. The author believes that ἐγκράτεια could be a way of raising one’s own prestige. In the Hellenized societies of antiquity, free men from the upper echelons had the most opportunities to demonstrate their ἐγκράτεια; they had access to many free women, youths, and slaves of both sexes. Denying oneself bodily pleasures with the above groups was a perfect opportunity to publicly demonstrate one’s self-control. This becomes important once we realize that men from nearly all corners of the Roman Empire were prone to a lack of restraint; a perfect example of this was the Corinthian community.<sup>26</sup>

As I have mentioned, ἐγκράτεια was not limited to sexuality. However, in the literature that we can in any way refer to Paul’s reality (either in terms of chronology or of geography), we cannot find many specifics. Usually, there is talk of restraint as such. The complexity of this idea and its more universal nature is displayed only by Epictetus’ teacher Gaius Musonius Rufus, who lived at more or less the same time as the Apostle to the Nations. He says that “the beginning and fundament of virtue is restraint in eating and drinking” (*Mus. Ruf. Dissert. XVIII<sup>A</sup>, 5–7<sup>27</sup>*), which will be important in our later reflections.

The presentation of the topic of self-control is multifaceted. What especially attracts our attention is the ideological weight of the Greek ἐγκράτεια, which is rarely free of connotations of a philosophical or ethical nature (the

25 καιρὸς γὰρ συνουσίας γυναικὸς αὐτοῦ καὶ καιρὸς ἐγκρατείας εἰς προσευχὴν αὐτοῦ (translation mine from: Thesaurus Linguae Graecae. A Digital Library of Greek Literature, <http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu>, 04.03.2016).

26 Cf. K. E. Valentine, *1 Corinthians 7 in Light of Ancient Rhetoric of SelfControl*, “Review and Expositor” 110 (2013) no. 4, p. 582.

27 Gaius Musonius Rufus appears to be an advocate of vegetarianism; he claims that eating meat is more fitting of wild animals than of humans – cf. C. E. Lutz, *Musonius Rufus...*, op. cit., p. 112–113.

Septuagint is an exception). What, then, could Paul could have been thinking of when he used the same term as the philosophers?

### 3. Was Paul an Encratic?

What seems certain is the lack of coincidence in Paul's use of the term ἐγκράτεια. A reference to such an important idea could not have been coincidental, even if its semantics was partly separated from deeper philosophical complexities. However, it should be emphasized that Paul did not use this term as a result of the influence of the Septuagint, where ἐγκράτεια instead referred to "containing" someone or something by force, not in the categories of sexuality or food (Exodus 9:2, 2 Maccabees 8:30; 10:15, 17; 13:13; 4 Maccabees 5:34; Daniel 13:39). In this meaning of the term, he was closer to the philosophers than to the authors of the Bible. The contexts undoubtedly indicate the meaning of ἐγκράτεια, because they appear when such consequential topics as marriage (1 Corinthians 7), topics implicitly related to food (1 Corinthians 8), and the apostolate (1 Corinthians 9). Perhaps it deals with even more important matters, as according to Acts 24:25 in some mysterious way this topic greatly moved, and even frightened the prosecutor Felix.<sup>28</sup>

#### 3.1. Sexuality

Paul refers to the duo of ἀκρασία and ἐγκράτεια only once in 1 Corinthians 7, although the topic of self-control is present in both the second part of this same epistle (in verse 9:25) as well as in Galatians 5:23. When addressing the community in Corinth, Paul had to deal with problems that were rather

<sup>28</sup> This is the only time in the entire Acts of the Apostles when Luke mentions ἐγκράτεια. However, in moral philosophy this topic must have been vital enough that tying together the temporal idea of self-control, which was very well-known to the pagan, to the coming judgment must have made a strong impression on the auditorium that had hitherto not thought about eternity. It was all the more stronger that according to Josephus' *testimonium* (Ant. 20:141–143) Felix was married for the third time, while his young and beautiful wife Drusilla left her husband upon Felix's encouragement – cf. D. L. Bock, *Acts*, Grand Rapids 2007, p. 695. Furthermore, as a result of Jewish alliances Felix was not unfamiliar with Jewish theology, which in Paul's version was probably convincing enough that it impacted the ineptitude of solving the conflict that had formed around the figure of the apostle – cf. J. R. Edwards, 'Public Theology' in *Luke-Acts. The Witness of the Gospel to Powers and Authorities*, "New Testament Studies" 62 (2016) no. 2, p. 242, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0028688515000466>.

peculiar as seen from the context of Christian teaching. They can be contained within two words: ἐπιθυμία and the resulting πορνεία (6:15–20). The problem of the Corinthians' intemperance seemed urgent to Paul, because being prone to ἐπιθυμία is in his view a pagan practice. Thus, πορνεία can be applied not only to sexual immodesty or adultery, but it can also be considered to be a form of idolatry (see: 1 Thessalonians 4:5). Furthermore, some Corinthian Christians who tried to tackle the lack of restraint that was spreading in their community began to espouse another erroneous view, that women should not even be touched (μὴ ἅπτεσθαι, 1 Corinthians 7:1).<sup>29</sup> In his desire to solve the community's problems, Paul gives two interesting recommendations:

Do not deprive each other, except perhaps by mutual consent for a time, to be free for prayer, but then return to one another, so that Satan may not tempt you through your lack of self-control (διὰ τὴν ἀκρασίαν) (verse 5).

Without a doubt, the aim of the teaching contained within the verse is to awaken among spouses the need and even necessity of practicing self-control. Since the community's situation was at a stalemate and, furthermore, Paul opted in favor of celibacy, the search for a balanced approach seemed to have been the only ration solution. The apostle was aware of the growing ἐπιθυμία in the community, which for centuries had been a problem affecting port cities. He decided to place moderate restraint at the center of his guidelines.<sup>30</sup> Understanding ἐγκράτεια in this case can be summarized as follows: since by its nature ἐπιθυμία in the strictly sexual meaning is experienced by spouses and, furthermore, it is naturally part of the relationship between a man and a woman, it should not be suppressed, as consequently fighting desire could lead to ἀκρασία, which directs all of human existence not so much for the satisfying of needs as for the desire to constantly experience pleasure. The indulgence of ἀκρασία, which in how Paul presents it does not have solely negative connotations, can become the area of Satan's activity. Thus, the apostle makes marriage a "middle road," attaching importance to both abstinence and sexual activity, at the same time emphasizing the need for

29 Cf. A. C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians. A commentary on the Greek Text*, Grand Rapids–Cambridge 2000, p. 507.

30 This verse and the intuition about the impossibility of freeing oneself from the power of ἀκρασία that follows from it was for Calvin a sufficient argument to oppose monastic life – cf. A. Robertson, A. Plummer, *First Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians*, Edinburgh 1914, p. 134.

a consent, as both ἐγκράτεια and ἐπιθυμία (and the related ἀκρασία) require the mutual consent of the spouses; either they are to subject themselves to it or together resign from it. In this case, consent and discipline with regards to time are necessary conditions for maintaining marital balance.<sup>31</sup> In the next part of his argument, he considers celibacy to be the most appropriate state, although he ultimately says:

[B]ut if they cannot exercise self-control they should marry, for it is better to marry than to be on fire (verse 9)<sup>32</sup>.

In this case, Paul's words are definitive. The first phrase begins with εἰ οὐ, which when used with a verb amounts to a contradiction.<sup>33</sup> The above-cited translation of verse 9 in the Polish Millennium Bible creates a certain semantic dissonance that requires a correction. Although the Polish translation seems to approach sexuality from a purely physiological perspective (that is how the words "contain themselves" can be understood), the Greek text refers to the idea of ἐγκράτεια, voluntary self-control, which is the topic of discussion in this article. In other words, this text should be understood as follows: "If they are not contained (if they do not practice self-control), let them marry."

These words, which very commonly are considered to be a clear deprecation of marriage, are in fact a perfect way of promoting them and are something of a key to the encratic practices for those who in any other case would have been incapable of exercising self-control. We also cannot avoid mentioning the fact that Paul addressed people whose image of sexuality was very different from ours; for his audience, sexuality was neither embarrassing nor particularly intimate. Thus the apostle's words cannot be applied universally (to more puritanical milieus, for example) and impacting the vision of marriage. We can only conclude that ἐγκράτεια is not limited to those who are "as [Paul]" (see: 1 Corinthians 7: 7–8), but is recommended to be practiced in marriage, which ensures stability and protects spouses against infidelity.<sup>34</sup> In

31 Cf. R. F. Collins, *First Corinthians*, Collegeville 1999, p. 259–260 (Sacra Pagina, 7).

32 The translation in the Polish Millennium Bible, meanwhile, reads: "If they cannot contain themselves (ἐγκρατεῦοντα), let them marry, for it is better to marry than to be on fire."

33 They are more categorical than εἰ μήτι present in verse 5.

34 In such a presentation, marriage appears to be something of a middle road that is somewhere between ἐγκράτεια and ἀκρασία. It would be wrong to use this to conclude that Paul had a negative attitude towards marriage. On the contrary, he had good relations with married spouses,

this meaning, Paul uses the idea of self-control, just as the above-mentioned Epictetus (*Ench.* 10:1) and Stobaeus, although not like Gaius Musonius Rufus. As Ward argues, here we are dealing with the principle that “marriage is helpful to some, but disadvantageous to others.”<sup>35</sup> Such a view of marriage makes Paul close to some Stoic scholars.

What attracts our attention and requires emphasizing in the two above-mentioned verses is the axiological ambivalence of the terms ἀκρασία and ἐγκράτεια itself, which in the case of married spouses could have both positive and negative connotations. An example of the former is especially interesting when we take into consideration the suggestion that ἀκρασία was a derivative of the verb κεράννυμι and through this derivation meant not so much “a lack of self-restraint” as “a desire for more sexual relations.” However, it is difficult to find convincing support for Papadopoulos’<sup>36</sup> proposal, because such a meaning is suggested neither by the semantics of the verb κεράννυμι, which deals with the topic of mixing water with wine, nor by the etymology of the \**kerh*<sub>2</sub><sup>37</sup> of Indo-European origin.

### 3.2. Foods

In the context of ἐγκράτεια, we should discuss dietary matters. Although they have not been directly tied to his idea in the First Epistle to the Corinthians, they undoubtedly refer to them. We should look for the source of this topic in Gaius Musonius Rufus, who in brief but powerful words refers to the previously mentioned reflections on the thought of eating and drinking, which he considers to be “the beginning and fundament of virtuosity.” Perhaps a search for similar claims in the Pauline Epistles would yield no results, but the general

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such as Priscilla and Aquila, Paul’s devoted associates who undoubtedly were encratites in the Biblical sense of the word – cf. C. J. Roetzel, *Paul. The Man and the Myth*, Edinburgh 1999, p. 147.

35 Paul lived at a time when there were two different matrimonial laws in the Roman Empire, *Lex Iulia de maritandis ordinibus* and *Lex Papia Poppea*. Both “legal codes” focused on propagating marriage and bearing as many children as possible. Those who remained unmarried and childless had to deal with legal punishments. Thus Gaius Musonius Rufus, who fully supported the Augustinian matrimonial law, is correctly accused of having a similar attitude. Ward argues that Musonius’ view was misrepresented by Stobaeus, who is the source for contemporary researchers who write about Musonius’ view on marriage – see: R. B. Ward, *Musonius and Paul on Marriage*, “New Testament Studies” 36 (1990) no. 2, p. 281–283, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0028688500015095>.

36 Cf. R. F. Collins, *First Corinthians*, op. cit., p. 260; K. N. Παπαδόπουλος, *Η σημασία της λεξείω «ακρασία» εν 1 Κορ. 7, 15*, “Δελτιο Βιβλικων Μελετων” 1979 no. 1, p. 135–136.

37 Cf. R. Beekes, L. van Beek, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek*, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 675.

idea certainly is contained within 1 Corinthians 8, in which Paul deals with foods offered to idols. Rudolph groups together the circumstances under which Christians from Corinth could have encountered similar foods: in the temples of idols, on the tables of idols (8:10), in slaughterhouses (10:25), and at the table of the unbeliever (10:27). He notes, however, that the apostle prohibits eating these foods only in the case of two places first mentioned.<sup>38</sup> Despite the scholar's suggestion, this prohibition should not be considered absolute, but instead left to the consideration of those who are influenced by ἐγκράτεια. If there is the possibility of scandalizing one's brother, Paul recommends, but does not command, absolute abstinence (8:12–13). However, if such a threat does not seem justified, he leaves it to the believer's own conscience. This is indicated by the imperative βλέπετε ("heed") and the expression ἡ ἐξουσία ὑμῶν ("your free choice"). This is an unusual rhetorical procedure consisting of avoiding a direct negative imperative, which changes the interpretation of the text, which appears to be a call to abstinence, or ἐγκράτεια, which was practiced for the good of the doubting person, rather than a new law limiting human freedom.<sup>39</sup> Paul therefore presents a specific circumstance, which is a perfect exemplification of the opinion of the already-mentioned Gaius Musonius Rufus. Self-control in eating and drinking and heeding to the weakness of one's neighbor could have really led to virtuosity (interestingly, not only to one's own virtuosity, but to that of one's neighbor as well). In this context, ἐγκράτεια could have led to greater good, and thus it has solely positive connotations. However, it is not imposed as absolutely necessary to be practiced by Christ's followers.

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38 Cf. D. J. Rudolph, *A Jew to the Jews. Jewish Contours of Pauline Flexibility in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23*, Tübingen 2011, p. 93.

39 Commentators have noted the absolute prohibition, which appears not in the epistles, but in Acts 15:29 and 16:4, which means that it was the official teaching of the early church. This is developed in an interesting way by Alex Cheung, who claims that the text from 1 Corinthians 8 is a polemical response to the crafty argumentation given to Paul by the community in Corinth, which responded to social pressure. Under such circumstances, the prohibition of eating offerings should be considered absolute, despite a certain ambivalence contained within Paul's words – cf. D. E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Grand Rapids 2003, p. 379–382. *Jewish Background and Pauline Legacy*, Sheffield 1999, p. 108–112 (Journal for the Study of the New Testament. Supplement Series, 176). This is also noted in the works of other authors, among them *Pierwszy List do Koryntian*, preface, translation from the original, commentary M. Rosik, Częstochowa 2009, p. 284 (Nowy Komentarz Biblijny. Nowy Testament, 7). According to some exegetes, among some people who lack knowledge, we should, in accordance with Stoic thought, seem in them people incapable of self-discipline – cf. D. E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Grand Rapids 2003, p. 379–382.

### 3.3. The Apostolate

A fuller image of what ἐγκράτεια is in Paul's thinking is provided by the sports metaphor in 1 Corinthians 9:24–27, which is also one of the oldest sports metaphors in Greek literature. It refers to a very specific cyclical competition, the Isthmian Games. There is a general consensus among exegetes regarding the main topic of this metaphor; it is ἐγκράτεια, which is explicitly mentioned only in verse 25.<sup>40</sup> There is still the question of if this metaphor deals with the topic of the struggle for the purity of the faith *in genere* (which seems to be suggested by the adjective ἐγκρατεῦομαι) or is instead focused on containing ἐπιθυμία (lust) and ἀκρασία (intemperance), which in the Corinthian context concerns above all the area of sexuality. If that were the case, the conclusions could lead us to certain observations not only with regards to the Biblical passage, but to the entirety of rivalry.

Paul's metaphor is a very convoluted image, so we will limit ourselves to only a few of its elements in order to avoid unnecessarily analyzing it in its entirety.<sup>41</sup> The encratic topic of the Biblical vision of the games can be situated in the figure of the athlete who practices ἐγκράτεια (verse 25) as well as Paul's words. The apostle says that "I drive my body and train it" (verse 27). At these two points, the apostle appears to refer to two stages of all the pan-Hellenic sporting events. The first of them, mentioned in verse 25, was the ten-month period of training (the last month of training was in the shrine), during which the athlete was under the care of a gymnast.<sup>42</sup> This period was frequently identified with a particular demonstration of ἐγκράτεια and undoubtedly was its most perfect manifestation in the Greek world.<sup>43</sup> Why? It was a time of exceptional challenge that did not remain without consequences. During the time of training the athlete could be required to leave the competition. This could be because of insubordination, not putting enough effort into training, ignoring one's coach, or poor results. During their preparations for the competition, athletes were subjected to individual training, which required

40 Cf. A. T. Cheung, *Idol Food in Corinth...*, op. cit., p. 143;

41 We can find a proposal for the exegesis of the metaphor in 1 Corinthians 9:24–27 reinterpreted in the presented text in: A. Rambier-Kwaśniewska, „Walcz w dobrych zawodach o wiarę” (1 Tm 6, 12a). *Relektura metaforyki sportowej w listach proto- i deuteropawłowych*, Wrocław 2014, p. 89–102.

42 Cf. S. G. Miller, *Starożytni olimpijczycy. Sportowe życie antycznej Grecji*, przekł. I. Żółtowska, Warszawa 2004, p. 109.

43 Cf. M. Mello, *Atleta di Cristo. Le metafore agonistiche in San Paolo*, Napoli 2011, p. 53–54, 59.

not only a special diet, but also performing numerous exercises. Because the athlete was isolated and his life during this exhausting time took place only in the gymnasium and in the Palaestra, we can assume that the preparations also involved sexual abstinence. The sources, especially iconographic ones, inform us, however, that the nudity of the charge and the close relationship with the gymnast were not marked by restraint, although here we should separate reality from the idealized world of the metaphor that this article deals with.<sup>44</sup>

When they used the term ἐγκράτεια to refer to athletes, ancient authors had in mind above all control over one's body and desires as well as limiting one's needs. This also encompassed the psychological sphere, which in the area of sport could be a decisive element during a tense moment of competition. In Paul's metaphorical use, the athlete's restraint appears to encompass every aspect of his life; it is expressed by the term σῶμα.<sup>45</sup>

Since the idea of ἐγκράτεια should be tied to training, which will happen if we interpret in its context Paul's different images hidden in the metaphor under discussion, such as that in verse 26 expressed by the words: "Thus I do not run aimlessly (οὐκ ἀδήλωσ); I do not fight as if I were shadowboxing (οὐκ ἄερα δέρω)." It is impossible to find an exegete who would not claim that this part of the metaphor is marked by irony, and its subject is a critique of the lack of concentration on the part of the runner running towards his goal, becoming subject to obstacles and distractions, or maybe ἐπιθυμία as well as the struggle against shadows, against an enemy who is not described and possibly was only a figment of his imagination.<sup>46</sup> Is this really the only possible interpretation?

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44 However, in his *Against Timarchus* Aeschines himself considered restraint to be a trait that should be recognized as *choregos* – cf. S. Miller, *Starożytni olimpijczycy. Sportowe życie antycznej Grecji*, op. cit., p. 177.

45 Such an identification of the noun σῶμα was already done by Pfitzner and it seems by all means correct. Pfitzner emphasizes that we can in no way consider the term to be equivalent to σάρξ, the main antagonist of the spiritual person in Paul's thinking. He notes that if we compare verse 27 with verse 19, we find certain parallels: first, between the verbs δουλαγωγῶ and ἐδούλωσα, and second, between σῶμα and ἐμαυτοῦ. In light of verse 19, σῶμα would not solely mean the body, but the entire life and person of Paul, both its physical and psychological aspects: his plans, hopes, desires, etc. – cf. V. C. Pfitzner, *Paul and the Agon Motif. Traditional Athletic Imagery in the Pauline Literature*, Leiden 1967, p. 92–93.

46 However, as Thiselton notes, it can be analogously demonstrated – cf. A. C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, op. cit., p. 714–715; M. Mello, *Atleta di Cristo, Le metafore agonistiche in San Paolo*, op. cit., p. 54; V. C. Pfitzner, *Paul and the Agon Motif*, op. cit., p. 90–91.

The key to a different understanding of the metaphor can be Pindar's words cited by Dariusz Ślapek: "A bad master is one who was not himself first a pupil."<sup>47</sup> The vision of the runner and the boxer can be understood in two ways, not only in the category of awkwardly fighting, but also of training. Significant is the use of the verbs τρέχω and πυκτεύω in the first person singular form in verse 26, thanks to which it becomes clear that the subject is the apostle himself. However, Paul does not identify himself with either of these two figures (see the particle οὐκ). He is neither the young man, who may have been a pankratiast who as part of training ran many times around the stadium or ran from βαλβίς to βαλβίς,<sup>48</sup> getting faster and improving his technique. Nor is Paul the boxer who, when training his blows, "shadowboxes" in the air. It seems, then, that by referring this image in a negative form to himself Paul notes his own maturity, which makes us see him not only as an experienced athlete, but also as a coach. Furthermore, in light of the previously cited words of Pindar, to Paul the gymnast training could not have been something unfamiliar. He himself had to train and master the appropriate "techniques of life in Christ." This means that the vision of the art of self-control in verse 24 should also be applied to the Apostle to the Nations. Paul painted his self-portrait with the words "everyone who prepares for competition practices ἐγκράτεια." In this way, Paul takes the form of a mature athlete who participates in a real struggle but takes on the burden of self-control. Not only is he himself active, but like a gymnast<sup>49</sup> he trains others, recommending them a metaphorical holistic training consisting of diet and exercise.<sup>50</sup> In this way, he transcends the boundaries of the real stadium, thus taking upon himself two roles.

The above observations are bound together by verse 27, which closes the entire metaphor. In it, Paul explains the specific impact that ἐγκράτεια has on his life. First, it consists of punching the eye (ὕπωπιάζω) of one's body (σῶμα), and, second, of "becoming enslaved." The term ὑπωπιάζω comes from athletic jargon and has nothing to do with self-harm or an inappropriately

47 D. Ślapek, *Sport i widowiska w świecie antycznym*, Kraków–Warszawa 2010, p. 689.

48 This term refers to both the start and finish lines.

49 Such was the role of gymnasts, whose duties far exceeded what the *paidotribes*, who were solely responsible for preparing the athletes in terms of physical shape, had previously dedicated themselves to. Gymnasts' knowledge also often encompassed medicine, hence their awareness of the enormous impact of diet on the general preparation of athletes for competitions – cf. D. Ślapek, *Sport i widowiska w świecie antycznym*, op. cit., p. 691–693.

50 We can apply this vision to spiritual nourishment, or the Eucharist, as well as spiritual exercises, such as persistent prayer.

understood asceticism. This is a reference to the boxer's training and fighting as well as, perhaps, the sexual abstinence that training required. When we consider "body" to be a metonymy of "everyday life *in genere*"<sup>51</sup> or also "an integral person living in the world,"<sup>52</sup> we can then apply "punching the body's eye" to the everyday training of the entire person, even at the cost of bearing wounds. The person who gives his or her all to preaching the Gospel everyday or devotes his or her life mission to doing so is prone to this and also to "enslaving" (δουλαγωγῶ) "the body." It seems that using the verbs ὑπωπιάζω and δουλαγωγῶ next to each other is borrowed from Semitic languages, what in the Hebrew literature is known as a hendiadys. The fact that the former verb relates to the purely physical aspect, while the latter refers to not only the physical, but also the social, psychological, and spiritual realms. Such an understanding of the verse is implied by the broad semantics of the noun σῶμα. Thus, one cannot limit this self-control to just one area of human existence. To summarize, in 1 Corinthians 7:24–27 we are dealing with an elaborate vision of the realization of ἐγκράτεια in the life of all who are engaged in the apostolate.

At this level, Paul only superficially appears close to the Stoics as a person who does not so much impose limits on himself as he without complaining accepts everything he encounters, be it, on the one hand, great persecutions, accidents, or imprisonment, or, on the other, financial support from the communities. Unlike the Stoics, everything he did he did for and because of the Gospels.

## Conclusions

An analysis of Stoic texts leads to the conclusion that the virtue of restraint refers to two unusually important areas of the life of the body: the consumption of foods (which Gaius Musonius Rufus wrote about) and human sexuality (which was emphasized by Epictetus). Paul's presentation of the virtue of ἐγκράτεια appears to clearly refer to these Stoic ideas; however, it is disconnected from virtue understood totally and in the context of new life in Christ in the present world. By practicing self-restraint, the "new person" in Paul's

51 A. C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, op. cit., p. 217.

52 G. D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Grand Rapids 1988, p. 439; K. L. Yinger, *Paul and Asceticism in 1 Corinthians 9:27a*, "Journal of Religion and Society" 10 (2008), p. 12–13.

understanding is he who limits consumption of food, not as the Stoics, to avoid gluttony, but because of one's neighbor, who could in some circumstances be scandalized by eating sacrifices offered to the gods, and according to the interpretation of the Gospels scandalizing one's neighbor is one of the greatest crimes (see: Matthew 18:7). It seems, however, that Paul most referred to self-control in 1 Corinthians 7:5–9. Since he understood ἀκρασία in the Stoic spirit as a chronic tendency towards lust, the encouragement of entering into marriage, in which the possibility of committing sexual sins is less likely, although there are still certain threats that spouses face, seems appropriate. Thus, having this in mind he also teach spouses to not allow ἀκρασία in everyday life through excessive abstinence.

By using a sports metaphor in 1 Corinthians 9:24–27, Paul universalizes the idea of restraint, applying it to everything (πάντα). It seems that this is a stage “for an advanced” master, one whose entire life is marked by training and fighting. God's athlete, experienced in encratic practices (which should not be confused with asceticism) is able to play the role of the master and adapt others, who through baptism have been called to “new life in Christ,” to self-control.

## Abstract

### Self-Discipline as a Condition for Life in Christ: Paul of Tarsus' Notion of ἐγκράτεια

St. Paul was a man of his time. He was familiar with philosophical thought, especially Stoicism, as he had grown up in a multicultural city in which Eastern ideas were impacted by Greek philosophy. Judaism coexisted alongside pagan religions, while synagogues functioned near gymnasiums. Thus, the young Paul appreciated the ideas of the Greek world as well as the concepts related to them. One of these was the minor virtue that can be found in philosophical texts and that is known as ἐγκράτεια. This Greek term is usually translated as “self-discipline” or “restraint.” We can directly find it at three points in the Pauline Epistles (1 Corinthians 7:9, 9:25; Galatians 5:23), although it is also possible to find indirect implementations of this idea. It turns out that Paul mentions ἐγκράτεια in the same contexts as the philosophers who were his contemporaries, especially Gaius Musonius Rufus and Epictetus. An analysis of ancient texts shows that the notion of self-control is present in Paul's epistolography, namely when he discusses food, sexuality, and the virtue of *in genere*, which according to the Apostle to the Nations should be a trait of the apostolate.

**Keywords:** self-discipline; ἐγκράτεια; St. Paul; sport; dietary prohibitions; marriage

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