

MICHEL FOUCAULT



THE USE OF
PLEASURE

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Aphrodisia

The *Suda* gives a definition of *aphrodisia* that will be repeated by Hesychius: *aphrodisia* are "the works, the acts of Aphrodite" (*erga Aphroditēs*). Doubtless one should not expect to see a very rigorous attempt at conceptualization in such a work as the one mentioned, but it is a fact that the Greeks had not evinced, either in their theoretical reflection or in their practical thinking, a very insistent concern for defining precisely what they meant by *aphrodisia*—whether it was a question of determining the nature of the thing designated, of delimiting its scope, or of drawing up an inventory of its elements. In any case, they had nothing resembling those long lists of possible acts, such as one finds later in the penitential books, the manuals of confession, or in works on psychopathology; no table that served to define what was licit, permitted, or normal, and to describe the vast family of prohibited gestures. Nor was there anything resembling the concern—which was so characteristic of the question of the flesh or of sexuality—for discovering the insidious presence of a power of undetermined limits and multiple masks beneath what appeared inoffensive or innocent. Neither classification nor decipherment. They might take great pains to fix the optimal age to marry and have children, and the best season for having sexual relations, but they would never say, like a Christian spiritual director, which gestures to make or avoid making, which preliminary caresses were allowed, which posi-

tion to take, or in which conditions one could interrupt the act. To the insufficiently prepared, Socrates recommended to flee from the sight of a handsome boy, even if it meant a year's exile,¹ and the *Phaedrus* evokes the lover's long struggle against his own desire; but nowhere is there a statement, as there will be in Christian spirituality, of the precautions that have to be taken in order to prevent desire from entering the soul surreptitiously, or to detect its secret traces. Even stranger perhaps: the doctors who set forth, in some detail, the elements of the *aphrodisia* regimen are practically silent concerning the forms that the acts themselves may take; they say very little—aside from a few references to the “natural position”—regarding what is in accord with or contrary to the will of nature.

Was this due to modesty? Possibly. For, as much as we like to credit the Greeks with a great liberty of morals, the representation of sexual acts that they suggest in their written works—and even in their erotic literature—seems to have been characterized by a good deal of reserve,* despite the impression one gets from the entertainments they staged or from certain iconographic representations that have been rediscovered.³ In any case, one does sense that Xenophon, Aristotle, and later Plutarch would not have thought it decent to dispense the sort of presumptive and pragmatic advice on sexual relations with one's lawful wife that the Christian authors lavishly distributed on the subject of conjugal pleasures. They were not prepared, as the directors of conscience would be, to regulate the process of demands and refusals, of first caresses, of the modalities of union, of the pleasures one experienced and the conclusion they should properly be given. But there was a positive reason for this attitude that we may perceive retrospectively as “reticence” or “reserve.” It was due to their conception of the *aphrodisia*, to the kind of questioning they directed to them, which was not oriented in the

*K. J. Dover notes an accentuation of this reserve in the course of the classical age.²

least toward the search for their profound nature, their canonical forms, or their secret potential.

1. The *aphrodisia* are the acts, gestures, and contacts that produce a certain form of pleasure. When Saint Augustine in his *Confessions* recalls the friendships of his youth, the intensity of his affections, the pleasures of the days spent together, the conversations, the enthusiasms and good times, he wonders if, underneath its seeming innocence, all that did not pertain to the flesh, to that "glue" which attaches us to the flesh.⁴ But when Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics* wants to determine exactly which people deserve to be called "self-indulgent," his definition is cautiously restrictive: self-indulgence—*akolasia*—relates only to the pleasures of the body; and among these, the pleasures of sight, hearing, and smell must be excluded.⁵ It is not self-indulgent to "delight in" (*charein*) colors, shapes, or paintings, nor in theater or music; one can, without self-indulgence, delight in the scent of fruit, roses, or incense; and, he says in the *Eudemian Ethics*,⁶ anyone who would become so intensely absorbed in looking at a statue or in listening to a song as to lose his appetite or taste for lovemaking could not be reproached for self-indulgence, any more than could someone who let himself be seduced by the Sirens. For there is pleasure that is liable to *akolasia* only where there is touch and contact: contact with the mouth, the tongue, and the throat (for the pleasures of food and drink), or contact with other parts of the body (for the pleasure of sex). Moreover, Aristotle remarks that it would be unjust to suspect self-indulgence in the case of certain pleasures experienced on the surface of the body, such as the noble pleasures that are produced by massages and heat in the gymnasium: "for the contact characteristic of the self-indulgent man does not affect the whole body but only certain parts."^{7*}

*One should, however, note the importance attributed by many Greek texts to the gaze and to the eyes in the genesis of desire or love; but it is not that the pleasure

It will be one of the characteristic traits of the Christian experience of the "flesh," and later of "sexuality," that the subject is expected to exercise suspicion often, to be able to recognize from afar the manifestations of a stealthy, resourceful, and dreadful power. Reading these signs will be all the more important as this power has the ability to cloak itself in many forms other than sexual acts. There is no similar suspicion inhabiting the experience of the *aphrodisia*. To be sure, in the teaching and the exercise of moderation, it is recommended to be wary of sounds, images, and scents; but this is not because attachment to them would be only the masked form of a desire whose essence is sexual: it is because there are musical forms capable of weakening the soul with their rhythms, and because there are sights capable of affecting the soul like a venom, and because a particular scent, a particular image, is apt to call up the "memory of the thing desired."⁹ And when philosophers are laughed at for claiming to love only the beautiful souls of boys, they are not suspected of harboring murky feelings of which they may not be conscious, but simply of waiting for the *tête-à-tête* in order to slip their hand under the tunic of their heart's desire.¹⁰

What of the form and variety of these acts? Greek natural history gives some descriptions, at least as concerns animals: Aristotle remarks that mating is not the same among all animals and does not take place in the same manner.¹¹ And in the part of Book VI of the *History of Animals* that deals more specifically with viviparous animals, he describes the different forms of copulation that can be observed: they vary according to the form and location of the organs, the position taken by the partners, and the duration of the act. But he also evokes the types of behavior that characterize the mating season: wild

of the gaze is self-indulgent; rather, it is thought to make an opening through which the soul is reached. In this connection, see Xenophon's *Memorabilia*.⁸ As for the kiss, it was very highly valued as a physical pleasure and a communication of souls despite the danger it carried. As a matter of fact, an entire historical study could be undertaken on the "pleasure body" and its transformations.

boars preparing for battle, elephants whose frenzy extends to the destruction of their keeper's house, or stallions that group their females together by tracing a big circle around them before throwing themselves against their rivals.¹² With regard to the human animal, while the description of organs and their functioning may be detailed, the subject of sexual behavior, with its possible variants, is barely touched upon. Which does not mean, however, that there was, in Greek medicine, philosophy, or ethics, a zone of strict silence around the sexual activity of humans. It is not that people were careful to avoid talking about these pleasurable acts; but when they were the subject of questioning, what was at issue was not the form they assumed, it was the activity they manifested. Their dynamics was much more important than their morphology.

This dynamics was defined by the movement that linked the *aphrodisia* to the pleasure that was associated with them and to the desire to which they gave rise. The attraction exerted by pleasure and the force of the desire that was directed toward it constituted, together with the action of the *aphrodisia* itself, a solid unity. The dissociation—or partial dissociation at least—of this ensemble would later become one of the basic features of the ethics of the flesh and the notion of sexuality. This dissociation was to be marked, on the one hand, by a certain “elision” of pleasure (a moral devaluation through the injunction given in the preaching by the Christian clergy against the pursuit of sensual pleasure as a goal of sexual practice; a theoretical devaluation shown by the extreme difficulty of finding a place for pleasure in the conception of sexuality); it would also be marked by an increasingly intense problematization of desire (in which the primordial sign of a fallen nature or the structure characteristic of the human condition would be visible). In the experience of the *aphrodisia* on the other hand, act, desire, and pleasure formed an ensemble whose elements were distinguishable certainly, but closely bound to one another. It was precisely their close linkage that constituted one of the essential characteristics of that form of

activity. Nature intended (for reasons we shall consider) that the performance of the act be associated with a pleasure, and it was this pleasure that gave rise to *epithumia*, to desire, in a movement that was naturally directed toward what "gives pleasure," according to a principle that Aristotle cites: desire is always "desire for the agreeable thing" (*hē gar epithumia tou hēdeōs estin*).¹³ It is true—Plato always comes back to the idea—that for the Greeks there could not be desire without privation, without the want of the thing desired and without a certain amount of suffering mixed in; but the appetite, Plato explains in the *Philebus*, can be aroused only by the representation, the image or the memory of the thing that gives pleasure; he concludes that there can be no desire except in the soul, for while the body is affected by privation, it is the soul and only the soul that can, through memory, make present the thing that is to be desired and thereby arouse the *epithumia*.¹⁴ Thus, what seems in fact to have formed the object of moral reflection for the Greeks in matters of sexual conduct was not exactly the act itself (considered in its different modalities), or desire (viewed from the standpoint of its origin or its aim), or even pleasure (evaluated according to the different objects or practices that can cause it); it was more the dynamics that joined all three in a circular fashion (the desire that leads to the act, the act that is linked to pleasure, and the pleasure that occasions desire). The ethical question that was raised was not: which desires? which acts? which pleasures? but rather: with what force is one transported "by the pleasures and desires"? The ontology to which this ethics of sexual behavior referred was not, at least not in its general form, an ontology of deficiency and desire; it was not that of a nature setting the standard for acts; it was an ontology of a force that linked together acts, pleasures, and desires. It was this dynamic relationship that constituted what might be called the texture of the ethical experience of the *aphrodisia*.*

*The frequency of expressions that link pleasures and desires very closely together should be noted. These expressions show that what is at stake in the ethical system

This dynamics is analyzed in terms of two major variables. The first is quantitative; it has to do with the degree of activity that is shown by the number and frequency of acts. What differentiates men from one another, for medicine and moral philosophy alike, is not so much the type of objects toward which they are oriented, nor the mode of sexual practice they prefer; above all, it is the intensity of that practice. The division is between lesser and greater: moderation or excess. It is rather rare, when a notable personage is depicted, for his preference for one form of sexual practice or another to be pointed up.* On the other hand, it is always important for his moral characterization to note whether he has been able to show moderation in his involvement with women or boys, like Agesilaus, who carried moderation to the point that he refused to kiss the young man that he loved; or whether he surrendered, like Alcibiades or Arcesilaus, to the appetite for the pleasures that one can enjoy with both sexes.¹⁸ This point is supported by the famous passage of the first book of the *Laws*: it is true that Plato draws a sharp opposition in this passage between the relationship "according to nature" that joins man and woman for procreative ends, and relations "against nature" of male with male and female with female.¹⁹ But this opposition, as marked as it is from the standpoint of naturalness, is referred by Plato to the more basic distinction between self-restraint and self-indulgence. The practices that contravene nature and the principle of procreation are not explained as the effect of an abnormal nature or of a peculiar form of desire; they are merely the result of immoderation: "a lack of

of the *aphrodisia* is the dynamic ensemble consisting of desire and pleasure associated with the act. The *epithumiai-hēdonai* pair occurs quite commonly in Plato.¹⁵ Frequent, too, are expressions that speak of pleasure as a force that persuades, transports, triumphs, as in Xenophon's *Memorabilia*.¹⁶

*It sometimes happens that a man's particular fondness for boys will be mentioned for narrative purposes. Xenophon does this in the *Anabasis*, in regard to a certain Episthenes. But when he draws a negative portrait of Menon, he does not reproach him for this kind of taste, but for misusing such pleasures: obtaining a command too young, or loving an overage boy while still being beardless himself.¹⁷

self-restraint with regard to pleasure" (*akrateia hēdonēs*) is their source.²⁰ And when, in the *Timaeus*, Plato declares that lust should be considered as the effect, not of a bad volition of the soul, but of a sickness of the body, this disorder is described in terms of a grand pathology of excess: the sperm, instead of remaining enclosed in the marrow and its bony casing, overflows and starts to stream through the whole body, so that the latter becomes like a tree whose vegetative power exceeds all limits; the individual is thus driven to distraction for a large part of his existence by "pleasures and pains in excess."²¹ This idea that immorality in the pleasures of sex is always connected with exaggeration, surplus, and excess is found again in the third book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*: Aristotle explains that for the natural desires that are common to everyone, the only offenses that one can commit are quantitative in nature: they pertain to "the more" (*to pleion*); so that natural desire only consists in satisfying needs, "to eat or drink whatever offers itself till one is surfeited is to exceed the natural amount [*tōi plēthei*]." It is true that Aristotle also makes allowance for the particular pleasures of individuals. It happens that people commit different types of offenses, either by not taking their pleasure "where they should," or by behaving "like the crowd," or again, by not taking their pleasure "as they ought." But, Aristotle adds, "self-indulgent individuals exceed [*hyperballousi*] in all these ways; they both delight in some things that they ought not to delight in, and if one ought to delight in some of the things they delight in, they do so more than one ought and than most men do." What constitutes self-indulgence in this sphere is excess, "and that is culpable."^{22*} It appears, then, that the primary dividing line laid down by moral judgment in the area of sexual behavior was not prescribed by the nature of the act, with its possible variations, but by the activity and its quantitative gradations.

*It should be noted, however, that Aristotle gives his attention on several occasions to the question of the "disgraceful pleasures" that some individuals tend to seek.²¹

The practice of the pleasures was also related to another variable that might be labeled "role or polarity specific." Corresponding to the term *aphrodisia* was the verb *aphrodisiazein*. It refers to sexual activity in general: people thus spoke of the moment when animals reached an age at which they were capable of *aphrodisiazein*.²⁴ It also denotes the accomplishment of a sexual act of any kind: thus, in Xenophon, Antisthenes mentions the desire to *aphrodisiazein*, which he sometimes has.²⁵ But the verb can also be employed in its active sense, in which case it relates specifically to the so-called "masculine" role in intercourse, and to the active function defined by penetration. And inversely, one can use it in its passive form—*aphrodisiasthēnai*—designating in this case the other role in sexual union: the "passive" role of the object partner. This role is the one that nature had set aside for women—Aristotle speaks of the age at which girls become capable of *aphrodisiasthēnai*;²⁶ it is the role that could be imposed by force on someone who was thus reduced to being the object of the other's pleasure;²⁷ it is also the role accepted by the boy or man who let himself be penetrated by his partner—the author of the *Problems* thus speculates about what causes some men to take pleasure in *aphrodisiazeisthai*.²⁸

It is doubtless correct to say that there is no noun in the Greek vocabulary that would consolidate, into a common notion, whatever might be specific to male sexuality and female sexuality.²⁹ But it should be remarked that in the practice of sexual pleasures two roles and two poles can be clearly distinguished, just as they can be distinguished in the reproductive function; these consisted of two positional values: that of the subject and that of the object, that of the agent and that of the "patient"—as Aristotle says, "the female, as female, is passive, and the male, as male, is active."³⁰ Whereas the experience of the "flesh" would be considered as an experience common to men and women, even if it did not take the same form in both, and while "sexuality" would be marked by the great caesura between male and female sexuality, the *aphrodi-*

sia were thought of as an activity involving two actors, each having its role and function—the one who performs the activity and the one on whom it is performed.

From this viewpoint, and in this ethics (always bearing in mind that it was a male ethics, made by and for men), it can be said that the dividing line fell mainly between men and women, for the simple reason that there was a strong differentiation between the world of men and that of women in many ancient societies. But more generally, it fell between what might be called the "active actors" in the drama of pleasures, and the "passive actors": on one side, those who were the subjects of sexual activity (and who were expected to carry it out in a measured and opportune manner); and on the other, those who were the object-partners, the supporting players with whom it was carried out. The first were men, naturally, but more specifically they were adult free men; the second included women of course, but women made up only one element of a much larger group that was sometimes referred to as a way of designating the objects of possible pleasure: "women, boys, slaves." In the text known as the Hippocratic Oath, the doctor pledges to refrain from *erga aphrodisia* in every house he enters, with any person whatsoever, whether a woman, a free man, or a slave.³¹

Hence the second major variable that engaged moral valuation, in addition to the "quantity of activity" criterion, was the question of remaining in one's role or abandoning it, being the subject of the activity or its object, joining those who underwent it—even if one was a man—or remaining with those who actively performed it. For a man, excess and passivity were the two main forms of immorality in the practice of the *aphrodisia*.

2. While sexual activity had thus to become an object of moral differentiation and valuation, the reason for this was not that the sexual act was bad in itself, nor that it bore the mark of a primordial fall from grace. Even when the current form

of sexual relations and love was referred back, as it was by Aristophanes in the *Symposium*, to an original tragedy involving the pride of humans and punishment by the gods, neither the act nor pleasure was considered bad for all that; on the contrary, they tended toward the restoration of the highest state of being that man had achieved.³² In general, sexual activity was perceived as natural (natural and indispensable) since it was through this activity that living creatures were able to reproduce, the species as a whole was able to escape extinction,³³ and cities, families, names, and religions were able to endure far longer than individuals, who were destined to pass away. The desires that led to the *aphrodisia* were classed by Plato among the most natural and necessary; and the pleasures that could be obtained from the *aphrodisia* had their cause, according to Aristotle, in necessary things that concerned the body and the life of the body in general.³⁴ In short, as Rufus of Ephesus was to point out, seeing that sexual activity was deeply and harmoniously grounded in nature, there was no way that it could be considered bad.³⁵ In this respect, the moral experience of the *aphrodisia* was of course radically different from the experience of the flesh that would develop later.

But as natural and even necessary as it may have been considered, it was nonetheless the object of a moral concern. It called for a delimitation that would enable one to determine the proper degree and extent to which it could be practiced. And yet, if it could pose questions of good and evil, this was not in spite of its naturalness, or because the latter might have been altered; it was precisely because of the way in which it had been organized by nature. Two traits marked the pleasure with which it was associated. First, there was its inferior character: bearing in mind that for Aristippus and the Cyrenaics "pleasure does not differ from pleasure,"³⁶ sexual pleasure was generally characterized as being, not a bearer of evil, but ontologically or qualitatively inferior—for several reasons: it was common to animals and men (and thus did not constitute

a specifically human trait); it was mixed with privation and suffering (in contrast to the pleasures of sight and hearing); it depended on the body and its necessities and it was aimed at restoring the organism to its state prior to need.³⁷ But there was also the fact that this conditioned, subordinate, and inferior pleasure was extremely acute; as Plato explains at the beginning of the *Laws*, if nature arranged for men and women to be attracted to one another, it was in order that procreation might be possible and the survival of the species might be ensured.³⁸ Now, this purpose was so important and it was so essential that humans produce descendants, that nature attached an extremely intense pleasure to the act of procreation. Just as animals are reminded of the need to nourish themselves, thus assuring their individual survival, by the natural pleasure that is associated with eating and drinking, so the necessity of begetting offspring, of leaving a progeny behind, is constantly recalled by the pleasure and the desire that accompany the mating of the sexes. The *Laws* thus refers to the existence of three basic appetites, relating to food, drink, and reproduction. All three are strong, imperative, and intense, but the third one in particular, although "the latest to emerge," is "the keenest lust."³⁹ Socrates asks his interlocutor in the *Republic* whether he knows of "a greater and sharper pleasure than the sexual."⁴⁰

It was just this natural acuteness of pleasure, together with the attraction it exerted on desire, that caused sexual activity to go beyond the limits that were set by nature when she made the pleasure of the *aphrodisia* an inferior, subordinate, and conditioned pleasure. Because of this intensity, people were induced to overturn the hierarchy, placing these appetites and their satisfaction uppermost, and giving them absolute power over the soul. Also because of it, people were led to go beyond the satisfaction of needs and to continue looking for pleasure even after the body had been restored. The tendency to rebellion and riotousness was the "stasiastic" potential of the sexual appetite; and the tendency to exaggeration, to excess, was

its "hyperbolic" potential.⁴¹ Nature had invested human beings with this necessary and redoubtable force, which was always on the point of overshooting the objective that was set for it. One understands why, in these conditions, sexual activity required a moral discrimination that was, as we have seen, more dynamic than morphological. If it was necessary, as Plato said, to bridle it with the three strongest restraints: fear, law, and true reason; if it was necessary, as Aristotle thought, for desire to obey reason the way a child obeyed his tutor; if Aristippus himself advised that, while it was all right to "use" pleasures, one had to be careful not to be carried away by them⁴²—the reason was not that sexual activity was a vice, nor that it might deviate from a canonical model; it was because sexual activity was associated with a force, an *energeia*, that was itself liable to be excessive. In the Christian doctrine of the flesh, the excessive force of pleasure had its principle in the Fall and in the weakness that had marked human nature ever since. For classical Greek thought, this force was potentially excessive by nature, and the moral question was how to confront this force, how to control it and regulate its economy in a suitable way.

The fact that sexual activity appeared in the form of a play of forces established by nature, but subject to abuse, related it to eating and the moral problems the latter tended to pose. This association between the ethics of sex and the ethics of the table was a constant factor in ancient culture. One could find countless examples of it. When, in the first book of the *Memorabilia*, he wants to show how useful Socrates was to his disciples, by his example and his observations, Xenophon sets forth the precepts and conduct of his master "concerning eating and drinking and the pleasures of love."⁴³ The interlocutors of the *Republic*, when they deal with the education of guardians, come to agree that moderation (*sōphrosynē*) demands the threefold mastery of the pleasures of drink, sex, and food (*potoi, aphrodisia, edōdai*).⁴⁴ And Aristotle follows

suit: in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the three examples he gives of "common pleasures" are those of eating, drinking, and, for youths and vigorous men, the "pleasures of the bed."⁴⁵ In these three forms of pleasure, he recognizes the same type of danger: that of exceeding what is necessary; he even identifies a physiological principle that they hold in common, noting pleasures of contact and touch in all three (according to him, food and drink do not cause their particular pleasure except by coming in contact with the tongue and especially the throat).⁴⁶ When he speaks in the *Symposium*, the doctor Eryximachus claims for his art the prerogative of advising on the manner in which one must make use of the pleasures of the bed and the table; according to him, it is doctors who ought to say how to enjoy rich food without making oneself sick; it also rests with them to prescribe, to those who practice physical love—Eros Pandemos—how to have an orgasm without any resulting ill effects.⁴⁴

It would be interesting, surely, to trace the long history of the connections between alimentary ethics and sexual ethics, as manifested in doctrines, but also in religious rituals and dietary rules; one would need to discover how, over a long period of time, the play of alimentary prescriptions became uncoupled from that of sexual morals, by following the evolution of their respective importance (with the rather belated moment, no doubt, when the problem of sexual conduct became more worrisome than that of alimentary behaviors) and the gradual differentiation of their specific structure (the moment when sexual desire began to be questioned in terms other than alimentary appetite). In any case, in the reflection of the Greeks in the classical period, it does seem that the moral problematization of food, drink, and sexual activity was carried out in a rather similar manner. Foods, wines, and relations with women and boys constituted analogous ethical material; they brought forces into play that were natural, but that always tended to be excessive; and they all raised the

same question: how could one, how must one "make use" (*chrēsthai*) of this dynamics of pleasures, desires, and acts? A question of right use. As Aristotle expresses it, "all men enjoy in some way or another both savoury foods and wines and sexual intercourse, but not all men do so as they ought [*ouch' hōs dei*]."48

2

Chrēsis

How does a man enjoy his pleasure "as one ought"? To what principles does he refer in order to moderate, limit, regulate that activity? What sort of validity might these principles have that would enable a man to justify his having to obey them? Or, in other words, what is the mode of subjection that is implied in this moral problematization of sexual conduct?

The goal of moral reflection on the *aphrodisia* was much less to establish a systematic code that would determine the canonical form of sexual acts, trace out the boundary of the prohibitions, and assign practices to one side or the other of a dividing line, than to work out the conditions and modalities of a "use"; that is, to define a style for what the Greeks called *chrēsis aphrodisiōn*, the use of pleasures. The common expression *chrēsis aphrodisiōn* related, in a general way, to sexual activity (for example, people would speak of times of the year or the age in one's life when it was good to *chrēsthai aphrodisiōis*).¹ But the term also referred to the manner in which an individual managed his sexual activity, his way of conducting himself in such matters, the regimen he allowed himself or imposed on himself, the conditions in which he accomplished sexual acts, the share he allotted them in his life.* It was not

*Plato talks about the right "possession and practice" (*ktēsis te kai chreia*) of women and children, so that what was at issue was the whole range of relationships and forms of relations that one could have with them.² Polybius speaks of the *chreia aphrodisiōn* which, along with indulgence in luxurious clothes and food, characterized the habits of hereditary rulers and provoked discontent and revolution.³

Enkrateia

The interiority of Christian morality is often contrasted with the exteriority of a pagan morality that would consider acts only in their concrete realization, in their visible and manifest form, in their degree of conformity with rules, and in the light of opinion or with a view to the memory they leave behind them. But this traditionally accepted opposition may well miss the essential elements of both. What is called Christian interiority is a particular mode of relationship with oneself, comprising precise forms of attention, concern, decipherment, verbalization, confession, self-accusation, struggle against temptation, renunciation, spiritual combat, and so on. And what is designated as the "exteriority" of ancient morality also implies the principle of an elaboration of self, albeit in a very different form. The evolution that occurred—quite slowly at that—between paganism and Christianity did not consist in a gradual interiorization of rules, acts, and transgressions; rather, it carried out a restructuration of the forms of self-relationship and a transformation of the practices and techniques on which this relationship was based.

Classical language had a term for designating this form of relationship with oneself, this "attitude" which was necessary to the ethics of pleasures and which was manifested through the proper use one made of them: *enkrateia*. As a matter of fact, for a long time the word remained rather close to *sōphrosynē*: one often finds them employed together or alter-

natively, with very similar meanings. When Xenophon speaks of moderation—which, together with piety, wisdom, courage, and justice, was among the five virtues he usually recognized—he employs the words *sōphrosynē* and *enkrateia* interchangeably.¹ Plato refers to this proximity of the two words when Socrates, questioned by Callicles concerning what he meant by “ruling himself” (*auton heauton archein*), replies that it consists in “being temperate, master of himself [*sōphrona ontā kai enkratē auton heautou*], ruling the pleasures and appetites within him [*archein tōn hēdonōn kai epithumiōn*].”² And when, in the *Republic*, he considers the four cardinal virtues in turn—wisdom, courage, justice, and moderation (*sōphrosynē*)—he defines the latter by *enkrateia*: “Moderation [*sōphrosynē*] is a certain orderliness and mastery [*kosmos kai enkrateia*] over certain pleasures and appetites.”^{3*}

We may note, however, that while the meanings of these two words are very close, they stop short of being exact synonyms. Each refers to a somewhat different mode of relationship to self. The virtue of *sōphrosynē* is described rather as a very general state that ensures that one will do “what is fitting as regards both gods and men”⁴—that is, one will be not only moderate but righteous and just, and courageous as well.† In contrast, *enkrateia* is characterized more by an active form of self-mastery, which enables one to resist or struggle, and to achieve domination in the area of desires and pleasures. According to Helen North, Aristotle was the first to distinguish systematically between *sōphrosynē* and *enkrateia*.⁶ The former is characterized in the *Nicomachean Ethics* by the fact that the subject deliberately chooses reasonable principles of action, that he is capable of following and applying them, that he holds to the “right mean” between insensitivity and excess (a middle course that is not equidistant between the two, because

*Aristotle says that some people believe that one who is *sōphrōn* is *enkratēs* and *karterikos*.

†Compare: “The correct apportionment is one which honors most the good things pertaining to the soul, provided it has moderation.”

moderation is actually much further away from excess than from insensitivity), and that he derives pleasure from the moderation he displays. The opposite of *sōphrosynē* is the immoderation (*akolasia*) that is expressed by deliberately choosing bad principles, following them of one’s own accord, surrendering even to the weakest desires, and taking pleasure in bad conduct: the immoderate individual is shameless and incorrigible. *Enkrateia*, with its opposite, *akrasia*, is located on the axis of struggle, resistance, and combat; it is self-control, tension, “contenance”; *enkrateia* rules over pleasures and desires, but has to struggle to maintain control. Unlike the “moderate” man, the “continent” one experiences pleasures that are not in accord with reason, but he no longer allows himself to be carried away by them, and his merit will be greater in proportion as his desires are strong. As an opposite, *akrasia* is not, like immoderation, a deliberate choosing of bad principles; it invites comparison, rather, with those cities that have good laws but are incapable of enforcing them; the incontinent individual lets himself be overcome in spite of himself, and despite the reasonable principles he embraces, either because he does not have the strength to put them into practice or because he has not given them sufficient thought: this explains why the incontinent person can come to his senses and achieve self-mastery.⁷ Thus, *enkrateia* can be regarded as the prerequisite of *sōphrosynē*, as the form of effort and control that the individual must apply to himself in order to become moderate (*sōphrōn*).

In any case, the term *enkrateia* in the classical vocabulary seems to refer in general to the dynamics of a domination of oneself by oneself and to the effort that this demands.

1. To begin with, this exercise of domination implies an agonistic relation. The Athenian of the *Laws* reminds Cleinias of this: if it is true that the man who is blessed with courage will attain “only half his potential” without “experience and training” in actual combat, it stands to reason that he will not

be able to become moderate (*sōphrōn*) “if he has not fought triumphantly against the many pleasures and desires [*pollais hēdonais kai epithumiais diamemachēmenos*] using the help of speech, deed, and art [*logos, ergon, technē*] in games and in serious pursuits.”⁸ These are almost the same words that Antiphon the Sophist employed on his own account: “He is not wise [*sōphrōn*] who has not tried the ugly and the bad; for then there is nothing he has conquered [*kratein*] and nothing that would enable him to assert that he is virtuous [*kosmios*].”⁹ One could behave ethically only by adopting a combative attitude toward the pleasures. As we have seen, the *aphrodisia* were made not only possible but desirable by an interplay of forces whose origin and finality were natural, but whose potential, by the fact that they had their own energy, was for revolt and excess. These forces could not be used in the moderate way that was fitting unless one was capable of opposing, resisting, and subduing them. Of course, if it was necessary to confront them, this was because they were inferior appetites that humans happen to share—like hunger and thirst—with the animals;¹⁰ but this natural inferiority would not of itself be a reason for having to combat them, if there was not the danger that, winning out over all else, they would extend their rule over the whole individual, eventually reducing him to slavery. In other words, it was not their intrinsic nature, their disqualification on principle, that necessitated this “polemical” attitude toward oneself, but their possible ascendancy and dominion. Ethical conduct in matters of pleasure was contingent on a battle for power. This perception of the *hēdonai* and *epithumiai* as a formidable enemy force, and the correlative constitution of oneself as a vigilant adversary who confronts them, struggles against them, and tries to subdue them, is revealed in a whole series of expressions traditionally employed to characterize moderation and immoderation: setting oneself against the pleasures and desires, not giving in to them, resisting their assaults, or on the contrary, letting oneself be overcome by them,¹¹ defeating them or being defeated by

them,¹² being armed or equipped against them.¹³ It is also revealed in metaphors such as that of the battle that has to be fought against armed adversaries, or that of the acropolis-soul assaulted by a hostile band and needing a solid garrison for its defense, or that of hornets that set upon reasonable and moderate desires, killing them or driving them out unless one manages to rid oneself of these attackers.¹⁴ It is expressed, too, by such themes as that of the untamed forces of desire that invade the soul during its slumber if it has not had the foresight to take the necessary precautions.¹⁵ The relationship to desires and pleasures is conceived as a pugnacious one: a man must take the position and role of the adversary with respect to them, either according to the model of the fighting soldier or the model of the wrestler in a match. One should keep in mind that the Athenian of the *Laws*, when he speaks of the need to restrain the three basic appetites, invokes the aid of “the Muses and the gods of contests [*theoi agōnioi*].”¹⁶ The long tradition of spiritual combat, which was to take so many diverse forms, was already clearly delineated in classical Greek thought.

2. This combative relationship with adversaries was also an agonistic relationship with oneself. The battle to be fought, the victory to be won, the defeat that one risked suffering—these were processes and events that took place between oneself and oneself. The adversaries the individual had to combat were not just within him or close by; they were part of him. To be sure, we would need to account for the various theoretical formulations that were proposed concerning this differentiation between the part of oneself that was supposed to fight and the part that was supposed to be defeated. Parts of the soul that ought to maintain a certain hierarchical relationship among themselves? Body and soul understood as two realities with different origins? Forces straining toward different goals and working against one another like the two horses of a team? But in any case, the thing to remember in trying to define the

general style of this ascetics is that the adversary that was to be fought, however far removed it might be by nature from any conception of the soul, reason, or virtue, did not represent a different, ontologically alien power. The conceptual link between the movement of concupiscence, in its most insidious and most secret forms, and the presence of the Other, with its ruses and its power of illusion, was to be one of the essential traits of the Christian ethics of the flesh. In the ethics of the *aphrodisia*, the inevitability and difficulty of the combat derived, on the contrary, from the fact that it unfolded as a solo contest: to struggle against "the desires and the pleasures" was to cross swords with oneself.

In the *Republic*, Plato stresses how strange, and at the same time somewhat ludicrous and outmoded, is a familiar expression that he himself had resorted to several times: it is the one that consists in saying that a person is "stronger" or "weaker" than himself (*kreittōn, hēttōn heautou*).¹⁷ Indeed, there is paradox in claiming that one is stronger than oneself, since this implies that one is also, by the same token, weaker than oneself. But according to Plato, the expression is supported by the fact of a prior distinction between two parts of the soul, a better part and a worse, and that with regard to the victory or the defeat of oneself over oneself, the speaker places himself on the side of the first: "The expression self-control seems to want to indicate that in the soul of the man himself there is a better part and a worse part; whenever what is by nature the better part is in control of the worse, this is expressed by saying that the man is self-controlled or master of himself, and this is a term of praise. When, on the other hand, the smaller and better part, because of poor upbringing or bad company, is overpowered by the larger and worse, this is made a reproach and called being defeated by oneself, and a man in that situation is called uncontrolled."¹⁸ And it is made clear at the beginning of the *Laws* that this antagonism of oneself toward oneself is meant to structure the ethical attitude of the individual vis-à-vis desires and pleasures: the reason that is given for

the need of a ruling authority and a legislative authority in every state is that even in peacetime all states are at war with one another; in the same way one must assume that if "all are enemies of all in public," then "in private each is an enemy of himself"; and of all the victories it is possible to win, "the first and best" is the victory "of oneself over oneself," whereas "being defeated by oneself is the most shameful and at the same time the worst of all defeats."¹⁹

3. Such a "polemical" attitude with respect to oneself tended toward a result that was quite naturally expressed as victory—a victory much more impressive, says the *Laws*, than those won in wrestling and running contests.²⁰ This victory was sometimes characterized by the complete extirpation or expulsion of desires.^{21*} But much more often, it was defined by the setting up of a solid and stable state of rule of the self over the self; the intensity of the desires and pleasures did not disappear, but the moderate subject controlled it well enough so as never to give way to violence. The famous test of Socrates, in which he proves capable of resisting seduction by Alcibiades, does not show him "purified" of all desire for boys: it reveals his ability to resist whenever and however he chooses. Such a test would meet with disapproval from Christians because it would testify to the abiding presence—for them immoral—of desire. But long before them, Bion the Borysthenite made light of it, declaring that if Socrates felt desire for Alcibiades, he was foolish to abstain, and if he felt none, his conduct was entirely unremarkable.²³ Similarly, in Aristotle's analysis, *enkrateia*, defined as mastery and victory, presupposes the presence of desires, and is all the more valuable as it manages to control those that are violent.²⁴ *Sōphrosynē* itself, although defined by Aristotle as a state of virtue, did not imply the suppression of desires but rather their control: Aristotle places it in an intermediary position between a self-

*In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, it is a question of "bidding pleasure be gone," as the old people of Troy wanted to do with Helen.²²

indulgence (*akolasia*) in which one gladly abandons oneself to one's pleasures, and an insensitivity (*anaisthēsia*)—extremely rare, it should be added—in which one feels no pleasure; the moderate individual is not one who has no desires but one who desires “only to a moderate degree, not more than he should, nor when he should not.”²⁵

In the domain of pleasures, virtue was not conceived as a state of integrity, but as a relationship of domination, a relation of mastery. This is shown by the terms that are used—whether in Plato, Xenophon, Diogenes, Antiphon, or Aristotle—to define moderation: “rule the desires and the pleasures,” “exercise power over them,” “govern them” (*kratein, archein*). There is an aphorism that captures this general conception of pleasure; interestingly, it is attributed to Aristippus, who had a rather different theory of pleasure from that of Socrates: “It is not abstinence from pleasures that is best, but mastery over them without ever being worsted” (*to kratein kai mē hēttasthai hēdonōn ariston, ou to mē chrēsthai*).²⁶ In other words, to form oneself as a virtuous and moderate subject in the use he makes of pleasures, the individual has to construct a relationship with the self that is of the “domination-submission,” “command-obedience,” “mastery-docility” type (and not, as will be the case in Christian spirituality, a relationship of the “elucidation-renunciation,” “decipherment-purification” type). This is what could be called the “heautocratic” structure of the subject in the ethical practice of the pleasures.

4. The development of this heautocratic form was patterned after several models: for example, in Plato there is the model of the team with its driver, and in Aristotle, that of the child with the adult (our desiring faculty ought to comply with the prescriptions of reason “as the child should live according to the direction of his tutor”).²⁷ But it was related to two great schemas in particular. That of domestic life, first of all: just as a household could not be in good order unless the rank and authority of the master was respected within it, so a man

would be moderate only insofar as he was able to rule his desires as if they were his servants. Conversely, immoderation could be likened to a household that was mismanaged. At the beginning of the *Oeconomicus*—which deals precisely with the role of the master of the house and the art of ruling one's wife, one's estate, and one's servants—Xenophon describes the disorganized soul. It is at once a counter-example of what a well-ordered household should be, and a portrait of those bad masters who, incapable of governing themselves, bring ruin to their estates; in the soul of the immoderate man, “harsh” masters (gluttony, drunkenness, lust, ambition) enslave the man who should be governing, and after exploiting him in his youth, abandon him to grow old in misery.²⁸ The model of civic life is also called on in order to define the moderate attitude. It is a familiar theme in Plato that desires can be likened to a low-born populace that will grow agitated and rebellious unless it is kept in check;²⁹ but the strict correlation between the individual and the city, which is the mainstay of Plato's thinking in the *Republic*, enables him to elaborate on the “civic” model of moderation and its opposite, page after page. There, the ethics of pleasure is of the same order of reality as the political structure: “If the individual is like the city, the same structure must prevail in him”; and he will be self-indulgent when he lacks the power structure, the *archē*, that would allow him to defeat, to rule over (*kratein*) the inferior powers; then “his soul must be full of servitude and lack freedom”; the soul's “best parts” will be enslaved and “a small part, the most wicked and mad, is master.”³⁰ At the end of the next to last book of the *Republic*, after having set up the model of the city, Plato acknowledges that the philosopher will have little chance of encountering a state so perfect in this world or of serving his function within it; but he goes on to say that, nevertheless, the “paradigm” of the city is laid up in heaven for him who wants to contemplate it; looking upon it, the philosopher will be able to “set up the government of his soul” (*heauton kratoikizein*): “It makes no difference whether

it exists *anywhere* or will exist. He would take part in the public affairs of that city only, not of any other."³¹ Individual virtue needed to be structured like a city.

5. A struggle of this kind required training. The metaphor of the match, of athletic competition and battle, did not serve merely to designate the nature of the relationship one had with desires and pleasures, with their force that was always liable to turn seditious or rebellious; it also related to the preparation that enabled one to withstand such a confrontation. As Plato says, a man will not be able to oppose or defeat them if he is *agymnastos*.³² Exercise was no less indispensable in this order of things than in the case of other techniques one acquired: *mathēsis* alone was not sufficient; it had to be backed up by a training, an *askēsis*. This was one of the great Socratic lessons; it did not contradict the principle that said one could not willfully do wrong, knowing that it was wrong; it gave this knowledge a form that was not reducible to the mere awareness of a principle. Speaking in reference to the accusations brought against Socrates, Xenophon takes care to distinguish his teaching from that of the philosophers—or "self-styled lovers of wisdom"—for whom once man has learned what it is to be just or moderate (*sōphrōn*), he can become unjust or dissolute. Like Socrates, Xenophon objects to this theory: if one does not exercise one's body, one cannot sustain the functions of the body (*ta tou sōmatos erga*); similarly, if one does not exercise the soul, one cannot sustain the functions of the soul, so that one will not be able to "do what one ought to do nor avoid what one ought not to do."³³ It is for this reason that Xenophon thinks that Socrates cannot be held accountable for Alcibiades' misbehavior: the latter was not a victim of the teaching he received, but rather, after all his successes with men, women, and a whole populace made him a champion, he acted like many athletes: once victory was won, he thought he could "neglect his training" (*amelein tēs askēseōs*).³⁴

Plato returns often to this Socratic principle of *askēsis*. He

represents Socrates showing Alcibiades or Callicles that they have no right to involve themselves with the affairs of the city or to govern others if they have not first learned what is necessary and trained accordingly: "And then, when we have practiced it [*askēsantes*] together this way, then finally, if you think we ought to, we'll undertake political business."³⁵ And he associates this requirement of practice with the need to attend to oneself. This *epimeleia heautou*, care of the self, which was a precondition that had to be met before one was qualified to attend to the affairs of others or lead them, included not only the need to know (to know the things one does not know, to know that one is ignorant, to know one's own nature), but to attend effectively to the self, and to exercise and transform oneself.³⁶ The doctrine and practice of the Cynics also accorded a good deal of importance to *askēsis*; indeed, the Cynic life as a whole could be seen as a sort of continuous exercise. Diogenes advocated training the body and the soul at the same time: each of the two exercises "was worthless without the other, good health and strength being no less useful than the rest, since what concerns the body concerns the soul as well." The object of this twofold training was both to enable the individual to face privations without suffering, as they occurred, and to reduce every pleasure to nothing more than the elementary satisfaction of needs. Considered as a whole, this exercise implied a reduction to nature, a victory over self, and a natural economy that would produce a life of real satisfactions: "Nothing in life," Diogenes maintained, "has any chance of succeeding without strenuous practice; and this is capable of overcoming anything [*pan eknikēsai*]. . . . Instead of useless toils men should choose such as nature recommends, whereby they might have lived happily. . . . For even the despising of pleasure is itself most pleasurable, when we are habituated to it; and just as those accustomed to a life of pleasure feel disgust when they pass over to the opposite experience, so those whose training has been of the opposite kind derive more pleasure from despising pleasure than from

the pleasures themselves [*hēdion autōn tōn hēdonōn kataphrousi*]."³⁷

The importance of exercise would not be neglected in the subsequent philosophical tradition. In fact it was considerably amplified: new exercises were added, and procedures, objectives, and possible variants were defined; their effectiveness was debated; *askēsis* in its different forms (training, meditation, tests of thinking, examination of conscience, control of representations) eventually became a subject matter for teaching and constituted one of the basic instruments used in the direction of souls. By contrast, in the texts of the classical period one finds relatively few details on the concrete form that the ethical *askēsis* could take. Doubtless the Pythagorean tradition recognized many exercises: dietary regimens, reviewing of one's misdeeds at the end of the day, or meditation practices that ought to precede sleep so as to ward off bad dreams and encourage the visions that might come from the gods. Plato makes a precise reference to these evening spiritual preparations in a passage of the *Republic* in which he evokes the danger of desires that are always apt to invade the soul.³⁸ But, apart from these Pythagorean practices, one finds few instances—whether in Xenophon, Plato, Diogenes, or Aristotle—where *askēsis* is specified as an exercise in self-control. There are two likely reasons for this: first, exercise was regarded as the actual practice of what one needed to train for; it was not something distinct from the goal to be reached. Through training, one became accustomed to the behavior that one would eventually have to manifest.* Thus Xenophon praises Spartan education for teaching children to endure hunger by rationing their food, to endure cold by giving them only one garment, and to endure suffering by exposing them to physical punishments, just as they were taught to practice self-control by being made to show the strictest modesty in

*Compare Plato in the *Laws*: "Whatever a man intends to become good at, this he must practice [*meleiēan*] from childhood; whether he's playing or being serious, he should spend his time with each of the things that pertain to the activity."³⁹

demeanor (walking in the streets in silence, with downcast eyes and with hands hidden beneath their cloaks).⁴⁰ Similarly, Plato proposes subjecting young people to tests of courage that would expose them to simulated dangers; this would be a means of training and improving them, and a means of gauging their merit at the same time: just as one leads "colts into noise and tumult to see if they are fearful, so we must expose our young to fears and pleasures to test them, much more thoroughly than one tests gold in fire, and see whether a guardian is hard to bewitch and behaves well in all circumstances as a good guardian of himself and of the cultural education he has received."⁴¹ In the *Laws*, Plato goes so far as to imagine a drug that has not yet been invented: it would make everything look frightening to anyone who ingested it, and it could be used for trying one's courage: either in private "out of a sense of shame at being seen before he was in what he considered good condition," or in a group and even in public "in the company of many fellow drinkers," to show that one was able to overcome "the power of the necessary transformation effected by the drink."⁴² In the same way, banquets could be planned and accepted as tests of self-control, so to speak, based on this artificial and ideal model. Aristotle expresses this circularity of ethical apprenticeship and learnable virtue in a simple phrase: "By abstaining from pleasures we become temperate and it is when we have become so that we are most able to abstain from them."⁴³

As for the other reason that may explain the absence of a specific art for exercising the soul, it has to do with the fact that self-mastery and the mastery of others were regarded as having the same form; since one was expected to govern oneself in the same manner as one governed one's household and played one's role in the city, it followed that the development of personal virtues, of *enkrateia* in particular, was not essentially different from the development that enabled one to rise above other citizens to a position of leadership. The same apprenticeship ought to make a man both capable of virtue

and capable of exercising power. Governing oneself, managing one's estate, and participating in the administration of the city were three practices of the same type. Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* shows the continuity and isomorphism between these three "arts," as well as the chronological sequence by which they were to be practiced in the life of an individual. The young Critobulus declares that he is now capable of ruling himself, that he will no longer allow himself to be dominated by his desires and pleasures (Socrates reminds him that the latter are like servants who are best kept under supervision); therefore it is time for him to marry and with the help of his wife to administer his household; and, as Xenophon points out several times, this domestic government—understood as the management of a household and the cultivation of a domain, the maintenance or development of an estate—constituted, when given the right amount of dedication, a remarkable physical and moral training for anyone who aimed to fulfill his civic obligations, establish his public authority, and assume leadership functions. Generally speaking, anything that would contribute to the political education of a man as a citizen would also contribute to his training in virtue; and conversely, the two endeavors went hand in hand. Moral *askēsis* formed part of the *paideia* of the free man who had a role to play in the city and in dealings with others; it had no need of separate methods; gymnastics and endurance trials, music and the learning of vigorous and manly rhythms, practice in hunting and warfare, concern with one's demeanor in public, acquiring the *aidōs* that would lead to self-respect through the respect one showed for others—all this was a means of educating the man who would be of service to his city, and it was also moral training for anyone who intended to master himself. Commenting on the tests of contrived fear that he recommends, Plato speaks of them as a means of identifying those boys who are most likely to be "the best men for themselves and for the city"; those will be the ones recruited to govern: "The one who is thus tested as a child, as a youth, and as an adult, and comes

out of it untainted [*akēratos*] is to be made a ruler as well as a guardian."⁴⁴ And in the *Laws*, when the Athenian wants to define what he means by *paideia*, he characterizes it as what trains "from childhood in virtue" and makes one "desire and love to become a perfect citizen who knows how to rule and be ruled with justice."⁴⁵

In a word, we can say that the theme of an *askēsis*, as a practical training that was indispensable in order for an individual to form himself as a moral subject, was important—emphasized even—in classical Greek thought, especially in the tradition issuing from Socrates. And yet, this "ascetics" was not organized or conceived as a corpus of separate practices that would constitute a kind of specific art of the soul, with its techniques, procedures, and prescriptions. It was not distinct from the practice of virtue itself; it was the rehearsal that anticipated that practice. Further, it made use of the same exercises as those that molded the citizen: the master of himself and the master of others received the same training. It would not be long before this ascetics would begin to have an independent status, or at least a partial and relative autonomy. In two ways: there was to be a differentiation between the exercises that enabled one to govern oneself and the learning of what was necessary in order to govern others; there was also to be a differentiation between the exercises themselves and the virtue, moderation, and temperance for which they were meant to serve as training: their procedures (trials, examinations, self-control) tended to form a particular technique that was more complex than the mere rehearsal of the moral behavior they anticipated. The time would come when the art of the self would assume its own shape, distinct from the ethical conduct that was its objective. But in classical Greek thought, the "ascetics" that enabled one to make oneself into an ethical subject was an integral part—down to its very form—of the practice of a virtuous life, which was also the life of a "free" man in the full, positive and political sense of the word.