

Philosophy for the Body, Food for the Mind

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Abstract: Ancient Greek philosophers stressed the importance of asceticism, in order to increase wisdom, sometimes reaching the point of starvation. Neglecting one's own body by strict ascetic practices, which included a very poor and limited diet, led to a higher status at the philosophical level and was a way to ideal perfection. Food or rather the refusal of it played a crucial role in their philosophy. Ancient biographers tell us about this struggle against material needs, whereas at the same time some comic texts bear witness to the contrast with ordinary people's way of eating.

When Christianity took over ancient civilization and became the dominant ideology, the ideal of perfection focused on salvation and union with God. In order to attain this divine union, which recalled the original perfection before sin, all passions should be controlled, especially sex and food. Depriving the body from almost any nourishment was the safest way to attain a full development of the soul and a perfect knowledge of God.

In the West, the ideal of perfection has changed throughout history up to the present, from ancient philosophy to spiritual salvation, purity or even aesthetic excellence, all of which are subjective concepts of perfection to be attained by individuals through despising material food, sometime to the point of starvation.

Keywords: Ancient Greek Philosophy; Asceticism; Biographies; Diogenes Laertius; Women Saints

A few years ago, at an advanced Modern Greek course for foreigners in Athens, a divorced woman of British origin, having lived in Germany and the USA and speaking fluent English, German and French, in her forties, very thin and looking very pale and emaciated, explained that she ate only once a day and very frugally. When she was asked why, her answer was "because it is important for our salvation". Her words did not put the stress on health, or well-being, or a longer life, but on "salvation", whatever it meant, and she spoke in a collective plural, "our", instead of using an individual "my". It developed into a longer conversation in which she stated that she had converted

to Orthodox Christianity and come to Greece, having no previous knowledge of its ancient history or of its ancient or modern language, seeking knowledge and, in her words, “the birthplace of wisdom”.

On the other hand, the daughter of a colleague went through a long and very serious period of anorexia. Being a brilliant student as she was, good-looking and belonging to a structured and loving family, she had nevertheless a very different idea of herself, looking for physical and aesthetic perfection in her own, very subjective, terms. At the time, our research was focused on the concept of wisdom, the perception of the body and the biographical narrative, or in which way the account of a philosopher's life is related to a philosophical doctrine. Both cases (and many others which could be taken as examples) made us think that subjects and patterns of the past could be found through history up to the present day and could help to explain modern points of view in terms of personal identity and the idea of the individual self. Does obtaining wisdom necessarily mean a certain diet? Is it possible to define an inverse relationship between bodily and intellectual nourishment? Does a subjective idea of perfection, either spiritual or intellectual or aesthetic or physical, include a need for self-destruction, which should be rather the opposite of perfection? We tried to follow the path of these questions along the ancient witnesses of wisdom, spiritual life and food, well aware that problems of the past are often the background of problems of the present and looking for what image of reality is created through narrative (in this case, biographical narrative).

We have inherited a tradition deeply rooted in Hellenism and Christianity in which reality was often defined in dualistic, opposite terms: body and soul, matter and intellect (or mind, or spirit), good and evil, heaven and hell, even man and woman. In this context, we want to look at the relationship between body, soul and what nourishes both. Modern medicine and psychiatry will probably put the stress on the interdependence of all parts and features of individuals, but we ask what the perception of food is in connection with the development of the inner human being, of human perfection, as it is perceived at the very beginning of European thinking. Ancient Greek philosophers stressed the importance of asceticism, in order to increase wisdom, sometimes reaching the point of starvation. When Christianity took over the ancient philosophical and religious ways of thinking and became the dominant ideology, the ideal of perfection focused on salvation and union with God. In order to attain this divine union, which recalled the original perfection before sin, all passions should be controlled, especially sex and food. In the Western tradition, the ideal of perfection has changed throughout history up to the present, from ancient philosophy to spiritual salvation, purity or even aesthetic excellence, all of which are subjective concepts of perfection only to be attained by individuals through despising material food, sometimes to the point of starvation.

1. The Asceticism of Ancient Greek Philosophers

Ancient Greeks have often been quoted, in Western literature, as a source of wisdom, the origin of philosophy and a model of human life. Nearly everybody is acquainted with the Socratic phrase: “As for me, all I know is that I know nothing” and Epicure's phrase is also familiar: “Death does not concern us, because as long as we exist, death is

not here. And when it does come, we no longer exist”, or the Pythagorean Theorem we learned at school. But literature preserves also the biographies of these ancient wise men (the greatest biographer is Diogenes Laertius, DL, of the 3rd. cent.), and it is proper to speak, here, of men rather than persons or people, since almost all ancient Greek philosophers were male. Philosophy and wisdom were a male privilege, as was freedom of speech and citizenship or involvement in politics. Even literature was mostly a male activity, since it meant participating in political life, and although Sappho and some other lesser known female poetic voices may come to our attention for their accomplishments, they were, nevertheless, a glorious exception. The contempt towards feminine intellectual abilities is deeply rooted in Western history, too. In terms of ancient philosophy, only a “he” can be used, although some feminine nouns can be traced in selected groups such as Pythagorism. Therefore, philosophy as a privilege of the male mind makes a particular strong impact when proceeding from some Christian women in the first centuries, as we shall see further on.

Regarding food, the most widespread and readily identifiable trait amongst the vast majority of Ancient Greek Philosophers, especially as portrayed in their biographies, is their contempt for the senses, their ascetic way of life. Asceticism is a fundamental feature of a philosopher’s biography: it is what ensures that he is recognized by the community as a serious professional and it is seen to embody his singular freedom of spirit. An ascetic life is ordinarily associated with one that is simple and in agreement with nature, as postulated by Pythagoras (DL 8.13). This is the typical canonical interpretation, and we see it resurface in Philostratus (*Vit. Soph.* 2.1.7), Lucian (*Nigr.* 26), Philo (*De uita contempl.* 37.73), Porphyry (*VP* 46), Iamblichus (*Vit. Pyth.* 69, 228) and Philostratus (*Apol.* 1.8). The Pythagorean influence stands out in all these instances. This translates in practice into a renunciation of bodily needs (eating and drinking), extreme frugality and the rejection of all forms of personal comfort.

1.1 A philosopher’s diet

Socrates practiced frugality, claiming that the fewer needs a man has, the closer he is to the gods (DL 2.27; see also Xenophon, *Mem.* 1.2, 60; 6, 11-14), or in the famous phrase that he eats to live, not lives to eat (DL 2.34). Epicurus ate only bread, cheese and water (DL 10.11). Menedemus of Eritrea, unable to refuse an invitation to dinner, ate nothing but olives (DL 2.129). Timon had no qualms in going without his dinner (DL 9.114). Diogenes was another famed for his frugality (DL 6.21, 22-23), to the extent that he once attempted to eat raw meat, but was unable to digest it (DL 6.34). This anecdote must probably be interpreted as the biographical manifestation of the return to nature claimed by the school of the Cynics, in opposition to civilization (see M. Detienne, *Dionisos mis à mort*, Paris 1977, p. 153-154, engl. *Dionysos Slain*, Baltimore & London 1979).

Zeno ate only small loaves and honey (DL 7.13) or at the very least endeavoured to eat only uncooked food (DL 7.26), although he was somewhat less vigilant on the subject of drinking at banquets, claiming that lupins are too bitter, but when they are soaked they become sweet (DL 7.26). Pythagoras declared himself wholeheartedly against the excessive consumption of food and drink (DL 8.9) and sought to train men to eat only uncooked food and to drink only plain water (DL 8.13), although Delatte (1922:176)

views this Pythagorean doctrine as a “contamination des theories pythagoriciennes par l'idéal cynique”. His own diet consisted solely of bread and honey, vegetables, and occasionally fish (DL 8.19). And whilst we are in the dark as to the nature of the special food Epimenides received from the Nymphs (DL 1.114), what is clear is that it was enough for him to live on over a long period of time, suggesting that he too must have been fanatically frugal, which may have contributed to his reputation among modern anthropologists as a Greek representative of shamanism (see Dodds 1951, p. 140-168).

In practice, this frugality when it comes to food often took the form of vegetarianism: abstaining from both eating meat and drinking wine was the ultimate symbol of asceticism, since it implies purity of the soul, according to Pythagoras, who would go down as one of the founding fathers in the history of vegetarianism (DL 8.19). Nevertheless, there is some debate as to the extent of Pythagoras' vegetarianism, which appears to have been far less strict than that of Empedocles: indeed, he allowed the sacrifice of inanimate animals (DL 8.19), although it is also asserted that he allowed the eating of all animals, with the exception of oxen and rams, and that he had no qualms in allowing athletes to train on meat (DL 8.12. 20). When considering these passages, some authors talk of Pythagoras's “empedoclization” (see Delatte 1922, p. 175; Burkert 1962 [1972], p. 180-182 and n. 111; and especially Balaudé 1997; on vegetarianism, Haussleiter 1935 is a useful resource). He was convinced that this type of diet was beneficial to the health of the body and the acuteness of the intellect (DL 8.13). Thus he never sacrificed any living animal: the only offerings he made to Apollo Delian were bread, barley and cakes, all untouched by fire (DL 8.13). Not only did he abstain from all types of meat, but he went out of his way to avoid close contact with butchers and hunters (Porphyry, *VP* 7).

Pythagoras' legendary abstinence from beans (DL 8.24), which has given rise to all manner of interpretations, ranging from the purely dietary (see Delatte 1930) to the religious and the doctrinal (see Burkert 1962 [1972], p. 183-184.), is a separate issue and is not something we address here. Heraclitus fed on only grasses and plants; not, in his case, out of any philosophical conviction, but rather owing to a willed misanthropic isolation (DL 9.3). Empedocles, who was supposed to commit suicide by throwing himself in the volcano and leaving only his sandal behind, a tale which impressed Hölderlin to the point of dedicating him a great work, was certainly the most militantly vegetarian of them all; so radical was he in his vegetarianism that his sacrifices to the gods comprised of an ox made of honey and flour (DL 8.53). There may also be a hint of vegetarianism in Plato: according to one of the biographies, Plato's diet, no doubt influenced by Pythagoras, as so many features of his life were, was of vegetables (*Vita Anonyma* 79 Westermann), not animals. Xenocrates is another considered to have been vegetarian by some, as he once refused to kill a sparrow who had taken shelter under his cloak (DL 4.10). This is the explanation offered by Isnardi Parente 1985, with Aelian, *VH* 13.31. Apollonius of Tyana is also reported to have been vegetarian (Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius* 1.8), and so the association between vegetarianism and the philosopher has become commonplace.

A number of philosophers are explicitly cited as non wine-drinkers as a symbol of their supreme austerity. These include the likes of the well-known Pythagoras (DL 8.19) and Epicure (DL 10.11) and the less famous Crates (DL 6.90), Pittacus (DL 1.76, Athenaeus X 427e) and Anacharsis (DL 1.103). Plato advised people who got drunk to look at themselves in the mirror when “under the influence” in order that they might behold

their deplorable state (DL 3.39). The anecdote that Plato deliberately situated the Academy in a totally remote, unkept place (Porphryry, *De abstin.* 1.36) should also be considered in the light of this asceticism, as a further display of abstinence from all kinds of comfort. Riginos (1976, p. 122) wonders whether the origins of this story might not lie in the hostile tradition's commitment to "ridiculing the extremes to which the philosopher went in pursuing his own doctrine", repeating a typical biographical cliché according to which the philosopher carries his own doctrine to the extreme. In any case, this anecdote about Plato's extreme asceticism is clearly one that the tradition, or at the very least all those who cite it, sees as a positive one (see also Basilius, *Ad adoles.* 9.80-84; Hieronimus, *Adv. Iouin.* 2.9).

Abstinence from or restriction of sleep was also common, as well as austerity in clothing. Philosophers are supposed to have a single garment, which is light and is worn equally in summer or winter, like that of Zeno (DL 7.26-27). Diogenes, the one we know for living in a barrel, was the first to wear his cloak doubled to make it last longer, and also to sleep with it (DL 6.22-23). Another frequent attribute is abstinence from sexual relations and must be considered a benchmark of asceticism, both among Ancient Greeks and among Christians. Pythagoras went as far as to declare that the sexual act is unhealthy, because it weakens the body (DL 8.9). Indeed, he prescribed sexual abstinence as a rule of conduct for his disciples (DL 8.19). Plato, according to tradition, remained totally celibate throughout his life, and explicitly declared himself against sexual relations, for the sake of purity. One of his disciples, Xenocrates, a mathematician of the 4th c. BC espouses sexual moderation, as evinced by his immense display of restraint when a courtesan tried to seduce him, as well as when some of his pupils put a prostitute into his bed: neither of both manages to get anything out of him (the scene is clearly lifted from Plato's *Banquet* 122b-223d).

Asceticism is understood, moreover, as a voluntary and impassible giving up of bodily sensations, a choice to focus on certain solid and immutable truths which belong to the realm of philosophy. Cynical asceticism, in particular, involved a series of highly rigorous physical exercises (for an excellent all-round discussion of the meaning and the basis of this issue, see Goulet-Cazé 1986): Diogenes lives in a boat; in summer he rolls around in boiling sand, and in winter he embraces statues covered in snow, in sickness and in health (DL 6.23). What is more, he shows the height of contempt for his own body, demanding he not be buried, but rather left out in the open so that the beasts can devour him (DL 6.79). The purpose of these habits is expounded in doctrinal form by none other than Diogenes himself (DL 6.70-71): just like athletes and musicians have to constantly exercise their body to hone the particular skills of their art, so the philosopher has to exercise his body in outright contempt for pleasure in order to achieve an excellent conditioning of the soul, since there "is nothing whatever in life that can be achieved without practice, and that alone was able to overcome every obstacle" (DL 6.71; an extremely useful detailed discussion of it can be found in Goulet-Cazé 1986, especially pages 195-222). Diogenes Laertius constantly stresses the coherence between Diogenes the cynic's doctrine and life (DL 6.71, also DL 6.28 and 64), and thus it seems evident that these ascetic anecdotes in fact have their root in their own words and doctrines. However, lately (see Bracht Branham & Goulet-Cazé 1996, especially p. 81-104), there has been an attempt to show that in the cynics, and particularly in Diogenes, the force of the doctrines lies not in "a set of doctrines, let alone a method, but himself" (Bracht Branham & Goulet-Cazé 1996, p. 87): it is the philosopher's life, as demonstrated in various concrete anecdotes, that transmits the doctrine.

In the same vein, being impassible and despising luxury is also a form of wisdom. Self control and disdain for material goods was a way to distinguish important belongings from unimportant: Stilpo also disdained material goods and was unconcerned with losing everything he had, because what was most important to him, his reason and his knowledge, could not be taken away from him (DL 2.115). Plato is extreme in his self control, going so far as to clamp down on his own desires: when he's thirsty, he grabs the water and throws it to the ground as a form of punishment (Stobaeus 3.17.35). This anecdote is attributed to Pythagoras in other traditions (see Riginos 1976, p. 159), a fact which serves to demonstrate its stock nature.

One of the few females in this context is Hipparchia, in the 4th. c., who, after her conversion to philosophy (among Cynics), scorns her own beauty, her high birth and all of her suitors in order to practice philosophical *askesis* (that is, ascetic exercise) alongside Crates (DL 6.96). Aristotle's customs, too, are temperate to the extreme (*Vita Vulgata* 24 Düring) and Xenocrates meditated with himself assiduously every day, spending up to one hour in silence (DL 4.11). In short, what we have here is clearly no more and no less than the application of the philosophers' doctrines to their own lives.

Many are remarked upon for their utter impassibility in the face of misfortune, such as Xenophon, who does not mourn his son's death, because he knew all along that he had fathered a mortal man (DL 2.55) and Xenophanes, who buries his sons with his own hands (DL 9.20). This brings to mind a stereotypical anecdote used to exemplify the impassibility and serenity of the wise man, especially in the face of the worst of tragedies. They can also be quite simply insensitive, whatever the circumstances.

Another direct consequence of this asceticism is the commonplace that the philosopher possesses extreme temperance and never falls ill. Zeno, for instance, was so temperate that he lent his name to a proverb: "more temperate than the philosopher Zeno" (DL 7.27), and indeed he knew no disease and always enjoyed excellent health (DL 7.28). Socrates was another who enjoyed an extraordinarily clean bill of health, thanks to his orderly way of life: on several occasions a plague broke out in Athens and he was the only one not to catch it (DL 2.25). Crates draws an explicit parallel between ascetic exercise and good health, addressing himself thus to all those who mock his rigorous practices: "Courage, Crates, as far as your eyes and the rest of your body is concerned: For you shall see those who now ridicule you, convulsed with disease, and envying your happiness, and accusing themselves of slothfulness" (DL 6.91-92; see the discussion of this passage by Goulet-Cazé 1986, p. 155-158).

The parallel, in this sense, is often drawn with Heracles, as a hero who can endure all manner of hardships, a vanquisher of misfortunes, the ascetic symbol par excellence, especially but not exclusively amongst the cynic philosophers (see Höistad 1948, p. 33-63). Indeed, as well as, naturally, Diogenes, who states that Heracles is the very model of freedom (DL 6.41, 50, 71), others explicitly compared to Heracles for their powers of endurance are Crates the academic (DL 2.78), Plato (DL 3.63; 5.7), Zeno (DL 7.29) and Cleanthes, whom Zeno dubbed a "second Heracles" in admiration of his temperance and because he took on as his own the ridicule directed at the hero in the works of the poets (DL 7.173).

In some cases this asceticism, which, as we have seen, is very widespread in the biographical tradition, reflects the embodiment in a philosopher's life of his doctrine or that of his school: this is the case of all those characters who stand out for their impassibility and capability of staying unperturbed, the lot of them stoic philosophers. Nonetheless, a lack of passions and asceticism seem to characterize the philosopher in general: absolute mastery of his passions and even his bodily needs forms part of his wisdom; making it, therefore, a totally novel form of wisdom, one which does not find its way into any other group of people's biographies and which, without a doubt, serves as a positive benchmark of the philosopher within his biographical tradition. Indeed, unlike the philosopher, poets are always represented as cloaked in the latest fashions and clean-shaven, a symbol for their tendency towards luxury, for which reason they often appear seated upon soft cushions (see Zanker 1995 [1997], p.156-161). Indeed, popular Greek morale was always well-disposed towards those able to endure all sorts of troubles, such as soldiers, whose efforts were thus shrouded with virtue (see Dover 1974, p.163-164).

We could argue that in the popular imagination the good philosopher goes one step further and practices asceticism, just as in later ages asceticism would come to be expected of a saint. Indeed, Bieler, in his analyses of the lives of later generations of philosophers, states that a strict practice of asceticism is considered a fundamental hallmark in the life of a *theios aner*, a "man of God": the ascetic wise man becomes an idealized figure which in turn influences the way philosophers are depicted (see Bieler 1967², p. 60-73).

The fact that the most widespread conception of the philosopher was an ascetic one is also demonstrated in Comedy. Philemon aptly sums up this commonplace in a work whose title, *The Philosophers*, speaks volumes (Philemon, fr. 88 Kassel-Austin):

This man adopts a new philosophy,
he teaches to be hungry; nevertheless
he gets disciples.
Bread his only food,
his best desert dried figs; water his drink.

These verses are also cited, in a similar context, albeit in a different order, by Clement of Alexandria (*Strom.* 2.121, 12).

Indeed, ascetic practices were viewed with much misgiving by the wider public. Their dietary regime, in particular, was subject to all sorts of taunts and comic parodies. Socrates appears most frequently in Aristophanes, *Aves* 1554f., *Ranae* 1491f., *Clouds* 103, 119f., 198f., 649f. (see also W. Schmid's 1948's discussion of this popular image of Socrates from Aristophanes), and there are as many as three well-known comedies that bear Pythagoras' name in the title (Sanchis Llopis 2005). And the hostile biographical traditions portray the philosophers as notorious gluttons, given to drinking, lustful and luxurious, participants in all manner of sexual liaisons, notably involving boys and prostitutes. This sort of anecdote is generally used as ammunition to refute a particular philosopher's doctrine, by demonstrating that he does not practise what he preaches. These attempts form part of a wider-reaching, more negative biographical tradition, generally committed to taking apart at the seams the ascetic profile of the philosopher as it is depicted by other traditions. Sometimes, a tradition of moderation

and self-control coexists without problem with a comic description of excess. Not even Plato himself is spared: in stark contrast to his rigorous asceticism, he eventually dies of gluttony, ironically at a marriage banquet (DL 3.2).

The Oratory hosted a further repertory of commonplace anecdotes, most of which are lifted from the Comedy itself, or invented and distorted for the occasion: Trenkner 1958, p. 154-162, offers evidence for, at the very least, Lysias, Demosthenes and Isocrates, the three Greek models of rhetoric. The Latin writers Cicero (*De orat.* 2.59.241; 2.72.292) and Quintilian (*Inst. or.* 4.2.29) instructed the orators to invent stock anecdotes, if necessary, in order to create the right atmosphere amongst the audience.

Finally, a letter attributed to Xenophon, rival of Plato according to the biographical tradition, criticizes the philosopher for, leaving aside other things related to his doctrine, gluttony. What's more, in defiance of Plato's strict, ascetic celibacy which is asserted by late Byzantine writers, Diogenes Laertius spends some time dwelling on the narration of Plato's numerous liaisons with young boys, prostitutes, and even with Socrates' wife, Xanthippe (DL 3.29-32). The origin of these particular anecdotes lies in several erotic epigrams that Plato is supposed to have dedicated to his lovers, included in the *Greek Anthology*, a fact which itself amply demonstrates their commonplace nature.

Following the same formula of refuting a philosopher's doctrine by demonstrating plainly that his actions speak louder than his words, the cynics and the stoics who, as we have seen, practice the most extreme form of asceticism, find that their critics come back even stronger with an image that is its very opposite. Menippus (3rd.c. BC) has a deep love of money and only lived in austerity until he was made a citizen of Thebes (DL 6.99). Zeno (5th.c. BC) is a glutton who loved to feast (DL 7.26). Dionysius of Heraclea (4th.c. BC) indulged in luxury without disguise (DL 7.167). Even Aristotle squandered his family fortune and was forced to become a mercenary soldier and later a medicine salesman (DL 10.8). It is equally easy to see how, taken *in malam partem*, Epicure's doctrine on pleasure can be misconstrued to the extreme, giving rise to the image of an Epicure who is so given to over-eating that he vomits twice a day (DL 10.6) – a popular interpretation that has been passed down and is widely held by many non-specialists today.

As we have previously noted, the bulk of these interpretations can often be traced back to Comedy and reflect a popular reinterpretation of asceticism: those philosophers who went to great extremes of austerity and led a simple, frugal life, putting aside their passions, are in actual fact equally extreme in their debauchery. In virtually all of these cases, furthermore, we are drawn to the conclusion that these types of anecdotes are included in the biographies as a result of the rivalries between opposing schools: the best way to discredit a person's followers is, clearly, to discredit the master himself, showing that his way of life goes against his own doctrine.

It is made clear, however, by virtue of precisely that sort of counter-reading performed by the sources themselves, that what defines the philosopher in the positive biographical traditions is asceticism and not debauchery. Indeed, Aristophanes' philosophers are portrayed as perfect ascetics (*Clouds* 412-419):

Choir: O man, who hast desired great wisdom from us!

How happy will you become among the Athenians and among the Greeks,
if you be possessed of a good memory, and be a deep thinker,
and endurance of labour be implanted in your soul,
and you be not wearied either by standing or walking,
nor be exceedingly vexed at shivering with cold, nor long to break your fast,
and you refrain from wine, and gymnastics, and the other follies,
and consider this the highest excellence, as is proper a clever man should,
to conquer by action and counsel, and by battling with your tongue.”
(trans. W. J. Hickie)

This notwithstanding, it is worth noting that Aristophanes' description makes patent a large degree of bewilderment at philosophers' ascetic behaviour: as we have seen, in the ancient popular imagination asceticism was largely viewed as an oddity, far removed from ordinary social habits, a fact that helps explain how a mirror-image of it was able to take roots so easily.

1.2 Death by starvation

Though seemingly accidental in a few rare cases (see Grau 2010), death by starvation is usually self-imposed as a form of suicide. Thus, in his despair for failing to free his country, despite all his efforts, Menedemus of Eretria (3rd.-2nd. c. BC) lets himself die of starvation (DL 2.143). In some versions Zeno also lets himself die of starvation as a form of suicide after breaking his finger (DL 7.31). Other Stoics also choose this way of dying, such as Dionysius “the Renegade”, who commits suicide in this way for motives that we do not know (DL 7.167).

What interests us mainly is that starvation is not at all something that heroes, poets or any other ancient cultural agents die from. Ancient myth and literature usually attribute a certain kind of death to poets, warriors, heroes or politicians, according to the meaning of their public life. Starvation is not glorious or heroic. Instead, it is a kind of death that can be considered exclusive to philosophers. This could be a popular interpretation of the extreme asceticism of philosophers who are capable of enduring long periods of famine, but it also leads to the fact that intellectual wisdom and material food are situated on opposite poles and seen as almost contradictory.

One of the versions regarding Pythagoras' death seems to confirm this theory. According to Dicaearchus (fr. 35 Wehrli), a philosopher, cartographer and mathematician of the 4th.-3rd c. b. C., Pythagoras, the champion of asceticism, dies of starvation after finding refuge in a temple of the Muses at Metapontum, presumably to escape persecution after his house had been set on fire. Heraclides of Lembos, a Greek philosopher who served at the court of Ptolemy in Egypt (2nd. c. BC) however, explains that after Pythagoras buried Pherecydes in Delos (DL 1.118), he returns to Croton, where he meets Cylon, who is about to offer a splendid banquet. Pythagoras refuses to attend the banquet, since he is already on his way to Metapontum, where he ends his days by abstaining from eating because he no longer wants to live (DL 8.40). The second version in particular makes explicit the contrast between Pythagoras and his enemy Cylon with regard to food. This seems to support the hypothesis of a popular interpretation of Pythagoras' asceticism, especially with regard to his diet, which leads

him to his own death. Diogenes Laertius dedicates two epigrams to Pythagoras' dietary paradoxes, which must have seemed rather surprising to the non-initiated. The second of the two epigrams seems to refer explicitly to the second version mentioned above with regard to death by starvation (DL 8.44):

So wise was Pythagoras that he
would touch no meats, but called it impious,
bade others eat. Good wisdom: not for us
to do the wrong; let others impious be.
(trans. R. D. Hicks)

2. Asceticism and food among early Christians

Seeking a perfect life through wisdom as taught by philosophers was also an aim of Christian groups of the first centuries, but they included it in the path towards a perfection which could only be found in divine life, which, in Christian terms, was called the path towards salvation. In the first centuries of our era, much of philosophical thought became theological thought, and together with the great treatises on divine or human nature, a lot of works on asceticism and human behaviour were produced.

We focus here on individual renunciation of food as a subjectively perceived unavoidable necessity for spiritual growth or perfection among early Christians, in a similar way to the colourful description of ancient biographies above.

2.1 Renunciation and balance

We do not want to put the stress on moderation, but on renunciation. Among Christians as well as among non-Christian Greeks, the idea of balance of the self included a rational, well-disposed distribution of bodily functions and spiritual needs. The idea of moderation is deeply rooted in ancient Greek civilization: excess is a source for many diseases and catastrophes; the religious wisdom of Delphi, the central religious point of ancient Greeks, is "nothing in excess", both in spiritual and in material practices. This includes the very structure of Greek religion: in the polytheistic pantheon, every god should be conveniently acknowledged, and the tragic examples of *hybris* caused by despising a divinity are well known (as in Euripides' tragedy *Hippolytus*, for instance, where the hero takes no notice of Aphrodite and therefore provokes his own death).

Nothing in excess means therefore a little bit of everything, which includes food for the well-being of the body and its survival. Among the first Christians, there is an important stress on moderation in ordinary life, especially in food and sex. Food is necessary for daily survival, but certain restrictions are required in order to avoid the excesses of lust or the gluttony which could be harmful to the very survival of the body. An appropriately frugal diet was considered sufficient to cover the unavoidable needs of the believer, allowing him or her to dedicate him/herself fully to the more important business of attending to spiritual matters.

This moderate diet could include olives, bread, oil, water, dried fruits, possibly cheese and very occasionally meat, everything in small proportion considered only from an extremely practical point of view. Moderation means also balance, in all senses, including a broader way of seeing the whole world as well-balanced, also (see Skiadas-Lascaratos 2001).

We are not so much interested in moderation as in renunciation and the relationship between the renunciation of material food and spiritual development. Restrictions on food are a part of moderation: avoiding certain foods (meat, wine, animal products and derivatives, etc.) or restricting eating at certain periods (liturgical fasting) can be a way of eating included in a larger project of balanced existence. A restricted diet, from the point of view of the first Christians, can focus the purely necessary maintenance of bodily health which ensures spiritual capacities towards what is really important from a religious point of view. Many of the first monastic diets or ascetic advices are concerned with the necessity of preserving bodily health without indulging in any luxury or moral weakness (see Rousseau 1999). At the same time, the almost complete renunciation of food at certain periods (liturgical fasting) is also a part of a system of balance: especially (but not only) in the liturgical year; the alternation of periods of fasting with periods when food is allowed (not necessarily opulent or overabundant) represents an idea of giving to bodily health what it really needs for its preservation, but not wasting any extra attention on food itself or, especially, on the body itself.

It would be interesting to examine the use of periods of fasting in terms of equilibrium, although this is not exactly the aim of this short paper. Nevertheless, we would like to point out that fasting is normally seen (among ancients and often in contemporary societies as well) as a way of individual renunciation, self-denial or even self-chastening, even if it is promoted by a community inside of society (such as a monastic community), whereas it acquires a different, positive meaning if it is seen as a part of a whole, that is, a certain period of time (a year or a liturgical year) which contributes towards the equilibrium of the whole (see Grimm 1996). Certainly, for the common people, the liturgical year provides occasions for sumptuous feasting, with the result that the fasting periods are seen as necessary complements to overwhelming excess. Fasting periods like Lent do not exclusively have a sense of penitence: they also anticipate a period of compensating feasts and abundance (Easter). It is interesting to remember here that, in modern times, Christian fasting was not confined to Lent and to the penitential sense of remembering death on Good Friday, but that before Christmas there was also a four-week period of fasting (Advent), with the object of anticipating the joy of birth (and, in both cases, the immoderate overabundance of Easter or Christmas). Renunciation as equilibrium not only of the individual human body but especially of the community which seeks a spiritual significance in the whole year also includes indulging on ritual occasions in the opposite pole of overabundance. Fasting becomes feasting (on ancient Greek periods of fasting and its ritual significance, see Camps-Gaset 1993). In modern Western societies, deprived of a common religious aim, excessive feasting periods like Christmas have gone beyond food consumption, but still focus on family sharing of overabundant, opulent and impossible meals, whereas the subsequent fasting periods are replaced by hygienic medical advice on healthy low-calorie diets. We shall not follow the path of the collective calendar, but go back to the way of life of those who intend a higher aim, above ordinary people.

Moderation is, therefore, an important aim for any kind of life tending to wisdom or spiritual fulfilment, intended for everybody as a general advice. Food (or sex, or material properties, or human glory) should not be the centre of your life, because your life needs everything in due measure, in well-balanced proportion, in order to avoid pain and disaster. This is, roughly, how ancient Greeks would put it. Early Christians would say more or less the same, but giving as a reason that one's life, as human being, longs for a higher position than the worldly one: human beings are, in Christian terms, destined for divine salvation.

2.2 Struggling for perfection

But what about people who are extraordinary? What if somebody seeks a higher level of wisdom, a surer path of perfection leading to God, like ancient philosophers did in terms of wisdom? Is moderation enough? Or, putting the question the other way around, is the balance between many material and spiritual aspects of human life the proper way to attain divine perfection, or does the individual need something absolutely different, something like bodily denial, for instance?

Christian ascetic men and women and all those who sought a degree of perfection above that of the average faithful, stressed fasting as a very important measure, together with sexual abstinence, even more crucial, if possible, on the path towards God. In fact, their daily practices and renunciations were quite similar to those narrated by the biographers of ancient philosophers: refraining from sexual intercourse, despising any material luxuries or worldly honours, despising all kind of bodily comforts, often including elementary hygienic measures, and considerably reducing either the amount or the type of food taken, or both. We shall only quote a few cases, since the number of examples here would be overwhelming.

Fasting could be the appropriate behaviour against sin, as a practice of penitence and self-denial, for an individual who has become aware of his/her sins and has converted. *Metanoia*, a Greek word which is difficult to translate, since it means both conversion, change of mind, and penitence, necessarily involves fasting, among other practices. If fasting is considered as a means to wash away sin, there is, to our opinion, no contradiction with balance or moderation, in spite of certain modern analyses. The crucial subject concerning food and material survival is the idea of the body. The way a society deals with food and sex (as well and with hygiene and fashion) reveals its conception of the human body and, ultimately, of human beings, but sometimes modern (and individual) prejudices are projected on ancient studies. Modern scholarship on the subject is plentiful (see the excellent review of J. P. Culianu 1991).

It is certainly a crucial subject, but we want to stress here a contradiction which is not always pointed out in modern studies: the contradiction, in the first centuries of our time, between a Greek tradition which regarded matter as contemptuous and despicable and valued spiritual and invisible things, which we can call wisdom, and, on the other hand, an incipient Christian belief which considered matter as being good, because it had been created by God. We should properly speak of tension and not of contradiction, because the balance fluctuates between one pole and the other, and because the theological controversies and the philosophic Christian discourse of the first centuries

oscillate between justification of what has been created (which includes man and his/her bodily needs) and negation of the material being as a source of distraction (or direct cause of sin; see Gregory of Nyssa, 4th c. AD., *On the Making of Man* and especially his way of discussing original sin). An intellectual system which made a clear dualistic distinction between body and soul, asserting that the body was created by God and therefore good, created great intellectual uneasiness on behalf of inherited tradition (see Keenan 1994 p. 335-337)

While two natures—the Divine and incorporeal nature, and the irrational life of brutes—are separated from each other as extremes, human nature is the mean between them: for in the compound nature of man we may behold a part of each of the natures I have mentioned—of the Divine, the rational and intelligent element, which does not admit the distinction of male and female; of the irrational, our bodily form and structure, divided into male and female: for each of these elements is certainly to be found in all that partakes of human life.

(Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, XVI. 9. transl. H.A. Wilson).

At the same time, sin (or passions, if we put it in a more classical as well as patristic terms), as the spiritual burden which stops the soul from rising to the superior level of divine perfection, made it easy to attach a completely negative sense to the body, as a potential source of all possible occasions for falling down and becoming the prey of undue passion (see Tertullian, *On Fasting*, Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* II.20, and the short and strict advice of Jerome, *Letters* XIV, XX and CXXX).

To free one from the passions often meant distancing oneself from one's body and its needs, and from here it is a short step to despising the body as such (see Reineke 1990). The Christian idea of the body as a vessel containing the precious gift of a Christian soul born for salvation is sometimes not very far away from the ancient Greek idea of the body as a grave imprisoning the soul which has to be liberated (see Clark 1999).

We do not know how many of these descriptions are real. If, as it has been established above, a pattern for biographies of ancient philosophers can be produced, and if common sense stops us from honestly believing in impossible deeds, modern readers should not trust Christian biographies as being truly historical, even if tradition has tried to convince us that a true religious life means sacrifice and self-denial up to impossible extremes. There are studies of the lives of ancient ascetic women (especially medieval women) made from the point of view of modern psychiatry or medicine which show that the symptoms of diseases which are well attested today are also found among ancient men and especially women (see Bell 1985 and Tait 1993). We will not follow this path in terms of historical reality: what matters is the perception that society had of food, body and soul and the relationship between them, not the reliability of the historical account in itself. The fact is that in the first centuries of Christianity, the perception of a true religious life leading to the divine union required a severe renunciation of material and practical aspects of life, even of the conscience of one's own body.

It is interesting to see that feminine characters appear in this context, even if referred to in texts written by men. Let us see two examples:

Indeed, in the beginning, Melania would just taste a little oil and take a bit of something to drink in the evening (she had never used wine during her worldly life[...]). Then after that she began to mortify her body with strenuous fasting. At first she took food without oil every two days, then every three days, and then every five, so that it was only on Saturday and Sunday that she ate some mouldy bread. She was zealous to surpass everyone in asceticism.

(Gerontius, *Life of Melania the Younger*, 22, transl. of E.A. Clark)

Macrina aims to overcome matter, choosing the path of the spirit and the intellect:

Such was the manner of their life, so great the height of their philosophy, and so holy their conduct day and night, as to make verbal description inadequate. For just as souls freed from the body by death are saved from the cares of this life, so was their life far removed from all earthly follies and ordered with a view of imitating the angelic life.[...] But these women fell short of the angelic and immaterial nature only in so far as they appeared in bodily form, and were contained within a human frame, and were dependent upon the organs of sense.

(Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Macrina*, trans. H. A. Wilson)

Her asceticism points towards philosophy, towards wisdom, as did ancient philosophers, and a parallel can be drawn between her biography and the biography of philosophers mentioned above. Gregory of Nyssa had a deep knowledge of classical tradition, having been taught in a good scholarly education and is himself one of the greatest Christian thinkers. His conception of “philosophy” agrees with that of the ancient philosophers, and the narrative of Macrina’s life is probably fashioned according to the standard features of classical biography. It should be remembered that one of Gregory’s most controversial writings, *On Life and Resurrection*, is a formal dialogue in which Macrina explains to her brother, in very platonic terms, the truth about the afterlife. What is interesting here is that Macrina, idealized, is shown as an accomplished philosopher, having attained wisdom through asceticism and renunciation.

Fasting is not reserved only for one sex; it is advised for penitence in general and especially for those who want to attain perfection, that is, those who live ascetic or monastic lives (see Rousseau 1999). But philosophy is certainly a masculine privilege: to interpret and teach is not allowed to women, at least as a general principle. Women can approach wisdom occasionally through fasting and other ascetic practices. Nevertheless, there are some cases of women capable of philosophy, as texts put it, but they are always compared to males because of this intellectual ability. There are many studies on the “masculinising” aspect of primitive female asceticism: women, through denying their own feminine body and their feminine condition altogether (sex and motherhood, but “spiritual weakness” as well) are closer to a masculine model which is closer to God or, at least, not as close to passions as women are (see Petersen-Szemerédy 1993 and Castelli 1991). Fasting is a duty encouraged both in men and women, but philosophy is mainly a privilege of men, and philosophy, like in ancient models, has to be attained through many renunciations, including abstinence from food.

It should not be forgotten that modern views of women’s lives, especially in Antiquity, are necessarily arrived at through men’s eyes (and Jerome played a very particular role

in this sense, see *Letters* XXIII, XXXIX, CVII, CXXX). There are very few accounts written by women. It is advisable to be careful when analysing ancient reports on women: the self-awareness of ancient women is almost impossible to define, since most accounts come from men. We can approach the image that men had of women, or of certain women, and the perception society had of them; but we can hardly approach the perception women had of themselves. Something similar could probably be said about certain masculine attitudes, for which we are more indebted to literary patterns than to true beliefs, but in the case of biographies of women or information about them, what has survived is mainly the way women were looked at or were supposed to be, and not real feminine behaviour or consciousness.

Men and women intending to attain perfection or divine wisdom have a special relationship towards food: they should refrain from eating certain food or on certain occasions or, more often, refrain from eating in general, that is, reduce the amount of food to what is strictly necessary and avoid all kinds of luxuries. Food is merely subsidiary to wisdom: it has to be taken (and cared about) in order to sustain the human body, but not in order to give pleasure to it or to improve its condition as body. It becomes a pure instrument for the development of the spiritual interests (Clement, *Stromateis* II, 20, see also Rousseau 1999).

This abstinence can be due to several causes, always starting with this subsidiary condition of the human body: it can be a way to express repentance from sin and a self-imposed punishment, in order to attain forgiveness and salvation (Tertullian, *On Fasting*). The penitential character of fasting can be found through all ages and religions. But it can also be a way to express what is really important to the human being, and then it is not exactly a case of self-denial or self-chastising, but of stressing one pole of dualism instead of finding a balance. Refraining from food can be the way to attain upper levels of knowledge, wisdom and especially to be closer to the angels (and therefore to God) who do not need to be fed on anything (as well as not needing sexual intercourse, since they need no reproduction). The angelical nature of perfection explains the contempt towards food and the benefits of fasting.

But a number of theologians and writers insist on moderation at every level, fasting included. Moderation and balance are necessary and food is the nutrition of the body. Gluttony may endanger the salvation of the soul, but excessive fasting is not advisable. Fasting to the point of starvation is a hindrance to the proper development of a mind devoted to God.

Theological advice against extreme fasting is frequent among first Christians, not only through simple common sense, but also as a result of theological reasoning: the limit of fasting is starvation, and, even if the human body is considered to be an instrument and not a goal in itself, to endanger one's own life is, after all, to attack creation (Jerome, *Letters*, CXXX, 11). The body is subject to passions and passions are the product of evil; this is the way some ancient Christian thinkers tried to solve the contradiction (*their* contradiction) between material world and divine creation, but as long as humans control and dominate passions, necessary survival and nutrition are also a part of wisdom.

In this context of self-renunciation and moderation, pointing to divine knowledge, the portrait of women is more radical: if fasting (among other types of renunciation) is the

appropriate path to attain wisdom and divine perfection, women are supposed to fast more intensely because, theoretically and according to certain (powerful) authors (like Clement, Gregory of Nyssa, and especially Jerome), they are less close to divine nature than men. In ancient biographies of female saints or ascetics, women are supposed to be stricter and more demanding in their own renunciation, even to the point of being blamed for extreme renunciation. At the same time, the advice to be less rigorous in fasting provides them with a prestige which an average moderate life would hardly bring.

I knew her labour all night long with her hands at the mill to subdue her body; and she used to say: "Fasting is insufficient; I give it an ally in the shape of toilsome watching, that I may destroy the insolence of Esau." She abstained absolutely from anything with blood and life in it, but taking fish and vegetables with oil on feast days, at other times she continued to content herself with a mixture of sour wine and dry bread.
(Palladius, *The Lausiaca History*, engl. transl. 1918)

On the portrait of feminine models, we see a pattern of excellence which makes them similar to men (they become "masculinised") in terms of knowledge and wisdom, not only through fasting, but through other measures of renunciation and behaviour (see James 1997 and Castelli 1991), and, at the same time, the extreme demands which conform this excellence and which can lead them to destruction are also the reason for which they are envied by ordinary people, both men and women (see MacDonald 1996). There is a tension, a contradiction, between fasting as a way to attain wisdom or the moral perfection which leads to God, and the model of excellence of this same perfection, which paradoxically leads to the destruction of balance. Through exaggerated fasting, to the point of starving, women not only attain the (male) condition of being wise, but they are accepted as superior to their own condition. To put it in other words, the image of a perfect, wise woman which some conspicuous first Christian thinkers had is that of a woman who makes extreme acts of renunciation (Gerontius, *Life of Melania the Younger*, 22.25). There are shadows and lights in this portrait, since a certain kind of renunciation (on marriage and childbirth) also provided a space of freedom for women, as has already been pointed out (see Salisbury 1991), but if we speak of food renunciation, that is, of the basic nutrition of the body for its survival, it is certain that, in spite of all advice for moderation, the expectations are higher and stricter for women. In spite of all exhortations to moderation and to take proper, even if scarce, nourishment for the body, the projected image of what feminine perfection should be is far closer to destruction than to balance.

This is a great distance away from the consideration of body and soul as a whole, interdependent unity (see Keenan 1994: 334). Ancient philosophers were seen as different from ordinary people and this difference was expressed, among other ways, in terms of food peculiarities. The first Christian men and women devoted to wisdom were considered, also, in very similar terms of renunciation of bodily activities. But the new way of thinking represented by Christianity in the first centuries had different ways of absorbing tradition. Since matter has been created by God, it is not evil (Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*). The relationship towards one's own body, as well as towards the material world, can be transformed.

3. Conclusion

Through this short historical account, we have tried to show the recurrence of a pattern which we can still find nowadays. The past may seem strange compared to our modern points of view, behaviour patterns or beliefs, but if we look at it closely, we may see that some of its features have changed only outwardly. Ancient texts on philosophers allow us to recognize a social model of excellence, in terms of intellectual behaviour, which survives in early Christianity and can be traced throughout history. This intellectual behaviour is heavily dependant on a particular relationship towards food and its consumption or abstinence.

We could follow the relationship between this model of excellence and its real influence on society, in ancient and medieval, but also in modern times, aware that texts (that is, narrative, storytelling and even philosophy or theology) do not describe the real biography or the bare facts, but produce instead an image of what is supposed (or expected) to have prestige and to be a sometimes unattainable, destructive model of excellence. It is always a question of balance (or rather a tension), asking to which extent the special demands of a certain vision of life can lead to a full accomplishment of this life or to its destruction. People's real lives try sometimes to accommodate to this image, either intellectually or physically aesthetic, in order to attain prestige and excellence. This survey of ancient texts may help us to put under critical focus the narratives on models of excellence and their influence on the individual and collective concept of the body and the self.

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