

‘GUT-MADNESS’: *GASTRIMARGIA* IN PLATO AND BEYOND

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The classical Greeks’ and Romans’ ethical systems focused heavily on virtues, that is to say, on good human attributes. Human vices, in fact, always received much more thorough treatment from Christian writers than pagan writers gave them. Our very notion of a vice is heavily influenced by Christian views of sin. This should not overshadow the fact that pagan writers dealt, to some extent, with habits or actions which later entered the canon of vices or sins (for example, Aristotle in the work commonly called *Virtues and Vices*). My topic is *gastrimargia*: the bad habit which, in Greek, means ‘gut-madness’, and which came to be translated as *gula* in Latin and *gluttony* in English.

Overeating and its visible outcome, obesity, are receiving, in our society, a high level of attention, both official and individual. Yet, to state the obvious, overeating (like drinking too much alcohol) is not something unprecedented in earlier societies. Perhaps not so obviously, it was a feature even of societies of the distant past, in times which we might think were insufficiently wealthy to allow it.

Gastrimargia represented, of course, one of those bodily desires the denial of which was critical to both pagan and Christian virtue. In fact, the very commonness of the habit may have been the reason why it seems to have assumed quite an important role in some ethical discussions. *Gastrimargia* features in two key dialogues of Plato. The first I want to discuss appears in the *Phaedo*. It is easy to forget how very ascetic Plato makes Socrates, in this dialogue. The excesses of early Christian self-denial are better known, but it is important to remember that Plato and Socrates, at least in the *Phaedo*, gave ample justification for this kind of attitude. It is very likely that this influenced the classically-educated fathers.

[Socrates]: Would you not say that he [the philosopher] is entirely concerned with the soul and not with the body? He would like, as far as he can, to get away from the body and turn to the soul.

[Simmias]: That is true.

[Socrates]: In matters of this sort philosophers, above all other men, may be observed in every sort of way to dis sever the soul from the communion of the body (Jowett translation, adapted, 64e-65a).

... For the body is a source of endless trouble to us by reason of the mere requirement of food; and also is liable to diseases which overtake and impede us in the search after true being: it fills us full of loves, and lusts, and fears, and fancies of all kinds, and endless foolery, and in fact, as men say, takes away from us the power of thinking at all ... In this present life, I reckon that we make the nearest approach to knowledge when we have the least possible concern or interest in the body, and are not saturated with the bodily nature, but remain pure until the hour when God himself is pleased to release us. (66-67)

This isn’t some unstable Gnostic in 170 AD, or Saint Macarius in the desert: it is Socrates in the *Phaedo*. In particular, we find, the body’s dependence on food is seen as problematical. The body is described as a ‘mass of evil’, a ‘source of endless trouble’, ‘impure.’ At this point, it is a surprise to realise that such an important phenomenon as this ‘hatred of the body’, as opposed to the soul – an attitude we might most associate with the ascetics such as Origen (who avowedly took Platonic models) – lacks an appropriate word in English. Most historians of early Christianity call it ‘asceticism’, but this is inadequate, for several reasons: it rightly refers to practices (originally the self-disciplined training of the athlete) rather than an attitude; and it does not capture the emotional force of the phenomenon.

‘Asceticism’ seems, in fact, euphemistic. Body-hating does not merely downplay, or reject, the *pleasure* associated with eating (although it does this); it includes resentment about the *necessity* of eating, simply because the act of eating, in the old phrase, ‘keeps body and soul together.’ It is thus intimately connected with a dualist concept of human nature. (The term *misomatos* occurs in Ptolemy, but its context is quite different: he is describing an outcome from an adverse aspect of Saturn, and does not approve of the ‘body-hating’, whereas the ascetic is happily body-hating.¹) ‘Misomatist’ I believe has been used very occasionally, but the importance of the concept throughout history and up to the present day, demands its wider application.

The relationship of the soul with the body, through inevitable activity such as sense perception, is pinpointed by Socrates with another compelling image.

And were we not saying long ago that the soul when using the body as an instrument of perception, that is to say, when using the sense of sight or hearing or some other sense (for the meaning of perceiving through the body is perceiving through the senses)-were we not saying that the soul too is then dragged by the body into the region of the changeable, and wanders and is confused; the world spins round her, and she is like a drunkard when under their influence? (after Jowett, 79c)

The soul which has been corrupted by bad habits during life is also, in some sense, spoiled for the future. In particular, souls of people who have made a habit of overeating may well be reincarnated in a shameful animal:

I mean to say that men who have followed after gluttony, and wantonness, and drunkenness, and have had no thought of avoiding them, would pass into asses and animals of that sort. (81e)

(We may recall St Francis of Assisi calling his own body ‘Brother Ass’, and gratuitously mistreating it – despite his well-known kindness to animals in general.²) In the *Republic*, too, we find a powerful image of gluttonous people: that they are like cattle, always looking down and their heads always to the dining table (IX.586a-b). This association of human vices with perhaps less attractive animals is perhaps unfair to the animals. Animals, either in the wild or under domestication, are seldom afforded the opportunity to overeat, let alone drink too much alcohol (wantonness is another matter). Conversely, it is perhaps flattering to the bee or ant that it is seen as an appropriate home for the soul of a virtuous person.

While these references to animals in the *Phaedo* and *Republic* are purely for symbolic purposes, the discussion in the *Timaeus* is very much an account of natural history. Plato’s lengthy description of the body, and its various sections and their functions, is as complete a work of anatomy as we have from the ancient world. Having said this, it is important to note that, for Plato, an account of the nature of the body must also include an account of the human soul in its several forms. At the risk of rehearsing what is already well known, we recall that, as described in the *Timaeus*, there are three kinds of soul. There are: an immortal kind, located principally in the head; a mortal one subject to passions and desires, and located in the chest (69d-e); and a third kind, located between the diaphragm and the navel, dedicated only to pleasures and pains (70d-71a, 77b). This seems an unreasonably high number of souls (or parts of souls), but it does permit a belief that some elements of thought and consciousness are mortal, while those associated with the highest soul are immortal.

¹ Ptolemy *Tetrabiblos* Book 3 section 13. Many thanks to Peter Brown of the University of NSW for this reference.

² ‘St. Francis of Assisi, founder of the Friars Minor, Confessor – 1181-1226’, accessed 21 February 2011: <http://www.ewtn.com/library/marty/francis.htm>.

Timaeus/Plato's account is punctuated with statements concerning the interaction between the material and immaterial parts. For example, the lungs assist in controlling the passions experienced in the heart (70d). At length, the triangular structure of bone marrow eventually wears away, and the immortal soul, as a result, can depart the more freely (81d).

The creator gods were aware of the animal nature of the third soul, and its preoccupation with feeding. In order to impose some semblance of rationality in that region, they gave the liver the powers of revealing, in some manner, the truth – through divination (71b-e). It was on broadly similar lines, Timaeus/Plato argues, that the digestive system was created.

The gods knew that we would lack self-control over food and drink, that our greed would make us consume far more of them than was either moderate or necessary. They wanted to ensure that the human species was not rapidly killed off by diseases and did not come to an end straight away, without having attained its proper end. As a result of this prescience, then, they put the so-called 'abdomen' in place as a receptacle to hold excess food and drink, and they looped the intestines to and fro to stop food passing so quickly through us that before very long the body would necessarily need more, and so generate a cycle of insatiability. For gluttony would prevent any of us from being interested in philosophy and culture, as a result of being incapable of attending to the most divine part of us. (Waterfield, 72e-73a)

So the creator gods set up a kind of gastric extension. Two points are obvious. First, if the creator gods anticipated human lack of self-control, why could they not have created the soul without the tendency to excess? Timaeus/Plato wants to credit them with prescience, but is a little defensive about their failure to prevent human subjection to desires. The second point is that, clearly, the gastric extension didn't work. Humans do, in fact, regularly eat and drink to excess, despite the existence of a lengthy digestive tract.

Finally, we may note that Timaeus/Plato gives two quite differing reasons for the gods' attempt to prevent excessive eating and drinking.

1. 'They wanted to ensure that the human species was not rapidly killed off by diseases ...'

This is what we may call the health objection to overeating. In the Hippocratic treatises, broadly speaking, eating the wrong foods, or too much food, was seen to cause diseases (see, e.g. *Tradition in Medicine*, sometimes known as *On Ancient Medicine*³). This is a familiar argument: our health authorities today are most concerned about the debilitating and often fatal diseases (such as heart disease or Type 2 diabetes) which are consequent upon overeating and obesity.

The second reason, though, relates to quality of mental life.

2. 'For gluttony would prevent any of us from being interested in philosophy and culture, as a result of being incapable of attending to the most divine part of us.'

The term *gastrimargia*, traditionally translated as 'gluttony', is actually far more specific and offensive a word. It literally means 'gut-madness' or 'belly-obsession.' This is a fascinating analysis, because it links overeating not only with death through disease (*dia nosous*: 72e) but with an intellectually inferior life, even with mental illness (since, even though Plato says the gods avoided this, he clearly implies that excessive eating would lead to that result). This is an argument which receives less overt exposure these days. But it may be more familiar than many of us would like to

³ Lloyd *et al.* (1978) 71 section 3.

admit. It comes back, again, to the position that pleasures of the mind (as well as those of the spirit) are different from, and superior to, pleasures of the body.

Not, however, that Plato dismissed bodily activity altogether (he had, after all, been a competitive wrestler in his youth). He emphasises the importance of balancing intellectual activity with physical exercise (*Timaeus* 88b-c). Mathematicians and other intellectuals, he says, should have a proper amount of exercise, including gymnastics (a catch-all term for physical training), while a person who spends a lot of time cultivating his body should also work on music and philosophy. This notion of balance was critical to contemporary and later medical prescriptions.

Along with Plato and the Hippocratic writers, it is relevant to note Aristotle's judgments on the subject of overeating. It is probably with the *Timaeus* in mind that Aristotle described touch and taste as being those sensations which, in self-indulgent people (*akolastoi*), are most like those of animals (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1118b1). Like Plato, Aristotle described over-eaters, unusually and offensively, as 'gut-mad' (*NE* 1118b19: *gastrimargoi*⁴). Aristotle also used the adjective *psektos*, 'blameworthy', to describe self-indulgence in this kind of pleasure. From the verb *psego*, 'I blame', this is a clear expression of moral disapproval (*NE* 1118b28).⁵

A later instance of the emphasis on natural order and balance in bodily health is to be found in the work of Galen.⁶ He was trained as a philosopher as well as a doctor; several of his works dealt with philosophical matters: he regarded moral virtue as critically important. In his view, it was only by curing oneself of tendencies towards luxury and vice that one could achieve worthwhile results in life.⁷ He believed that excessive indulgence in food, drink and sex could be one antecedent cause of disease. Disease was defined as an unbalanced disposition of the body (the imbalance was termed *duskrasia*, which had moral overtones), in which one or more natural bodily functions was impeded. Therapy aimed at restoring the natural balance between the qualities.⁸

A link with virtue is also made by implication in Galen's rejection of atomist physics, according to which, he says, 'obviously, courage, wisdom, temperance and self-control are all mere nonsense' (*On the Natural Faculties*, section 12). We might not imagine that adherence to any belief system about physics need indicate a particular stand about virtue, but, as with the framework of the elements, it is clear that such a link existed in ancient Greek thought.

Galen's contemporary, Athenaeus, in his influential book *Deipnosophistae*, 'Dinner Party Intellectuals' (12.549), described a particularly obese individual. Dionysius, tyrant of Heraclea on the Black Sea, had lived in the generation immediately following Plato's own. Overeating and excess had led to his obesity, but Dionysius was so embarrassed about his condition that he shut himself in a small tower, where he only became fatter. He suffered from difficulty in breathing. When he was in a deep sleep, doctors inserted long, thin needles into his flesh: there was no reaction until a needle reached a relatively healthy and sensitive point, at which

⁴ The most commonly used word for madness in Greek literature is, of course, *mania*. A more thorough study is called for on the different usages and implications of the *marg-* compounds and *mania*. *Mania* is often imposed externally by the gods (see, e.g., Hartigan [1987] 127). Indeed, Achilles' fury at the outset of the *Iliad*, while termed *mēnis*, is also a kind of insanity (see, e.g., Smith [2001] 6). In addition to *gastrimargos*, the word *laimargos* is also, but less commonly, used in classical texts to mean 'gluttonous'. The word *gastrimargus* is the name of a genus of locusts and grasshoppers.

⁵ Aristotle (1941) 927-1112.

⁶ Hankinson (2008).

⁷ Hankinson (2008) 23.

⁸ Hankinson (2008) 230; Tieleman (2008) 60-61.

Dionysius reacted and awoke. The tale is recorded by a number of authors, indicating that it exercised a hold on the public imagination. Athenaeus attributed the story to Nymphis, a local Heraclea historian, which gives it some additional credibility.⁹

Athenaeus' discussion addresses the moral and economic aspects of material luxury. It is maintained that excess, luxury and pleasure were particularly tempting to people in power. In relating the story of Dionysius, as someone who had destroyed his health through over-indulgence, Athenaeus uses the term *adēphagia* (549b). This literally means 'eating enough', but, curiously, it had come to mean 'eating too much', with a moral force beyond the literal meaning. Athenaeus adds the poignant detail that the tyrant would hold conversations with people who came to see him, while holding a box over his body (*protithemenos kibōton tou sōmatos*: 549c), revealing only his face. He also quotes a verse of the comic poet Menander's, purporting to have been said by exiles from Heraclea, in which they refer to Dionysius as a 'fat pig' (*pachus ...hus*: we note another animal metaphor). The verses point out that because of the ill health brought on by pleasure, Dionysius did not have long to enjoy it: and that his only desire left to be fulfilled was that for death (12.549c). (Menander is described as a person who spoke as little evil as possible, indicating that if even he were so trenchantly critical of Dionysius, there must be important moral grounds.)

The Dionysius anecdotes are significant from a number of points of view. These are the moral nature of its purported etiology (excess); the notoriety, over centuries, of an extremely obese person; the shame with which such an individual, despite his power and prominence in the Greek world (Dionysius was a key player in the political and dynastic manoeuvring upon the death of Alexander) viewed himself, and his desire for seclusion; and the surgical treatment, involving the use of needles in a manner recalling acupuncture or liposuction. (How effective this or any other treatment may have been is not recorded; Dionysius died at 55.)

From the viewpoint of Plato's views of virtue, it is almost as if Dionysius embodied the kind of excess which was recommended to men in power by Callicles in the *Gorgias*. The discussion in *Republic VIII and IX* of the tyrant's progress is also relevant. Clearly, Dionysius, like Plato's imagined or paradigmatic tyrants, was in a position to gratify his desires to the greatest extent possible. It did not, as we have seen, bring him happiness.

So even though Greek society was relatively relaxed about eating habits and body shape, it appears that if an individual exceeded the broad norms, he felt shame – that is to say, moral consciousness. Dionysius was, however, a popular ruler, being described as gentle and humane, so his subjects evidently saw beyond the fat to the other moral qualities within.

The status of classical medicine in the Christian era was curious. Just as Christian thought could not credibly subsist without pagan literature and philosophy, pagan medicine retained important status even as fundamental beliefs about the body changed. As the container of the soul, in a manner comparable to that described by Plato in the *Timaeus*, the human body had a special status in medieval belief.¹⁰

It is perhaps as a reflection of broadly Platonic or Neoplatonic influence, rather than of anything specifically Christian, that gluttony came to be considered one of the seven deadly sins, or cardinal vices. (The Aristotelian list at *Virtues and Vices* 1250a3

⁹ Athenaeus <http://www.attalus.org/old/athenaeus12b.html#c72> accessed 21 February 2011. Greek text at: http://www.sflit.ucl.ac.be/files/AClassFTP/Textes/ATHENEE/deipnosophistes_12.txt accessed 21 February 2011

¹⁰ Pouchelle (1990).

is rather more subtle.) The earliest known listing, by the fourth-century ascetic monk Evagrius Ponticus, uses the Platonic term *gastrimargia* (the context being an account of those forces most opposed to religious practice).¹¹ The term captures a sense of an activity which is less than rational, less even than human, and therefore inferior to appropriate mental and spiritual activity. It is also considered an enabler of other bad practices such as sexual impropriety.¹² Ultimately, Plato and Christian theorists had the same objection to overeating. In the words of ‘the abbot Daniel’:

Insomuch as the body is cherished, so doth the soul wax lean: and when the body hath grown lean, then does the soul wax fat.¹³

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¹¹ See Evagrius’ *Peri diaphorōn ponerōn logismōn* 1, version by L. Dysinger accessed 21 February 2011 at http://www.ldysinger.com/Evagrius/04_Peri-Log/00a_start.htm.

¹² *Peri diaphorōn ponerōn logismōn* 1. Flood (2004) 148-50, argues that, however much influenced by the broadly Platonist traditions exemplified by Clement of Alexandria and Origen, Evagrius also emphasised the worth of the body from a Christian perspective.

¹³ Book X Section XVII of the *Verba Seniorum* (6th century CE), Waddell (1936) 112.

(Greek text)

http://www.sflt.ucl.ac.be/files/AClassFTP/Textes/ATHENEE/deipnosophistes_12.txt accessed 21 February 2011.

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