

## SEXUAL PLEASURES AND THE LOGIC OF EXCESS IN THE ERA OF AIDS

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This essay is about the relation between the two human phenomena named in its title: sexual pleasures and excess. The context is as indicated: the era of the AIDS pandemic. The tiny word "and" stands for the relation between the two elements involved, and it could be read in two very different ways: as *external and accidental* or as *internal and necessary*. If we choose the first alternative, reading sexual pleasures and excess as only accidentally related, we are allowed to imagine sex as fundamentally harmonious and healthy, indeed as a constituent part of a well-balanced life, and by the same token, the logic of excess could be regarded as something we could be drawn into only if we betray the true meaning of sex, perhaps demanding too much of it and letting it be the director of scenes of our lives where it should not be in charge. However, the logic of excess could also be read as something that rightly belong to sex, as something sex could not exist without, at least not for long. In that case, sexual harmony is just a vain idea, perhaps a necessary idea, but still an illusion.

Of course, claiming to have a final answer to such a question would be rather preposterous. Yet, I feel that the question has a real importance in the era in which we live, and that debating it could be worthwhile. The context of my inquiry is the era we live in, insofar as it could be called the era of AIDS. But perhaps we could have something to learn from people living in other eras: they could shed light on the way we live—from perspectives we would otherwise not be aware of.

Now, the strategy to be adopted in combating an epidemic like AIDS will depend on what is perceived as behavioural patterns facilitating the spread of the disease. And it is precisely on this level that our perception of the role of excess could be crucial. What I mean to say is this: the strategy to be adopted in order to reduce the spread of a sexually transmitted disease will, to a certain extent, depend on whether or not those who engage in this battle think of sex as something inherently excessive. If you think of excess as something that can be avoided in a pleasurable sexual experience, you will look for other strategies than if you identify sex with some kind of excess.

There are so many unanswered questions in relation to AIDS, and the concept of excess does certainly not shed light on all of them. So, I will try to situate this phenomenon on the level where it belongs in this context.

Nobody knows exactly how and when AIDS originated. The AIDS virus could be the result of a recent mutation, or it could have been around for a long time, hiding behind other diseases, waiting for the conceptual means to discover it. Thus, although the virus may be an old one, the disease is certainly perceived as new. What we do know is that AIDS as a *pandemic* is an eminently modern phenomenon insofar as it could not have emerged in a non-modern environment. The proliferation of AIDS since the early 1980s depended not only on biological causes that may have been present for centuries, but also on the coincidence of cultural events that are quite recent. Commenting on such events, the physician and historian of science, Mirko Drazen Grmek in his *History of AIDS* (1990) uses the expression "sexual contacts of a quantitatively new type", giving examples like: "organized homosexual promiscuity, greater liberty in amorous behaviour, mixing of diverse populations, travels that significantly expanded the choice of sexual partners..." (Grmek 1990: 158) The expansion of AIDS as a modern disease could, in fact, seem to follow from an unprecedented increase in promiscuity, both homosexual and heterosexual, in the wake of liberation from the yoke of behavioural expectation imposed by local traditions.

It seems quite legitimate to invoke these factors: they offer a credible explanation why AIDS could not have developed into a pandemic before the second half of the 20th century, as massive urbanization weakened the authority of all kinds of local institutions. But still, only part of the enigma is solved: I do not think that modern facilities for fast travel and the destruction of traditional social bonds tell the whole story. That is why I will insist on a factor which is rarely found worthy of notice in social sciences and cultural studies that focus on the transformation of behavioural patterns over the last few decades: and this is precisely the factor named "excess". In order to understand the spread of AIDS, I think it is necessary to investigate the significance of excessive behaviour for human existence in general, and for sex in particular, and this, I think, can be done as a philosophical meditation prior to an empirical study focussing on the decline of those historical institutions that traditionally are set up in order to mitigate the effects of excess. My approach will be limited by the tradition which has offered both the object and the instruments of my own research: the tradition of Western philosophy—hopefully as a contribution to a dialogue with approaches from other perspectives.

My meditation is informed by the following hypothesis: There is a drive towards excess, a drive that constitutes a menace against all social bonds susceptible of restraining a disease like AIDS. It would follow from this hypothesis that understanding the dynamics of excess could contribute towards more adequate cultural policies for combating the current pandemic.

So, what could be the meaning of "excess"? Let me quote a couple of authorities. The *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* (1999: 476) gives the following definition: "(an amount which is) more than acceptable, expected or reasonable" while, according to *The Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* (1963:341), "excess" means "immoderation; intemperance (in eating and drinking)".

Intemperance in the areas mentioned by the latter dictionary has, in fact, been a subject of ethical concern since the beginnings of Western philosophy in ancient Greece, 2500 years ago. The French philosopher Michel Foucault highlighted this concern in *The Use of Pleasure*, a book that was published the year he died of AIDS, 1984, as the second volume of his pathbreaking, unfinished work, *A History of Sexuality*. In this work, Michel Foucault tries to show how Greek philosophers treated intemperance as a problem that free (male!) citizens had to confront in their management of things that give rise to pleasures. Ethical concern emerges because there are no pleasures without the inherent danger of disturbing the equilibrium and thus the well-being of the subject. According to Foucault, the Greeks handled these dangers by means of practices that he called "technologies of the self", and which we could understand as the different kinds of "care of the self" knowledge: knowledge needed for self-preservation and the enjoyment of life. The French historian of sexuality ranges these practices into four categories according to their objects: 1) dietetics, the science of what, how much and when to eat and drink in order to care for the body; 2) economics, the art of managing the wife and the rest of the household; 3) erotics, the art of loving, of taking pleasure in an object whose subjectivity you have to respect; and finally 4) philosophy, the love for truth (supposed to unite people who are approaching the same ideal). The point of acquiring the named sciences was to avoid the dangers associated with the enjoyment of the practices dealing with specific objects: one's own body in the case of dietetics, the wife in the case of economics, lovers in the case of erotics, and truth in philosophy. In all these cases, a kind of self-knowledge is seen to be needed in order to dominate forces that threaten the well-being of the subject: "The accent was placed on the relationship with the self that enabled a person to keep from being carried away by the appetites and pleasures, to maintain a mastery and superiority over them, to keep his senses in a state of tranquillity, to remain free from interior bondage to the passions, and to achieve a mode of being that could be defined by the full enjoyment of oneself, or the perfect supremacy of oneself over oneself" (Foucault 1986:31). According to Foucault, the danger was seen to be particularly severe in the field of erotics, since sexual appetite was perceived as an inherently unruly passion: "(...) 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 know to confront this force, how to control it and regulate its economy in a suitable way" (Foucault 1986: 50).

Sexuality does not seem to enjoy an absolute privilege in this respect: quoting Plato and Aristotle, Foucault shows that the pleasures of food and drink were seen to carry the same kind of risks as sex. In Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, he finds that the pleasures of contact and touch are present in all three, and these pleasures are potentially excessive no matter where contact and touch are located on the body. So, if the danger of excess was not the same in all of them, there seems to have been a difference of degree. This is spelled out in a quotation from Plato's *Gorgias*, where Socrates, to his question as to whether his interlocutor could think of "a greater and sharper pleasure than the sexual", gets the answer: "No, nor a madder one" (Foucault 1986:90).

If the pleasures of the table and the bed give rise to excess, it is because they tend to make us pass beyond the limits of what is good for us and put us off balance. In fact, if there is no *natural* protection against excess, it is because you simply want more. If you follow your natural passions, you will soon experience the truth of William Blake's sentence: "You never know what is enough unless you know what is more than enough" (Foucault ); or, in other words: before you know what has happened, you are the slave, and the excessive force is your master: "These forces could not be used in the moderate way that was fitting them 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 happened to share—like hunger and thirst—with the animals; but this natural inferiority would not of itself be a reason for having to combat them, if it was not the danger that, winning out over all else, they would extend their rule over the whole individual, eventually reducing him to slavery" (Foucault) . The war metaphors extensively used by Greek authors in this connection clearly indicate that they did not trust nature to see to it that balance be restored through reasonable satisfaction. Since nature would not set a limit, the cure had to be sought on another level, the level of ethics, the science of rules for wise conduct of personal and social affairs.

So how do we come by these rules? According to Michel Foucault, Greek citizens of the enlightened ages of the 5th and 4th centuries BC thought of rules of conduct not as universal principles given once and for all by some superhuman, alien force, but rather as something human beings give themselves through the exercise of their own reason. It seemed to be a question of "coming to terms" with forces within ourselves, forces we depend on for intense enjoyment, but which also, if not dominated, can likewise lead to severe pain. In this respect, the wisdom of the ancient Greeks is being opposed to Christian religion, which is supposed to mark off excessive sexual desire as an evil force originating from an alien, diabolical source with which there can, of course, be no question of coming to terms (since evil should be eradicated, not come to terms with). And here is the reason why Foucault recommends Greek wisdom: the Greeks might have something to teach us now that Christianity with its universal laws and its ideology of renunciation is losing its hold on us. If religious authorities fail to give us advice, we could perhaps learn something from the wisdom of enlightened and free Greek citizens who constructed an ethics of the economy of pleasures in order to preserve equilibrium when confronted by forces which were liable to put barbarians off hinges.

Michel Foucault states the dangerous character of sexual appetites as a matter of fact. He does not try to explain why these forces appeared as "excessive by nature" otherwise than by referring to slavery as the natural consequence of failure to set up rules for the use of pleasures. Perhaps the concept of satisfaction could lead us in the right direction: are we not exposed to the dangers of excess simply because sexual desires do not lead to any *natural* limit of full satisfaction? This is exactly what Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, suggests in his theory of sexual drives: these are energies that aim at satisfaction, not in one

single manner, but through a great variety of objects and activities, several of which are called perversions, insofar as they have nothing to do with the propagation of life. But why should only sexuality be liable to perversion? Cannot eating and drinking be perverted—can't they be led astray from their natural aims? Of course, they could, but perhaps not in exactly the same manner as with sexuality: and this simply because they *do have* a natural aim: *incorporation*, which occurs exactly while the food and drink are being *enjoyed*. As food and drink become part of the one who enjoys the meal, nature provides enjoyment. By the same token, if sexual desire is *by nature* liable to the form of excess that Freud calls perversion, it could be because natural aim and enjoyment do not coincide. According to the French philosopher Jean-Claude Milner, the non-pervert sexual act—the coitus—did not at all conform to the Greek *ideal* of pleasure: it was performed more as a duty towards society than as an aim in itself. The Greek paradigm of pleasure appeared to be the one illustrated by devouring food: “According to the doctrine of the Ancients, the fundamental paradigm of pleasure is the hungry person who is eating and the thirsty one who is drinking. It's according to this standard that any pleasure is measured and legitimized. Whether or not this could have anything to do with the ever present possibility of droughts and famines is not so important, the main point of the matter being that in this connection, the relation to the body is perceived in terms of incorporation” (Milner 1997:23).

If there is no complete satisfaction without incorporation and if incorporation means devouring, what could the options be for diverse activities as far as pleasure is concerned? Food could be devoured, but when it comes to the relation between bodies, it may seem that no complete satisfaction could be reached unless one body incorporates another body. Indeed, if people passionately in love tend to talk about devouring each other, this could be regarded not just as a manner of talking, but rather as a fantasy sustaining their desire. Greek authors like Homer and Plato seem to have been aware of this: gods and mortals who seek pleasure *at all costs* do not abstain from flesh from their own species. But devouring another person otherwise than by the eyes was not an option for the law-abiding Greek citizens, since cannibalism was forbidden. Indeed, cannibalism was supposed to have been put to an end by Zeus, head of the Greek gods, who castrated the Titan Cronos, his cannibal father. Since incorporation could not be accomplished during the sexual act, intercourse had to be experienced as a failure: “The coitus is in general the experience of an impossibility” (Milner 1997:41)—for the Greek citizen, the necessity of reproducing life could seem to involve failure in the satisfaction of desire. This looks like a very dramatic scenario: there's no real pleasure without incorporation, but sex offers only penetration, not incorporation, so it leaves us unsatisfied, always dreaming of something more, and the fantasy of something more could seem to be a necessity in order to keep desire alive. If the fantasy of something more can be sufficiently powerful, it can make us sacrifice everything, including our health and our well-being for the sake of making it come true, at least once in a life-time... So, excess could be seen as following from love since what we dream of in the act of love is an impossible dream. Love puts you off balance because it's never it.

But the Greeks would not have been the Greeks if they had not found a way out of this predicament. The way out was the kind of love they called *philia*—the term used in the word philosophy, the *philia* of *sophia*, love of wisdom. According to Milner, *philia* is an institutionalized relation, a certain kind of behaviour that a member of Greek society was obliged to show towards a foreign guest. The point here was treating as a member of the social body the one who was *not* a member of the social body. The guest was not expected to change: he was expected to remain foreign although he was to be treated as “one of us”, as belonging to the same social body. Thus, hospitality could be considered as a sort of incorporation without enforced assimilation. This was called *philia*, a kind of love that could facilitate pleasurable encounters for those who had had to give up cannibalism. Philosophy could thus be viewed as the kind of wisdom (*sophia*) that is based on hospitality (*philia*). And this, I think, could be called the Greek solution to the problem of excess.

Now, the ancient Greek civilization had its rise and time of glory and its unpredictable fall. Saint Paul was not impressed: unembarrassed, he declared that he would prefer God's folly to

Greek wisdom. And to the Greeks it would certainly appear as sheer nonsense when he professed a religion that did not belong to anyone in particular, be they Greeks or Jews or men or women or slaves or free citizens. A new era was born. The problem of excess appeared within a new context. Pleasure and love were still part of the problem, but those two elements were, by and by, subordinated to a third element, which, I think, characterizes modern excess: freedom.

Love subordinated to freedom could be called love of freedom, and again, if pleasure is felt as a must in any accomplished love relationship, then freedom of love is felt more or less as a human right for all modern subjects supposed to love freedom. In fact, the love of the freedom of love combined with advanced technology produced the contraceptive pill, which liberated the enjoyment of love from any considerations about future consequences. In the era of AIDS, a deadly menace can only be avoided by the use of condoms, and if condoms are not as readily used as pills, the reason could seem to be that condoms are felt to reduce male freedom to enjoy the pleasures of the moment without being reminded of the future. And, if modern technology has liberated love from one of the snares established by nature, others could seem to be imposed instead: do not modern people talk of the freedom to enjoy in terms of *natural* freedom? Does nature set any limit to that freedom? Now, if freedom of love means freedom to enjoy the body of the other *at any cost*, then excess could seem to be not only a potentiality or an inherent danger related to love, but rather an essential part of love.<sup>1</sup> Some philosophers of the European Enlightenment of the 18th century hailed this dark side of freedom as an unalienable right. Thus the French libertarian Marquis de Sade viewed the enjoyment of inflicting pain to the other as an aim in itself and consequently as a human right just because forbidding it would be against the principles of freedom. Other philosophers answered this challenge by inventing new ethical concepts. In this way, the German philosopher Immanuel Kant tried to show that the very attempt to use somebody else just as an instrument for one's own enjoyment would contradict human reason, the very capacity that freedom is grounded upon. But still Kant, who is recognized as the most important moral philosopher of the European Enlightenment, saw a problem in that freedom was not only a principle based on reason, but could also appear as an object of love: "The love of freedom is naturally so strong in man that when once he has grown accustomed to freedom, he will sacrifice everything for its sake.... Owing to his natural love of freedom, it is necessary that man should have his natural roughness smoothed down; with animals, their instincts renders this unnecessary".<sup>2</sup>

In this text, Immanuel Kant not only posits love of freedom as a natural quality in human beings; he also gives freedom the responsibility for "human roughness", and this roughness, which seems to have no natural limits, is opposed to *animal* roughness, which is checked by natural instincts. In fact, excess seems to be a quality that distinguishes human beings as a species different from all other beings: that is why humans need a smoothing down that is not needed in animals. "Discipline" is the name Kant gave to this smoothing: "Discipline", for instance, must restrain him from venturing wildly and rashly into danger. Discipline, thus, is merely negative, its action being to counteract man's natural unruliness. The positive part of education is instruction"(Kant 1899, quoted by Zizek 1999: 36). So, here we have it spelt out very clearly: unruliness is the same as roughness, they are both natural children of human freedom, and the cure is discipline. Since animals have instincts to guide them, they don't need it, so discipline is supposed to target a specifically human unruliness. While animals seem to have something in their nature to counterbalance their wild urges and propensities, nature does not seem to offer anything to prevent humans from an excessive behaviour that threatens to put them off hinges.

Equipped with freedom, human beings don't seem to be embedded in a natural life-world the way animals are. And if a moral philosopher like Kant suggests discipline as a compensation for natural instincts, it simply means that human drive towards excess can only be met efficiently by a counter-force on the same level, which is no longer the level of *animal* nature: "By discipline, men are placed in subjection to the laws of mankind, and brought to feel their constraint" "(Kant 1899, quoted by Zizek 1999: 36). If humans have severed their

links with nature and do not follow the laws of natural instincts, it is because they have linked up with laws belonging to another dimension, the properly human condition, which involves constraints we do not *necessarily* submit to: since we have a free will, we can choose to submit to them, or we can refuse. In his pedagogical writings, Kant recommends discipline as an instrument to hamper excess, but in his ethical texts Kant makes it abundantly clear that following externally imposed discipline has no ethical value as such, since moral actions depend on following laws that we give ourselves. For Kant, the only ethically relevant discipline is self-discipline. Thus, this great reformer of modern moral philosophy seems to be in agreement with the ancient Greeks that Michel Foucault comments on.

The theme of human roughness being of another and more severe kind than animal roughness, is a very old one. We meet it in Aeschylus, the Greek dramatist who wrote his *Oresteia* a couple of centuries before Aristotle wrote his *Ethics*: he describes human wildness as more excessive than any force of nature:

Marvels, the Earth breeds many marvels,  
terrible marvels overwhelm us.  
The heaving arms of the sea embrace and swarm  
with savage life. And high in the no man's light of night  
torches hang like swords. The hawk on the wing,  
the beast astride the fields  
can tell the whirlwind's fury roaring strong.

Oh, but a man's high daring spirit,  
who can account for that? Or woman's  
desperate passion daring past all bounds?  
She couples with every form of ruin known to mortals,  
Woman, frenzied, driven wild with lust,  
twists the dark, warm harness  
of wedded love - tortures man and beast.

The poet marvels at savage animal life, but that is nothing compared to "man's high daring spirit". The most extreme expression of this daring spirit seems to be the feminine excess, "wild with lust...". Since the *Oresteia* trilogy was written by a man, these lines could of course be read as an expression of the patriarchal order, from which feminine excess appears as threatening to swallow the male subject. So, are not these verses I quoted from Aeschylus just another example of how patriarchal myths demonize women? But such a reading could seem to be too simplistic, for if excess is the quality that distinguishes human beings as such from animals, then woman must, according to Aeschylus, have reached the highest stage of development of humankind, and literature, philosophy and other intellectual activities could be seen as diverse attempts to cope with this fact, either by trying to come to terms with it or by trying to cover it up.

In the fragments preserved from the first generation of Greek philosophers, we find a clear concern about excess, although the problem is treated by means of concepts that are gender neutral - on the face of it. Thus, in a text attributed to the philosopher Anaximander, who was a contemporary of Aeschylus, different cosmological forces and elements are said to pay each other back for their *injustice* against each other. Here, excess seems to be intrinsic to existence as such, since there is no way an element can exist without infringing on other elements. Thus, the very existence of fire could be said to involve a sin committed against water, since fire, if not checked by water, would sooner or later transgress the borders set for fire things and set *everything* on fire. In Anaximander, equilibrium is restored as transgressive elements are forced by elements infringed upon to give up their special characteristics and return to the status of that which has no borders (*apeiron*) and thus is absolutely indistinguishable. After a certain measure of time, the injustice involved in the excess without

which an element cannot exist is paid for by its giving up existence. In this case, excess, which is equivalent to existence as a particular thing, is described as a drive towards *injustice*. The existence of an element seems to depend on a force that is excessive as such, and there seems to be no possible cosmic harmony beyond the one which consists in the act of *restoring* justice after a period of excess.<sup>3</sup> In Anaximander, there is no question of ranking some elements higher than others in a hierarchy.

If we turn to the Pythagoreans, a later generation of philosophers who were to influence Plato, the idea of paying for excess is left behind, and cosmic harmony seems to be secured by means of a hierarchic structure where the active male principle of tracing borders is seen to exert itself on a receptive, female element which needs the male principle in order to be limited. Female principles such as even numbers, darkness, diversity and movement need to be checked by male principles such as odd numbers, light, unity and rest.<sup>4</sup> Here, the male principle is that which is actively delimiting things, that which constitutes things as unities with clear forms that appear in the light of day. Light is associated with reason, while darkness is associated with irrational forces, so the male norm is the norm for rationality, too, while the female principle is that which, lacking in rationality, cannot govern itself, but has to be governed by an exterior force. The drive towards excess here seems to be on the female side only. With Plato and Aristotle, this theme is developed into the dichotomies of *form and matter*, *active and passive*. If heat is a male quality in Aristotle, it is because hot is an active, forming principle, while cold is not. To Plato and Aristotle and other philosophers that I refer to as "the ancients", the whole world is organized in oppositional binaries associated with male and female positions.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps the most clear case of how *moral* philosophy can be read as a strategy for coming to terms with human excess, is found in Aristotle, who advocates temperance as a virtue that allows people to choose the right middle way between insensibility and excess. Temperance is seen by Aristotle as dependent on *enkrateia*, a sort of mastery over oneself, a virtue which allows a free citizen to fight and resist and assure his dominance in relation to desires and pleasures. In his comments on Aristotle's ethics, Michel Foucault is at pains to show that temperance depends on the permanent presence of dangerous desires and that it would have no value beyond the domination over violent, rebellious forces. Desire did not appear as an *evil*, but rather as a *challenge* which might lead to defeat or victory, depending on the moral strength of the subject (Foucault 1986: 79). This subject would necessarily be a male subject, since the ability to respect a certain hierarchy within the soul, authorizing eternal reason to hold the sway of changeable objects such as desirable bodies, was the same ability that was supposed to be required of people who were to exercise authority over households and cities, and the male prerogative of ruling households and cities was never questioned by Aristotle.

Now, all the various strategies for coming to terms with excess found in Greek philosophy crucially depend on a cosmology where the subjection of excessive forces within the human soul to the nobler forces of reason is secured by the resemblance of the human soul to the hierarchical structure of the universe: reason, which is the eternal element in the human soul, is supposed to gain superiority insofar as it links up with the eternal elements in the universe—those perfect, eternal, unchanging elements which are situated beyond the moon... This cosmology collapsed with the scientific revolution in the 16th and 17th centuries, and modern European philosophy does not offer any coping strategy in terms of appeals to the structure of the universe. Some philosophers of the 20th century, like Martin Heidegger, have tried to identify human technological attitude as the primary source of excess, since it throws us out of our natural life-world, where we should be embedded in a pragmatic context with things around us. But then, this would mean that a disease like AIDS could not be counteracted by antiviral drugs, which represent advanced technology, nor could the pandemic be counteracted by condoms, which represents not so advanced technology, but still technology.

Of course, there is an understandable human nostalgia, a deep-rooted longing towards a situation where one is submerged in one's surroundings and does not have to search for technological solutions in order to survive. But since we have lost our instincts, we are off hinges and separated from a world that we depend upon for survival. As beings of language and not of instincts, we do not organize our survival in a way dictated by nature, and since we are not dictated by nature, we cannot help trying to dictate nature. Measured against the order of nature, we are in excess, and I do not think this situation can change, for in that case we would have to exchange words for instincts. A more viable approach could lie in the way we exchange words, in other words, in admitting our excess and not trying to cover it up. If the strategy adopted by ancient Greek philosophers for covering up their own excess typically consisted in blaming it all on the woman, then a typically modern covering up strategy could be seen to consist in blaming it all on technology. A real coping strategy could consist in promoting an openness about the specifically human dimension of the problem, and, hopefully, if we can see ourselves as the problem, we can also see ourselves as the solution.

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<sup>1</sup> Thus, in the theory of love elaborated by the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (cf. *Encore*), the cause of desire is called surplus-enjoyment (*plus-de-jouir*, a term constructed along the same line as Marx' surplus value, *plus-value*).

<sup>2</sup> *Kant on Education*, London, 1899, quoted from: Slavoj Zizek, (1999: 36).

<sup>3</sup> Justice thus seem to be conceived as a cure against negative forces without having to be measured against any positive ideals.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. the Pythagorean "table of oppositions" referred to by Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 986 a 23-26.

<sup>5</sup> Jacques Lacan puts it this way: "Until then (the advent of the new sciences), nothing in the realm of knowledge had been conceived without taking part of the fantasy of how the sexual relation is inscribed, and the subjects of the ancient theory of knowledge cannot even be supposed not to have known about it. Let us just consider the terms of active and passive, which determine all that has been elaborated as to the relation between form and matter, this fundamental relation that is referred to by each step taken first by Plato first and then by Aristotle concerning the nature of things. It is visible, even touchable, that these state statements can only be supported by a fantasy by which they tried to create a substitute for that which by no means can be said, that is: the sexual relation. (Author's translation (K.R.S.) from Lacan, 1975: 75.) To Lacan, the way we organize the world in oppositional binaries that are associated with male and female positions is caused by a *fantasy* we need to sustain our desire: the fantasy of a harmonious sexual relationship. Sexes that are just *different* nevertheless could seem complementary, because otherwise, our desire might despair. And then, this complementarity seems to require one term that should gain hegemony by totalizing the two of them: the phallus is thus opposed to nothing or void, or a hole, like form as opposed to a matter that it informs, like active is opposed to a passive term that it sets in motion, like light is opposed to a darkness that it lights up etc.: like a woman in Aristotle's view had to be ruled by a man, because she was nothing but an underdeveloped man. The two terms that constitute the binaries that the world of Plato and Aristotle was built on, were never on an equal footing. And though we are not Aristotelians or Platonists, and though we do not believe that women are underdeveloped men, the same economy of hierarchical binarism still works: in a great variety of fields, medicine, e.g., the male function is still



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the normative function, so that female qualities are considered as accidents departing from human essence.

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