

Büro für besondere Texte

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I. Intro

There was this party. The conversation had several subjects, we all were no longer young, no excessive eaters, no excessive fitness-folks, some smokers, who enjoyed their cigarettes outside, some non-smokers. The meal was vegetarian with one vegan dish. Beverage consisted of wine and water and beer. I knew of one in the group who does never drink alcohol, maybe because he had fallen into addiction once and freed himself from it, another person, known to me as a joyful wine-drinker, said she is just on a diet for a certain health problem, otherwise she would enjoy the Baclava and the wine. We have never been that kind of people who need to talk all the time on food or climate and what to avoid and what to do. Climate and health - we have it in our minds as everybody these days, but it is there together with the awareness of other issues and problems. And regarding our personal life-styles, we think, we are reasonable and balanced and circumspective in what to do, what to avoid, in living and letting live. But even in such a beautiful tolerant and well-behaved group it can pop up all of a sudden: the *Zeitgeist* of asceticism.

At a certain point this smart and good looking woman, very slim, very healthy, very, let us say, "natural" in her appearance - and being very nice - began to talk about cold showers and that you, if you do *only* cold showers, no longer need all these substances for a nice skin, that people use who take warm showers. She was listened to quite a time, and the atmosphere of warm welcoming to anybody did not change a little. Only when I said, well, I do enjoy the kick of cold showers and a

fresh swim in pretty cold water, but actually I enjoy a hot shower too, it turned out that there were others who already must have felt bad about their secret love for warm showers and all these nice substances we feed our skins with afterwards. They expressed gratitude towards my coming out as a lover of warm showers and cosmetic pleasures. Wow. Had they, in spite of all the good atmosphere, been afraid that I, undeniably formed to a certain strictness by the youth in the home of a Protestant minister and personally behaving comparatively "green" as a consumer, I could join in the call for the next renunciation, less warm showers?

The conversation went on, everything went well. And I do no tell the story in order to criticize anybody for indulging in the pleasures of the use of cold water nor do I find it ridiculous to abstain from using even green cosmetics, if people choose to do so. What I do want to criticize, however, is a general spirit, a *Zeitgeist*, that celebrates renunciation and sacrifice as such and disdains pleasure. Why so? To put it the shortest possible way: Asceticism is about control. Which is, again, not in itself a bad thing. There is no relative autonomy or freedom without a relative ability of all people to control themselves. But the desire for control is itself in need of balance and control. Where it runs out of control, excessive compulsory disorders do not only molest the lives of individuals (which would be their business alone) but also the entire fabric of all sorts of social entities. This insight, which had become pretty widespread and well-accepted in the educational efforts and developing psychologies at least in the Western world during the decades following World War II, seems to somehow get lost in the new millennium, and I wonder why.

The Zeitgeist of asceticism is everywhere. It is about control - and signifies a desire for control that could easily itself become uncontrollable

II. Discipline, Ascesis and Control Simple

The desire for control is as old as humanity. With a being that is not entirely organized by the overall rule of "pure instinct" - the question

"what shall we do?" is always open. The smallest child begins her life by checking how much she can achieve by her own actions and where these actions are confronted with a limitation. From the beginning we meet both fulfilment of our needs - and the denial of fulfilment. In our earliest relations we experience *other* humans as those who fulfil our needs or refuse to do so. At the beginning, our closest parenting persons are almost in full control. However, already with our first cry we try to gain control for ourselves. Over the long years of childhood we usually learn that via "impulse control" we better achieve what we wish for than via immediate expression of our feelings under this or that type of stress. In all cultures it is elementary for parenting to teach infants the ability of postponing or letting entirely go of impulsive desires – later education only adds to this or builds on it.

Accordingly, a general stream of wisdom traditions, which can be met in all cultures known to us thus far, has, therefore, great estimation for parental work and its disciplining aspects. At the same time its teachers are pretty well aware of the resistance all education meets – and warns against later revenge. They know, life will turn former strong parents into elderly people that are weak and dependent on their meanwhile strong offspring. So most traditions do a lot to make sure that old folks are being revered and entrusted with decisive responsibilities in the communities. This common wisdom element in all cultures takes it, moreover, for granted that all humans strive for pleasure and power (power being understood as the ability to control access to the basic pleasures). Wisdom literatures take for granted that people tend to seek their own pleasure at first and only then care for others. Their educational purpose is, therefore, to make people think: Isn't it wiser to consider the interest of the others as well? Isn't it smart to respect the powerful without fearing them too much? Doesn't fear only stem from "egotist" motives? Isn't it better to let go of that which fixes you in dependency? Hence the more or less differentiated anti-ego discourse with its ascetic elements in all these traditions.

However: Wisdom-literature in general is founded on balance and the golden rule of treating others as you would be treated by them. Wisdom leads peoples to organize their lives around a common

center, pass knowledge of how to do things from one generation to the next, lead a life in smart (and even sustainable) interaction with nature, keep a rhythm of work and leisure for all classes, make the youth respect the older and the older deal responsibly with the youth, and bring about constant changes with circumspection and timeliness. Were it only for this stream of wisdom in all of them - no religion could really clash with another, neither could any culture. As to pleasure, all wisdoms of all peoples teach nothing but measure. Its relative asceticism only serves the limiting of pain and harm. But if possible, you should be able to enjoy, when it is time for pleasure, and you should be able to be very disciplined when it is time for hard work etc. Wisdom loves the world and wishes you a good long life, as long as you don't behave too badly.

Wisdom as common stream in all cultures says: Pleasure and measure are to be in balance.

III. Loss of Control and an Early Dialectic of Sacrificing

But all of these wisdoms are made for peaceful situations when there may be conflicts here and there, but no excesses, no violent shocking events, no total victory of one group in society over the other. Wisdom is not for utopia nor for paradise. Wisdom wants you to think that there is no pleasure without a little bit of pain, and no pain that cannot be turned into a good thing by prudent understanding and acting. The more problematic religions, and with them the one core thing in most violent religions, *sacrifice*, arise, however, in violent situations, in situations of shock and trauma. The radical religions - I might say - begin with the experience that there might not be pleasure without pain, but that there is definitely pain without pleasure. This has to be changed, and here the first master-trick in cultural history comes in: Sacrificing. How does it work?

The wonderful Canadian poet and classicist, Anne Carson, has put it as brief as possible in her remarkable work entitled *Glass, Irony, and God*:

"There is a kind of pressure in humans to take what is most beloved by them and smash it. Religion calls this pressure piety and the smashed thing a sacrifice to God."

One sober rational-historical explanation to this "pressure" is provided by Christoph Türcke. He begins with traumatic experiences of early humankind. Under the painful impression of having lost their homes and loved ones to, let's say, a volcanic eruption or any other catastrophe, people imagine that they can regain control over their fate when becoming themselves the cause of their own loss. The deal with the imaginary Gods, then, is to sacrifice, for instance, the firstborn child, in order to get the blessing at least over all the other children that should follow. Same with the animals of the herds and the fruit of the land, or even that little piece of foreskin in order to keep the greater masculinity intact. The basic idea is always: if I prove to be strong enough for renunciation, I shall be rewarded – as I have been rewarded by my loving parent for the discipline in postponing satisfaction for this or that desire and so on.

Of course, this more or less childish trick does not really work – besides of creating the advantage of cultic unity, it causes a lot of immediate and collateral damage. Therefore, from a pretty early age on, people question the sense of sacrifices and search for better solutions. It is usually called the "process of rationalization". Reason is not wisdom, as we know, and here part of our present problem has its roots. This process of rationalization begins already in the Bible and cultural parallels of its time. As Carson writes further: "Prophets question these names. What is an idol? An idol is a useless sacrifice, says Isaiah."

Abraham, in this view (which is affirmed scholarly by some historians of religions) is an early prophet. In an environment, in which everybody is supposed to sacrifice the firstborn, the story that is being told about the binding of Isaac by his father, basically says: See what a man! He has already sent the firstborn, Ismael, to the desert, which is the same thing as sacrificing him. And then he is even ready to sacrifice the really beloved son of his old age, miraculously conceived and born to the beloved Sarah. But this God then, who demanded the greatest of

sacrifices, is convinced by Abraham's piety and seizes the opportunity to show that he does no longer want human sacrifices. In other words: the story comes to justify the *abolition* of human sacrifice. It comes to soften the demands of the imagined deities – and it can only convince the more rigorous sacrificers by aggravating the demand and elevating the obedience of the pious pioneer of non-sacrificing. Only after this move, intended to prove that the first to *interrupt* the habit of sacrificing children is not simply a traitor or a coward or an egotist rebellious softie who loves his child more than his God, but rather a hero of unconditioned piety, the end of child sacrificing can be communicated as God's will.

Loss of control in catastrophic situations creates the desire to gain hold of it again. This is in archaic times "achieved" by sacrifice. Sacrifice is the exaggeration of measured impulse-control under peaceful conditions.

IV. Subjecting Nature and the Asceticism of Masters

It takes particular strength to lead the masses to a better life. To be strong, is not an easy thing, however. Most of the wisdom literature is directed to potential and real leaders. Biblical Josef made his fortune by advising the Egyptian pharaoh, Aristotle was the adviser of Alexander the Great, Seneca the adviser of Nero, and so on. They all teach awareness of one fact: It is impossible to protect a house, a city, a state, an empire, against all sorts of natural or human interventions. There are too many factors that can escape your control. But one thing is always in your hand: you can control your own impulses. Hence traditional wisdom addresses the common ruler to keep himself sober and controlled and resilient to all sorts of temptations. However, who would know better than these advisers that the master has to be rewarded somehow. One important element of his reward is that he has access to pleasures *not* allowed to the subjects. But even to masters and those who do not principally object it, pleasure is a tricky thing.

In their well-known work on the *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, the Philosophers Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno are dealing

with the dominion-aspects of rational modernity (and capitalism). They say that human thought has emerged in the process of human liberation from the threatening and frightening powers of nature. When nature has been almost perfectly subjected, it, however, takes revenge, according to our philosophers: by giving pleasure to the human being:

Pleasure abducts and seduces the human spirit away from pure thought, the strive for pleasure distracts rulers away from the straightforward pursuit of their tasks, and in a similar way distracts later modern citizens away from rationally framing their lives. This is why pleasure has to be avoided, condemned, or at least sensitively restricted in all cultures known to us thus far. It would be, in other words, the reason for asceticism and discipline simple: to save our very rational capacities from falling prey to irrational pleasures, or to nature's revenge, if you will.

In claiming that pleasure – and the weakness of yearning for it – is the revenge of nature for its having been overcome by reason and rationality, Adorno and Horkheimer bring the entire complex relationship between master and slave into the discourse on pleasure and asceticism. And they discuss it in the example of Odysseus, an exemplary master. Odysseus, master of reason and cunning, overcomes all sorts of mythical and archaic forces by his smartness. One of his godly admirers, seductive and insidious Kirke, has (after having been overwhelmed by her love towards the brave man) warned him from the sirens. Their irresistibly seductive singing has drawn all sailors passing the rocks on which they reside to death. Odysseus, as you all know, wanted to hear this promising music without drowning. He wanted to have the cake and eat it, he wanted to enjoy the flash without being struck by it. In order to achieve this, he not only has to coerce himself into the painful position of being tied to the mast, but he has also to prevent the slaves who drive the ship from enjoying the same acoustic pleasure that he takes the liberty to enjoy. Only by this token it is possible that the ship passes the rocks of the sirens unharmed.

When nature takes revenge against reason by cunningly offering a deadly pleasure - then the avantgarde master uses himself a trick which has become common all over the world: He separates the pleasure from the danger. But in order to be able to act like this, he is - in antiquity, and not only then - depending on others, who either are exposed to the dangers in his place, or depraved from sharing his pleasures, or both. The asceticism of masters must not be total - if there are others who bare the consequences of pleasure for them.

Even measured pleasure is supposed to be dangerous. Masters separate pleasure from danger by putting servants into danger and taking the pleasure for themselves. But some (*Horkheimer and Adorno say*) pleasure itself is a revenge of the subjected nature.

V. The Spirit of Revenge and the Asceticism of Slaves

Slaves, however, can rebel against their lot. If a master is not wise - meaning that he does not offer the people on whose service he depends, some sort of token, be it protection, fair payment and participation or at least *panem et circenses*¹, the famous bread and games, the ancient feast or the modern holidays and social welfare - his slaves or servants or subjects will suffer too much and seek revenge. Already the ancient type of *circenses*, something like contemporary bullfight with humans instead of bulls, makes the audience repeat the Odyssean trick: they sit in the ranks, getting the kick of the view of real bloodshed, but letting others fight and suffer.

Only that the kick they get, e.g., in the Colosseum, is severely infected by sacrificial violence. In the same measure in which they are brutally subjected by their masters, these Roman consumers of cruelty seem to find pleasure in seeing others suffering worse. But can we call this pleasure? Psychologically speaking, the sadist's misunderstanding of the erotic as enjoying the humiliation and torturing of others, is clearly a disorder. As is the traumatic repetition of self-exposure to the sight of

¹ Juvenal

cruel events in today's, most times fictional entertainment by criminal novels. Both the urge to humiliate others and the voyeur's delight in watching cruel actions are a compulsion rather than anything like a joy of life which could be cultivatable by measured use. (There maybe people here who like the more playful variants of the so-called sexual orientation of Sado-Masochism, and I apologize - we don't need to enter into the details of the psychology of sadism here, but I am ready to answer questions later. To my purpose in this talk it may be enough to state that) the impulse to humiliate others is inextricably connected with the early and definite frustration of other ways to gain the relative control over your own desires and your fate in society, which are open to luckier and healthier people.

Therefore: even if our cultural history is full of narratives of sadistic leaders (who often underwent horrible educations in their childhoods) - the sadistic disorder is in its genesis and fixation rather a disorder of slaves.

In fact, only very resilient individuals are capable of developing a comparatively healthy attitude towards desire and pleasure under the condition of permanent dominion and subjection. In order to become resilient themselves and to equip their people with strength, leaders of rebellious movements (who usually aim at gaining control and taking it from the ruling class of their time and place) tend to teach a rigorous asceticism. Most rebellions begin with a brutal subjection first of the women and families in a rebellious movement, and they go on with cruel fights for all sorts of revenge as we see it all over the Middle East. The religious "rationalisation" of the roughness in the several warlord's "disciplines" is only barely masking the growth and spreading of a collective trauma and revenge syndrome.

However, there have been more successful and peaceful rebellions, which began with acquiring the asceticism of masters for the slaves and worked by the strong image of a leader who was able to master his own revenge impulses as well as his natural desires. This was obviously the convincing force in early Christianity, and also, for instance, with Mahatma Ghandi, who preached non-violent action and

the abstaining from revenge. (These movements were not exactly feminist either, but neither were they so violently abusive towards women as are the present Islamist rebellions).

In view of the asceticism of slaves, the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan wrote: *Freedom emerges in the triangle of (1) the renunciation of desire, which the Master demands from the slave who (under the threat of death-penalty) must not enjoy the fruits of his/ her work, (2) the readiness of both master and? slaves to sacrifice their lives for some greater good, and (3) the suicidal renunciation of the Slave, who by this move annuls the victory of the Master as the latter is left alone in his unhuman solitude (instead of enjoying the sight of the slave in his pain).*

As to the lives of individuals and social entities, we need to understand that a total and sustainable frustration of normal human desires stands at the beginning of all sorts of cruel and self-sacrificing attitudes as well as of unconscious but all the more compulsive asceticism.²

It is the slave - the soul in self-defence against depravation - who turns to an almost suicidal asceticism and renunciation of the entire concept of pleasure. If he doesn't, he won't be fit for an efficient fight for more equality. As I recently heard a young scholar and political activist from India say about digital workers in Calcutta: "These people are too happy! They should not be so happy, they should see what is being done to them and rebel against it."

If wise masters do bad enough with keeping their pleasure in measure, slaves who suffer under rigorous denial of pleasure to them and wish to

² And maybe it is not by mere chance alone that the impulse of revenge is preferedly directed towards a female, motherly figure who usually is the first person to frustrate the infant's desires. Cf. the text of <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MpMgzWBpu2o>. If this sounds too abstract in your ears: take a short look into traditional marriages. You will find this principle perfectly at work in some, and our cultural traditions are full of praises of the pure woman of the house. There are many other more or less intimate relationships in which this dialectic can be observed.

change their lot, have to be willing and able to sacrifice even more than they have in case of obedience. Rigorous asceticism is - often unconsciously, but as often declaredly - the presupposition of rebellion.

VI. The Paulinian Twist

Of course, this Indian scholar meant well. Of course, these workers are clearly exploited - and they probably only say they are happy in order not to get fired. Nevertheless, there was something in her speech that sounded Puritan to me - in the sense of the famous saying: "Puritanism is the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, might be happy".³ I thought, if they are happy - and some may have good reasons to be when comparing their achievements to an earlier stage of untouchables in some remote village - why not just let them be happy? The attribute "Puritan" has indeed become synonym for an asceticism that ran wild, after the goal, a self-determined society, had been achieved in the United States.

So, what we need to look for, is the point at which an asceticism that has been meaningful, becomes something abstract and absolute.

I'll bother you once again with love now, and for a reason. The efficient fighter in a war, an arena of bloody fights or soccer, is demanded to abstain from drugs and delighting drinks before the decisive battle. And warriors in all cultures are usually even called to give up on individual love before battles. A measure that is prolonged into more or less religious institutions, where the so-called spiritual war never ends. The sexual activity compatible with wars and the struggle for control is abuse, not love.

Still, love in a concept that is supposed to transcend individual love, is said to be the very essence of the Christian religion. This religion is largely founded on the missionary activities and the seven authentic letters of a certain Jewish tentmaker from Tarsus, who in his early life

³ Ascribed to H.L. Mencken, but probably older.

called himself Saul, persecuted the young Jesus-movement, but underwent conversion. He then called himself Paul and unfolded incredible activities in order to convert others. In one of his seven letters, the first to the Corinthians, he sings the hymn of selfless love, known to most Christians in the world. Before singing this hymn in the thirteenth chapter, in the same letter, Paul calls for a spiritual race (chapter 9) :

²⁴ Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. ²⁵ Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.

²⁶ Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. ²⁷ No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

(You might remember the quote of Lacan's text, which constructed the desire for pleasure as the common goal of master and slave. This paragraph of St. Paul seems, however, to show more than anything else that it is not the yearning for pleasure, which is the destructive common goal of slave and master. Rather it is the will for power and fame, which both share, once pleasure has been cut out as unavailable anyway for the slave.)

The idea to first subject your own body (make it your "slave") is yet pretty much in line with all the admonitions of Paul's time and place. As Paul preaches rather to slaves than to masters, it is no wonder either that his letter sounds a bit more radical than a classical text of wisdom. However - in a later letter, the one to the Romans, he writes about failure. And here the matter becomes more interesting.

Libraries have been written on the seventh chapter of Paul's Letter to the Romans. For not only does he there confess how he in spite of all his struggle remains a sinner: ¹⁹ *For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.* ²⁰ *Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.*

Other than his contemporaries he constructs a connection between sin and law that seems to have a strong twist against the law itself.

7,7: What shall we say, then? Is the law sinful? Certainly not! Nevertheless, I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet.' 8: For apart from the law, sin lies dead. 9 I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. 10 The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. 11 For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.

One could feel tempted to think that Christianity would have been a liberating force, as compared to stoic and other ascetic cults, philosophies and religions. Blaming the law, right? What a nice idea. And what a dangerous one! Paul most probably met a violent death in Rome for it, as some would have it⁴.

But then, look around in the history of Christianity: All sorts of tough enmity towards all sorts of pleasure, harsh asceticism especially in those compartments of our majority religion, that have become known as Protestant – which hold precisely those theologies that take careful recourse to Paul's letter to the Romans and Galatians in particular. If they - with their favourite apostle - claim to fulfil the law "aus Freiheit" (for free, from their own free decision) - yet they are not erroneously perceived as being the most severe, black, ascetic and law-obeying people in the entire world. Their attitude - of doing some pedantic asceticism just so, without external coercion or legal command, only driven by intrinsic motivation - seems to have only been refined by enlightenment: Doesn't it work in our times even without religion? We, the kings and queens of asceticism, need less than these 7 letters of some ancient fanatic, in order to sweat ourselves to death in the gym and - if invited for a good, though small meal - treat even pleasure with

⁴ Paulusakten

a feeling of obligation. (Barbie: ascetic ideal, compared to Liz Taylor, for instance; Lagerfeld, control!) - ("Genusspflicht").

How do we make sense of this?

VII. Overcoming the Traumatic Split – is it Possible?

The main point of Paul's letters is that they describe the *gap* between that which we want and shall and ought – and that which we do and can. He does not treat this gap as something that has to be closed by all means (1:1 "Umsetzung" of a plan) but rather as a possibly productive opening towards something new. The self-proclaimed lover of the law knows that there is no sacrifice ("work") that will ever heal this split. But the one thing he gains is belief. What is the content of his belief? Father, son, and holy spirit? This I would not take too seriously. Important for the mentality that was created by these 7 letters seems to be the belief that it is always meaningful to strive for the best. Even *if* or even *because* a certain goal can never be fully achieved. The productive gap has been filled by some with a pretty stupid prescription of this or that "true belief" – leading again to excesses of asceticism that Paul and Jesus tried to leave behind with their new "*euangelion*". But the awareness of the gap and the hope for love never stopped working its way underground. Time and again it could stipulate new beginnings and reformations. Whether Paul's wisdom is really superior to those other wisdoms we know in the world, readers and listeners may decide for themselves. But to me it is important as – by giving up on the idea of being in a 1:1 control relationship with which law so ever – he makes wisdom accessible also to slaves, and also to societies that are not from the outset peaceful and stable.

Let's take the wisdom and free ourselves from the battle-cries of mere asceticism. Those who have come to this party here, I don't have to convince that we should look out for a more balanced attitude towards pleasure anyway. And probably I don't have to convince you of the necessity to control the desire for control. If I took you on a long ride through the history of our cultures, it was just in order to offer you

some arguments in favor of pleasure and against an asceticism that has become an idol.

Idolatry and superstition - these can well be the proper names for religious and cultural movements, which try to gain full control over the minds of their adherents. Whether the authors of Jewish wisdom literature or of Epicurean philosophy, whether the sages of Christian humanism or the philosophers of early enlightenment: There has always been a stream of thought in all cultures that tried to overcome the idolatric tendencies in the very cultures which produced fanatics and moderate thinkers side by side.

(In his latest work, John Toland, one of the early thinkers of European enlightenment, who coined the expression "pantheists" thinking that all beings are divine and deserve respect and kindness, imagined a banquet of wise people (indeed he was one of the first who did not want to exclude women principally from higher education) under the name of "Pantheisticon". It is supposed to be celebrated a little like the Platonic Symposium and a little like a congregation of Free Masons. (The first version of his text looked in print a little like a mockery of the Book of Common Prayer, only that the content differed a lot, and the visions expressed by some of the imaginary speakers are clearly what we would call pantheistic until this day. Concerning superstition he writes):

Yet as superstition is always the same in vigor though sometimes different in rigor and as no wise person's attempt to root it out of the minds of all persons, which could not be compassed at any rate, was never amiss, yet such a person will use his or her endeavors to do all that can be done. That is, by plucking out the teeth and paring the nails of this worst and most pernicious of monsters, he or she will not endure it at its pleasure to hurt on every side." (John Toland, Pantheisticon)

If we accept Anne Carson's definition that an idol is a useless sacrifice - then our exaggerated asceticism, which only expresses our yearning

for absolute control over at least our physical lives, clearly demands all sorts of useless sacrifices and is most probably idolatry.

When we speak about imbalanced asceticism, what has to be taken seriously is not each single demand like *only cold showers once a week* or similar things. Not all of ascetic exercise (asceticism means nothing but exercise) is irrational or bad. If somebody loses control over her consumption of alcohol and with it over all the rest of her life – it is certainly a good decision to abstain from it. But to those who can enjoy the pleasures of having a good wine without falling prey to addictive abuse – why should they be doomed to a life without it? If we manage to grow our food in balance with the capacities of nature (including our own health) – why should we forbid all sorts of meat consumption? What has to be taken seriously in the *Zeitgeist* of asceticism, is the haunting fear of losing control expressed in it.

Wisdom is all about balance. It doesn't necessarily exclude some excesses in individual lives. Sometimes the human soul loves to lose control. That is not a bad thing. The opposite. It can be a very good experience (- and basically every job which entails a little element of unforeseeability is perceived as more meaningful than any occupation in which it is clear what is going to happen). But it is a better experience when there is an opportunity to regain control after a while, and when you not lose hold of your entire precious relative and timely autonomy.

Human life does not come without trauma – but it is good to know that sacrifice is not a solution. Wisdom built on measure in the relation between renunciation and pleasure, on mutual respect of all beings rather than on dominion between "mind" and "body" or "masters" and "slaves" will allow for more happiness for a greater number of people than will all excessive asceticism and blind rigor of sacrificing. And if pleasure is nature's revenge for human attempts to gain full control over it: why not accept the offer and enter into better conversation with nature in a way enjoyable to both?

Abstract:

What is asceticism? It is an anxious and even demonizing attitude towards pleasure. In seven steps of cultural-historical reflection the difference between wise measure and the excesses of sacrifice and extreme asceticism is laid out. The sacrificial reading of traditions and its secularized form of ascetic Zeitgeist is described as a desperate attempt to control lives that are feared to be out of control otherwise. The more "sovereign" attitude of wisdom, which rhymes pleasure with measure, is recommended.