In this chapter I propose to explore one particular realm of pathology that has relevance to the sphere of mental health and the formation of mental disease concepts in ancient medicine: nutrition and eating/drinking behaviours, and their alteration as forms of mental disorder. These include appetite and lack thereof, pathological drives (or absence of drives) towards food, food restriction and pathological voracity, and a general distortion in one's attitudes towards food. I suggest that this area of experience received increased attention in late-antique medical writings as part of a wider phenomenon, the inclusion of the themes of voluntariness, self-control and the management of needs and desires, so much so that specific diseases thus emerged in association with these areas of human subjectivity—a topic which has still not received the attention it deserves, unlike other aspects of subjective bodily needs and desires, notably sex.

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1 I have labelled these 'eating disturbances' for the purpose of our discussion, without any retrospective identification of these experiences with current psychiatric taxonomies of eating disorders. By 'mental' I refer primarily to the ancient categorisations of pathological behaviours under disturbances of the mind variously labelled as forms of 'madness' (i.e., using vocabulary of mental disorder: see Thumiger, ‘The Early Greek Medical Vocabulary of Insanity’, in Harris, W. V. (2015) Mental Disorders in the Classical World, 61–95, for a survey) or in continuity with them; moreover, their relevance to psychopathology can be easily appreciated by modern readers too, as we shall see. For a discussion of the psychology of eating patterns in classical medicine see Thumiger, C. (2017) A History of the Mind and Mental Health in Classical Greek Medical Thought, 188–228.

2 In his cultural-historical discussion (1986. The Use of Pleasure, volume 2 of The History of Sexuality, 109–116, esp. 114) Foucault does mention food, emphasising a much less intense preoccupation, in classical personal morality, with its consumption and enjoyment than
The case of disturbances in the area of nutritional behaviours is interesting for various reasons. First of all, this is a central aspect of human life, whose potential psychological relevance does not need argument: failure to eat under mental distress is topical in ancient literatures as it is in contemporary understanding. From a historical perspective, eating as meaningful beyond its fundamental function has been studied from all sort of perspectives by cultural studies, especially as social activity: the consumption of cooked food has long been regarded as specifically human and universally so, involving a number of social habits that characterize human communities. The psychology of eating as experience of the individual, by contrast, has received much less attention, perhaps also through concerns about anachronism and retrospective diagnoses of common eating disorders in contemporary developed societies, of which the most known labels are anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa.

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with sex in support of his own focus on sex and sexuality as the most loaded experience. Foucault refers especially to Xenophon, Plato and Aristotle to corroborate his thesis. Apart from the overstatement of certain sexual themes (see Nussbaum, M. C. (1985) 'Affections of the Greeks', New York Times Book Review 2,10,11, 13–14, Lloyd, G. E. R. (1986) ‘The Mind on Sex’, The New York Review of Books 13,3) the absence of the complementary discussion of food in late antique medicine appears to be a major fault in the picture: attention to the element of voluntariness in the experiences of appetite and its variations, in fact, is also noticeably absent from classical medicine, despite the topos of frugality cherished by earlier philosophical discussions, and Aristotle’s discussion of akrasia as impairment in strong medical terms in Eth. Nic. 7. (Flawed) desires are increasingly thematised in ethical discussions by Hellenistic and later philosophers as expression of a ‘disease of the soul’ and later attract the scrutiny of medicine (although the division between these two spheres remains an uncomfortable one: see Polito, R. (2016) ‘Competence Conflicts between Philosophy and Medicine: Caelius Aurelianus and the Stoics on Mental diseases’, Classical Quarterly 66, 1; we shall not however engage with the philosophical discussion of desires, pleasure and pain from Democritus onwards). I argue, here and in my chapter on satyriasis in this volume, that sex and food are in fact very similar cases, in which what is at stake is not sex specifically but the prominence gained by voluntariness, desires and drives in the definition of human (mental) life and health in the first centuries of our era.
