Modern Asceticism and Contemporary Body Culture

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‘Modern asceticism’ appears a paradox. By the dominant mythology of modernism, it should not exist. Asceticism is something that the modern world has left behind, together with the Christianity that formerly underpinned it. Here Christianity is regarded as encoding a series of ascetic values, rooted in hostility to sexuality and the body, carried forward in the traditional catholic valorisation of virginity and chastity. Enlightenment thinkers from Voltaire to Russell have associated asceticism with monkish excess, repressed sexuality and a culture of life denial. Surely modernism is about escaping from all that, and presenting a new secular ideal that views the body and its expression in a positive, healthy form: that is a certainly part of the modernist myth. And yet, as the chapters in this book ably show, ascetic impulses did not disappear in the early twentieth century. Modernity did not eradicate their cultural expression. Indeed, far from disappearing, asceticism appears to be part of the modernist project, carried forward at its heart.

One way we can understand this paradox is in terms of the particular historical moment. Modern asceticism is rooted in the rejection of the nineteenth century bourgeois world. It is about clearing out the clutter of the High Victorian interior – the heavy drapes, the dusty fringes, the elaboration of ornament, the shadowy spaces – and letting the sun shine on the bright, clean, freshly coloured and simplified interior. Air, light, sunshine, cleanliness and purity are the watchwords of the interwar period, and are used in ways that extend beyond their literal relevance. Such impulses were carried through in the presentation of the body, exemplified in the period after the First World War by changes in women’s dress, with adoption of short skirts, cropped hair, minimal underwear, and the espousal of the new boyish, athletic figure, and the suntanned complexion. In the same way Victorian attitudes to sexuality were to be swept away and replaced by new, ‘healthy’ ones, informed by Freudian insights, freed from what were seen as repressive codes. One version of this account sees these impulses as the opposite of ascetic, inspired
by a new hedonism of the body and associated with the freeing up of sexual constraint. But as earlier chapters show these cultural trends also contain more ambivalent elements, as we saw, for example, in the history of nudism with its repudiation of overt eroticism. Early twentieth century and interwar asceticism also has links with fascist movements, and through them with a pervasive masculinisation of the body, though these impulses are also present in mainstream democratic regimes. To this end, one can interpret modern asceticism as something located in the particular contingencies of the period – a post-Victorian, secular reaction that carried within it elements of what it reacted against, but whose time is now past.

I want to argue, however, that these ascetic impulses have not disappeared, that we can detect their presence in current cultural phenomena, and indeed that they represent something central to modernism and the high or late modernist world that has succeeded it. In the following sections I will briefly outline three areas of current culture where ascetic impulses can be detected. The first concerns the culture of dieting, and related to it the malignant phenomenon of eating disorders; the second, the growing familiarity with, and mainstreaming of, vegetarian food practices; and the third, growing stringency in relation to bodily cleanliness in modern culture, and its consequences for the management of sickness and old age. I will then address how we might understand these tendencies, drawing on the work of four key theorists of the body, Norbert Elias, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva and Bryan Turner.

**Dieting and eating disorders**

Over the twentieth century, the body ideal for women has changed. (1) The generous curves and flowing figures that were prized in the period up until the First World War gave way to a new slim ideal. In parallel with other cultural movements, this can be seen as a revolt against the Victorian era with its heavily upholstered figures, an attempt to free women from the constraints of corsets, petticoats and abundant flesh, substituting a lighter, slimmer, more athletic body, free to engage in sports and other activity. It also represents a retreat from overt fertility and from a body that exemplifies maternity and domesticity. As women increasingly engaged with paid work, so they were required to fit
into more masculinised worlds, in which overt fecundity was no longer valued and in which the new demand was for a youthful, boyish, pre-maternal figure. Achieving this, however, requires increased levels of disciplinary activity to control and reduce the abundance of unruly flesh.

The reality of modern bodies is, however, rather different, with growing incidence of obesity across the western world. (2) All western societies display this trend, though with variations in pattern and degree, to the extent that World Health Organisation now terms it a global epidemic. (3) The underlying reasons are complex. At a simplest level it arises in the West from modern abundance, and the end of the culture of dearth and famine. But social and cultural changes are also significant. Declining levels of physical activity have resulted from the mechanisation of work and transport, and from the spread of social and physical environments that discourage exercise. Eating patterns have become more fragmented and de-structured, with the growth of fast food, the omnipresence of eating opportunities in the social landscape and the rise of what Fischler terms the Empire of Snacks, (4) all creating a situation where individual are constantly presented with opportunities to eat. Food is also increasingly consumed in energy dense forms that are shaped by the interests of the food industry. (5)

All this has created an obesogenic environment that shifts the onus of responsibility on to the individual, who is increasingly required to exercise conscious control over his or her intake, substituting internal restraint for what had previously been externally structured, through patterns of activity or eating, through social norms, or simply through dearth. Individuals are required to monitor and discipline their bodies by means of activities that draw on traditional ascetic practices such as conscious abstinence or self denial, but now deployed in pursuit of the new slim body ideal. Furthermore, it is increasingly not enough for the body to be slim, it must also be lean and toned, and this requires further disciplinary activity in the form of focussed exercise, gym attendance and other body work. The emphasis for women has shifted from the external corset of the nineteenth century to the internalised one of musculature and self-restraint. The body is now shaped
and disciplined according to a new hard ideal that repudiates soft or flowing flesh, and
instead presents a clearly defined and bounded ideal.

In pursuit of this we now have in the West a pervasive culture of dieting, in which being
on a diet is normative for most women. Though the figures (at least in the UK) suggest
that men are equally, or even slightly more, likely to be overweight, the cultural practices
of diets and dieting are strongly feminised; indeed for this reason some men are reluctant
to attend slimming clubs or openly declare they are slimming. This gendered pattern is
part of a wider set of disciplinary practices related to the achievement of acceptable forms
of femininity. As Wolf (6) and other feminists note, women in the late twentieth and
twentieth-first centuries, despite having achieved greater equality in education and
employment, are still engaged in extensive disciplinary practices in relation to their
bodies, toning, exercising, limiting, constricting, shaving, painting them in pursuit of a
body ideal. At the level of the media these disciplinary practices of femininity are closely
policing through the bodies of female celebrities and other women in the public eye who
are made subject to the ‘fat police’ or the ‘cellulite patrol’, humiliated for failure to
achieve normative femininity.

Such practices take on more extreme and malign forms in eating disorders, understood
here as a range of conditions, centred on bulimia and anorexia nervosa. (7) Attempts have
been made to identify the condition historically, in particular associating it with ‘fasting
girls’ in the early nineteenth century, or the practices of medieval saints or holy women.
Bynam argues persuasively, however, that medieval practices need to be interpreted
within the specific religious context of medieval women’s relation to food, the body and
the meanings of ingestion and abstinence. (8) Though problems of population selection
and changing levels of recognition mean that there are difficulties in obtaining secure
figures on current incidence, there is a general agreement that numbers have risen
significantly in the last thirty years. Eating disorders can thus be seen as a phenomena of
the late twentieth and twentieth-first centuries. Current interpretations of eating disorders
recognise that they are complex phenomena that expresses both individual
psychopathology and wider cultural themes – an analysis captured in Bordo’s
characterisation of anorexia as ‘psychopathology as a crystallisation of culture.’ (9) At one end of the continuum, eating disorders, particularly anorexia, are serious life threatening psychiatric disorders: at the other, they represent practices and meanings that are widespread in the culture, for example in the widespread practice of binging and purging among young women.

Eating disorders have a strongly gendered character, the commonly quoted ratio of female to male being 10:1; and cultural analyses draw heavily on gender as explanation, indeed feminist analyses have long led the field in their interpretation. (10) Eating disorders are here seen as reflecting the paradoxical situation of women in modern culture, representing a working through, at a bodily level, of tensions in relation to women’s wider social position. In this they are both a rebellion against contemporary femininity, with their creation of an ugly, pathological body in which the visible signs of femininity have been eradicated, and an exaggerated adherence to aspects of it, in their pursuit of a stripped, ultra slim body on which no ounce of fat is visible. Some writers, such as Showalter, (11) have drawn parallels between the current epidemic of anorexia and the late-nineteenth century one of hysteria, which similarly combined exaggerated adherence to the norms of femininity, in the form of passivity and weakness, at the same time as rebellion against them, through extremes of behaviour and unfeminine wildness.

Bordo in her analysis of anorexia explores the ways in which the phenomenon carries forward a deep set of themes found in western culture.(12) In particular she points to the dualist tradition that has been present in western culture from the time of the Greeks in which the body is seen as a form of limitation and containment, something that is heavy and that weights us down, and that we aspire to transcend and free ourselves from. Here the body is seen as alien, as something against which the spirit wages a war of denial and mastery. She sees these beliefs as forming central part of the anorexic’s attitude to her body. They are, of course, central to the tradition of Western asceticism. A key theme in the account of anorexia, both in terms of analysis and sufferer’s own narration, is the question of control. Anorexia is about achieving control of the body and self in a context of a personal or social world that feels out of control, in which the body becomes a site
for intensive monitoring. To this degree eating disorders have been characterised as ‘epidemics of the will’, representing exaggerated attempts at self mastery through acute control of the body; and parallels are sometimes drawn with pathological exercise or gym-use performed by some men.(13)

Anorexia thus displays many of the classic elements of asceticism, involving as it does the close regulation of ingestion, often accompanied by withdrawal from the social world. It centres on the denial of the flesh both in the sense of the fleshly desires of the individual and of literal flesh in the form of the curves of the female body. It is often accompanied by feelings of revulsion. It represents a rejection of sexuality in its pursuit of the pre-pubescent body, in which menstrual periods have often ceased. It often calls on purificatory themes through the use of purging, or attempts to create an ethereal, light body through the extreme avoidance of what are seen as heavy, carnal, fat-building up foods. As part of this, it is often associated in its early stages with the adoption of vegetarian diet. Anorexia thus represents a carrying forward into the culture of modernity of many of the classic ideas and practices associated with asceticism.

**Vegetarianism**

The second set of cultural practices I want to explore relates to vegetarianism, in particular the growth in popularity in the late twentieth century of vegetarian diets, and the mainstreaming of these ideas in the wider retreat from consumption of red meat. In its modern form vegetarianism emerged in the nineteenth century, when it was largely a northern European, post-Protestant phenomenon. (14) It has been particularly strong in the Britain, Germany and the United States. The national traditions are slightly different with, for example, vegetarianism in Britain having a stronger focus on animal cruelty, and German vegetarianism putting greater emphasis on health. All vegetarian movements, however, share a constellation of arguments and concerns centred around ethical issues, health concerns, ecological arguments and spiritual aspirations. Resonating through these are a set of values around wholeness, nature and purity. Modern vegetarianism is commonly found in conjunction with a range of broadly ‘progressivist’ movements, some of which have been discussed in the earlier chapters. It is recurrently
associated with pacifism, feminism and ecology. At a religious level, its associations are with free versions of Christianity like Quakerism, with ideas of Indian or Eastern spirituality, and with the free floating ‘spirituality’ characteristic of late modernity. In the UK, it is recurrently associated with the Left; though in Germany and other continental European traditions, its political links are more complex. It also has strong connections with alternative medical traditions.

Modern vegetarianism differs from earlier forms. In the Middle Ages, though vegetarianism as a term did not exist, the diet was implicitly present, encoded in ideas concerning the meaning of meat and abstinence from it. Avoiding red meat, and sometimes all animal products, was part of medieval fasting practice, tied to the cycle of the church’s year and week. It also underpinned hierarchies of holiness in relation to monastic life, with monks adopting stricter versions of this pattern, and with the strictest orders adopting the most austere versions. Underlying these practices were a series of connections made between meat, flesh and carnality, in which the ingestion of meat, especially red meat was seen to stimulate the passions, particularly those of sexuality and aggression. Some of this carries over into nineteenth and twentieth century vegetarianism, but in the context of a very different set of ideas. Modern vegetarianism focuses on this-worldly health and wellbeing, rather than austerity and denial oriented towards the hereafter and pleasing to God. Most importantly, modern vegetarianism is strongly concerned with cruelty to animals, something wholly absent from the medieval version. Lastly it seeks to establish a permanently purified or higher state, rather than one structured by the cycle of fasting and feast.

Modern vegetarianism encodes a hierarchy in terms of the meanings of foods that derives from, and is shared by, dominant meat eating culture. At the top is red meat, followed by white meats such as poultry. This is followed by fish. At the level below are foods like cheese and eggs that derive from animals but are not made of their living substance. Finally we reach the vegetable foods like fruits and grains that involve no animal element. Within dominant culture, the categories at the top of the hierarchy have the greatest status: they alone have the capacity to form the basis of a high status meal.
Animal products like cheese and eggs can be the basis of a meal, but only a lower status one such as light lunch or a snack: in the dominant view, vegetables alone are not sufficient for a full meal. The hierarchy also intersects with cooking: in general within the dominant scheme cooked meals are accorded greater status than uncooked, and the highest categories of food – such as meat - are those that require to be cooked. This hierarchy is replicated in vegetarian and quasi-vegetarian practice. Vegetarians eschew meat and fish, but eat animal products like milk and eggs; whereas vegans adopt a stricter rule and confine themselves to the bottom category alone. There are also intermediate categories such as fishetarians, who avoid meat but eat fish, or people who only avoid red meat. Again their practices reiterate and endorse the structure of the hierarchy. The hierarchy is also reflected, as we noted earlier, in medieval practices of abstinence.

As we have noted, vegetarians eat down the hierarchy, and that is part of why vegetarians food is traditionally regarded as deficient within the dominant culture. It is seen as lacking, and this condemnation is often carried over into the evaluation of vegetarians themselves. There is a gendered aspect to this, with the condemnation attaching more strongly to men. Meat and men are seen as linked, at both the symbolic and pseudo-physiological levels. Men are presented as ‘needing’ red meat, and those who eschew it can be seen as failing to achieve dominant masculinity. Vegetarianism is thus a feminised diet; and the practice is indeed biased towards women, particularly younger women, a pattern also reflected in borderline practices such as avoiding just red meat.

Vegetarianism has recurring associations with feminism; and since the late nineteenth century feminists of both the First and Second Wave, particularly those who adopted a radical feminist position, have made the connection between the exploitation of animals and of women. Many have presented vegetarianism as part of a wider feminist project of creating a reformed and redeemed version of the world that reflects women-centred values and that eschews the world of violence, cruelty and oppression. At the symbolic level, the diet also encodes female values in that many of the elements that make it up are ones traditionally regarded as female: light, pale, fresh items, as opposed to the dark, heavy ones of meat. Within vegetarian culture this endorses a series of oppositions
around: light/heavy, fresh/rotten, alive/dead, clean/unclean, pure/impure. In this
vegetarian food is seen to embody the positive values of renewal and life, as opposed to
the negative ones of decay and death. Vegetarianism is presented as building up a light,
purified body, as opposed to the heavy toxin laden body of the meat eater. This is part of
why vegetarian food is assumed within dominant culture - against nutritional science - to
be ‘slimming’. The association is also underpinned by the issue of cooking, with ‘salad’
similarly perceived as slimming and in some sense connected with women. A vegetarian
diet thus resonates with some of the themes we encountered earlier in relation to the
culture of slimming. As we shall see in the next section, there are also connections with
the clean, purified body of modern hygiene.

Modern vegetarianism thus shares aspects of dominant meat eating culture in the form of
the hierarchy of foods, at the same time as radically disrupting and revaluing them.
Vegetarianism is presented positively not in terms of what is given up, but what is
gained. It is helped in this by its alliance with other wholefood or diet reform movements;
so that vegetarianism is not confined to avoidance, but associated positively with new
ways of eating, centred around wholeness and nature. It presents a distinct way of eating
and cooking and not just a removal from the diet of avoided items.

In the late twentieth century, in Britain and North America at least, vegetarian ideas have
seeped into the mainstream. The diet is now widely familiar; vegetarian options are
ubiquitous on restaurant menus. Being a vegetarian no longer condemns an individual to
a separate existence, as it once did; and with this has gone a softening of the social
condemnation. Indeed, there is a growing trend across North America and Europe away
from the consumption of red meat in general. This partly arises from health concerns,
with the predominant advice of nutritionists being to eat less meat, especially red meat,
but it also reflects changes in sensibility, a wish to eat in different ways, that have been
influenced by ideas from vegetarianism.

Can we still talk of vegetarianism as an ascetic practice? It certainly has strong ascetic
elements in its history, exemplified in the retreat from carnality and the pursuit of moral
and bodily purity. It did previously mark people as set apart, pursuing distinctive and specific practices that cut them off from the generality; and in this it underpinned ideas of holy community or redeemed social order that echoed other forms of ascetic withdrawal. But these practices in modern vegetarianism are now carried forward within a different set of ideas, ones that present the diet not in terms of abstinence, but positively in terms of benefits. Vegetarian food is seen as better, morally and physiologically: fresher, lighter and purer. The redemptive qualities it offers are also generalisable, in that they are not confined to a holy elite, to moral or religious virtuosi, nor are they structured by fast and feast. Modern vegetarianism thus contains aspects of traditional asceticism, but carried forward within a new set of values that emphasises this-worldly well-being and the possibility of a generalisable secular moral redemption.

The clean body
The third cultural tendency I want to explore concerns growing standards of cleanliness in relation to the body. Vigarello in his account of the history of washing traces the shift from a late medieval concern with the cleanliness of just the visible parts of the body, in the form of face and hands, towards, by the early modern period, a wider preoccupation focussed on freshness of linen. Frequent changes of linen both acted to cleanse the body through the removal of sweat and dirt, and enabled the public display of cleanliness through its visible whiteness. By the nineteenth century, the focus had moved to the body as a whole, and to direct forms of washing and bathing. Vigarello, deploying a Foucauldian analysis, interprets this in terms of the steady advance from concern with just visible surfaces of the person towards ever more thoroughgoing surveillance of the body underneath.

These cultural trends were reinforced in the nineteenth century by technological developments, in the form of the fixed and plumbed bath tubs, located in rooms specifically designated for cleansing, of abundant piped hot water, and soaps specifically developed for use on the skin. In the nineteenth century, cleanliness became a class issue, as the poor were increasingly perceived to smell - a social division reinforced by rising standards among the bourgeoisie. The discourse of division along olfactory lines
continued in Britain into the 1930s, only finally disappearing in the post-war era. In the second half of the twentieth century, bathrooms became universal in the Western home. By the early twenty-first century expectations of frequent washing and showering, together with growing privatisation and individualisation of the body, mean that the ratio of bathrooms to bedrooms in the modern home approaches one to one. There is now a widespread expectation in Europe and North America that people will shower or wash daily, and that they will not smell, or only of soap or perfume.

The retreat from body smell is part of a wider re-evaluation of the senses. (16) With the passage to modernity, the eyes and vision assume new dominance, becoming the basis for what Jay terms the ‘scopic regime of modernity’. (17) The sense that has lost out in this is smell, which has become subordinated to sight. Corbin notes the steady retreat from the eighteenth century from pleasure in strong body odours. At the end of the nineteenth, it was still possible to speak of bouquet de corsage, the attractive smell of perspiration that arose from the body in the ballroom, but by the 1930s, this had become ‘B.O.’ Body Odour remained a recurrent preoccupation in women’s magazines and adverts in the post-war era, but is rarely mentioned today, mastered as it has been by more frequent washing and more effective deodorants. Once again there is a gendered dimension in this, with ‘nice’ standards in relation to the body traditionally regarded as an aspect of femininity, something men need not be so concerned with. Smells are still significant in the modern world, however, but they are increasingly artificially produced, omnipresent in soaps, shampoos, cleaning products. Occasionally protests are raised against this ultra clean, artificially scented, body ideal, which is presented as antiseptic, asexual and implicitly body denying in its suppression of odours and its washing away of human secretions, but it remains the cultural norm; and the stringency with which it is applied has, if anything, increased.

This model of the body is, however, threatened by inescapable aspects of life in the form of sickness, decay and death. Öberg suggests that modern sensibilities result in conditions like sickness or incontinence becoming increasingly unacceptable and marginalised, marking sufferers off from the mainstream. (18) Lawton provides an extreme account of
this in what she terms ‘dirty dying’ in the hospice where the disintegration of the body leads to a gradual annihilation of the self. (19) Increasingly these aspects of life are sequestered in special, hygienic spaces, such as hospitals, hospices, old people’s homes. Such institutions, she argues, are there to ‘enable certain ideas about living, personhood and the hygienic, sanitised, somatically bounded body to be symbolically enforced and maintained.’ (20) In the modern West, identity and selfhood are dependant upon the possession of a physically bounded body. In earlier cultures, she suggests, identity is more relational, personhood less fixed and individual, more fluid and permeable. With this went a different attitude to the body and its boundaries. Where people are not thought of as having a singular authentic identity mapped on to a singular separate body, substances emitted from the body were not seen as problematic in quite the same way as they are in the contemporary western paradigm. Unboundedness undermines modern individualistic constructions of the person as stable, bounded and autonomous. This is why body smell is particularly significant. It extends the person’s corporeality in ways that intrude and seep into other’s spaces. As Classen and colleagues argue this boundary transgressing quality acts ‘to threaten the abstract and impersonal regime of modernity’, running counter to the modern world view, with its emphasis on the individual privacy of discrete, defined bodies. (21)

Are such tendencies ascetic? It is certainly the case that water and washing have long been associated with purificatory regimes in which the body is cleansed from sins, presented anew. Ascetic practices often draw on ideas of cleansing that is both bodily and spiritual. Aspects of this can be detected in the modern concern with bodily cleanliness, particularly as evinced within the closely related fields of beauty therapy and spa culture, with their deployment of ideas of cleansing, both inner and outer. But these practices occur within a different structure of ideas from that of traditional asceticism. In case of the beauty sector they are located within discourses of pleasure, of pampering, of body pleasing rather than body denial. They are certainly never ascetic in the old sense of neglectful of the body - ragged, indifferent, dirty like the Desert Fathers. Their focus is profoundly this-worldly. They are also strongly individualistic, centred around the well-being and pleasure of the individual – indeed the focus on the individual is a central part
of their message, with their recurrent offer of ‘time for you’. The hypercleanliness of modern society thus contains ambivalent elements, balanced as it is on a thin line between the impulse of asceticism and the pursuit of bodily ease.

**The Body in High Modernity**

The key to these cultural trends, and indeed to modern asceticism itself, is the body. Asceticism is, at its core, bodily, and that is so even where it is extended culturally to other fields such as intellectual pursuit (chapter 7) or architectural environment (chapters 8 and 9). To understand it, therefore, we need to draw on the work of theorists of the body, particularly those who have explored the different ways in which it has been historically and culturally constituted. I am going to discuss briefly four such: Norbert Elias, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva and Bryan Turner, and suggest some of the ways in which their work alerts us to important aspects of modern asceticism in terms of refinement, discipline, the rejection of the Abject and a shift to a this-worldly orientation.

Norbert Elias in his celebrated account of the Civilising Process traces changes in expectations of conduct accompanying the rising threshold of shame across a range of areas: sexual behaviour, bodily functions, eating habits, table manners, violence. As a result, certain aspects of life become perceived as distasteful, and are moved behind the screens of social life, confined to new private spaces such as the bedroom and, later, bathroom. It produces, in Bourdieu’s terms, a new habitus, a second nature of internalised, automatic restraint. These processes are accompanied by increasing individualisation of the self and the body, and a growing concern with privacy, separation and distinctiveness. (22)

In relation to eating, his account famously traces the arrival in the late Middle Ages of the fork and its impact on table manners, marking a culture of growing refinement and separateness in which eating with your hands or from a common dish becomes increasingly unacceptable. In relation to meat, these shifts are linked to the growth from the eighteenth century of tendermindedness towards animals. The banning of cruel sports like bear baiting; the rise of legislation around animal cruelty; the concern with slaughter
regimes; and, more recently, the growing concern over factory farming: all rest on a
growing internalisation of concern for animals that is part of Elias’s Civilising Process. In
terms of presentation of food, it results in a gradual movement away from direct displays
of animality, with the retreat from consumption of distinct and visible body parts such as
the head, feet or brains, once openly displayed as delicacies. Joints still have their status,
in the UK at least, though butcher’s shops no longer display whole carcasses in the way
that they once did. Modern sensibilities are more squeamish. Meat is now presented,
particularly in the supermarkets, in trimmed, discrete forms that sanitise its animal
origins. The Civilising Process thus underlies a wider cultural shift in sensibility in favour
of vegetarianism and the quasi-vegetarian practices that we noted earlier.

Elias’s work is also relevant to changing norms around the body in relation to slimness
and cleanliness, the movement towards both of these reflecting his central argument
about the growth in personal refinement, and the transition from grossness in behaviour
or manner. The clean, showered body of modernity is the reverse of the earlier
Rabelaisian, of Breughelian carnevalesque body, with its gross appetites, that rejoiced in
strong smells and body fluids, and that relished violence and sexual excess. The slimmed,
toned body of the modernist ideal, with its emphasis on control, on limitation and
discipline, is similarly a repudiation of these Rabelaisian appetites, part of the
internalisation of the civilisation process. These insights from Elias enable us to
understand a key element in modern asceticism. It is never about the neglect of the body –
wearing rags, having dirty, matted hair – as it has been in earlier periods, rather it is a
form of asceticism that is about control and discipline, in which refinement of behaviour
plays a central part.

Modern asceticism centres on disciplining the body. Here the key theorist is Michel
Foucault, who perhaps of all writers has done most to alert us to the significance of the
body and its cultural constitution. (23) For Foucault, the body is never natural or given;
rather it is produced culturally, and historically, through the operation of discourses,
particularly those of power/knowledge. In his early work, Foucault pursued these
processes through the key institutions of the prison, the clinic and the asylum, and their
related discourses of penal theory, medicine, psychiatry and sexology. Power and knowledge act here as a unity, a single discursive structure, that is all-pervasive and anonymous, its sites diverse and scattered. It is thus not personal, and has no defined centre, operating at a capillary level, located in a web of cultural processes.

Foucault’s early work was criticised for its failure to encompass agency, but he attempted to redress this in later work through the concept of techniques of the self. These allowed for a shift away from the earlier preoccupation with power, and its anonymous operation, towards a focus on processes of self formation. He describes the techniques of the self as processes that ‘permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help if others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality’. (23) He sees his work as concerned with ‘technologies of individual domination, the history of how the individual acts upon himself.’ (24) Techniques of the body are thus active forms of self-formation wherein individuals apply disciplinary practices to themselves. This is a departure from the earlier emphasis on power/knowledge and its role in creating docile bodies. By such means individuals can author themselves, cultivate themselves through ‘arts of existence’ in such a way as to become self-determining agents. The focus on the body remains, but it is the body in interaction with the self. This analysis fits well with the practices outlined above. Diet and dieting are attempts to mould the body into a form that is acceptable to modern taste; they are about the achievement of an ideal, the accomplishment of a programme of personal self development carried forward at the level of the body and offering dreams of happiness, success, popularity and acceptance. Vegetarianism similarly offers a form of self-development, though here carried forward terms of a purer, healthier, more moral life, one that does not rest on the ingestion of cruelty and violence, or other forms of grossness of diet, and that aims to build up a purer, fresher, healthier body that supports a higher mode of being. The increasing concern with bodily hygiene also contains something of this sense of the techniques of the self, with its emphasis on self cultivation and refinement and the creation of a cleansed, ordered body contained within its individualised boundaries.
The third writer whose work is helpful in thinking about this area is Julia Kristeva with her concept of the Abject. Kristeva, a post-structuralist and feminist, draws on psychoanalytic theory, particular that of Melanie Klein, in conjunction with the work of - the very different - Mary Douglas, to develop a concept of the Abject. This represents that which is expelled and rejected and is, in consequence, regarded with horror or distaste. (25) Kristeva sees the Abject as arising from the breakdown of meaning resulting from the loss of distinction between subject and object, self and other. Her primary example of this is the reaction to a corpse, but human dirt and other ambiguous categories of matter can also elicit it. Abjection contains a strong threat of contamination or engulfment. In classic psychoanalytic way, she presents this primal human response as rooted in earliest experiences in relation to the mother and her body, in which the infant both desires the closeness of the maternal body and fears engulfment and the threatened eradication of the self.

Something of these feelings underlies asceticism with its desire for purity, its striving for separation and containment. Modern asceticism often seems to be about establishing control over threats of engulfment or Rabelaisian excess, and establishing order and discipline over the chaos of the body and the self. Her ideas can also help make sense of some of the gendered connections of the phenomenon, since for Kristeva the Abject is closely connected with unacceptable forms of bodily femaleness. Women, as we noted, are more linked with the practices of modern asceticism. They are more likely to consciously engaged in slimming and to endorse the ultra slim and toned physique. They are more likely to adopt vegetarianism and quasi-vegetarian diets, and are symbolically connected with these forms of eating with their language of lightness, purity and freshness. These gendered connections are, as we have noted, also carried over in cultural expectations in relation to standards of hygiene and cleanliness. From a psychoanalytic viewpoint, however, such preoccupations also signal their opposite, in the threat of Abjection that lies within women’s bodies, the instability that arises from their flow and flux, and through which their bodies are less clearly bounded, less individually delineated than men’s. As a result they may be seen as requiring more in the way of discipline and
control, particularly in a culture that increasingly valorises these qualities, and in which there are rising expectations that bodies be clearly defined and individually delineated.

Lastly, I want to turn to writers whose work has addressed the body in High Modernity, in particular Bryan Turner who has argued that we need to understand the transition to High Modernity in terms of a shift in focus from work on the soul to work on the body. (26) In this he draws on Weber’s celebrated account of the Protestant Revolution and the shift it produced from a focus on the specialised virtuosi religion of monasticism and priesthood to the generalised requirement that all should pursue holiness in daily life and in their secular calling. With this went a further shift towards individualism and interiority. In the specifically British context, this was associated from the eighteenth century with the rise of Methodism which, in addition to its spiritual requirements, enjoined a more general sobriety in life and behaviour, exemplified in modest dress, abstemious habits and cleanliness of person - it was Wesley who popularised the phrase that cleanliness was next to godliness. In the twentieth century with the decline in religious belief and practice, these impulses increasingly took on secular this-worldly forms. There was a shift from work on the soul to work on the body, which became the focus of new moral requirements. Ascetic practices were no longer adopted in order to be pleasing to God, or obedient to his commandments, but as part of creating and shaping the body in particular ways through regimes of exercise, diet and body work. Shilling argues that in late modernity, the body has become the key project, a focus of new levels of interest; with this shift in focus goes an intensification of individualisation, as people seek this-worldly forms of salvation through their bodies and the control of them.

**Asceticism revisited**

Asceticism is about control of the body, and through it, of the self. It rests on restraint and denial, particularly of what have at various historical times been portrayed as fleshly or animal desires. Though it can be pursued to excess, it commonly contains an impulse to moderation, a retreat from excess, particularly where this is associated with loss of control. This is frequently enshrined at a bodily level through moderation in eating and drinking, through the avoidance of stimulating or inflaming substances, through retreat
from the expression of anger, aggression or sexuality. It often draws on concepts of purity that aim to extract the individual from the contamination of the world. As such it frequently deploys rituals or practices of purification, like cleansing or washing. Like all human impulses or expressions it is protean in character, capable of being found in conjunction with myriad social forms. It recurs, however, because of its nature of as one of what Mary Douglas (27) argues are Natural Symbols, expressions of social relations, typically rooted in the body, that are capable of bearing varied meanings, and that require to be interpreted in context, but that have certain recurring associations that arise from our common experience of embodiment. In presenting three broad areas of modern cultural practice, I have endeavoured to show how they draw on aspects of traditional asceticism, but in a ways that are new, that are consonant with the central values of the modernist project, and indeed reflect central themes within it, in particular in relation to the wider set of disciplinary practices that act to constitute the body in High Modernity.
Endnotes


20. Ibid p123.


