

The Sake of Fasting: Anorexia as Secular Asceticism

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Can anorexia be viewed as modern-day asceticism? In an effort to shed light on this enigmatic disorder, this study compares anorexia to various forms of religious asceticism, seeking common interpersonal, intrapersonal and cultural processes and motivations. It also aims to understand how those experiences differ, and posit the effect of religious interpretation on fasting.

The various psychological-phenomenological and social-cultural aspects of anorexia are reviewed, alongside historical accounts and psychological theories (James, Freud) of asceticism. The study then tackles several personal recollections of anorexia in an in-depth qualitative analysis, yielding seven categories common to both forms of fasting: magic; poverty; relationships/power-struggle; terror; splitting; ambition; and appearance .

The anorexic text confronts its reader with contradictory, fragmented and a-logical/magical reasoning, feelings of isolation and unworthiness, and a tyrannical moral sense of guilt and repentance. It also betrays implicit, grandiose wishes for containment and heroism, wishes explicit in ascetic texts. Religion's ability to articulate and cater to these wishes may account for their difference in affect and behavior.

Secular anorexia and asceticism conduct similar, complex dialogues with their respective cultures, which value thinness as moral and heroic. Both, paradoxically, find the zealous adoption of the culture's restrictions meaningful and liberating. This is indicative of fastings' "adaptivity" and universality, as a meaning-making and "selfing" mechanism.

Like asceticism, anorexia is a distinct moral system which gives unique interpretations to its culture's values and symbols. Using asceticism as a historical precedent enriches our understanding of the anorexic mind, thereby strengthening the therapeutic bond, which is crucial to treatment.

Keywords: Anorexia, asceticism, meaning-making, anorexic narrative, religion, fasting, William James, Freud, Totem and Taboo.

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