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« *If you control your nutrition, you can shape your body at will!* ». A rational management of food intake by bodybuilders

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Abstract

Here is how Cédric sees people eating French fries, six month after entering a bodybuilding training room: « If I give it greasy food (speaking about his body), I run the risk of being nauseated by these chips and the organism will not miss out on the chance of stocking all this unhoped for fat, which would ruin 5 weeks of daily efforts. Ridiculous! ». Certain foods become a source of aversion; eating is no longer a pleasure. These words are even more surprising when discovering Cédric's dietary habits. Indeed, he eats alternatively 33 grams of plain rice and then, one hour later, 100 grams of chicken, which he repeats 16 times a day. In order to stay awake, he takes pure caffeine, in addition to the usual products: vitamins and food supplements. How is such a fast change in food tastes and distastes possible? How does it occur? This can only be understood by examining the logic that governs the world of bodybuilding. Each aspect of life is reorganized around one single aim: maximal muscular development. Thus, increasing muscular mass is the ultimate aim of bodybuilders, which means that pleasure can only come from activities that bring them closer to this aim. Eating becomes a completely instrumental activity; bodybuilders speak of « nutrimentation ». Phases of drastic dieting are followed by calorific orgies. These modifications are the result of the continuous inculcation of puritan ethics which progressively organize every aspect of their life. *Key words: Body-building, nutrition, asceticism, muscle, exploitation*

Rezumat

Iată cum vede Cédric oamenii care mănâncă cartofi prăjiți, șase luni de la intrarea într-un program de culturism la o sală de antrenament: «Dacă îi dau alimente grase (vorbind despre corpul lui), risc să îmi fie greață de la aceste chipsuri, iar organismul nu va pierde ocazia să stocheze toate aceste cantități nesperatede grăsime, ceea ce ar ruina cele 5 săptămâni de efort de zi cu zi. Ridicol! ». Anumite alimente devin o sursă de aversiune; a mânca nu mai reprezintă o plăcere. Aceste cuvinte devin chiar mai surprinzătoare atunci când descoperim obiceiurile alimentare ale lui Cédric. Într-adevăr, el mănâncă în mod alternativ, 33 de grame de orez simplu și apoi, o oră mai târziu, 100 de grame de carne de pui, proces care se repetă de 16 ori pe zi. Pentru a rămâne treaz, el consumă cofeină pură, în plus față de produsele obișnuite: vitamine și suplimente alimentare. Cum a putut fi posibilă o astfel de schimbare rapidă în gusturile și dezgusturile sale alimentare? Cum s-a produs aceasta? Acest lucru poate fi înțeles doar prin examinarea logicii care guvernează lumea culturismului. Fiecare aspect al vieții este reorganizat în jurul un singur scop: dezvoltarea musculară maximă. Astfel, creșterea masei musculare este scopul final al culturiștilor, ceea ce înseamnă că plăcerea poate veni numai din activitățile care îi aduce mai aproape de acest obiectiv. A mânca devine o activitate complet instrumentală: culturiștii vorbesc de «nutrimentație». Fazele de dietă drastice sunt urmate de orgiile calorice. Aceste modificări sunt rezultatul inculcării continue a eticii puritane, care organizează în mod progresiv fiecare aspect al vieții lor.

Cuvinte cheie: culturism, nutriție, ascetism, musculatură, cercetare

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1. Introduction

At a café terrace, I met Cédric who started bodybuilding six months ago. In twelve weeks, he will take part in the *International Federation of Bodybuilding and Fitness* competition and he regularly takes notes on his performances and his feelings in a notebook which he shares with me. As we are sitting at a table, he looks at a plate of chips that the waiter brought to the next table. Looking at me, he says: "I don't understand that these people should poison themselves with chips".

This disgust is also prominent in his log book, after 5 weeks on a very strict diet; this is how Cédric describes the way in which he manages his old eating habits when he recognizes the smell of chips upon leaving the weights room:

« If I give it greasy food (speaking about his body), I run the risk of being nauseated by these chips and the organism will not miss out on the chance of stocking all this unhoped for fat, which would ruin 5 weeks of daily efforts. Ridiculous! Also, I'd be really disappointed afterwards to have succumbed to temptation. »

These words are even more surprising when examining Cédric's eating habits. He takes seven meals a day at fixed times. Each meal is made up of 75 grams of rice, 200 grams of chicken or ground beef, of vegetables, fruit, grapefruit juice and a glass of Coke zero. In periods leading up to competitions, his eating habits are even harsher: he eats alternatively 33 grams of plain rice and then, one hour later, 100 grams of chicken, which he repeats 16 times a day. In order to stay awake, he takes pure caffeine, in addition to the usual products: vitamins and food supplements.

Few people would have even reacted to this plate of chips which inspired such a strong feeling of disgust in Cédric. Six months of bodybuilding seem to have been enough to modify his dietary likes and dislikes. How do bodybuilders familiarize with this new diet? How does such an important change in eating habits and tastes take place?

In order to understand the dietary socializing processes at play, we will base this work on an immersion survey [1, 6, 9] that was completed by Eric Perera in the world of bodybuilding by using an active participation strategy, during 8 months, at the pace of 4 two-hour training sessions per day [7]. The assimilation, through the body, of the everyday life of a training room allowed him to be more receptive to the bodybuilders' modus operandi, their conventions and practices. In this way, he spent time with Damien (1) [8, 12], a beginner who started bodybuilding at the same time as him, as well as actual bodybuilders such as Benjamin, Louis and Christophe, whom he follows to competitions. Their words (an emic discourse signaled by

quotation marks and italics in the text) are related within this article and completed by a second log book, entrusted by Cédric, a bodybuilder who describes 9 months of physical preparation as well as his participation in national competitions.

2. « Your diet sets the pace of your life »

How do aspiring bodybuilders learn how to eat? I began my immersion two weeks ago. Out of bed at half past seven in the morning, my first reflex is to write down my weight and percentage of body fat in my notebook. I see on my BIA (Bioelectrical Impedance Analysis) scales that I have lost 4 kilograms since entering the training room for the first time, with a current weight of 74 kilograms and 14% of body fat. Satisfied with my weight loss, I take my first breakfast at precisely 8 o'clock. For the last 19 days, I have been closely following the « cutting phase » recommended by the coach, which I stuck to the door of the fridge. I start by preparing two portions of ground beef, with some salad leaves seasoned with a dash of olive oil and a pinch of salt. I am allowed to eat as much salad as I want, but I am satisfied with one plateful. When I've finished, I go back to sleep in order to promote my physical recovery. The training session of the day before was, as usual, very demanding on the muscular front; which is why I rest now in order to be able to "give it all I have" tonight.

At 10 o'clock, I eat the same thing again, that is to say two more beef burgers and some salad. At 1 o'clock P.M., I repeat the process except that this time I eat 3 portions of beef with any green vegetable of my choice. I opt for spinach.

The next meal is scheduled at 5 o'clock, comprising again two beef burgers and some salad. Before this, I must go shopping as the groceries go down very quickly. Moreover, I rarely pass unnoticed at the supermarket with my 8 boxes of 10 beef burgers (the freezer compartment in my fridge cannot hold more than 80 beef burgers). I have to go back to the shops every week in order to follow the diet recommended by my coach, which costs 545 Euros (2) a month (more or less the same as what I pay for my apartment's rent) [4, 10].

After my 5 o'clock meal, I get ready for a training session which will start at 6 o'clock. At the weights room, I meet up with the group of people with whom I've been relentlessly working two muscle groups per session. After one and half - sometimes two – hours, I go home, absolutely exhausted by the physical efforts at the gym. At 9 o'clock in the evening, I cook 400 grams of chicken with steamed green beans.

This daily routine is kept up throughout the period called the *«cutting phase»,* a diet which must be followed for over a month, recommended by the

coach. Taking into account the white meat eaten for the evening meal, the total amounts to 1.3 kilograms of meat consumed throughout one single day. The coach explained that such a diet would stimulate our metabolic rate and enable it to *« shed the fat».* He also added that the beef brought us the protein and glycogen which our muscles need. Lastly, the green vegetables (salad, spinach, beans, etc.) provide the minerals and vitamins which the organism requires. The large quantity of meat consumed enables, on the one hand, to gain muscular strength, and on the other hand, to get rid of the bad fats.

Progressively, organizing the meals and the training sessions takes over my entire days. Damien describes this diet as follows: «Your diet sets the pace of your life. It is what organizes your life around two, three, five meals a day. With such large quantities, you can hardly just take it in a lunch box. You have to go home and cook, go shopping. All this takes time, and you set your pace in order to accommodate all this and all the rest. » (Damien)

Although at first, eating beef burgers in the morning was quite pleasant (more of a game really), I rapidly lost any pleasure in eating; the smell of the ground beef began to put me off; I started only barely cooking them so that my apartment wouldn't smell of them.

After a couple of weeks, eating in a repetitive way the same foods becomes repulsive: « You're not here for the fun of it, you're here to suffer. The diet is linked to that I saw it as quite a blast to be eating steaks for breakfast. After a day, three days, you begin to have had enough. You're not absolutely sick of it, but...not really sick of it because, in truth, it's not that difficult, but it's still a big effort. The act of changing your eating habits, quite drastically and there! You just take what is needed but no more. Not a single gram of sugar, not a single gram of fat. » (Damien)

The daily planning of meals impacts deeply on the lifestyle. Little by little, the sacrifice extends beyond the gym and takes root at home, notably through food intake. The diet that must be followed, stuck to the fridge door, is a permanent reminder of the coach's words: « *You stick to what I wrote down on the paper. You only eat what I wrote!* » Everything is planned. Eating only what is authorized becomes a daily automatic reflex.

Bodybuilders have two obsessions: « *Loosing the fat* » and « *Gaining muscle mass* ». Before competitions, they rid themselves of a maximum amount of fat in order to reach the lowest possible level of body fat, while always trying to maintain their muscle mass. After competitions, they must put back on as much weight as possible in order to « *build* » muscle.

After losing 7 kilograms in one month and one week, the coach announced that it was time for me to change diets.

3. « Carb refeeding » and « calorie orgy »

After the five weeks of the cutting phase, I am allowed to start eating chicken and potatoes again in a phase called *« carb refeeding »*. At each meal, I can use 10 grams of butter to go with my potatoes and a green apple is allowed with the 10 o'clock meal. This new diet has two main effects.

Firstly, going over to a food intake based on chicken and potatoes enables to rediscover the forgotten pleasures of eating. It felt in some ways as if I was « coming back to life ». I feel guilty when the time comes to add the 10 grams of butter because the previous diet was so strict on that point. I take so much pleasure in eating the morning apple. I wake up with joy in the mornings, thinking about the fact that I'm allowed an apple, and it is the moment which I appreciate the most during this diet. Sweet foods were forbidden up until now with the aim of making the body slimmer. These rediscovered sensations give me back a certain level of energy and a better complexion. However, this pleasure is short-lived since this diet is just as repetitive and restrictive as the previous one.

Secondly, along with this «coming back to life» feeling, I feel closer to the group. Indeed, the « carb refeeding » phase brings me closer to the performances of the bodybuilders and allows me to work with them. This new diet simultaneously enables me to rapidly gain muscle, but also to keep up the training sessions alongside the bodybuilders without faltering. I complete the series of exercises more easily. For instance, the sit-ups session, which was particularly difficult for me before, no longer poses any problems. My body, which is beginning to change and to gain muscle, is more and more pleasing to me when I look in the mirror. A feeling of «all-might» is taking over me because of my eating habits and their effects on my body and on my state of mind. It is at this point that I came closer to the bodybuilders and embraced the group's values

My place within the group's hierarchy also took on another dimension, simultaneously with my change of diet and my weight and strength performances. The full possession of my faculties enabled me to measure with the bodybuilders whereas before, the coach only allowed me to train with the beginners. My rapid weight gain also brought me the coach's praise: «*it's great! You must carry on putting on mass like that* ». Despite my weight gain, my abdominal muscles remain the same and well « defined ». I get praised before the envious eyes of the athletes: «*You've gained!* », «*you're looking good* », «*you've really grown nicely* ». In this way, I really start feeling like I am part of the group and I begin to find my place within it by conforming to the new norm. I weigh myself regularly in order to evaluate each day the effects of the diet. Without gaining any body fat, I put on muscle. The transformations are visible and, just like the bodybuilders do, I watch the evolution of my body in the mirror. This rapid increase in muscular mass also requires finding new bearings.

After losing 7 kilograms during the cutting phase, low in carbohydrates, the hyper carbohydrate phase (3) based on potatoes (1 kilogram per day), enables me to be more dynamic and to gain muscle in a short time. The glycogenic overcompensation is the origin of this gain in muscle which is both rapid and visible.

After a few weeks, I stopped gaining muscle quite so quickly; the coach then announced that I would move on to a third phase, abundant in rich foods. This diet is aimed at putting on weight. After a drastic cutting phase based on eating beef burgers and then the refeeding phase, I am now entering a calorie orgy phase, for bulking. I must take in as many calories as possible: bananas, sweet yoghurt drinks, sweetened condensed milk; «everything is allowed»!

This diet increases my energy tenfold. The dietary recommendations are followed with the aim of optimizing training. In the same way as with the other diets, this new « bulking» phase is difficult to follow because of the large quantities of food that must be eaten. But I only eat to gain muscle.

Once the maximum weight is reached, a new slimming phase is initiated in order to *« cut »* and return to a muscular and defined silhouette. This is the way in which the muscular mass is augmented, through alternating *« bulking phases »* and *« cutting phases »*. At the training room, all our conversations begin with the same question about weight: *« How much did you lose? »*, if we are in a slimming phase or *« How much have you gained? »*, for those who are in a bulking phase.

Thence, pleasure can only be derived from activities which bring them closer to this goal. The bodybuilder eats only with the aim of transforming his body and does not take any pleasure in *« swallowing »* the same food in massive quantities over a long period of time. The notion of pleasure is elsewhere, it resides in the feeling of having control over one's body by acting upon it. As it was by emphasized Cédric: « if you control your nutrition, you can shape your body at will!». Previous eating habits thus take on another meaning altogether and become inconceivable. Nonbodybuilders become difficult to understand as they overindulge and don't take care of their bodies. For

instance, desserts and greasy foods which are part of a normal diet hardly appeal to me anymore. I am following a line of body restructuring and I am not envious of my family and friends who do not care enough about their eating habits. The slightest lapse in my diet could obliterate weeks of work in the training room.

The periods leading up to competitions are the times when bodybuilders really push their diet to the most extreme limits.

4. A lifestyle which is judged by peers

Planning meals, daily and rationally, and following them scrupulously requires a total implication « at 300 % ». « Continuously pushing back our limits to achieve our ends, whatever it takes, sacrifices and suffering, only the results count... » (Cedric). In fact, it is really difficult to understand why the people around you don't pay more attention to their daily eating habits, which contributes to setting the bodybuilder even more apart from the others. This elected feeling amplifies the sense of not being part of «the average people» and plays a role in legitimizing this lifestyle. « I've never been like the ordinary men so why should I eat like them, all these people who poison themselves daily, little by little, eating anything and everything, without even knowing why? (...) I give to my body everything it needs to function and to my muscles everything they need to grow. No waste, nothing useless. » (Cedric). This rational management of food intakes is a condition for entering the world of bodybuilding. Making muscle depends on a lifestyle which is judged by peers but which is perceived from the outside as being non-standard and unconventional. The bodybuilder status is obtained as soon as a person is judged as capable of parading on stage and exposing his body in public. While following the physical preparation to the letter, the athlete can take part in competitions. What is more, the preparation for competitions can involve certain people, that is to say those who have progressively incorporated the norms and values transmitted by the training room: « a lifestyle which is considered as morally pure » [5]. Anyone who allows himself to stray is stigmatized [3], regardless of what his results might actually be². It is a discipline of the body which requires an unfailing commitment. An example perfectly illustrates this situation: a bodybuilder selected by the coach enters the room with chocolate at the corner of his mouth when he is in a cutting phase. Despite this athlete's promising career, the coach, who is outraged, publicly points out the stupidity of this attitude which destroys his own efforts.

The athletes who are judged as able for the competitions are the focus point of a very special attention. They all go through a « cutting » period in order to bring the percentage of body fat to its lowest and to «unveil» the muscular fibers which were exercised during the previous months. The athlete is ready for the competitions as soon as his skin is a thin as « cigarette paper ». The body looks like an anatomy chart of both short and bulky muscles. This physical result is the fruit of a continuous adjustment of the diet right up to the moment of the competition, indeed right up to the moment of actually going up on the stage. In fact, as soon as they know that their turn is coming, they eat a few crisps: for Benjamin « it retains water and gives the muscles a final boost. (...) The crisps bring sodium which provokes a chemical effect, that is to sav that it'll make the body swell for three minutes ». In reality, it is a chemical balance between a precise dose of sodium and of potassium which will provoke a « *muscular rebound* ». The unbalance will create a movement of intra and extra adipose water: the sodium holds back the water in the body, and the potassium intake three days before the competition promotes the penetration of the water into the muscles. « Potassium is intracellular and sodium is extracellular. When you eat a pizza with salt, your body is going to become veiled, shrouded by the water which comes out of your cells. The muscular rebound is efficient every 2 or 3 weeks. » (Louis). We can notice at this point that the athletes' diet is completed by a banana. For his part, Christophe tells me that he eats 20 potatoes a day before he obtains the carb refeeding. Thus, eating some crisps before going on stage creates a muscular rebound and enables to refine the body's transformation by optimizing the muscular bulk in just a few minutes.

After a competition, the bodybuilder can *« eat whatever he wants to for the next two days. The chance for him to regain weight and obtain the carb reefed. That is to say that for 48 hours, the body will not take on the bad fats. »* (Coach). This period is a kind of reward which offers the possibility for the athletes to infringe on their usually strict diet. In the times between two competitions, everything is designed to keep up the achieved muscular bulk. The worry of losing this *«* impossible perfect body *»* obtained with such difficulty is compensated by an adjustment of the diet.

Regular training and visible physical results allow one to be recognized, not only in the training room, but also by peers: the prizes after competitions are handed out by former bodybuilders. In this way, they are valorized, admired and watched with either amusement or disappointment on the outside. This meets with the words of Duret indicating that « the internal recognition and the external rejection» are part of the weights room way of functioning, and that this effect « peaks in feminine bodybuilding circles. To be a female bodybuilder, especially a champion, condemns one to be perceived, outside of this circle, not by the standards of ideal beauty which are in fact sought, but as an ugly monster » [2].

5. Being a bodybuilder: a rational control of self

Bodybuilders as a group determine norms for behavior which are strongly prescriptive, by stigmatizing certain conducts and valorizing others. Thus, there exist some internal norms for eating habits which justify the increase of muscular mass, which is the bodybuilders' ultimate goal. Food is reduced to the simple status of an instrument which is used for a precise task: losing fat during a *«cutting»* period and gaining weight during the *«bulking»* phases.

The daily life of a bodybuilder is thus reorganized around a strict diet and training. The «menu» which must be scrupulously followed, stuck to the fridge door, is a constant reminder of the constraints imposed by this diet. Bodybuilding gradually insinuates itself into everyday life through the diet constraints. The food restrictions, followed to the letter, necessitate a daily organization and enter, just like physical training, into a rational logic. The 5 meals per day impose a particular rhythm of life in which eating is no longer a pleasing activity because eating has become a rational activity. Eating becomes mechanical and bland, whichever the proposed diet. In fact, eating is no longer a pleasure because it is solely a means of acting upon one's body, with the aim of losing the bad fats. The lack of sugars and carbohydrates in the diet impose on the body a need to always be drawing on its reserves, which only serves to amplify the tiredness accumulated through the training exercises. Although these eating recommendations may seem humorous at first, they rapidly become nauseating and overwhelming. Following these diets to the letter sets the pace for the initiate's everyday life. while distancing him/her « from the average people who eat everything and anything » (Cédric). Eating habits are also the focus point of most taboos in the bodybuilding world. One of the first lessons for beginners concerns the purity or impurity of different foods. To engage in such practices therefore implies adopting a new normality, as well as reorganizing tastes and distastes as a function of optimal muscular gain.

À new relationship to the body is created in which diets are a rational means to achieve body modification. As eating becomes a fully instrumental activity, Cédric speaks of « *nutrimentation* ». Indeed, he doesn't eat any more, he « *nutriments* » in order to control his body by taking a rational action over it. Making food intake instrumental is part of the main muscular gain objective. Progressively, tastes and distastes are reorganized in order to conform to the needs and the values of bodybuilding. The coach and the group of bodybuilders encourage beginners to eat rationally. This is how the new diet reorganizes every aspect of life, by modifying the social perceptions and relations of the athlete. Reaching an ideal muscled body requires a moral discipline which compares to domestication efforts, to an extreme self-control.

In this way, Cédric's disgust which was slightly confusing at the beginning of this article can be understood. Eating chips is not a part of his body construction project in view of taking part in competitions. All his daily efforts are aimed at losing bad fats. Even if temptation is strong, the risk of enabling the « organism to stock all this unhoped for fat » is too great. This is how he learned to control his food intake and, from there, his desires, with the single aim of making muscle. He doesn't need the coach's reproaches anymore in order to control his eating since he has interiorized the gym's dieting norms.

Thus, becoming a bodybuilder involves a radical change of one's eating habits. The dieting phases which succeed to one another are ways to rationalize muscle formation. In this way, drastic cutting phases follow calorie orgies. « destructuring » and « restructuring » the body and its muscular mass in a controlled manner. Shaping the body involves a reorganization of daily life in favour of muscle gain. Accordingly, this commitment implies redefining social relations by coming closer to the members of the training room and in glorifying the «good manners» of muscle gain. The new lifestyle which is embraced embodies a true asceticism (3) [11], guided by the rational behavior of physical efforts and daily dieting. Such asceticism drives the athletes' actions, which consist in living uniquely for and by bodybuilding, while avoiding any other sporting activity and abiding by dieting constraints. Gaining muscle is based on a lifestyle which is judged by peers and within which the relationship with food is instrumental. Finally, the bodybuilder's muscle capital is secondary; it is only a way of making visible the rational selfcontrol, a lifestyle which is valorized by the training room and the peers within it.

Beginners progressively discover that bodybuilding is a way of life, a full-time practice. Scheduling the times of the initiating tests creates a new normality, a new order which is different from the established social order. Everyday life is centered on one single aim: gaining muscle. Training and dieting are only means to reach this goal. The athletes everyday life is totally programmed, organized in such a way that it is difficult to live any other way than for the body and the physical results. The aim of this lifestyle, which appertains to asceticism, is to control the body by exerting a rational discipline over it without « letting it go ». Depending on their dieting phase, cutting or bulking, certain types of food become a source of disgust; eating is clearly no longer a pleasure but a daily asceticism made up of strict restrictions and prescriptions. In this way, eating is organized and paced in order to act upon, and to control, the body. Food intake is rationalized with the aim of obtaining a maximal muscular productivity. In this context, one doesn't eat anymore, one « nutriments ».

Notes

(1) An interview was carried out with Damien at the end of the immersion in order for the exchanges to be more authentic during the observation period. Taking up interviewing as a data collecting method after 8 months of fieldwork gives validity to the change of roles: introduced as a simple student, Eric Perera went from participating observer to investigator, researcher in the field of sociology. These are two very different methods which are associated with two phases of a single field survey. As Zuppinger explained, « what is true for participant observation. which is so to speak only another strategy or tool amongst others in field surveys, is not necessarily so for interviewing techniques » (2005 : 3). Going from one to the other thus implies a change of one's usual role and can be a source of interrogations for the interviewee. However, the time spent in the training room and the integration within the group rapidly smoothed out these concerns. This is in line with the words of Strauss et al. (1964), explaining that carrying out an ethnographic interview requires, following the golden rule of participant observation, that the person leading these interviews becomes a member of the situation under study in order for them to be a success.

(2) The «lifestyle » imposed by bodybuilding, whether in terms of the time spent at the weights room or in terms of eating habits, requires personal sacrifices and important financial means (Wasielwski, 1991, Johns 1997).

(3) Practicing bodybuilding requires sacrifices which, for Kinnunen (2004), are not accepted in order to achieve a recognized body on the outside, but to satisfy the cultural standards of the group. These standards organize a well-defined lifestyle that is shared by a sub-culture of which the « authentic » bodybuilder is the center. Thus, to become a « true » bodybuilder, certain purity rules must be followed which mark the boundary between the secular and the sacred. For Kinnunen, it is essential to present on the outside a lifestyle judged as morally pure. Thus, the food must be « pure » in order to reach physical perfection and to « obtain all this community's respect » (Kinnunen, 2004: 320).

(4) Max Weber was the first to define asceticism on a sociology level. With reference to asceticism at the heart of occidental Christianity, he sees in it « a systematic rational behavior aiming to overcome the man in his status natural and to be free from the power of irrational instincts and dependence on the world and on nature» (1964: 146).

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