

Introduction

Modern Asceticism: A Historical Exploration

Evert Peeters, Leen Van Molle and Kaat Wils

Modern civilisation, the famous German film director Wilhelm Prager believed, posed a threat to the physical and mental condition of the German nation. In their hugely popular film *Wege zu Kraft und Schönheit/Ways to Strength and Beauty* (1924), Prager and his script writer, the physician Nicholas Kaufmann, confronted their viewers with a bleak assessment of the state of health of their fellow citizens. The film showed corpulent, bourgeois, chain-smoking youngsters, sickly gymnasium pupils and light-shunning, myopic scholars. The images added up to a diagnosis. Modern Europe, Prager was instructing his public, sat huddled over lifeless ideas. *Wege zu Kraft und Schönheit* showed the European bourgeoisie gaping at the glories of classical antiquity in museums, while in real life the classical ideals of balance and harmony seemed to have been completely lost. In Prager's view, the bourgeoisie paid lip-service to the principle of *mens sana in corpore sano* (a healthy mind in a healthy body), but failed to practise it. Alienated from healthy and 'natural' ways of living, people had wandered astray into book learning and harmful habits. Prager's social critique proved popular, bringing him the biggest success of his career. The strong condemnation, expressed particularly in Catholic circles, of the – often naked – Roman statues and characters appearing in the film merely fanned the flames of popularity and further enhanced the success of Prager's account.

Wege zu Kraft und Schönheit represented more than just an indictment. The film directors also offered a course of therapy. Scene after scene, Prager and Kaufmann demonstrated to their viewers how modern society could get back in touch again with the physical prowess and intellectual peace which

– so the script suggested – had prevailed in antiquity. As their vision of the future, Prager and Kaufmann presented a world of physical and natural beauty. In a Roman bathhouse, they depicted sculpted male bodies, and showed children engaged in martial sports. The film also showed muscular bodies in a contemporary setting. The Roman scenes shifted virtually seamlessly to sequences of modern dancers, runners and champion gymnasts. Physical exercise and dance flowed into one another, such as in the scene in which a female dancer performed the gymnastic exercises of the American gynaecologist Bess Mensendieck before the open, rippling sea. Flowing, rhythmic movements pointed the way to a healthy, full life for German citizens. In the closing scene, the film-makers placed bathing Romans and athletes from the 1920s alongside one another. *Wege zu Kraft und Schönheit* was showing not just an ideal, it was suggested, but also the beginnings of a fundamental change for the better.

In this book, the indictments and promises displayed in *Wege zu Kraft und Schönheit* will be historicised within a broader cultural framework of ‘modern asceticism’. Like the makers of *Wege zu Kraft und Schönheit*, proponents of modern asceticism were not just expressing an idealistic dissatisfaction with modernity that was shared at that time by other artists, scientists and politicians. They also seemed to embody this cultural critique in ways which have been insufficiently considered by previous scholars. Strikingly, they combined optimism with a high degree of strictness. In Prager’s and Kaufmann’s film, this tension revealed itself in various ways. While they used neo-romantic metaphors to illustrate the gap between unspoilt nature and the decadent city, they resorted to scientific diagrams to present the importance of deep chest breathing or correct physical posture. Scene after scene they showed liberated bodies, yet held them captive in a controlled, rhythmical cadence. And although the Christian God was completely absent in *Wege zu Kraft und Schönheit*, Greek temples evoked memories of an organised religiosity. Prager and Kaufmann promised a new freedom, but also employed a discourse of asceticism. Modern emancipation in their view presupposed a high degree of abstinence and control. This tension is the subject of this book.

Even in modernity, we will argue, the complex interplay between freedom and control remains connected to premodern traditions. The use of age-old ascetic forms made *Wege zu Kraft und Schönheit* an emblematic yet confusing film. In Prager and Kaufmann’s film, a traditional longing for purity was made to serve modern desires for personal authenticity. In this volume, we will focus on the remarkable ways in which, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, premodern ascetic forms came to incorporate modernity. The gendering power of modern asceticism, in the first place, will often take the lead in our analysis. Representations of sobriety and opulence, we will argue, strongly informed the construction of modern masculinity and femininity as

they displayed the floating meaning of the self, of authority and submission, of respectability and immorality. In the second place, the making of class was no less informed by the distinctive power of modern asceticism. Sobriety and continence built the bourgeois self-image and propelled working-class opposition against bourgeois hegemony. Thirdly, the rise of modern asceticism also demonstrated the intimate linkage between political and cultural discourses. It contributed as much to the republican rhetoric of the twentieth-century nation-state as it underpinned the quest for artistic purity and scientific truth. In a broader sense, however, the politics of modern asceticism pervaded everyday culture as a whole.

The Polis and the Convent: Gendered Traditions

In a famous essay, Bertrand Russell described asceticism as an ‘evil passion’, born of the Christian misconception that pleasure can only be found in sensuality, ‘and yet, in fact, not only the best pleasures, but also the very worst, are purely mental’.¹ In this way, he expressed the widespread conviction that all asceticism is necessarily centred on mental life, and must therefore be anti-physical; just as it is also directed towards the spiritual and hence should be anti-secular. Asceticism, added Russell, was ‘essentially religious’.² In parallel, an extensive historical literature links the whole repertoire of ascetic practices with religions and transcendent significance. Asceticism appears inextricably bound up with worship, religious spirituality, piety, contemplation and mysticism, cult prescriptions and monastic rules such as chastity, poverty and obedience.

However, originally the Greek word *askèsis* simply meant ‘exercise’, primarily the exercising of the body so that it would gain in strength and beauty. Central to the Greek ascetic tradition was not rejection of the body, but in fact the appreciation of it. For example, Socratic philosophy stated that mind and body should be in balance and that both needed maintaining, which in the case of the body involved toughening and abstinence from anything harmful. A life of exercise, abstinence and regularity served the Greek ideal of athletic masculinity. Among modern ascetics, this classical tradition acquired a new lustre. Thinkers such as Nietzsche contended that the Greeks had elevated an ethic of physical control and exercise that differed radically from the Judaeo-Christian form of asceticism, which was hostile to the body. Moreover, this classical asceticism, Nietzsche believed, was only meaningful as an attribute of good citizenship. It could only exist as a republican ideal. For asceticism as physical control was the basic precondition for the polis which, as he commented in *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, ‘had to be protected against the elemental life forces’. Only against the background of this control could ‘the drama of life play itself out within the citadel, with its civic gods, laws, virtues, sculp-

tures, stories and political philosophies'.³ Asceticism, so it seemed, was a public affair. Republican discourse was deeply pervaded by its logics.

In the classical polis, this republican asceticism brought along a very masculine imagery. Male citizen-soldiers were supposed to protect the polis against life forces that were defined as feminine. At the games in Olympia, but also in the education at the *Akadèmia*, male citizens performed the reign of asceticism through controlled muscular power. In the army, the same performance was combined with strategies of violence and dominance. In Athens, however, classic asceticism found its highest expression in the democratic ritual of city politics. Here, moderation and virtue were the guarantees of the integrity of elected judges and administrators, but also of the political dedication of the electors themselves. The popular assembly seemed to liberate these citizens, at least for the duration of their deliberations, from their private interests. It was precisely this elevation from the private sphere that further enforced the explicitly masculine character of classical asceticism. The citizen as a political creature rose not just above the concerns of trade and industry, but, more importantly, above the domestic sphere. Greek asceticism as a political condition had no place for women or slaves. In Sparta, the logics of classical asceticism had resulted in military rule instead of democracy, according to a popular reading. Public asceticism took on the form of a military spirit of sacrifice. Not democratic ritual, but military might formed the buffer against Nietzsche's 'elemental life forces'. Even more than in Athens, this militarised asceticism detached the citizen-soldier from the domestic sphere. At the same time, mastery and self-control became an even more central part of the self-image of the polis. Political independence, Herodotos made the Spartan leader Demaratos declare, was impossible without the law. The Spartans' freedom was only possible thanks to the strictest 'control' and 'prudence'. The law was to be feared, and fleeing from battle was regarded as more dishonourable than death. Republican asceticism assumed its most radical form in Sparta. It was a combination of political and military asceticism that would later also be honoured in republican Rome.⁴

The asceticism that Russell described as an 'evil passion' in fact developed in opposition to this classical republican asceticism. During the last centuries of the western Roman empire, Christianity did not invent asceticism, but borrowed it from the Greeks in order to turn it against the pagan polis and against the sinful body. Instead of male athletes, citizens and soldiers, now martyrs and holy virgins, hermits, Syrian stylites and, later on, Carthusians came to the fore. They replaced the polis with the hereafter, the body with the spirit. Individual seekers of Christian purity further radicalised older practices. The quest for truth was already associated by the Greek philosophers with forbearance from bodily pleasures and comfort. The abstinence which fights the desires of the body remained central in Christian asceticism: abstinence from

food or drink, such as fasting and not drinking alcohol, temporary sexual abstinence or lifelong celibacy, keeping vigil or abstaining from sleep. Physical discipline could in fact be taken much further, including practices such as not washing, not cutting hair or nails, braving extreme heat or cold, inflicting pain on or mutilating oneself. Christian asceticism also refers to the rejection of personal possessions: the ascetic believes in poverty and material detachment. Moreover, Christian asceticism disengages its practitioners from the society around them, isolates them and throws them back on themselves through self-imposed silence and a retreat into prayer and meditation, through continual roaming – the *peregrinatio* which prevents attachment and enforces an unworldly homelessness – or again, through lengthy, sometimes lifelong, physical separation in caves, deserts and cloister cells, on remote islands or high up on a pillar. The old asceticism had, in other words, been transformed from physical exercise to abstinence and starvation. As the influence of Christianity in the Roman *imperium* grew – and especially when the new faith was elevated to the status of state religion under the emperor Theodosius – this new interpretation also seemed to eradicate the institutional memories of republican asceticism. Elements of the radical asceticism of the martyrs and stylites were passed on to the new monastic lifestyle. This lifestyle paralleled a new ‘worldly’ order in which monasteries became cultural and economic centres, whereas the previously dominant polis lost much of its importance, for several centuries at least.

Historians emphasise that ascetic suffering, as advocated by Christianity, merely served to establish a spiritual layering of reality, to make the higher prevail over the lower, the soul over the body, the transcendent over the immanent. In this Christian framework, asceticism averts evil and invokes goodness, it combats sin (negative asceticism) and feeds virtue (positive asceticism), with the achievement of transformation as its ultimate goal. For this pivotal moment, too, a rich vocabulary has been developed, with words such as purification, redemption, liberation and rescue. In Christianity, asceticism refers to the way that weak man, burdened with original sin, must go down in order to fulfil the divine purpose. Christian asceticism is pleasing to God, it is fundamentally theocentric. The meaning of suffering on earth lies in the positive prospect of happiness in the hereafter. The detached life of Jesus himself and his twelve apostles serves as a pointer. But the way to heaven is long and strewn with thousands of temptations. The crucifixion bridges the gap between the worldly life and the truly godly life.

In the monastery, the gender relations that had prevailed in the polis were reordered. In the Christian tradition, asceticism became closely connected with both male and female religious authority and respectability. It was not relations in the public forum but a more private, even family-based relationship that was reflected by that authority and respectability. Especially within

the monastic orders which developed in the early Middle Ages in both the Eastern and the Western churches, asceticism became a question of surrender – and above all of love. Political mastery was replaced by religious subjugation. Obviously, this change affected the Greek heritage. The private character of Christian asceticism was paralleled by a certain feminisation which took place in the course of the Middle Ages. In theological terms, the achievement of mystical grace and divine election was prepared for through ascetic practices. Monks and nuns practised day in, day out, each for himself or herself, the suppression of worldly desires and yearnings and the instilling of the desired behaviour until it became virtually automatic.

Asceticism, Authenticity and the Rise of the Individual

Yet the triumph of Christian asceticism did not mean the permanent destruction of its republican predecessor and antithesis. Although monastic asceticism was prominent in medieval culture, its civic antithesis seemed to gain a second wind from the late eleventh century on, culminating in the revival of an urban republican ethos at the time of the Renaissance. Particularly in the Italian city-states of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the classical ideal of bodily control was revived. In humanist education, the classical model came to incorporate the spirit of the new republic. In numerous educational tracts, authors such as Vergerio praised the courage and perseverance of the Greeks, as well as their rural way of life, their sober clothing and plain food, their emphasis on physical toughness and their hunting skills.⁵ These were qualities which – again – male citizens needed to acquire in order to ensure the independence of the Renaissance cities from the outside world and, not least, against the power of the Church. The independence of the city-state republic was again associated with political or military asceticism, as it had been in classical Greece. While administrators in Venice or Florence presented themselves as new Athenians, democratic in outlook and completely devoted to public affairs, critics such as Machiavelli called for the restoration of a more Spartan or Roman form of government, in order to overcome the political conflicts and impasses which often handicapped the city-states. In these Spartan plans, greater power for the city's nobility and more intense military training went hand in hand. Like Athenian democratic rhetoric, the Spartan current in political discourse pointed above all to a revival of a classical tradition of public asceticism which turned out not to have been completely destroyed by monastic asceticism. Again, the double masculine imagery of the citizen-soldier seemed to triumph over the 'feminine' rhetoric of the Christian ascetics.

In this context of regenerating republicanism, however, Christian asceticism was revolutionised. Whereas medieval Christianity lived on in the clois-

ters, whose inhabitants found themselves relocated to the margins of urban civilisation once again, the Protestant Reformation founded a new brand of Christian asceticism that started to consume the city from within. Calvinists suspended monastic life and paired religious concern with a new appreciation of worldly profit. Even more than their monastic forbearers, they suppressed worldly desires so as not to divert attention from God or arouse his wrath. The road to sanctification, however, was not confined to the cloister any more. The whole of worldly existence could serve purification, if pursued with the right ascetic attitude and religious goal. As striving for worldly profit gained a religious significance, pleasure for the sake of worldly pleasure alone became even more sinful than before. Only the deep awareness of sin could legitimate worldly profit. Protestantism turned personal profit into a means of purification in an urban context and therefore intensified, not lessened, the individualised asceticism of the medieval hermits and nuns.

Ever since Max Weber's famous thesis,⁶ this return of Christian asceticism to the cities of the Renaissance has been discussed as a formative event in the making of modern capitalism. As Henk de Smaele reminds us (this volume), for Weber, asceticism was carried out of monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality; by doing so it did its part in building the cosmos of the modern economic order. Since material goods were to be piled up for God's glory, they became loaded with a symbolic importance beyond imagination. For Weber, the ascetic work ethic of Protestantism also helped to ensure religious and social order. It guaranteed that private profit led to postponed consumption and even greater profit, instead of decadence. In comparable terms, John Mandeville and Adam Smith argued that Protestantism guided the private profit principle not to mutual destruction but to greater common profit. Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees* and Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* clearly showed how the invisible hand that held 'private vices' and 'public benefits' in balance was a new tool for an older religious asceticism.⁷

Even if the sources of modern capitalism can be related to a religiously inspired sense of asceticism, they triggered an evolution that in many respects can be called anti-ascetic. The accumulation of wealth that was rendered possible by capitalism gradually opened up the way for a capitalist economy without an ascetic moment. As such, the rise of capitalism did not render traditional religious asceticism obsolete: rather, it was invigorated. That was certainly the case in Catholic countries, where the Weberian link between religious and economic values was less obvious, or at least more complicated. These countries witnessed a return to the ancient monastic ideals as a reaction against the culture of abundance developing in society and in the Church itself. The foundation of the *Ordo Cisterciensis Stricteris Observantiae* at Châtillon in France, and its rapid spread in the seventeenth century, were symptomatic in this respect. The adepts of this order had to refrain from eat-

ing meat, and therefore became known as *les abstinents*. In the second half of that century, a new reform of the order began at the monastery of La Trappe, in Normandy, making it even more severe by proscribing an absolute silence and isolation from the world.

If the Christian tradition of asceticism was reinvigorated as a reaction against the development of capitalism, the same holds true for the republican tradition. One of the reasons why Jean-Jacques Rousseau venerated the Spartan tradition was its antipathy to trade and its rejection of individual profit. For Rousseau, most of the material needs by which the materialist society of his time were driven were purely artificial, and therefore deflected man from virtue and from the common good. By creating unnecessary needs, capitalist society threatened the true republic which Rousseau had in mind. That threat was obviously a threat of feminisation. In Rousseau's highly gendered world view, the republic was based on male virtues, whereas consumption was feminine activity.

If the Rousseauist version of republicanism found its way into the idiom of the more radically democratic wing of the French revolutionaries, it did not form the most lasting heritage of the revolutionary wave of the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries. That heritage was monopolised in the first place by the liberal bourgeoisie, who accepted the values of capitalism and tried to exploit them in order to procure as much happiness as possible for as many people as possible. To some extent, the liberal bourgeoisie can be seen as adepts of an 'ascetic' capitalism, opposing the unrestrained accumulation of wealth by the 'idle classes'. Nonetheless, the paradox of ascetic capitalism would even be more striking now than it had been two-and-a-half centuries before. The Industrial Revolution engendered an economic growth which had never been seen before, and created therefore what Thorstein Veblen has famously called 'a leisure class', which could indulge in 'conspicuous consumption', and in the satisfaction of utterly individual needs and wants.⁸ The individual self, whose birth historians situate within this context, did not need any external justification, be it in a collectivity or in a supernatural order. When this self was questioned by the last decades of the nineteenth century, it was not so much in the name of some higher entity, but because of the disturbing emergence of the masses as a historical actor. Within this context, loss of the self was seen as a threat rather than as a goal.

For the self-chosen self-denial which is so crucial to asceticism, nineteenth-century European modernity, therefore, was an extremely unwelcoming context. And yet, discourses and practices of asceticism did find their way into modern times. The ancient repertoires of asceticism were reformulated in ways which at one and the same time fitted within the idiom of modernity, and also contained a critique of it. If Rousseau's idea of a democratic republic had turned out not to be a viable political system, a similar kind of self-

denying dedication was asked vis-à-vis the nation, which became the central political signifier throughout the nineteenth century. Unlike the republican self-denial, however, 'sacrifice for the nation' had a depoliticising nature. The engagement that was asked from all citizens was not one to construct the polis through deliberating or carrying out offices, but one to glorify or defend the preexisting entity which the nation was supposed to be. Closer to the republican ideal was probably the ideological commitment that was requested of adherents of those well-structured political parties that have developed since the last decades of the nineteenth century. This modern kind of asceticism seems to have been present primarily in those left-wing political movements which explicitly referred to the democratic republicanism of the French revolutionary tradition. Both nation and ideology were often described as systems of belief which had to provide the meaning which could less and less be provided by supernatural beliefs.

The liberal bourgeoisie, however, often experienced this blind dedication to the nation or to ideology as 'self-debasing'. Their critique of the materialist excesses of the dominant culture, therefore, did not result in self-effacement for the sake of some external ideal, but for the sake of a greater personal authenticity. Presumably the most modern form of asceticism was, therefore, what can paradoxically be called the 'self-oriented self-denial'. Through control and abstinence, modern individuals delineated their own space from the crowd. New, 'modern' forms of asceticism were still borrowed from classical sources, but often detached from their public character. They became, as Foucault has called them, technologies of the self.⁹ Thus modern city dwellers in the nineteenth century were likewise concerned with a healthy and moderate diet, often cast in the naturalistic terms of classical antiquity. This same focus on self-development dominated the European fascination with the vegetarianism of the Greeks ('pythagoreanism') or the revival of the Ancient Greeks' controlled physicality, which continued without abatement during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It was revealed in the revival of Greek bathing in spa culture and the fascination with gymnastics and even fitness. Here too, ascetic discourses and practices primarily served a strictly individualistic goal, although they were borrowed from a republican, 'collective' or a transcendental, religious tradition. From the nineteenth century, modern asceticism became increasingly a vehicle of personal authenticity, embodied in a rich and diverse culture of the self.

Pluralities of Modern Asceticism

In this book, the ambivalent nature of this modern asceticism, with its focus on either self-realisation or ideological dedication, will be considered. The

central question in this analysis is to what extent an old repertoire of ascetic practices could have new meanings imparted to it. Light will be shed on the character of modern asceticism itself, but the continuing influence of classical and religious discourses will also be investigated. Through a range of subtopics, this paradox will be further analysed. Thus attention will be paid to the conflicting individualistic and collective characteristics of this modern asceticism, on the processes of cultural distinction and conformism that were at work in this asceticism. Consideration will also be given to the different gender identities which, as in the centuries before the French Revolution, were constructed and experienced with the help of ascetic practices. Finally, the significance of modern asceticism in terms of cultural criticism will be examined. It will become clear that ascetic ideals have been often invoked against the presumed moral and physical degeneration of Western society. At the same time, though, emphasis will be placed on the extent to which modern ascetics themselves helped shape modernity. The quest for a freer, truer rhythm of life, instead of the hollow formalisms and rigid hierarchies of established bourgeois society, was no throwback to tradition, but opened the way to a radically new world. The particularly practical cultural critique, which assumed an almost tangible physical character in *Wege zu Kraft und Schönheit*, will be discussed in this book as a modern discourse.

The fact that this modern, individualistic asceticism seemed to differ in a number of key points from the classical-republican and the Christian traditions did not mean that it constituted a monolithic project in itself. The impression left by *Wege zu Kraft und Schönheit* is not without ambiguity. Modern asceticism is not a uniform cultural trend, and certainly not an organised movement. For this reason, an ideal type will not be presented in this book. Instead, a broad perspective will be opened up. In a number of different fields of cultural and social history, a recurrent dynamic rather than a precisely defined movement will be described. Like the multiplicity of modern cultural expressions with which they became interwoven, the ascetic ideas and practices that form the subject of this book also resist interpretation. Altogether, they constitute the plurality of modern asceticism.

The striking popularity of *Wege zu Kraft und Schönheit*, we have argued, illustrated the continuous lure of plural asceticism in the early decades of the twentieth century. The movie equally displayed, however, prototypical places which sheltered and produced modern asceticism. At these places, discourses of Christian and republican asceticism, carried along and transformed by capitalism and revolution, were most spectacularly appropriated anew. In his contribution, Evert Peeters focuses upon natural therapy, naturism and the German *Lebensreform* ('life reform'). In the midst of the modern capital, these movements heralded the vision of an imaginary natural utopia. The middle-class adherents of *Lebensreform* hoped to flee all too real cities that were per-

ceived to be degenerate and sick. In special centres for nudist recreation and in sanatoria for natural therapy, they tried to make their utopia materialise. At those spots, ascetic practices served in a quest for a 'more genuine' life and a 'more authentic' self, liberated from physical degeneration and alienating mass culture. It will become clear that these prototypical subcultures were European movements which, contrary to what has often been suggested, went far beyond the boundaries of Wilhelmine and Weimar Germany, and fascist Europe. The quest for a more authentic existence, it will be argued, captured the enthusiasm of Western European Catholics, Central European Jews, German conservative *Junkers* and French socialists alike.

The Belgian case, which will be developed in particular by Peeters, illustrates this plurality. It demonstrates to what extent modern asceticism was influenced by very different national traditions. Belgian 'life reform' also sheds some light on the contradictory meanings religion could represent for modern ascetics. Both as a challenge and as a burden, Catholic tradition confronted life reformers with the historicity of their proper practices and ideas. Borrowing from plural sources, Peeters argues, naturopaths and naturists constructed and perceived individual authenticity. The asceticism practised in a group was a tool for the discovery of the true, naked self. Renunciation, Peeters's contribution suggests, was to open the way to a purer pleasure. In this way, the cult places of ascetic authenticity became an antithesis to the modernity which had come in for such criticism.

Incidentally, this did not mean that these places of modern asceticism were not threatened by ambivalence. In a culture typified by excess and consumption, it paradoxically did not always prove easy to define clearly 'correct' pleasure based on ascetic principles from the 'erroneous', alienating enjoyment of modern capitalism, since ascetic projects such as naturopathy and naturism were themselves marketed as modern consumer goods; there was also a danger of asceticism being degraded into a mere means of pleasure. This emerges very clearly in Michael Hau's analysis of German sanatoria and the *Lebensreform* movement, in which the wealthy bourgeoisie, rather than middle-class citizens, are scrutinised. The ascetic naturopathic regime that was offered to patients in expensive sanatoria remained consistent with the broader cultural critique that characterised *Lebensreform*, and thus provided participants with a code of conduct which promised moral superiority. At the same time, however, this regime was constantly 'beleaguered' by notions of pleasure which were external to culture-critical asceticism. If the sanatorium wanted to be attractive, it needed to integrate the burgeoning consumer culture rather than reject it. And nude bathing and walking may have had a hygienic and moral significance, but that did not prevent free physical contact between the sexes from enhancing the sanatorium's attractiveness.

The prototypical places of modern asceticism, so it seemed, were dominated by a specific kind of social regulation that was not only a matter of deliberate individual choices. Being a (non-conventional) part of bourgeois leisure culture, *Lebensreform* practices evidently evoked problems of class identity. Since this leisure culture also included nude culture, it also raised questions of respectability and therefore of social regulation. In the second section of this book, the complex relationship between positive ascetic choices of modern ascetics on the one hand, and the coerced character these ‘choices’ could take on the other hand, are analysed. What relationship could there be between modern asceticism and modern pleasure? The furore caused by the naked scenes in *Wege zu Kraft und Schönheit* is illustrative in this context. The boundaries between ascetic nakedness and eroticism were unclear; information had to be presented as entertainment in order to reach a large public. The pleasure of asceticism – physical exercise, a natural lifestyle and self-control – that the film advocated was sold using other, non-ascetic means. Nakedness was also erotic, the ascetic images were fast-moving and dynamic, the film’s rhythm was captivating. Asceticism was intoxicating. The problematic relationship that existed between message and entertainment, between asceticism and pleasure, also presented the film censors in all Western countries during the interwar period with considerable difficulties. Tom Saunders’s contribution to this book examines the inevitable tension which existed between the medium of film and the ideals of asceticism – as well as the political regulation of both kinds of ‘pleasure’.

A similar intricate relationship between deliberate abstinence (from pleasure) and coercion is apparent in nineteenth-century and twentieth-century sexual politics. Since the end of the nineteenth century, the interests of the nation were also formulated very clearly in this area. French fears of *dépopulation* after its military defeat at the hands of the Prussians in 1870, German ambitions in Europe, and the British construction of a colonial empire made population growth a political issue of the highest importance in very different contexts. In France after the First World War, policing of the ban on abortion was tightened up and advertising contraceptives was prohibited, while in Germany and Great Britain, eugenics became a new intellectual fashion – in many different forms. Paradoxically, this public concern with reproduction also made the more explicit discussion of personal intimacy possible. Unintentionally, it made it more acceptable to talk about sex, made it possible to discuss individual sexual experiences, and ultimately increased women’s right to sexual self-determination.

In the discourse of individual sexual experience that arose in this fashion, abstinence and pleasure with regard to sexuality existed in a complex relationship with one another. Thus Lesley Hall points out in her contribution that participation in sexual relations (or rather the endurance thereof) was an

obvious element of self-sacrifice for many women until well into the twentieth century. The feminist critique of the duplicitous morality of marriage was also internalised by a number of men to such an extent that pleasure became a problematic question and abstinence was sometimes opted for. When sexologists began assigning abstinence a role as an exercise in eroticism in the early twentieth century, this provided the impetus for a new framework for the perception of sexuality. Excessive emphasis on asceticism, argued the British sexologist Havelock Ellis in 1910, had placed too much stress on the sexual impulses. Moderation of the former, he suggested to his readers, would be accompanied by moderation of the latter. Sexual abstinence could then be an effective means of regaining control of personal intimacy against the demands of spousal rights or the birth policy of Church and State, although asceticism should not become an end in itself.

Problems of social regulation, however, appeared not only in the fields of mass entertainment and intimate experience. The regulatory power of asceticism also haunted the minds of (late) nineteenth-century intellectuals who tried to conceptualise the link between asceticism and modernity. In his contribution, Henk de Smaele maps out these philosophers' and social theorists' obsession with the persisting reality of asceticism in Western history. He focuses upon the religious motives that haunted these analysts. De Smaele shows that for nineteenth-century theorists such as Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, modern asceticism came down to ascetic capitalism, not republicanism. They convinced their contemporaries that this particular kind of (post-)Protestant asceticism still pervaded modern economy and society. And though this religious asceticism would gradually secularise, it never fully lost its colonising and dominating character. It structured modern power and dominance as much as modern pleasure. And it continues to do so, even today. Indirectly, however, De Smaele also demonstrates how this Weberian account helped to obscure the republican sources of asceticism. Paradoxically, many critics of ascetic capitalism remained imprisoned in the very same tradition.

De Smaele gives ample indices of this imprisonment. The critics of ascetic capitalism's social regulation, so it seems, could hardly think of any (republican or other) regime beyond its scope. For Weber and Durkheim, asceticism became an analytic category which typified and closed modern society as a whole. In other words, asceticism was a concept that enabled the unspoken assumptions of modern society to be laid bare in a new and often surprising way. That society might have abandoned heaven, but not the religious practices that had been associated with the notion of God. Such an analysis was not only popular in the nineteenth century, for it also remains intellectually attractive today. The links that Marx had already drawn in the 1840s between asceticism and the slave morality of capitalism have therefore lost little of their shrewdness. The position defended by later theoreticians –

namely, that asceticism paradoxically represents an essential characteristic of modern consumer culture – also continues to inspire contemporary writers. However, the strength of a general concept of asceticism of this kind also contains a weakness. The concept scarcely had any differentiating power any longer. Consumer urges or thriftiness: both turned out to represent forms of asceticism. In this way, social conformism and anti-capitalist cultural critique, economic success and the rejection of such success, seemed to blend with one another, as related offshoots of a single (Protestant) religious ascetic discourse. In nineteenth-century social theory, the social regulation of ascetic capitalism was no longer something one chose. Rather, it became like the pattern that structured the limited choices of modern individuals.

Rather than consider asceticism as an all-pervading characteristic of modern society as a whole, it seems fruitful to approach it instead as an instrument which enabled individuals and groups to broaden the range of their choices, to search for a distinctive way of life, to construct individual and group identities. The field of aesthetics offers an example of the dynamics of distinction that was implied by asceticism. In the third section of this volume, the focus is in the modernistic visual language that gained currency in the cultural field. More specifically, the ascetic programmes of different groups of modernist architects will be analysed. The divergent target publics of avant-garde architects and of 'functional', standardised construction for the masses will serve as the starting point. A strong element of choice was also apparent in the social and societal ambitions of twentieth-century architecture – aesthetics and distinctiveness were synonymous. Those who opted for asceticism marked themselves out as different. It was based on a belief in the superiority of those who succeeded in voluntarily denying themselves the material prerequisites of modern society. Wessel Krul's reading of the early twentieth-century work of Adolf Loos, the 'father' of asceticism in modern architecture, makes this conflict apparent. For Loos, Krul argues, asceticism in architectural aesthetics was very closely bound up with a desire for power, masculinity and order. In Loos's view, that order was needed to provide an antidote to the prevailing culture of externalities and ornament that he associated with decadence and degeneracy.

However, asceticism could equally be aimed at paring back excessive individuality. Austerity played a crucial role in the consolidation of social differences in very different fields, too. This emerges from Sofie De Caigny's contribution about domestic and stylistic advice that was issued during the interwar period by intermediary organisations to working women and farmers' wives. Arguments of a hygienic-scientific and moral nature were employed in the definition of an austere alternative to the model of the nineteenth-century bourgeois dwelling, full of ornament, which was attractive to workers. Modernist architectural ideals of austerity also provided a source of inspiration here. Within modernism, austerity stood for functionality, transparency

and social engagement. However, the ascetic traits of modernist architectural theory did not necessarily coincide with a concern for social equality.

The dynamics of cultural distinction that were part of the attractiveness of aesthetic asceticism were equally at work in modern science and philosophy – fields to which the fourth part of this book is devoted. Here too, asceticism served as an element in the construction of modern identities, a subtle and powerful tool in processes of inclusion and exclusion. In the field of science, profound cultural changes occurred from the middle of the nineteenth century. Institutionalisation, professionalisation and internationalisation required a growing application of discipline in behaviour and language on the part of science's practitioners. Just as the national republic became an 'imagined community' with extensive sovereignty during this period, so science also acquired a new kind of autonomy and authority. And just as 'real men' had to be prepared to die for their country, so too one had to be ready to sacrifice oneself for science. The ethics of asceticism that were associated with science in a new way from the late nineteenth century were very much tailored to male concerns. As Kaat Wils indicates in her contribution on Marie Curie, the culture of scientific asceticism and the relative inaccessibility of science to women were intimately bound up with one another. Again, neo-republican masculinity could only prevail against the background of a family-based femininity which it had first invoked itself.

The ascetic character of modern scientific discourse was revealed at an even more fundamental level, however. The desire to rid culture of what was superfluous, superficial, impure or unhealthy did not just introduce new contrasts between the masculine-public and feminine-private spheres. To a certain extent, that desire also placed a strain on classical, controlled masculinity itself. Klaas van Berkel argues in his contribution to this book that Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy of language in the *Tractatus* (1922) can be regarded as a constitutive element in the history of modern asceticism. Because language cannot say anything meaningful about religion and ethics, Wittgenstein reasoned, refraining from speech is a precondition for a truly religious or ethical life. The use of language that was so important in the history of philosophy was in Wittgenstein's case an exercise in asceticism – an exercise which, not coincidentally perhaps, was consistent with Wittgenstein's own lifestyle. His philosophy featured not a proud Greek citizen, but a lone eccentric in a barrel. Not a virile soldier but a sickly youth, not the general interest but an intensely private obscurity.

By presenting Van Berkel's interpretation of Wittgenstein, we do not want to suggest, though, that modern asceticism ended in the middle of the twentieth century by silencing itself. It appears, nevertheless, that the Second World War has functioned as a turning point. The postwar world with its unstoppable affluence hence constitutes the theme of the last part of this book. Whereas the

search for bodily experienced authenticity became part of mainstream culture, the republican vein of the ascetic tradition lost much of its relevance. In his contribution, Marnix Beyen shows how, in various European countries, the topos of austerity in the reconstruction period following the Second World War primarily served future prospects of growing prosperity of middle-class families and individuals. The moral call for discipline and asceticism was maintained by older elites. They hoped in this way to resurrect both a classical (republican) nation and a traditional (equally republican) masculinity from the rubble of the Second World War. However, it became clear that republican ascetic ideals lost much of their attractiveness with the expansion of affluence and the continual growth of the modern middle classes after the Second World War. Republican asceticism, so it seemed, could not live on without its distinctive quality. It could retain this quality within radical political subcultures, such as European communist parties, but it no longer functioned as a model for the masses of 'ordinary' workers and middle-class people.

Late twentieth-century debates about the postwar welfare state would, however, continue to draw on ascetic maxims. In the United States under Ronald Reagan, the United Kingdom under Margaret Thatcher, and the (socio-)liberal democracies in continental Europe, the conviction grew that social support could also lead to individual laziness. Too many social adjustments to the workings of the market, ran the critique of a number of controversial intellectuals, made the individual urge to perform and the sense of responsibility to society at large crumble away. Neo-liberalism and neo-asceticism could blend together – in such a discourse at any rate – with surprising ease. It remains in other words fruitful to take asceticism into account in analyses of contemporary capitalism.

Such analyses will also take into account the marketing of another, more individual strand of asceticism: the asceticism of contemporary body culture. In the closing chapter, Julia Twigg reflects on the ascetic character of modern body culture by focusing on the culture of dieting, vegetarianism and the pursuit of bodily cleanliness. Individuals are required to monitor and discipline their bodies by means of activities such as conscious abstinence or self-denial, deployed in pursuit of a body ideal which is partly new but equally indebted to ancient aesthetics and ideals of physical beauty. One of the specificities of this contemporary form of asceticism is without doubt its complex interaction with – equally mass-marketed – anti-ascetic hedonism.

Postwar asceticism is, however, not only to be found in radical leftist politics or mainstream body culture. Nostalgic memories of hardship and discipline in the armed forces, youth movements and boarding schools remain as present as the fashionable irritation with presumed modern-day laziness. Even in seemingly autonomous areas such as science, the modern ideal of the ascetic scientist remains surprisingly influential too. Scientific culture con-

tinues to be structured by the rhetoric and ethics of asceticism. The highest peaks of contemporary asceticism, however, are reached by modern ecologism. Abandoning one's own comfort zone has to be a project of personal and universal purification. In the most radical variation of that ecological project, the asceticist seems to want to erase their own tracks and, in so doing, themselves. This self-denial remains liable to elicit irritation and ridicule. After all, arrogance is always suspected of hiding behind this asceticism. The distinction indisputably associated with asceticism, however, does not seem to have lost its cultural authority. It remains a source of fear and yet a place of salvation. Is this modern passion ultimately any less evil than its predecessors? Even within academia, it continues to repel as much as it attracts. It is beyond pleasure that the pleasure of asceticism is to be found.

Notes

1. B. Russell, 'Ideas that have harmed Mankind', in B. Russell, *Unpopular Essays* (New York, [1950] reprint 1995), 160.
2. Ibid.
3. F. Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie* (1872), quoted in R. Safranski, *Nietzsche. Een biografie van zijn denken*, trans. M. Wildschut (Amsterdam, 2002), 73.
4. E. Rawson, *The Spartan Tradition in European Thought* (Oxford, 1991).
5. 'Mirrors of Princes' and other educational tracts, such as Vergerio, *De ingenuis moribus ac liberalibus studiis* ('On the Manners of a Gentleman and on Liberal Studies') (Venice, 1472).
6. M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic* (New York, 1958[1905]).
7. J. Mandeville, *Fable of the Bees* (Oxford, 1924 [1723]); A. Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (London, 1776).
8. T. Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (1899).
9. M. Foucault, 'Technologies of the Self', in L.M. Martin, H. Gutman and P.H. Hutton (eds), *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault* (London, 1988) 16–49.

References

- Foucault, M. (1988). 'Technologies of the Self', in L.M. Martin, H. Gutman and P.H. Hutton (eds), *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, London, pp.16–49.
- Mandeville, B. 1924[1723]. *The Fable of the Bees: Or Private Vices, Publick Benefits*, ed. F.B. Kaye, 2 vols, Oxford.
- Rawson, E. 1991. *The Spartan Tradition in European Thought*, Oxford.

- Russell, B. 1995[1950]. 'Ideas that have harmed Mankind', in B. Russell, *Unpopular Essays*. New York, pp.146–65.
- Safranski, R. 2002². *Nietzsche. Een biografie van zijn denken*, trans. M. Wildschut, Amsterdam.
- Smith, A. [1776]. *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, 4 vol., London.
- Veblen, T. (1899). *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions*.
- Vergerio, P.P. 1472. *De ingenuis moribus ac liberalibus studiis*, Venice.
- Weber, M. 1958[1905]. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. T. Parsons, New York.