

Clean eating and orthorexia as technologies of the self

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As numerous social and traditional media outlets and ads constantly remind us, our diets must be “clean” a vague descriptor whose fuzzy boundaries can fit a plethora of surrogate terms: organic, natural, whole, non-GMO, unprocessed, gluten free, vegan, sugar-free, fat-free, low-carb, raw, unrefined, and so on. The evidence for “clean eating” is often contradictory or cherry-picked, but its dogma is nevertheless viscerally felt to be true, or at least compelling, banking on a series of binaries lopsided in its favor: clean/dirty, organic/synthetic, natural/artificial, whole/incomplete, unprocessed/processed, pure/altere



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The modern-day obsession with “clean eating” has sprouted from multiple diffuse nodes: healthism (the neoliberal tenet that we are each individually responsible for our own health), clever marketing, alternative medicine and lifestyles, a reaction to western lifestyle diseases (e.g. obesity), food scares (e.g., E-coli contaminations, Mad Cow Disease), as well as a preoccupation with the dietary purity of the populace, which often took nationalistic and racist overtones.^{1, 2} But what happens when one gets so obsessed with clean eating as to be (ironically) consumed by it? According to recent research, one can acquire a new eating disorder: orthorexia, derived from the Greek *orthos*=right, and *rexia*=hunger, appetite.

Orthorexia, in short, is defined as a compulsion for eating “right,” that is pure, healthy food in pursuit of perfect health and control over one’s body.³ The definition of “pure” or “healthy” varies, depending on the vagaries of alternative nutrition “science” seeking to cure modern-day ailments through diet. The overall wellbeing of the orthorexic sufferer may be affected by weight loss, persistent dysphoric states, anxiety toward meal planning and social situations involving food, obsessive behaviors and illusions of control, and nutritional imbalances (stemming, ironically, from the quest for nutritional perfection).⁴ Orthorexia engenders feelings of control and superiority, which equate nutritional choices with moral prowess.

The concept itself was invented less than twenty years ago by a holistic doctor for the purposes of self-diagnosis. Steve Bratman coined the term “orthorexia nervosa” in an article for the *Yoga Journal* in 1997; in it, he documented his and others’ increasingly restrictive, ritualistic behaviors regarding food—raw, macrobiotic, vegan, organic, natural, non-GMO, to name just a few, which came from a sincere desire to adhere strictly to naturopathic principles in order to manage his health. “Eventually,” he recalls, “I became such a snob that I disdained to eat any vegetable that had been plucked from the ground more than fifteen minutes. I was a total vegetarian, chewed each mouthful of food fifty times, always ate in a quiet place (which meant alone) . . . (He is eventually cured through a series of eye-opening encounters with spiritual leaders, who gradually make him recognize that his habits were neither healthy nor life-affirming).⁵ Bratman expounded on the concept in a follow-up book, *Health Food Junkies* (with David Knight, 2000), which was favorably reviewed in *JAMA*, and whose take-home message was quickly disseminated via a network of wellness websites and magazines.⁶ The concept was eventually taken up in the medical literature starting roughly in 2004. The first to expand on the definition were an Italian research team led by Donini et al., who also devised an instrument for diagnosing orthorexia—the ORTO-15 questionnaire.⁷ The instrument was flawed and has never been successfully validated, yielding wildly varying rates of orthorexia in the general population, from 6.9 % to 57.6 % in a follow-up study; however, numerous studies used it to show that a significant number of people in the general population are susceptible to orthorexia, with some populations (e.g., medical or nutrition students) more than others.^{9, 10, 11, 12} No consistent gender differences have been revealed.

The concept of orthorexia jumped back and forth between popular and clinical genres and discourse communities. In its first mediatic cycle, orthorexia spread, from Bratman’s article and book, to health websites (which are heavily cited in the 2004 Donini et al. study), and on to clinical journals. In its second uptake cycle, the concept made its way from medical journals back to health magazines, websites and the health sections of newspapers, and into the vast seas of social media. Orthorexia was considered for inclusion in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual V (DSM-V)*, an attempt that failed due to lack of sufficient evidence.¹³ A big boost in the recognition and popularization of orthorexia came in 2014-2015, when Jordan Younger, a popular vegan blogger and Instagrammer, admitted she was suffering from orthorexia and gave up veganism in an attempt to get better. The backlash from her vegan followers was swift, and the media immediately seized on the story—“which mixed novelty, shock value, and scandal all in one. Not only was orthorexia a novel term, but a popular (blond, thin, young, pretty, photogenic) health blogger was actually anything but healthy and, on top of that, veganism was revealed to be conducive to an eating disorder. Younger became notorious and was featured on TV and in many newspapers, magazines, and websites. Her 2015 memoir detailing her struggle with orthorexia (*Breaking Vegan: One woman’s journey from veganism, extreme dieting, and orthorexia to a more balanced life*) was endorsed by Bratman, orthorexia’s inventor and patient zero, who in turn cited her case in a clinical review of orthorexia he co-authored.¹⁴ The concept’s reuptake in social media was swift, and numerous confessionals and stories about orthorexia started appearing around this time, accompanied by a sharp rise in the hashtag #orthorexia.¹⁵ Meanwhile, the clinical research on the topic has continued apace, with close to 100 hits in PubMed to date and a recent book on the topic.¹⁶

Younger, like the many similar self-confessed orthorexics documented in the media, displays an obsessive preoccupation with food, or rather the *right* food, stemming from her initial desire to cure her own digestive troubles; but given that there is no central authority on clean eating, her ideas of what is “right” are a pastiche of trends that she tries, tweaks, and continually refines in hopes of achieving a feeling of purity and calm in her stomach, and a perfect (healthy, fit) body.¹⁷ To this day, she prescribes health advice via her blog, podcast, and app, and devises and sells juice cleanses on her website, “The Balanced Blonde” (formerly “The Blonde Vegan”)—although in her memoir her obsession with juice cleanses is painted as a major manifestation of her disorder. Her complex yoga and dietary regimens, which are illustrative of contingents of wellness bloggers, can be described as a “technology of the self,” defined by Foucault as

â€œpermit[ting] individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of other 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.â€¹⁸ â€œClean eating,â€ consequently, can be loosely characterized as a neoliberal technology of the self, using composite dietary regimes, often complemented by fitness regimes, to perfect the body and confer both physical and moral superiority to the strict adherents in the context of healthism.

Younger is just one of many similar health, wellness, food, and fitness bloggers and YouTube and Instagram stars. Some examples are Vani Hari â€œThe Food Babeâ€ (a relentless crusader for freeing our foods of â€œchemicalsâ€); David â€œAvocadoâ€ Wolfe (a raw food guru); Freele â€œThe Banana Girlâ€ (a committed vegan advocating a diet based on raw fruit and in particular bananas); or Belle Gibson (who claimed she cured her multiple cancers through a â€œcleanâ€ diet and alternative treatments, though she was later exposed to have lied about her cancer). In the echo-chambers of the internet their popularity is amplified via â€œfollowersâ€ and â€œlikes,â€ and â€œmonetizedâ€ (Hari, for example, has a best-selling book, sells her own natural supplements on her website, and is about to release a second book.) They all are digital entrepreneurs of the self, modeling clean eating as a self-perfecting technology. Their behavior gets modeled and spreadsâ€virallyâ€via social media, allowing orthorexia to proliferate; indeed, a study found that Instagram users have high rates of orthorexia.¹⁹

In a recent book, Kravetz made the case that bulimia had also spread via popular media, which picked up on an initial report of a few isolated cases of bingeing and purging behavior in 1972, causing an eventual epidemic of bulimic behaviors primarily among young women.²⁰ Western societal pressures to be thin mixed with an abundance of food choices were among the vectors contributing to this behavioral contagion. In the case of orthorexia, the abundance of food choices remains but is matched by an abundance of often contradictory dietary and health advice. The internet provides the medium for digital contagion, while our collective preoccupation with clean eating might be the decisive factor in whether oneâ€™s *healthy* dietary behaviors cross the line into pathology. While not an official *DSM* diagnosis yet, orthorexia is at a minimum a symptom of a cultural pathology, a neoliberal disease emerging from the proliferation of â€œclean eatingâ€ discourses, and a technology-of-the-self gone awry.

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Highlighted in *Frontispiece* [Volume 11, Issue 1](#) "Winter 2019"

Summer 2018 |

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