**Introduction**

The present research explores the tension in contemporary culture between capitalism—the dominant economic system around the world—and the consumer culture that supports it, on the one hand, and the widespread pejorative attitudes toward fat coupled with the pressure to be thin as they are expressed in the current medical and public discourse about excess weight and dieting. In an economic system predicated on constantly growing needs and desires and buttressed by a hedonistic consumer culture, which places at its center the values of the pursuit of pleasure and limitless consumption (Ewen, 1976; Turner, 1996; Migone, 2007), it would be reasonable to expect that ideologies promoting restraint, avoidance, and asceticism in the dominant cultural discourse would be marginalized. However, an examination of the medical discourse, both professional and public, which over the past three decades has dealt with the “obesity epidemic” and sees the rising obesity rates as a significant global threat to public health (Kuczmarski et al., 1994; Wang et al, 2008), reveals that ideologies endorsing the values of asceticism and restraint still have a significant and influential place in contemporary culture.

Although capitalism appears to have assimilated the modern imperative to be thin,[[1]](#footnote-1) the effects of the cultural demand for eating in moderation and the negative attitudes towards being overweight are sometimes inconsistent with the interests of the capitalist system, to the point of contradiction. An illustrative example is the surprising discrepancy between the limited supply of plus-size women’s clothing in the United States and the massive demand for it, not to mention the immense potential for profit in this market segment, as evident from the reports published in economic and research literature (Banjo and Molla, 2016). These show that although the majority of American women require large clothing sizes and the sales figures of plus-size women’s clothing are on a significant and constant rise, representing a growing relative share of the women’s clothing market, the supply in this area is much lower than the demand, both in terms of quantity and variety. Moreover, the fashion industry neglects and marginalizes customers interested in these sizes by placing the products intended for them in remote corners of clothing stores (Downing Peters, 2014; Christle and Dunn, 2016). They are never featured in store windows, let alone in prestigious fashion magazines. This phenomenon expresses a conspicuous tension between capitalist ideology, which ostensibly places profitability at the forefront, and a collective rejection of the fat body— a “cultural disgust” with fat and “flabby” or “soft” body parts (Bordo, 1993, p. 190)—which cannot be explained by economic logic alone. This quandary is expressed in the biting remarks of Michael Moon and Eve Sedgwick who claim that the fat woman is given an implicit but clear message in the clothing store, saying: “There’s nothing here for you to spend your money on.” They liken this situation to “the precipitation of one’s very body as a kind of cul-de-sac blockage or clot in the circulation of economic value” (Moon and Kosofski Sedgwick, 2001, p. 294).

This tension gives rise to the present article’s claim, namely, that alongside the culture of consumption and the hedonistic ethics that support it, there exists an ascetic ethic that is contrary to the ethos of the fulfillment of desires that supports the interests of the economy (Campbell, 1987). This ascetic ethic is present in the aesthetic, medical, and sociocultural discourses on fatness and thinness and promotes values and practices of austerity, restraint, and self-moderation, or “ascesis” as it is broadly defined by Foucault—“*ethical work* that one performs on oneself […] to attempt to transform oneself into the ethical subject of one’s behavior” (Foucault 1990, p. 27, emphasis in the original) or “arts of existence [which are] intentional and voluntary actions by which men […] seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an oeuvre that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria” (Ibid., pp. 10–11).

The dieting methods on which the present article focuses correspond to Foucault’s definition of ascetic activity and can be seen as practices encompassed by the ethics of self-care. These dieting approaches receive their meaning from broader ethical discourses that provide justification for the actions of regulation, restraint, and self-control that they promote in the midst of a consumer culture that encourages unlimited gratification. To explore this broad ethical context, the article examines the relationship that diet methods maintain with dominant ethical discourses in Western culture, constituting what Foucault calls “memory fields” and with which diet methods maintain relationships of “filiation, genesis, transformation, continuity and historical discontinuity” (Foucault, 1972, p. 58).

Ancient Greek and Christian ethics constitute for Western culture a sort of “cultural archive” or “memory field,” that is, a repository of ideas, values, and practices, including those concerning the care of the body and its nourishment. The ideas and practices contained in these ethical systems provide meaning and justification for the ideas and practices that characterize the mainstream diet discourses of our time. The aim of the present article, then, is to examine contemporary diet methods as ethical systems that express key elements of ancient Greek and early Christian ethics in light of the analysis proposed by Foucault in his later work. For this purpose, we shall analyze six commercial diet books and one commercial diet website, which were sampled according to criteria of commercial success and extensive exposure to the clientele of the “diet market” in the U.S. The diet books chosen are among the most successful diet methods to emerge between 1967—when Jean Nidetch, founder of “Weight Watchers,” published her first book—and the present day, including the Weight Watchers website from 2017–2018.

**Christian and Ancient Greek Ethics**

Our use of the concept of ascesis relies, as mentioned, on Foucault’s definition of the term as posited in his essays about Christian and ancient Greek ethics. Foucault distinguishes between “ethics” and the “moral code.” While he sees the latter as a set of more or less clearly defined values and rules (Foucault 1990), ethics for Foucault refers to the aspect of moral behavior that concerns the attitude of the individual to the values and rules according to which he is supposed to act.

פוקו משתמש בעקרון הדאגה לעצמי (epimeleia heautou) שהנחה את מגוון העמדות האתיות שפותחו בשיח הפילוסופי היווני-רומי, כפרספקטיבה לניתוח תפיסות האתיקה המתעצבות בשיח הפילוסופי והרפואי היווני-רומי העתיק וכן בשיח התיאולוגי של אבות הכנסייה הנוצרית. עקרון זה קבע כתכלית אתית את העיסוק של הסובייקט בעיצובו העצמי באמצעות טכניקות שאותן תרגל באופן מתמיד (אסקזיס) למען מימוש עצמי מסוים שלו שהוצב כמטרה, בהתאם לעמדות האתיות השונות. תפיסה זו של דאגה לעצמי אומצה על ידי הנצרות הקדומה ופורשה בהתאם להנחות יסוד אחרות על אודות התכלית שעל הסובייקט לחתור אליה (Foucault 2005).

Foucault argues that one must distinguish between four components of ethics, one of which is ascesis. The other three are the “ethical substance”— the part of the self that is the object to be shaped through behavior; the “telos”—the ethical purpose that one’s work on the self strives to achieve or the moral being that the individual strives to become after establishing himself as a moral subject through ascetic practice; and the “mode of subjection”—the reasons for which the individual subjects himself to ethical rules (Foucault, 1990; Foucault, 1995). We shall now briefly present the main characteristics of Christian and ancient Greek ethics based on Foucault’s discussion of them.

Foucault views Christian and ancient Greek ethics as fundamentally different from each other in terms of the four elements mentioned above. In early Christian ethics, the passions of the flesh constitute the ethical substance that must be submitted to the ethical imperatives; the telos is the achievement of purity— purification from sins and the passions of the flesh and gaining immortal life in the bosom of God; the mode of subjection is the need to be cleansed of the sense of sin that originates from original sin to gain salvation; and finally, the ethical work, or ascesis, consists of various methods of physical privation, self-denial, and purification, including confession, fasting, and sexual celibacy (Foucault, 1994). We can see, therefore, that care for the self in this ethic paradoxically takes the shape of self-negation (Foucault, 2005, p. 13).

In Greek ethics, on the other hand, it is “aphrodisia,” or the use of pleasure, that constitutes the ethical substance rather than the passions of the flesh. In contrast to Christian ethics, which focuses on the processes taking place in the dark recesses of the soul, Greek ethics concerns the actions involved in producing pleasure (Foucault 1995). While Christian ethics perceive man as born pre-stamped with the mark of sin and forever doomed to lust after it (Tillich, 1968, pp. 43–60), Greek ethics sees man as an intelligent, autonomous, and sovereign being. Therefore, in this ethics, the telos is a life of self-control focused on this world rather than the afterlife through the establishment of an admirable and aesthetic existence of a virtuous self, a self that is master of its pleasures and knows how to use them in a moderate and balanced manner. Such an existence should give the individual a sense of fulfillment and personal happiness (Rawls, 2000; Foucault, 2008). The mode of subjection in this ethics is the individual’s attempt to confer upon their existence the most aesthetic form possible and to construct themselves as a subject capable of self-mastery, and thus, mastery over others (Foucault, 1993). Unlike the early Christians, the Greeks did not judge one’s failure to do the good and right thing to be “evil” or a mark of a deep-seated moral defect but a simple absence of correct behavior patterns (Anscombe, 1985). Thus, Greek asceticism included a collection of technologies of the self “which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (Foucault, 1988, p.18). These technologies included, among other things, self-examination and regular practice of physical and psychological self-mastery. These, in turn, shaped the proper use of bodily pleasures such as eating or sexuality as part of the self-fulfillment of the subject as having control over themselves and others (Foucault, 1993).

The Foucauldian perspective has already been used as a prism through which to examine the Weight Watchers diet by Cressida Heyes (2006), who proposes a feminist reading pointing to the liberating aspects of dieting, which include self-care techniques, as an alternative to an approach that considers dieting methods to be repressive. Contrary to this, in the present article, we shall use Foucault’s analysis to argue that diets are a way of preserving ethical technologies in the context of a consumer culture that promotes ethics that are contrary to them. We will, therefore, focus not on the effects that diets have on practitioners or their experiences, but on the ethical groundwork that underlies them. Finally, unlike Heyes, who deals with Weight Watchers in its twenty-first-century incarnation, we shall examine the ethical changes this diet approach has undergone since its founding in 1963.

Let us now examine two themes characteristic of each of our chosen ethics to illustrate their presence in and influence on dieting methods.

**Christian Ethics in Dieting Approaches**

a. Desire as a contaminant and the aspiration toward purity

One theme that occupies a central place in diet plans that emphasize improving health as a central benefit is the theme of “contamination,” which functions in such diets both as a concrete physical danger and as a central ethical image. These diets present physical contamination as a visible and concrete cause of inflammation and disease, which each method seeks to explain “scientifically” as arising from “unhealthy” eating, that is, a diet that does not follow the principles it proposes. While the explanation for how and why this occurs is presented as scientific, each diet also contains a moral layer in which the illness or the contamination functions as punishment for moral transgressions. Contamination is thus both the real result of and simultaneously a metaphor for sin—the sin of excessive and inappropriate gratification of the desire to eat.

The clearest and most explicit example of the theme of contamination as a moral offense among the diet books examined in our study was found in *The Whole30: The 30-Day Guide to Total Health and Food Freedom* (Hartwig and Hartwig, 2015). The authors invite readers to perform a 30-day “reboot” of their body by eliminating a variety of “harmful” foods. By doing so, according to them, the readers will be cured of a host of disorders and pains, both physical and mental, and will experience a kind of “new beginning” in terms of their health. To enjoy these health benefits, the reader must adhere to a strict nutritional regime that involves abstaining from, among other things, processed foods and foods high in sugars and carbohydrates for at least thirty days—hence the name of the diet. At the core of this approach lies the rationale of purifying the body by getting rid of contaminants. The authors see the forbidden foods as triggering the development of a general physical condition known as “systemic inflammation”—inflammation that chronically burdens the immune system and therefore causes a variety of physical and mental impairments. The inflammation is ostensibly responsible for countless medical conditions ranging from autoimmune diseases to heart disease and stroke. The source of the contamination, according to the authors, is the intestine: eating foods high in sugar and carbohydrates leads to “leaky gut syndrome,” a condition in which the small intestine is no longer able to digest the nutrients and therefore the half-digested food, along with various bacteria and toxins, “leaks” from the intestine into the bloodstream, thereby polluting the body and causing a series of ailments.

It is rather transparent, despite the scientific or pseudo-scientific explanations proffered by the authors, that the idea of contamination is analogous to moral sin. According to the Whole30 diet, a large portion of our health complaints are due to contamination, which is the implicit result of overindulgence, that is, of the sin of gluttony. This contamination is not presented as a metaphor but as a concrete, physical phenomenon that one experiences as punishment for breaking rules that are fundamentally of a moral nature. It originates from the most material and “dirtiest” organ of the body— the gut— as a consequence of a wild and licentious lifestyle.

In Whole30, the agent of evil is what the authors call the “Sugar Dragon.” According to the authors, every single one of us has a Sugar Dragon living within us and demanding its sugar-rich gratifications. The more these are given to him, the stronger it grows, and the greater its demands become (ibid., p. 27). “אנו מתייחסים לצורך הנחוש של המוח שלך בסוכר, בג'אנק פוד, או פשוט בפחמימות כאל 'דרקון הסוכר' שלך. ככל שאתה מאכיל אותו כך הוא נושף יותר אש וכך הוא נהיה חזק יותר,” the authors write (ibid.). A follower of the Whole30 method should be able to overcome their passive and lethargic state, which is concretely expressed as a “lazy metabolism” (ibid, p. 26), and enlist in the war against the obscene passions that the Sugar Dragon imposes on them. Purification and the fight against gluttony require taking extreme measures such as “starvation” and even the “slaughter” of the Sugar Dragon by completely depriving it of sugar: “הדרך היחידה לשחוט את דרקון הסוכר שלך היא להרעיב אותו [...] וזו הסיבה שבשלה Whole30 איננה מאפשרת שום תוספת סוכר, לא פחות אלא כלום” (ibid., p. 27). Of course, as could be expected, the amount of sin in which the individual indulged in their “previous life” is directly proportionate to the price of atonement and the pain involved in paying it.

Purification by way of the Whole30 diet involves significant suffering and self-denial resulting from the restrictions and the physical side effects accompanying the dietary change: headaches, fatigue, and a general feeling of malaise, as well as the mental battle against the countless temptations around us. The creators of the diet warn readers that things may get worse before they get better, but at the end of the process, the suffering pays off and brings the practitioner not only physical well-being but also moral superiority and self-worth for having endured the necessary suffering for the sake of improving their health.

The Whole30 diet features several identifiable elements from Christian ethical discourse: contamination, which is a prominent theme in the diet, is, along with the “stain,” a central metaphor for sin and baseness in Christian moral thinking (Foucault, 2014). The stain or contamination must be wiped clean or purified through asceticism. The life of the devout Christian believer is to be conducted as a constant mental battle to purify oneself from contamination in order to achieve the telos of purity and eternal life in the bosom of God (Foucault, 1994). Similarly, the Whole30 diet practitioner directs their efforts toward gaining bodily purification, health, and increased life expectancy—a variation on the Christian ethical telos. The “contamination,” according to the Whole30 diet, is the result of sin: in this case, feasting on contaminated foods, i.e., the sin of gluttony. It also seems that the choice of the authors to represent inefficient metabolism as “laziness” is not accidental and echoes the close connection that exists in the Christian ethical discourse between the sin of sloth and that of gluttony—two of the seven deadly sins (Miller, 1997, p. 95).

​ The state of contamination is caused, according to some of the Church Fathers, due to the presence of the devil in the souls of believers, who must "לגרש את האלמנט העוין, הזר, החיצוני והאחר הזה מהנשמה" through mortification of the flesh (Foucault, 2014, p. 125). Passion and desires of the flesh undergo reification in Christianity and become a foreign entity that exists within us and which must be fought. Thus, in Christianity, desires or urges are often likened to a dragon, which, along with the serpent and demons, symbolizes the work of the devil (Foucault, 1993, p. 220; Meeks, 1993, p. 112). The Whole30 method likewise features an immoral and demonic agency of evil and sin: the Sugar Dragon, the cause of contamination. Similarly to the Christian idea that the devil finds a hiding place in every nook and cranny of the believer’s soul, seductive sugar is also described in the Whole30 method as a cunning entity that habitually disguises itself in seemingly innocent food, its presence only revealed through a careful examination of the list of ingredients (Hartwig & Hartwig, 2015, p. 45).

The Whole30 program is the dieting approach that uses Christian ideas of artificial contamination and its ascetic purification most prominently and evidently. A less explicit reference can be found in two other methods investigated in the current study, which also warn against contamination from food in the form of “inflammation”—the intermittent fasting method (Fung & Moore, 2016) and the ketogenic diet (Ramos, 2016). These diets “medicalize” the vocabulary of ancient moral-religious violations and divert them from the overt moral realm to the medical realm, under whose auspices the individual can “return” to the moral “straight and narrow path” using a quasi-medical rationale.

b. Confessional practices in diet methods

Foucault places confession, in its various permutations, at the center of his work on sexuality and regimes of truth (Foucault, 2014; Foucault 1978, pp. 17–35). Some of these confessional practices are self-reflection techniques, while others aim to reveal the truth about the subject. All the diet approaches examined in the study contain various practices of confession. In some cases, the confession is made privately before an authority, while others require the practitioner to make it publicly in front of a real or virtual community. As we shall see, in some diets the confession is made verbally while in others it has additional non-verbal or performative aspects in the shape of confession rituals conducted before a community.

The method in which confession practices are used most distinctly and dramatically is in the Weight Watchers program. Founder Jean Nidetch saw giving fat people the opportunity to talk freely about their “sins” as the main innovation of her approach. According to her, this innovation is a necessary condition for breaking the pattern that perpetuates chronic obesity—the pattern of concealment (Nidetch, 1970). Therefore, the crux of her method consists of exposing this concealment, extracting the truth about the self, and exposing the behaviors—the lies and deception—that prevent treating the obesity problem at its root and often exacerbate it. As Nidetch puts it, “כעת, משום שהתוודינו בפני אחרים, יכולנו לעזור לעצמנו להפסיק לעשות מה שידענו שאסור לנו לעשות,” (ibid., p. 93). Thanks to this, according to her, “אנשים שאף פעם לפני כן לא היו מסוגלים להישאר בדיאטה, רזו באופן קבוע” (ibid., p. 95).

During the first decades of the company’s existence, the prime mechanism of confession and the discovery of the truth about the self was the weighing ceremony held at Weight Watchers meetings. Each participant would be weighed once a week behind a curtain by the group instructor. The instructor would then record the results on a weight-tracking card and discuss them with the participant publicly in front of the group. Thus, the physical “confession” extracted through the weighing process was also converted into a verbal confession, in which participants were required to confess the “truth” regarding their eating patterns that week before their small community. The minutes of a typical Weight Watchers meeting from the late 1960s record a female participant, whose weighing indicated a lack of weight loss, being forced to make a brutal and detailed confession by the instructor. The latter gives the woman a journal and demands that she record everything she eats. “Every bite,” she says, “אני רוצה לדעת [...] תני לי לבדוק ונמצא מה זה” (Nidetch, 1970, pp. 172–173).

The participants in these groups voluntarily subject themselves to public shaming, which puts pressure on them to be constantly vigilant regarding any deviation in their weight. This is an integral part of the philosophy of Weight Watchers, which views fat people as condemned to perpetual “repentant” status, forever knocking on the gates of normative society—the society of people who correspond to reasonable weight parameters—but never quite accepted into it. The perception imparted to the group members is that it is impossible to completely recover from the fat “disease,” and that the fat person—the sinner—must be always on guard lest they sin again. One of the roles of the group instructor, who is the figure of authority in the meeting, is to preserve the participants’ fear of obesity and impart to them the fundamental importance of remaining vigilant if one wishes to maintain a low weight throughout their life. In one of the meetings described by Nidetch in her book, the instructor reprimands a group member who lost weight but started gaining it back, saying: “זוהי טעות. אסור לך לחשוב כי תירפא אי פעם מלהיות שמן [...] כשאתה עולה שני פאונדס עליך להיות מבוהל” (Ibid, p. 168). Excess weight, therefore, represents a tendency to give into the temptation of sin, a tendency of which one must forever remain wary. The Weight Watcher subject, as established by the group and its confessional practices, is one who is prone to sin, and is forever in the position of a repentant who is required to reveal the truth about themselves in their quest to rid themselves of the mark of sin and to be accepted and reintegrated into the community of righteous people.

In his lectures on the “Government of the Living,” Foucault analyzes the various practices of confession in early Christianity and distinguishes between “exomologesis”—confession as a public act in which the confessor acknowledges their status as a sinner and demonstrates this through verbal or dramatic means—and exagoreusis, a process whereby the self becomes the object of discourse and the confessor engages in the self-examination of the minute motions of the soul (Foucault, 2014, p. 307). While the first type of confession is general and does not include details of the sins but only a recognition in principle that the confessor is obliged to do constant penance, the second type of confession may also manifest itself in revealing the details of the sins. For Foucault, the latter form of confession involves a deeper self-inquiry than that required by Greek ethics, which strive to ensure self-control through self-awareness. The ethical substance of Christian ethics is passions, intentions, and thoughts, while that of Greek ethics is actions alone.

The proceedings of Weight Watchers meetings—the weighing ceremony, the public discussion of “sins” in front of the group, followed by receiving directives from the group instructor—constitute a combination of several forms of confession. On the one hand, we can identify the performative element of exomologesis in the act of standing up before the group and confessing one’s sins, as well as the participants’ constant public status of atonement. On the other hand, we can also see that these meetings involve an element of personal confession, the “causa” described by Foucault, and its reiteration as the widely misconceived verbal-public confession (Foucault, 2014, pp. 210–211).

The requirement to confess before an authority and before the community can also be found in other methods such as the Whole30 diet, (Hartwig & Hartwig, 2015) where the confession takes the shape of an online report, as well as the Body Love method developed by nutritionist Kelly LeVeque (2017), and the Atkins diet (1972, 2002). In the latter, alongside procedures of reporting through physical follow-ups, the practitioner is required to register and self-monitor results in order to ensure the correct implementation of the method.

To summarize, the two examples discussed above of the use of a key metaphor (that of contamination and purification) and a key practice (confession in its various forms) in contemporary diet methods demonstrate our claim that in the midst of a contemporary consumer culture based on hedonistic ethics, there is a living and pulsating core of ascetic ethics as expressed by popular diet approaches. These approaches, inherently inclined toward asceticism, make use of ideas and practices borrowed from Christian ethics, which emphasizes self-negation, where the telos is the establishment of a moral self, improved by way of asceticism. It is difficult to distinguish this element of consumer culture and the place that diets occupy within it without taking its ethical aspect into account.

In these diet approaches, we have discerned elements of Christian ethics, where the ethical substance is the desire to enjoy unrestrained eating and the unceasing preoccupation with pleasure, the telos is the transformation of the subject into a physically and morally “pure” one, the mode of subjectification is the imperative to thinness or the current cultural morphological standard, and the work is ascesis, i.e., the rules of the diet that include both dietary restrictions and the various practices of confession and technologies of the self (such as keeping a journal or group confession) that the method imposes.

**Greek Ethics**

Cultivation of the self as an ethical telos

It would appear that some decades into its existence, the Weight Watchers company underwent a profound change in terms of its positions and messaging. At first, founder Jean Nidetch’s books expressed a harsh, judgmental position toward the fat body, presenting excess weight as a sign of moral weakness. As indicated by the content of the current Weight Watchers (WW) website, this approach has been replaced with a position that urges its followers to take care of themselves, nurture themselves, and shape themselves into the best versions of themselves. The fat body is perceived as no longer indicating a moral defect but personal neglect and a lack of self-care, whether due to self-sacrifice and concern for others, the lack of grooming habits, or any number of other reasons. The telos in the contemporary version of the method and the promise offered by the site include the development of self-care and self-cultivating behaviors, which will improve the quality of the members’ lives and allow them to establish themselves as subjects who have control over their lives and enjoy self-fulfillment, increased satisfaction, and empowerment. Weight loss and the adherence to practices leading up to it are seen in this context as symbolizing a much greater achievement than a mere reduction of fat—they indicate the individual’s ability to position themselves as an object of self-care.

Thus, for example, Oprah Winfrey, in the video “Energy Matters,” which appeared on the company’s website (as of 2018), quotes her friend Jamie, who writes that she used to worry and constantly take care of everyone else except herself, which left her exhausted and depleted of energy. In order to take care of herself, Jamie enrolled in the Weight Watchers program and lost one hundred and twelve pounds (about 51 kg). Jamie is quoted as saying that putting her needs on the “family calendar” actually changed her life. Jamie is photographed in the video looking thin and smiling, surrounded by her family. Oprah summarizes Jamie’s story by saying: “ברכות לג'יימי על הורדת מאה ושתים-עשרה פאונדס וחשוב יותר, על חיים חדשים.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Self-care, which in this context consists of weight loss, would appear to confer a variety of positive effects on the self of the participant in the weight loss program. These effects include, for example, an increase in the individual’s sense of control over their life, increased self-confidence, the courage to respond to challenges, and the realization of their personal potential. The dominant message on the website is that WW “איננה דיאטה, אלא סגנון חיים” and that it helps program members transform their lives through the acquisition of self-care habits.

A typical example of this can be seen in the comments made by one of the program’s participants on “Connect”—the WW virtual community: “אני נהיית אט אט גרסה טובה יותר של עצמי עם כל בחירה שאני עושה. יש לי חיים מדהימים יותר מאי פעם. אני מרגישה חזקה. מרגישה בלתי מנוצחת. אני יכולה לכבוש את העולם!” The site also includes many “סיפורי הצלחה” expressing the message of self-care and the supremely positive impact it has had on the participants. These stories are presented with exciting headlines such as “Kellie discovered a new passion” or “גוונדולין החליטה ללכת סולו” and are accompanied by photographs of the members looking happy and energetic. They illustrate the lifestyle change the participants have undergone through the transition to self-care and the effects this transition has had on the participants’ selves, effects that clearly and visibly go beyond the realm of weight loss, but are represented by the weight loss and facilitated by it.

One of the main characteristics of the ethics of self-care is the attitude toward the body. Here, the body is an object of interest only to the extent that its ailments and malfunctions impact upon and are indicative of one’s mental state. If so, the purpose of weight loss is not to develop a strong, healthy, and athletic body but to deal with the disorders of the mind that manifest in the body and vice versa. The physical practices of the method are designed to optimize the health of the body, which is frequently threatened by pain and disease, and by optimizing the body—to optimize the mind, thus achieving self-control. Such an approach requires constant vigilance to one’s health and the factors affecting it, in particular one’s diet (Foucault, 1986, pp. 56–57; Foucault, 2005, pp. 426–428).

We can see, therefore, that the Weight Watchers company has experienced a shift in its ethical positions and in the way it tries to sell the practice of abstinence in a world of increasing abundance and consumerism from the beginning of the second half of the 20th century to the first quarter of the 21st century. This shift has seen the company transition from a strict and judgmental moral position that associates obesity with sin and guilt, to a position more in line with today’s society, which does not refer to sin and guilt at all, but rather emphasizes self-care as the key to a good and healthy life. While the company’s initial position maintained an affinity with Christian ethical discourse, its current concepts draw on Greek ethics, softened through the use of “New Age” language.

The aspiration to balance and moderation

Another prominent element in the current WW approach and in the Body Love diet is the idea of balance, or finding a golden mean between two extremes. Thus, for instance, Kelly LeVeque proclaims in her 2017 best-seller *Body Love* that she strives to liberate her followers from subjecting themselves to radical and ascetic diets, and by contrast enable them to "לחיות בשלום" ו"ביחסי אהבה" with their body, as suggested by the title of the book. While the telos of her plan is also presented as providing the opportunity to live a good life, this is supplemented by the aspect of balance or moderation as a key ideal. According to LeVeque, weight gain is the manifestation of a life lacking in happiness and well-being, which in itself is the result of an imbalance on one or more of the diverse planes of individual existence: physiological, behavioral, or emotional. These planes are interrelated and exert a mutual influence on each other. The implementation of extreme fad diets only exacerbates the problem by causing an emotional imbalance that manifests itself in an obsessive preoccupation with counting calories, on the one hand, and binge eating, on the other hand. The constant swings between the two extremes eventually lead to more excess weight. In addition, the fat body represents an imbalance on the physiological plane—abrupt peaks and dips in blood sugar and insulin levels, presenting a pattern resembling “רכבת הרים תלולה” (LeVeque, 2017, p. 59).

The Body Love method provides its followers with a “נוסחת הריפוי” that restores the correct balance between the different food groups in one’s nutrition regimen and produces physiological and mental balance. This balance will reward practitioners with the “good life” that preserves the golden mean and makes it possible to enjoy the best of both worlds: culinary and social pleasure while at the same time maintaining a healthy body at a healthy weight. This promise is echoed in LeVeque’s words when she writes: “Bingeing and cleansing cycles swing you back and forth like an out of control pendulum, but happiness and health are attained when you find balance. […] Balance is found with intentional movement to eat clean, sweat often, and even enjoy a glass of wine with friends” (LeVeque, 2017, p. 27). Elsewhere, LeVeque emphasizes that balance will make her followers thin, beautiful, and healthy (in that order):

Once in balance, you will lose fat, increase lean muscle mass, and probably go down at least one jean size. Your hair will become thicker and shinier, your skin will clear out and take a fresh glow, and your overall appearance will improve. On the inside, your body will adapt to this new inner balance by reducing pain and other inflammation, giving more energy, and enabling you to sleep better. Over time, any illnesses that have crept on you will be reversed, as your body adjusts to its natural homeostatic state. (Ibid., p. 72)

Leveque’s statements, as well as those appearing on the WW website, express a central principle in Greek ethics, as formulated by Aristotle. This principle is the idea of balance or moderation—“sophrosyne” in Greek—defined by Aristotle as “the right mean between insensitivity and excess,” which is chosen deliberately by the rational subject (Foucault, 1985, p. 64). The rational subject is, thus, one who practices the “right measure” (Foucault 1985, p. 102), that is to say, chooses the path of neither too much nor too little. Such a person acts in balance or moderation and avoids extremes. This is also the mark of the contented person who lives a “good life.” Accordingly, the purpose of the Greek ethical self-formation was to become a “sophron” (Foucault, 1985, p. 65)—a moderate person who controls themselves and is not a slave to their pleasures (Foucault, 1986, p. 349). Several contemporary diet approaches utilize this principle as a central axis, guaranteeing, as demonstrated above, beauty, slimness, health, and control over one’s body and life.

**Conclusion**

The analysis of diet methods we have proposed here indicates the existence of a distinct similarity between ethical ideas and practices present in contemporary diet approaches, and themes, ideas, and practices found in the Greek and Christian ethical discourses. An examination of the diets reveals that the effort to reduce body fat is viewed not only as a dietary process but also as a means of working on the individual’s deficient ethical behavior, thus demarcating the improved ethical status of the weight-losing subject. The individual’s ameliorated ethical conduct is fully parallel to and is expressed in the visible results of their reduced body size.

The comparison between the studied diets reveals that most of them maintain a distinct relationship with one main ethical system out of the two examined. It would appear that diet methods based on authoritarian practices and the demand for obedience, including a precise list of dietary rules, such as the initial Weight Watchers approach, are dominated by ideas and themes of mortification of the flesh (in the Christian sense), control of the mind over the body and its desires, self-denial, and the perception of fat as a deep-seated moral defect—elements that tie them to the Christian ethical discourse. By contrast, less authoritarian approaches based on freedom, flexibility, and self-management, wherein the practitioners are perceived as rational individuals, tend to emphasize balance, autonomy, liberal choice, and the aspiration to a good life—elements that tie them to the Greek ethical discourse.

An interesting lack of continuity emerged from the comparison of texts published by the Weight Watchers company at different time points half a century apart. This comparison showed a shift in the type of discourse the company employs in its publications. Texts written close to the company’s founding, in the 1960s and 1970s, display a clear connection to ideas and practices from the Christian ethical discourse. This affinity was expressed in the idea that the fat body is a sign of a moral pathology worthy of shame and an authoritarian approach that demands absolute obedience to meticulous rules, as well as in the demand to make a detailed weekly confession of guilt before an authority figure and the community. On the other hand, in the content featured on the company’s current website, the fat body is interpreted as a sign of personal unhappiness, a lack of self-care, and the failure to realize one’s inherent potential for a good life, concepts that correspond in spirit to the Greek ethical discourse. This increased presence of concepts compatible with Greek ethics is also evident in other 21st-century diet approaches, albeit not all of them.

The ethical shift in WW’s ideology probably reflects broader cultural changes that have taken place in the West in recent decades. These are related, among other things, to the general cultural challenge to authority and the transition from forms of governmentality that enforce control through physical and legal force to the neoliberal forms of governmentality that have dominated Western democracies since the middle of the 20th century (Rose, 1999). This transition was made possible, among other things, thanks to the increased cultural presence of the therapy professions that have produced norms and ideal images of life and of the self, motivating individuals to “take responsibility for their lives” and recreate themselves as improved versions of the self they desire, versions that are also in line with the interests of the state, while performing voluntary self-monitoring. Indeed, as our analysis indicates, the vocabulary and ideas of most contemporary diets include terms and therapeutic values of the type pointed out by Nicholas Rose. It is clear that, as part of this broad shift in forms of governmentality, authoritative methods of addressing diet clients, which were culturally legitimate in the middle of the 20th century, no longer fit the cultural climate of the late 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century and have thus been forced to move in a new direction that emphasizes autonomy and self-management, with a focus on achieving happiness and satisfaction rather than fighting against seductive passions.

The ethical discourses used to justify diet methods have changed throughout the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, from Christian ethics that inculcate a consciousness of sin and guilt to Greek ethics that emphasize self-control and striving to live a good life, couched in fashionable New Age terms such as “self-fulfillment,” “empowerment,” and “growth.” This change has allowed the authors of the diets to deal with the challenge of selling an ascetic practice, which by its very nature is demanding and restrictive, in the midst of a hedonistic consumer culture. Likewise, it has allowed them to create an attractive approach to weight reduction that does not appear to be a clear contradiction to the ethics that underlie the consumption culture within which the potential consumers of the various diets operate.

Finally, we hope this study will contribute to further establishing a critical view of common beliefs and assumptions regarding fatness and thinness currently taken for granted, a view promoted in the field of “fat studies” (Wann, 2009). These assumptions, prevalent today in the discourse of diet and public health, such as the apparently clear connection between fat and disease, are presented as free from any foreign agenda and as scientific and morally neutral. A critical awareness of the widespread influence of hidden moral positions on medical-nutritional approaches to fat may allow any individual who is exposed to pressure to be thin in the current culture (which is basically every person living in this culture) to adopt critical thinking about the medical and health assumptions and beliefs that are prevalent today regarding the fat body. Such critical thinking may, in turn, prevent them from internalizing beliefs that constitute the fat body and the fat self as indicative of physical and moral defects, thereby demanding its mortification and “calling to order.”

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1. This imperative, in its modern version, emerged at the end of the 19th century and almost immediately began to be exploited as a source of profit by the capitalist economy (Stearns, 1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. "Energy Matters" Oprah Winfrey Inspirational Video. Retrieved from: https://www.weightwatchers.com/us/m/cms/inspiration-oprah on 20.1.2018 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)