

Gödel's Anorexia

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Abstract

Kurt Gödel, the greatest logician of all time, suffered from anorexia nervosa that ended his life. Contrary to apocrypha, his case was protracted and fit the syndrome well. He had many anorexic traits: perfectionism, fastidiousness, fear of maturity, conflict avoidance, drive to symmetry, and sensitivity. The case exhibits some of the less known ways anorexia nervosa can pan out.

1 Introduction

It is well-known that Kurt Gödel starved himself to death, which is attributed to paranoia and hypochondria [1]. The thinness and inadequate diet in fact stretched some 36 years; though his motivations aren't clearly articulated, the background of a thoroughly anorexic personality deserves attention.

Rather than an ironic juxtaposition of rationalism and madness, the diligent fastidiousness that characterized his professional work is a prerequisite for developing anorexia nervosa. In work and in his prolonged self-starvation, he was an extreme perfectionist.

2 Background & Personality

In his mathematical career, his drive, precision, and privacy were noted early on [1, p. 31, p. 108]. His papers were typically thorough and laconic [1, p. 126] and his lectures were admirably clear [1, p. 135, p. 148]. His singular focus on work was signal throughout his life [1, p. 135, pp. 177-178, p. 182]. The perfectionism was extreme [1, p. 201, p. 216, p. 218]; a colleague called him “the most doggedly fastidious individual he had ever known.” [1, p. 217]. He had a legalistic style and was prone to spending time and effort on minor details, bureaucratic or otherwise, to the exasperation of his colleagues [1, p. 202].

Beyond the recognizable anankastic personality, he was shy and reserved [1, p. 135] and especially conflict-averse [1, p. 26, p. 77, p. 219].

2.1 Mental Illness

He was prone to mental illness, having stayed in a sanatorium for overwork [1, pp. 105-106]; he read on psychiatry around the time so presumably considered it relevant to himself [1, p. 122].

In addition to the noted hypochondria, he had an obsessional fear of poisoning [1, p. 111]. A particular fear of noxious gases [1, pp. 158-159, p. 196] would persist until near the end of his life. The eccentricity was so notable it worried even his mathematician colleagues [1, p. 158].

The obsessional fear of poisoning and extensive machinations foreshadow: the link between OCD and anorexia is known from the psychiatric literature [12, 7, 11].

2.2 Drive to Symmetry

Drive to symmetry is part of the anorexic personality [5, 8] and would seem to be a prerequisite for a mathematician.

But Gödel's Platonism went beyond that typical of mathematicians — his eponymous incompleteness theorem would seem to destroy “Wir müssen wissen, wir werden wissen,” but it presented no deep difficulty to him: he still believed in a mathematical sense-perception that made one objective truth accessible [1, pp. 163-165].

His physics was characteristically motivated by extreme positions; he believed that the universe was rational and reducible to a unitary lawful order [1, pp. 211-212].

3 Case

3.1 Onset

Gödel's diet begins in earnest with an ulcer in 1940, aged 34 [1, p. 97]; he would continue with the fastidious rule-obsessed undereating for the rest of his life.

The case is atypical in that onset is late, but it illustrates one of the ways anorexia can come about: food restrictions compound; any negative energy balance leads to further undereating rather than motivating by hunger. He would continue to undereat for the next 38 years, until death by starvation.

3.2 Anorexic Attitudes

Gödel never shows any drive for thinness, though he denies that his clearly insufficient diet is the cause of his health problems. The diet is entirely self-imposed [1, p. 231].

While he may have been aware that low body weight is indicative of ill health initially, even early on he worries about eating too much. His wife Adele faced constant disagreements to get him to eat more [1, p. 168]. His diet was consistently inadequate to the point where his mother wrote concerned letters

from across the Atlantic [1, p. 212]. When emaciation shocked friends it did not deter from his work [1, pp. 231-232].

He was aware of the health problems; he read from medical literature but this did not seem to make his thinking more lucid and he never attributed his problems to under-eating [1, p. 246]

He attributes the lack of vitality to the Institute for Advanced Study [1, p. 234] — one must imagine a perfectionist without job duties wracked by the lack of completion, but the fact that he does not mention the malnutrition is significant.

3.3 Syndromic Behaviors

Most notably, Gödel wore heavy winter clothes in the summer, presumably due to emaciation [1, p. 186, p. 247].

His laxative use was extensive and conscientiously documented (occupying five folders in his archive and covering 30 years) [1, p. 168]. He was characteristically fixated on the minutiae of his own bowel movements [1, p. 220].

Later he took up smoking — despite his obsessional fear of poisoning by noxious gases [1, p. 234].

3.3.1 Vegetarianism

At the end of his life, Gödel refused meat [1, p. 249], vegetarianism being a well-known feature of the anorexic syndrome [2, 4, 6].

3.4 Isolation & Dependence

Isolation in anorexia nervosa is signal [9]:

Many [anorexics] were without friends at all, saw no one but their families and therapists, and never dated. The pictures they painted of their social lives were unrelievedly bleak.

Gödel's food refusal and isolation were intertwined; as his life progressed his social-professional circle dwindled. By 1942 he was seen as asocial and focused on work [1, p. 160], more than the shyness perceived in Austria. He was notably solitary at the IAS [1, p. 176] and in the Princeton community [1, p. 181]. After 1952 (through his death in 1978) he did not lecture on mathematics [1, p. 203].

Gödel's singular focus on work did not abate with ill health [1, p. 220] though it did seem to isolate him. As his friends died, he became isolated from colleagues [1, pp. 229-230]. By the end he was withdrawn to the point of being ill at ease in social settings; he had a reputation for being unapproachable [1, pp. 243-244].

3.4.1 Babysitters

He depended on babysitters such as Einstein [1, p. 176], and on Adele in everyday life [1, p. 154]. Adele was strong-willed [1, p. 153] and complemented Kurt's conflict-averse nature [1, p. 187]. She had to manage his diet [1, p. 181], both to make sure he ate enough and to reassure him that food was not toxic. Her persistence and sympathy feeding him saved his life several times [1, p. 154, p. 193]. When Adele's own health declined, his death crept on as he was unable to eat [1, pp. 249-252].

Maturity fears mark anorexia [3]; Gödel does not explicitly endorse such sentiments but one can see he is ill-equipped to navigating life.

4 Conclusion

On the anorexic side: Gödel's anorexia was most obviously atypical in its late onset (age 32). It is haunting: given his anankastic sensitive personality and shyness from conflict, perhaps it was inevitable he would have some brush with self-starvation. One must also note that his enduring case in fact killed him [1, p. 253]; this is contrary to perception that chronic anorexic is stable [10].

On the mathematical side: recognition of the sensitive, conflict avoidant personality (and pertinent maturity fears) clarifies Gödel's biography. Far from a mysterious eccentricity, his self-starvation fit with the drive to symmetry that fueled his work.

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