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Ascetic Experience

Jain initiates removing every hair from their heads. Theravada Buddhists deep in meditation. Sramanas striving for renunciation through yogic practices. Desert anchorites subsisting for weeks on a couple of pieces of stale bread. Ascetic practices are undertaken in many different religious traditions and also play a role in some nonreligious pursuits such as sports. In fact, the Greek term *askēsis* refers to athletic or military exercises, and the imagery of training or athletic discipline is often employed in descriptions of the ascetic life. Ascetic practices are an important dimension of many religious traditions; they are attested in Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Sufi, Sikh, Zoroastrian, and various other traditions. Many indigenous religions also feature ascetic elements and occasionally even long-term pursuits of ascetic lives (as in some forms of Shamanism). Even at first glance, these experiences have common features. They all seem to involve rigorous practices of abstention from the comforts and delights of ordinary life. They all appear to have an intense focus on the ascetic's inner life, emotions, and actions. They are often characterized by silence, various forms of meditation, and strong mental discipline, sometimes even by an attempt to empty the mind altogether. Ascetic practices are usually not elaborate, beautiful, or "showy." There is not all that much to see; it is often more about removal from or renunciation of everyday life. Many religions emphasize that ascetic practices cannot be separated from their context in the pursuit of a religiously inflected life. For example, this is a criticism often made of Western appropriations of yoga: It loses something when it is severed from its broader spiritual focus and the ascetic forms of prayer in which it originated. All the same, it is not unusual for people to appropriate ascetic elements into their personal lives for a variety of purposes.

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Within Christianity, forms of ascetic behavior and experience were among the earliest manifestations of a dedicated religious life, especially in areas of Egypt, Palestine, and Syria. Often called the "desert movement," it is also credited with giving rise to monastic forms of behavior and practice. In fact, these two types of life are frequently conflated with each other. Mary Hughes-Edwards, in her study of medieval anchorites, laments: "Definitions of asceticism are seldom attempted by modern scholars. Henry Chadwick does not define it in his survey of the history of ascetical ideals. Conrad Leyser does not gloss it in his survey volume *Authority and Asceticism from Augustine to Gregory the Great*, but instead conflates 'ascetic', 'mystic' and 'religious' and synonymizes the 'ascetic' with the 'monastic movement'. Such synchronizations are common."[1] More recent works exacerbate this confusion. William Harmless in his study of the desert ascetics refers to them throughout as monastics, and the book posits itself as a history of early monasticism.[2] In his book on mysticism he examines Evagrius – a key figure of the early desert movement – as the quintessential mystic.[3] Terms like ascetic, monastic, mystical, devotional, spiritual, and Christian are often employed more or less interchangeably in the literature. Hughes depicts the detrimental effects of this lack of definition: "The absence of ascetical definition results in extremely broad contemporary applications of the term, often too inclusive to be useful. These may focus on austerity and abstemiousness, but can obscure, through ambiguity, the precise nature of medieval asceticism, which the anchoritic guides reveal as a rigorous set of practices; a circumscribed form of devotional worship commanding a specialized vocabulary."[4] The same is surely true of earlier forms of asceticism when they are conflated with monasticism or mysticism.

Clear distinctions between these solitary forms of withdrawal from the world and the phenomenon of communal monasticism emerge early. Sometimes the two types are referred to as "anchorite" and "coenobitic," respectively, although there are also intermediate forms – like the loosely organized "lavra" (or "laura"), in which individual ascetics lived in cells

[1] Mary Hughes-Edwards, *Reading Medieval Anchoritism: Ideology and Spiritual Practice* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012), 59. See also her more detailed account and criticism of such confusion in ibid., 82–93.

[2] William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[3] William Harmless, *Mystics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 135–57.

[4] Hughes-Edwards, *Reading Medieval Anchoritism*, 59.

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but came together for some activities, such as regular liturgy and celebrations of Pascha/Easter – or combined forms, such as a monastery that also had some reclusive hermits attached to it (Barsanuphius and John of Gaza are particularly prominent examples of the latter).[5] Although ascetic practices can and often do occur in monastic settings, they are also distinct ways of pursuing a religious life. Many ascetics do not live in a monastery and some monastics do (or did) not undertake recognizably ascetic practices.

Asceticism overlaps with other ways of living a religious or spiritual life as well. For example, mystical experience can be preceded or even seen to be induced by ascetic practices, yet it can also occur without ascetic preparation and many ascetics never have mystical experiences. In fact, most ascetic writings are profoundly suspicious of such experiences. One might say something similar of liturgy or ritual: Many ascetics participated in basic ritual functions, meeting on Sundays for the Eucharist or at least celebrating Pascha together. Yet ritual does not feature prominently in their descriptions. Many forms of ritual can involve ascetic practices, but the two are not identical and there are many elements of ritual that are quite different from ascetic behavior or experience. The nature of the practices and experiences of ascetic, monastic, mystical, devotional, and ritual manifestations can be described with distinctive characteristics that do not agree or overlap in all respects.

The operating hypothesis of this chapter, then, will be to treat the ascetic phenomenon as its own kind of experience, trying to determine its specific characteristics, without denying that it could and can often occur together with or as a stage toward other experiences or behaviors in particular cases – and that there may well be some overlap between ascetic and monastic experience or between both of them and mystical or ritual experience. There are three elements that the present phenomenological analysis will highlight as especially crucial in ascetic experience: the practices of withdrawal and abstention, the emphasis on vigilance or discernment, and the forms of self-denial or self-abnegation. Ascetic experience, the chapter will seek to show, grapples in heightened fashion with the fundamental human sense of failure and inadequacy, which it

[5] Tavatha actually serves as an example for all of these: It had a monastery, individual cells of varying degrees of enclosure surrounding the monastery where elders or those advanced in the spiritual life lived, and supreme elders who eschewed all contact with other people, aside from Abba Seridos (for Barsanuphius) and Abba Dorotheos (for John).

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seeks to relieve through intense training, disciplining, and cleansing of the self.[6] First, however, it will provide some brief historical background and examination of the types of sources that might lend themselves to phenomenological depiction of the ascetic phenomenon in its Christian forms of manifestation.

BACKGROUND, CONTEXT, AND SOURCES

Although forms of ascetic behavior occur across centuries of Christian experience to the present day and can be observed in many other religious traditions and even in nonreligious activities, the "peak" of Christian asceticism can be said to have occurred in the third through seventh centuries, most famously in lower or northern Egypt by the Nile delta, but also in upper Egypt, in the areas around Gaza and Sinai, and other areas of the Middle East.[7] The most famous "character" – although probably not the originator – was Antony the Great, as depicted by Athanasius of Alexandria in his famous *Life of Antony*.[8] Many other so-called desert

[6] Hughes-Edwards points out that the ascetic guides she examines in her study of medieval ascetics "understand the term 'ascetic' to refer to an individual who engages in mortificatory and deprivatory practices for the purpose of gaining spiritual purity." Hughes-Edwards, *Reading Medieval Anchoritism*, 59.

[7] For basic historical background and description, see Harmless, *Desert Christians*; Alexander Ryrie, *The Desert Movement: Fresh Perspectives on the Spirituality of the Desert* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2011); Richard Finn, *Asceticism in the Graeco-Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Peter Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978); D. J. Chitty, *The Desert a City* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995); Suzanna Elm, *Virgins of God: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994). For asceticism's interaction with the broader society, see Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Asceticism and Society in Crisis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); for the role of the body in asceticism, see Patricia Cox Miller, *The Corporeal Imagination: Signifying the Holy in Late Ancient Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); for an analysis of the use of scripture to justify its particular way of living a Christian life, see Elizabeth A. Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

[8] Athanasius of Alexandria, *The Life of Antony*, trans. Tim Vivian and Apostolos Athanassakis (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2003). For the Greek text see SC [= *Sources chrétiennes*] 400. Several of the extant lives of Antony claim that he observed other people practicing asceticism in order to learn from them, although he was probably one of the first to go more deeply into the desert. The Coptic life reports: "For there were not yet many monasteries at all in Egypt, and no monks knew yet the farther desert, but each one who wished to would attend to himself, going outside of his village a little ways, and he would practice ascetic discipline by himself." Text in *Journeying into God: Seven Early Monastic Lives*, trans. Tim Vivian (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 14. The end of the life says that "in this way monasteries came into being in the mountains,

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fathers or elders, including some women,[9] retreated from the bustle of urban life into nearby or remote areas of various degrees of wasteland and the desired solitude.[10] Sometimes the desert or even the solitude is more metaphorical than physical, inasmuch as some ascetics exercised their practices in the middle of the city, pursuing their various professions while practicing an inner withdrawal.[11] Such withdrawal – whether "geographical" or "metaphorical" – becomes an abiding and distinguishing characteristic of the very nature of asceticism.

Accounts of the desert ascetics (active from the 330s to the 460s), especially those living in northern or lower Egypt in the areas of Nitria,

and the desert filled with monks" (ibid., 24). Athanasius claims that Antony turns the desert into a city; *Life of Antony*, 92–93. Vast numbers of monks and nuns are reported in various ancient sources; presumably not all of these numbers are reliable, but they certainly indicate the popularity of this way of life.

[9] There were desert "mothers" and there is an interesting strain of transvestite ascetics – usually women dressing as men and living in solitude, who were often discovered to have been women upon their death and the ensuing preparation for burial – but it must be admitted that ascetic experience, at least in its Christian manifestations, is predominantly a "male" endeavor. (The opposite will be the case, at least to some extent, for mystical experience.) The *History of the Monks of Egypt*, however, reports for the town of Oxyrhynchus in the Thebaid that the bishop "had under his jurisdiction ten thousand monks and twenty thousand nuns." *The Lives of the Desert Fathers: The Historia Monachorum in Aegypto*, trans. Norman Russell (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 1980), V.4; 67. Clark claims that this form of piety was popular with women and that "women figure prominently in ascetic texts of the early Christian period" in her *Reading Renunciation*, 24, 37. (The latter claim seems rather exaggerated. Some women are mentioned by the texts, but certainly not many and not prominently.) On the role of women in asceticism, see Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 24, 440–45; Ryrie, *Desert Movement*, 99–117; Verna Harrison, "Women in the *Philokalia*?" in *The Philokalia*, ed. Brock Bingaman and Bradley Nassif (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 252–61; G. Clark, "Women and Asceticism in Late Antiquity," in Vincent L. Wimbush and R. Valantsis, eds., *Asceticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 33–48. Two representative stories of transvestite ascetics (Athanasia and Anastasia) are included in the accounts of Daniel of Scetis in *Witness to Holiness: Abba Daniel of Scetis*, ed. Tim Vivian (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2008), 50–65, 69–76. There are also a number of brief stories about women (though not as "ammas"), both anonymous and named, in Palladius of Aspuna, *The Lausiac History*, trans. John Wortley (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2015), 14–17, 77–80, 102–4, 108–10, 120–25, 127–35, 136, 138.

[10] Clark rightly points out, however, that "despite the representations of early Christian ascetics as solitary hermits in the desert or the wilderness, most ascetic practitioners were dependent on considerable community support." Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, 35. Although several of the early histories focus on individual hermits, they often implicitly refer to larger monastic communities as well.

[11] Tim Vivian says of Pambo and his companion that the landscape they "traverse is almost mythical, archetypal, symbolic, a palimpsest of the spirit where the map of the spiritual journey has been written over the terrestrial map." *Journeying into God*, 2.

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Kellia, and Sketis,[12] can be found in the late fourth-century text *History of the Monks of Egypt* (*Historia Monachorum in Aegypto*), the early fifth-century *Lausiac History* by Palladius of Aspuna, and the *Apophthegmata patrum* or "Sayings of the Fathers," which exists in several different collections, some ordered alphabetically by the name of the elder, some organized by topic.[13] Descriptions of ascetic lives and practices can also be found in some other texts, especially ecclesiastical histories (such as that of Eusebius) and hagiographic accounts.[14] The advice provided in the shape of brief anecdotes in the *Apophthegmata* and the *Lausiac History* is given a much fuller theoretical development in the writings of Evagrius of Pontus (c. 345–99),[15] and the *Institutes* and *Conferences* (composed 425–28)

[12] The monastic communities in Sketis, Kellia, and Nitria (all in lower/northern Egypt) are the most famous and most well known, but there were desert ascetics (both anchorite and coenobitic) in other areas as well (such as upper Egypt, Gaza, Judea, and Syria). See Ryrie, *Desert Movement*, for discussion of some of these lesser-known versions. For a description of the settlement at Nitria, see *Lausiac History* 7.1–5.

[13] *The Book of the Elders: Sayings of the Desert Fathers. The Systematic Collection*, trans. John Wortley (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2012). This is an English translation of the Greek version of the *Apophthegmata patrum* published in the *Sources chrétiennes* series in three volumes (SC 387, 474, 498). A slightly different collection was translated by Benedicta Ward as *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1975). (The more recent Wortley translation will be used here.) See also the translation of the "alphabetical" version: *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, trans. John Wortley (Yonkers: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2014). See also John Moschus, *The Spiritual Meadow*, trans. John Wortley (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1992); the Greek text can be found in SC 12. For a critique of the "lure of Egypt," see Andrew Louth, "On Being a Christian in Late Antiquity: St Basil the Great between the Desert and the City," in *Christians Shaping Identity from the Roman Empire to Byzantium*, ed. Geoffrey D. Dunn and Wendy Mayer (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 85–89. For reflections on how the apophthegmata were employed in various other contexts, see several of the essays included in *Wisdom on the Move: Late Antique Traditions in Multicultural Conversation. Essays in Honor of Samuel Rubenson*, eds. Susan Ashbrook Harvey, Thomas Arentzen, Henrik Rydell Johnsén, and Andreas Westergren (Leiden: Brill, 2020).

[14] See Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, trans. Roy J. Defferari, 2 vols. (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1953, 1955). For examples of hagiographic accounts, see *Journeying into God*, which includes both Egyptian and Palestinian lives, including that of one woman (Syncletia of Palestine); the collection of accounts about Daniel of Scetis in translations of the lives extant in Greek, Coptic, Ethiopic, Syriac, Armenian, Latin, Old Church Slavonic, and Arabic sources in *Witness to Holiness*; and the collection *Four Desert Fathers: Pambo, Evagrius, Macarius of Egypt and Macarius of Alexandria*, trans. Tim Vivian (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004), which translates several Coptic sources associated with the *Lausiac History* of Palladius.

[15] Evagrius of Pontus, *The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, trans. Robert E. Sinkewicz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). All references to Evagrius are from this work, cited first by his own title and section number, then providing the page number to the English translation. (Similar conventions will be followed for other patristic sources that compile several ancient texts.)

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of John Cassian (c. 365–c. 435), through whom they had a profound influence on the development of Western monasticism.[16] Further sources of brief advice, specific instructions, or longer addresses include the discourses of Isaiah of Scetis (fifth century),[17] the writings of Mark the Monk (fifth century),[18] the letters of the ascetics Barsanuphius and John (early sixth century Gaza),[19] the discourses of Dorotheos of Gaza (sixth century),[20] the "ladder of divine ascent" of John Climacus (probably sixth century, possibly seventh century Sinai),[21] and texts from the *Philokalia*, an extensive collection of ascetic writings from the fourth to fifteenth centuries.[22] Evagrius' suspect association with the Origenic tradition and the related crisis in Egyptian monasticism around 400 pushed some of his teachings underground (thus some texts are only extant in Syriac and Armenian, in which they were immensely popular),[23] but their spirit is preserved and carried forward in many of the writings collected in the *Philokalia*.

[16] John Cassian, *The Conferences*, trans. Boniface Ramsey (New York: Paulist Press, 1997) and Cassian, *The Institutes*, trans. Boniface Ramsey (New York: Newman Press, 2000). The Latin texts can be found in SC 109, 42, 54, and 64. Denis M. Searby argues that Cassian wrote in both Greek and Latin and that *The Institutes* might have originally been composed in Greek in his "Between East and West: Cassian the Roman in Greek and Latin," in Harvey, *Wisdom on the Move*, 97–118.

[17] Abba Isaiah of Scetis, *Ascetic Discourses*, trans. John Chryssavgis and Robert Penkett (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2002).

[18] Mark the Monk, *Counsels on the Spiritual Life*, trans. Tim Vivian (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2009). For the Greek texts, see SC 445 and 455.

[19] *Barsanuphius and John: Letters*, trans. John Chryssavgis, 2 vols. (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2006, 2007). A shorter selection was published earlier as *Letters from the Desert. Barsanuphius and John: A Selection of Questions and Responses*, trans. John Chryssavgis (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003). For the Greek texts, see SC 426, 427, 450, 451, and 468. For a study of the letters that focuses especially on the structure of monastic authority, see Jennifer L. Hevelone-Harper, *Disciples of the Desert: Monks, Laity, and Spiritual Authority in Sixth-Century Gaza* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).

[20] Dorotheos of Gaza, *Discourses and Sayings*, trans. Eric P. Wheeler (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1977). For the Greek text, see SC 92. Although Dorotheos is often addressing communities of monks, his advice consistently emulates the ascetic life.

[21] John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* (Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1978).

[22] *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*, 4 vols., trans. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware (London: Faber & Faber, 1979, 1981, 1984, 1995). (The first volume of the *Philokalia* includes texts by or selections from Evagrius, Cassian, Mark the Monk, and Isaiah the Solitary, thus duplicating some of the texts already mentioned.) There is also an extensive Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, and Georgian literature.

[23] On the Origenist controversy, see Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 359–63. Cassian gives a personal account at the start of his Tenth Conference.

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These sources can be roughly grouped into two genres, although there is some overlap between them. One crucial type of sources includes reports about ascetic figures, which can take the form of travel reports (e.g., Cassian's *Conferences* or the *History of the Monks of Egypt*), descriptions of individual "lives" (like that of Antony the Great, of Daniel of Scetis, and many others), or brief anecdotes as illustrations within more didactic texts (e.g., the *Apophthegmata patrum* or the *Lausiac History*). While some of these clearly have a historical basis, as evidenced by reliable and verifiable references to geographical specificities or political events, their main aim is not to produce an accurate historical compilation of biographical facts, but rather to present these figures as exemplars of the ascetic life.[24] In this regard, they are actually especially useful for phenomenological analysis, because they present not simply empirical or anecdotal data, but instead a paradigmatic or exemplary experience, one that lends itself especially to ascertaining the nature or type of an experience.[25] Such reports for the purposes of instruction or emulation may well be more useful for achieving a good sense of ascetic experience than a more strictly empirical account in the modern sense of historical recording.

A second type of source is the sets of instructions or discourses about ascetic life and practices, often set within the reports of lives or linked to them in some form. These include the letters of Barsanuphius and John, the discourses of Isaiah of Scetis and Dorotheos of Gaza, the discourses of individual ascetics reported in Cassian's *Conferences* and his more straightforward descriptions in his *Institutes*, Climacus' *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, almost all of the texts in the Evagrian corpus, and most of those gathered in the *Philokalia*. Here also paradigmatic experience is set

[24] Vivian argues for the basic historicity of the life of Daniel of Scetis in his introduction to the compilation *Witness to Holiness*, 17–25. Paphnutius in the Life of Abba Aaron cites as the reason for writing down the stories that they "may be set down as authoritative models for all future generations." *Journeying into God*, 133.

[25] For example, Palladius ends his prologue to the *Lausiac History* by saying that the point of the narratives about the ascetics he describes is to examine "the nature of their endeavor" (P.16; 7). The *Life of Antony* concludes with the hope that those who read it will learn how to live this kind of life (258–59). One version of the *Apophthegmata* begins the prologue by saying: "In this book the virtuous asceticism, the wondrous way of life, and the sayings of holy and blessed fathers are recorded to school those who are desirous of successfully pursuing the heavenly way of life and willing to travel the road to the kingdom of heaven by emulating and imitating them." *Book of the Elders*, 3. Cassian describes the purpose of his writing as "so that we may offer to our readers only what is necessary for instruction in the perfect life and not a useless and vain object of wonderment without any correction for faults." Cassian, *Conferences* 18.I.3; 635.

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forth, albeit in a somewhat different form, less as exemplified by a particular ascetic (aside from the occasional illustrative anecdote) and more describing broad patterns of behavior that anyone undertaking this sort of life should pursue or emulate.

Both types of sources lend themselves well to phenomenological analysis because they are deeply interested in describing the ascetic life in such a way that it might be recognized, distinguished, and imitated. That is to say, portraying ascetic experience accurately as a pursuit or practice that can be emulated and evaluated is a vested and crucial interest of the authors. While individual writers might not always have met their desired goal, the texts were also subject to a selection process inasmuch as lives or discourses that seemed especially valuable, paradigmatic, or exemplary were more likely to be disseminated more widely, translated more frequently, and preserved more carefully. More idiosyncratic or exceptional practices that were not seen as representative do not tend to be copied as avidly or to be disseminated as widely and are thus less likely to survive.[26] Although certainly descriptions of individual ascetics differ in emphasis and in the characteristics they report, this material is surprisingly cohesive and presents a very clear picture of what was taken to be essential for ascetic life and experience. These include recognized processes of withdrawal and abstention, as well as shared practices of vigilance and discernment, for the purposes of disciplining and reshaping the self.

PROCESSES OF WITHDRAWAL AND ABSTENTION

Probably the most obvious and certainly one of the most important elements of ascetic experience is its emphasis on withdrawal from the "world," whether literal or metaphorical (*anchorēsis*, in fact, means "withdrawal"). In such withdrawal, the desert – of varying types and degrees – plays an especially important spatial role to the point that early

[26] This also means that when peculiarities do occur and are preserved, they are probably more accurate in our contemporary sense of "historical"; they must have been obvious enough not to fall victim to the tendency for emulation of recognizable patterns. The ancient sources are not oblivious to a desire for truthful representation. For example, the author of the *History of the Monks of Egypt* says at one point: "The father told us these and other even more marvellous stories about this saint. They are so very extraordinary that we have not written them all down – not because they are not true, but because some people will be skeptical. As for us, we were fully convinced because many great fathers told us these things and had seen them themselves with their own eyes" (XIII.12; 94).

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Christian asceticism is often simply described as the "desert" movement or its exemplars as the "desert fathers" or elders. Withdrawal from or renunciation of the world is often the first step in instructions to anyone wishing to undertake an ascetic life.[27] Cassian has Paphnutius explain that renunciation can result from a direct call from God, from the wish to imitate someone else's holy life, or from the need for repentance and fear of death.[28] Although such withdrawal can involve a singular dramatic act of abandonment of one's former life, family,[29] and property – as in Athanasius' *Life of Antony*, where Antony is depicted as heeding a biblical injunction to give up everything to follow Christ – it is also clear throughout that there are often successive stages of increasing withdrawal and that indeed it turns into an attitude that must be practiced throughout an ascetic's life.[30] Withdrawal is not just a one-time act, but becomes a way of life.[31] Cassian tells several stories of ascetics withdrawing further and further into the desert or seeking out monasteries with more rigorous discipline.[32] The prologue to the *History of*

[27] It is the topic of the first discourse in Dorotheos' *Discourses* (77–93), and the first step of Climacus' *Ladder of Divine Ascent* (3–10), followed by detachment as step 2 (11–14) and exile as the third step (14–20). After explaining basic monastic customs of dress and the times for prayer, Cassian's *Institutes* begins with the topic of renunciation (Fourth Book), before turning to discuss the spirits of gluttony, fornication, avarice, anger, sadness, acedia, vainglory, and pride.

[28] Cassian, Third Conference III.1–IV.5; 120–22. He also stresses that a physical withdrawal has to be accompanied by a renunciation of the heart. Cassian, Third Conference VII.7; 126. Evagrius distinguishes between three kinds of renunciation in the treatise *On Thoughts* 26; *Ascetic Corpus*, 172.

[29] Female ascetics are often reported to want to escape marriage, sometimes by subterfuge, e.g., Syncletia. *Journeying into God*, 48–51. At other times they are reformed prostitutes who mark an even more radical departure from their former way of life (most famously Mary of Egypt, but there are also several other such stories, e.g., *Lausiac History* 69.1–3; 138).

[30] Paphnutius reports of Omnophrius and similar ascetics: "Because of the great joy they have seen, they do not remember that this world even exists." *Journeying into God*, 180. This is indirectly supported further by describing the innermost desert in terms that evoke paradise (ibid., 182–86).

[31] Several stories stress that sins and inclinations cannot be removed at once, but that it is incremental work that takes years to accomplish through small, daily steps. E.g., *Book of the Elders* 7.49; 116. It is also affirmed that one "can make a fresh start every day and every hour" (ibid., 11.69; 204).

[32] E.g., the story of Abba Pinufius in Cassian, *Institutes* 4.XXX.2–6; 94–96. The Abba says that "renunciation is nothing else than a manifestation of the cross and of a dying." Cassian, *Institutes* 4.XXXIV; 97. Dorotheos says that it "puts to death" in a person "the affection for the things of this world"; perfect renunciation involves renouncing "self-will and the desire for these things." Dorotheos, *Discourses and Sayings*, 87.

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the Monks of Egypt reports that many of the ascetics encountered by the visitors "are astonished when they hear what goes on in the world, for they have attained a complete forgetfulness of earthly affairs."[33] There are also several dramatic stories of long-time ascetics returning to the world, often precipitated by pride and the conviction that they have succeeded and are now immune to temptation.[34] Such stories and especially their telling as admonition to the hearer viscerally make the point that one is never finished withdrawing and that renunciation has to be practiced to one's dying day. Many ascetics proclaim their inadequacy even on their deathbed and sometimes beg for additional time for further repentance.[35]

The withdrawal from regular life and the flight to the desert thus highlight spatiality as an important feature of the phenomenality of ascetic experience. This is a particular type of spatiality: The point is not the beauty or the intricacy of the space; the place itself does not even really matter. It is the *absence* of spatial features that matters, the starkness of the place, its distinction from regular space. Interestingly, time seems to play no comparable role in the ascetic experience, except perhaps in the suspension of any relation to time by repetitive activity. There is no sense of time passing in the desert and, although it will be sometimes pointed out how long an ascetic has dwelled in the desert, these numbers tend to have symbolic functions or just to exemplify that it has taken one's entire life to repent.[36] Ascetic experience thus constitutes itself in terms of the emptiness of place and the absence or insignificance of time, as a withdrawal from or even rejection of regular space and time.

Another form of withdrawal or denial is exhibited in an especially excessive form by the ascetics who pretend to be mad and do things

[33] *History of the Monks of Egypt* 6; 50.

[34] The *History of the Monks of Egypt* reports several such examples, usually told as a warning against pride (e.g., I.32–36, 45–58; 56–57, 59–61). There are also several included in the *Apophthegmata* and in Cassian. In this regard, there are interesting parallels to contemporary movements like Alcoholics Anonymous, in which it is widely acknowledged that the temptation of addiction remains for a lifetime and that a single drink might plunge an alcoholic back into full-blown addiction.

[35] E.g., *Book of the Elders* 1.25, 3.23, 11.9–10; 12, 30, 190.

[36] Sometimes biblical numbers are used to refer to the length of having dwelled in the desert (often for forty years like Israel's forty years of wandering in the wilderness), but generally time seems to stand still. The Coptic life of Antony actually points this out: "He observed that in saying 'today,' he was not counting time that has passed but was always laying a foundation, endeavoring each day to stand before God and to attain an acceptable form." *Journeying into God*, 18.

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that would (and do) usually invite strong censure by society.[37] Here the withdrawal is not just from society – not necessarily in the physical sense but in the sense of being an accepted member of society – but even, at least apparently, from one's own reasoning faculties. The "holy fool" – ascetics pretending to be mad or deranged – is a particularly dramatic and variously attested phenomenon of separating from the world, taking leave of one's own mind in a rigorous separation from regular society. Caring for lepers occasionally becomes another such example.[38] The ascetic life involves withdrawal in many stages and respects, not just from the world, from one's property or relatives, giving up one's former way of life, but also withdrawal from temptation, from one's own affects and dispositions, from desires or patterns of thought. In these respects, the primary thrust of ascetic instruction is "negative," not in the sense that it would be dismal or devoid of joy or humor (humor is actually often employed in various anecdotes), but in the sense that the stress is on the practices and thoughts one should avoid or the passions one should eliminate or subdue.[39] Its practices are characterized by subtraction and elimination, not by increase or multiplication, except in effort. The phenomenality of the ascetic experience is characterized by abstention, removal, withdrawal. It is an experience of separation and renunciation.

In the Christian manifestations, the goal of such withdrawal is partly to induce an increasing awareness of one's inadequacy or sinfulness and, even more fully, to repent for one's sins and combat them. This becomes

[37] See the stories about Mark the Fool and the nun pretending to be drunk in *Witness to Holiness*, 43–44, 47–50, or the story about the laughing ascetic in *Book of the Elders* 8.32; 131–32. There is a similar story (about a woman pretending to be insane) in the *Lausiac History*, 79–80, and in *Book of the Elders* 19.24; 322–23.

[38] The life of Daniel of Scetis highlights several examples of both.

[39] Clark affirms, however, that "despite the obvious ways in which asceticism can appear as a pessimistic movement in its alleged flight from 'the world,' there is a certain optimism at its heart" in that its participants "can cultivate extraordinary forms of human existence." Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, 17. Although Evagrius focuses extensively on vices or evil thoughts, he does sometimes include the virtues that should be cultivated instead. E.g. Evagrius, *On the Vices Opposed to the Virtues*; *Ascetic Corpus*, 61–65. Cassian similarly affirms that pursuit of the virtues is as important as the eradication of vices: "Hence it will be of no great help to the person who desires to arrive at the height of perfection to have attained to the end of repentance – that is, abstaining from what is unlawful – if he does not also constantly and tirelessly reach out to those virtues by which one attains to the marks of reparation." He stresses that "it is not enough for someone to have abstained from the stinking filth of sins that disgust the Lord if he does not also possess, through purity of heart and the perfection of apostolic love, that good fragrance of virtuousness wherein the Lord takes delight." Cassian, *Conferences* 20.XII.3–4; 704.

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another – and obviously related – distinguishing characteristic of ascetic experience, which often features an overwhelming sense of sinfulness and need for penitence, some of which can go to excessive extremes.[40] This often entails the denial of many basic human needs, such as severely reducing or even avoiding food (or types of food), clothing, sleep, shelter, and interaction with others. The desert is sought out partly for its void, for its emptiness, its lack of crowds or comforts. When it becomes too populated, because too many others pursue or seek to imitate them, ascetics will regularly withdraw further into the desert or practice more rigorous withdrawal and abstinence.[41] Scetis is founded when the cells (Kellia) become too full. Many of the ascetics in Judea seem to have originally escaped Egypt in search of increased solitude. Barsanuphius and John refuse to allow anyone apart from a single intermediary to see them and communicate only by letter. Although many hagiographical accounts report trips to cities, these always serve a particular purpose of exhortation or other demonstration. Some early texts indulge in what almost amounts to competition with regard to rigorous feats of abstention (especially from food, sleep, and the sight of women).[42]

Such a void or emptiness becomes an important feature of ascetic experience. One might thus speak of it as a minimalist or abnegating

[40] Cassian tells a rather disturbing story of child abuse in order to test the father's complete renunciation of paternal love in Cassian, *Institutes* 4.XXVII.1–4; 92–93. The *Apophthegmata* abound with similar stories, both self-inflicted and exercised by elders to test someone's obedience and detachment from the world.

[41] A story from the Ethiopic *Collectio Monastica* illustrates this: "I went one day to Abba Poemen and said to him: 'I have gone everywhere to [find somewhere to] live, but I have not found any peace. Where do you wish me to live?' The old man responded to him: 'There is no longer hardly any desert in our days. Go, look for a good-sized crowd. Go live among them and conduct yourself like someone who does not exist. Say to yourself I've got no worries. Then you will taste a royal peace.'" Cited in Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 473. There seems to have been a whole genre of ascetical tourism in the ancient world; many people came to see the ascetics primarily out of curiosity. This was especially a problem in the "holy land" because in that case visits to the various holy sites could be combined with visits to the various saintly elders. Both seem to have held immense attraction. On the phenomenon of pilgrimage to the holy land in late antiquity, see P. W. L. Walker, *Holy City, Holy Places? Christian Attitudes to Jerusalem and the Holy Land in the Fourth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), and Gary Vikan, *Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Byzantine Collection Publications 5, 2010). For an account of pilgrimage to sites associated with saints, see Georgia Frank, *The Memory of the Eyes: Pilgrims to Living Saints in Christian Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

[42] A piece of advice repeated in several places encapsulates this: "Speaking about life, a brother asked an elder and the elder said: 'Eat hay, wear hay, sleep on hay (meaning despise everything), and acquire a heart of steel!'" *Book of the Elders*, 12; also 382.

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phenomenon. It is not an exorbitant or enthusiastic religious experience; it features no superlative visions or ecstatic enthusiasm. Rather, the ascetic life seems to reduce human experience to its essentials and sometimes even to minimize those essentials further. One might perhaps hazard to say that the ascetic drills down to the fundamental structures of the human condition by trying to withdraw from their particular ordinary or everyday manifestations. Through their rigorous control over their own lives, they cut off anything superfluous or superficial, leaving only what is absolutely necessary to human survival. Asceticism is phenomenologically minimalist.

Later texts or specific instructions try to temper the worst excesses, making individual allowances for someone with a weak constitution, counseling a more moderate regimen, or even admonishing individuals to take care of their bodies and their health. Dorotheos of Gaza, for example, whose health was often in a precarious state, is repeatedly admonished to take care of his body. Barsanuphius and John frequently counsel moderation to others as well. Isaiah of Scetis says: "Keep your vigil modestly, and do not deprive your body of its needs, but perform your duties leniently and sensibly, lest your soul is darkened by the degree of sleeplessness and gives up the struggle."[43] Even Evagrius already warns: "There will also be times when sickness of the body comes along and makes it necessary for you to eat a second and third time or even more often; so do not let your thoughts be saddened by this."[44] Several elders insist that one must care for the body and avoid excessive behaviors.

Such rigorous control of one's body has many parallels in the ascetic practices of other religious traditions and also in nonreligious forms of ascetic practice such as athletic training or dieting. Here, too, nonessentials are set aside in order to focus on what is most important. A rigorous training of the body, as desired in athletic competition, requires foregoing many ordinary pleasures and occupations. While other religious traditions or nonreligious ascetic practices may not share the sense of sinfulness that the Christian ascetics expressed, such practices are often linked to a felt experience of failure (as in some forms of dieting)

[43] Isaiah of Scetis, *Ascetic Discourses*, 57. He also warns beginners against trying to imitate the exploits of people who have been practicing various disciplines for their entire lifetime (ibid., 60).

[44] Evagrius, *Foundations* 10; *Ascetic Corpus*, 10. In a different treatise he discusses in some detail the temptation of "excessive asceticism"; indeed, "the desire for an extreme asceticism" can be as demonic and debilitating as the various vices. Evagrius, *On Thoughts* 35; *Ascetic Corpus*, 177–78.

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or at least of the sense that something is seriously wrong with the world and that withdrawal from it might be the only remedy (as in some Buddhist practices). Obviously, such parallels would need to be investigated more fully.

An awareness of sin and a commitment to removing or combatting it is often a very personal endeavor. While individual ascetics undertake extreme penitential practices, these are seldom advised for others. Ascetics frequently think of themselves as more sinful than anyone else – and this is counseled as exemplary, partly to induce humility, partly to maintain the ascetic way of life, which is generated by an awareness of one's sinfulness. Rarely are blanket statements about everyone's sinfulness issued; such an admission is generally made in the first-person singular.[45] In this regard, Isaiah of Scetis says, "each of them bears his own burden."[46] One accuses *oneself*, not others.[47] In the few cases where others are accused, this usually occurs within the context of community, and solely as an illustration to cultivate further individual pursuits of penitence and to guard against pride.[48] This, too, is crucial from a phenomenological perspective: The ascetic experience provides an insight into the self, but not

[45] Similarly, while one states one's own sinfulness instead of excoriating that of others, or a particular elder undertakes rigorous penitential practices but counsels moderation for others, so one always admires other people's feats, never one's own. Cassian also notes how ridiculous it is when people give up great riches and then fight over measly possessions in the desert. In this form of renunciation, "although it has a poor man's property, it has not laid aside a rich man's will." Cassian, *Conferences* 4.XXI.4; 171.

[46] Isaiah of Scetis, *Ascetic Discourses*, 112. It is also interesting that this discourse, in which the ascetic is compared to a criminal, is mostly in the first person. It begins by saying "woe to me" and ends by acknowledging "I do not know what I will do," asking the brothers "who know me" for assistance (ibid., 111–13). The parallel between criminal and ascetic in its consciousness of guilt is obviously also pertinent and reveals something about the self-perception of the ascetic.

[47] Indeed, many ascetic lives comment on the lack of judgment of a particular ascetic or tell stories of judgmental ascetics as a warning; e.g., *Four Desert Fathers*, 80; Dorotheos, *Discourses and Sayings*, 131–39; *Book of the Elders*, 133–42. Dorotheos points out that "nothing angers God so much or strips a man so bare or carries him so effectively to his ruin as calumniating, condemning, or despising his neighbor." Dorotheos, *Discourses and Sayings*, 132.

[48] For example, Dorotheos reports the story of someone who is so suspicious of others that he ends up convincing himself of seeing things that did not actually occur. The monk is called out before the others and his alternate version of reality disproved as an admonition to him and to others. Dorotheos, *Discourses and Sayings*, 158–59. His warning that after entertaining false ideas "for a while they begin to persuade us, until we are convinced that we have seen things which do not exist and never could exist" (ibid., 158), is surely prescient of the way in which today false information travels on the internet and can convince people into entire worldviews that have only the most tenuous hold on reality.

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necessarily an empathetic thinking or feeling into another (in the sense of *Einfühlung*). The ascetic life has a crucial first-person perspective that cannot simply be applied to others. Important differences in this regard will emerge in other types of religious experience, such as monastic or compassionate experience.

One dramatic element of this quest for repentance is the frequent stress laid on cultivating a spirit of penitence or compunction (*katanyxis*) involving copious weeping and profound grieving as ways of inducing sorrow over one's sin.[49] Penitence has to be "mixed with wailing and inexpressible laments."[50] Isaiah of Scetis compares it to a criminal in prison who realizes he deserves the punishment for his crimes and thus is concerned entirely with himself and not with judging others. He does not worry about food or about correcting others or even about personal slights, but instead is focused entirely on his own pain, grieving his crimes, and fearing the coming judgment.[51] Similarly, the ascetic is not anxious about food, sleep, or anyone else, but is entirely devoted to his or her own repentance. In a later discourse Isaiah affirms: "If someone searches for the Lord with a heart full of sorrow, he listens to his condition, asks with knowledge and becomes anxious with heartache, that he is not attached to a worldly thing but fearfully takes care of his soul."[52] The elders frequently compare the sorrow needed for true repentance to a woman's grief at her husband's death.[53]

Although some types of personal devotional practices also operate with a strong consciousness of sin, no other form of religious experience makes tears and grief such an important tool of its endeavor or such a crucial element of its life.[54] In fact, this is probably the affect most

[49] Contrition is the third topic treated in the topical collection of the *Apophthegmata* (*Book of the Elders*, 25–37) and the theme of step 7 of Climacus' *Ladder of Divine Ascent* where tears and sorrow are prominent (70–80).

[50] "Encomium on the Life of Saint Theognius, Bishop of Bethelia," *Journeying into God*, 160.

[51] Isaiah of Scetis, *Ascetic Discourses*, 111–12. See also the (more than a hundred) "Lamentations" of Discourse 29 (ibid., 235–45).

[52] Isaiah of Scetis, *Ascetic Discourses*, 218. He counsels, however: "Let us implore, then, the kindness of God in the application of the heart, the tears, and mortification" (ibid., 232).

[53] *Book of the Elders*, 30–31. Pursuing the ascetic life is like passing through the tomb of death (ibid., 3.28; 31). See also ibid., 16.11; 292.

[54] In fact, the *Life of Abba Aaron* employs this as a distinction between monastic and ascetic experience: "The monastic life has become well known, but this [ascetic] way of life is labor and suffering up to the very end." *Journeying into God*, 115. There are frequent references to groaning and weeping in discussions of this sorrow, e.g., *Book of the Elders*, 25–28.

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characteristic of the ascetic experience, which in many other respects tries to stamp out excessive affect, especially in the form of the "passions."[55] There is a careful line drawn, however, between the kind of mourning associated with contrition leading to compunction and the kind of sadness or despondency leading to despair.[56] For example, an elder who has no compassion for a younger person and causes him to despair is upbraided quite harshly.[57] An affect that moves to greater withdrawal and abstention is an important tool, but affects that disturb such withdrawal and form or revive attachments with the "world" are to be avoided.

Combatting the passions and the patterns of thought associated with them or precipitated by them is one of the central endeavors of ascetic life and practice. The very point of withdrawal from the world is the elimination of temptation and the undivided focus on prayer and subjugation of the passions. A significant bulk of the discourses and instructions are devoted to this topic. For this purpose, the ascetic texts develop elaborate lists and descriptions of such attitudes and behaviors, most fully systematized in several treatises by Evagrius (*To Eulogios*, *On the Vices Opposed to the Virtues*, *On the Eight Thoughts*, and the most famous text, *Praktikos* or *The Monk*) and in Cassian's *Institutes*, which first outlines basic monastic practices, including what to wear and how to sing psalms, and then devotes one chapter (or "book") each to the "spirits" of gluttony, fornication (or lust), avarice (or greed), wrath (or anger), despondency (or sadness), acedia (or listlessness), vainglory, and pride, respectively.[58] In a different way, the various stories told about ascetics also illustrate these vices or the corresponding virtues and are sometimes

[55] It should also be acknowledged that suffering and pain were often deliberately embraced and celebrated as tools for sanctity. For a couple of examples, see *Book of the Elders*, 104–5, 119, 121. In this regard, *pathos* in the sense of suffering or pain becomes the means of combatting *pathos* in the sense of passion. The ability to withstand pain and suffering is very frequently cited as a characteristic of the holy person (e.g., *Journeying into God*, 17; *Witness to Holiness*, 45–46; etc.). Illness is not interpreted as a result of sin but it can serve as an occasion to cultivate virtue.

[56] Isaiah admonishes: "Let us not leave room in our heart for despondency," because "through despondency we demean ourselves to disparage spiritual food," namely repentance. Isaiah of Scetis, *Ascetic Discourses*, 200, 208.

[57] Cassian, *Conferences* 2.XIII.4–12; 95–98.

[58] For the most extensive discussions see Evagrius, *On the Vices Opposed to the Virtues* 1–9, *On the Eight Thoughts*, *The Monk* 6–33, *On Thoughts* 1–22; *Ascetic Corpus*, 62–65, 73–90, 97–103, 153–68, respectively; Cassian, *Institutes*, Books V–XII. They are also discussed in detail in a long discourse in the *Conferences* (Fifth Conference). Frequent references to them are made throughout the texts in a less structured manner.

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deliberately organized so as to focus on them more fully, for example grouping together all the stories about pride or vainglory.

The term for these thoughts or dispositions in Evagrius and much of the subsequent (Greek) tradition is *logismos* (pl. *logismoi*). Like the other crucial term, *pathos* (pl. *pathei*), some authors treat *logismoi* as neutral, able to become either positive or negative; others consider them more fully developed trains of thoughts or attitudes that are evil and must be combatted.[59] The same will be true of the "passions," which for some authors are natural (even Christ is said to have natural human passions), but in some texts always have a negative connotation.[60] When they are used in more neutral or natural fashion, the aim becomes to direct and guide the thoughts and passions; when they are used with a purely negative meaning, the advice usually is to root them out and eliminate them altogether. A similar ambivalence exists over the source of these thoughts and temptations; sometimes they are considered self-generated by one's own imagination or desires, sometimes they are thought to be due to demonic influence and to come from the outside.[61] They are blameworthy only when one gives in to these thoughts, cultivates them, acts on them, and establishes habits and patterns of behavior. Some writers will use *logismoi* or *pathei* only for these blameworthy full-blown dispositions; some will employ them even for the initial first movement of heart or mind. The point, obviously, is the same in both cases: not to allow something to have destructive power over one's thinking and emotion.

[59] For example, in Evagrius, *logismos* is always used for the full vice, while Abba Silvanus affirms "that there is no condemnation whatsoever for having *logismoi*." *Book of the Elders* 10.100; 167. See also 172–74, 195, 208, 222, 263, where *logismos* is used positively.

[60] In Isaiah of Scetis, the passions are neutral desires that can be cultivated in positive ways or put to destructive use, e.g., Isaiah of Scetis, *Ascetic Discourses*, 44, 143–46. By contrast, the life of Abba George of Choziba claims: "We are not harmed so much by our neighbor … as we are by some tiny passion that we have within us. We are full of passion! Who among us will be able to boast that he is without passion or sin?" *Journeying into God*, 100. Finn argues that "asceticism enables freedom from overwhelming emotions that in turn allows one to concentrate on love of God"; thus, asceticism "restores man as a rational being to his natural state." Finn, *Asceticism in the Graeco-Roman World*, 123. This is a fairly frequent claim in the secondary literature, although it is rarely stated as explicitly in the primary texts. An important exception is Dorotheos, who repeatedly affirms that virtues are natural and describes vices as illnesses impeding our natural and healthy state (see note 88 later in this chapter).

[61] Ultimately most of the tradition agrees that one is not responsible for the initial thought or temptation, regardless of whether it arises in the mind "naturally" or whether it is induced by a demon or comes from the outside in some other form. The next section will examine these processes of discernment more fully.

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Dorotheos of Gaza explicitly says that renunciation and purification become practiced by the early ascetics because they realized that thereby the soul or mind "starts functioning as nature intended it to."[62] There is a profound recognition here about the relationship between affect, thinking, and action.

A first clear characteristic of ascetic experience therefore is an often radical withdrawal from the world, both physically and emotionally. Such withdrawal serves the purpose of seeking to eliminate all temptations, trying to avoid the passions, in order to purify body, heart, and mind. Ascetic experience engages in lifelong repentance in a single-minded focus on one's own life through an increasing awareness of one's sins, including the temptations that might arise through patterns of thought or affect. Such a focus requires a stripped-down experience of space and time in such a way that they become of no account, are neutralized in their particularities. The ascetic withdraws from ordinary life and negates its specific manifestations in order to examine the affects and thoughts of consciousness in single-minded attention. This requires careful practices of discernment and constant vigilance.

PRACTICES OF VIGILANCE AND DISCERNMENT

In order to combat vices at their root and to produce virtues instead, the ascetics engage in rigorous processes of discernment, constantly monitoring their own thoughts, attitudes, and actions. Such self-examination is undertaken in a variety of ways, which all cultivate attitudes of attentiveness and vigilance as an absolutely crucial element of ascetic practice. "Be attentive to yourself" is a constant refrain in Evagrius, Cassian, Dorotheos of Gaza, the correspondence of Barsanuphius and John, and other texts. Abba Poemen says: "Being on the alert, paying attention to oneself, and discretion – these three virtues are the working tools of the soul."[63] Another elder asserts: "Without vigilance a person makes no progress, not even in a single virtue."[64] Isaiah of Scetis warns: "Always examine where you falter, and try to correct yourselves."[65] The examination is marked both by the discovery of sin or false attitudes and by the

[62] Dorotheos, *Discourses and Sayings*, 84.

[63] *Book of the Elders*, 11.

[64] *Book of the Elders*, 190.

[65] Isaiah of Scetis, *Ascetic Discourses*, 39. He reiterates this also in many other places in the discourses, e.g., Discourse 22, which repeatedly exhorts the listeners to examine themselves or be attentive to themselves (ibid., 163–71; see also 196).

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goal of curtailing and ultimately eliminating them. Dorotheos summarizes: "The fathers used to tell us how we should purify ourselves bit by bit, that is, by examining ourselves carefully every evening about how we have passed the day, and again at dawn about how we have passed the night." He insists that "we really need to scrutinize our conduct every six hours and see in what way we have sinned."[66] Therefore, we must "keep watch over ourselves always."[67] Being attentive to oneself by examining one's thoughts and attitudes is at the core of the daily practice of the ascetic life. Ascetic experience manifests to a large extent as a continual process of observation, discernment, and judgment: "Therefore stand over your heart, watching your senses."[68] This requires constant vigilance. Such an examination of consciousness itself already has phenomenological leanings. Although it would surely be anachronistic to refer to the ascetics as phenomenologists, in many ways their examination of consciousness, careful attention to their thoughts, and analysis of their affects have parallels to the phenomenological method, albeit obviously with a quite different goal than philosophical phenomenology. They seek to understand the movements of consciousness, to discern the pattern of thoughts and the ways in which they generate emotions, affective attachments, and actions.

Over time, such practices of self-examination become increasingly codified and structured.[69] One becomes able to examine oneself through the practices of stillness (*hēsychia*), attentiveness (*prosochē*), and watchfulness or vigilance (*nēpsis*), which aim to achieve serenity or dispassion (*apatheia*).[70] Even *apatheia* is not a final goal, however, but an intermediate goal on the way toward the higher goal of the Christian life, namely knowledge of God (*theologia*). Already Evagrius makes these distinctions: on the one hand, the ascetic practice (*praktikē*) of elimination of vices and cultivation of virtues; on the other hand, the pursuit of "theology" or "mystical knowledge" (*gnōstikē*).[71] Cassian also explicitly distinguishes between the "practical" stage, consisting in the elimination of vices and

[66] Dorotheos, *Discourses and Sayings*, 175. He counsels such constant self-examination, especially in the morning and evening, also in other discourses (ibid., 113).

[67] Ibid., 107.

[68] Isaiah of Scetis, *Ascetic Discourses*, 134.

[69] This technical terminology is worked out more fully in the later texts than in the earlier ones, although the emphases are present throughout. Stillness and attentiveness are already counseled frequently in the *Apophthegmata*. It is the first subject discussed in the collection organized by topic. *Book of the Elders*, 15–24.

[70] On *hēsychia*, see *Book of the Elders*, 15–24.

[71] See the detailed table in Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 346.

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acquiring of virtues, and the "theoretical" stage, involving knowledge of self and ultimately of God.[72] The latter is "incomparably superior" to the former; its "dignity is greater than all the dignity of righteousness and all the zeal for righteousness."[73] The great majority of the texts are devoted to the "practical" dimension, however, and especially to the elimination of vices and governing of thoughts. For this, discernment (*diakrisis*) of one's thoughts and affects is essential. Isaiah of Scetis affirms: "All things are abolished by discernment, when it gathers and considers them, but it is impossible for discernment to come to you, unless you cultivate the ground, beginning with silence."[74] Such discernment is able to analyze not only whether a temptation is inflicted from the outside or arises from one's own thoughts, but also how to cut it off at the root before it becomes more entrenched or even develops into a regular habit or disposition.

The phenomenology of this progression of entrenchment in consciousness becomes quite sophisticated over time. An overall consensus emerges about the ways in which thoughts and desires influence action and become established habits. The order or naming of the stages occasionally varies somewhat, but broadly speaking the sequence is usually described as follows:[75] (1) a thought (in the widest sense of imagination, perception, memory, etc.) arises within consciousness either of its own accord or put there by temptation (*prosbolē*); (2) one becomes disturbed by or preoccupied with this thought, at least momentarily (*pararripismos*); (3) one "connects" with the thought by entertaining it and dwelling on it (*homilia* or *syndyasmos*); (4) one agrees to the thought and intends to act on it (*synkatathesis*); (5) through repeated action one develops a disposition or habit of this pattern of thought (*prolēpsis*); (6) finally it has become a full-blown passion or vice.[76] This describes well how a fleeting thought can ultimately give

[72] See the detailed discussion in Cassian, *Conferences* 14; 505–27.

[73] Cassian, *Conferences* 23.III.1; 791.

[74] Isaiah of Scetis, *Ascetic Discourses*, 126.

[75] The technical terminology is taken from the explanation in the glossary appended to Palmer, Sherrard, and Ware's translation of the *Philokalia*, included at the end of each of the four volumes.

[76] Both Aristotelian and Stoic influences can be discerned here on multiple levels: the cultivation of virtues and vices as habits or dispositions of the soul and the pursuit of *apatheia* so as to avoid disturbing *pathei*. There is also a significant influence of the discussions about what is in our power or "up to us" and what is unintentional or involuntary. These deeply influenced Christian thinking, including many aspects of discussions about the nature of Christ – and hence the nature of the human. For Stoicism, see Margaret R. Graver, *Stoicism and Emotion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); James A. Francis, *Subversive Virtue: Asceticism and Authority in the Second-Century Pagan World* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995); Margaret E. Reesor, *The*

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rise to entrenched patterns of behavior. The ascetic undertaking is primarily directed at preventing this sequence, namely by cutting off the temptation or thought at the root before it becomes established in the mind, heart, or consciousness (*nous*, *kardia*, and even *dianoia* are often used interchangeably in that respect, although *kardia*/heart is more frequently employed to speak of the person as a whole). It obviously also tries to combat dispositions that have already developed and either seeks to exterminate them altogether (for the case of habits of vice) or to guide them into better directions and reform them (for dispositions that tend to passions).

Anger can serve as a particularly vivid example of how this works. The ascetics think of anger as a passion that masters us, maybe even renders us less than human.[77] Dorotheos describes the process like that of starting a fire: Someone else's "provoking remark" is like a "spark" thrown into tinder. If one ignores the remark, the spark is snuffed out. If one dwells on it and thinks the remark was intended to annoy, one feeds the flame by adding wood or fuel to it. The mind becomes disturbed like the first smoke of kindling. This disturbance stimulates the mind with more thoughts and emotions, increasingly setting it aflame and generating ideas of vengeance. Thus, at first the flame can be easily extinguished and even a little fire can be put out with some effort, but "if you dwell on it and inflame your heart and torment yourself with thoughts and conflicting emotions the heart catches fire and there you are in a passion."[78] Even at this point the fire can still be controlled and extinguished with effort, but if it is fed further "like someone piling logs on a blazing hearth and flaming the fire and so making more firebrands" it becomes a raging inferno.[79] In another context, he compares the growing of a basic desire into a harmful passion to pulling up a cypress: easily done when it is a mere seedling, increasingly difficult as it grows, and finally impossible when it has become a deeply rooted and large tree.[80] Isaiah of Scetis compares the process to rust eating away at iron or a worm gnawing on wood.[81]

Nature of Man in Early Stoic Philosophy (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989); Albrecht Dihle, *The Theory of Will in Classical Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); André-Jean Voelke, *L'idée de volonté dans le Stoïcisme* (Paris: PUF, 1973).

77 Dorotheos suggest as much in his discourse on anger: Dorotheos, *Discourses and Sayings*, 149.

78 Ibid., 150.

79 Ibid.

80 Ibid., 174. Isaiah of Scetis compares it to "trampling down" one's conscience. Isaiah of Scetis, *Ascetic Discourses*, 63.

81 Isaiah of Scetis, *Ascetic Discourses*, 124. He calls "brave" "the person who struggles against his former sins" (ibid., 175).

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Again, there is profound phenomenological insight here about how emotions and affects function, including how something like "moral emotions" – in Anthony Steinbock's sense – are formed, in both positive and negative senses. The ascetic analysis reveals how emotions like anger can develop into destructive rage or deep resentment and how one might prevent this from happening by paying attention to the more primordial movements of affect before they become patterns of thought, emotion, and action. Thus, in this case, phenomenology is not only helpful for understanding how ascetic practice operates, but the ascetic analysis and advice can themselves become useful phenomenologically by showing us how various movements of consciousness become entrenched, develop into dispositions, and ultimately result in addictive and destructive behaviors.

Aside from detailing how emotions are generated and develop into full-blown passions, Dorotheos also draws insightful distinctions between anger and resentment: One might with an apology erase momentary anger and yet could maintain an underlying disposition of resentment that can be irritated by a new instance. He compares this to "a person who has a wound and puts a plaster on it; after a while, through the plaster, the wound heals and forms a scar, but it still remains a weak spot and if someone throws a stone at him, this place is more easily damaged than the rest of the body and begins to bleed."[82] Thus, a particular instance of anger can be healed and yet remain a sore spot to be irritated more easily by a subsequent instance. Dorotheos also repeatedly points out that people are different, not only tempted in different ways, but also requiring different measures for an effective response. Indeed, as is true of bodily illnesses, some people might have a predisposition for certain vices and succumb to them much more quickly than others. Thus, certain situations pose much greater danger to them, leading them to fall into addiction or depression, when another person might not have been affected at all by such a minor occurrence. He concludes from this that "there is need therefore of much vigilance and zeal."[83] Again, attentiveness is of the highest importance.

In a different address he distinguishes what he calls "three conditions" or, perhaps better, three possibilities of response, namely allowing the passions to run freely, trying to control them, or seeking to uproot them altogether.[84] He describes in detail how each of the three responses may

[82] Dorotheos, *Discourses and Sayings*, 153.
[83] Ibid., 180.
[84] Ibid., 167. He goes on to work them out and illustrate them with examples (ibid., 167–71).

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operate. In that context he advises: "They ought to grope about in themselves not so much for the *how* and *wherefore* of their passion itself as to come to grips with the cause of their passionate reactions and so to come to see *why* they were defeated or seized by their passions."[85] Dorotheos argues that many different aspects need to be considered in attending to one's conscience. After describing several of them, he concludes: "To put it simply, all the hidden things that happen inside of us, things which no one sees except God and our conscience, we need to take account of."[86] He also depicts situations in which habits become addictive and seem impossible to break even if the person does not want to engage in the action, knows it to be wrong, and gains no benefit from it.[87] This is partly why they are called passions: They subject us and rule over us, making us passive and hindering our self-directed activity. To pursue virtue is to give rest to the soul because it returns it to its natural and healthy state.[88] Similar insights into the working of emotions and passions are elaborated in many other ascetic texts.

Thus, in this literature an analysis of consciousness is developed that is attentive to the development of momentary feeling into fuller emotional response, becoming cemented into destructive habits that form dispositions of pathos, which can fuel pernicious and destructive patterns of behavior. At the same time, advice is provided on how one might break such habits, interrupt the patterns, and begin to cultivate healthier dispositions.[89] This is a process: Dorotheos stresses that one learns only

[85] Ibid., 169; emphasis in text. He also points out that there are some people "who while fighting to control one passion do so by indulging another passion" (ibid.).

[86] Dorotheos, *Discourses and Sayings*, 106. He also stresses that one can trouble, harm, or wound someone by a look or a gesture (ibid.).

[87] He concludes the description of a concrete example by saying: "Do you see what a miserable affliction it is? He knew it was evil, he knew that he was doing wrong, he was troubled and wept over it, and all the same the unfortunate man was dragged along by his evil habit" (ibid., 179).

[88] "I say, therefore, that insofar as we carry out what is good, we generate for ourselves a habit of virtue—that is, we take up a state proper to our nature, we return to a state of health which belongs to us, as diseased eyes recover their normal reactions to light, or from any other state of weaknesses, we return to the normal state of health which belongs to our very nature." By contrast: "In the case of vice it is entirely different, by doing repeatedly what is evil we acquire a habit which is foreign to us, something unnatural. We put ourselves, as it were, into a permanent state of pestilential sickness, so that we can no longer be healed without many tears." Ibid., 180. He goes on to compare this in even more detail to bodily sickness and health. In a different discourse he reiterates this conviction: "God gave us the virtues as an endowment of our nature, but he did not endow us with vices" (ibid., 188).

[89] Dorotheos compares it to learning a trade, which requires diligent attention and much practice (ibid., 164).

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through repeated acting and making mistakes: "Always he has to start by doing – and doing it wrong – making and unmaking, until, little by little, working patiently and persevering, he learns the trade."[90] Yet instead of being simplistically anti-body, as is often assumed, many texts are carefully attuned to the movements of the body and the intellect.[91] Cassian argues, for example, that because certain passions are linked more fully to corporeal expressions than others, they also require a bodily response.[92] Fasting and sexual abstinence are such prominent measures in the ascetic withdrawal partly because they address most directly the fundamental bodily temptations of gluttony and fornication. The ascetics recognize that our desires for food and sex are deep-seated and profound urges that cannot be erased (maybe should not be erased), but can very easily be subverted into destructive patterns of behavior that can cause tremendous harm to ourselves and to others.

Both the analysis of the mind and heart developed here and the guidance suggested by the elders display acute psychological awareness and profound insight into human dispositions and their development that may well allow for a "genetic account" of certain dispositions of consciousness in a phenomenological sense.[93] Although that cannot be undertaken here, as the concern is to understand and describe ascetic experience as a religious phenomenon rather than a broader analysis of consciousness, it is important that such description, analysis, and advice are central characteristics of this literature. In the case of asceticism, the religious experience takes on a profound dimension of self-examination, a singular focus on one's own consciousness in regard to its movements, patterns, and dispositions.[94] Discernment is inscribed into the very structure of this

[90] Ibid., 154. This also means that one should not judge others: "But let him grope about in his own heart and if he experiences there a movement of anger or resentment let him not speak" in correction of another (ibid., 115).

[91] Isaiah of Scetis claims that "caring for it [the body] with godly fear is good." Isaiah of Scetis, *Ascetic Discourses*, 123.

[92] Cassian, *Conferences* 5.IV.3–4; 184–85.

[93] In this regard, see Anthony Steinbock's *Moral Emotions: Reclaiming the Evidence of the Heart* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2014), in which he examines various types of personal and interpersonal affects, such as guilt, shame, pride, and hope.

[94] One especially vivid illustration of this pattern of progress is the image of the ladder, most famously that of John Climacus. Here each step in the ascetic life is represented as the rung of a ladder that must be climbed arduously and from which one is in danger of falling at any point. Dorotheos also uses the imagery of ladders leading into hell or heaven. He stresses that we are not expected to fly to the top of the ladder without any effort, but instead we should "keep from going downwards" by not harming or offending or demeaning others. Dorotheos, *Discourses and Sayings*, 206.

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way of living religion. To a large extent the ascetic experience is defined and described as precisely such a focus on self-examination. The elements of withdrawal and silence already discussed are in the service of such analysis and diagnosis.

PURPOSES OF DENYING AND DISCIPLINING THE SELF

Another element of this focus on the interior state of consciousness and on mental attitudes is the fact that the concrete actions ascetics undertake are often deliberately futile. The strong emphasis on obedience in the literature exacerbates this, both in terms of the need for guidance and in the sense that the elder will often command actions that seem nonsensical or unproductive (sometimes that is their very point, in that they are meant to train the ascetic in obedience). Obedience to a wiser guide is crucial to eliminating vices and controlling passions, because it frees one from subjugation to them and teaches new patterns of behavior.[95] Yet despite their rigorous ascetic exercises, the ascetics report very little in the way of concrete encounters with the divine and are singularly suspicious of vivid manifestations, which are often suspected to be demonic. They do not celebrate their own achievements, refuse adulation, and never claim sanctity for themselves.[96] In a couple of dramatic examples, dreams or visions confirm that an ascetic has succeeded, usually on the person's deathbed, but "success" here always means full repentance and forgiveness of sins, rather than reaching some sort of pinnacle of holiness. Some stories deliberately upset even such norms of "success"; for example, David of Scetis tells the story of a prostitute who is fully forgiven for her dissolute life by a few hours of penitence.[97] That is to say, ascetic experience is in many

[95] Obedience is step 4 of the *Ladder of Divine Ascent* and is illustrated with multiple stories (Climacus, *Ladder*, 20–54). It is also a prominent theme in the *Apophthegmata* (*Book of the Elders*, 233–45). Dorotheos asks: "Do you know someone who has fallen? Be sure that he directed himself. Nothing is more grievous than to be one's own director, nothing more pernicious." Dorotheos, *Discourses and Sayings*, 126. It is also pointed out, however, that a bad guide can harm someone and that one needs to leave to find a better advisor in such a case (e.g., *Book of the Elders* 10.90; 164).

[96] Macarius the Great is reported as saying: "A person cannot be perfect if he does not acquire great humility in his heart and in the body, declines to measure himself in any matter but rather places himself in humiliation beneath the whole of creation, and refuses to judge anybody at all except himself alone." *Book of the Elders*, 10.

[97] *Witness to Holiness*, 87–90. It is also worth pointing out that he works no miracles in an environment that often regarded wonderworking (*thaumaturgia*) as a distinguishing characteristic of the holy person. One such wonderworker is George of Choziba, although even this account – full of miraculous stories – is focused on his humility and

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ways a minimalist experience, marked by denial and emptiness, rather than affirmation and overflowing fullness, as will be the case for other sorts of religious experiences.

The focus on the more "negative" dimension of withdrawal or abnegation does not entail that asceticism does not also seek to cultivate "positive" virtues, but even these often feature an element of denial. Abba Aaron tells a newcomer that "this way of life is labor and suffering up to the very end."[98] Humility in the sense of not thinking anything good of oneself is a distinctive virtue that ascetics are often told to cultivate above all others.[99] Dorotheos has an elder say: "Humility is a great and divine work and the road to humility is labor, bodily labor, while seeking to know oneself and to put oneself below everyone else and praying to God about everything."[100] Even love is not usually applied to the self but always means love of others.[101] This directing of all focus away from

kindness. *Journeying into God*, 71–105. The "passion of arrogance" is condemned as "the most vain and wretched" (ibid., 100). For other accounts of wonderworkers, see *Book of the Elders*, 350–56, although it is striking how little space is devoted to this topic in the *Apophthegmata*.

[98] "Life of Abba Aaron," *Journeying into God*, 125.

[99] *Book of the Elders*, 246–88; Climacus, *Ladder*, 149–60; Dorotheos, *Discourses and Sayings*, 94–103. Isaiah of Scetis defines humility as "considering oneself to be sinful and not doing any good before God." *Ascetic Discourses*, 147. Wortley claims that humility is the most important path to salvation, more important even than purity of heart. Wortley, *Give Me a Word*, 18. Cassian describes ten elements of humility, including absolute obedience and thinking oneself worthless. Cassian, *Institutes* 4.XXXIX.2; 100.

[100] Dorotheos, *Discourses and Sayings*, 101. He also contends that true humility cannot be adequately described (ibid., 100).

[101] Even this is heavily qualified. For example, the *History of the Monks of Egypt* judges love of others to be good, but the singular focus on God enabled by withdrawal from the world as decidedly superior: "And so you too, my children, should cultivate stillness and ceaselessly train yourselves for contemplation, that when you pray to God you may do so with a pure mind. For an ascetic is good if he is constantly training himself in the world, if he shows brother love and practises hospitality and charity, if he gives alms and is generous to visitors, if he helps the sick and does not give offence to anyone. He is good, he is exceedingly good, for he is a man who puts the commandments into practice and does them. But he is occupied with earthly things. Better and greater than he is the contemplative, who has risen from active works to the spiritual sphere and has left it to others to be anxious about earthly things. Since he has not only denied himself but even become forgetful of himself, he is concerned with the things of heaven. He stands unimpeded in the presence of God, without any anxiety holding him back. For such a man spends his life with God; he is occupied with God, and praises him with ceaseless hymnody" (I.62–63; 62). In the *Lausiac History* helping someone in need is sometimes portrayed as demonic temptation to deviate from one's purpose of solitude and prayer (e.g., 16.4–6; 32–33). There are, however, also multiple stories of benevolence and charity (e.g., chapters 40 and 68). Evagrius sometimes speaks of charity or love as the foundation of the ascetic life, e.g., Evagrius, *Eulogios* 11, *Chapters on Prayer*

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the self is in a curiously paradoxical relationship with an almost singular focus on the self. Ascetic experience is deeply characterized by this need to know the self; it is "necessary for ascetics at all times to know their own lives, as in a mirror."[102] Another elder is reported as saying: "Know yourself and you shall never fall."[103] Ironically, this results in an almost obsessive focus on the self. Asceticism is perhaps the religious life and practice most singularly preoccupied with the self, knowing oneself intimately, and being wholly focused on such self-examination at every moment of the day.

Such examination is obviously not just geared at knowledge or discernment, but rather aims at self-discipline, self-control, and ultimately transformation of the self. Although most of the ascetic literature focuses on repentance and purification of the self, it is clear that the aim is ultimately an intense kind of self-discipline that enables living a pure or holy life, which would no longer succumb to sin, even as temptation always remains a danger, especially in the form of pride. This involves severing the control of internal or external compulsions and instead developing and exercising supreme self-control (*enkrateia*). Such self-control does not merely regard physical things but is especially concerned with mental and emotional dimensions, such as curbing one's tongue, desires, and affections. Control over one's thoughts is deemed superior to control over one's bodily desires.[104] Being in full control of oneself heals not just the body but also the soul, and it renders one's entire being well-balanced and healthy. Besides the athletic imagery, this literature

121–25; *Ascetic Corpus*, 37 and 206, respectively. In a text written for monks, he says: "Better a secular serving his brother in sickness than an anchorite who shows no pity for his neighbor." Evagrius, *To Monks* 78; *Ascetic Corpus*, 127. Cassian does argue at one point, however, that the "reward" of perfect renunciation is being greatly loved. Cassian, *Conferences* 24.XXVI.2; 847. Dorotheos frequently stresses the importance of care for and love of others. He insists at one point that we draw close to God as we draw close to others: "To the degree that the saints enter into the things of the spirit, they desire to come near to God; and in proportion to their progress in the things of the spirit, they do in fact come close to God and to their neighbor. The closer they are to God, the closer they become to one another; and the closer they are to one another, the closer they become to God. … the more we are united to our neighbor the more we are united to God." Dorotheos, *Discourses and Sayings*, 139. He is, however, here addressing a community of monks, not speaking of the solitary ascetic life.

[102] "Coptic Life of Antony," *Journeying into God*, 18.

[103] *Book of the Elders* 12.26; 225.

[104] E.g., the story about Hilarion and Epiphanius in *Book of the Elders* 4.15; 41. Evagrius points out that combatting one's thoughts requires courage. *Eulogios* 17; *Ascetic Corpus*, 44.

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is suffused with medical imagery: Ascetic practices are perceived as pedagogical means or medical tools for the healing of the person, not only physically but also spiritually and intellectually.[105] Evagrius compares the combat with one's "thoughts" to the pain caused by "scalpel and cautery" – both aim at healing the wound.[106] Pierre Hadot calls this a "therapeutics of the passions."[107] Such imagery and exhortation are employed in the patristic texts not only for the radical ascetic withdrawal to the desert, but also for the more "ordinary" ascetic practices in urban or regular Christian life.[108]

Relying especially on Cassian, Michel Foucault argues that a new experience of the self emerges in early Christian asceticism, an accusing or exhibiting of the self (*exomologesis*) that actually constitutes an important element of self-accusation (*exagoreusis*) and of "practicing" the self.[109] He calls it a "self-revelation" that is at the same time a "self-destruction," an exposure of the self in order to deny or eliminate the self.[110] He argues for this as a radically new conception of the self that has an essential link to truth (it develops a "truth-technology"): "We have to sacrifice the self in order to discover the truth about ourselves,

[105] These latter two are not usually distinguished, although the writers do inherit the Greek distinctions between physical or material and spiritual or psychical. Medical imagery is particularly prominent in the *Discourses* of Dorotheos of Gaza, who was a physician (he explicitly calls wickedness a "sickness" in places, e.g., Dorotheos, *Discourses and Sayings*, 166), but it is pervasive in the literature. For a further example, see the description of someone refusing to follow a doctor's advice by Isaiah of Scetis in *Ascetic Discourses*, 113. Cassian also frequently employs medical imagery. For one example, see Cassian, *Conferences* 19.XII.1; 677. A concern with health of soul and body is obviously a major feature of the ancient world more generally. It is not coincidental that the most copied works of antiquity are those of Galen.

[106] Evagrius, *Eight Thoughts* 31; *Ascetic Corpus*, 89. See also the interpretation of various physical illnesses in terms of inner maladies in *Thirty-Three Ordered Chapters* 1–16; *Ascetic Corpus*, 224–25.

[107] Pierre Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 244. He argues that early Christianity ultimately derived this particular "way of life" from ancient philosophy, although it sought to justify it by biblical means (ibid., 249).

[108] This language is ubiquitous in Basil of Caesarea's homilies and Diodochus of Photike's *Discourses*, but is also frequently employed by other patristic authors. See *One Hundred Practical Texts of Perception and Spiritual Discernment from Diadochos of Photike*, ed. and trans. Janet Elaine Rutherford (Belfast: Belfast Byzantine Enterprises, 2000).

[109] Michel Foucault, "About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self: Two Lectures at Dartmouth," *Political Theory* 21.2 (1993): 198–227. See also the fuller account in Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981–1982*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2005).

[110] Foucault, "Hermeneutics of the Self," 215.

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and we have to discover the truth about ourselves in order to sacrifice ourselves."[111] Foucault contends that while ancient ("pagan") *askēsis* led to self-formation and self-constitution, Christian forms of *askēsis* aimed at self-renunciation, at an elimination of the subject, albeit via the "objectification of the self in a true discourse."[112] Even later medieval practices of confession, Foucault contends, have as their goal articulating the truth about the self, rather than formation of a certain kind of subject.[113]

Yet ascetic practice does not aim simply at sacrifice or annihilation of the self. Rather, the ascetic experience tries to eliminate or severely restrain certain aspects of the self, in order to cultivate other aspects or generate a new kind of self. Pointing to the *Apophthegmata* and similar texts, Hadot argues that "attention to the self translates into self-mastery and self-control, which can be obtained only by habit and perseverance in ascetic practices."[114] He contends that Christianity took its inspiration from ancient philosophy, and accordingly "attention to the self, the search for impassivity, peace of mind, and the absence of worry, and in particular the flight from the body became the primary objectives of spiritual life."[115] Ascetic experience does not flee the body as such, however, but instead seeks to eliminate the thoughts and passions that seek to dominate it and lead it astray. Indeed, many hagiographies stress the bodily health and vigor of great ascetics as a kind of "proof" of their spiritual health.[116] It is fairly clear that even intense bodily practices (like deprivation of food or sleep) aim at control of the body, its thoughts, emotions, and desires, rather than its annihilation.

Such self-control is accomplished through a subjugation of the will, which is partly why obedience plays such an important role. Dorotheos is

[111] Ibid., 221 (with misspellings corrected).

[112] Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 333; similar claims and comparisons are reiterated frequently in these lectures. The "Christian athlete" is an enemy to himself and thus always struggles against himself (ibid., 322).

[113] Ibid., 362–64. He calls this a "highly significant event in the relations between the subject and truth" and "an absolutely crucial moment in the history of subjectivity in the West" (ibid., 364).

[114] Hadot, *Ancient Philosophy*, 144.

[115] Ibid., 252. His examples are all about *ascetic* life. Finn argues, however, that "the importance of fasting as a communal activity" refutes the idea that "early Christian asceticism reveals 'an intense orientation toward the development and articulation of an individual subjectivity.'" Finn, *Asceticism in the Graeco-Roman World*, 61.

[116] Most famously in Athanasius, *Life of Antony* (93–93, 256–57), but also in various other texts. The *History of the Monks of Egypt* reports of ascetics leaving the Eucharist that "one could see them in the desert filled with a joy and a bodily contentment such as one cannot see on earth." *History of the Monks of Egypt* VIII.52; 78.

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especially clear about this subjugation of the will in order to reform and redirect it: "Do yourself violence in all things and cut off your own will, and, by the grace of Christ living in you, you will become so habituated to cutting off self-will that you do it without constraint or trouble as naturally as you do your own will." As a consequence, "no longer will you want certain things to happen, but what is happening will be the thing you want and you will be at peace with all."[117] At stake is a realignment of the will with what is truly good and desirable, rather than the false desires and affects that lead us astray and seek to possess us, so that we become obsessed with and addicted to them. As in the case of cutting off the initial temptations to annoyance before they develop into a full disposition of anger and rage, so self-denial is practiced in little steps in order to develop it into a more continuous disposition: "A man denying himself in this way comes little by little to form a habit of it, so that from denying himself in little things, he begins to deny himself in great without the least trouble." This leads to a state of peace, tranquility, and "holy indifference."[118] This denial of one's will hence leads not to an annihilation of the self, but to self-mastery.[119]

The point throughout is purity of the heart or of the person as a whole.[120] Evagrius describes it as shaking off anything that stifles the inner self, leading ultimately to peace within oneself.[121] Cassian calls it "a perfect and integral purity of heart," a "will and invisible purity of the heart" that renders us "free from clamoring thoughts" and leads to

[117] Dorotheos, *Discourses and Sayings*, 239.

[118] Ibid., 89. He also argues that "this habit of accusing ourselves will work out well for us and bring us peace and much profit, and nothing else that we can do will bring this about" (ibid., 143).

[119] Hughes-Edwards similarly argues in regard to medieval asceticism: "In an age where violence was comparatively commonplace, medieval asceticism is best understood, not as the church's legitimization of self-harm or punishment, but as an intellectualized and disciplined devotional system intended to sublimate bodily desires to spiritual purpose. Asceticism uses the body to 'get at' the soul or, rather, it uses the body to reveal the state of an ascetic's spiritual health and improve it. Its purificatory power ultimately remains an expression of God's strength, however, not mankind's." Hughes-Edwards, *Reading Medieval Anchoritism*, 59.

[120] For example, Evagrius, *On the Vices Opposed to the Virtues* 10, *On Thoughts* 36, *Chapters on Prayer* 2; *Ascetic Corpus*, 65, 178, 193, respectively. This is a constant theme in Cassian who describes it as a gift of God, e.g., Cassian, *Conferences* 12.XV.3; 453. For fuller discussions, see some of the essays included in Harriet A. Luckman and Linda Kulzer, eds., *Purity of Heart in Early Ascetic and Monastic Literature* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999).

[121] Evagrius, *Eulogios* 4, 6; *Ascetic Corpus*, 32, 33. Cassian similarly speaks of "inner tranquillity of the heart" in Cassian, *Conferences* 16.XXII.3; 571.

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"integrity."[122] It entails freedom from what binds us, freedom of mind, heart, and body.[123] Evagrius describes the state of *apatheia* as one of knowledge and serenity that need no longer worry about abstinence or even perseverance, because virtue has become firmly established and so such a person naturally does the good.[124] If we "give more attention to ourselves," so as to "make progress in virtue," our self becomes renewed.[125] The various kinds of renunciation accordingly always have as their goal an inner (and outer) freedom and greater knowledge.[126] Thus, although he affirms that "the beginning of salvation is condemnation of yourself," that is assuredly not its end.[127] Rather, it is self-knowledge and knowledge of God, in that order: "You want to know God? First know yourself."[128] Cassian describes different degrees of perfection that result in "friendship" with God.[129] Ultimately, Cassian concludes that leading this kind of life is the only way to prevent one's own ruin.[130]

This paradoxical tension between supreme focus on the self and simultaneous denial of it can be felt in other ways in the ascetic sources as well. The desire to be free from bodily temptations leads to intense bodily practices. The abstention from food is conjoined with a strong emphasis on hospitality.[131] There is fierce independence coupled with an almost morbid emphasis on absolute obedience. The ascetic has no possessions and yet is told to treat everything with care. Deep sadness over one's sins will result in "spiritual joy."[132] One is exhorted both to stay away from others and to imitate their good life. The ascetic remains silently in his or

[122] Cassian, *Conferences* 20.VII.2; 698; 21.XXXVI.1–3; 748.

[123] Evagrius, *Eight Thoughts* 3.1–14, *Reflections* 60; *Ascetic Corpus*, 78–79, 216, respectively. In contrast, he describes anger as driving us to madness, being tossed about as if by a gale of wind or darkened like clouds over the sun. Evagrius, *Eight Thoughts* 4.1–13; *Ascetic Corpus*, 80. Cassian depicts it as a healing and purification of the senses in Cassian, *Conferences* 21.XXVI.5–6; 740. In a different place he calls it the "highest good," far beyond "abstinence, sobriety, humility, righteousness, mercy, temperance, and kindness." Cassian, *Conferences* 23.XV.5; 806.

[124] Evagrius, *Praktikos* 64–70; *Ascetic Corpus*, 109.

[125] Evagrius, *On Thoughts* 15; *Ascetic Corpus*, 163.

[126] Evagrius, *On Thoughts* 26; *Ascetic Corpus*, 172.

[127] Evagrius, *Maxims* 1.1; *Ascetic Corpus*, 229.

[128] Evagrius, *Maxims* 2.2; *Ascetic Corpus*, 230. One of the final maxims in this collection counsels: "When you want to know yourself as to who you are, do not compare who you were, but what you have become from the beginning." Evagrius, *Maxims* 3.10; *Ascetic Corpus*, 232.

[129] Cassian, *Conferences* 11.XII.5; 418–19.

[130] Cassian, *Conferences* 24.XXVI.13; 850.

[131] For one example, see Evagrius, *Eulogios* 24; *Ascetic Corpus*, 51–52.

[132] Cassian, *Conferences* 24.XXVI.6–7; 849.

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her cell, yet craves a "word" from the spiritual elder and recites psalms or other prayers all day long.

This emphasis on silence, coupled with the desire for a "word" from a spiritual elder, is especially interesting. Stillness (*hēsychia*) is a crucial element of ascetic practice from early (e.g., Evagrian) texts to much later ones (such as those gathered in the *Philokalia*). Ascetics are exhorted to avoid speech, especially useless chatter, and exhortations often feature anecdotes of ascetics who do not speak for years – this is especially the case for transvestite ascetics (presumably because they might have given themselves away if their voice was heard or perhaps also to combat the perception of women as more garrulous). *Logismoi* – not just thoughts but also patterns of speech – are to be avoided and combatted. At the same time, "give me a word" is the standard request addressed to an elder, presumably someone who had already practiced years of renunciation and silence, thus learning the wisdom of speech. It is telling that these "words" are often dispensed in brief phrases rather than long discourses. Even when visited by people who have traveled a long way to see them, the ascetics frequently refuse to speak or give only brief instructions or pronounce enigmatic sayings. There are certainly longer discourses and speeches, although these typically occur in the context of texts that are framed as instructions for others (especially in the case of Cassian) and rarely in the context of descriptions of the lives or practices of individual ascetics.[133] Silence becomes the "negative" symptom of the inner serenity that is the mark of a pure life.

This strong emphasis on the individual self in asceticism is rather surprising for the ancient world and for religious experience across many traditions and centuries.[134] It stands in marked contrast to liturgical or ritual and monastic experiences, which are almost always communal. Ascetic experience – like mystical experience, but in quite different fashion – is usually a solitary experience and may well be even more solitary than the highly singular experience of the mystic. While mystical experience, despite its excess and ineffability, is almost always communicated to others, sometimes even exhibited for others or at least observed by

[133] Sometimes they are connected to supervisory functions, as seems to be the case for Isaiah and Dorotheos, where they were probably delivered in monastic settings for the exhortation of the community. This also demonstrates that speech is more prominent in monastic experience than in strictly ascetic experience, in its anchorite form.

[134] This is sometimes remarked on in distinguishing monasticism from asceticism, especially when a guide counsels a disciple to leave a monastery and go further into the desert, e.g., *Journeying into God*, 148.

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them, ascetic experience deliberately flees the presence of others. At the same time, the ascetic sources largely agree that such pursuit of the self should be undertaken only under the guidance of a wise guide or elder who has experience leading others. One becomes such an elder only after decades of submission to others, practice in one's own life, and the cultivation of wisdom. Only after the most intense self-scrutiny under the guidance of experienced elders can one begin to aid others in their own self-examination.

PHENOMENALITY OF ABNEGATION

Ascetic behavior is thus in various ways characterized by the moves of emptying or eliminating, in the most radical instances, or at least of subduing and disciplining, in its less radical forms. Ascetic experience involves the movements of withdrawal from or renunciation of ordinary life through a careful and vigilant examination of affects and dispositions in order to shape a self in supreme control of itself. Ascetic experience focuses uniquely on the self; it makes oneself the subject of constant investigation, in order to achieve a purification of the self, removing everything that might tempt one to failure. The phenomenality of the ascetic life is a highly disciplined, minimalist phenomenality of abnegation or suspension that discards everything useless or tempting.

While mystical or liturgical experience often features abundance and beauty as important elements of its practices and experiences, such descriptions are almost entirely absent from ascetic reports or instructions. Almost no ascetic figure claims clear or excessive experiences of divine manifestations, and even lesser "manifestations" are often rejected as misleading and attributed to demonic influence or temptation. The ascetic effort of renunciation, discipline, and penitence continues to the moment of death; it becomes an entire life lived in this way. This is an important element that clearly distinguishes ascetic experience from other forms of religious life. Although repentance and even rejection of certain behaviors are an element of many types of religious behavior, no other form of religious life features such rigorous, consistent, and practically unending renunciation and emptiness.

Ascetic practices are defined by strenuous forms of abnegation and usually framed in terms of a liminal desert state on the edge of the abyss. In this regard, Jean-Yves Lacoste correctly describes "being before the Absolute" in terms of abnegation and liminality (as noted in the Introduction, he calls this "liturgical" experience, even as he

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makes clear that he is not focusing on ritual practice).[135] In fact, most of his concrete examples are about ascetics or about ascetic practices. He depicts the ascetic all-night wakefulness as a suspension of time, the withdrawal to the desert as a suspension of space, and various ascetic forms of prayer as a suspension of normal human interaction. Such practice, in his view, is essentially kenotic. For Lacoste, this is a "nonexperience," a nonspace and nontime, at the very limit – or even beyond the limit – of all human experience.[136] Experience before the Absolute for him anticipates the parousia or eschaton, although it cannot yet live in it. He calls it "the symbolic space of definitive existence in the margins of the world, and the subversive space of its inchoation."[137] The holy fool and other modes of ascetic performance challenge everyday human forms of living in the world and present them with a kenotic possibility of what he calls "parousiac" existence.[138] Such existence overturns or denies all normal ways of living.

Lacoste's analysis is a good portrayal not so much of "liturgical" experience, but of various aspects of ascetic practices. Ascetic experience is, in fact, experience at the "limit": at the limit of human society, at the limit of human endurance, at the limits of time and space. It does not seem accurate, however, to identify it as *non*experience. While ascetic practice seeks to eliminate certain experiences, affects, and thoughts and avoids many places, it does seek out other places and does constitute a lived experience. It suspends ordinary place and time in order to penetrate to a more fundamental experience of the self. The ascetic suspension of or withdrawal from regular time, space, and community makes it exist in a liminal time and space, on the boundary not simply of human habitation

[135] He warns the reader that "what 'liturgy' designates in these pages is, in fact, as convention would have it, the logic that presides over the encounter between man and God writ large" and is not concerned solely or even primarily with acts of worship. Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, 2.

[136] For his most comprehensive account, see Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, especially chapters 2–5. His description contrasts significantly with that of Jean-Luc Marion who is just as kenotic, but describes religious experience primarily in terms of abundance, excess, and saturation, rather than abnegation and emptiness. Marion's descriptions are a better fit for mystical experiences (or even certain types of "fundamentalist" experience) and will be discussed more fully in that context.

[137] Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, 72. See also his *Note sur le temps*, which works this out in terms of time.

[138] Even basic prayer does this: "When we pray, we contest that being-in-the-world accounts entirely for our being; and we are proposing that a relation to the Absolute can have the first and last word on the question of who we are." Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, 44.

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but of human experience. It seeks to suspend ordinary human experience via a personal limit experience that can potentially become a model for others but remains personal. (That is, it does not usually aim at a revolutionary overthrow of social or political structures.) In this way, the ascetic is an exemplar of a particular kind of humanity, but not necessarily representative of all of humanity. Ascetic experience is deliberately marginal. It never counsels that all people should abandon their jobs, their spouses, their possessions, and all forms of procreation.[139] Rather, it functions as a warning that all those apparently "normal" aspects of life can come to possess or control us and that instead we are to control them or at least use them rightly. The most important and standard human "cares" (food, clothing, sleep, safe and comfortable shelter, human companionship, sexuality) are suspended or at least significantly minimized.

In this way, the time, place, corporeality, affectivity, and relation to others within the ascetic experience all imply a "break" with the "regular" world of ordinary life. The ascetic experience is defined by a laying aside or suspension of "care" rather than its embrace. Heidegger argues that human existence is most fundamentally defined by *Sorge*, worry or concern (though usually translated as "care"), the constant preoccupation that marks our immersion in daily life.[140] Human existence usually drifts along submerged in the concerns of daily life, following the patterns provided by society, acting as others do, often unthinkingly and automatically. It is only when something uncanny (*unheimlich*, i.e., weird, creepy) occurs that we are ripped out of our complacency by no longer feeling at home (*Heim*) and coming face to face with our finitude. This amorphous angst or dread for our existence (as opposed to fear of a specific danger) confronts us with ourselves and enables us to grasp our own existence decisively (*entschlossen*) and to own it (achieving *Eigentlichkeit*, often misleadingly translated as authenticity).[141] We do so by existentially grasping and owning our finitude, the possibility of our nonexistence, thus living consciously toward death.[142] Heidegger contends that these describe the most fundamental structures of human existence (*Dasein*).

[139] In this regard, Lacoste is right that it is "optional" or "supererogatory," as he stresses repeatedly in his account.

[140] This is worked out most fully in chapter 6 of part I of Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (§39–§44).

[141] This is worked out most fully in chapter 2 of part II of Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*. On angst or dread, see §40.

[142] See chapter 1 of part II of Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (§46–§53).

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By contrast, the ascetic life is no longer a life defined by care, in all its senses of concern, worry, and self-preoccupation. At the same time, it constitutes being-toward-death in the most radical manner through a constant holding of death before oneself and embracing it fiercely. As in Heidegger, this confrontation with one's finitude and end is enabled through a loss or abandonment of the home and a confrontation of the self within the "un-homely" space of the desert. The ascetic fiercely embraces his or her death, practices it in a sort of anticipatory fashion, meets it with intensive decisiveness or resoluteness (*Entschlossenheit*), and yet does not do so for purposes of authenticity or self-appropriation (*Eigentlichkeit*), not in order to "own" (*eigen*) the self but rather to let go of it or, more precisely, to direct it toward God. The ascetic is neither "in the world" in Heidegger's sense nor out of it (as perhaps in Lacoste's sense), but the place where asceticism is practiced is that of emptiness and liminality, in which time is suspended or becomes artificial and space becomes all-consuming in its very absence and emptiness.

Heidegger argues that the call of conscience (*Gewissen*) calls us out of our unthinking immersion in daily life, our going along with the crowd, and confronts us with our own *Nichtigkeit*, which means not only annihilation in the sense of nonexistence, but also implies unimportance, insignificance, or smallness. Even if they do not speak of conscience in the same way as Heidegger does, the ascetics clearly strive for such a sense of *Nichtigkeit*, for a recognition of their own finitude and fallenness, and they oppose what they consider passions and temptations as resolutely as possible. The call that drives the ascetics to the desert is not first of all a divine revelation, but a deeply felt sense of their own unworthiness and the need for a fundamental change of attitude and disposition. They work on this with the most single-minded attention imaginable, suspending all care for the everyday in rigorous fashion, by removing themselves from ordinary ways of being in the world and being with others. Their solitary and decisive being-toward-death does not rely on some comfortable assurance of salvation that would make unnecessary the difficult task of existence and self-examination.

Despite its clear moves of abnegation, the ascetic experience is a refusal of passivity, in the sense of being ruled by the passions, in favor of supreme self-control coupled with intense humility and obedience, which, ironically, require a different kind of passivity and giving up of control. It refocuses or even eliminates many desires, affects, and thoughts, channeling them into the supreme desire for repentance – attendant with its affect of grieving – and into the constant redirecting of thoughts. Consciousness

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is examined by stilling it, rather than filling it. Pride, greed, vanity, and so forth are scrutinized as forms of consciousness, affect, and thought, seen to be produced by the confluence of thought and affect, entrenched by repeated practice that turns into habitual dispositions. These vices are exterminated in a similar "staged" and progressive effort at renunciation and retraining of mind and affect.

Ascetic experience thus manifests most fundamentally as an experience of rigorous withdrawal and deep contrition committed to a transformation of one's consciousness and actions via sustained practices of discernment. It exercises such transformation of the very patterns and structures of consciousness by persistent silence, vigilant attentiveness, and careful analysis. Ascetic experience is marked so profoundly by withdrawal from and negation of distractions and temptations because it seeks to focus in singular fashion on the development and health of a self that is seen to stand in fundamental tension with the present self of the ascetic, experienced as weak, deficient, and easily distracted. Ascetic experience has a far more profound sense of inadequacy and failure than perhaps any other form of religious experience, yet pursues an elevated goal of purity with unequaled determination. It is maybe not coincidental that language of the demonic and the angelic is so prevalent in this literature. Surely that is at least to some extent due to the time and place: Egypt seems to have had a particularly vivid sense of "spiritual powers."[143] But it also fits the extremes of ascetic experience: the fear of sinking into the demonic, the determination to purge it forcefully from one's own experience, actions, habits, and dispositions, and the elevated goal of living an "angelic" life already here on earth, not in terms of its heavenly satisfactions, but in terms of its purity and separation from earthly needs.[144]

Perhaps more than any other form of religious pursuit or at least in quite different fashion, asceticism is an intensely singular experience. Its emphasis on withdrawal from others and total focus on self-reformation

[143] The author of the *History of the Monks of Egypt* actually comments on this: "For at one time a gross and obscene idolatry abounded in Egypt, more than in any other nation. For the Egyptians worshipped dogs and apes and other animals, and considered garlic and onions and other common vegetables to be gods" (VIII.21; 73). He goes on to describe the various forms of such worship in some detail (VIII.21–23; 73).

[144] Describing asceticism as the angelic life is fairly common. Already the *History of the Monks of Egypt* mentions it in the prologue (P4; 49) and at various points in the text, as do many other texts. Imagery of paradise is also not uncommon. For a particular vivid example see "The Life of Onnophrius," *Journeying into God*, 172–87.

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entails eschewing many communal forms of religious manifestation. Although ascetic writers do sometimes speak of the importance of love for the neighbor and some performed charitable actions for others, this is not their primary occupation.[145] It is not excluded but also not highlighted or made of prime importance, as will be the case for other ways of living religion. While mystical experience can certainly be extremely singular, it does not feature the intense self-preoccupation of the ascetics. Mystical experience usually comes suddenly, surprisingly, as a gift, without any doing on the part of the recipient. Ascetic experience, instead, is focused almost exclusively on the effort and labor one must undertake – even when this work on the self is not physical – and very rarely speaks of fulfillment or reception of abundant gifts. While devotional experience is also often very individual and personal, it is so in much more arbitrary and looser fashion than ascetic experience, which pursues a rigorous schedule and imposes tight discipline on the self. And while much devotional experience capitalizes on generating religious feeling, ascetic experience seems positively allergic to it. Pathos of any sort tends to be distrusted. Even the authors who do not condemn it wholesale as evil counsel rigorous control of it. Emotions are to be purged, tightly controlled, and redirected. This is quite different from the role emotion or affect plays in liturgical, mystical, and devotional experience where both are significant, albeit in different ways.

Ascetic experience, then, can be clearly distinguished from other sorts of religious experience, although that will obviously have to be demonstrated far more fully once these manifestations have been examined more closely. Unlike liturgical or monastic experience – but like many forms of mystical or devotional experience – it is solitary or singular, to some extent even deliberately turned away from others. Unlike mystical or ritual experience it is defined by abnegation, poverty, and withdrawal, not by excess or abundance. Unlike devotional or compassionate experience it is clearly delineated by patterns and practices that in many ways must be rigorously followed; it has a religious

[145] Indeed, contrasts between the ascetic withdrawal to the desert and the charitable work of Christians who remain in villages and towns are drawn repeatedly. Sometimes this is done to teach the ascetic humility by pointing to the sanctity of a doctor or laborer, but a clear "division of labor" seems to obtain, even in the pursuit of sanctity. *The Life of Pachomius* explicitly assigns the work of care for the poor and sick to clergy and "faithful old men" in the towns. *Pachomian Koinonia*, vol. 1, trans. Armand Veilleux (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1980), 29. For a more detailed discussion of Pachomius, see Chapter 3.

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"blueprint," so to speak, in a way that these other manifestations do not. The role played by discernment and examination of consciousness in the ascetic experience is also extraordinary. Although other forms of practicing religion can include discernment – and many expressions of mysticism were under suspicion by various ecclesial authorities – they do not necessarily feature discernment and judgment as among the key characteristic features of their very exercise.

Ascetic experience deals perhaps more than any other kind with the human sense of failure and inadequacy. It develops a cure for it, an athletic program of bodily and mental discipline that trains the ascetic to transform patterns of thoughts, even memories and imaginations, to shape new dispositions. Liturgical experience also tries to shape dispositions, but it does so through the filling of memory and imagination rather than by emptying or purging them. Ascetic experience constitutes a disciplined, lifelong effort to overcome what is regarded as a fragile and sick self and to create a robust and healthy self. Such a reformed self is turned away from everything that might prove tempting or distracting and focused entirely on mastering itself. Language of divine revelation or of experiences of fulfillment or abundant love is basically absent in ascetic texts; they are almost singularly focused on admission of sinfulness and the need for self-control. Asceticism devises a religious solution for humans' sense of their own failures and inadequacies, an extreme way of examining them and coping with them.

In this regard there are certainly parallels between the religious practice of asceticism and other contemporary ascetic practices that do not occur in the context of any particular religion. For example, many dietary regimens have uncanny parallels to ascetic practices, although more fully focused on the body and perhaps less explicitly on interior dispositions.[146] Some therapies attempting to address addictive forms of behavior also display ascetic features. Not surprisingly, the intense forms of discipline practiced by athletes often take semi-ascetic forms. One might say that these are family resemblances that show the broader human need for self-examination, self-control, and self-discipline that are channeled within asceticism in a particularly religious context and manner. Dieting and sports aim at health of the body in a way similar to how religious asceticism aims at health

[146] Some do refer to them, for example by trying to address perceptions of the self or emotional difficulties that might be linked to obesity. Burton attributes quasi-religious ascetic elements to several contemporary phenomena, such as wellness culture and techno-utopianism, albeit for self-optimization rather than renunciation. Burton, *Strange Rites*, 92, 97, 198.

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of the whole person through a single-minded focus on training and self-discipline. Asceticism also recognizes – in a way that many diet fads or self-help literature, for example, do not, but organizations like Alcoholics Anonymous do – that such intense work on oneself and a denial of certain desires for the cultivation of new habits require guidance and support, that they are almost impossible to accomplish on one's own. At the same time such work does require a removal of the self from temptations, or even from communities or individuals that will draw one back into the attitude and practices one is seeking to eliminate.[147] That is not to say that there is nothing distinctive about religious forms of asceticism or, among them, Christian asceticism, but it is to acknowledge that ascetic experience addresses something that matters to the human condition, that is shared by human experiences more broadly. Asceticism is unique in the particular concrete ways in which it approaches and engages this broader human characteristic, but it is also exemplary of it and has connections with other ways of pursuing similar needs, desires, and attitudes.

Many individuals or groups of people in various cultures have experienced and expressed such needs and pursued such experiences, in both religious and nonreligious ways. Many Asian forms of religious or spiritual expression – such as Jainism, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism, and various forms of Buddhism and Hinduism – have strongly ascetic elements, involving fasting, simple dress, extensive practices of meditation, removal from ordinary ways of living, sometimes even forms of self-mutilation. It would be interesting to explore how the patterns of Christian asceticism uncovered in this chapter "fit" ascetic experiences in other religious traditions. Do Sikh or Jain forms of asceticism, for example, manifest in similar ways? A much fuller examination would be needed to give a substantive response, but there are certainly many at least superficial parallels, such as the renunciation of ordinary life, the extensive practices of attention and meditation, and an exorbitant focus on one's own spiritual pursuits that paradoxically seems aimed at denying or minimizing the self. Whether such parallels hold beneath the surface would have to be shown through careful and detailed studies.[148] Clark finds it "dubious

[147] This may well be one of the central insights of groups like Alcoholics Anonymous: the need for communal support, mentorship, cultivation of new forms of self-control, and removal from tempting people and situations.

[148] For example, Ute Piertruschka explores ways in which the Christian desert apophthegmata were appropriated by some Sufi ascetics in her "The Monk as Storyteller? On the Transmission of the *Apophthegmata Patrum* among Muslim Ascetics in Basra," in Harvey, *Wisdom on the Move*, 166–84.

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that the study of early Christian renunciation locates an 'essence' of asceticism that holds cross-culturally."[149] While one might not be able to "locate" such an "essence," the chapter has sought to demonstrate shared crucial features – withdrawal, vigilance, self-renunciation – in Christian manifestations of ascetic experience that allow it to emerge as a particular kind of living religion, one that is different in important ways from other manners of living religion while also maintaining some continuity with them.

[149] Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, 15.

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