

A Theory of the Social Function of Asceticism

Richard Valantasis

Over the course of the past seventy years or more, theorists in the social sciences and the humanities have explored asceticism as a vital component of sociology, social history, and hermeneutics; while historians have been exploring the role of asceticism and the place of ascetics in the societies of late antiquity and the western Middle Ages. The historical perspective has focused on the function of asceticism and the ascetic within the dominant social context, while the attention of the theorists has focused on it as an economic, social, political, and interpretative instrument within the larger cultural domain. Although at first glance the distinction seems minor, there is in fact a great difference in approach: the theorists understand asceticism as a large and pervasive cultural system; while the historians view asceticism as specific religious practices relating to social withdrawal, restriction of food, regulation of sexuality, and the formation of religious community. The larger cultural systems of the ascetical theorists locate asceticism at the center of cultural, social, and individual engagement in every sphere of cultural expression; the particular religious practices of the historian locate asceticism only in the religious or philosophical arenas.

My goal in this paper is to present the ascetical theories of the three primary ascetical theorists of this century (Max Weber, Michel Foucault, and Geoffrey Harpham) and to develop a theory of asceticism within which the social function of asceticism may be described. The three theorists presented here represent a wide diversity of interests, from economic history and the sociology of religion to social history and literary theory. Although each succeeding theorist has studied the work of the previous ones, the perspective on asceticism and the academic discourses of each has been significantly different. My own theory, presented below, will attempt to build on the contributions of each of these. I hope, thereby, to bridge the gap between ascetical theory and historical study.

Weber, Foucault, and Harpham

Max Weber's theory of asceticism, developed early in this century, treats asceticism as part of sociological theory and the history of economics. Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*¹ developed the theory of innerworldly asceticism

as a means of understanding the emergence of capitalism. This initial exploration of asceticism explored the relationship between the development of the work force; the valuation of wealth and material good in the Protestant Reformation; the Protestant concept of a vocation to live in the world (as opposed to those Catholic monks who withdrew from the world); and the doctrine of predestination, which provided the opportunity for right conduct of life to prove that one is saved. In this economic study, Weber treats asceticism primarily as “methodically controlled and supervised” conduct (p. 132). Weber maintains that, for Protestants, this controlled conduct was directed specifically to living in the world, a world that consisted of daily living as the focus of Christian life and vocation. Asceticism, the controlled conduct, undertook, then, to remodel the world, so that Protestant ideals would be able to be achieved within it. The heart of the argument revolves about the remaking of the economic world through the development of theological principles that have been worked out in particular patterns of behavior. The asceticism of working in the world creates the work force; the kind of subjectivity necessary for the work force to function; and the theological justification for the sort of lifestyle to be lived.

Weber again addresses the theory of asceticism in his *Sociology of Religion*.² Under the heading of paths to salvation, Weber links three elements of asceticism: the particular path of salvation; particular human conduct; and the means of training in that conduct. Moving from economics to the theory of the sociology of religion, Weber locates the methodically controlled behavior specifically within the teleological path toward salvation. The particular goal of salvation, the manner of achieving sanctification, emerges from a psychic and physical regimen or discipline aimed toward controlling and creating within a person an antiinstinctual response, subordinated to the religious goal. Asceticism, here, is defined as “a methodical procedure for achieving religious salvation” (p. 164). He identifies asceticism as either world-rejecting (that is, salvation achieved through withdrawal from the world) or innerworldly (that is, salvation achieved through participation in the world while rejecting the world’s institutions).

There is much about Weber’s theories that is outmoded—his propensity for polarities, for example, between asceticism and mysticism, and between innerworldly and world-rejecting. Yet they establish that asceticism has wider economic and political implications; that behaviors are at the heart of ascetical activity; that those behaviors are strongly regulated and directed toward specific goals; and that ascetic behaviors set out ways of relating to other people (as, for example, by creating a work force). The link, including the economic implications and orientations toward the world, of the three elements—identified as paths of salvation, human conduct, and the means of training in that conduct—hits at the heart of ascetical theory.

Michel Foucault explores the place of asceticism in the context of ethical formation. In an interview³ in which he explained the project of his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault distinguished four aspects of what he called “the relationship to oneself”: (1) the ethical substance (that is, the part of oneself that concerns moral conduct, the material with which ethics works); (2) the mode of subjection (that is, the mode that encourages or spurs people on to relate to their moral obligations,

such as revelation or divine law); (3) asceticism, or self-forming activity (that is, the changes that one makes to oneself in order to become an ethical subject); and (4) the *telos*, or goal (that is, the end toward which the ethics moves, the end result of ethical formation). Although Foucault identifies asceticism as one aspect of this process of ethical formation, he also views asceticism as the heart of the entire process of formation:

No technique, no professional skill can be acquired without exercise; neither can one learn the art of living, the *technē tou biou*, without an *askēsis* which must be taken as a training of oneself by oneself: this was one of the traditional principles to which the Pythagoreans, the Socratics, the Cynics had for a long time attributed great importance. *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, p. 364

In the second volume⁴ of his *History of Sexuality*, entitled *The Use of Pleasure*, he further develops this perspective on asceticism. It is here that Foucault distinguished (p. 26) between the set of rules of moral conduct itself; the evaluation of the person based upon those rules; and the systems of formation that enable one to be a subject acting according to those rules. These different ways of constructing oneself as a subject of moral action differ according to the *telos* or the goal of the moral life that is the result of moral formation. Foucault explains:

There is no specific moral action that does not refer to a unified moral conduct; no moral conduct that does not call for the forming of oneself as an ethical subject; and no forming of the ethical subject without “modes of subjectivation” and “ascetics” or “practices of the self” that supports them. *History of Sexuality*, vol. 2, p. 28

Foucault’s system, then, proposes a system of formation that involves a goal of life encapsulated in a system of behavior, which requires formation through processes of subjectivation and ascetic practices.

Geoffrey Harpham develops a theory of asceticism in relation to contemporary structuralists, poststructuralists, and postmodern theories of literary criticism and in conversation with Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and other theorists of contemporary literary criticism. In his recent book, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism*,⁵ he enlarges the arena of ascetical studies by exploring the relationship of asceticism and culture. Harpham develops the theory of asceticism as “the ‘cultural’ element in culture; it makes culture comparable, and is therefore one way of describing the common feature that permits communication or understanding between cultures.”⁶ He views asceticism as “the fundamental operating ground on which the particular culture is overlaid.”⁷ Harpham’s work directs attention from the merely descriptive—whether of the literary strategies or of the ascetic’s behavior—to the systems invoked to give meaning and to enable communication within a given culture. Harpham argues that asceticism is related to culture because asceticism is that which enables communication in a culture. He likens asceticism to the MS-DOS that enables programs to run on a computer: asceticism is the fundamental operating ground upon which culture is laid and because of which culture can function. Like Foucault, Harpham emphasizes the ethical nature of culture itself, arguing that there is an inherent level of self-denial necessary for a person to live within a culture so that the resistance to

appetites and desires is at the heart of cultural integration and functioning. Asceticism, moreover, structures oppositions without collapsing them so that asceticism raises the issue of culture by creating the opposite, the anticulture. Asceticism, therefore, is always ambivalent, compromising the polarities it establishes.

Harpham defines asceticism in a tight sense as the asceticism of early Christianity, the historical ideology of a specific period, and in a loose sense as "any act of self-denial undertaken as a strategy of empowerment or gratification." Central, therefore, to any ascetical agenda is resistance. Resistance is a structural part of desire itself, not imposed from outside it; and desire is always resisted from within, since without resistance there is no desire.

A Theory of Asceticism

My own theory of asceticism begins with the important factor that Harpham's orientation omits. He correctly asserts that the basis of ascetical activity is the cultural foundations that lie behind the particularities of a given culture, like MS-DOS to a particular computer program.⁸ However, the ascetical program relates not to the interaction of the two systems (deep cultural structure and cultural expression) but to the integration of an individual person, and of groups of people, into the culture itself. At the center of ascetical activity is a self who, through behavioral changes, seeks to become a different person, a new self; to become a different person in new relationships; and to become a different person in a new society that forms a new culture. As this new self emerges (in relationship to itself, to others, to society, to the world) it masters the behaviors that enable it at once to deconstruct the old self and to construct the new. Asceticism, then, constructs both the old and the reformed self and the cultures in which these selves function: asceticism asserts the subject of behavioral change and transformation, while constructing and reconstructing the environment in which that subjectivity functions.

The relationship of this subjectivity to environment is the relationship of individual to culture. Asceticism links the two by enabling the integration of individual into culture. Through asceticism, integration into a culture occurs at every level of human existence: consciously and unconsciously; voluntarily and involuntarily; somatic and mental; emotional and intellectual; religious and secular. This means that asceticism functions as a system of cultural formation; it orients the person or group of people to the immediate cultural environment and to the unexpressed, but present, systems that underlie it. Until a person or a group of people is equipped or empowered to perform within a culture, the culture remains an esoteric system into which the person or group has not been initiated. Asceticism initiates a person or group into the cultural systems that enable communication; that equip the person or group for productive living within the culture; and that empower them to live within the culture. As the primary system of formation within a culture, asceticism unlocks the otherwise closed or invisible systems of communication and rhetorical production in a culture, and hence intersects all the operative systems: larger cultural systems, social systems, and individual psychological systems.

A preliminary definition of asceticism may be advanced. Asceticism may be defined as performances designed to inaugurate an alternative culture, to enable different social relations, and to create a new identity. This definition hangs on four elements: performances, culture, relationships, and subjectivity. I will explore each one in turn.

Performances

It is not difficult to notice from the history of asceticism that it involves the performance of certain acts: fasting, withdrawal from society, silence, physical prayer, and manual labor, to name just a few. These acts function as signifiers in a semiotic system, in that they carry meaning with the context of their performance: a particular performance such as fasting bears no inherent and self-evident meaning except that which is assigned it in the system.

The method of ascetical training resembles the workshop and rehearsal method for acquiring competence in theatrical performance. Richard Schechner describes this method in this way: "The task of the workshop is to deconstruct the ready-mades of individual behavior, texts, and cultural artifacts into strips of malleable behavior material; the work of the rehearsal is to reconstruct them into a new, integral system: a performance."⁹ The interiorizing and naturalizing of behavior, emotions, and every cultural expression through the deconstructive and reconstructive process, anterior to a convincing performance, emerges from the patterning of the theatrical role in its world, with its peculiar systems, relationships, and psychology. The rigorous and systematic repatterning eventually enables the actor to enter and to be the character. Asceticism, with its goal of creating new persons through patterning of behavior, operates in a similar fashion. By the systematic training and retraining, the ascetic becomes a different person molded to live in a different culture, trained to relate to people in a different manner, psychologically motivated to live a different life. Through these performances, the ascetic, like the performer who becomes able to "experience as actual" anything imaginable,¹⁰ can experience the goal of ascetical life as the transformed life.

These performances consist of learned and repeated activity and behaviors: the ascetic learns the techniques of asceticism by repeated activity, repeated prayer, a consistently affirmed withdrawal, continuous silence, repeated physical acts of fasting, sleep deprivation, and manual labor. As these activities and behaviors are repeated, the ascetic masters them. This means that the activities and behaviors that are performed are eminently repeatable; and that they can be learned, mastered, and repeated until the ascetic achieves a certain state or quality of life. In their repetition, these acts take on the appearance of verisimilitude, they become natural activities for the monk as perceived within the ascetic culture. The verisimilitude points toward the successful creation of a larger frame of reference and of meaning that supports the ascetic manner of living.

These performances, therefore, include an element of intentionality: the behaviors intend more than mere repetition and imitation of behavior; the behaviors displace attention from themselves to a larger referential arena, and their purpose relates at once to an alternative culture and to the potential of a new subjectivity.

Culture

Clifford Geertz explains that “Culture is the fabric of meaning in terms of which human beings interpret their experience and guide their action” and that culture is “an ordered system of meaning and of symbols in terms of which social interaction takes place.”¹¹ Negatively described, asceticism breaks down the dominant culture through performances that aim toward establishing a counter-cultural or alternative cultural milieu. Positively described, the ascetic, like an actor learning to be a character in a play, lives in a new culture created through the careful repatterning of basic behaviors and relations.

The behavior shifts the center of the culture and creates an alternative culture around this new center. The performances force the construction of a culture in which such new behavior is normative. The heavy emphasis on the location of asceticism (withdrawal, monastery, desert, pilgrimage, pillar) articulates and creates the cultural occasion for a change in cultural venue. This new culture becomes the normal or normative or true culture for those whose performance initiates them into it.

It is not necessary that the alternative culture formed through asceticism oppose the dominant culture. The counter-cultural orientation need not indicate hostility or mutual exclusion. Cultures may coinhere, and an ascetic may participate in a number of different cultures simultaneously.

Moreover, communities may, like monasteries, create a new culture without individual members of that community knowing it. The intentionality does not always rest on the individual body but may reside with the corporate body.

Relationships

Culture defines the potential, the larger systems upon which humans can call in their living: culture becomes concrete at the level of social relationships. Within this broader cultural context, Geertz explains, there are the “actually existing network of social relations” and “the ongoing process of interactive behavior.” Behavior invokes the systems laid out in the culture, while the culture makes available to an individual the parameters, direction, and action of social interaction. “Culture is the fabric of meaning in terms of which human beings interpret their experience and guide their action; social structure is the form that action takes.”¹² The new culture is built upon two correlative elements—new social arrangements and new subjects capable of living in the culture. Cultures enable (or prohibit) certain kinds of social structures. A new culture, therefore, must define new and different ways of relating in order to differentiate itself from other cultures and other ways of relating.

Subjectivity

The goal of ascetic performance finds its fullest expression in the articulation and construction of a new subjectivity. Both performance and culture open potential space for the creation of an alternative or new subject.

The new subjectivity is the *skopos* (guardian) that calls for the behavior and the cultural milieu. There is an element of the intentional, the deliberate, the articulation

of a new goal and a new understanding of subjectivity, toward which the person moves. This teleological element is crucial and central to understanding asceticism.

The ascetic subjectivity is multivalent and multicentered in that it bears by nature at least a twoway centeredness (the old person and the ascetically reconstructed person) and possibly more, since people may participate in a number of different coinherent cultures. The various locations of the ascetic subject (social/political, geographical, philosophical, psychic) articulate or represent other centers of the ascetic subject—centers from which the entire new culture may be organized. Therefore, the ascetical location duplicates the multivalency of the emerging subject of ascetical activity.

The Social Function of Asceticism

Within this definition, asceticism performs four major social functions. First, asceticism enables the person to function within the re-envisioned or re-created world. Through ritual, new social relations, different articulations of self and body, and through a variety of psychological transformations, the ascetic learns to live within another world. To “live as an angel,”—the goal that our Orthodox monks have set for themselves—means that through their asceticism monks are enabled to function “as angels” from the beginning of their ascetical activity, or at least to begin to know what it means to “live as angels.” Asceticism allows this life on the basis of a re-envisioned world.

Second, since so much of the ascetic culture relies upon narrative, biography, demonic and angelic psychology, as well as systems of theological anthropology and soteriology, asceticism provides the method for translating these theoretical and strategic concepts into patterns of behavior. The metaphoric presentation of the transfiguration of Antony in Athanasius’s *Vita Antonii*, for example, does not explain how one goes about imitating Antony in order for the self to be transfigured. Asceticism patterns such theories and images into purposeful and systematic practices whose goal can be incrementally achieved. After a similar regimen of fasting, withdrawal, meditation, and conflict with demons, the ascetic may achieve the same goal as Antony, or, more precisely, the ascetic may achieve that state which a community understands as a correlative state defined by the literary presentation of Antony’s life. Asceticism patterns and makes concrete such distant phenomena into purposeful behavioral patterns.

Third, the re-envisioning of the world and of human life in it requires intensive perceptual transformation. In order to achieve a different state, as visualized or pictorialized by a religion, there must be at the most basic perceptual level of the senses, and of perceptions and experience, a form of retraining geared toward the re-envisioned world. Asceticism provides the means for this retraining. It is at the level of ascetical performance that the ascetic experiences and perceives the world differently. The novice who enters a monastery must learn at the outset the differences between, for example, “eating in the world” and “eating in the monastery”:

both relate to food, but the signification of the food and its eating will differ, in referent and in content, from cultural domain to cultural domain. At this most basic level, asceticism retrains the senses and perceptions of the ascetic, a retraining based upon the theological culture and its articulated goals.

Fourth, asceticism provides the means through which other domains of knowledge and understanding can be incorporated into the re-envisioned world. Scientific, historical, doctrinal, sectarian, and other kinds of issues are translated through asceticism into the other conception of the world. A good example of this is the patristic genre of the *Hexameron*,¹³ a theological exposition of the days of creation, which uses the ascetical activity of exegesis to incorporate coeval scientific and medical information into the religious culture. Asceticism functions as a prism through which the light of other domains of knowledge are refracted into a new cultural environment. This refraction gives the old knowledge a new interpretative environment so that the context provides the frame of reference for understanding and meaning.

Asceticism operates through the goals that it sets up for organizing human mentation and behavior.¹⁴ By positing a goal (or goals) toward which the individual or group is to progress as the highest good, or the more perfect state, or the most absorbed by the sacred, asceticism lays out the attaining of that goal through concrete patterning of behavior. Because asceticism operates at the level of behavior, the behavior itself often becomes the focus of attention, yet the goal is generally not known in the specific behavior, but in the state or experience the behavior is designed to effect. The goal, however, expresses the particular culture's own peculiar systems; the ascetical practices systematize the procedure for movement into the culture; and the individual finds fulfillment and nurture in the integration into the highest aspiration expressed in the goal.

My definition of asceticism, then, locates the function of asceticism in the cultural, social, and psychological frames of a culture and its counter-cultures. Asceticism initiates the practitioner into the new culture, and initiates the practitioner into the social and psychological systems that activate the culture. This theory of asceticism points our historical study of religious asceticism toward the exploration of the larger cultural complex of meanings, relationships, and subjectivities that construct the ascetic and the ascetic's performances.

NOTES

1. The full reference for this is: Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: Unwyn Hyman, 1930).
2. Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Ephraim Fishcoff [originally published in Germany by J.C.B. Mohr, 1922] (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963).
3. Michel Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow [originally published in Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, eds., *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983)] (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984).
4. Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, vol. 2, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1985).

5. Geoffrey Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
6. Ibid., p. xi.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. "Magnitudes of Performance," in *The Anthropology of Experience*, eds. Victor W. Turner and Edward M. Bruner (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), p. 345.
10. Schechner, "Magnitudes of Performance," p. 363.
11. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 144.
12. Ibid.
13. Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, and Ambrose of Milan have written such expositions of the first six days of creation in *The Book of Genesis*.
14. Michel Foucault, *Care of the Self*, vol. 3, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), pp. 64–68.

Psychophysiological and Comparative Analysis of Ascetico-Meditational Discipline: Toward a New Theory of Asceticism

William C. Bushell

In this paper I describe a number of the major psychophysiological enhancements that accompany the practice, particularly the long-term practice, of asceticism and meditation (including prayer, contemplation, etc.), with special reference to contemporary Ethiopian Orthodox Christian asceticism and to the desert Christian movement of the early centuries CE. The present description and explanation of ascetic and meditational practice (the ascetico-meditational regimen) constitutes a new theory of the functions of asceticism and altered states of consciousness (ASCs), a theory that is developed in greater depth elsewhere.¹

In this same source I also present the first study ever undertaken of the living tradition of Ethiopian eremitic asceticism, the research for which was conducted by me in Ethiopia over the course of the period 1988–1991. Ethiopia, as is not at all well known, possesses the last remaining large-scale tradition of Christian eremitic asceticism in the world. Thousands of men and women practice rigorous ascetico-meditational discipline throughout the mountain caves (much of Ethiopia exists on an extensive highland plateau), forests, deserts, and lake islands of present-day Ethiopia. Owing to a relative absence of modernization and westernization, which, in turn, is due in part to its relative geographical and geological inaccessibility, the tradition of eremitic asceticism, which became established in this country beginning at the latest in the fourth century CE, remains to this day not only extraordinarily robust but also strikingly pristine. The contemporary forms of eremitic ascetic Christianity that survive in robust and pristine form in Ethiopia are direct descendants of the desert Christian movement of Egypt, Palestine, and Syria (third and fourth centuries onward), and in a sense preserve a kind of “window” on these traditions. However, it is important to emphasize that the genius of Ethiopian Christianity has been to preserve and continue the authentic, virtuoso eremitic traditions that have all but disappeared from most other parts of the Christian world; geographical determinism is only part of the reason for this phenomenon of preservation.

I have organized the following analysis of Christian eremitic asceticism around

some key points presented by one of the premier interpreters of early Christian asceticism, Peter Brown. However, my analysis of ascetico-meditational phenomena is based on relevant data from various branches of psychophysiological and medical research, as well as on a theoretical orientation that looks at ascetico-meditational discipline as a widespread human phenomenon, and is therefore cross-cultural and comparative.

A key concept in what follows is Weber's notion of the "ideal type": as an anthropologist who conducts field research, I am well aware of the variations in behaviors that are always found "on the ground," as the anthropological term has it. Nevertheless, although people may engage in ascetico-meditational behaviors for an almost infinite variety of reasons, I believe the following analysis will demonstrate that certain specific functions, "outcomes," provide the best (functional) explanation for the *raison d'être* of these practices.

Distilling a great deal of early Christian ascetic literature, Brown explains the beliefs of these ascetics concerning the potential outcome of persistence in the rigorously observed, long-term ascetico-meditational régime. After issuing the warning that "it takes some effort of the modern imagination to recapture this aspect of the ascetic life," he explains:

The ascetics of late antiquity tended to view the human body as an "autarkic" system. In ideal conditions it was thought capable of running on its own "heat"; it would need only enough nourishment to keep that heat alive. In its "natural" state—a state with which the ascetics tended to identify the bodies of Adam and Eve—the body had acted like a finely tuned engine, capable of "idling" indefinitely.²

It was "their lust for physical food" in fact, that "[destroyed . . .] the perfect physical equilibrium with which they [Adam and Eve] had first been created"; this perfect physical equilibrium had revealed a "frankly physical exuberance,"³ moreover.

In fact, and contrary to common belief—including that of many modern medically trained persons—the Desert Fathers' beliefs regarding fasting, radical restriction of food intake, and nutrition and energy are consistent with a large body of contemporary experimental research, research that demonstrates that fasting and significant reductions in caloric intake (dietary restriction) actually may result in a broad spectrum of psychophysiological enhancements, including just those touted by the ascetic tradition.

Ascetic fasting or restriction of food intake, if done properly,⁴ would result in outcomes consistent with the strikingly salutary principles of scientifically investigated fasting and what researchers have called dietary restriction, in which the constellation of potential outcomes includes: the disappearance of the pain, discomfort, and dysphoria of hunger, and their replacement with feelings of well-being, tranquillity, and even euphoria;⁵ "(enhanced) efficiency of food utilization,"⁶ as evinced by indices of body weight, nutritional status, and activity or energy;⁷ and even general enhancement of health, as evinced by decreases in illness and retardation of aging.⁸

According to a number of recent medical (experimental) studies and case reports, the subjective feeling of hunger may, in fact, disappear or become greatly