# Virtue and Asceticism

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**Abstract**
Although one can find a robust philosophical tradition supporting asceticism in the West, from ancient Greece to at least early modernity, very little attention has been paid to what motivated this broad support. Instead, following criticism from figures such as Hume, Voltaire, Bentham, and Nietzsche, asceticism has been largely disregarded as either eccentric or uniquely religious. In this paper, I provide what I take to be the core moral argument that motivated many philosophical ascetics. In brief, acts of deliberate self-denial are practice in an important part of acting ethically and are thus practically rational as a means to acquiring virtue. And if this argument has been a core motivation for asceticism in the West then arguably philosophical ascetics have been on to something, especially given contemporary empirical research on self-control.

In the *Phaedo*, Plato suggests that the life of the true philosopher involves a program of rigorous asceticism, and one can find a broad commitment to character-building practices of deliberate self-denial among philosophers up to the period of early modernity. The collective criticisms of Hume, Voltaire, Bentham, and Nietzsche have however appeared to put an end to this philosophical tradition (with a few exceptions), sufficiently so that little contemporary attention is paid to why so many earlier philosophers advocated for it. Despite its peculiarity, advocacy of asceticism among philosophers is historically interesting, both given the prominence of its historical supporters and the relative paucity of explicit arguments in its favor. In this paper, I seek to fill in the historical gap by highlighting an argument that likely motivated its defenders. But this argument is of more than merely historical interest. For, as I seek to show, contemporary research on self-control supports philosophical reflections favoring ascetical practices. For this reason, ascetical practices should remain relevant to contemporary philosophy, particularly in the field of ethics.

The plan of the paper is as follows. I will first provide a brief overview of the history of philosophical asceticism, including some of its central defenders and detractors. I will then outline an argument that is plausibly thought to have motivated asceticism's defenders, though only extant in highly abbreviated forms. Finally, I will turn to provide that argument a contemporary defense against objections.

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## 1. Historical Background

To focus just on the philosophical developments of the West, a rigorously ascetical tradition was attributed to Pythagoras and his school, which was highly influential among ancient Greeks through late Antique thinkers, such as Porphyry and Iamblichus. Pythagoras is said to have imposed 'trials of the most varied nature, punishments, and restraints by fire and sword for innate intemperance' and demanded silence of applicants to his school for *five years* before admittance, among other tests.[1] Pythagoras may have been influenced here through his acquaintance with an earlier ascetic philosopher, Epimenides of Knossos (DL VIII 3; DL I 109–115). Empedocles personifies fasting as a god, Nestis, and treats her as one of the four root causes of all things (DK21B6).

The very word 'asceticism' as it is understood today may well have first been introduced by Democritus, when he uses the term to designate the training that leads to virtue (DK55B242). Protagorus uses it in a similar sense (DK74B3), whereas previously askêsis was used to refer to training or exercise broadly.[2] In the *Phaedo* (67e8), among other places, Plato espouses ascetical practices as essential to the life of the true philosopher, who is 'in every way hostile to the body'.[3] In the *Nichomachean Ethics* (1109b8–12), Aristotle counsels 'we must beware above all of pleasure and its sources' and react to it 'as the elders reacted to Helen', namely by sending it away 'on each occasion'. If we do that, he suggests, 'we shall be less in error'.[4]

[1] David Fideler (ed.) *The Pythagorean Sourcebook and Library*, trans. Kenneth Sylvan Guthrie (Grand Rapids: Phanes Press, 1987), 73–75.

[2] Joseph Swain, 'The Hellenic Origins of Christian Asceticism' (Columbia University, 1916), 47.

[3] Translation from Plato, *Plato: Euthyphro. Apology. Crito. Phaedo. Phaedrus*, trans. Harold North Fowler, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), see also 83b5-7, *Republic* 404a, 518e, 536b2, *Philebus* 33b, and *Protagoras* 323d, cf. Travis Butler, 'A Riveting Argument in Favor of Asceticism in the Phaedo', *History of Philosophy Quarterly* **29**.2 (2012): 103–23; David Ebrey, 'The Asceticism of the Phaedo: Pleasure, Purification, and the Soul's Proper Activity', *Archiv Für Geschichte Der Philosophie* **99**.1 (2017): 1–30; John M. Cooper, *Pursuits of Wisdom: Six Ways of Life in Ancient Philosophy from Socrates to Plotinus* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2013), 60–69.

[4] *Nichomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1999), 29. These comments notwithstanding, Aristotle's positive comments about pleasure elsewhere make an interpretation



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The Cynics broadly advocated for ascetical practices as later did the Stoics. Diogenes of Sinope, for instance, is said to have taught that proper, strenuous training allows one to 'derive more pleasure from despising pleasure than from the pleasures themselves' and 'would adduce indisputable evidence to show how easily from gymnastic training we arrive at virtue' (DL VI 70–71). Seneca advises 'the body should be treated more rigorously, that it may not be disobedient to the mind' (Epistles 8:5).[5] Epictetus provides an extended discussion of the need for practice in the virtues, and askêsis is a prominent theme in the *Discourses*.[6] Although not as ascetic as his contemporaries, Epicurus advocated a simple lifestyle devoid of extravagant pleasures.

Given the shared religious tradition advocating for asceticism (such as the eremitical practices of figures such as Simeon Stylites and other desert fathers), it should go almost without saying that Christian philosophers from late antiquity through early modernity tended to share a positive outlook on many practices involving self-denial (to say nothing of the views of Jewish and Islamic philosophers of that period).[7] Kant had a well-known disposition toward asceticism (leading to a dispute with Schiller) while Schopenhauer was explicit in his philosophical advocacy of self-abnegation, supplying one of the more extended arguments favoring asceticism among its modern philosophical defenders.[8] William James too plainly advocates for ascetical practices in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (lectures XI–XV). Some more contemporary philosophers, such as Ludwig

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of his attitude toward deliberate acts of self-denial for the sake of building character difficult. For an overview, see Richard Kraut, 'Aristotle's Ethics', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (ed.) Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2017 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2017), sec. 8, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/aristotle-ethics/. At the same time, a commitment to the view that pleasure plays a central role in human flourishing should not be taken as *prima facie* inconsistent with approbation of asceticism, as Aquinas's similar endorsement of pleasure should suggest (e.g. Summa Theologica I–II, Q.34, a.1–4).

[5] Translation in *Seneca*, trans. Richard M. Gummere, vol. 4 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1917), 39. Yet for Seneca, the mean in these matters involves an unaffected austerity (cf. Epistles 5:5).

[6] See especially *Discourses* 3.12. I thank Jacob Klein for this reference.

[7] For a representative view, see Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II–II, Q.88, a.2 ad3.

[8] *The World as Will and Representation, Vol. 1*, trans. E.F.J. Payne, Reprint edition (New York: Dover Publications, 1966), 391–92.



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Wittgenstein, Bertrand Russell, and Albert Camus, appear to have self-consciously embraced an ascetic lifestyle without arguing in favor of it at any length.[9] Michel Foucault is an exception. For Foucault explicitly defends ascetical practices as an important part of an individual's self-creation (or 'aesthetics of the self') and sees ancient Greek asceticism as representing a positive expression of the search for a beautiful mode of life.[10]

What motivated such a diverse philosophical group to converge upon the rationality of ascetical practices? Certainly individual philosophers had unique motivations and varied commitments to practices involving deliberate self-denial arising from their broader views. Plato, for instance, thought negatively about the world of sense-experience, thereby motivating a host of practices that involve detachment or denial of it. But such a motivation does little to explain Aristotle's apparent dismissal of pleasure or Pythagorean asceticism, for that matter. Similarly, Schopenhauer saw in attitudes of asceticism an important strategy for avoiding the suffering that comes from exercises of the will, but few other philosophical advocates of asceticism shared Schopenhauer's views on the nature of suffering. Is there a common motivation?

[9] Regarding Wittgenstein, see for instance William J. Deangelis, *Ludwig Wittgenstein - A Cultural Point of View* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 162, for Russell see Philip Ironside, *The Social and Political Thought of Bertrand Russell: The Development of an Aristocratic Liberalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 41 – though Russell changed his mind on this later in life. And for Camus, Olivier Todd, *Albert Camus: A Life*, trans. Benjamin Ivry (New York: Knopf, 1997), 187–88. It seems most probable that Kurt Gödel's well-known asceticism was the result of a mental disorder, cf. Hao Wang, *Reflections on Kurt Gödel* (Cambridge, Mass.: Bradford Books, 1990), 15, particularly as he died of malnutrition.

[10] See, among others Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* (ed.) Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Penguin Press, 1997), 282; Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault* (ed.) Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988); Alice Ramos, 'Technologies of the Self: Truth, Asceticism, and Autonomy', *Bulletin de La Société Américaine de Philosophie de Langue Française* **6**.1/2 (April 1, 1994): 20–29; Bob Robinson, 'Foucault, Michel: Ethics', Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2011, http://www.iep.utm.edu/fouc-eth/#SH3c. However, despite defending asceticism, Foucault neglects to identify the reason why ascetical practices lead to self-mastery, as this paper seeks to do.



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According to Nietzsche, there is. In the absence of much explicit argument for asceticism among its defenders, Nietzsche suggests that philosophers began engaging in these practices to promote the discipline – endowing it with an otherworldly appearance, mimicking religion.[11] And this was an effective promotion, for Nietzsche, because the 'ascetic ideal' that philosophers began to embody intimates a meaning in suffering that humanity otherwise lacked.[12] But this explanation, construed broadly as the chief reason why asceticism became prominent among philosophers, is problematic on several fronts; among them, advocates of asceticism were not wholly silent on the rationale for deliberate self-denial. Instead, most provided ostensibly reasoned, albeit highly abbreviated, considerations in its favor.[13] The most common element in these arguments is the claim that acts of deliberate self-denial are useful ways of gaining mastery over oneself, more particularly, over impulses or involuntary desires that one considers to be irrational, so as to pursue virtue. In a moment, I will turn this consideration into a more complete argument, but first we must consider asceticism's main critics.

[11] Nietzsche seems to have thought that this was a necessary condition for the survival of the philosophical enterprise, thus 'for the longest time philosophy would not have been possible at all on earth without ascetic wraps and cloak, without an ascetic self-misunderstanding' in *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1989), 115–16. Taken at face value, this empirical claim is supported by scant historical or sociological analysis. It is moreover *prima facie* implausible since the philosophers in question have been perfectly willing to stand against other countervailing social pressures, regardless of the long-term consequences for the social success of philosophy.

[12] Bernd Magnus, 'Asceticism and Eternal Recurrence: A Bridge Too Far', *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* **37**, Supplement (March 1, 1999): 94–95.

[13] Nietzsche may have understood these considerations to be rationalizations driven more deeply by a semi-conscious impulse toward the ascetic ideal. Yet, one might hope for serious, charitable consideration of the rationales explicitly provided by philosophers in favor of asceticism – particularly since Nietzsche at times himself expresses positive approval of asceticism, e.g. in *The Will to Power* (ed.) Walter Kaufmann, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, 1st edition (New York: Vintage, 1968), 483–84 – a fact that may have inspired Foucault's later embrace of ascetical acts, cf. James Urpeth, '"Noble" Ascesis Between Nietzsche and Foucault', *New Nietzsche Studies* **2**.3/4 (July 1, 1998): 65–91. Without taking a philosopher's explicit explanation for supporting asceticism seriously, a hermeneutics of suspicion might be applied just as easily to Nietzsche's 'natural' asceticism and to Foucault's development of the same.



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In a well-known passage, David Hume[14] panned ascetical practices such as fasting and self-denial as so many 'monkish virtues' – practiced by the gloomy, hair-brained enthusiast, but rejected by 'men of sense'.[15] Jeremy Bentham[16] too derided the 'principle of asceticism' as that norm most fundamentally opposed to his favored criterion for moral goodness, namely the principle of utility.[17] Voltaire's self-conscious libertinism appeared to positively revolt at self-denial, especially with regard to sex.[18] Nietzsche's view also appears overwhelming negative, calling advocates of asceticism '"anti-natural" enthusiasts'[19] and citing the ascetic ideal as 'the

[14] *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals: A Critical Edition* (ed.) Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 73.

[15] In *The Natural History of Religion*, Hume claims that only religion could motivate ascetical practices like fasting or self-flagellation – practices, for Hume, that are totally removed from the exercise of virtue and are for this reason attractive to religious people as otherwise unprompted expressions of devotion to a deity. See David Hume, *Writings on Religion* (ed.) Antony Flew (La Salle, Ill: Open Court, 1999), 175–79. Thus Hume explains, 'In restoring a loan, or paying a debt, his divinity is nowise beholden to him; because these acts of justice are what he was bound to perform, and what many would have performed, were there no god in the universe. But if he fast a day, or give himself a sound whipping; this has a direct reference, in his opinion, to the service of God. No other motive could engage him to such austerities' op. cit., 177; cf. Terence Irwin, *The Development of Ethics: A Historical and Critical Study Volume II: From Suarez to Rousseau* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 644–55. Yet if the argument of this paper is successful, Hume is wrong to push such a division between acts of virtue and those of asceticism, and likewise wrong to see the claimed superfluity of the latter as giving it a distinctively religious color.

[16] *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (ed.) J. H. Burns and H. L. A. Hart (Oxford : New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), chap. 2.

[17] For Bentham at least, the 'principle of asceticism' was no strawman, for he explicitly identifies it (like Hume) with the common practices of monks, see op. cit. note 16, 17; cf. Frederick Rosen, *Classical Utilitarianism from Hume to Mill* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 181, for discussion including Mill's nuanced appropriation of these criticisms.

[18] See discussion in J.B. Shank, 'Voltaire', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (ed.) Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2010, sec. 2.2, http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2010/entries/voltaire/.

[19] *Beyond Good & Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1989), 67.



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harmful ideal *par excellance*'[20] (1989b, 312) as well as the 'crudest form of perversion' of the human will.[21]

For Hume, Voltaire, Bentham, and Nietzsche, the underlying motive to engage in self-denial was almost exclusively bound up with religion, and so much the worse for the religions that recommend it. The proper exercise of rationality, so it seems, drives a person to oppose ascetical practices.[22] For convenience, we can dub the position that asceticism is irrational the thesis of 'indulgentism' and its advocates – centrally, Hume, Voltaire, Bentham, Nietzsche – the 'indulgentists'. Opposed to indulgentism is the view of 'asceticism', which for present purposes is the claim that acts of deliberate self-denial can be, and often are, rational.

Much of the indulgentist criticism of asceticism is as superficial as the arguments for asceticism are underdeveloped. Nietzsche's criticisms were the most sophisticated, reacting as they were to the ascetic argument of Schopenhauer. But like Schopenhauer's own arguments for asceticism, much of Nietzsche's criticism appears wedded to a broader set of unique philosophical commitments. Most centrally, asceticism is wrong for Nietzsche because it is life-denying, hence 'The ascetic treats life as a wrong road on which one must finally walk back to the point where it begins, or as a mistake that is put right by deeds'.[23] More to the point, Nietzsche sees in the ideals of asceticism a repression of those laudable natural instincts that are constitutive of a good life; it involves a 'nausea' with oneself that is symptomatic of nihilism.[24]

At a deep level, Nietzsche takes asceticism and the cluster of ideas commonly given in its defense to be popularly appealing because it offers a meaning and a solution to the inevitable suffering of this life: suffering exists because we are guilty, and guilt can be expiated through suffering.[25] Being commonly deceived by the 'ascetic priest' to understand suffering in this way, most practitioners of

[20] Nietzsche, op. cit. note 11, 312.

[21] *Nietzsche: "On the Genealogy of Morality" and Other Writings* (ed.) Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. Carol Diethe, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 103.

[22] There appear to be religious motivations for asceticism distinct from those offered in this paper (e.g. those expressed in Colossians 1:24). This paper will only examine whether there are non-religious motivations favoring the rationality of asceticism, despite much of the Western debate over asceticism being religious in character.

[23] Nietzsche, op. cit. note 11, 117.

[24] Nietzsche, op. cit. note 11, 122.

[25] Magnus, op. cit. note 12, 94–96.



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asceticism add to their 'punishment' with an unhealthy and unending self-abuse and self-repression.[26] Unsurprisingly, Nietzsche believes this self-abuse leads to a transient relief (as one ostensibly understands otherwise meaningless suffering), though it is ultimately self-destructive.[27] Nietzsche's criticisms here appear to assume a highly suspect interpretation of the ascetical enterprise, which the forthcoming argument should correct. But he also assumes as part of his criticism a unique eudemonist moral view that is at best controversial.

In contrast to Nietzsche, the indulgentist arguments of Hume, Bentham, and Voltaire consist in little more than ridicule. Although in each case, indulgentist criticisms can be linked to their broader reflections on the moral life (e.g., Bentham's view that ascetical acts result in net pain and are thus wrong given the felicific calculus), reasoned, standalone critiques of deliberate self-denial are difficult to find.[28] It is likely that, save for Nietzsche, the indulgentists did not think asceticism warranted deep philosophical attention. This superficiality is perhaps best explained by a historical myopia. The most visible adherents of asceticism in European modernity were zealous lay or, more commonly, consecrated Christian religious. And the ascetical practices themselves could be as provocative as public processions of hooded self-flagellants – accompanied almost exclusively by distinctively religious justifications. It should thus come as little surprise that Hume, Voltaire, and Bentham overlooked the philosophical adherents of asceticism whose advocacy predated Christianity, and treated the whole class of ascetical acts as having a similar and irrational motivation.[29] Before addressing these criticisms, I will now turn to provide an argument in favor of ascetical practices.

[26] Op. cit. note 11, 128–29, 140–41; cf. R. Lanier Anderson, 'Friedrich Nietzsche', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (ed.) Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2017, 2017, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/nietzsche/.

[27] Magnus, op. cit. note 12, 95.

[28] One might also read the collective criticisms of Hume, Bentham, and Voltaire as attacking the view that ascetical practices are ends in themselves. So understood, however, their criticisms ignore what little had been said in asceticism's defense by philosophers up to that time, namely that asceticism is a sort of training for virtue.

[29] Interpreting Nietzsche on this point is a matter of difficulty (e.g. references to the influence of the 'ascetic priest' may be intended as emblematic, rather than literal; cf. Magnus, op. cit. note 12, 94–95). However, Nietzsche appears to have fallen into a similar historical error in ostensibly characterizing philosophical asceticism as ultimately arising from religious sources (cf. op. cit. note 11, 115–16.). Although the priests (and to a lesser



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## 2. Arguing for Asceticism

Now that I have provided this brief historical sketch, I will turn to providing what I take to have been a common, core argument motivating philosophical advocates of asceticism. My intention here is to provide a philosophically-lean, highly general argument that could thereby be the more plausibly thought to have motivated a range of otherwise diverse historical defenders. Given the relative silence of its advocates, it is impossible to make a decisive historical case for the appeal of the following considerations. But what I shall presently argue accords with the few, brief things that are said by many philosophical ascetics. It is also sufficiently intuitive that, plausibly, advocates thought spelling out the argument in detail was an exercise of redundant tedium. Thus, if this argument were a core historic motivation for philosophical asceticism, its intuitiveness could help explain the relative silence of its advocates.

Asceticism involves deliberately acting in ways that involve self-denial for the sake of positively cultivating one's moral character, where 'self-denial' is understood as resisting (or not submitting to) internal pressures to act in a ways that commonly lead to cognitive or sensual pleasure, or at least the absence of predictable cognitive or sensual pain.[30] Many pursuits – such as athletics or acts of the

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degree, lay members) of Greek religions commonly practiced ritual purification rites and some limited self-denial (e.g., celibacy) during important yearly ceremonies, little evidence suggests highly ascetical practices were encouraged as perpetual (Abaris the Hyperborean notwithstanding). Orphic and Pythagorean cults may count as two exceptions, though in both cases extant evidence suggests their asceticism consisted primarily in the avoidance of meat and beans. Whereas the ascetical ideas favored say by Plato, among others, seem more robust in contrast, making Nietzsche's historical-psychological theory of the ascetic ideal less plausible as a general explanation of ascetical practices. Put differently, ancient Greek ascetics were more likely to be philosophers than priests (and correspondingly associate asceticism with virtue creation rather than guilt expiation), suggesting that any causal role may well have been driven more by philosophy than by religion.

[30] So defined, self-denial is a broad category that could even include some vicious acts, if the vice is unpleasant to its perpetrator. Although a more refined definition of self-denial is desirable, the definition of asceticism given here makes a narrower definition unnecessary for the purposes of the paper, since asceticism will only involve the morally beneficial types of self-denial.



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virtues, among others – involve varying degrees of self-denial, but asceticism differs from these centrally in that the former characteristically do not involve willing acts of self-denial qua self-denial, unlike asceticism. Ascetical acts are chosen because of the difficulty an ascetic foresees in their performance – the difficulty is not in principle eliminable, as it is in other self-denying pursuits. Instead, self-denial in non-ascetical pursuits is characteristically willed indirectly, as an undesirable aspect of an otherwise unrelated choice. Thus, for example, an act of temperance may require denying oneself a very appealing slice of torte, and such a choice will characteristically involve standing firm against internal countervailing pressures to eat the torte (hence, self-denial), at least in most agents. The immediate end of one's choice in a case like this (say, physical health or a virtuous character) would be thwarted by succumbing to the countervailing pressures.[31] In such a case, eating the slice of torte would be vicious, an act of gluttony. In contrast, each individual act of asceticism is characteristically expendable, as it were. That is, unlike many acts of the virtues, one can fail in the performance of a particular ascetical act without thereby harming one's moral character. For although, like an act of virtue, ascetical acts have as their goal an improvement in one's character, asceticism differs from virtue also in that it contributes only indirectly to one's moral character. Ascetical acts are merely intended to develop one part of acting rightly, namely an ability to act according to one's judgment, despite internal pressure to the contrary. For this reason, ascetical acts are, at least individually considered, superfluous to a good moral character.[32] A person who

[31] Athletic training is more like asceticism in this respect, since one does not typically become a failed athlete by skipping a workout. Yet, Diogenes's comparisons notwithstanding, asceticism differs from the self-denial involved in athletics because self-denial involved in athletics is ordinarily not directly chosen, but is an unintended aspect of athletic training and performance. Even if some athletes do choose acts of self-denial directly as a means to bolster willpower for a successful future performance, this would differ from asceticism in that the latter has a specifically moral direction that would be lacking in the pursuit of a closely analogous athletic self-discipline.

[32] On this point, Hume was close to the mark (see note 8). But one would commit the fallacy of composition if one inferred that, because token acts of a type are superfluous, they are also collectively superfluous (or even unhelpful). Each individual workout may be superfluous for an athlete's success, for instance, but the athlete would be foolish to conclude that working out itself can be discontinued without loss.



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decides to break a self-imposed fast, say, has not thereby acted viciously or become a glutton.

Asceticism is rational precisely because it closely resembles acts of the virtues. Put differently, asceticism is reasonable as a means to acquire virtue because it simulates, and allows one to habituate, one of the most difficult aspects of acting rightly: judging and then acting in accord with one's judgment against internal countervailing pressures. In this way, asceticism phenomenologically mirrors a ubiquitous part of the moral life. For though the countervailing pressures that one remains steadfast against in asceticism do not incline one to act viciously and are thus not morally required to resist, they are for this reason excellent practice for acting rightly. The internal pressures one resists in ascetical acts constitute a sort of artificial temptation. And as many genuine temptations are appealing because of an anticipated pleasure in acting wrongly or an avoidance of pain, the artificial temptations in asceticism count as close analogues to the genuine article. In brief, acts of deliberate self-denial are effective practice in choosing according to one's best judgment and cultivating the virtues, since the acquisition of virtue ordinarily requires a facility with suffering and self-denial that ascetical practices engender. On the common assumption that virtuous habits are rational to pursue, so too are ascetical practices rational as an effective means to a rational end.

What are ascetical practices? Medieval ascetical writings commonly dub these 'mortifications', and I will follow suit. Mortification comes in two varieties: corporal and incorporeal. Corporal mortification is the better known, because it is the more attention grabbing. Acts of this sort involve physical discomfort or pain. Some of the more recognizable activities include wearing sackcloth or a hairshirt, celibacy, self-flagellation, and fasting, among many others. Of course, these are severe mortifications. Corporal mortification can also include much more mundane practices, such as small portion sizes at meals or turning off the air conditioning on a hot day.[33]

[33] Although asceticism is popularly understood as requiring self-inflicted pain (of an extreme variety, e.g. Silas in *The Da Vinci Code*), it is a mistake to narrowly define ascetical acts in terms of well-known forms of corporal mortification. Ascetical literature is full of recommendations for a broad spectrum of acts of deliberate, though not necessarily physically painful, self-denial. Thus, for instance, Jean Baptiste Marie Vianney, a canonized 19th century Roman Catholic priest, practiced extreme asceticism (including self-flagellation, lengthy fasts, and encircling himself with iron chains, among others). Yet, he accompanied these practices with those much more mundane and non-painful. One of his biographers recounts



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Incorporeal mortification involves acts in which the suffering is more straightforwardly psychological: remaining silent in the face of unjust criticism, depriving oneself of some permissible pleasure (say, dessert), volunteering to abide by another person's preferences (say, in restaurant or movie choice) even when they conflict with one's own, or submitting one's choices entirely to another person rather than exercising one's own liberty, among many others. The distinction is not rigid, since psychological suffering is often difficult to demarcate from physical suffering. The ideal mortification in the tradition involves some portion of both, with an essential preference for incorporeal mortification as the more difficult and vital essence of asceticism, as the following argument should make clear. It is thus far less desirable to take cold showers daily or be abstemious with food and drink, for instance, if this became by long practice one's settled preference. In such a case, capturing the spirit of asceticism would require one's taking a relaxing, hot shower or eating something delicious, as a matter of denying one's preferential inclinations and thus once again phenomenologically mirroring acts of Aristotelian continence.

Advocates of asceticism do not suggest these practices are ends in themselves, or intrinsically valuable, as if suffering were desirable for its own sake. Rather, the brief arguments we find regularly point to virtue as the goal. Asceticism is a rational means to that end. So, if some act of mortification ran counter to the successful pursuit of the intended end of virtue, advocates of asceticism would deny that act's positive value or rationality. Hence, there are strict limits to ascetical acts. For instance, one should not fast or keep vigil so much that one's health is threatened or one is incapable of

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that Rev. Vianney practiced a 'perpetual self-restraint by which he closed every avenue to the most innocent enjoyment of the senses, and refused to avail himself of the most ordinary alleviations of pain and discomfort. He had imposed, as a rule, upon himself never to smell a flower, never to drink when parched with thirst, never to brush off a fly, never to appear to be conscious of an unpleasant smell, never to express disgust at any repulsive sight, never to complain of any thing whatever which affected him personally, never to sit down, never to lean against any thing when kneeling. He had a great shrinking from cold, but would never take any means to preserve himself from it' Alfred Monnin, *Life of the Curé d'Ars* (London: Burns and Lambert, 1862), 257. He also commonly recommended non-painful ascetical acts to others in his public preaching, see Jean Vianney, *The Spirit of the Curé of Ars*. (ed.) J.E. Bowden and Alfred Monnin (London: Burns, Lambert, and Oates, 1865), 109.



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satisfying other, more important duties – for all other things being equal, voluntarily bringing about poor health or failures in one's duties is not constitutive of the virtues. Nor should one submit one's choices to another person so totally that one is disposed to do something that is objectively wrong if commanded, for acting badly is certainly inimical to excellence of character. These are excesses of mortification because they run contrary to that end to which these practices are centrally aimed as a means.

To fill out the argument sketched above, it is useful to employ some Aristotelian terminology, although it should be clear that the argument does not assume any uniquely Aristotelian claims. For Aristotle, at the summit of human excellence stands the virtuous agent, who not only does what is good habitually but also does so without internal struggle and even with characteristic pleasure (cf. *EN* 1104b 3–8). Few of us will attain to such heights, I suspect. At the opposite end of the spectrum is the vicious person, who dismisses the value of virtue and pursues his pernicious desires without regard for moral norms. Most of us fall somewhere between these two poles. The continent agent, on the one hand, behaves in accord with the virtues, but does so despite an internal struggle: an appetite or a passion (or even a bad former habit) generates countervailing pressure on the agent to act against her best judgment. Yet, she acts according to her best judgment, despite internal pressure to the contrary. On the other hand, there is the incontinent agent who fails to surmount and gain victory over the same sort of countervailing internal pressures that oppose his best judgment. The incontinent agent generally judges rightly on what to do, but fails to act rightly.

Experience suggests that Aristotle's description of the struggles involved for the continent and incontinent agent is accurate. Doing the right thing in some particular situation for most of us commonly involves willing an act despite having, in that situation, some internal resistance to the act's performance. And sometimes we fail, being drawn in by countervailing pressures. The struggle is ordinarily characterized by desires or desire-like conative states (of various strengths) inclining one to act other than one's cognitive judgment dictates is proper, whether the pressure directs one to another activity entirely or merely not to engage in the action favored by right reasoning. If Aristotle is right about moving from the state of continence to genuine virtue, then these internal struggles will be more manageable over time as an agent continues to act in accord with the virtues, and even disappear altogether and be replaced by pleasure in doing the good. Put differently, this process of movement toward virtue involves the countervailing conative states constitutive of the internal



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struggle fading in their conative vivacity or 'pull' until they disappear entirely. Aristotle might be wrong about the eventual disappearance of struggle involved in virtuous activity, but at least in the meantime for most people, good character requires enduring and not giving in to sometimes strong internal pressures to act against one's best judgment.

Those familiar with this feature of the moral life know that suffering is a normal accompaniment of this struggle, and that this suffering is generally more acute when one makes a serious effort to act rightly than when one gives in to the countervailing pressures. If so, then the continent agent characteristically suffers more than others in seeking to act well. Most of the present argument will thus focus on such an agent as exemplifying the rationale for asceticism, with the understanding that much of what I have to say applies *mutatis mutandis* to the incontinent agent seeking to improve her character.

The suffering experienced by a continent agent in his struggle to do the right thing is most commonly (but not exclusively) psychological and varies in degrees of intensity depending upon one's characteristic weaknesses and the circumstances at hand. What are the sources of pain? Two stand out. The continent agent will ordinarily feel pain in having to choose – a pain of being pulled in conflicting directions. And characteristically choosing the right thing in these circumstances, he will also feel pain in having to deny himself the satisfaction or pleasure involved in what is suggested by the countervailing internal pressures – whether it be turning down a cupcake or sex, the pleasant chore over the tedious, sleeping in over getting up early, or whatever. Put differently, a second source of pain for the continent agent is the pain of self-denial, especially denial of acts that would generate some immediate pleasure.

Acts of self-denial involve a degree of psychological suffering over and above the suffering involved in being divided. And in at least some cases, acting properly may even involve a degree of *physical* discomfort or pain, in contrast to the relatively pain-free – indeed, often pleasurable – object of one's temptation. Even for the truly virtuous agent, getting up at the proper time may mean being groggy whereas sleeping in is predictably enjoyable, the tedious chore may be physically demanding (e.g., helping a friend move), maintaining a healthy diet may mean more pangs of hunger, and so on. In sum, the continent agent's choosing to act rightly means regularly willing and remaining steadfast in choices that right reason supports but which also involve psychological and sometimes even physical pain.



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The characteristic struggle and suffering involved in choosing to act well is perhaps one central reason why any movement from incontinence to continence, or continence to true Aristotelian virtue, will be difficult. For it involves habitually winning every like struggle over a lengthy period. It is easier to give in, to have the cake, to say the unkind word, to put off the tedious job, and so on. To consistently do what is more difficult requires some measure of self-control or, perhaps more aptly, self-denial. Psychological literature often calls it 'self-regulation', and I will use all three interchangeably to refer to the activity that separates the continent from the incontinent agent. Without an adequate measure of self-control, one will consistently take the easier – and less virtuous – path.

Where does asceticism enter in? Among the other well-recognized benefits of habits is that they make what's difficult easier. And self-denial is predictably difficult. Hence, given that continent agents find acting in accord with their best judgment at least somewhat difficult, it is rational to cultivate a habit that would make it easier to overcome internal pressures that oppose one's judgment. Cultivating such a habit would be practically rational, at least, as a conducive means to a rationally-desirable end, namely virtue. Yet, what sort of activity involves regularly acting against predictably strong, countervailing internal drives, in favor of a previously-made judgment? In a word, mortification. For mortification involves willing those acts that one knows will be difficult *because* one knows they will be difficult – they are activities chosen precisely because one expects strong countervailing pressures to arise against performing them.

There is then a phenomenological isomorphism between acting well for a continent agent, on the one hand, and performing some act of deliberate self-denial, on the other. But whereas in the former case, the moral 'stakes' of the act are ineliminably present, in the latter case, acting or failing in some practice of mortification has no immediate moral dimensions – exactly what one looks for in a practice activity. Whether it be shooting hoops with a friend, going to the driving range, or doing simple, throwaway sketches of scenes from daily life, the activities of practice involve a low or no-stakes variation of the activity for which one is practicing. By reducing the stakes, one can go through many of the motions of the activity – whether mental or physical – without worrying about whether one's attempt is a complete success. Thus, if one slices on the driving range, no problem, whereas during a tournament it could mean elimination. Practice also commonly involves some simplification of the practiced activity, making it somewhat easier than it would otherwise be. Thus, a baseball player trying to improve his



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hitting game may start with low speeds in a batting cage, so that he can master the range of actions required for success, and eventually work up to the speeds likely to be encountered in a real game.

To apply these same techniques to the practice of morality, one must find some activity that by itself has a morally neutral character – thus reducing or eliminating the stakes for success – and, if possible, an activity in which the difficulty can be apportioned to the relative ability of the aspirant to virtue, made easier if needs be. Mortification satisfies both desiderata, as the following illustration should make clear. One of the most enduring ascetical practices is the simple fast of bread and water. During this fast, one will predictably experience urges to eat something more appetizing, and these urges will wax and wane. In a very similar way, one may find satisfying one's daily duties hopelessly humdrum. Take grading papers at the end of term, for example. In both the fast and in grading, one will likely feel the task at hand to be burdensome from its insipidity. There are more exciting things to do, and there are more delicious things to eat. But whereas neglecting or abandoning one's daily duties – in this case, grading – is ordinarily wrong, there's nothing as such morally wrong with breaking one's self-imposed fast and going out for sushi. Hence, if one wants to practice and thereby cultivate a habit to make it easier to force oneself to persevere in one's daily duties, it is rational to select some ascetical activity failure in which has no further consequences (other than, perhaps, the realization that one still has room to grow in self-control). Moreover, if fasting for a day is too difficult, one can opt to do so just for a single meal. And so on.

Given their phenomenological similarity, acts of mortification help one practice handling the suffering involved in self-denial, practices that nurture and eventually habituate those strategies for coping with internal struggles successfully that are so necessary for doing the right thing. Mortification is thus a sort of weight-training for the virtues, helping us practice one difficult part of doing the right thing – namely, rational self-control in the face of internal pressure – so that this part is done with greater ease. It's true that this practice will not capture all the activities required by virtue, but it captures some central ones in a way that reduces the pressure for success. It is thus an ideal practice for acting ethically.

Now since psychological suffering is the most common feature of a continent agent's willing what's right, as described above, the core type of asceticism is incorporeal mortification. In other words, to be a genuinely effective exercise for doing the right thing, ascetical practices must essentially involve a felt internal resistance to an act



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that needs to be psychologically overcome. But corporal mortification should not be discounted, despite its *prima facie* shock value. For acts that involve some physical suffering are acts that most agents can predictably expect will lead to strong internal countervailing pressure – with the more extreme the mortification, the more radical the countervailing pressure one can expect.[34] And assuming that the choice of physical pain induced is not in conflict with the virtues, say because it goes against one's more pressing duties or otherwise leads to consequences the virtuous agent would choose to avoid (e.g., bad health, dishonor, etc.), there is no reason to dismiss corporal mortification as unfitting a means to make progress in acting rightly. It is an exaggeration to personify such practices as a god, pace Empedocles, but abstaining from all food by skipping a meal or three – thus leading to physical discomfort – is no less a genuine practice at self-control and thus virtue than fasting on bread and water. Moreover, as many acts of virtue do require some physical discomfort, as explained above, an ease when it comes to physical suffering will also carry over to ease with physically-demanding acts of virtue.

Of course, despite the high-profile philosophical proponents of corporal and incorporeal mortification, the contemporary reaction to such advocacy is likely to be similar to the shared reaction of the indulgentists. To appropriate a phrase from J.L. Mackie, such self-denial seems 'queer'. I shall respond this objection below, among others. But for the moment, it's worth raising some empirical considerations in favor of what has otherwise been an argument from the armchair. As it turns out, the reflections detailed above have support from empirical research on the development of self-control and by extension, virtue.

The thesis that asceticism is rational as a means to virtue appears to be empirically testable.[35] And empirical testing seems particularly

[34] For some mentally imbalanced individuals, acts of this sort can become pathological and disjoined from any effort to acquire virtue; hence, 'self-harm' is a common symptom of multiple mental disorders. Yet, the foregoing argument should make clear why asceticism does not endorse this pathology: for individuals like this, feeling pain has become desirable as an end in itself. It thus ceases to have those essential features that make mortification a practice in self-control for people who are mentally balanced. For individuals like this, the more appropriate practice in virtue would be the incorporeal mortification of listening to and following carefully the relevant advice of a competent mental health specialist.

[35] Some qualification is appropriate here. For it may well be the case that part of the reason mortification works in the acquisition of



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relevant because contrary anecdotal or intuitive considerations can be marshalled against the preceding argument. For example, perhaps mortification is a bad idea because it could potentially overwhelm an individual, undermining potential opportunities to act rightly by frittering away motivation on pointless exercises. After all, on one reading of Nietzsche, living up to the lofty ideals of perfection already involves a high degree of struggle and suffering.[36] Perhaps Nietzsche is right and morality is demanding enough as it is. Shouldn't individuals save up their energy for choices that actually matter?

In the empirical literature, an individual's relative capacity for self-regulation in a range of domains – so called 'trait self-control' – is a recognized psychological characteristic. And although there is some empirical evidence to support the view that an individual's capacity for self-control can be partially depleted after strenuous use,[37] there is also substantive empirical evidence that the capacity for self-control, which mortification is designed to foster, is a stable character trait apt for cultivation by exercise. Researchers thus tend not to think of self-control like a battery, where one must 'save up' (or ration) its usage, as the contrary intuitive consideration above might imply.

Instead, the most prominent model of trait self-control in the literature is known as the 'strength' (or 'resource') model. According to this model, a person's capacity for self-regulation (or willpower) is like a muscle that increases in strength and endurance through repeated challenge and strain, but which is also capable of fatigue after particularly strenuous exercise.[38] So rather than

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self-control is due to how the ascetical agent conceptualizes her activities (e.g., seeing them as acts of practice in self-control or listening to reason). So, although experimental design may get participants to do acts that externally resemble mortification easily enough through rewards, such activities are not genuinely ascetical. Capturing this cognitive element without running into issues of sampling bias seems a difficult but crucial constraint on direct empirical testing of the above argument.

[36] Cf. Thomas Hurka, *Perfectionism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 27, 66–77.

[37] This is so called 'ego deficit'; cf. Kathleen D. Vohs et al., 'Making Choices Impairs Subsequent Self-Control: A Limited-Resource Account of Decision Making, Self-Regulation, and Active Initiative', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* **94**.5 (May 2008): 883–98; Martin S. Hagger et al., 'Ego Depletion and the Strength Model of Self-Control: A Meta-Analysis', *Psychological Bulletin* **136**.4 (2010): 495–525.

[38] Roy F. Baumeister, Kathleen D. Vohs, and Dianne M. Tice, 'The Strength Model of Self-Control', *Current Directions in Psychological*



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making the ordinary demands of life generally more difficult to satisfy, mortification makes them less difficult by increasing the ease with which a person exercises self-control. Importantly for the intuitive argument I sketched above, on this model, self-control exercises in one domain generalize to other domains. Put differently, given this popular model, self-control can be developed as such – by acts of self-denial or mortification – and the resulting increase in self-control can be applied to acts of the virtues, among others. Thus, for instance, individuals who intentionally avoid eating sweets for two weeks have been found to have greater success in quitting smoking.[39] Meta-analyses of the evidence favoring the strength model suggest that there is, as Berkman[40] puts it, 'reason to be optimistic that self-regulation training might work, and that it potentially works quite well'.[41]

Very importantly in the context of the foregoing argument, trait self-control has been found by empirical researchers to benefit its possessors in a varied range of domains related to acting according to one's best judgment. Notably, these benefits include success in so-called 'vice-virtue conflicts' – that is, doing the right thing when feeling pulled to act otherwise – as well as successful dieting, and overcoming drug addiction, among many others. Trait self-control is especially noted for its role in an individual's formation of positive habits – precisely in line with the intuitive argument sketched above. It is also associated with greater affective well-being and life-satisfaction

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*Science* **16**.6 (December 1, 2007): 351–55; Mark Muraven and Roy F. Baumeister, 'Self-Regulation and Depletion of Limited Resources: Does Self-Control Resemble a Muscle?', *Psychological Bulletin* **126**.2 (March 2000): 247–59.

[39] Mark Muraven, 'Building Self-Control Strength: Practicing Self-Control Leads to Improved Self-Control Performance', *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* **46**.2 (March 1, 2010): 465–68.

[40] Elliot Berkman, 'Self-Regulation Training', in *Handbook of Self-Regulation: Research, Theory and Applications* (ed.) Roy F. Baumeister and Kathleen D. Vohs, 3rd ed. (New York: Guilford, 2017), 440–57.

[41] It would be a misconception to expect that increases in trait self-control will lead to a uniform acquisition of every virtue, however. For self-control is only one part of the virtues, and given variations in temperament, personality, and upbringing, we should expect that people will find particular, moderate gains in self-control do help them act rightly in some moral domains while other domains – those in which they have greater moral weaknesses – remain difficult (perhaps requiring greater gains in trait self-control).



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ratings than those without such a trait.[42] Although the science is not fully settled on self-control and its cultivation[43], the available research supports mortification for the same basic reasons alluded to by prominent philosophical ascetics and which I have explained more fully above: it can be an effective way of pursuing virtue.

Now that I have sketched an argument for asceticism, I will recap before considering a few objections. In brief, it is a pervasive feature of the moral life that we face internal conflict when choosing to do the right thing. Ascetical practices are poised to help allay the difficulty in acting virtuously because they involve practice and habituation of one of the most difficult parts of being a continent agent, namely self-control. Very likely, reflections like this led to the prominent philosophical tradition supporting asceticism, and if so, the tradition appears to have been on to something. For empirical work on self-control suggests that it can be strengthened through voluntary acts of mortification, and that those with strong self-control tend to act on their best judgment, thereby forming virtuous habits and leading lives of greater personal fulfillment.

[42] Among others, cf. Denise T. D. de Ridder et al., 'Taking Stock of Self-Control: A Meta-Analysis of How Trait Self-Control Relates to a Wide Range of Behaviors', *Personality and Social Psychology Review* **16**.1 (February 1, 2012): 76–99; Wilhelm Hofmann et al., 'Yes, But Are They Happy? Effects of Trait Self-Control on Affective Well-Being and Life Satisfaction', *Journal of Personality* **82**.4 (August 1, 2014): 265–77; Marieke A. Adriaanse et al., 'Effortless Inhibition: Habit Mediates the Relation between Self-Control and Unhealthy Snack Consumption', *Frontiers in Psychology* **5** (May 16, 2014); Michael R. Ent, Roy F. Baumeister, and Dianne M. Tice, 'Trait Self-Control and the Avoidance of Temptation', *Personality and Individual Differences* **74** (February 2015): 12–15. Moreover, formed habits have been found to be motivating even when an agent experiences the sort of depleted willpower or motivational deficit that arises after making difficult choices, cf. David T. Neal, Wendy Wood, and Aimee Drolet, 'How Do People Adhere to Goals When Willpower Is Low? The Profits (and Pitfalls) of Strong Habits', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* **104**.6 (June 2013): 959–75. So, an agent who has been engaging in ascetical behaviors for the sake of virtue will likely remain motivated to act on their developed habits even if they otherwise feel drained by some recent act of mortification.

[43] Cf. Michael Inzlicht and Elliot Berkman, 'Six Questions for the Resource Model of Control (and Some Answers)', *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* **9**.10 (October 2015): 511–24.



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## 3. Objections and Replies

As previously mentioned, the contemporary reader is likely to see these practices as odd or worse. So it's worth addressing this concern in the course of evaluating the ascetical argument. The best response the ascetic has here, I think, is to concede the point. Ascetical practices do ordinarily seem strange, at least at first glance. Yet if the argument highlighted above is successful, any *prima facie* reaction that asceticism is eccentric should give way to an *ultima facie* understanding of the highly useful and thus rational role mortification plays in the moral life. It may seem strange at first, but that's not a sufficient reason to dismiss it as irrational. Why does mortification seem strange? One possible reason is that mortification is rare and – absent reflections like those above – lacks an obvious *raison d'être*. Yet one might argue that virtue itself – or a sincere effort to acquire virtue, say by following around a virtuous agent – is equally peculiar on that front.

Perhaps there's something more robust grounding this adverse reaction, however. We are disposed to see as excellent not someone who shuns pleasure, as asceticism might be construed to counsel, but instead the one who enjoys pleasure in moderation. The reason we find mortification too strange to be recommended is not that we don't understand it, but rather that mortification runs contrary to the dispositions of noble, temperate individuals whom we are naturally inclined to admire. Asceticism, so the argument goes, is just another name for Aristotle's vice of insensibility – a rare deficiency in the pursuit of pleasure (cf. *EN* 1107b 5–9). If so, Nietzsche may have had a point in calling asceticism life-denying.

In reply, it must first be conceded that were ascetical practices to run counter to the end of the virtues, they would be irrational. So much is directly entailed by the paper's central argument. And it seems rational to assume that there is a virtuous disposition toward pleasure – classically, temperance – that involves its moderate enjoyment. So to be rational, asceticism must complement the acquisition of that virtue, not oppose it.[44] And this is just what asceticism

[44] In the Platonic and Christian traditions, ascetical rhetoric can give a life-denying impression. Plato speaks of philosophy as the practice of dying. And in the New Testament, one can find a refrain of death to self. In the case of the Christian tradition at least, talk of death to self is most commonly understood in a metaphorical way, representing a suppression of excessive desires in keeping with the ascetical argument above. Plato in contrast takes this language seriously, but centrally because he sees life in the body



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advocates. For nothing in the ascetical argument promotes avoiding pleasure as such, even if individual acts of mortification involve forgoing some token pleasure or preference satisfaction. After all, avoiding all pleasure would appear practically impossible without clear moral failing. (Even mere bread and water is pleasurable when one is hungry.) Rather, the ascetical argument implies we should practice self-denial only insofar as it helps us to achieve the virtues, including the virtue of temperance. Now for most of us, the acquisition of temperance does not involve seeking to cultivate a greater desire for pleasure. As Aristotle implies, deficiency in seeking pleasure is rare. Most commonly, to acquire temperance one must instead restrain and partially repress a native excess in pleasure-seeking, at least on occasion. It's true that we find the temperate individual appealing, but what are those of us predisposed to intemperance to do about it?

As Aristotle (*EN* 1999, 29) insightfully argues, in order to hit the mean of virtue we must examine our natural tendencies and 'drag ourselves off in the contrary direction' from what we have a propensity for 'as they do in straightening bent wood'. That is, we should err a little on the side of the mean that conflicts with our natural propensity (cf. *EN* 1109a 32–35, 1109b 24–27). Hence, given the common propensity for immoderately seeking pleasure, it is not out of keeping with a naturally-attractive human excellence to practice mortification as a way of straightening ourselves out. Moreover, given a native proclivity for pleasure, it is generally unlikely that over time asceticism will make us so disposed to seeking the unpleasant that we overshoot the ideal of moderation and acquire instead the vice of insensibility. Of course, as gestured at above, were a person to begin to develop insensibility, the appropriate incorporeal mortification would be to seek some pleasure. In point of fact, given the preceding argument, relaxation will be more pleasant for the ascetic than her non-ascetic counterpart because she will be the more capable of suppressing immoderate inclinations that arise at these times without breaking a sweat. Relaxation is more pleasant when the decision to not have another glass of wine or boorishly cut someone off in conversation involves no difficult internal struggle.

One last objection is worth considering. Historically at least, a common indulgentist charge has been that asceticism is 'monkish'. That is, many have thought that asceticism is inextricably linked to

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to be unnatural state for the soul at odds with a genuinely flourishing life – for Plato, any Nietzschean affirmation of the appetites of the body is thus far more life-denying.



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an irrational or unhealthy religiosity. As suggested above, this charge partially has arisen from historical myopia. But the conflation of asceticism with religion has persisted such that contemporary academic interest in asceticism is almost exclusively the domain of religious studies. This conflation is worth addressing.

There is nothing distinctively religious in the claim that acting rightly often involves an internal struggle, nor in the claim that success in handling the internal struggle can become easier with practice, including practice in self-denial. These are instead general propositions pertaining to moral psychology and supported by empirical research.[45] Nor is it plausible to take these claims as being at bottom motivated by a belief that we are in a state of perpetual guilt, the expiation of which must be perpetually renewed through compulsory self-abuse. As the argument above illustrates, compulsive self-abuse is irrational and not constitutive of the virtues. After all, for all his criticism of the 'ascetic ideal', even Nietzsche expresses a positive role for a 'natural' asceticism – a 'gymnastics of the will'.[46] This seems fitting given that even a budding Nietzschean higher man will presumably go through a continent stage during which time he will experience internal countervailing pressures, say, to return to 'slave' or 'herd' moral norms.[47] Acts that involve practice in overcoming negative internal pressures will then presumably be consistent with a variety of religious and non-religious views of a good life, including those of the indulgentists. It is thus a mistake to think that asceticism as such must be motivated by a religious self-loathing, as one reading of Nietzsche might imply, or by a profusion of supernatural terror and desire to placate a deity as per Hume, among others.

Although different conceptions of goodness alter the landscape of what ascetical practices accord with virtue – remaining silent in the face of unjust criticism, for instance, may be off the table for an aspiring *übermensch* – mortification as such should remain a rational option for nearly every moral theory that values habitually acting well and

[45] Asceticism seems incompatible only with views that suggest one ought ordinarily to concede to one's strong internal drives, no matter one's best judgment to the contrary. Perhaps the Cyrenaic hedonists such as Aristippus would deny this, as they apparently advocated no delay in gratification – including in, say, visiting prostitutes, see Kurt Lampe, *The Birth of Hedonism: The Cyrenaic Philosophers and Pleasure as a Way of Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 105–7.

[46] Nietzsche, op. cit. note 13, 483–84.

[47] As Anderson, op. cit. note 26, explains, Nietzsche would have no objection to self-discipline in the interest of virtue, which is expressly what the preceding argument appeals to. See also Urpeth, op. cit. note 13.



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recognizes the phenomena of continence, as does any theory worth its salt.[48] Thus, despite criticism that seems to have put this tradition to rest for a time, philosophers should remain interested in asceticism as a rational part of a morally virtuous life.[49]

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[48] It goes without saying that virtue theories in ethics tend to rank virtues as highly valuable, and theorists in this camp have included both Hume and Nietzsche, see Christine Swanton, *The Virtue Ethics of Hume and Nietzsche* (John Wiley & Sons, 2015). Yet the positive appraisal of virtue in other normative theories is somewhat less well-known. For Kant's approbation of virtue, see among others essays in Monika Betzler (ed.) *Kant's Ethics of Virtue* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008). Consequentialist theories may at first glance seem to have open to them plausible grounds for denying the positive value of cultivating the right sorts of habits, but against this among contemporary consequentialists, see e.g. Pettit on 'robustly demanding goods' in *The Robust Demands of the Good: Ethics with Attachment, Virtue, and Respect* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). And among classic utilitarians, J.S. Mill seeks at length to appropriate the value of virtue in *Utilitarianism*, ed. George Sher, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2002), 36–41, 61, 64, to name some prominent normative theories.

[49] I wish to thank Leonard Sidharta, Jacob Klein, and M.V. Dougherty for their insightful comments and suggestions.



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