

## Asceticism

There is a morbid fascination in any survey of the ascetic practices of man. Fasting, the virgin priestess, and the mutilation of the body are common features of ancient religions. In monastic Christianity the austere ideals of celibacy, obedience, and poverty have been both practiced and admired. Even today there are many who observe Lent and those for whom fasting and penance are seldom out of season. The most accomplished ascetics have been the wanderers (*sunnyasins*) of ancient India and the anchorites of fourth-century Egypt. One *sunnyasin* held his arms above his head with fists clenched until the muscles in his arms atrophied and the nails grew through his palms. It is said that the anchorite St. Simeon Stylites tied a rope tightly around himself until it ate into his body and his flesh became infested with worms. As the worms fell from his body he replaced them in his putrefied flesh, saying, "Eat what God has given you."

Behind such ascetic practices usually lies the philosophical theory of asceticism, a theory that demands and justifies this unnatural way of life. Although the term "ascetic" was originally applied to any sort of moral discipline, it has since acquired a narrower and more negative meaning. Asceticism may now be defined as the theory that one ought on principle to deny one's desires. Asceticism may be partial or complete. Partial asceticism is the theory that one ought to deny one's "lower desires," which are usually identified as sensuous, bodily, or worldly and are contrasted with more virtuous or spiritual desires. Complete asceticism is the theory that one ought to deny all desires without exception. Asceticism may also be moderate or extreme. Moderate asceticism is the theory that one ought to repress one's desires as far as is compatible with the necessities of this life. Extreme asceticism is the theory that one ought to annihilate one's desires totally.

**History.** The belief that austerities (*tapas*) burn away sin was a product of the non-Aryan tradition of ancient India. This belief persisted, and the austerities were recommended by the yogis and the Jains. All orthodox systems of Indian philosophy agreed that the goal of life is liberation (*moksa*) from this world of suffering, and most maintained that the renunciation of worldly desires is necessary for liberation. Although the Buddha tried and rejected austerities, his principle that the cause of suffering is craving led later Buddhists to advocate renunciation and even to practice austerities. The Jains held that liberation is possible only when one has annihilated all passion, because passion attracts karma, believed by this sect to be a subtle form of matter that holds the soul in bondage.

Asceticism seems to have entered Western philosophy from the mystery religions that influenced Pythagoreanism about the end of the sixth century B.C. Although Greek ethics was predominantly naturalistic, Plato sometimes argued that one ought to repress the bodily desires in order to free the soul in its search for knowledge. Some Cynics renounced worldly desires in order to pursue virtue in independence. The early Stoics defined emotion as irrational desire and held up the ideal of the apathetic man in whom all emotions had been annihilated. Plotinus emphasized the ascetic side of Plato's philosophy and claimed that matter is the source of all evil.

This undercurrent of asceticism rose to the surface in medieval philosophy with its emphasis on religious otherworldliness. The foundations of this asceticism were laid by such theologians as St. Athanasius, St. Gregory of Nyssa, St. Ambrose, and even St. Augustine. They believed that the desires of the flesh should be repressed in order to achieve moral virtue and the contemplation of God. Their view molded the monastic institutions that were established in the fourth century. Virtually unchallenged, this asceticism remained a potent influence on religious life until the Renaissance.

Of modern philosophers, only Schopenhauer has been an important advocate of asceticism; he would have one completely annihilate the will to live in all its manifestations. Bentham and Nietzsche have each criticized asceticism from very different standpoints.

From the article "Asceticism," by Carl Wellman in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Vol. 1*, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc. & The Free Press, 1967), pp. 171-4. This excerpt is posted here to assist your understanding of Nietzsche's 3rd essay in the *On the Genealogy of Morals*, "What is the Meaning of Ascetic Ideals?"

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