

The Psychological Motivation to Practice Asceticism in the Greco-Roman World

An important motivation to practice asceticism in most major religious traditions is to attain mentally therapeutic (psychological) benefits. Or, stated in the simplest manner possible: it is “to feel better.”

It has been claimed that recent scientific studies prove that ascetical practice leads to: (1) decrease in the sensual passions that cause suffering, (2) increase in concentration, and (3) a euphoric state of freedom and happiness. In fact, this is precisely what the ancient practitioners of asceticism have always claimed.

In the Greco-Roman world of late antiquity, the benefits of ascetical practice were believed to be:

1. Apatheia - without *pathos*, i.e. freedom from “passion” (esp. harmful desires) and “suffering.”

It is usually translated as “equanimity.” This paradigm of Egyptian monastic spirituality was borrowed from popular Greek spiritual philosophy – Neo-Platonism, Stoicism, etc. In fact, the central paradigm of late antique Greek philosophy was: “how to attain *apatheia*.” The means was *askesis*, i.e. the training of the mind to conform to *logos* (reason, natural order) or *theos* (pan- or panentheistic God) through “spiritual” exercises.

The project of asceticism is then the healing of the passions that lead to sin and suffering.

Apatheia is achieved through *catharsis* (purification/purgation) from the vices (delusion, greed, aversion, fear, worry, pride, etc.) that give rise to negative emotions.

(a parallel word in the Eastern church was the word *hesychasm*: stillness, rest, quiet, calmness, silence)

The biblical parallel to the Greek spiritual philosophy of *apatheia* was: purity, contentment, peace, rest, and blessedness. (John Cassian loosely translated *apatheia* for the less philosophically-minded Latin church as “purity of heart.” Importantly, he said that the immediate goal of the monk is to attain this purity of heart.)

2. Theoria – (illumination, mental vision, contemplation)

It is claimed that *apatheia* led to mental clarity, concentration, one-pointedness (singleness) of the mind, illumination, and even the vision of God.

The biblical parallel to the connection between *apatheia* and *theoria* of Greek philosophical spirituality (which culminated in the Neo-Platonic threefold ascending path of *purification, illumination, unification*) is: “the pure in heart shall see God” (Matt. 5:8).

3. Ekstasis (to “stand outside” of oneself) in a state of freedom (from self) and heavenly bliss.

The result of a mind that is completely clear of all mental defilements and concentrated in single-minded contemplation is a state of euphoric bliss.

The biblical parallel to this concept from Greek philosophical spirituality are numerous and varied: joy, glory, blessedness, beatitude, experience of the “the holy spirit,” *theosis*, i.e. partaking in the divine nature.

Conclusion: the popular belief in the Greco-Roman world was that virtue – and the training in virtue through ascetical practice – leads to the removal of suffering, heightened mental powers, and happiness.