

# Discretion: Greater than All the Virtues

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εἶπεν γέρων· ὅτι μείζων πασῶν  
τῶν ἀρετῶν ἐστὶν ἡ διάκρισις<sup>1</sup>

IT IS GENERALLY BELIEVED that the “Desert Fathers,” those first Christian monks (and some nuns) who began to people the deserts of Egypt and Syria-Palestine in the fourth century A.D., practiced a wildly excessive asceticism. The *Rule of Saint Benedict* has frequently been praised for introducing a note of moderation into what is perceived as a prevailing monasticism notorious for its absence of restraint. But in fact those early monks may well have been more discreet in their disciplines than rumour allows. There are of course certain aspects of the monastic life which are and must always be pursued without restraint, since monks are responding to certain *absolute* commands of Jesus. “If you would be perfect,” he says (and elsewhere: “Be perfect even as your heavenly father is perfect,” Mtt 5:48) “go sell your property (τὰ ὑπάρχοντα ὑμῶν), give [the proceeds] to the poor (you will have treasure in heaven) then come and follow me” (Mtt 19:21, Lk 12:33, cf. Mk 10:21). It was precisely in response to such absolute injunctions that so many people took the desert road. For them there could be no partial renunciation, no conditional following, as this tale demonstrates (N 17):

<sup>1</sup> N 106, 21.25. As explained in *GRBS* 42 (2001) 290 n.5 and more fully in 46 (2006) 327–328, references to the *Apophthegmata* are in the form of: Name, number, and ref. to *PG* 65 for *APalph*; by the letter N+number to *APanon* (forthcoming, ed. J. Wortley, CUP); by chapter and item [XX.YY] to Guy’s edition of *APsys*.

There was a novice who wished to renounce [the world] and he said to the elder: “I want to become a monk.” The elder said: “You are not able.” He said: “I am able.” The elder said to him: “If you are willing, go and renounce [the world], then come and reside in your cell.” He went off and, keeping back a hundred pieces of gold for himself, gave away what he possessed, then came to the elder. But the elder [said] to him: “Go and reside in your cell.” He went and took up residence but, while he was residing there, the *logismoi* said: “The door is old; it wants to be [replaced].” Coming to the elder, he said: “The *logismoi* are saying that the door is old and wanted to be [replaced].” The elder said to him: “You have not renounced [the world] but go, renounce [it] and reside here.” So off he went and gave away ninety pieces of gold, concealing ten pieces for himself. Coming to the elder he said: “Look, I have renounced [the world].” Said the elder to him: “Go and reside in your cell.” He went and took up residence there, but while he was residing there the *logismoi* said that the roof was old and wanted to be [renewed]. He went away and said to the elder: “My *logismoi* are telling me that the roof is old and wanted to be [renewed].” “Go and renounce [the world],” the elder said, and he went off and gave away the ten pieces of gold too, came back and said to the elder: “Look, I have renounced [the world].” When he had taken up residence, the *logismoi* said to him: “Everything here is old and the lion is coming to devour me.” He tells his *logismoi* to the elder and the elder says to him: “I am expecting everything to come down on top of me and the lion to come and eat me up so I may be at rest. Go, reside in your cell and pray to God.”

No less stringent than the forbidding of property is the exclusion of relatives. Jesus also said: “If a person comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life too, he cannot be my disciple” (Lk 14:26, cf. Mtt 10:37–38). The *Jerusalem Bible* footnotes the word *hate*: “Hebraism: an emphatic way of expressing a *total detachment*”—which is precisely what was required of the person aspiring to be a monk. This commandment too is absolute: it leaves no room for compromise.

The same however is not by any means true of many of Jesus’ other commandments. He says that he came “not to

dissolve, but to fulfil, the law and the prophets” (Mtt 5:48), which is usually taken to mean: to replace the multiple regulations of the Mosaic Law by certain general principles. In theory at least, the precise directives of the law required little more of the person than obedience, although, as Jesus points out, in fact one’s judgement sometimes had to be brought into play, e.g.: “Which of you shall have an ass or an ox fallen into a well and will not straightway draw him up on the Sabbath day?” (Lk 13:15 and esp. 14:5). That is a relatively easy matter: whether or not to obey the fourth commandment to “remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy” (Ex. 20:9). But Jesus utters commandments that require a far more demanding application of one’s judgement, e.g. to “love one’s neighbour as oneself” (Mtt 22:39, Lk 10:27); the so-called “Golden Rule,” “Do unto others” etc. (Mtt 7:12, Lk 6:31); “Love your enemies” (Mtt 5:44, Lk 6:27); and the “New Commandment,” “That you love one another” (Jo 13:34). Even where Jesus’ directions regard specific topics such as almsgiving, fasting, forgiveness, humility, judging, and so forth, they are rarely explicit in the way the regulations of the Mosaic Law were explicit. Far more often do they require one to engage one’s intelligence and to make moral judgements, at times very fine moral judgements.

The Gospels give little guidance as to *how* such judgements are to be made, and Paul not much more (his “Let your magnanimity [ἐπιεικές] be manifest to all,” Phil. 4:5, however, should not be overlooked). Once (and once only) the word *διάκρισις* (*discretion, discernment, or discrimination*) is found in the Christian Scriptures in the sense of discerning good and evil (πρὸς διάκρισιν καλοῦ τε καὶ κακοῦ, Heb. 5:14). The word is only found two other times, each time with a different meaning: *διακρίσεις διαλογισμῶν*, Rom 14:1, and *διακρίσεις πνευμάτων*, 1 Cor 12:10 (the verb *διακρίνω* only means “to observe” in the NT). While early Christian writers borrowed Paul’s expression *discernment of spirits*, in the course of the fifth century the word *διάκρισις* did eventually recover the sense it

carries in Heb. 5:14 and “s’enrichit de sens nouveaux: celui d’aptitude à discerner le juste milieu, celui de mesure et de modération.”<sup>2</sup>

The Hellenes had long experimented with the idea of virtue in terms “de mesure et de moderation,” defining “the good” as a mean (τὸ μέσον, hence *aurea mediocritas*) between two extremes; as an avoiding of excess (μηδὲν ἄγαν), and of all things being done in due proportion (μέτρον). This kind of thinking, however, is rarely found in early Christian thought—until the advent of Christian monachism, that is. It is precisely in the literary débris of that movement, the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, that the word *discretion* begins to appear in the sense indicated; not only to appear, but to be accorded a status of the highest importance. One father says: “Discretion is greater than all the virtues” (N 106, 21.25), and when “an elder was asked: ‘What is the monk’s task (τὸ ἔργον)?’ ‘Discretion’, he replied” (N 93, 21.9). When Paul Euergetinos drew up his great *Synagoge* in the eleventh century he could affirm “that discretion is the greatest among the virtues and the man of faith must do what he does with [discretion] (ὅτι μεγίστη ἐν ἀρεταῖς ἡ διάκρισις καὶ δεῖ τὸν πιστὸν μετ’ αὐτῆς ποιεῖν ἢ ποιεῖ) for those things which are brought about without discretion or aimlessly reap no benefit even though they be good, and sometimes they even do damage.”<sup>3</sup>

In the form in which the “Systematic” collection of *Apophthegmata Patrum* (*APSys*) has come down to us, the longest (194 items) of its 21 sections is the one concerned with discretion. Section 10 (περὶ διακρίσεως) begins with this categorical saying attributed to Antony the Great: “There are some who wore their bodies away with *askesis* but became far from God because they did not have discretion” (διὰ τὸ μὴ ἐσχηκέναι αὐ-

<sup>2</sup> André Cabassut, “Discretion,” *DS* 3 (1957) 1311–1330, at 1312, and citing 1247 ff.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Euergetinos, *Συναγωγή* [*A Collection of the inspired sayings of the godly and holy fathers*] (Venice 1783; 6<sup>th</sup> ed. in 4 vols. Athens 1980: III 372, hypoth. III.31).

τοὺς διάκρισιν, Antony 8, 77B, 10.1). That is clear enough, but the person who wishes to learn more about discretion and how it is to be acquired is doomed to be somewhat disappointed by what follows, for, its title notwithstanding, the section does not have much to say about the nature of discretion. The noun *διάκρισις* only occurs five more times in Section 10, the verb *διακρίνειν* only three times, thus:

On hearing how Abba Agathon willingly accepted all kinds of slander *except* the charge that he was a heretic, “they were amazed at his discretion and went their way enlightened” (Agathon 5, 109C, 10.12).

Charged with presumption when he accepted the water-bottle from a priest, John the Dwarf replied: “I accepted in order to get a reward for him and so he would not be distressed that nobody accepted from him.” “They were astonished when he said this and much enlightened by his discretion,” the passage concludes (John Colobos 7, 205C, 10.37).<sup>4</sup>

A brother asks an elder whether one has salvation if such-and-such a *logismos* comes to him. “Having no experience in discretion, that [elder] replied: ‘He has lost his soul.’” [The brother goes to] “report his *logismoi* to Abba Silvanus, for he was one of great discretion [who] poulticed [*κατέπλασεν*] his soul [with texts] from the sacred Scriptures [indicating] that there is repentance for those who consciously turn to God ... I have told these things so we might see that there is danger in speaking of either our *logismoi* or our actions to indiscreet/undiscerning persons” (*ἀδιακρίτοις ἀνθρώποις*) (N 217, 10.100).

A devout brother reproved by “a voice,” having *distinguished* the power of the voice (*διακρίνας τὴν δύναμιν τῆς φωνῆς*), modified his behaviour (N 404, 10.137).

While it is clear from these apophthegms that discretion is admirable, useful, and essential in a confessor, they tell us almost nothing about what discretion *is*; there is however one more saying that does shed a little light: Synkletike 15, 425CD.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See also the apophthegm Poemen 52, 333CD, 10.88 (cited 651 below).

<sup>5</sup> This is an extract from the *Vita* of the fourth-century Amma Synkletike,

Here is posed the very question one would like to have answered: “There is an intensified *askesis* that is of the enemy and his disciples practice it; how then are we to discriminate the godly and royal *askesis* from that which is tyrannical and demoniacal?” (*πὼς οὖν διακρίνωμεν τὴν θείαν καὶ βασιλικὴν ἄσκησιν ἐκ τῆς τυραννικῆς καὶ δαιμονιώδους;*). In other words, how is one to exercise discretion? Then the good amma goes on: “Is it not clear from due proportion?” (*ἢ δῆλον ὡς ἀπὸ τῆς συμμετρίας;*) and a little further on she says: “For lack of proportion is destructive everywhere” (*πανταχοῦ γὰρ ἡ ἀμετρία φθοροποιὸς τυγχάνει*).

*συμμετρία, ἀμετρία*: due proportion, lack of proportion; that which is within the limit (*μέτρον*) and that which is beyond it, in either the sense of falling short of or of exceeding the limit: these are what discretion is to discern and avoid, for there is danger in both. E.g.: “one can suffer damage from disproportionate (*ἀμετρία*) weeping” (N 135, 3.38). Amma Synkletike goes further: the enemy “will project a totally unreasonable sorrow that has been called *accidie* by many people” (Synkletike S 10,<sup>6</sup> 10.103). Evagrius Ponticus, “the philosopher of the desert,” stresses that there is a proper *time* as well as proportion for every practice (*Practicus* 15, 10.25):

Reading, watching, and prayer stabilize a wandering mind; hunger, labor, and isolation quench burning desire; psalm-singing, long-suffering, and mercy put anger to rest, if these things are activated at the appropriate times and in due proportion (*καὶ ταῦτα τοῖς προσήκουσιν χρόνοις τε καὶ μέτροις γινόμενα*). For that which is disproportionate or not in due season (*τὰ γὰρ ἀμετρα καὶ ἄκαιρα*) is short-lasting and harmful rather than beneficial.

The word *μέτρον* is employed in two spiritual senses in the *apophthegmata*. On the one hand it is used to denote a person’s actual stature, meaning the point to which he has advanced in

<sup>6</sup>BHG 1694, PG 28.1487–1558, ch. 100.

<sup>6</sup>Jean-Claude Guy, *Recherches sur la tradition grecque des Apophthegmata Patrum* (Brussels 1962, rpt. 1984 with corrections) 35.

his spiritual progress, e.g.: μακάριε, οὐπω ἔφθασας εἰς τὸ μέτρον τῶνδε τῶν [αὐτῶν δύο] γυναικῶν τῆσδε τῆς πόλεως.<sup>7</sup> Although the monk is repeatedly warned *not* to attempt to measure himself or to assess his own progress<sup>8</sup> the question is frequently asked: “have I arrived” (or it is said: “you have not yet arrived”) “at the stature (μέτρον) of ...”<sup>9</sup> On the other hand μέτρον can mean both a person’s potential or his capability, hence the *limit* beyond which he is incapable of proceeding:

Abba Orsisios said: “Unbaked brick set in a foundation near to a river does not last one day, but it lasts like stone if it is baked. Likewise a person with a carnal mentality and not purged by the fire of the word of God like Joseph [Ps 104:19, LXX only] falls apart when he proceeds to govern. For there are many temptations for such people. A person aware of his own limitations (τὰ ἴδια μέτρα) does well to flee from the burden of authority; but they who are firm in the faith are immovable ... As for ourselves, knowing our own limitations (μέτρα), let us fight the good fight for in that way we are only just able to escape the judgement of God” (Orsisios 1, 316AB, 15.69).

An elder said: “This is why we make no progress: we do not understand our own limitations (οὐκ ἐπιστάμεθα τὰ μέτρα ἑαυτῶν); we do not persevere in the work we undertake and we seek to acquire virtue effortlessly” (N 297, 7.30).

A brother asked an elder: “What is humble mindedness?” “It is to do good to those who wrong you” the elder said. “And if one cannot measure up to that stature (ἐὰν μὴ φθάσῃ τις εἰς τὸ

<sup>7</sup> N 489, 20.21, BHG 999yb *De praestantia mulierum duarum*. The plural is also found in this sense: “Until a man attains the stature of Moses (εἰς τὰ μέτρα Μωϋσέως) and become almost a son of God, he gets no help from the world” (N 538). See also N 449, ἰδοὺ ἄλλα τὰ μέτρα τὰ σὰ καὶ ἄλλα τὰ ἐκείνων.

<sup>8</sup> Thus Poemen 36 and 73, 15.50 and 51. Isaiah of Scete as quoted in 5.23, 10.28, and 15.26: “The task (ἔργον) of humility is this: silence and not to measure oneself in anything”; the same injunction is attributed to Macarius the Great (1.16) and to John Colobos 34, 216AC (μὴ ἑαυτὸν μετρεῖν).

<sup>9</sup> Thus N 67, 20.22; N 489, 20.21; Eucharistus 1, 168D–169C, 20.2; N 646, 10.164; Carion 1, 249CD, 15.17; Sisoës 9, 393BC, 15.62.

μέτρον τοῦτο), what should he do?” the brother said. “Let him run away and elect to remain silent” (φευγέτω ἐλόμενος τὸ σιωπᾶν) the elder said (N 305A,<sup>10</sup> 15.81).

It is clear that the monk needs to be aware of his own limits and potential.

It is perhaps even more important that one who is directing others be aware of (and respect) *their* μέτρα. This is the point of a well-known story about Antony the Great (Antony 13, 77D–80A, 10.3):

There was somebody in the desert hunting wild beasts and he saw Abba Antony enjoying himself (χαριεντιζόμενον) with the brothers. He was offended, so the elder wanted to convince him that the brothers needed to relax from time to time. He said to him: “Put an arrow to your bow and draw it.” He did so. He said to him again: “Draw,” and he drew. Again he said: “Draw.” The hunter said to him: “If I draw too much (ὑπὲρ τὸ μέτρον) my bow will break.” Said Abba Antony to him: “So it is too with the work of God (τὸ ἔργον τοῦ Θεοῦ). If we draw beyond measure (πλεῖον τοῦ μέτρου) on the brothers they will soon collapse; so they must relax from time to time.

Writing ca. 419 about Pachomius (ca. 290–346), the alleged founder of coenobitic monachism, Palladius says that an angel gave him a bronze tablet on which were inscribed instructions on how to administer the young monks he was about to gather together to live a common life under his direction:<sup>11</sup>

Let each one eat and drink according to his strength (κατὰ δύναμιν) and do you give them tasks proportionate to the strength (πρὸς τὰς δυνάμεις) of those who eat. Do not prevent them from fasting or eating but give the physically demanding tasks to the stronger ones who are eating, imposing easy tasks (τὰ ἄτονα) on the less strong and more ascetic ones (τοῖς ἀτονωτέροις καὶ ἀσκητικωτέροις).

Thus “From each according to his ability, to each according to

<sup>10</sup> Guy, *Recherches* 90 n.1.

<sup>11</sup> *HL* 32.2, ed. Butler 88–89; cf. Soz. *HE* 3.14.10–11.



his need” (as one would later express it) appears to have been a basic element of the monastic way of life, extending beyond the merely material and physical aspects of that life, as this extract from the section on *Discretion* makes clear (N 216, 10.112):

An experienced elder told a brother: “It is required of a [monk] according to the capability of each one” (*πρὸς τὸ μέτρον ἑκάστου ζητεῖται παρ’ αὐτοῦ*). The brother begged the elder: “For the Lord’s sake, explain this saying to me.” The elder said to him: “Suppose there is a highly desirable object lying here and two brothers came in, one of great capability, the other less so (*ὁ εἰς ἔχων μέτρα μεγάλα, ὁ δὲ ἕτερος ἥττονα*). If the *logismos* of the perfect brother says: ‘I would like to possess that object’ and, without hesitation, he immediately represses it, he is not defiled. And if the one not so advanced should covet the object and entertain the thought in his mind but still does not take it, neither is he defiled.”

It is no easy matter to identify one’s own or (*a fortiori*) another’s limitations. Fine distinctions are to be made to arrive at a satisfactory conclusion, distinctions of which only a subtle discretion is capable. While there is little to be learnt from the *Apophthegmata* about what precisely the Fathers meant by discretion, there is one Father who has good deal to say about it: John Cassian (ca. 360–435). Although John was very much part of the eremitic tradition (there are eight sayings attributed to him in *APalph*, 244A–246D) in a number of important ways he was not as others were. Indeed he resembles Evagrius (whose disciple he was) more than any other of the Fathers. As a young man he enrolled as a monk at Bethlehem but within a few years (certainly after 385) he left for Egypt with his friend Germanus. For some time (maybe for as many as fourteen or as few as two years) he was at Scete and The Cells but in 399 or 400 he went to Constantinople. There he was raised to the diaconate by John Chrysostom who sent him on an embassy to the then Pope of Rome, Innocent I. John appears to have remained in the west for the rest of his life, mainly in Provence, where he founded two monasteries near Marseilles. Some time after 425 he produced the two works for which he is famous: the *Institutes of the Coenobia* (twelve books) and the *Conferences (Conflationes)* (twenty-four books). In these works he

sought to set out and adapt the theory and practice of Egyptian monachism for monks in Provence. Unlike the *apophthegmata*, John's books are sustained discourses. They were written in Latin—which may have been his mother tongue, for he was probably born and raised in the west, possibly in Provence.<sup>12</sup> Much of what he writes is put into the mouth of one or other of the Desert Fathers he had known in Egypt, or even one of their predecessors, e.g. Antony the Great (whom one of them claimed to have heard speaking.) But, bearing in mind that it must have been at least a quarter of a century since John had been in Egypt when he set himself to writing about the way they lived and taught there and that he was *adapting* his material to the needs of the west, the question arises of how accurately his work portrays Egyptian ideals. But after considering all the available evidence, Owen Chadwick concludes: “Cassian's testimony therefore is not far from the original Egyptian tradition.”<sup>13</sup>

What then does John have to say about discretion? The second book of *Conferences*, “De discretione,” is entirely concerned with this topic, which has however already been broached at the end of the previous book. There Abba Moses of Scete engaged in a dialogue with Germanus (the friend of John) and one or more unnamed companions (of whom we are allowed to assume that John was one). Having spoken at length of the goal of the monk (*de monachi destinatione vel fine*) Moses goes on to say (*Conf.* 1.23.1):

Tomorrow I want to tell you a little more about the excellence and grace of discretion (*volo vobis adhuc super discretionis eximietate vel gratia*) which among all the virtues holds the supreme and first place (*quae inter cunctas virtutes arcem ac primatum tenet*) and to demonstrate its excellence and usefulness not only by day-to-day examples but also by the ancient opinions and sayings of our fathers (*excellentiamque eius et utilitatem non solum cotidianis exemplis sed etiam antiquis patrum consultationibus ac sententiis adprobare*).

<sup>12</sup> Owen Chadwick, *John Cassian, a Study in Primitive Monasticism*<sup>2</sup> (London 1968) 9.

<sup>13</sup> *John Cassian* 13.

Next day Moses starts out by asserting that discretion “is not some small virtue nor one that can be attained by human effort along the way unless it be conferred by divine generosity” (*est enim non mediocris quaedam virtus nec quae humana passim valeat industria comprehendere, nisi divina fuerit largitate conlata*, 2.1.3). “So you see,” he says a little later, “the gift of discretion is nothing earthly or of small account but the highest award of divine grace” (*videtis ergo non terrenum nec parvum esse discretionis munus, sed divinae gratiae maximum praemium*, 2.1.4).

In accordance with his promise to illustrate his message with examples from the past, Moses goes on to recall how, as a young man, he once heard Antony the Great discussing the following question at great length: “What virtue, what observance could always keep the monk protected from the snares and deceptions of the devil and bring him in a straight line and with a sure pace to the summit of perfection?” (2.2.1–2). Antony’s response echoes his apophthegm quoted above (Antony 8): that some, having led lives of impeccable and severe asceticism, came to a bad end (*detestabili fine concluderint*), their lack of discretion having barred them from persevering to the end (2.2.3–4):

One can see no other reason for their fall other than that they did not have the opportunity of being instructed by those of old time and were not able to acquire that virtue [sc. discretion] which, keeping itself distant from the two opposing extremes, teaches the monk always to proceed along the Royal Way, permitting one neither to diverge to the right (to exceed the limit of just self-control by excessive fervour and inappropriate self-advancement) nor to the left (to relaxation and vice under the pretext of ruling the body correctly in a slackness of spirit) (*minus a senioribus instituti nequaquam potuerunt rationem discretionis adipisci, quae praetermittens utramque nimietatem via regia monachorum docet semper incedere et nec dextra virtutum permittit extollī*).

Prompted by many psalms, the ascetic endeavour is frequently referred to as “the way,” “the way of God,”<sup>14</sup> and

<sup>14</sup> E.g. εἰς τὴν ὁδὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ bis in N 248, 10.115, and “the strait and

rather magnificently as “the Royal Way” (to which Synkletike may have been making oblique reference with her “godly and royal *askesis*,” 639 above) This is a reference to a passage in Numbers: requesting permission to lead the Israelites through the land of Edom, Moses assures its king, “We will go along the Royal Way; we will not turn aside to the right side nor to the left until we have passed your borders” (ὁδῶ βασιλικῇ πορευσόμεθα, οὐκ ἐκκλινοῦμεν δεξιὰ οὐδὲ εὐώνημα ἕως ἂν παρέλθωμεν τὰ ὄριά σου, Num 20:17, 21:22; cf. Prov 4:27). The idea appealed to the desert-dwellers: “Abba Benjamin would say to his disciples: ‘Travel the Royal Way (ὁδῶ βασιλικῇ πορεύεσθε), count [“do not count” *nn*] the mile-posts and be not discouraged’ ” (Benjamin 5, 145A, 7.5). When Abba Poemen advocated a moderate degree of fasting Abba Joseph commented: “They gave us this way because it is royal and light”<sup>15</sup> (παρέδωκαν ἡμῖν τὴν ὁδὸν ταύτην ὅτι βασιλική ἐστι καὶ ἐλαφρά, Poemen 31, 329C, 10.61). And at the conclusion of what may well be the most enigmatic item in the entire apophthegmatic canon, the writer concludes: “Let us guard against asking of God for more than we can handle and agreeing to do what we are in fact incapable of delivering. For it is better to travel the Royal Way by which (deviating neither to right nor to left) we will be able to be saved from this present wicked age, having humility in all things.”<sup>16</sup>

Sayings such as these may have been inspired by Basil of Caesarea (Basil the Great, ca. 330–379). In the fourth chapter of his *Monastic Constitutions*, headed “That one must adjust abstinence to the strength of the body” (ὅτι δεῖ τῇ δυνάμει τοῦ

narrow way” (Mt 7:14) in 10.116, N 249, Ammonas 1 124A. See also ἡ ἀληθινὴ ὁδός at the end of Poemen 8, 324B, 10.54.

<sup>15</sup> Surely a subtle allusion to Christ who is the *way* (ἡ ὁδός, Jn 14:6) and whose burden is *light* (ἐλαφρόν, Mt 11:30).

<sup>16</sup> καλὸν δὲ μᾶλλον τὴν βασιλικὴν ὁδεύειν ὁδὸν δι’ ἧς δυνησόμεθα μὴ ἐκκλίνοντες εἰς δεξιὰ ἢ εἰς ἀριστερὰ σωθῆναι, N 620: J. Wortley, “A ‘Narratio’ of Rare Distinction: *de monacho superbo*,” *AnalBol* 100 (1982) 351–363, and “*De monacho superbo*: BHG 1450x,” *Florilegium* 1 (1979) 126–139.

σώματος μετρεῖν τὴν ἐγκράτειαν, *PG* 31.1345D), he says: “It is appropriate for the ascetic to be detached from all conceit and to travel the truly middle and royal road, not at all inclining to either [side]: neither embracing relaxation nor disabling the body by excessive abstinence.”<sup>17</sup> He makes a similar reference to Num 20:17, 21:22, in the Homily εἰς τὸ πρόσεχε σεαυτῶ: “If you are a traveller, pay heed to yourself like the one who prayed ‘Direct my steps’ [Ps 118:113], lest you turn aside from the way and incline to left or to right: travel the Royal Road.”<sup>18</sup>

John Cassian avers that it is by discretion that one discerns the Royal Way and by discretion that “we will not turn aside to the right hand nor to the left until we have passed your borders.” He makes Abba Moses assert that “the lamp of the body” in the Gospel (Mtt 6:2–23, Lk 11:34–36) is discretion (2.2.5) and give various examples, in the course of which he says: “For the parent, the guardian, and the moderator of all the virtues is discretion” (*omnium namque virtutum generatrix, custos moderatrixque discretio est*, 2.4.4). Three striking examples of the use of discretion follow, ending with the statement: “So you see how dangerous it is not to have discretion” (2.8).

Germanus now asks a very pertinent question: “It is abundantly clear from these recent examples and the pronouncements of those of old time that discretion is the source and in a way the root of all virtues (*fontem quodammodo radicemque cunctarum esse virtutum*). We want to be taught in what way one

<sup>17</sup> *Const. ascet.* 4.2 (*PG* 31.1349B): τύφου παντὸς ἀπηλλάχθαι προσήκει τὸν ἀσκητὴν, καὶ τὴν μέσην ὄντως καὶ βασιλικὴν ὁδὸν πορευόμενον, ἐπὶ θάτερα μηδαμῶς ἀποκλίνειν· μήτε τὴν ἄνεσιν ἀσπαζόμενον, μήτε τῇ ὑπερβολῇ τῆς ἐγκρατείας ἀχρειοῦντα τὸ σῶμα.

<sup>18</sup> ὁδοιπόρος εἶ ὁμοιος τῷ εὐχόμενῳ· τὰ διαβήματά μου κατεύθυνον. πρόσεχε σεαυτῶ μὴ παρατραπῆς τῆς ὁδοῦ, μὴ ἐκκλίνης δεξιᾷ ἢ ἀριστερᾷ· ὁδῶ βασιλικῇ πορεύου: *L’Homélie de Basil de Césarée sur le mot ‘Observe-toi toi-même’*, ed. Stig Y. Rudberg (Uppsala 1962) 29, *PG* 31.206C; English transl. (from *PG*) M. M. Wagner, *Saint Basil: The Ascetical Works* (New York 1950) 431–446. Further on (ch. 8) one is advised to devote his entire endeavour towards the upward journey, ὅλην ἔχειν τὴν ὁρμὴν πρὸς τὸν ἄνω πορείαν (Rudberg 36, *PG* 216C).

should acquire [discretion] or how it is possible to know whether things are true and godly or false and devilish” (2.9.1). Moses’ answer is formal (2.10.1):

True discretion is not acquired other than by true humility. The first evidence of this humility is if everything, not only that which is to be done but also what is contemplated, be submitted to the judgement of the elders (*seniorum reserventur examini*) so that one trust nothing to one’s own judgement but acquiesce in their decisions in all things and learn from their tradition what he ought to judge to be right and wrong.

“Therefore the footsteps of the elders should always be followed with closest attention and everything that arises in our hearts be brought to them without the veil of shame” (2.11.8)—but there follows a warning which found its way into *APys* as an apophthegm (5.4, from *Conf.* 2.13):

Abba Cassian said: “Abba Moses used to tell us: ‘It is good not to hide the *logismoi* but to declare them to spiritual and discerning elders (*γέρονσι πνευματικοῖς καὶ διακριτικοῖς*); not to those who have only gone white with time, for many are they who, considering [a father’s] age, confess their own *logismoi* and, instead of healing, fall into despair on account of the inexperience (*ἀπειρίαν*) of the one hearing [the confession].’

This point is made at some length (74 lines), leaving no doubt that, for John, discretion is in fact a habit of following in the footsteps of those who have gone before, not of exercising one’s own judgement. “For in this way we can easily attain the knowledge of true discretion (*ad scientiam discretionis verae pervenire facillime poterimus*): walking in the footsteps of the ancients, let us not presume either to do anything novel or to conclude anything by our own judgement” (*neque agere quicquam novi neque discernere nostro iudicio praesumamus*, 2.11.6). Thus John seems to be saying that while on the one hand we can “easily attain” (*pervenire*) discretion, on the other hand we must always have recourse to the counsel of the fathers to guide us rather than exercise a grace granted to the individual. “For by no other vice does the devil lead and draw the monk to a sudden death as when he persuades him to neglect the counsels of the elders

and to trust in his own judgement and his own understanding” (2.11.7). This however is not really consonant with a scriptural text (which John has himself previously quoted) that seems to say that discretion can grow in a person through experience: “Solid food is for full grown men who by reason of use [or: “trained by experience”] have their senses exercised to discern good and evil” (τῶν διὰ τὴν ἕξιν τὰ αἰσθητήρια γεγυμνασμένα ἔχόντων πρὸς διάκρισιν καλοῦ τε καὶ κακοῦ: Heb 5:14, *Conf.* 2.4.3). And in fact, elsewhere John concedes that this can be so for those well advanced in asceticism (*Inst.* 5.4.1):

There is an old and admirable saying of blessed Antony [*non inveni*] that if after living in a coenobium a monk seek to attain a higher [degree of] perfection, having acquired the gift of discretion, he is then capable of relying on his own judgement and, attaining the summit of *anachoresis*, he does not in the least have to ask of one person, even the greatest, about any of all the virtues (*et adprehensio discretionis examine proprio iam potens est stare iudicio atque ad arcem anachoreseos pervenire, minime debere ab uno quamvis summo universa genera virtutum expetere*).

Later (5.36.1) he characterises anchorites as those who

dwelling for a long time in coenobia, having been carefully and thoroughly instructed in the *rule of patience and discretion*, having mastered the virtues of both humility and poverty and having totally destroyed every vice, penetrate the deep recesses of the desert in order to engage in terrible combat with the demons.

The dictum “Every effort should be made through the virtue of humility for the grace of discretion to be acquired (*discretionis bonum ... adquiri*) which can keep us undamaged from either extreme” (*Conf.* 2.16.1) forms a bridge passage, assuring one that discretion is something that can be acquired and moving towards a more formal definition of what it is: “For there is an old saying: ἀκρότητες ἰσότητες, extremes meet each other.” The final section of this conference then proceeds to speak of fasting, using it as an example to illustrate the nature of discretion. For it is a simple fact that some people need more food and drink, also more sleep, than others, just as some can work harder and longer than others. Likewise for certain activities

there is a right *time* for some people that would be wrong for others. To deviate from the right path, either by (for instance) drinking too much or too little, is equally harmful and in the end the harm produces an equally noxious result. One who fasts too much will suffer malnutrition, he who eats too much will be in danger of losing his soul—and so forth. Discretion is what teaches a person to identify the way that is correct for him and to walk the tightrope between too much and too little.

While the various sections of *APsys* do not by any means consist only of items clearly related to the stated topic of the section, they do for the most part contain a significant number of items clearly pertinent to that topic. Section ten appears to be an exception. If one were to be asked to read through its 194 items and then suggest what it was all about, he/she might be hard pressed to give an answer. This is explained in an apophthegm which is found in the Discretion-section of *APanon* (N 216–253) but not (together with N 253, 1.31) in *APsys* ch. 10 (N 225):

An elder said: “This is the life of the monk: work, obedience, meditation, not judging, not back-biting ...” [he runs the gamut of monastic morality] “nor to fill one’s belly, but to do everything with discretion (*ἐν διακρίσει δὲ πάντα πράττειν*). In this the monk consists.”

Here is the root of the matter: one can regard discretion as a virtue not unlike others, but it has this distinction: that it is universally applicable. The monk must “do everything with discretion”; discretion is required at all times and in every situation. Discretion can be compared to history: on the one hand, history is a discreet discipline, but on the other hand it is universal in that there is a history of all things. So it is by no means inappropriate that a section on discretion be the longest of all, for it is in the exercise of discretion that the *σωφροσύνη*, the forbearance and restraint characteristic of eremitic monachism, are truly revealed. And they are never more in evidence than when the demands on the capacity of the individual are being adjusted, e.g. Ammonas 4, 120BC, 10.20:



[Somebody asked]: “Three *logismoi* perplex me: whether to dwell in the desert, to go to a foreign land where nobody knows me, or to shut myself up in a cell, meeting nobody and eating every second day.” Abba Ammonas said to him: “It will not do you any good to do any one of the three. Do you rather remain in your cell, eat a little each day and always have in your heart what the Publican said [cf. Luke 18:13, “God be merciful to me a sinner”]—then you can be saved.”

The ability of the discreet elder to adjust the “normal” rules to the needs of the individual (and indeed to go to the heart of the supposed “rules”) is well illustrated by this saying (Longinus 1, 256CD, 10.45):

Abba Longinus asked Abba Lucian about three *logismoi*: “I want to live in a strange land.” The elder said to him: “Unless you hold your tongue wherever you go, you are no stranger. So hold your tongue here and you are a stranger.” He also said: “I want to fast every other day.” Abba Lucian said to him: “The prophet Isaiah said: ‘If you bend you neck like a bulrush, not even so will he call it an acceptable fast’ [Is 58:5]. Do you rather abstain from evil *logismoi*.” A third time he spoke to him: “I want to get away from people,” but he said to him: “Unless you first get it right with people, you will not be able to get it right living alone either.”

Abba Poemen said: “There is a person who seems to keep silent while, in his heart, he is passing judgement on others. Such a person is speaking all the time. Another person is speaking from dawn to dusk yet maintains silence: I mean, he says nothing that is not beneficial” (Poemen 27, 349A, 10.75). Discretion can cut through appearances to the reality behind them: “Our mouth stinks from fasting; we have learnt the scriptures by heart; we have perfected [our knowledge of the Psalms of] David and yet we do not possess what God is looking for—fear, love, and humility” (N 222, 10.135). These and several other items like them appear to be saying that, while one can err to one side or the other, by attempting to do more or achieving less than one is capable of, one can also err in failing to perform in the right spirit, like not being in love and charity with one’s neighbour, e.g. Joseph of Panepho 4, 229AB, 10.40:

A brother asked Abba Joseph: “What am I to do, for I can neither endure distress nor work to provide charity?” The elder said to him: “If you can do neither of these things, keep your conscience clear with respect to your neighbour and refrain from all evil; then you will be saved, for God seeks the sinless soul.”

Abba Poemen cuts to the quick: “There is a person carrying an axe who chops away the whole day long and does not succeed in getting the tree down. There is another person, experienced in felling, who brings the tree down with a few cuts,” and he used to say: “The axe is discretion“ (Poemen 52, 333CD, 10.88). This is illustrated in a hitherto unpublished anonymous tale of a monk in the Thebaid who led a life of utter asceticism, pursuing all the disciplines, eating a meal on Sundays only. The devil gave him to think that he excelled in fasting and ought now to perform miracles, but God intervened. The monk resolved to go to some experienced elder to receive divine guidance on how he might be saved (*ὡς ἐκ Θεοῦ δέξομαι ὁδηγίαν εἰς τὸ σωθῆναί με*). The elder sent him to buy a quantity of bread and wine then to sit quietly in his cell consuming it. He obeyed, praying fervently; gradually he began to understand why it came about that he was living indiscriminately and as he pleased (*εἰς ἐπίγνωσιν τῆς αἰτίας ἐλθὼν δι’ ἣν συνέβη αὐτὸν ἀδιαφορῆσαι ὡς ἐνόμιζεν*). Returning to the elder in due course, he received this sage advice:<sup>19</sup>

My son, God, the lover of mankind, watched over you and did not let the adversary get the better of you—for [the adversary] is ever accustomed to lead astray those directed towards virtue with fine-sounding words and to bring them to the presumptuous state of mind. He also coerces them and leads them on to undertake high degrees of righteous activity (*ἀναγκάζει τε αὐτοὺς καὶ προτρέπεται μεγάλα μέτρα μετελθεῖν κατορθωμάτων*) in order to bring them down this way. There is no sinful passion so abominable in the sight of God as pride: no righteous activity more honourable with him than that of humility. See both the examples of the Pharisee and the Publican [Lk 18:9–

<sup>19</sup> N 641, *BHG* 1450y *De monacho ad superbiam propenso*.

14]; the extremes of both sides are so precarious (*αἱ ἀκρότητες τοίνυν οὕτως ἐπισηφαλεῖς ἑκατέρων μερῶν*), for one of the elders said: “Excess is of the demons.” Follow then the Royal Way (as the Scripture says), deviating neither to left nor to right. Use moderation in feeding (*τὰ ὑπέμετρα τῶν δαιμόνων ἐστίν. ὁδῶ οὖν βασιλικῇ πορεύου κατὰ τὴν Γραφήν, καὶ μὴ ἐκκλίνῃς δεξιὰ ἢ ἀριστερά* [Num 20:17, 21:22], *ἀλλὰ μεσότητι κέχρησο ἐν τῇ μεταλήψει*) eating moderately (*μέτρῳ*) in the evening. But if need arise, do not scruple to break the time-limit; for suffering, or any other reason, you should set aside the appointed hour. And if it happens that you are eating again in the day [i.e. twice a day] do not scruple, for we are not under law but under grace.

The concluding phrase echoes Paul’s *οὐ γὰρ ἐστε ὑπὸ νόμον ἀλλὰ ὑπὸ χάριν* (Rom 6:14) and, so far as this writer can discover, this is the *only* reference to that statement in the *apophthegmata*. This is unfortunate because here Paul unequivocally states precisely *why* the Christian (monk or worldling) is obliged to exercise discretion in his practice.

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