

Musonius Rufus and Roman Ascetical Theory

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ASCETICISM has for generations been a central interest for scholars in the study of religion. In more recent years, however, as interdisciplinary studies have brought together often divergent disciplines,¹ asceticism has emerged as a significant topic in the study both of religion and of philosophy in antiquity, especially in Late Antiquity.² The study of religion, history of philosophy, and classics converge particularly well for studying the history of western asceticism. This essay explores the intersection of those interests by exploring the ascetical theory of the Roman philosopher Musonius Rufus.

Musonius Rufus (*ca* 30–102 C.E.), born in Volsinii, was an Etruscan by birth and an *eques* by status. His influence as a philosopher, however, emerged from his teaching and political involvement in Rome. Cora Lutz, the English translator of Musonius' treatises, maintained that "he was at the height of his influence in the time of Nero," while his political interactions

¹This is best shown by the international conference on asceticism sponsored by Union Seminary in New York City and Saint Louis University, which brought together classicists, philosophers, historians of religions, Church historians, patrologists, anthropologists, and sociologists. See the published papers *Asceticism*, ed. Vincent Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (New York 1995: hereafter WIMBUSH/VALANTASIS).

²There is a vast bibliography for asceticism in Late Antiquity. See especially Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York 1988); Averil Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire* (Berkeley 1990); and Gillian Clark, "Women and Asceticism in Late Antiquity: The Refusal of Status and Gender," in Wimbush/Valantasis 33–48, and her *Women in Late Antiquity: Pagan and Christian Lifestyles* (Oxford 1993).

included banishment by Nero, involvement in political activity during the reign of Vespasian who also banished him, and reinstatement by Titus. His intellectual influence in the imperial period and following extended far: among others he influenced Pliny the Younger and Clement of Alexandria; and he taught the influential philosophers Dio Chrysostom and Epictetus.³ Both in antiquity and in modern times, Musonius has been characterized as the Roman Socrates.⁴ He is generally acknowledged as an important philosopher of the imperial Stoa.⁵

Musonius is the first western author from whom we have a recorded discourse on asceticism.⁶ Granted, the concept of ascetical formation, verbally designated by the Greek words *μελετάω*, *γυμνάζω*, and *ἀσκέω* and their cognates,⁷ was part of the philosophical tradition prior to Musonius, and many earlier philosophers spoke of ascetical activity as part of philosophical and civic life, some of whom may even have written treatises on

³This biographical information is based on Cora Lutz, "Musonius Rufus: The Roman Socrates," YCS 10 (1947: hereafter LUTZ) 13–20, quotation on 14. Lutz provides all the documentation for Musonius' biography and influence. See also Joseph Samuel Houser, "The Philosophy of Musonius Rufus: A Study of Applied Ethics in the Late Stoa" (diss. Brown Univ. 1997: hereafter HOUSER) 1–11; and Delbert L. Wiens, "Musonius Rufus and Genuine Education" (diss. Univ. of Chicago 1970: hereafter WIENS) 1–16; and K. von Fritz, "Musonius," RE 16 (1933) 894.

⁴Lutz 3–4 cites the sources and discusses the comparison. Amand Jagu, *Musonius Rufus Entretien et Fragments: Introduction, Traduction, et Commentaire* (Hildesheim 1979), provides an overview of his life and thought with a French translation of the discourses; for an Italian introduction, overview of life and thought, and translation, Sante Guidotti, *Gaio Rufo Musonio e lo Stoicismo Romano* (Bolsena 1979).

⁵Musonius' Stoic credentials are difficult to establish. Houser 12–48 documents Musonius' philosophical connections with known Stoics. Musonius' emphasis on practice resembles Cynicism. My argument is that the question is not whether Musonius was Cynic or Stoic, but that he, like both Cynicism and Stoicism, turns towards asceticism as a primary modality and concern of philosophy. For further discussion, see the conclusions below.

⁶Musonius did not leave any of his own writings. I accept the reliability of the textual witnesses to his diatribes as edited by O. Hense, *Musonius Rufus Reliquae* (Leipzig 1905) and revised by Lutz. On the question of the reliability of the texts, see Lutz 6–13; Houser 2–7; Wiens 1–18.

⁷See Hermigild Dressler, *The Usage of Ἀσκέω and its Cognates in Greek Documents to 100 A.D.* (Washington 1947).

asceticism.⁸ From the perspective of religious studies, the life and teachings of the Cynics from their founding through Late Antiquity provide an important witness to this prolonged interest and orientation toward asceticism.⁹ Additionally, the therapeutic moral literature of the Hellenistic and Roman period, read with ascetical theory in mind, points toward the pervasive nature of the ascetical question.¹⁰ But none of these writings on the theory of asceticism has survived from a period earlier than Musonius.

The first tangible articulation of an ascetical theory¹¹ emerges

⁸See Joseph Ward Sain, *The Hellenic Origins of Christian Asceticism* (diss. Columbia Univ. 1916); also the section on pagan asceticism by M. Olphe-Galliard in the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* I (1932) 941–960 s.v. “Ascèse, Ascétisme.”

⁹The best collection of essays on Cynicism that spans the whole history is that of R. Bracht Branham and Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé, ed., *The Cynics* (Berkeley 1966). See also Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé, *L’Ascèse Cynique: Un commentaire de Diogène Laërce VI 70–71* (Paris 1986), and her “Le cynisme à l’époque impériale,” *ANRW* II.36.4 (1990) 2720–2833. Another important collection of essays in Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé and Richard Goulet, ed., *Le Cynisme ancien et ses prolongements* (Paris 1993). The history of Cynicism may be consulted (though with care) in the now classic Donald R. Dudley, *A History of Cynicism From Diogenes to the 6th Century A.D.* (London 1937), as well as the more recent Luis E. Navia, *Classical Cynicism: A Critical Study* (Westport 1996).

¹⁰Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton 1994). Nussbaum explores Hellenistic ethics and underscores the performative dimension of ethics, but nowhere refers to asceticism. Her references to Musonius are scant. But see Houser 12–48.

¹¹It is possible to document a corpus of theoretical treatments of asceticism in western philosophy and religion beginning with the first century C.E. We know of two treatises from the Roman imperial period: Discourse VI of Musonius Rufus and Discourse XII of Epictetus. These treatises inaugurate a very long literary tradition of works developing ascetical theory that gathers up all the major religions of the Greco-Roman period and Late Antiquity; they include such significant figures as Clement of Alexandria, Plotinus, Iamblichus, Porphyry, Proclus, the Cappadocians Basil and Gregory of Nyssa, Evagrius of Pontus, John Cassian, and John Climacus, among many others. There is a wide diversity of sources. Among the most helpful: Elizabeth A. Clark, *The Originist Controversy: The Cultural Construction of an Early Christian Debate* (Princeton 1992); Susanna Elm, *‘Virgins of God’: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford 1994); Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism* (Chicago 1987); Philip Rousseau, *Ascetics, Authority, and the Church in the Age of Jerome and Cassian* (Oxford 1978); Aline Rousselle, *Porneia: De la maîtrise du corps à la privation sensorielle, II^e–IV^e siècles* (Paris 1983). For sources and texts, see *Ascetic Behavior in Greco-Roman Antiquity: A Sourcebook*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush (Minneapolis 1990).

from the summaries written by Lucius, a student or follower of Musonius Rufus.¹² From Musonius and his student Epictetus, as James Francis demonstrates, Roman asceticism flourishes in the second century C.E.¹³ The most influential form of Roman ascetical theory¹⁴ develops during the third and fourth centuries in the work of Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus, and Proclus.¹⁵

Although Musonius provides the earliest extant ascetical theory, few scholars have noticed, explored, or explained his theory in relationship to his philosophy. A. C. Van Geytenbeek's *Musonius and Greek Diatribe*, for example, reviews the major doctrines of Musonian ethics and philosophy and intends to locate Musonius' teaching in the context of the diatribe, the popular philosophy of the Hellenistic and Roman period. A

¹²For a general overview of Musonius' asceticism from a religious studies perspective see Teresa M. Shaw, *The Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis 1998) 33–37.

¹³James A. Francis, *Subversive Virtue: Asceticism and Authority in the Second-Century Pagan World* (University Park 1995: hereafter FRANCIS).

¹⁴Parallel to the development of ascetical theory stand various other genres of literature that apply ascetical theory without discussing the theory itself. These applied ascetical writers include Marcus Aurelius (see Francis 21–52; Pierre Hadot, *The Inner Citadel: The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*, transl. Michael Chase [Cambridge 1998] 183–231); Philo of Alexandria (Verna E. F. Harrison, "The Allegorization of Gender: Plato and Philo on Spiritual Child-bearing," in Wimbush/Valantasis 520–534; and more peripherally, Michael L. Satlow, "Shame and Sex in Late Antique Judaism," 535–543); Lucian's *Peregrinus* (see Francis 53–81); the *sententiae* of Sextus (Henry Chadwick, *The Sentences of Sextus: A Contribution to the History of Early Christian Ethics* [Cambridge 1959] 97–106); and the sayings collection in the *Gospel of Thomas* (Richard Valantasis, "Is the Gospel of Thomas Ascetical? Revisiting an Old Problem with a New Theory," *J ECS* 7 [1999] 55–81); perhaps the gospels of the New Testament (see in L. E. Vaage and V. L. Wimbush, edd., *Asceticism and the New Testament* [New York 1999]: Anthony Saldarini, "Asceticism and the Gospel of Matthew," 11–27; Mary Ann Tolbert, "Asceticism and Mark's Gospel," 29–48; Susan R. Garrett, "Beloved Physician of the Soul? Luke as Advocate for Ascetic Practice," 71–96; David Rensberger, "Asceticism and the Gospel of John," 127–148); the apocryphal acts of the New Testament (Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* [Cambridge 1996] 20–67); as well as the biographies of Diogenes Laertius (see for example, Goulet-Cazé [*supra* n.9]); among many other texts.

¹⁵See Anthony Meredith, "Asceticism—Christian and Greek," *JThS* 27 (1976) 313–332; and on the Platonist traditions, John M. Dillon, "Rejecting the Body, Refining the Body: Some Remarks on the Development of Platonist Asceticism," in Wimbush/Valantasis 80–87; and J. Giles Milhaven, "Asceticism and the Moral Good: A Tale of Two Pleasures," 375–394.

chapter (96–123) entitled “The Problems of Asceticism” discusses Musonius’ teaching with regard to the regulation of food, clothing, footwear, household living conditions, furniture, and the personal hygiene of the philosopher without discussing Discourse VI, which is entitled “On Asceticism.” Van Geytenbeek (40–50) treats Discourse VI primarily under the rubric of “Practical education to virtue” where *askesis* relates principally to the practice and enactment of ethical principles. Van Geytenbeek rejects Musonius’ own categorization and systematization in exploring asceticism and analyzes only the applied categories of Musonius’ asceticism. Two unpublished dissertations display the same tendency. Delbert Wiens’ 1970 dissertation, “Musonius Rufus and Genuine Education,” treats asceticism as part of the education of adults as distinct from the education of children. Joseph Houser’s 1997 dissertation, “The Philosophy of Musonius Rufus: A Study of Applied Ethics in the Late Stoa,” also explores tantalizingly “applied ethics” and approaches Musonius’ philosophy from its pervasive practical application. While valuing Musonius’ applicability and even his theory of *askesis*, Houser never expressly studies Musonius’ practicality as part of the larger philosophical and theological discourse about asceticism. For Houser, Musonius’ practicality remains an expression of a philosophical disposition rather than a reformulation of philosophy itself towards ascetical theory and practice.¹⁶ Indeed asceticism in the classical period was a function of education beginning at least with Aristotle, but it cannot be assumed that such an educational formation was the only application of asceticism particularly among philosophers exploring the moral life. Especially when Musonius addresses the question of ascetical theory directly, that ascetical theory must be taken seriously as central to a description and analysis

¹⁶ A similar academic treatment regarding Epictetus occurs in B. L. Hijmans, Jr, *ΑΣΚΗΣΙΣ: Notes on Epictetus’ Educational System* (Assen 1959).

of his asceticism, and that ascetical theory ought to be integrated into an understanding of the author's philosophy and ethics. This has not been the case with those studying Musonius' philosophy.

The evidence for Musonius' ascetical theory is very strong.¹⁷ Lucius, Musonius' student, transmits the teaching by summarizing what he heard from Musonius over a period of time.¹⁸ Discourse VI is presented as a set of arguments reconstructed by Lucius about a subject upon which Musonius frequently spoke: "He always vigorously urged his students toward asceticism using arguments such as these" (παρώρμα δὲ πρὸς ἄσκησιν τοὺς συνόντας ἐντεταμένως ἀεὶ τοιοῖσδέ τισι λόγοις χρώμενος).¹⁹ This introductory statement makes two important points. First, asceticism was central to Musonius' teaching. Second, the arguments presented in Discourse VI, therefore, are summary arguments, not a recording of an argument as Musonius made it. Musonius presented the case for asceticism to his students frequently and consistently using a variety of arguments.

Musonius, however, has remained a peripheral figure to the history of western asceticism. By explicating Musonius' theory of asceticism, this essay will attempt to locate Musonius as part of the mainstream of Greco-Roman and Late Antique Roman and Christian ascetical authors. In a four-part argument, I shall argue first that Musonius Rufus' ascetical theory begins in a particular understanding of the human condition and its attendant debilitation by negative socialization. Second, in the context of the bad habits inculcated by socialization, Musonius advances the cardinal virtues as the goal of ascetical effort, constructing in the process dual subjectivities, a rejected one

¹⁷Francis 11–19 provides a general and helpful introduction to Musonius' and Epictetus' ascetical teaching.

¹⁸See Lutz 8–13 for a description of the two sources (Lucius and Pollio) for summaries of Musonius' teaching.

¹⁹15.7–8, my translation. Unless otherwise noted, I use the text and translation of Lutz, cited by page and line number of the Greek.

that remains in the state of negative socialization and an embraced one that strives to understand and to practice the virtues. Third, in this context Musonius' two systems of asceticism, one for the soul and body together and one for the mind alone, give substance and direction to the effort to practice the virtues. Fourth, Musonius' ascetical theory will be connected to his philosophy and ethics.

1. Philosophical anthropology and negative socialization

Musonius' ascetical teaching originates in his philosophical anthropology. His anthropology revolves around two elements: an innate propensity for virtue and a correlative capacity for becoming like gods. In Discourse II, Lucius explains that Musonius argued that "All of us, he used to say, are so fashioned by nature that we can live our lives free from error and nobly" (πάντες, ἔφη, φύσει πεφύκαμεν οὕτως, ὥστε ζῆν ἀναμαρτήτως καὶ καλῶς, 36.16–17). He underscores that this capacity to live well and blamelessly is for all and not simply for a few, and he attributes this to the fact that "Clearly, then, there is no explanation for this other than that the human being is born with an inclination toward virtue" (δῆλον οὖν, ὡς οὐδὲν ἕτερον τούτου αἴτιον ἢ τὸ πρὸς ἀρετὴν γεγονέναι τὸν ἄνθρωπον, 38.1–2). This is a very positive orientation concerning the human condition and its innate inclination toward virtue.

Musonius also argued that "it is necessary for us to become of one mind with God" (fr.38, οὐκοῦν καὶ ἡμᾶς συμψήφους χρὴ τῷ θεῷ γενέσθαι: 136.4–5, my translation) with respect to human actions. This similarity of opinion with God (συμψήφους τῷ θεῷ) demands that humans accomplish that which is in their control and that they entrust the things outside their control to the benevolence of the cosmos. This high regard for human capacity again underscores Musonius' positive attitude toward human effort.

This positive construction of philosophical anthropology contrasts markedly, however, with the perspective on the human condition described in Discourse VI on asceticism. Here Musonius' ascetical theory problematizes human activity and capacity in order precisely to articulate a basis for ascetical activity.²⁰ Musonius' anthropology in this discourse on ascetical theory has three elements. The first is a rather benign observation that human beings consist of a composite (τι σύνθετον) of both soul and body (54.4), each of which must be addressed fully in any ascetical activity. Musonius will use these constituent elements of human existence as the basis for developing two distinct types of ascetical systems (this will be taken up more fully below). He argues that the ascetic must attend to both (ἀνάγκη τὸν ἀσκοῦντα ἀμφοῖν ἐπιμελεῖσθαι, 54.4–5), without neglecting or denigrating either part. This anthropology remains consistent with the very positive view of the human's capacity to incline toward virtue and the human's ability to cooperate with the divine mind.

The positive perspective on anthropology ends there, however, because the next two elements of Musonius' ascetical anthropology in Discourse VI take a decidedly negative turn. He contrasts the necessity for training in philosophy with medical and other training:

And moreover such practical exercise is the more important for the student of philosophy than for the student of medicine or any similar art (καὶ τοσοῦτω γε χρή μᾶλλον ἀσκεῖν τὸν φιλοσοφεῖν ἀξιοῦντα ἢ περ τὸν ἰατρικῆς ἢ τινος τέχνης ὁμοίας ἐφιέμενον), the more philosophy claims to be a greater and more difficult discipline than any other study. The reason for this is that men who enter the other professions have not had their souls corrupted beforehand (οὐ προδιεφθαρμένοι τὰς ψυχὰς) and have not learned the opposite of what they are going to be

²⁰Houser 12–48 discusses the medical analogy and therapeutic model in relation to Stoic teaching. My perspective here is different, but not contrary to Houser's.

taught (οὐδ' ἐναντία μεμαθηκότες οἷς μαθήσεσθαι μέλλουσιν), but the ones who start out to study philosophy have been born and reared in an environment filled with corruption and evil (ἐν διαφθορᾷ γεγενημένοι πρότερον πολλῇ καὶ ἐμπεπλησμένοι κακίας), and therefore turn to virtue in such a state that they need a longer and more thorough training (οὕτω μετίασι τὴν ἀρετήν, ὥστε καὶ ταύτη πλείονος δεηθῆναι τῆς ἀσκήσεως, 52.26–54.2).

Musonius argues that the social and political environment corrupts the soul. This corruption does not impede those who pursue training in medicine and other practical arts, but has a debilitating effect on those pursuing philosophy because this environment in fact teaches the opposite of the virtues pursued by the philosopher. Doctors and musicians may learn their arts without reference to this depravity, but this environmental depravity forces the philosopher to pursue virtue with vigorous ascetical training. This environmental depravity functions as the spring-board to asceticism, the starting-point for the pursuit of virtue.

The third element of Musonius' ascetical theory builds upon this idea of environmental depravity:

It is true that all of us who have participated in philosophic discussion have heard and apprehended that neither pain nor death nor poverty nor anything else which is free from wrong is an evil, and again that wealth, life, pleasure, or anything else which does not partake of virtue is not a good. And yet, in spite of understanding this, because of the depravity which has been implanted in us straight from childhood and because of evil habits engendered by this depravity (ὅμως δὲ καὶ ταῦθ' ὑπειληφότες διὰ τὴν ἀπὸ παιδῶν εὐθὺς γεγονυῖαν ἡμῖν διαφθορὰν καὶ τὴν ὑπὸ τῆς διαφθορᾶς συνήθειαν πονηράν), when hardship comes we think an evil has come upon us, and when pleasure comes our way we think that a good has befallen us; we dread death as the most extreme misfortune; we cling to life as the greatest blessing, and when we give away money we grieve as if we were injured, but upon receiving it we rejoice as if a benefit had been conferred (54.30–56.5).

Musonius presents this depravity as implanted from youth onward. Depravity comes through socializing, not through the ontology of the human condition (an ontology described in neutral if not positive terms in other discourses as discussed above). Negative socialization hardens into bad habits that impede philosophical progress by habitually interpreting hardship as evil, pleasure as good, death as misfortune, life as a blessing, monetary benefaction as loss, and monetary gifts as gain. Musonius summarizes this habituation to false thinking succinctly: “Similarly with the majority of other things, we do not meet circumstances in accordance with right principles, but rather we follow wretched habit” (παραπλησίως δὲ καὶ ἐπὶ πλείονων ἄλλων οὐκ ἀκολούθως ταῖς ὀρθαῖς ὑπολήψεσι τοῖς πράγμασι χρώμεθα, τῷ δὲ φαύλῳ ἔθει μᾶλλον ἀκολουθοῦμεν, 56.5–7). These habitual responses to the impulses of daily life delude and degrade human reactions by impeding the principled response required by philosophy. Habit, precisely as recrudescence of evil socialization, puts a barrier between right thinking and response and the true virtue of the philosopher. The proper philosophical response to this situation is the philosophical development of proper habits:

Since, then, I repeat, all this is the case, the person who is in training must strive (δεῖ τὸν ἀσκοῦντα ζητεῖν) to habituate himself not to love pleasure, not to avoid hardship, not to be infatuated with living, not to fear death, and in the case of goods or money not to place receiving above giving (56.7–11).

The contrary ascetical discipline, oriented toward indifference to pleasure, endurance of hardship, honesty about living, bravery with respect to death, and giving money rather than receiving it, establishes the values of the true philosopher.²¹

In general, Musonius’ anthropology remained positive. Human beings consist of a composite of soul and body that inclines

²¹Wiens 38–46 explicates well the Musonian concept of *ethos*.

toward virtue and may agree with the mind of God. Only when the issue turned to asceticism did Musonius introduce the negativity of destructive socialization and evil habits. Without this evil against which humans struggle there can exist no correlative good for humans to develop. His theory needed the negative habituation as a platform for positive philosophical effort. Musonius' positive articulations about human ontology and potentiality set the goal for ascetic practice: to acquire virtue and to become godlike despite the habits instilled by society that impede those goals.

2. Virtues as the goals of ascetical effort

Musonius' ascetical system promulgates the four cardinal virtues as goals: the good person must display temperance, justice, courage, and prudence. He presents these virtues not as abstractions, but as fully embodied practices.²² Of temperance, for example, he writes:

How, indeed, could a person immediately become temperate if he only knew that one must not be overcome by pleasure, but was quite unpracticed in withstanding pleasures (52.15–17)?

The practices associated with a particular virtue give the virtue substance and authenticity. Justice requires not only knowing what is fair, but practicing to avoid selfishness and greed; courage requires not only knowing not to fear, but positively practicing courage in the face of fearful things; prudence does not simply list what is good and bad, but must also practice scorn for what appears on the surface to be good. The goal of the good life revolves around the practices associated with each of the four cardinal virtues. Musonius summarizes his perspective: "Therefore upon the learning of the lessons appropriate to each and every excellence (ἀρετή), practical training (ἄσκησις) must follow invariably" (52.24). Musonius yoked virtue to

²²See Houser 83–93.

ascetical training. These ascetical practices of virtue, however, require special toil (πόνος)²³ precisely because people have been socialized and habituated in an opposite direction from birth, a depravity implanted early and seriously impeding progress.

Musonius argues that the theory of virtues and their practice mutually develop the person. Like musicians and doctors, theory must be performed: doctors and musicians “not only must master the theoretical side of their respective arts but must also train themselves to act according to their principles” (μὴ μόνον ἀνειληφέναι τὰ θεωρήματα τῆς αὐτοῦ τέχνης ἐκάτερον, ἀλλὰ καὶ γεγυμνάσαι πράττειν κατὰ τὰ θεωρήματα). It is not the specific vocation of philosopher who must practice the theory of virtues, but any person who would become good (τὸν ἐσόμενον ἀγαθὸν ἄνδρα, 52.11–12). Any who seek the good life and who desire to become good must know both the theory and the practice of virtue. They must be trained in virtue to perform their skills as admirably as a good doctor and an accomplished musician. Those striving toward becoming good must display and perform the virtues in their daily lives. Musonius argues that “Virtue is not simply theoretical knowledge, but it is practical application as well, just like the arts of medicine and music” (ἡ ἀρετή, ἔφη, ἐπιστήμη ἐστὶν οὐ θεωρητικὴ μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ πρακτικὴ καθάπερ ἢ τε ἰατρικὴ καὶ ἡ μουσικὴ, 52.8–10). The analogy with other arts implies that the acquisition of virtue is also an art. Not only is the acquisition of virtue a performance, like the offering of a musician or the therapy of a doctor, but also the end result is a work of art, a fabrication of an artifact of the good person.²⁴ The virtuous art produces a person who displays the theory of virtues in the events of daily living, the finished product of an artistic endeavor of creation. The following summary presents this argument succinctly:

²³This is discussed explicitly in Musonius’ Discourse VII.

²⁴See Maude Gleason, *Making Men: Sophists and Self-Representation in Ancient Rome* (Princeton 1995).

Therefore, as the physician and the musician not only must master the theoretical side of their respective arts but must also train themselves to act according to their principles (δεῖ οὖν ὡσπερ τὸν ἰατρὸν καὶ τὸν μουσικὸν μὴ μόνον ἀνειληφέναι τὰ θεωρήματα τῆς αὐτοῦ τέχνης ἐκάτερον, ἀλλὰ καὶ γεγυμνάσθαι πράττειν κατὰ τὰ θεωρήματα), so a man who wishes to become good (τὸν ἐσόμενον ἀγαθὸν ἄνδρα) not only must be thoroughly familiar (ἐκμανθάνειν) with the precepts which are conducive to virtue but must also be earnest (φιλοτίμως) and zealous (φιλοπόνως) in applying (γυμνάζεσθαι) these principles (52.10–15).

The acquisition of virtue stands as a goal toward which humans may apply themselves energetically. The achievement of the goal will refashion and recreate the person fully, making them not only an artisan but also an artifact of virtue as well.

In Musonius' theory two distinct subjectivities may be understood to function for each person: the first person is that one into whom depravity has been implanted from youth onwards; the second is the one who aims toward becoming good and who becomes good through practice of the virtues. These subjective options are implicit in his treatment of the human condition and the role of the virtues. The second person, the one who strives for the good, receives deliberate training in rejecting the habits formed from childhood onward—negative habits that inhibited the ability to understand the virtues and to perform them accordingly. The person striving toward living the virtuous life rejects the normatively socialized person. The rejection of the socially received subjectivity forms the foundation for the construction of the ascetically virtuous subjectivity. The struggle for the ascetic revolves around the construction of an alternative subjectivity oriented toward the understanding and performance of virtues.²⁵

²⁵The theory undergirding this reading of Musonius' asceticism comes from Richard Valantasis, "Constructions of Power in Asceticism," *Jour Amer Acad Rel* 63 (1995) 792–800.

3. Musonius' two interrelated ascetical systems

Musonius presents two interrelated systems of asceticism²⁶ to assist the seeker in understanding the steps toward the construction of this alternative and preferred subjectivity: "Now there are two kinds of training, one which is appropriate for the soul alone, and the other which is common to both soul and body" (τῆς οὖν ἀσκήσεως ἢ μὲν τις ἰδίᾳ τῆς ψυχῆς μόνῃς γίνουιτ' ἂν ὀρθῶς, ἢ δὲ τις κοινῇ ταύτης τε καὶ τοῦ σώματος, 54.10–11). Musonius describes the asceticism common to both soul and body:

We use the training (ἀσκησις) common to both when we discipline ourselves (συνεπιζομένων ἡμῶν) to cold, heat, thirst, hunger, meagre rations, hard beds, avoidance of pleasures, and patience under suffering. For by these things and others like them the body is strengthened and becomes capable of enduring hardship, sturdy and ready for any task (διὰ γὰρ τούτων καὶ τῶν τοιούτων ῥώννυται μὲν τὸ σῶμα καὶ γίνεται δυσπαθὲς τε καὶ στερεὸν καὶ χρήσιμον πρὸς ἅπαν ἔργον); the soul too is strengthened since it is trained for courage by patience under hardship and for self-control by abstinence from pleasures (ῥώννυται δὲ ἡ ψυχὴ γυμναζομένη διὰ μὲν τῆς ὑπομονῆς τῶν ἐπιπόνων πρὸς ἀνδρείαν, διὰ δὲ τῆς ἀποχῆς τῶν ἡδέων πρὸς σωφροσύνην, 54.11–18).

Musonius based the ascetical system for both body and soul upon the accommodation and endurance of physical hardship. By training the body to endure a variety of negative physical circumstances, the ascetic develops physical strength while at the same time training the soul to manifest two of the four primary virtues, courage and self-control.

There is no suggestion here of denigration or rejection of the body. Nor is there any sense that bodily practices are secondary to spiritual practices. The focus on the performance of specific acts of endurance allows Musonius to integrate body and soul in one common ascetical formation that benefits the whole per-

²⁶Francis 12–13; Shaw (*supra* n.12) 34–35; Wiens 73–85.

son. In other words, the body-soul distinction reiterates the distinction between the theory of virtue and the practice of virtue discussed earlier: the theory only has validity when it is put into practice, so that the practice, the physical actions, perfect and complete the theoretical formulation.

The second ascetical system engages the mind and adapts practices to intellectual discernment:

Training which is peculiar to the soul consists (*ἰδίᾳ δὲ τῆς ψυχῆς ἄσκησις ἐστὶ*) first of all in seeing that the proofs pertaining to apparent goods as not being real goods are always ready at hand (*πρῶτον μὲν τὰς ἀποδείξεις προχείρους ποιείσθαι τὰς τε περὶ τῶν ἀγαθῶν τῶν δοκούντων ὡς οὐκ ἀγαθὰ*) and likewise those pertaining to apparent evils as not being real evils (*καὶ τὰς περὶ τῶν κακῶν τῶν δοκούντων ὡς οὐ κακά*), and in learning to recognize the things which are truly good and in becoming accustomed to distinguish them from what are not truly good (*καὶ τὰ ἀληθῶς ἀγαθὰ γνωρίζειν τε καὶ διακρίνειν ἀπὸ τῶν μὴ ἀληθῶς ἐθίζεσθαι*). In the next place it consists of practice (*εἶτα δὲ μελετᾶν*) in not avoiding any of the things which only seem evil, and in not pursuing any of the things which only seem good; in shunning by every means those which are truly evil and in pursuing by every means those which are truly good (54.18–25).

The second ascetical system describes a set of intellectual practices correlative and parallel to the physical practices of the asceticism appropriate to the body and the soul. These intellectual practices strive to exercise the mind in right judgment and to lead the person to good living in a fully integrated system. This second ascetical system revolves around three steps.

The first step is insuring that proofs are ready at hand.²⁷ The proofs, presumably drawn from Musonius' school lessons, indicate that apparent goods are not really good and apparent evils are not necessarily evil. The proofs thereby undercut the received reality that depends upon appearances and they probe further to establish what is indeed good and evil within the

²⁷On the role of arguments and proofs in the Stoic context, see Houser 93–96.

system that Musonius propounds. This step hinges on mastering the principles that undercut appearances and having them available for easy use. These appearances in all likelihood reproduce the depraved reality of the wider culture that impedes philosophic pursuit of the good and that results in deadening habits.

The second step follows more explicitly on the first. In addition to the proofs, the ascetic must recognize and distinguish what is truly good, while at the same time developing a familiarity and comfort with the understanding that follows from that recognition and distinction. The second step, then, consciously redefines the good and establishes the redefined goods as patterns of response in daily circumstances. The ascetic must not only master the classroom understanding but also learn personally to understand and distinguish the truly good things. This step describes a process of accommodation to the redefined and re-articulated concept of the good central to the development of a subjectivity oriented toward the development of virtue.

The third step, adhering to Musonius' emphasis on the full integration of theory and practice, advocates the practice of acting on the basis of the newly redefined reality. Here the ascetic practices the refusal to act on the wider culture's wrongly-conceived and false fantasy of reality regarding good and evil. Positively put, the ascetic embraces the pursuit of a good and the avoidance of evil articulated in the reality reconstructed away from the deadening habits of action and thought promulgated in the wider culture.

It is possible now in summary to describe Musonius' system from all the parts that have been explored. Musonius developed a fully articulated ascetical theory that integrates every facet of human existence—the personal and the social, as well as the intellectual and the physical. His ascetical system, the integrated system of theory and practice, recognizes that social habituation ruins an otherwise healthy human inclination

toward the development of virtue and the conforming of the mind to the divine. Asceticism seeks to reverse this debilitating social habituation by the intentional pursuit of virtues. This reversal requires two strategies of reconstruction. The first encompasses the redefinition of what is good and what is evil apart from their socially received definitions and the construction of what is truly good and truly evil based on an understanding of the virtues. The second strategy involves the reconstruction of reality that follows from this redefinition of good and evil so that the person learns to live naturally and habitually in a world that at once deviates from the surrounding received and common social world and manifests the newly articulated morals and values. The ascetic must learn not only to redefine good and evil, but to live a life based on this redefinition and re-habituation. The strategies of reconstruction provide the foundation for the practice of what has been theoretically presented. The center of this ascetical system remains the fabrication of the truly good person as an artifact, an embodiment, of virtue. The reality of the good person's life will be known to exhibit the redefined understanding of the world based upon the pursuit of truly good things and the avoidance of evil things. In short, the lived religion of the person will display the ethical, spiritual, and intellectual understanding of the person. Two related kinds of ascetical programs lead to the development of this fabricated personality: the intellectual formation of the soul and the ethical (or practical) formation of the soul and the body together. The person, a composite of soul and body in this system, receives complete transformation of mind and body in concrete experiences both mental and physical. This ascetical system does not rest on a bifurcation of physical and spiritual, but upon their mingling in the life of the person. Through this complete ascetical system, the problem that arose for the person through debilitating habituation is

resolved: by dual ascetical work on soul and body, and on the soul, the person is freed again to attain the virtuous life that communicates the mind of God.

4. Asceticism in Musonius' philosophy

Musonius' ascetical system does not diverge from his philosophical agenda. His ascetical system in fact explains much about what has been recorded about his thought and his concerns. Van Geytenbeek's analysis of Musonius' specific practices makes sense only in relationship to this articulated ascetical system. The ultimate goal in Musonius' system includes the regulation of food, clothing, footwear, living conditions, furniture, and personal hygiene, not as separate activities unrelated to one another, but as practical elements displaying, or embodying, particular virtues. These practices, both physical and intellectual, become ascetical for Musonius precisely because they become arenas for the struggle against received socialization and toward the attainment of virtue in the practice of everyday living. Divorced from the system, these practices seem quaint and common, but aligned with the ascetical system they become the concrete places where reality is reconstructed and where the person gains mastery of a new self.

These seemingly unrelated topics such as food and clothing are central, not peripheral, elements of his ascetical system. Musonius' system expands the conceptual mold of ascetical concerns to include a wide variety of practices not normally associated with asceticism by modern scholars. Here we can include also the following as ascetic disciplines: exile (Discourse IX), freedom from prosecuting others (X), farming (XI), disobedience (XVI), marriage (XII and XIII A and B),²⁸ and the education of women (III).²⁹ Musonius purposefully connects

²⁸See Houser 135–136.

²⁹Houser 158–196 explores this fully in the context of Roman moralizing.

theory and practice in every domain of human existence in which humans might cultivate the life of virtue. For Musonius, every human activity, not just a select few, holds the potential for ascetic endeavor.

An analysis of one of these ascetical disciplines according to Musonius' own system will illustrate its ascetical modality and the way Musonius' system operates. Discourse IX³⁰ takes up the question of whether or not exile is an evil. After a brief argument that a person in exile still has access to the physical world, since exile "does not in any way deprive us of water, earth, air, or the sun and the other planets, or indeed even the society of other people,"³¹ the treatise presents the simple principle to be applied readily to exile:

For such [an exiled person] does not value or despise any place as the cause of his happiness or unhappiness (ὁ γὰρ τοιοῦτος χωρίον μὲν οὐδὲν οὔτε τιμᾶ οὔτ' ἀτιμάζει οὕτως ὡς εὐδαιμονίας (ἢ κακοδαιμονίας) αἴτιον), but he makes the whole matter depend upon himself (αὐτὸς δὲ ἐν αὐτῷ τίθεται τὸ πᾶν) and considers himself a citizen of the city of God (νομίζει εἶναι πολίτης τῆς τοῦ Διὸς πόλεως) which is made up of humans and gods (68.19–22).

This is, of course, a familiar Stoic teaching, which is not peculiar to Musonius, but he employs it as the basis for analyzing a life-situation. There follows a series of propositions that explore what is really good (or only apparently good) and what is really bad (or only apparently bad): that one may acquire virtue in any place; that exile provides the leisure for discerning and practicing the good; that (contrary to wider opinion) exile may be a blessing to some, as with Diogenes for personal transforma-

³⁰Lutz (5) argues that this treatise may in fact reflect an actual letter by Musonius and may reflect more directly his own thinking and writing. Her opinion has received little support; see Houser 2–3 and n.11. I find the treatise a curious mixture of direct address (see the summary argument that follows) to the reader and Lucius' summary arguments. In agreement with Lutz I suggest that an original letter may have served as the basis for the incorporation of other summary materials by Lucius.

³¹68.6–7 (translation slightly revised).

tion; that exile provides an opportunity to live simply and healthily and that it “helps rather than hinders health both of body and of spirit” (καὶ σῶμα καὶ ψυχὴν συνεργεῖ μᾶλλον ἢ ἀντιπράττει ἢ φυγή, 70.21–22); that virtuous people thrive wherever they are; that some exiled people have even acquired large fortunes, as with Odysseus and Themistocles; that there is no opprobrium involved because the errors of the judicial system are well known; and finally, that any restriction of freedom of speech results not from exile but from the exiled person’s fear of reprisal.³² These propositions redefine the substance of good and evil, and they provide a new way of understanding exile, the world, and the opportunities presented. By engaging in the mental exercise, the ascetic comes to understand exile as an occasion of personal, social, and intellectual growth. The centrality of the virtues are made clear in this summary argument:

The reflections which I employ for my own benefit (οἷς δὲ λογισμοῖς χρῶμαι πρὸς ἑμαυτόν) so as not to be irked by exile, I should like to repeat to you. It seems to me that exile does not strip a person entirely, not even of the things which the average man calls good, as I have just shown. But if he is deprived of some or all of them, he is still not deprived of the things which are truly goods (τῶν γε ἀληθῶς ἀγαθῶν οὐ στερίσκει). Certainly the exile is not prevented from possessing courage and justice simply because he is banished, nor self-control, nor understanding, nor any of the other virtues which when present serve to bring honor and benefit to a man and show him to be praiseworthy and of good repute, but when absent, serve to cause him harm and dishonor and show him to be wicked and of ill-repute. Since this is true, if you are that good man and have his virtues, exile will not harm or degrade you, because the virtues are present in you which are most able to help and to sustain you (τούτων δὲ ταύτη ἐχόντων, εἰ μὲν ἀγαθὸς εἶ οὗτος καὶ τὰς ἀρετὰς ἔχεις, οὐκ ἂν σε βλάπτει ἢ φυγή οὐδ’ ἂν ταπεινοίη, παρόντων γε τῶν

³²I consider these summary arguments to be the product of Lucius’ work that have been incorporated into Musonius’ earlier and original letter.

ὠφελεῖν καὶ ἐπαίρειν μάλιστα δυναμένων). But if you are bad, it is the evil that harms you and not exile; and the misery you feel in the exile is the product of evil, not of exile. It is from this you must hasten to secure release rather than from exile.³³

Musonius develops a compelling argument that redefined the nature of reality with respect to apparent and real good and evil, while at the same time opening avenues for the exiled person to grow, develop, and become healthy of mind and body. The ascetical program has combined physical and intellectual labor into a comprehensive program for reform. For Musonius, exile is an ascetical practice.

Musonius presents a bold and consistent plan for transforming members of his society through rigorous ascetical activity, a personal transformation in direct conflict with the prevailing mores of the majority culture. It is not surprising that Musonius' project, and that of other philosophers of his day, sufficiently threatened the established order that they were at various time persecuted by emperors of Rome.³⁴ Their ascetical formation was understood as a subversive program.³⁵ Exile, banishment, and sometimes death were the cost of pursuing these ascetical aims.

Conclusions

From the perspective of a religious studies scholar, classicists and historians of philosophy have missed the heart of Musonius' philosophical agenda by not addressing the ascetical dimension of his teaching. His ascetical project, that is, forms

³³74.20–76.1. I consider this summary statement to be part of Musonius' original letter.

³⁴B. F. Harris, "Stoic and Cynic under Vespasian," *Prudentia* 9 (1977) 105–114. More generally, P. A. Brunt, "Stoicism and the Principate," *BSR* 43 (1975) 7–35.

³⁵This has been fully explored, and convincingly argued, by Houser 53–96. He argues that both philosophy and the philosopher could be viewed as subversive.

not a peripheral, but a central part of his program and his life. By rejecting the traditional subjects of philosophical discourse and teaching and by taking up asceticism as the center of his philosophical program, Musonius placed ethical and religious practice in the fore of philosophical activity. To be a philosopher meant to practice and manifest philosophically articulated virtues. As Pierre Hadot describes it, philosophy became a way of life.³⁶ The instrument of that philosophy, however, was not the ethical tradition alone, not the theoretical study of good and evil, but the ascetical formation of people capable of living according to values and mores divergent from the normative culture and expressive of an alternative world and its understanding. That new way of life was thoroughly ascetical.

The existence in Rome of a philosopher with a fully articulated ascetical system generations before the so-called flowering of asceticism in Late Antique Christianity demands a rewriting of the scholarly reconstruction of the history of Western asceticism. Not only must that history begin in Roman philosophical circles of the imperial era, but it must also begin to explore the Roman philosophical interaction with Christian asceticism. Musonius' ascetical theory, as well as his emphasis on asceticism in his philosophy, shifts attention both earlier in time to the first century and further West to Rome and the western Mediterranean basin.

Religious scholars also have much to learn from Musonius. His theory of asceticism was developed during the critical period during which most New Testament literature was being written. His theory circulated in Rome and the Mediterranean basin at the time of the writing of the Gospel of Mark, and was disseminated during the revisions of Mark produced by Matthew

³⁶Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, transl. Michael Chase (Oxford 1995; revision and expansion of *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*² [Paris 1987]).

and Luke. His theory was in circulation during the collection of the sayings of Jesus, a collection not unlike the collection of the sayings of Musonius by his followers. The skeptical reception of Musonius' project by those in authority possibly sheds light on the poor reception of Pauline theology in incipient Christianity.

In the face of Musonius' ascetical project, scholars of early Christianity cannot seek to define asceticism by first looking to the fourth-century Christian ascetics and working backward in time,³⁷ but now they must look across to Roman and Jewish contemporaries of Christian writers to seek a different understanding of ascetical theory and practice in the first century.³⁸ The definition of asceticism, dependent as it has been on Late Antique models, must now shift to authors and projects of the imperial period as models and systems of asceticism that preceded and perhaps even produced the later and more familiar asceticism of Late Antique Romans, Jews, and Christians.³⁹ Above all, Musonius' ascetical project places in the center of scholarly attention the critical question of systems of formation in classical antiquity, the curious place where theory and practice meet to produce subjects empowered to live and to act in their own society either as members of the dominant society or as persons who withdraw from that dominant society to produce an alternative social grouping. All of this formative interest may not have begun with Musonius, but Musonius provides the

³⁷Shaw (*supra* n.12) 5–10 also argues that asceticism must be contextualized more widely.

³⁸There is serious resistance to looking at Roman asceticism as a model for early Christian practice; see, for example, Tolbert (*supra* n.14) 29–48. Here Tolbert uses later Christian monastic asceticism as the model for interpreting the Gospel of Mark, despite the existence of coeval Roman ascetical writings. A more interesting and engaging study of ancient Greek models of asceticism and their potential for interpreting early Christianity is displayed in the same volume by Stephen J. Patterson, "Askesis and the Early Jesus Tradition," 49–69.

³⁹The most valuable exploration of these issues, including the question of cross-cultural ascetical studies, is Elizabeth A. Clark, "The Ascetic Impulse in Religious Life: A General Response," in Wimbush/Valantasis 505–510.

first documented instance of a Roman ascetical project that has theological, philosophical, and certainly political implications then and now.

There is, however, more to say about the larger picture of religion and philosophy in the imperial period. It is difficult to know how to categorize Musonius Rufus in terms of the history of philosophy. His thought certainly resembles, and often develops from, Stoic philosophy. Yet his emphasis on practice seems to align him more with the Cynicism of the imperial period. The style of his teaching, the diatribe, was certainly common to both, so much so that it has been called by New Testament scholars, the Cynic-Stoic diatribe.⁴⁰ This attempt at categorization in known philosophical movements does not seem to account for the kind of thinking that begins to take place in the first century C.E. Among at least a few of these philosophers like Musonius Rufus, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius, the distinguishing characteristic seems to revolve around an interest in and pursuit of ascetical activity as the heart of philosophy and religion. Such authors seem more appropriately to be identified with their asceticism than with specific philosophical schools. Musonius Rufus leads the way in this movement, providing both a complete ascetical system central to his philosophy, and a set of applications of these principles in the daily life of his followers. This is precisely where Houser has correctly identified the heart of Musonius' philosophy.⁴¹

My argument goes further than Houser's to point to an ascetical orientation not only in Musonius Rufus but also in a variety of philosophical environments. For example, some scholars who study the early Christian interaction with Hel-

⁴⁰See the classic study by Rudolph Bultmann, *Der Stil der Paulinischen Predigt und die Kynisch-Stoische Diatribe* (Göttingen 1910). Now also Stanley K. Stowers, *The Diatribe and Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Chico 1981).

⁴¹See Houser 101–157.

lenistic and Roman religion and philosophy have argued that Jesus was a Cynic⁴² and that Paul was a Stoic.⁴³ The Cynic-Stoic alignment of formative Christianity has been commonplace for over a century. All such arguments attempt to locate their principals in known philosophical categories based on reconstructions of real and distinct Stoicism and Cynicism in the imperial period. The definitions of Stoicism and Cynicism both include an orientation toward asceticism. Perhaps what is needed, and this follows from my argument about Musonius, is not a redefinition of the philosophical schools, but a recognition that asceticism emerged as a major factor in philosophical and religious life. It is precisely this turn to asceticism witnessed in Musonius Rufus that may also be detected in the emergence of Rabbinic Judaism, Pauline Jewish-Christianity, and formative Christianity. The list of ascetically oriented religious leaders and philosophical teachers gathers up many of the leading minds of the period. Musonius Rufus documents the emergence of this ascetical orientation, and through his influence he set the agenda for philosophers and theologians of generations to follow.

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⁴²F. Gerald Downing, *Cynics and Christian Origins* (Edinburgh 1992), and *Christ and the Cynics: Jesus and Other Radical Preachers in First-Century Tradition* (Sheffield 1988).

⁴³Most recently Troels Engberg-Pedersen, *Paul and the Stoics* (Louisville 2000).