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The Undergraduate Essay Prize was established in 2018 for the best essays written by 3rd–year undergraduates studying Classics, Ancient History, Ancient World Studies or Archaeology at a Victorian university. John Henry, then at Monash University, was one of the inaugural winners.

‘The servant of vainglory (κενοδοξία) leads a double life. To outward appearance, he lives with the monks; but in his heart of hearts he is in the world.’

John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* (22.28)

‘I will not cease to grasp the hope I hold
Of saintdom, and to clamour, mourn and sob,
Battering the gates of heaven with storms of prayer ....’

Tennyson, *St. Simeon Stylites* (2.5–7)

The Christian discourse in the first few centuries of Late Antiquity consciously set itself against the more lenient approach to worldly pride and glory found in paganism—it becomes a mark of the virtuous to ‘despise glory’, in Saint Augustine’s words (*De civ. D.* 5.19). Using contemporary literature from the 4-5th centuries C.E., I wish to argue that this did not make pride go away—rather, in the new ascetic world an old virtue transformed into a new vice: vainglory (κενοδοξία). This pride provided one impetus among many for the ostentatious asceticism found in Late Antiquity—didactic writers like Euagrius Ponticus and John Cassian saw this watered-down pride as a spur to moral conduct, a means of crushing worse vices. In such a manner, vainglory could perpetuate asceticism as much as it threatened its ideal existence.

The Christian discourse’s renunciation of worldly pride is already mature by Late Antiquity. In ascetic writings around this time, pagan images of glory and competition are reappropriated for a more inward–looking vision;3 in John Cassian’s 5th-century *Institutes* (1),4 for instance, the worldly ambitions surrounding the ἄγων are ignored for a more suitably inward–looking monastic vision, where he describes avoiding gluttony as the first trial in the Olympic Games of self–purification. In Athanasius’ *Life of Antony*, the hermit that stars in the book refuses to be tempted by demons into returning to a social life, and building up a public reputation. These aspirations are quite literally demonised in this discourse, and it is these things that the ascetic must leave behind.5

Here I wish to suggest that such a renunciation of worldly ideals could have very real psychological consequences (consequences, I should hasten to add, observable from contemporary evidence,

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2 Quoted in Fredeman (1968), 73.
3 For a 5th century B.C.E. example on pagan glory and victory, with the public cheering on, see e.g. Bacchyl. *Ode* 3, where the poet commemorates the victor of a chariot race, Hieron of Sicily, with the crowd cheering on (θρόησε δὲ λαὸς).
5 ‘…And then [the demon] tried to lead [Antony] away from his instruction (ἄσκησις), reminding him of his possessions (κτήματα), his concern for his sister, social relationships, love of money (φιλαργυρία), love of reputation (φιλοδοξία) … and [he said] of virtue (ἀρετή) that its fulfilment (τίτλος) is a slog and a great burden …’. Athanasius *Vita Antonii* 5.
and not armchair theories). When the desire for worldly ambition and pride is stifled, it would merely get channelled elsewhere. In consequence, it could lead to a kind of high-minded asceticism that could afflict both the novice and elder, the monachos or the cenobite, be it in Egypt, Syria or Gaul. This impulse to master oneself, this pride, I would argue, provides one further explanation for the extraordinary asceticism we see attested in Late Antique literature—as we shall see, it is presented as a kind of sustenance to allow ascetic practices to continue.

Here I want to avoid mono-causal explanations of how Late Antique asceticism could reach such a feverish pitch—caution is necessary as it inevitably invites strong modern value judgements due to its extreme character. Edward Gibbon viewed the monks as a ‘race of filthy animals’, dismissing the ‘extravagant penances’ of the hermit as a product of fanaticism, living the life of a beast. Even Peter Brown once described the extreme ascetic practices of the time as ‘frankly histrionic’. It is an intriguing behaviour that requires various causal explanations. Finn’s reminder that Late Antique monasticism took on different regional forms due to varying ‘economics, geography and demography’ from places like Syria to Egypt naturally applies to asceticism at this same period. I leave all such considerations open. On our present subject, Peter Brown suggested in 1971 that we should see these extremes of asceticism (particularly its Syrian expression, such as the Stylites movement) as a carefully sustained effort to avoid society at all costs, using self-mortification to appear as the outsider; a ‘stranger par excellence’ that takes on the social role of the impartial mediator in urban disputes. In the 1990s, Brown retracted this theory, believing it overstated the novelty and contemporary importance of the ‘holy man’, and a general scepticism about tracking real trends from hagiographic literature has prevailed. Dagron, for example, sees the ‘otherness’ of the holy man as literary construction to dispel scepticism about his otherworldly status—he does not take it as a real trend as the 1971 Peter Brown did.

Of course we can’t take literary representation for everything; no one would deny that extreme ascetic practices existed in Late Antiquity to some degree. That is simple Ockham’s razor—why would so many writers conspire to lie about such a practice? The only question open to scepticism is how representative such a practice was, which is not the present concern of this paper. I wish only to argue that, of the ‘holy men’ that did exist along with their extravagant behaviours (however few), the causal explanations for their lifestyle—their motivations—were not always pure. I suggest that we can find more of the practical reality of Late Antique asceticism in non-hagiographic genres that lack such an immediately rhetorical purpose—monastic rules and moral treatises, I argue, can often betray a worldly candour that does not always seek to beguile its readers with the holiness of its subject-matter; not all Late Antique literary genres should be treated with the same suspicion as hagiography. For this reason, I will investigate one of the causes of such ‘extravagant’ and ‘histrionic’ asceticism using texts that are plausibly read as reacting against real-world trends. If, for instance, we start to see debts legislation spreading in archaic Greece, we can reasonably infer that debt were occurring.

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6 My attempt at psychological explanation here is an attempt, with theorists like Lucien Febvre, to absorb the mentality of the time using the sources as directly as possible—not to use modern psychological theory, or worse, psychoanalysis. Cf. Hunt (2002), 337–56.
7 Gibbon Volume III (1993), 161; Gibbon Volume IV (1993), 20–1.
8 Brown (1971), 93.
9 Finn (2009), 143.
in reality—or at the very least, the burden of proof rests on the contrary view. In the same way, if there’s enough Late Antique literature cautioning against vainglory in monks, we must take it seriously as a real-world problem beyond literary representation. Of these works, I am not misleadingly presenting a few scattered statements here and there as systematic. The writers we will shortly consult—Euagrius Ponticus and his disciple John Cassian—presented systematic views on vainglory that can be treated as a doctrine in a contemporary sense.

To begin with, there are plenty of titbits to suggest some concern with the problem of vainglory and worldly pride creeping into the monastery, which lead to safeguards to prevent the monastery from becoming, in Hannah Arendt’s words, a sort of ‘counterworld’. For this very reason, as Lawrence points out, ecclesiastical offices that lifted monks from priests and bishops were criticised by figures like Athanasius in the 4th century, and in the 5th an anonymous French monastery founder. Monastic rules such as the Benedictine Rule forbade overt expressions of pride in the monastery. In a letter on the ascetic lifestyle written in 374 C.E., Jerome cautioned against boasting of one’s ascetic castitas (Ep. 14.9); other letters around this time express concerns of vainglory in general. The 5th-century Apophthegmata Patrum, collecting titbits of practical wisdom for Egyptian ascetics, also contains cautionary advice for ascetic teachers becoming overly pompous with their power: ‘let [the teacher] be a stranger to the desire for domination, vainglory and pride’. The threat of such vices was, therefore, at least a source of recurring anxiety.

The systematic treatment on this vice in Late Antiquity appears to begin with Euagrius Ponticus in the late 4th century, himself the product of a long stint in the Egyptian ascetic life. Addressing himself to fellow Egyptians to help them reach a state of ‘impassivity’ (in the context of a larger trilogy), Euagrius’ Praktikos portrays vainglory—the seventh of eight vices or bad ‘thoughts’ (λογισμοί)—as a dangerous impulse to pursue glory (δόξα), which chases faith away (τὴν πίστιν ἀποδιώκουσα—Pro. 3.1.6). Although Euagrius’ advice is prescriptive, it is built upon observation. Vainglory easily conceals itself among the virtues, and importantly Euagrius links this vice as something that can often afflict men that aspire to be priests, or monks seeking glory ‘among men’—an aspiration, interestingly enough, in tension with the hagiography presented of ‘many’ desert monks, who, as Antoine and Claire Guillaume remind us, were presented as rejecting any
With vivid metaphors, Cassian’s chapter on vainglory illustrates some of the unintended psychological side-effects of abandoning worldly ideals for an exclusively spiritual one. Cassian warned his ascetic audience that vainglory can be dependent on the opinion of others or entirely self-sustaining—solitude, indeed, can aggravate one’s vanity (Institutes, 11.6.). He argued that this vice is particularly dangerous to ascetics that have overcome their carnal pleasures, as vanity can be directed towards worldly material things, but also spiritual matters (11.2). Cassian also echoes Euagrius (Praktikos 1.30–2), noting that of all the vices, vainglory is incredibly difficult to shake off—the vice doesn’t ease as a monk gets older (Institutes 11.8), and like an onion, if one layer of vainglory is ‘peeled’ away it simply recurs (11.5). Monks that wore rags or fasted openly could be easily afflicted by κενοδοξία (11.4), and could equally become vain from obsessing over their singing voice, or their emaciated body, or their renunciation of the world; others comforted themselves that they could have easily obtained honour and wealth if they wanted (11.13). This is all presented by Cassian in a tone of disapproval, yet in another work with a similarly didactic purpose—the Conferences—he betrays how much this vainglory could sustain ascetic practices, as much as undermine them (some candid advice unsurprisingly unattested in contemporary hagiographic literature). He, like Euagrius, presents it pragmatically as a lesser evil for crushing worse vices of the carnal pleasures, a strategy particularly useful for beginners (Conferences 5.12). From his daily encounters, Cassian observes that vainglory deters sinful behaviour, and he recounts how the desire to meet the approval of others could sustain difficult periods of fasting in monks. 33 Vainglory among monks, therefore, was seen by Cassian as a common staple of monastic life that could help to maintain ascetic practices; it was not

John Cassian was a Gallic monk who founded a community in Marseilles after living an ascetic life in Egypt. By 420 C.E., Cassian had already made a name for himself across Gaul, and a bishop from Apt that desired to found a monastic community requested from him both a monastic rule and spiritual guidance in a single text, to which Cassian complied with his twelve-book opus the Institutes.29 So again, like his master Euagrius, Cassian was providing candid guidance to fellow monks. Significantly, Cassian himself is quite explicit that he would not fill his work with exotic miracles and spectacles—his is a work of practical advice with no hagiographical padding.30 It is intended to be, therefore, an everyday manual that tries to anticipate real-life pitfalls of monasticism, and to correct the common vices of the monk.31 Despite writing in Latin, Cassian uses the Greek word for vainglory—κενοδοξία (lit. an ‘empty opinion’)—which suggests that Cassian is consciously continuing the discourse on the vices of Euagrius.32

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26  Ibid., 531 n. 31.
27  Ibid., 636–7.
28  Ibid., 530–1.
30  ‘I shall make no attempt to relate anecdotes of miracles and prodigies… I have wholly omitted them because they contribute nothing but astonishment to the instruction of the reader in the perfect life.’ Quoted in Chadwick (1950), 48.
31  Note that listing vices was not Euagrius’ and Cassian’s invention, however. Hellenistic literature had already popularised this genre: c.f. Euagrius Ponticus, Tome I (1971), 75.
33  Ibid.

There are plenty of other demonstrable similarities between the two thinkers, e.g. Euagrius Ponticus, Tome I (1971), 484 n. 1.
the behaviour of a deranged few, but a common ailment that Cassian presents as a lesser evil preferable to the baser vices like licentiousness.

At the start of his *Life of Antony*, Athanasius puts forward his hagiography as a moral ideal for monks that enter into a ‘noble’ competition with one another.34 He describes this in light-hearted terms, but clearly the desire for praise and glory was something that troubled his contemporaries when it descended into boastful high-mindedness. Yet this behaviour, as I have argued, emerged as a natural consequence of abandoning pagan glory; pride did not vanish but merely redirected itself into the spiritual world. As we have seen, vainglory was presented by 4th-5th century authors as not merely a vice, but also a powerful mechanism that could sustain the ascetic practices of the ‘holy man’—which provides another causal explanation among many for this phenomenon in Late Antiquity.

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34 Ἀγαθὴν ἅμιλλαν ἐνεστῆσαθε πρὸς τοὺς ἐν Αἰγύπτω μοναχοὺς, ἤτοι παρισωθῆναι, ἢ καὶ ὑπερβάλλεσθαι τούτους προελόμενοι τῇ κατ᾿ ἀρετὴν ὑμῶν ἀσκήσει. Athanasius *Vita Antonii* Pro. 1.

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