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HOW TO FOCUS

[I.I] Cum in heremo Sciti, ubi monachorum probatissimi patres et omnis commorabatur perfectio, abbatem Moysen, qui inter illos egregios flores suavius non solum actuali, uerum etiam theoretica uirtute fragrabat, institutione eius fundari cupiens expetissem una cum sancto abbate Germano (cum quo mihi ab ipso tirocinio ac rudimentis militiae spiritalis ita indiuiduum deinceps contubernium tam in coenobio quam in heremo fuit, ut cuncti ad significandam solidaritatis ac propositi nostri parilitatem pronuntiarent unam mentem atque animam duobus inesse corporibus),

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Cassian and Germanus Consult Abba Moses of Scetis

The desert of Scetis: home to the most battle-tested monastic elders and their many perfect achievements. Abba Moses was the sweetest of all those extraordinary flowers there; his practical and also his contemplative powers were full of fragrance. I wanted to get some grounding in his teaching, so the holy abba Germanus and I *had* to seek him out. Germanus had been with me ever since we had entered the spiritual military and started basic training, and from then on, we were such inseparable bunkmates in both the monastic community and the desert that everyone remarked on the equality of our companionship and our sense of purpose. They said that we were one mind and soul in two bodies.

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pariterque ab eodem abbate aedificationis sermonem fuis lacrimis posceremus (quippe cuius hunc animi rigorem manifestissime noueramus, ut nisi fideliter desiderantibus et cum omni cordis contritione quaerentibus nequaquam adquiesceret ianuam perfectionis aperire, ne scilicet, si passim uel nolentibus eam uel tepide sitientibus exhiberet, res necessarias et quae solis perfectionem cupientibus debent esse conpertae, indignis et fastidiose suscipientibus pandens aut iactantiae uitium aut proditionis crimen uideretur incurrere), tandem fatigatus precibus nostris ita exorsus est.

[I.2.1] Omnes, inquit, artes ac disciplinae scopon quendam, id est destinationem, et telos, hoc est finem proprium habent, ad quem respiciens uniuscuiusque artis industrius adpetitor cunctos labores et pericula atque dispendia aequanimiter libenterque sustentat.

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And now both of us were pouring out tears¹⁹ and begging Abba Moses to edify us with his words. (We did this because we knew he was so notoriously strict that he'd agree to open the door of perfection only to people who longed for it in good faith and sought it out in a state of total anguish. He didn't want to seem to be committing the crime of betrayal or giving into the impulse to show off. Revealing that door indiscriminately to people who weren't up for it, or who were only sort of interested, would result in the disclosure of vital matters—things that only people seeking perfection should learn—to unworthy recipients who wouldn't know what it all was worth.) Eventually he was worn down by our pleas and began to speak.

“Every acquired skill and every discipline,” he said, “has a *scopos* and a *telos*, some immediate goal and some ultimate goal that is particular to it. Practitioners of any skilled craft will gladly and good-naturedly work through all

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nam et agricola nunc torridos solis radios, nunc pruinas et glaciem non declinans terram infatigabiliter scindit et indomitas agri glaebas frequenti subigit uomere, dum scopon seruat, ut eam cunctis sentibus expurgatam uniuersisque graminibus absolutam in modum solubilis harenae exercendo comminuat, finem, id est perceptionem copiosarum frugum et exuberantiam segetum non alias adepturum se esse confidens, quo uel ipse deinceps uitam securus exigere uel suam possit amplificare substantiam. [I.2.2] referta etiam frugibus horrea libenter exhaurit easque putribus sulcis instanti labore commendat, praesentem deminutionem futurarum messium contemplatione non sentiens.

illi etiam, qui negotiationum solent exercere commercia, non incertos pelagi timent casus, non ulla discrimina perhorrescunt, dum ad finem quaestus spe praepeti prouocantur.

nec non etiam hi qui militiae mundialis ambitione flammantur, dum prospiciunt honorum ac potentiae finem, peregrinationum exitia ac

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their fatigue and risks and costs as they keep those goals in mind.²⁰

“Take a farmer, for instance, who tirelessly breaks up the soil and plows through the untilled clods of his field over and over again, without giving up in the frost and ice or in the withering rays of the sun. He does this while keeping his eye on his immediate goal of clearing away all the thorns, purging all the vegetation, and crumbling the earth into a loamy texture. He is certain that this is the only way he’ll achieve his ultimate goal: a yield of copious produce and abundant grain that will enable him to live comfortably or even to build up his wealth. He’s even willing to draw down the produce from his storehouses when supplies are already getting low, and he works hard to entrust their seeds to the fallow farrows. He doesn’t see it as a shortage in the present, because he is focused on future harvests.

“Likewise the merchants who work in wholesale trade aren’t afraid of what might

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pericula non sentiunt nec praesentibus aerumnis
bellisque frangunt, dum propositum sibi dig-
nitatis finem cupiunt obtinere.

[1.2.3] habet ergo et nostra professio scopon
proprium ac finem suum, pro quo labores cunc-
tos non solum infatigabiliter, uerum etiam
gratanter inpendimus, ob quem nos ieiuniorum
inedia non fatigat, uigiliarum lassitudo delectat,
lectio ac meditatio scripturarum continuata non
satiat, labor etiam incessabilis nuditasque et om-
nium rerum priuatio, horror quoque huius uas-
tissimae solitudinis non deterret. ob quem uos
ipsi procul dubio parentum spreuistis affectum

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happen unexpectedly on the open sea. As long as the drive to profit propels them to an ultimate goal, there isn't any hazard that scares them.

Not even the members of the earthly military who are stoked by ambition notice the ravages or dangers of their campaigns when they have the ultimate goal of honors and influence to look forward to. And they aren't shattered by losses or battles in the moment, as long as they're eagerly anticipating the ultimate goal of the promotion they've visualized for themselves.

“Our own profession has particular immediate and ultimate goals, too, and we devote all our labors tirelessly and even enthusiastically to them. This is why fasting doesn't wear us out, why the fatigue from keeping vigil all night appeals to us, why constant reading and meditating on the scriptures is never enough for us, and why incessant work and nakedness and complete dispossession and this chilling expanse of solitude doesn't scare us off. And it is

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et patrium solum ac delicias mundi tot pertransitis regionibus despexistis, ut ad nos homines rusticos et idiotas atque in hoc heremi squalore degentes peruenire possetis. propter quod respondete, inquit, mihi quae sit destinatio uestra uel finis, qui ad haec omnia libentissime sustinenda uos prouocat.

[I.3] Et cum persisteret nostram elicere super hac interrogatione sententiam, respondimus regni caelorum causa haec cuncta tolerari.

[I.4.I] Ad quod ille: Bene, inquit: argute de fine dixistis. qui uero debeat esse scopos noster, id est destinatio, cui iugiter inhaerentes finem ualeamus attingere, prae omnibus nosse debetis.

et cum ignorationem confessi simpliciter fuissimus, adiecit: in omni ut dixi arte ac disciplina praecedit quidam scopos, id est animae destinatio siue incessabilis mentis intentio. quam

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undoubtedly why you yourselves rejected the affection of your families and turned away from your only homeland and from the delightful things in the world, traveling long distances so that you could visit us of all people—rednecks and hicks living in this desolate desert. So tell me: what are your immediate and ultimate goals? What’s compelling you two to endure all of this so willingly?”

Since Moses kept trying to elicit a response from us, we answered that the kingdom of the heavens was the reason to endure all these things.

He replied, “Nicely done! You’ve given an incisive answer about your ultimate goal. But before anything else, you should really know what our scopos should be. I’m talking about our immediate goal, the thing we stick to all the time so that we’re eventually able to reach the ultimate goal.”

We openly admitted that we didn’t know. So he went on: “Like I said, there is a particular scopos

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nisi quis omni studio perseuerantiaque seruauerit, nec ad finem desiderati fructus poterit peruenire.

[I.4.2] nam ut dixi agricola finem habens secure copioseque uiuendi in prouentu segetum fecundarum scopon, id est destinationem gerit agrum suum cunctis sentibus expurgare eumque uniuersis infructuosis uacuare graminibus, nec aliter se quieti finis opulentiam adepturum esse confidit, nisi id, quod usu obtinere desiderat, quadam prius operis ac spei suae ratione possideat.

negotiator quoque conparandarum mercium desiderium non deponit, per quod possit quaestuosius diuitias congregare, quia frustra concupisceret lucrum, nisi uiam qua ad id tenderet elegisset.

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that leads the way in every single skill and discipline. Think of it as an immediate goal for the soul, or a relentless mental attentiveness. If you don't focus on it with all your effort and perseverance, you won't be able to reach your ultimate goal and enjoy the payoff you've been waiting for.

“For instance, as I said before, the farmer whose ultimate goal is to live comfortably and prosperously off his plentiful yields of grain operates with the *scopos* or immediate goal of clearing all the thorns from his field and getting rid of all the weeds. He doesn't assume that he'll achieve his ultimate goal—getting rich—by doing nothing; he knows for certain that he'll possess what he really wants to have only by means of his plan of hard work and hope.

“The same is true of the merchant. He never gives up the drive to procure merchandise, which is such a lucrative way for him to accumulate wealth. It would be pointless for him to pursue profit without deciding how to get there.

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et qui certis quibusque dignitatibus mundi huius cupiunt honorari, cui se officio uel ordini debeant mancipare ante proponunt, ut per legitimum spei tramitem finem quoque ualeant desideratae dignitatis adtingere.

[1.4.3] itaque et uiae nostrae finis quidem est regnum dei. quid uero sit scopos debet diligenter inquiri: qui si nobis similiter conpertus non fuerit, frustra nitendo fatigabimur, quia sine uia tendentibus labor est itineris, non profectus.

ad quod obstupescens nobis senex intulit: finis quidem nostrae professionis ut diximus regnum dei seu regnum caelorum est, destinatio uero, id est scopos, puritas cordis, sine qua ad illum finem impossibile est quempiam peruenire.

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“As for people who want to be honored with some particular distinction the world has to offer: the first thing they do is decide what job or office to land on, so that by setting their hopes on the right course of action, they can arrive at their ultimate goal of the accolade they’ve always wanted.

“In the same way, when it comes to our own path, the end point is the kingdom of God. But as for what our *scopos* might be, we should really make a careful investigation. If we don’t figure it out like other people do, we’ll wear ourselves out to the point of exhaustion—all for nothing, because if we don’t follow a path, our work is a journey that goes nowhere.”

As we sat in astonishment at what he’d said, the old man made this proposition: “As we said, the ultimate goal that is specific to our profession is the kingdom of God, the kingdom of the heavens. And in fact our immediate goal, our *scopos*, is clarity and tranquility of the heart.²¹

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[I.4.4] in hac ergo destinatione defigentes nostrae directionis obtutus uelut ad certam lineam cursum rectissimum dirigemus, ac si paululum quid ab hac cogitatio nostra deflexerit, ad contemplationem eius ilico recurrentes rursus eam uelut ad quandam normam rectissime corrigemus, quae semper omnes conatus nostros ad unum hoc reuocans signum arguet statim, si a proposita directione mens nostra uel paululum deuiauerit.

[I.5.1] Quemadmodum hi, quibus usus est bellica tela tractandi, cum ante regem mundi huius artis suae cupiunt peritiam demonstrare, in paruissima quaedam scutula, quae depicta in se continent praemia, iacula uel sagittas intorquere contendunt, certi quod non alias nisi destinationis suae linea ad finem possint desiderati praemii peruenire, quo tum demum utique potentur, cum propositum scopon ualuerint obtinere:

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Without that clarity, it's totally impossible to reach the ultimate goal.

“So we should fix our navigation on this immediate goal, like we're steering ourselves along a set line down a very straight route. And even if our thinking were to veer away from it a bit, we would hurry to set it in our sights again, like making a precise correction with a ruler—a ruler that keeps drawing all our ventures back to this one guideline and alerting us immediately if our mind takes even a little detour from the course in front of us.

“Take, for example, people who are trained in handling military projectiles. When they want to showcase their expertise in this skill in the presence of a king in some part of the world, they shoot their javelins or arrows at miniscule targets that have prizes depicted on them. They're sure that the only way to obtain the ultimate goal of the prize they're after is to follow the sightline of their immediate goal. And

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qui si forte ab eorum fuerit subtractus intuitu, quantumlibet a recto tramite cassa imperitorum deerret intentio, excidisse se tamen ab illius disciplinatae lineae directione non sentient, quia nullum habent certum signum quod uel peritiam directionis probet uel arguat prauitatem. et ideo cum inutiles in aëra uacuumque fuderint iactus, in quo peccauerint quoque decepti sint diiudicare non possunt, quippe quos nullum accusat indicium quantum a directione discesserint, nec quo deinceps corrigere uel reuocare debeant lineam disciplinae docere potest passius obtutus.

[1.5.2] ita igitur et nostri propositi finis quidem secundum apostolum uita aeterna est, ita eodem pronuntiante: habentes quidem fructum uestrum in sanctificationem, finem uero uitam aeternam, scopos uero est puritas cordis, quam sanctificationem non inmerito nuncupauit, sine

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then in the end, they *do* get that ultimate goal, when they to stick to their set scopos.

“But if the target happened to be taken away, nobody—not even an inexperienced shooter who aimed way off the right trajectory—would know whether they’d deviated from the designated line, because they wouldn’t have any indicator to tell whether their aim was true or crooked. And the result of having dumped their useless shots into the open air would be that they couldn’t tell where they went wrong or where they were misled, obviously because there wouldn’t be any telltale sign of how far they’d gone off course. If your eye doesn’t know where to look, it can’t offer any guidance about where to adjust or realign your aim.

“So as I was saying, the ultimate goal that has been set before us is everlasting life, as the apostle Paul declared: ‘Ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life.’ The scopos here is clarity of heart, and the word he used for it was ‘holiness,’ with good reason.

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qua praedictus finis non poterit adprehendi, acsi dixisset aliis uerbis: habentes quidem scopon uestrum in cordis puritate, finem uero uitam aeternam. de qua destinatione docens nos idem beatus apostolus ipsum nomen, id est scopon, significanter expressit ita dicens: quae posteriora sunt obliuiscens, ad ea uero quae in ante sunt extendens me, ad destinatum persequor, ad brauium supernae uocationis domini.

[1.5.3] quod euidentius in Graeco ponitur *κατὰ σκοπὸν διώκω*, id est secundum destinationem persequor, tamquam si dixisset: hac destinatione qua illa quae posteriora sunt obliuiscor, id est anterioris hominis uitia, ad finem brauii caelestis peruenire contendo.

quidquid ergo nos ad hunc scopon, id est puritatem cordis potest dirigere, tota uirtute sectandum est, quidquid autem ab hac retrahit, ut perniciosum ac noxium deuitandum. pro hac enim uniuersa agimus atque toleramus, pro hac parentes, patria, dignitates, diuitiae, deliciae

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Without clarity of heart, the ultimate goal he mentioned would be unattainable. It was as if he'd said in so many words 'Ye have your scopos unto clarity of heart, and the end everlasting life.' And the same blessed apostle literally used the word scopos in teaching us about this immediate goal. He said: 'Forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the goal for the prize of the high calling of the Lord.'

"The connection is more obvious in the Greek original: 'I press toward the immediate goal' is *kata skopon diōkō*. It's as if he'd said, 'with this immediate goal I forget the things behind me—the weaknesses of the person I was before—and I go after the ultimate goal of the celestial prize.'²²

"And so whatever can point us toward this immediate goal of clarity and tranquility of heart should be followed with all our might, and whatever drags us away from it should be treated as a destructive and toxic thing. Everything we

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mundi huius et uoluptas uniuersa contemnitur,
ut scilicet puritas cordis perpetua retentetur.

[1.5.4] hac itaque nobis destinatione proposita semper actus nostri et cogitationes ad eam obtinendam rectissime dirigentur. quae si prae oculis nostris iugiter statuta non fuerit, non solum cunctos labores nostros uacuos pariter atque instabiles reddens in cassum eos ac sine ullo emolumento compellet effundi,

sed etiam cogitationes omnes diuersas sibi que contrarias suscitabit. necesse est enim mentem quo recurat cuiue principaliter inhaereat non habentem per singulas horas atque momenta pro incursum uarietate mutari atque ex his quae extrinsecus accedunt in illum statum continuo transformari qui sibi primus occurrerit.

[1.6.1] Hinc namque est quod nonnullos mundi huius maximas facultates et non solum

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pursue and put up with, we do for the sake of this scopos. For its sake we disregard families, homelands, professional advancements, wealth, the world's charms, really every single pleasurable thing: all to maintain a clear heart always.

“And once this immediate goal is in front of us, our actions and thoughts should always be steered along the straightest path toward achieving it. If it isn't constantly propped up in front of our eyes, it would make all our efforts hollow and flimsy. It would be a waste—all that to no end, with no payoff.

“It would also stir up all sorts of conflicting thoughts. When the mind doesn't have a headquarters to return to and to keep in close contact with, it will inevitably get bounced around by all sorts of distractions, and it will just keep taking on the shape of whatever external stimulus it comes across next.

“We have seen this at play among people who don't put any stock in pricey assets—whether

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multa auri atque argenti talenta, uerum etiam praediorum magnificentiam contemntes post haec uidimus pro scalpello, pro graphio, pro acu, pro calamo commoueri. qui si contemplationem cordis mundi fixam tenerent, numquam utique pro paruis rebus admitterent, quod ne pro magnis ac pretiosis incurrerent opibus, easdem penitus abicere maluerunt.

[I.6.2] nam et plerumque nonnulli tanto zelo codicem seruant, ut eum ne leuiter quidem legi uel contingi ab aliquo sinant, et inde occasiones inpatientiae ac mortis incurrunt, unde monentur stipendia patientiae et caritatis acquirere, cumque omnes diuitias suas pro Christi amore disperserint, pristinum tamen cordis affectum in rebus minimis retentantes et pro ipsis nonnumquam mobiliter irascentes, ueluti qui non habeant apostolicam caritatem, ex omnibus infructuosi sterilesque redduntur. quod in spiritu beatus apostolus praeuidens et si distribuero, inquit, in cibos pauperum omnes facultates meas et tradidero corpus meum ut

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it's piles of cash in gold and silver, or even luxe estates—only to be shaken up about a knife, a stylus, a needle, a pen.²³ But if they were keeping their heart's concentration tidy, there's no way they would let small things clutter it up, given that they'd already decided to get rid of their sizeable and valuable holdings so as not to run into the same problem!

“It's often the case, for instance, that some people will guard a book so jealously that they can barely stand to let someone else read or even touch it. In the process, they turn opportunities to reap the rewards of being accommodating and charitable into opportunities to reap the rewards of intolerance and death. Although they've distributed all their wealth out of love for Christ, they still hold onto their heart's old proclivity for the most insignificant things, and they can rapidly fly into a rage over them, just like those people who do not have apostolic charity and are rendered unproductive and sterile. The blessed

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ardeam, caritatem autem non habuero, nihil mihi prodest.

[1.6.3] unde liquido conprobatur perfectionem non statim nuditate nec priuatione omnium facultatum seu dignitatum abiectioe contingi, nisi fuerit caritas illa cuius apostolus membra describit, quae in sola cordis puritate consistit. nam quid est aliud non aemulari, non inflari, non inritari, non agere perperam, non quaerere quae sua sunt, non super iniquitate gaudere, non cogitare malum et reliqua, nisi cor perfectum atque mundissimum deo semper offerre et intactum a cunctis perturbationibus custodire?

[1.7.1] Omnia igitur huius gratia gerenda adpetendaque sunt nobis. pro hac solitudo

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apostle foresaw this in his spirit and said that ‘if I should distribute all my goods to feed the poor, and if I should deliver my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.’

“Clearly this proves that perfection can’t be attained the instant you strip yourself down, or deprive yourself of all your properties, or jettison your titles—unless you have that charity whose component parts the apostle described, this love that can be found only in the clarity and tranquility of the heart. After all, what does it mean to *not* be competitive, not be pompous, not be irritated, not be misleading, not misbehave, not be self-serving, not take pleasure in things that are wrong, not think about evil, and all the rest? What does it mean except to offer a refined and spotlessly clean heart to God always, and to keep it away from any and all psychological turbulence?

“And so everything we do and strive for should be done for the sake of clarity of

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sectanda est, pro hac ieiunia, uigilias, labores, corporis nuditatem, lectionem ceterasque uirtutes debere nos suscipere nouerimus, ut scilicet per illas ab uniuersis passionibus noxiis inlaesum parare cor nostrum et conseruare possimus et ad perfectionem caritatis istis gradibus innitendo conscendere, et non propter has obseruantias, si forte honesta ac necessaria occupatione praeuenti sollemnitate districtiois nostrae non potuerimus implere, incidamus in tristitiam uel iram siue indignationem, ob quae expugnanda illud quod praetermissum est fueramus acturi.

[I.7.2] non enim tantum est lucrum ieiunii quantum irae dispendium nec tantus lectione capitur fructus quantum contemptu fratris incurritur detrimentum. ea igitur quae sequentia sunt, id est ieiunia, uigiliae, anachoresis, meditatio scripturarum, propter principalem scopon, id est puritatem cordis, quod est caritas, nos conuenit exercere et non propter illa principalem hanc proturbare uirtutem, qua in nobis integra inlaesaque durante nihil oberit, si aliquid eorum

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heart. Solitude should be pursued for it. We know that we should take on fasts, vigils, manual labor, nakedness, reading, and other feats for it—so that we can condition our heart and keep it unharmed from all those toxic pathologies,²⁴ climbing those steps to a perfect state of love. And if some legitimate and pressing task happens to come up and we can't carry out our usual strict regimen, we shouldn't get sad or angry or annoyed. The very point of our regimen is to overcome such disturbances!

“After all, the advantages of fasting don't make up for the loss incurred when we're angry, and the benefits of reading don't make up for the damage done when we despise a brother. We're supposed to practice this series of exercises—fasts, vigils, isolation, meditating on the scriptures—for the sake of the fundamental scopos, for the sake of clarity of heart, which is love. We shouldn't counteract this fundamental source of strength in us simply for the sake of

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quae sequentia sunt pro necessitate fuerit praetermissum: siquidem nec proderit uniuersa fecisse adempta hac qua diximus principali causa, cuius obtentu sunt omnia peragenda.

[1.7.3] ob hoc enim quis ferramenta cuiuslibet artis instituere sibimet ac praeparare festinat, non ut ea possideat otiosa nec ut emolumentum illius fructum qui speratur ex ipsis in nuda instrumentorum possessione constituat, sed ut eorum ministerio peritiam finemque illius disciplinae cuius haec adiumenta sunt efficaciter adprehendat. igitur ieiunia, uigiliae, meditatio scripturarum, nuditas ac priuatio omnium facultatum non perfectio, sed perfectionis instrumenta sunt, quia non in ipsis consistit disciplinae illius finis, sed per illa peruenitur ad finem.

[1.7.4] in cassum igitur haec exercitia molietur, quisque his uelut summo bono contentus