CHAPTER 25

Discourse 21: On Cutting the Hair

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In Greece adult males grew beards as a matter of course before Alexander the Great introduced the fashion of shaving. Similarly, before the second century BC the prevailing habit for Roman men was to let their hair and beards grow long without cropping or shaving. The first to depart from this custom and shave every day, Pliny the Elder reports, was Scipio Aemilianus (185/184–129 BC). Scipio's habit soon grew popular. With the wide adoption of the Hellenistic fashion of wearing the hair short and of shaving daily, barbers in Rome proliferated. Indeed, short hair and a clean-shaven face became such a firmly established norm of civilized appearance that a long, straggly beard was regarded as slovenly and squalid (Kaufman 1932, 145). 'Even if there was no etymological link between the Latin words for beard, *barba*, and barbarian, *barbarus*, the terms acquired shared connotations of rough, rustic unkemptness' (Toner 2015, 96). Consequently, from this time on through the imperial age, 'allowing the beard to grow, besides being a mark of negligence, was a sign of mourning motivated by a judicial conviction, by the necessity of defending oneself against a public accusation, or by some other great calamity' (Kaufman 1932, 146). The habit of shaving was further embellished with the custom of consecrating to the gods the hair from a young man's 'first shaving' (*depositio barbae*). This depilatory rite of passage, which was celebrated with public sacrifices and revelry, was apparently borrowed from the Greeks and seems not to precede the imperial age. Though it occurred at no set time, the rite was usually performed around twenty years of age or when the youth donned the *toga virilis*. Often, then, this occurred some time after the actual growth of facial hair. The *depositio barbae* was seen to mark the beginning of manhood (Kaufman 1932, 146). Certain emperors practiced this rite with panache. To celebrate his first shaving, Augustus hosted 'a magnificent entertainment himself, besides granting all the other citizens a festival at public expense' (Dio Cass. 48.34). Nero placed the hair from his own first shave in a gaudy gold box set with pearls and, with a great sacrifice of bulls, dedicated it to Jupiter. Similarly, Petronius (*Satyricon* 75) relates that the vulgar freedman Trimalchio kept his first shorn beard hairs in a large golden box (Toner 2015, 97–8). Consequently, how a Roman man managed the hair on his scalp and face carried considerable social and religious significance. The range of symbolic

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meanings expressed by hairstyling and clothing included the power to create or transform a person's image. 'Hairstyles and attitudes toward facial hair were linked closely with ideas of gender and identity' (Toner 2015, 97). Moreover,

> The presence or absence of hair, facial or other, constitutes a semiotic system that may encompass virtually any aspect of society (e.g. religion, status, morality). In the late Republic, men over forty (at least those who are preserved in the literary and visual record) seem to have been closely shaven; a full beard was associated with the idealized past, and was still worn chiefly by philosophers and foreigners in this period. (Christenson 2004, 61)

Since shaving was the cultural norm for Romans, a beard was a sign that the man behind it was an outsider, whether a beggar, a foreigner, or an intellectual. This is the context in which to understand Musonius' remarks about the hair on a man's head.

So, why does Musonius advocate letting one's hair and beard grow long? Is he simply being old-fashioned by rejecting the novel custom? It seems not. He makes no appeal to return to the beard-wearing custom of the good old days simply for its own sake. Thus, Musonius does not invoke 'the idealized past' to justify his view. Note also that the argument Musonius presents applies to all men, not specifically to philosophers.

Two more suggested rationales are that philosophers may have grown their hair and beards long out of a desire to highlight their indifference to normal life or to exaggerate their appearance of wisdom (Toner 2015, 97). Yet neither of these speculations is plausible. As for the former, Musonius is clear that beard growth is natural, so letting the beard be is the natural, and so normal, choice. Musonius is certainly not indifferent to living in agreement with the norm of nature. As for the latter suggestion, Musonius does not intimate that a beard makes a man appear wise. He cares about *being* wise, not *looking* wise to others. Since wisdom is rare, most people lack it anyway. Any fool can grow a long, shaggy beard.[1] Thus, a beard per se is no evidence of wisdom. Wisdom consists in integrity of character and perfection of reason. It is displayed in one's words and deeds, in the soundness of one's arguments, and in consistently living admirably, not in the long hairs on one's face.

Nonetheless, in ancient Rome beards mattered to philosophers because beards were in fact regarded as the philosopher's badge. Different schools of philosophy adopted different kinds of beard to distinguish themselves from

1 Musonius' student Epictetus (*c.*55–*c.*135 AD) argues that it is not a rough cloak, a long beard, and luxuriant hair that make someone a philosopher, but rather reason (*Diss.* 4.8.12–16).

one another (Sellars 2003, 15–21). Since beards were a visible hallmark of philosophers, beards were considered inseparable from a philosopher's role and identity. This is shown in a scenario described by Musonius' student Epictetus. Epictetus' interlocutor demands that he shave off his beard, to which he replies, 'If I am a philosopher, I won't shave it off.' The interlocutor responds, 'Then I'll have you beheaded.' Epictetus responds, 'If it pleases you to do so, go ahead' (*Diss.* 1.2.29). Epictetus' point is that he would refuse to allow the threat of decapitation to coerce him into stripping off the philosopher's badge with which nature graces his face (Stephens 2014, 374–8). In the second century CE the significance of the philosopher's beard is reflected in the proposal to punish a fake philosopher by cutting off his beard close to the skin with goat-shears (Lucian, *Pisc*. 46).

Musonius' doctrine on hair and beard is squarely grounded in the Stoic definition of the goal (*telos*) as 'living in agreement with nature' (LS 63A, B, C; 394–5). His interpretations of what living in agreement with nature means apply to a wide range of topics, including food (*Discourses* 18A–B), clothing and shelter (*Discourse* 19), and furnishings (*Discourse* 20). A common refrain throughout is that reason shows that luxury and extravagance ruin natural, virtuous living.

Here in *Discourse* 21 Musonius offers regarding hair care the same earthy, naturalistic interpretation that he offers in *Discourse* 18 regarding eating. There he says the stomach serves the same function in human beings as roots do in plants. The homology presented here is that human hair is like a vine, and so it ought to be cropped for the same purpose a vine is pruned. That purpose is to remove only what is useless. Latin philology supports this homological link between trimming hair and pruning vines. 'The *tonsor* (barber), in the broad sense, was one who sheared or clipped either man or beast, or even one who pruned plants' (Kaufman 1932, 145). The gardener trims off only the vine's superfluous parts. Similarly, if locks of hair grow down over the eyes and impede vision, then they become excessive. If locks grow thick over the ears and hamper hearing, then they become excessive. Only excessive locks of hair need to be trimmed.

Musonius states that nature provides us with hair for the purpose of covering or protecting. Men have five different kinds of hair on their heads: scalp, beard, eyebrow, eyelash, and nostril. The natural purpose of eyebrows and eyelashes is to shield the eyes from dust and debris. So, it is contrary to nature, and thus wrong, to endanger our eyes by removing their brows or lashes. Similarly, Musonius reasons that the natural purpose of the beard is to shield the face – presumably from the wind, cold, or irritants to the skin. Eyebrows and eyelashes never grow excessively long, and so they are never superfluous.

Removing eyebrows or eyelashes would be as destructive and unnatural as a gardener tearing healthy grape vines out of the ground. According to Musonius' view of divine providence, just as Nature/the gods/God gave us grape vines to provide us with fruit (and wine), Providence-Nature-God gave us useful, protective eyebrows, eyelashes, beards, and head hair to protect us from the elements. Accordingly, to uproot and discard such useful protections given to us by nature is not merely imprudent, it shows ingratitude to the divine. For that reason, removing any hair that is not troublesome is downright impious. To prune away only the superfluous parts of the vine demonstrates good caretaking that expresses pious appreciation of the vine's benefits. Similarly, to leave one's eyebrows and eyelashes be, and to clip only the superfluous scalp hair from one's head, shows pious appreciation of these gifts.

The beard protects a man's face from the elements just as his scalp hair protects his pate. This is one reason why a pogonotomy is unnatural and wrong. To this Musonius adds another: a pogonotomy desecrates the symbol that Nature-Providence-God gifted to mark the male sex. He supports this claim with two homologies by which nature identifies males of other species. The cock's crest differentiates him from the hen. The lion's mane differentiates him from the lioness. Similarly, a man's beard differentiates him from females and boys.[2] The hairs on a man's face are therefore neither useless nor insignificant. Nature provides beards both to protect a man's face and to signify his masculinity. As long as a man has a healthy body (and face), his beard is helpful, not a hindrance. Musonius concludes that only a disease afflicting facial skin could warrant a pogonotomy.

Musonius approves of the remark of Zeno of Citium, the founder of the Stoa, that it is just as natural to cut the hair to prevent it from becoming a burden or hampering any activity as it is to let it grow long. This is because nature endows us with reason and judgement. So, acting in agreement with nature for us entails acting reasonably and judging wisely. Thus, simple, prudent trimming of excessive scalp hair is natural and justified by reason. In contrast, whenever it is unnecessary to preserve one's bodily health, depilating is unreasonable, unjustified, and unnatural. Musonius asserts that nature shows greater care guarding against deficiency than against excess, in both plants and

2 Epictetus repeats these same examples of nature's signs of sex differentiation, adding that a man's beard is finer than a cock's comb and more majestic than a lion's mane (*Diss.* 1.16.9–14). Epictetus also echoes Musonius' judgement when he denies that a man is made beautiful and clean by curling his locks or plucking the hair from his legs any more than a lion is made clean by plucking out his mane or a cock is made clean by pulling off his comb (*Diss.* 3.1.42–5).

animals. He judges that the removal of excess is much easier and simpler than adding to what is lacking. This suggests that human beings more often grow too much hair than not enough, and that it is easier and simpler to crop off the excess than it is to, say, reverse balding.[3] In any case, he says that we ought to use our innate intelligence to assist nature by compensating for deficiencies by supplementing what nature provides on the one hand, and compensating for excesses by eliminating what nature provides in superabundance. Our natural gift of reason enables us to adjust both nature's bounty and stinginess to suit our anthropocentric needs. In short, Musonius is convinced that nature would not have given us hair if it were useless or burdensome.

As an equestrian, Musonius belonged to the optimate class, the elite, traditionalist politicians who 'adopted masculine-coded walk and dress' (Corbeill 2002, 206). Admiration of Greek culture may also contribute to Musonius' attitude. The fact that Lucius' notes are in Greek likely indicates that Musonius lectured in Greek, lending further plausibility to seeing him as a Hellenophile. Thus, both the appeal of Greek custom (before Alexander) and his construal of Stoic naturalism persuade him that removing the beard and elaborately sculpting the coiffure offend masculine propriety. On this view, the natural purpose of a man's hair and beard is not to make him look handsome. Hair and beard are not means of pleasing the tastes of others. Real beauty, Musonius believes, is beauty of the mind. The beautiful mind is wise, just, temperate, and courageous. So, virtue is what makes a human being beautiful, not hair. Consequently, a good man ought not concern himself with looking pleasing to a woman. Any woman who is attracted not to a man's virtues of character but to a fancy haircut, a racy little beard, or a smoothly shaved face is an unsuitable mate in any case. Thus, Musonius maintains that a man ought to care about becoming virtuous, not meeting someone else's standard of outward beauty. A man should dedicate himself to self-improvement, education, and the cultivation of wisdom, not to beautifying his appearance. Consequently, for men to employ barbers to make them look pleasing to women reflects a twisted, unnatural code of masculinity rebarbative to Musonius.

In the urban environment of Rome, barbers served to create alternate male identities. Young men went to barbershops to enhance their sexual identity and attractiveness. 'Ovid emphasizes the importance of good personal grooming in the task of attracting young women: "now let your stubborn locks not be spoiled by bad cutting; let hair and beard be dressed by a practised hand. Do not let … any hair be in the hollows of your nostrils"' (*Ars Am.* 1.517–20;

3 Though he makes no mention of baldness, we may surmise that, given his disdain for artifice, Musonius would disapprove of wearing wigs or toupees to try to 'compensate' for baldness.

Toner 2015, 98). Barbers catered to their customers' wishes by plucking out stray hairs with fine pincers or tweezers (*volsellae*) and curling their hair (Kaufman 1932, 147). Inventive, exotic techniques of trimming the beard were ways the sophisticated urban metrosexual displayed creativity in imperial Rome: 'Part of your jaw is clipped, part shaved, part plucked. Who would think it is one head?' (Mart. 8.47; Toner 2015, 98). In addition to coding gender, the quality of the haircut and beard-trim broadly reflected social status.

> We can easily imagine that the rich were prepared to pay handsomely for talented barbers, rather than risk some unskilled apprentice hacking away at their hair and faces. The wealth gap that enabled the elite to cut themselves off from the rest of society in this way is reflected in their sneering attitude towards more humble folk's *cultus*. Horace mocks the appearance of a man who was *rusticus tonsus*, and warns that you will be ridiculed if you have badly cut hair of unequal length. (Toner 2015, 101)

Musonius impugns the misguided notion of masculinity behind this sort of sneering mockery. Those who think they must shave their faces to imitate the beardless and cut their hair different lengths in front and back to look good to women are deluded. Contrary to their intentions, in his judgement, their crinal contortions actually fail to make them look good. Such aggressive alterations to the hair and beard, Musonius contends, do not differ from the efforts of women to make themselves beautiful. Barbers abet their customers by blurring differences between traditional male and female practices, thereby problematizing gender boundaries (Toner 2015, 98).

Musonius is not alone in objecting to fussing over the beard and hair to court the approval of others. Seneca the Younger also 'complains about the use of new ways of trimming the beard as a means of self-promotion' (Toner 2015, 98; cf. *Ep.* 114.20–21). He condemns fastidious hairstyling as symptomatic of the decadence of the affluent. 'Seneca contrasts the unshorn Romans of old with those who see themselves in the full-length gold mirrors of his own time, when "luxury, encouraged by sheer opulence, has gradually developed for the worst, and vices have taken on enormous growth"' (Toner 2015, 98; cf. *QNat.* 1.17.7–10). Frilly hair, fussy beards (*barbulae*), and flashy attire proclaim the folly of exhibitionists, according to Seneca.

> You note this tendency in those who pluck out or thin out their beards, or who closely shear and shave the upper lip while preserving the rest of the hair and allowing it to grow, or in those who wear cloaks of outlandish colors, who wear a transparent toga, and who never deign to do anything which will escape general

> notice; they endeavor to excite and attract people's eyes, and they even put up with censure, provided that they can advertise themselves. That is the style of Maecenas and all the others who stray from the path, not by chance, but consciously and voluntarily. (*Ep.* 114.21; Olson 2014, 199–200)

Seneca's views were very likely shaped by his father, the rhetorician. According to Seneca the Elder, the dainty, gender-bending haircare of young men reflected their indolence and decadence.

> Their minds are possessed by sleep, laziness and an industry in the pursuit of wicked ends more reprehensible than sleep and laziness. … Their preferred way of living leads them to arrange their hair exquisitely, to mould their voices until they are as sweet as those of women, to compete with women in the softness of their bodies, decking themselves out with filthy fineries. … All their lives they remain as weak and soft as the day they were born, assaulting one another's chastity, neglectful of their own. … Go then and see if you can find an orator among the smooth and hairless of today, men only in their lusts. (Sen. *Controv*. 1. pr. 8–9; Edwards 1993, 82)

Musonius impressed the significance of natural hair care on Epictetus. Like his teacher, Epictetus too devotes an entire discourse to explaining (to a young, prissily coiffed visitor to his school) why curling, cutting, and plucking out body hairs sorely fails to grasp what it means for a man to make himself beautiful (*Diss.* 3.1).

The rustic model of masculinity defended by Musonius rejects as contrary to nature the urbane dandy bent on primping his coiffure to please women. The dandy is a panderer, not a respectable man (see Richlin 1997). 'Depilation was also held to be a conventional sign of the pathicus. Such a man removed the hair from his legs, chest, buttocks, even genitals by means of plucking, pitch, or other depilatory and was said to be hairless or "smooth" (*levis*, *glaber*, *expolitus*)' (Olson 2014, 189). Musonius reasons that men do wrong when they cater to the popular practice of shaving their faces to make themselves look like prepubescent boys. A man's beauty is to be found in a sound mind, not a fancy head of hair and denuded face. Hairdressing was a very popular activity of Roman *women*, for whom it functioned as a key marker of social status. For a Roman man, 'too much attention to appearance could cast aspersions on one's masculinity, since adornment was conventionally associated with women' (Olson 2014, 187). Musonius contends that meticulous grooming and styling of hair is unmanly because it is contrary to a man's nature. A man who lives agreeably with nature, he believes, improves himself by gaining virtue, not by

altering his appearance to boost his sex appeal, enhance his popularity, or display his social class or wealth (see Olson 2014). The desire to please another, whether female or male, betrays a woeful lack of self-respect. Fastidious hairdressing and shaving to appeal to the taste of women or boys cannot win self-respect. Neither curling hair, nor shortening it, nor removing it entirely have any power whatsoever to make a man good. Virtue is perfected reason, a state of character, a condition of the soul, not any external feature of the body.

The logic underlying Musonius' argument looks like this:

1. Nature makes women and boys beardless.
2. Nature gives grown men beards to signal their manliness.
3. Hence, nature intends grown men to have faces that look different from women and boys.
4. Hence, it is contrary to nature for grown men to imitate women or boys by going beardless.
5. Acting contrary to nature conflicts with reason and virtue.
6. Therefore, it is wrong for grown men to go beardless.

On this logic, Musonius construes a pogonotomy as an act of mutilation that violates nature's norm. Consequently, it is a pogonotomy, not a shaggy beard, that is a calamity. To celebrate this calamitous mutilation publicly and glorify it religiously is sheer desecration. Indeed, since nature provides men beards as signs of their manliness, a pogonotomy is tantamount to castration. This idea has persisted for centuries. The hair being cut off has been interpreted as symbolic castration by G.A. Wilken in 1886 and the psychoanalyst Dr Charles Berg in 1951 (Leach 1958, 149). Berg amasses evidence from dreams, anthropology, folklore, legend, symptoms, and perversions to construct a psychoanalytic argument that head hair is universally a symbol of the genital organs in the unconscious mind, and that cutting it is the unconscious equivalent of symbolic castration (Allen 1952, 301). 'For Dr Berg, the apparently simple act of shaving the beard is nothing less than an attempt to control primary aggressive impulses' (Leach 1958, 149). Musonius' view is subtly different. For him, shaving one's beard aggressively mutilates and destroys nature's gift to the face of a man, and thereby symbolizes emasculation.

Some men of his day, Musonius laments, shave their faces and cut their hair to free themselves of the weight of it. As we have seen, he emphatically denies that hair anywhere on a man's body can ever constitute a burden (βάρος). So, Musonius condemns those who convince themselves that their hair and beards are too heavy to bear. The Greek reads: σαφῶς οὗτοί γε κατεαγότες ὑπὸ τῆς τρυφῆς καὶ ἐκνενευρισμένοι παντάπασιν (*Discouse* 21, 128.32–3 Lutz). The core meaning of κατάγνυμι is 'to be broken,' and τρυφή means softness, delicacy, daintiness, fastidiousness, or luxury. Accordingly, we can translate this text: 'Clearly these

men have been broken by daintiness' – they have been conquered by softness, degraded by delicacy, and enslaved by luxury – 'and are completely unnerved.' To be 'unnerved' or 'enervated' here means that they have been robbed of their manly vigour and so weakened both physically and morally. They have become effete degenerates, and so have been unmade, unmanned, emasculated (see Edwards 1993). Their dainty ways have left them impotent. These sorry fellows, Musonius bemoans, can endure being seen as womanish creatures (γυναικώδεις) and hermaphrodites (ἀνδρόγυνοι). To mangle the gender role to which nature assigned them is something they would avoid at all costs, Musonius insists, if they were real men. For him nature divides male from female with a sharp, fixed line that allows no blurry, grey area for androgynous hairstyles.

Could hair be a burden to human beings? This question, which has guided the whole discourse, Musonius returns to at its conclusion. His argument, which appeals to a final biological homology, is an enthymeme that can be reconstructed like this:

1. Hair is for humans what feathers are for birds.
2. Feathers cannot be a burden to birds.
3. Therefore, hair cannot be a burden to humans.

The homological analogue asserted in the first premise is established by no less an authority on biology than Aristotle: 'Some such affections occur in a corresponding manner also in all animals which have not hair but something analogous to it, as the feathers of birds and scales in the class of fish' (*Gen. an.* 5.3). Given this homology, is a charitable interpretation of this argument warranted?

As seen above, Musonius decries men manipulating their hair to look handsome to women. He insists it is contrary to nature for male human beings to display their hair to attract mates. We know, however, that it is entirely natural for many species of birds to do exactly this. Male robins, chaffinches, pheasants, and Birds of Paradise in Papua New Guinea use their plumage to attract mates. Elaborate feather microstructures allow male tanagers, for example, to enhance their colours, making them seem as if they are higher quality mates (Anthes 2021). So, as the feathers of a male bird indicate something about him as a potential mate, similarly a male's beard indicates that he is a mature adult male able to reproduce. The avian analogy works well enough. Musonius succeeds in showing that hair is no burden to men *just as* feathers are no burden to birds (of either sex). This claim is plausible for the simple reason that feathers protect a bird's skin. Thus, feathers do not hinder birds from living according to (their avian) nature. Consequently, feathers are helpful, not a burden, to birds. Similarly, hair protects men's skin. Thus, hair does not hinder men from living according to (their human) nature. Consequently, hair is helpful, not a burden, to men.

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