Powers of Practice: Michel Foucault and the Politics of Asceticism

This dissertation offers a novel re-reading of Michel Foucault’s oeuvre from 1975 – 1984 oriented by his late theory of asceticism. This reading reveals in the late Foucault a method for reading ethical phenomena that is founded in a close examination of ascesis. This term is to be understood in its pre-Christian, etymological sense as those activities – in domains as diverse as sport, philosophy, and rhetoric – the practice of which directly transforms the practitioner. An ‘ethnography of the ascetic,’ as Foucault refers to his late project, always looks at these practices in their social-political context to understand how practices of the self inflect relations with others and are in turn mediated by the ideational and material contexts in which they are undertaken. As such, a Foucaultian theory of asceticism pulls us not away from but directly towards the political: ascetics are always entangled in relations of power that they reinforce or resist. A theoretically rich understanding of asceticism is crucial if we are to diagnose and specify the political role that the self and self-development do and might play in contexts and problems as diverse as neoliberal lifestyle capitalism and contemporary disciplinary procedures, and if we are to overcome traditional dichotomies in political thought between agency and structure, care of self and collective action, or politics and ethics. After an Introduction, which offers an original philological exploration of the notion of ascesis-as-practice, distinguishes Foucault’s theory of ascesis from other practice theorists, and theorizes ascesis as the key concept in a Foucaultian dialectic of freedom and power, the dissertation is divided into two parts. Part 1 (Chapters 1 to 3) develops a theory of asceticism via a reading of Foucault’s late works; Part 2 (Chapters 4 to 6) uses this theory to rethink the notions of discipline, self-entrepreneurship, and neoliberalism as forms of governance.

Chapter 1 situates Foucault’s interest in antiquity and asceticism in historical and biographical context, exploring his academic milieu and influences (including ‘French Hellenism’ and Zen Buddhism) as well as his long-standing personal interest in practices of self-overcoming. Chapter 2 offers a close reading of Foucault’s late texts in conversation with thinkers in the anthropology of ethics, to show how his work on the care of the self offers a comprehensive method for understanding ascesis in its socio-political, interpersonal, as well as doctrinal, moral, and metaphysical contexts. I argue that Foucault’s turn to antiquity is not a normative one but a methodological one: that is, the explicit and widespread interest in ascesis in ancient Greece makes it a privileged case study from which to develop an anthropological theory of ethics. Chapter 3 is an analysis of Foucault’s concept of parrhesia, inspired by the work of Peter Sloterdijk, that sees in this concept the hinge between the active cultivation of the self via ascesis and the inert habits into which we are unknowingly inculcated. Parrhesia is a form of critique that interrupts our complacency in the explicating of an existing ethos and provides the impetus and possibility for developing new ones. Chapter 4 revisits Discipline and Punish from the perspective developed in Chapters 1 to 3 and argues that this (in)famous text is not simply an anti-modern polemic or a rejection of discipline as such; discipline rather represents a dangerous yet promising beginning to an ‘ascetic renaissance,’ that is, a rebirth of the interest in and knowledge of the means by which human beings can practice on themselves to improve their political and ethical capacities. The challenge of discipline is to find a way to disconnect the increase of capacities from the increase in coercion. Chapter 5 continues this analysis, arguing that modern capitalism is highly ascetic in the proper sense of being oriented around practices of self-shaping. It analyses neoliberalism in terms of human capital theory and shows that practices such as fitness and mindfulness have taken up their place as component parts of ‘self-entrepreneurship,’ that is, attempts to increase one’s competitiveness on the market. But this means neither that Foucault is a neoliberal nor that ascesis is necessarily complicit in neoliberalism. An ascetological framework can help us parse the dangers and promises of self-entrepreneurship for our political and ethical ways of being, and to reemploy elements of its practice culture in the creation of new political possibilities. Chapter 6 concludes the dissertation with seven theses on a political theory of asceticism, drawing from and expanding upon Foucault’s thought. It begins an argument, to be elaborated in future works, that ascesis is foundational to the development of political and ethical capacities, but that uneven access to ascesis can produce social inequalities. Asceticism should therefore have its place in our thinking on democracy and social justice.