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Gavin Flood

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CHAPTER I

Setting the parameters

The subjective thinker is a dialectician oriented to the existential; he has the intellectual passion to hold firm the qualitative disjunction.

Søren Kierkegaard¹

Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.

Jaroslav Pelikan²

This book is devoted to the possibility of understanding the ascetic self in a time when most of us no longer find a place within ascetic traditions and in which asceticism is treated with suspicion. Ascetic discourse and practice have become alien in a world where religion is de-cosmologised and where the idea of deferring the gratification of desire for some other good is accepted only with hesitation. While there are what seem to be ascetical dimensions to all of our lives, and what appear to be ascetic practices take place by other names in the form of varied bodily regimes, from dietary disciplines for the purposes of health or beauty to physical training for athletic competitions, there is no ideology of repeated abstinence in secular life.³ The residues of ascetic practice in our culture have become mere technique without the accompaniment of tradition and an articulated idea of transcendence. And while all too many suffer deprivation driven by necessity, this cannot be classed as ascetic pursuit, for asceticism is voluntary. In the cultures of proliferation and excess that mark the modern Western world, in the decentred exuberance of urban life, there is little place for abstinence, self-contraction, containment, and the purification of desire that have been part of the ascetic life of thousands of men and women throughout the centuries. These men and women, in religious orders or practising alone, have all been part of a tradition and linguistic community that legitimated their practice. All have performed the memory of tradition, and it is this memory of tradition that marks asceticism off from mere abstinence or abstinence for a secular pursuit, such as health. Asceticism

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has normative relevance for religion and some political practice. It is this sense of the ascetic self in relation to tradition and the linguistic community in which she or he is embedded that I wish to explore.

The central contention of the book can be stated quite simply: that the ascetic self is performed. It performs the memory of tradition and it performs the ambiguity of the self. By this I mean that asceticism is always set within, or in some cases in reaction to, a religious tradition, within a shared memory that both looks back to an origin and looks forward to a future goal. But asceticism only flourishes in certain kinds of tradition that might be called ‘cosmological’; in traditions where cosmology is lost, asceticism as performance becomes eroded or becomes a purely internalised performance. This will be to defend a fairly robust notion of tradition – and *religious* tradition in particular – and to see asceticism as a quintessentially religious act. There are clearly analogues of asceticism in the contemporary, secularised world, but these are not asceticism, because they do not perform the memory of tradition. Some have tried to explain asceticism in terms of contemporary medical categories, particularly female asceticism in terms of dietary conditions such as anorexia nervosa, but this is to misunderstand the nature of asceticism as acting out the memory of tradition, whether or not these ascetics were actually subject to that condition.

Asceticism within tradition is performed by a self; not a disembodied self, but a historical, language-bearing, gendered person with their own name and story. Asceticism entails subjectivity, it entails a self *who* renounces, but a self that is always expressed through the structures of tradition. Rather than being subjected to individual desire as the person’s predominant driving force, asceticism advocates the subjection of oneself to tradition, to a master, in order to undergo a transformation. The ascetic submits her life to a form that transforms it, to a training that changes a person’s orientation from the fulfilment of desire to a narrative greater than the self. The ascetic self shapes the narrative of her life to the narrative of tradition. There is a deep ambiguity here. On the one hand, asceticism entails the assertion of the individual will, a kind of purified intentionality, yet on the other it wishes to wholly form itself in the shape of tradition and in terms of the tradition’s goals. The goals of ascetic traditions are so often the eradication of subjectivity through the self becoming wholly passive (as in Christianity), through the self realising its non-agency (as in Advaita Vedānta) or through the self understanding its non-essential nature (as in Buddhism). Yet the eradication of subjectivity in ascetic pursuit entails the assertion of subjectivity in voluntary acts of will. Asceticism, then, is the performance of this

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ambiguity, an ambiguity that is absolutely central to subjectivity. Indeed, we might say that subjectivity comes into view more sharply in the distance between goal and means, between ascetic intention (such as the self's passivity) and expression (such as the weakening of the body through will). In some ways, the ascetic self is an ironic self. This conception of subjectivity as the performance of ambiguity is, of course, rooted in Kierkegaard, but a Kierkegaardian conception fused with tradition. I will say more about this presently.

It is my contention that this fairly simple claim holds up in traditions of asceticism in at least the three religions of Christianity, Buddhism and that amalgam of traditions we call Hinduism. The book therefore makes a claim for some degree of universalism. I am hesitant about the word 'universalism', as it evokes ideas of the grand narrative of Enlightenment reason that has fallen under such criticism in the past thirty years, or of a deeply problematic perennial philosophy that makes claims about a 'universal spiritual truth' and does not give credence to the particularity of tradition and the location of voice. On the other hand, there are equally deep problems about extreme forms of relativism and the implication of closed cultural worlds. Apart from the initial problem that all claims are relative except that claim itself, extreme forms of relativism are not viable. In an obvious sense, we can learn one another's languages, we recognise joy, fear and disgust in all other human beings, and we are all subject to bodily constraint and the need for food, warmth, shelter and company. Above all, we are embodied and are subject to death. This is not to deny, of course, that there is great diversity in the way cultures respond to and deal with human need and the way languages construct our worldviews. Culture, particularly the structures of language, clearly affects the ways we think.⁴ But all human beings share fundamental needs and environmental responses.

The book would therefore wish to make a claim about a commonality with regard to the ascetic self, while at the same time wishing not to detract from the richness of tradition and historical depths that have formed events, cultures and people into their particularity. The ascetic self is formed by tradition and internalises tradition and its goals, yet this process is itself shared among traditions. There are methodological implications for this general position that I shall examine presently, but I would wish to claim that this is an attempt to write a kind of comparative religion that is post-foundational or postcritical, and that respects diverse and divergent voices. In what remains of the introduction, I state the general argument about the ascetic self in terms of performance, the memory of tradition, the ambiguity

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of the self and subjectivity, and conclude with some consideration of the problem of universalism and method.

ASCETICISM AS PERFORMANCE

What is meant by asceticism? If, as Freud claimed, culture is founded on the renunciation of the instincts, then in one sense all culture is ascetical. In Harpham's excellent study, this is to see the ascetic impulse as pre-ideological.⁵ But while this is an important idea, it is too wide a base from which to begin a focussed discussion: we need to delineate a narrower band of cultural practices and ideas to which the term 'asceticism' points. This is not so much a matter of offering arbitrary definitions, but rather a need to develop a strategy of containment within which to discuss a range of cultural meanings. Turning to its Greek roots, the term *askesis* denoted the training of athletes and with early Christianity came to denote the practices of 'spiritual athletes' who trained in morality. In the New Testament *askeo* or 'to do one's best' occurs as referring to the 'voluntary discipline of the self to benefit the soul'.⁶ By the early centuries of the Christian era in the ancient world, the term had come to refer to the practice of celibacy and later to more extreme physical disciplines.

To begin, we might say that asceticism is the reversal of the flow of the body, which is also an attempt to reverse the flow of time. Asceticism refers to a range of habits or bodily regimes designed to restrict or reverse the instinctual impulses of the body and to an ideology that maintains that in so doing a greater good or happiness can be achieved. These goals are not simply abstract ideologies or justifications for the power of institutions, they are the future orientations and narrative identities of people: their desire to break through the constraints of time and body, their desire to achieve a goal, the goal of human perfection in this or in some other world. The reversal of the flow of the body is performed in ascetic practice. To reverse the flow of the body is both to perform the memory of tradition and to perform the ambiguity of the self. With few exceptions (although there are some) the ascetic does not intend to die, which would be the closure of the ambiguity, but rather to perform that ambiguity through the reversal of the flow of the body, as we shall see.

Asceticism is a way in which a tradition patterns the body or imposes order upon it, in the sense that the body is subjected to an institutional power by which it is inscribed, but the ascetic self also transcends that institutional power. The ascetic appropriates the tradition to his or her self-narrative for a range of reasons. At one level, this is to achieve a

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tradition-specific goal of sainthood, liberation, or whatever, through bodily restriction. There will be other reasons too that any one person maps a tradition onto herself and appropriates a cultural meaning, located in the narrative of a particular life and probably in unconscious motivation.

A key feature of the reversal of the body's orientation is the renunciation of food and sexual practice along with the attempted eradication of sexual desire. Not only this: in propounding a life of simplicity and minimal worldly interaction, ascetic cultures often renounce aesthetic pleasures as well, such as music and dancing, although we must not forget the importance of music and beauty in the liturgies of the monastic cultures of Europe. The performance of asceticism can also incorporate mental disciplines, including the cultivation of humility and detachment. Wimbush and Valantasis observe that in a conference on asceticism across cultures, 'familiar patterns of behaviour' began to emerge, such as 'fasting, social withdrawal, [and] continual prayer', along with similar metaphors of 'marriage to divinity, a distrust of body, valuation of the intellect', and correlative theological formulations such as 'ascent to the divine, avoidance of evil, [and] regeneration'.⁷ These patterns might themselves be founded on more fundamental imperatives. Collins identifies a cultural logic of asceticism in a South Asian context that connects reproduction with ageing and death and so an escape from ageing and death with a denial of reproduction. He writes:

... from among the many and various responses to physicality, one first connects the body and reproduction to the inevitability of ageing and death. If what is brought into being by physical means is always subject to decay and death, and if it is not possible to imagine and aspire to a kind of well-being which will not decay and die, then that state must be non-physical, or at least even if in some sense physical then asexual, because not physically reproductive.⁸

Although writing about South Asia, this denial of reproduction specified by Collins is a feature common to ascetic ideologies. The denial of reproduction and of sexuality is the reversal of the flow of the body. This reversal describes the central performance of the ascetic self, typically in an ascetic community and always within a tradition. But the reversal of the flow of the body can be performed by those living married lives, generally men, where the ideal of sexual renunciation still remains or is redefined, as in the tantric Hindu context where sexuality is used as a form of asceticism.

The ascetic self performs asceticism through tradition-specific, bodily regimes or habits and in obedience to ascetic discipline. Through an act of will the ascetic self takes on the forms prescribed for it by tradition and

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generates long-term patterns of behaviour, intended, ironically, to subvert that will. These cultural habits are the hallmarks of asceticism and can be understood as bodily performance. The work of Bourdieu has highlighted the importance of the *habitus* in social formation, where *habitus* refers to dispositions to act and react in certain ways⁹ and to submit to collective rhythms.¹⁰ The shaping of the body in a particular way, the conformity to a discipline and conformity of the body to a predetermined, cultural form is conformity to external power structures, such as the power of the state, the church and the tradition. In this sense, power is inscribed upon the body through the *habitus*. The ascetic conforms to the discipline of the tradition, shapes his or her body into particular cultural forms over time, and thereby appropriates the tradition. This appropriation of tradition is a form of remembrance, the memory of tradition performed through the body, and is also the vehicle for change or transformation. Both the male and female body become the re-enactment or performance of the tradition, and through that performance occurs the transformation of the self. The Hindu ascetic holding his arm aloft is conforming to tradition and appropriating a cultural form as an act of will – a will that, in the end, seeks its own destruction.

The bodily disciplines of asceticism not only produce conformity to the power of tradition, they can also express resistance; adapting the body to the form of tradition might be regarded as a means of transcending it. Simone Weil, as we shall see, made her body conform to the regularities of the workplace, not as an act of compliant docility but as an act of freedom. Through accepting the inscription of external power in the form of the work regime, Weil performs an act of asceticism that is simultaneously an act of external conformity and an act of political resistance through inner resistance to the automation of the self. The body and the encoding of tradition and culture upon it become, for her, a means for transcending the body and a reversal of the flow of the body (and so a reversal of time and necessity). Pain, willingly accepted, becomes the method for the body's transcendence. This is a common feature of ascetic traditions. The body is harnessed and controlled, sometimes put into situations of intentional suffering, in order not only to attain an inner transcendence but also to attain a bodily perfection. Through developing ascetic habit, ascetic ideology maintains that the limits of the body can be superseded and a 'new' body created or the body transcended.

Because of the ideology of bodily transcendence or bodily perfection by means of the body, gender is a problematic category through which to view asceticism. Medieval Christian women ascetics, as Hollywood has

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observed, were concerned with issues about the apostolic life, poverty, work and action, issues that their male counterparts were also concerned with, although hagiographies written by men attempted to see women wholly in terms of the body.¹¹ Medieval concerns in the West were focussed not so much on the sexualised (and gendered) body, but on the body as the site of corruption and death, in which case there tends to be an equalisation of somatic discourse between men and women.¹² Both men and women shared in the reversal of the body's flow, an attempted reversal of death and corruption. Nevertheless, gender is important in viewing the ascetic self from our perspective in the early twenty-first century. Gender has become an important analytical tool for looking at the histories of asceticism, especially the relationship of the ascetic self to power in terms of conformity and resistance. Indeed, we might claim that *resistance* to power enacted through ascetic performance – including ascetic writing – is mainly female, in contrast to *conformity* to power, which is mainly male. We see this in the life and work of the Beguines and Marguerite Porete, for example, who confronted and resisted Church authority, whereas conformity to domination tends to be male, as men are the wielders of social power.

To reverse the body's flow is to perform asceticism. Asceticism is always performed, which is to say always in the public domain (even when performed in privacy). One of the key features of performance is that it is public and can be observed. Asceticism is therefore performance because the reversal of the flow of the body is enacted within a community and tradition. Ascetic acts performed within the privacy of a cell or forest are nevertheless still public in the sense that they participate in and are given sanction by the wider community and tradition. This is an important point. Ascetic performance is public and only makes sense in the context of community and tradition. Through performing asceticism the ascetic is performing tradition, and the performance of tradition is a public affair. But not only is ascetic performance public, it is also subjective or the subjective appropriation of tradition. To develop the idea of the ascetic self as a kind of performed self is to locate asceticism within the general sphere of ritual understood by Rappaport as the performance of more or less invariant formal actions and utterances (see pp. 15, 214). The ascetic self is formed through ritual, which is the performance of the memory of tradition, but which is intimately connected to subjectivity in the ascetic case. This is to separate subjectivity from modern notions of individuality (see p. 241) and to set subjectivity within the public realm of tradition. Asceticism as the subjective appropriation of tradition is the enactment of a cultural memory. Indeed, the performance of tradition can be seen as the

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performance of memory: reversing the body's flow is enacting the memory of tradition, a tradition that becomes encoded in the body. This pattern is fundamental to asceticism and can be seen over and over again in ascetic traditions.

THE MEMORY OF TRADITION

Asceticism entails tradition and is always set within its boundaries. In this sense it is public, and the ascetic subjectivity that performs the memory of tradition is a shared or collective subjectivity. The ascetic self takes on the presuppositions of a particular community, imbibes the ideology of a community's tradition or traditions, and conforms his or her body to the practices determined by it. The nature of tradition is, of course, complex. We might take it simply to mean, as Shils does (echoing Augustine), that which is handed down from the past, a *traditum*,¹³ or, as Pelikan does, the 'social glue that brings cohesiveness to a clan or tribe'.¹⁴ Digging deeper, we might distinguish different aspects of tradition, as John Thompson does.¹⁵ But central to the concept of tradition is memory, especially collective memory passed through the generations. The sociologist Hervieu-Léger has described tradition (and religion) as a 'chain of memory' which confers transcendent authority on the past. A tradition 'describes the body of representations, images, theoretical and practical intelligence, behaviour, attitudes and so on that a group or society accepts in the name of the *necessary* continuity between the past and the present'.¹⁶ Tradition is not passively received but actively reconstructed in a shared imagination and reconstituted in the present as memory. It is more than the passive conserving of information, it is the active enlivening of the present through links with the past. Although in one sense tradition is constructed in a shared imagination, this is not to say that tradition is made up and unreal, but rather is in a constant process of (re)construction in the flow of temporal continuity from the past. Although constructed, tradition is also received, in the words of Maximus, 'through succession from those who came before'.¹⁷

Following Jacques Le Goff, we might take memory to mean 'the capacity for conserving certain information',¹⁸ information deemed important by a community and often with the function of legitimising the power of a particular group. But not only this, memory is also important to ensure the transmission of information and knowledge, important not only for collective identity and the maintenance of power relations but also for individual formation of a life. Ascetic traditions replicate a certain kind of

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memory of tradition through the generations, a memory that is constantly reconstructed and enlivened but that eventually becomes eroded with changed historical conditions. Memory, as Mary Carruthers has marvelously shown in the medieval monastic world, was central to the transmission of tradition and the process of religious transformation. *Memoria* has a wider connotation than simply repetition or reiteration: it has the sense of creative thought and construction.¹⁹ There are analogues here in the Indian world, as we shall see.

The important point is that ascetic traditions are forms of collective memory enacted in the body through praxis and enacted in language through discourse. Ascetic traditions are set within the wider framework of collective memory, the wider tradition that presents asceticism as central to discourse, and a valued practice. But while representation or imitation, as acts of memory, are central to the transmission of tradition, what is specific to asceticism? Ascetic traditions assume the general background presuppositions of any community, but I think there are three features characteristic of ascetic traditions generally. Firstly, ascetic traditions are always set within or are a part of a *religious* tradition, moreover a *cosmological* religious tradition. Secondly, cosmological traditions interiorise cosmology. That is, there is a tendency in cosmological religions to emphasise interiority, and an interiority that interfaces with the structure of the hierarchical cosmos in a way that goes beyond what might be understood simply as subjectivity. Thirdly, ascetic traditions are the enactment of the memory of tradition, which is also the expression of cosmology, for tradition is understood as an expression of the cosmic structure. Let us look at each of these.

To make claims about religious tradition, that such a concept is even useful, goes against the grain of some recent scholarship that wishes to pull away from any essentialist understanding and sees religion in terms of social construction, culture and power relations.²⁰ I do not wish to directly engage with this literature here²¹ but rather to claim that what distinguishes a tradition as religious is, as I have argued, value-laden narratives and behaviours that bind people to their goals, to their community, and to non-empirical claims and beings.²² This is to follow Lactantius' sense of *religio* as that which binds, and we might add that people are bound by the memory of tradition. It is also to acknowledge some sense that a *religious* tradition is concerned with 'ultimate concern' for any human being, with meaning, with death and with transcendence.²³ While, of course, the concept of religion is in one sense constructed, developing as an abstract term from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in a context that separated it from

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a 'secular' realm of governance, this does not mean that religion does not refer to provinces of human meaning outside of the West or before that period. A concept can be constructed and at the same time revelatory, opening out a realm of discourse and practice. This is to claim (along with others) that religion is more than simply a matter of local, political concern. Paul Griffiths has very usefully argued that a religious account of the world must be comprehensive, unsurpassable and central to an individual life,²⁴ and asceticism must be seen in this kind of context. For a man or woman to devote their life to a path and practice that can involve great discomfort and pain is to make a commitment to a goal that has ultimate value for them. It is also to give commitment to a tradition that they regard as giving a comprehensive, unsurpassable and central account of the world. What is distinctive about ascetic traditions is that such an account must also be cosmological.

Asceticism occurs *par excellence* in cosmological religion. By 'cosmological religion', I mean traditions that give an account of the relationship between self and cosmos or, in theistic traditions, self, cosmos and God. Jainism, Śaiva Siddhānta and Orthodox Christianity would be good examples. In such religions, ideas of creation or manifestation will be important and they will have a developed sense of tradition. In Christianity this has meant a strong ecclesiology, in Hinduism a strong sense of tradition itself being part of the flow (*śrotas*) from the divine realm. Such traditions are concerned with the order of things, with categories, and with organisms being in their right place. They claim to offer an accurate description of the cosmos and the meaning of human existence within it, from artistic expression to everyday human behaviour. Furthermore, this knowledge is not inconsequential, and knowledge of the spiritual path is also knowledge of the nature of the universe. Cosmological religion provides a map and a route from which individual life-ways can be constructed. They generally have a hierarchical view of the structure of the cosmos, locating pure or advanced beings, such as gods and angels, at the top of the hierarchy and less developed beings, such as plants and insects, at the bottom. The hierarchy is reflected in the institutions of the tradition. This is not necessarily a moral hierarchy, for human beings, although structurally lower, are often regarded as possessing freedom of will (in Christianity) or a quality that allows their liberation (in Buddhism). We can take many examples, and shall do so in coming chapters, from Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism, but one will suffice here. In a text from one of the traditions of Śiva, the *Mālinīvijayottara-tantra* ('The Supreme Victory of the (Goddess of) the Garland of Letters') composed before or during the tenth century CE, a