

ASCESIS. Introduction, etymology and bibliography 1989.

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I. Introduction to Askesis for discussion with David Ramage.

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I want to cultivate the capacity for second thoughts, by which I mean the stance and the competence that makes it feasible to inquire into the obvious. This is what I call learning.

Learning presupposes both critical and ascetical habits; habits of the right and habits of the left. I consider the cultivation of learning as a dissymetrical but complementary growth of both these sets of habits. I see that since the foundation of the University in the late Middle Ages, the humanist tradition has preeminently fostered the formation of critical habits. Higher Education has come to be the refinement of the habits of the mind, while military service, schools, the conjugal family and later the media have taken over the sad remanents of the "heart's" formation.

This preponderance of critical over ascetical training for insight and wisdom can be understood as a necessary condition for the science which we now have. Like the science it brought forth, it this reduction of intellectual formation to critical procedures constitutes something which cannot adequately be compared with anything in other cultures of epochs. What is worse: we now tend to take this one-sided style of learning to be traditional and historians of education project the present prejudice into the past. This not only makes it very difficult to understand Plato or Plotinus, Marc Aurelius or Boethius, Abaelard or Ockham. It also makes it almost impossible to inquire into the current status of science as the source of the obvious by which we live. Scientific assumptions are the appropriate shell for ascetically untrained, learned persons.

The habits of the heart and the cultivation of its virtues are peripherals to the pursuit of higher learning today. Ascetical discipline has been exorcised from the core of the learning disciplines. For a full millennium the Church cultivated a balanced tradition of study and reflection within which antique traditions were transmitted to Western Societies. Only one aspect of this tradition, namely the conceptual-critical side is accepted as the legitimate concern of humanistic learning. And, as Weber, Tröltzsch and Scheler pointed out, the ascetical habits which shaped western mentalities during a millennium became a driving force in the creation of a social order which is as unique and unprecedented as the scientific shell which fits critical secularism.

I want to explore the demise of intellectual asceticism as a characteristic of western learning since the time it became academic. In this historical perspective, I want to argue for the possibility of a new complementarity between critical and ascetical learning. I want to reclaim for ascetical theory, method and discipline a status equal to that the University now assigns to critical and technical disciplines. I am fully aware that by shaping my argument in this fashion, I enter into discussion about the demise of an institution which, since the 13th century, we perceive as "University".

What some call the current crisis of the university others see as its abdication. This abdication can be imagined as analogous to the abdication of the cloister at the end of the monastic age, which has brought the University into existence. So, I am not arguing for the discontinuation of the academic tradition ever more than I would ever argue for the discontinuation of the monastic tradition. Both are precious, and both provide the frame for very distinct facets of high vocations.

I also do not argue that a contemporary recovery of critical ascetical learning can be conceived as a continuation of the western, or for that matter, any "spiritual" tradition. The asceticism which can be practiced at the end of the 20th century is something profoundly different from any previously known. My proposed study of christian ascetical disciplines within the pursuit of learning will be guided by the desire to write good history, not to engage in apologetics or mission. It has the purpose of stressing what has been lost to learning disciplines under the aegis of the University, an institution historically auspicious to the dismissal of ascetical discipline from the core of higher learning.

The five-year course that I propose toward a legitimate place for ascetical theory and discipline within the core of any contemporary methodology of higher learning. Athletics, religious programs, psychotherapeutic counselling, student politics, career counselling, sensitivity training, movement politics are appendages, not constitutive elements of the University's main task. I want to explore the possibility for a radical renewal of learning, and not for institutional or curricular change.

I would be happy to offer this course at a school of divinity because the history of asceticism in western societies is, fundamentally, a theological issue. It is true that the mind-body dualism which distinguishes western asceticism from that of India or China predates the Christian era. Orphic, Cynic, Stoic, Epicurean -- even Essenian and Gnostic trends -- have contributed to that

imbalance between mind and flesh in the pursuit of learning which has remained ever since as characteristic for the civilization within which Christianity has spread.

However, for over a millennium the inclusion of ascetical theory and praxis within the pursuit of learning and wisdom was an essential part of the Church's history. From Nietzsche to Girard, von Troeltsch or L. Dumont the socio-psychological consequences of this heritage have been explored. The results of the exorcism of this very same heritage from the tradition of humanist, bookish, increasingly democratic University-centered learning is a less studied field.

One obvious reason for the existence of this blind spot is, indubitably, the repugnant connotation evoked whenever the word "ascetic" is pronounced today. As long as it is used to explain some behaviour in Calvinist Geneva, or some form of sado-masochistic narcissism for which the psychologist needs a term, it may be used. The recent Americanization of the French term "spiritualité" and its sloppy and mystifying use have made this aversion more legitimate than ever. Yet, I will dare to recover the term "asceticism". I will use it to distinguish two asymmetrically complementary domains of consciousness which both need to be disciplined in a man of learning: to relate ascetical to critical striving, competence and virtues.

I will not attempt to create a theory, though I hope to whet the appetite of my auditors for one. Nor will I give guidance towards ascetical practice. Rather, I will try to *recover the perceptions of self and other which led to the formation of ascetical disciplines*. I will place the body rather than the mind at the center of my lectures, not because I can distinguish the two, but because I need a term, the term "body" to engage the student's interest in the traditional habits that cultivate personal centers which they might never have adverted to, such as the heart, the eyes, the limbs, the stomach, the flesh, the ears and the spirit.

In five successive years I want to concentrate on ascetical concepts, images and endeavors that have been metaphorically related to one of these "organs". During the first year, 1990, I will focus on the "heart". In several lectures I will report on its guard, its opening, the dangers of its hardening, its spaciousness and its sweetness. Each year I intend to prepare in advance a book-length manuscript on my chosen subject. I will not only deliver a series of lectures, but conduct, after the lecture, a seminar for selected auditors who have prepared themselves by using the Manuscript as a guide. I hope to incorporate the insights gained during the seminar into the text which I will ready for publication within a couple of months after the close of the quarter.

II. Note on: The history and the word-field in antiquity.

The etymology of the greek word askéo remains obscure. Homer uses it to speak of work that is artistic (Il.10,438; 23,743; Od.23,198) or technical (Il.3,388;4,110). In the same way the word is used by Herodot (3,1;2,130)

The word then comes to designate (1) physical culture (2) the cultivation of the intelligence of the will and (3) the performance of religious duties.

(1) From the exercise of an art (Herodot,3,125) and "application to a task" (Democrit.,53a) the shift of meaning leads to the "exercise of the body to make it strong" (Xenophon, Cyrop.,2,1,20). This body-building is a side-effect of rural life (Xenophon, Oec.,5,1) and it is directly pursued in the training of athletes and soldiers. (Plato, Prot.,323d; Xenophon, Cyr., 8,1,24). Plato uses the term to qualify the constancy and commitment of a good pupil training under a teacher of gymnastics. oi asketái are the professionally trained soldiers in opposition to the untrained military idiōtai (Xenophon, Cyrop.,1,5,11)

(2) In this very same passage of Xenophon (1,1,5-11) a further shift in meaning refers to the application of him who searches for wisdom. Aristoteles (Eth. Nic.,9,1170a 11) uses the term for training in both martial and moral virtues.

Isokrates establishes the analogy according to which philosophías askesis, philosophical asceticism strengthens the soul as "medical" care the body. The pursuit of learning, (epistémē) virtue and health are seen as parallel pursuits, each requiring its own askesis, all three dependent on wise habits of temperance (Plato, Gorgias, 507c)

For the Cynics, their morality can be reduced to askesis (Diogenes Laertius, 6,48,70). For Philo, ascetical intelligence engages in a methodical effort that is both moral and religious, by which the convert progressively detaches himself from the sensible world. (vide: Comm. allég. des Saintes Lois, édit Bréhier, Picard 1909)

(3) The moral askesis of classical antiquity cannot ever be wholly divorced from a religious setting. For the Pythagoreians the practice of asceticism is equivalent to religion. Philon's katharàn

eusébean askēn (de Abrah.,129) is, for this reason, consistent with general use. Yet, it is from Philon that the Church fathers have inherited the general and the technical use of the word:

(general) Because, in the New Testament, the term is used one time only, and in a very general sense: Acts,24,16. In the Old Testament, the term appears only sporadically, in the greek originals of the Books of Macc.(2Mac.,15,4; 4Mac.,13,22;12,11). In the Pauline letters the term itself does not appear, but an equivalent term strongly suggests it: (gýmnaze seautōn pros eusébean 1 Tim.,4,7 & e somatikē gymnasia ibid. 8)

In the apostolic and apologetical fathers of the second century the word áskesis appears only twice: (Tatian, 19,1 & Martyr.Polyc., 18,3) in both instances it refers to the preparation for martyrdom. But the perfect christian is as a matter of course defined as an asket: asketés. (1 Clem. ad Rom.,5,1; Ignat. ad Pol.,1,3; 2;3; 3,1).Clement of Alexandria here follows Plotin: christian perfection is gnostic askesis (Strom.,4,22; PG 8,1344) and the patriarch Jacob is its model (Paed.,1,7; PG.,8,17).

(technical use) In Origenes (Contra Celsum, 5,2; 54,1 -edit. Koetschau) the technical meaning given by the somewhat "mythical pythagorean fraternity" and used by Plotinus comes to be part of the christian vocabulary: áskesis now is used to define a special , socially recognizable way of life characteristic for those who "live in continence". Hence, very soon, texts that Church Fathers address not to christians in general, but to special groups among them, are called "asceticals"

Distinct philosophical contexts for the use of the word in antiquity.

"Pythagoreans" and Orphics.

For those who claimed to be pupils of Pythagoras, and about whom we know mainly through the writings of their would-be pupils three centuries later, askesis meant to break the circle of re-incarnation and the efforts implied in freeing the soul from the grave of the body. This effort is that which Plato (Republic 10,606b) calls "the pythagorean way of life", for which the pythagoreans invented and first used the term *philosophy*. Its purpose is the achievement of *katharsis*, purification, which within the pythagorean and orphic discourse also acquires a very specific technical meaning: the search for measure, moderation, symmetrí as a result of ascetical exercises. Each evening the adept is expected to review his day, and examine where he has given way

to sadness, depression: where and when he has "chewed up his heart" (Diog. Laert.,8,117). Only when this interior harmony can be established and reigns in the heart, the "innermost god" (Jamblicus, Life of Pythagoras, 240) will be rendered the appropriate cult.

In the neo-phythagorean schools of the first century áskesis is taken up and developed as the pursuit of this intensely religious experience: *metriopathy* is the word for this asketical pursuit of keeping the heart in a precarious balance between various passions, which is a condition for insightful living (FN Festugière, *Idéal* pp 76-85). However, simultaneously, askesis becomes supremely useful: it is perceived by other, less contemplatively oriented practitioners as the route towards magical and mantic powers (FN Carcopino p 261ff). The union with the innermost divinity is now pursued as a means to receive revelations about the future, to acquire the power to do miracles. (FN Strathmann, p316).

The cynics.

Socrates practices áskesis, by identifying science and virtue he assumed its central function within philosophy, but he did not elaborate on its theory. His example was transformed into an ideal by the Cynics, and through them the call for asceticism became, recurrently, a constitutive part of classical philosophical currents. (ex.gr.Epictet, *Conversations*,3,22 edit Schenkl, Teubner,1898)

[res. I.G.KIDD:] Happiness is found in 'virtuous' action, which was the practical expression of self-realization, arete, self-knowledge based on the awareness of the distinction between natural and artificial values. Freedom was to be achieved by renunciation to desire, indulgence and the ignorance generated by life in a corrupt society. The goal of áskesis was autarakeia, self-sufficiency, self-governance. "Cynics wished not merely to devalue the coin like Socrates and the Stoics, but to deface it paracharattein..hence the attempt to reduce physical wants to a minimum" As a herald of God, the Cynic was the watchdog of mankind, to bark at illusions; the surgeon whose knife sliced the cancer of cant from the mind of others. Hence the new stress on literary genres: the anecdotal, mordant quipp,cheira, the diatribe and the satire.

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J. de Guibert refuses to use the french *ascétisme* which, according to him was mainly used to refer to exaggerations like *hyperascétisme, pan-ascétisme, pan-mysticisme.*