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*Asceticism/Askēsis:  
Foucault's Thinking Historical Subjectivity*

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Ladelle McWhorter

In the Introduction to *The Use of Pleasure* Foucault calls his work an *askēsis*, “an exercise of oneself in the activity of thought.” The “living substance of philosophy,” Foucault writes, is the essay, “which should be understood as the assay or test by which, in the game of truth, one undergoes changes, and not as the simplistic appropriation of others for the purpose of communication.”<sup>1</sup> Foucault’s work, then, does not simply report to us his conclusions or theories. Foucault is not primarily interested in imparting information. What he offers instead is a kind of exercise book.

Hence, if we are to think through Foucault’s work, we need first to think the meaning of the word *exercise*. An exercise, of course, is a kind of practice, a practice designed to change the one who undergoes it. We undertake various programs of exercise in order to alter ourselves in some way. We engage in physical exercises to change the contours of our bodies or magnify their strength, to clear our minds of anger or depression, or to stimulate ourselves for intellectual work. We engage in mathematical or logic exercises in order to train ourselves in the patterns of mathematical or logical thought, as we engage in grammatical exercises in order to discipline our writing and speech. Exercises are transforming practices, practices “by which . . . one undergoes changes.”

An exercise book, then, requires an approach quite different from most works of professional scholarship. If a typical work of scholarship is to be understood as simply a report of its author's conclusions, suggestions, and perhaps still-embryonic ideas, then it may be taken as a product, the result of an agent's or a subject's having acted to produce it. As such it is an object to be perceived and judged and thought about, an object external to and separable from us subjects who read and judge it. But an exercise book demands to be treated as a very different kind of thing. If it is the case that exercise, *askēsis*, is a transformative practice, then Foucault's exercise books cannot be adequately comprehended by the notion 'object'. They cannot be perceived and read and judged by a subject whose being is wholly external to them. As we have noted, an exercise is a practice whose very nature it is to alter the practitioner. And that means that the practitioner (the writer, the reader) and the practice are not external to one another. As the *askēsis* plays out, the boundaries necessary for maintaining subjective and objective identities shift and may even erode.

Exercises are often empowering and enlightening. There may be very good reasons for engaging in them. However, we who have Nietzsche's works as part of our heritage have reason to hesitate. In the wake of the third essay in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Foucault's use of the word *askēsis*, from which we get *asceticism*, cannot help but make us wince. We cannot help but notice that asceticism, like Foucault's *askēsis*, denotes self-transforming practice; asceticism, too, changes the subject who undergoes it. Foucault's use of such a closely related word forces us to ask the question: Is it possible that Foucault the neo-Nietzschean in some sneaky or occluded way embraces the ascetic ideal after all? Is Foucault's *askēsis* just a new twist in the history of asceticism? Or does it bring with it a possibility for difference? In pursuit of that question we first need to examine Nietzsche's genealogy of asceticism.

In *On the Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche locates the beginning of the modern self—a being with interiority, memory, conscience, the ability to make promises—in a certain fastidiousness, a certain desire for keeping clean.<sup>2</sup> Modern selfhood begins in a dream of purity, of the putting aside, the exclusion of whatever appears extraneous, unnecessary, in excess. Perhaps it begins innocuously enough. This abstinence is empowering, self-affirming; it breeds more of itself. And so a sorting process begins. As this complex of self-affirming drives intensifies itself, it discounts, excludes, perhaps in some cases denies that which it now names *other*.

Thus modern selfhood is born, and at the same time modern morality. By a process of sorting out and refusing there comes to be constituted a world, an "external world," an "evil world" from which the self rebounds and turns inward, relentlessly seeking that world's pure opposition, seeking to affirm itself. The modern self's drive for self-affirmation *is* an ascetic drive. What are we modern ascetic selves seeking? That which is truly ourselves, the pure kernel, the self-identical core. How shall we find it? Exclude all that merely adorns, all that clings, all that soils, all that corrupts. Thus asceticism begets the will to constancy, clarity, reliability, integrity, certainty, eternality, identity, the Selfsame. Thus asceticism begets the will to truth.

Nietzsche pulls no punches. It is out of fear that asceticism begets this will to true identity. In order to perpetuate itself it must deny its origins in dispersed drives; it must insist upon the existence of a perfect unity at the heart of things, underlying all that differs and dies, all that wrecks itself in the winds of change. It must insist on the persistence of its self-identity in order to continue being what it is—the drive to purify. To do otherwise is to endanger itself, to risk itself. And that it will not do; that it is too fearful to do.

Now, we could sit in judgment of Nietzsche's discourse; we could criticize his logic or his sense of history. We could even out-Nietzsche him and fault him for reading too much simplicity into things. But none of that would change the fact that Nietzsche's discourse disturbs, and we undergo that disturbance, regardless of how we appropriate it. The discourse appropriates us. We find ourselves within its lineage. It gives rise to us.

We ascetic selves probably will live out Nietzsche's attack on the ascetic ideal in embarrassment. It is embarrassing to find oneself in a discourse whose own fearful, timid lineage is laid bare. Through Nietzsche's discourse the ascetic ideal inspires us with disgust. We smell ourselves and hurry to hold our noses. But that does not help, for the very gesture of nose-holding itself is an ascetic response, a rejection of impurity, a refusal of the corrupt. So, despite ourselves, the ascetic ideal plays itself out first in our embarrassment and then in our frustration within its tenacious grip.

Therefore, when Foucault calls us to *askēsis* unapologetically and without so much as a blush, we have every reason to be surprised, and somewhat suspicious as well. Just what is Foucault asking us to submit to? It would seem that he is asking us to participate in the perpetuation of asceticism's ugly history, a perpetuation all the worse for its apparent forgetfulness of Nietzsche's thought. But Foucault's

*askēsis* purports to be other than an insistence upon ascetic submission to rigid identity structures. It purports to be the very opposite, in fact—an attempt to think subjectivity in the absence of transhistorical structure, the pure kernel of the ascetic dream. However, if this claim to otherness is true, Foucault is engaged in an apparent paradox. He—a subject, a self, a person with a particular identity, that man Michel Foucault—is trying to exercise himself in the thinking of his own contingency, his own optionality. He is attempting to put himself through an exercise that would constitute the undergoing of his own dispersal. What are we to make of even the thought of that?

Cynicism snaps: This call of his for inwardness, selfhood, and subjectivity to think its historical emergence out of disparate forces and shameful heterogeneous unions could not possibly emerge from within the ascetic complex that is modern subjectivity, unless—*unless*—it is some new ploy, some new strategy for purification. Perhaps in Foucault's discourse the ascetic will is attempting to subject itself to a rigid identity in yet a new way; perhaps it is attempting to think dissension as—its truth.

Foucault has been read that way, as Nietzsche has. Foucault's *askēsis* can be read as a kind of vengeful attempt to humiliate the ascetically produced self-identical self by bringing it up against its *real* genealogical past. If we were to read Foucault this way we would understand him to be perpetuating and perhaps developing asceticism in at least two ways. First, he would be maintaining the notion of a pure, self-identical truth of the self. In other words, he would still be positing a constant core, but in this case the core would be something like the Freudian id, a petty, infantile, frightened little thing. Second, in addition to positing this pure center of being, Foucault's discourse would be a perpetuation of asceticism in the sense that he would be forcing himself, and us, to turn around and face this puny, ugly little truth that is ourselves; he would be forcing us to strip away our delusions of grandeur and our pride in order to *be* that which we *really* are; he would be imposing, once again, and in yet a new and more repulsive way, the rigid standard of absolute identity. He would be calling us to an ever more honest ownership of ourselves. (But lest this sound too cruel, let us hasten to add that in such debasement there is, we must admit, a certain ascetic appeal.)

It would be unwise to discount this reading out of hand—as though we had some standard of truth against which it failed to measure up—so we will allow it to stand as a possible reading of Foucault's text. But there is an instability at the center of that

reading, an instability that is the reader him- or herself. In order to read Foucault's discourse as *nothing but* a perverse perpetuation of the ascetic ideal we must engage in a bit of ascetic refusal ourselves; we must insist that a discourse is the product of an author, a subject who acts. We must reject the possibility that Foucault's *discourse itself* might move us beyond the control of the ascetic self who produced or reads it. In other words, we must insist that there exist logically separable subjects and objects that stand in relation to each other as external causes and effects and maintain their identities regardless of change. But, if we pay careful attention to the transformative processes of *askēsis*, we realize that that insistence is optional, and we can begin to undergo the possibility that there are other powers in this discourse of Foucault's, other voices besides the active, other grammars besides our Latinate substantive. The only way to find out is to engage the *askēsis* and allow ourselves to undergo.

We cannot reproduce Foucault's *askēsis* here. However, some remarks may help us get a feel for some of the directions such an exercise might begin to take. Foucault's tool is genealogy, the patient, meticulous tracing of relations of force. In Foucault's texts—*Discipline and Punish*, for example, as well as the sexuality series—what emerges are coherent, plausible accounts of the gradual manufacture of human selves—sexual selves, law-abiding selves, delinquent selves, moral selves, beings whose births bear great resemblance to the births of institutions, practices, and discourses of all kinds.

In Foucault's discourse, a self—like an institution such as a legal system or a state—is not best understood as something substantial and enduring. In a certain sense neither a self nor an institution is a thing at all. Both are better thought as occurrences, innumerable indiscrete events. Some analogies may be of help.

If one were to make a film of an immobile object stationed in a windowless room and then were to project that film for an audience, what the audience would see would be a still image. But the image would be sustained not by some enduring substance manifesting itself or deigning to appear. Rather, the image would be sustained by dozens and perhaps hundreds or thousands of bursts of patterned light. The apparently stable image would continually occur rather than subsist. Perhaps a better example is the shape formed when water rushes down a circular drain. Despite its visibility and regularity, this funnel shape is not a subsisting thing; it is simply the sensible tension of a set of forces in play. It exists only as long as those forces maintain a certain equilibrium.<sup>3</sup>

For Foucault, the world occurs, as the film image and the water funnel occur, as always changeable sets of repeated force events clashing against each other or holding each other in tension. We need posit no subsisting things. We may think among events, as ourselves events, of the eventful character of seemingly subsistent things. Does this mean we have thought those things in their truth? Not in this discourse, if by truth we mean some constant reality, some subsisting thing. The ascetic insistent upon constancy finds itself in continual frustration here. There is no constant truth of the ascetic self, not even an ugly one.

Self, then, as part of the eventful world, is itself eventful. It is to be thought as a nexus of repeating force events remaining more or less steady through time. Selves take many different shapes, as it were, as force events shift, are unable to repeat, or occur at a reduced level of energy *vis-à-vis* one another. Nevertheless, the shifts are usually minor; selves remain identifiable most of the time. This is to be expected, unless there is some relatively cataclysmic change in the sustaining patterns of force events. But what if there is? Well, then, selves may be dramatically altered. Some may die. New forms may be born.

Postcataclysmic arrangements are not predictable; for, in an eventful world, there are no underlying, hidden laws or structures that govern change. However, the emergings of arrangements are often traceable in retrospect. Certain sorts of force networks might come to show themselves as essential to the maintenance of a given equilibrium. One might interrogate such a network with regard to its structure and emergence and so begin to think the history of its becoming the essence of a particular arrangement or current equilibric form.<sup>4</sup>

Selves, then, have histories, of course, but they also *are* historical. They are not subsisting entities to which things happen, around which events occur; not enduring substances whose manifestations are sometimes deformed or incomplete; selves occur at every instant, and at every instant their occurring interacts with or conflicts with, reinforces or disrupts all sorts of other occurrences "in" the matrices of world-event. Analyses will accordingly be multiple and complex. Hence genealogy as opposed to a quest for truth.

But back to our first question: must we read Foucault's discourse as a new and more insidious ascetic trap? As long as *we* insist upon *reading it-as-an-object*, protecting ourselves from its action, remaining in tight control, perhaps that is all that it can be. Perhaps we will never read it as anything but a fanciful report on the contents of

Michel Foucault's mind. But when the discourse begins to stir us, when the *askēsis* gets underway, something else may very well occur.

A first sign that something else is occurring is the appearance of fear. Very often, and as Nietzsche no doubt would have predicted, this fear expresses itself as a desire to maintain social or moral order. Time after time students and colleagues have voiced to me their fear that if we cease to hold to the notion that selves have self-identical, transhistorical cores, we will no longer be able to hold people responsible for what they do. And, if people cannot be held responsible, order cannot be maintained. Might will equal right, and society will degenerate into a war of all against all.

One response to that fear might be: what makes you think that that is not how things are now? But as an initial answer, such would be a frivolous response. A second, less frivolous response might be to question the logic of the fear. Does the absence of transhistorical subjectivity necessarily result in the preclusion of personal responsibility? The answer to that question is, I think, no, but eventually, as we undergo Foucault's discourse, the question itself comes to seem strange and answering it comes to seem beside the point. Nonetheless it will be instructive to pursue this issue briefly here.

First, we need a better account of the allegedly threatened link between constant self-identity and personal responsibility. A little social observation can give us that. Apparently one of the rules of the game of responsibility assignments is that one should not hold someone responsible for a situation if that person is *other* than the person who brought it about. For example, most people would not be likely to consent to holding the grandchildren of a murderer responsible for the murderer's crimes. (Of course, as we know, people really do hold relatives responsible for the wrongdoing of others. Entire families are treated with contempt when one family member offends the public taste. And, without doubt, there are times when outrage over one incident turns into violence against whoever happens to get in the injured one's way. But these cases, most would insist, are regrettable reminders of the imperfections of human beings, not true exemplars of justice well wrought.) Likewise, many people would argue that one cannot hold a person responsible for an act if the person has changed significantly since its commission. When a prisoner pleads that he was temporarily insane at the time of the act, he may be understood in part to be claiming that he is not the same man in some important way, so that to punish him now would be unjust. We might also understand the sentiment "he has suffered enough" to mean in part "because of what he has undergone he has



changed since the time of the egregious act, so it is not appropriate to hold the person he is now responsible for it." At any rate, it seems clear that we typically require a person who is to be held responsible for something to have a fairly stable identity through time. Therefore, anything we do to undermine our ordinary belief in stable personal identity cores threatens our ability to hold people responsible for whatever occurs.

Of course, stability of identity is not the only official prerequisite for holding someone responsible. In order for us legitimately to hold a person responsible for something, he or she must be related to it as its cause. It is officially illicit to blame, for example, the bearer of bad news. We should reserve our wrath for the person who actually brought the bad situation about.

Now, some claim that Foucault's historicization of the subject places in question the notion that there is any stable core, any identity that would unify the undergoing of punishment with the commitment of an act. If the transhistorical self is merely a dream of Western man, then subjective duration is just an illusion, too. Foucault has destroyed the responsible self.

This, however, is simply not the case. Foucault is not attempting (primarily, or even necessarily) to dismantle the responsible self; he is attempting to understand how it came to be, a task whose presuppositions obviously include a conviction that there do exist such selves. Foucault's work does not suggest that no one is ever *really* responsible for anything; it does suggest that responsibility is historically formed and its necessary preconditions are maintained by relations of force. Foucault's primary question is not, how can we expose and dispose of an illusion?, but rather, how did the real phenomenon of self-identity come to be and how is it sustained in a given discursive region? His genealogical analyses of sexuality and desire are examples of his attempts to understand how forms of self-identity are constructed and how they are reproduced within networks of power relations that themselves are unstable and shifting. As we said before, Foucault's understanding of the self-identical self is that it is not a persisting entity so much as it is a steady repeating of relations or events, like the film image or the water funnel.

Of course, even if Foucault leaves us with some shimmering alternative to the *stable* responsible self, he may still threaten the game of responsibility assignments on some other front. If we are to be able to hold people responsible in the usual ways, we also need to be able to understand a self as a cause and, furthermore, as a cause that is not itself totally caused.

If self is impinged upon by social, historical, or linguistic forces, then self is not an uncaused cause. Little will eliminate our desire to hold someone responsible faster than our deciding that the person was absolutely unable to behave otherwise than he or she did.

Foucault's view *seems* to eliminate the possibility that selves are not completely determined by social forces. For, if selves are maintained at every moment by power networks, then each self must be at the mercy of the networks that hold it together and make it up. Therefore the self itself is not responsible for what it does.

However, this way of thinking is not Foucault's. This way of thinking still assumes that self is somehow independent of the forces in question. On Foucault's view, self is precisely not *something* upon which historical forces act. Self *is* the networks of forces themselves. These forces are not causes external to the product they create. Self simply *is* those forces in tension with themselves. The analytic dichotomy inside/outside just breaks down.<sup>5</sup>

To reiterate, in order to understand self as not responsible for any of its acts, we must assume self to be a kind of thing preexisting the forces that act upon it and external to them. But if self *is* those forces or some subset of them, it is not merely being acted upon. Therefore, while it is true that in Foucault's discourse it is not the case that self is an uncaused cause, the pure origin of its a posteriori acts, neither is it the case that self is nothing but the middle billiard ball in a combination shot. Personal responsibility does not necessarily go out the window; but it does need to be rethought. (And I would like to suggest that that might be part of what Foucault was doing the last years of his life.)

But far more interesting than the idea that Foucault could answer his critics on more or less their own terms—that he can perhaps reassure them that the game of responsibility assignments need not be stopped or lost—is the existence of this threatened posture itself. We may take this as a clue that, while on some levels Foucault's discourse may be a perpetuation and development of the power of ascetic drives, on some level those drives are also threatened with erosion and possibly undermined. Let us look again at asceticism as self-transformative practice.

It is the case, within Nietzsche's account, that asceticism transforms itself as it affirms itself and extends its strength. Ascetic drives refine themselves, produce ever finer points of distinction as the sorting process of self and other plays itself out. The ascetic self, then, undergoes changes as the process intensifies, becoming more powerful perhaps and ever more rigidly defined. The ascetic self is

subjected and subjectified by the processes of purification that posit its ever more carefully delineated identity core. The ascetic self en-selves itself by enforcing the continued stability of the identity it seeks to *be*. Asceticism is a powerfully paradoxical drive for constant self-transformation toward a perfect stasis in a pure unity of self-identical repose.

Foucault's *askēsis* bears great resemblance to the movement of self-transformative ascetic drives. The ascetic self's drive to *know* itself is certainly apparent in Foucault. And there is a sense in which in Foucault we encounter a kind of truth, a truth that the self is not self-identical but rather that it is an amalgamation of disparate forms. The ascetic self, upon encountering that "truth," upon acceding to the plausibility of genealogical accounts, begins, predictably enough, to discipline itself to that self-knowledge, to bring itself into intellectual conformity with that truth.

But when the drive to purify confronts the "truth" of its own impurity, when it runs headlong into the contradictory project of attempting to pare itself down to its fundamental multiplicity, ascetic selfhood begins to undergo the self-transforming power of Foucault's discourse, and the valences that held themselves in tension to produce the notion of a perfect unity, of some enduring Same, must necessarily shift. The thought of self in the center of Foucault's discourse is the thought of transgression, a reversal of forces, a gradual or perhaps violent turning outward of the valences before turned in, like fingers pulling loose from a stone they have gripped too hard for too long. It will be necessary to find a different way to speak: *When there occurs the undergoing* of the genealogical stripping away of the argumentative and commonsense forces sustaining belief in the unitary self, when there occurs the undergoing of the exposure of the fearful and nonrational drives that put those beliefs in place, there may occur a kind of death of the ahistorical self, just as, in Nietzsche's discourse, when there occurs the undergoing of the exposure of the ungodliness that supported gods, there occurs a kind of death of the ahistorical God. As the thought of God loses its power to shape a world, the thought of a unitary self-identity begins to lose its power to shape a life.

And what then? Will human being simply fly apart? Will we all go stark raving mad? Will might equal right and society degenerate into a war of all against all? Perhaps. But why should it come that? Selfishness would be a strange thing in a discourse that did not insist upon the unity of self-identical selves. Perhaps, as Nietzsche says, morality and evil are Siamese twins.

Foucault's discourse, then, like ascetic discourses, is a self-transformative exercise. It is an *askēsis* that allows the powers of ascetic selfhood to bring themselves to bear in characteristic ways. But because Foucault's discourse draws asceticism to focus its self-transformative power on the drive for purification itself, ascetic selfhood finds itself in question. Not only does self-transformation occur here, but there is within the discourse an awareness of this transformative power and an allowance of it as opposed to a denial or an attempt at masterful control. Thus, like ascetic discourses, Foucault's is a discourse that transforms itself; but it transforms itself from an active production of an agent-subject to a process of self-overcoming that opens possibilities for movements of differing rather than the continued movement of purification that is an insistence upon the identity of the same.

Yes, Foucault's discourse begins as and in some ways may be read as remaining an ascetic discourse. It draws its energy from its ascetic lineage and past. But within Foucault's discourse ascetic selfhood cannot maintain control of the direction of its own forceful drives. Thus, as Foucault's discourse operates upon the forces at its own discursive center, something other to asceticism may begin to emerge, something we ascetic selves are not able to name, something that will resist the ascetic drive to label and identify, but something the undergoing of which may be either beautiful or terrible or both but which will definitely be—to use a Nietzschean word—interesting.

### Notes

1. Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley, vol. 2 of *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 9.

2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), First Essay, section 6, p. 32. It is doubtful that this account of the ascetic ideal would have emerged for me had it not been for the work of Charles Scott of Vanderbilt University; in particular, see *The Question of Ethics* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1990), chap. 2.

3. After this paper was written I happened to be reading J. Baird Callicott's *In Defense of the Land Ethic: Essays in Environmental Philosophy* (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1989), when I ran across the following quotation from Yale biophysicist Harold Morowitz: "Viewed from the point of view of modern [ecology], each living thing . . . is a dissipative structure,

that is it does not endure in and of itself but only as a result of the continual flow of energy in the system. An example might be instructive. Consider a vortex in a stream of flowing water. The vortex is a structure made of an ever-changing group of water molecules. It does not exist as an entity in the classical Western sense; it exists only because of the flow of water through the stream. In the same sense, the structures out of which biological entities are made are transient, unstable entities with constantly changing molecules, dependent on a constant flow of energy from food in order to maintain form and structure. . . . From this point of view the reality of individuals is problematic because they do not exist per se but only as local perturbations in this universal flow." Callicott cites this from Morowitz's "Biology as a Cosmological Science," in *Main Currents in Modern Thought* 28 (1972): 156.

4. It is important to notice how very differently the word *essence* functions in this context from the way it seems to function in classical contexts. *Essence* here is the name of whatever historically emerging forces function to maintain a particular structure and protect it from perversion or disintegration. *Essence* does not name the truth of any set of structures or forces.

5. The breakdown of the dichotomy inside/outside occurs here much as it does in ecological discourse (compare note 3). Once thinking begins to occur in the absence of the classical liberal notion of atomic individuality, the rigid distinction between what is *I* and what is *not-I* (or what is here inside and what is there outside) carries little force. Perhaps what we are moving toward is an ecological understanding of human being.