



REVIEW

Niki Kasumi Clements, *Sites of the Ascetic Self: John Cassian and Christian Ethical Formation*. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020. Pp. 280. ISBN: 978-0-268-10785-7 (hardback).

This is a book about Cassian, but it is also a book about Foucault. Imbued with Foucault's late theoretical concerns about the production of subjectivity, asceticism, care of the self, and techniques of self-transformation, Clements' text skillfully turns to an important figure in the Christian ascetic tradition to produce a case study that can help us better think not only John Cassian but also various questions of subject formation today.

Clements' goal is clear: "To read Cassian with Foucault's ethical emphasis on asceticism [...] without assuming the institutionalist and interiorizing reading to which Foucault reduces Cassian" (p. 13). In other words, she undertakes to read Cassian both with and against Foucault.

If she is reading Cassian *with* Foucault, it is because she employs his late theoretical apparatus of 'asceticism' in order to make sense of the late antique Christian thinker and indeed because she follows Foucault in interrupting a long-standing commonplace about the very meaning of this term 'asceticism.' Asceticism is not – or not only – the practice of self-denial and world-denial by now so familiar from the popular use of the term but is rather the name of a self-transformative *praxis*.

If Clements is reading Cassian *against* Foucault, it is because, as she argues, Cassian remained something of a blind spot in Foucault's ongoing explorations of ancient asceticism and/as a *praxis* of self-shaping and social transformation. While Foucault possessed the requisite theoretical tools to see in Cassian a thinker of "ethical agency," he persisted – perhaps his untimely death prevented a later breakthrough on this point – in seeing in Cassian an ascetic in the traditional sense: self-depriving, obedient, submissive, and also – as Foucault would later say of psychoanalytic ethics – excessively focused on the hermeneutics of self-excitation and self-expression.

To read Cassian as though his 'asceticism' were merely submissive and renunciatory, Clements argues, is to remain unaware of a vast wealth of resources that Cassian can offer to those interested in thinking self-transformation, whether as specialists of late antiquity or thinkers of the modern socio-political problems of identity formation and contestation. In a word, then, Clements' project is to accept the general late Foucauldian theory of ethics

but to refuse the particular Foucauldian reading of Cassian. This allows Clements both to provide a novel reading of Cassian *and* to use Cassian to “engage and extend Foucault’s final philosophical task: to frame critical possibilities for ethical transformation” (p. 17).

Once we re-read Cassian with-and-against Foucault in this way, Clements argues, we reveal in him a theorist of what she calls “ethical agency.” By “ethical agency,” Clements refers to a capacity to act which is neither entirely free nor entirely determined, a capacity cultivated by practices of the self but always existing within a formational context that is, of course, formed in turn by the agent. Such a dialectical response to the “structure-agency” problem is certainly not novel in itself, but Clements’ approach is interesting in that she shows how Cassian’s theory of agency is one in which the self is only ever one agent amongst others – divine and demonic, environmental and social – in negotiation with which Cassian undertakes his efforts of self-transformation.

In sketching out this general argument, Clements’ book is divided into two sections, with an introduction and conclusion. The introduction situates Clements’ intervention amongst classical studies of asceticism – most notably Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals* and Weber’s *Protestant Ethic* – as well as among the contemporary literature on asceticism in religious studies. It also overviews her project as laid out above, including, importantly, her insistence that the ‘self’ under consideration is not a unified object but a composite entity which has various ‘sites’ to be explored: the body, affects, and the community in which the self is situated.

The first half of the book explores the theory of asceticism as a contribution to theories of *ethos* and agency, informed by queer and feminist theory. Chapter 1 introduces theories of agency and recapitulates parts of the theoretical introduction that begins the book. Chapter 2 then places Cassian in historical context, situating him as a bilingual, culturally multiple and liminal figure who finds himself (among other contexts) stuck between extremes in the Pelagian Controversy—a location which can help to explain his measured and dialectical understanding of grace and human effort. Chapter 3 closes the first half of the book by providing a reconstruction of Cassian’s philosophical and theological anthropology and his theory of human effort, freedom, and agency.

The second half of the book explores the eponymous sites of the ascetic self. Clements undertakes the laudable – indeed *necessary* if one is to take asceticism seriously – task of examining the concrete, daily practices that make up the ascetic life as professed by Cassian. Here she explores the practices – “the force and sweat of ethics” (p. 24) – that constitute his projects of self-transformation, divided across three ‘sites’: the body and bodily practices (Chapter 4); affects and emotions as cultivated by practices of reading and exemplarity (Chapter 5); and the social self as shaped through interactions with others, that is, via practices of friendship and spiritual direction, for example (Chapter 6). Two arguments that stand out here are, first, that prayer should be situated alongside eating and drinking (or, indeed, not-drinking and not-eating) as a properly *bodily* practice and, second, that inter-subjective interactions are an integral part of the ascetic *praxis*, a *praxis* which must not, therefore, be read as monadic, isolating, solipsistic.

In offering her new reading of the ascetic animal, Clements draws up a table of distinctions and oppositions that I think could helpfully be complicated without necessarily refusing her general theses. In the first place, there is the distinction between, on the one hand, vitiating practices (that is, self-denial, refusal of pleasures or, in a word, 'asceticism' as typically understood in non-specialist conversation today), which Nietzsche (according to Clements) considers to be the defining feature of asceticism; and, on the other hand, practices of self-transformation and self-cultivation which, as Clements wishes to emphasize, form the real kernel of asceticism in Foucault, in Cassian, and in other early Christian thinkers. Given the importance of this distinction for Clements' project, and given that many of the practices that she analyses as 'transformative' do indeed seem extreme and renunciatory (e.g., long fasts, severe sleep restriction), the *transformative vs. renunciatory* schema did not seem to me sufficiently thoroughly theorized in this text.

The logical move, as I see it, is not so much to accept a dichotomy between vitiating and transformative practices and then to insist that the term *asceticism* is better understood as comprehending the latter than the former but rather to adopt a perspective that allows one to see 1) that *both* self-abnegating *and* self-transformative (or even self-maximizing) practices are ascetic in the proper definition of the term and 2) that even self-abnegating practices are also necessarily practices of self-transformation. To take Nietzsche, for example, he surely thought that self-abnegation was also a transformative exercise (transformative of both subjects and values), even if he disagreed with the ethical teleology by which this transformation was oriented in Christianity. Indeed, he insisted that Christian asceticism, for all of its self-denying, was a will to power, that it was precisely the mechanism by which the priest makes his message convincing. (Importantly, Nietzsche also allows that the philosopher and the artist are ascetics, albeit of quite a different orientation).

Another schema worth revisiting is the equation that Clements draws between "power," vitiating, and social reproduction, on the one hand, and "freedom," self-transformation, and social transformation, on the other, setting then these two sets of equivalences against one another as opposites. This schema could be complicated in a number of theoretically helpful ways. In the first place, I would argue, renunciation can be freely undertaken precisely as a means not only to refuse oneself but to maximize one's capacities for personal and political action. In this sense, what Clements calls "vitiating" can be designed as an ascetic practice of personal liberation and social transformation (an obvious example would be Gandhi's ascetic politics). Moreover, although Foucault was not entirely consistent in his vocabulary (as Clements herself cites, Foucault once "lament[ed]: 'Perhaps I've insisted too much on the technology of power and domination'" [21]), he did distinguish domination from power and insisted that power and freedom were not opposed to one another but rather co-constitutive. That power is productive and enabling is perhaps clearest precisely in the domain of asceticism, in which yielding to a set of rules (such as the rules of a Vipassana meditation retreat) can yield new abilities – new capacities for acting, thinking, and doing – in the practitioner that would not have been gained had they stubbornly resisted these rules (and been expelled from the retreat). And even

in its 'free' (that is, its most spontaneous and its minimally coerced) forms, asceticism is always necessarily imbued with power, the application of a better over a worse self, of a will to change that must 'whip into shape' a series of habits, emotions, bodily dispositions, etc., that are not yet what the practitioner would like them to be.

These theoretical questions and suggestions are not meant to deny the overall value of Clements' analysis of the ascetic phenomenon and of Cassian's work as fundamentally oriented towards the production of new ways of being. Clements' text is not only a valuable contribution to the studies of religion – which it certainly is – but promises a broad and interdisciplinary impact. Those interested in Michel Foucault, and above all in his works of the late 1970s and early 1980s, will find in the introductory pages of this book a compelling reconstruction of a Foucauldian theory of asceticism, and in the text as a whole a revealing case study in the domain that Foucault once referred to as the "ethnology of the ascetic."¹ *Sites of the Ascetic Self* will surely, for this reason, also be an important text for those in the field of the anthropology of ethics who wish to learn more about a key figure in the history of systems of self-creation and self-transformation. Finally, this book will be of importance for all of those students of self-creation – in particular in queer and feminist theory – who wish to learn more about a pre-modern example of the transformative power of the application of self to self.

References

Foucault, Michel, *L'herméneutique Du Sujet: Cours Au Collège de France, 1981-1982*, ed. François Ewald, Alessandro Fontana, and Frédéric Gros. Paris: Seuil / Gallimard, 2001.

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¹ Michel Foucault, *L'herméneutique Du Sujet: Cours Au Collège de France, 1981-1982* (2001), 399.