THE HOLY FOOLS:
A THEOLOGICAL ENQUIRY

Andrew Thomas

Thesis submitted to the University of Nottingham for the degree of Doctor of

Philosophy

May 2009

Abstract

What is the significance of the deployment of madness in the early Christian ascetic experience of holiness? The first Byzantine holy fools – themselves critics of monastic orders – represent the consistent and logical conclusion of the theology and practice of the early Christian ascetics, and in particular that of the followers of Anthony and Pachomius. The flight to the desert of the first Christian anchorites and coenobites was an attempt to transform the experience and theology of holiness in church and society by transgressing the rules and thoughts of the city in a practical outworking of negative theology. The transgressive behaviour of the holy fools renewed that transformation by accepting neither secular nor religious truth and life. Where desert fathers and mothers had transformed the production of norms by their obedience and ascetic transcendence of human life, holy fools undermined the religious production of norms through their masterless obedience, defeat of vainglory, and foreignness to self. The transformation of the production of ethical knowledge amongst early Christian ascetics – through control of passions, representations, and silence – was followed through by the holy fools' apophatic babble and rejection of religious *loci* of knowledge production in liturgy, confession, religious community and ecclesial authority. As a continuation of ascetic methods of reforming the self's relation to society by brutal truth-telling and truth-hearing, the holy fools used self-ostracising insult and laughter to follow divine truth into the periphery without legislating universal modesty and submission to group truths. As such, the holy fools exemplify the practices most idealised in early Christian asceticism – humility, suspicion of fixed orders and truths, apophatic critique of doctrine and legislation – with renewed innovation and commitment to city life. They applied the strategic moves and principles of negative theology to the Christian theology and practice of holiness through aspiring to desert freedom, the practice of ignorance, and the unserious self.

Table of Contents

Abbreviations (Ancient Literature)

Unless otherwise indicated, translations are those listed in the bibliography. Numbering in ancient texts is in general according to chapter. The anonymous collection of *apophthegmata partum* is numbered according to Ward's edition.

Reference to Greek and Latin texts has been to Migne, unless otherwise indicated.

	Acta Sanctorum	*Acta Sanctorum*
	Apoph. Patr. (alph)	*Apophthegmata Patrum (alph.)*
	lib. grad.	*liber graduum*
	h. mon.	*historia monachorum in Aegypto*
	Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.)	*Apophthegmata Patrum (Gk. syst.)*
	v. dan. scet.	*vita Danielis Scetiotis*
	Apoph. Patr. (Lat)	*Apophthegmata Patrum (Lat.)*
	Apoph. Patr. (anon)	*Apophthegmata Patrum (anon)*
Athanasius Alexandrinus	*v. Anton.*	*Vita Antonii*
Augustinus Hipponensis	*c. mend.*	*contra mendacium*
	Ench.	*Enchiridion*
	de civ. dei	*de civitate dei contra paganos*
	conf.	*Confessionum*
	doctr. chr.	*De Doctrina Christiana*
	lib.art.	*de libero arbitrio*
	mend.	*de mendacio*
	op. mon.	*de opere monachorum*
	de trin	*de trinitate*
Barsanuphius and Iohannes	*resp.*	*responsiones*
Basilius Magnus	*leg. lib. gent.*	*ad adolescentes de legendis libris gentilium*
	ascet. 1	*sermo asceticus 1*
	ascet 2	*sermo asceticus 2*
	d. bapt.	*de baptismo libro duo*
	ascet. disc.	*sermo eiusdem de ascetica disciplina*
	hom. 10	*homilia 10 adversus eos qui irascuntur*
	hom. 20	*homilia 20 de humilitate*
	reg. fus.	*regulae fusius tractatae*
	moral.	*moralia*
	renunt	*sermo de renuntiatione saeculi*
	jud.	*de judicio dei*
Cassianus Iohannes	*de institutis*	*De institutis coenobiorum*
	Collationes	*Collationes*
Cicero Marcus Tullius	*tusc. disp.*	*Tusculanae Disputationes*
Clemens Alexandrinus	*str.*	*stromateis*

Climacus John	*scal.*	*scala paradisi*
Denys Areopagitus	*c.h.*	*de caelesti hierarchia*
	d.n.	*de divinis nominibus*
	e.h.	*de ecclesiastica hierarchia*
	myst.	*de mystica theologia*
Diogenes Laertius	*vit. phil.*	*Vitae Philosophorum*
Epictetus	*Ench.*	*Encheiridion*
Evagrius Ponticus	*de orat.*	*De oratione*
	defin.	*definitiones*
	excerpts	*excerpts*
	sent. ad virg.	*Sententiae ad virginem*
	par. ad mon	*Paraenesis ad monachos*
	hypo.	*hypotyposes*
	ep. ad mel.	*Epistula ad Melaniam*
	ep.	*epistula*
	cap. paraen.	*Capita paraenetica*
	Prakt.	*Praktikos*
	oct. spir.	*de octo spiritibus malitiae*
	de vitiis	*De vitiis quae opposita sunt virtutibus*
	de mal. cog.	*De malignis cogationibus*
	skem.	*Skemmata*
	schol. in eccl.	*Scholia in Ecclesiasten*
	schol. in luc.	*Scholia in Lucam*
	cap. xxxiii	*capitula xxxiii*
	Eulog.	*Eulogios*
	sent. ad mon.	*Sententiae ad monachos*
Evagrius Scholasticus	*h.e.*	*historia ecclesiastica*
Gregorius Magnus	*Lib. Reg. Past.Liber*	*Regulæ Pastoralis*
Hieronymus	*ep.*	*epistula*
	v. Pauli.	*vita Sancti Pauli Eremitae*
Leontius Episcopus Neapolitanus	*v. Sym.*	*vita Symeonis Sali*
Maximus Confessor	*carit. 1-4*	*capitum de caritate quattuor centuriae*
Moschus John	*prat.*	*pratum spirituale*
Nikephoros	*vit. and.*	*vita andreii*
Palladius	*h. Laus.*	*historia Lausiaca*
Rufinus	*Hist. Monach.*	*Historia Monachorum in Aegypto*
Thomas Aquinas	*summa theologiae*	*summa theologiae*
Zosimas	*alloquia*	*alloquia*

Acknowledgements

Six years have now passed since I explained to my wife that I could not write a doctoral thesis because I did not have an idea. Since that time, I have benefited from conversations with friends, colleagues, students and strangers that have managed to persuade me that this was a correct assessment of the situation, but that I should still write.

To work and think several hundred miles from your academic home is always a challenge, and the Department of Theology and Religious Studies (not least the ever helpful and sympathetic Janet Longley) have been more than accommodating. A special thanks must go to my supervisor Philip Goodchild, who has always been polite enough to make my glaring mistakes seem natural ones, and who has never given a comment that has not been worth acting on. His keen discernment, absurdly well informed thought, and his patient, effective academic effort will always stand out in my mind as a model of philosophical work.

Recent years have also seen the development of an enormously resourceful group of research students at the department, and I have gained a great deal from their passion and insight into the task of doing good theology and philosophy. The all too rare conversations I have had with Alex Andrews, Jeff Biebighauser, Anthony Paul Smith, Michael O'Neill Burns, Ben Kautzer, and Thomas Lynch have been both inspiring and informative.

I owe a further debt of gratitude to the Faculty of Theology at the University of Oslo. Not only have they generously extended library hospitality even when I have not had formal links to the institution, but I have been accepted into their academic discussions both over lunch and in seminars. In particular, Sturla Stålsett, Kjetil Hafstad, Espen Dahl and Trygve Wyller have encouraged me, indicated new avenues of research, and listened to my often incoherent thoughts on subjects that I really had nothing to do with. A further gathering that has been an enormous help is the sporadic meeting of the Oslo Patristics reading group. Stig Frøyshov has been especially helpful, not least in checking my often sketchy understanding of Greek texts.

A source of constant inspiration has been my daughter Sunniva Grace, to whom I have read everything from Foucault to Teresa of Avila. She has been good enough to decorate my writings and has proclaimed her agreement to our neighbours at the top of her voice.

The people that to whom my work owes most, though, are those who have bothered to say no. Friends and family who have not bought into my self-created genius cult and have

forced me to justify my arguments and give up those that no longer hold water. Without these, my thoughts would have long ago spiralled off into self-glorifying nonsense. My thanks go especially to Harald Torgauten, Tom Clark, and most of all to my ever honest, ever surprising wife, Helene Thomas. These have long been my readers and my audience, and they are responsible for my coherence. The remaining nonsense is all of my own creating, but I hope that they will continue the work they have started in helping me to eradicate it.

Introduction

The holy fool is no stranger to the modern world. The name is used to describe beatniks, truth-telling weirdos, and modern ascetics. It doesn't matter what you are reacting to, so long as you challenge established truths in innovative ways, you are a holy fool.

This study is based on the assumption that it does matter what you are reacting to. The starting point determines the range of answers available. Speaking of the holy fools of late antiquity in the same breath as modern European gurus and even early modern Russian holy fools implies abandoning a specific starting point. It makes transformation an unchanging absolute rather than a negotiation of particular differences on the basis of shared practices and thoughts.

I will here be considering the holy fools of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages in the Eastern reaches of the Holy Roman Empire. Their situation is striking not just because these figures are the earliest source for the 'holy fool', but also because of their starting point. The first Byzantine fools react against early Christian asceticism. They emerge from the monastic movements of Egypt, Palestine and Syria.

It is the nature of early Christian asceticism that makes what follows more than a list of ways in which holy fools differ from their predecessors. At the time of our holy fools, Eastern monks and nuns had developed a sophisticated technology of personal and social transformation that baptised the philosophy of late antiquity in developing the church's theology, ethos, and interpretation of Scripture. Their holiness was characterised by discipline, disconnection, and self-mastery. It is in these terms that the holy fools attempt to transform the Christian experience of the holy.

Another assumption: the Christian experience of the holy is historically mediated. There is nothing necessary, nothing timeless about it. We experience the holy – rightly or wrongly – in context. Perhaps it will be called a Hegelian starting point, but it is also founded on the dogma of the infinity and inexhaustibility of God, who always exceeds and transcends our current thoughts.

It is because of the theological practice of the early Christian ascetics that holy fools – who mark their departure precisely from the norms, knowledge, and saintly selfhood of monasticism – are called holy rather than simply foolish. It does not simply take a trailblazing

holy man to transform the experience of holiness. It takes a transformed reception too. "Continuity is but the phenomenon of a discontinuity."[1]

I will therefore attempt to draw up the common features and conversions enacted in the emergence of the holy fools amongst early Christian ascetics. Shared theologies made it possible for contemporaries to identify them as holy; conversions are what catch our attention and theirs, constituting a critique that elicits transformation. We could say that the one makes them holy, whilst the other makes them foolish.

The task is therefore restricted to the earliest Christian holy fools. Parallels in other religions, places, and times are no doubt interesting, and may even help us to understand the material in hand. These are not, however, the domain of this study. Two reasons motivate the choice: firstly, in order to posit a genuine parallel, a thoroughgoing understanding is necessary of each phenomenon, so that the parallel itself adds no new knowledge concerning either of them, but mere illustrations of particular features. Secondly, even though the theme of this work is ostensibly a set of historical religious figures, my underlying interest is an understanding of the experience and theology of holiness, as it is negotiated in Theology's classical era, in the wake of one of the most far-reaching transformations Christianity has undergone, namely the birth of monasticism.

Even this restriction is not enough, though. There have been a number of interpretations of Christian foolishness that have included everything from Biblical material, through Byzantine holy fools, to modern religious radicals.[2] These works attempt to draw up a Christian theology of holy madness. Whilst useful studies in themselves, demonstrating the range of phenomena we are inclined to call foolish and holy, there tends to be very little to unite the phenomena described. Christians are called mad all the time, but that doesn't make them holy. On the other hand, counter-cultural holy men and women have emerged, noticed and unnoticed, in most historical eras, without their having anything in common with the Byzantine holy fools.

Similarly, madness in itself has been praised as holy in different contexts in church history, without any obvious reference to each other or significant common features. Byzantine hagiographers praised holy fools for pretending to be mad in order to hide their holiness;[3] Erasmus praises madness because of its refusal of Renaissance theological self-righteousness;[4] modern charismatic Christians praise madness because it overcomes

---

[1]   Foucault, 1972 [1961]: 144, my translation.
[2]Typical examples are the post-modern Phan, 2001 and the historical Saward, 1980.
[3]Dagron, 1990.
[4] in Erasmus, 1989[1510].

inhibitions for the sake of worship.[5] Therefore, this study will concentrate on the unique theology of one of these groups – namely the early Christian Byzantine holy fools – in order to examine that way of thinking in all its specificity. The common features of a Christian theology of madness will have to wait for another day.

Even at this degree of specificity, however, we will have to make some distinctions. The delimiting of this field has caused enormous problems in the secondary literature, and any preliminary definition of holy fools is bound to rule out or include figures that are relevant. So I shall impose an arbitrary distinction, and remain alert to its contingency throughout. I propose to include in this study all hagiography that includes the appellation 'salos',[6] which came to be used for holy fools by the Eastern church. Chronologically, I will be considering all holy fools up until and including the time of Symeon the holy fool. After Symeon, there was very little foolish hagiography until St Andrew Salos, three hundred years after Leontius' silly scribblings.[7]

This definition has the disadvantage of including certain desert fathers who clearly do not adopt the lifestyle of a holy fool.[8] Since these instances do not describe a holy man or woman pretending to be mad for any long time, we can however discount them from our description of holy foolery. We are looking primarily at people who adopt this way of life as a vocation rather than as a last resort on one occasion. The other disadvantage is that it excludes the story of Antiochus, recorded by Johannes Climacus,[9] who pretended to be a fool ($\dot{\varepsilon}\xi\eta\chi\omega\nu$) for thirteen years as an act of penance. Since this instance is set in the context of early Christian asceticism (as the natural step from obedience and enduring insults), this exclusion is no disaster.

Perhaps a more controversial decision is to exclude St Andrew Salos[10] from this study. The parallels between Symeon Salos and Andrew Salos are so striking that any work on holy fools that included the one without the other appears incomplete. There are, however, good reasons for positing a break at this point.

---

[5] according to, for example, Cox, 1995.

[6] the standard Greek term for fools for Christ's sake: σαλός.

[7] The date of the life of Andrew Salos has been the subject of a long debate between C. Mango and L. Rydèn. See the discussion in Rydèn's introduction and commentary to Nikephoros, *vit. and.*

[8] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Moses 8 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* VIII.10 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* VIII.13 and *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Ammonas 9 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XV.12 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XV.13.

[9] Climacus, *scal.:* Step 4. A possible reference to Antiochus may be behind Symeon's comments in Symeon the New Theologian 1980: VI.8.

[10] Text, translation and commentary can be found in Ryden's edition. cf. Nikephoros, *vit. and.*

Firstly, and most importantly, Andrew does not arise from a monastic community or lifestyle. He receives a divine calling whilst living as a slave in Constantinople. All the fools in our period either live amongst religious or have been religious themselves.

Secondly, Andrew – though himself originally from Scythia – does not move to the place where he works as a holy fool: he lives in Constantinople both before and after his call to be a fool. In contrast, the early holy fools are anonymous and unknown in the place where they begin their calling. Symeon, for example, moves from Edessa to Emesa, via a long stay in the desert.

Thirdly, Andrew does not resemble a monk, but a prophet. Whilst we can and will interpret the early holy fools as adopting a particular mode of asceticism, Andrew Salos is to be interpreted against the background of other frameworks. He foretells events in the city, and a large part of his life is taken up with an elaborate apocalypse.

Fourthly, Andrew takes foolish disciples. He is emulated. The earliest holy fools only reveal their way of life reluctantly and by divine command, and when they do, they do not recommend it to anyone else.

These features force me to agree with Grosdidier de Matons,[11] who in his seminal work on holy foolery and Andrew Salos in particular argued that the hagiography of the Mediaeval Byzantine fools is of an entirely different genre and character to its forerunners. Its mode of edification is at odds with that of the hagiography of early holy fools. We could say that whilst writings concerning Andrew Salos draw the reader into its description, asking her to become a holy fool, and thus describable by the hagiographer, the early fools retain the reader-text relation. The aim in writing about the early fools is that the reader may know that there are holy fools. It is not that the reader may become one.

To the extent that later interpretations of holy fools similarly disregard their relation to asceticism, they are similarly irrelevant to this study. It is perhaps surprising to note, however, that the link to monasticism is more resilient in interpretations than in practice. Symeon the new theologian, for example, associates pretending to be mad ($\sigma\alpha\lambda o\varsigma$) not with supernatural speech, but with a monastic economy of vainglory and control of the passions, albeit in condemning the practice.[12] Similarly, Dostoevsky's holy fools are often (but not always)

---

[11] de Matons, 1970, e.g. on p328: 'starting out with the most original kind of saint hagiography has to offer, [Andrew Salos' hagiographer] ends up by giving holiness its most banal, conventional, and even most false image.' (my translation)

[12] Symeon the New Theologian, 1980: XXVIII.12. Ivanov notes further fool-like activity in hagiography about Symeon the New Theologian, which falls outside the confines of this work, for the above-mentioned reasons. Ivanov 2006 [1994]: 174-182.

compared with and set in the context of monasticism: the exegetical problems involved in identifying authentic holy fools notwithstanding, *de facto* fools (who were generally identifiable and known figures in Dostoevsky's Russia) appear in the context of monasteries, with and over against the conventional religious.[13] When later interpetations refer to holy foolishness as a way of relating to Christian asceticism, then, they will also be relevant to the study of the earliest holy fools.

What do these restrictions leave us with? If we are to only regard those stories written before Leontius of Neapolis that use the word 'salos' to refer to those that embrace the life of feigning madness for Christ's sake, a coherent group of texts emerges:

➢ Isidora of Tabennesiotes, who was abused by her entire monastery for her madness until her holiness is revealed by an angel to Piteroum (cf. below, on page 24);[14]

➢ Abba Mark the fool who moved to Alexandria to play the fool at the baths of Hippo, and who was discovered by Abba Daniel of Scetis;[15]

➢ the anonymous monk living in the community around abba Silvanus in Palestine who laughed and fooled around in public, but in private counted his good and bad thoughts by making piles of pebbles, only allowing himself to eat if the good outweighed the bad;[16]

➢ Symeon the holy fool, whose long *vita* by Leontius of Neapolis[17] represents 'the pinnacle of the *literary* development of the ideas of holy foolery'[18] describing a flight from the world through the common life, the desert, and the madness of the city, where Symeon mocks, steals, and shits his way through the last days of his life in a fest of holy foolishness, always hiding, always provocative.

---

[13] Father Therapon is a monastic authority and holy fool in Dostoevsky, 1994[1880]: IV.1; Semyon Yakovlevich the holy fool – though treated as a prophet – is attended by monks, and connected to a local monastery: Dostoevsky, 2000[1872]: II.5.ii

[14] *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XVIII.19 Palladius, *h. Laus.:* XXIV.

[15] cf. now the excellent critical collection by Britt Dahlman of the Daniel texts: *v. dan. scet.* The story of Mark the holy fool appears in chapter 2.

[16] *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* VIII.32

[17] Leontius, *v. Sym.*, based at least partly on the short chapter on 'Symeon the monk' in Evagrius Scholasticus, *h.e.:* IV.34.

[18] Ivanov, 2006[1994]: 130, italics original.

So the holy fools material itself justifies an examination of the texts that appear at this time (from the fourth to the seventh century) and location (Egypt and Syria) of transitions: from antiquity to the Middle Ages; from pagan Rome to the Holy Roman Empire; from philosophy to doctrine; between the Eastern empire and the orient; between the diaphysite orthodox world and the multiplying orthodoxies around monophysitism; between the Christian East and the Muslim East. It is in this context that the holy fools appear and establish a place for themselves in religious consciousness.

There are generally three academic tasks attempted regarding the holy fools material: describing a previously unknown set of texts,[19] which has now been largely achieved in the online edition of Kreuger's commentary and translation of Leontius' *Life of Symeon*[20] and the magisterial translations of the sayings of the desert fathers and mothers by Benedicta Ward;[21] identifying an historical and notional context in which to understand them, for example amongst the desert fathers and mothers,[22] cynic philosophers,[23] the religious phenomena of crazy-wise gurus;[24] and elucidating the significance of the holy fools in the grammar of a particular practice or doctrine, assuming the details of a context and logic in order to make the meanings of the texts emerge in that discussion.[25] Now that we have established the set of data, what contexts will we be setting them in, and how will the texts be approached?

A good analysis will have to argue both for a context and for an understanding of that context. The reading suggested here will be against the background of Christian asceticism as one step in the developing conception of the philosophical life. The holy fools will be portrayed as an internal critique of Christian monasticism understood as philosophical practice.

The approach will therefore owe a great deal to Michel Foucault's interrogations of philosophical practice in its relation to truth-telling. Foucault's historical writings danced around the Christian asceticism of late antiquity without ever directly addressing it in any systematic study.[26] His concerns regarding the literature are fairly clear, however, and his

---

[19] Examples of this approach include Rydén, 1981 Frøyshov, 2003 Ware, 2000 Syrkin, 1982.
[20] http://www.escholarship.org/editions/view?docId=ft6k4007sx&brand=ucpress, the online version of Krueger, 1996.
[21] Ward, 1975 Ward, 2003.
[22] Gorainoff, 1983: ch. 1 Ivanov, 2006[1994]: chs. 1 and 2.
[23] Krueger, 1996.
[24] Boutenoff, 2003 Feuerstein, 1991, who is followed by Phan, 2001.
[25] Dagron, 1990 Certeau, 1979.
[26] Key texts are: Foucault 1979, 1996 [1984], 2000 [1981], 2000c [1982], 2000a [1983], 2000b [1983], 2000 [1985], 2005 [2001]: lectures on 24th February, 3rd March and 10th March, (2007a) [1980], 2007b [1980], and especially 2007 [2004]: lectures from the 1st February to the 8th March, and 2009: lectures from 29th February and 28th March.

approach to it was demonstrated both in his short analyses and in his work on the philosophy of late antiquity.[27] The method adopted here is perhaps best demonstrated in the two trajectories of Platonic thought outlined in Foucault's final lecture series.

Socrates' psychagogical practice lies at the heart of much of Foucault's later thought, stretched as it was between analyses of Platonism on the one hand and Kant's article on Enlightenment on the other.[28] An important point made in the analyses of the Socratic dialogues is that the great philosopher is not simply repeating the Delphic command to know yourself, but that he wanders the streets of Athens encouraging young and old rather to take care of themselves (the "care of the self": ἐπιμελεια ἑαυτου). This care generated two major implications for platonic thought, two forms of telling the truth about the self in order to mould the aesthetics of existence. Foucault therefore outlines two modes of giving an account of oneself.

Firstly, the philosopher can give an account of himself through an understanding and elaboration of the being of the soul. Socratic truth-telling gives way to metaphysics. Foucault associates this trajectory with the *Alcibiades*, but its trajectory is clear in neoplatonism. *Alcibiades* was important as a dialogue because it came first in the later pedagogical lists.[29] The truth-telling philosopher works on his way of life by placing himself in an ontological order, and by appealing to a different world, the realm of the soul.

Secondly, the philosopher may give an account of himself through a description of and work on his life (βιος), the interrogation of forms of life. One's self is questioned according to the measure of virtue, but more enduringly according to truth. What kind of life is necessary in order for me to be able to speak the truth? Foucault roots this trajectory in the dialogue *Laches*, although its heirs are the practical philosophers of late antiquity, and in particular the Cynics, late Stoics, and early Christian ascetics.

Whilst these two traditions are no doubt related – indeed Foucault's histories speak primarily of the roots of the ascetic tradition in *Alcibiades* rather than in *Laches* until the 1984 lectures – their relation is flexible and varied. There is no specific metaphysic of the soul and the other world that applies to one specific way of life. They are reconfigured again and again in the history of the soul.

---

[27] In particular, see Foucault 1992a [1984], 1996 [1984], 2000c [1982], 2000 [1983], 2005 [2001], 2009, and Pearson 2001.

[28] The transition from the one to the other can be seen in a variety of texts from the 1980s: Foucault 1983, 2007 [1990], 2008: lectures from the 5th and 12th January.

[29] Foucault mentions Olympiodorus and Proclus in Foucault 2005 [2001]: 170. See his longer analyses in the first two lectures, and comparisons scattered throughout these lectures.

The following analyses of holy fools and early Christian asceticism will be primarily guided by the concerns of the latter trajectory. Where theories of the soul and the other world are treated, it will be for the sake of the understanding of the truth-telling that concerns and is produced by the true way of life.

A number of consequences follow from this focus. Firstly, the traditional division of Patristics into the more theoretical texts of Augustine, the Cappadocian fathers, etc over against the hagiographical texts of church histories, stories and sayings of monks, and so on will not hold. The theory and practice of the self are constantly playing off each other. Metaphysical theories of the other world and the eternal soul have practical implications for ascetic heroes, and particular practices of death and hope will sometimes require a particular metaphysic, and sometimes allow metaphysical flexibility. Neither can be studied in isolation.

Secondly, Christian asceticism can not be read as a mere continuation of either the platonic tradition or the cynic ascetic tradition. In the monastic Christianity of late antiquity, the possibility of truth-telling required a particular ascetic practice, and ascetic practice produced and assumed a set of truth games. Whilst Cynic philosophers more or less ignored metaphysics, and neoplatonists eschewed the radical life transformations of cynics and monks, Christian philosophers united the life of withdrawal with the life of the soul. The desert is where you save your soul.[30]

Thirdly, theology contains a vital reference to practice in two directions. On the one hand, truth-telling is grounded in practice. Only particular games of truth and habits of mastery over one's thought will allow the emergence of truth about the other life of God and the soul. On the other hand, life is assessed not only against the standards of truth, but against those of the divine life. In short, truth produces and is produced by holiness.

Illustrations of this principle can be found in the analysis of dispassion (below, section 2.1.2: Death: escaping from ethics). The notion of the dispassion of God has troubled theologians for some time. Grounding it in the practice of dispassion will add to our understanding of how ancient theologians thought through the attribute, for example demonstrating that it is by no means incommensurate with love, that it is concerned with social convention, manipulation, and knowledge. On the other hand, the practice itself is driven to a great extent because of the theology of divine impassibility.

A further illustration concerns the account given below of negative theology, or apophaticism (section I.2.1 below). Whilst the theme will first be confronted in practical

---

[30] Foucault 2009: 228.

terms – the rejection of the city, particular forms of life, and conventional shapes of holiness as non-divine – ascetic practice is both driven by and a mode of producing intellectual apophaticism. For this reason, we will first confront it in the section on ways of transforming norms and then later in the description of the transformation of knowledge.

Foucault himself did not directly address the emergence of early Christian asceticism (by which I mean both the anchoritic movements of Anthony and the cenobitic institutions of Pachomius as they arose in the Eastern stretches of the Empire at the turn of the fourth century), he challenged his hearers to take it seriously, and confessed that what he was saying on the subject was highly provisional.[31] For these reasons, the following analyses will not be restricted to Foucault's own conclusions, for the following reasons.

Foucault's concern with Christianity was determined by surrounding analyses. So instead of establishing fine lines of logical progression in thought and practice, he often presented Christianity as a fairly flat figure stretching from late antiquity to the Renaissance. A case in point is his account of obedience. He describes the practice of total obedience as a precursor to the governmental systems that united practices of asceticism to civic loyalty. To this purpose, Foucault's histories portray one form of obedience to ecclesiastic authorities as a mode of heteronomy. In fact, obedience was only allied to institutional hierarchy in certain contexts (namely particular cenobitic institutions) and some time after the emergence of monasticism. The obedience elaborated as a practice of the self amongst early Christian ascetics was long entirely independent of ecclesiastical order, and chapter one below sets out a grammar of obedience at odds with Foucault's depressing picture of a governmental technique that in practice undermined the self confidence produced by mystical experience.[32]

Instead of aping Foucault's critical studies, then, we will embrace his program of re-launching the question of what way of life is necessary for telling the truth, what techniques allow a transformation of morals, and what relation to the self is generated by these transformations? We will examine the hagiographical and theoretical reflections on asceticism as interrogations of life and self.

The question that is being asked throughout these tasks is: what is the significance of the deployment of madness in the Christian experience of holiness? Addressing this question will further involve steering between the two tendencies to assert an absolute break with the contemporary religious practice, and so to deny the fool's holiness, and the tendency to claim

---

[31] In Foucault 2009: 290.
[32] Foucault 2009: 302-308. Cf. also the governmental analysis of obedience in lectures of Foucault 2007 [2004]: 22nd February and 1st March.

complete continuity with existing experience of holiness, and so to deny the fool's foolishness.

The identification of transformations in the experience of holiness presents three primary sub-questions:

1. How are the norms of the holy and the unholy transformed?

2. How is the knowledge of the holy transformed?

3. How is the relation of the self to society in its holy and profane manifestations reconfigured?[33]

Because these three elements of experience – norms, knowledge, and the self's relation to society – are all addressed at a profound level by the early Christian ascetics, the transformation elicited by the holy fools is unlikely to be limited to simple transitions in practical norms, the assertion of one voice in the discussion of religious knowledge, and the institution of one new social form of religion. Instead, attention will be directed to the ways in which early Christian ascetics and holy fools alike transform and undermine the activities that make norms, knowledge, and the self-society relation possible. What does this mean in practice?

1. In addressing norm-making activities, the holy fools insert their abnormality into the way of life of the desert fathers and mothers through their development of the discipline of obedience, their practices of radical dissociation, and their solutions to the practical problem of vainglory. These disciplines are themselves practices that make it possible to take a critical stance to systems of norms. Obedience – a dominating theme throughout ascetic literature in late antiquity and the early middle ages – denies the necessity of an agent's actions being entirely motivated by their own will. By bracketing the moral judgment of the obedient monk or nun, a space for critical assessment of that judgment is carved out. Dissociation has a similar function, where the moral agent becomes a stranger to herself in order to work on her thought and action, and how they relate to one another. The problem of vainglory is not simply concerned with morality, but the effects a moral action can have on the self. These are all disciplines that work on norm-making activity. They do not merely change the morality

---

[33] The axes used here are adapted from those outlined by Foucault in his lectures of 1983: cf. Foucault, 2008: 4-7.

they have received. They are ways in which morality as such can be examined, assessed, and transformed.

Against this background, the holy fools appear as challenging the holiness of ascetic norm-making activity. They clearly embrace aspects of the religious life, but in such a way as to clash with the values and traditions of mainstream Christian monasticism. By echoing classic instances of obedient acts, practising absolute dissociation, and playing around the sin of vainglory, they modify the way in which holiness had come to be experienced. They represent a challenge to Christian asceticism from within. This challenge is the subject of part one.

2. How is knowledge of the holy produced and transformed by the holy fools? A key mode of gaining control over the production of knowledge amongst the early Christian ascetics was mastery over the passions. Disciplines and practices were deployed to have an effect on passions, which in turn allowed the thinking agent to exercise choice on how things were represented. The ascetic production and critique of knowledge was activated both in the realm of social knowledge – reconceptualising money, gender, politics – and in that of theology.

The holy fools continue this program of denying the institutions and practices that support knowledge by questioning the knowledge of both the religious and secular realms. They undermine the practices and knowledge that configure gender, market, and religion through playing with and making contingent divisions that seemed necessary. In their freedom from passion, they refuse to let holiness underwrite the present. God-talk takes place within the context of established values and meanings. The attribution of goodness to God then orders hierarchies of goodness and godliness in the world. In this respect, the social order of Christendom in late antiquity was a theological order. Holy fools can be seen enacting a practical apophatic theology that takes seriously the challenges posed by the conventions and practices intertwined with meanings and utterances. With their denial of forms of life and their play on religious acts, they perform the twin elements of apophaticism: critique and play, or the *via negativa* and the *via dissimilis*. It is such practices of knowledge that we will discuss in part two.

3. The holy fools address the problem of the self's relation to society by their approach to the universal demand of holiness. The early Christian ascetics had appropriated the philosophical technique of fearless speech by transforming it into a hermeneutic. The Christian is obliged to hear true speech from anyone. The location of heroic knowledge had

thereby been transferred from the individual philosophical speaker to the mass of listeners, thus posing the problem that had been underlying ancient philosophy ever since Socrates: if social and personal transformation is to be valued, who is to be required and who enabled to attain to those values?

The issue determines the holiness and the possibility of holiness for both religious and secular. If the infinite demands of self-knowledge and self-transformation are universally obliging, then everyone has to be a monk. If they apply only to a few, then the political and personal power that results from philosophical and ascetic techniques is restricted to a few aristocrats. These problems are particularly relevant to the range, public communication, and obligations of the dogma, techniques, and experts of philosophy, and are relevant as a framework of interpretation both for ancient truth-telling techniques and for ascetic techniques of ethics like the humour and humility of early Christian ascetics and holy fools. If humility is a resource for the bracketing and transformation of norms and knowledge, how is that resource affected if it becomes a demand rather than a choice? And what are the political implications of restricting the demand to a specific group of religious?

The holy fools' response to the challenge of universal asceticism betrays a more sophisticated approach to the self's relation to society than might be expected (outside the ecclesiological debate taking place at the time between Augustine and Pelagius). In particular, their practice of humility owes more to their fidelity to the Christian story than to the political and utilitarian techniques of their secular counterparts. As such, they are acutely aware of the dangers of ascetic and philosophical accounts of the self that appeal to a momentous identity that must be defended and taken seriously. These problems and issues are addressed in part three.

All these three questions – concerning norms, knowledge, and the self's relation to society – are part of a larger investigation: what role does the asceticism inhabited and transformed by the holy fools play in the theology and experience of holiness of their time? In order to make sense whilst treating the historical problems of the background and contribution of holy fools, I will need to assume an understanding of asceticism. It is unavoidable – and desirable – that the understanding of asceticism be transformed by these accounts. It is also necessary to mark out a starting point.

In what follows, I will start by assuming that asceticism is a form of self-training that encompasses techniques of physical regulation (what one eats, where one stays, what one produces and says) and rational practice (what one thinks and says, how one feels, when and

to whom one gives an account of oneself) with a view to determining the shape of one's life. In the context of the Christian tradition, I am particularly interested in those who aspired to live a 'philosophical life', cultivating virtual and real solitude and practicing spiritual disciplines such as fasting and regular prayer. This tradition culminates in, but is not restricted to, the two precedents set by Pachomius (who founded monastic institutions of the common life – the 'cenobites') and Anthony (who initiated the tradition of Christian desert hermits – the 'anchorites'). It is to the immediate forerunners of these (e.g. Origen, Clement) and more importantly their explicit successors (e.g. the desert fathers and mothers, Basil of Caesarea, Evagrius of Pontus) that I refer when I mention 'early Christian ascetics.'

This is not to say that the thesis is purely concerned with practical matters rather than theoretical – orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy, as theologians have become accustomed to divide the field. It is doubtful whether this kind of division is ever valid: certainly the purposes of this discussion would be hopelessly thwarted if we were to think the practical elements entirely independently of the dogmatic, or *vice versa*. Indeed, to take one example, the discussion of dispassion (Greek: *apatheia*) has been repeatedly confused in secondary literature by ignorance of either practical or dogmatic issues, instead of letting ascetic practice throw light on the dogma of God's impassibility, and vice versa. A proper integration of these issues will attribute to dispassion a clearer relation to love, and to practical dispassion its active character (on which, cf. below, on page 101).

Studying Christian theology and experience of holiness will require dovetailing considerations of practice and theory. Recent theories of holiness have been dominated by the description of experience: holiness has become the preserve of anthropologists and phenomenologists. In what follows, these approaches are partially undermined, partially transcended. Undermined because there is no theory of an ahistorical, non-transformable founding subject behind the account given here of norms, knowledge, and self and society. Everything is negotiated. Transcended because the objects of study are taken seriously as theoreticians of holiness rather than simply vessels of experience.

The experience of holiness is intimately involved with the knowledge of God. Theology and holiness are inextricably linked. For all their reticence regarding the discussion of God-talk, the desert fathers and mothers alter the way in which theology is thought by their transformation of the practice of holiness. Witnesses can be found to this historically – Athanasius' thought was influenced enormously by his relationship with Anthony the Great and his own encounter with the desert – and logically – the characteristics of a holy God that

are ruled out by theology are bound to be selected according to criteria determined by one's experience of holy renunciation. Linguistic reference is part of an entire language, and there are no sections of a language that are entirely segregated from the whole, least of all the various elements of religious language.

One final note on the normativity of the holy fools. Whilst I have focused on these particular figures out of scholarly affection, I am not attempting here to present them as model theologians or Christians. I do not claim to 'have found, on all essential points, the final solution of the problems' of Theology with this thesis.[34] Instead, the portrayal of asceticism throughout the work attempts to steer between the doxological view of asceticism that has become typical of certain 'poetic' ethical thinkers,[35] and the unquestioning critical view that assumes we know precisely what is wrong with asceticism without having to state it.

In theological terms, this thesis is written under the aegis of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. Nothing is assumed to be evil at the outset, but neither is anything unambiguous. Even the modern prison can be a tool for art and a beautiful life[36]; even heartfelt worship of God can become the context of oppression and slavery. A paradigmatic case of non-evil ambiguous practice is the ascetic aspiration to humility.

Humility is a recurring theme in this thesis. It is the virtue lying behind the critique of norms inherent in the foolish rejection of vainglory in part one; it drives the positing of contingency in the critique of knowledge in part two; it ultimately becomes problematic as constituting the relation of the self to society in part three. It plays a vital distinguishing role in the practice of negative theology: is God unknowable because our knowledge is faulted or because She is mysterious?[37] It is the main objective of most of the ascetic techniques we shall speak of in this study. It is also, however, a main objective for techniques of governmentality: that we should know our tiny and insignificant place in the world. The negotiation of these difficulties – between abandoning humility and manipulating it; between espousing it and enforcing it – is an ongoing problem solved neither by the holy fools nor by any theory of asceticism that I have encountered.

The merit of the holy fools is their assertion of contingency in an established ascetic order. The contemporary relevance of this study of asceticism could be brought out by a study

---

[34] Wittgenstein, 1961[1921]: introduction.

[35] This would apply to anyone wanting to construct their 'life as a work of art', but I am thinking specifically of Nehamas, 1998 McGushin, 2007 O'Leary, 2002.

[36] see Oscar Wilde's ecstatic appreciation of his prison experience in *de profundis*: Wilde, 2007[1913].

[37] This is the theme in Turner's recent magisterial treatment in Turner, 2004, where he suggests that we should not think God to exist in a banal contained way, but that we have never really understood existence.

of the ways in which we are tempted and required to reflect upon our own training of the self today, which could include analyses of popular psychology, secular repentance, care institutions, or national insurances.[38] In order to see how these disciplines are neither evil nor unambiguous, though, they will have to appear in their contingency and exposure to description. In short, their holiness must be taken away. It is precisely this process – the deprivation of the holiness of everyday values – that the holy fools enable. Not in order to condemn (monks, for example, are both ridiculed and commended), but in order to clear a space for thought, laughter and evaluation. In order to see the world as creation: as divine, but not God.

It is in the context of this ambiguity and art that the holy fools have a great deal to say about contemporary and ancient asceticism, through their infinite demands, their transcendence of ethics, their laughter, and their mockery of heterogeneity. That is the tenor of my dodgy doxology.

---

[38] in short, it could include all the devices and domains studied by contemporary governmentality studies (I am thinking particularly of those inspired by foucauldians Colin Gordon and Nikolas Rose), for which, see Barry, et al., 1996 Burchell, et al., 1991.

1: Becoming Unnormal

> Wit, an 't be thy will, put me into good fooling! Those wits that think they have thee,
> do very oft prove fools; and I, that am sure I lack thee, may pass for a wise man; for
> what says Quinapalus? 'Better a witty fool than a foolish wit.'[1]

What is the nature of the transgression of holy fools? At what level is their challenge to the norms of their ascetic background pitched? How do they conform to and transform the tradition of ascetic self-ostracism, and what practices allow this transformation?

In this first part, we will address the way in which norms are formed, enforced, and transgressed in the ascetic context in which holy fools narratives are set. We will set aside the various debates on specific casuistry – how long a monk should fast for, how to deal with persistent family trouble, whether to visit other monks – and focus on attitudes to rulings, issues of conformity, and the judgement of success and failure in ascetic morality. Attention will in this way not simply be paid to the fact of the transformation of holiness, but its technology.

In order to examine norms at such a level, we will first elucidate a prominent mode of moral action in the asceticism of late antiquity, namely obedience, and ask how it was transformed in the tradition of the holy fools. Then we will turn to the minimalist trend in monasticism, and in particular what was reserved from the maxim to renounce all received norms. This will reveal an entire economy of conformity and transcendence regarding ascetic rules. Finally, we will address two interpretations of holy fools' relation to their ascetic background, in terms of the casuistry of vainglory (itself a mode of relating to moral value), and the practice of dissociation from self and society.

A note on ascetic sources: this part will primarily consist in an interpretation of the *Apophthegmata Patrum* collections. A strange choice, perhaps, because they are famously unreliable as historical material.[2] They originated as oral tradition, and we only have textual translations.[3] They cover an extensive period of time (at least the length of the fourth century), and there is substantial evidence of heavy editing on the part of later generations.

---

[1] Shakespeare, 1998: II.5
[2] See Rubenson, 1995: 189 for some reasons for this.
[3] Introduction to the textual problems can be found in Guy's introduction to the Greek Systematic texts, in *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* 23-35, and in Chryssavgis, 2003: 9-11 Harmless, 2000: 484-486.

Their status in the tradition, however, is unparalleled. Later witnesses such as Zosimus (*fl.* 475-525)[4], fathers Barsanuphius and John (*fl.* 520-550?)[5], John Moschus (*fl.* 578-619)[6] and Johannes Climacus (575-650)[7] demonstrate the stature of the texts in the period of Symeon of Emesa (portrayed as living around 550; presented by Evagrius Scholasticus as a contemporary of Barsanuphius) and his hagiographers (Evagrius Scholasticus, *fl.* 590-600; Leontius of Napolis, *fl.* 641-649). The fame of the desert fathers and mothers (who are more or less defined for later generations by these texts) was such that some of the most renowned church fathers and mothers (Jerome, Evagrius Ponticus, John Chrysostom, Cassian) were connected to them. We also have records of various journeys into the desert on the part of prominent theologians and Christian figures.[8] There is good reason to believe that versions of these texts were being read by those who read holy fool hagiography, and indeed those who witnessed holy fools (to the extent that the hagiography reflects historical experience).

It should further be noted that the very earliest holy fool – which is to say (in this thesis), the first story illustrating the word 'salos' – comes from a story which found its way into the Latin collection of the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. The story of the nun from the Tabennesiotes cloister, whom later tradition named Isidora, is probably to be found in its earliest form in Palladius' *Lausiac History*.[9] It soon arrived in the Latin tradition, however (as the Latin collection is one of the earliest versions of the *Apophthegmata Patrum*), and found its place in the *Acta Sanctorum*.[10] A very similar story was recorded of a nun who feigned drunkenness in the Daniel of Scetis hagiography.[11] The Isidora tradition has even been argued to be the founding text for the Cinderella fairy tale.[12]

So we will be using the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, in their Greek and Latin Collections. The two Greek collections are arranged alphabetically (with a long section of anonymous sayings) and systematically respectively, and the Latin collection is arranged systematically. Guy has helpfully appended an index to his critical edition of the Greek Systematic collection that shows where the alphabetical sayings are to be found in the Greek Systematic

---

[4] Quotations and references to be found in Zosimas, *alloquia:* I, IV, IX, X, XII-XV.

[5] throughout their correspondance, but note particularly the comments in Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* prologue, the quotation in 287, and references in 128, 143, 150, 256, 469.

[6] Moschus, *prat.:* 55, 212, 219.

[7] who quotes the *apophthegmata patrum* in Climacus, *scal.:* Steps 5, 19, 29, although the historical characters and themes are present at various points throughout the work: cf. especially stories in steps 4 and 24.

[8] Rufinus and Melania in Rufinus, *Hist. Monach.*; Cassian and Germanus in Cassianus, *Collationes*.

[9] Palladius, *h. Laus.:* XXIV.

[10] *Acta Sanctorum:* Maii, I (1968), 49f.

[11] *v. dan. scet.:* 5.

[12] cf. Ivanov, 2006[1994]: 51-53. Useful comments on the story can be found in Vogt, 1987.

collection,[13] and by including cross references in the margin of the text itself. There is no such index for the Latin collection. These factors all make study of these epoch-making texts a little unwieldy.

In order to support my interpretation of the texts, I will be referring to four other categories of material:

1. Cassian's writings, which were written down in Latin some time after his journeys in Egypt with Germanus. These are an essential resource, and became particularly influential in the Western tradition. However, they are so different in form (the *Institutes[14]* describe the rule of the desert fathers and the eight temptations of Evagrius Ponticus, and the *Conferences[15]* are presented more or less as long dictated discourses he had heard in Egypt), and so influenced by Cassian's own concerns and interpretive framework (largely borrowed from Evagrius Ponticus) that they are difficult to relate to the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, in spite of the fact that both Cassian and Evagrius Ponticus feature as desert fathers in that text.

2. Hagiographical resources: Palladius' *Lausiac History[16]*, Evagrius Scholasticus' *Ecclesiastic History,[17]* the hagiographic fragments associated with Daniel of Scetis, and Rufinus' *History of the Monks of Egypt[18]* recount a number of stories concerning the protagonists and context of the *Apophthegmata Patrum*.

3. Ascetic theorists: theologians such as Evagrius of Pontus and Basil of Caesarea, in addition to bequeathing a number of exegetical works, contain a great deal of reflection on the day to day life and problems of anchoritic and coenobitic monasticism, respectively. Evagrius Ponticus was located in the Egyptian desert, and learnt at the feet of Macarius the Alexandrian and Macarius the Great; Basil

---

[13] *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* Vol. III.
[14] Cassianus, *de institutis*.
[15] Cassianus, *Collationes*.
[16] Palladius, *h. Laus.*
[17] Evagrius Scholasticus, *h.e.*
[18] Rufinus, *Hist. Monach.*

was based in Palestine, and is largely critical of the anchoritic tradition,[19] with which he is nevertheless familiar.

4. Later interpretation: the *Apophthegmata Patrum* provided later asceticism with a touchstone for authentic monasticism in the context of growing multiplicity.[20] Later interpreters such as Barsanuphius and John,[21] John Climacus,[22] John Moschus and those he met in his *Spiritual Meadow*,[23] and Zosimus[24] help us to understand how the texts were applied and interpreted around the time of the holy fools studied here and their hagiographers.

---

[19] e.g. in Basilius, *renunt.*
[20] As described by Evagrius Scholasticus, *h.e.*
[21] Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.*
[22] esp. Climacus, *scal.*
[23] Moschus, *prat.*
[24] in Zosimas, *alloquia.*

1.1: Negative Obedience

It is remarkably difficult to identify behaviour that would be considered mad in antiquity, given that the practices of giving away one's money, getting naked in public, and living in the desert on one loaf of bread per week – all standard, easily recognisable monastic tasks familiar to the Christian of late antiquity – are hardly likely to be counted normal in occidental society today! There is an element of modern madness in all asceticism.

The problem is not unique to modern secular observers though. Indeed, the desert monks appear to have seen it as their lot to be considered mad by the world, as their founding father Anthony the Great once put it: 'A time is coming when men will go mad, and when they see someone who is not mad, they will attack him, saying "You are mad, you are not like us."'[25] It is possible, however, to isolate certain acts that seem to have been recounted to religious and secular alike specifically because of their weirdness. Monks did extreme things – even those who were not designated holy fools – for extreme reasons.

In what follows, I will give an outline of the various kinds of strange behaviour exhibited amongst early Christian ascetics before or apart from holy fools, and determine their motivation. The practice of obedience is the main reason for weird behaviour amongst these Eastern solitaries, and needs to be understood if the holy fools are then to be seen in contrast and continuity with it. The stories of crazy obedience can be roughly divided into three categories: transgression, distorted interpretation, and crazy tasks.

What I am calling the category of *transgressive crazy obedience* is the command to actually break rules and laws. A fairly harmless form of this could be the command to lie about one's own virtue. Whilst discussing this, Cassian records that a monk may lie even when speakers are perfectly aware of what they are doing.

> For if we also wish to consider what we recall our elders used to do unhesitatingly, making believe that their miraculous powers and their own deeds, which had to be mentioned in conferences for the sake of the younger men, were other people's doing – what other judgement can we make of these things than that they were downright lies? (2) … For it is more justifiable to lie by this kind of deception than either to conceal by an inappropriate silence things that could edify our listeners or to brag with harmful vanity by speaking truthfully about ourselves.[26]

---

[25] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Anthony 25 Hieronymus, *ep.:* xlv.

[26] Cassianus, *Collationes:* XVII.xxiv.1f, and contrast Augustine's attitude in Augustinus, *mend.* discussed below on page 166ff.

This is not a particularly subversive transgression, however, as it is a result of practical reasoning based on accepted norms. The monk still lives by autonomous ethics rather than obedience. He prioritises one rule over another, rather than undermining a set of rules and rule-making practices. It may seem transgressive, but it is hardly weird: when another monk draws the diametrically opposite conclusion, it strikes us not as abnormal, but as simply interesting.[27] There is a possibility for conversation.

Other incidents go further, as they break laws almost gratuitously. Here, the form is clear: a brother asks another brother to do something, and the latter does it without questioning the former's judgement for a moment.

> It was said that Abba Saios and Abba Moue lived together. Abba Saios was very obedient, but he was very rigid. To test him, the old man said to him, 'Go and steal.' Through obedience Abba Saios went to steal from the brethren, giving thanks to the Lord in everything. Abba Moue took the things and returned them secretly.[28]

It is not certain what the tradition thinks about this particular trend – the story is followed immediately in the *Apophthegmata* with a story of how Abba Moue abandoned Abba Saios on the road, fainting from exhaustion, and asked the brothers to collect him 'because he is lying there helpless'. Is the radically obedient monk helpless? The point stands however that transgressive behaviour is recorded as being caused and justified by the principle of obedience. The principle is to 'obey in everything, even if the matter appears to you to be sinful'.[29] This should hopefully rid us of the idea that obedience was a necessarily normalising force in antiquity. Obedience as a discipline is in this case independent of the moral law or common rule, and sinning against a director is worse than sinning against God.[30]

The second category, of *distorted interpretation*, is also recorded as an instance of obedience. Monks go out of their way to agree with the verdict of their companion out of obedience. This form of obedience can be found both on the part of junior monks (e.g. where he agrees with his master's identification of a boar as a deer[31]), and on the part of elder monks:

---

[27] *h. mon.:* I.14f; Abba Alonius recommends lying specifically to hide murderers from magistrates: *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Alonius 4; an anonymous abba lies for the benefit of a soul *Apoph. Patr. (anon):* 92; Climacus discounts lying out of prudent motives: Climacus, *scal.:* Step 12.

[28] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Saius 1.

[29] Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 288. These matters include murder according to letter 615.

[30] Climacus, *scal.:* Step 4 *Apoph. Patr. (anon):* 158

[31] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Mark, disciple of abba Silvanus 2

He took the fish, intentionally cooked some of it badly, and offered it to the old man who ate it without saying anything. Then he said to him, 'Is it good, old man?' He replied, 'It is very good.' Afterwards he brought him a little that was well cooked and said, 'Old man, I have spoiled it,' and he replied, 'Yes you have spoiled it a little.' Then Abba Athre said to me, 'Do you see how obedience is intrinsic to the old man?'[32]

Obedience for early Christian ascetics could be associated with control over one's understanding and perception of the world. There is even an example of two ascetics who did not manage to follow this principle, both insisting on their identification of a bird, resulting in conflict.[33] In Christian asceticism, obedience exerted an influence upon knowledge and perception.

By far the most common category of obedient crazy behaviour, however, is that of the *crazy tasks* given by monks to teach their disciples. This kind of story is attested in different sources: Cassian[34] tells of disciples who water a dry stick (xxiv), throw out their supply of oil (xxv), and try to move an enormous boulder single-handedly (xxvi); disciples can put themselves in great danger at the behest of their spiritual director:

It was said of Abba John, the disciple of Abba Paul, that his obedience was very great. Now there were some tombs thereabouts where a hyena lived. The old man saw some dung in the place, and told John to go and fetch it. He said, 'And what shall I do about the hyena, abba?' The old man said to him, jokingly, 'If she sets upon you, tie her up and bring her here.' So in the evening, the brother went there. And lo, the hyena fell upon him. According to the old man's instruction, he rushed to catch her. But the hyena ran away. He pursued her saying, 'My abba says I am to tie you up.' He seized her and bound her. Now the old man was uneasy and sat waiting for him. When he returned, he brought the hyena on a rope. When the old man saw this he was filled with wonder, but he wanted to humiliate him, so he struck him and said, 'Fool, why have you brought a silly dog here?' Then the old man set her free at once and let her go.[35]

At this point, we encounter the entire spread of reasonable and unreasonable obedience, from the drudgery of serving food to the scandal of throwing one's child into the

---

[32] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Pistos 1 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XV.60 = the first part of *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XV.43. Cf. also the related story of the father that ate lamp oil given by his foolish disciple in *Apoph. Patr. (anon):* 19. The tradition is appreciated in later generations. Cf. Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 842 – 'Strive hard, however, to reach the point of accepting [the words of the fathers], even when they tell you that darkness is light.' (square brackets original).

[33] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Nicetas 1 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XVII.33

[34] in Cassianus, *Collationes:* IV.

[35] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* John, disciple of Abba Paul 1 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XIV.5 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XIV.4

fire (from which the father is always saved, in an Abrahamic way)[36]. The Systematic collections of sayings of the desert fathers have a chapter dedicated to obedience recounting these tasks. As we have seen, not all of the desert fathers and mothers restricted themselves to reasonable requests.

The significance of these stories emerges both in their parallels with the behaviour of the holy fools (elaborated below) *and* in the way in which they interrupt the ascetic's normal conduct. Obedience brackets the importance of community norms, shared understandings, and the sense of human limitation. All these factors license a contingent relation to normality and reason, as well as an openness regarding the very practice of establishing and creating norms.

When these parallels are borne in mind, the distinction between holy fools and other monks and nuns of the time is not as great. In fact, Symeon the holy fool echoes some of these stories in his life. The most obvious one is Abba John's hyena story, which resembles Symeon's début in Emesa:

> When the famous Symeon found a dead dog on a dunghill outside the city, he loosened the rope belt he was wearing, and tied it to the dog's foot. He dragged the dog as he ran and entered the gate.[37]

We also witness Symeon stealing from his employers for no apparent reason. As soon as he is paid to sell beans for a bean seller on the street, who had been good enough to take him in, he gave out half of the food, and ate the other half.[38] Abba Mark the holy fool also steals from the market, distributing his ill-gotten goods to the fools that surround him: the holy fools cover the category of transgressive crazy behaviour extensively.[39] As regards crazy interpretation, Symeon accepts the accusation that he is responsible for the pregnancy of a woman who falsely claimed to have been raped by him, and refuses to protest his innocence.[40]

What do these parallels in the contemporary monastic literature tell us about the behaviour of holy fools? If there is nothing to separate the holy fool from the odd behaviour of his predecessors, why should we mark them out as a group? Having noted the continuity of the account, we now need to identify the discontinuity.

The key feature that distinguishes these actions from those of previous ascetics is the lack of command. Early Christians did weird things in order to obey their companions

---

[36] *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XIV.8, 18 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XIV.15, 28.

[37] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* IV.145.

[38] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* IV.146.

[39] *v. dan. scet.:* 2.

[40] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* 151 Evagrius Scholasticus, *h.e.:* IV.34; cf. similar accounts in Palladius, *h. Laus.:* LXX *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Macarios 1 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XV.25 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XV.39.

(usually their superiors) without questioning or judging their actions. The holy fools have no obvious reason to do what they do. Their acts defy the interpretation given to those outlined above, and the narrator is often reluctant to comment on them himself. Certainly the story of the tied up dog has thwarted interpreters eager to see some significance in it.[41]

If we are to characterise the holy fools' distinctive behaviour as monastic subversion torn loose from obedience, then this is a break from the contemporary ascetic ethos. We argued above that obedience was central to all instances of weird behaviour amongst the desert fathers and mothers. A number of texts witness to the priority of obedience above other virtues generally considered synonymous with the religious life: continence;[42] self control;[43] and solitude.[44]

So it would seem that a proper understanding of the holy fools will require a proper account of the practice of obedience in antiquity. In the following, I will outline an approach to this subject by first clearing the ground of modern problems, and then sketching out an interpretation around an unremarkable example of obedience. The analysis will work towards an understanding of the strategy of obedience, and its relationship to practices of dissociation.

1.1.1: Understanding Obedience

Obedience takes many forms, and Christian asceticism has gone cycles of transformations and re-creations in its two millennium history. The problems arising from the notion of religious obedience today would not necessarily apply to the practices of the ascetic communities of the Eastern church.

Firstly, it should be pointed out that desert monasticism did not appear in a vacuum. There are elements that were common to both early Christian asceticism and the philosophy of late antiquity. Obedience to someone who hears and speaks your truth was not the innovation of Christian monasticism. It constituted an essential part of learning the life skill that led to happiness in antiquity. Patristic appropriation of Stoic techniques of confession, moderation and calm did indeed in time introduce a new relationship to the code of the law, but obedience to a teacher or guide was already present.[45]

---

[41] Is the dog a cynic reference (so Krueger, 1996: 100-104) or the god-dog Anubis (so Kislinger, 1988)?

[42] *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XIV.9. The Greek has 'ascesis' - *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XIV.17 = *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Syncletia 16. Ascesis is also compared to obedience in *Apoph. Patr. (anon):* 161.

[43] Basilius, *ascet 2:* 2 (enkrateia) *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XIV.7,17 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* 14, 27 = *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Pambo 3 and *Apoph. Patr. (anon):* 161.

[44] *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XIV.19 = *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Rufus 2 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XIV.29; cf. also *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Basil the Great *Apoph. Patr. (anon):* 163.

[45] Foucault, 2001: 111.

Secondly, monastic obedience was not necessarily a virtue connected to a hierarchy.[46] Obedience is praised repeatedly in the sayings of the desert fathers, but these stories never include a bishop. In fact, quite the opposite is true: bishops are ridiculed and taunted amongst the desert fathers, and considered failures in humility.[47] The case is a little more complicated with reference to the *abba* and the disciple (and particularly in coenobitic monasticism),[48] which is clearly a relationship of authority. However, the number of stories referring to obedience on the part of the *abba* to a disciple (cf. over, on page 29), and brothers obeying weaker brothers[49] would lead the reader to believe that obedience is a virtue exercised in relation to people as such, particularly amongst brothers and sisters, and not solely to those in authority.

> Three old men, of whom one had a bad reputation, came one day to Abba Achilles. The first asked him, 'Father, make me a fishing-net.' 'I will not make you one,' he replied. Then the second said, 'Of your charity make one, so that we may have a souvenir of you in the monastery'. But he said, 'I do not have time.' Then the third one, who had a bad reputation, said, 'Make me a fishing net, so that I may have something from your hands, Father.' Abba Achilles answered him at once, 'For you, I will make one.'[50]

It is worth emphasising this point about the mobility of the relationship of obedience, because of the obvious connection it has to a critique of the power inherent in asceticism. For some critical theorists, obedience is the decisive factor that turned liberating antique philosophy into controlling discipline.[51] If asceticism is a method for producing a group of docile people[52] then the value of obedience becomes a tool of societal control wielded by a small group. It is oligarchy's plaything.

Now I think it would be ingenuous to deny that the relationship between two solitaries is a power relation as soon as obedience becomes a factor. There are naturally at least two sets

---

[46] Clark, 1988: 635 Chryssavgis, 2003: 60, although contrast Basil of Caesarea's writings on the common life: 'I noticed that as long as the common obedience of the others to some one leader was maintained, all was discipline and harmony in the whole group;' Basilius, *jud.:* §2; 'Since it is in every way fitting that the community be obedient and under subjection to a superior' Basilius, *ascet. 1*. This trend dominated the reception history of Christian asceticism: Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 242.

[47] Moschus, *prat.:* 1.

[48] cf. the references above, in footnote 46: Basil repeatedly uses the Pauline model of obedience to the secular authority: Basilius, *ascet 2*.

[49] e.g. brother Acacius in Climacus, *scal.:* Step 4. Cf. also Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 212.

[50] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Achilles 1 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* X.18 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* X.18. Cf. also *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XIV.17 *Apoph. Patr. (anon):* 161 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XIV.27.

[51] e.g. in Bernauer, 2002: , who describes obedience as the essence of fascism (p78) McGushin, 2007: 165-167, 172 Hunter, 1996: 156 Davidson, 2008.

[52] as it is appropriated to do in the modern prison and asylum systems - cf. Foucault, 1991[1975]: 238f Foucault, 2006[2003]: 174, 249.

of interests, with strategic moves available on both sides. The fact that one commands, and the other obeys, perhaps against their common sense or will, implies that the power flows in one direction. However, when the strategic moves available to the monk can include a reversal of this relationship, the situation gains a game-like character. What is missing is an institutional or scientific fixing of the definition of 'governor' and 'governed',[53] clearly identifiable in oligarchies (which could be enforced by myths of genealogy or anthropological myths of race inferiority for example) or disciplinary societies (which could be enforced by knowledge of criminal tendencies or ethico-evolutionary laws). In this way, the technique of obedience in certain desert communities resembles Foucault's description of playful S&M practices in its being unafraid of strategic power and unwilling to espouse techniques that emphasise unidirectional flows and hide the possibility of resistance:

> What strikes me with regard to S&M is how it differs from social power. What characterizes power[54] is the fact that it is a strategic relation which has been stabilized through institutions. So the mobility in power relations is limited, and there are strongholds that are very, very difficult to suppress because they have been institutionalized and are now very pervasive in courts, codes, and so on. … On this point, the S&M game is very interesting because it is a strategic relation, but it is always fluid.[55]

It may indeed be true to say that some early Christians did actually think of obedience to a spiritual guide as a goal in itself, with the latter occupying a similar place to absolute faith in Kierkegaard's thought,[56] but there is good reason to see the discipline of obedience as a means to a further end.[57] For some, obedience can be their rule of life – quite independently of law, or rule, or will - until they die.[58] Obedience is sufficient for them. For others, obedience is most important at the beginning of the monastic life,[59] and can lead to another habit entirely. It is for this reason, then, that we can ask the question: what role does obedience play in the desert fathers' establishment of norms? Given that it challenges one set of behaviours, what is its objective and function in positive terms?

---

[53] Veyne, 1997[1978]: 160.
[54] Foucault's argument only really makes sense if this sentence refers to *social* power, and not power in general. The interview was originally in English, so it is not possible to check the translation.
[55] Foucault, 2000b[1982]: 169.
[56] e.g. in Kierkegaard, 1985[1843], and cf. the above references to Abraham in n.36 above.
[57] It is the way to dispassion in Climacus, *scal.:* Step 4 and progress in Step 28.
[58] *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XIV.12 = *Apoph. Patr. (anon):* 158a = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XIV.20, and the case of brother Acacius in Climacus, *scal.:* Step 4.
[59] *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XIV.15 = *Apoph. Patr. (anon):* 158b = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XIV.24.

A good example of the result of obedience I want to focus on can be seen in the story of a monk from Scythia who came to be guided by one of the old men in the desert. I will give the aphophthegmaton in full, as we will be going through it step by step:

A brother in Scetis, on his way to the harvest, approached a great old man and said to him, 'Abba, tell me what to do, for I'm going away to the harvest.' The old man says to him, 'And if I tell you, will you heed me?' The brother says, 'I will obey you.' (obedio tibi/᾽Ακούσω σου) So the old man said to him, 'If you will heed me, rise and take leave of this harvest, then come and I will command you concerning what you will do.' And going out, the brother took leave of the harvest, and then came to the old man. The old man said to him, 'Go into your cell and spend the next fifty days eating bread with salt once a day, and then I will command you something else.' And going out, he spent his days thus, and then he came back to the old man. So the old man, seeing that he was a real worker [operarius/᾽εργάτης], taught him how to sit in his cell. The brother left for his cell, and there prostrated himself, face to the ground for three days and three nights, weeping before God. And afterwards, when thoughts said to him, 'You have risen, you have become great,' he himself [restraining the vices of his thoughts, humbly][60] brought forth his defects, saying, 'And where are all my errors?' But if they again spoke to him, 'You have done much that you are unaware of,' he also spoke, 'But I will do service [λειτουργεία] to God, and I believe that he will deal mercifully with me.' So succumbing, the spirits [of evil thoughts][61] revealed themselves to him visibly, saying, 'We have been buffeted by you.' He said to them, 'How?' They said to him, 'If we raise you up, you run to humility; if we humble you, you return to the heights.'[62]

Upon being asked what the young monk should do, the old man first elicits a commitment to obedience. It is only once the young monk has committed himself to obedience by renouncing work, fasting, and showing himself to be devoted to the task set him that the old man then introduces him to the monastic life proper, by explaining to him how to sit[63] in his cell.

Sitting in one's cell was the particular activity of the desert ascetics. It worked not simply as a necessity of life, but as a virtuous form of life meant to combat demons and produce goodness in religious ascetics. It is difficult to discover any one ethical code for the desert fathers and mothers based on their sayings in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* (Cassian is

---

[60] This phrase is only found in the Latin: 'temperans vitia cogitationum suarum'.
[61] This specification is only found in the Latin: 'malarum cogitationum'.
[62] My translation from the Greek of *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XIV.23, with reference to the Latin of *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XIV.14. The story is also recorded in *Apoph. Patr. (anon):* 159.
[63] The Latin 'esse in cella sua' is a tempting phrase – 'how to be in the cell' – but it is almost certainly a mistranslation: 'sedere in cella' is more frequently attested in the *Apoph. Patr. (Lat)*.

another case entirely). What they have in common, though, is the practice of sitting in one's cell. In this story, it constitutes the initiation of the novice into the ways of the desert fathers and mothers. In other stories, it is both an ethical precept[64] and the boundary marker of their way of life (cf. the discussion below, on page 59-61).[65]

The way this monk is in his cell is an example of the direction in which obedience is meant to lead. The young monk goes down to his cell, lies prostrate on the ground for three days and three nights weeping, and notably develops a particular relationship to his thoughts. Presumably as a result of the directions of the old man, the monk controls his thoughts (Latin: *cogitationes*/Greek: *logismoi*) and his vision (Latin: *conspectus*) in such a way as to adjust them according to his will. He is able to choose which of his memories he should remember, what to have before his eyes.

There are two points to be made about this progression. Firstly, the final state, in which the monk defeats the demons, is not characterised as much by a rule as by a technique. It is a technique of control over one's thoughts and vision. Obedience results in a certain relation to the norms of the self which is structured by the Christian story,[66] whereby the monk can actually make a choice as regards the way he is rather than be a passive receiver of impressions, visions, etc. So we still have no reference to the law, text, or common rule, merely a critique of the sources of the self. As Johannes Climacus has it, in the chapter that resonates most with the desert fathers of all his steps in the Ladder of Divine Ascent, 'obedience is self-mistrust up to one's dying day, in every matter, even the good.'[67]

The second point to be made is that in the final state, the monk's thoughts and visions are subject to him with the same docility, the same unquestioning obedience with which he placed himself in submission to the old man. The obedience has been transferred from an inter-subjective phenomenon into an intra-subjective phenomenon. What had been a two person relation has developed into a habit of individual thought. Just as the monk did what his spiritual father commanded, his thoughts do what he commands.[68]

This latter interpretation of obedience is so counter-intuitive that it will need to be backed up by more than my exegesis of one text. A factor that argues in its favour is that ideal

---

[64] *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* II.9 = *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Moses 6 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* II.19.

[65] 'Sicut pisces, si tardaverint in sicco, moriuntur; ita et monachi tardantes extra cellam, aut cum viris saecularibus immorantes, a quietis proposito revolvuntur', *Apoph. Patr. (Lat): = Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Anthony 10 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* II.1

[66] Humility's basis in the Christian story is discussed below, on page 207.

[67] Climacus, *scal.:* Step 4. Cf. also Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 253.

[68] The body can also be obedient: Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 159.

obedience is praised for being instantaneous. A story that arises in a number of sources[69] concerns a disciple called Mark, who is called upon by an *abba* whilst he is working on a manuscript. The proof of his obedience is evidenced by the fact that Mark did not complete the letter 'O' before running to appear before the old man. So the old man's love for him on account of his obedience is vindicated by Mark's immediate response to his voice.[70]

Obedience is internalised as a virtue, and monks are encouraged to be with themselves in solitude as their spiritual guides were with them in community.[71] If this is the case, we might expect the forms of crazy obedience mentioned over (on page 28) also to be internalised, and certainly as regards crazy interpretation, we see this result: monks exert a freedom of choice as regards what they see and hear:

> Then Abba Abraham said to him, 'If you were to find a woman lying on your mat when you entered your cell would you think that it is not a woman?' 'No,' he replied, 'But I should struggle against my thoughts so as not to touch her.' Then Abba Abraham said, 'Then you have not destroyed the passion, but it still lives in you although it is controlled.'[72]

1.1.2: Political Obedience

To go even further in our interpretation of obedience, attention must be drawn to the victory achieved by ascetics in their cells. In the instance mentioned over (on page 34) the monk from Scythia defeated demons, who had tried to change his attitude towards the world through bringing certain of his thoughts to his attention. Here it should be noted that although the demons are obviously independent agents, it was the monk's own thoughts that were the object of suspicion. The demons were not attacking the body, but the monk's own mind, his relation to his self, his form of life.[73] It is in this way that it makes sense to speak of spiritual battle: in the attempt to gain mastery over one's thought, taking it back from external influences in the world. The assertion of this kind of obedience is the struggle for agency and self-determination.

Obedience towards one's direction or director is considered no more an act of submission than disobedience is. Either the ascetic obeys the thoughts she chooses, or those

---

[69] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Mark, disciple of Silvanus 1 (cf. also Pistos 1) = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XIV.11 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XIV.5.

[70] Cf. also Anthony in Palladius, *h. Laus.:* IV.3.

[71] So Macarius of Alexandria 'gives his mind a commandment' in Palladius, *h. Laus.:* XVIII.17. Cf. also obedience as rejection of society in *lib. grad.:* XXV.7.

[72] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Abraham 1 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* X.15 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* X.19. Cf. also Evagrius, *de mal. cog.:* 3: 'on account of holy impassibility, "there is no male and female"'. Passions are discussed in greater depth below, on page 91ff.

[73] Demons are also portrayed as seductively praising the monk in Climacus, *scal.:* Step 26.

chosen by the demon, or society, or tradition (cf. the quote by Pierre Hadot, under, on page 39). Early Christian ascetics would not necessarily have seen obedience to a spiritual director as any less an act of freedom than obedience to one's own will, because neither of these are uncompromised. It is only when one is obliged to obey – when obedience is necessary either because of coercion or because of an established norm[74] – that one's freedom is impinged upon. If one chooses to obey, then it can not be obligatory. Conversely, if one's obedience is unconscious, then one cannot choose it, and it becomes necessary. For the desert fathers and mothers, when people obey their own will, they are usually simply deluded into thinking that they are independent agents.[75] One must become aware of the principle of one's actions. Obedience is a way of making norms and norm-making practices visible.

For example, certain desert fathers were actually quite lenient in terms of rules ('do not set any decrees for yourself')[76], but as a matter of pure freedom, they were strict with themselves. Sisoi admits that drinking a number of glasses of wine would not be a problem, if there were no spiritual force ready to steal one's freedom.[77] So the mortification of the will introduced by Christian forms of spirituality is only an act of unfreedom if the will is otherwise entirely free from the compulsion of the 'principalities and powers'[78]. The demonology of the time is modelled upon secular power. In a similar way, resistance to demons is the political act of asserting alternative authority. Obedience is justified by reference to the Christian *political* community, with quotations of Paul's exhortations to obedience to the secular authority in Romans.[79]

Obedience is central to Christian asceticism in late antiquity, but not in the sense that it assumes the absence of obedience outside the community. Instead, monastic obedience simply makes overt the kind of relationship to which the self is subject anyway. Whilst the freedom of the city involves the right to choose the goods (in the sense of wares) with which to satisfy one's desires – the object of desire[80] – the freedom of the desert refuses that right in order to choose the way in which to desire – action upon the subject of desire. The difference between these is not as much that of the presence or absence of obedience, but between

---

[74] The so-called 'conduct of conduct' questioned in governmentality literature: Barry, et al., 1996 Burchell, et al., 1991.

[75] This is when active force becomes reactive force in Nietzsche's work: 'he who cannot obey himself will be commanded.' Nietzsche, 1961[1885]: II On Self-Overcoming. Cf. also Deleuze, 2006[1962]: part 2.

[76] Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 21.

[77] *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* IV.37 = *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Sisoes 2 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* IV.45; cf. *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Xoius 1.

[78] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Theophilus the Archbishop 4.

[79] Basilius, *ascet 2.*

[80] This freedom later bases Locke's conception of liberty: cf. Goodchild, 2002: 33 – "Liberty compresses the good of human action to a single value, easing discomfort, by an arbitrary choice of taste: cheese or lobsters."

having or not having an influence upon one's obedience. Bob Dylan was therefore describing ancient society as well as his own time when he wrote:

> Might like to wear cotton, might like to wear silk,
>
> Might like to drink whiskey, might like to drink milk,
>
> You might like to eat caviar, you might like to eat bread,
>
> You may be sleeping on the floor, sleeping in a king-sized bed
>
>
> But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed
>
> You're gonna have to serve somebody,
>
> Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord
>
> But you're gonna have to serve somebody.[81]

The deployment of asceticism in late antiquity did involve work upon norms of behaviour, and taking control of one's obedience was a first step in becoming free from the forms of being in the world necessary for urban citizen participation. So obedience is not just a matter of conforming one's will to something, but also tearing it loose from another order, as Herbert McCabe has pointed out:

> our obedience, our solidarity with the community, is the way in which we find *ourselves*. Obedience for us is not a denial of self but a discovery of self. For – to say it again – obedience is not the suppression of our will in favour of someone else's, it is learning to live in community, in solidarity, which is simply learning to live. Of course to discover yourself is to unlearn as well as to learn; it is to abandon a notion of yourself that you had before in favour of a new and deeper one.[82]

The notion of obedience – which would later be a touchstone of good citizenship[83] – was in antiquity a tool of sanctification, setting a life apart from the ways of the majority. Although this sounds very religious (both in the modern and in the traditional sense), the very point of most philosophical disciplines in late antiquity – like examining one's thoughts, being vigilant, and calling principles to mind – was to aristocratically separate oneself from common suppositions and attitudes. This necessarily involved a certain amount of ostracising

---

[81] Dylan, 1979. Cf. also Barsanuphius' contrast of Christian grace to human rule in Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.*: 23.

[82] McCabe, 2000[1987]: 231.

[83] Cf. the value of 'passive obedience' in Berkeley, 1953[1712] and Mill, 1999[1859]: II.

society, as opinions and preconceptions are the building blocks of common life.[84] In this respect, far from being the tool of conformity to the law, enforcing normal standards with military discipline, obedience was a philosophical technique naturally growing out of Plato's work, rejecting as it does the preconceptions and insecure opinions of the masses. Consider the following passage from Epictetus:

> So what means can we resort to against a form of life [Greek: *ethos* = custom, habit, presupposed practice]?[85] The opposite form of life. You hear laypeople saying, 'That poor man just died! His father died, and his mother: he was cut off by an untimely death, whilst abroad.' Hear the opposing analyses, tear yourself away from those voices, oppose one form of life with another.[86]

Epictetus here clearly exhorts paying attention to one's attitudes, and not simply accepting everything one sees and hears. He also talks about dealing with distress, uncertainty, and scepticism, and the mental actions to be taken against them. This kind of attitude has recently been argued – by the likes of Pierre Hadot, Alexander Nehamas, and Paul Rabbow – to constitute the essence of ancient philosophy, from Socrates to Plotinus.[87] The action exhorted by this kind of ancient philosophy involves taking control of one's attitudes in an act of self mastery, and separating oneself from the attitudes that present themselves in those around one.

> It is precisely for this that spiritual exercises are intended. Their goal is a kind of self-formation, or *paideia*, which is to teach us to live, not in conformity with human prejudices and social conventions – for social life is itself a product of the passions – but in conformity with the nature of man, which is none other than reason. Each in its own way, all schools believed in the freedom of the will, thanks to which man has the possibility to modify, improve, and realize himself.[88]

In fact, that kind of separation was indeed the effect of Christian asceticism. They were not producing docile conforming citizens, for the religious of late antiquity were widely despised for their radical sexual mores and social habits. Abstinence withdrew them from public space and household duty, challenging the civic norms of the time. In particular, the

---

[84] Badiou, 2001[1998]: 50f.

[85] Lampe, 1961 notes that the word is also used of liturgy in antiquity: liturgy as a philosophico-spiritual exercise in antiquity is unfortunately under-studied in philosophy and patristics.

[86] Epictetus, *Ench.:* xxvii.4-6, my translation. Cf. also the account of obedience as humbly resisting the public super-ego in Basilius, *reg. fus.:* 21.

[87] Hadot, 2002[1995] Nehamas, 1998 Rabbow, 1954.

[88] Hadot, 1995: 102 - cf. also Clark, 1988: 632, 635.

recommendation of widows staying single and young women remaining virgins provoked comment, and indeed anger directed at early Christian communities.[89] The entire movement of early Christian asceticism was one of revolt and independence from society at large. Monastic communities broke away from secular groups both physically and spiritually. Physically, because they retreated to the desert and communities outside the city; spiritually, because they problematised the configuration of their relationship to their body, perceptions, thoughts, and language.

This break epitomises the behaviour of the holy fool. After Symeon had spent a number of years in the desert, fasting, praying, and through silence separating himself from all earthly bonds, he decided to return to the city in order to 'mock the world' (ἐμπαίζω– to ridicule, make dance, make fun of). He and John had already spent a good deal of time and attention in tearing themselves away from their families, not least their female dependents. Now Symeon decided to engage with the world, through consciously making an effort to be contrary to it.

1.1.3: Foolery as Religious Emancipation

In Leontius' narrative, the life of Symeon is punctuated by ruptures in Symeon's life, as he steadily forsakes more and more of the world. First he leaves his career and normal life by adopting coenobitic monasticism. Then he abandons the common life of the monastery for the desert. In the desert, he abandons his family, both in terms of obligation and emotionally. Finally, he abandons the solitude of the desert and embraces the city. This final step can be interpreted as an ascetic move against asceticism, as he forsakes the outer trappings of the religious life (including obedience to a spiritual father or brother), whilst internalising them. His vocation is an ethical move of abandoning the vainglory of religion and constructing an internal solitude (cf. under, on page 73).

> 'Beware, be on your guard, brother Symeon, unless as the desert gathered together, the world disperses; and as silence helped, commotion hinders; and as much as keeping watch brought, you lose through sleep. Be on your guard, brother, lest the delusion of worldly things corrupt the prudence of the monastic life. Beware, lest the fruit from the privation of women, from whom God has saved you until today, be destroyed by spending time with them. Beware, lest the love of possessions carry off poverty, lest foods fatten the body, which fasting had melted away. Beware, brother, lest you lose your compunction through laughter and your prayer through your carelessness. Beware, please, lest when your face laughs, your mind be dissolved; lest when

---

[89] Brown, 1988: ch. 1.

your hands fondle, your soul fondles as well; lest when your mouth eats, your heart eats as well; lest when your feet walk, your inner silence dances along recklessly; and to speak concisely, lest as much as the body does outwardly, the soul does inwardly. But if [144] you receive strength entirely from God, brother, so that whatever the forms, or words, or actions the body makes, your mind and your heart remain unmoved and untroubled and in no way are defiled or harmed by them, truly I rejoice in your salvation…'[90]

The behaviour of the holy fool can be seen in continuity with the asceticism of the time: that much has been demonstrated before.[91] Moreover, it has to be seen in such a context. If it is not narrated as a form of late antique or early medieval asceticism, then there is no sense in which they are holy fools: they are simply fools. Their holiness consists in their conformity with the values that they (at least apparently) reject. This is the challenge faced by their hagiographers. The challenge to interpretation is to give an account of both the foolish element and the recognition of holiness therein.

We should understand Symeon's foolery as a step in asceticism, away from the specific relationships of asceticism. So for example, late antique monks restrict their eating by fasting and table fellowship at weekends with the eucharist, and in doing so separate themselves from the eating habits of their society.[92] Instead of eating together with family and friends, two or three times per day, food bought from the market, priced according to its taste and nourishment, they deliberately ate alone, once a day or less, food which had no taste and was not especially nourishing, or with their spiritual family gathered around a ritual of remembrance. Practices obviously varied, but moderation was the rule, and the aim of the asceticism appeared to be to become acutely aware of 'where you are and what you want'.[93]

When Symeon comes to town, he also separated himself from the eating habits of his society, but in a completely different way. He is also in control of his desire for food (having fasted in secret for a week before this incident), but he demonstrates this control by eating insatiably in the street (not at a table). He eats superhuman amounts of lupines, on the street, whilst giving out all the goods he has been employed to sell.[94] This is a form of asceticism, but not the form recognisable at the time.

---

[90] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* III.143f.
[91] cf. on page 29, and Gorainoff, 1983: chapter 1 Ivanov, 2006[1994]: chapter 1 Krueger, 1996: chapter 3.
[92] Palladius, *h. Laus.:* XVIII.2.
[93] Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 49 Hence the practice of eating a little every day so as to avoid gluttonously ending the period of fasting (*Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Agathon 20), and eating a great deal if required by hospitality (*Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XIII.3 = *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Cassian 3 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XIII.3 Cassianus, *de institutis:* V.25).
[94] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* IV.146.

Symeon breaks away from contemporary forms of gender relations in a similar way. Contemporary monks would – instead of supporting their mothers and pursuing their women contemporaries – flee from women in order to be alone with other men. Both mothers and wives were dangerous because they placed the monk within a natural family rather than in the family of God – they were a sign of worldliness.[95] This kind of behaviour radically undermined the political unit of the household, and male leadership of women, who were proof of his honour and virility.

Symeon transgresses the forms of life of the time, but not in order to embrace a new community of asceticism. He openly befriends prostitutes, for example, and demands fidelity of them.[96] Honest women in church, on the other hand, he pelts with nuts. Similarly, he sits loose to gender markers: whilst those in the city had two sets of baths for the sexes, and those in the desert did not even allow that degree of sharing, Symeon deliberately goes into the wrong bath area. And all this he accomplishes on account of his severe asceticism, through exerting power over his self and controlling his actions. After this last episode, for example, his confidant, Deacon John, asks him:

> 'For God's sake, father, how did you feel when you entered into the women's bath?' He said, 'Believe me, child, just as a piece of wood goes with other pieces of wood, thus was I there. For I felt neither that I had a body nor that I had entered among bodies, but the whole of my mind was on God's work, and I did not part from Him.'[97]

This is the case in many of the markers of asceticism at the time: Cassian goes to great lengths to describe the attire of the desert monks, that separate them out from the society of their time,[98] but Symeon puts all his clothes on his head;[99] monks stay silent for months out of fear of accidentally saying something wrong[100] – Agathon kept a stone in his mouth for three years in order not to say anything[101] – but Symeon babbles away like one possessed;[102] the desert fathers work hard in their cell to earn their keep by making ropes, whereas Symeon

---

[95] Brown, 1971: 92.
[96] Leontius, *v. Sym.*: IV.156.
[97] Leontius, *v. Sym.*: IV.149. The Daniel of Scetis hagiography, which is deeply marked by the holy fool ethos (including in its corpus the story of abba Mark the fool), includes two stories of cross-dressing ascetics: Athanasia who pretended to be a man, and Anastasia who pretended to be a eunuch. *v. dan. scet.*: 7 and 8. Another is described in Moschus, *prat.*: 170.
[98] Cassianus, *de institutis:* book I - cf. also Palladius, *h. Laus.*: XXXII.
[99] Leontius, *v. Sym.*: IV.148.
[100] cf. the exhortations to silence in Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.*: 279, 283 *et passim*, Moschus, *prat.*: 67, 156, 187.
[101] *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* IV.7 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* IV.7 = *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Agathon 15.
[102] Leontius, *v. Sym.*: IV.155.

wanders the streets dancing, playing, begging, and gallivanting with prostitutes;[103] Christians mark time by following the liturgy of holy week with fasting and prayer, but Symeon gorges himself with cakes on Holy Thursday.[104] All this he is enabled to do by the freedom he attains by his spiritual exercise:

> When [John] saw him on Holy Thursday sitting in the cake shop having eaten since early morning, he said to him, 'How much does it cost, Fool?' And he said to him, holding forty noumia in his hand, 'Here's my follis, stupid,' showing that he was eating after forty days (of fasting).[105]

It is through these ascetic disciplines of transgression, through his obedience cut loose from community, sitting loose to the necessities of society and the traditions of anti-social religious life, that Symeon the holy fool attempts to separate himself from the necessity of the forms of life presented to him in the city and in the desert. He removes himself from both of them by mockery, discipline, and obeying the voice from nowhere. As such, his practice represents a thoroughgoing development of Christian asceticism, understood as a practice of freedom and a rejection of history's necessity.

---

[103] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* IV.156.
[104] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* IV.156f.
[105] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* IV,157.

1.2: Foolery and negations: the shape of ascetic rejection

Holy fools deny the constructive elements of early Christian asceticism, including their theology and practices of holiness. But given the extreme renunciation that characterises the asceticism of their time, the question arises: what exactly is being denied here? And if their spiritual practice denies the God-reference of asceticism, what holiness or theology is left them?

The prior question, then, is what grounds have we for giving a theological interpretation to the early Christian ascetics, when those most clearly marked out by their ascetic practice do not appear to have written theological treatises? Even if we identify certain exceptions (like Evagrius of Pontus), their work is almost incomprehensible if we do not interpret it as a tool for ascetic exercise. The question of theology seems entirely lost on groups like the desert fathers.

Early Christian asceticism was not simply a form of philosophical practice. Although it is important to understand the debate into which they were speaking – and the overall assumptions of the philosophical project in late antiquity – it would be deceptive to claim that both religious and secular philosophers were simply doing the same thing. It is indeed plausible that ancient thinkers had in common a concern for the practice of philosophy rather than the dogma thereof, as Hadot has argued.[106] However, the discontinuities between the philosophical schools and monastic communities are still far too numerous and striking to claim unbroken continuity. These discontinuities can all be associated with the particulars of their different doctrines, and specifically their different theologies.

The founding fathers were inspired to the ascetic life for reasons distinct from those given by their non-Christian contemporaries. Where Plato was more or less recognised as a uniting factor by all philosophical schools in late antiquity – whether Stoic, neoplatonist, or Pyrhonnian – the Christians were committed to exegesis of the Bible. Exegetical practices may have been continuous with the philosophical heritage, but the texts themselves were different. Augustine had read a good deal of platonism as a professional rhetor before he was persuaded to adopt the "the blessed life" by a combination of the lives and sayings of the fathers and reading the Bible. Similarly, Anthony was not called out to the desert by an argument, but by Jesus' words to the rich young man.[107] These two were to set the pattern for their successors.

---

[106] in Hadot, 1995 Hadot, 2002[1995].

[107] Athanasius, *v. Anton.:* 2; quoting Matthew 19.21; cf. also *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Apollo 2 amongst others

This new inspiration is not seen only at moments of conversion, however. Ascetics are extremely suspicious of Plato, however much he is worked into the Theology of the age.[108] Similarly, the Bible becomes an integral part of their way of life.[109] Although it is difficult to gauge the importance of exegetical debate in monastic communities,[110] the sayings of the fathers and mothers are peppered with quotations from the Scriptures.

The Bible is also the basis of the liturgy at the time. Again it is often forgotten that early Christian ascetics followed a liturgy.[111] Far from being grouchy hermits immersed in their own thoughts, their days and weeks were punctuated by gatherings for the celebration of the eucharist with psalms and prayers (the *synaxis*). They also kept to a cycle of psalms.

These things set ancient Christian ascetics apart from the philosophers of the time. Although it was common practice, for example, to memorise phrases and quotations so that they were to hand when needed (Diogenes Laertius[112] represents a collection of these, and Epicurus' letters and Evagrius Ponticus' book against sadness in particular appear to have been used in this way),[113] there was no real liturgy amongst the anchorites in terms of ordering weekdays with set prayers and songs. And while monks and nuns also memorised the sayings of their mentors, they were quick to form a completely new canon, rejecting the wisdom built up by the Hellenists and Romans for the previous seven centuries. By the time of Zosimas, for example, the *Apophthegmata Patrum* had already become material for constant reading among religious. 'For the blessed Zosimas always loved to read these *Sayings* all the time; they were almost like the air that he breathed.'[114]

Perhaps as a result of these practices, the value content of the spiritual practices was different amongst the Christian ascetics. As we saw in the passage on obedience (over, on page 34), the aim for the religious was to attain to radical humility without losing faith in God.[115] So the monk in question learned to resist the temptation to be encouraged to self-confidence by his own discipline, whilst still believing in a merciful God.

---

[108] The relation between Christianity and Platonism is too marginal to this thesis to be addressed here: in our literature, Plato is at least given a positive appraisal in Palladius, *h. Laus.:* prologue 11 Basilius, *leg. lib. gent* Evagrius Scholasticus, *h.e.:* I.21.

[109] Evagrius frequently read the Bible through the night, and most desert fathers and mothers had committed vast sections of Scripture to memory. cf. Casiday, 2006: 121.

[110] Burton-Christie, 1993.

[111] Basil of Caesarea lays out the hours of prayer for his community in Basilius, *reg. fus.:* question 37.

[112] in Diogenes, *vit. phil.*.

[113] Sinkewicz, 2003: Intro, p. xxxiii. Augustine wrote his *Enchiridion* in response to a request for a handbook. He did not oblige. Cf. Augustinus, *Ench.:* VI.

[114] Zosimas, *alloquia:* XII.b. For more on memory of the desert fathers and mothers as a spiritual practice, cf. Harmless, 2000: esp. 513-517.

[115] A theme also found in *Apoph. Patr. (anon):* 54.

This form of humility and faith is simply not to be found among ancient philosophers.[116] The values behind most spiritual exercises appear to be freedom (as we have explained above), and release from suffering. So Epictetus for example did not work on the self in order to attain a particular relation to creation (namely humility and hope), but in order not to be bothered by it and other people (cf. over, on page 39): a non-relation.

A good example of the continuity and diversity of ancient asceticism can be found in the practice of death. It is a common feature of ancient philosophy to be concerned with one's attitude towards death. Cicero's work in particular is concerned with undermining one's fear of it. However, an understanding of the (non-)phenomenon of death is only half the story for ancient philosophy. It is one thing to be able to think coherently about death. It is quite another to cease to fear it, as the ancients recognised.

On the other hand, a response to the latter problem did include discussion as a philosophical exercise. As Hadot and others have taught us to realise, study of ancient philosophy needs to take into consideration both what is being said, and the result of saying it. Philosophy has both content and function, and it is not always possible or desirable to distinguish the two.

This is particularly the case for the ancients' view of death. Cicero's work can be read as an instance of the Stoic practice of *praemeditatio futurorum malorum*, whereby the philosopher would consider future evils in order to prepare his soul to peacefully endure them. The aim is clearly to overcome fear and sorrow (*miseria*).[117]

Christian asceticism also cultivated a practice of meditation on death, but with significant changes that have to do with content as well as practice. Firstly, death is associated with accountability and judgement before God. Much ink has been spilt concerning the origins of the Christian view of the afterlife[118], and I do not intend to write its history and parentage here. For my purposes, it is simply important to note the result: death became associated with standing before the judgement seat of God.

Even more significant, however, is the result this doctrine has in terms of spiritual exercises. The story of the death of abba Arsenius links the experience and thought of death to virtues central to ancient Christian monasticism:

---

[116] Clark, 1988: 630 Dagron, 1990: 930 and below, on page 203ff.
[117] Cicero, *tusc. disp.*: III.13f.
[118] Cf. Milbank's summary of the debate between Warburton and Lowth in Milbank, 1997: 55-72, and McGrath, 2003.

When his death drew near, the brethren saw him weeping and they said to him 'Truly, Father, are you also afraid?' 'Indeed,' he answered them, 'the fear which is mine at this hour has been with me ever since I became a monk.'[119]

Comparing Cicero's frame of mind with Arsenius, we can see that whilst the former's spiritual exercise was intended to eliminate sadness, fear, and humility, the latter's consideration of death actually provoked it. Whilst Cicero's writings inspire confidence, those of the desert fathers undermine all confidence in one's own righteousness, and pre-empt the judgement of God by blaming themselves for their sins.[120]

Mistrust in one's own good deeds diverts trust towards the mercy of God. The ancient Christian ascetic could never be sure that she had done right, but could still trust in the mercy of God: 'I shall have no confidence until I meet God.'[121] This again results in the practice of humility and trust, as outlined in the story of obedience (cf. over, on page 34): I am neither confident nor condemned. However, the practice of blaming oneself is to be found throughout the Christian tradition of asceticism in late antiquity.[122]

It is in these ways that, although we can see clear lines of continuity between ancient philosophical and early Christian asceticism, providing an account of these latter that left out theological considerations would lead to substantial lacunae. Indeed, the continuity can also be seen in precisely those areas where I have pointed out essential discontinuity – Stoic avoidance of sadness must have influenced Christian accounts of the sin of listnessness ('accidie'), and Christian values of humility gained in sophistication through contemporary philosophical debate on the attainability of the sage and the good life – but the practices of thought, together with the forms of elaboration and explanation, had irreversibly acquired a vital reference to God and the Christian story.

1.2.1: Negative Theology

So there is good reason to assert the specificity of the Christian thought of the desert fathers and mothers, not least with regard to their view of God. If their way of life and values were at least strongly influenced by the notion of accountability to God, what kind of God is it that determines their discourse and practice? If the understanding and experience of God

---

[119] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Arsenius 40 - cf. also Theodore of Pherme 2 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* VII.9 *Apoph. Patr. (anon):* 3, 6, 14, 50, 64 Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 20, 242 Climacus, *scal.:* Steps 4 and 15

[120] Climacus equates the Christian and Stoic practices of death in Climacus, *scal.:* Step 6

[121] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Agathon 29 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XI.2 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XI.9,10

[122] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Agathon 3, Anthony 4 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XV.2 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XV.2 Zosimas, *alloquia:* XIV.a

decides the way in which one thinks, conceives ideas, and speaks, then the nature of one's theology will be all important for the configuration of norms.

I will be arguing here that the asceticism of the early Christians had a strongly apophatic element. It was a theology of estrangement from the world. It will also become clear that fleeing the world involved positively constructing a new way of life. So – as is the case with all apophaticism – there is a cataphatic element to early asceticism, however understated.

It will perhaps be an unfamiliar move to assert a third variety of negative theology, namely the practical, alongside the familiar categories of intellectual and affective apophaticism. Of course there is no question here of discerning an interpretation of Denys the Areopagite. So what is meant in this context with "the practice of negative theology"?

It is perhaps most understandable that we are not simple speaking here of an intellectual movement. Doubtless ascetic practice has consequences – to be expanded on in part two – for speculative thought, but that is not the primary focus when giving an account of monastic practice. The primary question for the practice of negative theology is "How do I live a holy life when confronted with unknowing regarding the divine?"

This question unites speculative thought regarding God with monastic criticism of secularism. The secular life does not allow us to speak of God because it embraces worldly values that do not stand in the darkness of faith. Flight from the world is justified both by the criticism of worldly values and by the project of forming a life that will re-form our reference system so as to speak rightly of and to God.

On the other hand, the practice of negative theology is not to be identified with the affective tradition of apophaticism. As Lossky has pointed out, apophaticism and mysticism are by no means united in early Christian writings. We could even oppose the two in certain forms of negative theology. John of the Cross (whose work can also be described both as speculative negative theology and a practice of apophaticism), for example, specifically advocates rejecting mystical experience because of the apophatic cause of spiritual mortification. The unambiguous embrace of mystical experience does reduce the theological agent to a passive recipient of God's grace in the world rather than an actively engaging person capable of love and creative understanding. The practice of negative theology, on the other hand, consciously assesses life and the world in an attempt to guard itself from the worship of idols.

To approach negative theology in this way is neither unnatural or innovative. It has long been admitted that the work of, for example, Denys the Areopagite owes as much to the ascetic tradition as it does to the speculative.[123] His work is obviously rooted in monasticism: the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* includes a chapter on the initiation of monks;[124] ascetic saints have cosmic significance;[125] many of the letters are clearly to monks, and make reference to the monastic life.

The mastery of speech and thought is in other words an essentially ascetic task. Just as physics is to be examined both in terms of it theoretical content and in terms of its effects on the soul, so negative theology has specific practical effects. So in our examination we will both be considering what kind of theology is being appealed to, but also how this theology participates in the living of the godly life. What kind of theology grounds confidence in prayer (as in the story of the monk at harvest above, on page 34)? What effects does it have on the thought and life of the ascetic? These questions – largely ignored by accounts of negative theology hitherto – are essential to the study of the practice of negative theology.

The first way in which early ascetic theology is identifiably apophatic is the common refusal to explain or elaborate on theological themes. This happens at precisely those points where religious authorities would be expected to resolve issues and deliver explanations. In particular, many religious avoid the interpretation of Scripture:

> One day some old men came to see Abba Anthony. In the midst of them was Abba Joseph. Wanting to test them, the old man suggested a text from the Scriptures, and, beginning with the youngest, he asked them what it meant. Each gave his opinion as he was able. But to each one the old man said, 'You have not understood it.' Last of all he said to Abba Joseph, 'How would you explain this saying?' and he replied, 'I do not know.' Then Abba Anthony said, 'Indeed, Abba Joseph has found the way, for he has said: 'I do not know.''[126]

It is precisely the element distinguishing early Christians from philosophical ascetics – namely the interpretation of the Bible – that is treated with such reticence. As mentioned over (on page 45), this does not mean a refusal to quote the scriptures, but instead a climbing down

---

[123] Once again most recently in Louth 2008a: 581f; 2008b: 588, 591-593.

[124] Denys Areopagitus *e.h*: VI.

[125] Denys Areopagitus *e.h.* VII.iii.6.

[126] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Anthony 17 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XV.4 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XV.4. This is not an isolated example. Arsenius (*Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Arsenius 42 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XV.10 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XV.11) tried to avoid exegesis, Zeno (*Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Zeno 4 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* X.22 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* X.27) preferred to think of his sins than interpret the Bible, Pambo would refuse to answer a Biblical question for months (Palladius, *h. Laus.:* X.7), Copres chastises himself for accepting an invitation to a bible study (*Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Copres 3 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XV.24 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XV.38).

from authority, a refusal to set oneself up as a reference point in addition to the word of God. It is entirely in keeping with the refusal to close the question of God in negative theology, resulting in the undermining of any certain knowledge of divine nature.[127]

The desert religious would also avoid speech and the prestige of theology particularly regarding the final judgement. This is notably the case in terms of the content of God's judgement: they refuse to hand out dispensations or predictions of the final judgement.[128] Moreover, abba Sisoes even embraces unknowing regarding the very event of final judgement. When he was approached by other monks plagued by very specific visions of punishment in the afterlife, he replied:

> 'For my part, I do not keep in mind the remembrance of any of these things, for God is compassionate and I hope that he will show me his mercy.' Hearing this, the old men went back offended. But the old man, not wishing to let them go away hurt, said to them, 'Blessed are you, my brothers; truly I envy you. The first speaks of the river of fire, the second of hell and the third of darkness. Now if your spirit is filled with such remembrances, it is impossible for you to sin. What shall I do, then? I who am hard of heart and to whom it has not been granted so much as to know whether there is a punishment for men; no doubt it is because of this that I am sinning all the time.'[129]

The saying is particularly striking because once again it inserts a doctrine of negative theology precisely where the monks had a distinctive practice. Although contemplation of death and judgement in these communities was neither unimportant nor indeed based on unknowingness,[130] there is certainly an element of simplicity that tempers this kind of philosophical exercise.

A second important respect in which the desert fathers and mothers refused knowledge is cosmology. The form is common: a visitor comes to see a solitary, and begins immediately to speak of difficult problems about the way the physical and spiritual world is. The hermit remains silent. Eventually he is challenged to come with an answer, and responds with reference to his way of life. 'This is what I do.' Here the reference is not even to the nature of the soul (although the actions and passions of the soul are relevant), but to simple and visible actions.[131]

---

[127] Evagrius, *de orat.:* 72f
[128] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Agathon 29, Ammonas 8, 10, John the Persian 1, *et passim*; *Apoph. Patr. (anon):* 175 Evagrius, *ep.:* 7. This is also the case with the Syriac community of the *lib. grad.:* V.11, XXX.10, 12.
[129] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Sisoes 19
[130] For examples of contemplation of the final judgement, cf. Evagrius, *hypo.:* 9 *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Elias 1, Silvanus 2, and especially Evagrius 1
[131] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Poemen 8 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* X.39 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* X.54

Thirdly, the negative theology of early Christian ascetics is related to the reductive nature of their way of life. Here it is perhaps useful to compare it with the asceticism of the philosophers.

Whilst the reasoning behind asceticism in late antiquity was fairly constant (subdue desire in order to separate oneself from convention and opinion), the techniques changed with desert asceticism. Instead of applying their philosophy with anti-social self ostracism, philosophers in antiquity in general attempted to adjust their way of being in the world. Not to reject the world, but to adapt to it. So Seneca's asceticism did not consist in abandoning table fellowship, but in moderating his consumption. In general, it could be said that the practices of the self were exercises in being an individual in society. They were originally political actions.[132]

Desert asceticism, on the other hand, is characterised by rejecting social goods. Most noticeably, Christians would reject the security of their civil standing (Arsenius, for example, was advisor to an emperor) and family (a number of monks refuse to see their parents). In addition, they shun eating habits, sleep, drink, the company of others, and ownership of property.

So we could say that Christian asceticism is a form of forsaking things and abandoning ways of life. Whilst the philosophical life primarily regulates people's needs and the needs of their body, Christians actually rejected them, as far as was possible. It was an ethos of estrangement rather than temperance.

They thought of this movement away from society as a movement from the world and towards God. This is only logical, given that a good deal of their motivation to do these things was the judgement of God, as I have suggested over (on page 46). The practice of estrangement may well have been associated with the refusal of idols. In fact, one of the more prominent authors of Eastern asceticism in the early sixth century, abba Zosimas, reveals an acute sensitivity to the temptation inherent in this form of life towards embracing something that is not God once one has torn oneself from the world. He advocates a radical abandonment of things in favour of the unknown God who is not a thing, in terms reminiscent of Žižek's account of fetishism.[133]

---

[132] Foucault, 1992a[1984]: 87.

[133] In Žižek, 2001: 13-15; cf. also *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Gelasius 5 – 'Your spirit is more enslaved by the needle with which you work than the spirit of Gelasius by these goods.' and Cassianus, *Collationes:* I.6 Cassianus, *de institutis:* IV.13 Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 336 Climacus, *scal.:* Step 17.

'There are times when someone will ignore large sums of money; nevertheless, when it comes to a small needle, one's attachment to it may cause one much trouble. Then the small needle replaces the large amount of money. Therefore, one becomes a slave of the needle, or the monastic cap, or the handkerchief, or the book, instead of being a servant of God.'[134]

The fourth reason I have for characterising the theology of early Christian ascetics as primarily apophatic is their tendency towards silence (cf. for example Agathon over on page 42).[135] Silence is not simply a good alternative to saying something one shouldn't, although that is certainly an element of it: as Arsenius said, 'I have often repented of having spoken, but never of having been silent.'[136] Silence was also the alternative to elaborating a theology of spiritual things and cosmologies, in the way mentioned over (on page 50). It is the discursive equivalent of fasting: we abandon words in order to embrace God.[137]

Silence is repeatedly associated with the central tasks of the ascetic in their sayings.[138] There even appears to have been a debate as to whether one should speak at all. Spiritual leaders are repeatedly praised for teaching without saying anything. Although Poemen appears to have tried to resolve the dilemma by recognising both apophatic and cataphatic theology – 'The man who speaks for God's sake does well; but he who is silent for God's sake also does well'[139] – the scales tend to come down on the side of silence. Silence is portrayed as the ideal theology. The story of Pambo's silence is set within the stock frame of a visit for edification:

> The same Abba Theophilus, the archbishop, came to Scetis one day. The brethren who were assembled said to Abba Pambo, 'Say something to the archbishop, so that he may be edified.' The old man said to them, 'If he is not edified by my silence, he will not be edified by my speech.'[140]

For some, the fear of speaking 'unnecessary words'[141] was bound up with the fear of heresy, which was acute.[142] Christian ascetics would blame themselves for everything but

---

[134] Zosimas, *alloquia:* V.ii.b.

[135] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Agathon 16, Isidore of Pelusia 1, Macarius the Great 26, Nisterus the Cenobite 1f, Poemen 3, 37, 42, 187, 205 Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 469.

[136] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Arsenius 40 - cf. also Isidore of Pelusia 1.

[137] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Zeno 8.

[138] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Andrew 1, Arsenius 2, Bessarion 10, Poemen 37, 168, Sisoes 42.

[139] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Poemen 147; cf. also the discussion of Poemen's ruling in Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 287.

[140] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Theophilus 2 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XV.42 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XV.59.

[141] the phrase comes from *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Macarius 26.

[142] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Theodore of Pherme 4 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* X.23 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* X.32.

heresy, because to speak words against God was to separate oneself from God.[143] For this reason, extreme caution had to be exercised in speaking theology. Teaching was dangerous for the soul, and an ascetic does well to avoid it. The dilemma is obviously that if a religious is obliged to speak out of courtesy, the subject should not distract from God, but the arguments against speaking of God outlined above still hold. The dilemma is discussed at great length with a casuistry of courtesy, gossip, small talk, obedience, and scriptural interpretation in the correspondence of Barsanuphius and John.[144] When confronted with the dilemma, abba Amoun decided that it is better to speak of the sayings of the fathers than of the Bible.[145] The words of God are dangerous.

These traits of the desert fathers – their reticence concerning theology and judgement, their ascetics of estrangement, and their keeping silence – justify aligning their theology with apophatic theology. They refuse to speak of God, discourage theological discussion, and claim ignorance concerning God's view on the world (his judgement). Negative theology is their ideal.

How then do the holy fools reject a worldview and way of life characterised by negation? In keeping with this approach of negativity, early Christian ascetics like the desert fathers and mothers concentrate more on what they reject than what they embrace. So their lives are marked by the grammar of negation. They do not embrace the desert – their abode varied from suburbs through wilderness to riverbanks – but abandon the city. Their lives are marked by the denial of a particular order rather than the espousal of a religious way of life. This denial of the particular opens them up to a gaping freedom.

1.2.2: Apophatic Diversity

The result of this practice of negative theology is flexibility as regards the form of life that is to be adopted: St Paul's principle of diversity in the Spirit (1 Cor 12) is appropriated to identify the holy life with a God that can not be fixed down.[146] Whilst there certainly are common features amongst early Christian ascetics, and it would not be difficult to sketch out an overview of the two or three main streams of withdrawal from the world, it is striking how much diversity the movements allow for.

---

[143] *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* X.10 = *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Agathon 5 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* X.12.
[144] Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 286-294. Cf. also *Apoph. Patr. (anon):* 170, 186.
[145] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Amoun of Nitria 2 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XI.20 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XI.56, echoed in Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 469.
[146] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* John the Dwarf 43.

There are four discernible attitudes to diversity in the tradition of the desert fathers, representing various points in the range between complete conformity and unfixed pluralism. They may all be justified within the context of the theology of asceticism and so all retain a constant principle throughout their renunciation.

One attitude to plurality that emerges clearly is the tendency to experimentation. The first generation of desert fathers and mothers had rejected the world's form of life and had no obvious alternative to embrace as yet. As a result, a number of different lifestyles developed amongst the anchorites, and disciples would learn their discipline from a particular *abba* or *amma* rather than from a fixed rule (Basil's rules were not written until the end of the fourth century, and had little or no influence in the Egyptian desert; Pachomian cenobitic monasticism followed a rule from the beginning).[147] Later, Abba Antiochus is even reported (by Climacus) to have offered three totally different rules of life to his disciples.[148] For this reason, when people approached a holy man or woman in order to learn from them, they would not simply ask how to become a better monk. Instead, the very definition of being a monk was open to debate.

> For our perfect fathers were not limited by any particular rule. Indeed, their daily rule included singing Psalms a little, repeating [verses] by heart a little, examining their thoughts a little, taking a little break for food, and [all] this with fear of God.[149]

The 'way of life' of a Christian was not fixed, but young ascetics approach old experienced ones and ask them 'Abba, give me a way of life'[150]. Macarius the Great tells of his experience of meeting quintessential monks, who rejected the world, and were given a way of life (οἰκονομια) by God.[151] Palladius describes the 5000 monks on the Mountain of Nitria as having different modes of life, varying according to their capacity.[152] At the same time, Nisterus the Great lays no great store by the specifics of the way of life: none of them allow one to refer to God, or delimit God's nature.

---

[147] For plurality within Pachomian monasticism, cf. Palladius, *h. Laus.:* XXXII.2.

[148] Climacus, *scal.:* Step 4.

[149] Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 85, square brackets original.

[150] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Elias 8 *Apoph. Patr. (anon):* 193 Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 189 Moschus, *prat.:* 52.

[151] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Macarius the Great 2.

[152] Palladius, *h. Laus.:* VII.2.

'Are not all actions equal? Scripture says that Abraham was hospitable and God was with him. David was humble, and God was with him. Elias loved interior peace and God was with him. So, do whatever you see your soul desires according to God and guard your heart.'[153]

In contrast to ascetic experimentation, the second attitude to multiplicity presents reasons to conform to one particular local way of life that do not justify it as being the exclusive way of living before God. In order to avoid becoming an ascetic hero, and endangering your soul by attracting praise and respect, a Christian should follow local – and therefore arbitrary – customs. Abba Motius' maxim was 'Wherever you live, follow the same manner of life as everyone else and if you see devout men, whom you trust doing something, do the same and you will be at peace.'[154] This maxim assumes two things: firstly, that a place will have an identifiable way of life, presumably formed by a number of people adopting the habits of certain old men or women; secondly, that the specifics of this form of life are entirely irrelevant as compared to the avoidance of praise. So this approach relativises a particular lifestyle and at the same time subverts the economy of that way of life by refusing to earn honour or shame within its framework.

The third attitude to multiplicity represents a reaction against this kind of pluralism however. In time, the particular traditions stemming from the various ascetics would not simply act as alternatives, but as models from which the present generation has fallen away.[155] As a result, the ways of forerunners became authoritative, such that variety became frowned upon by some. It is in the nature of teaching that one way of life is recommended over another. However, there is good evidence to suggest that the sayings of the fathers tended towards a rejection of plurality itself as well as other ways of life.

'Abba, give me a way of life.' The old man said to the brother, 'In the days of our predecessors they took great care about these three virtues: poverty, obedience and fasting. But among monks nowadays avarice, self-confidence and great greed have taken charge. Choose whichever you want most.'[156]

The final relationship to plurality that I want to present here comes closest to uniformity. Although the fathers and mothers are fairly lenient with their disciples, they make it clear that they do this out of mercy rather than accepting many different ways of life. In this

---

[153] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Nisterus 2 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* I.18 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* I.11 - cf. also X.7.

[154] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Motius 1. A similar moral is taught in *Apoph. Patr. (anon):* 125.

[155] Among many sayings that tell of disillusionment, cf. *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Felix *Apoph. Patr. (anon):* 96, 218 Moschus, *prat.:* 130, 168.

[156] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Elias 8 - cf. also Theophilus the Archbishop 1 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XV.19 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XV.31. The quote can also be found in Moschus, *prat.:* 52.

way they maintain the taxonomy of one communal lifestyle. So for example, Joseph of Panephysis gives one piece of advice to one monk, and conflicting guidance to another.[157] However, when questioned about this, he explains that to only one of them did he talk 'as if to himself'.

In a similar vein, Poemen (who was one of the monks that went to Joseph in the above apophthegmatum) affirms the way of life of a monk who works hard in the fields and gives to the poor. When questioned about it by a disciple however, he refuses that way of life as unworthy of a monk. It is certainly allowed, but it is 'not the work of a monk.'[158] Basil takes the attitude to its furthest point and advocates uniformity for its own sake – 'for all who aim at the same goal are alike in as many ways as possible'.[159]

From this brief overview, a picture emerges of the desert fathers as initially experimenting with their ways of life, advocating many ways in different situations, but eventually settling down into one particular form. This form would then develop its own way of allocating praise and blame, honour and shame, so that true monks may be distinguished from false ones, and ascetics could vie with each other for respect.

> Abba Joseph asked Abba Poemen, 'How should one fast?' Abba Poemen said to him, 'For my part, I think it better that one should eat every day, but only a little, so as not to be satisfied.' Abba Joseph said to him, 'When you were younger, did you not fast two days at a time, abba?' The old man said: 'Yes, even for three days and four and the whole week. The Fathers tried all this out as they were able and they found it preferable to eat every day, but just a small amount. They have left us this royal way, which is light.'[160]

This saying is instructive because it lays out the three options available regarding asceticism. The first is living in the world and not fasting at all. The second is the way of extreme renunciation, such as fasting for an entire week. The third way is a compromise between the two. Poemen calls it a "royal way", which is significant: the reference is to Numbers 20.17 and 21.22, where the people of Israel walk along the royal road (Lat: *via regia*; Gk: *ὁδος βασιλικη*), and 'not turn aside to the right or to the left'. It is a standard patristic way of expressing the third way between two extremes or two vices.

---

[157] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Joseph of Panephysis 3 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* X.29 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* X.38.

[158] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Poemen 22 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* X.46 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* X.66.

[159] Basilius, *reg. fus.:* 22.

[160] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Poemen 31 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* X.44 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* X.61. This rule is also offered in Evagrius, *hypo.:* 10, and more severe abstinence discouraged in Evagrius, *de mal. cog.:* 35 Evagrius, *excerpts:* 2. Barsanuphius' diet recommendation can be found in Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 63.

It is tempting to see here a premature solution, to the problem of practical apophaticism. The way of the world is rejected, but since no form of renunciation is unproblematically holy (extreme fasting can lead to gluttony or vainglory for instance), the monk must follow the way of religious authority. There is no reference here, however, to the way of divine holiness: it is a pragmatic solution that is conscious of its failure to construct one true way of life. The monk continues what he has received, and the way is 'light', but not necessarily God. It is perhaps beyond affirmation and denial of a holy way of life, but it equally appears to have given up on the appellation 'holy'.

The desert fathers and mothers adhered to rules in different ways. Rather than enforcing one form of life in the desert, they cultivated a number of different monastic ideals. These were not always thought of as competing, although in time – and with the introduction of more rules of common life – they boiled down into a small number of distinct forms. This was a historical development, however, and by no means a necessary part of early Christian asceticism. In what follows, we will see this pattern repeated, whereby the monks and nuns of the desert embrace a radical form of renunciation, but ultimately transmit a very concrete way of life that will become standard for the monastic tradition.

1.3: Ascetic Positivism: the sine qua non of renunciation

In spite of their resistance to form and dogmatism, there are ways of describing the positivity of the desert ways of life of late antiquity. In order to contrast early Christian ascetics with the early holy fools, we will have to discover some specific characteristics that mark out both. So apart from their refusal of the city, what do early Christian ascetics have in common?

Even in the most radical statements of pluralism, something is reserved as the *sine qua non* of the blessed life. We saw over (on page 55) that Nisterus the Great could recommend any way of life, but insisted on the practice of guarding one's heart (Greek: *phulaxon tēn kardion sou*; Latin: *custodi cor tuum*). This is a common theme.[161]

It would be a mistake to understand the practice of guarding the heart as a vague mental action with only indistinct symbolic force. All studies of this kind of spiritual exercise need to be specific and concrete in their descriptions.[162] Indeed, this is the tendency of the texts themselves. For example, Agathon is questioned concerning the relationship between the interior guard and bodily work.[163] The systematic collection – which represents an earlier source than the alphabetical – records this interchange and then adds details about what Agathon did, in terms of work, thought, food and clothes.[164] It is clear from this that what today might be termed a psychological state, independent of everyday life, was thought of by the desert fathers in terms of practices and habits.

It is therefore natural to consider the phenomenon of guarding the heart in terms of place, prayer, and social practices. Since this particular virtue is widely attested as central to the monastic life,[165] we will thereby gain an understanding of a fixed point around which the Christian ascetics allowed their various degrees of plurality.

---

[161] *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XI.27, XI.37 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XI.78 = *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Orisius 2. Cf. also *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XI.45, II.1 = *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Anthony 10, ($\tau\eta$ $\varepsilon\nu\delta\sigma\nu$ $\phi\upsilon\lambda\alpha\kappa\eta$; interior custodia); *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* IV.55 (custodierunt se), V.14 (cogitationem suam custodiens), VII.34 (custodit conscientiam suam), XI.26 = *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Peter the Pionite 2, *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XVI.16 (custodire mentem), and *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Poemen 135 ($\nu\eta\phi\varepsilon\iota\nu$ $\delta\iota\alpha\nu\sigma\iota\alpha\nu$). Palladius, *h. Laus.:* XXVIII ($\dot{\text{o}}$ $\phi\acute{\upsilon}\lambda\alpha\xi$ $\tau\eta\varsigma$ $\sigma\omega\phi\rho\sigma\sigma\acute{\upsilon}\nu\eta\varsigma$) *lib. grad.:* VI.2, XXX.20 Evagrius, *de mal. cog.:* 25, 27, 36 Evagrius, *de orat.:* 87 Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 137B Basilius, *renunt* Climacus, *scal.:* Step 4 *Apoph. Patr. (anon):* 33, 58, 70, 141, 211. Noted also by Linge, 2000: 553.

[162] As exemplified by Michel Foucault, e.g. in Foucault, 2000[1985] Foucault, 2000[1981] Foucault, 2005[2001] Foucault, et al., 1988 and Pierre Hadot, in Hadot, 1995 Hadot, 2002[1995].

[163] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Agathon 8 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* X.11 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* X.13.

[164] *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* X.11. In both the alphabetical and the systematic collections in Greek, the details form a separate apophthegm - AP Syst (Gk) *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* X.13,14 = *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Agathon 10.

[165] e.g. in Lossky, 1976: 202.

'If Pambo fasted for two days together and ate two loaves, would he become a monk in that way? No. And if Pambo works to get two pence and gives them in alms, would he become a monk that way? No, not that way either.' He said to them, 'The works are good, but if you guard your conscience towards your neighbour, then you will be saved.'[166]

1.3.1: Place

One of the practices most associated with guarding the heart is that of staying in the cell.[167] Whilst this does not appear to modern ears to be a practice, it had very concrete forms and significance for the desert fathers and mothers (cf. over, on page 34). It is notable that in the case of the monk who came in from the harvest, the only teaching he received from the experienced desert father concerned 'the manner in which he should sit in the cell.' (my translation – Latin: *quomodo oporteret esse in cella sua*; Greek: $\pi\omega\varsigma$ $\delta\epsilon\iota$ $\kappa\alpha\theta\iota\sigma\alpha\iota$ $\dot{\epsilon}\nu$ $\tau\omega$ $\kappa\epsilon\lambda\lambda\iota\omega$: over, on page 34) In addition to forming a kind of macrocosm for the soul,[168] the cell was a constitutive feature of the understanding of spiritual exercise, the presence of God, and solitude.

The practice of the cell forms a bare essential in ascetic life.[169] It is a common occurrence in the *apophthegmata* that a monk approaches one of the desert fathers or mothers to tell them how severe they are in their strict life, or occasionally to complain that they are not able to be so extreme. Either way, the response is the same: do not try to be so intense, just sit in your cell.[170]

The instruction is sometimes meant to prevent distraction: the cells were bare, and there was a good deal more temptation outside it. However, temptation in and of itself was not necessarily a bad thing in these environments: quite the opposite.[171] Being in the cell is a particular practice that replaces other forms of renunciation. So when someone is feeling tempted to go to live with other people in a coenobitic monastery, they come to Paphnutius for advice:

---

[166] *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* X.65 = *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Pambo 2; cf. also *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XI.2. = *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Agathon 29.

[167] *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* II.1 = *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Anthony 10 and *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* VIII.12 = *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Serapion 4 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* VIII.9 (although the Greek here uses the more philosophical expression '$\pi\rho\sigma\epsilon\chi\epsilon$ $\sigma\epsilon\alpha\upsilon\tau\omega$' – attend to yourself. cf. Hadot, 1995: 130-136)Evagrius, *hypo.:* 5.

[168] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Ammonas 4 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* X.16 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* X.20.

[169] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Pambo 8 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* I.16 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* I.25 Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 172.

[170] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Heraclides - cf. also Arsenius 11 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* VII.27 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* VII.34 *Apoph. Patr. (anon):* 15, 63, 66, 70, 73 Evagrius, *hypo.:* 6f.

[171] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Anthony 5 *et passim*; Moschus, *prat.:* 209.

The old man said to him, 'Go and stay in your cell; make only one prayer in the morning and one in the evening and one at night. When you are hungry, eat, when you are thirsty, drink; when you are tired, sleep. But stay in the cell and take no notice of this thought.' The brother went and found Abba John and told him what Abba Paphnutius had said and Abba John said, 'Don't pray at all, just stay in the cell.'[172]

The significance of sitting in the cell was not simply the absence of meaningful political activity, however: the cell is not necessarily the place of Agamben's bare life.[173] The cell was supposed to 'teach you everything',[174] and there were good ways and bad ways of being in the cell.[175] For Poemen, for example, sitting in the cell was synonymous with 'manual work, eating only once a day, silence, meditation'.[176] It was the place of struggle with demons and one's own thoughts.[177] It was importantly a place of the presence of God.[178]

Perhaps the greatest significance of the cell was its solitude. The hermits would come together on weekends and meet to celebrate the eucharist and pray together, and then they would flee to their cells in order to preserve their silence. The cell was the place of the self and solitude. It was the place of self examination.[179] Macarius the Great defines 'fleeing from men' as 'to sit in your cell and weep for your sins'.[180]

So although the habit of staying in the cell certainly had specific significance and content for early ascetics, its value was precisely the effort of being with oneself,[181] without distraction,[182] in order to work on the self and examine the self. Abba Ammoes was so strict in this matter that he did not even look at his cell's contents,[183] and this is a natural working out

---

[172] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Paphnutius 5. cf. also freedom of thought in the cell - *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* VII.37 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* VII.45.

[173] Agamben, 1998[1995]. Which is not to say that the cell does not develop into the place of the homo sacer in European asceticism and biopolitics. Barsanuphius significantly calls his cell a cemetery, for example: Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 142.

[174] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Moses 6 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* II.9 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* II.19.

[175] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Poemen 96 Moschus, *prat.:* 110; cf. also quotation above, on page 34.

[176] *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* VII.24 - cf. also X.64 = *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Poemen 168 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* X.93.

[177] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Moses 1 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XVIII.12 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XVIII.17.

[178] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Gelasius 6, Daniel 5 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XI.8 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XI.16.

[179] Evagrius, *hypo.:* 9 Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 237.

[180] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Macarius the Great 27. Macarius is quoted by John, who adds 'as well as to remain vigilant so that the intellect is not taken captive but rather struggles, and, if it is taken captive, to return it to its place.' Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 172. Cf. also the unserious cell, below on page 213.

[181] 'ita erunt et cogitationes ejus qui propter Deum tolerabiliter in cella sua resederit; quia etsi ad modicum nutant, sed iterum revertuntur ad eum' *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* VII.30 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* VII.37.

[182] Evagrius, *excerpts:* 32

[183] *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* IV.11 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* IV.11 = *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Ammoes 3; cf. also *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* IV.16 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* IV.16 = *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Helladius 1.

of the logic of the cell. It was the context – remarkable for its minimalism[184] – for the care for the self.

Having identified 'guarding your soul' as a positive element in early Christian asceticism, we have now also isolated one aspect of its content in the practice of the cell. This practice itself, though, can be treated both as a specific form of life (with rules of fasting, praying, repenting, etc.), and as a place of inactivity. Cell solitude is also a renunciation of the standards and conventions of the common life.

1.3.2: Prayer

As regards the prayers of early Christian ascetics, the relations to freedom and positivity can be seen fairly clearly. There is certainly an ideal of prayer without form, where the solitary stays before God in undisturbed contemplation. However, even the anchorites of the desert would meet on weekends to pray together in set forms, as Gould has shown.[185] It is as a result of this that the dilemma of meeting in order to pray or cultivating one's own prayer life alone in the cell arose. This dilemma evoked various responses, some of which we have already occasioned upon: Motius says that one should not mark oneself out by staying away from the *synaxis* (the liturgical office said in common by hermits of the area – cf. over on page 55); many others advocated running away as soon as it was over.[186] There are a few aspects that served to pin down monastic prayer in specific ways, and I will here concentrate on three of the most significant, namely psalmody, set prayers, and the liturgy.

The most common form of prayer we see being practiced in the deserts of Egypt and Palestine in late antiquity is psalmody. The saying of psalms made up the main component of the common prayer of both anchorites (solitaries) and cenobites (ascetics of the common life).[187] It is also spoken of as one of the key features of being a monk, the way in which true Christian ascetics could be recognised.[188]

---

[184] as Brown points out concerning Daniel the Stylite, who 'avoided being placed' - Brown, 1971: 92. Cf. also Evagrius on the cell as non-attachment in Evagrius, *hypo.:* 5.

[185] Gould, 1993.

[186] E.g. *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Isaac the Theban 2 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XI.47.

[187] E.g. in Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 85, 248 Evagrius, *excerpts:* 2 Evagrius, *de mal. cog.:* 27 *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Eulogius the Priest, John the Dwarf 35, Serapion 1, Syncletia 27 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* X.71, and *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Thenaton of Enaton 3 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XI.11 - cf. also IV.57, VII.17, 27, X.20, XI.9, XIV.1. The Latin translation of 'synaxis' in the systematic collection here is literally 'to make the ministry of psalming' in *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XIV.2 = *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Arsenius 24 and *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XIV.1

[188] *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* V.18, VIII.4 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* V.22, VIII.4 = *Apoph. Patr. (anon):* 36 and *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Eulogius the Priest.

The frequent chanting of defined texts is specific enough to form a constructive element to ascetic renunciation. Monks and nuns would say psalms in order to exercise control in their lives, but the control led in the direction dictated by the content of the psalms.

In addition to the specification of the text to be chanted, it would appear that a certain choice of psalms was selected for the *synaxis*.[189] Often mentioned are the 'twelve psalms',[190] so that it is not simply a case of saying psalms, but of saying *the* psalms, i.e. those selected for the task. This specifies the form even further.

The practice developed over time. Isidore the Priest tells us that when he was young, he put no limits whatsoever on the psalms that he would read.[191] Others read the entire psalter.[192] But just as extreme fasting was dampened to moderate eating (cf. over, on page 59), excessive psalmody was also discouraged in time.[193] In this way we can see the practice of saying psalms as a radically new way of life, and attaining an order that was followed in common life.[194]

The saying of set prayers was also a common feature of the Christian ascetic liturgy.[195] Not only did they pray together, but when in their cell, monks and nuns would say prayers in private.

This practice in itself is a specific element in Christian renunciation. Whilst philosophers would memorise the sayings of their teachers, as well as tests, rules, and principles by which to focus and to judge a situation, Christians would address God when challenging situations arose.[196]

On the other hand, some of the desert fathers could be decidedly bland on this count, encouraging their disciples to use few words. Whilst it is most likely that a number of the sayings of the desert fathers were preserved so that their prayer could be repeated, this is not always because of their formulation. A good example of a combination of a set prayer with a bland prayer is the following story about abba Macarius:

---

[189] The study of psalm selection, collection, and recitation has attained a certain degree of complexity, particularly in relation to ancient psalm books. For a good introduction, cf. Frøyshov, 2005.

[190] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Macarius the Great 33, an Abba of Rome 1 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* X.76 - cf. also X.97 Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 143.

[191] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Isidore the Priest 4 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* X.17.

[192] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Serapion 1.

[193] Evagrius, *excerpts:* 22.

[194] With a corresponding complexity as the tradition develops: cf. Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 142 *et passim*.

[195] Cf. the summary in *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* V.18.

[196] Cf. the list of practices against a wandering mind in *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* X.20 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* X.25.

Some brothers asked Macarius, 'How should we pray?' He said, 'There is no need to talk much in prayer. Reach out your hands often, and say, 'Lord have mercy on me, as you will and as you know.' But if conflict troubles you, say, 'Lord, help me.' He knows what is best for us, and has mercy.'[197]

There does appear to have been a canon of prayers, however, and they could be enumerated.[198] This would imply that the prayers were short phrases or sentences addressed to God, clearly identifiable as separate entities. If these prayers were indeed such set forms as those suggested by Macarius above, then the practice of frequent or continuous prayer goes from being a minimalist practice of focus and renunciation to being a constitutive way of life.

There is also evidence for the introduction of a timetable of prayer in the desert. The most frequent context for prayers in the Systematic collection in Latin is that of a meeting of monks, who pray before sitting down together or leaving each other.[199] In this way, the monks and nuns inculcated in their common life specific habits that would form them in particular ways.

In addition to the prayers said when a Christian was in trouble or when they met each other, early Christian ascetics marked time by the prayers they said. As was the case with the psalmody, there is some debate as to the origins of the liturgy of desert fathers and mothers. What is certain is that this liturgy had a particular relationship to renunciation and conformity.

Keeping the hours of prayer – mirroring in various degrees the monastic offices of matins, lauds, prime, terce, sext, none, compline etc. – was a natural part of ascetic renunciation.[200] Instead of marking time by work, market, and authority, early Christian ascetics would 'measure the hours' (Greek: *melein tas hōras tōn sunaxeōn*) with regular prayer and fasting. The two go together.[201]

---

[197] *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XII.12 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* Gk. Syst XII.11 = *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Macarius the Great 19. Cf. also discussion in Sinkewicz, 2003: Intro, p. xix. Barsanuphius recommends the prayers 'Lord have mercy.'; 'God, have mercy on me, the wretched one'; 'God, you see my affliction; help me.' Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 87, 143, and compares the prayer of Macarius to the Lord's Prayer in letter 140. The Jesus prayer is recommended in Climacus, *scal.:* Step 15.

[198] 103 prayers are counted in *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XII.15 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XII.18; 24 in Palladius, *h. Laus.:* XVII.10, 12 in XXXII.6 300 in *Apoph. Patr. (anon):* 148, and 500 repetitions of "Lord have mercy" in Moschus, *prat.:* 104.

[199] *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* VII.24, 43, VIII.9, X.76, XII:3, 15, XIV.16, XV.66.

[200] More prevalent in coenobitic monasticism than in its anchoritic variant: Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 143.

[201] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Poemen 168 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* X.93 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* X.64: lat: ministerii horas; Gk: μη αμελειν ... των συναξεων τας ωρας. Cf. also *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* IV.71 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* IV.58, and Basil's and Evagrius' rejection of the market: 'keep yourself from buying and selling', Evagrius, *hypo.:* 8 Basilius, *ascet. disc.*

Once again, the monks and nuns tend towards transcending the specific form for the sake of the general virtue.[202] Whilst it is important to mark the times of prayer, it is even more important to be present to God the entire time, rather than at regular intervals.

> 'By your prayers we have kept our rule; we carefully observe the offices of terce, sext, none and vespers.' But Epiphanius rebuked him and said, 'Then you are failing to pray at other times. The true monk ought to pray without ceasing. He should always be singing psalms in his heart.'[203]

Nevertheless, the result of this debate among the fathers has indeed been a set form of prayers for the hours, and the influence of monastic movements upon the liturgical practice of the church has been immense in this respect.[204] Not only are there monasteries surviving in a direct line of descent from the fathers and mothers of Egypt and Palestine, but through the journeys of Cassian, Jerome, and Alypius (the close friend of Augustine), these prayer habits have constituted the starting point of the Western monastic orders.

In this respect, the prayers of the early Christian ascetics can also be identified as a positive aspect of their practice that was to be embraced. Whilst Christians were encouraged to renounce the ways of the world, they were also given something to embrace. On the other hand, there is evidence to suggest that this form was not always fixed down. There were rules, and ascetics would also transcend these rules in a disciplined fashion. In this way, the practice of prayer is both a support and resistance to the formation of a normal ascetic life.

1.3.3: Clothing Practices

There are other practices that demonstrate this tension between particular forms and a transcending renunciation that can be found in the ascetic observance of the cell and the prayers. The final feature that appears to have become essential to the monastic way of life that I want to explore here is that of clothing.

The monastic habit was an essential identity marker for the monk. Cassian chooses to open his *Institutions* and Evagrius Ponticus his *Praktikos*[205] with a description of the desert fathers' apparel; a priest of Pelusia makes use of the habit to include and exclude monks;[206] Basil counts the monk's habit as a marker alongside that of the soldier, senator, and authority

---

[202] Basil dictates hours of prayer so people can't use their extreme piety as an excuse not to work: Basilius, *reg. fus.*: question 37.

[203] *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XII.6 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XII.6 = *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Epiphanius 3. Cf. also *lib. grad.:* VII.20 .

[204] cf. Frøyshov, 2005: and references there.

[205] Cassianus, *de institutis:* I Evagrius, *Prakt.:* Prologue 2-7.

[206] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Poemen 11.

(as well as the down and out);[207] Isaac the priest of the Cells uses incorrect habit as a reason to exclude a brother[208]; a monk leaving the monastic life removes his habit,[209] and an anonymous abba speaks of adopting the habit as a rite of passage equivalent to baptism.[210]

The principles that decided which clothes were chosen were those of renunciation. Although Cassian does give an allegorical interpretation of the clothes towards the end of his account, the function of the main robe is to replace nudity (elsewhere listed alongside fasting, vigils, work, and reading amongst the forms of ascetic renunciation)[211] without conforming to fashion.[212] Similarly, the hood is in place for the 'regulation of the character'.[213] So, as we saw was the case over with obedience (on page 39) the form of asceticism appears to be based upon a deliberate exercise of renunciation, working out the implications of negative theology.[214]

In spite of the uniformity that Cassian both observes and prescribes for his own community, there is still a movement amongst the desert fathers and mothers to transcend this rule. Abba Isaac, the priest of the Cells, appears to have been particularly concerned about this.[215] Once again we have a kind of chronological form that bewails the development of conformity at the cost of the radical renunciation of the first fathers:

> Isaac said to the brothers, 'Pambo and our predecessors used to wear old and much-patched clothes. You wear good clothes. Go away, you have made this place into a desert.[216]

---

[207] Basilius, *reg. fus.:* question 22.

[208] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Isaac, Priest of the Cells 8 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* VI.9 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* VI.8. It is unclear what the error consisted in: Guy claims that the Greek κουσσουλιον has been incorrectly translated as 'cucullum' in the Latin (in a note to the Greek Systematic version), because of Cassian's description of the desert uniform, which includes a hood – Cassianus, *de institutis:* I.4: de cucullis Aegyptiorum. There is nothing to say, however, that Isaac was not simply reacting to the traditions of a uniform that diverged with his own standard: either as a development in his community, or simply originating from a different geographical area (which is most likely, as the hooded monk seems to be arriving).

[209] Moschus, *prat.:* 118.

[210] *Apoph. Patr. (anon):* 234. Similarly when Symeon Salos and John receive the habit in Leontius, *v. Sym.:* I.131, 134.

[211] Cassianus, *Collationes:* I.7.

[212] Cassianus, *de institutis:* I.2.

[213] Cassianus, *de institutis:* I.3.

[214] Evagrius, *hypo.:* 4 Evagrius, *sent. ad mon.:* 82 Evagrius, *sent. ad virg.:* 23 Evagrius, *de mal. cog.:* 6. Later, the monastic vestments become a source of religious power. Barsanuphius is requested to send his hood to a disciple in Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 1.

[215] Cf. footnote 65 above. Isidore flouted the rule by wearing almost no linen: Palladius, *h. Laus.:* I.1.

[216] *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* VI.9 (translation adjusted) = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* VI.10 = *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Isaac, Priest of the Cells 7 - cf. also Palladius, *h. Laus.:* LXVI.2, LXVIII.4.

A further instance of ascetics transcending the rule concerning clothes can be found in the story of the monk who paraded naked down the street.[217] As with abba Isaac, the motivation appears to have been renunciation of convention.

The negative theology of early Christian ascetics was interpreted in constructive and specific ways in many elements of their practice – in the cell, in prayer, and in their clothing – whilst throughout struggling with the ideal of transcending these ways.[218] In rejecting the world and shunning the self-glorifying image of the ascetic athlete, they constructed norms that avoided sin without policing a fixed way of holiness. Not only did the monks form a rule for themselves, but they were then ambivalent in their relationship to this rule.

It is difficult to avoid the fact, however, that the way of the desert was a way of holiness. It is not a simple matter to be adhere to a religious way of life with no appeal to God. The norms of the desert were religious norms, and were justified by theological and scriptural reasoning. Monastic practical apophaticism renounced the world in historically specific ways. They rejected worldly norms of eating and work, and then embraced disciplines of regular fasts and particular occupations (e.g. rope baskets). The negative theology of the desert fathers had a uniqueness that we are justified in calling its cataphatic element.

---

[217] Palladius, *h. Laus.:* XXXVII Sarapion 14. Cf. also the grazer abba Sophronios who went naked for seventy years: Moschus, *prat.:* 159.
[218] This is the burden of *Memra* 14 of *lib. grad.*.

1.4: Empty Fools: Vainglory

On the basis of this analysis of the theology of early Christian ascetics, we may now turn to the case of the holy fools. What kind of renunciation to they embrace? Is their practical apophaticism more or less consistent than that of other early Christian ascetics? To what extent do they stand in continuity with the renunciation of the desert fathers and mothers? Do they take up elements of constructive renunciation, or do they tend towards transcending those constructions?

One of the most nuanced accounts given of holy fools is to be found in an article by Gilbert Dagron about honour in the Byzantine world.[219] He sees the behaviour of the fools in terms of an ascetic defence against vainglory. The monastic vice of vainglory is described as essentially becoming a part of the honour system of the world. Whilst honour and shame have been important factors constituting the world of the Eastern Mediterranean, Dagron claims that holy fools are characterised by their transcendence of them.

As such, their holiness consists in an intervention precisely at the point of norm-making activity. They do not simply transgress rules, but deny the validity of their recommendation. For the command 'be honourable' is like 'be good' or 'be rational'. It has no content, but denying its validity is part of the revaluation of *all* honour-based norms.

Vainglory is a particularly pernicious temptation, as it appears precisely when someone has done something right (even by obeying). 'Like the sun which shines on all alike, vainglory beams on every occupation.'[220] In order to avoid it, religious have to be completely unaware of their own goodness, which requires a certain degree of self-alienation. The holy fools, by accepting insults, transgressing identity-marking laws of the church, and hiding all their virtues, achieve this to a unique extent.

Dagron's analysis is persuasive, and gets to the heart of one of the techniques of renunciation among Christian ascetics, namely the activation of the observant surroundings. This ascetic practice consisted of a close accountability of the Christian to his or her confessor. A good monk is a watched monk.

The way this worked in practice, as we know, formed the beginnings of the general discipline of regular confession.[221] Monks sift through their thoughts in order to evaluate them. They suspect their thoughts and classify them by verbalising them, and telling them to

---

[219] Dagron, 1990.
[220] Climacus, *scal.*: Step 22 – cf. also Step 2 and 26 Evagrius, *de mal. cog.:* 3 Evagrius, *excerpts:* 43 Evagrius, *de orat.:* 7 Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 278 Maximus, *carit. 1-4:* II.35, III.59.
[221] cf. Foucault, 2000c[1982] Foucault, 2000a[1983] on this.

another. The emphasis is not just on making right judgements, but on being exhaustive.[222] No thought must be allowed to get through the net. All must be revealed.

> Whenever the demon troubles you, come to me, and this will rebuke him, and so he will go away. Nothing troubles the demon of lust more than laying bare his urgings. Nothing pleases him more than the concealment of the temptation. Eleven times the brother went to the hermit, and blamed himself for his imaginings (Latin: *cogitationes*)[223]

So monks and nuns would present themselves to the scrutiny of their spiritual advisors in order to produce a kind of bodily discipline of self-mastery, conscientising themselves so as not to uncritically accept the sins of the age or of their tradition. In this respect, the confessor took the place of the eye of God.[224] Monks would also activate the function of societal honour and shame in order to strengthen their moral resolve. The form of the moral rule was: do not do anything that you would be ashamed to do before God:

> He said to her, 'Come with me.' When they came to a crowded place, he said to her, 'Come on, I will lie with you here as you wanted.' She looked round at the crowd and said, 'How can we do it here, with all these people standing round? We should be ashamed.' He said, 'If you blush before men, should you not blush the more before God, who discloses the hidden things of darkness?'[225]

It is this tendency that also caught Kristeva's attention in her reading of Christian asceticism, as exemplified by St Anthony.[226] Monks would spend their entire lives examining themselves as if their confessor were actually present. Through verbalising their thoughts, they would place themselves in a realm of a specific public morality, even when alone in their cell.

Given time, the physical presence of the confessor became less essential than the imagination of one. So monks constitute the presence of a judge – and thereby of God – in order to discipline themselves.[227] It is in this kind of framework that we may understand the

---

[222] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Anthony 38 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XI.2. This demand does not seem to have continued long. John specifically contradicts it in Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 165.

[223] 'sed magis, quoties molestus est daemon, veni ad me, et increpatus abscedet. Nihil enim sic extaediat daemonem fornicationis, quomodo si revelentur stimulationes ejus. Et nihil eum sic laetificat, quomodo si abscondantur cogitationes. Venit ergo frater ad senem undecies, accusans cogitationes suas.' *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* V.13 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* V.16 (λογισμος). Cf. also Cassianus, *de institutis:* IV.ix.

[224] cf. also the Rule of Benedict IV.49, where every monk should know for certain that God sees him in every place (in omni loco Deum se respicere pro certo scire), and its equivalent in Basil of Caesarea: Basilius, *renunt*; on the perspective of God as a technique of morality, cf. Thomas, 2006a Thomas, 2008.

[225] *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* X.21 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* X.26 = *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Ephrem 3. Epicurus had this role for his disciples well after his death – cf. the discussion in Hadot, 2002[1995]: 124.

[226] Kristeva, 1982[1980]: 130.

[227] Imagining the face of the superior is an expression of obedience in: Climacus, *scal.:* Step 4.

contemplation of final judgement throughout one's life.[228] Only God can be a right judge, so thinking of self judgement involves thinking of God's judgement.

It is at this point that the practice of negative theology can be inserted. If God is defined by all the good values shared by one particular group of people, then shame in the face of God will generate exactly the same behaviour as shame in the face of that society. However, if one's theology includes a divergence between shared values and the character of God, then the behaviour produced by the two forms of shame will be different. The desert fathers and mothers are certainly characterised by their prioritisation of God over society. That prioritisation would however have no effect whatsoever were it not for the content of their theology. Since the apophatic theology of early Christian ascetics disallows defining God by the values of the city, the behaviour produced by the observing confessor and God is quite different from the manners of the city.

As Foucault observed concerning the Cynic Crates,[229] the radically observable life can be expressed both as conformed to norms and as shamelessness. Cynics were shameless because their values were not those of the masses. Early Christian ascetics could be shameless because they did not seek the praise of men and women, but of an unknown God. So in the story about abba Ephrem quoted here, it is the monk that is ready to do something outrageous before people, while the prostitute will not. Ascetics that abandon the world no longer blush before the scandal of society,[230] but bring their sins before the judgement of a superior, or companion. In this way they deny the honour/shame system of the world, only in order to embrace the hidden honour of the kingdom of God.

Even this rejection is not enough for the holy fool. Precisely because this form of confession and openness is a solution to the problem of honour and shame, it allows for the danger of vainglory. 'All recognised virtue is suspect: so one must go beyond communal discipline which reintroduces honour under cover of imitation, beyond individual ascetic exploits which arouse admiration.'[231] Vainglory can only be defeated if the honour of both the world and the desert are transcended. The holy fool does not blush before the world, or before holy people, or anyone else.

---

[228] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Anthony 33, Agathon 29, Evagrius 1, Cronius 3, Silvanus 2.
[229] Foucault 2009: 234f.
[230] As pointed out by the monk who challenged the nun to put all her clothes onto her head in Palladius, *h. Laus.:* XXXVII. Similarly, a monk who goes back on his intention to sleep with a religious woman is then exhorted by her not to 'let shame get the better' of him in Moschus, *prat.:* 204.
[231] Dagron, 1990: 933f, my translation.

Dagron is therefore interpreting holy fools as a particular kind of 'secret saint.' Maximus the Confessor appeals to secrecy as the solution to vainglory,[232] and the holy fool hagiography is associated with the related category of secret saints, who hide their good works from others in cunning ways. The story of Mark the holy fool, for example, is followed by the story of a monk masquerading as a blind beggar, a nun feigning drunkenness (who resembles Isidora), and two cross-dressing nuns.[233] In these stories, praise is offered to God 'who alone knows how many secret servants he has.'[234]

This analysis has advantages over its rivals.[235] The first is that it is substantial: instead of simply noting the parallels with contemporary asceticism, it applies colour to the comparison. It places the holy fools in a robust understanding of their ascetic context. The second advantage is that it fits well with the reading of asceticism given above concerning the pattern in early asceticism of renunciation accompanied by a tension between a specific form and transcendence of that form. According to Dagron, the holy fools are simply taking the element of transcendence seriously, following through the original impetus of ascetics to renounce all forms of honour system. As an example, see Barsanuphius' response to compliments:

> Brother, through you the Scripture has been fulfilled in me that says: 'My people, those who praise you are deceiving you,' and so on. Such a compliment does not permit us to look upon the shame of our very own countenance. For I believe that it is harmful even for those who have reached some measure, since it removes them from faith in God. For it is said, 'How can you believe in me when you accept glory from one another?' Therefore, those who acquire the humility of the Apostle will instead choose foolishness for themselves, in order that afterwards they might become wise.[236]

So, for example, where monks and nuns renounce the world by wearing extremely simple clothing, the holy fools continue their renunciation of all forms of vainglory by renouncing monastic clothing too. Symeon takes off his belt, then his habit,[237] and Isidora leaves her veil – just as defining as the habit was for monks[238] – to wrap a rag around her

---

[232] Maximus, *carit. 1-4:* III.62, IV.43, IV.49.

[233] *v. dan. scet.*

[234] *v. dan. scet.:* 5, echoed in Moschus, *prat.:* 37. Cf. also 108 and 111 on the same theme.

[235] for example Krueger, 1996 Feuerstein, 1991 Gorainoff, 1983 Ware, 2000 Rydén, 1981 Saward, 1980 Frøyshov, 2003 Syrkin, 1982.

[236] Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 126. Cf. also Moschus, *prat.:* 110. The same verse is quoted for the same reason in *Apoph. Patr. (anon):* 205.

[237] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* IV.145, 148.

[238] Brown, 1988: 260f.

head.[239] It is a thought precisely in line with the consideration of clothes summarised above (cf. over, on page 65). The fools neglect ascetic morality in order not to be proud of keeping to the code.

In other words, the holy fools' rejection of vainglory is of a piece with early Christian ascetic practical apophaticism. Recognition of religious goodness is also constructive theology. It claims to have identified an unambiguous and univocal aspect of God's goodness. By transcending both the world's norms and those of the religious life, holy fools establish a practice of the ongoing denial of norms. Whenever ascetic renunciation rests by asserting a "royal way", it is denied by the holy fool and her accusation of vainglory.

There are, however, certain problems with Dagron's suggestion. In his article, he argues that the fools appear at the intersection of the interpretation of the Pauline trope of 'fools for Christ'[240], the social phenomenon of madness, and the moral reflection on honour that takes place in the casuistry of vainglory (Latin: *vana gloria*; Greek: *kenodoxia*). The interpretation of Paul in terms of the phenomenon of madness seems undeniable: whatever the meaning of the word *salos*/*salē* in Greek, the holy fools are also called mad ('touched' – Latin: *fatua*), and Paul is quoted to explain them.

The casuistry of vainglory is more difficult to discern in their behaviour. True enough, holy fools call down dishonour upon themselves,[241] and hide their virtue,[242] which appear to be standard defences against vainglory, but it is less certain that they were seen as shameful and immoral people. Their actions can just as easily be seen as ultra-holy acts, however inconvenient or embarrassing. In fact, parallels to the practice of the desert fathers would suggest that the narrators of their lives would not have been the only ones to have considered them as holy people in their society. The children that Symeon first encountered did immediately recognise him as 'a crazy abba'. Evagrius Scholasticus, after having introduced Symeon as one who hid his virtue in order to avoid vainglory (confirming Dagron), then goes on to recount stock proofs of his holiness that were witnessed by the general public: the accusation of fathering a child;[243] maintaining celibacy whilst visiting prostitutes,[244] and

---

[239] *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XVIII.19 Palladius, *h. Laus.:* XXIV.1.
[240] similarly Vogt, 1987.
[241] *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XVI.19.
[242] For exhortations and examples of the deployment of secrecy against vainglory in the early ascetic tradition, cf. *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* VIII.6 Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 257.
[243] cf. *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XV.25 = *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Macarius the Great 1 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XV.39 and Palladius, *h. Laus.:* LXX 'The Lector Calumniated'
[244] e.g. *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* John the Dwarf 40 and Serapion 1 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XIII.17 and XVII.34

prophecy. We cannot explain the entire account of Leontius, for example, with the concept of vainglory.

At this point the analysis becomes more complicated, because we have to distinguish between varieties of transgression. It is fairly simple to trace the roots of a positive morality, but what distinctions can be made in a lack of morality? This problem lies at the root of many unnuanced accounts of holy foolery.[245] In order to describe this domain of anti-morality, consider the forms of renunciation in the following story:

> A brother settled outside his village and did not return there for many years. He said to the brethren, 'See how many years it is since I went back to the village, while you often go up there.' This was told to Abba Poemen and the old man said, 'I used to go back up there at night and walk all round my village, so that the thought of not having gone up there would not cause me vain-glory.'[246]

Here we clearly find a case of monastic life outside the desert that is justified by the casuistry of vainglory: Poemen transgresses the general rule in order to remember his limitations. The reasoning is specifically not based on a test of endurance. He goes there at night so as not to be tempted by people. The effect it has is upon Poemen himself, to demonstrate his own limitations and his attachment to a place. Compare this with the account of another transgression of space rules in the form of the Grazers, whose way of life Symeon the fool embraced in the first part of Leontius' account, before becoming a holy fool.[247]

> Another mode has also been devised, one which reaches to the utmost extent of resolution and endurance: for transporting themselves to a scorched wilderness, and covering only those parts which nature requires to be concealed, both men and women leave the rest of their persons exposed both to excessive frosts and scorching blasts, regardless alike of heat and cold. They, moreover, cast off the ordinary food of mankind, and feed upon the produce of the ground, whence they are termed Grazers; allowing themselves no more than is barely sufficient to sustain life.[248]

This way of life also transgresses the rule of the place of the cell, but they do so simply because they can. The motivation is extreme renunciation, transcendence of human society, and the ascetic life.

---

[245] in particular, Feuerstein, 1991 and Saward, 1980.
[246] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Poemen 110. Cf. also *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Matoes 13 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XI.79.
[247] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* I.133, II.137. For more on grazers, cf. Moschus, *prat.:* 19, 21, 92, 129, 159, 167.
[248] Evagrius Scholasticus, *h.e.:* I.21.

Both these spatial transgressions are based in a form of renunciation, the one renouncing the discipline of the cell to avoid vainglory, and the other renouncing it in order to transcend human order.

The crucial question is: which form of renunciation is exemplified by the holy fools? Certainly the avoidance of vainglory is a key issue in Evagrius Scholasticus' treatment of Symeon. There are also elements of this motivation in the story of Isidora.[249] Leontius, however, portrays the life of Symeon as one heroic renunciation after another. It is telling that the return to the city that forms the fulcrum of the story and starts off the foolish antics is not for the benefit of the ascetic's soul – to remind him of his human nature and defend against vainglory – but for the sake of the city itself.

> 'What more benefit do we derive, brother, from passing time in this desert? But if you hear me, get up, let us depart; let us save others. For as we are, we do not benefit anyone except ourselves, and have not brought anyone else to salvation.'[250]

This addition to Dagron's thesis is confirmed by his best support, Evagrius Scholasticus. In the chapter that describes the Grazers, he continues by recounting another category of ascetic that lived in the city and hid their extreme asceticism, in words that indicate holy fools, not least by their similarity to his chapter on Symeon:[251] they bath with members of the opposite sex, eat when they are not supposed to, and disregard clothing conventions. Interestingly, though, he says that these ascetics represent a combination of the ways of life of the Grazers and of communal ascetics of the *laurae* (coenobitic settlements).

This combination has to be further specified, however. We may argue for a continuity between early Christian asceticism and the holy fools. It cannot be denied, however, that they exemplify a particularly extreme version of that asceticism. Whereas monks had spent nights in prayer with prostitutes, Symeon sits on their back while they whip him; some ascetics spend months in silence, while the holy fool never speaks a word of sense; desert religious hide their virtue, but the holy fool transgresses all rules of good conduct and disappears as soon as any of their virtues are discovered. Symeon and Mark the fool die;[252] Isidora disappears into the wilderness. The problem this raises for our thesis is that it is precisely

---

[249] Palladius, *h. Laus.:* XXIV.1 *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XVIII.19.
[250] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* III.142.
[251] Compare Evagrius Scholasticus, *h.e.:* I.21 with IV.34. Ivanov says that Evagrius Scholasticus is being disingenuous and 'refusing to call a spade a spade' - Ivanov, 2006[1994]: 101. It is rather more likely that the holy fool simply did not represent a commonly recognisable category for his readership.
[252] *v. dan. scet.:* 2.

extreme ascetic acts that are eschewed by those trying to combat vainglory. Monks who are too ascetic are criticised.

> A brother came in and saw that they were drinking wine, and fled up on to a roof, and the roof fell in. When they heard the noise, they ran and found the brother lying half dead. They began to blame him, saying, 'It served you right, you were guilty of vainglory.'[253]

The number of sayings in the *apophthegmata patrum* that mention vainglory specifically is not great, despite the prominence of the theme. There are many further instances where the thought lies behind the text as a motivating factor, however. The story of Poemen and the village above is one. The justification of uniformity on the grounds that it does not set one above others is another (cf. over, on page 55). In fact, it could be argued that this is the motivation of all the instances of an ascetic playing down or hiding their virtue. Simple obedience to a master was generally considered sufficient and sufficiently insane for the task of overcoming the temptation to evaluate oneself. Dramatic feats of madness were unnecessarily ostentatious.

> in accordance with the Apostle's precept, make yourself foolish in this world so that you may be wise by scrutinizing nothing and examining nothing of what has been enjoined on you; instead, always exhibit an obedience characterized by utter simplicity and faith, judging only that as holy, useful, and wise which the law of God or the deliberation of your elder has imposed on you. Once you have been well established by training of this kind, you will be able, under this discipline, to abide forever, and you will not be drawn away from the cenobium by any trials of the enemy or by any factions.[254]

The point here is that the holy fools' transcendence of the positive elements of ascetic renunciation does not fit with the techniques employed to avoid vainglory amongst Christian ascetics. Sure enough, the life of the holy fools does indeed meet the challenge of vainglory: the problem that every time one does something good, one is aware of it can be solved by a dissociation of the self. However, the casuistry of vainglory that is to be found in the context of Eastern monasticism does not solve the problem in this way. It stops short at hiding virtue, feigning vice and – most importantly – eschewing extreme acts of asceticism.

---

[253] *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* IV.54 - and the parallel that justifies the vain monk in *Apoph. Patr. (anon):* 16; cf. also the tale of the extreme nun who closed herself in her cell and denied all luxury before falling through vainglory (κενοδοχια): Palladius, *h. Laus.:* XXVIII.

[254] Cassianus, *de institutis:* IV.41.3. Cf. also the example of brother Isidore who endured the dishonour of standing by the gate and falsely claiming to be epileptic ('Εὖχαι ὕπερ ἐμου, πάτερ, ὅτι ἐπιληπτικός εἰμι'): Climacus, *scal.:* Step 4. Climacus elsewhere complains 'I dress well or badly, and am vainglorious in either case' (step 22).

1.5: Distracting Holiness: Dissociation

It is perhaps because the problem of vainglory was solved at a different level that the holy fools were free to show their asceticism so freely. Because they exercised such a degree of dissociation from the self, they did not have recourse to the methods of compromise espoused by other early ascetics. They could therefore continue their program of openly transcending the cataphatic elements of Christian asceticism unhindered.

In this respect, Dagron was right to point out that the holy fools transcended systems of honour and shame by deploying the motive of secrecy against it. They even appear to have transcended norms that belong to the ascetic movement from which they sprang. But they did not do this in continuity with early Christian ascetic techniques of humility. Their works seem all too vainglorious for that. The rejection of honour and shame is important as a device of apophaticism, but there is more to be said about their practice.

What is the significance of the technique of dissociation in late antique asceticism and the holy fool stories? A brief overview of the practices in place in late antique philosophy and religion as regards perspective upon the world is perhaps in order. In particular I want to bring out the philosophical view from above, the religious separation from the world, and the internalisation of that separation, ultimately in the holy fools' ideal of 'mocking the world'.

Pierre Hadot has done a great deal of work on the tradition of seeing things from above in historic European philosophy.[255] For him, the perspective from above – or the god's eye view, the flight of the soul, the view from universality and objectivity, the view from nature – was a hermeneutical key to the spiritual exercises of the philosophers. In order to rid themselves of the delusions of society, passion, and prejudice, ancient philosophers from all schools would make an effort to separate themselves from needs and desires, the very things that connected them to the world.

This aspect of ancient philosophy is seen by Hadot in a number of features of ancient thought. The gods are thought to dwell on mountains, the sea, and the underworld: all vantage points of infinity that place the world. Fantasies of flight, appearing in sources as diverse as Plato, Homer, Cicero, Ovid, Lucretius, Lucian, and various cynics[256] (we might add St. Philip, Augustine[257], desert fathers,[258] and later monastic traditions of flying ascetics[259]), are often

---

[255] The theme appears throughout his work, but is most concisely put in Hadot, 1995: ch. 9.
[256] sources and bibliography to be found in Hadot, 1995.
[257] e.g. in the ascent with Monica at Ostia in Augustinus, *conf.:* IX.x.23-26.
[258] The alphabetical source alone records flying or transported monks in the following apophthegmata: *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Anthony 30, Ammonathas, John the Dwarf 14, Macarius the Great 14.
[259] *h. mon.:* X.20.

interpreted as the soul's unbounded vision. Projects within the discipline of physics are embarked upon in order to free thought to travel within and beyond the world. Cynic philosophers are called 'overseers' (Greek: *episkopoi* - bishops) of the world, because they look upon it and judge it from such a height.

One of the key perspectives from which people may see the world, however, was death. The philosopher should consult with Charon, the gatekeeper of Hades, and die to the world in order to see it as it is. In this way, ancient philosophy had a startlingly modern view of objectivity: to see the world as it is, one must adopt the view from nowhere.

These same themes are taken up by another historian of late antiquity, namely Peter Brown, in his seminal account of the holy man.[260] Here the context has shifted from the cities of the Mediterranean to the Syrian desert. Brown attempts to get beyond the modern disgust with the seeming dualism and misogyny of Christian monks in order to examine the practical function of these holy men, and their relation to power.

The conclusion arrived at is that the location of the monks – in the desert, the cell, the tomb,[261] or on the pillar, as with the Stylites – is designed to be the opposite pole of human society.[262] The holy man would attempt to push himself away from all ties to family, economic interest, and village society. The reason they fled from women was not that women were disgusting: they fled women and bishops for fear that they would be fixed to a place within a public order, namely that of priest or of husband.

> the holy man drew his powers from outside the human race: by going to live in the desert, in close identification with an animal kingdom that stood, in the imagination of contemporaries, for the opposite pole of all human society. Perched on his column, nearer to the demons of the upper air than to human beings, Symeon [the Stylite] was objectivity personified.[263]

It is this formation of the opposite pole of human order that constituted the holy man's objectivity. Insofar as he did not participate in a public order, he could judge that order. This view from the desert (where the monk dies to a society) is a close relative of the philosophical view from nowhere.

Brown goes one step further though. In addition to separation from the world, ascetics would internalise foreignness in order to become dissociated in themselves. They would

---

[260] Brown, 1971.

[261] Palladius, *h. Laus.*: V.1.

[262] beyond all its desires, power, and material concerns: Evagrius, *hypo.*: 3.

[263] Brown, 1971: 92 – he makes his analysis more precise later, claiming that the monks 'mobilized' the misogyny of the ancient world 'as part of a wider strategy': Brown, 1988: 243 For bishops placing monks, cf. also Palladius, *h. Laus.*: XI.1

cultivate the 'objectivity of a stranger'[264] within their own life. This is the meaning of self-mortification: not the punishing of the self, or even the elimination of the self, but the gradual pushing of the self away from what it is meant to regard. It is a renunciation of the world and a construction of objectivity – as Brown put it, 'the deep social significance of asceticism as a long drawn out, solemn ritual of dissociation – of becoming the total stranger.'[265]

Dissociation works upon ascetics' knowledge by not only undermining the value systems surrounding them, but also by withdrawing them from their own understanding of morals. Ignoring others' moral judgement is insufficient to defeat vainglory. The ascetic has to wage the 'double warfare'[266] of ignoring her own moral judgement as well: 'if we feel that our work is pleasing to God, … this is the ultimate vainglory in ourselves.'[267] So the apophaticism of early Christian ascetics regarding moral knowledge has itself a moral motivation in the casuistry of vainglory. We do not know when we have been good because we refuse to know. We refuse to be told.

> An old man said, 'If the baker does not put blinkers on the beast of burden, she does not turn the mill and eats his wages; so it is with us. By the divine economy we receive blinkers which prevent us from seeing the good we do, from glorifying ourselves and thus losing our reward. For this reason we are sometimes handed over to bad thoughts, and we see ourselves in order to blame ourselves. These bad thoughts become blinkers for us which hide from us the little good we do. In truth, every time a man blames himself, he does not lose his reward.'[268]

The internalisation of dissociation was all the more important for female ascetics than for men. Women were more often deprived of the physical separation of the desert that reminded them of their stranger status, so that they had to be particular over the activities of dissociation, rather than its location.[269] It is perhaps for this reason that the one most concerned with inner dissociation among the desert fathers and mothers is amma Syncletia: a woman of the desert. In her gathered sayings, she is particularly concerned with the practice of spiritual exercises[270] and the regulation of food and word.[271] She is also very particular about the interior life,[272] which outweighs the importance of the desert for her.

---

[264] Brown, 1971: 99 - foreignness is recommended in *Apoph. Patr. (anon):* 174, 236 Evagrius, *hypo.:* 3 Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 55 Moschus, *prat.:* 12.
[265] Brown, 1971: 99 Climacus, *scal.:* Step 3.
[266] Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 324.
[267] Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 61.
[268] *Apoph. Patr. (anon):* 191.
[269] Brown, 1988: 269f.
[270] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Syncletia 7, 8, 12, 15, .
[271] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Syncletia 4, 8, 9, 15.
[272] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Syncletia 12, 19, 24.

78

Amma Syncletica said, 'There are many who live in the mountains and behave as if they were in the town, and they are wasting their time. It is possible to be a solitary in one's mind while living in a crowd, and it is possible for one who is a solitary to live in the crowd of his own thoughts.'[273]

Through these forms of life, therefore, we may arrive at an understanding of the dissociation involved in the holy fool's 'mocking the world'. Ascetics within society have to be careful to dissociate themselves from that society by non-geographical means. They must carry the desert within them, and thrust themselves against society, thus pushing their own self away from it.

Laughing in this instance is a technique of distancing oneself. Hadot records the laughter of flying souls when they see the world from a distance.[274] Fools carry this kind of distance within themselves, rendering the world ridiculous. The fool attempted to retain objectivity by a dissociation of the self, constructed as the preservation of the unmoved soul:

But if [144] you receive strength entirely from God, brother, so that whatever the forms, or words, or actions the body makes, your mind and your heart remain unmoved and untroubled and in no way are defiled or harmed by them, truly I rejoice in your salvation,[275]

The holy fools use the techniques of early Christian asceticism – in the tradition and development of ancient philosophy – to dissociate themselves from the world. The real development they make is that they include in their understanding of the world the place that has been allocated to the holy man.[276] The holy fool dissociates from the desert, ascetic exercise, and church practice, as they were being affirmed in the society of ancient Christianity. The motivation for this can be thought of both as a renunciation of honour and vainglory, and as an apophatic denial of the specific forms of religion, the former in continuity with the program of the desert fathers and mothers, and the latter in discontinuity with it.

It is only once we have understood the holy fools' rejection of both worlds – that of the city and that of the desert – that we gain a framework to understand their theology. In following the God who was without place, the fools eluded all identification. They refused to be placed. In order to become strangers to themselves, and to therefore draw near to God, they

[273] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Syncletia 19 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* II.27 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* II.14 (where it is altered somewhat and attributed to Matrona, possibly a translation of 'amma')
[274] Hadot, 1995: 246.
[275] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* III.143f; cf. also the longer quotation above, on page 40.
[276] For a discussion on the problem of becoming placed as similar and exotic, cf. below on page 138.

had to reject community, judgement, and convention. The fool would do precisely what the early Christian ascetics did, all over again, this time renouncing religion.

Just as ascetics reject the community of the world in order to embrace solitude, the fools renounced community *tout court*. Anthony had fled to the desert. Symeon the holy fool – following a similar pattern – went further and further into solitude, rejecting cenobitic monasticism for the life of the hermit. Symeon's rejection of community is a pursuit of the God of the desert, of no-place.[277]

After Anthony, however, 'the desert became a city'.[278] With steadily more monastic communities being planted, even those who had not espoused the community life of the cenobites had to consider their relationship to their neighbour. More importantly for our purposes, the desert ascetics' homes had become places of pilgrimages. It is to this kind of journey that we owe a good deal of our literature about these ascetics on the edges of society. Both Cassian's work and the *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* are essentially accounts of travellers that went from settlement to settlement in order to sit at the feet of the great spiritual masters.

In line with the monastic habit of abandoning judgement, the fools abandon all authoritative judgement (apart from when insulting everyone they met, of course!). The desert fathers and mothers would avoid magistrates like the plague,[279] and cover over any sins they happened to witness. Similarly the holy fools would accept abuse without resisting,[280] and overturn the judgements they found in place, abusing those considered to be holy (those in church,[281] those observing religious orders[282]) and embracing those thought unholy (prostitutes, demon-possessed).[283]

The radical separation espoused by the desert fathers had not been continued by holy men and women of later generations who settled in the Palestinian desert. Symeon Stylites, for example, whilst embracing a serenity and a detachment far greater than the heroes of the Egyptian desert, also regularly dispensed judgement concerning disputes in the secular world. Indeed, this seems to have been a major function of the holy man in the early middle ages, according to Peter Brown.[284] Holiness was no longer identified with renunciation and

---

[277] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* II.137.
[278] Athanasius, *v. Anton.:* 14.
[279] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Arsenius 7, Poemen 5, 9, Simon 2.
[280] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* IV.147f.
[281] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* IV.145f.
[282] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* IV.153.
[283] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* IV.162.
[284] Brown, 1971: 93.

exclusion: it had found a place in the world, albeit a marginal place in the desert, or on a pole. Not so Symeon the holy fool. As soon as holy fools are placed in a situation of established reverence, they disappear.[285]

Just as the early Christian ascetics (and their philosophical predecessors) attempted to work their way out of the conventions of the world, the holy fools also reject established religious and philosophical functions. We saw above that the desert ascetics marked themselves out with their location, their prayer, and their clothing. Similarly, the holy fools ignored conventions of market, table fellowship, and marking time in their way of life.

In the Syria of Symeon the holy fool, however, the asceticism of the desert fathers was no longer something that made them offensive to the world. The cycle of psalms and liturgy had become a part of church life, and state life. The monastic garb could be easily recognised, and located.[286] Monasticism had become a part of the life of the city. The holy fools (and here we have to draw a sharp distinction between those of late antiquity/early middle ages and those of the Byzantine Middle Ages, cf. above, on page 10) have no place in the economy of the world: they do not bless people, and they do not accept requests. They say no liturgy, and play no part in the public life of the church.

In these ways, the holy fool returns Eastern monasticism to its roots in the Egyptian desert by refusing to become a part of the world. They reject the community of saints, refuse holy judgement, and abandon all markers of holiness. The structure of their life echoes the 'not then … not there … not that' of negative theology.

In denying the God-reference of religious space, however, they also refuse the "royal way" that allows practical theology to rest after its renunciation. Where early Christian ascetics concentrated on one negation – that of the holiness of the world – the holy fools hold to an entire series of negations: neither the good Christian life, nor that of the monastery, nor that of desert solitude, nor even that of the fool in the city may represent God. Neither assertion nor renunciation is safe.

This is perhaps the holy fools' practical solution to the speculative problem posed by Denys the Areopagite's idea that God is 'beyond assertion and denial'.[287] Instead of collapsing the two into one practice, the holy fools insist on a continued habit of laughter, denial, and renunciation.

---

[285] Expressed most clearly in the case of 'Isidora' the nun: *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XVIII.19 Palladius, *h. Laus.:* XXXIV.7. The motif of a Christian disappearing from the world in flight from honour is common in the literature: *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Philagrios 1 *Apoph. Patr. (anon):* 62, 176 Cassianus, *de institutis:* IV.30.

[286] Basilius, *reg. fus.:* question 22.

[287] Denys Areopagitus, *myst.* 1048B. For a discussion of this text, cf. below, on page 145.

In embracing the continuous practice of ascetic and theological denial, the holy fool comes close to Kolakowski's type of the jester that opposes the priest. Whilst the latter attempts to re-state truths in the culture of each age, the jester laughs each time and points out his complete failure.

> The jester's philosophy always has the same role: it reveals the shakiness of the seemingly unshakeable and casts doubt on the seemingly certain; it exposes the contradictions of the seemingly obvious, the self-evident, the incontrovertible; it ridicules accepted common sense and discovers truths in absurdities.[288]

Whilst the point may seem facile, the practice of continuous re-statement and rejection in the presence of an unknown God has a good pedigree. The statement about God's transcendence of assertion and denial is after all part of the conclusion, rather than the beginning, of Denys' *Mystical Theology*, and he himself follows it up by a simple statement of what he does as a theologian; 'We make assertions and denials of what is next to it'.[289] No silence, then, or even a re-instatement of a new transcendent theological discourse. Simply further assertion and denial around God, like a beautiful, and needless dance.

There is also a good deal of exegetical support for the idea that the holy fools are ascetics who try not to occupy a place in their search for a genuinely transcendent God. We could even say that their holiness is not to be found in space, leaving their madness to the world. In trying to be holy and without space, they take mortification to an extreme point.

> Let me describe for you a crazy person, so that when you see a crazy one who treats himself with contempt and does not own a house or a wife and any property, not even [extra] garments besides his clothes, nor food apart from a day-to-day [supply], say, 'These are my [ways of life] and I should imitate them'. When you see him talking insanely with everyone – and [if] he establishes a law for himself so that he may not become angry in order not to be found at fault, and [if] he despises the wisdom [of] the wise sage of the world and the philosopher because he is contemptuous of whatever is visible – say, 'These are mine, this is the madness of the apostles'.[290]

---

[288] Kolakowski 2004 [1959]: 260.
[289] Denys Areopagitus, *myst.* 1048B. A more systematic statement of the task of cautious denial and foolish assertion is given below, on page 145.
[290] *lib. grad.:* XVI.7, square brackets original.

A crucial point, made by de Certeau, is that the fools are not seductive.[291] They do not invite others to their way of life. Contrary to the impression given by the continuing tradition, Byzantine holy fools do not take disciples.

The desert masters all took disciples, who would then copy their way of life. They were often reluctant to do so, and sometimes even seemed to repel their disciples. But it was broadly understood that this was the way of things, so that when a disciple does not feel he is learning anything, he can with justification complain to the other monks of the area.[292] Holy fools do not have disciples that copy their way of life. They live in solitude socially as well as physically.

It is more than that, however. The holy fools do not simply decline to take disciples. They repel followers. Those who admire them are called fools, and receive nothing but abuse. They hide their way of life, so that no-one can copy it. They live in secret and eat in secret. It is impossible to take up their way of life.

The only person who can even witness the holiness of the holy fools is a phantom narrator (to the narrator). This is a trope of the hagiographical genre,[293] and is required for the logic of the story: if no-one at all recognised the holiness of the fool, then neither would the narrator know about it. John the Deacon becomes Symeon the Fool's witness and supposedly tells his story to the hagiographer, Leontius of Neapolis.

The narrator could presumably not take that place himself: that would be to boast of his own discernment over against that of the inhabitants of Emesa. So it is only natural that the person picked to be the phantom narrator tends to be a highly-placed member of the church. His merit is great, but only earned through his recognition of the fool, never his own foolishness. He does not emulate Symeon's behaviour.

The witness does not get away from the fool's abuse either: if anything, he becomes a target for it. It is in the witness' presence that the fool strips naked[294]; it is the witness' friend who gets beaten up by the fool;[295] he is frequently called an idiot and shares the blame for half the things Symeon Salos does. In this respect, the fool treats him like any other: he is part of the city order.

---

[291]   Certeau, 1979: 536.
[292]   *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Isaac, Priest of the Cells 2. The problem is also raised in Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 123
[293] Dagron, 1990: 933 Krueger, 1996: 23.
[294] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* IV.148.
[295] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* IV.149.

The witness does not share the life of the fool. Whilst he does invite him to the baths, Symeon the fool makes a point out of marking their differences. They never share fasts, nor do they act the fool together, except insofar as Symeon joins in with communal games. They are not together, even though he is a privileged observer.

It is perhaps for these reasons that Dagron claims that the narrator does not reveal Symeon's holiness to the world in the story. He is a witness who doesn't see. Because there is no sign in the story that Symeon has not received the secrecy he asks for.[296] That secrecy is at least a part of the story that remains intact.

> He is like an eye hidden away at the bottom of a consciousness which only allows objectivisation in a story of what would ordinarily stay forever concealed.[297]

Further support for the interpretation of the fools' holiness as being the practice of a non-place is found in the manner of the fool's death. The revelation of holiness and the fool's disappearance (or death) coincide. In the case of Isidora, her holiness is divinely revealed, so she disappears into the desert. In the case of Symeon the holy fool, he dies, and so his holiness is revealed (his body even disappears, and only then do people come to their senses and tell each other of his holy deeds).[298]

The obvious interpretation here is that it is only when the fool's foolishness has disappeared, when s/he has entirely disappeared, that the holiness can be recognised. Their holiness and their foolishness can not occupy the same space. Only when there is no longer a place marker for the holy can it be captured. Notice in particular that the holiness can not even be tied down to the relics of the saint.

If we set this practice of death in the context of the ascetic practices of late antiquity though, the picture becomes starker. As we saw over (on pages 46 and 76), the ancients would use the concept of death to gain a clearer perspective on their life. Secular philosophers would consider their life from the point of view of death (the view from nowhere), and early Christian ascetics would bring the final judgement to bear in their self-assessment throughout their life. Similarly, the asceticism of the desert sought to push the self to the margins (in death, in the desert, in the sea), in order to see the whole. For the holy fools, the truth about themselves was not revealed until they had been pushed beyond the margins to occupy no space. Once again, the fools have embraced the apophatic impetus of Christian asceticism and

---

[296] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* III.144.
[297] Dagron, 1990: 933, my translation.
[298] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* IV.168.

radicalised it, refusing its constructive norms. They embraced not the practice of death, but death itself.

This gives us a context for understanding the non-seductive nature of the holy fools' way of life. No-one can occupy their space in the world because it is no space. They have not created a category in the world, but attempted to eradicate one. To want to be a holy fool is to want death. It is to want to leave the world.

In these ways, fools adopt a practice of negative theology. They are not seductive; they are not spoken about or witnessed to; their holiness is only seen in their death; they occupy no space. At each point, we see the holy fools using ascetic techniques to follow a transcendent God. They identify the theology driving the norm of the religious society that places even the asceticism of the desert, and they deny it. They undermine the holiness of their contemporaries and push their own holiness off the edge. They follow the God who has no place.

Strictly speaking, writing must end here. If fools attempt to write themselves out of history, it is futile to attempt to describe them and categorise them. All success in that task will simply mark failure in their task. If they are trying to construct a practice of apophaticism, then a description of that practice will inevitably be confused (just as the narrative of these stories inevitably becomes unstable).

So identifying the holy fools will always be a case of showing what they have avoided. There can be no positive criteria for entry into the class until the fools meet their ultimate failure in institutionalisation. Their view from nowhere, however, does have the effect of circumscribing the world, making the saeculum contingent. In identifying themselves as not of the world, they have an effect on the world's self understanding.

For now, the conclusion is clear. The theology of the holy fools forces the contingency of the theologically driven norms of religious society. It challenges the way holiness is placed and packaged by forcing the possibility of a radical apophaticism, subverting the production of norms of behaviour, consumption, and worship. It is not just that we don't know who God is, but we don't know who we are. It is a practice of dissociation from all that is, in order to embrace the one who is without place.

2: Practised Ignorance

We may have knowing of our Self in this life by continuant help and virtue of our high Nature. In which knowing we may exercise and grow, by forwarding and speeding of mercy and grace; but we may never fully know our Self until the last point: in which point this passing life and manner of pain and woe shall have an end. And therefore it belongeth properly to us, both by nature and by grace, to long and desire with all our mights to know our Self in fulness of endless joy.[1]

2.1: Practices of Thought in the Desert

In discussing the holy fools' transformation of norms against the background of the desert fathers and mothers, feigning madness was considered as a response to the problem of self-consciousness. What kind of self-knowledge is it licit for a Christian to own? Whilst most early ascetics avoided vainglory by keeping their saintly self secret, holy fools were unashamed of their extreme renunciation whilst practising such asceticism as to make self-consciousness impossible. They refuse ethical knowledge of the self.

There is reason to further this investigation by looking more carefully at the way in which holy men and women in the patristic period treated moral knowledge. If dissociation and unknowing is one method of being unaware of one's own godliness, what knowledge is therefore licit? Do holy fools leave worldly knowledge as it is? So we need to move from the ethics of knowledge to the knowledge of ethics and the holy. Insofar as such knowledge is part of the experience of holiness, it will be an important part of our mapping of the transformation the fools exerted on that experience.

In what follows, we will build upon these studies of the practice of practice by turning towards its awareness, expression, and knowledge. Once again, we will not be asking so much 'what did the holy fools and early Christian ascetics know?' Instead, attention will be turned towards how knowledge is arrived at, and ways in which it is expressed, critiqued, and judged.

Just as the transformation of norms was examined through the means of producing, transforming, and assessing forms of life, the transformation of knowledge of holiness will be studied through the practices of knowledge division and production. By looking at the ways in

---

[1] Julian, 1901: XLVI.

which knowledge can be ratified, discounted, and assessed, we identify what could be called the technology of epistemology. Where all science has its investigative and technological disciplines, epistemology can be divided into theoretical and applied parts. The one asks whether and to what extent knowledge is possible, whereas the other asks how knowledge may be produced and treated. To the extent that these projects can be at all separated, our focus on the transformation of knowledge dictates that the first be temporarily set aside for the sake of the second. In the following, the technology of epistemology will be mapped out with a view to identifying the ways in which early Christian ascetics and holy fools transform the practice of knowledge.

In keeping with the emphasis of the foregoing, the investigation will be further limited to the expression of values, as they are encapsulated in (firstly) the language of ethics, and (secondly) the problems of God-talk. Eventually this will enable the ascetic scepticism towards language and society to emerge. In contrast to the above account, though, this will be presented not in terms of ethical, but of epistemological practice: the ascetic espousal of objectivity for the sake of truth and god-talk.

So in this part, the first theme to receive attention is the constitution and criticism of ethical knowledge in terms of praise, blame, and ethical representations. After a more technical account of ancient Christian epistemology, we will plot the fools' transformation of holiness onto the discussion and practice of negative theology in its practical implications for social critique, silence, and babbling.

2.1.1: Praise and Blame: speaking ethics

How is ethics thought in antiquity? Let us start with an example. The verbal habit of praise and blame, whereby things are designated as good or bad through the post-modern non-descriptive verbalisation of one's attitude to them, is argued by James Smith to be central to Augustine's *Confessions*.[2] It is portrayed as the Christian contribution to the philosophy of language. Not only does it have the advantage of avoiding onto-theology, but it gives us a verbal practice that may reinstate all the hesitations and criticisms concerning the secular world that may emerge from his Christian Theology. We could call it a practice of ethical knowledge.

Smith's exegesis of the text is excellent: Augustine does indeed primarily use the language of praise in his search for God through his own history. He rummages through his bag of memories in order to find the immanent God there, avoiding idolatry by attributing all

[2] Smith, 2002.

good to God, and all bad to the evil in himself. He addresses God in telling his own story, expressing the rather stiff truths of *creatio ex nihilo* and evil as *privatio boni* in an elegant literary style. Conversely, he addresses himself in his confusion and regret over the evil in his life,[3] which is a point missed by most interpreters, who read the 'you' consistently as a reference to God.

The praise/blame mode of reference is actually a product of these theories as well. It is difficult to call God a good thing when one has identified 'good' with 'created'. Christian theology had, at least since the third century, established that all that is, is good, because all that is, is created. But God is not created, so the adjective 'good' needs two different modes of reference to account for the double meaning (created/creator). The practice of praise and blame sits loose to knowledge of cosmology, and so manages to speak with this problem unresolved. On the other hand, it is difficult to call anything evil, insofar as evil is a privation of good. So there is no evil thing, only things that have not yet achieved goodness. But praise and blame are not confined to the form of subject/predicate statements. Their force is independent of their specific reference. I can say that I am fascinated by the beauty of music and led astray by the glamour of prestige without attributing cosmological status to either music or prestige.

What is missing in Smith's interpretation, however, is an account of the modes of ethics of late antiquity in general. In his enthusiasm for a God language that evades the problems of reference in theology (which for Augustine is more a practical problem regarding the obligation of praise than a theoretical one touching on the violence of language),[4] he fails to realise the peculiarity of his own (non-Augustinian) theological tradition. Describing the good in terms of praise and blame is by no means the preserve of Augustine's work. Instead, praise and blame were the rhetorical moves whereby morality was spoken in late antiquity.

A few examples will suffice. Firstly, in Augustine himself: outside of the *Confessions*, he repeatedly refers to good things and bad things in creation in terms of praiseworthiness. It is even part of his famous Plotinian argument of the goodness of creation, and evil as a *privatio boni*, where he clearly demonstrates the parallelism between goodness and praiseworthiness:

---

[3] E.g. Augustinus, *conf.:* IV.11.16-IV.13.20.
[4] Augustinus, *doctr. chr.:* I.vi.6.

[Augustine:] Nevertheless, all things are rightly deserving of praise by the very fact that they exist, since they are good inasmuch as they exist.[5]

Secondly, Diogenes Laertius records this technique as defining ethics in the two primary directions of thought in late antiquity, Stoicism and Epicureanism. Here it should be noted that these are not simply examples of the use of praise and blame. His *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* – which was to have a unique position in later understandings of both Stoicism and Epicureanism – makes it central to the philosophical theory of aesthetic life and ethical action, relating it to necessity, freedom, beauty and action:

> By the beautiful is meant properly and in an unique sense that good which renders its possessors praiseworthy, or briefly, good which is worthy of praise;[6]

> For he sees that necessity destroys responsibility and that chance or fortune is inconstant; whereas our own actions are free, and it is to them that praise and blame naturally attach.[7]

This is similarly the place praise and blame have in Cicero's work on the passions of the soul (lat: *perturbationes*: cf. under, on pages 93ff), where he outlines the grief and pleasure to be eschewed and embraced in the world. In the course of enumerating these phenomena, he comes upon the word 'Aemulatio', which can be interpreted with both praise and blame ('ut et in laude et in vitio nomen hoc sit').[8] Given that this practice of discerning goods and evils is central to the philosophical way of life in late antiquity, it is significant that Cicero notes that it takes place in this idiom.

Cicero is not alone in using the rhetoric of praise and blame as the expression of moral judgement. Somewhat closer to the home of the desert fathers, Clement of Alexandria refers to the verbal device in the context of the possibility of morality: without freedom, praise and blame is not possible.

> But neither praise nor blame, neither honour nor punishment are right when the soul has no command over appetite and aversion, and the evil is obligatory.[9]

---

[5] Augustinus, *lib.art.:* III.vii.21. This expression of cosmology appears throughout the corpus, e.g. in Augustinus, *de trin.:* V.1 (prologue) Augustinus, *de civ. dei:* X.9, XII.1,4.
[6] Diogenes, *vit. phil.:* VII.1.100.
[7] Diogenes, *vit. phil.:* X.133.
[8] Cicero, *tusc. disp.:* IV.VIII.
[9] Clemens, *str.:* I.17, my translation.

We can thus see that both philosophers and theologians of the Greek and Latin world of late antiquity used the practice of praise and blame to identify and express the good in the world and to establish a moral language concerning actions.[10]

In the light of this standard expression of late antique ethics, the practice of early Christian ascetics stands out as unusual. To reject praise and blame is not a simple act of modesty: that would only account for the rejection of praise. To reject blame as well is to refuse to accept potentially useful criticism. It is the rejection of moral judgment *per se*. So desert fathers refuse to blame themselves, in a phrase reminiscent of Paul.[11] In order to grasp this rejection, we need to understand it as a reaction against the ethical knowledge of late antique society itself, rather than as simply the association of a favourable self-assessment with vanity, flattery, or self-deception.

This is not to say that the rejection of praise is the innovation of early Christian ascetics: we may see a similar rejection in many of the sources just appealed to. We could say that on the level of principle, praise and blame was the way in which to think ethics, whereas on the level of practice, it was rejected.

Amongst stoic philosophers, for example, this was all a part of the program originating in Plato of separating oneself from the opinions of the masses. A philosopher is to guard his thought by not engaging in conversation that is entirely independent of truth, the kind of conversation that in fact ensures the smooth running of society.[12] Hence the philosophical *topos* of the rejection of small talk.

> But rarely, and when occasion requires you to talk, talk, indeed, but about no ordinary topics. Do not talk about gladiators, or horse-races, or athletes, or things to eat and drink – topics that arise on all occasions; but above all, do not talk about people, either blaming, or praising, or comparing them. If, then, you can, by your own conversation bring over that of your companions to what is seemly. But if you happen to be left alone in the presence of aliens, keep silence.[13]

The avoidance of praise and blame also comes under the theme of rejecting imperfect goods. The praise of other people is a temptation, a good that seems satisfying but which can

---

[10]For further examples of uncritical use of praise and blame for the substantives 'good' and 'bad', see Evagrius, *ep. ad mel.*: 34, 50, 54 Evagrius, *schol. in eccl.*: 51, 52, 56 (51: 'ψεκτοις πραγμασιν ... δε ἐπαινετοις')

[11] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Paphnutius 3, Agathon 2 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XI.2 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XI.8 Basilius, *hom. 20* and Paul's statements in 1 Corinthians 4.3.

[12] This understanding of opinion and society has most recently been put forward in Badiou, 2001[1998]. Cf. the Hadot quotation above, on page 39.

[13] Epictetus, *Ench.:* xxxiii.

not be relied upon, as others can be mistaken either in their good opinion of you (flattery) or in their bad (resentment).

> Signs of one who is making progress are: He censures no one, praises no one, blames no one, finds fault with no one, says nothing about himself as though he were somebody or knew something. When he is hampered or prevented, he blames himself. And if anyone compliments him, he smiles to himself at the person complimenting; while if anyone censures him, he makes no defense.[14]

Both these tendencies can be seen amongst the early Christian ascetics. Their practice of silence is particularly imposed in relation to small talk and the assessment of others. The theme of being entirely neutral to praise and blame is also attested:

> Meekness is a permanent condition of that soul which remains unaffected by whether or not it is spoken well of, whether or not it is honoured or praised. … The first stage of blessed patience is to accept dishonour with bitterness and anguish of soul. The intermediate stage is to be free from pain amid all such things. The perfect stage, if that is attainable, is to think of dishonour as praise. Let the first rejoice and the second be strong, but blessed be the third, for he exults in the Lord.[15]

There is reason to believe, however, that certain desert Christians achieved this independence in judgement more thoroughly than their secular counterparts. Where Epictetus, for example, accepts all negative judgement dealt him by strangers and ignores flattery, early Christian ascetics had an altogether more neutral attitude. The examination of conscience was an established practice amongst early Christian ascetics, but when it comes to reacting to flattery, young monks are encouraged to disregard all thoughts of guilt. The good is good whether it is done in order to achieve glory or for its own sake.[16]

So the practice of praise and blame is both less and more than we originally implied. It is less than a Christian contribution to the problem of ethical reference: praise and blame were a mode of expressing knowledge of morality common to a wide variety of thinkers in late antiquity. It is more than a form of expressing values: conceptualising the practice enabled thinkers to isolate and assess their development of ethical knowledge. So that discussion of

---

[14] Epictetus, *Ench.:* xlviii. Other examples of rejecting praise as an imperfect good can be found among both the philosophers and theologians of late antiquity: Evagrius, *de orat.:* 40 Moschus, *prat.:* 153.

[15] Climacus, *scal.:* Step 8.. Cf. also Step 25, *h. mon.:* X.11 Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 412.

[16] *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XIII.6, 19 = *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Poemen 51, Sarah 7 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XIII.6 Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 290 Climacus, *scal.:* Step 12: 'if a few drops of vainglory fall on you, what harm? Provided of course, that you become a source of profit to many.'

the praiseworthiness of certain practices or phenomena could then develop into discussion of the usefulness of moral assessment. Whilst ancient philosophers took sceptical attitudes towards the usefulness of positive moral assessment, early Christian ascetics adopted a critical stance towards moral knowledge *per se*, as it was expressed in the practices of praise and blame. This is the first aspect to be noted of the ascetic practice of moral knowledge.

2.1.2: Death: escaping from ethics

There is more to be said about this technological stance, however. We are interested not simply in the fact of a critical distance between the ascetic and the construction of knowledge. There still remains the question of how this critical distance was conceived. What practices motivated, produced, and enacted the ascetic scepticism towards moral knowledge?

The practice of death has already been mentioned elsewhere in this thesis (cf. above, on page 46). Death was a multivalent notion in the practice of early Christian ascetics, however. We saw how it related to God's judgement and acted as a place-holder for transcendence in the desert and madness. It also has a function with regard to the practice of human judgement.

The force of speaking death in the above-mentioned practices has been death as the locus of judgement and death as the lack of being. In other contexts, however, it is thought as independence from the desire of the world. Death is not concerned with status or judgement. It is of another order, which can not compete or react to the blessings and abuses of the world. Crucially for us, death is not affected by praise or blame. The paradigmatic story that demonstrates this, whilst found in many forms and sources, probably derives from the teaching of Macarius the Egyptian (c. 300-390).

A brother came to see Abba Macarius the Egyptian, and said to him, 'Abba, give me a word, that I may be saved.' So the old man said, 'Go to the cemetery and abuse the dead.' The brother went there, abused them and threw stones at them; then he returned and told the old man about it. The latter said to him, 'Didn't they say anything to you?' He replied, 'No.' The old man said, 'Go back tomorrow and praise them.' So the brother went away and praised them, calling them, 'Apostles, saints and righteous men.' He returned to the old man and said to him, 'I have complimented them.' And the old man said to him, 'Did they not answer you?' The brother said no. The old man said to him, 'You know how you insulted them and they did not reply, and how you praised them and they did not speak; so you too if you wish to be saved must do the same

and become a dead man. Like the dead, take no account of either the scorn of men or their praises, and you can be saved.[17]

Here the ideal is a paralysis of all feelings that react to praise and blame. The image implies a non-reaction to the movements of the passions provoked by others (as we saw in the case of the obedient monk above, on page 34). Macarius exhorts the monk to be at a completely other level to the judgements of men. The aim is not a positive virtue (meekness, generosity), but complete neutrality.[18]

Other versions of this story are more striking in their refusal to recommend a particular way of life. It becomes obvious that this is not a specific and concrete Christian virtue when Anoub uses the example of a stone idol to demonstrate the monastic life.[19] Here once again, the emphasis is put on negative virtues: 'Did it get angry? No. Did it refuse to forgive? No.' Anoub's fellow monks are being exhorted to inaction.

Versions of this edificatory story can be discovered in foundational texts for ancient Christian asceticism. Macarius the Egyptian was the leader/initiator of the famous Scetis community, and Anoub is speaking to the community around Poemen, responsible for preserving the sayings of the desert fathers.[20] So it perhaps comes as no surprise that the story should exemplify a virtue central to the monastic enterprise, namely that of *apatheia*. If we are to understand the force of death in its meaning of the rejection of values, we must see it in its relation to the rejection of passions. This kind of interpretation of death will be vindicated if it is also the case that the practice of *apatheia* in late antique asceticism also functioned to negate the canons of knowledge and veridiction practiced in the society of late antiquity.

How is the virtue of *apatheia* related to the rejection of moral knowledge amongst early Christian ascetics? The understanding of the early Christian concept of *apatheia* is fraught with difficulties. It is set in a web of meanings with a long history,[21] and even longer consequences.

A few problems should be highlighted at the outset. The first is a commonplace of modern literature on the topic: whilst it is tempting to translate the Greek *apatheia* (and the Latin *impassibilis*) with the English 'apathy', such an understanding would serve only to take

---

[17] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Macarius 23 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* X.47.
[18] Climacus, *scal.:* Step 8.
[19] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Anoub 1 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XV.11 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XV.12. Cf. also the comparison of death and the eradication of passions in Symeon the New Theologian 1980: XXIV.3.
[20] According to Harmless, 2000: 484.
[21] A large part of this history is traced in Sorabji, 2000: I draw on his work particularly in reference to the ancient philosophers in this section.

us further from that of the early Christian ascetics, for whom the attainment of *apatheia* was the result of extreme effort and ascetic exertion.

A further distraction in these studies has been the relation of the doctrine to Pelagianism. Although not always acknowledged explicitly, the pelagian debate must be the cause of such studies[22] that avidly pursue the question of whether a human can attain to *apatheia* in this life, to which Evagrius of Pontus – the most prominent theorist of the subject – was frustratingly ambiguous. This question need not detain us long: it is usually associated with the understanding of *apatheia* as a condition of prayer – and so related to the later tradition of hesychasm in Byzantine theology[23] – rather than a practice of asceticism, and so does not affect our question. It is clearly a practical ideal for God and humanity, whether it is achievable on earth or not, and that is enough for our argument.

A good translation may therefore be 'dispassion'. This has a number of advantages: firstly, it is borne out by etymology (*pathos* = passion); secondly, it answers to the background, entrenched as it is in the question of human passions; thirdly, it reflects the practical implications of the concept (which we will examine below); and fourthly, it solves the problem of partial *apatheia*, as the soul can achieve freedom from some passions and not others, and still grammatically be attributed with *apatheia* – dissociated from *a* passion.[24]

In our literature, the passions were almost exclusively understood as a problem and an excess, and whatever the tradition they inherited may have thought about the desirability or otherwise of the passions, certainly the desert fathers and mothers with few exceptions[25] understood them as part of the network of sin and temptation.

The technology developed for dealing with passions in antiquity was already complex by the time of the birth of monasticism with St Anthony the Great. Certain Stoic philosophers had boiled the experience of negative passions down to two judgements: an evaluation of the favourability of the circumstances, and the appropriateness of a response. In this respect, passions could be isolated, discussed, and acted upon. It is this kind of attitude that constitutes the ancient technologies of the self,[26] or 'therapies of the emotions' in Sorabji's phrase.[27]

---

[22] Rasmussen, 2005 is typical in this respect.
[23] For which, cf. Lossky, 1976.
[24] Linge has a similar account, whereby *apatheia* can be thought both as technique and as condition - Linge, 2000: 557.
[25] Noted in Ware, 1989 Williams, 1993.
[26] Foucault, 2000c[1982].
[27] Sorabji, 2000.

That passions can be treated and manipulated was the consensus view amongst ancient philosophers, and by far the most important method was to introduce further passions.[28] The schools of philosophy would then differ as regards taxonomy of passions, the role of the will in passions, and the ideal attitude towards passions, all in relation to their various theories of the soul. One debate, for example, was the extent to which passions should be eliminated (*apatheia*), or controlled (*metriopatheia*), a discussion which was to survive into the theology of early Christian ascetics.

The early Christian ascetics retained this attitude towards the passions as another aspect of the Christian philosophy. In order to understand the ideal of *apatheia*, we shall have to give an account of their thought concerning the passions.

The passions were regularly thought of in terms of politics. It was not simply a question of suffering from distasteful passions, but of ruling them, or being ruled. Whilst treatments and ideals concerning passions varied in antiquity, most early Christian ascetics held this in common: that the passions are to be defeated[29] and governed.[30] In their turn, passions can dominate;[31] enslave;[32] attack,[33] and move.[34]

At this point the uniformity ceases, however. Christian treatments of passions are almost as wide-ranging as those of the ancient philosophers. A diverse collection of sayings such as the *Apophthegmata Patrum*[35] brings out a number of contrasts nicely.

1. One solution to the affliction of the passions is to 'love [*agapēson*] all conflicting passions, and your passions will abate'.[36] Another passage, in an equivalent context (a list of exhortations to a young monk in the form of commands, all in the aorist imperative) recommends exactly the opposite: 'hate the passions!'.[37]

2. On the level of cosmology, there is disagreement as to the nature of the passions: whilst one monk categorises three distinct forms of attack, whereby the flesh is

---

[28] cf. Olympiodorus' summary in Sorabji, 2000: chapter 19.
[29] *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XIV.22 Evagrius, *de orat.:* 135.
[30] *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* IV.57 Evagrius, *schol. in luc.:* 4 Evagrius, *excerpts:* 23.
[31] *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* I.11.
[32] *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XI.31 *lib. grad.:* VII.8 Evagrius, *de orat.:* 71.
[33] *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* VII.12.
[34] *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* IX.25f Evagrius, *de orat.:* 73.
[35] for the formation of the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, see above, on page 23.
[36] *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* V.53.
[37] *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XI.50.

different from passions which are different from demons,[38] others refer specifically to 'the passions of the flesh'.[39]

3. There is also a variety of taxonomies of passions. On the one hand, passions are simply negative attitudes and actions, like (predictably) fornication, unbridled speech/gossip, and vainglory.[40] On the other, they appear as direct temptations towards good things like money, honour, and rest.[41] Some of the monks appear to make finer distinctions between passions, whereby they each represent various routes to wrongdoing.[42]

The question of responding to passions, however, did form a discussion that drew various schools of asceticism together, with a common language and aim, in spite of the varying theories and cosmologies underlying them. Out of the different accounts of the passions, there arise debates over specific questions of application. The monks discuss the extent to which they should yield to the passions,[43] how to trace the origin of the passions,[44] and of course how to oppose them, to gain control over them. Whilst theories diverged, the shared project of dealing with passions enabled a conversation.

The advice given is in keeping with the ascetic techniques we have seen above. The monk is told to guard the heart[45] so the passion does not produce knowledge in the eyes, the tongue, and pass into deeds. It is also important to speak one's passion,[46] just as they would speak or write their thoughts (cf. above, on page 67). Again, the desert fathers and mothers were a lot clearer about the technology of the passions than they were about their theory and nature. Thoughts had to be kept free from passions, or they would draw the ascetic into illusions about self and the world. The practice of dispassion was the most important technology of knowledge amongst early Christian ascetics.

---

[38] *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* V.54.
[39] *ta pathē tēs sarkos*: *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* IV.20; *pathē ta sarkikē*: *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XI.36 Evagrius, *cap. paraen.:* III.6. 'Passions of the soul' is also a standard expression: Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 72 Climacus, *scal.:* Steps 4 and 15.
[40] *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* V.34, X.11/49, VIII.6.
[41] *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XI.30.
[42] *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* V.51.
[43] *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* X.38.
[44] *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* III.50, V.37 Evagrius, *Eulog.:* 29.31.
[45] *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XVIII.23, cf. above, on page 58.
[46] *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* VII.9.

One of the most sophisticated thinkers concerning the passions in late antiquity is numbered amongst the desert fathers, namely Evagrius of Pontus (*fl.* 385-399). Drawing upon a wealth of learning from the philosophical schools, and having sat at the feet of central desert fathers such as Macarius of Alexandria and Macarius the Great of Egypt, he was to exert an influence upon Christianity entirely out of proportion with the number of works preserved under his name. In the East, he was a main proponent of the Origenist school, and the hero of church historian and politician Rufinus; in the West, he provides the inspiration for the work of his disciple, John Cassian. In his work, we find that rare phenomenon: a consistent and systematised ascetic theology.

Evagrius Ponticus is perhaps most famous for being the Christian originator of the seven deadly sins, although he started with a list of nine, which he then boiled down to eight[47] (Gregory the Great reduced them further to seven), and didn't just term them vices (although his successors in both East and West did). Evagrius Ponticus is unique in holding to a taxonomy of passions, thus helping us to understand *apatheia* better.

Apart from his book on the nine vices,[48] Evagrius Ponticus is fairly consistent with his list of eight, which are:

1. gluttony
2. fornication
3. avarice (philarguria – literally 'love of money')
4. sadness
5. anger
6. acedia (listnessness – the 'midday demon')
7. vainglory
8. pride.[49]

They correspond (somewhat artificially) to eight virtues:[50]

1. abstinence
2. chastity
3. freedom from possessions
4. joy

---

[47] The 'eight vices' survived for some time in the Eastern ascetic tradition: Climacus, *scal.:* Step 13, although he sides with Gregory's seven in Step 22.

[48] Evagrius, *de vitiis.*

[49] A list that echoes this can be found in Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 137B: 'gluttony, fornication, avarice, sorrow, despondency, anger, wrath, gossip, hatred, vainglory, pride'

[50] Evagrius, *de vitiis.*

5. patience

6. perseverance

7. freedom from vainglory

8. humility.

In this way, the eight list up the plural and various ways in which an ascetic can be led astray. Whilst it is tempting to treat these as an exhaustive list, Evagrius Ponticus' comments on these (which act as a framework for various parts of his writings) enlarge on and expand the list extensively. Besides the ninth temptation of jealousy (opposed to 'freedom from jealousy')[51], he also writes of the passions of licentiousness,[52] irascibility,[53] and others.

So is this a list of passions? Or a list of eight deadly sins? The question is at times difficult to answer: some of Evagrius Ponticus' treatments of this list take the form of sayings selected under these categories, so the definition of the categories is entirely editorial. The most obvious reference for the list, for example, is a book that bears the title 'On the Eight Thoughts'.[54] Some manuscripts, however, have the title 'On the Eight Spirits of Wickedness', and the text opens (with the chapter on gluttony) with the words:

1. Abstinence is the origin of fruitfulness, the blossom and beginning of the practical life. / 2. He who controls the stomach diminishes the passions; he who is overcome by food gives increase to pleasures. / 3. 'Amalek was the first of the nations' (Num. 24:20); and *gluttony is the first of the passions*.[55]

So the titles suggest conceiving of gluttony as a thought or a spirit of wickedness, whereas the contents immediately suggest understanding it as a passion. It is not always editing that throws up problems, however. In general, the items in the list are explicitly given four different manifestations: vice, thought, passion, and demon/spirit. But when Evagrius Ponticus is writing about the items themselves, he does not seem to care which of these he is referring to. The list of nine refers explicitly to vices, and yet when describing the interaction between vainglory, jealousy, and pride, he calls them 'the three-strand chain of vices, the threefold poisonous mixture of passions, the threefold tongue of heretics.'[56]

Similarly, in the *Praktikos*, Evagrius Ponticus uses the list to describe thoughts (exhaustively: unlike the multiform passions, there are only eight possible categories of

---

[51] Evagrius, *de vitiis:* 8.
[52] Evagrius, *oct. spir.:* 2.10.
[53] Evagrius, *de mal. cog.:* 13.
[54] Evagrius, *oct. spir.*
[55] Evagrius, *oct. spir.:* 1, emphasis mine.
[56] Evagrius, *de vitiis:* 7.

'thought'), together with their remedies, before changing tack in order to move on to the subject of passions. He introduces the fifth thought of anger, however, with the words '*Anger is a passion* that arises very quickly.'[57] All these factors have led commentators to assume (rather brazenly) that passions, thoughts, demons, and vices are the same thing for Evagrius Ponticus.[58]

Evagrius Ponticus' lists are therefore not the place to look for a consistent theory of how thoughts, passions, demons, and sins relate. All we can say from these texts is that they all can manifest in instances of one of the (at least) eight categories described above. This does not, however, mean that Evagrius Ponticus has no theory for how the thoughts and passions worked. Outside of the lists themselves, he has a very coherent account (*pace* Sinckewitcz).[59] In order to discern this, however, we will need to pay very close attention to his use of the terms 'thought', passion', 'vice' and 'demon' and concentrate less on which temptation is being treated at the time. The justification for this exegesis is the hermeneutical assumption that a text is coherent rather than incoherent. Assuming that the author neglected to distinguish between the passion of gluttony and the thought of gluttony simply because he was elucidating gluttony rather than thoughts and passions, what distinctions does he make when explaining thoughts and passions?

It is my hypothesis that Evagrius Ponticus not only systematised the temptations into eight (or more) kinds, but that he in turn systematised them into four different manifestations. So in all, Evagrius Ponticus is noticing at least 32 (4x8) operations: the thought, passion, demon, and vice of gluttony, then the thought, passion, demon and vice of fornication, and so on.

Sorabji[60] has argued that Evagrius Ponticus' 'thoughts' are his conception of what Seneca calls 'first movements', which is to say the involuntary reaction to an external phenomenon, for example salivating at the smell of lamb chops, tensing one's muscles on hearing a gunshot, etc. They are unavoidable, they resemble more substantial emotions (eagerness, fear), and they may only last a moment.

> Whether or not all these thoughts trouble the soul is not within our power; but it is for us to decide if they are to linger within us or not and whether or not they stir up the passions.[61]

---

[57] Evagrius, *Prakt.:* 11, emphasis mine.
[58] Ware, 1989: 317f Rasmussen, 2005: 149.
[59] Sinkewicz, 2003: intro, p. xxv. Linge also claims that Evagrius pursues no ideas in a systematically connected way in Linge, 2000: 541.
[60] Sorabji, 2000: 359f.
[61] Evagrius, *Prakt.:* 6.

So much for the relation between thoughts and passions. The picture is elaborated somewhat when Evagrius Ponticus applies it to perception and interpretation. Here the distinction is not simply one of succession, but of mental act. Whilst he simply appeared confused in his account of the eight categories above, the acuity of this analysis of perception is remarkable. In his account of the phenomenology of the temptation of greed, he distinguishes precisely the elements we attempted to prise apart above:

> Suppose the thought of avarice is sent by [the enemy]; distinguish within this thought the mind that received it, the mental representation of gold, the gold itself, and the passion of avarice; then ask which of these elements is a sin. Is it the mind? But how? It is the image of God. But can it be the mental representation of gold? And who in his right mind would ever say this? Does the gold itself constitute sin? Then for what purpose was it created? It follows therefore that the fourth element is the cause of the sin, namely, that which is not an object with substantial subsistence, nor the mental representation of an object, nor even the incorporeal mind, but a pleasure hostile to humanity, born of free will, and compelling the mind to make improper use of the creatures of God:[62]

Here the relation between thoughts, passions, and sins is cleared up. The innocent mind innocuously represents a morally neutral object, but the representation is attached to the passion of avarice, which compels to sinful action. We have a sequence of thought-passion-vice. The question of demons is also implied. Time and again, demons are portrayed as suggesting a thought or a passion (more often than not, the two are connected in the memory), and the ascetic may decide what to do about this new knowledge. The passion would then have the character of a 'first movement' that reacts to the initial thought. By inserting a moral evaluation in the middle of this sequence, Evagrius Ponticus is making an attempt to gain control over his knowledge. Whilst assuming an analysis of human action that involves a self beset with external and historical constraints, he resists a deterministic account that assumes the *passivity* of the self. The passions denote a motivation to action and judgement that is not constituted by the moral agent, and as such threaten the ascetic's freedom. But where freedom is threatened, it can also resist. For this reason, a control over and renunciation of the passions is in keeping with self-determination.

This portrayal of the demons in Evagrius Ponticus elaborates on the question of agency that has been implicit throughout the discussion of the passions. The ascetics struggle against demons not simply because of the process demon-thought-passion-sin. They struggle

---

[62] Evagrius, *de mal. cog.*: 19.

for self-determinacy.[63] They struggle for the control of their own thoughts. Evagrius Ponticus' advice is not simply 'Do not fall into sin', but 'We must not obey them!'.[64] The ideal ascetic is not simply good, but is 'kingless'.[65]

Evagrius Ponticus' ascetico-technical brilliance is not limited to his taxonomy of the passions however. He furthers the ascetic tradition with his methods of achieving dispassion. As we saw above, analysis and the examination of thoughts and conscience is an important aspect of this, which will form an element of a number of different methods. One technique he is well known for, though, is that of using the demons against each other.

This particular method of attaining to dispassion takes advantage of the theories outlined above: the passions and thoughts can be divided up according to the same categories as the demons and vices. Not all thoughts are sinful, however. And not all categories are compatible. So if one is able to have a thought without it eliciting a passion, then that thought is morally neutral. If it is a kind of temptation incompatible with that of the current enemy (Evagrius Ponticus recommends the use of anger against tempting demons;[66] one can imagine it being particularly effective against sadness or *acedia* (the sixth vice, on page 96)), it can be used against that enemy, even if they do not have the same status (e.g. a thought against a demon, etc).

> The demon of vainglory is opposed to the demon of fornication, and it is impossible for them to attack the soul at the same time, since the former promises honours and the latter is the forerunner of dishonour. Therefore, if one of these approaches and presses hard upon you, then fashion within yourself the thoughts of the opposing demon. And if you should be able, as the saying goes, to knock out one nail with another, know that you are near the frontiers of impassibility [*apatheia*], for your mind found the strength to annihilate the thoughts of the demon by means of human thoughts.[67]

Here the distinction between demons and thoughts is employed effectively. The demon is not the same as, but makes use of thoughts. Far from mixing up the various forms in

---

[63] Evagrius, *schol. in luc.:* 4.
[64] Evagrius, *Prakt.:* 22; Cf. also the theme in the *lib. grad.:* XV.6, et passim Moschus, *prat.:* 45.
[65] *abasileutos* – Evagrius, *cap. xxxiii:* 19.3. cf. also Evagrius, *hypo.:* 3, where *apatheia* is associated with resistance to principalities and powers.
[66] Evagrius, *schol. in eccl.:* 56 Evagrius, *defin.:* 11.
[67] Evagrius, *Prakt.:* 58. Cf. also Evagrius, *excerpts:* 43 (fornication against vainglory). Climacus attempts to combat vainglory with gluttony, but without the nuanced distinction between vice and passion: Climacus, *scal.:* Step 14. He does the same with the demons and passions of vainglory and anger in Step 22, and the thoughts and demons of gluttony and vainglory in Step 26.

which fornication can manifest itself, this technique is reliant upon clear distinctions in the cosmology of the passions, thoughts, and demons.

In spite of the at times rather vague cosmology, and the work's resistance to questions concerning perfection and the enumeration of passions, Evagrius Ponticus' writings exemplify a thoroughgoing ascetic theory and a systematic phenomenology of the mind. His thoughts concerning dispassion reveal a technology of objective knowledge, where passions are neutralised for the sake of the cultivation of freedom and virtue. Where passions, reacting immediately to praise and blame, draw the ascetic towards evaluation and desire, ascetic practices resist relating to the world in such an unreflective way, based on the knowledge of received values.

The early Christian ascetics' dispassion was not a virtue of passive spiritual docility, but a practice designed to have an effect on knowledge, as a form of scepticism and critique of knowledges that appear as given, mediated by tradition and habit. As Foucault describes the concept among Stoics and Epicureans, 'Not having passions is no longer having any passivity'.[68] It is not an adherence to the soul over against fleshly passion; it is not static tranquillity, and it is not a divine lack of activity. All these attitudes might be complicit with the world's knowledge. The difficulty of holding these two thoughts together – that dispassion means non-reaction to provocation and that it is a robust state of activity – has caused a number of problems in the secondary literature.[69]

This analysis does not simply rely upon the theories of Evagrius Ponticus. The refusal of passions was always meant to work against inactivity. One of the passions to be rejected is that of rest (Greek: *anapausis*), which hinders the ascetic from progressing.[70] The passion of vainglory is particularly dangerous for god-talk, as it persuades the thinker that he has arrived at the right concept of God.[71] So the person who is free from the passions would naturally not be inactive. Evagrius Ponticus' fifth temptation is sadness. The passion of sadness is characterised by encumbrance and lack of movement. It is like *apatheia*'s evil twin:[72] it resembles dispassion but is in reality a muffling of all virtue and goodness. Something similar could be said for the passion of *acedia* (vice 6, on page 96).[73]

---

[68] Foucault, 2007[2004]: 178.

[69] Rasmussen, 2005: 155 Chryssavgis, 2003: 58. It lies at the root of modern theology's anxieties concerning the impassibility of God.

[70] *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XI.30. Sleep is also counted a passion in Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 216.

[71] Evagrius, *de orat.:* 72f, 116.

[72] Evagrius, *oct. spir.:* 12 (5.15). A point also made in Linge, 2000: 564n32.

[73] Evagrius, *oct. spir.:* 16 (7.20) .

The grammar of the passion of vainglory has the same structure. Ascetics who listen to praise for their actions have no further need of struggle. They have arrived at their objective and received their reward. For this reason, Evagrius Ponticus does not simply recommend secrecy and humility against vainglory and pride, but also perseverance.[74]

The point about perseverance, the infinity of God always being more abundant and more fascinating than our desire and progress can attain to, is brought out by other theologians contemplating God's infinitude. It is perhaps this kind of thought that founds the refusal of sadness and rest in the desert fathers and mothers. The contemplative life is not a life at rest, but a 'renewal of wonder', as one author has put it, commenting on Gregory of Nyssa.[75]

It is perhaps not surprising that the secondary literature struggles with this concept of active impassibility. The difficulty is not simply attested at the level of technique, but also finds its context at the level of cosmology. Arguments were raging in the cities whilst the gnomic statements of the *Apophthegmata Patrum* were being composed, and one of the crucial questions in these discussions was how God, who is impassible, could be an active creating force in the world. What is the nature of God's action? The traditional way to solve this problem was by way of divine logos or energy, a demiurge or a spirit of God. But when the Christological version of this argument developed on the basis of the history of the son of God and the divinity of the word of God, the same problem arose. If the logos is divine, how can it be active and still impassible? This kind of question led the Arians to deny the divinity of Christ and the orthodox to re-interpret impassibility.

There are, as we have now seen, a number of reasons to interpret the practices of the early Christian ascetics as exercises in control, critique, and objectivity. It should be sufficient, therefore, to embrace the mastery of the passions without having to write off passions as a whole. Sorabji traces this option through antique philosophy, and argues that it was embraced by a number of theologians connected with asceticism, including Basil the Great, in his ascetic rules.[76] If that option was available to desert Christians, and given the stamp of orthodoxy by such authorities, why is it that the word for moderation of passion – *metriopatheia* – does not appear once in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, whilst *apatheia* is a firmly established aspiration?

---

[74] Evagrius, *Eulog.*: 13, 20. He is followed by Symeon the New Theologian 1980: IV.5.
[75] Williams, 1993: 241.
[76] Sorabji, 2000: 392. Kallistos Ware argues something similar for Abba Isaias and Theodoret of Cyrus in Ware, 1989, and Rowan Williams portrays the discussion of this subject between Gregory of Nyssa and his sister Macrina in Williams, 1993: esp. pp236f.

Explanation could take various avenues here. Self-mastery was simply one step towards dispassion. Regulating one's life in order to get rid of the passions was crucial to the ascetic life.[77] Self mastery was not the end, but the means. Whilst ancient Christian ascetics cannot be divorced from their philosophical background, their appropriation was a Christian one: the aim of *apatheia* is love.[78]

Freedom of thought was decisive. An ascetic should try to be free from the passions in order to think freely. So we have a tentative view of the progress of the ascetic: self mastery leads to dispassion, which leads to free thoughts, and prayer. Thoughts become bound to one thing and static when that thing is represented with passion. The mind that has knowledge of an item with passion becomes bound to that insignificant item, and gives it more attention than it is worth purely on account of its use for the mind as an object of passion.[79] Only by throwing off the passion can the mind move on, and retain its flexibility and freedom.[80] Only by rejecting passionate knowledge is the person in a position to love.

The area in which the early Christian ascetics were clearest in their need to reject the passions was in their understanding of representation. This in turn is where their struggle for objectivity is itself most clear, and their function as world-rejecting free thinkers most on trial.

We have already seen over (on page 99) Evagrius Ponticus' conception of the relation between passionate representation and sin. The sight of gold is not sinful except insofar as the passions represent it to us as for us, an object of my pleasure. Here the passions are the names given to a kind of capitalist 'seeing as'.[81] The vision of the world without passion would be one of extreme intimacy and unknowing, whereas with the passions, the world becomes a set of concepts of things to be used, subjected, bought and sold.[82] This is the explanation both of Evagrius Ponticus' texts on sin in representation and the story of abba Abraham quoted above (on page 36), which continues with the words

> 'Again, you are walking in the road and you see stones and shards, and amongst them gold: do
> you have the power in your mind to think them of equal value?' And he said, 'No, but I will

---

[77] Evagrius, *Prakt.:* 35.
[78] Evagrius, *Prakt.:* 81, 84.
[79] Basilius, *hom. 10.*
[80] Evagrius, *de mal. cog.:* 22, 40.
[81] cf. Marx, 1891: chapter on 'The Nature and Growth of Capital'. Cf. also on Bataille, below, on page 110.
[82] 'it is possible to remember gold with greed and without greed, and similarly in the case of other things.' Evagrius, *de mal. cog.:* 4 cf. also Linge, 2000: 564. The consequence of this is to make no distinction between people, as regards whether they are enemies or friends, helpful or adverse: Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 68 Maximus, *carit. 1-4:* I.25.

make war against the thought so as not to take it.' The old man said, 'Behold therefore, the passion lives, but is chained.'[83]

So the understandings of gender,[84] economic value, and political utility[85] are determined by the passions. The practice of *apatheia* involves thinking things without their implications and meanings for the activity of evaluation and exchange. The passionless ascetic receives only 'bare representations'.[86]

Whilst it would be claiming too much to say that passions are identical to representations, they are certainly linked at many points in the desert corpus. Passions are associated with mental images in the memory that distract from prayer,[87] and Evagrius Ponticus uses the language of 'impassioned representation' again and again.[88] There also appears to have been a debate in his circles as to whether it is the passion or the representation that comes first.[89]

Images with passions are a particular problem when addressing the mind towards God.[90] In Evagrius Ponticus, this is given three reasons, in terms of practice, theology, and mental acts. Firstly, it is distracting to think about images when one is attempting to direct one's thought to a God whom one has not seen.[91] Secondly, it is not in keeping with the principles of negative theology to have an image in one's mind whilst praying. God is without image, so all representations are necessarily not to do with prayer.[92] Finally, Evagrius Ponticus anticipates Augustine's doctrine of the image of God being seen in the soul only when the soul remembers, understands, and loves God.[93] To pray to God is to withdraw into oneself, and 'passionate attachments to material things' distort the soul's capacity to act as a reflection of God, making it incapable of prayer.[94]

Being aware of the significance of this 'seeing as' becomes a rule in Evagrius Ponticus. Whilst keeping to the idea that the bare perception of an item is human and

---

[83] *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* X.19 (my translation) = *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Abraham 1 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* X.15.
[84] Evagrius, *de mal. cog.:* 3.
[85] Evagrius, *de mal. cog.:* 26.
[86] Evagrius, *excerpts:* 12 Evagrius, *de orat.:* 55f. Here I use Casiday's translation in Casiday, 2006: 192. Cf. Symeon the New Theologian's condemnation of seeing things 'in accordance with their passionate desires.' in Symeon the New Theologian 1980: XXIV.3.
[87] *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* II.22 Evagrius, *de mal. cog.:* 3f.
[88] Evagrius, *de mal. cog.:* 4,53,54,71 Evagrius, *skem.:* 16.
[89] Evagrius, *Prakt.:* 37.
[90] Evagrius, *Eulog.:* 30 Evagrius, *sent. ad virg.:* 6 Evagrius, *de mal. cog.:* 16, 36, and Symeon the New Theologian 1980: XXIV.3f.
[91] Evagrius, *Prakt.:* 23. Cf. also Climacus, *scal.:* Step 28.
[92] Evagrius, *de mal. cog.:* 2 Evagrius, *de orat.:* 66 Evagrius, *schol. in eccl.:* 35.
[93] Augustinus, *de trin.:* 15.
[94] Evagrius, *par. ad mon:* 2.5 Evagrius, *ep. ad mel.:* 23.

innocent, he attributes knowledge associated with acquisition, enjoyment, and esteem to demonic thoughts, and the knowledge of the perception as a sign of the nature of things and spiritual principles (essentially perception informed by scriptural exegesis) to angelic thoughts.[95] The bare thought and the angelic thought are not associated with passions. But the demonic thought is all to do with passions of jealousy, acquisition, and vainglory. Although Evagrius Ponticus doesn't ascribe to the practice of measuring the passions, his ideal of freedom from the passions is associated with bracketing knowledge of values, measuring thoughts, and determining one's own life.

2.1.3: Withdrawal from the world: challenging ethics

What was the meaning of *apatheia* for the ethical knowledge of the desert fathers and mothers? It is clear that dispassion amongst the desert Christians – and especially Evagrius Ponticus – was a polyvalent ideal. There was general agreement, though, that the passions were bound up with prejudice and knowing the world as something to be used. In rejecting the passions, they were attempting to gain control over and direction to their actions and understanding. Dispassion was an ideal of an active life of non-passivity. This understanding and lifestyle was still a significant part of the knowledge and discipline of early Christian ascetics (*pace* Foucault).[96]

Dispassion is also a mode of emancipation from the knowledge mediated by social living. Passions define things as beneficial for me as a member of the exchange society. They define people as useful for marriage (fornication), politics (pride), and honour (vainglory),[97] and things as sellable (avarice) or consumable (gluttony), etc. Dispassion signifies withdrawal from these exchanges, engendering objectivity. Dispassion leaves the world as it is: for this is the only way in which it can be beautiful.[98]

> For these five causes men love one another, whether it be to their praise or their blame: namely, for God's sake, as the virtuous man loves everybody and as the man who is not yet possessed of virtue loves the virtuous man; or for natural reasons, as parents love their children and vice versa; or for vainglory, as the man that is extolled loves the extoller; or for avarice, as one loves a wealthy man for benefits received; or for love of pleasure, as the man who cares only for his

---

[95] Evagrius, *de mal. cog.*: 8, quoted below, on page 108.
[96] 'What does the absence of *pathē*, of passions, mean for Christianity? Essentially it means renunciation of egoism, of my own singular will.' Foucault, 2007[2004]: 178. cf. Macrina's argument against passive passion in Williams, 1993: 237.
[97] 'the wages of vainglory': Evagrius, *ep.*: 7.1.
[98] On this approach to art, cf. Fried, 2007.

belly and things of sex. The first is praiseworthy, the second is in between, the rest belong to the passions.[99]

This reading of dispassion in terms of withdrawal from exchange brings us back to a consideration of the meaning of the desert. The *anachoresis* of the early Christian ascetics included both the psychological withdrawal into the heart, and the physical withdrawal into the desert: becoming an anchorite.

The reasons for choosing the desert for this purpose were obvious. In the desert there was no food to eat, nothing to evoke the passion of gluttony. There were certainly no members of the opposite sex unless they were also Christian ascetics: late antique Mediterranean society tended to confine women to the household – ruled by a husband or father – and exceptions to this (e.g. women of independent means and prostitutes) were restricted to the city. There was very little audience for one's heroic deeds, no-one to boast to. There was no market society, and no political structure. The desert was indeed a place for economic and political refugees. The desert is outside the reach of even the most eager tax-collector.[100]

So the city was the space connected with practices of acquisition and manipulation, whilst the desert refused these practices. In the city, one could speak of justice and mercy; righteousness and temperance. In the desert, the will and means to attain these values were not in place. The desert was the great exception. As such, the fathers and mothers of the desert rejected not just the praise, practices, and passions of the city: they rejected its knowledge.

In going out to the desert to be free from passion, early Christian ascetics denied their membership in the human race, for 'it is human to have passions'. What were considered human functions – eating, sleeping, drinking, having sex, speaking – were denied. The space of the monks' cells was a place of wild animals and other non-humans.

Peter Brown puts an emphasis on this interpretation of Christian monasticism as 'the opposite pole of all human society.'[101] The desert was not the place of humanity, but that of animals. Hence the most extreme ascetics were those who lived the life of a ruminant, the so-called 'grazers' mentioned in the histories of Evagrius Scholasticus and John Moschus. Danger from wild animals was very real, and a number of stories represent desert fathers and mothers braving the lairs of hyenas and big cats.[102]

---

[99] Maximus, *carit. 1-4:* II.9.
[100] Chitty, 1966: 7.
[101] Brown, 1971: 92.
[102] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* John, disciple of Abba Paul 1 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XIV.4 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* IV.5 Climacus, *scal.:* Step 7 Moschus, *prat.:* 2, 18, 58, *et passim.*

A further non-human inhabitant of the desert was the demon. The model text on desert asceticism, Athanasius' *Life of St Anthony*, is graphic in its portrayal of Anthony's retreat to his desert fortress where he was tormented by demons.[103] But other stories are more everyday in their approach: one desert father wanders in search of a new location, and spends the night in an abandoned pagan temple in the wilderness, and demons try to disturb him all night.[104] The message comes from all parts of Christian desert writing: the desert was first and foremost the home of demons, and only experienced ascetics may go there with impunity.

All this reversal of human society serves primarily to throw light on what has been abandoned by desert Christians.[105] The point of elaborating and living out a life in the desert was to demonstrate the contingency of the world of the city. The desert fathers and mothers went into the desert in order to deny all the assumptions of secular life.[106] Where human life had been assumed to be contained by the ways of human society, and anything without was simply bestial or spiritual, early Christian ascetics made 'the desert a city'. They lived the alternative. In crossing the boundaries of possibility, they made it possible to describe and know what was within those boundaries as something specific, contained, contingent, and that therefore might be otherwise. 'The world' had lost its necessity, and the *saeculum* had been placed.

---

[103] Athanasius, *v. Anton.:* 12-14.

[104] *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* V.28 = *Apoph. Patr. (anon):* 44.

[105] cf. the emphasis on disconnection from identity and society in Linge's account of ancient Christian asceticism, in stark contrast to the 'gentlemanly asceticism' of ancient philosophy: Linge, 2000: 550f.

[106] Hence the theme of being 'strangers/foreigners in the world' in the Christian literature of late antiquity: *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* X.20, 45, XVIII.40 *lib. grad.:* V.18, XIV.1, XXI.3 Evagrius, *hypo.:* 6 Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 55 Climacus, *scal.:* Step 4, receiving a magisterial exposition in Williams, 2005: ch. 2.

2.2: Ascetic Epistemology

Monastic treatment of the passions developed through various trajectories. The most famous being their reception as deadly sins or vices, which were a matter of dialogue between East and West in the early Middle Ages.[107] Passions also became a matter for medical science and the understanding of humanity in modern philosophy.[108] In matters of epistemology, however, they were part of the presupposed language of philosophy. They represent the unreasonable, the uncontrollable aspects of human nature. So far have they come from the accounts of antiquity that their relation to reason is one of patient to doctor and prisoner to guard rather than clay to potter and glass for the eye. It is striking that in antiquity, unreason can be understood as a result of dispassion, whereas in the modern age, passion is one domain of unreason.

The domain of control over the passions has a peculiar character amongst the early Christian ascetics, as compared with their philosophical heirs. We have seen that for Evagrius Ponticus and the desert fathers, to master the passions is to insert one's agency into the process of representation. In order to discern how the holy fools transform knowledge of holiness, we therefore need to identify the theory and technology of epistemology among their ascetic predecessors. How did their asceticism transform and produce knowledge?

> After lengthy observation we have learned to recognize this difference between angelic and human thoughts, and those that come from the demons. Firstly angelic thoughts are concerned with the investigation of the natures of things and search out their spiritual principles. For example, the reason why gold was made and why it is sand-like and scattered through the lower regions of the earth, and is discovered with much labour and toil; how when it is discovered it is washed and delivered to the fire and then placed in the hands of artisans who make the lampstand of the tabernacle, and incense burner, the censers, and the vessels from which by the grace of the Saviour the king of Babylon no longer drinks, but it is Cleopas who brings a heart burning with these mysteries. The demonic thought neither knows nor understands these things, but without shame it suggests only the acquisition of sensible gold and predicts the enjoyment and esteem that will come from this. The human thought neither seeks the acquisition of gold nor is concerned with investigating what gold symbolizes; rather, it merely introduces in the intellect the simple form of Gold separate from any passion of greed. The same reasoning can be applied to other matters by mentally engaging the exercise of this rule.[109]

---

[107] Johannes Climacus discusses the reduction to seven deadly sins by Gregory the Great, and concurs with the identification of vainglory with pride, in Climacus, *scal.:* Step 22.

[108] Starting with Descartes, 1989[1649].

[109] Evagrius, *de mal. cog.:* 8.

In this passage, Evagrius Ponticus outlines for us one of the ways in which early Christian ascetics may distance themselves from their knowledge of the world and produce new resonances and meanings. His angelic thought allows reality and even natural knowledge, but it is then inserted into an entirely different set of significations, each themselves referring to themes of ascetic and Christian theology. In this case, he takes the conventional and practical understanding of gold mining, and sees it as part of the story of the Exodus, the symbolism of the tabernacle, and the motif of the return from exile. These stories in turn evoke an understanding of the soul as the temple of God, its return from the exile of sin, and its participation in the sacraments of Christ, all summed up in the model of the conversion and resurrection vision on the road to Emmaus.

The above analysis of technologies of the passions amongst desert fathers showed early Christian ascetics attempting to create a break from secular knowledge by transforming their understanding and associations towards thoughts and phenomena. Their allegorical interpretation of life saturated perceptions with the presence of God. The everday is known as holy, as opposed to being subject to my desires, manipulation and market interests.

Assuming that this is no mere facet of cosmological dualism, where the pristine incorporeal mind has to be protected from the dirt of fleshly influence, what philosophical move is being made here? We have outlined the ethical implications of this kind of practice above. Here we will elaborate the theoretical implications for epistemological technology.

If the project of eradicating market, gender, and political assumptions from one's epistemology were to be espoused by a modern Christian movement, it would be entirely familiar to us. Scepticism towards the mode of representational thought is a standard facet of contemporary post-Kantian philosophy. Whether we are reading Foucault's work on the historical *a priori*, Wittgenstein's appeal to forms of life, Bataille's religious critique of reification/commodification, or Saussure's structural account of the sign, the assumption is that the way in which we think – our language, logic, and concepts – is historically mediated, and could be otherwise. We are bound to think as we do, but others might think differently. Our signs are contingent and obligatory.

Early Christian asceticism on our reading resembles an inherently modern, indeed secular project, but there are good reasons for believing that early Christian ascetics thought of their departure from the 'world' and the city as a semiotic as well as a politico-religious task. The above exegeses have certainly implied parallels with these assumptions about thought. Representations are contingent: not only may we be led astray by the simplest of

images, but we are not obliged to believe our eyes. 'Knowledge falsely so called is trusting in one's own thought that things are exactly as they appear to us.'[110] The agency of demons was capable of providing illusions, but bad habits would do just as well.[111] Similarly, representations are not simply chosen, or easily manipulated: the practice of obedience was one way in which a monk may challenge the felt obligation to believe one's representations (cf. above, on page 28). Giving up one's will to another was not primarily a way of destroying agency, but of forcing scepticism regarding thought. Humility allows the monk to challenge socially produced knowledge, of which he is himself a product.

There are obviously clear differences. Whilst Bataille critiques the practice of 'seeing as' as a whole, and appeals to the intimacy of being in the world like water in water, the desert fathers and mothers attempt to produce a 'natural' perception of the world: 'The rule and limit of absolute chastity is to have the same feelings regarding animate and inanimate beings, rational and irrational.'[112] This does not deny the fact that both Bataille and early Christian ascetics reject the economic perception of the world as primarily utilitarian benefits, equivalent to labour and market values. Their reactions, however, diverge. Whilst Bataille eliminates thought's connection to the market through needless and irrational consumption, the ascetic cultivates practices of interpretation that read the world as caught up in a semiotic system pointing to God through symbol and metaphor.

So far, all these readings of ancient texts could be a generous interpretation of certain ascetic practices. Can evidence be found that this ascetic approach was grounded in a thought through epistemological technology that required the Christian to interrupt the interpretation of the world with their moral agency? In order to investigate this, we must leave the oriental desert fathers and mothers, who eschewed the making of philosophical theories, and look to the other end of the Mediterranean at another ascetic theologian.

Why should we consider Augustine's work as a contribution to early Christian asceticism? There are a great number of reasons internal to Augustine's own life and work that would suggest such a move: his lifelong monastic vocation; his correspondence with ascetic thinkers (noticeably Jerome); the influence of the story of St Anthony in his conversion[113]; his debate with Pelagius on asceticism and the city, along with its reception in the community of John Cassian, and more could be added. There are also a series of literary parallels: his interpretation of Platonism as a call to the religious life; the wave of Latin

---

[110] Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.*: 373.
[111] Climacus, *scal.*: Step 26.
[112] Climacus, *scal.*: Step 15; cf. Bataille, 1989[1973] and above, on page 103.
[113] Augustinus, *conf.*: VIII.vi.14 and VIII.xii.29.

(translations of) hagiography into Latin in his time[114]; Augustine's *Rule* (whose authorship – unlike its connection to Augustine's circle – is disputed);[115] and the general appropriation and discussion of philosophical considerations of asceticism.[116]

But the claim to relevance here is not a very bold one. It is not that Augustine was read by the Eastern ascetic tradition, or that his aims were the same. The level of philosophical and theological reflection in his work – far more systematic and speculative than even Evagrius Ponticus – are all but unthinkable in the Egyptian and Palestinian desert communities of his time. However, precisely because the latter were silent on issues of epistemology, we may turn to Augustine as someone who shared a starting point – the ascetic life of monastic community – and faced similar moral problems of the practice and conceptualisation of desire. The differences between them were to contribute to setting the scene for the later developments of Eastern and Western monasticism. Their similarities are a result of their treatment and practice of a shared heritage.

In what may be his most overtly philosophical work,[117] Augustine makes an appeal to pre-discursive conditions that are vital to have in place before any good interpretation may be endeavoured. So he prefaces his essay on the function of signs, which was to set the agenda for Mediaeval philosophy of language in Europe, with a book on things, to which signs refer. This book outlined a categorisation into things that are to be used (*uti*), and things that are to be enjoyed (*frui*). The latter have value in and of themselves, whereas the former are loved because of the value they derive from another.

The relation this distinction bears to signs is complex, but essentially, the use/enjoy division is overlaid the sign/thing distinction. We refer signs endlessly until we reach a thing, and we use things endlessly until we reach something to be enjoyed. In both cases, the endpoint is God: all signs refer ultimately to God through natural signs – smoke is a sign of fire, the world is a sign of God; all things are to be used except God, who can be enjoyed. However, since all things are created, God can be recognised (as reference) and enjoyed in everything.[118] God is not a thing, however,[119] and so paradoxically, the only one that can be enjoyed rather than used, referred to rather than used to refer, undermines the general rule that signs refer to things.

---

[114] e.g. Cassianus, *Collationes*; Rufinus, *Hist. Monach.*; Hieronymus, *v. Pauli.*
[115] For a translation and discussion, cf. Lawless, 1987.
[116] Most explicitly in his rule and *op. mon.* For a longer discussion, cf. Lawless 2002.
[117] Augustinus, *doctr. chr.:* I.
[118] Thomas Aquinas, *summa theologiae:* 1a 5.1,4 For more on this line of interpretation, see Thomas, 2003 Williams, 1989.
[119] Augustinus, *doctr. chr.:* I.v.5.

In short, Augustine gets himself into a muddle, and bangs his head against the limits of language. This is a result of the fact that he is directing his intervention *before language*. He is attempting to lay out the ground rules for reference, in his own words. All logical consideration of meaning will have to make use of different types, or a meta-language, which will itself require a logic, enquiry into which generates an infinite regress. It is concerning this regress that Wittgenstein bids us be silent,[120] or to play with our self-conscious nonsense.[121] We speak of what we do not know.

The specific warning Augustine is making concerns reference and love. He wants to point out that we read scriptures in order to help us to love God. Yet this very project is flawed. Because in reading, we refer to things that we can and have identified through thought and language. They are what we love and make use of. But God is not to be used, or identified, or read off from a script. God is the creator of every reader, and so cannot be an element in a system, discourse, or instruction. God is to be enjoyed as the immanent presence to all thought.

After his ethico-theological introduction to God-language, Augustine continues with a treatment of signs in the interpretation of scripture. He points out that the systems of signification and coding that we have received are established by long years of habit and established authority.[122] This habit and authority is neither necessary nor always desirable, so he directs the student of scripture to the learning of these codes and institutions, but with a critical eye towards their origin and implications. The result is what could be called the first project of semiotic cultural criticism.

The aim is for the Christian user of signs to cultivate their agency as regards culture and language. To that end, the reader is directed to the origin and validity of each regime of truth. Magical knowledge, for example, is rejected because of its origin in contracts and common language with demons.[123] Logic and number are accepted because of their rational validity.[124] Other areas of knowledge are contingent: they are useful for the smooth running of society, but the Christian is not bound by them. These include the configuration of gender, rank, measurement, and economic value:[125] precisely those domains the desert fathers and Evagrius called impassioned meanings.

---

[120] This is the reference of 'that of which we cannot speak' in the closing line of Wittgenstein, 1961[1921].
[121] Wittgenstein, 1998[1977]: 64.
[122] Augustinus, *doctr. chr.:* II.xiii.19.
[123] Augustinus, *doctr. chr.:* II.xx.30-xxiv.37.
[124] Augustinus, *doctr. chr.:* II.xxxix.58.
[125] Augustinus, *doctr. chr.:* II.xxv.39.

Augustine echoes Evagrius Ponticus' use of the knowledge of his day, baptised through the complex web of scriptural references. He even recommends young theologians to draw up reference books of the ways in which the Bible refers to the various sciences: what animals signify what, what all the numbers refer to, and so on. However, this is not simply for the sake of understanding the Bible but also of understanding the world. It is an ascetical task as well as a hermeneutical one.[126]

Augustine inserts love into the faculty of speech and representation. His semiotics is both cast as a preliminary stage of interpretation and as an ascetic exercise in 'seeing as', akin to that of Evagrius Ponticus and the desert fathers and mothers. His biblical interpretation is part and parcel of this: both appropriating non-doctrinal knowledge for the sake of discerning truth, and using the text to exert an influence upon the truth of the world.

If we are to accept that early Christian asceticism proposed an epistemological practice of inserting agency into the process of knowledge and representations, there are a certain number of implications. Firstly, the knowledge we have received in the world is contingent, so that it is possible to manipulate it and change it into something else. Secondly, knowledge is bound up with forms of life, so that the transformation of knowledge entails a practice, and not just a thought. It involves assessing the production of knowledge in the light of Christian taxonomies and ordered love.

The first implication, asserting that knowledge-making processes are contingent, is bound to be surprising. It does not only question common knowledge, but common concepts and systems of thought, the pre-requisites of knowledge. So, for example, desert fathers and mothers did not challenge the geography of holiness in late antiquity by discussing whether prostitutes could be holy: they visited prostitutes and prayed with them. Their practice transforms the way in which prostitution is thought and known without discussion.

One way of making knowledge contingent is to make it specific. If a system of knowledge can be described, it is not all there is, but one way among many. Therefore it is not necessary, and can be transformed or rejected. So for example we saw a number of different attitudes to the law and to monastic variation in part one (on page 54): these attitudes make it possible to experiment with new Christian relations to law and monasticism. They refuse to let the practical discussion of the definition of monasticism be closed. The early Christian ascetics were innovative regarding new forms of life. Whilst withdrawal from the world of

---

[126] This will mean re-casting the debate concerning the function of the *de doctrina christiana*, which has arisen in the wake of the seminal article Verheijen, 1974. For more on this, see Thomas, 2003 Arnold and Bright, 1995 Harrison, 2006.

politics was a commonplace in the philosophy of late antiquity, the communities and asceticism constructed by the desert fathers and mothers were both radical and new.

The perspective gained by these new forms of life in the desert enabled the transformation of a concept. The 'world' had for some time been thought of not only in terms of political life, but as a system of desire, by those embracing monastic withdrawal to the desert. The biblical source most quoted is the definition given by John: the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, and the pride of life (1 John 2.16). The geographical move, however, gave this denomination a very concrete character. The world becomes the life of the city. It is the contingent configuration of family, political alliance, money, and desire. Physical departure from this environment allowed the desert fathers and mothers to conceptualise that system of life and knowledge as just one among many. It is specifically the way of 'the world', as opposed to that of angels or demons or the desert.

This is the epistemological implication of the technique of dissociation outlined in part one (on page 75ff). Once the world could be looked at as an object, it could be conceptualised, made into a specific variable. Becoming a stranger means seeing one's life – what one has become estranged from – as an object, as one among many. It is the privilege of foreigners to see very clearly the difference between what is necessary and what is contingent in a culture.

The conceptualisation of 'the world' is therefore a test case of the technological epistemological revolution of early Christian asceticism. It is an instance – along with their control of the passions – of someone inserting their agency into the process of knowledge through forcing into place a governing concept. Later traditions of asceticism combine the tasks:

> Someone withdrawing from the world for the sake of the Lord is no longer attached to possessions, that he should not appear to be deceived by the passions. If you have left the world, then do not begin to reach out for it. Otherwise your passions will come back to you.[127]

This particular technique assumes that describing something involves transcending it in some way (virtual or otherwise). It is only when the desert fathers and mothers had withdrawn from the world that they were able to describe it as such in any detail. It is not that it had no function in forms of life previous to the flight to the desert, but that it gained a set of

---

[127] Climacus, *scal.:* Step 3.

functions afterwards. The specificity of these functions, and their descriptive nature, all imply that the agent is not necessarily participating in what previously had described everything.

The grammar of 'the world' – irrespective of the specific transformation forced by the flight to the desert – is such that it lends itself to transcendence. John's original definition in terms of desire and pride was already revolutionary. Because the world is all that is (the case). To describe it as contingent is to assert the possibility of revolution. John's statement implies that everything can and has changed. Everything can be questioned. Everything is contingent. Because everything can be compared to the realm of the Father. In concrete terms, this means for the first Christians that everything can be compared to the church. For the desert fathers and mothers, everything (including the church) can be compared to the desert. And this does not preclude comparing everything (including the desert) to a further situation, for example madness.

Each comparison suggests a new bifurcation of reality and allows new modes of description. But since we may in each case be describing everything that is (the case), the bifurcation implies total revolution. Everything becomes liable to transformation. The simple act of description forces contingency by transcendence: pushing oneself away from what one thought was the unmoveable edge.

This practice of knowledge that objectifies a contingent world of course mirrors the modern revolutionary practice of criticising the now, highlighted in Foucault's exegeses of Kant.[128] The question as to what determines the present and what is to determine the future is addressed by Kant and Foucault as the paradigmatic philosophical task. Describing the present by tracing its limits is merely the chronological equivalent of the topological practice of placing the world through fleeing to its borders. Both are epistemological as well as political projects.

The second implication of the early Christian ascetic insertion of agency into technologies of knowledge and representations that we noted was the integration of knowledge with forms of life. There are obvious examples of this. Living in community will give you a reading of Paul's letters to the churches that sympathises much more with his reconciliatory words than life in absolute solitude. Rituals structure one's sense of history and relation to the everyday, and everyday negotiations are the context for one's knowledge of manners and social order.

---

[128] Foucault presented a number of different exegeses of Kant's article 'What is Enlightenment' (Kant, 2007[1784]) during the final years of his life, e.g. in Foucault, 2000[1984] Foucault, 2007[1990] Foucault, 2008: 8-39.

The key areas we mentioned above – gender, economic value, political alliances – that were shunned by desert fathers as generated by the passions are all both practices of life and domains of knowledge. Gender is configured by social roles and marital practices in late antiquity. It corresponds to a code of knowledge concerning what is masculine and what is feminine. This knowledge can be adhered to or transgressed. Economics is configured by a market, and entails knowledge of everything's price. Political alliances are forged through friendship and civic duties, and yield knowledge of the city's life, its people, and of politics.

In each of these cases, abandoning the form of life threatens the necessity of the knowledge. Someone who does not care how much his property costs does not strike his bank manager as odd: they can not have a conversation. They are strangers to each other, just as those initiated into the world of facebook cannot be 'friends' with those who are not. As Jerome says, 'each is a madman for the other.'[129]

A further example can be given from our above discussion of vainglory. Whilst there are indeed a great number of practical solutions to the problem of vainglory – secrecy, exposure to the elements, refusal to attempt extreme asceticism, holy foolishness – one solution suggested was ignorance. You can avoid the practices that lead you to glory in your own fabulousness, or you can simply be ignorant of the categories that qualify you as a successful monk: 'simpler people do not usually succumb to the poison of vainglory, which is, after all, a loss of simplicity and a hypocritical mode of behavior.'[130]

In other words, we have an asceticism that integrates knowledge and practice so as to make them mutually dependent. We have seen that challenging the form of life that founds particular knowledges will produce effects within that knowledge. At the same time, to challenge the knowledge (by for example claiming that women are not created as wives; that money is defined by human sovereignty, and friendship is more godly than status) will produce other behaviours (as we saw in part one).

The ascetic revolutionary epistemology outlined here is based on the ethics of renunciation. A casuistry of vainglory and objectivity justifies denying worldly knowledge. The denial is further allied to a thesis concerning the knowability of God.

The early Christian ascetics addressed their practice to the process of knowledge. Their control over passions, forcing of concepts, and reflection on knowledge-shaping forms of life were all ways of inserting agency into the formation of the conditions of knowledge.

---

[129] Hieronymus, *ep.:* xlv.

[130] Climacus, *scal.:* 22. Hence John considers 'acting stupid' as a response to vainglory: Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 332.

Some of them even reflected on the issue and developed epistemological theories to deal with the problem.

2.3: The Work of a Silence

Ascetics and philosophers work on their language and knowledge. Once again, we have constructed a picture containing very little theology. We must therefore add this one element, in order to consider their contribution not simply to the technology of knowledge and epistemology, but also to the challenges of theology and god-talk.

The ascetic and foolish approach to theology is of central importance not simply because we are interested in their religious knowledge just as much as their religious practice. It is also the foundation stone and breaking point of their knowledge: foundation stone because they reject the knowledge of the city and embrace the desert as the place of God and the theological location; breaking point because they embrace the desert for its featurelessness – the desert is the place of the impossibility of God-talk. This breaking point defines the location and manner of the transformation of knowledge. When the desert becomes a city, the knowledge of God can be spoken. When the holy fools take desert solitude back into the city, they challenge the theology of urban Christianity.

We will therefore have to investigate not only the theology of early Christian ascetics and holy fools, but their specifically apophatic theology. The norms of the desert fathers and mothers were described by their techniques of withdrawal from the world. Their knowledge will be described in the ways by which they refuse to speak of God: their 'practice of ignorance.'[131] How do they avoid the danger of misrepresenting God? How do they work on a language and knowledge that does not reach out to God and yet shapes their lives? How to be holy when the holy is inexpressible? In this way, we will be forced to treat the subject both historically and notionall through elucidating the words of early Christian ascetics and through explaining the moves allowed by the domain of negative theology. In this way, I will draw on two very different sources in what follows: our closely defined historical sources will yield arguments concerning manifestations of negative theology in early Christian asceticism, and the Christian tradition as a whole (including modern authors) will elucidate the grammar of negative theology as such, by showing what moves are and were available to the project.

2.3.1: Saying No to Theology

Theology and religious practice were intimately bound up for early Christian ascetics. In spite of their reticence regarding God-talk and doctrine, their asceticism demanded reference to God:

---

[131] Climacus, *scal.*: Step 4.

The man who wants to talk about love is undertaking to speak about God. But it is risky to talk about God and could even be dangerous for the unwary. Angels know how to speak about love, but even they do so only in proportion to the light within them.

"God is love". But someone eager to define this is blindly striving to measure the sand in the ocean.

Love, by its nature, is a resemblance to God, insofar as this is humanly possible. In its activity it is inebriation of the soul. Its distinctive character is to be a fountain of faith, an abyss of patience, a sea of humility.

Love is the banishment of every sort of contrariness, for love thinks no evil.

Love, dispassion, and adoption are distinguished by name, and name only. Light, fire, and flame join to fashion one activity. So too with love, dispassion, and adoption.

… There is nothing wrong about offering human analogies for longing, fear, concern, zeal, service, and love of God. Lucky the man who loves and longs for God, as a smitten lover does for his beloved. Lucky the man whose fear of God is in no way less than the fear of the accused in front of a judge. Lucky the man who is caught up with the zeal of loyal slaves toward their owner. Lucky the man who is as passionately concerned with the virtues as a jealous husband watching over his wife. Lucky the man who prays before God like a courtier before the king. Lucky the man who strives without end to please the Lord as others try to please men.[132]

The Christian who attempts to live the good life is caught in a dilemma, according to John Climacus. Either they call their love purely their own, and so fall into the trap of vainglory, or they attribute it to God's work. But then they stand in danger of defining God according to their own life. So Climacus exhorts the Christian to refuse the task of measuring love and goodness, and instead fill up the measure of human goodness within them.

So theology is a dangerous necessity of speech about love. At the same time, it is only the person whose love has been purified that can properly engage in theology. In the same step, Climacus described the pure Christian as someone completely distracted by the love of God, unaware of hunger, or danger, or self. It is only when these concerns of measuring the self and the body have been brushed aside that theology can take place.

So the good life entails and warns against theology. But good theology is not possible until the good life has been achieved. For Climacus, apophaticism and kataphatacism are pre-requisites and results of love. By loving and not knowing God, we can become good. By

---

[132] Climacus, *scal.:* Step 30.

becoming good, we can know the Trinity and the analogical nature of our love. For 'Purity makes of a disciple someone who can speak of God, and he can move on to a knowledge of the Trinity.'

How can a Christian attempt to not know God? If all apophatic theologians were consistent, we would not know about it. Because they would not be able to tell us that they are theologians. Sooner or later, an apophatic theologian has to say something, and at some point, she will say something about God.[133]

For all its heuristic usefulness, the discipline of apophatic theology is not typically something embraced by individual theologians. Denys the Areopagite is not a monolithic apophatic theologian, because his works include a great deal of constructive theology, not least his interpretations of ecclesiastical practice in the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*.[134] It would be more accurate to say that certain theologians sometimes write in an apophatic mode.

The Christian tradition notes an overriding theological reason to abandon the apophatic mode, break silence, and say something (wrong) about God, and that is described by Augustine, after he had once more banged his head against the limits of language:

> Have I spoken something, have I uttered something, worthy of God? No, I feel that all I have done is to wish to speak; if I did say something, it is not what I wanted to say. How do I know this? Simply because God is unspeakable. But what I have spoken would not have been spoken if it were unspeakable. For this reason God should not even be called unspeakable, … Yet although nothing can be spoken in a way worthy of God, he has sanctioned the homage of the human voice, and chosen that we should derive pleasure from our words in praise of him.[135]

So strict apophaticism on its own is insufficient, as it is incapable of praise, and therefore strives against the purpose of humanity to serve and praise God. It also assumes something positive about God, namely unspeakability. But speaking of God is also insufficient, as it is doomed to failure. We do not know when we are speaking the truth. Words refer to things, and God is not a thing. The need for silence is accepted by those who allow the validity of the project of knowing God. But not accepting the task of knowing God also implies silence about God.

---

[133] For Michel de Certeau, this defines the domain of spirituality as well: where silence and speech are equally impossible. Certeau, 1973: 153.

[134] Denys, *e.h.*

[135] Augustinus, *doctr. chr.:* I.vi.6. Cf. also Denys, *e.h.:* I.2.

Theology is therefore caught between disobedience and nonsense: either it keeps silent, and lives in rebellion to God, or it speaks of and to God, but only does so falsely. Why is God-talk so doomed to failure?

Take the statement 'God is immutable'. An argument for the statement could be 'We know that God is immutable because if She were mutable, then there would be something that causes action in God. God is not a caused thing but the cause of things, so God is immutable.'

This argument (with which I have no great problem) is not an apophatic one. Although 'immutable' means the same as 'not mutable', it can still be thought as a positive quality. This can be shown both *de facto* and *de jure*: on the one hand, it is a positive quality because it determines God's relation to movement and causality, namely that God is always the subject rather than the object of these predicates; on the other hand, certain theologians[136] have had problems with this doctrine, which hinders them from speaking of God's repentance and mercy. So it is not an instance of saying nothing about God.

This particular problem arises because of the logical form of the denial. Suppose someone were to assert the traditional statement of apophatic theology, that 'God is darkness'. If we are to be strict about our language, we would have to deny this. So the alternative would be that 'God is light'. That doesn't seem to solve our problem though, so we have to look at the grammar of the terms. Darkness and light are comparative terms: if we are in complete darkness, we can see nothing. If we then are able to see something at all, it means that there is a tiny degree of light, so that it is not completely dark. If it is not completely dark, therefore, it must be slightly light. So the statement 'God is not dark' means the same as 'God is light', as long as we do not take either term to be complete. If we want to, we could say that God is neither light nor dark, but that would – in keeping with the grammar of light and dark – also allow the statement that God is both light and dark.[137]

The only way, it seems, to preserve strict apophaticism and deny the statement that 'God is dark' is to work on the scope of the word 'not'. 'Not' can grammatically be treated as an adverb, and therefore can function adverbially or sententially. We have so far only used it adverbially of the adjective 'dark'. If we raise the scope of the 'not', it can refer to the entire sentence, producing 'It is not the case that God is dark'. Now this does not commit us to applying the categories of darkness and light at all: it has the force of a blank denial.

---

[136] e.g. Karl Barth, Walter Moberly.

[137] Kant argues something similar to this with regard to the proposition that a body has a good smell in Kant, 1929[1781]: B 531; Denys the Areopagite is also acutely aware of the ambiguity of certain negations: Denys, *myst.:* I.

However, this is not quite right either. Having denied that we can predicate concepts of light and dark (mutability, or size, or longevity, etc.), we still have the problem of what we can predicate of God. But if we look at the word 'dark', we all know more or less what we mean with the word. It has a meaning in other sentences so that we can at least be clear about the parameters of meaning even when we use it metaphorically. For apophatic theology, this is not the case with the word 'God'. The words are used in entirely different ways. As Kant puts it:

> The cosmological ideas [*viz.* 'darkness' etc.] alone have the peculiarity that they can presuppose their object, and the empirical synthesis required for its concept, as being given.[138]

Since there is no such givenness with the concept of God, which has been inherited by the Christian tradition from various sources and translations – the pagan 'gods' of Greek and Roman religion, the Hebrew tetragrammaton, Plato's demiurge and Aristotle's unmoved mover – we can not simply assume its meaning. We know what it means for a night and hair to be dark, because we have experience of truly predicating things of nights and hair, and predicating dark of things like them. This is not the case with predicating things of God, who is the only one of her species, so that no one is like him. So the very project of theology is problematic before we even begin to say something about God (whatever/whoever God may be).

There are three solutions to this problem that I want to outline here, based on religious experience, values, and work on thought, respectively.

1. We could replace the word 'God' with the expression 'the one whom we pray to/worship/obey etc.' Whilst this solution has advantages that it does not assume much notional content, it does assume that our prayer, worship, etc. occur in the context of true religion. Prayer and worship have their own reference, and Augustine's *Confessions* is possibly one of the most consistent attempts at a systematic work of God talk using the word 'you' as reference. However, speaking to God begs all the questions that speaking of God does: it assumes that he is listening, that she interacts with the world, etc. True religion is informed by and informs theology, but does not cut the Gordian knot of God-talk.

2. We could replace the word 'God' with a traditional reference, such as 'that than which no greater can be conceived.' Although a popular choice, this way forward is

---

[138] Kant, 1929[1781]: B 507.

subject to a variety of factors. Firstly, it is fairly clear to any modern reader of the fathers and mothers of the church that their concept of greatness is quite different to our modern everyday understanding. These values and definitions are presupposed in language and theology. Augustine makes regular[139] appeal to sanity in reference to God: pagan theology is not just wrong, it is mad and foolish. Such a break with the religious culture of his time is, as we have seen (over, in 2.1: Practices of Thought in the Desert) in keeping with the dissociation of the desert fathers and mothers from the ethics of the city. If we are to call God great, then we have to be aware of what our language also calls 'great'.[140]

3. The third solution is to work on our language. Given that our religion and definitions have to take for granted that we already live in an encoded world, that we already have an established set of meanings, then we must deal with what we have before we can propose new practices of true religion or new meanings of the divine. As Rowan Williams has put it in his attempt to define the enterprise of Theology:

I assume that the theologian *is* always beginning in the middle of things. There is a practice of common life and language already there, a practice that defines a specific shared way of interpreting human life as lived in relation to God. The meanings of the word 'God' are to be discovered by watching what this community does.[141]

The obvious example for this approach in late antiquity is the development of a common language to speak of God in the various doctrinal formulations. In each case, theologians and churchmen take up language already being used in Scripture, thought, prayer, and philosophy, and refine it for their current use. It is also for this reason, I take it, that Thomas Aquinas lays out the various ways in which we speak of God at the beginning of the *Summa*.[142] He did not then write 'Now we know the truth about God', but 'and this is what we all call God.' He then attempts to carve out a language that is consistent, based on these established verbal practices. It has been argued that this is what he is doing when he establishes God's 'formal features' in questions 2-25 of the first part of the *Summa*.[143]

---

[139] Augustinus, *doctr. chr.:* I.ix.9 Augustinus, *de civ. dei:* VI.10 *et passim.*
[140] Denys, *d.n.:* VII Evagrius, *de orat.:* 73.
[141] Williams, 2000: xii.
[142] Thomas Aquinas, *summa theologiae:* 1a.2.3.
[143] Turner, 2004: 41-44.

Augustine does something similar with the word 'God' in the words following his admission of nonsense (quoted over on page 120). Acknowledging that all who use the word 'God' (both Christians and non-Christians) are inspired to think of a 'being than which there is nothing better or more exalted',[144] and that we know nothing from the name itself, he proceeds to list the values held dear by various people, showing what they will imagine or conceive when they hear the name 'God'. He then describes a process of identifying superior values, eliminating inferior ones, and abstracting high virtues from the things we esteem highest (life from living things, wisdom from the wise, etc.). The conclusion of all this is ultimately the work of God's grace in our thoughts and character:

> our minds must be purified so that they are able to perceive that light and then hold fast to it. Let us consider this process of cleansing as a trek, or a voyage, to our homeland; though progress towards the one who is ever present is not made through space, but through integrity of purpose and character.[145]

Given that the apophatic theologian is caught between the necessity and insufficiency of language and knowledge, one of these solutions must be espoused, or another proposed. Our knowledge is saturated with terms that apply to the world, and belief in God the Creator of that world implies that this is not a problem. We have only to identify the goodness of creation and apply it analogically to God. However, our standards are so burned that we never know when we have achieved a genuine perception of the good. It is only when our knowledge of the good has been utterly transformed that we can know the good.

An apophatic theology that consistently suspects knowledge of God must therefore be suspicious of the language of theology. Whether it grounds its God-reference in religious practice, authoritative definitions, or everyday language, it is unable to avoid the suppositions of human culture. It is obliged to embrace a form of language-critique. Its voice is not its own.

One thinker to have done more than most to advance the study of apophaticism in the Christian tradition in recent years is Denys Turner,[146] and it will perhaps be useful at this point to take his position as an example of a sophisticated statement of the possibility of restating the apophatic (and cataphatic) position. I choose Turner (rather than, for example, Marion, Derrida, McGinn or Lash) because he gives good answers to some of the difficult questions I have raised here. Ultimately these answers themselves become problematic.

---

[144] Augustinus, *doctr. chr.:* I.vii.7.
[145] Augustinus, *doctr. chr.:* I.x.10.
[146] e.g. in Turner 1995, 2002, 2004, and 2008.

Turner bases his statement of apophaticism on the patristic expression of unknowing that unites Plato's cave with Moses' 'face to face' meeting with God. The framework for this is given by Denys the Areopagite. The apophatic theologian must progressively deny both similarities and contrasts, progressing through the concepts of human knowledge, from those we are not tempted to apply to God ('God is a teapot, a body, a rock, a dove, an angry soldier') to those which we are ('God is being, existent, light, the perceiver of the universe, our maker'). We deny both similarity and contrast because our words – learnt as they are in application to created reality – are not appropriate for predication of divinity, even in the negative. We deny both bad and good concepts of God to avoid thinking that we have sufficiently understood her.[147]

For Turner, theological language breaks apart and is meant to break apart. No language is appropriate of God. 'If it is apophatic, then it is *beyond* language.'[148] Language collapses *as such*. It is not simply that we have not managed to use it properly. It does not work.

> theological talk has a grammar. It is a language. But that said, it is the grammar of a mystery, of language which breaks down according to determinable rules of breakdown. Theological speech is subject to a sort of *programmed* obsolescence.[149]

After the breakdown of language, the theologian still needs certain strategies to make theology fall apart correctly. There must be no opening for the temptation to rest in one's success or to capture God's essence. For this reason, the theologian must muster all the resources of theological *style* and *pragmatics* – how language is used, and to what purpose – that will succeed in making theology act properly without positing a set of true propositions. Turner's examples of this span the mixed metaphors of Denys' mystical theology[150] and Eckhart's rhetoric[151] that both show what cannot be said: that this theological sentence is not true.

Here I shall be forced to sacrifice the canons of fairness in order to use Turner's presentation to demonstrate a few further problems with the apophatic project as he (and I) attempt it. The problems concern the necessity of language, the successful statement of theological failure, and defaults in everyday practice.

---

[147] for Turner's exegesis of Denys, cf. Turner 1995: 19-49.
[148] Turner 2004: 160.
[149] Turner 2004: 186.
[150] Turner 2002: 18.
[151] Turner 2004: 104-107.

Firstly, it should be noted that concerning the theory of language, Turner is certainly not naïve. It is tempting to assume that it is an easy thing to say that language is deficient. To think that when I fail to express my thought, it is because of a fault in language, whereas my pristine thought is prior to language and untainted by its creaturely historical nature. In reality, the rejection of language as such is also the denial of knowledge, science, and perhaps more seriously all the ways of being together which are entirely dependent on speech and truth. It is easy to claim that our modern age lacks the common references and standards of truth that held previous communities together, but if that were the case, then I would surely be utterly bewildered when a stranger asks me for the time, small talks about the weather, or tries to sell me a watch. I am not, and my lack of bewilderment is evidence of the good functioning of language.

I am, however, confused about who I refer to with the word 'God', and Turner informs me to my relief that this is because of the inadequacy of language itself rather than my religion. Now, leaving aside my relief (which would no doubt be short lived when I contemplate how who I am is constructed by what I say), how is my language inadequate? Turner wants to stress that it is not merely my conception of God that is at fault, but my understanding of everything – of existence itself – falls apart in light of the apophatic task.

Instead of positing that it is only theological language rather than everyday language that falls apart, Turner embraces the connectedness of all language.[152] It is simply not possible to challenge the grammar of existence and then assume that we can go on talking about physics and atoms and stars in the same way. Theology does not take place in a sealed room.

I suspect that Turner will want to steer between the two dangers of denying all forms of language-mediated community on the one hand and allowing all everyday language (even the kind that appeals to theology like coronations, spiritual exercises, etc.) to continue as it is. He might claim that the difference imposed on language and thought by the existence of a creator who is not created but is not different from creation either is not a discernible difference. He calls it a displacement of reason.[153] It is a change in perspective, but not one of substance.

The rhetoric of the breakdown of language does however bear an uncomfortable resemblance to the values of detachment of solitude that so often accompany apophatic theology.[154] Turner's theology comes close to resulting in a silent hermit's theology, itself so

---

[152] Turner 1995: 255; 2002: 17.
[153] Turner 2004: 242.
[154] Detachment in particular is part of Turner's reading of Eckhart in Turner 1995: 168-185.

easily conditioned by particular theological justifications and forms, as we saw in our above analysis of the desert fathers (above, 1.3: Ascetic Positivism: the sine qua non of renunciation). We will return to the problem of telling silence below (on page 136).

Turner's apophaticism does, however, include a set of practices that contribute specific substance to his refusal. We mentioned issues of style and act above. We could also go into further detail concerning liturgy and asceticism. Turner reads Eckhart and the *Cloud of Unknowing*, together with its cognate literature as providing a critique of desire that comes close to our above analysis of passions.[155]

It is crucial that the apophatic process yield such specific result because of the prior existence of life and language. Apophatic theology may not simply withdraw from the task of transforming language because theology is *already* deployed in the everday to justify an entire range of social functions, from the most obvious religious and state practices to the subtle theological references of money,[156] celebrity cults ('idols') and education.

For this reason, it is so disappointing that Turner resorts to such secular theological discourse when describing the most specific part of his project: namely the 'program' by which Theology falls apart. Why does he describe the breakdown of language and theological achievement as being 'embarrassed into silence'[157] or a 'crisis of depression'[158] when the theologically processed language of vainglory and dispassion is available to him?

This is not merely a challenge to Turner's highly prized orthodoxy. It is a warning concerning our replacement of knowledge about God with knowledge about the ways in which we fall short of her. If we do not know who we are trying to describe with our theological concepts, then neither do we know 'how to describe their degree of inadequacy.'[159] We are cut loose and there is no standard to judge by. That is why it is essential to be alert to the ways in which we describe the breakdown of theology, lest we re-insert a standard of goodness (adequacy, health) after we have undermined the idea of the possibility of speaking goodness.

Turner appeals twice to the notion of shame: first through the theologian's embarrassment, and then in describing the crisis of depression. The ascetic theologian feels shame at their inability to describe God. She may also then either embrace what early Christian ascetics would call vainglory at her discover (Turner deploys an Aristotelian

---

[155] cf. Turner 1995: 183-185; 209.
[156] on which cf. now Goodchild 2007.
[157] Turner 1995: 23; 2002: 18.
[158] Turner 1995: 243.
[159] Turner 1995: 39.

argument and calls it smugness) or face the consequences of her discovery in the loss of all standards by which honour and shame might have been allocated. This loss is also the loss of self, and is experienced as a crisis of depression.

Now Turner is aware of the problems of using imported vocabulary, and therefore includes his own analysis of depression. This is not the case with embarrassment, although I suppose it would be possible. Here I want to mark out the danger. It is tempting to assume that we have achieved something by grounding or explaining our apophaticism in lived experience (of embarrassment, vainglory, etc.). But Turner wants to think of this kind of theology as an ongoing process. He speaks of 'arrested apophaticism',[160] and the dangers of stopping at self-congratulation.[161] I would suggest that these dangers had already been mapped out by those who thought out the practice of apophaticism in late antiquity and warned against the stagnation inherent in vainglory.

So to sum up my reading of Turner, we can see that he certainly does take seriously the practical implications of the apophatic project. However, in attempting to draw the failure of language from the inside, he makes appeal to a series of standards – shame, depression, coherent language – that themselves are vulnerable to apophatic critique.

How do we proceed from here to the theological practice of late antiquity? What practices of theological breakdown are licit and able to resist the stagnation of apophatic denial? We will consider first the way of holy foolishness, in its development of the critique of religious practice and knowledge developed by the desert fathers and mothers. Then we will continue to assess holy foolishness in the light of the diverse practices of silence and the failure of knowledge in negative theology.

2.3.2: Babbling against the Machine

In part one it was argued that the holy fools denied the cataphatic element in early Christian asceticism (cf. above, on page 40). The techniques of the desert fathers and their theological partners worked towards estrangement from society. This estrangement had a positive element: the monk abandons the city to fall into the arms of the common life and ordered solitude of monasticism, with all its forms, rituals, and practices. In this section, we will return to this thesis about the holy fools, but with particular reference to the transformative technology of knowledge and its critical relation to cultural institutions. After

---

[160] Turner 2002: 16.
[161] Turner 1995: 243.

a summary of the relevant aspects of the fools' way of life, we will consider the significance of these specific ways of challenging the smooth running of society.

Holy fools distance themselves from both the knowledge of the city and that of Christian asceticism through a non-silent refusal of technologies of knowledge. Isidora's reaction to her discovery by the visiting monk is a case in point:

> When she came in he saw the rag on her head and, falling down at her feet, he said, 'Bless me!' She too fell down at his feet and said 'Bless me, my lord.' All the women were amazed at this and said, 'Abba, do not let her insult you. She is touched.'[162]

De Certeau draws attention to the way in which Isidora refuses to be set up by Piteroum in the position of a beneficent leader, working in the forms and language of the community to support the forms of honour and shame that have become institutional.

> He loosens her from her infinity. He fixes her into the place he formerly occupied, that of blessing, and of being "father" (superior of the order). … In this case, the idiot defines the man-master: it is for "you," man, to "bless"; for you, the institutional, virile, and parternal power of articulating with a signifier (the blessing) the divine exteriority on the exteriority of the faithful. Stay in your place, which is the ministerial power of the signifier, linguistic ob-jectification. From this point of view, she "refuses" to take the place that he occupies in the symbolic institution.[163]

Here the language functions – blessing, leading, commanding – all serve to place the speaker within the culture. By renouncing these words, this holy fool renounces the social place of religion, and embraces the infinite. Notice the double use the author makes of quotation marks here: he is quoting an ancient text, but he is also expressing the dissociation between the two characters. The holy fool is using the language of the spiritual leader, not her own. She echoes, she quotes. She becomes foreign to the language of her own community, no longer using its words as tools, but letting them pass through her mouth and body without gaining foothold. She sees the world with its language as an object.

Systems of honour and shame appeal to a community: when working within this discourse, the moral agent assumes – and thus refers to – a common understanding of what is honourable behaviour, and what is dishonourable. In this way, honour and shame work in ways similar to Augustine's values (over, on page 124). Therefore, when we break with this

---

[162] *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XVIII.19.
[163] Certeau, 1979: 531f, my translation.

understanding, we appeal to a different system, a different community of discourse (in the case of Christian monasticism, this community would imply the notion of God, which is why the holy fools' practice was a negative *theology* rather than just negativity). It is one of the conditions of language and thought that can not even be discussed. Specific cases of honourable and dishonourable behaviour may be disputed in shared language, but this itself assumes established canons of interpretation and standards of judgment by reference to which the discussion may take place. If not even this minimal agreement concerning honour and shame as describing terms is in place, then no discussion is possible (for a description of the way in which this technology can work, cf. above, on pages 67ff).

Again, this is parallel to Augustine's values: those who do not share them are not unreasonable, simply mad. It is perhaps for this reason that systems of honour and shame have provided such fruitful material for anthropologists, for they are one of the ways in which many cultures configure our forms of life. And so Dagron describes the holy fools as radically other. If one does not conform to the conditions of language, one can not be described. Outside these conditions is the realm of alterity and madness 'The monk and the saint come from without, they flock to another family, belong to another city and adhere to another code.'[164]

This other community was at that time represented by monastic groups in the desert – different ways of life, different fields of discourse, different ways of constructing honour and shame. It is small wonder that Symeon is immediately greeted as 'a crazy abba': desert asceticism challenges the smooth running of society. What separated this alterity from that of the holy fools, however, was that holy fools did not acknowledge the holiness of the saintly desert either: they embraced filth, mocked monks, threw off their habit, did not fast, and openly expressed their virulent sexuality. As we noted above (on page 83), a key witness to this is the lack of relic veneration:[165] the body of Symeon can not be found and Isidora simply disappears into the wilderness. Dostoevsky is faithful to the tradition when he recounts another strategy for his holy fool abba Zosimus in *The Brothers Karamazov*, by telling how the body of the saint began to stink immediately after death.[166] Similarly, Symeon the New Theologian refuses to identify the world with the secular city as if withdrawal from it in the religious life could define holiness.[167] A further witness is the way the Daniel of Scetis stories

---

[164] Dagron, 1990: 936, my translation.

[165] Johannes Climacus recounts how saints could be buried as confessors, where the holiest corpses emitted a sweet fragrance: Climacus, *scal.:* Step 4. Relics play a major part in John Moschus' hagiographical work: Moschus, *prat.:* 56, 84, 90.

[166] Dostoevsky, 1994[1880]: VII.1.

[167] Symeon the New Theologian 1980: V.16 and XXII.5.

131

are punctuated with the emptying of the Scetis monastic settlements of monks seeking the blessing of unlikely saints (Mark the fool, a blind beggar, a cross-dressing ascetic).[168] The pilgrimage destination becomes its starting point. Holy fools defy the institution of the praise of religious achievement. They subvert holiness language. Even their own.

Symeon's practice echoes Isidora's. He is described as fleeing from honour in the manner of a typical desert monk.[169] In particular, he would distance himself from praise by secrecy, insults, and laughter.

> But if anyone saluted him with an inclination of the head, he would leave the place angrily and hastily, through reluctance that his peculiar virtues should be detected by many persons.[170]

Secrecy. As previously noted (cf. above, on page 82) there are actually people in Leontius' narrative who honour Symeon, if only for the wonders he does. The narrative slips back into more common hagiographic formulae. It is however only when the fool disappears that these confessions come to light. The truth of the fool is not in himself, but in his absence. There is no sense in his life, but enlightenment at his death – 'Then all came to their senses, as if from sleep, and told each other … that he had played the fool for God's sake.'[171] To the extent that any can honour the fool during his life, they can not express that honour to others – their acts of praise do not exist in the honour-shame society.

The secrecy of holy fools and secret saints undermines systems of discerning goodness amongst ascetics that had become formalised and attached to authority by the time of Symeon and Leontius. Johannes Climacus tells us that whilst he was handing out judgment and punishment in his community – according to codes of equivalence between sins and penance that were to become more and more established and rigid in the Middle Ages – his task was confounded by secret saints:

> I knew a man who sinned openly but repented in secret. I denounced him for being lecherous but he was chaste in the eyes of God, having propitiated Him by a genuine conversion. … If a man commits a sin before you at the very moment of his death, pass no judgment, because the judgment of God is hidden from men. It has happened that men have sinned greatly in the open but have done greater good deeds in secret, so that those who would disparage them have been fooled, with smoke instead of sunlight in their eyes.[172]

---

[168] *v. dan. scet.:* 2, 3, 7.
[169] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Moses 8 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* VIII.10 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* VIII.13.
[170] Evagrius Scholasticus, *h.e.:* IV.34.
[171] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* 168.
[172] Climacus, *scal.:* Step 10. Cf. also the deliberate confusion caused by monks claiming responsibility for others' sins in Step 4, and the discernment of those who feign passion in Symeon the New Theologian 1980:

Insults. In addition to the secrecy, Symeon alienates himself from the city through insults. Just as he is rejected through the naming of his foolery, he distances himself from the community by naming them fools, not worthy to be spoken to (negating the assumption of address: you are one who will listen to me). He is especially violent towards those who come to him as a person of theological power:

> They sought him out and found him in the phouska-seller's shop, eating beans like a bear. Immediately one (of the fathers) was scandalized and said to himself, 'Truly we have come to see a great sage; this man has much to explain to us.' As they approached him, they said to him, 'Bless us.' He said to them, 'You have come at a bad time, and the one who sent you is an idiot.' Thereupon he grabbed the ear of the one who had been scandalized and gave him such a blow that (the bruise) could be seen for three days.[173]

This rejection of the community and its authorities undermines the practice of praise and blame. Knowledge of goodness and badness is formed together with others, through discussion, shared values, and common meanings. By continually jarring with the moral judgment of a group, the holy fool rejects its knowledge and no longer shares in its judgment even implicitly.[174]

Laughter. Just as the discourse of the crazy nun did not engage with that of the abba, Symeon's discourse is radically at odds with that of Emesa in the alienation of laughter. This is inherent in the very nature of laughter at others' expense. When one partner laughs – without replying – at the words of another, then communication has failed. Laughter creates distance between words – the distance of a perspective. We laugh at things that do not work in our grammar: at climbing ivy that misses a step, or mistaking a song for a toothpick. It is a mark of a lack of sense, of moves that do not have any use in our language game: the dead wood of discourse.[175]

Through laughter, a language's limitations are configured. It marks the border between sense and nonsense that is determinative for knowledge. It is the shared activity of ruling statements out as what cannot be said. In reference to this role Wittgenstein claimed that the depth of jokes is the depth of philosophy.[176] Attention to laughter shows us the limits of our knowledge.

VIII.1.
[173] Leontius, *v. Sym.*: 153.
[174] For more on the effect insults have on one's relation to self and others, cf. below, on page 149ff.
[175] Wittgenstein, 2001[1953]: 42.
[176] Wittgenstein, 1993[1933]: 168f.

These techniques of the avoidance of honour might be interpreted, however, as more than a simple moral discipline. They could be interpreted as resistance to the very possibility of honour, to the very nature of institutions that produce discourse, honour and shame. Symeon is not just resisting *this* way of organising community respect, he is resisting respect in itself, as something human and obstructive of God-talk.

The forms of honour bring us back to the point of appeal to a community. If the holy fools do not sit well in any system of honour and shame, then neither will they need any community for their status. Signs of honour and shame require at least the institution of discourse, and the holy fools attempt to escape from all these institutions. There are a number of reasons to interpret the lives of the holy fools as non-references, lives that refuse to be signs.

> The madness of the idiot does not enter into the discourse of communication any more than death does. It is not symbolisable. Garbage does not know how to turn itself "holy". The monastic operation fails. The madness of the madwoman consists in not (being able to be) participating in the circulation of the signifier; in being nothing, in relation to madness itself, but its "simulation";[177]

In line with their refusal to participate in sign systems, the holy fools resist key features – signifiers, tools of knowledge, forms of life – of the semiotic system that allows knowledge of God. They undermine technologies of moral knowledge.

The main signifier Symeon relieves himself of is monastic morality. He does not define God by demonstrating what is good and religious in his own life. On the contrary, he is openly sinful, tries to bring condemnation upon himself by confessing to making women pregnant, acting guiltily around prostitutes, stealing and gorging himself, all whilst retaining his monastic habit and the markers of his identity as religious. In this way, he undermines the claims he might have to understanding the infinitely good in his way of life and practices of holiness. He does not give up the project of reference, merely the way in which it is practised in his present world.

> For a drunk person is ridiculed by people, is beaten, despised, does not account himself worthy, offers no opinions, teaches no one, gives no advice about anything, cannot discern between what is good and what is wrong.[178]

---

[177] Certeau, 1979: 534, my translation.
[178] Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.*: 37.

The second signifier Symeon denied is the worship of the church. Evagrius Scholasticus notes in particular that his solitude is one of prayer, as he affords 'none the means of knowing how and when he propitiated the Deity'.[179] Similarly, he disrupts the liturgy – something unheard of for a Christian of the Eastern Orthodox church at the time – and does not follow the church year. He also undermines the church hierarchy, singling out monks for particularly heavy ridicule.[180] Other fools focus on abbots and Bishops.[181]

> The sage who is supposed to know – Daniel or Piteroum – is there purely in order to offer a space of language to the others' knowledge (that is to say, to their madness) and in order to thereby mark the altering effects in the privileged places of meaning (the patriarchate, the monastery).[182]

Holy fools' choice of targets reveals a concern to challenge the institutions of knowledge. Through attacking liturgy and liturgical persons, they question the locus of theological exegesis, disrupt the technology of theological knowledge in the liturgy, and interrupt the community that is bound together by and produces speech about God.

The third resistance to reference comes in the deceptions and the secrets of these fools. Even though he is named a fool, believed to be immoral, and considered a demoniac, in all these things he is only pretending. That is what a holy fool is, according to their hagiographers (including modern interpreters): a monk who has just gone mad is not a holy fool. This is an issue that runs through the text – that the fool pretends to be what he is taken to be. Even when he babbles, he 'pretended to babble'.[183] At the end of the day, he is not even mad. His contemporaries will only penetrate the deceptive exterior. Only God sees the heart, and can therefore interpret the exterior truthfully.

Resistance to language is most obviously seen in Symeon's refusal to express himself. Not only does he associate with the other misfits of that society – prostitutes and demoniacs, those without names or recognition – but he babbles out nonsense, refusing to confess his truth. In this way, 'he was just like the many who babbled and prophesied because of demons.'[184] Even the demons he alienated.

---

[179] Evagrius Scholasticus, *h.e.:* IV.34.
[180] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* 153.
[181] e.g. Mark the fool in *v. dan. scet.:* 2.
[182] Certeau, 1979: 539, my translation.
[183] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* 155.
[184] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* 156.

therefore some daimoniacs cried out and said, 'O violence, Fool, you jeer at the whole world. Have you also come by us to give us trouble? Retreat from here; you are not one of us…'[185]

In all these strategies for avoiding the conditions of discourse, the holy fools are avoiding the ways in which we speak the concept of God. When they restrict themselves to attaining the praise of God, they in reality act as if they do not accept any praise at all. God does not participate in their honour-shame systems. Symeon tries desperately not to refer, to be an apophatic ascetic. In avoiding honour, he is attempting to retreat from what should only be given to God. 'He irritates, amuses, provokes admiration or beatings, but he does not divert language toward what has no place.'[186]

De Certeau sees holy foolery as '*practices* of the infinite, or if you prefer, effective and spatial deployments of the unanalysable.'[187] As their bodies do not signify, they can do bodily theology without referring to the one without body. So the rejection of language primarily takes the form of rejecting language that designates them as holy, even when that language describes their avoidance of vainglory (which is as far as Dagron's analysis takes us).[188] Playing the fool, pretending to be insignificant, all constitute relations to the body that do not then make claims to portray the infinite. They are broken signifiers of God, words that dance around the infinite without presuming to understand, contain, or define it. Their articulate silence gestures towards the nameless one.

The foolish practice of the infinite is probably most evident in laughter. By laughing at the world, the fool bears witness to the possibility of being addressed by one without place.[189] For the laughter creates distance, but the world is all that is. The derision does not come from the institution of holiness – the church or the monastery – and yet there is no other discourse to replace it. Laughter objectifies its victim, thus undermining any society's 'centre complex'.[190] It is important to remember that holy fools are almost always foreigners. At the same time, it does not define itself as anything except discursive nonsense. Laughter does not have to seek a place to stand. It is a sign with no self-reference. 'It bring to a standstill the fading of the Other into indefinitely trading simulacra.'[191]

---

[185] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* 162.
[186] Certeau, 1979: 536, my translation.
[187] Certeau, 1979: 542, my translation, emphasis original.
[188] Dagron, 1990. Cf. the discussion above, on page 67ff.
[189] Evagrius warns against the temptation of reducing God to the place of the strange and exotic: Evagrius, *de orat.:* 67.
[190] Koyama, 1984.
[191] Certeau, 1979: 542.

In the laughter of the mad all are brought into question. The projects of making sense, of giving honour, are relativised by laughter. At the same time as it refuses the definition of its own space, it questions the knowledge of any society, so that those nearer the margins are closer to it than those in the middle. The laughter of the spaceless one masquerades as the grimaces of those who are not given space.

The holy fools are not simply on the edge of society, they attempt to undermine God signification by deriding and withdrawing from those institutions that portray God. As Symeon fooled, theologians and philosophers were penning their apophatic theology, unaware that any attempt to speak apophaticism would be doomed to failure.

2.3.3: Telling Silence

Our account of the holy fools' attitude to God-talk assumes an analysis of religion's relation to knowledge in late antiquity and a thesis concerning the construction of silence. More specifically, it assumes that the radical ascetics of the desert had assumed a particular space in relation to 'the world', and it implies that this space legitimated the forms of social life rather than challenging them. Religion had become describable, and its place allocated by a knowledge ratified and moderated by the city. It had become an object, and part of a social order. In addition, silence is assumed to be insufficient as an apophatic strategy, in that it is just as constructed, just as telling, and just as significant as speech. In this section, I will justify these assumptions.

Turning to the place of religion first, this analysis is simply one further step in the argument made above (on page 79) plotting the progress of early Christian asceticism from the embrace of negativity and death to the assumption of a religio-juridical role in the society of late antiquity. The very first desert fathers took steps to avoid being placed as functional holy men that were useful to society:

> Blessed Archbishop Theophilus, accompanied by a magistrate, came one day to find Abba Arsenius. He questioned the old man, to hear a word from him. After a short silence the old man answered him, 'Will you put into practice what I say to you?' They promised him this. 'If you hear Arsenius is anywhere, do not go there.'[192]

Arsenius objects to acting as a religious authority for the institutional urban church and the legal system. The way he expresses this is moreover suggestive of a deeper reaction against being placed in relation to structures of goodness and right. He does not want to give

---

[192] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Arsenius 7 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* II.4 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* II.6.

the impression that it is easy to find holiness. He does not want his visitors to feel they know where he is.

Certainly Arsenius' task was not easy: not only do we know of the travels of the companies of Cassian[193] and Rufinus to visit solitaries in the Egyptian desert,[194] but the group of cells in Nitria and the Cells – around which the *Apophthegmata Patrum* developed – were served by bakeries, doctors, and a guest house where people could find free accommodation whilst they visit the fathers living there.[195]

The ideal, however, is demonstrated by the various stories in which the monks refuse judgement. We have already mentioned their renunciation of judgement over one another. They would also flee from the role of adjudicator. Those among the desert fathers and mothers who were revered were also those most sought after as judges. So they would also have to be the most cunning in fleeing that place given them.[196]

The most spectacular failure in transcending the system of the world was Symeon the Stylite. This Syrian ascetic was dramatic in his rejection of worldly values, living a life of severe self-discipline on top of a pillar in the desert. But it was only a matter of time before his life became known and his pillar was surrounded by curious Christians, people seeking patronage, disputing parties, and pilgrims. He was no longer outside the conventions and knowledge of the world, but part of it, one function alongside others in the rural society of late antiquity.[197] This was not a tension that early Christian asceticism seemed able to resolve.

In this way, the monastic life came to stand at the edge of urban society in late antiquity. Nevertheless, it played an important role in determining the truth of that community and configuring their relations to one another. Hence Isidora refuses to take the place of religious power: it is associated with and determinative of gender, rank, value, and measures (cf. above, on page 129). All those factors that Augustine allows to his young theologians are rejected by Isidora. They have nothing to do with the infinity she is practising. She upholds her break with the world.

A natural application of this theory – and one related to our topic – would be to the mediaeval and ancient Carnival. Each year, social relations are turned on their head in the

---

[193] Cassianus, *Collationes*.
[194] Rufinus, *Hist. Monach.*
[195] Chitty, 1966: 31.
[196] Moses feigns madness - *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* VIII.10 = *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Moses 8 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* VIII.13; the problem of giving advice without judgment is addressed directly in *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* IX.26.
[197] For a social analysis of the role of Symeon the Stylite, see Brown, 1971: 90-93.

feast of fools,[198] and mayhem results. Whilst the carnival could be seen as resistance to the social power of the world, it may all too easily simply re-affirm the normal order by appeal to the disastrous chaos of the carnival. Anyone who challenges the present hierarchy is seen to be recommending social chaos.

There is something to be said for the celebration of the carnival, however. Given that this is specifically a *religious* – and therefore permanent – festival, it does maintain the impression of the contingency of social order. God's order is seen at least as much in the upside-down relations of the carnival as it is in the justice and peace of the divine king. Neither orders exhaust the kingdom of God on their own.

The relation of contingency to affirmation cuts both ways, however. Whilst it flags the importance of configuring society in different ways in order to provoke reform, it also demonstrates the insufficiency of the contingency strategy we noted above (on pages 113-115). Demonstrating that the present order is not the only possible one may simply lead to a polemical characterisation of the alternatives.

The danger of affirming rather than undermining social orders with one's difference comes into force when the alternative becomes the exotic. When one has almost nothing in common with the other, the obligation to take it seriously as an alternative way of life is weaker. So for example, we saw Symeon renouncing the various markers of monasticism with his crazy behaviour. If he had also permanently renounced his habit, there would be nothing to identify him as a serious monk. So he would no longer be delivering a critique, but a spectacle. The alternative has to offer a possible, or even an unavoidable place to stand in order to make the normal appear as absurd in its turn.

Monasticism stood in danger of becoming exotic, and the process could be traced through the steadily more extreme forms of asceticism espoused by various groups in Syria.[199] The process culminated in the Stylites on their holy poles, and the grazers who lived on grass and herbs. Holy fools stand in danger of going the same way. So what resources do negative theologians have to resist being placed by knowledge of the exotic, and so functioning as a tool for forcing the necessity of normality?

It has become common to refer to God as 'The Other', so as not to reduce Her to something familiar. 'The Other' is a placeholder for a noun that should represent the unknown, the challenging, the foreign. In ethical theories (principally stemming from Levinas

---

[198] cf. the analysis in Cox, 1969, which does not consider the thesis of the social role of the exotic.
[199] Described clearly by Evagrius Scholasticus, *h.e.:* IV.

and Løgstrup),[200] this foreign address poses a challenge to me that is constitutive of the ethical experience. The move is similar to Augustine's practice of calling God 'you', and then critically honing one's concept of God to eradicate elements of humanity and inconsistency. It is a move that is least assertive concerning God's nature, and may be described as apophatic.

As such, the theology of 'The Other' does not fall prey to pre-given decisions concerning divinity and religion. It is, however, vulnerable to a whole set of assumptions that require further elucidation to avoid:

1. It assumes a particular form of difference without establishing and identifying any shared features. The grammar of difference is such that it describes any two things, and that it fails to describe them. Two things are always different, in that were they entirely the same, they would be only one thing. As soon as they are distinct in time, place, or nature, they become different, and two. They might be two identical trees, distinct in space; two identical grains of corn, distinct only in time; two attributes of an identical molecule, distinct only in character. At the same time, insofar as we can describe them as two anything, they are not absolutely different. Two different people are still the same species; a dog and a cat are two animals, and so are of the same kingdom; however, sovereignty can not be compared to Orville the duck. They are not two of anything, and so have nothing in common. As such, it is not grammatical to call them 'different'. 'Sovereignty is different from Orville the duck' and 'Orville the duck is sovereignty's other' are both nonsense. In this way, difference and otherness are empty adjectives unless they are further qualified by a shared attribute: space, time, character, etc. As long as that shared or analogous attribute is ignored, the identity of God as totally different will be empty of content and critical force. God becomes either unthinkable or exotic.

2. It is self-referential. 'Different' and 'other' are two place adjectives. In this way, what is 'other' is entirely dependent on what is 'the same', i.e. myself. What is

---

[200] Critchley, 2007.

foreign to me might well be familiar to a Norwegian woman. Whilst sounding specific and minimalist, the signifier 'other' is actually general and comprehensive. The concept (in my case) includes all things feminine, French, feline, mediaeval, metallic, and royal. Furthermore, in the light of the grammar of difference and otherness, to call God 'the Other' is at least to say that we have something in common with God (otherwise She could not be compared with us). If the name is to have any non-general sense, it must be further defined, and apophaticism must be abandoned.

3. To the extent that I am addressed by this other, we are both confined to the conditions of the negotiations of identity. The form of the self is conditioned by my social context. Butler argues that this is also the case of the one by whom I am addressed and challenged.

> When we come up against the limits of any epistemological horizon and realize that the question is not simply whether I can or will *know* you, or whether I can be *known*, we are compelled to realize as well that 'you' qualify in the scheme of the human within which I operate, and that no 'I' can begin to tell its story without asking: 'Who are you?' 'Who speaks to me?' 'To whom do I speak when I speak to you?' If this establishes the priority of rhetoric to ethics, that might be just as well. The mode of address conditions and structures the way in which moral questions emerge.[201]

The language of difference will not fulfil the function of a founding theological quality, no matter how minimalist it attempts to be. The conditions and assumptions of our context challenge the apophatic project in the very notion of address and speech.

Silence is further insufficient as a denial of speech about God because it is full of content. If we appeal to silence out of distrust that our words will express something we do not want to say, or something not appropriate to say, then silence is not the answer. Silence has a structure, a context, and a significance just as salient as those of language. In the twentieth century, this lesson has perhaps been posited most forcefully by avant-garde

---

[201] Butler, 2005: 134.

classical music. The silences of composers like John Cage and Morton Feldman are just as considered and expressive as the sounds. They are an integral part of the music.

Christian ascetics are very often acutely aware of the implications of silence. We have read above of the admonitions to silence in early monasticism. But in the communities of common life, silence had to be regulated. Desert fathers and their heirs were all too aware of the various ways in which we can be silent in the face of our companions. Just as Foucault reacted against the boring 'obligation to speak' in pre-war France,[202] Cassian's desert fathers warned against using silence as an expression of anger (the silent treatment), and John Climacus admonished his disciples 'Do not become silent in an unreasonable way that causes disturbance and hard feeling in others'.[203]

If silence is always a part of its context, then further strategies need to be considered that may resist the significance of the discourse of theology. An apophatic theology can not even take refuge in not speaking, so how can it speak of God without assumptions? How can apophaticism be thoroughgoing in its thought and practice?

2.3.4: Effusive Silence

The early Christian ascetics and holy fools were caught between speaking and silence. Speaking of God and goodness was dangerous because of presumption and vainglory. Silence presented the self as serenely unbothered by the confusion caused by exposure to the almighty:[204] '…in order that you may not be considered as being silent, say something from what you know, but be brief and avoid too many words or inopportune glory'[205] was Barsanuphius' advice to a monk aspiring to the virtues of non-silence.

There are three techniques of defying language through non-silence that will be treated here, arising from various domains of the Christian tradition. Firstly, I will appeal to the practice of glossolalia, then relate it to the *via dissimilis*, and finally to the ascetic habit of mocking the world.

Glossolalia, or speaking in tongues, is a solution to the horns of the Augustinian dilemma we noted over (on page 124). Speech of God is good, but no speech is sufficient. De Certeau describes it as a transition from 'I cannot say'; through 'I believe in saying'; 'I must

---

[202] Foucault, 2000a[1982]: 122-123.
[203] Climacus, *scal.:* Step 5. See the treatment in steps 4 and 8, and related points concerning 'non-silence' in Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 314, 320. Cf. also Muers, 2004, esp. pp146f, for a sensitive treatment of the avoidance of being silenced and manipulating silence as a kind of speech act.
[204] as portrayed in Climacus, *scal.:* Step 30.
[205] Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 698.

say'; 'I can say nothing' to 'I can say'.[206] Glossolalia assumes the vacuity and necessity of language. So the glossolalist opts to change the currency: all speech is bound by the conventions and corruptions of human society, so we shall liberate ourselves by throwing off the conditions of speech. It is a moment of abandon.

Speaking in tongues is defined by resistance to meaning. If the utterance makes sense, then it is not glossolalia. Even interpretations of glossolalia – in the Christian tradition (1 Cor 12,14) – must be divinely inspired. Human interpretation is not interpretation of glossolalia. So it is entirely separate from human discourse, the language of God and the angels. Not silent, but not speech either.

> It seems that the threshold between muteness and speaking can be extended and organized, can be reconstituted like a 'no man's land,' a space of vocal manipulations and jubilations, already free from silence but not yet subject to a particular language.[207]

This stretching may only occur at the expense of its neighbours, however. The raucous babbling of glossolalia is offensive towards pious silence and critical to religious speech. It not only assumes the insufficiency of speech and silence: it also asserts them. All human speech is necessarily subordinate to divine speech, and no theology may express itself meaningfully in divine speech. As such, there is a struggle between glossolalia and interpretation. Hence their appearance in the New Testament is invariably in the context of community conflict: the controversial acceptance of Samaritans into the church; Paul's attempt to wrest the Corinthian congregation from their pagan habits. In the latter case, glossolalia is forbidden unless it is wedded to interpretation, for the sake of order. Speaking in tongues was clearly experienced by the early church as deeply subversive.[208]

De Certeau notes that his above transition may also be reversed. Instead of glossolalia as the final solution to a prior problem, it is the initial given that leads to the rejection of a problem: from 'I can say', through 'I can say nothing'; 'I must not say'; and 'I do not believe in saying' to 'I cannot say'. This movement embraces glossolalia, but re-applies it to speech. We could say that the first transition mimics speech because of the necessity of language, whereas the second transition mimics speech in order to undermine and replace that necessity.

In many respects like poetry, glossolalia produces a looser relation to speech. It may serve to shift speech somewhat, by forcing alternatives. As the basis for community, however,

---

[206] Certeau, 1996[1980]: 32.
[207] Certeau, 1996[1980]: 38.
[208] This tendency is celebrated in Cox, 1995: 143-157.

it can be deeply pernicious. Again like poetry, it is parasitic on normal language. There is no transgression without normality. This is of course not a criticism, but a restriction. Weird speech only has critical force insofar as it may be considered an alternative to established speech. Glossolalia is immediately so exotic as to be emptied of its critical power. This is essentially Paul's point in his letter to the Corinthians, where he points out that an outsider witnessing a congregation speaking in tongues regards it as insane and thus to be disregarded, whereas prophecy has the power of transformation and conversion.[209]

Should glossolalia become a part of normal speech, it would act as false liberation. The practice may be used as an illusion of freedom, the end product. Once achieved, the speaker may accept whatever other institutions are offered uncritically. Proof of the absence of manipulation is given in the freedom of glossolalia. Speaking in tongues becomes the exception that justifies the community's sovereignty.[210]

A further instance in which speech is freed from its debt to the conditions of language can be found in the apophatic nonsense of the *via dissimilis*, whereby disciplined philosophers are given free rein to speak of God as they wish, unconfined by the careful and specific language of metaphysics, and free from the fear of blasphemy. The only condition is that the language used not have the aura of believability. It becomes entirely unproblematic to refer to God as a rock, a king, or a woman, as long as one is keeping to this idiom. Motivations vary, and it is certainly true to say that this trope is used as a key to interpreting Scripture. Denys the Areopagite mentions two prime objectives, however:

> that the divine things remain inaccessible to the profane and so that all those with a real wish to see the sacred imagery may not dwell on the types as true. So true negations and the unlike comparisons with their last echoes offer due homage to the divine things.[211]

The motivation for this is surprisingly similar to that of glossolalia. It is admitted that God-talk is a hopeless project, but the challenge of interpreting the wordy scriptures and tradition necessitates belief in language, so the solution becomes to sanction all words concerning God, as long as one is aware that they do not refer in the same way as they usually do. This awareness is best preserved alongside language that couldn't possibly be univocally referred to God, and so the philosopher is encouraged to speak nonsense of God.

---

[209] 1 Cor 14.22-25.
[210] For a more detailed application of this theory to British charismaticism, cf. Thomas, 2006b.
[211] Denys, *c.h.:* 145A.

In this way the wise men of God, exponents of hidden inspiration, separate the 'Holy of Holies' from defilement by anything in the realm of the imperfect or the profane. They therefore honor the dissimilar shape … For this reason there is nothing ridiculous about representing heavenly beings with similarities which are dissimilar and incongruous.[212]

In practice, this means that serious metaphysics becomes deeply suspicious, as it will always tempt the writer into thinking that she has said something true about God. So in order to counteract this temptation, we may replace sophisticated theological statements like 'God is timeless' with what might be considered barbarisms like 'God is a warrior'; 'God is a flower', or 'God is a clown'. And the Christian scriptures – which posed such a problem to the sophisticated rhetoricians of late antiquity – provide us with a rich source of barbaric attributes for God. Denys the Areopagite lists up the sun, stars, light, fire, water, ointment, a corner stone, a lion, a panther, a leopard, a bear, and a worm.[213] More could be added.

The speaker of these barbarisms is therefore committed to speaking nonsense, and like the glossolalist is aware of the senselessness of her speech whilst uttering it. As such, this language flouts a number of the maxims of natural language. For example, it is entirely grammatical in this context to say 'God is an animal, but I don't believe she is', which is a form of proposition that is otherwise illicit.[214] In this respect, apophatic nonsense is a way of working on language and thought that has direct consequences regarding how a speaker relates to knowledge and truth-claims, dislocating the relation to language and belief.

It should be noted here that unlike glossolalia, the *via dissimilis* includes a technique for adapting to the shifting conditions of normal speech. Should the use of grotesque imagery in reference to God become standard fare in any theological discourse, it will no longer be the *via dissimilis*. In this instance, the practitioner of the mode of reference to God will have to come up with further ways of speaking of God that do not command belief. It is perhaps unnecessary to draw out the practical implications for a theology of holiness and the knowledge of godly behaviour.

The practice can further be related to Evagrius Ponticus' technique of manipulating thoughts (described over, on page 100). Evagrius Ponticus also described the temptation to think of God through an image, and whilst he did not embrace the way of dissimilarity, he did accept the challenge of wresting one's thoughts from the intellectual project of believing

---

[212] Denys, *c.h.:* 145A. The theme is discussed thoroughly in chapter two of this work (136D-145C), and occurs also in Denys, *d.n.:* 865B-C, 869A Denys, *myst.:* 1045D-1048B.
[213] Denys, *c.h.:* 144D-145A.
[214] It is an example of 'Moore's Paradox', first discussed in Moore, 1942.

oneself to have identified a truth that captured God's essence. His technique of summoning a thought that he knew to be unholy in order to drive out one that he suspected of being so corresponds to the practical significance of apophatic nonsense.[215]

This linguistic practice assumes apophaticism rather than asserting it. Like glossolalia, it can leave normal language exactly as it is. It is not the habit of using dissimilar terms for God that undermines the use of similar terms. This way is entirely reliant upon the choice of the theologian. It is perfectly possible for the dissimilar way and the more dangerous similar way to exist alongside one another.

Apophatic nonsense thereby provides a way out of Augustine's dilemma, but it does not further the project of negative theology as such. Indeed, it requires and assumes the practice of verbal denial in order to make sense. Instead of pointing out what is to be denied of God, it licenses speech of God that does not have to be denied, because it is based on reference that does not reach its referent.

We may identify two essential aspects of apophaticism: the denial and critique of God-talk on the one hand, and the absurd play of dissimilar God-talk on the other. Without critique, the God-talk merely sets up an exotic alternative rather than a corrective; without absurd play, the denial stands in danger of assuming that its words of negation have arrived at a knowledge of God.

> It is beyond assertion and denial. We make assertions and denials of what is next to it, but never of it, for it is both beyond every assertion, being the perfect and unique cause of all things, and, by virtue of its pre-eminently simple and absolute nature, free of every limitation, beyond every limitation; it is also beyond every denial.[216]

The final practice of negative theology to be mentioned here combines these two maxims through a form of double dissociation. The practice of mocking the world can be found in a variety of sources apart from the holy fool literature. Its most common form is the holy man's insult. Through mockery and offensive behaviour, early Christian ascetics attempted to extract themselves from the moral values of the world, and to provoke a critical attitude in their quarry.

We have described the practice of early Christian ascetics as dissociative before (cf. above, on page 75ff), and will not repeat the exegesis here. Let it suffice to point out that

---

[215] Evagrius, *Prakt.:* 42, 58. Apophatic work on concepts is described as a specific activity in Denys, *c.h.:* 164D Denys, *e.h.:* 369.

[216] Denys, *myst.:* 1048B.

mockery of central structures and values in city life functions as a flight from such values. If one can insult an institution such as court justice or ecclesial hierarchy, then that institution will have less influence in forming one's own judgement.

More pertinent to our purposes is that the insult specifically critiques assumptions and values that are not available for discussion. It provokes a dissociation in its victim's relation to self. It is characterised precisely as an insult, and not merely an observation, because of its personal nature: it is a challenge to a person's values and self-image. It is a statement that should not be said, and this is marked by the offence caused. This is the critical aspect of the insult. It is a form of linguistic-normative transgression, because it both speaks and acts in a way not allowed by the linguistic community.

The aspect of absurdity is inherent in the fact that the insult takes the form of mockery, mimicry, and play. In the case of the ascetic insult, it is not just an individual that is being mocked, but the entire world. As such, the insulting monk takes up the perspective from nowhere.

It is as apophatic mockery of the world that I intend to interpret the holy fools in the final part of this work. In this respect, the interpretation will be obliged to defend two theses henceforth regarding their strategy:

1. that it includes both apophatic maxims of critique and play;

2. that these two maxims are effective as practices of apophaticism.

My methods for achieving this will be largely those already employed in the first two parts: to describe the holy fools as a development in the asceticism of late antiquity; to assess their practice philosophically as techniques of the self and modes of critique; to plot this interpretation in the context of theological themes of obedience, repentance, and humility.

.

3: The Unserious Self

And Dionysius with so great desire

  To contemplate these Orders set himself,

  He named them and distinguished them as I do.

But Gregory afterwards dissented from him;

  Wherefore, as soon as he unclosed his eyes

  Within this heaven, he at himself did smile.[1]

The problem of knowledge and veridiction in early Christian asceticism led us naturally to the practice of the knowing self, in its relation to its tradition, context, and values. In this final part, the practice of truth-telling will be described in terms of its influence and dependence on the self. To what extent does truth-telling and truth-hearing allow and provoke the transformation of the self and its relation to society?[2] The asceticism of the desert fathers and mothers and the holy fools form part of a long truth-telling tradition in antiquity that has particular forms and objectives that need to be outlined and set in the context of their societal function and their place as condition and result of Christian holiness. Are these techniques appropriated for the sake of revaluation or in order to allow citizens to adapt to their societal and political conditions? How resilient is holiness?

Truth-telling and asceticism are – by the time of the desert fathers and mothers – intimately entwined in the early Christian experience of holiness. We will give an account of the contribution made by Christianity to this longstanding discussion (specifically in its practice of the insult), and assess its significance in processes of transformation and homogenisation.

The form of truth-telling most relevant for the study of holy fools is comedy. How does the comic insult relate to universal truth and the transformation of the self? Approaching humour as a kind of asceticism, the holy fools will be read – alongside critical studies of humour and an account of the problematic nature of truth-telling – as a response to the ambiguous place of honesty and ethics in the transformation of self and society.

---

[1] Dante, 1997[1867]: Paradiso, canto xxviii.

[2] This question should be distinguished from that of later epistemology, which asked what relation to self and society allows truth-telling. Cf. Foucault, 2005[2001]: 6th January.

Finally, the holy fools' objective of humility emerges both as dangerous and as a source of critique, so we will have to ask what characterises Christian and foolish humility and whether its transformation of the self is autonomous, or whether it is unavoidably and perpetually a tool for provoking conformity and social homogeneity. I will also be arguing that humility – and particularly the consistent humility of the holy fools – is a central part of the Christian tradition, and the mainstay of asceticism.

3.1: Knowledge and truth: the insult

The insult is the practice of truth-telling that early Christian ascetics and holy fools held in common. It was a mode of cultivating humility and listening to strangers. A typical description is the story told by abba John the Dwarf about a young man trying to obtain forgiveness from his philosopher guardian:

> Although the young man came and asked his guardian to forgive him he would not receive him, but said, 'Go and work for three years as a ferryman and I will forgive you.' After three years the young man came to him again, and this time he said, 'You still have not done penance; go and work for three more years, and give away all you earn, bearing all insults.' So he did this, and then his guardian said to him, 'Now go to Athens and learn philosophy.' There was an old man who sat at the philosophers' gate and he used to insult everyone who entered it. When he insulted this young man, the boy began to laugh, and the old man said, 'Why are you laughing, when I have insulted you?' He told him, 'Would you not expect me to laugh? For three years I have paid to be insulted and now I am insulted free of charge. That is why I laughed.' Abba John said, 'The gate of the Lord is like that, and we Fathers go through many insults in order to enter joyfully into the city of God.'[3]

We will examine the philosophical background and implications of this practice below. This story at least outlines the framework. Firstly, the insult was heard by the sinner, and in this case as a form of penance. Early Christian ascetics would hear insults in order to identify and expose their own sin. Secondly, the virtue corresponding to the truth-practice is 'bearing all insults', which implies patience and humility. We will see below that the insult is associated with dispassion. It is the patience that puts aside bias and irritation in order to look the objective truth in the face. Thirdly, it is related to philosophy. The insult is a practice of truth and part of the search for it. Fourthly, it results in joy. The truth is essentially good news, which is why it is neither vertiginous nor horrifying to face it.

The history of truth-telling which lies behind the practice of the desert fathers and mothers revolves around the virtue of frankness. More specifically, the virtue of *parrhēsia*: saying everything, or fearless speech. Parrhesia is the virtue of speaking the truth regardless of the consequences to one's own concerns and safety. It is a complicated concept in

---

[3] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* John the Dwarf 41 Cf. also the letter of John the disciple of Barsanuphius, who surely refers to this apophthemgaton when he claims that 'Many people have paid a price in order to be insulted and to learn patience. Yet you are learning patience at no cost, since the Lord says: "By your patience you shall gain your souls". We should give thanks to the person who afflicts us; for through such a person, we acquire patience.' Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 554.

antiquity, associated with democracy, courage, friendship, marriage, sovereignty, and good character. Very schematically – because the most important point here is to demonstrate the transformation carried out by the early Christian ascetics – we can distinguish the following moments:[4]

The institution of democracy: fearless speech is the *sine qua non* of democratic rule. It is only when all citizens are free to speak their own mind (rather than that of an oligarch, monarch, or other sovereign) that we can speak of the people's rule. Parrhesia is thereby both a legal concept concerning civic order (who is allowed to say what) and a practical concept describing what happens in the democratic assembly, the *ekklesia* (how decisions are made). Fearless speech would be employed in the assembly, and is every citizen's right.

Speaking unpopular truths: once this understanding of democracy is assumed, however, there is a distinction made between those who have an equal right to speak, and those who actually do speak. Those who speak *to* the assembly must speak fearlessly, free from the influence of power and money. So whilst there is a general right concerning the right to speak, there is also a particular quality limited to those who *do* speak, and are thereby heard, in the democratic city. So fearless speech is a practice that divides the people into those who speak and those who are spoken to.

Addressing sovereignty: this latter quality can then be generalised to other political systems, whether they be democratic or not. Fearless speech is indispensable for the sovereign (hence its role in democratic assemblies) in order for him/them to govern well. For this to happen, an unspoken parrhesiastic contract is negotiated, whereby the fearless speaker agrees to tell the truth to the sovereign on condition that the latter gives the speaker license to speak without fear of punishment. Hence the 'fearless' element in parrhesia, because the contract requires constant re-negotiation, and the one who granted permission to say everything can just as easily withdraw that permission. The parrhesiast is always in danger.

Ethical frankness: the Socratic appropriation of fearless speech moved it away from a specifically political practice towards a tool for forming the good and modest citizen. It is through Socrates' parrhesia that he is able to interrogate everyone concerning their own concerns and their own wisdom. He does so in order to turn them towards themselves and listen to uncomfortable home truths, that they may measure themselves against truth. This kind of citizen is certainly useful for the city, but like Socrates, they would not necessarily

---

[4] In the summary of pages 150 to 151, I will be following Foucault's work closely, as he is most responsible for bringing the concept of parrhesia to current debate. Until further courses are published, the most important books are Foucault, 2008, Foucualt 2009 and Pearson 2001.

play a major role in state politics (in contrast to the kind of bold politician we see in Solon for example).[5]

Rejection of flattery: fearless speech is opposed to the lies and flattery told to the sovereign or the political agent in order to curry their favour. As such, the fearless speaker must be both courageous, and disinterested. Disregarding personal gain and safety corresponds to the relentless concern for truth. And the practice of fearless speech therefore shuns the joys of pleasant speech (and thereby often stands in contrast with rhetoric).

Scandalous speech: the Cynics took the Socratic life to a different level and spoke fearlessly to anyone and everyone. They brave not only individual wrath by insulting the powerful (most paradigmatically in the case of Diogenes the Cynic's mockery of Alexander the great) but also ostracism from society by transgressing social rules and taboos. Like the holy fools,[6] their sphere of activity was the street rather than the school, and their target group was everyone.

Identifying a fearless speaker: the importance of hearing fearless speech became generalised in the generations after Socrates, although still linked to the political life. It became important for a philosopher to identify someone who could speak the truth to him. Stoics in particular would visit certain figures who would tell them the truth objectively. The development of spiritual guides who would listen and speak in order to make the agent a better philosopher was prevalent in late antiquity, and took a number of different forms (from visiting gurus to attending schools).

All these moments entail a particular relation between truth and the self. The sovereign hears truth-telling through withholding his violent force. The parrhesiast speaks the truth by braving violence that threatens to annihilate the truth by destroying or constraining the self. The truth-teller risks scandal, ostracism and death by challenging community boundaries and provoking the wrath of the people. Truth can be prioritised or deprioritised in relation to political power, status, and self-indulgence. It is therefore entirely reasonable in antiquity to ask 'what value has truth?'

Against this background, the Christian practice of the insult is a little more understandable. The insult is an example of an utterance that of its very nature arouses anger and puts the speaker in danger. It is opposed to flattery, and can often be the context of penetrating truths that will not be heard on the lips of more polite company. Insults – both in the political sphere and in social relations – court danger and require courage, even

---

[5] Foucault contrasts the parrhesia of Socrates and Solon in Foucault 2009: 70f.
[6] The comparison receives in depth consideration in Krueger, 1996: chapters 5 and 6.

foolishness. They have a lot in common with fearless speech, and were certainly part of the philosophical repertoire of Cynic philosophy.

The cynic practice of telling uncomfortable truths appears in the Christian literature of late antiquity as characteristic of secular philosophy, and in this respect we can see the tradition continued among the desert fathers and mothers. Naturally, Christian hagiography is full of stories about the transfiguration of Pagan philosophy in the Christian philosophy (like the above story of John the dwarf). In our literature, however, the practice of tolerating insults is singled out as a particular locus for comparison.

> Let that foe of yours upbraid you, but do you not upbraid him. Regard his words as a training ground in which to exercise philosophy.[7]

> If perhaps in temptation your brother insists on abusing you, do you not be carried away from your charitable dispositions, suffering the same wicked demon to infest your mind. And you will not be carried away if, being reviled, you bless, being tricked, you remain well-disposed. This is the philosophic way according to Christ; who will not walk it, does not enjoy His company.[8]

Ancient Christian ascetics, rather than dealing out insults, set a high value on the ability to endure them. The ideal is justified in various ways, including the obvious ones of turning the other cheek,[9] and being patient with one's brother or sister.[10] The two main justifications for accepting insults, however, were the struggle against vainglory and judgement.

Vainglory has already been treated above (on page 67ff), where the more zany works of the desert fathers and mothers were considered as a tool against it. Obedience to insulting commands is a technique of opposing vainglory.[11] Whether it is accompanied by commands or not, however, the way in which insults can be used in this struggle is to accept the unfair judgement over oneself as truth, in order to dethrone 'the unrealistic opinion every man has about himself'[12] imposed by vainglory within and flattery without.[13] Insults are not to be opposed or even endured, but embraced and surpassed, because 'every insult falls short of the

---

[7] Basilius, *hom. 10.*

[8] Maximus, *carit. 1-4:* IV.30. Cf. also *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XVI.16 = *Apoph. Patr. (anon):* 211 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XVI.25.

[9] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Daniel 3 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XV.14 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XV.15.

[10] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Isidore the Priest 1, Moses 3, Phortas 1 *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XV.52, 84.

[11] *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XV.64 = *Apoph. Patr. (anon):* 174 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XV.83.

[12] Basilius, *hom. 10.*

[13] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Moses 4, Serapion 4 Evagrius, *Eulog.:* 26.27 Basilius, *moral.:* LXXII.

truth'[14]. For this reason, Macarius the Great would not speak to people who approached him with fear and honour, but if he was offered the greeting, 'Abba, when you were a camel-driver, and stole nitre and sold it again, did not the keepers beat you?'[15] then he would open up and welcome the heckler.

The monk should be humble in this way, keeping silence when beaten and abused, and offering no retaliation. Only in this way would he benefit his soul.[16] Nisterus the Cenobite (i.e. who lived in a community) was known for his reticence in the face of arguments and trouble. When approached, he explained his actions by likening himself to a donkey, who remains silent though beaten and ill-treated.[17]

Enduring insults therefore refers back to another of the monastic techniques discussed above, namely freeing oneself from passion.[18] Nisterus is another of the exemplars of *apatheia* who wanted to be like gravestones, statues, or idols in their dispassion as regards praise and blame (cf. above, on page 91). The monk's attitude towards the insult becomes one more facet of the collection of techniques associated with that ideal: 'Just as a dead man feels no praise or insult, so a man of faith disdains esteem and dishonour.'[19]

The desert fathers and mothers also used the acceptance of insults to oppose the temptation to deal out judgements. Abba Moses instructs his disciples to accept abuse in order to avoid judgement of others. As soon as one accepts responsibility for what one is being accused of in an insult, one receives forgiveness from God. But it is still necessary to concentrate on one's own sins to prevent the attention from turning to others for the sake of hatred or slander. Insults are accepted to avoid judgement, just as freedom from passions is pursued to establish objectivity.

So how is the insulting behaviour of the early Christian ascetics different from that of their philosophical counterparts? Christian practice is strikingly similar to that of the Cynic philosophers, who can be thought of as the aggressors of ancient philosophy. These zany thinkers spoke out their doctrines and perceptions regardless of the consequences of insulting kings, transgressing taboos, and challenging accepted truths. The two person relation of truth teller to student was similarly an attempt to find the truth regardless of the potential damage

---

[14] Basilius, *hom. 10.*

[15] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Macarius the Great 31; cf. also Agathon 5 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* X.10 = *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* X.12.

[16] Evagrius, *Eulog.:* 4.4 *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Anthony 15, Zacharias 3, Isaiah 1 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* VIII.2, XV.17 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* VIII.2, XV.19 Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 125, 237 Climacus, *scal.:* Steps 2, 4 and 8 Maximus, *carit. 1-4:* I.28 Moschus, *prat.:* 206

[17] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Nisterus the Cenobite 2 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XV.30 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XV.46.

[18] Passion is the defining feature of an insult's power according to Basilius, *hom. 10.*

[19] Evagrius, *par. ad mon:* II.14.

done to either party. The danger is that the one hearing the truth will be so offended by the truth that they abandon the quest, and in the worst case attack the truth-teller. In both contexts, the results take place in the hearer of the truth, but the philosophical hero is the speaker of truth.

With the ascetic tradition we have summarised here, the hero-role has been transferred to the hearer of truth: hearing insults gives you treasure in heaven.[20] The speaker of the insult is no longer in focus, even in the case of a spiritual leader insulting a monk in order to give him 'frequent opportunities to gain crowns … through having to put up with insults, dishonour, contempt, and mockery.'[21] In contrast to cynic philosophers, the ascetic Christians of late antiquity do not in general go into the city and proclaim their offensive truths. Instead, they withdraw to the desert in order to hear them. In this respect, the practice has become a good deal more individual, and less committed to the transformation of a community. The implications of truth-telling for democracy have become less evident.

On the other hand, by releasing the role of truth teller from its connection to the brave philosopher, they idealise the attitude of the community. It is no longer an isolated practice of truth-telling, it is a virtue that anyone can have. Anyone can hear the truth, because everyone is offended at some point. The element of courage is still intact, but it has become the courage of hearing rather than that of speaking: 'With unshakeable courage they accepted the criticisms of the superior and indeed of those far below him in rank.'[22] The desert fathers and mothers do not adhere to fearless speech, but to fearless hermeneutics. Dare to hear truth that you would ordinarily dismiss. Assume that everyone is reasonable and worth listening to. Do not let the boundaries of your world and your view of the self get in the way of your quest for truth.

The transition is also one of internalisation. Although the element of courage has been moved from speech to hearing, the object of fear has remained the same, namely the fear of damage to one's self, and one's own anger and reprisals. Fearless hermeneutics is thus a practice of the self, whereby one takes a decision to expose one's self to the insult in order to eradicate self-image as a hindrance in the quest for truth. It still requires an external agent, but only because of inner weakness. If we were able to be imaginative enough in our self-critique, other people would not be necessary.

---

[20] Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 125, Symeon the New Theologian 1980: IV.12.
[21] Climacus, *scal.:* Step 4.
[22] Climacus, *scal.:* Step 4.

There are two kinds of disregard of oneself: one is from within the heart, and the other from injuries received from the outside. The second is greater, namely the one that comes from the outside. For the one that comes from the heart requires less labor than the one that comes from other people, because the latter creates more pain in the heart.[23]

The danger of reprisals is nevertheless entirely necessary: anger and provocation manifest the interruption and transformation of one relation of the self to shared values. The self is mediated by and in keeping with the meanings and transactions of a society, so that experiencing insults as offensive marks the transgression of *shared* boundaries. Flattery therefore becomes an expression of positive evaluation within those shared values that confirms those values, whereas an insult expresses a negative evaluation according to shared values that can call them into question. If I do not share the value assumed by the flattery or insult, then neither can I be provoked or soothed by it. It is actually very difficult to insult a foreigner. I am not insulted when a Norwegian calls me unsporty, just as a Norwegian is not insulted when I call them a bad sport. We do not share those values. So insults and flattery are not only practices of the self, but ways of relating to and accepting shared values. Detachment regarding insult and flattery implies revaluation of those values.

We can, therefore, plot the insult on a logic of truth-telling. Early philosophers discover that truth is difficult to hear. They introduce techniques to overcome the stubbornness of belief in assumed truths (Socratic irony, mathematical proofs, insults). The insult forces the thinker to reveal and challenge their own beliefs. The thinker enlists the help of truth-tellers to challenge the beliefs and practices that they do not see and cannot change because of their own convictions and self-image. Christian thinkers see that the insult has this function regardless of its speaker. They embrace the insult as a practice of truth-hearing, making the role of the truth-teller redundant. They identify the hindrance to truth-hearing as the vainglory of the listener rather than the flattery of the speaker.

Someone who notices that he is easily overcome by pride, a nasty temper, malice, and hypocrisy, and who thinks of defending himself against these by unsheathing the double-edged sword of meekness and patience, such a man if he wishes to break free entirely from these vices ought to go live in a monastery, as if it were a fuller's shop of salvation. In particular, he should choose the most austere place. He will be spiritually stretched and beaten by the insults, injuries, and rebuffs of the brothers. He may even be physically beaten, trampled on, and kicked, so that he may wash out the filth still lying in the sentient part of his soul. There is an old saying that

---

[23] Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 278.

reproof is the washtub for the soul's passions, and you ought to believe it, for people in the world who load indignities onto someone and then boast about it to others like to say, 'I gave him a good scrubbing.' Which, of course, is quite accurate.[24]

In this context, the practice of the holy fools emerges as a regress in the process. Instead of hearing insults, they are once again dealing them out to anyone who will listen. They return to the city, and don't seem to be willing to listen to anyone. Once again, it is the speaker of insults that is the hero, rather than the hearer.

This resemblance to the cynic philosophers is only skin deep, however: the holy fools were still obviously marked by the ascetic values of defeating vainglory by letting insults fall upon themselves. The one to whom Symeon the holy fool exclusively speaks truth, for example (John the Deacon in Leontius' narrative), only ever calls him 'fool', and does not show him any honour. The people who did show him honour got only abuse in return.[25]

The two distinctive features marking the holy fools out from early Christian ascetics that we noted, however, are still valid. Firstly, the fools leave their solitude and return to the city; and secondly, the insulter receives back the hero role. There are instances of insulting behaviour praised amongst the desert fathers and mothers,[26] but in general it is condemned by early Christian ascetics,[27] and enduring offence encouraged.

There is reason to pause at this point, however. Symeon the holy fool did indeed go around the city insulting people, and was thrashed for it. He is also portrayed, however, as accepting the accusations against him.[28] The earliest record of a holy fool was Isidora, who gained the nickname 'the human sponge' because she accepted all the abuse and insults that were piled upon her.[29] If we interpret the holy fools stories as a development of the ascetic tradition of the insult, what should we focus on as readers? The insults of the holy fool would then be examples of words *we* should hear as truth. They are tools for our fearless hermeneutics.

The setting of the stories of holy fools does direct our attention towards those who recognise the holiness of the fools. The story of Isidora is about the discovery and revelation

---

[24] Climacus, *scal.:* Step 8.
[25] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* IV.153.
[26] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Theodore of Pherme 28, Macarius the Great 4 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* VII.9 *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* VII.14 Climacus, *scal.:* Step 4.
[27] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Theodora 4, Nisterus 5 Basilius, *hom. 10* Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 614. Gould overstates the case against insulting others: Gould, 1993: 132, 134. However, the condemnation runs into the tradition: cf. Symeon the New Theologian 1980: XXVII.7.
[28] e.g. when accused of making a slave pregnant: Leontius, *v. Sym.:* IV.151f Evagrius Scholasticus, *h.e.:* IV.34.
[29] *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XVIII.19 and Palladius, *h. Laus.:* XXIV.

of her holiness: it is only the first few lines that are devoted to her way of life. The anchorite Piteroum only knows of it whilst being chastised for pride by an angel. The climax of the story comes when her holiness is recognised. Her behaviour remains constant. The account of Symeon the holy fool in the history of Evagrius Scholasticus is also marked by the recognition and veiling of Symeon's holiness: each story (abusive behaviour in taverns; the accusation that he had fathered a slave's child; visiting a prostitute; dancing among pillars) includes an element of suspicion that he is not a holy man at all (he gets angry, isn't celibate or sedate), the author's explanation of holiness, and a moment of revelation (confiding in friends, a pregnant woman's confession before childbirth, the prostitute's poverty revealed, the dancing revealed as prophetic). The stories are both about holy fools and about discerning holiness.

It is therefore particularly striking that one of our handful of stories about holy fools (that use the Greek designation '*salos*') appears in the context of a story about Daniel of Scetis. Whilst the historical status of the collection is in doubt, it is at least established that after the introductory story, the Daniel narratives are all discoveries of other people's piety. The stories witness to a tendency for early Christian ascetics to discern holiness outside the boundaries of their own monastic ways of life. But the collection gains status in time (being one of the seven great *paterika* – collections of stories about the fathers), and thereby witnesses to the virtue not only of leading a holy life, but of discovering holiness in others. Daniel of Scetis has almost no other virtue to speak of.[30]

Leontius' work on the life of Symeon appears in a similar light. In his introduction, he accuses those who do not recognise Symeon's holiness of being subject to passions, and not knowing the Scriptures. This accusation is then claimed to be the intention of the holy fool's life:

> Indeed, I say that through spending time in the city, hanging around with women, and the rest of the deception of his life, he truly sought to show to the slothful and pretentious a weakness in the virtuous life and the power granted by God to those who truly serve against the spirits of evil with all their souls.[31]

So the stories of holy fools are every bit as concerned with the perception of holiness as they are with its practice. As we noted above (on page 77), the holiness of the fools is concealed from all: it is this non-knowledge of holiness that constitutes their success, because

---

[30] *v. dan. scet.*
[31] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* intro.122, translation modified.

awareness of holiness is a part of the principle of vainglory. The function of holy foolishness – disrupting liturgy, transgressing taboos, babbling, and denying asceticism – is to disabuse all of the suspicion they might have that they are being confronted with a good person. The morality of the witness is therefore at odds with that of the fool: in order to be good, the witness must attribute holiness to the fool; whereas the fool must shun that attribution both in herself and in others. It is here that the holy fools become challenging: whilst Evagrius Scholasticus and the story of the mad nun contain stories of divine revelation, Leontius' *Life of Symeon* relates divine veiling.

This paradox generates many of the tensions in these works of hagiography. The fool is holy because of the attempt to hide that holiness, whereas the unrighteousness of the world is revealed by not perceiving what has been hidden. The concealment is proof both of the fool's holiness and the world's corruption. What is more, the concealment is God's doing (in answer to the fool's prayer):[32] it seems the decks are stacked in favour of the fools in this struggle.

Divine concealment is not simply seen in the fool's prayer, however: the narrative requires witnesses to the fool's holiness in order to include a vindication that identifies the fool as holy. Miracles must happen, not only for the sake of establishing the reader's holiness in hearing the insult, but for the fool's in giving it. But this leaves the problem of how the fool remains recognisably holy but still unrecognised. In Leontius' narrative, the problem is solved by the natural and supernatural confounding of the witness' speech. A merchant stays silent because he was embarrassed, and accepts everyone else's judgment concerning the fool;[33] the fool's former employers didn't dare to contradict public opinion that ridiculed him;[34] some circus fans had become monks as a result of one of Symeon's miracles, but they were supernaturally hindered from saying anything about it;[35] a local authority investigates Symeon, who strips and dances for him, but as soon as he decides Symeon is only pretending to be mad, his tongue is bound;[36] a Jew catches Symeon in the act of speaking to angels, but as soon as he attempts to expose him, he is struck dumb, and then reprimanded in a dream;[37] a group of theologians are also struck dumb so they could not repeat his critique of Origen;[38]

---

[32] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* III.144; cf. also 'God hid Abba Symeon's plan' – IV.165.
[33] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* IV.159.
[34] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* IV.154.
[35] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* IV.164.
[36] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* IV.156.
[37] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* IV.154.
[38] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* IV.153.

others simply seem to lose their senses and not understand him until they receive divine revelation.[39]

Knowledge of the fools' holiness becomes possible only at the time of death: those who lose their senses can understand and tell of the holy fool once s/he has died. As soon as Isidora is discovered, she disappears into the desert. We non-fools, we witnesses and readers are not able to win the struggle with the fools over the recognition of their holiness. We can only await their death. If they strive to conceal, and we to recognise, then they always prove to be the stronger. Even the possibility of venerating their memory after their disappearance is frustrated: their bodies disappear. We are denied the cult of the saints. The recognition of true holiness in the world is impossible. Once again the reader is thrown up against the extreme negative theology of the hagiography. The holy fools exist, but we do not know who they are, just as God and creation are good, but in ways that we do not understand. We have no standards by which to recognise the holiness of the fool or the goodness of God (cf. above on page 124).

The earliest holy fool literature has therefore an odd message: there are holy fools, but they can not be recognised. And the corollary of this statement is that for us, anyone may be a holy fool. As far as the reader is concerned, holy fools exist and are nowhere to be found. Therefore holy fools are concealed everywhere. No speaker can be ruled out *a priori*.

The conclusion that anyone may be a holy fool is also drawn in the closing paragraphs of the *Life of Symeon*. After Symeon has given an account of his life to Leontius' secret informer, he instructs the latter in matters of holy living:

> And he spoke again, 'I beg you, never disregard a single soul, [167] especially when it happens to be a monk or a beggar. For Your Charity knows that His place is among the beggars, especially among the blind, people made as pure as sun through their patience and distress.'[40]

Symeon was masquerading precisely as a monk and a beggar. He hid all his virtues, but never hid the fact that he was a monk, in spite of the respect he is reported to have had for the habit when he first embraced the religious life.[41] Similarly, he would often accept charitable gifts from people and associate with beggars,[42] in spite of the fact that he obviously

---

[39] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* IV.150, 168.
[40] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* IV.166f.
[41] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* I.131f.
[42] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* IV.163.

had a great deal of money at his disposal (he 'employed' a large number of prostitutes on a permanent basis).[43]

It is in this context – that of producing the expectation of holy fools among certain groups of society – that we can see Symeon's other impersonations. By his pretending to fit in with particular identities and groups, he could challenge the impression we have that we understand who they are. We do not understand demon possession, because we might be mistaking holy fools for the possessed. Identities Leontius portrays Symeon as contesting in this way included the possessed (IV.156, 162), the clients of prostitutes (IV.155f),[44] circus workers, dancers and fans (IV.147, 154f, 163f), rapists (IV.148, 151), the godless (IV.148), and the mad (IV.155 *et passim*). Our conception of the place of holiness in the world needs to be re-negotiated. Values need to be re-thought, and society's currency needs to be changed.

> For sometimes he pretended to have a limp, sometimes he jumped around, sometimes he dragged himself along on his buttocks, sometimes he stuck out his foot for someone running and tripped him. Other times when there was a new moon, he looked at the sky and fell down and thrashed about. Sometimes also he pretended to babble, for he said that of all semblances, this one is most fitting and most useful to those who simulate folly [156] for the sake of Christ.[45]

To recap, the holy fools narratives condemn the non-recognition of holy fools; demonstrate that their recognition is impossible (through the nature of the case and divine intervention); and direct the reader's attention to the typical domain of holy fools in groups that otherwise would be dismissed as unholy. If we apply these theses regarding the objectives of holy fool literature to our outline of the development of the interpretation of insults, we can see these works of hagiography generalising the insult. The holy fool might be anywhere, so the insulting truth may come from anywhere.

The holy fool stories are therefore entirely in line with the early Christian ascetic tendency towards cultivating an attitude of listening that is open to insult. They both confirm this approach, and aim to produce it in their readers. After hearing about the lives of holy fools, the Christian of late antiquity will know that some insults are the product of someone's resentment, but that some might be the prophetic act of a divinely inspired holy man or woman. *But we don't know which is which*. The speakers (the holy fool; God) are directly attempting to hide the source of their words. The task of the good person is to recognise holy fools for who they are. But if the corollary of this paradoxical situation is that fools are

---

[43] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* IV.155.
[44] cf. also Evagrius Scholasticus, *h.e.:* IV.34.
[45] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* IV.155f.

everywhere, the conclusion regarding the insult has to be that no insult can be ruled out as false *a priori*: all are an opportunity to listen humbly. And because insults are founded upon values that are put into question, no insult is the final word. All humility is also playful.[46]

The paradoxical struggle between the holy fool and the listener corresponds to the two elements of apophatic theology we established above (on page 145), namely critique and play. Just as the holiness of the fools is necessarily hidden, and their uninhibited play mere pretence that mocks the values of the world, so apophatic theology will always necessarily tend towards ignorance, and the free play of lies about God. God and the fool are hidden; stories about them are a pretence.

The critical element of the apophaticism of holy fools consists in the prophetic action from nowhere. The holy fools refuse to accept the configuration of holiness that they meet in the city (with its centre in liturgy and its boundaries in acceptable behaviour) and so deny them through insult and transgression. Symeon puts out the candles in church and then goes out to steal beans.[47] He denies the centre and the perimeter of holiness because God has no perimeter, and Her centre is everywhere.

The playful element consists in their pretence. The behaviour of the fools is so wild that it is unlikely to be taken as a portrayal of God. The only way in which it may be taken as such is by recognising it as simulated. They are not *really* foolish. But that still leaves the question open as to what their holiness consists in. Whilst the hagiographer (and the modern interpreter) attempt to validate the behaviour of the fool through interpretation, the holy fools themselves will admit no imitators. They cannot condone their own behaviour.

This is of course part of the project: an imitator would be an admiring disciple, so that the holy fool's virtue would no longer be hidden. But even when faced with someone who has seen the holy fool's pretence, Symeon begs them to follow another way. John the hermit at the beginning of the story is sent back to the desert,[48] and John the archdeacon towards the end of the story is presented as an ideal observer, not as a disciple or a new holy fool.[49] Instead of being seductive holy figures, they cultivate apophatic observers of godliness.

The holy fools thus embrace the challenge of apophatic theology and social transformation. Through the technique of the truth-telling insult, they question the placing of holiness in their society, the values it entails, and the relations of the self. Their behaviour,

---

[46] For more on this theme, cf. below, on page 214.
[47] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* IV.145f.
[48] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* III.144.
[49] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* IV.166f.

and the attitude they produce in their readers, transcend assertion and denial. The fools themselves critique Theology and posit laughter, whilst their readers become sceptical to all forms of holiness, seeing holy fools in all things – from demoniacs to dancers, and from prostitutes to prattlers.

3.2: Fearing Speech

Brutal truth-telling and biting insults are perhaps not standard characteristics associated with ascetic saints in the Christian tradition. Whilst truth is acknowledged as a value in itself, the practices of truth-telling are fraught with moral danger. Fearless speech, which started off as a way of resisting domination and asserting wisdom, has a trajectory that may be traced – precisely through the use of insults – to the brutal forcing of humble self-knowledge in disciplines such as early modern psychiatry and criminology.[50] It may be a tool for the transformation of the self's relation to society, or for forcing the self to submit to its place in society. Flexibility is ambiguous.

Early Christian ascetics themselves were ambivalent to the practice of telling people the truth about their lives. Not everyone could bear it, and not everyone was meant to follow the way of the desert, as we saw in the discussion of multiplicity (above, on page 54). This made it difficult for disciples:

> Again abba Poemen said: I once came to lower Heracleon, to abba Joseph, and he had a really beautiful mulberry tree by his hermitage; and in the morning he said to me, 'Go and get some for yourself, and have a nibble.' Now it was a Friday. So I did not eat because of the fast, and I asked him about it, saying 'Tell me by God the reason for your telling me "Go and have a nibble." Because I didn't go because of the fast, but now I'm ashamed of myself, because I didn't follow your command, thinking that you'd given me an instruction for no reason.' But he replied, 'The old men did not speak clearly to the brothers at the beginning, but with great distortion: and if they saw anyone doing these distortions, then they would only speak profitably to them, realising that they were obedient in everything.'[51]

In addition to demonstrating once more the centrality of obedience for early Christian ascetics, this saying shows us the subtle play of assent between master and disciple that would lead to the kind of relation where the master could exercise his or her parrhesia towards the disciple. The practice was only meant for a few people, and they had to signal very clearly that they were willing to listen. The parrhesiastic contract is negotiated through a play of transgression, discernment, and obedience. For early Christian ascetics, honest and profitable truth-telling can only take place within this context. They are consciously hesitant about telling the truth.

---

[50]   According to Foucault 2009: 9.

[51] *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* X.30 (my translation) = *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Joseph of Panephysis 5 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* X.39.

So it is possible to ask the question 'What value has truth?' In this chapter, we will examine more precisely how truth-telling constructs a relation to the self. In particular, focus will be directed towards the place of and value of truth-telling (and in particular as regards uncomfortable home truths) in a specific community. Truth and listening are necessary elements of the task of ordering and defining any community. I will describe the practices as relevant to ecclesiology, with its issues of obligation, dogma, and constituted experts.

The practices of truth-telling in late antiquity have come under the scrutiny of certain recent philosophers as part of a history of the present. In spite of his reputation as an 'historian of discontinuity', Foucault's work attempts to draw lines of descent from the Socratic exercises of Stoics through Mediaeval spiritual direction to modern relations of government and counselling.[52]

Rather than tracing this history here, I propose to identify various respects in which the different forms of truth-telling and truth-hearing are problematic. How and why is it recommended? From where does the value of truth derive? What kinds of truth are being told? The interface between truth-telling as a resource for self-determination bears specific relations to its practice as a requirement of the community, both logically and historically. I will be drawing on historical sources throughout the tradition depending on the particular quality being studied at each point. But instead of using the sources to illustrate an historical progression, I will be calling on them to demonstrate a logical principle which may apply to a number of different manifestations of the phenomenon of truth-telling. In this way, I hope to avoid the twin errors of historical criticism, namely the temptations to describe history as on the one hand a rational progression of thought, and on the other as the betrayal of a pure and rational origin.

Truth-telling is a problem in its tendency to universalism. Foucault considered all antiquity to have been a 'profound error'[53] because it aspired to being a philosophy for everyone. This aspiration is dissatisfactory. Universal truth telling can either be applied as a requirement or as an ideal. Requiring people to tell and hear the truth about themselves in order to be part of the universal fellowship makes this particular philosophical technique a way of forcing the populace instead of a tool for transformation. Positing universal philosophy as an ideal results in the same determination of culture by techniques of truth-

---

[52] A brief summary can be found in McGushin, 2007: ch. 6. Cf. also chapters one and two of Foucault, 2005[2001].
[53] Foucault, 1996[1984]: 466.

telling, although without including everyone in the same way. Either way, the attitude to truth ceases to be definitive of good and desirability, and acquires the status of being 'a' good.

Keeping truth-telling as the reserve of small groups of people does not solve the problem, however. Truth-telling as a secret good will then allow the marketing of philosophical techniques to whoever has the means to nurture the habit of telling the truth about themselves. This market may integrate its interests with the universal ideal mentioned above, or it may simply offer its goods on their own terms. Either way, a marketable lack is constituted in order to sell truth-telling. Even if the technique is offered freely by its expert philosophers, as long as it is to avoid the above dangers of the universal ideal or requirement, it will only ever be able to achieve the constitution of an aristocratic group protecting their own access to the truth. It will only be natural to make the transition from seeing the non-initiated as truthless humans to untrue humans. And if the philosopher attempts to keep the technique entirely to himself, then he loses both the telling and the truth.

So the philosophers of late antiquity were caught between social stagnation and aristocracy. They chose the latter. Enlightenment social thought would later choose the former in their theories of *raison d'état*.[54] For the potential for transformation elicited by truth-telling and truth-hearing induce flexibility in the subject. That flexibility may be used to put the subject into question in its relation to society and produce new forms of life. It may cause a critical voice that refuses to accept its place from the state. Flexibility may also be deployed as an instrument of homogeneity however. Truth-telling may simply require the subject to adapt its life and truth to society. It may require modesty and docility for the sake of suppressing the socially transforming self. Truth-telling facilitates both.

Techniques of truth-telling and truth-hearing are not however doomed to either aristocracy or homogeneity. Truth is not immoral but dangerous. Universalism is not the same as forced homogeneity. Accounts of truth are not all wrong, but they do all owe us a way of steering between the dangers of elitism and normalising coercion. This argument concerning the nature of truth telling and asceticism will be the basis of my evaluation of truth, humour and humility in the final sections of this thesis.

In order to facilitate a critical account of truth-telling in its relation to the transformation of society and its relation to the self, let us now turn to the various ways in which the logic of veridiction is configured positively. How does truth-telling become an obligation, and what kinds of truth are included in that obligation? Are truth-telling

---

[54] Foucault, 1979 Foucault, 2007[2004].

techniques committed to certain truth values, and how do those values place and restrict the self? What role does the truth-telling expert have in configuring particular relations between self and society? In all these issues, we will have an eye to the value of truth-telling and truth-hearing for the projects of revolution and homogenisation.

3.2.1: Lying

Lying is the opposite of telling the truth. However much I may believe that I am Theology's answer to Friedrich Nietzsche, to make such a claim would be a lie. In order to be able to tell the truth about the matter, I will need good friends to disenchant me and experts to give me a proper appreciation of Nietzsche's genius.

There are a variety of lies, and not all of them require good friends and philosophers. An atlas will show me that Sweden is not the capital of Norway (veridiction of political cartography), and the presentation of sweet wrappers in my coat pocket will convince me of the futility of claiming that it was actually my daughter who had filched the last Quality Street (veridiction of guilt and innocence).

There was an array of opinions regarding lying amongst the early Christian ascetics, a selection of which are presented above (on page 232). Cassian's justification of lying quoted there was based on the duty a speaker has towards her audience. Others embrace a casuistry of prudence, results, and rules (cf. fn.27 above, on page 28). The motivations given for telling the truth appeal exclusively to either care of others or care for the soul. John Climacus contrasts these two principles:

> A man may lie on the grounds of prudence, and indeed regards as an act of righteousness the actual destruction of his own soul. The inventor of lies declares that he is following the example of Rahab and maintains that his own destruction is the cause of salvation for others.[55]

Lying effects other members of a community in different ways. There are very few people that are seriously worried about my illusions regarding the genius of Nietzsche and me. Some might be worried about any claim to be the Messiah, although this depends on whether it appears on the record cover of a popular rock and roll artist, or on the lips of a toga-clad tap dancer quaffing de-icer. Lying about what one had for breakfast does not concern your fellows to the same degree as lies about whether you'd paid for it. The obligation not to lie is not universal.

---

[55] Climacus, *scal.:* Step 12.

Stoics and early Christian thinkers were acutely aware of the variety of lies. Fine distinctions were made between statements of belief, truth, and justification. On the back of this tradition, Augustine wrote two fairly typical treatises, attempting to elucidate the relation between the obligation of truth-telling and the logic of belief.[56] He distinguishes 8 types of lie, in a hierarchy of seriousness (where the first is the worst, and the first five are illicit, whereas the last three are wrong but allowable in certain circumstances):

1. concerning religious doctrine
2. unjustly hurtful
3. that profit one at others' expense
4. lying for lying's sake
5. that satifies the desire for pretty speech
6. to prevent theft
7. to prevent death (even of the guilty)
8. to prevent bodily impurity.[57]

Whilst this list makes the issue appear as a treatment of teleological priorities – a choice between the lesser of two evils – Augustine makes use of a sophisticated philosophical framework both to ground and apply the list. He takes account of issues of agency and consent, of intention and the moral benefit of the truth.

After opening the treatise with an assertion of the uncompromising concern for the truth, he immediately introduces the case of jokes to challenge the reader's assumption that we know what a lie is. He then goes into a variety of cases where the definition of a proposition as a lie can be challenged, before he attempts an interpretation of the various Biblical warrants for the admission and prohibition of lying. He considers questions such as does the speaker believe the proposition? Does she expect to be believed? Does he believe he is telling the truth? Is knowledge of the proposition beneficial? We can summarise these issues most conveniently on a table showing relevant information concerning any person *A*'s utterance of any proposition *p*:

---

[56] Augustinus, *mend* Augustinus, *c. mend.* We will be concentrating on the former.
[57] Augustinus, *mend.*: xiv.25, xxi.42.

168

Table showing the moral possibilities of *A* uttering *p*.

A believes *p*	*A* believes her belief regarding *p* is correct	*p* is true	*A* expects to be believed that *p*	Knowing *p* is beneficial to the hearer	*A* is lying	Moral assessment
Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	ideal
Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	brutal
Y	Y	Y	N	Y	?	malevolent
Y	Y	Y	N	N	?	ironic
Y	Y	N	Y	Y	N	rash
Y	Y	N	Y	N	N	leading astray
Y	Y	N	N	Y	N	rash
Y	Y	N	N	N	N	rash
Y	N	Y	Y	Y	N	ideal
Y	N	Y	Y	N	N	brutal
Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	malevolent
Y	N	Y	N	N	N	-
Y	N	N	Y	Y	N	generous
Y	N	N	Y	N	N	malevolent
Y	N	N	N	Y	N	malevolent
Y	N	N	N	N	N	-
N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	rash/generous
N	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	rash/malevolent
N	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	rash/brutal
N	Y	Y	N	N	Y	rash/malevolent
N	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	pragmatic
N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	malevolent
N	Y	N	N	Y	Y	cunning/pragmatic
N	Y	N	N	N	Y	cunning
N	N	Y	Y	Y	?	generous
N	N	Y	Y	N	?	malevolent
N	N	Y	N	Y	Y	malevolent
N	N	Y	N	N	?	cunning/pragmatic
N	N	N	Y	Y	Y	pragmatic
N	N	N	Y	N	Y	malevolent
N	N	N	N	Y	Y	brutal
N	N	N	N	N	?	cunning/pragmatic

So the morality of truth telling is a good deal more complicated for Augustine than the simple determination of whether someone is speaking true statements or not. He finally considers decisive not the social obligation we have to each other to tell the truth, but the desire to tell the truth to oneself. Telling the truth is useful to ourselves because it is by

nurturing the truth in our soul that we produce right actions and right loves. Only in this way can we become good. This consideration far outweighs physical and social benefits or dangers that might suggest the expediency of lying.

Augustine's categories of lies show us the range of social consequences truth-telling can have. If an honest citizen is attempting to come up with a practical solution to a social challenge, it does not help the community if that person is entirely ignorant of its details and background, or deceiving themselves about its possible solutions. It is important that politicians not be self-deceiving about their tasks and abilities.

This was Socrates' accusation to the people of Athens. His truth-telling was one of uncomfortable truths that were expedient for the state to know. The truth-hearing of the democratic assembly of Athens had an immediate effect on the citizens of that state. They were obliged to hear the truth and to tell the truth. It was not simply a matter of taking care of their soul: they needed to legislate for their community.

Combining these two aspects, however – the freedom of a truth-teller and the obligations towards a community – radically transforms the practice of truth-telling. If the truths an agent is obliged to tell to the group are the same kind as those offered by a fearless speaker, the individual becomes dependent upon and exposed to truth-tellers (or absolutely everyone if the moral hero is the truth-hearer rather than the truth-teller) in order to fulfil that obligation. This situation could easily result from a general conviction that people with a lack of self-knowledge are dangerous. In order to protect society against them, truth-hearing would then become obligatory. Whilst fearless speaking started off as a contract between a vulnerable speaker and a powerful hearer, it can develop into the social contract: the governor (representing the community) tells the truth to the individual, which s/he is then obliged to confess in order to remain a member of the community. Without a taxonomy of different truth obligations, it is difficult to see how the general use of truth-telling techniques is to refrain from degenerating into this situation.

In the context of a social body, telling lies about the political situation and oneself has a public effect. If the phenomenon of lying is indiscriminately defined as utterances of false statements, the obligation not to lie becomes an obligation to know the truth as well as being honest. It becomes an obligation to hear and acknowledge uncomfortable truths, an obligation to hearing fearless speech. The ideal of truth-telling then results in a universal maxim of openness and observability.

3.2.2: Values

If the truth-telling practice itself is committed to particular relations between self and society, then it will not promote the transformation of that relation. It is therefore crucial to discern any positive content in fearless speech: its values, doctrine, and theory. The character of parrhesia is critical. It has a negative force. The truth-teller is remarkable because she says everything, regardless of convention or danger. There is no doctrine presented as common to all parrhesiasts, unless it be the command *aude sapere* – dare to know. More often than not, what the free-speaker dares to say consists in simple contradiction of their hearers' assumed truths. So Socrates tells people that they are not as wise as they think; Diogenes claims that the kingship of Alexander the Great is mere sham; Stoics will point out the impracticability of daily life, and Cynics deny the rationality of the categories of public and private life.

Because fearless speech involves an implicit accusation of self-flattery or deception, early Christian ascetics were hesitant towards it, and sometimes even hostile. Many condemned parrhesia along with chattering and gossip as an idle activity that kept the ascetic from their proper silence before God. Another reason to reject it, though, was the confidence it implied in one's knowledge of the neighbour.

> Abba Peter, who was the disciple of abba Lot, told the story: 'I was once in abba Agathon's cell, and a certain brother came to him, saying "I want to live with the brothers, but tell me how I should live with them." The old man said to him "Guard foreignness (Greek: ξενιτεια; Latin: *peregrinatio*)[58] you have on the first day you go to them for all the days of your life, and do not assume boldness (Greek: παρρησιασθης; Latin: *assumas fiduciam*)." Abba Macarius says to him, "What does boldness do?" The old man says to him "It is as powerful as the summer that, during a drought, drives everything before its face, because summer also spoils the fruit of trees." Abba Macarius said "Is boldness so bad?" Abba Agathon replied "There is no passion worse than boldness; for it is the mother of all passions. The hard working monk should therefore not embrace boldness, not even if he is alone in his cell." '[59]

In this case, parrhesia is not contrasted with silence, but with foreignness: being a stranger. The virtue is then not the silence of worship, but that of hesitancy before other people. Agathon wishes to warn monks against rushing in to proclaiming truths about the brothers without knowing who they are. And the discovery of who one's neighbour is is an

---

[58] I prefer the Greek reading here, as it retains the sense of arrival on the first day better than the Latin does.
[59] *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* X.8 (my translation) = *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Agathon 1 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* X.11. Foucault completely ignores the positive virtue of strangeness in his commentary on this passage in Foucault 2009: 305-307.

endless activity. We are a mystery to each other that can not even be fathomed by the practice and doctrine of truth-telling.

Fearless speech is not simply about the denial of self-flattery and illusion. It does not just take courage to see what everyone is ignoring. It takes discernment. You have to know what you are looking for. Whilst the Socratic and Cynic forms of fearless speech are the most unadorned, Stoic and Christian traditions developed a sophisticated set of practices that would form the background against which the truth-teller might speak courageously and truth-hearers might be able to speak the truth about themselves.

This is not the place for an exhaustive overview of these contexts for parrhesia. They vary in detail, from the simple recommendation of St Anthony that hermits write down all their thoughts for the scrutiny of their spiritual director, to the proliferation of handbooks for spiritual direction in the wake of the Council of Trent (1545-1563) which made annual confession universally obligatory. The techniques differ enormously, but all have the same objective: to provide a context for the moral agent's truth-hearing.

The road from the practice of truth-telling to the doctrine of truth about the person is short. It is a mere practical task to show people, as Socrates did, that they are deceiving themselves in believing their current way of life to be a rational construction from first principles. It is a natural corollary of this practical task to believe that people are self-deceived concerning themselves. This corollary itself may be elaborated into a taxonomy of flattering lies we tell ourselves concerning our greatness, and its recognition or non-recognition by others.

The transition from shocking home truths to doctrine may be illustrated by the history of Evagrius' doctrine of the passions. Continuing the philosophical tradition that attempted to take control of the passions (particularly through Stoic consolation literature), Evagrius wrote his taxonomy of passions in order to establish practices that would eradicate them. As we saw above (on pages 96-101), this constituted a technology of the self in its relation to truth and the world, whereby Evagrius aimed to produce objectivity. The objectivity itself served the twin aims of truth and non-manipulative love.

These aims are less clear in Cassian's account of Evagrius' taxonomy, which describes eight faults, rather than eight passions.[60] It is a short step from these to the description of general sins that may describe all Christians, monastic or otherwise (and in this respect

---

[60] Cassianus, *de institutis:* books V-XII, each of which treats one fault Cassianus, *Collationes:* book V. Climacus also has eight vices: Climacus, *scal.:* Step 13, although strictly speaking he adheres to Gregory the Great's taxonomy of seven deadly sins – cf. Step 22.

Pelagius was by no means the loser in his controversy with Augustine: monastic techniques are quickly applied to and required of the secular church). With Gregory's moral comments on Job, a number of transformations have occurred to Cassian's list: the faults are generalised, reduced to seven, and connected to the eternal status of the person. They are no longer 8 practical temptations, but have become the seven deadly sins.

This taxonomy of sins becomes a doctrine concerning the destiny and status of the person. Moreover, the list of sins itself yields new techniques and interpretations of techniques. They are used by truth-tellers and spiritual directors, and the confession gains the significance of a diagnosis of the confessing Christian's moral substance.[61]

Whilst this is simply one contingent and historical trajectory for the practice of parrhesia, the adoption of positive doctrines concerning the person is not a peculiarity exclusive to the religious appropriation of the technique. The truth-teller does acquire authority in the course of the parrhesiastic contract. The two forms of courage involved (courage to speak despite the danger of reprisals, and the courage to hear despite the danger of insult) also imply two forms of trust (that the hearer will not become violent and that the speaker will tell the truth). Trusting someone to tell the truth is not grounded in first principles, it is merely necessary to the effectiveness of the technique. The parrhesiastic technique involves belief in the words of the speaker. The transition then from choosing to believe a parrhesiast, towards adhering to commonly held beliefs (particularly as parrhesiasts learn their trade from handbooks and institutional authorities), and finally to homogeneous community based on shared perceptions of moral dangers is entirely in keeping with the ideal of fearless speaking whenever that ideal is held universally.

Fearless speakers regularly acquired a set of disciples, and however resistant they may have been to established opinion, they became associated with particular doctrines. It is not a necessary result of the practice of parrhesia, but unless the fearless speaker takes steps to avoid it (for example through persistent critique of truth-tellers themselves or a theory of the development of doctrine), the values and critiques that it is courageous to tell soon solidify into established and fixed truths about the person that are no longer dangerous to speak. Fearless speech may be transformed into uncritical assumption universally applied. These assumptions still call the subject into question, produce flexibility and a critical stance towards the self, but to the extent that they espouse fixed standards, their objective is

---

[61] A good example is the opening chapters of John of the Cross, 1990.

adaptability towards society rather than the transformation of normality. If the doctrine retains its parrhesiastic authority, anyone denying it will be hailed not as a critic, but a coward.

3.2.3: Experts

The practice of parrhesia has always been a two-place activity. Socrates spoke the truth not to himself but to politicians, opponents and disciples. Cynics spoke out brazenly to anyone. The Stoics listened to the bold words of their truth-tellers. The desert fathers listened to the insults of strangers, and sometimes even of sages. There may not have been a contract negotiated in each case, and the relation was not always successful either. Nevertheless, the truth game can only be described as parrhesiastic if there is both a truth-teller and someone to listen to them. This concrete role can easily be adapted to the market, so that in antiquity, it was amenable to the aristocratic tendencies of philosophers. To the extent that the role of the truth-teller becomes defined and restricted by specific criteria, it will also be suited to the homogenisation of the self's relation to society.

Early Christian ascetics did not radically undermine the role of the authoritative man in truth-telling, although they were sensitive to the aristocracy of the philosophy of fearless speech. They did not, for example, restrict the role of the spiritual master to members of the upper classes or intelligentsia. Abba Arsenius – who had been an imperial tutor – was particularly aware to this problem:

> Someone said to blessed Arsenius, 'How is it that we, with all our education and our wide knowledge got no-where, while these Egyptian peasants acquire so many virtues? Abba Arsenius said to him, 'We indeed get nothing from our secular education, but these Egyptian peasants acquire the virtues by hard work.'

> One day Abba Arsenius consulted an old Egyptian monk about his own thoughts. Someone noticed this and said to him, 'Abba Arsenius, how is it that you with such a good Latin and Greek education, ask this peasant about your thoughts?' He replied, 'I have indeed been taught Latin and Greek, but I do not know even the alphabet of this peasant.'[62]

As we have seen, the different forms of the technique of parrhesia concentrate on different elements of the negotiation – the truth-teller, the truth itself, the truth-hearer, the object of the truth, etc. The treatment of anyone and everyone as one's truth-teller, for example, is a late development. The transfer of the technique from the political sphere (where

---

[62] *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Arsenius 5 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* X.5 (where the interlocutor is Evagrius) = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* X.7 and *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Arsenius 6 = *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XV.7 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XV.7.

the truth-teller speaks to the entire assembly) to the personal (where the truth-teller speaks to the individual politician) appears in the work of Socrates and Plato.[63] Foucault identifies Galen as the first to listen to a neutral party who would otherwise be a stranger rather than a friend who tells you the truth because it is in your interests.[64]

Common to all these moments of the tradition is the recognition of the speaker as a truth-teller. In antiquity, there was not simply a debate concerning how to know the truth, but also how to recognise the truth-teller: this is the force of the warnings against flattery. It is not simply that one takes illicit pleasure in hearing lies, but also that the flatterer apes the parrhesiast: he is 'a servant of devils, a teacher of pride, the destroyer of contrition, a vandal of excellence, a perverse guide'.[65] The flatterer does not help one to speak the truth about oneself.

How does one recognise the truth teller? There are certain qualifications and hallmarks by which they are known, and these are noted and categorised at various points in the tradition.[66] These qualifications have to do with the person's honesty with himself, with his knowledge of the passions, his discipline, courage, and objectivity.

Recognition is a shared thing. If I have criteria for identifying someone who can tell me the truth, then that person can logically claim those criteria to persuade someone to recognise them as a truth-teller. So qualifications become recommendations, and identifying a truth-teller is in keeping with their public recognition as such. Once again (as when we studied the doctrines of parrhesiasts), we are faced with the social challenge of authority: no-one is obliged to accept someone's authority, but neither is anyone free from the assumed choice of some authorities over others.

The tacit or public recognition of certain authorities adds to the obligation to speak the truth one hears from the qualified truth-teller. It is one further way in which the universalism of truth-telling and truth-hearing is reinforced. The recognition may be informal (as in the case of truth-telling friends) or more obviously formal (as in the case of the truth-telling priest). Either way, the parrhesiastic activity entails that a particular group of people with specific values and qualifications exert an influence in the determination of the truth about individuals. As soon as the authority of truth-telling is divorced from its characteristic elements of resistance to political authority, exposure to physical danger, distinction from the opinions of the majority, it may be used to recommend any group of people.

---

[63] Cf. Foucault 2009: lecture of 15th February.
[64] Foucault, 2005[2001]: 399.
[65] Climacus, *scal.*: Step 22.
[66] e.g. in Plutarch, 2006[1878].

I hold the bet that most of you have met at least one of those guys who nowadays regularly visit a kind of master who takes their money from them in order to teach them how to take care of themselves. Fortunately enough, I have forgotten, either in French or in English, or in German, the name of those modern masters. In antiquity, they were called philosophers.[67]

The Greek philosophical tradition, both in its Christian and its classical manifestations, has been largely responsible for the continuation of the parrhesiastic tradition (particularly in middle- and neo-platonism). However, its idealisation of the philosopher king, not least as realised in the person of Marcus Aurelius, demonstrates the antiquity of this governor/truth-teller combination. The fact that the technique was not used in governmental technologies until early modernism is surely due to its attachment to the role of the advisor to the king, and later to marginal ascetic communities rather than to late antiquity's noble resistance to state power. The power of the parrhesiastic expert is difficult to resist, and is a result of reflection on the practice of truth-telling. By characterising and limiting the truth-teller, the tradition defined and grounded the possibilities of truth-hearing in a particular relation to one order of society. Truth-tellers enabled citizens to fulfil the ideal relation, leading philosophically ordered society onto the horns of the ecclesiological dilemma outlined above (on page 163-166).

In its tendencies towards imposing an obligation not to lie, establishing doctrine, and fixing a class of experts, the practice of parrhesia is beset with difficulties. None of these are necessary results of truth-telling, but all are contingent directions to which it may lead.

The effect of these difficulties is to rigidify the self. When the authority of a courageous truth-teller is identified with established ideal qualities and a particular class of people, the image of the truth can thereby be confined to that ideal. Establishing a fixed taxonomy of virtue and vice, together with techniques for avoiding the one, cultivating the other, and assessing the result, has the force of defining a model to which all must conform. The obligation for everyone to speak the truth about themselves to the community (represented by the truth-teller) enforces the necessity of the ideal and the model for the sake of the stability of that community.

In short, these are specific ways in which the practice of parrhesia can lead to social homogeneity rather than to critique. Truth-telling is not the unambiguous ethical ideal

---

[67] Foucault, 1983.

embraced by certain naïve Foucauldians.[68] It is a practice that lies at the root of disciplinary techniques of normalisation. It plays into the hands of aristocratic philosophy, marketed citizenship, and of homogenising ascetic ideals. For this reason, constructive proposals for practical modes of critique (e.g. Bernauer's mysticism; Butler's giving an account of oneself; Critchley's Humour)[69] must face the implications and possible appropriations allowed by their theories. They must find out the cost of telling the truth.

---

[68] This uncritical appropriation is often associated with theologians, although it can most easily be found amongst the Foucauldian ethical writers: Davidson, 1994 McGushin, 2007 O'Leary, 2002.
[69] Bernauer, 2002 Butler, 2005 Critchley, 2002.

3.3: Humour

I would like to take the example here of humour, which is both the most attractive and most relevant method of truth-telling to be found as regards holy fools. It also has the advantage of having been considered by a wide range of philosophers throughout the centuries. It is a prime example of truth-telling that reconfigures one's relation to oneself, with both personal factors (affecting one's sense of humour) and social factors (through sharing a joke). With its political satire and individual surprise it is a mode of truth-telling uniquely able to transform the relation of the self to society. By looking at the implications of humour, and attitudes towards it among early Christian ascetics, we will be able to assess the significance of the playful comedy and truth-telling insults of the holy fools.

In this section we will look at the technique itself, as it is interpreted by some modern authors,[70] and argue for the interpretation of humour as a form of asceticism and work on the self. Once the foundation of this interpretation is given, we can turn to the ways in which humour – and particularly the laughter of the holy fools – falls upon the ecclesiological dilemma, and what resources it has for solving it.

Humour can be interpreted as a mode of the fearless speech we examined above, namely as an activity with implications for social life, and effects on the self. Like the practice of learning the truth through listening to a truth-teller, humour is primarily a social activity. We laugh at what others tell us. If we laugh on our own, it is usually because we have been provoked by someone else's thoughts, either in writing or memory. At the same time, we say that people have a good sense of humour, and this is an individual quality, in the sense that we would not say that a football team, my relationship with my sister, or all pedestrians have a good sense of humour.

So there is an interaction between the relationship and the attitude: I laugh with others to the extent that I have a sense of humour that fits the interaction. Both the laughter and the attitude are dynamic: they develop and are transformed. I meet new things to laugh at every day; I find things funny today that may have been banal or even insulting yesterday. Just as we saw the courage of truth-telling and the courage of truth-hearing, the comic situation allows for the telling of jokes and the appreciation of jokes. Both may cause the failure of comedy.

---

[70] e.g. Critchley, 2002 Bergson, 2005[1901] Berger, 1997.

Humour has an identifiable relation to truth-telling in addition to its parallel structure. There are factors in truth-telling that equally rule out being funny. You cannot, for example, use humour to patently communicate dogma. In fact, it is a typical butt for comics. Similarly, it is impossible to be a flattering comic. Any joke that appears extravagant in its praise for the hearer simply has to be taken tongue-in-cheek. A flattering truth-teller has also renounced her task.

A further similarity between fearless speech and humour is the challenge both pose to the unspoken assumptions of those who find the joke funny. This may be in terms of simple punning, which brings into question the meaning of words. More subtle, however, is the comic trick of making everyday life seem absurd.[71] By adjusting the perception of reality somewhat, the logic we enter into when we accept an idiom is revealed and mocked. Two examples of mocking advertising demonstrate the technique.

- Wittgenstein closes a letter to Gilbert Pattisson with the comment 'Somehow or other, one instinctively feels that Two Steeples No. 83 Quality Sock is a real man's sock. It's a sock of taste – dressy, fashionable, comfortable.'[72]

- An advertising campaign for a 'no frills' chain reads 'Buy one. Pay for one.'

The comic and truth-telling also have similar relationships to courage. Both dare to transgress censorship and taboos in their speech. Both are in their element when they do so. Critique and joking – e.g. Greek comedy and Roman satire – have both been forbidden by religious and political authorities, to the detriment of the knowledge of truth. Comics throughout history have had to pay dearly for their trade.

Truth-telling can be humorous. Braving taboos can be humorous. Humour is critical. More specifically, the laugher is often mocked by what s/he laughs at. Humour helps us to find ourselves absurd, which can be a long step towards self-transformation.

As such, humour involves a very specific division of the self. It is a division determined by laughter: the self finds itself funny. Whilst this is certainly not true of all humour, or all laughter, it is at least a branch of humour that has been normatively recommended recently by Critchley, himself taking up the descriptions of the healthy self in the later work of Freud.[73]

---

[71] Bergson, 2005[1901]: 18, 75f.
[72] quoted in Monk, 1990: 266f..
[73] Critchley, 2002: esp. ch.7.

When the self has been divided in this way, it becomes possible to tell the truth about the self and acknowledge the critique elaborated by the comic without the possibility of insult. If one has found the joke funny, then it simply cannot offend. If it does offend, it is no longer funny. There is no guarantee here, and the comedian's task is to get the audience to remain in this abjective relation to themselves long enough for her to tell the truth.

In this respect, the sense of humour is a form of *apatheia*. We noted above (on page 153) the relation of *apatheia* to insults: to provoke someone is to test the presence of passion. Without the passion, an insult may become funny. Unless we are disconnected from our passions on the other hand, we will be unable to find something funny. If we immediately feel concern for a clown slipping on a banana skin, it will not be funny. If we are worried about our self image, we will not be able to laugh.

> Here I would point out, as a symptom equally worthy of notice, the ABSENCE OF FEELING which usually accompanies laughter. It seems as though the comic could not produce its disturbing effect unless it fell, so to say, on the surface of a soul that is thoroughly calm and unruffled. Indifference is its natural environment, for laughter has no greater foe than emotion.[74]

The candid view of oneself produced by humour (and truth-telling) works both inwards and outwards. We are confronted with our absurd nature, our world, and our bodies (which is perhaps why it is so hard not to laugh when someone farts in metaphysical surroundings), and forced to recognise the modesty of our lives. At the same time, we are introduced to the possibility of another way of configuring reality. The silliness of our way of life is not compatible with its logical necessity. Critique of our modes of being-together and our representations is made possible. Everyday life may be transformed – or transfigured – by the comic vision. The comedian is a social visionary, forcing the possibility into thought that things could be otherwise.

But because all this is a pleasurable experience, our absurdity does not awaken revulsion in us, or even regret. In our laughter, our faults seem to us like so many endearing foolishnesses. Satirist Jeremy Hardy pointed this out concerning the frustration felt by the British at the bureaucracy of food regulations in the United Kingdom, that requires packets of walnuts to include a note on the back saying 'may contain nuts':

> That's the thing that people get most irate about isn't it? 'It's outrageous, packets of nuts which may contain nuts in it!' I know it's foolish, but it's quite quaint and charming. It's like the old

---

[74] Bergson, 2005[1901]: 4.

money, it wasn't doing any harm, pounds shillings and pence. Yes, it was lunatic, but it was quite charming. Why can't we have our quirks? What's wrong with it?[75]

It is worth tarrying briefly at this understanding of humour as critique. The tendency of modern philosophy to address its critical eye towards the presuppositions of truth as well as its content has turned into a mark of academic rigour that is not always justified. We are asked to believe a thinker because he 'challenges established and presupposed tacit truths'. The term Foucault used to describe discontinuities in the development of thought – problematisation[76] – has become a standard academic term more or less synonymous with 'look at'. People express their intention to 'problematise' the notion of the family, the treatment of sexuality or the layout of public buildings in antiquity or modern times.

The problem with this particular appropriation of modern philosophy is that it yields almost exclusively mendacious descriptions. If a book has genuinely challenged established tacit presuppositions, then it would be deeply shocking (or unbelievable and thereby extremely funny). If it is not perceived as such, then we must be sceptical as to the extent to which the truths it has challenged really were deep-seated tacit presuppositions. Similarly, if it were genuinely possible for one researcher to 'problematise' a particular concept, group of people, or practice in which they themselves participate, then that person would be some sort of messiah figure in that culture. They would also be entirely incomprehensible to their peers. In Foucault's terminology, at least, shared experiences, perceptions, and eventually concepts become problematic as a result of a variety of factors, and the last ones to know about it are often the academics who integrate the new terminology – the self, ideology, the homeless – into their thought. If professors can sit in their offices and discuss the social significance of the family, this is because it has already become problematic. If it had not become so, it would not occur to anyone to discuss it. It is not a mistake to use the word to describe the age-old academic process of isolating and studying an object of thought or experience as problematisation (or at least, if it is, it is a trivial exegetical one). But it is not a very convincing evidence of truth-telling either.

In fact, a number of thinkers have attempted to transform themselves and culture by addressing what they consider tacit presuppositions, and the project is not to be denied by so much failure. It is altogether more dangerous, however, to identify a success story. Revolutionary ideas as well as manipulative falsehoods have been offered to the world as

---

[75] Anderson, 2008.
[76] Foucault, 2000: 117-119.

unpopular truths.[77] We have already noted the social danger inherent in a false proclamation of liberation. As a result, Foucault outlines his ideals for such a project in his agreement with the school of phenomenology:

> Impossible, as one turns these pages, not to think of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's teaching and of what was for him the essential philosophical task: never to consent to being completely comfortable with one's own presuppositions. Never to let them fall peacefully asleep, but also never to believe that a new fact will suffice to overturn them; never to imagine that one can change them like arbitrary axioms, remembering that in order to give them the necessary mobility one must have a distant view, but also look at what is nearby and all around oneself.[78]

The practice of critique is not guaranteed to induce a radical change in language and culture. Although I will be arguing here that humour does have the characteristics of a particularly penetrating critique that allows us to see the world differently, there is no formula to produce the kind of cultural transformation dreamt of by recent theorists. To the extent that humour is met with surprise and resistance, however, it can be shown to be doing more than re-organising language and culture in the surface.

Surprise is thought by some to be the very essence of humour. The punch-line to a joke, or the sudden recognition of a mime's object are not just funny, but unexpected. We had not thought this situation in this way before. The surprise is increased the closer it gets to the bone. So half the humour of satirists is based in the audience not expecting them to be so daring. Note that the surprise explains both the humour here (it's the resolving punch line) and the critique (the new way of looking at the world feels like a resolution/revolution). A good example of this is the song 'The Pursuit of Happiness' by *The Divine Comedy*. The theme of the song is laid out as a message of love, full of flattery and noble devotion: "Just as long as we are together for ever I'll never be anything other than happy". The lover is fulfilled and completed by the beloved. The beloved is all that matters. Then the final line delivers a crushing blow to its own genre:

> Hey, don't be surprised if millions die in plague and murder,
>
> True happiness lies beyond your fries and happy burger.[79]

---

[77] Dostoevsky's *Demons* is (among other things) an excellent portrayal of the abuse of the popularity of progressive ideas in nineteenth century Russia: Dostoevsky, 2000[1872].

[78] Foucault, 2002[1979]: 448

[79] Hannon, 1997.

The final sentence is a classic punch line. But it also leaves us to reflect on the use of the word 'happy' in the song and elsewhere. If 'happy' can be applied to a hamburger, what value can be attributed to the happiness the lover derives from being with his beloved? How serious can love songs ever be from now on? The punch line, during the singing of which the instruments fade away, allowing the truth-telling conclusion to appear naked in its frank intensity, leaves us with an odd feeling of being displaced, like we have been fooled into inauthenticity.

The thesis that surprise is at least one element of humour has not, to my knowledge, been contested. That humour regularly meets with resistance is also widely accepted. A common criticism is that a comic has 'gone too far', or that she is saying things just for laughs rather than the more serious business of making a point. Jokes can be in poor taste. These are signs that the joke is transgressing limits, which is not to say that the transgression is good or bad. The fact that the resistance takes the form of non-cognitive criticism – in terms of taste, of pre-set limits to speech, of whether it's funny or not, rather than contesting its patent truth claim – demonstrates that the joke is not operating in the realm of logical thought. We don't answer one of Freud's jokes about Jews by pointing out that it is founded in a deception concerning Jewish hygiene.[80] It is not simply false, but revealing of bad character.

One instance of comedy which both meets with resistance and is manifestly meant to work on its hearers' categories of thought is Eddie Izzard's stand-up comedy, and in particular his sequence on being a transvestite. In making the distinction between 'weirdo transvestites' and 'executive transvestites', he makes patent the way in which the category of transvestite has become defined in relation to a construction of normality and morality rather than having the positive meaning of cross-dressing. He attempts to prise away the concepts of sexuality, gender, and violence. Perhaps more subtly, he mocks the bourgeois morality that attributes all things that have to do with the 'executive class' with an acceptable status.

> When I was in New York, there was a guy in the Bronx who was living in a cave – like you do, and he was coming out and shooting at geese and – a lot of weird things going on with this guy; and the police picked him up and they found a collection of women's shoes, and they thought, 'Maybe he's a transvestite.' And if he is, he's a fucking weirdo transvestite! I'm much more in the executive transvestite area. Travel the world, yes, it's much more executive. Like J. Edgar Hoover, what a fuckhead he was! They found out when he died that he was a transvestite, and

---

[80] These jokes are scattered throughout Freud, 2002[1905].

they go, 'Well, that explains his weird behaviour!' Yeah, fucking weirdo transvestite! (*points to himself*) Executive transvestite. It's a lot wider community, more wide than you'd think.[81]

Izzard does not fall into the mistake of constructing a new identity for transvestites. He does not ask to be taken seriously. It is not that we should include in our knowledge of humanity categories of gender, sexuality, and cross-dressing. Instead, he attempts to produce confusion and frustrate the formation of categories. In addition to his self-confession as an executive transvestite, for example, he also calls himself a 'lesbian trapped in a man's body' or 'a male tomboy'. His comedy is a brazen challenge – categorise me if you can!

This work on the conditions of thought is of a piece with his activism. Eddie Izzard is also a member of Amnesty International and has organised a number of events to support them. One particular form his work took was a protest against the death of Vanessa Lorena Ledesma, who died in police custody in Buenos Aries, Argentina: 'I stood on Argentine territory at the foot of their embassy and said, "I'm a transvestite, I'm on your property, so arrest me and beat the shit out of me like you did with your other transvestites!"'[82]

Humour enables critique both through its own truth-telling practices and through its nurture of an attitude of affectionate self-critique that allows scepticism and change in our own thought. It is a mode of social transformation in both these respects: we are changed by its truth and we become open to change by the efficacy of its technique. In this respect, humour can be described well as a speech act. Its locutionary force (the patent truth claim of the joke, e.g. 'I'm an executive transvestite') differs from its illocutionary force (its social critique, e.g. 'don't automatically associate transvestites with dangerous individuals'), and its perlocutionary force is then laughter.[83]

In contrast with its transformative portrayals, the attitude comedy inculcates in us – of modesty and flexibility – is an ongoing point of character. We are brought down to earth by our sense of humour. If we are in the habit of laughing at the world, then nothing in the world is safe from the comic perspective. Everything can change.

This technique's most attractive attribute is perhaps that of delight. We enjoy laughing. Unlike the insult, humour is not a difficult pill to swallow. It is a part of the gracious ordering of creation that leads us to the good and the true through our natural appreciation of the beautiful.[84] Our bodies need food, and hence the existence of Cornish

---

[81] Izzard, 1998.
[82] Garfield, 2001.
[83] For the theory of Speech Acts, see paradigmatically Searle, 1969 and Austin, 1975.
[84] For the seminal account of this in Augustine's work, cf. Harrison, 1992.

pasties; we need to drink, hence hot chocolate; we need to hear the truth, hence Dostoevsky's novels and Wittgenstein's philosophy; we need to be humble, hence comedy. The practice is good, true, and beautiful, without the painful effort of repentance and transformation. As Critchley has put it, 'your super-ego is your amigo'![85]

Humour is not merely an interesting technique of ethics and critique. It is theologically grounded, through its character of delight, its adherence to the truth, and its objective of goodness. The comic is the flipside of the priest, where the latter adheres to abiding truths, reinterpreting the tradition for each new day, and the former criticises the priest's compromising attitude to contemporary culture, and challenges the obvious truths that condition thought.[86]

In parallel with the practice of fearless speech, however, this technique is beset with dangers. The public recommendation or ethical endorsement of critical humour may license its use to force transformation in the entire population. That transformation would be dictated by and conformed to the sense of humour of that population, and in particular those intelligent and powerful enough to exert an influence on it. However, if critical humour becomes the preserve of an elite few, then all the resources of that technique of the self – flexibility, adaptability, and self-knowledge – are restricted to that aristocratic minority. Alternatively, the technique may become a marketable good like spiritual guidance or therapy. That kind of marketing might then cultivate a sense of lack in the population: a sense of humour becomes the reserve of the rich. This is the economic effect of the assertion of taste in public comedy.

In what follows, I shall enumerate problems that parallel those mentioned concerning truth-telling (cf. over, on pages 166-174) in order to discern whether humour, and particularly that of the holy fools, is able to avoid the slippage from critical truth-telling into the forcing of the self's flexibility for the sake of social homogeneity that takes place when truth becomes obligatory, dogmatic, and the preserve of a few experts. When applied to humour, these themes become the obligation to laugh; stock comic forms; and the power of the comic.

3.3.1: The obligation to laugh

Humour both assumes and constitutes a community. Translating jokes is a perilous affair, but a feeling of community results if the joke is appreciated. We rarely laugh on our own. Something has to be extremely funny to provoke solitary laughter, whereas we can

---

[85] Critchley, 2002: 93-107.
[86] This portrayal is given in Kolakowski, 2004[1959].

laugh at banalities in the right company.[87] If we unite this social function of humour with the self-critical effects, however, humour becomes a tool of homogeneity and the policing of cultural boundaries. This section will attempt a critique of humour in terms of this reading of comedy. Laughter at oneself may be pleasurable, but those who cannot laugh with the joker are both ostracised thereby, and kept outside by the truth-force of the joke for those who laugh.

We can interpret the perceived dourness of the theologians of the patristic era in this context. A brief examination of what motivated the fathers and mothers of the church to resist laughter will give the lie to unhelpfully reductionist accounts of these thinkers as grumpy old men.[88] Certainly the ascetic thinkers were acutely aware of the social dynamics of humour, braving ridicule and ostracism by resisting unhelpful humour:

> But when the demons observe that we stay clear of the sallies of some outstanding wit, as though we were avoiding the plague, they try to catch us with two seemingly plausible thoughts, namely that we should not be offensive to the person telling the witty story and we should not give the appearance of loving God more than he does. Be off! Do not dawdle! Otherwise the jokes will start coming back to you when you are at prayer. But do not simply run away. Break up the bad company in a devout way by setting before them the thought of death and judgment, and if a few drops of vainglory fall on you, what harm? Provided of course, that you become a source of profit to many.[89]

Humour and vainglory are two key modes of preserving fixed values in a group. They are inherently social, and hard to resist. The attitude of early Christian ascetics towards them is characterised by self-determination. Humour needs to be open to the critical eye, like a passion. The ascetic needs to be able to 'command laughter'[90] and reason about the comic.[91] Because comedy is an extremely reasonable thing.

The effects of comedy are socially useful. Bergson refers to the way laughter produces social flexibility so that people may adapt themselves to the demands of living in community. Laughter homogenises.[92] Consider the recent rise of ethnic humour: it is now possible to laugh at one's ethnicity because of the national identity enforced by integration politics, which

---

[87] Bergson, 2005[1901]: 4f *et passim* Augustinus, *conf.:* II.ix.17 Schopenhauer, 2004[1903]: Further Psychological Observations.
[88] e.g. in Screech, 1997: 47f, *et passim*.
[89] Climacus, *scal.:* Step 12. John Chrysostom is described by John Moschus not as one who never laughed, but as one who never 'listened to witty words.' Moschus, *prat.:* 191.
[90] Climacus, *scal.:* Step 7.
[91] Basilius, *reg. fus.:* Question 17.
[92] Bergson, 2005[1901]: 73, Symeon the New Theologian 1980: VII.12.

relativises ethnic culture. Whilst this identity was still fragile and negotiable, one's relation to one's ethnic origins was still strong and non-negotiable, hence the play on the rigidity of older generations prevalent in this brand of humour. The young generation of multicultural British citizens laughs at the older generation that was unable and unwilling to adapt and hybridise its culture. Inflexible ethnic traditions are critiqued and laughed at in ways that affirm the adaptability of cosmopolitan Europe. And here it is important to note that the comedians are laughing *at themselves*: their own identity; their own family, which they've managed to bracket in order to fit into secular cosmopolitanism. The discomfort inherent in this analysis takes us immediately into the ecclesiological dilemma: one is suspicious of the cultural assumptions that incline one to mock one's own culture, whereas forbidding this kind of humour implies denying a set of resources for being happy and criticising public life.

In what is to my knowledge the first modern observation of the social technology of government as the organisation and appropriation of self-control – the art of arts[93] – Bergson notes the social utility of an ascetic technique:

> Laughter, then, does not belong to the province of esthetics alone, since unconsciously (and even immorally in many particular instances) it pursues a utilitarian aim of general improvement. And yet there is something esthetic about it, since the comic comes into being just when society and the individual, freed from the worry of self-preservation, begin to regard themselves as works of art.[94]

This particular quality of humour has been identified by business executives all over the world, so that 'executive toys' and 'executive games' have become common practice in various corporations and office-based institutions. The effectiveness of the workforce is here augmented by their relaxation in each other's presence and the trivialising of contingent differences that confirms the shared assumptions of the work context. Through humour, they are able to speak the truth to each other: the working group becomes more cohesive through the community-building activity of shared joking, and more effective through the openness created around gentle mockery.

It is difficult not to be suspicious of this utilitarian humour. As Critchley has put it:

---

[93] The term used to denote the conduct of conduct essential to spiritual direction and modern government: cf. Foucault, 2002[1982] Foucault, 2007[2004]: 148-154 Burchell, 1996: 19, largely quoting Gregorius, *Lib. Reg. Past.:* I.1.

[94] Bergson, 2005[1901]: 10.

Such enforced fun is a form of compulsory happiness, and it is tempting to see it as one further sign of the ways in which employees' private lives are being increasingly regulated by the interests of their employers.[95]

The question is: is it possible to resist this form of intrusion? The game of humour is difficult to decline without experiencing immediate ostracism. Refusing to be amused by something is both to depart from the shared activity and to invite the community's derision. Expressing offence and solidarity with the butt of the joke is both brave and bad form. The critique inherent in comedy can cut both ways. Like the obligation not to lie, the obligation to laugh may soon turn into forced self-humiliation.

This aspect of humour is particularly disturbing because of its combination of techniques of the self with social utility. It is not even the ostracism that is pernicious here: we can be happily alone when ostracised. Humour that produces humility does not necessarily homogenise, and social utility can be a commendable virtue. When all these aspects are combined, however, the automatic nature of the technique of humour becomes a form of government that subsumes the pursuit of happiness under the objectives of the pursuit of an effective workforce, a national identity, motivation for citizen participation, etc. These community aims are pursued within the context of a form of truth-telling that has enormous powers of commanding assent. The technique of veridiction is appropriated for the cause of social utility.[96] In this context, the ostracism is unlikely to happen, because the joking acts as an inclusive force. But including the useful can be just as sinister as ostracising the ineffective.

Comedy becomes a force of government for precisely the reasons that it was considered critical above: it is surprising, enables critique, places and comforts the self, and challenges presuppositions. Just as the value of truth-telling can be deployed in the program of nation-building, so can the critique of humour be a function of national identity and social harmony. The techniques of change beloved of Foucault, whereby philosophical activity consists 'in the endeavour to know how and to what extent it might be possible to think differently, instead of legitimating what is already known'[97] are relayed time after time in homogenising and effectivising corporate workshops concerned with 'thinking outside the box'. Humour is no exception.

---

[95] Critchley, 2002: 13.
[96] See Foucault, 1979: 239 for an account of how this kind of combination (of the 'city-citizen' game with the 'shepherd-flock' game) is characteristic of government in early modern Europe.
[97] Foucault, 1992b[1984]: 9.

Do the holy fools embrace this governmental force of humour? Is their foolery a way of forcing people into the kingdom of God by making them laugh? Symeon the Holy Fool is certainly portrayed as an aggressive monk. He accepts the criticism of the anchoritic life as unsociable and ultimately self-centred,[98] and responds by taking his asceticism to town. As such, his aim is to save souls. So we can not expect his life to pose no demands on the people he meets. Symeon openly espouses the obligation – indeed the forcing – of humility.

> [Symeon] said to John, "What more benefit do we derive, brother, from passing time in this desert? But if you hear me, get up, let us depart; let us save others. For as we are, we do not benefit anyone except ourselves, and have not brought anyone else to salvation." And he began to quote to him from the Holy Scripture such things as "Let no one seek his own good, but rather the good of his neighbor", and again, "All things to all men, that I might save all", and from the Gospel, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven", and other such things. … Symeon said to him, "Believe (me), I won't stay, but I will go in the power of Christ; I will mock the world."[99]

In line with this stated intention, he forces certain people to respond to his teaching of orthodoxy. Leontius relates a number of occasions when the holy fool miraculously obliges the unorthodox to accept Christianity. The specific methods vary – a juggler's hand is shrivelled until he swears to renounce the theatre; some 'acephalic heretics' (monophysites; diaphysites in the Syriac text)[100] receive a destructive demon in their shop until they confess orthodoxy; Symeon breaks all the wares of a Jewish glassblower until he converts – but the general form is a threat of violence followed by conversion. The stories are all miraculous, even when the secrecy narrative does not require them to be (it is presumably fairly easy to destroy the produce of a glassblower, but Symeon does so by simply making the sign of the cross).[101]

It would be a mistake to leave out the aggressive miracle-working characteristics of the holy fools. They are warriors for (diaphysite) Orthodoxy in a time and place in which Orthodoxy was confronted with its neighbours (the monophysite churches, along with many other movements defined as heretical and forced into the East like Nestorianism, Manicheanism, and Messalianism). This is what constitutes their markers of holiness in the

---

[98] e.g. in Basilius, *renunt* Climacus, *scal.:* Step 4. This theme also underlies Cassian's treatment of the two forms of monasticism in Cassianus, *Collationes:* XIX.
[99] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* III.142f.
[100] Rompay, 1994: 388.
[101] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* IV.163.

hagiographic world.[102] It is also pertinent, however, to address the question of their foolish practice and use of humour – quite apart from their miraculous works – as regards the element of force and obligation.

It is difficult to reconstruct any one culture's sense of humour. We find it hard enough to identify the reasons we find things funny in our own context, without crossing seas and centuries in our observation.[103] So in the following, I shall have to simply assume that the behaviour of the holy fools is meant to seem ridiculous.

Some people do laugh at the foolish behaviour of the holy fools, although it is remarkable that key witnesses do not respond in terms of laughter or confusion. Those who associate with the fools on their own level tend to laugh and play: those on the margins, and the prostitutes he dances with.[104] But the average citizen of Emesa does not. Neither indeed does the exemplary witness, John the deacon, who gravely refuses to be scandalised.

> Once his friend, Deacon John, invited him to lunch, and they were hanging salted meats there. So Abba Symeon began to knock down the raw meat and eat it. The all-wise John, not wanting to say anything to him with a loud voice, drew near his ear and said to him, "You really don't scandalize me, (even) if you eat raw camel. Do whatever you'd like with the rest." For he knew the Fool's virtue, because he also was a spiritual person.[105]

We are at least far from the pernicious obligation to laugh that renders humour suspicious. If laughter was meant to be the moral response, then John the Deacon would laugh as well. Recognition (cf. the discussion over, on page 156) is distinct from comic appreciation. The response to the holy fool is much more biblical. The people of Emesa (apart from the ideal observer) are scandalised. When holiness is revealed to them in a way they do not expect, they can not accept it, and the holy one becomes a fool for them, just as the message of Christ was foolishness to the Greeks.[106] In this respect, the holy fool's audience combines the mistakes of Paul's Greeks and Jews: to them, he is both scandalous and foolish.[107]

People are not obliged to laugh at or with the holy fools. This much is obvious from the deafeningly laughterless silence accompanying most of his actions. Instead, his mockery

---

[102] Moschus, *prat.:* 213.
[103] John Haldon has braved the difficulties with moderate success: Haldon, 2002.
[104] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* IV.163.
[105] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* IV.158.
[106] 1 Corinthians 1.23.
[107] For a description of the holy fool tradition as reception history of this passage in 1 Corinthians, cf. Vogt, 1987.

functions as so many failed jokes. Holy fools ostracise themselves with their humour by appealing to a community that is almost permanently absent. Their laughter defines their society, but their society is not that of the city, but of the periphery.

However, in keeping with his practical outworking of the *via dissimilis*, the community appealed to by the holy fool's laughter does include the members of the religious periphery. Prostitutes and beggars, Mark the fool's crowd of lunatics,[108] those most patently unblessed by this present order, can all laugh with the holy fool (at least, in Leontius' account).[109] Their lot renders them unlikely holy men and women. They do not direct thought towards God nor claim to be Her representative on earth.

The holy fools' work of self-ostracism makes their humour fail. They have so few people to laugh with that no-one can be obliged to appreciate it. In denying the holiness of their community's laughter, they ostracise their own. In their humorous solidarity with the periphery, everyone in the city becomes the butt of the joke (whether they are dispassionate enough to appreciate it as a joke or not). It is not a sufficient tool to prevent subsequent recognised holy fools representing God in such a way as to religiously oblige people to submit themselves to their crushing mockery, but this obligation is not owing to their foolishness, but to the acknowledgment of their holiness. And successful fools are not recognised. Therefore, to the extent that people feel obliged to accept the holy fools' mockery, the original project of ascetic holy fools has failed or been replaced.

The holy fools certainly oblige and force their audience to take their message seriously, through miracle and judgement. Their humour and mockery, however, repeatedly fall on deaf ears. It causes a scandal and ultimately ostracises itself.[110] As such, it offers a choice of solidarity rather than forcing community. People can overcome their sense of scandal and see the holiness of the outcasts in their community rather than rejecting the holy fool as demonic. But any mocking claim to represent that holy periphery will diverge from the example of the first holy fools, whose holiness is required to be secret.

3.3.2: Stock comic forms

How does the form of humour contribute to or oppose the transformation of the self's relation to society? However unique and radical comedians may be, it is unavoidable that their form of humour will be emulated. A brief search of the internet will inform us that Eddie

---

[108] *v. dan. scet.:* 2.

[109] Leontius is admittedly one of the most socially conscious hagiographers of antiquity: cf. his other extant work on John the Almsgiver in Festugière, 1974.

[110] Basil takes it as analytic truth that the insane are not to be taken seriously in Basilius, *hom. 10.*

Izzard is no longer the only self-proclaimed executive transvestite in the world. Jokes are retold, added to, and given new contexts. They take on new roles and gain different social dynamics. As the humorous tradition develops, it may still retain the authority (in the case of humour, this will include the obligation to laugh) of its comic origin. We recognise derivatives of forms of humour as funny in spite of their transformations. As a comic form rigidifies, so will its requisite cultural assumptions, so that it leaves its power of self-critique behind and makes the ostracised element it mocks almost irreversibly lost.

One comic form that has been noted as archetypically British is self-deprecating humour that laughs at one's own (failed or corny) attempts to be funny. Someone makes a smart remark, immediately becomes aware that it was unacceptable in some way (a bad pun, a tired double-entendre, etc.), and then laughs at their own lack of subtlety by asking 'Did you see what I did there?'

This form of humour is a classic example of the modesty-inducing smile beloved of Critchley, the 'quiet acknowledgement of one's limitedness.'[111] In recent years it has become an extremely common form, at least in British society, so that the uninitiated have observed it as a British curiosity.[112]

In becoming conversational bread and butter, the form loses some of its spontaneous modesty, and attains the shape of a confession. It has turned into an idiom that one feels obliged to resort to when feeling the disapproval of one's listeners. The speaker offers a bad pun, and instead of covering it over or moving on, s/he now feels obliged to confess to being rubbish at telling jokes. And if the confession is not forthcoming, the form can be turned onto the speaker, with the stinging 'I see what you did there.'

The combination of humour's power to incline us to modestly find ourselves ridiculous with its appeal to communal appreciation can in other words have a homogenising effect. The road from humbling humour to humiliating heckling is short. This stock form of comedy (at the time of writing) shows modesty's homogenising potential.

Humour relates to its community in a number of ways. We have seen here how it provokes a confession of humility. It can also cultivate mediocrity. Whilst the powers of parody may work well to produce social change when directed towards current situations, it may also act as a critique of divergence.

---

[111] Critchley, 2002: 109.
[112] In considering this form, I have benefited greatly from conversation with Jeff Biebighauser.

Parody can be heard as a deterrent. If directed towards something that we are not rather than something that we are, humour simply produces cultural stagnation. By finding ourselves absurd, we produce change. In turn, finding development and change absurd stifles abnormality and transformation. One kind of comedy that falls into this latter category is the 'thin end of the wedge' variety, which often starts out 'what'll they think of next, …?' Someone objects to the opening of borders to working immigrants, and expresses it as 'What'll they think of next, a no-frills bus service from Poland? Warsaw to London: that'll be five quid and a new bathroom for Mr Picklestop at number 32!' Such parody actually stifles the courage to think innovatively through vilifying divergences from the status quo.

Stock techniques of this kind of comedy include the hyperbole of the unknown. And here we shift from the simple writing off of new ideas to the ridiculing of strange thoughts. Hyperbole of the unknown may take more forms than mere verbal mockery. Representational parodies can be included. The parody of the religious nut on the street corner can be used to prevent us from taking seriously the inter-religious debate that takes place between fundamentalists that engage in preaching and debating on the street.[113] More perniciously, portraying political process as impossibly complicated, contrary, and run by bureaucrats will restrict political activity to certain kinds of administratively minded citizenship much more effectively than party elections do.

A further technique of humour that may stagnate rather than critique is the self-effacing humour of the powerful. Here the technique involves modesty on the part of agents who have access to a great deal of resources and political authority, as they find themselves ridiculous. Whilst the effect may be that they thereby listen to critique, it is not a necessary result. But those witnessing the humour are put at ease, no longer rightfully suspicious of the stubbornness and self-interest of the powerful. Being honest about innocent shortcomings hides ideological disagreement. In this way, humour may become a technique of discouraging the use of parrhesia, the fearless speech of the governed. It gives authority an element of inevitability: I will rule even though I am incompetent, because there must be a master.[114]

Given our interpretation of holy foolery as resistance to ascetic practice, it is difficult to tie down any specific holy foolish techniques of humour. However, we have also branded the holy fools as a variety of ascetic, and they are at least recognisable as a group against that

---

[113] For a sympathetic account of which, cf. Cox, 1995: ch. 10.

[114] In this respect, intellectuals who arrogantly ridicule American presidents for their stupidity appear to be suffering from amnesia regarding all the ridiculous sovereigns of European history, from the Shakespearian monarchs through mad king George to the diminutive Napoleon Bonaparte. Cf. Critchley, 2007: Appendix. For this critique applied to the bungling administrator, cf. Foucault, 2003[1999]: 13.

background. So we shall examine their practice as transferable technique in terms of their refusal of asceticism and embrace of transgression.

The identification of the practice of holy fools as an ascetic critique of asceticism does allow a description of their practice in terms of negative forces. The holy fools deny the truth of the self offered in their culture's conceptions of holiness. Holiness is redefined as freedom from ascetic determination. So what effects will a general application of this principle have? Can this kind of refusal be generalised?

Holy fools demonstrate their freedom from religious, cultural, and ascetic definitions of holiness through transgressing them. They work free from ecclesiastic holiness through disrupting the liturgy and mocking ecclesiastical order (Symeon dons a stole of sausages while parodying a deacon one Sunday).[115] They work free from cultural holiness through transgressing civil law through stealing, acting aggressively, fornicating, and mocking civil authorities (including a 'village headman').[116] They work free from ascetic holiness through ignoring religious markers of time, diet, and place: they do not fast at the right time, they eat waste food, they leave the desert. In these ways, they challenge contemporary ways of life and godliness.

The praise of transgression works like humour, however, in its social function of provoking people to 'think outside the box'. There are at least two problems with valuing transgressions. Firstly, it averts us from taking time over the difficult job of evaluating our present: is this way of doing things desirable, true, and good? Such questions require at least a preliminary analysis of one particular situation. Embracing transgression does not allow the stability required for cultural criticism and appreciation, thus enabling a contented cohabitation of surface cultural radicalism on the one hand and irreproachable practical ways of life on the other: discuss as much as you like, just as long as you obey; transgress as much as you like, as long as you pay.[117] The demand to transgress is a call to action whose function is to drown out reflection. Reform is a political tool for deferring critique.

Secondly, the praise of transgression focuses attention on particular accepted standards to which we object. Contemporary European culture, for example, has developed a sophisticated expertise in rejecting (perceived) Victorian sexual values, at the expense of any honest analysis of the present or nineteenth century sexual mores. Its complete inefficacy in this aim of critiquing that period of history's values and art can easily be witnessed in the

---

[115] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* IV.160f.
[116] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* IV.156.
[117] Kant, 2007[1784]: 31. Contemporary capitalism's 'default ontology' determined by the spectral logic of capital is laid out in Goodchild, 2005.

emotive power and popularity of Victorian romances evidenced in the success of film adaptations of the novels of Jane Austen, Dickens, and the Brontë sisters.

The praise of transgression can function both to transform the present and to conform to it. Isolating this particular technique of the holy fool will betray its critical task. It also eradicates the nature of the holy fool. As soon as the holiness of the transgression is identified, it can no longer be used to combat vainglory. It is precisely when the holy fool is revealed (by divine revelation in our literature) as such that the holy fool disappears (cf. above, on page 83). Identifying any technique – even persistent critique – as generally holy tears it away from the ascetic repertoire of the holy fools, whose main task is to become unaware of their own holiness.

A related example could be my use of the word 'mad' in this thesis. It is an act of devotion to Foucault, who brought the term back into circulation with his own doctoral thesis on the history of madness.[118] He used it originally because it was an unscientific term that avoided the deployment of the power of medical and social knowledge over those conventionally called mentally ill. The term was not expected to be taken seriously as an academic denomination. Since his book, however, the coinage has regained academic seriousness, and no longer serves this purpose. So that devotion to Foucault in this context betrays his own critical practice.[119]

The technique of the praise of folly – which is to say, the technique of the hagiographers – may be generalised into a force for social cohesion and government. The discipline of psychiatry, after all, was based upon the notion of the noble innocent madman, in Pinel's claim that the confined madmen of the Bastille were only driven mad by their chains. The asylum was defined as an enclosed space of tolerance. However, the technique of acting mad (or drunk, or sinful) specifically in order to deprive oneself of apparent virtue can not be generalised into a governing technique of producing social cohesion because it simply does not posit one form of behaviour that can be recommended (not even transgression). Its humble and practical denial of any identifiable holiness refuses to accept or offer knowledge of itself and does not recognise the logic or morality of existing ways of life or thought.

Comedy and comic transgression is therefore full of complications as a technique of critique and social transformation. It includes fixed forms filtered into culture that impose demands, confession and humiliation, oppose unorthodox thought, and distract criticism from

---

[118] Foucault, 2006[1961].

[119] The critical practice was never sufficient however: 'The word from beyond is a dream that we keep renewing.' Foucault, 1996[1976]: 198.

its most relevant targets by aping critique. For all their satirical and political potential, stock forms of humour can result in the muffling of critique and abnormality. The repetition of comedy mirrors the universalisation of asceticism. Not that any of these are its essential role: humour is neither solution nor social ill, just dangerous.

3.3.3: The Power of the Comic

Mystics and comedians are praised on all sides. It takes a particular kind of dry and humourless scholar to criticise either of them. I am surely not the only researcher to have been vilified for not appealing to experience in every sentence. It takes the courage of Dostoevsky[120] to point out that there are also evil mystics, that power over truth-telling and critique is not identical with goodness. The identification of humourous people, together with their use and abuse of this power, are decisive for the implications of humour in relation to the transformation of self and society.

If comedy is a practice of the self as well as an attitude to truth, it gives the comic enormous power. This kind of power is a key feature of Pyle's analysis of the fools in Shakespeare, as she portrays them each as holy fools, drawing parallels with the silly theology of the Mediaeval mystery plays.[121]

Pyle's Shakespearian fools are far from those of Byzantium that we are studying however. Instead they are portrayed as doctors that heal the moral ills of the Shakespearian world. They manipulate events and truths in order to conform their 'patients' to the ideal of a Shakespearian moral hero. Rather than employing asceticism to undermine the God-reference of the present's way of living, Pyle claims that Shakespeare's fools attempt to produce ascetic morality in others. Certainly the Shakespearian fool exercises a forceful moral presence in the plays.

Without going into the parallels between and identification of Shakespearian and Byzantine fools – which would be an entire study of its own – what I wish to observe in Shakespeare's clowns is the influence and status of the comic. The paradigmatic example is perhaps given in Feste the Clown of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. In Act IV, Scene III of that play, Feste – at the instigation of the other comic characters in the play – dresses up as a curate by the name of Sir Topas (a knighted priest: it is tempting to hear a reference to Sir Thomas More), in order to torment the play's humourless steward, Malvolio, around whose downfall the play revolves.

---

[120] Dostoevsky, 1994[1880]: 160, 406.
[121] Pyle, 1998.

The comic subplot of the play functions to save Malvolio from vainglory, but it goes much further than that. The main joke that is played on him – sending him a fake love letter – provokes in him ridiculous and humiliating behaviour. But in the episode with Feste/Sir Topas, he is forced to bring his own sanity into question.

As a comic situation, we are not asked to be suspicious of the story at all. Here is a clear case of the audience and characters laughing at someone who deserves to be taken down a peg or too.

Malvolio is confined within a dark cell and visited by tormentors. First Toby Belch, then Feste the clown – both as Sir Topas, then again as himself. They attempt to persuade Malvolio that he is mad, through the confinement itself (presumably carried out by Belch), and by Feste's deliberately confusing discourse, of which he has a inexhaustible supply, as he demonstrates first to Belch:

> Bonos dies, Sir Toby: for as the old hermit of Prague, that
>
> never saw pen and ink, very wittily said to a niece of King
>
> Gorboduc, 'That that is, is'; so I, being master parson, am
>
> master parson: for what is that but that? and is but is?
>
> SIR TOBY.
>
> To him, Sir Topas.[122]

Feste then takes to persuading his 'patient' to believe his dark confinement is light, that Pythagoras was orthodox, and that he is talking complete nonsense. 'Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes.'[123] The reversal is brought out time and time again. Here we have a fool who is aware of his foolery, and a worldly man who is not.[124]

Feste's behaviour is not only sinister because of his abuse of his authority as comic. His practice exemplifies the societal use of comedy to produce a particular, acceptable form of the self's relation to the world. Malvolio is obnoxious, but not simply in the eyes of the audience: his downfall consists in his being arrogant towards the comic mass. Feste the

---

[122] Shakespeare, 1998: IV.III.
[123] Proverbs 26.5.
[124] Shakespeare, 1998: I.V, III.I, V.I – including Feste's final spoken line: '"By the Lord, fool, I am not mad;"-- But do you remember? "Madam, why laugh you at such a barren rascal? An you smile not, he's gagged"? And thus the whirligig of time brings in his revenges.'

clown, Sir Toby Belch, the maid Maria, and Fabian all constitute the background community to the play: they are the chorus. And when they take objection to Malvolio's attitude, they destroy him through humour.

The genius of the play is not simply the humour and moral purpose of its comedy, but the way it jars with the audience towards the end. Shakespeare asks us both to laugh at the fall of the arrogant, and to be critical to our own laughter. The proud Malvolio is presented in humiliated indignation, refusing to laugh at his downfall, and then he is vindicated. 'He hath been most notoriously abused'.[125] And it is perhaps only once this has been said at the play's conclusion that the discomfort the audience felt during the prison scene can be expressed. In this comedy, Shakespeare is reflecting on the role and task of the comic writer, just as he portrays (and laughs at) the task of the religious writer in his pious *Midsummer Night's Dream*.

This is a particular example of the way in which the comedian's power can be directed towards social cohesion and normality rather than critique and diversity. However, the use of theatrical techniques to convince the mad of their medical status in the classical age would indicate that it is not an exceptional instance.[126] It becomes a natural function of the way humour expresses and is limited by the community. Jokes require shared assumptions in order to work. So laughter at what is unacceptable to those who share those assumptions is not only a possible, but a logical use of comedy. Shakespeare's comedy is so interesting because it both uses that comedy to reveal the absurdities of normal life (Feste's humour works in this way throughout the play as well) and it portrays the comic as an arena of moral danger, where the truly foolish are manipulated into violence (the foolish but harmless aristocrat Andrew Aguecheek is reduced to sabre-rattling) and the truly immodest are forcibly humiliated.

There is no obvious essential difference in the form of the comic between these pernicious uses of humour and the more positive, critical use (*pace* Critchley). In the example of *Twelfth Night*, it is precisely the benign modesty-inducing humour that is used violently. But this is also true of the stock comic forms and the community obligations. We use the same forms for self-critique and for mocking the different. It is precisely because we are obliged to laugh that comedy is effective against our own pig-headed arrogance, but it is also the obligation that makes it into a sinister tool for office management.

It is not difficult to see how the holy fools' technique of the insult may be abused. If I decide to take all insults seriously as potential revelation, then I make a choice concerning my

---

[125] Act V, scene I, echoing Malvolio's complaint in IV.II – 'Fool, there was never man so notoriously abused;'
[126] Foucault, 2006[1961]: 329-334.

relation to the truth. But if I recommend that others hear *my* insults as the very word of God, then I am imposing an authority onto them. The moral valuing of the insult gives speakers of insults greater freedom to exercise their power.

Taking insults seriously (and not ruling them out *a priori*) may indeed allow us to hear a liberating truth that we otherwise would not be exposed to in the presence of polite society. Fearless listening is part of the courage of fearless speech. The generalisation of this courage, however, can easily form part of a technology of particular subjectivation into a specific community. It enables the hearer to put aside established truths of the self, but the thrill of fearless listening (and radical critique) can then continue to support the rigidity of the new values implied in the insulting truth. In this manner, it is both a force for attaining critical distance from one's culture, and a way of further entrenching the necessity of a newly embraced culture. It could be said that the insult can be deeply critical to one reference of the word 'us' but it is equally able to take for granted another reference of 'us'.[127]

It would be misguided to claim that the Christian story saves us from this kind of manipulation. We have already noted the role homogeneity plays in combating vainglory amongst the desert fathers (above, on page 55). It is also fairly clear that the value of societal critique and the courage of being distinctive supports a great deal of modern Christian counter-cultural movements, not least certain forms of charismatic Christianity.[128] It is a genuine danger for all religious communities – whether monastic or otherwise – that take societal critique seriously. It is further the danger for all models of holy people such as that presented by the holy fools.

The holy fool tradition at least attempts to deal with such issues, even if it is not aware of them in these terms. We can see them addressed by a range of holy foolish characteristics: firstly, the critique of ascetic identities; secondly, the critique from nowhere, thirdly, the value of secrecy, and finally the opposition to seduction. All of these are features we have already mentioned in our exegesis: here I simply want to apply them to the problem of the transference of the techniques and expertise of the holy fools.

Firstly, we have argued above that the holy fools take ascetic transcendence to its natural conclusion. Just as early Christian asceticism embraced both a standard moderated form of asceticism and a transcending hyperbolic form, the holy fools both reveal monastic form to be contingent, and transcend it through their transgression. So when the asceticism of

---

[127] For the expression of cultural critique as distancing oneself from 'us', see Foucault, 2008: 14.

[128] For the description of difference as an absolute value in the context of conservative Christianity, see amongst many other books, Roberts, 2000. I have analysed the function of certain daringly abnormal 'manifestations of the Spirit' in charismatic communities in Thomas, 2006b.

late antiquity had established particular forms of world-denial – particular dress, particular calendars, particular eating habits – the holy fools would take into use others. Instead of wearing the humble habit, they would don a scullery maid's rag, or nothing at all. Instead of following the church's lectionary, they would eat cakes in holy week and sausages on Sundays. Instead of eating only one modest meal a day, they would eat the remains of the meal or gorge vast quantities of beans in public.[129]

The holy fools of late antiquity are therefore acutely attentive to the institution of specific forms in the practice of ascetic abjection. Their departure from desert life is an example of the continuous refusal of the located and particular practice of the absolute. They leave the life of the secular city for the common life of the monastery, from there to the desert, and from there to the solitude of the city. Each time, the move is the same. Each time, they renounce a way of life. They refuse to be satisfied with only one division (world/city), and seek God each time in the margins of the community, geography, and reason.

The rhetoric of holy fools will nevertheless have the potential to found a community on one particular division (secular/religious; normal/foolish). But I am also making an historical claim: it is not impossible for asceticism to become, as it does with the holy fools, flexible and innovative enough in its critique to refuse the authority of any ascetically-founded community. Or a community founded on insult and injury.

Secondly, the holy fools make use of the critique from nowhere. Their efforts to combat vainglory involve developing strategies to divert attributions of holiness. They deliberately act in such a way as to be thought unholy. The holy fool thus differs absolutely from the prophet, who claims to deliver the words of God; from the religious teacher, who claims to know the truth of God; from the mystic, who has been burnt by the encounter with God into speaking pregnant mysteries; and from the parrhesiast, whose authority derives from their own courage. The critique of the holy fool has no obvious authority.

Those adhering to the values that are being judged will consider holy fools to be transgressors. However, the fool attempts to deceive even those who are well-disposed. When some monastic leaders with a question about Origen are sent to Symeon the holy fool by his brother in the desert, they recognise his holiness, but all they get is abuse:

> As they approached him, they said to him, "Bless us." He said to them, "You have come at a bad time, and the one who sent you is an idiot." Thereupon he grabbed the ear of the one who had been scandalized and gave him such a blow that (the bruise) could be seen for three days.

---

[129] Something Basil finds unthinkable even for non-Christians – Basilius, *d. bapt.*: II.Q8.

And he said, "Have you found fault with my beans? They were soaked for forty days, but Origen would not eat them because he plunged into the sea and was not strong enough to get out, and he drowned in the deep." They were amazed that he said all this in advance—and also this, "Does the Fool want the ten? He's as much an idiot as you!—Do you want a kick on the shin?" he said. "Yes, yes, go away." And immediately lifting up a jug of hot wine he burned the two of them on their lips, so that they were unable to repeat what he had told them.[130]

In these and other ways, the holy fools attempted to eschew the role of religious leader. They not only turned away all admirers, but they devised a whole repertoire of particular techniques (disrupting the liturgy, pretending to be possessed), of semblances to simulate folly, that would prevent people from associating them with divinity.

Thirdly, holy fools hedge their techniques of ascetic madness with the security of secrecy. Not only do they create a myth of unholiness around themselves for the sake of humility, but they keep their real identity a secret.

Secrecy is a decisive character amongst the holy fools.[131] It is not only Symeon the holy fool that has to cover over his virtues and miracles with scandalous acts (as when he pretended to rape the tavern-keeper's wife after saving him from a poisonous snake)[132]: Isidora is only holy in secret; Mark the holy fool is one of the many secret saints in the narrative of Daniel of Scetis;[133] and the few things mentioned about Symeon in the account of Evagrius Scholasticus mainly concern his secret piety.[134]

Acting scandalously was only one part of this. The saints would further keep out of the public eye (the Tabennesiotes convent was deep in the desert, and Isidora stayed in the kitchens), and pray that no-one would find out about them.[135] Symeon similarly would practise his asceticism in secret, keeping a hiding place in the city where he could freely be ascetic.

This wise man truly kept nothing in his hut—for he had a hut to sleep in, or rather in which to stay awake at night—except for one bundle of twigs. Often he passed the night without sleeping, praying until morning, drenching the ground with his tears.[136]

---

[130] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* IV.152f.
[131] de Matons, 1970: 293 Dagron, 1990: 933. Cf. also above, on page 70.
[132] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* IV.147f.
[133] *v. dan. scet.:* 2. Dahlmann notes the characteristic throughout the work in chapter II of her introduction to the text.
[134] Evagrius Scholasticus, *h.e.:* IV.34.
[135] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* III.145.
[136] Leontius, *v. Sym.:* IV.166 – contrast 148, 156.

Secrecy in itself is not enough however. It is a perfectly natural part of a counter-cultural community to keep its common life secret, whether from fear of violence or to preserve its authenticity and purity. The secrecy of the holy fool, however, is absolute. It is not possible to keep the secret of the holy fool as a community truth, because it can not be shared. Those who know the truth about the holy fool do not know about each other. Should a community find out about the holy fool, then the fool disappears (cf. above, on page 83). The whole point of the fool's madness is that they cannot tell *themselves* about their holiness: they embrace 'two solitudes, from the interior me and from the town.'[137]

In this way, the insults of the holy fools cannot be shared as a common truth that may found a community. The truth of the holy fool (that they are not really fools) is an absolute secret. As such, they do not draw people into community with them. There is no shared assumption about the insulter around which a community of the fool may gather. Everyone is an outsider to the holy fool.

Fourthly, the holy fools are not seductive.[138] There is no community of holy fools into which people can be inducted. This is not to deny that the tradition of holy fools has continued in the Eastern Orthodox church to this day, and that this tradition no doubt has at times included apprenticeships and learning from the holy fool master. However, in the texts from late antiquity and the early Byzantine Middle Ages we are studying, there is no evidence of any community of holy fools. The only text that comes close is Mark the holy fool's chorus of genuine lunatic, to whom he distributes the alms he receives.[139]

Even at the level of hagiography, among those who consider the fools to be holy, the identity of believers is not constituted by emulation, but admiration. Leontius, the holy fool's hagiographer does not aspire to be a holy fool. He simply recognises Symeon to be one. Similarly, the community around Isidora did not all start to feign madness after the divine revelation of the holy fool in their midst, they simply honoured the nun who had done so (and who could no more).

> They fell at [Piteroum's] feet, confessing various things, one saying how she had poured the leavings of her plate over her; another how she had beaten her with her fists; another how she had blistered her nose. So they confessed various and sundry outrages. After praying for them, he left. After a few days she was unable to bear the praise and honour of the sisters, and all their apologizing was so burdensome to her that she left the monastery.[140]

---

[137] Dagron, 1990: 930, my translation.
[138] Certeau, 1979: 542.
[139] *v. dan. scet.:* 2.
[140] *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XVIII.19 Palladius, *h. Laus.:* XXIV.

This non-seductive character – common to all the holy fools we have discussed – is significant because it precludes the desire to conform to a model. We can not envisage a group of Leontius' friends going around Neapolis with 'What Would a Holy Fool Do?' wristbands and paraphernalia. If the holy fools reject the norms of one community, they at the same time attempt to prevent the assertion of new norms by their ascetic power. And so they continue to push away admirers, rather than initiating them into secrets of conformity that have been earned by enduring abuse and insult.

The holy fools do not offer spiritual benefit for enduring ascetic hardship. They do not ask others to be conformed to their example, and nor do they praise those who recognise them. Through their non-seductive, secretive ascetic critique from nowhere, they attempt (and do not always succeed) to escape from the power of their own expertise, techniques, and dogmatic demands. They are aware of the danger of their enterprise.

There is no easy solution to these problems with humour. If we are continually suspicious of comedy, it will become ineffective in revealing to us our presumption and absurdity. If we embrace it as a value in itself, we are deprived of resistance to its constitution of a homogeneous community. As a technique of the self, humour is dangerous, whether we are aware of the danger or not. And that danger is precisely why it is helpful in the critical task.

3.4: The Unserious Self

Humility has been central to the ways in which humour and fearless speech have had an effect on the relation of self to society. Avoiding flatterers, modestly becoming aware of one's relation to one's body and placing oneself in society are all projects of the humble self. They are also sites of moral danger: how to espouse the virtue of humility without legislating it for others and thus requiring adaptation to my demands and the demands of my society? In this section, then, we turn to the Christian and ascetic understanding of humility.

The book on humility in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* is scattered with stories of ascetics who accept accusations against themselves. They do not resist rejection and confess sins that are not their own. John Moschus relates a story that had become associated with the saying of abba Poemen 'that each man should always question himself on every matter.' A monk accused another of a particular (unnamed) sin, and ostracised him because of it. After protesting his innocence, the accused monk reasoned with himself thus:

> "The kindly deacon loves me and, prompted by his love for me, he has confided to me that which was in his heart concerning me to put me on my guard. I will make sure that I do not do that deed in future. But, oh, wretched soul! While you say you have not done *that* deed, are there not thousands of misdeeds done by you which you have forgotten? Where are the things you did yesterday or the day before that or ten days ago? Can you recall them? Is it not possible that you have done this deed as lightly as you did the others, and have forgotten it as readily as you forgot them?" And so I [the accused monk] disposed my thoughts to accept the possibility that I had in truth committed that deed, but had forgotten it – just as I had forgotten my other misdeeds.[141]

This narrative activates many of the themes we have described above: for example guarding oneself, accepting criticism, and placing the self by controlling one's thoughts. The acceptance of guilt resembles the distorted interpretations with which we opened our interpretation of obedience (cf. above, on page 28). Having since examined the ascetic practice of truth-hearing, we can identify the monk's acceptance of guilt as an instance of receiving truth from all quarters. I am a mystery to myself, and have no inherent authority to describe my own truth.

The monk's docile openness to the truth of the self can – as we have now established – work in different directions. It is based on a severance of the self from its established

---

[141] Moschus, *prat.*: 219.

mediations by society and tradition: the humble monk is not allied to previous truths about himself. However, the docility is useful both to the monk and to society. The monk is thereby free from determinations of the self's relation to society that he may not have chosen himself. He is free to negotiate his own values. However, he is also able to shape his relation to values according to the expediency of the state. His docility has utility for the state. A person who does not insist on the truths of their own self will not resist the community's truths about the human either. The subject has become a problem for itself. From this docile self derive revolution as well as adaptation to a fixed environment.[142]

The story of this monk's confession tells us more than his docility however. It shows us how unimportant he considers the truth of the self's assessment. When the monk discovers a difference in opinion with his brother concerning his goodness, he effortlessly changes his own view of the matter, as if he were considering the life of a complete stranger. When – in the sequel – his brother changes his mind too, there is no agonising over what was true and what was false, but pure joy at the reconciliation.

The truth about the self's moral assessment is unknown and unimportant for the humble Christian. It is not simply that she is open to others' opinion, but she does not care to dwell on the subject at all. Humility results in unseriousness concerning the self's morality.

It is fitting that we return to humility and unseriousness at the end of a work on holy fools, because a feature common to the majority of holy fool stories is reference to St Paul's claim to be a fool for Christ (1 Cor. 4.10). Paul's appeal to foolishness is part of a network of references to cross, transcendence, justification by faith, and boasting. So the explicit working out of his theory of foolishness is not simply in his polemics against Greek thought at the beginning of the Corinthian correspondence (*pace* Breton),[143] but in his declaration of weakness at its end.

Paul's choice to play the fool and do a little boasting in 2 Corinthians (chapters 11 and 12) is shocking. He had already explained that the transcendence of the law meant that boasting was excluded, leaving no room for confusion: 'God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.' (1 Cor

---

[142] For a good illustration of the conception of the problematic self as a prelude to adaptation to state normality, see Foucault's stubborn refusal to analyse himself on TV in Foucault and Chomsky, 1997[1974]: 124: 'Elders: Well, I'm wondering what are the psychological reasons for this… / Foucault: *[protesting]* Well, you can wonder about it, but I can't help that. … I'm not making a problem out of a personal question, I make of a personal question an absence of a problem.'

[143] Breton, 2002[1981].

1.27-29, NRSV translation) 'Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith.' (Rom. 3.27, NRSV).

Boasting is excluded because it is based on a fixed set of evaluations. To boast of one's achievements implies that both speaker and hearer share the high value set upon the objectives and performances achieved. No-one can boast to me of their great accomplishments in the game of *Warcraft* until I have also been initiated into that particular mystery. So any boasting is vain on two counts: I boast because I feel I've achieved something great, and I consider boasting possible because I think the values according to which my greatness is measured are true. I have both perceived and achieved the good.

Against this, Paul excludes boasting not according to an ethical law, but according to 'the law of faith'. Boasting is invalid because it is allied to the value of achievements. If we do not know what achievements are good, then we can not boast. We must simply have faith.

Boasting is therefore based on a law, and does not allow the transformations we have been speaking of in relation to the way of life of early Christian ascetics. Humility, on the other hand, refuses the assumption of a fixed law.

Paul's alternative (in 2 Cor. 11) is to ape others' boasting according to standards he does not respect. This refuses the task of defining a set of values by which he may be measured, because he refuses to stand out as a model of any standard he accepts. Aping others' boasting empties existing standards of their validity. The one who fulfils the law to a unique extent does not espouse it as his own measure. This is the flipside of the refusal to judge oneself we noted above (on page 89). Instead of resisting judgement according to one measure, Paul submits himself to the measure, and demonstrates how little has been achieved by that judgement. He does not just write off the law, but exhausts it.

Once again, though, it is striking that Paul does not consider the refusal of law to be an ethical commandment. When he succumbs to the temptation to measure himself according to old and new standards (as a good Jew and a good Apostle), he is not doing something wrong, but something foolish. There is nothing to gain by it. He is free from the economy of honour and shame that earns and loses by attention to one's morality.

Humility is therefore not a moral virtue as much as an attitude towards virtue. It identifies and assesses one's relation to the norms and knowledge of the self, their mediation by one's community and tradition. It allows free transformation of the self in its relation to received values through bracketing moral requirements and assessing their validity from a distance.

It is not entirely honest though to claim that humility is not a moral virtue. Humility is after all a character trait aspired to both by early Christian ascetics and modern philosophers. If humility describes a quality of relation towards morality itself, how can that quality be assessed?

As soon as we claim that one's relation to values needs to be assessed, we assume that there is such a thing as a good relation to morality. Goodness itself, however, is a value. So the implication then becomes that our relation to values is assessed by meta-values. In other words, there is an ethical demand concerning our relation to ethics. If that ethical demand is itself problematic, then we have an infinite regress of ethical demands. This is the alternative justification for excluding boasting in Rom. 3.27. Should we be humble because of a law of works or out of the law of faith? Humility is not a work. It cannot be legislated, but believed.

So if our ethical demand is posed wrongly, then humility will not help us. If we try to be virtuous in order to earn the approval of the citizens of the country we live in, we will very likely also try to be critical, transgressive, and humble in order to earn their approval.

Recent moral theorists have attempted to substitute the ethical demand for an aesthetical one. Ethics is not determined by convention or by truth, but by beauty. However, the ethical discourse is so forcefully associated with moral demands rather than aesthetical assessment that the aesthetic revolution repeatedly reverts to an ethical demand to be beautiful. In other words, the set of values is transformed, but their assertion retains the form of an ethical demand.

The transformation and rejection of law is fraught with difficulties deriving from the persistence and prioritisation of the good rather than beauty and truth. It is to this last transcendental then that I believe humility makes its appeal. Christian humility does not assert a rule but a truth. The human is related to the unknown God in a particular way, with a specific history. To this extent, humility competes with the human sciences' virtues of modesty. Where a psychologist might assume that a human lacks something and therefore asserts non-judgement in order to allow the person to modestly confess that lack, a Christian knows that the human lacks nothing, and so must explain the obvious problem with an unalterable history of fall and forgiveness. These competing truths produce competing grammars of confession and relations to morality that can be described and examined.

For the purposes of our account of early Christian asceticism and the way of life of the holy fools, we will describe the humble mode of relating to morality. There are at least three ways in which Christian humility can be distinguished from its contemporary philosophical

equivalents. Firstly, it is a function of a story rather than a solution to a practical ethical requirement. Secondly, it is founded on the grace of God rather than the courage of the individual. Thirdly, it produces unserious speech, rather than final truths about the self.

3.4.1: Humility and the Christian Story

The techniques associated with humility in ancient non-Christian philosophy were primarily practical moves aimed at producing modesty, preventing disappointment, and cultivating prudence. They combat hubris rather than vainglory, and produce modesty rather than humility.

The Christian virtue of humility – although it draws from and has affinities with this philosophical tradition – is both motivated and justified by the Christian story. Reference is not usually made to the nemesis brought on by hubris, but rather to Christ's injunctions 'Turn the other cheek'; 'Blessed are the poor in spirit'.[144] Similarly, vainglory is the reversal of Messianic kenosis. Christ's emptying himself (kenosis) of glory renders all glory empty (kenodoxa=vainglory).

The grammar of Christian theology requires and produces humility. The doctrine of Creation and Fall places humanity at the pinnacle of all that is, and tells of its self-inflicted corruption of creational bliss. The event of the incarnation and redemption speaks of God's initiative to save humanity independently of the law, so that justification is not the work of the self, but gift. Christian humility is given its specific character as a result of this story. It is consciousness of one's own corruption and then salvation through another's work. It is refusal to recognise the efficacy of moral law to transform my worth. It is relief from the obligation to be perfect, and the related recognition of need and fallenness. Humility is therefore not as much a moral requirement in the Christian tradition, as it is a function of revealed doctrine.

Humility recognises the danger of being in the right – gives it the religious designation of 'self-righteousness' – and embraces the joy of being alive and wrong. It divides good living from consciousness of righteousness by withdrawing the practice of godliness from the allocation of blame. This is the grammar of righteousness by faith: that it is possible to be good without attempting to measure one's goodness.

In the example examined in depth above (on page 34), the control the monk exercised over his thoughts was not a question of sheer mind control – 'I refuse to think these sinful thoughts' – but one of calling to mind his Christian narrative, both doctrinally and

---

[144] Matthew 5.39/Luke 3.29. Referred to in *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XV.14, 53, XVI.16 *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XV.15, 71, XVI.25 *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Daniel 3 and *Apoph. Patr. (anon):* 165 and 211.

biographically. When brought high by the elation of his successful attempt to pursue the ascetic life, he remembered his sins, denying the importance of ethics. When brought low by the accusations of sinfulness, he recalled the faithfulness of God, denying the importance of guilt.

All this is to say that Christian humility works in the same way that a joke does. It is not a moral decision, but a reaction to a relationship of truth. You cannot consider whether a joke is funny whilst it is being told. You laugh or you do not laugh: afterwards you can tell whether it was funny because you know how you reacted. Similarly, you cannot tell whether you are thinking humbly at the moment. You are or you are not. But you can make the judgement afterwards, and you can make an attempt at speaking humbly/funnily.

This is a phenomenon most people are familiar with. You can assess yourself on intelligence, on looks, even on personality. But as soon as you consider your modesty, it is impossible to say anything: 'I am by far the most humble person I know'; 'In front of others [the insensitive man] criticizes himself for being vainglorious, and in making the admission he is looking for glory.'[145] We are reduced to silence.[146] Humility defies language.

Humility is in this way founded on truth rather than convenience. It is not a virtue that is valued because it works practically: that is not the force of the concern of ascetics with practice rather than doctrine. Rather, it is the practice of a truth. And here truth needs the resonance it has in other European languages of 'tro' – loyal, truthful, in the sense we still have of being 'true to form', or keeping a 'troth'.[147]

In this respect, humility is the archetypal mode of faithfulness to the event of the life of Christ.[148] It is cultivated through telling the story of creation and redemption. It is the active component of the hermeneutical circle. The recollection of this event produces a mode of self-relation that brackets former systems of ethics and social interaction. Humility forms a community incongruous with the world before the event which can only relate to it through critique and rejection.

3.4.2: Humility and Grace

Humility is further distinguished from philosophical techniques of the self in its grounding in grace rather than courage. Humour has the power to bracket our ridiculousness

---

[145] Climacus, *scal.:* Step 18.

[146] which is how abba Alonius responded to praise: *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XV.39 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XV.54 = *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Poemen 55.

[147] Critchley, 2007: 43.

[148] The reference is of course to Badiou, although I see the culmination of the Christian story in the life of Christ rather than purely in the resurrection. cf. Badiou, 2003[1997].

by having the courage and cheerfulness to see our quirks as funny rather than as signs of our doom. Nevertheless it still involves courage, and the ability to laugh when the joke is on you is a sign of greatness as well as of a sense of humour. Christian humility is founded on grace, however: the conviction that our life is underwritten by God, so that humble critique does not simply cause the silliness of everything to emerge: it vilifies social values for the sake of what really matters. It constitutes a reconfiguration of values rather than simply making it easier to live with those we have.

It was argued above that the ability to see ourselves as ridiculous produces social and personal transformation, and not necessarily both at the same time. We become flexible both in order to adapt ourselves to the state of normality we are presented with, and for the sake of re-thinking our mode of being in society. The contingency of the self may serve stability as well as revolution.

Critchley's reading of humour bears out the double implication. On the one hand, he embraces it as a kind of critical social anthropology that relieves us of shared cultural assumptions.[149] On the other, he posits it as a celebration of all the standards by which we judge ourselves. He accepts that we are confined by our conditions – that we are wretched beings – and sees humour as therapy for the acceptance of these conditions. These two functions of humour – of consolation and liberation – are in tension throughout his account, and nowhere more strongly than in its conclusion:

> For me, it is this smile – deriding the having and the not having, the pleasure and the pain, the sublimity and suffering of the human situation – that is the essence of humour. … Yet, this smile does not bring unhappiness, but rather elevation and liberation, the lucidity of consolation. This is why, melancholy animals that we are, human beings are also the most cheerful. We smile and find ourselves ridiculous. Our wretchedness is our greatness.[150]

We should not pass over the non-oppressive function of this conformity to our values too quickly. Conscious conformity to a non-remarkable state is also a form of self-determination for early Christian ascetics (cf. Motius above, on page 55). It is resistance to the community imperative to excel within the limitations of social acceptance, normality's tempting offer to try out your transgressive freedom so it can expand its boundaries and distract you from its contingency.[151] Transgression and individuality are not necessarily free from social forces. Indeed, quite the opposite is the case in late modernity.

---

[149] Critchley, 2002: 67.
[150] Critchley, 2002: 111.
[151] A theme also taken up in Žižek's interpretation of Chesterton, in Žižek, 2005: 52.

We laugh together at our own foolishness. The joke is on us all. We laugh in order to be able to conform to the requirements of our community, but the joke is only funny in the company of that community. If we did not laugh, others would laugh at us.

Hence the difficulty and courage inherent in laughing at our entire community. The critical function of humour is not guaranteed by the community. Laugh at ourselves, and no-one minds; laugh at everyone's shared values, and we may laugh alone. We may end up doing everything alone.

It takes courage to see the ridiculousness of one's own way of being, and even more courage to point it out. This kind of joke risks not being laughed at. If I joke about my own idiosyncrasy, I may just be thought weird. A bishop joking that he is actually only wearing a dress because he's an executive transvestite might not get a lot of laughs in the Lambeth Council. Jokes about bishops installing CCTV ('epi-scopes') in their vicars' bedrooms even less so. The one laughs at the self in a way that challenges the shared values expected in humour; the other laughs more directly at the common language of the group. Both risk ostracism.

The point I am making about this courage is that it may simply be foolishness. It is foolish rather than brave to rush unarmed into battle. Is the transgressive humour of the radical critic brave or foolish if absolutely no-one agrees with her? There is a fine line between transgression that is trail-blazing and self-imposed and transgression that is sad and lonely.[152]

The humility lying behind the humour of early Christian ascetics does not depend upon the superhuman courage of the martyr-critic. Instead, it witnesses to a different order. It undermines shared values because it has already experienced the neutralisation of those values. The humour of the holy fools is both a moral critique and a statement of fidelity to the Christian story. It is both exile from the world and a struggle for the Kingdom of God. It denies the judgment of the world because it has heard the judgment of God.[153] Humility is the abandonment of one ethic whilst embracing the grace of another, as abba Alonius put it: 'that you be below the irrational animals, and know that they are not condemned.'[154]

---

[152] The best portrayal I know of this is to be found in the character of the founder of the order of wedding crashers in the film of that name, who ends up crashing funerals in order to get laid: Dobkin, 2005 (written by Steve Faber and Bob Fisher).

[153] Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 347: 'Do not seek answers from anyone in regard to yourself, but create the answers for yourself.'

[154] *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XV.36 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XV.53 = *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Poemen 41.

It is through this humility that the fools are holy. Freed from the pressure to be good and religious, the fools glory in the non-condemnation – indeed the holiness – of the physical, the animal, and the shameful. So by embracing the scum and detritus of the community (Isidora's cleaning and Symeon's street shitting), they portray themselves as worthless members whilst celebrating the holy world of the new order.

> [Isidora] never sat down at table or ate a scrap of bread, but she wiped up with a sponge the crumbs from the tables and was satisfied with the scouring from the pots.

> Often, indeed, when his belly sought to do its private function, immediately, and without blushing, [Symeon] squatted in the market place, wherever he found himself, in front of everyone.[155]

All this humour is underwritten by God. Not that it is necessarily funny or successful (that depends on the hearer), but it no longer sets their self into question or puts them in danger of being ostracised from the new community. They share their laughter with those who also gain by the redemption of the entire world – prostitutes, beggars, and children – but they are ostracised by those who have invested in the old order – tradesmen, religious authorities, and the learned. They nevertheless have courage for this because, like the martyrs of old, their lives are kept with Christ in God. The holy fool never laughs alone.

3.4.3: Humility and unserious speech

In distinction to truth-telling humour, humility – being the *telos* of Christian humour – results in no static truth about the self. In fact, the only truly humble confession is one that refuses to be taken seriously. Telling the truth about the self is only a means to an end for early Christian asceticism.

We have portrayed humour as a mode of truth-telling. It tells us the truth about ourselves. Comedians portray us in an amusing light so that we may be modest in our claims about our place in the world, and ultimately so that we will not be disappointed with our own greatness.

But this truth about ourselves is always dependent upon dogma. It is not a pure refusal. Eddie Izzard attempts to confuse the relationship of sexuality to gender, because he subscribes to the dogma that these are two distinct and separate phenomena that can be configured in many different ways. So he tells the truth about himself in terms of fixed and distinct

---

[155] *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XVIII.19 Palladius, *h. Laus.:* XXIV and Leontius, *v. Sym.:* IV.148. The scatological element of these stories is brought out particularly well in Certeau, 1979: esp. 542f.

determinative categories in each realm. I am heterosexual. I am a transvestite. I am butch. And these are categories he forces us to take seriously. He asserts his right to be a transvestite. He is a comedian who is deadly serious about the truth concerning himself.

The truths that Critchley gains from humour are altogether more cosmological. It is not simply a case of displacing ourselves in the values of the world. Humour posits our limits. It places us in relation to transcendence and bodiliness. It describes 'the eccentricity of the human situation':

> between beasts and angels, between being and having, between the physical and the metaphysical. We are thoroughly material beings that are unable to *be* that materiality. Such is the curse of reflection, but such also is the source of our dignity. Humour is the daily bread of that dignity.[156]

There is no one truth central to all humour, and Critchley's account does not imply such a single truth either. However much he generalises here, this kind of insight is only applicable to one particular kind of humour, namely the *risus purus* of which he is so enamoured. Nevertheless, it would be no exaggeration to claim that each instance of humour rests upon a dogma. At the very least, to the extent that humour is a technique of the self in the way described above, it is also dogmatic concerning the self. The question is, does Christian humility follow humorous modesty in positing such dogma?

One key moment of transformation in the European journey from Socratic self-government through Christian humility to modern therapy is the book on pastoral care by Pope Gregory the Great.[157] Here he gives practical advice on how bishops and spiritual directors should live and speak in order to direct their people well. The work's third book (out of four) is divided up into chapters on human characteristics and addresses how these affect the way in which people are to be directed. The characteristics are set out in pairs: men and women, poor and rich, joyful and sad, lovers of strife and peacemakers, and so on. In each case, the identity of the person (as joyful, female, peacemaker, etc.) is assumed before the direction can take place.

If we set to one side the historical development of this passage – its use in European Mediaeval government, Episcopal *visitatio*, and thence to modern juridical procedures[158] – the technique's grammar is clear. The truth about people is taken for granted rather than given

---

[156] Critchley, 2002: 109.
[157] Gregorius, *Lib. Reg. Past.*
[158] Foucault, 2002[1973]: 46-52.

them, and they are governed towards further virtue. Telling the truth about the self is a means to a further end rather than an end in itself. In other words: the injunction to 'know yourself' is neither the final desire (as in modernity) nor the final moral objective (as in antiquity).

More often than not, the advice to be given to people distinguished by a particular human truth is that they should not allow themselves to be defined by it. They should live as if the truth about them was not determinative for their life and practice. The joyful and the sad should not be essentially so, but flexible:

> Differently to be admonished are the joyful and the sad. That is, before the joyful are to be set the sad things that follow upon punishment; but before the sad the promised joyful things of the kingdom. Let the joyful learn by the asperity of threatenings what to be afraid of: let the sad bear what joys of reward they may look forward to.[159]

The wise and the dull are similarly warned to act independently of their knowledge; the patient and the impatient are warned to be ignorant of their own endurance of hardship; the talkative and silent are warned to hold to the truth rather than to the opportunity to speak. The admonitions are more than so many golden means. They exhort people to refuse caricatures of humanity. They distract people away from silly descriptions and towards the mystery of the indescribable divine.

Successful humility will therefore shrug off the truth about the person. It no longer takes confession seriously. The humble ascetic does not expect her words to provide a solution to the problem of truth. The unserious self is relieved of the obligation to speak the truth about the self. It does not set itself up as a judge of statements about itself. It does not feel bound to adhere to a particular view of the self. It has renounced judgement and refuses to take itself seriously:

> A brother asked Poemen, 'How ought I to behave in my cell in the place where I live?' He answered, 'Be as prudent as a stranger; and wherever you are, do not expect your words to be taken seriously when you speak, and you will find peace.'[160]

At this point, the practice of being a fool can be universalised. For all Christians are fools to the extent that they do not know the truth – refuse to know – the truth about their moral status. The Christian is not subject to moral measurement: not good, but not condemned either. Christian words carry no burden of truth, as they come from the frivolous and

---

[159] Gregorius, *Lib. Reg. Past.:* III.3, admonition 4, translation modified.
[160] *Apoph. Patr. (Lat):* XV.33 = *Apoph. Patr. (Gk. syst.):* XV.49 = *Apoph. Patr. (alph):* Poemen 191/S4.

forgivable source of displaced amorality.[161] The Christian is shown kindness but released from the demand to be serious.

This is the force of being a stranger in the world. Not only to accept rejection, to renounce attachments and obligations, to adhere to a different set of values. But also to expect to be misunderstood, to be indifferent to the judgement and truth games that you inhabit. All this because one accepts another order, another truth, rather than simply nihilistically denying the validity of the truth about the self offered by governors and insulters. And the other order can be witnessed in anyone, so that everyone should be taken seriously.

> Has someone insulted you? Bless him. Has he struck you? Suffer it. Has he despised you and set you at naught? Reflect that you are made of earth and that you will return to the earth. Whoever arms himself beforehand with these considerations will find that every insult falls short of the truth.[162]

It is for this reason holy fools do not simply deal out insults and biting home truths to the people they meet. They also accept every appellation, every insult they are dealt, not seriously, but playfully. They accept the accusations (adulterer, idiot, wretch, madman) and fling them back again, calling everyone idiots and madmen. By offering no resistance to truths about themselves, they mock the attempt to tie them down to particular roles and categories.

This is the element of play which is added to the apophatic criticism. The holy fools mock the institutions of holiness – in liturgy, power, and asceticism – and then embrace all kinds of truth about themselves. But nothing sticks. Their humour aims at a humility that dislocates the self from truthful speech (as we argued above on page 75ff). Their speech and their lives are unserious, and there is no truth to be told about the holy fools.

---

[161] The fool is defined as infinitely forgivable in Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *resp.:* 68.

[162] Basilius, *hom. 10*.

Conclusion

The recurring theme in this study has been that the holy fools make up a critique of early Christian asceticism from within the movement. They are to be understood as embracing and perfecting the religious vocation. They ascetically undermine asceticism.

But this much was stated in the introduction: we need to discover the holy fools' continuity with the ascetic background in order to establish their holiness, and discontinuity to locate their foolishness. It is a necessity of historical investigation that any description of historical phenomena in their context will always point out the continuity and difference of the object of its study. Without the former, no frame of description is possible; without the latter, no object is discernible to later tradition.

Even the incarnation is to be framed as an understandable contribution to the history of the people of Israel, and the annals of the Roman Empire, with similar precedents (Judas the Galilean, the kings and prophets of Israel) and similar successors (Paul, Peter, Francis). It is part of the scandal of the cross that it was just one more sign of the power of Rome. An historical phenomenon needs to be isolated before it may be described however, and this is done by noting its discontinuity. The most radically transforming events in history like the French Revolution and the conversion of Constantine are noticeable because they mark a transition from a past in which they take part – feudal society and the Roman Empire – into a future which they initiate – the French republic and the Holy Roman Empire. The events themselves, though causing radical transformation, are entirely continuous with the history to which they contribute.

So in order to answer our question of the significance of the deployment of madness in the Christian experience of madness, we had to ask, in turn, *in what particular ways* did the holy fools and their hagiographers assume the holiness of early Christian ascetics, and how did they critique it? What specific features were constants, and what was changed? Hence our task of drawing up the shared features and transformations fools worked on the tradition functioned not simply to define their holiness and foolishness, but also to carve out their historical specificity.

In examining the practices of norms, we discovered that the holy fools and their predecessors held in common the will to transcendence. The spiritual techniques of early Christian ascetics were an exercise in gaining control of, and even obliterating, their need for food, clothes, sex, and other necessities of life. This included the need to feel moral,

manifested in the passion of vainglory. There were those who radically rejected these needs, and those who moderated them, catering to them in specific forms. Some fasted for weeks, some ate only once a day, and others chewed grass. Some took the habit, some wore only bad clothes, and others got naked. In time, however, monasticism gained a specific form throughout the East, with recognisable attire, and well-defined eating habits.

The holy fools expressed this will to transcendence by controlling their needs in other ways. Whilst monks fasted according to the church year, holy fools paraded sausages and cakes on fast days, and ate inhuman quantities of beans. Christian ascetics controlled their need to feel moral by eschewing extreme asceticism; holy fools by secrecy and mental dissociation. They did not acknowledge the new religious order.

We can summarise the holy fools' challenge to ascetic norms in terms of their continuing the practice of becoming a stranger. As Anthony became estranged from city life and embraced the barren desert, the holy fools become estranged from religious life and embrace the unreflective life of the distracted fool. They have no time to know if they are good or who they really are. Their lives are a secret even to themselves.

The practice of knowledge revealed further continuities and divergences. Many early Christian ascetics had espoused a way of generating knowledge through a form of semiotic critique around the practice and control of the passions. Through questioning the significance and semiotic system of their representations, they force alternative knowledge and construct new taxonomies of signification and practices of thought.

The holy fools are presented as already dispassionate, as not part of the systems and desires that tempt us to represent the world in terms of acquisition and pleasure. They do not recognise distinctions of male and female, economic and moral evaluation, friend and enemy. However, neither do they recognise the practices that form new taxonomies of knowledge: they disrupt liturgy, mock religious authority, and play around religious language.

Whilst this may appear as a mere practical renunciation, consideration of problems of apophaticism make us aware to the practices of reason that allow us to conceptualise both the things we describe, and the attributes we predicate of them. The holy fools make a concrete contribution to theology by denying the location of holiness, modifying the force of attributes such as holiness, dispassion, and goodness. Their practice enacts the critique of the *via negativa* – by not recognising the authority and God-reference of religious practice – and that of the *via dissimilis* – by playing at being holy amongst those assumed unholy and ungood.

Describing the holy fools' continuity with and transformation of the Christian tradition in terms of a practice of negative theology is not meant to imply that their contribution is *merely* practical. Instead, their critique has a double thrust: against those apophatic theologians that have not considered the force of their forms of life, and against those practical and ascetic theologians that have not been sufficiently critical in their apophaticism.

Much has now been said concerning the way in which early Christian ascetics and holy fools configure the relation between self and society. Their attitude is one of renunciation: the abandonment of the norms and knowledge of society. They refuse to be placed. However, the renunciation of any community, and the recommendation that others renounce it, is the first step towards founding a new community, with specific and human forms of life every bit as contingent and placed as the one renounced, although not necessarily as secular.

The dilemma of monasticism that we noted concerns the problem of ecclesiological universalism: should everyone be a monk? If so, then everyone will be obliged to exert the tremendous force of monastic holiness upon themselves for the sake of self-transformation. If not, then this force – with all its political and personal consequences – is denied an entire group of people. The dangers of leaning in either of these directions can be noted in the way critique slips into dogma that define the self, spiritual exercises slip into rigid forms of control, and free-speaking agents slip into powerful moral experts.

The holy fools may not be able to work themselves free of these dilemma: the later holy fools tradition in Russia and the Byzantine empire stemmed largely from the story of St Andrew the Holy Fool, who certainly posed as an expert that plied his trade in controlling people through his holy foolishness, and his way of life was modelled on the earliest holy fools (especially Symeon). However, the early fools' refusal to take disciples, their unknowledge concerning holiness, and their espousal of continuous critique and renunciation are at least attempts to avoid the asceticism of hegemony and aristocracy.

All these considerations lead us to reconceptualise the role of humility in negotiating the self's relation to society. Humility may of course serve either stability or revolution: it may bracket the self in order to embrace normality, or it may bracket society's demands on the self for the sake of the individual's way of life. It may also construct an infinite demand at the heart of civil society, as it may constitute the condition of sanity and the touchstone of good morals, but it is driven by a contradiction. 'I am humble' is ungrammatical. So the requirement of humility can never be consciously fulfilled. The practice and theology of

humility that has been developing in this study of holy fools and Christian ascetics has a number of features that address this problem. Humility is driven by another order, and so requires no courage; it is practiced by faithfulness to the Christian story rather than any specific truth of the self; it is critical of systems of evaluation; it refuses to adhere to the seriousness of a substantial self.

The experience and theology of holiness is shared and transformed by early Christian ascetics and holy fools. They share the practice of the transformation of norms, knowledge, and the self's relation to society. The holy fools modify this practice by continuing it where it had created new forms and given the impression of necessity and exclusive holiness. They retain the theology of holiness that denies its centre and circumference, by mocking the holy and laughing with the unholy.

The holy fool therefore adheres to a practice of theology that refuses to believe the myths and assurances that tell them they have arrived. It is true: they are lies. They wander the cities and religious communities of late antiquity laughing at themselves and others, rejoicing in the ridiculousness and unseriousness of the search for holiness. The search for a way to be unknowingly good.

Bibliography

Verba Seniorum (*Apophthegmata Patrum (Lat.)* - ed: Rosweyde, H., 1843), Patrologia Latina: 73

Historia monachorum in Aegypto : édition critique du texte grec (*historia monachorum in Aegypto* - ed: Festugière, A. J., 1961), Subsidia hagiographica, Société des Bollandistes, Bruxelles

Apophthegmata Patrum: Alphabetical Series (*Apophthegmata Patrum (alph.)* - ed: Migne, J. P., 1975a), Patrologia Cursus Completus, Series Graeca: 65, Paris

The wisdom of the Desert Fathers : the Apophthegmata Patrum (the anonymous series) (*Apophthegmata Patrum (anon)* - tr/ed: Ward, B., 1975b), S.L.G. Press, Oxford

Les Apophtegmes des Pères: collection systématique (*Apophthegmata Patrum (Gk. syst.)* - tr/ed: Guy, J.-C., 1993-2005), Sources Chrétiennes: 387, 474, 498, Les Édition du Cerf, Paris

Acta Sanctorum (*Acta Sanctorum* -, 1999), Proquest LLC

The Book of Steps (*liber graduum* - tr/ed: Kitchen, R. A. Parmentier, M. F. G., 2005), Cistercian Studies: 196, Cistercian Publishing, Kalamazoo

Saint Daniel of Sketis (*vita Danielis Scetiotis* - tr/ed: Dahlman, B., 2007), in Dahlman, B. (ed), *Saint Daniel of Sketis: A Group of Hagiographic Texts*, Uppsala University Library, Uppsala

Agamben Giorgio (1998) [1995] *Homo sacer : sovereign power and bare life* (tr: Heller-Roazen, D.), Stanford University Press, Stanford, Calif.

Anderson Colin (director) (2008)*, The News Quiz*, Friday Night Comedy on Radio 4, BBC Radio 4

Arnold Duane W. H. and Bright Pamela (Eds.) (1995) *De doctrina Christiana : a classic of western culture,* University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame.

Athanasius Alexandrinus, *The Life of St Anthony* (*Vita Antonii* - tr/ed: Deferrari, R. J., 1952) Fathers of the Church, a new Translation 15, New York

Augustinus Hipponensis, *Against Lying* (*contra mendacium* - tr/ed: Browne, H., 1887a), in Schaff, P. (ed), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, III, T&T Clark, Edinburgh

Augustinus Hipponensis, *On Lying* (*de mendacio* - tr/ed: Browne, H., 1887b), in Schaff, P. (ed), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, III, T&T Clark, Edinburgh

Augustinus Hipponensis, *On Free Will* (*de libero arbitrio* - tr/ed: Russell, R. P., 1968) Fathers of the Church, A New Translation 58, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington DC

Augustinus Hipponensis, *The Trinity* (*de trinitate* - tr/ed: Hill, E., 1991) The Works of St Augustine: a translation for the 21st century, New City Press, New York

Augustinus Hipponensis, *Confessions* (*Confessionum* - tr/ed: Chadwick, H., 1992) The world's classics, Oxford University Press, Oxford ; New York

Augustinus Hipponensis, *On Christian Teaching* (*De Doctrina Christiana* - tr/ed: Green, R. P. H., 1997), Oxford University Press, Oxford

Augustinus Hipponensis, *The city of God against the pagans* (*de civitate dei contra paganos* - tr/ed: Dyson, R. W., 1998) Cambridge texts in the history of political thought, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge ; New York

Augustinus Hipponensis, *The Augustine Catechism : the Enchiridion on faith, hope, and love* (*Enchiridion* - tr/ed: Harbert, B., 1999) The Augustine series, New City Press, Hyde Park, N.Y.

Augustinus Hipponensis, *Of the Work of Monks* (*de opera monachorum* – tr/ed: Browne, H., 1887 [1847]) in Schaff, P. (ed), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, III, T&T Clark, Edinburgh.

Austin J. L. (1975) *How to do things with words,* The William James lectures, Clarendon Press, Oxford

Badiou Alain (2001) [1998] *Ethics : an essay on the understanding of evil* (tr: Hallward, P.), Verso, London ; New York

Badiou Alain (2003) [1997] *Saint Paul : the foundation of universalism* (tr: Brassier, R.)*,* Cultural memory in the present, Stanford University Press, Stanford, Calif.

Barry Andrew, et al. (Eds.) (1996) *Foucault and political reason : liberalism, neo-liberalism, and rationalities of government,* University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Barsanuphius and Iohannes, *Letters* (*responsiones* - tr/ed: Chryssavgis, J., 2006-2007) Fathers of the Church, A New Translation 113-114, Catholic University of America Press, New York

Basilius Magnus, *Address to Young Men on the Right Use of Greek literature* (*ad adolescentes de legendis libris gentilium* - tr/ed: Padelford, F. M., 1902), *Yale Studies in English*, Essays on the study and use of poetry by Plutarch and Basil the Great 15, H. Holt and company, New York, 99-120

Basilius Magnus, *An ascetical Discourse (I)* (*sermo asceticus 1* - tr/ed: Wagner, M. M., 1950a), in Wagner, M. M. (ed), *Ascetical Works*, Fathers of the Church: A New Translation, Catholic University of America, Washington DC

Basilius Magnus, *An ascetical Discourse (II)* (*sermo asceticus 2* - tr/ed: Wagner, M. M., 1950b), in Wagner, M. M. (ed), *Ascetical Works*, Fathers of the Church: A New Translation, Catholic University of America, Washington DC

Basilius Magnus, *Concerning Baptism* (*de baptismo libro duo* - tr/ed: Wace, H., 1950c), in Wagner, M. M. (ed)Fathers of the Church: A New Translation, Catholic University of America, Washington DC, 339-430

Basilius Magnus, *Homily 10: Against those who are prone to anger* (*homilia 10 adversus eos qui irascuntur* - tr/ed: Wagner, M. M., 1950d), in Wagner, M. M. (ed), *Ascetical Works*, Fathers of the Church: A New Translation, Catholic University of America, Washington DC

Basilius Magnus, *Homily 20: Of Homility* (*homilia 20 de humilitate* - tr/ed: Wagner, M. M., 1950e) Fathers of the Church: A New Translation, Catholic University of America, Washington DC, 475-486

Basilius Magnus, *The Long Rules* (*regulae fusius tractatae* - tr/ed: Wagner, M. M., 1950f), in Wagner, M. M. (ed), *Ascetical Works*, Fathers of the Church: A New Translation, Catholic University of America, Washington DC

Basilius Magnus, *Moralia* (*moralia* - ed: Wagner, M. M., 1950g), in Wagner, M. M. (ed), *Ascetical Works*, Fathers of the Church: A New Translation, Catholic University of America, Washington DC

Basilius Magnus, *On Renunciation of the World* (*sermo de renuntiatione saeculi* - tr/ed: Wagner, M. M., 1950h), in Wagner, M. M. (ed), *Ascetical Works*, Fathers of the Church: A New Translation, Catholic University of America, Washington DC

Basilius Magnus, *On the Judgment of God* (*de judicio dei* - tr/ed: Wagner, M. M., 1950i), in Wagner, M. M. (ed), *Ascetical Works*, Fathers of the Church: A New Translation, Catholic University of America, Washington DC

Basilius Magnus, *A Discourse on Ascetical Discipline: How the monk should be equipped* (*sermo eiusdem de ascetica disciplina* - tr/ed: Wagner, M. M., 1970), in Wagner, M. M. (ed)Fathers of the Church: A New Translation, Catholic University of America, Washington DC, 33-36

Bataille Georges (1989) [1973] *Theory of religion* (tr: Hurley, R.), Zone Books, New York

Berger Peter L. (1997) *Redeeming laughter : the comic dimension of human experience*, Walter de Gruyter, New York

Bergson Henri (2005) [1901] *Laughter : an essay on the meaning of the comic* (tr: Brereton, C. Rothwell, F.), Dover Publications, Mineola, NY

Berkeley George (1953) [1712] "Passive Obedience, Or the Christian Doctrine of not resisting the Supreme Power, proved and vindicated upon the principles of the Law of Nature. In a Discourse delivered at the College Chapel" In *The works of George Berkeley*, The works of George Berkeley, Vol. VI (Ed, Jessop, T. E.) Nelson, London pp. 1-46.

Bernauer James William (2002) "Michel Foucault's Philosophy of Religion: an Introduction to the Non-Fascist Life" In *Michel Foucault and theology : the politics of religious experience* (Eds, Bernauer, J. W. Carrette, J. R.) Ashgate, Aldershot; Burlington pp. 77-97.

Boutenoff Peter C (2003) ""What kind of fool am I?" Further Gleanings from Holy Folly" In *Abba: The Tradition of Orthodoxy in the West* (Eds, Behr, J., Louth, A. Conomos, D.) Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, New York pp. 335-349.

Breton Stanislas (2002) [1981] *The Word and the Cross* (tr: Porter, J.)*, Perspectives in Continental Philosophy, Fordham University Press, New York

Brown Peter Robert Lamont (1971) "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity"*, The Journal of Roman Studies,* **61,** 80-101.

Brown Peter Robert Lamont (1988) *The body and society : men, women, and sexual renunciation in early Christianity,* Lectures on the history of religions ; new series, 13, Columbia University Press, New York

Burchell Graham (1996) "Liberal Government and Techniques of the Self" In *Foucault and Political Reason* (Eds, Barry, A., Osborne, T. Rose, N.) Routledge, London pp. 19-36.

Burchell Graham, et al. (1991) *The Foucault effect : studies in governmentality : with two lectures by and an interview with Michel Foucault*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago

Burton-Christie Douglas (1993) *The Word in the desert : scripture and the quest for holiness in early Christian monasticism*, Oxford University Press, New York

Butler Judith (2005) *Giving an account of oneself*, Fordham University Press, New York

Casiday Augustine (2006) *Evagrius Ponticus*, Routledge, London

Cassianus Iohannes, *John Cassian : the conferences* (*Collationes* - tr/ed: Ramsey, B., 1997) Ancient Christian writers 57, Paulist Press, New York

Cassianus Iohannes, *Cassian, the institutes* (*De institutis coenobiorum* - tr/ed: Ramsey, B., 2000) Ancient Christian writers 58, Newman Press, New York

Certeau Michel de (1973) *L'absent de l'histoire,* Sciences humaines et idéologies, 4, Mame, Tours

Certeau Michel de (1979) "Le Silence de L'absolu: Folles et Fous de Dieu"*, Recherches de Science Religieuse,* **67,** 525-546.

Certeau Michel de (1996) [1980]"Vocal Utopias: Glossolalias" (tr: Daniel Rosenberg)*, Representations,* **56,** 29-47.

Chitty Derwas J. (1966) *The desert a city: an introduction to the study of Egyptian and Palestinian monasticism under the Christian Empire*, Blackwell, Oxford,

Chryssavgis John (2003) *In the heart of the desert : the spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers : with a translation of Abba Zosimas' Reflections,* Treasures of the world's religions, World Wisdom, Bloomington, Ind.

Cicero Marcus Tullius, *Tusculan Disputations* (*Tusculanae Disputationes* - tr/ed: King, J. E., 1927) Cicero's Philosophical Treatises, LOEB Classical Library, W. Heinemann, London, New York,

Clark Elizabeth A. (1988) "Foucault, The Fathers, and Sex"*, Journal of the American Academy of Religion,* **56,** 619-641.

Clemens Alexandrinus, *Stromata, or Miscellanies* (*stromateis* - tr/ed: Wilson, W., 1867), in Roberts, A. Donaldson, J. (eds), *Ante-Nicene Fathers II: Fathers of the Second Century*, Edinburgh

Climacus John, *The ladder of divine ascent* (*scala paradisi* - tr/ed: Luibheid, C. Russell, N., 1982) The Classics of Western spirituality, Paulist Press, New York

Cox Harvey Gallagher (1969) *The feast of fools; a theological essay on festivity and fantasy*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge,

Cox Harvey Gallagher (1995) *Fire from heaven : the rise of pentecostal spirituality and the reshaping of religion in the twenty-first century*, Addison-Wesley Pub., Reading, Mass.

Critchley Simon (2002) *On humour,* Thinking in action, Routledge, London ; New York

Critchley Simon (2007) *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*, Verso, London

Dagron Gilbert (1990) "L'Homme Sans Honneur Ou le Saint Scandaleux"*, Annales ESC,* **45,** 929-939.

Dante Alighieri (1997) [1867] *The Divine Comedy* (tr: Longfellow, H. W.), Gutenberg Etext

Davidson Arnold Ira (1994) "Ethics as ascetics: Foucault, the history of ethics, and ancient thought" In *The Cambridge companion to Foucault* (Ed, Gutting, G.) Cambridge University Press, Cambridge pp. 115-140.

Davidson Arnold Ira, (2008) "In Praise of Counter-Conduct", at
http://files.openomy.com/public/cwkoopman/9_Davidson.mp3, accessed 14/08/08

de Matons Jose Grosdidier (1970) "Les Thèmes d'Édification dans la Vie d'André Salos",
Travaux et Memoires, **4,** 277-328.

Deleuze Gilles (2006) [1962] *Nietzsche and philosophy* (tr: Tomlinson, H.), Continuum,
London ; New York

Denys Areopagitus, *The Celestial Hierarchy* (*de caelesti hierarchia* - tr/ed: Luibheid, C.,
1987a), in Luibheid, C. Rorem, P. (eds), *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*,
Classics of Western Spirituality, Paulist Press, New York, 143-191

Denys Areopagitus, *The Divine Names* (*de divinis nominibus* - tr/ed: Luibheid, C., 1987b), in
Luibheid, C. Rorem, P. (eds), *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, Classics of
Western Spirituality, Paulist Press, New York, 47-131

Denys Areopagitus, *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* (*de ecclesiastica hierarchia* - tr/ed:
Luibheid, C., 1987c), in Luibheid, C. Rorem, P. (eds), *Pseudo-Dionysius: The
Complete Works*, Classics of Western Spirituality, Paulist Press, New York, 193-259

Denys Areopagitus, *The Mystical Theology* (*de mystica theologia* - tr/ed: Luibheid, C.,
1987d), in Luibheid, C. Rorem, P. (eds), *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, The
Classics of Western Spirituality, Paulist Press, New York, 133-141

Descartes René (1989) [1649] *The passions of the soul* (tr: Voss, S.), Hackett Pub. Co.,
Indianapolis

Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of eminent philosophers* (*Vitae Philosophorum* - tr/ed: Hicks, R. D.,
1925) The Loeb classical library. [Greek authors], W. Heineman, London, New York

Wedding Crashers, (2005) Dobkin David (director), New Line Cinema, USA

Dostoevsky Fyodor (1994) [1880] *The Karamazov brothers* (tr: Avsey, I.)*,* The World's
classics, Oxford University Press, Oxford

Dostoevsky Fyodor (2000) [1872] *Demons* (tr: Pevear, R. Volokhonsky, L.), Knopf, New
York

Dylan Bob, (1979) "Gotta Serve Somebody", at http://www.bobdylan.com/songs/serve.html,
accessed 25/08/06

Epictetus, *Encheiridion* (*Encheiridion* - tr/ed: Oldfather, W. A., 1926b), in Oldfather, W. A.
(ed), *Epictetus; the Discourses as reported by Arrian, the Manual and fragments, with
an English translation*, Loeb Classical Library 217-218, Harvard University Press,
London, New York

Erasmus Desiderius (1989) [1510] "The praise of folly" In *The praise of folly and other
writings : a new translation with critical commentary* (Ed, Adams, R. M.) Norton,
New York pp. 3-87.

Evagrius Ponticus, *Chapters on Prayer* (*De oratione* - tr/ed: Sinkewicz, R. E., 2003a), in
Sinkewicz, R. E. (ed), *The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, Oxford University Press, Oxford,
183-209

Evagrius Ponticus, *Exhortation to a virgin* (*Sententiae ad virginem* - tr/ed: Sinkewicz, R. E.,
2003b), in Sinkewicz, R. E. (ed), *The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, Oxford University Press,
Oxford, 131-135

Evagrius Ponticus, *Exhortations to Monks* (*Paraenesis ad monachos* - tr/ed: Sinkewicz, R. E., 2003c), in Sinkewicz, R. E. (ed), *The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 217-223

Evagrius Ponticus, *Foundations of the Monastic Life: a presentation of the practice of stillness* (*hypotyposes* - tr/ed: Sinkewicz, R. E., 2003d), in Sinkewicz, R. E. (ed), *The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1-11

Evagrius Ponticus, *Maxims 1-3* (*Capita paraenetica* - tr/ed: Sinkewicz, R. E., 2003e), in Sinkewicz, R. E. (ed), *The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 228-232

Evagrius Ponticus, *The Monk: A Treatise on the Practical Life* (*Praktikos* - tr/ed: Sinkewicz, R. E., 2003f), in Sinkewicz, R. E. (ed), *The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, Oxford University Press, Oxford

Evagrius Ponticus, *On the Eight Thoughts* (*de octo spiritibus malitiae* - tr/ed: Sinkewicz, R. E., 2003g), in Sinkewicz, R. E. (ed), *The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 66-90

Evagrius Ponticus, *On the Vices Opposed to the Virtues [To Eulogius]* (*De vitiis quae opposita sunt virtutibus* - tr/ed: Sinkewicz, R. E., 2003h), in Sinkewicz, R. E. (ed), *The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 60-65

Evagrius Ponticus, *On Thoughts* (*De malignis cogationibus* - tr/ed: Sinkewicz, R. E., 2003i), in Sinkewicz, R. E. (ed), *The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 136-182

Evagrius Ponticus, *Reflections* (*Skemmata* - tr/ed: Sinkewicz, R. E., 2003j), in Sinkewicz, R. E. (ed), *The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 210-216

Evagrius Ponticus, *Thirty-Three Ordered Chapters* (*capitula xxxiii* - tr/ed: Sinkewicz, R. E., 2003k), in Sinkewicz, R. E. (ed), *The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 224-227

Evagrius Ponticus, *To Eulogius: on the confession of thoughts and counsel in their regard* (*Eulogios* - tr/ed: Sinkewicz, R. E., 2003l), in Sinkewicz, R. E. (ed), *The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 12-59, 310-333

Evagrius Ponticus, *To Monks in monasteries and communities* (*Sententiae ad monachos* - tr/ed: Sinkewicz, R. E., 2003m), in Sinkewicz, R. E. (ed), *The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 115-131

Evagrius Ponticus, *Definitions* (*definitiones* - tr/ed: Casiday, A., 2006a), in Casiday, A. (ed), *Evagrius Ponticus*, The Early Church Fathers, Routledge, London, 183-184

Evagrius Ponticus, *Excerpts* (*excerpts* - tr/ed: Casiday, A., 2006b), in Casiday, A. (ed), *Evagrius Ponticus*, The Early Church Fathers, Routledge, London, 172-180

Evagrius Ponticus, *The Great Letter* (*Epistula ad Melaniam* - tr/ed: Casiday, A., 2006c), in Casiday, A. (ed), *Evagrius Ponticus*, The Early Church Fathers, Routledge, London, 63-77

Evagrius Ponticus, *Letters* (*epistula* - tr/ed: Casiday, A., 2006d), in Casiday, A. (ed), *Evagrius Ponticus*, The Early Church Fathers, Routledge, London, 59-62

Evagrius Ponticus, *Scholia on Ecclesiastes* (*Scholia in Ecclesiasten* - tr/ed: Casiday, A., 2006e), in Casiday, A. (ed), *Evagrius Ponticus*, The Early Church Fathers, Routledge, London, 130-149

Evagrius Ponticus, *Scholia on Luke* (*Scholia in Lucam* - tr/ed: Casiday, A., 2006f), in Casiday, A. (ed), *Evagrius Ponticus*, The Early Church Fathers, Routledge, London, 153-161

Evagrius Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical history* (*historia ecclesiastica* - tr/ed: Walford, E., 1846), S. Bagster and sons, London.

Festugière A. J. (Ed.) (1974) *Vie de Syméon le Fou ; (et) Vie de Jean de Chypre,* P. Geuthner, Paris.

Feuerstein Georg (1991) *Holy madness : the shock tactics and radical teachings of crazy-wise adepts, holy fools, and rascal gurus*, Paragon House, New York, N.Y.

Foucault Michel, (1972) [1961] *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*, Paris : Gallimard.

Foucault Michel, (1979) "Omnes et Singulatim: Towards a Criticism of Political Reason" paper given at *The Tanner Lectures*, Stanford University, www.tannerlectures.utah.edu/lectures/foucault81.pdf

Foucault Michel, (1983) "The Culture of the Self", at http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/VideoTest/foucault-cult1.ram, accessed 15/02/07

Foucault Michel (1991) [1975] *Discipline and punish : the birth of the prison* (tr: Sheridan, A.), Penguin books, London

Foucault Michel (1992a) [1984] *The Care of the Self* (tr: Hurley, R.)*, The History of Sexuality, 3, Penguin, London

Foucault Michel (1992b) [1984] *The Use of Pleasure* (tr: Hurley, R.)*, The History of Sexuality, 2, Penguin, London

Foucault Michel (1996) [1976] "The social extension of the norm" (Interviewed by Werner, P.) In Lotringer, S. (ed), *Foucault Live: Collected Interviews, 1961-1984*, Semiotext(e), New York pp. 196-199.

Foucault Michel (1996) [1984] "The Return of Morality" In *Foucault Live: Collected Interviews, 1961-1984*, Foucault Live: Collected Interviews, 1961-1984 (Eds, Barbedette, G. Scala, A.) Semiotext(e), New York pp. 465-473.

Foucault Michel (2000) "Polemics, Politics, and Problematizations: An Interview with Michel Foucault" (Interviewed by Rabinow, P.) In Rabinow, P. (ed), *Ethics: subjectivity and truth: The Essential Works of Foucault*, Vol. 1, Penguin Books, London pp. 111-119.

Foucault Michel (2000) [1981] "Sexuality and Solitude" In *Ethics : subjectivity and truth*, The Essential Works of Foucault, Vol. 1 (Ed, Rabinow, P.) Penguin Books, London pp. 175-184.

Foucault Michel (2000a) [1982] "Michel Foucault" (Interviewed by Riggins, S.) In Rabinow, P. (ed), *Ethics : subjectivity and truth*, The Essential Works of Foucault, Vol. 1, Penguin Books, London pp. 121-133.

Foucault Michel (2000b) [1982] "Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity" (Interviewed by Gallagher, B. Wilson, A.) In Rabinow, P. (ed), *Ethics : subjectivity and truth: The Essential Works of Foucault*, Vol. 1, Penguin Books, London pp. 163-173.

Foucault Michel (2000c) [1982] "Technologies of the Self" In *Ethics : subjectivity and truth*, The Essential Works of Foucault, Vol. 1 (Ed, Rabinow, P.) Penguin Books, London pp. 223-251.

Foucault Michel (2000a) [1983] "Self Writing" In *Ethics : subjectivity and truth*, The Essential Works of Foucault, Vol. 1 (Ed, Rabinow, P.) Penguin Books, London pp. 207-222.

Foucault Michel (2000b) [1983] "On the Genealogy of Ethics: an Overview of Work in Progress" In *Ethics : subjectivity and truth*, The Essential Works of Foucault, Vol. 1 (Ed, Rabinow, P.) Penguin Books, London pp. 253-280.

Foucault Michel (2000) [1984] "What is Enlightenment?" In *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, The Essential Works of Foucault, Vol. 1 (Ed, Rabinow, P.) Penguin Books, London pp. 303-319.

Foucault Michel (2000) [1985] "The Battle for Chastity" In *Ethics : subjectivity and truth*, The Essential Works of Foucault, Vol. 1 (Ed, Rabinow, P.) Penguin Books, London pp. 185-197.

Foucault Michel (2002) [1973] "Truth and Juridical Forms" In *Power*, The Essential Works of Foucault, Vol. 3 (Ed, Faubion, J. D.) Penguin Books, London pp. 1-89.

Foucault Michel (2002) [1979] "For an Ethic of Discomfort" In *Power*, The Essential Works of Foucault, Vol. 3 (Ed, Faubion, J. D.) Penguin Books, London pp. 443-448.

Foucault Michel (2002) [1982] "The Subject and Power" In *Power*, The Essential Works of Foucault, Vol. 3 (Ed, Faubion, J. D.) Penguin Books, London pp. 326-348.

Foucault Michel (2003) [1999] *Abnormal : lectures at the Collège de France, 1974-1975* (tr: Burchell, G.), Picador, New York

Foucault Michel (2005) [2001] *The hermeneutics of the subject : lectures at the Collège de France, 1981-1982* (tr: Burchell, G.), Palgrave-Macmillan, New York

Foucault Michel (2006) [1961] *The History of Madness* (tr: Murphy, J. Khalfa, J.), Routledge, London

Foucault Michel (2006) [2003] *Psychiatric Power: lectures at the Collége de France 1973-1974* (tr: Burchell, G.), Palgrave Macmillan, New York

Foucault Michel (2007a) [1980] "Subjectivity and Truth" In *The Politics of Truth*, Semiotext(e) (Ed, Lotringer, S.) MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. pp.147-167.

Foucault Michel (2007b) [1980] "Christianity and Confession" In *The Politics of Truth*, Semiotext(e) (Ed, Lotringer, S.) MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. pp.169-191.

Foucault Michel (2007) [1990] "What is Critique?" In *The Politics of Truth*, Semiotext(e) (Ed, Lotringer, S.) MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. pp. 41-81.

Foucault Michel (2007) [2004] *Security, territory, population : lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-1978* (tr: Burchell, G.), Palgrave Macmillan, New York

Foucault Michel (2008) *Le Gouvernement de Soi et des Autres: Cours au Collège de France (1982-1983),* Hautes études, Gallimard/Seuil, Paris

Foucault Michel (2009) *Le Courage de la Vérité : Le Gouvernement de soi et des autres II : Cours au Collège de France (1983-1984)*, Hautes études, Gallimard/Seuil, Paris.

Foucault Michel and Chomsky Noam (1997) [1974] "Human Nature: Justice versus Power" (Interviewed by Elders, F.) In Davidson, A. I. (ed), *Foucault and his Interlocutors*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago pp. 107-145.

Foucault Michel, et al. (1988) *Technologies of the self : a seminar with Michel Foucault*, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst

Freud Sigmund (2002) [1905] *The joke and its relation to the unconscious* (tr: Crick, J.)*, Penguin classics, Penguin, London ; New York, N.Y.

Fried Michael (2007) "Jeff Wall, Wittgenstein, and the Everyday"*, Critical Inquiry, ***33,** 495-526.

Frøyshov Stig R (2005) "Bønnens praksis i den egyptiske ørkenmonastisismen : en innledende studie"*, Norsk Teologisk Tidsskrift, ***106,** 147-169.

Frøyshov Wenche Valentina Stray (2003) "Kristi dårer"*, Over Alt***, 42-49.

Garfield Simon (2001), "Frock Tactics" Interview in *The Observer* 27/05/2001

Goodchild Philip (2002) *Capitalism and religion : the price of piety*, Routledge, London

Goodchild Philip (2005) "Capital and Kingdom: an Eschatological Ontology" In *Theology and the Political: The New Debate*, SIC (Eds, Davis, C., Milbank, J. Žižek, S.) Duke University Press, Durham and London pp. 127-152.

Gorainoff Irina (1983) *Les fols en Christ dans la tradition orthodoxe,* Théophanie. Essais, Desclée De Brouwer, Paris

Gould Graham (1993) *The desert fathers on monastic community,* Oxford early Christian studies, Clarendon Press, Oxford

Gregorius Magnus, *The Book of Pastoral Rule* (*Liber Regulæ Pastoralis* - tr/ed: Barmby, J., 1895), in Schaff, P. Wace, H. (eds), *Leo the Great and Gregory the Great*, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers II.XII, T&T Clark, Edinburgh

Hadot Pierre (1995) *Philosophy as a way of life : spiritual exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (tr: Chase, M.), Blackwell, Malden, MA

Hadot Pierre (2002) [1995] *What is ancient philosophy?* (tr: Chase, M.), Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass.

Haldon John (2002) "Humour and the everyday in Byzantium" In *Humour, History and Politics in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Ed, Halsall, G.) Cambridge University Press, Cambridge pp. 48-72.

Hannon Niel, (1997) "In Pursuit of Happiness", at http://www.thedivinecomedy.com/?page_id=23#albumShort, accessed 07/03/08

Harmless William (2000) "Remembering Poemen Remembering: The Desert Fathers and the Spirituality of Memory"*, Church History, ***69,** 483-518.

Harrison Carol (1992) *Beauty and revelation in the thought of Saint Augustine,* Oxford theological monographs, Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York

Harrison Carol (2006) "De Doctrina Christiana"*, New Blackfriars, ***87,** 121-131.

Hieronymus, *Letters* (*epistula* - tr/ed: Fremantle, W. H., Lewis, G. Martley, W. G., 1892), in Schaff, P. (ed), *The Principle Works of St. Jerome*, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers 2-06, T&T Clark, Edinburgh

Hieronymus, *The Life of Paul the Hermit* (*vita Sancti Pauli Eremitae* – tr/ed: Fremantle, W. H., Lewis, G. Martley, W. G., 1892), in Schaff, P. (ed), *The Principle Works of St. Jerome*, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers 2-06, T&T Clark, Edinburgh.

Hunter Ian (1996) "Assembling the School" In *Foucault and Political Reason* (Eds, Barry, A., Osborne, T. Rose, N.) Routledge, Oxford pp. 143-166.

Ivanov S. A. (2006) [1994] *Holy fools in Byzantium and beyond* (tr: Franklin, S.)*,* Oxford studies in Byzantium, Oxford University Press, Oxford ; New York

Izzard Eddie (1998) *Dress to Kill*, San Francisco, Universal Pictures UK

John of the Cross (1990) *Dark night of the soul* (tr: Peers, E. A.), Image Books, Doubleday, New York

Julian Norwich (1901) *Revelations of Divine Love* (tr: Warrack, G.), Christian Classics Ethereal Library

Kant Immanuel (1929) [1781] *Critique of Pure Reason* (tr: Smith, N. K.), Macmillan, London

Kant Immanuel (2007) [1784] "Was Ist Aufklärung?" In *Michel Foucault: The Politics of Truth* (Ed, Lotringer, S.) Semiotext(e), Los Angeles pp. 29-37.

Kierkegaard Søren (1985) [1843] *Fear and trembling* (tr: Hannay, A.)*,* Penguin classics, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, New York

Kislinger Ewald (1988) "Symeon Salos' Hund"*, Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik,* **38,** 165-170.

Kolakowski Leszek (2004) [1959] "The Priest and the Jester: Reflections on the Theological Heritage of Contemporary Thought" In *Kolakowski: The Two Eyes of Spinoza & Other Essays on Philosophers* (Ed, Janowski, Z.) St. Augustine's Press, Indiana pp. 239-262.

Koyama Kosuke (1984) *Mount Fuji and Mount Sinai: A Critique of Idols*, Orbis Books, Michigan

Kristeva Julia (1982) [1980] *Powers of horror : an essay on abjection* (tr: Roudiez, L. S.)*,* European perspectives, Columbia University Press, New York

Krueger Derek (1996) *Symeon the holy fool : Leontius's Life and the late antique city,* The transformation of the classical heritage ; 25, University of California Press, Berkeley

Lampe G. W. H. (1961) *A Patristic Greek lexicon*, Clarendon, Oxford ; New York

Lawless, G. (1987) *Augustine of Hippo and His Monastic Rule*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.

Lawless, G. (2002) "Augustine's decentring of asceticism" in Dodaro, R. and Lawless, G. (eds) *Augustine and his Critics*, London: Routledge, pp. 142-163.

Leontius Episcopus Neapolitanus, *Vie de Syméon le Fou* (*vita Symeonis Sali* - tr/ed: Festugière, A. J. ed: Rydén, L., 1974), in Festugière, A. J. (ed), *Vie de Syméon le Fou ; (et) Vie de Jean de Chypre*, Bibliothèque archéologique et historique 95, P. Geuthner, Paris

Leontius Episcopus Neapolitanus, *The Life of Symeon the Fool* (*vita Symeonis Sali* - tr/ed: Krueger, D. ed: Festugière, A. J. Rydèn, L., 1996), in Krueger, D. (ed), *Symeon the holy fool : Leontius's Life and the late antique city*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 131-171

Linge David E (2000) "Leading the Life of Angels: Ascetic Practice and Reflection in the Writings of Evagrius of Pontus"*, Journal of the American Academy of Religion,* **68,** 537-568.

Lossky Vladimir (1976) *The mystical theology of the Eastern Church*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, N.Y.

Marx Karl (1891) *Wage Labour and Capital* (tr: Engels, F.), the original 1891 pamphlet

Maximus Confessor, *The Four Centuries on Charity* (*capitum de caritate quattuor centuriae* - tr/ed: Sherwood, P., 1955), in Sherwood, P. (ed), *Maximus the Confessor: The ascetic life. The four centuries on charity*, Ancient Christian Writers XXI, Newman Press, Westminster, Md., 136-208

McCabe Herbert (2000) [1987] *God matters,* Contemporary Christian Insights, Mowbray, London

McGrath Alister E. (2003) *A brief history of heaven,* Blackwell brief histories of religion, Blackwell, Malden

McGushin Edward F. (2007) *Foucault's askésis : an introduction to the philosophical life*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Ill.

Milbank John (1997) *The word made strange : theology, language, culture*, Blackwell Publishers, Cambridge, MA

Mill John Stuart (1999) [1859] *On Liberty*, Bartleby.com, New York

Monk Ray (1990) *Ludwig Wittgenstein : the duty of genius*, Free Press : Maxwell Macmillan International, New York

Moore G. E. (1942) "A Reply to My Critics" In *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore* (Ed, Schilpp, P.) Tudor, Evanston pp. 535-677.

Moschus John, *The Spiritual Meadow* (*pratum spirituale* - tr/ed: Wortley, J., 1992) Cistercian Studies Series 139, Cistercian Publications, Michigan

Muers Rachel (2004) *Keeping God's silence : towards a theological ethics of communication,* Challenges in contemporary theology, Blackwell Pub., Malden, MA

Nehamas Alexander (1998) *The art of living : Socratic reflections from Plato to Foucault,* Sather classical lectures ; v. 61, University of California Press, Berkeley

Nietzsche Friedrich Wilhelm (1961) [1885] *Thus spoke Zarathustra; a book for everyone and no one* (tr: Hollingdale, R. J.)*,* Penguin classics, Penguin Books, Baltimore

Nikephoros, *The life of St. Andrew the Fool* (*vita andreii* - tr/ed: Rydén, L., 1995) Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis. Studia Byzantina Upsaliensia, Uppsala University ; Almqvist & Wiksell International, Uppsala, Stockholm

O'Leary Timothy (2002) *Foucault : the art of ethics*, Continuum, London ; New York

Palladius, *The Lausiac history* (*historia Lausiaca* - tr/ed: Meyer, R. T., 1965) Ancient Christian writers; the works of the Fathers in translation 34, Newman Press, Westminster, Md.,

Pearson Joseph (2001) *Michel Foucault: Fearless speech*, Semiotext(e) : [Distributed by MIT Press], Los Angeles

Phan Peter C (2001) "The Wisdom of Holy Fools in Postmodernity"*, Theological Studies,* **62,** 730-752.

Plutarch, (2006) [1878] "How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend" (tr: Tullie), at http://www.bostonleadershipbuilders.com/plutarch/moralia/how_to_tell_a_flatterer_from_a_friend.htm, accessed 25/09/08

Pyle Sandra J. (1998) *Mirth and morality of Shakespeare's holy fools,* Studies in British literature ; v. 33, Edwin Mellen Press, Lewiston

Rabbow Paul (1954) *Seelenführung; Methodik der Exerzitien in der Antike*, Kösel-Verlag, München,

Rasmussen Mette Sophia Bøcher (2005) "Like a rock or like God? The concept of apatheia in the monastic theology of Evagrius of Pontus"*, Studia Theologica,* **59,** 147-162.

Roberts Vaughan (2000) *Distinctives*, Authentic Lifestyle, Carlisle

Rompay Lucas-Van (1994) "The Syriac version of the "Life of Symeon Salos" : first soundings" In *Philohistor: Miscellanea in Honorem C. Laga Septuagenarii* (Eds, Schoors, A. Van Deun, P.) Peeters, Louvain pp. 381-398.

Rubenson Samuel (1995) *The letters of St. Antony : monasticism and the making of a saint,* Studies in antiquity and Christianity, Fortress Press, Minneapolis

Rufinus, *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* (*Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* - ed: Migne, J. P., 1979) Patrologia Cursus Completus, Series Latina 21, 1963

Rydén Lennart (1981) "The Holy Fool" In *The Byzantine Saint*, Studies Supplementary to Sobornost, Vol. 5 (Ed, Hackel, S.) The Bemrose Press Ltd, London pp. 106-113.

Saward John (1980) *Perfect fools : folly for Christ's sake in Catholic and Orthodox spirituality*, Oxford University Press, Oxford ; New York

Schopenhauer Arthur, (2004) [1903] "Studies in Pessimism" (tr: Saunders, B.), at http://www.gutenberg.org/files/10732/10732-8.txt, accessed 10/10/08

Screech M. A. (1997) *Laughter at the foot of the cross*, Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, London ; New York

Searle John R. (1969) *Speech acts: an essay in the philosophy of language*, Cambridge U.P., London,

Shakespeare William, (1998) "Twelfth Night, or What You Will", at http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext98/2ws2810.txt, accessed 19/03/2008

Sinkewicz Robert E. (Ed.) (2003) *Evagrius of Pontus : the Greek ascetic corpus,* Oxford University Press, New York ; Oxford.

Smith James K. A. (2002) *Speech and theology : language and the logic of Incarnation,* Radical orthodoxy series, Routledge, London ; New York

Sorabji Richard (2000) *Emotion and peace of mind : from Stoic agitation to Christian temptation,* The Gifford lectures, Oxford University Press, Oxford ; New York

Symeon the New Theologian (1980) *Discourses*, (Translated from Symeon 1963-5 by deCatanzaro, C. J.) The Classics of Western Spirituality, Paulist Press, New York.

Symeon the New Theologian (1963-5) *Catéchèses*, (ed: Krivochéine, B.; tr: Paramelle, J.) Sources Chrétiennes 96, 104, 113, Les Éditions du Cerf, Paris.

Syrkin Alexander Y (1982) "On the Behavior of the "Fool for Christ's Sake""*, History of Religions,* **22,** 150-171.

Thomas Andrew, (2003), *Augustine and Signs*, MA thesis at Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Durham

Thomas Andrew (2006a) "Gud som ser"*, Kirke og Kultur,* **111,** 219-233.

Thomas Andrew (2006b) "Pentecostalism and normalization" In *Spirits of globalization : the growth of Pentecostalism and experiential spiritualities in a global age* (Ed, Stålsett, S. J.) SCM Press, London pp. S. 160-169.

Thomas Andrew (2008) "God, Vision and Power: Looking at Berkeley's cosmology and disciplinary power", *Studia Theologica,* **62,** 80-97.

Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (*summa theologiae* - tr/ed: Dominicans, E., 2006), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

Turner Denys (1995) *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, New York

Turner Denys (2002) "Apophaticism, idolatry and the claims of reason" in *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation* (eds, Turner, D. and Davies, O.) Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, New York, pp. 11-34

Turner Denys (2004) *Faith, reason, and the existence of God*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, New York

Turner Denys (2008) "Dionysius and some late Medieval mystical theologians of Northern Europe", *Modern Theology*, **24:4**, 651-665.

Verheijen L (1974) "Le De Doctrina Christiana de saint Augustin: Un manuel d'herméneutique et d'expression chrétienne avec, en II, 19(29)-42(63), une "charte fondamentale pour une culture chrétienne"", *Augustiniana,* **24,** 10-20.

Veyne Paul (1997) [1978] "Foucault Revolutionizes History" In *Foucault and his Interlocutors* (Ed, Davidson, A. I.) University of Chicago Press, Chicago pp. 146-182.

Vogt Kari (1987) "La Moniale Folle du Monastère des Tabennésiotes: Une Interprétation du chapitre 34 de l'Historia Lausiaca de Pallade", *Symbolae Osloenses,* **62,** 95-108.

Ward Benedicta (Ed.) (1975) *The sayings of the Desert Fathers : the alphabetical collection,* Mowbrays, London.

Ward Benedicta (Ed.) (2003) *The Desert Fathers : sayings of the early Christian monks (Translated from the Latin),* Penguin Books, London ; New York.

Ware Kallistos Timothy (1989) "The meaning of "Pathos" in Abba Isaias and Theodoret of Cyrus", *Studia Patristica,* **XX,** 315-322.

Ware Kallistos Timothy (2000) "The Fool in Christ as Prophet and Apostle" In *The inner kingdom* St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY.

Wilde Oscar, (2007) [1913] "de profundis", at http://www.gutenberg.org/files/921/921-h/921-h.htm, accessed

Williams Rowan (1989) "Language, Reality and Desire in Augustine's De Doctrina", *Literature and Theology,* **3,** 138-150.

Williams Rowan (1993) "Macrina's Deathbed Revisited: Gregory of Nyssa on Mind and Passion" In *Christian Faith and Greek Philosophy in Late Antiquity: Essays in Tribute to George Christopher Stead* (Eds, Wickham, L. R. Bammel, C. P.) E J Brill, New York pp. 227-246.

Williams Rowan (2000) *On christian theology,* Challenges in contemporary theology, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, UK

Williams Rowan (2005) *Why study the past?: the quest for the historical church,* Sarum theological lectures, Darton, Longman and Todd, London

Wittgenstein Ludwig (1961) [1921] *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* (tr: Pears, D. F. McGuinness, B. F.), Routledge & Paul; Humanities Press, London, New York,

Wittgenstein Ludwig (1993) [1933] "Philosophy" In *Philosophical Occasions 1912-1951* (Eds, Klagge, J. C., Nordmann, A. Nyman, H.) Hackett, Indianapolis pp. 158-199.

Wittgenstein Ludwig (1998) [1977] *Culture and value: A Selection from the Posthumous Remains* (tr: Winch, P.), Blackwell Publishing, Oxford

Wittgenstein Ludwig (2001) [1953] *Philosophical investigations* (tr: Anscombe, G. E. M.), Macmillan, New York,

Wright N. T. (1996) *Jesus and the victory of God,* Christian origins and the question of God ; v.2, SPCK, London

Žižek Slavoj (2001) *On belief,* Thinking in action, Routledge, London ; New York

Žižek Slavoj (2005) "The "Thrilling Romance of Orthodoxy"" In *Theology and the Political: The New Debate*, SIC (Eds, Žižek, S., Milbank, J. Davies, C.) Duke University Press, Durham, USA pp. 52-71.

Zosimas, *The Reflections of Abba Zosimas* (*alloquia* - tr/ed: Chryssavgis, J., 2004), SLG Press, Oxford