Teaching as Asceticism:
Transforming the Self Through the Practice

Darryl M. De Marzio
Teachers College, Columbia University

> There is no specific moral action that does not refer to a unified moral conduct; no moral conduct that does not call for the forming of oneself as an ethical subject; and no forming of the ethical subject without "modes of subjectivation" and an "ascetics" or "practices of the self" that support them.
>
> —Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 2: The Use of Pleasure*

I believe that for many who enter the ranks (myself included), the decision to teach is a moral action, mostly because teaching is understood as a way of being; a way for one to form oneself; a way for one to flourish and to live well. In short, teaching can be understood as a time-honored response to the question, How shall I live my life? In this essay, I would like to focus on an ascetics of teaching. Or, to put it another way, I would like to understand the teacher as an ethical subject through the idea of asceticism.

If we believe that teaching is such a way of being, and if we take Michel Foucault's remarks seriously here, then we should consider if and how asceticism plays a role in understanding the teacher as ethical subject. What is asceticism in teaching? Is the decision to teach an ascetic one? Is living the teaching life a mode of asceticism? Or, perhaps, is asceticism a pernicious ideal that teachers pursue to their detriment? If so, can we do away with the ascetic ideal in teaching? And if we can do away with it, then how so?

In order to begin to address these questions, I discuss a 2003 article published in *Educational Theory* by Chris Higgins.[1] In this article, Higgins offers a critique of what he dubs the "ascetic ideal" in teaching. Suspicious of asceticism through and through, Higgins unleashes a two-pronged attack against asceticism in teaching. On the one hand, says Higgins, the field of philosophy of education suffers from a case of myopia when it comes to the study of the ethics of teaching. Rarely do we take seriously questions of how the activity of teaching contributes to the flourishing of the teacher, and for this the ascetic ideal in teaching bears the brunt of the blame. On this account, I believe that Higgins is mostly right, but partly wrong. Indeed, we should be more inclined to consider how and why teaching is a self-flourishing activity. However, as I shall argue here, asceticism as a mode of self-renunciation is not something that is antithetical to the flourishing of the teacher, but, on the contrary, is a stance that contributes to it.

The second prong in Higgins's critique is his argument that asceticism leads to teacher burnout and an overall loss of self. I will argue again to the contrary. Asceticism in teaching is not a loss of self, but a way in which one forms a self. In order to make this case, I will re-interpret an example of asceticism in teaching, an example that Higgins employs to make his own case against asceticism.

I will conclude by gesturing toward a theory of asceticism in teaching. I will summarily argue that teaching is an ascetic practice of the self. As such, it is a way, perhaps one of the very few remaining ways, to practice ethical freedom in resistance to a dominant culture.

A Critique of a Critique of the Ascetic Ideal in Teaching

In order to argue that the field of philosophy of education is narrow in scope when it comes to the study of the ethics of teaching, Higgins incorporates Bernard Williams's distinction between morality and ethics.[2] Morality, for Williams and Higgins, is the domain of reflection that essentially deals with the question, What is it right to do? In this respect, we can say that morality is the domain most prolific in modern philosophy, steeped in the moral frameworks of utilitarianism and Kantianism. Ethics, on the other hand, is the domain of reflection that essentially deals with the question, What is it good to be? In this respect, we can say retrospectively that ethics was the domain most prolific in ancient philosophy, saturated in conceptions of the good, happiness, virtue, and practical wisdom.

There of course has been a recent revival in ethics. Higgins cites, along with Williams, philosophers such as Iris Murdoch, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Charles Taylor as contributors to the new conversation surrounding questions of human excellence and flourishing.[3] Despite this revival in ethics, we have yet to see its full influence in the field of philosophy of education and in the ethics of teaching. When it comes to studying the ethics of teaching, Higgins claims, we are still stuck in the domain of morality, important as that domain is. We have failed to adequately address the ethics of teaching — "that domain of inquiry concerned with whether and why the activity of teaching is worthwhile to the teacher" — and have become focused exclusively on questions of the moral obligations of teachers toward their students.[4]

As I declared at the outset, Higgins is correct on this account. The vast majority of literature under the heading "the ethics of teaching" has remained mostly in the moral domain. However, Higgins believes that the reason the ethics of teaching is mired in this domain is because of the ascetic ideal in teaching. That is to say, because teaching is primarily understood as an act of self-sacrifice in the name of the flourishing of others, the question of the flourishing of the teacher has been ignored. Or, to put it another way, it is precisely because of the ascetic ideal — the view that teaching is an act of self-renunciation — that there is no question of the flourishing of the teacher at all. Thus Higgins sees the ascetic ideal hiding behind such altruistic mantras as the following: Teaching is not about the flourishing, cultivation, or formation of the teacher, rather, teaching requires acts of self-sacrifice in order to bring about the flourishing, cultivation, and formation of students.

Asceticism in teaching, for Higgins, "begins when one distances oneself from one's desires in the name of the good of others." He goes on to say that such asceticism "flourishes in cultures of service where altruistic ideals are coupled with difficult working conditions, when the needs of others leads us not only to eschew particular pleasures but to sacrifice opportunities for our own development in

important ways."[5] Thus we have, as Higgins cites, recruitment posters which tell future teachers, "You've made your own dreams come true. Isn't it time you started on someone else's?"[6]

Higgins distinguishes asceticism in teaching from those "antihedonistic ethics that are commonly described as 'ascetic'." These latter practices of the self are what we commonly associate with asceticism. For example, the early Christian desert monastic that would deny themselves worldly pleasures in order to "experience heightened religious states." No matter how odd these practices may seem to be, they are not indicative of the ascetic ideal in teaching. The reason, Higgins suggests, is that such ascetics through self-renunciation "are pursuing their own development in light of what they deem highest."[7] On the other hand, teacher-ascetics deny themselves, not for their own cultivation, but for the cultivation of students. It is a distancing from one's desires and needs in order to attend the desires and needs of others.

But can we make such a marked distinction? Are there ascetic practices that are clearly distinct because some are for the self and some are for others? If we follow the examples of the ascetic desert monk and the ascetic-teacher will this be the difference that we find?

Scholars tend to agree that there are two basic components of ascetic practice.[8] The first is a type of withdrawal. The desert monastic distances the self from the world. Ascetic-teachers, says Higgins, distance themselves from their desires. The second component of ascetic practice is a type of self-control. The desert monastic is required to control their desire for worldly pleasures, in some cases perhaps violently, in other cases maybe only moderately. The ascetic-teacher must practice modes of self-control too. Teachers must not use students as means to their own ends, no matter what their desires tell them, for example.

In considering both of these components of ascetic practice, withdrawal and self-control, are we are forced to conclude that certain ascetics enact these components with an aim toward self-flourishing, while others do so with an aim toward the flourishing of others? Contrary to Higgins, I believe that with both the desert monastic and the teacher we can see these ascetic components as practices that enable both the self and others to flourish. In short, there always can be an element of *for the self* in one's sacrifice for others, and always an element of *for others* in one's sacrifice of self.

The theologian Kallistos Ware, for example, argues that the early Christian desert monastic always maintained a connection to the world through their withdrawal from it, and always maintained a connection to the self through their austere practices of self-control. In their flight from the world to the desert, the monastic had a double aim: to meet with God and to fight the Devil.[9] The desert represented a place where both God and the Devil could be encountered. The monastic did not seek to encounter God and the Devil in the desert solely for their self-cultivation. Instead, the intent had always to do with a possible return to the world. In communion with God through flight to the desert, the ascetic monk ultimately supported his fellow

humanity through such "prayerful union" with God. Encountering demons in order to defeat them had a similar world affirming function. The Devil is the embodiment of evil for all humankind, and to wage spiritual battle against it would be to fight on behalf of the world.

Ware's interpretation of this type of asceticism in early Christianity helps explain why so many of the desert ascetics returned as spiritual guides and teachers. Although they did not withdraw for the sake of becoming teachers, the ascetic practices cultivated in the desert enabled many monks to become guides and masters for initiates. This interpretation is also supported by the tradition of hagiography in early Christianity. The life of the desert ascetic continued to serve as an exemplary mode of Christian self-cultivation for others. In this way, even the most solitary ascetic was always serving others through their practices of the self.

Asceticism, then, in all of its manifestations is, as Richard Valantasis has argued, a mode of performance.[10] On the flip side, all performances, says Geoffrey Harphram, reflect ascetic practices of self-denial, because a performing subject is ultimately a self-disciplined subject.[11] Perhaps it is through this idea of performance that we can begin to see how the self-renunciation of the teacher-ascetic is both for self and for others. To recall Higgins's claim of the ascetic ideal in teaching, it is when teachers distance themselves from their desires for the sake of the good of students. Are we now in a position to say that through such self-renunciation *for others* the teacher is simultaneously engaged in a practice *for the self*?

Perhaps an overly simplistic example of a teacher's performance will be sufficient to show how a teacher's act of self-sacrifice for their students can also be a part of a teacher's practice of the self. Such an example can be derived from such run-of-the-mill activity as calling upon students to speak in class.[12] Imagine that as a teacher you find yourself facilitating a lively discussion. There may come a moment when you, as the teacher, desire to speak, either to further the discussion along with a series of questions, or to round off the discussion with your own commentary. However, as a reflective practitioner, you have also spent time wondering about how you can become a better teacher by getting more students involved in class discussions. In fact, you have noticed that you tend to do too much talking, and the class gets bogged down because you carry on a bit, often traveling down tangent paths. You have arrived at this moment in the class discussion, moved by the desire to speak, but practiced in reflecting on how checking this desire could possibly further your own understanding of the craft and move you to form yourself as a new kind of teacher. Therefore you deny yourself the chance to speak at this moment, and instead call upon a student who rarely contributes. After the class, you reflect further on your progress as a teacher, and dwell on how teaching is an activity that allows you to perform various discourse virtues — of coming to judge wisely the right time to speak and the right time to listen.

In this example, crude as it is, we can see how teaching as a way of being for others allows one to be for oneself. A potential objection to this example, an objection I believe to be implicit in Higgins's critique of the ascetic ideal in teaching,

is that such a case avoids the overarching question, Why teach? In other words, if working on your discourse virtues is what you seek then there are other practices that can contribute to such development. The example is not sufficient to account for why so many enter the ranks in the first place, let alone to illuminate how teaching is a unique way of forming the ethical subject.

In order to tackle these concerns, I would like to borrow an example that Higgins employs to demonstrate how the ascetic ideal can lead to teacher burnout. It is an example that Higgins draws from the film, *To Sir With Love*. Higgins sets up the example as follows. I quote at length:

> *To Sir With Love* is the story of a man named Thackeray (Sidney Poitier) who aspires to be an engineer. We meet Thackeray just as he has completed his training and is on the verge of tasting the fruits of his labor. When he has trouble landing his first job, he decides to teach while continuing the search for an engineering position. At the end of the film, after the school year has ended and Thackeray's seniors have graduated from his class and the school, the job offer he has been waiting for finally comes through. In the dramatic final scene, Thackeray is sitting alone in his classroom, quietly pondering his good news, when two juniors barge into the room in a burst of roughhousing and raucous behavior. When the students realize they have interrupted a teacher, their hilarity increases as they adopt their usual rebellious stance. Then, as they realize that Thackeray is the senior-class teacher they have been hearing about, they announce that he is to be their teacher next year. With this gesture, their defiant attitude softens slightly, suggesting an invitation to tame them as he has the wild class before them. After they leave, in a dramatic reversal, Thackeray rips up the letter and decides to remain a teacher.[13]

Higgins interprets Thackeray's decision to teach as a moral action and a "call to service." He concludes that the tearing up of the letter "suggests an act of renunciation, a tearing away from his former aspirations." Thackeray is, as are all ascetic-teachers, "motivated by the needs of students rather than as caught up in their own responsibilities, intrigued by a vision of what they might become through teaching."

I contend that we can read Thackeray's decision to teach in a different way. This is not to make a claim about the correct interpretation of the film, but to make a claim that moves us toward a greater understanding of asceticism in teaching. Whereas Higgins maintains that Thackeray has put off his desire to be an engineer, I would like to maintain that Thackeray has transformed his desire *to be* through his decision to teach. Rather than distancing himself from his desires, Thackeray has worked to establish a new relationship to himself, to what he values and desires to be. Thackeray's decision to renounce engineering is much like the decision that many have made who have once worked in other vocations but choose later in life to be a teacher. It is also like the decision that many talented and bright young scholars make when they choose to become philosophers of education, rather than, say, corporate lawyers. I do not mean to suggest here that teaching is unique because it is an ethical endeavor, while engineering and corporate law are not. Nor do I mean to suggest either that other vocations do not require self-sacrifice or other modes of ascetic behavior. What I hope to convey through these examples is that what makes teaching an ethical endeavor, and what makes the decision to teach a response to the question, How should I live my life?, is at least partially explained through its asceticism. In other words, one could not pursue the good life through teaching if

teaching did not call upon the self to sacrifice and to transform one's desires. Teaching and being of service for others is a way for one to care for the self, to transform the self, and to enact a special vision of human flourishing.

One constant remains throughout all ascetic traditions, and I believe in teaching as well: the renunciation of certain pleasures. Perhaps Thackeray has denied himself the pleasures that come along with a career in engineering, but his asceticism in teaching does not mean that he must abandon the pleasures that come along from teaching. In this regard, there is no such thing as a strictly anti-hedonistic asceticism that rejects pleasure *qua* pleasure. All ascetic traditions are open to certain relationships to pleasure. In fact, it is the pleasures that are celebrated and cherished, rather than the ones that are forgone, that ultimately define specific ascetic traditions.[14] And as it happens in the case of Thackeray, the pleasure of being an engineer was renounced, but the pleasure of being a teacher was affirmed. As Harphram puts it, "whatever the choice, something is renounced and something embraced; and therefore desire is always both gratified and negated."[15]

Toward a Theory of Asceticism in Teaching

I would like to conclude by pointing toward possible areas of further inquiry into the ascetics of teaching. I have already mentioned the importance of performance in both teaching and all ascetic traditions. Teaching, like artistic performance, requires discipline, practice, and a patterning of certain behaviors — not to punish the self, but to transform the self. What we would need to consider, then, is how these modes of teaching performance become part and parcel of the task of forming oneself. Or, as Foucault might put it, how do the various activities of teaching become more like "the task of testing oneself, examining oneself, monitoring oneself in a series of clearly defined exercises…central to the formation of the ethical subject?"[16] I hope that my example of calling on students to speak in class is a teaching activity that illuminates this point. The day-to-day practice of teaching is a way in which the self can work upon the self and, in so doing, transform the self into what one seeks to become. Thus, the relationship between the teaching life and the performing life, as well as studies of the performances of ancient ascetic practices, can be taken up to highlight the asceticism of teaching.

In addition to studying performance, we can also do well to tap into the emerging literature on educational relations. Although the asceticism of Socrates has been taken up by the likes of Foucault and Pierre Hadot, little has been written about Socrates as an ascetic-teacher in the literature in philosophy of education. The ascetic practices of the philosopher that Socrates describes in the *Phaedo*, for example, arguably launched an entire ascetic tradition within Western philosophy. Yet, little has been written about Socrates' own acts of renunciation in relation to his students. Examples can be drawn from Socrates not accepting fees from his younger interlocutors, to his denial of Alcibiades, both erotically in the *Symposium* and politically in the *Alcibiades Major*. In sum, we can learn from exemplary educators of the past and their ascetic acts to determine how and why the teacher has become an ethical ideal in our culture.

Finally, I believe that the teacher's relationship to the larger culture can be revisited through a study of the ascetics of teaching. Since asceticism has to do with the renunciation of an "old self" (a la Thackeray's renunciation of himself as an engineer), toward the transfiguration of a new self through practices of the self, we may then begin to see how the decision to teach often reflects a renunciation of the larger culture. Whereas Higgins might see the ascetic-teacher that puts off life in the name of care for others as an unsustainable altruism, I prefer to see, as I believe Foucault did in his later work, the ascetic-teacher as practicing an ethics of freedom. Perhaps teaching, precisely because of its lack of recognition from the larger culture, can continue to be a place for ascetic practice in the modern world — enabling us to realize our own purpose in the world and the dignity that we imagine for ourselves.

1. Chris Higgins, "Teaching and the Good Life: A Critique of the Ascetic Ideal in Education," *Educational Theory* 53, no. 2 (2003): 131–54.

2. Higgins discusses Williams's distinction and its implications for education in Chris Higgins, "Das Gluck des Lehrers" [The Flourishing of the Teacher], trans. Thomas Fuhr, *Zeitschrift fur Padagogik* 48, no. 4 (2002): 495–513.

3. See for example, Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of the Good* (London: Routledge, 1970); Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study of Moral Theory* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981); Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985); and Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989). I would be quick to include into this group the later Foucault, especially in Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 2: The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1985); Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 3: The Care of the Self*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1986); and *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the College de France, 1981–1982*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2006).

4. Higgins, "Teaching and the Good Life," 134.

5. Ibid., 143.

6. Recruitment poster for the New York City Teaching Fellows Program, 2001–2002.

7. Higgins, "Teaching and the Good Life."

8. Kallistos Ware, "The Way of the Ascetics: Negative or Affirmative?" in *Asceticism*, eds. Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 4.

9. Ibid., 7.

10. Richard Valantasis, "Constructions of Power in Asceticism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 63, no. 4 (1995), 797.

11. Geoffrey Galt Harphram, "Asceticism and Compensations of Art," in Wimbush and Valantasis, eds., *Asceticism*, 357.

12. For an excellent discussion of the moral (and ethical) significance of calling upon students, see David T. Hansen, "From Role to Person: The Moral Layeredness of Classroom Teaching," *American Educational Research Journal* 30, no. 4 (1993): 651–74.

13. Higgins, "Teaching and the Good Life," 147.

14. J. Giles Milhaven makes this point in J. Giles Milhaven, "Asceticism and the Moral Good: A Tale of Two Pleasures," in Wimbush and Valantasis, eds., *Asceticism,* 375–94.

15. Harphram, "Asceticism and Compensations of Art," 359.

16. Foucault, *Care of the Self*, 68.