

Ascetic Practice and Teaching as Service: A Feminist View

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As an ascetic practice of self-denial in service to others, teaching promotes an ethical way of life that enables teachers to form themselves and flourish.

I take this to be the gist of Darryl De Marzio's response to Chris Higgins. Whereas Higgins assumes that nourishing others through self-renunciation engenders loss of self and teacher burnout, De Marzio counters that Higgins's conclusion rests on an indefensible polarization of self and other, as well as on a limited notion of what "self-denial" means. Ascetic practice is not "self-centering" or "self-ottering," De Marzio argues. When a teacher checks his or her desire to talk, for example, he or she provides opportunities for students to converse. In so doing, the teacher cultivates his or her own judgment of how discourse virtues can best be taught. "In short," De Marzio concludes, "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."

Neither does self-denial stunt, punish, or harm the self. Many spiritual practices renounce desire in order to decrease the ego's attachment to material things and heighten awareness of the interdependent and ephemeral condition of being human. Achieving existential clarity enriches life's meaning and enables individuals to realize what De Marzio (following Michel Foucault) calls an ethics of freedom.

De Marzio's essay made me think. Framing pedagogy as an ascetic practice that enriches self-understanding counteracts prevailing instrumentalist conceptions of teaching in ways I had not considered. It also provides an important alternative to popular images of service, which seem to be captured more and more by the sentimental altruism of celebrity culture.

But while De Marzio's conclusions are compelling, his argument ultimately falls short of articulating its own most original and provocative insights. Illuminating these insights requires us to critically examine assumptions about the self on which De Marzio's asceticism rests. I therefore want to look at what De Marzio says about the self. I then will draw on an essay by feminist theologian, Valerie Saiving, to consider what De Marzio's view of the self both highlights and obscures with respect to ascetic practice and teaching.

De Marzio's ascetic individual denies desires, defeats devils, and withdraws into the desert. Performing these and other acts of self-sacrifice requires self-discipline and self-control. Controlling appetites, indulgences, and other selfish tendencies enables the ascetic to "work upon the self," De Marzio says, "and, in so doing, transform the self into what one seeks to become."

The self that underlies De Marzio's picture of ascetic discipline is self-disposing and self-possessed. Such a self is existentially independent and free. Saiving notes that existential freedom can be the source of imagination, creativity,

individuality, and choice. But freedom also gives rise to lonely anxiety. According to Saiving, the free self sometimes tries to assuage existential angst “by magnifying its own power, righteousness, or knowledge.”¹ In so doing, the individual sins. Sin, Saiving explains, “is the unjustified concern of the self for its own power and prestige” (*HS*, 26).

To counteract sin, theologians counsel love. Love, Saiving writes, is “the one real solution to the fundamental predicament in which man stands. Love...is completely self-giving, taking no thought for its own interests but seeking only the good of the other.” Through the salvation of love, the self realizes a “concrete relatedness of an *I* to a *Thou*” (*HS*, 26–7).

The challenge set by this theological dynamic is to learn to love in a way that mitigates “pride, will-to-power, exploitation, self-assertiveness, and the treatment of others as objects rather than persons” (*HS*, 35). At the same time, love must not stifle the individuated self, who is free to imagine, create, and act in the world. Seen in this light, De Marzio’s ascetic practice becomes a strategy for resolving the tension between sinful pride and self-negating absorption. Denying desires through self-control, the ascetic does not control people, nor objectify or manipulate them for his or her own ends. Self-renunciation instead invites receptivity to others, opening a space in which to establish relationships of service. Service does not overwhelm the ascetic precisely because service crucially depends on an independent self who is free to exert self-control.

The existential struggle that De Marzio’s ascetic service resolves is assumed to be universal. It is not. The story, rather, makes assumptions about the human condition that valorize the experience of men. Because men do not bear children, and because individuating from the mother requires men to engage in a complex process of differentiation, males experience a form of estrangement that is less salient for women. Women, of course, “are not strangers to that ‘divine discontent’ which has always driven men,” Saiving concedes (*HS*, 36). Women, no less than men, struggle with sin and salvation.

But the direction of struggle for women differs. Women’s reproductive role is embodied, immediate, and prolonged. Individuating from the mother does not require girls to renounce female reproductive capacity. Loneliness and separation thus inadequately capture women’s existential situation and “underlying character structure” (*HS*, 27).² The phrase, “self-transcending relation,” pertains more directly to women (*HS*, 36 and 37). As a basic orientation in life, self-transcendence can take various positive forms, such as receptivity, care, sensitivity, concern, and devotion. But self-transcending love “is not the whole meaning of life,” Saiving argues. A woman can learn that it’s possible to “give too much of herself, so that nothing remains of her own uniqueness; she can become merely an emptiness, almost a zero, without value to herself, to her fellow men, or, perhaps, even to God” (*HS*, 37).

Whereas the sins that tempt men derive from exaggerated self-involvement, the sins that tempt women arise from self-abnegation: the tendency to surrender one’s needs to the needs and desires of others. Examples of such sins include “dependence

on others for one's own self-definition [and] inability to respect boundaries of privacy" (*HS*, 37). If salvation for a man entails overcoming will-to-power and pride, salvation for a woman entails learning to become "an individual in her own right, a separate person some part of whose mind and feelings are inviolable, some part of whose time belongs strictly to herself" (*HS*, 39).

Following Saiving, we can conclude that healthy service for women does not entail denying desires, emotions, or needs. Enlarging, capacitating, even indulging the self, not self-renunciation, is what permits women to be both involved and free. To the extent that theologians continue to define human struggles in terms of male experience, the actions women must take if they are to live meaningfully and well will be regarded as sinful, not transformative (*HS*, 39).

Because self-denial can stunt women rather than help them flourish, we might conclude that De Marzio's ascetic practice is irrelevant and even harmful for female teachers. To the extent that asceticism is equated with self-renunciation, I agree that this conclusion is warranted. But self-renunciation alone does not fully capture why De Marzio's ideas are compelling. More than self-renunciation, De Marzio's asceticism for me underscores how teaching can be a meaningful life of service that requires self-discipline. Self-discipline, I suggest, need not involve self-denial or self-control, in the sense of learning to master oneself by squelching desires and conquering needs. In light of Saiving's feminist critique, I invite De Marzio to consider three questions:

1. If service can require — not preclude — enlarging or magnifying the self, what practical consequences might follow for teaching?
2. Might student-teacher relations be enriched, not thwarted, by teachers who establish boundaries between their own needs and the needs of their students?
3. Saiving notes that the male and female experiences she describes represent tendencies and general orientations that may affect both genders (*HS*, 33 and 36). This suggests that teachers must learn to judge when service requires them to step back and withdraw and when it requires them to step forward. How can teachers develop the judgment they need to discern the difference?

My questions aim to reframe, not relinquish, how teaching can be construed as a meaningful life of disciplined service. I myself have no ready answers. I am eager to learn what De Marzio thinks.

1. Valerie Saiving, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, eds. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (New York: Harper-San Francisco, 1979), 26. This text will be cited as *HS* in the text for all subsequent references.

2. Also see Nel Noddings, *Educating for Intelligent Belief and Unbelief* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993), 60 and 69–70.