

**An Asceticism of Being:
Foucault & the Epistemology of Self, Post Modernity**

Sven Davisson

*I pay homage to the guru, the divine friend,
Mahatma Guru Shri Paramahansa Shivaji, Osho, Baba-ji*

The mental focus of the past several decades, in the West, has been marked by a heightened quest for essence, sometimes internal sometimes external—a quest always figured within the reputedly “private” and, paradoxically, articulated in the unquestionably public. Identity politics, the contrasting concurrent philosophy of postmodernism, arose as a reaction to the egalitarian prerogatives of the post-60’s humanist agenda and the latter’s attempts to eradicate the social ills of racism, homophobia, heterosexism, anti-Semitism, etc. by erasing difference. This trend in the political has been mirrored by an even more pervasive, and persuasive, movement in the, at times, overlapping areas of religion and spirituality. This mirroring has proved all the more pronounced for its easy collusion with the “soul-searching” inherent in the polemic of historic religiosity. In general, spirituality in the West has been transfigured historically in terms of an heroic quest for the soul and through this knowledge obtaining a closeness to God. In the twentieth century this has been secularized into a search for the soul in order to gain a closeness to Self. The loosely connected grouping of overlapping mystical schemas and recycled pop self-improvements generally termed the New Age Movement typifies this essentialized spiritual quest.

To know ‘who we are’ has become increasingly synonymous with spirituality. Since the earliest roots of Christian mysticism knowing has been posited as *the* means for achieving a closeness to God. French post-structuralist philosopher Michel Foucault pointed out that the entire process was shaped around a search for increased “individualization.” “We try to seize what’s at the bottom of the soul of the individual,” he said. “‘Tell me who you are’, there is the spirituality of Christianity.” (Foucault, “Michel Foucault and Zen,” 1999, p. 112) This internal, personal questing for the “secret” within is the philosopher’s stone of the Western metaphysi-



cal alchemist. This quest relies on two presumptive assertions: it both reifies the soul and elevates it to the ultimate embodiment of truth. It remains almost unthinkable to question if there is a subjective self and that subjectivity should itself be the object of knowledge. Foucault artfully problematized both these, seemingly immutable, assertions. In his histories of the clinic, the criminal system, the epistemology of knowledge and sexuality, Foucault was examining the role of subjectivity and its relation to both knowledge and power. Foucault argued that modern man finds himself in an “ambiguous position as an object of knowledge and as a subject that knows.” (Foucault, 1970, p. 312) Outlining Foucault’s position Daniel Palmer observes “for Foucault, such attempts to constitute individuals as objects of their own knowledge is both theoretically dubious and socially perilous.” (Palmer, 1998, p. 408)

The religious expression of Western Judeo-Christian culture has been marked by its imputation of and relation to the Soul. That each human being has a soul is the axiom at the central to its dogmas, while the redemption of the soul is the steel that forms the girders of its framework. The soul is something to be cared for—saved, purged, cleansed and protected in a circular movement of sin and confession. This is, of course, manifested with difference within the various prismatic subdivisions that have arisen since the Schism, but at the heart of it all remains the soul as essence. Over the course of 19th century, the previous century’s imperative mechanism of the institutionalized religious confessional was secularized by transference to the analyst’s couch. (Foucault, 1980, pp. 63, 65-7) Psychoanalysis, oxymoronic at its inception, proposed to assist one in (re)gaining agency over oneself by abdicating free will to a chaotic neurosis of bio-impulses and synaptic whim.

The soul figures no less prominently within Eastern philosophy. It is that which reincarnates and as such is an unquestioned facet in the cosmology of Hinduism and its proto-modernist child Buddhism. The soul moves as a static element within a dynamic structure of change and remanifestation across the boundaries of life, death and species. “A sober person is not bewildered by such a change.” *Baghavad-gita* 2:13. (Prabhupada, 1985, p. 93) Within the Brahman philosophical structure the soul is something that is at once distinct from the body while residing within the body. “The sky, due to its subtle nature, does not mix with anything although it is all-pervading. Similarly, the soul situated in Brahma vision does not mix with the body, though situated in that body.” *Baghavad-gita* 13:33 (Prabhupada, 1985, p. 678) The soul is something other within—a particular of the infinite. In his comment on verse 13:34 Swami Prabhupada describes it as “a small particle of spirit soul ... situated in the heart.” (Prabhupada, 1985, pp. 678-9) The soul provides



the animus to the corporeal edifice of bone, sinew, muscle, and flesh. Verse 13:34 of the *Gita* likens the soul to the sun, illuminating the body with consciousness as the sun does the earth with light.

Buddhist philosophy, of course, extends the discussion to conventionally reify the soul in the relative while, simultaneously, arguing for the inherent emptiness of the same soul in an ultimate sense. Traditionally, Buddhists hold that beings do have a soul. It is the soul which is tied to the cycle of birth and re-birth—*samsara*—and it is the release of the soul which signifies the realization of *nirvana*. While accepting the Brahmic notion of *karma*, Buddhism rejects the essential nature of the soul or self. To the Buddhist, the soul is as empty (devoid of essence) as everything else in cyclic existence. Central to (Mahayana, Greater Vehicle) Buddhism is the teaching of the two truths, conventional and ultimate. The first, conventional truth, is the relative approach to the world which allows for the mundane perception and the utility of the phenomenal world. The second, ultimate truth, is the realization that all things are dependently arisen, mutable and lacking of inherent essence.

The religious modus historically has been marked by a search for absolute interiority—with the possible exception of certain Buddhist traditions (see post-script). (Palmer, 1998, p. 408) Since the Delphic directive to “know thyself” the search has been on. This operative assumption has been that an essence of self exists within and that it is something to be discovered and revealed. This process is most marked in the doctrines of the Christian West, partaking as they do of the inheritance of their Greco-Roman forebears. The entire discursive and liturgical power of the church has been directed to this end. This is a phenomenology endemic to the past 2,000 years and initially articulated in the writings of Soranus, Rufus of Ephesus, Plutarch, Seneca and other physicians and philosophers of the first two centuries. The early Christians borrowed heavily from this “insistence on the attention that should be brought to bear on oneself.” (Foucault, "About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self," 1999; Foucault, 1988, pp. 39-41) These early Christian philosophers and mystics differed from their Greco-Roman predecessors diverting “the practices of self towards the hermeneutics of self and the deciphering of oneself as a subject of desire.” (Foucault and Kritzman ed., 1988, p. 260) It should be pointed out that the shift from the ethos of antiquity to the compulsion to self-examination was not exclusively Christian. (McNeill, 1998, pp. 59-60) Throughout this period, the self-analytic imperative evolved through the Catholic confessional and protestant witnessing of the declaration of sinful acts to the modern focus on the secular confessions of psychiatry and self-referential identity discourse. The West has limited itself to the knowledge of the subjective “I.” The dictum of



Delphi to ‘know thyself’ has become both the spiritual and secular order of knowing. The Eastern conceptions of the soul developed along somewhat similar lines, though the fragmentary nature of Eastern practice (lacking Pope or Patriarch) allowed for marked divergence as well. Consequently the focus on interiority was not as markedly pronounced in the East as it was in the West. The Hindus posited a self as a fragment that resided in the body along side a Supersoul, which was nothing less than the face of the Godhead. This fragment, being part of the divine, was not changeable. The Buddhist sought through meditation to dissolve the self—more appropriately the reification of self—by the full and experiential realization of emptiness. In contrast to the Hindu belief, the Buddhists held that the soul, or self, is constantly undergoing change and is, therefore, ultimately empty of inherent existence.

Foucault argued that this interrogation of self was aligned with a compulsion to discourse first applied with the monastic confessional and then, later, moved outside of the monastery walls. Eventually, by the advent of the 19th century, the confession and its puritan counterpart, the public repentance of transgression, were a ubiquitous element of most social structures. The origin of this compulsion was the focus of Foucault’s later work. His 1979-1980 course at Collège de France explored “how a type of government of men is formed in which what is required is not simply to obey but also to reveal, by saying it, what one is.” (Eribon, 1991, p. 317) In Foucault’s analysis this compulsion was a productive rather than repressive force. In the groundbreaking first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault unilaterally rejected the “repressive hypothesis” favored by historians. He argued, rather, that the concern for self, as sexuality, was ubiquitous in the Victorian world. Rather than being repressed and unequivocally silenced, sex and transgression were routinely the subject of both academic concern and particular public dialogue. Even silence, he noted, was a particular type of discourse.

The repressive model rests on the notion that there are ‘powers’ that are doing this ‘to us’—a model which is appealing by virtue of providing something to ‘speak out’ against. (Foucault, 1980, pp. 7, 27) The processes Foucault proposes differ greatly from this absolutist model. He observed power as multitudinous lines coming at one from all directions. ‘Power from above’ was far too simple, for Foucault. He replaced the theory of hegemonic power with a more subtle ‘relations to power.’ “Power is everywhere,” he wrote, “not because it encloses everything, but because it comes from everywhere.” He described this power as a “moving substrate of force relations.” (Foucault, 1980, p. 82)

In the 19th century the simple discourse of the Christian pastoral exploded



into a diverse pleroma of scientific and pedagogic discourses. This process transformed what was once discreet acts into evidence of identity. Previous to this shift, acts were not constitutive of an identity. The Christian metaphysicians held that everyone was capable of sin, therefore a sinful, transgressive act, did not imbue an individual with any note of difference. Suddenly in the middle to late 19th century, a list of scientific, medical and psychological categories came into existence—the criminal, the insane, the invert, etc. The compulsion to discourse, once confined to confession and penitence, was easily transferred to this new arena. Over the course of just a few decades, science insisted on the labeling and placement of the individual. Even the concept of the ‘normal’ was codified later and only in relation to the polymorphous mass of categories.

Foucault argues that no essential element resides at the core of the subjective. Foucault stated in his critique of the essentialist position that the search for such an inner “self,” the *raison d’être* of the modernist impulse defining identity politics, always proves fruitless at its ultimate extension.(Foucault, et al., 1984) This position can be easily extended to the larger view of self and soul: No essential nature (or identity) exists, thus the search for the root of subjectivity leads irrefutably to a dead end. No core exists at the heart of the onion, nor does a wagon remain once its constitutive parts are removed. In his critique of post-Hegelian identity, Chris Cutrone writes, “The idealist construction of the subject founders on its falsely taking subject to be objective in the sense of something existing in-itself, precisely what it is not: measured against the standard of entities, the subject is condemned to nothingness.”(Cutrone, 2000, p. 263)

Foucault’s analysis asks the critical question why the relation one has to oneself has to be one of knowledge. Explicitly, this forced him “to reject a certain *a priori* theory of the subject.” Foucault argued that such a rejection of the basis of Western ontology was necessary to achieve his examination of the “relationships which can exist between the constitution of the subject or the different forms of the subject and games of truth, practices of power, and so forth.” (McNeill, 1998, p. 59) Ultimately, Foucault fully rejects the assumption that knowledge equates to knowledge of self and that the only relation that we can have with ourselves is as a object of observation. (Palmer, 1998, p. 408) Simply put, Foucault argues that there is nothing there to find. The Western mystics’ Quest for total individualization is an ontologic dead end. Palmer states this position succinctly, “there is no deep truth

*In the sphere I am everywhere the centre, as she, the
circumference is nowhere found. —Liber AL vel Legis (II:3)*



about ourselves.” (Palmer, 1998, p. 408) In a 1982 interview Foucault articulated this position in a lighter tone, “I don’t feel that it is necessary to know exactly what I am. The main interest in life and work is to become something else that you were not in the beginning.” (“Truth, Power, Self: An Interview with Michel Foucault,” 1988, p. 9) Palmer highlights two distinct problems Foucault exposed with any attempt “to found a systemic and positive knowledge about ourselves.” The first centers on the “plausibility” of successfully achieving such knowledge; the second points to the “practical implications” of positioning ourselves as subjects of our own knowledge. (Palmer, 1998, p. 402)

Questions of subjectivity and the epistemic self have arisen as the driving questions in the dialogue of modernism through to postmodernism. Is everything relative to the subjectivity of the perceiver? Does subjectivity exist? If so is it relative, empty or absolute? What is the relation between self and other? Does such a relation even exist and if so what are its constituent parts? This philosophical (and political) dialogue has been paralleled by the increasing personalization of the spiritual quest. As the Golgotha of institutionalized religion has slowly eroded, the rise of subjective relativist spiritual agendas have grown—either in small to medium groups, the so-called “New Religious Movements,” or on a completely personal solitary level. More often than not this has resembled the postmodernist artistic aesthetic, creating a heterozygous amalgam of appropriated imagery, icons and philosophical precepts. The trend has been to center these historical and/or cultural fragments around a drive for ferreting out the root of one’s essence—whether termed Being, self or inner child.

Nobody in the whole history of consciousness has been able to say why he is. All that one can do is shrug your shoulders: I am, there is no question of why.—Osho

Foucault instead proposed a process involving a creative approach to the self. For Foucault, the emptiness of self-essence logically demanded a productive relation between one and one’s self. The self and its relationships (to others, to power and to categorizations) is something that is mutable, dynamic, limited only by the conceptual limitations of the self at any given socio-historic nexus. Of this Palmer says, “Truth (for Foucault) is not passively deciphered, but is dynamically created.” (Palmer, 1998, p. 409) Foucault termed this process ‘*askesis*,’ ‘ascetical practice’ or creative expansion. In an interview he described *askesis* as “something else: it’s the work that one performs on oneself in order to transform oneself or make the *self* appear that happily one never attains.” (Foucault, 1989, p. 206) *Askesis* is the Greek root of asceticism and Foucault intentionally uses this term to link



back to a classical philosophical tradition he examined in depth in *The Care of Self*, volume three of his *History of Sexuality*. His taxonomic choice reflects Foucault's emphasis on a deliberate, hermeneutic approach. Through this he attempts to resurrect a notion that the self is something to be cultivated rather than explored. The soul is distinct for its potential not its inherency. Foucault, however, is not simply invoking antiquity, as some of his critics have charged, as a call to move back to some remote "golden age." He is using, instead, the oppositional model of Greek *ethos* to destabilize deeply ingrained, modern conceptions of self and identity.

In his discussion of Foucault's philosophy, Palmer describes Foucault's asceticism as a process "not to decipher what we 'really' are, but to strive to cultivate what we might become." (Palmer, 1998, p. 408) Foucault himself argued that "the main interest in life and work is to become something else that you were not in the beginning." ("Truth, Power, Self: An Interview with Michel Foucault," 1988, p. 9) For Foucault the self is something to be "cultivated," tended, shaped through the application of a creative mechanism. Knowledge is the knowledge one presents to the world and discovers through the process of creation, not the knowledge that one finds hidden in one's self. The mind, body and spirit reach to grab at a great, limitless truth, rather than delving internally for an essential atom of meaning.

For Foucault who we are, our self if you will, is inextricably linked to where, when and how we are. No unified, pure, absolute self exists. Instead, the individual is a mosaic of fragmentary moments, memories, genetics and cultural genealogy. Here he is building directly off of Martin Heidegger's theories of Being. Palmer describes Heidegger's philosophy as "pointing out that we do not exist first as isolated Cartesian egos but are acculturated into a set of shared social practices that allow entities or beings to be disclosed to us in specific meaningful ways." (Palmer, 1998, p. 403) It is impossible to separate who we are from where we have come from and where we have been. Our interpretations of the world (and, if directed inwards, ourselves) is shaped by our family, culture, past relationships; we are at each moment the totality of our conditioning. Again summarizes Heidegger, Palmer states "there can be no human nature as it were; there are only specific interpretations of what it means to be a human being in specific cultures." (Palmer, 1998, p. 403) The entirety of Foucault's intellectual corpus is centered around the inseparability of self from conditioning. Despite later interpretations to the contrary, Foucault never argued for a totality of social-construction. Rather, like Heidegger before him, he endeavored to point out the social conditions in which being functions in an attempt to expose the unseen and, therefore, unexamined lines of power which constrain the individual.



In this *askesis*, Foucault proposed a ongoing process in which boundaries are mapped so that they can be pushed at. His focus was the direct opposite of the internal quest. He argued for an expansion of self, pushing outwards towards a limit which is always just beyond reach. In an interview given just prior to his death, he outlined this view, “the relationships we have to have with ourselves are not ones of identity, rather they must be relationships of differentiation, of creation, of innovation.”(Foucault, et al., 1984) Foucault’s *praxis* calls for the individual to stand in opposition to those forces which seek to hinder his knowledge. James Miller, in his *Passions of Michel Foucault*, summarizes this mode of being: “To be modern is not to accept oneself as one is in the flux of the passing moments” but, rather, as the result “of a complex and difficult elaboration.”(Miller, 1993, p. 333) In this way Foucault gives agency back to the individual. Our bodies and ourselves are not a territory to be mined but one to molded, shaped and re-shaped. “Where religions once demanded the sacrifice of human bodies, knowledge now calls for experimentation on ourselves.”(Miller, 1993, p. 346) Through this process one increasingly realizes the mutability of both identity and truth. As Palmer points out, one reaches the realization that “categories are precisely historical and contingent and not universal and necessary.” (Palmer, 1998, p. 407) Foucault’s *Genesis* is a call for us to be something else—his *Song of Solomon* his own personal exploration of the sexual underground.

For Foucault the interrogation of self proved in fact to be a mechanism of oppression. Many of his works outline the process of knowing and the way in which the process constrains the individual. In his *History of Sexuality volume one*, Foucault methodically outlines the way in which the compulsion to discourse actually worked as a mechanism of power that effectively channeled sexuality rather than overtly oppressing it. The goal of his intellectual work, in his own words, was an attempt to explicate “the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them.” (Palmer, 1998, p. 406) Foucault brings into question the relation we have with knowledge and the relation one has with oneself. He proposes the application of a life-long process of personal unfolding, rather than private/public revelation. His theory, asks us to resist the impulse to analyze who we are and corollary compulsion to confess incessantly. He calls on the individual to enlarge themselves through a process of perpetual redefinition—a process that culminates in the realization of the impermanent nature of the world and truth. Rather than seeking to reveal a internal hidden nature, he urges us to resist the categories that been placed within—a placement we have been blinded to by the inculcated focus on interiority. Foucault described his goal in



very precise and eloquent terms: “That is *what* I tried to reconstitute: the formation and development of a practice of self whose aim was to constitute oneself as the worker of the beauty of one’s own life.” (Foucault and Kritzman ed., 1988, p. 259)

Postscript Foucault & Zen

In the spring of 1978 Foucault traveled to Japan intending to be initiated into Zen Buddhism. At the suggestion of his master Omori Sogen, head of the Seionji temple in Uenohara, Foucault spent several days living the life of a monk. (Eribon, 1991, p. 310) Foucault’s discussion with the priests of the temple were published in the Japanese review *Shunjû* and, later, the French journal *Umi*. Foucault acknowledged his interest in Buddhist but admitted what interested him most “is life itself in a Zen temple, that is to say the practice of Zen, its exercises and its rules. For I believe that a totally different mentality to our own is formed through the practice and exercises of a Zen temple.” (Foucault, "Michel Foucault and Zen," 1999, p. 110) During the course of these discussions, Foucault emphasized the principle difference he saw between Zen practice and the Christian practice of individualisation:

As for Zen, it seems that all the techniques linked to spirituality are, conversely, tending to attenuate the individual. Zen and Christian mysticism are two things you can’t compare, whereas the technique of Christian spirituality and that of Zen are comparable. And, here, there exists a great opposition. In Christian mysticism, even when it preaches the union of God and the individual, there is something that is individual. The one is he who loves and the other is he who is loved. (Foucault, "Michel Foucault and Zen," 1999, p. 112)

The basic, the fundamental being is the same, not only in human beings but in *all* beings. The tree has a being—only its body is different from you; and the tiger has a being—only its body is different from you. The differences are only on the circumference. The center is always the same because the center is one. The name of the center is God.—Osho, *The Dhammapada: The Way of the Buddha*, vol. 4



References

- Cutrone, Christopher. "The Child with a Lion: The Utopia of Interracial Intimacy." *GLQ* 6, no. 2 (2000): 249-85.
- Eribon, Didier. *Michel Foucault*. Translated by Betsy Wing. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991.
- Foucault, Michel. "About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self." In *Religion and Culture Michel Foucault*, edited by Jeremy R. Carrette, 158-81. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- . *The Care of Self*. Translated by Robert Hurley. Vol. 3, *History of Sexuality*. New York: Vintage, 1988.
- . "Friendship as a Way of Life." In *Foucault Live*, edited by Sylvere Lotringer: Semiotexte, 1989.
- . *An Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley. Vol. 1, *History of Sexuality*. New York: Vintage, 1980.
- . "Michel Foucault and Zen." In *Religion and Culture Michel Foucault*, edited by Jeremy R. Carrette, 110-14. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- . *The Order of Things*. New York: Vintage, 1970.
- Foucault, Michel, Bob Gallagher, and Alexander Wilson. "Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity." *The Advocate*, 7 August 1984.
- Foucault, Michel, and Lawrence D. Kritzman ed. *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984*. New York: Routledge, 1988.
- McNeill, Will. "Care for the Self: Originary Ethics in Heidegger and Foucault." *Philosophy Today* 1998, 53-64.
- Miller, James. *The Passion of Michel Foucault*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993.
- Palmer, Daniel E. "On Refusing Who We Are: Foucault's Critique of the Epistemic Subject." *Philosophy Today* 1998, 402-10.
- Prabhupada, A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami. *Bhagavad-Gita as It Is*. Los Angeles: Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1985.
- "Truth, Power, Self: An Interview with Michel Foucault." In *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, edited by L. Martin, H. Gutman and P. Hutton. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988.

