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## Askēsis and organizational culture

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### Abstract

This article makes the case for the contribution of the cultural theory of Sloterdijk and the tradition of philosophical anthropology on which it is based to an understanding of the processes of culture formation in organizations. Rather than see culture formation as the model of an autonomous self which sacrifices or gives up this autonomy as a result of identification with the organizational culture, or retains it by resisting or distancing from the culture, the article argues that we should see organizational selves as engaged in processes of *askēsis*, understood as 'systems of spiritual exercises, ... practised in collectives of personalised regimes' (Sloterdijk 2009: 12), the aim of which is the fulfilment of the imperative 'you must change your life!' (Sloterdijk 2009). The article illustrates the application of the theory to the formation of 'secessionist' cultures, cultures devoted to the pursuit of radical ascetic aims, by outlining the mechanisms of *askēsis* in contemporary organizations: the splitting of the self into 'willing' and 'unwilling' elements which are in constant 'endo-rhetorical' dialogue; the imitation of exemplars of ascetic behaviour, or the 'perfectionist vita'; 'conversion' to the organizational culture, whether as a sudden experience or as a gradual process, and organizational cultures understood as 'cultures of observance', the aim of which are to encourage the employee to scrutinize habitual behaviour and change this behaviour in line with the ideals of the secessionist culture. The end point of *askēsis* is reached when the employee conceives organizational life itself as a continual 'test' of commitment and will. **Key words.** Askēsis; asceticism; organizational culture; formation of organizational self; conversion; autonomy; Sloterdijk.

## 1. Introduction: Asceticism in work and management thought

In Charles Handy's *Beyond Certainty: The Changing World of Organisations* (Handy 1995), we find a chapter entitled 'Make Your Business a Monastery', in which he describes an executive seminar run by an international hotel chain which was addressed by a Benedictine monk. The monk's talk was received enthusiastically by the audience of hotel managers, because, Handy claims, 'their hotels, you could see them thinking, could be like his monastery' (Handy 1995: 188). What he means by this, of course, is not that hotels should *literally* become like monasteries, locking their guests in cells, the hotel restaurant enforcing a vow of silence at meals, or forcing the guests to get up at dawn to pray, but the idea that they could make 'hotel-keeping into a mission' and that to 'work for a cause can be wonderfully exciting, much more exciting than working for the shareholders' (ibid.).

In *The Benedictine Rule of Leadership* (Galbraith 2004), which attempts to apply the monastic rules of St. Benedict to management, we find a similar allusion to business seen as a monastic community, admission to which involves subscribing to a process of 'formation' of the self:

The Benedictine concept of corporate formation is ... strategic. ... . Formation is the formal process designed to teach values and vision. It provides the metaphors, language and skills to develop a way of thinking in line with the corporate interest. It creates a sense of employee self-development. ... And, unlike training, formation is education as to the 'why' things happen rather than just the 'how'. (Galbraith 2004: 13)

In the Benedictine concept of 'formation' of the individual to be fit for a corporate vision, a process going beyond 'mere' training, we are, then, supposed to see business as imbued with a 'higher' purpose, which the employee has to internalize. The appeal of monastic asceticism for these management theorists is, it seems, related not to withdrawal from the world, but to the necessity of giving work meaning beyond the material, beyond the mere making of profit, and the sense of elevation engendered by this: 'The sense of being used for a mighty purpose makes up for ... small inefficiencies, ... often lousy pay and poor conditions' (Handy 1995: 189). Other recent management writers have sought to apply monastic principles to management in a similar fashion. Kennedy (1999) and Tredget (2002), for example, both propose that Fayol's management ideas may derive from the Rule of St Benedict, while Moberg and Calkins (2001) revisit the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius Loyola as a tool for examining business ethics.

The idea of asceticism as bringing with it an *elevating* devotion to work alluded to in these texts seems at first glance reminiscent of Weber's idea of a higher vocation or calling as lending dignity to the 'spirit of capitalism' and as a means of psychological motivation of those within it who regarded themselves as the elect. The central elements of Weberian 'inner-worldly' asceticism, however, such as the necessity of 'the destruction of the spontaneity of the instinct-driven enjoyment of life' (Weber 2001: 72), seems hardly compatible with contemporary organizational life, supposedly imbued as it is with the values of 'fun', 'excitement' and 'pleasure' (Rodrigues and Collinson 1995). Weber saw the monastery as an institution in which the monk had to 'subordinate life to the supremacy of an organized will' and in which actions were subject to 'a permanent control and a reflection upon their ethical implications' (Weber 2001:72). As Boltanski and Chiapello (2005), in their examination of the development of managerial discourse from the 1960s to the 1990s point out, from the 1960s onward the Weberian notion of asceticism could no

longer fulfil the function of giving a moral support to a 'new spirit of capitalism' based on the 'materialistic hedonism of the consumer society' (2005: 28).

Furthermore, it seems that the central virtue of monastic asceticism, unquestioning obedience to a superior, is at first glance hardly compatible with a workplace founded on the professed idea of the 'practical autonomy' of the worker and 'micro-emancipation' (Willmott 1993, Alvesson and Willmott 2002). In Cassian's *Monastic Institutes*, in particular Book IV, 'Of the Training of the Monks' we find a clear statement of the requirement for such absolute obedience:

Juniors may not, without the knowledge or permission of their master, so much as leave the room, nor even presume to satisfy the common demands of nature on their own authority. They are so eager to carry out without question whatever he asks them to do, as if they were commanded by God from heaven, that when occasionally impossibilities are asked of them, they obey with such trusting devotion that they try to carry them out wholeheartedly and without the slightest hesitation. (Cassian 1999: 45)

The traditional monastic virtues of humility, patience, eagerness to serve, and devotion, however, might well be those which managerialist writers see as desirable to apply to contemporary organizations.

The apparent contradiction between a spirit of capitalism which seemingly rejects the self-denial of Weberian asceticism and a renewed interest of management theorists in asceticism can perhaps be explained by the postulation of a new form of asceticism in recent managerial discourse. The 'new spirit of capitalism' which pervades managerial texts from the 1990s onward, according to Boltanski and Chiapello, is characterized by a form of moralistic asceticism, based not on work as a source of salvation, as in Weber, but on the moralizing of the *exemplum*: the necessity of following the example of exceptional beings (managers) who are 'proficient at numerous tasks, constantly educating themselves, adaptable, with a capacity for self-organization and working with very different people' (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 76).

The authority of this 'exceptional being' is not expressed by means of giving orders and strict rules, as in the monastic order, but by being a 'catalyst', 'visionary', 'coach', or 'source of inspiration' to employees (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 77). The 'leader' must derive authority not from issuing orders, in other words, but from establishing a culture in which 'everyone must know what they must do without having to be told' (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 76). The form of asceticism prevalent in contemporary managerial discourse, we will argue, is primarily *moralistic* and *cultural* in nature, rather than *religious*: its primary purpose is to establish organizational cultures in which, as Boltanski and Chiapello say, everyone 'knows what to do without having to be told'. In examining the new interest in asceticism in contemporary organizations, then, we should not, as Kelly et al. (2007: 272) say, look for a 'singular (Protestant) work ethic' or indeed any ethic derived from a religious value system, but, rather, examine the processes through which 'organizations prescribe individuals to engage in a project of the self' (Bardon and Jossierand 2010: 510).

## **2. Autonomy, askēsis, and the formation of the organizational self**

The relationship between the organizational self and the formation of organizational cultures has been the subject of extensive treatment in the literature, some of which

makes direct or indirect reference to asceticism and monasticism. The process of identity formation in relation to organizational cultures, or 'identity work' (Alvesson and Willmott 2002: 622) is seen as essentially related to the autonomous self of the employee: it is the price the employee has to pay for the 'expanded practical autonomy' (Willmott 1993: 517) which postmodern management theory and practice supposedly grants (Alvesson and Willmott 2002: 624). There is, in other words, a paradox at the heart of identity formation in the postmodern organization: the self is, on the one hand, given greater apparent freedom or autonomy than under Taylorist management; on the other hand, this autonomy is accompanied by an imperative for the organizational self to become increasingly concerned with itself as an object of knowledge, or as Knights and Willmott (1989) put it, following Foucault, to become a 'self-disciplining subjectivity', and thus allowing the cultural power of the organization to operate upon the subject formatively.

Of the targets of such 'identity work' set out by Alvesson and Willmott (2002), three relate particularly to a process of self-formation which can be understood as a moralistic process of cultural askēsis. First, 'identity work' is often accomplished by the organizational self comparing itself with others within the organization, usually resulting in an increased insecurity and diminished self-worth. This process of self-formation by comparison with models or exemplars of perfection which are to be imitated, an essential feature of askēsis, we will term, following Sloterdijk (2009), the imitation of the perfectionist vita.

Second, there is a strong moral dimension to 'identity work', accomplished through the imitation of 'stories with a strong morality' (Alvesson and Willmott 2002: 629). The imitation of exemplary ascetic narratives, such as acts of devotion and extreme self-denial by superiors, are an essential part of organizational askēsis. Such narratives have a 'strong morality' in that they are only subject to imitation, not questioning. Third, 'identity work' is governed by rules about the 'natural' way of doing things, which may operate just as much *indirectly* as directly, as a 'by-product' of other activities (Alvesson and Willmott 2002: 631). Just as monastic orders contain both explicit and implicit ascetic rules, we will argue, so organisational cultures understood as 'cultures of observance' contain implicit ascetic rules or prescriptions which, in contrast to explicit rules, are not rational and thus not open to challenge or question. Such implicit rules can serve as ways of strengthening the culture, whilst at the same time allowing the employee the illusion of autonomy.

The similarity of these features of 'identity work' in contemporary organizational cultures to ascetic practices has been noted in the preponderance of 'self-help' literature (Garsten and Grey 1997) and the associated 'therapeutic habitus' (Costea et al. 2008). Garsten and Grey (1997) see their presence in the postmodern organization as a continuation of the 'secularized Protestant ethic' of Weber. As organizations become more fragmented (Martin 2002) management realises that external rules need to be replaced by 'internalized rules of behaviour based on common values' and monastic life is seen as a model of a form of life in which such internalized rules are prevalent (Garsten and Grey 1997: 214). The discourse of self-help and therapy, then, may replicate the 'Christian conscience' present in the ascetic community, albeit in a 'distinctly secularized version' (Garsten and Grey 1997: 218).

While Garsten and Grey invoke Weber in explanation of this form of secularized askēsis, Ray (1986) cites Durkheim's sociology of religious forms with a similar argumentative function: the lack of shared values and beliefs previously characteristic of religious value systems are something which managers seek to replicate in contemporary organizations by declaring the enterprise 'sacred' and organizational culture a source of 'non-deified religious spirituality' (Ray 1986: 290).

The 'spiritual' or 'religious' function of organizational culture, therefore, seems to be closely related to the professed 'humanism' of postmodern management, replacing the 'de-humanizing' nature of Taylorism: management realise that employees need some form of emotional or symbolic identification, which is supplied by the firm representing itself as a source of Durkheim's 'realm of the sacred'. Unfortunately for the employee seeking such spiritual sustenance, however, this turns out to be just another 'frontier' of control (Ray 1986), perhaps more pervasive than under Taylorism.

There seem to be two problems in this argument for a 'spiritual turn' in relation to organizational cultures. First, supposing that people in postmodern society do seek such 'spiritual identification', the question why should they seek this in the workplace rather than elsewhere seems to be unanswered. Second, by equating the 'humanistic' intentions of postmodern management with concern for a purported 'inwardness' or 'spirituality' of the employee present in the autonomous self, this seems to give too much credence to these intentions, which turn out, unsurprisingly, to be anti-humanist. By replacing the discourse of the 'religious', the 'spiritual', and the 'sacred' with the terms 'pseudo-religious' or 'pseudo-spiritual', initiatives to strengthen organizational cultures might be more appropriately described as 'de-spiritualized regimes of askēsis' (Sloterdijk 2009): while such practices might *imitate* the form of religious or spiritual practices, they have no religious or spiritual content as such, being designed solely to encourage compliance with organizational culture, while allowing the employee to still believe in his/her autonomy.

The connection between religious or 'spiritual' discourse in corporate culture initiatives and associated HRM programmes and control has been developed further by several writers with reference to Foucault's works on the 'care of the self'. Townley, for instance, talks of the aim of training as promoting the idea of employees as 'harboring a secret truth', which training is designed to get them to 'confess' (1993: 536). The 'management' of emotions, in particular the suppression of 'inappropriate' emotions such as anger and indignation (whether justified or not), and their replacement by appropriate emotions, is an important part of this required 'confessional attitude'. Townley (1993, 1995), cites in this respect Foucault's reference to Marcus Aurelius in *The Care of the Self*, in particular the 'art of governing oneself' (Foucault 1984: 89) expressed in the genre of *hyponemata*, or notes to oneself analysing one's day to day conduct, one of the basic techniques of Stoic askēsis, and the similar form of exercises put forward by Epictetus (Foucault 1984: 91).

Foucault, and Townley following him, wishes, however, to make a clear distinction between these Stoic forms of askēsis, which are seen positively as part of ethical 'self-formation', and the later, Christian form of askēsis, or 'self-awareness', which dominates contemporary HRM practices. In the latter, the self is to be distrusted, the subject of constant 'vigilance', and is to be submitted to a regime of development towards perfection and union with God. Garsten and Grey (1997), however, rightly doubt whether such a clear distinction between 'self-formation' and 'self-awareness' can be drawn in practice. Further, from the point of view of the genealogy of askēsis, there are clear continuities between Stoic and early Christian forms of exercise, as writers such as Hadot (1995, 1998) have shown, casting doubt on the clarity of the distinction made by Foucault.

The 'management of emotions' in the therapeutic discourse of HRM seen as a programme of 'self-awareness' has been seen by some writers as akin to a religious process of conversion (Ackers and Preston 1997). The religious metaphor 'conversion' is seemingly employed here to describe the moment when the supposedly autonomous organizational self is brought to the realization of the

necessity of full identification with the organizational culture, a moment accompanied by an intense emotional experience as the employee suddenly 'sees the light' of the higher perspective offered by management. The 'sudden' and 'overwhelming' nature of this 'conversion' seems to confirm the rhetorical power of the idea of managers as 'saviours' of the employees' souls (Sørensen 2008), and indeed confirm that employees' souls are to be submitted for 'salvation' in the first place. In reality, we will argue, the process of 'conversion' to an organizational culture is more likely to be a long process of *askēsis* which employees embark upon (involuntarily), at the end of which there is no 'way out' of the resultant identity conflict other than to 'convert' to the culture.

Rather than a binary opposition between the supposedly autonomous self and the self which fully identifies with or has been 'converted to' the culture, what we have in reality are individuals 'split' within themselves between identification and dis-identification, or between 'role embracement' and 'role distancing' (Kunda 1992: 198). The organizational self is thus 'unstable', conducting a 'tightrope walk' or 'balancing act' between identification and dis-identification (Kunda 1992: 216). An insight into this 'splitting' of the self into elements which identify and elements which resist or dis-identify with the culture, and the dynamic relationship between them can, it will be argued, be gained by examining canonical ascetic texts which speak of the self precisely in these terms.

Fleming and Spicer (2003) cast further radical doubt on the notion of an autonomous organizational self, able to withdraw or distance itself from corporate culture by means of cynicism, while outwardly continuing to 'perform' the rituals of the culture. Thus the question of whether the organizational self fully 'believes' in the culture or has been 'converted' to it becomes of secondary importance. Drawing on Althusser's and Žižek's notion of ideology as something radically external rather than internal, they point out that the cynical subject, whether he/she 'believes' in the organizational culture or not, nevertheless often 'performs' it, perhaps better than the subject who does 'believe' in it. This scepticism regarding the autonomous self as a site of resistance, leads Fleming and Spicer to the potentially depressing conclusion 'if believing can be practised 'for us', then is there really any escape from corporate colonization?' (2003: 170). Fleming and Spicer's argument deconstructs the supposed opposition between 'outside' (the outward behaviour of the organizational self) and 'inside', a unified autonomous self 'beyond' the reach of corporate culture programmes.

Contu (2008) goes further in burying the autonomous organizational self and describes such views as 'residual "bourgeois humanism"', a belief that, in counter-balance to the fragmented postmodern subject there is 'a whole powerful ego that enables us to follow wishes and desires in choosing and deciding what one has to do with oneself' (Contu 2008: 372). In the camp of such 'residual bourgeois humanism', in her view, are those who see in Foucault's ethical programme of the 'care of the self' a form of 'softer resistance, resistance without the acid that can destroy the machine of power' (Contu 2008: 374).

Recent literature has pursued this deconstruction of a simple divide between outside 'geometrical' organizational space and the 'inner' space of an autonomous self. Fleming and Spicer (2004) allude to the permeability of boundaries between the organization and private life, both in terms of geometrical space (e.g. the workplace and the home) and *imagined* space. Their reference to Bachelard (2004: 88) is significant: just as important as whether the employees' *actual* private space/time is being eroded by organizational culture is whether they *imagine* it to be so. Fleming and Spicer give the example of an away day held on a Sunday in the organization they studied: 'Failing to attend this activity was a sign that they (the employees) are

not fully committed to the firm and lacked the required ‘attitude’ (2004: 85). The away day, therefore, was interpreted as a ‘test’ of the degree of the employees’ degree of commitment to the organizational culture (whether it actually was designed as such or not, it was imagined to be).

Such an interpretation of (organizational) life as a continual test of commitment to organizational culture is a fundamental aim of askēsis as interpreted by Foucault in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*. For the Stoics and even more in later, Christian, forms of askēsis, according to Foucault, the aim of the various forms of ‘spiritual exercise’ undertaken was to reach the stage where ‘the test must become a general attitude towards reality’ (Foucault 2005: 431). The end product of askēsis is: a ‘questioning of the self by the self ... knowing what you are capable of, whether you can do a particular kind of thing and see it through ... measuring how far you have advanced’ (Foucault 2005: 430). In the sections which follow, we will outline the mechanisms of askēsis through which such a process occurs in contemporary organizations, to the point where ‘the test’ of commitment to the culture becomes a general attitude.

### 3. Religious and cultural views of asceticism and askēsis

Before analysing the forms and mechanisms of askēsis in contemporary organizations, we will attempt to clarify the terms ‘asceticism’ and ‘askēsis’ and address the question whether contemporary organizational asceticism is primarily a religious phenomenon and the implications of this.

The view that asceticism is essentially related to religion is put forward by Flood (2004: 2):

Asceticism is always set within, or in some cases reaction to, a religious tradition, within a shared memory that both looks back to an origin and looks forward to a future goal ...(it is) a quintessentially religious act. There are clearly analogues of asceticism in the contemporary, secularised world, but these are not asceticism, because they do not perform the memory of tradition.

For Flood, asceticism must have ‘a sacred origin’ (215), relate to a religious tradition or ritual, and is thus defined as an ‘erosion of individuality through an act of will’ (212) exercised within a religious tradition.

Viewed in this religious sense, asceticism consists of two elements: *anachōrēsis* (withdrawal from the world) and *enkrateia* (self-control) (Ware 1998: 4). For the early Christian ascetics, withdrawal from the world, whether in the literal form either as individuals in the desert (anchorites) or later into monastic communities (cenobites), became synonymous with the transformation of the external world into the spiritual. The archetypal account of such a withdrawal was Athanasius’s *Life of St. Anthony*, in which Antony’s withdrawal into the desert and confrontation with temptation in the form of demons becomes the paradigm for a ‘combative’ form of ascetic life (Harpham 1987: 14).

The second element of asceticism as a religious practice, self-denial or the ‘erosion of individuality through an act of will’ is that element which has subsequently been the subject of ‘disparagement by modernity’ (Flood 2004: 212). Nietzsche’s scathing polemic from the Third Treatise of *The Genealogy of Morality*, in particular, is perhaps the clearest statement in the modern era of the pathological connection



between religious asceticism and a pathology characterized by sexual denial, negation of the self and a glorification of suffering:

An ascetic life is a self-contradiction: here an unparalleled *ressentiment* rules, that of an unfulfilled instinct and power-will that wants to be master, not over something in life, but over life itself and its deepest, strongest, most profound conditions; ... satisfaction is *looked for* and found in failure, decay, pain, misfortune, ugliness, voluntary deprivation, destruction of selfhood, self-flagellation and self-sacrifice. (Nietzsche 2007: 85)

For Nietzsche the supposed 'spiritual' origins of Christian morality in asceticism disguise the fact its 'primary motive is not *love* of one's *spiritual* self,' but *ressentiment*, a 'hatred of the body', and thus 'the supposed concern of the ascetic for "salvation of the soul" is a pretense' (Scheler 1961: 103).

On the basis of these two defining elements of asceticism as a religious practice, we could expect that it would not be a significant phenomenon in contemporary organizational life. First, there has been a process of secularization, towards an age which the theologian Paul Tillich characterized in 1925 in *The Religious Situation of the Age* as one of "self-contained finality," or a 'general demise ... of traditional cosmologies, ... the rise of human sciences and Enlightenment reason and ... the demise of broader religious tradition with the twofold death of 'God' and 'Man' (Flood 2004: 235). Second, there appears to have been in modernity an increasing rejection of those 'pathological' expressions of religious asceticism attacked by Nietzsche. As Sloterdijk puts it, 'most contemporaries ... would see the desire to escape the world as a form of illness' (Sloterdijk 1995: 105).

In the postmodern era, however, it seems that the speeding up of communication processes and life in general and the associated nausea have been accompanied by renewal of the desire to escape the world, as reflected in the various technologies available to us designed to help us 'escape' from it (Sloterdijk 2004: 357-508). It would be wrong, however, to necessarily identify this new interest in asceticism, necessarily as a renewal of 'spirituality' or religious impulse. To understand such contemporary forms, we need a broadening of the definition and theory of asceticism beyond its purely religious form towards a wider cultural phenomenon.

There are various elements which can contribute towards such a re-definition. First, a genealogy of religious ascetic practices shows that they have a history beyond those present in Christian asceticism, particularly in the concept of 'spiritual exercises' in Ancient philosophy. Finn Op (2009: 1) while restricting the definition of asceticism to the 'voluntary abstention for religious reasons from food and drink, sleep, wealth, or sexual activity', admits that while such practices clearly became part of a religious tradition in early Christianity, and to some extent in Hellenistic and Rabbinic Judaism, they are prefigured by similar Pagan practices, in particular, the 'philosophical' asceticism practiced in Ancient Greece by the Cynics and the Pythagoreans (Finn Op 2009: 9-33).

Hadot (1995, 1998), makes a similar connection with earlier forms by replacing the term asceticism, associated primarily with Christian practices, and associated with those 'pathological' expressions of the ascetic impulse attacked by Nietzsche, with the Greek term *askēsis*, which he understands as 'the practice of spiritual exercises – (which) already existed in the philosophical tradition of antiquity. ... (and is) still alive in contemporary consciousness' (Hadot 1995: 82).

*Askēsis* understood as 'spiritual exercises' in Ancient philosophy, Hadot points out, does not necessarily imply a 'metaphysical' or 'religious' sense with which it has become associated in Christianity and other religions, but the sense that exercises were 'practical, required effort and training, and were lived; they were *spiritual* because they involved the entire spirit, one's whole way of being' (Hadot 1995: 21). This element of Hadot's definition is crucial to a 'cultural' rather than 'religious' theory of contemporary asceticism: a programme of training or discipline undergone, voluntarily or otherwise, with the purpose of bringing the self into a desired shape or form. This emphasis on technique or technologies is reflected in the term used by Foucault to describe *askēsis*, 'technologies of the self' (Foucault 1998), and in Sloterdijk's equivalent term 'anthropotechnics' (Sloterdijk 2009: 23).

The second contributory element to a cultural re-definition of asceticism is the connection of *askēsis* to power, and the relationship of power to the formation of cultures. Harpham (1987), for instance, emphasizes this relation by defining asceticism as 'any act of self-denial undertaken as a strategy of empowerment or gratification' (xiii), the essence of which is narratability of this act within a culture as performance. The archetypal ascetic narrative, hagiography, for instance, 'documents a class of people trying to achieve complete narratability' (Harpham 1987: 73).

Valantasis (1995a) also highlights the importance of ascetic practices in the formation of 'counter cultures' to established cultures. This element of breaking away from established cultures through ascetic practices, however, does not necessarily imply the literal establishment of a (physically) separate or ideologically oppositional culture (as was the case in the early Christian *anakhōrēsis*). As Valantasis (1995a) notes, 'cultures may coinhere, and an ascetic may participate in a number of different cultures simultaneously' (549). In other words, the ascetic may, through engaging in ascetic practices or 'technologies' 'secede' from the world of the established culture while remaining superficially within it. Alternatively, those in power may superimpose new implicit 'ascetic' norms or rules within an existing culture, requiring those within the culture to aspire to these norms while superficially retaining the structures of the 'old' culture.

Valantasis outlines four main elements of this 'culture-forming' power of *askēsis*. First, through ritual formation and new social relations the ascetic learns to live in a new social world. Second, through the centrality of 'exemplary' narrative performances such as those emphasized by Harpham, and their associated demonic and angelic psychologies, *askēsis* translates theological concepts within this new culture into prescribed patterns of behaviour (even in cultures where the theological basis of such behaviour is unstated). Taken together these elements lead Valantasis (1995b) to a definition of asceticism which relates, culture, narrative performance and power: 'performances within a dominant social environment intended to inaugurate a new subjectivity, different social relations, and an alternative social universe' (797).

#### **4. Towards a cultural theory of *askēsis* and organizational culture**

##### **4.1 The contribution of Foucault**

Foucault's concern with asceticism and his examination of ascetic practices is considered to be a feature of his late work, in which we see a shift from an examination in his earlier work of 'discipline exercised by others' to, in the later work, 'forms of self-discipline exercised in the pursuit of pleasure and ethics' (Starkey and Hatchuel 2002: 642). This later work, in particular *Technologies of the Self* (Foucault 1988) *The History of Sexuality III: The Care of the Self* (Foucault 1997) and *The*

*Hermeneutics of the Subject. Lectures at the Collège de France 1981-1982* (Foucault 2005) are part of an ethical project in which Foucault's aim is to establish a form of 'non dogmatic normativity' compatible with ethical freedom.

Foucault's engagement with the ascetic tradition rests on a distinction between two different concepts of self. The first, close to the utopian notion of the autonomous subject invoked by postmodern management theorists outlined above is characterized by the 'absolute value attributed to the individual in his singularity and by the degree of independence conceded to him vis-à-vis the group to which he belongs and the institutions to which he is answerable' (Foucault 1997: 42). This is the notion which Foucault wishes to locate in the Stoic form of askēsis: 'the formation of a full, perfect, complete, and self-sufficient relationship with oneself' (Foucault 2005: 319). Early Christian asceticism and the tradition of monastic cenobitism, on the other hand, expressly reject this notion of the individual, as Foucault says, in 'a disqualification of the values of private life; and ... an explicit rejection of any individualism that might be inherent in the practice of reclusion' (Foucault 1997: 43).

In order to accentuate this distinction, Foucault abandons, in *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, the word 'asceticism', which is associated with the Christian form, and turns, as does Hadot, to the Greek word askēsis. For Foucault, however, the sense of askēsis meaning 'spiritual exercise' concentrates too much on technique, 'this or that particular exercise or to the individual's undertaking of a series of exercises' (Foucault 2005: 416). He instead adopts the general term 'ascetics', which places equal weight on the techniques and on their purposes, defined as:

The more or less coordinated set of exercises that are available, recommended, or even obligatory, and any way utilizable by individuals in a moral, philosophical and religious system in order to achieve a definite spiritual objective (Foucault 2005: 416).

Notwithstanding the worth of Foucault's ethical project, which rests upon the distinction of 'good' and 'bad' senses of askēsis, his engagement with the ascetic tradition is clearly of great value in building a 'cultural' theory of ascetic practices in organizations, and has clearly been recognised as such (Townley 1995, Starkey and Hatchuel 2002, Kelly et al. 2007, Bardon and Josserand 2011). The difficulty, however, comes in the very definition above, that 'ascetics' can be just 'available' or 'utilizable' or may also be 'recommended' or 'obligatory'. The subject, then, appears to have the freedom to choose whether and to what degree to submit to these regimes of exercise. We are thus returned to a belief in the autonomous subject, and that even if the organizational self has no choice about whether to engage in such programmes, there will always be an 'inner self' beyond their reach upon which they cannot act, an assumption which recent literature, as discussed above, has challenged.

## **4.2 The contribution of Sloterdijk**

Sloterdijk's interest in asceticism and its implications for cultural theory has its starting point his work *Weltfremdheit (Estrangement from the World)* (Sloterdijk 1995). In that work the process of withdrawal from the world which characterizes the religious tradition of asceticism is seen as in essence a process of *metoikesis*, 'a movement to another form of dwelling, a transmutation to another form of self-awareness ... a migration between states or dimensions of being' (Sloterdijk 1995: 82-83).<sup>1</sup> Such a process, as experienced by the Anchorites in their withdrawal into the desert, can be understood as a 'metaphorical institution' (Sloterdijk 1995: 88)

which underlies cultural formation in general. This leads Sloterdijk to two main propositions, that 'the impetus to escape the world is present in the world throughout history' and that 'there has been a universalization of the monastic into an anthropological archetype' (Sloterdijk 1995: 111).

Both in *Weltfremdheit* and in the *Sphären* trilogy which follows it (Sloterdijk 1998-2005) Sloterdijk's understanding of cultural formation draws on the German tradition of philosophical anthropology of Scheler, Plessner, and Gehlen (Fischer 2009). The understanding of culture in this tradition derives from a phenomenological analysis of the 'dual aspect' of man: being situated *in* the world, and at the same time feeling *detached* from it: the human is 'a centred, living subject, but at the same time, by observing himself out of the corner of his eye, at a distance, he finds himself as a body among material bodies, marginalized, de-centred, objectified, ... a thing among things' (Fischer 2009: 158).

This dual aspect of man as an anthropological category is termed by Plessner 'ex-centric positionality', 'ex-centricity' here having no connotations of 'eccentricity', odd or capricious behaviour, but describing the ability of the human subject to draw a boundary or adopt a different position in relation to its surroundings or a former aspect of the self: 'to distance oneself from oneself, to posit a gap between oneself and one's experiences' (Fischer 2000: 276). The self counters the instability inherent in its 'ex-centric positionality' by forming cultures: 'placeless, timeless, faced with the void, the eccentric life-form creates for itself a foundation ... artificiality in action, thought and dream is the inner means, by which the human being harmonizes itself with its nature' (Plessner 1982: 25).<sup>2</sup> Plessner's term for culture is 'natural artificiality' to illustrate the point that cultures are 'by "nature" "artificial" or constructed' (Fischer 2009: 161). Askēsis, a process of withdrawal or secession from the world, of distancing oneself from a former aspect of the self, is, then, a paradigmatic form of cultural formation in response to 'ex-centric positionality'.

The 'ex-centric positionality' of the self and cultural formation as a counter to this is an essential anthropological building block of human sphere-building activity, Sloterdijk's main concern in the *Sphären* trilogy (Sloterdijk 1998-2004). Human beings' basic form of inhabitation is defined by Sloterdijk there as the sphere, 'a circular, internally divided entity, interiorized and made accessible, which human beings inhabit' (Sloterdijk 1998: 28), formed by converting exterior space into interiorized place. The fundamental form of the sphere as defined in *Sphären I* is the bubble, a thin, unstable protective outer layer protecting the self from the outside, containing within itself opposing poles, a 'polarized and differentiated, internally divided, subjectivized space of experience' (Sloterdijk 1998: 46).

Spheres are combined into agglomerations to form 'foam', Sloterdijk's term for 'society' (Sloterdijk 2004). Relations between the cells in 'foam' are not primarily those of communication but imitation, contagion and the result of the pursuit of immunity strategies (Borch 2009). Cultures within organizations, then, are created by the imitation of exemplars, secession from existing cultures and norms, and the establishment of new cultures. If, in *Sphären*, as Borch says, the 'inner working of the cells' is not explored, then in Sloterdijk's more recent book, *Du mußt dein Leben ändern* (*You must change your life*) (Sloterdijk 2009), it is. In this book, by examining the structure of askēsis in both religious and philosophical traditions, Sloterdijk hopes to demonstrate 'the fundamental importance of the life of practice for the formation of styles of being or "cultures"' (Sloterdijk 2009: 59).

The title of the book alludes to the existence in contemporary culture of an ascetic imperative, in which 'life is defined as a gap between higher and lower forms' and in

which ‘the only imperative is change in myself’ (Sloterdijk 2009: 47). The analogy between Sloterdijk’s principle and Foucault’s notion of the end point of askēsis as the conception of life itself as a ‘test’ is apparent. The ascetic imperative to ‘change one’s life’ might have previously been defined in religious belief systems by a relationship to God, but the ‘regimes of exercise’ which characterize the contemporary form of the imperative are not religious but ‘misunderstood systems of spiritual exercises, whether these are practiced in collectives or in personalised regimes’ (Sloterdijk 2009: 12). An ‘exercise’ is defined by Sloterdijk as ‘any operation, through which the qualification of the person carrying it out for the next performance of that operation is conserved or improved, whether it is declared as an exercise or not’ (Sloterdijk 2009: 13). The relationship to systems of power is encompassed by the general term used by Sloterdijk to describe regimes of exercise, ‘anthropotechnics’, defined as ‘the mental and physical exercise processes, by means of which people ... have tried to optimise their cosmic and social status ... by ‘work on the self’’ (Sloterdijk 2009: 23).

To sum up, what Sloterdijk hopes to achieve in *Du mußt dein Leben ändern* is a comprehensive theory of askēsis in contemporary culture, set within the context of his general theory of human sphere-building as put forward in *Sphären*, and in the tradition of philosophical anthropology. In the remaining sections of this article we will expound the main elements of this theory with reference to canonical ascetic texts, and apply these mechanisms to organizations, and in particular the understanding of the relationship between the organizational self and the formation of organizational cultures.

## **5. Mechanisms of askēsis and culture formation in organizations**

### **5.1 Secession and the endo-rhetorical structure of the self**

The basic notion of Sloterdijk’s theory is that of secession, understood not in terms of either literal withdrawal from the world, as in the monastery, or by establishing a culture dedicated to the radical pursuit of artistic aims, as in the Vienna Secession, for example, but as an inner operation through which the ascetic self separates itself from habit, from a former life and from the norms of an existing culture, and thus creates a new subjectivity by means of exercises. The archetypal form of this exercise, as present in Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, is: ‘the making of a differentiation between two radically different spheres of influence: what I can influence by means of my own powers, and what can only be influenced by the powers of others’ (Sloterdijk 2009: 349). By differentiating between what can and what cannot be influenced by my actions, by attaining an inner attitude of ‘objectivity’ understood in the Stoic sense, the self is freed from attachment. The classic example of this exercise is in Epictetus’s *Enchiridion* Chapter 3:

In the case of particular things that delight you, or benefit you, or to which you have grown attached, remind yourself of what they are. Start with things of little value. If it is china you like, for instance, say, ‘I am fond of a piece of China.’ When it breaks, then you won’t be as disconcerted. When giving your wife or child a kiss, repeat to yourself, ‘I am kissing a mortal.’ Then you won’t be so distraught if they are taken from you. (Epictetus 2008: 222)

This secession has two consequences: first, having accepted that it should concern itself only with those things which depend upon it, the external world is ‘rendered indifferent’ and ‘is only capable of constituting the antithesis of retreat, flight, and contempt’ (Sloterdijk 2009: 353). The potential which this offers for the establishment and strengthening of organizational cultures, a principal reason, as we have seen,

why management theorists are interested in monasticism, is obvious. Secondly, secession opens up an inner space within the self, 'liberates an immense excess of self-referentiality' (Sloterdijk 2009: 353), upon which further exercises, whose aim is to strengthen the resolve with which the decision to secede was made, can operate. Referring to a term of Foucault, Sloterdijk refers to this inner space as 'heterotopia': 'spaces of radical difference, which, on the one hand, belong to the social fabric of a particular culture, but on the other hand are distinguished from the trivial continuum of the everyday because within them special rules, often contradictory to those which generally pertain, apply' (Sloterdijk 2009: 345). Sloterdijk's analysis clearly mirrors the analysis of the potential of askēsis to form 'counter-cultures' put forward by Valantasis, discussed above.

Secession is accomplished by a 'self-doubling' or splitting of the self, 'an asymmetrical self-doubling, in which the inner Other is associated as the superior partner, who occupies the position of 'spiritual monitor' of his charge, imparting to him 'the certainty that he is constantly observed, tested and harshly judged, but also, in the case of crisis, supported' (Sloterdijk 2009: 363). One part of the self, the 'vigilant self', keeps watch over the other, checking for any weakness or backsliding, setting up a constant 'endo-rhetorical' dialogue in the split or doubled self (Sloterdijk 2009: 364). We can see many examples of such endo-rhetorical dialogue in canonical ascetic texts in the Stoic and the Christian traditions.

In St. John Climacus's *Divine Ladder of Ascent* (Climacus 1982), the trainee monk/ascetic who has made the decision to embark on the ascetic life is enjoined to be *vigilant* about the former self: 'We ought to be very careful to keep a watch on ourselves. When a harbour is full of ships it is easy for them to run against each other, particularly if they are secretly riddled by the worm of bad temper.' (Climacus 1982: 110). One 'half' of the self is here charged with the task of keeping a check on the 'unruliness' of the other (as conveyed by the harbour/ships metaphor). The voices associated with each element of the doubled self, Sloterdijk argues, have three purposes (Sloterdijk 2009: 364).

First, there are voices which reinforce the monk/trainee's secession from the world, as exemplified by Step 3 of the ladder (On Exile): (Exile is) 'an irrevocable renunciation of everything in one's familiar surroundings that hinders one from attaining the ideal of holiness' (Climacus 1982: 85). Second, there are voices which serve to strengthen the monk/trainee's resolve and prevent backsliding, as exemplified in the following from Step 5: 'We ought to be on our guard, in case our conscience has stopped troubling us, not so much because of its being clear, but because of its being immersed in sin' (Climacus 1982: 130). Third, there are voices of a 'visionary' nature, which keep the trainee's eye fixed on the 'reward' to be gained by secession and the hardships it involves, as evidenced by the following from Step 26: 'The sun is bright when clouds have left the air; and a soul, freed of its old habits and also forgiven, has surely seen the divine light' (Climacus 1982: 242).

Such 'endo-rhetorical' inner dialogue can also be seen in Chapter 7 of the *Rule of Benedict*. As the monk/trainee progresses from the early stages of secession to the later, the vigilant 'authority' within the self is still portrayed as external – the watchful eye of God: 'let him (the monk) recall that he is always seen by God in heaven, that his actions everywhere are in God's sight and are reported by the angels at every hour' (Benedict 1982: 33). By the time the monk/trainee has reached the higher stages, the 'external' authority has now been transformed into an entirely internal vigilant authority, mirrored in the endo-rhetorical dialogue: 'he should ... constantly say in his heart...*Lord, I am a sinner, not worthy to look up to heaven*' (Benedict 1982: 38). As the vigilance of the 'spiritual monitor' replaces any need for 'external'

vigilance, the monk has no further need to speak: 'a monk controls his tongue and remains silent, not speaking unless asked a question ... a monk speaks gently and without laughter, seriously and with becoming modesty' (Benedict 1982: 37). External silence thus betokens the fact that the internal endo-rhetorical dialogue is complete, and that a state of complete obedience has been attained.

Other early Christian ascetic texts use similar metaphors to depict the struggle and dialogue between two selves within the monk/trainee: Gregory of Nyssa draws on the classical mythology of the centaur and the Minotaur to this end: 'a man becomes double-natured, a centaur made up of reason and passion. It is possible to see many such people: either they resemble the Minotaur, being bull-headed in their belief in idolatry, although they appear to be leading a good life' (Gregory of Nyssa 1967: 99). St. Basil personifies the self to be kept under vigilance as 'the Renegade' and uses metaphors of battle to depict the struggle with it: 'Be assured, then, that you will not escape doing battle with the Renegade nor will you gain victory over him without much striving to observe the evangelical doctrines. How will you, stationed in the very thick of the battle, be able to win the contest against the Enemy?' (Basil 1962: 18).

## 5.2. 'Conversion' to organisational cultures

How is the ascetic self brought to the point of deciding to 'secede'? The analogy between this phenomenon and a religious 'conversion', as argued above, has some led writers to assume that this analogy signifies a real religious experience, particularly within the religious tradition of Christianity. If we examine 'conversion' in the wider philosophical sense of *askēsis*, however, we can differentiate different concepts of 'conversion' which are not necessarily connected to religion. The first such concept is the Platonic *epistrophē* or the turning away from the world of appearances towards a metaphysical reality, as set out in *The Republic* VII, 518c-d: 'the mind as a whole must be turned away from the world of change until its eye can bear to look straight at reality' (518d)(Plato 1974: 322)

Foucault (2005) characterizes the *epistrophē* in three aspects:

The *epistrophē* ... consists first of all in turning away from appearances... as a way of turning away from something ... . Second: taking stock of oneself by acknowledging one's own ignorance and by deciding precisely to care about the self, to take care of the self. And finally, the third stage, on the basis of this reversion to the self, which leads us to recollection, we will be able to return to our homeland, the homeland of essences, truth and Being. (209)

Leaving the Platonic metaphysics of the soul on one side, we can see clearly in this description two crucial aspects of the *epistrophē*: firstly, it is essentially a *pedagogic* discourse a process through which knowledge about the self is gained, or, in Plato's terms, regained. Second, the process takes time and usually occurs in stages or steps: the self is on an upward trajectory, as implicit in the metaphor of the 'ladder' which abounds in canonical depictions of the ascetic self, which we will outline in the next section.

The Platonic concept is transformed in later Hellenistic and Roman thought, particularly in Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, and most importantly, Seneca, into 'the establishment of a complete, perfect, and adequate relationship of self to self' (Foucault 2005: 210). In this 'conversion of the self to the self', '[se] *convertere ad se*, the essential element is much more exercise, practice, and training: *askēsis* rather than knowledge' (Foucault : 2005: 210). In the Stoics this 'conversion to self' takes the form of a particular kind of exercise: a turning away from an (unhealthy) curiosity

about others, their motivations and deeds, and a (healthy) concern with our own, as exemplified by Marcus Aurelius:

Do not waste the balance of life left to you in thoughts about other persons, ... I mean if you imagine to yourself what so and so is doing, and why; what he is saying or thinking or planning ... . Rather, you must, in the train of your thoughts ... habituate yourself only to thoughts about which if someone were suddenly to ask: 'What is in your mind now?', you would reply, quite frankly, *this or that*, (*Meditations* III, 4)(Marcus Aurelius 2008: 17)

The essence of 'conversion' as *epistrophē*, then, is a process of *askēsis* in which we view ourselves as on an upward trajectory, progress along which can only be maintained by means of constant exercise and vigilance. In terms of contemporary organizations, the 'healthy' (from the managerial perspective) concern with the self and its deficiencies would be the end point of *askēsis* and turning away, for instance, from an (unhealthy) concern with the deficiencies of the organization and its management.

The second notion of conversion is that of *metanoia*, which can be translated as a change of mind on reflection. Foucault describes it as 'a drastic change of mind, a radical renewal; ... a sort of rebirth of the subject by himself, with death and resurrection at the heart of this as an experience of oneself and the renunciation of the self' (2005: 216). *Metanoia* is often described as a sudden new awareness, 'a bringing together and taking heed of that of which one has already been aware, but with which, due to the lack, up to now, of compelling circumstances, one has been unable to deal with in all its consequences' (Sloterdijk 2009: 474). *Metanoia*, in other words, describes the bringing to consciousness of something which has already been present in the psyche, or to use religious language, the 'soul'.

If the Platonic *epistrophē* is associated with knowledge, and an upward trajectory from the world of appearances to the reality 'beyond', then *metanoia* is often associated a downward trajectory, and with what Arendt calls in Chapter 2 of Part 2 of *The Life of the Mind*, 'The Discovery of the Inner Man'. In the discovery of the 'inner man' the stress is on the discovery of the faculty of the 'will', the 'experiences caused man to become aware of the fact that they were capable of forming volitions' (Arendt 1978: 52). This discovery of the 'will' comes about through a process of *askēsis*, inner conflict and extreme emotions: a dialogue 'between me and myself' (which) 'takes place only in solitude, in a withdrawal from the world of appearances' (Arendt 1978: 64).

As a first paradigmatic example of this Arendt cites St. Paul's description of his 'inner wretchedness' as depicted in the Letter to the Romans, 7, 19-25 (King James Version):

For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me.

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close to hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? (Romans 7, 19-24)

Arendt interprets this as an instance not just of the 'will' overcoming the 'unwillingness' of the flesh, but the discovery of an 'imperative that says ... "Thou



shalt will" (and) puts me before a choice between an I-will and an I-will-not' (Arendt 1978: 68). The discovery of the will, therefore, can only be accomplished by my becoming aware of an inner resistance, a part of the self (in Paul's terminology, the flesh) which is to be overcome.

This inner process of askēsis thus results in an inner conflict, the only resolution of which is the discovery and exercise of the autonomous faculty of the will, which thus makes 'conversion' necessary. The key sentence in Arendt's account is 'Thou shalt will ... and not mindlessly execute orders' (69): thus the end point of organizational askesis is where the employee discovers their own capacity for autonomous volition, of becoming one's 'own manager' and not just to execute orders. A similar struggle between 'the willing' part of the ego and the unwilling characterizes the Stoic askēsis, according to Arendt, but with the difference that in Epictetus 'their frankly antagonistic relationship does not subject the self to the extremes of despair that we hear so much of in Paul's lamentation' (82). Most importantly for its analogous form in the contemporary organization, in the Stoic askēsis the will is subject to a programme of training to bring it into the required form.

A similar askēsis can be seen in St. Augustine's account of his conversion in the *Confessions*. Augustine's moment of *metanoia* comes in Book 8, sections 19-30. The state of inner turmoil which he experiences in a Milan garden has been prepared for by a process of turning inward: we read in Section 16 'Lord, you turned my attention back to myself ... you set me before my face ... there was no way of escaping from myself' (Augustine 2008: 144). In Section 19 he further describes this as a 'grand struggle in my inner house' (Augustine 2008: 146). In section 22 he describes a similar 'split' in the self as in St. Paul:

The self which willed to serve was identical with the self which was unwilling. It was I. I was neither wholly willing nor wholly unwilling. So I was in conflict with myself and was dissociated from myself. (148)

The resolution of this conflict in Section 29 when he hears the words 'Pick up and read, pick up and read' uttered by the voice of a child from a nearby house, and which he interprets as a divine command to open the gospel and read the words of St. Paul, is described as a 'sudden moment' but has been led up to by the process of askēsis described in the earlier part of Book 8, and is something which has been prepared in the first 8 books, which detail his turning away from his former life and beliefs. As Arendt says, in Augustine 'the split occurs in the will itself; ... it is the same willing ego that simultaneously wills and nills' (Arendt 1978: 94), but 'how the will, divided against itself, finally reaches the moment when it becomes "entire" remains a mystery' (96).

We can, then, interpret *metanoia* in the contemporary organizational setting as a psychological phenomenon, a process of inner conflict brought about by askēsis, in which the ego becomes aware of the autonomous faculty of the will, and the result of which is perhaps that the only 'way out' for the employee is to 'convert' and fully embrace the cultural prescriptions offered by management. As Sloterdijk puts it:

What converts like to describe as an effect of grace, manifests itself from a psychological perspective as a gain in personal energy as a consequence of an increased integration. This occurs when the entire apparatus of psychic impulses is brought under a unifying perspective of meaning. (Sloterdijk 2009: 480).

How does this translate into the prescriptions of management writers? The tendency of some 'change consultants' to appropriate the language of *metanoia* to describe commitment to new organizational practices has been noted by scholars (Ackers and Preston, 1997, Turnbull, 2000, 2001). The former strongly critique the notion that such spiritually-packaged 'process consultancy' can do any more than create a 'feelgood factor': 'the ecstatic experience soon fades, once managers return to mundane realities; just as after every Billy Graham rally, thousands return to their old ways' (Ackers and Preston, 1997: 697).

Turnbull, writing a little later than Ackers and Preston (2000, 2001) was less sanguine than they about the effects of cultural change interventions packaged in spiritual language. She felt that despite evidence of their continuing professional skill, many of the managers in the organization she studied had been significantly affected by 'socio-psychological coercion'. Like Tourish and Tourish (2010) her conclusion is that such transfer of the language of religious conversion into the secular domain is dangerous: 'I do not share Ackers and Preston's optimism that the... potentially damaging and highly transient rhetoric of such programmes have only short term effects on their participants. I fear that even when the "ecstatic experience fades" the emotional experiences will remain' (Turnbull 2001: 27).

### 5.3 The perfectionist vita and the exemplary ascetic narrative

Having 'seceded' and having embarked upon a 'conversion' of the type we have argued for in the previous section, the ascetic self needs a model or exemplary narrative against which to judge its progress towards the goal of perfection. This is provided by what Sloterdijk calls the exemplary 'perfectionist vita,' and closely related to this the metaphor of (organizational) life as consisting of the ascent of a ladder, whose upper end represents the ideal to be attained. The purpose of these two closely related forms of 'exercise' is the 'activation of a latent ideal of perfection' at the end of which is 'the promise of an irresistible victory prize, comparable to the *athlon* for which Greek athletes competed' (Sloterdijk 2009: 382). In its prototypical form in Stoic and early Christian texts, Sloterdijk shows, the ladder is divided into a varying number of rungs, and the texts indicate by means of behavioural prescriptions and examples which ascetic disciplines are necessary to ascend the ladder and to achieve the ideal of perfection at its upper end.

In Seneca's seminal Stoic text the *Letters to Lucilius* we see an early prototype of such a 'ladder', consisting of three grades of Stoic virtue (Sloterdijk 2009: 390). In Letter 71 Seneca refers to two categories of person: one who has attained the first grade or stage, 'the neophyte who is pressing onwards and upwards in the cultivation of his moral powers' but who, 'near though he may draw to the perfect good, yet ... has not given it the completing touch, will now and again fall back and partially relax the tension of his will' (Seneca 1932: 253). This is contrasted with 'the man who has attained beatitude, whose moral force is fully developed, is best pleased with himself when he has tested himself most soundly; he not only endures but takes to himself what others dread' (Seneca 1932: 253).

In Letter 75 Seneca develops this schema into a full 'three-fold division': the 'first degree' or 'class of proficient' consisting of 'those who do not yet possess the true wisdom, yet stand in its neighbourhood. ... Those who have already disburdened themselves of all passions and vices, who have learnt those truths a grasp of what was essential, but their confidence is not yet based on experience' (Seneca 1932: 276). The second degree consists of 'those who have put away the passions as well as the gravest spiritual ailments, but without establishing beyond doubt their title to a

sense of immunity. They may in fact relapse.’ (Seneca 1932: 276). One who has attained the third degree ‘has escaped from avarice but still feels anger; or it is no longer tempted by the lust of the flesh, but still by the lust of the parade’ (Seneca 1932: 276).

In the early Christian ascetics, the rudimentary three stages of Seneca’s prototypical schema have been replaced by a much more developed ladder, its most sophisticated forms being the *Ladder of Divine Ascent* of St. John Climacus (Climacus 1982) and Chapter 7 of the *Rule of Benedict* (Benedict 1982). Climacus’s ladder has thirty rungs, which are grouped together into three phases (the analogy with the three phases of Stoic virtue of Seneca can clearly be seen). Benedict has 12 ‘degrees’ through which the monk must progress to reach the ideal of perfection. The first phase of Climacus’s *Divine Ladder*, represented by steps 1-3, constitute the ‘break with the world’ or what Sloterdijk calls ‘secession’. Having renounced the world, the trainee ascetic enters the second phase, which consists of steps 4-26. This phase, described by Climacus as ‘the practice of the virtues’, has a dialectical structure consisting of the definition of each vice, discussion of its sources, and suggestion of remedies for it. Climacus makes extensive use of narrative anecdotes to illustrate those who have overcome the vices, and strives to keep a balance between the negative (condemnation of the vice) and the positive (remedies and hopes for overcoming it). Having reached step 26, the trainee enters the third and final phase, union with God, or the fully contemplative life.

What is the purpose of the ladder in the context of a cultural theory of the ascetic life? Ware (1982), in his introduction to *The Ladder* gives a number of pointers to how it should be interpreted. First, the ascent is intended to be a struggle – we cannot ‘climb the ladder in a single stride’ – but must expect to fall back. Second, we should not interpret the ladder metaphor too literally ‘the different steps are not to be regarded as strictly consecutive ... if we progress to the higher stages ... (we) simultaneously develop on the lower’ (Ware 1982: 16). The essence of the ladder can, then, be described as a ‘dialectical theology’: rather than providing a simple ‘scale’ against which we can measure ourselves, it functions, rather, to promote reflection and (endo-rhetorical) dialogue in the trainee ascetic between ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ aspects of the ‘soul’ or psyche (Ware 1982: 21). The ladder, therefore, is not an explicit code or set of rules but rather a way of promoting inner reflection, and method of gaining acceptance by the trainee/employee of life as a constant ‘test’, ‘spiritual exercise’ or training programme.

#### **5.4. Organizational cultures as ‘cultures of observance’**

In Wittgenstein’s ‘Remarks on Culture and Value’ (Wittgenstein 1980), we find the following remark, written in 1949:

Culture is an observance. Or at least it presupposes an observance. (Remark 83e)

In the original German the word is *Ordensregel*, which has the connotation of ‘monastic rule’. Whether explicitly understood as such by Wittgenstein or not, Sloterdijk argues, this conception of culture is an implicitly ascetic one, in the sense that monastic rule is ‘a set of prescriptions that cannot be grounded further, and which together provide the image of a form of life’ (Sloterdijk 2009: 214). The notion of ‘culture’ invoked by Wittgenstein, Sloterdijk argues, consists of a form of life, habits, practices, rituals, which are developed in the idea of a ‘secession’ from the mundane, ‘real’ world.

The essence of organizational culture as an 'observance', then, is a *modus vivendi*, 'which in its explicitness, rigour, vigilance and reduction to essentials can be compared to existence within a monastic order' (Sloterdijk 2009: 216). The 'rule of rules' in this community of observance is the maxim 'you must change your life!': 'those participating in exercises become aware of their exercises as exercises, that is as engaging forms of life' (Sloterdijk 2009: 229).

Organizational culture is essentially, at least in the eyes of the management theorists cited earlier, one of dedication to a single cause – such as making profit and serving 'the customer'. In an everyday 'outside' culture, one is not 'ever asked if one wishes to sub-ordinate oneself to its rules' indeed one does not ask oneself 'whether there are any rules at all' (Sloterdijk 2009: 215). The idea of being aware of rules, or of voluntarily submitting oneself to them while clearly the case in the monastery, it might be objected, is hardly the case with the contemporary organization: if there are such rules, then one does not voluntarily submit oneself to them, but is obliged to do so if one wishes to be employed there. Further, in the era which seemingly rejects the 'pathological asceticism' argued for earlier in this paper, individuals are unlikely to voluntarily submit to ascetic rules of this explicit kind. Monastic rules, however, consist of both explicit and implicit ascetic rules.

There are three basic types of monastic rules with varying degrees of explicitness (Derwich 2000). First, there are monastic rules which define the main principles and spirit of monastic life, describing the programme of spiritual formation. These systems of rules tend to be written down, apply to the whole Order, but can also be adapted according to the needs of an individual monastery. Second, 'customaries' describe details of the practice of everyday life, such as taking meals, working and sleeping, and are not always written down. Thirdly, there are constitutions and monastic statutes, which establish the institutional framework for the development of monasticism.

Within the contemporary ascetic organization, analogously, there may be differing degrees of explicitness of ascetic practices: explicit codes governing the general spirit of life, such as mission and vision statements, and accompanying visions of how the individual can attain 'perfection' in the context of these ideals. Here the system of communication, in particular the communication of the path to perfection set out by exemplary narratives, plays a crucial role. At the other end of the scale, and particularly important for contemporary organizations intent on establishing patterns of 'engaging life' in 'secessionist' cultures, are implicit patterns of behaviour, rituals, and habits, which, for this reason, can be even more important and pernicious than explicit rules, as they are ultimately arbitrary, their sole justification being cultural: 'the way we do things here' (this seems to be the crux of Wittgenstein's point). Whatever the degree of explicitness or implicitness of rules, however, the fundamental tenet of organizational life as *askēsis* is that: 'regardless of which particular prescriptions are at issue, it demands ... that each step, each movement of the hand be carried out with meditative care, and that each word be spoken prudently' (Sloterdijk 2009: 214).

Once this implicit 'rule of rules' is followed, then, the vigilance which is required of the trainee/employee becomes 'habit': there is no need of further rules or their enforcement. 'Habit' here, however, should not be understood as an unthinking or unconscious carrying out of tasks. Sloterdijk here distinguishes two types of possession of self, as originally expressed in philosophical form in Heraclitus's Fragment 102: 'Ēthos anthrópo daimon'. Sloterdijk interprets this as saying that there is in the human being a fundamental conflict between 'The lower, the habitual foundation, and the higher, the demonic' (Sloterdijk 2009: 258). Life is thus

interpreted as conflict between two forms of possession: possession by the habitual, the everyday and the routine on the one hand, and by the 'demonic', inspiration by higher ideas on the other, or as Sloterdijk puts it: 'The human being is, in principle, suspended between two types of being possessed: possessed by habit and lethargy, he appears inanimate and mechanical; possessed by passions and ideas he appears over-animated and manically driven' (Sloterdijk 2009: 266). The goal of organisational askēsis, accordingly, is to convert the lower, mechanical and habitual into the higher by means of exercise, albeit a form of the higher which is controlled and not susceptible to the manic element of Heraclitus's 'demonic'.

In describing the conversion of the habitual into a 'higher' form of possession Sloterdijk refers to two concepts of 'possession' present in Greek philosophy and also in later, Scholastic notions of virtue. In Plato's *Phaedrus*, sections 244a-245b, for instance, we find an account of how the 'manic' elements of possession (or divine madness as Plato describes it) can be converted into a more 'productive' form of inspiration. There Socrates says: 'If it were true without qualification that madness is an evil, that would be all very well, but in fact madness, provided it comes as a gift of heaven, is the channel by which we receive the greatest blessings' (Plato 1981: 46). Similarly, Aristotle, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, uses the term *hexis* to indicate a state of inner possession, where the virtuous person has brought under control the instinctual and habitual.

The task of trainee under askēsis, as Sloterdijk expresses it, is to 'achieve a reversal of the relationship of possession and bring what possesses him under his own direction' (Sloterdijk 2009: 269). Instead of habits possessing him or her, in other words, the employee must become capable of possessing his or her habits. This process, which can only be brought by means of exercise, is one of 'de-automatization' and 're-automatization' of behaviour: 'the adept subjugates himself to a rigorous exercise regime, through which he de-automatizes his behaviour in every important respect. At the same time he must re-automatize his newly learnt behaviour, so that what he aspires to be or to constitute becomes second nature' (Sloterdijk 2009: 269).

The aim of organizational cultures understood as 'cultures of observance', then, is to bring about in each employee a 'de-automatization' of habitual behaviour, and, through a process of askēsis, a process of 're-automatization' of new behaviour in line with the ideals of the secessionist culture.

## 5.5 Implications for organizational theory

Sloterdijk's theory of human sphere building contributes to a re-conceptualization of organizational 'cultures' as agglomerations of shifting and co-existing cells or spheres, formed by relationships of contagion and imitation (Borch 2009). His work on askēsis in particular, presented here, for which the wider work on the theory of spheres provides a context, arguably constitutes a basis on which a theory of ascetic norms and culture formation in organizations can be built, following on from the implicit treatment of asceticism in organizations in the work of Alvesson and Willmott (2002), Garsten and Grey (1997), Townley (1993, 1995) and Costea et al.(2008), among others.

Sloterdijk's work builds on the later work of Foucault on asceticism, already extensively applied in the field of organizational theory (Townley 1995, Starkey and Hatchuel 2002, Kelly et al. 2007, Bardon and Josserand 2011). Its validity, however, does not depend on our prior acceptance of an ethical project, or on our being able to identify and maintain a distinction between religious and non-religious forms of

askēsis in organizations. In emphasizing a continuity between the religious and non-religious forms of askēsis in contemporary organizations, seeing ascetic practices as 'de-spiritualized regimes of exercise', this avoids the necessity of invoking a religious discourse in explanation of them, and therefore of attributing 'humanistic' aims to contemporary management practices whose implications are expressly non-humanistic (Ackers and Preston 1997, Turnbull 2000, 2002, Sørensen 2008).

Power and control in 'secessionist' cultures, as expounded here, is exercised by means of implicit ascetic ideals rather than direct control, in particular by the setting up of exemplars of 'perfection' which employees are to follow, and by the internalization of mechanisms of 'observance', in which habitual behaviour is constantly questioned and 're-automatized' in line with these implicit ascetic aims. This view of organizations and management, therefore, is in line with Boltanski and Chiapello's (2005: 76) conceptualization of managerial discourses in the present 'spirit of capitalism' as being founded on a moralizing process, the aim of which is that 'everyone knows what to do without having to be told'.

Finally, the idea that organizational selves are 'split' by these processes of askēsis into 'vigilant' and 'renegade', 'willing' and the 'unwilling' elements which are constantly in 'endo-rhetorical' dialogue, carries further the deconstruction of the identify/dis-identify binary which has been carried out in the recent work of Fleming and Spicer (2003, 2004) and Contu (2008). There is no pre-existing autonomous self upon which cultural power in organizations works but, following Plessner's philosophical anthropology which forms the basis of much of Sloterdijk's work in the area, selves which are, at the same time, 'in' the culture and detached from it.

## **6. Conclusion**

It has been our aim to argue for the importance of Sloterdijk's theory of askēsis as a means of understanding the relationship between the putative autonomous organizational self and the formation of organizational cultures. The original contribution of this to the field of organizational culture stems from its embedding within a comprehensive theory of human sphere building in the tradition of philosophical anthropology (Sloterdijk 1998-2004). The key elements of this theory which have important applications to organizational theory, as set out by Borch (2009), are its emphasis on processes of imitation, immunization, and transformation of the self in line with the maxim 'you must change your life' as being central to cultural formation within organizations.

According to this theory, we should see organizational cultures as 'secessionist' cultures which may inhere within or alongside existing cultures, brought about by engendering a 'split' and 'endo-rhetorical' dialogue in the organizational self between a 'vigilant' element and another element which is to be watched over, or between the 'willing' and the 'unwilling' self. The relative importance of these two elements will be related to the degree of progress of the ascetic/trainee towards latent ideals of 'perfection' within the secessionist culture, or the imitation of the 'perfectionist vita', consisting of exemplary narratives of devotion, self-sacrifice or commitment within the organization. In the mind of the employee this reflection on progress will often take the form of the metaphor of a 'ladder' which is to be ascended, towards the goal of perfection.

Rather than a binary opposition between the autonomous self and the fully committed self which has been 'converted' to the organizational culture, what we have in practice are selves which are at various stages of askēsis towards the top end of the ladder. It is our argument that we need not employ religious or even 'spiritual'

discourse to describe this process. In arguing this we are not anti-religious, but sceptical that, by describing the process of conversion as 'religious' or 'spiritual' we are still lending too much credence to the claims of postmodern management theory to be 'humanistic', and downplaying the emotional and psychological costs to the employee of organizational culture programmes. In examining two paradigmatic cases of 'religious' conversion we have shown that, notwithstanding the employment of religious discourse by the subjects of these 'conversions' to describe their experiences, what they describe in reality is a process of inner turmoil brought about by askēsis, through which the 'willing self' or 'inner man' (Arendt) is discovered. It is the discovery of this 'willing self' which we maintain is the aim of organizational culture programmes to bring about, a process which has no religious or spiritual justification as such.

Finally, the ultimate aim of organizational cultures understood as 'cultures of observance' is the bringing about of an attitude in the employee in which they constantly examine their habitual behaviour, and 're-automatize' a new, examined, behaviour in line with the aims of the secessionist culture. The end point of this process of askēsis is reached when the employee conceives of organizational life itself as a constant 'test' of commitment. These ideals, when employed in the monastery in the purpose of serving God, might arguably lead to the realization of monastic virtues of benevolence and humility; when employed in the organizational setting, as the management theorists cited at the beginning of this article advocate, they lead to emotional insecurity and psychological damage, as the extensive literature on the subject shows.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> All translations from this and Sloterdijk's other works are the authors'.

<sup>2</sup> Translations from Plessner are the authors'.

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