

# **The Making and Unmaking of Selfhood. Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Ascetic Practices, between Philosophy and Religion**

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Winter-Spring 2024



Organized by

Andrea Sangiacomo (Philosophy), Arjen Bakker (Religious Studies), and Federico Minzoni (Philosophy and Religious Studies)

This interfaculty seminar addresses the themes of selfhood, subject-formation, and subject overcoming, considering the doctrinal embedding of ascetic practices as well as their performative unfolding. Which strategies do human beings develop to address, enact and think about their humanity? How do ‘spiritual exercises’, performance, and other embodied practices affect the way in which selfhood is conceptualized or transformed?

In this seminar series, we shall look at self-shaping techniques in different religious and philosophical contexts of Antiquity, ranging from the Graeco-Roman world to classical India and China. The starting point of our conversation is the assumption that selfhood is not a given, but the contingent and open-ended expression of specific social, cultural and historical conditions. Building on the refusal of any essentialist account of subjectivity, we aim to analyze the subject as a process, inquiring the crucial role played by ascetic practices and doctrines in constructing and deconstructing the self, both at the social and at the individual level.

Each meeting features two speakers who will present different perspectives on a common theme, laying the basis for an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural exchange in the discussion that will follow.

*The Social Features of Self-Shaping.*

*On the Relation between Ascetics and Non-Ascetics*

**Jessica Frazier** (Trinity College Oxford)

**Oliver Freiburger** (Texas University Austin)

Wednesday 21<sup>st</sup> February, 17.00 to 18.30 CET

*Devotion as Self-Shaping.*

*Bhakti between Theology and Aesthetics*

**Saverio Marchignoli** (University of Bologna)

**Shiv Subramaniam** (Emory University)

Monday 11<sup>th</sup> March, 16.00 to 17.30 CET

*Self-Shaping East and West.*

*Zhuangzi and Marcus Aurelius on the Good Life*

**Lucas den Boer** (Ghent University)

**Ada C. Bronowski** (Erasmus University Rotterdam)

Monday 22<sup>nd</sup> April, 17.00 to 18.30 CET

*Self-Shaping between Philosophy and Religion.*

*Hadot and Foucault Reconsidered*

**Niki K. Clements** (Rice University)

**Marta Faustino** (IFILNOVA Lisboa)

Monday 13<sup>th</sup> May, 17.00 to 18.30 CE

# CALENDAR AND ABSTRACTS

## 1. The Social Features of Self-Shaping. On the Relation

between Ascetics and Non-Ascetics

Jessica Frazier and Oliver Freiberger

Wednesday 21<sup>st</sup> February, 17.00 to 18.30 CET

### 1.1 *Ascetics, Non-Ascetics, and the Dilemma of Prestige*

Oliver Freiberger, Texas University Austin

In many cultures, ascetics are respected and revered, and they enjoy social prestige. Non-ascetics support them with material goods, ask them for religious instruction, and hope to get a share of their perceived spiritual power. But sometimes ascetics find themselves in a dilemma. The more attention and donations they receive, the more they struggle to maintain the way of life for which they are revered. Examining ascetic ways of dealing with this dilemma in Hindu, Buddhist and Christian sources, I will distinguish four options: radical withdrawal; the creation of antiprestige; adaptation; and the institutionalization of prestige. A critical analysis of normative ascetic texts can also provide information about prestige concepts of non-ascetics and shed light on the debate about the abuse of ascetic prestige. While the notion that prestige is not desirable is common in ascetic sources, some ascetics use it to their advantage – and are also criticized for it.

### 1.2 *The Democratisation of Yoga. Ascetic skills of the self, from death in Dharma, to life in Ayurveda*

Jessica Frazier, Trinity College Oxford

The ascetic traditions in India had an early 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BCE start as the ecstatic specialism of shamans and philosophers. But they grew to develop extraordinarily sophisticated models of mind, and means for systematically stilling, deconstructing, and reforming it. These skills, requiring detachment, thrived as elite practices for elite soteriologies. But over time, they became integrated into the larger culture of thriving kingdoms, arts and sciences. We look at how priests tried to control the ascetic refinement of the Self in the darkly demanding *dharmasāstras*, but how the Ayurvedic texts on the uses of the Self depict a different, more creative and democratic picture where every self is a king.

2. Devotion as Self-Shaping. Bhakti between  
Theology and Aesthetics  
Saverio Marchignoli and Shiv Subramaniam  
Monday 11<sup>th</sup> March, 16.00 to 17.30 CET

2.1 *Loving God. What Rāmānuja Means by Bhakti*

Shiv Subramaniam, Emory University

My talk explores the thought of Rāmānuja, an eleventh-century theologian from south India. Specifically, it investigates what Rāmānuja meant when he said that our greatest good consists in *bhakti*, or devotion to god. I shall begin with a brief introduction to Rāmānuja and his intellectual background. Rāmānuja is the inheritor of two distinct traditions: Vedānta, a tradition dedicated to developing the monistic intuitions of the Sanskrit Upanishads; and Tamil Vaishnavism, the religion of ecstatic devotion to the personal god Vishnu (a devotion expressed most eloquently in the Tamil poetry of the twelve *ālvārs*—“the ones who drowned” in god). Honoring the insights of both these traditions, Rāmānuja formulated a complex theology in which loving god (*bhakti*) amounts to experiencing oneself as an aspect of him. In the bulk of my talk, I will aim to specify this experience, as well as describe the practices Rāmānuja considered necessary for achieving it.

2.2 *Savoring Emotions. Subjectivity in Indian Erotic Bhakti and its Aesthetic-Theological Explanation*

Saverio Marchignoli, University of Bologna

I intend to investigate the oscillation between loss and reacquisition of self in the aesthetic-theological explanation of kṛṣṇaite erotic *bhakti*, especially in the theorization of *bhakti-rasa* by Rūpa and Jīva Gosvāmin (early 16<sup>th</sup> century). The theory of *bhakti-rasa* concerns emotions and the role they play in the process of transformation of the subject up to abandonment in the taste of the erotic relationship with the divine. The theorists’ treatment makes use of the language and conceptualization of the Indian aesthetic tradition having as its object the “taste of emotions” (*rasa*) produced by poetry and theatrical performance.

### 3. Self-Shaping East and West. Zhuangzi and Marcus Aurelius on the Good Life

Lucas den Boer and Ada C. Bronowski

Monday 22<sup>nd</sup> April, 17.00 to 16.30 CET

#### 3.1 *Riding upon the Wind. Zhuangzi's Daoist View on the Self*

Lucas den Boer, Ghent University

The *Zhuangzi* is one of the main works of classical Daoist philosophy. It is known for its relativism, humour, and inspiring ideas about living an authentic and spontaneous life in accordance with the natural flow of the Dao. This view on the ideal state of living is closely connected with Zhuangzi's idea about the self – a notion that is discussed as a hindrance to the good life. In my talk, I will explore key passages from the Inner Chapters of the *Zhuangzi* that deal with the self. In particular, I will focus on what it means to have a self that can facilitate the ideal state of mind in which we constantly adapt to changing circumstances. In addition, I will address how Zhuangzi's ideas about the self and no self relate to his views on emotions.

#### 3.2 *Marcus the Masochist*

Ada Bronowski, Erasmus University Rotterdam

Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* is a work full of admonitions directed to its author about how to accept, understand and not bear grudges against the pettiness and wrong-doing of others. These formulations are traditionally tied back to a core Stoic ethical philosophy, first and foremost by Marcus himself. But in his hands, Stoic ethics have transformed from a philosophy of objective rationalisation to a philosophy that demands sacrifice and is practiced through self-reproach. Marcus develops a relation to philosophy that is essentially self-punishing, which has had a huge influence till today when it comes not only to Stoicism but the practice of philosophy in general. The presentation will question the roots of this transformation in Marcus and how it rises from a personal interpretation that grows from a sense of inadequacy and guilt.

## 4. Self-Shaping between Philosophy and Religion.

### Hadot and Foucault Reconsidered

Niki K. Clements and Marta Faustino

Monday 13<sup>th</sup> May, 17.00 to 16.30 CET

#### 4.1 *On the Tension Field Between Philosophy and Religion. Reassessing Hadot's Notion of Spiritual Exercises*

Marta Faustino, IFILNOVA - NOVA Institute of Philosophy

This talk will discuss Hadot's notion of philosophical spirituality, focussing in particular on one of the most frequent criticisms made against his notion of spiritual exercises. According to John Cooper, for example, the notion of spiritual exercises is derived from religion and Hadot's use of it inaccurately blurs the distinction between the philosophical and the religious way of life. After i) clarifying the roots of Hadot's notion of spiritual exercises, ii) outlining his own direct answers to similar criticisms, and iii) contextualizing the notion in ancient philosophical forms of *askēsis*, I argue that Cooper's critical reading of Hadot is essentially determined by a narrower understanding of spirituality and a competing conception of what philosophy is. Although Cooper's divergence from Hadot seems to be more terminological than philosophical or even hermeneutical in nature, their contrasting accounts bring to light two different metaphilosophies and two competing understandings not only of what philosophy was in antiquity but also of what it should become in contemporary times.

#### 4.2 *Foucault's Spirituality before Philosophy and Religion*

Niki K. Clements (Rice University)

In a January 20, 1984 interview, just five months before his death, Michel Foucault notes: "By spirituality I understand – but I am not sure that it is a definition which we can hold for very long – that which precisely refers to a subject acceding to a certain mode of being and to the transformations which the subject must make of himself in order to accede to this mode of being. I believe that, in ancient spirituality, there was identity or almost so between spirituality and philosophy." In this talk, I will frame how Foucault's "spirituality" comes from his decade-long engagement with the force of religion and philosophy in the genealogy of modern subjectivity. As he rewrites his *History of Sexuality* series between 1974 and 1984, Foucault extends his historical analyses from western modernity to Christian then Greek and Roman antiquity. And he concurrently expands his analytics of power and knowledge to include a third axis of ethics as relation to self and others. This conceptual shift opens space for Foucault's rethinking of both philosophy and religion in antiquity as engaged in an art of living, where "spirituality" necessarily involves the transformation of self between Socrates and Gregory of Nyssa. Foucault thus offers a challenge to modern constructions of philosophy and religion – and the relation between subjectivity and truth – that separate how one lives and what one knows.

## SPEAKERS

**Lucas den Boer** (Ghent University) is a postdoctoral researcher whose scholarly interests centre on the history of Indian philosophy, with a particular focus on the social history of Indian thought in the first millennium CE. He holds an MA in Philosophy from the University of Groningen (2015) and a PhD in Asian Studies from Leiden University (2020). Prior to his position in Ghent, he was a Postdoctoral Researcher at the University of Naples “L’Orientale,” Dipartimento Asia, Africa e Mediterraneo (2020–2022).

**Ada C. Bronowski** (Erasmus University Rotterdam) is an associate professor of Classical Thought specializing in Stoicism, Epicureanism, ancient materialism, philosophy of mind and language. She is currently finishing a book on Stoic *lekta* and working on a project about the non-material origins of materialism. Her parallel interests include the philosophical commitments of Renaissance Humanists Leon Battista Alberti and Nicholas of Cusa. She is also working on a project focused on the philosophical letter through the ages.

**Niki K. Clements** (Rice University) is an associate professor of Religion working at the disciplinary intersection of philosophy of religion, the history of Christian practice, and religious ethics. She specializes in Christian asceticism in late antiquity, critically analyzing its resources for thinking through contemporary questions of ethical formation and conceptions of subjectivity from embodied, affective, and inter-relational perspectives. Her first monograph, *Sites of the Ascetic Self: John Cassian and Early Christian Ethical Formation* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2020), is the first comprehensive treatment of the ethical thought of John Cassian (c.360-c.435), the late ancient architect of Christian monasticism doctrinally marginalized for his optimistic views on human agency. Clements’ second book project, *Foucault the Confessor*, engages with Michel Foucault’s fascination with early Christian texts (including Cassian’s) and its formative role in his late turn to ethics. The volume editor for *Mental Religion: The Brain, Cognition, and Culture* (Macmillan Press, September 2016), she has also authored articles on asceticism, religious ethics, hermeneutics, and the emotions

**Marta Faustino** (IFILNOVA - NOVA Institute of Philosophy) is an appointed research fellow coordinating the Art of Living Permanent Seminar (CultureLab). She studied Sciences of Communication (2002) and Philosophy (2005) at the Faculty of Social and Human Sciences of the NOVA University Lisbon and earned her Doctorate in Philosophy (2013), from the same university, with a thesis on Nietzsche’s conceptions of ‘great health’ and therapy. She is currently working on an individual research project on philosophy as a way of life, with a particular focus on Nietzsche, Hadot, and Foucault. From 2018 to 2022, she was the coordinator of the Art of Living Research Group and she is currently leading, as Principal Investigator, the FCT Exploratory Project “Mapping Philosophy as a Way of Life: An Ancient Model, A Contemporary Approach”. She is a member of LNG (Lisbon Nietzsche Group), GIRN (Groupe International de Recherches sur Nietzsche), HyperNietzsche, Red Iberoamericana Foucault and Mellon Philosophy as a Way of Life Network. She is author of several articles and essays on Nietzsche, Hadot, Foucault and the Hellenistic philosophers, and co-editor of *Nietzsche e Pessoa: Ensaios* (Tinta-da-china, 2016), *Rostos do Si: Autobiografia, Confissão, Terapia* (Vendaval, 2019), *The Late Foucault: Ethical and Political Questions* (Bloomsbury, 2020) and *Filosofia Como Modo de Vida: Ensaios Escolhidos* (Edições 70, 2022).

**Jessica Frazier** (Trinity College Oxford, Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies) is a University Research Lecturer teaching courses on Hinduism, Theories of Religion, and Indian Philosophy. Her research explores key philosophical themes across cultures, from Indian classical theories of Being to twentieth-century phenomenology. Her books explore conceptions of reality, the self and the good across cultures, focusing on classical Indian metaphysics and German phenomenology. She is also the managing editor of the *Journal of Hindu Studies* (OUP). Her work on Hindu ideas translates them into global terms, to facilitate new ways of innovative thinking about a number of key issues that shape contemporary society: the nature of a good life, justice and human rights, metaphysics, the goals of community. She anchors these perspectives in classic texts, and brings them into conversation with academic philosophy and existential concerns.

**Oliver Freiberger** (University of Texas at Austin) is Professor of Asian Studies and Religious Studies. He completed his Ph.D. in Indology, with minors in History of Religions and Tibetology, at the University of Göttingen in 1999 and received his Habilitation degree in Religious Studies from the University of Bayreuth in 2009. He was a Donald D. Harrington Faculty Fellow at UT in 2002-03 and joined the faculty in 2004. Prof. Freiberger's primary research interests include the history of Buddhism in South Asia, asceticism, religious boundary-making, and comparison in the study of religion. He has (co-)written five monographs, (co-)edited ten collected volumes, and published multiple articles and book chapters on those and other topics in Asian religions and on method and theory. His most recent books, on the comparative method in the study of religion, are *Considering Comparison: A Method for Religious Studies* (Oxford University Press, 2019), and *Religionsvergleich: Ansätze, Kritik, Praxis* (Nomos, 2022), a German-language textbook on comparison.

**Saverio Marchignoli** (University of Bologna) is an associate professor of Indian and Central Asian Philosophy, Religions and History. His research activity focuses on India's intellectual history. Starting from an Indian perspective, he deals with philosophical problems both from a theoretical and a historical point of view. His research interests include the intellectual history of colonial India, the interpretations of Indian thought in the West, the new canonization of ancient texts by Indian religious thinkers, and the transcultural implications of the philosophical-religious hermeneutics of Indian texts.

**Shiv Subramaniam** (Emory University) specializes in Sanskrit literature. His research investigates the philosophical implications of Sanskrit literary works, and focuses particularly on classical Sanskrit poetry as well as the poetry and theology of the Śrīvaiṣṇava religious tradition. His current book-project, *Thinking after Kālidāsa*, examines exemplary instances in the reception of the Sanskrit poet Kālidāsa (4<sup>th</sup> c.), in order to argue that the interest of his poetry is not exhausted by the aesthetic pleasure that readers have claimed to derive from it but also lies in its thinking; for example, its insights into the nature of daydreaming, the value of ascetic life, and the condition of mortality. Shiv is also a member of the Kampan project, and is currently working on a translation Book 1 of Kampan's Tamil *Rāmāyaṇa*. His work has appeared in *The Journal of Indian Philosophy*, and the authors he has written on include Kālidāsa, Kuntaka, Vedāntadeśika, Bilhaṇa, and Sri Aurobindo.