

**Two puzzles in the Early Christian Constitution of the Self:  
Reflections on Agency in Foucault's interpretation of  
Cassian**

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ABSTRACT:

I tease out two early Christian puzzles about agency: (a) Agential Control: how can agents self-constitute if their primary experience of themselves is not one of control, as in Greek antiquity, but of relative powerlessness? And (b): Ethical Expertise: how can agents constitute themselves as ethical agents if they cannot trust themselves to recognise, and act in the light of, the good? I argue, first, that Foucault saw the importance of these puzzles and focused on extreme obedience as affording a possible resolution; second, that he failed to resolve the puzzles because of his reliance on an overly voluntarist and reflective understanding of obedience as an exercise of will; and finally, that turning to Cassian’s own thoughts on the relation between extreme obedience and humility as *kenosis* affords us a way out of the puzzles.

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I focus on Foucault’s recently published analyses of the early Christian constitution of the self as dependent on a key practice: the examination-confession, which Foucault characterises as a ‘form of experience understood at the same time as a mode of self-presence and a schema of self-transformation’ (2018, p. 49). I restrict the scope of my analyses to an author central to *Les Aveux de la Chair*, John Cassian (c360–435 AD).<sup>1</sup> Following Foucault, I approach Cassian’s work as a case study affording us insights into the early Christian understanding of what it means to constitute and experience oneself as an ethical agent: an agent capable, inasmuch as possible, of living their life in the light of what they understand as the good. More specifically, I focus on the exercise of agency at work in such constitution.

The idea of a constitution of the self is ambiguous. Depending on whether the genitive ‘of’ is understood as grammatically active or passive, the constitution of the self can refer either to an active, intentional process whereby selves constitute themselves, or to a passive, causal process whereby selves are constituted by external factors applied to them. Both these aspects are operative in Foucault’s previous analyses of historical forms of the constitution of the self.

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<sup>1</sup> Some of my reasons are exegetical: with the exception of Augustine, Cassian is the author to whom Foucault devotes the most attention. Cassian’s name is mentioned 167 times. Augustine is mentioned 285 times (note, however, that Foucault’s references to Augustine occur almost entirely in the last chapter, where the issues examined are largely theological). Cassian is also the only early Christian author on whom we have revised and approved work by Foucault (in the form of an article, ‘The Battle for Chastity’). But there are also substantive reasons. Although Cassian is not as widely known now as his famous contemporary, Augustine (354–430), he left a very significant legacy: his writings inspired much of St Benedict’s rule and strongly influenced Ignatius de Loyola, Pope Gregory I, John Climacus, Saint Francis of Salles and St Dominic to mention a few. Further, Cassian was primarily an ascetic, not a theoretician. There is an intensely personal, practical, *lived* tone to his work which makes it particularly relevant to understand experiences of oneself as an ethical agent.

According to Foucault, in Greek antiquity the agent's comportment was an 'object for concern, an element for reflection, a material for stylisation' (1990a, p. 23. See also, 1990b, p. 256). Free, male agents constituted themselves by forming reflective intentions and carrying these out through 'etho-poietical' [ethos-producing] techniques such as the ascetic practices described by Xenophon. In his earlier work on 19<sup>th</sup> century disciplines, however, Foucault had presented the constitution of the self as resulting from processes applied *to*, not by, the self. On this second picture, the self is constituted by disciplinary processes which bypass consciousness and directly target the bodies of individuals. These processes operate in controlled environments, such as barracks or prisons, by regulating timetables, spatial arrangements, and even bodily movements. In such cases, there is no experience of oneself as an ethical agent: far from being in the driver's seat, the 'modern soul is nothing but an effect of the training of bodies' (1991, p. 24. See also p. 137).

So, on these two opposite views either the self is in reflective control of its own constitution, or it is constituted in ways unbeknownst to it. By contrast, consider the following passage from Cassian: 'Germanus: if only it [*compunctio*, penitent tears] could be recalled at our own will: for sometimes when I am desirous to stir myself up with all my power to the same conviction and tears, (...) I am unable to bring back that copiousness of tears (...). And so (...) do I mourn that I cannot bring it back again whenever I wish' (2009, p. 1009). Germanus does not understand himself as passively determined by external causes or processes. He has formed a reflective intention ('to stir himself up with all his power to the same conviction and tears') which he would like to carry out. But he finds himself unable to do so. His experience of himself as an ethical agent is one of 'mourning' for a power he does not have. But mourning does not fit the dichotomy between active self-constitution and passive determination sketched out above. It can be seen both as something that happens to us, and as something that we do. It can be viewed as an emotional response to profoundly sad circumstances, and as an intentional act carried out through specific forms and rituals. In the same way, key practices in the early Christian constitution of the self, in particular extreme obedience, are presented by Cassian both as acts performed by the self for its own constitution and as involving neither agential control nor the formation of any reflective intentions. How are we to make sense of these early Christian experiences and practices of the self?

The paper is divided in four parts: first, I turn to Foucault's analyses of Greek and Roman antiquity as a contrast case to tease out two puzzles about agency specific to the early Christian constitution of the self. I then argue (a) that Foucault saw the importance of these two puzzles and focused on extreme obedience as affording a possible resolution; (b) that he failed to resolve the puzzles because of his reliance on an overly voluntarist and reflective understanding of obedience as an exercise of will; (c), that turning to Cassian's own thoughts on the deep relation between extreme obedience and humility as *kenosis* affords us a way out of the puzzles. I conclude with a few reflections on the agency at play in humble self-constitution.

## TWO PUZZLES OF EARLY CHRISTIAN SELF-CONSTITUTION

Foucault's analysis of the stoic examination of conscience is presented as 'an exercise of control over the self' (2018, p. 109) endowed with four main features. Firstly, the constitution of oneself as an ethical agent presupposes reflective intentions<sup>2</sup> which define the goal of the action:

<sup>2</sup> Although I use such notions as 'intention' and 'control', I have no wish to enter the extensive contemporary debates about agency and causation, about what counts as causing in the 'right way' or so-called 'deviant' causes. My aim is to not to characterise what it means to be the author of an action, or what counts as an action, but to tease out some features of the experience of oneself as an ethical agent involved in the constitution of the self. I make no claim about how this experience correlates (or not) with events in the world.

the intention to self-examine in general, and more specific intentions such as Seneca making an inventory of the day's deeds or Serenus examining his feelings about wealth or posthumous glory (2018, p. 110). Secondly, these reflective intentions involve reasons that are intelligible to the agent. Whether answerable at the time of the action, or only retrospectively, the question 'why' (act in this way) is relevant: Seneca performs the examination of conscience because he wants to achieve *ataraxia*. Serenus defers to Seneca's advice because he seeks the same goal, and he does not follow the advice blindly. Thirdly, the Stoic examination of conscience requires instrumental reasoning to determine the means required to carry out the relevant intentions (see 2018, p. 136). Finally, the examination is perceived by the agent as an 'exercise of control over the self' (2018, p. 109). Foucault's analyses indicate that this feeling of control rests on the agent's being confident (a) that the selected means are appropriate to, and will bring about, the end, and (b) that s/he is well suited to the task of carrying out these means. Both Seneca and Serenus experience self-examination as a process in which the agent exercises 'ceaseless control' (2018, p. 108). The aim of the process is autonomy: to 'establish the conditions of a sovereign control of the will over itself' (2018, p. 126; also p. 108).

*Prima facie*, the Christian self-examination is similar to its Stoic counterpart under all four aspects. It involves reflective intentions: 'one must execute upon oneself a constant examination' (2018, p. 132; 243). It is motivated by reasons (2018, p. 127). Further, it involves specific means, such as the careful analysis and weighing of each thought, and a feeling of control evidenced by the confident, assertoric tone of the recommendations made (2018, p. 127; also p. 133, 222).

Yet Foucault identifies four key differences between the Christian and Stoic examination of conscience. Firstly, while the Stoic examination was meant to be temporary, its Christian counterpart is never-ending (2018, p. 242; also p. 132). Secondly, the object of the stoic examination was the remembrance and evaluation of past deeds; by contrast, Cassian's examination bears on thoughts rather than deeds (2018, p. 133; also p. 243). Thirdly, and consequently, the examination of the self is now exercised in the new form of a hermeneutic of suspicion. Since temptation threatens constantly, and from the inside, agents must constantly second-guess themselves: the examination is animated by 'a suspicion that one must bring to bear everywhere and at each instant against oneself' (2018, p. 243). Finally, the aim of the Christian examination is definitely not autonomy (2018, p. 130). Because of the Fall, the soul has been weakened and is now constitutively exposed to Satan as a 'principle of illusion from within the inside' (2018, p. 130). Thus *discretio* (discernment), the virtue best suited to the examination of conscience, cannot 'consist in the exercise of a reason mastering the passions that agitate the body [as with the Stoa], but in a labour of thought over itself trying to escape the illusions and deceptions that go through it' (2018, p. 130).

From these four differences emerges a profound tension between, on the one hand, the formal features of the constitution of the self and, on the other hand, what the examination reveals as possible for the agent. Let us return to the four features previously examined. Firstly, agents may form intentions reflectively (such as examining themselves), but they cannot trust these intentions because they cannot know whether they are pure or not: 'How would the thought that forms itself in the examination be surer than the one that is examined?' (2018, p. 139). Secondly, while their intentions are responsive to reasons, agents cannot trust these reasons because they may be mere rationalisations for reprehensible thoughts or desires (for example the intention to fast, laudable as it may seem, could be an instance of the 'lust of the spirit against the flesh' (Gal. v. 17) 2009, p. 820)). Thirdly, although agents may determine a number of means to carry out their intentions, they cannot be sure that these means are truly appropriate to the situation (2018, p. 138, still on fasting) nor that they themselves are well suited to the carrying out of such means. Contrary to Stoic agents, who trust the citadel of their inner thoughts, early

Christian agents are haunted by the question ‘who thinks in my thought? Am I not in some way deceived?’ (2018, p. 138; also p. 132, 142).

Thus the examination of conscience reveals that early Christian agents are by themselves incapable of carrying out the task of self-constitution. This incapability can be analysed in terms of two puzzles about early Christian agency. First, how can agents self-constitute if their primary experience of themselves is not one of control, as in Greek antiquity, but of relative powerlessness? What is the point of forming ethical intentions if these cannot be carried out? Call this the puzzle of early Christian agential control. Second (and relatedly): the examination of conscience does not only reveal that early Christian agents cannot trust their power to carry out their intentions. It also shows that they cannot trust the goodness of their intentions. But how can agents constitute themselves as ethical agents if they cannot trust themselves to recognise, and act in the light of, the good? Call this the puzzle of early Christian ethical expertise. Both puzzles are about agency. Both are puzzling because they point to a Munchausen problem: the early Christian constitution of the self seems to presuppose what is to be achieved — agential control and ethical expertise respectively.

The problem is compounded by the fact that the difficulties identified by the puzzles are not a matter of temporary or remediable incapacity: like Augustine, his illustrious contemporary, Cassian believes that human beings are now constitutively unable to achieve salvation by their own efforts (2018, p. 133; 229). He launches a vehement attack against those who trust in their own powers when self-examining: ‘many have fallen who thought themselves safe and because they thought themselves safe. More precisely, it is because they thought that this protection was owed to themselves, to their exercises, to their progress and to their strength’ (2018, p. 228). To mimic Augustine’s famous line in the *City of God*, the Stoic agent’s self-confidence is a vice in disguise.

So, early Christian agents are faced with a seemingly impossible ought: they must constitute themselves as ethical agents, and yet left to themselves are incapable of doing so. What are they to do? Part of the answer has to do with the role of grace, which Foucault emphasises (2018, p. 133), and is out of our control. But Cassian was a practicing ascetic: he held that our own efforts, while not sufficient (he was not a Pelagian), may advance us on the way to proper self-constitution (2009, p. 806). In particular, we can seek the help of others. So, the agent has a temporal recourse at his disposal: confession, as the other side of the examination (2018, p. 142; also 139). Each junior monk is required to disclose all the thoughts that the examination of conscience allows to surface to a Senior who, due to his greater experience (and the grace of God) will be able to do what the younger monk himself cannot do: exercise *discretio* and issue appropriate guidance.

This, in turn, requires from the confessee what one may call ‘extreme obedience’ (2018, p. 122; also 124; 143; 372). Such obedience is extreme because it is not due just to one’s Senior: the monk is ‘led by the rule, led by the commands of the abbot, led by the orders of his director, even by the volitions of his brethren, for even though these do not issue from an elder, they have the privilege of being the volitions of others’ (2018, p. 122; also 123; 124; 372). This radicalisation indicates that the function of obedience far exceeds that of ensuring that the agent can make progress with self-constitution by following his confessor’s orders. As Foucault puts it, ‘the value of obedience is not in the content of the prescribed act. It resides in its form – in the fact that one is subjected to the will of another and that one bends to that will, without attaching any importance to what is willed, but by focusing on the fact that it is another who wills’ (2018: 123; see also 125).

Prima facie, extreme obedience affords a formal solution to the puzzle of expertise: sinful agents may constitute themselves appropriately if such constitution results from their obeying the commands of another, more enlightened person who issues them under the light of the good. However, one may worry on two counts. Firstly, this solution leaves the puzzle of agential control

intact: how will agents who experience themselves as powerless make themselves obey in the extreme manner described? Secondly, the solution may involve a regress in relation to the puzzle of ethical expertise itself: since sinful agents cannot trust themselves (nor their intentions) to be good, how can they know that they are obeying for the right reasons? In short, how can agents whose will is fundamentally corrupt become virtuous by willing themselves to obey? As Cassian worries, 'free will would never lead us to attain true perfection' (2009, p. 825).

Foucault's implicit answer is ambiguous: on the one hand, he acknowledges the difficulty by characterising extreme obedience as will-lessness. On the other, he holds that such will-lessness can result from a paradoxical, self-negating, exercise of the will. What this consists in is not clear, and in the space of seven pages Foucault presents no less than thirteen definitions. It is to these that I now turn, with a view to finding out whether they allow us to understand extreme obedience in a way which affords a way out of both puzzles.

#### EXTREME OBEDIENCE AS A PARADOXICAL EXERCISE OF WILL.

Foucault's definitions can be arranged in three sets, which I attend to in turn.

##### *Willing not to will*

The first set includes: 'willing not to will' (123, 125), 'to mortify one's own will' (125), 'to exercise one's own will upon and against itself' (125) and 'a relentless determination not to will anymore' (126). The common thread is that extreme obedience would result from self-denial: the will wills not to will. The most immediate way to understand such self-denial consists in construing it as a piece of instrumental reasoning in which 'not to will' is the end of the action (the will going 'against itself', as Foucault puts it), and 'willing', the means to achieve such end (the will 'exercising itself upon itself'). Such instrumental construal is broadly in line with an understanding of willing readily available to Cassian, namely Aristotle's notion of προαίρεσις (EN 1111b20 sq.), i.e. the power to deliberate about the means appropriate to a desired end and to act according to such deliberation (NE: 1112b33). The 'relentless determination not to will anymore' Foucault mentions then makes sense as a particularly intense application of the means towards the end. Correlatively, the 'mortification' (literally: 'becoming dead') of the will appears as the result of the will having successfully turned its own power against itself.

The problem with this instrumental reading, however, is that it involves a practical contradiction: for it is not possible to exclude an act X (in this case, willing) by performing X. I cannot carry out the intention 'not to will' by willing, because in so willing I would do exactly what I mean not to do. Call this the means-ends practical contradiction. A version of this practical contradiction is operative in the last expression of this group, namely 'not to grant to my will any legitimacy nor any justification to will' (2018, p. 124). Willing appears again as the means ('not to grant'), and the withdrawing of (subjective) legitimacy from the will, the end. But if I were to try to carry out the intention not to grant my will any legitimacy by an act of will, then the successful implementation of the means would require the very legitimacy that such implementation is meant to deny. In other words, I could only deny legitimacy to my will effectively if my will was taken to be sovereign in the very act of denying itself legitimacy. Consequently, the injunction not to grant one's will any legitimacy is self-invalidating—call this the legitimacy practical contradiction. Both practical contradictions make it difficult to characterise extreme obedience coherently as willing not to will.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> One may object that both contradictions require the idea that the will not to will must operate at the same time as its end. Yet could I not coherently will now not to will later, or deny legitimacy now to my future volitions, on the model of a Ulysses contract? In answer, textually this does not seem to be what Foucault has in mind. The full quote reads: 'I feel ready to obey [the other] in everything, not matter how low he is,



### *Renouncing one's own will/accepting all directions*

The second set comprises two subsets which examine obedience from symmetrical standpoints. (i) includes 'to renounce the smallest of one's own volitions' (125), 'to renounce one's own will' (126), 'to renounce willing by oneself' (126). (ii) includes 'to accept to undergo this will, to be ductile and transparent in relation to it' (123), 'to accept everything that the director wants and to bear all things from him' (123), 'to accept the will of the other as the principle of all action' (126).

A lot depends on how one understands the two key terms, 'renouncing' and 'accepting'. Foucault glosses on acceptance as 'the will to accept a direction' (2018, p. 120), and so implicitly considers acceptance an act of will. Since renunciation is the opposite of acceptance, it would make sense to suppose that it is achieved by the same means, namely willing. Acceptance and renunciation then become implementations by the will of a decision: it is in this sense that Edward VIII of England renounced the crown to marry Wallis Simpson, or that one accepts the terms of a marriage contract. On such a reading, however, set (i) is faced with the means-end practical contradiction, and set (ii) with the legitimacy practical contradiction. 'Renouncing one's own will' and its cognates become specific instances of willing not to will, and we are back to the difficulties previously examined: I cannot renounce my own will by an act of will. Conversely, accepting the will of the other as the principle of all action' is a case of the legitimacy practical contradiction because it implicitly reasserts the authority of my own will in the very act that is supposed to cancel it out. If the will of the other is taken as the principle of all action *because I accept it as such* (in the sense of willing myself to accept it), then ultimately it is my own will which remains the principle of my actions.

### *Willing to oppose nothing/not to resist*

The final set (c) comprises such characterisations as 'to will to oppose nothing, neither one's own will, nor one's reason, nor any interest even if it appeared legitimate' (123), and 'to will not to oppose or resist' (123, 125). In this case there is no practical contradiction between the means (willing) and the end (not to oppose anything). Yet there is no reason either to think that not to oppose anything would by itself result in obedience. It would more likely result in inertia, in not doing anything *at all* (including obeying).

This difficulty could be fixed by subordinating the 'will not to oppose anything' to another, over-arching intention, namely that of obeying in everything. This is what Foucault does by relating the will to oppose nothing to the 'will to accept a direction' (120). In this case, extreme obedience becomes voluntary submission. If we follow Foucault's previous analyses of the early Christian constitution of the self, then this would result from the formation of a reflective intention to obey, justified by reasons accessible to the agent, carried out by specific means and involving a feeling of control in the paradoxical form of *allowing* another to determine one's course of action. This account of extreme obedience as voluntary submission, however, remains

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and I grant my own will no legitimacy nor any justification to will'. The passage is in the present tense, with no distinction between present and future volitions, and implies a readiness to deny legitimacy to my will every time another person, no matter how low their status should be, gives me a command. Beyond these textual considerations, one key problem with Ulysses contracts is that they need to be enforceable. And while this is possible (although often problematic) in medical contexts, in relation to Foucault's interpretation the prospect of enforcement generates a dilemma: either the will itself will be the enforcer, but then it could only do this through an exercise of will, and by reasserting its authority (thus reviving the practical contradictions); or someone else will have to do the enforcing, in which case obedience will collapse into coercion.

vulnerable to both puzzles: the sinful agent cannot be sure that he will be able to carry out his intention to obey, nor that his intention is genuinely good. Further, as we shall see below this characterisation of extreme obedience as voluntary submission does not fit the phenomenon as described by Cassian.

I now seek a way out of the Foucauldian impasses by turning directly to Cassian's views on extreme obedience and by exploring its relation to humility.

#### EXTREME OBEDIENCE, HUMILITY AND *KENOSIS*.

So, how should one understand extreme obedience? Cassian's answer is unequivocal: 'no one can obey an Elder but one who has been filled with the love of God and perfected in the virtue of humility' (2009, p. 421, 838). The same is true for *discretio*: 'true *discretio*, said he, is only secured by true humility. And of this humility the first proof is given by [not trusting] at all in your own judgment but accepting their decisions in all points' (2009, p. 758, 979-980). Thus the key to understanding extreme obedience, and to solving the puzzle of early Christian self-constitution, is humility. But what is humility? Foucault sees it as a self-relation: 'in humility I am aware that I am so low that (...) I recognise myself as inferior to anyone' (2018: p. 124), a definition which echoes the *Oxford English Dictionary*, according to which to be humble is 'to have a low estimate of one's importance, worthiness, or merits, marked by the absence of self-assertion or self-exaltation'. Yet for Cassian (as for Augustine) humility is primarily a relation to *God*, not to the self or to others. Or rather, humility as a relation to God is what mediates appropriately the relation to the self and to others (just as love of God is what mediates appropriately love of the self and love of the neighbour). Because he does not see the importance of God as a medium term and understands humility in an implicitly secular manner, Foucault cannot grasp appropriately the relation between extreme obedience and humility.

We must thus turn to the religious meaning of humility. The canonical text is *Philippians*, ii 6-8, which Cassian quotes several times: Christ, 'being in the form of God, emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men, and being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross' (2009, p. 680, 703, 1256, 1462, 1499, 1522, 1525). Christ's humility shows itself as *kenosis* (from *kenoein*, to empty). Minimally construed, *kenosis* has two symmetrical and inseparable aspects.<sup>4</sup> On the one hand, it is a self-emptying whereby Christ set aside the form and attributes of divinity ('[He] emptied himself (...) being made in the likeness of men'). Such setting aside is not a one-off occurrence but a process of humbling which extended throughout Christ's life, from the incarnation to his death on the cross (then considered particularly ignominious). On the other hand, the self-emptying of *kenosis* is at the same time a giving away whereby the possibility of mankind's salvation is secured. The emptying of the self is a pouring forth of love: humility and charity are intrinsically

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<sup>4</sup> The Chalcedonian proclamation of the 'two natures' doctrine (451AD), according to which Christ was truly God and truly a human being was meant to clarify the status of *kenosis*. It was followed by much further debate, in particular during the 17<sup>th</sup> century when a controversy arose between the Giessen and the Tübingen schools (see for example Schmid 1961, p. 390 sq.). The first distinguishes between possession and use of the divine attributes and claims that during the incarnation Christ continued to possess his attributes but refrained from using them except to perform miracles. In this case *kenosis* is a *kenosis tes chreseos*, a *kenosis* of use. By contrast, the Tübingen school argues that in order to preserve the unity of the two natures in Christ, *kenosis* was merely a *krupsis tes chreseos*, a concealment of his divine powers. These debates, however, are largely posterior to Cassian's life and that there is no theological discussion in his work of the best possible interpretation for *kenosis*. Consequently, I have sought to be as neutral as possible in describing *kenosis* as a setting aside of Christ's divine form and attributes, which allows both for the possibility of Christ's not using or just hiding his divine powers.



connected (2009, p. 421). Crucially, *kenosis* manifests obedience in its most extreme form: by 'humbling Himself', Christ 'became obedient unto death'.

I propose that extreme obedience is best understood, not as an exercise of will, but as a pre-reflective imitation (within the limits of the ontological distance between creatures and their creator) of Christ's *kenosis*. The imitation of Christ is at the heart of Cassian's views on humility and obedience (see 2009, p. 523, 544, 1006, 1018, 1058, 1246). He specifically highlights the exemplary character of Christ's *kenosis* in the following passage: '[the Lord] prayed in the character of man which He had taken, that he might give us a form of prayer as others things also *by his example*: saying thus: "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless not as I will but as Thou wilt"' (2009, p. 1018, my italics). Formally, Christ's address to his Father, 'not as I will, but as Thou wilt', affords a resolution to the ethical puzzle of the early Christian constitution. The self does not will anything, not to align its will on God's, nor even not to will. Like the Apostle, it becomes a 'vessel' for the will of God, a recurrent metaphor for Cassian (*Acts*: 9:15. Cf. Cassian, p. 590, 633, 737, 769, 998, 1160, 1210, 1421, 1424, 1546). The function of a vessel is to receive its contents without denaturing them, and to pour them forth. This is made possible by *kenosis*, through which agents empty themselves of everything that is their own (2009, p. 707. 2018, p. 145) and become entirely attentive and responsive to the will of God.<sup>5</sup> As Cassian explains, 'humility cannot possibly be acquired without giving up everything: and as long as a man is a stranger to this, he cannot possibly attain the virtue of obedience' (2009, p. 706).

But what does it mean to 'give up' everything? In particular, could not this 'giving up of everything' be *itself* conceived of as an exercise of will? As the carrying out, through ascetic techniques, of an intention to empty oneself? Then the emptying of one's sinful desires would become an exercise in self-mastery in the form of extreme self-denial. Such denial would ultimately remain an egocentric preoccupation with the self and be faced with a practical contradiction: one cannot turn away from the self by focusing on it.

The answer to this worry resides in the other aspect of *kenosis*: the giving away out of love. 'True self-denial' Cassian tells us, 'is *implanted* in us by the love of Christ' (2009, p. 707, my italics). Self-denial does not prepare for, but arises from, our love for Christ. Returning to the example of Gethsemane may help us understand this point. Christ did not seek to empty himself *prior* to sacrificing himself out of love: his love expressed itself *through* the self-emptying of *kenosis*. Such self-emptying was not a discrete act: it was the correlate of the outward-facing movement of Christ's love. Similarly, early Christian agents do not first intend to empty themselves of their sins and sinful thoughts so as to love God and others: the loving *is* the self-emptying.<sup>6</sup> The more we give away of ourselves in service out of love for others, the more we are emptied of egocentric concerns.<sup>7</sup> To return to the metaphor of the vessel, just as the level in a jug

<sup>5</sup> Humble agents realise that they owe everything that is good in them to God. The only things they really own, both in the sense of possessing them and having to own up to them, are their sins and their sinful intentions or desires: these are what *kenosis* strips away. Note that on this view one of the central issues in the contemporary reflections on humility, namely whether it constitutively involves ignorance or a failure of self-knowledge (because the humble person would systematically under-estimate her own merits), does not arise. Here, humility is the appropriate ethical response to the certain knowledge that one has no merits of one's own. As Augustine puts it, 'you are not being told: "be something less than you are" but "understand what you are. Understand that you are weak; understand that you are merely human; understand that you are a sinner"' (Serm. 137.4 (WSA III/4: 374).

<sup>6</sup> Perhaps a secular example will help convey this point. Most people show a notable decrease in self-centredness after they have become parents. Yet typically this decrease is not the result of an intention to become less self-centred: it is the correlate of the parents having become responsive, through love, to the needs of their child.

<sup>7</sup> This line of thought accords with contemporary defences of humility as a virtue. Critics of humility often object that humility constitutively involves either a failure of self-knowledge or the systematic devaluation

drops when the water is poured out in offering, in the same way the emptying of the self is proportional to the agent's love for God, until the self is so other-directed that there is no place for self-concern anymore.<sup>8</sup> The resulting, appropriately constituted self is what we might call a kenotic self: a self that is emptied of its egocentric contents by its love for the divine (2009, p. 483, 489). For such a self, to obey a command is to love Christ *in* the other person (2009, p. 483). Thus a 'high born brother', when commanded to load ten baskets on his shoulders and 'hawk them through the streets for sale' (a duty deemed 'mean and unusual' for a man of good birth and wealth), 'paid no attention to the indignity of the thing' and 'carried [this] out with the utmost zeal, and trampling under foot all shame and confusion, *out of love for Christ, and for His Name's sake* (2009, p. 489, my italics).

Importantly (especially re: the agential control puzzle), extreme obedience is an immediate expression of love. It does not rely on conscious intention-forming but is achieved pre-reflectively. When the Blessed John was asked by his beloved senior to 'throw this cruse of oil out of the window, he flew upstairs when summoned and threw it out of the window and cast it down to the ground and broke it in pieces without any thought or consideration of the folly of the command, or their daily wants, and bodily infirmity, or of their poverty, and the trials and difficulties of the wretched desert in which, even if they had got the money for it, oil of that quality, once lost, could not be procured or replaced' (2009, p. 484). Cassian only lists the reasons why John might have *not* complied with the command to emphasise the immediacy of the response: John 'flew upstairs'. Similarly, consider the monk who, 'practicing the writer's art', hears the knock on his door which summons him to prayer: 'although he may have just begun to form a letter, [he] does not venture to finish it but runs out with the utmost speed, at the very moment when the sound of the knocking reaches his ears, without even waiting to finish the letter he has begun' (2009, p. 470). Here too Cassian emphasises both the immediacy ('at *the very moment* when the sounds of the knocking reaches his ears') and the spontaneity ('at full speed', 'without even waiting to finish the letter he has begun') of the monk's response to hearing the knock. The formation of even a negative intention such as not to oppose anything (as in Foucault's account) would be one thought too many.

But what about the imitative process from which extreme obedience is meant to result? Couldn't the imitation of Christ's kenosis *itself* be construed as the result of a deliberate, intentional process manifest in each instance of obedient comportment? In which case both puzzles would arise again, for how could agents trust their power to execute their intention to imitate Christ, and their own goodness in forming such an intention?

It is certainly possible to construe certain cases of imitation as relying on explicit intention forming: a comedian set on imitating a celebrity will deliberately and repeatedly try to imitate specific turns of phrase, gestures or intonations. But this endogenous, reflective model is not the only possible one. Dijksterhuis (2004) shows that well socialised adults imitate each other by responding to clues picked up from their environment, without these clues being thematised and without any deliberative intention to respond to them. Such clues can be directly observable, as when unbeknownst to ourselves we mimic a person's tone of voice or physical stance. But they can also be more abstract. On what Dijksterhuis calls the 'high road to imitation' (2004, p. 213),

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of one's own worth. By contrast, Kvanvig (2018) thinks of humility as a virtue of attention: being humble consists in having a disposition to be more attentive to the virtues of others than to one's own. This is interestingly similar to the movement of *kenosis* in the sense that the increase in attention given to the virtues of others correlates directly, and without any separate intention formation, with a decrease of attention to the self. Some formulations of Cassian seem to support this view: 'in humility (...) each may think more of the knowledge and holiness of his partner, and hold that the better part of true discretion is to be found in the judgment of another rather than in his own' (2009, p. 1158).

the relevant clues are most often ‘personality traits’ inferred from the observation of another person’s comportment, or ‘stereotypes’, patterns of comportment available in one’s cultural environment and implicitly recognised by the agent. In both cases ‘a process of behavioural adjustment ensues, in which one’s behavioural patterns are, often subtly, brought in line with the behaviour of another person’ (ibidem). For example, we may pre-reflectively come to imitate a friend’s perceived generosity because we saw her repeatedly give alms to the poor or make donations to charities.

Cassian seems to follow a similar, exogenous route when he reflects on imitation. He sees the latter, not as the reflective application to the self of a conceptual model, but as a practice patterned on the life of Christ and the apostles. Commenting on the fact that Paul, while preaching to the Church of Ephesus, still took his share of the labour needed to provide food and water, Cassian attributes to the Apostle the following thought: ‘he [Paul] laid bare the reason why he imposed such labour on himself: “that we might,” says he, “*give a pattern to you to imitate us*’ (2009, p. 635, my italics). More generally, when reflecting on how sinners might become appropriately constituted ethical agents Cassian notes that they must have ‘the inspiration of the Lord’: ‘He draws us towards the way of salvation (...) by His own act’ (2009, p. 806). We are not given reasons to form appropriate intentions to imitate Christ: we are meant to respond directly to the ‘draw’ of his actions. Such draw can be glossed upon in the light of Dijksterhuis’ ‘high road to imitation’, as resting on the agent implicitly recognising and internalising character traits or patterns of comportment understood as worthy. Both the exemplar-based teaching and the tightly knit communal life in the Coenobium would have trained monks to respond pre-reflectively to such behavioural patterns by internalising them. Thus imitation is best understood, not as the result of an explicit intention to imitate, but as a pre-reflective practice whereby agents develop patterns of comportment in response to the clues and models they pick up from the Gospels and from their ethical environment.<sup>9</sup>

## CONCLUSION

We can now return to the puzzles of early Christian self-constitution. Recall that the puzzle of agential control arose because early Christian agents cannot trust in their power to carry out the intentions they set to themselves. But since humble agents empty themselves through love from any egocentric concerns, they do not have any goals of their own that they could intend (and fail) to carry out. Further, they do not act ethically by forming and carrying out reflective intentions, but by responding directly to the commands given. The most accomplished agents, like Abbot Pinufius, do not even need to be commanded: they are able to read off, and respond to, ethical solicitations directly from their environment. Correlatively, the immediacy of such responses, combined with the absence of reflective intentions and of personal goals, does not allow for experiences of powerlessness to arise: agents interact smoothly with their ethical environment. This, in turn, helps with the puzzle of ethical expertise. Recall that the problem was that morally corrupt agents cannot trust the goodness of their intentions. But humble agents let go of their egocentric desires, becoming transparent ‘vessels’ for the will of God. Freed from their inward curvature by the imitation of Christ’s *kenosis*, they become fully attuned to the ethical solicitations of their environment.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Note that while the agent’s humility expresses itself in the agent’s comportment, such expression does not need to involve awareness *that* humility is expressed. If anything, such awareness would likely get in the way of true humility being expressed (by reintroducing a focus on the self).

<sup>10</sup> One may worry that this makes the success for the early Christian constitution of the self heavily dependent on the goodness of the relevant ethical environment. Historically, it is likely a concern of this sort which prompted Cassian to travel from the Middle East to Gaul to found his own *coenobium*, the

So, the puzzles of early Christian constitution are not so much solved as dissolved by an appropriate understanding of extreme obedience as grounded in humility. In letting themselves be governed by others, and ultimately by God, early Christian agents give up on becoming ethical agents through self-determination: but they do not give up on becoming ethical agents. Paradoxically, the surrender of extreme obedience liberates the self from itself, orients agents towards others through love, and so allows them to become ethically accomplished. Yet, one may ask, in which sense do obedient agents *do* anything? How is a ‘vessel’ an agent? Why is not extreme obedience best understood on the model of a reflex, a knee-jerk reaction inculcated through habit and discipline? One way to answer this question is to emphasise that the responsiveness of the accomplished ethical agent is not blind automatism. An inexperienced agent (such as a novice) would not be capable of John’s attentiveness, devotion and wholeheartedness. John’s fluid responsiveness to the ethical solicitations of his environment is made possible by his pre-reflective, practical understanding which discloses the solicitations to him *as* solicitations. This understanding, in turn, was developed in John’s case through continuous engagement with self, others and God by means of monastic techniques such as silence, vigil and prayer. It is this understanding which both allows the relevant ethical solicitations to exert maximal traction and lights up the best way of answering them. Without the right environment, the ethical solicitations would be much harder to respond to; but without the right understanding, they would not register on the agent in the first place. So, John’s ethical responsiveness does not arise merely causally, from certain solicitations obtaining (e.g. the giving of a command), but from these solicitations being pre-reflectively understood on the background of a set of personal skills and abilities developed through the years. Being as a human ‘vessel’, while neither a case of self-determination nor something that can be done at will, is nevertheless not an instance of passivity because it requires an appropriate understanding of self and world. Thus on this early Christian picture John’s responsiveness is an ethical accomplishment for which he can be praised (as his Senior does indeed), and for which other agents can be blamed, should they fail to develop it.

*Béatrice Han-Pile*  
*University of Essex*  
*Wivenhoe Park*  
*Colchester CO7 9NG*  
*Tel: 01206 872532*

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Abbey of St Victor, which served in the West as a model for later monastic development. Note, however, that this worry is not specific to the early Christian constitution of the self: it applies to any account (in particular Aristotelian or Neo-Aristotelian) in which ethical flourishing cannot be accomplished solo but depends on the agent living in an appropriate environment.

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