

DAYDREAMING REVISITED

A Psychology for the Examen Explored

Andrew Walker

THE IGNATIAN EXAMEN OF CONSCIENCE draws on ideas that have long been part of the Christian tradition. It is now acknowledged as integral to Ignatian spirituality and to the process of discernment; it has become fashionable to note that it is the style of prayer on which Ignatius insisted most. Of all the forms of prayer presented in the Exercises, the Examen is surely the one most consistent with their purpose and end.

The Examen is inextricably linked in traditional practice with the concept of sin, and continues to be presented in this light in the popular forms of Compline available. Seen then simply as an examination of conscience, it can often be reduced to cataloguing transgressions. George Aschenbrenner's seminal article¹ on the subject moved us forward. It reminded us that the Spanish word *consciencia* could, and perhaps should, be understood as 'consciousness' rather than 'conscience', given the moralistic overtones which this latter word now has.

Aschenbrenner's reworking of the Examen converges with the best insights of contemporary moral theology. Dietrich Bonhoeffer taught us that the central demand of ethics should not turn on the question of how I can do or be good, but rather on 'the reality of the reconciliation of God and humanity brought about through the life, death and resurrection of Christ'.² More recently, the papal encyclical *Veritatis splendor* similarly articulated a context for morality in the nature of the human person and their relationship with God. The Examen can be read in a way that supports this shift from an objective morality of action to an informed subjective morality of person.

¹ George Aschenbrenner, 'Consciousness Examen', *Review for Religious*, 31 (1972), pp. 14-21.

² Quoted by Edwin Robertson from the new edition of Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* in *The Tablet*, 22 February 2003, pp. 26-27, here p. 27.

Personal unfreedom and inordinate attachment are set within the whole of an individual's relationship with the God of Jesus Christ, incarnate and risen, with the Father prodigal of love. To use the language of the Exercises, we now know that the Examen should always be connected with the First Principle and Foundation. There are links too, of course, between the Examen and the decisions which emerge from the Exercises. As John English has written,

. . . a reliable decision demands closer union with God, and . . . the closer one draws to God, the more often and more stringently God demands decisions in response.³

Nevertheless, the Examen is as much about a more intimate knowledge of self and God and about the growing and deepening relationship between the two as about any particular choice. What God is waiting for is not so much the right conclusion about a practical question as our suppleness in falling into the divine hands so that God can work in us.⁴

The Examen's efficacy depends on its frequency as much as on its accessibility and breadth. Ribadeneira tells us that Ignatius normally used to practise it hourly:

Once the blessed Father met a certain one of our Fathers, and asked him how often he had made his Examen that day. When he said 'seven times, if I am not mistaken', Father replied 'hey—so seldom?'—and this when there was still a good part of the day remaining.⁵

Nevertheless, the Examen has still—in my experience—not really caught on outside certain circles. Its traditional structure can seem cumbersome and off-putting, and its stress on introspection may make its use appear laborious or selfish.⁶ Even as a daily discipline it may not be sufficient in fostering the supple awareness and sensitivity that is

³ *Spiritual Freedom: From an Experience of the Spiritual Exercises to the Art of Spiritual Guidance* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1995 [1973]), p. 18.

⁴ John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, translated by Colm Luibheid and Benedicta Ward (London: SPCK, 1982), p. 244.

⁵ Ribadeneira, in MHSJ FN 2, p. 345.

⁶ Dennis Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn and Matthew Linn, *Sleeping With Bread: Holding What Gives You Life* (New York: Paulist Press, 1995), represents a fine attempt to meet these objections.

sought. Perhaps, then, it might be helpful to explore how various schools of modern psychology might interpret the Examen—not simply because of the new insights this might yield, but also as a way of helping us understand what we are doing in the Examen and why we are doing it. Such an account may help us to follow what Joe Veale once memorably summarised as an Ignatian principle: ‘have a contemplative grasp of the end and be flexible in your use of the means’.⁷

Consciousness and Unconsciousness

Even though the Examen is an Examen of Consciousness, the unconscious certainly influences what happens when people make it.

There is a tendency to dualism dogging any exploration of unconscious material: those training as spiritual directors, for example, are always asking for greater clarity about the difference between psychology and spirituality, about how spiritual direction differs from counselling or therapy. Some retreatants can see questions about feelings or about the past as intrusive, irrelevant, and inappropriate within the ministry of direction. Yet the unconscious is not just the place where unwanted thoughts, feelings and events get stored. It is also a place of integration. Thomas Merton lamented the widespread neglect of the unconscious in his day, not just for reasons connected with personal development, but also because of how attention to the unconscious brings with it social, theological and communal advantages. The unconscious is like some great underground river within us, at times flowing peaceably, at times a torrent. It can provide life-giving water and life-enhancing power. Its effects are both positive and negative. They can be harnessed creatively, though the prudent will always use caution, remembering how destructive these forces can be. The unconscious is a place of richness and energy.

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In the realm of the unconscious, moral presuppositions, tidy divisions, and detailed cognitive maps cease to work in any straightforward way. In his account of the archetype of wholeness in the unconscious, Jung claimed—surely rightly—that it is impossible to

⁷ ‘The First Week: Practical Questions’, *The Way Supplement*, 48 (Autumn 1983), pp. 15-27, here p. 20.

separate the spiritual from the psychological; and were such a separation possible, it would probably be most undesirable.⁸

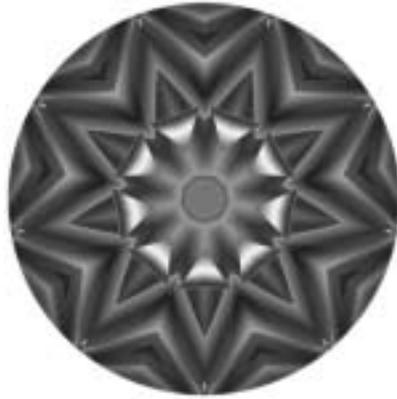
Many languages have developed as ways of articulating the unconscious. I shall draw particularly on transpersonal psychologies, in particular on Psychosynthesis. These are perhaps the approaches which most richly complement a faith perspective on human reality.

Clearly some distinctions are necessary if we are to talk of the value of unconscious material and of how the process of making this material conscious enriches us. Roberto Assagioli, the person whose inspiration did most to develop Psychosynthesis, suggests that there are three levels of unconsciousness.⁹ The middle level is the most accessible; to draw on Assagioli's metaphors, this level immediately surrounds the field of awareness or consciousness itself. The lower level contains the more 'animal', instinctual or darker material; the higher contains unrealised potential and other material that is more positive, though still repressed or suppressed. Higher and lower are equal in all but the nature of their content: they are equally valuable, equally difficult, equally near and far from consciousness itself. But, to repeat, tidy divisions and moral labels rarely work in this realm. Positive qualities can be feared by our conscious self (thus Nelson Mandela's famous speech suggesting that it is our greatness that we fear); so-called negative emotions, properly explored, can be bearers of great gifts (for example the gift of self-value and self-assertion that may lie at the heart of unexpressed rage or anger). Higher and lower unconscious material are always intimately connected and cannot be worked with in isolation. Many a therapist working with childhood trauma can bear witness to a birth of freedom or to a rediscovery of hope or meaning. Many a spiritual director whose mutual exploration of the faith journey with the directee begins to evoke some darker and more uncomfortable emotions can bear witness to this as well.

When material from the higher or lower levels comes into consciousness, our freedom is expanded, and our minds and hearts become more supple. It may be that our consciousness cannot hold the material in a sustained way, and so it returns to unconsciousness.

⁸ This paragraph draws on Judith Reger, 'Dreams in the Spiritual Life', *Human Development*, 18/3 (Fall 1997), p. 44.

⁹ *Psychosynthesis* (London: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 17.



But now perhaps it will no longer be suppressed or repressed, but rather held in the ‘middle unconscious’, where it is still relatively accessible, just on the boundary of consciousness. The Ignatian Examen gently stimulates the negotiation of unconscious material. It helps us to befriend estranged elements or parts of ourselves, and to reintegrate them.

There are obviously questions to be clarified here about the meaning of ‘consciousness’. Transpersonal psychologies generally present human consciousness as a reality with two strands. The first strand could be termed an animal awareness: the neural representation of the world that gives orientation to all animals, and to which they behaviourally adjust. The second strand is specifically human: it involves reflection and language.¹⁰ This sets us apart from the rest of creation. Not only do we know; we know that we know. Consciousness thus involves oscillations: between instinctual awareness and reflectivity; between reflection and articulation; between the content of consciousness and the part that seems to be aware. The different sorts of reflective techniques that have been developed—from Psychosynthesis’ Evening Review to the Ignatian Examen—help school these oscillations.

¹⁰ See Zoltan Torey, *The Crucible of Consciousness* (Oxford: OUP, 1999), especially pp. 129-132—though Torey would not agree with my conclusions.

Psychosynthesis names what experiences and mediates these strands the self or I,¹¹ likening it to the conductor of an orchestra. The instruments are all that makes up the content of our experience, conscious and unconscious: body, mind, feelings, the different parts of ourselves, our knowledge, the roles we have taken on board, and so on. The self's role is to be aware, to co-ordinate. How successfully it accomplishes these tasks will depend on its strength, skill and motivation. There are obvious convergences here with Christian uses of the word 'soul'. Central to the self or soul are the faculties of love and will; modern theorists will speak of a link to the Higher or Transpersonal Self, just as medieval writers would use the comparison between the candle and the sun to talk of the soul's relationship to God.

This self or soul needs to be nurtured and shaped because it is always in the process of being formed. Its ability to be aware needs refining; its skill in co-ordination and integration needs fostering. In one sense it is a co-creator. Just as one of the creation accounts in Genesis sees God as brooding over the waters, and then ordering and bringing forth, so the self or soul must order and bring forth the unconscious elements within its own personality. Thus interior entropy is reduced and energy used more creatively: conflictive thoughts are harmonized; meaning is discovered in the chance events of life; there is a reconciliation between one's chosen goals and the natural forces of life.¹² These ideas from the theory of Psychosynthesis can give us insight into what is happening in the different stages of the Examen.

The Stages of the Examen

Celebrating the Present Moment

At the beginning of the Examen we focus, in gratitude and in the presence of our God, on the present. We are making a statement about how God's gifts are present to us *now*, and therefore standing against the tendency to avoid the present, whether by focusing on the past (letting ourselves be distracted by memories or by nostalgia), or by looking towards the future (occupied by hopes and fears which present

¹¹ Piero Ferrucci, *What We May Be: The Vision and Techniques of Psychosynthesis* (Wellingborough: Crucible, 1989 [1982]).

¹² Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *The Evolving Self* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994), p. 239

attention will do nothing to change), or by making comparisons with other people or current situations ('if only that were different').

Of course we cannot leave behind the past and future completely. But their value to us at this point is wholly dependent on how they affect the present, on influences that may—at the outset—be unconscious. The German novelist, Bernhard Schlink, has put the point memorably with regard to the past:

If something hurts me, the hurts I suffered back then come back to me, and when I feel guilty, the feelings of guilt return; if I yearn for something today, or feel homesick, I feel the yearnings and homesickness from back then. The geological layers of our lives rest so tightly one on top of the other that we always come up against earlier events in later ones, not as matter that has been fully formed and pushed aside, but absolutely present and alive.¹³

Sometimes an encounter or event will trigger past unresolved material abruptly; at other times the material will come into awareness more gently. Either way we need to trust ourselves and God as we begin this exercise. The gratitude expressed is a sign of the giftedness of time, of the truth that lies beneath the surface of things, and of an offering back of the gift to the giver. Our self or soul holds the conductor's baton: we can begin to pay attention to the music.

Articulating Desire and Disposition

In the second step, we pray for enlightenment, we establish the priority we are giving to the uncovering of meaning. This is both a duty and a joy, a felt want and an injunction to which we commit ourselves. The habitual articulation of this ensures that the practice will endure, even when desire or inclination seem absent or weak. Perhaps, too, we have an inherited disposition towards meaning-making. Anthony Storr writes:

There can be little doubt that humanity is so constituted that we are compelled to seek symbolic solutions and syntheses, and that

¹³ *The Reader*, translated by Carol Brown Janeway (London: Phoenix, 1998 [1995]), p. 215.

this trait originated in an adaptive device which better fitted us to master the world in which we found ourselves.¹⁴

We may trust, too, that our very striving and desiring are borne by the Spirit, drawing us in divine discontent into ever more intense union.

Reviewing the Past

David Levin writes of the soul or self developing through different stages: hearing, skilful hearing, and hearkening.¹⁵ In the regular review of our day fostered by the Ignatian Examen, we reflect on the time just past and thus are brought to a place of listening and seeing with diminished ego. Over time we become more and more able to discriminate, to discern, and our potential as human beings in relation to God becomes ever more liberated.

In the process of reviewing the events, occurrences, encounters and experiences of whatever period of time has been chosen, all the associated feelings, connections, thoughts and deeper feelings become more apparent. There may then emerge an awareness of themes and patterns, of ongoing motives and interests—all the more so if we make this prayer regularly, sustaining the practice of reflection. We can become ever more sensitive to both the positive and the negative forces that lie beneath the surface of things, and to how the Holy Spirit works with us through them both.

Many traditions, including that of Psychosynthesis, attest also to a variation of this review, one that restricts and therefore sharpens the focus. The Ignatian Exercises contain also a Particular Examen, focusing on a particular fault. The principle can be extended. Some years ago, one director of mine noticed an overly self-critical streak in me, and therefore asked me to replace until further notice the General Examen with the question: ‘What three things have I done today that God might want to be grateful to me for?’ A nice example of both the Ignatian principle of *agere contra* in action and a contemporary extension of the Particular Examen.¹⁶

¹⁴ *The Dynamics of Creation* (London: Penguin, 1976), p. 217.

¹⁵ *The Listening Self* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 46-48.

¹⁶ See Exx 13, 24-31, 157.

Whatever the form it takes, this review allows the areas of congruence and consonance to come to the surface as well as any interior dissonance, agitation or disturbance. The review forms the heart of the whole exercise.

Releasing Sorrow and Joy

The fourth stage involves our somehow expressing what the review has touched in us. Because he describes the Examen within the context of the First Week, Ignatius speaks of asking pardon for sins (Exx 43.6), but we can also cite the 'cry of wonder' in the second of the First Week exercises (Exx 60), and perhaps the reflection and drawing profit of the gospel contemplations later. The review, with its insights and increased levels of awareness, may well provoke a strong affective response. Psychodynamically, what may happen is that a surge of energy accompanies the emergence of unconscious material into consciousness, for energy has been invested both in the matter stored and in the act of keeping it stored. Like a kind of childbirth, this will sometimes be messy and not entirely comfortable. The vivifying process 'offers a fuller sense of being alive from moment to moment and this is worth the frequent pain of deeper self awareness'.¹⁷ Pain, guilt and sorrow may be evoked, but always against a background of thanksgiving and hope. These feelings need to be expressed and so released. The soul or self can then appropriate the insights and fruits of the process, while waste or anything toxic will simply be dispersed. Expression becomes a form of purgation.

Orientation and Integration

At the end of the Examen, Ignatius suggests that we 'purpose amendment' with God's grace (Exx 43.7). This final step is essential as a means of grounding the whole experience. It may, as Ignatius suggests, take the form of a resolution or a commitment; it is always a matter of turning attention outwards and to the future. We come more to life through this prayer in order to help others live more fully; our reflection is in the service of our action; as we explore our identity, our choices about how to build the Kingdom in and through all of who we are will be facilitated.

¹⁷ Jerome Sayer, *Daydreaming and Fantasy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 261.

Daydreaming

Dreams have always been centrally important in the exploration of the unconscious. But Freud's 'royal road to the unconscious', as he referred to dreams, led to a dark, pessimistic place. Jung's Shadow is a much more positive concept: the 'manure pile' can also be '99% pure gold'. This positive understanding has been taken up and developed by Psychosynthesis.

Daydreams, too, are revealing. The exploration of daydreams was pioneered in the mid-twentieth century by the Frenchman, Robert Desoille, in his concept of the waking dream.¹⁸ In Desoille's approach the patient is guided through an imaginative journey of descent and ascent, itself based on Dante's *Divine Comedy*, but using the individual's own personal unconscious material. An adapted version of the approach is still used by practitioners of Psychosynthesis today, and serves as a means both of diagnosis and of therapy.

We find similar movements of descent and ascent in the Examen. We are moving back temporally over the past day (or whatever the period of time may be), only to re-emerge into the present enlightened and enriched by greater awareness and insight. We are also delving beneath the surface of thoughts, feelings and events in order to touch into the unconscious truths and treasures that are buried within. Then we bring back into consciousness the gold we have discovered. Ultimately, the movement is that of Holy Saturday and the harrowing of hell: the bringing of the gospel to the darkest corners of creation, and the bringing of that darkness into the light. The daydream and the reflections to which it gives rise can thus be both radical and redemptive.

**We are delving
beneath the
surface to touch
into the treasures
buried within**

Courageously Grasping Reality

For Dietrich Bonhoeffer the strictly ethical life needs always to be relativised; even when we have to 'grasp reality courageously' and take hard, ambiguous decisions, our life remains 'wonderfully enfolded by good powers (*von guten Mächten wunderbar geborgen*)'.¹⁹ Hence we can

¹⁸ *Le rêve éveillé en psychothérapie: Essai sur la fonction de régulation de l'inconscient collectif* (Paris: Presses Universitaires, 1945).

¹⁹ Both quotations come from poems written by Bonhoeffer in the last year of his life.

always move forward in trust and hope, whether in the chaos Bonhoeffer confronted in 1945, or in the ambiguous situations we face today.

There will always be believers who condemn introspection, who are therefore uneasy with the insights of psychology, and who avoid the Examen and similar prayer exercises. But introspection undertaken in faith grounds our experience in those greater good powers and can radically transform our perspective. As Harry Williams reminds us:

. . . theological enquiry is basically related to self-awareness and therefore it involves a process of self-discovery, so that, whatever else theology is, it must in some sense be a theology of the self.²⁰

Given that Christianity proclaims a God whose own self is irrevocably committed to the human, we cannot make a sharp disjunction between what is human and what is divine. What we say about God will have implications for our lives; when we reflect on how we have spent our time, we will always be saying something about God. Thus it is not surprising that there are convergences between the practice of the Ignatian Examen and contemporary transpersonal psychology. Both provide a gateway to unconscious material and an appropriate means whereby that material can be transformed. Both are open to the Spirit's surprises, perhaps coming through the imagination and through our daydreaming. Both draw on ancient spiritual practices of examining our lives in the quest for an integrated humanity, one that recognises the reality of our transpersonal or divine potential. The Examen helps us discern the good forces that are at work in the conscious and unconscious processes of our lives, and to sense how we remain, both individually and corporately, wonderfully enfolded.

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²⁰ H. A. Williams, *True Resurrection* (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1983 [1972]), p. ix.