

## MORE THAN COLLABORATION

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FOR THE CONTEMPORARY REVIVAL OF THE IGNATIAN EXERCISES, one of the most important resources has been the contribution made by psychology. Understandably and perhaps inevitably, psychologists can treat spirituality in general, and the Exercises in particular, as simply one means of human development among others. Moreover, they may well focus on the individual rather than on those with whom the individual stands in relationship. In this article, I want to suggest that all of us—including psychologists—need to think differently. We will only develop a proper psychology of the Exercises if we recognise that the spiritual freedom and transformation they promote presuppose a mutual relational commitment between the self and God. God acts in the human heart. Any psychology articulated simply in terms of the self's development is liable to obscure and distort that central reality.

I propose to make this case by putting forward three interrelated claims. Firstly, it is a mistake to see the Exercises primarily in terms of 'ego-strengthening'; they need to be seen as a process by which a person is given a new nature in relationality with God. Secondly, I want to suggest that ego-development is not an end in itself; rather it represents a transitional stage on the path towards authentic, mature relationality with God. Indeed, I want to speculate that the ego is best understood as itself a 'transitional object'. Finally, I want to argue that the interchange between theology and psychology needs to be genuinely reciprocal. It is not just that theological accounts of the self need to be informed by psychology. It is equally the case that an adequate psychology needs to take seriously, at least as a possibility, theology's account of the self in relationship with God. In particular, not every psychological account of ego-development is consistent with the gospel vision.

### ***On Ego-Strengthening***

In the last special number of *The Way*, 'Psychology and Ignatian Spirituality', Ruth Holgate and W. W. Meissner both referred to the

*The Way*, 43/4 (October 2004), 29-40

transformation nurtured by the Ignatian Exercises in terms of the psychological concept of 'ego-strengthening'. This process involves a 'graced collaboration': the Holy Spirit works through the 'natural' resources of a person's ego in order to motivate change. Holgate presents 'ego strength' as,

... the ability of the ego to direct and control its energy in the face of the various pulls from the id, from the superego, and from outside forces. Sufficient ego strength implies a level of conscious self-control.<sup>1</sup>

But is the language of 'ego-strengthening' and 'graced collaboration' strong enough? Does it really convey the deep, painful, psychic re-structuring offered by Ignatian spirituality that strengthens a person's ego in a particular way? Is Meissner really correct to see the reconstruction of the psyche fostered by the Exercises as 'centred on the pilgrim's ego'?<sup>2</sup> Is it really 'conscious self-control' that is at stake here? Or should we be talking about something else: another sort of control that arises when the human self comes into conscious relationship with God? Surely the Exercises are about more than self-control? Surely they facilitate the transformation of the self into a 'self in unique relationality'? And is not the Source of this relationality God?

Of course the Exercises do strengthen a person's ego. But this occurs in so far as the ego is *relativised* by the Holy Spirit, moved away from the centre of attention. The ego no longer directs and controls a person 'on its own'; it operates, rather, 'in relationality', relationality with God. Paradoxically, the effect is indeed that the ego is strengthened rather than diminished, but the strengthening is of a certain kind. The ego's amazing capacities are affirmed in that its relationality with God negates its propensity to chaos. People actively participate in the process, but they emphatically neither initiate nor effect this re-construction on their own. I use the term 'relationality', rather than the more familiar 'relationship', as a way of indicating that our relationship with God can take on a life of itself, so to speak (just

<sup>1</sup> Ruth Holgate, 'Growing into God', *The Way*, 42/3 (July 2003), 7-18, here 8.

<sup>2</sup> W. W. Meissner, *To the Greater Glory: A Psychological Study of Ignatian Spirituality* (Milwaukee: Marquette UP, 1999), 76, quoted in Holgate, 'Growing into God', 9.

as the love between the Father and the Son in classical Trinitarian theology is somehow a third entity called the Spirit). It is human-divine relationality in this sense that I understand to be the goal of the Exercises.<sup>3</sup>

It is not, therefore, the promise of 'self-mastery' supported by 'the grace of God'<sup>4</sup> that draws a person to the Exercises, but the desire evoked by the opening phrase of Hopkins' greatest poem: 'Thou mastering me / God!' Moreover, such desires arise only through the invitation of the Holy Spirit, and as an active, dynamic response to God's initiative. 'Human-divine relationality' is by no means a fruit of the ego's effort alone.



### *Penance*

The point becomes manifest in the language we use to think about sin and penance, and about the graces of the First Week. For Holgate, grace energizes 'the resources of the ego .... It is an active not passive spirituality envisaged here, one energized by God.'<sup>5</sup> Meissner describes penance as involving 'a form of self-assertion', 'assuming responsibility', 'reinforcement of the independence of the self', 'self-disciplinary action', 'active mastery of instinctual impulses and desires', and 'development in ego-capacity'.<sup>6</sup> All of this 'requires directive activity of the ego'.<sup>7</sup> But, as Holgate herself acknowledges in passing,<sup>8</sup> it is God who energizes Christian spiritual growth, not a vague power or energy. If Ignatius understands God as the generating Source of the process, then any account of ego-strengthening primarily in terms of the self

<sup>3</sup> For the concept of relationality, see James Loder, *Transforming Moment*, (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1989), 78; James Loder and Jim Neidhardt, *The Knight's Move: The Relational Logic of Spirit in Theology and Science* (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1992), 36-59; and Loder, *Logic of the Spirit: Human Development in Theological Perspective* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 13-14.

<sup>4</sup> Holgate, 'Growing into God', 11.

<sup>5</sup> Meissner, 'The Ignatian Paradox', 17.

<sup>6</sup> Meissner, *To the Greater Glory*, 168, quoted in Holgate, 'Growing into God', 16.

<sup>7</sup> Meissner, *To the Greater Glory*, 172-173, quoted in Holgate, 'Growing into God', 16.

<sup>8</sup> Holgate, 'Growing into God', 17. She acknowledges that this might 'appear as a matter of "no pain, no gain", of effort and straining at spiritual growth', noting that God energizes this process of 'graced collaboration'.

only distorts the issue. We are dealing with death and rebirth, not simply with self-development.

Meissner regularly evokes a Thomist principle:

Grace does not replace or override the resources of human nature, but 'perfects' them. It works in and through natural human capacities.<sup>9</sup>

This language tells us only half the story: it asserts that God's action in grace perfects God's primordial intention for humanity. But the 'perfecting' also involves a structural shift, something new—not a purely 'natural' development that would occur without a divine initiative. Surely the Exercises centre on something other than a continuation or intensification of the synergy of grace and nature involved in our very existence. Surely they nurture quite specifically 'spiritual effects', the divine gift that St Paul calls a *new creation* in Christ.

*Related but Different*

The ego-strengthening that is nurtured by the Exercises is in some ways quite different from other developmental ego-strengthening. A person may strengthen their ego through individual therapy without acknowledging the human-divine relationship. From a Christian viewpoint God is still involved, since without God's gracious sustaining will the therapeutic relationship would not exist. But there is no explicitly willed co-operation with God.

Christian tradition asserts that human beings have fallen, and are therefore incapable of choosing the good and opting for God simply from their own resources. God in person must somehow supply; it is the Holy Spirit who enables us to reconnect on a profound level with the Original in whose image they are made.<sup>10</sup> There is a profound difference between the experience of human-divine relationality and that of developmental ego-strengthening more generally. Under the experience of grace, a person comes to recognise how their own

<sup>9</sup> Meissner, 'The Ignatian Paradox', 41.

<sup>10</sup> For a careful discussion of Augustine's understanding of original sin, in dialogue with feminist theology, see Alistair McFadyen, *Bound to Sin: Abuse, Holocaust and the Christian Doctrine of Sin* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), especially chapter 8. McFadyen is both a psychiatric nurse and a theologian.

humanity is in relationality with a divine who is wholly other—a recognition which is both deeply painful and deeply joyful.

### *Negation and Restructuring*

Christianity speaks of a primeval Fall, a corruption of the creation that God had seen to be good, a corruption that sets in early in human history. However problematic this belief may be historically, it serves as a powerful symbolic expression of the ambiguities haunting the process of ego-development.

Ego-development is the person's self-creation and self-discovery as they interact with their lived world. They have to differentiate between themselves and what is not themselves. This seems to occur as an infant experiences separation from the primary carer and from external restraint. The separation is necessary; theologically we have to see it as something willed by God and therefore in itself good. But, in lived reality, anxiety sets in at this point, inevitably. At a very early stage, the process of human growth becomes complicated and corrupted; it has to proceed if the person is to flourish and mature, but the process is inevitably flawed. Some primeval force seems to prevent the human being from developing in a balanced and peaceful way. The anxiety corrupts the reciprocity between the child and its environment, even though that environment is, thanks to God's sustaining presence, the source of life. As a person's ego strengthens, it becomes capable of greater achievements and accomplishments. But the strong ego will still be haunted by its anxiety, by its inability to prevent death (with the associated *Angst* about non-existence), and by its propensity towards idolatry, its tendency to substitute some created reality for God. If the human ego is as capable of evil as it is of good, then ego-strengthening as such can increase its capacity for harm.

***As the ego  
develops,  
anxiety  
sets in***

Everything, then, depends on *how* the ego is strengthened. The Exercises open us to an ego-strengthening brought about through human-divine relationality, through the self-gift of God drawing the creature back into gracious relationship. Grace addresses the ego's negation, restructuring the psyche so that the person can live, die and live again in the human-divine relationality for which God created them. God both perfects the person and gives them a new nature.

The Ignatian Exercises strengthen our ego capacities in a distinctive and paradoxical way, one that faces up to sin or negation

and reorientates the ego within the context of human-divine relationality. The Exercises involve what might seem like ego-weakening. A person painfully recognises on some level the negation or sin that is part of their identity and agency. Ruth Holgate refers to this process as it occurs in the First Week of the Exercises.<sup>11</sup> The Holy Spirit enables a self-awareness that involves inner or personal conflict. A person's ego struggles to ensure pleasure and survival in the face of the threat that neither can be maintained. This type of self-confrontation is distressing.<sup>12</sup> Yet as the person risks this look into their 'inner void', they can encounter, despite the pain, the Source of divine grace who sustains them and enables them to face both their own ego capacities and their propensity for negation. The encounter with the Holy Spirit relativises the ego, orienting it towards human-divine relationality.

Ignatius asserts that God invites and enables faithful living. The psychic restructuring that allows us to move from an ego-centred life to human-divine relationality involves the deep pain of inner conflict and self-awareness. The ego needs to be exposed and restructured so that its strength can come out of the relational reality for which it was created, rather than out of defensive negation. Divine engagement is required for an ego-strengthening that redirects our development in intentional relationality with the Source of our being.

Any direct correspondence between the ego-strengthening that ostensibly arises from human intention alone, and the ego-strengthening that arises from deep, transforming human-divine relationality seems, therefore, highly questionable. But perhaps there is more to be said. Perhaps, viewed theologically, a person's ego-development *prepares* them for human-divine relationality.

<sup>11</sup> Holgate, 'Growing into God', 12.

<sup>12</sup> Sarah Coakley asserts that 'engaging in any such regular and repeated "waiting on the divine" will involve great personal commitment and (apparently) great personal risk; to put it in psychological terms, the dangers of a too-sudden uprush of material from the unconscious, too immediate a contact of the thus disarmed self with God, are not inconsiderable' (*Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* [Oxford: Blackwell, 2002], 35).

### ***The Ego as Transitional Object***

In his *Way* article, Brendan Callaghan asserts that for Ignatius ‘God calls me to become who I am capable of being’.<sup>13</sup> God both invites and enables this becoming. The Exercises engage a whole person, their intellect, their imagination and their emotions, as they take possession of themselves inside and out. To explore this ‘self-possession’, Callaghan focuses on the post-Freudian school of Object Relations, which studies ‘the ways in which individuals learn to relate to “that which is other-than-I”’. This school emphasizes relationships as key motivating factors in human life. In the course of learning to relate to others, people learn to relate to themselves:

To learn that I am separate and hence sometimes alone, to learn that I am not all-powerful and hence must sometimes be helpless—these are potentially terrifying transitions. But I must make them if I am to become a functioning adult in the world.

According to Callaghan’s summary of Object Relations theory, we cope with being alone and helpless through a transitional object, ‘something that is both “out there” in the physical world and which carries significance for me in my internal world—an object which I both discover and create’. Can we consider our egos as transitional objects, both self-discovered and self-created?

As Callaghan presents them, transitional objects enable a person to inhabit a transitional space, ‘to stay at the point of intersection between the outside and the inside’. This point of intersection ‘does not just have the quality of “between” as in “located between”, but also as in “leading between” or “bridging between” inner and outer worlds; it transcends the dualism of subjectivity and objectivity. ‘Our God-representations’, Callaghan writes, ‘can be seen as operating’ in this space of inner and outer intersection. These representations derive from various sources, and can develop throughout our lives.’<sup>14</sup>

The Ignatian Exercises foster development in our God-representations, as well as in how we represent ourselves in

<sup>13</sup> Brendan Callaghan, ‘Do Teddy Bears Make Good Spiritual Directors?’, *The Way*, 42/3 (July 2003), 19-32, here 20. For the remaining references on this page, see 20-24.

<sup>14</sup> Callaghan, ‘Do Teddy Bears Make Good Spiritual Directors?’, 27-28. See Callaghan’s article for further discussion of ‘God-representations’.

relationship with God. We are confronted 'with the fundamental images and symbols of the gospel' and these images and symbols interact with our God-representations. Our human-divine relationality reshapes our images, in a permanent process of growth. Callaghan notes that the Ignatian Exercises assist the exercitant,

... in the process of disengaging from a possessive, idolatrous attachment to any particular image of God, or to any particular image of myself in relation to God .... I can grow in seeing God and myself more truthfully.<sup>15</sup>

This clarity of vision is produced by human-divine relationality, not through the efforts of the exercitant alone. Our images are never perfect reflections of reality, but they can be refined or replaced, with great struggle and pain, as we interact with the realities that they represent.

An understanding of the ego as itself a transitional object is consistent with the active sense of transitional objects bridging or 'leading between' subjectivity and objectivity in transitional space. I both discover and create my ego, in response to my inevitable and necessary experiences of aloneness and helplessness. According to some psychoanalytic theory, children simultaneously discover and create, prior to the development of the ego, what is called the 'face phenomenon'—a sense of their carer's presence as represented by the face, around which they orient and order their world. They experience anxiety in the absence of the 'face', and external restraint when the 'face' returns. They then protect themselves from the anxiety through the discovery and creation of the ego.<sup>16</sup>

The ego is a more permanent presence. It is like a face that will never go away. Whereas the face comes and goes, causing the vulnerable child acute anxiety, the ego is permanent, and seems to offer security and reassurance, a defence against the threat of abandonment. The ego becomes the means through which the self

<sup>15</sup> Callaghan, 'Do Teddy Bears Make Good Spiritual Directors?', 31-32.

<sup>16</sup> I am drawing on the theory of James Loder, who is himself drawing on René Spitz, *The First Year of Life: A Psychoanalytic Study of Normal and Deviant Development of Object Relations* (New York: International Universities Press, 1965); and *No and Yes* (New York: International Universities Press, 1957), in his assertions about ego-creation, discovery, and development. See Loder, *Transforming Moment*, 161-176, and Loder, *Logic of the Spirit*, 93-94, 135.





Saviour's Face by Andrei Jawlensky  
(1864-1941)

relates to the inner and outer worlds, but it does not provide a true connection with reality. It is too much conditioned by the self's need and fear. We are all too aware at one level that the defensive ego cannot prevent death or protect against existential *Angst*, but we still try to achieve survival and pleasure.

This conflict can only be resolved if somehow—through grace?—we are opened to our personality being restructured, and specifically to being restructured in human-divine relationality.<sup>17</sup> Painful awareness of our hurts, of our idols, and of our harmful proclivities can make us aware of God's

loving presence. The ego can be seen as itself a transitional object, preparing the person for explicit human-divine relationality. People become more fully who they are in dynamic relationship with God. As Jesus indicated, they lose their lives in order to find them (Matthew 16:25).

### **Interdisciplinarity**

One theme running through much contemporary writing on psychology and spirituality is the relationship between human and divine agency, between theological explanation and accounts of

<sup>17</sup> James Loder asserts the possibility of a psychological and neurological opening to the transcendent through the collapse of a person's ego defences (see the text that he co-authored with Jim Neidhardt, *The Knight's Move*, 15 n.18, 271). For Loder, questions about meaning and purpose open a person to the sustaining presence of God, who simultaneously offers a deep, transforming relationship. Such questions reflect a person's inner tension between sin and *imago dei*. Sin distorts human responses to meaning and purpose questions, while the *imago dei* (individually and collectively) continues to search for 'its original' (Loder, *Logic of the Spirit*, 114).

human nature given by the human sciences. The work of James Loder, whom I have already mentioned, offers some fruitful insights.

Loder studied human knowing, in particular what he called 'convictional' or 'transformational' knowing. He argued that humans know or think transformationally, in an inherently paradoxical process occurring,

... whenever, within a given frame of reference or experience, hidden orders of coherence and meaning emerge to replace or alter the axioms of the given frame and reorder its elements accordingly.<sup>18</sup>

Coherence and meaning emerge through something like a figure-ground reversal, in which the background becomes the focus of awareness.<sup>19</sup> In the transformational knowing nurtured in the Ignatian Exercises, God's sustaining presence is no longer merely a more or less conscious background; it becomes the focus of a person's awareness and life.

Loder's theory can be used to qualify Meissner's assertions about God's gracious presence working in and through natural resources. It highlights both the continuities and the discontinuities between other transformations and Christian transformation.<sup>20</sup> In Christian transformational knowing, the focus is not on the ego, but on the self in human-divine relationality. God's sustaining presence becomes the Source of coherence and meaning amid an existential conflict between the ego's efforts to ensure pleasure and survival and the painful realisations of failure and mortality.<sup>21</sup> Christian transformation relativises the ego, strengthening and reconstructing it in a distinctive way.

This leads us to a more general point about psychology and theology. It has become common to claim that 'psychology reveals much about the Spiritual Exercises'. But the insights should not flow

<sup>18</sup> Loder, *Transforming Moment*, 229.

<sup>19</sup> Loder cites the work of Michael Polanyi (*Personal Knowledge* [New York: Harper & Row, 1962], 174-184) and his discussion of tacit and explicit awareness. See Loder and Neidhardt, *The Knight's Move*, 3.

<sup>20</sup> See Loder, *Transforming Moment*, chapter two.

<sup>21</sup> Loder notes that 'Human beings begin to die the moment they are born' (*Logic of the Spirit*, 73). The artist David Hockney is quoted as saying, 'Some die young, some die old. The harsh truth is that the cause of death is birth.' (*The Times* [17 March 2004], on p. 2 of the section entitled *Times 2*).

only in one direction. Not only those who live and pray out of the Ignatian Exercises, but also psychologists interested in psychic transformation, can benefit from understanding divine grace in interdisciplinary terms. Psychology as a discipline might not want categorically to affirm divine gracious initiative and relational desire.<sup>22</sup> Yet if it remains open to the possibility of divine agency having reportable effects in the human psyche, psychology will be better able to describe and explain Christian spiritual transformation.

If psychologists can at least remain open to the possibility that exercitants are engaged with a reality outside themselves, then they are open to new insights into psychic transformation. In his survey of the origins of the human sense of God in sociology, anthropology and psychology, John Bowker concludes that the 'possibility *cannot be excluded* that there may be *x* in reality which has in the past ... reinforced the continuity of such terms as "god"'.<sup>23</sup> By focusing,

... on the ways in which individuals form a personal construct of life, psychoanalysis necessarily returns to an interest in the ***possible reality*** of the objects of belief. It does *not* say that all objects of belief therefore have a reality in existence; but it no longer excludes the ***possibility of a reality*** of objects of belief in effect, and hence perhaps, in some instances, of a reality in existence as a sufficient ground for the effect.<sup>24</sup>

Even if researchers want to be sceptical about the divine origin of the ego-strengthening effects of the Exercises, they should still recognise in principle the importance of relationality as such in psychic transformation. They may conclude that this relationality only exists between a person's ego and their identification with a faith community or with particular symbols and images, but the power of the relationality remains evident. And given that the Exercises clearly have *some* positive effect, 'good science' requires that the God-question at least be left open.

<sup>22</sup> Some trans-personal psychologists do affirm the reality of the transcendent, at least as a possibility, and urge others to consider doing so themselves. See B. Lancaster, 'In Defence of the Transcendent', presented at the Transpersonal Psychology Review, The British Psychological Society Annual Meeting, 2003.

<sup>23</sup> John Bowker, *The Sense of God: Sociological, Anthropological, and Psychological Approaches to the Origin of the Sense of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 131, my emphasis.

<sup>24</sup> Bowker, *The Sense of God*, 133, italics original, my emphasis in bold italic.

Brendan Callaghan begins his article by recalling how his psychology teacher asserted that ‘the facts are friendly’: ‘good science should point us towards the same reality as Christian reflection and insight’.<sup>25</sup> He ends by noting that psychology provides ‘a glimpse of some of the mechanisms which make the Exercises effective in fostering our growth before God’.<sup>26</sup> For his part, Meissner writes that ‘there is plenty of room for endorsing [the] principle of integral action of nature and grace as proposed in the Ignatian paradox in the clinical interaction with patients in the analytic setting’.<sup>27</sup> For these authors, as for myself, psychological and spiritual collaboration need to produce insights for each discipline. I am at one with these authors in insisting that we need to learn from both psychology and theology. But psychology will give us true insight only if we recognise that the Ignatian Exercises open us up to a reality beyond the ego, to the Holy Spirit engaging a person in the painful yet joyful realities of new life.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Callaghan, ‘Do Teddy Bears Make Good Spiritual Directors?’, 19.

<sup>26</sup> Callaghan, ‘Do Teddy Bears Make Good Spiritual Directors?’, 32.

<sup>27</sup> Meissner, ‘The Ignatian Paradox’, 44.

<sup>28</sup> I would like to acknowledge the helpful comments of Drs P. Endean and D. Wright on earlier drafts of this essay.