

DECEPTIONS IN DISCERNMENT

Antonio Guillén

WHEN DISCERNMENT IS BEING CONSIDERED, we need to take the possibility of self-deception into account. No matter how generous and well-intentioned our own desires and offerings may be, it is to the calls and replies of the Lord that we must be listening. And yet experience teaches me that, almost inevitably, my own voice will be heard interfering with the Lord's, and the effect will be to deform God's message quite radically. How then can we know that the calls and replies being received really come from God and are not just our own, invented from our own worries and our own choices? Are we taking the Lord's name in vain? When our desire is to discern the will of God on some particular point, how can we be sure that we are truly leaving ourselves behind?

Such problems could not escape the notice of someone such as St Ignatius, that master in the art of suspicion-of-self. Admittedly he waited until the Second Week of the Exercises before commenting on them; because, for those unversed in matters of the spirit, 'the matter dealt with will be too subtle and too elevated to be understood' (Exx 9). Unfortunately the real danger exists today—for beginners and for the more advanced—that we have too easily overlooked his warnings.

In the course of the Exercises, such warnings appear at the very start of the Second Week.¹ While encouraging us in the following of Jesus, St Ignatius at the same time makes several explicit references to

¹ The most fundamental points come under the heading: 'Rules for the same purpose, serving for a more advanced discernment of spirits. Rules more applicable to the Second Week.' (Exx 328) They were written in Rome c. 1540, and form a complement to sections written earlier, basically in Manresa, in 1522: the Meditation on the Two Standards (Exx 136–147), with its 'Preamble' (Exx 135), added later, and the 'Rules by which to perceive and understand to some extent the various movements produced in the soul Rules more suitable for the First Week' (Exx 313–327). Thus Ignatius was conscious of the theme of deception throughout the whole process of working out the Spiritual Exercises.

‘habitual deceits’ and ‘hidden snares’ (Exx 332, 334). In his piling up of negative expressions (‘specious arguments’, ‘evil intention’, ‘wickedness’, ‘perverted purposes’, ‘depraved intention’, ‘deception’ [Exx 329–336]) we can sense the pain and anger of someone who has often found himself tricked and nonplussed in his spiritual life. From what we know of St Ignatius it comes as no surprise that he feels the need to draw up ‘rules’ to give advice that may be of help to others in the practice of discernment, because of what he has himself ‘detected and recognised’ (Exx 334).

As we attempt to follow in his footsteps, perhaps what he would want us to do is to gather together more systematically his scattered remarks, and present them in order, freeing them from a language that is now archaic and so allowing the transmission of the practical wisdom they contain. What he has left as our inheritance in this area continues to be as valuable as ever.

Discernment Can Only Take Place In Contemplating the Life of Jesus

In religious and clerical circles ‘discernment’ has become something of an umbrella word. With overuse it has come to include much more than was originally intended. It is a word and a concept requiring many preconditions. St Ignatius himself carefully constructed a context for his remarks, which cannot be understood when taken out of that context. It is quite alarming to hear a person of some spiritual standing remark—no matter whether the subject is of major or minor importance—‘I have discerned so-and-so’, in a tone of voice that excludes any possibility of explaining the reasons. It is as though to say, ‘It’s my affair and there’s nothing more to be said!’ The situation becomes even more worrying when the word ‘discernment’ is used in cases that may involve, for instance, the rejection of a previous obligation, or the clinging on to a self-chosen work, or the stipulation of certain conditions before accepting another. And in all these cases there is not the slightest reference to contemplation of the life of Jesus or to the distinguishing marks of his Kingdom.

In fact, none of these examples can really be said to involve ‘discernment’, at least as this was understood by St Ignatius. For him such a process can only be undertaken and properly carried out ‘while at the same time contemplating’ the life of Jesus (Exx 135). The key to interpretation needed in all discernment is the incarnation, the decision

of the Trinity: 'Let us bring about the redemption!' (Exx 107) Then comes the great call of Jesus which encourages us 'to come with me' through life for this task (Exx 93, 95). The mission that each Christian is given cannot be properly understood outside this precise context.

Consequently, at the start of any discernment process, the advice given by St Ignatius needs to be carefully weighed and borne in mind: 'while at the same time contemplating his [Jesus'] life, we shall begin to investigate and ask in which life or state the Divine Majesty wishes to avail himself of us' (Exx 135). Without such contemplation no discernment is possible; in reality our own spontaneous and natural ways of thinking follow quite different coordinates from those employed by Jesus. Unless we enter with empathy into his mind, we can hardly expect the results of our own reflections to be in harmony with his logic.

The parable of the Two Standards works on the basic assumption that one can always expect a head-on confrontation within the soul between our own egoism urged on by 'the coveting of wealth' and 'the empty honours of the world' (Exx 142)—and the 'sacred doctrine' of Jesus, which inspires us deliberately to abandon the preoccupation with self: for 'it must be borne in mind that a person will make progress in things of the spirit to the degree to which they divest themselves of self-love, self-will, and self-interest' (Exx 145, 189). Despite the apparently Manichaean tone of terms such as 'the good angel' and 'the bad angel', or 'the supreme and true commander' (Exx 139) and 'the enemy of human nature' (Exx 7, 10, 136, 333, 334), what these expressions emphasize is the radical conflict between two opposed proposals, two ways of thinking, two logics that cannot be reconciled with one another, both of which 'come from outside' (Exx 32) and await our free response.

***The radical
conflict
between two
opposed
proposals***

If we are asked to discern 'while at the same time contemplating' scenes from the life of Christ, surely it is because there should be some relationship between the result of the discernment and what is 'felt and relished' in the contemplation. We are urged to keep in the memory—and recount to others—those moments or scenes in which we have found ourselves called by the Lord Jesus; in which we have felt the need to imitate and love him more; in which we have discovered our hearts 'burning within us'; and in which we have discovered the call to a new way, following in his footsteps. However, if our discernment has not been of this sort, but has been taking place



St Michael Weighing Souls, *thirteenth century, Barcelona*

without any heartfelt seduction, how can we be sure that, throughout the process, we were really listening for his voice? Should we not rather suspect that we have been playing with loaded dice?

Self-deceit Hidden under the Appearance of Good Reasons

Despite a widespread misinterpretation of the teaching of St Ignatius, the reality is that, for him, no decision or spiritual election can be made simply and solely in the light of reasons for and against. Not even his 'Third Way' of making a 'sound and good election', chosen for a 'time of tranquillity', ends simply with a summing-up and appraisal of the pros and cons. Instead, 'after making an election', the person who made it should 'come before God our Lord, and offer him this election, so that his Divine Majesty may be pleased to accept and confirm it' (Exx 183). This implies that one has to adopt a waiting attitude, hoping that spiritual consolation will come, bringing happiness and deeply felt peace.

When Ignatian discernment is taking place, it is the heart-in-love that is the specially privileged witness, becoming aware of the 'various movements produced in the soul' (Exx 313). Only in its depths can one discern whether these movements come from the Lord or from oneself. More than anywhere else, it is the heart that receives the calls and replies of the Lord with the greatest assurance that they come immediately from God. Hence the importance of knowing how to recognise them.

To those searching for God, these calls come accompanied with 'courage and strength, consolations, tears, inspirations and quietness ... with true gladness and spiritual joy' (Exx 315, 329). Whereas the demands of egoism come with 'sadness and distress'. The two types of feeling cannot be mistaken for one another; all doubt is completely and for ever excluded.

Admittedly, the conflict and opposition between the two logics still goes on and never ends completely, because the 'evil leader' is always on the lookout for other modes of attack. The logic of our own egoism, which has been only superficially diverted by the greater seduction of a new love, struggles to hold on to its place in our hearts and sends messages to the head which will justify its demands. Suddenly, specious arguments appear with counter-proposals, 'false reasoning' which can 'harass, sadden and obstruct ... so as to impede progress' (Exx 315). The result is that deceit crystallizes into self-deceit, which is much more difficult to lay bare as it is camouflaged by fallacious reasoning.

The reply that now appears comes no longer from the Lord but from myself, and it is disguised by all sorts of argumentation, self-interested reasoning, and a paralyzing apathy, none of which were present in the discernment itself, but which now seek to undermine and alter its result. It is 'characteristic' of the enemy 'to fight against the joy and spiritual consolation, by bringing forward specious arguments, subtleties and one fallacy after another' (Exx 329). Though it may seem obvious, this warning of Ignatius never loses its relevance.

Is it possible, however, for a decision that sprang so clearly from what was passionately 'felt and tasted' in the heart simply to melt away because of seemingly persuasive reasons? When such arguments creep into view that seek to alter substantially what has been decided, there appear at the same time a loss of peace and an increase of sadness and trouble. These are the warning signs to which I should be attentive. Am I to give credence to arguments that seem to diminish the

consolation that has already been tasted, without bringing some equal or greater consolation with them?

There is one more consideration that can help us to strengthen our suspicions when we are threatened with self-deceit. It is often the case that we can be very blind when it comes to uncovering the falseness of our own self-justification and self-deceit; however, we tend to be very quick-sighted when it is a question of uncovering self-deceit in others! Are there not some lessons to be learnt here, both humble and practical?

Self-deceit Hidden under False Consolations

It is hardly surprising that much talk of 'deep joy' and 'peace in the soul', offered as proof and security that a discernment has been well made, brings with it the danger of a self-regarding misuse of the term 'consolation', which can be wildly inaccurate. In fact it is not unusual to hear someone add with great conviction, after minimal or erroneous consideration, 'But I am completely at peace', while unconscious that their non-verbal communication may be saying exactly the opposite. This common experience is typical of what constitutes self-deception.

St Ignatius was aware of this, both in himself and in others, and took great pains to formulate principles and criteria that would help us lay bare hidden falsehoods. In Ignatian language, 'It is characteristic of the bad angel to assume the form of an angel of light' (Exx 332), in order to trick us better. In other words, our own egoism knows how to invent substitutes for consolation when we need them as justifying proof for ourselves or for others. But obviously the results are not quite the same, and the advice of Ignatius makes this point.

Provided the examination made is fairly complete and has some depth, it is certainly possible to distinguish the original feeling from its substitutes, the true from the false consolation. We are all able to see that there are different types of happiness and very different degrees of peace, and that there can be changes of key in both cases. A spiritual person has to know how to get this sort of examination right.

St Ignatius, in his search for a yardstick that will efficiently and reliably confirm what is true consolation, introduces into the Exercises at this point (and only now) what he calls, in technical language, 'consolation without preceding cause' (Exx 330, 336). A great deal has

been written on this controversial topic,² but for our present purposes it suffices to say that, as is generally agreed, it refers to the completely gratuitous nature of God's intervention. It is the immediacy of God in the soul that is really being indicated (something that has been suggested from as early as the Annotations [Exx 15]) and at the same time the bounteous nature of God our Lord, which floods through the whole process of the Exercises and reaches a culmination especially in the Contemplation to Attain Love (Exx 230–237).

Anyone who searches for God already has, at the very least, a deep experience of the undeserved nature of so much in life: as St Augustine sensitively makes God remark, 'You would not seek me, if you had not already found me'. One becomes aware at some point of what it is suddenly to feel a happiness and peace that have no relation to any effort, any endeavour of one's own, or even to the life one is living. Very often there has been no adequate justification that might have given hope for such a gift, no 'preceding cause' that might have led one to suspect what was coming. Nevertheless, it is a genuine experience and the effects are known to be real and lasting. Fortunately it is imprinted on the memory, with all its revealing details which the heart cannot forget.

A happiness and peace that have no relation to any effort

The advice that is being given at this point, in order to avoid or remove self-deceit, is to compare the levels of happiness and peace which appear at the present moment—and are open to doubt—with that other exceptional memory with its lasting and strong effects—which is not open to doubt. Whenever the degree of happiness and peace now being felt fails to measure up to that yardstick—that which was, 'without doubting or being able to doubt' (Exx 175), true consolation—one should not yet give the present experiences 'complete credence' (Exx 336). Putting this in Ignatian terms, there are still reasons for suspecting that they come from the bad angel, and that he is tempting us 'under the appearance of good' (Exx 10, 331, 336).

At first, it may be difficult to put this Ignatian advice into practice, but eventually it becomes very clear and revealing. It can be of service to everyone, bringing to light signs of proud obstinacy or other

² For a good, short exposition of the meaning of the term and the controversy it provoked, see José García de Castro, in *Diccionario de espiritualidad ignaciana* (Bilbao/Santander: Mensajero/Sal Terrae, 2007), 425–428; the same author has devoted a book to the subject, *El Dios emergente. Sobre la 'consolación sin causa'* (Bilbao/Santander: Mensajero/Sal Terrae, 2001).

symptoms of self-deceit. Nobody with any sense could compare these to the peace that overflows from true consolation

The Need to Scrutinise the Beginning, Middle and End of Our Thoughts

The struggle that goes on between the two logical systems, that of Jesus and that of one's own egoism, can never be said to have ended. Deceit is most entrenched when we deny this opposition and when we want to convince ourselves that the two standards can be reconciled. And no sooner does such a compromise fail to materialise in one area than the tempter—our own egoism—tries in another. One of the most common attempts is to suggest a self-interested diversion in the reasoning process of discernment.

Whenever this process of discernment has been taking place, and we have been attentive to the call of the Lord, then 'the whole course of our thoughts' should be 'good and tending towards what is wholly right'. But we cannot claim that all comes equally from God when something appears, that is 'bad or distracting or less good' (Exx 333), in the beginning, middle or end of the process. The correct interpretation, then, would be that these final thoughts belong rather to our own logic.

So at times it is not unusual for what began as a resolution to help others—something that belongs to the logic of 'the supreme and true commander' (Exx 139)—to finish up being simply a desire to exalt oneself—something that comes under the logic of 'the evil leader'. When this happens, it clearly shows that, despite our protestations to the contrary, we have not divested ourselves 'of self-love, self-will and self-interest' (Exx 189). The evil remained hidden in the unguarded cellars of the ego. What is harmful is that now it comes to the surface, pretending to be a valid and genuine consequence of our option for Jesus. If examined in a superficial and inadequate way, this deviation—and the self-deceit that follows—can actually pass unnoticed.

Perhaps something like this has happened not infrequently in our pastoral initiatives, both past and present. Quite often we find that what, in the beginning, was the good desire to hand on the Christian message freely in all its radical nature, has become, in the middle, some sort of manipulation that fails to respect others and, in the end, has become the justification for imposing a measure on others without proper consultation and with a barrage of condemnations, threats,

excommunications and moral censures against those who do not listen to us By then, surely our thinking has finished in ‘something bad or distracting or (at least) less good’ (Exx 333)? In place of the original true desire to preach without limits about Jesus and his Kingdom we move towards impositions, threats and condemnations. Only a ‘close attention to the whole course of our thoughts’ can provide a solution.

It is not by chance that St Ignatius uses here the Pauline image of the ‘angel of light’ (2 Corinthians 11:14, Exx 332) to describe the disguise so often used by the Tempter to trick us. We are warned by Ignatius of the constant need to pay careful attention in examining each step of the discernment (Exx 333–334).

Somewhat surprisingly, the suspicion that our self-interest may be interfering, even in the most holy, has to be extended to every level. Thus, even if at the start of the process the consolation was so genuine that one could not doubt the Lord’s call, St Ignatius insists that one should examine separately—‘carefully and attentively’—the ‘precise time’ of the experience and its ‘afterglow’: because the ‘after-effects of the consolation now passed’ do not legitimise all of the thinking that follows ‘during this second period’. We should never forget that at this time ‘we form various plans and opinions which are not directly given by God our Lord’ (Exx 336).

A full examination that covers all stages of the experience will finish up revealing the ‘serpent’s tail’ of the Tempter, ‘the evil end to which he leads’ (Exx 333); the effect is felt at once in the heart because ‘in the end the



St Michael Fighting the Dragon, by Dürer

soul is weakened, upset or distressed, losing the peace, tranquillity and quiet previously experienced'. For St Ignatius here also there is a definitive and unmistakable warning signal. That is why he emphasizes the link between a change of key in the peace and joy felt in the soul and the deceit and triumph of 'the enemy of our progress and eternal well-being'. It is most important for a spiritual person to listen for such an alarm-bell and to have the skill to recognise it.

The Gentle Breeze, Not the Loud Thunder, Is Characteristic of God

Along these lines we find another piece of advice given by Ignatius to help anyone engaged in discernment to distinguish promptly the logic of the Lord from that of the Enemy. It is known (from the testimony of Nadal) that in his old age St Ignatius would tell his fellow Jesuits that, from the beginning of his following of the Lord, 'he was carried gently by God to where he did not know'. So it is not surprising that an appreciative reference to the gentleness (*suavidad*, sometimes translated as 'sweetness') of God's calling would not be lacking in the advice he gives.

Earlier in the Exercises a reference to this gentleness had appeared linked directly to the presence of God or the call of Jesus (Exx 124, 275). But it is especially here, in the advice for discernment in the Second Week, that it appears as a specific manifestation of divine action in the soul: Ignatius refers to 'the state of sweetness [*suavidad*] and spiritual joy' which the person experienced prior to being tempted; because 'the good angel touches the soul gently, lightly and sweetly' (*dulce, leve y suavemente*, Exx 334–335).

The scene that immediately comes to mind is that of Elijah on Mount Horeb, who did not find God in the great wind, nor in the earthquake, nor in the fire, but in the murmur of a gentle breeze (1 Kings 19:11–12).³ Similarly for St Ignatius the manner of God's revelation is not noisy, like the plop of water on stone. The images that convey more clearly what he felt about the awareness of God's presence, both in himself and in others, are those of water seeping into a sponge, or of the good angel entering the soul 'quietly, as one would enter one's own house by an open door' (Exx 335).

³ There are various interpretations of this phrase: that given follows the Spanish *el susurro de la brisa suave*, but RSV gives 'a still small voice', and NRSV 'a sound of sheer silence'.



Elijah on Mount Horeb, by *Daniele de Volterra*

Right from the start, with the Rules for Discernment of the First Week (Exx 314–315), there are references to the radical difference in the way both the good and the bad spirit act according to the disposition of each person, if it ‘is either contrary or similar to these angels’ (Exx 335). This holds true as an unequivocal pointer for discernment at all times. In the case of those searching for God, the good spirit enters bringing ‘courage and strength, consolations and quiet’, while the bad spirit arrives ‘to harass, sadden and obstruct and to disturb with false reasoning’ (Exx 315). On the other hand, in the case of those not searching for God, both spirits use the opposite procedure and act *contrario modo*. The same happens at this later stage, and the same criterion can be used to cut short any deception.

No spiritually minded person should ever allow this to slip his or her memory once the experience has been recognised within. One needs to grow in sensitivity to the recurring patterns of God in one’s life. One has to recognise the particular way in which one has grown accustomed to recognising God’s calls. Also one must treasure those indications from the Lord—felt deep in the intimacy of the heart—that have often acted both as checks or corrections and as spurs to action, as happened

to the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:25). The Lord's way of dealing with each one is not to rain, but to pour! He likes to open rich seams in which 'his devoted soul' can time and again find and enjoy his presence. He carries that soul discreetly and gently along 'the way in which she will be better able to serve him in the future' (Exx 15). The path that has been opened runs smoothly.

On the other hand, when there are sharp shifts in that deeply felt communication, these are not due to God but to the Enemy, who inclines more to the spectacular and flamboyant than to the gentle and discreet. A spiritual person has to be convinced that God does not make use of the bizarre, the extravagant, the extempore, and brilliant revelations in order to communicate with those who seek God, but just the opposite. God does not talk in shouts, and does nothing that can make listeners lose their peace or call into question God's discreet gentleness.

Discernment Is Not a Technique, but a Constant Call to Search for God

The texts on discernment can only be understood within the context where St Ignatius presents them: that is, the benevolence and utter gratuity of God. Very significantly, the Ignatian meditation on the Two Standards does not end, as one might have expected, with the election by the exercitant of the good Standard, but with the humble triple petition to be 'chosen and received under his standard' (Exx 147).

In a similar way, should the outcome of a discernment be that I begin to suspect that I am excessively attached to some form of self-deceit, the meditation proposed—on the Three Classes (Exx 149–156)—does not end with an exhortation to tear myself free of an attachment. Instead it encourages me warmly to ask, on three occasions, with all my strength and energy—'even though it goes against carnal instinct' (Exx 157)—that the Lord will set me free.

But there is even more. When discernment reaches the stage where the exercitant has to 'consider attentively ... from time to time throughout the whole day' (Exx 164) how important it is to desire the love of God to the point of madness, in order to forestall our hidden self-deceits and strengthen our own integrity, the exercise proposed—on Three Kinds of Humility—does not conclude, as one might have expected, in a formal decision to love God in this way, but in a new triple petition to the Lord asking 'to be chosen, should the Lord so

wish, for this third kind of humility, which is greater and better, so as the more to imitate and serve him' (Exx 168). One asks the Lord three times for everything. Or to put it better, St Ignatius proposes that, for everything that has to do with discernment, we should hear ourselves asking for what we want three times. This is to help us to be well aware what a gift all this involves. Undoubtedly, discernment is not, and cannot be, the putting into action of some spiritual technique. Instead it is opening oneself to a spirit and to a gift. This is the only context that allows one to understand and apply all these texts correctly.

Whenever we lose sight of this context, the possibility of deceit grows. Thus, if we assume that discernment is a matter of skill in the application of rules for consulting some sort of divine oracle, we shall not succeed in what we are trying to do. The soul becomes bereft of peace and deep happiness, and there can be none of the spiritual profit that had been promised. But if, on the contrary, I humbly approach God with my hands stretched out like those of a beggar and with my needy heart truly open, the word of the Lord can enter straight into my soul and the heart is left burning within me.

When we discern, we are not asking for privileged information concerning life and its crossroads. Rather, we are making ourselves ready to begin a permanent dialogue—one that will be lively, friendly, continuous, ever fresh and never-ending, with the Lord Jesus, concerning the incidents of our following day by day in his service. With such an attitude, it becomes easy to spot and correct the deceptions of our egoism; whereas with an attitude that is self-reliant, we can never become free from them.

To close with a graphic image: the best advice Ignatius can give to those who search for God is: 'Do not stop!' Deceit enters when we come to a standstill and start looking at ourselves. When that happens, discernment brakes to a halt.

translated by Joseph A. Munitiz SJ

Antonio Guillén SJ, a native of Valencia, entered the Society of Jesus in 1962. He has taught business studies, and worked for many years in Jesuit administration. He is currently director of the sanatorium at Fontilles.