'FROM GOOD TO BETTER' OR 'FROM BAD TO WORSE'

Exercises 335 with Diagram

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THE SEVENTH OF IGNATIUS' Second Set of Rules for the Discernment of Spirits reads as follows:

> Seventhly, in those who are moving from good to better, the good Angel touches such a soul sweetly, lightly, and smoothly, as a drop of water does when entering a sponge; and the bad angel touches it sharply, noisily, and with disturbance as a drop of water does when it drops on a rock: those, however, who are moving from bad to worse, the aforesaid spirits touch in the contrary way. The reason for this is, the disposition of the soul is either contrary to the aforesaid Angels, or similar; when the disposition is contrary, the spirits enter blusteringly and in a way that can be felt, so that their arrival can easily be spotted; when the disposition is similar the spirit enters silently, like someone entering their own house, with the door open. (Exx 335)

I must confess that for all too many years I equated the phrase 'from bad to worse' with the state of those in the very first of the Rules for Discernment, in the First Set (Exx 314), and encouraged others to do the same. The early Rule is about people going from mortal sin to mortal sin, and therefore finding the things of God resistible, but sin irresistible. Without labelling alcoholism as a mortal sin, since no matter how we label it in this case free will has almost disappeared, we could think of how someone in the throes of alcoholism would find the thought of giving up drinking disturbing and upsetting, whereas the thought of finding another drink would seem life-giving and welcome.

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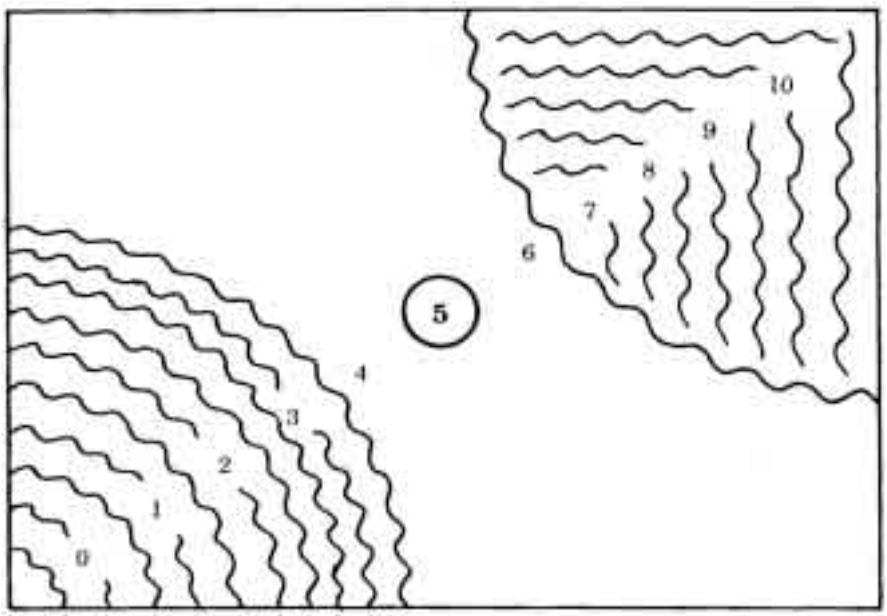
But the Rules of the Second Set are for people who have more or less got the drift of the First Set, and can now begin to notice more subtle and insidious temptations, as a result of which they can go from good to better without being constantly relegated to square one and starting again after failure. So how may we describe the difference between people going from good to better in the advanced class and people going from bad to worse in the advanced class? My solution over the years, indeed until recently, has been to ignore the difference, and to state to anyone who would listen that the Angel of God is the one who speaks to our hearts sweetly, lightly, smoothly like a drop of water entering (not dropping on) a sponge. Yet Ignatius says quite definitely that the bad angel can slip in just as sweetly, lightly and smoothly if we are not watchful.

Nevertheless I have in fact been taking the bad angel very seriously for many years now, having succumbed to deceitful notions more than once, to my own distress and that of many others then affected by my unwisdom. Finally, in 1986, while under the care of the psychiatrist Dr Harry Egdell, I began to see a pattern repeating itself, a pattern that offered the chance of a solution, a way to spot the deceptions as soon as they arrived. The diagram I made of this pattern eventually appeared in my book *Finding the Still Point*, and I reproduce it here with the permission of David Wavre, the publisher.



The title of the diagram is 'Two Kinds of Desolation': the first relates to depression and lack of inspiration, and the second to over-stress and overexcitement or obsession. When Ignatius, or anyone else, asks us to go against the desolation, *agere contra*, in order to find consolation again, it is quite vital to know which kind of desolation we are in. If we are in the depressed kind, we need to work upwards to a better frame of mind; but if we are in a situation of overwork, over-strain or over-stimulation then the way to regain a peaceful frame of mind is to climb down the scale and do less. Sadly, it is not always easy to tell the difference between the two forms of desolation, since high stress can make people feel depressed, with the result that they may work even harder to try and shake it off, thus making the situation worse instead of better. And so on.

The meaning I gave to the numbers in the diagram works like this:

> (0) stands for complete depression, when a person needs constant medical care.
>
> (1) is also clinical depression, but not quite so severe—the person could be on the way up, or still on the way down.
>
> (2) is severe depression still, but sufferers are physically able to look after themselves, even if they are unable to work for a time. It might be the result of a sudden bereavement or being made redundant.
>
> (3) is 'Monday morning feeling', but experienced all the time, not just on Monday mornings.
>
> (4) is slight depression, hardly felt at all.
>
> (5) is the still point, the point of balance. It is like a yacht at sea in the perfect wind force for the craft, or a violin or guitar string tightened to the exact note for which that string was designed.
>
> (6) is slight over-stress or overexcitement, but hardly noticeable.
>
> (7) is felt over-stress or overexcitement, but the person feels able to cope.
>
> (8) is when stress or excitement is felt to be too much, but is not easy to withdraw from—a crisis time when control is being lost.
>
> (9) is when the stress or overexcitement has won the battle, but nobody else has yet realised the fact.
>
> (10) is when the fact becomes obvious, and the person is clinically manic or in breakdown.

In shorthand, people in moods (0) to (3), or in (7) to (10), are in desolation, and people stable in (4), (5) or (6) are in consolation. Most people operate between (3) and (7) most of the time, with occasional climbs to (8) in a crisis, or dips to (2) when serious losses occur.

How does this diagram relate to the difference between 'from good to better' and 'from bad to worse'? First of all, consolation is the state for which Ignatius obviously expects us all to aim, since he tells us in so many ways how to get out of desolation. On my scale, which I call the *mood scale*, anyone who is living a life in consolation and is stable in (4), (5) or (6) is clearly going from good to better, since such a person can see clearly, is not lost in the woods, and is more likely to make instinctive good decisions in line with God's will and not his or her own will.

Furthermore, as I have advised many people, if we are labouring away at (7) or, even more clearly, if we are at (8), going from good to better involves turning our aim around and heading for (5). It is not good to be over-stressed, but as soon as we turn our aim, our desire, our will, towards (5), then our starting point is good, no matter where it is on the scale. After that, every move in the direction of (5) will be going from good to better. Immediately, a different kind of peace and 'drop of water on a sponge' is felt, and the clamour and splash comes instead from the frustrated ambition we were pursuing as if our happiness depended on it, but which now does not like to be abandoned.

When, on the other hand, we were peaceful somewhere between (4) and (6), and a desire takes hold of us do something beyond our capacity, or which we could do but have no legitimately free time in which to do it, then we have set our aim where it will take us to (7) or (8) on the scale, and we are going from bad (a bad idea, an unwise scheme) to worse, since such projects always lead to more and more complications.

The same language fits when we are going down the scale from a stable consolation at (4) towards numbers (3), (2) or, worse still, (1). We are going from bad to worse. But if we manage to turn round (that is, repent) and aim in an upwards direction towards (5), then we are moving from good to better, because our aim is now right, even though we are still suffering depression of some sort.

A good example of the upper numbers can be seen in Ignatius' temptation to pray long hours into the night instead of getting enough sleep in order to be wide awake at the next day's theology lectures (compare *Autobiography*, 54 and 82). He had forgotten his (5), his central resolve to be true to himself—to get qualified with a licence to teach theology—and was chasing the false appeal of mystical prayer which gave him the impression that he had already arrived at his true goal. He was getting carried away, up there at (8). In fact he was running away from (5) and playing into the hands of the bad angel: his Spiritual Exercises would never have been licensed if he had continued. At the moment he realised what was happening and turned around towards his true vocation—at that moment—he began going from good to better instead of from bad to worse. The thought of lectures was good again, but he sorely missed his prayers.

There is also an example from the life of Ignatius of a similar turnaround in the lower numbers of the scale, down there with depression. Ignatius was asked on one occasion how long it would take him to be reconciled to the inevitable if the Society of Jesus were abolished by the Pope. He said that a quarter of an hour's prayer should do it.[1] Of that the first five minutes, at least, would be a downward spiral of severe disappointment, after which he would, one hopes, come to his true self and aim back up from (2) towards his customary (5). It is worth noting that the movement towards the

[1] *Remembering Iñigo: Glimpses of the Life of Saint Ignatius of Loyola—The* Memoriale *of Luis Gonçalves da Câmara*, translated by Alexander Eaglestone and Joseph A. Munitiz (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2004), n. 182.

central (5) always has the effect of integrating the person, whereas movement down from (5) or up from (5) disintegrates, scatters and confuses.

In the Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius wants his retreatant to spot the deceits of the bad angel as early as possible, to limit the damage (Exx 334). Judging from my own experience of deceitful temptations, what blinded me to the shift from good water-on-sponge to lying water-on-sponge is the fact that I badly wanted something. Deep down, and perhaps unrecognised at the time, there was a desire for something that appeared to be good. Once, long ago, I badly wanted to shine at my philosophical studies as I had shone at every other academic subject before, when I was still at school. As a result I refused to acknowledge that I was out of my depth and made myself ill trying to complete an extended essay on Plato, moving from (5) and to (9) and beyond. Ignatius, I suspect, fancied himself as a permanent contemplative at the time when his prayers seemed so blessed, but in fact this was leading him away from the true Ignatius.

I find it significant that one of the books that Ignatius allows retreatants in the Second Week of the Exercises to read is the one he calls Gerson, which we know as *The Imitation of Christ*. The 'Ignatian' heart of the book is to be found in volume 3, chapter 15: 'What stance to take and what to say in prayer in the case of every desirable thing that comes our way'. Jesus is seen as warning the reader not to jump at every good idea that comes to mind, but to take thought and pray and surrender. Not every good idea comes from the good spirit. Present your good ideas to me, says Jesus, and be ready to abandon them if I say they are not good for you, or not what I want. Put yourself in my hands, let me turn you this way or that way, without your being biased towards what you wanted in the first place. The chapter includes the powerful advice, 'Love to be unknown and to be accounted as nothing'.

In the same way, I would say that what leads to our mistaking the downward, depressive spiral for something good is not getting something we wanted, or else losing it. When we lose something, it seems good to go looking for it; when we are bereaved, it seems good to enter into and dwell in the memories of the person we have lost, and so it is. But there is always a danger of not being able to escape in the end from the land of memories back into the present world. The

extreme case I am thinking of would be Miss Havisham in Dickens' *Great Expectations*, who never took off her wedding dress after the day when she was jilted. Our wants and desires are not always on the surface: even in bereavement, it can happen that we do not realise how much the person who is dying means to us until it is too late.

So perhaps the best way to avoid getting into the traps of the wrong angel is to study and pray about why we want what we currently want and why we miss what we have currently lost. We should use the kind of prayer in that chapter of the *Imitation*—along with any available clues as to how to turn our movement inwards towards our personal number (5). This takes us towards cognitive therapy, and matters beyond the scope of this article.[2] In general, though, it is worth recognising that to combat the experiences of (0) to (4) I need to insist that I am not rubbish, I am God's child. To combat those of (6) to (10) I need to insist that I am not God, but God's child. At (5) I am able to identify myself as this particular one of God's children.

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[2] See Donald Meichenbaum, *Cognitive-Behaviour Modification: An Integrative Approach* (New York: Plenum, 1977).