RECLAIMING THE PARTICULAR EXAMEN

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WHEN IGNATIAN SPIRITUALITY is mentioned in the more general context of Christian spirituality, it tends to be associated with imaginative contemplation, the General Examen and, perhaps, the phrase 'finding God in all things'. That the General Examen should figure so prominently owes a great deal to its rehabilitation from an overly sin-focused 'examination of conscience' to a rather richer 'examination of consciousness', following a seminal paper by George Aschenbrenner in 1972.[1] By contrast, the Particular and Daily Examen, which immediately precedes it, remains obscure. I have encountered attempts to recover it by swapping the idea of counteracting a particular sin for that of following a positive motto, but I cannot recall a single instance of anyone finding a richness in this to compare with that of the General Examen. This suggests that something is being missed.

A very quick summary of the Particular Examen (Exx 24–31), as it appears in the text of the *Spiritual Exercises*, would say that it engages with a particular sin or defect. Exercitants are to guard themselves against it on rising (Exx 24) and take account of the number of times it occurs (Exx 25–26), with a view to reducing or eliminating it. Ignatius suggests a diagram (Exx 31) to help them keep track of their progress, which also provides a helpful affirmation for the progress made. He suggests a discreet striking of the breast (Exx 27) each time they catch themselves falling into the fault.

Describing the Particular Examen in these terms invites a charge of Pelagianism, in that exercitants seem to be working out their own salvation without recourse to grace. It is also psychologically naïve to suggest that a significant defect or sin can be eliminated simply by trying a little

[1] 'Consciousness Examen', reprinted in George A. Aschenbrenner, *Quickening the Fire in Our Midst: The Challenge of Diocesan Priestly Spirituality* (Chicago: Loyola, 2002), 166–179.

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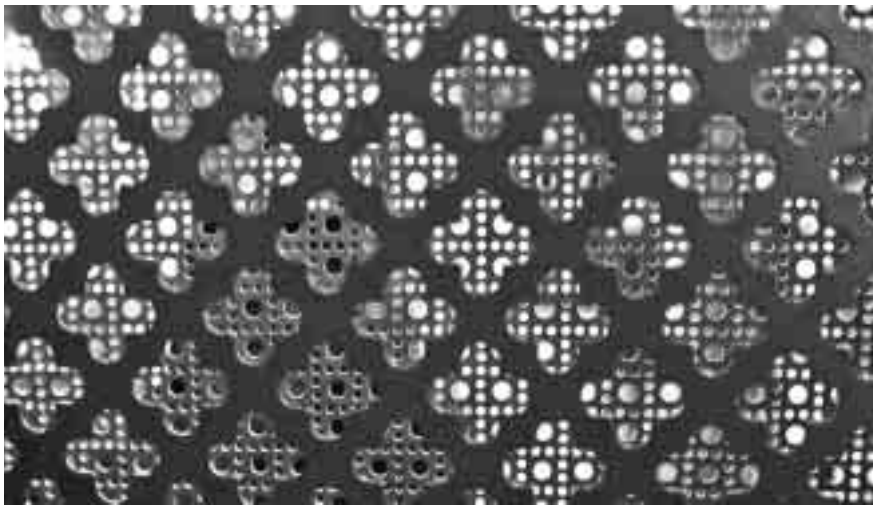

harder: it is difficult to imagine the Particular Examen, used as written, being of much use to a person who has repeatedly tried and failed to lose weight or to give up smoking, or to someone who has repeatedly gone to confession after losing his or her temper with a spouse, only to do so again a few days later. It could also be harmful, for example to people who have struggled against their sexual orientation, perceiving it to be sinful, before coming to realise that that it is how God made them. In each of these examples, the wise course would be to look at the underlying causes of the behaviour rather than simply to suppress it.

Yet a glance at the letters of Ignatius does not point to someone either Pelagian or psychologically naïve. I would like to explore ways of being with the Particular Examen in the context of the discernment of spirits (Exx 313–336) which avoid these charges. Before that, I would also like to consider some thoughts on understandings of sin and on the position of the Particular Examen in the Exercises.

Sin

The idea of sin, both individual and collective, has been the subject of reflection and exploration since the beginnings of Christianity. Much is owed to the work of Augustine, whose reflections were partly a response to Pelagius. Of particular relevance for my purposes here are the social changes between Ignatius' time and ours that have a significant impact on thinking about the context of the language of sin in the Particular Examen.

Ignatius was born in the year before Columbus discovered America and a quarter of a century before Martin Luther posted his *Ninety-Five Theses* for debate in Wittenberg. It was a world where Western Europe had, effectively, one Church and little exposure to other cultures. In Spain there was a memory of Moorish dominance. Though that might well have been the stuff of unconscious fears, the conscious effect was to make an apparently undivided European Christianity seem an attractive alternative to the Moors. Ignatius inherited a context where the distinction between sin as a personal matter and sin as transgressing the conventions of society did not need to be as nuanced as in the multicultural world we now inhabit. Nancy Caciola's book *Discerning Spirits* paints a picture of a mediaeval Europe in which divine and social order were closely linked, so it was natural to assume that someone under the influence of the good spirit supported the order of Church and society, but someone under the influence of the bad spirit was a threat to be dealt with by the apparatus of the state.[2] The Church was seen as well placed to make this distinction, which I suggest is because of what it held of the collective unconscious.

By way of a contrast, my mind jumps to John Oman. Writing in the early twentieth century, he offered a distinction between a moral person—who seeks to be accountable to God for his or her actions—and morality in the sense of following socially accepted conventions of behaviour.[3] Oman goes so far as to suggest that this latter heteronomy is 'at best a non-moral state and in constant danger of becoming immoral'.[4] His words precede the horrors of the Third Reich and of apartheid, in which what we would now see as evil forces took hold in countries deeply rooted in Christianity.

Ignatius sits at the turning point between these two worlds. In social terms, the Reformation was a key stage in the emergence both of the modern European nation state and of the diversity that frames the context for Oman. I do not think it is coincidence that both Luther and Ignatius were badly beset by scruples as young men, as if struggling in a time when an old order was breaking down. In psychoanalytic terms, this might be to suggest that the superego was not acting as an internalisation of society's

[2] Nancy Caciola, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages* (New York: Cornell UP, 2006).

[3] See Stephen Bevans, *John Oman and His Doctrine of God* (Cambridge: CUP, 1992), 71–72 for a summary of Oman's position.

[4] John Oman, *Grace and Personality* (Cambridge: CUP, 1917), 51.

values that would enable either of them to be at peace with his context, but as an expression of a world that was ceasing to work.

Ignatius' Rules for Discernment of Spirits (Exx 313–336) clearly have a connection to the world that Caciola describes, but they have also moved towards a more subtle exploration of interior experience. Where sin, in the sense of breaking rules, had been closely associated with what might undermine someone's connection with God, the focus was shifting more towards personal experience. One of the things Ignatius has in common with Luther and those who come after him is this appeal to personal conviction and experience. The Inquisition were probably right to be suspicious of Ignatius; and the relationship between the collective and the individual changed radically as the Reformation brought a new diversity of Churches and ideas across Europe.

That trend has gone a long way. Today it is impossible to think of sin simply as the breaking of accepted rules without also asking whether those rules are valid. Even someone deeply rooted in one religious or ethical tradition and its values is aware that others exist, which means things are relative. This leads me to see Aschenbrenner's rehabilitation of the General Examen as a return to Ignatius from a position where his words, read in a different historical context, had taken on an altered meaning. Aschenbrenner moves the General Examen from an emphasis on 'Where have I followed or broken the rules?' to 'Where have I met or not met God?'. In Ignatius' generation, the rules would have been seen as creating the context in which to meet God, making these two statements much more nearly synonymous than they seem today.

My quibble with Aschenbrenner's approach, as with David Fleming's modern paraphrase of the Exercises, is that it relocates the language of Ignatius too narrowly within one particular strand of modern religious culture.[5] I find it is often more helpful to invite a retreatant to go back to Ignatius and appropriate directly from his own text as well as via Aschenbrenner or Fleming—or to use their approaches as giving permission for modern appropriation rather needing to be followed too closely.

The task now is to ask what the Particular Examen might offer in stepping across from the medieval-becoming-Renaissance world of Ignatius to the twenty-first century. Just as Aschenbrenner and Fleming write out

[5] David L. Fleming, *Draw Me into Your Friendship: A Literal Translation and Contemporary Reading of the Spiritual Exercises* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996).

of their Jesuit heritage, it probably clarifies things if I acknowledge that, as a member of the United Reformed Church, I write with a debt to the Reformed tradition, which goes back to Calvin. I avoid the term 'Calvinist' because that tends to be associated with the conservatising lurch taken by the tradition after his death: for both Ignatius and Calvin there is much to be gained by moving the focus from their reception by subsequent generations back to themselves and their context.

The Position of the Particular Examen in the Spiritual Exercises

The text of the First Week of the *Spiritual Exercises* begins with the Principle and Foundation (Exx 23), then the Particular and Daily Examen (Exx 24–31), the General Examen (Exx 32–43), the note on General Confession and Communion (Exx 44) and then the actual exercises of the First Week. In his psychoanalytically informed study of Ignatius, William Meissner describes the Principle and Foundation as 'as direct and condensed an expression of Ignatius' ego ideal as I have found' and suggests that the thrust of the examens and note on confession convey 'a sense of the detailed and programmed character of his attempts to stem the torment stemming from his relentlessly punitive superego'.[6] In effect, this is to name an ideal in the Principle and Foundation and then to explore the first shortcoming that comes to mind in a process leading to an experience of confession.

To explore the first shortcoming that comes to mind

In writing this I am conscious of acting out of an assumption that the text of the *Spiritual Exercises* is what was given on the Long Retreat, and that the Particular Examen is primarily part of the process of the First Week of that retreat. As with the General Examen, I think it is much more widely applicable. Ignatius talks in the *Autobiography* (n.80) of giving 'spiritual exercises' in Alcalá in 1526/1527, but it is not so clear how those exercises relate to the now-familiar text, or how that text relates to what Ignatius actually did on a typical Long Retreat. I find it helpful to have in mind the possibility that the text of the *Spiritual Exercises* includes both material for a Long Retreat and for other retreats, and what today might be called his spiritual direction toolkit.

There is clear evidence that the Particular Examen was used in the context of a retreat, from its very inclusion in the text, and from its

[6] William W. Meissner, *Ignatius of Loyola: The Psychology of a Saint* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1992), 91, 94.

being mentioned explicitly in Annotation 18 and, as a way to address a particular fault, in the notes at the end of the First Week (Exx 90). In the early directories it is mentioned in relation to someone making the full Exercises and to someone making just the First Week. Ignatius' *Directives and Instructions* suggest that,

> The spiritual exercises should not be given in their entirety except to a few persons … but the exercises of the first week can be made available to large numbers … and some examinations of conscience can be given far more widely. (Dir 5:31)

I take the plural 'examinations' to refer to both the Particular and General Examens. Polanco (Dir 20:10) is explicit about this. Both Hoffaeus (Dir 17:5) and Miró (Dir 23:60) refer to people making just the First Week and leaving with the Contemplation to Attain Love. These clearly suggest that the Particular Examen would be part of a retreat of just the First Week.

Recalling the implications of Meissner's analysis, Davilá (Dir 31:64) says, 'the particular Examen is given in the second meeting. During the Exercises this Examen is used to remove defects that creep in regarding the additions and rules of the Exercises.' This is echoed in the *Official Directory of 1599* (Dir 43:111), and Miró explicitly mentions the Particular Examen being used in this way in each Week of the Exercises (Dir 23:105, 23:115, 23:124, 23:141). The interesting subtlety in this for present purposes is that the Particular Examen is advocated as a way of addressing 'defects' emerging during the Exercises, rather than major sins.

However, there are two little details in the description of the Particular Examen which are surprising if Ignatius was writing it solely for use in a retreat. One is the suggestion that

> Each time one falls into that particular sin or defect, let him put his hand on his breast, grieving for having fallen: which can be done even in the presence of many, without their perceiving what he is doing (Exx 27).

The 'presence of many' sounds more like normal daily life than a retreat. The other detail is that the table to keep track of progress (Exx 31) runs for seven days, beginning on a Sunday. This is the only place in the Exercises where the process is tied to a specific day of the week: it is hard to imagine Ignatius meaning that the Particular Examen should be given on the first Sunday of a Long Retreat and that the

process should then wait for a week. That suggestion makes far more sense in the context of what would now be called ongoing direction.

An Exercise for Beginners

One reading of the Particular Examen is as an introductory exercise to be given to someone of little experience who is either just beginning to receive ongoing direction or is making a first retreat. That fits with the suggestion in the *Official Directory* (Dir 43:89), presumably referring to experienced exercitants, that, 'our men who have made the Exercises completely should ordinarily go through the First Week in a fairly short time—sometime less than three or even two days', which implies not labouring over—or not giving—all the material for the First Week.

With an experienced directee, a literal reading of the Particular Examen might indeed invite charges of Pelagianism and psychological naïveté, because it does not engage with the causes of sin. But with a beginner things might have a different character: there is a wisdom in encouraging someone to do something specific as a way of getting in touch with the desire to draw closer to God, and seeking to give up a particular sin might be especially helpful—seeing sin as something that obstructs the connection with God. This would suggest that the primary object is in fact to draw closer to God, so the usefulness of the Examen does not depend on whether the sin is actually eliminated. The point when it becomes life-giving to engage with the actual causes of the sin might come at a later stage in the person's spiritual development.

A Nuanced Reading of the Particular Examen in the Context of Discernment

I would like to offer an alternative way of being with the Particular Examen, with an eye on the language of discernment rather than simply that of sin. Where the General Examen is a broad approach to deepening the connection with God, the Particular Examen is way to address something specific. The invitation is to attribute the perceived difficulty of a situation to the action of the bad spirit and infer that the good spirit is pulling in roughly the opposite direction.

The starting point for what I am suggesting is a personal experience of using the General Examen in a rather rough period. On the specific occasion I recall, the felt sense was that there were a number of things happening for me where the term 'bad spirit' was appropriate. What followed was a realisation that, if the term 'bad spirit' seemed to fit, then this opened up the consoling thought that the 'good spirit' could be inferred to be gently opposing it—both at the level of reality and of my perception. Suddenly things felt very different. Later that day I met up with a friend who noticed that there had been a change, even though the external circumstances were unaltered.

Formalising this a little, the approach I am suggesting is to jot down in one column headings that summarise the ways in which the bad spirit seems to be acting, and in a second column to write what seems to be the opposite for each of these. It is crucial that both activities are done at an emotional level, so that the felt realities of the situation and the felt opposites are recorded. The next stage is to form a short phrase out of the opposites. An example might be:

Characteristic of bad spirit	Opposite
trapped	free
uncreative	creative
oppressed	free
undervalued	valued
hopeless	hopeful

The words in the second column might come together to make a phrase such as 'free, creative, valued, hopeful'. Simply saying the phrase is a way of pointing in the opposite direction from the bad spirit. It is important not to use it as a mantra or as something to work at: as in my initial experience, the idea is that it is enough to name the possibility of the good spirit being inferred from the perceived actions of the bad.

In naming the key characteristics of what the bad spirit is up to and then choosing to point in the opposite direction, a person is making a good first guess at where the good spirit is gently pulling. This is particularly helpful when genuine positives are hard to find directly. In the language of sin and forgiveness, this is to treat sin as what leads a person to feel distant from God, to express the action of the bad spirit in terms of sin, and to choose to be open to the grace or forgiveness of God that counteracts it. In the language of the discernment of spirits, it is not actively to fight the bad spirit—which simply gives it more power. Instead the model is, at the very least, to name another possibility and, at best, to use the direction in which the bad spirit is pointing as a signpost to head the opposite way.

It is highly likely that the phrase that emerges is not a fully accurate description of where a person is being drawn, so it is essential not to hang on to it. I find it helpful to think of the phrase as a first guess which needs to be refined. It is important for retreatants to go through the whole process again, if it is needed, rather than staying with the same phrase, in order to model for themselves the reality that change is possible. This is so even if, by coincidence, someone comes up with the same phrase twice.

I have been surprised by how much is unlocked by this approach, both in myself and in directees. As director this means that I have this possibility in mind whenever a situation arises in which the term 'bad spirit' seems appropriate. Some of the most striking examples I recall are when the things a retreatant has listed as 'opposites' have surprised me, because they did not strike me being as the opposite of what was in the first column, as if something more subtle is being shown. I have also had some particularly memorable experiences where each item in a seemingly disparate list in the first column has the same opposite—perhaps 'understanding', 'creativity' or 'love'.

A Thought on Discernment

I am conscious of having used the terms 'good spirit' and 'bad spirit' without defining them, except by reference to Ignatius' rules (Exx 313–336).

The terms are often treated as though they can be heard either as metaphysical realities or as metaphors for internal processes. I think that is too simplistic, not least because God is often encountered in a person's internal processes and in ways that are not straightforward.

I thought it would be sensible at this stage to give a quick thumbnail sketch of the range of possible readings of the Rules for Discernment of Spirits: but I realised that I could do no more than scratch the surface. Instead I would like to refer briefly to Jacques Lacan, for a moment borrowing some of his linguistic precision. He offers the idea that metaphor is a form of 'condensation'—a term Freud originally coined to refer to the situation where one object in a dream stands for several associations or ideas. The Lacanian approach enriches that substantially, taking it beyond the world of dreams.

In the present context I find that this approach allows the phrases 'good spirit' and 'bad spirit' to maintain one layer of meaning at the level of what is perceived to pull towards God and what acts against this dynamic; and, at a more subtle level, it is what allows the terms to be used at all, in as much as they have apparent meaning. This allows an intentional non-clarity as to whether it means 'my experience of the metaphysical reality of God', 'my sense of God', 'my sense of good' or something less binary such as 'my mood', 'my fantasies' or 'my indigestion', where the terms in themselves also have some sense of meaning—much as it is possible to explore indigestion in the language of discernment as well as of medicine. William Meissner's reading of Ignatius' vision of the serpent[7] offers an exploration of how something can be experienced initially as the consolation-bringing work of the 'good spirit' and later re-understood as the disturbing work of the 'bad spirit', in a process that finally ends with the vision at La Storta, after which the experience does not recur. I read this as an integration of whatever had been going on in the vision of the serpent, without the details needing to be named. To frame it in theological language: however useful the terms, neither the good spirit nor the bad is outside God, regardless of how one's thought processes might cause them to be perceived. If they are not outside God, then they can all potentially be used to draw closer to God.

[7] At Manressa in 1522 Ignatius had the first of many visions of something that had 'the shape of a serpent, and … many things that shone like eyes. He used to take much delight and be consoled by seeing this thing' (*Autobiography*, n. 19).

A More Subtle Approach

In writing this I have moved a long way, from the simplistic language of sin to the subtle use of the discernment of spirits. I have in mind Annotation 17:

> It is very advantageous that the one who is giving the Exercises, without wishing to ask about or know the exercitant's personal thoughts or sins, should be faithfully informed about the various agitations and thoughts which the different spirits stir up in the retreatant.

Meissner rightly observes that a constant task for mystics is to sift their experiences, not least to distinguish those of the mystical realm from those with other sources, and he reads the Rules for Discernment of Spirits in this context.[8] It would be a mistake to apply such a treatment to the Particular Examen in too fixed a way: it is enough that, at the moment when they are used, the terms 'good spirit' and 'bad spirit' have meaning. This is to see the use of both terms as part of a process of integration.

Where the sophisticated use of a Lacan-influenced language of metaphor comes into its own is that it allows for a very subtle sifting of experiences under circumstances where, although the terms 'good' and 'bad' may have apparent meaning, a person can recognise that his or her perception is part of the process, so they are not absolutes. Though a person may conclude that a particular perception was wrong (as Ignatius does with the vision of the serpent), the assumption is that this exploring is ultimately in the context of God, whose reality is fundamentally good. This means that it is the actual process of exploring and attending to what is going on that leads someone more deeply into God—which is a great deal more subtle than the simplistic assumption that someone should follow the 'good spirit' and avoid the 'bad spirit'. The latter easily tips over into 'that which I perceive to be of God' in opposition to 'that which I perceive not to be of God', which places more emphasis on the perception than on God. In the language of projection, this is to say that people almost inevitably project unconscious material on to the 'good spirit' and the 'bad spirit': simply rejecting the bad spirit prevents them working with that of themselves that they are projecting.

I find it helpful to think with the same sensitivity and unknowing as would be appropriate in working with dreams, where the basic assumption

[8] Meissner, *Ignatius of Loyola*, 316.

is that a healing process is in play with which we are invited to cooperate, in a way that does not require understanding as a first stage. This is particularly acute when dealing with apparently bad dreams which become enriching when processed, where that outcome would be obstructed by resisting the dream as the work of the 'bad spirit'.

In writing this I have in mind Meissner's critique of *agere contra*, or acting against something, either desolation or the bad spirit.[9] Meissner suggests that this makes most sense in terms of drives and desires, and would almost inevitably lead, not to the elimination of what is opposed, but simply to its repression out of conscious processes. While this makes sense for Ignatius as a young man—and lies behind my assertion that the most obvious reading of the Particular Examen is psychologically naïve—I think it is clear that a process of deepening goes on. *Agere contra* takes on a very different feel if it becomes a careful sifting of the circumstances around desolation, relocating it from a bad thing to be resisted to an invitation to learn something of God. For Ignatius the process of maturing was gradual, but I am struck by the integrated language of Ignatius' spiritual diary, which makes astonishingly few references to 'good' and 'bad' spirits and instead seems to focus on a gentle being-with his experience.[10] In this, vastly more subtle, space, such a reading of the Particular Examen still finds use, but it is much more nuanced.

Another Perspective

It could reasonably be asked why I do not suggest a detailed exploration of the directee's list of headings under which the bad spirit seems to be operating. Some of these might feature elsewhere in work with the same directee. The point here is that, if the listing of headings and of their opposites, and the process of making a phrase from the latter, are all done emotionally rather than logically, then, as with dream work, the directee's internal processes are being engaged without having to be understood. This can be thought of as engaging the directee's metanarrative. In mathematical terms, it has a similar feel to transforming the co-ordinate system in order to simplify the solving of a complex geometric problem.

I typically suggest this approach to the Particular Examen in two circumstances. One is if what is being named feels as if it all has a strongly

[9] Meissner, *Ignatius of Loyola*, 103–105.
[10] See *Inigo: Discernment Log-Book, The Spiritual Diary of St Ignatius Loyola*, edited and translated by Joseph A. Munitiz (London: Inigo Enterprises, 1987).

negative quality, as if the sense of the situation being overwhelming or intractable could itself be seen as the work of the bad spirit. The other is when the situation feels highly complex, giving an intuitive sense that there must be a something beneath what is being said. My sense is of the mature Ignatius living with a rich set of mystic experiences which are saved from being bewildering by his willingness to sit lightly enough to wait and see what emerges. The language of good and bad spirits is a way of being with these experiences, provided there is sufficient generosity to recognise that understanding is incomplete and mistakes are made. That seems a healthy mindset to bring to this use of the Particular Examen.

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Though the Particular Examen can be read as an elementary exercise for a beginner in spirituality, I hope that I have opened up some much more sophisticated uses here, either at the stage when the language of a binary choice between good and bad spirits is useful—particularly where its action seems slightly perverse—or, moving on from that, in a highly subtle space where the terms 'good' and 'bad spirit' find a usefulness in themselves, even though the situation may not invite a simple reading in terms of good and bad. Counter-intuitively, this means that nourishment can be drawn from being able to describe something in terms of the action of the bad spirit.

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