The Spirit in Contemporary Culture

WHAT IGNATIUS DID NOT KNOW ABOUT MAKING DECISIONS

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DISCERNMENT IN THE PROCESS of decision-making is at the core of the Spiritual Exercises. The main purpose is that 'each one should desire and seek nothing except the greater praise and glory of God our Lord' (Exx 189). In order to help those who practise the Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius not only offers the process of the Exercises as a whole, in which retreatants confront their life with the Gospels and engage in a personal encounter with Jesus Christ, but also draws up specific rules: the Methods of Election, placed centrally between the Second and Third Weeks (Exx 169–189), and the Rules for the Discernment of Spirits, which are more suitable for the First Week (Exx 313–327) and for the Second Week (Exx 328–336), situated at the end of the work.

The quality and practical applicability of these directions surprise us time and again. They are still relevant in modern society and, upon reading management books on decision-making, I often wonder whether we should not better turn to the *Spiritual Exercises* instead. However, it is also true that in the last decades a lot of innovative scientific research has been carried out on decision-making. This work, mostly derived from outside the context of seeking the greater glory of God, can provide additional insight and is useful for those who are faced with a choice or who assist others in their decision-making process.

This idea inspired my somewhat provocative title here, which aims to benefit from what Ignatius did not know about making choices. There are two parts: the first indicates how making decisions in our present-day world is much more complex than during Ignatius' time—so, obviously, he did not know everything about decision-making. The second part attempts to reap the fruits from recent research on decision-making and to combine these results with the rules described in the *Spiritual Exercises*.

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Context

One of the main reasons why Ignatius could not know everything about making decisions is historical: we live in an entirely different cultural context from when the *Spiritual Exercises* was written. At that time there were simply fewer choices, choices were less complex and the need to connect personal freedom with making choices was less of an issue than it is today. Conversely, present-day society offers more choices, often of a more complex nature, and these choices reflect our autonomy more clearly. Moreover, people are often 'weary of making decisions', as Marc Desmet explains. Inspired by the work of the French sociologist Alain Ehrenberg, Desmet points towards a major cultural shift of the last century, which has become inescapable for us all: the culture of self-determination.[1] Central to the development of self-determination is that people make many more decisions themselves: they want, are able and have to do so.

People Want, Are Able and Have to Make More Decisions

People Want to Make More Decisions

Choosing is, more than ever before, considered to be something good. We assume that making choices brings us greater autonomy and freedom. Generally speaking, we think that, if faced with a choice, it is best to make the decision *ourselves*, since we reckon that this is the only way to be sure our preferences and interests are duly considered, and thus will determine the success of the decision. Today, in contrast to Ignatius' time, choices made *for* us by someone else are often experienced as something negative. And not only do we wish to make decisions ourselves, we also seek to maximise our freedom by increasing the number of available choices.

People Are Able to Make More Decisions

Our modern life is defined by multiple choice. The image of the supermarket with hundreds of products epitomizes this trend, but the availability of choice is not limited to the supermarket: the internet has an additional (almost inexhaustible) supply of products and commodities, increasing

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[1] See Alain Ehrenberg, *La fatigue d'être soi: Dépression et société* (Paris: Jacob, 1998); English edition: *The Weariness of the Self: Diagnosing the History of Depression in the Contemporary Age*, translated by Enrico Caouette and others (Kingston, On: McGill–Queens UP, 2010); Marc Desmet and Ria Grommen, *Moe van het moeten kiezen: Op zoek naar een spiritualiteit van zelfbeschikking*, new edn (Tielt: Lannoo, 2013).

exponentially the number of available things to buy. Notably, this phenomenon of a multitude of choices does not merely apply to shopping, but also intersects with the essential aspects of life.

In Ignatius' time there were two major possibilities for choice in civil status (considered by Ignatius as 'unchangeable' elections [Exx 171]): marriage or religious life. Nowadays, when filing a Belgian taxation form, various other options for civil status are available: (legally) cohabiting, married or cohabiting with a person of the same sex, divorced, (legally) separated, and so on. Moreover, these choices are commonly perceived as changeable. Many young, and slightly older, people are hesitant about committing themselves to 'unchangeable' choices. The abundance of choice also applies to beginning and end of life decisions: whether or not—and how—to have a child, how to respond to terminal illness, and so on.

This variety of options puts before us decisions that were previously perhaps not entirely absent, but certainly not as diverse; nor did they manifest themselves so explicitly as they do nowadays. This diversity also reflects the complexity of certain choices which, in themselves, might be the right thing to do, though they are not exactly in accordance with church doctrine. Concerning the latter cases, Ignatius took a more unequivocal stance than is usually the case today. For Ignatius, in these situations, one should not make an election (Exx 170).

People Have to Make More Decisions

As Nikolas Rose, professor of sociology at the London School of Economics, eloquently puts it:

> Modern individuals are not merely free to choose, but *obliged to be free*, to understand and enact their lives in terms of choice. They must

> interpret their past and dream their future as outcomes of choices made or choices still to make.[2]

When browsing through supermarket aisles, we are *obliged* to choose between different brands of jam if we want any jam at all. For students at university, degrees are not offered with a fixed curriculum: there is a variety of optional courses available, between which they are obliged to choose. This obligation also applies to the more essential issues in life: while we might be opposed on principle to some kinds of prenatal test or to euthanasia, when faced with certain situations in life, we are still confronted with the availability of these choices, even though in the end we may reject them. Thus, self-determination has become a life mission.

The Other Side of the Coin

The availability of so many choices has advantages: more options are before us, and we enjoy a higher degree of autonomy than before. Yet, recent research, much of it carried out by US scholars, illuminates the other side of the coin.

Not Everyone Wants to Decide More

The idea that we want to make more decisions is rooted in a preconceived notion that this must be a good thing, because of the greater autonomy and freedom involved. However, as Sheena Iyengar points out, not everyone wants to make choices to the same degree. There is a strong cultural influence on how far people are willing to make decisions: 'We all want and need to be in control of our lives, but how we understand this control depends on the stories we are told and the beliefs we come to hold'.[3] These societal and cultural factors involved in decision-making are not considered by Ignatius.

Iyengar carried out tests on a sample group of children and adults from Anglo-American and Asian American cultural backgrounds.[4] One of these tests randomly divided the children from both cultures into three groups to solve anagrams. The first group could choose their own word-puzzle and a coloured marker-pen to work on it. The second group was assigned a particular puzzle and marker by the teacher (after seeing all available options). The third group was told that their mothers had selected this particular puzzle and marker for them as the one that suited them best.

[2] Nikolas Rose, *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999), 87.
[3] Sheena Iyengar, *The Art of Choosing* (New York: Twelve, 2010), 28.
[4] Iyengar, *Art of Choosing*, 48–49.

Anglo-American children performed better and worked longer when they were able to exercise personal choice. When someone else told them what to do, their performance and motivation dropped dramatically. In comparison, Asian American children performed best and were most motivated when they believed their mothers had made the choice for them. There was a marked contrast between the two backgrounds: Anglo-American children were visibly embarrassed by the idea that their mothers had been consulted. 'You asked my *mother*?', one seven-year-old exclaimed. By contrast, Natsumi, a young Japanese American girl, asked her teacher: 'Could you please tell my mommy that I did it just like she said?' Each group had different ideas about making decisions and about the degree of importance they attached to decision-making itself.

This insight teaches us that we need to proceed with caution when assisting someone in making choices. We need to sense what appeals to a person or obstructs that person in making (a particular) choice. Education and culture can be involved in the process. This prudence, which is necessary to facilitate decision-making, is supported by the idea that making decisions entails the exercise of freedom, but that narrowly autonomous choice is not necessarily the solution to everything. Perhaps choices made through an autonomy connected to others also constitute a kind of freedom.

More Decisions Do Not Necessarily Lead to Better Choices

The idea that the likelihood of making the best choice increases as more options are available is another widespread view. However, many choices involve deciding between things that are only slightly different, and the importance of our choice depends on our ability to differentiate between similar options. Comparing too many options leads to feeling overwhelmed and not making any choice at all. Paradoxically, being able to choose between more options does not necessarily lead to actual choices, nor does it necessarily lead to better choices.

Another piece of research by Sheena Iyengar aptly demonstrates this.[5] The research was carried out in a US supermarket known for its mind-boggling variety of choice: 150 sorts of vinegar, 250 sorts of mustard, 250 sorts of cheese, and so on. Researchers posed as salespeople representing a particular brand of jam. The study was carried out in two different phases. The first time, customers could taste an assortment of 24 jams, the second time only 6 jams were offered. In both cases, the customers received a discount coupon to spend among the large assortment of jams in the jam

[5] Iyengar, *Art of Choosing*, 183 following.

aisle. First, researchers checked how many customers entering the store were drawn to the jam booth: 60 per cent were attracted to the larger assortment, but only 40 per cent to the smaller one. When looking at the resulting purchasing choices, however, the distribution was entirely different. In fact, a substantial number of customers who tasted from the large assortment roamed around in the jam aisle, looking puzzled, and eventually left empty-handed. In the end 30 per cent of the people who had seen the small assortment proceeded to buy jam, whereas only 3 per cent of the people who saw the large assortment eventually bought something, despite the fact that the larger stand had initially drawn many more people. This 'jam test' has become a standard model for other studies. The conclusion is that in general (allowing for exceptions), when people are faced with a limited number of options (four to six) rather than a large number (twenty to thirty), they are more inclined to make a choice, feel more confident of their choice, and are happier with what they choose.

An important element in assisting people to make choices, or in making choices ourselves, is to be aware of how the number of available choices influences us. Does the number of options paralyze us? If that is the case, it might be a good idea to limit the number of available choices in order to emphasize the differences between the options before us.

The Obligation to Make More Decisions Can Be a Burden

According to Alain Ehrenberg, the increased prevalence of depression in present-day society can be linked to the burden of increasing choice.[6] This burden can also have other, if less serious, consequences. In his

[6] Ehrenberg, *Weariness of the Self*, 232.

book *The Paradox of Choice*, the US psychologist Barry Schwartz, who on many points agrees with Iyengar's research, indicates a number of other effects resulting from this obligation of choice, such as a shift in the responsibility associated with decision-making. He gives the example of patient autonomy in the medical world.[7] While in the past doctors often used to make decisions for their patients, now they present a number of alternatives, asking them 'What do you want me to do?' Thus, the burden of responsibility is shifted from doctors to patients, from those who are technically knowledgeable and competent to those who are probably less so.

Every advantage has its side effects. Too many options can lead to paralysis rather than liberation, so that more options ultimately result in fewer decisions, as proved by the jam test. But, even if we overcome this paralysis, Schwartz argues, we end up less satisfied with the result of our choice. He states there are three reasons for this. First, it is easy to imagine that we could have made a better choice. The presence of imagined alternatives encourages us to regret our decisions, which subtracts from satisfaction even if the choice was a good one: more options lead to more regret. His second reason pushes this view further: not merely the presence of an alternative option, but also the advantages of that option make us less satisfied with our final decision (this is termed 'alternative costs' or 'opportunity costs'). Finally, there is the problem of escalation of expectations. When there are many options, expectations go up, and satisfaction levels drop accordingly. 'Everything was better back when everything was worse: people were open to a pleasant surprise', says Schwartz.[8] The best you

[7] Barry Schwartz, *The Paradox of Choice: Why Less Is More* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 29–33.
[8] Barry Schwartz, 'The Paradox of Choice', audio talk and transcript (2005), available at http://www.ted.com/talks/barry_schwartz_on_the_paradox_of_choice.

can hope for now is that your choice meets your expectations: you will no longer ever be pleasantly surprised. The secret of happiness is to keep your expectations as low as possible. More than in the past, we are responsible for our own choices, and if things go wrong we can reproach only ourselves for it.

The potentially paralyzing factor in making choices is not simply that options are so numerous, but that the burden of responsibility associated with our choices is onerous. In assisting people in the decision-making process, it is important to be aware of this choice-fatigue: we can register what responses of consolation or desolation making choices elicits from us, how choosing, even during the Spiritual Exercises, might be paralyzing, and how we need help to overcome this paralysis.

Lessons for Making a Decision

The context in which we live, and the importance of choices within it, influence how we respond to choices taken according to the process described in the *Spiritual Exercises*. However, there are more things to consider than context. It might be beneficial to enter into dialogue with recent research into the decision-making process—especially from the domains of economics and psychology—in order to see how this research could nuance, deepen or supplement the directions of the *Spiritual Exercises*.

In the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius distinguishes between three times suitable for making a sound and good election (Exx 175–176): either we are moved by God so that the divine power so impels the will that all doubt, or rather all ability to doubt, is removed from the mind (the First Time, by spontaneous inspiration); or we can make a choice through the discernment of spirits, attending to the motions of consolation and desolation (the Second Time); or, in a time of tranquillity without much motion, we can make a choice on the basis of reasoned arguments (the Third Time). Ignatius develops two ways of making a good election according to this Third Time (Exx 178–188). The first method in the Third Time weighs the advantages and disadvantages of each option carefully, and the second attempts to filter out any subjective bias by striving towards greater objectivity.

Even though the *Spiritual Exercises* devotes ample attention to the discernment of spirits on the basis of consolation and desolation (the Second Time), the importance given to making a choice based on rational arguments (the Third Time) might suggest that Ignatius considered the latter more important. This apparent preference is consonant with the

widespread popular opinion that choices are best made rationally, not emotionally.

It is precisely in this area of reason and emotion in decision-making that much scientific research has been conducted. In what follows I shall first explore research that examines the connection between emotions and reason, and the variety and mechanisms of emotions. Then I shall consider different mechanisms for making decisions, which not only indicate that our rational choices are not always very rational, but may also help us in making a discernment orientated towards the greater glory of God.

The Enigma of Our Emotions

Emotions and Reason

A pioneering work on the connection between emotions and reason is Antonio Damasio's *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*. Contrary to the Cartesian view regarding the two as separate, Damasio has demonstrated, on the basis of neurological research, that emotions are a major component of the machinery of reason. He defends the view that 'reason may not be as pure as most of us think it is or wish it were, emotions and feelings may not be intruders in the bastion of reason at all: they may be enmeshed in its networks, for worse and for better'.[9]

Damasio points out that our ability to use cognitive strategies successfully is in all probability dependent on our ability to experience emotion. He does not claim that emotions are always working to our advantage, or that they take decisions for us, or that we are not rational creatures. He merely asserts that certain aspects of emotions and feelings are indispensable to reason: 'At their best, feelings point us in the proper direction, take us to the appropriate place in a decision-making space, where we may put the instruments of logic to good use'.[10] He demonstrates this by means of precise descriptions of people suffering from neurological damage, in whose brains the link between emotion and reason had been severed. These people may remain as intelligent as before sustaining the injury, but in their personal lives they often make decisions whose consequences are disastrous because the emotional component is absent from the decision-making process.

Damasio uncovers various mechanisms that play a role in the functioning of our emotions. He looks into the connection between

[9] Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: Avon, 1995), xii.
[10] Damasio, *Descartes' Error*, xiii.

emotions, bodily experience and the reactions these provoke in the brain. Based on this connection, he formulates his 'somatic marker hypothesis'. Somatic markers are physiological reactions, such as muscle tension, gooseflesh or sweaty hands, that are connected to a particular emotional event. These bodily reactions directly influence the areas responsible for decision-making in the brain. Thus, emotions are responses of both mind and body to different stimuli. Physiological change in the body is connected to the brain, where it is transformed into an emotion that signals to the individual what was just experienced. Damasio's theory, which is carefully developed and supported by neurobiological research, is counter-intuitive, and contradicts the idea that bodily reactions are a consequence, and not the cause, of certain emotions. One could say that we do not get palpitations because we are feeling anxious, but that our anxiety is experienced because our heart starts to palpitate.

Over time, emotions and their corresponding physiological reactions are increasingly associated with particular events and past outcomes. When we are taking decisions, such associations will encourage us to perform some actions and avoid others. For example, when we experience a somatic marker associated with a positive outcome, we will feel happy and motivated to pursue an associated action. When experiencing a somatic marker associated with a negative outcome, we will feel sad, and this emotion may then serve as an internal alarm, warning us to avoid an action.[11]

The understanding of somatic markers is helpful for someone making the Exercises: it shows that it is not only important to be aware of our present experience of consolation or desolation, but also to connect that experience with analogous past events when we experienced similar movements. Insight into the connection between reason and emotion more generally is also useful. The boundary between the Second Time (more orientated towards motions of the spirits) and the Third Time (more based on reason) might seem less clearly defined than initially appears. The complementarity between the two methods functions as circular movement. When we draw up of a list of advantages and disadvantages in 'tranquillity', we in fact already 'experience' them. This experience is often asymmetrical in the importance assigned to different advantages and disadvantages. Being aware of the asymmetry helps us to adjust our judgment and thus place God more centrally in the decision-making process, as is the purpose of the Spiritual Exercises.

[11] Damasio, *Descartes' Error*, 173 following.

Background Feelings

Apart from exploring the connection between reason and emotions, there is also quite a lot of research that seeks to distinguish between different types of emotions and feelings. Damasio, for example, singles out three different types of feeling. The first is what he calls 'Basic Universal Emotions': happiness, sadness, anger, fear and disgust. The second type consists in emotions that are slightly different from the above:

> Euphoria and ecstasy are variations of happiness, melancholia and wistfulness are variations of sadness, panic and shyness are variations of fear. This second variety of feelings is tuned by experience, when subtler shades of cognitive state are connected to subtler variations of emotional body state.[12]

The third type is 'background feelings': they originate from what Damasio terms 'background body states' rather than emotional states: well-being or malaise, calm or tension.

Even though the distinction between emotions and feelings is not always clear in Damasio's work, the existence and nature of these background feelings are crucial to discernment of spirits. Background feelings are linked to our mood, state of mind, flow of affects, *états d'âme*, as Christophe André terms it.[13] They are long-lasting and continuous, persisting even after the cause is taken away. What we feel when we exult with joy upon hearing good news is not a background feeling. It is an emotion on the surface rather than a profound undercurrent. A characteristic of background feelings is that they last longer than the particular situations that caused them.

There are various ways to connect with our state of mind in this sense. Often we only have to stop what we are doing: our *états d'âme* are always present, like background music: all we have to do is stop, for instance, when walking in the woods. We stop walking and listen to the wind, the trees, the birds and other sound impressions. We have to take time to appreciate such states of mind. We can become aware of them by being susceptible to the moments when they manifest themselves, sometimes unexpectedly and undesired: small and unplanned encounters in everyday life can incite a feeling of consolation or desolation which is not an

[12] Damasio, *Descartes' Error*, 149–150.
[13] Christophe André, *Les États d'âme: Un apprentissage de la sérénité* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2009), 19–23. English edition: *Feelings and Moods*, translated by Helen Morrison (Cambridge: Polity, 2012).

immediate reaction to a particular event, but which reflects an undercurrent that is more profound. Background feelings are the living heart of our connection with the world. We cannot really provoke or arouse them; they are there, they are given. Being conscious of background feelings can be helpful when making decisions.

The Duration of Emotions

Related to background feelings is the question of the duration of emotions. Philippe Verduyn, a researcher at Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, observes a great variation:

> Anger can last anywhere between a few seconds and several hours or even longer. Generally speaking, certain kinds of emotions last longer than others. The most prolonged emotion is grief, followed by (in decreasing order of duration) happiness, anger and gratitude. Why these differences exist is still under investigation.[14]

What factors determine how prolonged a specific emotion is in a specific person? Verduyn explains that,

> There are marked correspondences between one's character and the duration of one's emotions. Extrovert people enjoy positive emotions longer than introvert people, and neurotic people suffer longer from negative emotions than stable-minded individuals. I also researched the particulars of the event which provokes the emotion: one feels miserable when passed up for promotion, but this feeling will last longer when one had been anticipating this promotion for a long time, and will persist even longer when one thinks this promotion is unfairly given to someone else. The more of a mismatch there is between an event and one's objective, the longer the emotion will last. Of course, the relative importance of the event also plays a part: one will not mope for an entire day because there is no sugar to put in one's coffee …. [15]

Verduyn also points out that there are cultural differences in the persistence of emotion. Negative emotions generally last longer in collectivist cultures, such as in Africa, than in individualist cultures, such as in Western Europe.

The results of this research are still preliminary, but they point towards an important element which might be relevant to the discernment of spirits and the positive or negative feelings that are connected with

[14] Philippe Verduyn, quoted in 'Droevig duurt het langst: Doctoraat brengt dynamiek van emoties in kaart', *Campuskrant* (30 May 2012) (my translation).
[15] Verduyn, quoted in 'Droevig duurt het langst'.

consolation and desolation. It is useful to pay attention to the duration of experiences which may have an impact on how we will perceive those feelings while in the discernment process. Cultural differences in experiencing emotions also have to be taken into account.

Regret and Anticipating Regret

When explaining the second method of making an election according to the Third Time, Ignatius describes two future visions for exercitants to reflect upon: 'I will consider, as if I were at the point of death …' (Exx 186), and 'Imagining and considering how I will find myself on judgment day …' (Exx 187). In both cases they should 'think how at that time I will wish I had decided in regard to the present election'.

This future projection is a method often used subconsciously in decision-making, and in relation not only to reasoned argumentation, but also to the movements of our emotions. George Loewenstein and Jennifer S. Lerner distinguish between two types of emotions that arise during the decision-making process: the emotions experienced while weighing different options and deciding, and future emotions that we anticipate.[16] One of the most important future emotions for decision-making is regret, the fear of which looms large over many decisions people take. *If you don't do this, you'll regret it later* is a familiar warning, and the experience of regret is known to us all. As the Dutch psychologists Marcel Zeelenberg and Rik Pieters demonstrate, the emotional condition of regret is often …

> … accompanied by feelings that one should have known better and by a sinking feeling, by thoughts about the mistake one has made and the opportunities lost, by tendencies to kick oneself and to correct one's mistake, by desires to undo the event and get a second chance ….[17]

However, regret is a counterfactual emotion, since events cannot be undone. People who make decisions know they are inclined to regret, and the thought of a future painful emotion is often involved in the decision-making process. Notably, there is a kind of asymmetry in the emotion of regret: people expect to feel a stronger emotional reaction to an outcome that is the result of their own actions—for which they are more

[16] See George Loewenstein and Jennifer S. Lerner, 'The Role of Affect in Decision-Making', in *Handbook of Affective Sciences*, edited by Richard J. Davidson, Klaus R. Sherer and H. Hill Goldsmith (Oxford: OUP, 2003), 619–642.

[17] Marcel Zeelenberg and Rik Pieters, 'A Theory of Regret Regulation 1.0', *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 17/1 (2007), 3–18.

responsible—than to the same outcome if it was not the consequence of their own actions.

Moreover, the distinction between the 'default option' and 'deviating options' is also involved in the experience of regret. The default option when owning stock is not to sell it; and when meeting colleagues in the morning, the default option is to greet them. Selling and failing to greet your colleague both deviate from the default option and therefore easily provoke regret. This asymmetry in the risk of regret favours conventional and risk-averse choices. The bias appears in many contexts.[18]

Reflecting on anticipated regret is a useful technique in discernment: will I, ten years from now, regret this decision? Awareness of the asymmetry in regret can also be useful: will something I may regret result from my own actions and responsibility? Do I regret a decision more deeply because I departed from the default option? These considerations might help us to gain a clearer view of disordered attachments (Exx 179).

Our Reasoned Choices Are Not So Rational after All

In terms of Ignatian election, research concerning feelings and emotions is mainly (though not exclusively) relevant to the Second Time. But there is also a large body of scientific research concerning aspects of what Ignatius terms the Third Time—rational choice.

Daniel Kahneman is a world-renowned psychologist who won the Nobel Prize in economics for his influential study questioning the traditional rational model for how people make decisions. He starts out from two ways of thinking, called System 1 and System 2, originally described by Keith Stanovich and Richard West.

> **System 1** operates automatically and quickly, with little or no effort and no sense of voluntary control.
>
> **System 2** allocates attention to the effortful mental activities that demand it, including complex computations. The operations of System 2 are often associated with the subjective experience of agency, choice, and concentration.[19]

Richard Thaler and Cass Sustein use the terms 'automated' and 'reflective' to describe these two systems.[20] It could be argued that the First Time of

[18] Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (London: Allen Lane, 2011), 348–349.
[19] Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 20.
[20] Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness* (New York: Penguin, 2009).

choice in the Spiritual Exercises, when we spontaneously and immediately make a decision, may be subsumed under System 1. The Second and Third Times, which require more reasoning and discernment, controlled processes serving to decontextualise and depersonalise problems, belong to System 2.

People generally feel more drawn to System 2: the conscious rational self which holds its own opinions and makes choices and reflects on what to do and what to think. Nevertheless, according to Kahneman,

> Although System 2 believes itself to be where the action is, the automatic System 1 is the hero …. I describe System 1 as effortlessly originating impressions and feelings that are the main sources of the explicit beliefs and deliberate choices of System 2.[21]

Kahneman continues,

> The division of labor between System 1 and System 2 is highly efficient …. because System 1 is generally very good at what it does …. System 1 has biases, however, systematic errors that it is prone to make in specified circumstances.[22]

Since System 1 works automatically and cannot be switched on or off according to our own wishes, such mistakes in our intuitive thinking are hard to avoid. Moreover, 'System 2 may have no clue to the error. Even when cues to likely errors are available, errors can be prevented only by the enhanced monitoring and effortful activity of System 2.'[23] System 2 is too sluggish and inefficient to serve as a substitute for System 1 in routine decisions. Kahneman presents a selection of intuitive mistakes to teach us to recognise similar situations in which such mistakes might be made, and to help us avoid making them, especially when there is a great deal at stake.

Ignatius did not yet know about the biases that lead to these mistakes, but they are often relevant when making a choice according to the Second and, especially, the Third Times; therefore it is good to be aware of them.

Loss Aversion

As Kahneman explains, 'many of the options we face in life are "mixed": there is a risk of loss and an opportunity for gain, and we must decide

[21] Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 21.
[22] Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 25.
[23] Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 28.

whether to take the gamble or reject it'.[24] The ways we react to winning and losing are markedly different. The principle of loss aversion states that, when placed in direct comparison to each other, the possibility of loss outweighs the chance of gain. Kahneman gives a simple example:

> You are offered a gamble on the toss of a coin.
> If the coin shows tails, you lose $100.
> If the coin shows heads, you win $150.
> Is this gamble attractive? Would you accept it?
>
> To make this choice, you must balance the psychological benefit of getting $150 against the psychological cost of losing $100. How do you feel about it? Although the expected value of the gamble is obviously positive, because you stand to gain more than you can lose, you probably dislike it—most people do …. For most people the fear of losing $100 is more intense than the hope of gaining $150. [25]

We are happy when we gain, but losing is terrible. From these observations, Kahneman concluded that 'losses loom larger than gains' (about one-and-a-half to two-and-a-half times larger) and that people are 'loss averse'.[26]

> Loss aversion refers to the relative strength of two motives: we are driven more strongly to avoid losses than to achieve gains …. As we might expect from negativity dominance, the two motives are not equally powerful. The aversion to the failure of not reaching the goal is much stronger than the desire to exceed it.[27]

Being aware of loss aversion is especially useful in the first method according to the Third Time. Ignatius presses us 'to consider and reason out how many advantages or benefits accrue to myself … solely for the praise of God our Lord and the salvation of my soul' (Exx 181). This can be done by making lists of both the advantages and disadvantages of each option. Ignatius strives towards a very rational process:

> After I have thus considered and reasoned out all the aspects of the proposed matter, I should see to which side reason more inclines. It is in this way, namely, according to

[24] Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 283.
[25] Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 283.
[26] Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 284.
[27] Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 302–303.

> the greater motion arising from reason, and not according to some motion arising from sensitive nature, that I ought to come to my decision about the matter proposed. (Exx 182)

Awareness of loss aversion not only makes us realise the noticeable motions present in the decision-making process, but also gives us the insight that the relative weight of these motions, as in the case of loss, is asymmetrical.

The Reference Point

Another important insight necessary for discernment, which is related to loss aversion, is that our judgment is based on a neutral reference point which we develop on the basis of prior experience.

> You can easily set up a compelling demonstration of this principle. Place three bowls of water in front of you. Put ice water into the left-hand bowl and warm water into the right-hand bowl. The water in the middle bowl should be at room temperature. Immerse your hands in the cold and warm water for about a minute, then dip both in the middle bowl. You will experience the same temperature as heat in one hand and cold in the other.

In making decisions, we consciously or unconsciously compare to such a reference point. 'A reference point is sometimes the status quo, but it can also be a goal in the future: not achieving a goal is a loss, exceeding the goal is a gain.'[28]

In discernment, as in the rational method, we have to be aware of the reference point we use. The advantages and disadvantages, and the preferences, we derive from this point are not fixed; they vary with the reference point so that we will consider something as more or less advantageous based on a particular reference point. Moreover,

> The disadvantages of a change often loom larger than the advantages, inducing a bias that favors the status quo. Of course, loss aversion does not imply that people never prefer to change their situation …. Loss aversion implies only that choices are strongly biased in favor of the reference situation, and generally biased to favor small rather than large changes).[29]

These insights indirectly confirm the importance of reorientating the reference point in our lives, and of taking the (incarnated) service and

[28] Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 303.
[29] Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 292.

praise of God as a reference point, even though that service and praise must be incarnated. When making decisions according to the directions of the Spiritual Exercises, we must equally be aware that in general the dislike of failing to achieve one's goal is far stronger than the desire to exceed it.

Availability

'Availability' here refers to the (relative) ease with which instances come to mind (or whereby we recall certain examples from memory). When the recollection is smooth and easy, we tend to estimate the size of a category as large and the frequency of an event as high. Kahneman gives several examples:

> A salient event that attracts your attention will be easily retrieved from memory. Divorces among Hollywood celebrities and sex scandals among politicians attract much attention, and instances will come easily to mind. You are therefore likely to exaggerate the frequency of both …. A dramatic event temporarily increases the availability of its category. A plane crash that attracts media coverage will temporarily alter your feelings about the safety of flying …. Personal experiences, pictures, and vivid examples are more available than incidents that happened to others, or mere words, or statistics.[30]

Kahneman also refers to a famous study in which spouses were asked how much they contributed to household chores, organising social events and so on.

> As expected, the self-assessed contributions added up to more than 100%. The explanation is a simple availability bias: both spouses remember their own individual efforts and contributions much more clearly than those of the other …. The bias is not necessarily self-serving: spouses also overestimated their contribution to causing quarrels, although to a smaller extent than their contributions to more desirable outcomes.[31]

The psychological mechanism behind this availability is even more complex. The number of examples we can generate, and the ease with which these items come to mind, have great bearing on the final decision. This sometimes yields rather paradoxical results:

> People … are less confident in a certain choice when asked to produce more arguments in favour of that choice [and] are less confident that

[30] Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 130–131.
[31] Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 131.

> a certain event was avoidable after listing more ways it could have been avoided. The same bias contributes to the common observation that many members of a collaborative team feel they have done more than their share and also feel that the others are not adequately grateful for their individual contributions.[32]

Availability appears to be a crucial element in reasoned discernment, especially when Ignatius asks us to list advantages and disadvantages. The availability of experiences, as well as our reference points, will determine the number of advantages and disadvantages and the ease with which they are generated, and will influence the relative weight we assign to them in our discernment.

The Decoy Effect

The decoy, or asymmetrical dominance, effect is a method used in marketing to direct people towards one of the two options by adding a third, 'asymmetrically dominated', option. This means that the third option is wholly inferior to one of the other two, but only partly inferior to the other.

In his book *Predictably Irrational*, Dan Ariely gives the example of a real advertisement, which he used in an experiment among his students: they could choose between three possible subscriptions to *The Economist*:

> 1. Internet-only subscription for $59 …
> 2. Print-only subscription for $125 …
> 3. Print-and-Internet subscription for $125.[33]

Which one would you choose? Out of the hundred students, 84 per cent opted for the third and most expensive option, and only 16 per cent selected the cheapest version. Obviously, nobody chose the print edition, since it was just as expensive as the print and digital version in the third option. When all is considered, these results seem fairly logical and this distribution was to be expected.

In a subsequent experiment, Ariely removed the middle option (the print-only subscription). Once this 'decoy product' had gone, more students (68 per cent) chose the cheaper option instead of the more expensive one. In some respects, the decoy product was superior to one of the others (the digital version), but it was not better than the other option (print

[32] Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 133.
[33] Daniel Ariely, *Predictably Irrational: The Hidden Forces That Shape Our Decisions* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 5.

and digital). As a result of the addition of this decoy, more students selected the most expensive option, compared with when the decoy product was not available. Ariely goes on to demonstrate how this decoy effect also applies to more significant life decisions (such as in love).

When we are presented with two mutually exclusive options, we are inclined to find a compromise that is superior to one of them, but certainly not to the other. It is precisely the addition of this compromise which makes us select one of the original two basic options. But this is not always evident: Ariely shows how we generally like to keep all options open, and thus start to shift between options or become indecisive. Our fear of losing options in fact prevents us from putting our energy fully into one single choice.

Being aware of the decoy effect is an important step in guarding ourselves against it. The question we must ask ourselves is: 'Do we really want one of these options, or do we only want it because it is a good deal?'

The Two Selves

Returning to the work of Daniel Kahneman, there is a final insight that might usefully be applied to the Times of making decisions in the Spiritual Exercises. Both the Second and the Third Times are methods closely tied to reflection and introspection. We need to become aware of and look back on our movements of consolation and desolation (Second Time), or the different advantages and disadvantages (Third Time) that play a role in our decision. As we have seen, the ideal version of this process closely resembles the way of thinking put forward in Stanovich and West's System 2, a system of thought that consciously takes the time to arrive at a well-balanced conclusion. In this process, a great deal of attention is devoted to remembering. When we discern according to the Second Time, the experience of our emotions of consolation and desolation plays an important part. This concerns both our experience of these emotions, and the memory of that experience. Consequently the last insight I shall explore here is the difference and coherence between the two 'selves': the experiencing self and the remembering self.

Kahneman introduces the concept of the two selves based on the example of two patients undergoing painful medical treatment. Patient A has a treatment characterized by high-intensity pain and short duration, whereas patient B has more painful procedures overall, but with a decreasing intensity of pain. We would expect patient B to suffer more from treatment. When both patients are questioned, however, it turns

out that patient B looks back more positively on receiving treatment than patient A. The reason is that patient B experienced the treatment as less painful, because the intensity of the pain lowered gradually. Lowering the peak intensity of pain resulted in a better memory of the treatment, and the duration of the treatment had no bearing on the final assessment of all the pain experienced. This experiment clearly indicates the difference between the two selves:

> The *experiencing self* is the one that answers the question 'Does it hurt now?', whereas the *remembering self* is the one that answers the question 'how much did it hurt, on the whole?' Memories are all we get to keep from our experience of living, and the only perspective that we can adopt as we think about our lives is therefore that of the remembering self.[34]

Now, it is often difficult to distinguish between memories and experiences. Kahneman gives a striking example: a man had been listening with full attention to a record of a long symphony,

> … on a disc that was scratched near the end, producing a shocking sound … he reported that the bad ending 'ruined the whole experience'. But the experience was not actually ruined, only the memory of it. The experiencing self had had an experience that was almost entirely good, and the bad end could not undo it, because it had already happened. My questioner had … effectively ignored 40 minutes of musical bliss.[35]

What defines our story is the remembering self and the changes, the significant moments and the ending involved in this memory. When we take a two-week holiday, for the experiencing self the second week is just as good as the first. However, for the remembering self the second week is not as good: 'there are no new memories added. You have not changed the story.'[36] The remembering self is forgetful and selective: of the entire holiday, only the equivalent of a few minutes of emotions are remembered. These experiences will be assigned a positive (happy, consolation) or negative (unhappy, desolation) association in our memory, and often guide us to steer away from the negative and strive towards the positive in the future. How the story ends is one of the most crucial elements in determining how

[34] Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 381.
[35] Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 381.
[36] Daniel Kahneman, 'The Riddle of Experience versus Memory', audio talk and transcript, available at http://www.ted.com/talks/daniel_kahneman_the_riddle_of_experience_vs_memory, accessed 1 June 2014.

the remembering self looks back on an experience. If a story has a negative conclusion, the entire story is tainted by it, and vice versa. This phenomenon can, of course, be quite problematic when making decisions.

The remembering self not only tells stories, it also takes decisions:

> The experiencing self has no voice in [a] choice. We actually don't choose between experiences, we choose between memories of experiences. And even when we think about the future, we don't think of our future normally as experiences. We think of our future as anticipated memories.[37]

We place more weight on memory than on experience, even though experiences take up much more time.

> The remembering self is sometimes wrong, but it is the one that keeps score and governs what we learn from living, and it is the one that makes decisions. What we learn from the past is to maximize the qualities of our future memories, not necessarily of our future experience. This is the tyranny of the remembering self.[38]

In another example, Kahneman shows how it is the remembering self that chooses where we go on holiday.

> They asked students to maintain daily diaries and record a daily evaluation of their experiences during spring break. The students also provided a global rating of the vacation when it had ended. Finally,

[37] Kahneman, 'The Riddle of Experience'.
[38] Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 381.

> they indicated whether or not they intended to repeat … the vacation …. Statistical analysis established that the intentions for future vacations were entirely determined by the final evaluation—even when that score did not accurately represent the quality of the experience that was described in the diaries.[39]

The distinction—and coherence—between the two selves is a matter of great importance when practising the Spiritual Exercises. When assisting a person in making decisions, we usually ask that he or she reflects on past experiences (of consolation and desolation). One of the major challenges is to confront the remembering self and the experiencing self in this process. As the example of holidays shows, this will influence the final decision.

Becoming Free

In today's world, as we have seen, people want, are able and have to make more decisions than ever before. Although there are some drawbacks to this development, the plethora of books on making choices does not only indicate how important choice has become in our lives, but also shows that people want to make good choices. A centuries-old manual such as the *Spiritual Exercises* can be a part of this. The Exercises are a school of freedom: they contain practices that help us grow in freedom and direct us in finding out what God intends for us in life.

Because of this dynamic, the new insights into decision-making derived from recent research are especially valuable: this research not only adequately reflects the complexity of the decision-making process, but also provides us with additional guidelines on becoming free people. Inevitably there are quite a lot of things that Ignatius did not and could not know about making decisions, but being aware of them can help us realise one of the central purposes of the Spiritual Exercises: becoming free from everything to which we might be attached, in order to make the right choice (Ignatian 'indifference') (Exx 179).

At the end of this story, we could introduce a counterpoint: books on making decisions, including the *Spiritual Exercises*, have one characteristic in common: they are based on the unspoken assumption that choices belong to the autonomous self which, through the process of (individual or collective) discernment, can arrive at a final choice. But we need not decide on every aspect of our lives, and choosing should not be considered

[39] Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 389.

as something too mechanical or instrumentalist. Having considered the many aspects that directly or indirectly influence the decision-making process, a more spiritual attitude might be to give control out of our hands, and to be receptive to the unexpected and to surprises.

Important events in our lives are often not self-chosen, but given to us. We do not only choose proactively, but we also need space for experiencing mercy. Analogous to this is the phenomenon of serendipity: the gift of finding something for which we were not looking; the discovering of something unexpected while looking for something else. This is only possible if we remain attentive to things other than those for which we are searching. Fixation on the goal might actually complicate decisions; sometimes we can reach the goal by moving away from it. When not actively thinking about it, and creating space for the other, we may, in certain cases, also make the right decision. Ignatius did not know everything about making choices; but, as I hope I have been able to make clear, neither do we.

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