

PHENOMENOLOGY, PSYCHIATRY AND IGNATIAN DISCERNMENT

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DISCERNMENT in St Ignatius's sense has a clear experiential character and as such it can also properly be viewed in relation to normal and abnormal psychological experience.

Before entering into a present day examination of discernment, it may be of some use to consider the historical circumstances, both external, personal and internal, in which the concept of discernment emerged. Spain was engaged in reform well before Luther. The founder of the University of Alcala, Jimenez de Cisneros, had encouraged the humanist learning, but also a return to a more direct form of religious experience, as expressed by some saintly and often illiterate religious people. Cisneros protected Madre Juana de la Cruz, and the religious authorities did exert toleration of other religious people who appeared to have gifts of discernment, like Fray Melchor, a jewish convert to catholicism and a franciscan, who in 1512 was asked by the vicar general to visit religious houses to select men in whom God's Spirit dwells. Fray Melchor consulted Sor Maria de Santo Domingo and the beata de Piedrahita, both illiterate women.¹ Though the possible dangers of this trend had constantly exercised the Church's vigilance,² it was not necessarily the object of complete intolerance. During the Reformation the emphasis on inner experience became paramount.

Inner experience discernment

St Ignatius, a military man, with a minimum of reading and no academic background, also concentrates on inner experience as the guide of religious life. Contemporaneous with him were many

¹ Bataillon, M., *Erasmus y Espana*, (Mexico City, 1950).

² Cf *Il Movimento del Libero Spirito*, Testi e Documenti a cura di Romana Guarnieri (Archivio Italiano per la Storia della Pietà, 1965).

alumbrados, most of them in religious orders. They belonged to the *recogidos* or the *dejados*. The first encouraged a search of inner religious experience, in retreat from the world; the second preached the *dejamiento* or abandonment to the love of God, which guides the individual and places him beyond sin. Both *recogimiento* and *dejamiento* were forms of escape from the excessive institutionalism of the christian life. In both the religious experience is central. The beginnings of St Ignatius's religious change occurs in this setting and it is in some respects difficult to separate from other *alumbrado* movements. He started a lay apostolate as a result of inner experience. Twice he was subjected to inquiry, in 1526 and 1527, in Alcala, and after being forbidden to teach other people he was asked to read for three years in the university. He moved to Salamanca and again was suspected of illuminism. He did, however, behave differently from many *alumbrados*: he accepted the prescription of study and with it the authority of the Church. But the *recogimiento* and the search and examination of conscience, and the emphasis on inner experience, remained. It is of interest to see how far these aspects were the main attraction for those that had been under reformed influences in Europe, and as a result contributed to the success of the Company as the champions of the Counter Reformation.

The personal circumstances of the experiences of St Ignatius and their nature are of clear psychological interest. The most important ones occurred in Manresa, and it is known that they did so in a state of physical privation of food and sleep. Some of these states were clearly pathological. Perceptual anomalies are not unusual in such states and we have a clear description of one by the saint:

He went to beg alms in Manresa every day, and he ate no meat and drank no wine, although they were given to him. On Sundays he did not fast, and if he was given a little wine he drank it. And because he had been very particular in the care of his hair, as was the custom in those days, and he had fine hair, he decided to let it grow anyhow, according to its nature, without either combing or cutting it, or covering it with anything at night or during the day. For the same reason he allowed his toe-nails and his finger-nails to grow unhindered, because he had been fastidious in this respect also. While he was staying in this hospital, it chanced that he often saw in broad daylight something in the air close to him, which gave him much satisfaction because it was exceedingly beauti-

ful. He could not clearly determine what exactly it was, but it seemed somehow to have the form of a serpent, with many things that shone like eyes, though they were not eyes. He found great delight and consolation in seeing that thing, and the more often he saw it the greater grew his pleasure. Its disappearance from his sight left him discontented. Up to this time he had always continued in a certain interior disposition of great uniform joyfulness, without any understanding of inward spiritual things. While the vision aforesaid lasted, for it recurred over several days, or a little before it began, he was vehemently assailed and troubled in his mind by the thought of the difficulty of his life, as though voices spoke within his soul, saying, 'How can you possibly endure such a life for the seventy years you have still to live?' To this he replied in his soul very vigorously (because he felt that the question came from the enemy), 'O wretched creature! Canst thou promise me even one hour of life?' And so he conquered the temptation and remained at peace.¹

This experience is remarkable in its simplicity and particularly in the lack of elaboration, in spite of the fact that it was described long after it occurred. This indicates the lack of proneness in St Ignatius to imaginative embellishment or active unconscious build-up. It is more comparable to the experiences in organic brain disorder of a reversible kind, e.g. those due to transient toxic effects, such as fainting. That the saint was not happy with the method, e.g. severe privation, for which he had a heroic capacity, was shown by its abandonment and the discouragement of attempts by others to do the same. His personal experiences made it necessary to note their importance, and hence his knowledge about them and the rules he finally gave to discern between those that were good and desirable and those that were not.

Discernment and affect

A contemporary reader of the rules for discernment cannot escape noticing the importance of the psychological aspects. To those psychologically trained, discernment of spirits must appear closely bound with the affective life. By affect, the psychiatrist means largely feelings. A classification of feelings that has found psychiatric accept-

¹ Broderick, J., *Saint Ignatius Loyola*, (London 1956), p 92 ff.

ance is that of Max Scheler. It is the basis for the profound psychiatric study by Kurt Schneider of the affective and mood disorders.¹ According to this view, feelings are stratified into *sensorial* feelings which are located in parts of the body and are dependent on sensation; *vital* feelings, more vague and general, e.g. fatigue, or vague respiratory and circulatory feelings; *psychic* feelings, directed or motivated feelings, the result of other psychological experiences; and finally the *spiritual* feelings which constitute the top layer: these are absolute, and they do not correspond to anything external. They are modes of being. Max Scheler analyses two: serenity and hopelessness.² They are not so precisely described as the other feelings, and they constitute the layer of religious and metaphysical experiences.

The province of the psychiatrist is strictly that of the first three layers. The last, i.e. the spiritual feelings, is outside this. Nevertheless, spiritual feelings may not be pure because the lines of separation may be in practice less clear than they are in theory, and often they are contaminants from the other layers. In this respect, the role of the psychiatrist is more to point out those feelings that arise from the biological or psychological organism and that are consequently in themselves not spiritual, than to state positively what is spiritual feeling. In a rough way, a psychiatrist could say that mortification and abstinence had as its objective to peel off the layer of biological function from the psychological experience, and with it the sensorial and vital feelings; and that psychological examination dealt with the psychic feelings, e.g. the need for vain-glory. Only then can the layer of spiritual feelings be reached.

That consolation and desolation are feelings can be further verified by their characteristic polarity. Examples of other polarities in the layer of vital feelings are: the normal polarity of cheerfulness-sadness, the pathological elation-depression, or in the feeling of anxiety between the poles of tenseness and relaxation. Feelings are notoriously difficult to describe, and St Ignatius makes a good effort to try to delineate the polarity consolation-desolation. He does so first by defining some of their qualities, by considering these states as effects of spiritual influences, and by examining some aspects of their dynamics: i.e. the way they develop in a person's temporally ordered experience.

¹ Scheler, Max, *The Nature of Sympathy*, transl. Heath, P., (London, 1954) pp 48-9. Schneider, K., *Die Schichtung des emotionalen Lebens und der Aufbau der Depressions zustände*, (Z. Neurol, 1920, 59).

² There is an interesting similarity between this pair and ignatian consolation/desolation.

In the rules for the First Week,¹ the affective states mentioned include: compunction and remorse,² courage and strength,³ regret and sadness,⁴ any interior movement experienced by the soul causing it to glow with love for its Creator and Lord;⁵ the shedding of tears leading to love of God, either out of sorrow for sin or for the sufferings of Christ our Lord: darkness of soul,⁶ disquiet of mind; the condition in which the soul finds itself listless, apathetic, melancholic. In these and the other rules of the First Week, the phenomena are clearly described in psychological terms and the core of the experiences are affective states. In the same rules are given both rules of action – as not to plan when in distress,⁷ and reasons for experience of the distress.

In the rules for the Second Week,⁸ St Ignatius gives a most precise way of distinguishing between spiritual influences by their effects in determining affective states. The characteristic effect produced by God and his angels is genuine lightness of heart and spiritual joy, and the elimination of all disturbing sadness engendered by the enemy. The characteristic activity of the enemy is to resist such lightness of heart and spiritual comfort, alleging specious reasons, subtle suggestions, and sophistries without end. There are also in this section some of the dynamic aspects. For example, the sense of comfort experienced can result from the intervention of the good or bad angel – resulting progress or regress being that by which the one is distinguished from the other. Further dynamic guidelines are given for making the same distinction⁹ – thoughts are to be attended to carefully to test their progression and relatedness at all points, beginning, middle and end. The soundness of thought, the direction in which it leads, and the peace and tranquillity or lack of it accompanying its development, are the criteria on which to act. Similarly,¹⁰ the good angel touches the good softly – the evil angel roughly and disturbingly.

According to the dynamic conception of St Ignatius, the soul is moved by a play of forces arising from the good or evil spirits. The movement is never ending and the attainment of one position, be it favourable or unfavourable, is no guarantee of permanence. This leads to the conclusion that the soul should be cautious when up and hopeful when down. The test is always, ultimately, an affective test.

¹ Exx 314–327.

² Exx 314.

³ Exx 315.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Exx 316.

⁶ Exx 317.

⁷ Exx 319.

⁸ Exx 328–336.

⁹ Exx 333.

¹⁰ Exx 335.

Ignatian psychological insight

It could be argued that affective states are vaguely defined and that, because they are vague, they indicate that the psychological sophistication and perspicacity shown by St Ignatius are poor. There is little evidence in the rules to support such a contention. The main confusion would arise if the states referred to as desolation-consolation were a matter of judgment and not affect, and if St Ignatius, because of inadequacy of knowledge, had not been able to see the difference. However, when a disturbance of judgment is in question, St Ignatius promptly disposes of the problem – as for example in the rules for scruples. The name of scruple, he says, is ordinarily given to an act of our own free choice and judgment by which we take for sin that which is not;¹ for example, after treading accidentally on two crossed bits of straw, a man may conclude by his own judgment that he has sinned. But this is not strictly a scruple, being in fact an erroneous judgment. He shows further, that the essence of the scruple is the doubt that persists.² Now the first scruple is wholly detestable, being downright error; the second may be profitable, but only temporarily. This is an important point, since very persistent and irreducible scruples can be a serious psychological impediment.³ No present day psychiatric textbook could improve on the definition of scruple or an obsessional thought, beyond the point reached by St Ignatius in a few precise sentences.

There is a further point which shows unusual psychological penetration. St Ignatius clearly separates what the phenomenologist would call a primary, not derived, psychological experience from the secondary or derived phenomena. He says that when comfort has no preceding occasion, whilst it is true it cannot be illusory, we have to be careful to distinguish the specific time of the actual comforting from the subsequent stage, that is, the secondary elaboration: 'in it the soul makes resolutions and plans which are not the direct result of the action of God. They may be the soul's own activity based on the established habits of mind or the implications of ideas or judgments previously formed; they may be the result of the good or the evil spirit':⁴ in other words, he is speaking of secondary elaboration.

This last analysis has a finesse of psychological penetration that was not available to psychiatric thought until the advent of phenom-

¹ Exx 346.² Exx 347.³ Exx 348.⁴ Exx 336.

enological analysis, and the differentiations between primary and secondary of the Heidelberg school during the first half of this century which have proved so useful in the analysis of morbid psychology.

Discernment and psychoanalytic conceptions

Most of the preceding remarks are concerned with the psychiatric aspects of the rules of discernment looked at in a descriptive phenomenological way. It is possible to go on to consider the same rules in terms of contents. Here the dynamic aspects of the rules and the agencies or powers described by St Ignatius can be easily translated into more modern garb. This has been done.¹ Such a translation substitutes for one group of theologically derived conceptions (i.e. good and evil angel), another psychologically derived, namely the *id*, the *ego* and the *superego*.

The principal theme that comes out of Fr Meissner's 'translation' and interpretation is the relating of the affective states of the ignatian first week rules to the struggle in a person between unlimited impulse-seeking gratification (*id*, in freudian terms) and the unified area of reason, resolution and purpose in him (*ego*). When the *id* is dominating, whatever happens to fulfil its demands brings gratification under the dominance of the pleasure principle. When *ego*-control comes to be used, with its orientation to reality and reason, conflict is experienced – compunction and remorse.² The other rules of the first week can likewise be interpreted with further more elaborate reference to psychoanalytic concepts. For the rules of the second week a similar series of interpretations may be made. It is suggested here that *ego*-control has been fairly securely established. For such a person 'more and more of the energies of the *ego* are taken up in the effort of spiritual growth rather than in counter-cathexis' (resistance to temptation).³ Consequently there is scope for resurgence of the more unregenerate side of life, but now in a subtle and indirect form.

From the classifications offered by Fr Meissner in approaching this comparison of the ignatian discernment rules and psychoanalytic conceptions, it is made clear that here is no mere psychologizing of theological and religious matters. Consolation is not the same as gratification:⁴ it has reference not merely to the pleasureable, but to reality. Reality in turn does not, in this translation, have the

¹ Meissner, W., S.J., *Psychological notes on the Spiritual Exercises III*, in *Woodstock Letters*, (1964, 93), pp 165–191.

² Exx 314. ³ Meissner, W., *loc. cit.* p 186.

⁴ Meissner, W., *loc. cit.* p 182.

same restricted sense of merely social or inter-personal values that it has in psychoanalytic theory, but includes 'spiritual realities (knowledge of which is had through revelation and theology)'.¹ In spite of these clarifications however, the overall usefulness of restating the ignatian rules in what is basically freudian language can be questioned from a number of points of view. While such a restatement has value in showing the contemporary relevance of the ignatian rules, it might at the same time seem to lose sight of the fact that freudian categories are, in their way, to some extent abstract. Such a translation – which could also be extended to meet the several other concept schemes in use in contemporary psychology – certainly does not bring out any new descriptions of relationships in experience. It provides no new phenomenology; but serves simply to restate ignatian observations in a newer and in some ways less flexible language.

Summary and conclusion

That discernment in the ignatian sense is, then, an exploration of affective states becomes clearer from the foregoing. The spiritual ordering of experience depends on the relative ordering of the sensorial, vital, and psychic feelings in their several polarities. There is little difficulty in discovering the distortions of the vital and psychological feelings in the personal account of St Ignatius' own experiences. He succeeded in separating them out from one another, and in marking them for others.

St Ignatius' conception was dynamic in that it entailed temporal progression, through the action of opposing forces. Ignatian dynamics can easily be translated into freudian terms. That this translation is possible demonstrates the psychological depth of the Ignatian rules.

The psychiatrist's contribution is the examination of the sensorial, vital and psychological feelings. Imbalance of the polarities of any of these levels can either distort genuine spiritual experiences, or lend spiritual appearances to disturbances which are pathological and, as such, properly within the realm of the psychiatrist. Religious values as such, however, transcend the limits of the psychiatrist's discipline.

¹ *Op. cit.*, p 181.