

# THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES AND PSYCHOANALYTIC THERAPY

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A COMPARISON between the systems for the transformation of attitudes, feelings, and behaviour developed by two men so apparently disparate in outlook as St Ignatius of Loyola and Sigmund Freud might be expected to reveal nothing but contrasts. But we are so steeped in the details of the religious and philosophical controversies of the last few centuries, that we are likely to overlook the common substrate of the divergent positions. It is the occidental model of man which is strongly characterized by individualism, and is in sharp contrast to the socio-centric models which prevail in the orient.<sup>1</sup> One cannot imagine the thought either of Freud or St Ignatius arising out of an oriental cultural matrix.

The decisive articulation of the occidental model is to be found in St Augustine. For the last seventeen hundred years, nearly all descriptions of man's desperate plight and suggestions for its remedy have derived ultimately from his work. While at the metaphysical level he was a monist, he subscribed to an ethical dualism of good and evil. Furthermore, by him man is held responsible even for those sins which he does not personally commit; and it is easy to see that nearly all moral and social progress depends on this idea. His intellectual power was unsurpassed. In his writing he combined so many strands, answered so many different human needs, that he has been used as a springboard for almost every major theological development since his time. In this way he was the intellectual ancestor not only of all the theological developments of the middle ages but also of the heresies, and all modern philosophy stems ultimately from his work. One can attribute the diversity and even the contradictions of the resulting positions to Augustine's ability and willingness to balance both sides of numerous paradoxes in a creative tension, while followers have usually tended to emphasize one point to the exclusion of others.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hsu, Francis L. K.: 'Kinship is the Key', in *The Center Magazine*, VI (November 1973), pp 4-15.

<sup>2</sup> Randall, J. H.: 'The Manifold Experience of St Augustine', in *The American Scholar*, vol 38 (Winter 1968-69).

The core of the augustinian position, shared of course by St Ignatius, is this: Man is a sinner who suffers from real guilt unless punished. Punishment is loss of God. Extrication from this predicament is by God's grace. Freud substituted narrow new terms for this description of human suffering. For him it is the neurotic who suffers from imaginary guilt arising out of unfulfilled sinful wishes. Punishment is fear of losing parental love. Absolution comes through the analyst (a surrogate parent). One might say that Freud has described a particular 'subset' of the universal 'set' described by St Augustine. In the twentieth century we have seen a tendency, now somewhat waning, to apply Freud's statement of the position in an all-encompassing manner, an attempt to make a sufficient philosophy of it. For this reason the Church was quite properly wary of freudian theory, and resisted it vigorously for many years. In considering the implications of the freudian position as stated above, however, it is important to distinguish the *technique* from the *philosophy* of psychoanalysis. If the formulation is used only to describe certain kinds of human suffering which, in the present state of knowledge, can most effectively be relieved by applying the techniques derived from psychoanalytic theory, one cannot quarrel with it. And if, as we have suggested, Freud's limited view of man stems ultimately from St Augustine's larger one, we will not be unduly surprised to discover that there are striking points of similarity between Freud's technique for effecting major psychological change and the technique of St Ignatius as described in the *Spiritual Exercises*.

The Exercises are designed to bring about spiritual change. Since this is necessarily mediated through the psyche, it is possible to make valid comparisons with any other system which is similarly mediated, regardless of its philosophical or religious presuppositions. Considered in this purely phenomenological way, there is an extremely interesting point-for-point comparison between the Spiritual Exercises from the Principle and Foundation to the Parable of the Kingdom (but only that far, for reasons that will become clear presently), and the techniques of modern depth psychotherapy as elaborated by Freud and his followers. (I am including not only classical psychoanalysis, but also what is generally referred to as psychoanalytically-oriented psychotherapy.)

The first point of comparison comes with the selection of candidates. A study of the Annotations shows that it was clear to Ignatius that not everyone would be able to make the full Exercises, although persons of good will, no matter how limited in other ways, would always be candidates for some version of the First Week.<sup>3</sup> The

<sup>3</sup> Exx 18.

exercitants must be in touch with their feelings, and able to use their imagination creatively. He was aware that, for some people, the experience of making the full Exercises would be too unsettling, and that they would not be able to maintain a normal equilibrium through the effort. Similarly, only some people are suitable candidates for depth psychotherapy, and again the criteria are similar. The prospective patients must be able to experience relatively normal affect, they must be judged able to free-associate, and their ego-strength must be adequate lest the strain of analysis or intensive therapy precipitate a psychotic attack.

Since our comparison is not between the contents, but between the techniques of the two systems, and furthermore, as has been already suggested, the comparison is in any case only possible in terms of the First Week, it naturally follows that most of the material cited from St Ignatius will be drawn largely from the Rules for the discernment of spirits and the Annotations.

There are of course many ways of stating the goals of the Exercises. One may think of them as a school of prayer, for learning to make positive judgments in the here and now, and for the clarification of inner movements, feelings and attitudes, both positive and negative. Similarly, one goal of psychotherapy is to enable the patient to have better judgment and to be able to make life-decisions with less anxiety than before the treatment. This is effected by an improvement in understanding the self. About the second exercise of the First Week, Stanley says, 'The aim is to bring home to one a realistic picture of himself as a personality deformed by his past'.<sup>4</sup> One can easily imagine the same words being used to define the problem of neurosis, where the patient is hampered by inappropriate processing of childhood experience. Stanley goes on to say: 'At best he has an almost overpowering inclination to ratify, by actual sin, the original sin by Adam and Eve'.<sup>5</sup> In an obvious parallel, Freud described a characteristic of his patients which he called the 'repetition compulsion'. This means that the patient keeps recreating situations which he will continually mismanage in a neurotic manner conditioned by, and symbolic of, the original trauma.

The *technique* (as distinct from the *contents*) of all the major exercises may be described as that of 'dream-reverie'; and since Ignatius felt that it was important for a successful prayer period that there be a definite

<sup>4</sup> Stanley, D., S.J.: *A Modern Scriptural Approach to the Spiritual Exercises* (Chicago, 1967), p 16.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

object to relate to, he assigned specific topics for each occasion. The freudian depth-therapies are not as rigid in this way, but tend to use the dreams (both night and day varieties) of the patient as the starting point for the familiar technique known as *free association*, which is designed to give access to the contents of the unconscious mind. Here a difference appears. In free association there is no prescribed focus or direction, but the thoughts are encouraged to wander spontaneously, no matter how far they stray from the original dream-stimulus. The ignatian reverie is perhaps more aptly compared to the jungian process known as *active imagination*. Here there is a predetermined central nucleus from and around which thoughts and images are encouraged to arise, and continuity of subject matter from one session to the next is aided. One function of the ignatian repetition is that of assisting the exercitants to focus their attention on the central nucleus of the exercise in hand, as well as to maintain continuity from one phase of the work to the next.

The process of spiritual discernment is one in which there is a prayerful sifting through felt needs and desires, spontaneous impulses and inclinations, and the conflicting interior reactions which are experienced when one confronts the events of one's life. This sifting process is undertaken to separate those that move one to choose selfish actions from those that move one to choose loving actions. In the process of discernment one learns to tell the difference between the good reverie feelings which last from those that do not, and hence to make judgments from the inner feelings or movements.<sup>6</sup> In a similar manner the technique of psychotherapy relies heavily on the use of emotion as a sort of psychological scalpel for the dissection of various issues which arise. Anyone who has ever been in treatment will recognize the familiar question, 'Yes, but how do you *feel* about it?' The patient is encouraged to learn to distinguish between impulsive and long-term responses, between feelings which in fact serve larger goals of the personality and those which do not. The distinction between loving actions and selfish actions would certainly not be stated in those words, but nevertheless one can see here a parallel to those aspects of psychotherapy which focus on adequate socialization-responses in the patient.

St Ignatius distinguished three kinds of thoughts: first, those which were strictly his own, which he felt arose from his own free will and from logical process. The other two kinds of thoughts he said did not

<sup>6</sup> Cf Futrell, John: 'The Still Small Voice', in *The Way*, vol 11 (October 1971).

come from within, but from without, from beyond his control, and he referred to them as the 'good spirit' and the 'evil spirit'. Even though he assigned to these spirits an origin utterly external to the mind, he recognized that they must appear through the psyche. He emphasized the importance of becoming aware of these spirits and thought they would appear most clearly during periods of silence and prayer. Psychotherapists of any school would refer to the first category of ignatian thoughts as the contents of the conscious mind. Those of the freudian school would not agree to the external origin of the spirits, but would speak of material coming up spontaneously from the unconscious. They would emphasize the importance of making this material conscious, and would agree that a definite period of time set aside, preferably daily, and free from other distractions, is necessary to encourage the appearance of such material. Psychotherapists of the jungian school might be more willing to assign, at least in some instances, an external origin to unconscious contents, and would surely be more willing to assume that the unconscious contains health-promoting and growth-producing elements (the 'good spirit'), as well as neurotic and destructive ones (the 'evil spirit').

St Ignatius felt that, through grace, the integrating process within the self which results from making the Exercises would enable the exercitant to find God and would lead him to God's will. The psychotherapist would agree that an integrating process is at the core of the treatment, but at least those of the freudian school would claim that this can take place without reference to God or even the higher self. Earlier in the history of depth-psychotherapy, there was an attempt to implement the technique entirely without reference to the patient's or the therapist's conscious value-system, but this is no longer strictly adhered to by most practitioners. While not bringing God into it, most would feel that the patient must establish and maintain some sort of coherent value-system which must harmonize at least partially with that of the surrounding culture.

St Ignatius also felt that there was a real need for 'objectification': that a person could not make the Exercises without a director. Even if the director were quite non-directive, it would at least be important for the exercitant to hear himself telling someone else the fruits of the work. In a similar manner, nearly all therapists are agreed that, with extremely few if any exceptions, real self-analysis is not possible. Again, this is quite independent of whether the therapist takes an active or passive role in the process.

Ignatius knew that it is important for the spiritual director not to be manipulative or authoritarian. Unfortunately, through the centuries since he wrote, this prescription was not always adhered to; but the current trend in modern revitalization and reinterpretation of the Exercises is to avoid this error. In an exactly similar manner, it is very important for the therapist not to be manipulative or attempt to impose his or her own ideas and values on the patient. The current state of the psychotherapeutic art is one of recognizing that in various covert ways there was indeed a tendency to mould the patient, particularly women, according to classical psychoanalytic theory. In the case of the Freudians, this is due to something beyond the deplorably common human tendency to assume authority whenever possible. The theory of psychoanalysis tends to be very reductionistic, interpreting all numinous and emotionally significant experience in purely instinctual terms.<sup>7</sup> (The Jungians, on the other hand, accept the transcendent category as having independent validity.) It is the recognition of this reductionistic and covertly authoritarian bias which is responsible for much of the unrest and dissatisfaction with classical analysis which is rampant today. But again it is important to remember that whenever and wherever this has occurred, it has been a distortion of the original technique, which was quite clearly designed to encourage the maximum degree of freedom and individuality in the patient.

In the rules given for the director, St Ignatius emphasizes that it is important to deal with the exercitants according to where they are habitually inclined. This corresponds to the psychotherapeutic maxim that one must meet the patient where he is. St Ignatius, in his rules for discernment, describes two common types of persons and their spiritual states. The first tend to go from one mortal sin to another; and he says that in such cases the evil spirit moves them to sensual delight and gratifications which serve to keep them in their unfortunate state.<sup>8</sup> It has long been recognized by spiritual directors that persons of this type frequently cannot make the Exercises, or in fact do not complete them, unless they can be dislodged from their sinful attachments by a strong and effective experience of desolation. This corresponds to the type of patient whose symptoms or neurotic character-traits appear to be ego-syntonic, which is to say that they do not experience much significant subjective discomfort, and so the depth of their motivation for therapy is questionable. These patients are apt to miss appointments, or to show other signs of not taking the

<sup>7</sup> Storr, Anthony: *C. G. Jung* (New York, 1973), p 13.

<sup>8</sup> Exx 314.

endeavour seriously, and make little or no progress. Frequently such persons have come to therapy because they belong to a social group which feels that being in therapy has some status-value, or because being 'in treatment' provides them with a socially unassailable excuse to continue their familiar behaviour patterns. The rationalization goes something like this: 'You can't expect too much of me, after all, I'm sick!' The experienced therapist recognizes that such persons are exceptionally difficult if not impossible to treat. They frequently terminate therapy prematurely, and if they do not, once the condition is clear, the therapist advises them to do so.

In other cases, the therapeutic endeavour may serve to exacerbate the patient's symptoms to the point where an anxiety attack or other psychological discomfort occurs. This unpleasant experience may provide the patient with enough motivation to go to work on the underlying problem. In the corresponding type of person making the Exercises, the good spirit acts by giving an experience of desolation, which may produce sufficient remorse to motivate change.<sup>9</sup>

The second type of exercitant described by St Ignatius is one who is highly motivated to pursue the lofty goals of the retreat. In such a case the evil spirit will harass the subject with anxiety and sadness (whereas the good spirit gives an experience of courage, strength and peace).<sup>10</sup> Ignatius advises that when the exercitant is in the grip of severe desolation characterized by self-hatred, lowered emotional tone, and despondency, this should be handled by treating him kindly and gently; further, he should not be permitted to make decisions during the predominance of such feelings. In a similar way, the patient who is well motivated to pursue his analysis may be in the grip of feelings of inadequacy, anxiety and depression, which may be so severe as to tempt him to abandon the therapeutic effort. These can be handled if, through the establishment of a trusting relationship with the therapist, the patient is enabled to accept interpretations. In addition, the therapist will discourage the patient from making any major life-decisions until this very troubled phase of therapy has been successfully negotiated.

In a famous section which seems quaint if not actually distasteful to the modern consciousness, Ignatius describes the Devil as acting like a woman who is weak and passive in the face of strength, and contentious and angry in the face of weakness.<sup>11</sup> In other situations the Devil may resemble a false lover and seducer who is secretive, lying, and deceitful.<sup>12</sup> Finally the Devil is described as a plundering and cunning leader of an

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Exx 315.

<sup>11</sup> Exx 325.

<sup>12</sup> Exx 326.

enemy army.<sup>13</sup> In the terminology of modern depth-psychology, these portrayals translate into good descriptions of three very common distortions of personality which have extremely unfortunate social as well as individual repercussions. In what follows, there is no intended implication that the described syndromes could not occur in persons of either sex, but for the sake of brevity the simpler typical case is used.

Jungian typology would see the first description as that of a woman possessed by a *negative animus*. By this is meant that the positive values of a mature femininity have been unable to develop because the woman has not made peace with her animus, the masculine component of her psyche. This thwarted part of herself then takes the reins and causes her to behave in a destructive, deceitful manner which is irrelevant to the real requirements of her relationships with others.

The second case could well be described in modern terms as an extreme form of 'male chauvinism', the man who has not made peace with his anima, the feminine component of his psyche, and is therefore unable to relate to women except as objects to be manipulated for his own pleasure or convenience.

The third case often occurs in both men and women, but cultural conditions thus far have favoured the more extreme forms appearing in men. We see here a description of the 'power trip' which is so destructive to all concerned. As one examines the social problems of the twentieth century in the West, it is clear that a large majority of them stem from these three personality distortions, and the results in the culture are such that even the most confirmed agnostic might well use the word 'demonic' to describe them.

At the beginning of the Second Week of the Exercises, there is a day of repose, in which are recollected the fruits of the First Week, and the exercitant is invited to contemplate imaginatively the Parable of the Kingdom.<sup>14</sup> Here he is invited to look ahead, to dream the impossible dream, to go beyond himself. This seems to show partial correspondence to the termination phase of psychotherapy, at least as it is usually conducted in the Freudian school. The patient is now ready to review the work that has been done and to set goals for himself. He is invited to examine the question, 'Now that you are well, what is your style of maturity?'

As we have seen, Freud's concept of the scope and cause of human suffering was rooted in the belief that all psychological phenomena were ultimately reducible to basic instinctual components. Therefore

<sup>13</sup> Exx 327.

<sup>14</sup> Exx 91-98.



it is understandable that he should perceive the therapist's task to be complete when the patients had achieved a degree of self-knowledge which could free them from the inappropriate and disordered attachments of their fantasies, thereby relieving them of their burden of neurotic guilt and making possible that degree of self-esteem without which adequate functioning is impossible. St Ignatius, whose system is rooted in St Augustine's cosmic perspective, knew that the task was much larger. To be sure, we have seen that the purgative way of the First Week has many parallels to the Freudian system. But Ignatius's elaboration of Augustine's formulation was that in the First Week and the Parable of the Kingdom, the exercitant, in part through the development of self-knowledge but principally through the operations of grace, should discover that, in spite of the limitations of sin, he is nevertheless a loved child of God, with a significant purpose and destiny in the total cosmic order.

Jung believed that the transcendent function of the psyche has independent validity, and that if it is not encouraged to develop, serious pathology will ensue, which in turn will be destructively projected on to the social order. He saw religion as the indispensable countervailing force to mass-mindedness.<sup>15</sup> One can therefore find parallels in his therapeutic system which extend at least through the Second Week of the Exercises, concerned as they are with the illumination of getting to know God and developing one's relationship with him. But of course Ignatius goes further still. In the unitive Third Week, the exercitant learns true compassion, which is far from easy since it requires complete transcendence of the self while retaining absolutely the sense of individual responsibility. Finally, in the joyful Fourth Week, the exercitant learns to translate the heightened capacity for love into effective redeeming action in the world.

Taken as a whole, the Exercises thus can be seen to teach us how to avoid the selfish dangers of excessive individualism, while retaining the sense of personal responsibility which is a prerequisite to the real creativity of a full Christian life. This is a task so difficult that some thoughtful observers of the world scene have thought it impossible.<sup>16</sup> And so we see that a comparison of the Exercises with the secular systems of psychotherapy shows that for the ultimate good of humanity the health of individuals may indeed be necessary, but it is not sufficient.

<sup>15</sup> Cf Jung, C. G.: *The Undiscovered Self* (Boston, 1972).

<sup>16</sup> Hsu, *op. cit.*, *passim*.