

THE PLACE OF DESIRES IN THE IGNATIAN EXERCISES

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AT THE ROOT OF OUR TITLE is a question; in fact when one considers it in detail there are several related questions, each carrying their own implications about desire and desires. The purpose of this present article is to attempt to unravel these questions, look at their implications and come to a more integrated understanding of this important topic. That Ignatius considers the topic important is clear from the Exercises and the frequent reference to desires and the exercitant asking for and finding that which is desired. Our approach here will be to attempt to draw on the experience of subjects searching for the locus of their desires in the context of long-term, in-depth psychotherapy in the hope that that experience may shed light on the fundamental dynamic of the Exercises, and that this light may reflect back usefully on some of the more profound questions around psychotherapy itself and the processes operative within that context.

The questions of desire

But first of all let us look at the implied questions in our title. The first and most immediately obvious question is simply to ask whether desires have a real place in the Exercises that is to be taken seriously. Are desires not so commonly suspect that one should not better think of an exercising subject as being engaged upon a process that will rid him or her of desire? Associated as they are with what is sexual at least in the most general sense, is not the object of specifically spiritual exercises to rid oneself of that? This attitude to desire, so familiar in the Buddhist tradition, finds itself echoed in much of Western tradition. So, for example, we find John of the Cross saying that one should seek 'not that which is a desire for anything, but that which is a desire for nothing'. This can and often has been understood as an expression of the desirability of not having any desire at all. It is suggested that that is the way to true freedom, and that one is only then liberated when one has rid oneself of the torment of attachment to desire and to the things that

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are desired. In this view of things, desires—as the word is used in common English—are really part of what Ignatius has in mind when he speaks of ‘disordered affections’ in the introduction to his text. And yet it cannot be so because he does advise asking in prayer for that which I desire. Implied necessarily then in Ignatius is some notion of different kinds of desires among and between which the exercitant must learn to distinguish and so become free. This general approach to the question of desire is perhaps what is widely understood as the question about desire, and the object of the Exercises is to identify and follow what might be termed appropriate or ordered desire. An adequate answer to the question about the place of desire in this context, then, will be given in some set of criteria which will perhaps enable the subject to distinguish in an on-going way between ordered and disordered desire.

Desire in psychotherapy

As well as the question about the place of desire in the above sense, there is, it seems, the more general question common to the focus of psychotherapeutic work which asks about the place of desire in the more general sense of simply asking, where is desire, what place does it have, where can it be located, what is its source or where does it come from? And closely allied to that question is the one which asks the *terminus ad quem* of desire, that is to say what does it lead to, where or in what position will it be met, satisfied, fulfilled or whatever? In what direction does it lead and where will it carry the subject of desire—the person who is desiring—if it is followed? One might formulate this notion of desire in terms of simply asking what is the role of desire fundamentally in the context of the internal dynamics of the subject? This question will be more commonly expressed in psychotherapy work in the sense that what is being sought is a desired place, understanding place not simply in terms of physical location but as a kind of metaphor for happiness or fulfilment. One’s desired place will be in a certain kind of idyllic relationship or set of relationships which offers the real possibility of life-enhancing experience in whatever way this is imagined. It will be a place of more than just contentment, but also of growth to one’s full human potential, whatever that might seem to mean. For a person of deep religious values it will be a place of union with God. For someone experiencing conflict it may well be the kind of place described so poignantly by Hopkins—‘I have desired to go where springs not fail’ and ‘to be . . . out of the swing of the sea’.¹ This is of course reminiscent of Augustine’s famous expression about the restless heart that seeks rest above all in God. But for someone whose search is not explicitly

formulated in religious terms, there remains the longing in them for that which their hearts desire and which seems unattainable outside of fleeting moments or through fantasy.

The subject and place of desire

I want to draw on one formulation of desire offered by psychoanalysis in order to see whether it might not be possible to clarify what is involved here.² This analysis has been very influential in recent years and takes desire as central to its whole understanding of the human subject. Indeed one might say that the human subject is constituted by desire in a thoroughly radical fashion. What might this mean? If one takes desire at its most fundamental it is that force at the heart of the subject, which is the source of all one's striving. That which I most fundamentally desire is that which guides all my other derived choices, that in relation to which I judge other decisions made or directions taken. It is as though there is a kind of desire which precedes other desires, which lies at the heart of them and directs them. And it is or seems to be always characterized by a lack, a gap or an absence. Desire is more appropriately understood in terms of the absence to which it points, or the lack which specifies it. One can only desire in a radical sense what one does not have, or desire to be what one is not—at least not to the extent to which one conceives one could be. It is therefore the motor of all growth, development and change and that within the human subject which leads to movement in a basic way. It has been suggested above that desire in this sense could be said to constitute the subject. How is this to be understood? When one analyses the development of the subject towards being a person in his or her own right, it is clear that the axis of this development is something like desire, and a desire which is necessarily frustrated. In considering the processes which every subject goes through in the movement to a position where it can say 'I' and know even inchoately to what or to whom that refers, what is involved here is something like a psychic birth and separation from the mother or mother-figure. Both of these things necessarily belong together, that is the psychic birth and the separation, and it is useful to think of desire as emerging at that point. The point of the psychic birth is the point at which the child realizes its separateness, and also, in some general sense, its own identity. But it is characterized by and born in the context of a sense of loss—loss of mother and the safety and security involved in that basic attachment to her. It could be said that the child's need is for the continuation of that bond. But this is impossible. This need is transformed into desire, and is experienced as a continuing longing for that

state of affairs which is past, and which is now felt as loss or absence. It is based on the memory of a time and circumstance and mode of relating which has now become impossible, and of a state which could only be re-established at the cost of the abandonment of what has been achieved in that loss, namely a sense of individuality and some sense of being oneself a subject. So one could say that desire was born with the birth of the subject, that is the psychic birth. But of course it continues to have, as it were, two sides. The birth of the subject is experienced by that subject as loss, but will also be experienced as loss by the parent. It is not often that this side of the event receives as much attention as it deserves. There is also the desire of the mother/parent born of the loss of the child, now no longer in the same fundamental way attached and dependent. Her need is equally impossible of course in the sense that it cannot be fulfilled again unless at the cost of reversing the achieved subjectivity of her child, so that her relationship with her child is again—as is the child's relationship with her—specified by desire. Perhaps we can see that the desires of both actors in this dyad are best expressed in that the persons involved know themselves to be desired by the other. Desire then emerges as that which makes the subject seek to be the desire of the other; or more directly, the desire of the subject is to be desired by the other.³ This understanding of it is well reflected in the ordinary usage of the word in so far as it is always clearly implied that that which is desired is always elsewhere, in another place. The desire of one's heart is somewhere else and, at the same time, it is in one's heart and is that which is most intimate and central to the direction of one's life. That is the strange paradox of desire: it is both in one and elsewhere, and can only be understood as being constituted by two poles. And so one can speak more appropriately perhaps not so much of finding one's desire, as of following the locus of it, and being guided by it. Concretely what is involved is the continuing evocation and unfolding of one's desire with ever more adequate specifications of it. So much for desire in general. We now come to look at Ignatius' treatment of desire, particularly in the Exercises.

Ignatian desire

Clearly it is important to acknowledge that desire had its own concrete history for Ignatius himself. Unfortunately we can only speculate about his early experience as so little is known in any detail about that, and the little we know only gives rise to questions. It is known that he was the last of thirteen children. At his birth he was handed over to a nurse, the young wife of a blacksmith. We know that his mother died

when he was very young and that he was then cared for by his sister-in-law, the wife of his brother Martin. We can only speculate about the effect of this on the child. It would certainly make it difficult for him to take a clear position within his family structure and it is plausible to think that it leads him towards the rich and varied imaginary world which shows itself in his autobiography. This world is inhabited almost entirely by images of all kinds with a great deal of emphasis on his own self-images. Entering into, or the taking of a position in relation to the real world becomes for him a painful and difficult process because his desire presents itself to Ignatius very largely in terms of images. His world is an imaginary world, which is akin to the world of the child. It will help towards understanding that world to indicate briefly in what that imaginary world consists.

The imaginary has to do with images of the self, either one's own images of oneself, or those of others. These images are not explored, elaborated or articulated as long as they remain in the imaginary. They are characterized by immediacy, emotion, playfulness, and they are unstructured. In that register of the imaginary everything is possible, therefore, because it is largely internal. The life of the young child is dominated by the imaginary for perhaps the first five years of life, and for much longer in a more limited way. The desire of the child is characterized by a pure mutual dependence that is total and it is fundamental to the child's mode of existence. It is operative to some extent through all adult life, though not so determining of life choices and emotional states in the normal adult. In the imaginary register the subject thinks of itself in terms of images, and these are always to some extent false and alienating. Ignatius is powerfully influenced by this mode and his desire is expressed in terms of images.

This is not to say that desire is purely in the imaginary, but rather, that we are given in the images some critically important indicators of what the desire itself is and what its locus is. Ignatius longs to be the object of God's desire; in fact, in faith, he knows himself to be just that and to follow that desire is the meaning of his life. The one who is desired longs to be possessed by the one who desires and understands their lives as being fully for the other and understandable only in relation to that desire of the other. So the purpose of his life becomes to do that which is God's desire, or God's will, as he puts it. The desire of the subject who desires becomes identical with the desire of the one desired, so Ignatius very vividly, again and again expresses this throughout the Exercises in the sense that he continually returns to wanting to do what it is that his Divine Majesty desires of him. And his prayer is readily understandable

as an expression of his desire that his life and actions would conform ever more perfectly to the will of his God. This is surely the sense of the repeated preparatory prayer first introduced in Exx 46.⁴ That is made further explicit in Exx 48, which again is repeated in very many places, where the exercitant is encouraged to ask for what 'I want and desire'. It is suggested then that, possibly directly influenced by Augustine, Ignatius focuses very directly on the desire of the subject⁵ and that this forms a central part of the dynamic of the Exercises themselves. That the whole Exercises are geared to evoking and appropriating authentic desire in the subject would seem to be the key to an overall understanding of them. Ignatius knows that the heart of the human subject is so often plagued by a plurality of desires, and he is concerned to identify and find the locus of the most appropriate and fundamental desire. That that is not easy is also clear. His own struggle to make his own desires in relation to poverty a reality is clearly evidenced in his Spiritual Diary. This suggests that the one desiring is always faced with a gap between desire as experienced, and reality. The move from the imaginary into the real presents fundamental problems of which Ignatius was aware.

The real in general terms is that which emerges from the imaginary through and as a result of exploration, elaboration and articulation. It is a kind of structured mode of existence in which the desire for the other is articulated or otherwise expressed and it heads towards an adequate self-understanding which is perhaps never entirely achieved. It demands appropriate action that is directed by the subject in the light of its authentic desires. It is never reached because desire, which is its motor and drive, does not end and is always calling for more. But the movement towards the real involves the attainment of a relatively clear position in a network of significant relationships, and that in a structured way. Perhaps this is what Ignatius was seeking to establish in his Constitutions. It is plausible to think of Ignatius' struggle throughout his life as being towards that kind of personal position in which he understood himself to be the object of his God's desire, and therefore able to exist and be himself and follow that desire, and further to find a structured mode of existence which would give expression to it.

Conclusions

It is hopefully clear from the above why desires are important in the Exercises in that they can be considered to constitute the subject in a fundamental way and suggest a way forward for that subject. In that sense the identity of the subject is made up of his or her desires; one might say perhaps that one is what one wants, or that the subject is

already that for which she or he has a capacity. In classical terminology one might say that desire is related to the potential of the subject. But it will also be clear that desire is not experienced directly and that it remains hidden to a greater or lesser extent. And it does so because of its inevitable relation to the lack or absence which is always to a greater or lesser extent threatening. And so our desires are sometimes best explored in the open context of an authentic psychotherapy, or in the context of the Exercises at the invitation of a loving God who evokes our deepest desires in his communication to us of his desire for us.

NOTES

¹ Gardner, W. H. and Mackenzie, N. H. (eds): *The poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* 4th edition (Oxford, 1970). The lines here are from 'Heaven-Haven'.

² Lacan, J.: *The four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis*, edited by J. A. Miller and translated by A. Sheridan (London, 1973).

³ Moore, S.: *Let this mind be in you* (London, 1985).

⁴ *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola* with translation and commentary by G. E. Ganss (Chicago, 1992).

⁵ See Ganss, especially pp 156 and 167.