PERSONAL GROWTH AND THE IGNATIAN SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

Ego Development and the Four Weeks

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THE IGNATIAN EXERCISES EASILY invite comparison with psychological models of personal growth. Both describe a developmental sequence, implicit in the Exercises, but explicit in psychology's models. The ego development model of Jane Loevinger[1] seems particularly apt for this comparison. The major areas of growth she delineated parallel closely the tasks of the Ignatian four Weeks. This paper outlines Loevinger's understandings and then compares her developmental process with each Week's work in the Exercises.

LOEVINGER'S STAGE MODEL OF PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Structural stage theories say that personal development progresses through an orderly series of stages. Earlier stages must each be successfully completed before later stages are reached. At any time, people are located somewhere along the growth continuum. Each level is the last for some people; not everyone reaches high development.

Each stage has its own unique organization of personal qualities, which developed out of preceding stages and lay the groundwork for following ones. People are not always clearly in one stage, as stages simply mark milestones on the growth continuum. Level of development indicates a person's general character.

Loevinger developed her ego model empirically using an Incomplete Sentences psychological test,[2] extensive interviews, and life history materials. Ego development has four main aspects: impulse control, interpersonal style, conscious preoccupations, and cognitive style.[3] These areas parallel traditional religious concerns.

The areas of ego development

Impulse control or character development clearly relates to religious behavioural codes and conscience development; spiritual progress demands moral growth. This area represents the major work of the Ignatian First Week.

Religious codes also consider how one relates to others important. Spiritually maturing persons must refine relationships. The Second Week's work in the Ignatian Exercises involves developing a mature relationship with Jesus, one purged of infantile manœuvres or strategies.

A third aspect of ego growth—cognitive style—describes how we understand and react to our existence. Growth requires tolerance for ambiguity, a sense of paradox, and willingly living with cognitive uncertainty. Clearly the difficult Ignatian Third Week is an education in this.

The things that preoccupy us, what we return to over and again in our minds—Loevinger's final ego component—indicate what is most deeply important to us. This is the acid test of the Fourth Week's fruits. When the retreat is ending, one can examine what changes it has made in attitudes, aspirations and values.

The early stages

Loevinger's earliest, pre-conformist stages of development have little relevance to retreatants. They describe very self-centred and under-controlled development, appropriate to infancy and early childhood. Ignatius would definitely have considered adults like this inappropriate candidates for the Exercises, unfit 'because of a lack of natural talents . . . a certain kind of personality, or perhaps because God does not draw them' (Exx 18).[4]

First is Loevinger's *symbiotic stage*, in which the infant differentiates a sense of self. Adults at this level are institutionalized. The next stage is *impulsive*, in which immediate consequences control behaviour, relationships are highly exploitative, preoccupations are gross bodily states and emotions, and there is much conceptual confusion. Adults at this stage may be incarcerated. At the self-protective level, morality is expedient, governed by what gets the best short-term results. Interpersonal relations are wary and manipulative. Preoccupations are with desires and self-protection, and cognitive style is stereotyped and prejudiced. While society tolerates such adults, they are not likely to seek spiritual retreats.

Conformist stage

At the conformist stage, a child identifies with authority and obeys rules simply because they are the rules. Conformists fear ostracism or

loss of face much more than punishment; disapproval is the most potent sanction. A legalistic mentality governs, with little concern about how behaviour affects others. Conformists adopt very simplistic conduct guidelines that admit to no exceptions. They judge behaviour by rigid rules with absolute standards of right and wrong. Deviation from these norms is strongly disapproved.

Conformists also value 'niceness', and consider acceptance and approval very important. They seek companions who fit stereotyped and conventional standards of appropriateness. They reject out-groups, and usually define relationships in terms of shared activities rather than feelings. However, they also may greatly sentimentalize people and relationships.

Conformists are preoccupied with material things, reputation, status and appearances. They deny inner conflict, and describe inner life only in banal terms. Conceptually simple, they use many clichés, moralisms and stereotypes in thought and speech. Conformists may find themselves in spiritual retreats as an 'appropriate' thing to do; they will suffer considerably if the retreat is successful with them.

Self-aware level

The self-aware level is an unstable transition time. Morally, one starts to differentiate between norms and goals. One also increasingly realizes that he or she often falls short of norms. Increased self-awareness lets self-evaluation replace group standards. One starts to see the many possibilities in most situations, recognizes that rules have exceptions, and begins to judge conduct according to context. Capacity for self-criticism develops.

Here one is preoccupied with personal adjustment, vaguely understood possibilities and opportunities, dealing with problems, and understanding oneself. There is considerable focus on feelings, which are often about relationships with others. Awareness of alternatives and exceptions reflects increased cognitive complexity. There is less social stereotyping as appreciation of individual differences grows.

Conscientious stage

Conscientious development is usually not possible before early adulthood. Conscience, in the sense of 'long-term, self-evaluated goals and ideas, differentiated self-criticism, and a sense of responsibility',[5] first appears here. This internalized morality is defined more by motives and consequences than by rules, and leads to increased introspective self-consciousness. One experiences the most guilt of all at this stage;

typically one endorses high standards and is acutely aware of failure to meet them.

Much more mutuality in interpersonal relations develops with appreciating individual differences and others' viewpoints. Relationships become intensive and responsible with great concern for communication. Conscientious people see themselves as others' 'keeper', wanting even to protect others from growth experiences or to control their lives. Satisfaction with personal choices may produce proselytizing.

Conscientious people are preoccupied with obligations, ideals, achievement, discerning motives, self-expression and self-respect. Increased cognitive complexity brings varied and complex concerns. A rich inner life reveals differentiated feelings with awareness of behaviour patterning, traits and motives.

Individualistic level

Concerns about dependency and increasing awareness of individuality mark the individualistic transition period. One becomes increasingly tolerant of self and others. As conscientious striving for achievement and excessive moralistic responsibility for others lessen, relationships deepen.

Awareness of inner conflict increases. The chief preoccupations are social problems, differentiating inner from outer life, and personal development—as opposed to simple achievement. Greater conceptual complexity results in increased tolerance for contradiction and paradox. Individualistic people evaluate behaviour in terms of psychological causation, and distinguish between processes and outcomes.

Autonomous stage

In autonomous development, impulse control ceases to be a problem, and moral concern focuses on priorities and appropriateness. Inner conflict is acknowledged and managed well. Autonomous individuals transcend polarities and see reality as a complex whole; they hold broad, abstract social ideals.

Increased respect for individuality brings greater tolerance for others. With freedom from immaturely excessive conscience demands, autonomous people more easily allow others to choose their own paths and make their own mistakes. They view self and others in terms of developmental histories.

Preoccupations at this stage are self-fulfilment, role differentiation, and understanding self in the social context. Autonomous people want to be realistic and objective, and they try to integrate physiological and

psychological functioning. They have high tolerance for ambiguity, complex patterning of thought, a feel for paradox, and broad and objective cognitive perspectives. They can unite and integrate apparently incompatible ideas.

Integrated stage

The integrated stage is difficult to describe because it represents full maturity, the crown of Loevinger's developmental process. One here no longer simply copes but reconciles conflict, and not only accepts but cherishes individual differences and contradictions. People here have recognized and fully accepted personal limitations, have renounced the unattainable, and are beyond concern with self-fulfilment because identity is completely developed.

EGO DEVELOPMENT THROUGH THE FOUR WEEKS

We now examine progress through the 'four weeks' of the Ignatian Exercises in the light of Loevinger's developmental process. We will look at each week's tasks, goals, and desired graces in relation to corresponding areas of ego development.

First Week

The First Week's conscience work is foundational to the rest of the Exercises, and conscience is also a necessary basis for other aspects of ego development. Its limits define the development possible in other areas. Ignatius considered this Week's work all that is appropriate for many people. He says this both in Exx 18 and in some of his letters.[6]

The First Week's opening exercise sets the tone for the month's work. The deceptively simple attitudes toward self, world, others and God that Ignatius considers important prefigure what ideally would be a fully formed stance by the end of the retreat. Of special relevance to the First Week, he says: 'We ought not be led on by our natural likes and dislikes' (Exx 23) even in matters very important to us.

Growing out of self-centred action, which often inflicts harm on self or others, is the task of conscience development. It begins with managing grosser impulses to damaging behaviour. Until Loevinger's conformist stage, some gross misbehaviour is expected as moral choices turn solely on self concerns. Ignatius would consider First-Week work all that is appropriate for such people, if any spiritual retreat is.

Many working their first retreat are in conformist development. Conformists may arrive smug in the security of their own basic goodness, and strongly defended against seeing themselves differently.

Ignatius immediately asks them to pray for the grace of 'the gift of feeling shame and confusion before God as I consider . . . my own sinful life' (Exx 47). Conformists are not unfamiliar with shame, but Ignatius does not want the self-centred, angry quality of their shame. He wants the shame of full, stark realization of the consequences of inappropriate conduct, attitudes and speech.

The next grace—'of a growing and intense sorrow' for sin (Exx 55)—requires self-aware ability to realize how one fails to meet standards. One must look beneath the surface face shown to others into self-honesty. 'Something else is revealed and becomes the focal point for conversion, for example, an attitude of self-righteousness or an unwillingness to receive.'[7] Ignatius asks for a thorough examination of the moral self, looking steadfastly at all its disorder. Such realization is agonizing in either secular or spiritual development.

In the third exercise, Ignatius asks for even more intense remorse; he wants the depth of feeling that spurs life changes. He encourages retreatants to go to Mary to gain understanding of how to amend life (Exx 63). Here Ignatius is requiring a task of conscientious development. He wants the retreatant to come to internalized, personally chosen conduct guidelines that assume major life importance.

Taking such a step could easily lead a person into a new moralistic stance. One could feel superior because of hard-won understandings in place of earlier pride in adhering to mindlessly adopted group standards. Great danger of excessive moralistic concern about others' conduct also exists. Ignatius next uses a harder method to impress this on the retreatant, a meditation on damnation (Exx 65–71).

To avoid self-righteousness, one must realize one's own limitations quite fully, something Ignatius counsels all along. One must know better the limits of legalistic morality, and how attempts to justify oneself by law are doomed to failure. Retreatants often realize that individual sins are less the problem than deep underlying attitudes.

> The realization deepens that one is unable to consciously regulate tendencies to grab for security, love, and control . . . The person is painfully aware of not being in control of [one's] own motivation.[8]

Ignatius says to cling to the loving goodness of God as the remedy (Exx 65).

Loevinger offers no method, but describes similar outcomes of outgrowing the excessive moralism of conscientiousness. Focus on others' flaws lessens, and priorities and appropriateness of behaviour become greater concerns than being legalistically correct. Loevinger's

developmental process ends with impulse control ceasing to be a problem as one balances duties, needs, priorities and situational considerations. Morality becomes more purely mental, with chosen behaviour easily following decisions.

Ignatius hopes for similar outcomes, based on deep surrender to God. He encourages the proper use of penance to this end (Exx 82–89), carefully reminding the retreatant that proper moderation in appetites is not penance but only required temperance. Penance must not fall into legalistic errors, or into belief that one can so justify oneself.

Ignatius encourages confession to end the First Week by exteriorizing one's increased awareness of sinfulness. He urges retreatants throughout the work to develop gratitude to God for sustaining them to this point. 'The stress which Ignatius puts on gratitude in the First Week is significant in making a judgment about a retreatant's readiness to move on to the Second Week.'[9]

Second Week

A bridge exercise to lead from the First to the Second Week is the call to follow Jesus, who is much more worthy than any worldly leader (Exx 91–99). This exercise sets the stage for purifying one's relationship with Jesus to fulfil the grace sought: 'that I might be able to hear his call, and that I might be ready and willing to do what he wants' (Exx 91).

> In other words, one seeks to develop a fully appropriate relationship with Jesus. This necessarily involves, as the Week unfolds, recognition of inappropriate and/or immature ways of relating to him.[10]

The grace sought in the exercises of contemplating Jesus' life stays uniform: to know Jesus more intimately that one may love him more perfectly and follow him more closely (Exx 104). The considerations open with the incarnation, and the infancy and childhood of Jesus.

This material gives Ignatius the basis for another special exercise—the meditation on the Two Standards—to explore how wholeheartedly one will give oneself to Jesus' work. This could be considered a choice whether to remain a good conformist, who makes no trouble but lives on the surface of life, or to mature into understanding more deeply what discipleship requires.

Ignatius immediately follows this task with the exercise on Three Types of Persons, defined by their degree of sincerity in wanting to be rid of whatever stands in the way of growth in relationship with Jesus. Fleming comments:

> It is not enough to understand the strategy of Christ in choosing poverty, humiliations, and humility and so calling us to follow. We must have a readiness of will and desire to be able to follow.[11]

These exercises leave some retreatants despondent, sometimes not understanding why.

> We venture the hypothesis that the 'doldrums' are a form of resistance to entering this experience, that somehow or other the retreatant is becoming aware of 'the cost of discipleship' and is resisting without even knowing it.[12]

Jesus can no longer be only a meek and mild 'sugar daddy', but requires an adequate response from the retreatant. This parallels the movement to conscientious relationships in Loevinger's model, which requires that one become increasingly responsible and mutual in relationship.

Ignatius next sends the retreatant to the adult life of Jesus, contemplating these mysteries in chronological order up to the passion. He insists that one focus completely on the mystery at hand each day, avoiding other topics. One must fully experience the understanding of Jesus that each mystery can yield, and this requires full attentiveness to each. One must get to know Jesus better to make a more adequate response in relationship with him.

Another special meditation, this one on the Three Degrees of Humility (Exx 165–168), follows. This squarely asks the person how closely he or she is willing to follow Jesus, what cost one is willing to pay. There is no room here for conformist sentimentality or superficiality. This honest question demands an honest answer. Truth may require admitting to less than vanity would prefer. 'The main issue is to discern clearly where one is and what the Spirit obviously wants of me. And this may well be . . . the second degree of humility.'[13]

Should one fail this test of honesty, the quality of the relationship does not advance. If one passes, and honestly recognizes where he or she is, then one progresses to even deeper relating. Similarly to Loevinger's autonomous stage, one accepts and tolerates the truth about oneself, and realizes that one is in the process of development. Such acceptance brings the ability to so behave with others and thus reflect something of Jesus' tolerance and compassion.

After this Ignatius ends the Second Week with consideration of vocation in life. Ideally, one now more realistically and maturely relates to Jesus, and puts on the mind of Jesus in all other relationships. Ignatius

> expects a certain connaturality to develop in us such that the way in which Jesus responds to his Father, to his fellow men and women, and to events becomes more and more our way of response.[14]

Third Week

Being somewhat established in living in the mind and heart of Jesus, the retreatant is now invited to share Jesus' anguish. Retreatants ask for the grace to stay in sorrow with Jesus in his sufferings (Exx 193). They

> may well find that they have asked for more than they expected and that they resist strongly letting this revelation penetrate to their hearts. The 'Third Week' is very often a struggle.[15]

Of Jesus, the letter to the Hebrews says : 'Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered' (Hebrews 5:8).

> Jesus is all but crushed at the perspective of what will be entailed for Him as servant for righteousness over sin. The intensity of the temptation shouts out for support and encouragement . . . But here in His lowest moment of tense anguish and loneliness, similar to that of a trapped animal, a gentle strength and a mighty patience is born.[16]

It is with us as with Jesus: we learn through suffering. The Third Week's invitation is to transformation won only with intensely relentless suffering, suffering that turns us inside out and changes how we view everything. It is suffering that matures us in how we conceive of and react to our lives. If we experience the passion with Jesus, we experience intense anguish, frustration, hopelessness, helplessness, vulnerability, aloneness, emptiness, despair, loss of meaning and purpose, fear and shrinking away, dread,—and only finally, possibly, a fuller surrender.

There is risk. One watches everything one would hold onto crumble.

> There is nothing we can work at in the Third Week . . . [One] lets it come or . . . doesn't . . . The feel of the darkness . . . says to the person that the experience of prayer has come to a dead end, that [one] has failed. And so the temptation to retreat into superficial good cheer or mind-absorbing work seems a call to virtue and Christian good sense . . . These disturbing feelings will conflict sharply with the retreatant's expectations . . . [One] has not anticipated doubts and a sense of futility.[17]

Retreatants look at history, they look at themselves, and they see the same things played out over and again. They

> considered how from the earliest years and down through the centuries our history has been one of misunderstanding, envy, jealousy, rivalry, dissension, greed, violence, [and] they found themselves asking a distressing question: Was it all—is it all—worth it?[18]

How has Jesus changed anything? *Has* Jesus changed anything? Is there even any point in trying? All the doubts, weakness of faith, fear and dread that a retreatant has pushed away can surface now as a torment in one capable of a full retreat.

One is face to face with paradox, contradiction, fruitless dichotomies, uncertainties. One cannot begin to penetrate these depths clinging to a conformist cognitive simplicity. Not even the conscientious complexity that understands psychological patterning and can describe finely differentiated emotional states, is sufficient for the fullest experience.

To identify more fully with Jesus, truly to be with him and learn obedience through suffering as he did, requires even more.

> The grace these exercitants were obviously experiencing was a real compassion with the Lord in anguish. . . . Many seemed to hear him say: 'I know just how you feel. I once felt that way myself. Stay with me for a while. Don't bother trying to figure it all out; just be with me . . . Sorrow in company with Christ in His sorrow, being crushed with the pain that crushed Christ, tears and a deep-felt sense of suffering . . . was experienced by most [mature] exercitants.[19]

The fullest experience requires great tolerance for ambiguity, contradiction, uncertainty and paradox. To leap to an easy answer is to flee the experience. No particular outcome is guaranteed, either. Some retreatants remain in darkness. Some identify more strongly with suffering than others. Some find faith more comfortable, others more difficult. Some simply

> experienced a quieting down, a sense of deep peace, a willingness to just be with Christ. It was still very dark and distressing, but they felt . . . a gentle force enabling them to trust and surrender in faith to a mystery beyond their comprehension.[20]

Ignatius ends the Third Week with another structural piece—the rules for eating. How odd this might initially seem at this point! The difficulty fades if one sees it as a bridge piece leading to the Fourth Week. These rules show how one is now to consider Jesus in all things, to do things with conscious awareness of being about the work of God.

Fourth Week

The grace sought in the Fourth Week is to enter into the joy of the risen Lord (Exx 221). This is not a taken-for-granted outcome. What does it require? It calls for decreased emphasis on oneself and one's

previous goals, aims and desires. Sometimes it is as if one 'were saying to [one]self (or hearing the Lord say): "Don't take yourself so seriously". This has truly been a saving grace, a safeguard against morbid self-pity.'[21]

Ignatius' discussion of our random thoughts and non-free feelings, in his Rules for Discernment (Exx 313–336), is important here. Our voluntary actions are obvious; these may call for penance or gratitude. The involuntary in us speaks of where our heart really is, what is important to us. We learn if our hearts and minds are centred where Jesus' heart and mind are centred by watching our conscious preoccupations.

What keeps claiming our attention? Loevinger has given us a good developmental list ranging from gross bodily states and raw emotions, through various self-centred social concerns, to duties, goals and ideals. Beyond that come broader social concerns, considering the whole picture, and responding from that vision instead of one's own limited self.

Ignatius' closing piece, Contemplation to Attain the Love of God (Exx 230–237), gives the framework within which Christians care for the totality. The requested grace, to love and serve God in all things (Exx 233), requires seeing God in all things. Ignatius's self-dedicatory prayer—Take, Lord, and receive (Exx 234)—summarizes this stance of centring one's entire life and being in God.

Summary

We have seen how Loevinger's four aspects of ego development parallel the tasks of the Ignatian Exercises: conscience the First Week, relationship the Second Week, cognitive complexity the Third Week, and conscious preoccupations the Fourth Week. We have seen how sequential growth in each of Loevinger's areas describes probable growth in the Exercises. In ways like this, contemporary psychology greatly aids our understanding of psychological processes involved in experiencing and co-operating with grace.

NOTES

[1] I have used Loevinger's model in relation to other spiritualities also; for a recent article, see Meadow, Mary Jo: 'Personality maturity and Teresa's *Interior castle*', *Pastoral Psychology* 40 (1992), pp 293–302.

[2] See Loevinger, Jane and Wessler, R.: *Measuring ego development* vol 1 (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1970); and Loevinger, Jane, Wessler, R. and Redmore, D.: *Measuring ego development* vol 2 (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1970).

[3] Loevinger, Jane: *Ego development* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1976).
[4] The numbers following references to the Exercises are the numbers Ignatius assigned to the sections. Using this numbering system instead of page references makes it easy to refer to any edition of *The Exercises*.
[5] Loevinger, *op. cit.*, 1976, p 20.
[6] Bush, Bernard J.: 'The eighteenth annotation of the Spiritual Exercises and social sinfulness' in *Notes on the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola: the best of the Review*, ed D. L. Fleming (St Louis: Review for Religious, 1983), p 80.
[7] Barry, William J.: 'On asking God to reveal Himself in retreat', *Review for Religious* 37 (1970), p 174.
[8] Osiek, Carolyn: 'The First Week of the Spiritual Exercises and the conversion of Saint Paul', *Review for Religious* 36 (1977), p 659.
[9] Fleming, David L.: *Notes on the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola: the best of the Review* (St Louis: Review for Religious, 1983), p 9.
[10] Meadow, Mary Jo: 'Four stages of spiritual experience: a comparison of the Ignatian Exercises and Jungian psychotherapy', *Pastoral Psychology* 37 (1989), p 181.
[11] Fleming, *op. cit.*, p 12.
[12] Barry, William J.: 'The experience of the First and Second Weeks of the Spiritual Exercises', *Review for Religious* 32 (1973), p 104.
[13] *Ibid.*, p 108.
[14] Fleming, *op. cit.*, p 15.
[15] Barry, *op. cit.*, 1970, p 175.
[16] Aschenbrenner, George A.: 'Hidden in Jesus before the Father', *Review for Religious* 34 (1975), p 129.
[17] Connolly, William J.: 'Experiences of darkness in directed retreats', *Review for Religious* 33 (1974), p 614.
[18] Maruca, Dominic: 'The graces of the Third and Fourth Weeks', *Soundings* (Washington DC: Center of Concern), cited from Fleming, 1983, p 138.
[19] *Ibid.*, p 139.
[20] *Ibid.*, p 140.
[21] *Ibid.*, p 142.