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Loyola and Freud: Two schools of feeling

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Psychoanalysis did not fall from heaven. Many concepts and ideas that Freud would develop, particularly that of the human unconscious, can be found in the work of others before him. But he put things together, created a new way of thought and, what is more, a way of using it as a therapy. Psychoanalysis is a school where we learn to perceive, investigate and understand our feelings and to reorganise our life according to that experience. As a therapist, Freud was highly original and seems to have had no predecessors. There is, however, one exception, three and a half centuries before him, one that during a very long time and all over the Western world has had an influence which can be compared to Freud's role in our days. These were the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit Order. About 1530, after the cultural earthquake of Renaissance and Reformation, he wrote these *Exercises* as a 'school of feeling', a guidebook for those who, with the help of a spiritual leader, wanted to scrutinize methodically, during a long time, their inner life, to 'discern', as Ignatius called it, 'the good and bad spirits'[1], which were operating inside them, in order to reorganize their lives.

The differences between Ignatius and Freud must be clear to everyone. They have to do with the fact that religion and the idea of 'God' refer to a much more idealized world than Freud's 'unconscious'. The 'I' of Freud's analysis is his own centre, whereas, even if the God in Loyola's program would be unmasked as a projection of the father (or mother) figure, the 'I' here seems to turn around an inner centre which from the very beginning of the *Exercises* is a split one: 'you' – God – and 'I'. Yet analogies between psychoanalysis and these *Exercises* are even more striking. A 'relation to the unknown' (Guy Rosolato) – for Ignatius to God and the spirits, for Freud to the unconscious – is at the core of both experiences. Self-examination forms their main practice. They also share the same aim, a change of life. All kinds of rules, about place, time, body position, accompany both explorations of the mind which are surveyed by a leader to whom the maximal openness about thought and feelings is required. Imagination and fantasy are stimulated all the time and even transference plays a central part in both enterprises.

As often happens with important phenomena of social and cultural life, as different as theatre plays, orphanages or healthcare systems, they have had their predecessors in the world of religion. In many regards psychoanalysis can be considered as secularized *Spiritual Exercises*. After two centuries of Enlightenment, of victorious reason, Freud was the first scientist to show such a serious,

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1 This discernment – 'distinctio spirituum' – was in 1530 a modern, internalised version of the old 'probatio spirituum' the traditional public trial of the bad or heretical spirits active in a suspect person.

methodical interest in the antecedents or supports of that intelligence, in impressions, feelings, fantasies, passion, everything his colleagues tended to consider as secondary or even inferior. Freud wanted to show that reason often functioned as the humble servant of these irrational faculties.

When Ignatius, long before, conceived his *Spiritual Exercises*, there was no question yet of Enlightenment. The Renaissance, which saw our modern 'self' make its big breakthrough, prepared the arrival of the age of rationality, but did not have its superiority complex. It certainly did not yet underestimate human feelings and imagination as keys to the mystery of the human mind. Mistrust and even disdain towards those fundamental faculties which unite body and mind would only originate a century later with thinkers like Descartes, Pascal, Locke, Leibniz and even, though hesitantly, Kant. For Ignatius those faculties are still the very source of our experience and the material on which our thought is based. Therefore this religious predecessor of psychoanalysis helps us in his own way to understand better what is at stake in the Freudian approach to the human mind.

I now would like to illustrate this by comparing some essential aspects of both schools of feeling: the basic structure of the inner processes they describe, the tools they use to support that experience: firstly imagination, secondly transference and thirdly the choices which mark the end of both psychoanalysis and Loyola's *Exercises*.

As for the structure of these processes, Freud as well as Loyola see the adult in analysis or in prayer as a child who has not become a really adult being, and who should re-examine his or her life in function of that situation. 'From child to choice', could be the definition of each of the two inner adventures, the ability of making a real choice being the mark of an adult life. This structure is easily perceptible in the Freudian analysis. Here the patient is torn between aspirations and anxieties which, having their origin in the time a child is mainly with the mother, could be called 'motherly' – pleasure, security, intimacy – and those which appear when the father starts to play his role of 'other' in the life of the child, we could call 'fatherly' – share and care, justice, etc. [Of course these words, 'motherly' and 'fatherly', do not refer to persons but to functions. A father also shares in the function of the mother and vice-versa]. The 'I' in an analysis can be seen as the result of the dialectics between these two functions of our psyche, its egocentrism, heritage of 'the mother', and its need of 'otherness', heritage of 'the father' who has to show to his child the way out of the house, away from the mother. In an analysis we 'work ourselves again through' these old and often unresolved experiences, in order to acquire enough inner distance – one could perhaps call it 'post-oedipal' distance – to handle them with more freedom than before[2].

In the case of Ignatius the same structure is recognisable, in spite of the fact that here the moral problem which Freud strictly wants to avoid often tends to create a black and white scheme. In the eyes of Ignatius, the so called exercitant – the person engaged in these *Exercices* – is a 'child of God', but mainly a sinning child, someone who has to quit his or her former life. The initial scheme is the same as in Freud's analysis: from child to choice. Ignatius asks his exercitant to spend a whole week on this theme. Self-examination becomes an obsessive practice during these *Exercises*: a very systematic examination that mainly concerns our dark side , our sinful thoughts, sinful words, sinful deeds. In the centuries after Ignatius and through his influence, this practice will become omnipresent in the Roman Catholic world, and sexuality will increasingly tend to become one of the centres of this self-examination. Freud will not be the first to discover sexuality in the core of the human psyche... Be it what it be, our 'ego' does not get much positive appreciation in Ignatius' *Exercises*, with the exception of our will which is still able to turn the ship of life in another direction. But the 'motherly' side of existence remains in the dark until salvation appears, in the person of the idealised other, Jesus Christ, the one whom you can follow and imitate like a child imitates his father, and who takes you away from the dark motherly, egocentric, sinful side of existence. Ignatius asks his exercitant to spend

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2 The motherly side in our use of language is marked by the figure of proximity, the metonymy, whereas the 'fatherly' use, involving also the presence or the other, of difference, leads us to the metaphor. The language game of metonymy and metaphor results in the metamorphosis of the speaker, which is the objective of both prayer and analysis...

three weeks on this big example, the life of Christ. Thanks to that long process of identification with the words and the life of Christ the exercitant also becomes able to retrieve the now purified world of the mother. This process finds its conclusion in what is perhaps the most famous exercise of Ignatius, the 'contemplation to attain love', where the motherly world of the body, of creation, and the fatherly world of relating to the other meet and are reconciled. By that time the dependent child has made the choices of a responsible adult.

Once more, what is relevant is not content but form. The content of Freud's story and that of Ignatius share certain analogies, but remain for good reasons alien to each other. But the structure, the basic form of both psychoanalysis and the *Spiritual Exercises*, show the same psychic processes at work. That is also true when we have a closer look at the motor propelling them – human imagination – and at the other instruments that make it work, the final choices – the 'election' – and more in particular the transference[3]. Here the correspondences are the most intriguing and revealing. I do not have to insist on the importance of free association in psychoanalysis, nor on that of transference, which towards the end of his life Freud even considered as the main instrument for a successful analysis. The initial signs of both phenomena are also recognisable in the *Spiritual Exercises.* For Ignatius, each meditation on whatever subject, starts with what he calls a composition of the place in the imagination of the exercitant. Be it heaven or hell, Jerusalem or Bethlehem, but also the house where the exercitant himself lived as a child, committing his first sins, our fantasy is our main help in prayer and in decision making. 'It is profitable to use the imagination and to apply the five senses' (121): The body has to be involved in our prayers and our thinking: the gospel here becomes an inner theatre play, we hear Jesus speaking, we even smell and 'taste the infinite sweetness and charm of the Divinity', or touch and embrace the places where he walks. Roland Barthes once rightly remarked that Ignatius invites us as much to fill our minds with images as Zen-masters want to empty them. Ignatius still has a very strong sense of the bodily implications of everything we call spiritual. He does not yet speak, as Freud does, about 'imagining anything', which would be the key to free association, but he opens the doors to 'imagining everything', therapeutic imagination which is certainly the sign of an open mind. In the same spirit he requires a total openness of the exercitant versus his leader.

When he talks about 'perceiving and then understanding, a least to some extent, the various motions which are caused in the soul' (S.E. 313) we are indeed dealing with a kind of psychoanalysis *avant la lettre*, looking at our inner life with all the intensity and perspicacity we may possess. The most striking aspect of Ignatius' activity here is that he discovers how good and bad spirits are not as easy to discern as it may seem. Bad spirits often take the appearance of a good spirit and vice versa. You have to watch them with great alertness and see the results of their work. No doubt that this in the eyes of Ignatius most complicated and important phenomenon in our inner life refers to what Freud one day would also find the most important in his practice, terming it 'transference', which is the unconscious at work. Unconsciously, we are facing or addressing someone else than the person we think we are dealing with. Freud would interpret such a game of masks in a psychological way where Ignatius still sees good and bad angels at work. However, through all of this he realises that reason and intelligence are not what only, or what most matter to understand life. That insight will often be lost in the centuries of Enlightenment after him. Freud will try to retrieve it, though not without a certain ambiguity. He also wanted so dearly to belong to the world of science and reason which rejected him...

Not only therapeutic association and transference are at work in Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*. His role as a predecessor appears also when we look at the choices that mark the final stages of psychoanalysis and of Ignatius' *Exercises*. Freud's main remark about this issue is that strictly speaking, an analysis never ends, and new choices will have to be made. Ignatius shares that insight

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3 Transference is an inner mechanism in the patient by which he is able to transfer, mostly unconsciously, old, never resolved feelings, mainly concerning the relation to his parents in the past, to other people now, and during the analysis – hopefully – to the analyst. Recognition of this transference mechanisme in oneself is often the beginning of the end of an analysis.

and therefore invites his exercitant to go through the same experience every year. In psychoanalysis that would not be as easy. Therefore a central choice concerns the ending of the analysis and the timing of it, whereas Ignatius even establishes rules about the choice – 'the election' – of the future life of the exercitant. He marks 'three times suitable for making a sound and good election'. The first and best is evidence by 'intuition', the second clarity by feelings of consolation and desolation, only the third is the result of pure reasoning.

Both Ignatius and Freud give a place to fantasy, poetics and the irrational in their stories of inner experience. Comparing these two 'schools of feeling', many of us will be mainly sensitive to, or grateful for Freud's jump into modernity, for the way he unmasks theological or philosophical pretensions to possess or even govern a higher truth. Freud wants human reason and science to lead the way to the future. However, what Ignatius seems to realise more than Freud is that knowledge, inner light, cannot and should not be, or become only the light of reason. Our mind would be like a lamp without batteries. Human reason cannot pretend to dominate human life. There is something highly positive in not pretending that we can – or should – know everything.

The unknown – call it 'God', the unconscious, the nirvana or whatever – is not a realm, a reality which at the end could or should be translated into rational language. Knowledge cannot be exclusively reduced to reason. That is only true as long as we are investigating the material, 'scientific' world In the world of the mind, of the 'immaterial', we are dealing with a different 'unknown'. In the heart of it we find the mysteries of death and of creativity. That realm, which we carry inside our minds and bodies, is an open space, reaching beyond reason and theory, and even beyond imagination and myth. Therefore we invented a hidden God and the unconscious. Those concepts or, even more, those experiences will always be necessary to keep us going, to keep our minds free.