

## Discernment and decision making in Ignatian Mysticism and Paulo Coelho select novels

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**Abstract:** This research related to Discernment and decision making in Ignatian Mysticism and Paulo Coelho. Data used mainly from secondary sources. Decision-making is an art because the choices that an individual makes affect not only that individual but also in most cases those around him/her. The most difficult road that a human person encounters is the crossroad where life unfolds countless choices before and sometimes the decisions have lasting consequences. Robert Frost's —The Road Not Taken highlights the crucial issues involved in decision-making.

**Keywords:** Discernment and decision making, Ignatian Mysticism, disappointments, gymnastic.

Many a time life is compared to a road. Human persons have to journey through this road: some long and some short; some smooth and some rocky; some crooked and some straight; some narrow and some broad; and some familiar and some strange. There are roads that lead to fame and fortune on the one hand, and isolation and poverty on the other. There are roads that lead to happiness and there are roads that lead to sadness; roads towards victory and jubilation, and roads towards defeats and disappointments.

Just like in any road, so too in life there are corners, detours, and crossroads. Human persons are confronted by countless choices each day. Choices follow decisions which are personal. There comes a time when an individual consciously guards his/her right to choose. It is central to his/her individuality—the very definition of free will.

Decision-making is an art because the choices that an individual makes affect not only that individual but also in most cases those around him/her. The most difficult road that a human person encounters is the crossroad where life unfolds countless choices before and sometimes the decisions have lasting consequences. Robert Frost's —The Road Not Taken highlights the crucial issues involved in decision-making:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –  
Took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference. **(Robert Frost's)**

Decision-making is never easy. Some decisions are clear while others are difficult. A serious person who is committed to life will not take any decision randomly or waver and dither for years, for life is a journey and he/she will have to make a choice one way or the other. Evelyn Underhill says, —The true asceticism is a gymnastic not of the body, but of the mind. It involves training in the art of recollection, the concentration of thought, will, and love upon the eternal realities which we commonly ignore (The Essentials of Mysticism 24).

Making good decisions calls for balancing the seemingly antithetical forces of emotion and rationality. As human beings, we have to perceive the present and predict the future in whatever

way we can, even while dealing with uncertainty. The important aspect to be noted is that a human person is a product of the choices that he/she makes. Each decision defines him/her as a person and how he/she is different from others. However, not all decisions are life-changing. Therefore, important choices must be carefully made due to the lasting impact they could have on an individual. The *Oxford Advanced American Dictionary* defines discernment' as —the ability to show good judgment about the quality of someone or something.¶ From the synonyms that are attributed to the word discernment,' namely, insightful, perceptive, prudent, sagacious, sage, sapient, and wise, it is clear that it is an action word which involves a process and a method. Discernment refers to the ability to see what is not evident to the average mind. It stresses accuracy in reading characters or motives or appreciating a work of art, and the ability to distinguish and choose what is true or appropriate or excellent. In common parlance, discernment can be defined as a process of making a choice.

The English word discernment' and its verb discern' derive their meaning from Greek and Latin roots respectively which literally means to sift, to separate, to distinguish.' In common parlance, it is like separating ripe from unripe fruits or sifting fine flour from coarse flour or distinguishing the good from the bad. In spirituality, the word discernment' gathers a lot of significance. Carroll Putrell points out:

The Greek word diakrisis' and the Latin words discernere' and discretio' in their root meaning signify to divide, to separate, to distinguish, to render discreet'. The application of the words specifically to the discernment of spirits or to the more complex spiritual process (enveloping the discernment of spirits) which leads to the actual choice of concrete action fluctuates both in Scripture and in Christian tradition. (*Ignatian Discernment* )

Somy Mansoor in his *Understanding the Examen* talks of spirituality as —a way towards God . . . a pilgrimage path to God that has its origin in one or more individuals . . . [and] transmitted to subsequent generations¶ (10). Spirituality could be called a way of living— —living in a certain way that includes all the activities that make up the complex reality called life¶ (Mansoor 10). There are many schools in spirituality and mysticism. What distinguishes Ignatian Spirituality from the other schools of spirituality is its great vision of life and world. David L. Fleming writes in *What is Ignatian Spirituality?* —Ignatian spirituality offers us a vision. It is a vision of life, of work, and of love - a three-part vision that helps us see what is really true about God and about the world he created¶ (2).

One of the hallmarks of Ignatian Spirituality or perhaps its central feature is the Discernment of Spirits.' Ignatius in his *Spiritual Exercises* refers to discernment as Discernment of the Spirits.' Discernment acts as the fulcrum on which Ignatian Spirituality moves to —test everything and to hold fast what is good" (1Thes 5,21). Discernment' means to separate, to distinguish one thing from another and form a judgment about it and talk about its origin, nature, orientation, etc. Rex Pai, an expert in Ignatian Discernment, defines discernment as —a sifting of one's inner experiences to discover their orientation and hence recognize their origin¶ (32). Pai's definition hinges on three important terms: inner experience', orientation', and origin' which need further explanation.

Inner experience‘ happens at three levels. The first may spring from the mind: thoughts, beliefs and judgments. The second springs from the emotional level: feelings and emotions. The third operates at the will‘ level desires and inspirations. These three levels in constant interaction with one another lead to the formation and development of attitudes, values and habits of thinking and acting.

Orientation‘ is the key word in the process of discernment. By orientation,‘ one means a person's basic attitudes, beliefs, or feelings in relation to a particular subject or issue. –To discover the orientation requires a certain awareness and understanding of these inner experiences|| notes (Pai 11). Origin,‘ in classical terminology, refers to and applies to the things or persons from which something is ultimately derived and often points to causal factors that produce good and evil, and light and darkness. These factors constantly act upon the person and lead him/her to live a life of goodness or evil. In short, discernment could be summarized as seeking and finding as far as possible God’s will through the process of sifting inner experiences and discovering their orientations.

Pai suggests at least nine preconditions as certain dispositions and attitudes that are needed for a person to do a proper discernment. These nine preconditions are not mandatory but are essential so that the person is able to make a good discernment. The nine preconditions are: Commitment to look for God’s will; trusting and having faith in a God who is loving; self-revealing and concerned about His creation; a relationship with the divine through prayer; an awareness of one’s inner movements, one’s thoughts, feelings and desires; an awareness of social reality, the world and the context in which one lives and make one’s choices; inner freedom (freedom from fears and anxieties, prejudices and false beliefs, attachment to persons and things, resentments, unhealed wounds of the past, etc.); a certain sense of humility to be dependent on God or openness to the Spirit and readiness to listen and even learn from others; fraternal love or being other-oriented; and a courage to take risks. Pai summarizes: —Discernment is a way of life for those who are not satisfied with just doing and avoiding evil, but a desire to search for what is pleasing to God and to do the most loving thing, in every detail of their life|| (*Discernment: A Way of Life* 15-16).

Ignatius, the mystic, reveals that there are different spirits which try to influence human persons and cautions that individuals need to choose carefully. He begins the rules for Discernment of the Spirits in the following words: —Rules by which to perceive and understand to some extent the various movements produced in the soul: the good that they may be accepted, and the bad, that they may be rejected|| (*Spiritual Exercises* 313). Therefore, discernment enables a person to distinguish between the spiritually authentic and its opposite, and between what is and what is not of the Spirit.

Pai interprets the first two rules of discernment in the *Spiritual Exercises* which speaks of two types of persons as —those who are basically self-oriented and those who are basically other-oriented|| (*Spiritual Exercises* 314-316). –For a self-oriented person, the evil spirit encourages by means of good feelings, imaginations and apparent pleasures; the good spirit will disturb such a person through reasoning that leads to repentance|| (Pai 29). But for the \_other-oriented person‘, the evil spirit might disturb him/her with false reasons that produce anxiety and sadness whereas —the good spirit

will encourage with consolations peace, joy, strength etc. (Pai 29). It can also happen that the good spirit might challenge the other-oriented person to give up his/her selfishness and motivate him/her to explore his/her latent talents and innate skills.

Consolation and desolation are two key terms discussed by Ignatius in his *Spiritual Exercises*. In a general way, one could say that spiritual consolation is feeling good, while spiritual desolation is feeling bad. Consolation could be experienced through an increase in faith, hope and love, a sense of joy or peace, strength or courage, confidence or self-acceptance, a feeling of gratitude and awareness of being a forgiven sinner. Desolations, on the other hand, can be experienced through a feeling of lack of faith, hope and love, a sense of sadness or confusion, weakness or fear, diffidence or self-rejection, an inability to accept others and a sense of alienation from persons and even God, and a sense of guilt and remorse because of sinfulness and weakness. Ignatius discovered that both consolation and desolation can move one towards God or pull him/her away from God. The movement of spirits obviously involves a set of complex variables: consolation and desolation, good and evil spirits, movement towards and away from God.

Spiritual discernment is a powerful process by which the exercitant examines the nature of his/her experiences by asking him/herself if that particular impulse or idea or plan or project or word comes from the Divine or not. He/She is able to decipher through discernment whether those inspirations and impulses come from God or from the evil spirit. In this manner, discernment becomes a way to search and find God in and through one's life situations. Maloney in his book, *Called to Intimacy*, remarks:

. . . the discipline of examining each thought from within as it rises is something that only you and I can and must do if we are serious about attaining the goal: to live in love. No one can give you this self-knowledge. You need to submit at each moment, every movement from within to the guidance of God's Word dwelling within you. This is why being conscious at all times of God's indwelling presence within you is so important. (Maloney)

The usual prayer of many a school boy in convent schools in the West would be the prayer of Richard of Chichester which is associated with Ignatius and it includes these three petitions: – To see you more clearly, To follow you more nearly, To love you more dearly . . . ' This is a prayer that is so simple that it trips off the lips of children in primary school, yet so far-reaching that it can lead us to the very heart of God-with-us (Landmarks: An Ignatian Journey 200).

In relationships, when one wants to deepen his/her relationship with the other person, he/she has to go beyond factual knowledge of the other person and should get to know the other person a little more deeply. This dynamics could be applied to one's relationship with God as well. In the beginning, mere recitation of a *mantra* or performing some rituals would suffice. But to know God more intimately, that individual has to take some risks.

In *The Pilgrimage*, the narrator, when the story unfolds, is in the ritualistic assembly of the RAM tradition where he is about to receive the sword, the symbolic authority to be a master of the RAM

tradition. When he is about to receive the honour of getting the sword, the master pulls back the sword from him. The sword has been denied to him because the master feels that he has not fulfilled the essential requirement of humility. In the RAM tradition, humility is the prerequisite to be a master. The master feels that he is distracted by the pride of possessing the sword and does not have the mind set to teach the ordinary people the RAM tradition. He now feels humiliated and distressed that at the last moment he lost his sword. He learns from his wife that he has to go in search of the sword that is hidden in a place and learns that it can be reached only after an arduous pilgrimage. He decides to go on a pilgrimage and take –a medieval route known as the Strange Road to, Santiago (4). He, after discerning the pros and cons of the pilgrimage, especially what he has to endure and the outcome, composes himself and decides to undertake the pilgrimage. He confesses, –Even if I were not able to find my sword, the pilgrimage along the Road to Santiago was going to help me find myself (14). Discernment helped him to clarify the purpose of his life.

Coelho imagines, while discussing with Petrus, that people’s deformities and diseases are punishments for the mistakes committed in their previous births. But Petrus clarifies and emphasizes that –God is not vengeance and adds, –God is love. His only form of punishment is to make someone who interrupts a work of love (48). On another occasion when he asked Petrus how people are capable of inflicting cruelty on themselves, Petrus responds: –People don’t like to ask too much of life because they are afraid, they will be defeated. But if someone wants to fight the good fight, that person must view the world as if it were a marvelous treasure waiting to be discovered and won (81-82).

The narrator learns quite many lessons of life from Petrus, his *guru*. The lessons that he has learnt cannot be forgotten because they are lived experiences preceded by proper discernment. For example, Petrus and the narrator, on their way to Santiago, have to cross the Pyrenees. It is indeed a very difficult journey. They have to travel for a week in the woods sleeping on the ground and walking throughout the day. So, on the Road to Santiago they have to make sacrifices. On the seventh day, Petrus asks the narrator about their long and arduous journey and not wanting to offend his master, he replies that it was nice. Petrus replies, much to his amazement, –It must have been nice, because it took us six days to go a distance, we could have gone in one (35). Petrus reveals that he has taken him through different routes showing him that road in different angles. And since the narrator’s mind was bent on getting his sword, he was not aware that he had already passed by certain places four or five times. Petrus discloses, –This happened because the process of moving along did not exist for you. The only thing that existed was your desire at your goal (36). The narrator feels embarrassed that he has been walking on the same road for days together without recognizing it. The master taught his disciple a life-lesson in this process of discernment. He informs him:

When you are moving towards an objective, it is very important to pay attention to the road. It is the road that teaches us the best way to get there, and the road enriches us as we walk its length . . .

And it is the same thing when you have an objective in your life. It will turn out



to be better or worse depending on the route you choose to reach it and the way you negotiate that route. That's why the second RAM practice is so important; it extracts from what we are used to seeing every day the secrets that, because of our routine, we never see. (Maloney)

Following the Seed Exercise, Petrus teaches him the Speed Exercise where the pilgrim is asked to walk for twenty minutes at half the speed at which he/she normally walks. He asks him to —pay attention to the details, people, and surroundings and adds that the best time to do this is after lunch (37).

Ignatius calls this the Daily Examen' where the exercitant is called to self- examine the whole day twice—once before or after lunch and the other before going to bed. The Examen of Conscience is an awareness exercise and a powerful means to grow in daily discernment. Pai explains the same in simple words: —By looking at the way we responded to the different happenings and situations of the day, we discover our inner orientations towards good or towards evil (or less good). In its turn, our orientation shows us what is to be encouraged and fostered within us, and what is to be dropped or modified (123).

**Conclusion:** This paper deals with the culmination of the quest of the protagonists which has been viewed in terms of the arrival implying self realisation/ enlightenment/ *moksha*/ liberation from the cycle of birth-death-rebirth. It has been viewed in terms of final stage of Jung's individuation process called "transformation" followed by integration with the community/ roots where the quest starts from. After throwing light on the points of difference between Eastern and western quest processes, the final stage of Campbellian "return" has been examined in detailed manner. For instance, in the Eastern thought, self- realisation is viewed as union of the seeker (soul) with the divine (Oversoul) thereby becoming aware of one's being as Brahman; but in the Western thought, individuality is given excessive prominence.

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