

IMAGINATION AND EXPERIENCE: CONSCIENCE AND MORAL REFLECTION IN IGNATIAN PEDAGOGY

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GENERAL AIMS:

My general aim for this project was to investigate the ways in which Ignatian pedagogy and practice can contribute to the development of a habit of moral reflection in our students. Since I regularly teach PHIL100 Ethics as Intro to Philosophy, I was particularly interested in the ways in which I might draw on the tradition of Jesuit pedagogy to help students to identify connections between the theories of justice and of the good life that we examine in that course and their own experiences. My initial aim was to consider possible roles for the Spiritual Exercises in establishing that link.

RESEARCH AND BACKGROUND:

I worked with Dr. Trudelle Thomas in examining two primary topics:

First, we examined different approaches to Ignatian pedagogy by reading articles from a variety of authors. We considered especially the relation between the Ignatian idea of *cura personalis* and the educator's role in moral reflection and formation. The notion of *cura personalis*, of caring for the whole person, is one that is central to Xavier's mission. In this connection, we are concerned with seeing our students develop not only intellectually, but also morally and spiritually. At the same time, it is unclear exactly what role we might play in promoting that moral development, especially through the classes we offer. It is a significant feature of Ignatian pedagogy that Jesuit education was initially intended for preparing initiates for the society, not for the education of lay people.

However, the liberal character of Xavier undergraduate education imposes some limitations on the applicability of Ignatian principles and ideas. In particular, I believe we should not be *primarily* concerned with requiring our students to act in a way that is consistent with a specific idea of justice or the good life (though we certainly *do* want them to act in accordance with some conception of these things). Instead, we should make it our aim to help students to develop a capacity to reflect on and understand the nature of justice and the good life so that they can pursue that life for themselves, without dependence on the authority of a teacher. Dr. Thomas and I engaged in a number of fruitful discussions on our own experiences in the classroom and as teachers, focusing especially on the idea of ethical virtue—of a habitual disposition to act and think in ways consistent with the demands of justice and the goal of a good life—and on the ways in which we might contribute to the cultivation of virtue in our students.

Second, Dr. Thomas and I also devoted significant attention to the animating ideas of Ignatius's Spiritual Exercises. We considered the role that careful reflection on individual experience plays in Ignatius's ideas. In this connection, I was particularly interested in Ignatius's stress on the roles of *imagination* in recalling one's own experiences and history, and *desire* in finding direction for one's own convictions and actions. We might be inclined to dismiss both of these, believing that they provide, at best, secondary guidance in moral questions. For example, if a moral life is simply a product of adherence to a set of universal rules of conduct, then individual imagination and desire will need to receive all of their guidance from those rules, and will not be

matters of primary interest. By contrast, Ignatius stresses that these intimately personal matters are not simply objects to be directed by rules or abstract universal demands, but instead are themselves significant guides to justice and the good. Reflection on one's own personal experiences with a view to understanding one's deepest desire is in fact essential to achieving an orientation toward these ultimate ends. In the Exercises, Ignatius frequently stresses the importance of "seeing with the eyes of the imagination," of making present one's own experiences (or some event from scripture).

In this connection, I have been primarily interested in the role that the examination of one's conscience plays in Ignatius's Exercises. Ignatius proposes this examination not simply with a view to identifying our moral failures, our sins. Rather, he encourages us to find and distinguish experiences of *desolation*, those in which our desires are at odds with our "deepest desire," which orients us toward the achievement of our purpose (for Ignatius, it orients us towards God), from experiences of *consolation*, in which we experience a harmony of our particular desires and our ultimate purpose. To this extent, Ignatius encourages us to reflect on and identify the moral roots of our emotions and desires on the grounds that the imaginative engagement with these very personal, individual experiences is essential for the achievement of our highest purpose. Not only does Ignatius claim that every individual should engage in this conscientious examination. He also believes that the very particular character of our individual experiences has a moral significance and value that we might otherwise overlook.

MY PROJECT:

I aimed to bring together these two general issues—moral development as an element of *cura personalis* and the role of imagination and experience in the Spiritual Exercises—through a writing assignment for my PHIL100 Ethics as Intro to Philosophy sections in Spring 2013.

For this assignment, students were required to attend a lecture in the ongoing "Ethics, Religion, and Society" series on "Justice, Tolerance, and Diversity," or a lecture sponsored by the Philosophy Department at some point during the semester. Following the lecture, students were required to write a brief account of the speaker's lecture, identifying its central claim and argument. However, they were also required to offer a personal reflection on an issue of moral, social, or political significance on which the speaker dwelt.

For this personal reflection, I first asked students to consider the way in which they confronted an ethical question in their own experience. I asked students not only to explain a situation in which they found themselves, but also imaginatively to recall their own individual responses—their personal feelings and thoughts—and to state how those personal experiences shaped their own understanding of the ethical question. Second, I asked students to consider the role that this experience played in shaping their *response* to that ethical question. I encouraged students to reflect on ways in which their moral experience either strengthened or transformed their understanding of the issue. Finally, I asked students to identify whether they now agree or disagree with the view offered by the speaker, and to state reasons for their agreement or disagreement.

AIMS OF THIS ASSIGNMENT:

First, the assignment encouraged (by requiring) students to attend a lecture sponsored by ERS or Philosophy. To this end, it worked to foster student engagement in the intellectual life of the university. In the case of the ERS series, it drew attention to the impressive series of speakers who have agreed to author original pieces on topics of great significance to the life of the institution. Moreover, because it encourages students to bring reflection on their own personal experiences and histories to bear on the subject matter that the speaker addresses, it aimed to draw students' attention to connections between their own lives and the intellectual concerns of the speaker, concerns which it might otherwise be possible to think bear no great connection to the students' own lives.

Second, the assignment encouraged students to reflect on their own moral experiences, with a view to showing how those personal experiences are essential to discerning the demands of justice and the purpose of a good life. To this extent, it points to the relevance of issues of general ethical concern to their own lives and experiences.

Third, the assignment required students to link their own individual experiences to a response to the ethical question about which they write that is, in principle at least, shareable by others. In asking the students to state the reasons for their agreement or disagreement with the views expressed by the speaker about whom they are writing, the assignment required that students transcend their own individual standpoint, and to consider the ways in which a moral issue that has touched them directly and powerfully should be significant for the lives of others.

In general, the assignment encouraged students to bridge what may be a gap in their moral reflection and thinking, namely that between the concrete level of moral experience, and the more abstract level of ethical reasoning and reflection. The assignment aimed to bridge this gap by drawing on the resources offered by Jesuit pedagogy and spiritual practice.

RESULTS:

On the whole, this project was a success. While the quality of submitted essays was not entirely consistent, those students who seriously engaged with the assignment succeeded in presenting not only accurate and thorough accounts of the speakers' views, but more importantly, thoughtful and careful reflections on the moral significance of those views for their own lives. Some students reflected on their experiences as members of a family, as participants in a community, as citizens in a state, and as students and drew links between the ideas and arguments proposed by the speakers and those experiences. I am confident that, in the case of at least a few students, this exercise helped them to achieve a kind of clarity in understanding the moral character of their experiences that they previously did not have.

In general, I was heartily encouraged by the informal discussions that I had with students both in class and in office hours concerning their reflection papers. Students showed a laudable willingness to reflect on the connections between their own lives and the ideas discussed in the lectures. This activity of reflection mutually enriched their understanding both of their own experiences and of the ideas presented by speakers in the lecture series.