

The Life of Saint Ignatius: Philosophical and Pedagogical Implications

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Introduction

I have always been interested in the experiential context out of which one philosophizes. In keeping with this interest, I wanted to obtain some sense of the experiential context out of which Iñigo de Loyola emerged to become Saint Ignatius. I began W.W. Meissner's *Ignatius of Loyola: The Psychology of a Saint*,¹ and moved to the *Spiritual Diary* and *Spiritual Exercises*, as well as other cognate works in Ignatian scholarship. Below are some insights discerned along the way, followed by some brief implications for pedagogy.

Preliminary Notions: Experiential Time and Secondary Reflection

The experiential life of Saint Ignatius is not a linear phenomenon; it is reflexively continuous and best represented by a spiral.² Experiential time does not conform to the time of the clock. "Clock-time" refers to a most abstract conception of time – the discrete time of the chronometer. From the perspective of clock-time, the "present" is "now", the "past" is "no longer," and the "future" is "not yet." Prima facie, this conception of time makes sense. It supports the traditional notion of time as a series consisting of past, present, and future. Philosophical speaking, the concepts associated with clock-time lead to paradox. The "now" becomes a fleeting moment between the "no longer" and the "not yet" – a specious, vanishing present! How can a person exist within such a razor-thin span of duration?

Experiential time is multi-dimensional; the three dimensions of time (past, present, and future) are related. Martin Heidegger, a twentieth century, German philosopher who wrote extensively on the question of time, characterized experiential time as "a remarkable 'relatedness, backwards or forwards.'"³ Within the "ecstatic" unity of experiential time, the three

¹ W.W. Meissner S.J., *Ignatius of Loyola: the Psychology of a Saint* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994). As both a Jesuit and M.D. with a clinical specialty in Freudian psychoanalysis, Meissner is well equipped to provide a unique look into the mind of Ignatius.

² The *spira mirabilis*, Latin for "miraculous spiral," refers to the logarithmic spiral. The logarithmic spiral was first described by Descartes and later investigated by Jacob Bernoulli, who called it *Spira mirabilis*, "the marvelous or miraculous spiral." Bernoulli was fascinated by one of the unique mathematical properties of the logarithmic spiral: the size of the spiral increases but its shape is unaltered with each successive curve, a property known as self-similarity. The *spira mirabilis* has is discernable in nature in the form of nautilus shells and sunflower heads. Bernoulli wanted such a spiral engraved on his headstone along with the phrase "*Eadem mutata resurgo*" ("Although changed, I shall arise the same"), but, in error, an Archimedean spiral was engraved instead.

³ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (Harper and Row, 1962) 28.

dimensions of time are intra-related – the future invades the present by way of the past: “Temporality is the primordial ‘outside of itself’ in and for itself. We therefore call the phenomenon of the future, the character of having been, and the Present, the *ecstases* of temporality, Temporality ... [in] essence is a process of temporalizing in the unity of the ecstasies.”⁴

Hans-Georg Gadamer, another twentieth century, German philosopher, and student of Heidegger, characterized experiential time as similar to the process of negotiating a series of bending, hairpin mountain switchbacks; when traversing an ascending path, one advances by crossing over where one has been.⁵ Gadamer’s example further implies that experience is reflexively circuitous and capable of reaching elevated levels of perspective. Similar to the case of a reflexive verb in which the action rebounds upon the subject, the reflexive unity of experiential time results in a synergistic unity in which the temporal unit becomes larger than the sum of its parts. A contemporary computer scientist, Douglas R. Hofstadter, examines the significance of reflexive awareness in his book, *I am a Strange Loop*. Hofstadter understands reflexive (recursive) experience in terms of a “looping effect” capable of yielding exponential growth: “Feedback loops have levels of subtlety and complexity that are seldom given any thought, but turn out to be rich and full of surprise.”⁶ Feedback loops act as a dynamo by serving as the locus of a concentrated discharge of energy. As in the case of a guitar in close proximity to an amplifier, a feedback loop consists of a synergistic relationship caused by an exponentially increasing source of power being recursively generated within a self-referential field.⁷

Secondary reflection, a notion developed by the twentieth-century, French philosopher Gabriel Marcel, provides another helpful lens through which to view the experiential development of Ignatius. In the course of day-to-day living, our primary mode of relating to the world is functional. Marcel refers to this way of relating as “primary reflection” – things are abstracted from their wider context and represented in terms of a function served within a chain of efficient causality – “doing this in order to obtain that.” Despite occupying a location within a causal network, things experienced from a material perspective appear fragmented. The quotidian world stands before us with the appearance of authority but, as Marcel reminds us: “Life completely transcends the categories of biology [and] infinitely transcends my possible conscious grasp at any given moment.”⁸ Life oftentimes exhibits a dynamic aspect experienced

⁴ *Ibid.*: 377

⁵ See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Apprenticeships*, trans. Robert R. Sullivan (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985): 50-51.

⁶ Douglas Hofstadter, *I Am a Strange Loop* (New York: Basic Books, 2007): 55-56. In his more popular *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* (New York: Basic Books, 1979), Hofstadter uses examples from Bach’s Canons, Escher’s drawings, and Gödel’s incompleteness theorem to demonstrate the power of self-reference.

⁷ See *I Am a Strange Loop*, p. 54: [E]ach cycling around of the input sound would theoretically amplify its volume by a fixed factor, say k – thus, two loops would amplify a factor by k^2 , three loops by k^3 , and so on. We all know the power of exponential growth from hearing horror stories about exponential growth of the earth’s population or some such disaster.”

⁸ Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being, Volume I: Reflection and Mystery*, trans. G.S. Fraser (Regnery, 1950): 167.

as mystery. Mystery cannot be captured in canonical speech or ratiocinative thinking. Problems, on the other hand, occur in a specifically defined context within which they can be “solved.” A problematic situation requires the subject to take an exterior position *vis á vis* the problem “at hand” – a strange perspective in which the subject somehow removes itself from the very circumstances under consideration. What gives the self the ability to inhabit a “non-problematical” sphere? Our egocentric orientation is unable to account for the obdurate and inviolable source of *that* through which the problem is constituted. What is the source that gives meaning to the self and allows the self to consider itself separately from any problem? This source cannot come from a self! Sands begin to shift beneath our feet – something akin to the experience of a tightrope walker who, “as soon as it looks at its feet, it realizes that it is operating in mid-air.”⁹ The treatment of any problem demands an inquiry into the totality of being and the self as related to that totality. Secondary reflection is an attempt to gain awareness of the wider, mysterious totality within which we exist, seeking higher unities discerned through experiential and intellectual synthesis. This experience is beautifully captured by the American writer, Norman Maclean: “All there is to thinking is seeing something noticeable which makes you see something you weren’t noticing which makes you see something that isn’t even visible.”¹⁰

The Life of Ignatius: The Winding Path from Guipúzcoa to Pamplona

Experiential time and secondary reflection provide useful lenses through which to view the life of Ignatius.¹¹ The course of Ignatius’ life exhibits a complex seriatim character. From the beginning, his genetic development exhibits a dynamism that is not serendipitous. Born in the Guipúzcoa region of Spain where it is said that the water is so saturated with iron that “the inhabitants have it in their veins,”¹² Iñigo reflected the autochthonous temper of toughness and persistency. Raised by three women, his birth mother, a surrogate, and Magdalena – his older brother’s wife – the young Iñigo’s experience of maternal love was always mitigated by a sense of absence – a sense he would never completely overcome. It was during this formative time that Ignatius would undergo his first encounter with religious experience. The Annunciation, a painting in which the Archangel Gabriel informs the Virgin Mary she will conceive the Son of God, was a wedding gift to Magdalena from Queen Isabella. Magdalena had the painting installed in a specially constructed cathedral at Loyola. Iñigo developed a special devotion to the picture. According to Pedro de Leturia, S.J., “In the life of the author of the *Exercises*, Doña Magdalena’s picture of our Lady had the first place, long before those of Olaz, Aránzazu, and Montserrat.”¹³

⁹ Annie Dillard, *Living by Fiction* (Harper and Row, 1982): 55.

¹⁰ Norman Maclean, *A River Runs Through and Other Stories* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976): 92.

¹¹ The account given of Ignatius’ life is necessarily selective due to reasons of space. See Meissner, Chapter XX, “Divine and/or Psychic Causality?” for a more synoptic account.

¹² See Meissner: 3.

¹³ Cited in Hugo Rahner, S.J., *Saint Ignatius Loyola: Letters to Women* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1960): 116.

Although the clerical life had been considered an option, young Iñigo displayed too much life and vivacity for the ecclesiastic vocation. He was sent to Arévalo to join the household of Juan Valázquez de Cuéllar – a man of great wealth and member of the aristocracy who took a paternal interest in the boy. It is at this point that Iñigo became consumed by macho, chivalrous behavior. During this time, Iñigo experienced such a high degree of social and political immunity that he was able to avoid a murder charge!

Iñigo's circumstances would soon take a turn for the worse. Valázquez's wealth and power came to an end with the death of King Ferdinand of Castile in 1516. With five hundred escudos and two horses, Iñigo journeyed to Pamplona to find the duke of Nájera – a distant relative. The events at Pamplona are moments of world historical significance in the life of Ignatius. A French force of twelve thousand men, equipped with heavy artillery, surrounded the fortress ready to attack. The garrison commander was prepared to accept the terms of surrender but Iñigo refused, petitioning the governor with "so many reasons ... that he persuaded him to carry on the defense against the judgment of the officers, who found some strength in his spirit and courage."¹⁴ Prior to the six hour attack, Iñigo gave his last confession.

The walls of the fortress collapsed under sustained artillery fire. Iñigo stood at the forefront, anticipating his last stand. A cannonball shattered both legs. The battle was over. As a tribute to his bravery, the French assisted in Iñigo's convalescence, seeing and to it that he was escorted back to the castle of Loyola.

The extent of Iñigo's injuries required spiritual intervention. His sister-in-law, Magdalena, provided him with the four-volume *Life of Jesus* and the *Flos Sanctorum* (*The Lives of Saints*) during recuperation, ultimately lighting the fuse of his conversion experience in August of 1553:

One night as he lay awake, he saw clearly the likeness of our Lady with the Holy Child Jesus, at the sight of which he received most abundant consolation for a considerable interval of time. He felt so great a disgust with his past life, especially with its offenses of the flesh, that he thought all such images which had formerly occupied his mind were wiped out.¹⁵

¹⁴ See Meissner: 35. See also *Saint Ignatius of Loyola: Personal Writings*, edited and translated by J. Munitz and P. Endean (New York: Penguin Classics, 1996): 13.

¹⁵ See Meissner: 57. See also *Personal Writings*: 16.

From Montserrat to Manresa: The Spiral Continues

Return to thyself; but when, again facing upwards, thou hast returned to thyself, stay not in thyself. First return to thyself from the things that are without and then give thyself back to Him that made thee.¹⁶

It would be a mistake to view Iñigo's conversion experience in terms of a "wiping out" of the past – quite the contrary, his past is about to be re-inscribed within a higher unity. The narcissistic aspects of his former self as hidalgo and courtier are realigned in terms of greater degrees of service to God. In terms of experiential time, we are confronted with continuous epigenetic development and radical synthesis. We are able to witness the coming of Iñigo's future, as Saint Ignatius, *in statu nascendi* – arriving out of the past in the course of the present. In this sense, Ignatius is a pilgrim or *homo viator*; underway to a destination of religious significance in recognition of the need for penitential response to one's past.¹⁷

In the wake of his conversion experience, Iñigo, elegantly dressed, set off for the shrine of our Lady of Montserrat. On the evening of the Annunciation, he made his general confession and received absolution from Jean Chanon, a highly respected French priest. Iñigo relinquished his clothes to a poor beggar and later hung his sword and scabbard on the entrance to the cathedral. At daybreak, he set off for Barcelona in a rough, sackcloth robe and hemp girdle. He traveled a short distance to Manresa. Expecting to stay a few days, he remained there a year. These were "the most important months in the entire life of Iñigo de Loyola."¹⁸ He alternated between a small cell in a Dominican priory and a cave, overlooking the valley of Cardoner, where he would carry out his prayers and penitence in the form of *agere contra* – reacting vigorously against inclinations non-spiritual in nature. During this time Iñigo undergoes a transvaluation of identity:

[T]he process that had been begun on the bed of convalescence was extended and deepened in the cave at Manresa. At Loyola Iñigo had undergone an experience which could best be summarized under the rubric of a deepening and broadening of his value orientation.... At Loyola Iñigo became aware of and sensitive to another dimension of reality, the spiritual dimension, which from his childhood had remained a significant, but not determining, element in his colorful milieu.... [T]he moratorium at Manresa had in fact produced a new personality, the lines of continuity between Iñigo the courageous man of arms and the emerging personality of the pilgrim were all too clear. [I]t does not seem

¹⁶ Saint Augustine, *Sermon 330* in *Saint Augustine: Essential Sermons* (New York: New City Press): 383.

¹⁷ See Meissner: 63. See also p. 59: "[T]he transformation was not a sudden or climactic event, but a slow process that began during his convalescence, was subjected to its definitive reconstruction in the cave of Manresa, and finally came to fruition in the extraordinary career of Ignatius."

¹⁸ Meissner: 69.

accurate to envision this process as the elimination of an old identity and its replacement with a new one. The identity of Iñigo was not destroyed; it was transformed.¹⁹

Reconstructing one's life in terms of increasing degrees of awareness of the presence of God is the Ignatian version of secondary reflection – an attempt to recover experience from fragmentation, restoring a sense of ontological continuity to our most mundane acts; in Marcel's words, a grafting of the flesh on to the spirit ... remaking, thread by thread, the spiritual fabric heedlessly torn."²⁰ Ignatius would often undergo an experience of the world emerging from "something white out of which rays were coming, and out of which God made light ... but [Ignatius] did not know how to *explain* these things...."²¹

Pedagogical Implications

What pedagogical implications can one draw from this brief overview of Ignatius early life? First, it is of the utmost importance to *engage students where they are* in terms of their particular experiential context. Not all students share the same past, nor are all students oriented to the same future in the present moment. Pedagogy must engage in the basic activity of *cura personalis*, addressing the dynamic situation of "backward-forward relatedness" occurring at every moment in the life of a person. Like Plato's conception of knowledge as a process of re-collecting, Ignatian pedagogy is a form of re-remembering: "a creative process that goes to the depth of reality and begins recreating it."²²

Secondly, pedagogy must highlight the process of experiential growth, the *magis*,²³ occurring reflexively as one traverses the switchbacks associated with wider degrees of awareness and understanding, passing through incomplete views while seeking broader truth and

¹⁹ Meissner: 84-85. The neoplatonic notion *circumincessio*, or circumincession, is helpful for understanding Ignatius development.

²⁰ See Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being, Volume I*: 203, and *Homo Viator: Introduction to a Metaphysic of Hope*, trans. E. Craufurd (Harper & Row, 1962): 100.

²¹ Meissner: 80 (emphasis added). See also *Personal Writings*: 26. In a section entitled "Mystical Experiences" (Meissner: 80-83), the reader is presented with a rich sampling Ignatius' mystical experiences. One is particularly worth mentioning:

"[A]bout a mile distant from Manresa ... he sat down by the river which there ran deep. As he sat, the eyes of his understanding began to open. He beheld no vision, but he saw and understood many things, spiritual as well as those concerning faith and learning. This took place with so great an illumination that these things appeared to be something altogether new. He cannot point out the particulars of what he then understood, although there were many, except that he received a great illumination in his understanding. This was so great that in the whole course of his past life right up to his sixty-second year, if he were to gather all the helps that he had received from God, and everything he knew, and add them together, he does not think that they would equal all that he received at that one time (81)."

²² See Adolfo Nicolás, S.J., "Depth, Universality and Learned Ministry: Challenges to Jesuit Higher Education Today," p. 4 at <http://www.udmercy.edu/mission/university/jesuit-mercy/sponsors/jesuit-community/Nicolas-JHE-2010.pdf>. N.B. Nicolás is the Superior General of the Society of Jesus.

²³ See Hugo Rahner, S.J., *The Spirituality of Saint Ignatius Loyola* (Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Press, 1953), p. 22, for an account of the experiential dimension of Ignatian *magis*: "[T]he net result of his traditions in his family home and of his aristocratic upbringing, formed the immediate preparation for the 'more' of his service in the battle line of his eternal King, into the ranks of whose army he is now deployed as a consequence of his conversion."

richer harmony of thought: “The starting point, then, will always be what is real [which] leads one to see the hidden presence of God in what is seen, touched, smelt, felt.”²⁴

Finally, pedagogy must lead to an awareness of *ad maiorem gloriam Dei*. All things should be viewed in their relation to God, the source of all relations – an energizing experience of grace working in and through man’s psychic potentialities.²⁵

²⁴ See Nicolás, p. 4.

²⁵ See Josef Stierli, “Ignatian Prayer: Seeking God in All Things,” in *Ignatius of Loyola: His Personality and Spiritual Heritage*, ed. F. Wulf, S.J. (Saint Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1977): 151ff. Also Meissner: 347.