

DISCERNMENT - INPUT

INTRODUCTION

Discernment is one of the most characteristic features of Ignatian spirituality, even though it is not original or exclusive to it. It is becoming more and more known and practiced in the religious world and secular forms of this practice are also developing. While discernment is often seen as a vital part of decision-making, in its essence, it is not about solely making decisions or about resolving questions or problems. It is, fundamentally, an attitude and way of being. This separation has its basis in the Spiritual Exercises where the rules for discerning what Ignatius calls “the Spirits” are in a separate section from the guidelines for making an election (decision). Without being comprehensive, the following section provides some insights on the way Ignatius spoke about discernment, the three times of election that he suggests, as well as key considerations for Ignatian leaders who desire to integrate discernment in their life and decision-making. A list of references are offered in the resources section for those who desire to deepen in the subject.

MAIN IDEAS

Demystifying discernment : Is discernment for the experts?

An informal way of considering this question is starting from a conversation excerpted from Moliere’s *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*. The dialogue is between Monsieur Jourdain (a social climber learning philosophy) and his philosophy master:

MONSIEUR JOURDAIN: And when one speaks, what is that then?

PHILOSOPHY MASTER: Prose.

MONSIEUR JOURDAIN: What! When I say, "Nicole, bring me my slippers, and give me my nightcap," that's prose?

PHILOSOPHY MASTER: Yes, Sir.

MONSIEUR JOURDAIN: By my faith! For more than forty years I have been speaking prose without knowing anything about it, and I am much obliged to you for having taught me that.

Just like speaking prose, discernment often happens naturally. In Karl Rahner’s words: “With important decisions pretty well everyone makes their choice more or less explicitly in the way Ignatius thinks, just as normal people use logic even if they’ve never studied it (practically useful though it still is to study logic and sometimes draw conclusions on its basis).”

In summary, when people, in the position where they are, ask serious questions about what’s the right thing to do, and how they can best serve the Lord, then they’ve already got the most important thing. Discernment is happening anyway. The beginning of the Constitutions make explicit that what carries us forward is the love of God and the work of the Holy Spirit written on people’s hearts. This is not something particularly jesuit or a matter limited to priests or experts. Discernment workshops or readings may give a few tools to take the goodness that is already happening a bit further.

“It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?’ Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?’ No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.”

Deuteronomy 30: 9-13

Ignatius, Discernment and Decisions in the Constitutions

Ignatius never uses the word discernimento anywhere; his standard noun is *discreción* which could be best translated in English as “prudent judgement”. The only part in the Constitutions where Ignatius talks about discernment is Part VII.2.1 [618], where he says that the Superior needs to think very carefully given that people may be concerned about their own needs and not those of the whole Society.

The paragraph covers the following key points:

- The Society is there to meet needs everywhere—generously, but responsibly (not putting its men at too much risk)
- The Jesuit superior has the power to make decisions about mission delegated by the Holy See
- People who make demands are concerned about their own particular needs, rather than the needs of the whole body of Christ.
- The Superior needs to think very carefully about the decisions he takes.
- If necessary he has recourse to special prayer and he takes advice.
- He then makes decisions about whether and whom to send where and how.

When thinking about discernment we could think about:

- Discretion – ‘you may allow, at your discretion, an employee extra sick leave’
- Discrimination – not in the negative sense of the word, but understood for example as distinguishing between different strategies for different circumstances
- Prudence – ‘right reason in matters of action’, ‘applying universal knowledge to a particular case’ (Aquinas II-II 47)

From this perspective, we might sense that perhaps what Ignatius lacked at Montserrat was discernment (prudence, discrimination...). When he writes the passage of Montserrat in his Autobiography, it is as if he was saying: “Remember I got things wrong at the beginning”. He had got the idea from Amadis de Gaul and he criticizes himself in this passage because he did not think about what his action would do to the beggar (who hardly benefited from his generosity).

In summary, Const VII.2.1 was just about being very careful before deciding. “Discerning God’s Will” (*hacer buena y sana elección*) is understood as to make a **good** and **sound** choice. One way of making good and sound choices involves “*discreción de varios spíritus*” (in context clearly meaning ‘distinguishing between various spirits’).

Discernment and the language of spirits

The association of Discernment and Spirits is key. Yet, one of the challenges in understanding the core of discernment may also be related to the ‘Spirit’ language/wording.

The important point to keep in this regard is that our freedom can be influenced in ways we don’t obviously control.

- “There are three kinds of thoughts in me: that is, one my own, which springs from my mere liberty and will; and two others, which come from without, one from the good spirit, and the other from the bad.” (Exx 32)

Ignatius viewed the self as free, but situated under influences from outside. He speaks confidently of the influence of angels and spirits. Some commentators (eg. Toner, Marsh) defend such language vigorously against the demythologizing trends of modern theology.

Demythologizers on the other hand might be happier with another language:

- For example the language of conditioning factors— “the life and death of all of us has its influence on others.”
- Or even the language of “foundational assumptions” and the ability to put them into question.
- There are also important influences on contemporary practice from the critical social sciences and psychology. (The maîtres de soupçon)

No matter the language you prefer to use, you may find in Ignatius’ Rules for Discernment of Spirits” helpful insights that could guide your decision-making. The first set of these rules that Ignatius suggests in the Spiritual Exercises are “Rules for perceiving and understanding, to some degree, **the different movements** that are produced in the soul—the good, that they may be accepted; the bad, that they may be rejected.” Though the second set of rules are described as providing “mayor discreción de espíritu”, they are firstly “Rules for the same effect”: “Rules for the same effect with greater discernment of spirits and they help more for the second week”

The discernment of spirits as suggested by Ignatius can be seen as a three-fold paradigm:

1. **Perceiving and being aware** of what is going on, noticing the things that are happening internally. This involves seeking vigilance, alertness and the **courage** to be aware, as well as differentiating between different kinds of interior awareness (psychological, moral, spiritual)
2. **Understanding and evaluating the various movements and influences** (seeing how the Spirit is at work, noticing internal deceits, distinguishing between what is truly good and what is only apparently good but presented to us as the real thing)
3. **Taking action** (accepting or rejecting)

Ignatius on the influence of the spirits

In order to understand how the various influences work “the good, that they may be accepted; the bad, that they may be rejected”, Ignatius distinguishes between two fundamental directions of life. The first two of his rules classify persons in two categories, those going towards the bad (moving away from God) and those going towards the good (moving towards God). Often today it is said we are inwardly complex, with movements in both directions at the same time. This fits common experience, of people conscientious enough to engage in the spiritual life, but capable also of great negativity. This claim may also converge with Ignatius’s assumption that the evil spirit can work within a good person by appearing in the guise of the angel of light. (Exx 332)

Ignatius suggests that: “In those who go on from good to better, the good Angel touches such a soul sweetly, lightly and gently, like a drop of water which enters into a sponge; and the evil touches it sharply and with noise and disquiet, as when the drop of water falls on the stone. And the above-said spirits touch in a contrary way those who go on from bad to worse”. (Exx 335)

	Congenial Experience	Disruptive Experience
Person moving positively	Keep with it	An attack, tempting you to give up or give in
Person moving negatively	Not good ...	A salutary shock

Learning to tune in like that helps us live in a way that is truly Gospel-inspired, in accordance with the perceived movement of the Spirit. Similarly, decisions on concrete points will follow more easily.

When thinking about a decision/election that needs to be made, it helps to keep in mind that there is always an interaction between the person who is making the election (Subject) and what the Object of his choice might be. **The “subject” of discernment** is the first critical element to consider. Without such a subject it makes no sense even to begin to talk about procedures, techniques or rules for discernment. The discernment question with any strong provocation from outside is to be assessed depending whether it is confronting within “the subject of discernment” a movement towards the good or the bad. (Often a need to wait and see). For Saint Ignatius **good discernment means «accompanied» discernment**. Allowing oneself to be helped and enlightened by another person helps toward objectivity, even though the decisions must ultimately be taken by the discerning subject.

The three “times” of Election

Ignatius considers three times of making a decision (election) namely:

- “when God our Lord so moves and attracts the will, that without doubting, or being able to doubt, the devout soul ... follows what is shown it, as St. Paul and St. Matthew did in following Christ our Lord”. (Exx 175)
- “when enough light and knowledge is received by experience of consolations and desolations, and by the experience of the discernment of various spirits”. (Exx 176)
- “The third time is quiet...when the soul is not acted on by various spirits, and uses its natural powers freely and tranquilly”. (Exx 177)

Refer to the Handout for an overview of these three times of election.

Final Considerations

- **Discernment is happening anyway.** As highlighted at the beginning of this section, whether we know it or not, discernment is often happening anyway. With important decisions, we naturally take a long time to reflect (even without knowing that we are discerning) and tend to make our decisions based on the option that **fits most** with our sense of self (who we feel we are at the moment) which is made more explicit over our rather long time of thought.
- **Discernment is not only, and not ultimately, a matter of rational analysis.** Discernment is NOT strategic thinking or solely an exercise of the head (if we start thinking of heart and head as something different we are getting discernment wrong). It’s a matter of feeling whether it “suits” or not. And this feeling will ultimately be a question of whether the object we are considering “feels good”, provides satisfaction and peace.

- **Discernment as an attitude:** More basic than the particular discernments and decisions we make at various times in our lives is **the habit of discernment** in our ordinary lives, that is, the habit of cultivating attention, tuning in to and discerning our internal spiritual movements, getting rid of inordinate attachments, and responding to the call to love. How can my love be expressed more concretely? How can I respond more delicately? How can I serve more effectively? Seeking the will of God involves searching for sound and good ways to concretize God's love in our own personal life and in the reality in which we move. As the ultimate form and expression of love, Jesus is the basic referent of discernment.
- **Discernment is difficult** not because we need special and esoteric skills (though intuition and a sharp mind are useful) but because the moral life is challenging. It is first hard to work out what is to be done and often this right decision has heavy moral implications – That is why it is difficult.
- Therefore, in regards to discernment it is much more important to **speak about attitudes and habits than only about techniques**, which are many and varied. Applying the techniques is not at odds with common sense; it requires the prudence that is called for in every decision about life.
- **An act of trust:** There is sometimes the danger of paralysis when people get so concerned about their motivations in discernment that they get suspicious of them. That danger is in everything. One way of getting around that is to come back to the first principle of discernment: Trusting one's own goodness and trusting that the Spirit is at work. When you ask yourself if you are making the Right decision you are already on the right way. The problems are there but God is also there and he will help us deal with them. In the end you do what you reasonably can to make sure you are not fooling yourself and then you move forward with confidence, trusting that if you get it wrong, the Lord will find a way of telling you.

FINAL THOUGHT

"My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I cannot see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself. And the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But, I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. "

Thomas Merton

EXPECTED LEARNINGS AND OUTCOMES

1. Understanding discernment both as a movement of love and as a call for vigilance
2. Educating ourselves to detect our inner dense complexes motives
3. Discerning how God is operating in one's life
4. Learning about the different times of election

"Discernment must be at the basis of all that is Jesuit"

GC36