

Pleasure in Austerity

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Throughout the season of Lent, *Thinking Faith* will offer a series of reflections on how practicing austerity affects and benefits our own lives and the lives of those around us. In the first article of this series, Joe Egerton looks at how we might explain our Lenten observances to people who do not see the value of them – is it possible to take pleasure in austerity?

To take pleasure in austerity would at first seem impossible, or a form of masochism. Austerity is something at best to be endured; and while we may occasionally admire an austere individual, we are somewhat reluctant to regard him or her as a role model. A common reaction to reading St Ignatius's accountⁱ of the austerities he inflicted on himself in the earlier stages of his spiritual journey is 'this is a man in urgent need of psychiatric help' – a conclusion likely to be reinforced by the physical consequences he suffered later in his life.

It is undeniable that austerity involves a lack of some pleasures, pleasures that are of course greatly valued in consumer societies, where Easter is an opportunity to get away to warm weather, sea, sun etc. To choose to forego pleasures is at odds with the values of modernity. So when Christians give up something that gives pleasure, when we fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, or perhaps turn down an invitation to supper to attend a Lenten service or hear a Lenten homily, then we can be regarded as somewhat odd.

To advocate or even defend to many of our contemporaries practices such as fasting and abstinence by using any framework that pre-supposes the existence of God is unlikely to succeed. We can see why this should be so by considering how St Thomas Aquinas argues that religious observance (liturgies, prayer, fasting) is virtuous. Religious observance, he says, is not a consequence of the supernatural or



theological virtue of faith; it is an example of the natural, cardinal virtue of justice, for we humans owe to God as our Creator praise and prayer. As all people have the potential to act justly, we might at first think that we have here an argument that we could use to explain our practice of giving things up for Lent – in conversation with somebody who is willing to accept that there is or might be a God, perhaps one could try such an

explanation. The argument will of course cut no ice with somebody who does not believe in God at all: nothing can be due to a non-existent being.ⁱⁱ

Is pleasure good in itself?

Pope John Paul II suggested that we might find in philosophy resources for dialogueⁱⁱⁱ, citing as an example the great Jesuit philosopher Francisco Suarez (1548 -1617) who is often praised for his gentleness. Our ability to engage in dialogue of course depends on obeying the opening injunction at the start of the First Week of the Spiritual Exercises:

Any good Christian has to be more ready to justify than to condemn a neighbour's statement. If no justification can be found, one should ask the neighbour in what sense it is to be taken, and if that sense is wrong, he or she should be corrected lovingly. Should this not be sufficient, one should seek all suitable means to justify it by understanding it in a good sense.^{iv}

So what propositions from philosophy might be of help to us? What sort of points might it be helpful to make to enable a friend who does not share our beliefs to appreciate that denying oneself pleasures is good and reasonable, and not an example of at best eccentricity and at worst a deformed personality?^v

One frequent misunderstanding of Christianity is that it is opposed to pleasure. This is evidenced in a famous line of Macaulay: ‘The Puritan hated bear-baiting, not because it gave pain to the bear, but because it gave pleasure to the spectators’. Macaulay was not the first and certainly not the last to hurl the allegation of regarding pleasure as evil at Augustinian theologians – and perhaps St Augustine himself. But such allegations represent a crude and unfair description of a complex theology that draws heavily on Plato and his successors. The actual position taken by St Augustine and some of his followers on pleasure and the closely related issue of original sin or the effect of the Fall on humans, is indeed at odds with that of St Thomas Aquinas and St Ignatius. But St Thomas expressly denies that his Augustinian predecessors (and St Thomas is unquestionably an Augustinian as well as an Aristotelian) asserted that pleasure is evil. “No one maintains this. The Platonists [including Augustinian Platonists], who were of the opinion that pleasure is not a good, did not hold that pleasure is evil simply and in itself, but they denied that it is a good in as much as it is sometimes imperfect or an obstacle to virtue.”^{vi} (Emphasis added).

St Thomas’s own position is that pleasure is in itself good. The desire for pleasure belongs to nature, which is basically good, and not to vice^{vii}. This is not of course to deny that some pleasures arise from bad actions, or indeed that a desire for a pleasure may lead us to a bad action; but the badness will be in the action (or activity) and not in the pleasure. St Thomas observes that denying that ‘pleasure is good’ entails an assertion that it is possible for natural judgment to fail in all cases. And St Thomas does not think a universal failure of natural judgment to be possible in a world governed by divine providence.

In the Spiritual Exercises, the rules by which to perceive and understand to some extent the various movements produced in the soul explicitly attribute to us a power of rational, moral judgment^{viii}. St Ignatius

here is following St Thomas in his view that the Fall and Original Sin damage but do not destroy the power of human reason to discern good and evil without the need for divine revelation. In the first rule, he carefully avoids suggesting that it is pleasure that the enemy uses to retain us and reinforce us in vices and sins. He says that the enemy uses apparent pleasures. (Emphasis added). For St Ignatius, as for St Thomas, pleasure is good. The problem is with actions and activities.

St Thomas and later – I think consequentially^{ix} – St Ignatius took the position that they did because they knew the philosophical arguments about pleasure, and in particular those of Aristotle^x. And it is to these that I now turn, relating ideas of pleasure to ‘austerity’.

Forfeiting our pleasures

‘Austerity’ is derived from the Greek adjective *austēros*. The literal meaning of this word is dry or bitter or harsh. As aridity is, in Ignatian spirituality, a sign of something being wrong, we might initially think that this is a reason for believing that austerity is at odds with the pleasure in spirituality. However, in the Republic^{xi}, Plato uses this adjective metaphorically to describe the sort of poet who would be welcome in his polis – the poet with opposite characteristics is to be detained at Heathrow and returned home. The *austēros* poet celebrates the virtues that the discussion up to that point has identified as important for Plato’s ideal society, essentially virtues of discipline and restraint. In the Eudemian Ethics^{xii}, Aristotle, in making the observation that two friends will often have opposite characteristics, contrasts the *austēros* with somebody who is witty and amusing. In the Nicomachean Ethics^{xiii}, someone who lacks ready wit is described as *agroikos* – literally of the field, so a farmer. *Agroikos* is used in the comedies of Aristophanes^{xiv} to draw a contrast with the sophisticated city dweller, so the word is often translated as ‘boorish’. But I think Aristotle may have had in his mind a style of life that was later to lead Benjamin Franklin to regard the occupation of yeoman farmer as peculiarly conducive to a virtuous life (Franklin and Aristotle have different lists of virtues) – we may contrast Dante’s view that banking was an activity incompatible with virtue.

We can see in these examples that although austerity may not be something that is instantly attractive there is something in it that the serious philosophers found valuable, even if the Jonathan Ross of the time thought those who worked the land simply a good target at which to poke fun. I add an example of something *austēros* in its literal sense – bitter – being described as ‘pleasurable’: St Thomas, who may be thought to have had some experience of good eating, wrote, ‘well fed people enjoy pungent and bitter foods as an aid to digestion, although nothing in them is naturally pleasant...The reason is that, as enjoyable things are compared, so are the pleasures they cause’^{xv}

Is a life without pleasure capable of being a good life? Aristotle for one thought not. We need however to be careful to draw a distinction between ‘I would not enjoy that style of life’ and ‘That is unpleasant for anyone.’ Some styles of life will be entirely repugnant – and rightly so. Nobody should be deprived of clean water, of food, of shelter, and families should have homes that are, however basic, adequate for family life^{xvi}. It is because such lives are made in a sense bad, however good the individuals compelled to live them may be, that we are called to work to alleviate such conditions. We are not certainly called to subject our families to such deprivation.

What is open to question is my judgment that I would not be happier living a life with less material advantages. Voluntarily giving up some pleasant and agreeable things for the 40 days of Lent may be a valuable experiment to test my initial rejection of something. I may find that a change I made thinking it would be good but disagreeable is not at all disagreeable, for instance, taking more exercise and eating more carefully may lead me to appreciate pleasures that sloth and greed had denied me.

At a superficial level, I may just be giving up something that I enjoy; at a deeper level I may be commencing a process of questioning my entire style of life. A few years ago, any questioning of luxury spending would, one suspects, be regarded as somewhat eccentric; more recently, some features of high cost living, for instance 4x4s as city family or even second cars have become less fashionable. The state of the economy may well encourage a wider questioning of the importance of consumption to human

happiness, and we may benefit from experience of giving material goods up for a few weeks.

Goods one can buy are not the only goods available to us. Not so many years ago, the range of equipment to occupy children was far more limited, and parents had to spend more time in activities with their children. Those parents whose children can be kept quiet by equipment that has been purchased no longer undertake, at least not to the same extent, activities with their children. It is not self-evident that the pleasures made possible by children having equipment to amuse themselves exceed those of actually engaging in activities as a family. More reading, chess, board and card games, walks and more meals together with more conversation may produce more, not less pleasure. Fewer goods may lead to greater happiness.

This is one set of messages that come out of a philosophical consideration of what actually constitutes a pleasure.

One pleasure over another

Another important observation that we can extract from philosophical considerations of pleasure is the capacity of some pleasures to distract and take us over. St Thomas agrees with Aristotle that the pleasure of sex is so strong that it makes any other activity impossible. Although St Thomas famously had no personal experience on which to base this assessment, scattered passages in the Summa suggest that participants in his graduate classes could bear testimony^{xvii} to this; one at least appears to have been so anxious to get into bed with his girlfriend that he pushed an old lady under a hay cart. Doubtless the subsequent discipline by the Dean made this student a hero with the other students^{xviii}. We have to be selective in what we do – we cannot enjoy the pleasure of climbing a mountain or riding a horse after a heavy meal; we are unlikely to be able to enjoy a Shakespeare play or a Wagner opera if we have drunk a bottle of wine beforehand and so on.

A certain amount of self-denial is essential if we wish to develop some new skill. And one of the skills that we can develop is to understand a bit better where we are and where we are going. This requires medit-

ation. This particular meditation is a voluntary exercise of our ability to judge our own judgment. The reflective and voluntary features of rationality are stated by St Thomas Aquinas^{xix}; this develops and clarifies the discussion in the first book of the Nicomachean Ethics of that function peculiar to humans among all the animals of rational thought^{xx}. Such meditation will be disrupted by physical pleasures. But those who have experienced such meditation will know that it also brings its own pleasure. Those who have not experienced meditation may be unable to see the point of it. There may of course be a failure – but the person who fails will not be the one who does not see the point but the one who has experienced both the benefit and the pleasure of such meditation but fails to convey the joy that is there for the taking.

Less is more

There are benefits of accepting a degree of austerity, and there is value in the Lenten practice of giving things up. If we lived in a world – and we may all too soon live in such a world – in which my eating a bowl of rice or burning a litre of fuel means that somebody else cannot, then simple justice would require each of us to practice a degree of austerity. But in our present circumstances, my eating something does not cause another to go hungry. Choosing to give something up is not pointless; but the real value of foregoing a physical pleasure is the opportunity it affords to engage in an activity that brings a higher, spiritual pleasure.

The severity of the recession – I will not annoy Lord Mandelson by calling it a depression – means that an unusually large number of people will be asking questions about what really matters for them and their families, what is the good each should pursue. We owe to Aristotle and St Thomas the insight that the good life, the moral life is one of growth in the virtues, a growth brought about by a willingness to engage in reflection on what we have done and what we plan to do, and a life that is informed by a growing

understanding of those excellences that are the virtues. In the 1500s, God gave Ignatius of Loyola insights into the development of the human spirit; he in turn gave them to his companions; and we have received them in the form of the Ignatian Exercises. We are the heirs of a long tradition that has something distinctive and important to offer to those who seek the means of living a good and fulfilled life. And, most importantly, the Ignatian Exercises do not require a narrow concept of a common good in order to work.

Such a life is likely to mean a reduced emphasis on material goods. By recent standards, we and our children may indeed face austerity in coming months and years. What we call austerity will still be unimaginable prosperity by the standards of our grandparents and great grandparents. This may open up a possibility of a life in which other goods are more successfully pursued and we enjoy the pleasures that supervene on those activities. In the period immediately before the Credit Crunch, the world experienced rapid increases in the prices of commodities, raw materials and food, suggesting that we could not expect continuing rapid consumer growth because resources needed to sustain it were simply not available. If so, seeking a return to apparently unending growth is a mistake. Perhaps we have reached the point Keynes foresaw when he wrote ‘The day is not far off when the economic problem will take the back seat where it belongs, and the arena of the heart and the head will be occupied or reoccupied, by our real problems, the problems of life and of human relations, of creation and behaviour and religion.’^{xxi} Such a life will not be a life without pleasure – the pleasures will be different. And, dare one say, better.

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ⁱ In 1553/4 at the behest of Jerome Nadel and with evident reluctance Ignatius of Loyola gave an oral account of his experiences after sustaining severe injuries at the siege of Pamphlona on 20 May 1521 to Luis Gonsalves da Camera, a young Portuguese Jesuit working in the house in Rome; da Camera (for whose excellent memory there is powerful independent evidence) immediately made notes and later re-dictated these notes to a secretary; the text has come down to us and is variously known as the Reminiscences, the Pilgrim's Journey, the Autobiography and the Memorial. (da Camera left recollections of his own that are also known as The Memorial, so care is needed in identifying the right book.) Good modern translations are available in the Penguin Classics "Saint Ignatius of Loyola: Personal Writings"; or in a translation called the Pilgrim's Journey published by Inigo Enterprises. The story told to da Camera needs to be understood as da Camera and his contemporaries understood it – a story of experiences undergone from which Ignatius learned lessons; for example, young entrants to the Society were required to eat and live sensibly and not subject themselves to the undue fasting that Ignatius had learned the hard way was a mistake.

ⁱⁱ Over the centuries, the Summa has been read in separate parts, which has the unfortunate consequence of disguising the extent to which arguments in later parts rely on earlier conclusions; the discussion of virtues in the Second Part of the Second Part depends on discussion of, for instance, the nature and effect of Grace in the First Part of the Second Part; and the whole pre-supposes the First Part, with its arguments tending to show the rationality of belief in God's existence. The discussion of Religion as part of Justice is at ST IIa IIae Q81; the quotation from Cicero – referred to in many translations as "Tully" as his full name was Marcus Tullius Cicero – is from Rhet II 53: "*religion consists in offering service and ceremonial rites to a superior nature that men call divine*":

www.ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/summa.SS.ii.SS.Q81.SS.Q81.A1.html. St Thomas asserts that natural reason is capable of knowing that God exists at Ia Q12 Art 12:

www.ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/summa.FP.Q12.A12.htm

ⁱⁱⁱ Fides et Ratio is at

www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_15101998_fides-et-ratio_en.html. The reference to Suarez comes at paragraph 62, where it is his use by Lutherans that is cited as an illustration of the value of philosophy. Para 62 concludes with a plea for clear thinking: "Consider, for instance, the disregard of modern thought and culture which has led either to a refusal of any kind of dialogue or to an indiscriminate acceptance of any kind of philosophy."

^{iv} Exx 22: there are a large number of translations of the Exercises, with substantial difference as the translator seeks to represent the thoughts of St. Ignatius in a way that is most helpful to somebody giving the Exercises. The American Jesuit website has a downloadable pdf of a translation by Elder Mullen SJ, published in 1914 at www.jesuit.org/Spirituality/Spiritual+Exercises/default.aspx. Another translation of the Exercises is printed in the Penguin Classics edition – see note i.

^v The influential 20th century philosopher John Rawls used the phrase deforming the human spirit in an attack on St Thomas's account of the final good of humans (enjoying the divine vision) and St Ignatius's First Principle and Foundation's insistence that the only test for the goodness of an action is whether it helped us towards God.

^{vi} *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics, Book VII, Lecture XIII, last sentence of 1502 and 1503.*

^{vii} *Commentary, X, II, 1975 and 1977*

^{viii} Exx 314. In Mullen's translation, the first Rule reads: *In the persons who go from mortal sin to mortal sin, the enemy is commonly used to propose to them apparent pleasures, making them imagine sensual delights and pleasures in order to hold them more and make them grow in their vices and sins. In these persons the good spirit uses the opposite method, pricking them and biting their consciences through the process of reason.* For Ignatius, Favre and their contemporaries, "the process of reason" is the system of Aristotle. The Penguin Classics edition's rendering of this rule uses the phrase "the power of rational moral judgement", accompanied by a footnote that draws attention to the use of St Thomas's term, *synderesis*, rather than "the process of reason". There is no contradiction between the concepts – *synderesis* underpins Aristotle's practical reasoning.

^{ix} The structure of the first rule, EXX 314, and the use of a technical term suggests that what has come down to us was revised during St Ignatius's time at the University of Paris, where we know he studied both the Nicomachean Ethics and the Summa. However it is difficult to envisage how the Spiritual Exercises could have been given without some version of the rules. St Ignatius's praise of Peter Favre, his roommate at Paris, may well contain an element of thanks for help in developing the Exercises into what we have today.

^x The portrait of St Ignatius as lacking learning is a travesty; only an educated individual could have followed the career he did before Pamphlona; what he lacked was an in depth knowledge of philosophy and theology and of the Latin in which it was studied. This lack he remedied at Paris where he obtained a Masters degree in Philosophy. Peter Favre was regarded as the greatest translator of Aristotle of his age; but his friend and pupil Ignatius of Loyola would have put to shame many a modern professor of philosophy in

the knowledge of Aristotle's texts that would be required of graduate students at Paris.

^{xi} R 398a

^{xii} EE 1240a2

^{xiii} EN 1108a 23-26

^{xiv} Acharnians 674

^{xv} *Commentary, VII, XII 1489*

^{xvi} This is the teaching of the Catholic Church, repeated emphatically by every Pope since Leo XIII addressed the problems of industrial society in *Rerum Novarum*. The late Archbishop Dwyer captured this when he warned a government minister that some conditions in his archdiocese of Birmingham were so bad that tolerating them put his immortal soul in danger.

^{xvii} Telling 20 something year old students "no sex before marriage" was doubtless as well received in the 13th century as it is in the 21st: St Thomas's took revenge by teasing him about his propensity to eat large meals – ST IIa IIae Q 153 Art 2, Obj 6 looks like just the point that a slightly mischievous student might make – and there would doubtless have been some merriment at the answer as a man does not acquire the girth of St Thomas by one large meal.

^{xviii} ST Ia IIae Q73 Art 8 - the actual offence discussed was crossing a field with growing crops on the way to the girlfriend; but in an age of industrial farming I have changed the crime into one that we would regard as serious.

^{xix} *De Veritate 22*

^{xx} The Ignatian Exercises are a tool that develops this skill. Although they employ the life of Christ as a basis for meditation, it is a large mistake to regard them as having a purely religious foundation. Jerome Nadel, one of the closest associates of St Ignatius, was asked "Who are the Spiritual Exercises meant for?" To which Nadel answered: "Everyone – Catholic, Protestant, Pagan" He could give this answer because the Exercises are grounded in St Thomas's understanding of human rationality as being a process in which we will to judge our own judgment. It is of course important to remember that St Thomas inherited from Aristotle a view of the soul and the nature of humans in which humans are animals with rational powers, not disembodied intellects: judgment involves heart (and stomach) as well as mind, contrary to Descartes and his successors.

^{xxi} *First Annual Report of the Arts Council (1945-1946)*