



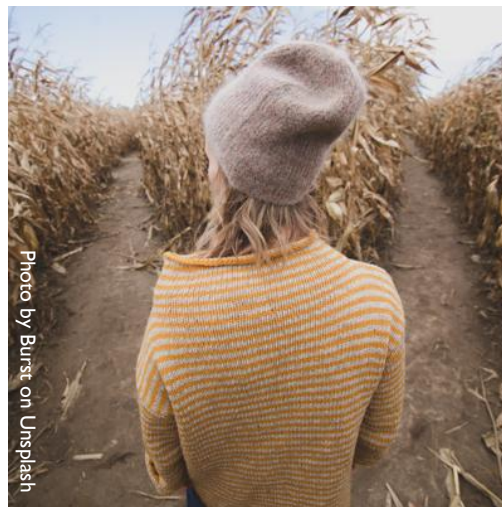
# Discernment: the good, the bad ... the Ignatian

Rob Marsh SJ

It was precisely an exercise in discernment of spirits that enabled Rob Marsh SJ to offer this Ignatian introduction to the practice that will be the focus of our attention this Lent. Join him in a careful consideration of ‘one particular microsecond of one particular life, and one paragraph of many where Ignatius catalogues the way the good and bad spirit work’, and see an example of Ignatian discernment at work.

Just a microsecond of my day:

I am looking at my computer and hesitating to open this file. I want to try and write some more of this article. I am feeling discouraged and thinking that of course I am going to run aground again in no time. ‘Who wants to read what you write anyway?’ ‘Wouldn’t it be better to come back later when you feel more focused?’ And then I remember the deadline is looming and a feeling of anxiety grows but rather than motivating me to type I feel lethargic and stuck. Running in parallel, I am aware of the bright winter sky and glowing Oxford stonework in my peripheral vision. The light wants to lift my heart. There is the hint of a memory of walking down a road under a similar sky, head up, having just finished a dissertation. I can begin to remember feeling alive, relieved ... elated.



Ignatian spirituality has been called a ‘mysticism of choice’ and that is true. But it means more than it being a methodology for making big decisions: at the heart of Ignatian spirituality there is a developed practice of discernment. The term discernment often gets used these days to refer to two quite distinct but related things: making big apostolic decisions, life choices, and such – what Ignatius called ‘election’; and the more humble practice of discernment of

spirits. Both are practical skills; both are aimed at making choices, either big decisions or the small stuff of moment-by-moment, hour-by-hour, day-by-day practicality – what I think of as micro-choices. So exactly what do I mean by micro-choices?

Ignatius regarded human experience as being saturated with a succession of dynamic psychological events, each succeeding the other as in my microsecond above – what he called the *motions* of the soul. These include thoughts, feelings, ideas, images, desires, perceptions, insights, emotions, inclinations, moods, self-talk, etc.: all the stuff going on in our head, our heart, our gut. That sounds reasonable to a modern ear. What might not seem so modern is his belief that these motions come from three distinct sources, the first being the natural – though often complicated – working of the human person. But he traces the origin of our inner motions to two outer forces, too, what he calls the bad spirit and the good spirit. The good spirit is at work to bring us closer to God and closer to the purpose for which we were created while the bad spirit is intent on sabotaging all of that. And in Ignatian terms that gets played out on the very humble playing field of the many, many microseconds that make up our lives, even when most of those microseconds’ motions make no direct reference to God.

Discernment – discernment of spirits – is first of all about telling apart the motions arising from these three sources and, in his ‘rules for discernment’ (and elsewhere), Ignatius gives an eloquently pithy catalogue of what the work of the good and bad spirit looks like in the human heart, in terms of the motions they inspire. Let me quote just one of his descriptions:

... it is characteristic of the evil spirit to cause gnawing anxiety, to sadden, and to set up obstacles. In this way he unsettles these persons by false reasons aimed at preventing their progress. [...] it is characteristic of the good spirit to stir up courage and strength, consolations, tears, inspirations, and tranquillity. He makes things easier and eliminates all obstacles, so that the persons may move forward in doing good. (*Spiritual Exercises*, §315)

As easy or difficult as it may be, the process of ‘telling apart’ is only the start. Ignatius heads his treatment of discernment in the *Spiritual Exercises* with the following, carefully convoluted title: ‘rules to aid us toward perceiving and then understanding, at least to some extent, the various motions which are caused in the soul, the good motions that they may be received, and the bad that they may be rejected’. We are to perceive first, then understand and then *choose* to receive or reject insofar as we are able. Take my microsecond. Applying Ignatius’s characterisation of the good and bad spirits it is easy, once I have perceived – and how difficult it can be even after half a lifetime of practice to bring one’s *motional* life to the point of perception – to understand the various motions at work in terms of their origin in the good and bad spirit. But what happens next is crucial! Once I know (‘to some extent’) which bits of my microsecond’s worth of inner stuff are coming from where, I find myself with the opportunity to choose (‘to some extent’) which threads I pay more attention to. Which do I receive and which do I reject? Well I am sitting here typing (and deleting – so much deleting), which bears witness to the micro-choice I made. I chose to reject the thread inspired by the bad spirit and receive the thread coming from the good spirit.

That sounds a bit ... *static*: let’s look closer. I want to say that getting to type wasn’t a matter of will-power. Rejecting the bad spirit’s inspirations is less about opposing them and more about laying them aside,

giving them less airtime, starving them of attention. Direct suppression more often than not serves to amplify the din the bad spirit makes. Rejecting the bad spirit’s motions is best done gently, if firmly – and anyway, rejecting the bad spirit only gives us a direction *not* to go in. In fact, it is primarily by receiving the good spirit’s motions that something good happens. How do we receive them? I like the resonance between receiving and hospitality. Receiving is best done by paying attention to, dwelling with, relishing, engaging with the good spirit’s motions, because when we engage them something more *moves*, something we won’t notice until we engage. In the case of my microsecond that hint of a memory was at first *just* a hint, a trace, an echo of a blue sky and bright stone asking for my attention through the window blind. But noticing it, paying attention to it, let it open up and bring to awareness bodily sensations (the weight of reams of paper I was carrying, the set of my shoulders as I took in the sky) in memory and in real-time. Staying with that physical awareness allowed me to notice feelings of life and potential. From there a few words offered themselves. I opened this file and started to type. The good spirit, ‘makes things easier and eliminates all obstacles’.

Notice the asymmetry of the two sets of motions. The bad spirit (in this case and often) stagnates, nothing happens and an old opinion is set deeper in stone. The good spirit doesn’t just do the opposite but goes somewhere creative, opens up a new space. Even though it hinges in my microsecond on the evocation of a 32-year-old memory it leads somewhere new and unstuck. This isn’t the first time lately I have sat down to write and encountered the same discouragement and anxiety and difficulty. And it isn’t the first time I have been able to say to myself, ‘this is all bad spirit, reject it’. But brute force opposition has failed me for weeks. I have been focused on the strategy of rejection; I have been fascinated by the bad spirit. Today I was able to be intrigued instead by the good spirit.

Now all the above is based on one particular microsecond of one particular life, and one paragraph of many where Ignatius catalogues the way the good and bad spirit work. People differ and the good and bad spirit have many strings to their bows but I think I can advance a general rule of thumb here: when making micro-choices – and macro-choices, for that matter – we do best to engage with the good spirit rather than oppose the bad.

'Of course', people say when I suggest my rule of thumb ... and then go on to rehearse for me at length all the bad spirit's opinions and how bad it has felt to live with them. It is hard not to be fascinated with the bad spirit's view of things and inadvertently *receive* it, pay disproportionate attention to it. We do the same when we try and out-argue the bad spirit – a dialogue with the [devil](#) is one we always lose or, rather, we go round and round, over and over old ground. A particularly nasty trap in our psychologically astute times is to try to get to the bottom of *why* the particular thing the bad spirit is 'saying' to us has a hold: to map out our pathology. The promise is that self-knowledge will set us free but far too often while we seek to understand we give the bad spirit endless heart-space and God very little.

Now I'm in danger of falling into my own trap here. I feel compelled to write about all the many ways that the bad spirit fascinates and monopolises attention. I have a schema of illuminating examples! But I refuse, in my fascination, to give the bad spirit more airtime than it deserves. So I'll delete those five brilliant (believe me) paragraphs and see if I can finish instead by engaging with the good spirit a little more.

Strangely, it takes more effort – or at least resolute intention – to engage with the good spirit than with the bad, initially at least. Given that the fruits of such engagement are so life-giving and creative and delightful (and challenging!), you would think we would all take every chance to dwell there. But, while the bad spirit is fascinating, the good spirit tends not to draw attention to itself: like the God it serves, it specialises in humility and gives itself freely and without fuss.

Yet the good spirit repays whatever attention we manage to give. My microsecond has developed as I have been able to receive it: first the sky and the light, then the memory, then the words. And moreover as I have written about it and returned to it another fruit of the good spirit has slowly ripened: a presence has turned up. There is now *someone* present in my prolonged microsecond, someone beside me, and as I stay there I recognise him. I say 'him' because it is Jesus that the good spirit has brought me to, at once familiar and a little startling. He has his own feelings and thoughts and a desire to be involved. Right now we are writing but there is a conversation to come.

The bad spirit is clamouring for my attention again: 'but there you go pretending, against the evidence, that good spirit can always be found alongside the ubiquitous bad... such wishful thinking!' If I trust my experience as a spiritual director, the evidence is that the good spirit can almost always be found even when the work of the bad spirit seems all-encompassing: there are nearly always nuggets of gold among the mud – the slightest glint needs to be panned for and washed bright. And the good spirit is worth engaging with even then, or especially then, when creativity is so needed.

Even when the gold seems all panned out – to stretch the metaphor further than it should go – there are ways to invite the good spirit into any particular experience. I'll mention just three. There is, for example, the practice of active gratitude: scanning your experience with a deliberately grateful eye in the way Ignatius mandates in his Consciousness [Examen](#). Then there is the practice of imaginal presence: spending a moment considering how God is looking at me right now (*Spiritual Exercises*, §75) and seeing what follows. Thirdly there is what Ignatius calls 'colloquy' or conversation with God, as 'one friend to another': in this context taking the experience presented by the bad spirit to God, naming it as such, and letting God give an alternative point of view. Such practices – there are many more – give a little new space for the good spirit to be found when it seems to be absent, for I believe my rule of thumb still holds: when we discern, we do better to engage with the good spirit rather than oppose the bad.

Discernment of spirits gives us the practical opportunity to become aware of the many microseconds making up our lives, to tease apart the different motions that make them up, and then to choose to lay aside those from the bad spirit and engage more with those from the good. In the process we grow closer to God, deeper into the purpose for which we are created and we turn experience into prayer.

*Rob Marsh SJ is a tutor in Spirituality at Campion Hall, University of Oxford.*