

HOW DISCERNMENT BETWEEN GOOD AND EVIL SHAPES THE DYNAMICS OF THE HUMAN JOURNEY¹

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The long-lasting coronavirus pandemic has brought the search for right judgment about situations and about human responses to them to the forefront of our attention. It has been interesting to see how quickly the clichés about each person having their own truth and their own right to do whatever they like to achieve their dreams have hit their limits and fallen apart, even if those who hold them have often not changed their patterns of behaviour unless forced to do so. We have followed how politicians, like Boris Johnson, only changed at least some of their views regarding the illness by encountering it themselves in a relatively severe form. It seems, however, that even such situations have not led to any kind of more profound personal or societal transformation. A simple example: in Prague public transport a number of people who previously behaved as if they did not breathe through their noses, started to put their masks fully on only when the numbers of new cases of COVID-19 rose so steeply that practically all the passengers were likely to have among their family and friends someone who was ill with the disease. One of the questions we touch in this issue is as to why enlightened self-interest is not the same as right judgment, or, perhaps more precisely, discernment, “the art of choice, which safeguards both the transcendence of Good and the ultimate freedom of the human person.”²

The concept of discernment that we use for this art comes from Greek. It combines *dia* (between) and *krínein* (judge, decide). *Diakrínein* then means to separate out, to make a distinction, to learn by discriminating, to determine, to decide, to give a judgment. The substantive *diákrisis* is derived from such an operation, which, according to Franz Brentano, a predecessor of phenomenology, plays a central and mediating role in how we experience the world, relations with other people and creatures, and relationship with the holy and the transcendent.³

Right judgment does not happen in the abstract. It is not a property one can have. The symbolism of the journey on which one learns to discern runs through different religions and cultures. Abraham has to learn how to discern what comes from God and what from his desires or fears before he becomes the father of a multitude of nations. Moses has to discern between what leads to life and what to death, and only thus can he become giver of the divine law, who knows God by name. But also, for example, Odysseus on his journey has to learn how to discern between good and evil in all the different concrete situations in which he finds himself, before he becomes an archetype of a man of wisdom, of moral and spiritual depth.

The different images, indeed, in different variants and interpretations, speak of discernment as a process in which human identity is formed. In this process human freedom is purified of either selfish or over-

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² Brother Adalberto Mainardi and Ivana Noble, “Discernment and the Christian Life: Introduction”, *Acta Universitatis Carolinae Theologica*, no. 2 (2019), here 6.

³ Brentano speaks about experience as a mental phenomenon to which we have access in our inner consciousness in three moments: the presentation, the judgment, and the movement of our will and feelings. See Franz Brentano, *Psychology From an Empirical Standpoint* (Routledge, 1995), 198.

scrupulous self-centredness. The real choices between what is good and what is evil move from the surface to the very heart of human life, and reveal their implications. From that depth, they inform every detail of how people act, speak or even think, how they relate to others. In the ascetic tradition discernment was therefore often linked to learning the ways of discerning disturbing ‘thoughts’ (*loghismoi* in Greek, *cogitationes* in Latin) that already took people into their inner prisons. Learning discernment meant learning liberation, letting oneself to be redirected from the land of the shadows to the light of the divine Logos, and seeing, in this light, oneself and others made whole. The mystical and the very practical belonged together. Both formed the dynamics of the human journey.

The visions of a healed whole have been under a magnifying glass during the pandemic, as have been the particular options people are faced with. The link between the two was, however, often missing. Whether I go into quarantine after meeting someone who is COVID-positive or not, whether I vote for a party that promises to cut my taxes while it ignores broader social and ecological problems or not, with regard to the discernment these questions often remained only at the surface, where what was claimed as right judgment and what was an expression of a narrow and short-term self-interest coincided.

One can identify judgment with understanding, as the hermeneutical tradition does, but some of the articles in this issue show that it is more complicated than that. Or at least, they make it clear that we need to speak about different levels of understanding, and take on board that sometimes people do not understand and still act. And by this we do not mean that they lack relevant knowledge. Ludwig Wittgenstein in his last work, *On Certainty*, addresses the problem of the lack of grounds we normally relate to knowing or believing, perhaps even the lack of content that can be translated into words and thus also into what we usually associate with understanding, into some kind of grasp, of “seeing on our part”. And yet we act, and Wittgenstein even claims that “it is our acting which lies at the bottom of our language-game”, even when our certainties are groundless.⁴ In this respect Paul Ricoeur already in his early works makes a difference between a “reductive” and a “restorative” understanding,⁵ and gradually spells out how the figurative and the non-figurative, the semantic and the non-semantic elements which influence our judgment interact. The papers gathered in this issue offer several views of the complexities of understanding, which can be seen as binding together self-interest and action.

Victoria Harrison and Rhett Gayle provide an analysis of examples, where “cognitive access to a conception of an ideal future self” opens a different kind of understanding. This understanding lives in practices, in bringing the actual self into closer conformity with the ideal, and providing a mirror in which those who embark on such a journey can see not only their current state but also the positive and the negative options in the light of the maturity embedded in the ideal.⁶

Michael Barnes in his article approaches discernment as the gift of the Spirit teaching people the type of understanding that we call wisdom. He explores how this dynamic gift coexists or clashes with other spiritual influences. Taking the two different sets of “Rules for the Discernment of Spirits” from the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola, he argues that the process of making right judgment involves “the management and clarification of a fundamental conversion of heart”. The movements of consolation and desolation belong to this process and cannot be isolated as sole criteria for making the judgment; rather, Barnes argues, they can contribute to “a contemplative sensitivity to the Spirit of God ordering [the] movements”. With the help of Michel de Certeau he shows how the conceptual and the pre- or non-conceptual reactions to the experiences of good and evil, where one often collides with the other, whether in human inward life or in the outer world, are included into the movements of the Spirit, and their transformation is made possible. Discernment is a gift of the Other, of the dialogue with the Other and with others, a dialogue which initiates the restorative process, according to Barnes, a process leading to human and spiritual maturity.

4 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), §204.

5 Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Harper & Row, 1967), 350.

6 With his concept of narrative identity, Paul Ricoeur has underlined the importance of the reflective possibilities of stories for the development of self-expression. See Paul Ricoeur, *Soi-même comme un autre* (Seuil, 1990).

The dialogical approach towards discernment is taken also by Tim Noble and Petr Jandejsek, who concentrate on how Liberation Theology works with the personal and the common dimensions of the good and evil. Like Barnes, they see human interiority and the communal as deeply interwoven, and the dynamics of discernment growing from and impacting on both. Their main attention is given not only to the “how” of the discernment but to the outcomes of “what” is discerned in the public sphere, in particular with regard to “those who are not free – the poor, the oppressed, those to whom injustice is done”. Discernment involving liberation of those, with those, and for those disadvantaged people, the authors argue, has to be aware of the dialogue killers – of the ideological agendas surfacing when any group of people is a priori given an advantageous position, even if the perspective is inverted and the last become first.

These articles already show that discernment as the art of choice includes not only good and evil as two options opposed against each other, or even clashing with each other. The phenomenological - hermeneutical approach to discernment presented by Jason Alvis deals with the diversity of what is being discerned from the point of view of values. Alvis draws on Max Scheler’s notion of “religious acts” and his criticisms of types of “difference”. Equipped with Scheler’s methodology, he goes back to the Christian classics and analyses four steps of discernment identified by the fifth-century mystic writer, John Cassian, arguing that discernment today also involves “sorting out” the differences between human images of the supreme reality and the inbreaking transcendent otherness, testified by a correct teaching on God.

Matěj Kováčik complements the phenomenological tradition with that of analytical philosophy, as he turns to the themes of free will, determinism, and divine foreknowledge in relation to discernment. He argues that the theological tradition since St Augustine, retaining “the sovereignty of God’s will and grace, but also the freedom of humans to choose between good and evil” has led to unsatisfactory paradoxical solutions. Kováčik compares hard determinism, compatibilism and libertarianism, pointing out the logical weaknesses of each position. Then he attempts to move these positions into a mutually enriching conversation, in which the paradox cannot be resolved, but the edges of the extreme conclusions can be avoided.

In the following article Christoph Schneider engages with the paradoxical nature of reality entering into the process of discernment differently. He presents and analyses the figures of the madman and the saint in Dostoevsky’s novels, paying attention to how they discern, and how their discernment is informed by the metaphysical, spiritual, and moral universe in which Dostoevsky places them. In his journey beyond the surface to the depth of the implications of the differences between good and evil, Schneider shows how the evil not only denies, but also imitates, caricatures and replaces the good. He also pays attention to the cases when the good is too weak to make a lasting impact in the world, because it is disembodied. Sound moral and spiritual judgment, Schneider argues, needs to be accompanied by an embodied love, and only then can it lead to human maturity as much as to the transformation of the world.

Two articles dedicated to Paul Ricœur’s philosophical anthropology, and in particular to the symbolic categories which help Ricœur to grasp the reality of evil, such as stain, sin or guilt, argue for the need of restorative understanding that brings healing. Marius Daniel Ban also turns to Dostoyevsky, as he illustrates how full moral responsibility, necessary for discernment, is achieved, and what its obstacles are. With the help of Ricœur he then elaborates how symbols aid a shift from the “responsibility for one’s past actions and their effects” to the understanding of responsibility which “involves a prospective concern for other people, particularly those who are most vulnerable and likely to be harmed”. He argues for care to become the central category on which moral discernment needs to orient, rather than to focus on blame. Marieke Maes argues that Ricœur’s analysis of the different forms of consciousness of evil helps towards self-knowledge, which in turn contributes to making right decisions regarding what leads to life and what leads to death, between God and the nothingness of idols. She traces a dialectics between knowing ourselves and becoming ourselves, and shows how Ricœur’s interpretation of symbols opens a redeeming, restorative dimension in this process.

Perry Hamalis considers the role of doubt in moral discernment and human growth. Drawing on Aristotle, but also Early Christian Ascetic writers he argues that moral knowledge is less precise than knowledge in other spheres of human inquiry, and also that discernment in this area draws on a healthy, even, he says,

“grace-filled” doubt. He contrasts such “virtuous moral doubt” to an “excessive moral doubt” which leads to an extreme lack of confidence about what to do when facing a moral choice, and to “the extreme deficiency of proper doubt” which opens door to morally and spiritually dangerous decisions.

The final article by Duncan Angus and Marion Carson makes a contribution from the perspective of a general clinical psychiatry and considers whether, and if so how, a serious mental illness impacts on the ability to make a moral discernment. It argues against reducing decision-making to balanced reasoning, and it shows through selected examples and their analysis how other factors, “conscious and unconscious forces”, are at play. The authors argue that while it should not be underestimated how conditions like acute anxiety, psychosis or brain injury can affect people’s judgment, such conditions do not deprive people of the ability to make moral decisions. In practice, they argue, mental illness never stands on its own as a sole explanation of human behaviour, even when it comes to harming others or self-harming. The article challenges those concepts of freedom and responsibility, which assume that right and wrong can be judged by people from some kind of disembodied distance.

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