

# TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF DISCERNMENT

By WILLIAM A. BARRY

**D**ISCERNMENT' has become the new buzz word among religious people. 'I discerned that God was calling me to be a religious', 'to be a priest', 'to marry you', 'to become provincial'. 'Our community discerned that we were being called to a simpler life style', 'to give up this apostolate', 'to elect this superior'. Often enough the glibness of the statement makes one wonder about the genuineness of the 'discernment'. In the history of spirituality discernment of the will of God seems to require more asceticism, more prayer, more self-doubt, more humility than seems evident when the word is so easily tossed off in our day. The fragment of his spiritual diary which has been preserved indicates how careful and almost scrupulous Ignatius of Loyola was in trying to discern God's will.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, his autobiography presents us with a startling instance of the problem of discernment. During his 'long retreat' in Manresa Ignatius decided that God was calling him to go to Jerusalem and remain there, visiting the holy places and helping souls: '... he was very firm in his purpose and had resolved that he would not fail to carry it out for any reason'.<sup>2</sup> The provincial of the Franciscans in Jerusalem refused him permission to stay on and indicated that he commanded him under pain of sin and with the threat of excommunication. Ignatius concludes: '... it was not Our Lord's will that he remain in those holy places'.<sup>3</sup> Often enough in our own day we hear complaints about how superiors thwart the discernment of an individual. Indeed, such complaints lead to the cynicism which puts into the mouth of a mythical superior the words: 'You discern; I decide'. No doubt, superiors are human and can be blind in their discernment, a complicating factor in any theory or practice of discernment. But, for Ignatius, it seems, the final criterion for the genuineness of a call of God was whether it could be carried out in the real world where other agents also have a say. Discernment obviously is a rather complicated issue. In this article I want to contribute to a theological understanding of these complications on the grounds that one of most practical helps toward sound discernment is good theory.

The Ignatian vignette poses the first and perhaps greatest problem for a theory of discernment. In one form it looks like this: God wants Ignatius to end up in Rome founding the Society of Jesus; to attain this end he keeps putting roadblocks in Ignatius's way that gradually narrow his options to the 'Roman solution'. The provincial of the Franciscans is thus just one pawn in God's plan for Ignatius. In this understanding, life is a chess game where God has command of all the moves. But then what is the use of discernment at all? Why not just follow one's nose and let the roadblocks lead one to where the chess master wants to play you? And if, in fact, the final decision about my fate is in someone else's hands, why waste time trying to figure things out for myself?

Perhaps the best way to discern, then, is the one Ignatius used when he could not decide whether to pursue and kill 'the Moor' who, in his eyes, had besmirched Our Lady's honour.

Tired of examining what would be best to do and not finding any guiding principle, he decided as follows, to let the mule go with the reins slack as far as the place where the road separated. If the mule took the village road, he would seek out the Moor and strike him; if the mule did not go toward the village but kept on the highway, he would let him be. He did as he proposed. Although the village was little more than thirty or forty paces away, and the road to it was very broad and very good, Our Lord willed that the mule took the highway and not the village road.<sup>4</sup>

Obviously Ignatius did not consider this method of discernment ideal, as the rest of his life and his *Spiritual Exercises* make clear. But the example does bring out what is perhaps an implicit theory of discernment in many people. Since it is so difficult in this complex world to know what is God's will, we can let the toss of a coin decide or, as Ignatius did, let a jackass decide. Another, and perhaps more popular, implicit theory is to let rule or law or custom decide. 'Do I have a vocation to religious life? Yes, because I am healthy, religiously inclined and desirous of doing the better thing.' This reasoning relies on the rule that religious life is a higher form of Christian living. Another rule that helped Christians to decide a course of action seems to have been: the more difficult or painful course of action is more probably the one God wants. Now rules can be a help to discernment, but in the final analysis discernment cannot be a matter of applying the right rule or law to the case. If that were true, then casuistry would be the equivalent of discernment, and wise lawyers would be all that we needed. Christianity would indeed be a religion of the law.

Recently I read John Macmurray's Gifford Lectures of 1953 and 1954.<sup>5</sup> Macmurray's work can, I believe, provide us with the

tools for forging a theological theory of discernment, one that more adequately accounts for the data of revelation as presented in scripture and the Judeo-Christian tradition. First, I will summarize the main points of Macmurray's philosophy that bear on the question of discernment. With such a summary in hand I shall then attempt to develop elements of a theology of individual and communal discernment. The aim, at this point, is not to be comprehensive, but to lay the foundation for an adequate theology of discernment.

Macmurray begins by demonstrating the dead-end to which any philosophy tends which begins with the 'I think' of Descartes. The dead-end is agnosticism or atheism in the philosophical field and totalitarianism in the political. As an alternative he proposes that philosophy begin with what is primary in our experience; we are primarily doers, but knowing doers, that is, agents. Thus, philosophy begins with the 'I do' rather than with the 'I think'. Action includes knowledge: 'To do, and to know that I do, are two aspects of one and the same experience. *This* knowledge is absolute and necessary. It is not, however, knowledge of an object but what we may call "knowledge in action".'<sup>6</sup> That is, when I act, I know that I am acting and what I intend. Action is, therefore, the actualizing of a possibility, the determining of a future. Hence, the possibility of action implies free will. 'To deny free-will is to deny the possibility of action. . . . That I am free is an immediate implication of the "I do"; and to deny freedom is to assert that no one ever *does* anything, that no one is capable even of thinking or observing.'<sup>7</sup> What is actualized when I act is the past, and as such (i.e., as past) completely determinate; but the future, precisely as future, is indeterminate, something to be determined by action.

Macmurray distinguishes an event from an action. An event is simply what happens. Every event has a cause; every action has a reason. Events are attributed to non-agents; acts to agents. The fact that Ignatius's mule did not follow the Moor is an event since we assume that the mule did not intend to avoid following the Moor. But notice that Ignatius attributes the mule's activity to God's intention, and so in his mind it is an action; not an action of the mule, however, but of God. All actions include events as part of their constitution. For example, I write a letter to a friend. This action includes within it habits such as my style of handwriting and involuntary muscular and other physiological events which are essential to my act of writing, but not what I deliberately intend.

What has all this to do with discernment? At the end of the first series of lectures Macmurray argues that from the standpoint of

the 'I do' the only coherent way to think of the world is as one action.<sup>8</sup> Overly simplified his argument runs in this fashion. Either the world is one process, i.e., a series of events, or it is one action. If it is one process, then there are no actions, including our own. All such 'actions' are part of the one process which is determinate. So freedom and intentionality are illusory. But this is to deny the possibility of action, and the fact that I act is indubitable. Thus, it is not possible to think the world as one process. But since action includes and is constituted by events, it is possible to think the world as one action, informed by a unitary intention. He then goes on to argue that in order to act we must think the world as a unity of action because our action requires the cooperation of the world of which we are a part.

If we could not rely upon the world outside us, we could not act in it. We can act only through knowledge of the Other (he means, what is not 'I'); and only what is a determinable unity can be known. It does not follow . . . that its future can be completely determined in advance; only that whatever occurs must be systematically related to what has gone before, so that through all its changes the world remains one world.<sup>9</sup>

How can such a thought be verified? Macmurray argues that the possibility of verification resides in the effect it has on intention and action.

If we act as if the world, in its unity, is intentional; that is, if we believe in practice that the world is one action . . . we shall act differently from anyone who does not believe this. We shall act as though our own actions were our contributions to the one inclusive action which is the history of the world. . . . Our conception of the unity of the world determines a way of life; and the satisfactoriness or unsatisfactoriness of that way of life is its verification.<sup>10</sup>

Such a line of reasoning obviously tends toward the affirmation of a God who is the universal Agent.

At the end of the second series of Gifford Lectures Macmurray returns to this issue, only now he entitles his last chapter 'The Personal Universe'. The following paragraph sums up his argument:

There is, then, only one way in which we can think our relation to the world, and that is to think it as a personal relation, through the form of the personal. We must think that the world is one action, and that its impersonal aspect is the negative aspect of this unity of action, contained in it, subordinated within it, and

necessary to its constitution. To conceive the world thus is to conceive it as the act of God, the Creator of the world, and ourselves as created agents, with a limited and dependent freedom to determine the future, which can be realized only on the condition that our intentions are in harmony with His intention, and which must frustrate itself if they are not.<sup>11</sup>

The connection of this line of argument with discernment lies close to hand. But before we make the connection, it may help our understanding of what Macmurray is saying to present an extended example from ordinary human experience. I decided to write this article. My intention was to explain Macmurray in such a way that others would have an insight which would affect their life and ministry. This one action whose intention was to have an effect on others included a number of other actions; for example, I read and re-read Macmurray with the intention of understanding him, and I wrote several drafts of the article and the final draft. It also included a manifold of events, happenings that were not actions since not intentional, for example, eye-hand coordination in writing and typing, writing skills, memories and associations. Moreover, as I wrote I became aware of new questions, puzzles that I had not thought of before, and my action had to be adjusted accordingly. To complicate the issue even further my action depends on the action of others. I must convince an editor to publish my article and must hope that at least some readers will read it. The success of my intention depends, in other words, on other free agents as well as on many events such as the safe delivery of the mail.

That the world is one action of God means that God has a unitary intention for the whole creation and that his one action includes and is constituted by all the actions of every created agent and all the events that will ever occur in the history of the universe. In other words, the one action of God includes the free actions of all of us human beings. Because we really are agents, the future of God's action is not determinate since only the past is completely determined. So in some mysterious way God's action depends on us. Our faith tells us that God's intention will not ultimately be thwarted—as my intention in writing this article may be thwarted both by my own inadequacy and by the actions of other agents. At the same time our faith and our experience tell us that we really are free agents, not pawns in the great chess game of creation. If our actions are truly free, then, again in some mysterious fashion, God's one action includes them and adjusts to them in order to attain his intention. Ignatius could have decided to risk excommunication and to stay in Jerusalem, in which case world history

would have been different, and God's one action would have had to take this act of Ignatius into account. I fail to see how such a conception of God's one action limits God. It seems to me that the conception of God's immensity is immeasurably enhanced if we understand him as a God who can attain his one intention for the world when his one action includes free choices by human agents which seem inimical to his intention.

If the universe is one action informed by one intention, can we know God's intention? The human analogy may help us here. No one can really know the intention of another's action unless that other reveals it. I may try to deduce your intention from your behaviour, but such deductions are at best based on circumstantial evidence and, therefore, always hypothetical. As Macmurray says: 'All knowledge of persons is by revelation.'<sup>12</sup> If this is true of human relations, how much more true of our relation with God. So the question is: has God revealed his intention for the universe? At the least we can say that he has revealed his intention for our world, whatever may be said of the whole universe. God's intention, it seems, is that all human beings live as brothers and sisters in a community of faith, hope and love united with Jesus Christ as sons and daughters of God, our Father and in harmony with the whole created universe.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. . . . For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fulness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. (Eph 1,3. 9-10)

God's one action will be attained—because he is God. How those who willfully refuse to be brought into the one community of God's family are included in God's one action is not for us to know. What we do know, in faith, is that no created being is excluded from the one action which is this world.

We can now make the connection to discernment. Human life in this world is problematic. Community with one another is bedevilled by fear, as is communion with God. Perhaps at root the fear is the fear of death, of annihilation.<sup>13</sup> Whatever the source, fear keeps us in either subservient or antagonistic relations with one another. If we do form bonds of community with some people, the fear shows itself in our attempts to make the community exclusive, 'us and not them'. Only perfect love casts out fear, as the First Letter of John says, and our peace lies in attaining that perfect love, or at least moving toward it. That perfect love is the will of God. Hence, the ultimate happiness of each individual

resides in trying to align him- or herself with this will of God. Moreover, since perfect love cannot be attained until all human beings are one community, what is for my peace must also be for the peace of all humanity or lead toward it. In the ideal order, then, my desire as a Christian is to have all my actions in tune with the one action of God which intends a world community of perfect love.

In fact, to the extent that I am out of tune with the one action of God, to that extent I will experience myself as alienated, unhappy, unfulfilled. I may not know the reason for my malaise and blame it on failed opportunities, the stupidity or bad will of others, or an upset stomach. I may look for all sorts of anodynes to relieve the malaise. I may seek relief in work, in relationships, in commitment to a great cause, in alcohol, in drugs. The perpetual attraction of such myths as the pursuit of the Holy Grail indicates the depth of the human desire to be in tune with God's intention. If you have ever experienced a time when you were 'in the flow', able to live with relative unambivalence and lack of fear in the now, attuned to the presence of God, then you have an idea of what it might be like to be at one with the one action of God. In such a state you are a contemplative in action. You know that you are at the right place at the right time. There are no doubts about whether you should be someone else or somewhere else. You do not need to justify being a married man or woman or a religious; it is right to be who you are here and now. And you live and act comfortably with the knowledge of your own limitations, of your finitude, of your small part in the immense history of the world. To be attuned to the one action of God, to his will, is to be extraordinarily free, happy and fulfilled even in the midst of a world of sorrow and pain. One can, perhaps, understand how Jesus could celebrate the Last Supper even though he knew in his bones that it would be 'last'.

God's will for each of us is not utilitarian, as I have argued elsewhere.<sup>14</sup> We are not means to his end. Rather, if we were able to be perfectly attuned to his one action, we would be perfectly happy and would also be co-creators of his one action which intends a community of lovers. To the extent that we are in tune, to that extent we are happy and fulfilled and co-creators of that community. This is the satisfactoriness of a way of life which Macmurray says is the justification for that way of life and one of the criteria, in my opinion, for the discernment of spirits.

Since, however, my position in the world is problematic, bedevilled by original sin and its consequences, I am not, *ipso facto*, in tune with the one action of God. I find myself torn between

fear and love, between the desire for union and the terror of it. Moreover, I live in a world of conflicting desires, of conflicting groups, of conflicting claims. How can I know how to align myself with the one action of God? This is the point where discernment comes in. If I want to attune my actions and intentions with God's one action and intention, then I must discipline my heart to hear what his intention is, or rather, I must let my heart be disciplined to hear how my actions fit into his one action. I must be willing to start slowly, to let God train my heart as he did Ignatius, through painstaking trial and error. 'God treated him at this time just as a schoolmaster treats a child whom he is teaching.'<sup>15</sup> I must learn to pay attention to the movements of my heart, to reflect on them wisely and carefully with the help of others, and to test them over time. In this process I must learn two equally difficult and seemingly incompatible attitudes: to trust myself and my reactions and to recognize how easily I can delude myself. Discernment requires that I believe that God will show himself in my experience and that I yet be wary of mindless credulity toward that same experience.

I can begin this process of discernment, this schooling of the heart, at any point in my life. It is never too late, while I am alive, to try to attune my actions with the one action of God because the future is not yet determined and so I can co-determine it in tune with God's intention or not. The door to repentance and conversion is always open. At the same time I have to realize that my actions do create an environment which limits my further action; the past cannot be undone. This insight leads in two directions. On the one hand, it argues for the seriousness of beginning the schooling of the heart as early as possible so that more of my future can be more fully attuned to God's one action. On the other hand, it counsels us to the wisdom which does not cry over spilt milk, but accepts the reality of the present as the environment where *now* I must seek God's will for the future. Moreover, as we shall presently see, such wisdom must also embrace the limiting environment created by the past actions of others.

We can, perhaps, better understand Ignatius's own practice of the examination of conscience as well as his well-known insistence that whatever other spiritual exercises a Jesuit's apostolic labours required him to forego, the examination of conscience twice daily should be retained. Ignatius, apparently, was accustomed to making frequent examinations every day of his life, even long after his period of scruples had passed. I believe that the practice was Ignatius's way of trying to remain in tune with God's action at



every moment of his day. For Ignatius each moment and period of the day was, as it were, a period of prayer, a period of walking with the Lord. During the Spiritual Exercises he advises that the exercitant spend some time after each period of prayer reflecting on what happened, noticing the movements of consolation and desolation in order to discern the movement of the Lord. So too daily life could be seen as an arena for God's action as well as the action of those spirits which run counter to God's action. So he advised periodic reflection on those periods of 'prayer'. In this way, he hoped, his men would become contemplatives in action.

I return once again to the saying attributed to Ignatius and which is loosely translated as 'Pray as if everything depended on you, work as if everything depended on God'.<sup>16</sup> I pray, that is, I put myself in conscious relationship with God, in order to attune myself to him, to become one with him in intention and action because I do co-determine the future. So the future does depend on me. Paul Claudel, at the head of one of his plays, quotes a Portuguese proverb: 'God writes straight with crooked lines'. My line can be more or less straight depending on how in tune I am with God's one action. Once I have done the best I can to get my line straight, then I can work 'as if everything depended on God', as indeed it does. I can let God write straight with my crooked line, or with the crooked line which is my action as it meshes with and conflicts with the actions of others. In other words, like Jesus I do the best I can and leave resurrection to the Father, leave the 'success' or 'failure' of my actions to the one action of God.

This understanding of discernment pushes beyond the confines of individual discernment. My present environment is not just the product of my own past choices, but of those of many others, and the 'success' or 'failure' of my intentions depends on the actions of others. The one action of God includes and takes into account not only all these individual actions but also the institutions, processes and structures which are in some fashion the product of the joint decisions of many individuals both to found them and to keep them in existence. Families, schools, churches, societies, companies, conglomerates of companies, nations are all part of the one action of God which is the universe. These institutions enhance and limit the freedom and agency of the individual, and they can be more or less in tune with the one action of God. At whatever point of history I act, therefore, I am limited in what is concretely possible by the environment which is the product of the history of the universe, and more specifically of humanity, to that point, as well as by the actions of those who are also acting in that same environment. Even if I want to, I cannot reinvent the wheel, as it

were. One example may suffice to illustrate the meaning of this insight for the theory and practice of discernment. The present Superior General of the Society of Jesus does not have the same freedom to discern apostolic directions for the Society of Jesus that Ignatius had because the almost 450 years since its founding have created a wholly new environment which includes institutional commitments, political and religious alliances and misalliances, and traditions within the Society as well as a different international and church order that both enhance and constrain what might be done. The present General must do his discerning in this environment. There is no other theatre but the present one wherein he can do his part to co-determine the future. The wisdom necessary for discernment requires an acceptance of the present environment as the one and only theatre for my action.

These reflections lead us to the issue of communal discernment. Most of the institutions which form our environment are the product of communal decisions or at least of communal acquiescence in their maintenance. More and more we moderns are recognizing our interdependence on one another. What happens in the Persian Gulf affects life in the United States and vice-versa. The decision by a mayor and city council to build a subway line through one neighbourhood rather than another will affect the lives and actions of people in both neighbourhoods. Institutions, laws, projects and social groupings can be more or less attuned to the one action of God, can create an environment more or less conducive to what God's action intends. Moreover, the technological advances of this century face us with the terrifying challenge of harnessing the energies of many of our institutions and structures more in harmony with God's one action or of seeing those energies destroy civilization on our planet. A burning question for our day, therefore, is how to make those institutions and structures more attuned to God's will. Ultimately this question reduces to how to foster among more and more human beings a desire and an ability to discern communally, because only human persons can act and only human persons can decide to act in concert. There is, perhaps, no greater challenge to religion today than to foster the conditions that make such communal discernment possible.

At the same time we must recognize that there are enormous difficulties in the way of communal discernment. Individuals and groups of individuals feel more and more powerless to change the conditions of their lives. The power of the state and of the military-industrial complex seems overwhelming. Economic, political and social structures seem too complicated and intricate to be changed. If we do not believe in the possibility of effecting change, we will

not group together to try to discern communally. It is no accident, I believe, that the flurry of interest in communal discernment in the early 1970s died down. Many people feel the futility of 'fighting City Hall', as it were.<sup>17</sup>

And yet there are signs of hope. The basic thrust of the *comunidades de base* of Brazil and other parts of Latin America is to enable groups of ordinary people to trust one another enough to believe in their power to make society, or some part of it, more amenable to gospel values. Groups such as these are fostering the conditions that make communal discernment possible. Such efforts are urgently needed at all levels of society and church and throughout the world. More and more of God's people need to believe that the power of love, the drive toward making the one community of all people which God intends, is greater than those powers of this world which seem hell-bent on thwarting the one action of God. Perhaps the greatest sin of our day is not to believe in God's power, the power of love, the power of the Holy Spirit who dwells in our hearts.

That Holy Spirit dwelling in our hearts can be likened to a tuning fork set to the music of God's action. We can become attuned to the one action by becoming more and more aware of the tone played in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Individually we can attune our actions to that pitch and tone and by sharing our experience we can become more attuned to the whole range of the music of God's one action. But such attunement will not come easy. Humility, asceticism, honesty and a commitment to prayer, reflection and communal sharing are absolute necessities. The cacophany that wants to drown out the music of God's one action is loud and insistent. We need to recall what Jesus said about the demon which the apostles could not cast out: 'This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer' (Mk 9,29). And it may not be amiss to add what other ancient manuscripts add: 'and fasting'.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Journal of Saint Ignatius*, (Rome: Centrum Ignatianum Spiritualitatis, 1979).

<sup>2</sup> Ignatius of Loyola, *The autobiography of St. Ignatius Loyola*, trans. Joseph F. O'Callaghan, ed. John C. Olin, (New York: Harper Torchbacks, 1974), p 50.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p 50.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p 31.

<sup>5</sup> John Macmurray, *The self as agent, and Persons in relation*, (Atlantic Highlands, N. J.: Humanities Press), 1978.

<sup>6</sup> *The self as agent*, p 90-91.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p 134.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter X, 'The world as one action'

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p 220.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p 221.

<sup>11</sup> *Persons in relation*, p 222.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p 169.

<sup>13</sup> Cf Ernest Becker, *The denial of death*, (New York: Free Press, 1973).

<sup>14</sup> William A. Barry, 'God's love is not utilitarian', *Review for Religious*, 1987, vol 46, no 6 pp 831-843.

<sup>15</sup> Ignatius of Loyola, *Autobiography*, *op. cit.*, p 37.

<sup>16</sup> The Latin version can be found in 'Selectae S. Patris nostri Ignatii sententiae,' no II, in *Thesaurus spiritualis Societatis Jesu*, (Roma: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1948, p 480). Gaston Fessard, in a long appendix to volume I of his *La dialectique des Exercices Spirituels de saint Ignace de Loyola* (Paris: Aubier, 1966), traces the historical background of the saying. He demonstrates that although not from Ignatius's hand the saying does express the dialectic of his spirituality. I have referred to this saying in Barry, *op. cit.*

<sup>17</sup> In *Let this mind be in you: the quest for identity through Oedipus to Christ* (Minneapolis: Winston, 1985) Sebastian Moore argues cogently that it is the 'voice' of original sin which whispers to us that the way things are is the way they have to be.