

**The Rules for the Discernment of Spirits in  
St. Ignatius of Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises* and  
the Discernment of the Sage in Laozi’s *Dao De Jing*  
as Practical Guides to Living Well and  
Knowing that You Are Doing So**

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**Abstract:** Living well and knowing that one is doing so involve not only making the right choices in life but knowing that those choices are right. This requires a discernment in determining whether one’s feeling convictions are in accord with objective, checkable self-transcending criteria. In this paper I examine both St. Ignatius of Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises* and Laozi’s *Dao De Jing* as world famous practical guides for living well and knowing you are doing so. I argue that just as in the *Spiritual Exercises*, living well and knowing one is doing so involves a subjective criterion of the experience of spiritual consolation and the objective criterion of whether that chosen way of life or action is in conformity with the life of Jesus Christ as understood by the faith community of the Church, so in the *Dao De Jing*, living well and knowing one is doing so requires the sage to recognize not only his experience of inner peace and harmony as a criterion but as well the objective criterion of being in conformity with the real (vs. only apparent) harmony of nature and promoting harmony within human society. We learn from both works that if we are to live well and know that we are doing so, we need a discernment based not simply on self-

justifying experience (of spiritual consolation or inner peace and harmony) but on objective, or self-transcending criterion as well.

**Keywords:** discernment, spiritual consolation, spiritual desolation, objective and subjective criterion

## Introduction

The happiness of the virtuous person, Aristotle maintained, consists not simply in *living* virtuously but in knowing, or *appreciating*, that he or she is doing so.<sup>1</sup> In this paper I am going to examine and compare two famous but very different works from different religious, historical, and cultural points of view, the one the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola, a famous religious manual composed in the mid-sixteenth century in Spain; the other, the *Dao De Jing* 道德經, an ancient (from the 4<sup>th</sup> Century BCE) Chinese mystical and philosophical classic ascribed to the figure of Laozi, 老子.<sup>2</sup> Despite their significant differences, both these works can be fruitfully understood and compared as practical manuals designed so that their practitioners might live well and be aware that they were doing so.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* IX.9 1170b10ff.

<sup>2</sup> For a concise historical introduction to the text and author, cf. WING-TSIT CHAN, ed., *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 136-8. In Daoism the *Dao* (or Way) is understood to be the principle of both the cosmic and moral order. In this paper the Chinese and English transliteration of the word will be capitalized.

<sup>3</sup> As the virtuous person, for Aristotle, consists not simply in his actually living virtuously but in *appreciating* (and so enjoying) that he is doing so, I shall argue that analogously for the Christian in making the *Spiritual Exercises*, living well is not simply making the right decision according to God's will but in *knowing* one is doing so in the experience of spiritual consolation. I shall

## The Argument of the Paper

In order to show that both St. Ignatius of Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises* (henceforth *Sp Ex*) and Laozi’s *Dao De Jing* (henceforth *DDJ*) can be such practical guides, I am going to focus on the description in each work of the inner life and dynamics of their practitioners as they make their way through the texts. In the experience of the person making the *Sp Ex* in the context of a retreat (normally accompanied by a spiritual director) and in the experience of the student of the *Dao* in meditating on the verses of *DDJ* (not without guidance from a Daoist master), both will engage in a reflective process in examining their lives and in making significant decisions. This reflective process involves two dimensions, one objective, the other subjective. The objective dimension to be considered will be whether the decision to be made is in conformity with the standard presented in the given text as *normative*, and the subjective dimension of the decision will be whether the one in making the decision experiences a feeling *consonant* with living in conformity with that standard. In the case of the retreatant making the *Sp Ex*, his or her reflective process in making a decision, which St. Ignatius calls a discernment (*discreción*) will involve an objective dimension as to whether the decision is in conformity with the standard of the life of Jesus Christ as this life is understood by the faith community of the Church. The subjective dimension will consist in whether the decision involves an experience of spiritual consolation in the love of God. In the case of the student of the *Dao*, as he or she meditates on the verses of the *DDJ*, the reflective

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argue similarly that in the *DDJ* enlightenment is not simply acting in accord with the *Dao* but in knowing that one is doing so in experiencing *zu* - peace and contentment.

process (which has no special name) involved in making a significant decision will respect an objective dimension as to whether the decision is in conformity with the standard of the *Dao* as the *Dao* is traditionally understood and recorded in the text of the *DDJ* and a subjective dimension in whether that decision is accompanied by an experience of inner peace and harmony, or “knowing contentment” (*zhi zu* 知足) (*DDJ* 33, cf 44), an experience understood to be characteristic of those who are in accord with the *Dao*.

For both the *Sp Ex* and the *DDJ* a proper reflection process in any decision will involve both these objective and subjective dimensions and by offering their practitioners guidance in this process, the *Sp Ex* and the *DDJ* can be understood as effective practical guides for their practitioners in living well and in appreciating that they are doing so.

## I

### **The *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius as a Method for Finding God’s Will in the Choice of a Way of Life (or in Some Particular Action)**

The practical purpose of the *Sp Ex* of St. Ignatius is for the retreatant to discover and to embrace the Will of God in a choice of a way of life (or of some important action). Such a choice has as its basis what Ignatius calls “The First Principle and Foundation”:

We are created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and in doing so to save our souls. The other things on the face of the earth are created to help us in attaining the end for which we are created. Hence we are to make use of such things in as far as they help us in the attainment of our end, and we must rid ourselves of them in as far as they prove a hindrance to us. Therefore we must make ourselves indifferent to all created

things as far as we are not under any prohibition (...). Our one desire and choice should be what is more conducive to the end for which we are created (*Sp Ex* 23).<sup>4</sup>

In order for anyone to make a choice of a way of life (or of some momentous action in one’s life) in accord with the praise, reverence and service of God, certain “spiritual exercises” are needed. Such exercises are described as “every way of preparing and disposing the soul to rid itself of all inordinate attachments, and, after their removal, of seeking and finding the will of God in the disposition of our life for the salvation of our soul” (*Sp Ex* 1). In the *Sp Ex*, these exercises involve contemplating Jesus Christ in his life, death, and resurrection. As Jesus is believed to be *the* Way to God (John 14:6), by so focusing on Christ throughout the retreat and by carefully attending to the inner movements of the heart, it is believed that the retreatant will be inspired to know and then choose to follow Christ in whatever particular way of life or action that the retreatant is considering.

In the process of considering a way of life or some particular action in following Christ, Ignatius describes three “times” in which a decisive choice can be made (*Sp Ex* 175-189). For the specific purposes of this article, however, we will focus on what Ignatius calls the *second* time of deciding—a time when the retreatant by attending to his or her inner experience of *spirits*, both good and evil, can be helped in making a right decision inspired by God, so that one can immediately experience the rightness of the decision.

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<sup>4</sup> While the text of the *Spiritual Exercises* in the original Spanish can be found in *Obras de San Ignacio de Loyola*, Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos (Madrid: Editorial Catolica, 1963), 206-303, I will be using the English translation of *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius* by Louis Puhl, S.J, Chicago 1952.

But before we examine this second time of deciding according to an experience of spirits, a few preliminary points are to be kept in mind. In attending to inner experience, the retreatant will be aware of the state of, and movements within his or her consciousness.<sup>5</sup> “Soul” (*ánima*) is the term Ignatius uses to refer to the inner principle of life and consciousness unique to each person. By the phrase “movements of soul” (*las varias mociones que en el ánima*) Ignatius refers to the affective responses of feeling and desire based on perceptions, imaginations, thoughts, and images of the situations the retreatant may have in prayer or in mind at any time during the retreat. These movements of soul are experienced as motive forces, impulses of attraction or repulsion which may influence the retreatant in thought, word, or deed. These impulses can be felt as positive (e.g., pleasant, comforting, inviting) in attracting a retreatant toward someone or something (emotions like love, joy, peace, etc. are examples of positive impulses) or as negative (e.g., unpleasant, discomforting, discouraging) in repelling the retreatant from another person or situation (emotions such as fear, anger, anxiety). A *spirit* (*espíritu*) on the other hand is understood as a force which transcends the consciousness of the retreatant. As such, “spirit” is to be distinguished from the retreatant’s own *soul*.

For Ignatius movements of *soul* (*mociones que en el ánima*) are to be distinguished from motions as actions of *spirits* (*espíritus*). While

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<sup>5</sup> In beginning with the *second time* we begin with the retreatant’s subjective experience, his or her experience of inner movements and emotions. In examining and judging the truth of these subjective experiences, the second time begins with the subjective dimension of discernment and in discerning its truth will have the retreatant (and his or her director) consider the objective dimension of these experiences in their conformity (or not) with the life of Christ as understood by the faith community of the Church.

movements of soul can arise voluntarily or involuntarily from a retreatant’s own consciousness, these movements can also have as their causal source a *spirit*—a force which transcends the retreatant’s own consciousness and is in some form personal: the one good (ultimately God), the other, evil, Satan.<sup>6</sup> These different spirits are experienced as antagonistic, influencing the person to think and act in different if not opposed ways.

Ignatius believed that negative movements of soul could be caused either by a person’s own psychology or by the influence of an evil spirit. Positive movements of soul could also be the result of a person’s own psychology but could also be caused by either a good spirit (leading the person to God) or by an evil spirit (leading the person away from God). If the person is to make a right decision, the influence of personal psychology as well as the action of the different spirits must be recognized and distinguished

By the term “discernment” (*discreción*) Ignatius means the act or process of discerning, that is, of recognizing or perceiving something otherwise difficult or obscure by means of discriminating differences. A discernment of spirits (*discreción de espíritus*)<sup>7</sup> is a process of recognizing or perceiving the reality and influence of a spirit in one’s

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<sup>6</sup> Cf *Sp Ex* 329 where Ignatius writes “It is characteristic of God and His Angels, in their actions (*en sus mociones*) to give (*dar*) the soul true happiness and joy, and to banish all the sadness and disturbances which are caused by the enemy. It is characteristic of the evil one to fight against such happiness and consolation by proposing (*trayendo*) fallacious reasonings subtleties, and continual deceptions. The movements of spirits are personal and so better understood as *actions* rather than simply generic *motions*, as the latter could be the effect of the retreatant’s own psychological make-up or the effect of merely physical causes.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Sp Ex* 328 *Ejercicio espirituales, Obras de San Ignacio de Loyola*, Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos Madrid, 1963, 328

consciousness by first distinguishing that spirit from one's own consciousness and then by distinguishing that spirit as either a good or bad spirit.<sup>8</sup>

In order to aid the retreatant and his or her director in discerning good from bad spirits, St. Ignatius offers in the appendix of the *Sp Ex* (313-336) certain rules which he formulated, collected, and systematized over a long period of time.

### **The Use of Rules for the Discernment of Spirits (*Sp Ex* 313-336)**

Ignatius's Rules for the Discernment of Spirits are divided into what he calls "two weeks," or periods, which mark in some manner the retreatant's progress in following the life of Christ in meditation during his making the *Sp Ex*. As the retreatant is gradually drawn into a deeper relationship with Jesus in prayer during the retreat and considers the decision he or she needs to make, the influence of the spirits in the retreatant's consciousness can become more and more subtle. The "first week" rules deal with the basic principles of the different spirits and how to recognize them. The "second week" rules deal with some of the complicated and subtle ways the different spirits can interact and influence a person in making a choice of life. In an examination of these "two weeks" which follows, we will limit ourselves to consider

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<sup>8</sup> J. TONER, *A Commentary on Saint Ignatius's Rules for the Discernment of Spirits* [cf. nt. 4] (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1991), 12-13 and M. RUIZ JURADO, *Il Discernimento Spirituale* (cf. nt. 4), Edizioni San Paolo 1997, 232, and cf. M. IVENS, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises* (Leominster: Gracewing 1998), 205-209. Understanding these spirits and discerning between them has not been without controversy among commentators of the *Sp Ex*. For some of the diverse interpretations of Ignatian "consolation" and "desolation" cf. J. TONER, *A Commentary on Saint Ignatius'* (cf. nt. 4), 283-290.

and comment only on those rules most relevant for the purpose of this study.

### **FIRST WEEK RULES (*Sp Ex 313-327*)**

Ignatius opens the first week rules with a description of the purpose of the rules, which are: “for understanding to some extent the different movements produced in the soul and for recognizing those that are *good* to admit them, and those that are bad, to reject them” (*Sp Ex 313*).

The first rule of the first week focuses on the experience of the movement of soul and sets forth a crucial distinction between differing *movements* of soul with respect to an action:

In the case of those who go from one mortal sin to another, the enemy is ordinarily accustomed to propose apparent pleasures. He fills their imagination with sensual delights and gratifications, the more readily to keep them in their vices and increase the number of their sins. With such persons the good spirit uses a method which is the reverse of the above. Making use of the light of reason, he will rouse the sting of conscience and fill them with remorse (*Sp Ex 314*).

A few important preliminary things are to be noted in this first rule. “Mortal sin” is a thought, word, or deed in serious violation of God’s will based on Christian faith and the teaching of the Church. From the perspective of the Christian faith, a movement of soul toward what is sinful is toward what is objectively negative and yet such a movement of soul can be experienced *subjectively* as *either* positive or negative so that the retreatant’s *subjective* movement of soul, whether positive or negative, is not indicative of the objective goodness or evil of the action from the point of view of faith.

In the next, or second rule of the first week Ignatius states:

In the case of those who go on earnestly striving to cleanse their souls from sin and who seek to rise in the service of God our Lord to greater perfection, the method pursued is the opposite of that mentioned on the first rule. Then it is characteristic of the evil spirit to harass with anxiety, to afflict with sadness, to raise obstacles backed by fallacious reasonings that disturb the soul. Thus he seeks to prevent the soul from advancing. It is characteristic of the good spirit, however, to give courage and strength, consolations, tears, inspirations and peace. This He does by making all easy, by removing all obstacles so that the soul goes forward in doing good (*Sp Ex* 315).

A good spirit causes positive movements of soul in the direction of what is objectively good, whereas the evil spirit causes negative movements of soul toward what is objectively good, but positive movements toward what is objectively evil. Spirits are judged to be good or bad not by their positive or negative subjective “feel” but by whether they influence the agent to choose or not choose action which is in objective conformity with God’s will as understood from a faith perspective.

The third and fourth rules describe the experience of spiritual consolation and desolation:

SPIRITUAL CONSOLATION. I call it consolation when an interior movement is aroused in the soul, by which it is inflamed with love of its Creator and Lord, and as a consequence, can love no creature on the face of the earth for its own sake, but only in the Creator of them all. It is likewise consolation when one sheds tears that move to the love of God, whether it be because of the sufferings of Christ our Lord, or for any other reason that is immediately directed to the praise and service of God. Finally, I call consolation every increase of faith, hope, and love, and all interior joy that invites and attracts to what is heavenly and to the salvation of one’s soul by filling it with peace and quiet in its Creator and Lord (*Sp Ex* 316).

And the fourth:

SPIRITUAL DESOLATION. I call desolation what is entirely the opposite of what is described in the third rule, as darkness of soul, turmoil of spirit, inclination to what is lowly and earthly, restlessness rising from many disturbance and temptations which lead to want of faith, want of hope, want of love. The soul is wholly slothful, tepid, sad, and separated, as it were, from its Creator and Lord. For just as consolation is the opposite of desolation, so the thoughts that spring from consolation are the opposite of those that spring from desolation (*Sp Ex* 317).

Here we note that while spiritual consolation and desolation are subjectively experienced, respectively, as positive or negative movements of the soul, these movements are recognized as *spiritual* by their *intentional object*: the explicit consciousness of God or the things of God. When one considers God or the things of God and experiences *positive* motivation in the emotions of love, joy, and peace, this movement of soul is a spiritual *consolation* inclining the person to the love of God and the desire to do His will, whereas the experience of a *negative* movement of soul, when considering God or the things of God (feelings of sloth, tepidness, sadness, etc.), is an experience of *desolation* inducing the person to turn away from God.

In the fifth and sixth rules, Ignatius counsels the retreatant on how to treat desolation and consolation in discerning a decision to be made:

In time of desolation we should never make any change, but remain firm and constant in the resolution and decision which guided us the day before the desolation, or in the decision to which we adhered in the preceding consolation. For just as in consolation the good spirit guides and counsels us, so in desolation the evil spirit guides and counsels. Following his counsels we can never find the way to a right decision (*Sp Ex* 318).

Though in desolation we must never change our former resolutions, it will be very advantageous to intensify our activity against the desolation. We can insist more on prayer, upon meditation, and on much examination of ourselves. We can make an effort in a suitable way to do some penance (*Sp Ex* 319).

So far, the above rules seem to suggest that when considering a decision to be made, the retreatant can interpret his or her experience of (spiritual) consolation as in some way meeting with divine approval in so far as the consolation indicates being guided by the good spirit whereas the experience of desolation can be interpreted as failing divine approval in so far as in desolation the evil spirit is guiding and counseling. Yet as we shall see shortly when we get to the rules of the second week, there may not be a simple correlation between the subjective experience of spiritual consolation and objective divine approval.

### **SECOND WEEK RULES (*Sp Ex* 328-336)**

Rules for the Discernment of Spirits for the *second* week are described as: “further rules for understanding the different movements produced in the soul. They serve for a more accurate discernment of spirits” (*Sp Ex* 328).

In the first rule of the second week Ignatius describes the good spirit (whether God or His Angels) as giving true happiness:

It is characteristic of God and His Angels, when they act upon the soul, to give true happiness and spiritual joy, and to banish all the sadness and the disturbances caused by the enemy. It is characteristic of the evil one to fight against such happiness and consolation by proposing fallacious reasonings, subtleties, and continual deceptions (*Sp Ex* 329).

While this first rule apparently summarizes points already noted in the rules for the first week, there is a twofold complication as we are now told that the good spirit of the first week can be the action of *either* God *or* His Angels and that the effect of the good spirit (either God or His Angels) is “*true* happiness and joy”—a description which implies that there can also be a *false* happiness and joy. An experience of consolation, then, can be ambiguous—either true or false—and so itself is in need of discernment to determine whether it be one or the other.

In addition to a recognition that there can be a true or false consolation, in the second rule of this second week St. Ignatius notes for the first time a kind of consolation which only God can give:

God alone can give consolation to the soul without any previous cause. It belongs solely to the Creator to come into a soul, to leave it, to act upon it, to draw it wholly to the love of the Divine Majesty. I said without previous cause, that is, without any previous perception or knowledge of any subject by which a soul might be led to such a consolation through its own acts of will and intellect (*Sp Ex* 330).

God, as creator of the soul, is capable of consoling the soul of the retreatant “without previous cause” that is, in an immediate and intimate way.<sup>9</sup>

In the next rule of this second week, this divine “consolation without previous cause” is distinguished from an experience of consolation which can be caused by *either* good *or* evil spirits:

If a cause preceded, both the good angel and the evil spirit can give consolation to a soul but for quite different purposes. The good angel consoles for progress of the soul; that it may

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<sup>9</sup> For a more detailed analysis of this second rule of the second week as well as a description of various commentators’ differing views on the nature and frequency of such consolation “without previous cause,” cf. M. RUIZ JURADO, *Il Discernimento Spirituale* (cf. nt. 4), 227-229.

advance and rise to what is more perfect. The evil spirit consoles for purposes that are contrary, and that afterwards he might draw the soul to his own perverse intentions and wickedness (*Sp Ex* 331).

Previously, in the second rule of this second week we had read that “without previous cause” was to be understood as “without any previous perception or knowledge of any subject by which a soul might be led to such a consolation through its own acts of will and intellect” (*Sp Ex* 330). Now in this third rule of the second week Ignatius introduces us to a different kind of consolation—a consolation *with* previous cause. The experience of this kind of consolation can be caused by *either* the good spirit (angel) *or* the evil spirit depending on whether that consolation leads toward or away from God (“what is more perfect”).

So far, then, we can conclude that consolation *without* previous cause comes directly from God (and so must be true consolation) whereas consolation *with* previous cause can be either true or false depending on its source—*either* the good *or* the evil spirit. Once these two kinds of consolation are introduced, the retreatant must now discern (or be helped to discern) a possible consolation “without previous cause” from a consolation “with previous cause,” and of the latter kind—one that is true (as guided by the good spirit) from one that is false (misguided by the evil spirit).

In the fourth rule Ignatius begins to describe how the retreatant and his or her director are to discern whether consolation “with previous cause” is ultimately caused by the good or evil spirit:

It is a mark of the evil spirit to assume the appearance of an angel of light. He begins by suggesting thoughts that are suited to a devout soul, and ends by suggesting his own. For example,

he will suggest holy and pious thoughts that are wholly in conformity with the sanctity of the soul. Afterwards, he will endeavor little by little to end by drawing the soul into his hidden snares and evil designs (*Sp Ex* 332).

If the retreatant and director are to discern which spirit is ultimately causing consolation *with* previous cause, they must examine not the immediate experience itself of the consolation but rather its progression and conclusion. Moreover, judgments as to whether the consolation leads to thoughts suited to a devout soul or whether they lead to hidden snares and evil designs require a standard outside the subjective experience of the consolation itself.

The fifth rule of the second week instructs the retreatant and director how to determine whether the retreatant’s thoughts (an important component of consolation) are coming from the evil spirit rather than the good:

We must carefully observe the whole course of our thoughts. If the beginning and middle and end of the course of thoughts are wholly good and directed to what is entirely right, it is a sign that they are from the good angel. But the course of thoughts suggested to us may terminate in something evil, or distracting, or less good than the soul had formerly proposed to do. Again, it may end in what weakens the soul, or disquiets it; or by destroying the peace, tranquility, and quiet which it had before, it may cause disturbance to the soul. These things are a clear sign that the thoughts are proceeding from the evil spirit, the enemy of our progress and eternal salvation (*Sp Ex* 333).

As noted above in the third rule of the first week, spiritual consolation consists in thoughts of God accompanied by positive movements of soul, of emotions like love, joy, and peace. But to discern whether thoughts coming from consolation *with* previous cause are ultimately caused by the good *or* evil spirit, the retreatant is instructed to observe the *whole progression* of these thoughts and

finally their *conclusion*. If the conclusion of this progression of thoughts is in accord with what is wholly good and right, the consolation of such thoughts can be judged to come from the good spirit, but if those thoughts ultimately lead rather to something less good or even something evil, the consolation accompanying such thoughts can be judged to come from the evil spirit. What is implied here in this judgment is the insufficiency of the subjective *experience itself* of consolation; a standard or criterion *other than* the experience of the consolation itself is needed. For Ignatius, this objective standard or criterion is ultimately that of the teaching of the Christian faith which both retreatant and director accept.

In the sixth rule of the second week Ignatius counsels the retreatant to carefully review his or her experience with the evil spirit's use of consolation to deceive him so as to guard against such deception in the future:

When the enemy of our human nature has been detected and recognized by the trail of evil marking his course and by the wicked end to which he leads us, it will be profitable for the one who has been tempted to review immediately the whole course of the temptation. Let him consider the series of thoughts, how they arose, how the evil one gradually attempted to make him step down from the state of spiritual delight and joy in which he was, till finally he drew him to his wicked designs. The purpose of this review is that once such experience has been understood and carefully observed, we may guard ourselves for the future against the customary deceits of the enemy (*Sp Ex* 334).

Once the train and conclusion of the subjective experience of consolation can be seen to come from the good or the evil spirit, the retreatant and his or her director are instructed to go back and review the experience and its discernment for future discernment of like

experiences. Again, such discernment for future reference presumes the implication of the fifth rule: that the subjective experience of consolation is ultimately determined by an objective standard, the standard of faith that both retreatant and director accept.

In the eighth rule Ignatius goes back to examining the experience of consolation without previous cause, the consolation that comes directly from God:

When consolation is without previous cause, as was said, there can be no deception in it, since it can proceed from God our Lord only.<sup>10</sup> But a spiritual person who has received such a consolation must consider it very attentively, and must cautiously distinguish the actual time of the consolation from the period that follows it. At such a time the soul is still fervent and favored with the grace and aftereffects of the consolation which has passed. In this second period the soul frequently forms various resolutions and plans which are not granted directly by God our Lord. They may come from our own reasoning on the relations of our concepts and on the consequences of our judgments or they may come from the good or evil spirit. Hence, they must be carefully examined before they are given full approval and put into execution (*Sp Ex* 336).

We are told here that the immediate experience of God’s action on the soul cannot deceive for it comes directly from God. No further discernment as to the source of the consolation is needed. The consolation is directly of God. Aside from the question of how the retreatant and his or her spiritual guide (or anyone else) could be certain of an experience of consolation without previous cause (a question Ignatius does not seem to ask), one could ask: what practical

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<sup>10</sup> And for a detailed analysis of this eighth rule of the second week, cf. M. RUIZ JURADO, *Il Discernimento Spirituale* (cf. nt. 4), 229-239.

significance such a consolation can have for the retreatant trying to make a decision in accord with God's will? If, as some commentators have understood, consolation is more a volitional impetus than anything else, does this special consolation indicate that what the retreatant is considering as a way of life or a particular action to be chosen *is* being divinely inspired and so in accordance with God's will? Nowhere in the text does Ignatius identify any experience of consolation (with or without previous cause) with God's will. Yet in warning the director and the retreatant to distinguish consolation *without* previous cause from the experience of its aftereffects by means of the *thoughts* that arise from the latter, Ignatius seems to imply that (in contrast to the thoughts and plans made during an experience of the aftereffect) there *could* be thoughts or plans made during the time of experiencing consolation *without* previous cause, and then the question could be asked whether such thoughts or plans can be taken as indicating the divine will. However, *even if* an experience of consolation without previous cause *could* be interpreted as an indication of God's will in a choice of action, (as seems to be the case in Ignatius's description of the conversion experiences of St. Matthew or St. Paul at *Sp Ex* 175) Ignatius holds that whatever is made manifest or affectively affirmed in these special experiences must always be within the objective bounds of the faith.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> And outside the *Sp Ex* themselves, as in his letter to Teresa Rejadell (June 18, 1536), Ignatius writes, "It often happens that Our Lord moves and forces us interiorly to one action or another by opening up our mind and heart, i.e., speaking inside us without any noise of voices, raising us entirely to His divine love, without our being able to resist His purpose, even if we wanted. The purpose of His that we then adopt is such that of necessity we conform with the commandments, with the precepts of the Church and with obedience to our superiors, and it is full of complete humility because the same divine Spirit is in everything." Letter No. 7, 99-107 from *Saint Ignatius of Loyola: Personal*

We must conclude then that if a discernment of spirits is indeed a way of determining a choice of a way of life (or of any important action in the retreatant’s life) as being consonant with God’s will, the *subjective* experience of consolation (whether *with* or *without* previous cause) *must* include the *objective* criterion of the faith of the Church. In the case of consolation *without* previous cause, if there is indeed any intentional content by way of any thought or image that could be interpreted as some sort of divine manifestation, that consolation would *at least* have to conform with (or not contradict) the faith of the Church for it to even be considered as coming from God, much less any indication of the divine will. In both kinds of consolation, that objective criterion can be none other than the person and life of Jesus Christ as understood and believed by the faith community of the Church. The retreatant must consult not simply his or her own subjective experience of the spirit in making a choice of a way of life or action, but also and *finally* this choice must at the very least be in accord with the life of Christ as understood by the faith community. It is for this reason that Ignatius begins his analysis of making a choice of a way of life in the *Sp Ex* by setting the parameters of such a choice as within the bounds of what is lawful within the Church (*Sp Ex* 170-174, cf. 189) and concludes the *Sp Ex* with an appendix entitled: “Rules for Thinking with the Church” (*Sp Ex* 352-370).

So what can we take away from this analysis of St. Ignatius’s Rules for the Discernment of Spirits in our own choice of a way of life or of some important action? If we want our choice to be right, that is, in accord with God’s will (or at least not opposed to God’s will) for our

true end of praising, reverencing, and serving God, we must meet *two* criteria, one *subjective*, the other *objective*. The subjective criterion is the experience of spiritual consolation as described in the third rule of the first week, the experience of the love of God leading to an increase in faith, hope, and charity, and joy, peace, and quiet in God. If the retreatant is sincerely seeking to find and do the will of God in making a choice of a way of life, the experience of consolation (as the felt love of God) surely must be a *sine qua non* for the rightness of any decision made. Consolation could be understood as constituting a *necessary* condition for knowing that one's choice of life or action is consonant with God's will. Yet however *necessary*, the experience of consolation cannot be a *sufficient* condition for knowing that one's choice of life or action is so consonant with the divine will. If the retreatant and his or her director are to know whether the choice to be made is in accordance with (or at least not opposed to) God's will, that choice must conform to the objective criterion of the life of Christ as believed in by the faith community of the Church. If both these criteria are met, the retreatant and retreat directors can be sure that that choice is *consonant* with God's will for His praise, reverence, and service.

However, as St. Ignatius never *identifies* God's will with an experience of spiritual consolation, these two criteria can be understood only as offering necessary and sufficient conditions for knowing that the contemplated choice is consonant with or at least not opposed to God's will. The actual discovery of God's will for the retreatant in his or her very particular choice of life or in a particularly significant decision in his or her life will involve historical and personal particulars which will ultimately require the exercise of his or her prudential judgment. What can be said, though, is that *whatever* God's will actually is for the retreatant in any particular choice as this has been

discerned by the retreatant, that choice will be consonant with God’s will if it is chosen for the sake of following Christ as understood and approved of in the faith community of the Church from an experience of spiritual consolation in the love of God.

The retreatant can then be understood to be living well (as living in conformity with God’s will) and to be knowing that he or she is doing so (by experiencing the consoling love of God).

## II

### **Laozi: *Dao De Jing* and the Need for Discernment in the Sage’s Experience of Following the *Dao***

Recalling Ignatius’s understanding of the term “discernment” as the act or process of recognizing or perceiving something otherwise difficult or obscure by means of discriminating differences, we have seen how in the *Sp Ex* a discernment of the action of spirits in the inner experience of the retreatant was necessary to make a right choice of a way of life or of some important action—a choice in accord with God’s will. This discernment of spirits required the recognition of two criteria, one subjective (the experience itself of the positive movements of soul in spiritual consolation) and the objective criterion of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as understood by the faith community of the Church. A spiritual, or religious faith discernment as found in the *Sp Ex* requires the retreatant to recognize and fulfill these two criteria if he or she is to live well and know that he or she is doing so in a choice of life or action.

While Laozi’s *DDJ* is not a text written from a religious faith perspective and not usually understood specifically as a guide for decision-making, it can certainly be understood as a practical guide for

the serious student to live well by meditating on the *Dao* (and by joining with the sage in following the *Dao* in his or her life). In this second section of my paper, however, I am going to argue the *DDJ* can also be understood more specifically as a practical guide for decision-making. The evidence for this in the text is found in certain verses where the sage (and, by implication, the student of the *Dao* in following the example of the sage) is presented as engaged in a reflective process that can be understood as a *moral philosophical* discernment of a choice of action. Moreover, this reflective process the sage engages in arguably involves both a subjective and an objective criterion if he is to really (rather than only apparently) follow the *Dao* in that decision. This reflective process the sage engages in in making a decision can be understood as *analogous* to the process of discernment the retreatant engages in as described in the *Sp Ex*. Despite the obvious difference between the *Sp Ex* as an explicitly religious faith document and the *DDJ* as a more secular mystical or philosophical work, I argue that the experiences of both the sage (and by implication the student of the *Dao*) and the retreatant in these two works are comparable enough that their comparison can be mutually enlightening for appreciating both works as practical guides for their practitioners by helping them make use of a reflective decision process for the sake of their living well and knowing that they are doing so. To do this however we must first note the profound similarities between the *Sp Ex* and the *DDJ*.

The first remarkable similarity to be noted in the *Sp Ex* and the *DDJ* is that both works are self-described not as a theoretical investigation of the nature of their respective subjects but rather as *practical* guides, that is, guides as to *how* to live in accord with a special *way*. For St. Ignatius, of course, as a Christian, Jesus Christ is

presumed to be *the* Way to God (cf. John 14:6) and the purpose of making the *Sp Ex* is not to offer a theoretical reflection on that belief but rather to discover God’s will in the important decisions the retreatant as a Christian needs to conform to the life of Jesus Christ as *the* Way in his or her life. For Laozi in the *DDJ*, the nature of the *Dao* 道 as the Way is examined but that examination is offered for the sake of putting the Way into practice. Both works then can be understood as presenting a *practical* ideal to be followed in *action*; a recognizable *way* to live well.

Secondly, in both the *Sp Ex* and the *DDJ* great attention is paid to the inner experience of the practitioner in following that Way. This inner experience involves both positive and negative kinds of emotion where the experience of the positive indicates the way is *rightly* being followed, while the experience of negative kinds of emotion indicates that the way is *not* being followed or at least that something is wrong.

But thirdly, and most importantly, as I shall presently attempt to show, while the inner experience of positive feeling is a *subjective* indication of rightly following the way for both the practitioner of the *Sp Ex* and the *DDJ*, an *objective* criterion needs to be recognized and conformed to if the practitioner is to *know* he or she is *rightly* following the Way.

What is the textual evidence in the *DDJ* for these three claims?

First of all, as many commentators have noted, the *DDJ* has as its practical concern the *Dao* as the Way to be *lived*.<sup>12</sup> The sage or

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<sup>12</sup> This of course is one possible interpretation of the *DDJ*. For some others, cf. I. ROBINET, “The Diverse Interpretations of the *Laozi*” in M. CSIKSZENTMIHALYI – P. IVANHOE, ed., *Religious and Philosophical Aspects of the Laozi* (Albany: State University of New York, 1999), 127-159.

enlightened person (*sheng ren* 聖人) is the one who follows the Way by *practising* that Way. But following the *Dao* for the sage is not a matter of following some practical maxim or abstract rule but is rather an identification in some way with the *Dao* as the mysterious origin or source (*shi* 始) of everything:

*wu ming tian di zhi shi* 無名天地之始 “nameless it is the source of heaven and earth” (1).

*Dao sheng yi; yi sheng er; er sheng san; san sheng wan wu* 道生一, 一生二, 二生三, 三生萬物 “The Way begets the one; one begets two; two begets three; three begets the myriad creatures” (42).<sup>13</sup>

*dao ke dao fei chang dao ming ke ming fei chang ming* 道可道, 非常道, 名可名, 非常名 “The Way that can be spoken of is not the constant way; the name that can be named is not the constant name” (1).

This mysterious nameless source of everything cannot be sensibly perceived:

*shi zhi bu jian ming yue yi ting zhi bu wen ming yue xi* 視之不見, 名曰夷, 聽之不聞, 名曰希 “searched for but unseen, its name is without form; listened to but not heard, its name is silence” (14).

Indeed, it is not a perceptible *thing* among things. Rather, as the *source* of all things, the *Dao transcends* those things and can only be referred to (in comparison with them), as “*no thing*”:<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> English translation of the Chinese text: D.C. LAU, *Lao Tzu Tao Te Ching* (New York: Penguin, 1976). I will use Lau’s translation throughout although I will also rely in part on Philip Ivanhoe’s translation and commentary of the *DDJ* in his *The Daodejing of Laozi* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2003).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. M. CSIKSZENTMIHALYI, “Mysticism and Apophatic Discourse in the *Laozi*,” in M. CSIKSZENTMIHALYI – P. IVANHOE, ed., *Religious and Philosophical Aspects* (cf. nt. 10), 33-58.

*tian xia wan wu sheng yu you you sheng yu wu* 天下萬物生於有，有生於無 “the myriad creatures in the world are born from something, and something from nothing” (40).

The influence of the *Dao* is unique and supremely effective:

*Dao chang wu wei er wu bu wei* 道常無爲而無不爲 “the Way never acts yet nothing is left undone” (37).

An influence that is beneficent, even provident:

*fu wei dao shan dai qie cheng* 夫唯道，善貸且成 “it is the Way alone that excels in bestowing and accomplishing” (41).

*wan wu zuo yan er bu ci sheng er bu you wei er bu shi gong cheng er fu ju* 萬物作焉而不辭，生而不有，爲而不恃，功成而弗居 “the myriad creatures arise from it yet it claims no authority; it gives life yet claims no possession; it benefits them yet exacts no gratitude, it accomplishes its tasks without dwelling on them” (2, cf. 34, 51, 81).

*tian zhi dao bu zheng er shan sheng bu yan er shan ying bu zhao er zi lai chan ran er shan mou tian wang hui hui shu er bu shi* 天之道，不爭而善勝，不言而善應，不召而自來，繹然而善謀，天網恢恢，疏而不失 “the Way of heaven excels in overcoming though it does not contend, in responding though it does not speak, in attracting though it does not summon, in laying plans though it appears slack. The net of heaven is cast wide. Though the mesh is not fine, yet nothing ever slips through” (73).

*tian dao wu qin chang yu shan ren* 天道無親，常與善人 “it is the Way of heaven to show no favoritism. It is forever on the side of the good man” (79).

The *effect* of the *Dao*'s benevolent influence is the ordered *harmony* (*he* 和) of nature:

*Dao sheng yi yi sheng er er sheng san san sheng wan wu wan wu fu yin er bao yang chong qi yi wei he...* 道生一，一生二，二生三，三生萬物，萬物負陰而抱陽，沖氣以爲和 “the Dao produces the one. The one produces the two. The two produces

the three. Three produces the ten thousand things. The ten thousand things carry yin and embrace yang and by blending their qi they attain harmony” (42).

But as the provident source of the harmony of all things, the *Dao* presents itself as a practical reality to be freely *followed or not* and many if not most prefer not to do so:

*da Dao shen yi er min hao jing* 大道甚夷, 而民好徑 “the great way is easy, yet people prefer by-paths” (53).

Indeed, those who *do* follow the *Dao* in practice are few:

*shang shi wen Dao qin er xing zhi zhong shi wen dao ruo cun ruowang xia shi wen dao da xiaozhi bu xiao bu zu yi wei dao* 上士聞道, 勤而行之, 中士聞道, 若存若亡, 下士聞道, 大笑之, 不笑不足以爲道 “when the best student hears about the Way, he practices it assiduously; when the average student hears about the Way, it seems to him one moment there and gone the next; when the worst student hears about the way, he laughs out loud. If he did not laugh, it would be unworthy of the way” (41).

The sage on the other hand is the one who follows the *Dao* and in doing so imitates the *Dao*:

*Tian zhi Dao li er bu hai sheng ren zhi dao wei er bu zheng*, 天之道, 利而不害, 聖人之道, 爲而不爭 “the Way of heaven benefits and does not harm; the Way of the sage is bountiful and does not contend” (81).

For the sage to follow (*cong* 從) the *Dao* is to put the *Dao* into practice (*xing* 行 41) by means of non-action (*wu-wei* 無爲) (37, 38, 43, 47, 48, 63, 64) with no words (*bu yan* 不言), thereby benefiting all people, both good and bad (27, 49) without contending (*bu zheng* 不爭) (66, 68) or exalting himself (72) or expecting recognition from others (77). Moreover, should the sage be called to govern others, he will imitate the *Dao* by effectively promoting peace and contentment among the people (3, 80, cf. 57).

The sage’s following the *Dao* is an inner *experience* of unity (*yi* 一) (22), harmony (*he* 和) (55, 56), peace, or stillness (*jing* 靜) (16, 31, 37), a pleasing state of consciousness which can be summed up by the phrase “knowing sufficiency (or contentment)” (*zhi zu* 知足) (33, cf 44).

On the other hand, the experience of those who *refuse* to follow the *Dao*, is described as troubled (*luan* 亂) (3) by inner confusion (*huo* 惑) (22), and discontent (*bu zhi zu* 不知足) in the desire to *possess* (*yu de* 欲得), (46) what is difficult to obtain (*nan de* 難得) (12, 26).

Now to step back briefly here to consider the significance of these verses for the purpose of this study, we might note that while the *DDJ* may not be an explicitly religious work,<sup>15</sup> the nature of the *Dao* in the text is nevertheless described in recognizably religious terms. The *Dao* is the fundamental reality which both causes and providentially cares for all things, presenting itself as a way to be freely followed by imitation. To this extent at least, the *Dao* and its relation to the sage could be understood as analogous to the figure of Jesus Christ as the Way in relation to the retreatant in the *Sp Ex*. For as the retreatant in meditating on the life, death, and resurrection of Christ in the *Sp Ex* is inspired to follow Christ in making a particular choice of life or action, so the sage can be understood as meditating on the *Dao* in order to imitate the *Dao* in his day-to-day life.

Further, in both the *Sp Ex* and the *DDJ* close attention is given to the inner experience of their respective practitioners in following their respective ways and the positive and negative feelings noted in doing so seem to parallel one another. The sage’s experience of inner unity

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<sup>15</sup> Although cf., Jia, Jinhua, 2009. “Religious Origin of the terms *Dao* and *De* and their signification in the *Laozi*,” The Royal Asiatic Society *JRAS*, Series 3, 19, 4.

and harmony, for instance, appears analogous to the experience of spiritual consolation in the *Sp Ex* and the experience of inner confusion and discontent as described of one who does not follow the *Dao* appears analogous to the experience of what Ignatius would call the spiritual desolation of one who is tepid or negligent in his or her spiritual exercises (cf. *Sp Ex* 322).

But if there is a striking analogy in the description of the inner experience of the Daoist sage and the retreatant in the *Sp Ex*, there is certainly one clear difference between them. In the *Sp Ex* the experience of positive emotions in spiritual consolation in contemplating a choice of life or action does *not* by itself indicate that the choice the retreatant is considering is in accord with God's will, for, as we have seen, spiritual consolation can be either true (as caused by God or good spirits) in leading the person according to God's will or false (as caused by the evil spirit) in leading the retreatant away from God's will. And, as we have noted previously, even *true* consolation for Ignatius cannot in itself be identified as doing God's will. This ambiguity in the retreatant's subjective experience of spiritual consolation leads to the recognition that a spiritual discernment is required which takes as its objective criterion the conformity of the retreatant's chosen life or action with the life and action of Christ as understood by the normative faith of the Church. If the experience of spiritual consolation is really an indication of divine approval in some way, any choice of action must be in conformity with the objective criterion of faith. But can a parallel for this need for an objective criterion in the *Sp Ex* be found in the sage's experience in the *DDJ*? For the sage's experience of inner peace in unity and harmony appears to need *no* criterion *outside* the experience itself as indicating that he is following the *Dao*. The sage, in other words, appears to need no

reflective process, no type of discernment as to whether he is following the *Dao* or not beyond the awareness of his own experience of the *Dao*. In other words, for the sage to experience inner peace and harmony is to be following the *Dao*.

If this is so, is there any evidence in the text of the *DDJ* to suggest that there may be certain situations in which the sage may find that his experience of inner peace and harmony would *not* in itself be *sufficient* to determine if he were following the *Dao*? If there were any such situations, the sage would then appear to need a criterion *beyond* that of his habitual subjective experience of contentment and inner harmony to discern if he were really (rather than only apparently) following the *Dao*. In the following, I cite some verses in the *DDJ* that suggest the sage *does* need such an objective criterion.

The first piece of textual evidence in this regard can be found in a verse from chapter 31 where the sage is described as encountering situation in which he must make a practical decision on how to respond to situations of violence and war. In this verse, the sage first recognizes that weapons and their use are not open to a follower of the *Dao*:

*Fu jia bing zhe bu xiang zhi qi wu huo wu zhi gu you dao zhe bu chu* 夫佳兵者，不祥之器物或惡之，故有道者不處 “Fine weapons are inauspicious, all find them repulsive and so one who has the Way does not use them” (31).

Weapons are instruments of violence and as violence is contrary to the nature of the *Dao*, the sage naturally does not use them. Yet the following part of the verse suggests that at times the taking up of arms is necessary and when this is so, arms must be taken up even if it means killing human beings:

*bu de yi er yong zhi tian dan wei shang sheng er bu mei er mei zhi zhe shi le sha ren* 不得已而用之，恬淡爲上，勝而不美，而美之者，是樂殺人 “when one is compelled to use them [arms],

it is best to do so without relish, for there is no glory in victory, and to glorify it despite this is to exult in the killing of men” (31).

When, or in which particular situation or situations would the sage feel compelled to take up arms? The text here does not explain and a similar question arises in a verse from chapter 30 where military campaigns are criticized:

*Shi zhi suo chu jing ji sheng yan da jun zhi hou bi you xiong nian* 師之所處，荊棘生焉。大軍之後，必有凶年 “where troops have encamped there will brambles grow; in the wake of a mighty army bad harvests follow without fail”.

Despite the moral problematic of a military campaign, the sage may find himself in the midst of such a campaign where:

*shan zhe guo er yi bu gan yi qu qiang guo er wu jin guo er wu fa* 善者果而已，不敢以取強，果而勿矜，果而勿伐 “one who is good aims only at bringing a campaign to a conclusion and dares not intimidate. One brings it to a conclusion but does not boast” (30).

In these two verses, the sage appears to find himself faced with a situation which would appear to challenge him in his commitment to following the *Dao*. Presumably in such a situation the sage must (somehow) respond as one who habitually follows the *Dao*. Verse 31 implies that the sage recognizes that the situation compels him to take up arms. But surely such recognition on his part presupposes an evaluation of the situation and a choice to take up arms. By what criterion or criteria could the sage use to make such a choice? His habitual experience of inner peace and harmony, or “knowing contentment” by itself would seem to offer no rationale for choosing to act in one way or another—or not to act at all. But these verses imply that the sage does indeed choose to take up arms *and* that his choice is in conformity with the *Dao*.

In a verse from chapter 74 the sage appears to be called on to make another decision, this time with regard to the administration of punishment:

*chang you si sha zhe sha fu dai si sha zhe sha shi wei dai da jiang zhuo fu dai da jiang zhuo zhe xi you bu shang qi shou yi*  
常有司殺者殺，夫代司殺者殺，是調代大匠斲 夫代大匠斲者，希有不傷其手矣 “there is a regular executioner whose charge it is to kill. To kill on behalf of the executioner is what is described as chopping wood on behalf of the master carpenter. In chopping wood on behalf of the master carpenter, there are few who escape hurting their own hands instead”.

This passage has puzzled many commentators.<sup>16</sup> Is the sage being called on to decide whether human beings or God alone can kill, and if the former, who is authorized to do the killing? Such a decision presupposes having to make a choice of action between alternatives and the passage implies that there is a right and a wrong way to respond. As in verses taken from chapters 30 and 31 where the sage appeared to be called on to make a decision to take up arms or not, this passage describes another situation in which the sage must decide how to respond. The verse clearly implies that in this situation there is a *right* way to respond, that is, by refraining to kill on behalf of the executioner. But to respond in this (the right way) rather than in the wrong way (or ways) would (again) seem to require of the sage something more than his habitual experience of inner peace and harmony, for to rely solely on that inner experience of peace would appear to justify (or not) *any* or *no* response at all!

Finally, in a verse from chapter 79 the sage appears to be confronted with another difficult situation calling for evaluation of a

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. A. SABBADINI, ed., *Lao Tzu Tao Te Ching: Una guida all'interpretazione del libro fondamentale del taoismo*, Milano 2017, 550-554.

complicated situation and a decision to respond in one way *rather* than another. In this chapter the sage is presented with a decision that involves the administration of justice between parties so as to ensure harmony between them:

*He da yuan bi you yu yuan an ke yi wei shan shi yi sheng ren zhi zuo qi er bu ze yu ren you de si qi wu de si che*, 和大怨，必有餘怨，安可以爲善，是以聖人執左契，而不責於人，有德司契，無德司徹 “When peace is made between great enemies some enmity is bound to remain un-dispelled. How can this be considered perfect? Therefore the sage takes the left hand tally but exacts no payment from the people. The man of virtue takes charge of the tally; the man of no virtue takes charge of exaction.”

Here the sage is (yet again) presented with an *option*: *either* to take the left hand tally, the tally of the creditor who is *owed* exaction *or* to take the right hand tally, the tally of the debtor who *owes* the exaction. But if he would bring about harmonious reconciliation between enemies, the sage sees that the left hand tally *rather than* the right hand tally must be taken. He as creditor (to whom is owed the exaction) has the rightful authority to exact or refrain from exacting payment from the people as his debtors. He understands that the *right* (as opposed to a *wrong*) way to respond to this situation is to take the left hand tally as this will enable him to refrain from demanding rightful exaction from the people as his debtors and so contribute to reconciliation among the people. This decision of the sage to take the left hand tally *rather* than the right for the sake of a harmonious reconciliation would appear to require consideration of a criterion beyond his own habitual inner peace in order to discern what the right (vs. less good or even wrong) response would be.

If the sage is one who habitually acts in accord with the *Dao*, we see from the above verses in the *DDJ* that there are situations where the

sage seems to require some criterion beyond his own habitual peace and inner harmony, if he is to respond in the *right* way—that is, a response that is *really* in accord with the *Dao*. Does the *DDJ* provide evidence of a criterion the sage can appeal to above and beyond his own inner (subjective) experience to decide *rightly* rather than wrongly in any given situation?

The textual evidence for such a criterion in the *DDJ* appears to be the nature of the *Dao* itself.

*Dao sheng yi yi sheng er er sheng san san sheng wan wu wan wu fu yin er bao yang chong qi yi wei he* 道生一，一生二，二生三，三生萬物，萬物負陰而抱陽，沖氣以為和 “The way begets the one; the one produces two; two produces three. Three produces the myriad creatures. The myriad creatures shoulder yin and embrace yang, and by blending these qi they attain harmony”<sup>17</sup> (42).

The *Dao* is the source of real order and harmony. Since the sage wishes to follow the *Dao* in his life, the nature of the *Dao* as the source of all and whose providential influence effects order and harmony in nature should be *normative* for him in his evaluation of situations in which he must decide to act and to act in one way or another.<sup>18</sup> And since the *Dao*, by effecting the real order and harmony in nature effects the order and harmony in human society, the sage in following the *Dao* would act in accordance with the *Dao* so as to promote the real order

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<sup>17</sup> Here I use Ivanhoe’s translation of the line in *The Daodejing of Laozi* (cf. nt. 11), 45.

<sup>18</sup> This practical maxim of the sage does not involve illicitly deriving an “ought” from an “is” by deducing a practical conclusion from a theoretical premise. Rather, by first desiring to follow the *Dao* as his good and practical goal, the sage’s choice of action in conformity with that goal is a piece of practical reasoning through and through, as cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1143a31-5.

and harmony of nature and of his society. This arguably is the objective criterion the sage needs in his choice of action in conformity with the *Dao*.

Now in some verses of the *DDJ* the sage is called on to govern the people by following the *Dao* in *non-action*:

*Wo wu wei er min zi hua wo hao jing er min zi zheng wo wu shi er min zi fu wo wu yu er min zi pu* 我無爲而民自化, 我好靜而民自正, 我無事而民自富, 我無欲而民自樸 (*the sage says*) “I take no action and the people are transformed of themselves; I prefer stillness and the people are rectified by themselves; I act without busyness and yet the people will prosper by themselves; I am free of desire and the people of themselves become simple like the uncarved block” (57).

*Sheng ren zhi zhi xu qi xin shi qi fu ruo qi zhi qiang qi gu chang shi min wu zhi wu yu shi fu zhi zhe bu gan wei ye wei wu wei ze wu bu zhi* 聖人之治, 虛其心, 實其腹, 弱其志, 強其骨, 常使民無知無欲, 使夫智者不敢爲也, 爲無爲, 則無不治 “in governing the people the sage keeps them free of desire and satisfies their needs, dampens their hearts and strengthens their physique. Constantly keeps the people without cunning and without desire, ensures that the clever never dare to act. In taking no action, order prevails” (3).

The result of such non-action is to:

*Sui you jia bing wu suo chen zhi shi ren fu jie sheng er yong zhi gan qi shi mei qi fu an qi ju le qi su lin guo xiang wang ji quan zhi sheng xiang wen min zhi lao si, bu xiang wang lai* 雖有甲兵, 無所陳之, 使人復結繩而用之, 甘其食, 美其服, 安其居, 樂其俗, 隣國相望, 鷄犬之聲相聞, 民至老死不相往來 “ensure that even though the people have tools for war for a troop or battalion they will not use them. Let the people return to knotting cord and use them as well so that they find relish in their food and beauty in their clothes, will be content in their abode and happy in the way they live. Neighboring communities may see each together, roosters and dog’s sounds can mutually be heard, people reach old age and death, yet without having gone to visit each other” (80).

The *Dao* is supremely effective in ordering and harmonizing states of affairs by this mysterious non-action. In these verses, the sage in understanding the nature of the *Dao* follows by non-action, thereby imitating the *Dao* as the source of universal natural harmony as well as harmony within human society. In so doing (or not doing) the sage apparently allows the people simply to be in well-being. Does this mean that in situations of governance, the sage simply assumes a quietist attitude by not acting at all thereby allowing the *Dao* to act (by not acting) in allowing the people simply to be? A way of interpreting the sage’s apparent quietism in governing the people that would be consonant with our understanding of the necessity of the sage’s choice of action in the previous verses would be to interpret the sage here as *choosing to act by not acting* in conformity with his understanding the nature of the *Dao*. On this interpretation, his is not an absolute quietism here but a rightly reasoned response to a given situation.

What I am suggesting then is that the sage as the wise man understands the nature of the *Dao*, and this *knowledge* of the nature of the *Dao* as a providential source and provider of all things provides him with an objective *moral* reason for responding in the morally *right* way to each and every situation he finds himself in so that he would be acting (or better not-acting) in imitation of the *Dao*. And since there is a radical difference between order and disorder, harmony and disharmony, right and wrong, the sage must respond to each situation, as it were, *mindfully* with the *knowledge* of the nature of the *Dao* (and the *motivation* to act as the *Dao* acts). His awareness of the nature and (non) activity of the *Dao*, then gives the sage the objective criterion to *morally discern* how to respond *rightly* (as in accordance with the *Dao*) in any given situation. Sometimes, for instance, he will discern that following the *Dao* will involve entering (or not entering) a military

campaign, if so entering would promote (or not) an overall harmony in nature and society (more so than another possible choice). Other times he will be able to discern that following the non-action of the *Dao* in a particular situation is rather to make a decision about whether, and if so, who, is to administer what kind of punishment that will promote natural and civic harmony.<sup>19</sup> These decisions require that the sage (or those who aspire to live like the sage) must rely not only on the subjective criterion of an habitual inner experience of peace and harmony, but on an evaluation of the given situation in the light of the objective criterion of the *Dao* as the source and provider of peace and harmony. This objective criterion as provided by the text of the *DDJ* will then have its public criterion in whether or not the choice of the sage in each situation actually does promote peace and harmony in nature and in his community.

The sage, then, can be understood to be living well (as acting in conformity with the nature of the *Dao*) and to be knowing that he is doing so (in his experience of peace and contentment).

We may conclude then that as the retreatant in the *Sp Ex* must discern and choose what life or what action is in real conformity with Jesus Christ, so in an analogous way the sage in the *DDJ* makes a *moral* discernment in choosing to live in conformity with the *Dao* in each of the many and differing situations in which he finds himself. And as the retreatant is able to know the rightness of a decision according to a subjective criterion of spiritual consolation and the objective criterion of the life of Jesus Christ according to Church teaching, so the sage in making any decision to follow the *Dao* makes

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<sup>19</sup> Daoist non-activity cannot (rightly) be understood as any form of quietism unconcerned with, or in disregard of morality.

use of a subjective criterion of inner peace and harmony (knowing contentment), as well as a consideration of the nature of the *Dao* as source and provider of harmony in nature and society—a harmony which he must conform to and promote. If then the *Sp Ex* is understood as a practical religious faith manual to help a person make the right decision, that is, a decision in conformity with the life of Jesus Christ, the *DDJ* can also be understood as a practical manual of reflective moral reasoning in helping the student of the *Dao* follow the *Dao* in his or her life. Both works in their own way help their practitioners live well and know that they are doing so by providing a reflective procedure in decision-making which requires following both a subjective and an objective criterion. Of course this reflective procedure differs as the one is rooted in religious faith while the other is rooted in a particular philosophical or moral understanding of the universe, but the criteria involved in such a process appear to be remarkably analogous.

### SUMMARY

Living well and knowing that one is doing so involve not only making the right choices in life but knowing that those choices are right. In this paper I have looked at both St. Ignatius of Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises* and Laozi’s *Dao De Jing* as different examples of practical guides in making use of a reflective process which aids in the decision to act rightly rather than wrongly in one’s choice of life or actions. I have first examined the *Spiritual Exercises* as such a practical guide and then examined the *Dao De Jing* as a practical guide in an analogous way. I have argued that just as in the *Spiritual Exercises*, living well and knowing one is doing so is to be combined in a choice

of life or action which involves respecting the subjective criterion of the experience of spiritual consolation with the objective criterion of that life or action in a verifiable conformity with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ in the faith understanding of the Church, so in the *Dao De Jing* living well and knowing one is doing so is to be combined in the choices of action of the sage (or anyone who wants to be a sage), choices which in a comparable way involve a recognition and fulfillment of two criteria: a subjective criterion of inner peace and harmony in following the *Dao* and the objective criterion of those choices promoting peace and harmony in nature and in the social community.

So what can we take away from this interpretation of the *Spiritual Exercises* and the *Dao De Jing*? We learn from the former that living well and knowing one is doing so is living in conformity with God's will as manifest in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ with the inner experience of spiritual consolation while for the latter, living well consists in following the *Dao* in the promotion of a publically verifiable social harmony, and knowing that one is doing so is in the experience of inner peace and contentment. And in both works we learn that while the subjective experience of consolation or inner contentment is a necessary condition for a right decision, this subjective experience must involve an objective, or self-transcending criterion, a criterion that is (at least in principle) open to a communal evaluation (in the one case in the judgment of the Church, in the other, in a communally recognized sense of social and natural harmony).

In summary, then, both the retreatant and the sage in the important decisions in life as guided by their use respectively of the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius and the *Dao De Jing* of Laozi can be understood to be living well and knowing that they are doing so.

**[摘要]** 活得有德性，且知道自己是這樣生活，不僅涉及在生活中做出正確的選擇，還要知道這些選擇是正確的。這需要辨別一個人的感覺信念是否符合客觀的、可檢驗的自我超越標準。在這篇文章中，我檢視了聖依納爵·羅耀拉的《神操》和老子的《道德經》，作為世界著名的生活實踐指南，即如何認知活得好、有德性。我認為，就像在《神操》中，活得有德性，並知道自己是這樣做，涉及到主觀的神慰的體驗和客觀標準，即選擇的生活方式或行為是否符合教會團體所理解的耶穌基督的生活。同樣，在《道德經》中，活得有德性，並知道自己是如此生活，這要求聖人不僅認識到他內心平靜與和諧的體驗是一個準則，而且符合真實的（對比表面的）大自然的和諧，以及促進人類社會和諧的客觀標準。我們從這兩部作品中了解到，如果我們要活得有德性，並知道自己是這樣生活，我們需要的辨別不僅基於自我辯解（神慰或內心的平靜與和諧）的經驗，而且也基於客觀或自我超越標準。

**關鍵詞：**分辨，神慰，神枯，主觀及客觀標準