ARISTOTELIAN FRIENDSHIP AND IGNATIAN COMPANIONSHIP

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This is how you ascertain the truth of spiritual experience: it propels you back toward the world and other people, and not simply more deeply within yourself.[1]

This essay aims to construct a relationship between two accounts of friendship, one with its source in ancient Greece and the other with roots in 16th century Spain. The first account is Aristotle's famous discussion of friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, in which he argues that friendship is an essential part of a flourishing human life. The second account is the less well-known but still highly influential picture of companionship articulated and lived out by St. Ignatius of Loyola. Ignatius was the founder of the Society of Jesus (better known as the Jesuits), the original members of which are commonly called the companions. As part of their efforts to form a new religious community, Ignatius and his companions created a set of structures and practices to govern the lives of the Jesuits as individuals and as members of an order. Those structures and practices formed the basis of a distinctive spirituality, with companionship as a central aspect of it.

On the surface, it may seem as though Aristotelian friendship and Ignatian companionship have little in common, given that the accounts were developed in such different contexts. And yet, there are similarities well worth exploring. Notably, both Aristotle and Ignatius see friendship as an essential part of the human good. They also both emphasize the role

[1] Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss: Meditations of a Modern Believer* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2013), 72.

of ongoing shared activity and experience in the formation and sustenance of such relationships. My interest in these two accounts, however, is not purely historical or even comparative. Rather, I will argue that exploration of these accounts can help illuminate the good of friendship as we experience it in the current age. In particular, Aristotle and Ignatius provide us with important insights into the challenges of friendship in times of suffering and grief. Aristotle and Ignatius are surely right that we need friends with whom to walk through our shared human lives, with all their characteristic joys and tragedies. I hope to show that their accounts can help us in our efforts to cultivate and sustain such friendships.

The essay has three parts. In Part I, I set out Aristotle's account of friendship, focusing especially on his claims about shared activity in friendship and the role that friends play in times of good and bad fortune. For Aristotle, friends are an essential component of a flourishing human life; we cannot live well without friends. True friends are goods for each other in a variety of ways. Aristotle argued that friends must live together and participate in joint activities as a way of cultivating virtue and doing fine actions. In this kind of closely shared life, friends inevitably end up participating in each other's triumphs and tragedies. I will suggest that even in our dramatically different modern context, Aristotle's account of friendship still has important lessons for how we should think about and undertake the project of sharing in a friend's suffering.

In Part II, I turn to companionship as it appears in both the writings of St. Ignatius and his own life. Although Ignatius is considered the official founder of the Society of Jesus, he did not work alone. Indeed, his companions played a crucial role in developing this novel idea of community and articulating the distinctive spirituality that undergirds it. The early Jesuits had a common aim, but at the outset they had little idea what form that aim would take or what would

be needed in order to accomplish it. Ignatius and his companions were spread out across multiple countries and eventually continents, and yet they nevertheless sought to live out a shared spiritual mission. These distinctive (and perhaps surprisingly modern) features of 16th century Ignatian companionship are, I suggest, useful in thinking about friendship as we experience it today. Moreover, Ignatius was well aware of the extent to which we are prone to what he referred to as times of spiritual desolation—interior experiences that take us away from God and subsequently produce a sense of abandonment, loss, and separation. Ignatian spirituality takes it as a given that human life often follows a very rocky and difficult path. The spiritual practices of the Ignatian tradition are designed to help us cultivate the dispositions and habits necessary to sustain us through those experiences of grief, agony, and isolation. Those same dispositions and habits, I will suggest, also enable us to sustain our friends and be good companions during times of both joy and despair.

In Part III, I will draw these two accounts together and consider what friendship on this Aristotelian-Ignatian model might look like today. Here I will focus on the ways in which friends are companions to each other during the despair and isolation occasioned by serious illness, trauma, and death. Both Aristotle and Ignatius have important insights into the value and function of friendship in these moments, insights that can help us think through the contemporary version of the same problem. How can we be good friends and companions to each other in the darkest times of our lives? How might shared spiritual practices and experiences facilitate this kind of companionship? Taken together, the accounts of Aristotle and Ignatius provide a useful perspective from which to answer these questions.

PART I

Further, it is most necessary for our life. For no one would choose to live without friends even if he had all the other goods.[2]

So says Aristotle in his most famous and influential ethical work, the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Indeed, two of the ten books of the *Ethics* are devoted to the topic of friendship, which perhaps is some indication of just how seriously Aristotle took the subject. In Book I of the *Ethics*, Aristotle gives an account of the best, most *eudaimon* life for human beings. That life is one that includes both virtuous activity and external goods. Perhaps the most important of those external goods is friendship. Friendship, for Aristotle, is good in its own right, but it is also good insofar as our friends (at least, friends of the right kind) help us become more virtuous. We cannot flourish in the absence of such friends.

Aristotle's conviction on this point is due in part to his belief that human beings are by nature social creatures. We do not live by ourselves; we live in communities with others. My good as an individual is, for better or for worse, tied up with the good of the others with whom I share my life. If an account of happiness is to meet his criterion for self-sufficiency, meaning that it is lacking in nothing, it must incorporate the fact that my happiness is tied to the fortunes of my friends. As he puts it in I.7, "what we count as self-sufficient is not what suffices for a solitary person, living an isolated life, but what suffices also for parents, children, wife, and, in general, for friends and fellow citizens, since a human being is a naturally political animal."[3]

The implication of this claim is that it makes each person's happiness vulnerable to luck in ways that other accounts of happiness, most notably the Socratic/Platonic account, do not. According to Socrates, a just person with a harmonious soul could be happy even while being

[2] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* trans. Terence Irwin, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999), 1155a5-6.
[3] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* 1097b9-12.

stretched on the torture rack. Aristotle appears to find this implausible. Without disagreeing that virtue is the substantial contributor to our happiness (thereby providing happiness with the stability he thinks it needs), he nevertheless expresses some skepticism about the idea that a life of torture could be lacking in nothing. The case he offers as support for this view is that of Priam, the ill-fated king of Troy.[4] Clearly Priam's life would have been better if he had not suffered the losses of his family and his kingdom. His seemingly charmed life took a disastrous turn right before its end. No amount of virtue could bring his children back from the dead or recover what Troy had lost. Priam's own virtue may have helped him cope better with his devastating circumstances than a less virtuous person could have managed to do; still, it is impossible to regard him as anything other than a tragic figure in virtue of his losses.

We need friends because we are fundamentally social, but Aristotle clearly regards some friendships as more worth having than others. He distinguishes among friendships of utility, friendships of pleasure, and friendships of character, or complete friendships. Although Aristotle describes all of them as forms of friendship, it is complete friendship that occupies his attention and that plays a crucial role in his theory. Complete friendships are characterized by the fact that the friends seek not only their own good, but the good of each other as well, and for that other's own sake. In this way, they become goods for each other. As he puts it in VIII. 6: "Moreover, in loving their friend they love what is good for themselves; for when a good person becomes a friend he becomes a good for his friend."[5]

For Aristotle, there are multiple senses in which a complete friend is a good for her friend. We enjoy the presence of our friends, but that enjoyment is not what is distinctive about

[4] There are scholarly debates over how to interpret Aristotle's use of happy (*eudaimon*) versus blessed (*makarion*) in these passages. It's plausible to interpret him as saying that Priam could be considered happy, but not blessed. On this, see Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge University Press, 1986), 327-336.
[5] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* 1157b34-35.

complete friendship. A complete friend takes up the good of her friend as something that is good in its own right, or for its own sake. I want my friend's life to go well not because it means she will be in a better position to help me or because it will make her more fun to be around. I want her life to go well for *her* sake. But Aristotle's conception of how we are related to our friends adds a twist to this. For my friend's good is not hers alone; it is also mine. What it means to be a friend is to take up her good as part of my own. When she does well, I do well. When she suffers, I suffer too.[6]

Crucially, for Aristotle, caring about my friend's good requires correct judgment about that good. It is her genuine good that matters, and I can be a complete friend only if I am capable of recognizing and promoting what is genuinely good for her. This is part of the reason why Aristotle thought that complete friendship requires virtue, or at least a commitment to virtue. A vicious person is not capable of being a good for another in the relevant way. This is not simply because vicious people are too selfish to care about another person's good for its own sake, in the way that complete friends do. It is also because a vicious person does not have the capacity to recognize or promote someone's good in the first place.

Aristotle thinks that it is impossible to flourish without virtue. Because friends naturally want each other to flourish, this implies that one of the central tasks of friendship is to help each other become more virtuous. On Aristotle's view, we do this primarily by way of shared activities and projects, through which friends cultivate and express virtue together. The centrality of shared activities in the cultivation of virtue is a primary reason why Aristotle insists that

[6] Aristotle's theory is often criticized for being egoistic, insofar as the reasons we have to be virtuous, or pursue friendships, all seem to come back to our own flourishing in some way. This is a very large issue, and I cannot do justice to it here. I will just say that any sense in which Aristotle's theory is egoistic is a very thin sense indeed. Egoism, as we normally think of it, reduces all other concerns to how they impact me. Aristotle's theory, by contrast, expands my own concerns to include the concerns of my family, friends, and community.

friends must live together. It is in the context of that shared life that they develop the habits and practices of virtue, and act in ways that exemplify it. The *eudaimon* life is one conducted together with other people.

Aristotle is attentive to the fact that these shared activities change over the course of human life, in response to alterations in ourselves and our circumstances. Friends are always goods for each other, but the way in which they are goods for each other does not remain static:

> Moreover, the young need friends to keep them from error. The old need friends to care for them and support the actions that fail because of weakness. And those in their prime need friends to do fine actions; for 'when two go together…' they are more capable of understanding and action.[7]

During youth, the primary way in which my friend can be a good for me is to prevent me from making mistakes, the kind of mistakes that young people without fully developed practical wisdom are likely to commit. Although Aristotle isn't specific about the kind of error he has in mind, we can imagine from our own experiences the many ways in which friends might help correct the judgments and decisions of each other. If I tend toward recklessness, my more cautious friend may keep me from making dangerous mistakes in my judgments about risk. If instead I am prone to being overcome by fear, my friend may be useful in preventing me from talking myself out of actions that I really should do. Friends serve as crucial correctives to our particular vices and moral failings, and we do the same for them. Together we shape our understanding of what is worthwhile, and we encourage each other in pursuit of what we gradually recognize to be good.

This mutual support in becoming virtuous is perhaps the most important way in which friends are goods for each other. Aristotle's second claim, however, suggests that there is also value simply in doing virtuous actions with our friends. This is both because those actions are

[7] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* 1155a12-15

noble in themselves and also because such shared actions enable us to extend the scope of our own individual agency. Friends working together can achieve far more than each could achieve on his or her own, as Aristotle's remarks about those in their prime suggest. Moreover, older people need friends to help carry out actions that they themselves no longer have the strength to do. Friends enable me to act virtuously in ways I could not do by myself, and I do the same for them. In all these different ways, friends reinforce and extend each other's moral capacities.

The importance Aristotle assigns to common experiences and activities explains why he also insists that friends must live together for, as he says, "nothing is as proper to friends as living together."[8] For Aristotle, people who do not live together, however much they wish each other well, cannot be complete friends because there is no way for them to engage in those all-important shared activities. Now, of course, we have other ways of maintaining relationships with friends over distance, but the point about the importance of common experiences still holds. Any Aristotelian account of friendship must provide avenues through which friends can share in each other's lives and experiences in the relevant ways. If they are to be goods for each other, friends who do not live together must still be able to do things together in a way robust enough to count as sharing their lives. Interestingly, Ignatius did not seem to see great distance as an impediment to companionship. We will return to this in Part II.

Given that complete friendship requires a deep entrenchment in each other's lives, it is not surprising that Aristotle makes a point of saying that no one person can have many of them. It takes time and energy to cultivate and sustain a complete friendship, and they do not develop immediately. We must know our friends well and come to love them well enough to want their good for its own sake. This latter point is important, because for Aristotle, complete friendships

[8] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* 1157b20

are not just large time commitments. They are also large emotional commitments. Moreover, they are emotional commitments of a distinctive sort. As we have seen, in a complete friendship, my friend's good becomes my own good. It is not simply that I want my friend's life to go well; rather, it is that my friend's life going well is a condition of my own life going well. To be a friend to someone is to bind one's fate to that person. The joys and tragedies of my friend's life are also the joys and tragedies of my own life. This has profound consequences for our day-to-day lives, leaving open the potential for what we might describe as a kind of emotional whiplash. Aristotle notes: "It also becomes difficult for many to share one another's enjoyments and distresses as their own, since you are quite likely to find yourself sharing one friend's pleasure and another friend's grief at the same time."[9] This is, of course, psychologically difficult for the individual, but it is also a challenge for the friendship itself. If I am to be a good for my friend, I must be able and willing to take up the right place in her life, even when that is a very difficult place to be.

Aristotle's brief discussion of friendship in times of trouble points to some of the complexities of friendship in such circumstances. In IX.11, he notes that the presence of friends reduces our burdens, though the mechanism through which this happens is unclear:

> The very presence of friends is also pleasant, in ill fortune as well as good fortune; for we have our pain lightened when our friends share our distress. Indeed, that is why one might be puzzled about whether they take a part of it from us, as though helping us to lift a weight, or, alternatively, their presence is pleasant and our awareness that they share our distress makes the pain smaller.[10]

Aristotle sets the puzzle aside, as he is more interested in noting the phenomenon itself. The presence of friends in times of ill fortune reduces our suffering; that much is clear. This,

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[9] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* 1171a6-9. This problem is nicely illustrated by the sometimes jarring nature of a Facebook feed, with posts about tragedies mixed in with cat videos.

[10] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* 1171a29-34.

however, produces a practical problem for friendship that Aristotle goes on to describe. Complete friends do not want to cause each other pain. They also seek to unburden each other wherever possible. Someone in the midst of a tragedy will want to spare her friends from suffering on her behalf; she will not want them to feel her pain alongside her. She may even try to hide her troubles. And yet, her friend will want to know about her suffering and ameliorate it in any way possible. Although Aristotle puts his point in unfortunately sexist terms, his main observation resonates with common experience. Concern for our friends leads us to want to shield them from the painful turns in our lives. At the same time, their concern for us leads them to seek us out in our pain and share in our burdens.

This may seem inconsistent, but Aristotle is not aiming to write a how-to manual for friendship. We should not expect friendship in complex situations to be straightforward or simple. On Aristotle's view, friendship is a source of both pain and relief from pain. My own suffering is alleviated by the presence of my friends, but it is increased by their suffering. We cannot know in advance how this will work out over the course of a lifetime, dependent as it is on circumstance and fortune. The important point to note is this: the claim that a complete friendship is a good for me does not rule out the possibility that it may put me into very painful circumstances, circumstances I would not otherwise be in.

It is impossible to understand how friendship, taken this way, could contribute to our happiness unless we take seriously the idea that happiness should be understood in the ancient sense of flourishing, rather than in the more modern sense of lengthy periods of warm, fuzzy feelings about the world. What makes my life go better in the first sense may make it go worse in the second sense. This is perhaps most evident when it comes to the virtue of courage. A virtuously courageous person may find herself having to make sacrifices that a less courageous

person would not. Aristotle's position is that a courageous person who gives up her life for a noble cause is both losing something genuinely important *and* at the same time living well. In other words, a flourishing human life is not necessarily a pleasant human life.

For Aristotle, friendship always makes our lives better, but it will not always make our lives smoother or more pleasant. The shared activities of friendship are not always enjoyable ones; indeed, many of them are marked by anxiety and pain. Spending time together in an oncologist's waiting room is not what we ordinarily think of when we think of friends getting together. But it is as much a part of the shared life of friends as going to the movies. Friendship can and often does require accompanying our friends into places of deep despair and grief. This is, of course, emotionally draining. But the demands of Aristotelian friendship are not simply demands on my time or emotional energy. They are demands on the deepest part of myself. Moreover, living up to these demands well requires virtue. Virtue, for Aristotle, is an internal state that finds expression in our external choices, attitudes, and actions. In order to be a good friend in times of despair, I must be in the right state myself. I suggest that Ignatian spirituality has much to offer when it comes to describing that state and helping us learn to cultivate it.

PART II

I call desolation all the contrary of the third rule, such as darkness of soul, disturbance in it, movement of things low and earthly, the unquiet of different agitations and temptations, moving to want of confidence, without hope, without love, when one finds oneself all lazy, tepid, sad, and as if separated from his Creator and Lord.[11]

The legacy of St. Ignatius is characterized by his unique and enduring perspective on human spiritual experience, in both its interior and its exterior manifestations. The focus of Ignatian spirituality is on the ways in which we experience God's presence and absence in our lives and in the world. But Ignatian spiritual practice is not something conducted in isolation from other people. Companionship is a central component of it, and indeed, an essential part of Ignatius's own life and work. His vision of companionship is expressed, in different ways, in his two most influential books—the *Spiritual Exercises* and the *Constitutions*. The *Spiritual Exercises* provide a framework for individual spiritual development and practice, whereas the *Constitutions* are the foundational governing documents for the new society he was in the process of forming. Both works express his view that even individual spiritual formation takes place within a community. Spiritual formation, like the cultivation of Aristotelian virtue, aims to produce an inner state with an outward focus. And like Aristotelian virtue, that inner state is cultivated, sustained, and expressed through the common activities and practices of companions sharing their lives with each other.

The foundation of Ignatian spirituality is a set of loosely structured exercises, originally spelled out by Ignatius in the *Spiritual Exercises* and subsequently modified in various ways. That practice of formation, referred to in Ignatian circles as the Exercises, is organized as a four "week" retreat of prayer, reading, and reflection. A person making the Exercises works with a

[11] St. Ignatius of Loyola, "Rules for Perceiving and Knowing in Some Manner the Different Movements which are Caused in the Soul," *The Spiritual Exercises* (Acheron Press, 2012).

spiritual director, who serves as a companion and guide to the process. As we will see, this relationship between the retreatant and the spiritual director provides useful insight into the Ignatian vision of companionship. The *Constitutions,* which were written six years after the publication of the *Spiritual Exercises*, set out Ignatius's vision for his fledgling Society of Jesus. The primary aim of the *Constitutions* is to spell out how such a community should be formed and administered so as to foster the spiritual growth and work of its members. Ignatius recognized that even seemingly minor details were essential to the ability of the new Jesuits to live and work in harmony. It sets out a collaborative model for a community seeking to live out a shared mission, but remaining responsive to the every-changing needs of its members and the broader community. Together, the *Spiritual Exercises* and the *Constitutions* illuminate the spiritual life that Ignatius sought for himself and his companions. They also make apparent the unusually adaptive and open structure of the Society itself and its understanding of its own work in the world. It is that adaptiveness and openness characteristics of the Ignatian approach to companionship that makes it such a useful source of insight about friendship in difficult circumstances.

Ignatius was born into a privileged family and led what can only be described as an eventful and exciting life, but he also faced his share of challenges and difficulties. A soldier in his younger days, he was badly injured in battle and suffered through a prolonged and arduous recovery. During that time period, he underwent the spiritual awakening that eventually led him to form the Jesuit order. Importantly, his conversion did not present him with any sort of fully articulated plan of action. Indeed, he had little idea about what exactly he was called to do, other than to "help souls," as he was fond of saying. The road toward the Society of Jesus was circuitous, and involved what we might describe as some wrong turns. What Ignatius did have

was confidence that he was doing God's will and the companionship of some other like-minded people. Some of these companions came and went; others stayed and joined Ignatius as the original members of the Society. It is clear, however, that the presence of these companions was enormously influential on Ignatius himself and the eventual shape of the Society.

Biographical accounts of Ignatius during the years leading up to the founding of the order, as well as the years afterwards, show just how much he relied on the wisdom and judgment of his companions, and the divine guidance he believed it reflected.[12] Ignatian spiritual practice focuses on discerning God's will for oneself and one's life, and Ignatius took very seriously the results of such discernment in his colleagues. This led to what might seem like a very disjointed and scattershot way of proceeding, especially during the earliest years of the Society. Although the companions had their initial base in Paris, they often went in separate directions (with Francis Xavier heading to India and later Japan and China). They also engaged in constant discernment and readjustment of their plans, based on their varying experiences and abruptly changing circumstances. Ignatius had the idea that he and his companions would become missionaries to the Holy Land; instead, they found themselves setting up schools, first in Messina and then gradually spreading throughout other parts of Italy and eventually other parts of the world. Although most people now associate the Jesuits with their highly respected secondary schools and universities, it was certainly not what they set out to do or initially saw as the defining mission of their order.

What drew them into education? The short answer is that they saw a need within the new order and in the surrounding communities, and they responded to that need.[13] The foundational

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[12] For a comprehensive account of the early Jesuit companions, see John W. O'Malley, SJ, *The First Jesuits* (Harvard University Press, 1993).

[13] For the longer answer, see John W. O'Malley, SJ, "How the First Jesuits Became Involved in Education" in *A Jesuit Education Reader,* ed. George Traub, SJ (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2008), 43-62.

principle for the Jesuits is to free themselves to discern and do God's will as it presents itself in the world. Their aim, in the words of Ignatius, is simply to help souls, and the mission of the Society is to help souls in whatever way that prayerful discernment directs. Since the founding of the Jesuit order, that capacity for prayerful discernment has been shaped and cultivated in crucial ways by the practice of the Exercises. The Exercises seek to help a person become the kind of person who is capable of doing what she is called to do in the world.

The Exercises, as Ignatius conceived of them, consist of a progressive set of imaginative reflections, meditations, and contemplative activities. The division into four weeks is mostly metaphorical. Although Jesuits and some lay people do in fact spend a month in retreat doing the Exercises, the weeks aren't necessarily to be taken as literal time periods.[14] They are more like landscapes through which a person travels, stopping for rest or nourishment at certain points along the way. The aim of the Exercises is to cultivate in the retreatant a state of interior openness to God and God's activity in that person's life. That requires that the person acquire awareness of his or her own passions, attachments, and motivations and become free of anything that takes the person away from God.

Given how focused the Exercises are on the interior experience of the person undertaking them, it may seem strange to look to them for illumination about friendship. But as we have already seen, Ignatius himself relied heavily on his companions and their own processes of discernment when making decisions about the future of the order. Ignatian spirituality is at once personal and collaborative. The collaboration is necessary not simply because we live and work with others, but because we need the insight of those others to help us complete the interior work of the Exercises. In the Ignatian tradition, the Exercises are undertaken with a director, an

[14] Ignatius himself made provisions for people to do the Exercises in other timeframes, with the 19th Annotation being widely practiced among lay people.

experienced companion whose task is to discern the needs and desires of the retreatant and provide gentle, careful guidance at each step. The job of the director is not to set an agenda, but to accompany the retreatant on his or her movement through each of the four weeks. This means that Ignatian spiritual direction is a dynamic process with no defined set of procedures or rules. It is, rather, a deeply personal relationship aimed at the retreatant's own spiritual growth as she understands it. The process cannot work unless both the retreatant and the director are prepared to be receptive to insights and experiences that might produce unexpected alterations in the plan. The director does not know where the retreat will lead any more than the retreatant. The Exercises are a shared journey along a path that is different every time.

I will return to this idea of accompanying someone on an unclear path in Part III. First, however, I want to expand on three themes from the Exercises, themes that help us understand what friendship characterized by Ignatian ideals and principles might be like in general and specifically in times of despair. These themes are: 1) the interior experience of consolation and desolation; 2) the state of being present to someone or some experience; 3) the process of discernment about courses of action. I should note that by highlighting these three themes, I am addressing only a small part of the Exercises, which are rich with material for reflection. I am also taking up a single angle on the themes, and there are certainly many others. My aim is to show how these themes can help us think better about the specific challenges that suffering poses to friendship.

One of the central insights of Ignatian spirituality is that the human experience is characterized by periods of what Ignatius called desolation and consolation. Desolation, as described in the quote from the *Spiritual Exercises* that opened Part II of this paper, is fundamentally an experience of isolation or separation from God, although the subject of the

experience may not characterize it that way. Consolation, by contrast, is a feeling of drawing closer to God, and of feeling God's loving embrace. The Exercises encourage introspection and self-awareness about one's inner state, with a particular emphasis on what kinds of prayers, activities, and thoughts produce feelings of consolation and desolation. As Ignatius describes them, consolation and desolation are primarily a matter of a person's inner experience and reactions, but it seems plausible to think that in at least some cases, these states arise as a result of external events and circumstances that catapult us into joy or anguish. It is not always predictable how this will occur; the death of a child can strengthen the faith of one parent while destroying every shred of it in another. What *is* predictable is that every human life will include these periods of consolation and desolation. The Exercises certainly aim at helping retreatants identify and cultivate sources of consolation, but Ignatius was under no illusions that the Exercises would provide any kind of easy cure for despair and suffering.[15]

Let me now turn to the second theme, which is that of presence. Ignatian spirituality is in many ways most deeply about presence—being present in contemplative prayer and feeling the presence of God in one's surroundings and in daily activities. The Exercises encourage presence in a variety of ways, including contemplation, meditation, and imaginative reflection. A crucial aspect of the Exercises is that it is not a purely, or even primarily, rational endeavor. The prayers and activities of the Exercises engage the emotions, in part by harnessing the retreatant's imaginative capacities. Retreatants may be asked to imagine themselves in various circumstances or settings, including Gospel stories. The idea is to cultivate the capacity to enter more fully and purposefully into some particular moment or experience.

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[15] This is perhaps best illustrated in the letters of Mother Teresa, who herself struggled through long periods of what Ignatius describes as desolation. See *Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the 'Saint of Calcutta',* ed. Brian Kolodiejchuk, MC (New York: Doubleday, 2007).

In an influential essay on Ignatian spirituality, Howard Gray gives an account of Ignatian engagement with other persons that is helpful for understanding this idea of presence. He distinguishes among three elements: attention, reverence, and devotion.[16] Gray defines attention as "allowing the reality of the other to be present to you in all its integrity." This is harder than it seems, as it requires that we be capable of setting aside our own ideas, plans, and frameworks in order to see what is in front of us more fully, more openly, and more accurately. It is a receptivity to what is there, taking the time and trouble to see it properly. Attentiveness must be followed by reverence. As Gray puts it, "reverence means that what one has been attentive to must now be accepted as it is, in its own terms."[17] Like attentiveness, reverence requires that we set aside ourselves and our own wishes and desires and simply acknowledge the reality we perceive, without necessarily trying to alter it to suit our own desires.[18] Finally, there is devotion, which Gray describe as a "moment when the heart is touched, drawing the person to greater love or deeper faith."[19] It is through fully attending to another person that we can come to value them and love them for who and what they already are. In order to do this, we must cultivate certain dispositions in ourselves, dispositions that enable us to engage with the world receptively and lovingly, open to whatever it is we might perceive and where it might take us. Ignatian spiritual practice aims at producing not a particular outcome, but a particular approach to the world.

The third and final theme is that of discernment, which we might describe as the art of wise decision-making. Ignatian spirituality hardly has a monopoly on this concept, but Ignatian discernment does have distinctive elements. The idea is that the disposition of open, loving

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[16] Howard Gray, SJ, "Ignatian Spirituality" in *An Ignatian Spirituality Reader,* ed. George Traub, SJ (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2008), 64.
[17] Gray, "Ignatian Spirituality," 65.
[18] For a slightly different, but largely compatible account of reverence, see Paul Woodruff, *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue,* 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
[19] Gray, "Ignatian Spirituality," 66.

attention to the world makes it possible to see better what God wills for the world and for the person undertaking the discernment. Ignatius made a point of saying that big decisions should not be made in times of either desolation or consolation, believing that these might produce distortions in our perceptions. The appropriate state of mind for Ignatian discernment is one of robust self-awareness. The person must be attentive to the various patterns of emotion and response into which she tends to fall, so that she is able to reflect honestly and openly about what is pulling her in certain directions or making certain courses of action seem particularly salient or appealing. She must also be sufficiently receptive to new possibilities and challenges that make themselves visible to her during the process of discernment. Just as Ignatius had to be open to the idea of creating schools, despite that not being the original plan, so the person engaging in Ignatian discernment has to be open to the idea that she may be called to do things or take on tasks that never occurred to her or that she may think herself unequipped to take on.

These three themes—consolation and desolation, presence, and discernment—are important to understanding not just Ignatian spirituality, but also distinctively Ignatian companionship. Consider, again, the role of the spiritual director in the Exercises. The director, has the task of guiding the person's reflections in such a way to cultivate the relevant dispositions in that person. She must be able to recognize indications of desolation and help the person become aware of them himself—no small task. It requires that the director be fully present to the retreatant and his experiences, both those he can articulate and those he cannot. The director's role is a dynamic one, always shifting in response to the individual retreatant's needs. Judging how to respond to those needs requires skills of discernment on the part of the director. The goal is to point the retreatant in directions that will be beneficial while still remaining in a fundamentally background role. Her job is not to lead the person to God directly;

rather, her role is better described as clearing away the brush so that the person can see her own way forward.

The Ignatian spiritual director is, in many ways, a complete friend in Aristotle's sense.[20] She takes up the good of the retreatant as her own and becoming a good for the retreatant. One of her primary tasks is to help the retreatment identify moments and experiences of consolation in her life. But there is another sense in which she herself is a kind of consolation, insofar as her activity has the effect of making it easier for the person to find her way to God. This happens as much through her presence as through anything that she says or does. The point of spiritual direction is not instruction; it is accompaniment. The director cannot accompany someone well unless she is prepared to follow the same uncertain path that the early Jesuits did. The same is true for the retreatant. Neither knows in advance how the Exercises will turn out, but they are committed to heading into it together.

I suggest that the model exemplified in this relationship between the spiritual director and the retreatant is useful in helping us think about friendship in times of despair. The habits and dispositions cultivated through the Exercises and exemplified in the spiritual director's work are the habits and dispositions of a friend in a more general sense. To be a good friend to someone in a time of desolation is to be the face of God for that person, a living, instantiated reminder of God and God's presence. In the Ignatian tradition, it matters comparatively little whether the sufferer would describe it in those terms. The point is to help the sufferer feel embraced by love itself, even in the midst of that suffering. This is how an Ignatian companion is consolation to another, and this is how such companions are goods for each other.

[20] David McPherson has pointed out to me that many relationships of spiritual direction lack the persistence and pervasiveness of Aristotelian friendship. They may also be closer to relationships of unequals in Aristotle's terminology.

PART III

Come sit beside me on my mourning bench.[21]

In this last section of the essay, I will draw together these two accounts of friendship in the context of friendship in times of despair. There are, of course, many forms of despair, but I will focus on situations in which one of the friends is going through a personal tragedy of some kind, such as her own grave illness or impending death, or that of a loved one. Such events are common occurrences in any human life, but they pose a significant challenge to friendship. My goal in this last section of the essay is to consider how the Aristotelian and Ignatian pictures of Parts I and II shed some light on what it takes to share another's suffering well.

The quote that opens this paragraph is from *Lament for a Son* by philosopher and theologian Nicholas Wolterstorff, whose twenty-five year-old son died in a mountain climbing accident. *Lament for a Son* is a reflection on grief, both as an abstract concept and as a personal experience. Wolterstorff notes that there is a tendency for people to minimize or explain away suffering, with the effect of creating distance between themselves and the sufferer:

> But please: Don't say it's not really so bad. Because it is. Death is awful, demonic. If you think your task as comforter is to tell me that really, all things considered, it's not so bad, you do not sit with me in my grief but place yourself off in the distance away from me. Over there, you are of no help. What I need to hear from you is that you recognize how painful it is. I need to hear from you that you are with me in my desperation. To comfort me, you have to come close. Come sit beside me on my mourning bench.[22]

Friendship in times of despair is a matter of coming close. This, however, is a challenging thing to do well. As we will see, it requires what we can describe as the cultivation of a specific disposition or virtue.

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[21] Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdsman Publishing, 1987) 34.
[22] Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son,* p. 34.

Wolterstorff describes his experience of grief as deeply isolating and alienating. In his grief, he no longer sees the world as he did before, and he is unable to engage with it as he did before and as other people still do: "I walked into a store. The ordinariness of what I saw repelled me—people putting onions into baskets, squeezing melons, hoisting gallons of milk, clerks ringing up sales."[23] The result is that he feels alone in the world, out of step with it, even when among fellow grievers:

> Though united in that we are grieving, we grieve differently. As each death has its own character, so too each grief over a death has its own character—its own inscape. The dynamics of each person's sorrow must be allowed to work themselves out without judgment. I may find it strange that you should be tearful today but dry-eyed yesterday when my tears were yesterday. But my sorrow is not your sorrow. There's something more: I must struggle so hard to regain life that I cannot reach out to you. Nor you to me. The one not grieving must touch us both.[24]

Here we see both the presence of desolation and also an opening for consolation. But the individuality, the solitude of the grief is a challenge. It is not enough to know that we should try to help a grieving friend; we must figure out how we come close enough to sit beside her on her mourning bench. It calls for a certain interior awareness that enables us to be fully present to the suffering friend and succeed in being a good to her.

One of Wolterstorff's striking insights is that even words intending to be comforting can have the effect of making the sufferer feel even more alone. He experienced attempts at consolation that minimized his loss not as comfort, but as distancing. The people who told him that death wasn't really demonic were, from Wolterstorff's standpoint, putting themselves further away from him and his suffering. In his book, *A Grief Observed*, C.S. Lewis describes his own similar reaction to people who tried to use Christian theology (or at least certain platitudinous versions of it) to comfort him during the painful death of his wife:

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[23] Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son,* p. 52.
[24] Woltertorff, *Lament for a Son,* p. 56.

> Talk to me about the truth of religion and I'll listen gladly. Talk to me about the duty of religion and I'll listen submissively. But don't come talking to me about the consolations of religion or I shall suspect that you don't understand…..If a mother is mourning not for what she has lost but for what her dead child has lost, it is a comfort to believe that the child has not lost the end for which it was created. And it is a comfort to believe that she herself, in losing her chief or only natural happiness, has not lost a greater thing, that she may still hope to 'glorify God and enjoy Him forever.' A comfort to the God-aimed, eternal spirit within her. But not to her motherhood. The specifically maternal happiness must be written off. Never, in any place or time, will she have her son on her knees, or bathe him, or tell him a story, or plan for his future, or see his grandchild.[25]

Lewis found no solace in his faith during certain periods of his grief. When he sought out God in his desperation, he experienced this response, which is an apt description of desolation: "A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away."[26] Lewis was not inclined to doubt God's existence in his grief, although many people are. His desolation was mostly expressed as anger at God and doubts about God's ultimate goodness:

> Not that I am (I think) in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about Him. The conclusion I dread is not, 'So there's no God after all,' but 'So this is what God's really like. Deceive yourself no longer.'[27]

It seems unlikely that Lewis, at that particular point in his life, would have found consolation in any attempts at theodicy. There could be no comfort for him in a defense of God's ultimate goodness or a description of a happy reunion in heaven. The loss he mourned was the loss of the living, breathing human being who was his wife, and no theological abstraction was capable of reaching that part of his pain. Even direct personal appeals to God left him feeling abandoned and alone in his suffering.

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[25] C.S.Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1961), 25-27.
[26] Lewis, *A Grief Observed,* 6.
[27] Lewis, *A Grief Observed,* 6-7.

The idea that religion may be unable to console a religious believer may seem unnerving. What Wolterstorff and Lewis found so alienating, however, was not religion itself, but rather a particular use of religion. Consider how common it is for people who have suffered through the death of a child to be told that it is part of God's plan, or that God had a reason for it, or that their precious child is now an angel. Although some people might find such remarks consoling, others do not. Not all grieving parents are theists, of course, but even theists may hear such remarks as a dismissal of their loss as unimportant or even good in the broad scheme of things. As Lewis points out, this fails to acknowledge the reality of the loss for those parents and its shattering effects on their lives.

We might think, then, that the lesson is simply to avoid making platitudinous remarks. And yet, the problem isn't really with the remarks, annoying as they may be. Such misplaced attempts at consolation fail not because of the words chosen, but because of the person choosing the words. Some people respond to the tragedies of friends by simply drifting away. This kind of distancing is familiar enough, but there is a more subtle form of distancing that can happen even when the would-be-consoler stays nearby, trying to help. It arises from our own fears and anxieties, and can deceive us into thinking that words that comfort us will also comfort the sufferer. When it comes to death and dying, we are prone to engaging in a great deal of magical thinking, as Joan Didion has so aptly put it.[28] If we can chalk up the other person's circumstances to some fault, some misstep, some past sin, then we can rest in the illusion that we ourselves are not vulnerable to the same suffering. Likewise, if we can minimize the badness of the person's loss, we can shield ourselves from the possibility of having to face such pain ourselves. In other words, we make the other person's suffering about ourselves, not about them.

[28] Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2005).

To some extent, that is because their suffering *is* our suffering, as we saw in Aristotle's account of complete friends. It really is terrible to draw close to a suffering friend and see the landscape as they see it. But that is precisely what friends must do.

In her memoir about the death of her infant son from Tay-Sachs disease, Emily Rapp suggests that mothers of dying children are simply too frightening for many people to face:

> Our grief is primal and unwieldy and it embarrasses people. Talking about end-of-life care decisions for our babies to a bunch of parents with typically developing kids is tantamount to breathing fire at a dinner party or on the playground. Nobody wants to see what we see so clearly. Nobody wants to know the truth about their children, about themselves: that none of it is forever.[29]

For Rapp, this is as much about the unwillingness to see as the inability to see. We fail to come close to suffering people not because we can't imagine their pain but because we don't *want* to imagine it.

When we are faced with someone else's suffering, there is a strong temptation to deal with it by taking it into our own hands and shaping it into something we find more palatable. But if I recast my friend's experience to make it fit with what I would prefer it to be, I render myself unable to be a good for her. As Wolterstorff says, I place myself away from her when she needs me to come close. Coming close, though, requires that I first become aware of myself and my own motivations. I have to be able to recognize the difference between joining my friend in her grief and taking it over to make it more bearable for me. This is possible only by cultivating a disposition that is at once focused inward on myself and outward on my friend. I have to know myself before I can place myself next to her.

As I said in Part II, the individual reflections and prayers of the Exercises often ask the retreatant to engage in imaginative activities. Many of these activities involve imagining oneself

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[29] Emily Rapp, *The Still Point of a Turning World* (New York: Penguin, 2013), 18.

in a scene from the Gospels, taking up the perspective of the people in it and how they experience what is happening. In the context of the Exercises, these reflections seek to bring the person closer to person of Jesus, but they also help cultivate a sense of what it means to be present in a particular moment as it is occurring. It is not about writing a new story; it is about using one's imagination to put oneself in a story that that is not one's own.

The early Jesuits set out with each other on a path that at many points, was quite uncertain. They did not know where they would be going, what they would be doing, or how they would manage it. Ignatian spiritual practice is, in many ways, about cultivating one's own ability to walk into such uncertainty with faith and hope. The spiritual director needs this disposition in order to be a companion to retreatants making the Exercises, where they will cultivate it themselves. And friends need this disposition in order to accompany each other into the abyss of illness and death.

The disposition is one that we might describe as a kind of selfless self-awareness. We need to be able to see when our own needs and anxieties are intruding on the other's experience in such a way that we are not really sharing it. Employing Gray's framework, we might say that to console a suffering friend, we need attention, reverence, and devotion. We have to acknowledge the reality of the suffering and our friend's experience of it without trying to recast or alter it to suit our own desires. If I am insisting that everything will turn out all right because I need to believe that in order to alleviate my own anxiety, then I am not being fully present to my friend as her companion. I may think that I am diminishing her pain, in the way that Aristotle says that friends do, but that would be a mistake. Rather, I am just attempting to change it so that it becomes less terrifying for me. Sitting beside a friend on her mourning bench requires that I be open to seeing the view from where she is, even when the view is bleak. This is not to say that

we should deceive ourselves into thinking we understand just how our friend feels or what the loss means to her. That would just be another way of reshaping her experience to suit me. The goal is not to try to make sense of her loss, either for her or for myself. It is simply to be present in it with her, to share the activity of grief and mourning with her.

This kind of presence demands a great deal from us in some ways, but not in others. It does not demand that we offer explanations, defenses, or reasons for what has happened. It does not demand that the consoler herself even believe that there is an explanation for what has happened. The consoler need not be a believer herself, and she certainly doesn't need the kind of religious certainty that we think spiritual consolation requires. Ignatian consolation requires that we *be* the presence of God for another, but it does not ask us to make sense of God or the suffering. It asks only that we witness it with our friend and stay with her. Rapp is not a theist in any traditional sense, but she describes her experience of accompanying her son Ronan through his short life in quintessentially Ignatian terms: "My plan was simple and yet impossible: to go with him as far as I could along this journey that we call life, to be with him as deeply as I could from moment to moment, and then to let him go."[30]

Rapp's simple, impossible plan is not very specific, but it is hard to imagine how it could be. As she knows, her only real job is to love her son through it all. She does not know, and could not know, what that will entail for her. Her love for Ronan is expressed through her commitment to go with him and be with him, wherever that takes her. She declines to think of this as grave, since as she says, she has no other real choice. That is of course true, but we might rightly consider her brave in virtue of her willingness to face her own despair and commit to loving Ronan fully through it all.

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[30] Rapp, *The Still Point of a Turning World,* 114.

In the face of a grim diagnosis, the path ahead for both the sufferer and her friends is often a very uncertain one. This is true of both the outcome and the experiences they will face along the way. Friendship commits us to walk along that uncertain path with the sufferer, without knowing where it will go or what it will require of us. We have to be prepared to take up new tasks, including profoundly challenging ones, if that is what our friend needs from us. Most importantly, we must be willing to confront our own darkest fears so that we can be present to our friend and share in the difficult activities that now characterize her life.

In this section, I have been describing the disposition needed to serve as true consolation for suffering friends. It requires that we reflect on our own inner tendencies, fears, and desires so that we can recognize when we are using them as self-protection. I can only be a good to my friend if I can come close to her; if I cannot free myself from my own fear and despair, I will distance myself instead. I must be open to her despair and love her well enough to accompany her on a path about which we know nothing, except that it will be painful for both of us. Although Aristotle's complete friends wish to spare each other pain, they also wish to face it together.

Aristotle and Ignatius share the view that friendship is an essential component of a good human life, making us better and making our lives better. We are goods for our friends and they are goods for us. This is true even when our shared activities are painful ones. In such circumstances, virtuous friends are genuine consolation to each other simply through their presence. Ignatian spirituality gives us insight into what such consolation looks like and what it requires from us. The Exercises also give us tools with which to cultivate it. The challenge of friendship in times of despair is to do what seems impossible to help each other bear what seems unbearable. In this way, we somehow make the experience both possible and bearable. Friends

extend our capacities in moments of desolation, enabling us to face well what we cannot at any rate avoid. The shared activities of virtuous friends are not always enjoyable, but they are no less noble for that. As Aristotle put it, "anyone who is to be happy, then, must have excellent friends."[31] [32]

[31] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* 1170b18.

[32] I have been exceptionally lucky to be surrounded with good companions. When it comes to understanding Ignatius himself and Ignatian spirituality, I am especially indebted to Tony Moore, Howard Gray, SJ, Phil Burroughs, SJ, Kevin O'Brien, SJ, and John O'Malley, SJ. I am also grateful to David McPherson for his helpful comments on this paper, and to the friends who have allowed me the grace of sharing in their suffering.