

Some notes on Scruples: Íñigo's experience at Manresa¹

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22. Now he began to be greatly troubled by scruples. Although the general confession he had made at Montserrat had been entirely written out and made carefully enough, there still remained some things from time to time he thought he had not confessed. This caused him a good deal of worry, for even though he had confessed it, his mind was never at rest. He began, therefore, to look for some spiritual man who would cure him of his scruples, but without success. Finally, a Doctor of the Cathedral Church, a very spiritual man who preached there, told him one day in confession to write out all he could remember. He did so. But after confessing it his scruples returned, each time becoming more minute, so that he became more upset, and although he knew that these scruples were doing him much harm and that it would be good to be rid of them, he could not shake them off. Sometimes he thought the cure would be for the confessor to tell him in the name of Jesus Christ never to mention anything of the past, and he wished that his confessor would so direct him, but he did not dare tell the confessor so.

23. But without his having said a word to him, his confessor told him not to confess anything of his past life unless it was something absolutely clear. But because he thought that everything was quite clear, this direction was of no use to him and he continued in his anxiety. At the same time he was in a small room which the Dominicans had given him in their monastery, where he continued with his seven hours of prayer on his knees, rising faithfully every midnight, and performing all other exercises already mentioned. But none of them provided him with a cure for his scruples, although it was now some months that they had been afflicting him. Once, being very disturbed because of them, he set himself to pray and with great fervor he cried aloud to God, saying: "Help me Lord, for I find no remedy among men, nor in any creature. No task would be too irksome for me if I thought I could get help. Lord, show me where I may get it, and even if I have to follow after a little puppy to get the remedy I need, I will do it."

24. While these thoughts were tormenting him, he was frequently seized with the temptation to throw himself into an excavation close to his room and adjacent to the place where he was praying. But he knew that it would be a sin to do away with himself. He cried again: "Lord, I will do nothing to offend you," frequently repeating those words. Here he recalled the story of a saint who, to obtain from God something he much desired, went many days without eating until he got what he wanted. Giving a good deal of thought to this fact, he finally made up his mind to do the same thing, telling himself that he would neither eat nor drink until God did something for him, or he saw that death was approaching. For, if he saw himself reduced to the extremity of having to die if he did not eat, in that case he would ask for bread and food (as though in that extremity, he could either ask for it or even eat it).

25. He resorted to this one Sunday after having received communion, and went through the whole week without putting a morsel of food into his mouth. He omitted none of his ordinary exercises, even going to the divine office and praying on his knees from midnight on and so forth. But on the following Sunday, which was his confession day, as he was accustomed to be very detailed with his confessor, he told him also that he had eaten nothing that week. The confessor bade him give up this abstinence, and although he was still strong, he obeyed his confessor and that day and the next he found himself delivered from his scruples. But on the third day, which was Tuesday, while he was praying, he began to recall his sins, and so went on thinking of his past sins, one after the other, as though one grew out of another, until he felt that it was his bounden duty to confess them once again. As a sequel to these thoughts, he was seized with a disgust of the life he was leading and a desire to be done with it. It was Our Lord's way of awakening him, as it were, from sleep. As he now had some experience of the different spirits from the different lessons he had received from God, he began to look about for the way in which that spirit had been able to take possession of him. He therefore made up his mind, which had become very clear on the matter, never to confess his past sins again, and from that day on he remained free of those scruples, holding it a certainty that our Lord in his mercy had liberated him.

¹ The Autobiography of Ignatius of Loyola.

The following notes help to perceive and understand Scruples and persuasions of our Enemy²

[346] First Note. The first: They commonly call a scruple what proceeds from our own judgment and freedom: that is to say, when I freely decide that that is sin which is not sin, as when it happens that after some one has accidentally stepped on a cross of straw, he decides with his own judgment that he has sinned. This is properly an erroneous judgment and not a real scruple.

[347] Second Note. The second: After I have stepped on that cross, or after I have thought or said or done some other thing, there comes to me a thought from without that I have sinned, and on the other hand it appears to me that I have not sinned; still I feel disturbance in this; that is to say, in as much as I doubt and in as much as I do not doubt. That is a real scruple and temptation which the enemy sets.

[348] Third Note. Third: The first scruple — of the first note — is much to be abhorred, because it is all error; but the second — of the second note — for some space of time is of no little profit to the soul which is giving itself to spiritual exercises; rather in great manner it purifies and cleanses such a soul, separating it much from all appearance of sin: according to that saying of Gregory: "It belongs to good minds to see a fault where there is no fault."

[349] Fourth Note. The fourth: The enemy looks much if a soul is gross or delicate, and if it is delicate, he tries to make it more delicate in the extreme, to disturb and embarrass it more. For instance, if he sees that a soul does not consent to either mortal sin or venial or any appearance of deliberate sin, then the enemy, when he cannot make it fall into a thing that appears sin, aims at making it make out sin where there is not sin, as in a word or very small thought.

If the soul is gross, the enemy tries to make it more gross; for instance, if before it made no account of venial sins, he will try to have it make little account of mortal sins, and if before it made some account, he will try to have it now make much less or none.

[350] Fifth Note. The fifth: The soul which desires to benefit itself in the spiritual life, ought always to proceed the contrary way to what the enemy proceeds; that is to say, if the enemy wants to make the soul gross, let it aim at making itself delicate. Likewise, if the enemy tries to draw it out to extreme fineness, let the soul try to establish itself in the mean, in order to quiet itself in everything.

[351] Sixth Note. The sixth: When such good soul wants to speak or do something within the Church, within the understanding of our Superiors, and which should be for the glory of God our Lord, and there comes to him a thought or temptation from without that he should neither say nor do that thing -- bringing to him apparent reasons of vainglory or of another thing, etc., -- then he ought to raise his understanding to his Creator and Lord, and if he sees that it is His due service, or at the least not contrary to it, he ought to act diametrically against such temptation, according to St. Bernard, answering the same: "Neither for thee did I begin, nor for thee will I stop."

² We know that the obsessional aspects of Ignatius' character made him vulnerable to symptomatic self-doubting and shame — the components of a pathological scrupulosity. The fruit of his own struggles with this dilemma was distilled into his rules for dealing with scruples — linked immediately to the persuasions of the enemy [345-351]. However vulnerable he might have been to such severely neurotic symptoms, we must also respect the psychological acumen with which he was able to examine his own experience and make some telling and astute observations (Meissner, p. 94-95).

Polanco's letter to Father Juan Marín on behalf of Ignatius³

Juan Marín was a young Spanish Jesuit teaching in the Jesuit college in Bivona, Sicily. He did wonderful work among the people and manifested a great zeal for souls but, unfortunately, he had a scrupulous conscience and continually suffered torment from scruples. Ignatius was especially interested in him since he too had suffered from scruples and, thus, he wanted to do whatever he could to free Marín of his affliction. Writing through Polanco, Ignatius offers him remedies to overcome his scrupulosity, insisting that he must submit himself to the judgment of his superior and confide in God. Marín did not live to enjoy a scruple-free conscience, for only weeks after receiving this letter he was suddenly taken ill and died on the following day, September 16.

Rome, June 24, 1556

From the letters of Father Master Jerónimo⁴ and also of Father Eleuthère⁵, our Father has learned what God is pleased to accomplish through the ministry of Ours in your city. I am sure that He would make more use of them if your reverence's excessive scrupulosity, reinforced by the lack of humble resignation, had not proved an obstacle. Up to a certain point scruples are not harmful to the one suffering from them, when that person becomes, because of his scruples, more vigilant and careful about not offending God, and does not form a judgment that this or that is sinful, even though he has some doubt or fear that it is, and places his confidence in another person whom he should trust, setting aside his own judgment and accepting that of his adviser. If these two points do not help the scrupulous person, then he is in the gravest danger, not only of offending God by failing to avoid what he erroneously thinks is sin, but also of losing the opportunity and the ability to serve Him, and even his own natural judgment.

So Master Marín, determine to keep these two points fixed in your memory: (1) not to make any judgment or to decide by yourself that something is sinful when it is not clearly evident that it is and others do not think so; (2) when you fear that there is sin, you should refer the matter to the judgment of your superior, Father Eleuthère, and believe what he says, not because he is Master Eleuthère (even though he is a man of fine spirit and entirely trustworthy), but because he is your superior who holds the place of Christ our Lord. You should do the same with any other superior you may have: humble yourself and trust that Divine Providence will rule and guide you by means of your superior. And believe me, if you have true humility and submissiveness, your scruples will not cause you so much trouble. Pride is the fuel they feed on, and it is pride that places more reliance on one's own judgment and less on the judgment of others whom we trust.

Also beseech God in your prayers and Masses to free you from this suffering or infirmity, as far as is needful to avoid offending Him, or being an obstacle to His greater service, and ask the prayers of others for the same intention. Offering you mine, I commend myself to yours.

May Christ our Lord give us all His grace always to know and fulfill His most holy will.

³ Marín was born in Valencia, Spain, probably in 1529, and was commonly known among his Jesuit brethren as Valentino. He entered the Society in his native city in 1553 and then came to Italy for studies. He was ordained in Palermo in 1556 and unexpectedly died at Bivona on September 16 of that year.

⁴ Jerónimo Doménech was Provincial in Sicily.

⁵ The rector at Bivona was Eleuthère Dupont, known in the correspondence as Pontanus. He was born in Lille, France, on October 27, 1527, and became a Jesuit in Paris on April 6, 1550. He was ordained in Rome in September 1555, and was then appointed rector of the community in Bivona, Sicily. He died in Brussels on January 31, 1611.

Notes Concerning Scruples⁶

Ignatius defines two categories of scruples: false scruples [346] and real scruples [347].

[346] First Note. The first: They commonly call a scruple what proceeds from our own judgment and freedom: that is to say, when I freely decide that that is sin which is not sin, as when it happens that after some one has accidentally stepped on a cross of straw, he decides with his own judgment that he has sinned. This is properly an erroneous judgment and not a real scruple.

In [346] Ignatius gives an example that may appear somewhat curious to us today. In sixteenth-century Spain treading on the cross was a way of declaring apostasy and abandoning the Christian faith. It was a time of great tension with the Mohammedans and the Saracens. There were rumors about religious symbols being deliberately woven into the carpets so that people would step on them. There was a question about whether a person who inadvertently stepped on such a cross, or a symbol of the Trinity, or some other religious symbol was committing sin. Ignatius uses this as an example of how people judge that a particular act is a sin when there is none. He notes that this is not a scruple. Rather it is an error of judgment based either on false information, or a mistaken application of a general moral principle. A judgment, whether mistaken or not, produces conviction, unless or until the judgment is challenged by new arguments of data. In these cases Ignatius directs the person to find out the truth and reject the error.

[347] Second Note. The second: After I have stepped on that cross, or after I have thought or said or done some other thing, there comes to me a thought from without that I have sinned, and on the other hand it appears to me that I have not sinned; still I feel disturbance in this; that is to say, in as much as I doubt and in as much as I do not doubt.

A real scruple occurs if I continue to be anxious about the matter, doubting and not doubting without being able to come to any conclusion. A “thought from without” comes unbidden into my mind, as distinct from rising out of my conscious and free judgment based on evidence or argument. Today we might prefer to say that such a thought comes from our unconscious, rather than “from without”. Whatever the origin of the thought, the person is disturbed. In a real scruple, the characteristic disturbance of feeling arises from a conflict within the mind itself, which doubts, but at the same time does not doubt, because it is still able, even though in conflict and deprived of security and peace, to hold to the reasonable opinion that sin has not been committed. Ignatius is assuming here that a person afflicted with scruples is capable, even with difficulty, of distinguishing these two levels. Ivens (1998) notes that for a person in a pathological anxiety state the distinction itself breaks down.⁷

[348] Third Note. Third: The first scruple — of the first note — is much to be abhorred, because it is all error; but the second — of the second note — for some space of time is of no little profit to the soul which is giving itself to spiritual exercises; rather in great manner it purifies and cleanses such a soul, separating it much from all appearance of sin: according to that saying of Gregory: “It belongs to good minds to see a fault where there is no fault.”

Ignatius suggests, in [348], that the person find out why false scruple is wrong and reject it. What does one do about a real scruple? One learns from it. This is reminiscent of [175-179], the *Three Times for Making A Choice*, where in the second time [176] Ignatius suggests that the person examine, and try to get much light and understanding from the consolations and the desolations that are present. By weighing both sides one derives both light and understanding.

⁶ These notes are taken from George Schemel, S.J. and Judith Roemer, *Beyond Individuation to Discipleship: A Directory For Those Who Give The Spiritual Exercises*. Private Printing, p. 263 – 267.

⁷ Michael Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises*. Surrey, England: Inigo Enterprises, 1998. p. 244.

[176] Second Time. The second, when enough light and knowledge is received by experience of consolations and desolations, and by the experience of the discernment of various spirits.

Having to agonize over some of these dilemmas will teach one many things about the many facets of the issue. Scrupulous doubt can promote a sharpening in moral sensibility.

Rule [327] in the Rules for Discernment for the First Week is almost the same as [349].

[327] Fourteenth Rule. The conduct of our enemy may also be compared to the tactics of a leader intent upon seizing and plundering a position he desires. A commander and leader of an army will encamp, explore the fortifications and defenses of the stronghold, and attack at the weakest point. In the same way, the enemy of our human nature investigates from every side all our virtues, theological, cardinal, and moral.

In [349]

[349] Fourth Note. The fourth: The enemy looks much if a soul is gross or delicate, and if it is delicate, he tries to make it more delicate in the extreme, to disturb and embarrass it more. For instance, if he sees that a soul does not consent to either mortal sin or venial or any appearance of deliberate sin, then the enemy, when he cannot make it fall into a thing that appears sin, aims at making it make out sin where there is not sin, as in a word or very small thought.

If the soul is gross, the enemy tries to make it more gross; for instance, if before it made no account of venial sins, he will try to have it make little account of mortal sins, and if before it made some account, he will try to have it now make much less or none.

How is the one making the Exercises to respond? Ignatius answers that question in [350].

[350] Fifth Note. The fifth: The soul which desires to benefit itself in the spiritual life, ought always to proceed the contrary way to what the enemy proceeds; that is to say, if the enemy wants to make the soul gross, let it aim at making itself delicate. Likewise, if the enemy tries to draw it out to extreme fineness, let the soul try to establish itself in the mean, in order to quiet itself in everything.

An episode of scrupulosity can be of profit if it is part of a movement towards the eventual mean between the insensitive and the over-sensitive conscience.

Schemel and Roemer suggest that [351] is probably the most important guideline of the whole Exercises. It is the pivotal point of discernment spirituality:

[351] Sixth Note. The sixth: When such good soul wants to speak or do something within the Church, within the understanding of our Superiors, and which should be for the glory of God our Lord, and there comes to him a thought or temptation from without that he should neither say nor do that thing -- bringing to him apparent reasons of vainglory or of another thing, etc., -- then he ought to raise his understanding to his Creator and Lord, and if he sees that it is His due service, or at the least not contrary to it, he ought to act diametrically against such temptation, according to St. Bernard, answering the same: "Neither for thee did I begin, nor for thee will I stop."

When such good soul wants to speak or do something within the Church, within the understanding of our Superiors, and which should be for the glory of God our Lord...

Notice this is a rather tentative situation.

...and there comes to him a thought or temptation from without that he should neither say nor do that thing... [351]

In other words some “thought or temptation from without” is saying this is not a good thing to do, even though inwardly I have decided that it is a good thing to do.

...bringing to him apparent reasons of vainglory or of another thing, etc., — then he ought to raise his understanding to his Creator and Lord, and if he sees that it is His due service, or at the least not contrary to it, he ought to act diametrically against such temptation, according to St. Bernard, answering the same: “Neither for thee did I begin, nor for thee will I stop.” [351]

Ivens (1998, p. 247) notes that the incident with St. Bernard referred to by Ignatius in [351] is described in the *Golden Legend* :

Once when he (Bernard) was preaching to the people and they were paying devout attention to his every word, a tempting thought crept into his mind: “Now you’re preaching at your best and people are listening to you willingly, and they’ve all esteemed you as a wise man.” But the man of God, feeling himself beset with this idea, paused for a moment and thought whether he should go on with his sermon or end it. At once, strengthened by God’s help, he silently answered the Tempter: “You had nothing to do with my beginning to preach, and nothing you can do will make me stop”, and calmly continued to the end of his sermon.

In [351] Ignatius instructs the person to *act diametrically against such temptation*. This instruction is reminiscent of [325] of the Rules for Discernment of Spirits:

[325] Twelfth Rule...it is the way of the enemy to weaken and lose heart, his temptations taking flight, when the person who is exercising himself in spiritual things opposes a bold front against the temptations of the enemy, doing diametrically the opposite. And on the contrary, if the person who is exercising himself commences to have fear and lose heart in suffering the temptations, there is no beast so wild on the face of the earth as the enemy of human nature in following out his damnable intention with so great malice.

Ignatius’ final note about scrupulosity consists not in doubt about the moral quality of a past action, but about the quality of one’s motivation in wishing to take a course of action perceived as good in itself and approved. This note is especially relevant to apostolic ministry, and illustrates the importance for Ignatius of not allowing any aspect of the service of the Kingdom to be jeopardized by specious self-doubt.

Tutorism, Probabilism and Note [351]

Schemel and Roemer suggest that some spiritualities in the Church are based on the tutorist tradition.⁸ Tutorists would say, “Be safe. Do not risk. Only do what you are told. You can do only those things which are expressly permitted.”⁹ That is one end of a continuum. In [351] Ignatius is not opting for the “safe option”. He is venturesome enough and confident enough of a loving God to champion a venturesome spirituality. Probabilism¹⁰, which proceeds from discernment spirituality, is quite different from tutorism and the spiritualities that proceed from tutorism. There is a great difference between the attitudes of tutorism and those of probabilism. Discernment is definitely more risky. A person is more liable to get things mixed up, to be dealing with many ambiguities. Yet freedom is the key to discernment spirituality. It assumes that the person believes that God enters into his or her life, and believes in his or her freedom to take a grace God has given, show initiative and incarnate that grace in creative ways.

Schemel and Roemer also state that these guidelines are given to someone after he or she has gone through the First Week and is “a devout soul.” They are given to a person who has examined who he or she is, why he or she is, how God loves him or her, even in his or her sinfulness. These are guidelines for someone who understands his or her own need for redemption. It is in this context that you can say to someone who has been formed and educated in this particular school of prayer and discernment, “If you get a good inspiration, and it does not seem to be contrary to God, go ahead and do it.”

Does that guarantee that the decision will be 100% right? No, but one has over a 90% chance that it will be. Note [351] speaks about freedom and personal initiative. It says we have freedom except in those things which are expressly forbidden. That is a very different stance from a position of trying to be safe and sure. One can ask the question whether one wants certitude or truth. Truth is not always that sure. Certitude does not necessarily give one the truth, and truth does not necessarily give one certitude. How much ambiguity can a person tolerate? How risky and creative are they willing to be?

Note [351] in the *Notes Concerning Scruples* is the inspiration of much religious freedom and much controversy. There in [351] one can see much of the spirituality of Ignatius and the Society that follows him, much of its glory and much of its pain. This is not a philosophical position, although many philosophical implications come from it. The position of religious freedom represented by [351] is really an image of God, a religious experience. Such an image comes out of the faith experience of praying people.

⁸ *Tutorism* is the moral system which holds that, in cases of doubt about the morality of a particular course of action, one must follow the safer opinion (the opinion for law) unless the likelihood that the law does not bind (the opinion for liberty) is most probable. Tutorism leads to rigorism when always practiced. It tends to limit moral initiative, may create the propensity for scrupulosity, and impose unnecessary hardships on people.

⁹ The maxim of tutorism is, "always choose the safer course". Its proponents claim that tutorism provides the only safe and prudent guide for an uncertain conscience. (www.katapi.org.uk/MoralTH/ChV.htm accessed 22 August, 2004)

¹⁰ *Probabilism* is the moral system which holds that, when there is question solely of the lawfulness or unlawfulness of an action, it is permissible to follow a solidly probable opinion in favor of liberty even though the opposing view is more probable. When a prohibiting law is certain, the subjects of the law are bound to abstain from performing the action which the law forbids, unless they are excused by one of the ordinary exempting causes. On the other hand, when it is certain that no law forbids an action, there is no obligation to abstain from performing it. Between these two extremes there can be varying degrees of uncertainty about the existence or cessation of a prohibiting law. There is doubt in the strict sense when the intellect neither assents nor dissents, because either there are no positive arguments for and against the law, or the arguments for and against the law are equal in strength. The opinion which favors the law, and which is technically called the safe opinion, can be more probable than the opinion which favors liberty and which still retains solid probability. Again, the opinion which favors the law can be most probable, and the opinion which favors liberty only slightly probable. In the same way the opinion which favors liberty and which is technically called the less safe opinion, can be more probable than the opposing view, or can be most probable. (www.newadvent.org/cathen/12441a.htm accessed 22 August, 2004)

Scruples and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder

As givers of the Spiritual Exercises we need to know not only Ignatius' "Notes Concerning Scruples", but also what modern psychology can tell us about scruples and their treatment. We must know when to refer exercitants for psychological help. The following notes are adapted from two articles written by Paul Duckro PhD and Jason Williams of the St. Louis Behavioral Medicine Institute, at St. Louis University, entitled "Scrupulosity: Age Old Problems, Holistic Responses." ¹¹

Definition of scrupulosity

Scrupulosity involves "seeing sin where there is none...The person judges personal behavior as immoral that one's faith community would see as blameless" (Ciarrocchi, 1995). Not all scrupulosity is associated with religious issues. As Van Ornum writes, "Some define scrupulosity as excessive worry and concern over religious matters. John Cardinal O'Connor suggests a wider definition: '... clearly people become scrupulous over a broad spectrum of issues which are not explicitly religious. Because of the moral sensitivity of their conscience, people scruple over the moral dimensions of daily behavior'"(p. 5).

Nevertheless, it is true that the great majority of persons with scrupulosity are or were committed to a particular religion. Scrupulosity grows in the soil of a sensitive, delicate conscience; such soil is more often to be found among those with religiously formed consciences, those concerned with sin (Kolvenbach, 1996). Scrupulosity may be particularly common among Roman Catholics (Van Ornum, p.5), but it can affect any person with a sensitive moral conscience. It is reported among Orthodox Jews, Protestants, and Muslims as well. Scrupulosity is characterized by excessive worry, self-doubt, fear of taking risks, anxiety, embarrassment, intrusive thoughts, rituals, guilt, crippling indecision, problems in social and occupational functioning, and avoidance of the fullness of life.

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders

Only recently has scrupulosity been discussed and studied by mental health professionals. The word "scrupulosity" appears nowhere in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV, American Psychiatric Association, 1994). There are references to some forms of obsessions and compulsions which are essentially religious or moral in nature, but scrupulosity as a particular syndrome is not treated.

In part, this lack of attention may be because persons with scrupulosity do not bring these concerns to mental health professionals. Because of the moral and religious nature of the anxieties and rituals involved in scrupulosity, many sufferers seek help from priests, pastors, spiritual directors and other religious professionals. In turn, mental health professionals may incorrectly identify such issues as different from other obsessions and compulsions. When people with scrupulosity seek help from mental health professionals, they may be disenchanted by the lack of sensitivity to their religious beliefs and spiritual experiences, particularly when treatment is ineffective.

¹¹ These were accessed online at: www.slbmi.com/oldsite/articles.htm on 7th August, 2004.

Scruples and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder

An increasing number of mental health professionals have come to understand scrupulosity as a sub-type of obsessive-compulsive disorder, often abbreviated as OCD. This disorder is an affliction of doubt and anxiety which involves:

- **obsessions** (unwanted thoughts, urges, and impulses), are refined as “Psychic elements which lack the normal faculty of disappearing under the influence of the will, and for that reason upset the normal course of psychic processes.”¹²
- **compulsions** (repetitive acts performed to alleviate or avoid anxiety, often in response to obsessions).

Since Freud’s early work with patients with obsessional neuroses, much has been done to further the understanding, classification, diagnosis, and treatment of OCD. We know more about its prevalence, its pathophysiology, and effective multi-modal therapy. It is now considered a serious disorder, but treatable.

As much as scrupulosity and OCD have in common, we know about scrupulosity. On the other hand, little scientific study of scrupulosity itself has been undertaken.

With the resurgence of interest in the integration of behavioral science and religious commitment in promoting psychic and spiritual health has come greater recognition of scrupulosity as a significant problem worthy of scientific study. Although there remains very little empirical research regarding scrupulosity *per se*, there is a great deal of useful information which can be gleaned from clinical writings and empirical study of OCD in general.

What is Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD)?

In the DSM IV, OCD is described as a disorder involving recurrent obsessions and/or compulsions. Obsessions are recurrent and persistent ideas, thoughts, impulses, or images that are experienced as intrusive and inappropriate and that cause marked anxiety or distress. To the sufferer, obsessions are known as "ego-dystonic" thoughts, referring to the uncomfortable experience of such thoughts as imposed and intrusive.¹³

Obsessions

Obsessions are to ordinary worries as migraine is to ordinary tension headache. Some examples of obsessions:

- **Contamination obsessions** involve fears that the sufferer has exposed himself or herself, or someone else, to germs or dangerous chemicals.
- **Pathological doubt** "occurs when the person cannot feel certain that even the most elementary tasks were completed" (Ciarrocchi, 1995, p. 21), as in doubts about whether one turned off the iron or fears that the bump you heard while driving was you hitting someone — fears that persist even if you go back and check.
- **Somatic obsessions** involve hyper-vigilance about signs of illness in your self or others, fears which often require repeated reassurance from medical professionals.

¹²

L. Lownefeld, *Die psychischen Zwangerscherinungen*, Wiesbaden, 1904, p. 69.

¹³

Hence Ignatius writes in Note [347] “there comes to me a thought *from without* that I have sinned.”

- **An obsessive need for symmetry** involves concerns for regularity and order in the placement of objects which goes beyond traits of neatness and orderliness, leading to intense anxiety and distress when things are not ordered, lined up, and symmetrical.
- **Aggressive obsessions** are ideas, urges, or images of hurting others, which may lead a parent to, for example, have repeated impulses to kill a loved child.
- **Sexual obsessions** are "unwanted, persistent ideas, images, or urges with a sexual theme" (Ciarrocchi, 1995, p. 22).
- **Religious obsessions** such as a religious person having recurrent blasphemous thoughts.

Although any of these obsessions can be associated with scrupulosity, "blasphemous" thoughts are the most common.

Compulsions

The person who suffers with an obsession is driven to relieve the anxiety which it brings. Often this effort to alleviate the anxiety takes the form of repetitive thoughts or actions meant to neutralize the feared consequences of the obsessive thought. These thoughts or actions become compulsive and repetitive precisely because they do not get to the heart of the matter. They provide temporary relief only. The individual comes to depend on them as the only solace available, but as a person with chronic pain might come to depend on narcotic medication. In contrast to obsessions, these compulsions are (strictly speaking) voluntary but very strongly motivated.

Some examples of compulsions:

- **Checking compulsions** arise from uncertainty regarding possible harm to others, such as the need to check and recheck the iron or the area where the bump was heard while driving. Often, the doubt remains, and the checking goes on and on.
- **Washing compulsions** arise from obsessions about contamination.
- **Counting compulsions** may arise from need-for-symmetry obsessions, as the sufferer may need a certain number of items present or acts completed.
- **A compulsion to confess** can arise from fears of hurting or contaminating others, somatic obsessions, or other obsessions involving moral or religious concerns.
- **Symmetry and precision compulsions** may involve doing things in a particular, rigid order, such as reading books in order of the Dewey Decimal System.
- **Hoarding compulsions** involve collecting and gathering in excess of normal "pack rat" tendencies. This hoarding often is done with no real purpose, and usually results in huge, space-wasting collections of unneeded and/or outdated items (e.g., old newspapers or pieces of cloth).

An obsession about:	May lead to a compulsion to:
Being contaminated	Wash one's hands incessantly
Pathological doubt	Check and re-check
Symmetry	Be overly neat and orderly
The full confession of one's past sins	Repeatedly confess

Incidence of OCD

Until about 1987, it was believed that only one or two people per thousand suffered from OCD (Van Ornum). More recent studies have shown the lifetime prevalence to be approximately 2.5 per cent. The disorder is equally common among males and females, though it tends to begin earlier in men. The most common age of onset for men is between six and 15; whereas, women most often develop symptoms between the ages of 20 and 29, but symptoms can begin at almost any age. When children demonstrate symptoms of OCD they often do not perceive the obsessions and compulsions as ego-dystonic. If they do feel odd, children will hide their symptoms for fear of being perceived by others as "weird" (Wagner, 1997). In either case, children are less likely to ask for help. Children typically come for treatment when their parents notice and become concerned about their washing, checking, or ordering rituals.

An ordinary intrusive thought may be experienced as annoying or "weird," but an obsession becomes an experience which is feared. It may become a sin for which the individual must atone or suffer terrible consequences. Paradoxically, the anxiety associated with these thoughts then actually makes them more frequent and persistent. Worry, repetitive thoughts about normal stressors, is an inefficient coping mechanism, but one which almost all of us use at times. There is in it the unspoken belief that if we worry enough we might well keep the difficulty in question at bay somehow. Of course, in itself worry does very little which is productive. This is so largely because our focus is on the emotion (anxiety) rather than on the problem to be solved.

For those who do not suffer with OCD, the rituals of everyday life do not seem to interrupt the flow of the day; they may actually help to make the person more productive. Many aphorisms point to the extent to which we value carefulness and systematic ways of proceeding. Even as prominent a person as Santa Claus confesses to "making a list" and "checking it twice." Compulsions are notable for the extent to which they control the individual's life (the tail wags the dog) and, ironically, for the extent to which they are ultimately ineffective in producing anything more than temporary relief, at best. For example, we might say that "confession is good for the soul"; however, for the person suffering from OCD, confession becomes a compulsive activity which must be done over and over again, perhaps even for the same offense. As in other clinical uses of the term, compulsion will always involve an effort to avoid some unpleasant state, seeking a goal which is in itself desirable, but in a way in which the goal cannot be fully realized. The compulsion brings enough relief to keep it going, and not enough to put it to rest.

Hopefully, this way of thinking about obsessive-compulsive characteristics and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder makes clear these important distinctions. Many persons have obsessive-compulsive characteristics; these are usually highly valued. A person may go to the extreme in this regard, and even merit the "title" of Obsessive-Compulsive Personality Disorder, but this inflexible pursuit of control in life is not in itself Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder. In fact, and perhaps surprisingly, the two disorders typically do not appear in the same person. In contrast to the pervasive concerns of the person with the personality disorder, persons suffering with OCD display a very narrow focus of concern. For example, in OCD the individual may give inordinate time to cleaning the kitchen after preparing a meal, yet place little importance on personal appearance or keeping other parts of the house in order.

Scrupulosity, in turn, is a unique form of OCD. It is characterized by obsessions and compulsions with a moral or religious focus. In scrupulosity, realistic moral issues are elaborated out of proportion. Most religiously committed persons have experienced some type of scrupulous concern at one time or another, especially in younger years. During periods of increased religious fervor, efforts to be 'a good Christian' may have taken the form of unrealistically high standards for behavior. Sensitivity to imperfect realization of the desire for union with God may have led to periods of rigidity in prayer. Coming to know personal responsibility and sinfulness may have brought on painful guilt to which harsh treatment of the body seemed the only atonement and/or way of preventing further sins. In scrupulosity as a psychological disorder, these concerns and responses persist, becoming more intense and more narrow.

They do not lead to growth in trust and radical dependence on God, but seem to be resolved only in greater despair and the sense that all depends on human effort. Peace is sought assiduously, held for an instant, only to be lost again.

Treatment of Scrupulosity

Initially, clients with scrupulosity are more likely to seek help from religious professionals than from psychologists or psychiatrists. By the time the scrupulous person arrives in a mental health setting, they often have developed depression in addition to the scrupulosity. Depression in scrupulosity is often associated with the losses which occur as others become unable to tolerate the repetitive behaviors. The scrupulous themselves may begin to feel trapped in their own prison of anxiety and undoing. It is not unusual to find, despite the exquisite moral sensitivity of the scrupulous person, a dramatic withdrawal from religious practice and the support which the religious community might otherwise offer.

Unfortunately, scrupulous persons also often find little in the way of accurate empathy from mental health professionals. Many psychologists and psychiatrists are not themselves people of faith. Relatively few have been trained to understand and respect healthy religious practice. Many come with distorted views of religion, seeing it as a passion of the uneducated or even inimical to mental health. Not surprisingly, many professionals have tried to neutralize the exaggerated concerns of the scrupulous person by urging him or her to engage in wholesale revision of moral standards. This approach has not proven very helpful. In recent years, there is a growing recognition that understanding religious heritage is just as important an aspect of respecting diversity as is sensitivity to ethnic, racial and gender differences. The ability to recognize and work with the healthy religious commitment which co-exists with the aberrations inherent to scrupulosity is critical to effective treatment of this disorder.

In addition, the scientific community has made great strides toward an empirical model of treatment for OCD in general. The most widely accepted treatment regimen today is a combination of:

- (i) medication, and
- (ii) cognitive-behavioral therapy.

The most promising class of medications is the Selective Serotonergic Re-uptake Inhibitor (SSRI). Developed initially for the treatment of depression, these medications have been used as well for a variety of chronic medical disorders. In effect, they help normalize available levels of an important neurotransmitter, serotonin, associated with a sense of well-being. Such medication does not cure OCD. It is a way of managing the symptoms.

Cognitive-behavioral therapy complements the biological work of medication management by helping the client change how he or she responds to the initial stimulus which raised anxiety. The first stage of therapy is often a combination of education and support which brings the client to the point of readiness. The client cannot proceed until there is some level of confidence in the therapist and in the rationales offered to explain the disorder and the treatment. Irrational beliefs which simply augment the obsessive response must be identified, articulated, and eventually revised. Cognitive and physical anxiety management techniques are learned so that they can be used in place of the "protective" rituals.

When the client is ready, the therapist assists in setting up purposeful "exposures" to the obsessions. These may be presented in imagination or in realistic situations; however, the nature of a particular obsession (for example, a feared image or word) sometimes may limit effective exposure to imagination. The client agrees to use the alternative anxiety management techniques instead of the more familiar (and more trusted) rituals. For example, the client may purposefully make an imperfect prayer or limit confession to "new sins" only. This technique, known as "exposure and response prevention" (ERP), is

very powerful, but it is important to remember that it is not done in isolation. Cognitive-behavioral therapy is not a cruel or manipulative process. The techniques are offered in the context of an empathic relationship and with the informed consent and involvement of the client. The overall process has been shown to be the single most effective type of psychological treatment for OCD in general. We have found it to be equally effective for scrupulosity as a sub-type of OCD.

Clearly, there is an exclusively pastoral approach to managing scrupulosity. Religious professionals have been dealing with scrupulosity for centuries, well before the development of modern scientific methods. Examined from the perspective of science, many of the pastoral methods can be understood in cognitive-behavioral terms. Such intrinsic areas of overlap do not detract from the validity and internal consistency of the pastoral approach.

Nevertheless, there is evidence that a holistic integration of medical, behavioral and religious approaches has been the more effective way to assist the scrupulous client. In preparing the client for behavioral therapy, the religious professional plays an important role. Most clients need assistance from religious leaders in challenging the beliefs which lead to anxiety and obsessive ritualizing. In the course of working through the hierarchy of "exposures" there is need for some reasonable "checking in" to reassure the client that their challenge is to their own irrational beliefs, not to God. In addition to this type of theological education, we have also found that spiritual direction, concurrent with cognitive-behavioral therapy, is also invaluable in assisting the client to develop in their own understanding of God. Many clients need to find their way to a greater sense of being loved for who they are rather than for what they can do. They need a greater appreciation of the extent to which they are imperfect and are loved by God in that imperfection, not in spite of it. From that sense of being loved, it is much easier for the client to experience trust, optimism and relaxation. It provides the foundation for truly coming to love.

Team Approach

In the end, as suggested so well by Van Ornum, the holistic approach best serves the client because it best reflects the nature of the disorder. The optimal plan incorporates medication, cognitive and behavioral techniques, supportive therapy, theological consultation, and spiritual direction toward the development of a more open and trusting relationship with God. It would be the rare person who could do justice to all these roles. A team approach offers the more realistic possibility. We have seen it work, another illustration of the burgeoning, synergistic collaboration between behavioral science and religious faith. In this type of collaboration lies reasonable hope that we are finding an effective response for an age-old problem all the more vexing because it afflicts such good people.

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