

TONE SVETELJ

Boston College
USA

Contemporary Dedication to Awareness as Compared to the Legacy of St. Ignatius' Examen

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Abstract: The rising interest in awareness is a modern phenomenon which can be interpreted as an attempt to reconstruct, what seems to be an extremely important but still missing aspect in our lives in a secular society. True awareness is a rare quality which goes beyond simple self-awareness and growth in attentiveness. True awareness allows us to become aware of our own strengths and weaknesses, become less judgmental, more proactive, emotionally more mature and open to a metareality: love, compassion, creativity, personal evolution. This modern interest in awareness in many ways overlaps with the Ignatian examen as a way of finding God and God's blessings in our daily life. The focus of the examen is much more than awareness of past events; it is the moment of deep connection with God in the present moment.

Keywords: awareness, mindfulness, Ignatian examen, God's presence

Współczesna fascynacja świadomością w porównaniu z dziedzictwem egzaminu św. Ignacego

Streszczenie: Rosnące zainteresowanie świadomością jest zjawiskiem współczesnym, które można interpretować jako próbę rekonstrukcji tego, co wydaje się niezwykle ważnym, ale wciąż brakującym aspektem naszego życia w świeckim społeczeństwie. Prawdziwa świadomość to rzadka cecha, która wykracza poza zwykłą samoświadomość i wzrost uwagi. Prawdziwa świadomość pozwala nam uświadomić sobie własne mocne i słabe strony, stać się mniej krytycznymi, bardziej proaktywnymi, bardziej dojrzałymi emocjonalnie i otwartymi na metarzeczywistość: miłość, współczucie, kreatywność, rozwój osobisty. To współczesne zainteresowanie świadomością pod wieloma względami pokrywa się z egzaminem ignacjańskim jako sposobem

na znalezienie Boga i Bożych błogosławieństw w naszym codziennym życiu. Przedmiotem badania jest coś znacznie więcej niż świadomość przeszłych wydarzeń; jest to moment głębokiego połączenia z Bogiem w chwili obecnej.

Słowa kluczowe: świadomość, uważność, rachunek ignacjański, obecność Boża

Introduction

The importance of awareness in general, and its benefits in particular, call for our attention on different levels: as a necessary activity in our daily life, as an object of scientific investigation, or simply as something curious if not exotic. By practicing awareness, we can organize our cluttered way of thinking, support our mental health, improve our physical wellbeing, impact our happiness and inner fulfilment, strengthen our general health, improve relationships, and even increase our productivity. In short, awareness allows us to see the world differently and to grow and flourish into a more fulfilled life. This article explores the background of the resurgence of awareness in our time. Why does such desire and a need to practice awareness exist today? Is there a place for awareness within Christian spirituality?

1. Rise of Awareness

The most general definition of awareness is a state of being conscious of something, or the ability to directly know and perceive, feel or be cognizant of an event. Awareness is also described as the capacity of our mind that reminds us of our environment, and the ability that focuses attention to our surroundings. Awareness is frequently associated with mindfulness, which can be described as the act of being present, appreciating surroundings, being still and calm. Many texts use awareness and mindfulness in an interchangeable way. They are intrinsically connected, even though performing different functions. When meditating, for example, our mind can easily wander. In such a moment, our awareness allows us to become aware of this wandering and alerts us to return to meditation. This return becomes the task of mindfulness.

If awareness and mindfulness are relatively fresh in our conversation, they have existed for centuries in the Buddhist tradition and in its teaching. By meditating and practicing awareness/mindfulness, we can expand our spiritual capacities, and connect with the deeper aspects of our interior journey. Once more in touch with our inner self, we should be better able to discern how to continue with our life, and consequently, reach a higher level of true meaning and purpose.

D. Chopra in his book *Metahuman: Unleashing Your Infinite Potential* states that awareness is much more important than intelligence or a high IQ. Being smart does not immunize us from living unconsciously, driven by habits, fixed beliefs, opinions, peer-group values and old conditioning. It is awareness that leads us beyond fixed beliefs and opinions towards a metareality, which is free from old mental constructions and enables us to make better choices. It is this new awareness which brings us closer to the most valued things: love, compassion, curiosity, creativity, personal evolution¹.

Besides one's personal development, there is a rising interest in awareness within the scientific world as well as in the fields of psychology, therapy, education, pedagogy, religion, spirituality, philosophy, neuroscience, economy, racism, politics, cultural studies, and time management. With this, one might state that the post-modern life is becoming more and more aware that something very important has been missing in our life perception. Despite the pre-dominant objective, pragmatic, emotionless and many times fragmented scientific approach, we, as intelligent and spiritual beings, are rediscovering that it is impossible to grasp entirely the complexity of our existence. As scientific and objective as we try to be, we are aware that there is something still missing. This missing piece is extremely important for our existence. The post-modern mind is in many ways able to fragment, analyze and deconstruct the traditional structures and forms of meaning, but much less efficient in replacing them with something more meaningful and life-giving. If this is the case, one might pose the hypothesis that the growing attractiveness of awareness is an attempt to reconstruct what is important and meaningful in our life, and to re-discover the cosmos/universe as a complex, orderly and beautiful system or arrangement, the opposite of chaos.

2. Fashionable Awareness

Either searching for higher efficiency or deeper meaning of life, we should immerse ourselves into awareness, which creates a higher level of confidence, creativity, sounder decisions, stronger relationships, more effective communication, increased profit and much more. With awareness, we should come to know better our own strengths as well as our weaknesses, become more open minded, less judgmental, have a better insight into our beliefs, become more proactive, more efficient in our stress and time management. Self-awareness is also the key component of emotional intelligence, which allows for better control and handling our emotions.

¹ D. Chopra, *The Importance of Being Aware*, <https://deepakchopra.medium.com/the-importance-of-being-aware-3308e2918020> [5/7/2021].

These claims are based on an underlying assumption that a higher level of awareness will help us qualitatively improve our life. Despite these fashionable benefits, the fact remains that awareness does not necessarily or automatically lead to positive results. Just simply having more information, our behavior frequently remains the same, or might even lead towards negative activities. For example, the American government's billion-dollar National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign launched in 1998, with the goal to inform youth about the dangers of drugs, made many young people more likely to smoke weed (Singal). Similarly, calorie counting with the help of modern sophisticated devices collects much information about daily consumption of calories, but does not necessarily empower us to eat healthier or improve our physical activities. It can happen that a new collection of information leads us simply to the opposite side. It is true that having more information about gender-based violence can raise awareness of a disturbing norm in a community, but it can, at the same time, reaffirm the perpetrator's belief that their violent behavior will remain without repercussion².

The way forward is not negligence of awareness as such, but understanding that awareness in terms of having more information does not necessarily motivate us to act differently or better. Our decision-making process cannot be reduced to a simple awareness of ourselves, without taking into consideration cognitive shortcuts, personality traits, past experiences, social cues, habits, needs, emotions and other non-intellectual factors, which profoundly shape our way of thinking and acting³ (Williams). To illustrate this with an example, let us talk about obesity. With the present amount of new data about obesity, our society should have solved this health challenge. But the reality is that we are still far from a satisfying solution. Awareness leads to change only when it is attached to the self-awareness, which is intrinsically connected with the core values of our life. What brings people to the point of change is connection with their core values, expressed either as their personal beliefs, intrinsic motives or transcending purposeful issues. For example, when we become profoundly aware about the value of our health or perhaps of father's absence in the life of his children because of his obesity, a change in eating habits will occur.

² E. L. Paluck i in., *Social Norms Marketing Aimed at Gender Based Violence: a Literature Review and Critical Assessment, Conducted for the International Rescue Committee, May 2010*, <http://static.squarespace.com/static/5186d08fe4b065e39b45b91e/t/52d1f24ce4b07fea759e4446/1389490764065/Paluck%20Ball%20IRC%20Social%20Norms%20Marketing%20Long.pdf> [2/7/2021].

³ S. Williams, *Self-Awareness and Personal Development*, <http://www.wright.edu/~scott.williams/skills/selfawareness.htm> [2/8/2021].

Based on 10 separate investigations with nearly 5000 participants, T. Eurich concluded that “self-awareness is a truly rare quality; we estimate that only 10-15% of the people we studied actually fit the criteria”⁴. In her research, she distinguishes two levels of self-awareness: internal (one’s own values, passions, aspirations, thoughts, feelings, strengths, weaknesses), and external self-awareness (how other people view us). Contrary to popular belief, we do not always learn from our experiences and self-awareness. In addition, expertise in one area can prevent questioning assumptions, which might lead us to false confidence and self-knowledge. Simple self-awareness remains only one side of the truth, if not balanced by competing and distinct external viewpoints. How other people see us, their benevolent but critical feedback, are as important as our internal self-awareness. Sometimes we simply do not have access to many unconscious thoughts, feelings, and motives, or our perception of them might be simply our own invention, based on our bias, whatever “insights”, contradictory evidences, unproductive negative thoughts, fears, insecurities, and similar. For this reason, honest external feedback becomes critical in the development of our self-awareness and personal growth, especially if it is based more on *what* and less on *why* something happened. The *why* approach leads to rationalization and the potential denial of what happened, while the *what* approach helps us grasp what really happened.

3. The Legacy of the Ignatian Examen

If there is a strong interest in the relevance of awareness, either on a scientific level or on a level of personal development, the awareness phenomenon as such is not something completely new in our time. As mentioned previously, awareness is one of the key components of Buddhism, which today is gradually influencing the Western mind, both in Europe and in the Americas. Interest in awareness has much older roots and can be easily traced back to the Stoic tradition more than two thousand years ago. Within the timeframes of European Humanism and the Renaissance, from 14th to 16th Century, the brilliant minds of that time looked for more original ways of articulating moral and civic perspectives as well as values which would be a strengthening guidance in life. Many of them believed that return to ancient Greek wisdom would be the right direction. This was also the time of spiritual and religious renewal, as this attests to the high number of saints from that historical period. Their spiritual concerns were finding new and refreshing ways of connection with God and belonging to the Church, creating new forms of being together and living

⁴ T. Eurich, *What Self-Awareness Really is (and How to Cultivate It)?*, <https://hbr.org/2018/01/what-self-awareness-really-is-and-how-to-cultivate-it> [4/7/2021].

a more meaningful daily life amidst the turmoil of the tectonic changes of the 15th and 16th century. It seemed that the previous traditional solutions were unable to nourish sufficiently the unquiet of people's hearts and minds.

A special place among these saints belongs to St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), the founder of the Jesuit order. His deepest spiritual insights are described in his pivotal work *the Spiritual Exercises*. In this writing, one can find the most important principles of Ignatian spirituality for the members of the Jesuit order as well as for laypeople desiring to deepen their relationship with God. The book, as such, includes a compilation of meditations, prayers, discernment, and contemplative practices, which will become the foundation of Ignatian spirituality. These spiritual practices were practical answers to real-world problems. Ignatius did not invent these practices; he discovered certain principles which he knew were true because he observed how these principles helped people on their spiritual journey⁵.

A special chapter in *the Spiritual Exercises* is the exercise called the Examen, known as well as the *Daily or Ignatian Examen*. The purpose of this exercise is to review our present past in order to find God and God's blessings in our daily life. This prayer is based on conviction central to the Hebrew and Christian faith that we live a life in dialogue with God, who wants to communicate with us⁶. Ideally at noon and in the evening, or at least at the end of the day, the practitioner reviews his/her day in order to become aware of God's presence in his/her daily life. So, the Examen can be primarily described as an exercise of awareness regarding what is going on in one's life. The focus of the examen is not a search for moral weakness and sins in terms of examination of one's conscience; the focus of the examen is everything that has happened in one's life.

The presence of God or our experience of God should not be limited to specific consecrated spaces or buildings, or to well organized periods of time, retreats, spiritual exercises, or residing in a monastery. By using a more secular language, our search for the fullness of life should not be focused so much on something over there outside us; the fullness of life can be found only within us. Through encounters with the depths of our hearts, we find the most meaningful answers and consequently the quietness of our own hearts. As Augustine writes at the beginning of his *Confessions*, "...our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee"⁷. More than 1000 years after Augustine, Ignatius, with new emphasis, states that God is to be found in every day encounters with other people, challenges, disappointments, delights, regular work, as well as in our thoughts, feelings and concerns. Nothing in our lives

⁵ J. Manney, *A Simple Life-Changing Prayer*, Chicago 2011, s. 7-8; I. Platovnjak, *The importance of imagination in Ignatian spirituality*, "Bogoslovska smotra" 88/4 (2018), s. 1036-1044.

⁶ D. Hamm, *The Ignatian Examen, Praying Backward Through Your Day*, "Catholic Spiritual Practices", eds. C. M. Griffith, T.H. Groome, Brewster/Massachusetts 2012, s. 103.

⁷ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. by F. J. Sheed, Indianapolis/Cambridge 2006. s. 3.

is so insignificant that it does not deserve God's attention and presence⁸. In short, Ignatius teaches us to go into the world and find God in all things.

The originality of the Ignatian examen is the method of becoming aware of what is going on in our life. If we become aware of them, our simple every day experiences are the privileged occasions for our meeting with God. However, awareness of these experiences is not the final goal of the daily examen, but only the starting step of something much larger. The goal of the examen is not simply to become aware of our life and eventually of God's presence in our events. Practicing awareness should lead us to a different kind of thinking and acting, shaped according to God's will⁹.

4. The Structure of Examen

The Daily examen is a five-step exercise or routine, built on simple but extremely insightful elements. The goal of this paragraph is not to present a detailed analysis of each one of these elements, but simply to present the structure and complexity of the Examen, which is much more than a simple exercise of awareness. The following presentation is based on T. M. Gallagher's book *The Examen Prayer*¹⁰.

The initial step is usually described as a short prayer of gratitude and thanksgiving for all things that we are grateful for, and it does not matter whether they are big or small. To enter into this state of gratitude, we should recollect and calm down in the midst of daily routine in order to become aware of God's bounty in our life. However, the first step does not end with the awareness of God's goodness; this awareness should immediately lead to thanksgiving, i.e., our response in the face of God's goodness. At this point, Ignatius is very specific when stressing the importance of gratitude. Our failure to recognize the good things, the graces, and the gifts received from God is the cause, beginning and origin of all evils and sins¹¹. The examen begins with what is most fundamental in our spiritual lives, i.e., what God does for us and our gratitude in return.

The second step is a short invocation for help and guidance during the review of the day. The second step is a creation of the pure intention which will help us see what God does in our life: it is all about God's grace. Creation of this intention and petition for help opens our poverty to the outpouring of God's grace and love, which

⁸ J. Manney, *A Simple Life-Changing Prayer*, Chicago 2011, s. 6.

⁹ I. Platovnjak, *Goodness and health: the culture of goodness. Synthesis philosophica*, Online Edition No. 1 (2017) 79-92, s. 87-89.

¹⁰ T. G. Gallagher, *The Examen Prayer, Ignatian Wisdom for Our Lives Today*, New York 2006, s. 57-112.

¹¹ Ibid. s. 59.

will enable us to do all things. In other words, the fruitful practice of the examen does not depend primarily on our own efforts; the insight and transforming power are essentially God's grace within us. Through this grace we can see what God has inspired us to wish and desire. In this grace, we will receive a deeper insight into God's concrete workings in our life, into our interior movements opposed to God's work and into a deeper level of inner freedom.

The third step presents moment by moment review of the events as well as of the inner emotional states of the past day. This review is much more than an external superficial overview or an intellectual remembering of what happened, and it is far from a moral evaluation or a judgment of the events in terms of good and bad. The review is an exercise of actual awareness and recollection of the past events as they happened, with an attentive focus on the moments of consolation and desolation, of thoughts arising from them, and of spiritual desires arising in the heart (Spiritual Exercises 317) The aim of this step is to clearly identify in our daily experiences what is of God and what is not. By doing so, we grow in spiritual freedom, freedom from deception and freedom to say yes to God's love.

The fourth step is the act of contrition and our humble asking for forgiveness of sins and for healing of past mistakes (Spiritual Exercises 43). Letting go of and reconciliation with past events is crucial for any kind of personal or spiritual growth. The best we can do from our side is asking for forgiveness, which becomes simply the gateway to a much more important reality, i.e., God's response to our petition: the welcoming kiss, the joyful celebration and the outpouring of a new life that we call forgiveness (Lk 15:20-23). So, the examen is not the self-evaluation of a heart in isolation, but rather a dialogue or conversation between two hearts. God's love sets our hearts free from self-accusation, sin and the burden of past events. There is no wonder why Ignatius emphasizes so much in the first step the importance of God's goodness and love for us. Out of this desire for communion in love, the desire for forgiveness is born. The experience of forgiveness is the experience of love, infusing in us new vitality.

The fifth and the last step is a short prayer asking for God's help how to move on in our spiritual progress. Looking back is necessary in order to look forward. Imagine the things that will most probably happen, people that I will meet and decisions that I need to take. This short overview of the events to come is an imaginary anticipation of these events, which should happen in God's presence. Our past experiences should illuminate our future and give us an insight into how to grow in our seeking God.

5. The Aim of the Examen

The Daily Examen is much more than a mental exercise in five steps with the goal of remembering past events. The Examen is first of all an act of gratitude for the past events of our life, which have slipped in so many ways from our awareness. By slowing down two times a day, ideally for 15 minutes at noon and in the evening, in gratitude I practice attentiveness and awareness of my past experiences, which are the space and time through which God is revealing Himself to me. Since a direct or immediate experience of God's presence in our life is a rare gift, reserved only for the few (for example, Moses at the burning bush), we should not conclude that God is not revealing to the rest of us. Even though God's presence and revelation take place continuously in our life, we are not always able to perceive it occurring. Once aware of past events, we can also become aware of God's presence and action in our life, even though only *post factum*. The moment of awareness of past events becomes at the same time the moment of discovery of God's presence in our life, which takes place simultaneously with the act of awareness. For this reason, the examen with its acts of awareness present much more than recollection of a past event; the act of the examen as such is the moment of deep connection with God in the present moment, in the most personal way. By sharing ourselves more generously with God, God reveals divine presence to us more fully. "God's presence becomes affectively alive in us through our awareness of God's self-revelation in a given moment"¹².

The awareness of past events consequently leads us to finding new and better ways of co-operating with God's gifts and calling. In this way, the Examen becomes the moment of discernment and search of new ways as to how to discover what moves us closer to God.

While reviewing past events, as presented in the third step of the Examen, we are especially attentive to inner movements, i.e., experiences of consolation or desolation. Consolation in this case refers to the experience of what is deeply and genuinely good for us, our souls, that which leads us towards God and away from selfish preoccupations. Desolation on the other side refers to experiences that are not good for us, selfish events, carelessness regarding God's gifts and graces, and attachment to other things in place of God. Consolation and desolation in this case are much more than feelings of delight and despair, arising in us at any moment and beyond our active engagement. True consolation is much more than having a good feeling; true consolation is a gift that increases our faith, hope, and love.

¹² M. Conroy, *The Discerning Heart, Discovering a Personal God*, Chicago 1993, s. 63.

For this reason, the prime concern of the daily examen is not focused on conscience, but on consciousness. These two terms are often confused, misunderstood, or incorrectly used interchangeably. The concept of conscience is generally understood as the inherent ability to perceive what is right and what is wrong, and based on this perception, to control, monitor, evaluate and execute actions. The perception of what is right or wrong, good or evil, just or unjust, is shaped by the cultural, political, economic and religious understanding of values, both on the individual and collective level. The lower or higher level of conscience depends on the lower or higher level of identification with these values. Personal integration of these values into our life shapes the integrity of our life and the quality of our actions¹³.

If conscience is a relatively simple mechanism, this is not the case of consciousness. Consciousness is the function of the human mind that receives and processes information, crystallizes it and then stores or rejects it with the help of the five senses, reasoning abilities, imagination, emotion and memory. If the five senses enable the mind to receive information, the imagination and emotion process it, reason judges it, and finally memory stores or rejects it¹⁴.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that growing curiosity and interest about the importance of awareness in our time is a precious opportunity, which can lead us to a higher level of inner freedom away from fixed beliefs and habits. Besides numerous benefits on a purely physiological level, awareness opens the door towards a more fulfilling life on the spiritual level. The interest in awareness is much more than curiosity about a new phenomenon; this interest is an expression of the contemporary desire to focus on the undeniable importance of the inner world, our consciousness, its education, connectedness with the human body, and above all, rediscovery of the I as the consciousness in a new light. As appealing as this rediscovery might sound, it remains shallow, if it does not open us to something that is transcending our immediate reality. It was Ignatius' intention that we discover God's all-loving presence in our life, which is the peak of our existence. With rediscovery of the consciousness and of God's all-loving presence, we want to intensify those qualities of awareness that are the most valuable and essential to our being human: compassion, curiosity, creativity, personal evolution, and above all, faith, hope and love. In this

¹³ T. Slater, "Synderesis" in: *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, New York 1912, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14384a.htm> [27.8.2021].

¹⁴ G. Vithoukias, D. F. Muresanu, "Conscience and Consciousness: a definition", in *Journal of Medicine and Life*, Mar 15; (7)1. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3956087/> [7/7/2021].

way, awareness enables us to step beyond our immediate reality (ego, memories, beliefs, opinions, old conditioning, mental constructions, sins) towards the source of what is the most valued, God.

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