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Mystical Experience and Decision Making

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Abstract: The study of decision making is currently significant in various areas of knowledge, particularly in an interdisciplinary approach involving psychologists, economists, sociologists, cognitive scientists, and political scientists. This article explores the decision-making process in a new field: the mystical lived experience; i.e., approaches the *perception of something present as unknown*, the perception of *mystery*, within the decision-making process. It emphasizes that every perception requires a response, more or less conscious, and the mystical lived experience is no exception. The goal is to enhance our understanding and interpretation of the dynamics of mystical experience using a phenomenological analysis of the decision-making process as a hermeneutic key. The philosophical and anthropological background of this article draws from Karl Rahner's transcendental experience, while the phenomenological and psychological perspective is informed by Louis Roy's experiences of transcendence and Juan Martin Velasco's studies on mysticism. The article first establishes the theoretical foundations of this new approach and then applies a decision-making analysis to the significant decisions made by St. Ignatius of Loyola, as detailed in his autobiography.

Keywords: mysticism; decision making; perception; mystery

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1. Introduction

Currently, the study of decision making is significant in different areas of knowledge, but above all, in an interdisciplinary approach with the participation of psychologists, economists, sociologists, and political scientists (Morelli et al. 2022; Gonzalez 2014). In the strictly scientific field, cognitive neuroscience can follow brain activity in real time while people are making decisions thanks to functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), electroencephalography (EEG), and computational modeling, and artificial intelligence algorithms can simulate and predict in different contexts how decisions are made (Gold and Shadlen 2007; Kable and Glimcher 2009; Ouden and Cools 2013).

Longitudinal and field studies are important in qualitative studies, which follow decision making over time and within the environments in which they are made, helping to better understand their diachronic development and the influence of the environment on them. These studies also seek a practical application to propose changes in the political, economic, business, and medical fields as well as in almost all dimensions of daily life (Denzin and Lincoln 2017).

Turning to studies on decision making in regard to religious experience, religious beliefs influence moral decisions since they propose an ethical and axiological framework to guide daily behavior, particularly in situations of conflict. They also influence the orientation of personal behavior and the establishment of strategies for weighing risk and uncertainty in the face of certain difficult decisions. In some cases, beliefs can lead to conflicts of conscience arising out of tension with scientific or societal norms, especially when

dealing with situations in which people's lives are at stake (Jonsen et al. 2010; Sulaiman et al. 2022; Oldmixon and Calfano 2007; Elsayed et al. 2023). Obviously, religious beliefs influence the choices made in the face of fundamental human existential problems, such as the meaning of existence, death, and suffering (Frankl 1946; Batson and Schoenrade 1983).

Religious experiences play a very important role in guiding one's existence, providing a horizon of reference that transcends the subject itself, which means assuming life 'religiously'. This kind of experience can be called mystical because it is the perception, without the involvement of the bodily senses, of 'something' or 'someone'.[1] It is said to be a mystical presence because it is related to the etymological meaning of the word mystery: that which is perceived by closing your eyes and then not spoken about to keep the secret of what has been perceived (Wiseman 1993).

Attributing the adjective of 'mystical' to a human experience certainly depends on the cultural and religious context of the person who has it. However, it is always 'something' or 'someone' that is perceived as being present, as a presence, and which motivates a reaction, a response of some kind.[2] If it is true that there is no perception without a more or less conscious response to what is perceived, then the assumption that guides this research is that mystical experiences do not escape this dynamic. As Berthoz (2006, pp. 89–90) states, "To perceive is to decide".

The present article seeks to justify that assumption from the perspective on the mystical experience presented by Juan Martín Velasco and the proposal of the transcendental analysis made by Karl Rahner with David Chalmers's observations on consciousness and support taken from Louis Roy's phenomenological analysis of the experiences of transcendence. Of course, it is also necessary to approach contemporary investigation on decision making. For the purposes of this paper, a concrete example of decision making within a religious context will be taken from Ignatius of Loyola's *Autobiography*.

In other words, the aim is to deepen the interpretation and understanding of the dynamics in which the mystical experience occurs using an analysis of the decision process as a hermeneutic key. Thus, the first part presents the theoretical foundation of the proposal, while the second develops the practical application of the method of decision analysis to the testimony of Ignatius' mystical experience that he left in his autobiography.

2. Theoretical Basis

In this first part, I will define the two main concepts addressed in this research, the mystical experience and the decision-making process, and then show how they are articulated through a method of decision analysis.

2.1. The Transforming Mystical Experience

At the beginning of his treatise on the mystical phenomenon, Juan Martín Velasco proposes a broad definition of mystical experiences as "inner, immediate, fruitful experiences of the union—in whatever form it is lived—of the subject's depth [*fondo del sujeto*] with the whole, the universe, the absolute, the divine, God, or the Spirit, which take place at a level of consciousness that surpasses that which governs ordinary and objective experience" (Martín Velasco 1999, p. 23). To characterize this experience, the author takes into consideration those common elements present in different mystical/religious or lay traditions that, while respecting the differences, can help to form an idea of what such an experience means (Martín Velasco 1999, pp. 319–56). In it, two poles must be identified: a subject and an intimately perceived presence, totally distinct from the person experiencing it, which cannot be accounted for and therefore can be described as a 'mystery'. However, upon becoming aware of it, that presence presents itself with an all-encompassing character,

where what is perceived is experienced as a totality to which the subject not only feels incorporated but also a participant, producing a novel experience of self.

The subject is aware that they have not caused the experience, rather it has occurred independently of their will. They cannot doubt the direct contact made with this presence, for it has left behind profound feelings of joy, happiness, and peace that cannot be compared to any previous experience they have ever had. Paradoxically, what is perceived cannot be known as one knows objects in everyday life. Rather, it is experienced as an inundation of light that blinds and overwhelms the rational capacity: the only thing the subject knows is that they do not know what the experience is. Nevertheless, the perception of that presence unifies the subject with a totality, a sense of internal integration, leaving them feeling simplified and uncomplicated, as if having reached the one truly necessary thing.

Now, it is not surprising that such an experience gives rise to a profound process of transformation because, if what is perceived is presented as the presence of a *mystery*—with the peculiar characteristics that have been outlined—it cannot leave the subject insensible to making an intimate and personal decision that will be radically transformative in whatever direction the experience leads, whether it is toward rejection, indifference, or acceptance.

To better understand what such a transformation entails, it is helpful to look at the framework offered by St. John of the Cross. For him, transformation is oriented toward union with Mystery. In his case, that means union with the God revealed in the Judeo-Christian tradition, a path realized through mutual love that leads to the union of wills between the faithful subject and their God, renouncing everything that does not contribute to this union. It is a *participatory* transformation:

> "When God grants this supernatural favor to the soul, so great a union is caused that all the things of both God and the soul become one in participant transformation, and the soul appears to be God more than a soul. Indeed, it is God by participation. Yet, truly, its being (even though transformed) is naturally as distinct from God's as it was before, just as the window, although illumined by the ray, has an existence distinct from the ray". (*Ascent* 2,5,7)[3]

In this case, the presence of mystery emerges as a loving presence that tends to arouse in the subject an equally loving response that asks that everything standing in the way of a full surrender be set aside in order to conform to the divine will (*Ascent* 2,5,4). The union of likeness is given "when God's will and the souls are in conformity, so that nothing in the one is repugnant to the other. When the soul completely rids itself of what is repugnant and not conformed to the divine will, it rests transformed in God through love" (*Ascent* 2,5,3).

To attain this transformation is to attain spiritual perfection: "a total transformation in the Beloved in which each [God and the soul] surrenders the entire possession of self to the other with a certain consummation of the union of love. The soul thereby becomes divine, becomes God through participation, insofar as is possible in this life" (*Canticle B* 22,3). Thus, the believer becomes a "shadow of God", capable of acting like God. Indeed,

> through this substantial transformation, it performs in this measure in God and through God what He through Himself does in it. For the will of the two is one will, and thus God's operation and the soul's is one. Since God gives Himself with a free and gracious will, so too, the soul (possessing a will the more generous and freer the more it is united with God) gives to God, God Himself in God; and this is a true and complete gift of the soul to God. (*Flame B* 3,78)

In other words,

> When there is union of love, the image of the Beloved is so clearly sketched in the will and drawn so intimately and vividly, that it is true to say that the Beloved lives in the lover and the lover in the Beloved. Love produces such likeness in

> this transformation of lovers that one can say each is the other and both are one. The reason is that in the union and transformation of love each gives possession of self to the other, and each leaves and exchanges self for the other. Thus, each one lives in the other and is the other, and both are one in the transformation of love. (*Canticle B* 12, 7)

In the relationship of love between God and the believer, there is such an exchange that one can speak of a process of transformation in which one becomes the other and vice versa, a process that leads to unity between the two. In this sense, John affirms that

> One should not think it impossible that the soul be capable of so sublime an activity as this breathing in God, through participation as God breathes in it. For, granted that God favors it by union with the Most Blessed Trinity, in which it becomes deiform and God through participation, how could it be incredible that it also understands, knows, and loves –or better that this be done in it– in the Trinity, together with it, as does the Trinity itself! Yet God accomplishes this in the soul through communication and participation. This is transformation in the three Persons in power and wisdom and love, and thus the soul is like God through this transformation. He created it in His image and likeness that it might attain such resemblance. (*Canticle B* 39:4)

The transformative experience of a Christian mystic is taken as an example to highlight the fact that it does not matter how the perceived *mystery* is conceived. What matters is that the only way that there can be a relationship between the two—between the subject and the perceived *mystery*—is through a decision on the part of the person having the experience. For this reason, it is essential to consider the decision-making process in the mystical experience, regardless of whether the *mystery* is conceived of as a personal or impersonal being.

2.2. Anthropological Foundation of Mystical Experience

In the preceding paragraph, we have accepted as a fact of experience that 'mystical experience' is the experience of a relationship between the Presence of the Mystery and the person. This section aims to provide an anthropological foundation for this experience, in order to lay the groundwork for an epistemological interpretation of this 'fact of experience' from the perspective of the decision-making process as a hermeneutical key. To this end, first of all, an updated interpretation of the decision-making process is approached, then an outline of an interdisciplinary theoretical framework is given to situate it anthropologically, and the conclusion will show that the subject–Presence relationship is a communicative relationship implying the person's decision-making process in the face of the Presence experienced.

2.2.1. The Decision-Making Process

In her book, *Judgement and Decision-Making in the Lab and the World*, Nancy S. Kim presents three models of decision making that have been identified as a result of psychological and neuroscientific research in this field (Kim 2018, pp. 9–10). The first model is the descriptive, which explains the way in which people actually make their decisions, without any moral consideration. The second one is the normative, where the decision-maker follows a protocol to know the possible options and their consequences and, by comparing them, is guided to make a choice following an order of preferences. Finally, the third model is the prescriptive, which combines the two previous models, i.e., faced with an uncertain situation, the theoretically possible decisions are considered and the one that responds to the uncertain situation in the best way realistically possible is chosen.

Focusing our attention on descriptive models, which are more akin to the decision-making process that interests us, those that follow a *dual process* stand out, i.e., decision making is approached from two mental strategies. Kahneman (2012, pp. 19–30) calls the first *System 1* and the second *System 2*, although more recently other researchers call them *Type 1* and *Type 2* (Evans and Stanovich 2013, pp. 223–41). The first is a fast, intuitive, automatic, and emotional decision-making process, not necessarily conscious and which does not need memory to function and is also autonomous from other systems. The second process is rather reflective, deliberate, sequential, controlled, rational, and conscious. It needs memory to function and uses hypothetical and analytical reasoning (*cognitive decoupling*). It is considered that, evolutionarily, the former precedes the latter, as it corresponds better to animal cognition and basic emotions, while the latter is akin to human behavior and reflects complex emotions. They are different, but the authors discuss whether both processes are executed simultaneously or whether the second one is executed only when the first one fails.

Nowadays, the importance of the emotional dimension in decision making is clear, an aspect that was traditionally neglected due to an exclusively rational conception of that process.[4] Thanks to the advances made in experimental research, we must consider emotion as a partner that intervenes inseparably at the moment of making a decision.[5] In this respect, the approach developed by Antonio Damasio is outstanding.

It is not possible to detail Damasio's proposal in this paper (Damasio 1994, p. 147), but it is important to point out that every feeling is constructed from the awareness of the mental images perceived (cognitive aspect) and concomitant emotional states. To explain this hermeneutic circle, the author proposes constructs such as *somatic markers*, which are physiological responses to past experiences that are associated with emotions that arise in the present moment and guide—more or less consciously—the process of decision making. These *markers* act on the backdrop of *background feelings*, which are the stable emotional *background* of the subject (Zas Friz De Col 2021, pp. 325–52).

In summary, at the present moment of research, it is clear that there are two ways of making decisions: one is fast and intuitive, and the other, slow and meditative. It is also clear that decision making implies the decisive participation of the emotional dimension of the subject and not exclusively the participation of the cognitive dimension. The interesting thing about these approaches is that empirical research is reaching very high levels of sophistication to explain phenomena of human consciousness that, until recently, were considered difficult to access. However, in order to anthropologically frame the mystical experience, it is necessary to situate the decision-making process in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework. Therefore, I will present three authors who, from a philosophical, psychological, and phenomenological perspective, help to this end.

2.2.2. Three Authors for a Theoretical Framework: Karl Rahner, David Chalmers, and Louis Roy

According to Rahner, the human being, by being human, is a self-conscious being who knows himself as a subjectivity that has the capacity to know and make decisions. This capacity constitutes, for Rahner, the *transcendental experience*, which makes possible the exercise of concrete acts of human knowledge and will.[6] This capacity allows us to transcend and overcome the finitude of our historical condition, thus opening us up to the mystery of our existence and of the world. The paradox of this condition is that, although we recognize that hawse have not given ourselves the capacity to be self-conscious, nevertheless, we realize that because of this capacity, we are capable of self-transcendence towards the whole of reality. In this sense, we discover and know ourselves as a *transcendental subject* entrusted to ourselves, a bio-psychic unity conscious of our finitude as well as an openness to the infinite, which precedes the concrete acts of knowing and deciding.

For this reason, Rahner affirms that persons are and remain transcendent beings, that is, always having the silent and uncontrollable infinity of reality present as mystery. This makes us totally open to this mystery, in which we become aware of ourselves as persons and as subjects (see Rahner 1992, p. 35). The human transcendentality "is rather a relationship which does not establish itself by its own power, but is experienced as something which was established by and is at the disposal of another, and which is grounded in the abyss of ineffable mystery" (Rahner 1992, p. 68).

When this transcendental subject finds themself as the subject of a mystical experience, in which a Presence with the characteristics previously described is perceived, then that experience places that person at the very root of their self-aware human condition because the mystery of the perceived Presence refers them to the perception of the mystery of the origin of their capacity to know and decide: thus, in perceiving the mystery of the Presence, they simultaneously perceive the mystery of their own human condition and from this experience arises within the question of the meaning of the perceived mystery in its dual—subjective and objective—aspect given by the Presence. Therefore, paraphrasing Rahner, reflection on the meaning of life and its mystery refers to a vital experience that precedes the reflexive question, "[*S*]*peaking* of God is the reflection which points to a more original, unthematic, and unreflexive knowledge of God" (Rahner 1992, p. 52; italics in the original). In reality, reflection on the meaning of life that is motivated by the mystical experience only makes the subject aware that their self-awareness and reality in its totality are a mystery.

According to Rahner, through this experience, the subject becomes aware of this condition of mystery. Therefore, this condition makes the awareness possible, not the other way around. Precisely, then, the transcendental experience is the root of the mystery of the human condition and of reality, from which we orient ourselves to mystery, because we are nestled within and are referred to it. It is an orientation that does not depend on awareness, but on the human condition as human. "This original experience is always present, and it should not be confused with the objectifying, although necessary, reflection upon man's transcendental orientation towards mystery" (Rahner 1992, p. 53).

The *transcendentality* of the human condition is the condition of possibility of the mystical experience because, through it, the subject opens themself to the unfathomable mystery of their condition as a thinking subject who is capable of making a decision in the encounter with a Presence that is perceived as something that entirely surpasses them. That is why, through *transcendentality*, the subject perceives themself as a historically determined unity and, at the same time, capable of going beyond that determination.

The transcendental experience that makes the mystical experience possible orients the human being from the mystery of the human condition to the mystery that is outside the person, but which allows them to perceive that it is not a question of two mysteries, but the same unique mystery. However, the mystery of Presence does not allow itself to be circumscribed in the historical dimension of the same experience, for it goes beyond it. Mystery cannot be categorized, otherwise it would cease to be a mystery in its *transcendentality*. Moreover, transcendental experience is what allows the subject to perceive themself as a subject, distinct from their perception of Presence. Infinity, transcendence and creatureliness go together (Rahner 1992, p. 54).

Due to the transcendental experience that is their foundation, the mystical experience makes it possible for the subject—from their subjectivity—to perceive themself as founded from the mystery, simultaneously autonomous before it, but without being able to dispose of it, in an experience that cannot be objectified. Thus, for Rahner, the horizon of transcendence is a mystery: "this nameless and indefinable term of transcendence, which is distinguished from everything else only from its own side, and hence differentiates everything else from

itself, and which is the norm for everything and is beyond all other norms, this term becomes that which is absolutely beyond our disposal." (Rahner 1992, p. 95). However, it is not until the person experiences themself as a free subject, responsible before God, and accepts this responsibility that they can understand what autonomy is and understand that it does not decrease, but increases, in the same proportion as dependence on God. On this point, the only relevant matter is that we are both independent and, in light of what grounds us, also dependent (see Rahner 1992, p. 114). What is properly human, that which makes it possible to exercise freedom through knowledge and the capacity to choose autonomously, lies in and depends on the condition of anonymous mystery. In other words, the transcendent mystery allows itself to be perceived historically because it is already present transcendentally in the subject.

Having grasped Rahner's philosophical proposal, it would now be worthwhile to associate the phenomenological interpretation that David Chalmers makes of the dynamics with which human consciousness acts (Zas Friz De Col 2019, pp. 74–75). According to Chalmers, we can distinguish two inseparable dimensions in the unity of consciousness: the phenomenal (PhC) and the psychological (PsC). The first is the self-consciousness that the subject of the experience has of being the one who experiences it, while the second is the content of the experience, the experience itself. If the PhC is a non-conceptual intuition of the self, an immediate conscious awareness of a self that knows itself to be itself, the PsC is rather the capacity of the PhC to become aware of the experience's perceived contents (Chalmers 1999, p. 27). This makes possible the passage from perception to reflection because in the PhC there is an awareness of what is perceived through the PsC in a double register that is simultaneously cognitive and affective. What has been perceived is then reflected upon and is issued a critical judgment. These judgments have a progression that occurs in three successive levels: in the first one, the perception of something is verified ("I see an apple") which produces, in second moment, the cognitive and affective awareness of what has been seen ("I see the apple and I would like to eat it,"), and, finally, a reflective type of judgment can be produced that goes beyond the two preceding ones: "Why do I want to eat that apple?".

Applying this trilogy to mystical experience one would have (1) the impression of having perceived the presence of 'something' that (2) has left a positive affective and cognitive resonance and that (3) raises the question: "What kind of experience is this?".

A more detailed analysis of this type of experience is offered by Louis Roy with his reflections on transcendent experience, which he defines as "*an apprehension of the infinite through feeling, in a particular circumstance*" (L. Roy 2001, p. 4, italics in the original). These can be very brief episodic perceptions that, unexpectedly, break into the person's everyday life. They give "the strong impression of being in touch with something that absolutely transcends us" (L. Roy 2021, p. 20), a something that escapes our power and control, and which is impossible to fully understand or define.

These episodes usually occur without warning during everyday life. They are grasped immediately and intuitively. For Roy, the relationship between the person and the perceived 'mystical' presence is through human intentionality, which is "that by which we come to know transcendence, while transcendence is the ontological grounding of intentionality" (L. Roy 2001, p. 153). The transcendent is "that which absolutely surpasses the universe of finite beings, not in terms of size or power, but in terms of meaningfulness, truth, and worth—in a word, in terms of being" (L. Roy 2001, p. 156). This analysis corresponds to the transcendental constitution of the subject (Rahner) and to the double dimension of human consciousness (Chalmers).

The perception of such Presence is not given through the bodily senses, however, there can be no doubt that it is the perception of 'something' real. They are transcendent

experiences lived from the human transcendental condition; therefore, they are experienced with a strong sense of their reality:

> People who have the strong impression that they have been touched by the infinite are right; they can trust their own interpretation provided they are willing to deepen it and, if necessary, allow it to redirect their life; philosophy and world religions do offer them frames of reference in which transcendent experience and the transformation that ensues both make sense. (L. Roy 2001, p. 187)

These experiences—always, according to Roy—have a dual, indivisible dimension: a cognitive one, because the experience of transcendence leaves 'something' that must be interpreted in some way, just as any other experience, and an emotional one, because it leaves the sensation of having been in contact with 'something' totally transcendental and infinite. These experiences place the person in

> a relationship with a unique unknown pronounced to be non-finite, in-finite. . . . the central judgment that is thereby conveyed is, for the most part, negative: [We find ourselves] in the presence of a mystery, an Other which appears totally different from all worldly beings. Therefore, the discovery that stands at the heart of transcendent experience and that can be formulated in the statement, 'there is something totally different here', includes a little amount of affirmation and a vast amount of negation. (L. Roy 2001, p. 166)

For Roy, experiences of transcendence and the feeling they leave behind can be interpreted as experiences of God, because in them one has, on the one hand, the impression that reality presents itself to the personal conscience as 'insufficient' and, on the other hand, at the same time, a strong feeling of fullness. Therefore, we "reasonably affirm that the Holy Spirit has touched us, both in our feelings and in our thoughts" (L. Roy 2021, p. 83).

Roy classifies experiences of transcendence into four types: aesthetic, ontological, ethical, and interpersonal (L. Roy 2001, pp. 14–24).[7] In the first, aesthetic ones, there is a very vivid perception of nature, as if one were participating in it by being part of its greater whole or, also, the vivid impression of being surpassed by the forces of nature. In the ontological ones, there is a perception of the contrast between being and non-being, between contingent finitude and stable and eternal being, perceiving the presence of deeper reality in an imprecise way, beyond reality itself. In ethical experiences, the permanent valence of values is experienced above historical and cultural contingencies, manifesting a contrast to anti-values. Finally, in interpersonal experiences of transcendence, one experiences the desire for attraction and communion with another person, or rather that of rejection and repulsion, in a love—hate dynamic.

Roy also analyzes factors commonly present in these four types of experience of transcendence and finds six elements to deciphering them (L. Roy 2021, pp. 15–26). Each of these experiences (1) has a preparation time that depends on the personal situation of the subject, (2) occurs on a specific historical occasion, in which they manifest dimensions of (3) feeling and (4) discovery, respectively, leading to the awareness of a vital feeling that responds to the pleasurable perception of something infinite, which (5) requires an interpretation and (6) bears fruit in the subject of the experience, depending on the attitude that the subject assumes in light of what is experienced.

It is interesting to note that the role of decision making is not extensively developed in Rahner's transcendental approach, and it is not explicitly assumed either by Chalmers or by Roy. There is no doubt that these analyses are pertinent to providing a frame of reference for the mystical experiences discussed in the first section. However, the analysis of these experiences from the dynamics of the decision-making process can help to understand them in even greater detail.

2.2.3. The Decision-Making Process as Communicative and Transformative Mediation

Mystical experiences, which were discussed at the beginning of this article (Section 2.1), are experiences in which there is contact, communication with a Presence that presents itself as a 'mystery', in the face of which the subject feels intimately called to make a decision. The decisional aspect does not appear central in Rahner's philosophical/theological analysis or in the phenomenological analyses of Chalmers and Roy. I would like to bring it to the forefront of the theoretical considerations of how the decision-making process is considered today (Section 2.2.1), highlighting the two ways of making decisions (fast/intuitive and slow/meditative) and the role of the emotions in decision making. Although there is a lack of development of the decisional aspect in the authors cited above and in the state of current studies on the subject, 'mystical' experiences (Martin Velasco) can be identified with experiences of transcendence (Roy), which then opens the way for an approach that gives the decision-making process centrality in a communicative and transformative relationship between the subject and the Presence. This section will thus deal with the act of deciding, looking at it closely on the basis of the preceding analysis.

It is a communicative act because the Presence is presented in the subject's perceptual field, communicating 'something', a cognitive content and an emotional effect, in the face of which, after becoming aware of the experience and reflecting on it, the subject must reach a judgment regarding what has been experienced and make a decision in the face of what has been perceived. The decision can be of an immediate/intuitive or a slow/meditative type, but ought to include in a very incisive way the emotional dimension. Now, whatever decision is made in the face of the p(P)presence, it certainly implies an important transformation, given the characteristics that such an experience presents and signifies in the life of the person who has had the encounter.[8]

When a subject makes a decision, they select a preference, which indicates a precise option for orientation in a given situation. The decision ends a deliberation after evaluating a situation and rearranges the preceding order (Zas Friz De Col 2012, pp. 115–28). Taking this into account, in a decision-making process there are six aspects (some with dual characteristics) to be considered (Zas Friz De Col 2020, pp. 11–20; 2019, pp. 76–86): (1) the **context** and the **occasion** of the decision; (2) the perception of what triggers the initiation of the decision-making process, which can be call **motions (*mociones*)**; (3) the **awareness** of the cognitive contents and the affective resonance of the motion that motivates the process; (4) the object of **reflection** that should end with a **judgment** (5) from which a **decision** is explicitly formulated; and (6) the **consequences** of the assumed decision are accepted.

Applying this analysis to mystical experiences of transcendence, we find the same steps: (1) they occur in a given context and occasion, (2) contact is made with the Presence of the Mystery, of which one (3) becomes aware, more or less explicitly, by the cognitive contents it leaves together with the affective resonances it produces, upon which the person (4) reflects and comes to formulate a judgment in order to (5) make a decision and (6) responsibly assume its consequences, which produces a transformation, a reordering of the person's preceding priorities. Obviously, the transformative process will depend on the decisions that the person makes responsibly in the face of the 'mystical' motions received, which the person perceives with greater or lesser attention according to the 'mystical' orientation of their life, that is, according to the way they personalize their relationship with Mystery, in a positive or negative sense, since the decisions chosen will determine how they see themselves in relation to it.

3. Synchronic and Diachronic Analysis of the Decisions of St. Ignatius of Loyola

The theoretical approach developed up to this point has had the purpose of laying the foundations of what will be presented below: a practical example of the decisional analysis in the mystical experience over time in its dual—synchronic and diachronic—aspect. It has become clear that, in the mystical experience, there is a perception of a Presence that becomes present to the subject as a Mystery and in the face of which the subject must make an interpretation and give a response, formulating a decision. In this relationship, the responsible transformation of the subject depends on the decisions made in light of the *motions* (*mociones*) perceived. To the extent that this relationship deepens, the subject will be more and more attentive to the motions received, which will lead to making more conscious decisions. From this theoretical perspective, briefly summarized, I will present a synchronic analysis of six decisions made by St. Ignatius of Loyola as recorded in his autobiography, in order to make a second, diachronic, analysis of all of them (Zas Friz De Col 2022).

3.1. Synchronic Analysis

The *Autobiography* is a text that gathers the narration that St. Ignatius makes of his life to Luis Gonzalez de Camara in three different periods: August 1553, March 1555 and between September and October of the same year, 1555. The intention of the work is to collect the memoirs of the holy founder so that his followers in the Society of Jesus would have it as a stimulus for their relationship with the Mystery of God. In this sense, the text responds to the question of how Ignatius' relationship with the Presence of that Mystery had developed since his conversion in 1521 up to the time of the narrative (Rambla 2015, pp. 197–201). The following are six of the main decisions that played an important role in his life, as recorded in the aforementioned text.

The **context** of the first decision is from the year 1521, when Ignatius is 30 years old and is in the family home in Loyola, convalescing from a war wound, unable to move from his bed. To pass his free time, he asks for books on chivalry, but there are none to be found. Instead, he is given a book on the life of Jesus and another on the lives of the saints. The **occasion** of the experience being analyzed is the reading of these books. Progressing in the reading, he is more and more amazed by the penances that the saints carry out and he begins to imagine that he does them as well. At other times, he imagines that he performs feats to win the admiration of a noble lady with whom he is in love. But he perceives a difference in the two **motions** that occur in his state of mind and becomes **aware** that while he imagines the holy penances, he is consoled interiorly in a more intense and stable way than when he perceives to be imagining the noble lady. He is so struck by this fact that he begins to **reflect** on it until he reaches a **judgment**: to go to Jerusalem imitating the penitents, which he **decides** to put into practice as soon as he recovers from his wound, coherently assuming all the **consequences** of this decision, as recorded in his autobiography.

Recovered from his convalescence, Ignatius went on pilgrimage to the Holy Land between July and October 1523. During his stay in Jerusalem, the **context** of the second decision takes place. Ignatius wants to stay in the city out of devotion to Jesus and to help 'souls'. To do so, he must ask permission from the provincial of the Franciscan friars, which is the **occasion** of the decision: the provincial tells him that he cannot stay, which is presented as the **motion** that initiates the new decision-making process. As can be assumed—because it does not appear in the text of the *Autobiography*—he must have received the decision of the provincial as bad news and with displeasure (the **awareness** of the motion), which moves him to **reflect** on what he must do to follow God's will, until he reaches a clear **judgment** and **decides** to abide by the decision of the provincial and return to Venice (**consequence**).

The decision to leave the Holy Land against his wishes provides the **context** and **occasion** for the third decision. When Ignatius sets out on his return journey in the autumn of 1524, he wonders what he should do; this is the **motion** that has him preoccupied (**awareness**) and upon which he **reflects** until he comes to a **judgment** and **decides to** go to study in Barcelona, where he remains from 1524 to 1526 (**consequence**).

In the Spring of 1526, he moved to the University of Alcalá de Henares to continue his studies. His lifestyle aroused the suspicions of the Holy Inquisition, for which he underwent several trials. In this **context**, the **occasion** that prepares the fourth decision arises. Finally, the sentence is pronounced and Ignatius is absolved of all charges and suspicions. But he is ordered not to speak of religious matters with other people for a period of four years, until he concludes his studies. This is the **motion** that makes him doubt what he should do in the face of the sentence (**awareness**) and, **reflecting** and asking for advice from the Archbishop of Valladolid, he clearly **judges** that he should follow the advice he is given, so he **decides** to go to study at the University of Salamanca, which he does (**consequences**).

In July 1527, he is in Salamanca, but as soon as he arrives, he, once again, encounters problems with the ecclesiastical authorities, which provides the **context** for the fifth decision. The occasion arose when, after being subjected to interrogations and imprisoned for three weeks, he was sentenced, leaving him free but imposing on him, as in Alcalá, the condition that he did not speak of things of God until he had finished his studies. This is the **motion** he becomes **aware** of by the effects it produces and on which he **reflects** until he reaches a **judgment** and **decides** to go to study in Paris (**consequences**).

In February of 1528, Ignatius arrived in Paris and left there for the last time in April of 1535. Between those years, Ignatius managed to form a group of companions who were determined to stay together. This is the **context** of the sixth decision. The **occasion** occurs when Ignatius' doctor recommends for him to leave the city for health reasons, in search of his native air. However, the trip is also the first step in putting into action a plan that Ignatius had thought of with his companions, thanks to the practice of the *Spiritual Exercises*. In fact, the practice of the *Spiritual Exercises* was the **motion** that made the group **aware** of a new way of living the Gospel, which is why they **reflected** until arriving at a clear judgment that what they had to do was to go and live in Jerusalem, but **decided** that, if after a year they did not manage to get there from Venice, they would go to the Pope to place themselves at his service. When in fact, after a year, they were not able to sail, they went to Rome in November 1537 to place themselves at the Pope's orders (**consequences**).

3.2. Diachronic Analysis

Federico Ruiz has reinterpreted the classical outline of the development of the Christian life where the beginner is in the purgative stage, followed by the illuminative stage, and reaching perfection in the unitive one. He considered it rigid and unconnected with the psychological maturation of a person (Ruiz 2001, pp. 509–60).

For these reasons, he proposes a holistic and integral approach to personal development in which he also integrates the path of spiritual progress toward a maturing relationship with Mystery. He lists six stages: initiation, personalization, internalization, crisis, maturity, and death/glorification.

Christian *initiation* does not properly begin with baptism but with conversion. In the next stage, that of *personalization*, conversion is consolidated and one begins to consciously organize one's life around the new values discovered through conversion. The third phase is *internalization*: the faithful become accustomed to making the experience of their relationship with the Mystery more and more explicit and conscious in their daily lives. The following stage, the fourth, corresponds to *crisis*. In the normal development of spiritual

life, certain passages become necessary in which the previously internalized attitude is progressively purified (the *nights of the spirit*). The crisis is initiated when a balanced situation becomes unstable and requires transitioning to a new stability in the personal relationship with Mystery. The next stage, *maturity*, is that provisional 'perfection' that can be accessed in this life, where one achieves a realistic view of the Mystery of God, excluding extraordinary phenomena as a sign of Christian maturity. One acquires a deep inner stability in the relationship with God that corresponds, in Christian terminology, to a state of *holiness* or *deification*. In the last stage, Ruiz calls *death glorification*, which includes the period of old age, not forgetting those stages of 'diminishment' such as illness, accidents, or 'misfortunes' that happen suddenly and which, not infrequently, anticipate death or a more or less permanent state of physical or psychological diminishment.

Interpreting the synchronic analysis of the six decisions from Ruiz's diachronic perspective, it can be affirmed that the historical transformation of Ignatius' 'mystical' experience—if it can be called that—*initiates* when he reflects on the perception of two states of mind that arise as he imagines two different situations, ultimately deciding to imitate the penitent saints by going to Jerusalem. He decides simply because, of the two options, it is the one that he finds most emotionally exciting. He does not reason, he lets himself be carried away by enthusiasm. But when he is forced to leave Jerusalem—accepting the fact that he is not allowed to stay and thus renouncing the desire for which he undertook the journey—then he must decide what to do in a much more reflective way. There are no more wild exhilarations, he must reflect seriously, and he does so from an intentionality that is becoming more and more conscious. He discovers more and more clearly the action of the Presence within him and it motivates him progressively with greater lucidity in making his decisions.

The knowledge of how this Presence works in his intimacy and the progressive *personalization* and *interiorization* of this knowledge is what orients Ignatius' relationship with Mystery in an increasingly mature, conscious, and reflective way. That knowledge is nothing other than the discernment of the motions that Ignatius identifies as coming—directly or indirectly—from the very Presence of Mystery, which he calls the 'good spirit' as opposed to other motions that are also present, but which come from the 'bad spirit'. This is the compass that Ignatius follows in order to act according to the will of Mystery, which is an obedience motivated by love, since 'obeying' the Mystery of the good spirit is possible only in a loving relationship with it. For this reason, it can be affirmed that the discernment of the motions (*mociones*) of the two spirits, as a decision-making process, is the mediation that unites Ignatius to Mystery. In this sense, it is also important to state that one cannot find a 'dark night of the soul' in his mystical development, owing precisely to the practice of the discernment of spirits that purifies him constantly through his decisions.

Ignatius' 'mystical' *maturation* is directly proportional to the development of his capacity for discernment. It is understood as a particular modality of decision making with which he orients himself to interpret the motions he receives from the two spirits. It is important to clarify, as we have seen, that motions are not necessarily divine inspirations, but also events in personal history that need to be interpreted from the experience of Mystery in order to make decisions and orient one's life in a concrete way. Ignatius himself affirms in the *Spiritual Exercises* that these motions may or may not have a cause that precedes them. If they do not have a cause, it is probable that they come directly from the Presence, but if they are motions (*mociones*) perceived through some cause, such as a historical situation, a reading, a conversation, etc., they do not cease to orient the subject divinely. For, even if the motion does not come directly from an intervention of the Presence, it can always be co-intuited in the awareness of the motion.[9] For this reason, it is not enough just to perceive the motion (*moción*), but to analyze it through awareness in its dual dimension: cognitive and affective, which is what is reflected upon in order to

arrive at a judgment and make a decision. Finally, the last stage, death glorification, is not considered in the *Autobiography* of Ignatius, but is well known that he suffered throughout his life from many illnesses, dying in Rome on 31 July 1556.

At this point, it only remains to conclude this section by answering a question: is it possible to extrapolate Ignatius' experience to mystical experiences in non-Christian contexts? For the moment, the answer can only be hypothesized in relation to non-Christian religions, since there are no analyses available. However, it can be assumed that in them, there must also be the perception of 'something' that is interpreted—although perhaps not with the same word—but within the realm of 'mystery'. In any case, this 'something' is perceived and interpreted as a 'presence' in the face of which a decision must be made. In this sense, it can be hypothesized that an analysis such as the one proposed here is possible. What is available is a publication—although it is debatable whether it belongs to the religious realm or not—where the decisional analysis, as proposed in this section, is applied to the *Diary* of Etty Hillesum (Csaba 2021, pp. 127–79).

4. Conclusions

The development of the first part, which included the phenomenology of Martín Velasco, the transcendental analysis of Karl Rahner, the reflection on consciousness of David Chalmers, the transcendental experiences of Louis Roy, and the formulation of an outline for interpreting the decision-making process, has led to the establishment of a theoretical framework to justify the analysis of decisions that has been carried out in the second part of the article on the text of the *Autobiography* of Ignatius of Loyola. Both parts give unity to a strategy to answer the question whether it is possible to establish a link between the mystical experience and the decision-making process, as implicitly formulated in the title of the article.

In fact, the definition of mystical experience noted in the introduction, like the perception of the Presence of Mystery that motivates a decision in the subject who has perceived it, when analyzed from the decision-making process defined in the first part and applied in the second part to Ignatius of Loyola, allows us to formulate a conclusion: at least in the Christian experience, but possibly in any numinous experience (Otto), it is possible to identify the perception of the Presence of Mystery (motion) and the decision of the subject (decision) in the decision-making process in a phenomenologically, anthropologically, and psychologically integrated way. The so-called mystical experiences do not escape this dynamic: by better understanding their human dynamism, justice is better done to transcendent Mystery.

The transcendent dimension of the human condition is oriented towards the encounter of something that presents itself as Mystery and this is understood as an authentically human process, not ideologically superadded to its condition of intelligent being. By integrating the motion of Mystery and the decision of the subject who perceives it in the decision-making process, it is possible to resize the 'ineffability' of the mystical experience without touching the transcendent dimension of the Mystery, but better elucidating the human dynamics involved. This seems important for interpreting mystical motions from a phenomenological and psychological perspective: all human perception, in order to be so, must be conscious, for there is no perception without awareness and without decision, because what is perceived is always perceived from a cognitive content and an emotional reaction, and it is on this content and this reaction that one reflects, more or less consciously, until arriving at a judgment and concluding the process by making a decision regarding what has been perceived. Finally, decisional analysis as has been outlined can be an instrument that, from an anthropological perspective, facilitates dialogue between religions and rapprochement with the secularized mentality of our time because

no phenomenon is excluded a priori from the perceptual field and, therefore, from the decision-making process.

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Notes

1 To avoid ambiguities in the use of the term 'perception', the only way to become aware of the divine presence, or the divine, is by perceiving it. The verb to perceive must be taken in a broad sense: perceiving God, or what is divine, it is possible not only through the bodily senses, but also through its direct intervention in the intimate consciousness of the person. In this case, the perceiver affirms, pure and simple, that what he perceives is something real, that he is faced with *something* or *someone*. Intuition and insight have different nuances, although they can form part of the perceptual process. The mystical experience is not a perception but rather begins with a perception of which one becomes aware due to the cognitive content it leaves and the affective effect it produces. One reflects on this and reaches a judgment in order to decide in the face of what has been perceived.

2 "Mystical religious texts are those that witness to another form of divine presence, one that can, indeed, sometimes be attained within the context of the ordinary religious observances, but which need not be. What differentiates it from other forms of religious consciousness is its presentation as both subjectively and objectively more direct, even at times as immediate" (McGinn 1990, XIX).

3 *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross* (1979). The titles are abbreviated in this way: The Ascent of Mount Carmel: *Ascent*, followed by the number of the book, chapter and paragraph; Spiritual Canticle B: *Canticle B*; and The Living Flame of Love B: *Flame B*, both followed by the number of the stanza and paragraph.

4 Considering, for example, the relationship between the cognitive and emotional dimension studied in research on pathological gambling, understood as an alteration of the decision-making process, a directly proportional relationship between impulsivity and cognitive impairment in decision making is evident (S. Roy 2016, p. 45).

5 Levine (2024). It is worth including the *abstract* of the article: "The traditional idea of emotion and cognition in Western culture is that emotion is separate from, and inferior to, cognition. This article reviews results from experimental neuroscience that refute this notion and support the idea that emotion and cognition are partners that depend on each other for organized decision making. Cooperation between cortical and subcortical parts of the brain is essential for behavior that adapts successfully to the environment in pursuit of goals. Concurrently, there has been a rich development of computational neural network theories that combine emotion as a source of values with reason as a process of discerning the actions that will best implement those values. Incorporating the partnership view of emotion and cognition encourages integration of those two aspects of the psyche, with benefit both for mental illness treatment and for making society more cooperative".

6 "Transcendental experience is the experience of *transcendence*, in which experience in the structure of the subject and therefore also the ultimate structure of every conceivable object of knowledge are present together and in identity. This transcendental experience, of course, is not merely an experience of pure knowledge, but also of the will and of freedom. The same character of transcendentality belongs to them, so that basically one can ask about the source and the destiny of the subject as a knowing being and as a free being together" (Rahner 1992, pp. 20–21, italics from the original).

7 Unfortunately, there is no place here to show some examples of each of the four different types.

8 For the theme of transformation from a Christian perspective, see (Zas Friz De Col 2022, pp. 4–9).

9 The *co-intuition* "es un conocimiento 'implicado' en otro ser, 'acompañado' de otro ser: De ahí la preposición *cum* delante de la palabra *intuición*" (Rodríguez-Bachiller 1976, p. 51); in other words, it is "la visión simultánea de Dios y las criaturas en un solo acto, sin necesidad de ilación lógica" (González de Cardedal 1966, p. 551).

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