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Turning to Mystery in Institutional Theory: *The Jesuit Spiritual Exercises*

Bento da Silva, Jose, Llewellyn, Nick, & Quattrone, Paolo
***Organization Studies* (forthcoming, 2022)**

Abstract

Previous researchers have argued that material objects reproduce institutional logics on the basis of their durability, immutability and mobility. In this paper we analyse material objects that secure logics not because they reveal meanings and significations, but because they allow individuals and groups to confront the mystery of institutional values. Drawing on extensive historical sources, we analyse a small material object, a book entitled *The Spiritual Exercises*, and investigate the institutionalisation of a practice for discovering what cannot be rendered material, the ineffable mystery of God's will, as key component of the Jesuit beliefs system.

We argue that religious logics require objects that present, rather than resolve, the mystery of institutional values. We extend the literature on institutional logics by considering how mystery enables institutions and their logics to embrace difference, adapt and endure for centuries. Our paper shows that institutional values and goods are ontologically mysterious *no-things*, ready to be interrogated through objects and procedural logics.

Keywords: Institutional logics, materiality, Jesuits, mystery

Introduction

This study analyses how material objects allow institutions and their logics to endure (Gawer & Phillips, 2013; Lawrence, Leca & Zilber, 2013; Raviola & Norbäck, 2013; Monteiro & Nicolini, 2015; Friedland, 2018). Previous work suggests that this endurance rests on the objects' material properties and capacity to inscribe norms of social behaviour and institutional order. For example, objects such as churches (Jones & Massa, 2013), maps (Latour, 1993) and books (Eisenstein, 1983) exhibit 'durability' (Jones, Boxenbaum, & Anthony, 2013), 'immutability' and '(im)mobility' (Latour, 1993). However, although 'specific objects or constellations of objects' may 'produce particular effects' (Friedland, 2018, p. 527), institutions are 'symbolic systems which have non-observable, absolute, transrational referents' (Friedland & Alford, 1991, p. 249) that cannot be rendered wholly visible in material objects. We explore the relationship between presence and absence in institutions.

To do this, we consider a central institution of modern society, Christian religion (Friedland & Alford, 1991), producing a longitudinal historical analysis of *The Spiritual Exercises* (hereafter *Exercises*), a book owned by every Jesuit. Our study reveals the role of material objects in the institutionalisation of a religious logic and explores the history of a book written to enable the Jesuit belief system, which in their context meant enabling the search for God's will. The *Exercises* have certainly been mobile and enduring over the course of nearly half a millennium. However, we argue that they are successful precisely because they do not make institutional substance visible, certain and clear (Friedland, 2018). They make God's irreducible mystery present, rather than representing or reifying it. Thus, the institutional logic is secured through what is absent and immaterial, and not through the substantiation of meaning (Quattrone, 2015). We label this phenomenon 'objectual mystery', and argue that the *Exercises*' lack of material content allows them to be a container for various contents, enabling the Jesuits to adapt and endure for centuries. The design of the *Exercises* makes mystery a

condition for the persistence of the religious logic, while also creating conditions for organising (Garud, Jain, & Tuertscher, 2008).

Our contribution is twofold. First, we develop the notion of objectual mystery. For a logic to endure, the material dimension of institutional substance must be as undefined and mysterious as the institutional ideals, values and beliefs it seeks to embody. Institutional logics persist not because of a material presence, but because of an absence, which requires continual interrogation. In so doing, we engage with that emergent stream of literature that emphasises the role of absences (e.g. Furnari, Crilly, Misangyi, Greckhamer, Fiss, & Aguilera, 2021; Giovannoni & Quattrone, 2018; Powell, 2018), future-making (Beckert, 2021; Hernes & Schultz, 2020; Wenzel, Krämer, Kock, & Reckwitz, 2020; Thomson & Byrne, 2021), and silence (e.g. Antebi, 2013) as ways to deal with the unknowable and then not positively observable. Second, we use the notion of ‘objectual mystery’ to respond to concerns about institutional approaches’ ability to recognise the endogenous dynamism of institutions and their logics (Quattrone, 2015; Lounsbury & Wang, 2020). The ‘overly stable, substantive and reified depiction[s] of logics’ (Lounsbury & Wang, 2020, p. 11) has underpinned extant accounts of how logics come to be, change, or diffuse. Through the construct of ‘objectual mystery’ we show how logics do not need to be substantiated to enact action and generate social order.

Theoretical Context

The materiality of institutional logics

Institutions ‘have logics that must be made material to signify’ (Friedland, 2002, p. 383); they ‘operate through specific objects or constellations of objects whose practical affordances produce particular effects’ (Friedland, 2018, p. 527). In all institutions, not just organised religion, these logics are incomplete. Institutions are ‘symbolic systems which have non-

observable, absolute, transrational referents' (Friedland & Alford, 1991, p. 249); they have 'substances' that cannot be 'reduced to a thing's materiality, and thus cannot be described, only pointed to and named' (Friedland, 2013b, p. 19). They 'must be transmuted into observable objects – nested and interlocked – which are the means by which practices are anchored, affected and oriented' (Friedland, 2013a, p. 37). Institutional logics are bound by 'value, practice and object' (Friedland, 2013a, p. 36, 2018, p. 525), but they never fully materialise.

Materiality is thus a key assumption in the institutional logics approach (Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012). Every institutional order is seen as having material characteristics essential to its reproduction. Without objects, 'ideational elements are not easily translated, diffused and institutionalised' (Jones et al., 2013, p. 54). Jones et al.'s 2013 analysis exemplifies how objects are implicated in the creation and reproduction of institutional logics, mediating the relationship between what is visible and invisible. An examination of two dominant architectural forms shows how 'materials made religious ideas concrete and relevant for social actors, triggering identification and enabling novel practices' (Jones & Massa, 2013, p. 1127). That study demonstrates that 'Christian ideas [were] expressed through material form such as spire (or its absence), plan (cruciform versus H versus square), and stone or concrete, and that their material form was pivotal to their enduring and becoming institutionalised' (Jones & Massa, 2013, p. 1128). The properties of the materials are significant because they endure, enabling persistent patterns of identification, and thereby making institutional logics concrete. The materiality of vaults, naves, cupolas, choirs and stalls enables believers to 'read churches' (McNamara, 2011) and the logic of religion as if they were pages of a book (Carruthers, 1998). Attention to the material shows how, 'Yoked to a particular logic, objects in their objectivity and productivity sustain the believability, the naturalness of that institutional logic' (Friedland, 2018, p. 529).

Despite Friedland and Alford's (1991) call to bring the material 'back in', the materiality of institutions, or how objects play a role in making sense of the symbolic, remains relatively 'invisible' compared with ideational aspects such as cognitive frames, norms and symbols (see Jones et al., 2013, p. 51). Where studies have been conducted, institutional analysis has perhaps failed to escape the 'appeal of the form' and the assumption that the material has organising effects because of its 'presence' in space (Knox, O'Doherty, Vurdubakis, & Westrup, 2015). An understanding of the ontology of materiality expressed in terms of presence may contribute somewhat to the lack of dynamism in institutional analysis described in recent critiques, which highlight the 'overly stable, substantive and reified depictions of logics that exist in the literature' (Lounsbury & Wang, 2020, p. 11). In this understanding, mysterious and invisible institutional substance is rendered concrete, certain and materially present. This goes against Friedland and Alford's (1991) initial attempt to refrain from reifying logics. Symbols, myths and ceremonies are never made fully real when embedded in material objects: 'An institutional substance does not exist; it is rather an absent presence necessary to institutional life' (Friedland, 2013a, p. 34). What has been termed the 'materiality of absences' (Giovannoni & Quattrone, 2018) may help to address the reification of institutions, their logics and the material, by looking at the presence of absences and their roles in shaping individual, social and institutional orders. If institutions and their logics are mysterious, absent and invisible, then we need to think again about the material dimension, and how it coheres with this ineffability.

Towards a new ontology for institutional objects

If we think of institutional logics as 'mysterious' (Friedland, 2013a, p. 34), then material objects can never fully express them. Materiality can never make fully present 'institutional goods' such as love, God and money (Friedland, 2018), which remain mysterious. Understanding the failure of material objects to fully substantiate logics may help us better

appreciate the complex historical processes surrounding institutions' creation, diffusion and endurance.

Our argument around mystery resonates somewhat with studies that treat ambiguity as a matter of 'beliefs, impressions and negotiation of meanings' (Alvesson, 2001, p. 870). Particularly instructive here is the work of King and Frost (2002), who show how ambiguity allows the management of distance, balancing consistency with diversity. They show that ambiguity inspired both the Catholic Church's strategy and the design of the US constitution, guaranteeing unity through diversity. In the case of the Catholic Church, they note that holding 'the community of believers together required clarification and direction', whilst 'the fundamental faith of the Church rested on a set of mysteries that were, almost by definition, not amenable to precise description or explication' (King & Frost, 2002, p. 13). Similarly, the US constitution defines *how* but not *what* decisions are made (King & Frost, 2002, p. 13). These examples point to the presence of procedural rather than substantial rationalities when dealing with diversity, uncertainty and the unknown (Quattrone, 2015). That said, ambiguity is often treated as a cognitive limitation, or as a functional tool to facilitate management (see Eisenberg, 1984). In the search for 'closure of meaning' (Jarzabkowski & Sillince, 2007, p. 1641), ambiguity makes relevant the use of rhetoric, storytelling and narratives (Jarzabkowski, Sillince, & Shaw, 2010, pp. 222–223; Landau, Drori, & Terjesen, 2014), through which identities, values and legitimate forms of ordering are interrogated (Joutsenvirta & Vaara, 2015; Brown & Toyoki, 2013). In our treatment of mystery, which we distinguish from the notion of ambiguity, matters are deliberately left undefined because institutional values and goods are instead conceived as transcendental: they cannot be fixed in time and space (Alvesson, 2001; Friedland & Quattrone, 2019), and they are mysterious by definition, and not as the result of cognitive limitations or strategic intent. Rather than having objective goals and masking them, or analysing ambiguity stemming from the impossibility of unequivocal

knowledge, we argue that mystery is an ontological dimension that transcends cognitive approaches.

In considering mystery and institutional logics, we deepen understanding of how logics expand the possibilities for organising, acting and sustaining institutions. The mystery of the ‘goods’ (Friedland, 2018) that underpin institutions can only be searched for, never fully known. Similarity, homogeneity and knowledge do not secure institutional logics; rather, order is achieved through difference, heterogeneity and constant interrogation, as our empirical study illustrates.

Methods

Historical research was conducted over seven years to trace the *Exercises*’ role in the institutionalisation of Ignatian spirituality. The *Exercises* describe a distinctive method of prayer. They take the form of a small (A5) book of a little over 100 pages in length, written by Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, over 25 years. We take a long view in producing a holistic understanding of the interplay between objects and a specific institutional logic (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005).

Our main primary sources were the Jesuit archives in London (*Archivum Britannicum Societatis Iesu*, ABSI) and Rome (*Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu*, ARSI). We also made extensive use of secondary sources. The primary sources posed considerable challenges, as the archives are very large, with only indirect references to the materiality of the *Exercises*. We continually had to pursue ‘hunches’ and rely on an element of good fortune. Furthermore, different data sets are available for different periods. For the early period (1522 and 1526), we consulted Ignatius’s transcribed *Autobiography* (1995). From 1527, we were able to draw on Ignatius’s 7,000 published letters, which we read in the original (Portuguese, Spanish and Italian). For the period between 1548 and 1773, when the Jesuits were suppressed, we analysed

the Jesuit Constitutions, the Directories for the *Exercises* and the decrees of the Jesuits' 'General Congregations'. In the Society's post-restoration period (1814–1922), our primary sources were 19th-century decrees of the General Congregations, letters from Jesuit Generals such as Roothaan, and their notes on the *Exercises*, consulted in the ARSI. Despite the difficulties, we were able to build up a substantial 'archival residue' (Gephart, 1993). We should note that one of the authors practised the *Exercises* in their entirety.

The research progressed in two clear phases. Following a temporal bracketing strategy (Langley, 1999), we began to piece together the *Exercises*' role in creating, legitimising and diffusing a new religious logic (Greenwood, Suddaby, & Hinings, 2002; Rao, Monin, & Durand, 2003; Wright & Zammuto, 2013). For example, we explored how the text emerged from scattered notes as Ignatius travelled through Spain and in Paris in 1522; how these notes influenced the establishment of a group in Paris that would become the first Jesuits; how the inquisition engaged Ignatius's early writings; how the text was translated to appease hostile cardinals in 1540; how the Society's global spread was isomorphic with the structure of 17th-century trade and postal routes; and the interplay between Jesuits and early printing technologies. We determined how the object was historically embedded and 'defined by sociohistorical environments' (Vaara & Lamberg, 2016, p. 634), producing a detailed chronological history of the object (Greenwood et al., 2002; Rao et al., 2003; Wright & Zammuto, 2013).

While continually following 'leads' through the archives, only a minority of which would yield useful information, we came to think differently about the text. During our data collection, we implicitly conceptualised the text as a positive historical presence – a 'thing' that was carried, written, edited, printed and transported – and which could be confiscated. Our thinking began to change as we analysed objects 'nested' around the central text (Friedland, 2013a, p. 37). These included notes on how the *Exercises* should be conducted, which circulated freely

within the Society, and devotional art images distributed to laypeople to enable them to perform and practise the *Exercises*, which we observed on our travels in South America. We came to understand that, rather than substantiating the meaning of the *Exercises*, these and other objects were doing the reverse: they pointedly sought to maintain the mystery at the heart of Ignatian spirituality. We came to think in terms of absences, and how material objects demarcate things that should be unknown and unknowable. In other words, the text of the *Exercises* could not be understood exclusively in relation of the materiality of the object. We instead had to consider the materially absent, that is, the space in between what was nested around the main object, which was equally, if not more important, than the materially present object itself.

With this ‘hunch’ we returned to the materials for a more focused phase of data collection and analysis. Our interests became driven by a theoretical problem we wished to explain (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007): how do objects preserve and demarcate the absence at the heart of the logic of Ignatian spirituality? This phase was considerably quicker than the preceding period of research because we were already highly sensitised to the data and had a better sense of the geography of the archives, but we still had to pursue ‘leads’. For example, while exploring the restoration of the Society, we alighted by chance on correspondence from the General detailing the importance of not imposing any choice on the exercitant. Through more theoretically informed forays into the archives, we came to establish an account of how the text embeds religious logic in practice, not only as a material presence distributed around the world to Jesuit missions, but also through a series of carefully constructed absences. Ultimately, we created an account that sits between the pure narrative style of historical studies and ‘thematic analysis’ (Rowlinson, Hassard, & Decker, 2014, p. 253), the narrative of which reflects our ‘own reflexive understanding’ (Vaara & Lamberg, 2016, p. 638).

Our study deals with a religious logic and the primary data sources obviously manifest an evangelical tone. As analysts, when we refer to ‘God’s will’ or ‘Our Lord’, we are simply referring to the language terms and belief system of a particular monotheistic religion.

Findings

Introduction

The *Exercises* have been practised by all Jesuits since 1540. Approved by Popes Paul III and Julius III, the founding Papal Bull of the Jesuit Order describes the *Exercises* as one of the Jesuits’ key missions. They entail a method of prayer consisting of defined activities of writing and reflection. By practising the text, the individual (‘exercitant’) may find God’s will. For Jesuits, the *Exercises* are the key to unlocking the mystery of God’s will. They inform how individuals, groups and ‘managers’ (Jesuits use the term ‘*provincial*’) decide between alternative courses of action, and how the Society is ‘organised’. We think the *Exercises* pose an intriguing puzzle for organisational theory. How can a society function through a practice posited on mystery, where anything of importance cannot be known in advance?

In the sections that follow, we consider how the text constitutes the mystery at the heart of the Jesuit corpus, how it spread throughout the wider population of Catholic laypeople, and how it structures conditions of organising within the Jesuit corpus to the present day.

A book to be practised

The initial aim of the *Exercises* was to help people make major life decisions according to God’s will (Diego Laínez, letter to Ignatius of Loyola, Venice, 11 January 1543; letter from Laínez to Ignatius of Loyola, Bologna, 16 June 1547), but it quickly broadened into a way to determine God’s will in any situation and at any time. ‘*Seeking God in all things*’ became part of the Jesuit belief system (see *Exercises*, §230-§237; inter alia, letters by Ignatius of Loyola

to Juan Alvarez, Rome, 18 July 1549, to Urbano Fernandes, Rome 1 June 1551, or to Francisco de Borja, Rome, 17 September 1555). God's will cannot be known in advance but is discovered through practising of the text, referred to as 'discernment' in the Jesuit tradition.



Figure 1. 'Examen conscientiae' (Examination of conscience)

Source: *Exercitia spiritvalia S.P. Ignatii Loyolæ* (1676). Antwerp: Michaellem Knobbaert.

Such discernment occurs through four stages, known as 'weeks'. In the first week of the *Exercises*, exercitants learn how to examine their conscience, meditate on their sins and reflect on the possibility of condemnation to Hell should they not confess. Figure 1 is an art image we found in a printed version of the *Exercises*, depicting the five steps for examining one's conscience in week one. These are: give thanks to God (*gratias age*), ask for grace to know one's sins (*pete lumen*), make an account of one's soul (*examina*), ask for pardon from God (*dole*) and amend one's sins (*propone*) (*Exercises*, §43). Although the *Exercises* demand that individuals reflect on their sins, the text neither defines sin nor suggests how individuals might

make amends. Characteristically, these questions are left entirely open. Instead, exercitants must discover what is sinful by engaging in a quasi-mystical process through which understanding emerges through their interpolation into biblical scenes. Art images were produced to enable this process of imagination (Carruthers, 1998). Figure 2, discovered by one of the authors on a tour of churches in Ecuador, is based on an engraving made in Europe entitled ‘On hell’, by Joseph Sebastian and Johann Baptist Klauber. It is used as a meditative tool to trigger imagination of Hell.



Figure 2. ‘On hell’ by Francisco Albán (1760-64).

Part of a series on the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, Palacio Arzobispal, Quito, Ecuador.

The meditation calls individuals to reflect on the mystery of Hell, but the text does not substantiate what might lead to eternal condemnation. That is for individuals to discover, by learning how to see ‘with the eyes of the imagination the huge fires and, so to speak, the souls within the bodies full of fire’ (*Exercises*, §66).

The second week of the *Exercises*, which is central to this paper, involves discerning God's will, through which individuals come to know what they should do. A series of meditations on the mysteries of the life of Christ is presented, including the Incarnation, the Nativity and the Presentation in the Temple. Through a specific method for finding God's will, entitled 'The Election' (*Exercises* §169 – §188), individuals reflect on what they should 'elect', or choose, to do. However, what constitutes the praise of God is not substantiated: no meaning is attached to the notion, and any decision is potentially God's will if it is 'good' and the exercitant is 'indifferent' (*Exercises*, §170). The notion of 'good' is similarly left without meaning, but some guidance is given. Individuals are warned not to think that apparently good choices come from God. The example given is priesthood. It might be assumed that choosing a religious form of life is good and thus describes the will of God, but the Jesuit tradition eschews this way of thinking. It might not be God's will if the decision:

was not made properly and in a rightly ordered way, free from disordered affections, the only thing that can be considered is to repent and then explore how to lead a good life within the decision made. An election of this kind does not seem to be a divine vocation, since it is something improperly ordered and indirect (*Exercises*, §172).

To be sure that a decision comes directly from God's will, exercitants must adopt an orientation of complete indifference to themselves and their deeds. Being indifferent means:

without any disordered affection, to such an extent that I am not more inclined or emotionally disposed toward taking the matter proposed rather than relinquishing it, nor more toward relinquishing it rather than taking it. Instead, I should find myself in the middle, like the pointer of a balance (*Exercises*, §179).

Exercitants assess their emotions to ensure that nothing is impeding an indifferent decision, as indifference is the hallmark of God's will. Without indifference, God's will cannot be known through reason. Exercitants are therefore invited to put themselves in a meditative void that can be filled only with God's will, about which they can know nothing until they feel it and reason about their sensations.

The *Exercises* demand a daunting degree of introspection on the inner movements of the soul, without ever substantiating what a good life means for the individual. The practice was honed over nearly a quarter of a century and promises an existential experience, whereby individuals confront the mystery of God and understand his will for them personally. Importantly, exercitants do not practice the *Exercises* alone. A notable Jesuit innovation in the 16th century was the creation of a 'master' or 'spiritual guide', a confidant from whom exercitants receive guidance on what comes from God's will and what does not, whilst preserving the mystery of God's will, which appears only to the exercitant.

A book to be listened to: The role of master

The first Jesuits who practised the *Exercises*, prior to the formation of the Society of Jesus, were guided by Ignatius. They took notes on their experiences with Ignatius and would 'give them [the *Exercises*] to others' (letter from Diego Laínez to Ignatius of Loyola, Parma, 2 June 1540), acting as spiritual guides. The *Exercises* were written for the master, not the exercitant:

The person who gives to another the method and procedure for meditating or contemplating should accurately narrate the history contained in the contemplation or meditation, going over the points with only a brief or summary explanation (*Exercises*, §2).

The *Exercises* were thus a book not only to be practised (Quattrone, 2009), but also to be listened to, establishing an active relationship between the text of the *Exercises* and its point of implementation, between the master and the exercitant. Those guided by Ignatius would guide others, who in turn could act as guides, and the practice thus expanded centrifugally and exponentially from Ignatius' initial example in Rome.

The master's role is clearly defined and enigmatic. Both master and exercitant are strictly 'bound by Loyola's very precise instructions or *anotaciones* that regulate even the most technical and miniscule aspects' of the practice (Sluhovsky, 2013, p. 658). Throughout this process, the master 'must also be indifferent' (Directory of Gil González Dávila, c.1587, translated in Palmer, 1996, p. 255) and never seek to substantiate God's will:

The one giving the Exercises should not urge the one receiving them toward poverty or any other promise more than toward their opposites, or to one state or manner of living more than to another. [...] Accordingly, the one giving the Exercises ought not to lean or incline in either direction but rather, while standing by like the pointer of a scale in equilibrium, to allow the Creator to deal immediately with the creature and the creature with its Creator and Lord (*Exercises*, §15).

Spiritual guides adapted the practice to the individual, 'For the *Exercises* must be given in a form adapted to the characteristics of different persons' (Counsels of Father Duarte Pereyra, c.1562, translated in Palmer, 1996, p. 47), whilst exercising 'extreme care not to give the exercitant the impression that one is attempting to persuade him to anything' (circa 1568, translated in Palmer, 1996, p. 65). The guides' role is not to substantiate God's will, but to enable exercitants to identify the feeling of "consolation", i.e., that their spiritual experiences are orthodox and originate in God' (Sluhovsky, 2013, p. 658). Such experiences are not about 'evidential certitude'; 'experiential knowledge [is] not evidential knowledge' (Directory of Gil

González Dávila, c.1587, translated in Palmer, 1996, p. 253). Rather, the master positions the exercitant ‘as present to the mystery – or the mystery as present to himself’ (Report from Jesuit Antonio Valentino [1540–1611] on how he directed the *Exercises*, §26, translated in Palmer, 1996), not trying to resolve the mystery.

A book to be rewritten

Right from the beginning, some guides became renowned for being especially effective in enabling the discernment of God’s will. These included Peter Faber, whom Ignatius considered to be the best at guiding others (*Memoriale Seu Diarum Patris Ludovici Gonzalez de Camara*, 26 February 1555, FN, n.d.; Castro Valdés, 2006), and Peter Canisius, whose notes became famous (Iparraguirre, 1946, p. 186). Canisius had been a disciple of Faber, which suggests that lineages of authority emerged as a result of the master/exercitant relation. In each country, particular Jesuits became notable for guiding others: Leonardo Kessel in Germany, Diego Laínez in Italy, and Francis of Borgia and Francisco de Villanueva in Spain (Iparraguirre, 1946). Guides developed expansive notes on how to direct the *Exercises*, which were circulated widely and eventually published alongside the *Exercises* themselves, the masters’ notes supplementing the primary text ‘in the margins’ (Derrida, 1967).

The practice of masters publishing and distributing their notes was maintained over centuries. In the ARSI, we found examples of some pre-19th-century masters’ notes, for example by Jean Grou and Giuseppe Maria Mazzolari (see ARSI, *Exercitia*, 4, 5 and 6), as well as notes by Jesuit leaders such as Roothaan (ARSI, *Puncta meditationum et instructionum spiritualium*). None seek to substantiate God’s will. The masters’ notes, just like the *Exercises*, are characterised by what they do not say, substantiate or reify. They seek not closure, but an opening through which individuals may experience God’s will. Roothaan’s 19th-century notes emphasise that God manifests his will through individual inspiration (*Puncta meditationum et*

instructionum spiritualium, p. 440). According to Rahner (1971), whose 20th-century notes also became famous, God's will is made available to all who search for it, and 'is not a special privilege of a person chosen for an elite' (Endean, 2001, p. 31). As Barthes (1976) showed, the *Exercises* and the masters' notes are 'literarily impoverished' precisely so that, through an 'acted text' (p. 42), the master can help the exercitant to be in the presence of God's mystery. The masters' notes are a means of completing what is left incomplete by the book: they bring the text to the specific context of the exercitant, without ever reifying the context. The notes are a 'con-text', and the book of the *Exercises* a 'pre-text' that triggers the encounter between an individual and God's mystery. What the *Exercises*, the notes and the master did was to always point away from them and towards the metaphysical (as per rhetorical practices in Early Modern times, Carruthers, 1998), rather than making the reader focus on what they presented.

A book to be inhabited

For nearly half a millennium, the *Exercises* have been a means, method and condition of organisation within the Jesuit tradition. However, in this section, we illustrate how a sense of mystery is constitutive of the Jesuit tradition's organisation more broadly.

As well as a book to be practised and listened to, the *Exercises* were also allocated a physical space and time, building a further level of materiality around the text. In 1555, Ignatius ordered that every Jesuit house should have a space for practising the *Exercises* (see letter to Simao Rodrigues, October 1547; letter to Alfonso Salmeron, Rome, 1 March 1555), and such spaces to which one could retreat became characteristic of Jesuit practice. Retreats were, and are, based on the delineation of weeks in the *Exercises*. Relatively soon after 1555, retreat houses could be found wherever there were Jesuits (Iparraguirre, 1946, 1955, 1973), including Asia and Latin America. These had clear strategic relevance for the expansion of the Jesuit tradition. We found strong empirical evidence that they were used to diffuse the *Exercises*

within the Catholic world, with members of other religious organisations, such as nuns, abbots, monks, bishops and parish priests, regularly engaging with the practice through retreats (inter alia, letter to Pontio Cogordano, Rome, 12 February 1555; letter to all Jesuit students, Rome, March 1543/June 1544; letter to Francisco de Borgia, Rome, 1547).

The importance of retreat houses, spiritually *and* organisationally, is evident in many data sources. Throughout their history, we found an astounding level of focused attention given to managing, monitoring and promoting retreat houses. For instance, Figure 3 is an image of an 18th-century pamphlet publicly announcing the opening of a Jesuit retreat house in Lima (Peru). It states that a retreat house with 10 rooms has been opened so that everyone, ‘*after a general confession, will start to direct, with a new and better order, their affects, direct their actions, correct their excesses, regulate their habits, and improve their lives*’ (authors’ own translation).

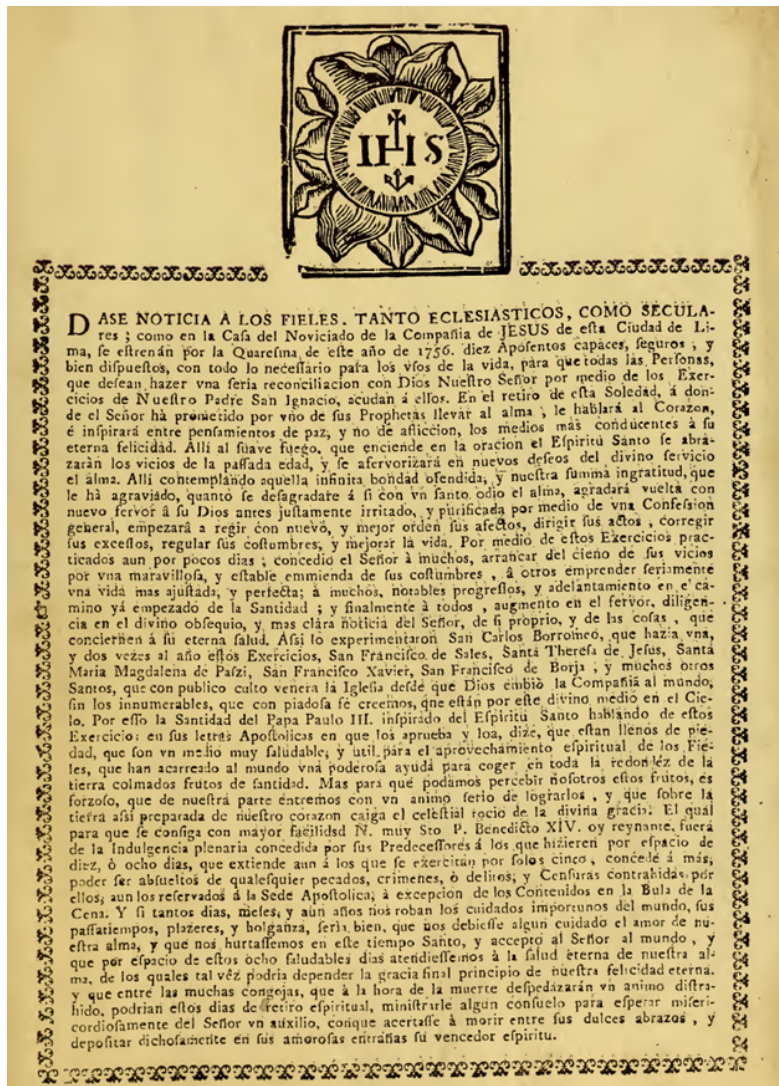


Figure 3. Pamphlet, 1756

Source: The John Carter Brown Library

(<https://archive.org/details/dasenoticialosfi00jesu/page/n2>, accessed 9 December 2019)

The Jesuits gathered precise statistics on retreats. For example, in the ARSI we found a set of documents, the *Nuova Compagnia, Statistica*, containing a separate folio of statistics entirely on the practice of the *Exercises*. The *Elenchus statisticus exercitorum clausorum* records the number of participants in the *Exercises*, how many retreats were conducted and their duration, and the types of people doing the *Exercises* (religious, priest, lay, student). Statistics were gathered on each Jesuit community and each country, and were reported annually to the headquarters in Rome.

In addition to the institutionalisation of retreat houses, the *Exercises* created conditions under which spiritual conversations would come to guide the Society's decision-making processes at all levels. We have already mentioned that discernment lies at the heart of the Jesuit way of deciding what to do, as the exercitant is put in a position of constantly engaging with God's mystery. To this day, discernment applies not just to individual elections, but also to decisions that impact on the Society as a whole. Discernment is routinely applied to any situation in which an individual or organisational decision is required. The Jesuits developed a dialogic-oral tradition based on the model of exercitant and guide (Bento da Silva, Llewellyn, & Anderson-Gough, 2017); discernment 'is always a dialogue', and 'is neither an intimist experience, nor an individualist one' (Sosa, 2018, p. 4).

At the collective level, decision making occurs through communal apostolic discernment (CAD), the practice of which remains faithful to the original text of the *Exercises*. For example, we found an internal document on collective discernment, shared with participants in a workshop held from 19 January to 3 February 2009, organised by the Jesuit headquarters in Rome. At this meeting, contemporary practice was grounded in passages from the *Exercises*. For example, paragraph 22 reads:

'it should be presupposed that every good Christian ought to be more eager to put a good interpretation on a neighbour's statement than to condemn it. Further, if one cannot interpret it favourably, one should ask how the other means it. If that meaning is wrong, one should correct the person with love; and if this is not enough, one should search out every appropriate means through which, by understanding the statement in a good way, it may be saved.'

This excerpt describes a style of interrelating (Weick & Roberts, 1993) characteristic of Jesuit practice, of speaking, listening and being open to mystery through the other: '[CAD] *is a way*

of being open and attentive to the presence of God in the world, community, and myself. God is already at work in my brothers and sisters. God works and labours in all created things (contemplation on love). Nourish all along the process of discernment as a way of listening and speaking to each other.' Listening to others is deemed fundamental to Jesuit collective discernment because 'God works in every person, so you have to actively listen to them – which is equivalent to listening to God' (from an exchange with a Jesuit).

Discernment is spiritual and mysterious, but also practical. It informs decisions, for example about resource allocations such as which missions to develop and which to close, and how to elect Jesuit leaders through a process known as *murmuratio*. When meeting to elect the global leader, Jesuits meet in pairs, and for days discuss whom each considers to be the best candidate. The dialogic tradition, which emanates from the model of exercitant and guide, informs how Jesuits assess individual performance and make decisions on individual placements through a process known as the 'Account of Conscience' (see Bento da Silva et al., 2017). It has shaped rudimentary accounting practices, such as the use of cash boxes operated with two keys held by different Jesuits. Money would be removed after a dialogue between the two parties, a spiritual preference made material in the form of lock and two key (Quattrone, 2015).

The dialogical character of the *Exercises* – the fact that everything must be done with and understood with and through another – has become imprinted on the Society. When understood in this way, we see that the Society has built outwards from the founding principle that nothing of importance can be known in advance of discernment through dialogue.

Summary of Findings

We have shown how the Jesuits came to find themselves engaging in ongoing patterns of questioning, interaction and inquiry driven by material objects. On this basis, and not because

of their innate properties, material objects have shaped the Jesuit Order. From the very beginning, materiality did not achieve closure in how it anchors practice. The association between object and practice is relational, and the religious ‘logic’ of the Jesuit Order has been reproduced and incrementally modified through an unfolding dialogue initiated but not delimited by the object. Even before the *Exercises* were legitimised by the Church, the practice of giving spiritual guidance based on Ignatius’s primary written notes led to the production of secondary objects, known as the *acomodados*, which spread throughout the Jesuit network. When the text was then published, the relationship between object and practice had to be mediated by various ‘supplements’ (Derrida, 1967). Whilst Eisenstein (1983) argues that the printing press resolved problems relating to the ‘adulteration’ of handwritten texts, we have seen that this historical transition is less clear-cut in the Jesuit case. Rather, the Jesuits developed a host of material supplements. In this sense, the text is akin to an unfinished building (Giovannoni & Quattrone, 2018), continually supplemented by new rooms and corridors, new fixtures and fittings. Art objects, which reached as far afield as Latin America, served this same purpose, allowing the Jesuit logic of close relationships between God and individuals to diffuse. The relation to practice has changed over time, yet the Jesuit Order has maintained continuity with Jesuit tradition through each period of change. The object produces a collective sense of a single Jesuit tradition, not in spite of but precisely because of the *Exercises’* objectual mystery.

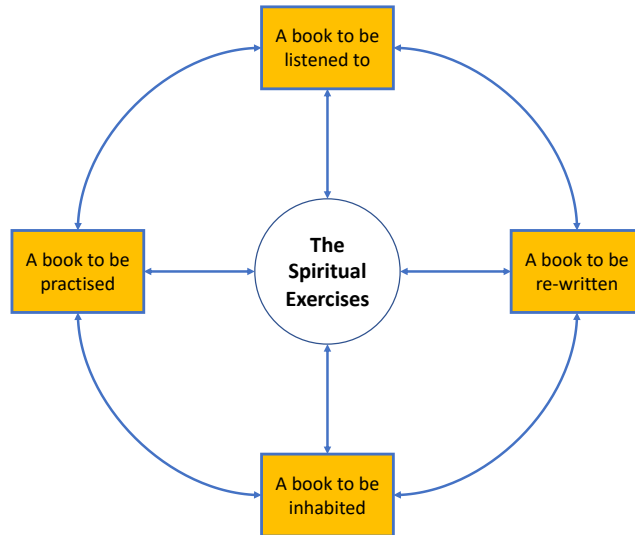


Figure 4. Objectual mystery

The fact that mystery cannot be substantiated does not mean that it is not generative. Our findings show that the *Exercises*, as an object, trigger practising, listening, writing and inhabiting (see Figure 4), which in turn trigger the creation of other objects and allow mystery to be generative. The Jesuit logic of mystery is replicated over time and space, even though the mystery remains unsubstantiated, and the book of the *Exercises*, as an object, is never fixed. Practising, re-writing, listening to and an inhabiting of the book do not follow pre-established intentions in pursuit of a given *objective*, but generate (in-) *tentions* rather than resolving them. The practice leads nowhere; listening is made in indifference; re-writing follows an open-ended plot that begins with an inventory of the self and ends with finding the mystery of God; and inhabiting beyond time and space allows each individual experience of God to be both unique and mysterious. The object is mysterious not because its affordances nest coherently within each other, but because its affordances are put ‘in-tension’. One modality (practising, listening, re-writing or inhabiting) supplements the others, without the tension inherent in any encounter with the mystery being necessarily resolved.

Discussion

Drawing on extensive archival work, we have explored the Jesuit Spiritual *Exercises* to deepen our understanding of the relationship between mystery, the invisibility of institutional substance (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Friedland, 2013a, 2018) and how objects provide ‘pivoting points’ for practices (Jones et al., 2013). Our case reveals that the material and dialogic dimensions associated with objects suggest a different form of substantiation beyond material presence, indicating the role of mystery in generating institutional orders (Quattrone, 2015).

On the mystery of institutional goods

The *Exercises* were designed to allow the pursuit and interrogation of the mystery of institutional values. The need to ensure that a multitude of believers continuously confront that mystery means the *Exercises* are defined by absence rather than presence. Mystery is not revealed by the *Exercises*; rather, through practise, exercitants engage with the book, the master, their notes and the mystery of institutional values and goods. The *Exercises* are therefore never fixed. They are constantly re-written through the master’s notes and re-inhabited by the exercitant in retreat. They create a container for theoretically infinite contents (see Quattrone, Ronzani, Jancsary, & Höllerer, 2021).

We have shown materiality does not resolve, but points towards mystery, as a reflective opportunity to orientate choice, forcing individuals to continuously explore mystery. Its generativity arises from a negative definition that transcends the material and prompts a reflective process leading to action: the power of the negative creates the conditions for action. The *Exercises* are therefore an object not because they ‘are’, but because they ‘attract’.

The *Exercises* are ‘things that talk’ (Daston, 2004), that gather multiplicities around them. They ‘do not merely repeat’ and are not instruments for recording and playing back’

(Daston, 2004, p. 11). Similar to what is highlighted in recent studies on remote working and interpersonal connectivity (Hafermalz and Riemer, 2020), media and technologies of communication frame the interaction, but do not define it. Rather, these technologies are objects to think with, ‘objects of fascination, association, and endless consideration’ (Daston, 2004). For this reason, it is important to analyse how books are made, altered and appropriated when they travel across time and space. The ‘shift in attention from being to becoming can undermine seemingly obvious assumptions about thingness’ (Daston, 2004, p. 20). Tracking the evolution of the *Exercises*’ materiality opens up new vistas on how books allow institutional logics to co-exist by combining non-phenomenological substances with processes, practices and actions (Quattrone, 2015; Friedland, 2018). Institutional values and goods are intrinsically mysterious, and we want to recall here what Friedland noted: ‘institutional substance does not exist; it is rather an absent presence necessary to institutional life’ (2013a, p. 34). His findings resonate with those of Latour (2013), when he writes of religion and love as modes of existence that cannot be cognitively known. However, our findings point towards the opposite: a present absence, the revelation of a mystery as mystery, requiring the material in order to prompt processes of interrogation. A process that exploits the role of mystery and incompleteness in guaranteeing forms of social, political, and cosmological ordering (see Kings and Frost, 2002; Ezzamel, 2009).

Our paper shows that institutional values and goods (Friedland, 2013b) are ontologically mysterious *no*-things, ready to be interrogated through procedural logics (Quattrone, 2015). This allows us to construe mystery as what emerges out of the entanglement between the material, in our case, the book as practice, the master’s notes, the dialogical encounter with the master and the inhabiting of the book, and the ‘primeval experience’ (Dupré, 1998, p. viii) that informs the exercitant’s interior encounter with mystery.

Mysterious by design

Ignatius was not like an engineer with strategic choice to convey unequivocal or ambiguous meanings through the creation of objects, nor like the director of the Californian Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, who used ambiguity to avoid reconciling the diverse meanings held by different professional groups (see Star & Griesemer, 1989, in Barley, Leonardi, & Bailey, 2010, pp. 281ff.). Ignatius could not know how the mystery of God's will, that is, the intrinsically unknowable value of a religious belief system, would manifest itself to individuals or how institutional values would evolve in different times and spaces; thus, his evangelisation strategy had to be different. Given the scale of the Jesuits' evangelical effort, it would have been impossible to design an object capable of capturing the intentions, needs and meanings of all potential interactors across distance and time. This effort speaks to those studies on the creative spirit of modern entrepreneurs (e.g. Linstead, 2018), who are intrinsically attracted by the mysterious – the not known – and what needs to be discovered *in between* (*entre-*) different ventures (*-preneurs*) (see also Hjorth, Strati, Dodd and Weik, 2018). It also speaks to how the unknowable (think of studies on future and future-making, Hernes & Schultz, 2020; Wenzel, Krämer, Kock, & Reckwitz, 2020; Thomson & Byrne, 2021) is not only generative of certain practices of sense-making and sense-giving but generate imagination (Beckert, 2021; Quattrone, 2009), wise decision-making, and exploration rather than exploitation thus guaranteeing strategic success and institutional persistence (Powell, 2018; Quattrone, 2015). Indeed, any attempt to define and inscribe God's will for an individual would undermine the whole logic of Ignatian spirituality, which is posited precisely on mystery being constitutive of the Jesuits' institutional values as open to what is different while guaranteeing institutional unity. In this regard, Assmann and Baumgarten (2001) note that monotheistic religions explicitly avoid representations of God. This is made clear in Hebrew, which makes the word 'God' unutterable by its sequence of consonants (YHWHY). Similarly, in the Jesuit art tradition,

Baroque works symbolise the continuous unfolding and irreducibility of the divine (Deleuze, 1998). Exercitants realise that they must act and pursue God's will, but such action is an exploration rather than an implementation of that will. In the context of the *Exercises*, the search for God's will is what is institutionalised, not God's will per se: that was the core Jesuit institutional value.

However, God's will is neither ambiguous nor a matter of 'interpretive flexibility'. The latter implies an ontological statement, insofar as all things encountered in our experience can have multiple meanings. God's will is not ambiguous and does not belong to the domain of any type of knowledge. As Dupré (1998, p. 3) puts it, 'the religious act intends the transcendent "object"', about which any 'epistemological concerns' (p. 19) are absent. The notion of 'God's will' points to that which is hidden and cannot be expressed. Hence, Von Balthasar's contention that mystery manifests itself through an aesthetical revelation whereby the aesthetical form reveals the mystery, while 'at the same time protecting and veiling it [...] The content does not lie behind the form but within it' (Von Balthasar, 1982, p. 151). So, what is the role played by objects in such settings?

Objectual mystery

Our study supports Jones and Massa's (2013) argument, and the general tenet of actor-network theory (Law, 1987), that objects do not merely represent 'unobservable substances' (Friedland, 2013, p. 37) in material form. Objects 'act back' on the people who create them. Rather than understanding material objects as passive reflections of institutional logics, or the intentions of powerful actors, we have analysed how the same object transforms itself into multiple different objects that trigger engagement with mystery. It is the search, and how that search is conducted, that guarantees order and not the materialisation of institutional goods.

Our case thus informs and develops a theoretical debate within institutional theory concerning the nature of the relationship between objects, practices and logics, whereby objects may be considered as ‘pivoting points’ for practices (Jones et al., 2013). In the case of the Jesuits, the *Exercises* have shaped Jesuit practice ‘at a distance’, not because of their ambiguity (Latour, 1987; King & Frost, 2002), but because they make the mystery visible while simultaneously veiling it. They have promoted the spread of a particular form-of-life, without ever entirely determining what this form-of-life should be.

Objects are thus not ‘material manifestations’ of logics. It is not enough to argue that institutional logics are fixed into ‘observable objects – nested and interlocked – which are the means by which practices are anchored, affected and oriented’ (Friedland, 2013a, p. 37). Rather, in our case, the object is as mysterious as the logics it seeks to embody. This objectual mystery has driven practice over centuries because it poses the exercitant’s ongoing relational engagement with the various dimensions of the *Exercises* in conjunction with the exercitant’s primeval subjective experience of the mystery of God. The relational engagement and primeval experience sustain the search for a revelation of God’s will, without guaranteeing that this will ever manifest itself. In this sense, the void has an agency in predisposing the interplay among dispersed and potentially opposed institutional values and actors (Giovannoni and Quattrone, 2018), where physical and virtual objects become performances rather than being simply performative (Nash, 2020). The object triggers a series of unending ‘dialogues’ (Tsoukas, 2009) with institutional values and goods. It is the unending nature of the dialogue that secures the logics of the institution.

The object thus mediates the relationship between change and stability (March, 1996), and between materiality and immateriality. Over 400 years, the practice of the *Exercises* has changed but the founding object has not. It is not the materiality of the object itself that secures the Jesuit logic; rather, the fact that Jesuits must continually interrogate God’s will enables

adaptation, diffusion and maintenance of the institution. Existing literature has shown how material objects underpin institutional logics by spreading meanings and identities in ways that endure over time. In contrast, by taking a long historical view, we have shown that objects can also conceal the institutional logics and values that they are supposed to manifest and disseminate. Objects can pose questions and problems with which successive generations must resolve, and logics and rationalities unfold through this continuous dialogue. Therefore, we propose that we must move beyond conceptions of the relationship between the material and institutional logics underpinned by correspondence, coherence, meaning and purpose. This implies openness to the inherent mystery of institutional logics, and to the mystery that affords some objects institutional relevance.

Our paper provides insights into how we might bridge ‘the current division of labour between studies of material and ideational aspects of institutionalisation’ (Zilber, 2008, p. 164). The history of the *Exercises* shows that absences also have agency. They help to open a debate on whether institutions are to be conceived of as a stabilising combination of values and practices, leading to ‘taken-for-grantedness’, or rather as an evolutionary combination of these values and practices, which has agency not because they define typified and knowable criteria of appropriateness (Berger and Luckmann, 1967), but because of the impossibility of knowing them: ‘a privative non-coinciding, a coinciding from afar, a divergence’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 124-5). They make us face the need for a kind of ‘phenomenological institutionalism’ which recovers the influence of phenomenology on the early institutional theorists (see Lounsbury and Wang, 2020; Gehman, 2021).

Our paper contributes to the raising attention given to mystery, absences, the unknowable, and the negative, which is surfacing in organisation studies and beyond. As also shown by Cucchi, Lubberink, Dentoni, and Gartner (2021), it is, at times, in the context of spiritual communities, mysterious tragedies, and inexplicable events that community-based

enterprises are created. There is thus room to use mystery as lens to make sense of organisations, organising and sense-making (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2020; Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011). The study of situated action can ethnographically enlighten the contradictions of those spaces in between various institutional logics, values, and practices (Zilber, 2020). Organisational and institutional theorists should recognise that they might fruitfully analyse not only what can be positively observed, but also the positive presence of a negative absence. We must come to terms with the fact that the mysterious matters, and that objects may be containers of veiled and mysterious contents that manifest themselves outside our modern and substantiated domains of knowledge.

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