I began my analysis of Ignatius’ critique of ascetic ideals with an exploration of the understanding of asceticism that informs his letter to the scholastics in Coimbra. I then proceeded to consider Ignatius’ efforts to articulate the definition of discernment that would provide the basis for the hierarchical arrangement of the different Jesuit communities. My discussion of these efforts treated them as developments of what is already outlined in the letter to Coimbra—the assumption, which I now state explicitly, was that everything that Ignatius has to say about the superior’s claim on discernment and about the importance of living under a superior can be traced back to that document.

Now, my reading of the letter to Coimbra showed that everything that Ignatius has to say about discernment aims, in the end, to secure the instrument’s operativity: Ignatius insists on the need for the superior to stake his rightful claim on discernment because he believes that to be the best way of preventing the instrument from being damaged—as it might be if it takes it upon itself to decide what it should do. If what Ignatius has to say about discernment can be traced back to the letter to Coimbra, then it is possible to assume that his insistence on the need for Jesuits to live under a superior—a need that form him follows from his definition of discernment—is also concerned with securing the instrument’s operativity: hierarchy, too, is in the service of the instrument.

I remark on this point in preparation for a discussion, precisely, of the relation between the metaphor of the instrument and the process culminating in the consolidation of a hierarchical arrangement for the whole Society. Ignatius’ exhaustive reflection on obedience, starting with the letter to Coimbra and culminating in his famous letter of 26 March 1553, will prove crucial to this discussion. But so will the metaphor that is meant to give expression to the hierarchical ideal, and to the unity that hierarchy is considered capable of bringing about. I am referring here to the metaphor of the body.

I noted just now that hierarchy as Ignatius speaks of it would seem to be in the service of the instrument. In the end, though, the very opposite might be the case. What functions at one specific juncture as a way of
securing the instrument’s operativity might, in its development, pose a challenge to the central presuppositions of the instrumental paradigm. The same hierarchical destiny that seems to be in the service of the instrument, in other words, might end up working against it. The reason for this opposition lies in a threat as serious as, if not more serious than, the one posed by the ascetic drive. What distinguishes this threat is the fact that it originates, unlike the one associated with the ascetic drive, in the operative instrument. At stake here is that dispersion which, as I suggested in my discussion of the commitment to instruction, the instrument itself posits as the condition of its efficacy. What makes it threatening should not be hard to identify. It is the fact that it is bound up with the possibility of the disintegration of the community of instruments.

In his first letter to Gandía, Ignatius had reflected on the advantages of a daily practice of obedience, the kind of practice that is only possible in the presence of a superior. What he had to say there reflects a consciousness of the Society’s uniqueness: this practice is necessary, he suggests, not only in light of the fact that among Jesuits there are many who are very learned and influential—two things that might make them resistant to taking orders—but also because the Society includes “people who are in mission from the Pope or from other Church dignitaries” and who are therefore “scattered in places far away from where the General Superior lives.”

If the instruments are truly committed to continuously extend their action towards others, they cannot expect to be present to one another—the fact that Jesuits are “scattered in places far away” is in and of itself an indication of their efficacy as instruments. Ignatius and those around him seem to have understood, however, that this dispersion could end up compromising what, in the same letter to Gandía, Ignatius refers to, for the first time, as “the body of the Society [el cuerpo de la Compañía].” That the union between Jesuits could suffer in light of the dispersion of its members is something that the Constitutions themselves will recognize. They do so, I should note here, in the very terms in which the problem of union is formulated, as a problem touching on the imagination of a body:

The more difficult it is for the members of this congregation to be united with their head and among themselves, since they are so scattered among the faithful and the unbelievers in diverse parts of the world, the more ought

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1 Ep., 1:559.
2 Ep., 1:558.