

Fragmentation, Impartiality, and Conscience in Gurdjieff's Teaching

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In *Beelzebub's Tales* the Emblem of the Society Akhaldan¹ is described as a Sphinx-like sculpture called "Conscience" which is composed of five symbolic elements: Bull trunk; Lion leg; Eagle wings; Virgin breasts; and Amber, which connects but separates the breasts from the rest of the beast². The word "Con-science" implies a unification of the five into one being, "Con" meaning "together" and "science" meaning "sensation" or "awareness." We note that elsewhere³ Conscience is defined as "feeling together all that is ordinarily felt separately".

The amber of the Akhaldan sphinx is said to represent impartiality: that our love for others (caritas, care, symbolized by the virgin breasts) must be strictly impartial, non-egoistic, not influenced by any self-interest, or any interest based on a separate identity membership such as race, gender, religion, class, or community. Again, the word "im-partial" implies a unified inner state, echoing the connotation of "con-science". The five-part beast is actually meant to be One, but only becomes fully human when unified under impartiality. In fact, we fail to live up to any of the characteristics symbolized by the five parts: indefatigability (bull), courage and sense of might (lion), freedom of thought (wings), love (breasts), and impartiality (amber). Each of these represents a lack for which we can and should experience remorse ("re-morse", that which "bites back"). It is this remorse which must be cognized and felt in its full bite, in every situation of life, which alone can generate the force that will change the inner man, eventually allow the old man to die, and resurrect and reunite the new man.

In Gurdjieff work, the idea of a Way of fragmentation followed by unification is expressed in several metaphors. In another one, in *Fragments* it is said that it is necessary to separate oneself into three "centers": body, heart, mind; only after which is unification as an individual "I" possible. Too, the very title of Ouspensky's great book reminds us that the teaching, while a unified whole, is given and can only be given in the form of fragments. If we wish to make the teaching "known" (to ourselves, for example) we have to make it our own by a personal "work" of "verification" of the fragments, followed by another work to bring the fragments together.

In certain ancient myths and initiation rituals the self is dismembered, then re-assembled, remembered. Phillippe Lavastine reminds us⁴ that the creation myth of the Rig Veda speaks about

¹ *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*, G. I. Gurdjieff (first edition), pp. 310-311

² A noted symbolist reminds us (anonymous communication) that the four bodily components of the Emblem can be aligned with the classical elements Earth, Fire, Air, and Water. Indeed, Water is the milk of life on earth; it exists on our planet in liquid form only because of a cyclic process of evaporation and precipitation conditioned by earth, fire, and air. The fifth component Amber can be aligned with the mysterious fifth element "quint-essence."

³ *Fragments of an Unknown Teaching*, P. D. Ouspensky.

⁴ "Two Vedantas: The Best and the Worst of India," a lecture sponsored by the Gurdjieff Foundation in San Francisco, published in *Material for Thought* No. 5, Spring 1974, Far West Editions.

how God in the form of Man (*Purusha*) was dismembered by the lesser gods, his own senses, and now has to be re-membered. In another similar myth Dionysius was torn apart and eaten by the Titans at the instigation of Hera—but his heart was saved by his mother Semele (“The Earth,” illegitimate mistress of Zeus) and he was resurrected⁵. This was enacted in Orphic Dionysian Mystery rituals in which the initiate enters a trance by means of dance, music, and psychedelic drugs (or at least wine) and experiences inner dismemberment and death followed by ecstatic re-memberment. Similar myths and rituals existed in ancient Egypt, the pre-Columbian New World⁶, and other places.

Such rituals were often sacrifices. The celebrant sacrifices either his “self”, or valuable goods, or an animal. The sacrifice is dismembered, then metaphysically resurrected whole, often conceived as rebirth in a cosmic dimension. In later historical phases of the Indo-European/Mesopotamian axis, after about the mid-first millennium BCE, what is sacrificed is often money. This reflects the universalizing tendency of money, which is argued by Seaford to be parallel to and even causative to the development of monotheism and monism (the concept that All is One Whole Thing, the uni-verse) and monarchy and a sense of man as a separate individual with private property rather than embedded within a community. Such ideas developed precisely in those cultures in which money began to be a universal medium of exchange.

This raises perhaps a new question about a major subtext that runs through *Beelzebub's Tales*, Beelzebub's aim of ending the practice of animal sacrifice on Earth—an aim which it seems he never quite accomplished.

Lavastine said that we aspire to be “individuals”, meaning un-divided, but that now we are “dividuals”. A similar concept appears in ethnographic notes on Melanesian ideas⁷ of the nature of man:⁸

In the simplest terms, the individual is considered to be an indivisible self or person. That is, it refers to something like the essential core, or spirit of a singular human being, which, as a whole, defines that self in its particularity. To change, remove or otherwise alter any part of that whole would fundamentally alter the ‘self’; she/he would then be, effectively, a different

⁵ See the important recent scholarly survey of such myths *The Origins of Philosophy in Ancient Greece and Ancient India* by Richard Seaford, 2019.

⁶ “The Way of Sacrifice and the Light Within,” Richard Hodges, 2015
<http://richardhodges.com/SacrificeAndLight4.htm> .

⁷ We note a received tradition that Gurdjieff undertook a mysterious trip to the Solomon Islands, in Melanesia. Perhaps it is relevant that Solomon Island religion included a nine-pointed circle of divine principles that bears certain resemblances to Gurdjieff's Enneagram.

⁸ “From Dividual and Individual to Porous Subjects,” K. Smith *Australian Journal of Anthropology*, 23.1.5–64, cited in Seaford *op. cit.*

person. By contrast, the dividual is considered to be divisible, comprising a complex of separable—interrelated but essentially independent—dimensions or aspects. The individual is thus monadic, while the dividual is fractal; the individual is atomistic, while the dividual is always socially embedded; the individual is an autonomous social actor, the author of his or her own actions, while the dividual is a heteronomous actor performing a culturally written script; the individual is a free-agent, while the dividual is determined by cultural structures; the individual is egocentric, and the dividual is sociocentric.

In Melanesia an important ritual is what anthropologists call “potlach,” a giving-away of much or all of one’s worldly goods. The Individual, liberated from his dividual possessions (which possess him as much as he possesses them), gains much more in personal being and standing in the community than is given up

Gurdjieff promises on the first page of *Beelzebub’s Tales* to “destroy mercilessly all the beliefs and view by centuries rooted in [them]”—a noble aim, but has it really happened? Who would realistically claim to have actually had “all beliefs and views” destroyed? Yet, even in its hyperbole (like much of Gurdjieff’s writings) this reminds us of the fact that to have one’s cherished beliefs destroyed is not a bad thing; beliefs are one more thing that need to be repented of. Hyperbole is not necessarily bad: as the saying has it “sometimes too much of a good thing is not nearly enough”⁹.

This destruction of beliefs cannot happen mechanically, passively. We must consciously recognize our beliefs, and sacrifice them. How is this to be done? One way is by opening to ideas contrary to our beliefs. This seems to be Gurdjieff’s method in *Beelzebub’s Tales*: many of the stories and concepts in the book contain patent absurdities that contradict what anyone might have brought with him. There is a certain practice implied, of provisionally accepting such absurdities and examining them alongside the contradictory ideas we come to the book with, which are also seen to be absurdities at least in the sense that we have only adopted them ready-made without really examining or verifying them.

Let us take, for example, the story about the origin of apes: female humans, isolated from male humans by the “transapalnian” catastrophe, mated with lower animals and gave birth to apes, half-human but externally resembling the animal half of their parentage. Here, Darwinian evolution theory would be set against the story in *Beelzebub*. A deeper understanding of both would be the hoped-for result of the confrontation. In this case one understanding of Beelzebub’s story is that the lonely females represent the passive nature of our organism which mechanically takes on anything as a habit if it is often repeated or compelled, and the male “animals” represent mere animal desires of the organism such as for food, sleep, sex gratification, prestige, etc. The “apes” are then the personality formations in us—in all of us—adopted by the organism to do those learned behaviors, inner as well as outer, that help gratify these desires. Darwin can explain the same thing, but in a way that does not entail the remorse of having given oneself over to these sub-human formations.

⁹ W. C. Fields. An earlier version of this quip is attributed to Mark Twain.

But there are still more sacrifices required, deeper ones. What is the main sacrifice to which Gurdjieff calls us, in the name of unification? In a talk from the 1940's Gurdjieff speaks of "sensation," which has long been a main principle of his practical teaching. It is difficult to define precisely what this "sensation" is, but in this talk he gives a key: this sensation grows from "free attention" which is liberated by efforts to free oneself from "identification." Identification is the principle aspect of that overweening self-interest that always narrows our moral and intellectual vision and poisons our efforts of "inner work." In a word: Ego. Not the sacred "I am" of the true Individual but the Ego of social motivation and valuation.

In this talk, "sensation" is compared to the moon, which Gurdjieff (in *Fragments*) calls the "growing tip of the Ray of Creation". Reading a little deeper into this metaphor, we wonder if it is significant that the light of the moon is millions of times fainter than the light that illuminates it, the Sun, which is symbolically conscious attention; and that the inner simulacrum of one's whole self, the man inside that we sometimes perceive within the sensation of the body, is not a bit like the "man in the moon": a pale perceptual interpretations of faint shadows.

Yet we are told we need to sacrifice to this moon in oneself. To feed it consciously by our intentional suffering, or else it will be fed unconsciously by our inevitable death. The intentional suffering of abandoning our identification with contents of thought, largely the intellectual deductions from beliefs drummed into us so effectively by education, upbringing, childhood traumas such as fear of punishment and disapproval by parents and others, etc. Only this abandonment of much that we hold precious can free our conscious attention to turn toward a deeper substratum of inner life, which is what is called "sensation". This is not just a looking at the man-in-the moon, it is becoming the Moon and the Sun, entering into a new process of reciprocal feeding between consciousness and deep being.