

Inside Out

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We live inside out. We experience the world as out-there—but from where, from what place, do we do the experiencing? One of the teachings I absorbed from my early years in Gurdjieff was that we should turn around, “see the seer,” recognize the perceiver in every moment of perception. I later found a similar idea in the Buddhist doctrine of Mahamudra, expressed in a way that is at first puzzling: “things have no self-nature.” What was puzzling was that the self itself is said not to have any self-nature. Reading and pondering the book *Mahamudra I* deciphered the puzzle: what is meant is that “experience” and “thought” present themselves to us as “out there,” but they are constructions of mind, hence not trustworthy representations of reality. The only reality is the *mind* which is where the construction of “reality” takes place. It takes a lifetime of correctly conducted inner work to come to a conviction and an ineluctable perception that this is always so. I recognized this as similar to Gurdjieff’s doctrine that work on oneself begins with “correctly conducted self-observation,” which must be founded on the idea of one’s mechanicality.

To always “see the seer,” to “remember oneself”: no small thing.

What is the seer? It is a measuring stick, a *ruler* by which space and things in space, and other beings, are measured. An idea from Einstein is useful: the meaning of “relativity” is not simply that motion is always *relative*, a movement of one thing relative to something else—it is a deeper idea, that movement and dimension is always implicitly *measured* by a ruler. The essential thing is that what we can actually know of space and time is inherently *local*: it can only take place in a *here and now* in which the ruler can be put right up against the thing measured. A larger-scale view of the world is possible only by stitching together an infinity, a continuum, of local measurements. This idea is necessary for a valid mathematical representation of that astonishing new principle of general relativity, that space-time is curved, and that what appears to us as the force of gravity is actually an epiphenomenon of this curvature: the curvature is affected locally by the presence of material objects in space in a way that causes them to seem to attract each other.

An analogy is the curvature of the earth. Locally, from ground level, the earth appears to be flat, because it is so large that we do not see its curvature. But if we make careful measurements we discover for example that the angles of very large triangles of land do not add up to what Euclidean geometry teaches they must add up to if the world were flat: 180 degrees. They add up to more than that by an amount which happens to be exactly proportional to the acreage included in the triangle! By this means we deploy *local* measurements (of angles) to infer a *global* property of the earth (spherical curvature). We can even measure the size of the earth in this way, from the excess angles of a triangle of land much smaller than the whole earth!

Relativity implies that we can only achieve a valid non-local representation of space by *local* measurements, and by taking into account how the local ruler changes from place to place and time to time. Something similar applies to consciousness: we can only have a valid consciousness of the world outside by stitching together local observations, which can only be

“here and now,” and by taking into account the inner ruler and its changes as it is affected by the things in the world. Further, we can tell how large the world is by the excess angles of outer things, which always add up to more than we expected.

You may be wondering what all this means for us, for *oneself*. I am getting to that. It means that one needs to cultivate a new attitude to the world, a more passive attitude, in which one does not force the conception of how the world *is* as a whole into some procrustean idea-bed, but simply registers impressions, and then can gradually stitch them together into a larger conception. But this only gives valid results to the extent that we make sure that what they seem to add up to does not exceed what they really add up to.

Central to this stitched-up fabric is always the *stitcher*, the central consciousness, the *seer*. Going deeper, even our conception of the self itself, stitched up from observations in which we conceive that there is a self, from or in which the observation takes place, is recognized as a *fabrication*. We cannot ultimately trust the stitcher. We can only trust the observation, the impression, and only in the moment of it.

It is like Diogenes’ esoteric principle only to trust what he could “touch and smell,” for which he was said by his enemies to be “like a dog,” “a cynic” (from the Greek for dog: “kyon”). But he liked the image and took it on as the epithet for his school.

Descartes’s *cogito ergo sum* is also in play: we take his *cogito* to mean “cognize,” “have in mind,” rather than the common translation “think” which misleadingly implies a discursive process. His discovery was that his *existence* (Latin “*sum*”: “I am”) was an inference from directly perceived *cogito*.

And the scene in *Genesis* of primordial man eating the fruit of “knowledge” may, by a stretch, mean that knowledge (which includes but is not limited to “good and evil”) is a fabrication which ensnares man in the illusion of its “truth”: is this the real “original sin,” conceived and born out of virgin perception, because of which man must toil and suffer? A certain new modesty of mind is required, a sacrificial death of vain self-overestimation, which grants salvation from much unnecessary suffering.

But despite that many people may be aware of such critique they do not really *live* it. It has been said that there have been many philosophers but very few of them *lived* their philosophy. Diogenes would be one. And Socrates. And Buddha. And Nietzsche. We are not yet such, we are far from *living* what we think we know. It is a long study.