

“Being” in *Beelzebub*¹

[R Hodges](#) © December 2021

Being contains everything manifested; Non-Being contains everything unmanifested, including Being itself; but universal Possibility contains both Being and Non-Being.

René Guénon, *The Multiple States of Being*

Ancient wise men sensed a doubled universe—
Existence here below, source up above.
This line drawn, questions then arose:
What *is* above, and what below?

How does potential put on Being?
Who indeed can say?
The very gods are later than Creation,
and whether He whose eye’s perspective
takes in All did make the world, or did not—
He alone might know the reason it was made;
or may not know.

Creation Hymn, Rg Veda 10.129, transl. R Hodges

Introduction

What is “being”? What is the being of man, and are there different grades of man’s being? Is it possible, and how, to attain a higher grade of being? Such questions occur naturally to people (though perhaps not very often), and are addressed, sometimes very deeply, in various teachings, philosophies, religions. In Gurdjieff’s teaching they are central.

The idea of “being” is not understood by us. Understanding is dependent on level of being², and our ordinary level does not admit the understanding of fundamental realities such as “being.” A key aim of *Beelzebub’s Tales* is to gradually illuminate a new understanding. This requires a radical change in us. Foretastes occur in brief flashes, but we are unable to hold on to them. Real change, enduring change,

¹ The full title of Gurdjieff’s magnum opus is *Beelzebub’s Tales to His Grandson* (BT in the present essay). In chapter II “Why Beelzebub Was in Our Solar System” the stage is set: we learn that Beelzebub has been granted reprieve from long exile in our remote solar system Ors and is making the long return voyage to his home planet Karatas on spaceship Karnak. To pass the time he is telling tales about his sojourns on our planet Earth to his grandson Hassein.

It may be worth noting that “Hassein” was the name of the grandson of the prophet Muhammad. It may also be worth noting that in heraldry “Ors” means “gold”; and “Kara” means “black” in Turkic languages, which Gurdjieff frequently makes use of in his made-up words.

² P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous* Chapter IV p. 67: Ouspensky quotes Gurdjieff as saying “Understanding is the resultant of knowledge and being” and that in the West knowledge is highly developed, but Being has fallen behind.

entails long effort and cooperation on our part, beginning with the recognition that we do not understand, energized by a deep wish to understand.

The idea of “consciousness” presents similar problems. People assume that they are conscious most of the time. But is it so?³ Even if there is a point of consciousness “inside,” isn’t it a light that is transient or at least fluctuating? And isn’t it, even at its greatest degree of brightness, a tiny tip of a much larger iceberg of unconscious being? It is not impossible to be aware of such fluctuations, and of dark hidden depths: this is revealed by impartial self-observation as taught by Gurdjieff, which would necessarily lead to a different understanding.

This *not understanding* is a serious matter. Being and consciousness are profound mysteries. We read or hear or say these words and as usually happens with words we take their familiarity for granted and do not face the fact that we do not understand. This should strike us as a symptom of the weakness of our mind, its need for development. Is there a way to develop the mind? It begins with accepting the impression of *not understanding*. This is an inner attitude very hard to practice. It is not the same as looking away, passing over the question and going on something else. It is also not the same as escaping into sensation or feeling. It silences us, momentarily stopping the flow of associations, yet keeping thought alive. This knife-edge balance point is actually *Being itself*, prior to its inevitable descent into contingency. It is only here that we can receive any new understanding.

“Being” in *Beelzebub’s Tales*

The word “being” occurs in BT over 5000 times, in different combinations—more than any other substantive word⁴. Obviously, no explanation of being is possible in conventional words and concepts—other means such as symbolism and allegory are necessary. Other essential elements of Gurdjieff’s style and teaching method are word-play, satire, and humor.

Let us review the bones of what is said about “being.”

³ A recent book illustrates this problem: *Being You* by Anil Seth, a prominent researcher in “the science of Consciousness.” As in many books and articles in this relatively new field, there is a presumption that people are conscious and self-aware and that this consciousness constitutes what a person “really is.”

⁴ The published Russian text of *Beelzebub’s Tales* uses two different words that are both translated as “being” in the English version. One of the words in Russian is *существо* /sushchestvo/. This means in its basic connotation a being, a creature. The very first occurrence of “being” in a substantive sense in BT (p. 16 first paragraph: “evoke in their being”) is in the Russian *существо* /sushchestve/, a grammatical case of the same word.

The word БЫТЬ /byt/ is cognate to English “Being.” It is used in the headline of the poster (see below) for the Gurdjieff Institute in Tiflis: ЗНАТЬ-ПОНИМАТЬ-БЫТЬ /ZNAT'-PONIMAT'-BYT'/ (To Know—To Understand—To Be).

The title of BT Chapter VII “Becoming Aware of Genuine Being-Duty” is in the Russian text ОСОЗНАНИЕ ИСТИННОГО БЫТИЙНОГО ДОЛГА /OSOZNANIYE ISTINNOGO BYTIYNOGO DOLGA/. The word БЫТИЙНОГО is a form of БЫТЬ. The frequently occurring phrase “Being-partkdolg duty,” first appearing in BT in Chapter XIII “Why in Man’s Reason Fantasy May Be Perceived as Reality” is “бытийной-Парткдолг-обязанностью” /bytiynoy-Partkdolg-obyazannost'yu/. “Partkdolg” is one of Gurdjieff’s made-up words; ДОЛГ /dolg/ means duty or debt, so the phrase may mean “duty, (a) part (of being)” or perhaps “debt for Being.”

Among other things it is said that certain “tetartocosmoses”—animate creatures?—became such that they had two “natures”—one physical, the other spiritual—and were therefore called “beings.”⁵ The semantic form of the word “be-ing” actually conveys an implication of two natures: “a Thing, which Is.” Later, a “higher sacred part” of yet a third nature was added, or “coated” as BT puts it. These “three-brained-beings” are what is known as “man.”

The question of the Being of animals, two-brained beings, is made specially poignant by the story running through much of BT, about how one of Beelzebub’s reasons for his sojourns to Earth was to stop the practice of “animal sacrifice.”⁶ His interventions were not successful. In one case a reduction in animal sacrifice led to a very bad result⁷: it turns out that a certain Higher Being requires the suffering of sentient beings as a kind of food, and that stopping the suffering entailed by animal sacrifice led in compensation to an increase in war, with its human suffering and death. And yet animal sacrifice continues on a very large scale on earth, one case being the massive annual sacrifice of sheep in a key ritual of the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca.

It may be that the tales in BT about animal sacrifice and animal suffering are also allegorically about human beings’ sacrifice of their animalistic impulses and behaviors, and the suffering entailed. In any case, it is clear that “suffering” is a key element of Being, the more so the higher the grade of Being. BT says:

In all three-brained beings of the whole of our Universe without exception, among whom are also we men, owing to the data crystallized in our common presences for engendering in us the Divine impulse of conscience, “the-whole-of-us” and the whole of our essence, are, and must be, already in our foundation, only suffering.⁸

For Man, a series of grades of being (or of Reason, as is often said in BT) is evoked. They are assigned different names that are peppered throughout the book. Some of these names are, in ascending order: Degindad, Ternonald, Podkoolad, Anklad; three higher unnamed degrees are alluded to although they are described as not accessible to individual human beings⁹. There is a process of ascent from lower to higher grades that depends on “conscious labor and intentional suffering.” “Intentional suffering” seems to be able to substitute for the unconscious sufferings that a certain Higher Being feeds on.

But this is not the point. Suffering as food for some Higher Being, no matter how grand as idea, seems remote from human truth. Closer to home, suffering is surely a food that human Being feeds on. Unintentional suffering as well—the fulcrum of its value as nourishment is how it is received, the attitude of the one who suffers.

We are meant, evidently, to suffer for the poor level of our Being. The suffering of the “third brain,” the self-conscious part of man, is of a much higher individual as well as cosmic significance than animal suffering. The third brain is also the part capable of intention. “Intentional suffering” is *the* action that can produce food for Being. The whole of Gurdjieff’s third book *Life is Real, Only Then When ‘I Am’* is about

⁵ BT, Chapter “Purgatory”, p 764

⁶ The first such story begins in BT Chapter XIX “Beelzebub’s second descent” p189

⁷ The story of Atarnakh the Kurd, BT Chapter XLIII “Beelzebub’s Opinion of War”, p 1094 ff.

⁸ BT, Chapter “Organization by Ashiata Shiemash,” p 372

⁹ BT, Chapter “The Inevitable Result of Impartial Mentation,” p 1177

intentional suffering: on the very first page; in the Prologue when he realizes that he cannot, in spite of his great inner powers, “remember himself” intentionally; then in his account of his “moral sufferings” in that he fails to use his powers to cure his beloved wife of cancer because he has to spend his energy on issues relating to the financial failure of his Institute at the Prieuré; his ultimately dashed hopes for the Institute; his expulsion of his “brother” Orage¹⁰ from his leadership role in America, and Orage’s separation from Gurdjieff, and ultimately his death seven years later. Gurdjieff’s inner work is always to transform this suffering into potency for accomplishing his true aim, which is to help elevate the level of Being of people.

It seems that the “When ‘I Am’” of the title of this third book means “When I am suffering.” We may be meant to understand that the unique power of real “I” in a man is to suffer intentionally. But how much of such an understanding do we actually practice?

All this strikes me as an original and substantial answer to the question often posed but never really answered in religious and philosophical thought about the meaning of suffering, and the value of confession and penance. It is related to the classic stories of the sacrifices of great martyr “messengers” including Christ, Buddha, Socrates, but closer to the bone. But it is not really an answer unless it is practiced in one’s own life.

If words are the dry bones of Being, then when Gurdjieff says it is not the bones but the “buried dog” that must be dug up, does “dog” mean our Self, our Being itself? And is there an interlingual pun on Russian ДОЛГ /dolg/, which means Duty or Debt? Is it our “Duty” that must be dug up? There is a Gurdjieffian koan “what is it you remember when you remember yourself?” to which the classic answer is “you remember what you are here to do,” i.e. your duty. To “suffer” your duty honestly, which means etymologically to “carry” the burden of it. Self-remembering refers not only to an individual duty implied by the grand (if not grandiose) idea of *fate*, but also to small duties—for example there is a common experience of going into a room and discovering that one has forgotten why one did so: somehow between the thought of needing to go to another room for some reason and actually entering the room, the temporary small duty assigned by mind to the body has gotten lost.

Why was the “dog” of Self buried? It seems related to Freud’s idea of repression of thoughts and desires and actions forbidden from conscious awareness by social pressure from parents, religion, school, convention etc. This repressed Unconscious mind needs to be un-buried, made conscious, if we are to come into our true Being as adult grown-up individuals. *This* is no doubt our first duty to our own possible Being. No small thing.

Gurdjieff seems to disparage Freud in BT and elsewhere, yet many of his ideas seem quite resonant to Freud’s. For example there is this passage¹¹:

Only thanks to the single fact that [human beings], especially the contemporary ones, do not know at all and even do not suspect the necessity of at least adapting their famous education to the said subconsciousness of their offspring, but that they always and in everything intentionally assist every one of the rising generation to perceive impressions only from the abnormally artificial, then thanks only to this, when every one of them reaches the age of a responsible being all his being-judgments and all his deductions from them are always purely peculiarly-subjective in him and have no

¹⁰ Paul Beekman Taylor, *Brothers in Elysium: Orage in Gurdjieff’s Service*

¹¹ BT chapter XXXIII “Hypnotism” p. 567

connection not only with the genuine being-impulses arising also in him, but also neither with those general cosmic lawful phenomena, to sense which by Reason is proper to every three-brained being, and by means of which there is established that connection between all the three-brained beings of all our Great Universe for the collective fulfillment of the common universal functioning, for which purpose everything existing in the Universe just exists

Freud might not have gone this far: he would probably not have spoken so grandiosely about the purpose for which things exist. But he did speak about the buried impulse that the Greeks called *Thanatos*. This god personifying death is the counterpart of *Eros*, the life force. All creation participates in and incarnates Eros, but only Man can also participate consciously in Thanatos. The life of man-in-full must always include orientation toward death.

This is expressed for example in the wish for extinction of the *ego*. Ego is the attitude that dominates our being, which Gurdjieff calls “false self-love.”¹² This aim is understood in all traditions: for example *fana* in Sufism; *nirvana* in Buddhism, both words implying a kind of annihilation. Also self-immolation practices such as that of Tibetan Monks as described in BT¹³. And practices of “burial of self” of Christian Trappist monks (“la Trappe” means “the grave”).

Gurdjieff student René Daumal writes¹⁴ of his youthful attempts to induce a state as close to death as possible by breathing vapors of carbon tetrachloride—numerous other philosophers and psychologists have approached death unintentionally, and have used various chemicals and other means, and have brought back extraordinary accounts, but few if any as powerful as Daumal’s, a compelling evocation of a world infinitely more absolute and true than the one in which our paltry lives take place. Ouspensky writes about “experimental mysticism,” and Gurdjieff clearly was familiar with the use of drugs in esoteric schools. We hasten to say that the risk of such methods is very real—physical death has occurred, and Daumal’s experiments caused permanent damage to his health, though he wrote that one glimpse of that Reality was more than worth it. There are also psychological dangers—besides some people being plunged into psychosis, more than one person has become so identified with one transcendent experience that its memory, and the personal power it may grant, imaginary or real, dominates the rest of his life.

More to the point for our work, Beelzebub tells his grandson Hassein of a necessary practice for destroying “the egoism completely crystallized in [people] that has swallowed up the whole of their Essence and also that tendency to hate others which flows from it”¹⁵: always to remember the inevitability of one’s own death, even visualizing it in detail, and also the death of each person with whom one has relations. Such a practice, besides generating compassion for others, reveals the preciousness of our momentary possession of life, and adds poignancy and urgency to our quest to understand Being.

¹² *Views from the Real World*, G. I. Gurdjieff

¹³ BT chapter XXII “Beelzebub’s first time in Tibet,” p. 257

¹⁴ *A Fundamental Experiment*, René Daumal

¹⁵ BT Chapter XLVII “The Inevitable Result of Impartial Mentation” p. 1183. This is in the very last paragraph of BT that is in the voice of Beelzebub; the final chapter “From the Author” is in the voice of Gurdjieff himself



Poster for Gurdjieff's Tiflis Institute for the Harmonic Development of Man

Beyond Being, beyond Beelzebub?

We have been thinking Being and beings. But there is a thinking that goes beyond being. Plato writes “the Good is ‘epekeina tês ousias,’¹⁶ beyond being, prior to being. This idea inseminated Western philosophy and theology, notably Christianity and Islam. As idea, it is the image of God, when not reduced as people often do to a mere anthropomorphic image, a picture that Beelzebub likened to “an old Jew.”¹⁷ An example from Christianity: “In the beginning was the Word (Greek: λόγος, logos)...the Word was God.”¹⁸ The Word was prior to Being, gave rise to Being. From Islamic Sufism: Ibn ‘Arabi’s great work¹⁹, the first chapter “Adam” describes Adam as symbolically the archetype of Man, unique among beings as having been created to represent “both hands of God”: the manifest, and the un-manifest. Man is given the cosmic role of manifesting the un-manifest, or the pre-manifest, which he, like God, bears within him.

In Oriental thought pre-being is often represented as “emptiness.” For example, Taoism²⁰ says that What *is* exists because of what *is not*.

In Zen, the Heart Sutra²¹ is often chanted in ritual practice. Such ritual chant has the power to imprint the meaning of what is chanted on the mind of the chanter. I once experienced this with monks at Tassajara. The chanting left a more profound trace than the preceding hour of sitting.

Here is the core of the Sutra:

All things are empty:
Nothing is born, nothing dies,
nothing is pure, nothing is stained,
nothing increases, nothing decreases.

There is no feeling, no thought,
no will, no consciousness.
no eyes, no ears,
no nose, no tongue,
no body, no mind.

¹⁶Plato, *The Republic* (509b). Greek οὐσία, Ousia,, is the present participle of the verb εἶμι, eimí, “to be,” thus meaning “being,” or “I Am”

¹⁷ BT chapter XXXIX “Purgatory” p. 777

¹⁸ *New Testament*, John I, KJV

¹⁹ Ibn ‘Arabi, *Fusus al Hikam, The Bezels of Wisdom*. A foundational work of Sufi thought.

²⁰ See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tao>

²¹ A version in English is at <https://webpace.ship.edu/cgboer/heart sutra.html>. See also *My Heart Sutra: A World in 260 Characters* by Frederick Schodt, a serious lay student of this short scripture of worldwide importance.

no attainment of enlightenment,
no enlightenment to attain.

In BT, the idea of the Absolute is similar to “pre-being”: the “Most Most Holy Prime-Source Sun Absolute,”²² from which the whole cosmos emanated. But little is said in BT about the Absolute itself: what is of importance is the human world, and the possible evolution of individuals from their relatively minuscule level of being to a level at which they re-unite with the Absolute.

The narrative arc of the story of BT is the return from exile of Beelzebub himself. In the next to last chapter “The Inevitable Result of Impartial Mentation” Beelzebub is recognized as having attained to the level of Reason called “Anklad.” But this is still three levels below that of “Absolute Reason,” in which there is union with the Absolute. Beelzebub is, even at this elevation of Being, still a being.

The idea of fully developed Man, as in for example Ibn ‘Arabi, and in Taoism, and in esoteric Buddhism, seems to speak of something still higher. If beings are (as in BT) those cosmic arising that have “two natures,” Man has yet a third nature. Perhaps it is to be understood as “beyond being.” Man’s consciousness is not limited by “being,” or by any specific form. “My Heart has become capable of every form” is Ibn ‘Arabi’s cry of culmination of inner development, in his quasi-erotic ecstatic poem *Interpreter of Desires* (Arabic: *Tarjuman-al-Ashwaq*).

The great scholar/mystic of Sufism Henri Corbin opens for us a profound reading of the idea of inner work and development²³: Allah, being lonely, the ‘One alone’ (as Corbin glosses his name), created Man in order to be known. Man’s assigned task, uniquely within Creation, is to become capable to “know God.” But this is ultimately impossible, because Allah is in one aspect utterly transcendent, incommensurable with anything in Creation, including man and his mind. But man can encounter the divine through imagination, in what Corbin calls the “Imaginal Realm,” his translation of Ibn ‘Arabi’s term *Alam al-Mithal*, the Realm of Images. In this realm Man and God “co-create” images such as Angels, and the image of God himself. These images, explains Corbin, are not “imaginary”: they are real beings, though existing on a mental, non-material, plane.

It is in man’s consciousness, especially the consciousness of his heart, that man’s potential unlimitedness, and his conversation with the Divine, can take place. How are we to search and find this? We must engage, encounter, suffer, and throw off all our attachments to fixed forms. Including, I am saying, the form of Beelzebub. Man must, and *can*, go past Beelzebub.

²² BT Chapter XXXIX “Purgatory” p. 745 ff.

²³ *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabi: Alone with the Alone*, Henry Corbin