

## Tales of Powers

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Ontology, epistemology, soteriology: big words describing three phases of understanding:

Ontology—Being, what exists, what is reality

Epistemology—Knowledge, how do we know what exists? Can we know what exists?

Soteriology—Salvation. Can man be saved from punishment for what he has become?

This is related to the received teaching of the Abrahamic traditions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam):

Only God is “Real”, and to a lesser degree His Creation.

All that man can know is an illusion, a coarse approximation to reality.

Man can be saved by entering the presence of God, by working on himself through faith.

To be saved would be (or would begin with) waking from the dream. This implies the idea of an “I” which is asleep but can awaken. A distance remains, a dualistic relationship between an “I” and a reality to which it awakens. There is an alternative vision: that a non-phantastical “I” is one that knows that *it* is the dreamer, and that “reality,” and even God or The Gods, is a dream. In various forms this idea can be found as far back as Greek philosophy. But it is relegated to the heretical margins: Socrates, for example, was executed for it. It is also stated clearly in Tantric Buddhism where in *Tibetan Book of the Dead* the spirit of the deceased is repeatedly admonished to remember that all the glory as well as the horror he is experiencing exists only in his mind, and that *escape* from this illusion is his only hope, which begins by recognizing it as dream. There is a practice to recognize one’s dreaming state, instant by instant. Man’s “I,” his attention, or consciousness, is thus placed at the center, rather than God or World--a heliocentric revolution.

Socrates’ allegory of the cave has the soul chained in such a way that it sees only shadows on the cave wall. The soul can escape its chains and “turn around” and see the source of the light, and even the Sun itself, which represents Consciousness. This may have been inspired by the Mystery of Eleusis, in which the initiate enters into a dark cave and experiences “death,” and is then shown a bright light. What was experienced in the cave was supposed to be kept secret, on penalty of death, never spoken about. It may be that one of the charges against Socrates was that he gave away the secret. The main source for the story of Socrates’ trial and execution is Plato, who for some reason never said exactly what the charges were—perhaps that would have constituted telling the secret.

Castaneda goes further. Following sources such as Aztec and Mayan philosophical writings and rituals, his idea is to *be* the dreamer. “I” *is* a dream anyway—to recognize and accept this is a step toward truth. The aim of Castaneda’s “sorcery” is to improve the strength of the dream until it acts on the “real world.” This is a higher soteriology than salvation from eternal punishment as taught in the Abrahamic faiths.

In Mesoamerican tradition Art, Music, Song, Dance, Sorcery is the *Way*. Here are two of my own translations of Aztec sacred songs recorded in the 16th century by Sahagun in the collection *Cantares Mexicanos*:

## Song

Song is a flower-place within my soul.  
The vapor-scent befuddles me.  
My heart grows sweetly drunk in the joy-place  
Before the Ever-Present, Ever-Near



## Beauty

Beauty-painted viper, stay, be still  
Dream-imprint your subtle pattern  
Weave it as a gift-cloth  
To entice a lover-muse  
Her beauty shall exalt  
alone, of all that shines,  
You: ever-present serpent



## Gurdjieff and Castaneda

The leader of the Gurdjieff Foundation in America was called “Lord Pentland.” I studied with him for a long time. Once, full of excitement about the latest Castaneda book, I asked “Aren’t the ideas in Castaneda similar to ours”? Without missing a beat he replied “Yes, but they are in a different order.” A wonderful reply, with Pentlandesque double meaning. Then I had the nerve to ask him if it would be possible to work with Castaneda. His response: “He is only interested in prepared people.” What did it mean, “prepared”? Gurdjieff’s teaching starts from ground level, from what unprepared man is able to take in. Castaneda’s on the other hand started from a very high place which, as he tells it, he himself was for a long time unprepared to understand. No doubt I was not prepared.

The question of “Powers” was one thing that drew me to both Gurdjieff and Castaneda. The books of both seemed to encourage the belief that powers beyond the ordinary exist, that these two tall-tale-tellers had them, and that they also had and could teach a method by which such powers could be attained. For many young people including myself this idea was very seductive. Why this is so is itself an interesting question: is it because coming of age of our generation entailed a confrontation with emerging signs that one would never be able to accomplish the things one dreamed of? The promise or hint of extraordinary powers was enough to make one try extraordinary things.

What powers were on offer? In Gurdjieff there was a modest little power that seemed to be the key: to know oneself. An ancient idea, going back to ancient Greece—“Know thyself” (Γνώθι Σαυτόν) was the slogan inscribed on the pediment of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, where the oracle would impart hidden knowledge. It is said that it was a warning: if you didn’t know what you really wanted from the oracle, its prophecy could destroy you, as happened for example to Oedipus. It was the question posed by the sphinx of Mendham, Sophie Ouspensky: “What do you want?” Very few had an honest answer.

Experiencing the Mystery of Eleusis was supposed to confer the power of immortality. Gurdjieff too spoke of “dying to oneself” (one might read this as death of “ego”) as a necessary stage in acquiring self-knowledge. If there are powerful forces hidden within the self, a self-knowledge that illuminated the hidden places within might enable acquiring other more immediately applicable powers, ones that Gurdjieff and Castaneda both seemed to claim: telepathy, hypnotism, healing, seeing the future and the distant past.

But it seemed to me that “powers” was not the answer. It was the question. Are such powers real? Is there a way to acquire them? Or is this a distraction from a more essential quest? Are powers dangerous to those who seek them, partly because even imagining that one has them inflates ego? Is Self-Knowledge itself the aim and not merely a means to power? I read these books, and many others, and explored many of the methods proposed—inner exercises, meetings with groups, sacred dances, playing the music of Gurdjieff and de Hartmann, physical work with attention, etc.—as a kind of meditation, a search, upon this question.

I attained no powers, other than ordinary ones arising from practiced skills, and only a little bit of the power of “self-knowledge.” Gradually a more objective perspective appeared about what place these factors have in life. What gradually forced itself upon me was that even if not quite real, “powers” may

have at least an important imaginal place in life, an “ideal” that could have an action. A beneficent action, on condition that you didn’t “believe” in them. Cynical? Perhaps; but isn’t “cynicism,” the dog-like refusal to believe things unless one could smell and taste them, the very power forged by reputedly the only honest man in history, Diogenes, that enabled him to see things as they really are?

Pentland knew Castaneda. He helped him with one or two of his books. Once, invited to meet with Pentland in his East Side apartment, I noticed that the only thing on the table in the room where we sat together was Castaneda’s latest book *The Eagle’s Gift*, prominently displayed. I assumed it was meant for me to see it. This is the book in which Castaneda speaks of Don Juan’s advice about “remembering oneself,” but gives it a somewhat different meaning than it has in Gurdjieff. It is my guess that Castaneda’s “Don Juan,” which translates as “Lord John,” may be a sly reference to John Henry Sinclair, the Lord Pentland.

Pentland once invited Castaneda to visit the Gurdjieff House in San Francisco. I had been asked to come the same day, ostensibly to work on a certain project, but I think it was really to be present for the Castaneda visit. Unfortunately something came up that delayed me.

But that day I had an encounter with Castaneda after all. As I walked, late and remorseful, into the entrance foyer, there was a medium height stocky Hispanic-looking man coming into the otherwise empty room from an interior doorway. I had never seen him before, and since I knew everybody who belonged in the House it was a surprise. Our eyes locked for a moment. I had the thought to ask him “Who are you, and what are you doing here?” But I didn’t do it. He continued on his way past me, out the doorway. Later I realized who it was. I had missed an opportunity, to ask the great Castaneda that question!

I was told about the visit. There was a demonstration of Gurdjieff’s Movements for Castaneda, an “open class” of about twelve experienced students and one Movements leader. Asked what his impressions were he said “I don’t see how you can work with so many people at once.” He at that time was only working with very small groups of “sorcerers,” as described in his books. Later he started working with larger groups, when he was teaching his “Tensegrity passes” in Los Angeles, which are supposed to confer powers of sorcery. I have a DVD of these interesting exercises and have practiced some of them: they owe something to martial arts, to Tai Chi which he is known to have studied, and possibly something to Gurdjieff’s Movements.

Several people who had been at the Movements demonstration told me that they remembered me being there! This was made more extraordinary because of an exchange that had happened not long before. There was one of the typical large meetings at which Pentland entertained questions from anyone in the audience. I spoke up and blubbered a beginner’s type of speech about how I had wanted to go to a meeting somewhere else but found myself coming to St. Elmo after all. Pentland’s response: “It is not absolutely impossible to be in two places at the same time.” Was he proposing that as an exercise in a certain occult power, a challenge to me to try it, or to anybody who was paying attention? I decided to take it that way. Probably nobody else did. Some people who were there did not remember it when I recounted this exchange to them. Several times I “succeeded” in having people who were in a room be convinced I had been there with them while I was in the usual sense not there. The meeting with Castaneda was another example.

I heard another story. Castaneda had sent a couple of his students a few days previously to speak with Pentland about the planned visit. During their talk, one of the students bragged “You know, he can change his appearance, can appear as an animal for example.” At that point, the story goes, Pentland himself suddenly appeared to the visitors as a giant lizard being. I don’t know whether this is true or not. It was told to me by people who at least wanted to believe that Pentland had such powers.

Yet another story, this one from an anthropologist friend of mine who was close to Castaneda. One evening Castaneda was having dinner at this person’s house. Suddenly an object flew across the room and hit the wall with force. “What was that?” my shaken friend asked. Castaneda, calmly: “I don’t know, but it has been happening more often recently.”

Such powers! Are they real, or a form of hypnotism? Are they worth pursuing? What *is* worth doing? I don’t know.

There is a wise saying: “It’s not what you don’t know that gets you in trouble, it’s what you ‘know’ but isn’t true.” Not knowing is the highest wisdom. Salvation from belief.