

Gurdjieff's *All and Everything*

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Bennett grapples with the contradiction of trying to elucidate a “book that defies verbal analysis” and concludes that *Beelzebub's Tales* is an epoch-making work that represents the first new mythology in 4000 years.

Ouspensky records a conversation in St. Petersburg during the summer of 1916 in which Gurdjieff discussed the problem of communication, and the impossibility of conveying in our ordinary language ideas which are intelligible and obvious only for a higher state of consciousness. Speaking of the unity between man, the Universe, and God, he said that the objective knowledge by which alone this unity is to be understood can never be expressed in words or logical forms. At this point, Gurdjieff made a statement which is a key to the understanding of his own subsequent writings. He said:

Realising the imperfection and weakness of ordinary language, the people who have possessed objective knowledge have tried to express the idea of unity in ‘myths,’ in ‘symbols,’ and in particular ‘verbal formulas,’ which, having been transmitted without alteration, have carried on the idea from one school to another, often from one epoch to another.¹

In *All and Everything* Gurdjieff makes extensive use of these three forms, that is, symbol, myth, and verbal formula. There is no need in these mathematical days to defend the use of symbolism. It is regarded by many schools of modern thought as the only safe form of language. Wittgenstein² treats symbols as something more than conventional signs, and regards them as corresponding in some way to the reality to which they refer. He would probably accept Gurdjieff's dictum that: “symbols not only transmit knowledge but show the way to it.”³

Even though other thinkers deny any objective reference to symbols, no one questions that symbolism has a power beyond that of ordinary language. It is different with the language of myth. This is despised by superficial thinkers, but the greatest philosophers have known its value. Whitehead wrote:

The father of European philosophy, in one of his many moods of thought, laid down the axiom that the deeper truths must be adumbrated by myths. Surely the subsequent history of Western thought has amply justified his fleeting intuition.⁴

Toynbee follows Plato's lead and says:

Let us shut our eyes for the moment to the formulae of Science in order to open our ears to the language of Mythology.⁵

He attributes the value of mythological images to the fact that they are not embarrassed by the contradictions that arise when statements about ultimate reality are translated into logical terms. Even Cassirer, an arch priest of mathematical language, regards mythical thinking as one of the a priori forms in which the human mind operates, and an irreducible way of interpreting experiences.⁶

All these statements are true, but perhaps not quite as their authors understand them. The language of myth derives its supreme power from the fact that it unites what are hopelessly divorced in logical thinking: the inner world of human experience and the outer world which we call the Universe.

The importance of 'verbal formulas' as a means of conveying objective truths has been overlooked by modern thinkers, with the possible exception of Whitehead, and yet the type of verbal formula used by Gurdjieff in *All and Everything* corresponds precisely to what is regarded by many as the highest ideal of language, in which the meaning of an expression is created by the compulsion of inner experience. In Gurdjieff's hands, this form of language acquires a devastating power.

I have started to write about *All and Everything* in this way, because it is, in one aspect, an experiment in linguistic form. Gurdjieff uses every linguistic device from abstract symbolism to myth, from aphorism to pictorial image, from the simplicity and directness of Early English to the reiteration and exuberance of the East. But the linguistic form is always the means and not the end. There is, therefore, special importance in the form of language which he uses to express what Whitehead calls 'the deeper truths.'

In the reviews of the book which have appeared, *All and Everything* has usually been described as a cosmological epic or allegory. This disregards the distinction between allegory and myth.⁷ Allegory is a weaker and more sophisticated form of expression than myth. It belongs to our ordinary language, in which only relative ideas

can be expressed. The myths which to this day are the symbolic forms of our deeper thinking, have existed since the dawn of history. Toynbee has said that no genius has arisen in the last four thousand years capable of creating a new myth. This amounts to saying that for forty centuries, mankind has not discovered a new approach to 'the deeper truths.'

I believe this to be right, and it is a measure of the place which I would assign to Gurdjieff's work in the history of human thought that I find in *All and Everything* a new mythology, the power of which will only be understood by generations yet unborn.

It is not surprising that Gurdjieff's writings have been ridiculed and misunderstood by the very people who profess to desire above all else that a new spiritualising factor should enter human life. With prophetic vision, Albert Schweitzer nearly fifty years ago wrote:

What the ultimate goal towards which we are moving will be, what this something is which shall bring new life and new regulative principles to coming centuries, we do not know. We can only dimly divine that it will be the mighty deed of some mighty original genius, whose truth and rightness will be proved by the fact that we, working at our poor half thing, will oppose him might and main—we who imagine we long for nothing more eagerly than a genius powerful enough to open up with authority a new path for the world, seeing that we cannot succeed in moving it forward along the track which we have so laboriously prepared.⁸

Having said so much I might be excused for refusing to go further. If Gurdjieff has said what cannot be expressed in ordinary language, it would be folly to attempt a translation. This is true, and those who have studied *All and Everything* for many years, in the manuscript form in which it has been available to his own immediate pupils, know very well that he has dealt lightly with the reader in his "Friendly Advice" to read the book thrice in order to obtain from it that specific benefit "which I wish for you with all my being." Even with long study, the deeper truths of Gurdjieff's teaching remain untranslatable without impoverishment.

Unfortunately I have already gone too far and cannot evade the challenge to explain what I mean in asserting that Gurdjieff has said something new which is not expressed in the myths or philosophies of the last four thousand years. Toynbee has said with reason that the language of mythology avoids the logical contradictions inherent in every account of the relations between God and the Universe:

In logic, if God's Universe is perfect there cannot be a Devil outside it, while, if the Devil exists, the perfection which he comes to spoil must have been incomplete already through the very fact of his existence.⁹

Toynbee rightly conceives some kind of Devil as necessary for the process of creation, but remains involved in the dualism of good and evil, of conflicting wills, of antithetical purposes. This conflict is inherent in all our myths, from the Chinese Yin-Yang and *The Book of Job* to Goethe's *Faust* and the modern myth of dialectical materialism. Dualism remains imbedded in all our thought. Even Whitehead, who rejects what he calls the "vicious dualism of Decartes," the "bifurcation of Nature," holds that:

Throughout the Universe there reigns the union of opposites which is the ground of dualism.¹⁰

Gurdjieff specifically rejects the myth of good and evil. He puts in its place a Creation myth in which the very existence of the Universe is subject to overriding and determining conditions which make the complete realisation of the Divine Purpose inherently impossible. The fact of successive actualisation in Time imposes on every process the price of incompleteness and imperfection. This is the Merciless Heropass which:

has no source from which its arising should depend, but like 'Divine-Love' flows always ... independently by itself.¹¹

For Gurdjieff, Time has at once the absolute character of the Scholium to Definition VIII of Newton's *Principia*,¹² and also the disruptive tendency of the second Law of Thermodynamics, which according to Eddington: "holds the supreme position among the laws of Nature."¹³

In Gurdjieff's myth the Heropass is vanquished by the infinite wisdom of the Creator, not as an enemy or opposing principle, but rather as an ineluctable fact, the very condition of the possibility of existence. From this follows the Trogoautoegocratic principle, according to which the permanent harmony of the Universe is assured by the reciprocal feeding of everything that exists. I think that this conception was dimly sensed by the authors of the older *Upanishads*, and in the Serpent myths of many races, but it has never been understood as the sole remedy against the destructive power of Time.

In Gurdjieff's myth, the Universe comes into existence to ensure the perpetual self-renewal of the Most Holy Sun Absolute or First Principle. This conception is so necessary for the understanding of human destiny that Gurdjieff in his final chapter, "From the Author," translates it into ordinary language. Everything that lives must serve the "all-universal purposes." Man is not exempt from this necessity, and must, either by his life or by this death, contribute his quota to the transformation of energy upon which the reciprocal maintenance of all existence depends:

But at the same time Great Nature has given him the possibility of being not merely a blind tool of the whole of the entire service to these all-universal objective purposes but, while serving Her and actualising what is foreordained for him—which is the lot of every breathing creature—of working at the same time also for himself, for his own egoistic individuality.

This possibility was given also for service to the common purpose, owing to the fact that, for the equilibrium of these objective laws, such relatively liberated people are necessary.

Although the said liberation is possible, nevertheless whether any particular man has the chance to attain it—this is difficult to say.¹⁴

Man has thus a two-fold destiny, either to live only as the unconscious slave of the all-universal purpose, or to pay the debt of his own existence and thus attain independent individuality, with all that this brings of further possibilities of self-perfecting. In Gurdjieff's teaching of human destiny, there is the fundamental religious conception of man as a being in need of salvation. Salvation, moreover, is only possible through redemption from Above. While thus preserving the conceptions which are common to all the great religions, Gurdjieff presents them in a new and penetrating form. To mention one example only, I would say that his doctrine of Original Sin, expressed in the myth of the organ Kundabuffer, is more profoundly satisfying than anything to be found in the theologies of the East or the West. This recalls the avowed purpose of *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*, namely:

To destroy, mercilessly, without any compromises whatsoever, in the mentation and feelings of the reader, the beliefs and views, by centuries rooted in him, about everything existing in the world.¹⁵

Superficially, *All and Everything* is a cruel satire upon human nature. It exposes ruthlessly our age-old weaknesses of vanity, credulity and self-love. In his descriptions of modern life, Gurdjieff draws directly upon his own penetrating observations of forty years of travel in every continent and most countries. His combination of wit and compassion enables him to speak of the intimate absurdities of our private lives in a way that will offend only those who do not wish to face the truth. To what does all this lead? Rejecting the dualism of good and evil, Gurdjieff has to put in its place some ultimate regulating principle of universal validity. This brings us to one recurrent theme of the book that defies verbal analysis. It is Gurdjieff's doctrine of the "Sacred Impulse of Divine Conscience."

Gurdjieff is concerned with arousing the conviction, not only that there is something terribly wrong with "our ordinary being existence," but also that there is a way out—to a life more becoming to beings "created in the image of God." The

attentive reader cannot help feeling that he is in the presence of someone who has himself penetrated to this better world, and knows the means for attaining it. As one studies the book, there emerges the idea, which becomes a conviction, that the path of what Gurdjieff calls “conscious labour and intentional suffering” can indeed lead to imperishable being and the hope of reunion with the Prime Source of Everything Existing.

In *All and Everything* Gurdjieff makes no attempt to prove anything, that is to say, he uses no logical arguments, nor does he even explain the meaning of his most important assertions. This meaning can often be found only by confronting passages from several different contexts. In many cases the meaning of words only begins to take shape when the situations to which they correspond have been directly experienced. How then can the mere reading of the book arouse the conviction that its fundamental thesis is true? A great, though not the sole part, is played by the ‘verbal formulas’ which, according to Gurdjieff, are one of the elements of objective language.

This applies especially to Gurdjieff’s doctrine of Conscience. He sets up the “Sacred Impulse of Divine Conscience” as the sole regulating principle of conduct. It is the antithesis of morality, which is no more than a system of external rules having only local and transient significance. Of morality, he says that it has:

exactly that ‘unique property’ which belongs to the being bearing the name ‘chameleon.’¹⁶

The very idea of Objective Conscience defies analysis. It is as dangerous as it is powerful. Institutional religion rejects inner self-judgement in favour of moral principles and rules of conduct not merely to secure thereby a better hold upon their followers; there is a genuine danger that the idea of Conscience may degenerate into self-sufficiency and license. Gurdjieff meets the challenge with the formula of Ashiata Shiemash:

Only-he-will-be-called-and-will-become-the-Son-of-God-who-acquires-in-himself-Conscience.¹⁷

This formula is treated as axiomatic, that is, requiring neither explanation nor argument. Its meaning is conveyed by Gurdjieff’s emphasis upon the character of the inner change which must be wrought in man before he is fit and able to live by the dictates of conscience alone. In one sense, the whole of *Beelzebub’s Tales to His Grandson* is a commentary upon the doctrine of Conscience, for it depicts the process of its arising in Beelzebub’s grandson Hassein, from the 7th Chapter, when he first catches a glimpse of the meaning of duty, to the 46th Chapter, in which his understanding of the universal laws blends with an overwhelming compassion towards the sufferings of mankind.

Conscience and compassion are inseparable. The legomonism of Ashiata Shiemash, called “The Terror of the Situation,” contains the quintessence of Gurdjieff’s teaching about human life on earth. If man is to achieve his highest destiny, he must purge himself of the taint of Original Sin expressed as the consequences of the organ Kundabuffer. For this he must work and struggle and suffer, but whence is the urge for this work to arise?

Orthodox religion replies that it must come from the Sacred Impulses of Faith, Love, and Hope. Yet the history of mankind has shown that these impulses are ineffectual against the forces of egoism, vanity, self-love, suggestibility, and the rest, which ruin every good undertaking to which man sets his hand. Faith, Hope, and Love are so distorted that they can no longer serve as impulses towards self-perfecting. Gurdjieff teaches that there is one, and only one, sacred impulse remaining unspoiled, deep in the human psyche. This is the Sacred Impulse of Conscience, which cannot be destroyed. It is implanted by Divine Grace. Concerning this, with characteristic delicacy of touch, Gurdjieff exposes in one sentence his doctrine of the Suffering of God:

The factors for the being-impulse conscience arise in the presences of the three-brained beings from the localization of the particles of the “emanations-of-the-sorrow” of our omni-loving and long-suffering-endless-creator; that is why the source of the manifestation of genuine conscience in three-centered beings is sometimes called the representative of the creator.¹⁸

The doctrine of compassion is contained in another verbal formula which states the condition prerequisite for the process of self-purification by which a being can become worthy to be re-united with the Prime Source of Everything Existing. Purgatory is represented as a state of existence possible only for beings who have already acquired independent individuality, and perfected themselves to such a gradation of objective reason that they can pass in their experience beyond the limitations of the planetary system in which they were born. But these qualifications are not enough. Neither the inward strength of the fully-liberated individual, nor his aspiration towards ultimate perfection, are sufficient; without compassion towards other beings, further progress is impossible. All this is expressed in a verbal formula consisting of the words placed over the chief entrance of the Holy Planet Purgatory, decreeing the following:

Only he may enter here who puts himself in the position of the other results of my labours.¹⁹

From this, we come to the ‘concluding chord’ in the last chapter, “From the Author,” where:

each one of us must set for his chief aim to become in the process of our collective life a master. But not a master in that sense and meaning which this word conveys to contemporary people . . . but in the sense that a given man, thanks to his, in the objective sense, devout acts towards those around him—that is to say, acts manifested by him according to the dictates of his pure Reason alone . . . acquires in himself that something which of itself constrains all those about him to bow before him and with reverence carry out his orders.²⁰

The ultimate satisfaction for man is the knowledge that he has paid the debt of his own existence, and is free thereafter to serve the purposes for which he was created. This does not imply that life for Gurdjieff is reduced to a bleak self-denial. Real happiness for man is possible at every stage of his existence, but there is a warning formula:

Every real happiness for man can arise exclusively only from some unhappiness, also real, which he has already experienced.²¹

There is nothing novel about the contents of this formula. What is new and necessary for our time is the emphasis upon the inevitability of payment; Gurdjieff insistently taught that the only true wisdom is to pay in advance. In writing of Gurdjieff's verbal formulas, I have wandered from the task of stating what I mean by asserting that Gurdjieff has created a new mythology.

In detail, there is little new. Not much research is needed to discover the affinity of Gurdjieff's cosmology with Neo-Platonism in the West and Sankhya and the Abhidharma in the East. It is easy to show where he has drawn upon Christian (especially Greek Orthodox), Buddhist (chiefly Mahayana and Zen), Moslem (particularly Dervish and Sufi), and Ancient Egyptian and Assyrian sources. The originality of his teaching does not lie in its raw material but in the use to which it is put. His Creation myth is that of a Universe which is the scene of a striving necessary to the Deity. It is permeated through and through with the consequences of the simple fact of successive actualisation in Time. In writing these words, I am forcibly reminded of Alexander's *Space, Time and Deity*,²² and a comparison of the two books is indeed a demonstration of the immeasurable superiority of the language of myth and verbal formula over that of logical analysis, even when inspired by a poetic imagination. What is missing in writers like McTaggart,²³ Alexander and Whitehead is the feeling that the suffering and the striving of the Universe really matter.

With Gurdjieff, the drama of the Universe becomes a present living reality. Involution and evolution are neither good nor evil,²⁴ neither in opposition nor even complimentary to one another. They are equally necessary for the Divine Purposes. They are woven together by the reciprocal feeding of all existence, which is neither evolution nor involution. Here and everywhere Gurdjieff's mythology is through and

through triadic, and not dualistic. The problems of man, the Universe, and God are resolved in terms of a real mutual need for which philosophy has not hitherto found an adequate expression. From the cosmic drama there emerges the miraculous destiny to which man is called if he is willing to pay the price. Since the Universe itself is a perpetual striving, the highest destiny of man is no static beatitude, but the undying fulfillment of an everlasting purpose.

Notes

- ¹ P. D. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 1949, p. 279.
- ² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 1922.
- ³ *In Search of the Miraculous*, p. 280.
- ⁴ A. N. Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*, 1938, p. 14.
- ⁵ Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History*, [in 12 Vols. 1934–1961], Vol. I, p. 271.
- ⁶ E. Cassirer, *Die Philosophie der Symbolischen Formen*, Bd. II, pp. 107–111.
- ⁷ See the admirable discussion of this distinction by Dorothy Emmet, in *The Nature of Metaphysical Thinking*, Macmillan, 1946, p. 100.
- ⁸ Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 1906, p. 6.
- ⁹ A. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, Vol. I, p. 279.
- ¹⁰ A. N. Whitehead, *The Adventures of Ideas*, 1933, p. 245.
- ¹¹ *All and Everything*, 1950, p. 124.
- ¹² Isaac Newton, *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*, 1687.
- ¹³ Sir A. Eddington, *The Nature of the Physical World*, 1929, p. 74.
- ¹⁴ *All and Everything*, 1950, p. 1219.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. V, where Gurdjieff unequivocally states his purpose in each of the three series of *All and Everything*.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 343.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 368.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 372.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 1164.
- ²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 1236.
- ²¹ *Ibid*, p. 377.
- ²² Samuel Alexander, *Space, Time and Deity*, 2 Vols., 1920.
- ²³ John McTaggart Ellis, Cambridge atheistic idealist, best known for *Mind*, 1908.
- ²⁴ *All and Everything*, 1950, p. 1137–40. It is a wrong use of words to label either obedience or love as good and the other as evil. Evolution is ‘against God,’ and yet upon it He has “placed all His hopes and expectations for the future welfare of Everything Existing.” *Ibid*, p. 197.