

The Concept of Human Self: George Gurdjieff's *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson**

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Abstract

The Greco-Armenian spiritual master George I. Gurdjieff (1866–1949) has remained an important figure in twentieth-century Western esoteric thought. Gurdjieff claimed that people do not have a stable self-identity or, more radically, a soul, but instead comprise a set of personalities. There is only an opportunity for further gradual and conscious development of the highest parts of human existence. Depending on personal effort and choice, this opportunity can be used or not. However, being under the influence of different personalities, people do not live but involuntary react to external events. Such automatism, according to Gurdjieff, is the result of abnormal conditions for human existence, which in turn are the outcome of a lack of knowledge of biological and cosmic laws. This article studies Gurdjieff's discourse on the human self, initiated in his book *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*, which was published in 1950 as the first part of the trilogy *All and Everything*. This study is not only a useful tool with which to illuminate Gurdjieff's understanding of spiritual progress in the frame of Western esoteric thought but also a means to approach his concept of the self within so-called "self-spirituality."

Keywords: Western esotericism; George Gurdjieff; spiritual progress; the self; self-spirituality

Introduction

The notion of the self has been a significant and wide-ranging aspect of modern socio-cultural discourse.¹ Some scholars argue that Western modernity began (outside of exact timing and strict definitions) when everything began to be measured and viewed from the perspective of the individual self. Philosophically

1. Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, 2.

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or theologically detached from external authority, the self became its own authority. Anthropocentric ideology came about in different forms.² Discourses on spirituality, mysticism, and mystical/religious experience have necessarily included reference to human selfhood. As a result, in the twentieth century, the significance of the self in spiritual development reached its apex. The development of the self, based on a belief that there is potential in every person that is seeking an opportunity to be realized,³ has become a requirement in various New Age religious groups.⁴ From this perspective, the self has been described as an active agent, which necessarily implies a process of becoming; the view of the human self as a process dominated and was rarely questioned.⁵ Despite such an optimistic and progressive perspective on the human self, in the history of the Western esoteric tradition in the twentieth century there were teachers who were not very enthusiastic about human potential and suggested other approaches. One of these figures was George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff (1866–1949).

Gurdjieff's teaching was described in numerous diaries and works of his students as pointing to the significance of work on the self and spiritual transformation. But in spite of the important place occupied by his teaching in the history of the spiritual culture of the twentieth century, and an increasing academic interest in his intellectual heritage,⁶ his approach to the human self has not been studied sufficiently. One of the reasons for such a situation is the unsystematic and intricate style of Gurdjieff's works and teaching, which has contributed to a plurality of interpretations and a neglect of internal consistency of various parts of his works. Western discourses on spirituality and esotericism in the twentieth century influenced the reception and interpretation

2. Cupitt, *Mysticism after Modernity*, 5.

3. Shils, *Tradition*, 10–11.

4. Heelas, *The New Age Movement*, 18.

5. Kusserow, "Crossing the Great Divide," 546.

6. Needleman, "G. I. Gurdjieff and His School," 359–60; Hunt, *Lives in Spirit*, 232–58; Sedgwick, *Western Sufism*, 176–80.

of his message in two ways. Firstly, it has drawn the interest of people from different backgrounds, resulting in a mass of interpretive literature.⁷ Secondly, these interpretations prepared the way for his teaching to enjoy wider acceptance and more influence.

Gurdjieff's ideas have been the object of commentary primarily by his students and adherents who endeavored to explain and justify them according to their own understanding and arrange them in a more structured way.⁸ Two dominant tendencies in the study of religion or mysticism – essentialist and constructivist approaches – can be found in interpretations of his works. In the first tendency, a system is compared with other systems to identify universal structures and essential meanings within. This approach was particularly elaborated in the works of William James and Rudolf Otto.⁹ In the second approach, developed in the works of philosophers and anthropologists, a great deal of prominence was given to concrete socio-cultural factors thought to have resulted in dissimilarities between systems.¹⁰ In Gurdjieff's case, these approaches are combined in attempts to identify the origins of his system, which has produced a lot of speculation on the subject.¹¹

The reading of Gurdjieff's works demonstrates the need for analysis of his system in line with elements found within his own oeuvre to minimize reductionist and essentialist approaches applied to his legacy. However, that does not mean that contextual analysis of the socio-political and intellectual en-

7. See works about Gurdjieff or connected with him: Shah, *The Sufis*; Perry, *Gurdjieff*, 1-2 and Osho, *Meetings*.

8. Among others see, for example, Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 9; Nott, *Teachings*, 3; Bennett, *Gurdjieff*, 11; Claustres, *Becoming Conscious*.

9. James, *The Varieties*; Otto, *West-östliche Mystik* and Stace, *Mysticism*.

10. Hick, "Mystical Experience as Cognition," 422-37; Wainwright, *Mysticism* and Katz, *Mysticism, Comparative Mysticism*.

11. Among advocates of the affiliation of the Gurdjieffian system to a concrete tradition, John G. Bennett advocated a Gurdjieff-Sufism connection. In more recent studies the opinion that it was a mix of traditions of Neoplatonic, Orthodox Christian, and Asian origins prevails. See Bennett, *Gurdjieff*, 26, and Azize, "Solar Mysticism," 18-26.

vironment in which Gurdjieff developed his ideas is unimportant, since it could well help to identify the role of his system in the history of twentieth-century esoteric thought. It is important to keep in mind that Gurdjieff endeavored to represent his teaching in a specific location — that is, Western Europe of the 1920s and 1930s.¹² It is also important to recognize the influence of philosophical and cultural trends that were appearing and flourishing in the period. Gurdjieff was not alone in his cosmic orientation and criticism of the human species. His teaching can be contextualized within emerging Western occultism, particularly within the Theosophical Society of Madame Blavatsky, or with the Traditionalist School concerned with criticism of Western modernity,¹³ or with Russian cosmism, which paved the way to space exploration. These currents shared a pessimistic perspective on human nature and history. As such, this article does not assume Gurdjieff as *sui generis* phenomenon. Nevertheless, the analysis of historical, intellectual, and social contexts in a study of his system should be complemented and balanced by structural and conceptual readings of original texts, in order to discern the complexity and integrity of his teaching.

The attempt of this article is to sketch Gurdjieff's concept of the human self — a basic notion in the Gurdjieffian system — through textual analysis of his magnum opus, *Beelzebub's Tales to his Grandson*. The *Tales* are crucial for the evaluation of Gurdjieff's system. This text of 1,238 pages — divided into three books and forty-eight chapters — can be interpreted as the most complete and advanced expression of Gurdjieff's views on human culture, history, and, most importantly, spiritual development. Moreover, the *Tales* were perceived as a proposal for a new perspective on the human self.¹⁴ The plot of the story is organized around an extraterrestrial creature, Beelzebub, who travels with his

12. Although in the current paper Orientalism is not used as a theoretical lens, for further reading about Orientalist approach see Said, *Orientalism*.

13. Perhaps most fruitful would be a study comparing Gurdjieff with René Guénon (1886–1951), a key figure in the Traditionalist School. See especially Guénon, *The Crisis of the Modern World (La crise du monde moderne)*.

14. Bennett, *Talks*; Challenger, *Philosophy*, 10.

grandson, Hassein, and an old servant, Ahoon, on a spaceship. During this trip, he narrates his travels to Hassein, most of which are to the planet Earth. The framework of the *Tales* is therefore structured around Beelzebub's journeys, which he undertakes in order to understand men's inclination to kill each other. The result of this attempt is formulated in the tone of his remarks about human beings and the peculiarities of their existence: Gurdjieff's criticism of humans is conveyed through mockery and irony, which is expressed in Beelzebub's witty remarks, parody, anecdotes (particularly in his continuous references to Mullah Nassr Eddin), and dialogue (between Beelzebub and Hassein) throughout the story.

Methodologically, this article follows the systematization of concepts by identifying their characteristics, as used, for example, in the works of Jerrold Seigel for exploring the human self.¹⁵ It explores the notion of human self by identifying the objective and subjective reasons for the “deplorable state” of human life, as illustrated in the *Tales*. Following this task, the article consists of three parts. The first part describes the events closely related to the establishment of the context (abnormal conditions of life) – that is, the objective reasons for man's wretched situation. The second part formulates a range of phenomena created by people and inherent only to them. They explain further establishment of abnormality of human existence, clarifying the subjective reasons for human calamity. The final part focuses on the “ideal self,” represented in personal and collective models, showing the potential of the human self for spiritual growth.

External Reasons for the “Deplorable State” of Humans

The criticism of modern civilization is implied in the second part of the book's title, which is usually omitted: *An Objectively Impartial Criticism of the Life of Man*. As it is written on the first page of the book in reference to all three series, the *Tales* accomplish one fundamental task: “To destroy, mercilessly, without any compromises whatever, in the mentation and feelings of the reader, the beliefs

15. Seigel, *The Idea of the Self*, 5.

and views, by centuries rooted in him, about everything existing in the world.”¹⁶ Accordingly, the goal of the first series is the recognition of the abnormality of human existence.¹⁷ The purpose of Gurdjieff’s teaching is to confuse and provoke the reader, and make him forget about his fixed habits.¹⁸ For this reason, Gurdjieff created his own model of the universe, elaborated in the “Ray of Creation.” It contains eight levels, corresponding to Gurdjieff’s Law of Octaves, which states that everything in the world changes. Every process increases or decreases in its scope, depending on the current position in the octave. Gradually as it descends, the Ray decreases – only a minimal amount of the divine energy reaching the Earth can be used by humans. Gurdjieff puts the planet Earth (in the solar system Ors) on the periphery of universe (in comparison to other systems, it is maximally removed from the Sun Absolute – the assumed center). Yet, as James Moore notes, despite such a remoteness, Gurdjieff’s anthropological model takes a radical approach to Cartesian dualism by establishing an ultimate connection between creature and transcendent Creator.¹⁹

Gurdjieff, by means of a cosmic genre, establishes a context which allows him to take a distant and critical perspective on humanity. In doing so, he employs a variety of tools, including alternative cosmic organization, neologisms, and heroic personages. Human beings, according to the *Tales*, live in conditions not suitable for their nature.²⁰ There are external reasons for this situation, specifically three catastrophes that happened to the planet Earth.²¹ The central, and first, among them is the

16. Gurdjieff, *Beelzebub’s Tales to His Grandson*, preface [n.p.]. Hereafter abbreviated as *Beelzebub*.

17. Gurdjieff does not explain what is meant by abnormality in one single place: it is mentioned through the whole text. In some chapters, he places emphasis on one or another thing. For example, in chapter 27 he mentions that “alcoholism, cocainism, morphinism, nicotinism, onanism, monkism, Athenianism” were invented by people (*Beelzebub*, 382), which can give a general picture of what is meant.

18. Bennett, *Talks*, 9.

19. Moore, “Moveable Feasts,” 3.

20. Gurdjieff particularly underlines this abnormality in chapters 32, 34, and 37.

21. Gurdjieff also mentions an earthquake and a flood (*Beelzebub*, 180–81), and a sand storm (*Beelzebub*, 252) as the second and third catastrophes.

collision of the Earth with the comet Kondoor, which occurred because of an error made by a concrete sacred individual responsible for calculating their orbits. The subsequent problem was how to keep two broken-off pieces of the Earth on their orbits without endangering the universe, and the first decision made by the Highest Commission of angels and archangels was to keep them by the “special sacred vibrations ‘askokini’,” which is a result of independent “deflection” of two sacred laws (Heptaparaparashinokh and Triamazikamno) in cosmic units of the Earth.²²

As for the cosmic units of the Earth, their development went naturally and harmoniously: “there began gradually to be crystallized in the three-brained beings there the corresponding data for the acquisition of objective Reason.”²³ Ironically, according to the plot of Gurdjieff’s story, this harmonious development would lead unavoidably to the understanding by future people of the reason for their existence: the maintenance of detached fragments and the production of “askokin.” As Gurdjieff supposes, creatures of the planet Earth would not stand this enslavement.²⁴ And here Gurdjieff twists the plot of the *Tales* and introduces the events crucial for understanding his mysticism. So, the second decision made by the Highest Commission of angels and archangels thereafter was “to implant into the common presences of the three-brained beings there a special organ with a property such that, first, they should perceive reality topsy-turvy and, secondly, that every repeated impression from outside should crystallize in them data which would engender factors for evoking in them sensations of ‘pleasure’ and ‘enjoyment.’”²⁵ This special organ was named Kundabuffer, a term coined by Gurdjieff most likely in mockery of the widespread and popular idea among Western audiences of the concentration of female energy (*kundalini*) in the lumbar spine. However, Gurdjieff’s term has an opposite meaning to the positive and desirable energy which can be activated.

22. *Beelzebub*, 81–84.

23. *Ibid.*, 87.

24. *Ibid.*, 87–88.

25. *Ibid.*, 88.

Kundabuffer is about “the engendering properties of which they [people] might be protected from the possibility of seeing and feeling anything as it proceeds in reality.”²⁶ In other words, it is an obstacle to spiritual growth.

In establishing context for his interpretation of Gurdjieff’s discourse on the soul, Michael Pittman interprets the special organ as a “fall of man story.”²⁷ He assumes that the organ Kundabuffer can be correlated with human ego or directly with egoism.²⁸ However, despite the obvious identification with human egoism, the meaning of the Kundabuffer is not as evident as it seems. In the first place, egoism is mentioned as a unique property of – and an essential part of – the human psyche. Egoism was formed after the implantation of the special organ.²⁹ Secondly, the Kundabuffer was implanted somewhere in the lumbar area to prevent an accurate perception of reality, and to promote the manifestation of pleasure sensations. Even though the organ was installed for three years, its consequences remain forever: some new traits of the human psyche (among which egoism can be listed) were formed *after* an extraction of the organ but still under its harmful influence.³⁰ Thus, the function and usage of the Kundabuffer relate to the question of reality, which occupies a key position in connection with spiritual perfection. The importance of a clear perception of reality is expressed as a special command of God: “Always guard against such perceptions as may soil the purity of your brains.”³¹ This perception is possible with the knowledge of basic cosmic laws and the structure of the universe.

Here, we come to the brief description of the basic cosmic laws and the human connection with the cosmos. First, Gurdjieff connects the need for self-development with a concept of time. Along with divine love, time remains

26. *Ibid.*, 1220.

27. Pittman, *Classical Spirituality*, 78.

28. *Ibid.*, 81.

29. *Beelzebub*, 375–76.

30. *Ibid.*, 89–90.

31. *Ibid.*, 144.

beyond any influence or control.³² Time itself does not exist, and can be understood only by means of a comparison with other phenomena; yet, for people, as for other beings, every period of their life is limited.³³ Second, in chapter seventeen, Gurdjieff connects the mechanism of the physical universe with a proper sense of reality. The false perception of the universe's structure is a result of a lack of "the instinctive sensing of reality."³⁴ Moreover, he introduces a cosmic Trogoautoegocratic process (the "exchange of substances" or "reciprocal feeding"). The theory of reciprocal feeding, central for understanding the anthropological picture of the *Tales*, can be described as follows: "Man exists for a purpose not his own. This includes all beings — animals, birds, insects and bacteria. Each species is designed for a certain cosmic use. The norm of man is the discharge of the design for which he was created — like a machine designed to do a bit of work."³⁵ As Moore observes, such a design is "astounding and frightening" because it suggests a human factory using various kinds of fuel to produce another type of energy that is needed by "Great Nature."³⁶

Together with this process, two fundamental cosmic laws, Heptaparaparshinokh (the law of seven) and Triamazikamno (the law of three), are the bases of the function of the universe.³⁷ Together with these two laws, the substance called "etherokrilno" (an elemental substance filling the whole universe³⁸) is the reason for the emergence of everything in the universe. Human beings have three centers (thinking, feeling, and moving) or brains.³⁹ These cen-

32. *Ibid.*, 124.

33. *Ibid.*, 125–26.

34. *Ibid.*, 134.

35. Alfred Orage, as quoted in Nott, *Teachings*, 194.

36. Moore, *Gurdjieff*, 54.

37. *Beelzebub*, 750. The Law of Seven and the Law of Three can be better explained through Gurdjieff's enneagram, which was first published by Ouspensky. See Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 294. See also Bennett, *The Intelligent Enneagramm*.

38. *Beelzebub*, 137.

39. Ouspensky points to the number of centers being unclear (Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 55). Gurdjieff mentions (not in the *Tales*) at least two more centers: instinctive and

ters influence both physiological and psychological processes of human life. They exist as a result of the crystallization (actualization) of three holy forces (affirming, denying, and reconciling).⁴⁰ The difficulty with these centers is that they operate separately and constantly compete. As Gurdjieff explains, the situation when one center is more active than others can be compared with the three spiritual ways created by humans. The way of the *fakir* (Islam) relates to the moving center; the way of the *monk* (Christianity) connects with the feeling center; and the way of the *yogi* (Hinduism) relates to the thinking center.⁴¹ The problem is that people do not properly use these centers and as a result shorten their life duration.⁴²

Therefore, the collision of the planet Earth with the comet Kondoor and the implantation of the special organ Kundabuffer can be identified as the external factors which affected the formation process of the human self and its further development. In fact, these events explain reasons for a false perception of reality resulting in abnormal conditions of life, such as a shortened lifespan. Yet, Gurdjieff also points to factors exclusively connected with people.

Internal Reasons for the “Deplorable State” of Humans

Gurdjieff emphasizes that the main characteristics of human beings are the same as other three-brained creatures. They perceive reality with the three-brain system. Gurdjieff makes the development of the highest parts (*kesdjan*-body and soul) of human being dependent on perception of reality (including impressions, emotions, and reactions).⁴³ This process can be adjusted by Partkdolg-duty — Gurdjieff’s neologism for his method based on a correct perception of reality, which can be attained through conscious work and intentional suffering.⁴⁴

sexual; for a more detailed hierarchy of centers, see Wellbeloved, *Gurdjieff*, 33–35.

40. *Beelzebub*, 143–45.

41. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 50. Ouspensky calls Gurdjieff’s teaching the “Fourth Way,” describing it as “more exact and perfect.”

42. *Beelzebub*, 131–32.

43. *Ibid.*, 104.

44. *Ibid.*, 409.

As previously mentioned, Gurdjieff suggests that some external events are crucial in the development of human beings. However, he connects other events with the responsibility of people themselves. Among the phenomena that have the most influence on this development, Gurdjieff names two as the most maleficent: religion and education. These two things affect the further manifestation of the properties of the Kundabuffer. The process of education has been reduced, according to Gurdjieff, to establishing a number of diverse artificial customs and traditions in the minds of children. The problem is that these artificial perceptions are detached and have no connection with reality: they are not experienced, but merely automatically manifested. As a result, children become “living mechanical puppets”:⁴⁵ any new information or impression is perceived by them automatically without attempting to think distantly and objectively. Consequently, “they are satisfied with that alone, which someone once consciously or unconsciously put into them.”⁴⁶

As for religions of the planet Earth (called *havatvernoni* in the *Tales*), their necessity and usefulness are determined by their ability to overcome the destructive effects of the Kundabuffer.⁴⁷ Here, the criticism of religions and religious institutions allows Gurdjieff to remain outside of the official discourse on religion and of any group or movement.⁴⁸ Under critique are five traditions: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Lamaism. Chapter thirty-eight describes religion as an “obstruction” and one of the causes of the attenuation of three-brained beings on the planet Earth.⁴⁹ One can identify within this chapter some concrete reasons for, as Gurdjieff suggests, the misinterpretation of religious teachings: the notion of *good* and *bad* (and the creation of the ideas of heaven and hell), the immediate splintering into multiple groups

45. *Ibid.*, 1028–29.

46. *Ibid.*, 687.

47. *Ibid.*, 700, 715, 724–25.

48. Pittman, *Classical Spirituality*, 76.

49. *Beelzebub*, 694.

(“sects”), and the incorporation of religion into political affairs. However, the five aforementioned religions (particularly Christianity and Islam) can serve as support for the activation of inner divine impulses, such as love, hope, and faith.⁵⁰

Along with religion and education, the fragmentation of human personality is another internal reason for the deplorable state of human existence.⁵¹ As previously mentioned, Gurdjieff believes that man does not have a stable self-identity (“the centre of gravity”)⁵² but comprises various categories in his intellectual, emotional, and physical existence,⁵³ which are formulated in the *Tales* as thinking, feeling, and moving centers.⁵⁴ Without awareness of this multiplicity, personal development is problematic.⁵⁵ Gurdjieff provides a set of peculiarities of the human psyche that created the conditions for the further abnormal development.⁵⁶ These peculiarities are numerous and are spread throughout the whole story, which make them hard to scrutinize. Nevertheless, five of them seem specifically important in understanding Gurdjieff’s approach towards the human self. They to one degree or another have received more attention in Gurdjieff’s text. These features can be formulated as suggestibility, fanaticism, cruelty, pride, and adulation.

The first trait, suggestibility, is described in chapter thirteen. It is a human’s inability to draw conclusions independently, since this “strange trait of their general psyche, namely, of being satisfied with just what Smith or Brown says, without

50. *Ibid.*, 732–33.

51. Fragmentation of human personality as an essential part of modern readings of human selfhood was strongly articulated in sociological and psychological approaches to the human self in the beginning of the twentieth century. For construction of the modern self see Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, and of the psychological self, King, “Asian religions and mysticism,” 106–23.

52. *Beelzebub*, 31–32.

53. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 72.

54. Although Gurdjieff uses the term “three-brained” from the beginning of the novel, he first mentions “three centers” only in chapter 17. See *Beelzebub*, 164.

55. See, for example, “Breakfast with idiots.” This ritual was introduced by Gurdjieff in 1922. For further reading see Beekman, *Gurdjieff and Toomer* and Nott, *Journey*.

56. For example, chapter 11 is named “Piquant trait of the peculiar psyche of man.” Gurdjieff also uses different examples of human traditions, described in *Beelzebub*’s six visits to the Earth, to show the absurdity of human life.

trying to know more, became rooted in them already long ago, and now they no longer strive at all to know anything cognizable by their own active deliberations alone.”⁵⁷ However, here Gurdjieff makes clear that this trait is neither a result of the implantation of the organ Kundabuffer, nor its manifest consequence. It is a result of the conditions that people established, and they alone should be blamed for it.⁵⁸

The second trait is described in chapter eleven. It is a kind of punishment to “anathematize” someone who insulted you, usually in a religious context,⁵⁹ and can be understood as human fanaticism. Without doubt, this process of “anathema” is described with irony, yet this trait is crucial, since it naturally leads to something more dangerous – the third trait of the human psyche. This trait, according to Gurdjieff, is the same among all people: the “process of the destruction of each other’s existence,” or human cruelty, which is a result of an incorrect perception of reality.⁶⁰

The fourth trait, human pride, can be found in the idea that all human beings should consider only one place as the “centre of culture” for the whole of planet Earth.⁶¹ Beelzebub names it as the “one great secret of their psyche” and advises Hasein to pretend that he wants to learn something from people if he wants to succeed among them.⁶² The final trait, human adulation, which is intrinsically connected with the fourth trait, is described when Beelzebub, during his third trip to Earth, faces a tradition of “sacrificial offerings,” or destruction of other forms of beings in honor of the gods. This custom is based on the idea that in return for human offerings, “gods” and “idols” would support and help them.⁶³ In addition to these qualities one might also list egoism, self-love, vanity, conceit, and credulity, which are spread among all people regardless of where they

57. *Beelzebub*, 104.

58. *Ibid.*, 104–5.

59. *Ibid.*, 95.

60. *Ibid.*, 319.

61. *Ibid.*, 186.

62. *Ibid.*, 1075.

63. *Ibid.*, 182.

live or were born.⁶⁴ Thus, education and religion, along with the peculiarities of human nature such as suggestibility, fanaticism, cruelty, pride, and adulation, are proposed as the internal reasons for the abnormal human existence.

The “Ideal Self”

Represented by the image of ancient Asia in his works, or by an idea about the harmonious development of three centers, the “ideal” is a key aspect of Gurdjieff’s teaching.⁶⁵ According to the *Tales*, humans, as three-brained creatures, can use the localization of holy forces (centers) not only for the transformation of energy but also for personal development. However, one of the biggest mistakes of humanity is to think that the human soul exists from birth. The sacred forces are latent within humans, but their acquisition depends on personal effort.⁶⁶ In the *Tales*, the message is that one can realize one’s divine potential only by means of individual effort. This process can be achieved in two ways: collectively or personally.

As for a collective way, there is an example of an equipage consisting of a passenger, a carriage, a horse, and a coachman, which, perhaps, aptly represents Gurdjieff’s perspective. Despite the lack of originality — which Gurdjieff probably never claimed — this image seemingly points not to the plurality of human self but rather to the necessity of working as a group. The carriage corresponds to the body, the horse is compared to feelings, the coachman represents “consciousness” or mind, and the passenger sitting in the carriage is the human “I.” It is through successful work with all his parts that man may progress spiritually.⁶⁷ In this manner, Gurdjieff places a clear emphasis on the importance of group work and the transmission of knowledge.⁶⁸

64. *Ibid.*, 107.

65. In 1922 Gurdjieff established the Institute for Harmonious Development of Man in France; for a more detailed analysis of the ideal in Gurdjieff’s teaching see Tamdgidi, *Mysticism and Utopia*, 535–53.

66. *Beelzebub*, 226.

67. *Ibid.*, 1092–93.

68. On the account of community life see De Hartmann, *Our Life with Mr. Gurdjieff* or Webb, *The Lives*.

An ideal collective model can be identified with the Society of Akhaldan, which originated on the continent of Atlantis.⁶⁹ This society is founded on the initiative of a person named Belcultassi, who has succeeded in the development of his highest being-parts. Belcultassi devotes himself to understanding the reasons for impulses such as self-love, pride, and vanity, which create the illusion of his “I.”⁷⁰ Moreover, one can also name the brotherhood of Olbogmek,⁷¹ or the club of adherents of Legominism⁷² as examples of ideal collective organisations.⁷³ The goal of all these groups can be stated as the comprehension of the laws of nature and their proper transmission in different forms.

As for a personal, non-collective model of the “ideal-self,” one can distinguish between human and non-human examples. Gurdjieff presents Beelzebub as a non-human model; a human model might be identified in the character of the Bokharian dervish Hadji Asvatz Troov. The figure of Beelzebub, as Anna Challenger suggests, can be read as relating to Gurdjieff himself,⁷⁴ or to the Islamic prophet Muhammed.⁷⁵ Yet, in my opinion, crucial moments of Gurdjieff’s life — the death of a young wife, travels to Central Asia, and a search for the laws of nature — can be found in the stories of other characters.⁷⁶ In this regard, a reader who tries to identify the author of the *Tales* with one concrete character could understandably become confused. One may assume, however, that a number of characters represent Gurdjieff’s personality and teaching, rather than a single personage.

69. *Beelzebub*, 294.

70. *Ibid.*, 294–95.

71. *Ibid.*, 349.

72. *Ibid.*, 453–54.

73. For a more elaborated account of group work and community life see, for example, Cusack, “Intentional Communities in the Gurdjieff Teaching,” 159–78.

74. For example, chapter 33, dedicated to the work of Beelzebub as a hypnotist, may strengthen this argument. For the Gurdjieff-hypnotism connection see Tamdgidi, *Gurdjieff and Hypnosis*.

75. Challenger, *Philosophy*, 94–95.

76. For a better understanding of the storyline of the *Tales* one can read the second part of the trilogy. See Gurdjieff, *Meetings with Remarkable Men*.

Beelzebub, an extraterrestrial creature from the planet Karatas, around whom the narrative of the *Tales* is structured, possesses, like humans, a three-brained nature. He has succeeded in the development of his highest parts and has reached the highest level of spiritual development possible for three-brained beings.⁷⁷ But which facts about Beelzebub's life and personality does Gurdjieff emphasize in this spiritual development? Firstly, Gurdjieff points to Beelzebub's rebellious character, which was probably a reason for his exile. Secondly, he has spent many years far away from his homeland, but due to his efforts he was pardoned. Thirdly, and as can be seen throughout the story, despite various troubles during his journeys Beelzebub retains a good sense of humor, constantly making jokes and sharp remarks. Perhaps this style helps to avoid a didactic tone in the *Tales*.⁷⁸ Moreover, Gurdjieff avoids a preachy style by introducing Mullah Nassr Eddin,⁷⁹ a character from Central Asian folklore famous for his witty remarks, as a teacher of Beelzebub.⁸⁰ The style of Mullah's jokes allows without a didactic tone to show realities of a human life, with which the audience of the *Tales* (in Central Asia, Caucasus, Russia) was familiar. Gurdjieff even makes Mullah a character in chapter thirty-four, where he describes different national groups, including Russians. He describes them as: "Half-with-a-quarter-plus-three-quarters."⁸¹ This playfulness can also be recognized in Beelzebub's remarks. One of the examples can be found in words for two types of religious groups, that are "Orthodoxhydooraki" and "Katoshkihydooraki," which make clear the author's intention ("doorak" is a fool in Russian).⁸² In this

77. *Beelzebub*, 1078.

78. Pittman, *G. I. Gurdjieff*, 13–14.

79. See, for example, Nasr-ed-din Khoja, *Tales of Nasr-ed-din Khoja*.

80. The reference to Mullah is often interpreted as a sign of Gurdjieff's affiliation to Sufism (Pittman, *Classical Spirituality*, 87–88). However, in his anecdotes and stories, as represented in the *Tales*, one can hardly find direct instructions that are of Sufi origin. In my opinion, it is rather the usage of a collective image which helps Gurdjieff to reveal, by means of humor and irony, the less attractive sides of human nature.

81. *Beelzebub*, 601.

82. *Ibid.*, 258.

manner, the use of numerous neologisms and terms within the text reinforces the importance of the ironic style in Gurdjieff's language.⁸³

Another component of Beelzebub's personality which should be mentioned is his "egoism." After a careful reading of the text, one may conclude that Beelzebub always puts his own interest first. For example, in chapter forty-one, when Beelzebub is asked to discuss his real nature, he waits for an appropriate moment in order not to harm himself. Such behavior, however, is connected with a "being-property of sensing the inner feeling of similar beings in relation to oneself."⁸⁴ Moreover, at the end of the *Tales* Beelzebub's creator mentions an ancient wisdom which states that "in order to be a just and good altruist one must first of all be an out-and-out egoist."⁸⁵ The goal of personal perfection from this perspective is the full use of given opportunities. In other words, one should strive to become a master of one's own feelings and desires.

An example of the human "ideal self" and the concrete characteristics of a developed person can be also found in the description of Hamolinadir, an educated man whom Beelzebub meets in Babylon. This character appears only episodically, yet significant components of a developed personality are mentioned in relation to him: "At the age he was when I first met him he already had his 'I' – in respect of rationality directing what is called the 'automatic-psychic-functioning' of his common presence – at the maximum stability for three-centered beings of the planet Earth at that time, in consequence of which during what is called his 'waking-passive-state' he very definitely expressed being-manifestations, as, for instance, those called 'self-consciousness,' 'impartiality,' 'sincerity,' 'sensitivity of perception,' 'alertness,'

83. The *Tales* were originally written in Russian and Armenian. Gurdjieff plays with different languages to create his neologisms. For example, the word "Partk-dolg-duty" is a repetition of the word "duty" in Armenian, Russian, and English (see *Beelzebub*, 143–44; 409). Another example is Gurdjieff's word for religion: "Havatvernoni" (*Beelzebub*, 182). This neologism consists of two words *havat* and *vera*, both meaning "faith" in Armenian and Russian.

84. *Beelzebub*, 876.

85. *Ibid.*, 1236.

and so forth.”⁸⁶ Here, Gurdjieff points to two important components of a developed personality — self-awareness and self-control — both of which relate to human intellect. In fact, human intellect occupies a significant place in Gurdjieff’s system, which may point to some similarities, for example, with the importance of self-discipline in the Sufi tradition. The significance of an intellectual approach is emphasized through the story, whether it is in the case of Hadji Asvatz Troov or in chapter forty-seven which concerns the inevitable advantages of impartial thinking. As for human reason itself, “this is only the sum of all the impressions perceived by him [human], from which there gradually arise in him data for comparisons, deductions, and conclusions.”⁸⁷

Another character that serves as a prototype for the “ideal self” is the dervish Hadji Asvatz Troov. This character can be analyzed as a model for a “perfect man” and as a spokesman for Gurdjieff’s affiliation to Sufism. Despite the implications of this character for Sufism, as in the case of Mullah Nassr Eddin, the Bokharian dervish appears rather to be an example of *dānesbmand* (a scientist or sage in Iran and Central Asia) or the perfect man.⁸⁸ What is more important about Hadji is that by means of hard (conscious) work he has reached the knowledge of two cosmic laws: the law of seven (Heptaparaparshinokh) and the law of three (Triamazikamno).⁸⁹ As for his representation as Sufi, even though the whole of chapter forty-one is dedicated to him, and he is often mentioned and cited in relation to the Sufi influence on Gurdjieff,⁹⁰ there is no concrete reference to Sufi teachings or rituals, except for the two details that Hadji had entered a “dervish order” and had a “shaykh.” Pittman also argues that Hadji’s Sufi identity is a secondary fact, and that Gurdjieff uses him as a universal model of

86. *Ibid.*, 332–33.

87. *Ibid.*, 344.

88. On the problem of a Gurdjieff-Sufism connection see Sedgwick, “Sufism and the Gurdjieff Movement,” 129–48.

89. *Beelzebub*, 901.

90. Challenger, *Philosophy*, 13.

spiritual transformation.⁹¹ However, a prior or secondary usage of a set of symbols — Sufi or not — shows the mobility of Gurdjieff's system and his ability to create his own discourse, rather than to maintain an affiliation to one specific tradition.

Thus, the importance of the ideal to which man should strive is an essential part of the *Tales*' concept of the human self. One can identify the following features of the personal and collective “ideal-self”: self-control and self-awareness, based on a recognition of wrong and undesirable impulses and the automatism of human life; a work with these undesirable elements; an activation of a proper/natural existence by means of intellectual efforts and knowledge of cosmic laws and, more crucially, one's own nature.

Conclusion

This investigation has attempted to demonstrate how the systematization of concepts through identifying their characteristics can be used fruitfully for a clearer understanding of Gurdjieff's method oriented toward personal perfection. It helps to consider various aspects of the system in question by identifying its central themes and features. Taking into account the inner structure and logic of the system, this strategy, on the one hand, prevents the oversimplified identification of concepts and ideas, and, on the other, suggests a more structured picture of the subject.

To sketch the concept of the human self and its meaning for Gurdjieff's approach to spiritual development, the objective and subjective reasons for the deplorable human state are highlighted. Using a fairy tale genre, or “mythologized world-historical narrative,”⁹² Gurdjieff suggests that both external and internal influences are at play in the process of the formation of the human self. The collision of the Earth with the comet Kondoor and the implantation of the special organ Kundabuffer, which changes the perception of reality and establishes the pleasure impulses, have been identified in this

91. Pittman, *Classical Spirituality*, 101–2.

92. Tamdgidi, *Gurdjieff and Hypnosis*, 104–5.

article as the external causes of the deplorable state of human existence. In fact, even though these events are described as relatively independent and beyond human control, they are not the only reason for such a situation. Gurdjieff uses them to prepare the ground for further criticism of human nature – the focal theme of his teaching. First, under criticism are two phenomena created by humans: education and religion. They are blamed for the atrophy of rational thinking and the replacement of reality. Second, Gurdjieff describes different features of human nature, showing a colorful picture of the human character. Among them, suggestibility, fanaticism, cruelty, adulation, and pride are listed. Thus, education and religion along with peculiarities of human nature were identified as the internal reasons for the deplorable state of human existence.

However, despite this criticism, the way in which human beings are described and the place they occupy suggest that changes to their lamentable situation may be possible. The leitmotif of the story is that humans are three-brained beings. Although humans have lost many conventional qualities of the three-brained system, they have retained some of the advantages of this kind of creation, specifically an ability to use sacred forces for personal needs. In contrast to modern discourses on individuality, Gurdjieff presents a place of gradual and collective work in spiritual advancement. Although receiving different emphasis, both individual and collective efforts play a pivotal role. The image of the “ideal self” in both collective and individual forms is identified. This image is based on self-control and self-awareness, a recognition of the undesirable elements of human existence, working with these elements, and knowledge of cosmic laws and one’s own nature. Thus, Gurdjieff’s mosaic of the human self consists of various elements connected to a natural world (external reasons), specific human realities (internal reasons), and opportunities (the ideal) to overcome them.

While avoiding overemphasis on the question of the origins of Gurdjieff’s teaching, this study has presented a short outline of his concept of the self, identifying the objective and subjective reasons for the “deplorable state” of

human life, which are illustrated in the *Tales*. As above, such an approach could well be complemented by a contextual analysis of the socio-cultural environment in which Gurdjieff created his texts. Nevertheless, it is hoped that further studies will address the question of the self in Gurdjieff's work by taking into consideration the inner structure and logic of the texts they focus on, rather than merely through studying his background.

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