

The “Forest Philosophers”

Clifford Sharpe

Sharpe responds to misleading journalistic reports then circulating about Gurdjieff's Institute and provides informed comment on its workings. The title of this piece had by then become a journalistic catch-phrase for Gurdjieff and his followers.

J. W. D.

Considering how many fairly well-known English writers have been attracted by the work of the Gurdjieff Institute at Fontainebleau, and by the parallel teaching of Mr. Ouspensky in London, it seems rather strange that so little should have appeared about it hitherto in the English Press. The explanation, however, is simple enough. No one who takes the trouble seriously to investigate the subject is inclined to write about it until he has investigated it a little more, and the more he investigates the less inclined he becomes to write about it at all. The subject-matter of the teaching is at once so new and so vast in its scope that the task of describing even any one single aspect of it, that one may have grasped, seems impossible of accomplishment in anything less than a stout volume. The present writer would certainly not have been tempted to write a line on the subject but for the large number of almost wholly misleading articles and paragraphs that have been appearing in English newspapers during the past fortnight. It is no more possible than it was before to offer in an article, or even in a series of articles, an adequate description of the teaching itself, but it may perhaps be desirable to attempt to indicate its general trend, and to state a few facts about the two men who have brought it to Paris and to London.

Mr. Gurdjieff is of Greek origin but spent his youth in Persia. His disciple, Mr. Ouspensky, who came in contact with him in 1915, is a writer and an experienced scientific psychologist of Russian nationality, who enjoyed before the revolution a

considerable reputation in his own country. The movement originated some thirty years ago in an expedition organised by Mr. Gurdjieff-then very young-and two Russian savants, with the object of discovering, if possible, what lay behind the fabled 'wisdom of the East'. Five years were spent in gathering and training a band of about thirty investigators, mostly Russians, who between them might claim to know all that Europe knew of science and art. They then set out for that little-known region which lies between Eastern Persia and Tibet and there separated, each to seek entry into some 'school' where esoteric knowledge might be found. It must suffice here to say that after several years a few of them returned and organised a second expedition. Some of the members of both expeditions are still in Central Asia and will probably never return. Others, including Mr. Gurdjieff, after spending the best part of twenty years in various Eastern schools,¹ came back to Europe and are now engaged in working upon the mass of material that they brought with them while maintaining communication with those who have remained behind.

Of the nature of this material the present writer cannot speak with confidence. He has been informed that it covers almost every branch of human knowledge, with the exception of pure mathematics, regarding which the East appears to have nothing to teach the West; but of personal experience he can speak of only three subjects-psychology, music and medicine. In regard to these he has been convinced that Mr. Gurdjieff and his colleagues possess knowledge which is far in advance of anything that is known to European science. Naturally, he cannot convey his conviction to the reader. All he can do is to suggest the general nature of the superiority which he affirms. In psychology the analysis is infinitely more subtle, more comprehensive and more scientific than the work of, for instance, William James-who would certainly have become a keen student of Eastern methods after half an hour's conversation with Mr. Gurdjieff. For Mr. Gurdjieff appears to possess full and exact knowledge of the nature, causation and practical reproduction of those rare phenomena of hyper-consciousness in which James was so greatly interested. In music the East appears to possess a knowledge of the precise emotional effects of rhythm and tone that was never dreamt of even by a Mozart. In medicine Mr. Gurdjieff appears to have access to a full knowledge of principles which have scarcely yet even begun to be studied in Europe. At Fontainebleau he has what is perhaps the most complete installation of medico-electrical apparatus in the world. Western science has a certain knowledge of radiology, of the therapeutic effects, that is to say, both of sun-light and of certain artificial rays, but its knowledge of radiology in this direction is at present purely empirical. It knows something of the 'how' but almost nothing of the 'why'. Gurdjieff knows possibly less of the 'how' but vastly more of the 'why'. He may know less, too, of the appearance and habits of the specific bacilli of disease, but he knows far more of the natural forces of the body by which bacilli may be rendered harmless. Western science tells us that the 'cause' of pneumonia is the pneumococcus; it also tells us that the pneumococcus may be found in the throats of nine healthy people out of ten; but it tells us nothing of why it

successfully attacks this person and not that. It can only fall back upon some such vague phrase as 'lowered vitality'. Mr. Gurdjieff's medical knowledge might, perhaps, be briefly described as an ability to give a scientific explanation of what that phrase means-or rather of the many different meanings which its vagueness covers-and to suggest methods of promoting the capacity of resistance to infection, or of combating its results.

The above must be regarded merely as a general indication of the nature of part of the material which these explorers have brought back from the East. The writer has not the authority either of Mr. Gurdjieff or of Mr. Ouspensky for any of the statements in this article; he is describing merely his personal deductions and impressions. Quite certainly there is real knowledge to be obtained from contact with this new 'cult', which asks no man to believe anything which, if he has the time and the ability, he cannot prove for himself. Indeed, it condemns and forbids unsupported belief. Its fundamental precept is that all knowledge is worthless that is not grasped with that certainty which personal verification alone can give. This article itself is not written to convince, but merely to explain and to suggest. Those who consider such matters worth investigation must of necessity investigate for themselves, and will probably have to spend very much time in the process. The Gurdjieff movement is not a 'reforming' or a proselytising movement. It seeks neither converts nor money. Nor does it seek, in the ordinary sense of the phrase, to 'do something for the world'. It requires certain workers, not easily to be found, but to others it may have little or nothing to offer. As a movement it is neither religious nor democratic; its appeal, for the present at any rate, is not to the million.

The Gurdjieff 'Institute' at Fontainebleau has lately been described at considerable length by a correspondent of the Daily News; but his description conveys almost nothing of the real work that is being done there, even on its purely physical side. The life is very simple and uncomfortable, the food is adequate but too starchy for an ordinary stomach, the work is extremely hard. The physical work, indeed, results often in a degree of exhaustion which perhaps exceeds anything that was produced even by a prolonged spell in the winter trenches of Flanders in 1917. Yet behind it all there is no theory either of asceticism or of the 'simple life'. Abstinence is not praised, physical work is not idealised or exalted. Work at Fontainebleau is a medicine and a curse. Carried to extremes it creates increased capacity for effort and provides rich material for self-study-no more than that. Cold, hunger and physical exhaustion are things to be endured not for their own sake, nor to acquire 'merit' of any description, but simply for the sake of understanding the physical mechanism, making the most of it, and ultimately of bringing it into subjection. Other conditions provided at the 'Institute'-with an ingenuity that is almost diabolical-offer similar opportunities for the study of the emotional mechanism, but that side of the work cannot be described in a few words or sentences, and must here be passed over.

The Gurdjieff Institute has been compared in the Press by Mr. T. P. O'Connor and others with various experimental 'colonies' which have been established in Europe or America during the past few decades. All such comparisons, however, are entirely mistaken, and would not be offered by any one who had spent twenty-four hours at Fontainebleau, seeing all that there is to be seen there. As far as the writer's knowledge goes, the only recorded institution with which Mr. Gurdjieff's school can at all plausibly be compared is the school which was established in southern Italy by Pythagoras about 550 BC. The Pythagoreans lived in a colony and were subjected to all kinds of abstinences and physical exercises as a preparation for the extraordinary intellectual work which they accomplished. They were deeply concerned with rhythm, with movement, with the analysis of the octave, and with other apparently irrelevant subjects which are studied at Fontainebleau. In some respects the parallel is indeed almost absurdly exact. Pythagoras himself was a Greek who spent many years in Eastern Persia and Afghanistan, and who on returning to Europe established a school for the study and teaching of music and mathematics. He was indeed the founder of European mathematics, of the European theory of music, and of European astronomy. He taught the doctrine of re-incarnation before Buddha; he laid the foundations and solved the crucial problems of pure geometry 200 years before Euclid was born; and he described the earth as a sphere and a planet revolving with the other planets round a 'central fire', 2,000 years before Copernicus. Indeed, it is probably only the mystery which surrounded the work of his 'school'-wherein no discovery was ever ascribed to an individual-that has prevented his being acclaimed the greatest scientist of all time. It is not suggested here that Gurdjieff is another Pythagoras, but if parallels are to be sought this particular parallel is certainly irresistible-and no others are adequate, save perhaps some which might be discovered in the origins of Gothic architecture. So far at any rate as the modern world is concerned, the Gurdjieff Institute is a unique phenomenon. Its possibilities are either nothing or else almost infinite.

The 'wisdom of the East' is not a fable. That is the conclusion which these remarkable expeditions have brought back to Europe. But it is wisdom which cannot easily be summarised in a pamphlet or even set forth in the most massive tomes. Like the work of Einstein, its nature can be suggested, but it cannot be fully explained save to those who are prepared to spend many years in studying the foundations upon which it is built. For its direct exposition no language exists, nor, perhaps, ever will exist. The formulae of Einstein will probably be as incomprehensible to the general public a thousand years hence as they are to day. Human knowledge, when it passes beyond a certain point, can only be grasped with the aid of natural faculties which have undergone a severe and prolonged training. In Mr. Gurdjieff's school that training is physical and emotional as well as intellectual. The general public will never be able to grasp the meaning of his work. It will be able to judge it-if at all-solely by its results; and what is written here has no other purpose than to interest that probably tiny minority which can appreciate the magnitude of the possibilities

of the work upon which Mr. Gurdjieff and his colleagues are engaged. Very much more certainly will be heard of them.

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The psychological aspect of the Gurdjieff-Ouspensky teaching might be briefly described as the practical, detailed and infinitely painstaking application of the ancient precept: Know thyself. All the teaching is strictly practical. Only enough theory indeed is given to provide a language in which the results of self-study can be recorded and mutually related. The student may, if he likes, believe all he is told, but he is always reminded that belief is not knowledge, and can be of no value to him until he has verified it by direct self-observation; and he is continuously discouraged from discussing ideas, or even using words, of which he cannot offer concrete illustrations drawn from his own experience. The system thus contains its own test. As taught by Mr. Ouspensky, psychology is less a science than an art-the art of self-study.

A fundamental idea of the system is the attribution of all the motive forces of normal man to three distinct centres: mental, emotional and moving (or instinctive). The mental centre is the vehicle, not of all consciousness, but of all ratiocination. The emotional centre needs no definition. The moving or instinctive centre is the instrument: (1) of all instinctive sensations, hunger, thirst, sexual desire, and so on; and (2) of all automatic or semi-automatic movements-that is, movements that are not consciously controlled. We do not consciously control our legs in walking or our fingers in writing; if we attempted to do so we should walk or write extremely slowly and awkwardly as an infant does.² One of the purposes of the extremely complicated exercises which are taught by Mr. Gurdjieff at Fontainebleau is to increase the efficiency and rapidity with which mental centre can control physical movements. But in general, moving centre works very much more quickly than mental centre; and emotional centre enormously more quickly than either of them.

Extraordinary mental and physical phenomena may generally-in this system of analysis-be ascribed to the momentary and more or less accidental use of emotional energy by one or other of the other two centres. The phenomena referred to are recognised by all psychologists, though explained by none. There is, for instance, the 'mathematical prodigy'-the child of six or seven, who can do in his head in a few seconds a fractional cube root which experienced adult mathematicians can work out only with the expenditure of much time and labour. (This prodigious faculty, it may be noted in passing, seems invariably to grow weaker, and to disappear about the age of puberty.) Then there are all the phenomena of 'clairvoyance', including telepathy and premonition. There are the phenomena of religious 'ecstasy', which, as that greatest of scientific psychologists, William James, has shown, can be paralleled by states of mind produced by the inhalation of nitrous oxide. There is the quite real phenomenon of a man having suddenly 'the strength of

ten men'. And there is that strange mental phenomenon which frequently occurs when men are in a condition of extreme physical peril and when 'in a flash' they 'see their whole lives'. Less sensational, but of the same type, are those phenomena, of which perhaps most people have some experience, when for a second, or even for a few minutes, their minds work at an enormously greater speed than is usual. They see things 'in a flash', in a moment of 'inspiration'. A writer suddenly sees a whole book and could dictate it in ten minutes if he could only speak quickly enough; a politician is suddenly able to visualise simultaneously all the factors in a difficult situation; a mathematician suddenly 'sees' the key to an apparently insoluble differential equation; a portrait painter suddenly grasps the essential feature that he must paint; the business man of genius suddenly 'knows' what will happen to prices next week; the common or garden mortal suddenly grasps the full meaning of a maxim or a formula which he has heard all his life without understanding; James, after describing such phenomena, concluded that:

'normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence; but apply the requisite stimulus and at a touch they are there in all their completeness... No account of the universe can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded. How to regard them is the question.'

Nearly always such states of consciousness-of thought so clear and rapid as to be different in kind from ordinary thought-occur only by accident; but, as James recognised, they can sometimes be produced artificially (and illegitimately) by the use of drugs, alcohol, opium, nitrous oxide and especially hashish. The general attitude of Mr. Ouspensky (as the writer understands it) towards such phenomena is that intrinsically they are not abnormal but normal, that they are accidental and elementary manifestations of faculties which are innate in all normal human beings, and that in general they result from the mental or physical use of 'emotional' energy, or at any rate of some form of energy 'higher' than that which is ordinarily available for mental or physical processes. Of such energy there is not an infinite supply; its most valuable quality is that it can be expended with extreme rapidity, that it is released, so to speak, at a far higher potential than ordinary energy. The accumulation of months may be expended in a few minutes. It is therefore of the utmost importance to create it, to conserve it and consciously to direct its expenditure-and this is possible.

Normally we waste all forms of energy every minute of our lives, and that waste is bound to continue until we have learned to 'know ourselves'. We waste, for example, an immense amount of physical energy not merely in unnecessary movements-which is not very important-but by keeping muscles unnecessarily in tension; but failing, in other words, habitually to relax muscles which are not at the moment required. It is difficult to learn to relax, even when we are in an attitude of

repose, and still more when we are doing physical work, and in the doing of it are using three times as many muscles as are really necessary. Only by long study and severe use is it possible to learn which muscle need be used for a given purpose and which need not; but until we know we cannot prevent a constant waste of energy.

Far more important is the constant waste of emotional energy. It is wasted, for example, in 'day-dreaming'. Day-dreams are the result as a rule of the idle and uncontrolled working of emotional centre and absorb, almost automatically, all our surplus of emotional energy. More still is wasted in 'negative' emotions-fear, irritation, anxiety, anger. Every one knows how exhausting continuous mental anxiety may be, but every one does not recognise that other negative emotions, though not often so continuous, are just as wasteful, and sometimes, while they last, much more rapidly wasteful. They involve an unnecessary emotional tension, analogous to, and usually accompanied by, unnecessary muscular tension. It is one of the first principles of the Gurdjieff-Ouspensky system that all negative emotions-in so far as they are mechanical and foolish, as they usually are-must be utterly suppressed. In a few minutes of irritation over the losing of a train, or the impertinence of an omnibus conductor, or the suffering of a personal slight, we may expend energy that would have written an article or sustained us through a Marathon race.

The method of suppressing negative emotion and in general preventing the waste of emotional energy is more difficult to explain than to understand. It is substantially expressed in the phrase: 'Never identify'. We all of us 'identify' to a greater or less extent; with persons, with causes, with interests, with emotions, and not unusually with fancy pictures of ourselves. Women very commonly 'identify' with their husbands or their children, feeling what they feel, or even more than they feel, vicariously and unnecessarily. Men more usually 'identify' with their ambitions or their pleasures.³ Thus they surrender the control of their own emotions. They are at the mercy of their tastes or of their friends or of their own vanity or even of the weather. They are infinitely vulnerable and every wound implies a waste of energy. One has toothache, and if one 'identifies' with it, all the world is coloured by toothache-with a prodigal expenditure of energy. But worst of all, perhaps, because it tends to be chronic, is 'identification' with an imaginary portrait of oneself-day-dreaming. In that charming pursuit one may waste every ounce of energy one possesses. If you have an hour to spend, let us say, on the top of an omnibus, it is far more economical to occupy your mind with a useless arithmetical problem than to allow your emotional imagination to wander. To stop 'imagination' even for a week-which is extremely difficult-brings an astonishing gain of what we usually call psychical energy. And completely to stop 'identification', which is impossible, would bring us far more. If at all times we could see ourselves as other people see us, feel as little about ourselves as other people feel about us, and never (except deliberately) allow ourselves to be 'carried away' by our work or our pleasures or our dislikes or our more trivial interests, that would be complete 'non-identification', complete

emotional relaxation. But obviously such a state is not easily to be attained. The results, however, of even partial 'non-identification', if the effort be constant, are interesting and surprising.

From the practical point of view it is very important also to break habits-without reference to whether they are good or bad habits. The object of this is not to strengthen the will, but to increase the range of conscious life. Normally we are asleep by day and every day, lulled to sleep by an unbroken succession of habitual activities and habitual surroundings; it is only in quite unusual circumstances (especially dangerous circumstances) that we become even partially conscious of ourselves. By deliberately breaking habits-even trivial habits such as performing the operations of our toilet in a particular order or holding a cigarette always in the left hand or smiling mechanically when we speak-we create slightly unusual circumstances for ourselves and increase the average intensity of our consciousness, noticing many things which we should not otherwise notice and learning a great deal about the machines we are. To break even a single habit is far more difficult than it sounds, but the results are directly proportionate to the difficulty and are usually much greater than one would expect. We all know that we are the slaves of habit, but only by personal experiment can we realise how habit controls almost everything and how utterly mechanical we are.

Constant experiments are necessary. If you find out nothing, then there is no reason to pursue the study of the Gurdjieff-Ouspensky system. But if, as is more probable, you do make discoveries, then you cannot stop, for you begin to understand. One of the fundamental ideas of the system is the difference between 'knowledge' and 'understanding'. It is a difference which most people recognise more or less consciously, but which again is not easy to define. It is suggested in the common phrase that so-and-so 'has learned everything and knows everything'. Knowledge alone is intrinsically barren and worthless. A man might know by heart every medical work that had ever been written, and yet be the worst doctor in the world. 'Understanding' is, as a mathematician might say, a function of knowledge, but it always includes a certain element of emotion. Knowledge becomes understanding only when it is felt; and until it is felt it is useless, even for strictly scientific purposes. Every great scientific discoverer possesses a specific faculty in addition to mere 'cleverness'; we may call it the 'creative faculty' or 'imagination' or 'intuition'; the name does not matter so long as we recognise the emotional element in it, the element which transmutes knowledge into understanding. This transmutation cannot be explained, it is an alchemy of the mind; but nearly every one can observe the process in himself and distinguish fairly accurately between knowledge that is purely mental and knowledge that has become, as it were, part of himself, and that, in the full sense of the word, he can use. In the language of Mr. Ouspensky, 'understanding' is the product of 'knowledge' and 'being'. 'Knowledge' belongs to mental centre alone; 'being' is the state of development, and correlation of all three centres. 'Knowledge' and 'being' together form as it were an explosive

mixture which can produce 'understanding'-but only if there is some mechanism to provide a spark. 'Knowledge' may run ahead of 'being', and much more rarely 'being' may run ahead of 'knowledge'; but in either case real understanding is limited by the more backward element of the two. The writer has suggested that as regards pure mathematics the West had progressed as far as, or further than, the East; but Mr. Gurdjieff would probably say that whilst that was true it was only half the truth, that the West knows far more mathematics than it can understand, that its 'knowledge' in this connection has gone far beyond its 'being', and therefore it cannot use more than a fraction of what it knows-which is certainly the case.

The general object of Mr. Gurdjieff's teaching and method is to develop all the innate faculties of the normal human being, so that the student may ultimately become capable of using all forms of consciousness. But such a state of 'full consciousness' is of course an ideal which few, if any, can hope to attain. The neophyte will not learn at Fontainebleau how to control the flow of his blood, as many a dancing Dervish can; nor how to produce the emotional 'ecstasy' which some monks of the West as well as of the East have learned to command; nor how to control the actual processes of his mind, with the facility of an Eastern yogi. But he may possibly learn something more comprehensive than any of these. The fakir, the monk and the yogi each develop a high degree of control of a single centre. Mr. Gurdjieff's pupils are given the opportunity of developing all three centres simultaneously. Mr. Ouspensky's psychological teaching is merely preparatory; and, except possibly in the case of certain psychological types which are extremely rare in the Western world, it cannot lead to very substantial results, unless it is followed by a more or less prolonged training at the Fontainebleau school-the full title of which is the 'Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man'. It is an unprepossessing title, but it is hard to think of a better one.

This article is a very inadequate description even of the little that the writer has grasped of the Gurdjieff-Ouspensky teaching and a fortiori, of course, of the teaching itself. The necessity for extreme condensation has compelled the omission of vital definitions, and sometimes the use of inaccurate language. Curious or captious readers must await the authoritative exposition of the system by Mr. Ouspensky which is shortly to appear in book form. Meanwhile the present writer's object is not to give a full explanation of the system, still less to defend it; but merely to indicate its general features for the sake of those who may be inclined to investigate its possibilities for themselves.



Notes

1. In some, after the great difficulties of entrance had been overcome, an apprenticeship of several years was necessary, before any real knowledge could be given or taken.
2. Some people can write rapidly with their left hands at the first attempt, and recognisably in their own handwriting; but, of course, backwards. If one can keep mental centre from interfering, moving centre will direct the muscles of the left hand only a little less efficiently than it directs those of the right hand. The directive control, that is to say, rests not in the muscles, nor what we ordinarily call 'consciousness' but somewhere else. That somewhere else is what is meant by moving centre.
3. People who study this system with enthusiasm often 'identify' very deeply for a time with the system.