

*Body and Cosmology in the Mysticism of G. I. Gurdjieff*  
*Esotericism and 'Phemenological Anatomy'*  
*in Beelzebub's Tales To His Grandson and In Search of the Miraculous*

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The intention of this study is to make explicit the fundamental role that the body, and the embodiment of cosmology, play in the mysticism of G. I. Gurdjieff, who emerged from obscure origins as a refugee fleeing the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution of early twentieth century Russia. By his death in 1949, Gurdjieff exerted such an influence that he has become one of the seminal yet under-appreciated figures in the burgeoning 'occult revival' of the past several decades.

I hope to contribute to the recognition that Gurdjieff, his ideas, practices and influence are a worthy subject for serious scholarly study within the ambit of 'Religious Studies'. This aim clashes with the 'Cartesian' assumptions so prevalent in academic studies of mysticism and 'western' esotericism. These assumptions have overshadowed Gurdjieff's teaching, keeping it from its rightful place amidst twentieth century unchurched spiritual movements. More generally, they have also contributed to the elision of embodiment from the methodological considerations of the researcher in the study of religions as a whole.

The structure of this study is divided into three parts:

(1) The first part establishes a context for my examination of Gurdjieff and identifies the secondary and primary material of the study. A brief biography of Gurdjieff and a potted history of his teaching—and the movement that emerged under his name—provide an introduction. A review of extant scholarship introduces the main axis of the study of mysticism and esotericism. I argue that these are the most suitable academic analogues for G's teaching and provide a basic introductory outline of some of Gurdjieff's major ideas. I relate these axis to the broader unexplored issue of the body in Religious Studies and in the humanities. While acknowledging and utilizing the growing influence of Foucault's observations about the body in the study of religion, my study takes its cue more from the work of David Abram and Drew Leder and their development of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception and embodiment.

I review the main features of the Gurdjieffian literary corpus, a history of secondary studies and of the recent development 'Gurdjieff studies' as a nascent field, and identify its principal scholars. Gurdjieff specifically forbade followers to publish accounts of his system.

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This embargo was respected until Gurdjieff's death in 1949. My examination focuses on the two principal texts that Gurdjieff explicitly authorized for publication in the last few years of his life. These texts are, Gurdjieff's own magnum *opus*, variously known as either *All and Everything* or *The First Series*, *Beelzebub's Tales To His Grandson* and Ouspensky's *In Search of the Miraculous*. I discuss his—perhaps more widely read—autobiography, *Meetings With Remarkable Men* and the fragments published as *Life is real only then, when "I AM,"* the so-called *Second* and *Third Series* that were published posthumously under the auspices of his quasi-official 'successors,' the Gurdjieff Foundation. I include his discussion of abortive but revealing 1933 booklet, *Herald of the Coming Good*, since Gurdjieff did issue (and retract) it.

I argue that *Second* and *Third Series* and other texts published by some of Gurdjieff's successors, purporting to represent Gurdjieff's own words, are too problematic at present to place them on the same footing as the texts Gurdjieff authorized and had published. Where these posthumous texts, particularly those published and accountable memoirs of Gurdjieff's and Ouspensky's immediate associates, elucidate the question of body and cosmology, I have drawn on them to compliment the authorized texts.

There are good reasons for emphasizing the posthumous nature of these works. Like any new religious movement, the death of Gurdjieff left his followers with many of the problems of succession and questions about authority, that typically face new spiritual or religious movements. It is important to bear in mind that, regardless of their intrinsic merits, Gurdjieff's posthumous texts were published within that context. Most significantly, they were also, of course, interpreted, translated, and *edited* before they were published and so, reflect—in ways known only to multi-lingual translators within anonymous committees who have access to Gurdjieff's manuscripts—that same editorial influence.

These concerns are not new in the study of religions, and a great deal of methodical textual and historical documentation and study of numerous new religious movements has been already been undertaken by scholars of religions. What is surprising—and perhaps telling—is the extent of the mutual isolation of Gurdjieffians from independent scholars of religions. At this point, few of Gurdjieff's archival manuscripts are available for independent scholarly scrutiny. If 'Gurdjieff studies' is to move into a critical phase without being superficial or partisan of intention, there must proceed an extensive effort to collect all of extant material related directly to G's teaching at first-hand and to publish them with detailed authoritative notation and respect for the canons of independent scholarship

(2) In the second part, I systematically examine and compare *Beelzebub's Tales* and *In Search of the Miraculous* on the question of relationship between the body and cosmology. My main principle is the dramatic interplay in Gurdjieff's teaching between 'cosmological' as opposed to 'psychological' ideas. I argue that for Gurdjieff, this division, like the mind and body dichotomy, is a false distinction. The underlying idea, is perhaps best rendered as the mutual reflecting of the universe as macrocosm and human being as it's *potential* microcosm.

This section is divided into three parts:

- (i) Gurdjieff's 'macro-cosmology' in *Beelzebub's Tales* and *In Search of the Miraculous*, sometimes with supplementary material.

This section draws on Gurdjieff's notion of the 'reciprocal feeding' of everything.

- (ii) Gurdjieff's 'micro-cosmology' in *Beelzebub's Tales* and *In Search of the Miraculous*, with supplementary material divided into two sections:
- (a) actualized (human beings as we should be and why), and
  - (b) potential (human beings as we are and why).

This section involves Gurdjieff's notion of the three 'foods' and their assimilation.

Gurdjieff's 'micro-cosmological' practices and rituals. In addition to drawing on Gurdjieff's lifetime publications and his posthumous writings and notes of his talks, this section also draws on published memoirs—that are public record and thus usually well documented—of Ouspensky's former pupils who after his death associated directly with Gurdjieff.

I also examine a number of Gurdjieff's practices. Some of these are therapeutic in that they seek to reestablish human beings as a potential microcosm. Others are transformative in that they seek to actualize this microcosmic process. These are divided loosely into both major practices of self-observation and self-remembering and also involve to assimilation of the three kinds of 'food' - food, air, and impressions. Although this study will touch on the 'Movements'—the dances and gymnastic routines that initially made Gurdjieff's reputation, which he choreographed himself, and which are discussed his authorized texts and the memoirs of his pupils—the main focus will be on lesser-known exercises involving sensation, relaxation and the transformation and manipulation of 'matters.'

By examining in detail the contributions of Walker and Bennett, I examine how *In Search of the Miraculous* has skewed the centrality of embodiment in Gurdjieff's own writing and teaching. I propose the 'recovery' of Walker's prolific output from their current obscurity, in particularly because he so vividly contrasts Ouspensky and Gurdjieff.

- (3) The third part synthesizes my observations made thus far and seeks to establish a proper starting-point for situating Gurdjieff and 'Gurdjieff studies' within the study of religion.

With regard to esotericism, I contextualize Gurdjieff within mesmeric currents of the nineteenth century; the Russian spiritual and philosophical milieu of 'cosmicism' (which also produced the likes of the Russian scientist V.I. Vernadsky, whose work is the basis of the famous 'Gaia hypothesis'); and later still, within modernism. Unless esotericism is recognized as a multifaceted continuum within mysticism, the basic fundamentals of Gurdjieff's teaching are skewed. To further contextualize Gurdjieff, I draw on Jason BeDun's concept of the Manichaeic 'metabolism of salvation'. It is reminiscent in many ways of Gurdjieff's teaching, so I draw on it to argue, along with the work of seminal scholar of religions I. P. Couliano, that given certain conditions, the forms of logic inherent in scriptural monotheisms give rise to similar narratives without direct influence.

Research into the notion of 'subtle materiality' in esotericism, was pioneered by the little-known work of J.J. Poortman and G.R.S. Mead, then more recently by Couliano. It plays a large role in Gurdjieff's teaching also, along with the concomitant notion of 'subtle bodies.' I argue that Gurdjieff's own notions of 'higher being-bodies' is a development both continuous and discontinuous with this complex of ideas within esotericism. It needs to be understood both as situated within Gurdjieff's 'modernity' and as revealing to us an important but neglected aspect

of embodiment in esotericism, what Drew Leder calls the ‘phenomological anatomy’ of a worldview. Gurdjieff’s ‘esoteric’ worldview challenges our conventional ‘academic’ or scholarly point of view, but these two visions of reality are reconcilable when viewed from the perspective of a correct ‘anatomical’ alignment.

With regard to mysticism, I also explore the continuities Gurdjieff’s teaching has with:

—Arthur J. Deikman’s important observations about ‘deautomatization’ in his sadly neglected work in the psychology of mysticism

—the phenomenological investigations of David Abram, particularly in the light of the haunting similarities between many aspects of Gurdjieff’s cosmology and the now famous work on the ‘biosphere’ and its place in the cosmos by his aforementioned compatriot Vernadsky.

Finally, with regard to comparative ‘phenomenological anatomy,’ I draw on the results of Drew Leder’s inquiries to bring about a critique of both the dynamics of Gurdjieff’s microcosmological practices and the ‘disembodied’ methodology of the study of esotericism.

The all-important question of the origin of Gurdjieff’s teachings are—and are likely to remain—unanswerable. Setting aside the well-neigh impossible task of identifying the historical antecedents that Gurdjieff claims to have studied with, we can consider his general historical antecedents. This leads us to the common ground of Neoplatonism, Hermeticism and Gnosticism shared and made use of by both Christianity and Sufic Islam. I conclude by emphasizing that the further one examines Gurdjieff’s ideas, the more one perceives an overall integrity that draws one into further study.



David Pecotic is currently completing a doctoral dissertation in the Department of Studies in Religion at the University of Sydney. During his checkered postgraduate career, David has published articles on the relationship between indigenous Australians, Shamanism, and New Age religions, a book chapter on technology and the New Age, as well as encyclopedia articles in the forthcoming *Encyclopedia of Nature and Religion*, one on G. I. Gurdjieff and another on P.D. Ouspensky.

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