

The Fundament of Ecstasy

Some notes on enlightenment ascension

“We have good and evil angels. The former work through our voluntary active nature, and the latter through our passive nature.”

—Notes from a meeting with Gurdjieff, June 30 or July 17, 1922

There’s an implicit assumption... a default position, if you will... that the universe is built with bliss "at the top," and suffering at the bottom. This presumption rests on the simplistic! assumption that it's nicer on the top than the bottom; a vertical directionality dominates much allegedly sophisticated spiritual thinking. Despite the ultimate and inviolable metaphysical requirement of unity—an underlying (that is, outlying) cosmic condition of transcendental oneness—this dualistic up-and-down model roughly mirrors our sentient experience of material reality, which readily divides itself into polarized constituencies, no matter how great our psychospiritual and philosophical efforts to eradicate them may be. One feature both theistic and non-theistic (eg., Buddhist) systems share that underscores their common belief in an “above” and “below” is the use of winged angels in their iconography.

Here, then, a simplified version of various classical cosmologies in both flavors: bliss, the ultimate state of divinity (or enlightenment, in non-theistic liberation practices) emanates “above” us, descending from on high; “down” here on earth, we experience suffering as this primordial bliss decays into innumerable dark shades of its former self.

Spiritual evolution, in this common model, consists of rising “upwards” and going *back towards the bliss*. Said cosmologies thus presume verticality; yet in a universe where "up" and "down" are— at least physically—wholly arbitrary, we're left seeking a new understanding outside of verticality. One which rests, perhaps, on structure; or, better yet, Swedenborg's proximity through intention (spiritually speaking, he says, the soul is ever most proximate to that closest to our intentions.)

There's an alternate, as well, to the idea of suffering as the foundation and bliss as the object of an enlightenment ascension.

Let's propose, instead, that the universe as we know it is built on a fundament, a foundation, of bliss and ecstasy; and the heavenly hierarchy of ascent—which still by the way, *does lead back towards God*— leads us *into* suffering, instead of away from it.

This upside-down cosmology may smack of some devilish or demonic premise; yet we need to examine this question if we take Gurdjieff at his word in matters regarding the eternal suffering of God.

“Increase of knowledge implies an increase of ignorance.”

—Notes from a meeting with Gurdjieff, June 30 or July 17, 1922

The fundament of the universe is Love, bliss; it is an undifferentiated substance, like aether, from which all “stuff” is made. That is to say, all of creation emerges uninhibited from this foundational act of Love; Love *exists before matter* and consists of a one-ness that does not discriminate.

If we take this as the ground floor of reality as it arises we are not, I think, too far off. Words always fail; but it is something like this.

Having multiple direct experiences with religious ecstasy, I'll attest directly to the ground-floor nature of that Love/bliss; and it's in pondering those very exact, precisely remembered experiences that I can now understand that the nature of the universe is, *at the bottom*, ecstatic.

That ecstasy is at the same time both supremely intelligent and completely unintelligent; it fully embodies this contradiction, which effectively erases words and definitions while still preserving meaning.

Yet it begins before God's conscious investigation of His creation is ever undertaken. God wants to *know* His universe (see Gurdjieff's early talk on [the meaning of life](#)); the act of self-remembering on the microscopic scale is nothing more than a mirroring of the exact same process on a cosmological scale. The universe—and everything in it, sentient or otherwise—emerges from primordial bliss into a self-knowing which embodies Gurdjieff's *increase of knowledge*. That is the “active nature” of the universe; and it embodies, as well, our own active nature. The passivity of bliss, which demands nothing of the receiver, is the domain of ignorance; thus, the realm of angelic devils. One can see that they nonetheless occupy a critical place in the construction of this topsy-turvy universe; they lie at the foundation of all creation and are actually essential to its being. Furthermore, despite their passive and ignorant (unknowing) nature, they are still essentially loving, steeped, in fact, in the original substance of Divine Love. The metaphysical complexities this presents are touched upon in Sri Anirvan's *Buddhi* and *Buddhiyoga* (in *Inner Yoga*); all of that which seems evil ultimately engenders good and serves the good; and is even a necessary component of the good. This touches on transcendental, nondualistic understandings about the nature of reality which are correct from a technical and philosophical point of view, but which prove useless to us, since they cannot be reconciled on our own level.

Humanity is the Earth's nerve ends, through which planetary vibrations are received for transmission.”

—Notes from a meeting with Gurdjieff, June 30 or July 17, 1922

As God commences to know Himself through the conscious action of His creation, a paradoxical increase of ignorance takes place: that is to say, self-knowing, even at God’s level, becomes an action exponentially imbued with self-*unknowing*. Any process of becoming known correspondingly illuminates more and more of what is not known.

God would not need nerve-endings to sense if He was consciously all-knowing; Gurdjieff and Ibn al Arabi are in equal agreement on the premise that man acts on God’s behalf, as his Vicegerent (Arabi’s word) in this universal act of self-remembering.

In self-remembering, a palpable nerve-ending action on behalf of God, an inevitable anguish arises through the discovery of unknowing and an unfolding understanding that divides self from not-self. God perpetually discovers this universe—one of His own making—that nonetheless lies in fragments from the point of its origins onwards; and that is an eternal and irremediable state. (cf. my paper on [The Cosmology of Beelzebub](#).)

“No energy is ever lost in the cosmic scheme. Man has real individuality inherent in him, but can only reach it after long process and gradual growth through great effort.”

—Notes from a meeting with Gurdjieff, June 30 or July 17, 1922

There is a terrible and misleading flaw in the premise that bliss is the goal of “enlightenment”—a fully conscious state. Both Gurdjieff and Swedenborg made it clear enough that in their heavens, no one finds themselves at rest on clouds, idly strumming harps; heaven is a place of continuous inner and outer effort, of *work*. Let's remember here the original premise that the primordial unknowing of Bliss is forever a passive state, the place where evil angels operate. (See the opening quote).

Of course bliss is supremely alluring; we all secretly think we want a life of perfect repose and unassailable happiness. Yet such a life does nothing for us in the way of inner development; thus, I submit, a movement into bliss is not an ascent towards God and His heavenly kingdom but rather a descent towards the devil. The state of bliss is an unformed one; ecstatic, but useless. It *lacks the intelligence* which God seeks to nurture through creation.

This metaphysical proposition is too easily misunderstood, I fear; and may engender a rank Puritanism if interpreted literally. The point is that reaching towards God takes a certain kind of courage; one does not reach heaven, as Dante reminds us, before one traverses hell and purgatory.

In the same way, bliss rises towards anguish in the process of creation; and although it is an exquisite anguish, a sacred, perfect and utterly Godly anguish, it represents the right and proper state of the universe and God's and man's place in it, even if it contradicts the expected order.

I can and do, for that matter, attest to the fact that this is exactly how religious ecstasy is experienced: it begins with bliss, which is perfect, absolute, physical and unknowing; and it rises into a union with anguish, which is also perfect and absolute, but *emotional*, and *knowing*.

Bliss, the root condition of sacred Being, is unintelligent; anguish, the counterpart of bliss, is an extraordinarily intelligent state that arises in the process of becoming known.

These two forces, which are not good or evil either one, are objective and reciprocal; neither one can exist without the other. They discover their reconciliation as a single unified force in Consciousness.

No matter the perceived divisions, that is the underlying truth; yet outside of the transcendent—which (as Al Arabi pointed out) lies lawfully forever beyond the grasp of all sentient Being—we are left in residence here where the struggle to understand takes place.

Against desire

If we understand this question of an inherent and necessary inner tension—one which swims against the stream of available, yet passive, bliss—we begin to see where and why the classic struggle against desires, common to Christianity, Buddhism, and the Gurdjieff work, is an operable premise. Bliss, desire, represent a downward movement. This is, practically speaking, still a movement towards God; yet it's a movement that surrenders the very agency God needs to be active in order to engage in the creative movement of self-remembering, which alone can serve the utmost purpose of creation.

Non-desire, in this model, is a movement towards greater intelligence.

—New Delhi, December 2016

Some further notes, on levels

Of course, the connection between “higher” and “lower” inevitably rubs us up against the idea, in Gurdjieff's teaching, of levels. This idea is common to most metaphysical systems; yet in Gurdjieff's system, all the levels penetrate one another: they aren't physically separated, but integrated, at various rates of vibration.

The “higher” and “lower” aspects of levels in Gurdjieff's metaphysics, therefore, are not about *height* but about *speed*: they're dimensions not of space, but time: rate of vibration is determined by fluctuations in state over a given period of time.

This interesting thought, perhaps obvious once one has it, is perhaps also not so obvious until that point.

If we recall the essay “*Glimpses of Truth*” found in *Views from the Real World*, the protagonist discovers that in Gurdjieff’s world, “time does not exist.” Viewed in light of Gurdjieff’s system of cosmological vibrations, the statement amounts to a form of contradiction; the only way to measure rates of vibration, after all, is over time.

I’ve pointed out in other essays that from Gurdjieff’s point of view, the universe was created and consciousness arose strictly to counteract the effects of time, that is, slow it down; and one could take a wild stab into the darkness here by inferring that insofar as consciousness acquires a higher rate of vibration, so it “extracts” higher rates of vibration from the material world, concentrating them and concurrently slowing the passage of time down in the material universe.

This is admittedly out-of-the-box thinking and would need a great deal more examination before I could offer anything more meaningful on the subject. What I’m interested in here is that levels are not necessarily arranged vertically, but actually exist in three dimensions — just as the circulation of energies (vibrations) depicted in the enneagram is not *two*, but rather *three*, dimensional. All the indicators point here once again to the idea that the universe can’t be considered, in any strict sense, as arranged *vertically* — this is a convenience adopted because it is so difficult for us to think *dimensionally* on this matter.

In this hypothetical three-dimensional model, love/bliss still forms a foundational ground from which everything arises; and there is a dimensional development of intelligence in all directions that co-evolves out of this ground, achieving greater and greater levels of emergence whereby more intelligence, more knowing of the Divine by itself, more Divine self-remembering, takes place.

Yet in this evolving and emergent, self intelligent universe, the consequence of evolution and self-knowledge is an increase in the level of suffering. That suffering consists in turn of both acceptance and remorse. The evolution of an individual soul out of the ground of bliss and into the mysteries of acceptance and remorse of conscience represents a departure from God (the ground floor of love/bliss) in order to acquire understanding and knowledge and then return to him. Although conventional yogic intellectual models this are either vertical (stacked chakra diagrams) or circular (enneagrams) the actual relationships are far more dimensional and interpenetrated, a secret that the embedded circular forms preserve through their roundness, which imply wholeness, and thus dimensionality.

The idea that the universe, this dimensional field of emergent self-knowledge, evolves through suffering represents perhaps a radical departure, especially from the tenets of Buddhism, which contends that *escape* from suffering is the whole point of existence and spiritual evolution. It’s

quite notable, in this regard, that Gurdjieff turns Buddhism on its head in *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson* by contending that Buddha was the first saintly individual to introduce the idea of *intentional* suffering to mankind; in light of the above, that makes perfect sense.

It's absolutely necessary, here, to make one last reference to Victor Frankl's ideas in *Man's Search for Meaning*:

"Thus it can be seen that mental health is based on a certain degree of tension, the tension between what one has already achieved and what one still ought to accomplish, or the gap between what one is and what one should become. Such a tension is inherent in the human being and therefore is indispensable to mental well-being. We should not, then, be hesitant about challenging man with a potential meaning for him to fulfill. It is only thus that we evoke his will to meaning from its state of latency.

I consider it a dangerous misconception of mental hygiene to assume that what man needs in the first place is equilibrium or, as it is called in biology, "homeostasis," i.e., a tensionless state. What man actually needs is not a tensionless state but rather the striving and struggling for a worthwhile goal, a freely chosen task. What he needs is not the discharge of tension at any cost but the call of a potential meaning waiting to be fulfilled by him."

Frankl explores the question of suffering from an intensely personal, yet ultimately magnificent universal, point of view. No discussion on the subject and its relationship to man's inner development would be complete without a mention of his book.

And, last but not least, a recent article on the subject from the scientific community:

[avoiding spiritual struggles is linked with poor mental health](#)

—Sparkill, December 2016