

GURDJIEFF AND TIME

*'Time is the greatest mystery, containing all other mysteries.
Time is change. Time brings all. Life, death – and even miracles.'*
Rodney Collin

G.I. Gurdjieff described time or, in his nomenclature, 'heropass,' as the "Ideally-Unique-Subjective-Phenomenon." Time, according to Gurdjieff, is a unique phenomenon as it has no source from which it arises. It flows independently by itself and blends proportionately with every phenomenon occurring at a specific level or plane of the universe. "Only Time alone has no sense of objectivity because it is not the result of the fractioning of any definite cosmic phenomena. And it does not issue from anything, but blends always with everything and becomes self-sufficiently independent; therefore in the whole Universe it alone can be called and extolled as the 'Ideally-Unique-Subjective-Phenomenon'."

Within each level or scale of existence, Gurdjieff postulated that the phenomenological flow of time is perceived in a specific sequence, with defined developmental periods of birth, growth, decay, and death. "No matter what the scale – from the most dense to the most rarefied – the fundamental experiencing of the flow of time among beings is the same."

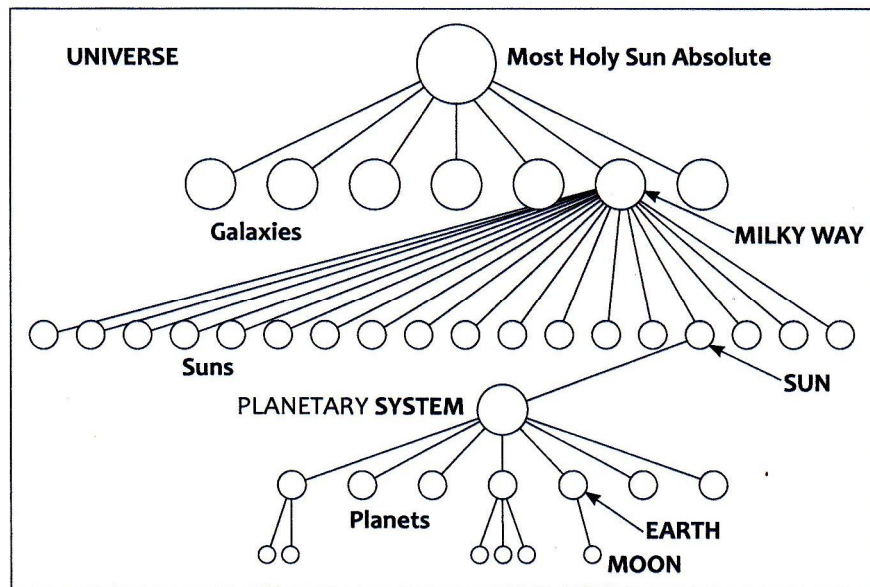
In this sense, Gurdjieff asserts that time is the one and only unchanging primordial reality through which everything exists. As well, every entity – from cell to human being to galaxy – perceives and experiences time in its own unique and specific way. In *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*, Gurdjieff describes the salient characteristics of time:

Time in itself does not exist; there is only the totality of the results ensuing from all the cosmic phenomena present in a given place. Time itself, no being can either understand by reason or sense by any outer or inner being-function. It cannot even be sensed by any gradation of instinct which arises and is present in every more or less independent cosmic concentration. It is possible to judge time only if one compares real cosmic phenomena which proceed in the same place and under the same conditions, where Time is being constated and considered. (1)

Time and Levels of Reality

One of the major principles of Gurdjieff's cosmological teachings is the concept of *scale* in the space-time matrix of phenomenal reality. He proposed seven fundamental levels or 'cosmoses,' which he called "the Ray of Creation," occurring in the manifest world: Absolute-All Worlds-All Suns-Sun-All Planets-Earth-Moon. His student P.D. Ouspensky stressed the importance of this model of the universe in his seminal book *In Search of the Miraculous*: "The idea of cosmoses helps us to understand our place in the world; and it solves many problems, as for instance, those connected with space and time. And above all this idea serves to establish exactly the *principle of relativity*."

The seven cosmoses, ranging from the finest (Absolute) to the densest (Moon) are depicted in the diagram below:



Each successive cosmos is a 'fraction' of the One Reality ('All and Everything'). In *Beelzebub's Tales*, Gurdjieff writes: "In the Great Universe all phenomena in general, without exception wherever they arise and manifest, are simply successively law conformable 'fractions' of some whole phenomenon where it has its prime arising on the 'Most Holy Sun Absolute'."

Gurdjieff emphasized the relational aspect of the concept of time occurring at different levels of the universe. For example, different cosmic phenomena and processes occur within the Sun (nuclear fusion), the Earth (movement of tectonic plates) and the human body (digestion of food). As a result, the flow of time is subjectively unique at each level: "Each level of the Ray of Creation has its arena of cosmic phenomena that defines the times of that world."

At each level of the Ray of Creation there are cosmic phenomena that are unique to that particular level. For instance, the process of nuclear fusion within the Sun creates pressures and temperatures millions of times greater than processes occurring on Earth. In *Explorations in Active Mentation*, Keith Buzzell expands on this idea:

In a given level of the Ray of Creation, the velocities and energies are *relative* to each other, as are the kinds of matter. The processes themselves *flow* in strict accordance with laws of causation and interaction, (i.e., molecules will *not* form and persist in the interior of a sun; crystalline macromolecules will *not* be digested by an animal body; temperatures of millions of degrees Kelvin will *not* occur in tectonic plate movements). The relativity of each participant to other participants in a process is what establishes the *relational* aspect of time. The flow of time for both tectonic plate movement and for digestion are 'Ideally-Unique-Subjective-

Phenomena' *at that specific level* of the Ray of Creation upon which they arise . . . Because the concept of time is relational and relative, it cannot have an independent existence. It is not a thing or a specific, singular event. For example, we experience the flow of time as a result of the cosmic phenomena taking place at our level of the Ray of Creation and of which we can be aware (i.e., the day/night, month, year). Humans have impressions concerning the flow of an event (one thing following another in a sequence), but we never sense or understand by reason the *time itself*, because time, as an independent *something*, does not exist. (2)

At each level or scale of reality, life forms (whether small or large) experience the flow of time "by the comparison of the duration of the phenomena around them." Keith Buzzell discusses this notion with respect to human beings in *Reflections on Gurdjieff's Whim*:

Human beings have quite well-defined limits to their perception of the passage of Time. We do not register a flow of Time when the cosmic phenomena are taking place at speeds or frequencies that exceed our nervous system's ability to register them. In these contemporary times, we are embedded in micro- and radio waves of photonic energies that reflect processes (cosmic phenomena) that are taking place so briefly that we have no receptors that can register them. There are a host of processes within us that complete themselves (go through a cyclical exchange of energies and forms) which, for us, have no subjectively measurable Time. Neither do we experience a flow of Time when we consider the gradual wearing down of a mountain range (that occurs over many millions of years). Nor do we experience a flow of time when we flip a light switch in a darkened room. We cannot experience Time passing when an electron is knocked out of its orbit by an ultraviolet photon or when the photosynthetic process is taking place in a leaf. We experience a flow of Time *only* with respect to the cosmic phenomena occurring at our level of the Ray of Creation. (3)

Buzzell also argues that Gurdjieff's conception of time has many significant parallels with the findings of quantum mechanics and particle physics. In *The Third Striving* he writes:

The resonance between Gurdjieff's myth (as we understand it) and the findings and theoretical understandings of modern science is quite striking. We consider Gurdjieff's treatment of Time as the most realistic, subtle and comprehensive approach which has been given a form. Rather than a linear, incremental and measured progression that knows no limit, he has removed Time's existence as a single extension (from the past to the future) and given its conception significance in terms of 'cosmic phenomena' at each level of the Universe – quite compatible with the concept of symmetry breaking that marks the progression of law from pre-atomic to atomic, molecular and all aspects of electromagnetic phenomena. Being (the Principle of Three) and Becoming (the Principle of Seven) emerge in Gurdjieff's conception, as distinct markers of levels of reality in our Universe, introducing a conception that finds remarkable resonances with the concepts of quantum mechanics. (4)

The findings of modern physics also provide a tripartite division of the world (matter, energy and information) that is congruent with Gurdjieff's Law of Three (active, passive and reconciling forces). Matter (passive) exists in ordinary time and is subject to disintegration through entropy. Energy (active) can change form but is never destroyed. Information (reconciling) includes all possibilities and is the "abstract structure of things and relationships."

In *The Enneagram of G.I. Gurdjieff*, scientist and Fourth Way student Christian Wertenbaker elaborates on this conception: "Mathematically, the fundamental constituents of matter are vibrations of possibility (probability amplitudes). Since atoms and subatomic particles also persist in ordinary time, all three dimensions of time are represented: possibility, eternity – as vibration, and ordinary time. So, in this sense, atoms might be regarded as little bundles of three-dimensional time."

Gurdjieff once famously said that "Time is breath." Although time is different in different cosmoses, the times in various cosmoses are related to each other. When Ouspensky explored this idea he concluded that for a human being a breath was approximately 3 seconds (i.e. twenty breaths per minute) and the cycle of day and night was 24 hours. Finally, the duration of human life was potentially 100 years. But he also recognized that human beings are only part of a higher cosmos (Earth, Sun and Milky Way). For each of these cosmoses, breath, day/night and duration had relational values with each other.

EVENT	CELL	MAN	PLANET	STAR	GALAXY
Impression	1 300,000,000 second	1 10,000 second	24 hours	100 years	3,000,000 years
Breath	1 10,000 second	3 seconds	100 years	3,000,000 years	9×10^{10} years
Day and night	3 seconds	24 hours	3,000,000 years	9×10^{10} years	3×10^{15} years
Life span	24 hours	100 years	9×10^{10} years	3×10^{15} years	9×10^{20} years

Ouspensky's model compares time in different cosmoses, ranging from a cell to a galaxy. "Although such a table can only be highly speculative as to the actual times of impressions, breath, day and night, and life span, it does seem to accord quite well with what physicists, geologists and astronomers calculate as the possible time duration for the Earth, Sun and Milky Way galaxy."

The Flow of Time and Entropy

Our everyday life experience is imbued with the sense of time moving from past to present to future. Time, by its relentless flow, ultimately alters and destroys all forms. In the ancient Greek myth of the reality of time, *Chronos* (Saturn) first begets his children and then devours them. Likewise, nothing exists forever and all things continually change and eventually cease to exist.

Most of us can agree on the experience that our lives appear as a certain progression of movement, of cycles, of periodicity. This sense of reality remains in the background as we move about in our lives. Yet, there are moments or events we are faced with when the stark reality of this incessant movement comes to the forefront of our experience, as when someone close to us, a loved one, at some point simply vanishes through the other unknown and little understood word: *death*. The finality of death – *now here, now gone* – shocks us anew into question and reveals an inescapable fact about *something* inherent in the nature of Time. While the shock of death may bring us momentarily to a new quality and sense of time, our day-to-day human existence soon enshrouds us back to the conditioned verbal and written expressions and notions of time. These words of time reveal our perceiving as well as how deeply the referent of Time influences the experiencing of our being existence. Isn't the content of our lives continually being referred to some point along an imaginary arrow of Time. (5)

One of the implications of linear, directional time is *entropy*. Entropy is generally defined as the degradation of matter and energy in the universe to an ultimate state of inert uniformity, i.e., the gradual dispersion of order over time. Christian Wertenbaker: "The inexorable increase of entropy in the universe claimed by classical physics could be seen as the result of two related deficiencies in its worldview: the virtual exclusion of consciousness and an incomplete understanding of time."

Modern physics considers that entropy, or disorder, always increases in a global sense, though it may decrease locally and temporarily, as in an organism, which is a highly organized entity, as the word suggests. But an organism, according to physics, has to maintain its orderly structure at the expense of increased disorder outside of itself, and the overall result is an increase in entropy globally. The global increase in entropy over time is a necessary consequence of there being only one dimension, and direction, of time. In fact, the direction of time, from past to future, can be defined as the direction in which entropy increases . . . A living organism maintains a selective order inside itself. If the organism died, its molecules would disperse; so it must actively maintain its internal order. There is a local decrease in entropy, but because it is using energy from outside, by eating and breathing, perceiving and acting, overall there is an increase in entropy in the world. The only way out of this conundrum is if there is a possibility of maintaining order without a greater increase in disorder elsewhere. According to Gurdjieff, the pur-

pose of the creation of the now existing universe was to counteract entropy, and if we regard the 'abode' of the creator as consciousness, it was to replenish, or maintain consciousness. This was ultimately made possible through the evolution of conscious beings, who could contribute to the consciousness of the universe, becoming as brain cells in the mind of God. (6)

Subjective Experience of Time

Throughout history, human beings have attempted to measure time with a wide array of mechanical instruments and devices such as the sundial, hourglass, swing of a pendulum and the unwinding of a spring. Yet, there is an element of subjectivity in any measuring tool: "Time is an apparent 'duration,' quantitatively measured by mechanical and other artificial means in arbitrary units relative to and chosen by the observer and dependent on his place in the Cosmos, as well as on his nature, his capacities, and the available tools and other means of study and the construction materials of the measuring apparatus."

Until this century it was thought that these devices, whether mechanical or other, once properly calibrated, work independently of their observers and makers and indicate "absolute time." It was assumed that any such device would indicate the same (arbitrarily chosen) unit of time to have elapsed in all circumstances and irrespective of the state or situation of the place in which the device is used. It is now known, as demonstrated by Albert Einstein, that this is not true and that the time, as recorded by every type of artificial device imaginable, varies relative to the observer and the differences in speed of relative motion between two time-measuring artefacts. The faster an observer moves with respect to another observer, the slower this observer's own "time" appears to flow, as compared with the "time" of the observer situated on the selected "stationary" object, such as Earth for instance. (7)

According to Gurdjieff, time flows in proportion to our psychological state and the quality of our past associations. The inner subjective experience of time may bear little or no relationship to so-called external or objective time. Our experience of the flow of time is subjective, depending on the situation, our mood, our expectations, and so forth. In certain types of experiences, such as accidents and critical life or death events, time seems to elongate and slow down. This so-called time elongation can also occur in certain "timeless" experiences of rapture, wonder, and other higher states of consciousness. But in other situations, such as boredom, time seems to drag on endlessly. Gurdjieff also noted that the sense of time is different for different human functions. In the moving/instinctive center we sense time sequentially as one thing after another. In the emotional center we experience time vividly in the present moment and in the mental center we experience time in both past and future.

Different life forms (microbes, insects, animals, humans) sense time differently and have different life spans, yet their inner subjective experiences and perceptions may be similar or equivalent:

For a man, the lifespan of a butterfly is very, very short, whereas that of a rock or mountain is extremely long. But in subjectively equivalent terms, everything that happens to a man in his lifetime (of 80 years or so) also happens to the butterfly in its lifetime (of 80 hours or so) and to a rock in its lifetime (of 80 million years or so), but of course in events corresponding to their own essences and natures and degrees of "consciousness." Consider, for instance, that a man's planetary body is made out of cells, most of which have a lifespan of a few hours. No wonder that a man can, within his body, perform in minutes feats of chemical reactions and synthesis that take days or more to carry out in a laboratory or factory. But for the particular group of cells whose job it is to perform this work, it takes the equivalent of "days" in their own time, relative to the total duration of their lives. Thus, what is a second, a minute, or an hour to the whole man is actually a day, a week, or a month to the working cells of which his body organs are made. Thus knowledge and understanding make what appears to be almost a miracle into something quite simple and comprehensible – and thus confirm that every Cosmos has its own "Time." (8)

Consciousness and Time

Gurdjieff taught that any description of the nature of reality must include both time and consciousness – two factors which modern science is still endeavoring to understand. Science currently recognizes only one dimension of time and is challenged to explain the nature and role of consciousness and the paradoxes of quantum mechanics. Christian Wertenbaker: "The nature of time and the role of consciousness have remained stubborn enigmas for scientists. The inclusion of time and consciousness, and of both the inner world of awareness and the outer world of phenomena, suggest a larger view than is currently encompassed by modern science."

From Gurdjieff's perspective, the past is memory, the present is attention and the future is preparedness. He spoke about memory in a talk to children in 1949: "Gurdjieff said that memory is time and time is memory. What cannot be remembered, he said, occupies no space in the flow of time, but what is remembered has a plasticity ever expandable or retractable unconsciously or willfully. Memory is our consciousness, our real time. We exist in consciousness no longer than our memory." He elaborated on this idea in "From the Author" at the conclusion of *Beelzebub's Tales*:

The memory of the average man, in comparison with the memory of a man harmoniously perfected, is a very imperfect adaptation of his utilization, during

his responsible life, of his previously perceived store of impressions. With the aid of memory, the average man from among impressions previously perceived, can make use of and, so to say, keep track of, only a very small part of his whole store of impressions, whereas the memory proper to the real man keeps track of all his impressions without exception, whenever they may have been perceived. (9)

The importance of attention to the present moment in whatever we are doing is highlighted in this exchange between Gurdjieff and student Kathryn Hulme:

When you do a thing, he once said, do it with the whole self. *One thing at a time.* Now I sit here and I eat. For me nothing exists in the world except this food, this table. I eat with the whole attention. So *you* must do – in everything. When you write a letter, do not at the same time think what will be the cost of laundering that shirt; when you compute laundering costs, do not think about the letter you must write. Everything has its time. To be able to do *one* thing at a time – that is a property of Man, not man in quotation marks. (10)

Gurdjieff posited a relationship between the perception of time and the level of presence and being of an individual: “The flow of time is perceived according to the completeness of one’s own presence.” Time may expand or retract in proportion to an increase or decrease of being. Through inner work, a spiritually developed human being can attain a state of “eternal reality, a timelessness in which in which past and future are an open field.” This allows access to higher worlds which are subject to different laws and conditions. The normal restrictions of time and space are transcended, and one may experience future events (precognition) or enter into past events (postcognition).

Most people’s lives are strongly conditioned by the personal psychological sense of the flow of time along the ‘horizontal dimension’ of past-present-future. The line of time contains an immeasurable point on it that we call “the present moment.” But there is no measurable point since all time is either behind us (past) or before us (future). *Now* is a continually moving point on a temporal vector along an endless line. “Time is the potentiality of experiences, and the flow of individual time is the rate at which potentialities are realized.”

However, according to Gurdjieff, when a conscious contact is made between our inner world and the outer world a different experience of time is possible. Here, a vertical dimension of time (eternity) meets the horizontal line of time through the creation of a conscious embodied attention – the state of pure consciousness or eternal silence.

For most people, the experience of time in the everyday world is subjective and dependent upon mental, emotional and physical states. When personality dominates essence the quality of time experience is diminished. In *Deeper Man*, Gurdjieff’s student John G. Bennett discusses how our experience of time is qualified by our level of inner development and being, noting that time expands dimensionally when we live our life from essence rather than conditioned

personality: "We live in an imaginary past and an imaginary future because we cannot live in the real present: we do not exist. We are not able to see the limitations of our lives and so we cannot see anything about what can be done in the future. We fail to see that in order to be here and now, we have to *be*."

Essence experience seems to give us more time because we are able to sustain ourselves in the present moment. In the personality, the present moment is always leaking away into the past and into the future through associations. We are caught up in things and have no time. We are unable to make a real contact with a past event and we are unable to hold a vision of the future. But what happens to us when we are under the laws of world 24 [planetary world] has a depth that enables it to hold together. What we have experienced in an essential way remains alive. We are able to make a connection with the future and prepare for what is to come. We have a place in the course of events and are not just a bit of flotsam tossed on the surface of external happenings. Under the domination of the personality, we are under anxiety about things which are outside our control and blind to things which are inside our control. We do not see how our inner state can influence what is possible. We are living according to a mechanical line of time. With the essence, we can see what is *potential* as well as what is *actual*; and this gives us the possibility of real choice. Choice changes the meaning of time. (11)

In a conversation with one of his earliest students, Olgivanna (Hinzenberg) Wright, Gurdjieff stressed the importance of using our limited time on earth productively and wisely:

"You still don't understand time. Every minute of your life on earth is important. If you waste one minute, in that span of time you might have lost the only chance for your inner transition. You must be aware of every minute of your life; time must be ever present in your consciousness. Through it you will understand eternity. The attribute of time is awareness. Every minute of your life is important." His words were strong. He looked at me with a thoughtful expression mixed with compassion. Every word of his remained sealed in the marrow of my bones. (12)

References

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