

I and Others

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The Art of Living

Man is a social being. His very being is essentially defined by his relationships with others, within groups of varying sizes. Perhaps in ancient times, when people lived in villages or in small bands, there were not many groups for an individual, and relationships were relatively stable. In modern life there are many groups—job, church, clubs, music ensemble, nuclear family—and change is frequent, often jarring. Probably this is an important cause of what many see as a degradation of man's inner life in modern times.

Individuality, each person's "I," subsists largely in its relationships with "others". One needs to understand better the nature of the relationship of "I" to other. An essential gesture of "I" is to distance itself from others, if only in order to experience itself as existing "in" these relationships. Yet sometimes the distancing relaxes and the inner experience of "I" and "other" merge— "I" becomes identified with the group. This dance of self and other, within groups, is the nexus of genuine human living, but also, all too frequently, of pathology. One needs to learn how to recognize and avoid merging with group pathology.

How to promote and develop good relationships, and good groups, is a central question for individuals, and for the whole modern human world. Many programs have been proposed and some of them have been seriously tried by large and small groups of people—but such efforts usually fail, under the law that nothing that people try can have a result better than the quality of the people who try it.

Still, there is hope that true *knowledge* of human nature, and of group nature, could be beneficial. Such knowledge would have to be founded in actual observation that penetrates through the barriers of received theory. One might keep in mind Sir Arthur Stanley Eddington's quip: "no observation can be considered valid unless supported by a theory," a mocking antiphrasis of the usual canons of scientific theory.

The Other exists to the self as an image imbued with significances. What is the source of these significances, of the very existence of the other as a presence? No doubt Freud was right that these "presences" begin as absences: first of all the withdrawal of the intimate bond of infant with its mother, and later in a different way, its father. Later relationships—brothers and sister, relatives, friends, spouse, children, lovers, work colleagues—are formed by these early experiences, often reincarnating the consequences of painful separations that were an inevitable component of infancy.

A man-shaped hole is left in the child's mind and heart which is like the armature for a sculpture. The person then makes such a sculpture of all the actual other people he encounters, and even of himself, his own body. And also of "others" that are not actual other humans but imaginal beings whose existence is taught in theories received from surrounding culture: ancestors, heroes, spirits, angels, planets, "sacred" things such as certain mountains and trees and ritual artifacts (this is more common in so-called "pantheistic" pre-civilized cultures), abstract entities like "country," "city," "money," etc. And gods—

surely the “God” of our Abrahamic religions is made thus, in the image of The Father: all-knowing, all-powerful, remote.

Even the “self” is formed as such a sculpture. The self, the self of one’s own body, is in fact an “other” in relation to “I.” Again, a merger is possible, an identification with the body; in fact this is a normal condition in most people’s lives. This is not necessarily a good thing. A certain distance allows more possibilities of inner life.

Practices of invoking and developing an “other self” run throughout traditional teachings and are widely practiced in modern teachings. For example Gurdjieff speaks about “remembering oneself” and “creating second body.” A specific practice is described in the oral tradition of Gurdjieff’s legacy as “attention of the mind on the sensation of the body.” One version of this practice is given in *Life is Real, Only Then When ‘I Am’* in the chapter “Fifth Talk”: a mantric recitation of “I Am” while trying to evoke a sensation of “vibration” in the solar plexus.

The result of intensive practice of this kind can be to quicken the body self, which eventually gives birth to a relatively permanent “second body” which among its properties endows the practitioner with new powers of action and perception. This “second body” can, notionally, be separated from the physical body and projected, and can exercise these powers at some distance. This resembles the “astral projection” attempted in new-age cults, and in some ancient traditions such as Tibetan Tantric Buddhism which describes such a practice in great detail (see for example *The Six Yogas of Naropa*). Also, the second body is believed to persist at least for a certain time after physical death.

But is this “true”? In the literal sense, it is obviously fantasy, supported by wishful thinking, similar to the way children daydream of being able to flap their wings and fly like a bird. Yet is it not true that a human being imbued with great charisma can project the will of his mind to a great distance? And control the lives of millions of people, can hypnotize them, make them confabulate things that are not real, and do things against their self-interest, and even against humanity; or do people just *say* and *believe* in these illusions rather than actually *seeing* them, and carry out absurd commands because of these beliefs? This is often suspected in the case of conventional posthypnotic suggestion. Obviously such use of “powers” is not a good thing; but more cases of that kind are recorded in history than world-shaking beneficent projection of powers. No use of powers be truly beneficent, if it is based on making people see and believe things that are not true, that they have never really seen.

As Shakespeare has Mark Anthony say to the Roman rabble who had lent him their ears: “The evil men do lives after them, the good is oft interred with the bones.” Yet it is the murdered Caesar who lives on as a hero in popular imagination, not so much the cynical Mark Anthony. Caesar’s evil is largely forgotten, he is remembered as a great man, a conquering hero. But like all kings and potentates, his acquisition and deployment of power involved great evil. Perhaps it is not that bad a thing that power-possessing-beings, living and dead, are often thought of as good men. It gives people some measure of goodness to aspire to, even though such aspirations are usually contaminated by a secret wish to be able to get back at or at least lord it over their tormentors of childhood and later. As Kant said, even though Reason can never prove the existence of God, it may be better to let people have their probably false beliefs, if it makes them behave better.

What then should *we* do, how should we live? What is right practice of the Art of Living? To try always to look deeper, more honestly. To *understand*, not by words alone but by experience, by trying, and often failing. And not to try to develop powers, just to accept oneself, and reality, as they really are. And to be nice to others, when possible.

The Art of Leaving

One final note: It is as important to study the Art of Leaving as the Art of Living. The lasting wounds of childhood were caused by artless leavings of mother and father. In every human life many other artless leavings have left their marks in turn. It's no wonder that in certain channels of Christian thought God is called *Deus absconditus*, the god who abandoned Man.

Sometimes one has to leave behind relationships, friends, lovers, houses, country, jobs, schools, clubs, treasured activities, functions of the aging or injured body. Each leaving tends to leave scars in the soul. The practice of the Art of Leaving would be to leave *consciously*. The pain, the emptiness, is still felt—one wouldn't want to avoid it—but it is to be transformed to good pain, pain which elevates the person and shows the way toward a richer inner life.

Finally, there is that great leaving that looms for everyone: dying. Wise men over the centuries have taught that life should be lived as toward death, as a preparation. Few can listen to this. Gurdjieff said that the only thing that could really help people would be for them to constantly visualize their own inevitable death and that of every other person whom they encounter.

Certain music helps one feel toward death: Chopin's profound Prelude no. 2 in A minor, which the great Hans von Bulow assigned the title "Presentiment of Death." Isle of the Dead by Rachmaninoff. Some pieces of the Gurdjieff/de Hartmann oeuvre: Prayer and Despair; Sacred Hymn no. 6, which ends in six rising stratospheric dissonant shrieks.

We are afraid of leavings. We don't know how to practice the Art of Leaving; and we have never been educated about it. It may not quite be too late to learn.