

...of consciousness

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One of the many “koans” of Gurdjieff’s teaching is the saying of nine lines described in *Beelzebub’s Tales* as engraved on an ancient marble table, a relic of Ashiata Shiemash.

Faith of consciousness is freedom
Faith of feeling is weakness
Faith of body is stupidity.

Love of consciousness evokes the same in response
Love of feeling evokes the opposite
Love of body depends on type and polarity.

Hope of consciousness is strength
Hope of feeling is slavery
Hope of body is disease.

Other renderings exist in English, this version is from the original published version of *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*, p. 361.

In the French edition of the book it is translated like this (or is this the original?)

La Foi de la conscience est liberté,
La Foi du sentiment est faiblesse.
La Foi du corps est bêtise.

L'Amour de la conscience provoque le même en répons.
L'Amour du sentiment provoque son contraire.
L'Amour du corps ne dépend que du type et de la polarité.

L'Espérance de la conscience est force.
L'Espérance du sentiment est servitude.
L'Espérance du corps est maladie.

Many people have pondered, as have I, the meaning of this, especially the first lines “...of consciousness.” What is “faith of consciousness,” etc.? What is “freedom”? Why is this passage important?

There is a simple reading that is not commonly discussed: “faith of consciousness,” sometimes rendered “conscious faith,” simply means to *believe* intentionally. This aligns with Tertullian’s comment in his early 3rd century work *De Carne Cristi*: “Credo quia absurdum,” “I believe because it is absurd.” This became an important idea in early modern Christianity: to believe *in spite of*, even *because of* the absurdity of what a Christian is required to believe. It is easy to understand the idea of “inner freedom” as including the freedom to believe the absurd.

This freedom-of-belief is like Coleridge’s recommended practice for reading literature: “suspended disbelief.” It is possible to enter into a work by temporarily “believing” the story it tells, its events, its characters, their emotions, struggles, triumphs, disasters. In the modern era when religious dogma and historiography can be considered fiction this is a very useful stance for reading and pondering religion and related teachings. For many written works it is simply the way words work on us, we find ourselves passively believing. Coleridge is suggesting that we not resist this. For some postmodern works (*Beelzebub’s Tales* is one) it is a struggle to decode what to believe—it may be necessary to believe two or more contradictory things at the same time.

People often try to make something highly esoteric, spiritual, out of these three classical “virtues,” which are received by us primarily via 1st Corinthians 13:13: “And now abide faith, hope, and love—but the greatest of these is love.”

It is sometimes said that “faith” is different from “belief”; yet the first commandment of religion is to *believe*; and in the ten commandments, to have no other belief. Perhaps *faith* is expected to follow *belief*.

But what is faith? One meaning of the word is “conformance to a model,” as in a “faithful translation,” or a faithful representation of an idea, or a faithful performance of a ritual, or of a piece of music. To have faith in Christ means to faithfully conform to Christlikeness.

Similarly to the idea in the Koran that the unconditional beneficence of Allah was that in creating the universe he freed things, primordially non-existent, from their agony of longing for existence, “suspended disbelief” can be an inner act that frees imaginal things from their longing for us to have faith in them. Perhaps this is a “religious act.” Though the ordinary-language meaning of the words “faith” “hope” and “love” are common psychological valences, the act of “suspended disbelief” elevates them (virtually) to esoteric status.

The French “la conscience” is ambiguous: it can mean English “conscience”; or “consciousness.” If we read “faith of *conscience*” it makes “faith” mean something of great human value: to live by *conscience* rather than convenience, rather than habit.

A yet higher reading is “faith *in* consciousness”: pure consciousness, prior to consciousness of any form. From the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* (in the translation of Evans-Wentz), here is a description of the experience of the moment of “death”: “...all things are like the void and cloudless sky, and the naked, spotless intellect is like unto a transparent vacuum without circumference or centre. At this moment, know thou thyself; and abide in that state.”

Perhaps such an idea should not be glossed as a noun, but rather as a verb. Heidegger does something like this in speaking of the human being as “*da-sein*,” which means in German simply “being there.”

We can go a little further with the Ashiatan inscription: “hope of consciousness” or “conscious hope” would mean to hope-on, in the face of a hopeless situation. Reading literally Gurdjieff’s stories of his own life, in *Meetings with Remarkable Men* and even more so in *Life is Real, Only Then When ‘I Am,’* there is account after account of Gurdjieff facing an impossible situation with firm resolution. Similar stories are projected into the tales of Beelzebub. Indeed, such hope is a powerful inner strength, rare among human beings, but found in the received stories of many heroes and saints.

Then, “love of consciousness,” “conscious love,” means to love *intentionally*, to love that which one does not like, people whom one does not like. Gurdjieff writes that he called on himself to do this with his followers, often deliberately taking on relationships with people that made him suffer. And he calls on those who would transmit his teaching to “love” those for whom they are responsible as recipients of such transmission, to “love those who work.” Or more broadly, to intentionally love every person. Gurdjieff even makes this the prime teaching of Christianity, an idea well-supported by the Gospels even if not very often realized in practice.

The six sentences about “feeling” (or emotion) and “body” are more problematic. The message is that it is bad if either emotion or body are in control. But this is the common condition: body—its habits, its desires—dictates emotions to serve its needs, emotion dictates to thought. “Consciousness” is an illusion—it thinks itself independent but this is vanity: what it thinks is completely dependent on the lower functions. If there is a moment of freedom of consciousness or will, it is quickly overwhelmed by desire and becomes a mere function. The take-home message of Ashiata is that consciousness *can* be free, can control the whole apparatus of being including emotion and body—but does this ever really take place, or is it just a tale, at best an ideal, a direction that calls? How to respond to the call? How even to *hear* it amidst all the noise, and all the pretending that what one thinks, what one desires, what one does, is a manifestation of consciousness, an act of the unmanifest (for that is what pure consciousness is) becoming manifest (for that is what *man* does, *man*-ifest the unmanifest). And how to know that nearly hopeless situation for a fact, in oneself and in one’s life.