

# Gurdjieff, Magnetic Centre and Richard Jefferies

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I've been pondering the idea Gurdjieff/Ouspensky refer to as 'Magnetic Centre', a certain something-or-other inside us that plays some part in the development and maintenance of enhanced consciousness in human life. It sounds very elitist but in the circumstances of life as we find them, it is an objective fact that only a very few people are able to find hidden possibilities in themselves: most limit themselves by existing solely in one part of their makeup; some in a purely physical mode of being who will never relate to those on a purely intellectual journey who will never relate to those with a purely emotional fix on life. These three ways precede 'The Fourth Way' along which one begins to gain a balance of physical, intellectual and emotional attachment to life; died in the wool athletes, philosophers & monks choose to continue to go their self-insulated way, on race track, in library or cell; if they do happen to meet up with one another they will each seem to be talking double-dutch.

To add to the mix, in Ouspensky's words, slightly edited:-

...in the ordinary conditions of life everybody lives under two kinds of influences. First there are the influences created in life, desire for riches, fame, [wars, politics, science, business, religion, burdened with mortgages] and so on, which we [4W people] call influences A. Secondly, there are other influences which come from outside life, which work in the same conditions although they are different, and we call these influences B. They reach people in the form of religion, literature or philosophy. Influences of the second kind are often conscious in their origin. Influences A are mechanical from the beginning. We can meet B influences or pass them by without noticing them, or we can hear them and think that we understand them, use the words and at the same time have no real understanding at all. These two influences really determine further development. When we accumulate influences B, the result can be a crystallisation in us of a certain kind of centre of attraction called [by the followers of The Fourth Way] Magnetic Centre...

It's obviously a metaphor but quite a compelling one: things deemed important can stick to an 'inner magnet', just like iron filings to a real magnet. More true to life, I suppose, it's the way things are attracted to one another

across crevices of the brain to form a more or less coherent pattern in the memory working of the Limbic System, which causes us to be programmed one way or another.

The majority of people are hypnotised by A Influences which can take up so much time that there's no room for anything else, certainly not B Influences which tend to be more subtly compelling. But once there's a Magnetic Centre developing inside us more & more B Influences seem to accrue so that there is less likelihood of being distracted by A Influences. When a person meets another who happens to be similarly endowed great friendship is possible even at a distance; they might even come across a C Influence, a super-person outside their normal scope who has a marked effect on them.

Somebody who has begun to achieve a balance of physical, mental and emotional and functions is likely to be more open to B Influences.

I have for many years, adequate bricklayer, constructor of thought-collages, composer/poet, imagined myself to be already well on 'The Fourth Way' and therefore find it interesting to figure out how I got there. What existential choices did I make early on in life that caused me to go down this pathway?

Being for various reasons in early life often left to my own resources, there was perhaps more chance to think about what was happening to me. By the age of fifteen I had read many of Lamb's essays, dipped into Thomas Carlyle, admiring his verbal style, read George Sturt, been fascinated by H.G. Wells, but everything was suddenly pulled together when I accidentally came across Richard Jefferies. When I first read *The Story of My Heart* in Paris at Easter 1953, I found all the bits & pieces of ideas I had entertained till then drawn together in one long eloquent outflow of deeply felt words; I was 15 and remember being stunned by the thought that somebody had got there before me. I soon learned, of course that I was joining a huge company of travellers on 'The Journey to the East'.

I have just re-read Jefferies' most important book yet again with the intention of being able to describe it precisely, with ample quotations, as the major B Influence on my life.

The seed-ground must have been prepared long before Easter 1953 when I realised that, though I was far from the bodily suffering Jefferies endured, it was also *my heart* he was talking about. Something or other had established a pattern of thinking that Jefferies defined clearly for me. I have been able to relate everything I have read or thought from then on somehow or the other to the words of that great book. Long strings of connections grow out of it.

Longmans, his publisher, asked Jefferies for a descriptive note on *The Story of My Heart*. He eventually produced a version which included this reference to himself in the third person:-

He claims to have erased from his mind the traditions and learning of the past ages, and to stand face to face with nature and with the unknown. The general aim of the work is to free thought from every trammel, with the view of its entering upon another and larger series of ideas than those which have occupied the brain of man so many centuries. He believes that there is a whole world of ideas outside and beyond those which now exercise us.

Jefferies offers a new way of conceptualising the world going ‘...beyond the stars into the hollow of space and, losing thus my separateness of being, [which] came to seem like part of the whole...’ Whereas ‘...our bodies are now conveyed all round the world with ease but obtain no advantage. As they start so they remain...’ for him there was no gap between now and eternity so that ‘like a shuttle the mind shot to & fro the past and the present in an instant...’

Knowing that ‘a nexus of ideas exists of which nothing is known—a vast system of ideas—a cosmos of thought’, Jefferies demands: ‘instead of a set of ideas based on tradition, let me give the mind a new thought, drawn straight from the wondrous present, direct this very hour...’

Realising that spirit, recognising my own inner consciousness, the psyche, so clearly, I cannot understand time. It is eternity now, I am in the midst of it. It is about me in the sunshine; I am in it, as the butterfly floats in the light-laden air. Nothing has to come; it is now. Now is eternity; now is the immortal life. Here this moment, by this tumult, on earth, now; I exist in it. The years, the centuries, the cycles are absolutely nothing; it is only a moment since this tumult was raised; in a thousand years more it will still be only a moment. To the soul there is no past and no future; all is and will be ever, in now. For artificial purposes time is mutually agreed on, but there is really no such thing. The shadow goes on upon the dial, the index moves round upon the clock, and what is the difference? None whatever. If the clock had never been set going, what would have been the difference? There may be time for the clock, the clock may make time for itself; there is none for me... Time has never existed, and never will; it is a purely artificial arrangement.

During the years when I ran ‘Time Management’ courses for executives in industry I used to bedazzle them by beginning my opening little lecture thus: “You’ve come here to learn how to manage your time better... Well, let me tell you there is no such thing as time...” which served to grab their attention immediately; somewhat shocked, they become focused on the artificiality of the conventional practice of time—if it’s artificial then we can grasp that idea and make something of it ourselves. That is Jefferies’ line. And ‘time is breath’, says Gurdjieff.

The feeling Jefferies has of being ‘me in the sunshine’ seems to me to be very much like the ‘Fourth Way’ concept of Self-remembering: there are frequent references to what amounts to the result of making the assertion, ‘this is me

being me here and now'. In another set of words, this has been a conscious habit of mine since very early childhood: 'I shall remember this moment for the rest of my life...' I can go back over many of the moments since then right now, aware of the way I became absorbed in whatever was around me at the time.

My thought, or inner consciousness, went up through the illumined sky, and I was lost in a moment of exaltation. This only lasted a very short time, perhaps only part of a second, and while it lasted there was no formulated wish. I was absorbed; I drank the beauty of the morning; I was exalted. When it ceased I did wish for some increase or enlargement of my existence to correspond with the largeness of feeling I had momentarily enjoyed. Sometimes the wind came through the tops of the elms, and the slender boughs bent, and gazing up through them, and beyond the fleecy clouds, I felt lifted up. The light coming across the grass and leaving itself on the dew-drops, the sound of the wind, and the sense of mounting to the lofty heaven, filled me with a deep sigh, a wish to draw something out of the beauty of it, some part of that which caused my admiration, the subtle inner essence.

Self-remembering takes one into the realm of Higher Consciousness—I think that's what Jefferies refers to as a super-abundance of soul-life which provided him with a new sense of reality & purpose, centuries of thought having failed 'to reconcile and fit the mind to the universe which is designless & purposeless and without idea...'

It was a necessity to have a few minutes of this separate life every day; my mind required to live its own life apart from other things. A great oak at a short distance was one resort, and sitting on the grass at the roots, or leaning against the trunk and looking over the quiet meadows towards the bright southern sky, I could live my own life a little while. Behind the trunk I was alone; I liked to lean against it; to touch the lichen on the rough bark. High in the wood of branches the birds were not alarmed; they sang, or called, and passed to and fro happily. The wind moved the leaves, and they replied to it softly; and now at this distance of time I can see the fragments of sky up through the boughs. Bees were always humming in the green field; ring-doves went over swiftly, flying for the woods.

It requires a shift of attention and a realisation that bees & wind & leaves, the sky and the trees & ring-doves flying are more than just 'things that happen'—they are significant events in a huge universe that are worth noting. But '...the agitated pool of life is stonily indifferent, the thought is absent or preoccupied, for it is evident that the mass [of human-unkind] are unconscious of the scene in which they act...'

People are sadly 'driven on by the push of accumulated circumstances... their necks are in the slave's ring, they are beaten like seaweed against the solid walls of fact....' And it's been like this for thousands of years, people driven on by pointless work:-

In ancient times, Xerxes, the king of kings, looking down upon his myriads, wept to think that in a hundred years not one of them would be left. Where will be these millions of to-day in a hundred years? But, further than that, let us ask, where then will be the sum and outcome of their labour ? If they wither away like summer grass, will not at least a result be left which those of a hundred years hence may be the better for? No, not one jot! There will not be any sum or outcome or result of this ceaseless labour and movement ; it vanishes in the moment that it is done, and in a hundred years nothing will be there, for nothing is there now. There will be no more sum or result than accumulates from the motion of a revolving cowl on a housetop.

Gurdjieff/Ouspensky tell us we are asleep. We are machine-slaves. Like Jefferies, they present a way of ceasing to be mechanical entities, ways of waking up from the sleep of life; it may take years of working on oneself with constant failures but the knack is to treat the failures as cues to stimulate a change of habit rather than beating oneself up with nettles. For Jefferies it's 'useless to fill the heart with bubbles' and he is possessed of an 'unquenchable'

...thought burning like the sun, that there is yet something to be found, something real, something to give each separate personality sunshine and flowers in its own existence now. Something to shape this million-handed labour to an end and outcome, leaving accumulated sunshine and flowers to those who shall succeed. It must be dragged forth by might of thought from the immense forces of the universe. To prepare for such an effort, first the mind must be cleared of the conceit that, because we live to-day, we are wiser than the ages gone. The mind must acknowledge its ignorance; all the learning and lore of so many eras must be erased from it as an encumbrance. It is not from past or present knowledge, science or faith, that it is to be drawn. Erase these altogether as they are erased under the fierce heat of the focus before me. Begin wholly afresh. Go straight to the sun, the immense forces of the universe, to the Entity unknown; go higher than a god, deeper than prayer and open a new day...

I think that Jefferies does successfully what J.G. Bennett (one of Gurdjieff's disciples) wanted to come to some conclusion about not long before he died—speed up the process of change in the Fourth Way. Jefferies does it by going 'straight to the sun'. I have found that both raising my arms to the sunrise and sinking into being thoroughly aware of what Eugene Marais called 'hesperian depression'—'the anxiety that overtakes the human and animal mind at sunset darkness and starlight'—together fill me in the first case with the joy of a new day and in the latter case with a paradoxical joy at *lacrymae rerum*. It is perhaps all one needs to anchor a new feeling of being awake—to remember oneself entirely on such occasions.

What else do we have to abandon wholeheartedly? Jefferies is very precise & assertive:-

The pageantry of power, the still more foolish pageantry of wealth, the senseless precedence of place; words fail me to express my utter contempt for such pleasure or such ambitions. Let me be in myself myself fully, and those I love equally so. It is enough to lie on the sward in the shadow of green boughs, to listen to the songs of summer, to drink in the sunlight, the air, the flowers, the sky, the beauty of all. Or upon the hill-tops to watch the white clouds rising over the curved hill-lines, their shadows descending the slope. Or on the beach to listen to the sweet sigh as the smooth sea runs up and recedes. It is lying beside the immortals, in-drawing the life of the ocean, the earth, and the sun.

All the ways we've been programmed to think have to be abandoned or, maybe, just pondered well. The indigestible rumblings of philosophy & religion, the insane nudging of the political Right and the dogmatic Left. Aneurin Bevan was quite right when he said he could not define Tories as anything other than 'worse than vermin' which is very unfair to vermin. The Right is solely concerned with the 'foolish pageantry of wealth, the senseless precedence of place...'; socialism is on the side of humanity—call it the Left if you like but the metaphor of artificial placement is irrelevant: you could have the politics of Up and Down, Near & Far, Backwards & Forwards, Sideways & Lengthways, Crooked & Curved—it would make no difference. There are those who value money for its own sake and those who value human beings—that's all there is in politics, as I've many times told the Tory MP who is supposed to represent me in Parliament!

Put aside the plan-circle of ideas, and it will at once be evident that there is no inherent necessity or 'must'. There is no inherent necessity for a first cause, or that the world and the universe was created, or that it was shaped of existing matter, or that it evolved itself and its inhabitants, or that the cosmos has existed in varying forms for ever. There may be other alternatives altogether. The only idea I can give is the idea that there is another idea. In this 'must'—'it must follow'—lies my objection to the logic of science... I say that, however carefully the argument be built up, even though apparently flawless, there is no such thing at present as 'it must follow'. Human ideas at present naturally form a plan, and a balanced design; they might be indicated by a geometrical figure, an upright straight line in the centre, and branching from that straight line curves on either hand exactly equal to each other. In drawing that is how we are taught... In nature and in fact there is no such thing. The stem of a tree represents the upright line, but the branches do not balance; those on one side are larger or longer than those on the other. Nothing is straight, but all things curved, crooked, and unequal.

Follow the crooked and the curved, the immense ranges of thought that we are either unaware of yet or conned into thinking of as misguided. 'In human affairs everything happens by chance—that is, in defiance of human ideas and without any direction of an intelligence...' Jefferies quotes a number of events resulting in human destruction for which there can be no justification. These

days there is no justification for people forced to sleep on the streets when we live in a society full of rich people suiting themselves, pretending to care. No justification for capitalists falling over each other to make money out of other people's illness & physical pain. There being no rhyme or reason to this, we have it in our power to effect change. Things just happen, as Gurdjieff says, but when we awake we can arrange the world in a different way.

These things speak with a voice of thunder. From every human being whose body has been racked by pain; from every human being who has suffered from accident or disease; from every human being drowned, burned, or slain by negligence, there goes up a continually increasing cry louder than the thunder. An awe-inspiring cry dread to listen to, which no one dares listen to, against which ears are stopped by the wax of superstition and the wax of criminal selfishness. These miseries are your doing, because you have mind and thought, and could have prevented them. You can prevent them in the future. You do not even try now.

The power possessors in their bunkers and palaces choose to ignore the thunder and we, accepting the lie that they are working on our behalf with an idiot belief that one day we may be like them, masters of industry, as they trickle down their wealth to us, go along with their indifference.

The complacency with which the mass of people go about their daily task, absolutely indifferent to all other considerations, is appalling in its concentrated stolidity. They do not intend wrong—they intend rightly: in truth, they work against the entire human race. So wedded and so confirmed is the world in its narrow groove of self, so stolid and so complacent under the immense weight of misery, so callous to its own possibilities, and so grown to its chains, that I almost despair to see it awakened.

Ouspensky is quite clear that the awakening when it comes will be painful because of all the adjustments that will have to be made in personal attitudes to living. Extraordinary that after twelve thousand years of effort the human race should still live from hand to mouth choosing to spend all its time in meaningless labour. You would have thought that we could have organised things for the comfort of all.

I well remember the Reith Lectures of 1954 when the world was still a little bit optimistic: Sir Leon Bagrit looked forward to the time when all the drudgery of the working day could be handed over to computers, same amount of 'wealth' being created, allowing ordinary people to begin to enjoy real life with, say, a two-day working week, creating a five day sabbath—my words, not his, but it's more or less what he was suggesting. Now, because they're saying it's good for us, they're actually talking about extending working life to 70... 75, 80... Nobody asks the really important question—what is human life for? They repeat the lie that people love work. What confounded nonsense.

How wonderful, says Jefferies ironically, that ‘people are so infatuated, or, rather, so limited of view that they glory in this state of things, declaring that work is the main object of human existence—work for subsistence—and glorying in their work-wasted time. To argue with such is impossible; to leave them is the only resource...’

This our earth this day produces sufficient for our existence. This our earth produces not only a sufficiency, but a superabundance, and pours a cornucopia of good things down upon us. Further, it produces sufficient for stores and granaries to be filled to the roof-tree for years ahead. I verily believe that the earth in one year produces enough food to last for thirty. Why, then, have we not enough ? Why do people die of starvation, or lead a miserable existence on the verge of it ? Why have millions upon millions to toil from morning to evening just to gain a mere crust of bread? Because of the absolute lack of organisation by which such labour should produce its effect, the absolute lack of distribution, the absolute lack even of the very idea that such things are possible. Nay, even to mention such things, to say that they are possible, is criminal with many...

The bloated capitalist, the slave-driver, all those who ride on the backs of the exploited. Sheer ignorance, duplicity, vested interests, inventing contrivances to keep our noses to the grindstone so we have neither time nor energy to ask questions, think, or engage in organised rebellion.

The human race for ages upon ages has been enslaved by ignorance and by interested persons whose object it has been to confine the minds of men, thereby doing more injury than if with infected hands they purposely imposed disease on the heads of the people. Almost worse than these, and at the present day as injurious, are those persons incessantly declaring, teaching, and impressing upon all that to work is man’s highest condition. This falsehood is the interested superstition of an age infatuated with money, which having accumulated it cannot even expend it in pageantry.

And here Jefferies makes the most telling point, the money economy has absolutely nothing to do with what a human individual is; it is not in operation for the benefit of ‘the human being in itself’ but for the Power Possessors to carry on eating with golden knives & forks. And they will call this ‘the politics of envy’, just as they did in the days of my youth, such is the level of their intellectual grasp of the argument. I asseverate that I would not know what to do with an income of more than £23,000 which is what I receive annually on account of age and service to humanity. It is also exactly the annual figure I received as a teacher’s salary when I achieved early retirement in 1992—no increase in nearly thirty years. Some politicians and footballers get that for one speech or one game of football—what on earth do they do with the money? I cannot begin to imagine.



It is a falsehood propagated for the doubtful benefit of two or three out of ten thousand. It is the lie of a morality founded on money only, and utterly outside and having no association whatever with the human being in itself. Many superstitions have been got rid of in these days; time it is that this, the last and worst, were eradicated.

Jefferies tells it exactly as it is:-

...it is the well-to-do, who are the criminal classes. It matters not in the least if the poor be improvident, or drunken, or evil in any way. Food and drink, roof and clothes, are the inalienable right of every child born into the light. If the world does not provide it freely—not as a grudging gift but as a right, as a son of the house sits down to breakfast—then is the world mad...

Jefferies celebrates idleness and the end of working for one's living. When I taught Stephen Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* for many years until some very ineffective people were put in charge of his organisation in Birmingham, I used to delight in announcing one of the apophthegms associated with the course: 'Nobody on their death bed ever said, "I wish I'd spent more time at the office..."' By ten o'clock on the day I started 'work' (23rd January 1955) I was wondering what it would be like on the day I retired. It is 27 years since I found out: I set off for my third cycle ride from John o'Groats to Land's End.

Jefferies is realistic about the need for some kind of labour which

...will be always necessary, since the plough must travel the furrow and the seed must be sown; but I maintain that a tenth, nay, a hundredth, part of the labour and slavery now gone through will be sufficient, and that in the course of time, as organisation perfects itself and discoveries advance, even that part will diminish. For the rise and fall of the tides alone furnish forth sufficient power to do automatically all the labour that is done on the earth. Is ideal man, then, to be idle? I answer that, if so, I see no wrong, but a great good. I deny altogether that idleness is an evil, or that it produces evil, and I am well aware why the interested are so bitter against idleness—namely, because it gives time for thought, and if we had time to think their reign would come to an end. Idleness—that is, the absence of the necessity to work for subsistence—is a great good. I hope succeeding generations will be able to be idle. I hope that nine-tenths of their time will be leisure time; that they may enjoy their days, and the earth, and the beauty of this beautiful world; that they may rest by the sea and dream; that they may dance and sing, and eat and drink. I will work towards that end with all my heart. If employment they must have... they shall not work for bread but for their souls...

It is not a belief, not an enslavement—it is the absolute truth which opens us to a new world.

Sometimes a very ecstasy of exquisite enjoyment of the entire visible universe filled me. I was aware that in reality the feeling and the thought were in me, and not in the earth or sun; yet I was more conscious of it when in company with these.

What was it Ouspensky said, quoted somewhere in the pages of **THERE MUST BE SOMETHING MORE TO LIFE THAN THIS?** 'Everything is in the mind...' All ideas, plans, projects, desires, mutinies, ambitions, all abstractions, all gods and demons, every decision, all endeavour... Since it's all in the mind, it can all be changed with a simple change of mind.