

# Gurdjieff on Sex: Subtle Bodies, Si 12, and the Sex Life of a Sage

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## Introduction

Georges Ivanovitch Gurdjieff (c. 1866–1949) was an Armenian-Greek teacher of esoteric doctrine. His rather candid teachings and views on sex and sexuality, which are scattered throughout his writings and those of his pupils, are seldom discussed by writers on Gurdjieff, though they are intrinsic to Gurdjieff’s overall vision of human beings and their potential for spiritual development. Gurdjieff’s fundamental teaching hinges on the precept that human beings are mechanical, habitually carrying out their lives in a sleep-like state. In his system, this is largely explained by the body’s continual squandering of the potent sexual energy produced by its “sex center.” The ultimate aim of Gurdjieff’s teaching is to harmonize the different “centers” that exist within the individual so that individuals might “wake up” and break out of their usual somnambulistic, mechanical state and, in this way, develop within themselves subtle bodies. The sex center plays a surprisingly significant and unique role in this soteriological process, as will be demonstrated.

This chapter will begin with a brief background to Gurdjieff and his teaching. Gurdjieff’s views on the sex center, which governs mechanical behavior but can potentially liberate individuals, will then be examined and positioned within the context of his “three-octave” system of food transformation outlined in Pyotr Demianovich Ouspensky’s (1878–1947) *In Search of the Miraculous* (1949). Following this, Gurdjieff’s views on heterosexuality, homosexuality, masturbation, and gender, with a focus on his contentious statements about women, will be assessed within the context

of his teaching. Finally, Gurdjieff's own flamboyant and controversial sex life will be considered.<sup>1</sup>

Gurdjieff's own writings, transcriptions of his talks, and the memoirs of close pupils, particularly those of J. G. Bennett (1897–1974) and Fritz Peters (1913–1979), will be utilized throughout this chapter. The two main texts used are Gurdjieff's *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson* (henceforth *Tales*), which constitutes the first part of his trilogy *All and Everything*, and pupil Ouspensky's *In Search of the Miraculous* (henceforth *Search*). Brief accounts of these texts follow.

Gurdjieff's *Tales* is an exhaustive critique of the behavior and customs of human beings, relayed by the wise, ancient extraterrestrial Beelzebub to his 13-year-old grandson Hassenin as they travel through space. Beelzebub had spent time on Mars observing Earth through his telescope and became so intrigued by human beings on this strange planet that he visited there six times. The time spanning his six Earth journeys, which amounts to several millennia, covers the period from just after the creation of the Earth until 1921. Gurdjieff stated that the ultimate aim of *Tales* was "to destroy, mercilessly, without any compromises whatsoever, in the mentation and feelings of the reader, the beliefs and views, by centuries rooted in him, about everything existing in the world" (1964, preface). *Tales* is written in a deliberately cryptic and symbolic manner, which aims to subvert usual modes of thinking and reading, requiring the reader to keep attentive in the struggle to understand the text (Wellbeloved 2002, 77–83). Gurdjieff demonstrated an ongoing interest in creating opportunities for pupils to struggle and face conflict so that they could understand his teachings experientially.

Ouspensky's *Search*, on the other hand, is a clear and comprehensive explication of Gurdjieff's ideas from 1915 to 1923. The majority of the text appears in quotation marks as Ouspensky's verbatim recollections of talks Gurdjieff gave to early groups. It is reported that Gurdjieff was at times critical of the text and of Ouspensky's excessively intellectual approach to the teaching (Bennett 1973, 177; Bennett 1997, 252). However, at other times Gurdjieff praised the text. In any case, *Search* is necessary to complement and clarify concepts from Gurdjieff's own more cryptic writings. Ouspensky is one of the earliest and most famous of Gurdjieff's pupils. He met Gurdjieff in 1914 and, shortly after, joined Gurdjieff's core six-member St. Petersburg group. After intensive training and close contact with Gurdjieff, Ouspensky began to distance himself in 1917 and two years later commenced lecturing on Gurdjieff's ideas. After brief visits to Gurdjieff's institute at Fontainebleau in 1922 and 1923, he separated completely from Gurdjieff and maintained a long and fruitful teaching career, amassing about 1,000 followers.

### Gurdjieff and His Teaching

Gurdjieff was born of Greek-Armenian parentage in the Greek quarter of the town Alexandropol (present-day Gyumri) in Russian Armenia, near the border of Turkey. He travelled extensively in his youth, seeking out sacred cities and sites in pursuit of esoteric knowledge. He arrived in Moscow in 1913 with the groundwork of his teaching formulated and began gathering pupils. He founded a school, the Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man, which began in Essentuki in the Caucasus and moved to Tiflis, then Constantinople, Berlin, and finally, in 1922, to the Chateau des Basses Loge in Avon in Fontainebleau, in the three-story main building known as the Prieuré. The building was believed to have been a Carmelite Monastery for priors, hence “Prieuré” (de Hartmann and de Hartmann 1992, 169). From that time Gurdjieff spent the majority of his life in France, where he wrote his four books, choreographed most of his sacred dances or “Movements,” composed music with pupil Thomas de Hartmann, and instructed groups of pupils through teaching methods involving household chores, gardening, farm and construction work, cooking, listening to music, listening to readings of his texts, and dancing. Throughout his life Gurdjieff, who by all accounts was a charismatic, unpredictable, vulgar, brazen, and intelligent character, was able to attract and maintain a large body of pupils that included talented artists and intellectuals.

During Gurdjieff’s lifetime, notwithstanding the sensationalist press reports written about his Movements demonstrations in the 1920s and concerning the death of writer Katherine Mansfield in 1923 while in his care, Gurdjieff was largely unknown outside his circle of pupils. His teaching began to spread in the 1950s, through the posthumous publication of his own writings and through the testimonies of pupils such as P. D. Ouspensky, Thomas and Olga de Hartmann, A. R. Orage, J. G. and Elizabeth Bennett, Fritz Peters, Margaret Anderson, René Zuber, and C. S. Nott. Gurdjieff’s teachings have now been carried on and expanded through Gurdjieff Foundation groups and independent groups in most major cities of the Western world (de Salzman 1987, 139–40). Gurdjieff influenced many artists, directors, choreographers, writers, actors, and thinkers, such as J. B. Priestly, Aldous Huxley, Katherine Mansfield, P. L. Travers, Moshe Feldenkrais, Frank Lloyd Wright, Alan Watts, Peter Brook, Arthur Miller, and Bill Murray (Gordon 1978, 34).

Gurdjieff taught that modern-day human beings, having been wrenched from the natural conditions in which they should be living due to “abnormal” contemporary education and culture, operate as dysfunctional machines that are controlled by uncoordinated centers in the body. The centers are in constant disarray, with each center struggling to

dominate the others (Ouspensky [1949] 1977, 53–54). In this condition human beings are machines that behave mechanically and unoriginally in the world, particularly as each of their centers maintains a small repertoire of habits that repeat endlessly (Gurdjieff 1984, 156). Living in this way, one's core self, known as "essence," is largely lost, and life is carried out through the false "personality," which is a protective, illusory mask that compensates for the lack of "essence." This condition characterizes the two lowest (of four) "states of consciousness" in which most people carry out their lives; the first is sleep at night and the second is the sleep-like condition in which one lives; "a far more dangerous sleep" than the former (Ouspensky [1949] 1977, 142–43). Gurdjieff's teaching aimed to reeducate the mechanical behaviors of the centers and bring them into harmony. This would allow people to become "complete" (Ouspensky [1949] 1977, 59–61), to develop "being" (de Hartmann and de Hartmann 1992, 203), and to live more consciously (Gurdjieff 1984, 69).

For Gurdjieff, the key to reeducating and harmonizing the centers is in the all-important transition from the second sleep-like state of consciousness to the third state of consciousness, known as "self-remembering" (Ouspensky [1949] 1977, 141). This is "the most important work for a man" (Gurdjieff 1999, 81–83) and "that absolutely necessary factor in the process of self-perfecting" (Gurdjieff [1964] 2002, 18). The term "self-remembering" means remembering to be aware of oneself in the present moment. This is achieved by "dividing attention" so that one is simultaneously aware of the self and also the current exterior or interior event or situation experienced (for example a task or emotion) (Ouspensky [1949] 1977, 118–20, 179). Gurdjieff taught that only through "self-remembering" can one break free from one's mechanical behaviors and somnambulistic condition to become conscious of one's self.

The ultimate objective of self-remembering was the setting into motion of an inner alchemical process in the body that could lead to the formation of subtle bodies or soul-like substances (Ouspensky [1949] 1977, 189, 193, 256), an objective reminiscent of many other esoteric traditions. In *Tales* Gurdjieff describes these subtle bodies as two "higher being-bodies," the "body-Kesdjan," or "astral body," and the "higher being-body," or "soul" (Gurdjieff [1950] 1964, 763–68). These "higher being-bodies" are cultivated within and "coat" the "planetary" body. Later they separate from it, but only the "higher being-body" has the possibility of becoming immortal (Gurdjieff [1950] 1964, 673–74, 764–68). One of Gurdjieff's central premises is that individuals are born with no subtle bodies but that these can be acquired through self-remembering and becoming conscious, which enables space or the capacity for "impressions" (sense experiences) to enter the organism and become refined and transformed into finer energy, which

crystallizes in the body to form subtle bodies. Pupil Thomas de Hartmann gives a useful explanation of this:

The real purpose of the Work in Essentuki could become clear only if a man gave his attention to the idea of the crystallization of the soul. The products of food, both coarse food and air, are necessary; but without impressions, the great achievement, the crystallization cannot take place. In this effort a man can rarely succeed by himself. . . . Material of a special quality received from impressions has to exist in the pupil if the teacher is to help this transformation to take place. To build up a sufficient quantity of this material, which the pupil had to collect by his own efforts, some kind of isolated “reservoirs” are necessary, where special conditions permit this material to be deposited. (de Hartmann and de Hartmann 1992, 69)

The fourth and highest state of consciousness, the “objective state of consciousness,” is attained at the point where one manifests subtle bodies, as it is, according to Gurdjieff, “the result of inner growth and of long and difficult work on oneself” (Ouspensky [1949] 1977, 142). He also relates the attainment of this state to one’s accessing of the “higher centres,” which are equated with subtle bodies (Ouspensky [1949] 1977, 180, 197). In the “objective state of consciousness,” one gains “knowledge of things in themselves” and can “see and feel the unity of everything” (Ouspensky [1949] 1977, 278–79). In this state pretensions and ego shatter, which means, in Gurdjieff’s terms, one is stripped of “personality,” and one’s “essence,” or “real I,” is revealed (Gurdjieff 1999, 107). To summarize, Gurdjieff taught that individuals must elevate themselves from the second to the third state of consciousness, the latter known as “self-remembering.” Working to “self-remember” allowed individuals to observe and correct their fragmented and mechanical conditions. This led them, by way of an alchemical process within the body, to the fourth state of consciousness and to the formation of subtle bodies.

### **The Sex Center and Its Role in the Transformation of the Three Foods**

In *Tales* Gurdjieff states that human beings consist of three centers, also variously termed “brains” or “localisations,” located in the head, spinal column, and breast, which represent, respectively, the intellect, body, and emotions (Gurdjieff [1950] 1964, 439–41, 777–80). However, Ouspensky demonstrates how Gurdjieff elaborated on this threefold model of the human being, teaching that there were seven centers in total: the moving, instinctive, sex, intellectual, emotional, higher emotional, and higher intellectual centers (Ouspensky [1949] 1977, 55–56, 115, 142). Instinctive and moving functions differ in that the former constitute reflexes and instincts,

such as the beating of the heart, breathing, the circulation of blood, and digestion, whereas the latter must be learned. The moving center often works by imitation, rather than by will or consciousness (Ouspensky [1949] 1977, 114–15).

In Gurdjieff's system, the sex center, along with the instinctive and moving centers, belongs to the lower story of the human being, who Gurdjieff likened to a three-story chemical factory that receives materials from outside the body and transforms them inside the body into materials of a finer quality. These centers of the lower story operate in accordance with the three forces of Gurdjieff's "Law of Three," which holds that every phenomenon in the universe is the result of the combination of three different forces. When there are two opposing forces, a neutralizing third force enables these opposing forces to produce a new phenomenon (Ouspensky [1949] 1977, 77). In the human being, the sex center acts as the neutralizing force, where the instinctive and moving centers represent active and passive forces (Ouspensky [1949] 1977, 55, 115). The sex center is, then, imperative for harmony between the centers, and it also plays a significant role in the creative capacity of the body, as will be shown. Gurdjieff stated, "The role of the sex center in creating a general equilibrium and a permanent center of gravity is very big . . . If it uses its own energy . . . all the other centers are subordinate to it. Therefore it would be a great thing if it worked with its own energy. This alone would indicate a comparatively very high level of being" (Ouspensky [1949] 1977, 258–59).

When operating at its full potential, the sex center also works with a much finer energy than do the other centers, and is thus the strongest and quickest of the centers (Ouspensky [1949] 1977, 258). However, due to the dysfunctional nature of human beings, the fine energy of the sex center is constantly plundered by the other centers and spent on useless activity. This means that it has no energy left for itself and has to steal the energy of other centers, which is much lower and coarser than its own. For this reason, the sex center has to work with inferior energy and virtually never functions to its fullest capacity (Ouspensky [1949] 1977, 55, 257–59). These disastrous interactions between the centers also mean that the sex center unites with the negative parts of other centers, which connects the sex center with unpleasant sensations and feelings. This is despite the fact that, unlike most of the centers, the sex center itself does not have a positive and negative side. That is, the sex center itself has no unpleasant sensations or feelings; there are either pleasant sensations and feelings or nothing, indifference (Ouspensky [1949] 1977, 257–58).

In chapter 9 of *Search* Ouspensky gives a detailed account of the transformation of matter in the human body through digestion. He presents his "Table of Hydrogens" in the form of three "octaves" or trajectories,

each relating to one of the three foods that human beings receive: ordinary food and drink, air, and “impressions,” or sense experiences. According to this system, these foods are all, up to a point, automatically digested and transformed into higher or finer matter in the body. However, there is a pivotal moment in the system, and in one’s spiritual development, where these octaves can no longer continue automatically and need a “shock” to proceed. Otherwise, the process of food transformation will stagnate, and finer matter will stop being produced. This “shock” can be understood with recourse to Gurdjieff’s “Law of Seven,” which holds that the trajectories of all processes in the universe proceed in seven unequal steps that correspond with the intervallic organization of what Gurdjieff termed the “seven-tone scale” (Ouspensky [1949] 1977, 124–25). Between these seven steps exist two noticeably smaller “intervals.” Throughout all processes, according to Gurdjieff, resistance is encountered at these intervals, and additional energy, or a shock, is needed for processes to continue.

In accordance with the Law of Seven, the body automatically transforms the three foods up to a certain point in each octave: in the “food octave,” this is “si 12”; in the “air octave,” “mi 48”; and in the “impressions octave,” “do 48.” These octaves cannot continue without the force of “carbon 12,” or “si 12,” and due to the dysfunctional condition of most people, this is where food transformation in the body ends. (“Carbon,” “oxygen,” and “nitrogen” represent forces that continually transform, in accordance with the Law of Three, to produce new, finer energy in the body. It became a convention in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries for esotericists to use the language of science, electricity, and magnetism to explain and legitimate ideas and systems. The seven stages of each octave are termed “do,” “re,” “mi,” “fa,” “sol,” “la,” “si,” and are each assigned a number indicating the level of density of matter at that stage.) However, for those who have knowledge of the Law of Seven and who are prepared to create the required shock, this barrier can be overcome. This shock involves self-remembering, or becoming conscious and awake to the present moment so that one is temporarily “shocked” out of one’s usual mechanical way of living, which is based on “identification.” This is where people constantly “identify” with (or become engrossed in) tasks, people, thoughts, emotions, and the like. In this state people not only “forget themselves,” but deplete the small amount of energy they produce by becoming absorbed in anything they encounter (Ouspensky [1949] 1977, 179–80, 196).

However, at the moment one is shocked out of this condition, one can no longer be in a state of identification, and this has consequences for the production of energy in the human factory because the great deal of energy usually wasted on identification is retained in the body. In Gurdjieff’s system, this becomes surplus energy, which is then digested and transformed



in a process that proceeds in accordance with the Laws of Three and Seven, so that finer matter can be extracted from it (Gurdjieff [1950] 1964, 144–47, 763; Ouspensky [1949] 1977, 188–89). This finer matter, which can only be attained through such a shock (Gurdjieff [1950] 1964, 792), is key to Gurdjieff’s ultimate objective for spiritual development: the crystallization of subtle bodies and the attainment of the highest state of consciousness. For this reason, such a shock was not an option—it was a duty; Gurdjieff described it as a fulfilling of “Partkdolg-duty,” a term that contains Armenian, Russian, and English words roughly translated as “duty-duty-duty” (Bennett 1979, 4).

It is noteworthy that Gurdjieff’s system of centers in the body and his teachings on the transformation of matter within the body are reminiscent of Indian tantric tradition, with Gurdjieff’s centers reflecting the tantric system of *cakras*. Indian tantric practices aim to cultivate internal alchemical processes in the subtle, or *vajra*, body, made up of channels (*nadi*) through which substances flow and are directed by the practitioner, and centers where these channels intersect (*cakras*). These practices appeared in a more or less complete form in Buddhist and Saiva texts in the ninth and tenth centuries, and can involve deity and *mandala* visualizations, and yogic practices with a marked sexual component. Arguments have been made for the possible links between these Indian practices and much earlier Taoist practices of *neidan*, or inner alchemy (Samuel 2008, 224, 271, 280–81, 291). *Neidan*, which is described in Chinese texts from the third century BCE, also assumes an internal subtle physiology of the body, which is made up of paths that lead to body organs, where energies flow or become blocked. Through physical, mental, and spiritual exercises, practitioners of *neidan* aim to direct energies around the body and refine and nurture them so that the soul can return to its original state of purity, yang. This is in accordance with the philosophy that Taoist cosmic principles, such as yin and yang and the five elements, can be reenacted in the body (Boehmer 1977, 65–75; Schipper 1993, 103–108).

Although writers on Gurdjieff’s system seldom consider it, the role of the sex center in the process of “food” transformation in the body is very important, for two related reasons. First, Gurdjieff held that when the sex center functions properly, it operates with the fine energy of si 12, which means that, unlike the other centers, it can “receive” the fine food of impressions, and this is significant for the manufacture of finer matter and the creation of subtle bodies (Ouspensky [1949] 1977, 255, 259). This is reminiscent of Hindu tantric tradition from roughly the fourth or fifth centuries, where sexual union and practices are considered to be potent methods of utilizing the fine spiritual energy, typically identified as “Shakti,” divine feminine power, believed to flow through the universe and human body (Urban 2006, 82, 85–86).



The second reason why the sex center is important in Gurdjieff's system of food transformation is that sexual activity itself, or conversely, sexual abstinence, can provide the shock needed to propel the continuation of si 12 into a new octave. Although Gurdjieff did not specifically discuss the significance of the orgasm to this system, he must have considered it a shock, a moment of surrender where one ceases to identify. He did say to Fritz Peters that a sexual experience was an example of "living in the moment" and being "totally involved," and that in life "it was necessary to achieve a similar degree of concentration and absorption in the moment purposefully and consciously." Though he added that, nowadays, even sex has ceased to command all one's energies and attention (Peters 1976, 266). In Gurdjieff's system, the moment of orgasm can be seen to create a temporary break from mechanical existence and identification, which causes "space" in the organism for finer matter to enter and transform. Indeed Gurdjieff stated that an active sex life can help the process of food transformation (Ouspensky [1949] 1977, 256).

Certainly, in many spiritual and esoteric systems, the orgasm is considered to be a critical moment in human consciousness and the key to magical power and contact with divine energies. American spiritualist Paschal Beverly Randolph (1825–75) saw the orgasm as "the most solemn, energetic and powerful moment . . . on earth," where "the souls of the partners are opened to the powers of the cosmos and anything then truly willed is accomplished" (Urban 2006, 8–9, 67). For Randolph, if the orgasm is directed toward a higher spiritual end, it leads the soul upward to higher states of spiritual transcendence, but if it is directed toward careless or selfish ends, it leads the soul downward to lower depraved states of corruption and results in psychological and spiritual destruction—to madness, criminality, and damnation (Urban 2006, 67, 73). Gurdjieff commentator James Webb suggests that Gurdjieff derived much of his material from Randolph (Webb 1980, 532–33), whose work on sex magic had a profound impact on later Western esotericism (Urban 2006, 66–67). Interestingly, similarly to Gurdjieff, Randolph explained his teaching as deriving from his travels through the Middle East, particularly from interactions with the Brotherhood of Eulis, groups of fakirs or Sufis, as well as the Ansairi and other Eastern masters among the Arabs, Turks, Syrians, Armenians, and Egyptians (Urban 2006, 66–67).

For Gurdjieff, sexual abstinence can also aid the process of food transformation, as long as the other centers also abstain, and the sexual energy saved is managed consciously and correctly (Ouspensky [1949] 1977, 256). Sexual abstinence must also create space in the organism and a shock, as it breaks the cycle of mechanical behavior. In *Tales* Gurdjieff speaks of sex energy in terms of "exioëhary," or sperm, produced by both males and females, which has the potential to nourish higher bodies and which

can be used productively but also harmfully through practices of sexual abstinence (Gurdjieff [1950] 1964, 806–10). In one of the most influential compendia of tantric ritual and iconography in northeast India, the *Brihat Tantrasara*, composed in the late sixteenth century in Bengal, sexual fluids are similarly considered a source of spiritual power. The goal of the tantric practices it expounds is not pleasure, but rather the harnessing of this power, which is considered potentially dangerous. This power can only be awakened through highly esoteric rituals (Urban 2006, 88–91).

In Gurdjieff's system of food transformation, there is, however, a barrier that most people encounter. As stated earlier, the sex center rarely operates with the fine energy of si 12 due to the typically dysfunctional state of the human organism. Human beings live in a mechanical condition where their centers are off-kilter, which means that the potent sexual energy they produce flows into the wrong centers. Rather than feeding the higher bodies, or producing a child, this energy pours into useless activities such as fighting, disputing, criticizing, playing sport excessively, and acts of destruction (Ouspensky [1949] 1977, 258). This is detrimental to one's health; in *Tales* Gurdjieff explains that when sexual energy, exioëhary, cannot evolve in the system of spiritual transformation, it "involves," creating illnesses and short life spans (Gurdjieff [1950] 1964, 793). This is why Gurdjieff told Fritz Peters that if one could not use one's sexual energy in the right way, there is a proper sublimation of sexual energy, and that is to use it for other equally creative activities (Peters 1978, 41; Peters 1976, 164, 227). One finds a similar teaching on the sublimation of sexual energy in Theravada Buddhism (Humphreys 1971, 113).

Thus Gurdjieff viewed sex as both a tool for spiritual transformation and as playing a tremendous role in feeding one's mechanical behavior. Indeed, he stated that sex is "the chief form of slavery and it is also the chief possibility of liberation" (Ouspensky [1949] 1977, 255). The harmonizing of the centers and proper use of the sex center are imperative to Gurdjieff's teaching and to the process of spiritual transformation, to the point where he even stated, "Only a person who is completely normal as regards sex has any chance in the work. Any kind of 'originality,' strange tastes, strange desires . . . must be destroyed from the very beginning. Modern education and modern life create an enormous number of sexual psychopaths. They have no chance at all in the work" (Ouspensky [1949] 1977, 257). What Gurdjieff considered "normal" and "strange" in regards to sex will now be examined.

### Views on Sexuality and Masturbation

For Gurdjieff, sex should simply serve the two intentions of nature—to produce children and to produce energy for spiritual development—and it

is “perversion” if it performs any other role (Peters 1976, 227–28). Gurdjieff vehemently advocated sex education for children so that these principles could be known and followed from a young age (Gurdjieff [1963] 2002, 54–57; Gurdjieff [1950] 1964, 1032–41; Gurdjieff 1984, 126–27). The ideal sexual union was a heterosexual and honest one, where sex was “conscious of itself”: “When sex is clearly conscious of itself and does not cover itself up by anything else it is not the mechanicalness about which I am speaking. On the contrary sex which exists by itself and is not dependent on anything else is already a great achievement. But the evil lies in this constant self-deception!” (Ouspensky [1949] 1977, 254–55).

In *Tales* Gurdjieff describes ideal, perfect beings existing on the planet Modiktheo, who consciously conjoin to produce offspring. These beings exist as three different sexes—Martna, Spirna, and Okina—but a unique form of conception occurs when the beings of each of these different sexes unite. First, they each independently experience a period of gestation where they perform “Partkdolg duty” (where they conduct themselves consciously and intentionally), and then, when the time of birth approaches, they “press close to each other and ultimately almost grow on to each other,” mutually giving birth to offspring with already-formed higher being-bodies. According to Gurdjieff, this conscious, purposeful approach to sex was ignored by human beings, who preferred the pursuit of pleasure, which is detrimental to spiritual growth (Gurdjieff [1950] 1964, 276–79, 771–73, 791–93).

Gurdjieff condemned the notion of sex for pleasure, as this is contrary to the twofold purpose of sex as outlined above, and thus denounced masturbation, contraception, and prostitution. His aversion to masturbation may have been influenced by advice given to him as a child by 70-year-old “Dean Borsh,” a most influential figure in the young Gurdjieff’s life when he undertook his schooling in Kars, Turkey. Gurdjieff reports that Dean Borsh had lectured him on sexual matters and had said that if, before adulthood, one yields, even once, to the temptation to “gratify lust,” he will lose the possibility of ever being a real man of real worth (Gurdjieff 2002[1963], 54). In line with this view, Gurdjieff stated to pupils that the reason why sexual associations interfere with spiritual work is because of infantile masturbation (Patterson 2000, 46), and in *Tales* Gurdjieff described masturbation as a harmful affliction and an evil. He even claimed that people were transformed into “psychopaths” by the practice, and endorsed male and female circumcision as a means to prevent masturbation in youth: “children’s onanism’ is scarcely met with among the children of those three-brained beings there who observe this custom of ‘circumcision,’ whereas all the children and youths of the beings who fail to observe this custom are without exception exposed to this same sexual abnormality” (Gurdjieff

[1950] 1964, 977–78). Gurdjieff’s negative views on masturbation reflect widespread beliefs in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which were based on the idea that sexual fluids contained precious, vital energy. Unnecessary waste of these fluids through self-gratification was considered a tragic loss for the organism (Urban 2006, 66, 72).

Gurdjieff also denounced homosexuality, which is perplexing considering that, in Paris in 1936 and 1937, he taught an all-female and mostly lesbian group called “The Rope.” The name came from Gurdjieff’s explanation that to mount the slopes of consciousness group members must be tied together on a *cordeé*, or rope (Beekman Taylor 2008, 191–92). The group had close, almost daily contact with Gurdjieff, with meetings held in restaurants or at his apartment. Gurdjieff taught them through readings of his texts, assigning exercises, and identifying members’ “inner animals” (Patterson 1999, 92). It is reported that he said to the group in relation to their sexuality, “You very dirty . . . but have something very good—many people not got—very special” (Patterson 1999, 249). And to one member, Solita Solano, he stated, “Something wrong your sex. Sex very important thing is, like light, like air you breathe, food you eat. If you are in five parts, two of your five parts depends from sex. You must more normal live” (Patterson 1999, 138). Pupil Fritz Peters maintained, “He was puritanical, even a fanatic, about homosexuality, and condemned it vigorously . . . He felt that homosexuality—as a career—was a dead-end street; and perhaps, further, one of Nature’s defences against overpopulation . . . He frequently reminded me that Nature would manage to ‘get even’ with Mankind if we continued to fight against rather than with the laws of the Universe” (Peters 1978, 43). Gurdjieff’s views on homosexuality must relate to his firm belief that both male and female components were necessary to create balance, as they contributed active and intellectual (male), and passive and emotional (female) elements. This type of polarity is common to various strands of Western esotericism, from Kabbalah to the Renaissance magic of Marsilio Ficino and the Enlightenment mysticism of Emmanuel Swedenborg; the union of male and female was regarded as the earthly reflection of the union of active and passive aspects of the Godhead (Urban 2006, 1–2). This dichotomous view of the sexes accords with Gurdjieff’s Law of Three, where every phenomenon in the universe is the result of the interplay between three forces; active and passive forces are neutralized by a third force, which creates something new. For example, a male (active force), female (passive force), and sexual force (neutralizing force) can produce a child (Gurdjieff [1950] 1964, 278). However, two active or two passive forces cannot lawfully operate in this way. Randolph expounded a similar theory, where the sexual instinct is the most fundamental force in the universe as it represents the natural attraction between active and passive forces (Urban 2006, 67).

In the colorful cosmological narrative of *Tales*, Gurdjieff explained that the “first beings,” called “Polormedekhtic” or “Monoentithis” beings, included both sexes in the same individual body. The splitting of the sexes occurred when the original planet Earth splintered into different parts due to a collision by the comet Kondoor. Human beings then became “half-beings” from a sexual and procreative standpoint, and since then have needed the other half—the opposite sex—to correctly carry out their lives and roles (Gurdjieff [1950] 1964, 771). This resembles the story in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanisad*, 1.4.3, where *purusha*, the first being, wished to have a companion. As he was as large as a man and woman in close embrace, he split his body into two, giving rise to husband and wife. This is why Yajnavalkya states, “The two of us are like two halves of a block” (Upanisads 1998, 13–14). It also parallels the biblical story of Adam being split into two when his rib was removed so that God could create a woman (*Genesis* 2: 21–23). Gurdjieff’s views on the different sexes and their distinct roles and natures will now be further explored.

### Views on Gender

Pupils Peters and Bennett describe Gurdjieff carefully separating the sexes at his institute at Fontainebleau. Peters maintains,

There was no mingling of the sexes in any “immoral” sense. The men and women bathed separately at the bath, and different hours were allotted for male and female use of the swimming pool. There was, in fact, a very strict code of morality in this purely physical sense, and we were highly amused when people sent us clippings from the Sunday supplements of various newspapers which “proved” that the Institute was a nudist colony, or a “free-love” group . . . While it was true that we swam without bathing suits, the swimming pool was equipped with curtains which were always drawn whenever anyone went in swimming. It was forbidden, in fact, for even the small children to swim without drawing the curtains. (Peters 1976, 78)

At the institute, pupils were also housed in a way in which the sexes were separated (Peters 1976, 129), and in the Study House, a large room used for Movements practice and demonstrations, men and women sat on different sides of the room (Bennett 1973, 231). On Saturdays, the men alone went with Gurdjieff to the Russian bath and spoke about things that were not to be repeated to the women. Afterward, they privately dined with Gurdjieff, and Gurdjieff’s ritual toasts to the different types of “idiots” at the table were originally given only to the men, in accordance with traditional dervish practice (Bennett 1973, 231). These toasts were meant to provide a mirror in which pupils could see themselves (Nott 1978, 102).

Gurdjieff believed that the sexes have distinct natures and thus distinct roles to play in life. For example, men have aspiration while women do not. Aspiration compels men to climb mountains, to fly, to write, compose music, and paint, and the fact that women attempt to do these things shows how the world is “mixed up” (Peters 1976, 112–13). Gender roles, according to Gurdjieff, have become confused in contemporary times because women now try to carry out men’s work: “Not necessary for woman do work of man in world. If woman can find real man, then woman become real woman without necessity work. But, like I tell, world mixed up. Today in world real man not exist, so woman even try to become man, do man’s work which is wrong for her nature” (Peters 1976, 113). Gurdjieff stated that a man who does not fulfil his active role, and a woman who attempts to fill this role, are both members of the “third sex,” for whom there is little prospect of transformation (Bennett 1973, 230). At one time he said that a true man and a true woman are not just male and female; they are each a combination of male and female, active and passive (Peters 1976, 113).

In a talk to his pupils, Gurdjieff stated that there are “equal chances” for both sexes in his work (Gurdjieff 1984, 87). However, this is at odds with other statements he made about women and their lack of potential for spiritual development. For example, Denis Saurat reported that Gurdjieff said that women could scarcely hope to come by souls except through sexual contact and union with men (Perry 1978, 76). Similarly, Gurdjieff asserted to Fritz Peters that women did not need his work because the nature of women was such that “self development,” in his sense of the phrase, was something that they could never achieve. The only hope for women to develop, “to go to Heaven,” is with a man (Peters 1976, 112). This view is reminiscent of Asian, Hellenic, and Hebrew traditional lore where, during sex, the woman is thought to draw from the man something of his power (Beekman Taylor 2006, 233). The idea was, however, criticized by Jessmin Howarth, a female pupil who bore Gurdjieff a child: “Why does there seem to be this growing idiocy, the idea that no woman can hope to gain a ‘Body Kesdjan’ unless she has had sexual intercourse with a ‘Master?’” (Howarth and Howarth 1998, 224)

Gurdjieff made other contentious statements about women. He said to Orage that “the cause of every anomaly can be found in women” (Beekman Taylor 2001, 243), and in *Tales* he cites wise Sufi philosopher Mullah Nassr Eddin’s repeated assertion that “the cause of every misunderstanding must be sought only in woman” (Gurdjieff [1950] 1964, 274). He even said to Peters that most relationships were merely that of man and “handkerchief.” “For him,” he said, “this very convenient; he suddenly feel need or wish to blow nose—and always he have this handkerchief with him” (Peters 1976, 216). There is also a bizarre story in *Tales* where men and women were

separated for a time: the men turned to onanism and pederasty, and the women sought sexual activity with beings of other forms. This led to the existence of the species of apes, which resemble human beings, and their psyches resemble that of the female sex (Gurdjieff [1950] 1964, 274–81).

In any assessment of Gurdjieff, one must constantly be mindful of the fact that his teaching was based on the belief that people need to be severely “woken up” and challenged if they have any hope of transforming spiritually. He demonstrated an ongoing interest in creating opportunities for pupils to struggle and face conflict so that they could understand his teachings experientially. Thus any of the above statements could have been meant as shocks, or appeals, for pupils to stay alert and keep on their guard, actively questioning everything. He did, after all, warn pupils not to take him literally (Nott 1978, 75). In any case, the above statements seem at variance with the fact that at the end of his life, Gurdjieff’s chosen successor was a woman, Jeanne de Salzmann, and also that he probably had more female than male pupils. Gurdjieff certainly encouraged women to commit themselves to his work, and many of his female pupils later played significant roles in perpetuating the teaching, particularly the Movements. Bennett even states that Gurdjieff’s female pupils were among the most successful of all the pupils, some occupying very important and decisive positions, and attained perhaps more than most of the men (Bennett 1973, 231).

### Gurdjieff’s Own Sex Life

Gurdjieff’s conservative, uncompromising views on sex might appear to conflict with his famously flamboyant character, vulgar sense of humor, and liberal relationships with women, some of them his pupils. There is a well-known incident recounted by sculptor and writer Rom Landau, who met Gurdjieff in New York in 1934. Landau was dining with a female friend, while Gurdjieff was seated at another table. He pointed Gurdjieff out to her, and Gurdjieff immediately caught her eye and suddenly began to inhale and exhale in a particular way. Landau’s friend turned pale and had an orgasm. She claimed to have been “struck right through my sexual centre. It was beastly!” (Landau 1935, 244).

Of Gurdjieff’s sex life, Bennett states,

His sexual life was strange in its unpredictability. At certain times he led a strict, almost ascetic life, having no relation with women at all. At other times, his sex life seemed to go wild and it must be said that his unbridled periods were more frequent than the ascetic. At times, he had sexual relationships not only with almost any woman who happened to come within



the sphere of his influence, but also with his own pupils. Quite a number of his women pupils bore him children. (Bennett 1973, 231–32)

It is known that pupils Jessmin Howarth, in 1924, and Edith Taylor, in 1928, bore Gurdjieff daughters, and Elizaveta de Stjernvall, in 1919, and Jeanne de Salzmänn, in 1923, whose husbands were working with Gurdjieff at the time, bore him sons. His affair with the married Lili Galumian produced a son in 1927. There is also some evidence that Gurdjieff made sexual advances to pupils Olga de Hartmann and Jessie Orage in 1930. Paul Beekman Taylor, who lived with Gurdjieff as an infant at the Prieuré in the 1920s, and worked with him in 1948 and 1949, states that in his presence Gurdjieff spoke of ten children, though in interviews he boasted of over one hundred (Beekman Taylor 2008, 18–19, 233).

Accounts given by pupil Jessmin Howarth and her daughter to Gurdjieff, Dushka Howarth, indicate that there was camaraderie between Gurdjieff's children and between the mothers (Howarth and Howarth 1998, 204, 206). They paint Gurdjieff as a fairly generous, kind, and protective father (Howarth and Howarth 1998, 204–205, 248). On one occasion Gurdjieff told Dushka that he would not allow pupil Alfred Etievant to fall in love with her because she was “Miss Gurdjieff” and was too good for him. She was to treat him like a “louse that one makes *chik*” (crushes between one's thumbnails). When she questioned this, Gurdjieff was adamant that he was her father and expected obedience, to which Dushka replied that she had only known him (Gurdjieff) for three weeks and had learned to be independent in her 24 years. Gurdjieff had apparently informed her casually one day that he was her father (Howarth and Howarth 1998, 204–205). It seems that some of the mothers of Gurdjieff's children, such as Jessmin Howarth, Edith Taylor, and Jeanne de Salzmänn, preferred to withhold this information from the children, while Gurdjieff was eventually upfront with them about it (Howarth and Howarth 1998, 205, 207, 213). Amusingly, Dushka admits that she and Petey Taylor, another of Gurdjieff's daughters, had found Michel de Salzmänn the most attractive man they had ever met, until it was revealed to them several days later that he was their half brother (Howarth and Howarth 1998, 213).

To the mothers of his children, Gurdjieff was variable. Jessmin Howarth reports that at one Saturday lunch, “Edith and I would be put through the same old routine of disapproval. We were not to call our daughters ‘Petey’ and ‘Dushka’ (but Eve and Sophia)! One time we would be shouted at ‘Svo-lotch!’ ‘Balda!’ [approximately: ‘lowest of the low!’ and ‘dullard!'] Another time treated with much special attention, extra food and commands to the girls to ‘love their mothers’” (Howarth and Howarth 1998, 206). At the time of some of his affairs with pupils, Gurdjieff was married to the Polish

Julia Osipovna Ostrowska, who was around twenty-three years his junior. Ostrowska's background is unknown; she may have been a countess and lady-in-waiting to Alexandra Feodorovna, or even a prostitute (Moore 1991, 67–68). According to de Hartmann she was tall and beautiful, “but not at all like those women of the cultured class who habitually interest themselves in new philosophical teachings. Our first impression was that she was rather remote from her husband's affairs. But we came to see how deeply and seriously she valued the Work of Mr. Gurdjieff. We grew to love her, deeply and sincerely” (de Hartmann and de Hartmann 1992, 17, 19). Gurdjieff and Ostrowska were married from around 1909 to her death in June 1926, though she never took the name of Gurdjieff, always remaining “Madame Ostrowska.” Gurdjieff commentator James Webb posits that this was because they were never legally wed and that Gurdjieff already had a wife living somewhere in Central Asia (Webb 1980, 137). Beekman Taylor discounts this, stating that in Russian society married women frequently retained their maiden names after marriage for informal use, and that on occasion she was listed as “Gurdjieff” on official documents (Beekman Taylor 2008, 18, 40).

Gurdjieff had deep affection for Ostrowska (Gurdjieff 1999, 36–40; Peters 1976, 76–77), and she occupied a privileged position in his work, taking lead roles in his Movements. He was devastated by her death to cancer at age 37, as is revealed in a story in *Tales* that reflects the circumstances surrounding Ostrowska's death. In the chapter “The Bokharian Dervish Hadji-Asvatz-Troov,” Gurdjieff tells of a European man whose wife was diagnosed with cancer. This man himself had discovered a cure for cancer, but had a road accident, which prevented him from putting his cure into effect in time. When he recovered, it was too late to use his method on his wife, so he decided not to spare himself and channeled his energies into his wife's body to slow down the cancer, managing to keep his wife alive for two years (Gurdjieff [1950] 1964, 910–14). Gurdjieff was attentive to his wife when she was ill and explained that, even though doctors had put her under sentence of death, he had been able to extend the time limit through his own efforts. Olga de Hartmann claimed that once during Ostrowska's last days, Gurdjieff caused a marked improvement in her condition by making her drink a glass of water that he had held for a few minutes in his hands (Webb 1980, 315–16).

When Ostrowska died, Gurdjieff retired to his room, shattered, seeing no one for two days. However, his behavior in the period that followed confused pupils. Gurdjieff devoted the day of the funeral to embarrassing the archbishop and preventing expressions of grief over Ostrowska's death. He described to pupils what he considered a traditional funeral custom from more enlightened times, where the friends of the deceased

spent three days remembering the evil deeds their acquaintance had committed and concentrating on their own mortality. At the funeral feast, Gurdjieff repeatedly cursed God (Webb 1980, 316). Further, shortly after Ostrowska's death, Gurdjieff was living with a married woman, whom he made pregnant (Peters 1976, 114). Beekman Taylor suggests that this was pupil Lili Galumian, who gave birth to her son Sergei in 1927 (Beekman Taylor 2006, 132).

Gurdjieff displayed a reverential and protective attitude toward his wife, mother, and other female blood relatives, and seems to have associated Ostrowska with his mother. He described them as being in rapport with nature and communicating in a silent language (Gurdjieff 1999, 36–39). They were buried together in Avon in Fontainebleau. Ostrowska was, perhaps, somewhat of an Earth Mother figure to Gurdjieff and to his pupils, a similar role to that played by L. Ron Hubbard's third wife, Mary Sue, for Hubbard and members of the Sea Org. Ostrowska must have turned a blind eye to Gurdjieff's affairs. She never bore Gurdjieff a child, and accounts suggest that they had separate rooms at the institute in Fontainebleau (Peters 1976, 28; de Hartmann and de Hartmann 1992, 248).

As discussed, Gurdjieff displayed quite a different attitude toward other women in his life. In his memoirs Fritz Peters is candid about Gurdjieff's promiscuity, stating that at the institute there were rumors that "a great deal more went on in his rooms other than drinking coffee and Armagnac. The normal state of his rooms after one night indicated that almost any human activity could have taken place there the night before. There is no doubt that his rooms were lived in, in the fullest sense of the word" (Peters 1976, 28). At times Gurdjieff used sex to shock individuals and demonstrate something of his teaching. Peters describes a dinner party that Gurdjieff held in 1933 at his New York apartment for 15 well-mannered New Yorkers. Over dinner Gurdjieff made provocative remarks about sex and gave accounts of his own sexual abilities and highly imaginative mind, declaring that he was capable of sustained sexual acts of incredible variety. He then launched into a detailed description of the sexual habits of various races and nations. The night resulted in an orgy (it is unclear whether Gurdjieff took part), and Gurdjieff then stated that he would gladly accept from them checks and cash in payment for this lesson, which demonstrated the soundness of observations he had made earlier that evening concerning the sexual motivations of Americans. Apparently, Gurdjieff received several thousand dollars that night (Peters 1976, 201–206).

Pupil Thomas de Hartmann recounts his first meeting with Gurdjieff, which took place, on Gurdjieff's suggestion, in a café frequented by prostitutes, where Gurdjieff made the coarse observation, "There are usually more whores here" (de Hartmann and de Hartmann 1992, 8). Gurdjieff

must have known that de Hartmann was a Guards officer at the time, and had he been seen at the café, he would have had to leave his regiment (de Hartmann and de Hartmann 1992, 7). According to de Hartmann, Gurdjieff did everything he could to create unfavorable conditions for this meeting, interpreting this as a technique in compelling de Hartmann to remember his “true aim” (de Hartmann and de Hartmann 1992, 74). Fritz Peters also states, “Gurdjieff frequently used sex as a kind of shock factor in dealing with individuals,” remembering a time when Gurdjieff wished for an egotistical woman at his institute to leave. At three in the morning, he propositioned her, and, utterly insulted, she immediately left the institute (Peters 1976, 228–29).

Although on matters of sex Gurdjieff taught the conservative values that he must have felt would benefit his pupils, personally, he clearly preferred not to live by them. In a study of the sexual behavior of contemporary spiritual teachers, American teacher of Vipassana meditation Jack Kornfield interviewed a broad cross-section of spiritual teachers from a variety of traditions and found that their sex lives, preferences, and experiences reflected those of the average person. He concluded that “teachers are likely to have active and complex sex lives. We have to re-examine the myth that enlightenment implies celibacy, and that sexuality is somehow abnormal or contrary to the awakened mind” (Kornfield 1985, 28).

This apparent contradiction between Gurdjieff’s theory and practice could be considered within the broader context of his life and teaching, which can essentially be viewed as continual experiments and improvisations; Gurdjieff commentator Peter Washington views improvisation as vital to Gurdjieff’s method (Washington 1993, 254). That is, all accounts of his life reveal that he was highly unpredictable and adaptable, constantly testing new methods of teaching, and using to the fullest any person, situation, and opportunity that came his way. This approach to life reflects his teaching aims; improvising his way through life might well have been Gurdjieff’s attempt at living “consciously” and keeping his movements challenging and unpredictable, for himself and his pupils. His sex life, “strange in its unpredictability,” as Bennett describes it (Bennett 1973, 231), could be considered in this way.

## Conclusion

This chapter aimed to provide a preliminary sketch of the place of sex and sexuality in the teachings of Gurdjieff and in his personal life. Gurdjieff viewed sex and sexual energy as essential tools for spiritual transformation and liberation, but at the same time he saw them as chief causes of one’s mechanical and disharmonious condition. In Gurdjieff’s system, the

sex center, when functioning at its full potential, operates with very fine energy, which can aid the process of spiritual transformation and the manifestation of one's subtle bodies. Further, sexual activity or, conversely, sexual abstinence can bring the shock that is required for the transformation of matter in the body to continue so that subtle bodies may form within the physical body. However, due to the dysfunctional nature of human beings, the fine sex energy produced by the sex center is most often plundered and misused by the other centers, creating disharmony in individuals and feeding their mechanical condition. This is why Gurdjieff condemned the notion of sex for pleasure as destructive and strenuously argued that the purpose of sex was only for spiritual development or for producing a child. Any other uses for sex were, in his view, "perversion." Gurdjieff's firm and unwavering opinions on masturbation, homosexuality, and the proper roles of the sexes were discussed.

Among Gurdjieff's most contentious statements are those that concern women. Although he once stated that men and women have equal chances for spiritual development, at other times he argued that women could not achieve this and that their best hope for coming in contact with a soul was through sexual union with a man. Gurdjieff made a number of other derogatory remarks about women in his writings and talks, which is puzzling considering that he chose a woman as his successor and eagerly encouraged women to commit themselves to his work. Indeed many of his women pupils later played significant roles in perpetuating the teaching, particularly the Movements.

Gurdjieff's words and actions constantly require careful interpretation; he is well-known for his shock techniques, blatant fabrications, symbolic and cryptic modes of communication, and great efforts to create both friction and questioning attitudes in his pupils so that they might wake up from their somnambulistic states. Thus it is impossible to judge Gurdjieff's more controversial statements on first glance. Further, while certain of Gurdjieff's ideas regarding the sexes may seem outmoded or offensive to modern sensibilities, Gurdjieff was a product of a specific religious culture, Orthodox Christianity, and a particular historical period, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In this context there was no sex education; in many countries women were campaigning for the right to vote; and subjects that are no longer controversial in contemporary society, such as masturbation and homosexuality, were utterly taboo.

Finally, it was demonstrated that, while Gurdjieff's teachings on sex were rigorously conservative, he himself preferred not to live by them. Pupils describe Gurdjieff's sex life as unpredictable; at time he led a strict, almost ascetic, life, and at other times he was extremely sexually active; and this activity involved a number of female pupils. Again, it is

fruitless, impossible, to make any firm presumption about this apparent contradiction. It is conceivable that his sex life, like most other aspects of his life, was an experiment or improvisation; he wished to keep it unpredictable and challenging, in line with his fundamental teaching methods and aims.

### Note

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