

THE MEANING OF LIFE

BY Gurdjieff

(originally read to us as "Pure and Impure Emotions")

What is the meaning of life? There are many opinions on this subject. "They" say: it is for the perfecting of self, or the sacrifice of self, or a preparation for future life, or an improvement of humanity, or even that it has no meaning at all. All these opinions look for the meaning of life outside of life itself. One must look inside oneself. The true sense of life is "connaissance". All life, all experience leads to "connaissance".

The world is everything existing. Man, in becoming conscious, becomes conscious of himself and of the world of which he is a part. The function of consciousness is to become aware of his, and its, existence. One's relation with oneself and with the world--this is "connaissance", or knowledge.

All the elements of the psyche of man--perceptions, sensations, conceptions, ideas, emotions, creation--are instruments of knowledge. All emotions, from the simplest to the most complicated--religious, moral, artistic--all are instruments of knowledge.

According to the theory of the "struggle for existence", it is the survival of the fittest which creates intellect and emotions, and these serve life. In fact these are not accidental; they play a role in creation and are the product of an intelligence of which we know nothing! and they lead to knowledge. But we do not discern the presence of the rational in phenomena and in the laws of life. We study a part and not the whole. When we understand that each life is a manifestation of a part of the whole, the possibility of understanding will open up.

To understand the rationality of the whole, it is necessary to understand the character of all, and all its functions. The function of man is knowledge; but if one does not understand man as a whole, one will not understand his function.

Our separate lives are the manifestation of some large entity. A tree is a manifestation of the psychic reign of the organic kingdom. Our lives have no other sense than the process by which we acquire knowledge. The process of the acquisition of knowledge

is not only by intellect but by the whole organism and organization of Life, culture, civilization. And, we acquire the knowledge of what we deserve to know.

Everyone agrees that the aim of intellect is knowledge. But we are not clear about our emotions: joy, anger, jealousy, pleasure, artistic creation; we do not see that all activity, all emotions, serve knowledge. We believe that creation demands knowledge, but how does it serve knowledge? How do religious emotions serve knowledge?

We oppose emotion and reason. We speak of cold reason, of intellect superior to emotion. This is an error in definition. Intellect taken as a whole is also emotion.

We have a habit of saying that it is possible to conquer sentiment by reason, or will, or duty. A sentiment can only be conquered by another sentiment--a stronger, superior sentiment. A soldier dies for his country not by habit of obedience, or duty, but because the sentiment of fear has been conquered by superior sentiments.

Reason provokes thoughts whose images evoke feelings which conquer a special sentiment. Reason has no limits--only humans have limits. True reason is the inner aspect of a being.

In man the growth of conscience consists in the growth of the intellect and the growth of superior emotions which accompany it (aesthetic, religious, moral); in growing they become more intellectual and at the same time, the intellect assimilates the emotions. "Spirituality" is a fusion of intellect with superior emotions.

A new order of receptivity comes from the union of intellect and superior emotions, but is not created by them. A seed springs from the ground, but is not created by earth. A grain is necessary. A grain may be there or not. If it is there, then it can be cultivated.

Man today understands much with intellect, but also with sentiments. With each sentiment man understands something which he could not understand without its aid. If we think that emotions serve life and not knowledge, we will

never understand emotions. There are things and relations which can only be understood emotionally, and ^{only} ~~only~~ with certain emotions. One must love in order to understand someone who loves. Etc.

We do not know each other because we live with different sentiments (emotions). The same sentiments give the same understanding. Mutual understanding-- or the illusion of mutual understanding--is the charm of love.

Emotions are the windows of the soul--colored glass through which the soul regards the world. Partial illumination--partial perceptions. There is nothing so clear, nothing more deceptive, than emotions.

Each sentiment has a reason for being. Certain ones are important for knowledge, others hinder; though theoretically all emotions serve knowledge. For example, fear: certain relations are known only through fear; that is nature's way of controlling the forces of life: fear of hunger makes one work. Look at the attitude of the mammifer toward the serpent: the serpent provokes fear and repulsion. By that fear the mammifer knows the nature of the serpent and the relation of that nature to his own, correctly, but strictly personally. But what the serpent really is, the mammifer cannot know through the emotion of fear; he can know that only by intellect.

Changing emotions are obstacles to the acquisition of a permanent "I". The ^{the} sign of growth of emotion is the liberation from the personal element. Personal emotion fools, is partial, unjust. Greater knowledge is in proportion to fewer personal elements. The problem is to feel impersonally. Not all emotions are easily freed of the personal. Certain ones by their nature corrupt, separate. Others, like love, lead man from the material to the miraculous.

There can be an impersonal envy; for example, envy of one who has conquered himself. An impersonal hate: the hate of injustice, of brutality. Impersonal anger--against stupidity, hypocrisy.

It is current to talk about "pure" and "impure" emotions; but we do not know how to define their difference. A pure emotion is one which is not mixed, which never seeks personal profit. An impure emotion is always mixed, it is never one; it is mixed with personal profit, with personal elements; it has sediments of other emotions.

An impure emotion does not give knowledge, or gives only confused knowledge. It sheds no light. (We are considering impure sentiments from the point of view generally called "moral".

Each emotion can be pure or impure; that is, mixed or unmixed. Jealousy, envy, love of country, fear--these can be pure feelings. There is even a sensuality which can be pure--as that of the Song of Songs, which gives the pulse of the physical movement of the universe.

Love of science can be pure, or mixed with personal profit. The external manifestations of pure and impure emotions may be the same. For example, two men playing chess: their exterior aspect is the same, but one is only concerned with resolving a problem, and the other seeks a personal profit. The same is true in art, literature, etc.

The love of activity is a worthy sentiment when it is pure. But what happens, invariably, is that it becomes mixed. A person starts with a certain aim, but in the course of action the direction changes. Pride, vanity, personal ambition enter in. As soon as one wishes to draw a personal profit from his activity, the sentiment becomes impure. That is what happens to our most elevated feelings--love, faith, charity. They become mixed with ^{personal} ~~personal~~ elements; they become impure.

And the purity of sentiment is not confined to goodness and gentleness. We see hate and violence in the gesture of Christ when he drives the money-changers' out of the temple. Hate can be a pure feeling. But it must have nothing personal attached to it.

All creation, all forms of art, were originally instruments of knowledge.