Brave New World at 75
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#16, Spring 2007, pgs. 41-54

The future is the present projected," said Aldous Huxley. "Our notions of the future have something of that significance which Freud attributes to our dreams. And not our notions of the future only: our notions of the past as well. For if prophecy is an expression of our contemporary fears and wishes, so too, to a very great extent, is history."

Huxley's most famous novel, Brave New World, was published in 1932, and the occasion of this seventy-fifth anniversary should lead us to wonder about his peculiar description of how we understand the future. We live in a time of biotechnological leaps forward that have made the term "Brave New World" almost a reflex for commentators worried we are rushing headlong toward a sterilized post-human society, engineered to joyless joy. It is easy to imagine that we see the shadows of our society in Huxley's vision of the future. But could it be that our insistence on seeing Huxley's book as an exceedingly successful prophecy actually prevents us from recognizing its real insight? Is there a way for us to understand the book free of the great distorting influence of our own times?

We can do that only by reading the book on its own terms, as its first readers did, and by letting ourselves be guided by the literary, scientific, and cultural critics of Huxley's day. In doing so, we may glimpse afresh something of the meaning of Brave New World in its author's mind and time.
"Progress is Lovely, Isn't It?"

Huxley's vision of the future begins with a tour of the Central London Hatchery and Conditioning Center, in the year of stability a.f. 632 (After Ford). "Viviparous" reproduction, that shameful secret of the past, has been replaced with manufacture; here the eggs are selected from disembodied ovaries, mixed in culture with the sperm, and incubated in a clean, sterile, efficient environment overseen by technicians—"the bizarre case," as one critic has noted, "of a product supervising a production line." The embryos are designated into five castes, and while the elite Alphas and Betas each come from one unique embryo per egg, the Gammas, Deltas, and Epsilons are cloned ("bokanovskified") into as many as ninety-six embryos per egg. "For in nature it takes thirty years for two hundred eggs to reach maturity. But our business is to stabilize the population at this moment, here and now. Dribbling out twins over a quarter of a century—what would be the use of that?"

Welcome to the World State, where "all men are physico-chemically equal" and "everybody's happy now." People are conditioned by genetic engineering, electric shocks, and hypnopaedic repetition to accept these and other mantras as the sum of their identities, to promote complacency and simple desires. Sexually, people are uniformly promiscuous—"everyone belongs to everyone else"—avoiding those neuroses rooted in repression or exclusive attachments. Erotic experimentation begins at six or eight years old. Economically, the society has subscribed so thoroughly to mass consumerism that the consumers themselves have been commodified. "Taught to acquire an infinity of gimcrack objects," as one early reviewer said, they spend their labor mindlessly producing the things that in their leisure they mindlessly consume. And, as one character explains, "if ever by some unlucky chance such a crevice of time should yawn in the solid substance of their distractions, there is always soma, delicious soma, half a gramme for a half-holiday, a gramme for a week-end, two grammes for a trip to the gorgeous East, three for a dark eternity on the moon." A dream drug without side effects, soma assuages every hurt or unmet need, from boredom to impotence to insecurity to chagrin, and all other "miseries of space and time."

An unholy alliance of industrial capitalist, fascist, communist, psychoanalytic, and pseudo-scientific ideologies has brought about the end of history. The past is taboo—"History is bunk," as "Our Ford" so eloquently said—and there is no future, because history's ends have been

accomplished. There is no pain, deformity, crime, anguish, or social discontent. Even death has no more sting: Children are acclimatized to the death palaces from the age of eighteen months, encouraged to poke around and eat chocolate creams while the dying are ushered into oblivion on soma, watching sports and pornography on television. Postmortem, the useful chemicals in every corpse are recovered in cremation to be used as fertilizer. “Fine to think we can go on being socially useful even after we’re dead,” gloats one character. “Making plants grow.”

There are a few remaining “savage reservations” not integrated into the World State. When Bernard and Lenina, a couple of hatchery employees, travel on vacation to one such reservation in New Mexico, their Siddhartha-like encounter with age, disease, and death ends in a remarkable discovery. One member of their civilization, left behind some twenty years before, has borne a son and raised him on the reservation. Bernard and Lenina take the woman and her grown son back to London. “Savage John,” as he is dubbed, has heard the glories of the “Other Place” from his mother all his life, and he is at first entranced. “O, wonder!” he says, with the same naïve irony as Shakespeare’s Miranda. “How many goodly creatures are there here! How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world, that has such people in’t!” But when his mother, whose natural aging has made her too grotesque for her own society, passes away in soma-induced delusions, he revolts. Retreating to a solitary haven, he is soon found out; in a blaze of torture and disgust, he and his ideals collapse in freakish self-destruction. Lenina, who despite all her conditioning can dimly feel a yearning for the other, greater world John tried to show her, is destroyed with him. It would seem to be the death of hope as well, but hope was never truly living in the World State, where the “births” are as devoid of potential as the lives are of significance.
Rational Futures

The critical reception of Brave New World was largely chilly. Most reviewers were disgruntled or disgusted with what they saw as unjustified alarmism. H. G. Wells was downright offended. “A writer of the standing of Aldous Huxley has no right to betray the future as he did in that book,” Wells said. In fact, Wells felt the bite of this betrayal personally—his own writings, especially his 1923 novel *Men Like Gods*, had been Huxley’s inspiration. Huxley told a friend in 1931 that he was “writing a novel about the future—on the horror of the Wellsian Utopia and a revolt against it.”

Wells is often considered the father of science fiction. His long train of novels predicted, among other things, tanks, aerial warfare, and the atomic bomb; as J. B. S. Haldane said, “the very mention of the future suggests him.” Although his earlier and most memorable work explores the darker possibilities of scientific advancement (in a 1940 preface to his 1908 novel *The War in the Air*, Wells said he wanted his epigraph to read “I told you so. You damned fools.”), in Huxley’s heyday Wells was writing utopias teeming with technogadgetry and what George Orwell called “enlightened sunbathers.” Rejecting Rousseau’s noble savage and the romantic utopias of Coleridge and Wordsworth, he saw the Industrial Revolution and modern science as enduring and largely positive developments in man’s eternal conflict with pitiless nature, including his own. Men Like Gods is the story of a group of contemporary Englishmen accidentally transported into an alternate dimension of peaceful, passionless Utopians who are uncritically committed to scientific rationalism and the self-negating collectivist state. As the title suggests, this is Wells’s idea of perfectible Man, achieved through communitarian ideals, technological enhancement, and an aggressive program of eugenics. The Utopians share their wisdom with the time-travelers, explaining how they put “the primordial fierce combativeness of the ancestral man-ape” behind them. Just as man’s intrinsic aggression had brought civilization to the brink of collapse, a great prophet saw the light. In “a dawn of new ideas,” an elite group of researchers reordered society until, finally annihilating the sources of strife, they achieved a cooperative state with “no parliament, no politics, no private wealth, no business competition, no police nor prisons, no lunatics, no defectives nor cripples,” whose motto is “Our education is our government.”

Huxley thought this vision preposterous. “Get rid of priests and kings, make Aeschylus and the differential calculus available to all, and the world will become a paradise,” he scoffed. Men Like Gods “annoyed me to the point of planning a parody, but when I started writing I found the idea of a negative Utopia so interesting that I forgot about Wells and launched into Brave New World.”

Prior to Huxley's book, however, another great dystopia had cast a scorching glare on totalitarian rationalism. Russian author Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* depicts a technocratic OneState whose citizens are "Numbers" governed with absolute authority in a system where political and quantitative laws are fused. Zamyatin, the Russian editor of H. G. Wells's novels, had at first supported the Bolshevik Revolution but came under fire throughout the 1920s for his vocal criticism of the Soviet regime. His works were banned and he was arrested several times, and finally moved permanently to Paris in 1931. First released in English in 1924, We was not officially published in Russian until 1988 under glasnost. Some critics suggested Huxley had borrowed from or been heavily influenced by We. George Orwell—himself not especially impressed with Brave New World, which he called a "brilliant caricature of the present" that "probably casts no light on the future"—even accused Huxley of plagiarism (a particularly strange charge since Orwell's own 1984 was much more directly influenced by We). Curious about it himself, Zamyatin learned through a mutual friend that Huxley had not read We before he published Brave New World, "which proves," he said, that "these ideas are in the air we breathe."

But most critics shared Wells's, not Zamyatin's, reaction to the book. "As prophecy it is merely fantastic," dismissed essayist Gerald Bullett. Wells's friend and fellow writer Wyndham Lewis called it "an unforgivable offense to Progress." Marxist literary critic Granville Hicks began his review by asking, "With war in Asia, bankruptcy in Europe and starvation everywhere, what do you suppose Aldous Huxley is now worrying about?" and ended it with several personal attacks.

Economist Henry Hazlitt sarcastically remarked that "a little suffering, a little irrationality, a little division and chaos, are perhaps necessary ingredients of an ideal state, but there has probably never been a time when the world has not had an oversupply of them." J. B. S. Haldane's then-wife Charlotte penned a snide review for Nature, complaining that Huxley's great-uncle Matthew Arnold, the conservative literary critic, had taken demonic possession of him, and that in any case, "biology is itself too surprising to be really amusing material for fiction." Even G. K. Chesterton thought Huxley's book sadly laughable, observing that, "However grimly he may enjoy the present, he already definitely hates the future. And I only differ from him in not believing that there is any such future to hate."

The review by poet and novelist L. A. G. Strong perhaps best evinces the critics' general sense of disappointment for a promising writer's senseless retreat into a ludicrous future: "Mr. Huxley has been born too late. Seventy years ago, the great powers of his mind would have been anchored to some mighty certitude, or to some equally mighty scientific denial of a certitude. Today he searches heaven and earth for a Commandment, but searches in vain: and the lack of it reduces him, metaphorically speaking, to a man standing beside a midden, shuddering and holding his nose."

Not everyone, however, dismissed Huxley's dystopia as nonsense. "Only biologists and philosophers will really appreciate the full force of Mr. Huxley's remarkable book," wrote Joseph Needham, a Cambridge biochemist and embryologist. "For of course in the world at large, those persons, and there will be many, who do not approve of his 'utopia,' will say, we can't believe all this, the biology is all wrong, it couldn't happen. Unfortunately, what gives the biologist a sardonic smile as he reads it, is the fact that the biology is perfectly right."

Huxley came from a famously scientific family. He was the grandson of the biologist T. H. Huxley, nicknamed "Darwin's Bulldog" for his early untiring advocacy for the theory of evolution; half-brother of Andrew Fielding Huxley, the 1963 Nobel laureate in physiology; and brother of Julian Huxley, a prominent geneticist. Aldous Huxley was also sometime friends with J. B. S. Haldane and Bertrand Russell, who debated the future of scientific and technological progress in a 1923 exchange of essays (the subject of a recent exegesis in these pages by Charles T. Rubin ["Daedalus and Icarus Revisited," Spring 2005]).

While it was Haldane who first used the word ectogenesis to describe the notion of creating human life outside the womb, the process of reproduction practiced in the World State's hatcheries, Huxley attributes the idea itself to Russell, at least figuratively. In his 1921 novel Crome Yellow, Huxley has the character Scogan, an unflattering and barely veiled portrayal of Russell, imagine a future where "an impersonal generation will take the place of Nature's hideous system. In vast state incubators, rows upon rows of gravid bottles will supply the world with the population it requires. The family system will disappear—society, sapped at its very base, will have to find a new foundation: and Eros, beautifully and irresponsibly free, will flit like a gay butterfly from flower to flower through a sunlit world." Haldane's interest in the subject dates back further still, to work he did at Oxford in 1912. Neither of these men, however, claimed responsibility for Huxley's ideas. Julian Huxley even explicitly disavowed supplying his brother's biological knowledge, saying that when Aldous came to him to discuss Brave New World, Aldous's ideas were already fully formed.

Molding Men

Julian Huxley and Haldane were cofounders of the Journal of Experimental Biology along with Lancelot Hogben, a geneticist who saw his work as "the elimination of holistic concepts by the ruthless application of mechanistic logic." As Huxley scholar Peter Firchow has pointed out, Hogben believed that the mechanistic approach could be applied to human psychology. He welcomed the advent of behaviorism, founded by experimental psychologist John B. Watson and operating, as Hogben said, with "the express object of making psychology a physical science, relieving man, the celestial pilgrim, of the burden of his soul." Building on Pavlov's classical conditioning techniques, Watson sought to radically redefine psychology, then dominated by Freudian psychoanalytic theory, as the study of behavioral responses to stimuli, divorced from all reference to supposed interior states of mind.

The psychological conditioning techniques in Brave New World are similar to experiments Watson had performed in real life, using loud noises and electric shocks to induce arbitrary fear into his subjects. He famously said that given twelve infants, he could take one and make of him any kind of person he chose—"doctor, lawyer, artist, merchant-chief, and, yes, even beggar-man and thief, regardless of his talents, penchants, tendencies, abilities, vocations, and race of his ancestors." Watson later admitted that he was exaggerating; nevertheless, the idea of comprehending and transforming the psyche as systematically as we do natural elements opens up unimagined horizons of possibility. But what would be done with our newfound powers over the mind—what kind of person we would make—is entirely arbitrary by Watson's standards.

The practical result of this in Huxley's World State is that, as Firchow has noted, although the behaviorists are employed in conditioning the citizens, and perform with rigorous efficiency, the direction of that conditioning has ironically been left to the Freudians, in whose eyes sexual taboos are responsible for every ill from neurotic repressions to social upheaval. Thus, as Needham said in his review, "the erotic play of children is encouraged, universal sexual relations are the rule, and indeed any sign of the beginning of a more deep and lasting affection is rebuked and stamped out, as being anti-social." What these two disparate and often warring schools of psychology share is an approach to cultural values and a blindness to all but the lowest of human desires—a blindness that Needham recognized as fatal to any project to increase real well-being:

> Mr. Huxley, of course, sees so clearly what the psychologists do not see, that such a world must give up not only war, but also spiritual conflicts of any kind, not only superstition, but also religion, not only literary criticism but also great creative art of whatever kind, not only economic chaos, but also all the beauty of the old traditional things, not only the hard and ugly parts of ethics, but the tender and beautiful parts too.

Lamenting the death of metaphysics, Needham wrote that science, which was born of philosophy, had overtaken its parent to become "the only substratum for Reason" and "nothing more nor less than the Mythology accompanying a Technique." Needham saw in Huxley's book an illustration of something Russell had observed: the mutinous tendency of the modern scientific enterprise, as

the means of mastering nature overtake its original intended ends. “It is as if a number of passages from Mr. Bertrand Russell’s recent book The Scientific Outlook had burst into flower, and had rearranged themselves in patches of color like man-eating orchids in a tropical forest,” he suggested. Indeed, Russell’s blueprint of a scientifically ordered society in his 1931 book is very similar to Huxley’s World State, highly regimented and organized around the principles of comfort, stability, and efficiency. Russell saw twentieth-century science as dangerously forsaking its philosophical origins—as he described it, early science was a love story between man and nature, born of Heraclitus’ “ever-living fire.” But as curiosity turned to technique, inquiry was drained of wonder and left to stagger about an existential wasteland:

As physics has developed, it has deprived us step by step of what we thought we knew concerning the intimate nature of the physical world. Color and sound, light and shade, form and texture, belong no longer to that external nature that the Ionians sought as the bride of their devotion. All these things have been transferred from the beloved to the lover, and the beloved has become a skeleton of rattling bones, cold and dreadful, but perhaps a mere phantasm. The poor physicists, appalled at the desert that their formulae have revealed, call upon God to give them comfort, but God must share the ghostliness of His creation.

This brief history is somewhat deceptive; while there may be some truth in Russell’s portrait of the dynamic of lover and beloved unbalanced by man’s increasing mastery over nature, it has long been the defining purpose of the scientific enterprise to achieve dominion—indeed, it is its greatest glory, or rather, one of ours. But Russell’s deeper insight is in recognizing the cold “ghostliness” of God and truth and all that men may value when science is the sole source of our ideals. In such an age, science comes to threaten those things that it should rightly serve:

When it takes out of life the moments to which life owes its value, science will not deserve admiration, however cleverly and however elaborately it may lead men along the road to despair. The sphere of value lies outside science, except insofar as science consists in the pursuit of knowledge. Science as the pursuit of power must not obtrude upon the sphere of values, and scientific technique, if it is to enrich human life, must not outweigh the ends which it should serve.... A new moral outlook is called for in which submission to the powers of nature is replaced by respect for what is best in man. It is where this respect is lacking that scientific technique is dangerous. So long as it is present, science, having delivered man from bondage to nature, can proceed to deliver him from bondage to the slavish part of himself.

In a review of Brave New World called “We Don’t Want to Be Happy,” Russell elaborated on the promise and perils of this scientific deliverance. Huxley, he wrote, “has undertaken to make us sad by the contemplation of a world without sadness.” After describing the material comforts of the fictional society, he reflected on the puzzling instinct to recoil from it:

In spite of these merits, the world which Mr. Huxley portrays is such as to arouse disgust in every normal reader, and obviously in Mr. Huxley himself. I have been asking myself why, and trying hard to think that his well-regulated world would really be an improvement upon the one in which we live. At moments I can make myself think this, but I can never make myself feel it. The feeling of revulsion against a well-ordered world has various sources: one of these is that we do not value happiness as much as we sometimes think we do.

Unlike the other great dystopias, Huxley’s World State, though totalitarian in its orthodoxy, is ostensibly ordered on the wants of the governed rather than the governors. Threats are rarely used or needed. Rule by bread and circuses has proved more potent than force—and more pernicious, precisely because every means of control is a perversion of something people really want. The only people with any capacity for dissatisfaction are a handful of Alphas, who are as unable to articulate their objection as Russell is. It is difficult to reject the sinister when by slight distortion it masquerades as the sublime. Why feeling should be able to distinguish these things while reason cannot is an interesting question, one which could be left forever unsettled by

tinkering, through biotechnology or psychological control, with what Huxley (in a later foreword to the book) called “the natural forms and expressions of life itself.”

One such expression, of course, is a certain measure of autonomy over the meaning and direction of our lives. Its total absence in the World State is ominously signified by the professional title of the genetic engineers: the Assistant Predestinators. But conflating the influences and experiences that shape our identities with the biological reconstruction of life, Russell, revolted but bemused, reasoned himself into a corner:

> But we are shocked—more, I think, than we ought to be—by the idea of molding people scientifically instead of allowing them to grow. We have a notion that we can choose what we will be, and that we should not wish to be robbed of this choice by scientific manipulators drugging us before we are born, giving us electric shocks in infancy, and whispering platitudes to us throughout our childhood.
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> But this feeling is, of course, irrational. In the course of nature the embryo grows through natural causes. The infant learns haphazard lessons of pleasure and pain which determine his taste. The child listens to moral propaganda, which may fail through being unscientific, but which, none the less, is intended to mold the character just as much as Mr. Huxley’s whispering machines. It seems, therefore, that we do not object to molding a human being, provided it is done badly; we only object when it is done well.

In the end, Russell said, “what we cling to so desperately is the illusion of freedom, an illusion which is tacitly negated by all moral instruction and all propaganda. To us human life would be intolerable without this illusion. In Mr. Huxley’s Brave New World men live quite comfortably without it.”

Freedom and Happiness

This “illusion of freedom” was cast into a clearer light by a reviewer who discerned that the temptation to sacrifice liberty to end suffering often becomes an attack on the reality of the liberty itself. Rebecca West, a prominent novelist and literary critic (and erstwhile mistress of H. G. Wells) said Huxley had “rewritten in terms of our age” Dostoevsky’s famous parable of the Grand Inquisitor from The Brothers Karamazov—“a symbolic statement that every generation ought to read afresh.”

“The Grand Inquisitor” is a story within the story, a troubled Karamazov brother’s case against both man and God. In his legend, Christ returns to earth in the fifteenth century and raises a child from the dead; this miracle causes a crowd and a commotion. The Grand Inquisitor, the cardinal of Seville, has Christ arrested and, sentencing Him to death, denounces Him for condemning mankind to misery when He could have made for them a paradise on earth. Underpinning his accusation is the problem of evil: how, if God is all-loving and all-powerful, could He allow man the autonomy to sin? Christ’s life and work held out the possibility of redemption, but left man the freedom not only to doubt but to cause unspeakable suffering. Man has not been equal to that responsibility. “For nothing has ever been more insufferable for man and for human society than freedom,” the cardinal tells Christ. “Turmoil, confusion, and unhappiness—these are the present lot of mankind, after you suffered so much for their freedom!” In the Grand Inquisitor’s indictment, he pits Christ’s offer of redemption against the church’s promise of security:

> With us everyone will be happy, and they will no longer rebel or destroy each other, as in your freedom, everywhere. Oh, we shall convince them that they will only become free when they resign their freedom to us, and submit to us. Will we be right, do you think, or will we be lying? They themselves will be convinced that we are right, for they will remember to what horrors of slavery and confusion your freedom led them.

The cardinal’s argument reappears in a strikingly similar confrontation in Brave New World. When John the Savage sours on the wonders of the World State, he foments a riot among the Deltas

and is brought before Mustapha Mond, the Resident World Controller for Western Europe. In the thematic climax of the novel, Mond defends his spiritually arid civilization by recalling the terrible history that preceded it. Love, literature, liberty, and even science itself are sacrificed in this most scientific of societies—all to serve the goals of happiness and stability. “Happiness,” Mond says, “is a hard master—particularly other people’s happiness. A much harder master, if one isn’t conditioned to accept it unquestioningly, than truth.” To achieve lasting social happiness, all else must be given up.

Each of these interrogations lays bare the fundamental compromise at the heart of that society. Both interlocutors avow a struggle, many years ago, to give up what is now at stake—faith for the Grand Inquisitor, truth for the World Controller—to “serve” the weak, debased, tormented human race, whose happiness depends upon the satisfaction of material wants and absolute submission to authority. “Only now,” says the cardinal, “has it become possible to think for the first time about human happiness. Man was made a rebel; can rebels be happy? ... No science will give them bread as long as they remain free, but in the end they will lay their freedom at our feet.” “Truth’s a menace,” says Mond, and “science is a public danger.... Universal happiness keeps the wheels steadily turning. Truth and beauty can’t.” Against the ever-greater misery that appears to be the price of personal autonomy, both pose the question: Is man worth his humanity?

Christ’s answer is a resurrection and a kiss; John parries, thrusts, and grandstands. His haphazard education has ill prepared him to argue with the World Controller—but armed with Shakespeare, desperation, and an excess of nobility, he bravely embraces those things which once made bravery necessary:

“Exposing what is mortal and unsure to all that fortune, death, and danger dare, even for an eggshell. Isn’t there something in that?” he asked, looking up at Mustapha Mond. “Quite apart from God—though of course God would be a reason for it. Isn’t there something in living dangerously?”

“There’s a great deal in it,” the Controller replied. “Men and women must have their adrenals stimulated from time to time.”

“What?” questioned the Savage, uncomprehending.

“It’s one of the conditions of perfect health. That’s why we’ve made the V.P.S. treatments compulsory.”

“V.P.S.?”

“Violent Passion Surrogate. Regularly once a month. We flood the whole system with adrenin. It’s the complete physiological equivalent of fear and rage. All the tonic effects of murdering Desdemona and being murdered by Othello, without any of the inconveniences.”

“But I like the inconveniences.”

“We don’t,” said the Controller. “We prefer to do things comfortably.”

“But I don’t want comfort. I want God, I want poetry, I want real danger, I want freedom, I want goodness, I want sin.”

“In fact,” said Mustapha Mond, “you’re claiming the right to be unhappy.”

“All right then,” said the Savage defiantly, “I’m claiming the right to be unhappy.”

“Not to mention the right to grow old and ugly and impotent; the right to have syphilis and cancer; the right to have too little to eat; the right to be lousy; the right to live in constant

apprehension of what may happen tomorrow; the right to catch typhoid; the right to be tortured by unspeakable pains of every kind."

There was a long silence.

"I claim them all," said the Savage at last.

Mustapha Mond shrugged his shoulders. "You're welcome," he said.

The unresolved ambivalence of Mond's final words suggests it is an open question whether a shallow and bland happiness might not be a worthwhile price to rid the world of suffering. How should he be answered? While John's heroics are appealing, by the end of this exchange, it is hard to say that he has won our sympathies. He rejects "civilization" but finds no compelling alternative; he turns to self-imposed exile, but the unbearable tension between his ascetic ideals and what Wells called the "simmering hot mud" of basic human nature finally degenerates into a sadomasochistic orgy and suicide. In the foreword to Brave New World's 1946 edition, Huxley regretted not giving John an alternative to "insanity on the one hand and lunacy on the other," an alternative he would later try (unconvincingly) to negotiate in his positive techno-utopia Island. But read in conversation with The Brothers Karamazov, West saw that something deeper is on trial: "Mr. Huxley is attacking the new spirit which tries to induce man to divert in continual insignificant movements relating to the material framework of life all his force, and to abandon the practice of speculating about his existence and his destiny."

Finding Responsibility

By shifting the question from political control to personal conscience, West's reading anticipated the decentralized way that many of the particular scientific and cultural furnishings of Huxley's world have made appearances in ours. Orwell's and Zamyatin's predictions of inevitable centralized totalitarian government have not come to pass—and indeed, neither have Huxley's. But the separation of sex from procreation, and love from sex; the consumption-saturated culture threatening to commodify the consumers; the increasingly physico-chemical attempt to explain and treat a troubled psyche—we did not need bureaucratic threats or hypnopaedic repetitions to want these things, and in this sense Huxley profoundly overestimated (or is it underestimated?) mankind, and his book may, in the deepest sense, have gotten our present all wrong. We chose these things ourselves, uncoerced by terror or war or social engineers. They have been developed to respond to real human hurts and desires; and, as might be expected of human choices, the results and motives have been mixed.

In psychiatry, for instance, drugs more targeted and sophisticated than all-purpose soma have allowed people once crippled by serious disorders to recover a level of normalcy unimaginable to previous generations. But ever-better drugs marketed to an ever-wider population cannot erase everyone's deepest longings or displace everyone's genuine psychic or spiritual hurts. Ultimately, our aspiration to bring man's nature itself within the ambit of the great Baconian project for the relief of man's estate lands us in terrain we must traverse with unprecedented care. On the same "cliffs of fall / Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed" where we find grotesqueries we also find grandeur, and it is with that selfsame mind that we must distinguish them. This is an enormously delicate and complicated project. It need not be said that trying to alter ourselves, psychologically or genetically, while refusing to consider what we ought to be would be disastrously misguided.

Lest what it is we ought or want to be seem obvious, it is helpful to remember that the achievement of total happiness and stability in Huxley's world requires rigid biosocial stratification—for "the secret of happiness and virtue," the Director of Hatcheries and Conditioning reminds us, is "liking what you've got to do. All conditioning aims at that: making people like their unescapable social destiny." The World State's dysgenic engineering program is something we would like to think that we would never contemplate. Yet social equality is a political or philosophical truth much more than a natural one; scientifically, we could not do much better than

“all men are physico-chemically equal.” As the precision and magnitude of our scientific powers increase, we will have to make ever more explicit choices between not wholly compatible goods.

Indeed, although democratically we will always be striving for a better society, and scientifically for a better life, the frequent conflict between these goods should remind us that we will never reach Utopia. And paradoxically, it is in the exercise of liberty and the pursuit of happiness that we may inadvertently damage the character of liberty and happiness themselves. Brave New World, then, is more than just a bleak inhuman specter of our future; it is an invitation to consider how to balance and preserve the things that matter most for ourselves and our posterity. We may remember Prospero, who, leaving behind his magical utopia for the brave old motley world of treason, dynasty, debauchery, and forgiveness, reclaims real responsibility and resumes his throne. It is part of man’s intense dignity that he is heir to multiple thrones, among them scientific mastery over that which no other form of knowledge can control, and moral insight into that which science may never see. Abdicating either one would frustrate all we strive to be.