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Aldous Huxley & Heaven and Hell

Consciousness: the quality or state of being aware especially of something within oneself (Merriam-Webster). Transcendence: the quality or state of being transcendent (Merriam-Webster). Transcendent: exceeding usual limits: surpassing; extending or lying beyond the limits of ordinary experience (Merriam-Webster). Preternatural: existing outside of nature; exceeding what is natural or regular: extraordinary; inexplicable by ordinary means especially: psychic (Merriam-Webster). In an effort to examine human consciousness, attain transcendence, and explore the preternatural, Aldous Huxley dedicated many years of his life delving into the human mind in hopes of discovering the doorway to the heavens, the Other Worlds, and all they might have to offer.

Aldous Huxley, one of the most remarkable, prolific authors of the twentieth century, began his writing career as a witty, pessimistic satirist. Over the decades that followed he would evolve into a mystic and a pacifist seeking self-transcendence and the divine. Born in Godalming, Surrey, England on July 26, 1894, Aldous Leonard Huxley was the grandson of distinguished scientist, Thomas Henry Huxley, friend and supporter of Charles Darwin; the son of biographer and editor, Leonard Huxley; and brother of physiologist and Nobel laureate Andrew Fielding Huxley and of evolutionary biologist Sir Julian Huxley. As a child, Huxley spent much time “contemplating the strangeness of things,” as his brother Julian described it

(Huxley 3). While attending Eton College, Aldous Huxley became partially blind for a time due to keratitis, inflammation of the cornea, making it difficult to read and ending his dreams of studying medicine. In 1916, Huxley graduated with a first-class honors degree in English Literature from Balliol College in Oxford, England.

Immediately after completing university, Huxley began writing, as a job and for himself. His first book, *Burning Wheel*, was published in 1916. He did not make a name for himself as a significant author until a few years later with his first two novels, *Crome Yellow* (1921) and *Antic Hay* (1923). These novels were humorous, malevolent satires aimed at the current state of the pretentious English intellectual coteries of the early 1920s. Also well known around the same time, were Huxley's novels *These Barren Leaves* (1925) and *Point Counter Point* (1928), both written in a similar style as the earlier two.

In 1932, *Brave New World* was published. Huxley brilliantly depicted his own wariness of the political and technological trends of the early 1900s in the controversial novel. Although satirical, the dystopian science fiction still holds up today; still being taught and analyzed in schools, nearly ninety years later. Another turning point for Huxley came in 1936 with *Eyeless in Gaza*. This novel, while attacking the lack of substance and indiscriminate focus illustrated by the present-day society, exhibited Huxley's increasing attraction to Hindu philosophy and mysticism as a possible alternative to the mundane. This became a common theme among many of his works that followed, including: *The Perennial Philosophy* (1946), in which, Huxley examined spiritual beliefs and revealed "the 'divine reality' common to all faiths," as HarperCollins Publishing Company describes it.

Aldous Huxley continued his scrutiny of the human condition with *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan* in 1939, shortly after his move to California. This novel was an exploration of

American culture, in particular, Huxley's observations of narcissism and obsession with youth. Although the cast and settings of the stories changed over time, his need to understand people, to find something deeper, to gain knowledge and wisdom was always his quest. As he researched religion, Huxley told the story of the 17th century French nuns that were said to have been possessed; *The Devils of Loudun* was published in 1952. He kept digging, into religion, mysticism, and philosophy, looking for something that seemed just out of his reach.

While looking for a substitute to the monotony of everyday, mortal life, Huxley found Vendata, "the philosophical underpinning of Hinduism," simply saying that when we see the divinity inside each thing, "we will also see that every religion is merely a different way of expressing the same principle, the same overarching truth that there is no separation between the soul and God" (Bebergal). Huxley began to look within for inspiration, for his writing and his life. The shift from malicious satirist to peaceful mystic is more than clear when looking at Huxley's books and essays. After *Eyeless in Gaza*, where his interest in spirituality from the East was first written about, came *What Are You Going to Do About It?: The Case for Constructive Peace* (1936); *Ends and Means: An Inquiry into the Nature of Ideals and into the Methods Employed for Their Realization* (1937); and *The Art of Seeing* (1942). Huxley was looking for a higher level of consciousness; at first through hypnosis or meditation.

It is unclear when exactly Aldous Huxley began experimenting with mind altering drugs; rumors include him dining in the early 1930s, with Aleister Crowley, who at that time introduced Huxley to peyote. By Huxley's own account though, he happily joined Humphry Osmond, English psychiatrist, in his psychedelic experiments in the spring of 1953, as a "guinea pig" (Huxley 12). Published in 1954, *The Doors of Perception* told of Huxley's own visionary experiences with mescaline, a hallucinogenic drug from the peyote cactus. The work was

entirely different from the earlier novels Huxley authored. In the book, Huxley explored his whole experience that May 5th; everything that he had seen, as well as the things that he had been reminded of saying (the experiment had been recorded), and the places that he had visited, mentally and physically, while still in his study and later when he and Osmond took a road trip into the city.

Two years later, in 1956, *Heaven and Hell* was published. In this essay, Huxley profoundly analyzed the mind, separating the ordinary, day to day, from that which lays just beyond. His essay stated:

A man consists of what I may call an Old World of personal consciousness and, beyond a dividing sea, a series of New Worlds- the not too distant Virginias and Carolinas of the personal subconscious and the vegetative soul; the Far West of the collective unconscious, with its flora of symbols, its tribes of aboriginal archetypes; and, across another, vaster ocean, at the antipodes of everyday consciousness, the world of Visionary Experience (Huxley 84).

An antipode, when describing any region, describes the place directly opposite it; Huxley used New South Wales, Australia as his example of an antipode. He compared the “Old World to the New, from the continent of familiar cows and horses to the continent of a wallaby and the platypus” (Huxley 85). Huxley used animals as metaphors for the ordinary and extraordinary thoughts and visions a person would have on a normal day compared to those experienced while on a mystical adventure.

As a member of the Vedanta Society of Southern California, Huxley originally followed the teachings of its founder, Swami Prabhavananda. He taught that “while practicing yoga and other spiritual exercises one would undoubtedly have paranormal experiences” (Bebergal). At

the time, Huxley's views were in line with those taught by the society. He wrote for their journal and even shared in his own life one of the key ideas of Vedanta, which was to not misconstrue the sometimes hasty or substantial effects of meditation as true spiritual visions. Although Huxley saw a more natural journey to the Other Worlds as the way in the beginning, it was obvious in his essay that his opinion had changed.

After illustrating the regions of the mind with his picturesque words, Huxley moved on to describe the pathways that may transport someone to the far away antipodes of their daily mind. Of the two, neither one has a sure result. First, there is hypnosis or meditation. Men have spent over 3000 years, according to the written records of Vedantism, practicing meditation. The results gained from hypnosis are not as great as those from method two, chemicals, though, according to Huxley. Those chemicals, known to him at the time, were mescaline (peyote) and lysergic acid (LSD). Using either chemical, Huxley explains, rather than hypnosis, will have "the longer range and takes its passengers further into the terra incognita" (Huxley 86).

The mechanisms through which the mind travels to the antipodes during a hypnotic state are unknown. We do know, however, that mescaline causes a change to the enzyme system that controls brain function, allowing the brain to focus less on everyday efficiency and more on visions and thoughts that are ordinarily filtered out due to their uselessness, according to the survival mode of the brain. Throughout history there are stories and paintings that depict visions induced by meditation, and even illness, fatigue, fasting, or confinement. Many religions call for fasting, as a way to worship and become closer to their God. People that fast may achieve some level of spiritual experience due to becoming glucose and vitamin deficient. Science supports that by depriving the brain, people may lead their minds to play tricks on them. The same could be said about seeking solitude to meditate. Restricted environments could promote seeing or

hearing things, even feeling odd sensations. Think about prisoners that are put into solitary and go crazy inside with only their own mind. “If men and women torment their bodies, it is not only because they hope in this way to atone for past sins and avoid future punishments; it is also because they long to visit the mind’s antipodes and do some visionary sightseeing” (Huxley 88).

Huxley researched through history, the many stories of Other Worlds, lands of gemstones and flowers, so vibrant, glowing from within, preternaturally. Stories of the garden of Eden, the Island of the Blest, the Elysian Plain, the Island of Leuke. Stories of magical islands also appear in the stories of the Celts and those of the Japanese. In the great Hindu epic, Ramayana, the land of Uttarakuru is said to be covered in jewels and gemstones, gold, and magnificent red and blue lotus, fruit, and beautiful birds. The stories sounded similar to the accounts of people that used chemicals to reach beyond their Old World, into the New. The vibrant colors and patterns, the splendor of it all, common among all religious stories. Had all these stories been the result of visions created by the mind, whether through meditation, deficiency, or chemicals?

Throughout history, man has worked tirelessly to build transporting objects. No matter the medium, clay, glass, canvas, carpets, carvings, mosaics, buildings, people have always wanted a way to escape reality and travel to a place beyond, take a spiritual trip. They have pulled enormous stones across long distances, built massive cathedrals of gorgeous glass pictures, all in hopes of finding a state of eternal euphoria. Aldous Huxley transported himself over the course of his life, from a critical and judgmental writer, to a seeker of truth, a proponent for peace, and a spiritual being. This is evident in one of his final works, *Island* (1962), published one year before his death. In this novel, Huxley wrote about a utopian society, a far cry from that of *Brave New World*.

Where there is light, there also must be dark though. Some people do not see the heavens when they travel beyond their world, they see hell. This is true for schizophrenics, among other naturally chemically imbalanced people, and of some people that use chemicals to transport themselves purposefully. In an interview with Aldous Huxley in 1958, Mike Wallace described Huxley as being “a man haunted by a vision of hell on earth” while speaking about *Brave New World* and the author’s other works that discussed possible threats to freedom. While Huxley feared for the future of mankind, he was able to find a way through which he felt we might redeem ourselves. Once through Vedanta philosophy and meditation, later through hallucinogenic drugs, Huxley had faith that people could bring back balance through spirituality, however it were achieved.

It is a shame that the history of ayahuasca was not known to Huxley during his life. How many more doors of perception might have been opened for him? As with any great subject, researching Aldous Huxley has led me down a rabbit hole, and I now have a list of his works that I want to read. In all honesty, I would love to read them all during my lifetime. Aldous Huxley could see things that the ordinary man or woman could not; still today, people do not see what is laid directly in front of their eyes. I believe through meditation and spirituality people may find peace in this haunting world. As seen with my earlier project, I have been studying Hinduism and was surprised that studying Huxley led me in that direction also. My quest is to not only find a higher level of consciousness and inner peace, but to continue to gain knowledge and wisdom throughout my life, and share what I learn so that I might better other people’s lives. Aldous Huxley and his essay *Heaven and Hell* has brought me a new awareness surrounding these areas and strengthened my resolve to search for enlightenment.

Works Cited

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