



## Aldous Leonard Huxley (1894-1963)

Aldous Leonard Huxley was born in Godalming, England and died in Los Angeles. The Huxley family was at the center of the literary and philosophical scene in England at the time. His grandfather was the famous biologist, T. H. Huxley, who introduced Darwin's theory of evolution to the public and coined the word "agnostic" to describe someone who is neutral about the existence of God. His mother, who graduated with a "First" in English Literature at Oxford in 1882, was a niece of the poet/essayist Matthew Arnold who focused on the crisis caused by the decline of religion as a moral foundation for society. His two older brothers, Julian and Andrew, both became distinguished biologists. Aldous planned to follow in their footsteps, but, while studying at *Eaton*, he became partially blind, which put an end to his plans for a scientific career. Despite his handicap, he obtained a scholarship to Oxford where, reading with the aid of a magnifying glass and eye drops, he studied English literature. He published his first book of poems, *The Burning Wheel*, in 1916, the year he graduated from Oxford. During this period, he also regularly attended the gatherings of a diverse gathering of progressive writers and intellectuals including the philosopher-mathematician Bertrand Russell, writer Virginia Woolf, writer and poet T.S. Eliot, the controversial critic Clive Bell, and writer D.H. Lawrence, who became a lifelong friend of Huxley, at Garsington Manor, the home of socialite, and Bertrand Russell's longtime lover, Lady Ottoline Morrell. Early in his career, Huxley became interested in Indian spirituality as an alternative to the Western rational scientific progressive world view. He is most famous for his dystopian social science fiction novel, *Brave New World*, which shows this Indian influence in its exploration of the conflicts between science, technology, and reason on the one hand, and religion, spirituality and morality on the other. The work is generally seen as prophetic in its anticipation of powerful psychological means of control by dictatorial governments, in vitro fertilization, genetic cloning, and virtual reality. After graduating from Oxford, Huxley taught at *Eaton* for a few years, where one of his inspired students, Eric Blair, later went on to write his own dystopian social science fiction novel titled *1984* under the pseudonym, "George Orwell." In one of those striking historical coincidences, Huxley's death went largely unnoticed because he died on the same day that John Kennedy was assassinated.

### Works

In his early period, Huxley published four novels that satirise the British society and conventional morality of his day. These angered some of his Garsington friends, especially Lady Ottoline, who never forgave him for his parody of her.

**Brave New World** (1932) signals the beginning of a new darker direction for Huxley. The novel is set in London in 2540 where babies, technologically designed to fill roles of a rigid castes society, are produced on assembly lines, the social and economic divide between the haves and the have-nots is legally enforced and people are controlled by advertising, drugs, sex and entertainment. The novel's anticipation of new forms of dictatorship including drugs and other psychological means of control, in vitro fertilization, genetic cloning, and virtual reality is widely seen as prophetic. Huxley's vision is in a sense darker than Orwell's vision in *1984*. Whereas Orwell worried whether one would be allowed to think freely, Huxley envisages a society in which people are psychologically conditioned by governments to not even want to do so.

In 1936 Huxley published his novel, **Eyeless in Gaza**, which displayed his growing interest in Eastern philosophy and mysticism. During this period, he began his long association with the *Vedanta Society*. Huxley's interest in mysticism led to his experiments with the hallucinogenic drug mescaline, chronicled in his 1954 non-fiction work, **The Doors of Perception**. When the famous (or infamous) Harvard professor, Timothy Leary ("Tune in, turn on, drop out!"), who became the most visible proponent in the United States of the use of hallucinogenic drugs as a means to spiritual enlightenment, read **The Doors of Perception**, he set up a meeting with Huxley and the two became long time friends. Leary argues that **The Doors of Perception** can be seen as part of the history of entheogenic model that sees such hallucinogenic drugs within a spiritual context (alongside, for example, the peyote extracted from a certain kind of cactus and used by some Native American tribes to induce spiritual visions).

In 1955 Huxley published a set of essays titled **Brave New World Revisited**, in which he argues that his predictions in *Brave New World* have, alarmingly, largely come true. His last novel, **The Island** (1962), takes a more hopeful look at some of the themes raised in **Brave New World**.

### Indian Influences

Huxley first visited India with his wife, Maria, in 1925, and found himself both fascinated and disgusted at his first exposure to raw Indian culture. However, even before this, the imagery in his first youthful book, *The Burning Wheel*, is reminiscent of the Buddhist wheel of becoming. The influence of Indian spirituality can also be seen in his 1927 essay "The Essence of Religion" and his 1929 essay "Spinoza's Worm." The five castes in *Brave New World*, Alphas, Betas, Deltas, Gammas, and Epsilons mirror the five castes in Indian culture, Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishyas, Sudras and Harijans. The name of the drug used by the state in *Brave New World* to control the population, "*soma*," is a Vedic Sanskrit word that refers to a plant of disputed identity that provides a hallucinogenic extract for use in Ancient Indian religious ceremonies. In his later work, *Island*, the intoxicating substance used on the island is called "*moksha* medicine," "*moksha*" being a Sanskrit word that means *liberation* (from the cycle of death and rebirth).

In his last novel, **Island**, Huxley describes a peaceful utopian society in a remote secluded island, *Pala*, in the middle of the Pacific Ocean whose basic principles of education, agriculture, economics and politics are modeled on certain values of Mahayana Buddhism. Huxley explores

the clash between the Western and *Palanese* inhabitants of *Pala* in order to contrast the destructive consequences of Western greed, materialism and militarism with the Buddhist pursuit of self-improvement, knowledge and spiritual enlightenment.

Huxley did not simply reject Western ideas in favor of Indian ones. In his later period, he remarked that it was his aim to “make the best of both Eastern and Western worlds. “**Brave New World** displays what would happen if the Western world, realizing that its confident belief in continual progress had not worked out as expected, were to implement Eastern ideas (e.g., the caste system) without understanding them, and papering over the lack of spiritual depth by employing foreign technologies. As Watt (1971) puts it, the moral seems to be that the “way to enlightenment consists, not of some remote visitation from the sky, from outside the self,” e.g., is, from some foreign technology, “but rather of tilling the soil of one’s individual soul.”

### Criticisms

Huxley’s friend and spiritual advisor, the Vedic monk Swami Prabhavanada, claims that Huxley’s belief in the use of hallucinogenic drugs as a path to spiritual enlightenment can be accused of using the same kind of technological substitute for genuine enlightenment that Huxley himself implicitly condemns in **Brave New World**. That is, Huxley is inconsistent insofar as in **Brave New World** drugs are used as an instrument of tyranny but in **The Doors of Perception** and **Island** drugs are used as an instrument of “liberation” (wisdom in a pill).

Similarly, the Jewish religious philosopher, Martin Buber, rejected Huxley’s view that mescaline enables a person to participate in “common being” with others because it actually transports a person to a “strictly private sphere”. The recourse to such drugs is merely the “fugitive flight out of the claim of the situation into the situationlessness [that] is no legitimate affair of man.”

Finally, the Oxford professor Robert Charles Zaehner published an article in 1954 titled “The Menace of Mescaline” in which he argues that the artificial interference with consciousness cannot produce genuine religious experiences but only what Pahnke and Richards call “experimental mysticism”. In his 1957 book, **Mysticism Sacred and Profane**, Zaehner turns turns the tables on Huxley and argues that the kind of experience one has upon taking such drugs is dependent on the religious views one *already* has. Since Huxley is already influenced by Vedanta and Mahayana Buddhism he will have vivid drug induced experiences that express those prior beliefs. If one is a Christian, or even an atheist, the same drugs will lead one to have experiences appropriate to those beliefs. In other words, hallucinogenic drugs do not lead one to spiritual enlightenment but only produce vivid experiences that amplify one’s prior beliefs.

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Note: Huxley published some 47 articles for *Vedanta and the West* and was involved in the production of five screenplays including *Pride and Prejudice* and *Jayne Eyre*. These and other Huxley works are listed in *Wikipedia*. URL: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aldous\\_Huxley\\_bibliography](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aldous_Huxley_bibliography)

There is a useful free online collection of many of Huxley’s works at fadedpage.com. URL: <https://www.fadedpage.com/csearch.php?author=Huxley%2C%20Aldous%20Leonard>

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