

Brave New World and the Flight from God

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ALDOUS HUXLEY'S *BRAVE NEW WORLD* (1932) is commonly seen as an indictment of both tyranny and technology. Huxley himself described its theme as "the advancement of science as it affects human individuals."¹ *Brave New World Revisited* (1958) deplored its vision of the over-orderly dystopia "where perfect efficiency left no room for freedom or personal initiative."² Yet *Brave New World* has a deeper meaning: a warning, by way of a grim portrait, of life in a world which has fled from God and lost all awareness of the transcendent. Reading the signs of his times, Huxley saw awaiting us a soulless utilitarian existence, incompatible with our nature and purpose. Subsequent history has vindicated his pessimism.

Brave New World's significations flow from Huxley's vision of reality and human nature and its implications for proper living. As Milton Birnbaum points out, by the early thirties, Huxley was in transition from cynicism to a mystical religion,³ which held that a transcendent God exists, and that one's proper final end, as the foreword to the 1946 edition of *Brave New World* notes, is "attaining unitive knowledge of the immanent Tao or Logos, the transcendent Godhead or Brahman."⁴ (Indeed, with its religious theme, *Brave New World* emerges as a milestone in Huxley's odyssey.)

Man, Huxley maintained, is an "em-

bodied spirit."⁵ As such, he is governed by belief:

It is in the light of our beliefs about the ultimate nature of reality that we formulate our conceptions of right and wrong; and it is in the light of our conceptions of right and wrong that we frame our conduct, not only in the relations of private life, but also in the sphere of politics and economics. So far from being irrelevant, our metaphysical beliefs are the finally determining factor in all our actions.⁶

Moreover, people possess not only a will to self-assertion but also a will to self-transcendence. "In a word, they long to get out of themselves, to pass beyond the limits of that tiny island universe, within which every individual finds himself confined."⁷ This longing arises because, "in some obscure way and in spite of our conscious ignorance, we know who we are. We know...that the ground of our individual knowing is identical with the Ground of all knowing and being."⁸ Our mission in life, then, is "upward self-transcendence," metaphysically upward affiliation culminating in union with the Divinity. Unfortunately, much self-transcendence is horizontal (toward "some cause wider than their own immediate interests," but not metaphysically higher, from hobbies and family to science or politics) or even down-

ward (toward drugs, loveless sex, etc.).⁹

Huxley saw self-restraint as essential to human dignity and proper living. His 1931 essay "Obstacle Race," published while *Brave New World* was in progress, depicted nineteenth-century life as "a kind of obstacle race," with conventions and taboos restricting behavior being the obstacles. While psychologically painful, it was worth the cost, because "the dignity of man consists precisely in his ability to restrain himself from dashing away along the flat, in his capacity to raise obstacles in his own path." Turning back from those obstacles is often "the most nobly and dignifiedly human thing a man can do."¹⁰ This resembles Irving Babbitt's view that "what is specifically human in man and ultimately divine is a certain quality of will, a will that is felt in its relation to his ordinary self as a will to refrain."¹¹ For both men, this self-mortification was an act of loyalty to standards, and indispensable for upward self-transcendence.

The struggle against adversity which this entails is essential for fulfilling emotional life. The "pleasurable excitements" from surmounting (even sometimes not surmounting) psychological obstacles surpass those of life without such restraints.¹² Huxley did not explain why, but we may speculate: Striving toward God entails surmounting obstacles, overcoming adversity. Hence we exult in meeting challenges; it is a microcosm of the victorious metaphysically-upward striving which our fulfillment requires.

II

Even before *Brave New World*, Huxley realized that the main tendency in the West was away from upward self-transcendence.

The fundamental beliefs shaping thought and conduct were shifting. *Music at Night* (1931) observed that Christian beliefs "are now only lukewarmly

believed in or even rejected outright." Likewise the once inspiring tenets of classical liberalism. Instead, "The modern emphasis is on personality. We justify our feelings and moods by an appeal to the 'right to happiness,' the 'right to self-expression.'"¹³ Western man was also, Huxley pointed out in 1927, embracing substitute religions, from democracy and egalitarianism to the cult of business efficiency.¹⁴ All these, of course, embody horizontal self-transcendence.

Moreover, science, technology, and mass production had seemingly removed many external constraints and disciplines, e.g., economic scarcity and the consequences of sexual license. Religion's decline and applied science's advance were, Huxley believed, working synergistically to undermine self-restraint by making moral taboos seem absurd (e.g., contraception)¹⁵ and self-indulgence seem good (overconsumption to absorb overproduction).¹⁶

On causality Huxley was undecided. In 1927 he averred that "material circumstances are driving all nations" to emulate America's machine civilization. "Fate acts within and without; there is no resisting."¹⁷ But "Ideals and the Machine Tool" (1931) rejected economic determinism. Huxley acknowledged "certain definite correlations" between men's world views and the economic situation. Hence "a correlation exists between the present popularity of the ideal of happiness [identified with comfort] and the rise of mass production." Unlike goodness, truth, and beauty, pursuit of happiness sustains production. Yet ideals—truth, beauty, goodness, happiness—arise apart from economics. Economics only determine which ideals shall be prevalent.¹⁸ *Brave New World* reverted to determinism. Huxley's wavering is unimportant. What matters is his realization that Western awareness of transcendent Reality was with-

ing.

Huxley divined too that machine civilization, and "liberation" from religion and religious morality, were exacting terrible forfeits. It was axiomatic to Huxley that getting something for nothing is impossible.¹⁹ Even before *Brave New World* he warned that success demands "nothing short of spiritual self-mutilation."²⁰ Machinery was inflicting similar mutilations. As Richard M. Weaver put it, "What had been created in response to the human spirit and had referential justification began to be autotelic and to make its own demands."²¹ Thus, as Huxley concluded,

Fordism, or the philosophy of industrialism, demands that we should sacrifice the animal man (and...large portions of the thinking, spiritual man)...to the Machine. There is no place in the factory, or in that larger factory which is the modern industrialized world, for animals on the one hand, or for artists, mystics, or even, finally, individuals on the other. Of all the ascetic religions Fordism is that which demands the cruelest mutilations of the human psyche...and offers the smallest spiritual returns. Rigorously practiced for a few generations, this dreadful religion will end by destroying the human race.²²

One mutilation he observed was a spreading mediocrity of aspiration. Demanding goals—pleasing God, living morally, partaking of high culture—were being replaced by lesser ones: "fun," comfort, conformity.²³ Unfortunately, multitudes are not interested in having their souls stretched by either a demanding religion and morality or an inspiring high culture—hence the great danger that the majority would cheerfully make a Faustian bargain, selling their souls for bread, baubles, comfort and amusement.²⁴

In particular, American modernity was pressuring higher and more intelligent independent souls to conform to mediocrity.²⁵ Beyond the evils of value inver-

sion and intelligence emulating stupidity, those most likely to heed calls from the divine Ground were being drawn away from the upward path.

With technology, secularization, and affluence flattening the "obstacle course," people, having neither inclination nor need for self-restraint, were forfeiting their dignity too.²⁶ And, Huxley warned, life bereft of "exaltations and agonies" would be boring.²⁷ The worst forfeit, and the true and ultimate peril, of modern history's main tendency is not political, abhorrent though tyranny and regimentation were to Huxley, but religious. Loss of awareness of the transcendent is cumulative and ultimately total. Living in a secularized world, immersed in the powerful distractions of horizontal and downward self-transcendence presented by a consumption-and-fun economy, with the path of upward self-transcendence increasingly forgotten, people have nowhere to go except into ways of life unworthy of beings with souls, utterly incapable of fulfilling a higher purpose: attaining knowledge of God.

In *Grey Eminence* (1941), his biography of Father Joseph, Cardinal Richelieu's adviser, Huxley observed that the West had been increasingly forsaking such knowledge for centuries:

The acquisition of one-pointedness and the cultivation of genuine mysticism were tasks no easier in the fourteenth century, or the seventeenth, than under Queen Victoria; they merely seemed more reasonable, more worthy of consideration by men of culture and intelligence.²⁸

[W]here there is no vision, the people perish; and...if those who are the salt of the earth lose their savour, there is nothing to keep that earth disinfected, nothing to prevent it from falling into complete decay. The mystics are channels through which a little knowledge of reality filters down into our human universe of ignorance and illusion. A totally unmythical world would be a world to-

tally blind and insane. From the beginnings of the eighteenth century onwards, the sources of mystical knowledge have been steadily diminishing in number, all over the planet. We are dangerously far advanced into the darkness.²⁹

In *Those Barren Leaves* (1925), Francis Chelifer's brooding, culminating in a cynical catechism, shows that, long before *Brave New World*, Huxley had spotted this danger:

Why am I doing this? What is it all for? Did I come into the world, *supplied with a soul which may very likely be immortal*, for the sole purpose of sitting every day at this desk?....

Q. On what condition can I live a life of contentment?

A. *On the condition that you do not think.*

Q. What is the function of newspapers, cinemas, radios, motor-bikes, jazz bands, etc.?

A. The function of these things is *the prevention of thought* and the killing of time. They are the most powerful instruments of human happiness.

Q. What did Buddha consider *the most deadly of the deadly sins*?

A. *Unawareness, stupidity.* (italics added)³⁰

III

Seen in this light, *Brave New World* is a warning that modern life threatens to inflict "the most deadly of the deadly sins": to annihilate awareness of the transcendent God and divert us from our true purpose.

Dystopia's people live in a continuous state of "unawareness, stupidity." Incomprehension, indeed, is one of the novel's themes. People are kept unaware of old age, strong feeling, death; they flee anything unpleasant into the drug *soma*. Underlying all this unawareness is deliberately-fostered unawareness of God. Abundant evidence in the novel proves

that this, not runaway science or totalitarianism, was Huxley's actual chief concern.

In Chapter 3, World Controller Mustapha Mond's enumeration of the former world's discarded features focuses on elements of transcendent religion: God, heaven, soul, immortality. The Henry Ford cult replaced religion, with crosses decapitated into T's, and Ford's Day celebrations, Community Sings, and orgiastic "Solidarity Services" as "religious" rites.

Just a few pages later, a moronic elevator operator is overwhelmed by reaching his building's roof and encountering "the warm glory of afternoon sunlight": "Oh, roof!" he repeated in a voice of rapture. He was as though suddenly and joyfully awakened from a dark annihilating stupor. "Roof!" To Peter Firchow, this shows that people can achieve fleeting awareness of a different reality despite conditioning.³¹ True; but, more profoundly, it is a metaphor for attaining the Beatific Vision. And the elevator operator's prompt return, duty-called, to darkness and "habitual stupor" warns that our enslavement to machine civilization keeps awareness of God fleeting at best.

Religious books are "smut," accessible only to World Controllers. The only self-transcendence permitted is horizontal: social solidarity and service. And it is God's existence and its implications for conduct, not science, economics, or politics, which dominates the dialogue between Mond and the Savage, where the novel's central argument appears.

Preventing awareness of God motivates Mond's suppression of "A New Theory of Biology," which addresses "the conception of purpose," as "heretical and...dangerous and potentially disruptive." Why? Because, Mond muses,

...once you began admitting explanations in terms of purpose—well, you didn't know what the result might be. It...might

make [intelligent people] lose their faith in happiness as the Sovereign Good and take to believing, instead, that the goal was somewhere beyond, somewhere outside the present human sphere; that the purpose of life was not the maintenance of well-being, but some intensification and refining of consciousness, some enlargement of knowledge.

This dread alternative purpose is none other than attaining unitive knowledge of God. That this is life's purpose Mond deems "quite possibly true. But not, in the present circumstance, admissible."

Blocking awareness of God arguably underlies more mundane awareness-blocks. As Lenina Crowne and Henry Foster embark on a date, advertising-bearing electric sky-signs keep them "*fortunately* unaware" of the "*depressing* fact" of a starry night. Afterward, though the sky-signs' "*separating screen*" had largely dissolved, *soma*, which had "raised a quite impenetrable wall between the actual universe and their minds," enables them to retain "happy ignorance" of the "*depressing* stars" (italics added). Why "depressing"? Because a starry night is one of Creation's classic witnesses for its Creator, before which mundane concerns pale into insignificance bordering on ridiculousness.

As Huxley knew, unitive knowledge of God requires silence; distractions are its mortal enemy;³² and by the twenties life was already distraction-ridden.³³ In his dystopia distraction via synthetic music and television is continuous, a favorite escape from anything disquieting for people sharing Lenina's determination "to preserve her incomprehension intact." The careful insulation of civilization's inmates from awareness of frustration, intense feeling, and death is partly to ensure the individual stability on which social stability and civilization depend: "When the individual feels, the community reels." But beyond that, beauty, love, heroism, pain, suffering

and death are windows and channels to a transcendent reality, to God. Ecstasy and suffering are the whetstones of the soul, sharpening it to a keen edge of awareness. Beauty is a directly perceptible experience of, and witness for, God's perfection and goodness, and the natural response to it is joyful appreciation; and, beyond this, awe, reverence, and thanksgiving for its Creator. Romantic love inspires, and finds expression in, tenderness, devotion, and reverence for the beloved—self-transcendent sentiments all.

Unlike fun and comfort, which make no spiritual demands on us, suffering—one's own or others'—compels a response; it seldom leaves us where we were. It provokes an anguished "Why?" demanding an answer. It prompts reflection on life's purpose and meaning, its fairness or unfairness—in short, upon the ultimate nature of reality. This leads ineluctably to the religious question. All this is especially true of death, the most poignant pain of all, irreversible and irrevocable, the unanswerable proof that reality is not malleable, that earthly existence is in at least some measure tragic, that its fleeting pleasures are not adequate recompense for its hurts.

That Huxley knew this is revealed by Mond's reading to the Savage from Cardinal Newman and Maine de Biran on how only the young and prosperous can be independent of God, and how aging, afflicted, death-conscious people turn to God for compensation. Mond assures the Savage that the moderns have preserved youth and prosperity, hence allowing this independence, and abolished loss, rendering religion superfluous. The Savage knows better, having felt the reality of loss at his mother's death in Park Lane Hospital: "'Oh, God, God, God...' the Savage kept repeating to himself. In the chaos of grief and remorse that filled his mind it was *the one articulate word*. 'God!' he whispered it aloud. 'God...'" (italics

added). To which a visiting child, unawareness personified, responds: "Whatever is he saying?"

Suffering and death, rightly considered, give the lie to the cult of comfort. As Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn divined:

If, as claimed by humanism, man were born only to be happy, he would not be born to die. Since his body is doomed to death, his task on earth evidently must be more spiritual: not a total engrossment in everyday life, not the search for the best ways to obtain material goods and then their carefree consumption. It has to be the fulfillment of a permanent, earnest duty so that one's life journey may become above all an experience of moral growth: to leave life a better human being than one started it.³⁴

Once aware of God and one's proper "task on earth," this implies, one will forsake "carefree consumption." But a poor consumer is a threat to prosperity. Hence not only religion but also awareness of anything that could prompt dangerous sentiments of ecstasy and suffering, which could draw one Godward, must be stifled. Hence the war against awareness.

Solzhenitsyn's words neatly express the Savage's view. His intense religiosity, and Huxley's handling of it, proves further that religion is *Brave New World's* true concern. At the Reservation the flashbacks about his upbringing culminate in his breakthrough to discovering "Time and Death and God," his mystical, ascetic quest for God in the mountains, and his emulation of Jesus on the Cross. This religiosity is in counterpoint to civilization's relentless secularism. To "unawareness, stupidity," he opposes an almost visionarily keen awareness of the Deity; to engrossment in material existence, his focus, as Bernard Marx complains, "on what he calls 'the soul,' which he persists in regarding as an entity independent of the physical environment"; to self-indulgence and *acedie*,

a ferocious penitential asceticism of purification and flagellation, and a rigorous sense of sin. His last words are a remorseful "Oh, my God, my God!"—his last act an atonement-by-suicide, on which, fittingly, the novel ends.

"If you had a God, you'd have a reason for self-denial," he observes. "But industrial civilization is only possible when there's no self-denial," Mond retorts. "Self-indulgence up to the very limits imposed by hygiene and economics. Otherwise the wheels stop turning." Machinery, Huxley contends, had forced a choice: stability or death. It had permitted vast population growth, but should the wheels stop turning, famine would ensue. And wheels require attendants,

...men as steady as the wheels upon their axles, sane men, obedient men, men stable in contentment.

Crying: My baby, my mother, my only, only love; groaning: My sin, my terrible God; screaming with pain, muttering with fever, bemoaning old age and poverty—how can they tend the wheels? And if they cannot tend the wheels....

Riding a tiger, daring not dismount, humanity warped itself to fit the machine, forsaking truth and beauty for comfort and happiness. "Mass production demanded the shift. Universal happiness keeps the wheels steadily turning; truth and beauty can't." But this entailed sacrificing the divine source of truth and beauty. "God isn't compatible with machinery and scientific medicine and universal happiness. You must make your choice. Our civilization has chosen machinery and medicine and happiness."

Indeed. You pay your money and you take your choice, as the 1946 edition's gloomy foreword noted. But "One can't have something for nothing. Happiness has got to be paid for." Forsaking God and enslaving itself to its own creation to avoid physical ruin, humanity inflicts on

itself spiritual ruin.

For, as the Savage knows, awareness of God precludes allowing oneself "to be degraded by pleasant vices. You'd have a reason for bearing things patiently and with courage.... God's the reason for everything noble and fine and heroic." All virtue, all righteous conduct, is loyalty to standards of excellence. Excellence, in turn, presupposes a conception of perfection. And perfection requires a transcendent metaphysic; a secular, materialist metaphysic will not support it; the imperfection of earthly existence, with its impermanence, its frequently realized potentials of ugliness, evil, suffering and death, is clear to any awareness above the sensual.

The great choice in life—as *Brave New World* makes clear—is between self-transcendence and self-indulgence. Virtue flows from the former, sin from the latter. And without a transcendent God to stretch our souls upward, to demand that we become more than we were, no truly compelling motive to self-transcending virtue exists. As history abundantly demonstrates, the entities inspiring horizontal self-transcendence can inspire sin at least as readily as virtue. And in a reductive, materialist world unaware of God, the prevailing ethic will be pragmatic, utilitarian, self-indulgent, pleasure-seeking, pain-shunning—because that is the only ethic supportable by such a metaphysic. Virtue atrophies for want of compelling or even plausible reason.

All that makes for truly human existence atrophies too. Human dignity disappears. If we are not "embodied spirits," then we are mere matter, and there is nothing awe-inspiring or reverential about us. Corpses reduce to utilitarian objects. The *Brave New World* cremates its dead and recovers their constituent chemicals. Flying with Lenina past a crematorium, Henry Foster sums up materialist reductionism and its radical egali-

tarianism in one phrase: "All men are physico-chemically equal." Live people fare no better. Being mere matter, Lenina, Bernard notes, "thinks of herself that way. She doesn't mind being meat." She worries at his seeming indifference, is relieved when he emotionlessly fondles her breasts, and frets constantly about her appearance.

A religious outlook—with its emotions of faith, trust, devotion, reverence for the other, and self-transcendence—orients one toward love as unbelief does not. As the Hound of Heaven warned, "Thou dravest love from thee, who dravest Me." Only soulless fun and sex remain. In the meeting between the Savage and Lenina, the taut, upwardly stretched, self-transcending, vividly aware soul collides with the slack, horizontal, self-indulgent, unaware one in perfect counterpoint. He kneels reverently before Lenina and kisses her hand; she leans forward lustfully. He proclaims his desire to perform some service to prove his love and worthiness of her; she listens in incomprehension and rising annoyance:

"At Malpais," the Savage was incoherently mumbling, "you had to bring her the skin of a mountain lion—I mean, when you wanted to marry some one. Or else a wolf."

"There aren't any lions in England," Lenina almost snapped.

"And even if there were," the Savage added, with sudden contemptuous resentment, "people would kill them out of helicopters, I suppose.... I'll do anything," he went on, more and more incoherently. "Anything you tell me.... I mean I'd sweep the floor if you wanted."

"But we've got vacuum cleaners here," said Lenina in bewilderment. "It isn't necessary."

"No, of course it isn't *necessary*. But some kinds of baseness are nobly undergone. I'd like to undergo something no-

bly. Don't you see?"

She doesn't see. She recoils in horror at his mention of marriage and greets his profession of love with a sexual advance.

Without struggle, without a demanding moral call to self-transcendence, without pain and ecstasy, all vivid interior life disappears. Indeed a corollary theme of *Brave New World* is that suffering and mortification are the price of transcendence, of fulfillment, of anything worthwhile, and that when life is purged of all occasion for paying this price, attaining these things becomes impossible. Note that Dystopia's rebels, seeking more intense, meaningful life, choose mortification. Helmholtz Watson adopts asceticism and experiences "a kind of mental excess"; Bernard wants "to try the effect of arresting my impulses"—i.e., resurrect Babbitt's "inner check." The Savage's discovery of "Time and Death and God" comes after being driven from the manhood initiation rite, "despised and rejected of men"; his initiation into divine mysteries follows a five-day fast. "The tears are necessary," he tells Mond, and recounts the tale of the Girl of Mataski, whose troth could be won only by a morning's hoeing in her garden, enduring magic flies and mosquitoes. "What you need," he concludes, "is something *with* tears for a change. Nothing costs enough here." Slackness pervades the *Brave New World*; the "obstacle course" is gone. Every peaceful self-indulgence is encouraged; no demands are made on anyone. Without passion or purpose, time exists only to be frittered away.

With souls slack, high art disappears. Helmholtz Watson, Emotional Engineer, accomplished minstrel of infantile "happiness," grasps the idiocy of trying to "say something about nothing." He could, he senses, write something "more important. Yes, and more intense, more violent." But nothing in his safe, easy

existence evokes such writing. Capable of appreciating *Romeo and Juliet* only as regards literary technique, he laughs when the Savage reads from it, then admits that

"...one needs ridiculous, mad situations like that; one can't write really well about anything else. Why was that old fellow such a marvellous propaganda technician? Because he had so many insane, excruciating things to get excited about. You've got to be hurt and upset; otherwise you can't think of the really good, penetrating, X rayish phrases.... We need some other kind of madness and violence. But what? What? Where can one find it?" He was silent; then, shaking his head, "I don't know," he said at last, "I don't know."

Huxley's dystopia, then, merely extrapolated the flight from God which he had observed for years. But whereas the *Brave New World* had deliberately chosen spiritually suicidal comfortable stupor, the West of the twenties was so exteriorized, so engrossed in affluence and seeming freedom from God, and so unaware of their costs, that it was drifting insensibly toward an oblivion of slack-souled "unawareness, stupidity." An increasingly mystical, religious man in an increasingly unmystical, irreligious world, Huxley was warning mankind to turn back before it was too late.

IV

Largely misread, the warning went unheeded. (This was partly Huxley's fault, as *Brave New World Revisited* stresses freedom, not religion.) The flight from God into a transcendence-purged world has intensified, while countervailing forces have withered. Just as the urban America of the Roaring Twenties was for Huxley the prefiguration of humanity's future, so is America today an index of heedless progress toward "a world totally blind and insane." America's secularization is already familiar. More omi-

nously, our government is increasingly persecuting religion—an aping of the Brave New World far more sinister than the State's tightening stranglehold on our economic life.

Pursuit of secular Utopia is stronger than ever. Not even in the dictionary³⁵ when Weaver flayed the “spoiled-child mentality,” “lifestyle” is now on every lip. Our staggering consumer debt, Americans' increasing gluttony and obesity, and the proliferation of superfluous costly articles (*e.g.*, walking shoes, running tights, skating blades), all confirm Huxley's warning of overconsumption deliberately fostered to sustain the economy—and of the warping of human nature to fit machinery.

Modern Americans typically see matter, in Simone Weil's phrase, as “a machine for manufacturing the good.”³⁶ Technology is the idolized tool for this process, and the advent of computers has only intensified our idolatry. Liberalism's cherished welfare state and the consumer capitalism trumpeted by “Conservatives” share the Brave New World's secularist-materialist premise: the good consists of pleasant sensations, attainable by optimally arranging matter and services and the purchasing power needed to acquire them. They share too its corollary goal of purging life of unpleasantness. They differ only in their methods and in who is assigned to serve these goals.

As in Huxley's dystopia, awareness of the mysterious, transcendent significations of life and death is fading. Concerning the first, witness the utilitarian Moloch's hecatomb of abortion; and concerning the second, note Henry Foster's chirp while passing the crematorium: “Fine to think we can go on being socially useful even after we're dead. Making plants grow,” informs the chilling vogue for organ harvesting, which has gone beyond willingness to give an organ posthumously to a family member and is

becoming almost a social obligation. Death is demystified accordingly, and not even the integrity of a corpse is beyond Moloch's reach. Which presupposes a broad, deep repudiation of that hallmark of spiritual decency, respect for the dead—and the dogmas of bodily resurrection and of body as temple of the Holy Spirit.

Though death is regarded “like any other physiological process,” suffering increasingly terrifies Americans, as witness the rising popularity of Dr. Kevorkian. This is merely the most lurid and ghastly symptom of the comfort cult's corollary: our national tendency to flinch from anything unpleasant, from petty inconveniences to suffering for principles. But virtue, spiritual growth, upward self-transcendence, and unitive knowledge of God cannot be attained by people craving an easy life.

Nor are these attainments open to the unaware, and America is increasingly rendering itself stuporous and grace-proof. Our *somas* include drugs, drink, TV, and athletics. Almost throughout their waking hours, Americans are immersed in distractions: TV, radio, tapes, CDs, computers, movies. And if “a crevice of time should yawn in the solid substance of their distractions,” the Walkman tape player will fill it. With increasing frequency, one encounters on our sidewalks dead-eyed, blank-faced or Walkman-engrossed specimens, staring mindlessly like zombies. “Virtual reality” technology, uncannily like Huxley's “feelies,” will only worsen our stupor.

Blocking awareness further is Americans' accelerating decerebration. The lack of widespread outrage over our disastrous system of education, and of any serious attempt to undo it, indicates that our educators are giving our slack-souled population what it wants. The popularity of “no-brainer” activities and the cretin-celebrating movie *Forrest Gump* con-

firm this.

Self-transcending conduct and emotions are increasingly viewed as disruptive. "Civilization," Mond tells the Savage, "has absolutely no need of nobility or heroism. These things are symptoms of political inefficiency. In a properly organized society like ours, nobody has any opportunities for being noble or heroic." David Brooks, writing in *The Wall Street Journal*, disparaged the courage, heroism, even manhood of diehard Communist Russians and Zulus opposing Mandela's African National Congress. "Today we place a higher emphasis on compromise and reconciliation, and are not so concerned that people should have fight in them."³⁷ Better to be "technocratic and prosaic" epicene sheep docilely turning the wheels and guzzling products, too immersed in commercialized distractions ever to grasp that they have sold their souls for comfort.

Love is withering in an atmosphere of fear, childish self-centeredness, and carnality.³⁸ The fervent love lauded for centuries in Western high culture is deprecated in self-help literature, and too often in real life, as "dysfunctional" or "obsessive," in favor of safe, casual companionability seeking only meaningless fun. Love is frequently replaced by dystopia's obsessive, casual sex. In this—and in popular obsessions with physical appearance, diet, and exercise (which consumes far more of a typical American's time than religion)—today's Americans see themselves as "so much meat."

Modern America, then, is primarily oriented toward soulless self-indulgence, away from upward self-transcendence. And the two possible obstacles to this Juggernaut of unawareness, culture and religion, are today, as in Huxley's dystopia, smoothing its path.

For centuries Western high art was inspired and informed by a transcendent metaphysic. Today's high art

bleakly confirms Huxley's prophecies. Fashionable minimalist art, music, and literature are merely Helmholtz's "saying something about nothing." Minimalism may, as Mond says, "require the most enormous ingenuity," making art "out of the absolute minimum...practically nothing but pure sensation," but it is also, as Helmholtz, the Savage, and our better critics grasp, "idiotic." Like Huxley's dystopian art, it imprisons its consumers in the unremitting banality and barbarism of modernity, instead of opening a window to a higher reality.

Religion has largely betrayed its mission as the conservator of awareness of the metaphysically transcendent. Roman Catholicism is pervaded by the insidious, seemingly innocuous but devastating heresy that worship is not "vertical" but "horizontal." Vertical worship seeks after upward self-transcendence, straining toward a God who is metaphysically other. Horizontal worship, "seeing the Christ in one's brothers and sisters," with the Mass as a "meal," is disturbingly near the "Solidarity Service" (*sans orgy*). It speaks volumes about the Church's loss of metaphysical acumen and vigilance that this heresy spreads unchecked.

Much popular religion is infantile and undemanding. Witness the angels fad, which reduces the metaphysically other to relentlessly cute figures on calendars. Mainstream religious morality is attenuated; demanding sanctions, especially in matters carnal, are increasingly jettisoned for fear of being "judgmental." Religion often merely exhorts us to niceness and "compassion"—a horizontalist heresy insofar as it substitutes for and thus forestalls love of God and upward self-transcendence.

Religion's recent rehabilitation among neoconservatives is not disproof, for it seeks not after upward self-transcendence. Rather, it has the same pragmatic

motive as the suppression of religion in Huxley's dystopia: to improve social control and stability, the better to keep the wheels turning.

In its essentials, *Brave New World* is dangerously near fulfilled prophecy. America's mental and spiritual life increasingly resembles a skyscraper whose inhabitants, having closed the blinds on the "depressing" starry Heaven, with its silent calls to transcendence,

are turning out the lights floor by floor, as their aspirations descend to the mediocrity of the Brave New World's dark basement of unawareness and fun. A politically and culturally marginalized reactionary remnant resists, Savage-like; but barring a massive reevaluation of values, it seems likely, as Huxley grimly forecast in 1946, that "the horror may be upon us within a single century."

1. *Brave New World* (New York, 1946 ed.; 1953 paperback ed.), ix. 2. *Brave New World Revisited* (New York, 1958; 1965 paperback ed.), 1-2. 3. *Aldous Huxley's Quest for Values* (Knoxville, Tenn., 1971), 166-167. 4. *Brave New World*, viii-ix. 5. *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow* (New York, 1956), 1. 6. *Ends and Means* (New York, 1937), 11. 7. *The Devils of Loudun* (New York, 1953), 67. 8. *Ibid.*, 69. 9. *Ibid.*, 313-327. 10. "Obstacle Race," *The Adelphi*, April 1931, 40, 41. 11. *Democracy and Leadership* (Indianapolis, 1979), 28. 12. "Obstacle Race," 40. 13. *Music at Night* (Garden City, N.Y., 1931), 101-102, 105. 14. "The Substitutes for Religion," in Huxley, *Proper Studies* (London, 1927), 207-229. 15. "Obstacle Race," 37. 16. *Jesting Pilate* (London, 1926), 266-270; "Foreheads Villainous Low," in *Music at Night*, 184-185. 17. "The Outlook for American Culture," *Harper's Magazine*, August 1927, 265. 18. "Ideals and the Machine Tool" (1931), in *Aldous Huxley's Hearst Essays* (New York, 1994), 14. 19. *Proper Studies* (London, 1927), 297; "Something for Nothing" (1933) in *Aldous Huxley's Hearst Essays*, 239; *The Perennial Philosophy* (New York, 1945), 79, 171. 20. *Proper*

Studies, 270. 21. *Visions of Order* (Bryn Mawr, 1995), 80. 22. *Music at Night*, 159-160. 23. See, e.g., Huxley, *Jesting Pilate* (London, 1926), 266-270, 280. 24. Huxley, "Outlook for American Culture," 267. 25. *Jesting Pilate*, 279-280; "Foreheads Villainous Low," *passim*. 26. "Obstacle Race," 40. 27. *Ibid.*, 36, 39. 28. *Grey Eminence* (New York, 1941), 77. 29. *Ibid.*, 103-104. 30. *Those Barren Leaves* (London, 1925), 106-107. 31. *The End of Utopia: A Study of Aldous Huxley's Brave New World*, (London, 1984), 24. 32. *The Perennial Philosophy*, 216-219; *Grey Eminence*, 70-74. 33. See the quote from *Those Barren Leaves*. 34. "A World Split Apart," in *Solzhenitsyn at Harvard* (Washington, DC, 1980), 19. 35. See the 1951 *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*. 36. Quoted in George A. Panichas, *The Courage of Judgment: Essays in Criticism, Culture, and Society* (Knoxville, 1982), 32. 37. "Last Stand of the Old Believers," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 5, 1993; "The Zulus: Victorian Warriors in the Modern Age," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 12, 1994. 38. See Kay Hymowitz, "The L Word: Love as Taboo," *City Journal*, Spring 1995.