

Aldous Huxley and the Perennial Philosophy: An Introduction to the Basic Concepts

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Let us start with "givens."

Aldous Huxley believed the Perennial Philosophy (the philosophy of mysticism was true, which entails certain beliefs. A given is the idea that there are two orders of "reality": orders which have a hierarchical relationship. The higher order is absolute; the lower is conditioned, impermanent, in constant flux--it is where we live. One can refer to the higher order as "That," and the order in which we live and move as "This."

Many human endeavors--religious, spiritual, psychological, social, even financial--are attempts to access the higher order, and to bring its benefits into the lower, to join That to This, to realize the concepts of "As above, so below" and "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." The first two endeavors, the religious and the spiritual, are obvious means of making this attempt. The third, the psychological, also partakes of the less-material, non-daylight side of things. That social enterprises address this issue is a harder case to make, although it becomes clearer when we talk about "utopias," or "the just society." But financial endeavors? These, too, are aimed at "a better life," even if it is conceived of in strictly material terms. The end, though, is still happiness, which is clearly one of the fruits of successfully accessing the "higher order."

Although we will center on religious, spiritual, and psychological topics, it must not be forgotten that--as we shall soon see with Huxley's work--many of these same ideas are applicable to the non-religious pursuit of happiness as well.

One of the central tenets of all religions, then, is that there is something other than what we see, and that the religious seeker is trying to participate in *That*.

This is the first tenet of the Perennial Philosophy, an idea that was stated most eloquently by Huxley. In the Introduction to the book named after the philosophy, Huxley called the Perennial Philosophy "the metaphysic that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; [and] the ethic that places man's final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being" (vii).

Note that Huxley uses "divine Reality" in the first two statements, and "the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being" in the third; these are homologous descriptions. Taking "the divine Reality" as the standard expression, we can approach it, following Huxley, from three angles:

Metaphysically, the Perennial Philosophy teaches that the divine Reality is the substance (or in some systems the creator) of all that we see.

Psychologically, the Perennial Philosophy tells us that the divine Reality is the model and "home" of the individual soul; and

Ethically, the Perennial Philosophy says that the divine Reality sets a standard for human behavior through knowing--and presumably therefore accessing--that divine Reality.

So although the divine Reality is both "immanent and transcendent," both inside the world and outside of it, this Reality has real implications for the way we understand the world, the way we understand ourselves, and the way we think and behave in this very life. This is reminiscent of a note found on Charles Lindbergh's nightstand the morning after his death: "I know there is infinity beyond ourselves. I wonder if there is infinity within." The Perennial Philosophy asserts that there is, and that it is intimately connected with the "infinity beyond."

Huxley clarifies this relationship in his Introduction to the Bhagavad-Gita (Prabhavananda and Isherwood). He called this "The Minimum Working Hypothesis:

At the core of the Perennial Philosophy we find four fundamental doctrines.

First: the phenomenal world of matter and of individualized consciousness--the world of things and animals and men and even gods--is the manifestation of a Divine Ground within which all partial realities have their being, and apart from which they would be non-existent.

Second: human beings are capable not merely of knowing about the Divine Ground by inference; they can also realize its existence by a direct intuition, superior to discursive reasoning. This immediate knowledge unites the knower with that which is known.

Third: man possesses a double nature, a phenomenal ego and an eternal Self, which is the inner man, the spirit, the spark of divinity within the soul. It is possible for a man, if

he so desires, to identify himself with the spirit and therefore with the Divine Ground, which is of the same or like nature with the spirit.

Fourth: man's life on earth has only one end and purpose: to identify himself with his eternal Self and so to come to unitive knowledge of the Divine Ground. (viii).

Each of Huxley's four points postulates a mode of connection between the divine Reality and the individual Soul. First, he asserts that apart from the divine Reality nothing at all would exist--including individual Souls. Second, he claims that individual Souls can know the divine Reality directly, and be united with it. Third, he says that it is possible for each person to identify with the eternal Self rather than the phenomenal ego, and thus be identified with the divine Reality. Fourth and finally, he says that the entire purpose of human life on earth is to achieve this union.

The first statement, that everything exists only in that it is the "manifestation" of the divine Reality, is clearly a reflection of the metaphysical statement above. In talking about *That* and *This*, the higher and lower orders of reality, Huxley points out that virtually all religions hold that *That* order is responsible for the existence of *This*. In the monotheistic systems, God--the personification of *That*--creates *This*. Hinduism is more in tune with Huxley's position that *That* manifests itself as *This*. Buddhism (always a special case) is less clear on this position, but if we accept Mahayana concepts of emptiness and Buddha nature as normative, then it is an easier step to understanding that *This* that we see is generated by *That*.

"The heavens declare the glory of God," the Psalmist writes at 19:1, "and the firmament sheweth his handywork." Yet he stops short of saying that the heavens (or the earth) actually are God. In the Western tradition, Huxley's assertions are most tenable when we are discussing mysticism. A Sufi Master, a Kabbalist, or St. John of the Cross, might be more comfortable with saying that what we see is a reflection of the divine nature, or of God himself. The Gnostic Christ, too, reflects this thinking: In the Gospel of Thomas he says: "I am the light that is above them all. I am the all; the all came forth from me, and the all attained to me. Cleave a (piece of) wood; I am there. Raise up a stone, and you will find me there." The myths of ancient peoples are even more explicit, being filled with stories of the dismemberment of gods and other primordial beings in order that the stuff of their bodies--which is clearly part of *That*--can become the basic stuff of *This*.

Even the more philosophical systems derive *This* from *That*. Plato's Theory of Forms postulates that everything we see in *This* sensible world has a perfect original in a realm of unseen Reality. Christian Neo-Platonism, too, builds on the idea of Christ as Logos, establishing an ordering principle out of which everything develops. Its near-cousin, Gnosticism, sees the material devolving out of the spiritual. And so it goes. We even see this on a biological level, at least in the human realm: virtually everything starts with an Idea. Inventions, industries, even families generally begin with a vision or a concept that is brought into physical "being." Dare we say that even instinct in animals is an unseen driving force that seeks to ensure the survival of species? And what about *Life* itself?

Huxley's first point, then, that what we see comes from what we don't see, seems easy to grasp. True, the things in *This* world can be said to be simply the physical consequences of physical actions. But what lay behind those actions? All of history, all of literature, all of science--indeed, every human and, as mentioned, even animal enterprise--can ultimately be traced back to forces and motivations that cannot be accounted for. Not only "In the beginning," but at every moment, That world impinges on *This*, and *This* depends on *That*.

The second assertion, that we can know the divine Reality directly, and thus be united to it, brings us more roundly into the realm of religion.

Or does it? When a grouse hen feigns a broken wing to distract a predator away from her nest of young, she is following "mere instinct." And yet, at that very moment, she is more of a grouse--and more of a mother--than most human beings will ever be. By obeying her "hard-wiring," is she not in a way more in tune with the "divine Reality" than a Hamlet who can do nothing but deliberate between courses of action, never landing on one or the other? Perhaps that is why those who engage in "extreme" sports, like helicopter skiing, say that when they are in the midst of such activities, making split-second decisions, they have "never felt more alive."

In any case, those of us whose cowardice--or common sense--keep us from jumping out of helicopters onto mountains find that there are other ways to "feel alive." One tried-and-true technique is as simple as--breathing. In the Eastern philosophies especially, the practice of mindful breathing or breath control is a doorway to knowing *That* better. But the importance of the breath in meditative technique is not limited to the East. The ancient "Jesus Prayer" of the Eastern Christian Church used the formula "Lord

Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." Each of the four parts of the prayer were to be recited on an in-or-out-breath. Thus the Prayer was tied to breathing techniques, which Anthony Bloom connects to Sufi practice.

Later, in the Western church, Ignatius of Loyola wrote in his Spiritual Exercises:

The Third Method of Prayer is that with each breath in or out, one has to pray mentally, saying one word of the Our Father, or of another prayer which is being recited: so that only one word be said between one breath and another, and while the time from one breath to another lasts, let attention be given chiefly to the meaning of such word, or to the person to whom he recites it, or to his own baseness, or to the difference from such great height to his own so great lowness.

This point need not belabored. It will suffice to note the similarity between such words as "spirit" and "respire," or that God breathed into Adam at the creation, to see that the connection between life and breathing pointed from *This* to *That* in even the earliest Western traditions.

As far as ways of knowing are concerned, Huxley again favors the mystic's route of "*direct intuition, superior to discursive reasoning.*" This is a consistent theme in religious literature, this transcending of discrimination and apprehension of unity. Yet the ways of doing this vary from meditation to marathons, from *samadhi* to sweat lodges. Sitting in stillness works for some, but for others so do sacraments. In India, for example, the *puja* of the *bhakti* practitioner is every bit as productive as the exercises of the yogin. Why not, then, the Holy Eucharist or personal prayer? Further, the path of *jnana* is an

accepted way of overcoming ignorance, which the East considers to be one of the (if not the) major impediments to spiritual achievement. Huxley's prejudice against attainment through knowing and his embracing of the "mystic" way is probably more a reaction against his Western upbringing than a reasoned criticism of a religious path.

This idea brings us to Huxley's third proposition, that one simply need adjust one's point of view from "*phenomenal ego*" to the "*eternal Self*" to "identify [one]self with the spirit and therefore with the *Divine Ground*." This again emphasizes the mystic's path, and is especially consonant with Hinduism. (Let us not forget that this statement of the Perennial Philosophy is in the Introduction to a translation of the *Bhagavad-Gita*.) Just as Western orthodoxy cannot accept the identity of knower with Known proposed in the second statement, so it sees humankind's spiritual problem as more than a matter of point of view. Humans are not just ignorant in the Christian tradition; they are sinful. This is a question not of understanding, but of morality.

But underlying Huxley's words is the concept of separation, of humans from the divine Reality, of humans from the world we see, and of the world we see from the divine Reality. On this all religions agree. Whether through wrong actions or wrong perceptions, humans live in a (perceived or real) state of isolation. The generally accepted etymology of "re-ligion" is that it provides a way to "re-connect" to that which is important. In Judaism, this is accomplished through membership in the community; in Christianity, through faith and/or good works; in Islam, through submission to the will of Allah. In the words of Bob Dylan, "You gotta serve somebody," and the Western traditions generally believe that salvation depends on a commitment to serving God rather than one's self.

Here, of course, the traditions of East and West glide close. One chooses the Large over the Small--*That* over *This*. That it is an act of will, and a relationship with a Person, are details. Strip these away, and Western theism becomes more compatible with the Eastern (and Western mystical) ideals of participation in the divine Reality.

Finally, then, Huxley's fourth point is that the "unitive knowledge of the Divine Ground" is our sole purpose for being here. Given Dylan's Dictum, this may mean that every quest of humankind is a quest for the divine Reality. Even if that quest is misdirected, it serves somebody. Implied in Huxley's statement is the idea that, to the extent one approaches the divine Reality, one is fulfilled; to the extent that one misses the mark, one is frustrated and unhappy. Whether it is "knowing God" or "being one with the universe," the attainment of re-ligion described above leads to personal happiness.

Some of the implications of Huxley's ideas

Considering all of this, and broadening Huxley's already-broad statements beyond his mystical and Eastern-leaning formulations, we come up with four simple, inclusive principles of the relationship between *That* and *This*:

1. *That* is bigger than *This*; specifically, there is *Something* bigger than me.
2. It is possible for me, through various methods, to come into relationship with *That*.
3. Until I attain a relationship with *That*, I will experience a sense of separation and loneliness.
4. After I attain a relationship with *That*, my life will be richer, fuller, and more rewarding.

Note the complete absence of any "theological" language in these statements. They could apply as well to psychology as religion; in fact, they could even accommodate sociological concepts of "group." That is, one could say, "The gang is larger than me; I can join the gang; until I do, I'll feel like a loner; when I do, I'll find a sense of belonging." Thus the "aberrations" of gang membership, premature sexual encounters, drug abuse, etc., may be symptoms of the Search for a Unitive Experience; it is simply a misdirected Search. The longing for belonging can lead in unfortunate directions, but it also allows for the possibility of redemption. Jungian Anthony Stevens calls this yearning "initiation hunger," and considers it to be "an archetypal need" (130-131).

Thus far, we have been discussing the "divine Reality" as though it were a person (or an impersonal entity of some sort). But there is an equally strong trend in religious literature to talk of *That* as a place, whether in this time, in a previous time, or out of time. Let us turn then to a look at *That World* as opposed to *This World*. Whether we call it Heaven, Paradise, Nirvana, a Pure Land, Valhalla, or The Happy Hunting Ground, it is naturally understood that *That World* symbolizes a state of mind. But it is very effective to portray it as a place in our stories and films, a place Over the Rainbow, a Laughing Place, a place East of the Sun and West of the Moon, a Magic Kingdom, a place in a dark wood, a place in the depths of our selves.

In the popular conception of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, devotees speak less of "salvation" or "justification" than they do of "going to heaven." This may be a place above the earth, or a future place ("the world to come"). The nature of *That World*

can be apprehended from a short passage found in the Lord's Prayer, where the one praying requests that "[God's] will be done on earth as it is in Heaven." This is, not coincidentally, a prayer for the union of *This World* and *That*; but it also says of *That World* that it is a place where God's will is (presumably constantly) done, a place that operates on a different set of rules than this one.

Looking deeper into the Biblical story, we find that such a place is said to have existed in the past--the Garden of Eden, or Paradise. There, there was no duality: God and humans, humans and nature, God and nature--all dwelt in harmony. Even the sexes were not distinguished: Adam and Eve were naked and were not ashamed. The Garden of Eden then represents the Union of Opposites, the Oneness of all reality, which was not differentiated until after the humans obtained the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Unlike the East, from the very beginning it seems that the West has based its loss of union with divine Reality on a moral lapse. (That it was Knowledge of Good and Evil, however, leaves open the possibility that we are dealing with a way of knowing in addition to a moral condition.)

The state of undifferentiated Oneness in the Garden of Eden is a reflection of many stories of the "chaos" at the beginning. It is even more clearly related to widespread legends of a "Golden Age." The Greek version of this story, as told by the later Latin writer Ovid, gives a good summary of the general trend among world mythologies. According to Ovid, in the Golden Age, the first age after the creation of humans, they behaved perfectly "without coercion." There were no armies, and the earth produced everything people needed "freely, without the scars of ploughs, untouched by hoes..." It was always Spring, and the weather was always temperate. In the course of time, this

happy state devolved into the Silver Age, which, while inferior to the Golden Age, was better than the ages to come. The Silver Age was characterized by a shift to four seasons, with a brief Spring. Extreme heat and cold were first known; houses had to be built, and farming began. The next age, the Bronze, is mentioned only briefly, when the people had "fiercer natures, readier to indulge in savage warfare, but not yet vicious." Finally came the terrible Iron Age, when "every kind of wickedness erupted into this age of baser natures..." Personal property was held; ships sailed the seas to get more goods, and men "entered the bowels of the earth, and excavating brought up the wealth it had concealed in Stygian shade, wealth that incites men to crime." There was war, and plunder, and murder. "Piety was dead, and virgin Astraea, last of all the immortals to depart, herself abandoned the blood-drenched earth" (Ovid, online). And that terrible age, the Age of Iron, is the one in which we now live. This Astraea is the Goddess of Justice, the One with the scales; perhaps she wears a blindfold because she can't bear to see what has happened?

That Time, then, and *That World*, are typified by the Garden of Eden, representing the Judeo-Christian "Golden Age" as well as a view of Paradise.

It would be incorrect to assume that the West is strictly interested in Paradise as a physical place or historical time, while the "mystic East" apprehends it as a state of mind. Even very scholastic Christian philosophers knew that the full apprehension of God was internal, not external. We have, for example, Augustine of Hippo's great statement concerning the Christian's relationship with God: "restless is our heart until it comes to rest in thee" (online). More striking is the experience of Thomas Aquinas. After a lifetime devoted to the most minute of scholastic arguments, Aquinas had what the

Catholic Encyclopedia calls "an unusually long ecstasy during Mass" (Kennedy, online). Afterward, he stated, "I can do no more. Such secrets have been revealed to me that all I have written now appears to be of little value" (Qtd. In Kennedy, online). Three months later he was dead. And yet, despite this inner transformation, at his death he affirmed the primacy of Jesus Christ and the power of the sacrament of Communion.

Just as the West is capable of viewing *That World* and *That Time* as a state of mind, so the East sometimes talks of the transcendent state as though it were a place. The localization of an abstract concept is useful for the practitioner; this may account for its nearly-universal application.

The Buddhist concept of *This World* and *That* is contained in the words *samsara* and *nirvana*. *Samsara* is *This World* of change, condition, contingency; Nirvana is *That World* of the absolute, unified, undifferentiated. Though different in nature from the Western "Heaven and Earth," the Buddhist idea shares a common theme. *Samsara*, like Earth, is a place of suffering, a vale of tears, and the realm of ignorance. *Nirvana*, like Heaven, is a place of peace. As we examine the various conceptions of *This World* and *That World*, we begin to see that *This World* embodies action and *That world*, stillness. This idea of a stillpoint resonates psychologically as well; the desire to look inward is often motivated by a need to escape the turmoil of *This World*. Not surprisingly, the person who has attained this state of quietude is sometimes referred to as being "centered."

A model for all of this can be found in a turning wheel (like the Wheel of Fortune), or an old-fashioned phonograph turntable. The closer one is to the outside of the wheel, the faster one moves. As one moves toward the center, or hub, the motion

slows down. Finally, there is a theoretical point at the center that doesn't move at all like the calm center of the hurricane: the stillpoint. This represents *That World*, the place of peace; and all the various endeavors to get to that center, whether religious, psychological, or social--whether well-directed or misdirected--all are represented by the summation of the principles of the Huxley's Minimum Working Hypothesis of the Perennial Philosophy.

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