

## Aldous Huxley's *Other World* of Consciousness

“... that perception is (or at least can be, ought to be) the same as Revelation, that Reality shines out of every appearance, that the One is totally, infinitely present in all particulars.”

Aldous Huxley, *Heaven and Hell*

### HUXLEY AND EXPERIMENTS WITH PSYCHEDELICS

In the beginning I wish to stress that the purpose of my elaboration is not the promotion of psychedelic drugs but investigation of phenomena that is partly connected with them. Beside psychedelic drugs such as peyote cactus, psilocybin and LSD-25, there are other techniques for producing the same effect upon the mind. According to Albert Hofmann, the accidental inventor of LSD-25, Aldous Huxley studied these phenomena profoundly and experimented only with *psychedelics*, which are not narcotically addictive and “less toxic than any other substances in pharmacologists’ repertory” (*The Doors* 5). He knew that psychedelics had been in use for thousands of years in Mexico as sacramental drugs. They produce profound consciousness-altering effects and can sometimes have negative effect, namely the appearance of fear - *mysterium tremendum*. “[T]his fear is due to the incompatibility between man’s egoism and the divine purity, between men’s self aggravated separateness and the infinity of God” (*The Doors* 49). The Latin American Indians, for this reason, allow only those who have been ritually cleansed, that is prepared by prayer and fasting, the right to ingest these drugs (*Moksha* Preface).

Huxley was a philosopher and he took mescaline in an attempt to answer the question of “the place of mind in the nature and the relationship between brain and consciousness” (*The Doors* 46). *The Doors of Perception* (1954) and its sequel *Heaven and Hell* (1956) contain Huxley’s account of his experiences with mescaline and other consciousness phenomena. Alexander T. Shulgin, in

the Introduction to *Moksha* (collection of Aldous Huxley's writings) said of Huxley that "he was fascinated by the potential in these drugs to provide learning experiences normally denied us within our educational system." (*Moksha* Introduction) He was not against education but against the "culture-conditioned prejudice" which misshapes our world. The world looked very different to him and the function of the brain was that of Henry Bergson's hypothesis is that our brain and its normal selves(") "acts as a utilitarian device for limiting and making selection from, the enormous possible world of consciousness, and for canalizing experiences into biologically profitable channels" (*Moksha* 29). What happens then when we experience disease, emotional shock, mescaline, aesthetic experiences and mystical enlightenment?(1) Ordinary brain activity is inhibited and the *Other World* raises into our consciousness. Albert Hofmann in his book *LSD - My Problem Child* said:

"...then the entry of another reality under the influence of LSD may be explained by the fact that the brain, the seat of the receiver, becomes biochemically altered. The receiver is thereby tuned into another wavelength than that corresponding to normal, everyday reality. Since the endless variety and diversity of the universe correspond to infinitely many different wavelengths, depending on the adjustment of the receiver, many different realities, including the respective ego, can become conscious. These different realities, more correctly designated as different aspects of the reality, are not mutually exclusive but are complementary, and form together a portion of the all-encompassing, timeless, transcendental reality, in which even the unimpeachable core of self-consciousness, which has the power to record the different egos, is located. The true importance of LSD and related hallucinogens lies in their capacity to shift the wavelength setting of the receiving "self," and thereby to evoke alterations in reality consciousness. This ability to allow different, new pictures of reality to arise, this truly cosmogonic power, makes the cultish worship of hallucinogenic plants as sacred drugs understandable".

Huxley's experiments with psychedelics and his life and work "can not be understood without recognizing why mysticism attracted him and what it meant for him to glimpse mystical enlightenment" (Deery 101).

#### ACCESSES TO THE *OTHER WORLD*

There is strong similarity between mescaline, LSD and adrenalin experiences. Adrenochrome (which is oxidized adrenalin) has an almost mescaline and LSD-like effect on the body. Because adrenochrome is produced in our body spontaneously "each one of us may be capable of

manufacturing a chemical, minute doses of which are known to cause profound change in consciousness” (*The Doors* 7). So in one way or another, all our experiences are chemically conditioned. In his series of lectures to an international gathering of psychologists (*Moksha* 212-231) Huxley evinced a clear system of the possible ways of shifting into different states of consciousness or “how to explore remoter regions of consciousness” and to have “transcendental experiences”.

1. *Spontaneous access* - Some people have ability to go to the far regions of the mind at any time without any difficulty. William Black, and Irish poet George Russell, moved back and forth from the everyday to the visionary world. It happens occasionally as well to “ordinary people”, when they are privileged to “visit opposite side of the mind”. It is possible too that a large number of children live in this kind of “visionary world”.

2. *Induced access* - There are many different other ways to induce visionary experiences. Without going into detail, the following are enumerated:-

- Hypnosis – it happens rarely, but some people in this state can enter a visionary world where they see strange creatures and landscapes.
- Yoga – the method of one-point concentration can result in the breaking through from the everyday world to the *Other World*.
- “Restricted environment” – the mind of an isolated person with limited external stimuli will very soon start to produce visionary experiences. It is possible that the temptations of St. Anthony were mostly induced by “restricted environment”(2).
- Systematic breathing – prolonged suspension of breath leads to a higher concentration of carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) which then produces remarkable visionary experiences in the mind.
- Sleep deprivation – after seven or eight days deprived of sleep, a person lives in a “completely visionary world with breakings-in of every kind of strange visions”.
- Fasting – after a long period of abstention from food our body chemistry changes and beside these bodily changes we experience psychological effects too.
- Self-imposed punishment - during self-flagellation, “large quantities of histamine and adrenalin [are] released”. A shocked body produces histamine which leads to physical and mental effects. Adrenalin may cause hallucinations, and toxins from

wounds change the enzyme system of the brain. By these methods the ascetic can produce different states of consciousness including psi-phenomena, visions and mystical experiences (*Heaven und Hell* 62-63).

- Prolonged and continuous chanting, drumming or reciting may produce a similar but less strong effect.
- Visionary art - firework, photography, theatrical spectacle, movie, art and vision inducing devices as stroboscopic lamps are also well known vehicles for transporting one to the far regions of the mind.
- Alcohol – the oldest and the most widely used conscious-changing substance.

3. *Chemical access* – It may be noted that almost every religion in history has known about and used mind-changing drugs that induce visionary experiences. *Soma* was used by Indians, alcohol by Greeks, Celts and Persians.

4. *The mushroom access* – as previously stated, the Mexican cactus peyote, mescaline (extract from peyote), LSD-25 (semi-synthesized drug) and psilocybin (a psychedelic alkaloid which is present in many species of fungi) all belong in this category.

All these means and methods can be, according to Huxley, used in “applied mysticism” and their use is beneficial.

#### *OTHER WORLD*

Huxley talks about the nature of this world in his lectures to the previously mentioned gathering of psychologists, in *The Doors of Perception* and in *Heaven and Hell*, as well as in his letters. According to Huxley, we could say that consciousness consists of three spheres:-

- personal consciousness – “concerned with the problems of our private history”,
- collective consciousness - the world of Jung’s archetypes and
- the *Other World* – heaven and hell of prophets and poets (*Moksha* 54).
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“A man consists of what I may call Old World of personal consciousness and, beyond a dividing sea, a series of New Worlds – the not distant Virgins 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, of the antipodes of everyday consciousness, the world of visionary experiences” (*Heaven and Hell* 10).

The main characteristics of this far region of the mind, which is almost completely different from our day-to-day world, can be classified into the following eleven perceptions.

- Light and colours –experiences of light can be negative and positive. Negative light belongs to hell, to the world of schizophrenics and can be seen in the late paintings of Van Gogh, Goya and in Kafka’s stories. Positive light belongs to heaven. Objects are self-luminous, everything is “brilliantly illuminated and seems to shine from within”, “everything shone with the inner light”. “All colours are intensified ... the mind’s capacity for recognizing fine distinctions of tone and hue is notably heightened” (*The Doors* 13).
- Space – the category of space had not been abolished but it had ceased to matter and the mind was perceiving the world in terms of other than spatial categories”. The main concern is not anymore with measurements and location, but being and meaning (*The Doors* 14).
- Time – there was an almost complete indifference to time.
- Any separation between subject and object perished and a sense of complete solidarity prevailed.
- Intuitive understanding of other people.
- A person has no interest in doing anything.
- Language – in “the world of transcendental experiences” the mind is completely free of language and outside conceptual thought. The universe is seen in a totally different way and it is inexpressible in words (*Heaven and Hell* 16).
- The fear of death is abolished.
- Love – love is experienced as a primary and fundamental cosmic fact. With the feeling of love comes “intense gratitude for the privilege of existence in this universe” (*Moksha* 142).
- Meaning – objects have meaning which is as intense as their colour and is identical with being, objects stand for themselves (*Heaven und Hell* 19).
- A sense of ultimate fulfilment - in spite of pain, death and all the horrors around us “the universe somehow is all right” (*Moksha* 222).

During visionary experiences it is possible to have a positive as well as a negative experience of *Other World*. Huxley asserts that "... visionary experience is not always blissful. It is sometimes terrible. There is hell as well as heaven." (*Heaven and Hell* 49) Negative emotions like fear, anger and hatred may arise, which a person feels are not compatible with the heavenly world. Under mescaline "in one way everything is supremely as it should be, in another there is something wrong" (*The Doors* 32). The truth is that our problems can not be solved by taking psychedelic drugs. "The full and final solution" is the Bodhisattva, "practical charity", the incarnated God.

## CONCLUSION

"Many were shocked. But, of course, Huxley was not the first nor the last writer to experiment with drugs; many artist sought to expand their consciousness through such means." (Deery 106) Like Dickens, Poe, Tennyson, Balzac, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Anais Nin, Picasso and Modigliani, Huxley was "testing the bounds of reality" and wanted to experience transcendental reality which he had previously only approached intellectually. "For almost twenty years Huxley had written about mysticism, but only after taking mescaline in 1953 was he able to claim his first mystical experience, his first sight of the other shore." (Deery 105) Huxley believed that not only psychedelics, but other sorts of addictive drugs and alcohol, were "a consequence of self-transcendental yearning" - the same as spiritual exercises and yoga (*Moksha* 160). Mescaline experiences for him were "not necessary to salvation" but "potentially helpful and to be accepted thankfully, if made available." When the doors have been opened once by chemicals it is possible that a person can then reenter the *Other World* just without any external assistance.

Although highly appreciative for the insights he gained through ingesting mescaline, he "argued for strict scientific study and for limited introduction among intellectual and political leaders. Perhaps he did come to regret the impact of his slim volume [*The Doors of Perception*]" (Deery 107). LSD was greatly misused during 60's and 70's but nobody can blame Huxley and his essay *The Doors of Perception* because the psychedelic drugs were not approached with the same level of seriousness. After all, psychedelic experiences were for Huxley just the first stage of mystical experiences, not an end to themselves. After publishing *The Doors of Perception* and his public

advocating the positive effects of psychedelics, Huxley's status in the intellectual world was attenuated. But his greatness lay exactly in that fact. His mind was opened to all questions, not only those raised by a particular *Geistzeit*. Although philosophy was not his vocation and he was not in favour of discursive intellect, behind his interest for mystical and his experiments with human mind, lay an interesting philosophical theory. He combined Bergson's philosophical model, Jung's theory of the collective unconscious, and mystical elements from all of the mainstream religions. For Huxley the mind is a kind of receiver, like a radio device. Changing wavelengths, which happens when our brain chemistry changes, alters our perspective, and we become able to perceive different realities. Being open to this notion we may then hope that we will achieve a better knowledge of the "real world" which is "different from the universe that people have created for themselves by means of their culture-conditioned means." (*Moksha* Introduction) There are many realities, but in a normally functioning brain we perceive only the one that is important for and enables our practical means. "What we ordinarily call "reality" is merely that slice of total fact which our biological equipment, our linguistic heritage and our social conventions of thought and feeling make it possible for us to apprehend." (*Moksha* 109) Huxley did not directly talk about mind and body interaction but in one of his lectures he states that we have to change our language to be able to describe "continuum of mind and body, a universe of complete continuity" (*Moksha* 183). Everything is connected with everything, and the two realities of mind and body cannot be separated. We cannot ask ourselves what comes first, mental or physical. The universe is a continuum, "multiplicity in unity, the reconciliation of opposites, the not-twoness of diversity" and love is "the bridge between objective and subjective, good and evil, death and life" (*Moksha* 92).

## NOTES

1) For me there is here some similarity between Huxley and K. Jasper's notion of "border situations" when we can have experiences of authentic existence. In: Wikipedia: *Karl Jaspers*.

2) According to Huxley, ascetism is doubly motivated: to give satisfaction for past sins and avoid punishment, and secondly to travel to the opposite side of the mind. In: *Heaven and Hell*, 13.

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