

THE SENSELESSNESS OF THE EXTREMES PRESENTED
IN ALDOUS HUXLEY'S BRAVE NEW WORLD

Matthew Vranicar

(1) Aldous Huxley, in his novel Brave New World, presents two opposing attitudes towards the body and the spirit. On the one hand, he creates a highly technological society in which the spiritual and the emotional needs of man are deliberately denied or subverted. This is deemed necessary in order to maintain a stable, structured society. Happiness is equated with physical well-being and easily achieved through technological innovations like genetic manipulation, conditioning, soma and forms of entertainment such as the feelies. On the other hand, Huxley also creates John Savage, a character who places supreme value on the spiritual and completely denies the physical being of man. He refuses to acknowledge that his body and its needs are an integral part of his existence. Huxley presents these two extremes to show how a balance between them is necessary for man to maintain a harmonious existence.

(2) The new world's process of genetic manipulation denies the emotional and spiritual needs of man in favor of physical well-being in two ways. First of all, the assembly line method of birth, in which babies are produced in bottles, estranges the once existent ties between a mother and her child. Motherhood, once something desired, now becomes a "dirty word" because the strong bonding between mother and child is seen as disruptive to the stability of the state: "When the individual feels, the community reels" (p. 62). Secondly, "Bokanovsky's Process" negates the notion of uniqueness (p. 3). With "ninety-six identical twins working ninety-six identical machines" (p. 4), the physical and psychic

similarities make it impossible to distinguish an individual's distinct spiritual identity. Human beings have become merely another mass-produced object whose soul is of no consequence. The machine-like "standard Gammas, unvarying Deltas, uniform Epsilons" make for a stable and efficient social system (p. 4). But, with this uniformity, the system has stifled the independent spiritual existence of the people.

(3) Spiritual uniqueness and emotional ties are also negated by conditioning. The conditioning process is based on hypnopaedia, a method of sleep-teaching which submits children to "suggestions from the State, . . . till at last the child's mind is these suggestions" (p. 19). Here, again, individual personality is sacrificed for the good of society. While the conditioning does vary from caste to caste, all people's minds are instilled with the same basic assumption that stability is the "primal and ultimate need" (p. 28). And stability can only be achieved when the spiritual side of man is abolished and when the physical nature of man dominates.

(4) Soma serves as another efficient tool to deny spiritual existence. It provides the ultimate in escape and pleasure without any physical side effects. By using soma, one suppresses all spiritual discomforts. Physical pleasures reign supreme. Painful confrontations with moral issues can easily be avoided through this holiday of both mind and body:

And if ever, by some unlucky chance, anything unpleasant should somehow happen, why, there's always soma to give you a holiday from the facts. And there's always soma to calm your anger, to reconcile you to your enemies, to make you patient and long-suffering. In the past you could only accomplish these things by making a great effort and after years of hard moral training. Now, you swallow two or three half-gramme tablets, and there you

are. Anybody can be virtuous now. You can carry
at least half your morality about in a bottle.
pp. 161-62

This statement exemplifies the new world's belief that man should not be subject to painful situations but, instead, should seek escape through physical pleasure.

(5) The new world's entertainment, such as the feelies, is another example of how the physical experience dominates all other. The feelies provide "a lot of agreeable sensations" to the inhabitants of the new world (p. 150). They reduce art, which was once thought provoking, to simple physical sensation. "The facial erogenous zones of the six thousand spectators in the Alhambra tingled with almost intolerable galvanic pleasure" (p. 113). While watching the feelies, the viewers are totally engrossed in physical enjoyment. Being so preoccupied with the physical, the minds of the viewers have no chance to meditate on the experience. Thus, the need for adventure, individual experience, and curiosity has diminished since all experiences can be shared vicariously through means of the feelies.

(6) The new world's attitude to sex also reveals this exaggerated worship of the physical. The elimination of all the emotional and spiritual values once attached to sex begins in childhood, when children are encouraged to participate in "erotic play" (p. 37). And it continues into adulthood, so that people are urged "to be a little more promiscuous" (p. 28). Society frowns upon long-term relationships and the emotions they foster because emotions are seen as a threat to stability. Thus sex has evolved into a form of pure physical pleasure, and society has gone so far as to say that "every one belongs to every one else" (p. 29). This piece of "wisdom" exemplifies this society's desire for a lack of emotional ties and spiritual discomfort, and its emphasis on physical

indulgence.

(7) In contrast to the new world's values, John Savage values physical denial as a means of spiritual fulfillment. What we see happening with Savage is a reaction to the new world's values--a reaction so violent that he transgresses to the opposite extreme. This is first witnessed in John's objection to the amount of soma given to Linda, his mother. Savage feels it is spiritually wrong to give her something which will eventually kill her, despite the physical freedom it will give her until her death. He rejects society's idea that one can and should easily escape discomforts through the use of soma, or any other physical pleasure.

(8) Savage's denial of the physical is also presented in his rejection of the feelies. The feelies leave John "desiring, ashamed of his desire" (p. 114), which is typical of how he quickly suppresses all of his body's impulses. Since the feelies have left him "desiring," he feels they are "base" and "ignoble" (p. 114). Through this reaction we learn that Savage is incapable of coping with his body's needs and desires, and thus, he simply subdues him with spiritual suffering.

(9) Savage's experience with Lenina further emphasizes his inability to cope with his physical desires. Lenina, a woman from the new world whose views on sex are those of society, decides she wants John to fulfill her physical pleasures. John's reaction, however, is not one of blissful surprise, as would be expected, but one of "horror, horror, horror" (p. 130). Savage is so shocked by her advances that, abstaining from physical fulfillment, he totally rejects all of society.

(10) His disapproval of society's value of physical enjoyment and indulgence is best revealed in Savage's meeting with the World Controller. During this meeting, Savage questions

all of the physical experiences which society deems necessary to stability. He objects to the feelies, to the twins, and even to the use of soma because he feels man has now become "degraded by pleasant vices" (p. 161). Savage argues that "nothing costs enough" in this new world and believes that "getting rid of everything unpleasant instead of learning to put up with it" (p. 162), as this world has done, is unnatural and immoral. John believes, instead, that all the discomforts and unhappiness which accompany spiritual freedom are a necessary and vital part of man's existence. He feels that "bearing things patiently" and "doing things with courage" (p. 161) are necessary actions for man to live life to the fullest.

(11) Savage's withdrawal from society and his actions while isolated illustrate how extreme is his denial of physical pleasures. He withdraws in order to escape from the "immoral" values of the new world. But putting himself through "tremulous and excruciating agony," John believes he can make the "purifications the more complete and thorough" (p. 166). He carries his denial of physical sensations so far that when he catches himself singing and enjoying himself, John forces himself to vomit by drinking warm water and mustard. He even constantly whips himself, and, when he thinks of Lenina, he whips himself harder and harder. At one time, he actually goes so far as to fling himself into a clump of juniper bushes and to embrace "an armful of green spikes" (p. 171), simply because he has desired to embrace Lenina. This whole image reveals Savage's inability to cope with physical desires and the resulting total denial of man's physicality.

(12) The ultimate refusal by Savage to accept his body and its needs as a necessary part of his existence comes in his suicide. John chooses death because he has finally given

in to the desires of the flesh. After the wild "orgy," Savage is both "stupefied by soma and exhausted by a long-drawn frenzy of sensuality" (p. 176). He has, in essence, admitted that his body and its desires can overpower his spiritual strength. John cannot accept this fact, however, and therefore, he commits the final denial of physical existence, death.

(13) Huxley, thus, has presented us with two extremes: a society which places supreme value on physical pleasures and denies all spiritual and emotional aspects of man; and a man who denies his physical existence and places all value on the spiritual. These extremes are presented in order that we might see the foolishness of both. Man cannot deny the fact that his body has many needs which must, eventually, be fulfilled. Nor can man deny the existence of a spirit which keeps him going in the face of hardships and discomfort. As even the World Controller states: "Extremes meet for the good reason that they were made to meet" (p. 26). Therefore, to sustain a sane existence, man must have a balanced attitude towards his spiritual and his physical being.