The Ego, Aldous Huxley

The Ego

In this lecture I want to start giving an answer in contemporary terms to the extremely difficult question of who we are.

Let us begin with the notion of 'I'. The 'I' remains very much what it was in Homer's time—that is to say, the self-conscious being who uses verbal symbols, who is able to employ reason, who looks before and after. This 'I' was defined in its essential form by Descartes as the creature who thinks: 'cogito ergo sum'—I think, therefore I am. More recently, beginning with Maine de Biran in the eighteenth century and going on with Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and, later, Henri Bergson, William James, and John Dewey, the 'I' has also been defined as the creature who wills. Instead of 'cogito ergo sum' the phrase should be 'volo ergo sum'—I will, therefore I am.

I would say that, in fact, the 'I', the self-conscious being, is the creature who wills and who thinks. This creature finds itself habitually confronted by what Maine de Biran called 'organic resistances'. In a word, the 'I' finds itself surrounded by a number of 'not-I's' within its own organism; it is only one among a considerable number of very important and dynamic factors.

We will begin thinking of these 'not-I's' on the level of the body because this is quite clearly the basic level on which the unconscious functions. At its deepest level, the unconscious is the body. We are dictated to by this strange intelligence within our physical organism which carries on and does extraordinary things without our knowing how. An obvious example of what the body can do apart from the 'I' is what happens when the 'I' gives a command. I will that my hand shall go up into the air. I will it all right, but I haven't the faintest idea how the act is performed. We have discovered, as a result of very long and arduous research, that the processes involved in lifting my hand are incredibly complex, but I have, as a self-conscious being, absolutely no idea of what they are.

I merely give a command and leave it to 'somebody else' to carry it out. Furthermore, this 'somebody else' works in an almost infallible way, if we leave him alone, to carry on the main processes of our bodily existence. The heartbeat, the digestion, the respiration, the glandular secretions, the healing process—all these things go on without the 'I' being in any way able to help them. In fact, what are called psychosomatic diseases are the consequences of the 'I' and the personal unconscious interfering with the otherwise almost infallible proceedings of this deeper self within us.

What on earth is this 'deeper self' on the physiological level? We have no really satisfactory name for it at present, although in the past we had some names. In the Aristotelian psychology and physiology there was a kind of trinity of soul: there was the rational soul, which was the soul belonging to the 'I', and there were also the vegetative and the animal souls, which looked after the physiological processes in the body. We have, then, to think in terms of this strange kind of physiological intelligence, which is looking after us without our knowing how it does its work, and which we can't help, but which we can interfere with.

We can observe this physiological intelligence in certain animals. There is, of course, the intelligence of the instincts, which is remarkable enough and which has been developed by evolution in the course of millions of years. But over and above instinctive purposive actions, there are actions carried out by the 'not-I'—the vegetative soul or entelechy—which are not instinctive at all and which yet betray the most exceptional degree of intelligence and purpose.

Perhaps one of the most fantastic examples of this kind of physiological intelligence is the ability of the parrot to imitate the human voice. The parrot presumably listens to the human voice; is conscious, in so far as parrots are conscious—and I suppose they are conscious; takes some kind of interest in what is being said; wishes—heaven only knows why—to reproduce it; and then something else takes over. The remarkable physiological intelligence within the parrot, which is infinitely more intelligent than the parrot itself, proceeds to manipulate literally hundreds of muscles in the parrot's speaking apparatus—a noise-making apparatus which is utterly different from the human one: The parrot has no teeth and no soft palate, its tongue is perfectly different from ours, its vocal chords are different, and it has a beak.

Yet it is able to reproduce articulate human speech so well that sometimes human beings are actually deceived by it. And very often parrots, with their curious sense of humour, will annoy dogs by imitating their masters and calling them. The more one thinks of this extraordinary behaviour, the odder it becomes; it has nothing to do with instinct and it has nothing to do with biological survival. But parrots, for some unknown reason, desire to imitate, and their physiological intelligence is able to arrange the relevant muscles so as to reproduce the sounds it hears with a precision which no merely conscious mind could possibly equal.

Something similar occurs in very small infants. The fact that infants at a very early age will smile back at a smiling face is the result of an imitative process. When such infants see a smile, there is something within them which proceeds to arrange the muscles of the face in such a way that the smile is reproduced.

We see then that over and above the merely vegetative faculties—the power of keeping the heart beating, the respiration and the digestion going—the physiological intelligence is capable of very remarkable ad hoc performances. In our conscious life these take place all the time. We visualize something we want to do and it is done—not by the 'I', but by this extraordinary thing we carry about inside us. It is one of the basic physiological facts with which the 'I' is associated, one of the powers with which it has to live.

Another physiological fact with which the 'I' has to live is the body's morphology, its actual shape and structure. What influences do these have upon our psychological life? Here obviously the most remarkable fact about human beings is that they are very different from one another—which illustrates the general evolutionary tendency that the higher up in the scale of evolution a species is, the more profound the variations within it: the most highly variable species is homo sapiens.

Along with these morphological variations, there are also very remarkable biochemical variations within the human species, and it is possible to carry on human life with quite different biochemical arrangements. This biochemical variability is one of the things which annoys pharmacologists very much, because unfortunately different human beings will react in

entirely different ways to the same drug; the one desire of any scientist is to have a standard that he can work upon, and the human being is very, very far from standardized. It is this tremendous variability within the physical organism which is at the basis of all our moral ideas about the goodness of democracy and the value of such things as tolerance and living and letting live.

It seems pretty obvious that creatures which are so extremely different from one another physically are probably different from one another psychologically. It would be very surprising if hereditary differences as great as we can observe between one individual and another should not be correlated with very considerable differences in their behaviour and in their general psychological set-up. Indeed, the realization of the interdependence of mental behaviour and physical structure goes back to great antiquity. It was formulated by Hippocrates, the father of Western medicine, who spoke about two main physical types—what he called 'phthisic' habitus and 'apoplectic' habitus. The apoplectic habitus is the sort of big, burly, rather fattish, typical businessman or politician, who is going to have the renal-cardiac syndrome in later life. This is still a variety of human being we clearly recognize. The phthisic habitus was a slight mistake. Hippocrates evidently thought that the thin, slender type was particularly subject to phthisis or tuberculosis, but there is no particular evidence to show that this is the case.

Aristotle had a very curious approach to the mind-body problem: He tried to correlate mental characteristics with only one physical characteristic. For example, he was very interested in the shape of the nose. He was also interested in the resemblance of human beings to certain animal types, and he would classify them in this way, so that leonine-looking people were leonine in character—or, rather, like what he supposed lions to be like; we are not sure what they are like at all. There is something in this; if you look at a photograph of Garibaldi, you see he looked exactly like a lion, and he was a leonine man. But this is a very crude system of correlation.

With Galen, in the beginning of our era, we get a much more elaborate typology, a correlation between mind and body in terms of the four humours—blood, black bile, yellow bile, and phlegm. It is interesting to see that this very ancient psychophysical theory has left its trace upon our current vocabulary. We still speak of people with a sanguine temperament, a phlegmatic temperament, people who are choleric, people who are melancholic with a preponderance of black bile, and so on. These were fairly adequate notions—doctors and physiologists went on speaking in these terms right through the eighteenth century—and they did help people to think about the fundamental correlation between mind and body.

In more recent times—from the very end of the eighteenth century on—we get a more scientific approach to the problem. The French were pioneers in this field: Leon Rostan spoke of three types of people, the type digestive, the type musculaire, and the type cérébral—the digestive, muscular, and cerebral types. It is an extremely acute observation. Later in the century there was G. Viola in Italy, also talking about a tripartite division into what he called macro-splanchnic, normo-splanchnic, and micro-splanchnic body types. These terms are very much the same, when they are explained, as those used by Rostan; they refer to the short trunk of the long-legged thin person, the medium trunk of the muscular person, and the heavy, relatively long trunk of the bulky person.

In our own time we have the important studies of Ernst Kretschmer, who made some very interesting correlations between body types and different kinds of insanity. He started with a tripartite division—the athletic, the pyknic, and the asthenic type—but reduced it (unfortunately) to two, the pyknic, or fat, bulky type, and the leptosome, or thin, light type.

More recently, and more scientifically and thoroughly, the matter has been gone into by Dr William H. Sheldon and his collaborators, whose powerful technique for analysing and quantifying the physical differences between human beings in terms of a tri-polar frame of reference we discussed briefly a few days ago.

Sheldon calls the three poles endomorphy, mesomorphy, and ectomorphy. Endomorphy is the pole which at its extreme gives very big, fat, soft people with slow reactions and with a tendency to put on weight and become extremely fat in old age. These people are in a sense 'gut people'. Their gut is very often twice as heavy and twice as long as the gut of an extreme ectomorph. They have an amazing power of assimilation, and they are at home on the earth inasmuch as they have an immense capacity to absorb food and to remain alive. The mesomorphs are 'muscle people' with heavy bones and powerful muscles. You can see their pictures any day in the sporting pages of the newspaper; the professional footballers all belong to this terrific type.

They tend to have a powerful neck and a rather coarse skin with very heavy folds showing in the face. They have great endurance and striving force, and, as we shall see when we come to the correlations of temperament, they tend to be aggressive—politicians, businessmen, soldiers, and so on. The ectomorphs are the thin, light, stringy-muscled people whose ratio of surface area to mass is extremely high and whose nervous system is consequently much closer to the surface than either the mesomorph's or the endomorph's. They are, so to speak, built around a nervous system which is much more vulnerable, being nearer the outside, and much more sensitive than those of the other two.

Sheldon devised a method for quantifying the different amounts of each component in every human being. The amount varies on a 7-point scale between 1 and 7, and any individual's pattern can be expressed in terms of three digits. I happen to be a 1-2-7. That is to say, I have a minimum of endomorphy, a little mesomorphy, which permits me to get around, and the maximum of ectomorphy. This is not a very common type; the types near the middle are commonest. Sheldon once told me that most members of my type are in asylums—I am extremely lucky to be out.

Something which Sheldon stresses as being very important in the physical set-up is what he calls 'dysplasia', a disharmony between different regions of the body. Certain regions of the body may exhibit a proportion of the three factors quite different from that of other regions. This is a typical sort of would-be athlete's tragedy: a boy who has enough mesomorphy to feel the desire to become an athlete may unfortunately have much more ectomorphic extremities, so that he simply doesn't have the strength in his arms and wrists and ankles to support his athletic ambitions; he would like to be an athlete but he just cannot be. These dysplasias probably play a very important part in juvenile delinquency.

There is another dysplasia, which is also very common, and which may likewise cause very severe psychological disturbance. It can probably be found in Elizabeth Arden's Arizona Maine Chance, for ladies who have a classical torso but unfortunately complete dysplasia in the hips, which tend to bulge out and which have to be treated locally as strenuously as

possible. Another factor which Sheldon emphasizes is what he calls ‘gynandromorphy’. All of us display some degree of resemblance to the opposite sex, but some of us may have a good deal of it. A high degree of gynandromorphy acts as a kind of total dysplasia and may cause, again, great psychological trouble.

We have now to consider the relationship between these physical differences and the temperament of the people who have them. Sheldon has been able to establish a fairly high level of correlation between the physical pattern of any given individual and a pattern of temperament which he measures on a point scale in terms of intensity. Using about sixty different fundamental psychological traits, twenty for each of the three components, he has found that there is a fairly close relationship—the deviation is usually no more than one point—between the physical and the temperamental patterns. In cases where the deviation between the temperamental pattern and the physical pattern is as much as two points, the person is under very great permanent stress. Deviations of more than two points apparently are never found except in mental institutions.

The reason for the deviations is that sociological pressures demand that people behave in a certain way which doesn’t happen to be the way in which their physique would normally ‘ask’ them to behave. Anthropologists have shown how powerful this trend can be, particularly in primitive societies which exercise a prodigious pressure upon their members. For example, Margaret Mead showed in her study of the Pueblo Indians that the Pueblos have a profound disapproval of anybody who shows a typical mesomorphic pattern of behaviour. They don’t like people who, in our terms, are aggressive, show leadership, have drive. They want people who conform, who behave as other people in the tribe behave.

In our own culture, progressive education represents an almost exclusive valuation of the mesomorphic, and to some extent the endomorphic, points of view. Unfortunate children who were born with introverted tendencies are made to share and to rush around with others, and they are absolutely miserable, because what they want is privacy, and not to be pushed around with a great herd of other people. But this has become fashionable now, just as it was fashionable in an earlier age to try to repress the mesomorph and the endomorph, to impose stoical restraints upon the overflowing, spill-the-beans endomorph and to impose quasi-physical restraints on the exuberant energy of the mesomorph. You can look at earlier civilizations and see the social patterns which were created for doing precisely this.

There has always been a great problem of what to do with powerful muscular men with a tremendous drive for domination. One of the answers in the Middle Ages was to put them into religious orders of knighthood and send them out to fight with the Mohammedans. This kept them out of the way as far as Europeans were concerned, and they were bound and kept in very good order by all kinds of traditions and codes. At the same time means were found for protecting the introverted people without much muscular energy by establishing convents into which they could retire. This permitted the various people to find the niches in society most suitable to them, and the more violent were prevented from doing a lot of mischief to their fellow men.

It does happen that the internal categorical imperatives of temperament and physique are so strong in certain individuals that in spite of profound sociological pressure they start trying to behave like Napoleons, with the result that they get severely slapped down by the rest of society. This shows that even under the greatest sociological

pressures the fundamental, physically determined drives of temperament may carry people into very great social trouble. And the moral is that we shouldn't try to mould or squeeze people into the procrustean bed of our popular conception of human virtue of the moment, but permit them as far as possible to develop along their own temperamental lines.

Let us now give a very brief account of the main temperamental traits connected with the three physical traits, endomorphy, mesomorphy, and ectomorphy. Endomorphs—the round, fat, gut people—are distinguished by relaxation, by a love of comfort, a love of ceremoniousness, and a love of eating—above all, eating in public. They are good routineers and they have a universal, indiscriminate amiability. They are very good mixers, they like people, and they have no difficulty in communication. In fact, they communicate all the time. They have an extreme extroversion of affect. Under the influence of alcohol, they become even more genial and amiable than they were before.

The extreme mesomorph is a driving person who loves power, is indifferent to others, and tends to be callous and to trample on other people. He is the typical aggressive go-getter. He may do it very politely, but he is still an aggressive go-getter. He tends to make a great deal of noise. He laughs loudly. He snores loudly. He speaks loudly and he has all the traits of an effective soldier and politician. If you look at the photographs of the gentleman (Nikita Khrushchev) who visited our shores recently, you will see that he is quite clearly an endomorphic mesomorph. He has enough endomorphy to be very genial when he wants to be and to get on with people and to communicate, but he also has the terrific driving force of the somatotonic temperament which goes with mesomorphy. In vino veritas; under alcohol the highly somatotonic person tends to become even more aggressive than he is ordinarily. These are the people who get into fights in bars and make themselves very unpleasant; they are extremely different from the genial drunks on the endomorphic scale.

The ectomorph, the cerebrotonic, is essentially an introvert and lives in a permanent state of restraint. His actions are restrained. He has great difficulty in communication. He is not a good mixer. He feels that the endomorph, with his pouring out of what he is feeling, is very shallow, very trivial, and vulgar in many ways, and he is horrified by the driving energy of the mesomorph. He is very fond of privacy and doesn't make much noise. Under the influence of alcohol he just feels ill.

So much for what seems to be the most highly developed scientific correlation yet made between physique and temperament. I find it extraordinary that this should have been so totally neglected by Freudian and by neo-Freudian psychology, but unfortunately, among many schools of psychology at the present time, the importance of hereditary physical differences in the whole study of the human psyche is sadly under-estimated. I want to read a brief passage from a recent book by Professor Norman Brown, Life Against Death. He is speaking very critically of the neo-Freudians and blaming them for thinking too much in purely psychological terms, and he sets up against them what he calls the 'materialism' of Freud himself.

He says, 'With the loss of the Freudian materialism of the body, psychology becomes in neo-Freudian hands, as also in Jungian hands, once more what it was before the Freudian revolution, a psychology of the autonomous soul.' But when we pass from this generalization to the specific facts of the case and see what Professor Brown, who is an ardent Freudian, has to say about 'Freudian materialism of the body', we find that the materialism consists almost exclusively in a preoccupation with

events in only two parts of the body—the mouth and the anus. It is an absolutely extraordinary fact that the 'Freudian materialism of the body' boils down to this incredibly limited preoccupation with such an infinitesimal part of the total physical organism. After all, we are much more than these two aspects of the body, and we do know that our bodies have the most profound influence upon our behaviour and upon other people's behaviour.

Psychologists proceed as though we were disembodied souls or souls connected only with one or the other end of a digestive tube, as Freud would have us believe, and nothing else. And it is all the more remarkable when one reads that so extremely acute and philosophical a psychiatric writer as Erich Fromm, one of the neo-Freudians, defines temperament as the psychic qualities which are rooted in a constitutionally given soma. This is an admirable definition. Then he says that it is extremely important that psychologists should take account of these temperamental differences. And he says that undoubtedly in the future this will take place. But he himself pays no further attention to them at all, ignores the fact that there is already a very large literature on the subject, and proceeds as though nothing whatever had been done.

Not only are the main schools of psychiatry today indifferent to the relationship between the psyche and the physique, but we find the same sort of indifference in behaviourism. We have, for example, in B. F. Skinner's Science and Human Behavior, a very fully developed science of human behaviour which is exactly like, say, the science of the laws of motion. But the laws of motion are illustrated in very different ways by a breaking wave, a flying arrow, and a butterfly. It seems to me self-evident that the laws of behaviour are illustrated in very different ways according to the physique and temperament of the person who illustrates them, yet there is the minimum of reference to the fundamental physical and temperamental differences between people.

Sheldon has also done very valuable work in the field of mental illness. On the basis of standardized photographs of three thousand schizophrenics in various mental hospitals, he has come to some very interesting conclusions. He found, first of all, that Kretschmer's earlier insight that schizophrenia was very largely correlated with a high degree of ectomorphy is true. But he goes on to say that what Kretschmer did not make clear is that in a very large proportion of these cases there was not merely ectomorphy but also a high degree of disharmony within the body, which was clearly reflected by a disharmony within the temperament. Consequently, one has to consider the idea that while schizophrenia may be precipitated by traumatic experiences, these experiences are felt to be traumatic because they occur to people in a high ectomorphic region with a high degree of dysplasia. There wouldn't have been such disastrous effects if these people had been shaped differently.

Here again we see the enormous sociological importance of Sheldon's ideas. If there are people who can be identified as, so to speak, predestined to go towards schizophrenia, then there is quite a lot we can do in the way of prevention by means of differential education to shield them from disturbing shocks. And there is probably also something which can be done on the pharmacological level, for it seems to be pretty clear that most schizophrenics have some biochemical anomaly. Presumably the traumatic experience accentuates the biochemical anomaly, which in turn makes people schizophrenic mentally, which in turn makes them more subject to these traumatic experiences—and so a vicious circle is set up. The importance of finding a way to check this most serious of all the

scourges which now affect civilized men becomes clear when we realize that more than 50 per cent of all hospital beds in this country are occupied by schizophrenics. It is our major health problem at the moment, and it is simply not being solved by the kind of psychotherapy which is at present available, largely because this psychotherapy has ignored the physical correlates of the disease.

A very interesting case of the correlation between physique and character is to be found in the traditional image of Christ. Christ has been painted now for nearly two thousand years and if we look at his traditional image we find that he is always represented as a personage with a high degree of ectomorphy. On the basis of a study of many hundreds of these images, Sheldon says that the average figure of Christ in Christian art is a 2-3-5, that is to say, there is a certain amount of endomorphy, which gives the power of communication and sympathy; a bit more of mesomorphy, which gives the messianic drive and the power to carry through the message; and a high degree of ectomorphy, which gives the inward-looking life and the doctrine of restraint which has run through the whole orthodoxy of Christianity. What to do with the extreme mesomorphs has been one of the great problems of Christianity. They have in the past been controlled by the various orders of chivalry and by elaborate educational procedures, all based upon a cerebrotonic view of life, with an idea of restraint and control.

It is quite clear that there has always been an intuition among Christians that this was the inevitable physical form of the Saviour. In fact, it is very interesting that in the rare cases where artists have departed from this traditional norm we are often rather shocked by the representation. Certain artists have represented the form of Christ as a much higher mesomorph. There is a very famous picture of the resurrection by Piero della Francesca which shows this tremendously athletic figure rising from the grave. It is a magnificent picture, but it is curiously out of the traditional view of Christ. There are also muscular, powerful figures of Christ in many of the paintings of Rubens. When he had seen some of these paintings William Blake made the little rhyme which says,

I understood Christ was a carpenter

And not a brewer’s servant, my good Sir.

We should remark here that no artist whatever has represented Christ with a high degree of endomorphy. In this Christianity differs very much from Confucianism, for some of the Chinese sacred figures are typical endomorph figures—big, soft, and comfortable. Actually, the Confucian system is essentially endomorphic. It is a system of relaxation, of great preoccupation with family, of ceremoniousness, and it is thus not at all like the Christian system. It has a different kind of temperamental background to it.

We see, then, that on the deepest level our unconscious equals our constitution: we are determined by what we physically and temperamentally are. Naturally the environment plays a very great part, but it plays the particular part it does because we are the particular people that we are. It is important to bring out this deepest physical level of the unconscious because it is quite pointless to talk about the unconscious unless we see it rooted in the constitutional differences which make us the individuals we are.

The end