

The Individual Life of Man, Aldous Huxley

The Individual Life of Man

In this lecture I shall discuss the relationship between man on the macroscopic level and man on the microscopic or individual level. What is the relationship between the individual and his society and the historical process in which both are involved? This seems a fairly obvious and trivial question, but I think it is actually a question of considerable importance; there is nothing self-evident about the relationship between the individual and the greater mass of historical and social life within which he is embedded.

I shall start with a physical analogy, not with a biological analogy, because the biological analogies so frequently used in discussing sociological matters are essentially false. I don't think, for example, that society is an organism, as many people have said. An organism is a creature having its own life, able to direct itself, having sense organs and some sort of central nervous system; society does not seem to have any of these characteristics. We shall be much nearer the truth if we say that society is an organization within which individual organisms have their place.

The analogy I want to use is a very simple one: the analogy of gases and the individual molecules which compose them. The laws of gases deal with the interdependence of volume, pressure, and temperature. They are quite simple laws and extremely instructive and helpful in regard to our dealing with gases in any considerable quantity. The molecules of which gases are composed, however, possess neither temperature nor pressure, and almost no volume, so that the laws which apply to gases do not in the least apply to molecules. The only attributes of molecules which are relevant to the behaviour of gases are kinetic energy and the tendency to random movement. It is the combination of these two attributes which, when the molecules occur in sufficient numbers, leads to the characteristic behaviour of gases according to the formulations of the gas laws. The point that we have to stress is that gas laws are entirely different from molecule laws and that what holds true in one sphere has almost no relevance in the other.

In the same way we see that there is a profound difference between the generalizations which we can make about societies at large and the generalizations we can make about individuals. We cannot, by exercising empathy in relation to individuals, say anything about society; and conversely, we cannot, from the generalizations which we can infer from the observation of society, say anything about the behaviour of particular individuals. We see this very clearly in the statistics which are constantly being printed in the papers. We know that, according to the actuarial statistics of life insurance companies, the average age of death is sixty-seven for men and seventy-two for women. But this tells us nothing about when Mr or Mrs Jones is likely to die. There is then this gulf: the life of the individual, which is a life of self-consciousness, a life of feeling, a life of will, a life of urges and intentions, does not apply to society. The generalizations which can be made in the larger, social sphere are possible only because very large numbers and very considerable durations of time are involved.

In general we find that the greater the numbers involved in any natural event, the more precise are the generalizations—the so-called natural laws—which we can formulate. This was one of the great discoveries of the

nineteenth century, which Ludwig Boltzmann made very clear in his classical work on heat. The same basic notion underlay the whole Darwinian theory, which was in fact the statement of the average behaviour of enormous numbers of individuals. Within societies the numbers of individuals are extremely small when compared with the numbers of molecules within a unit of gas or of atoms within a human body. Consequently, the generalizations which we can make from the observation of a society have many more exceptions than the laws of physics and chemistry (and they are not so precise and accurate).

Nevertheless we certainly can make some generalizations about society as a whole, and, although many sociologists have attempted to go much too far in formulating them, such laws have real value and are capable of giving us some power to predict the future. However, when we come to the behaviour of individuals, we find that a knowledge of these laws is not particularly helpful—it doesn't help us to predict what Tom, Dick, and Harry are going to do. There is a basic differentiation between the natural sciences and the historical sciences. The natural sciences seek to reduce diversity to unity by finding the similarities between objects or events and by making a generalization about them, whereas in the study of history on the small scale, and in the study of biography, we remain concerned with particular cases. In the world of natural science it would almost be necessary to leave out of account a miracle, if it were to take place, because a miracle is something which can never be repeated and which occurs outside the general law of averages; but within the sphere of history, if a miracle took place we should certainly have to take account of it.

Let us now consider the relationship of the individual to history. Every individual life span obviously runs parallel to a sector of the general historical movement of the age in which the person lives. But to what extent do we exist in history? To what extent is an individual in the history of his time? To start with we must ask the question, What is history? Ideally, history is the record of everything that happens; clearly there could never be such a record because it is much too complex to set down and, anyhow, the changes and chances of the past have eliminated practically all information about earlier periods. In fact, what historians describe as history is simply those aspects of the past which, according to their own philosophy of life, they regard as particularly important and significant. Let me take an example from what a philosophical historian, Arnold Toynbee, says about the history of our time:

What will be singled out as the salient event of our time by future historians, centuries hence, looking back on the first half of the twentieth century and trying to see its activities and experiences in that just proportion which the time-perspective sometimes reveals? Not, I fancy, any of those sensational or tragic or catastrophic political and economic events which occupy the headlines of our newspapers and the foregrounds of our minds; not wars, revolutions, massacres, deportations, famines, gluts, slumps, or booms, but something of which we are only half-conscious, and out of which it would be difficult to make a headline ...

Future historians will say, I think, that the great event of the twentieth century was the impact of the Western civilization upon all the other living societies of the world of that day.

But if the impact of the West on other cultures is the really important historical fact of our time, then virtually none of us is in history. For

we are not subjectively cognizant of this impact of the West upon other cultures or of the impact of other cultures upon the West.

A similar case in point is the thirteenth century, which is generally regarded by modern historians as one of the great golden ages of the human spirit, the age of scholasticism and the great cathedrals. Yet if you read the works of any of the moralists, the people who were the contemporaries of St Thomas Aquinas and the cathedral builders, you find that all of them are agreed that their age was an age of decadence, that never were men so immoral and delinquent as they were at that time, that they were much stupider than they had been in the past, and so on. Who is right? Were the people who actually lived through the age of scholasticism and of the cathedral builders correct in thinking that theirs was an age of decadence, or are we correct in thinking that it was a golden age when the spirit of man developed in an extraordinary way? This is a question that remains open; probably in a sense both are correct. But what is brought home very clearly is that what we live through subjectively is very far from being the essence of history as perceived by the historians of a future time. We have to be aware of the curious fact that we are living in two worlds and that our individual world does not correspond to the large-scale one with which the philosophical historian deals.

To what extent is individual life, which runs parallel with the great stream of history, in fact within that stream? The most startling fact about every individual life is that a third of it is passed entirely outside of history and even outside of space and time, so far as subjective experience is concerned: a third of our life is passed in sleep, in which we are neither in space nor in time, from an internal point of view. Nor are we in history; we just pass out of the world of history into a state of temporary not-being. It is a state which is absolutely essential to us because in it we take refuge from our hideous egotistic activities in order to regain a certain amount of the health and sanity which we are always undermining by our conscious activities.

Shakespeare has a wonderful passage about sleep in Macbeth:

Sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleeve of care,
The death of each day's life, sore labour's bath,
Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course,
Chief nourisher in life's feast.

This is exactly what sleep is—the extraordinary accession of new life and new insight which come in during those eight hours out of the twenty-four when we can escape from ourselves. Even the most violent fanatic or the most delinquent gangster is, for a third of his life, in this moment of complete unconsciousness when he can forget his ego, in some way reconciled with the deep, divine source of all being. It is a beautiful thought that even a Hitler, even a Himmler, even a Genghis Kahn, even a Jay Gould, even a Richelieu can forget for a moment his fearful daytime preoccupations.

A very interesting fact, when we come to social organizations, is the discovery that they never sleep. Social organizations live, so to speak, in a state of chronic insomnia; they never depart from themselves nor open themselves up to new accessions of life and insight. They are corrected from time to time only by individuals—who do get the benefit of

sleep and therefore can reform social organizations in a rational way. As Mr Bumble said, 'the law is a ass'—for the reason that the law never sleeps. The Church suffers similarly. There was a hymn which I used to sing very frequently at school, one of whose verses goes,

We thank Thee that Thy Church unsleeping,

While earth moves onward into Light,

Through all the world her watch is keeping,

And rests not now by day or night.

This watchful sleeplessness may account for the deplorable facts of ecclesiastical history. The Church is periodically reformed by people who get inspiration from sleep and from the deep mind, and because of this it remains as sane as it does. But it suffers from the defects of all organizations inasmuch as, not being an organism but merely an organization, it does not have the capacity to retreat and take holidays from itself; it never sleeps and cannot recuperate.

To come back to the individual and the extent to which he is in history, we find that there are a great many periods in his life besides those spent asleep when he is out of history. These include infancy and most of childhood. During those periods he is living an almost wholly private life in which public affairs have very little influence at all. The same is true of old age and decrepitude, and periods of sickness, too; here the individual is so much diminished that he falls out of public life altogether, and because of his narrowed attention and the chronic pain and frustration, he lives quite out of all relationship with the public world. Finally, the most private and non-historical act of all is the act of death, in which there is a narrowing down of attention until the individual is taken totally out of the world of history. It is true that there have been eminent men who have tried to remain historical even on their death bed. There is a very painful story about Daniel Webster, who talked excessively to his friends while he was dying and wound up by asking, 'Have I said anything unworthy of Daniel Webster?' It seems to be a terrible thing that a man at this moment of life should feel it necessary to be still a public, historical figure, to worry about whether he was still worthy of his own reputation.

When we add up all the periods during which we are out of history—the period of sleep, the period of infancy, the period of extreme old age and decrepitude, and the period of sickness—we find that out of the average seventy-year life span the individual probably spends about forty years completely outside of history. He just isn't there at all in relation to the grand historical generalizations which sociologists and historians make.

Even as a mature and self-conscious being, however, the individual spends a great deal of time in a life which is purely private and not historical. The definition of private life which I like the best is one given by the Russian essayist Vasili Rozanov about thirty or forty years ago. He said that private life is 'picking your nose, and looking at the sunset'. This is a very beautiful definition; if you interpret it in a more general way, you see that what it really means is that private life consists in enjoying your purely physiological reactions and your aesthetic and inspirational reactions. Naturally we tend to rationalize and explain these experiences in terms of the prevailing culture.

Nevertheless they do remain amazingly private and apart from the general historical movement of the time in which we live.

It seems to me worthwhile to look at the case histories of some poets and other artists in relation to the time in which they lived. Wordsworth wrote his Lyrical Ballads, the whole of *The Prelude*, and the great odes (including the 'Ode. Intimations of Immortality') between 1795 and 1807, that is to say, at the height of what was until very recent times the most overwhelming period of change in European history—the period of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, which inaugurated the modern epoch. Although Wordsworth talks in *The Prelude* about his reactions to the French Revolution, the really significant thing about all this mass of poetry is its nature mysticism, which is what appeals to us, what makes Wordsworth live and seem important in the modern world.

One of Wordsworth's contemporaries was Jane Austen; *Pride and Prejudice* was written in 1796 and the other novels between 1811 and 1816. Yet not only was Jane Austen's life hardly affected by the considerable events going on in the world around her, practically all her characters remained completely unaffected. Once or twice there is a faint hint—some of the men may be in uniform—but that is about all. It is remarkable to think that these novels, with their immensely intimate and ironical analysis of the family life of every day, should have been written in the midst of the most fantastic upheaval of modern times.

Another example—a man I happen to have been much interested in at one time, was the French philosopher Maine de Biran, the greatest metaphysician of the eighteenth century. We know a great deal about his private life because he left a very detailed diary covering almost every year of his adult life. It is interesting to find what was going on in Maine de Biran's mind in the early summer of 1794, which was the year of the execution of Danton and the year Robespierre's power was at its height and the Terror in full swing. Maine de Biran was living in his own house in the country, a good way from Paris. He wrote, 'Today, 27 May, I had an experience too beautiful to be ever forgotten. I was walking by myself a few minutes before sundown ...' There follows a rather long passage about how the night of nature filled him with a kind of Wordsworthian ecstasy, and ravishment succeeded ravishment, and, he continued, 'if I could perpetuate this state I should have found upon this earth the joys of heaven.'

Biran came closer to history during the hundred days. At the time of Napoleon's first abdication, he had gone over enthusiastically to the royalist side—he had always been a loyal supporter of the King—so when Napoleon came back from Elba he was in a very awkward and unpleasant position. But even then he was able to escape into the world of pure intellectual speculation: 'I live in this world of speculation foreign to all the interests of the outside world. These speculations keep me from thinking of the actions of my fellow men, and this is fortunate, for I cannot think of them except to hate them and despise.' In the same way, in an earlier century, we get the testimony of Montaigne, who says in his marvellously frank and honest way, 'I cannot too much stress with how little an expense to my peace of mind I have lived half my life in my house, while my country was in ruins.'

Such facts are of enormous significance. They show that even this small-scale, short-range, catastrophic history, which goes on all the time in its violent and brutal way, and which, as Toynbee says, occupies 'the headlines of our newspapers and the foregrounds of our minds,' does not very much engage us. Although at certain moments we may be painfully

involved, for the most part we can continue to live our intensely private lives.

This was certainly the experience of a great many people during the catastrophes of recent years, although a very important point which has to be stressed is that in contemporary times—above all in totalitarian countries, but to an increasing extent in democratic countries as well—the governmental authorities have gone out of their way to prevent people's escaping into their private lives during moments of crisis. Hitler had the strongest objections to permitting people to live in their private world, and the Russians still do, insisting upon everyone's becoming engaged and enmeshed in short-range history. It would be very difficult now for a *Maine de Biran* or a *Jane Austen* to live quite so completely apart from the historical moment, largely because wars and revolutions involve entire populations rather than small bodies of professional fighting men.

Nevertheless the difference between private life and public life, between biography and history, still remains a very strong one. We see clearly in the nature of our newspapers the fact that most people are not much interested in the public life of their times. Most of the space in newspapers is given up to the more sensational events of private life, such as murders and divorces, and a relatively small amount is given to the consideration of the great historical events of our time. This is the most striking difference between newspapers in the Western world and newspapers in the totalitarian regimes, where almost no space is given to the adventures of private life and the ideas on which public life is based are drummed in continuously in propagandist articles. This makes the newspapers, I imagine, incredibly dull, but it serves the purpose of the rulers, which is to indoctrinate their subjects and to make them go single-minded in a certain direction.

One of the best ways of looking at the divorce between private and public life is to consider the idea and the fact of progress. To what extent is it a fact of our subjective life? Progress is a modern myth which arose in the time of the Renaissance and came to its flowering in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Previously the whole idea had been that man had had a golden age in the past and had been going steadily downhill since. From the time of the Renaissance onward the golden age was in the future and man was going up. There have been several versions of the myth. There was the idea, which was very popular in the eighteenth century, that if you got rid of priests and kings, then automatically the golden age would appear. Then there was the myth of the nineteenth century, that industrialization would bring universal peace. This expression of the myth died rather painfully during this century; the First World War and the Russian Revolution gave it a serious blow, and it was polished off by the more recent events of the Second World War and the Atom Bomb.

But although the myth is no longer tenable, we can nevertheless say that progress is a fact. There is quite clearly a trace of progress recognizable within the natural order—the fundamental basic progress from the inorganic to the organic, the evolution of giant molecules which could reproduce themselves and which made life possible, the passage from extremely simple forms of life to more complex forms capable of adapting themselves to different kinds of environments and finally even controlling the environment. We see progress from the animals which produce their young with eggs to the animals which produce embryos and control temperature within the body and then to the animals which develop a highly organized nervous system.

Although it is quite clear that within the biological range everything which has developed in the past persists to this day—the giant molecules still persist in the form of viruses; so do the single cell organisms still persist—nevertheless at the leading edge of the development there is something which can quite clearly and legitimately be described as progress. The same thing seems to be true even within the human sphere, where evolution has ceased for the most part to be biological and hereditary. We still have the same kind of innate capacities which our ancestors had, but—owing to the facts that we have language and can accumulate knowledge—we use those capacities in a much more effective way for controlling our environment today than in the past. We are perfectly justified in saying that there has been genuine progress, although one can still go about this world and find neolithic and even palaeolithic people.

The question, then, is: While this progress can be observed objectively, to what extent can it be experienced? Obviously the original biological progress was never experienced, partly for the good reason that for about two billion years there was nobody to experience it in a conscious way. Even after man arose, for almost all of his time on earth he was, as an individual, completely unable to experience progress, for the simple reason that progress took place extremely slowly.

Now, however, progressive changes in the field of technology and the field of ideas are taking place in spans which are measured by decades or less. Thus it should at least theoretically be possible for the individual to have a direct subjective experience of progress. And, to some extent, he does. Nevertheless it remains true that we don't experience progress subjectively very much, although we observe it, we read about it, we see the signs of it in buildings and new types of aeroplanes and so on.

There are many reasons why we don't experience progress as much as we might expect that we should. To start with, human life is not a progressive action. It rises to a certain level, proceeds on a plateau, and then sinks down. Inasmuch as human life is intrinsically non-progressive, we cannot expect that there will be in many phases of it a very strong subjective experience of the progress which we can objectively observe. It is very difficult to ask old people to be aware of the world going up and up when they themselves are going down and down. In the second place, man has an almost infinite capacity for taking things for granted. When something new comes in, it is rather astonishing for a day or two, and then it is accepted as part of the order of things. What today is a golden ceiling overhead becomes—when we make the climb and get to it—a disregarded floor under our feet. Then, too, we must remember that every child is born into the world as it exists at that moment and has no experience of the world as it was before.

To a child born into the world at the present time, TV and jet planes are a part of the order of things. He has no idea of the sort of world in which I was brought up, which was a world of horses and trains, although these curious (to him) neolithic survivals still exist. This is another reason why it is as exceedingly difficult for us to experience progress subjectively as it is to experience other aspects of public and historical life: most of us are concerned only with the facts of our private lives, with family relationships, with squabbles, with jealousies, with pity for the people around us, with envy, with sex, with gossip. We are involved only in the life of the molecule, not in the life of the gas.

For all these reasons, then—because our life span is so short and progress in the past has been so slow, because we take things for granted, because human life is itself non-progressive, and because we live and want to live so much in our isolated, insulated private life—these great objective facts are very little experienced by us, and we find ourselves living in a strange amphibious world. Man is a multiple amphibian, living in many double worlds and leading many double lives, and one of them is undoubtedly this life of being a private individual embedded in a history which one can see objectively but which one doesn't experience. Dr Johnson, who was extremely hardboiled about idealism and pretensions, has a couplet which expresses it all very clearly. It is not good poetry, but it is a good epigram:

How small of all that human hearts endure,

That part which laws or kings can cause or cure.

We can add to kings and lords such items as technology and scientific invention, and we shall find that the same thing remains true: there is a very small part of history which is felt subjectively to be of supreme importance to us. As Dr Johnson says, 'publick affairs vex no man' and the news of a lost battle never caused any man to 'eat his dinner the worse'. Conversely, the news of a scientific breakthrough or some immense discovery never makes any man eat his dinner the better.

This state of amphibiousness between society and the individual, between history and biography, is an odd and uneasy kind of existence. But we have to accept it, and in any process of education we have to prepare young people to live in both worlds—to live as best they can in their individual world and, if possible, to take an intelligent interest in the historical one. They probably can never feel the historical world subjectively as they should—or perhaps they shouldn't; I think it is a great blessing that we don't feel it subjectively most of the time. Anyhow, they should be aware of it intellectually and objectively, so as to be able to be useful citizens. For this is always the problem of human beings—to realize amphibiousness and to know that they must make the best of this world and of that.

I will conclude this brief sketch of our amphibiousness with a passage which has always touched me very much, from a strange late Elizabethan poet, Lord Brooke:

Oh wearisome Condition of Humanity!

Borne under one Law, to another bound:

Vainly begot, and yet forbidden vanity,

Created sicke, commanded to be sound:

What meaneth Nature by these diverse Lawes?

Passion and Reason, selfe division cause.

The end