

## The Problem of Human Nature, Aldous Huxley

### The Problem of Human Nature

In the last lecture we discussed the rather curious relationship between the individual life and the public, historical life of man. In the lectures which follow I shall talk about the individual. I shall try to pose and answer the question, Who precisely are we? What sort of creature is the human being? Are we, as Descartes said, a completely individualized ego, whose essence is consciousness, and who is related only to one part of matter within the body? And is matter entirely of another class of reality, having as its essence only extension? Or are we, as modern empiricists are inclined to believe, a monistic mind-body? Is the self completely insulated from all other selves, or is there some kind of psychic medium in which all selves bathe, so that the individual is not totally cut off from other minds?

I want to start with the manner in which people in the past have thought about human nature. The terms in which they discussed the problem are of course very different from the terms in which we discuss it; they dealt with fundamentally the same facts in terms of different frames of theoretical reference. Nevertheless, I think it is worthwhile making this historical detour because when we examine what people have thought in the past about the nature of man, we find that it does throw a great deal of light on the problem.

I shall begin with the theory of man as we find it in the well-spring of Western civilization, that is to say, in the Homeric poems. The best way of starting is to read a passage from the nineteenth book of the Iliad, where the terrible quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles is made up. Agamemnon apologizes to the enraged Achilles for having taken away his girl, Briseis, and explains why he did it. He says,

I was not to blame. It was Zeus and my lot and the Fury that walks in the darkness, that blinded my judgment that day when I confiscated Achilles's girl. What could I do? At such moments there is a power that takes command, Ate, the eldest daughter of Zeus, who blinds us, the cursed sprite that she is, flitting through men's heads, corrupting them, bringing down now this one, now that one. Why, even Zeus was blinded by her once, and Zeus is known to stand above all men and all gods.

Instead of regarding this as a way of shirking responsibility, Achilles accepts the explanation wholeheartedly and says, 'how utterly a man can be blinded by Father Zeus!'

The creature Ate which Agamemnon speaks of in this passage is a very interesting personage. In the later Greek tragedians the word 'Ate' stands for disaster in general, but in the Homeric poems 'Ate' means the state of mind that leads to disaster—the kind of infatuation, the moral blindness, the fact of being carried away, which leads men to do things against their better judgment and even against their rudimentary interests.

We see here that what we should call unconscious urges and drives is explained in the terms of the ninth century b.c. as intervention from without by supernatural forces. In a word, the whole theory of Homer is based upon the idea of demonic or divine possession. The gods either intervene directly or else they intervene by some agent such as Ate—who

is herself a divine being—and they cause us to do preposterous and dreadful things.

Besides the bad interventions, there are in Homer also good interventions, where the supernatural powers suddenly come and help us. The word *menos* occurs very frequently in the *Iliad* and in the *Odyssey*, it means power, strength, the accession of some new insight or ability, the capacity to do something difficult or impossible. *Menos* will suddenly come upon a man in battle, or it will come upon him in counsel, giving him wisdom and intelligence. Even animals are capable of *menos*; a horse can suddenly have a great deal of *menos* and gallop at a much greater rate than it could before. So we see that the two sides of what we shall call the unconscious self are represented by two kinds of supernatural interventions.

In Homer, an intervention may be either by some known god—Zeus, or Zeus's immediate agent, or Athena, or any of the other gods—or else it may be by some supernatural being whom one doesn't know. In this case the intervention is spoken of as being caused by a *daimon*, an anonymous god of some kind. The *daimon* idea comes right down into Classical Greece. Socrates's monitions—the little voice that he heard, telling him to avoid doing things which he ought not to do—was the voice of a *daimon*, a divine being. An interesting aspect of what Socrates has to say about these irrational interventions coming from what we call below the threshold of consciousness is the idea that there are several kinds of madness.

There is a natural madness due to disease and there are two kinds of supernatural madness: the destructive madness brought about by Ate, or by one of the gods who wishes to bring us down, and the helpful madness, which Plato divides into four categories—the prophetic madness (as illustrated by the Oracle of Delphi); the Dionysian ritual madness of the orgiastic catharsis; the poetic madness; and the erotic madness. Socrates says in one place that 'the greatest blessings come to us by way of madness', provided always that the madness be given to us by divine gift.

It is worth remarking that the idea of supernatural possession went on exercising a tremendous influence on men's minds, and was accepted as a rational explanation of many peculiar forms of human behaviour, until well on in the seventeenth century. I happen to have made a study of this matter as it occurred in the seventeenth century; I wrote a book on the celebrated case of the Devils of Loudun, which is a story of the so-called possession of an entire convent of nuns. One sees in reading the theologians, the moralists, and even most of the doctors of the period, that the idea of demonic possession seemed absolutely obvious in those days. Until one has an adequate theory of the subliminal self, the idea of possession is completely logical and sensible. It seems to be about the only way in which these strange phenomena can be explained.

It is interesting in this context to see how the Greeks dealt therapeutically with many of the psychological problems which we treat either with drugs or by psychotherapy. Anxiety states, they found, could be dealt with very satisfactorily by getting people to participate in the Dionysiac orgies, which were great dances that went on for hours and hours until people went into a kind of ecstasy and even fell down in a state of exhaustion. Later on came the corybantic dances, which were diagnostic as well as cathartic. As far as one can make out, the point of the corybantic dance was first of all to listen to certain types of music, each of which expressed the personality of some god, and then, by seeing which music the sick person reacted to, learn which was the god responsible for his possession. Not only did one enter into the cathartic

dance; at the end of the dance one performed the requisite rituals and made the proper sacrifices and so obtained an absolution which undoubtedly helped towards the consummation of the cure.

This kind of thing still goes on at the present time. Last year in Brazil I had the opportunity of witnessing several Macumba dances (they are called Macumba dances in Rio, candomblé in Bahia). These are Brazilian adaptations of West African tribal rites; they are practised by the Negroes, who are in an extremely poor economic position, and who lead pretty intolerable lives of great frustration. They work off their accumulated frustration on Saturday nights, not by getting drunk, but in a much more satisfactory manner: by dancing from sunset to the following sunrise. I would say that the therapeutic results of these Saturday night dances are at least equivalent to six months on the psychoanalytic couch at fifty dollars a time. And the Greeks did this regularly—what may be called group therapy, in Greek terms.

Most educated people ceased to believe in possession towards the end of the seventeenth century, and there was a curious interregnum during the eighteenth century and a good part of the nineteenth when there was really no satisfactory explanation of these very odd phenomena. Either they were simply disregarded, or they were explained as the French Commission which sat on the Mesmer case (in which Benjamin Franklin took part) explained what was then called mesmerism and what we now call hypnotism—in terms of something vaguely called 'imagination'—and as such dismissed.

It was not until the latter part of the nineteenth century that the theory of the unconscious as a dynamic force was developed in order to explain the facts of experimental hypnosis and of hysteria, which were being systematically studied in Paris by Jean Martin Charcot and in Vienna by Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud. This theory provided for the first time a really satisfactory alternative to the possession hypothesis.

I think it is important to remark, however, that in his own way Homer was extremely realistic subjectively, if not objectively. For many of the sudden urges or hunches or insights which even normal people have are felt as though they were invasions from the outside or supernatural interventions. Among people in an abnormal state of mind, the sense of being possessed by external forces is extraordinarily strong. These people hear voices and see hallucinations, and it is almost impossible for them not to believe that some alien force is attacking them.

As a matter of cultural history, it is interesting to see how the 'explanation' of this universal and everlasting human phenomenon—what people 'see' and 'hear'—has varied at different ages, in terms of the different Weltanschauungs which have been accepted at the moment. The idea of supernatural possession lasted from the time of Homer right through the Christian epoch until at least the seventeenth century. Then, in the middle years of the nineteenth century, after the rise of spiritualism, many people regarded phenomena such as those produced by the Fox sisters in 1848 as due not to possession by supernatural beings but to possession by departed spirits.

In modern times, the explanations are in most cases very different. Like most people who have published books and have become to some extent public figures, I receive a great many unsolicited letters, some of which come from what I suppose is the lunatic fringe (sometimes one has the sense that the fringe is like that on a Spanish shawl—that there is more

fringe than shawl). I have had in the last few years at least a dozen of these pathetic letters, and I am reminded of it because just the other day I received one from Sweden, from a gentleman who has written me as long ago as 1952 about the same problem.

In exactly the same way as in many of the other letters, he complains that he is being subjected to bombardment by some new kind of radio, which he says is in the hands of a group of (as he describes them) 'homosexual-fascist-communists' who are sending out messages and pumping them into his mind; and the poor man is in this terrible state and can get no relief because the Swedish police are in league with his enemies, and so on and so forth. This is a very common phenomenon. These experiences which are felt as invasion, and which would have been interpreted in the past as possession by supernatural beings, or possibly as possession by departed spirits, now appear to be possession by an electronic device. Nothing changes, but everything changes. The fundamental experiences remain the same, but the cultural frame of reference in which we explain them varies profoundly from age to age.

Now we have to go back again for a moment to Homer, to see what exactly is the nature of the self. We have talked about deep irrational drives which are produced (in Homer's terms) by the intervention of supernatural beings. But what is the human personality on which these interventions take place? The interesting thing in Homer is that, as far as he is concerned, there is no such thing as a permanent soul. The word 'psyche' is used by him, but never in relation to the mind of a person during his lifetime.

It refers only to the thing which leaves the body at the last breath and which then becomes a ghost, like the ones seen by Ulysses in Hades. These ghosts are insubstantial—they are not personalities at all—and, if you remember, they can only communicate with Ulysses after he has fed them with blood. He makes a sacrifice and pours the blood into the trench; the ghosts drink a little of it, take on a little materiality, and are able to talk with him.

This is the only use of the word 'psyche' in Homer. For the rest, the personality is seen by Homer very much as many modern empirical psychologists see it, as a kind of bundle of symbiotic complexes. There is the ego, which is more or less equivalent to what he calls the noos, the rational side of man. Other forces within the personality include thumos, the organ of feeling, which is one of the most important; it is located in the chest and mounts up very often into the nostrils and the head. Then there is the midriff, the fren, which means mind, organ of passion, life. The belly also plays an important part, rather as in the Jewish tradition, where the bowels are the seat of compassion and the heart of affections.

Homer's psychology is curiously like the psychology of early Buddhism, although Homer is not so incredibly and painfully systematic. The early Buddhist idea is that man is anatta, without a substantial soul. He consists of a group of skandhas, which are complexes, partly physiological, partly emotional, consisting partly of the appetitive and partly of the reflective and intellectual side of man. All the facts of human behaviour can be explained in terms of this skandhas, just as Homer thought that all the facts of human behaviour could be explained in terms of the thumos, fren, noos, ego, and so on.

One of the most interesting facts about Homeric psychology, in which it also resembles very much the older Indian psychology, is that there is

virtually no reference to the will. It seems to us extremely strange that these older psychologists don't talk about the will, but if you don't have a unitary controlling soul, then the idea of will doesn't seem to be so very important, and it seems to be possible to get on without it. In the marriage service, to the question 'Dost thou take this woman to be thy wedded wife?' we would answer 'I will'; but the Homeric hero, if he was being fully logical, would say, 'Well, my thumos and my fren are all for it, and in spite of the fact that my noos has certain reservations, I will go along with my viscera, all the more so as I can feel definitely the symptoms of possession by Aphrodite.'

The idea of a multiplicity of semi-independent forces loosely bound together within the mind-body, whose symbiosis constitutes the personality, has been commented upon by Professor Martin P. Nilsson, who wrote a few years ago in the Harvard Theological Review that 'Pluralistic teaching about the soul is founded in the nature of things, and only our habits of thought make it surprising that man should have several "souls".' Homer was not a philosopher, but he was an extremely acute observer—what may be called a kind of palaeo-empiricist—and in a certain sense he anticipated the judgment of Hume on the nature of the human being. For Hume insisted that there is no observable self. All that we observe is a 'bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement'.

So much for the position of Homer, that man has no substantial, detachable soul, but is a bundle of semi-independent symbiotic forces, half physiological and half psychological. This was the current notion about 800 b.c. About 400 years later the Greek notion of the personality was entirely different. We find in Socrates and Plato that it is completely self-evident that man has a unitary soul and that this soul is detachable and can survive after the death of the body. The question arises, What is the reason for this profound change? It used to be fashionable to say that maybe there had been influences from India, but recent scholarship inclines to the belief that the important influences during that period were from the North. It was in the seventh century that the Greeks first began penetrating into the area of the Black Sea and founding colonies upon its shores. There they came into contact with the Scythians, who practised a form of shamanistic religion such as is still practised in Siberia and Central Asia—or was practised until the inhabitants of those parts of the world were converted to Marxism.

The shaman was a medicine man who established contact with the gods, but he did it in a way fundamentally different from the way in which the Delphic Oracle, the Pythia of Delphi, established her contact with the gods. The Pythia of Delphi was what the Greeks called entheos: she had the god inside her, she was filled with the god—from entheos comes our word 'enthusiasm'—and the god spoke through her in the first person. Apollo, when he spoke through the Pythia, said 'I' in precisely the same way as the modern medium speaks with the voice of her control. The shaman, on the contrary, did something quite different. He didn't wait for the god to come into him. He went out to look for the god. He practised what in modern mediumistic jargon is called 'travelling clairvoyance'. He went into a trance and got out of himself and moved about the world and came in contact with divine beings and saw what was going on in other places.

Whether clairvoyance is a fact or not, I don't know. But it is absolutely undoubted that certain people believe it to be a fact. They have a capacity for apparently going out of themselves, getting information from

distant places, and getting into contact with what appear to be divine beings. They also seem to have the capacity of getting into contact with previous existences. One of the interesting things about the shamans is that they remembered their earlier existences as shamans of an earlier date, and the fact that they were reincarnations of people who had had the same power in the past was one of the things which gave them their power to be shamans in the present.

Modern scholarship inclines to believe that the rise of the Orphic holy men in Greece was essentially due to shamanistic influences from the Black Sea and that in fact such Orphic holy men as Epimenides were shamans. And there is no doubt at all that Pythagoras was profoundly influenced by the Orphic holy men and took on from them many features of his system, which in turn influenced the later philosophers.

In the Pythagorean system reincarnation was no longer regarded as the privilege of very few exceptional people (the shamans). It was democratized and made available to all. This had a very profound theological and psychological effect because reincarnation ceased to be a reward and a source of power, as it had been for the shamans. Instead the implication was that reincarnation was a kind of punishment and that each person was living out a life that was in fact the hell of previous lives, a kind of misery and horror from which the one desire was to escape. Thus we get already among the people influenced by Orphic thought the idea of original sin, that no one is innocent, that all men are evil-poneroi, as the Greeks said.

And so we find ourselves, from the time of Pythagoras on, with this new notion of a substantial unitary soul imprisoned in a body for offences which have been committed in earlier lives. The phrase 'soma sema' (body equals tomb) begins occurring in Greek in the fifth and fourth centuries, an idea which is absolutely opposed to anything that had ever entered the mind of Homer, to whom the body wasn't a tomb, but a part of the personality. With a sort of canonization of these ideas by Socrates and Plato, we get the beginning of the mind-body dualism which then was systematized and made scientific very much later on by Descartes, and which has haunted Christian thought ever since. This distinction between mind and body, and the sense that the body is very bad, that the spirit is in some way alien to the animal side and to nature in general—this semi-Manichaeian point of view—is very far from the Hebrew tradition, which completely accepts the life of the body. Nevertheless, in spite of the fact that Christianity derives from the Hebrew tradition, this Greek dualistic and puritanical side, which springs from the Orphics and goes on to Plato, often predominates.

It is worth spending a moment to discuss the Hebrew point of view with regard to the soul. In the earlier parts of the Old Testament there is no immortal soul. Man is rewarded on this earth, and soul and body are completely joined. The personality is a mind-body, and just as Homer has no word for the substantial soul, so Old Testament Hebrew has no word for the general conception of body. It seems so obvious that the two go together that it is not necessary to make the distinction. On the other hand, there were numerous words for the various organs of the body, and we find in the Old Testament, and also in the New, that psychological ideas are constantly expressed in physiological terms.

Joseph's bowels 'did yearn upon his brother' (Genesis 43:30) and God's mercy is equated with bowels by Isaiah. St Paul urges the Colossians to put on 'bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, long-suffering' (Colossians 3:12). In Philippians he exhorts his

correspondents by the bowels of Christ (1:8) and speaks of the 'bowels of mercies' (2:1). In the Psalms we get constant references to the kidneys, which have a deep psychological meaning. God 'trieth the heart and reins' (Psalms 7:9) and he tests man's faith; 'my reins also instruct me' (Psalms 16:7), 'Examine me, O Lord, and prove me; try my reins and my heart' (Psalms 26:2), 'Thus my heart was grieved, and I was pricked in my reins' (Psalms 73:21), and so on.

This constant reference to the bodily expressions of personality and conditions of behaviour runs through the Old Testament in the most realistic way. There is a kind of proto-empiricism here which, as in Homer, stresses the great importance of the physiological side of man. And with modern developments in endocrinology we now realize that these things are perfectly true. The reins, or rather the little glands on top of them, the adrenals, are of enormous importance to us. The fact of having more or less adrenalin or no adrenalin in the blood makes a profound difference to our personality. We have discovered that many of the violent and sudden experiences which seem to us completely irrational and which are experienced subjectively, as though they were interventions from outside, are in fact due to sudden physiological uprushes of chemical materials created within the body.

While we are talking of these chemical mind-body changes we should also mention the external chemicals that are taken in from the outside and can produce profound effects upon the mind. As Housman said,

Malt does more than Milton can,

To justify God's ways to man.

And there are many chemicals a great deal more effective than beer. Incidentally, one of the most fascinating by-paths of the history of religion is the one that traces the use of chemicals in various religious traditions for the purpose of changing the state of mind and producing enthusiasm, the sense of god within. Almost all religious traditions at one time or another made use of some such chemical mind changers, from wine in the rites of Dionysius to beer in the rites of the Celts, and to peyote in the rites of many North American Indians. It would take me too far afield to go into this, but these religious traditions, which we are today beginning to investigate, make us much more sympathetic with the empirical and semi-physiological way of looking at the mind which was current among the Hebrews and in the time of Homer.

Let us now try to sum up what has been happening. We may say that the history of psychology since the time of Homer has taken the form of a kind of spiral. We begin with the mind-body, this personality which hasn't got a single controlling soul. We pass then to the idea of a detachable soul as it was developed by Plato. And in recent years we seem to have come around again to a position which is 'above' the Homeric one—a kind of scientific empiricism, where we are inclined to accept the idea of an inseparable mind-body composed of rather loosely associated elements which don't necessarily form a single unitary soul.

The question remains whether beneath this Humean or Buddhistic arrangement of skandhas there is some kind of pure ego or atman, as the Indians say. This is something which we shall have to discuss in later lectures, but I would like today to quote a few words of Bertrand Russell on the subject: 'it does not follow [from Hume's view of human personality] that there is no simple Self; it only follows that we cannot know whether there is or not, and that the Self, except as a bundle of

perceptions, cannot enter into any part of our knowledge'. I would be inclined to dispute this. I think that there probably are methods by which the pure ego or self or atman can enter into our consciousness, and I shall talk about them in later lectures. But meanwhile we have to bear in mind that, as Russell says, the existence of a loosely conjoined aggregate of powers does not necessarily mean that there is no simple soul or atman. It merely means that it is extremely difficult, but not impossible, to contact it.

The end