

## *Brave New World, Plato's Republic, and Our Scientific Regime*

*Matthew J. Franck*

For much of the Cold War, George Orwell's novel *1984* eclipsed Aldous Huxley's earlier work *Brave New World*. Orwell's book, published in 1949, seemed to many readers the more apt dystopia for understanding the challenge of totalitarianism, since it could be said to capture the essential character of the regimes on the other side of the Iron Curtain. With the Cold War now long over, and with that era's public preoccupation with space, military technology, and the physical sciences redirected toward the biological and behavioral sciences and their potential to reshape human beings and society, Huxley's dark tale has seemed "relevant" again. This is a judgment that would not have surprised its author. Huxley's latest biographer, Nicholas Murray, explains that when Orwell sent Huxley an early copy of *1984*, Huxley wrote back to say "that he had enjoyed it but believed his book [*Brave New World*] was better prophecy," with its portrait of a gentler but more effective totalitarianism than Orwell's "boot smashing down on the face."

Though Huxley clearly intended his 1932 book as a dystopia, Murray reports that the novel was "popular with American college students in the 1950s" for its portents of sexual liberation, and that the contemporary French novelist Michel Houellebecq, in the words of one of his characters, treats *Brave New World* as "exactly the sort of world we're trying to create, the world we want to live in." Murray himself, whose strong suit is Huxley's personal life rather than his literary production, plays up the respects in which the novel is a "critique of modern consumerism." To be sure, there are the planned obsolescence of consumer goods, the conditioned desire for empty recreations, and the replacement of God with the shade of Henry Ford. But this is superficial. A more penetrating view was taken by Rebecca West, who in a 1932 review of the book in the *Daily Telegraph* called it "the most serious religious work written for some years," and remarked that in one pivotal scene Huxley had "rewritten in terms of our age the chapter called 'The Grand Inquisitor' in *The Brothers*

---

*Matthew J. Franck is director of the William E. and Carol G. Simon Center on Religion and the Constitution at the Witherspoon Institute.*

FALL 2013 ~ 73

*Karamazov*.” (West’s comparison was discussed at length in these pages in Caitrin Nicol’s essay “*Brave New World* at 75,” Spring 2007.)

But an even more telling comparison can be made—that *Brave New World* is a modern counterpart to the “city in speech” built by Socrates and his young interlocutors in Plato’s *Republic*. Whether Huxley saw the similarities himself is far from clear. In neither the “Foreword” added to the 1946 edition nor his lengthy 1958 essay *Brave New World Revisited*, which is published together with the novel in some editions, does he indicate any consciousness of a parallel. Nor do his *Complete Essays* (published 2000–2002) shed light on this. His biographer Murray mentions no such connection in Huxley’s mind either; nor does his earlier biographer Sybille Bedford. Yet it may not be necessary to confirm any precise authorial intention on Huxley’s part to imitate Plato. Whereas Huxley’s other novels are largely forgotten today by the general public, and his later visits to the themes of *Brave New World* are those of a crank whose imaginative gifts have deserted him, in writing his greatest work he seems to have been in the grip of an idea larger than himself. Plato’s Socrates tells us in the *Apology* that when he “went to the poets” to “ask them thoroughly what they meant” in their greatest poems, he found to his surprise that “almost everyone present, so to speak, would have spoken better than the poets did about the poetry that they themselves had made.” For as Socrates said (not without some biting irony) in Plato’s *Ion*, “all the good epic poets speak all their fine poems not from art but by being inspired and possessed, and it is the same for the good lyric poets.” Perhaps during the mere four months it took Huxley to write *Brave New World*, he was “possessed” in this way and remained forever unconscious of his debt to Plato.

### **The Structure of Huxley’s World State**

From the first paragraph of the novel, we learn the motto of the World State of Huxley’s imagination: “Community, Identity, Stability.” This brings to mind Socrates’ question to Glaucon in *The Republic*: “Have we any greater evil for a city than what splits it and makes it many instead of one? Or a greater good than what binds it together and makes it one?” Socrates and Glaucon agree that “that city [is] best governed which is most like a single human being.” In the same vein, the individual in the World State is “just a cell in the social body.” As for stability, described by one of Huxley’s chief characters as “the primal and the ultimate need,” this is something Socrates cannot guarantee regarding his city in speech: he tells his young friends that their city is “so composed” as to be “hard to be moved,” but that “since

---

for everything that has come into being there is decay," even it will not "remain for all time." At the end of *Brave New World*, we have no reason to believe that Huxley's World Controllers have not conquered the problem of decay. They appear to have achieved a perfectly static perfect justice. But then, unlike the rulers in Socrates' city—unlike Socrates himself—they have wholly mastered a science that is (in Socrates' words) "sovereign of better and worse begettings." For the need to conquer human nature by eugenics is only the most obvious matter where Plato and Huxley meet on common ground. (All quotations from the *Republic* in this essay are drawn from Allan Bloom's translation.)

The necessity of eugenics is driven by another principle the two polities have in common: "one man, one art." Each cell in the social body has its peculiar work to do. As Plato's Socrates divides his city into three classes—the golden guardians, the silver auxiliaries, and the iron or bronze farmers and artisans—Huxley's World State has the five classes of Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta, and Epsilon. Socrates recognizes that he cannot keep his classes differentiated—hence he cannot keep the city stable—without keeping a "careful... watch" over the children born to the parents in each class, transferring up and down the social scale those children who are better fitted to be reared in another class than the one into which they were born. Ultimately, with respect to the gold class, Socrates opts for a concerted eugenics program that involves the destruction of marriage and the family and the concealment of every child's peculiar parentage, with childrearing handed over to a common nursery.

But Huxley does Socrates one better. The World State has completely severed sexual intercourse from procreation. No more viviparous reproduction; instead, the Hatchery and Conditioning Centre has taken over the whole work of producing each generation of citizens. Babies are made there on the assembly line by strictly selected *in vitro* fertilization and gestation, and their conditioning for their role in life begun even before they are "decanted." Special lines of "plus" and "minus" models of each class are manufactured, from "Alpha-Plus" to "Epsilon-Minus Semi-Moron." Descending to even more particularity, they are prepared for their precise adult jobs by doses of chemicals, exposure to heat and cold and other stimuli, and—after decanting—by early-childhood conditioning to like or dislike objects like books and flowers or experiences like darkness or sunshine. But will not the State need many workers identically made to do certain low-class jobs requiring mass manpower? That is solved in part by Bokanovsky's Process, a method akin to cloning that can produce as many as ninety-six copies of a single embryo.

---

In Plato's city, the sexes are generally equal in their participation in public life and work—but not quite. As Glaucon says to Socrates, they will assign “everything in common” to both sexes, “except that we use the females as weaker and the males as stronger.” Soon thereafter they agree that while there is no art “practiced by human beings in which the class of men doesn't excel that of women,” yet because there is “no practice relevant to the government of a city that is peculiar to woman,” and “the natures are scattered alike among both” sexes, the women must be educated as the men are and assigned the same duties. Socrates blithely leads Glaucon to neglect even the possibility that there is an art of mothering, and to agree to the joint exercise of the sexes, naked, in their gymnastic training. Conditioning over time, they say, will accustom the male and female guardians to this immodesty. Somehow love of the city will be all they think of when they see what would normally be other objects of their affection.

So also in Huxley's book, the sexes are in almost entire equality with one another. If with the banishment of viviparous reproduction the word “mother” is now an obscenity, why not? And yet, the equality is not quite complete—we never hear of a female World Controller or other high official. But the bad joke of Socrates' naked unisex gymnastics is retold in Huxley's early conditioning of both sexes to treat intercourse as play. Children at the Conditioning Centre, “naked in the warm June sunshine,” engage in “ordinary erotic play.” No need to restrain the natural sexual urges and channel them for eugenic purposes, as Socrates had to do. With reproduction cordoned off from sex—with every woman who is not hormonally engineered to be a sterile “freemartin” always going about equipped with her “Malthusian belt” of contraceptives, and strategically located Abortion Centres ready in case of accident—a wholly indiscriminate recreational sexuality can be unleashed, indeed encouraged, in both sexes.

Paramount for maintaining the basic structure of both Huxley's World State and Plato's city are their educational regimes. Socrates has his “noble lie”—a false tale about the creation of the city and its people that, if believed to be true, would guarantee citizens' loyalty to the city and at the same time contentedness about their fixed place in it—all shored up by a strict censorship of poetry to inculcate the most politically unifying opinions. Similarly, the World State has its regime of “hypnopædia” (sleep teaching), in which nocturnal repetitions of moral maxims drone into the ears of the children until their conditioned responses to virtually every social situation are automatic. Like Socrates' citizens who are schooled that they are “brothers and born of the earth” but fashioned by “the god” with the different metals in their natures, Huxley's are taught over and over that “every one belongs to

---

every one else,” that “all men are physico-chemically equal,” yet steadily conditioned to be unthinkingly content with their own station in life: “I’m really awfully glad I’m a Beta. . . . Oh no, I *don’t* want to play with Delta children.”

As they grow up, the children of the World State “learn to take dying as a matter of course,” undergoing “death conditioning” from an early age on field trips to the Hospital for the Dying, where men and women of sixty go to end lives that have been productive and pleasurable to the very end—sixty apparently being the upper limit at which all the powers of work and play can go on undimmed. Socrates too insists that his city’s young charges must “be told things that will make them fear death least,” so that “a decent man” will believe that for his fallen comrade “being dead is not a terrible thing.” But Socrates’ aim is to inculcate courage among warriors, a virtue of which there is no need in the World State, the scene of universal peace. Where there are no enemies, there is no need of soldiers, hence no need of physical courage in the face of violent death. Death comes peacefully, by prearrangement at a fixed age, in the World State. But the mystery of death is still frightening in itself, and so a kind of moral courage is still required, in the form (as Socrates puts it) of an “opinion produced by law through education about what—and what sort of thing—is terrible.”

### The Mastery of Eros

The ideal society needs more than political organization and proper education toward love of the state; it also requires that citizens’ private pleasures be rightly directed. Socrates defines moderation as “a certain kind of order and mastery of certain kinds of pleasures and desires.” Later in the *Republic*, he argues that there are three kinds of pleasures, corresponding to “three primary classes of human beings. . . : wisdom-loving, victory-loving, gain-loving.” This describes a clear hierarchy of pleasures and of people. In *Brave New World*, this hierarchy is flattened (with the possible exception of the World Controllers, about whom more anon). All the World State’s citizens appear to be gain-loving, seekers of the lowest pleasures. They play Obstacle Golf (their sports are as close as they come to being victory-loving); they go to full-sensory movie theaters, the “feelies” (in Huxley’s day the “talkies” were still new); they flit about in their helicopters from one empty entertainment to another. In the case of Alphas, for whom this endless round of pleasures might begin to pall, it is especially important that they conform to “their duty to be infantile, even against their inclination,” that they be adults at work and children at play. Perverse though it may be, this too is a certain kind of mastery of desire.

Yet there is an undercurrent of discontent in the World State. Despite all the planned breeding and conditioning, further steps are needed to keep a lid on potentially explosive passions—or to vent them safely. Most famously, there is *soma*, a narcotic that can be used daily, in moderate doses, to take a “holiday” from reality, with no hangover, depression, or withdrawal symptoms afterward. But *soma* is still not enough. The World State’s citizens need a monthly Violent Passion Surrogate, a hormonal treatment designed to produce in the person the “complete physiological equivalent of fear and rage,” but “without any of the inconveniences.” Likewise, women may need a Pregnancy Substitute now and then. And all citizens are expected to attend a regular Solidarity Service, a mockery of religious ritual culminating in a *soma*-induced orgy that is supposed to reinforce the individual’s total submersion in the community.

And it is just here, in the sacrifice of individuality, that Huxley’s leading characters display the World State’s rare failures. For eros is naturally directed toward the attainment of something or someone that is one’s own, uniquely—one’s own things, one’s own thoughts, one’s own accomplishments, one’s own lover. Lenina Crowne, a young worker at the Hatchery, finds she must struggle to be conventionally promiscuous. Something in her yearns for attachment to one man alone, but she cannot conquer her conditioning and see her way clearly to that desire, or articulate its object. When she meets John, the displaced son of civilization from the New Mexico Savage Reservation, she discovers the object of her desire. Is it merely his strange restraint and unattainability? Or is it something more? She cannot tell. She copes with her confusion, and with the anguish of his rejection of her, by doping up on *soma*, but still she is drawn to John at the very end.

One of Huxley’s central characters, Bernard Marx, is a misfit. In this uniform world, he stands out like a sore thumb: “He stood eight centimetres short of the standard Alpha height and was slender in proportion.” By the standards of his world, he is as misshapen and homely as Socrates was said to be. His physical inferiority has turned him inward, made him thoughtful. He has become a loner, a lover of solitude—something quite against the grain. He cannot endure the idle banter of his fellow men about sex and sports, he is embarrassed and inadequate around women, and he is made emptier rather than sated by the Solidarity Service. Bernard too has a problem with eros, in fact a bundle of problems. He wants an idealized Lenina but finds that the real Lenina leaves him empty when he has her. He wants to live his own life, think his own thoughts, wallow in his own broodings. Working in hypnopædia at the Conditioning Centre, he is aware of the behavior modification to which everyone including himself has been subjected, and in some

---

respects he is free of it by virtue of his deep knowledge of it. He has taken one step out of the cave of the World State. Hence he can look back and see the superficiality of life inside it, and he knows the value of true friendship.

Fortunately, Bernard has one true friend, Helmholtz Watson, a writer and teacher in the College of Emotional Engineering. Helmholtz seems to be Bernard's polar opposite: tall, strikingly handsome, with many conquests among women, and a complete social success. But for all his apparent well-adjustedness, Helmholtz, like Bernard, "had also become aware of his difference from the people who surrounded him." In Bernard he finds a kindred spirit. The one with a "physical shortcoming," the other with a "mental excess," they spend many hours together, talking about thoughts and feelings that are bottled up inside them and that no one else will understand. Helmholtz has "a feeling that I've got something important to say and the power to say it—only I don't know what it is, and I can't make any use of the power." As it turns out, Helmholtz has the eros of a poet in a society that has no need of poetry beyond the most banal slogans, jingles, and feelie screenplays.

Bernard and Helmholtz are risking great danger, and they are dangerous themselves. In a world that condemns privacy and stifles private thinking, they are loners. The society proclaims that "every one belongs to every one else," but they belong to each other, each enjoying the other's uniqueness as a person in a society that treats the individual as fungible. While the State insists on their being infantile and unquestioningly parroting what they have been taught—much as the people in Plato's famous allegory of the cave maintain that the shadows on the wall are reality—Bernard and Helmholtz struggle to be adults, to stake a claim to their own thoughts and actions. Rebelling against the ethic of play, they seek the life of leisure, mind to mind. They are the proto-philosopher and the proto-poet, waiting to be born anew and having more in common than Socrates lets on in the *Republic*. They are free men, or almost so, struggling to be so. Like Lenina, but even more than she, they cannot live down to the World State's notion of moderation.

### **The Poet Meets the Ruling Philosopher**

The world of these three characters—Bernard, Helmholtz, and Lenina—is turned inside out by Bernard's discovery of John, "the Savage," on his visit with Lenina to the Savage Reservation in New Mexico. John is the son of a "civilized" Beta woman, Linda, who became lost on a visit years earlier with Bernard's superior, the Director of the London Hatchery and

---

Conditioning Centre. Marooned with the Indians on the reservation, she discovers she is pregnant, and, far from an Abortion Centre, she suffers the shame of giving birth to the baby who grows up to be John. She cannot go back to civilization, and raises her son amidst the savages. Linda never adjusts to the “uncivilized” life, with its monogamous marriage, primitive amenities, and syncretic mix of Christianity and native American religion. Promiscuous as ever, she is branded a whore by the Indian women, even beaten and ostracized by them.

John suffers much the same ostracism, but manages to half-insinuate himself into the savage culture, with the help of one or two sympathetic adults. His mother teaches him to read English with a pamphlet she had with her when she was lost—an instruction manual for Beta workers in the Hatchery. But when her Indian boyfriend turns up a decayed copy of Shakespeare’s complete works, John is introduced to the formative experience of his life. The book becomes his constant companion, and he commits much of it to memory.

Bernard, who has feared his superior will punish his nonconformity with a transfer to Iceland, sees in John an opportunity to take preemptive revenge, as soon as he discovers that his boss is the young man’s father. He arranges to take the Savage and his mother back to London as an anthropological curiosity. Linda is ecstatic to be back in the world of unlimited *soma*, though there is no longer any place there for her, and after the initial shock of disgust she engenders due to her “decay” after twenty years among the savages, no one really takes an interest in her.

John, on the other hand, is a celebrity, and causes a tremendous (albeit temporary) inflation of the reputation of Bernard, who at first controls access to him. Part of the society’s fascination with John is that he is so mysterious. The “civilized” have been bred, conditioned, drugged, and entertained until strong emotions have become strange to them—as the World Controller tells a group of young pupils, “No pains have been spared to make your lives emotionally easy—to preserve you, so far as that is possible, from having emotions at all.” But John is a creature of passion who yearns for romantic love. The “civilized” sate every appetite the moment they feel it; John’s religious sensibility and Shakespearean moral vocabulary produce a strong sense of sin and temptation, and impose an ethic of honor and restraint upon him.

John rebels against Bernard’s exploitation of him, befriends the poetic Helmholtz, and trembles with desire for Lenina, only to react with revulsion when she throws herself at him. He watches his mother die of an overconsumption of *soma* in the Hospital for the Dying. This is the

---

final straw, as he is maddened by a troupe of young “twins” brought in to watch her die for the sake of their “death conditioning,” violating—in John’s eyes—the dignity of his mother’s passing. His reaction is to disrupt the distribution of the daily *soma* ration to the hospital’s Delta workers, first out of pity for them and then out of anger, proclaiming that “I’ll *make* you be free whether you want to or not.” He only succeeds in causing a riot that brings Bernard and Helmholtz to the scene, as well as the police (who specialize, naturally, in nonviolent crowd control).

This is the rupture that brings John to the attention of the Resident World Controller for Western Europe, Mustapha Mond. Mond has appeared in several earlier scenes, but now he takes center stage for two chapters (16 and 17) that contain a pivotal scene (the part of the book praised by Rebecca West as reminiscent of Dostoyevsky). What ensues is a kind of Platonic dialogue between John and Mond, the poet and the philosopher-king.

In the *Republic*, following the allegory of the cave, Socrates tells Glaucon that “those who are without education and experience of truth would never be adequate stewards of a city, nor would those who have been allowed to spend their time in education continuously to the end.” Therefore, in their city in speech, they will “compel the best natures” to take up philosophy, but they will conjure them in the name of justice to return from their studies to rule the city, for “you we have begotten for yourselves and for the rest of the city like leaders and kings in hives; you have been better and more perfectly educated and more able to participate in both lives.”

Exchange “philosopher” for “scientist,” and this is exactly Mond’s situation. He relates a little of his past to John, Bernard, and Helmholtz:

“I was a pretty good physicist in my time. Too good—good enough to realize that all our science is just a cookery book, with an orthodox theory of cooking that nobody’s allowed to question, and a list of recipes that mustn’t be added to except by special permission from the head cook. I’m the head cook now. But I was an inquisitive young scullion once. I started doing a bit of cooking on my own. Unorthodox cooking, illicit cooking. A bit of real science, in fact.” He was silent.

“What happened?” asked Helmholtz Watson.

The Controller sighed. “Very nearly what’s going to happen to you young men. I was on the point of being sent to an island.”

Mond was given the choice between exile and being groomed for “an actual Controllership. I chose this and let the science go,” he tells them

---

somewhat wistfully, and then, “in a brisker tone,” he utters words that could have come straight from Socrates’ account of the relation between the philosopher-king and his city: “Well, duty’s duty. One can’t consult one’s own preferences.” Realizing in his new role that “truth’s a menace, science is a public danger,” Mond must now maintain the regime of the noble lies, act as a censor, and exile Bernard and Helmholtz to an island where they will be permitted to pursue truth and beauty unmolested, in isolation from the World State’s absolute imperative of “comfort and happiness.”

In an earlier scene, we see what a burden Mond carries. Reading a paper titled “A New Theory of Biology,” which offers a “mathematical treatment of the conception of purpose” in nature (a challenge to the regnant Darwinian materialism), the Controller makes a notation forbidding the paper’s publication, but not without a twinge of regret:

A pity, he thought, as he signed his name. It was a masterly piece of work. But once you began admitting explanations in terms of purpose—well, you didn’t know what the result might be. It was the sort of idea that might easily de-condition the more unsettled minds among the higher castes—make them lose their faith in happiness as the Sovereign Good and take to believing, instead, that the goal was somewhere beyond, somewhere outside the present human sphere; that the purpose of life was not the maintenance of well-being, but some intensification and refining of consciousness, some enlargement of knowledge. Which was, the Controller reflected, quite possibly true. But not, in the present circumstance, admissible. He picked up his pen again, and under the words “*Not to be published*” drew a second line, thicker and blacker than the first; then sighed. “What fun it would be,” he thought, “if one didn’t have to think about happiness!”

The Controller, like Socrates’ philosopher-king, is a free man in the truest sense, while voluntarily enslaving himself to a duty to others. Only a truly free man can look after the interests of all the unfree souls in his charge, with a full understanding of the threats to their happiness and to the stability of the society. Only he can view his city from the outside, as it were—from a perspective external to, and higher than, the cave—and then devote himself wholeheartedly to the justice that prevails inside it.

Mond’s freedom is reflected in his library, which he reveals privately to John. In the presence of Bernard and Helmholtz, he has already shown that he knows Shakespeare as well as the Savage does. After their departure, alone with John, he opens a safe to display a “whole collection

of pornographic old books” that he keeps in secret: a Bible, Thomas à Kempis’s *The Imitation of Christ*, William James’s *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, and other works of religion and philosophy. To John’s indignant question of why he keeps these “books about God” concealed from everyone else, the Controller replies that “they’re old; they’re about God hundreds of years ago. Not about God now.” And so begins an intense exchange between Mond and the Savage about the presence or absence of God in the world. But Mond’s answer about the old books’ concealment is too facile, and he surely knows it. The books are not old and irrelevant. They are old and *powerful*. He tells John his real reason a little later:

God isn’t compatible with machinery and scientific medicine and universal happiness. You must make your choice. Our civilization has chosen machinery and medicine and happiness. That’s why I have to keep these books locked up in the safe.

Like the work of the young biologist that Mond censors, the books in his safe are dangerous because they are persuasive. And they are persuasive because they contain much that is true. Were they as obsolete as Mond pretends at first—were they merely amusing remnants of an ignorant past—the books could be tolerated. Perhaps they would gather dust on library shelves, unread because they have nothing to teach us and no power to move us. Perhaps they would gradually disappear over the centuries, discarded freely for the same reasons. But they would not need to be *suppressed*. Mond himself tacitly recognizes the power of these old books: he has pored over many of them, has committed passages of Shakespeare to memory, and can turn to favorite pages of, say, Cardinal Newman in a moment. The books are Mond’s private companions, his refuge from the closed society he supervises. He is “wise” enough to see their appeal without being outwardly moved by it. But he knows others lack his wisdom.

John, the child of Shakespeare, recoils from the Controller’s arguments for the World State’s somnolent stability and against the old books:

“But I don’t want comfort. I want God, I want poetry, I want real danger, I want freedom, I want goodness. I want sin.”

“In fact,” said Mustapha Mond, “you’re claiming the right to be unhappy.”

“All right then,” said the Savage defiantly, “I’m claiming the right to be unhappy.”

And so their dialogue draws to a close. Forbidden by Mond to join Bernard and Helmholtz in their island exile, John banishes himself to the English countryside, where his failure to escape the curiosity of the civilized ends in the manner of a Shakespearean tragic protagonist, with his murder of Lenina and his own suicide.

But the Savage's challenge to the Controller lingers in the reader's mind, as Huxley intends that it should. As Mond himself admits,

Actual happiness always looks pretty squalid in comparison with the over-compensations for misery. And, of course, stability isn't nearly so spectacular as instability. And being contented has none of the glamour of a good fight against misfortune, none of the picturesqueness of a struggle with temptation, or a fatal overthrow by passion or doubt. Happiness is never grand.

And Huxley does not make it easy for us; the verbal combat between John and Mond is not pitched unevenly, with John's passion and poetry winning easily. The surprise, for those of us who share John's repugnance at the World State, is how very good the Controller's arguments are. Between Shakespeare and Our Ford ("or Our Freud, as, for some inscrutable reason, he chose to call himself whenever he spoke of psychological matters"), the battle is truly of titanic dimensions.

### **The Philosopher Confronts the Ruling Poets**

There is something similarly seductive, and similarly repulsive, about the "justice" in Socrates' city in speech. As the World State has banished Shakespeare and every other call to the higher manifestations of eros, so Socrates banishes Homer. In his first discussion of the poetry to be permitted in the city, Socrates insists on the revision of what the poets say about the gods and heroes: they must never be seen to lie, to deceive, to exhibit weakness or base passion, or to be the cause of anything but the good. And all tragedy and comedy must be reformed to encourage only the imitation of the virtues. But this first assault on the poets is not enough. When Socrates returns to the subject in Book X, he banishes the poets altogether, and public enemy number one is Homer. Turning to "tragedy and its leader, Homer," Socrates remarks that "we hear from some that these men know all arts and all things human that have to do with virtue and vice, and the divine things too." It is precisely on this score that "there is an old quarrel between philosophy and poetry": both philosophy and poetry lay claim to a complete account of the things that matter most to us regarding how we should live.

---

Socrates makes an argument against Homer that is as facile as the argument Mustapha Mond makes against Shakespeare and the other old books in his safe—and as with Mond, it is surely *knowingly* facile on Socrates' part. "Dear Homer," he demands, "tell us which of the cities was better governed thanks to you." None can be named. Socrates and Glaucon then agree that there is no evidence that Homer "was in private a leader in education for certain men who cherished him for his intercourse and handed down a certain Homeric way of life to those who came after." But these are tests appropriate for measuring the influence of a philosopher—for Socrates himself, for instance. They are not apt tests for a poet's influence, which is more indirect and indistinct, but also more pervasive in the case of the great poets. Shakespeare gave to the English-speaking world an entire moral language, a cultural discourse regarding love, heroism, honor, justice, wit, treachery—in short, all the virtues and vices—that still has great power today, centuries after he lived a life nearly as mysterious to us as Homer's was to the Greeks. And so with Homer. The entire Greek culture could be said to be his offspring. Its notions of manliness, of courage, of nobility, of striving, of suffering, of piety, all bear his imprint. The notion that there was no "Homeric way of life" is absurd on its face.

As Mond recognizes the persuasive power of the books he keeps hidden, so Socrates recognizes how dangerous his adversary is, in terms that belie his earlier argument:

When even the best of us hear Homer or any other of the tragic poets imitating one of the heroes in mourning and making quite an extended speech with lamentation, or, if you like, singing and beating his breast, you know that we enjoy it and that we give ourselves over to following the imitation; suffering along with the hero in all seriousness, we praise as a good poet the man who most puts us in this state.

If it were not the case that "we ourselves are charmed by them"—if he believed his initial belittling of their influence—Socrates would not treat Homer and the tragedians as such a serious threat to the politics informed by philosophy. Like the books in the Controller's safe, Homer must go because he has so much truth to impart to us.

But Socrates has a problem named Glaucon. In the first colloquy on censoring the poets, in Books II and III of the *Republic*, Socrates' interlocutor was Adeimantus, the more austere of the two brothers with whom he conducts most of his conversation. Perhaps it was not so hard to get Adeimantus to agree to that initial program of censorship. But in Book X,

when Socrates mounts his final and total assault on Homer and the poets, his interlocutor is Glaucon, the more passionate brother. With his erotic, poetic nature, Glaucon will be a hard sell for the complete exile of Homer and company. Something will have to fill the void of their absence in Glaucon's life. Man cannot live by philosophy alone; at least Glaucon cannot, even with the shimmering image of the Idea of the Good placed before his eyes.

So Socrates tells Glaucon the myth of Er, a tale of the immortal soul's travels after the death of the earthly body, and of the rewards that await the virtuous and vicious in choosing their next revolution on the wheel of life. This final work of imagination, which concludes the *Republic*, is not a patch on the epic poetry of Homer; it is far too flat and unappealing to meet the need of the soul for soaring erotic passion, and is comically inadequate as a source of inspiration. Ironically, the myth itself depends decisively on the listener's knowledge of the very Homeric tales that Socrates has insisted on censoring, since characters known to us only (or originally) from Homer appear in it, such as Ajax, Agamemnon, and Odysseus. The lives of such characters are essential background knowledge for whatever vitality or interest the myth of Er possesses—which isn't much.

Surely Socrates hopes that one central lesson in the myth penetrates any resistance Glaucon may still be feeling: that virtue, if it is to be its fullest self, must be the product of reason. In the myth, the man who draws the first lot for the next life he will lead chooses "the greatest tyranny," which is to say, the unhappiest life possible. He chooses tyranny because he "lived in an orderly regime in his former life, participating in virtue by habit, without philosophy." Others like him, whose previous lives left them "unpracticed by labors" and untested by adversity, chose in similarly unwise fashion, while for the most part those who had suffered misfortunes—and who perhaps lived in disorderly regimes—chose more wisely. But the only sure path to happiness, in one life after another, is to philosophize. "Virtue by habit," Socrates tells Glaucon, is unreliable when the chips are down. That is to say, virtue formed by poetry is insufficient. The tales full of fascinating characters, of events, of fortunes and misfortunes, insinuate themselves into the soul from an early age, when it is "most plastic, and each thing assimilates itself to the model whose stamp anyone wishes to give to it." Yet they form us without reflection on our part, and leave us in some sense thoughtless, even if we are fortunate enough to have been made virtuous by habit.

But philosophy makes one "a seeker and student" of the "knowledge to distinguish the good and the bad life, and so everywhere and always to choose the better from among those that are possible." If man cannot live

---

without poetry, as Socrates' myth of Er concedes in more ways than one, neither can he live consistently well without philosophy. The man who takes up philosophy will see what poetry can only imperfectly intimate, "the most important choice for him in life and death," namely how to choose "between the worse and the better life."

### The Promise of Progress

And that, of course, has been the whole point of the *Republic* from the beginning. The city in speech is not a blueprint for the actualization of perfect justice, notwithstanding the all-too-common shrill denunciations of Plato as a proto-totalitarian. As Glaucon comes to understand, the city they have been designing "has its place in speeches, since I don't suppose it exists anywhere on earth." Just so, agrees Socrates; the whole dialogue has been about how a man can "found a city within himself," and how he can "mind the things of this city alone, and of no other."

In its political teaching, the *Republic* is as much a dystopian poem as is *Brave New World*. With every step in his radical project of instituting uncompromisingly perfect justice—from the noble lie, to the abolition of the family among the guardians, to the eugenics program that brushes aside the incest taboo with a wave of the hand, to the impossible proposal that the city be ruled by philosophers, to the absurd suggestion that the city be founded by exiling all of an existing city's residents over ten years of age—Socrates reveals humanity's inability to overcome the limits that our nature imposes. We love the good, but we also love what is our own. Nature draws us toward other particular persons whom we embrace and love as our own; it gets in the way of our commitment to the collective good of the community, which has, in the best case, its own just yet conflicting demands on our love. Nature, or nature's God, has made us embodied souls, or ensouled bodies. We can live neither wholly for others nor wholly for ourselves, and this is no less true for the philosopher than for others. The project of perfect justice in which each of us is a "cell in the social body" is not within our grasp.

Or is it? Aldous Huxley makes us think this question through again. The modern devotion to the mastery of nature—including the mastery of human nature—may make Socrates' ironic project a horrifying possibility. Already we are debating the practical reality of matters that were still only hypothetical when Huxley wrote his book. We seriously debate whether it is ethical to clone human beings, or to exploit stem cells drawn from human embryos that are killed in the process, or to employ other

technologies for the biological “enhancement” of our lives. Mappers of the human genome dream of the day when the misfortunes of our frail, mortal nature will be overcome by the discovery of the genetic information that will serve to conquer every physical affliction. Ambitious neuroscientists aspire to unravel the mind-brain conundrum, revealing how every aspect of our behavior springs from the wiring of our cerebral circuits—perhaps as driven by our evolutionary imperatives.

Some of these scientific projects may be many years away from fruition. Some may be altogether bootless. But many people would hail every new discovery in the biological and behavioral sciences as advancing the cause of human freedom and each new technological innovation as empowering free individuals and weakening the old structures of the nation-state.

But if anything like the eugenic and behavioral technologies envisioned by Huxley were to come to pass, who would control them, and how? Would all of us have the resources to “enhance” ourselves and our offspring until every one of us was an “Alpha Double Plus”? And if we did, would not such an experiment quickly collapse in failure, as did the World Controllers’ experiment in the year A.F. 473 with an all-Alpha colony on Cyprus?

*Someone* must control science and its uses. Someone always does. Will it be scientists themselves? Individual consumers in a free marketplace? Thoughtful citizens in free democratic republics? Or a new class of Mustapha Mond? We may think that Mond goes too far when, in his conversation with the young friends in *Brave New World*, he says that “Science is dangerous; we have to keep it most carefully chained and muzzled.” But we can at least agree that, like Socrates’ young guardians, the “noble dogs” of science must be trained to be “at the same time gentle and great-spirited.” In this age of looming bioethical promises and challenges, that may be the greatest task before us.