THE PROBLEM OF STABILITY in Huxley’s BRAVE NEW WORLD

World Controller Mustapha Mond argues in favor of a “stable” society of “happy” citizens. No more striving, no more suffering. No disease. No pain. But there are sacrifices: namely emotion, individuality, freedom, love, family, religion, art, and the intellectual pursuits of science, philosophy, and history. Does Huxley stack the deck? Is this a genuine argument or anti-science, anti-progress propaganda?

We begin to think about these tradeoffs very early into the book.

Chapter Three: Maintaining Stability in the Brave New World

History, art, science, and religion are all threats to the Brave New World because they are too destabilizing.

- **History** is destabilizing because it understands civilization as a process, not a finished product; to see society this way might be too “empowering” and people would want to act on their new “ideas”
- **Art** (as opposed to propaganda) is destabilizing because it can evoke powerful thoughts and emotions that move us and change us in ways that can’t always be controlled; art can be inspirational—people might be inspired to see the world in a new light and then act in ways that can’t be easily controlled
- **Science** is destabilizing because it opens new frontiers and because it establishes “truths” which may have the effect of undermining happiness, pleasure, contentment. Truth can be discomforting.
- **Religion** is destabilizing because it offers an alternative ideology, an alternative morality, an alternative ethics—alternative attachments—all of which may undermine that sense of contentment and fulfillment with the Brave New World ideology, morality, and ethics.

Huxley seems pretty squarely against all of this sacrifice. Where do you stand? What do you think happens to a culture that is willing to substitute knowledge for ignorance? Art for cheap entertainment? What does that do to us over time? (Or right away?) What are the consequences of suppressing scientific advancement because it doesn’t suit your ideology? Do you agree or disagree with Huxley that these trends exist in our own culture?

“Stability” is the primary value in the Brave New World (along with “Community” and “Identity”). Without stability, the wheels wouldn’t turn. Mond often uses this metaphor of the “wheels.” What are the “wheels”?

The wheels are industrial capitalism: the process of creating supply and demand. Tending the wheels means tending to supply and demand, making sure they are absolutely balanced, so that economic stability can be achieved.

Would it be such a terrible thing if demand never exceeded supply, and our needs were always met comfortably? What would we have to accomplish to ensure that demand never exceeded supply? What’s the objection?
To create stability, obstacles like religion had to be overcome. How did the controllers get rid of religion?

- By providing a better “opiate” (Soma, “Christianity without tears”—the consolation without the mythology)
- By eliminating as far as possible any need for consolation, or explanation of “purpose” (Mond argues that Christianity, with its notions of “heaven” and the “immortal soul” were ineffective anyway)
- By replacing the image of “God” with the image of “Society” as the force larger than oneself that people “need” to believe in to be happy

The function of religion, in Mond’s mind, is to console and explain, to cling to something that endures beyond one’s vanishing self. The controllers merely substitute the State as that force that provides consolation and “meaning.” If the State can provide the same sense of meaning and purpose that religion used to provide, can you object to his logic?

The Brave New World had to be created forcefully, violently. Humanity did not go silently into this good night. A lot of blood was spilled to create this triumphant stability. But Mond acknowledges that force alone can never maintain stability. Ultimately the battle must be won for hearts and minds because mere force will fail in the end. But why?

Force creates opposition, rebellion, protest. You can beat it down but it will keep cropping up. You have to keep fighting the same war over and over and over again, and that depletes your resources. And so, in addition to “mere force,” the Brave New World relies on additional methods for conquering hearts and minds.

- First and foremost there’s conditioning, propaganda, emotional engineering.
- Also important: destroy all remnants or monuments associated with the past—leave nothing old behind as a reminder of alternatives.
- Convince people that you are giving them what they most want: if they think they have what they want they’ll remain indefinitely distracted and passive. In the Brave New World, people all the material comforts. They have steady work, lots of leisure time for thrilling entertainment, sex, and sports, a drug that guarantees the end of all pain, lots of friends they have a lot in common with, and prolonged youth till death. Not a bad start!

**STABILITY IS THE PRIMARY OBJECTIVE**

Mond argues that social stability is the modern world’s primary objective because it’s stability that gives rise to utopia. And since you can’t have social stability without stable individuals, every scientific and technological theory is deployed in the effort to stabilize the individual, which means, in effect, getting rid of individuality. In Mond’s philosophy, stability is the utopian key to paradise. It’s the key that gets us in the door.

In the Brave New World, stability is created biologically, psychologically, and chemically.

- **The BIOLOGICAL solution: stability in a test tube.**  
  The Bokanovsky Process creates “sameness” and eliminates, as far as possible, all personal identity and “individuality.” *What is so dangerous about the individual in the Brave New World?*
- **The PSYCHOLOGICAL solution: stability through “social predestination.”** Conditioning and hypnopaedia (sleep teaching) all but eliminate free will, decision-making, choice. Everyone is pre-conditioned to want to do what they have to do, and *a priori* truths are pre-programmed to be mindlessly accepted. 62,400 repetitions = 1 truth. For instance, no one questions the Brave New World premise that “everyone belongs to everyone else” or that society is more important than any one individual. *What would happen if people began to think critically about some of these assumptions? What assumptions underlie our own culture, and are we as uncritical about them as these Brave New Worlders?*
• The CHEMICAL solution: stability in a pill.
In *Brave New World Revisited*, Huxley explains: “The daily Soma ration was an insurance against personal maladjustment, social unrest and the spread of subversive ideas. Religion, Karl Marx declared, is the opium of the people. In the Brave New World this situation was reversed. Opium, or rather, Soma, was the people’s religion. Like religion, the drug had power to console and compensate, it called up visions of another, better world, it offered hope, strengthened faith and promoted charity” (ch. viii). *How does soma compare to the drugs developed, legally and illegally, today?*

What about us? What gives us a sense of stability? What do we rely on to create order, or a sense of order? Are there the same or different (or any) forces acting on us that keep us from making trouble?

**SOMA: ecstasy or oblivion?**

How do Brave New Worlders use soma?

• To escape from emotional pain or any mental strain; to switch off any kind of difficult feeling or painful event.
• To recreate; to take a pleasant “holiday.”
• To lose consciousness of individuality, to meld into a communal whole.
• To enhance ecstatic orgies.
• To switch on a feelings of well being, comfort, pleasure, hallucinatory pleasant sensation.

*How does soma compare to our legal and/or illegal recreational, or medicinal psychotropic drugs? How does it compare to your own conception of a utopian “wonder drug”?*

In what ways is SOMA a “wonder drug” and in what ways does it underwhelm?

**Soma seems great…**

• It’s great how soma provides instant relief, escape, well being—instant comfort and numbness—no pain. If we can take aspirin to relieve our headaches without feeling guilty, why not have a bottle of soma around to relieve our heartaches?
• It’s simple and safe. It has no side effects or consequences unless you consciously, repeatedly overdose.
• It provides protection against any trauma by raising an “impenetrable wall” between your mind and the “actual universe.”

The “wonder drug” tag hangs very loosely and is liable to fall off if you pull it just a little. The “impenetrable wall,” seems at first like “protection,” but on second glance it might seem like something else. Who does that wall benefit, the individual or the ruling powers who are interested in keeping the individual from feeling anything? Would it hurt people to feel pain? Isn’t pain an important source of growth? (No pain, no gain?) Isn’t pain what makes us empathize with the world around us, what makes us sensitive to other people? Furthermore, if you are walling everything out, you are equally walling everything in. The impenetrable wall may as well be a chemical prison. Maybe the prisons of the future will be in the form of a pill instead of a jail cell.

**…but what is not so wonderful about Soma?**

• It controls rather than enriches people. (The riot scene in chapter 14.)
• It disconnects people from one another rather than connects them. Can you think of any scenes in the novel that illustrate this? (Linda escapes all of her problems with soma. She abandons John completely.)
• It makes all personal growth impossible. (Because soma is such an easy solution to her problems, Lenina will need to invest any effort to understand Bernard or John.)
• It makes people “amoral”—it’s taken “hedonistically,” for the pure pleasure it provides, and for no other reason. Because it blinds us to tragedy, we end up incapable of empathy. We are amoral because we just don’t care. Why should we? Why would we?
• It is one of the instant gratifications that contribute to keeping people in a “childlike” or “infantile” state.

**What would a real wonder drug be like?**

A real wonder drug would be life enriching, not annihilating; it would act as a catalyst for metaphysical discovery and insight, mystical epiphany, intellectual breakthrough—a real wonder drug would reinforce our most cherished values and ideals, not destroy them or sever us from them as soma seems to do.

Some critics like David Pearce argue that Huxley gets it all wrong in *Brave New World*—that a “post-Darwinian” human-engineered “paradise” or utopia is not only possible but probable, and that we have to stop prejudicing ourselves against it by slanted books like this one. Pearce in particular has argued at length about the ways in which Huxley’s world is a straw-man that’s easy to hate. He exploits our fear of communist totalitarianism and rampant capitalism, and our reservations about Pavlovian-style conditioning and eugenics in an unfair way, by making it seem like happiness has to come at the expense of our most treasured values like “motherhood,” “home,” “family,” “freedom,” and “love.” In exchange for these we don’t even get real happiness but something insipid and inferior that’s not worthy of the name. Pearce seems to think Huxley’s novel is more like propaganda than art, feeding us an emotionally compelling but stacked argument that unnecessarily prejudices us against progress. The “transhuman” (or “post-human” as he sometimes calls it) world that Pearce and others imagine is a world where people “will be endowed with a greater capacity for love, empathy, and emotional depth.” Drugs (much more powerful than soma) will be available to help us reach new states of thought and emotion now inconceivable. Freedom and personal potential will be enriched, not obliterated as they are in *Brave New World*.

Pearce may be right; Huxley may not envision the kind of future it’s possible to envision in 2005. He is unaware of our modern drugs, modern advances in bioengineering, and nanotechnology. Real transhumans may prize diversity and have lots of imagination. New drugs may improve us mentally rather than reduce us to unconscious imbeciles. They may support our morality rather than destroy it. But the novel can be wrong about utopia and still be right as a satire. Is Huxley’s satire relevant to our world today?

**CHAPTER 16 and 17: A Debate**

Mond argues for the Brave New World definition of “happiness” (p. 220).

*Happiness is:*

• People getting what they want and never wanting what they can’t get
• Safety, health, tranquility, knowing and liking your “place,” your proper role
• No fear of death
• No family hassles, no responsibilities or attachments or sorrows

It sounds plausibly utopian, doesn’t it? If you think about it, that could be Adam and Eve in the Garden before they ate the apple. But this Paradise has a few modern flourishes that don’t make it into *Genesis:*

• Soma to switch off pain should something go wrong
• Conditioning so that you never behave incorrectly, disobediently, badly
• An endless supply of stimulating entertainment

*Happiness is NOT:*

• Liberty, freedom (too many bad decisions)
• Truth
• Equality (too much equality upsets the balance of the “wheels”)
The reasoning behind Mond’s philosophy seems to go something like this:

A necessary condition for happiness is stability. [major premise]
Stability is created by suppressing all change. [minor premise]
A necessary condition for happiness is the suppression of all change. [conclusion] / [major premise]
To suppress all change, truth, emotion, freedom must be suppressed. [minor premise]
A necessary condition for happiness is the suppression of truth, emotion, and freedom. [conclusion]

You may take issue with Mond’s conclusions, but how will you disprove his premises? Another question: What kinds of premises and conclusions would you argue given the same problem of defining and creating happiness?

Mond admits that “Happiness is a hard master—particularly other people’s happiness. A much harder master…than truth…” What is so difficult about the pursuit of happiness? What makes happiness such a hard master, so problematic?

But Mond insists that “universal happiness” is what keeps the wheels turning, what keeps the social order spinning “productively.” (But for who, for what, is another question.) If it’s true, as Mond insists, that “truth and beauty” are just cogs in the wheels and they can be exchanged for “happiness and comfort” is that an acceptable trade? If you had to choose, which would you prefer: truth and beauty (and instability) or happiness and comfort (and stability)? Do you agree or disagree with Huxley’s critique of modern culture: that it has embraced “comfort” over “truth”?

Mond explains how the Nine Years War led people to abandon their liberty in favor of “peace” and “security.” They sacrificed their freedom in the effort to gain social stability. How different is this from what we did here, passing the Patriot Act immediately after 9/11, uncritically, without carefully reading it, examining its implications or debating it in any way; even now the general public hasn’t fully re-examined or discussed its merits or shortcomings.

Mond, though he is a cheerleader for the brave new world, says he “likes” Helmholtz Watson’s “spirit”—the way he rejects comfort—but this is a real weakness in Huxley’s characterization of Mond. It’s seems to be Huxley himself who admires Helmholtz Watson and he intrudes upon Mond to make sure we know it. Mond would never approve of individual “spirit,” and he would find Helmholtz’s rejection of “comfort” stupid.

In Chapter 17, Mond debates John alone, explaining why he’s rejected God and religion, what makes the Brave New World independent of religion. God just isn’t needed.

Cardinal Newman is there to help Mond establish that we only “need” God in old age, when our capacity for sensation is so diminished that there’s a void that opens up—we cling to something that we hope won’t diminish, a “reality, an absolute everlasting truth.” Mond makes Society that everlasting truth; John clings to God. Does one or the other have the greater claim to “truth” or “reality” in your view?

If God exists, John argues, then you have a reason to be “virtuous,” because God demands that. This is an expression for the moral responsibility of the individual. But if Society is the absolute truth then you have no need of the virtues, Mond responds. What you need is a lot of pleasant vices. Self-indulgence keeps the social wheels turning, keeps the factories humming.

But what about God as “justice”—what about reward and punishment? Mond counters that it’s all human justice in the end; “Providence takes its cue from men.” (p. 236). It’s people who dictate the law, who organize society. The rest is imaginary, inconsequential. There is no “spirit” that continues after the body is gone.

Mond argues, like Cardinal Newman, that “independence” is an unnatural state, that people need to belong to something greater than themselves. Religion, the idea of God, fulfills that need, but in the Brave New World, society can fill it just as well, if not better. Religious practice is irrelevant.
John argues that the Gods have manifested themselves by the way humanity is degraded in this new world, by its spiritual poverty, its immorality. He argues for a moral code that transcends individuals and even societies—a higher law that’s immutable and unchanging. He’s appalled at the vices, but Mond has already explained that vices are necessary for social stability, and that the virtues are absolutely unnecessary. Heroism is passé. Virtue is irrelevant.


John wants to earn comfort and love. His traditions have taught him that comfort and love are valuables that come at a high cost, after much self-sacrifice, after one’s proven oneself worthy in some way. To gain well being without cost is cheating, he believes, so he wants to pay the price…through suffering comes wisdom, as the adage goes. Mond explains that in the Brave New World wisdom is irrelevant, unnecessary, and that suffering when one has the means to alleviate suffering is backwards and stupid.

They reach an impasse: John wants the human as is—warts and all; Mond wants the transhuman. It’s a standoff; neither side is convinced by the other. They square off stubbornly in the end (p. 240):

“We prefer to do things comfortably.”
“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.”
“Not to mention the right to grow old and ugly and impotent; the right to have syphilis and cancer; the right to have too little to eat; the right to be lousy; the right to live in constant apprehension of what may happen to-morrow; the right to catch typhoid; the right to be tortured by unspeakable pains of every kind.” There was a long silence.
“I claim them all,” said the Savage at last.
Mustapha Mond shrugged his shoulders. “You're welcome,” he said.

But has it been a fair argument, or did Huxley, as David Pearce charges, “stack the deck”? Is he guilty of trapping us with logical fallacies?