Culture and the Individual

Aldous Huxley

BETWEEN CULTURE and the individual the relationship is, and always has been, strangely ambivalent. We are at once the beneficiaries of our culture and its victims. Without culture, and without that precondition of all culture, language, man would be no more than another species of baboon. It is to language and culture that we owe our humanity. And "What a piece of work is a man!" says Hamlet: "How noble in reason! how infinite in faculties! . . . in action how like an angel! in apprehension, how like a god!" But, alas, in the intervals of being noble, rational and potentially infinite,

> *man, proud man,*
> *Dressed in a little brief authority,*
> *Most ignorant of what he is most assured,*
> *His glassy essence, like an angry ape,*
> *Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven*
> *As make the angels weep.*

Genius and angry ape, player of fantastic tricks and godlike reasoner-in all these roles individuals are the products of a language and a culture. Working on the twelve or thirteen billion neurons of a human brain, language and culture have given us law, science, ethics, philosophy; have made possible all the achievements of talent and of sanctity. They have also given us fanaticism, superstition and dogmatic bumptiousness; nationalistic idolatry and mass murder in the name of God; rabble-rousing propaganda and organized Iying. And, along with the salt of the earth, they have given us, generation after generation, countless millions of hypnotized conformists, the predestined victims of power-hungry rulers who are themselves the victims of all that is most senseless and inhuman in their cultural tradition.

Thanks to language and culture, human behavior can be incomparably more intelligent, more original, creative and flexible than the behavior of animals, whose brains are too small to accommodate the number of neurons necessary for the invention of language and the transmission of accumulated knowledge. But, thanks again to language and culture, human beings often behave with a stupidity, a lack of realism, a total inappropriateness, of which animals are incapable.

Trobriand Islander or Bostonian, Sicilian Catholic or Japanese Buddhist, each of us is born into some culture and passes his life within its confines. Between every human consciousness and the rest of the world stands an invisible fence, a network of traditional thinking-and-feeling patterns, of secondhand notions that have turned into axioms, of ancient slogans revered as divine revelations. What we see through the meshes of this net is never, of course, the unknowable "thing in itself." It is not even, in most cases, the thing as it impinges upon our senses and as our organism spontaneously reacts to it. What we ordinarily take in and respond to is a curious mixture of immediate experience with culturally conditioned symbol, of sense impressions with preconceived ideas about the nature of things. And by most people the symbolic elements in this cocktail of awareness are felt to be more important than the elements contributed by immediate experience. Inevitably so, for, to those who accept their culture totally and uncritically, words in the familiar language do not stand (however inadequately) for things. On the contrary, things stand for familiar words. Each unique event of their ongoing life is instantly and automatically classified as yet another concrete illustration of one of the verbalized, culture-hallowed

abstractions drummed into their heads by childhood conditioning.

It goes without saying that many of the ideas handed down to us by the transmitters of culture are eminently sensible and realistic. (If they were not, the human species would now be extinct.) But, along with these useful concepts, every culture hands down a stock of unrealistic notions, some of which never made any sense, while others may once have possessed survival value, but have now, in the changed and changing circumstances of ongoing history, become completely irrelevant. Since human beings respond to symbols as promptly and unequivocally as they respond to the stimuli of unmediated experience, and since most of them naively believe that culture-hallowed words about things are as real as, or even realer than their perceptions of the things themselves, these outdated or intrinsically nonsensical notions do enormous harm. Thanks to the realistic ideas handed down by culture, mankind has survived and, in certain fields, progresses. But thanks to the pernicious nonsense drummed into every individual in the course of his acculturation, mankind, though surviving and progressing, has always been in trouble. History is the record, among other things, of the fantastic and generally fiendish tricks played upon itself by culture-maddened humanity. And the hideous game goes on.

What can, and what should, the individual do to improve his ironically equivocal relationship with the culture in which he finds himself embedded? How can he continue to enjoy the benefits of culture without, at the same time, being stupefied or frenziedly intoxicated by its poisons? How can he become discriminatingly acculturated, rejecting what is silly or downright evil in his conditioning, and holding fast to that which makes for humane and intelligent behavior?

A culture cannot be discriminatingly accepted, much less be modified, except by persons who have seen through it-by persons who have cut holes in the confining stockade of verbalized symbols and so are able to look at the world and, by reflection, at themselves in a new and relatively unprejudiced way. Such persons are not merely born; they must also be made. But how?

In the field of formal education, what the would-be hole cutter needs is knowledge. Knowledge of the past and present history of cultures in all their fantastic variety, and knowledge about the nature and limitations, the uses and abuses, of language. A man who knows that there have been many cultures, and that each culture claims to be the best and truest of all, will find it hard to take too seriously the boastings and dogmatizings of his own tradition. Similarly, a man who knows how symbols are related to experience, and who practices the kind of linguistic self- control taught by the exponents of General Semantics, is unlikely to take too seriously the absurd or dangerous nonsense that, within every culture, passes for philosophy, practical wisdom and political argument. As a preparation for hole cutting, this kind of intellectual education is certainly valuable, but no less certainly insufficient. Training on the verbal level needs to be supplemented by training in wordless experiencing. We must learn how to be mentally silent, must cultivate the art of pure receptivity.

To be silently receptive-how childishly simple that seems! But in fact, as we very soon discover, how difficult! The universe in which men pass their lives is the creation of what Indian philosophy calls *Nama-Rupa*, Name and Form. Reality is a continuum, a fathomlessly mysterious and infinite Something, whose outward aspect is what we call Matter and whose inwardness is what we call Mind. Language is a device for taking the mystery out of Reality and making it amenable to human comprehension and manipulation. Acculturated man breaks up the continuum, attaches labels to a few of the fragments, projects the labels into the outside world and thus creates for himself an all-too-human universe of separate objects, each of which is merely the embodiment of a name, a particular illustration of some traditional abstraction. What we perceive takes on the pattern of the conceptual lattice through which it has been filtered. Pure receptivity is difficult because man's normal waking consciousness is always culturally conditioned. But normal waking consciousness, as William James pointed out many years ago, "is but one type of consciousness, while all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence; but apply the requisite stimulus, and at a touch they are there in all their completeness,

definite types of mentality which probably somewhere have their field of application and adaptation. No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these forms of consciousness disregarded."

Like the culture by which it is conditioned, normal waking consciousness is at once our best friend and a most dangerous enemy. It helps us to survive and make progress; but at the same time it prevents us from actualizing some of our most valuable potentialities and, on occasion, gets us into all kinds of trouble. To become fully human, man, proud man, the player of fantastic tricks, must learn to get out of his own way: only then will his infinite faculties and angelic apprehension get a chance of coming to the surface. In Blake's words, we must "cleanse the doors of perception"; for when the doors of perception are cleansed, "everything appears to man as it is-infinite." To normal waking consciousness things are the strictly finite and insulated embodiments of verbal labels. How can we break the habit of automatically imposing our prejudices and the memory of culture-hallowed words upon immediate experience? Answer: by the practice of pure receptivity and mental silence. These will cleanse the doors of perception and, in the process, make possible the emergence of other than normal forms of consciousness-aesthetic consciousness, visionary consciousness, mystical consciousness. Thanks to culture we are the heirs to vast accumulations of knowledge, to a priceless treasure of logical and scientific method, to thousands upon thousands of useful pieces of technological and organizational know-how. But the human mind-body possesses other sources of information, makes use of other types of reasoning, is gifted with an intrinsic wisdom that is independent of cultural conditioning.

Wordsworth writes that "our meddling intellect [that part of the mind which uses language to take the mystery out of Reality] mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things: we murder to dissect." Needless to say, we cannot get along without our meddling intellect. Verbalized conceptual thinking is indispensable. But even when they are used well, verbalized concepts mis-shape "the beauteous forms of things." And when (as happens so often) they are used badly, they mis-shape our lives by rationalizing ancient stupidities, by instigating mass murder, persecution and the playing of all the other fantastically ugly tricks that make the angels weep. Wise nonverbal passiveness is an antidote to unwise verbal activity and a necessary corrective to wise verbal activity. Verbalized concepts about experience need to be supplemented by direct, unmediated acquaintance with events as they present themselves to us.

It is the old story of the letter and the spirit. The letter is necessary, but must never be taken too seriously, for, divorced from the spirit, it cramps and finally kills. As for the spirit, it "bloweth where it listeth" and, if we fail to consult the best cultural charts, we may be blown off our course and suffer shipwreck. At present most of us make the worst of both worlds. Ignoring the freely blowing winds of the spirit and relying on cultural maps which may be centuries out-of- date, we rush full speed ahead under the high-pressure steam of our own overweening self- confidence. The tickets we have sold ourselves assure us that our destination is some port in the Islands of the Blest. In fact it turns out, more often than not, to be Devil's Island.

Self-education on the nonverbal level is as old as civilization. "Be still and know that I am God"-for the visionaries and mystics of every time and every place, this has been the first and greatest of the commandments. Poets listen to their Muse and in the same way the visionary and the mystic wait upon inspiration in a state of wise passiveness, of dynamic vacuity. In the Western tradition this state is called "the prayer of simple regard." At the other end of the world it is described in terms that are psychological rather than theistic. In mental silence we "look into our own Self-Nature," we "hold fast to the Not-Thought which lies in thought." we "become that which essentially we have always been." By wise activity we can acquire useful analytical knowledge about the world, knowledge that can be communicated by means of verbal symbols. In the state of wise passiveness we make possible the emergence of forms of consciousness other than the utilitarian consciousness of normal waking life. Useful analytical knowledge about the world is replaced by some kind of biologically inessential but spiritually enlightening acquaintance with the world. For example, there can be direct aesthetic

acquaintance with the world as beauty. Or there can be direct acquaintance with the intrinsic strangeness of existence, its wild implausibility. And finally there can be direct acquaintance with the world's unity. This immediate mystical experience of being at one with the fundamental Oneness that manifests itself in the infinite diversity of things and minds, can never be adequately expressed in words. Like visionary experience, the experience of the mystic can be talked about only from the outside. Verbal symbols can never convey its inwardness.

It is through mental silence and the practice of wise passiveness that artists, visionaries and mystics have made themselves ready for the immediate experience of the world as beauty, as mystery and as unity. But silence and wise passiveness are not the only roads leading out of the all-too-human universe created by normal, culture-conditioned consciousness. In *Expostulation and Reply,* Wordsworth's bookish friend, Matthew, reproaches the poet because

> *You look round on your Mother Earth,*
> *As if she for no purpose bore you;*
> *As if you were her first-born birth,*
> *And none have lived before you!*

From the point of view of normal waking consciousness, this is sheer intellectual delinquency. But it is what the artist, the visionary and the mystic must do and, in fact, have always done. "Look at a person, a landscape, any common object, as though you were seeing it for the first time." This is one of the exercises in immediate, unverbalized awareness prescribed in the ancient texts of Tantric Buddhism. Artists visionaries and mystics refuse to be enslaved to the culture-conditioned habits of feeling, thought and action which their society regards as right and natural. Whenever this seems desirable, they deliberately refrain from projecting upon reality those hallowed word patterns with which all human minds are so copiously stocked. They know as well as anyone else that culture and the language in which any given culture is rooted, are absolutely necessary and that, without them, the individual would not be human. But more vividly than the rest of mankind they also know that, to be *fully* human, the individual must learn to decondition himself, must be able to cut holes in the fence of verbalized symbols that hems him in.

In the exploration of the vast and mysterious world of human potentialities the great artists, visionaries and mystics have been trailblazing pioneers. But where they have been, others can follow. Potentially, all of us are "infinite in faculties and like gods in apprehension." Modes of consciousness different from normal waking consciousness are within the reach of anyone who knows how to apply the necessary stimuli. The universe in which a human being lives can be transfigured into a new creation. We have only to cut a hole in the fence and look around us with what the philosopher, Plotinus, describes as "that other kind of seeing, which everyone has but few make use of."

Within our current systems of education, training on the nonverbal level is meager in quantity and poor in quality. Moreover, its purpose, which is simply to help its recipients to be more "like gods in apprehension" is neither clearly stated nor consistently pursued. We could and, most emphatically, we should do better in this very important field than we are doing now. The practical wisdom of earlier civilizations and the findings of adventurous spirits within our own tradition and in our own time are freely available. With their aid a curriculum and a methodology of nonverbal training could be worked out without much difficulty. Unhappily most persons in authority have a vested interest in the maintenance of cultural fences. They frown upon hole cutting as subversive and dismiss Plotinus' "other kind of seeing" as a symptom of mental derangement. If an effective system of nonverbal education could be worked out, would the authorities allow it to be widely applied? It is an open question.

From the nonverbal world of culturally uncontaminated consciousness we pass to the subverbal world of physiology and biochemistry. A human being is a temperament and a product of cultural

conditioning; he is also, and primarily, an extremely complex and delicate biochemical system, whose inwardness, as the system changes from one state of equilibrium to another, is changing consciousness. It is because each one of us is a biochemical system that (according to Housman)

Malt does more than Milton can
To justify God's ways to man.

Beer achieves its theological triumphs because, in William James' words, "Drunkenness is the great exciter of the Yes function in man." And he adds that "It is part of the deeper mystery and tragedy of life that whiffs and gleams of something that we immediately recognize as excellent should be vouchsafed to so many of us only in the fleeting earlier phases of what, in its totality, is so degrading a poisoning." The tree is known by its fruits, and the fruits of too much reliance upon ethyl alcohol as an exciter of the Yes function are bitter indeed. No less bitter are the fruits of reliance upon such habit-forming sedatives, hallucinogens and mood elevators as opium and its derivatives, as cocaine (once so blithely recommended to his friends and patients by Dr. Freud), as the barbiturates and amphetamine. But in recent years the pharmacologists have extracted or synthesized several compounds that powerfully affect the mind without doing any harm to the body, either at the time of ingestion or, through addiction, later on. Through these new psychedelics, the subject's normal waking consciousness may be modified in many different ways. It is as though, for each individual, his deeper self decides which kind of experience will be most advantageous. Having decided, it makes use of the drug's mind-changing powers to give the person what he needs. Thus, if it would be good for him to have deeply buried memories uncovered, deeply buried memories will duly be uncovered. In cases where this is of no great importance, something else will happen. Normal waking consciousness may be replaced by aesthetic consciousness, and the world will be perceived in all its unimaginable beauty, all the blazing intensity of its "thereness." And aesthetic consciousness may modulate into visionary consciousness. Thanks to yet another kind of seeing, the world will now reveal itself as not only unimaginably beautiful, but also fathomlessly mysterious-as a multitudinous abyss of possibility forever actualizing itself into unprecedented forms. New insights into a new, transfigured world of givenness, new combinations of thought and fantasy-the stream of novelty pours through the world in a torrent, whose every drop is charged with meaning. There are the symbols whose meaning lies outside themselves in the given facts of visionary experience, and there are these given facts which signify only themselves. But "only themselves" is also "no less than the divine ground of all being." "Nothing but this" is at the same time "the Suchness of all." And now the aesthetic and the visionary consciousness deepen into mystical consciousness. The world is now seen as an infinite diversity that is yet a unity, and the beholder experiences himself as being at one with the infinite Oneness that manifests itself, totally present, at every point of space, at every instant in the flux of perpetual perishing and perpetual renewal. Our normal word-conditioned consciousness creates a universe of sharp distinctions, black and white, this and that, me and you and it. In the mystical consciousness of being at one with infinite Oneness, there is a reconciliation of opposites, a perception of the Not- Particular in particulars, a transcending of our ingrained subject4bject relationships with things and persons; there is an immediate experience of our solidarity with all being and a kind of organic conviction that in spite of the inscrutabilities of fate, in spite of our own dark stupidities and deliberate malevolence, yes, in spite of all that is so manifestly wrong with the world, it is yet, in some profound, paradoxical and entirely inexpressible way, All Right. For normal waking consciousness, the phrase, "God is Love," is no more than a piece of wishful positive thinking. For the mystical consciousness, it is a self-evident truth.

Unprecedentedly rapid technological and demographic changes are steadily increasing the dangers by which we are surrounded, and at the same time are steadily diminishing the relevance of the traditional feeling-and-behavior-patterns imposed upon all individuals, rulers and ruled alike, by their culture.

Always desirable, widespread training in the art of cutting holes in cultural fences is now the most urgent of necessities. Can such a training be speeded up and made more effective by a judicious use of the physically harmless psychedelics now available? On the basis of personal experience and the published evidence, I believe that it can. In my utopian fantasy, *Island,* I speculated in fictional terms about the ways in which a substance akin to psilocybin could be used to potentiate the nonverbal education of adolescents and to remind adults that the real world is very different from the misshapen universe they have created for themselves by means of their culture-conditioned prejudices. "Having Fun with Fungi"-that was how one waggish reviewer dismissed the matter. But which is better: to have Fun with Fungi or to have Idiocy with Ideology, to have Wars because of Words, to have Tomorrow's Misdeeds out of Yesterday's Miscreeds?

How should the psychedelics be administered? Under what circumstances, with what kind of preparation and follow-up? These are questions that must be answered empirically, by large-scale experiment. Man's collective mind has a high degree of viscosity and flows from one position to another with the reluctant deliberation of an ebbing tide of sludge. But in a world of explosive population increase, of headlong technological advance and of militant nationalism, the time at our disposal is strictly limited. We must discover, and discover very soon, new energy sources for overcoming our society's psychological inertia, better solvents for liquefyingthe sludgy stickiness of an anachronistic state of mind. On the verbal level an education in the nature and limitations, the uses and abuses of language; on the wordless level an education in mental silence and pure receptivity; and finally, through the use of harmless psychedelics, a course of chemically triggered conversion experiences or ecstasies-these, I believe, will provide all the sources of mental energy, all the solvents of conceptual sludge, that an individual requires. With their aid, he should be able to adapt himself selectively to his culture, rejecting its evils, stupidities and irrelevances, gratefully accepting all its treasures of accumulated knowledge, of rationality, human-heartedness and practical wisdom. If the number of such individuals is sufficiently great, if their quality is sufficiently high, they may be able to pass from discriminating acceptance of their culture to discriminating change and reform. Is this a hopefully utopian dream? Experiment can give us the answer, for the dream is pragmatic; the utopian hypotheses can be tested empirically. And in these oppressive times a little hope is surely no unwelcome visitant.

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