

“Life After Death in Huxley’s *Time Must Have a Stop*”

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Aldous Huxley characterized *Time Must Have a Stop* as “a piece of the *Comedie Humaine* that modulates into a version of the *Divina Commedia*” (qtd. in Woodcock 229). To be sure, some of the dialogue includes good-natured banter, frivolous wit, and self-deprecating humor. But some of the human comedy goes further and satirizes human imperfections. For instance, the novel portrays a “jaded pasha” (*Time* 67), most interested in his own pleasure, a pretentious scholarly man who talks too much (*Time* 79), and a beautiful young woman who believes that the essence of life is “pure shamelessness” and lives accordingly (*Time* 128). Some of the novel’s comedy is darkly pessimistic. For example, there are references to the cosmic joke of good intentions leading to disaster (*Time* 194). And there are sarcastic indictments of religion, science, politics, and education (*Time* 163-64).

In the middle of the novel, when one of the main characters dies, the scene shifts to an after-life realm, to something like a divine-comedy realm. Both Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and Huxley’s *Time Must Have a Stop* depict an after-death realm but provide different descriptions of it. In Dante’s book, a living man takes a guided tour of hell and sees the punishments that

have been divinely assigned for various serious sins. In contrast, Huxley's book depicts the experiences of a man after he has died. He seems to be in some kind of dream world, where there is no regular succession of time or fixed sense of place (*Time* 222).

This paper focuses on the after-life realm presented in Huxley's novel, summarizing, interpreting, and evaluating it. But understanding what happens in that realm requires a knowledge of the world of the living in the novel, so let's begin by following one of the main characters of the novel as he goes about his business one glorious Saturday in Florence, Italy, in 1929 (*Time* 11).

On this glorious day, English expatriate Eustace Barnack arises around 9 AM (*Time* 53). After a hot bath, he feels young again. But the fact is that during the last three years, he has aged considerably. His face looks like a "loose rubber mask sagging from the bones, flabby and soft and unwholesomely blotched" (*Time* 33). This pleasure loving man has been so self-indulgent that he has also become quite heavy. The whites of his eyes are "yellow and bloodshot" (*Time* 33). Yet these eyes still retain a twinkle. And his fine suits, elegant ties, and monocle on the end of a string still make him very much appear to be the "elderly dandy" (*Time* 35). Twenty-three years ago this man of culture married a "rich widow with a weak heart" and

moved to Florence (*Time* 38). Five years later his wife died, leaving him quite wealthy. He lives a widower in a large, luxurious villa in the hills of Florence. This glorious day is a special day for him because his seventeen-year-old English nephew Sebastian Barnack is coming to stay with him for a holiday. It is also special, even though he doesn't know it, because tonight Eustace Barnack will die.

The day of his death starts well enough for Eustace (*Time* 54-55). He takes a hearty breakfast and then retires to his library where he briefly reads Proust. At eleven he goes to the west wing of the villa to visit Mrs. Gamble, his mother-in-law, who is visiting for a month. Mrs. Gamble is a blind, frail octogenarian drill sergeant with an interest in spiritualism. Eustace has given her the affectionate nickname of "Queen Mother" (*Time* 56). A companion reading to her is Mrs. Thwale, a dark-haired, dark-eyed beauty with the "face of an Ingres Madonna," oval and serene (*Time* 56). Though just in her mid-twenties, she is recently widowed (*Time* 61).

Riding downtown with Eustace, Mrs. Thwale reveals that she regards herself as a "parasite ... a kind of glorified lady's maid" (*Time* 62). But she says she would rather do this kind of work than return to the poor and the good. As a clergyman's daughter, she says she has had her fill of trying to

emulate the lives of the early Christians. When she gets out to do her errands, Eustace goes to see the Weyls, dealers in fine arts (*Time* 65).

Gabriel Weyl is a friendly, warm, enthusiastic salesman *par excellence*. His wife is enchanting, “deliciously pink and plump, how had this young creature escaped from the Rubens canvas which was so obviously her home” (*Time* 65)? While at the Weyls, Eustace buys two exquisite drawings by Degas.

After lunch in a fine restaurant, Eustace is riding up a narrow street in a slowly moving cab when Mimi, a woman with whom he has been sexually intimate, runs up along side the cab. She complains of not having seen him lately, and then with a “look and a smile of frank lasciviousness” suggests that they go to her apartment right then (*Time* 82). Pleasure loving Eustace likes the idea, and they go to her apartment and have playful sex together.

Before going to pick up his nephew Sebastian, Eustace stops by to see his old friend and distant relative, Bruno Rontini. Bruno sells second-hand books and is very religious. He tries again to convert Eustace, but to no avail. Even so, Eustace thinks of Bruno as kind and gentle, even saint-like (*Time* 93).

At the train station, Eustace sees his nephew, a curly-headed seventeen-year-old who looks like “a Della Robbia angel of thirteen” (*Time*

2). He is shy, reticent, and self-conscious. Sensitive, he has the soul and the skills of a poet. After traveling to the villa to dine with Mrs. Gamble and Mrs. Thwale, Eustace plays the part of the wise old man of the world. He discusses sculpture, architecture, painting, poetry, philosophy, religion, and politics with Sebastian. He gives him advice regarding pleasure, women, and talent (*Time* 101-12).

Eustace regards his nephew's visit as an occasion for celebration. As a result, he over does it. After over-indulging on filleted sole, creamed chicken, champagne, brandy, coffee, and cigars, Eustace has a fatal heart attack. We have a first-hand view of his searing, shooting pain, his desperate struggle for air, and his last thoughts, as he dies alone on a cold bathroom floor (*Time* 112-14). These are the experiences Eustace had on the day of his death. How different are the experiences after his death.

At first there is just silence and darkness. There is awareness, but not of his former self. The awareness is minimal and ownerless. Existence is one-dimensional. There is no bodily sensation. There are no memories, only knowledge of absence. But eventually, this awareness of absence becomes aware of another awareness and of being known by this other awareness. This other awareness is a bright light, not an absence. Awareness of it brings satisfaction and joy.

The first awareness is included within and inter-penetrated by the shining light awareness. And because of this, there is “an identification with it” (*Time* 118). Not only does the first awareness know it is known by the shining-light awareness, but it also knows this through participating in the knowledge of the shining-light awareness. Now the first awareness knows bliss, not absence.

There is bliss but also hunger for more knowledge. As the light brightens, the knowledge becomes more complete. The light grows brighter still.

“Under the impact of that intensification, the joyful awareness of being known, the joyful participation in that knowledge was pinned against the limits of its bliss. Pinned with an increasing pressure until at last the limits began to give way and the awareness found itself beyond them, in another existence. An existence where the knowledge of being included within a shining presence had become a knowledge of being oppressed by an excess of light. Where that transfiguring interpenetration was apprehended as a force disruptive from within. Where the knowledge was so penetratingly luminous

that the participation in it was beyond the capacity of that which participated” (*Time* 118-19).

Now the shining presence brings pain by trying to make the participating awareness know more than it can possibly know.

There is the anguish of being crushed into a dense opacity by the bright light and of being fragmented into dust and “atoms of mere nonentity” (*Time* 119) by the light’s penetrating knowledge. At the same *Time*, knowledge by participation in the light reveals that the opacity and dust are hideous, “a privation of all beauty and reality” (*Time* 119). The bright light becomes all-encompassing, except for “this one small clot of untransparent absence” (*Time* 119) and those “dispersed atoms of nothingness” (*Time* 119). By participation in the knowledge of the light, the clot and atoms know themselves not only as opaque and separate, but also as repulsive, shameful privations.

There seems no escape as the brightness continues to increase. But then there is realization that the pain will go away if there is no participation in the brightness. Then the clot of privation need not regard itself as disgusting, but only as separate from the light. At the same time, through its participation in the light, there is realization that it does not have “a right to

separate existence, that this clotted and disintegrated absence was shameful and must be denied, must be annihilated – held up unflinchingly to the radiance of that invading knowledge and utterly annihilated, dissolved in the beauty of that impossible incandescence” (*Time* 120).

Then follows an impasse with the clot of privation maintaining a right to separate existence and the light denying such a right to the clot. Defending its right to separate existence, the clotted awareness removes its participation from the light’s knowledge and becomes separate. By doing so the awareness does not feel shame, and the light decreases.

Suddenly there is awareness of something like a memory, followed by a realization that it is Eustace Barnack who is aware. His self-awareness and memories are sources of such joy to him that, at least initially, he hardly notices the nearby lingering light.

For a long while he only remembers his last words, “Backwards and downwards,” the laughter they generated, and his last cigar, but this knowledge delights and reassures him. Then he notices an apparent change in the nearby shining presence. Now it appears to include an activity, a pattern, a “vast ubiquitous web of beknottedness and divergences, of parallels and spirals, of intricate figures and their curiously distorted projections – all shining and active and alive” (*Time* 132).

He feels connected to a figure on one of the “innumerable nodes of intersecting movement” (*Time* 132). This pattern projects from another pattern and within that pattern he “found another larger fragment of himself – found the remembered image of a small boy scrambling up out of the water of a ditch, wet and muddy to above the knees” (*Time* 132-33).

“The lines of living light fanned out, then came together in another knot,” and he remembered Mimi, whose smile was as inviting as her open claret-colored dressing gown. All the while he is aware of the other aspects of the light, its silence and its beauty. It approached, and he became “part of the bliss, became identical with the silence and the beauty” (*Time* 133). But this immediately leads to an awareness of himself as a shameful privation, a nothingness that has to be “considered and understood and then repudiated” (*Time* 133), to make room for beauty and bliss.

When the light becomes impossibly bright, he exercises his power not to participate in it but to ignore it. He limits his awareness to the cigar, the open claret-colored dressing gown, the laughter. He focuses on them “to the point of identification, to the point of being transubstantiated into them” (*Time* 134). This results in a dimming of the light.

But now in the lattice, there is an “abrupt displacement of awareness” (*Time* 134), and he discovers another part of himself. He remembers going

with Laurinna, a woman whom he'd passionately loved, to a Mozart concert and crying at the beauty of the music. At a nearby intersection in the web, he remembers one afternoon as a child when it suddenly seemed that someone had drawn back the curtain of sky and everything seemed different, "everything had fallen to bits" (*Time* 135). "Something had broken through the customary appearance" (*Time* 135).

Again he is aware of the bright, living silence, more beautiful than a sunset or Mozart's music. Moving across the lattice, he discovers memories of himself enjoying the beauties of nature and art. Again he remembers Mimi, her skin white against the bright cushions. But suddenly he again participates in the knowledge of absence "so hideous that there could be nothing but self-aborrence" (*Time* 144). But this *Time* when he tries to divert his attention by focusing on the cigar, the laughter, Mimi's open dressing gown, the light just intensifies, becoming in the process unbearably beautiful. His immediate fear turns to hatred and rage, and all at once his four-language vocabulary of obscenities returns to him. The barrage of his words dims the light and frees him from participating in a knowledge that regards him as despicable. Now he sees the light, for all its loveliness, as trying to trick him into suicide.

He thinks of his religious friend, Bruno, who in their last conversation encouraged him to allow himself to be forgiven. And as he moves “onto another plane of the lattice” (*Time* 145), he is aware of a knowledge he knows as Bruno’s. While Bruno says his prayers in a shabby hotel room, there is bright, tenderly blue, musical light. But for Eustace – “beauty and peace and tenderness – immediately recognized and immediately rejected. Known only to be hated, only to be defiled, idiomatically in four languages” (*Time* 145).

Eustace is enraged, calling Bruno a contemptible fool for using such tricks to try to get him to commit suicide. Then it became clear that there were others aware of the light, “a whole galaxy of awarenesses. Bright by participation, made one with the light that gave them their being. Made one and yet recognizable within the Universal Possibility, as possibilities that had actually been realized” (*Time* 145). Eustace is resentful of Bruno’s knowledge, calling him a “scrubby little bookseller” (*Time* 145), “a silly little rag-and-bone merchant” (*Time* 146), and a show-off.

But then Eustace becomes aware of Bruno’s knowledge, “not from the outside only” (*Time* 146), but through an identification with it, and immediately he is aware again of his own hideousness. But this *Time* he refuses to feel ashamed; he resolves to be damned rather than to be forced

into suicide. “In the brightness and the silence his thoughts were like lumps of excrement, like the noise of vomiting. And the more repulsive they seemed, the more frantic became his anger and hatred” (*Time* 146). But this *Time* his stream of obscenities does not obscure the light.

As his angry outburst dies away, he is left in his painful self-loathing. The hated light again makes him regard himself with contempt. Again he tries to take refuge in memories of Mimi, of ten pages of Proust, etc., “for the alternative was a total self-knowledge and self-abandonment, a total attention and exposure to the light” (*Time* 147). Because he is “inescapably identified” (*Time* 147) with the brightness, he focuses on the fragmentary memories as a way to protect himself.

If he stops focusing on the memories, he is afraid of losing himself. His only escape is along a path that makes him more of a captive. He wonders whether there is another path “around these excremental clots of old experience and the condemnation they imposed” (*Time* 147). The silent light suggests there is no way except the way through. But Eustace thinks that if he takes that path, he will be dead. “Stone dead, extinct, annihilated. There’d be nothing but this damned light, this fiendish brightness in the silence” (*Time* 147).

He hates the light and himself, finds both revolting. “But better this pain than its alternative; better this knowledge of his own hatefulness than the extinction of all knowledge whatsoever. Anything rather than that! Even these eternities of empty foolery” (*Time* 147). Thus he persists in going over his brief stock of memories again and again: Mimi, the ten pages of Proust, a poem he found humorous, etc. “But there was no alternative, no alternative except giving in to the light, except dying out into silence. But anything rather than that, anything, anything ...” (*Time* 149).

But suddenly there is a break in Eustace’s routine of reminiscences as he is surprised to be aware of other awarenesses like him in their opacity. They care about him in his opaque individuality. Their concern for him makes him feel that he has a “right to be himself” (*Time* 148). In addition, he suddenly regains bodily sensations. He has experiences of darkness behind eyelids, voices in front of him, and various aches and pains. As the Queen Mother is holding a séance to try to contact him, he connects with the body of the medium, Mrs. Byfleet. Being the focus of so much attention plus having bodily sensations again, he is insulated from the silent light.

Unfortunately, the medium has trouble accurately conveying most of his messages. For instance, when making reference to one of the Degas drawings, he says, “two buttocks and a pendulous bub’ (*Time* 152), she

translates this as “bucks and pendulums” (*Time* 152). When Mrs. Thwale asks him whether there is marriage where he is, the medium misunderstands his attempt at humor. But the question triggers a new stage of awareness for him.

Now he is not just aware from the outside or the inside of what people did in the past or are doing in the present; he becomes aware, “as though in vivid memory” (*Time* 152), of events that have “not as yet happened at all” (*Time* 152). He is aware of Mrs. Thwale christening a “Liberty Ship” and of her taking sexual liberties on a sofa with an adolescent naval officer.

Thinking of the connection between war and lust, he begins to laugh. As the séance ends, sensation drifts away from him and the silent beckoning light returns. Seeing it as a threat, Eustace directs his attention to his new memories of the future. Appreciating his own joke about crusades and copulations, he forces a hearty laugh.

Still thinking of the connection between whores and wars, Eustace finds his laughter no longer forced. It peals “now of its own accord” (*Time* 162), breaking the silence and dimming the light. The whole universe shakes with laughter. He becomes aware of more of his considered opinions about politics, religion, history, and education. He juxtaposes war casualties with the Gettysburg Address, the fight for liberty and equality with the rise

of Napoleon. He regards political struggles as amounting to taking power from one gang of ruffians and giving it to another gang of ruffians. He thinks of history as “downwards and backwards,” and the laughter explodes.

Silliness and murder, stupidity and destruction! ... And the motive was always idealism, the instruments were always courage and loyalty ... And all those treasures of knowledge placed so unhesitatingly at the service of passion! All the genius and intelligence dedicated to the attempt to achieve ends either impossible or diabolical” (*Time* 163).

His thoughts on triumphs in religion, science, and education lead to more laughter. He thinks of how religion has paved the way for exploitation, how religions become “political machine(s) and ... business concern(s)” (*Time* 164), and how scientific inventions have been misused. Then he indicts education for teaching “false history” and “the religion of nationalism” (*Time* 164). Again the whole universe shakes with laughter.

The whole universe laughs at the joke of his frustration, laughs at the “age-old slap-stick of disaster following on the heels of good intention” (*Time* 194). So many hilarities. Voltaire laughs at human stupidity and

Rabelais at human grossness. Eustace laughs “in unison with the universal merriment” (*Time* 194).

The light, “a blue caressing silence, ubiquitously present” (*Time* 194), tenderly beckons to him but is met by his strident rejections. Refusing to give it his attention, Eustace focuses on the triumphs of education, religion, science, and politics. The result is new extremes of laughter, a frenzied merriment, “paroxysm after cosmic paroxysm” (*Time* 195). Then he becomes aware that the laughter is out of his control, has a life of its own, and does not mean him well. The light shines tenderly, imploringly, and as he rejects it, there is a “convulsion of derision” (*Time* 195).

Suddenly he is again aware of “something that had not yet happened to somebody else” (*Time* 195). He is aware of his nephew Jim Poulshot lying wounded on the ground with three Japanese soldiers standing, looking down at him. When Jim asks for a doctor, they laugh and “the whole universe shook and howled in chorus” (*Time* 196). Then they stomped on his face until it was barely recognizable.

Eustace is horrified, but in the same moment “a blast of frantic laughter clawed at his being” (*Time* 197). His memories howled “with irrepressible glee” (*Time* 197), mocking Jim. Then smiling, the Japanese soldiers bayonet Jim in the chest, the throat, the face, the genitals --- until his

screaming stops. “The screaming stopped. But the laughter persisted – the howling, the epilepsy, the uncontrollable lacerating derision” (*Time* 197).

Immediately these memories begin again and become part of Eustace’s repetitive cycle of reminiscences that he uses to try to fend off the light. “And all the *Time* the yelping and the bassoons, the iron teeth, combing and carding the very substance of his being. Forever and forever, excruciatingly. But he knew what the light was up to” (*Time* 198). He knows the tender light is imploring him to renounce his individual self, but he is resolved not to do it. And so again, he turns to his cycle of memories -- - Mimi, Victorian flowers, etc.

But the howling, derisive laughter tears at his very being. On and on until suddenly with a jerk, he transitions “out of mere incoherent succession into the familiar orderliness of time” (*Time* 219). He is aware of having a body; he has sensations again. He inhabits the body of the medium, Mrs. Byfleet, again. The Queen Mother is holding another séance. Gabriel Weyl and his wife, dealers in fine art and business acquaintances of his, are also in attendance. For some reason he thinks they are very important but doesn’t really know why.

The Queen Mother wants Eustace to show that he’s there, so she asks him how much he paid Mr. Weyl for two drawings by Degas. The Weyls

and Mrs. Thwale all start talking at the same time, and Eustace becomes confused. He just focuses on the sound of the voices and the rhythms of breathing and pumping blood in his temporary body. He becomes aware again of “that blue shining stillness. Delicate, unutterably beautiful, like the essence of all skies and flowers ... And tender, yearning, supplicatory” (*Time* 220). But he continues to relish analyzing the sensations associated with being in Mrs. Byfleet’s body, such as the tastes on her tongue and the muscular movements involved in her swallowing. Somehow this reassures him.

Then he remembers cigar smoke, Mimi, “his collection of facts about the ludicrous or disastrous consequences of idealism” (*Time* 221). But this time he remembers these things without self-loathing. He realized that the “feeling of being in a body was an effective barrier against (the light’s) encroachments” (*Time* 221). Now he does not have to know himself as the light knows him.

Suddenly he sees the Weyls as a way out of his present situation. “There was a living uterine darkness awaiting him there ... hungry to engulf him into itself yearning to hold and cradle him ...” (*Time* 221). As the light grows brighter, he deploys his memories in defense. He notes again that a

body can protect him from the light, and “that protection could be had for the asking; or rather was being offered ...” (*Time* 221).

As the séance ends, he finds himself “out of the comfortable world where time is a regular succession and place is fixed and solid --- out in the chaos and delirium of unfettered mind” (*Time* 222), where images, words and memories are masterless. Back in the lattice network, he moves from node to node, “from one patterned figure to its strangely distorted projection in another pattern” (*Time* 222). Falling through the lattice network, he is aware of memories concerning other things that haven’t occurred yet.

In this case the Weyls are refugees on a crowded road fleeing the violence of war. There are planes overhead, guns are firing in the distance, and a nearby city burns. Walking beside Mrs. Weyl is her little son, who “would squeeze his mother’s hand and when she turned her tear-stained face towards him, would smile up at her encouragingly” (*Time* 222-23). A horse-drawn wagon bumps Mrs. Weyl into the path of a convoy of speeding heavy trucks, and she is crushed.

Briefly Eustace is alone with the light, and there is “total and absolute participation” (*Time* 223), leading to the painful, shameful knowledge of his hideous separate opacity. Then again he thinks about how the Weyls can free him from the light. He continues his memories of them.

A big woman tries to comfort the little boy whose mother has just been killed.

The little boy crouched there, his face in his hands, his body trembling and shaken by sobs. And suddenly it was no longer from outside that he was thought about. The agony of that grief and terror were known directly by an identifying experience of them – not as his, but mine. Eustace Barnack’s awareness of the child had become one with the child’s awareness of himself; it was that awareness.” (*Time* 224)

But then there is a shift and Eustace only has the memory of the little boy as someone else.

Even with the horror of the experiences, Eustace savors the bodily sensations it afforded him – a heart pounding, a sensation of being full. Then the silent light re-appears. Eustace wants nothing to do with it, and with resolve, he re-directs his attention away from it. Thus ends the after-world part of the novel.

Contemporary western critics did not know what to make of these after-life experiences. Some totally ignored this crucial part of the novel, while others called the after-life experiences “confusing” or

“incomprehensible” (Bowering 160-61). It is not surprising that these critics were so baffled if they were unfamiliar, as they probably were, with an eastern perspective on life after death, which informs the novel.

Later commentators took the novel to be presenting a Buddhist view of life after death. For instance, Peter Bowering said, “The second half of the novel, based on Eustace’s experiences on the *bardo* plane, owes its conception to *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*” (167). And B.L. Chakoo said that Huxley’s “*Time\_Must Have a Stop* was an attempt to portray Tibetan philosophy in the form of a novel. The reader who has not read the *Tibetan Book* will not be able to understand Uncle Eustace’s after-death experiences” (216).

Huxley did think *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* meaningful enough that he used its teachings to comfort Maria, his wife, as she lay dying from cancer in 1955 (Sawyer 161-62). And many of its ideas are reflected in the descriptions of after-life in *Time\_Must Have a Stop*. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, for example, describes a radiant, clear light seen at the point of death (89, 92), an initial loss of self (91, 95), a merging with the light (124), an inseparability from it (96, 117), a difficulty looking at it (111, 114), a desire to flee from it (106), a perception of lattice-work orbs of light (122),

an attachment to this world (114), fearful visions (162), karma (161), and reincarnation (112).

It also seems, however, that the after-life experiences in *Time\_Must Have a Stop* may reasonably be interpreted from a Hindu perspective as well. After all, Huxley had been studying Vedantic theology and been a member of the Vedanta Society in California since the late 1930s (Sawyer 111-12). According to this interpretation, the light is Brahman, and the clot is Atman or an individualized I-consciousness or soul (*Perennial* 215). The clot does not realize that it is part of Brahman. The latticework is either the thoughts of Brahman or the causal connections of karma. Eustace can see events in the past, present, or future because he has merged with God and shares His knowledge. God, as a being outside of time, experiences a timeless now. He sees all of time all at once as though on a hill above the flowing river of time. Eustace rejects the light due to his ignorance that he is part of it. Because of his egoism, he is overly attached to worldly existence. The terrible sights of death and brutality, the mocking laughter, and his individualized suffering are maya, tricky illusions (Smith 82-85). They are brought on by his bad karma. They are also attempts by Brahman to make Eustace realize that it would be better not to be reincarnated and instead

return to Brahman. Mrs. Weyl provides a way for him to escape the tormenting after-life plane because he can be reincarnated as her son.

The after-life experiences may be interpreted from a Buddhist perspective or a Hindu perspective because varieties of these two perspectives are sometimes very similar or interwoven with each other.

According to Jim Willis, “in Tibetan Buddhism we find a mixture of Buddhist philosophy and Hindu mysticism” (87). And Charles Holmes says,

Vedanta’ means literally ‘the end of the Veda’, the Vedas being the four collections of primary, canonical Indian scripture. More loosely the term refers to Hindu wisdom or the religious wisdom centering in the Upanishads .... For some Vedanta is doubtless merely a source of exotic appeal embodied in such strange works as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. (140)

Finally Heinrich Zimmer notes the similarity between Buddhist and Hindu outlooks when he says that “Mahayana schools transcended the comparatively naïve positivism of their associates and approached the nonduality of the contemporary Vedanta” (517).

Huxley took Buddhism and Hinduism to be examples of a more general religious outlook, one he propounded in *The Perennial Philosophy*, a book he published a year after *Time Must Have a Stop*. The perennial philosophy is

the metaphysic that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man's final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being. (*Perennial* vii)

This is a special knowledge. As Huxley says,

The last end of man, the ultimate reason for human existence, is unitive knowledge of the divine Ground – the knowledge that can come only to those who are prepared to “die to self” and so make room, as it were, for God. (*Perennial* 21)

According to Huxley, the perennial philosophy includes versions of Buddhism and Hinduism (*Perennial* 214). Even though Buddhists think of

what survives death as the character, not a soul, and Hindus think of it as an I-consciousness soul, Huxley says, “Either one of these conceptions of survival is logically self-consistent and can be made to “save the appearances” – in other words, to fit the odd and obscure facts of psychical research” (*Perennial* 215).

But even supposing that Eustace’s after-life experiences can be made sense of from either a Buddhist perspective or a Hindu perspective, why should this matter to us? Is Huxley’s account anything more than one of a multitude of coherent images of life after death? While stories about pixies, fairies, and witches may be entertaining, why should we take them seriously? How realistic are they? Is there reason to take his story any more seriously than we would take stories about fairies, pixies, or witches? Huxley’s account of life after death in *Time Must Have a Stop* takes for granted that we can communicate with the dead, have unitive knowledge of God, and be reincarnated. Is there any reason for us to take these things for granted? Are such assumptions warranted? It does not seem that they are.

In the novel there are two séances where Eustace’s relatives and friends try to contact him through a medium. The idea that a person could survive death as a spirit and then enter a medium’s body and communicate through it with the living is a key component of the spiritualist movement,

which began in the U.S. in the mid-nineteenth century. One difficulty here is that a tradition of trickery pervades this movement, thereby casting a serious doubt about the legitimacy of its evidence.

Consider two well-known mediums that were exposed as frauds: Madam Helena Blavatsky (1831-91) and Eusapia Paladino (1854-1918). In Madam Blavatsky's séances in England, a hired actor was discovered to be playing the part of a materialized spirit (Kelly 60). Part of Ms. Paladino's fame rested on tables levitating at her séances. Her trickery was not discovered until an investigator hid himself under the séance table and observed her acrobatic footwork (Hansel 62-64). Such trickery does not show that no medium ever contacts the dead, but it does cast a shadow of doubt over the séance room.

But what then of other cases where no trickery was discovered? Sitters at séances sometimes claim to see an apparition, feel a ghostly touch on the cheek, or hear unearthly music. Is their personal experience trustworthy evidence?

There seems to be good reason to doubt it. For one thing, it is dark or the lighting is dim at most séances. Bad lighting raises doubts about whether the testimony of witnesses is reliable because such lighting increases the risk of misperception. In dark séances or middle-of-the-night

séances, sitters may be tired or drowsy. In such situations, it becomes much easier for them to “see” things that aren’t really there. As philosopher Lewis Vaughn says,

“Researchers have shown that when people are in that drowsy state just before sleep, they often have weird hallucinations known as *hypnogogic imagery*. These images come on suddenly, are not in the sleeper’s control, and can seem as realistic as physical objects in the room. Images range from faces in the dark ghostly shapes, and colored geometric shapes” (36).

Furthermore, a strong belief that the medium can communicate with the dead may also be a factor in one’s estimation of whether there is good evidence to support this belief. For instance, in one study experimenters divided subjects into those doubting the existence of ESP and those believing in its existence (Vaughn 132). Experimenters then showed both groups two types of evidence, one type in support of ESP and the other type against it. Later, when experimenters questioned the subjects about the evidence, doubters said that some of the evidence presented was in support of ESP and some was against it. In contrast, the believers in ESP said that all the evidence presented had been for the existence of ESP. Their strong

belief in ESP seemed to close their minds to the possibility of its nonexistence.

Finally, expectations can affect what people think they experience. In another psychological study, when experimenters told test subjects that they would see a flash of light later during the experiment, the subjects reported seeing a flash of light even though none occurred (Vaughn 129-30).

Similarly sitters at séances who expect to come into contact with departed spirits may too readily interpret smoke as an apparition, garbled sound as a definite message.

Séance room conditions increase the risk of misperception. It is too dark, and perceivers are often tired or in a dream-like state. Prior beliefs too often close minds, and expectations too often lead sitters to “see” things that aren’t really there. As a general rule, personal experience is trustworthy only if there is no good reason to doubt it, but in such cases, there seems to be good reason to doubt it.

Defenders of such communication with the dead may ask how else mediums can know the things they know about the dead unless they are in contact with them. A major difficulty here is that alternative explanations of the “messages from the dead” have not been shown to be less plausible, have not been ruled out (Lamont 153-56). A medium could do old-fashioned

research on a person who has died. Or perhaps the medium learns about the dead through retrospective clairvoyance or even telepathy with the living. Perhaps the medium makes contact with a reservoir of the memories of all those who have passed on or even with an impersonal consciousness.

Contemporary mediums, such as John Edwards, may just be using cold reading when they seem to be contacting the dead. According to scientist Lynne Kelly, “Cold reading is telling people about themselves drawing on a knowledge of the psychology of the majority” (37). Most often the cold reader gets information by asking questions, “making statements, observing how people behave, and listening to what they say” (Vaughn 385). The reader may put out a stream of initials, asking who is D, or is it R, or A, or J? Then it is up to the sitter to provide further information. As Kelly says, “the sitter does most of the work, interpreting the information and finding the links” (36). If the sitter says, “Dan was my husband’s best friend,” the reader may emphasize the hit, saying, “Yes, of course, I’m getting that quite strongly.” If the sitter does not connect with any of the initials, the reader may move on quickly or suggest that the sitter is suppressing important information. Sticking with the psychology of the majority, the reader may say he/she senses something about someone the departed spirit especially misses, about some sacrifice the departed

especially appreciated. The sitter responds, and in this way the reader gets information while appearing to be giving it.

The cold reading hypothesis seems at least as believable as the communication with the dead hypothesis, since the results provided by mediums such as John Edwards can be duplicated by those skilled in cold reading (Vaughn 386). A further problem with the communication with the dead hypothesis is that if it were correct, it would seem that some of the departed would help solve the crimes of their own deaths. But instead it seems that the dead tell no tales (Lamont 153; Kelly 69).

The key point is that without reason to prefer the communication with the dead hypothesis over its competitors, there is no reason to take it more seriously than its competitors. In the novel, Huxley assumes that Eustace is contacted during a séance, but his assumption does not seem to be warranted by spiritualist evidence.

Huxley's picture of life after death shows the dead (Eustace) and the living (Bruno) experiencing unitive knowledge of divine reality. These mystical experiences involve a loss of individuality, a re-assuring feeling of peace and love, and a sense of gaining truth. Often this feeling is described as a feeling of merging with God.

The suggestion in the novel is that these feelings are a basis for belief in a supernatural, divine reality. The question now is whether these feelings provide an adequate basis for this belief. There's no doubt that many claim to have these experiences. When they cannot doubt the authenticity of the experiences, that is some evidence for them that they have been in touch with a divine ground. But should that be enough evidence for those who have not had such experiences? William Wainwright, a contemporary philosopher of religion, says we should accept their perceptual experiences as reliable unless we have good reason not to, and that we don't have good reason not to (119).

There is however good reason to doubt the reliability of mystic testimony. First, people from different cultures or even the same culture interpret the experiences in different ways. Some believe they experience a pantheistic god while others believe they experience a theistic god (Hepburn 429). It does not seem that a reliable technique would lead to such diverse outcomes. Background beliefs seem to be exerting too great an influence on the interpretation of the experience.

Second, even if there is cross-cultural agreement about the core of such experiences, there remains a question about whether one is really experiencing God in such cases or merely one's idea of God. In other

words, the experiences may be explainable psychologically instead of theologically. One may be experiencing a beautiful dream instead of a divine reality.

Defenders of these experiences may claim that just as agreement among subjects regarding the physical world is good evidence, so too is agreement among subjects regarding the spiritual world. The difficulty here is that this analogy breaks down (Scriven 100-02). Unlike everyday claims about the world around us, the claims of the mystic are presented by smaller numbers of people, are concerned with fewer things, are not so frequently checked, and are subject to greater disagreement.

With these beliefs about the world around us being so often checked, it is not likely that these beliefs would be a shared mistake. The same, however, cannot be said for the beliefs of the mystic. The inter-subjective agreement of mystics is not enough to bolster the theological interpretation of their experiences. Even when mystics agree that they are experiencing a divine reality, that is not enough to show that they are not sharing a mistake. The psychological interpretation of their experiences has not been discounted; it is no less plausible than the theological interpretation of them.

A further difficulty for mystical views is that mystics' reports of their experiences are paradoxical. Mystics say such things as "God is and is not

identical with the world” (qtd in Hepburn 431) and “The eternally resting Godhead is also the wheel rolling out of itself” (qtd in Stace 60). Taken literally, these reports seem self-contradictory, like ‘there’s a square triangle drawn on the paper’. Just as it seems that no shape can be completely four-sided and at the same time not four-sided, so it seems that no object can be fully at rest and at the same time not at rest.

Perhaps the reports are not meant to be taken literally. Thus “it moves and it moves not” might just be a poetic way of saying that the world is in a constant state of flux, but at its core is a quiet stillness (cf. Stace 59). Such a translation leads back to the question of whether those who have not had such experiences can trust in them.

If reports such as “The mystical enlightenment is an absolute emptiness which is absolute fullness” (qtd. in Hepburn 431) are metaphorical but cannot be translated into non-metaphorical language, such language remains extremely obscure. In this case, without understanding what the language means, it is difficult to know whether there is any reason to believe it is true. It is also difficult to take the mystic’s word for it that he is experiencing God. We are aware of too many cases where people strongly believe something is certain and yet they are mistaken.

Many mystics call their experience ineffable, i.e. incapable of being described. Perhaps they think this because they regard God as beyond logic. W.T. Stace says that contradictions cannot be removed from mystical experience because in these experiences one is trying, with a finite mind, to encompass an infinite being (60-62). This attempt inevitably leads to paradox. According to Stace, what this shows is that we cannot have knowledge of God through the logical intellect but only through direct experience. Those who have not had such experiences face the following difficulty here: once God is put beyond logic, it becomes extremely difficult to distinguish sense from nonsense (cf. Hepburn 431).

Those who have had such experiences may still regard them as self-authenticating, but for those who haven't had them, they seem too easy to misinterpret to count as good evidence for a mystical outlook. At the very least, then, there is reason to question the complete reliability of mystical experience.

Reincarnation, the idea that after death one's soul can be reborn into another body, is another key idea that Huxley's view of life after death in *Time Must Have a Stop* takes for granted. Hindus and Buddhists, among others, accept this belief. Usually this belief goes hand in hand with a belief in karma, the idea that the things that happen to a person are determined by

his/her past deeds, in this case deeds from a previous lifetime (Hick 301).

Thus whether one is reincarnated as a person, an animal, or a plant depends on how he/she behaved in his/her last lifetime. The key question here concerns the plausibility of this view. Is it reasonable to believe in reincarnation?

Reincarnationists offer a variety of types of evidence for their outlook. For example, they maintain that the best explanation of the existence of child prodigies is that they developed their talents in a previous lifetime. How else could Irish mathematician William Hamilton speak thirteen languages by the time he had reached adolescence? But as philosopher Paul Edwards says, “There is not the slightest reason to suppose that to explain the extraordinary gifts of men like Mozart and William Hamilton we have to go outside a study of the human brain” (51). In fact, giving up on brain research in deference to the hypothesis of learning in a previous lifetime would be likely to stunt the growth of science.

Other reincarnationists, particularly Ian Stevenson, claim that the memories of a number of small children provide good evidence for reincarnation (Hall 123-24; Edwards 253 ff.). The children claim that they remember a previous life in which they were Mr. So and So’s child or parent. This is evidence for reincarnation because there appears to be no

other way for the children to know the things they seem to know about the previous life.

But Stevenson's work faces methodological criticisms. Ruth Rena faults Stevenson for primarily studying children in areas where belief in reincarnation is widespread (*Almanac* 368). Her suggestion is that cultural background may be a better explanation of the reported experiences than previous lives. One would expect that if people in general are reincarnated, then it would not just be children from areas where the belief is prevalent who have such memories.

Ian Wilson notes that many alleged reincarnates had in prior lives been members of well-to-do families (Kelly 90). His suggestion is that if the members of the rich family are convinced that their lost loved one has returned, they will provide a variety of advantages for him/her and his/her current family. Wilson also discovered cases where children had been coached about the previous life they were supposed to have lived (Kelly 91). In these cases, at least, the children found out things about the previous life without necessarily having lived it. Even when no deception was involved, the parents of the alleged reincarnate may have wanted a special child so that they could themselves feel special.

Another kind of evidence for reincarnation is provided by cases of hypnotic regression. People who are hypnotized tell about earlier lives in other lands. The Bridey Murphy case from the middle of the twentieth-century is a well-known example of this type of case. In 1952, when an American housewife, Virginia Tighe, was hypnotized, she claimed to be Bridey Murphy, an Irish woman who lived in Ireland in the early 1800s (Edwards 59-79). Under hypnosis, Mrs. Tighe took on a different personality. Speaking in an Irish brogue, she gave details of her life in early nineteenth-century Cork, Ireland.

Such hypnotic regressions, however, do not seem to provide good evidence for reincarnation. First there are methodological problems with hypnosis. As Kelly says, "Hypnosis is a notoriously unreliable way to gain factual information. The patient is far too willing to say whatever seems to please the hypnotist" (85). Furthermore, if Bridey Murphy had actually been contacted through hypnosis, one would expect her remarks about her place and time to be rather accurate. But as Edwards points out, "checking Bridey's memories against their Irish records produced almost uniformly negative results on all points of importance" (66). Third, even if Bridey's descriptions had been accurate, they could have been so due to cryptomnesia, where one remembers something that happened to her in this life but does

not remember its source. Perhaps Mrs. Tighe learned about Ireland from books, movies, exhibits, or conversations.

To provide good evidence for reincarnation, hypnotic regressions must not be disconfirmed by further investigation and must rule out plausible alternative explanations such as cryptomnesia. In this widely publicized and studied case at least, hypnotic regression fails to provide good evidence for reincarnation.

It is true that in some cases of hypnotic regression, the hypnotized are supposed to speak in a different language, one that they have not learned in this life. But in general these claims are dubious as well. Some can be explained in terms of cryptomnesia. For instance, consider the case where a hypnotized man began speaking Oscan, a third-century B.C. Italian dialect. Later on, however, when asked under hypnosis how he could do that, he recalled having seen an Oscan grammar text once in a library (*Almanac* 50).

In another case, 'Gretchen's' native language was English and apparently she had not learned German in this life, yet under hypnosis she spoke German. Sarah Thomason, a linguist, questioned this case by pointing out that a native speaker of a language has a 10,000 word vocabulary, but Gretchen's vocabulary was only about 120 words, not more than what one would learn by watching WWII movies or glancing at a book on German.

To be convincing evidence for reincarnation, such cases must show fluent use of a language previously unknown to the alleged reincarnate. As Kelly says, “To date, no such case has emerged” (94).

Some advance religious reasons in support of reincarnation, saying for example that the doctrine is part of Hindu and other scriptural traditions (cf. Smart 123). That Hindu and Buddhist scriptures support reincarnation is not likely to sway non-Hindus and non-Buddhists. Moreover, since scriptural traditions conflict for example over the status of Jesus, they cannot all be correct. The question then arises: Why accept one scriptural tradition over others?

Reincarnationists may cite yogic testimony in support of reincarnation. Yogis are supposed to have developed the power to remember their previous lives. According to Pali scripture, Buddha himself claimed to remember over one hundred thousand of his previous lives (Hick 379). Philosopher and theologian John Hick maintains, however, that since these scriptures were written hundreds of years after Buddha’s death, it “is therefore difficult to regard them as hard historical evidence that he enjoyed such a retrospect of thousands of former lives or that other yogis have done so” (380).

That the Buddha taught the doctrine of rebirth may have been embellished to include memories of his own prior lives. Buddhist accounts of his previous lives may just be modified traditional stories used by the monks to teach moral lessons. According to Hick, their descriptions of palm trees made of gold and silver “belong to the rhetoric of the fairy-tale rather than historical reality” (380). In this case, it’s really not so clear that the Buddha claimed to remember past lives. In regard to other yogis, the question would have to be how reliable are their claims. The reliability of their memories seems to be as questionable as the reliability of mystical experience because these matters seem too easy to misinterpret.

Theologian Raynor Johnson postulates reincarnation as the best explanation of the widespread injustice in our world. He maintains that mere chance is no explanation at all of this injustice and that it is paradoxical to attribute responsibility for it to a good God. He then asks, “If neither of these alternatives is acceptable, what explanations have we to offer which carries with it (sic) the reasonable assurance that we live in a just world?” (qtd in Edwards 31). He suggests that reincarnation combined with karma assures us of a just universe.

But Johnson presents a false choice. As Edwards says, “Johnson presents us with the three alternatives of “mere chance,” God’s plan, and

reincarnation. This simply ignores the theory known as “naturalism,” which holds that all phenomena, if they are caused at all, are the result of natural causes” (32). Further, even if this world is unjust, there is no need to postulate reincarnation as the only way to make things right, since an afterlife without reincarnation but based on an “as you sow, so shall you reap” philosophy can still bring the world moral ledger into balance.

In sum, key elements of Huxley’s depiction of after-life in *Time Must Have a Stop*, viz. communication with the dead, mystical experience, and reincarnation, are not well substantiated. Assuming we want our view of life after death to be based on evidence, we need further evidence before we should accept the view Huxley presents. Even though his view of life after death is interesting, entertaining, puzzling, and even fascinating, we have no good reason to believe it true or to act on it in our lives. Its main virtue remains intact however: it raises questions that are worth considering because our answers to them are likely to have an impact on how we view the world around us and how we live our lives.

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