

## Scientific Contribution

### ***Brave New World* versus *Island* – Utopian and Dystopian Views on Psychopharmacology**

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**Abstract.** Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* is a famous dystopia, frequently called upon in public discussions about new biotechnology. It is less well known that 30 years later Huxley also wrote a utopian novel, called *Island*. This paper will discuss both novels focussing especially on the role of psychopharmacological substances. If we see fiction as a way of imagining what the world *could* look like, then what can we learn from Huxley's novels about psychopharmacology and how does that relate to the discussion in the ethical and philosophical literature on this subject? The paper argues that in the current ethical discussion the dystopian vision on psychopharmacology is dominant, but that a comparison between *Brave New World* and *Island* shows that a more utopian view is possible as well. This is illustrated by a discussion of the issue of psychopharmacology and authenticity. The second part of the paper draws some further conclusions for the ethical debate on psychopharmacology and human enhancement, by comparing the novels not only with each other, but also with our present reality. It is claimed that the debate should not get stuck in an opposition of dystopian and utopian views, but should address important issues that demand attention in our real world: those of evaluation and governance of enhancing psychopharmacological substances in democratic, pluralistic societies.

**Key words:** authenticity, enhancement, fiction, Huxley, psychopharmacology, Utopia

#### Introduction

Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) is a famous and widely known dystopia, frequently called upon in public discussions about biotechnological developments. It is less well known that Huxley has also written a utopian novel, *Island* (1962), published about 30 years after *Brave New World*. Whereas *Brave New World* vividly depicts a world in which humans have become less-than-human by means of biotechnological and socio-scientific techniques, *Island* sketches an idyllic community in which scientific knowledge is carefully employed for the enhancement of the quality of human lives. In this article I claim that these two novels can be understood as a kind of elaborate thought experiments of what the world *could* look like if certain powers and technologies became available to us. In this sense, they can be considered as heuristic 'tools' to help us think

about the possible worlds that technology could bring about.

In this article I will discuss Huxley's novels from this perspective, focussing especially on the role of psychopharmacological substances in both books. Psychopharmacological substances play a significant role in both *Brave New World* and in *Island*. The discussions and reflections on soma, in *Brave New World*, and on *moksha*-medicine in *Island*, can be read as two paradigmatic ways of looking at the ethical and philosophical meaning of such substances. While the first shows all the treacherous, dangerous and scary aspects of psychopharmacology, the second shows its potentially positive and enhancing effects. In *Brave New World*, soma stands for alienation, de-humanization and superficial mind-numbing pleasure. This image is reflected in many present day ethical commentaries that fear the de-humanizing and the identity- and authenticity-corrupting effects of psychopharmacology. In

contrast, the *moksha*-medicine used on the Island of Pala stands for revelation, authentic self-experience, mind-expansion and true human flourishing.

A reading of Huxley's novels can therefore, I believe, be helpful in taking stock of and analyzing the various arguments for and against the use of psychopharmacological substances, especially their so-called 'cosmetic' use. So, the leading question will be: what can we learn from Huxley's novels about psychopharmacology, and how does this relate to the discussion in the ethical and philosophical literature on this subject?

In the first part of this paper, I will show how the use of psychopharmacological substances is depicted in *Brave New World* and *Island* respectively, and how these images hang together with the dystopian and utopian worlds depicted in the novels. I will argue that in the current ethical discussion the dystopian vision on psychopharmacology is dominant, but that a comparison between *Brave New World* and *Island* shows that a more utopian view is possible as well. Next, I will illustrate this point by discussing in depth the issue of authenticity, which is often raised in the ethical discussion on psychopharmacology, and is also present in Huxley's novels.

In the second part of the article I will draw some further conclusions for the ethical debate on psychopharmacology and human enhancement, by comparing the novels not only with each other, but also with our present reality. I will contend that the debate should not get stuck in an opposition of dystopian and utopian views, but should address important issues that demand attention in our real world: the issues of evaluation, governance and regulation of enhancing psychopharmacological substances in democratic, pluralistic societies.

### Brave new world and soma

*Brave New World* (1932) is set in a future world in the year 632 After Ford.<sup>1</sup> In *Brave New World*, people are no longer born and raised the way we are used to: they are created by way of cloning and consequently grow up in bottles in the so-called Hatchery. Here, they are bred and conditioned in such a way that they are perfectly designed for the tasks they are meant to fulfil in society. This society is divided in casts, from Epsilon semi-morons to Deltas, Gammas, Betas, Alphas. The Deltas and Epsilons are designed for mean labour; they are not very bright but physically strong and resistant to pollution and monotonous work. Others are more intelligent and designed for white-collar work. One of the main

characters is Lenina Crowne, a popular and perfectly adjusted alpha. She dates Bernard Marx, an alpha-plus, who tends to be a bit brooding and heavyhearted – probably because of a small mistake during his hatching. Arguably the most important character in *Brave New World* is the Savage, a 'natural born', who has grown up in a Reservation between ancient Indian tribes under very harsh and primitive conditions. It is mainly through his experiences and his discussions with World Controller Mustapha Mond, that we gain insight in the culture, habits and philosophy of the World State.

The whole society of the World State revolves around economy and amusement. People work the whole day in Ford-like production processes and in the evenings they go to the 'feelies', play electromagnetic golf or have recreational sex. People have superficial friendships, but love relationships, let alone family-relationships, are absent. The main activities besides labouring are consuming and having fun. People do not go through the process of ageing, but instead remain in perfect health until in their sixties they die in a special Hospital for the Dying, in a soma-induced ecstasy. Their remains are processed into useful materials like phosphor. Community, identity and stability are considered to be the main values in the World State and the regime has succeeded very well in realizing them. As Mustapha Mond describes its achievements:

The world's stable now. People are happy; they get what they want, and they never want what they can't get. They're well off; they're safe; they're never ill; they're not afraid of death; they're blissfully ignorant of passion and old age; they're plagued with no mothers or fathers; they've got no wives, or children, or lovers they feel strongly about; they're so conditioned that they practically can't help behaving as they ought to behave. (Ch. 16, p. 200)<sup>2</sup>

What is the role of the psychotropic drug soma in this perfect world? At first sight, it fits into the utopian picture of complete happiness. Soma seems somewhat comparable to alcohol: in low dosages it induces pleasant feelings and stimulates social contact. People take soma as a kind of 'holiday' from everyday life, a trip to a temporary state of bliss. It makes them happy, relaxed and good-humoured. It soon becomes clear, however, that soma is not an innocent or ideal substance. What applies for the rest of *Brave New World's* inventions certainly applies to soma: its dystopian face shines right through the surface of utopian happiness.

And if ever, by some unlucky chance, anything unpleasant should somehow happen, why, there's always soma to give you a holiday from the facts. And there's always soma to calm your anger, to reconcile you to your enemies, to make you patient and long-suffering. In the past you could only accomplish these things by making a great effort and after years of hard moral training. Now, you swallow two or three half-gramme tablets, and there you are. Anybody can be virtuous now. You can carry at least half your morality about in a bottle. Christianity without tears—that's what soma is (Ch. 17, p. 217)

On closer inspection, the inhabitants of *Brave New World* take soma mainly to escape from unpleasant situations and from 'real life'; it produces only shallow feelings of well-being and no real happiness or fulfilment; and it distracts from any human effort or true morality. In brief, soma promotes a superficial hedonism and causes alienation from the kind of 'real human life' that we know. Furthermore, soma is used to keep the social order as it is. It is used as a kind of substitute for religious feelings in Community Sings and Solidarity Services, where the values of the World State are celebrated and enforced. It is quite literally opium for the people. Apart from its use in semi-religious gatherings, soma is also used to keep the Delta workforce content by free provisions after work.

'No shoving there now!' shouted the Deputy Sub-Bursar in a fury. He slammed down the lid of his cash-box. 'I shall stop the distribution unless I have good behaviour.' The Deltas muttered, jostled one another a little, and then were still. The threat had been effective. Deprivation of soma – appalling thought!

'That's better', said the young man, and reopened his cash-box. (Ch. 15, p. 192)

Soma is used to keep the society stable, to keep everyone content with their fate and turn all the inhabitants of *Brave New World* into 'shiny happy people'. Even the lack of true human passions and feelings is made up for by a psychopharmacological substitute: everybody gets VPS (Violent Passion Surrogate) once a month, to stimulate the adrenals. This is one of the conditions of perfect health. As Mustapha Mond explains, it is the complete physiological equivalent of fear and rage. Consequently, fear and rage as subjective emotions have become superfluous.

*Brave New World* clearly offers a dystopian picture of the use of psychoactive drugs. In it, soma stands for alienation, de-humanization and

superficial mind-numbing pleasure. This image of psychotropic substances, especially mood-altering drugs, is reflected in many contemporary ethical commentaries that fear the de-humanizing and corrupting effects of such drugs. In many serious works on enhancement or the ethics of psychopharmacology, *Brave New World* figures in the bibliography and is used (often merely rhetorically) to set the stage for the discussion on possible dangers of these developments. The President's Council on Bioethics, for instance, says: "The example of 'soma', the drug in Aldous Huxley's fictional *Brave New World*, illustrates the debased value of a spurious, drug-induced contentment. Soma – like cocaine, only without side effects or addiction – completely severs feeling from living, inner sensation from all external relations, the feeling of happiness from leading a good life." (2003, p. 294) In the Council's final over-all evaluation of mood-brightening drugs this image is clearly present.

### Island and the moksha-medicine

The relatively unknown novel *Island* was written by Huxley at the end of his life, in 1962, and it depicts a world that is almost the complete opposite of *Brave New World*.<sup>3</sup> Pala is a small island in the Pacific, where for 120 years an ideal society has flourished. A journalist named Will Farnaby is shipwrecked there and we discover this utopia through his eyes. Farnaby is actually an underground agent for an oil-magnet who wants to strike a deal with the government of Pala because of the substantial oil reserves on the island. However, the more Farnaby learns about Palanese culture, the more sympathetic to it he becomes. The people of Pala live in small communities, with different families together in so-called mutual adoption groups. Children are raised by their natural parents but their education and development are supported by the rest of the group. The circumstances are idyllic; the Palanese produce as much food and goods as they need but not more and their lifestyle displays a perfect balance between labour and relaxation and between physical exercise and mental activity. People are generally healthy, thanks to a very well-developed and mainly preventive medicine, but death and suffering are not absent or denied. In contrast, they are accepted as an inherent aspect of human life and people are educated and supported socially and psychologically to deal with them. Children

are carefully educated and conditioned and jobs are assigned according to physique and temperament. Sexuality in Pala is very free and closely connected to a spiritual view of life.

The culture of Pala – which was founded by a Buddhist king and a Scottish doctor – is a mixture of eastern religious and philosophical views, and western scientific knowledge and technologies. Science and technology, but also hypnosis, education, psychology, yoga and the so-called *moksha*-medicine are employed in the service of the realization of a good and human life for everyone. As dr Robert MacPhail, grandson of one of Pala's founders and one of the main characters in the book, explains the goals of his society: "Our wish is to be happy, our ambition to be fully human." (Ch. 9, p. 171)

Moksha-medicine is the psychotropic substance that plays an important role in Palanese life. Moksha literally means 'liberation' but the drug is also known as the 'reality revealer' or the 'truth-and-beauty pill'. It is used to sharpen and deepen consciousness and brings about a kind of mystical or spiritual experience. It is meant to teach people more about themselves and their place in the universe. As dr Robert challenges the island's crown prince Murugan (who has been educated in a Swiss boarding school and is fiercely opposed to the use of 'dope'):

[Make] a single experiment. Take four hundred milligrams of moksha- medicine and find out for yourself what it does, what it tells you about your own nature, about this strange world you've got to live in, learn in, suffer in and finally die in. Yes, even you will have to die one day - maybe fifty years from now, maybe tomorrow. Who knows? But it is going to happen, and one's a fool if one does not prepare for it (Ch. Ch. 9, p. 170)

Most people in Pala take the moksha medicine only a few times a year, and its effects are compared to those of meditation – a practice which has an important place in everyday Palanese life. While meditation is like daily dinner, the moksha-medicine is compared to a banquet, which is an occasional treat. Both meditation and moksha-medicine improve social intelligence, self-knowledge and self-understanding. As one of the characters, Vijaya, explains to Farnaby, moksha-medicine helps one by "getting to know oneself to the point where one won't be compelled by one's unconscious to do all the ugly, self-

stultifying things that one so often finds oneself doing." (Ch. 11, p. 225)

Moreover: "It helps one to be more intelligent [...] Not more intelligent in relation to science or logical argument but on the deeper level of concrete experience and personal relationships". And the kind and simple Mrs Rao adds: "[I have] no talents or cleverness. But when it comes to living, when it comes to understanding people and helping them, I feel myself growing more and more sensitive and skillful." (Ch. 11, p. 225)

It can be concluded that *Island* offers a view on psychopharmacological drugs that is very different from that of *Brave New World*. In contrast to soma, the moksha-medicine stands for revelation, greater consciousness and self-understanding, mind-expansion and human flourishing. The positive and enhancing effects of the drug are put to good use and appear to stand in the service of humanity rather than to lead to its decline. This is a kind of view that is less often called upon in the ethical discussions on psychopharmacology and human enhancement. None of the books or articles that cite *Brave New World* in order to stress the inherent dangers of (psychopharmacological) enhancement cite *Island*, or other more 'utopian' descriptions. When *Brave New World* and *Island* are understood as two opposed 'Gestalts' of psychopharmacological enhancement, it must be concluded that the dystopian Gestalt is dominant in the ethical debate.

### **Ethics and the problem of authenticity**

Many of the dystopian fears elicited by *Brave New World* find their positive mirror image in *Island*. The fear that psychotropic drugs will only give us a shallow hedonistic type of happiness instead of true fulfilment and 'happy souls' (President's Council, 2003) is countered by the image of deep human experience that the moksha-medicine brings about. The fear that psychotropic drugs will be like opium for the masses and suppress real and legitimate dissatisfaction with certain ways of life (Elliott, 2000) is countered by the thoughtful ways in which moksha-medicine is employed to learn about the human condition. Likewise, the fears that psychopharmacological substances will provide an easy way out of our problems instead of stimulating us to 'work hard on ourselves' (Fukuyama, 2002), or that they will 'dehumanize'

us instead of making us better people are all perfectly illustrated by *Brave New World*, while their opposites are depicted in *Island*. So, both dystopian and more utopian perspectives on the use of 'cosmetic' psychopharmacology are possible, even if in the current ethical debate the first tends to dominate.

To underpin this claim further I will now discuss in some more detail the – arguably – most problematic and most debated problem of psychopharmacological enhancement, that of authenticity. The debate on authenticity has been relatively well-developed, and positive as well as negative visions have been expressed. Huxley's novels can illustrate as well as supplement the various positions in the debate.

The problem of authenticity is frequently mentioned in the ethics literature about psychopharmacology. It concerns the fear that one cannot 'live truly', or not 'really be oneself', when using psychotropic drugs. The alienation found in *Brave New World* is exemplary for this fear. While the characters in *Brave New World* hardly seem to have an authentic self anyway, due to their cloned and conditioned nature, they tend to use soma to get away from anything – any situation or experience – that might induce self-reflection or self-awareness. In a famous section in *Brave New World*, Bernard and Lenina are flying over the British Channel by night, and Lenina gets more and more upset and horrified by the silent moonlight, the cloudy sky, and the black, foamed-flecked water heaving beneath them. Lenina is appalled and frightened by the fact that they are alone, without music, lights and distraction. Bernard, however, enjoys it: "It makes me feel as though...[...] as though I were more me, if you see what I mean. More on my own, not so completely a part of something else. Not just a cell in a social body. Doesn't it make you feel like that, Lenina?" But Lenina does not understand what he means and cries out: "I don't know what you mean. I am free. Free to have the most wonderful time. Everybody's happy nowadays." And when Bernard pushes his case she adds: "I don't understand anything. Nothing. Least of all why you don't take soma when you have these dreadful ideas of yours. You'd forget all about them. And instead of feeling miserable, you'd be jolly. So jolly." Bernard, however, feels that the use of soma to become less gloomy is inauthentic: "'I'd rather be myself' he said. 'Myself and nasty. Not somebody else, however jolly.'" (Ch. 6, pp. 80–82)

A totally opposite view comes to the fore in *Island*, where the moksha-medicine is supposed to

make people *more* themselves, instead of less. Taking the drug is intended to help them reveal their authentic being and to become who they really are. Dr. Robert explains this clearly in a speech at an initiation-ceremony for a group of adolescents, who are going to use the moksha-medicine for the first time.

'Liberation,' Dr. Robert began again, 'the ending of sorrow, ceasing to be what you ignorantly think you are and becoming what you are in fact. For a little while, thanks to the moksha-medicine, you will know what it's like to be what in fact you are, what in fact you always have been. What a timeless bliss! But, like everything else, this timelessness is transient. Like everything else, it will pass. And when it has passed, what will you do with this experience?' [...] 'Will you merely enjoy them as you would enjoy an evening at the puppet show, and then go back to business as usual. Or, having glimpsed, will you devote your lives to the business, not at all as usual, of being what you are in fact?' (Ch. 10, p. 208)

Here, the idea is that the drug can help reveal a true self and can help one to become who one really is. The effect is not alienation, but revelation. Authenticity is enhanced, not violated.

Both views on the relationship between the use of psychotropic substances and authenticity or authentic identity have been expressed in the ethical discussion on psychopharmacology, especially with regard to SSRI's such as Prozac (DeGrazia 2000, 2005; Elliott, 1998, 2000; Kramer 1993, 2000). The notion of 'becoming who you are in fact', which is central in Palanese culture, can be understood to refer to the self in the sense of personality or personal identity. The suggestion that the true self is somewhere to be discovered and revealed is, however, rejected by most present day philosophers; revelation is not the right term in connection to personal identity. The static notion of identity or self it presupposes has been criticised from various sides (e.g. feminist approaches to identity and autonomy, see MacKenzie and Stoljar, 2000)

The combined notions of self-discovery and self-creation are more apt in this context. The Palanese notion of 'becoming who you are in fact' can also be taken to suggest that the true self is not somewhere to be found but is something that one can become, perhaps by working on oneself (or one's self), by introspection and practice or by meditation and moksha medicine. Moksha medicine is then understood as a tool that can be put to

use in a process of discovering and developing oneself (cf Elliott, 1998, p. 186). When authenticity is understood as identification with one's own characteristics and coherence between one's values and one's personality, such forms of self-development and self-creation are perfectly compatible with authenticity (DeGrazia, 2000).

Following this view on authenticity and personal identity we can also observe that the rejection of the use of soma in *Brave New World* as a paradigm case of inauthenticity is perhaps too easy. The connection between soma and (in)authenticity is more complicated than a superficial reading might suggest. While Bernard consciously decides that he does not want to be anyone else, that his bad moods belong to him and are an essential (if not the most pleasant) part of who he is, Lenina seems to identify completely with the superficial values of *Brave New World*. While on the interpretation of 'authenticity' given above it would indeed be unauthentic for Bernard to take soma, the same does not go for Lenina. She is completely 'herself' – though perhaps her self is not very deep or very well-developed. Authenticity understood as being oneself does not imply anything about the content of that self; it can be moody, or it can be shallow and hedonistically inclined. An authentic person is not necessarily a nice or interesting person. If authenticity is understood as invoking one's own values and critical faculties in the choices one makes about how to live one's life, the real problem in *Brave New World* is that it has created people who almost completely lack these faculties. Like Lenina, they are people who seem to lack the capacity for authenticity altogether – the mindless taking of soma is a symptom, but not the cause of this condition.

Apart from the discussion on authenticity as a characteristic of personal identity, there is also a discussion going on about authenticity as related to human nature, especially in the context of human enhancement (Parens, 2005). In *Island*, the worldview and religious or spiritual convictions of the people of Pala include that there is something like 'really being yourself' or 'being what you are in fact', which refers to one's nature as a human being, or one's place in a cosmological whole. Here, the idea of an authentic self is closely connected with authenticity as a human being and thus with human nature. Though the specific Palanese worldview is not the kind of view many people in today's Western culture would endorse, it shows similarities to other views of the 'naturally

human', such as those invoked by the President's Council, or by Fukuyama. In the contemporary debate notions of the naturally human, or of natural human development, are still strongly present and are often taken to imply that drugs or other technologies are artificial and therefore 'unnatural' ways of interfering in this development. This line of argument is rather problematic since it remains unclear what this 'naturally human' is exactly, and how we can know what it is. Moreover, whatever is understood by 'naturally human' or 'natural human development', we constantly interfere with it through technology, medicine and the like. It remains unclear why certain unnatural interferences are problematic while others, apparently, are not.

A very important difference between the Palanese view on authenticity and that of the President's Council, is that the latter stresses that for authentic or natural human identity, contact with the 'real world' is essential. Being in touch with reality is what matters, and this is why the escapism of *Brave New World* is so forcefully rejected. On the same grounds, the 'trips' taken with moksha-medicine could be rejected. This is exactly what Murugan, the crown prince of Pala does – he rejects the use of moksha medicine on the grounds that the experiences it evokes are not real. They do not refer to anything in the outside world, he claims. The answer Dr Robert gives him is philosophically interesting enough to quote. He compares the experience of moksha-medicine with listening to music – which does not refer to anything outside itself either. "So maybe the whole thing does happen inside one's skull. Maybe it is private and there's no unitive knowledge of anything but one's own physiology. Who cares? The fact remains that the experience can open one's eyes and make one blessed and transform one's whole life." (Ch. 9, p. 171)

So, it is claimed that one can learn and grow from experiences even if they are not 'real' in the sense of referring directly to something in the outside world. One can even become 'more truly human' by such experiences.<sup>4</sup> This is an observation that deserves further philosophical development in the discussion on psychopharmacology. What exactly we should take the notion of the 'truly human' to imply (or even the question whether such a thing exists and if so, in what way) I will not discuss here. However, if we do identify characteristics or actions that deserve to be called 'truly human', we should allow for the possibility that psychopharmacology can somehow

enhance these instead of being intrinsically at odds with them.

### The use of fiction and the real world

I have compared Huxley's two novels to show different possible views on psychopharmacology and to show how literature can vividly point out some of the moral problems of possible future developments. I do not want to argue here that either one of the views presented in the novels is 'right', or even that one of them is 'better' than the other. Both have the merit of showing us something about the form that the use of psychopharmacology could take, and about the moral issues that might be connected to certain uses of psychopharmacology. In general, however, the dystopian view tends to be dominant in the ethical debate.<sup>5</sup> The report of the President's Council, for example, though it offers a subtle and insightful discussion, tends to emphasise the dangers and the threats to our humanity, and to neglect the possible gains and advantages of going 'beyond therapy'. Authors such as Sandel, Kass and Fukuyama all paint rather dystopian pictures of our biotechnologically enhanced future.

Since the dystopian view tends to dominate the debate, a view like that in *Island* will probably be quickly rejected as 'utopian' in the sense of being unrealistic, overly optimistic, or simply naïve. But if we reject the *Island*-view as unrealistic, why should we not reject *Brave New World* and the connected dystopian fears as well? Is that view not (also) completely unrealistic and overly pessimistic?

As far as I can see, there is one argument one could appeal to in order to support the claim that *Brave New World* is more realistic than *Island*, and that is the claim that the driving forces and the dominant social and cultural values in *Brave New World* are more like those in present day Western societies than the culture and values of the island of Pala. We recognise the economic drive, the consumerism, the commercialisation and the entertainment-culture of *Brave New World*.<sup>6</sup> But then again, we do also recognize much of the concerns, the quests and the human experiences in *Island*. And while small-scale communities and Buddhist-inspired spirituality may not be viable options in our world, neither are Hatcheries and World Controllers. With *Brave New World* in mind, we can see the 'run on Ritalin' (Diller, 1996) as a sign that parents drug their children into becoming model-citizens; but we can also read

reports of the subtlety and real concern with which parents deliberate about using or not using the drug in order to help their child (Singh, 2005, Slob 2004) that would remind us more of *Island*.

I believe it is hard to give a normatively neutral (that is: 'objective') answer to the question of which novel paints the most realistic image. But, more importantly, I believe it is actually the wrong question. The point of reading these novels is not that they show us how things are, but how they could be, and how we could look at them. Given the dominant position of the dystopian view, I think it would be good for the debate to pay more attention to the utopian view as well. This does not imply that we should uncritically applaud all the promises of the enhancement-industry, or that we should all become transhumanists overnight, but we should look seriously into the possible positive effects and applications of psychopharmacological enhancement. We should put dystopia and utopia on a par and look at the possible ethical benefits as well as the dangers. It is remarkable that there is no research or discussion whatsoever on enhancing human functions such as empathy, sympathy, trust or altruism.

### Comparative analysis: lessons for enhancement debate

I will conclude by leaving the world of literary fiction and return to our own real world. While we can learn a lot from utopian and dystopian fictions, they also carry the danger of forcing us into dichotomous ways of thinking (good and bad; for or against) and oversimplified views of the world. Two aspects that are typical of utopias and dystopias alike, but do not correspond to the actual situation in our world, they are the existence of a totally controllable society and the presence of only one single view of the good life. In these respects both *Brave New World* and *Island* differ significantly from our Western society, which is characterized by great individual freedom and a pluralism of worldviews. Having recognized this, we can draw three more conclusions that are important for the psychopharmacology debate.

First, the effects of psychopharmacological substances depend greatly on the society in which they are embedded. Soma could not do its work without the whole constellation of a mind-numbing pleasure industry, without the lack of critical faculties or real love and without the specific social

codes of the New World. Likewise, moksha-medicine would not work if it were not embedded in the social programme of education, training and practice of the Island of Pala. Without the specific religious or spiritual framework that gives meaning to the moksha-medicine experience, it may not even yield the same experience. Psychotropic substances are part of a comprehensive social order, the organization of society, its values and its institutions. So, whatever new psychopharmacological substances will come to do and mean in our world will be very much intertwined with our society as a whole. They will reflect the values we hold, they will be embedded in our social practices and institutions – and so we cannot judge their moral meaning without looking at these social structures, institutions and our cultural values. Whether or not new psychopharmacological substances will help create inauthentic and shallow people will depend for a great part on social factors, not on the drug or substance itself. Critique on psychopharmacological enhancement is therefore better understood as critique on the existing culture, trends and popular values, than as a critique on these substances ‘as such’.<sup>7</sup>

However, secondly, unlike in *Brave New World* and *Island*, in which – as in all utopias – there is almost total control over society, we will not be able to completely control the place or function new psychotropic substances will get in our society. Nor will we be able to control the ways in which new substances will become embedded in society, or the ways in which such substances may alter society. Laws, regulations and other forms of government control can of course influence the course of events but they cannot control it completely. It would be an illusion to think that we can predict exactly what the social effects of new substances will be, how society will react and how common values and practices might be changed due to these new substances. It is even more illusionary to think that we can arrange and govern all these effects and changes. In our complex and pluriform world that is simply impossible.

It is dangerous to forget that in our world complete control is impossible, and even more dangerous to forget why we should be happy that this is so. *Brave New World* and other famous dystopias like *1984* – as well as the ‘realised utopias’ of Stalin and Mao – have all made it far too clear that total control comes only at the cost of individual freedom. Nevertheless, a conservative author like Kass<sup>8</sup> sometimes appears to regret that

total control over society is not possible and that there seems to be no way to stop our slide off the slippery slope: “Just give us the technological imperative, liberal democratic society, compassionate humanitarianism, moral pluralism, and free markets, and we can take ourselves to *Brave New World* all by ourselves. If you require evidence, just look around.” (Kass, 2000).

This position displays little respect for people’s own views of the good life and little confidence in their critical faculties and in our democratic values. Fortunately, the President’s Council has not adopted the same point of view as its chairman, but stipulates that it is *our freedom* that holds the key to a remedy, because it gives us the opportunity to understand happiness in the right way and to act upon this understanding. This formulation, however, overlooks another important characteristic of our present world, that of pluralism. The President’s Council supposes that there is one right way to understand happiness and that we can use our freedom to find it, but apparently not to find other ways of understanding human happiness.

I believe, thirdly, that this value and life-style pluralism that characterize our world should be taken more seriously. As we have seen, the enhancement debate is in an important sense a debate about the good life and about human flourishing or human happiness. Underneath the discussion on authenticity lies a deeper discussion on what it is to be human. The moral evaluation of new psychopharmacological substances or mind-influencing drugs depends greatly on one’s ideas in this respect. In *Brave New World* the dominant view is one that we intuitively tend to reject: a view in which safety, stability, and pleasure dominate all other values. In *Island* the dominant view of the good life is a view that is perhaps more attractive to us, with its emphasis on humanity, compassion and meaning.<sup>9</sup> However, both the dystopian and the utopian world are characterized by the fact that there is *only one view* of the good life. Pluralism is absent in both worlds. Dissidents hardly exist. In *Brave New World* those who are too self-conscious or hold different views on the good life (who, for example, value truth or beauty over happiness) are banned to remote islands. In *Island*, the main dissident is Murugan, the crown prince of Pala who eventually betrays Pala by handing it over to a rivaling neighbour Sultan who is only interested in the oil reserves. This ending of the novel may be taken to suggest that economic forces will eventually ruin any good society, but also that a peaceful pluralism is not possible.



Unlike the world of *Island* or *Brave New World*, our world *is* pluralistic, and people hold vastly different views on what a good life entails. In fact, a quick search on the Internet shows that there are numerous virtual communities that hold views much like those in *Brave New World* and *Island*, and that are in fact inspired by these novels and aim to make their utopia come true.<sup>10</sup> Besides such small-scale initiatives there are of course huge differences in lifestyle and worldview between different groups within the western world – not to mention those in other parts of the world. This implies that there will also be very different views on the use of psychopharmacological substances. It is a very important question how we should deal with this variety in views with regard to psychopharmacological enhancement and the good life. Should we simply allow people to make their own decisions about whether or not to use new substances? This is problematic, since a widespread use of such drugs will influence those who choose not to take them as well (think for example of cognition-enhancing drugs, that will influence competitive abilities). Should we aim to show that one view of the good life is correct and that consequently the use of such drugs should be banned or stimulated? Should we discuss and argue about our various views of the good life and the place of psychotropic drugs in the hope that we will reach a shared view?

Thinking in terms of good and bad, utopia and dystopia should not prevent us from considering two important givens of our actual situation: the existence of pluralism with regard to values and worldviews and the lack of absolute control that characterizes liberal democratic societies. Taking this into account, the interaction between new psychopharmacological substances and society should be understood as a two-way traffic. In figuring out how to deal with new psychopharmacological substances and possibilities for psychopharmacological enhancement, fiction can be very helpful. But we should not get stuck in it.

### Acknowledgements

This research was funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research as part of the programme Ethics, Research and Governance.

### Notes

1. Henry Ford (1863–1947), the American car magnate who introduced methods for mass-production of cars

such as the assembly-line, is worshipped as a god in *Brave New World*.

2. Because there are numerous editions of *Brave New World* and *Island*, reference is made to both the chapter and page number of the quotations, in order to facilitate tracking down of quotations.
3. In his 1946 foreword to *Brave New World*, Huxley regrets that he has offered the Savage only two alternatives: that of the insane utopia of *Brave New World* and that of the primitive Indian village in the Reservation. If he were to rewrite the book, Huxley says, he would offer the Savage a third alternative. This alternative would consist of living in a community where the economics would be decentralist, the politics anarchist and co-operative and where science and technology would be used as though they had been made for man, instead of the other way around. Religion would be the conscious and intelligent pursuit of man's Final End. All this sounds remarkably like *Island*, suggesting that the opposed views the two works display, are in part representative of a shift in Huxley's own point of view.
4. This could also be compared to spiritual or mystical experiences; remember also the similarity between moksha-medicine and meditation. It seems odd not to recognize the ability to have such experiences and be somehow transformed or affected by them as a typically 'human' ability.
5. For an exception see Bostrom (2003).
6. Huxley wrote *Brave New World* in part as a satire on the global diffusion of the American way of life.
7. Carl Elliott (2003) has very cleverly described the various aspects and ambivalences of contemporary American culture and their relationship to enhancement technologies. The President's Council also locates the core of the enhancement debate in socio-cultural values and in questions about the nature of humanity, human flourishing and happiness.
8. Leon Kass, M.D. is the chairman of the President's Council for Bioethics
9. It can be argued that the underlying view of the good life (Huxley's view?) in both *Brave New World* and *Island* is actually the same. If *Island* is considered to be the blueprint for this good life, *Brave New World* is its negative.
10. See, for example [www.island.org](http://www.island.org) and [www.huxley.net](http://www.huxley.net) or [www.bltc.com](http://www.bltc.com)

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