

Truth as Its Counterpoint

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Abstract

From A. H. Maslow's remark that "science is the only way we have of shoving truth down the reluctant throat. Only science can overcome characterological differences in seeing and believing. Only science can progress." (in Aldous Huxley, Literature and Science, 1963), to Aldous Huxley's "we now find ourselves from the very start in the midst of a dialogue between nature and man, a dialogue of which science is only one part, so much so that the conventional division of the world into subject and object, into inner world and outer world, into body and soul, is no longer applicable and raises difficulties." (Literature and Science, 1963), one may realize that truth is to be found rather as a construct oscillating between conventional forms that the régimes of truth characterizing every societal arrangement build and personal interpretations of reality specific to any human creature. In brief, the present article explores the different 'shades of grey' that the birth of truth presupposes in a process of transactional interplay which appears most often under the form of contrapunctual exchange, with a reliance on Huxleyian texts read mainly through Foucauldian lenses.

Key words: *truth, counterpoint, knowledge, understanding, tension.*

Introduction

When it comes to truth and reality, knowledge and understanding, the central question – and probably the only one that may be needed to be asked – is this: how do we do to reach the truth? Attention should be paid to the verb. If one asks 'how do we *discover* the truth?', one automatically sets off relying on the idea that truth is something that already exists and is simply waiting to be revealed. However, the answers to this question may vary according to the way knowledge and understanding are envisaged.

One way that is believed to conduct to truth is via knowledge. But knowledge is such a vast domain that a series of considerations must be made about it. For example, if scientific knowledge is taken into account, it may be said that a large number of information came to be considered true as to the laws of nature. The data in the numerous fields of science are proof of this.

Another way taken into consideration as being one that leads the way to truth is via understanding. The experience has been given different names by different authors in the long run. Huxley refers to it as direct understanding, intuition, mystical revelation. The name that is given to it is not actually so

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important. For example, in *A Taste for the Secret*, Derrida comments on the position and function of proper names in philosophy arguing that they act as authorities in the field via a chronological priority or simply because they are others. And, as he shows earlier in his book, simply acknowledging the others, one necessarily finds oneself “disarmed before the other” and, thus, one accepts whatever ‘the other’ turns out to be. The same goes evidently with any other, especially if that other has a name – like God. What he says of Socrates may very well be applied to God: “I have to try to respect the very thing that is untranslatable in the event that carries the name of Socrates. Weakness before the ‘there has to be the other’ passes in philosophy through the existence of proper names” (Derrida 2001: 68).

This attitude of ‘weakness’ proves to be the most appropriate, just like Huxley said in *Names and Things*: “Modern thought is preponderantly Nominalistic; [...] men are muddleheaded creatures who imagine that, because they have invented a name, there must be some real objective thing to correspond to it” (Huxley 2001: 98).

So, it is not about the fact that knowledge and identity do not or should not exist, but that they need to be suspended so that one can be able to identify with the divine ground, God, the other world, or whatever name is given to it. The name of the divine has so little importance that indeed it is not the identification of the divine by the aid of its names or descriptions that is of any help. It is the direct experience of it – which has been reported so many times that cannot be successfully rendered in words – that counts and is able to reveal the truth.

Pluridimensionality – the new perspective

With Huxley, all these paths are reliable to a certain extent and it is through counterpointing the results of all of them that one may get greater chances to reach the truth. Restless as he is, he cannot think but contrapuntally. His essays and his novels are the expression of his manner of ratiocination. Once he has an idea, he inevitably comes against it with an opposite one, sometimes succeeding in harmonizing them, sometimes not. This flow of arguments, of ideas fighting each other in a debate, is the main mechanism of his writings, just like they are of his thinking. There does not exist, of course, a singular theme around which his thinking revolves, but a multitude of them intersecting each other; this is the reason why his novels render the diversity and multiplicity of life by the large number of interlinks of themes and plots. The characters are numerous and diverse, too, for they stand for the same pluridimensionality inherent in the human nature. Each character voices his inner diversity, and together, the diversity of the human species at large.

His contrapuntal structures are only instances from a network of reasoning which converge and separate again and again in their movement. It has to be also mentioned that they must not be envisaged as ending processes, but rather as live,

growing spirals. An association that could best render plastically the whole picture is the DNA chain made of two vertical strings connected at intervals by horizontal links, a chain that moves as if upwards and circularly, endlessly. He explains it in terms of the musicalization of fiction: "In sets of variations the process is carried a step further. The whole range of thought and feeling, yet all in organic relation to a ridiculous little waltz tune" (Huxley 1928: 78).

The link existing at all times between the two strings, and among the multiple range of chains, is a critical one, e.g. one that is itself a crisis, a tension, sometimes even a war. It appears that it could not be otherwise for it is only such a connection that can make the spiral move; when things are settled – the adjective itself is self-speaking – movement is impeded. The major framework in which Huxley constructs his fiction and non-fiction is a world in which there is a permanent search for equilibrium – spiritual and psychological, social and economic – but in which the adoption of inadequate standards leads to a failure in striking a balance. This is the case for Westerners. Instead, due to his vast study in psychology and parapsychology, mysticism and Oriental philosophy, he creates a very personal hybrid criterion of spiritual welfare which can be also the basis for the balanced progress in any sector of life.

Because they are closely knit aggregates rather than completely unified and indissoluble wholes, human beings are capable in some degree of temporary self-transcendence and can therefore come to at least a partial knowledge of the transcendent Spirit. But during most of their existence it is impossible for them to be aware of Spirit except as immanent in themselves and in the minds and lives and things outside them. Divine immanence is possible only because there is divine transcendence. There can be no indwelling of one piece of matter within another piece of matter; and, they may overlap, minds can never fuse, never wholly possess one another. But Spirit, which is of another order of being, can be completely co-extensive with bodies, co-active and co-conscious with minds. For this reason the realm of nature is always, potentially, the realm of grace. For the potentiality of grace to become actual, or for an actualized gratuitous grace to become permanently effective, there must, of course, be collaboration by the will (Huxley 2002: 115).

Although the sensation system through which human beings have experiences is common to all members, the cumulus of experiences and what people make out of them is different from person to person. Huxley puts it beautifully, again in musical terms: "In the human fugue there are eighteen hundred million parts. The resultant noise means something perhaps to the statistician, nothing to the artist" (Huxley 1928: 23). The reasons for this difference are multiple – body condition, environment, upbringing, etc.

Reality is what one makes of what one experiences. An example is to be found in *Point Counterpoint* where Huxley argues that an artist may have "the revelation of profoundest truth" when hearing a girl singing, an experience which

in turn, gives rise to the creation of another song which is “a slow and lovely meditation on the beauty (in spite of squalor and stupidity), the profound goodness (in spite of all the evil), the oneness (in spite of such bewildering diversity) of the world” (Huxley 1928: 24). The realm that the artist discovers transcends what is held as evident reality if a scientific or purely intellectual view of things is taken. But, Huxley maintains, this does not make the discovery less reliable: “It is a beauty, a goodness, a unity that no intellectual research can discover, that analysis dispels, but of whose reality the spirit is from time to time suddenly and overwhelmingly convinced” (Huxley 1928: 24). All the more so if one is to take into account that

[s]cientific hypotheses can be brought to experimental tests by the senses; metaphysical hypotheses cannot. We believe or disbelieve in a philosophy because we either do or do not feel as the philosopher felt about the world at large. Now, the senses are fairly uniform throughout the human race. [...] But man's feelings about the world at large are not at all uniform. There is no single norm about such experiences. Hence there can be no single universally satisfying philosophy. [...] Each, so far as he himself is concerned, is right. Given the question, both answers are true. But this question of providence, along with all the other cosmic riddles, is almost undoubtedly wrongly posed. The traditional method of rationalizing our experiences is faulty. Our experiences are real but our rationalizations of them are fantastic (Huxley 2000: 301).

Another reason for the diversity of interpretations is that

[a]ll men have similar sensations, but not all have similar intuitions. Religious intuitions differ in intensity, not only as between man and man, but in the same man at different moments. Given light and normal eyes, all of us on all occasions see very much the same things – which does not mean, of course, that we make the same use of what we see, or that these more or less identical sensations carry an identical meaning for each beholder (Huxley 2000: 245).

Modernity with Huxley means a fusion of two apparently contrapuntal stances – unity in diversity in diversity in unity. One the one hand, with him

the essence of the new way of looking is multiplicity. Multiplicity of eyes and multiplicity of aspects seen. For instance, one person interprets events in terms of bishops; another in terms of the price of flannel camisoles; another, like that young lady from Gulmerg,¹ he nodded after the retreating group, 'thinks of it in terms of good times. And then there's the biologist, the chemist, the physicist, the historian. Each sees, professionally, a different aspect of the event, a different layer of reality. What I want to do is to look with all those eyes at once. With religious eyes, scientific eyes, economic eyes, *homme moyen sensuel* eyes' [...] Because everything's implicit in anything. [...] nothing could well be queerer and that no picture can be queer enough to do justice to the facts' (Huxley 1928: 192).

On the other hand, each makes a different unique thing/reality of the same experience, just the way his characters do: "And Walter would be woken from his dream of love into a reality of what Lucy called 'fun,' into the cold daylight of sharply conscious, laughingly deliberate sensuality. She left him unjustified, his guiltiness unpalliated" (Huxley 1928: 201). This feeling basically explains what Huxley means when he says that the events and the experiences may be the same with all individuals, but it is what each makes of them that gives different shapes to those moments, to reality, to identities, to lives. It is not, thus, wrong, to say that there can be novelty, after all. As Derrida remarks later in the 21st century, there is a kind of *a priori* when he says that philosophers like Descartes or Kant claim that they try to begin from scratch, "to recover the *arche*, the beginning" for whatever is, "has already begun" (Derrida 2001: 68). And yet, in spite of the existence of an *a priori*, and in spite of repetition, this last one will never "exhaust the novelty of what comes" (Derrida 2001: 70) precisely due to the newness that the incalculable presupposes. Eventually, everything can be summed up in mathematical terms – there is knowledge about the existence of figures and about their possibility to combine *ad infinitum*, but when there exist unknown elements in the equation, the resultant combination is completely unpredictable. Therefore, in Eminescu's words, "Time goes, time comes, all is new and old are all" (*Vreme trece, vreme vine, Toate-s vechi si noua toate*) because "even if one were able to imagine the contents of experience wholly repeated – always the same thing, the same person, the same landscape, the same place and the same text returning – the fact that the present is new would be enough to change everything" (Derrida 2001: 70).

Another stance towards knowledge and reality is at the other extreme, where there are people like Everard in *Point Counterpoint* who "hated situations that were neither one thing nor the other [for] he preferred definite knowledge, however unpleasant, to even the most hopefully blissful of uncertainties" (Huxley 1928: 367). But again, this kind of knowledge may be gained only with the brain, in which case a complementary process of "suppressing [...] heart and bowels" inevitably takes place. Rampion clearly sets the two outcomes in the balance: "All that happens in the process is that they're transformed from living organs into offal. And why are they transformed? In the interests of what? Of a lot of silly knowledge and irrelevant abstractions" (Huxley 1928: 397).

As mentioned earlier, tension is necessary in order to initiate movement. As to Huxley's characters, each of them deals with the crises in his own way and the reader is offered the possibility to observe a wide range of experiences and reactions. Reality may be viewed as a diamond with millions of sides; through the *punctus contra punctum* technique the reader is exposed to a variegated range of alternatives for "Reality, as we know it, is an organic whole. [...] The observed solution of continuity are [...] rather between different states of the total reality as experienced by different individuals, and by the same individual at different

times" (Huxley 2000: 369). The benefits of this technique are enormous; as an individual, any reader occupies a position on this diamond called reality and therefore, is unable to see all its facets; but as a Huxley reader, every individual is provided with the trespassing of subjective boundaries and able to see the whole range of sides of the diamond, that is, of reality. The writer character Philip Quarles in *Point Counterpoint* considers that the artist should 'counterpoint' different strata as 'a new way of looking at things' (Huxley 1928: 191). It appears quite seeming, thus, that Huxley was greatly influenced by the theory of relativity when displaying ideas from so diverse experimental standpoints. Huxley was fond of the idea that "the same person is simultaneously a mass of atoms, a physiology, a mind, an object with a shape that can be painted, a cog in the economic machine, a voter, a lover etc." (1933: 274-5) So, either it is via his mouthpiece characters, or directly through his words, it is ideas and this pluriperspectivism that matter to him and are desired to be transmitted. And he does transmit them consistently both in his novels and in his essays because he wishes himself and his reader to look at reality "with religious eyes, scientific eyes, economic eyes" (Huxley 1928: 192). In brief, the contrapuntal form of the written piece reflects the plurality that Huxley believed and argued that exists in the micro- and the macrocosm.

According to Michel Foucault, this will to knowledge has been accounted for in a great number of ways along the years; Foucault finds it interesting to analyse only two of the models – the Aristotelian and the Nietzschean ones – as he believes them to be at the antipodes.

With Aristotle, it is the satisfaction of the visual perception the one that renders plain the connection between knowledge, pleasure, and truth. Besides, this basic desire to know which is manifested through seeing is also complemented by and satisfied more deeply in the pleasure of contemplation, which may be considered as the other extreme in the range that is the will to know.

Conversely, with Nietzsche, knowledge appears where there is disharmony between desire, fear, pleasure, instinct. Huxley remarks that "the poor in spirit are less successful than the rich in spirit, but they are for that reason more liable to be saved. Thanks to their poverty, they are actually unaware of many of the possibilities of discord which it is so easy for the richly gifted to turn into actual disharmony" (Huxley 2001: 121). Moreover, knowledge is dependent on interest, and truth is thus the result of the interplay of different pursuits of benefits, as Huxley sensibly observes, as well: "No philosophy is completely disinterested. The pure love of truth is always mingled to some extent with the need, consciously or unconsciously felt by even the noblest and the most intelligent philosophers, to justify a given form of personal or social behavior, to

rationalize the traditional prejudices of a given class or community" (Huxley 2001: 368). "For myself," Huxley confesses,

as, no doubt, for most of my contemporaries, the philosophy of meaninglessness was essentially an instrument of liberation. The liberation we desired was simultaneously liberation from a certain political and economic system and liberation from a certain system of morality. [...] After the War the philosophy of meaninglessness came once more triumphantly into fashion. [...] The universe as a whole still remained meaningless, but certain of its parts, such as the nation, the state, the class, the party, were endowed with significance and the highest value. The general acceptance of a doctrine that denies meaning and value to the world as a whole, while assigning them in a supreme degree to certain arbitrarily selected parts of the totality, can have only evil and disastrous results. 'All that we are (and consequently all that we do) is the result of what we have thought.' We have thought of ourselves as members of supremely meaningful and valuable communities – deified nations, divine classes and what not – existing within a meaningless universe. And because we have thought like this, rearmament is in full swing, economic nationalism becomes ever more intense, the battle of rival propagandas grows ever fiercer, and general war becomes increasingly more probable (Huxley 2001: 369-370).

The Nietzschean model makes both Huxley and Foucault reach the conclusion that knowledge is rather linked to politics and justice systems for it appears that truth is something that follows a worldly order and that the espial of this functioning is cathartic in itself. It is important to be studied all the more because it is this kind of avowal of truth that turned out to be fateful for the Western knowledge. According to an Albert Einstein quote, what one knows is up to the theory one uses. From this, it results that the access to truth is possible only through the filtration of data through a systematic web of conceptualizations. Moreover, when adding Foucault's reading of Nietzsche, it becomes evident that knowledge is not necessarily an amount of information external to the microcosmic level of the human mind that is accessed by individuals, but actually it is something created, as it were, by the human systems of thought and disseminated into the society. It, therefore, follows that issues like authority and power must be considered, both at the individual and the societal levels, since the shape truth is given depends on them.

Consequently, Foucault reckons that an analysis of the relations of power should be undertaken in the economy of this study for it is this kind of schemata that shape the knowledge and the truths in the Western world. Huxley, too, expresses his discontent again and again towards the power that scientists, for example, gain because of the possibility they have to "control, direct, and modify" to a great extent the world around them. It is in this sense that Francis Bacon's famous words – 'knowledge is power' – ought to be interpreted in Huxley's context. "Knowledge is power and [...] it is through their knowledge of what

happens in this unexperienced world of abstractions and inferences that scientists and technologists have acquired their enormous and growing power to control, direct, and modify the world of manifold appearances in which human beings are privileged and condemned to live" (Huxley 2002: 94). But if we are to consider the notions of knowledge and power from a Foucauldian perspective, it will become obvious that the relation between them is not appropriately displayed by the verb 'to be' (since it is not one of equivalence), but rather by the slash sign as Foucault wisely uses. More explicitly, it is not so much sovereignty (envisaged as a relation of subjectification by natural right or original power) that has to be looked into; in other words, it is not the basic terms that found such a power relation that are relevant, but the relation itself "inasmuch as the relation is what determines the elements on which it bears: instead of asking ideal subjects what part of themselves or what powers of theirs they have surrendered, allowing themselves to be subjectified [*se laisser assujettir*], one would need to inquire how relations of subjectivation can manufacture subjects" (Foucault 1997: 59). As mentioned before, a contrapuntal analysis is the best choice, and Foucault is actually pleading for

looking for the single form, the central point from which all the forms of power would be derived by way of consequence or development [only under condition that] one must first let them stand forth in their multiplicity, their differences, their specificity, their reversibility: study them therefore as relations of force that intersect, interrelate, converge, or, on the contrary, oppose one another or tend to cancel each other out (Foucault 1997: 59).

Going to War in Search of Truth

For the French philosopher, this strategy of analysis of knowledge based on the study of war seems so efficient that he strongly recommends that such views as Hobbes' – domination is instituted not by war but rather by "a calculation that allows war to be avoided" be dismissed (Foucault 1997: 63). As a further argument, he backs up his standpoint with the evidence found in the works of Augustin and Amedee Thierry which deploy two relevant interpretations of history – one regarding class struggle, the other focusing on biological confrontation (Foucault 1997: 64). Again, the linchpin of the discussion is the very relationship developed in the intercourse, which is given the sensible name of 'governmentality', rather than the fundamental elements that constitute it and make it appear. The relation is crucial for it is it that correlates sides, counterpoints, be they different states, peoples, or, in a deeper sense, the self and the others. It is only by understanding the relationship and the governmentality that one can comprehend how knowledge and truth are constituted. And this understanding must necessarily be contrapuntal in order to give the most of its

benefits; in Foucault's own words: "analyse it rather as a domain of strategic relations focusing on the behavior of the other or others" (Foucault 1997: 88).

In brief, it is such a contrapuntal perspective of the opposites and, as a matter of practical fact, of all the voices manifesting in the game that may reveal the knowledge and the truth emerging *in medias res*, along with an understanding of them, if one is to think optimistically.

As noted by many, things just get repeated in the long run; it is most often the justificatory theory that may alter, but it is inevitable, apparently, to avoid arriving at the same conclusions, the same answers, the same solutions. What varies, actually, would rather be knowledge and not wisdom:

The experience of past generations is 'culture,' and culture 'can be analysed into two ingredients – knowledge and wisdom, or, in other words, science and value.' Science, of course, has its own categorical imperative – the duty to follow wherever the facts may lead, to seek the truth without reference to current interests, preconceived notions, or even social needs. Wisdom, then, has a good right to be taken seriously as knowledge. But whereas knowledge can be traded, stored and compounded, wisdom (in Hubble's words) 'cannot be readily communicated, hence it cannot be pooled and it does not accumulate through the ages. Each man acquires his own experience (Huxley 2002: 30).

Huxley's urge to make the best of both worlds is a leitmotif of his entire work, his creed, as a matter of fact. He is completely convinced that human beings are amphibians, in other words, that the macrocosm and the microcosm are multi-layered structures. Therefore, they need to be experienced in their totality – that is to say, at all their levels. Abstractly, he wants people to live simultaneously and coherently as if they were in an animated spiral whose strings are infinite and whose movement is never-ending. Practically, the worlds or the layers or the strings that he wants people to intertwine in the spiral of living are the one made of knowledge (as it comes from scientific and intellectual progress) and the one made of understanding of the non-explainable.

To be fully human, we must learn to make the best of [...] [both worlds]: the world of books, of the social heredity of steadily accumulating knowledge, of science and technics and business, of words and the stock of second-hand notions which we project upon external reality as a frame of reference, in terms of which we may explain, to our own satisfaction, the enigma, moment by moment, of ongoing existence. Over against it stands [...] the world of sheer mystery, the world as an endless succession of unique events, the world as we perceive it in a state of alert receptiveness with no thought of explaining it, using it, exploiting it for our biological or cultural purposes (Huxley 2002: 310).

In short,

will and reason were not sufficient and [...] the individual could not, unaided, live as he ought to live, much less be 'saved,' or 'made-perfect.' His 'I' knew that it

needed help of some benevolent not-I more powerful than itself. And such help was actually forthcoming. The insufficiency of the 'I' was a matter of immediate experience; but so also was grace, so was inspiration. 'Communication of the Spirit with our spirit is a true psychological fact and not a mere matter of faith' (Huxley 2002: 97).

All the more limited are the possibilities of the human cogito since "according to the distinction between phenomenon and noumenon, everything visible – ourselves included – could be nothing but memory and phenomenalization" (Derrida 2001: 104). In Spinoza's words, we may run the risk similar to that of the stone: "if a stone that is falling could think, it might think it was doing so freely" (Derrida 2001: 142). So, one should better take a closer look at what Huxley explains:

If reality is to be understood in its fullness, as it is given moment by moment, there must be an awareness which is not limited, either deliberately by piety or concentration, or involuntarily by mere thoughtlessness and the force of habit. Understanding comes when we are totally aware – aware to the limits of our mental and physical potentialities. This, of course, is a very ancient doctrine (Huxley 2002: 225).

So, "the 'care of oneself' [is] understood as an experience, and thus also as a technique elaborating and transforming that experience" (Foucault 1997: 88). In Huxley's formulation: "Experience is not what happens to a man. It is what a man does with what happens to him" (Huxley 1993: 5). "Now it becomes a matter of attending to oneself, for oneself: one should be, for oneself and throughout one's existence, one's own object. But the impulse by which one's gaze is drawn 'aloft' – toward the divine element, toward the essences and the supracelestial world where they are visible" (Foucault 1997: 96). Experience and the turn to the self are prerequisites on the way to the truth for

[t]ruth can be defined in many ways. But if you define it as understanding (and this is how all the masters of the spiritual life have defined it), then it is clear that 'truth must be lived and there is nothing to argue about in this teaching; any arguing is sure to go against the intent of it.' This was something which Emerson knew and consistently acted upon. To the almost frenzied exasperation of that pugnacious manipulator of religious notions, the elder Henry James, he refused to argue about anything. And the same was true of William Law. "Away, then, with the fiction and workings of discursive reason, either for or against Christianity! They are only the wanton spirit of the mind, whilst ignorant of God and insensible of its own nature and condition. . . For neither God, nor heaven, nor hell, nor the devil, nor the flesh, can be any other way knowable in you or by you, but by their own existence and manifestation in you (Huxley 2002: 219).

Derrida further explains that in the relation with the incalculable, the occasion, the event, the chance, the aleatory, being weak means "exposing ourselves to what we

cannot appropriate" because "it is there, before us, without us - *there* is someone, something, that happens, that happens to us, and that has no need of us to happen (to us). And this relation to the event or alterity, as well as to chance or occasion, leaves us completely disarmed." Moreover, he insists that things must be left that way because if the situation were different, then nothing would eventually happen, would not have the chance to happen. "one has to be disarmed. The 'has to' says yes to the event: it is stronger than I am; it was there before me; the 'has to' is always the recognition of what is stronger than I. And there has to be a 'has to'. One has to have to. One has to accept that 'it' [*ca*] (the other, or whatever 'it' may be) is stronger than I am, for something to happen. I have to lack a certain strength, I have to lack it enough, for something to happen. If I were stronger than the other, or stronger than what happens, nothing would happen" (Derrida 1997: 63).

The whole point is that, ultimately, it is precisely that third space that Derrida speaks of (which is the same with Huxley's divine ground and Foucault's supracelestial world) that contains the truth, that is, reality and that everyone reaches the same ultimate reality but at different paces, according to the potentialities they develop, the strength of will, the level of awareness. It is just a matter of time, timing and pacing; eventually, everybody will reach the same destination the moment awareness dawns on us.

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