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A Land of Lotus-Eaters?

BY GEORGE MORRISON CARSTAIRS, M.D., F.R.C.P.E., D.P.M.

With the popularization of the psychotropic drugs, the author observes, a peculiar aberration has entered into public thinking: everyone nowadays expects to be happy. Pills have come to be regarded as a means to do away with the everyday anxieties and pain that have long served as spurs to human progress by leading to constructive action. This new view of unhappiness as a wholly negative and unnecessary emotion, the author suggests, is in need of reevaluation.

IT WAS quite early in his ten-year journey home from the siege of Troy that Odysseus and his warriors came to the land of lotus-eaters and were urged to eat this fruit, which had the property of making those who partook of it forget their home, their family and friends, and desire only to stay and taste it again and again. Odysseus was too much of a realist and man of action to be hooked by this dreamy opiate, although it was not long before he became entranced by Circe's sensual charms.

The legendary land of lotus-eaters continued to haunt the imagination of mankind for centuries. Invariably, it was conceived as somewhere far off in space or time: but in quite recent years the fantasy has reappeared and disquietingly threatens to invade our real world.

Some 40 years ago, Aldous Huxley published his pessimistic, satirical, and—at the time—highly improbable picture of the future of our race. In his *Brave New World*(2), the greater part of the earth had

become completely domesticated, a wholly man-made environment of great technical sophistication. Practical efficiency, in terms of mastery over material things and the exploitation of useful information, had resulted in a robot civilization in which strong feelings, especially painful feelings, had no place. The inhabitants of his mock-science-fiction utopia lived in a state of mild euphoria. If their peace of mind were ever threatened—for example by the intrusion of an unplanned or unwanted incident or a disturbing thought—they were trained from an early age to restore their equanimity by swallowing a Soma pill, which quickly reestablished their conformity to the prevailing mood of optimism.

The Contemporary Soma Pills

It all seemed farfetched at the time: but look how the times have caught up with his fantasy! When the British National Health Service was inaugurated 20 years ago, the two commonest drugs in everyday use were analgesics (such as aspirin) and sedatives (such as the barbiturates). Aspirins are still big business, as any viewer of commercial television must know; and 20 years of free or nominally charged prescriptions have boosted the consumption of barbiturates to quite extraordinary levels. In 1966, for example, general practitioners in England and Wales issued 36,000,000 prescriptions for sedatives, hypnotics, and tranquilizers—and this takes no account of the numbers prescribed by hospital doctors and psychiatrists.

During the last dozen years, a whole new series of drugs has been discovered and exploited by the pharmaceutical industry—the psychotropic drugs. These include the *tranquilizers*, drugs which claim to allay anxiety and trepidation without dulling the intellect, and the *antidepressants*, or mood

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elevators, which interfere (in ways still imperfectly understood) with the interior chemistry of the brain so as to lift the clouds of melancholy and dispel feelings of emotional exhaustion.

Early precursors of these latter drugs were amphetamine and its derivatives, substances which temporarily abolish feelings of hunger and sleepiness and induce a prolonged, if rather hectic and slapdash, willingness to "keep going." Hitler's soldiers kept going through days and nights of the 1940 blitzkrieg, thanks to amphetamines; truck drivers have used them for years to stave off fatigue when exceeding the safe limit of hours of driving; and teen-agers soon learned that with their aid a weekend party could be prolonged without wasting hours in sleep. Unfortunately, the brain that is overstimulated by amphetamine is liable to react in peculiar ways: for example, by developing auditory and visual hallucinations and delusions of being persecuted.

There are many other psychotropic drugs which have been discovered empirically to relieve some symptoms of mental illness, but which in larger doses or in different circumstances make the patient confused, delirious, excited, or deluded. As yet, little progress has been made in identifying the complex biochemical processes which are involved in normal and abnormal brain function. The fact that some tranquilizers and antidepressants really do what they claim has stimulated a great deal of pharmacological research in their mode of action. And the fact that some substances can evoke symptoms similar to those of mental illness has excited the hope that a closer study of their metabolism in the body may throw light on the metabolic processes underlying schizophrenia, mania, and depression.

Scientifically speaking, research work in brain biochemistry is still largely a matter of groping in the dark, but drug firms and their customers are notoriously impatient of the slow processes of scientific inquiry. What they want are "breakthroughs" and "wonder drugs"; and if they can't find them, they invent them.

Two rather unexpected by-products of the emergence of the new psychotropic drugs have been the uprush of public concern over

the worldwide increase in the abuse of drugs and the mounting frequency of attempted suicide by "taking an overdose."

The "Mind-Expanders"

Public debate about LSD, hashish, and kindred drugs has been so vociferous in recent years that we easily forget that some of these drugs have been known for quite a long time. As long ago as 1845 a group of writers, poets, and painters used to meet in Paris to explore the psychedelic properties of hashish. They called themselves "*le club des haschischins*." Members of this club used to take hashish and paint or compose under its influence. They were, of course, an intellectual ingroup, very much a minority, known to intellectual circles but not in touch with the mass of the population.

Mescaline too is a drug of quite respectable ancestry. It was investigated by a number of workers in different European countries at the end of the last century. A paper by Havelock Ellis describing his own experiences under the influence of mescaline was published in the *Lancet* as long ago as 1897(1). The drug came under investigation again in the 1930s when a group of workers at the Maudsley Hospital experimented with its use. Some of the research workers noted with relish the heightening of perception which they experienced under the influence of mescaline.

Dr. Gibbens (now Professor Trevor Gibbens, the holder of the first chair of forensic psychiatry in Britain) has described to me how at the end of one day's experimental work, while still under the influence of mescaline, he traveled down to London's Tate Gallery and walked through its very familiar rooms. On this particular afternoon, he said, he viewed the paintings in a completely new light: the colors seemed to shout at him with the force of a platoon of trumpeters. He found it an exhilarating experience, but was not tempted to repeat it.

The recent wave of interest in psychedelics, as they have come to be called, may be said to date from the publication of Aldous Huxley's little book *The Doors of Perception*(3). The movement has gathered force, particularly in America, thanks to the

proselytizing activities of individuals like Dr. Timothy Leary. He and his followers regard the use of drugs like LSD and psilocybin as being very definitely life-enhancing. They refer to these drugs as "mind-expanders" and in their propaganda assure their listeners that, until one has tried these drugs, one remains oblivious to one's own fullest mental potentialities.

Nor do their claims stop here. Enthusiasts for the psychedelics ascribe all sorts of moral values to the psychedelic experience. They believe quite naively that, by taking a drug like LSD, anyone can experience a state of illumination akin to the experiences described by mystics as the reward of their prolonged exercises in meditation. This is, to say the least, open to question. All too often the "illumination" experienced under the influence of such drugs appears to be profound to the subject but quite trivial to the onlookers.

Nevertheless, the whole social phenomenon of interest in psychedelic drugs is a fascinating one. All over the civilized world, but especially in the United States, young people in the 1960s have been turning to these drugs in the hope of gaining a new insight into their own personalities and of discovering, as never before, a deeper understanding of the meaning of their existence.

The older generation has viewed this phenomenon with unconcealed anger and dismay. The alarm aroused by experimentation with LSD is probably excessive, although it cannot be denied that some young people have been precipitated into psychotic breakdowns as a result of taking LSD and some have committed rash actions which have cost their own lives, or even in one or two cases the lives of others, while in a state of delirium. Whenever this happens, it becomes a matter for headline news, in curious contrast to the indifference born of years of familiarity which attends the daily deaths on the road and deaths in the home attributable to alcoholism.

Why, one wonders, is the older generation so perturbed at the spectacle of their children experimenting with mind-expanding drugs? It is not simply a realistic concern for their welfare. If this were all, the older people would be equally concerned to prevent their children from acquiring the

habit of overindulgence in alcohol and in cigarette smoking. I suggest that the real cause for this exaggerated concern is recognition of the fact that young people are deliberately challenging, and in many cases repudiating, the values which their elders have lived by; and it is this which we of the older generation find so hard to tolerate.

Even the rebels of 20 to 40 years ago are exasperated by these youngsters—hippies or Flower People—who opt out of the contemporary social scene. Some of my Communist friends are just as emphatic as any Conservative in condemning young people's "copping out." They argue: if these kids are dissatisfied with the state of the world, why don't they do something practical about it instead of electing to escape from it all into a private, delectable dream? One answer, of course, is that young people in modern society feel powerless to do anything really effective in the political sphere. This does not apply to all of them. Witness the young Americans who have worked hard and exposed themselves to considerable dangers in promoting the cause of integration and the other young people, both in America and elsewhere, who have been so active in protests against the war in Viet Nam, in particular, and against nuclear armaments in general. But perhaps even more young people have become cynical about the efficacy of such political forms of activity. That this cynicism in turn is only reluctantly adopted can be seen from the quite remarkable success of operations such as those of the Peace Corps and our own program for Voluntary Service Overseas.

A New Epidemic

A principal claim on the part of those who advocate the use of psychedelics is the right of every individual to explore the full potentialities of his personality, to do what he likes with himself. In this respect the psychedelic experimenters have something in common with a great many of their fellows in contemporary society. Here I am referring to the many thousands of people in every developed society who declare their dissatisfaction with the state of their lives by taking an overdose of sleeping tablets or of one of the other psychotropic drugs.

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The fact that the very sharp increase in the number of hospital admissions for attempted suicide coincided with the beginning of our British National Health Service caused me and probably many other observers to believe that this was no mere coincidence. Analyzing all the attempted suicides treated in the hospital in Edinburgh in 1962, Professor Neil Kessel pointed out that 80 percent of these individuals had swallowed drugs which had been prescribed for them on a National Health Service prescription form. He, too, thought the ready availability of psychotropic drugs, either free or at nominal expense, was an important contributory factor to the increase in "taking an overdose" (4). But he was mistaken: in fact the curve of the increased number of cases of attempted suicide has been paralleled in other European countries and in the U.S.A., even in the absence of any National Health Service.

This phenomenon, which has spread with the rapidity of an epidemic or perhaps I should say of a new fashion, must be seen as one response to the availability of these drugs throughout the world. In case I seem to exaggerate in referring to the increase in attempted suicides as an epidemic, perhaps I should point out that in England and Wales during 1966, of all the admissions to hospital wards treating acute medical emergencies, no less than one in ten was due to taking an overdose of drugs.

I suggest that this remarkable new phenomenon of recourse to overdoses of sleeping tablets and tranquilizers is a by-product of the very expectations which have been aroused by the advent of the psychotropic drugs. A peculiar aberration has entered into public thinking. Everyone nowadays expects to be happy. What is more, if anyone feels unhappy, he immediately thinks that something must be wrong either with him or with the state of the world, if not both.

It might be argued that a refusal to tolerate preventable unhappiness has been one of the spurs for human progress. (Charles Kingsley indeed referred to it as "divine discontent.") One can certainly agree that intolerance of unhappiness, if it leads to constructive action, is indeed a valuable human attribute. But in recent

years, we have seen another reaction to unhappiness: namely, the attempt, not to change the circumstances which have given rise to it, but instead to influence the biochemistry of the individual who is unhappy.

Pills to Alleviate the Stress of Life

Here the advertising literature of the drug firms has undoubtedly played a part. Again and again, as they introduce new tranquilizers, they would have us believe that *this* is the pill which will do away with anxiety, worry, and depression. So far, none of these pills has maintained for long the promise they aroused when they were first introduced; and perhaps it is as well that this has been the case, because simply to tackle the subjective feelings of unhappiness or depression without tackling the cause of these feelings is a very imperfect remedy and could even be dangerous.

If one thinks for a moment of the consequences of prescribing analgesic medicines to relieve the pain of illnesses of all sorts, quite clearly this would not only be bad medicine but would lead to the unchecked progress of serious illnesses like cancer. It is not difficult to imagine that similar harm might result from the indiscriminate use of anxiety-relieving drugs.

Some eight years ago, I heard a colleague deplore the fact that his general practitioner had not treated his elderly father for clear signs of depression. When I heard a little more about the old gentleman's depression, I found that it had been occasioned by the recent loss of his wife. He was, in fact, mourning for her death, and the spectacle of his mourning was so distressing to his son that the latter wanted it stopped at once by the administration of an antidepressant drug. It did not occur to him that mourning serves a positive purpose.

When we analyze the social factors in the background of many hundreds of cases of attempted suicide, we find that some are provoked by depression, but many others are the product of moods of petulance on the part of individuals who have never been very good at getting on with other people, who have never made a great success of their own lives, and who are not good at

tolerating setbacks. Their taking of an overdose is seldom intended as a serious attempt at killing themselves; it is much more an expression of indignation, a cry of protest at the fact that they are having to suffer. One is reminded of the celebrated utterance of King Frederick the Great of Prussia. At the onset of one of his battles, observing that his rank and file were showing a certain reluctance to throw themselves into the thick of the battle, he drove them on with the indignant cry: "You dogs, would you live forever?" One might apostrophize the large numbers of attempted suicides today in slightly less abusive terms: "You misguided people, what makes you think that you must never be unhappy?"

Suffering as a Spur To Action

I do not mean to imply that I approve of unnecessary suffering, but rather that suffering, like pain, is a part of human experience which is not entirely negative. Just as pain can serve the purpose of calling attention to an infection or a cancerous growth, or of compelling the immobilization of an injured limb, so may suffering compel us to take stock of a bad social situation or an unrewarding relationship. There is, in fact, a contradiction between the psychedelic gospel of widening our sensibilities and the tranquilizer user's wish to shut out unpleasant experiences from his awareness. The real danger we face from misuse of drugs is that the experimenter finds his drug a comforting means of escape from having to face up to painful realities. Drug dependency is the modern equivalent of lotusland. And this is true not only of depen-

dency on hard drugs, such as heroin or cocaine, but on many others, which are more readily available, such the amphetamines, barbiturates, and tranquilizers. For some hundreds of years, our society has condoned the use of one particular sedative drug—alcohol—in order to drown our sorrows and diminish our anxieties. This has been done at a considerable cost in lives clouded, ruined, or cut short by alcoholism. Today, the same individuals whose inability to face up to painful life situations made them overdependent on alcohol are having recourse also to other mildly stupefying drugs.

In Aldous Huxley's prophetic story, the hero was a nonconformist, who refused to remain deaf and blind to the painful aspects of human existence. In his rebellion, he insisted that one attains a deeper and ultimately more satisfying self-fulfillment by being willing to experience *everything* that life has to offer, whether agreeable or disagreeable, good or bad. Perhaps this is too bitter a pill to be prescribed on the National Health Service, too bleak a philosophy to be acceptable at peak TV viewing time. But I suggest that the need for just such a repudiation of the tranquilizing anodyne is already present and is likely to grow more urgent in the next few years.

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