

**READINGS
FROM HUXLEY**

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Readings from Huxley by Thomas Henry Huxley & Clarissa Rinaker

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TO MY COLLEAGUES

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INTRODUCTION

THE pursuit of truth was the keynote of Huxley's life and work. Not that he was always right; as Sam Slick said, "there is a great deal of human nature in all mankind." Like the rest of us, though we must admit less often than the rest of us, he sometimes mistook error for truth; he held at various times, perhaps even at the same time, ideas inconsistent with one another. He was right more often than we, however, and he was able to add to the world's knowledge, to the sum of truth, not only because he had early learned from Carlyle the hatred of cant, humbugs, and shams, but also because his conception of truth provided a method of discovering and rejecting error. Huxley never regarded truth as final, but always as progressive. Like the pragmatist, he held it impossible to establish fixed and eternal truth by discovering and reasoning from the so-called laws of the universe; he rather sought by observation, deduction, and verification — i.e., by the scientific method — to generalise the facts of existence as we find them, and thus to arrive at rational certainty. In the scientific field, which was particularly his own, and which lends itself to a strict method of truth seeking and finding more readily (but no more justly) than do abstract subjects, this method was highly successful and led to the establishment of important truth. In the field of ethics, however, Huxley was less successful. His most valuable work there was destructive — in exposing by his method of verification the fallacy of de-

pending too much upon absolute authority. When he undertook, however, to build up his own system of ethics, he had not the same command of evidence that he had in science, and he sometimes accepted assumptions which a rigid application of his method would have led him to reject.

To one who insists upon an immutable, absolute truth, Huxley may well seem not to arrive at truth at all; indeed he admitted that "it may fairly be doubted whether any generalisation, or hypothesis, based upon physical data is absolutely true, in the sense that a mathematical proposition is so." And he bases "rational certainty" upon two grounds: "the one that the evidence in favour of a given statement is as good as it can be" — when "the statement is to be taken as true"; the other, "that such evidence is plainly insufficient," — when it is untrue. But in each case it is true or false only "until something arises to modify the verdict, which, however properly reached, may always be more or less wrong, the best information being never complete, and the best reasoning being liable to fallacy." This pragmatic kind of truth is, however, more rather than less dependable than so-called absolute truth because, as Huxley points out, since the errors of such scientific generalisation "can become apparent only outside the limits of practicable observation, it may be just as usefully adopted . . . as if it were absolutely true." The justification of employing such postulates "as axioms of physical philosophy, lies in the circumstance that expectations logically based upon them are verified, or at any rate, not contradicted, whenever they can be tested by experience." Truth which rests upon authority or a *priori* assumption, on the other hand, defies both changing circumstances and verification of its *dicta*. A recent critic of Huxley, Mr. Paul Elmer More, condemns

Huxley's use of uncontradicted as well as verified hypotheses because, he says, the way to truth does not lie through error. That assertion seems to me less well founded than Bacon's saying, reiterated by Huxley, that "truth more easily comes out of error than out of confusion." This is certainly the case when one is armed with Huxley's habit of testing every hypothesis by bringing in all the evidence available — "is the evidence adequate to bear out the theory, or is it not?" — and his determination to "rest in no lie, and to rest in no verbal delusions."

The perception that truth is not final did not, as I said at starting, prevent Huxley from regarding it as the immediate jewel of his soul. Perhaps indeed truth is to be the more jealously cherished when every man bears the responsibility of discovering and preserving it. At any rate Huxley conceived highly of his duty to truth, watched anxiously his worthiness to serve it, and was resolved greatly to find quarrel in a straw when truth was at the stake. He wrote to his sister in 1850:

"I will leave my mark somewhere, and it shall be clear and distinct [T.H.H., his mark.] and free from the abominable-blur of cant, humbug, and self-seeking which surrounds everything in this present world — that is to say, supposing that I am not already unconsciously tainted myself, a result of which I have a morbid dread."

After forty years his adherence to truth was but strengthened by the battles he had waged in her name against adversaries superior in numbers, entrenched in ages old habits of thought, and fortified by ecclesiastical authority.

"Belief in majorities is not rooted in my breast, and if all the world were against me the fact might warn me to revise and criticise my opinions, but would not in itself supply a ghost