

**The Unexamined Life:
Celebrating Anti-Intellectualism in Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim***
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Intellectualism is the business of knowing. To discover truths, to find the unknown, having a love of learning – these are all things native to the academic. What is particularly intriguing about the novel *Lucky Jim* (1954) by Kingsley Amis is its avid anti-intellectual stance through the lens of its protagonist, Jim Dixon. *Lucky Jim* is a novel that started a genre – the academic novel; how can it be so anti-intellectual, mocking the very ivory tower upon which it stands? Philistinism in *Lucky Jim* is more than a simple distaste for learning and knowing: it is a warning against the disconsolation of philosophy. Philosophy offers little comfort in the modern world; it is best to ignore the reasons for events happening, as fate often deals a discourteous living to the overly philosophic. The best way to avoid suffering is to live one's life without questioning, sans examination.

Paradoxically, the novel is also a chronicle of Jim Dixon's education. Dixon discovers the benefits of knowing, despite his apparent hatred for the academic world of which he is a part. While certainly avoiding the truth is a great way of avoiding hurt, misery and boredom plague the person who does not seek out truth. While Jim Dixon appears to be an anti-intellectual, he discovers a love for truth through his desire for change in the course of Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim*. In order for those personal changes to happen, Dixon realizes certain truths must arise.

Unanswered questions plague Dixon's mind, as his dissatisfaction with his current circumstances makes woes spring up to provoke his evaluation. Dixon is consistent in his evasion of those questions; he assumes a rather anti-philosophic stance, reasoning that he will only feel worse upon discovering the truth of his afflictions. Dixon asks himself how he could possibly be a Professor of History, and "[a]s usual, Dixon [shelves] this question, telling himself

that what [matters is] that this man [has] decisive power over his future" (*Lucky Jim* 8). Dixon develops an incredibly tunneled vision; he ignores the reasons behind his predicament in the belief that rationalization can do little, if nothing, to alleviate his problems. Philip Gardner describes Dixon as "wondering where he is existentially" (Gardner 27). While certainly Dixon questions his predicament, his unwillingness to evaluate those questions makes the existential dilemma Gardner presents far-fetched. In debating existentially, one hopes to arrive at some greater understanding, and therefore greater happiness, through meditation, but Dixon's beliefs about self-evaluation prevent him from embarking on Gardner's proposed existential journey. Dixon refuses to separate himself from the circumstances of his environment; in refusing to divide himself from his surroundings, Dixon cannot access the principles of an existential debate.

Perhaps upon his decision to become honest with himself, and eventually others, he begins an existential journey, but even that would be unlikely. Dixon does not search to make sense of his predicament for the sake of truth itself; he desires *only to understand it enough to escape it*. Dixon's philosophy aligns perfectly with the phrase, "Let's work without theorizing [. . .]; it's the only way to make life bearable" (Voltaire 120). A phrase from Voltaire's *Candide* (1761), the sentence embodies the sentiment of a group of unfortunate souls plagued by poor fate and the harsh realities of a cruel world. The sentiment is an anti-intellectual sentiment, and for good reason, as the intellectual suffers innumerable hardships in his or her quest for philosophic fulfillment. Dixon does not feel the need to understand the particulars of his misery because he thinks that it will only make him feel worse, just as the conclusion of *Candide*, Voltaire's most influential anti-Enlightenment work, dictates. Dixon champions the argument against philosophy, as debate can only make one feel worse in a world where so much goes poorly.

Dixon simply fears truth; he does everything he can do to avoid it, seeing no benefit in knowing the reasons that cause events to happen. Upon the conclusion he reaches during one particular occasion of rare philosophical debate, "Dixon [feels] he ought to feel calmed and liberated at reaching this conclusion, but he [doesn't], any more than unease in the stomach is alleviated by the discovery of its technical name" (*Lucky Jim* 108). The truth, for Dixon, is simply such a negative notion that he cannot conceive of truth ever being positive. Dixon simply refuses to analyze his position in life; the narration helps to locate some of the sources of that angst, but Dixon himself is completely uninvolved in the debate over his present discomfort. Richard Bradford locates this predicament beautifully, writing, "Jim is frustrated and irritated, but he is never offered as a means of diagnosing contemporary states of angst or alienation" (*Lucky Him* 101). The mistake of many early critics was to read the novel as a social statement, mixing Dixon up in the social dilemmas of the time, but the fact is that Dixon lacks the philosophical complexity, or perhaps maybe just the motivation, to pinpoint the exact causes of general social unease. Certainly, the novel is a period piece about the redbrick university in post-war Great Britain. However, the relevance of historical and political considerations is negligible in considering the driving forces of change in Dixon's life. Sociopolitical concerns do not have a profound effect on Dixon's psyche. By profession, surely, Dixon should be curious to understand the history behind his present predicament, but Dixon is preferentially reticent. Understandably, self-evaluation is a large undertaking, but it seems natural for a man of Dixon's level of dissatisfaction to wonder what led him to the social path he must unwillingly negotiate.

As a defense mechanism to prevent actual self-evaluation, Dixon possesses an avid imagination: his child-like daydreams and imaginings reveal an underlying longing for drastic changes in his life. Dixon has various moments of self-projection in which he injects himself

into fantastical scenes he enjoys. When with Margaret at a bar, Dixon has the urge to sprint for the door as quickly as possible until boarding a city bus (*Lucky Jim* 25). Just moments later the thought occurs to him "how much he [likes the barmaid] and [has] in common with her, and how much she'd like and have in common with him if she only knew him" (*Lucky Jim* 25). It is apparent from the two visions so close in proximity that he does not like Margaret one bit, or at least at the time desires everything but her presence. He seems so helpless, fantasizing about running away and finding a new girl that he seems to be wishing for a fairy godmother to come by and rescue him. Bradford goes even so far as to call *Lucky Jim* "a fairytale, an achieved fantasy" (*Lucky Him* 101). Bradford claims that the novel chronicles the fulfillment of the impossible, and really, Dixon's daydreams do become reality through a string of good luck and blessings. Dixon cannot help but release a "long trombone-blast of anarchistic laughter" because "[t]he campaign against Bertrand he'd fantasied [*sic*] about at the Welch's [has] begun" (*Lucky Jim* 103). Dixon becomes fully aware that his imaginings, which at a previous instance he finds impossible, become reality as he throws away his apprehension and caution. By letting go of his anxiousness, Dixon finds that his burdens follow suit and let go of him in turn.

Dixon's visions also reveal his not-so-secret love of beauty and visual perfection. A love of aesthetics can mean distaste for academics; if one desires to see beauty, one can certainly dislike the prodding of objects with philosophic questioning. Dixon likes to take things at face value. He wants aesthetic simplicity in the midst of a complex age. After hiding a ruined table in a cluttered attic, Dixon notices:

The effect, when he [steps] back to look, [is] excellent; no observer could doubt that these objects [have] lived together for years in just this way. He [smiles],

shutting his eyes for a moment before slopping back into the world of reality.

(Lucky Jim 74)

His brief escape from his world of chaos through this small moment of aesthetic perfection, objects sitting together in harmonious stagnation, is a revelation to his love of aesthetics and the straightforwardness they offer. Aestheticism is an escape – a perfect shortcut from complexity to simplicity.

In contrast, sometimes images of aesthetic beauty strike Dixon as apparitions of the change he needs in his life; he sees things that disturb him to feel helplessness, longing, even a distinct desire for change. During his first viewing of Christine, Dixon recalls that "[t]he notion that women like this [are] never on view except as the property of men like Bertrand was so familiar to him that it had long since ceased to appear an injustice" (*Lucky Jim* 39). Dixon obviously enjoys objects of aesthetic beauty, but his attitude towards those objects is one of scorn and agitation. Dixon seems to think that all aesthetically pleasing things belong to another class, an injustice he finds objectionable, but nonetheless accepts. His instantaneous beliefs about Christine, her kind, and Bertrand's kind reflect a desire to know all there is to know at one glance. This aesthetic simplicity, however, does not work. He tries to equate beauty with truth, and therefore sees beauty as unattainable and annoying. While he desires to know, his simultaneous desire *not* to know presides and prevents him from actually taking the time to evaluate the facts of Christine's presence. He avoids having a proper introduction to this new entity, Christine, reflecting his fear of the unknown (*Lucky Jim* 42). Similarly, Dixon experiences a haunting visual image of the London skyline, an image he describes as occurring "unbearably" (*Lucky Jim* 26). He desires a change in his life, as the disturbing aesthetic images

reaffirm, but at the current time, he does not know how or why he should go about accomplishing those changes.

The realization that art can conceal, a fact Dixon discovers in his quest for aesthetic simplicity, forces Dixon to come to terms with his hatred of academic questioning. Living on the surface – believing that all can be known at the first encounter – simply does not work, as rarely are things simple enough to make study of them useless. As Dixon discovers that looks deceive, that things are rarely what they seem, he becomes intrigued. The mysteriousness of something not so clear or apparent sparks his interest; Dixon can no longer be an anti-intellectual if he dislikes deception. Margaret's appearance, with her arty wooden-beads and colorful shirt, certainly makes her appear as if she would not mind Dixon's sexual advances, but the fact that she objects makes Dixon less reliant upon the instant truth of appearance (*Lucky Jim* 77). Further intellectual curiosity enters Dixon's psyche as he discovers that Christine's severe expressions and mannerisms do not coincide with her carefree and unmannerly attitude; "[i]t was a puzzle" (*Lucky Jim* 79). Dixon even dares to go further, eventually denouncing the realm of appearance for lacking significant function entirely. Dixon interrogates, in this respect, Bertrand's blue beret. If a hat's function is to protect, what is the purpose of Bertrand's hat, if not to reaffirm his pretension, to pretend to be something that he is not? (*Lucky Jim* 188). With this increase of his intellectual curiosity, in asking questions and refusing to accept deceptive ideas, Dixon begins to ask some of the more pertinent questions he has avoided for so long.

On the other hand, perhaps Dixon is simply lazy, unwilling to use his mind because he prefers blissful ignorance to trial and its consequent failure. Ian Carter deduces that "thrown out of his lecturing job in a minor redbrick, Jim Dixon is saved from a fate worse than death - real work – by being hired to keep unwelcome visitors from a fabulously wealthy Scottish

Nationalist" (Carter 94). The assumption here is that Gore-Urquhart liberates Dixon through an extension of Dixon's beloved idleness and hatred for work. However, for Dixon, ignorance is *not* bliss; he realizes he must work harder and force himself to be honest with the people whom he fears. Dixon's happiness stems from his newly found self-honesty, a complete turnaround from Carter's claim. Dixon consciously decides that he will be completely honest with Gore-Urquhart, which is the true essence of his liberation in respect to Gore-Urquhart's job offer (*Lucky Jim* 214). In being honest with others, Dixon acquires a love of truth, and therefore a tendency towards intellectualism.

It is not simply the realization that he hates work that prompts Dixon to change his life; he takes chances and accepts the consequences of those actions as the truth fate can reveal. Randall Stevenson claims that taking his chances "exemplifies a tendency towards reconciliation with society, rather than any real desire to reform it [. . .]. Unconforming [*sic*] rebels or angry young men settle for compromise and social acceptance" (Stevenson 125). While it is certainly valid to claim that Amis' protagonist comes to an agreement with society, as the novel uncovers the best way possible for Jim Dixon to coexist with others, Dixon certainly does not alter his social values to achieve this. Individually, Dixon arrives at a compromise, exchanging his staunch unevaluated life for a truthful, honest living. Socially, however, Dixon does not compromise one bit. He simply finds a way to be himself among society, an accomplishment he achieves with a good helping of luck, which he unearths through blatant honesty with himself and others. "The imaginative core of the novel [. . .] is not the fact that Jim rebels or that he wins, but in the *way* he rebels and wins" (Salwak 75). Dixon's refusal to compromise his desires, and his refusal to back down from truth, makes the novel the innovative work that it is.

Dixon conveys a strong love of progress; despite his anti-intellectualism, he cannot help but be a slave to change. Dixon hates the primitive. Even though he hates his particular area of specialization, the Middle Ages, he broods upon its value in study, as it makes one appreciate the present day much more. Dixon reflects that

Those who [profess] themselves unable to believe in the reality of human progress ought to cheer themselves up [. . .] by a short study of the Middle Ages. The hydrogen bomb, the South African Government, Chiang Kai-shek, Senator McCarthy himself, would then seem a light price to pay for no longer being in the Middle Ages. [Have] people ever been as nasty, as self-indulgent, as dull, as miserable, as cocksure, as bad at art, as dismally ludicrous, or as wrong as they'd been in the [. . .] Middle Ages? (*Lucky Jim* 87)

Progress, with all the misery and disaster that comes with it, is much better than life in the Middle Ages, the embodiment of stagnation at its worst. Eventually, his hatred for boredom and idleness overrides his fear of truth, allowing him to tackle head-on the very fearful prospect of change, and its progenitor, luck.

Luck, for Jim Dixon, is a four-letter word. He hardly understands it, aside from understanding that he does not experience much of it. He sees luck as a property of others; once that luck becomes his property, the luck Dixon experiences liberates him from his moral ties to his responsibilities. Bradford sums up this moral lapse, writing, "Jim's 'luck' brings him not an intellectual victory but a life with Christine and the cheerful exchange of academia for a well paid job in London, and it was with such endorsements of hedonistic 'philistinism' that the novel

came to be regarded as the manifesto of a generation" (*Kingsley Amis* 27). Bradford sees *Lucky Jim* as "a piece of anarchic irreverence" (*Kingsley Amis* 27), attacking the miseries of tedious living with chaotic, uncontrolled revenge against intellectualism. While certainly, chaos and anarchy do come to mind as the forces that drive Dixon to his actions, in reality his actions only have the semblance of being anarchic. They are chaotic in nature, but truth-driven and reasonable in aim. Philip Gardner touches on this anarchic drive for change, prefacing his chapter on *Lucky Jim* with the assertion that at the time of the novel's release and writing, there was a "widespread sense that society needed to be changed, or at least modified" (Gardner 23). Perhaps this is true, that 1950s Great Britain feels stagnant and anxious for change. Perhaps it is also true that Kingsley Amis is aware of that feeling at the time, but that feeling is not the overriding driving force of Jim Dixon's world and the changes therein. To sum up the misunderstanding of Dixon, Elaine Showalter observes, "[t]his lad is not an angry young man at all, not an existential rebel or political revolutionary, but rather someone who would prefer to be happy, loved, and settled" (Leader 65). While yes, it is apt to put down the notion that Dixon is not an angry young man, nor an existential or political rebel; the truth is that Dixon's changes result from his desire for truth in his life, a desire to end pretension in the pursuit of life sans the restraints of lying and deceit. If one equates truth with happiness and peace, then certainly Dixon desires happiness and love indirectly, but Dixon's personal changes are due to a negative desire, a hatred of lying, rather than a positive desire for peace or happiness.

Dixon is hardly a morally qualified or positively deserving character in terms of the benefits he reaps due to his luck. As Ralph Caplan delineates, "Amis heroes are, by and large, 'not disqualified,' rather than positively qualified, for their jobs and for life generally" (Shapiro 11). Instead of being an unequivocal hero, profiting morality and reaffirming justice in a tired

world, the hero in Amis's novel *Lucky Jim* tends to be more like an anti-hero. He is not particularly morally upstanding, except for the fact that he is not *incredibly* immoral. Caplan reminds that Bertrand's vileness is the only fact that allows Dixon's claim upon Christine to be more valid (Shapiro 11). Moral righteousness is not a vital part of the world of Jim Dixon. He skates past moral repercussions with luck and coincidence. Neither is morality important to Christine. Christine even goes so far as to claim that social inequality is a good, beneficial vice; "she [thinks] it [is] no more than fair that one man should cheat and another be cheated to serve her convenience" (*Lucky Jim* 134). Christine's frankness in claiming that it is more important for she and Dixon to catch the cab than it is for the Barclays does not make her morally upstanding, yet the action seems to endear her further to Dixon. He sees Christine's selfishness as a simple laudation of the benefits of serving one's purpose. In the world of Jim Dixon, Malcolm Bradbury sees "an empirical morality in which common sense is better than pretension, ignorance better than self-deceit" (Bradbury 341). There are no clear positives or negatives, only varying degrees of non-positives and non-negatives; ignorance fuels this gray area. Dixon is willing to put pressing issues aside for the sake of being honest with himself, but not too honest, as total evaluation will erase the ignorance that guides Dixon's version of morality.

A sense of abandonment arises in Dixon as he pursues his new life; no longer will he feel the binding restraints of deceit and lying, as he is now able to enjoy life with the new faith he entrusts in his luck. Dixon, once he throws away his caution, actually becomes happier and luckier. David Lodge reflects, "Jim's fortunes begin to improve, in spite of deceptive appearances to the contrary" (*Lucky Jim* xii). The Merrie England lecture is simply another extension of his honesty, as he reveals his true beliefs under the influence three things: annoyance, anxiousness, and, of course, alcohol. He consumes generous amounts of alcohol,

while simultaneously building up general distaste for his current circumstances and an unbridled desire for change. Those influences, in combination with each other, serve as a truth serum, unleashing a part of Dixon who had never before spoken. All the seemingly horrible things that happen to Dixon turn out to be liberating, however, (*Lucky Jim* xiii), as he escapes any real punishment for them, gaining freedom in the removal of his mental shackles. Dixon finds empowerment through honesty; he finds that doing what he wants is the only training for doing more of what he wants (*Lucky Jim* 146). No longer is Dixon the same timid, scared, even dishonest boy he once would exemplify; he matures into a state of unchecked honesty that serves him well in the fulfillment of his luck and his pursuit of goodness.

Simply said, the novel is a pragmatic¹ triumph of the individual. Dixon begins the novel as a self-ignoring victim. He avoids questions, ignores his predicaments, and accepts things as they are. Once he begins getting annoyed, then curious, and acting on those tendencies, Dixon can suddenly navigate his miserable life. One should not confuse Dixon's turnaround with an existential journey, as the world around him very much has a relation to his actions. His internal changes allow him to interact more productively with his surroundings, so he cannot simply believe in whatever he chooses to believe, such as one would follow in a certain form of relativism. His personality becomes more pragmatically productive within his environment. The question of whether it is more his environment or his internal changes that force him to become a more effective, self-protecting individual is a meaningless question. Dixon's internal changes result from his reactions to his environment, and his internal changes directly affect how he reacts to his environment, so in this case, environment connects very much with the individual

¹ Pragmatic, in this instance, means that the individual reacts productively and concretely with his environment. A pragmatic triumph has real-world rewards, as opposed to internal triumphs, whose rewards are indefinable or discovered upon death, for example.

will. One cannot separate one element from the other to ascribe Dixon's development as either internally or externally propelled; the point is, a person cannot entirely separate him or herself from his or her environment, just the same way that a person cannot completely separate him or herself from his or her own beliefs. The best path to positive interactions with the world is to listen to oneself with an eye to the practical consequences of each of those resultant beliefs.

Dixon finds that even in a world muddled with problems, it is entirely possible to discover goodness and happiness. His dilemma, whether truth will hurt or help him, is irrelevant. The lesson becomes that one must take risks in life. While philosophy can certainly lead to depression in the post-modern age of over-stimulation, a person who completely ignores the evaluation of life can lack direction and purpose. A human devoid of progress and contemplation is simply an animal, while the entirely academic is simply a mind. If entirely devoid of human sensibilities, as one is as an animal, a person becomes incapable of connecting with society. A person living the purely intellectual life loses sight of inherently human activities in his or her pursuit of scholarly fulfillment. What would life be like without conversation, art, and other dynamic institutes of human invention? One must see beyond the pretensions of academia to enjoy the pursuits of the living, taking care not to completely ignore philosophy, as the pursuit of truth can often be a person's only guide. Moderation seems to be the best path towards morality, the pursuit of goodness, and a harmonic soundness of mind.

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