

Reinhard Heil: Predecessors of the Discourse on Human Enhancement (Abstract)

Reinhard Heil, M.A.

Office for Interdisciplinary NanoTechnologyStudies www.nanobuero.de

Darmstadt University of Technology

SPT 2009 Converging Technologies, Changing Societies, Track 1, July 7.-10.

Predecessors of the Discourse on Human Enhancement (Abstract accepted)

Julian Huxley, eminent biologist and humanist, not only coined the term "transhumanism" (Huxley 1957), but was also among the early visionaries of human enhancement. He proposed an improvement of man as early as 1931, based on the biological knowledge of that time. In current discourse the writings of early apologists of human enhancement are scarcely being referred to (but see e.g. Coenen 2007; Rubin 2005; Bostrom 2005), although a number of other well renowned natural scientists, such as John Desmond Bernal and John Burdon Sanderson Haldane, developed radical visions of the human future already in the 1920s.

Be it hive-minds, extension of life span, brain doping, changes in human physiognomy, the taking over of evolution by Man himself or even the splitting of humankind into different species: throughout their writings each of the fundamental ideas of today's discourse can be found. In 1931, Huxley describes the hopes merged in the contemporary term of human enhancement: "Most of us would like to live longer; to have healthier and happier lives; to be able to control the sex of our children when they are conceived, and afterwards to mould their bodies, intellects and temperaments into the best possible forms; to reduce unnecessary pain to a minimum; to be able at will to whip up our energies to their fullest pitch without later ill effects". (Huxley 1933).

What is new and original about this, as compared to older ideas of improving man such as those in classical humanistic discourse, is the focussing on the human body itself: the intention is no longer the development of human abilities or the adjustment of the environment to human needs, but the radical changing of the human body in order to adjust it to the requirements of a society shaped by new technologies. Huxley's, Bernal's und Haldane's visions mark the transition from the „engineering for the body and for the mind“ to the „engineering of the body and of the mind“ (Nordmann 2007).

The aforementioned authors apply a paradigm of control (cf. Ferrari 2008): It is their goal to

Reinhard Heil: Predecessors of the Discourse on Human Enhancement (Abstract)

finally overcome the restriction of inner human nature as well as those of nature surrounding man. In 1929; Bernal defined the „Three Enemies of the Rational Soul”: “The World, the Flesh & the Devil” (Bernal 1929), "world" meaning external restrictions, "flesh" the restrictions of man's physical constitution and "devil" the human psyche. Bernal and Huxley were influenced by Haldanes „Daedalus and the Future“ (1924), which expressed Haldane's vision of a potential future of human kind

The talk will reconstruct the basic statements of Huxley, Bernal und Haldane concerning human enhancement and highlight the role of these authors as intellectual harbingers of contemporary discourses of human enhancement and transhumanism. It is striking to find that much of what is understood as a (technological) threat for human nature and dignity in our own days has already been widely disputed almost a hundred years ago: It is not so much the visions and topics that have changed, but rather the possibilities of making the visions become reality as well as their reception throughout society. This will also be demonstrated by comparing the visions of the aforementioned authors to the ideas of John Harris, a contemporary spokesman of human enhancement and author of “Enhancing Evolution. The Ethical Case for Making Better People” (Harris 2007).

Bernal, John Desmond (1929): *The World, the Flesh & the Devil*, Indiana University Press: Bloomington and London.

Bostrom, Nick (2005): A History of Transhumanist Thought. In: *Journal of Evolution and Technology*, 2005, Vol.14, No. 1.

Coenen, Christopher (2007): Utopian Aspects of the Debate on Converging Technologies, in: G. Banse, A. Grunwald, I. Hronszky, G. Nelson: *Assessing Societal Implications of Converging Technological Development*, Berlin, pp. 141-172.

Ferrari, Arianna (2008): 'Is it all about human nature? Ethical challenges of converging technologies beyond a polarized debate', *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research*, 21:1, pp. 1-24.

Reinhard Heil: Predecessors of the Discourse on Human Enhancement (Abstract)

Haldane, John Burdon Sanderson (1924): *Daedalus or Science and the Future. A paper read to the Heretics*, Cambridge, February 4th, 1923, ³1924, London.

Harris, John (2007): *Enhancing Evolution. The Ethical Case for Making Better People*, Princeton.

Huxley, Julian (1931): *What Dare I Think?*, London.

Huxley, Julian (1957): Transhumanism, in: Julian Huxley: *New Bottles for New Wine. Essays by Julian Huxley*, London.

Nordmann, Alfred (2007): If and Then: A Critique of Speculative NanoEthics. In: *NanoEthics*, 1:1, pp. 31-46.

Rubin, Charles T. (2005): "Daedalus and Icarus Revisited", *The New Atlantis*, Number 8, Spring 2005, pp. 73-91.