

Notes

THE HISTORY OF 'TRANSHUMANISM'

TRANSHUMANISM is a movement that seeks to promote the evolution of the human race beyond its present limitations through the use of science and technology. The evolutionary biologist and eugenicist Julian Huxley (1887–1975) is usually identified as the originator of the term 'transhumanism', although present opinion differs on when he first used the expression. We suggest that Huxley did not coin the term and that his first uses of it do not coincide with any of the dates usually given. More interestingly, perhaps, in spite of its futuristic connotations 'transhumanism' has a long history that dates back to Dante's *Paradiso* and, ultimately, to the Pauline epistles.

Most authorities, including the *OED*, trace the earliest use of the term 'transhumanism' to Huxley's 1957 essay of the same name.¹ A minority, including leading figures of the transhumanist movement, have proposed the earlier date of 1927, when Huxley's essay 'Evolutionary Humanism' was published.² However, both of these dates are wrong. Huxley first used the term, as far as we can establish, in his two-part lecture 'Knowledge, Morality and Destiny'. This was the third series of William Alanson White Memorial Lectures delivered in Washington, DC on 19 and 20 April 1951 and published in the same

year in the journal *Psychiatry*.³ In the first lecture Huxley describes his creed thus: 'Such a broad philosophy might perhaps be called, not Humanism, because that has certain unsatisfactory connotations, but Transhumanism. It is the idea of humanity attempting to overcome its limitations and to arrive at fuller fruition.'⁴ The lecture was subsequently published with light revisions in Huxley's 1957 collection of essays *New Bottles for New Wine*.⁵ The volume opens with a short piece bearing the title 'Transhumanism', and which contains a paraphrase of the original definition from 1951: 'We need a name for this new belief. Perhaps *transhumanism* will serve; man remaining man, but transcending himself, by realizing the new possibilities of and for his human nature.'⁶ This appears to be a self-conscious coining of the expression and no doubt explains why the term is commonly, if mistakenly, said to originate in this source.

It is significant that the index to this collection includes several references to 'transhumanism', including ten pages of another essay entitled 'Evolutionary Humanism' in which the term does not appear. Presumably, the person who constructed the index thought that significant elements of the essay concerned the subject matter of transhumanism, even if the term itself was not present. This would have been an innocent enough decision had it not been for the fact that a much earlier version 'Evolutionary Humanism' appeared in Huxley's 1927 publication *Religion without Revelation*. It seems likely that it was on the basis of the 1957 index that James Hughes—who proposed the earlier date—deduced that the term was coined in 1927, mistakenly reasoning on the basis of the *New Bottles* index that the word appeared in 'Evolutionary Humanism' and therefore must have appeared in the 1927 version of that essay. In short, the most widely accepted date for Julian Huxley's coining of 'transhumanism'—1957—is incorrect. Huxley first used the term in a 1951 lecture that was

¹ See, e.g., *OED*, sv. 'Transhumanism'; 'Julian Huxley and Transhumanism', <<http://www.huxley.net/transhumanism/>>, accessed 11 April 2014; Gregory Hansell and William Grassie (eds), *H+/-: Transhumanism and its Critics*, (Philadelphia, 2011), 20; Ronald Cole-Turner (ed.), *Transhumanism and Transcendence* (Washington, DC, 2011), Introduction, 12.

² James Hughes claims in *Citizen Cyborg* that 'transhumanism' first appears in Huxley's *Religion without Revelation* (1927) but gives no page number for the citation. *Citizen Cyborg: Why Democratic Societies Must Respond to the Redesigning Human of the Future* (Cambridge, MA, 2004), 158. Nick Bostrom, one of the most prominent contemporary advocates of transhumanism, repeats the 1927 date in 'A History of Transhumanist Thought', *Journal of Evolution and Technology*, 14 (2005), 1–25, at 2. This date also appears, on Bostrom's authority, in Al Gore, *The Future* (New York, 2013), 239.

³ *Psychiatry*, xiv (1951), 127–51.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁵ Julian Huxley, 'Knowledge, Morality, and Destiny', *New Bottles for New Wine* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1957), 245–78.

⁶ Huxley, 'Transhumanism', 13–17, definition on p. 17.

published in the same year. The alternative date of 1927 is the result of an erroneous deduction from the misleading index entry in *New Bottles for New Wine*. If Huxley coined the term, he did so in 1951.

But was Huxley the first to use the term? In a word, no. A significant earlier reference to 'transhumanism' comes in a paper by the Canadian author, historian, jurist, and philosopher W. D. Lighthall. Among Lighthall's varied accomplishments was election to Fellowship of the Royal Society of Canada. In the 1940 *Proceedings and Transactions* of that body Lighthall published a highly speculative theory of cosmic evolution entitled 'The Law of Cosmic Evolutionary Adaptation: An Interpretation of Recent Thought'.⁷ The article outlines a progressivist metaphysical philosophy, similar in certain respects to that of both Huxley and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, that sought to connect cosmic, organic, and cultural evolution. Lighthall here speaks of the 'Paul's Transhumanism', citing the biblical reference I Corinthians 2:9: 'Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, neither has it entered the conception of man.'⁸ Given the vast gulf, both temporally and in terms of philosophical orientation, between St Paul and Julian Huxley, this reference may seem puzzling. However, a link between St Paul's putative transhumanism and that of Julian Huxley is provided, albeit circuitously, by Dante and his early nineteenth-century translator, Henry Francis Carey.

In what was to become the standard Victorian translation of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Carey used the term 'transhuman' in 1814 to render a term in the first Canto of Dante's *Paradiso*. In describing his heavenwards journey with Beatrice, Dante speaks of being 'transhumanised', creating a new Italian verb *trasumanar*:

As Glaucus, when he tasted of the herb,
That made him peer among the ocean gods;

⁷ W. D. Lighthall, 'The Law of Cosmic Evolutionary Adaptation: An Interpretation of Recent Thought', *Royal Society of Canada, Ottawa. Proceedings and Transactions / Mémoires et Comptes Rendus de la Société Royale Du Canada* 1940, ser. 3, v. 34, section 2, 135–41.

⁸ I Cor. 2:9; 'Law of Cosmic Evolutionary Adaptation', 189.

Words may not tell of that transhuman change.⁹

Here Dante makes reference to the deification of Glaucus, recounted in Ovid.¹⁰ But there are also unambiguous references in this Canto to St Paul's description of being 'caught up' to the third heaven (2 Corinthians 12). Dante's allusions to the biblical text are evident not merely from the general context, but also from his mention of the ineffability of the experience and his questioning of whether it had taken place in bodily form or not—both of which are rehearsals of St Paul's own speculations about the experience.¹¹

Lighthall, then, is making an 'ism' of the reference to the transhuman state familiar to readers of Carey's translation of the *Divine Comedy*. In an added twist, Lighthall got the biblical reference wrong. The 2 Corinthians passage that Dante draws upon speaks of 'things that cannot be told, which man may not utter' (12:4). This bears a passing resemblance to the 1 Corinthians passage cited by Lighthall: 'Eye has not seen, nor ear heard' which no doubt led to his confusion. Lighthall's conflation of these passages notwithstanding, it is clear that he is seeking to baptize his new scientific version of transhumanism by invoking Dante's *trasumanar* and St Paul's rapture.

Although we lack direct evidence of Huxley's familiarity with Lighthall's paper, given the former's deep interest in speculative theories of cosmic evolution and the prominence of the journal in which the paper appeared, it is likely that he had read it. Huxley had been searching for an alternative to 'evolutionary humanism' to characterize his own utopian scientific philosophy, and it seems that in Lighthall's formulation he had found one. Thus, while there is no doubt that Huxley's appropriation of the term 'transhumanism' and his association of it with his own brand of futurist ideology has

⁹ Dante, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieiri*, tr. William Henry Carey [1814] (New York, 1970), *Paradiso*, Canto 1, 68–70.

¹⁰ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, XIII, 898–968.

¹¹ For commentary see especially Steven Botterill, *Dante and the Mystical Tradition: Bernard of Clairvaux in the Commedia* (Cambridge, 1994), 94–241. Cf. C. H. Grandgent, *Companion to the Divine Comedy* (Cambridge, MA, 1975), 215–17; James Miller, *Dante and the Unorthodox* (Waterloo, Ontario, 2005), 6–7.

led to its present currency, he was not, as is commonly thought, its originator. As for the convoluted history of the term, its significance goes beyond etymology. It offers additional data for a longstanding debate about whether Western notions of progress and modernity are simply secularized versions of Judeo-Christian eschatological conceptions or whether they have an independent legitimacy.¹²

PETER HARRISON

University of Queensland

JOSEPH WOLYNIAK

University of Oxford

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¹² The classic statements of opposed positions on this question were provided by Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago, 1949) and Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (Cambridge, MA, 1985).