

Security and the Mind

King's College, Saltmarsh Rooms, June 1st, 2007

Participants:

Sunil Amrith
Nancy Cartwright
Ross Harrison
Olwen Hufton
Melissa Lane
Philipp Lehmann
David Palfrey
Martin Rees
Emma Rothschild
Barbara Sahakian

The main purpose of the informal meeting was to discuss and assess the need for an interdisciplinary dialogue on the consequences of recent and rapid developments in neuroscience and related fields – particularly in relation to already envisaged and potential applications in the military sector.

Emma Rothschild's introductory words traced the genealogy of the Centre's interest in the matter, which began in the 1980s with a series of discussions on the wider social and political effects of military technologies and continued with debates on disarmament and military security. The thoughts of Hideaki Koizumi – a scientist and inventor in the truest sense of the word – on potential repercussions of his eclectic research represented another point of origin, as too did Martin Rees' book *Our Final Hour*, which examines scenarios of possible catastrophes in the twenty-first century but leaves out the potential dangers of the new 'technologies of the mind'.

The presentation by Barbara Sahakian focused on recent developments in neuroscientific research and the ensuing ethical issues. Pharmaceutical companies have developed and produced so-called 'cognitive enhancers' (like *Modafinil*, also known as *Provigil*) that can improve mental capabilities even in 'healthy' individuals with only minimal apparent side effects. The positive implications of these 'smart drugs' are indisputable: among others, soldiers, shift workers, and students all benefit from an increased mental performance. Ideally, the 'cognitive enhancers' could even be selectively applied to eliminate disparities in societies. However, the existence of these drugs certainly raises a number of questions

as well: who should be allowed to use them and how could that be regulated to avoid new and even larger inequalities (based on an unequal access to the drugs); what are the consequences for self-perception of the users; is there a danger of ‘over-enhancing’ the human mind and thereby creating unwanted and possibly serious side effects such as the deregulation of memory mechanisms?

Sahakian also commented on the recent developments and ethical implications of neuroimaging–techniques which aid in the visualisation of mental processes. Again, the potential consequences are ambiguous: while the detection of lies or unconscious biases would be useful in determining right and wrong in court settings, the ability to trace activity in the brain also raises serious issues: should the mere thought (or predisposition) to commit a crime allow for a conviction; and how could an Orwellian scenario be avoided if the instruments of ‘brain reading’ fall into the ‘wrong’ hands?

In her concluding remarks, Sahakian called for an ‘active discourse between scientists and ethicists, policymakers, and the general public’ to address the issues raised by the recent developments in neurotechnology.

The following discussion revolved around questions of how the new technologies might shape religious and political thought, how they could potentially alter and form borders, collectivities and shared identities, and what influence the new pharmaceutical developments might have on self-perception and personality (a return to eighteenth century notions of fluid personalities?). Do the recent developments in neuroscience even have the potential to change standards of ‘normalcy’ and ‘health’? Melissa Lane also brought up the issue of the possible link between ‘technologies of the mind’ and the exploitation of these new means for coercive measures by state or other authorities.

In closing, the participants agreed that an ongoing discussion of the issues raised in the meeting would be not only desirable but also important to establish a general framework for an interdisciplinary examination of new neuroscientific technologies and their potential military, political, and social implications.