

# 'Someone' versus 'something': A reflection on transhumanist values in light of education

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## Abstract

Innovations in genetics, nanotechnology and artificial intelligence involve the possibility of enhancement of human attributes and capacities—offering humans innumerable opportunities for diverse, unprecedented experiences and developments both physically and cognitively. These new innovations, frequently associated with theoretical frameworks such as transhumanism, not only raise new ethical–pedagogical questions but also challenge the very meaning of education. Core educational concepts pertaining to the human being, personhood, and the educational self now need to be re-examined or rediscovered in confrontation with transhumanist values. In regard to this task, we investigate Bostrom's teleological approach towards transhumanist values, questioning his understanding of the human person and the inherent implications of a sensible agenda for education, situated within the broad humanist tradition. As an alternative to an educational prospect based on, or endorsing, transhumanist values, we adopt Spaemann's personalist program, implementing his distinction between 'being someone' versus 'being something'. Defending an understanding of the person as someone, and not as a thing that shall be cultivated, we employ Spaemann's

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distinction between anthropocentrism versus anthropomorphism, recognising the importance of contextualising the human being in a broader existential, embodied framework, while acknowledging the critique of the anthropocene. Along these lines, we elaborate on an understanding of education and the educated person that, in our view, safeguards core human values. In the discussion, we draw on insights from Spaemann, Arendt, Kierkegaard and Gadamer.

#### KEYWORDS

Bostrom, broad humanism, enhancement, person, Spaemann, transhumanism

## INTRODUCTION

The issue of transhumanism as it relates to pedagogy and education has recently been deliberated and challenged. Damberger and Hebert (2017) have, for example, disputed the argument often put forth by transhumanists that education in itself is a transhumanist project, as maintained by Buchanan (2011, p. 10). Damberger and Hebert argue that the objective of pedagogy never intended to transcend humankind as such (2017, p. 53). Lewin and Edwards (2012) have challenged the transhumanist aspiration of transcending the human condition into 'better than well-being' and argue that in order to overcome humanity, we need to have a clear understanding of what humanity is (p. 3).

At the heart of transhumanism lies a negative perspective on human nature coupled with a techno-scientific vision of how we should improve.<sup>1</sup> As Buchanan (2011a) points out, 'human nature is a mixed bag, with plenty of room for improvement' (p. 193). The present article questions the transhumanist tendency to describe humans as nothing more than information-processing objects, pertaining to a cognitivist understanding of the person (Svenaeus, 2019, p. 145). Information processing, and its enhancement, is idealised as the goal towards which we—the humans and the information-driven computing systems—ought to be heading. We investigate Bostrom's teleological view of transhumanist values and the new direction in 'education' as outlined by Bostrom and Sandberg (2009) and reflect critically on whether the underlying values of transhumanism are compatible with mainstream humanistic traditions and with the integrity of human personhood in education.

As an alternative to an educational agenda based on transhumanist values, we embrace Spaemann's personalist view (2006, 2015), in particular his helpful distinction between 'being someone' versus 'being something'. Spaemann (2006) argues that we are persons from the very moment we are born into the human race. Being a person is not a transition from one state to another, as something to someone, but a *modus existendi* (p. 237). Along similar lines of thought, we also note the important distinction between anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism (Spaemann, 2015, p. 91). In the transhumanist movement, there is an inherent criticism of the anthropocentric view of man and its various perceptions of personhood, e.g. as it often adopts Singer's view on speciesism, as can be seen, for example, in Persson and Savulescu (2010, p. 668). As an alternative to an anthropocentric view, Spaemann calls attention to the language of anthropomorphism. He thus highlights the importance of seeing the world anthropomorphically, which implies openness to seeing all living beings and the whole of nature not only as objects, but also as fellow creatures—sharing reality with us (Spaemann, 2015, p. 86).

As part of our reflection on the increasingly realised transhumanist interests in segments of the current culture—from the interests of the scientific community to information society ideals—we make use of Arendt's (2006) classic contribution to the science versus *humanitas* discussion. We note in particular that a dangerous tendency among

scientists, especially if purified and taken to extremes, is the committed concern with the reality of the physical world at the cost and 'radical elimination of all anthropomorphic elements and principles, as they arise either from the world given to the five human senses or from the categories inherent in the human mind' (Arendt, 2006, p. 260). The Roman *humanitas* interest was based on a view of human beings as the highest being we know of, in contrast to Greek anthropology, which did not have a corresponding word for *humanitas* and which did not think that 'man is the highest being there is'.<sup>2</sup> As Arendt points out, Aristotle even calls such belief 'absurd', *atopos*.<sup>3</sup> It is our view that Arendt's reflections on the rich *humanitas* tradition—including appreciation for poetical discourse (Simbirski, 2016)—should be reconsidered when this whole tradition once again risks being seriously marginalised and buried in the automation-steered, information-driven transhumanist vision for humanity/post-humanity.<sup>4</sup> The envisioned improvements transhumanists bring to the fore seem to have left out of the equation basic anthropomorphic elements and themes. As we develop our argument, taking into account also recently neglected anthropomorphic factors, we point to thinkers in the broad humanist tradition like Kierkegaard, Gadamer and Spaemann. They direct us to basic educational themes such as the continuous need for *Bildung* and an in-depth analysis of human self and personhood, and, not least, the more-than-intelligence or information-led human need for love.

The article outlines the importance of *being someone* in relation to three major themes: a reaffirmed anthropomorphic approach; selfhood and education from an existentialist point of view; and in light of *Bildung*. To further highlight the significance of these themes within a transhumanist setting, we sketch out some basic transhumanist presuppositions within a broad framework, followed by a brief account of Bostrom's teleological understanding of transhumanist values.

## TRANSHUMANIST PRESUPPOSITIONS

Transhumanism appeals to an ideal version of the self—urging each human being to become more humane: 'Human life, at its best, is wonderful. I'm asking you to create something greater: life that is truly humane' (Bostrom, 2008, p. 7). The ideal of the 'truly humane' sounds like a challenge to live in truth, but the thought that humans should 'create' something greater than human life collides with the humanistic tradition from Socrates: The wisest person is the one who acknowledges that 'he is in truth of no account in respect to wisdom' (Plato, 1966, Apology, 23a–b). The word 'transhumanism' was first used by Julian Huxley in a collection of essays that commences with a programme for what he, inspired by the triumphs in science and technology, sees as the 'cosmic duty' of the human species: to 'transcend itself ... in its entirety, as humanity'. He hopes for 'a new kind of existence' when enough people will believe in 'transhumanism' (Huxley, 1957, p. 17). To him, the problem is that 'man's control over nature applies as yet to external nature: the formidable conquest of his own nature remains to be achieved' (p. 12).

Transhumanism as a movement developed in the last decade of the 20th century. Some of its leaders include Max More, Natasha Vita-More, Nick Bostrom, James Hughes and Ray Kurzweil. The last is a research leader at Google. Bostrom has a position as Professor of Applied Philosophy at the University of Oxford. He is also the director of the Future of Humanity Institute in Oxford, run with money from James Martin, a pioneering British information technologist. The international transhumanist organisation Humanity+ (<https://humanityplus.org/about/>) is presented as an 'educational organization dedicated to elevating the human condition'. Natasha Vita-More serves as its executive director. Transhumanists have their own periodical: the *Journal of Evolution and Technology*. In other words, they are by no means a band of escapist, and they represent an influential trend in contemporary society: the attempt to dispense with the human body (Svenaeus, 2019, p. 118). On the webpage of Humanity+, one finds a 'Transhumanist Declaration' from 2009. It may be understood as a form of 'secular, technological doctrine of salvation' (Heilinger, 2010, p. 122). The various persons who have signed the declaration may have done so out of different philosophical and religious convictions. In the discussion below, articles by Bostrom (2005a, 2005b) comprise our point of departure.

Throughout human history, human beings have sought to improve the human condition. Socrates could ask: How should we live? Aristotle thought that we search for happiness, *eudaimonia*, as we want to be blessed with a good

*daemon*. Augustine wanted to rest in God, and Aquinas to return to, and see, God. Comenius' major work in seven volumes—lost in a library around 1700 and found again in the years immediately prior to the Second World War (Blekastad, 1969, p. 681)—bears the title: *De rerum humanarum emendatione—On the Correction and Improvement of Human Conditions* (Comenius, 1966). However, there have always been widely different understandings of the world and the state of human beings in the world. Such differences need to be explicitly discussed and evaluated (Wivestad, 2013). Bostrom's (2005a, 2005b) arguments are based on what he calls 'transhumanist values', but he does not expose his presuppositions to genuine testing by explicit confrontation with relevant alternatives in the broad humanistic tradition from Socrates to Arendt and Gadamer.

In the world views of European Antiquity and Middle Ages the human being was understood as part of a cosmos (an ordered whole) with God at the centre (the icons in the church look at us). During the Renaissance, some began to see the world from the individual human being's point of view (we see the paintings from our position). Descartes separated the subject (the thinking thing) from the objects (all other things). Further down the line, in the Enlightenment tradition, the task of the human subject became to master the objects. Many were inspired by Francis Bacon's identification of knowledge with human power and his advice of using the contemplated cause as a rule in operations (Bacon, 1902/1620, Aphorisms, Book 1, III, p. 11). In a related manner, secular humanism placed human beings at the centre of the world—in ways at odds with the broader humanistic tradition. This seems to be one of the presuppositions also of transhumanism, as transhumanists continue to intensify the Enlightenment belief in progress through science and technology. Bostrom (2005a, p. 4) mentions that transhumanism's key ideas come from La Mettrie and J.S. Mill, i.e. from mechanistic materialism and utilitarianism. This tradition has enjoyed success in medicine and transport, but it has also managed to produce weapons of mass destruction and, lately, means of mass distraction.

One-sided emphases on powerful knowledge came under critique already in the 17th century: 'How wretched is the teaching that does not lead to virtue and to piety! He who makes progress in knowledge but not in morality ... recedes rather than advances' (Comenius, 1633–1638/1907, 10.17, p. 74). The critique after 1960 by Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jürgen Habermas, Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor and others concerning the presuppositions of Enlightenment traditions appears not to have been directly addressed by Bostrom. Rather, as Professor in Applied Ethics, he is concerned with global security, such as 'equity of distribution, ecological diversity, and quality of human relationships' (Bostrom, 2005b, p. 10), but does not discuss how the individual's interests in enhancement might serve, or undermine, these and other general aims (justice and love) that epitomise the good life. He seems to presuppose that education is some kind of simple technology (p. 9) and does not mention significant neo-Aristotelian considerations that prioritise *phronesis* (moral practical wisdom) over *techné* (instrumental knowledge) (Kristjánsson, 2015). Transhumanism is also seriously challenged by the ethical and educational view that human beings ought 'to exist in the world without considering [themselves] as the center, origin, or ground of the world' (Biesta, 2017, p. 8). What is Bostrom's understanding of human values?

## BOSTROM'S TELEOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF TRANSHUMANIST VALUES

The ideology behind the transhumanist movement is linked to commonly endorsed transhumanist values. Bostrom (2005b) outlines, in the form of a table, several such transhumanist values that derive from what he considers to be the movement's core value, namely: 'Having the opportunity to explore the transhuman and posthuman realms' (p. 13). Already the first derivative value enlisted in Bostrom's account is far from common-sensical from an educational point of view, and far more controversial than the basic core statement. In bullet-point format, it reads: 'Nothing wrong about "tampering with nature"; the idea of hubris rejected' (p. 13). This seems to signal a preconceived agenda placing human beings in a supreme position above nature. The second derivative value, which reads 'Individual choice in use of enhancement technologies' (p. 13), further blurs the distinction between individual accidental preferences and what is really desirable. It highlights ethical–didactic elements pertaining, not least, to disability and ability issues in the

educational realm, as well as matters of equal human functioning (Van Hilvoorde & Landeweerd, 2010). Similarly, Bostrom's fifth value, 'Getting smarter (individually; collectively; and develop machine intelligence)' (p. 13), urgently actualises the meaning of education in an age of artificial intelligence (AI). If we are not heading towards a good life for all, the vision for individuals and groups of people getting ever smarter can easily turn into an effective disaster. This and other educational apprehensions emerging from Bostrom's itemised transhumanist values seem to undermine principal aspects of human personhood.

Bostrom (2005b) classifies education as 'low-tech' means of enhancement, aligned with philosophical contemplation and moral self-scrutiny (p. 9). This understanding of education as low-tech enhancement is underlined by Bostrom and Sandberg (2009), as well as by other enhancement advocates such as Buchanan (2011b). Education and training, they argue, might be labelled as 'conventional' means of enhancing cognition, and these low-tech techniques are well established and culturally accepted (Bostrom & Sandberg, 2009, p. 312). Education is used as an example of enhancement that has been around for centuries, and literacy is seen as a major cooperative framework that produces success or failure in life (Buchanan, 2011b, p. 148). However, a low-tech approach has limited power. Thus, in terms of enhancement strategies, 'transhumanists hope to go further' (Bostrom, 2005, p. 9). Even 'conventional' education itself, may, in their view, be a risky enhancement method. Furthering cognitive skills and capacities, education can, in their view, also create 'fanatics, dogmatists, sophistic arguers, skilled rationalizers, cynical manipulators, and indoctrinated, prejudiced, confused, or selfishly calculating minds' (Bostrom & Sandberg, 2009, p. 322). Likewise, what they define as high-quality education, including training in formal methods and critical thinking, can as well, in their view, have problematic effects. They find support for this in studies reporting that students are more selfish at graduation than when they entered economic studies (Bostrom & Sandberg, 2009, pp. 322–323). The underlying view of education—promoting enhancement aspirations more generally—that we see embedded in these examples might be summed up in Buchanan's view of education (2011b):

Education should aim (i) to promote the individual's flourishing, (ii) to equip her for fulfilling the role of citizen in a democratic polity, (iii) to help her to avoid economic dependency by enabling her to be an effective contributor to produce social cooperation, and (iv) to promote the general (social) well-being by contributing to the development of skills and knowledge that make more productive and fulfilling forms of cooperation possible. (p. 148)

Human flourishing, equipping persons to fulfil their role as citizens and develop skills and knowledge, seems unproblematic if placed within broad humanist thinking. However, if, on the other hand, such a view is embedded in transhumanist values, as outlined above, we see a host of ethical–pedagogical challenges. In order to challenge these transhumanist values, we suggest an understanding of humanity embedded within a broad humanistic educational tradition. This involves the endorsement of the human sciences as expressed through (1) a reaffirmed anthropomorphic approach towards education (within the humanities as well as the sciences), (2) a reflected view of the human person as a self and (3) the concept of *Bildung*. A brief summary concludes the article.

## 'BEING SOMEONE'—A REAFFIRMED ANTHROPOMORPHIC APPROACH

The seventh rule of the Transhumanist Declaration addresses the issue of the well-being of all humans and non-humans: 'We advocate the well-being of all sentience, including humans, non-human animals, and any future artificial intellects, modified life forms, or other intelligences to which technological and scientific advance may give rise' (Humanity+ Transhumanist Declaration, n.d.). From this statement it follows that transhumanists do not defend a traditional anthropocentric position (literally meaning human-centredness) in the sense that only human beings are worthy of ethical consideration, or that things are means to human ends (Kopnina, 2020). Even though it appears

that the Transhumanist Declaration embraces a sceptical attitude towards anthropocentrism, the post-human realm is anticipated as an extension of the human—as post-humanity emerges out of humanity (see Bostrom, 2005a, p. 4).

According to Spaemann (2015), the notion of anthropocentric thinking was coined by Hobbes. He provided guidelines for anthropocentric thinking pertaining to modern science in the sense that to know a thing means to know what we can do with it when we have it. Thus, to know what to do with a thing did *not* imply to 'know what it really is in itself' (p. 86), but rather how it might be used as a means or product. Modern science renounced anthropomorphism for the sake of anthropocentrism. Considering this development, Spaemann argues that the modern world is more anthropocentric than any other world throughout history and that the new environmental consciousness does not change anything regarding this fact, as all extra-human existence is instrumentally defined as 'environment'. It is understood fundamentally 'in reference to man' (p. 86). Anthropocentric thinking makes objects of the things outside the human being, whereas anthropomorphic thinking recognises the inanimate material world, not as an object, but as something that shares in reality with us. This teleological manner of seeing the immaterial world was left behind by the emergence of modern science, where that which exists outside ourselves is nothing more than objects. The driving force behind modern civilisation has been a Cartesian type of science with an objectifying and reductive approach to things, understanding them as extensions (*res extensa*) radically different from consciousness (*res cogitans*). This implied a prohibition of anthropomorphism in favour of radical anthropocentrism (p. 108). When we have done away with anthropomorphism with respect to things, we will ultimately have done away with anthropomorphism with respect to ourselves. Without special human categories in our talk about human beings, we leave behind a human understanding of ourselves. We lose the possibility of talking about human beings as subjects who are able to understand themselves. By talking about human beings solely as objects, resources or means, we dissolve ourselves as human subjects, and 'the anthropocentrism that lies at the basis of modern science and technology also fades away. The result is a subjectless, indifferent world of objects, which are no longer objects for anyone' (p. 88).

For Spaemann, the concept of person is intimately linked with anthropomorphism, as this way of thinking involves being able to know something as it is, or appears, in itself, in contrast to seeing things as carriers of particular qualities, as 'somethings.' Among the entities that exist, persons have a special position; they do not compose a natural kind, carrying certain capacities (2006, p. 1). The term 'person' has served as a *nomen dignitatis*, a concept with evaluative connotations, according to Spaemann, and has ever since Kant been the central plank in the foundation of human rights (p. 2). But, in Spaemann's view, the term 'person' has come to play a key role in demolishing the idea that human beings *qua* human beings have some kind of rights before other human beings, as the latter are not considered to be persons if, as individuals, they happen to lack the features of relevant capacities (p. 2). Against such thinking—which turns 'persons' into a something with certain capacities, into a generic term—Spaemann insists that the person is a 'generalizable proper noun' (p. 32). 'Person' does not refer to a human being in the aspect of its nature but to a particular individual who is being more basic than its nature. 'Persons', who are thinking beings, thus 'cannot be categorized exhaustively as members of their species, only as individuals, who exist *in* their nature. That is to say, they exist as persons' (p. 33). The right of a person can only be unconditional if they do not depend on satisfying the existing members of the community of rights that certain qualificative conditions are met. According to him, there can, and must, be one criterion for personality and one only; 'that is biological membership of the human race' (p. 247). Along these lines, the reality of persons is not consciousness, but life, embodied life. This is in contrast to Cartesian bifurcation of the world into consciousness and matter, being defined by extinction and 'de-realisation' of reality, because this bifurcation eliminates life, which Spaemann (2015) argues has been the connecting link between the two, as life is the proper paradigm for being (p. 91). When life itself reappears as important, existential themes will again be vital issues pertaining to human life. For a still fuller treatment of the human being, beyond Spaemann's reaffirmed anthropological approach, we shall now direct our attention to the concept of 'person', and the notion of 'being someone' as an existential challenge, drawing especially on Kierkegaard.

## 'BEING SOMEONE'—SELFHOOD AND EDUCATION FROM AN EXISTENTIALIST POINT OF VIEW

Bostrom's and other transhumanists' one-sided emphasis on human cognitive abilities, typically associated with the instrumental side of education (Bostrom, 2005b, p. 10), calls for alternative ways of thinking—not least since their stress on cognition tends to view education from a very narrow angle. As a response, we shall continue enquiring into the possibility of finding more broadly defined options.

There can be little doubt that our notions of *Bildung*, or educative formation, are closely associated with how we view reality—let us refer to this as our *understanding of being*. Existentialist philosophers, prominent thinkers like Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Gadamer and Sartre, have illuminated this theme.

We can easily find a core of common interests in these philosophers. They all attend to the fact that existence, and life in existence, is full of contradiction—good versus evil, regress versus progress, light versus darkness. When viewed this way, living is always associated with risk. Nevertheless, in a life marked by risk and tension, it is imperative to make choices—to choose something with one's whole being, often irrespective of what others may think or demand. For within a life-setting marked by contradiction, it is not outer success that is important but the choice of the right and appropriate action in each new situation. And the one who chooses in *freedom*, Sartre avers, chooses his or her neighbour (Sartre, 2007, p. 6). In this manner—in the particular situation, in existence, when one chooses freely—one contributes to forming a desirable life for all and for oneself as an ethical subject.

A major emphasis among existentialist thinkers is this stress on the importance of choosing. As humans, we ought to be engaged and personally involved in the activities of our choice, even if life at times may appear both pointless and irrational. As a consequence, it becomes possible, in Gadamerian terms, to compare life with play—play, as it maintains its rules, but which nonetheless appears to be without any goals outside itself. Gadamer thus discusses play, the game and the arts in terms of a 'non-goal-oriented rationality' that, on a more general note, also determines all understanding; it functions as a model for certain aspects of understanding, as well as for the *Bildung* of human beings (Gadamer, 1998, p. 22). A reason for including this perhaps somewhat unexpected hermeneutical aspect is that understanding here clearly exceeds the purely *cognitive*. For, like play, understanding, too, embraces the experience of the moment—carried by intuition and enthusiasm. Such situation-dependent experience seems to belong to the general course of human *Bildung* (Gadamer, 1989, pp. 9–19).

It is no exaggeration to say that the historical presuppositions of the kind of understanding of existence outlined above go back to the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. Of particular importance in this connection is Kierkegaard's Socratic 'know-thy-self' thinking and the way it unfolds in *Sickness unto Death* and *Works of Love*.

Kierkegaard's understanding of the human person, like Arendt's, goes far beyond the narrow digitalised intelligence and information concentration currently stressed by transhumanists. As a form of 19th-century anti-reductionistic antidote to transhumanism, Kierkegaard is a towering thinker within the humanities with quite an advanced theory of the complex and varied constituency of embodied human selfhood.

A peculiar existentialist twist in Kierkegaard's thought appears in his presentation of the human person as someone who falls in despair when she realises that the deepest foundation within herself—which he calls the 'self'—lives in inner tension (Kierkegaard, 1980a, 1980b, 1990). A human being is sustained in life by what Kierkegaard calls the eternal love, but, as a contrary movement, she also experiences the existence of dark powers within the self, a form of *destruction* from which a person desperately seeks to get away but from which she is not able to come loose. It is within this setting that Kierkegaard reflects on the *Bildung* of the individual. How should the individual's growth and development be determined? The typical answer Kierkegaard provides is a form of warning that *hybris* too easily gets in control where the individual turns her attention towards *herself*—in the sense of focusing on her own success and improvement. The *self-will*, accompanied by humanism's ideals of independency and free development, strives towards satisfying all kinds of expectations and requirements about 'making progress' in life. However, for Kierkegaard it is never a mere matter of 'making progress' in this sense. He does discuss a 'movement' in the individual, but this is an

existential development in the individual's inner being, to which her experienced despair can be traced; moreover, this 'movement', as such, does not escort the individual towards a final destination. In other words, it is not a matter of following a path towards an unattainable goal or requirement. On the contrary, what is at stake is an inner search, a scrutinising of one's own self with a view to bringing into light not least the dark powers within, waiting for an awakening to happen that prompts responsibility also for others. In Kierkegaard's view, this is a lifelong ethical-educational process that has its due value in itself. Its sole purpose is to *form* the individual's character, to form and to shape the 'self'. Precisely this, in Kierkegaard's thought-world, is to know oneself.

## 'BEING SOMEONE' IN LIGHT OF *BILDUNG*

Kierkegaard's 'know-thyself' thinking has its particular strength in enabling insights into who we are as human selves, through self-scrutinising and self-searching. Now, this is equivalent to making the *person*—rather than personal capacities—the centre of attention in *Bildung*, to the degree that Kierkegaard's injunction to 'know-thyself' succeeds in also integrating a person's qualities and aptitudes (Rise, 1997, pp. 59–63). An individual does not become educated (in the broad sense), or spiritually formed, simply by means of strengthening certain proficiencies or by strengthening certain aspects of the self (intelligence, memory etc.). *Bildung* engages the core of the personality, the 'self', which means the person as an embodied whole and a representative of the human race. Therefore, 'the whole race participates in the individual, and the individual in the whole race' (Kierkegaard, 1980a, 1980b, p. 28).

For Kierkegaard, education and spiritual formation ought not to be one-sidedly related to the person as a *single individual*, as the person is further characterised also by her social connections vis-à-vis others—and in her love of others. In Kierkegaard's thinking, this can only be comprehended when one considers that a person's 'self' is upheld and sustained by the eternal, divine love, described as a love that 'moves beyond itself'. The individual who reflects the eternal will also herself move beyond herself towards the other. And, we may add, to the degree that love is the sustaining premise in spiritual formation—the *Bildung* of the individual human being—the cognitive one-sidedness that characterises transhumanism will be corrected. In Kierkegaard, and his existentialist adherents, the *Bildung* of the individual is enacted on a significantly broader educational platform than that propounded by transhumanism. As a consequence, his focus on personhood and the process of *Bildung* also finds itself in a stronger position to serve as an educational guide in a complex world, characterised by contradiction.

As we look further afield, the endorsement of the human sciences as expressed through *Bildung*—spiritual formation and culture formation—tends to describe more the result of the process of becoming (culture resulting from *Bildung*) than the process itself (the continual *Bildung* of the person). Endorsed by Hegel and Gadamer, philosophy and the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) have their condition of existence in the notion of *Bildung*. For the being of *Geist* (spirit) has an essential connection with the idea of *Bildung* (Gadamer, 1989, pp. 12–13). It involves sacrificing particularity, and a too narrowly defined educative agenda, for the sake of universal thought (p. 12). *Bildung* in the humanities can further happen in a world that is humanly constituted through embodiment, language and custom (and not primarily through technology). The general characteristic of *Bildung*, Gadamer describes as follows: keeping oneself open to what is other—to other, more universal points of view. It embraces 'a sense of proportion and distance in relation to itself, and hence consists in rising above itself to universality' (p. 17). Such rising to the universal is not limited to theoretical *Bildung* but embraces human rationality as a whole (p. 12). Not least moral and practical wisdom (*phronesis*) have their due place. Moreover, on an everyday basis, *Bildung* becomes the element 'within which the educated person (*der Gebildete*) moves' (p. 14). Here 'the self-awareness of working consciousness contains all the elements that make up practical *Bildung*: the distancing from the immediacy of desire, of personal need and private interest, and the exacting demand of a universal' (p. 13). Thus, the wider discourse on *Bildung* signals, again, a grander vision for what the educational ideal may entail, beyond that presented by transhumanism's prospect of enhancement. Significant stress is here placed, not least, on the historical dimension of the educational project: 'in acquired *Bildung* nothing disappears, but everything is preserved' (p. 12).



## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Spaemann's anthropomorphic analysis of human personhood has provided additional strength to our initial leanings concerning potential weaknesses in transhumanism's view of the human being, and the educational premises involved. As human personhood is best conceived in embodied, relational terms, it seems unrealistic to hold that the self-preoccupied individual is best equipped to face tomorrow's challenges. To one-sidedly stimulate and enhance the individual's cognitive capacities 'externally' via artificial means, AI, nanotechnology etc. (Bostrom, 2014), may in reality be equivalent to anthropocentrically making the self-preoccupied individual—or its post-human reflection—all the more self-preoccupied. Such a scenario may materialise in so far as AI does not add anything else to the individual or 'digitalised intelligence' than a somehow improved edition of the individual herself. Kierkegaard and Spaemann here emerge as a radical alternative to transhumanist theorising, both with respect to the very notion of being human and with respect to the task of education as outlined above: Buchanan's educational programme, supplemented with Spaemann's reaffirmed anthropomorphic agenda, a reflected view of human personhood and the concept of *Bildung*. A basic premise in Kierkegaard's thought is that change, or personal development, comes from within the person, from the self, and not externally, 'artificially' supplied, from the outside. To focus undue attention on progress and strength in this connection is, according to Kierkegaard, equivalent to transplanting oneself into false pride and self-love—which, ethically speaking, is less beneficial for one's neighbour.

Kierkegaard and existentialist philosophy anticipate a breach with transhumanist thinking insofar as the ethical call from 'outwith' comes not from *technology*, but the fellow human being. It represents a breach, setting out to protect what may be described as true humanity—making the self-driven, ego-centric and techno-optimistic basis for the self undesired. Ultimately, it is the person who does not advocate her own strength, growth or enhancement that holds the power to make the other—someone she cares about—strong.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> 'Transhumanists' visions for our future ... [are] a symptom of prominent scientific ideologies that emerged in the wake of modernity. As a result, they feel empowered to dictate what we understand by the term "progress", and what we respect as rational' (Hoff et al., 2017, p. 1).
- <sup>2</sup> Cicero translated the Greek term *paideia* (the Hellenic standard for ideal human beings) with the Latin term *humanitas*.
- <sup>3</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VI, ch. 7, 1141a20ff. We notice, however, that, according to Aristotle and the Hellenic religion, the perfect and divine is eternal. So even to the extent that human beings (because of divine *logos*) may be the highest among living beings (plants and animals), the things that the universe consists of (stars, etc.) are much more divine (NE 1141a35–1141b2).
- <sup>4</sup> Post-humanity, or to be a post-human, within transhumanism is the view that human nature is a work-in-progress and should be remoulded in desirable ways (Bostrom, 2005b, p. 4). Posthumanism, on the other hand, as a critique, often relates to the humanism that is based on 14th- and 15th-century developments that may be summarised as a move towards an anthropocentric worldview (Herbrechter, 2018, p. 1). This is also criticised by Spaemann, as elaborated in the article.

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