Whither Personhood in the Brave New World?
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Carl Rogers introduced the idea of "fully functioning person" into psychological discourse and argued that such a person should be the goal of psychotherapy, education and social policy. He saw persons as irreducibly self-determining, creative, empathic, in touch with nature and experiencing the flow of life, and free to choose an authentic path towards their own fulfillment. This humanistic view contrasts with much contemporary social thought which increasingly sees humans in non-human terms. Such a robotic view currently drives much education, psychotherapy, management and social policy. Beyond that, a transhumanist movement celebrates the arrival of machine-human hybrids. This panel will reflect on the state of personhood in the 21st century and with participants consider what person-centered thinking and practice could/must offer to counter these dehumanizing trends.

Fostering personalization in an age of fear
Peter F. Schmid

The term person is name-giving for our approach and has a very clear, decisive and special meaning. According to the occidental, Jewish-Christian-Muslim tradition it refers to two seemingly contradictory yet dialectically connected dimensions of being a human: the substantial notion of being a person and the relational notion of becoming a person.

This means we are what we are: persons because we are autonomous, unique, born with rights and dignity nobody can take away from us, sovereign, responsible.

But it also means that we are interconnected, relational beings. We do not only have relationship, we are relationship. Each of us springs from a fundamental We; the We was first, the I came later; I wouldn't know who I am, if there was no You or Thou to provide the chance to develop my self. Thus we live in Thou-I-relationships. We are mutually dependent on each other, partners, we are in dialogue, connected with other humans and the world.

Therefore, personalization – to become a person – is the twofold task to develop autonomy and solidarity, individuality and connectedness.

Both dimensions are intrinsically present in Rogers' and the PCA's image of the human being, when we see the actualization tendency as the motivational force that only can unfold its power if, and only if, there are relational conditions of unconditional prizing and empathy in

authenticity – this is true for therapy as it is true in developmental psychology and everyday life. And as you know the image of the human being is the foundation for any ideas about change – be it in psychotherapy, be it in sociotherapy, in education or social policy, in a word: in all fields that make up our being and being-together.

Philosophers of dialogue or encounter philosophy put it even stronger: To be a person is to be a response, to live in respons-ibility out of respons-ability. Each of us is the response to the environment we live in: our societies with their values and goals, our economic and ecological structures.

A lot of current trends seem to be counterproductive to personalization. I briefly enumerate five:

There is a movement to **individualization instead of personalization**. Individuals think and act in terms of "what is good, what is desirable for me?" and they strive for knowledge. Persons think and act according to the experience that because of our interconnection there is no "either me OR you" but always a "me AND you" in terms of "what is desirable for us?" and they strive for acknowledgment.
Empathy is widely replaced with cognitive social perspective taking which uses what erroneously is called empathy for one's own favor. A one-sided understanding of personhood towards the substantial notion.

Secondly, there is a movement to **nationalism** – think of the fascination for Trump or right-wing party leaders or the motives behind Brexit. Marine LePen in France may well become the next French president – her declared aim is to destroy the European Union. In my own country, Austria, we have a right wing populist as presidential candidate who is favored by 50 percent of the population. Europe started to build fences against migrants and refugees and Trump blusters about a wall at the Mexican border. Like a knee-jerk reaction isolationistic cocooning is seen as the recipe for everything.
The We becomes Us and the Others become Them. A false understanding of personhood as demarcation of the seemingly like-minded.

There is a movement towards **populism**. Oversimplified solutions are always offered in times of crises and fear to seemingly voice people's needs and stances and, in fact, secure the power of those wanting to gain influence. This can be clearly seen in the formulas offered to deal with the so called refugees' crisis.
Care, love, positive regard, if you will, *becomes management and isolation by exclusion.* A one-sided understanding of personhood towards the substantial notion of gaining and maintaining power.

There is a movement towards **techniques and methods** in a mechanical understanding and way. From so called empirically validated treatments

to check-list driven "psychotherapy", which is in fact sheer social engineering like CBT and a lot of so-called short term treatments. The same goes for political and social concepts.
Encounter, i.e. *the relationship person to person, becomes assessment,* human relationship is regarded as a <u>precondition</u> for psychiatric, psychological, medical, whatever treatment instead of seeing it as *the* healing element itself. A one-sided understanding of personhood as expertise of the specialists and knowledgeable ones.

- There is a movement towards **individual-machine-interaction** where humans have to bring themselves into subjection to machines and follow their logics instead of human contact and interaction. Despite all advantage machines admittedly have for our every-day life, from computers to robots, we gradually behave in a way these machines teach us to behave and are often unaware how dehumanizing this machine-dominated world becomes. I came to study the future of this development and learned that many scientists await the so called technical singularity in the next d<u>e</u>cades. This is the term for the moment when machines will artificially be so intelligent – whatever intelligence means in this context - that their intelligence supersedes those of humans. This development is said to be unstoppable and irreversible. Once machines take over they also will regard humans that want to stop their dominance as prime enemies and take according measures against us. What sounds like ridiculous science fiction is science. Sitting in front of a computer right now already or still means that we do what the computer – or Microsoft or Apple – wants us to do in order to get what we want. The next, imminent and partly already present step is that we want what they want us to want.
What started according to the Genesis (1:28*) to subdue the world may well end in being subjugated* by our own achievements. – The self-elimination of persons.

The underlying problem of all this and more is definitely anxiety. Anxiety disorders are the topical and significant current diagnoses. In the sight of terrorism, migration, climate change, trends towards power play of new dictators, financial crises etc. etc. one might well speak of a collective anxiety disorder. – How to react in the face of anxiety?

According to our image of the human being and Carl Rogers' legacy the answer can only be to foster personalization and thus to facilitate hope. His hypothetical person of tomorrow embraces diversity, strengthens the "We" and resists to the temptation of "Us", values commonality and difference, fosters creativity and spontaneity. It is his legacy and thus our responsibility as a *person*-centered community deriving from our experience with people in need to speak up instead of only sighing, to write instead of only shaking our heads, to engage in politics and social

change instead of only regretting what we experience in our therapeutic closets. The person-centered approach has developed a variety of concrete ways to deal with anxiety – just to mention encounter groups as one specific contribution.

I am convinced that it is still valid what a president said when he came into office: "Yes, we can." We can, we must see ourselves as autonomous and interconnected bearers of hope in a world of despair - as persons who by being what they are provide hope for others to be what they are: persons.