

# On Humanism - A Plea for Dialogue

## *Über Humanismus - Plädoyer für einen Dialog*

*Nicole Vogel, social pedagogue, invites you to a dialogue on humanism in TCI. She explains her dialectical methodology and presents opposing positions in TCI literature. She clarifies her understanding of the terms 'values' and 'humanism'. She thus develops her own position: since values are always bound to individuals in practice and the term 'humanism' is subject to historical change, TCI as an educational concept cannot represent 'humanistic' values. However, with its postulates and axioms, it enables a dialogue about what humanism should mean today and in TCI.*

The socio-political and thus ethical positioning of theme-centred interaction was formulated with impressive clarity and urgency by Ruth Cohn. When I first came into contact with TCI, this humanistic claim prompted me to take a closer look at TCI, and I have now been doing so for six years. As an educator, then in school social work and now working with managers, I was interested in how Ruth Cohn expressed her attitude towards life and her fellow human beings in her educational work, as I am firmly convinced that the two are directly related.

### 1. Scepticism and hope for the humanism of TCI

I admit that I attended my first seminar with a sceptical, critical attitude. I have found that educational approaches emphasise the connection to humanism or humanistic values, but then, in relation to this claim, remain unclear in their concrete application or even become a "participation trap" (Wagner, 2013). In his book, Wagner points out the danger of participation-oriented formats that only appear to achieve their goals of participation, democratisation and responsibility-taking by those involved. He elaborates on how participation, which is desirable in itself, is co-opted by the capitalist economic system, e.g. in mediation processes, in the support of civic networks, in research by the Bertelsmann Foundation and other corporate foundations. Could TCI also fall into such a "trap"?

Initial readings allayed my doubts, as I read that Ruth Cohn was well aware of this problem. Precisely because of its connection to humanistic values and a humanistic ethic, she could not conceive of TCI as a value-neutral concept according to her own understanding: "It was necessary to explicitly state the commitment to ethical axioms as inherent to the TCI system. In doing so, I wanted to reduce the possibility that structural and process techniques could become technocratic and take on a life of their own" (Cohn und Farau, 1984, p. 437). Cohn refers to the experience that people apply techniques and methods purely schematically and to their own advantage, without considering the consequences for their counterparts. As an example, she cites the chairperson postulate, which was redefined or repurposed as a call for individualistic, socially indifferent behaviour (cf. *ibid.*). The insoluble, inherent link between TCI methods and techniques and " " an underlying humanistic ethic – there is no other way to interpret the concern for the "other" – thus apparently limits the arbitrary use of individual techniques and methods. §1§ Cohn also saw the challenging relationship between TCI and "marketability" in this sense. She rejected the goal of marketability for TCI. Rather, she was concerned with the question of how TCI can contribute to better living conditions for all.

So must TCI be clearly understood as a humanistic concept? How can the relationship between TCI and humanism or the humanistic claim of TCI be understood today? How do I understand it? Is the humanistic claim inherent in TCI, or would TCI also 'work' without this claim?

## 2. Dialectical reference

Aware that these are "big" questions, I will not attempt to find answers in the following, but rather to approach possible answers. In doing so, I refer to the discussion within the TCI literature, in which the different, even contradictory positions become clear. I find it an exciting undertaking to compare selected opposing positions and to fill a gap in the literature. I notice that the keyword "humanism" yields only a few hits in the search for specialist articles in this journal. I will not go into Cohn's remarks on the subject in depth. They have already been explored in detail and comprehensively (e.g. Cohn und Farau, 1984; Schneider-Landolf, Spielmann und Zitterbarth, 2014).

In my train of thought, I will focus on two central concepts: humanism and values. As a template for conceptual work and clarification, I will draw on a point of reference that has hardly been used in the reception of TCI to date: Marxist thinking. I refer to the Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism (Haug, 2004) and the Philosophical Dictionary (Klaus und Buhr, 1971), which in their approaches follow the scientific principle of dialectics as a method of knowledge. This seems insightful to me for the following reasons:

1. The foundation of TCI according to Ruth Cohn exhibits a thought structure that identifies and examines opposites, contradictions and paradoxes. It is described as thinking in "unity of opposites" and, in older publications, as a dialectical approach. This thought structure is particularly reflected in the axioms. (Cohn, 1973; Reiser, 1995; Scharer, 2020)
2. Marx and socialist ideas were not foreign to Cohn (Johach, 2014; Cohn, n.d.).
3. By making Marxist approaches fruitful, I hope to gain a further perspective on TCI. Ruth Cohn's references to socialism and the significance of Marx's reception for the development of TCI are certainly an exciting research task that remains to be done.

Since I assume that all literature, including reference works, whether clearly or less clearly formulated, represents a social point of view, I have decided to clearly state my point of reference here.

## 3. TCI as 'empty ethics'

First, I would like to address the view that TCI as an educational concept does not represent an explicit humanistic claim. In the book "Themenzentrierte Interaktion als Pädagogik" (Theme-Centred Interaction as Pedagogy), published in 1995 together with Walter Lotz, Reiser formulates his view of TCI as an educational system from an educational science perspective. He takes a critical look at the fundamental intellectual approach of TCI.

Reiser argues that by limiting itself to a "clear set of axioms, TCI remains consistent and at the same time open to different ideological and religious interpretations as well as to scientific discourse." According to Reiser, an explicit humanistic value orientation is not necessary. The focus should be on formulating a professional pedagogical concept for TCI. Reiser presents the orientation towards the basic assumptions of humanistic psychology and existentialist philosophy as historical. Humanistic psychology emerged in the USA as the "third force" of psychology alongside psychoanalysis and behaviourism at the time when Ruth Cohn developed TCI into a pedagogical approach. Humanistic psychology thus represents an important historical contribution, but does not offer a theoretically consistent foundation for TCI and, according to Reiser's line of thought, certainly does not justify a humanistic claim.

Almost 20 years later, Reiser confirms this view in his essay on „Werte, Sinn und Glaube bei Ruth Cohn und in der TZI“ (Reiser, 2016). He states: "Many of my TCI friends do not understand why I do not want to agree with the statement that TCI represents humanistic values." (Reiser, p. 64). TCI does not distinguish itself from other concepts by representing or emphasising particular values, even if this can apparently be derived from the second axiom, which formulates the ethical perspective of TCI.

In addition to Reiser, Lemaire and Reichert also take the view that TCI should be separated from humanistic values. Lemaire (2017, p. 88) advocates a "sober understanding of TCI as a working basis for communicative action." This does not need any ideological or religious connection in order to be effective in the sense of an emancipatory view of humanity. §2§ Reichert (2019, p. 42f) puts it even more bluntly: "I understand TCI as a collection of procedures for human interaction. It does not offer instructions for concrete action, but only procedures for generating instructions for action. In this respect, it resembles an 'empty ethic' that does not prescribe what to do in specific situations, but only makes rules or suggestions as to which procedures and principles should be followed." Understood in this way, TCI can show the way forward, but it cannot and does not want to prescribe where this leads.

Nevertheless, TCI is clearly recognised as having a strong connection to values. It is generally accepted that TCI is not a value-neutral educational concept. But what does that mean? Is TCI an "empty ethic" or is it based on human values? I realise that I need to take a step back. If decisions are influenced by values, then it is essential to understand what values are and how they arise.

#### 4. Clarifications on the understanding of 'values'

From an ethical perspective, in contrast to the economic perspective, values can be understood as a special aspect of the subject-object relationship or the individual-world relationship, in which the significance of objects, events, processes and qualities for human life is expressed. Values can be understood in two ways:

1. "as value in the sense of certain material and intellectual goods, of characteristics of social conditions and events, of aesthetic and moral characteristics and other personality qualities, and
2. in the form of ideals, models, principles of human behaviour" (Klaus und Buhr, 1971, p. 1152).

We can speak of an idealistic philosophy of values when values are declared to be "entities existing in themselves" that have no connection to social reality or are identified with people's subjective evaluations, desires, wishes or other psychological forms of individual consciousness. In this understanding, values cannot be questioned and thus elude any scientific clarification.

However, if values are understood as a social phenomenon and not as a natural property of material things or intellectual goods, then all intellectual, cultural, moral and aesthetic values are themselves a historical product and thus also historically changeable. They express the social conditions of existence, needs and interests of the respective individuals and classes.

According to this understanding, values express orientations, premises or even possible meanings for people, which are based on knowledge and experience from the past. This knowledge and experience can vary from person to person. They cannot be separated from the specific person, their position within society and the historical era.

## 5. Interim conclusion

If we follow this definition of values, then values are initially linked to a specific person and their insights and experiences. This implies, on the one hand, that no person is unaffected by values. The difference lies in the fact that some people are aware of their values, while others are not. On the other hand, this means that the concept of theme-centred interaction cannot represent values, as concrete values require a subject. §3§

If this view is followed, a clear distinction can be made between Ruth Cohn as a person and TCI as an educational concept. Cohn's values and those of many of her contemporaries stem from her biography and, in particular, her experience of fascism, which was one of the most extreme forms of inhumanity to date. Cohn's values therefore clearly shape the concept of TCI. In this sense, Reiser's clear distinction between TCI as an educational concept and the person who applies TCI and has concrete values must also be understood. He must separate TCI and values in order to be able to define the core of TCI pedagogy with sufficient clarity.

## 6. TCI as 'theory and practice of humanisation'

However, there is also a contrary view within TCI, represented, for example, by Jochen Spielmann (Spielmann, 2024). He combines his current further development of the TCI concept with an explicit humanistic claim. The aim of applying TCI is to "shape our world in such a way that both present and future living beings can shape and develop life" (Spielmann, p. 63). This means consuming resources only to the extent that they are available and not beyond that. The humanistic claim is formulated both in Spielmann's newly formulated axioms and in his postulates, for example when he writes: "Balance all influencing factors – personal, social, factual, contextual – in order to achieve humanising results (management and leadership perspective)" (Spielmann, p. 65). The vision is to be able to shape "the challenges of social transformation" (Spielmann, p. 69) through the balance of all the perspectives identified by Spielmann.

Even though the conceptual clarifications were largely rejected in the further discourse on Spielmann's further development of TCI, the humanistic claim of TCI formulated by him was not rejected.

Spielmann's position is also confirmed in older publications on TCI. However, the understanding of humanism and ethical values seems to be heterogeneous. For example, Peter Vogel associates the concept of humanism in relation to TCI with freedom of choice, the potential for growth and the necessity of responsibility (Vogel, 2014, p. 61). Löhmer and Standhardt, on the other hand, name "freedom, self-development, justice and human dignity" (2015, p. 103) as central humanistic values. The differences seem marginal and, above all, not mutually exclusive. But if TCI is associated with a humanistic, and therefore very demanding, concern, what exactly is meant by this? Is it sufficient to name individual life goals or values in order to formulate a concept of humanism?

A glance at Wikipedia (accessed on 24 January 2025) reveals seven different interpretations of the concept of humanism in modern philosophy alone. This does not even include the developments of transhumanism and posthumanism. This calls for a closer look at the term.

## 7. Clarifications on the understanding of 'humanism'

The term humanism can be described as controversial and is subject to contradictory and mutually exclusive claims: "The legitimisation of power through an asserted 'higher humanity' stands here against the claim of equal humanity for all people" (Haug, 2004, p. 549). If the second claim is accepted, humanism refers to the general striving for humanity (humanity) and a dignified existence (Klaus und Buhr, 1971, p. 482). Humanism thus encompasses all those ideas and aspirations in human history that are based on the following convictions:

- the educational and developmental capacity of human beings,
- respect for their dignity and personality,
- the focus on comprehensive education, the free exercise and development of their creative powers and abilities, and
- the advancement of human society, and the ever-increasing perfection and freedom of the human race.

The moment of activity in the service of humanity is thus as much a part of the essence of humanism §4§ as the relentless pursuit of knowledge and education. Conversely, this means that the pursuit of knowledge and education can only be understood in a humanistic sense if it is implemented for the progress and higher development of humanity and society.

The view of humanism and attempts to achieve humanistic goals are shaped in historical epochs by certain economic, political, cultural and intellectual conditions and are therefore always historically and socially conditioned (Haug, 2004; Klaus und Buhr, p. 482f). The concept of humanism in the bourgeois tradition, for example, is based on an educational ideal of antiquity and is thus limited to educational influences. According to this understanding, the required unity of humanistic attitudes and humanistic activity would not be fulfilled (Haug, 2004, p. 550; Klaus und Buhr, 1971, p. 483).

In this interpretation, the highest level of humanism means developing a general view of humanity that is based on the idea of the unity of the human race and the belief that there are essential characteristics common to all human beings. This also gives rise to the humanistic core of the idea of peace, since human dignity and respect for life are considered the highest goods to be defended. Any attempts to treat certain groups of people (e.g. women, the unemployed, refugees) as unequal and deny them certain rights would be exposed as inhumane in this sense.

This brief explanation already shows how malleable and open to interpretation the concept of humanism is. Its interpretation depends both on the historical era and on the social position of those who define the term.

## 8. Conclusions

At the beginning, I expressed my discomfort with educational approaches that emphasise their connection to humanism or humanistic values but then remain unclear in their concrete application. I can now grasp this discomfort more clearly in relation to TCI.

The unease does not arise from the reference to humanistic goals, but from the restriction to certain humanistic values that are formulated as universally valid goals, as is the case with Spielmann, for example. The apparent self-evidence creates the impression that there is no need to discuss it. It can quickly seem like dogma when, for example, an ecological and resource-conserving lifestyle is formulated as a goal, but I do not have the means to achieve this goal because I live in the countryside and am dependent on a car as a means of transport. It also potentially excludes me if social and economic distribution issues are more important to me, even though there is much to suggest that social and ecological issues can only be answered together (Butler, 2021).

Further discomfort arises when TZI is associated with a humanistic claim or even attributed a political dimension without offering a current conceptual clarification. If the concept of humanism is not to contribute to irrelevance, arbitrariness, or worse, to pseudo-humanisation, it is essential to examine the concept of humanism beyond ambiguous slogans. This is no easy task, as it is closely linked to one's own contemporary historical and cultural influences and convictions.

However, I also see this as an opportunity. If development always starts "from the subject and from the concrete" (Reiser, 1995, p. 23), then this also applies to the development towards more humanity in the sense of the term used here. What is meant by respect for dignity and personality, for example, can be defined and laid down in general terms, as in the Basic Law or in general human rights. However, what this means in practice, especially in conflict situations, can only be determined and taken responsibility for by each individual. The Chairperson Postulate makes this clear by naming individual decision-making ability as a goal. The second axiom points to the necessity of making evaluative decisions. §5§ A religious, political, ideological or spiritual orientation is not formulated in it, but is given by the concrete subject, the Chairperson.

With regard to TCI, as well as other educational concepts, understanding humanistic values in the awareness of their historicity and changeability should be seen as an ongoing task. I would also welcome a dialogue about different conceptions of humanism within TCI. This is because TCI represents an important, emancipatory educational practice that expands the capacity for action.

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- Wikipedia: <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humanismus> Zugriff am 24.1.2025.

Nicole Vogel, MA in Education, TZI basic training, TZI coach, has been working in the field of school-youth welfare cooperation for 15 years, currently in Berlin's education administration.

### Call-Outs

§1§ Concern for the other person limits the arbitrary use of individual techniques and methods.

§2§ TZI offers procedures for generating instructions for action

§3§ Concrete values require a subject

§4§ The moment of activity in the service of people is part of the essence of humanism

§5§ A religious, political, ideological or spiritual orientation is given by the concrete subject, the chairperson.

\*all quote are translated by deepl pro