Giftedness, ethics, and humanism

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Abstract
This paper examines giftedness and gifted education from the point of view of humanistic ethical critique. While religious worldviews may conceptualize individual talent as something that human beings have received (as a “gift”) from God or (more generally) from a divine world-order, secular humanism may also implicitly presuppose a quasi-theological understanding of giftedness as something for which we might be expected to maintain a proper attitude of gratitude. Drawing on humanistic sources ranging from Hannah Arendt’s concept of natality, Richard Rorty’s pragmatist challenge to the idea of human “answerability” to the world, and Primo Levi’s ethical criticism (in the context of his Holocaust writings) of the notion of providence, the paper argues that developing an appropriate stance toward whatever gifts and talents individuals may have is a matter of continuous ethical self-reflection that needs to be incorporated in gifted education.

Keywords
humanism, ethics, talent, gratitude, giftedness

Introduction
While religions typically view individual talent as, ultimately, something the individual has received from God, or from a divine world-order (obviously conceptualized in very different ways in different religions), secular humanism understands giftedness, as well as any related issues concerning gifted education, as something that belongs to the “human world”, our this-worldly existence as biological, psychological, social, and cultural creatures. Humanism is hardly a worldview unified enough to take any clear or distinctive position regarding human talent and gifted education, though. There is no reason to believe that different humanists would subscribe to any common account of what exactly
giftedness is and how gifted education ought to be best organized and developed. Rather, humanists of various stripes may be expected to share the basic assumption that giftedness needs to be explained and understood in terms of scientific, social-scientific, and humanistic inquiries within the behavioral and educational sciences, in particular.¹

This paper does not subscribe to secular humanism specifically (and certainly does not advance any ideological secularism as a worldview) but examines a more broadly “humanistic” ethical challenge concerning our appropriate relation to giftedness – our own or others’. This challenge can be captured by asking whether, and in what sense exactly, one ought to be grateful for one’s talent (and if so, to whom or to what). In principle, this is a question that we should, I believe, pose ourselves regardless of whether we view human life from a religious or a non-religious point of view. It is also a question that will easily lead to further educational questions: how exactly should the ethical assessment of our attitudes to gifts and talents be incorporated in educational practices and institutions?

While I am not assuming any specific form of secular humanism as a starting point for this inquiry, this does not mean that I would not view my own philosophical approach as secular. It definitely is secular, but subscribing to humanism in my wide sense is different from claiming that there is a well-defined worldview called “secular humanism” that should, or even can, be directly compared to religious worldviews. Nor do I think that secular humanism could usefully function as a basis of educational practices any more than religious outlooks can; one important task for educators in multicultural societies is to transcend such worldview-based differences when reflecting on, for example, the nature of individual giftedness. This, I suppose, is to be a humanist at the meta-level. One can “humanistically” explore the same kind of fundamental questions of meaning and value that religions from their own perspectives explore, but I find it important to avoid defining humanism as any kind of closed or final worldview. Rather, it is open to investigating the multiple ways in which human beings may organize their lives in different historical and cultural contexts, including religious ones. Making sense, philosophically, of our giftedness is of course an important element of such investigation.²

Let me also emphasize that I am not primarily discussing the ethical issues of giftedness from the point of view of education research or even the philosophy of education.³ My philosophical perspective is more general. This inquiry might also be characterized as belonging to the philosophy of religion (very broadly understood), because I want to take seriously the sense in which certain fundamental questions concerning our relation to the world in general are not dramatically different across the assumed boundaries between religious and secular outlooks. In particular, I will – toward the end of the paper – critically examine the notion of gratitude, or thankfulness, and when asking whether it is always ethically appropriate to be grateful for one’s giftedness, I am asking a question that in my view ought to be asked by secular and religious thinkers alike. To maintain that the religious and the secular perspectives do not essentially divide us in this regard is, I suppose, again to be a humanist at the meta-level. What we have, and share, is a human world, and it is within this world – no matter where our talents ultimately come from – that we have to decide how exactly, and at what kind of critical distance, we ought to view our giftedness (or our lack thereof).
Even though I am not taking any firm stand on psychological and educational theorization on giftedness, we may loosely base this discussion on the concept of “transformational giftedness”, which has been defined as an “exceptional ability or talent that can enable or has enabled an individual to make one or more extraordinary and meaningful contributions that help to make the world a better place” (Sternberg, 2020, p. 205; see further Tirri, 2021). This concept of giftedness is inherently ethical as it refers to the ethically significant use of our gifts and talents, though obviously it may be debated what exactly we should mean by making the world “a better place” or by “meaningful contributions” – or indeed by the idea that giftedness refers to some “exceptional” or “extraordinary” abilities. My aim is to show that even when (or perhaps especially when) we begin with such an ethically loaded notion of giftedness, we cannot avoid asking critical ethical questions about how exactly we ought to view our abilities and talents. Kirsi Tirri comments on Sternberg’s definition and its applicability in the Nordic and Finnish context as follows:

The concept of transformational giftedness adheres very well to the educational philosophy, the German Bildung tradition, on which education in Finland and in the Nordic countries is based. This philosophy aims at educating individuals to become competent citizens who actualize their individual talents and benefit society with their competences. The emphasis is on individual and societal transformation through education […], the goals of which include both excellence and ethics. Academic achievement is not seen as the only aim of schooling and should be complemented with life-long learning to promote wisdom and a moral lifestyle. The aspiration to contribute to matters larger than the self, a beyond-the-self orientation, is also similar in both these frameworks. (Tirri, 2021.)

As the very concept of transformational giftedness has, so to speak, ethics built into it – that is, talent is not understood as an individual’s “own” property in the sense that it could be appropriately used only for one’s own benefit but as incorporating a “beyond-the-self orientation” – the humanistic question focusing on the ethical significance of one’s talent is explicitly invited by this account of giftedness. In particular, it needs to be asked in what sense, and to whom (or to which), if any, we are responsible for the (transformational) giftedness we might enjoy. A philosophical way of raising such humanistic ethical issues is, indeed, a process of critical questioning rather than an attempt to arrive at a fully worked-out theory that could be directly applied to gifted education.

The bulk of the paper has two main parts. After this introduction, I will (in section 2) briefly introduce Hannah Arendt’s concept of “natality” and will (equally briefly) discuss the notion of “human answerability” to the world, which Richard Rorty views as a remnant of the idea of human responsibility to God that we find in theistic worldviews. Within this discussion, employing Arendt’s and Rorty’s concepts relatively freely, we may formulate the issue of ethically appropriate “use” of whatever talents or abilities we may have. From Rorty I will move on to consider the problem of our appropriate relation to our giftedness more generally, asking not merely how we should “use” our gifts but whether we ought to be grateful (to God or to the world, or whatever) for our having the gifts and talents we have (section 3). This inquiry will be framed by Primo Levi’s
reflections on his survival from the Holocaust and his resolute moral condemnation of any providentialist way of thinking about the “gift” of survival that might have been quasi-theologically interpreted as having been based on the significance of his literary talent and ability to pay witness. The short concluding section 4 will then summarize the discussion.

While I am not writing as an education researcher, I do hope that these reflections might, either explicitly or implicitly, be at least slightly relevant to gifted education. At the meta-level, it is tremendously important that we educate the young (or whoever we are educating) to an ever increasing and deepening understanding that it is a complicated question, and an inescapably ethical question, how exactly to view one’s possible giftedness. Indeed, as educators we ought to make them genuinely appreciate the ethical complexity of this question, a complexity that cannot be simply cashed out in terms of any technical learning of skills (that is, in terms of the idea of cultivating one’s talent as a mere skill or technique). Furthermore, far from solving any problems about how to view our talents or any of the “gifts” that life may have equipped us with, ethics raises such problems. It is impossible to teach ethics as we teach various “skills of life”, for example, and it is entirely misguided to view ethics as a way of resolving our moral difficulties; on the contrary, it is because of ethics that we have the moral problems we have (see, e.g., Gaita, 2004 [1991]). Moreover, our ethical problems are irreducibly there no matter whether we take a religious or a secular view on our lives. This is perhaps the most important “humanistic” moral I hope to draw in this paper: our being religious or non-religious does not really change much. In any event, we have the same fundamental ethical responsibility of using our talents in an appropriate way (continuously reflecting on what appropriateness itself means in this context) and of developing an ethically decent attitude to our (or anyone’s) being gifted in the way we (they) are (or are not). Such questions, to employ a phrase familiar from Wittgenstein (1969), are just “there, like our life”; we cannot get rid of them by allegedly solving them by means of some theoretical argument.

Our human “natality” and “answerability”

The humanistic ethical discourse on human giftedness can be framed, for example, in terms of Hannah Arendt’s (1958) famous concept of natality. We are, Arendt maintains, all irreducibly different simply by having been born into the world. Human beings are able to bring novelty and spontaneity into the world they inhabit, to initiate something new. It is this individual uniqueness and the irreducible human diversity based upon it that totalitarian regimes seek to suppress and ultimately abolish, as Arendt, as a leading analyst of totalitarianism, argued (see especially Arendt, 1976 [1951]). Pluralism and diversity are conditions of all human activity, and in psychological and educational terms we might express this by saying that this is largely due to human beings’ individual ways of being “gifted” the way they are. Arendt (1958, chapter 1) even regarded human “natality” as the most central category of political thought, precisely because it is essential to our diversity and the human capacity of “initiation”, or bringing about something unprecedented.

As already suggested in section 1, the Biblical question about the proper “use” of our talents – in Arendtian terms, of our natality – can be raised in a humanistic ethical context
just as it can in religious contexts. Given that we have our individual ways of being gifted that may be taken to contribute to the creating and maintaining of the human world, to beginning things anew, how exactly should we use those gifts? To whom (or to what) are we responsible for those uses? Where do we get the criteria for deciding which uses of our talents are ethically appropriate and which aren’t? These questions address our personal responsibilities for the way we seek to transform the world we live in, on the basis of our individual natality.

In liberal democracies, people can be expected to have a wide range of freedom regarding the ways they use their talents, and the ways they educate their children (or pupils, if they are in some branch of the teaching profession) to use them. Political institutions can also be expected to be committed to protecting such liberties, thus supporting the multifarious individual shapes that our natality may spontaneously take. (Totalitarian institutions, in contrast, seek to suppress this spontaneity, as Arendt perceptively tells us.) However, none of this employment of freedom – even within the most stable liberal democracies and their educational institutions – can be immune to ethical critique. In brief, our giftedness is never ethically neutral.

In quasi-Arendtian terms, we may say that the diversity of human natality places us in an irreducibly political and ethical framework in which the question about the proper use of our talents cannot be avoided. For example, I believe it can be argued that if parents observe their child to be extremely talented in motor sports, on a track to be an excellent Formula 1 driver, they should, instead of supporting and encouraging such talent, strongly discourage the child’s use of this gift as its fulfillment is clearly harmful to humanity and the non-human nature. They should do so even if the child has a deep and strong personal aspiration (rendering her/his life meaningful) to become a Formula 1 champion. In our critical times of a looming climate catastrophe and energy war, engagement in motor sports is an activity that arguably ought to be discouraged everywhere, and therefore an individual’s being particularly gifted in that area of life is also something that ought to be discouraged, with the aim of redirecting that talent to something else. This is a gift whose “transformational” character is not for the benefit of humanity but only for the benefit of an ethically problematic business of organizing generally harmful motor racing. If the concept of transformational giftedness (see section 1 above) is by definition something “positive”, something that benefits humanity, then the person with motor sports talent is not transformationally gifted in the first place, but if the concept is more broadly understood as ethically neutral (encompassing negative or harmful “transformations”), then it is possible to apply this concept to the present example as well. Moreover, some of our talents are, of course, much more seriously evil: think of a child that turns out to be particularly gifted in coming up with novel ways of torturing animals. Their spontaneous use of that talent – a dimension of their natality – surely ought to be immediately discontinued, at least before they start torturing other human beings.

The question then – for all of us – is whether we are cultivating the ethically right kind of gifts when cultivating whatever talents and abilities we might have as elements of our individual “natality”. Moreover, a related educational question is how this ethical responsibility of taking a critical distance from our actually being gifted in a particular way, enabling a critical analysis and possible transformation of our attitude to that giftedness,
can be turned into educational practices enhancing our (and our educatees’) abilities to
develop such critical attitudes. Gifted education is, then, arguably inseparable from
general moral education. When reflecting on how to “use” our talents we are reflecting on
whether it is a good thing that we have those talents in the first place, what it means to have
them, and what it means, more generally, to be a human being living in a world which can
be transformed – for better or worse – by using such talents.

American pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty (e.g., 1998, 1999) famously argued
throughout his (in many ways rather controversial) work that remnants from a theistic
worldview and from the idea of human beings’ “answerability” to God remain in various
secular ways of thinking. For example, scientific realism, according to Rorty, subscribes
to a quasi-religious view according to which human beings are answerable to “the world
as it is in itself”, especially regarding the epistemic task of getting the world right,
manifested in the understanding of inquiry (particularly scientific inquiry) as a practice of
seeking accurate representations of representation-independent reality. This is, in Rorty’s
view, the case even though most scientific realists may explicitly subscribe to atheism.8
What Rorty calls “antirepresentationalism” (viz., to put it crudely, the rejection of the idea
that our inquiries ought to aim at accurate representation) is also, he maintains, “anti-
authoritarianism” (see especially Rorty, 1999), and this primarily means that we should
question any non-human authority – not only a transcendent deity but the non-human
world in general – as supposedly acting as a standard for our practices of (say) inquiry,
ethical reflection, or education. Thus, analogously, extrapolating Rorty’s view, a secular
educational thinker failing to drop the idea of answerability could maintain that we ought
to be in some sense “grateful” (and educate others to learn to be grateful) for whatever
gifts and talents we may enjoy to the natural and social world we live in – that is, to our
genes, our history, our educational background, or what not – in order to take a proper
ethical stance to our having the gifts we have. This would still be a way of remaining
answerable to the world, and of recognizing one’s answerability – and something to be
abandoned, according to Rorty.

From a Rortyan pragmatist point of view, such an attitude needs to be transformed into
a full realization of the radical contingency of the human world and the equally radical
lack of any access to the transcendent (see also Rorty, 1989). Rorty repeatedly emphasizes
that we ought to think of ourselves as being answerable only to other human beings, not to
the world “in itself” (or nature, or history) nor any other analogue of the divine world-
order. This could, again, analogously apply to our being grateful for the gifts nature has
endowed us with. Acknowledging our contingency might also be taken to lead us to an
increased ethical motivation to use our gifts for the benefit of human beings in general
(which, again, does not require any religious grounding but is, on the other hand,
compatible with religious motivations).

I am not planning to dwell on Rorty’s pragmatism or its possible ethical and edu-
cational implications (any more than Arendt’s views), even though Rorty obviously has a
lot to say about the educational relevance of reading ethically significant literature, for
example.9 I am merely adopting his notion of answerability – which he proposes to view
critically in a resolutely humanistic light, disconnected from all religious connotations,
even those preserved in apparently fully secular scientific realism – and using it for my
own purposes, particularly for a critical analysis of gratitude as an allegedly ethical attitude to giftedness.

**The ethics of gratitude**

The Rortyan-inspired pragmatist awareness of human contingency (and thus of the historical contingency of whatever talents we may or may not enjoy) may, when viewed in the light of Rorty’s critique of all remnants of the idea of human answerability to the world, be radicalized into an ethical assessment of the very idea of gratitude. Gifted education might be thought of as not only cultivating transformational giftedness for the benefit of humanity but also as educating us toward a proper sense of gratitude for the talents we contingently have (without our own merit). Such gratitude, whether religious or non-religious, may be an ethically laudable attitude of humility. However, it could also more problematically signal an acceptance of an unfair and unjust world-order we should not simply accept even if we cannot change it. This critical idea can be illustrated with references to Primo Levi’s remarks on the (as he calls it) “monstrosity” of the idea of his having received the “gift” of surviving the Holocaust (instead of the millions who did not survive) in order for him to be possible to use this talent as a writer in paying witness. Levi condemns such a quasi-providentialist way of thinking and the idea of gratitude conjoined with it as ethically extremely problematic. His views should also constrain the ways we think about the ethics of gifted education from a humanistic perspective – or so I will suggest in the remainder of this paper.

Let us take a look at some key passages of Levi’s (largely autobiographical) work on the Holocaust. I have in mind two important loci: his response to his religious friend who suggested that perhaps he was “destined” to survive in order to be able to pay witness, and his description of what happened in his barrack after one horrendous “selection” at Auschwitz. These examples are in my view ethically – and, therefore, educationally – compelling, and they should make us seriously reconsider the ways we might be inclined to think about providence (whether or not explicitly conceived as divinely provided) and about gratitude for whatever gifts life (or God) may have equipped us with. What Levi shows – not only in the context of the Holocaust but teaching us a lesson going far beyond any particular historical monstrosity – is the utterly problematic character of these notions.

The explicit rejection of providence can be found in Levi’s late work, *The Drowned and the Saved*. He tells us that the idea that he might have been somehow “destined” to survive in order to be able to write his books on the Holocaust “seemed monstrous” to him, because those who survived (“the saved”) were not at all the best but only “the fittest”, in some sense even the worst (*Levi, 1988* [1986], pp. 62–63); we may presumably say that they were, ironically, not “the saved”, after all, but rather “the drowned”. He reflects further: “My religious friend had told me that I survived so that I could bear witness. I have done so, as best I could, […] but the thought that this testifying of mine could by itself gain for me the privilege of surviving […] troubles me, because I cannot see any proportion between the privilege and its outcome” (*Levi, 1988* [1986], p. 63; see, however, also p. 143). Even in more mundane contexts, we should arguably be wary of assuming that what we can do with our talents, even if they are instances of
transformational giftedness, would earn us the privilege of having been equipped with those gifts in the first place.

This thought should make us carefully consider what exactly is the ethically appropriate way of being grateful – again, to the world, to God, or whatever – for the gifts we have. An example of what Levi regarded as a blasphemous form of gratitude, manifested in a morally reprehensible prayer encapsulating a dramatic failure to acknowledge the suffering other, is provided by him in his first book, *If This Is a Man* (1958; also known by the English title, *Survival in Auschwitz*), where he tells us what happened after one particular selection at Auschwitz in 1944, after some prisoners had been selected to be murdered in the gas chambers and others to continue forced labor in the camp until the next selection. A prisoner called Kuhn had avoided death (this time) and thanked God by praying aloud in a strong voice, while another (much younger) one, Beppo, was lying in the next bunk, knowing he had been chosen to be murdered. Levi’s moral condemnation of Kuhn’s attitude is harsh: “Does Kuhn not understand that what happened today is an abomination, which no propitiatory prayer, no pardon, no expiation by the guilty – nothing at all in the power of man to do – can ever heal?” And he adds: “If I was God, I would spit at Kuhn’s prayer” (Levi, 1996 [1958], pp. 129–130).

This passage in Levi’s early work has been insightfully discussed by Jennifer L. Geddes (2018). She notes how outraged Levi is “at the theodical logic implicit in Kuhn’s prayer” (§2). Kuhn fails to see Beppo as a fellow human being – thus failing to acknowledge him as a victim of unjust suffering. But his failure is even far more serious than this: “By ascribing responsibility to God for not being selected, Kuhn’s prayer of thanks implicitly ascribes responsibility to God not only for Beppo’s selection, but by extension, for the whole genocidal system of which it is but one moment”, thereby actually liberating the Nazis from their guilt and ignoring the full human responsibility for the horror (Geddes, 2018, §2). Accordingly, Kuhn’s prayer is, Geddes maintains, blasphemous in obscuring human responsibility and by invoking the idea of divine providence that Levi so forcefully argues against. Such blasphemous prayer of gratitude seeks to fit everything, even the unthinkable murderous selection, into a coherent narrative rendering the world meaningful.

An even more disturbing conclusion now seems to follow from our taking seriously Levi’s ruthless analysis of grateful prayer. The Kuhn-Beppo case might be extrapolated to morally problematize any gratitude or thankfulness we are tempted to feel regarding our own fortunate situation – also outside the extreme circumstances of Auschwitz, in ordinary human life, religious and secular life included, and especially with regard to whatever talents and abilities we might contingently have. If we seriously entertain the idea that our fortunate situation (in comparison to our less fortunate fellow human beings), whether in terms of talent or anything else, say, health, wealth, social relations, professional success, or whatever, is in some sense an indication of divine grace that falls upon us instead of falling upon some others (or any secular proxy thereof), are we not in a sense acting like Kuhn in Levi’s description? Are we not thanking God (or the world, or life) aloud and thereby disregarding, non-acknowledging, the suffering other who might not have the same talents? Is gratitude inevitably an inadvertent acceptance of the immoral
and unjust logic of a world – divinely or secularly structured – that lets some of us flourish (and use their talent for others’ flourishing) while crushing others?

I am not implying that Levi himself would have intended his writings to be interpreted in this possibly rather extreme manner. In any case, the mere possibility of extrapolating the concern with blasphemy in this way demonstrates how central the responsibility for acknowledging another human being within the context of a shared human life is for Levi, and how both ethically and educationally significant his analysis of the destruction of the conditions of such responsibility in the Holocaust is.

Our worries about the ethics of gifted education are more mundane and far less radical than an ethical response to genocide must be, but we can bring an important lesson from Levi to this context nonetheless. This is the recognition that a naïve, unreﬂective gratitude for our talents and abilities – for our particular place in the world which we have not established ourselves but which has been handed down to us “from above”, by God or by nature – is not a sustainable attitude given our inescapable ethical need to recognize our fellow human beings in their diversity. It is a problematic way of being “answerable” to the world. We cannot simply accept as right or just that we ourselves have the talents we do while others don’t – whatever those talents are. This does not mean that everybody ought to have exactly the same talents and abilities; it would be insane to suggest anything like that, and as we learn from Arendt, pluralism and diversity are essential to human life as we know it. Nor does this mean that gifted education should seek to homogenize the talents people have. What it does mean is that an unproblematic thankfulness for gifts and talents is not a mature ethical attitude to the world we share with other human beings, and hardly an attitude to which we should educate the young. We should always be able to problematize, and take a critical distance to, the particular ways in which we are gifted and the ways our talents differ from others’. While the human pluralism based on Arendtian natality is something given to us, it may be argued that an ethically adequate attitude is not to simply accept it in the speciﬁc ways it is given but always continue to explore the ways in which the particular distribution of talent and ability in the world might seem, or be, unjust from others’ perspectives. If we fail to do so, we act analogously to prisoner Kuhn in Levi’s description, neglecting the unfortunate Beppo whom life did not equip with any gift that would have earned him a survival of the selection in 1944.

Conclusion

While I loosely started out from the notion of transformational giftedness, I have not in this paper aimed at any theoretical (let alone empirical) account of what giftedness is. At the meta-level, I have argued for the inescapability of ethical questions about human giftedness. No matter whether we take a religious (theological) or a secular humanistic perspective on the issue, we cannot avoid asking how we ought to “use” our gifts and talents – the spontaneity and natality enabling us to bring something new into the world, to employ Arendtian terms again. Nor can we avoid considering how to transfer this ethical question to educational contexts seeking to enhance our educatees’ capacities of reﬂecting on such issues as autonomously and critically as possible.
The most important message of a “humanistic” approach to gifted education and its ethical dimensions is then, perhaps, that nothing really changes whether or not we adopt a religious stance to the matter. We are in any case continuously challenged to respond to the ethical issues of giftedness from within our human form of life, our sharing the world with other human beings all of whom may be gifted in their unique ways, some of them more problematic than some others. We can cultivate these gifts in a wide variety of good and evil ways, and we ought to take full responsibility – toward other human beings rather than the non-human world – for doing so, being on guard against the temptations of too easy notions of “answerability” and gratitude. This is a never-ending educational task, not restricted to the (moral) education of the young but something that can also be phrased in terms of Stanley Cavell’s (1979) famous characterization of philosophy itself as an “education of grown-ups”. While discussing these issues from a Cavellian perspective would be a topic for another paper, Levi’s Holocaust writings remind us that we should never stop the moral education of our own lives, no matter how grown-up we find ourselves to be.12

**Declaration of conflicting interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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**Notes**

1. On the extremely wide range and multifarious relevance of (secular) humanistic thought, see, e.g., the essays in Pinn, 2019. For a recent philosophical attempt to analyze the ontological and epistemic practices of the humanities, see Pihlström, 2022.
2. The “great humanist” Georg Henrik von Wright, having defended humanism as a worldview or a general attitude to life for decades, reconsidered his own humanism toward the end of his long career, to the extent of actually confessing in his autobiography (von Wright, 2001) that he no longer subscribed to humanism – especially because so many secular humanists formulated their humanism as a self-congratulatory position hubristically relying on human beings’ ability to solve their problems by developing science and technology. Von Wright himself obviously approached philosophical problems secularly, but he refused to be simply categorized as a secular humanist and suggested that aggressive secularism had problematically appropriated the concept of humanism for its own purposes. The same general attitude characterizes this investigation, while of course in my view philosophy (including the philosophy of religion)
ought to be understood as a basically secular humanistic pursuit of critical understanding independent of any religious or theological assumptions.

3. Nor am I, however, investigating the various philosophical, theological, or anthropological theories of gift in this essay. For a historical learned theological perspective on gift that may at least implicitly be relevant to educational theories of giftedness, see, e.g., Saarinen, 2017; see also Saarinen, 2022 on Christian accounts of talent.

4. A philosophical critique of such concepts of giftedness may fully acknowledge the educational value of this or other ways of conceptualizing transformational giftedness while insisting that further discussion is needed to specify the sense in which giftedness must refer to something “extraordinary”. Aren’t human talents in some sense perfectly natural and ordinary, even though some of them may be statistically rare? As a literary example of transformational giftedness, we might consider T.S. Eliot’s (1951 [1919], pp. 17, 22) famous views on individual poetic talent as “impersonal” or even a surrender of personality.

5. An important Biblical source of this question is the parable of the three servants in the New Testament, also sometimes called “the parable of the talents”. See Matthew 25:14–30 and Luke 19:11–27.

6. Despite my references to Arendt’s work, I am not aiming at any scholarly interpretation of her views on natality, spontaneity, and diversity. Rather, I am just using her ideas as an inspiration for this reflection.

7. See, e.g., Rorty’s essays, “Is Truth a Goal of Inquiry?” and “The Very Idea of Human Answerability to the World”, in Rorty, 1998, pp. 19–42 and 138–152, as well as various related reflections in Rorty, 1999.

8. For a sophisticated version of scientific realism highly critical of Rorty’s pragmatism, see Niiniluoto, 1999; cf. Pihlström, 2021, 2022.

9. See Rorty, 1989 for his – also educationally highly relevant – interpretations of writers such as Dickens, Nabokov, and (above all) Orwell.

10. Levi does not explicitly speak about gifts, talents, or giftedness in this context, but his discussion is readily interpretable in these terms and can in any case be extrapolated into a consideration of our giftedness in general.

11. On the significance of Levi’s work for the debate between theodicies and anti-theodicies in the philosophy of religion and more broadly, see Pihlström, 2020.

12. I am grateful to Professor Kirsi Tirri for her encouragement to submit this paper to this special issue and to two anonymous reviewers for their suggestions.

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