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## **A Concept of Images of Humans**

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### **Abstract**

There is widespread consensus that images of humans (*'Menschenbilder'* in German) are fundamental to human self-understanding and the organisation of society. However, despite this fact there are hardly any publications offering general, theoretical examinations about images of man, their functions and effects.

The aim of this paper is to present such a general concept of images of man. Its four main points are:

- (a) Images of humans are historically and culturally determined systems of beliefs about fundamental attributes of being human. They define what the central human qualities are, which needs and inclinations to act humans have, where the goals of human life lie, which values should be respected, and how humans differentiate from plants, animals and machines.
- (b) Images of humans are central elements of cognitive or moral maps, that is, the epistemic and moral order by which humans conceive and sort the world: they form a central part of a society's social imaginary.
- (c) Images of humans are descriptive and normative. They orientate and guide human action. Being normative, images of humans have a constituting effect or a tendency to self-realisation.
- (d) Because they have this constitutive effect, images of humans play a fundamental role, not only for human identity, but also for the organisation of society, which is dependent on what humans think of themselves and of each other.

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## Introduction

There is widespread consensus that conceptions of human nature or, as I would call it, images of humans (*'Menschenbilder'* in German) are fundamental to human self-understanding and the organisation of society. 'Ideas of human nature are the most potent ideas there are.' (Trigg 1988, 169) However, despite this fact there are hardly any publications offering general, theoretical examinations about images of humans, their functions and effects.

In this paper, the first results of a research project aimed at formulating such a general concept of images of humans will be presented. In the first chapter, some basic terminological clarifications will be made. In the second chapter, a thought experiment shall demonstrate the importance of images of humans. Further conceptual differentiations and specifications can be found in the third and fourth chapter. Finally, in the fifth and sixth chapter, some key points of a theory of images of humans will be presented.

## Basic terminological clarifications

The term 'image of humans', as it is used in this paper, is derived from the German word *'Menschenbild'*. Unfortunately, there is no appropriate English translation for this word. Like the term *'Weltanschauung'*, which has been translated as 'worldvision' (Naugle 2002), but is mostly used in English as a loan word in its original German spelling, *'Menschenbild'* seems to be a specific German term. It could be translated as idea/understanding/concept/view of humans/human being/human nature, but all these translations cannot grasp the specific meaning and the richness of the German term. For this reason, I will use the term *image of humans*, which is not common in English. A similar, but not quite so gender-neutral term can be found in Kenneth Boulding (1991)<sup>1</sup> and especially in Wilfrid Sellars (1963), who both use the term 'image of man'. Sellars uses this term in his famous article *Philosophy and the scientific image of man*; it allows him (a) to focus on the way we understand human beings in a most general sense, (b) to highlight at the same time that there is a difference between our understanding of human beings and real human beings, and (c) to let open the question whether our understanding of human beings is true or not, i.e. whether it corresponds real human beings or not.

### *The four meanings of the term 'Menschenbild'*

The German word *'Menschenbild'* has at least four meanings:

(a) Firstly, in a literal sense, it means a material figure of the human body or the human face. A photo, a drawn picture or a sculpture are images of humans in this sense.

(b) Secondly, *'Menschenbild'* can stand for a concrete human person. This use is derived from the Christian and platonic belief that a concrete person is a

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to William O'Meara for giving me this valuable hint.

picture, an image of either God (Christianity) or of the eternal idea of the human being (Platonism). In this sense, individual human beings can be designated as images.

(c) Thirdly, '*Menschenbild*' can also denote a narrative, literary description of a person, of its character, its course of life, etc. This use of the term is related to the literal use, except that the figure is no longer material, but mental.

(d) Fourthly and finally, '*Menschenbild*' stands for conceptions about human beings, or, more precisely, for a bundle of beliefs about core qualities of human beings in general. Historically, this use of the term is the youngest. It comes up in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and becomes popular only after World War II. By now, this modern use has largely replaced the other uses.

In the following chapters, I will restrict my use of the term 'image of humans' to this modern meaning which matches more or less Sellars' use of the term 'image of man'. So, an image of humans can be defined as a *bundle of beliefs about core qualities of human beings in general*.

### **A thought experiment**

The importance of images of humans and the enormous consequences of changes within them can easily be made clear by a simple thought experiment. Just imagine what happened if we all came to believe that the claims of some neuroscientists that humans weren't free (e.g. Singer 2002, Roth 2009, Harris 2012) were true. This would mean we really would think that humans are not free but completely determined by neurological processes. If we really came to believe this, two things would be clear:

(a) Firstly, it would be clear that our individual and social life would change dramatically. We would have to turn upside down our moral and legal systems which all are based on the idea that we are, at least in some extent, free and therefore responsible for what we do. We would have to change the way we educate our kids, for it would not make sense to praise or blame them for their deeds. Rather, we would have to use rewards and punishments as mere tools for conditioning them. Criminal law would have to be totally altered, etc. In the end, we might even become uninvolved and uninterested observers of the body we are (Baumeister et al. 2011; Nahmias 2011; Vohs & Schooler 2008).

(b) Secondly, it would be clear that it is absolutely irrelevant for these changes to happen whether we are really free or not. The only relevant factor is whether we really *believe* we are not free. Of course, we normally try to believe only those things that (we think) are real. However, even then, the decisive factor is belief, not reality. Therefore, it is not so important whether the image of humans is true, but rather, whether it is *accepted as true* and believed in.

So, speaking of the image of humans rather than of humans means to take into account that

- there is an epistemological gap between our conception of human beings and the human beings themselves;

- that our conceptions of human beings are, at least in most cases, more relevant than what human beings really are. Whether our conceptions are true or false is of secondary importance, for also false beliefs do have real effects.

### **Images of humans: wide and narrow sense**

As defined above, images of humans are bundles of beliefs about core qualities of human beings in general. Such bundles encompass beliefs about human nature, i.e. what the essential human qualities are, which needs and inclinations to act humans normally have, where the goals of human life lie, which values humans should respect, and how humans differentiate from plants, animals and machines.

Images of humans can be found in a wide variety of forms. We can speak of the Marxist image of humans, of Freud's or Shakespeare's image of humans, of a culture's image of humans, of a religion's image of humans, of a scientific or even naturalistic image of humans, etc. It is clear, however, that images of humans do not only differ in terms of content, but also in terms of the field of their appearance. In order to get a more precise working definition, it is hence necessary to further differentiate the term into a wide and a narrow understanding. In the wide sense, the term encompasses all kinds of images of humans, i.e. literary images, scientific images, scientific models of humans, etc. In the narrow sense, the term image of humans only includes those bundles of beliefs about core qualities of human beings in general, that fulfil two conditions:

(a) The beliefs are embedded in the life-world: they are relevant to the life-world and deeply influence individual and social life in the life-world. In other words: these images of humans have a place in the real life of persons.

(b) The images of humans claim to be universal in a double sense: Firstly, they claim to be true for all human beings, and secondly, they claim to describe human beings in their core qualities, i.e. in those qualities that make humans human and are crucial for their action and their conduct of life. For example, in the ancient Greek world the faculty of speech or rationality was considered to be the specific human quality. But this faculty was not only understood as the distinguishing feature, but also regarded as an imperative: a human being is not only a *zoon logon echon* or an animal rationale, but should also try to lead an appropriate rational life and should try to submit him- or herself to rationality.

If we accept this narrow understanding of images of humans, the following bundles of beliefs about human qualities would not be images of man:

- Grand philosophical theories about the human being or human nature in general, as they can be found especially in the tradition of Philosophical Anthropology (e.g. Scheler 2009, Gehlen 1988).
- Models of man, i.e. strongly reduced concepts that are tailored to fit special (scientific) purposes and that are won through abstraction (see Degenais 1972; Hampden-Turner 1981). Well known examples of such models are Freud's structural model of man's psyche, consisting of *id*, *ego* and *super-*

*ego*, and the various mechanical models used in medical contexts. A paradigmatic model of man is the *homo oeconomicus*, which is applied throughout mainstream economic theory (Kirchgässner 2008; Zichy 2005).

- Philosophical implications about human nature, as they can be found in almost all sociological and practical philosophical theories.
- Life-world self-concepts that help to constitute individual identities.
- Life-world concepts of group identities, such as the self-understanding of the Greek, the Scottish or the Jew people.

As a conclusion, images of humans in the narrow sense can be defined as bundles of beliefs about core human qualities that are embedded in the life-world and strongly influence day-to-day action; these images could also be called real or life-world images of humans.

### **Life-world images of humans: further differentiations**

In order to get an even more precise account of what images of humans are, it is necessary to make some further differentiations, namely with regard to their extension of content and with regard to the extension of their factual validity.

#### *Universal and particularistic images of humans*

Images of humans do differ with regard to their extension. Firstly, there are images of man which apply to all members of the biological human species. There are two sub-varieties of these images of humans:

On the one hand, we have truly universalistic images of humans holding that all the core qualities of being human apply to all members of the biological human species, regardless of race, colour of the skin, language, cultural background, sexual orientation, mental state or stage of development. The Christian understanding of humans as images of god is such an image of humans. Being an image of god applies to all humans, no matter who and how they are.

On the other hand, there are images of humans which are universalistic in the sense that they apply to all human beings, but which nonetheless make differentiations between people. Some decisive core features apply only to a few, chosen people. Examples for such kind of images of humans are the Nazi image of humans which differentiates between Arian and Non-Arian humans, racist images of humans in general, or the image of humans of the Hindu caste system.

Beside these two universalistic types of images of humans, there are images of humans which are particularistic. They do not apply to all members of the human species. These images can usually be found with primitive people who think of themselves as the only human beings and of others as some kind of inferior beings. It is also well known that the ancient Greek considered other people to be barbarians, i.e. people who are not really human. Slave societies necessarily have such particularistic images of humans. Slavery can only be justified when the enslaved people are held to be not fully human. This can be well observed in the famous Valladolid debate 1550/51 about the question

whether the natives of the New World were humans or not (Brunstetter/Zartner 2011); in the latter case it was judged necessary to reduce them to slavery or serfdom.

It is important to see that the particularistic and the universal differentiating images of humans are very close and likely to blend into each other.

*Individual, group-specific and societal images of humans*

In addition to differentiating images of humans with regard to their extension of content, it makes sense to differentiate them with regard to the extension of their factual validity or – which amounts to the same thing – to the social level at which they are held and according to the extension of their factual zone of influence:

(a) Individual images of humans are bundles of beliefs that are held true by one individual person. These images are valid only for this single person and also have effects only for this person or through this person. So, it might be that Peter believes that humans were brought to earth by aliens and that these aliens will come soon to take the brave and good humans back to the alien planet. It is clear that this belief will above all effect Peter's conduct of life. But it will also affect other people's life as Peter goes on their nerves by telling them his story and trying to save their lives.

(b) Group specific images of humans are bundles of beliefs held true by a group of people. These images of humans consist of the sum of the overlapping beliefs about core qualities of human beings that are shared by all members of the group. In most of the cases, these images of humans will be thinner of content than individual images of humans because people normally do share less than all their beliefs with other people in a group. Examples for these kinds of group specific images can be found in religious or ideological groups, political parties, etc. Group specific images of humans certainly have effects on the group, but also on other people, depending on the overall influence of the group. The Marxist image of humans, though held true only by some intellectuals and the political elite of the Soviet Union, had an enormous influence on millions of people not sharing or even knowing it.

(c) Societal or cultural images of humans are rooted in a society's or a culture's shared values, institutions, moral and legal systems, in well-established practices etc. These images too are built of the sum of those overlapping beliefs about core qualities of human beings that are shared by the majority of a society's members. With regard to their content, these images of humans are even thinner than the group specific ones. And the more pluralistic a society is, the thinner its image of humans gets. Being an important part of a society's common sense and of its cultural background, these images of humans have the deepest possible influence on people.

However, the differentiation between individual, group specific and societal images of humans is somewhat artificial. Not only is there a fluent passage between the three levels with countless intermediate levels, but there are also manifold interdependencies between the levels.

### **A theory of life-world images of humans**

Until now, some different formal types of images of humans have been identified and roughly described. The following chapters will bring a more detailed account of what societal or cultural images of humans are, what kind of beliefs they involve, and how they function.

The following key points can be stated about images of humans:

(a) An image of humans does not stand for itself but is part of a bigger system of beliefs about the world as a whole; it is embedded in a world view, a *Weltanschauung*. It certainly is the most important part of a world view, for it is the very point where a world view touches the human being and where a world view has an immediate effect on reality. Take, for example, a reductionist evolutionary world view like the one Richard Dawkins (1976, 2006) holds for true. His claim that there is only matter becomes relevant to the life world when it comes down to the human being who is then left without a spiritual soul, without the hope of a life after death, without true religion, etc. This in turn will have massive effects on the way people live their lives.

(b) Images of humans are important sources for orientation. They are central elements of the cognitive or moral maps, i.e. the epistemic and moral order by which humans conceive and sort the world. As such, they form a central part of a social imaginary. According to Charles Taylor (2004), social imaginaries are the vague, partly inarticulate complex of notions that form people's common frame of reference, from which they imagine, understand and conceive their societies or their social situation.

Images of humans help to cope with life's and people's complexity by reducing it and them to key features. They comprise mutual expectations and define normal human behaviour. By this, human action can be substantiated and legitimated. In a very general sense, images of humans contain information about:

- The kind of behaviour that can normally be expected from people.
- The kind of behaviour that people should show.
- The way people should be treated (the way, I should treat people).
- The way people expect to be treated (which implies the behaviour other people expect from me).

(c) The beliefs that constitute an image of humans are related to each other and support each other. Otherwise, they could hardly function as sources of orientation. Therefore, images of humans can be understood as more or less coherent systems of beliefs.

(d) Images of humans are inevitable to have. Firstly, everybody needs to have some general ideas about what human beings are, what their core qualities are, how they normally behave and what inclinations to act they have, etc. Otherwise, acting, communicating, and leading a social life simply would

become impossible. Secondly, images of humans are inescapable because they are part of a society's cultural horizon in which people are born and raised up. However, these beliefs need not to be explicit, they can be – and in most of the cases they are – implicit. But they can easily be reconstructed from a person's words and deeds, or a society's moral and legal rules, standards, common narratives etc.

(e) Images of humans are either given explicitly in theories, confessions, legal documents, etc., or they are given implicitly in narratives like the creation story, in established practices, institutions, legal documents, etc. An image of humans is explicit when it serves as a reference point for justifying actions, i.e. when it is referred to as explicit source of orientation.

(f) Images of humans usually contain beliefs about how humans *are* and how they *should be*. They combine descriptive and normative elements. It might be possible that someone holds a purely descriptive image of humans, e.g. a rigid naturalistic one, but this is rather unlikely. However, an image of humans will always define standards for normality and guide behaviour, regardless whether it is *per se* normative or not. Therefore, even purely descriptive images of humans will necessarily have normative effects.

(g) Images of humans have far-going effects on individuals as well as on society. This is already true because they function as sources of orientation: The common beliefs about humans are the fundament of a society's moral and legal system, its institutions, and its organization. A society with a very authoritative image of humans, which is convinced that humans need strong guidance by leading figures, will hardly adopt a liberal democratic constitution. However, images of humans do have an even deeper influence on people. They have the power to constitute and shape human reality itself. By providing a basis for mutual expectations and for what is being considered as normal, they determine the way humans see and treat themselves and each other. And this, in turn, influences the way people feel, think and act; it determines the way humans are human. Therefore, images of humans have a tendency to self-realisation. They shape a human being's self-perception and regulate her or his behaviour, and consequently help to insure that she or he increasingly becomes what her or his self-images tell her or him what she or he is (Taylor 1985). What this means and how this happens will get clear in the next chapter.

### **Basic structures of images of humans**

As stated before, images of humans are more or less coherent bundles of beliefs about core qualities of human beings. They include fundamental cognitive, affective, and evaluative presuppositions humans make about themselves, and which they use to order their lives. But of what sort are these beliefs? What kind of information do images of humans normally contain? Do

the different images of humans have any common structures? Which beliefs do they normally include?

In general, images of humans do include beliefs with regard to six basic categories which are highly interconnected:

- (a) Beliefs about the centre of the individual life and its structure
- (b) Beliefs about the human body
- (c) Beliefs about the human place in cosmos
- (d) Beliefs about human values
- (e) Beliefs about normal human behaviour
- (f) Beliefs about other human qualities common to all mankind

*Ad (a) Beliefs about the centre of the individual life and its structure*

Images of humans include beliefs about the centre of the individual life. They inform whether humans have such a centre at all, and if this is the case, where it lies and of which kind it is. The western image of humans, for example, holds that humans have an individual self or an I which is a stable structure in the deep of oneself and which is closely related to self-consciousness (Taylor 1992; Seigel 2005). This self is the core of my essence, and it's the control centre of my decisions, my thoughts, my acts, etc., in short: the self is the centre of one's life. Such an understanding of the self is also a precondition for understanding oneself as sovereign master of one's own life, as autonomous agent who is rather independent from the world. However, there are other images of humans, for which the self does not play such an important role. The pre-modern European image of humans is thought to be of such a kind. And for some branches of Buddhism (or for Nietzsche as well as for some postmodern thinkers and some neuroscientists) the self is just an illusion which needs to be dissolved. With such a self-understanding, people rather feel themselves in connection with the world around them.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, for Western people the self is located somewhere deep in the body, usually in the chest or the brain. But there are cultures which locate the centre of one's life outside the body. The Aborigines, the native Australians, for example, believe that the real self is located in another spatiotemporal dimension, the dreamtime, of which the person here and now is just a part. In some branches of Buddhism too, the self is just a fraction of a bigger, all-encompassing spiritual entity.

And finally, while Western cultures rather develop independent selves, Asian cultures are thought to rather develop interdependent selves, i.e. selves that are dependent of other people – the family, the spouse, friends, etc. People with this kind of selves don't feel at home when the partner is missing and aren't able to make decisions (Markus & Kitayama 1991; Somech 2000).

All this does not only show that images of humans do indeed include assumptions about the centre of the individual life. It also shows that images of humans deeply influence whether people develop the respective structures. In other words: If someone doesn't assume he or she has a substantial self, he or she will not develop strong feelings of a self. The structure of a self or an I will

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<sup>1</sup> See also Taylors (2008) distinction between porous and buffered selves.

not be established, at least not as strong as in the Western individualistic culture.

*Ad (b) Beliefs about the human body*

Images of humans do contain beliefs about the human body. These beliefs are closely related to the assumptions about the self: Is the body home of the self, is it identical to the self, is the body the self's prison, is the body just a transient dwelling for the self, are there stable boundaries between the self and the body or is the self porous to what happens in the body etc.?

The body-concept given in an image of humans will have effects on the way people perceive and treat their bodies. It will also influence the way it feels to have a body.

*Ad (c) Beliefs about the human place in cosmos*

Images of humans always include information about the human place in cosmos. This information involves four dimensions: an ontological dimension, an axiological dimension, a dimension of power and a dimension of relationship. The ontological dimension refers to the human position in the ontological order of beings. Is the human being on the top of all beings; is it, as Christians think, the crown of the creation? Or is it below angels or other spiritual entities? Or is it just on the same stage as everything else?

The axiological dimension refers to the human position in the moral order of beings. If the human being is the most valuable being, is he or she less valuable than certain beings?

The power dimension refers to the power human beings have with regard to other beings. Is the human being the most powerful being? Or are there beings more powerful than humans – spiritual entities, deities? Do humans have to fear something or somebody?

The relationship dimension refers to the relationship humans have to all other things. Do humans stand apart from all other things, or are they closely connected to the cosmos, do they merge into it?

*Ad (d) Beliefs about human values*

Images of humans usually include information about what should be important to a human person. This information is given either in assumptions about the goal of human life, be it happiness, virtue, loving god, escape from reincarnation, procreation etc., or in assumptions about valuable human qualities and behaviour, such as rationality, spirituality, altruism, evolutionary fitness, etc. Taken together, these assumptions contain an explicit or implicit image of the ideal human being, i.e. an idea of how people should be or at least should strive to be.

*Ad (e) Beliefs about normal human behaviour*

Besides assumptions about the ideal human, images of humans also include assumptions about the real human, about normal human inclinations and motivations to act, etc. Most of the questions concerning the human nature belong in this category: Are humans egoistic or altruistic in the core of their

essence, are they good or bad, are they social or individualistic, are they shapeable through social techniques or are they rather naturally determined, etc.?

*Ad (f) Beliefs about other human qualities common to all mankind*

Finally, images of humans include beliefs about all the obvious common human qualities like pain sensitivity, mortality, getting tired, having feelings, being hungry and thirsty, etc. which are not of particular importance to the self-understanding. They rather constitute the background of every image of humans and can be activated at any time. Normally they do not get into focus unless circumstances demand it. For example, human mortality, which is not thought to be something special at the moment, would become a distinctive feature at the very moment there were possibilities to overcome it.

## **Outlook**

To summarize, it can be stated that images of humans are very influential, complex phenomena worth investigating philosophically. They surely are a truly interdisciplinary topic, situated at the boundaries of quite a few disciplines such as philosophy, sociology, psychology, anthropology, theology, etc. But nonetheless, clarifying the concept, grasping the phenomenon on a highest possible level of generality, and formulating a theoretical framework for further research are undoubtedly philosophical tasks. First steps in this direction and their results have been presented in this paper.

It is clear, however, that far more work has to be done: the key points have to be worked out in detail and filled with flesh, the effects images of humans have on individual persons and society need to be thoroughly described in theoretical terms, the role of images of humans for ethical and legal reasoning have to be examined, and finally, criteria for assessing and judging images of man have to be developed.

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