Menschenbild: An Important Factor for our Identity

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Abstract

Similar to the concept of *Weltanschauung*, the related concept of *Menschenbild* seems to be a specific German concept that is hard to translate: it means an individual person's, a group of people's or a society's understanding of the human being as such. This paper aims at introducing this latter concept, which plays an important role in German public, political, and academic discourses, thus making plausible the claim that every one of us has a *Menschenbild* and that *Menschenbilder* are very important and influential factors, in particular for our identity as humans. After elaborating on a definition of the concept, the paper explains what kinds of beliefs typically belong to a *Menschenbild*, introduces the differentiation between individual, group-specific and societal *Menschenbilder*, explains how they are embedded in our everyday life, gives a short description of their most important practical functions, explains how *Menschenbilder* are embedded in cultural systems, and explores their deep impact on society and human individuals.

Introduction[1]

It was philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche who first understood three things: First, that every one of us has a set of strong convictions on what it means to be human.[2] Second, that these convictions lie at the bottom of the epistemic and moral orders, by which we conceive and sort the world.[3] And third, that these convictions are very powerful, because they mold us: Our deepest convictions about what it means to be human are self-fulfilling prophecies; over time, they inscribe themselves into the human being and slowly turn us into what we think we are (Nietzsche 1988c, 419).[4]

Nietzsche called this set of convictions about the human being a *"Menschenbild"*. This concept has since then made a remarkable career in German thinking and has become very important and ubiquitous, particularly in public political and moral debates.[5] Unfortunately, there is no appropriate English translation for this word. Like the term *"Weltanschauung"*, which has been translated as "worldvision",[6] but is mostly used in English as a loan word in its original German spelling, "*Menschenbild*" seems to be a specifically German term. Literally, the term would be translated as "mental image of the human being", but the translations "understanding of the human being", "concept of human nature", "idea of the human being" or "view of the human being" may seem more appropriate. However, all these translations cannot really grasp the specific meaning and the richness of the German term. In particular, they miss the strong moral, societal and political connotations the term has. Therefore, I will simply use the German word *Menschenbild*. Put very boldly, a *Menschenbild* is

a bundle of deep convictions about the human being in general. As such, it functions like a scheme or a typification of the human being; it is a typification of what humans are, how they typically behave, what inclinations to act they have, what goals they have or should have, etc. Or, even more simply: A *Menschenbild* is the specific *filter* through which we look at human beings.

In this paper, I will elaborate on the insights Nietzsche had[7] and try to make plausible two claims:

1. *Menschenbilder*, that is our bundles of deep convictions about the human being, are fundamental for culture and society: They are the central element of the epistemic and moral orders by which we conceive and sort the world; so they are *the* cultural and historical *a-priori* par excellence.
2. The bundles of convictions are extremely influential, for they mold the human being. *Menschenbilder* are a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy: When they are believed in, they inscribe themselves into the human being; over time, they transform the human being and mold it according to their understanding.

I will try to make these claims plausible in seven steps: First, I will develop a definition of *Menschenbild*. Second, I will give a short overview of the typical contents of *Menschenbilder*. Third, I will introduce the differentiation between individual, group-specific, and societal *Menschenbilder*. Fourth, I will explain how our *Menschenbilder* are embedded in our everyday life, and fifth, I will give a short description of the most important functions *Menschenbilder* fulfill in our everyday life. Sixth, I'll explain how *Menschenbilder* are embedded in a society's cultural system, and finally, seventh, I'll explore the enormous impact *Menschenbilder* have both on human societies and on human individuals, making it a major factor for human identity.

1. Menschenbild: A definition

Every one of us has several convictions about the human being in general. Many of us, for example, hold that humans have free will or that they should strive for societal harmony, some hold the belief that humans are egoistic, some are convinced that they have been created by God, that they have an immortal soul, etc. The specific set of convictions a person, a group of people or a society has about the human being in general is what Nietzsche calls a *Menschenbild*. So, a *Menschenbild* consists of several strong beliefs about the human being in general: it is a *bundle of convictions* about the human being. Encompassing several convictions, these bundles do not only consist of the convictions themselves, but also of the relations between them. The convictions will complement, support, and limit each other, and every now and then they will also contradict each other. However, a certain minimum of coherence, consistency and systematicity is characteristic of every *Menschenbild*. Therefore, *Menschenbilder* can be defined as *more or less coherent* bundles of convictions about the human being.

We all hold a myriad of convictions about the human being. We believe that they usually have two legs, that they get older, usually have teeth, can laugh, run, cry etc. In a strict sense, all our beliefs about the human being are part of our *Menschenbild*. However, not everything we believe about the human being is of equal importance. Some convictions are – in a practical and systematic sense – more fundamental than others. For example, the conviction that humans possess

human dignity is practically and systematically more important than the belief that they usually have two ears. So, according to our *Menschenbild*, some human features are more important than others, which also means that some convictions about the human being are more fundamental than others. As a result we can say that, while *Menschenbilder* comprise all our beliefs about the human being, including the very trivial ones, they define certain beliefs as crucial. This allows us to reduce *Menschenbilder* to these crucial convictions. Therefore, we can extend our definition: A *Menschenbild* is a more or less coherent bundle of *crucial convictions* about the human being.

A further clarification needs to be added: *Menschenbilder* are bundles of convictions about the *human being in general*, and not about an individual human being or a particular type or a group of human beings. Although this seems to be clear, it has to be left open who is included by "the human being in general", for some *Menschenbilder* have a narrower, others a broader definition of who is a human being. Racist *Menschenbilder* for example do sometimes expel some members of the biological human species from the purview of humanity, while some animist *Menschenbilder* extend it to animals, plants, ghosts or even things.[8]

The definition thus runs as follows: A *Menschenbild* is a more or less coherent bundle of crucial convictions about the human being in general. This definition is very wide. It encompasses all sorts of views about the human being. Therefore, it makes sense to further distinguish a wide from a narrow meaning: In the wide sense, the term *Menschenbild* encompasses all kinds of such views, for example literary views such as Shakespeare's understanding of the human, theoretical or philosophical understandings of the human like Hobbes', Nietzsche's or Marx's view of the human, scientific models of the human like the *homo oeconomicus*, etc. In a narrow sense, which is both the basic Nietzschean and the true sense of that term, the term only includes such bundles of convictions about the human being that are embedded in ordinary everyday life, i.e. the life-world. In other words: Real *Menschenbilder* have a place in the real lives of real persons. From now on, the paper will focus solely on *Menschenbilder* in this latter, life-worldly sense.

2. Types of convictions

Life-worldly *Menschenbilder* are bundles of crucial convictions about the human being in general that are embedded in our everyday life. What are these important convictions about? As people have numerous different convictions about the human being in general, it is not possible to name them all. However, as shown elsewhere[9], it is possible to identify a few categories of convictions, under which all the important convictions about the human being fall. Through an analysis of what we need to know of each other in order to deal with each other in everyday life, and through an analysis of a number of culturally extremely diverse *Menschenbilder* it is possible to draft a list of ten categories of important beliefs that every image of the human being contains:

	Categories of Convictions	Questions answered by the convictions
1.	Convictions about who belongs to humanity	Are all members of the biological species homo sapiens human beings or is the definition of "human being" narrower or broader?
2.	Convictions about fundamental ontological features of the human being	What are the main (ontological) elements humans are made of? Do humans only have a material body or do they also have an immaterial soul (or even two or three souls)? What are the relations between these ontological elements, etc.?
3.	Convictions about the human being's position in the cosmos	What is the human being's ontological, axiological and power position with respect to all other beings? Is the human being the pinnacle of creation, is it nobler than all other beings or is it inferior to some beings or are all beings of equal worth, etc.?
4.	Convictions about ontological, axiological and legitimate power differences between humans.	Are all human beings ontologically and axiologically equal, and do all humans have the same right to possess power, or are there fundamental differences between humans, e.g. between man and woman, between old and young, between races and ethnic groups, etc.?
5.	Convictions about the character of human individuality	Are human beings individual beings in a strong sense or are they interconnected? Are individual beings sub- or superordinate to society, etc.?
6.	Convictions about the human self	Do humans have one substantial inner core self, do they consist of many selves, or is the self an illusion? Is the human self interdependent, i.e. a result of human relations, or is it independent, i.e. prior to human relations? Etc.
7.	Convictions about human freedom	Do humans have free will, and if so, how far does it reach? Is it just freedom of basic choice (e.g. choosing coffee with or without sugar) or is it far-reaching autonomy (e.g. choosing the moral system or one's life plan)? Etc.
8.	Convictions about human behavior (or human nature)	Is human behavior the result of innate dispositions or is it learned? How moldable is human behavior? Are there dominant factors determining human behavior such as genes, sexual desire or societal influence? Are there strong behavioral motivations and dispositions such as egotism? Etc.
9.	Convictions about core human capabilities	What are the capabilities only humans have? What are the capabilities that are particularly important for being human (the ability of language, reasoning, empathy, to feel and defend one's honor, etc.) and should these be trained? What capabilities are of human value? Etc.
10.	Convictions about the good human life	What is the real goal of human life? What is the meaning of human life? What values should a successful human life follow and realize? Etc.

These are the ten categories or issues we all have strong convictions about. They form an important part of our background beliefs, which allow us to interact with our fellow humans and live our ordinary day-to-day lives. It is important to see, however, that not everyone does necessarily have *clear* beliefs about all these issues. On the contrary, the convictions about many of these issues are often rather unclear and remain implicit in many cases. Also, people very often do not clearly know what they believe, but can at least tell rather clearly what they do not believe. For example, many people in Western societies might not be able to tell whether they believe humans have a material body *and* an immortal soul. But they *will* be able to clearly deny that humans have a material body and three immortal souls.

3. Individual, group-specific, and societal Menschenbilder

Menschenbilder are bundles of convictions about the human being. Every one of us has such a bundle of convictions. However, it is important to realize that we usually do not have all our convictions about the human being just for ourselves. On the contrary, we share many of them with other members of our society. Our *Menschenbild* thus has several layers. If we look a little closer we will discover that we share some of our convictions about the human being with all or nearly all other members of our society. In many countries, people for example share the convictions that humans are free and responsible for their deeds, that they deserve moral respect, that they remain themselves throughout their lives (and don't

become completely other persons) etc.

Additionally, we will discover that we share some of our convictions only with some other members of our society, i.e. with a group of people. In most secular societies, for example, only a few members of the society share the belief that humans have an immortal soul, or that God has created humanity.

Finally, we will discover that we have convictions we share with nobody else. These are convictions we hold completely by ourselves. For example, it might be that somebody holds the completely private belief that humans with long noses are particularly high principled, and it might well be that somebody else holds the completely idiosyncratic conviction that regularly brushing one's teeth not only guarantees a low dentist bill, but is also good for one's spiritual healing.

Our bundle of convictions about the human being in general is thus built up in different layers, formed by convictions we share with all, with a few, and with no other member of the society we live in. These layers can be isolated theoretically. By doing so, we are able to distinguish three different bundles of convictions, i.e. three *Menschenbilder*:

1. Individual *Menschenbilder,* consisting of all the convictions an individual person holds about the human being in general.
2. Group-specific *Menschenbilder,* being bundles of convictions that are believed in by groups. Typical examples of such groups are religious groups, sects, political parties, ideological groups, etc. A group-specific *Menschenbild* consists of all the shared overlapping convictions the members of a particular group have about the human being in general.
3. Societal *Menschenbilder* are bundles of convictions about the human being in general that are embedded in a society or a culture and that are embodied in a society's shared values, in the pedagogical system, in institutions, in well-established practices, etc. Here too, the *Menschenbild* consists of the shared overlapping convictions the members of the society have about the human being in general.

It is important to understand that these three kinds of *Menschenbilder* do not exist next to each other, but are grafted on each other. Societal *Menschenbilder* form the basis of the other *Menschenbilder*; they are a kind of very rudimentary torso-*Menschenbild* that is open for expansion and completion.[10] And this is exactly what group-specific *Menschenbilder* do: they specify the societal *Menschenbild* and add convictions to them. And individual *Menschenbilder* specify and add new convictions.

Our *Menschenbilder* are thus almost like a map: In a society, every member gets the same copy of the societal map. In this map, only the most important streets, buildings, rivers and mountains (i.e. the most important convictions about the human being) are indicated, that is: those streets, buildings, etc. which are necessary to know if you want to find your way in this society. With these maps in their hands, every member of society goes to the group or the groups he feels attached to – religions, political parties, other ideological groups – and adds all the points, streets, corners, etc. that are of importance for the groups he belongs to. And finally, with this enriched map, people go home and add all the things that are of importance to them as individuals. Note that the different layers on the map are drawn in different colors, so that people are able to distinguish between the marks on the map that are binding for all society members, and those marks that are only binding for me or the group I belong to. And indeed, we are well able to distinguish our private convictions

about the human being from the convictions we share with groups and the convictions that almost every member of the society holds. We know what people in our society generally think about the human being, and we know at which points our convictions differ from these general convictions.

Among these three sorts of *Menschenbilder*, the societal *Menschenbild* certainly is the most interesting and important one. A societal *Menschenbild* is a more or less coherent bundle of convictions about the human being that is shared by all – or at least by the majority of the – members of a society. In pluralistic societies, the convictions of the *Menschenbild* bear three characteristics:

1. The shared convictions are very abstract and thin with regard to their content. The thick and rather specific convictions of the individual and group-specific *Menschenbilder* are replaced by vague convictions that can be specified in a variety of ways and that are thus compatible with a whole range of more specific convictions.[11] Take, for example, the rather abstract conviction that humans have human dignity. In many societies, this is a widespread conviction. This abstract conviction, however, leaves open many questions: It does not define what human dignity exactly is, it does not give a justification for human dignity, and it does not tell what exactly follows from human dignity, for all this is a matter of divergent opinions: For some, human dignity is rooted in the likeliness to God, for others, it is rooted in the faculty of reason, for others again, it is rooted in biological complexity, and some think that human dignity is rooted in nothing but is a mere positing. Some think that abortion, the death penalty, or active euthanasia are all compatible with human dignity, while others think that they are a violation of human dignity, etc. There is, hence, only a very narrow societal consensus on human dignity; the shared conviction that humans possess human dignity is very thin and abstract.[12] But this is exactly the reason why this conviction is open for more specific interpretations and compatible with a wide range of more specific individual and group-specific convictions about human dignity.

2. The *Menschenbild* of pluralistic societies contains only a *few* positive abstract and thin convictions about important features of the human being. In most Western societies for example, these convictions are, among others: that every member of the biological species *homo sapiens* is a human being, that humans possess human dignity and are thus morally equal, that humans are (and should be) free and responsible for what they do, that they are or have a self, a kind of enclosed inner realm to which only they have access, that humans have a numerical identity in the sense that they are only one (and do not, as for example some African tribes think, consist of three or four persons)[13], that humans possess transtemporal identity in the sense that human persons remain themselves across the years and despite all the changes they go through, etc.

3. It is important to see that societal *Menschenbilder* do not only consist of a few positive convictions about the human being, but also contain a number of *negative* ones. This is because those individual and group-specific convictions that are not consensual in a society do not simply fall outside the societal *Menschenbild*, but remain there as a blank space. For example: The societal *Menschenbild* of a typical secularized society does not contain religious convictions. These convictions, which may well be found in individual and group-specific *Menschenbilder,* are not part of the shared societal *Menschenbild*. However, these religious convictions do not simply disappear but are rather replaced by the shared conviction that there is no shared belief in these religious matters. In secularized societies, there is the shared knowledge that people do not agree on whether humans have been created by God, whether they have an immortal

soul, etc.; people agree to disagree in these matters. But this shared conviction that people disagree in these matters is an important part of the societally shared *Menschenbild*. Consequently, a societal *Menschenbild* does not only consist of the shared positive convictions about the human being, but also of the shared negative convictions about which human features there is no societal consensus.

What is also important about societal *Menschenbilder* is the fact that they are the core of a society's individual and group-specific *Menschenbilder*. Recall the picture of the map: The most important markings, the ones that are relevant and mandatory for all – regardless of the added group-specific and individual markings – are the societal markings. This becomes particularly clear by the fact that you cannot get rid of the societal *Menschenbild* without falling out of society altogether. For example: Imagine you were a German Catholic. In this case, you also had a Catholic *Menschenbild*, a Catholic understanding of the human being. And this understanding would open up the Catholic world to you – its narratives and creeds, the practices of baptism, of weekly church ministries, of regular confessions and so on.

Now, it could happen that you lose your Catholic faith and with it also the Catholic *Menschenbild*. This might well be a very painful process, and entail a severe identity crisis. And by losing your faith in the Catholic *Menschenbild* you would certainly also lose access to the Catholic world that before made so perfect sense to you, but now seems rather absurd. However, even if you lost your Catholic understanding of the human being you could still participate in German society as a whole, you could still orient yourself in the common life-world, you would still have access to your former brothers and sisters in faith as members of your common society.

Things would be dramatically different when you lose a societally shared conviction about the human being. If you, for instance, seriously stopped to believe that humans are free, then you would no longer be able to orient yourself in your society, let alone in your Catholic universe. The moral system, the legal system, the educational system, the day-to-day interaction wouldn't make sense anymore. Societal *Menschenbilder* are thus the most important ones. They are the fundament of individual and group-specific *Menschenbilder* and almost cannot be denied in practice.

4. Menschenbild as hyper-typification

In order to understand what life-worldly *Menschenbilder* are and how they function, it is important to see that every one of us carries around with him or her a multitude of bundles of convictions about specific types of humans, and that we constantly make use of these bundles: We all have many different typifications, which we use to sort the people we encounter. We come across somebody, and instantly and totally automatically we assign that person to a category: this person is a child, a woman, a professor, a policeman, an artist, a politician, an actress, etc.

But we do not only assign humans to mere categories, we also assign them to convictions that are connected to the respective categories – convictions about the type of persons that fit into the category. For example: Artists are believed to be creative, sensitive and often socially difficult, plumbers are – at least in Austria, where I come from – believed to be unreliable, grumpy, always late and expensive. If these bundles of convictions about a certain type of human are incorrect, unjust, inappropriate or problematic, we call them stereotypes. But in many cases, our bundles of convictions are totally

unproblematic. For this reason, it is better to call them – just as Berger and Luckmann do – typifications.[14]

In everyday life, we have a huge stock of such typifications at our disposal, and we draw from them when we need them. We need them to bring order into the realm of humanity by classifying our fellow human beings. Our *Menschenbild* also belongs to this stock of typifications; in fact, a *Menschenbild* is basically a very general typification. As such, it works like an automatic stereotype.[15] Whenever I see a human being, I immediately and automatically attribute to him or her a number of features – important and not-so-important ones: I assume that this being is able to speak, that it has a reason, that it deserves moral respect, that it is or should at least be free and autonomous, I assume that it needs food and sleep, that it will have mood swings and so on.

So, in my everyday life, I also carry with me a bundle of convictions about the human being in general, and this bundle of convictions is activated every time I come across a human being or I hear the word "human". At this moment, I so to speak put the bundle of convictions over the phenomenon.

However, *Menschenbilder* are not ordinary typifications, but a very special kind of them. They do not stand at the same level as our other typifications, but are prior to them. They are higher-order typifications, or hyper-typifications.[16] This is due to two main reasons:

1. First of all, they are prior because they are more general: Before I typify a human being as a beggar, as a professor or as a plumber, I have to typify this phenomenon as a human being – or rather, by typifying somebody as a plumber or a professor, I have underhandedly always already typified him or her as a human being. So, it is this very bundle of convictions about the human being in general that opens up the realm of humanity and makes the application of all our more specific typifications possible. Only *if* and only *after* I have typified somebody as a human being I can use a more specific typification and typify him or her as a plumber or as an artist.

2. Secondly, *Menschenbilder* are prior because they are on a higher, or rather – the highest – hierarchical level of our typifications for the human being. Images of the human being are equipped with epistemic and moral authority. We generally think that our deepest core convictions about the human being are more true and right than all our other typifications. That this is indeed the case becomes clear when we correct ourselves. For example: When I read a newspaper report about an extraordinarily brutal case of rape and murder, the thought could arise in me that it would be best to immediately put the offenders, these monsters, against the wall and shoot them. However, if I am at least a little bit sensible, my faculty of moral self-correction would come into action the next moment: "You should not think that way", I would say to myself, "even these offenders are, their horrible deeds notwithstanding, human beings who have to be treated with respect and who thus deserve a fair trial." So, in this case, I have corrected a specific typification – the offenders as subhuman monsters – with a higher typification, namely my *Menschenbild* which comprises the convictions that human beings deserve moral respect and fair trials. But I can only do so because I think that my convictions that humans have dignity and deserve fair trials are more true than the thought I just had.

In short, our *Menschenbilder* are higher-order typifications that are equipped with epistemic and moral authority. We believe that they are true and right, and thus they are overruling other typifications.

Under normal circumstances, we are not aware of that. In general, we apply our *Menschenbilder* completely automatically, and we automatically assume that they are true and right. This is so because our *Menschenbilder* are transparent for their referent. It is not the case that I perceive a human being, and *then* I attribute to him or her all the qualities that I believe human beings have in general. On the contrary, I just see a human being with all the qualities I attribute to him or her. Only now and then it happens that we orient ourselves knowingly by our *Menschenbild*, and only sometimes does it comes to our mind that there is a difference between our *Menschenbild* and the real human being.

5. Functions of Menschenbilder

It should have become clear by now that *Menschenbilder* are indeed important elements of the epistemic and moral orders by which we conceive and sort the world. But what exactly do we need a *Menschenbild* for? Basically, a *Menschenbild* has the same functions as typifications in general have.[17] As shown elsewhere (Zichy 2017, 172-190), *Menschenbilder* have at least ten functions of which the five most important ones are:

1. *Identification*: *Menschenbilder* serve to identify an experienced phenomenon as a human being. To identify a phenomenon as a human being I need a set of criteria by means of which I can find out whether this thing there is a human being or not. *Menschenbilder* contain these very criteria. But if our *Menschenbilder* contain these criteria that allow us to identify human beings, they establish or open up – as said before – the realm of humanity.

2. *Reduction of complexity*: *Menschenbilder* are very general concepts. They reduce the myriads of human individuals, who existed, are existing, and will exist, to an abstract type, and they reduce the multitude and variety of specific features that individuals have to some abstract common features. By this, *Menschenbilder* allow us to seize all human beings in a somehow qualified entity, they enable us to interact with people unknown to us, and they enable us to interact with various people at the same time.

3. *Legitimation or justification*: *Menschenbilder* serve to justify other beliefs we hold about what is morally right or wrong, about how society should look like, about which kind of education we cherish and so on. And they serve to justify our actions towards our fellow people. To give an example: If we justify our rejection of immediate death penalty for murderers by saying that they have dignity and unconditionally deserve moral respect and thus deserve fair trials, we refer to a moral conviction which is part of a *Menschenbild*.

4. *Orientation*: *Menschenbilder* serve as points of orientation, in a double sense: First, our *Menschenbilder* inform us about what to expect from other people. For example: we usually expect people to behave more or less rationally in normal circumstances. But we can expect this only because we are convinced that humans are rational beings. Our *Menschenbilder* thus tell us what we can expect from each other. They are the fundament of mutual expectations and of the determination of what is normal human behavior. Second, *Menschenbilder* serve as models, especially in education. Our *Menschenbilder* tell us which features a human should have and which faculties he or she should develop.[18]

5. *Identity formation*: *Menschenbilder* are important for our identity. They tell us what the core features of the human being are. By this, they not only tell us what is important in human beings as such, but they also tell *me*, who

understands myself as a human being, what I am at my core, what is important in my life, where the goals and the meaning of my life lie. *Menschenbilder* thus are existentially significant, because they are deeply interwoven with our self-understandings and our identities.

6. Interweavings

Menschenbilder are not isolated entities. On the contrary, they are tightly interwoven with many of our other beliefs we have about all sorts of things. Actually, they are deeply embedded into the epistemic and moral orders by which we conceive, sort and construct the world. They are part of what can be called the system of meaning and beliefs which we need to have in order to make sense of the world and to find our way through the world.[19]

This has not to be explained at length: It is quite obvious that our deepest convictions about the human being are linked to a wide variety of other beliefs we hold. They are linked to our ontological beliefs, they are linked to our cosmological beliefs, they are linked to our moral, educational, juridical, political, societal beliefs, and they are of course linked to our religious and ideological beliefs, etc. Moreover, our *Menschenbild* is interwoven in many of the things we take for granted and in our everyday judgements. If I, for example, cherish the government's efforts for barrier-free access in all public buildings, I do so on the basis of a *Menschenbild* which tells me that people with impairments have equal rights.

That *Menschenbilder* are present almost everywhere becomes clear looking at societies that have a *Menschenbild* that differs from the one we are used to. Take, for example, South Africa during Apartheid: Race segregation was everywhere. In every public bus, in every restaurant, in every restroom, at every water fountain that was reserved for either white or for colored people, in all the discriminating behavior and gestures one had to show to each other, in the institutions, practices and so on, in all of that was given the conviction that colored people are inferior to white people, in all of that was present a racist *Menschenbild* that divided humanity into two classes of different dignity.[20]

In short: *Menschenbilder* are obviously almost everywhere, they are deeply interwoven in all our cultural constructions. But as long as we are familiar with them, as long as we identify with them, we are not able to perceive them.

It is important to understand, however, that *Menschenbilder* are not only an integral part of our cultural system, but they also form the very heart of it. There are five reasons to justify this claim:

1. Our convictions about the human being are central, because there are beliefs about the human being, and the human being is the very entity for whom culture and the system of meaning and beliefs exist.
2. The *Menschenbild* is that very element of culture by which the real human being gets access to culture and the system of meaning and beliefs: My parents and my society implicitly teach me that I am a human being, and if I accept that and if I hence identify myself with the *Menschenbild* they provide me, I also begin to understand how all the other things relate to me as a human. So, the *Menschenbild* is the cultural element through which I get access to the system of meaning and beliefs, and through which all other things – the world as a whole– gain their meaning for me.
3. Not only is the *Menschenbild* the element by which I enter the system of meaning and belief, but it is also the place

where this system touches reality, where it materializes. This thought can be explained by an example: If I have a belief about a specific stone, my belief will let the stone untouched. The stone will be touched only when I – e.g. because of my belief that it is a wonderful stone and that it has a good structure – start to carve it in order to make a statue out of it. In most cases, things are exactly like this: our beliefs about them have no direct influence on them, but only an indirect influence. In the case of our beliefs about the human being, things are quite different. Again, these beliefs are also beliefs about myself, and as such, they exert a direct influence on how I feel, how I see myself, on how I judge myself and so on. The system of meaning and belief – the cultural system – has its focal point in the *Menschenbild*: This is the very place where the system directly transforms reality.

4. The *Menschenbild* is the central cultural element, because it provides all our other beliefs to which it is linked with relevance. For example: The belief that God exists would, if taken as an isolated belief, be rather insignificant. It becomes significant only when there is a link to the human being, that is, when there are additional beliefs, such as: the human being has been created by God, the human being is under the rigorous observation of God and so on. All the things in the world have relevance for us only if they are somehow linked to the human being, which means: linked to our convictions about the human being.

5. The *Menschenbild* is not only linked to many beliefs. As said before, it is also the justifying fundament of many beliefs, among them in particular our moral, educational, societal and political beliefs.

To conclude: *Menschenbilder* not only are an integral part of the systems of meaning and beliefs, by which we sort or construct the world, but they are also the central element of these systems. Our cultural systems thus have an anthropocentric structure – though they may not be anthropocentric in content, they are necessarily always anthropocentric in their structure, i.e. they revolve around the *Menschenbild*.

5. Impact

Let us now come to the last and most important issue: The impact of *Menschenbilder*. The whole investigation into the *Menschenbilder* wouldn't make sense were it not for the fact that they are extremely influential.

It is a well-known fact that stereotypes like gender stereotypes or racial stereotypes, exert a deep influence on how we perceive the world and how we act in it.[21] *Menschenbilder* are nothing else than specific forms of higher-order typifications. As such, they

- coin our perception of ourselves and our fellow humans. They deeply influence the way we perceive, we feel, we think and act towards human beings. This has also been confirmed by a number of empirical studies.[22]
- deeply influence societal institutions, because institutions are built around the way we understand the human being. *Menschenbilder* are thus the fundament of our moral, pedagogical and juridical systems. Gustav Radbruch, the famous German legal scholar was only the first of many other German legal scholars who claim that the understanding of the human being is absolutely crucial for law and lawmaking. According to him, Menschenbilder are "epoch-making" in the history of law.[23] Likewise, the famous educational theorist and existentialist Otto Friedrich Bollnow has, as many others

after him, claimed that "anthropology [in the German sense of that word, i.e. *Menschenbilder*] is the key to every pedagogical system".[24]

- exert a deep influence on the constitution of the human being. In particular, they mold our personality: Just imagine a child that is brought up in a society which believes that autonomy, reason and self-reflection are the best and most valuable human faculties. Under normal circumstances, the child will of course develop these faculties, because everybody expects it to do so, and because the society provides the space where the child can train these faculties and learn to "use its own mind without another's guidance", to quote Kant.[25] The child will develop these faculties, because society provides training from the very first moment on, provides role models and so on. In contrast, imagine a child that is brought up in Afghanistan, where the ability of subordination is meant to be the most important one. This Afghan child is likely to bring to perfection the ability of obedience, the ability to suppress its own wishes, the ability to adapt itself to the social situation it is in, and it will develop a very sophisticated sensorium for social hierarchies. At the same time, it will, if at all, only rudimentary develop the faculty of independent reasoning and self-reflection.

There is a last point to make: *Menschenbilder* not only influence human personality, but also human subjectivity. They influence the way how it *feels* to be human.

For every one of us, it feels somehow to be. What it meant by "it feels to be" in this context is rather trivial. While you are sitting in your room, reading this paper and maybe asking yourself "What is he talking about?", you sense that you are sitting in a room, maybe you feel that you are getting tired, and of course, you feel that it is you who is sitting in the room and getting tired, etc. Whatever we do is accompanied by a number of self-feelings.[26] These accompanying self-feelings can be called the feeling to be. The claim is, that this self-feeling or that these self-feelings are deeply influenced by the societal *Menschenbild* under which we grow up as a child.

I will try to clarify this with an example: in most modern Western societies, it is believed that the human being is an autonomous and self-identical entity, that is: Modern Westerners generally think that humans have the faculty to freely choose how they want to live, and that they indeed should develop and exert this ability, and they also think that humans stay themselves throughout their lives, notwithstanding all the changes they go through, and they believe that humans are basically one whole thing and not consisting of two or more persons or spirits. And in fact, most Westerners feel exactly this way: they feel that they are, as persons, free or even autonomous, they feel to be self-identical through time, and they feel to be one whole thing, even though they sometimes are torn apart inwardly.

There are two things to say here:

Firstly: These self-feelings have a transcendental character, for they fundamentally define the place from which we perceive the world. These self-feelings are a core precondition of how the world appears to us and how we act in this world. Just imagine how the world appeared to us if we thought we were completely determined, if we thought we were consisting of more than one person, and if we thought of being somebody else every new day.

Secondly: These self-feelings are a product of our convictions about the human being. We do not believe that we are autonomous and self-identical, because we feel to be autonomous and self-identical, it is the other way around: we feel to

be autonomous and self-identical, because we think we are autonomous and self-identical. It was our *Menschenbild* that made us what we are. This claim can be made plausible by a look at some parts of the world. There are parts of this world where we find people who don't think the way modern Westeners think about the human being, and who obviously do not have the same self-feelings as modern Westeners have. Anthropologists have collected plenty of evidence that there are tribes – like Australian Aborigines – who think that the human being is not free but totally in the grip of a metaphysical power that permeates everything and is merging people, animals, plants, places and ancestors into a complex unity. According to this understanding, human beings resemble remote-controlled "puppets", to quote the French anthropologist Philippe Descola.[27] Or, take some tribes of the West-African Peul (or Fulbe), who think that the human being is inhabited by a number of persons whose presence in the body changes in time. Or think of the African Samo in Burkina Faso who believe that the human being is consisting of a multitude of ontological elements that constantly come and go as they like and that change all the time. In this case, the individual is every day a new individual. All these people have radically different understandings of the human being, and therefore, they also have radically different self-feelings.

If this claim is true and *Menschenbilder* do indeed influence human self-feelings, how can we explain this influence? A rather primitive model could help to understand this:

We all, as human beings, experience a broad range of very different feelings and self-feelings: I feel or experience that I can control something – my thoughts, my body; I experience that I can objectify myself and look at myself as if I was outside myself. In a similar manner, I experience that I am dependent on things and circumstances; I experience that I can't control things that happen: thoughts just pop up in my mind without asking, strong emotions like fury, anxiety or sexual arousal overwhelm me, I experience dreams that take me away in strange worlds, etc.

Depending on the *Menschenbild* under which I grow up, I learn to interpret these diverse feelings and experience them in a very different manner. It is these very interpretations by which my feelings and interpretations are molded. There are three mechanisms at work:

1. The feeling itself is changed by the interpretation. Depending on how we interpret a feeling, the feeling will be experienced. Take, for example, sexual arousal: If I've leant that sexuality is a bad thing, my sexual sensations will have a quite different qualitative character compared to when I've leant that sexuality is a completely natural and good thing. Likewise, the experience of having a will will have a quite different qualitative character, depending on whether I've learned that the will is *my* will, or I've learned that my will is the result of an outer power that permeates me, or even that my will is, as Buddhism teaches, a mere illusion.

2. It also depends on the *Menschenbild* with which feeling or sensation I identify myself. If I learn that the will is basically me, I will identify myself very strongly with the feelings of having a will and with the actions I cause by my will. If I learn that my will is an outward power or an illusion, I will not identify myself with the respective sensations. If I learn that I am a self-identical entity, I will identify myself stronger with the feelings and experiences of being an identity. If I learn to the contrary, that I am a non-identical entity, I will identify myself stronger with feelings of being torn apart and non-identity.

3. *Menschenbilder* influence the focal point of my self-perception. If I learn that I am an identical entity, I will experience

my feelings of identity much stronger that my feelings of non-identity. If I, on the other hand, learn that I am a non-identical entity, it will be the other way around.

In conclusion, it can be said that *Menschenbilder* are indeed a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. When they are really believed in at a societal level, they will inscribe themselves into the human beings who believe in it, and will mold these human beings according to the ideas the *Menschenbild* represents.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to elaborate on a concept which goes back to Nietzsche and has since then become very popular in the German-speaking (academic) world: the concept of *Menschenbild. Menschenbilder* are more or less coherent bundles of crucial convictions about the human being in general. They are ubiquitous phenomena: Every one of us believes in a *Menschenbild.* As we share many of our anthropological convictions with a few or even with most people in our society, it makes sense to distinguish individual, group-specific and societal *Menschenbilder*, of which the last one is the most important as it forms the core of the two other two. In our everyday lives, these bundles of convictions play an important role. They function like higher-order typifications that are equipped with epistemic and moral authority. Not only are they deeply embedded in the epistemic and moral orders by which we perceive and sort the world, but they are also the central element of these orders.

As such, they deeply influence how we see and act in the world. Even more, they also deeply influence how and who we *are* as humans. *Menschenbilder* are a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy: they mold the human being according to the ideas the human being has of him- or herself. If we take all this into account, the claim is justified: *Menschenbilder* are not only *the* historical-cultural apriori par excellence, they are indeed a crucial factor for human identity.

Footnotes

[1] The first part of this paper has already been published as: Michael Zichy, What is a Menschenbild? Introducing a Fruitful German Concept, in: *Self-awareness of Life in the New Era,* ed. By Peter Jonkers, He Xirong, and Yongze, Shi (Washington: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy 2020, 57-71.

[2] Friedrich Nietzsche, „Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen." In: Idem, *Kritische Studienausgabe, Vol. 1*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (München, Berlin, New York: dtv/de Gruyter, 1988), 368.

[3] Friedrich Nietzsche, „Nachgelassene Fragmente 1883." In Idem, *Kritische Studienausgabe, Vol. 10,* ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (München, Berlin, New York: dtv/de Gruyter, 1988), 316.

[4] Friedrich Nietzsche, „Menschliches, Allzumenschliches II." In Idem, *Kritische Studienausgabe, Vol. 2,* ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (München, Berlin, New York: dtv/de Gruyter), 1988.

5 For the role of *Menschenbilder* in the different branches of the humanities and social sciences see Bodo Rollka and Friederike Schultz, *Kommunikationsinstrument Menschenbild. Zur Verwendung von Menschenbildern in gesellschaftlichen Diskursen* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2011), Anna Katharina Reichardt and Eric Kubli, ed., Menschenbilder (Bern: Peter Lang, 1999), Rolf Oerter, ed., *Menschenbilder in der modernen Gesellschaft. Konzeptionen des Menschen in Wissenschaft, Bildung, Kunst, Wirtschaft und Politik* (Stuttgart: de Gruyter Oldenburg 1999); for the role of this term in German public discourse see Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, *Missbrauchte Götter. Zum Menschenbilderstreit in der Moderne* (München: C. H. Beck 2009); 133-176. For a detailed conceptual history of the term see Michael Zichy, „Menschenbild. Begriffsgeschichtliche Anmerkungen," *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 56, (2014): 7-30 and the first chapter of Michael Zichy, *Menschenbilder. Eine Grundlegung* (Freiburg/München: Verlag Karl Alber 2017).

6 See David Naugle, *Worldview: The history of a concept* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2002).

7 A full account of *Menschenbilder* can be found in Zichy, *Menschenbilder*.

8 See Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2013).

9 Zichy, *Menschenbilder*, 267-357.

10 This idea is inspired by Rawls' (John Rawls, "The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus."*Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 7, no. 1 (1987): 1–25 and idem, *Political Liberalism* [New York: Columbia University Press 1993]) concept of the overlapping consensus.

11 This idea is drawn from the concept of „open*Menschenbild*" which is, according to some German legal scholars, the fundament of the German Constitution; for this see Wolfram Höfling, *Offene Grundrechtsinterpretation. Grundrechtsauslegung zwischen amtlichem Interpretationsmonopol und privater Konkretisierungskompetenz* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot,1987), 116-118; Martin Morlok, *Selbstverständnis als Rechtskriterium* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1993), 283; Peter Häberle. *Das Menschenbild im Verfassungsstaat*, 4th ed. (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2008).

12 See Dieter Birnbacher. „Mehrdeutigkeiten im Begriff der Menschenwürde,"*Aufklärung und Kritik* Sonderheft 1 (1995): 6; Horst Dreier. „Bedeutung und systematische Stellung der Menschenwürde im deutschen Grundgesetz", in: Seelmann, Kurt, ed. *Menschenwürde als Rechtsbegriff* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2004), 35f.

13 Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*.

14 See Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann.*Die gesellschaftliche Konstruktion der Wirklichkeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch-Verlag, 2010) and Alfred Schütz and Thomas Luckmann. *Strukturen der Lebenswelt*, 2nd vol. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979).

15 For automatic stereotyping see Mahzarin Banaji and Curtis Hardin, "Automatic stereotyping,"*Psychological Science* 7, no. 3 (1996): 136-141; for stereotypes see John Dovidio et al, *The SAGE Handbook of Prejudice, Stereotyping, and Discrimination* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2010) and Lars-Eric Petersen and Bernd Six, ed.*Stereotype, Vorurteile*

und soziale Diskriminierung. Theorien, Befunde und Interventionen (Weinheim/Basel: Beltz, 2008).

[16] For the hierarchical structure of typifications see Roy D'Andrade, "Schemas and Motivation," in*Human Motives and Cultural Models*, ed. Roy D'Andrade and Claudia Strauss (Cambridge/New York/Victoria: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 32.

[17] For the functions of typifications see Craig McGarty, Vincent Yzerbyt and Russell Spears, ed.,*Stereotypes as Explanations. The Formation of Meaningful Beliefs about Social Groups* (Cambridge: Cambride University Press, 2002).

[18] This is the main reason why the issue of*Menschenbild* plays such an important role in German educational science.

[19] Others call this system of meaning and beliefs the world (Martin Heidegger: "Welt"), the symbolic order (Jacques Lacan), the form of life (Ludwig Wittgenstein), the cultural system, etc.

[20] See Brian Lapping, *Apartheid: A History* (New York: Grafton, 1986).

[21] See Christ Sibley and Fiona Barlow, ed., *The Cambridge Handbook of the Psychology of Prejudice*(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Dovidio et al., *SAGE Handbook of Prejudice*.

[22] See e.g. Patricia Greenfeld et al., Cultural Pathways Through Universal Development. In:*Annual Review of Psychology* 54 (2003): 461-490; Hazel Markus and Shinobu Kidayama, Culture and the Self: Implications for Cognition, Emotion and Motivation. In: *Psychological Review* 98/2 (1991): 224-253.

[23] Gustav Radbruch, Der Mensch im Recht. In: Idem,*Der Mensch im Recht. Ausgewählte Vorträge und Aufsätze über Grundfragen des Rechts*, 2. edition (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1961), 9-22.

[24] Otto Friedrich Bollnow, *Die Pädagogik der deutschen Romantik. Von Arndt bis Fröbel*(Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1952), 25.

[25] Immanuel Kant, *An Answer to the Question: „What is Enlightenment?"*(London: Penguin, 2009 [1784]).

[26] See Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*(Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1999).

[27] Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*.

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