on_education
Journal for Research and Debate

role models and understandings of the human being

Michael Zichy

This paper wants to show that (a) every pedagogy that aims at employing role models as educational means should also consider the understanding of the human being the role model expresses, and that (b) assessing and choosing role models wisely presupposes an antecedent reflection and articulation of the understanding of the human being the role models stands for. In order to do this, the first chapter provides some preliminary conceptual clarifications: It will define the concept of a role model, and then give an introduction into the concept of an understanding of the human being. In the following chapter, different aspects of the relation between role models and understandings of the human being will be explored: understandings of the human being as precondition for every pedagogy; understandings of the human being as sources of criteria for judging role models; role models as exemplary bearers and intermediaries of understandings of the human being; role models as sources of understandings of the human being. The third chapter concludes with a short summary and some recommendations.

Keywords: human being, human nature, role model, society, understanding of the human being

Role models are important.[1] From the very beginning of our existence, we are surrounded by people – our parents, siblings, relatives, nurses, teachers, etc. – whom we imitate and emulate. And by doing exactly this, we grow familiar with human behaviour, we are introduced into human society and we are shaped into a civilized human being. In early childhood, imitating and emulating others happens unconsciously. Later, in adolescence, unconscious imitation, while never ceasing, is increasingly complemented by conscious and purposeful imitation. Even in adulthood, finding orientation in a complex world is frequently done by unconsciously or consciously finding and emulating role models that give guidance in unclear and confusing situations (Daum & Gampe, 2016).

Obviously, role models are not isolated phenomena but are embedded in a society's cultural system. They are one of society's means to pass on its behavioural practices, values, and concepts from one generation to the next one. They thus play an important role in preserving and perpetuating (and conceivably changing) cultural systems. Within the cultural system, role models are especially linked to – and important for – one particular element that lies at the heart of a society's cultural system: the understanding of what it means to be human (or, in short, the understanding of the human being; in German: *Menschenbild*).

In this paper, the various connections between role models and understandings of the human being will be explored. By this, it eventually will become clear that (a) every pedagogy that aims at employing role models as educational means should also consider the understanding of the human being the role model expresses, and that (b) assessing and choosing role models wisely presupposes

an antecedent reflection and articulation of the understanding of the human being the role models stands for. The analysis will unfold in the following way:
The first chapter will provide some preliminary conceptual clarifications: It will define the concept of a role model, and then give a somewhat lengthier introduction into the concept of an understanding of the human being. In the following chapter, different aspects of the relation between role models and understandings of the human being will be explored: understandings of the human being as precondition for every pedagogy; understandings of the human being as sources of criteria for judging role models; role models as exemplary bearers and intermediaries of understandings of the human being; role models as sources of understandings of the human being. The third chapter concludes with a short summary and some recommendations.

1 Some Preliminary Conceptual Clarifications

1.1 Role models

From the two concepts that are dealt with in this paper, the concept of a role model is well known and easily explained: A role model usually is a person whose behaviour is imitated or emulated by other people, mostly because these others admire that person (or at least some aspects of her behaviour or some of her traits).

Sometimes, role models are followed unconsciously. For example, this is the case when small children emulate their parents or other people without knowing that they do so (Daum & Gampe, 2016). But role models can also be chosen and emulated consciously, and this is what educators often strive for with older children, when they ask them to know that and to know why, i.e., to critically reflect on why they imitate somebody's behaviour (Bandura, 1997; Sanderse, 2013).

Role models can also be distinguished according to the aspects for which they serve as role models. On the one hand, a person can serve as a limited role model for a specific aspect of her behaviour or for a specific role she plays. For example, I could easily say: "Although I generally find his behaviour repellent, he is an extremely diligent, precise and capable surgeon, and only in this very aspect, I eagerly take him as role model." On the other hand, persons can serve as role models in a more holistic, full way. In this case, a person is taken as a role model not in a specific aspect of her behaviour, but as a whole, i.e., in the basic patterns of all of her behaviour. Here, it is the whole personality, i.e., the way a person is and acts as a human being, that is taken as exemplary and worth emulating (Sanderse, 2013, p. 32). Both, taking someone as a limited or a holistic role model, can happen unconsciously or consciously.

When people generally talk about role models, they usually mean the latter, holistic type. This is also true for this paper: Here, a role model is understood as a person whose personality, fundamental dispositions or basic patterns of behaviour are imitated or emulated by somebody else, regardless of whether this happens unconsciously or consciously.

1.2 Understanding of the human being

In contrast to the concept of role model which is well known, the concept of "understanding of the human being" is probably rather unknown to an English-speaking audience and therefore needs to be introduced a little bit more in detail.

The concept "understanding of the human being" as used in this paper is derived from the German

concept *"Menschenbild"* (for the following, see Fahrenberg, 2004; Zichy, 2017a; Zichy, 2021). This concept was coined by the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) who first understood three things: First, that every one of us has a set of strong convictions on what it means to be human (1988a, p. 368). Second, that these convictions lie at the bottom of the epistemic, moral, societal and political orders by which we conceive, sort and organize the world (1988b, p. 316). 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 (1988c, p. 419).

Every one of us has several convictions about the human being in general. Many of us, for example, hold that humans are endowed with dignity and reason, have a free will or that they should strive for societal harmony, some hold the belief that humans are deeply egoistic, some are convinced that humans 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*, i.e. an understanding of the human being, is a bundle of convictions about the human being.

What are these convictions about? Since there is a myriad of different understandings of the human being, it is impossible to list them all. In formal terms, however, these convictions can be characterised more closely: First, all understandings of the human being contain descriptive assumptions about how humans *are*, and most of them also contain normative assumptions about how humans *should be*. Secondly, it is possible to sort the convictions into different categorical types. From this, a list of formal types of convictions can be obtained that are commonly found in understandings of the human being (Zichy, 2017a); these usually contain:

Table 1

	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 humans 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 humans 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.

Regarding this list, three things need to be considered:

First, people do usually not have clear beliefs about all the questions in the list; much of it remains vague and implicit. In addition, many of the assumptions are so deeply embedded in a society's culture and feel so natural to its members that they sometimes are not even aware that they have these assumptions, let alone that they know that these assumptions are mere assumptions (and not just pure reality). Secondly, understandings of the human being do not necessarily contain convictions on all these questions. Understandings of the human being can exist in very different degrees of abstraction and thickness. There are very specific, i.e. very concrete and thick understandings – such as Aristotle's understanding or that of the Catholic Church – that provide answers to all or most of these questions, but there are also very general, i.e. very abstract and thin understandings of the human being like the one underlying the international legal framework of Human rights (Zichy, 2017b) or the ones dominant in Western societies (Zichy, 2022), that leave much of this open. Thirdly, in contemporary Western societies, the major disagreements particularly relevant for pedagogy are situated in the fields 8 to 10 in which we do not only find descriptive, but above all powerful normative convictions.[2]

In order to better understand how understandings of the human being function in pluralist societies like the contemporary Western ones, it is helpful to distinguish three kinds of understandings of the human being:

1. Individual understandings of the human being are made up of all the convictions an individual person holds about the human being.
2. Group-specific understandings of the human being are 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 understanding consists of all the shared overlapping convictions the members of a particular group have about the human being.

3. Societal understandings of the human being are bundles of convictions about the human being that are embedded in a society or a culture and that are embodied in a society's shared values, in the legal, the political, the pedagogical system, in institutions, in well-established practices, etc. Here too, the understanding of the human being consists of the shared overlapping convictions the members of the society have about the human being.

Note that these three kinds of understandings of the human being do not exist next to each other but are grafted on each other. Societal understandings of the human being form the basis of the other understandings. Depending on a society's level of cultural diversity and plurality, its societal understanding is either more concrete and thicker or more abstract and thinner, and is correspondingly more or less open to variation. In any case, however, societal understandings of the human being are a kind of (very rudimentary) torso-understanding that is open for expansion and completion.[3] And this is exactly what group-specific understandings of the human being do: they specify the societal understanding and add convictions to it. And individual understandings specify and add new convictions.

A societal understanding of the human being is a 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 which include a wide range of very different individual and group-specific understandings of the human being, the convictions of the shared societal understanding of the human being are very abstract and thin. The thick and rather specific convictions of the individual and group-specific understandings 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. 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 why we should believe in 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 our likeness to God, for others, it is rooted in the human 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 postulate. 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. But this is exactly the reason why this conviction is open to more specific interpretations and compatible with a wide range of more specific individual and group-specific convictions about human dignity.

In our every-day life, understandings of the human being function like higher-order typifications (interpretative patterns or stereotypes, see Berger & Luckmann, 2010; Petersen & Six, 2008), even if the former are much more complex, multi-layered and difficult to change entities that belong to the "cultural deep structure" of a society, while the latter belong to the more easily changeable "cultural microstructure" (Leenen, 2019).

In general, typifications serve to quickly assign phenomena to a category and to recall the corresponding behaviour towards the phenomenon. When we meet someone, we immediately and automatically assign him or her to a category: woman, man, beggar, policeman, child, etc. This allows us to assess the person's behaviour and adjust our behaviour accordingly. The multitude of typifications available to us in everyday life is hierarchically preceded by an understanding of the human being (Leenen, 2019; D'Andrade, 1992): as the comprehensive category of all human-related

typifications, they create unity. At the same time, they serve as an epistemically and morally authoritative point of reference. Thus, for example, we correct stereotypes, but also judgements and actions, by pointing out that the people we are dealing with are also "humans" after all, that one must not "think of humans" in this way, or "deal with a human person" in this way.

Like all typifications that are available to us for classifying our fellow human beings, understandings of the human being also fulfil certain functions. These functions include, among others (for a full list, see Zichy, 2017a, p. 173-190):
Identification: An understanding of the human being makes it possible to identify a phenomenon as a human being in the first place. Identifying a phenomenon as a human being requires a set of criteria that can be used to recognise whether a phenomenon is a human being. Understandings of the human being contain precisely such a set of criteria.

Complexity reduction: Understandings of the human being reduce the myriad of human individuals that have existed, exist and will exist to an abstract type, and reduce the countless characteristics that human individuals exhibit to a few abstract common characteristics. By this, they allow to seize all human beings in a somehow qualified entity, and they enable interaction with unknown people and with several people at the same time.

Legitimation: We justify our opinions, judgements and actions with reference to our assumptions about human beings (by assuming, for example, that human beings have human dignity).
Orientation in a double sense: Firstly, understandings of the human being tell us – at least at a basic level – what can be expected from others. They form the basis for mutual expectations and for determining what is considered as normal human behaviour. Secondly, understandings of the human being function as abstract normative models which are particularly relevant for pedagogy.

Identity formation: Understandings of the human 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. Understandings of the human being thus are existentially significant, because they are deeply interwoven with our self-understandings and our identities.

2 Role Models and Understandings of the Human Being

Role models and understandings of the human being are interlinked in a number of ways. In order to understand how they are interlinked, it is important to see the differences between these two phenomena: Understandings of the human being are complex ideas with a universal scope, i.e., they are abstract, immaterial, mental entities that claim to represent all human beings; they are generalized and idealized representations of a part of the world. Role models in contrast are concrete persons who are thought to be exemplary in some way. Holistic role models are concrete persons that are held to be exemplary in their humanity, i.e. the way in which they realize a certain understanding of the human being. Roughly speaking, the relationship between understandings of the human being and role models could thus be taken as the relationship between idea and thing: While the understanding of the human being was the idea of the human being, the role model was the concrete and exemplary material realisation of this idea. However, even if not totally wrong, this simple Platonic model cannot grasp the complexity of the relation between these two entities. First, the understanding of the human being is not a Platonic idea but a human mental construct.

Secondly, albeit the understanding of the human being is indeed the origin of the role model in some way, it is at the same time also – at least partly – the result of role models. The relation between these two entities is thus rather reciprocal and interactive with both of them being constituted by as well as constituting the respective other entity.

2.1 Understanding of the human being as a precondition for pedagogy

The first way in which understandings of the human being are relevant for role models is located on a meta-level. Independently of how role models function in reality, identifying, analysing, understanding and deliberately putting them into praxis in education presupposes an understanding of the human being according to which humans are equipped with the ability to learn, to imitate and to emulate. This is actually quite obvious: As the German tradition of educational science has stressed since the 1930s (e.g. Bollnow, 1934; see Ried, 2017, pp. 232ff.), every pedagogy is necessarily based on a certain understanding of the human being that includes assumptions about general human learning abilities and about the human ideal that should be reached by education. A pedagogical understanding of the human being thus not only includes descriptive but also normative assumptions about human values, about aims humans should strive for, and about the aims of educational practices (Zirfas, 2021).

Take, for example, the understanding of the human being given in the pedagogy of the Enlightenment (e.g. Kant, Humboldt) which stressed the traditional concept of humans as rational beings. Consequently, the process of learning was understood as a primarily rational activity which in turn led to a disregard of emotional aspects and to the disappearance of the use of emulation and role models in education (Kindeberg, 2013, p. 102). Which kind of pedagogical praxis is chosen and what pedagogy aims for is thus strongly dependent on the underlying understanding of the human being. And it also depends on this understanding whether role models are regarded as an important pedagogical factor or not, and whether they are purposefully (and wisely) implemented in education or not.

2.2 Understandings of the human being as sources of criteria for role models

One of the questions discussed in the field of character formation is the question of how to identify and judge role models, for identifying and judging role models requires criteria, but where do these criteria come from? (Kristjánsson, 2006, pp. 41, 46-47) According to some scholars (Dunne, 1993; Hursthouse, 1999; Rose, 2004), we acquire these criteria by following exemplary people and emulating role models. However, if this was true, role models were the means to acquire the criteria necessary for identifying these very role models beforehand. Obviously, this is circular.

A common solution to this problem goes back to Plato and Aristotele who both claim that the criteria for judging role models (or, more general: criteria for good and bad) are objective and intelligible and can thus be grasped by reason, just as we can rationally grasp that two and two makes four. For sure, we learn to use our reason and to understand these criteria (also) by following role models, but once we have gained the ability to reason and to rationally grasp these criteria, we can understand their rational legitimacy on our own. This means that *what* we understand needs to be distinguished from *how* we get there; the context of justification of criteria is not the same as the context of discovery of these very criteria. Once we have gained the ability to use our reason by emulating role models, we can "see" the rightness of the criteria. The rightness of the criteria is thus not dependent on role models, just as little as "seeing" or "understanding" their rightness is. Only

learning to see and to understand is brought about by following role models.

However, even if this solution seems to work quite well in theory, things have proven not to be that simple. Firstly, there is no consensus about the criteria: the question of which criteria are the right ones is as much a subject of a notorious debate as the question of whether there are objective criteria at all. There might well be a somewhat fuzzy general consensus about the rough boundaries between which these criteria are to be found, but there is no agreement whatsoever on the criteria themselves, let alone on a justificatory theory for these criteria.

Secondly, and more importantly, in our every-day practice, we rarely engage in academic scrutiny to first justify criteria and then assess role models with these criteria. To the contrary, in our every-day practice, we generally just "see" or even "feel" that somebody is or would be a good role model. When this happens, we judge persons by automatically employing implicit criteria. Of course, when asked we are usually able to make our criteria explicit, but in doing so, we often take recourse to rather diffuse criteria such as "great personality", "being virtuous", "showing great humanness", etc. Giving more details on these criteria requires a lot of effort and normally leads us into academic fields most of us are not familiar with. The reason why we usually have no problem in identifying exemplary people who could well serve as role models while at the same time having difficulties in really pinning down our criteria, is that we draw on our understanding of the human being for doing so. As also a number of empirical studies show (see e.g. Salomon, 2003; Albert, 2022), it is our understanding of the human being that serves as an implicit (or explicit) criterion for judging the quality of role models (or, more generally, for good and bad behaviour) (Nassehi, 2006, pp. 273f.; Zichy, 2019). In particular, societal understandings of the human being are time-proven concepts that condense a society's experiences and knowledge, and are deeply interwoven into the identities of the respective society's members. As said before, they are made up of convictions about how humans are and how they should be, and of convictions about how humans typically behave and how they should behave. As such, they form the epistemic background that allows us to identify, to assess and to judge people in general and role models in particular.

To be clear: This does not make the academic study of criteria unnecessary. To the contrary, our understandings of the human being and the criteria they contain need to be constantly subjected to critical scrutiny, but this does not change the fact that in every-day life, we do not employ a sophisticated ethical criteriology, but the understanding of the human being we are familiar with, which we embody, which we are committed to and which forms an important part of our identity.

2.3 Role models as bearers of understandings of the human being

Understandings of the human being are abstract entities. They are "real" – in the sense of not remaining mere ideas – only when they are embodied by concrete people who "live" the understanding and thus represent and reproduce it by their existence. By being a certain type of human and by living a certain human life, people performatively reproduce the understanding of the human being they're familiar with, thereby granting it its existence. This is similar to language: According to Ferdinand de Saussure (1931, pp. 9-18), a language is an abstract, virtual system (which he called "la langue") on which we draw on when we speak. This system is real and held in existence only through the concrete speech acts of people (which de Saussure called "la parole"). On the one hand, the virtual system is thus the main source of our speaking, on the other hand, this virtual system is real only because it is held in existence by its materialisations in concrete speech acts; otherwise, the language would not be a living, but a dead language.

The same is true for our understandings of the human being: On the one hand, they are abstract entities which guide our behaviour, coin our perception and inform our judgements, on the other hand, they are only real and living because we embody them in what we are and because we constantly reproduce them in our behaviour.

While we all cannot but embody and represent our society's shared understanding of the human being by our being and behaving, we only do so less than perfectly. In particular, most of us fail to meet the high normative standards usually given in our understanding of the human being. Compared with this, persons who are widely held to be suitable for being role models embody and represent our understanding of the human being in an exemplary way. By being human in an outstanding, virtuous way, they especially come close to meeting the normative expectations given in our understanding of the human being.[4]

Drawing on what Immanuel Kant (Kant, vol. 6, pp. 479f.; see Mikhail, 2023, pp. 19-24) states on human examples, it can be said that role models have three functions regarding our understandings of the human being:

1. Role models illustrate the understanding of the human being, they visualize it and make it accessible.
2. Role models show that it is indeed possible to meet the normative standards given in the understanding of the human being, they thus prove that it is indeed possible to be a good human (according to the definition of "good human" given in the understanding of the human being).
3. Role models prove that meeting the normative standards given in the understanding of the human being is not just possible but really happens. They make clear that, human weaknesses and defectiveness notwithstanding, good people (according to the definition of good given in the understanding of the human being) do really exist.

But this is not all. Considering what has been said before, this list should be complemented with two more functions:

4. Role models help preserve the human being which they represent, because by functions 1.-3. they make sure that the understanding is realized in a concrete person and passed from one generation to the next one in a living form. Role models are thus not only representative, they are also constitutive.
5. Understandings of the human being are abstract. And the more pluralistic and culturally heterogeneous a society is, the more abstract and thinner its shared understanding of the human being becomes. By realizing or materializing these abstract concepts into a concrete form, i.e., a human person, the abstract concept becomes fleshed out and tangible. But turning an abstract, thin concept into a concrete, thick material reality necessarily includes interpretation: the abstract concept is *specified* in a certain way. Socially recognized role models thus are socially legitimate interpretations of an abstract ideal. In a performative way, they demonstrate (and define), how the abstract understanding can be interpreted and which interpretations are legitimate. For example: If the understanding of the human being includes the idea that humans are endowed with reason and should use this faculty, role models spell out for a specific societal and historical situation what it really means to have and to use reason. Role models translate abstract ideas and norms in an exemplary manner into a specific societal and historical context.

In a pluralist and culturally heterogeneous society where there is a plurality of different group-

specific and individual understandings of the human being, there will also be a plurality of role models, mirroring the societal plurality. However, just as the different understandings of the human being are enriched variations of the underlying societal understanding of the human being, many of the different role models stand for different interpretations of the same abstract, thin convictions about the human being. Take the faculty of reason, which is highly valued among most western understandings of the human being: This faculty can be interpreted as a faculty which is naturally oriented towards the good, the beautiful and the true, and which thus also is deeply linked to various moral virtues. But it can also be interpreted in a value-neutral way as a faculty of pure instrumental rationality, best used for the maximation of egoistic aims. So obviously, role models do more than just mirror, represent, and reproduce a certain understanding of the human being, they substantially interpret it.

2.4 Role models as sources of understandings of the human being

So far, three things have been argued for: Firstly, our (societal) understandings of the human being provide us with the (implicit) criteria we judge role models with. Secondly, our understandings of the human being exist only through and in those real people who embody this understanding, and role models embody our understandings of the human being in an exemplary manner. Therefore, they are particularly important for upholding and passing on understandings of the human being. Thirdly, role models do not only represent, but also always interpret the understanding of the human being, for the latter is an abstract entity which needs specification. While every human being specifies the understanding of the human being it embodies in a certain way, the interpretation given by role models is again exemplary.

However, there is more to it than that: As said before, understandings of the human being are ideational entities which are only real and living through their interpretations, their iterations. In other words, there is no "pure" understanding of the human being. From this follows that every interpretation is not only an interpretation, but also brings with it the potential to alter the understanding of the human being. This again is similar to language: Language is only real and living in the concrete speech acts. However, speech acts do not only reproduce and represent the system of language, each speech act also has the potential to alter the system of language (de Saussure, 1931). This is one of the reasons why living languages are constantly in flux. Now, this is also true for our understandings of the human being: They exist by virtue of role models that represent and reproduce them, but each role model also has the potential to alter the understanding. Role models thus not only represent, interpret and reproduce understandings of the human being, they also constitute them.

This potential turns role model into powerful factors. And this is especially true for those role models that deviate or even openly challenge the established societal understanding of the human being – for the good or for the bad.[5] Such role models do not only lead those for whom they serve as role models astray – or on a better path – they also have the potential to shift the established societal understanding of the human being as a whole. Numerous, massively deviating actual role models are therefore good indicators that the established understanding of the human being – and with it the basic moral fabric of a society – has become instable and is about to change.

3 Conclusion

If understandings of the human being are really the basic element of our cultural orders which also

provide us with the criteria to judge role models, and if – on the other hand – role models are not only important for the persuasiveness, the transmission and the stability of these very understandings, but also have to power to change them, we should keep a very close eye on them. This is all the more important as who serve as role models for us often remains implicit and unconscious, and they can thus change our understanding of the human being without us noticing it. Therefore, it is strongly advised to particularly observe false role models that are aberrances of an ethically sound understanding of the human being, for these role models, although false, have the power to change the understanding of the human being too.

So, what is to be done in the end? The results of this paper boil down to three recommendations:

1. Role models are powerful and influential. They thus have to be taken seriously, they should be made explicit and critically reflected on. This is particularly true for false role models.
2. The normative understanding of the human being which serves as source of criteria for choosing and evaluating role models should be made explicit.
3. The false understandings of the human being that are given implicitly in false and aberrant role models should be made explicit, analysed and criticized.

References

Albert, S. (2022). *Wie das Menschenbild die Unterrichtspraxis beeinflusst: Empirisch-rekonstruktive Studie zu Respekt aus Schülersicht*. wbv.
https://doi.org/10.3278/9783763971312

Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. WH Freeman.

Berger, P., & Luckmann, T. (2010). *Die gesellschaftliche Konstruktion der Wirklichkeit* (23rd ed.). Fischer.

Bollnow, O. (1934). *Das neue Bild des Menschen und die pädagogische Aufgabe*. Klostermann.

D'Andrade, R. (1992). Schemas and motivation. In R. D'Andrade & C. Strauss (Eds.), *Human motives and cultural models* (pp. 23–44). Cambridge University Press.
https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139166515.003

Daum, M., & Gampe, A. (2016). Die Rolle von Vorbildern in der sozial-kognitiven Entwicklung. *Psychologie und Erziehung*, *42*(1), 10–13.

Dunne, J. (1993). *Back to the rough ground: "Phronesis" and "techné" in modern philosophy and in Aristotle*. University of Notre Dame Press.

Fahrenberg, J. (2004). *Annahmen über den Menschen: Menschenbilder aus psychologischer, biologischer, religiöser und interkultureller Sicht*. Asanger.

Hursthouse, R. (1999). *On virtue ethics*. Oxford University Press.

Kant, I. (1900–1983). *Gesammelte Schriften*, 29 volumes, ed. Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften, vol. 23 Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin, starting from vol. 24

Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen. Walter de Gruyter.

Kindeberg, T. (2013). The significance of emulation in the oral interaction between teacher and students. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, *47*(1), 99–111. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9752.2012.00886.x

Kristjánsson, K. (2006). Emulation and the use of role models in moral education. *Journal of Moral Education*, *35*(1), 37–49. https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240500495278

Leenen, W. (2019). Grundbegriffe interkultureller Kompetenzvermittlung. In W. Leenen (Ed.), *Handbuch Methoden kultureller Weiterbildung* (pp. 25–168). Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht. https://doi.org/10.13109/9783666406485.25

Mikhail, T. (2023). Das Vorbild als pädagogisches Problem. In A. Schütte & J. Nielsen-Sikora (Eds.), *Wem folgen? Über Sinn, Wandel und Aktualität von Vorbildern* (pp. 13–25). Metzler. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-662-66838-2_2

Nassehi, A. (2006). Die Praxis ethischen Entscheidens Eine soziologische Forschungsperspektive. *Zeitschrift für medizinische Ethik*, *52*(4), 367–377.

Nietzsche, F. (1988a). Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen. In F. Nietzsche, *Kritische Studienausgabe*, 1, ed. by G. Colli and M. Montinari (pp. 157–510). dtv/Walter de Gruyter.

Nietzsche, F. (1988b). Nachgelassene Fragmente 1883. In F. Nietzsche, *Kritische Studienausgabe*, 10, ed. by G. Colli and M. Montinari (pp. 109–664). dtv/Walter de Gruyter.

Nietzsche, F. (1988c). Menschliches, Allzumenschliches II. In F. Nietzsche, *Kritische Studienausgabe*, 2, ed. by G. Colli and M. Montinari (pp. 367–704). dtv/Walter de Gruyter. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783112418864

Petersen, L., & Six, B. (Eds.). (2008). *Stereotype, Vorurteile und soziale Diskriminierung: Theorien, Befunde und Interventionen*. Beltz.

Rawls, J. (1987). The Idea of an overlapping consensus. *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies*, *7*(1), 1–25. https://doi.org/10.1093/ojls/7.1.1

Rawls, J. (1993). *Political liberalism*. Columbia University Press.

Ried, C. (2017). *Sozialpädagogik und Menschenbild: Bestimmung und Bestimmbarkeit der Sozialpädagogik als Denk- und Handlungsform*. Springer VS. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-14767-9

Rose, D. (2004). The potential of role-model education. *The encyclopedia of pedagogy and informal education*. Retrieved October 24, 2023 from https://infed.org/mobi/the-potential-of-role-model-education/

Salomon, F. (2003). Das Menschenbild als Hintergrund notfallmedizinischer Entscheidungen. *Notfall + Rettungsmedizin*, *6*, 242–246.

https://doi.org/10.1007/s10049-003-0564-3

Sanderse, W. (2013). The meaning of role modelling in moral and character education. *Journal of Moral Education*, *42*(1), 28–42.
https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2012.690727

Saussure, F. (1931). *Grundfragen der allgemeinen Sprachwissenschaft*, ed. by C. Bally and A. Sechehaye. Walter De Gruyter Mouton.
https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111484327

Zichy, M. (2017a). *Menschenbilder: Eine Grundlegung*. Karl Alber.
https://doi.org/10.5771/9783495813737

Zichy, M. (2017b). Menschenbild und Menschenrechte. *Zeitschrift für Philosophische Forschung*, *72*(3), 380–409.
https://doi.org/10.3196/004433017821835650

Zichy, M. (2019). Menschenbild und Ethik: Zur Klärung eines vertrackten Verhältnisses. *Jahrbuch für Wissenschaft und Ethik*, *24*(1), 7–48.
https://doi.org/10.1515/jwiet-2019-0002

Zichy, M. (2021). *Die Macht der Menschenbilder: Wie wir andere wahrnehmen*. Reclam.

Zichy, M. (2022). Das westliche Menschenbild: Hegemonie und Alternativen. In M. Zichy (Ed.), *Handbuch Menschenbilder* (pp. 1–24). Springer VS.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-32138-3_60-1

Zirfas, J. (2021). *Pädagogische Anthropologie*. Ferdinand Schöningh.
https://doi.org/10.36198/9783838555683

Recommended Citation
Zichy, M. (2024). Role models and understandings of the human being. *On Education. Journal for Research and Debate*, *7*(19).
https://doi.org/10.17899/on_ed.2024.19.1

Do you want to comment on this article? Please send your reply to editors@oneducation.net. Replies will be processed like invited contributions. This means they will be assessed according to standard criteria of quality, relevance, and civility. Please make sure to follow editorial policies and formatting guidelines.

Michael Zichy

Michael Zichy is an Austrian philosopher. Currently, he is Professor of Social Philosophy at the University of Bonn in Germany. Before that, he worked at the University of Salzburg, the New School for Social Research in New York, the Ludwig-Maximilians-University in Munich, and the European Commission in Brussels. His fields of expertise are social

philosophy, philosophical anthropology and ethics.

1. I'm indebted to the two anonymous reviewers whose remarks helped to improve this paper.
2. This notwithstanding, Western societies do of course have a number of shared strong normative convictions (Zichy, 2022).
3. This idea is inspired by Rawls' concept of the overlapping consensus (1987; 1993).
4. Whenever it says societal understandings of the human being in the lines to come, it could also be group-specific understandings. Strictly speaking, people rather represent and embody group-specific understandings of the human being, in particular in culturally diverse, pluralistic societies. This, however, has no impact on the general claim that people embody and represent understandings of the human being, be they societal or group-specific. Furthermore: As group-specific understandings usually are fleshed out versions of a society's shared understanding, people always also represent and embody this understanding. This is also true for culturally diverse, pluralistic societies like the Western ones. Even though these societies embrace a wide range of very different group-specific understandings of the human being, they still have a shared understanding which also includes basic but nonetheless quite robust normative standards, in particular for rational and moral behavior (see Zichy 2022). In addition: Whether it is the social understanding or rather a group-specific understanding which serves as source of criteria or expectations strongly depends on the context. For example: When it comes to role models in a Catholic school, a firm Catholic will presumably take the high standards of the Catholic understanding of the human being as point of reference, while the same Catholic might judge a politician's behavior whom she doesn't expect to meet these Catholic standards beforehand by more general criteria found in the societal understanding of the human being.
5. Our understandings of the human being are certainly not the only source of criteria for choosing role models. There are many different reasons (and corresponding sources of criteria) why people take somebody as a role model. Especially adolescents often tend to choose nonconformist persons as role models precisely because they contradict the established understanding of the human being.