

THE IMAGE

A condensed version of the Introduction
to *The Image: Knowledge in Life and Society*, by Kenneth E. Boulding

As I sit at my desk, I know where I am...I am not only located in space, I am located in time...I am located in space and time, I am located in a field of personal relations. I am not only located in space and in time and in personal relationships, I am also located in the world of nature, in a world of how things operate...Finally, I am located in the midst of a world of subtle intimations and emotions.

What I have been talking about is my image of the world. It is this image that largely governs my behavior. The first proposition of this work, therefore, is that behavior depends on the image.

What, however, determines the image? The image is built as a result of all past experience of the possessor of the image. From the moment of birth, if not before, there is a constant stream of messages entering the organism from the senses. Every time a message reaches a person, his/her image is likely to be changed in some degree by it, and as his/her image is changed his/her behavior patterns will be changed likewise.

The meaning of a message is the change which it produces in the image.. When a message hits an image one of three things can happen. In the first place, the image may remain unaffected, The second possible effect or impact of a message on an image is that it may change the image in some rather regular and well-defined way that might be described as simple addition.

There is, however, a third type of change of the image which might be described as a revolutionary change. Sometimes a message

hits some sort of nucleus or supporting structure of the image, and the whole thing changes in a quite radical way.

The sudden and dramatic nature of these reorganizations is perhaps a result of the fact that our image is in itself resistant to change. When it receives messages which conflict with it, its first impulse is to reject them as in some sense untrue.

One should perhaps add a fourth possible impact of the messages on the image. They may also have the effect of clarifying it, that is, of making something which previously was regarded as less certain, more certain, of something which was previously seen in a vague way, clearer.

Messages may also have the contrary effect. They may introduce doubt or uncertainty into the image.

The subjective knowledge structure or image of any individual or organization consists not only of images of "fact" but also images of "value."

The image of value is concerned with the rating of the various parts of our image of the world, according to some scale of betterness or worseness. We, all of us, possess one or more of these scales. Moreover, we change these scales of valuation in response to messages received much as we change our image of the world around us.

One of the most important propositions of this theory is that the value scales of any

individual or organization are perhaps the most important single element determining the effect of the messages it receives on its image of the world. If a message is perceived that is neither good nor bad it may have little or no effect on the image. If it is perceived as bad or hostile to the image which is held, there will be resistance to accepting it. This resistance is not usually infinite. An often repeated message or message which comes with unusual force or authority is able to penetrate the resistance and will be able to alter the image. If the resistances are very strong, it may take very strong, or often repeated messages to penetrate them, and when they are penetrated, the effect is a realignment or reorganization of the whole knowledge structure.

On the other hand, messages which are favorable to the existing image of the world are received easily and even though they may make minor modifications of the knowledge structure, there will not be any fundamental reorganization. Such messages may also have the effect of increasing the stability, that is to say, the resistance to unfavorable messages which the knowledge structure of image possesses.

The stability or resistance to change of a knowledge structure also depends on its internal consistency and arrangement. There seems to be some kind of principle or minimization of internal strain at work which makes some images stable and others unstable for purely internal reasons.

Even at the level of simple or supposedly simple sense perception we are increasingly discovering that the message which comes through the senses is itself mediated through a value system, through a highly learned process of interpretation and acceptance, makes some images stable and others unstable for purely internal reasons.

What this means is that for any individual organism or organization there are not such things as "facts." There are only messages filtered through a changeable value system.

A group of individuals does not merely share messages which come to them from "nature." They also initiate and receive messages themselves. This is the characteristic which distinguishes man from the lower organism--the art of conversation or discourse.

Knowledge grows also because of inward teachers as well as outward messages. As every good teacher knows, the business of teaching is not that of penetrating the student's defenses with the violence of the loudness of the teacher's messages. It is, rather, that of cooperating with the student's own inward teacher whereby the student's image may grow in conformity with that of his outward teacher.