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Role requirements and moral segmentation - An empirical perspective on the basis of moral education



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KLAUS BECK

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1. Introduction: Universalism versus relativism

Looking at the many crimes we are witnessing day by day, but also at the more or minor, nonetheless unacceptable acts of mobbing, recklessness, meanness, insinuation and so forth, everybody will certainly agree that we are in need of more and better morals. This desire is all but new. Fifty, hundred, two hundred and more years ago people were also complaining on moral deficits – often adding that in "the good old days" the world had been better.

Indeed, at any time, reasons to deplore a lack of morals have always been obvious. With respect to the modern inhuman terrorism we feel it pure irony when the protagonists tell us that they are acting just in the name of morals. To them this is undoubtedly right, to us it is undoubtedly wrong. This is an example – and it is for sure only one of very many – where we seem to have a case of unavoidable relativism. Each side has, in their eyes, the best reasons and there is no referee in sight who could make a decision which would be respected by all who are involved.

It is this type of relativism, say "unrestricted" relativism, against which the advocates of traditional universalism are arguing, be it the ancient Greeks, the medieval scholastics or the philosophers of the enlightenment and their modern epigones. They claim that we are given or can discover or may decide upon generally valid principles which shall command our moral acting, at any time and at any place, in any situation, so to speak.

In my paper I want to plead for a third position which I shall call "systemic" relativism. And in doing so, I will use an argument which in the eyes of traditional philosophers violates a fundamental logical rule. Seemingly I am going to stumble straight into the trap of the naturalistic fallacy (Moore) when I argue that fixing of moral standards in and for our modern world has to be founded on empirical findings – an argument which not only strikes professional philosophers but also common sense thinking, because we still stick to the idea that morals (have to) come first and that our actions will be judged in the light of previously and independently stated moral rules –, in other words: that moral principles and rules cannot be

derived from reality. In the following I am going to present a rationale which works the other way round, which is not infected by an explicit or implicit recourse on a divine moral law or a moral law drawn from pure reason – *ante rebus* – but is founded (of course not logically deduced) on the human condition of life in modern societies. In other words – not in mine but in those of KARL MARX – I try to put ethics from its head onto its feet. Let us see, how that works, how far it holds and what role empirical information can play within this argument.

2. Empirical foundation of morals

2.1 Evolutionary side conditions

Let us begin with two short hints which nevertheless might contain the strongest reasons. The first is a phylogenetic one. It argues that human moral feeling and thinking has evolved in the early days of mankind when our ancestors faced two problems, firstly to organise the coexistence of a number of people within a tribe and secondly to optimise co-operation for the production of necessary goods. A tribe or a group gained a comparative advantage if they succeeded in co-ordinating their life by rules: The better, i.e. the more efficient the rules and the stricter their observance the greater the synergetic effects that could be achieved, e.g. in collective successful hunting, in crop and stock farming and, when the population reached the limit of the nurturing capacity of the earth, in the survival of a tribe which was more and more endangered by genocide (MOHR 1987; LAMPE 1970; WUKETITS 1990). For sure, rules were not invented by somebody who sat down and reflected on the best way to oblige his tribal sisters and brothers to a certain mode of behaviour. And therefore this evolutionary approach has nothing to do with HOBBESian or ROUSSEAU's philosophy of social contract. Rather could we say that moral rules evolved or emerged without being invented deliberately by men. They developed in the course of evolution which retained the models of higher "inclusive", i.e. tribal fitness (MOHR 1987). This first hint to the development of morals which has received broad attention in the last, say, fifty years goes back to the famous German nobel laureate, FRIEDRICH VON HAYEK (1996).

The second point is very close to the first though it is neither the same nor logically implied by it. It is also of an evolutionary character and makes two claims. The *first* is that at least some of the fundamental moral rules which were superior to others gradually diffused by and by – during thousands of generations – in our genetic dispositions, so becoming something like fixed connected human behavioural inclinations to think and to act. Xenophobia and charity to our neighbour as well as prohibition of incest might be two good and intuitively

convincing examples (Mohr 1987)¹. The *second* point is that we as human beings are not only genetically disposed to several by and large fixed moral judgements but also to learn morals from birth on, that we are genetically disposed – again in analogy to Chomsky – to acquire the moral customs of the social setting into which we are born just as we are disposed to acquire its language. As a result, we "know" what in our culture is morally right and what is morally wrong. But this knowledge is not at our cognitive disposal. Though we know how to speak and to behave correctly we do not know the rules behind our mother tongue nor those behind our moral inclinations. And this is true not only for the "learners", the little children, but also for the "teachers", their parents, relatives and so on. At least to an unknown but supposedly large proportion our moral thinking and judging, whether innate or acquired during early childhood, is predetermined by intuition and not the result of conscious deliberation (HAIDT 2001).

To summarise, we are morally partially fixed, and also partially flexible in that we are able to adapt to a culture – the latter having evolved and having been differentiated under geographic, climatic and other natural conditions as well (CASIMIR 1993; LAMPE 1993). Ontogenetically speaking, we have deep innate moral roots; in early childhood we acquire basic moral convictions by enculturation which tend to be relatively stable during the life-span and, of course, we also can reflect on moral topics in a more or less rational way. Mainly this latter issue has caught the attention of practical philosophy. But our conscious moral thinking – including that of philosophers – is still grounded in and tied back to a basis, which is not yet fully understood and may be comparable to an iceberg with its peak representing philosophical ethics. Thus, Konrad Lorenz (1973) showed that Kant's "categories", discovered and defined by him as the rational transcendental precondition of epistemologic insight, is nothing else than the qualities of our evolved sensory organs, adapted to the physical world as our habitat.

It is known that LAWRENCE KOHLBERG's worldwide acknowledged theory of moral development and judgment is based on KANTian philosophy (BECK 1990). Especially two assumptions integrated in KOHLBERG's theory are the result of KANT's direct influence: The highest stage of moral development, i.e. Stage 6, is nearly identical with KANT's Categoric Imperative (cf. COLBY/KOHLBERG 1987). This means that – in KOHLBERG's opinion – human moral

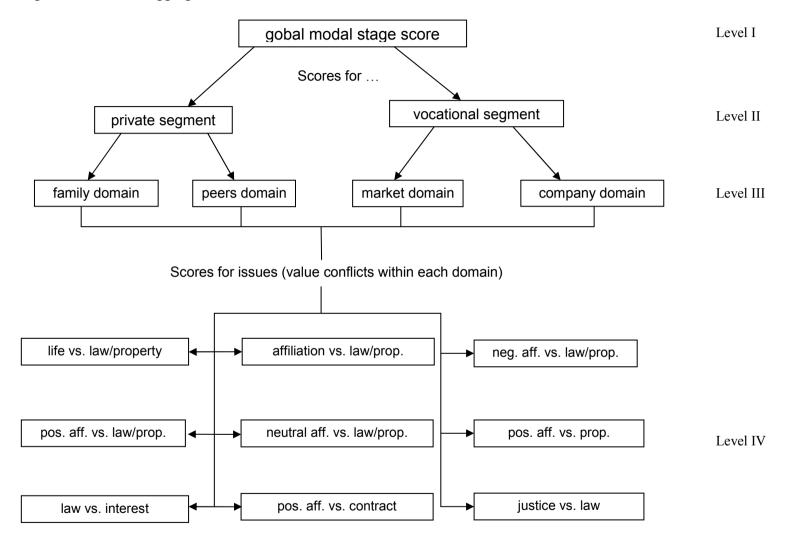
Admittedly, up to now we do not yet know in detail which of our moral inclinations stem from genetic sources. On the other hand and interestingly enough, some "deep" philosophers of morals after long and complicated reflection seem to detect nothing but our innate moral ideas – to put it in analogy to NOAM CHOM-SKY's "ideae innatae" (CHOMSKY 1972).

thinking tends to develop to a principled universalistic approach following the idea of a generally applicable and valid rule. KANT's anti-relativism is also incorporated in KOHLBERG's theory: The idea of general applicability and validity KOHLBERG preserves not only for Stage 6 but incorporates all stages (cf. ibid.). He claims that a person on his or her moral stage of thinking, be it Stage 5 or Stage 1, uses the respective principle to decide morally under all circumstances at any time. In his psychological language a moral principle as a guideline for ethical reasoning rules moral thinking in the shape of a "structured wholeness" (COLBY/KOHLBERG 1987, 8-9) – the instantiation of enlightened rationality.

2.2 Psycho-social facts

It is both interesting and systematically important to trace the influence of this, say, psychologically secularised, rationality principle on empirical research and the interpretations of its outcomes. Let us look at one important facet of this influence: To measure the individual moral judgement competence KOHLBERG and his co-workers (cf. COLBY/KOHLBERG 1987) suggest to administer three or four dilemma stories, which means to carry out the Moral Judgement Interview (MJI), collect and analyse all – roughly – 25 to 40 moral arguments the interviewee is more or less forced to produce. During an interview her or his arguments are drawn to different situations in which he or she is virtually put by variation of the initial story. For instance, in the famous Heinz-dilemma the interviewees have to reason whether they want Heinz to steel a drug for his beloved wife who is seriously ill but then they are also asked whether they are ready to steal for their friend, for a foreigner or even for a dog. Of course, arguments may change from variant to variant with respect to content. Nevertheless, from KOHLBERG's theoretical point of view they should rely without exception on one and only one stage principle, i.e. the highest one the interviewed person has reached so far in her or his moral development. But in the empirical reality things do not work that unambiguously. One and the same person provides arguments on different stages. The question is how to deal with such findings.

Fig. 1: Levels of disaggregation

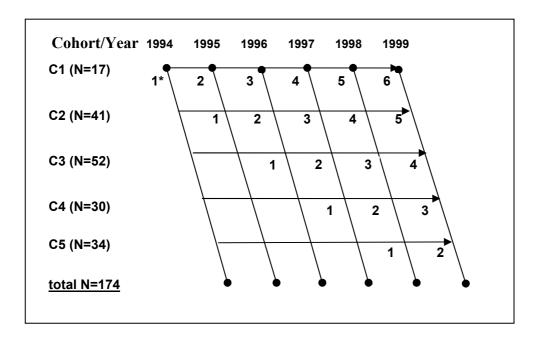


KOHLBERG invented the so-called "modal stage" as the true measure of a person's moral competence. He prescribed that only those answers count for a moral diagnosis which are on one and the same stage and take the greatest part of all answers given by an interviewee. All other arguments whether below or above the modal stage have to be neglected as long as they range below 25 % of the weighted scores (cf. Colby/Kohlberg 1987, 187). There are still some more sophisticated mathematical rules how to deal with different constellations of resulting answer sets (*ibid.*). They all aim at arriving at one and only one stage as the diagnosed competence of moral judgement. Let us ignore the cases of stage transition and focus on the central point of Kohlberg's argument. It turns out that by manipulation of authentic empirical findings (i.e. by neglecting arguments not in line with that of the modal stage) the theory – including its philosophical background – is immunized, i.e. the rationality principle seems to be corroborated. However, by what reasons are we allowed to drop certain deliberations expressed by a seriously reflecting person for a given situation and to keep others?

In the following it is shown what happens with KOHLBERG-type moral diagnoses, if the modal stage score is disaggregated by story and beyond, this way rehabilitating and re-including the disregarded arguments. As a first step of disaggregation we do no longer look at the so-called KOHLBERGian global modal stage score but at the segmental modal stage score, i.e. at the diagnosis a person would get for her or his judgment level in the vocational segment of life compared to the score for the non-vocational, i.e. private, segment (cf. Fig. 1). Then, in a further step, the segment scores are broken down to domain scores, i.e. to the diagnoses a person would get for his or her competence in the family, the peers, the market and the within-company domain. Again, according to KOHLBERG all these scores of one and the same person should be of one and the same stage.

We have collected data by administering four different domain specific stories and therefore are able to report results also at that level of disaggregation. We can even go one step further and disaggregate the domain specific modal stage scores to the level of the so-called issues, i.e. to the different value conflicts included in the variations of our dilemma stories. It is – at least for us – not unplausible that a person tends to produce different judgements depending on, e.g., whether law is conflicting with affiliation or whether property is opposed to contract. If so and if this turns out to be an individual's profile of judgement we call that a *segmented* moral judgement competence.

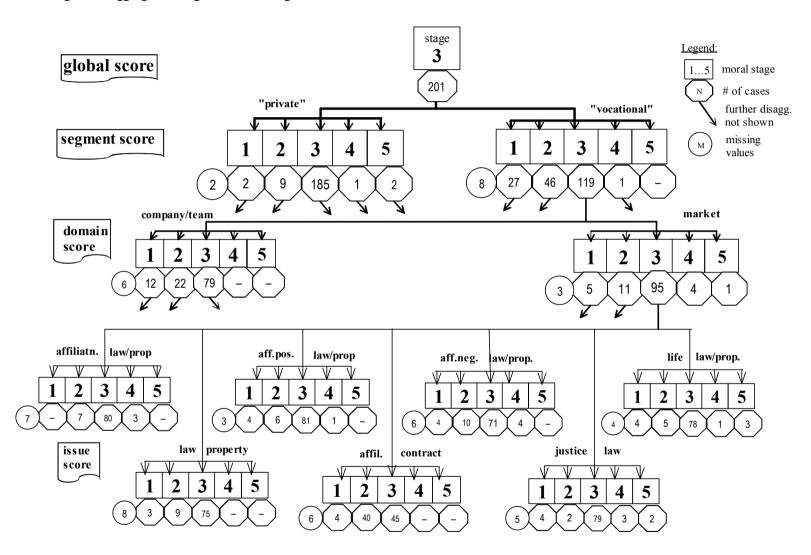
Fig. 2: Design of longitudinal study



We have scores from a longitudinal study with apprentices and clerks of insurance companies, 174 persons from whom we got data year by year (see Fig. 2). Adding all measuring points from all persons they sum up to 495 cases or data sets based on questionnaires and/or interviews dealing with the four conflict stories mentioned above. Fig. 3 presents a visual impression of the results.

We are tracing here only those 201 cases who achieved a global modal stage score of Stage 3 sensu KOHLBERG. On the segment level we find that 186 out of the 201 still get a Stage 3-score in the private segment whereas in the vocational segment only as few as 119 out of 201 cases are scored at Stage 3. This shows that our subjects, all having passed through higher secondary education, tend to segment their moral judgments to a greater extent in the vocational segment, to a lower but also not negligible degree in the private segment. Going further down to the domain level and then to the issue level it turns out that a greater or smaller part of the cases differentiate their moral judgement depending on the context for which they have to find a reasonable judgement.

Fig. 3: Disaggregation of global modal stage scores

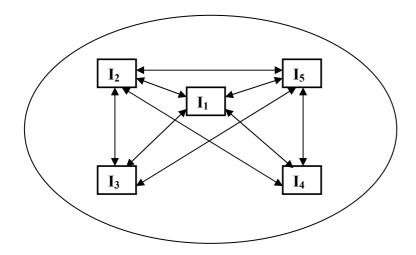


The result of this analysis is that on the different levels of disaggregation only 5 to 25 % as a maximum show results which fulfil Kohlberg's hypothesis that people follow one and the same rationale in making up their moral minds (Beck/Parche-Kawik 2004). In a re-analysis of Kohlberg's own data Reuss and Becker (1996) found similar results. To go one step further we could interpret even those results which seem to be homogeneous in Kohlberg's sense as a more or less accidental coincidence of principally segmented individual moral judgments which are normally differentiated along contexts, problem types, topics – the criteria differing from person to person and also from time to time during development within the life-span (Beck et al. 1999).

3. The human condition in modern mass societies

Turning back to the societal side of the ethical problem we can apply an evolutionary perspective again and state that our modern mass societies are the result of successions of developmental leaps from tribes and clans populating the earth during Pleistocene. With respect to morals, individuals in that early times were perfectly controlled by their families, relatives and tribesmen. Everybody could (and did) observe each other all day (and night) and could react immediately to attempts to infringe the rules in force. The execution of sanctions, too, could be controlled easily and entirely. Within these relatively small groups everybody was well-known to each other (see Fig. 4). We still have social constellations like that in little villages in the outback where some two or three hundred people live together.

Fig. 4: Social Relations in Traditional Societies



There and then, obedience to moral rules was not simply a question of intrapersonal thinking and willingness but also a matter of effective social control. Morals were not only taught by socialisation. They were institutionalised and implemented efficiently by the simultaneous establishment of social control and a fine tuned sanctionary system.

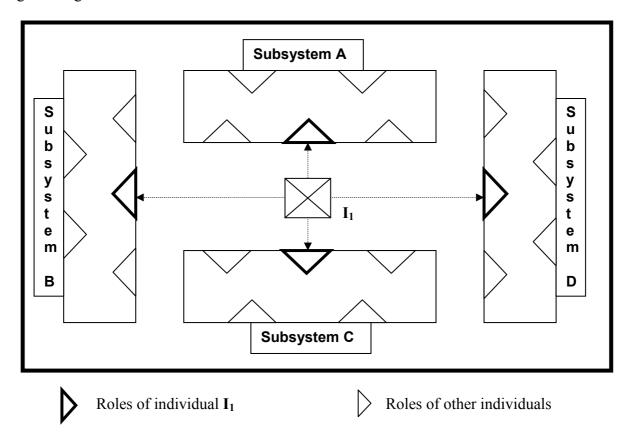
Thinking of this scenario helps us to recognize and understand some ethically important changes which have taken place up to now. Today, as a standard, we live in huge mass societies. Social relations are mainly anonymous. By division of labour and specialisation of social functions these societies have been split up into subsystems, e.g. economy, law, religion, politics, welfare. The same happens at smaller scales: Subsystems like economy are split up into, say, production branches, service functions and so on, down to sub-subsystems like schools, companies, clubs, but also chat-rooms and other virtual assemblies.

The important thing is that we as individuals are integrated in these societies by playing different roles which in turn are the functional elements of subsystems (cf. PARSONS 1978). The subsystems contribute to the overarching suprasystem by producing a special output, in particular goods and services (economy), law-based sentences (jurisdiction), earthly or heavenly orientations (churches, other ideological institutions), laws and rulings (legislative), health care (medical services) and so forth. To fulfil their tasks they developed specific internal structures which to a major part consist of professional human acts as well as functional rules. From an individual perspective acts and rules specific to a given subsystem are nothing else than role expectations directed to persons who enter this subsystem willing to contribute to the production of the subsystem specific output. Again, the internal structure of any subsystem has been adapted and optimized to optimally produce the output by evolution. And it is nearly unnecessary but nevertheless of major importance to add that, of course, each subsystem has developed its own specific "logic of production", i.e. structures of professional acts as well as sets of rules, equalled and mirrored by role expectations (cf. LUCKMANN 1996).

In our societies, one and the same person normally occupies not only one or two but several or even many roles which are part of different subsystems (see Fig. 5). For instance, as mothers, fathers, or children we are role keepers within a subsystem "family", as teachers we participate in the subsystem "public education", as consumers we act in the economy, as voters we are part of politics, as clerks we belong to a company, as TV-watchers we are in the "entertainment system", as shareholders we play a role in the world of stock exchange, as users

of trains, planes, trams and undergrounds we enter the "traffic system" and as authors or readers of papers like this we are part of the subsystem "science". There are hundreds of roles we can play. And – what is important – in each role we will meet different people who in turn meet different role players within their sets of roles. As a main difference not only to the early days of humanity but also to social arrangements up to the beginning of the 19th century *for the perspective of the individual* we have to state that in modern mass societies we live as role occupants integrated in different subsystems whereas in former times people lived and worked in a more or less holistic setting being involved totally in an all including world of life ("Lebenswelt"). *On the societal level* the corresponding structures can be described as subsystemic arrangements which absorb individual inclinations, suitabilities and competences to fulfil their function as part of a whole, the suprasystem.

Fig. 5: Integration of Individuals in Mass Societies



There is still one point left which has to be added to the present argument. The internal specific rules which the subsystems have developed include not only technical algorithms (in a very broad sense) but also moral prescriptions, the reason of which is grounded in the basic function and meaning of the respective subsystem. For instance, the ethical foundations the economic subsystem is built on consists in the justice of exchange, in a strategic orientation towards economic advantage by self-interested but nevertheless fair actions and observance of

contracts. This moral concept more or less matches with KOHLBERG's Stage 2. To think, decide and judge along these ethical guidelines is morally justified because in this way the subsystem "economy" fulfils best its task to serve the suprasystem by supplying goods and services and by saving resources: To produce or to run a business at minimum costs, i.e. to strive for maximum returns, is nothing else than to spare resources.

As we have seen, even selfishly motivated acts can be morally obliging given certain subsystemic role requirements (e.g. in market economy) which, in turn, are grounded in the morally legitimate function of the subsystem as part of a suprasystem. By contrast, within another subsystem, say welfare, a different foundation of moral rules has evolved. Acting as a role occupant in this functional setting is grounded on the idea of helping another person (or helping each other) to enhance the quality of life or prevent it from deteriorating. There are, of course, multiple fields or sub-subsystems where a moral imperative of this type is to be obeyed, e.g. schools, hospitals and homes for the aged, medical care, social work as well as team-work of all kinds. Very often the underlying motivation of role–conform behaviour in these settings is erroneously identified with "pure" morality as such. But it is better understood and more consistently modelled as fulfilment of role expectations, whether by free will or by more or less intensive social pressure. So, this moral segment might be represented best in terms of moral psychology by KOHLBERG's Stage 3.

Two further functionalities establishing different moral orientations may be added. Firstly, we focus on organisational role acts in a broad meaning like e.g. management activities in companies or communities, establishing law and order in traffic as well as in judicature or implementing rules by interpreting laws in public areas or private domains as well. In short, the principle of this whole moral field resembles very much KOHLBERG's Stage 4. And secondly, we have to think of the invention of rules, again in a very broad sense, e.g. as a member of any type of parliament, be it in the realm of government or at lower levels in school boards or club committees or in the management of companies by implementing a corporate culture. This type of moral orientation is similar to KOHLBERG's Stage 5.

All in all, we might differentiate at least four basic social functions (see Fig. 6) to which the many if not all subsystems could be subordinated under a moral perspective, namely:

Fig. 6: Types of social constellations in terms of KOHLBERGS hierarchy of moral stages

Social function	Moral orientation (approx.)
competition	Stage 2
co-operation	Stage 3
co-ordination	Stage 4
constitution	Stage 5

As a result, we can state that nowadays individuals are integrated in modern mass societies by social roles they have to take. Roles include role expectations which are "defined" within and by the respective subsystems. Role expectations contain among others specific moral obligations (SOMMER 1996; STEINVORTH 2002). The empirical fact of individual moral segmentation or differentiation (as a micro level phenomenon) reported in the second chapter, seems to be perfectly mirrored by the theoretical model of a systems (macro level) and role taking (meso level) approach.

From this analysis and interpretation some critical remarks on the traditional ethics approaches may be drawn. Though these remarks are somewhat sweeping and may sound a little rakish, they should reflect the leading ideas of the paper concentrating on three main points:

- 1. Universal ethics in general and especially that of KANT and his epigones miss the *conditio humana* of modern times in several respects:
 - They assume people to be rational beings; they fail to account for their emotionality.
 - They do not acknowledge that we are subject to genetic moral dispositions of two types: "hardwired" judgement tendencies ("genes") and the potential to incorporate the moral customs and habits of a given culture during early childhood (the so-called memes; DAWKINS 1976).
 - They suspect erroneously that human beings, when searching for a reasonable moral
 decision, are able to consider all relevant consequences of their acts not only to all
 members of their species but also to the world as a whole.
- 2. Universal ethics miss also the social conditions under which and for which moral solutions have to be found:

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- They do not take note of the fact that obedience to moral rules has to be monitored by the social communities, that it needs to be rewarded just as offences have to be sanctioned.²
- They ignore the problem of implementation of moral rules as a necessary precondition of compliance and of validity (Homann/Pies 1994). They only rely on the individual moral motivation be it originated by duty (which I follow by my own free will) or be it upheld by my insight in the eternal validity of the pure values given. So, they blind out that obedience to moral rules as far as it works is essentially driven by social control and not so much (or at least not so dependably) by personal conviction.
- 3. Universal ethics, whether formal like KANTian or material like e.g. Christian ethics erroneously imply that our complex world can be arranged and mastered by moral laws which claim unrestricted validity at any time in any place. Perhaps (!) this might have been a meaningful idea for the human condition in past ages. As we have seen, today, we are in need of differentiated morals well adapted to the "logics" of subsystems which we enter partially and temporarily by playing the respective roles i.e. systemic relativism.

Admittedly, we are now facing the question of how we as "whole" individuals can cope with the fact of a partialised personality, a "patchwork – identity" as some researchers state (KEUPP 1999). This is another question and by far not the only one which needs our intensive attention. However, as far as can be seen that attention will be a better investment than the nonending efforts of some philosophers and moralists on the one hand, psychologists and educators on the other, to improve mankind and to lift us all up in the moral heavens. These attempts have shown to be futile ever since the very beginning of mankind, since Adam and Eve and so long as our written history is traceable. Neither preachers nor teachers have been successful in educating us to universal benefactors. At best they achieve to talk us into a guilty conscience. It could be much more helpful to develop realistic, i.e. system based ethics which take into account our modern social constellations and which offer moral standards the obedience to which is not only a matter of individual dignity but is – in a very braod sense – "paying" (HOMANN/PIES 1994). As MATT RIDLEY (1996) has put it: We need "handy" reasons why it is worthwhile to be morally good.

This is not at all to be understood as a behavioristic argument. Rather, it expresses the social side conditions (meso level) of more or less deliberated human acting (micro level).

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