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## **The Meaning of Concepts of Human Nature in Organizational Life in Business Ethics Context<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

The main goal of this paper is to exhibit the role of the concept of human nature for the ethical orientation of organizational life. Therefore, after presenting some definitions of the concepts of human nature, which depict the complexity of these phenomena, some models of the concepts of human nature are described. Furthermore, the setting of the concepts of human nature in the organizational life is discussed. Those concepts can be perceived as a deep-structure of the organizational life, having an impact not only on the individual behaviour of employees and managers (like sensibility for human emotions, pro-social engagement, communication style), but also affecting their moral competence and influencing whole organizational culture – image of the organization, preferred management strategies and the way of perceiving justice. Those elements play crucial role in ethical attitude of the organization because all those variables support the efficacy of ethical rules and most of them are part of ethical code and corporate ethical code. Therefore, it is necessary for an organization to consider implicit and explicit concepts of human nature on which the organizational culture is based and support those concepts, which enables the ethical conduct of the organization and being alert especially to the consequences of materialistic/egoistic and competitive concepts of human nature. The theses discussed in the paper are supported by some empirical research studies conducted in this field.

**Keywords:** organizational culture, concepts of human nature, business ethics

**JEL Classification:** A13, L21

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## 1. Introduction

Organizations meeting the challenge of diversity encounter problems as a result not only of the different backgrounds of people (culture, gender, age) but also of the different concept of human nature that people have. Due to personality traits, cultural background, social influence and personal and social experiences, people develop different concepts of human nature, which have an impact on their behaviour as perceived in ethical terms.

The aim of the paper is to make sense of the importance of concepts of human nature in organizational life, particularly when it comes to ethical aspects, to distinguish some relevant organizational variables influenced by the concepts of human nature, and to set those variables within the business ethics context.

In order to reach these goals the following steps were conducted. Firstly, the term 'concept of human nature' (and its synonyms) will be defined and characterized and its function explained. The second part deals with presenting the business ethics context of the concept of human nature. This gives an opportunity to acknowledge the central place of concepts of human nature within the organization. In the third step, the influence of the concept of human nature on some relevant variables for ethical aspects of organizational life will be presented.

The main thesis of this paper is that there are some concepts of human nature which could make an organization more ethical by making people who work in/for the organization more sensitive to ethical issues. The organization could depict such concepts, which can be manifested implicitly (in the decision-making processes) or explicitly (employee models).

The methodology of this paper combines some inductive methods, like empirical research, with deductive methods, supplementing them with implications resulting from some relevant and applicable theories.

## 2. The concept of human nature – definitions, character, measuring

Concept of human nature (the image of man or concept of human being/concept of human nature) is a set of assumptions, attitudes and beliefs which answer the question who is the person by nature, how do they live in their social and physical environment and what are (or what should be) the values and goals of their life (meaning of life)<sup>2</sup>. Empirical sciences perceive them principally as a subjective

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<sup>2</sup> However, definitions vary depending on the discipline (like philosophy, philosophy of science, psychology, and management science. A. Horodecka, *Rola obrazów człowieka w koncepcjach zarządzania z uwzględnieniem aspektów metodologicznych*, "Studia Ekonomiczne" (Uniwersytet Ekonomiczny w Katowicach) 2012, No. 118, pp. 443-464; J. Fahrenberg, M. Cheetham, *Assumptions about Human Nature and the Impact of Philosophical Concepts on Professional Issues: A Questionnaire-Based*

theory (private theory), accounting for a substantial part of everyday personal theories and belief systems<sup>3</sup> including religious faith<sup>4</sup>, spirituality, freedom of will, the principles of ethics, social responsibility, and other values which are shaped by education, individual life experience and culture<sup>5</sup>. They are, on the one hand, some mental representations of reality, referring to a social reality, and on the other hand they play normative functions<sup>6</sup>, especially motivational and regulatory<sup>7</sup>, leading to higher moral standards (i.e. *a humanistic vision of humans*) or helping to justify morally bad deeds through, for instance, material gain (*economic man*)<sup>8</sup>. They include a self-image (self-concept) and, like the image of another person, or of other people, it is developed by each individual. Although there are some 'natural' tendencies in choosing some concepts of human nature (genes, socialization, socio-political-economic systems and cultural meaning systems (implicit anthropology), which interact with each other<sup>9</sup>), the cross-cultural research, business ethics, management studies assume that they are changeable.

People construct the concepts of human nature to reduce the complexity, and make a filter which enables them to work more efficiently, to make decisions faster and with less effort. They help to predict and explain the world and make them more congruent (the natural tendency of human beings).

It is therefore very important to have a solid, well-supported of the concept of human nature. The problem is that many disciplines dealing with this concept are working separately and there is no common consensus of what a person is. In this sense M. Scheler stated: 'we have a scientific, a philosophical and a theological

*Study with 800 Students from Psychology, Philosophy, and Science*, "Philosophy, Psychiatry & Psychology" 2007, vol. 14, No. 3, pp. 183-201; J. Fahrenberg, *Die Funktion von Menschenbildern – Forschungsaufgaben der empirischen Psychologie* [in:] *Die Menschenbilder in der Psychotherapie. Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven und die Modelle der Therapieschulen*, ed. H.G. Petzold, Krammer Verlag, Wien 2010, pp. 91-131; D. McGregor, *Theory X and Theory Y*, "Workforce" 2002, vol. 81, No. 1, pp. 32-35; E. Schein, *Organizational Psychology*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 1970; W.G. Ouchi, *Theory Z: How American Business Can Meet the Japanese Challenge*, "Business Horizons" 1981, No. 6, pp. 82-83, doi: 10.1016/0007-6813(81)90031-8; D. Turek, "Koncepcje człowieka" a modele pracownika. *Inspiracje dla ZZL*, "Edukacja Ekonomistów i Menedżerów" 2010, No. 16, pp. 11-25.

<sup>3</sup> J. Fahrenberg, *Die Funktion...*

<sup>4</sup> Religious and philosophical preconceptions constitute essential parts of this pattern ('Weltanschauung').

<sup>5</sup> J. Fahrenberg, *Menschenbilder* [in:] *Dorsch – Lexikon der Psychologie*, ed. M.A. Wirtz, Verlag Hans Huber, Bern 2014; J. Fahrenberg, M. Cheetham, *The Mind-body Problem as Seen by Students of Different Disciplines*, "Journal of Consciousness Studies" 2000, vol. 7, No. 5, pp. 47-59.

<sup>6</sup> J. Fahrenberg, *Die Funktion...*; A. Horodecka, *Funkcje obrazu człowieka w ekonomii* [in:] *Pomiedzy polityką stabilizacyjną i polityką rozwoju*, ed. J. Stacewicz, Szkoła Główna Handlowa, Warsaw 2012, pp. 9-39.

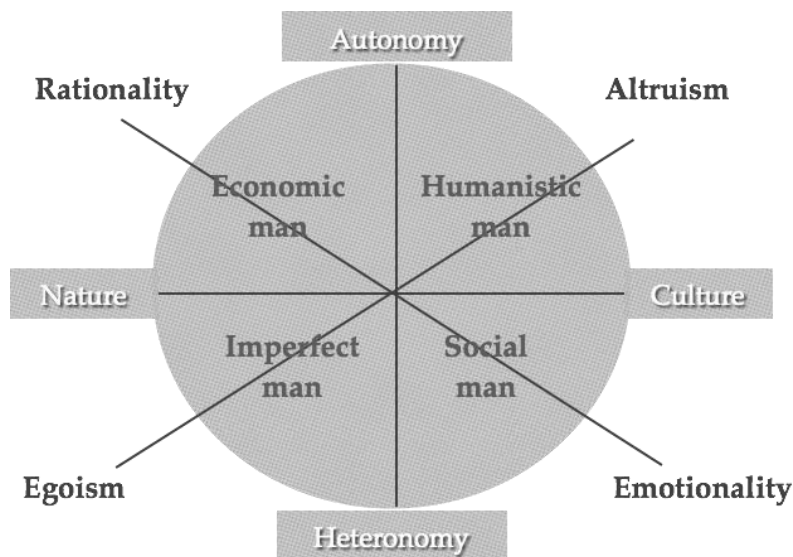
<sup>7</sup> W. Łukaszewski, *Prywatne koncepcje natury ludzkiej i ich funkcje regulacyjne* [in:] *Psychologia poznawcza w Polsce*, eds. E. Nęcka, A. Tokarz, IP PAN, Warsaw 1997, pp. 69-83.

<sup>8</sup> Kahneman indicates that people primed by money are less likely to help other people. D. Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Y. Minoura, *A Plea for a Hypothesis-Generating Approach to Link the Individual's World of Meaning and Society's Cultural Orientation: A Commentary on Oerter et al.*, "Culture & Psychology" 1996, vol. 2, pp. 53-61. doi: 10.1177/1354067X9621003.

anthropology, which aren't interested in each other, but we don't have an universal idea of a man'<sup>10</sup>. The effect is that in the specialist literature there are few or very schematic typologies of the image of man or 'assumptions about human nature'<sup>11</sup>. One of those typologies<sup>12</sup>, presented in Figure 1 encompass most common dimensions.

Figure 1 Concepts of human nature



Source: D. Turek, "Koncepcje człowieka" a modele pracownika. *Inspiracje dla ZZL*, "Edukacja Ekonomistów i Menedżerów" 2010, No. 16, pp. 11-25.

The first dimension (nature-nurture<sup>13</sup>) refers to the question of whether humans are shaped by their genes (nature), or by outside factors in the process of learning (nurture). The second dimension refers to the problem of whether people are egoistic or altruistic (discussed by social psychology). Evolutionary psychology delivers many well supported arguments for the altruistic orientation which, in consequence, serves the individual, because it maintains the group as a whole, which is the closest environment of individual. Moreover it can protect the passing

<sup>10</sup> M. Scheler, *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos*, Bouvier, Bonn 1991, p. 9.

Fahrenberg is concerned about the necessity to merge philosophical and psychological anthropology. J. Fahrenberg, *Plädoyer für eine interdisziplinäre Anthropologie auf empirischer Basis* [in:] *Wissenschaft und Therapie des Unbewussten. Band 2. Konversation und Resonanz in der Psychotherapie*, eds. G. Gödde, M.B. Buchholz, Psychosozial-Verlag, Gießen 2012, pp. 249-278.

<sup>11</sup> J. Fahrenberg, *Annahmen über den Menschen*, Asanger, Heidelberg 2004; J. Fahrenberg, M. Cheetham, *Assumptions...*, pp. 183-201.

<sup>12</sup> See footnote 2.

<sup>13</sup> G. Mandler, *Human Nature Explored*, Oxford University Press, New York 1997.

on of genes<sup>14</sup>. Rationality contra emotionality, the third dimension, is addressed well by Kahneman: rationality is ‘slow thinking’, emotionality is ‘fast, first thinking’<sup>15</sup>. This dimension provides answer to the question regarding our assumption that people use only the ‘first thinking’, or rather try to behave rationally, but it does not distinguish between value and goal-oriented rationality<sup>16</sup>. Goal-oriented rationality can be compared to economic rationality, and when taken as a basis for human reasoning, it could have negative consequence<sup>17</sup>. We can assume that the rationality characterizing economic man is a rationality oriented on goals, while humanistic man is rationality oriented on values.

### 3. Business ethics context of concepts of human nature

What is the setting of concepts of human nature in the organization when we perceive it from business ethics perspective? And what factors contribute to the ethical orientation of the organization and how can concepts of human nature influence them?

The first aspect is to check whether the decision process in the organization is an ethical one. Ethical decisions are based on ratio, norms (a deontological approach), virtues (virtue ethic) and consider the consequences for all participators (consequential ethic). Considering all participators means that we need to base our decisions on the stake-holder approach. According to Sullivan<sup>18</sup>, decision-making practices may emerge in part out of embedded human nature models of organizational members. Besides, ethical decisions are often settled in the ‘slow thinking’ as Kahneman says, which we usually avoid, activating stereotypes. Therefore, an ethical concept of human nature is one which makes ethical reasoning possible, enforcing the concept of man who values rationality, especially value-oriented rationality (only the humanistic model of man fulfils this criteria). Of course there is the question of whether we assume that people are social-made animals. On the one hand, it means that people are socially created, because of their social conformity – conforming to the norms respected in the society – and they can apply those norms in their life. But on the other hand, it does not necessary mean that they base their decisions on ethical reasoning.

<sup>14</sup> R. Dawkins, *Samolubny gen [The Selfish Gene]*, translated by M. Skoneczny, Prószyński i S-ka, Warsaw 1996.

<sup>15</sup> D. Kahneman, op. cit.

<sup>16</sup> A. Horodecka, K. Martowska, *Humanistic Vision of Man: Hope for Success, Emotional Intelligence and Pro-Social Engagement*, “International Journal of Arts and Sciences” 2014, No. 2, pp. 151-166.

<sup>17</sup> J.F. Tomer, *Economic Man vs. Heterodox Men: the Concepts of Human Nature in Schools of Economic Thought*, “Journal of Socio-Economics” 2001, vol. 30, No. 4, pp. 281-293.

<sup>18</sup> J.J. Sullivan, *Human Nature, Organizations, and Management Theory*, “The Academy of Management Review” 1986, vol. 11, No. 3, pp. 534-549. doi: 10.5465/AMR.1986.4306210.

The second aspect which enforces ethics in an organization is the ethical culture (which is a part of organizational culture)<sup>19</sup>. It is a culture whose origins lie in values and norms, enforcing justice, and a virtuous life leading to happiness. Concepts of human nature could be perceived, therefore, as a part of the knowledge and culture of the organization, and a part of the social and human capital. Building up this capital additionally enables all participators to be part of the national culture (social trust, social capital).

People from different cultures conceptualize similar structures of understanding human nature at different levels of complexity: those coming from eastern cultures stress a more collective and interdependent identity and perceive interdependency as crucial for human nature, whereas people coming from the US emphasize aspects of individuality and independence<sup>20</sup>.

Codes of conduct (ethics) with enforcement rules, accompanied by institutions, which implement them, give insight into the ethical attitude of the organization. The analysis of some content of ethical codices, corporate codices, and world-ethos provides some insight into what the central values<sup>21</sup> and concept of human nature (implicit or explicit) are. Central values are for instance the respect of other persons in their diversity and for the nature, justice, fairness. Some research carried out by Schwartz, especially a study which examines employee, managerial, and ethics officers' perceptions regarding their companies' codes of ethics reveals that such a code should encompass six universal moral values: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship<sup>22</sup>. In order that these values are respected and followed in the organization, they should be a part of the concepts of human nature we have. Code effectiveness depends on the way codes are created, implemented and administered<sup>23</sup>.

#### 4. Theoretical and empirical evidence for the meaning of concepts of human nature for organizational life

Theories of human nature characterize the deeply embedded belief structures of organizational life and guide the behaviour of managers and influence the structuring of the organization and the way organizational members respond to the culture<sup>24</sup>, organizational control<sup>25</sup> and the process of determining the actions of oth-

<sup>19</sup> W.G. Ouchi, op. cit., pp. 82-83.

<sup>20</sup> R. Oerter, R. Oerter, H. Agostiani, H.-O. Kim, S. Wibowo, *The Concept of Human Nature in East Asia: Etic and Emic Characteristics*, "Culture & Psychology" 1996, vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 9-51. doi: 10.1177/1354067X9621002.

<sup>21</sup> M.S. Schwartz, *Universal Moral Values for Corporate Codes of Ethics*, "Journal of Business Ethics" 2005, vol. 59, No. 1-2, pp. 27-44. doi: 10.1007/s10551-005-3403-2.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>23</sup> M.S. Schwartz, *Effective Corporate Codes of Ethics: Perceptions of Code Users*, "Journal of Business Ethics" 2004, vol. 55, No. 4, pp. 323-343. doi: 10.1007/s10551-004-2169-2.

<sup>24</sup> J.J. Sullivan, op. cit., p. 548.

ers. Embedded human nature models of organizational members can influence decision-making practices. The democratic man model can be responsible for participative decision-making, incorporating expanded goals focusing on organizational and individual needs. The modern man model influences rational decision making, while the totalitarian man perspective impacts on authoritarian decision styles, and the hermeneutical man theory may be associated with highly interactive and seemingly formless decision making.

Stronger moral competence<sup>26</sup> helps people to take ethical decisions, and has a model role for organizations<sup>27</sup>. It is dependent on the concept of human nature (positively correlated with the humanistic and social model of man<sup>28</sup>), which encompasses expectations about the self and others, and consequently about possible response patterns to the behaviour of others and builds up a stable social worldview that activates certain motivational goals. Negative beliefs about human nature<sup>29</sup> are negatively correlated with high moral competence<sup>30</sup>, because people assume that 'the nature of interpersonal relations is antagonistic and that the interests of various individuals and social groups ('egoistic by nature') are incompatible'<sup>31</sup>. If someone perceives the social world as dangerous and threatening, it may

<sup>25</sup> Classical, in which control is fixed, based on structure and authority, unilateral, and vertical; and contemporary, in which it is variable, based on interpersonal interactions and mutual understanding, and flows in all directions, see: J.T. McMahon, J.M. Ivancevich, *A Study of Control in a Manufacturing Organization: Managers and Non-managers*, "Administrative Science Quarterly" 1976, vol. 21, pp. 66-83.

<sup>26</sup> K. Phalet, E. Poppe, *Competence and Morality Dimensions of National and Ethnic Stereotypes: A Study in Six Eastern European Countries*, "European Journal of Social Psychology" 1997, vol. 27, pp. 703-723; S. Pinker, *Tabula rasa. Spory o naturę ludzką [The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature]*, GWP, Gdańsk 2005.

<sup>27</sup> M. Zupancic, M. Svetina, *Relations between Moral Judgement and the Concept of Human Nature – a Study of Slovenian Young Adults*, "Studia Psychologica" 1993, vol. 35, No. 4-5, pp. 425-430.

<sup>28</sup> D. Turek, A. Wojtczuk-Turek, „Koncepcje natury ludzkiej” a kompetencja moralna – analiza zależności, „Edukacja Ekonomistów i Menedżerów” 2011, vol. 21, pp. 83-102.

Even if the attitude of a person is ethical, it doesn't mean necessarily, that the person always will choose ethical behavior. D. Turek, *Czy postawy etyczne są dobrymi predyktorami nieetycznych zachowań pracowników?*, „Zarządzanie Zasobami Ludzkimi” 2011, No. 1, pp. 84-96.

<sup>29</sup> Dangerous world beliefs, competitive jungle world beliefs, life as a zero-sum game, and generalized interpersonal distrust. J. Duckitt, *A Dual-process Cognitive-motivational Theory of Ideology and Prejudice* [in:] *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, eds. M.P. Zanna, Academic Press, San Diego 2001, pp. 41-113; K. Skarżyńska, P. Radkiewicz, *Co wzmacnia/osłabia społeczny darwinizm? O roli doświadczeń z ludźmi, osobowości, wartości osobistych i przywiązania do wspólnoty*, „Psychologia Społeczna” 2011, No 1, pp. 7-23.

<sup>30</sup> High morality/communion judgments of people in general are inversely related to negativistic worldviews, and high competence/agency judgments are directly related to negativistic worldviews. P. Radkiewicz, K. Skarżyńska, K. Hamer, *The Influence of the Big Two. The Perception of People in Relation to Negativistic Beliefs about the Social World*, "Social Psychology" 2013, No. 2, pp. 75-83.

<sup>31</sup> On the other hand people with positive beliefs assume 'social relations are synergic, "human nature" is good, and people are basically cooperative'. T. Adorno, E. Frenkiel-Brunswik, D. Levinson, N. Sanford, *The Authoritarian Personality*, Harper, New York 1950; S. Pinker, op. cit.; B. Wojciszke, W. Baryła, J. Różycka, *Wiara w życie jako grę o sumie zerowej* [in:] *Miedzy przeszłością a przyszłością. Szkice z psychologii politycznej*, eds. U. Jakubowska, K. Skarżyńska, Polish Academy of Science, Warsaw 2009, pp. 179-188; K. Skarżyńska, *Człowiek a polityka. Zarys psychologii politycznej*, Scholar, Warsaw 2005.



activate the motif of social control and security, which leads to increased authoritarianism. Having a competitive-jungle worldview may lead to the power motive and, consequently, to an enhanced social dominance orientation.

Sensitivity to people's emotions is another ethical attitude. Having understanding for other feelings means that we have compassion with others and respect others' emotions, which means that we have to assume that emotions are a relevant part of humans nature and have to be respected.

Concepts of human nature can influence the emotional intelligence of people – people with a humanistic concept of human nature, or who are at least social (altruistic – engaged in pro-social activities), are more likely to have higher emotional intelligence than people with materialistic, or an egoistic concept of human nature<sup>32</sup>.

The way we communicate with other people might be perceived only on the basis of its efficiency, but of course it has ethical aspects – the most important of which are the way we perceive other people, either as an instrument or as an end in itself (the Humanity formulation of Kant's categorical imperative<sup>33</sup>). The communication style depends on many variables, which can be influenced by the model of man we have, for instance, emotional intelligence and sense of coherence<sup>34</sup>. People with a concept of human nature which is close to humanistic man (for instance enlightened man) have higher social emotional intelligence and higher SOC, which in turn makes them more efficient in communicating with other people. By contrast, models of man close to economic man (aggressive-competitive man, materialistic, selfish man) have lower emotional intelligence and sense of coherence, which makes them less efficient in communicating with others<sup>35</sup>.

Pro-social engagement is based on the assumption that it is worth engaging oneself for others. It means that people act not only for their own good, but for the good of other people, which is again an ethical attitude. Acting for others, and collaboration, improve not only commitment and communication, but the economic results. People with a humanistic model of man have higher emotional intelligence and higher locus of control, leading to higher hope, which in turn leads to higher pro-social engagement – people have the ability and motivation to engage themselves for other people<sup>36</sup>.

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<sup>32</sup> A. Horodecka, K. Martowska, E. Wroclawska-Warchala, *Concepts of Human Nature, Social Effectiveness and Communication in the Workplace*, "Journal of Business Leadership" 2014, No. 1, pp. 133-153; A. Horodecka, K. Martowska, op. cit.

<sup>33</sup> I. Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, translated by T.K. Abbott, edited by L. Denis, Broadview Press, Peterborough, Ont. 2005. Developed, enriched, modified in later works i.e.: I. Kant, *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht*, Meiner, Hamburg 2003.

<sup>34</sup> A. Horodecka, K. Martowska, E. Wroclawska-Warchala, op. cit.

<sup>35</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>36</sup> A. Horodecka, K. Martowska, op. cit.

The correlation between the image of an organization and the concept of human beings is indicated by many authors<sup>37</sup>. The way we think about the organization and shape of the organization depends on the theory of human beings which can be understood as a deep structure, which in part explains the emergence of the organization form<sup>38</sup>. Conversely, an organization which already has a defined organizational culture can enforce some concepts and diminish the meaning of other concepts of human nature. For instance, an organization which is orientated only towards individual efficiency and productivity, enforcing competitive situations, makes it more difficult for team-oriented people (social man), or to aim for the realization of altruistic goals (humanistic man).

The image of an organization often includes the way organizational justice is perceived, which in turn<sup>39</sup> affects the behaviour of its employees. Employees who don't feel they are being fairly perceived tend to behave counterproductively. The essential moderating variable is the leader-membership exchange – it is not the rules but the personal attitude of the managers which counts for far more on the perception of fairness by employees. Efficient rules alone cannot replace personal attitudes, which are based on our concept of human nature. What we need are effective concepts of human nature, which include fairness.

## 5. Conclusion

Managers wanting to lead an organization in an ethical way, which at the same time has many positive economic consequences, could base their ideas on, and reinforce, specific concepts of human nature by priming them<sup>40</sup> or deactivating concepts of human nature which aren't so effective, especially in decision-making processes.

Moreover they can look in more detail at codes of ethics (which impact human behaviour<sup>41</sup>) and ask what kind of concept of human nature is there, implicitly or explicitly. Undertaking the following actions may result in a positive impact on organizational justice and enforcing moral competence.

All these methods bring us back to the crucial question put in Psalms so beautifully – what is man that you are mindful of him? (Ps 8:4). Only then are we

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<sup>37</sup> E. Schein, op. cit.; G. Morgan, *Images of Organization*, SAGE Publications, London 1986; J.F. Tomer, *Beyond the Machine Model of the Firm, toward a Holistic Human Model*, "Journal of Socio-Economics" 1998, No. 3, pp. 323-340.

<sup>38</sup> J.J. Sullivan, op. cit., pp. 534-549.

<sup>39</sup> A. Horodecka, D. Turek, A. Wojtczuk-Turek, *Relationship between Organizational Justice, Organizational Procedures and Counterproductive Work Behavior and Job Satisfaction. The Case of New Zealand and Poland*, DePaul University, Chicago 2012.

<sup>40</sup> Kahneman and Tversky indicated that priming people by money, by some materialistic means, makes them less cooperative. D. Kahneman, op. cit.

<sup>41</sup> M.S. Schwartz, *The Nature of the Relationship between Corporate Codes of Ethics and Behaviour*, "Journal of Business Ethics" 2001, No. 3, pp. 247-262.

able to be able to deal with people justly, and fairly and respect them in their differences<sup>42</sup>.

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<sup>42</sup> Plurality of concepts doesn't mean that there aren't some common dimensions. The charter of the universal human rights of the UN (1948) and the Declaration of the World Parliament of Religions (1993) prove this.

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