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Tricky Questions and Straight Answers About Ethics in *Breaking Bad* and *The Wire*

> *"Is a meth empire really something to be that proud of?"*
> Jesse Pinkman, *Breaking Bad*

Abstract: This paper explores how the television series *Breaking Bad* argues about the ethics of Social Darwinism as dominant to the interest of the community, and why this is not just philosophical or religious question. It also makes a brief comparison with the ethical situation as portrayed in another television series, *The Wire*, claiming that these substantially different series, (one approaching morality and ethics through sheer individualism and free will, another through social determinism) both teach similar lessons about ethics. Having its main theme centered around ethics, *Breaking Bad* sees causes of socio-economical crises primarily in the moral destruction of modern society that destroys its institutions, not the other way around. In contrast, *The Wire* finds human morality in a dichotomy of an idealist-pragmatist type of man trapped inside the social systems that brutally arrange human lives through 'the Game' – in essence the socio-economical rules of urban life. I argue that *Breaking Bad* offers more arguments for not engaging in 'Darwinist' ethics, showing us in both literal and metaphorical ways the entire process arising from totalitarianism as today's most feared form of social system.

Keywords: quality TV series; *Breaking Bad*; *The Wire*; ethics; morality; Darwinism; solidarity

When we reduce all economic questions, all cultural enigmas and sociological dilemmas, we arrive at the same point: the question of ethics, because morality is the basic question of civilized human beings. As all great works of art, *Breaking Bad* and *The Wire* speak of ethical goals that we, as individuals and society can reach, while also questioning why we fail to do so in the modern world. Assuming that we are not making moral choices out of fear of God's punishment, the question is: why are our moral choices so important for us, in everyday life as we as philosophically and sociologically?

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Quantum ethics

In one scene Walter White, the main character in *Breaking Bad,* spontaneously chooses for himself the name 'Heisenberg' not merely to point out that he is a scientist but also because it has significant connotations about the moral issues that the series deals with. Werner Heisenberg, the winner of the Nobel Prize in physics in 1932, was most renowned for setting the uncertainty principle in quantum mechanics (1927).[1] In moments of Walter's desire to withdraw from crime, the entire field of his previous choices seems like a wave of concern for his family, and each rationalization seems coherent. But when he returns to the criminal game, each move he makes seems like a particle within the phase of a moral collapse. There is one field of collective interest and another of the individual, and according to the uncertainty principle the simultaneous reliability of these perspectives is impossible. Hence the inner struggle of the hero – who unites a decent family man and scientist with the destructive meth cook Heisenberg. It is, of course, a metaphor for the moral perception of the world that this series reflects on. Walter's end proves that coexistence of these moral perspectives is possible in theory, but in practice one of them always tends to prevail. Here, Heisenberg's uncertainty theory symbolizes moral relativism in a more complex way: it suggests that ethical choices differ in the world of individual interest (quantum physics) vs. the world of community interest (classical physics), but in the end, the moral that superimposes majority interest to minority must prevail. If an individual could survive without community, he would be either beast or God, as Aristotle said.[2] The interconnection of Walter's personal choices within a broader network of relations with others demonstrates that each decision by which an individual harms another fellow being, cumulatively, accelerates towards moral devastation. If such behavior is embraced by others, then, spreading like an avalanche, it will become the moral standard of the society. In terms of physics, Walter's descent towards evil is quite certain, but the velocity and manner of his getting there are not; they depend on the social milieu that cultivates moral reasoning similar to his.

Descriptive ethics, explaining determined behavioral patterns, which are acceptable in a certain society, serve as a model used by normative ethics to transform these patterns into criteria of moral judgment and action, i.e. an ethical code. This code applies to situations when ethical dilemmas occur, e.g. the conflict between public interest and personal values, which can be resolved in several ways. The series explores the 'Darwinistic' type of normative ethics that presume the division of people into categories of 'weak' vs. 'strong'. It would therefore be illogical if 'strong' people did not take advantage of the 'weak'. This position is vividly demonstrated by the rule set by Gus's killer Mike – "No more half measures" – by which he denies the second chance to people whom he considers weak (e.g. those who beat women or junkies),

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[1] According to the uncertainty principle, there is a limit to the simultaneous measuring of the position and momentum of a particle.

[2] Aristotel, *Politika*, trans. by Tomislav Ladan (Zagreb: Hrvatska sveučilišna naklada, 1992), A 2, 1253a1–5; 1253a25–29.

because he does not believe they are able to overcome their weaknesses. Walter often reminds his fellow methamphetamine cook Jesse that he will return to drugs the moment things get dangerous, that he is too weak to become 'better', although he is aware that Jesse is more moral than himself. Walter's son defies such division: he says that what his father considers 'strong' is merely a false mask, having once seen him in tears. Young people depicted in this series, whether they are addicts or paraplegics, have a stronger ethics and a more humane perspective than adults. Moreover, they become victims of adults, which is a clear metaphor not just of generational responsibility that led to recession and a lack of perspective for future generations, but also of the necessity to change the moral perspective of society.

And it is exactly here that we find the answer to the viewers' implicit question: why should a man remain moral if the system, whose rules he has obeyed, deprived him of a job, health care, pension, offered him a bad education and forced him into housing loans, at the same time ignoring the fact that there is no punishment for those who are guilty of ruining the system. What else is left except faith in the typical (American) self-made individual? *Breaking Bad* functions as an exhaust valve or a compensating lever for those viewers who feel deprived and manipulated by the system, because Walter is offering an image of a proud, individual revolt that manages to restore its self-respect at a time of economic crisis, refusing to be a victim, even at the cost of moral devastation. In the episode "Box Cutter", convinced that Gus is about to kill him, Walter opposes him: "What did you expect? Just simply roll over and allow you to murder us? That I wouldn't take measures, extreme measures to defend myself? Wrong. Think again." The scene in which the hero suddenly becomes aware of his own mortality is a recurrent TV trope, only here it has been turned upside down. Walter does not beg for his life, he demands it. The series therefore offers an answer within the framework of American society as a fertile soil for the growth of various Walters, a society that has legitimized crime in a wide spectrum, from economy to war politics since the time of the *Sopranos*. It has become like this as a result of crossing the critical point regarding individual moral decisions made by 'small' people.

In her attempt to answer the question about how normal people become criminals, Hannah Arendt in her work *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963) states that what is more dangerous than violence itself is when people stop thinking within ethical categories. After researching personalities of the most heinous Second World War criminals she concluded that Nazi evil is not linked only to pathological individuals like Hitler. Ordinary people are just as capable of performing atrocities. Like Walter, Nazi officer Adolf Eichmann was neither a fanatic nor a sociopath, but an average person. Although, they both suffer from absence of empathy as a syndrome of banality of evil, as Karen Adkins has explained in her essay, they are thinking, as do all rational men, to achieve their goals as efficiently as possible. As Adkins wrote, they are defined by "their ability to absorb themselves in technicalities elevated to misleading importance, a way of abstracting from the gruesome and

harmful details and consequences of their actions."[3] According to Arendt, both horror and the banality of evil lie in a man's unwillingness to fundamentally consider his/her and other people's actions at a crucial point; more importantly, it never occurred to the people to doubt Nazi moral principles as long as these principles were socially acceptable. Walter repeatedly says that he cooks meth to provide for his family, or to protect his family from the stigma of him being a convicted criminal. By proving that a person did not have to be a convinced Nazi in order to adapt and forget their own moral convictions, both Arendt in her book and the fictional world of *Breaking Bad*, point to the root of totalitarianism which threatens democratic societies, emerging from the murky waters of half-truth manipulations, fuelling emotional pain and existential fear of poverty. By questioning the share in overall guilt of those who were not criminals, the series reveals the same as Arendt: two kinds of people, the ones who had a role in the regime and those who remained silent and accepted the situation.

Walter's wife Skyler symbolizes those who adapt to authority, the silent ones with a weak resistance to evil, yet with constant unease for allowing it. Jesse symbolizes those who have long refused to believe that evil around them is active, exactly because they possess the normal ethical framework, but once they manage to see through the manipulation, the genuine resistance to evil within them is revived. Both kinds enable immorality by not stopping it. They are not evil but under a pressure that is big enough they cannot force themselves to be correct.

This series continuously provoke viewers with the question: do you really believe you are better than characters, or you are just justifying and rationalizing your own options as Walter does all too often. Since no one is abolished from responsibility for evil, *Breaking Bad* talks about a point at which it becomes necessary to stop diagnosing manipulation as a social disorder and to set firm boundaries against evil. Skyler functions as a mirror of people who have to confront their own losses and hardships which they are not guilty of but which nevertheless demand a decisive attitude. That is why Skyler must inevitably suffer because, just like Carmela Soprano, she neither listened to her conscience nor her lawyer's advice, that the only right solution is to stop being married to a criminal.

But, our conscience is not excluded from conditions and pressures of our social systems, as *The Wire* suggests. *The Wire* lays blame for the modern world's crisis on dysfunctional social systems and institutions that took away individuality and solidarity from people to the point that they become their own purpose, almost as they are moving toward some sort of 'matrix' shaped world. How is it possible to have a conscience in a world determined by the way the institutions work?

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[3] Karen Adkins, "Eichmann in Albuquerque," in *Philosophy and Breaking Bad*, ed. Kevin S. Decker, Robert Arp, David R. Koepsell (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan: 2017), 22.

Cannibalism of social systems in *The Wire*

The basic dilemma that *The Wire* presents its characters is between pragmatism and idealism. Pragmatists 'sensibly' conform to the system, whereas idealists insist on their ethical positions, refusing to adapt. The show vividly demonstrates how systems force people into becoming pragmatists and adhering to three 'holy' rules: do not show personal initiative, be obedient and be loyal. But, no matter how well they adapted, pragmatists pay the same or higher price than idealists. When in the episode "Final Grades" police detective McNulty tries to persuade Bodie, a dealer, to testify against his own gang, Bodie describes how systems treat their most loyal players:

> I been out there since I was 13. I ain't never fucked up a count, never stole off a package, never did some shit that I wasn't told to do [...] But what come back? [...] They want me to stand with them, right? But where the fuck they at when they supposed to be standing by us? I mean, when shit goes bad and there's hell to pay, where they at? This game is rigged, man. We like the little bitches on a chessboard.

Loyalty turns out to be a doubly-tragic deceit because obeying the rules leads to the disintegration of personality. But in spite of that, the people of the system believe that loyalty will eventually pay off, for each system cultivates a 'myth' that loyalty will be rewarded: the police myth about advancement as a result of good work turns out to be utopian as well as the myth about rewarding prisoners' loyalty by taking care of their families.

That is why David Simon, the author of *The Wire*, says that *The Wire* is a "story where the cops and the dealers work for Enron, and they get betrayed for their loyalty."[4] After Bodie also realizes that a pact with any repressive authorities results in ruined lives and that "the Game is just a setup", he turns from a pragmatist into an idealist: "I'll do whatever it takes. I don't give a fuck. Just don't ask me to live my life on my knees, got it?" When contrasted with pragmatists who achieve their personal goals regardless of consequences for others and society, idealists are disobedient and refuse to compromise their consciences. Heroes are not the people who stick to the law, but those who 'unreasonably' oppose the rules of their own system. While pragmatists find the meaning of life sheerly in its comfort, idealists find it in maintaining individual dignity (their own and that of others). Seemingly paradoxical, it is the idealists who more than anyone else, believe in institutions they work for, because they trust their basic concept of functioning for the benefit of majority. When police commander Cedric Daniels shows officer Ellis Carver the ropes, he gives the following advice: "You show loyalty, they learn loyalty. You show them it's about the work; it'll be about the work. You show them it's about some other kind of game, then that's the game they'll play."

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[4] Alan Sepinwall, *Revolution was Televised: The Cops, Crooks, Slingers and Slayers Who Changed TV Drama Forever* (New York: Touchstone, 2015), 81.

Yet, why do the rules of the Game seem so unchangeable inside and outside the series? The nature of the Game was explained by John von Neumann in his work *Theory of Games and Economic Behaviour* (with Oscar Mongestern, 1944) in which he explains the mathematical basis of economic strategies regarding winning and losing in games. Applied to *The Wire*, his principle shows that each system has its economic strategy and game model. In the episode "More With Less", in a comic scene, detectives use a photocopier as a 'truth detector'. In order to trick a dealer into confession they xeroxed papers with 'truth' and 'lie' written on them and pulled them out in accordance with his answers. This is the final part of the sequence which is based on the most popular game from game theory, "The Prisoner's Dilemma".

This game proves that players would rather choose the option of mutual accusations and consequently be sentenced than that of remaining silent and protecting each other, which could set them both free. This game theory shows that distrust is the prevailing relationship among people, although it provides evidence that mutual trust would be more beneficial to all.[5]

Von Neumann's theory of games says that in order for the game to function, the players must be rational because if one of them is irrational, the outcome of the game is not predictable and it collapses. Gangster character Omar does not rob dealers because he couldn't 'make a buck' any other way, but because he cannot give up his personal freedom. He cannot give up love either, the unique motivation which forces this character to get into his conflicts: the first was an act of revenge on Barksdale's gang for a killed lover, the second on Marlo, for a killed friend. Omar's love and solidarity are irrational elements which cannot be controlled by the system: he is often portrayed in this way, waiting in the shadow or unexpectedly attacking dealers. Irrational actions confuse the system – they eliminate cruelty from drug dealing, integrate treated addicts into society and reward based on merit. Such actions force it to change within the framework of another socioeconomic paradigm.

Anthropology teaches us that adaptation is the supreme survival strategy in the animal kingdom, whereas fighting idealism is an inherent human feature. Fighting idealists believe in actively overcoming life's difficulties. Here, those are the people from both sides of the law who are exposed in their actions, in accordance with Aristotle's perception of courage as the supreme quality because it enables the existence of all others, such as: responsibility (characters like Colvin, Lester, Sobotka), altruism (characters like D'Angelo, Carver, Bubbles) or love (characters like Omar, Daniels). When detective McNulty asks Freamon why he ruined his career because he continued to dig into the case in spite of his bosses' order, Freamon cannot give a clear answer. The reason is not just the presence of "some kind of unconditional ethical impulse" as Slavoj Žižek calls it.[6] Idealists do not accept immorality as an unavoidable

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[5] A game called *Tit for Tat* ensures the long-term most effective strategy for both players, because it is based on cooperation: one player never cheats on the other, but with each subsequent move he reflects the other player; if one cheats the other responds by cheating and vice versa. William Poundstone, *Prisoner's Dilemma: John von Neumann, Game Theory, and the Puzzle of the Bomb* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 239–53.

[6] Slavoj Žižek, "Žica ili sukob civilizacija u jednoj državi," *Forum* 23 (2012), http://www.forum.tm/clanak/zica-ili-sukob-civilizacija-u-jednoj-drzavi-521, acc. April 10, 2018.

aspect of life, they rather unmask it as hypocrisy, like Daniels, who would rather sacrifice his career than give up investigating the murders of fourteen prostitutes:

> I'll swallow a lie when I have to. I've swallowed a few big ones, lately, but the stat game? That lie? That's what ruined this department. Shining up shit and calling it gold so Majors become Colonels and Mayors become Governors, pretending to do police work while one fucking generation trains the next how not to do the job.

By keeping faith in individualism, people who remain defiant before the power of institutions, like McNulty, are confronted with the question: what are the chances of transforming the institutions? The series discusses this issue by reflecting on two methods of out-maneuvering the system: individual escape and reformation of the system from within.

The first character who managed to change the course of his destiny by ensuring significant change in his community is Dennis Cutty Wise, an ex killer from Barksdale's gang. After leaving prison he realizes that "the game is not part of him any more" and opens a boxing club which attracts young street dealers. But the longest story about a personal deliverance is Bubbles's story. He is a heroin addict and a snitch who constantly tries to 'save' some young addict from death by educating him how to survive on the streets, so his way of escaping the system is a fight with addiction. In order to defeat the system both characters must overcome their own weaknesses first. Nevertheless, both victories leave the system unchanged, except for a reminder that escape is possible, although on a sporadic, personal level. Not just escape, but escape of good people: those stories, as Linda Williams explains it, have forced the status quo to yield signs of *moral legibility* that is otherwise invisible "in an era where moral, let alone religious certainties are no longer self-evident".[7] *The Wire* is clearly posing the question of the death of the American dream as national concept, now being achievable on a negligible small scale.

Real reform is possible from inside the system, primarily if implemented by people, like politician Carcetty, who hold systemic power. Or, as policewoman Kima Greggs says, "The hardest part about being a police is making the job actually matters." All reformists, whether they have systemic power or not, have one thing in common: they wish to give a meaning of social usefulness to their work and, subsequently, to their life as well. That question raises the police commander Howard Bunny Colvin with a reform in the form of a very unusual social experiment, risking his career just six months before retirement: "The city is worse than when I came to the police force. What does it say about me? About my life?" With Colvin's project "Hamsterdam",[8] *The Wire* poses as a problem question for the society behind the screen: if we put

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[7] Linda Williams, *On The Wire* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014), 230.

[8] For detailed dramaturgical and sociological analysis of the project "Hamsterdam" see in: Sanja Kovačević, *Kvalitetne TV serije: milenijsko doba ekrana* (Zagreb: Jesenski & Turk, 2017), 162–64.

our problems out on the open, for everybody to see it so people of power can solve it, why don't we just do it? Why do the systems remain rigid, in spite of being aware of benefits of transparency and problem solving? Because they play on human weakness, on the fact that people quickly lose courage and steam at the point at which they would rather surrender than fight, scared that they will be "mocked, marginalized or ruined".[9]

But systems could root out their reforming idealists and yet they do not. Why?

From the system's point of view, everyone has his role. At the police department, Rawls has his "Trojan horse", lieutenant Marimow, an obedient oppressor who is assigned whenever someone needs to be 'broken'. The system selects the people it needs in order to remain inert by means of its 'guardians'. But what the systems also needs are 'rebels' whose task is to bring forward the burning issues which need to be solved when the system reaches the critical point. That is why idealism here is not a matter of personal choice, rather it has a social function – in the end it serves the system more than it serves the individuals. Omar, with his understanding of honor and individual freedom, serves as a counterbalance to dictatorial structure of the drug gangs. Kima Greggs, on the other side of the law, also blindly follows her principles – she refuses to denounce Wee-Bey as her assailant, in spite of the evidence, because she did not see in the dark, thus preventing the police from slipping into breaking the law out of frustration because their hands were tied. By choosing the more difficult roads, idealists have a corrective function in the community; without them the systems would either collapse within the anarchy of selfish interests, which lack plans for future generations, or they would ossify into dictatorship. In this way idealists cause the system to 'grow stronger', with their "actions they give fresh impetus to the very force that they oppose", says Žižek,[10] thus causing the system to produce an even bigger lie. By accumulating lies, the system creates a specific alternative reality that people believe in, for example that there is no point in rebelling against the system for it always finds a way of suffocating this resistance. The system maintains this lie by supporting people who will offer an illusion of freedom, of hope, and then it sucks them back inside and destroys hope even more strongly.

The Wire finds sense in the personal sacrifice as attempt to do some good, as Colvin did by adopting a young dealer Namond because his father, a hit man, gave his consent, which ensured a better life for Namond. So, according to its dramaturgical structure of the Greek tragedy, it also appears that it makes sense to "do your best to achieve dignity"[11] – after all.

The series showed that each social problem can be solved by changing the rules of the game, if the system really wants it. But, in order to accomplish such a large-scale reconstruction, it must first be allowed by its supreme system – neoliberalism.

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[9] David Simon in Rafael Alvarez, *The Wire: Truth Be Told* (New York: Canongate Books, 2009), 384.

[10] Žižek, "Žica ili sukob civilizacija u jednoj državi".

[11] David Simon in John Williams, "The Origin and Uses of David Simon's Anger," *Special way of being afraid*, 2008, http://specialwayofbeingafraid.blogspot.hr/2008/01/origin-and-uses-of-david-simons-anger.html, acc. April 10, 2018.

Surviving at other people's expense

Breaking Bad debuted in January 2008, at the start of the Great Recession. In it, Walter immediately introduced himself as an economically deprived and underprivileged member of the mainstream, collapsing, American middle class. Although Gillian did not know that the stock market would fall, nor did he want to engage in social criticism, as he emphasized in some interviews, it does not mean that the series is not critical, for after the fall of the Twin Towers, the atmosphere became electrified with fear, restrictive measures regarding civil rights and concealed state control. Here, the relationship between Walter and Jesse portrays the evil of recession growing behind a mask of success, causing moral people to become victims fighting for survival. That is why, in Brett Martin's words,[12] Walter's metamorphosis "becomes a grotesque magnification of American self-actualization ethos" and of the dark side of success, offering a version of individual resistance against political structures which had caused it. Walter symbolizes an army of people who are forced to 'live by their wits' within the scope of the 'grey economy' which flourishes because the state failed to provide economic regulations for what we call a 'decent' life, in accordance with peoples' competence and qualifications. Such a version of resistance emerges in societies where there is no option of organized resistance, or it is not accepted, e.g. an accurate plan for redistribution of goods like the one which was missing during the 1930s crisis in Europe, thus enabling the rise of fascism.

Therefore, at critical times, people appeal to their right to survival more than ever. "We will move on, and we will get past this. Because that's what human beings do! We survive", says Walter to his students after the plane crash, with the intention to console them.

One of the major contributions of this series is the fact that it reflects on the problem of morality in relation to survival: can Walter's criminal behavior be justified by his fight for survival?

Most people follow the principle of surviving at all costs. As witnessed by Victor Frankl in Nazi concentration camps, this principle was made possible by renouncing morality because those prisoners who adhered to moral principles tended to perish more quickly and more frequently.[13] *Breaking Bad* refers exactly to this confusion between morality vs. survival: as soon as a man becomes dependant on the rationalization that he is doing something in order to 'survive' – that one who kills does it so as not to be killed – for him/her there is no moral choice left. Deontological ethics, as opposed to 'Darwinistic' ones, consider that staying moral while fighting for survival is the only righteous ethical criterion, as described by Arendt:

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[12] Brett Martin, *Difficult Men: Behind the Scenes of a Creative Revolution, From The Sopranos and The Wire to Mad Men and Breaking Bad* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2013), 268.

[13] "We who have come back by the aid of many lucky chances or miracles – whatever one may choose to call them – we know: the best of us did not return." Viktor Frankl, *Život uvijek ima smisla* (Zagreb: Provincijalat franjevaca trećoredaca, 2001), 6.

> But to establish life as the highest good is actually, so far as ethics are concerned, question begging, since all ethics, Christian or non-Christian, presuppose that life is not the highest good for moral men and that there is always more at stake in life than the sustenance and procreation of individual living organisms.[14]

The series hereby demonstrates that moral perceived in this way – more precisely moral relativism used for survival and pragmatism as a mask for selfishness – inevitably leads to a wider devastation cycle for a larger number of people and returns like a boomerang: there are no conditions under which one man should harm another.

Even if society is perceived as a modern corporation, the 'stakeholders' model' of management, which is determined by ethical principles of profit and personal benefits, cannot exclusively be applied because contemporary business ethics also includes the model of 'influential interest groups' which prescribes socially responsible behavior: a corporation should be managed in the interest of all parties that have a share in it. This model does not introduce responsibility in its business equation in order to seduce the exploited majority by idealistic phrasing, but because practice has shown that being ethical brings long term benefits to the corporation. Those organizations that managed to establish a balance between ethical principles and profitability have a long-term perspective in terms of growth and development.[15] *Breaking Bad* points to the consequences of overcoming the stakeholders' model and shows what will exactly happen with social system if we ignore the model of social responsibility[16] – it will 'break bad'.

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[14] Hanna Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment* (New York: Shocken Books, 2003), 51.

[15] Ana Aleksić, "Poslovna etika – element uspješnog poslovanja," *Zbornik Ekonomskog fakulteta u Zagrebu* 1 (March 2007): 419–29.

[16] For a detailed discussion that includes criteria of economic model of social responsibility see: Kristijan Krkač, ed., *Uvod u poslovnu etiku i korporacijsku društvenu odgovornost* (Zagreb: Mate, 2007).

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