

Complementing (Personal) Sustainability

Toward a Contemporary Virtue Ethics Approach to Frugality

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In normative ethics, the concept of sustainability has recently gained undisputed respect, especially referring to its ecological, economical or social impact. This particular perspective of social ethics has narrowed down the horizon in which sustainability can be seen and reflected. This paper stresses various aspects of sustainability for the individual within the context of a virtue ethics that is aware of the critical remarks from its normative counterpart. Understood as a preventive ethics, a virtue concept of sustainability focuses on a) the historical context of patterns of (moral) conduct reflected by its socio-historical rootedness; b) the general moral capability envisaged in its teleological dimension; c) the potential of the individual, which can be optimized (*optimum potentiae*). In this threefold sense, the virtue concept of sustainability transcends mere parenetics. This concept cannot be unfolded without a notion of frugality that is developed from a historical background (a). Frugality includes human participation in the provisional activity of God (b). With a deep respect for the limitedness of resources, the 'virtue ethics of saving' has a potential to trigger a 'conscientization' of our economic development (c).

1. *Praenotanda*

Please take these considerations as an experiment from a linguistic angle. To develop these considerations, I am motivated and inspired by studies of the more general concept of frugality which encompasses a broad range of ideas that are compatible with certain approaches to sustainability. I will try to point out the advantages of a virtue ethics approach to sustainability that takes a «deviation» via frugality.

First of all, I would like to underline that the notion of «true frugality», developed in this paper, can never fully replace the scope of the term «sustainability». It is intended to complement and to enhance the inherent ideas of «sustainability» in respect to the individual. Therefore, this article ranges within the area of individual ethics. Unfolded as a virtue, frugality can lead the *individual* toward a sustainable life-style. Vice versa, the idea of sustainability can «refuel», can inspire the formerly bourgeois-protestant notion of frugality. I want to argue that the «emotive meaning» of «frugality» has not been entirely spoilt by the socio-historical context of its usage. In common language, it still has retained elements of its former virtue context. Therefore, I decided to plead for a «re-naisance» of frugality as a contemporary virtue guiding the individual toward an attitude (a life-style)

that enhances and realizes sustainability within the moral decisions occurring day by day.

It has been suggested to me rather to choose a virtue concept linked to ascetism, like for example simplicity, temperance or moderation (moderateness), the latter being a term that still needs to be defined in this context. Even though there are many arguments in favour of this suggestion (not tainted by social and/or historical misconceptions; rooted in a spiritual tradition of moral philosophy; reinterpreting the values of religious life/monasticism; adaptable to other religious backgrounds), frugality seems to share the same cultural roots as sustainability and links in with the presuppositions of sustainability much more precisely (human capacities of cultivation of nature; of future projection and of self-limitation).¹ It is not a mere coincidence that the «Unesco Courier» has devoted a whole issue (January 1998) to various aspects of frugality, including its virtue ethical,² political³ and ethnical⁴ dimensions. Of course, this collection of essays does not represent a discussion on a «proper scientific» level. The contributors from various angles show a genuine interest for the adaptability of the concept of frugality as a building brick of global ethics. In the international colloquium «Does Frugality Make Sense?» held in Leuven in 2002, this concept was explored more soundly and deeply. The introduction of the three editors gives an account of the reasons why frugality was chosen and how it is linked to simplicity.⁵ A similar point of view was advocated earlier by James A. Nash (1998), defending the *subversive virtue of frugality* against misunderstandings and distortions (ascetism, austerity, individualistic phenomenon, means to prosperity, simplicity).⁶

I would therefore plead for a positive adaptation of simplicity (or «moderation/moderateness») in order to illustrate how a «truly frugal» lifestyle might look.

If anyone would like to proceed from there to normative social ethics, it will be necessary to explore the implications of a «sustainable development» without the supporting principle of frugality. This is not the scope of this essay. Consequently, this approach does not reflect on the social ethical effects

¹ «Moderateness» (like «simplicity») for example does not presuppose a human capacity of future projection which is regarded essential for sustainability. For a fuller explanation of those three presuppositions, please refer to ch. 2 of this essay.

² Cf. J. GRIFFIN, *Is Frugality a Virtue? If Not an End in Itself, Frugality Can Lead to a Better Quality of Life*, in «Unesco Courier», 51 (1998), 1, pp. 10-13.

³ Cf. P. EKINS, *A Subversive Idea. The Values of Frugality Fly in the Face of the Prevailing Economic Order*, in «Unesco Courier», 51 (1998), 1, pp. 6-9.

⁴ Cf. B. SALL, *Making a Little Go a Long Way. Needy African Societies Governed by an Ethic of Saving, Caring and Sharing*, in «Unesco Courier», 51 (1998), 1, pp. 26-29.

⁵ Cf. L. BOUCKAERT - H. OPDEBEECK - L. ZSOLNAI, *Why Frugality?*, in L. ZSOLNAI - L. BOUCKAERT - H. OPDEBEECK (eds), *Frugality. Rebalancing Material and Spiritual Values in Economic Life* (Frontiers of Business Ethics, 4), Oxford et al. 2008, pp. 3-23, here pp. 3-4.

⁶ Cf. J.A. NASH, *On the Subversive Virtue: Frugality*, in D.A. CROCKER - T. LINDEN (eds), *Ethics of Consumption. The Good Life, Justice, and Global Stewardship*, Lanham et al. 1998, pp. 416-436, here pp. 423-426.

and underpinnings of «sustainability» which always has been a matter of interdisciplinary discussion.⁷

2. *A gleaming star turns into a supernova – the development of the concept of sustainability*

At a first glance, everyone seems to like sustainability, simply because it is a «sexy» term. Why «sexy»? Well, it has been proven to be a *metafix* for a whole bunch of people from various kinds of backgrounds.⁸ It appeals to profit oriented businesspersons who stick the term onto their products like a marketing label: «Made from sustainable forests in North Cumbria». Sounds marvellous, sells well. It also fits into the scheme of the organic farmer who puts safety first and likes to explain his Green philosophy to potential customers. It has been developed into an important means of argumentation for the social worker campaigning for justice and peace. It is even well suited to the ever broadened horizon of the open-minded environmentalist in her refurbished cottage next to a First-World City.⁹

Not even a cool calculating politician in her striving for GDP growth and (personal) success can do without it nor the European Parliamentarian in Brussels looking to develop (and to defend!) new regulations.

Since the UN World Commission on Environment and Development chaired by Gro Harlem Brundtland issued its report titled «Our common future» in 1987, the necessity of safeguarding a «sustainable development» was widely accepted. If humanity was at all interested in securing a future despite its endeavours to exploit natural resources, there will be no other option than to put the concept of sustainable development into practice:

«Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It contains within it two key concepts:

- the concept of ‘needs’, in particular the essential needs of the world’s poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and
- the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment’s ability to meet present and future needs».¹⁰

⁷ G. ALTNER, *Ethik der Nachhaltigkeit als interdisziplinäres Abwägungsinstrument*, in G. ALTNER - G. MICHELSEN (eds), *Ethik und Nachhaltigkeit. Grundsatzfragen und Handlungsperspektiven im universitären Agendaprozess* (Innovation in den Hochschulen: Nachhaltige Entwicklung, 5), Frankfurt a.M. 2001, pp. 100-116, here pp. 100-102.

⁸ Cf. A. DOBSON, *Drei Konzepte ökologischer Nachhaltigkeit*, in «Natur und Kultur», 1 (2000), pp. 62-85, here p. 62. In his essay, which presents three different types of sustainability concepts, A. Dobson refers to an observation made by Sharachandra Lélés in 1991.

⁹ Cf. O. RENN, *Ethische Anforderungen an eine Nachhaltige Entwicklung. Zwischen globalen Zwängen und individuellen Handlungsspielräumen*, in G. ALTNER - G. MICHELSEN (eds), *Ethik und Nachhaltigkeit*, pp. 64-99, here p. 65.

¹⁰ WORLD COMMISSION ON ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT, *Our Common Future*, Oxford - New York 1987, p. 43. At this point, I will not yet undertake a discussion of the main conceptual implications of this definition.

With this key text, «sustainability» commenced its triumphal march through governmental commissions, academic circles, Green agendas and various other documents, but it eventually failed to reach the level of the «average person», of colloquial or non-technical language. A survey in Germany at the beginning of the Millennium discloses that only 10% to 15% of the population were able to associate anything with the term «sustainability», not to mention a clear definition.¹¹

Therefore, is all that remains of «sustainability» something like the fatuousness of a «fashionable word» which continues to be used by an elitist group of intellectuals for a limited period of time?¹²

Given, that the Brundtland report and all the consecutive research on the limitedness of natural resources still retain their meaning and importance, we need to fill the gap between the scientific reception and discussion of sustainability and a widespread implementation into people's thinking and people's language. The issue behind sustainability is a very vital one for our civilization (ecologically, economically and socially regarding the rights of present and future generations) and cannot be left aside because of terminological turmoil. Consequently, an exploration of the major concepts of «sustainability» proves necessary.

3. *Can we find the right path? The question of the three magi looking at the star*

I would like to start with some etymological remarks even though they can never replace a methodologically sound exploration of the various notions (*Begriffe*) of a term (*Vokabel*). They can, however, illuminate the historical setting in order to open up our minds for certain notional developments.

This setting can be traced back to the experience of scarcity and limited resources in connection with the wood industry. In 1713, H.C. von Carlowitz, district mining director in the kingdom of Saxony, wrote his pioneering opus on the principles of forestry, titled *Sylvicultura Oeconomica. Naturmäßige Anweisung zur wilden Baum-Zucht*. Drawing on even more ancient forestry principles, he explained that any kind of foresting intending to generate a continuous steady income from astute forest management needs to deal

¹¹ Cf. O. REIS, *Nachhaltigkeit – Ethik – Theologie. Eine theologische Betrachtung der Nachhaltigkeitsdebatte* (Forum Religion und Sozialkultur, Abt B/18), Münster 2003, p. 15.

¹² «Wird Sustainable Development oder Nachhaltige Entwicklung in den nächsten Jahren endgültig als 'Leerformel', 'Alleskleber', 'Intellektueller Mix' oder 'Containerbegriff' dekonstruiert?», *ibidem*, p. 14. He refers back to U. JÜDES, *Nachhaltige Sprachverwirrung. Auf der Suche nach einer Theorie des Sustainable Development*, in «Politische Ökologie» (1997), pp. 26-29. Cf. M. VOGT, *Prinzip Nachhaltigkeit. Ein Entwurf aus theologisch-ethischer Perspektive* (Hochschulschriften zur Nachhaltigkeit, 39), München 2009, here pp. 110-112. M. VOGT adopts the expression «semantisches Chamäleon» in regard to the semantical vagueness of the term «sustainability» (*ibidem*, p. 111). Also cf. O. REIS, *Nachhaltigkeit – Ethik – Theologie*, p. 17. He quotes various authors who list the manifold definitions of sustainability, reaching the illustrious number of 70.

sensitively (sparingly) with benign Mother Nature to achieve a sort of cooperation.¹³ The simple goal of his considerations was shaped by economical considerations: For profitable silver mining, wood supply had to be secured by «continuirliche, beständige und nachhaltende Nutzung des Waldes» (i.e. continual, sustainable use of the forest), contrasting the previous primitive methods of unplanned exploitation. The basic idea behind his concept, clearly underpinned by economical interests, points to a «wise use» of nature which is regarded as a gift of God, entrusted to humanity for cultivation and conscious usage¹⁴. With the Tharandt (Saxony) school of forestry, founded in 1811, this concept of *Nachhaltigkeit* took on a key role and was developed into a model for other forestry schools all over the world. In the meantime, the term *Nachhaltigkeit* had entered the general vocabulary with the meaning «continual, long lasting effect». Nevertheless, the term was used sparingly. Encyclopaedias and various other leaflets inspired by enlightenment ideals spread this concept throughout Europe.¹⁵

It was the German-born immigrant C. Schurz who brought the idea of *nachhaltige Forstwirtschaft* to the U.S. In this context, the term «sustained yield forestry» was soon coined, describing the core idea of the American «conservation movement» which came very close to the aforementioned concepts of the forestry schools in Saxony: An efficient forest management should avoid and compensate previous exploitation in order to secure long lasting use (and thus income).

«Protect and use» would best describe what was meant by «wise use» in this anthropocentric utilitarian concept, centred on the «enlightened self-interest» of humanity. Subsequently, and hardly surprisingly, the concept enjoyed the protection of political circles and prominent political leaders. Th. Roosevelt for example supported the conservation movement. However, he could reach his goal in 1920 by creating a trust that secured high lumber prices in order to prevent excessive logging.

From these early days of thinking about (and campaigning for) sustainability, a fundamental division between conservationists and preservationists became apparent: The preservation movement rejected the anthropocentric view of the conservation movement in order to emphasize the transcendently rooted intrinsic value of nature. It pleaded for nature protection without any economical considerations or restrictions. The duty to protect any forms of biological life because of its intrinsic value is connected to a bio-centric position.

We find this fundamental division still discussed in the many facets of the sustainability research and debate. It marks a decisive point if we want

¹³ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 67.

¹⁴ Cf. S. HOFMEISTER, *Zwischen Klugheits- und Moralgebot: Das Leitbild Nachhaltige Entwicklung als Herausforderung zur Erneuerung der Ökonomie jenseits ihrer Bindungen an die dichotomen Konstrukte des sozialen Geschlechter- und Naturverhältnisses*, in G. ALTNER - G. MICHELSEN (eds), *Ethik und Nachhaltigkeit*, pp. 155-173, here p. 159.

¹⁵ Cf. M. VOGT, *Prinzip Nachhaltigkeit*, p. 115.

to define a sort of notional guideline of sustainability after having elucidated its etymology.

If we follow the research A. Dobson has done on the various concepts of sustainability strategies, there is much reason to plead for a middle course between a strict anthropocentrism which defines the duties connected to sustainability by human benefit alone and a biocentrism exclusively focusing on nature protection.¹⁶ Such a middle course stresses both human well-being and the protection duties towards the irreplaceable qualities of nature¹⁷. It neither rests on neo-classical economics (like the anthropocentric theories of replacement for human consumption) nor on ecological future projections alone (like the bio-centric theories operating with concepts of ecological sustainability). It moves away from the assumption that manufactured capital and natural capital are close substitutes. Thus it cannot be counted as a concept of weak sustainability.¹⁸ Instead, it opts for an interdisciplinary approach that takes into account the double-sided duty towards humankind and non-human nature.¹⁹ Therefore, empirical impulses from the social sciences and from economics have to be taken on board as well as biological insights in the widest sense. Consequently, the human being is seen as a participating organic entity within the multi-relational biosphere of nature.²⁰ This approach, of course, does not prevent dilemma situations, but it supplies a broadened paradigm of anthropology.

I would now like to leave this rough sketch of a more or less balanced concept of sustainability in order to focus on the general human presuppositions. If we do accept those (*prima facie*) duties toward the general well-being of humanity within «nature» understood as a complex ecosystem, we need to cultivate our human abilities for facing the challenge. This necessity does not only apply to «professionals» like researchers, eco-scientists, futurologists or political representatives, but to literally everybody, to the «average person».

These presuppositions define or better delineate the normative scope of sustainability if it is to be more than a remote principle for specialists and professionals, but an ethical challenge for everybody's daily life. I will try to point out three dimensions:

¹⁶ Cf. A. DOBSON, *Drei Konzepte ökologischer Nachhaltigkeit*, pp. 66-68. Dobson presents his pivotal scheme explaining those three types of concepts on p. 66. Cf. also G. ALTNER, *Ethik der Nachhaltigkeit*, pp. 107-108.

¹⁷ «Eine zweite Möglichkeit der Betrachtung natürlichen Kapitals wird in der Spalte B durch die Einführung des Begriffs 'Unwiederbringlichkeit' angezeigt ... Das Konzept B wird einfach von der Idee beseelt, dass jene Aspekte und Eigenschaften der nicht-menschlichen Natur, deren Verlust unumkehrbar wäre, das zu Erhaltende darstellen», A. DOBSON, *Drei Konzepte ökologischer Nachhaltigkeit*, p. 72.

¹⁸ Cf. K. OTT, *Eine Theorie «starker» Nachhaltigkeit*, in G. ALTNER - G. MICHELSEN (eds), *Ethik und Nachhaltigkeit. Grundsatzfragen und Handlungsperspektiven im universitären Agendaprozess* (Innovation in den Hochschulen: Nachhaltige Entwicklung 5), Frankfurt a.M. 2001, pp. 30-63, here pp. 40-41.

¹⁹ «Nachhaltige Entwicklung läuft also auf eine Strategie für ökologische Nachhaltigkeit hinaus, da sie glaubt, dass eine bestimmte Art der Entwicklung die Bedingungen herstellen wird, unter denen ökologische Nachhaltigkeit garantiert werden kann», A. DOBSON, *Drei Konzepte ökologischer Nachhaltigkeit*, p. 83.

²⁰ Cf. G. ALTNER, *Ethik der Nachhaltigkeit*, p. 109. He refers to the German philosopher G. Böhme (* 1937).

- 1) The social/ethnic capacity of cultivation of nature: This should not be misunderstood towards the well-known sense of subordination and exploitation but towards a socially shared sensitivity for the culturally implemented methods of caring for the ecosystem, which essentially provides for subsistence.²¹
- 2) The intellectual/rational capacity of future projection (the intellectual capacity to foresee and weigh consequences): Any concept of sustainability relies on models of future projection that try to explain the correlations of our present actions with possible (or likely) future effects for the ecosystem.
- 3) The emotional/volitional capacity of self-limitation: Resting on the optimistic view that human beings have an innate capability to adapt themselves (and their style of living) to given limitations and that their appetite for consumption and social status is NOT insatiable.²² This of course means a fundamental rethinking of the growth paradigm within western (capitalist) economies.

If these capacities are cultivated, the idea of sustainability can guide the individual toward a good life in a holistic sense (beyond personal well-being): ecologically (cultivation), inter-generationally (future projection) and intra-generationally (self-limitation).

Consequently, «sustainability for everybody» must not be seen merely as a principle or a set of values but as a process.²³

N. Munier stresses this point by quoting his favourite definition of sustainability:

«Sustainability is a vision of the future that provides us with a road map and helps us focus our attention on a set of values and ethical and moral principles by which to guide our actions».²⁴

Therefore, sustainability in its process dimension does not present a set of normative regulations but tries to change attitudes that guide and influence human conduct by presenting a vision.²⁵

This takes us very close to a virtue concept of sustainability. Let us now consider the general outline of such a concept.

²¹ Cf. G. SCHERHORN, *Nachhaltigkeit und Kapitalismus. Ethische Reflexionen ökonomischer Ziele*, in G. ALTNER - G. MICHELSEN (eds), *Ethik und Nachhaltigkeit*, pp. 134-154, here p. 135.

²² Cf. *ibidem*, p. 148; also cf. P. EKINS, *A Subversive Idea*, p. 8.

²³ Cf. N. MUNIER, *Introduction to Sustainability. Road to a Better Future*, Dordrecht et al. 2005, p. 1.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 10. He quotes a definition favoured by New Zealand author A. Fricker in 1998; cf. A. FRICKER, *Measuring up to Sustainability*, in «Futures», 30 (1998), 4, pp. 367-375.

²⁵ Cf. *Ibidem*, p. 13.

4. *The heaven of virtues*

Of course, there are many approaches to virtue ethics and virtue concepts. D. Mieth lists various traditions that formed virtue concepts (or approaches to virtue ethics): First, the classical philosophical tradition of ethics (Aristotle, Plato),²⁶ which was subsequently complemented and enriched by the Christian philosophical tradition (Augustine, Thomas Aquinas). Further spiritual reflections led to a Christian-ascetical tradition (Meister Eckhard).²⁷ During the fundamental social, scientific, religious and political changes of the 16th century, a «civic» virtue approach developed among the recently emerging bourgeois class. Decidedly autonomous/detached from ecclesial influences, their concept went back to the classical sources and was adapted to the ever increasing importance of economy in all areas of life (but nevertheless the subconscious influence of Christian preachers of various denominations can not be denied).²⁸ So-called «secondary virtues» (punctuality, cleanliness, obedience, temperance, frugality, soberness etc.) were born and «promulgated» by authors/authorities like B. Franklin, D. Defoe or C. Volney. Finally, the working class virtues need to be mentioned commencing with the bourgeois *homo oeconomicus* who is to be liberated from capitalistic constraints. However, conscious of their own «underdog» position, the workers cultivate a virtue of solidarity that is closely linked to fortitude and perseverance.²⁹

If we now look for a virtue concept that has already been implemented into contemporary society and that is capable of bringing about attitudes guiding towards sustainability, we cannot detach ourselves from the tradition it is based or rooted in.

If we follow the basic philosophical definition Aristotle has given of virtue in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, virtue can be understood as a firm fundamental attitude that enables man to realize his appropriate capacity in a perfect manner.³⁰ The person discovers this capacity in herself, cultivates it and brings it close to execution. Exactly this idea is envisaged – theologically enriched/reflected – by Thomas Aquinas when he speaks of *habitus operativus bonus*: A fundamental attitude which derives moral goodness from the imminent and facilitated execution of what is appropriate (i.e. in his created nature).³¹ Therefore, it transcends the platonic idea of a specific quality of the soul that *enables* the appropriate (good) execution of a human act. More than that, it facilitates its execution, enables the person to perform the appropriate act easily and with pleasure.

²⁶ Cf. D. MIETH, *Die neuen Tugenden. Ein ethischer Entwurf* (Schriften der Katholischen Akademie in Bayern, 104), Düsseldorf 1984, pp. 25-28.

²⁷ Cf. *ibidem*, pp. 42-48.

²⁸ Cf. *ibidem*, pp. 37-40.

²⁹ Cf. *ibidem*, pp. 40-41.

³⁰ ARISTOTELE, *Eth. Nic.* I,6 (1098 a15-20).

³¹ Cf. D. MIETH, *Die neuen Tugenden*, p. 21. Also P. NICKL, *Ordnung der Gefühle. Studien zum Begriff des habitus* (Paradeigmata 24), Hamburg 2005², pp. 37-43.

The idea of the «appropriate» is closely linked to Aquinas' theology of creation: Created in the image of God, woman finds her true identity (i.e. that which is appropriate and in this sense participates in the goodness of the creator) by realizing and actualizing her natural inclinations (*inclinationes naturales*) in a given situation. In this sense, a human being participates in the entelechy of creation, in the development of the divine creational order, directed towards the (eternal) good.

Virtue as an operational habit strives to actively bridge the gap between the potential of the natural dispositions (innate or acquired) and the original perfection of creation. In this context, it is precisely this dynamic process towards perfection which is described by the Aristotelian term *entelechy*. Within the teleological tension of entelechy, man is called by the creator and enabled by the virtues to realize his ultimate potential (*ultimum potentiae*) which includes participation (by human reason) in the providential faculty of god.

Woman thus becomes a created co-creator, equipped with her human intellectual and volitional capabilities (natural inclinations) that can be virtuously (= as perfectly as possible) actualized/put into action. Living according to the virtues is a creative process which of course presupposes training and education, but always entails an openness to discover one's own human inclinations.³² Consequently, virtues are always linked to the fundamental capacities of the soul (cardinal virtues: prudence – the intellectual part, justice – the volitional part, temperance – the emotionally concupiscent and fortitude – the irascible part) which are directed and corrected by reason.³³

It would have been a major progress if virtue ethics, outlined and specified by Thomas Aquinas, had been developed into a dynamic concept of *preventive* ethics looking for the ultimate human potential first in order to find normative answers to ethical problems. But, alas, the history of ethics took another route. It focused primarily on a *consecutive* method that tried to give distinctive normative directions in specific problematic cases.

On the one hand, moral theologians gained a reputation for being reliable advisors and spiritual directors/confessors, but on the other hand, they were stuck in their specialist role.³⁴ Without a reference to a practicable (i.e. normative!), dynamic and inclusive virtue concept, they were left to deal either with meta-ethical considerations or with intensely discussed single cases. The virtue approach was seen as an interesting, but fundamentally irrelevant addition to (teleological or deontological) normative ethics.³⁵

³² Cf. D. MIETH, *Die neuen Tugenden*, p. 25. D. Mieth points out that the term «inclination» can be misleading. The «natural inclination» Thomas Aquinas refers to is not automatically realized in blindly following one's own desires, intentions, hopes, wishes etc., but to fulfil what is in the scope of being specifically human.

³³ Cf. THOMAS AQUINAS, *S.Th.* I-II, q. 61 a. 2.

³⁴ Cf. D. MIETH, *Die neuen Tugenden*, p. 56.

³⁵ A good example might be B. SCHÜLLER, *Die Begründung sittlicher Urteile. Typen ethischer Argumentation in der Moralthologie*, Düsseldorf 1987³, pp. 299-306.

In order to rehabilitate this essential concept for normative moral theology (thus bringing it back to public discussion and attention), the Jesuit theologian Ph. Schmitz presented a three staged approach in 1979. His ideas, backed subsequently by D. Mieth, are based on the well-known concept of Thomas Aquinas but are fundamentally augmented by sociological components:

If we speak of a specific virtue, we never do this without historical awareness, without being conscious that it is rooted in a tradition (see above, etymological remarks). For example, we call cleanliness a secondary virtue and almost instinctively associate a (19th century European/American) bourgeois setting, defining a social and also a historical background.

Additionally, a virtue that is embedded in a social setting presents a model of conduct to the individual in order to develop (and challenge) his/her moral capacities. A third step would be a personal recognition of this virtue claim, i.e. a «conscientization». Therefore, virtue ethics has to

- 1) look back on history in order to discover those leading virtue concepts which have been influential to answer ethical problems. Moral conduct does not fall from heaven; it proves its relevance in a specific mental, social and historical setting;³⁶
- 2) present an idea(l) of the moral capabilities (*sittliches Leistungsvermögen*) regarding the realization of what is truly human in the given (problematic) situation. It has to strive for the *optimum potentiae* (see above, Thomas Aquinas). Comparing actual conduct with the presented model of general human capabilities may lead towards a parenthesis. It is always performed in order to respect the whole person (dimensions of foresight, responsibility, justice, perseverance and modesty);³⁷
- 3) present the *optimum potentiae* to each individual and lead toward a holistic conscientization reaching out to the character, the interests, intuition and motivation of the person involved. Thus, virtues finally present a *unique* outline of conduct which can serve as a horizon of what is morally demanded from the individual. In every particular situation, they reflect the way a person sees him/herself in the light of the *optimum potentiae*, so that a moral standard to act and to react within the given situation can be established.³⁸ This conscientization would be the last phase to determine what is morally right.

Perhaps Schmitz' contemporary approach to a normative virtue ethics may appear complicated and a bit artificial. Nonetheless, it has the potential of bringing back virtue ethics to the core of all ethical discussion. It leads to the

³⁶ Cf. Ph. SCHMITZ, *Tugend – der alte und der neue Weg zur inhaltlichen Bestimmung des sittlich richtigen Verhaltens*, in «Theologie und Philosophie», 54 (1979), pp. 161-182, here p. 163. He develops his point in the course of his essay: a) morally virtuous conduct is always connected to the situation/ horizon of circumstances in which it has been proven; b) virtuous conduct has its own history within society which reflects and carries a virtue through history; c) virtuous conduct has to fit into the changing history of the group (society) that supports it. Cf. *ibidem*, p. 167-170.

³⁷ Cf. *ibidem*, pp. 171-176.

³⁸ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 177.

determination of what is morally right in a given situation. Within the various approaches to normative ethics, the virtue concept has one fundamental advantage; it does not overrule motivational aspects. Since the times of Socrates, ethicists of all generations have been trapped in the fallacy that a correct (i.e. «good» or «right») moral judgement or insight automatically leads to morally correct action or conduct.³⁹

Virtue ethics does not ask for parenthesis as a supplement of its normative impact. Parenthesis is found integrated in the (second-stage) reflection on the moral capabilities of what is truly human.

5. *The non-fading light of frugality*

Out of these remarks on sustainability and virtue ethics, we should extract the following terminological problem: The term «sustainability» does not seem to be rooted in day-to-day language. The danger of devaluation to a «glittering fashion word» is imminent. On the other hand, the notion of «sustainability» needs to be preserved and introduced into «everyone's ethics». To achieve this, a normative concept of «sustainability» has to fulfil three presuppositions: 1) the social capacity of cultivation of nature; 2) the rational capacity of future projection; and 3) the emotional capacity of self-limitation.

Any normative concept fitting into these requirements ought to lead the individual to a «good life» (ecological, intergenerational, intra-generational well-being). It should take the «middle road» between anthropocentrism and biocentrism. We usually call such a dynamic concept that leads the individual to «good life» a virtue concept. Ph. Schmitz has shown that virtue ethics, sketched in a three-staged approach, does not miss out on normativity while still preserving the parenetical impact.

All we have to do now is look for such a virtue that fulfils the requirements and the general scope of sustainability in an individual context, but is much better and much more intensely rooted in society.⁴⁰ As a central thesis of my considerations I would like to suggest the virtue concept of frugality to fit into this role.

Frugality, like sustainability has a very similar heritage from its terminological outline: At the beginning, people (in the northern hemisphere) knew the experience of scarcity.⁴¹ The natural resources they found in the forests and on the fields were limited. In order to cope with this situation, they had to be frugal, i.e. they had to use the fruits of their hunting or cultivation

³⁹ Cf. D. MIETH, *Die neuen Tugenden*, pp. 49-50, 54-56.

⁴⁰ Speaking of «society» I am very much aware of my terminological imprecision. This term has to be narrowed down to cultural settings (i.e. western European society) and perhaps even to stratum specifications (i.e. middle-class dominated society). I chose this vague term to retain openness for various options, for example to include non-European cultural backgrounds and flexible class specifications.

⁴¹ Cf. B. SALL, *Making a Little Go a Long Way*, p. 27.

labours sparingly.⁴² In agricultural societies, frugality was absolutely vital in order to preserve corn for the next seed.⁴³ From its very beginning, frugality was linked to the community: It was primarily the wife's task to organize the storage for the whole family. In times of hardship, the well-being of the whole village relied on this (female) storage management.

Therefore, frugality presupposes a capacity of a socially relevant and socially implemented cultivation of nature.

Secondly, without a balanced future projection, frugality will easily turn either to miserliness (over-exaggerating future dangers) or to extravagance (downplaying future scarcity).⁴⁴ A frugal person has to be able to make clear decisions concerning the use of limited resources by estimating their future scarcity. If he or she does not direct her or his attention to the possible future development, the reference point for frugality and thus the insight into the importance of living frugally will be lost.

Therefore, frugality also essentially presupposes a rational capacity of future projection.

Finally, it seems quite obvious that frugality is closely related to the cardinal virtue of temperance, which according to the «classical» definition of Thomas Aquinas puts the order of reason into those passions that incite to act against reason.⁴⁵ In other words: Temperance points to the virtuously perfected capability of reason to curb the concupiscent passions. The same applies to frugality, which is characterized by the human capability to put a limit to one's own present desires – either in order to satisfy future desires or to secure the living (*Lebensgrundlage*) of future generations. In any case, frugality is focused on the human well-being.

Therefore, another essential presupposition to realize frugality can be seen in the human capacity of (rationally directed) self-limitation.

At this point, it should be obvious that frugality fulfils those three requirements concerning the human capacities linked to sustainability. Furthermore, we could gather from the historical sketch of the concept that frugality seems to be implemented into «everyman's language» («colloquial language») because of its terminological (and conceptual) tradition.

In a next step, we need to explore that virtue concept of frugality that shows the highest possible compatibility to the virtue approach to sustainability.

As any virtue concepts, frugality has a goal, an aim, a direction: it should help to lead the person towards a good life.⁴⁶ If we take the central elements of sustainability to define what «good life» means in this context, we end

⁴² The verb «to spare» also points in the same direction. It is derived from the Anglo-saxon word «sparian» which has the same root as «spar» in all Nordic languages, describing the act of leaving out, putting aside or even rescuing.

⁴³ Cf. W. JOHNSON, *Muddling toward Frugality*, San Francisco 1978, p. 12.

⁴⁴ Cf. A. ROBERTS, *Three Exceptional Figures. Frugality as a Moral and Political Protest against the Established Order*, in «Unesco Courier», 51 (1998), 1, pp. 15-16, here p. 15.

⁴⁵ Cf. THOMAS AQUINAS, *S.Th.* I-II, q. 61 a. 2.

⁴⁶ Cf. P. EKINS, *A Subversive Idea*, pp. 7-8.

up with the idea of well-being that encompasses all forms of biological life in their multi-relatedness, all present human cultures and societies and all future generations. By means of the virtue, human contribution to this three-dimensional general well-being should be directed to the best possible balance. As stated before, the human being is seen as a participating organic entity within the complex ecosystem, however burdened with a special responsibility for its preservation as a whole. Frugality therefore, complementing personal sustainability, should be directed towards this three-dimensional well-being.

How can the normativity of frugality as a virtue be established/approached? I will try to follow the model of Ph. Schmitz, which commences with the more general stage of historical reflection:

The virtue of frugality calls to mind a rich history (much more than sustainability) which cannot be explored here in detail. Starting from the philosophical reflections on the cardinal virtue of temperance, enriched by the Christian ascetical tradition, it has mainly been developed by the bourgeois approach to secondary virtues. Adam Smith praises it in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), Benjamin Franklin lists it among the top five civic virtues (he actually tried to pursue himself), Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* has to cultivate frugality on his island in order to survive and to secure a better standard of living. Developing from Calvinist and puritan ethics, the bourgeois ideal has mainly focused on the effectiveness (*Nützlichkeit*) of frugality for the accumulation of wealth from which a constant income could be drawn (A. Smith). Later on, frugality even infiltrated working class ethics as a means of coping with an economically disadvantaged position.⁴⁷ Today's *homo oeconomicus* uses frugality – if at all – to optimize his consumption level during his lifetime (F. Modigliani). Looking back on this history, we can find «true frugality»⁴⁸ *per modum determinationis*.⁴⁹

In this respect, it may be quite fruitful to extend the idea of the «created co-creator», which can be traced back to the human providential faculty mentioned in Thomas Aquinas. It was actually developed by Ph. Hefner in his book *The Human factor* (1993).⁵⁰ This idea can help draw an anthropological background from Christian theology in order to establish a contemporary virtue concept of frugality. The theology of the created co-creator perceives the human person as created by God in love. Thus, humanity is an essential part of the natural world and has to develop a respect for nature as a basic attitude that characterizes human life on earth. To live guided by respect for everything that is created entails an acceptance of the limits that are imposed on humanity by nature and a commitment to embrace a frugal way of life. Furthermore, as created beings loved by God, we are related to the other creatures. Through a spectrum of relationships, the human person realizes

⁴⁷ Cf. S. SMILES, *Thrift. A Book of Domestic Counsel*, London 1875.

⁴⁸ From this point, I will use this term instead of the more complicated expression: «Frugality complementing personal sustainability».

⁴⁹ Cf. D. MIETH, *Die neuen Tugenden*, p. 56.

⁵⁰ Cf. Ph.J. HEFNER, *The Human Factor. Evolution, Culture, and Religion*, Minneapolis (MN) 2001.

her dignity and is called to interact with the natural world and other human beings in respect, love, dignity and concern. The idea of participating in the creativity of God also highlights the creative qualities of the human person. We can continue the creative work of God and bring the creation to the purposes that God has for it. Creativity in the freedom God has left to us leads to responsibility and from there to a necessity to build up a sustainable society through the virtue of frugality.⁵¹

As a second stage, the ideal of moral capabilities essential for a «true frugality» should be presented: cultivation and prudent preservation of nature, foresight or future projection and self-limitation (*Selbstbegrenzung*). All of these capacities lead to what is truly human in the sense of a well balanced (or integrated) sustainability. This is distinctly different from the bourgeois virtue concept. «Living from the interest while preserving the capital basis» (A. Smith) does not illustrate an economical rule, but an idea of sustainable use of natural resources (= the capital basis).⁵² Therefore,

- «true frugality» looks on the cultivation of natural resources in the context of creatorship: As created co-creators, we participate in God's care and concern for his creation.
- «True frugality» believes that societies are interested to preserve themselves by caring for future generations.⁵³
- «True frugality» believes in the human capacity to curb consumerist desires, doubting that an insatiable striving for social recognition via wealth accumulation is a psychological law.⁵⁴

Of course, this delineates the *optimum potentiae*, not as a mere utopia but as a vision of a general moral capability (*allgemeines sittliches Leistungsvermögen*) of the human person. A vision, that has to be extended into daily practice.⁵⁵

The third stage touches the personal contribution, the conscientization of the virtue concept of frugality in day-to-day practice. How do I adapt the *optimum potentiae* to my own situation? Warren Johnson has shown us that this adaptation is not a straightforward, logical process of setting specific norms which are strictly to be followed; he calls this dynamic process «muddling towards frugality».⁵⁶ A virtue ethics approach means: The individual does not have to initiate this process. He or she does not have to invent how to live truly frugally in a given context. It might be possible to choose from and to adapt

⁵¹ Cf. F. KADAPLACKAL, *How the Idea «Created Co-Creator» Can Contribute to the Nurturing of Frugality in Economic Life*, in L. ZSOLNAI - L. BOUCKAERT - H. OPDEBEECK (eds), *Frugality*, pp. 71-93, here pp. 83-87.

⁵² Cf. N. MUNIER, *Introduction to Sustainability*, pp. 16-18.

⁵³ Cf. B. SALL, *Making a Little Go a Long Way*, p. 26.

⁵⁴ Cf. G. SCHERHORN, *Nachhaltigkeit und Kapitalismus*, p. 148; also P. EKINS, *A Subversive Idea*, p. 8.

⁵⁵ Cf. N. MUNIER, *Introduction to Sustainability*, p. 13.

⁵⁶ Cf. W. JOHNSON, *Muddling toward Frugality*, pp. 19-27.

various concepts that are already extant and have been developed by certain groups⁵⁷ (i.e. H. van Veen / R. van Eeden – the Dutch teachers of frugality;⁵⁸ the Quakers,⁵⁹ African Societies⁶⁰).

Such a social contextuality serves both as an incentive to act within a group morale and as a normative background that has to be autonomously verified according to the normative (rational) standards of universality. Growing up or decidedly living in such a social context/community helps to approach the pedagogical issues of learning how to acquire the virtue of (true) frugality.⁶¹

In this personal adaptation and creative interpretation, one thing should be borne in mind: Frugality is not a sour virtue of dry asceticism. If it does not go along with personal satisfaction and fulfilment, even a portion of joy, it will never have the chance of true implementation.⁶²

⁵⁷ Cf. *ibidem*, pp. 191-192.

⁵⁸ Cf. H. VAN VEEN - R. VAN EEDEN, *Geld oder Leben. Finanziell unabhängig und glücklich mit der Philosophie der Profis*, Landsberg am Lech 1997.

⁵⁹ Cf. L. MICHAELIS, *Quaker Simplicity*, in L. ZSOLNAI - L. BOUCKAERT - H. OPDEBEECK (eds), *Frugality*, pp. 95-122.

⁶⁰ Cf. B. SALL, *Making a Little Go a Long Way*.

⁶¹ Cf. A. ROBERTS, *Three Exceptional Figures*, pp. 15-16. In his short but interesting essay, A. Roberts introduces three «model figures» of frugality (Epictetus, Henry David Thoreau, and Mahatma Ghandi) from completely different backgrounds. Thus he gives three examples of a personal implementation of the virtue of frugality within a specific historical and philosophical context, showing the flexibility of the concept. Additionally, he stresses the pedagogical importance of «model figures» for our own adaptation.

⁶² Cf. G. SCHERHORN, *Nachhaltigkeit und Kapitalismus*, p. 151.