

Moral Particularism and Individualism – Challenging Reflection on Virtue Ethics

It has been an important place and context in which French lyricist Paul Ambroise Valéry made the following statement quite some time ago, but not so long ago: “Virtue, gentlemen, the word virtue is dead, or at least it dies out. [...] Thus it happened that the word virtue appears only in the catechism, in the burlesque, in the academy, and in operettas.”¹ No doubt, this statement on occasion of the poet’s acceptance to the Académie Française in the year 1925, sounds rather critical – and at the same time rather moderate compared to the controversial debates in preceding European intellectual history, e.g. concerning a quite intense discussion about emotion or sensuality and reasonable practical judgment in virtue ethics, with significant involvement of outstanding protagonists like Kant and Nietzsche.² Hence, one may cautiously

¹ Cited from: Georg Teichtweier, “Tugend,” Alfred Klose, Wolfgang Mantl, Valentin Zsifkovits, ed., *Katholisches Soziallexikon*, 2nd revised and extended ed. (Innsbruck, Wien, München, 1980), col. 3088-3094, here: 3088 (translation from German A.J.B.).

² A very short and systematically focused overview is presented by Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Grundlegung der Ethik. Ein theologischer Entwurf* (Freiburg im Breisgau, 2007), p. 43 ff; see also: Andreas Trampota, “Tugend,” Walter Brugger, Harald Schöndorf, ed., *Philosophisches Wörterbuch* (Freiburg im Breisgau, 2010), pp. 517-520; Jean-Pierre Wils, “Tugend,” Marcus Düwell, Christoph Hübenthal, Micha H. Werner, ed., *Handbuch Ethik*, 3rd updated ed. (Stuttgart, 2011), pp. 534-538, esp. 535 f.

question the attractiveness of choosing “virtues” as topic for today’s philosophical reflection on ethics, especially if the intention is to explore contemporary challenges of ethical importance in society and individual life. However, it’s helpful to also recall some earlier considerations by Max Scheler. Though aware of the problematic and somewhat negative connotation of “virtue,” in particular in the 18th and 19th century, Scheler emphasized a rather positive view on virtue ethics: “The time has come to stop pretending to just be the opponents of those boring citizens in the 18th century, and so to ridicule virtue. [...] Let’s instead search again for the world historic horizon of virtue.”³ It is by no means insignificant to recognize Scheler’s plea for rehabilitation of philosophical thought on virtue as an unprejudiced criticism of virtue critique. An approach like that can be seen as a token of independent thinking, of thematic openness and of methodological creativity. Taking these aspects into account, and having in mind a little more favorable view on virtues in European philosophy in the course of the second half of the 20th century, the chosen topic for a start-up of specific contemplation on ethical issues, in a trans-disciplinary and international context, may appear quite differently. It may, in fact, be seen as a courageous step to distinctly refuse unchallenged patterns of thinking and, instead, to get involved in sound philosophical discussion, and to some extent in the public discourse as well, about significant and probably crucial issues of contemporary ethical

³ Max Scheler, “Zur Rehabilitierung der Tugend,” Max Scheler, *Vom Umsturz der Werte. Abhandlungen und Aufsätze*, 5th ed. (Bern, München, 1972) [as essay published for the first time in 1913] (translation from German A.J.B.). For more about new interest in virtue ethics in the recent past (referring *inter alia* to A. MacIntyre, B. Williams, and R. Hursthouse) see: Jörn Müller, “Tugend,” Petra Kolmer, Armin G. Wildfeuer, ed., *Neues Handbuch philosophischer Grundbegriffe (NHpG)* (Freiburg im Breisgau, 2011), vol. 3, pp. 2244–2258, esp. 2251 f.

agendas. This is all the more true as the topic to be dealt with is not just virtue but more precisely “civic virtue.” – While referring primarily to Western European contexts, the following philosophical considerations would like to shed some light on a few specific areas and topics for reflection on virtues, just as a rough sketch, probably and hopefully animating for further discussion.

I. Phenomena of “New Individualism” – Some Observations

The meaningfulness, and also the significance of renewed philosophical reflection on virtues in general and more specifically on civic virtues may become more evident if we take a glance at some developments that are particularly striking in existing democratic and democratizing societies. Whatever else may be considered to belong to the main features of so-called modern or democratic societies⁴ – e.g. equal rights, separation of powers, freedom of conscience and religion, respect for minorities, access to cultural, social and economic participation etc.⁵ – it seems to be agree-

⁴ Though it would be interesting to have a more careful look at the meaning of “modern” and “modernity,” and especially at the upcoming of the respective terminology in the history of ideas, for this sketch it must suffice to point at the fact that the terms “modern” and “democratic” often substitute each other, or even appear as interchangeable terms.

⁵ Another and partly more elaborate list of characteristics for democratic societies is being mentioned by Dieter Senghaas, *How to Reorient the Intercultural Dialogue*. Speech delivered on occasion of the presentation of the Culture and Peace Award of the Villa Ichon on 17 November 2006 in the town hall of the Free Hanseatic City Bremen, <http://con-spiration.de/texte/english/2007/senghaas2-e.html>; *ibid.*, part III: “None of the achievements of civilization which are today in Europe and in the whole western world judged as fundamental for the structure and the building of a modern public order, were basic principles in the pre-

able that individualism can be called one of its characteristics. Of course, all that can be said about individualism as phenomenon would have to be reflected in a larger context of the constituent elements of what is called “modern” democratic society, including its complex roots in economic and social history and in particular in the history of ideas.⁶ However, this essay is not the place to go into this in detail.

What is also left aside in the following considerations is the quite fundamental philosophical debate on various expressions of individualism, as well as the discussion primarily in social sciences about (methodological) individualism and (holistic) concepts of society.⁷ The same applies to reflections about contractual ethical concepts (“contractualism”) referring to autonomy-based (normative) individualism.⁸ Of course, individualism is not a new phenomenon, and any effort of comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon would have to refer to in-depth research from different disciplines, both in regard to empiric analysis and theory formation, as is broadly available, including a quite sophisticated

modern old European traditional political order: The idea that all human beings were born free and equal in dignity and rights, with the consequence of protection of individual fundamental rights and equality before the law, equality of the sexes, separation of powers, freedom of religion, minority rights [...].

⁶ For more on this see Alois Joh. Buch, “Wiederentdeckung des Religiösen? Eine Herausforderung der Moralthologie,” *Studia Teologiczno-Historyczne Śląska Opolskiego* 27 (2007), pp. 257-282.

⁷ For a brief overview see: Michael Bösch, “Individuum,” Petra Kolmer, Armin G. Wildfeuer, ed., *Neues Handbuch*, vol. 2, pp. 1227-1237, esp. 1231. Regarding “methodological” individualism see also Eilert Herms, “Individualismus, methodologischer,” *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart (RGG)*, vol. 4, 4th revised ed. (Tübingen, 2001), col. 108 f.

⁸ Cf. Wolfgang Kersting, “Kontraktualismus,” Marcus Düwell, Christoph Hübenenthal, Micha H. Werner, ed., *Handbuch Ethik*, pp. 163-168.

debate.⁹ Not least, this most interesting debate concerns various attempts to provide explanations of the meaning of individualism as well as insights into its sociological and historical background, in particular with regard to the role of the individual and society respectively to the kind of interaction between the two.¹⁰ However, by its primarily philosophical intention this essay will not really discuss the complexity of backgrounds of individualism, even not the respective philosophical reflection on processes of

⁹ For historic backgrounds concerning individualism as term, and also in regard to respective ethical connotations and theoretical concepts primarily in the history of social philosophy in Europe, see A. Rauscher, "Individualismus," Joachim Ritter, Karlfried Gründer, ed., *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie (HWP)*, vol. 4, (Basel (Switzerland), 1976), col. 289-291; also: Wilhelm Gräb, "Individualismus," *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, col. 107 f; special reference in the respective debate is made to collectivism as the other side of individualism – see Matthias Heesch, "Individualethik," *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, col. 103-106, esp. 103; Hans-Ludwig Ollig, "Individualismus," Walter Brugger, Harald Schöndorf, ed., *Philosophisches Wörterbuch*, p. 222 f.

¹⁰ See A. Rauscher, "Individualismus," *HWP*, vol. 4, esp. col. 290. In the German speaking sociological debate special reference is made to research by Ulrich Beck (see e.g. Ulrich Beck, Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *Individualization. Institutionalized Individualism and its Social and Political Consequences*, (London (UK), Thousand Oaks (USA), New Delhi (India), 2002) – <http://sal.uniriotec.br/livros/BECK,%20Ulrich%20&%20BECK-GERNSCHEIM,%20Elisabeth.%20Individualization.pdf>, esp. the essay on: "Losing the Traditional: Individualization and 'Precarious Freedoms'," *ibid.*, pp. 2-21, and also the Authors' Foreword on "Institutionalized Individualism," *ibid.*, xx-xxv); explicit reference to this debate is made by Michael Bösch, "Individuum," Petra Kolmer, Armin G. Wildfeuer, ed., *Neues Handbuch*, esp. p. 1231 f, also by Urs Hafner, "Individualismus," *Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz* (Bern, 1998-2012) – <http://www.hls-dhs-dss.ch/textes/d/D27292.php> – and also, with special emphasis on ethical implications, by Hartmut Rosa, "Kommunitarismus," Marcus Düwell, Christoph Hübenthal, Micha H. Werner, ed., *Handbuch Ethik*, pp. 218-230, esp. 218.

individualization in modern times, though all this could be quite revealing.¹¹ Instead, based on a phenomenological approach, in this essay for a start individualism is understood simply as an observable phenomenon, i.e. as a kind of “neutral” part of social reality, namely in terms of a way of life and a kind of concept which intentionally and to a certain extent exclusively focuses on the individual as such and on its personal opportunities for designing one’s life, for decision making, and for action – *and* within which society does appear to be precisely just the framework of strictly individualized conduct of life. As a rule, both in theory and practice, this kind of individualism includes the idea that “the individual would take priority over society as a whole.”¹²

Special emphasis on the individual, as is also shaping any kind of individualism, is of course of particular significance for democratic societies.¹³ More precisely, this is true in a twofold dimension: Firstly, because democratic societies are based on the conviction

¹¹ For more see Karl-Fritz Daiber, “Individualisierung. I. Begriff,” *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, col. 106; Alois Joh. Buch, “Wiederentdeckung des Religiösen?”, esp. pp. 267-276.

¹² Hans-Ludwig Ollig, “Individualismus,” p. 222 f, esp. 222: “Der I[n]dividualismus] geht von einem Vorrang des Individuums gegenüber dem sozialen Ganzen aus.” (translation A.J.B.) – Cf. also Anton Rauscher, “Individualismus”, esp. p. 290.

¹³ Emphasis on the core role of the “individual” or the “individual” person in democratic societies is quite evident, in this regard also content and meaning of these terms seem to be clear too. However, philosophical reflection about individual and individuality shows rather varied expressions – a comprehensive overview on the respective history of philosophical thought is provided in a broad article: “Individuum, Individualität,” *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, col. 300-323; the part focusing on “Neuzeit” (by T. Borsche, *ibid.*, col. 310-323) deserves special attention, not least since it mentions quite interesting lines of thought that tend to individualistic ideas, especially in F. Nietzsche’s thought and also in some discourses in the 20th century.

that each person has “individual rights” (e.g. the right to freedom of expression, to freedom of faith etc.); on the other hand, one can notice an increasing claim in Western societies for a “right to live up *exclusively* and *rigidly* to individuality.” This claim, which to some extent probably mirrors remarkable social differentiation, tends to go clearly beyond the right to self-determination and autonomous living, as is basic and has to be guaranteed in democratic societies.¹⁴ However, what can be described as a sort of exclusive and rigid individualistic approach means much more, and also aims at something else, namely at demanding and enabling a kind of self-realization that is entirely individual-centered, or at best focused on a limited group of individuals, and that in any case is guided by individual interests and personal preferences only. On the other hand, this approach and the respective expression of a rather exaggerated individualism show itself as socially somewhat uninterested, probably almost insensitive, not to say in fact ignorant. Thus, also for reasons of terminological differentiation, this phenomenon should be called “new individualism”. This essay would like to address only a few select aspects and discuss also some ethically problematic implications precisely of this kind of “new individualism”, with a limited scope, and hence with respective conclusiveness.

“New individualism” as just sketched, which has a quite different profile compared to respective theories about individual and society in history of European cultural and intellectual history, like e.g. in European liberalism and Enlightenment,¹⁵ can be noticed

¹⁴ This right is supposed not just to be guaranteed all and everybody in general, it is also being applied to, and confirmed explicitly and specifically for, persons with special needs.

¹⁵ Reference to this is made by Eilert Herms, “Individualismus, methodologischer,” esp. p. 108. Regarding Enlightenment in social and intellectual European history, philosophical reflection on “autonomy” is of special importance – for

in nowadays Western Europe as an increasingly upcoming phenomenon, but not really geographically limited and thus as a more and more globalizing phenomenon. Actually, similar to any kind of individualism, also this specific new individualism appears on the one hand as a kind of practiced attitude to life or “lifestyle” and almost as a specific life culture, and on the other hand as a kind of programmatic idea with more or less elaborated theoretical underpinnings. In practical terms, and ethically speaking this is rather important, this new individualism exceeds the democratic competition and fight of interest groups and of sophisticated lobbying; it also differs from societal discourse about preferably fair and just balancing of interests as is usual in democratic societies. Instead, “new individualism” at first glance seems to engage in nothing else than pushing through one’s specific interests, sometimes by hook or crook, often at any cost and consequently with apparent aggression against others. Examples for this would be the creation of not transparent structures of decision making which serve only the interests of very few, bypassing of course democratic structures and processes, and also the publicly expressed demand of some liberalistic groups to favor economically and politically in particular the opportunities and interests that would serve self-development and

more see. For more see Michael Pauen, “Autonomie,” Petra Kolmer, Armin G. Wildfeuer, ed., *Neues Handbuch*, vol. 1, pp. 254-264, esp. 255. – Nota bene: there are indications for a certain relation between the concept of liberalism in European intellectual history and what in this essay is being called “new individualism”, cf. A. Rauscher, “Individualismus,” esp. p. 289 f. – Regarding liberalism as a phenomenon of economic, social and cultural history in Europe and Northern America, with special focus on its historical roots, on its relationship with Enlightenment as well as on its various perceptions and interpretations, see an informative overview by Lothar Gall, “Liberalismus,” *Staatslexikon*, ed. by Gorres-Gesellschaft, vol. 5, 7th entirely revised ed. (Freiburg i.Br., 1987), col. 916-921.

life chances of part of the young generation to the evident disadvantage of the elderly.¹⁶ These and other phenomena alike are not completely new, but can be observed more clearly and seem to become increasingly common in today's societies. Somehow self-contradictory they even tend to socialize "new individualism,"¹⁷ and – what is particularly striking – they are increasingly gaining acceptance in the general public too, or at least are facing only limited public dissent. The underlying theoretical elements are to provide arguments in favour of individualism as a core idea of democratic societies which as such are supposed to guarantee personal rights and self-development of each individual. However, within new individualistic thought these arguments, and even more individualistic practice, are often being developed as implicit contradiction or explicit confrontation to any concept that would claim to sensibly combine the efforts for individual rights and requirements on the one hand *and* a sound concept of civil society on the other hand. A concept of this kind would above all include balancing individual and social rights and obligations, but in case of conflict between the two it would also mean to limit individual interests and requirements in view of legitimate interests of society

¹⁶ This pattern can particularly be seen in the public discourse about health economics in general and about the high financial investment for medical care in increasingly ageing societies in particular.

¹⁷ In Western Europe one can see political pressure groups coming up that by their way of presentation show themselves as being driven by individualistic views on society, committing themselves "socially" to create a publicly efficient forum for almost purely individualistic concepts and to avoid any legislation that does not stick to, or would endanger, these concepts (cf. phenomena like the shift from lobbying to lobbyism, new individualistically focused pressure groups in the public discourse, extremely liberalistic statements and programs concerning social problems, also new political parties with rather individualistic programmatic orientation in the respective spectrum in Western Europe).

as a whole, as e.g. to a certain extent the concept of “social market economy” claims to achieve by orienting economy towards serving the individual as well as the common good.

Of course, like all concepts that contain attractive prospects for the development of one’s personal shaping of life, also this kind of “modern individualism” may tend both in theory and practice to exclusively focus on fostering for what it stands, which in this case naturally would mean to bring about a variety of “new individualisms.” Using the plural in this respect is a clear hint at pluralism as a kind of downside of individualism. Even though these individualisms are perceived, lived out and valued as a dominant characteristic or the main criteria of one’s personal choice, their exclusive individualistic focus nevertheless includes not seldom a high commitment to promoting the respective concepts as a core and in a sense ultimate goal of modern societies – but at the same time it contains a commitment to defend related interests, if necessary by fighting other concepts that are considered as a threat.

II. Particularism in the Context of Individualism

New individualism – while claiming to be also a characteristic product of democracy and while to some extent making the significance of social life to take a back seat within a specifically pointed concept of “individualized society” – in its extreme forms and as far as it shows sometimes a doctrinaire tendency may become in some way anti-social if not to some extent undemocratic, especially by consciously or unconsciously emphasizing a segregational model of society and by serving primarily particularistic purposes, i.e. serving exclusively the welfare or happiness of a limited and separated segment in society. It has to be stressed that such emphasis very often is individually based but not strictly individualistic, because it

may represent the specific priorities and interests of a rather small group of individualistically-minded persons. One should add, the more such forms of individualistic lifestyle become the characteristic attitude of small groups quasi closed upon themselves, the more they may be efficient in living out their philosophy of life and the more they may also be perceived in social terms as segregating or particularistic. Thus, in a way particularism as considered here indicates the other side of “new individualism”, now being viewed merely from a social and cultural perspective.

Particularism of this segregational kind is of course not a necessary ingredient or even an unavoidable consequence of any kind of individualism as such. However, the phenomenology of “new individualism” provides some indication concerning a kind of inherent tendency to particularism. Once individualism in theory and/or practice presents itself as main or almost exclusive framework of looking at and perceiving reality – nota bene: the individual as well as the social and societal reality – it may result in a kind of rather narrowed view on human life, based on purely individualized prospects for life and on particular goals only. From a less individualistic point of view, and purposely taking into consideration the exciting relationship between individual and society, one can easily notice a number of socially segregating and particularizing side-effects and implications from this sort of *exclusive* “new individualism”, though these effects may be influenced from other backgrounds and factors too. Such effects have been presented in various ways, and different terms were used for them, each of which emphasizes some specific aspects of more or less the same matter. Three of them shall be mentioned, not for a closer look at the respective accompanying theories, but just for the sake of insight into the phenomenological context of these terms and thus for further clarification of the significance of particularism in the context of individualism.

(1) *Segregation*: This term does not only represent forms of an increasing institutionalization of economic and social gaps within a local community or in society at large (like access to high standards of health care and high quality education etc.). Segregation also refers to processes of displacement of socially less privileged persons and groups, as is phenomenologically recognizable for instance in form of gentrification as a kind of spatial division of social and economic milieus, including proliferation of slums, in particular in large European cities.

(2) *Social heterogeneity*: This term is meant to underline significant social and economic gaps and differences between individual members of a community, within a society, or even between different societies, economies and cultures. Primarily from an economic point of view it is also called “structural heterogeneity” in order to indicate economic factors underlying these gaps and differences.¹⁸ However, since various sectors of societal life are closely interrelated, any societal structure and social cohesion do not remain untouched by economic structures. As mentioned by Dieter Senghaas, though primarily arguing in a world-wide perspective, the “well-known consequence of this structure [...] as a rule consists in an accentuated gap between rich and poor, between being privileged and being pushed in the edge in *one and the same society*.”¹⁹ Consequently one may also speak of “social

¹⁸ D. Senghaas refers explicitly to this term and its background (i.e. development research), by which “a social and economic structure is labeled in which different, hierarchically structured levels of productivity and ways of production interlace with each other” (Dieter Senghaas, *How to Reorient the Intercultural Dialogue*, part I).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, part I. – In the context of globalization, regarding non-EU or OECD-countries he has added: “*The well-known social disasters of developing countries around which since the sixties of the last century the discussion about development policy has resolved, are thus accentuated*” (*ibid.*).

heterogeneity,” or even more generally of “cultural heterogeneity.”²⁰ The latter would include also “different mental and cultural orientations,”²¹ again individually and socially. In some special relation to processes of globalization such differences and gaps can clearly be observed in societies in transition and specifically in developing societies.²² In the meantime, for several reasons,²³ similar processes and effects of heterogeneity are being perceived within European societies too, as a phenomenon in the context of increasing social gaps.²⁴

(3) *Eroding solidarity/non-solidarity (Entsolidarisierung/Desolidarisierung)*: This term indicates quite a number of observations concerning (Western) European societies, namely trends, pro-

²⁰ This term was used by Dieter Senghaas, *How to Reorient the Intercultural Dialogue*, part II: “*But as a rule displacement competition – not otherwise than in economy – leads to the development of structural heterogeneity now culturally.*”

²¹ *Ibid.*, part II.

²² It is precisely Dieter Senghaas who develops his argument on heterogeneity from a particular view on so-called “developing societies” (*ibid.*, part II).

²³ Regarding reasons, the public discourse as well as experts point at complex issues and contexts, like the global economic crisis which makes more evident also a crisis of the social welfare concept of European states (including the financial viability of the social systems e.g. in areas like pension, health, education etc.), or they point at many-sided aspects of “intercultural” and “interreligious” realities and conflicts within multicultural societies as is usually the case particularly in Western, Northern and Southern Europe.

²⁴ Just to mention an interesting observation in regard to a change in terminology especially in European societies: The terms “minority” and “majority” seem to have undergone a major shift in meaning. “Minority,” usually applied to socially disadvantaged or less privileged persons, is more and more applied to the economically and politically powerful “social elite” which usually is small in numbers – whereas, on reverse, the term “majority” is used more frequently for a growing number or even a major part of society being characterized as socially underprivileged and culturally marginalized.

cesses, and changes in personal opinions and preferences as well as in individual behavior which all have a common denominator in diminishing solidarity. From a different perspective, this term also describes the other side or the complementary counterpart as an outcome of a shift from value and action orientation which is based on solidarity to a focus on individualist concepts of life and particularistic purposes which subsequently lose sight of solidarity. Based on surveys and statistics, social scientists as well as philosophers and experts in sociology of religion have tried to enlighten and understand the context of “eroding solidarity”. As part of these efforts, at the end of the 20th century Paul M. Zulehner in his essays on sociological surveys from Austria²⁵ explicitly pointed out the close relation between “eroding solidarity” and diminishing commitment to justice in society on the one hand and on the other hand a new individualism, within which maintaining and securing one’s acquired rights and individual prosperity is a prime concern, and even happiness as a value “was simply privatized.”²⁶

It can be concluded, in a nutshell, that these terms and the “reality” and phenomena they represent point at the same observation, namely at rather efficient processes in parts of contemporary

²⁵ For this Zulehner refers to a survey-based study: P. M. Zulehner, H. Denz, M. Beham, C. Friesl, *Vom Untertan zum Freiheitskünstler. Eine Kulturdiagnose an Hand der Studien “Religion im Leben der Österreicher 1970–1990” und der “Europäischen Wertestudie – Österreichteil 1990”* (Wien, 1992) (cf. Paul M. Zulehner, *Ein Obdach der Seele. Geistliche Übungen – nicht nur für fromme Zeitgenossen*, 4th ed. (Düsseldorf, 1995), pp. 68 and 122).

²⁶ See Paul M. Zulehner, *Ein Obdach der Seele*, p. 68 f, where he uses the term “reliable solidarity” that apparently is missing in society: “*However, empiric research show a dramatic lack of person-related reliable solidarity. Our culture of freedom is being characterized to a large extent by ‘individualization’ and ‘privatization’. Happiness and misery, too, are being privatized nowadays*” (ibid., p. 68; translation A.J.B.).

democratic societies that are driven by exaggerated individualism and that lead to a social environment which is at least partly shaped by pursuit of particularistic purposes and interests. This observation is to quite some extent applicable particularly also to societies in Western Europe, probably even with a perspective of further “disintegration as consequence of globalization.”²⁷

III. Ethical Impact of Individualism and Particularism

Looking at that kind of processes that contribute *de facto* or intend purposely to foster new individualism and societal particularism one can hardly deny a certain proximity or even a direct link to ethical components. Because of the complex and multifold relation between society and individual the meaning of society cannot reasonably be reduced to just being the means of individual self-realization. Not only is society in different aspects a “condition of possibility” of developing even any individualism and particularism, also their practical implications in terms of acting according to exaggerated individualism and particularistic purposes are built on strong interrelation between individual and society.²⁸ As is known from fundamental ethical reflection, any kind of human action has a basic moral component; in a certain sense it contains a

²⁷ Dieter Senghaas, *How to Reorient the Intercultural Dialogue*, part I, puts it in a bit more detailed way: “*There are definitely signs that this procedure: social heteronomy resp. disintegration as consequence of globalization will within the coming one or two decades also seize the old industrialized countries – although not to the same extent.*”

²⁸ See Wilhelm Gräb, “Individualismus,” *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, esp. p. 108; the author explicitly points at the possible (mis-) understanding of individualism as “autistic” or “egotistic” (ibid.).

moral point of view,²⁹ if only because human action always is based on specific intentions and decisions and never remains independent from preferences and value judgments of others. This becomes even more evident from analyses of individualism and particularism as such, since in theory as well as in practice they are closely connected with a specific value orientation. Therefore, while noticing that contemporary western democracy offers an ideal framework to live up to pure individualism and hence may support or even create a sort of “structural non-solidarity,” Paul Zulehner clearly emphasizes the awareness of “a close relation of solidarity and freedom.”³⁰ According to him “solidarity is a person’s ‘being good for’, an ability, a competence and thus a virtue. It enables persons to strongly engage for a fairer distribution of life chances.”³¹ What this could mean in terms of desirable options can easily be shown for different areas in contemporary European societies, like intergenerational solidarity in family life, education of children, care for the dying, and protection of the unborn etc.³² In a way contrary to this vision of solidarity, “new individualism” as phenomenon, especially in

²⁹ What is also left aside in this essay is the fundamental debate about the “moral point of view” as ingredient or prerequisite of any human action; a brief overview on this is presented by Katrin Misselhorn, “Moral point of view,” Marcus Düwell, Christoph Hübenthal, Micha H. Werner, ed., *Handbuch Ethik*, pp. 431-434 (esp. p. 433 regarding virtue ethics in this context).

³⁰ See Paul Zulehner, *Ein Obdach der Seele*, p. 65: “Immer klarer ist uns heute, daß nur eine Verbindung zwischen Freiheit und Solidarität auch die Freiheit sichert” (translation A.J.B.).

³¹ Paul Zulehner, *Ein Obdach der Seele*, p. 65: “Solidarität ist eine Tauglichkeit des Menschen, eine Fähigkeit, eine Kompetenz und so gesehen eine Tugend. Sie macht einen Menschen fähig, sich starkzumachen für eine gerechtere Verteilung der Lebenschancen ...” (translation A.J.B.).

³² Cf. Paul Zulehner, *Ein Kind in ihrer Mitte* (Wien, 1999), esp. pp. 67 ff, 75 ff, 83-88, 95-100.

connection with in some way related phenomena like segregation, societal heterogeneity or non-solidarity, often shows itself closely linked to what may be called “ethical particularism.” It has to be stressed that ethical particularism addressed in this context does not refer to the well-known specific ethical reflection and debate concerning particular areas or sectors of applied ethics, like business ethics, environmental ethics, medical ethics etc.³³ Of course, one may argue that a kind of particularity seems to be more or less a characteristic of any ethical reflection or theory that is dealing with moral issues in certain fields of decision making and action. For reasons of terminological clarity, this general aspect of any applied ethics should preferably be labeled with the term “specific ethics” or “sectoral ethics,” whereas *ethical particularism* would be connoted to a concept of action focused on individual pursuit of specific purposes and interests *in society*, with rather limited moral involvement *for society* as such and especially with a lack of sense for the common good. In its extreme form this would also imply to look at democracy primarily as a means of, and at society just as framework for (sometimes brutal) enforcement of interests of individuals or of certain groups within society that have ways, resources and abilities to achieve their objectives.³⁴

However, it has to be also mentioned that a critical and open view at this issue will also reveal a certain involvement with some

³³ In the German speaking ethical discourse one would find the term “Bereichsethik” indicating what is meant by “specific ethics,” “individual areas of ethics,” and “specific and applied ethics”; whereas an equivalent term covering the entire sector of “applied ethics” (which may contain quite a number of individual areas of ethics, or even all areas of that kind) would be named “spezielle Moral” (predominantly used also in theological ethics).

³⁴ For a brief and dense overview on the ethical impact of individualism and particularism see A. Rauscher, “Individualismus,” esp. p. 290.

more general ethical connotation which is closely connected to individualistic and particularistic action and thought. It shows itself as exceeding pure individual or group-centered intentions and thus opens up to commitment in a broader perspective of social life.³⁵ Although and because such a commitment is often clearly based on a personally chosen set of values and thus remains basically in line with, and even would prove the underlying individualistic approach, it may contain quite remarkable dedication on a personal level too. Potential reasons for this most probably include the fact that this kind of personal commitment is perceived as deriving almost solely from personal conviction and individual choice and thus not as being induced by external motivation and in particular not by ethical traditions or moral institutions.³⁶ In short, in its concrete expressions the relation of individualism and morality shows itself quite differentiated.

Nevertheless, a close eye on more or less *purely* individualistically driven moral commitment, that is being expressed specifically as a kind of rather limited and segregated individualistic or group morality, allows to notice a still deeper dimension of potential ethical impact of certain forms of individualism and particularism. This dimension becomes phenomenologically apparent if strong moral dedication to select areas of individual life and action is

³⁵ Just to mention a few areas of such commitments that seem to be very common: involvement in special sports activities, participation in social events, contribution to cultural or political campaigns etc.

³⁶ Explicit reference to this context is made by Wilhelm Gräß, "Individualismus," esp. p. 108; for more on this see Alois Joh. Buch, "Growing Interest in Religion? – Decreasing Impact of Christian Ethics?" *Naukovi zapysky Ukrainskoho Katolytskoho Universytetu*, no. III: *Philosophy*, 1 (Lviv, 2012), pp. 247-262; see also, with a different approach but partly comparable conclusions, Hans Joas, "Führt Säkularisierung zum Moralverfall? Einige empirische Überlegungen," *Stimmen der Zeit* (StdZ), 230 (2012), pp. 291-304.

inconsistently combined with remarkable limits of openness for, or even with explicit denial of ethical significance of other areas.³⁷ Ethically meaningful particularism can also be expressed as pursuit of interests in select areas of politics, without actually caring for the overall social, economic, ecologic etc. environment.

Thus, what is much more common in democratic European societies and what therefore is also addressed in the public discourse about social challenges and respective duties of its members, is a quite obvious firm reluctance of individual protagonists or of particular groups in society towards commitment to social cohesion, or a sort of individualistic or joint retreat into the private sphere, which anyway is consequently fostering moral particularism. The latter, though individually perceived as morally justified by personal interests and values serving one's very own or a limited cohort's happiness, can ethically be seen as a significant threat to social cohesion that over time would lead to remarkable disintegration of society into particular interests.³⁸

Overall, reflection on obvious trends to individualism and its inclination to particularistic effects reveals a lot of moral aspects and challenges in contemporary societies, in particular in Western Europe. To those being sensitive and also interested in such matters, like all kinds of ethicists, this enriches the agenda of ethical

³⁷ For example, one can easily see moral dedication to environmental preservation going together with taking a stand against care for the aged; or to artificial human fertilization combined with arguing against protection of the unborn; or to rights for animals while ignoring the issue of rights for persons with special needs, etc.

³⁸ For a critical approach both towards individualism and particularism, including ethical criteria for such criticism, see Marianne Heimbach-Steins, "Menschenrechte der Frauen. Universaler Anspruch und kontextbezogene Konkretisierung," *Stimmen der Zeit*, 224 (2006), pp. 546-561, esp. p. 556 (also in English: <http://www.con-spiration.de/texte/2006/right.html>).

reflection – not the least and especially in regard to basic ethical ingredients of democratic and participatory civil society.

IV. Challenges for Reflection on Virtue Ethics and on Civic Virtue – and a Suggestion

From a more general point of view, partly beyond individualistic reluctance towards social involvement, the just mentioned phenomenon can be described as a kind of rather widespread *moral lethargy*, despite a noticeable interest in communal activities and social events. Its characteristics are a quite remarkable lack of moral awareness and attention, or, even more challenging, a kind of hesitation or refusal to engage morally, especially in social areas. Ethically speaking, this is one of the most striking and challenging phenomena in those societies that show intensive individualizing processes. Since that kind of moral lethargy concerns both ethical thought and concrete moral commitment in an even broader sense than the just mentioned individualistically driven reluctance towards social involvement, it is still a bit unclear and hence remains a matter of more in-depth analysis and reflection in how far and in which way the phenomena of new individualism and moral lethargy are interrelated. Research on this would of course have to look more closely also at further backgrounds of and deeper reasons for nowadays' moral lethargy, in particular in processes of social, economic and intellectual history in Europe.³⁹

³⁹ There are good reasons to assume that characteristic developments in the area of religion in Europe, and related to that in particular an increasing lack of institutional backing of Christian ethical thought, had quite some impact on what has brought about phenomena like moral lethargy. – For more on religion in Europe see José Casanova, "Die religiöse Lage in Europe," Hans Joas, Klaus Wiegandt, *Säkularisierung und die Weltreligionen* (Frankfurt am Main,

However, and in spite of some sort of ethically based activism in the socio-political arena,⁴⁰ democratic societies are facing such moral lethargy specifically in societal matters, and they have to cope with it – and this in addition to taking up challenges from the above mentioned limitations and social inadequacies of more or less purely interest-driven “new individualism” and particularism. An attitude of somehow fundamental moral lethargy may occur just as a passive stance, probably out of habit, or as a kind of active intention to basically refrain from moral involvement in society and leaving it intentionally to others. In any case, the lack as well as the refusal of moral awareness endanger reasonable decision making according to ethical requirements and subsequent responsible action, or they tend to make reasonable moral decision and action impossible, and ultimately may lead to a kind of oblivion of morality and moral values (“moralische Gleichgültigkeit” or “Wertverlust” and “Wertvergessen”) as Nicolai Hartmann, one of the last century’s phenomenological ethicists, would have put it.⁴¹ In public debates one can find this summarized in a rather simplified manner, by saying that a part of society simply is doing nothing but fighting for specific privileges or securing its rights

2007), pp. 322-357; Alois Joh. Buch, “Wiederentdeckung des Religiösen?”, esp. pp. 259-267.

⁴⁰ It is rather interesting to see that such activism is partly shaped by individualistic patterns too. In an exemplary form this can be noticed in some areas of human medicine and related medical ethics, e.g. in regard to calling for the right to suicide resp. to calling for services of so-called “merciful killing”, but also concerning public campaigns for reduced health services for the elderly; similarly, one could mention areas like the call for the right of abortion of handicapped unborn, which may tend to become a debate about a kind of duty or even an “obligation”, in order to relieve society from helping to carry respective concerns and sufferings etc.

⁴¹ Nicolai Hartmann, *Ethik*, 4th ed. (Berlin, 1962), pp. 16 and 49, see also 156, 808 ff.

and benefits while at the same time denying or even refusing any duties beyond that – and that a growing number of citizens do not really care about that creeping development to dodge collective obligations and thus seem literally to belong to a silent majority.

In this respect, in total the phenomena of noticeable moral lethargy together with increasing and exaggerating individualism in connection with particularistic effects can be considered as potential or real major threat to the functionality and sustainability of civil society, or to its further development and stabilization. One should not forget that civil society cannot just be implemented by order or by way of assigning obligations, nor is it a matter of self-implementation guaranteed simply by the existence of a somehow democratic framework. Instead, as is also obvious particularly from philosophical ethics, civil society depends on free and voluntary participation, and it remains a permanent challenge and an ongoing task. That is precisely why major concerns may be addressed in regard to ethical implications of extreme individualism and its particularistic effects as well as of a more general moral lethargy as just mentioned. These concerns relate in particular to what is called indispensable social and ethical foundations of respectful living together, of communal life, of shared solidarity, of a just society, and of peaceful global coexistence. In other words, these concerns refer to a culture of life, that would not just allow but attract participation of each and everybody and thus would encourage the development of personal talents and the creative contribution of individual competencies for the community, but for the sake of the common good would also set limits to inappropriate enforcement of individualistic interests and particularistic action. From the differentiated discussion about concepts and advancement of the common good, and also from insights into the complexity of democratic societies one can reasonably conclude that civil society urgently relies *inter*

alia on sound commitment of its members, which in any case includes a moral dimension. Sound commitment of this kind would foster a sort of civil culture, which besides offering the framework of transparent discourse about the basic orientation and related value dimensions of society would consequentially “advertise” development opportunities of civil society. With a particular view to develop or improve civil society, special efforts seem to be rather meaningful to (re)discover and elaborate *significant civic virtues that could suit the respective society in its specific historic and cultural context* and that could serve to attract concrete commitment as part of active citizenship and political correctness.⁴²

Taking this into consideration, moral lethargy or refusal to engage morally beyond a strictly limited pursuit of individual interest, would be just the opposite of what civil society is reliant on. If this refusal is to be understood as expression of one’s strong and deliberate conviction, its ethical implication seems to be quite obvious: probably having started with a kind of decision and action, deliberately or otherwise, it would develop towards a kind of habitual stance of refusing to participate in socially significant decision making and respective action. Notwithstanding the fact that even refusal of whatever social commitment has of course implicit social impact, the attitude that is underlying both new individualism and more general moral lethargy in individualizing societies, namely to opt for staying off *by principle* from social commitment and to leave

⁴² Advertising the idea of civil society as such would e.g. require respective efforts in education and formation, of course according to its ethical implications without any indoctrination and thus calling for free consent. In regard to more concrete content and design of civic virtues the respective historic and contextual aspect seems to be of great importance; that’s why even common terms like generosity, helpfulness, tolerance, etc. may still be too general and would have to be further specified within a respective context.

the societal tasks to others instead of making one's own hands socially dirty, is of considerable ethical importance since it can be seen as the expression of basic "denial of responsibility".

In terms of virtue ethics an attitude of this kind would be called a vice. In this regard, as an outcome of phenomenological analysis, also and in particular excessive individualism and particularism to a certain extent provide an "appropriate setting" to serve literally a kind of "vicious circle". Though at first glance they seem to strengthen the role and the living of individuals within society, they in fact endanger fundamentally the basic ethical structure of democratic societies and at the same time weaken the capabilities of individual self-realization, at least in the end, since individual well-being and well-fare in society in any case are linked by complex interrelationships. To quite some extent moral lethargy in general is of the same problematic nature, though probably at first sight in a less obvious way. Therefore, as an aside and without going into further details in this context, it can reasonably be presumed that both the denial of responsibility and the renewed interest in virtues, as indicated above, are also mirroring some core features of "modern society."⁴³ Anyway, from another point of view and

⁴³ For example, and *pars pro toto*, just two keywords indicating such features can be mentioned, namely an overall idea of "feasibility" that prevailed and partly still prevails in almost all sectors of human life, but also the concrete realization of the concept of "social welfare state." Both are in some way characteristic for Western European societies, and both are not really inspiring any awareness for virtues, nor individual commitment and action; instead, "feasibility" may suggest the availability of simply technical means and solutions for each and every individual and societal problem, the development of an exaggerating social welfare state may suggest personal initiative to be outdated or superfluous. – See more on this: Aloys Buch, "Die Zukunft Europas als Aufgabe. Dimensionen christlicher Verantwortung," P. Jaskóla, R. Porada, ed., *Ad plenam unitatem* (=Festschrift Alfons Nossol) (Opole, 2002), pp. 105-125, esp. 107-111.

particularly with respect to challenges and opportunities, in times of a partly excessive individualism and societal particularism, and in view of apparent moral lethargy, a quite different attitude seems to be required which may be called “readiness for responsibility” (“Verantwortungsbereitschaft”). As an attitude which is part of the driving forces of moral motivation, practical judgment, decision and action, “readiness for responsibility” can be considered a kind of basic virtue, particularly in societies that are characterized by very individualized ways of life or that are about to increasingly and excessively individualize.⁴⁴

At least, good reasons can be given for looking at “readiness for responsibility” in this way, and also for the suggestion to consider it as basic virtue. One of these reasons is that in practical terms this virtue would include both the creation or sharpening of a good sense of responsibility *and* the willingness to assume concrete personal responsibility – quite literally, which means to respond conscientiously as a moral subject to the moral call to engage for the ought-to-do and the ought-to-be and to act accordingly, as can be expressed following Nicolai Hartmann’s phenomenology based terminology,⁴⁵ and as can be taken from

⁴⁴ For more comprehensive reflection on this see: “Bereitschaft zur Verantwortung. Reflexionen über eine christliche Grund-Tugend,” *Studia Teologiczno-Historyczne Śląska Opolskiego* 27 (2007), pp. 125-139, esp. 133-139.

⁴⁵ Cf. Nicolai Hartmann, *Ethik*, esp. pp. 170-189; though Hartmann presents a special concept and understanding of values, his phenomenological insights into ought-to-be and ought-to-do are quite revealing as such, irrespective the accompanying phenomenology of values; for more on this see: Alois Joh. Buch, *Wert – Wertbewußtsein – Wertgeltung. Grundlagen und Grundprobleme der Ethik Nicolai Hartmann* (=Abhandlungen zur Philosophie, Psychologie und Pädagogik, vol. 164) (Bonn, 1982), esp. pp. 136-160.

detailed analysis of Kant's categorical imperative,⁴⁶ or from phenomenological reflection on decision of conscience.⁴⁷ Moreover, while not entering the debate about Kantian criticism of virtue as an habitual attitude vs. an "acquired ability,"⁴⁸ it does not appear too ambitious to argue that "readiness for responsibility" as a virtue does not only fit well to the central ethical role of the moral subject, and furthermore that it does not contradict but fosters essential options of individualizing concepts of life and self-realization, and thus even is compatible with concepts of socially committed moderate individualism. To a certain extent, this argumentation may also be applied to ethical virtues in general as personally adapted moral attitudes which *as such* offer quite some space for individual shaping. This inherent relation to individual creativity is presumably one of the reasons why some renewed attention is put on concepts of virtue ethics also in Western Europe currently and in the recent past. But there is more to it than that, especially in regard of appropriateness and efficiency of ethical theory. In his fundamental reflections on virtue ethics Eberhard Schockenhoff, while referring intensively also to Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, shows that virtue ethics is based on a "concept

⁴⁶ See e.g. Immanuel Kant, "Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten" (BA 52), Werke in zehn Bänden (Darmstadt, 1975), vol. 6, pp. 11-102, esp. 51; regarding philosophical analysis of the categorical imperative, see Jörg Splett, "Wenn es Gott nicht gibt, ist alles erlaubt?" *Zur theo-logischen Dimension des sittlichen Bewußtseins*, in: W. Kerber, ed., *Das Absolute in der Ethik*, München 1991, pp. 131-178, esp. 141-143 and 169-174.

⁴⁷ See Alois Joh. Buch, "Vergewisserung des Gewissens. Zu Bedeutung und Deutung des sittlichen Urphanomens," J. Schmidt et. al., ed., *Mitdenken über Gott und den Menschen* (=Festschrift Jörg Splett) (Münster, 2001), pp. 121-135, esp. 123-126.

⁴⁸ For a brief summary in this regard see Andreas Trampota, "Tugend," Walter Brugger, Harald Schondorf, ed., *Philosophisches Wörterbuch*, p. 519.

of good” that can overcome the “antagonism of self-interest and interest of others,” mainly because such a concept integrates individual motivation and moral standards.⁴⁹

Reaching this point, it becomes more and more obvious that suggesting “readiness for responsibility” as a basic virtue in respect to moral commitment for and within civil society implies some quite relevant problems and challenges for further reflection. Just to mention a few of them:

- To describe a virtue like “readiness for responsibility” as basic in regard to the moral foundation of today’s democratic societies means of course something else than to call for another cardinal virtue. However, “readiness for responsibility” can in fact be seen, ethically as a core element in terms of being crucial for fostering societal involvement and in particular for developing civic virtues. Even if one leaves aside any idea concerning a potential system of virtues, which time and again has been an issue of interest in the history of virtue ethics, quite some more insight could be gained from detailed studies on the ethical meaning of virtues in general within the current overall discourse in philosophical ethics, and of “readiness for responsibility” and its re-

⁴⁹ Cf. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Grundlegung der Ethik*, p. 47: “Die Tugendethik dagegen gründet auf einer Anschauung des Guten, die den Antagonismus von Eigen- und Fremdinteresse, von Sinnlichkeit und Vernunft oder von Glück und Moral überwinden kann. [...] Im Idealfall werden die persönlichen Motive des Handelnden durch den Standpunkt der Moral nicht eingeschränkt oder zurückgedrängt; vielmehr sind die Gesichtspunkte der Moral bereits in den Handlungsmotiven des tugendhaften Menschen wirksam.”

lationship to other (civic) virtues in particular.⁵⁰ Such detailed studies would also have to take into account the broader interdisciplinary discussion about ethical implications of “new individualism” and particularism in regard to individual well-being and social welfare. In philosophical terms this would include a special view on potential relations between (civic) virtues and ethical dimensions of the so-called “capability-approach” in the area of social justice and societal welfare.⁵¹

- Another challenge for ethical reflection is closely related to the one just mentioned. It concerns a more detailed analysis of both the content and the meaning of “readiness for responsibility.” This analysis would especially require terminological and hermeneutic studies about “responsibility,” which concerns the core of any moral action and thus any ethical reflection. More precisely, one

⁵⁰ Next to the well-known issues within the debate about the relation of “normative ethics” and “virtue ethics”, in-depth reflection in this context would also have to address the topic of “moral sense” in relation to a basic virtue like “readiness for responsibility.” For more on “moral sense” see Hilge Landweer, “Gefühl / moral sense,” Marcus Düwell, Christoph Hübenthal, Micha H. Werner, ed., *Handbuch Ethik*, pp. 366-371, esp. 366, 370.

⁵¹ Reference to this approach, which has been developed mainly by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum (“central capabilities”), and which is primarily focused on economic and social sciences but contains quite important elements of political philosophy and ethics, would probably provide deeper insights into practical social and moral implications also of civic virtues in regard to “capabilities” (see e.g. reflections on the capability approach, in the context of reports of poverty and wealth in Germany by Christian Arndt, Jürgen Volkert, Amartya Sen, “Capability-Approach – Ein neues Konzept der deutschen Armut- und Reichtumsberichterstattung,” *Vierteljahreshefte zur Wirtschaftsforschung*, 75 (2006), pp. 1, 7-29 (http://www.diw.de/documents/publikationen/73/diw_01.c.44352.de/diw_vjh_06-1.pdf).

would have to figure out in detail the semantic meaning of “responsibility,” the inherent moment of “response” and its phenomenological relation to communication (“responding” to what and to whom etc.), and finally its significance in different contexts of individual life and society.

- If “readiness for responsibility” and its relationship to civic virtues are considered a real issue, then the challenge of a certain emphasis on connecting theory and practice would emerge too. Though virtue ethics as part of practical philosophy remains primarily a theoretical effort, and hence is like any philosophical thought not of direct relevance for practice, its content however is obviously of specific significance for practical life. Thus, from theoretical insight as well as in view of the practical dimension of civic virtues for individual and social life, it seems reasonable to think about providing respective formation. The latter would mean the integration of virtue as a not indoctrinating but inspiring topic in the curricula of reflection and education at all levels. A particular challenge would be to concretize this within the area of higher education as part of sound preparation of potential future leaders that would be inclined and expected to assume specific responsibility in society.
- A challenge of a different nature is to further clarify the complex relation of virtue ethics and normative ethics, with a special focus on civic virtues. To deal with this challenge would particularly require special efforts concerning in-depth research on “normativity,” which would not be feasible without taking up and exceeding the respective post-Kantian and still lasting discussion

about practical reason and emotions.⁵² In addition to that, deeper reflection on normativity in the given context seems to be a real issue in regard to a specific kind of intrinsic “normative” element of new individualism as such – based on the phenomenological observation that new individualism, whether implicitly or explicitly, is not only claiming respect for strictly individual options for life and respective individualistic convictions or decisions, but suggesting this strongly as a kind of “normal” and basic pattern of behavior in democratic societies as well.

Clearly, to deal intensively with this issue, and also with the other aforementioned challenges, would mean to tackle far-reaching problems of fundamental ethical importance, not leaving out basic questions regarding ethical coherence and antagonisms within the field of tension between “individualism and society” – an area to which also civic virtues including “readiness for responsibility” to quite some extent are attached to. But reflecting this problem area beyond these few brief references would definitely go far beyond the topic of this essay.⁵³

⁵² This issue is being expressed similarly by the relation of reasonable practical judgment and sensuality (as the area to which, according to part of the history of virtue ethics, also virtues are supposed to belong); for more on this see Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Grundlegung der Ethik*, pp. 43, 45, also Jörn Müller, “Tugend,” p. 2247 f, 2251 – with reference to the Kantian “rationalist” criticism and its consequences Müller is quoting as a “short formula” by G. H. von Wright (*The varieties of goodness* (London, 1963), p. 149) as follows: “*The role of a virtue [...] is to counteract, eliminate, rule out the obscuring effects which emotion may have on our practical judgement*” (ibid., p. 2247 – incl. bibliographic information in the respective footnote no. 31 and note on p. 2255).

⁵³ To give only a few indications: Postulating ethical normativity of individualism, including normativity of its *per se* pluralistic expressions, would have to be addressed in detail, because ethical norms or standards can only be characterized

Concluding Remarks

The critical and thus differentiation-minded approach towards “new idealism” and particularism, as outlined in this essay, does not mean to simply fight basic ideas and ideals of individualism and pluralism in general, especially not in terms of socially and ethically well-balanced concepts of individualization and pluralization, which can be understood as almost indispensable elements of a any democratic society. Moreover, the just mentioned challenges do not at all serve to fundamentally criticize these ideals – especially not in the sense set out by Dieter Senghaas as “reactionary criticism” of modern democracy and societies, a criticism which according to him would originate from fundamental mistrust or from lack of acceptance in regard to basic principles of democracy and civil society.⁵⁴ On the

as “normative” if their content could at least to a certain extent be generalized or standardized; *or* else normativity would actually be substituted by individual discretion or choice and thus in fact would be reversed, since ethical normativity as such would imply also a kind of supra-individual or general bindingness. However, in both cases “normativity” may be at stake, and thus possibly lead to the conclusion that a certain basic ethical coherence in a community or society would *either* have to be considered unattainable, *or* the concept of normativity would dilute beyond recognition at least in its real ethical sense. From another perspective, this reflection would consequently also have to address problems concerning communicability and agreeability of ethical norms or standards in a democratic and pluralistic society, and thus take up the basic issue of how to organize a democratic ethical discourse, and how to let its outcome take effect in society. Not to forget, all this would also reveal the importance to reflect deeper on a possible focusing on a set of civic virtues which are supposed to be essential for real human development of individuals and society. This way, in regard to social ethics and morality based on such virtues even the question of a kind of social “normativity” of certain civic virtues would be touched.

⁵⁴ Cf. Dieter Senghaas, *How to Reorient the Intercultural Dialogue*, part III: He believes that “civilization of the modern social conflict, as can be observed in the heartlands of Europe [...] has been the result of a [...] conflict history [...] which

contrary, as a critical objection to the respective views of Senghaas and indeed also to his somewhat one-sided emphases on the blessings of individualism, it should be said that raising awareness for serious challenges in the ethical mastering of social life as well as in the compliance with related moral obligations may actually be instrumental in seriously contributing to shared and lasting acceptance of essential principles of democratic civil society. As a core element the latter would precisely include intentional caring for the sustainable well-functioning of just, human and livable social life, in short: to care societally as well as individually for the common good, and thus “to enable peaceful coexistence [...] and to put it on a durable basis with institutional protection against civil war.”⁵⁵

It is not unimportant to keep in mind this last-named perspective also in regard to so-called “societies in transition,” as part of former communist Central and Eastern Europe may be labeled too. Because there are good reasons to assume that the way these societies will probably manage to cope with challenges of change and transition – which includes social and ethical challenges of increasing individualism and particularism too – will have to integrate

each time provoked reactionary counter movements: that is a repelling criticism of individualism, liberalism and secularism, of the decay of good traditional manners, of plurality in general and tolerance towards many and diverse views of values in particular as birth places of loss of social value as well as of moral disorientation and depravity. What this reactionary criticism never wanted to understand or to accept was the fact that the principles of modern rule of law and democracy have as their goal to enable peaceful coexistence in a politicized society that has become irreversibly pluralistic, and to put it on a durable basis with institutional protection against civil war.”

⁵⁵ Cf. Dieter Senghaas, *How to Reorient the Intercultural Dialogue*, part III. – The socio-ethical importance of the concept of the common good is quite similarly reflected in the concept of social market economy which as an important element of theory and practice is stressing the principle of “public service obligations” (“Gemeinwohlverpflichtung”).

respective cultural values, backgrounds, identities and beliefs on one hand with the basic elements of a participatory and at individual freedom and social justice oriented democratic culture on the other hand. At least in this respect one can only agree with Dieter Senghaas' comment, saying: "Now the politically virulent cultural identity crisis of many present developing societies throughout the world (inclusively the former domain of 'Realsozialismus' [...]) cannot be mastered by exclusive recourse to one's own tradition or the pure adoption of foreign offers, although both can occasionally be observed."⁵⁶

Taking this into consideration, it becomes even more clear that also civic virtues can be seen as a means and thus as an issue in building up and improving true civil society, both in view of democratic societies and with respect to democratizing societies in transition. However, while referring to the introductory remarks concerning the varied history of virtue ethics, one must not forget about the general fragility of any moral endeavor and thus about some risks – albeit it as a kind of warning. A particular risk can be seen in deducing civic virtues too directly from existing societal

⁵⁶ Dieter Senghaas, *How to Reorient the Intercultural Dialogue*, part III. – In this regard, a kind of positive and somewhat promising perspective, as can be taken from Senghaas' reflections (with particular emphasis on countries outside Europe, but probably of a more general importance), should be mentioned too: "*Who understands his own European culture, precisely also the meanwhile everywhere highly esteemed political culture aiming at plurality, as historical result of a collective learning process rich in conflicts and often convulsive, will – in view of elsewhere precarious socio-political conflict situations – hardly assume that the homogeneous cultural profiles there are unalterable (Asian/Islamic values). On the contrary: For a long time it has been observed how non-European cultures – as reflex of a radical socio-economic change as well as of the political conflicts resulting from it – come into conflict with themselves, i.e. they become socially and therefore also mentally more complex, and consequently self-reflexive about this.*" (ibid.).

reality, or from a kind of static concept of society, and thus defining civic virtues too narrowly and hence limiting their ethical and humanizing impact on dynamic processes of continuous changes which characterize today's European societies. The latter would most probably lead to a kind of bloodless set of virtues and finally jeopardize their ethical and societal role and value – as has happened in the 18th and 19th century to a supposedly indispensable catalogue of fixed civic virtues at that time. Instead, the shaping of civic virtues in particular should contribute to sustainability within the dynamics of civil society and thus mirror to quite some extent the ongoing processes of societal development and change.

Finally, one may of course argue that reflecting on civic virtues and suggesting a special focus on “readiness for responsibility” as an underlying virtue sounds by far too individualistic again, and thus does not pay enough attention to the real political dimension of civic virtues which actually could be expressed much better and more appropriately, for instance, by justice as true cardinal virtue. Or, as a more fundamental argument, one may stress that any focus on *virtues* would as such run counter to philosophical reflection and concern about universal *values* and *principles*. However, one could humbly object and also sum up as follows: In societies that tend to be more and more shaped by exclusive “new individualism” respectively by moral particularism, and also more generally by a sort of trend towards moral lethargy, precisely “readiness for responsibility” seems to be a crucial ethical prerequisite serving to keep morality as such on the personal as well as on the public agenda, and thus as a basic virtue is a means to underline the necessity and to foster opportunities of moral commitment for living together, for social cohesion and the common good. Exactly because readiness for responsibility is essential for any moral action in regard to issues both of individual and social ethics, it can

also assume the role of an important basic virtue that would inspire moral abilities in general, which beyond its practical moral dimension would also support commitment to clarification and ethically indispensable ascertainment concerning universal values and principles, and thus would avoid any fundamental alternative of either moral principles or virtues. Of course, reflecting on virtues and paying particular attention to basic virtues and to potential impact of civic virtues, is not *the* response to all ethical challenges that civil society in a globalized world is facing – the more in view of the complex relationship and difference between philosophical ethics and moral practice. However, an emphasis on increasing “readiness for responsibility,” in concerto with other civic virtues, may be seen as *one approach* through which philosophical thought could hopefully foster responsible development of humane democratic societies. Moreover, it could contribute to strengthening or building up civil society with explicit orientation towards solidarity and justice, which *inter alia* would include efforts to improve social cohesion, not least in view of the present intercultural and interreligious societal reality, and with a view to securing a peaceful coexistence of societies in the world at large.