

Rethinking Reformation

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Freedom from the Self: Luther and Løgstrup on Sin as “Incurvatus in Se”

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to compare Martin Luther and K. E. Løgstrup on the theme of sin and grace, and to argue that while Løgstrup wanted to stay close to Luther in many respects, he nonetheless provides a secularized version of Luther’s picture, according to which we are liberated from our sinfulness not by God’s grace, but by our ethical encounter with other people. This then raises the question of whether Løgstrup’s approach can work, and thus whether this secularized alternative can be made stable and coherent. We begin by focusing on central themes concerning Løgstrup’s relation to Luther. We then outline the key features of Luther’s conception of sin and grace that were important to Løgstrup, and then consider how he develops that conception in a secularized manner. Finally, we discuss problems that might be raised for Løgstrup’s position.

Keywords: K. E. Løgstrup; Martin Luther; sin; grace; The Ethical Demand; Iris Murdoch

1 Løgstrup and Luther

There is little doubt that Løgstrup is greatly influenced in his thinking by Luther,¹ and not just by the Reformer himself, but also the Lutheran tradition as mediated through Grundtvig and Kierkegaard, as well as through contemporaries such as N. O. Jensen and H. Østergaard-Nielsen. While not wholly uncritical of Luther’s position, and willing to recognize the inevitable limitations placed on it by Luther’s place in history which sets a “horizon” on his thinking,² nonetheless in general Løgstrup wants to claim that Luther is on his side when he engages with various opponents, for example in his use of Luther to criticise Kant and Kierkegaard. Two broad areas of connection between Luther and Løgstrup are particularly significant, the first relating to Løgstrup’s conception of “ontological ethics”, and the second to his conception of human wickedness and the will. The latter issue will form the main focus of our paper, and will be discussed in more detail in the next section; but it is worth spelling out how it grows out of the former in a way that is characteristically Lutheran.

Løgstrup presents his ontological ethics by contrasting it with two other approaches: teleological and deontological ethics. In his paper “Ethics and Ontology”, Løgstrup helpfully outlines the way he sees them as related by asking in a sub-title to the paper: “Does duty mean too little in teleological ethics and too much in deontological ethics?” – where he makes clear in that section that the answer to both questions is “yes”, while he proposes ontological ethics as the approach that gets the balance just right. On the one side, while

¹ This has recently become even clearer thanks to Svend Andersen’s study of Løgstrup’s early readings of Luther, *Løgstrup & Luther*.

² Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, 94/*Den Ethiske Fordring*, 109-10. Translations have been modified where appropriate.

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he recognizes that in the classical tradition Plato and Aristotle as well as Aquinas and Scheler could be classified as teleological thinkers in some sense, the target he has in mind is the more modern subjectivist position that just thinks of the good in terms of what is desired,³ where he mentions Bertrand Russell and also P. H. Nowell-Smith as representatives of this view. On the other side, as deontological philosophers, he of course refers to Kant but also to Kierkegaard. The teleologists, Løgstrup argues, understand duty as a kind of “back up motive”, whereby we make certain actions into duties as a way of strengthening our natural altruism, which is seen as a desire to help others, so in this sense duty is conducive to the good. However, because the good in question is seen subjectively, as just what happens to satisfy our altruistic desires – a natural benevolence which according to teleological anthropology we just happen to possess – this gives duty a “cracked foundation”, which cannot satisfy our conception of duty: “This takes away all its force. In order to be duty, it must arise from unshakable facts”.⁴ This dissatisfaction then leads us to the opposite deontological camp, which thinks that to hold onto the objectivity of duty it must divorce it from the good altogether, and instead base it in some authority that is independent of the good, such as Kantian practical reason or Kierkegaard’s divine command. However, Løgstrup argues, this proves equally problematic as the duty in question then loses all content and becomes merely formal. Thus, he claims, while duty means too little in teleological ethics, as it is based on a purely subjective conception of the good, in deontological ethics it means too much, as it is not treated as “derivative” of the good,⁵ but as outside it in a way that generates an empty formalism and leads to an ethics of “duty for duty’s sake”. Teleological ethics is thus right to see duty as grounded in the good, but its conception of the good is too insubstantial to retain the objectivity of duty, while deontological ethics is right to try to retain the objectivity of duty, but can only do so by an appeal to authority that operates from outside the good, which then leaves this authority problematic and groundless.

This unsatisfactory oscillation between the two extremes thus gives Løgstrup the space in which to offer his ontological ethics. This ethics has an objective conception of the good on the one hand, which can therefore ground a contentful conception of duty on the other hand; and the normative basis for duty lies not in the authority of any commander—be it Kant’s practical reason or Kierkegaard’s God—but in the good itself, and what is required of us to realize it. This is what leads Løgstrup to opt for what he calls an “ontological ethics”:

Being forced to duty [*das Genötigtsein zu Pflicht*] depends on being bound up with something [*Verhaftetsein*]. Being bound up with something arises from the fact that our mutual human relationships have the character of power relations, just as our existence is ordered in an immovable way. If we do not do what we are forced to do, we are exploiting the fact that others rely on us, i.e. we are abusing our power and are destroying others’ lives. Being forced and being bound up with something which is expressed by deontological words in our language and ultimately in a word such as “responsibility” is not capable of being interpreted according to the teleological conception. The teleological interpretation of being obligated to be good towards others as a goal we have set ourselves and that presupposes a natural benevolence towards others obstructs our view of the ontological foundation of this obligation, namely the unshakable fact that we are at the mercy of each other . . . [But] If teleological ethics’ duty falls short, since it depends merely on the shaky ground of a benevolence that we have set as a goal for ourselves and that it is supposed to support, then it is overemphasized if it is supposed to be acted upon for its own sake, as it is in Kant’s ethics.⁶

Løgstrup thus presents his ontological ethics as making room for our responsibilities to others, and so making duty and obligation more than formal (contra deontological ethics), by basing these duties and obligations on an objective claim about how our lives are ordered and bound together in such a way as to enable us to flourish, rather than just based in what we happen to desire or feel (contra teleological ethics).

Now, in presenting his position, Løgstrup makes a significant reference to Luther in a way that tells us a good deal about his Lutheran commitments more generally. Løgstrup writes as follows, focusing specifically on the contrast with Kant’s perceived formalism:

³ Løgstrup, “Ethics and Ontology”, 265/“Ethik und Ontologie”, 357.

⁴ Løgstrup, “Ethics and Ontology”, 288/“Ethik und Ontologie”, 385.

⁵ Løgstrup, “Ethics and Ontology”, 288/“Ethik und Ontologie”, 385.

⁶ Løgstrup, “Ethics and Ontology”, 288–9/“Ethik und Ontologie”, 385–7.

Kant excludes the conception that we find in Luther according to which the nature of human beings and the world is constituted without our interference such that we are bound into responsibility relationships with each other, and the law is thus not formal but rather material...⁷

Løgstrup thus takes himself to be following Luther in seeing the world as one in which are dependent on one another, and thus “in each other’s hands” (to use the famous metaphor from *The Ethical Demand*),⁸ giving rise to relations of power and hence responsibility, to use this power for the good of the other. Moreover, this normative order of responsibilities is not one we create for ourselves via any form of contract or agreement, but one in which we are always already bound up, just by virtue of the structure of our lives together. Løgstrup’s ontological ethics may therefore be seen to derive a fundamental inspiration from the broadly natural law tradition, though in his case as developed by Luther rather than by Aquinas.⁹

Moreover, Løgstrup takes himself to be following Luther in treating our basic interdependence as giving rise not just to the general requirement to “love the neighbour” as an ethical demand, but also to more specific requirements which “refract” the latter within the concrete social world and context in which we are embedded, making the requirements on us more determinate in various ways. Løgstrup therefore writes, again making explicit reference to Luther:

The ethical demand receives its content from the fundamental condition [*grundvilkår*] that we live under and which we are powerless to change, namely that the life of the one person is entangled with that of the other person, and so it consists in taking care of the part of the other person’s life which as a result of this entanglement is at one’s mercy. “Nature (understood as the immutable basic condition) teaches what love does” (Luther).¹⁰ The ethical demand is refracted as through prisms of all the different and particular relationships in which we stand to one another as spouses, parents and children, teachers and students, employers and workers, as they are all forms of the fundamental condition whereby the ethical demand gets its content.¹¹

Løgstrup makes clear that (unlike Luther), he is prepared to allow that these “particular relationships” may take a variety of different forms over time, whereas Luther took social structures or “ordinances” to be more fixed and rigid – but for Løgstrup it is only the fundamental ethical demand to love and thus not to exploit the other that remains unchanged, while the context in which this is played out may vary.¹² Nonetheless, he agrees with Luther that *some* concrete social framework will always be required.

Why is this? In answering this question, we will uncover another fundamental area of agreement, which will also lead us to the second theme, taking us from ontological ethics to the question of our wickedness, grace, and the freedom of the will.

In Chapter 3 of *The Ethical Demand*, Løgstrup makes clear that the fact out of which the ethical demand arises – the fact of our mutual vulnerability and power over others – leaves us in a precarious situation, because we are unable to count on “freely invented and spontaneous good deeds” from our fellow human beings. As Løgstrup observes wryly: “This could only be the case if our lives unfolded in mutual esteem and respect for each other’s self-dependence and independence, and was free of anything problematic. But that is however not the way things are...”. How, then, can we ensure that we are not simply exploited by others, given their lack of such “esteem and respect” for our plight and our persons? Løgstrup argues that the role of various social norms is precisely to help resolve this difficulty, as offering us “protection” from others, by preventing “quite specific forms of violence” through imposing “limits on the individual’s

⁷ Løgstrup, “Ethics and Ontology”, 289/“Ethik und Ontologie”, 386.

⁸ Cf. Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, 15-16/*Den Etske Fordring*, 25.

⁹ Cf. also: “Luther’s ethics is the prototype of the other ethical conception [from Kant’s]. His ethical point of departure is that human beings, by virtue of the fact that their created nature is an ordered nature, have to live their lives with and against others in ordinances, so that it is in these responsible relations that they hear the law, which is material as a *lex naturalis*” (Løgstrup, ‘The Anthropology of Kant’s Ethics’, 30/‘Antropologien i Kants Etik’, 154).

¹⁰ Luther, *On Secular Authority*, Works 45: 128/*Werke* Abt. 1, 11: 279: The German original is “Denn die Natur lehrt, wie die Liebe tut: daß ich tun soll, was ich mir getan haben wollte”, which might be more clearly translated as: “For nature teaches the same as love does: that I ought to do what I would have done unto me”. The bracketed part of the quotation comes from Løgstrup.

¹¹ *Etske Begreber og Problemer*, 12.

¹² See the discussion in *The Ethical Demand*, Chapter 4.7, and *Etske Begreber og Problemer*, 35-6.

exploitation of the fact that the other human being is at their mercy”.¹³ These social norms – the “legal, moral, and conventional regulations” which help to govern society – provide people with additional and often more powerful incentives to avoid exploiting their neighbour, in those situations where love for their neighbour fails. For, such norms are enforced through various social pressures of punishment and reward, and inculcated in us as habits, in order to protect us from exploitation in a world in which the kindness of strangers is not something on which we can rely.

Now, while Løgstrup does not make this explicit, it is clear that at this point in the discussion, he is once again bringing in an important Lutheran theme, concerning the “uses of the law”. As is well known, within his framework of justification, Luther did not see conformity to the law as a means to acquire salvation, and nor did he acknowledge the kind of freedom in human beings that would have made this possible. However, he did allow other uses for the law, one of which (the first use, *usus civilis legis*) was to enable sinners to live together in society, and thus bring about order and justice in a fallen world – which if it was not fallen, could do without law altogether. Thus, just as Løgstrup accepts and sees that the precarious nature of our concern for other people requires a social framework to protect them without relying on any such concern, so Luther has a similar view, based on a similarly pessimistic view of human nature.

We have therefore seen how Løgstrup’s ontological ethics, which makes mutual vulnerability and power into the key source of our responsibilities, then leads to a further normative order of social norms which seeks to ensure that those responsibilities are met, though on a different basis, in a manner that reflects Luther’s own key distinction between love and law. We can now also see how underlying this two-stage structure is a conception of human wickedness that Løgstrup and Luther also share, and which will now provide us with the main focus for what follows. We will begin in the next section by outlining Luther’s position on this issue, and seeing how it ties in to his conception of grace.

2 Luther on sin and grace

Luther’s account of sin and grace is closely bound up with his “theology of the cross”, as contrasted with the “theology of glory”, where the contrast is laid out in texts such as the *Heidelberg Disputation*. For the “theology of glory”, the will is able to choose between good and evil; virtue is attainable through human effort; righteousness belongs to the individual themselves and is deserved; and the cross is a helpful exemplary aid. By contrast, for the “theology of the cross”, the will is bound; virtue is attainable only through grace; righteousness belongs to Christ and is freely given; and the cross is a necessary sacrifice to attain human redemption and enlightenment.¹⁴ As a result of this picture, Luther holds that human beings cannot be made good by our own efforts, but require God’s grace which is undeserved and unearned. Moreover, this conception goes beyond the Catholic conception of “infused” virtues: for while the latter cannot be attained through our efforts alone, they still belong to the individual in a way that makes them righteous in themselves, while on Luther’s account righteousness is never anything more than “imputed”, namely a “purity” that really belongs to Christ being used to “cover and conceal” our sinfulness, in the way that a cloak that belongs to someone else might be used to cover our bodies.¹⁵

Luther also adopts a particular conception of the *nature* of our sinfulness, which will be important to what follows. For Luther, our sinfulness takes the form of a fundamental self-concern, which means we are “curved in on ourselves” (*incurvatus in se*), as we turn inwards through the centripetal pressure of our self-absorption.¹⁶ This “inturnedness” cuts us off not only from God, but also from other people and the world around us, and so has ethical as well as religious consequences, making it impossible for us to truly love the neighbour in the kind of selfless way that this love requires, as well as making it impossible for us to relate properly to God’s creation.

¹³ Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, 53-4/*Den Ethiske Fordring*, 66-7.

¹⁴ Cf. Barone, *Luther’s Augustinian Theology of the Cross*, 107, which sets out this contrast in a helpful way.

¹⁵ Luther, “Psalm 51”, *Works* 12: 366-7/*Werke* 40.II: 407-8.

¹⁶ Luther, “Lectures on Romans”, *Works* 25: 345/*Werke* 56: 356; *Works* 25: 351-2/*Werke* 56: 363; *Works* 25: 346/*Werke* 56: 357; *Works* 25: 291/*Werke* 56: 304.

What is the explanation for this sinfulness, and its particular character? At one level, of course, Luther follows the Augustinian tradition in treating it as the legacy of the fall. But the difficulty with this approach, taken on its own, is that it may seem inadequate to account for what is required: more needs to be said *about* the fall, and what it has done to us and our relation to God, to explain what has turned us in on ourselves in this way. Here, it can be argued, Luther has a distinctive contribution to make: for as he famously suggests in his account of his so-called “tower experience”, he ultimately identified the source of this inturnedness to his anxiety about God’s judgement and forgiveness, an anxiety he could only overcome by re-thinking the structure of the nature of God’s grace:

Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners...

At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, “In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live’”. There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which the merciful God justifies us by faith...¹⁷

By his own account, Luther prior to this breakthrough was a self-absorbed sinner, albeit one trying to escape this sinfulness through penance and prayer, but in a way that made the situation worse rather than better, as it focused him yet further on himself. At the root of this crisis, he came to see, was an anxiety about his own salvation, which inevitably drew him inwards. The only way of escape was to re-think the nature of this salvation, as relying not on his own efforts, but on God’s grace which put the matter out of his hands. Thus, Luther argues, it is his new conception of justification – by faith rather than works, and thus by grace – which makes it possible for us to be freed from the anxiety which fuels our sinful preoccupation with ourselves. As Luther puts it: “Nor can he be freed from his perversity (which in the Scriptures is called curvedness, iniquity, and crookedness [*curvitas, iniquitas et perversitas*]) except by the grace of God”.¹⁸

Moreover, on Luther’s account, once we are so freed, the right relation to the neighbour and the world then become possible for us, as the “good tree” can then give rise to “good fruits” (to use his famous metaphor).¹⁹ Before the transformation wrought in us by God’s grace, anxiety concerning our relation to God, and his judgement over us, will make love of the neighbour impossible – and not just the anxiety itself, but the kind of pride and self-conceit which is merely the other side of the same coin, as we try to deal with that anxiety by puffing ourselves up, and taking matters into our own hands. Once we are transformed through grace, we are enabled to view ourselves and thus others in the right light, which then can allow us to stand in the ethical relation to the neighbour.²⁰ Until this occurs, the relation will need to be policed through the structures of the law, structures that will not in the end apply to those who attain grace.

¹⁷ Luther, “Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther’s Latin Writings”, *Works* 34: 337/*Werke* 54: 185-6.

¹⁸ Luther, “Lectures on Romans”, *Works* 25: 313/*Werke* 56: 325.

¹⁹ For example, “It is clear that the fruits do not bear the tree and that the tree does not grow on the fruits, also that, on the contrary, the trees bear the fruits and the fruits grow on the trees. As it is necessary, therefore, that the tree exists before their fruits and the fruits do not make trees either good or bad, but rather as the trees are, so are the fruits they bear; so a man must first be good or wicked before he does a good or wicked work, and his works do not make him good or wicked, but he himself makes his works either good or wicked” (Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian”, *Works* 31: 361/*Werke* 7: 61).

²⁰ “For we are not, as Aristotle believes, made righteous by the doing of righteous deeds, unless we deceive ourselves; but rather—if I may say so—in becoming and being righteous people we do righteous deeds. First, it is necessary that the person be changed, then the deeds [will follow]” (Luther, “Letters”, *Works* 48: 25/*Werke* BR 1: 70). Cf. “For the one who through faith is sure in his heart that he has a gracious God—a God who is not angry even though wrath is deserved—that one will go and do everything joyfully. Moreover, such a person can live in the same way before all people, loving and doing good to all, even if they are not worthy of love” (Luther, “Sermons”, *Works* 51: 283/*Werke* 36: 371). “As ... faith alone makes a person righteous and brings the Spirit and pleasure in good outward works, so unbelief alone commits sin and brings forth the fleshly pleasure in bad outward works, as happened to Adam and Eve in paradise, Genesis 3” (Luther, “Preface to Romans”, *Works* 35: 369; *Werke* DB 7: 6.34, 7.34–8.2). Cf. “Psalm 51”, *Works* 12: 308–9/*Werke* 40.II: 323–4.

Having outlined Luther’s conception in a very basic form, we can now turn to consider how far it maps on to Løgstrup’s, and where it gets transformed.

3 Løgstrup on sin and freedom from sin

As we have already seen, Løgstrup stays close to Luther in several fundamental respects, which as we will now see includes Luther’s conception of the nature of sin as *incurvatus in se*. However, we will also argue, Løgstrup differs importantly from Luther in how he conceives of this sinfulness being overcome, an issue which he handles in a more secular manner than on Luther’s account, in which an appeal to God’s grace is crucial.

Now, the general issue of how far Løgstrup can and should be read as a “secular” thinker is contested one, which raises many important and interesting questions about the nature of his thought and overall project – questions that cannot be considered fully here. But even if it is held that in the end, Løgstrup’s position cannot be treated in an entirely secular manner, there is no doubt that Løgstrup wanted to take significant steps in that direction, and our claim here is that this is one such step. Løgstrup’s willingness to take such steps, and his conviction that it was required by his philosophical project, can be seen at the very outset of *The Ethical Demand*, in his insistence that we must be able to make sense of Jesus’s proclamation to love the neighbour in “purely human terms”, if it is not to amount to “coercion”, as “faith without understanding is not faith but coercion”.²¹ Again, what precisely Løgstrup means by such “purely human terms” remains a debateable matter, particularly in the light of his later comment that here he meant to distinguish not between the “human” and the “religious”, but between the “human” and the “Christian”.²² But even here, he tells us that in *The Ethical Demand*, the penultimate chapter which deals with forgiveness and hence grace, *does* mark a transition to “the particularly Christian sphere”, which suggests that it is something he would want to exclude from the “purely human terms” in which the rest of the book is said to be presented.²³ At the very least, we seem warranted in considering Løgstrup’s treatment of how he takes our sinfulness to be overcome, and in not being surprised if the best interpretation of that treatment turns out to be more secular than Luther’s, given Løgstrup’s wider commitments and the moves he seems to want to make in a secularizing direction, even if in the end religious aspects remain in place elsewhere.

If (as we will argue) Løgstrup departs from Luther in his understanding of how our sinfulness is to be overcome, he nonetheless stays close to Luther in his conviction *that we are sinful*, and in his understanding of the *nature* of that sinfulness. Løgstrup makes clear that he accepts a Lutheran assessment of the extent of our sin when he writes as follows in Chapter 7 of *The Ethical Demand*:

[I]t is said that there is “at least some good” in a person. To which we reply, “No, there is not!” The notion that there is “at least some good” in a person amounts to subtracting something from the wickedness and adding it to the goodness of an individual’s own account – as though trust and natural love were not given to a person as a gift but are their own achievements and can be credited to their own account.

However, nothing can be subtracted from human wickedness. The self brings everything under the power of its selfishness. The human will is bound in this.²⁴

Following the Lutheran tradition, Løgstrup is arguing that left to itself the human will is wicked, as it is unable on its own to free itself from wickedness, and is thus unable to claim any credit for the good. Moreover, the form that this wickedness takes is a self-absorption of a Lutheran kind, as the person focuses

²¹ Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, 2/*Den Ethiske Fordring*, 10.

²² *Beyond the Ethical Demand*, 11/*Kunst og Etik*, 239–40.

²³ This is to put things rather briefly; for a more extended discussion see Rabjerg, *Tilværelse og Forståelse*, 179–205.

²⁴ Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, 140–1/*Den Ethiske Fordring*, 161.

in on themselves and their interests, at the expense of their neighbour.²⁵ To overcome this wickedness, the self needs to be transformed from outside, thereby making it capable of a love which points it away from itself towards others and the world, as “the purity of love is its outward directedness”.²⁶

However, despite this deep and fundamental convergence between Løgstrup and Luther, we now want to suggest that there is a significant *divergence* when it comes to their accounts of how it is this transformation can take place, and thus how this “outward directedness” is to be achieved. For Luther, as we have seen, the crucial vehicle for this transformation is grace, and thus a gift from God to an undeserving sinner; but for Løgstrup, it is a gift from *life*, which is good while we are wicked. This is reflected in the title of the relevant sub-section from Chapter 7: “The wickedness of human beings and the goodness of human life”; it can also be seen clearly if we put the passage cited above in context:

To show trust and to expose ourselves, to entertain a natural love, is goodness. In this sense goodness belongs to our human existence, though we ourselves are wicked. Both these affirmations need to be taken in full seriousness and there is no place for a reckoning in terms of more or less. Often such a reckoning does take place, for example when it is said that there is “at least some good” in a person. To which we reply, “No, there is not!” The notion that there is “at least some good” in a person amounts to subtracting something from the wickedness and adding it to the goodness of an individual’s own account – as though trust and natural love were not given to a person as a gift but are their own achievements and can be credited to their own account.

However, nothing can be subtracted from human wickedness. The self brings everything under the power of its selfishness. The human will is bound in this. The demand to love, which as a demand is addressed to our will, is an unfulfillable demand.

Nor can anything be added to the goodness of human life. The goodness is there. It exists, but in advance, always in advance – among other things through the realities of trust and love.²⁷

For Løgstrup, therefore, what makes it possible for our wickedness to be overcome is the goodness that attaches to life, which makes phenomena such as trust and love possible despite the wickedness that afflicts the human will, and the centripetal pull of the self. Løgstrup can thus be characterised as an “anthropological pessimist” but an “ontological optimist”,²⁸ in holding that we are wicked, but life is good, and so can overcome our wickedness, but not in a way for which we can claim any credit.

Now, in attributing goodness to life in this way, Løgstrup would appear to be offering a secularized version of the Lutheran picture, as here we are not enabled to be good through God, but through life and its workings. Of course, this remains *compatible* with a theological conception, at the level of creation if not grace – or to use a formulation from Løgstrup’s later work, it may well “suggest a religious interpretation”.²⁹ For example, it is certainly possible to think that God makes “life” such that it has this capacity to transform us, and to think that any *forgiveness* for our failure to be so transformed comes from God (which is the focus of Chapter 12 of *The Ethical Demand*). Indeed, in adopting this view of life, Løgstrup took himself to be following Luther’s own conception of creation.³⁰ Nonetheless, in identifying the goodness of life as the source of this transformation, de-coupled from a conception of God’s grace, Løgstrup clearly distances himself from the straightforwardly theological framework of the orthodox Lutheran position.

²⁵ “We lock ourselves up, because we think of ourselves. We lock ourselves up within ourselves. As if inside a house with the curtains closed. And in this house of ours with curtains closed and doors locked, we find—as we do in all houses—different rooms for different uses. And we walk through these rooms, from the room of pride to the comfortable sitting room of convenience—onwards through the chamber of resentment to the living room of self-satisfaction. Back and forth through many other rooms. For in this house there can be a great number of rooms, and they are all small and narrow. And all the walls are made up of mirrors in which we continuously see ourselves, in one room as proud, in the next as comfortable, in the next again as offended, and then as pleased with ourselves . . . But it is here we all reside. For we do not escape from our own house” (Løgstrup, *Prædikener fra Sandager-Hølevad*, 77–8).

²⁶ Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, 131/*Den Ethiske Fordring*, 150.

²⁷ Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, 140-1/*Den Ethiske Fordring*, 161.

²⁸ Cf. Rabjerg, “Løgstrup’s Ontological Ethics”; “Efterskrift”; and *Tilværelse og Forståelse*, 19-25.

²⁹ Løgstrup, *Beyond the Ethical Demand*, 139/*System og Symbol*, 117.

³⁰ For further discussion of Løgstrup relation to the Lutheran conception of creation, including the place of N. F. S. Grundtvig in this tradition and his influence on Løgstrup, see Gregersen, “K. E. Løgstrup and Scandinavian Creation Theology”.

Moreover, this sense of distance is reinforced if we now ask: *how* does life overcome our wickedness? What is the mechanism by which we are enabled to escape from our sinful natures, according to Løgstrup? His key claim is that this is achieved through the encounter with other people, who allow us to escape from ourselves and our inturnedness, and thus from the centripetal power of the self. This basic picture is something Løgstrup seems to have arrived at very early in his thinking, as it is found already in a passage from one of his notebooks probably written in 1938-39:

We say that human beings are unfree in the way they conduct themselves. This is to say that a human being is imprisoned within themselves.—Human beings are their own prisoner; this is the hopelessness of existence, because it means that we are incapable of freeing ourselves—any attempt to do so will only imprison us even further in ourselves. Cf. Luther's struggle with monasticism. Because we ourselves can do nothing but imprison ourselves more and more in bondage and reflection and self-absorption, in short: in pride. —We can only be freed by our fellow human beings. We can only free our fellow human beings – and through him and her be freed from our imprisonment in ourselves... Freedom is given to us by our fellow human beings—by serving him and her, or by getting involved with each other.³¹

This, then, is what the "goodness of human life" can be said to consist in: namely, it is so structured that despite our self-concern, the cage in which we find ourselves can be broken open through the ethical encounter with another person, who from the outside frees us from our imprisonment within ourselves.

How can this be achieved? Løgstrup seems to suggest the following: the person who is called upon to serve the other individual, by having the latter's vulnerability made evident to them, is equally freed from their own imprisonment, as this encounter draws them outward in having to deal with the other person and their needs. Moreover, particularly in his later writings, Løgstrup suggests that a similar outward directedness can be achieved through our experience of nature, and of artistic work.

One way to think about Løgstrup's position here, is to compare it to Iris Murdoch who herself was drawing on Simone Weil, where both focused on the phenomenon of "attention". Like Løgstrup (and Luther), Murdoch has a pretty pessimistic view of human beings with their "fat, relentless egos",³² a pessimism which she thinks has been obscured by "the unambitious optimism...of the Anglo-Saxon tradition", but which Freud has rightly countered, so that "[o]ne may say that what he presents us with is a realistic and detailed picture of the fallen man", which sees clearly that "[o]bjectivity and unselfishness are not natural to human beings".³³ Nonetheless, Murdoch does think it is possible for this selfishness to be pierced and overcome through a kind of attention to the world around us, including both other people, and nature more broadly, as in her famous example of seeing a kestrel:

I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious of my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but the kestrel. And when I return to thinking of the other matter it seems less important.³⁴

Like Løgstrup, therefore, Murdoch allows that while our self-concern can turn us in on ourselves, our perspective can also be transformed through the impact on us of our environment, in a way that draws us beyond ourselves. Moreover, like Løgstrup, Murdoch does not appeal to any mechanism of grace by which this is achieved, but instead suggests that it is this environment (which Løgstrup might call "life") which has the capacity to free us from our predicament as "anxious and resentful" subjects.

Given this account of Løgstrup's position, it can therefore be argued that in his conception of "life", and more particularly in his conception of our encounter with the other individual, we find a secular analogue of grace: namely, something that serves the same function of drawing us away from ourselves through a process that we cannot control and for which we can claim no credit, but where this process is not attributed to anything divine.

³¹ Notebook XXV.3.1, p. 34. Cf. also "A human being can only escape their self-preoccupation by means of a fellow human being" ("Pligt eller Ansvar", 213).

³² Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 52.

³³ Ibid., 50-51.

³⁴ Ibid., 84.

4 Problems

Having shown how Løgstrup's position can be considered as a secularized transposition of Luther's conception of grace, in this final section we now want to consider whether this transposition leaves Løgstrup's position facing difficulties which do not arise for Luther, precisely because Luther's account incorporates a theological structure that Løgstrup's does not. The central difficulty may be put in terms of a problem of explanation: namely, that this theological structure gives Luther greater explanatory resources than are available to Løgstrup, in a way that may seem to render the latter's position problematic. The question of explanation arises at two points for both thinkers: why is it that we are sinful and hence "inturned", and how is it that this "inturnedness" can be overcome?

In Luther's case, as we have seen, he has the resources to offer an explanation for our inturnedness, based on the fundamental anxiety we feel concerning our relation to God – an anxiety that can also manifest itself as a prideful turning away from God, which turns us in on ourselves in a different way. This, then, enables the Lutheran to give what may seem a plausible account of why it is that we find it hard to remain open to the other person – but of course it is an account that relies on theological assumptions. Likewise, Luther can then use the promise of grace to explain how this anxiety can be overcome, in a way that then makes it possible for us to direct our attention to the other person, and so to respond to them in love. On this second point, therefore, the Lutheran also has an account they can offer of how an ethical relation to the other is made possible, although once more it is an account that depends on his theological conception of grace.

For Løgstrup, however, things are apparently more difficult, as he cannot appeal to either of these explanatory elements, as to do so would bring him back to Luther's theological picture. The question is, therefore, whether this renders his position problematic? How can Løgstrup explain our "inturnedness" as he cannot claim that it is in any way generated by our anxiety in relation to God, and how can he explain how this "inturnedness" is overcome, if this anxiety is not dispelled through grace?

As regards the first issue, in fact Løgstrup's position is not so far from Luther's, but again takes a more secularized form. For, like Luther, the fundamental source of our inturnedness is still a combination of anxiety and pride, but rooted not so much in our concern about the relation to God, but a concern about our own sovereignty and the pride we take in it, both in itself, and how we are perceived by others. The context for this concern is what Løgstrup calls a fact about our existence, namely our interdependence.³⁵ This fact is deeply unsettling to us, as on the one hand we have to concede power and control to others, and on the other we are "interfered with" by the requirement to respond to them.³⁶ Both these features take away our sovereignty, causing us considerable concern; and we then turn in on ourselves to block this threat to our sovereignty, while at the same time taking pride in the feeling of self-assertion that this gives us. Or rather, to put it more accurately from Løgstrup's point of view, both are fundamental features of our existence, so we always already find ourselves inturned, just as we are always already interdependent. In his own terms, therefore, Løgstrup can offer an account of our sinfulness in a manner that is arguably as plausible as the one that can be found in Luther.

Turning now to the second problem, Luther's conception of grace, however one understands it, at least offers some account of how our inturnedness is overcome, by virtue of our relation to God—and if Løgstrup then gives no role to this relation, he may seem to leave that process unexplained. The difference might be put as follows: Luther's account of grace provides an explanation of how it is that our inturnedness is displaced, so that we then become open to the needs of the neighbour, whereas Løgstrup just suggests that our awareness of those needs is able to displace our inturnedness simply on its own. Thus, as we saw in

³⁵ "An individual never has something to do with another human being without holding something of that person's life in their hands" (Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, 16/*Den Ethiske Fordring*, 25); "It is characteristic of our human existence that we are mutually dependent on each other, and the dependency runs so deep that without it our existence would not be human at all. Without mutual dependence – Geiger calls it interdependence – there would be no language and no culture" (Løgstrup, *Kunst og Etik*, 137).

³⁶ Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, 45/*Den Ethiske Fordring*, 57.

the passage from his early notebooks cited above, on this account we are freed from ourselves through our “fellow human beings” and their dependence on us simply as such, where it is thanks to what in *The Ethical Demand* Løgstrup calls “the goodness of life” that this is made possible.³⁷ Likewise, on his later account of the sovereign expressions of life, these are presented as having the inherent capacity to take our self-concern away from us, without any prior need to appeal to grace.³⁸ Løgstrup thus speaks of “our inability to prevent the sovereign expressions of life from forcing their way through and realizing themselves”, and calls this “the grace of existence [*tilværelsens nåde*]” —where the “grace of the gospel” instead becomes a matter of forgiveness when “we persist in living closed in on ourselves [*indesluttede*] and doing as we please in our freedom”.³⁹ The Lutheran might therefore argue that because this account precisely leaves out the grace of God, and the role this must play in displacing our inturndness, it therefore misses out a crucial step needed to explain how it is that we do not just remain indifferent to the needs of the other.⁴⁰

However, one line of response to this objection would be to say that it may not represent a complete picture of Løgstrup’s account, at least in *The Ethical Demand*, as this is to leave out his conception of “life as a gift”. The significance of this conception to his account can be seen at the end of §7.7 of *The Ethical Demand*, where he writes that “from the receiving of our life—if we were really living in reception of it—spring the works of love” (p. 142/p. 163). Thus, what makes the works of love possible is our capacity to live life as a gift, to the extent that we can. For, it could be said, Løgstrup holds that insofar as we take life to be a gift, we will be more open to the ethical demand in a way that otherwise could not be the case, thus giving it an explanatory role parallel to Luther’s account of grace.

Interestingly, in his recent book *Saving God: Religion After Idolatry*, Mark Johnston has offered an account that appears broadly similar to Løgstrup’s. Johnston also starts from the Lutheran challenge of sin as “*incurvatus in se*”,⁴¹ which then is countered by the commandment to “love thy neighbour as thyself”: “We are in a condition of natural or original sin, but the ethical demand is something like the demand of *agape*, on its face an impossible demand given the centripetal force of self-love”.⁴² As a result, he suggests, “[w]e need a redeemer, an external source of grace that could overcome the centripetal force of self-will”.⁴³ However, rather than offering a straightforwardly theological account of that “source of grace” along Lutheran lines, he instead argues that the “centripetal force of self-will” can be overcome if we accept what he calls “the double donatory character of reality”, which he puts as follows:

First, I am an expression of Being Itself, as are all the things present to me, as Dylan Thomas puts it: “the force that through the green fuse drives the flower drives my green age”. Second, all of THIS is made available to me, gratis. Whatever happens then, I have already been endowed with great gifts; I have already won the cosmic lottery. Seeing all this I can then begin to overcome the centripetal force of the self, the condition of being *incurvatus in se*, and instead turn toward reality and the real needs of others.⁴⁴

Given the remarkable similarity between aspects of Johnston’s outlook and Løgstrup’s, this approach may seem to offer the latter a way forward in responding to our difficulty.

However, there are two worries that arise for this approach as readings of Løgstrup (and ironically both

³⁷ As noted by Ole Jensen, and later accepted by Løgstrup himself, in *The Ethical Demand* Løgstrup is in fact not consistent on this issue, as in some places he allows that “the goodness of life” is realized in phenomena such as love, whilst in other places he treats it as a mere speculative ideal (e.g. *The Ethical Demand*, 138/*Den Ethiske Fordring*, 158). For further discussion see Jensen, “‘Skabte livsmuligheder’—‘Suveræne livsytringer’: Bemærkninger til et grundtema hos K. E. Løgstrup”.

³⁸ Corresponding to the sovereign expressions of life, and their openness to the other, are what Løgstrup calls the ‘circling’, ‘confining’ or ‘constraining’ thoughts and emotions, such as taking offense, envy and jealousy: see for example Løgstrup, *Beyond the Ethical Demand*, 50/*Opgør med Kierkegaard*, 95, and *Ethiske Begreber og Problemer*, 16. These obviously also fit with the Lutheran conception of ‘*incurvatus in se*’.

³⁹ Løgstrup, *Beyond the Ethical Demand*, 69/*Opgør med Kierkegaard*, 118.

⁴⁰ Cf. Løgstrup, *Metaphysics*, vol 1, 91/*Skabelse og Tilintetgørelse: Metafysik IV*, 115: “Characteristic of expressions of life, moreover, is a spontaneity with an inexplicable power of breaking-through”.

⁴¹ Cf. Johnston, *Saving God*, 88–92.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 93.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 157.

stem from his proximity to Luther), one more easily resolved than the other. The first worry is Johnston's assumption that we can play an *active* role in developing a conception of life as a gift, in order to overcome our inturnedness for ourselves. This, however, would go entirely against Løgstrup's Lutheran anthropology as discussed above, which entails that human nature is too sinful to be cultivated by ourselves in this way, and this would amount to what could be described as a parallel to the "justification through works", which is fundamentally rejected on the Lutheran picture.

Nonetheless, this first worry is perhaps not insuperable, as what Johnston puts in terms of "overcoming the centripetal force of the self" through our own efforts, Løgstrup could put in terms of a purely underlying "understanding of life" which itself is a kind of gift, rather than something cultivated by ourselves. Taken in this more passive manner, therefore, it could be said that our understanding of life as a gift opens us up to others in the manner Johnston suggests – an understanding that some happen to possess to some degree, whilst others do not.

However, this approach still raises a second and more serious interpretative problem, namely: that even understood in this more passive way, this would imply that a person (such as the Good Samaritan, to use an example central to Løgstrup) is enabled to respond to the other due to their understanding that life is a gift; but this would run contrary to Løgstrup's key commitment that, as the self-concerned beings we are, we never *act* on such an understanding, even though we may entertain it theoretically, as Løgstrup himself does in reflecting on it in *The Ethical Demand*. If we *were* able to act on such an understanding, we could then claim that we are better than those who don't, even if the understanding is only passively acquired. It is clear, though, that this is an implication that (again like Luther), Løgstrup would want to avoid, making it hard to see how he could accept the solution outlined above.

In fact, we have already seen a clear indication of his position, namely through the conspicuous use of the subjunctive mood in the quote: "from the receiving of our life—if we were really living in reception of it—spring the works of love" (p. 142/p. 163, our italics). In using the subjunctive, Løgstrup is suggesting that we (including Good Samaritans) do not actually live our lives based on a reception of it, and thus not based on an understanding of life as a gift. Therefore, the really radical point Løgstrup is making here is that even if we were to have the right *theoretical* understanding of life, this might enable us to "theorize in a grand fashion",⁴⁵ but would not really put us at an advantage over the other person, as it remains mere theorizing, with no practical import. And, while we can attain this merely theoretical attitude for ourselves, it does not count, while the practical attitude which would count, is something we cannot attain for ourselves, so that in fact we do not live in reception of life when left to our own devices. Similarly, Luther would say that grace is given *undeservedly*, not through the individual having achieved a sufficiently pious Christian understanding prior to being given grace.

In the light of this problem, therefore, Løgstrup cannot hold that because they respond appropriately to the other person, this is because an individual is operating with a prior understand of life as a gift. Rather, he must mean that in responding to the other appropriately, the individual, *in that particular moment*, is seeing the other person in a way that is also to see life as a gift. The latter understanding of life therefore does not come prior to the former action, and thus cannot explain it, and how the "centripetal force of the self" is overcome, in the manner that Johnston had suggested. That this indeed is Løgstrup's view is shown in the following passage, where he makes it clear that the response to the other person *constitutes* our understanding of life as either gift or our own achievement, and so this understanding cannot itself account for that response:

But the content of this understanding of life is of such a nature that whether a human being believes it or denies it, is decided entirely by their active response [alene afgøres af dets virksomme stilling] to the entanglement of their own life with that of the other person. If the individual uses the entanglement as an occasion for taking care of the other person's

⁴⁵ Cf. "In order to avoid any misunderstanding, it should be added that an individual may very well dispute *theoretically* that their life has been given to them, while yet still *in fact* taking it as a gift. Likewise, a person may theorize in a grand fashion that they have received their life, while in fact taking it as if nothing is a gift, but that everything is theirs by right" (Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, 117/*Den Ethiske Fordring*, 134).

life, then the individual lives in the belief that their life is an ongoing gift. If, on the other hand, they exploit the involvement to their own advantage, they live in denial of this.⁴⁶

Now, however, we would appear to have reached an impasse: we have raised the problem of how Løgstrup can explain the overcoming of our inturnedness simply by appealing to our encounter with the other – for how, unless we are already opened up to the other, could this encounter break through to us? At the same time, we have rejected all the possible explanations that seem open to him, thus appearing to leave his position at a significant disadvantage compared to Luther.

A final option nonetheless remains, we would like to suggest: namely, for Løgstrup to simply point to the way in which this *does* happen, in a manner that his talk of “sovereign expressions of life” manages to illuminate, even though no underlying explanatory mechanism is brought in. That is, on Løgstrup’s understanding of such sovereign expressions, they are indeed sovereign precisely because they possess this capacity to displace our inturnedness, which is what makes them manifestations of “the grace of existence”.⁴⁷ The displacement can be conceived of as a shifting of attention from what is inwards to what is outwards. That this is not so mysterious after all can be shown if we return again to Murdoch’s kestrel: it just is the case that the bird in flight breaks through to her, turning her attention away from herself. Or, to use Løgstrup’s key example of the Good Samaritan, on coming across the injured traveller, “compassion is awakened by the perception of another person being hampered in the realization of their life”.⁴⁸ This awakening is simply the result of the encounter, but if we add further levels of explanation to account for it, we would seem to distort the phenomenology rather than illuminate it.

However, one last problem may seem to remain: if we really are so wicked, how can there be anything good in us to be awakened? If “the self brings everything under the power of its selfishness”, why doesn’t this make us impervious to the sovereign expression of life, which are forces for good? Even if we allow that sovereign expressions of life do not require our assistance, why isn’t the resistance of our wickedness too great to make it impossible for them to break through?

The answer is to get clearer on how precisely Løgstrup conceives of our wickedness. For, while left to ourselves, we are unable to overcome our wickedness, which is all that Løgstrup’s anthropological pessimism claims, he nonetheless holds that there is goodness within us, such as compassion, which is precisely what is released or awakened by the operation on us of the sovereign expressions of life.⁴⁹ If this were not the case, the latter would indeed be mysterious in a genuinely worrying way, as representing something entirely alien to us. But on the contrary, for Løgstrup we are never more ourselves than when the sovereign expressions of life break through to us, as they carry with them our identity.⁵⁰ Whereas for Luther, to achieve this identity required the operation of divine grace, we have therefore seen how Løgstrup might coherently claim that what this requires is the kind of encounter with the other person that is made possible by the “grace of existence”, a grace through which freedom from our self-imprisonment can be realized.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, 123/*Den Etske Fordring*, 141. The formulation ‘afgøres alene’ could be understood in a more epistemic way, suggesting that the individual’s response to the other person reveals to us what the individual’s understanding of life is really like, rather than constituting it, as we have claimed. However, that this would be a misreading is confirmed by other passages, such as the following, where the constitutive reading is clearly the only option: ‘If the individual pays attention to themselves at the expense of the other person, then they are living – through the attention to themselves involved in the action – as if they had called themselves into life, and were themselves sovereign over their lives. By contrast, if they care for the life of the other, then they are living their life in receipt of it’ (*The Ethical Demand*, 157/*Den Etske Fordring*, 179-80).

⁴⁷ Cf. Løgstrup, *Beyond the Ethical Demand*, 67-8/*Opgør med Kierkegaard*, 115: “For it is precisely not the will which produces the sovereign expressions of life; on the contrary, when the sovereign expression of life breaks through our confinement, it is because the expression of life rather than the will is what is sovereign”.

⁴⁸ Løgstrup, *Beyond the Ethical Demand*, 77/*Opgør med Kierkegaard*, 127.

⁴⁹ For further discussion, see Rabjerg, “Efterskrift”, 130.

⁵⁰ Cf. Løgstrup, *Beyond the Ethical Demand*, 53/*Opgør med Kierkegaard*, 98: “For to say that the expressions of life are sovereign amounts to saying that in them a human being is – without further ado – themselves”. Cf. also the discussion in *The Ethical Demand*, Chapter 10.1, where Løgstrup points to the naturalness to us of displaying love and trust to the other person, while at the same its distortion into unnaturalness is down to us.

⁵¹ We are grateful for helpful comments from participants at the ‘Rethink Reformation’ conference in Aarhus in 2017 at which an earlier version of this paper was presented, and to Bo Christian Holm for organizing the conference itself, and for this opportunity to publish the paper. We are also grateful to the anonymous referees for this journal, as well as to David Bugge.

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