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CONCERN
FOR THE OTHER

Perspectives on
the Ethics of
K. E. Løgstrup

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Knud E. Løgstrup is undoubtedly the most prominent philosopher-theologian Denmark has fostered since the days of Søren Kierkegaard. His book *The Ethical Demand* is a major work in twentieth-century Danish thinking. It reached an unusually broad audience when it was first published, and it still does. In his own lifetime Løgstrup had close contacts within German academic life, and many of his books and articles have been translated into German. His relation to the English-speaking world was different. Until recently, only the 1971 American edition of *The Ethical Demand* was available in English. The last two decades, however, have seen a growing interest in Løgstrup’s ethics in the Anglo-American world. One testament to this interest is the fact that this ethics plays a prominent part in Zygmunt Bauman’s well-known book *Postmodern Ethics*, from 1993, and another was the appearance in 1997 of a new edition of *The Ethical Demand* with an introduction by Hans Fink and Alasdair MacIntyre.

*The Ethical Demand*, however, mirrors only one phase of Løgstrup’s ethical thinking. During the later decades of his life Løgstrup developed important new themes. It was therefore natural to make available to English-speaking readers a more comprehensive selection of Løgstrup’s work in ethics. This consideration gave rise to the idea of translating texts and discussing them at an international workshop. Such a workshop, under the name “The Significance of K. E. Løgstrup’s Ethics,” was held in Denmark at the beautiful Sandbjerg Estate, the conference centre belonging to the University of Aarhus, from 8 May to 12 May 2002. The contributions from this workshop form the main content of the present volume. It is with great pleasure that we are now able to present this work and its companion *Beyond the*
Preface

Ethical Demand, a collection of texts by Logstrup on ethics, newly translated into English.

The editors would first and foremost like to thank the Velux Foundation for generously funding the reconstruction of the Logstrup Archive at the University of Aarhus and for making possible the Sandbjerg workshop. Our thanks are also extended to the contributors to this volume. Although Zygmunt Bauman was unable to participate, he wrote a contribution for the workshop material. Hans Fink, who was originally asked to comment on Bauman’s paper, gave a general philosophical analysis of Logstrup’s ethics, which we gratefully include. Øjvind Larsen did not participate in the workshop, but his close relationship with Bauman made him an obvious respondent, and we appreciate his willingness to contribute.

The chapters by non-English-speaking authors have received a careful linguistic revision by Heidi Flegal, who also translated three of the Logstrup texts in Beyond the Ethical Demand. Without her suggestions the language in this volume would not have been as fluent as we now find it to be.

Finally, we thank the publishers at the University of Notre Dame Press for their willingness to add two more Logstrup volumes to complement The Ethical Demand. Our first principal contact was Jeffrey Gainey, who was succeeded by Chuck Van Hof and Rebecca DeBoer. They deserve special gratitude for their patience and professional handling of all problems.

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Svend Andersen
Kees van Kooten Niekerk
Abbreviations

Abbreviations refer to translations of K. E. Løgstrup in *Beyond the Ethical Demand* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

LI    Expressions of Life and Ideas (chapter 6 of *Beyond the Ethical Demand*)

NEL   Norm and Expressions of Life (chapter 4)

R     Rejoinder (chapter 1)

SEL   The Sovereign Expressions of Life (chapter 2)

SGCN  Sovereign Expressions of Life, the Golden Rule, Character Traits, and Norms (chapter 3)
Introduction

Svend Andersen and Kees van Kooten Niekerk

Løgstrup’s ethics of the ethical demand was formulated half a century ago. Nevertheless, it seems to be receiving renewed attention today. This might, in part, be a result of its tendency to reflect several important trends in contemporary moral thinking. Here one could think of the widespread skepticism towards “modern” efforts to give a purely rational foundation for claims about moral behavior. Løgstrup related himself to the modern project in its Kantian version. Against the idea of the rational agent he set up a description of the interrelatedness of human being. In his opinion, humans do not have to discover or decide about moral life—our life as such is ordered with ethics already “built in,” so to speak. We cannot encounter others without being confronted with the radical demand to concern ourselves with their lives. Responsibility is a basic feature of human existence. This position lay close at hand for a Lutheran theologian, but Løgstrup developed and formulated it with the aid of phenomenological analysis. The appeal of his ethics therefore rests not so much on rational argument as on the careful descriptions of elementary features of interpersonal existence.

In his early work, Løgstrup put trust or self-exposure and the corresponding radical demand at the center of his ethical phenomenology. However, as can be seen from later texts, some of which are now collected in Beyond the Ethical Demand, important changes took place in his thinking. Most significant among these changes is the “appearance” of the concept or phenomenon
of “sovereign expressions of life.” These include phenomena such as trust, mercy, compassion, and openness of speech. Løgstrup originally regarded trust as the interpersonal feature out of which the ethical demand arises. But at this later stage he took it to be an ethical expression in its own right. Like the other expressions, trust is a spontaneous showing of regard for the other. Its sovereignty consists in the fact that we, as moral agents, do not have it under our control. We cannot produce trust by exercising our will. Rather, trust “takes us by surprise.” Like trust, mercy is also an ethical phenomenon, both in the sense that it is a way of taking care of the other, and in the sense that it is a consummation of human life. As ways of taking care of others, the expressions of life fulfill the ethical demand—before the demand has even made itself felt. The sovereign expressions of life are therefore more fundamental ethical phenomena than the demand that derives from them.

The introduction of the sovereign expressions of life is related to a number of other changes and clarifications. First, it becomes clear in Løgstrup that ethics as such does not necessarily have a religious foundation: the expressions of life are “open to religious interpretation,” but their ethical force is not dependent upon it. Second, even if Løgstrup still makes a clear distinction between what could be called “primary ethical phenomena” (such as the sovereign expressions of life and the ethical demand) and “ordinary” morality (consisting of norms, ideals, character traits, moral reasoning, and so on), the latter are granted a more prominent position. Besides drawing this distinction, Løgstrup proceeds to investigate the relationship between the two sets of phenomena. Thus, in some cases he regards norms as transformations of the expressions of life. Third, political ethics is given a more central place, and in the political domain, too, Løgstrup sees transformed expressions of life at work. The political-ethical ideal of helping those in need, for instance, can be seen as derived from mercy as an expression of life.

The contributions in the present volume deal with significant themes in Løgstrup’s later ethical writing without losing sight of the argument in The Ethical Demand. Several authors consider Løgstrup’s analysis of trust, which still plays an important role, now as one of the sovereign expressions of life. The analysis of trust is also discussed in several essays as an important instance of Løgstrup’s thorough phenomenological description. Another recurring issue is the question of whether Løgstrup’s
ethics is defensible on purely philosophical grounds or rests on theological presuppositions.

The essays included here fall into two groups. The volume begins with three introductory interpretations by scholars associated with the university where Løgstrup held his professorship and who are familiar with his work in its Danish context. These are followed by four essays that discuss Løgstrup’s ethics from an external perspective, thereby placing it in an international context. Each essay in the latter group is followed by a response from a Scandinavian scholar.

**Hans Fink** gives a loyal presentation of the main ideas of *The Ethical Demand* as read by a philosopher, offering a comprehensive answer to his own question, “Why should a philosopher like me, who is not a member of any church, be interested in studying Løgstrup’s theologically motivated attempt to limit himself to the philosophical?” He makes a sharp distinction between the ethics of the demand—the radical requirement of taking care of the other—and “ordinary” morality. The one and only ethical demand arises from features of human life that must be accepted as given facts. Fink emphasizes, however, that life can be regarded as given and can be lived in humility without one imagining a giver. He agrees with Løgstrup that the radical nature of the demand can be convincingly demonstrated by purely philosophical—phenomenological—analysis. Only the demand deserves to be called “ethical,” but if it “were the only demand we were under, life would be unbearable.” The importance of the many moral demands equals that of the one and only ethical demand. Fink clarifies his point about Løgstrup’s unusual approach to ethics by comparing Løgstrup with figures from traditional moral philosophy, such as Hume and Kant.

**Svend Andersen** follows up this line of thinking by reviewing the treatment Løgstrup himself gave to other moral philosophers. His aim is to help place Løgstrup within the landscape of moral philosophy. Løgstrup was not preoccupied with traditional moral philosophers—such as Aristotle and Aquinas—whereas we can regard Kant as his great adversary, and, on a par with Kant, Løgstrup’s famous compatriot Søren Kierkegaard. Løgstrup’s main inspiration was Martin Luther’s idea of
humans as being placed in relationships of responsibility. Løgstrup, in various ways, tried to reformulate this so-called doctrine of creation ordinances from Luther using a philosophical vocabulary. He found his most convincing philosophical support in the all-but-forgotten German phenomenologist Hans Lipps. This contribution sketches the parts of Lipps’s existential anthropology that were important for Løgstrup’s ethics. As a link to Løgstrup, it also compares Lipps’s analysis of the human face to that of Emmanuel Lévinas.

Kees van Kooten Niekerk’s contribution aims at elucidating Løgstrup’s view that morality is a substitute by tracing its genesis in the development of his ethical thought. In Opgør med Kierkegaard (Controverting Kierkegaard) Løgstrup regards acting out of duty or virtue as a substitute for the sovereign expressions of life: a substitute that is inferior to them, because the agent no longer draws the motivation from the intended benefit of the other, but draws it from his or her own sense of duty or virtue. According to Niekerk, Løgstrup’s conception of the sovereign expressions of life has its background in the ideal of an immediate, pre-reflective preoccupation with the other, which he inherited partly from Luther and partly from a Danish type of philosophy of life. Under the influence of the Danish theological movement “Tidehverv” (Time on the Turn), Løgstrup came to contrast this ideal to morality as a reflective preoccupation with oneself, which, from a theological point of view, must be regarded as sin. However, in Norm og spontaneitet (Norm and Spontaneity) this rather negative view of morality is counterbalanced by a more positive view focusing on immediate moral action.

Brenda Almond once again deals with Løgstrup’s position compared to twentieth-century British moral philosophy, a comparison that Løgstrup himself makes—at least partially—in Norm og spontaneitet. Løgstrup himself did not see much progress in the development from intuitionism to prescriptivism. And Almond to some extent agrees. She finds some similarity, however, between Løgstrup’s “intuitionism of the situation” and H. A. Prichard’s emphasis on the concrete situation in his rejection of the relevance of the question, “Why should I do my duty?” Almond’s association of Løgstrup with intuitionism leads her to regard W. D. Ross’s theory of prima facie duties as similar in many respects to Løgstrup’s ethical thought. She also points out connections between Løgstrup’s ethics and recent theories such as the feminist ethics of care.
Basically, Almond regards Løgstrup as a defender of an "ethics of agape" and hence as a Christian ethicist. Philosophically speaking, she defends the caution inherent in her English-speaking tradition "about foregoing the hard core of morality that is represented by concepts like rights, duties, and obligations." She agrees with Løgstrup, however, that our initial moral responses should be "responses to the facts of situations rather than the initiation of a chain of theoretical reflection."

In her response to Almond, Anne Marie Pahuus gives a more extensive treatment of the concept of "situation," which Løgstrup adopted to a substantial degree from Hans Lipps. Pahuus emphasizes the role of "imaginative understanding" in Løgstrup. But she critically argues in favor of the necessity of a self-reflective process in moral life.

Zygmunt Bauman is one of the principal authors who have made Løgstrup the ethicist known in the English-speaking world. He considers Løgstrup—as he does Lévinas—an important voice in postmodern (or "liquid modern") society, where traditional moral philosophy, with its relatedness to law, has ceased to be convincing. Løgstrup’s ethics of the radical but silent demand shows that there is no security in ethics. Yet Bauman questions the fundamental phenomenon of trust. He speculates that in promoting this phenomenon, Løgstrup’s course may have been determined by the social conditions in Denmark during his earlier years. But, he asks, is trust a realistic option in a modern society of "pure relationships" (to borrow a term of Anthony Giddens)? Is the world of today not "conspiring against trust"? In spite of this critical questioning, Bauman claims that the only hope for moral life is pre-reflective spontaneity. However—and this is a lesson Bauman learnt from Løgstrup—this hope is unavoidably connected with uncertainty. Bauman, too, points out the problems for moral action brought by globalization. How is it possible, he asks, to act on immediate sovereign expressions of life when the target of our action is far removed from our space of proximity? He concludes his essay by hinting at a possible connection between the much-needed global instruments of political action and Løgstrup’s ethics.

In his response to Bauman, Øjvind Larsen points out that Bauman’s enthusiasm for Løgstrup’s ethics is based on the fact that Løgstrup advocates a sort of unconditional responsibility that is sorely needed in a cynical, postmodern society. Larsen takes a critical approach to Bauman’s attempt to apply Løgstrup’s conception of responsibility to a global
perspective and argues that it involves an unlimited, “metaphysical” guilt for circumstances that lie beyond our personal sphere of causal influence. He emphasizes that in Løgstrup’s ethics, in contrast, responsibility and guilt are linked to personal relations between human beings in concrete situations. Larsen assesses Bauman’s juxtaposition of Løgstrup’s silent demand and the traditional “legislative forms of ethics.” He finds this label too broad, and he does not share Bauman’s conviction that Løgstrup’s ethics of the demand can be transmuted to accommodate a postmodern, globalized situation completely unlike that of Løgstrup’s day and age.

*Alasdair MacIntyre* also deserves credit for having introduced Løgstrup to the Anglo-American discussion of moral philosophy. In his contribution he looks at Løgstrup from a Thomist perspective, that is, from within a tradition that continually discusses questions with other schools of thought. For modern Thomism, one such important school is phenomenology. And, according to MacIntyre, it is from Løgstrup the phenomenologist that Thomists can learn something. Not surprisingly, though, MacIntyre does not find Løgstrup’s dismissive remarks on virtues convincing. This difference is rooted in a more fundamental disagreement about teleology. Løgstrup did not deal with teleology in the Thomistic sense, in which humans are directed towards their good in the context of natural law. Virtues for MacIntyre differ from what Løgstrup calls “character traits” in that they are habits directed towards goods. MacIntyre is also critical of Løgstrup’s analysis of trust, and he defends Aquinas’s claim that we can have reasons for trusting others. Leaning on psychological insights from D.W. Winnicott, he also points out the necessity of “cultivating discriminating suspicion.” Against Løgstrup’s thesis that spontaneity excludes reflection, MacIntyre claims that the spontaneity of the good has to be acquired through learning. According to Thomists, the virtuous agent has integrated reflection to such a degree that he or she responds spontaneously to ethical situations. Finally, MacIntyre returns to the ethical demand and argues that Løgstrup’s idea that the demand is unfillable is flawed. The demand is fulfilled by those who have advanced in virtue, especially the saints. This is a point on which the division between Thomists and Løgstrup turns out to coincide with the division between Catholics and Lutherans. So in the end, MacIntyre, too, draws attention to Løgstrup’s Lutheran heritage.
In his response to MacIntyre, Svein Aage Christoffersen profits from his comprehensive reading of Løgstrup’s work in Danish. He points to the very important distinction Løgstrup makes between the sovereign expression of life and the act in which it is embodied. The latter is always shaped by the situation and the society in which the agent is placed. Løgstrup would presumably be quick to grant reflection its place in relation to the sovereign expressions of life, namely, the actions to which they give rise.

The contribution from Hans Reinders explicitly presents Løgstrup as a Christian ethicist. Reinders takes seriously Løgstrup’s language of life as a gift. Reinders reminds us that Løgstrup himself regarded “understanding life as a gift” as a necessary precondition if the one-sidedness of the ethical demand was to make sense. But understanding one’s life as a gift is a religious belief, even if (according to Løgstrup) it is not a specifically Christian one. Løgstrup’s argument cannot be understood as purely philosophical, for, as Reinders observes, “proceeding from a religious perspective is not what philosophical ethics does.” In an illuminating way, Reinders places Løgstrup’s language in the context of the contemporary discussions of “gift” as carried out by Bauman, Pierre Bourdieu, Jacques Derrida, and John Milbank. He interprets Løgstrup’s analysis of the sovereign expressions of life as an answer to Derrida’s claim that a “true gift” is not possible. The expressions of life are part of God’s expansive giving of life itself. In thus claiming that the expressions of life can only be understood within language dealing with God’s creation and grace, Reinders is well aware that he goes far beyond what Løgstrup himself would have found acceptable.

Jakob Wolf, in his response to Reinders, rejects Reinders’s interpretation. He admits that Løgstrup’s distinction between philosophy and theology is of Lutheran origin, but in his view this should not be understood in a confessional sense. Løgstrup’s ethics admittedly has religious grounds, but grounds that are accessible to phenomenological analysis.

The contributions in this volume demonstrate that Løgstrup’s ethical thought contains valuable insights for contemporary ethical discussion. This applies first and foremost to his phenomenological approach,
which bases ethics on acute analyses of what is going on in human living together. More specifically, one could think of his elucidations of the moral importance of human interdependence and the role of spontaneity in human life. Løgstrup’s phenomenological approach was also the central subject of discussions during the Sandbjerg workshop. One of the principal topics of these discussions was the question, provoked by the different positions of Fink and Reinders, of whether Løgstrup’s ethics is convincing on purely philosophical grounds or can be accepted only on the basis of theological presuppositions. Another important theme was the scope of phenomenology. Is the notion that life is a gift (donum), for example, implied in a phenomenological description of the experience of gratitude, or does it involve a religious or theological interpretation that transcends such a description? Obviously, these two topics are connected insofar as a view of the reach of phenomenology affects the question of whether Løgstrup’s ethics can be considered philosophically plausible.

There was general agreement among the workshop participants that these issues, as well as a number of others, deserve further research.