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Others as the Ground of our Existence: Levinas, Løgstrup and Transcendental Arguments in Ethics

Robert Stern

While transcendental arguments in theoretical philosophy have perhaps gone out of favour, transcendental arguments in practical philosophy have retained a reasonable following, with their proponents being more optimistic on their behalf. It is easy to see why this greater optimism is justified: for, while Stroud's well-known critique of transcendental arguments in theoretical philosophy suggested that in the end they rely on a kind of idealism,[1] and while such idealism may seem problematic when it comes to the objects of our theoretical beliefs (the external world, other minds, and so on), when it comes to practical philosophy, such idealism or at least anti-realism may seem more palatable, so that here Stroud's concerns may seem to have less force. It could then be assumed that in practical philosophy, transcendental arguments have useful work to do, which is why they have been deployed by a diverse range of writers, from Kantians such as Christine Korsgaard, to communication theorists such as Karl-Otto Apel and his followers, to Catholic thinkers such as John Finnis. Proponents of such arguments typically take the foe to be the moral sceptic, who asks why he should be bound by morality and its norms, and try to show on transcendental grounds, to do with the necessary conditions for communication, or self-hood or agency or whatever, that the sceptic is always already bound by these norms, so in some sense the sceptic's question cannot be properly posed, and thus is answered.

My aim in this paper is straightforward. I want to first discuss an argument of this sort that has recently been attributed to Emmanuel Levinas by Diane Perpich, as a way of understanding Levinas's rather elusive views. Taking this as a representative of the use of a certain sort of transcendental argument against the sceptic, I will argue that it is not a convincing way to deal with their doubts, as it fails to achieve what it sets out to do. However, turning from Levinas to the Danish philosopher and theologian K. E. Løgstrup, I will argue that one can

[1] Cf. Barry Stroud, 'Transcendental Arguments', *Journal of Philosophy*, 65 (1968), pp. 241-56.

find transcendental reflections in his thought too, but used in a different way: not to answer the moral sceptic via a transcendental argument, but to help us show how certain fundamental misconceptions underlie moral scepticism nonetheless. I will suggest in this role transcendental reflections can be more successful – and that perhaps this is the way we should understand Levinas's comments too. Thus, while I think we should give up the ambition of trying to answer the moral sceptic directly using transcendental arguments, this does not mean we should abandon using some of the insights that have underpinned such arguments, in a way that reading Løgstrup can bring out.

I will begin by outlining the reading of Levinas that I want to focus on. I will then set out what I think is wrong with it as an answer to the sceptic. I will then turn to Løgstrup, to see if we can do better by adopting his approach.

But before I start, perhaps a very brief introduction to Løgstrup might be in order – for while I assume Levinas will be a familiar figure, Løgstrup is likely to be more obscure. As I have mentioned, Løgstrup was a Danish philosopher and theologian, born in 1905 and dying in 1981. His early reading was influenced by Kant and the phenomenological movement (particularly Edmund Husserl, Max Scheler, Hans Lipps, Martin Heidegger) and Kierkegaard, as well as Lutheran theology. He spent most of his academic life at the University of Aarhus, and of course lived through the German occupation of Denmark during the Second World War, which had an impact on his ethical thinking in a number of ways. He published his first major work *The Ethical Demand* in 1956 (the English translation published by Notre Dame University Press appeared in 1997). He published several later books and articles in ethics, theology, ~~and~~ metaphysics and philosophy of art (where some of the later ethical writings are translated in *Beyond the Ethical Demand*, University of Notre Dame Press, 2007, and a two volume selection from the four volume work on metaphysics was published in translation by Marquette University Press in 1995; several more works are available in German, mainly translated by his wife, whom he met while studying in Germany before the war).[2]

[2] Further bibliographical details are provided in the references to Løgstrup's works below.

One other preliminary point to mention, but which will be more significant as we go on, is the intriguing parallels between Levinas's ideas, life and work, and that of Løgstrup. For while it seems no significant encounter between the two ever occurred and certainly neither responded to the other in writing,[3] they were almost contemporary (Levinas was born in 1906 and died in 1995), and shared many similar influences, where the connection with Heidegger will be important for this paper: both studied with Heidegger before the war, both were shocked by Heidegger's political allegiances, and both wrote about Heidegger afterwards. Likewise for both, the central idea of their ethics is superficially similar – that is, while Levinas talks about the face-to-face encounter with the destitute other, Løgstrup emphasizes the ethical demand made by the other in their vulnerability and need for assistance. And both see the relation between ethics and religion in complex terms, on the one hand claiming to offer a non-theological ethics, while on the other still making use of religious idioms and thinking – in Levinas's case the religious background is Judaism, of course, while for Løgstrup it was Lutheranism. There are thus many issues on which comparison and contrast between these two thinkers can be highly illuminating, I think – but where this paper just focuses on one, namely how claims about our prior embeddedness as subjects within a world of other individuals and their needs might play a crucial role in our reflections on the ethical and its justification.

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[3] Levinas was in Strasbourg in 1923-29, then Freiburg in 1928-29, then back in Strasbourg before going to Paris in 1930 until 1940, while Løgstrup was in Strasbourg in 1930-31, then Göttingen in 1931-32, then Freiburg in 1933-34, and then Tübingen in 1934-35. It is thus at least possible that they both attended Jean Héring's classes in Strasbourg at some point in 1930, though we have no evidence of this. Hans Hauge has also suggested via personal communication that he finds it plausible that Løgstrup might have got the idea of criticizing Husserl (in his first attempt at writing a doctoral thesis, submitted in 1933) from Levinas's own thesis defense in 1930 which was on 'The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology'. As Bjørn Rabjerg has pointed out, Husserl was almost completely unknown in Denmark at the time (there are only two references to him before Løgstrup's dealings with Husserl, in 1915 and 1922 and both by the psychologist Edgar Rubin), so it is very likely that Løgstrup got this idea in Strasbourg in 1930. So perhaps not only Sartre, but also Løgstrup, 'was introduced to phenomenology by Levinas', as Levinas famously observed of the former.

1. Levinas

In his first major work, *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas begins with what many take to be a sceptical question concerning ethics: 'Everyone will readily agree that it is of the highest importance to know whether we are not duped by morality'.[4] Thus, it has been compared to what Korsgaard calls 'the normative question' in her book *The Sources of Normativity*:

> [I]t is the force of…normative claims – the right of these concepts to give laws to us – that we want to understand.
>
> And in ethics, the question can become urgent, for the day will come, for most of us, when what morality commands, obliges, or recommends is *hard*: that we share decisions with people whose intelligence or integrity don't inspire our confidence; that we assume grave responsibilities to which we feel inadequate; that we sacrifice our lives, or voluntarily relinquish what makes them sweet. And then the question – *why*? – will press, and rightly so.[5]

Korsgaard's and Levinas's question seem similar: morality requires things of us, but perhaps we are being fooled, perhaps it has no right to demand anything of us at all?

However, I think it is important to be clear about the spirit in which this question is being asked – or rather, the type of person who is asking it. One such person might be the so-called egoist of legend, who thinks the only thing she has reason to do is what is in her interests – and so when she asks this question, she wants some demonstration that morality is in her interests after all. But, as H. A. Prichard and others have argued, to try to answer this kind of sceptic – at least directly – is a mistake, because such a sceptic will only be satisfied if morality is shown to be in her interests, which might make her then *conform* to morality, but

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[4] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 21.
[5] Christine M. Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 9.

not make her *moral*, as she will then only do what is right because it is good for her to do so, and thus will never act out of moral reasons.[6]

But still, even if this direct response is hopeless and we should just not engage with the egoistic sceptic at all in this way, we could perhaps try another strategy, namely of trying to get them to see that there are reasons to do things which are *not* in their interests, of which moral reasons would then be one. Thus, we might not try to answer the egoist directly, but *indirectly*, by providing some argument to show they have more types of reasons than they thought.

But we also might not take the normative question in this egoistic spirit at all, and thus might not take our sceptic to be an egoist. Rather, our sceptic might already perfectly well accept that we can have reason to do things that are not grounded in our interests, but *still* be sceptical about morality as we have it, with its rules and regulations that it tries to impose on us, because in fact the 'morality system' is illegitimate and can be given a 'debunking' explanation, in a manner that undermines its claim to our allegiance. Thus, a figure like Bernard Mandeville (who Korsgaard mentions), or equally figures like Nietzsche or Marx or other 'masters of suspicion', try to make us see the norms of morality in a new light, in a way that shakes our confidence in them – not because we are egoist, but precisely because we are not. For example, Nietzsche puts this kind of worry with characteristic vehemence: 'In so far as morality *condemns* as morality and *not* with regard to the aims and objects of life, it is a specific error with regard to which one should show no sympathy, an *idiosyncrasy of the degenerate* which has caused an unspeakable amount of harm!'[7] In speaking of harm here, I take it, Nietzsche is not making an egoistic appeal to the harm caused to just you as an individual and expecting you to reject it as a result – rather, he is appealing to the harm it does to *us* as a whole, where it is in the failure to properly connect to our good in general that the illegitimacy of morality as it is currently practiced resides.

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[6] Cf. H. A. Prichard, 'Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?', reprinted in his *Moral Writings*, edited by Jim MacAdam (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 7-20.

[7] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Twilight of the Idols*, 'Morality as Anti-Nature' §6, translated by R. J. Holingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 46.

There is, finally, a third kind of moral sceptic, who does not doubt ethics from a purely egoistic standpoint, or claim to find in ethics some sinister facade for non-moral interests, but who just thinks when we engage in ethics, we engage in a practice that lacks the requisite grounding to really make sense – where the most radical claim might be that ethics just can never make sense, or more moderately that it doesn't make sense now. Thus, various kinds of nihilists, relativists and subjectivists might count as sceptics of this radical kind – as might those who think there are grounds for denying we have the sort of freedom that arguably morality requires.[8] And a more moderate sort of sceptic might be Elizabeth Anscombe, when she says that while talk of moral obligation could have been intelligible when we believed in God as a moral legislator, now we have given up that belief, our talk of moral obligation is as meaningless or empty as talk of crimes would be in a world without law courts or the police[9] – so in this sense, we are being 'duped' in talking in moral language, but not because morality is being deployed for non-moral interests, but because we are being foolish in thinking we are operating within an intelligible practice when really we are not.

I do not claim that these forms of moral scepticism are exhaustive, but I do think they can be distinguished from one another: where we might call the first egoistical scepticism, the second debunking scepticism, and the third metaphysical scepticism, as it questions the metaphysical framework which we seem to need to make sense of morality.

Now, I am not sure Levinas is precisely clear on which scepticism he has in mind – and this is not a question that can be gone into properly here. Instead, I now want to turn to a recent reading of Levinas by Diane Perpich, which tries to use a transcendental approach to address these issues.

Perpich begins by characterizing 'the sceptic's question' in terms of Levinas's response to an interviewe~~r~~re who asked him: 'What would you respond to someone who said that he did not…feel this call of the other, or more simply that the other left him indifferent?' Levinas, of course, thinks that this 'call of the

[8] Cf. Kant's worry that morality might be a 'phantasm' in *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4:445 (using the standard Akademie edition page numbering available in the margins of most translations).
[9] G. E. M. Anscombe, 'Modern Moral Philosophy', *Philosophy* 33 (1958), pp. 1-19.

other' is central to ethics, and is what it fundamentally consists in. Perpich then cites Levinas's reply: 'I do not believe that is truly possible. It is a matter here of our first experience, *the very one that constitutes us*, and which is as if the ground of our experience'.[10] Perpich takes the sceptic's challenge here to be as follows:

> The skeptic asks, "What is the other to me?" or "Why ought I value the other's demands?" Such questions imply that only a fool is duped into thinking that the other's claims to moral consideration have any binding force apart from that already provided by utility or other prudential considerations. In effect, the skeptic doubts that there are uniquely moral reasons and doubts that such reasons have a normative force that cannot be reduced to self-interest. The skeptic thus asks what reasons there are to value something or someone she has been told she has an obligation to value. She asks why she should think that the other has *moral* value or deserves moral consideration. (EEL, pp. 130-1)

Thus, of the three forms of moral scepticism outlined above, it is the egoistic sceptic that Perpich sees as Levinas's concern here.[11] And taking Levinas's interview response a certain way, Perpich glosses his answer as follows:[12]

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[10] Emmanuel Levinas, *Is it Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, edited by Jill Robbins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 184; cited in Diane Perpich, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), p. 130, her emphasis [hereafter abbreviated as EEL].

[11] And also at the beginning of TI in the passage we cited, where Perpich comments that 'That Levinas imagines the skeptic in this way is evident in the opening lines of *Totality and Infinity*' (EEL, p. 209, note 5).

[12] Perpich notes that her way of presenting things 'illuminates [Levinas's] position from a different perspective and in a different idiom', but still claims at it 'illuminates the structure of his thought' (EEL, p. 209, note 7); cf. also EEL pp. 134-5 and p. 14 . Michael Morgan also offers what he calls a 'transcendental reading' of Levinas, but without seeming to identify any transcendental argument as such: see Michael L Morgan, *Discovering Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 50-60. Transcendental aspects of Levinas's thinking are also discussed and debated in Robert Bernasconi, 'Rereading *Totality and Infinity*', in Arleen B Dallery and Charles E Scott, *The Question of the Other: Essays in Contemporary Continental Philosophy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), pp. 23-34; Theodore de Boer, 'An Ethical Transcendental Philosophy' in Richard A Cohen (ed), *Face to Face with Levinas* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986), pp. 83-115; Jeffrey Dudiak, *The Intrigue of Ethics: A Reading of the Idea of Discourse in the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), and Brian Treanor, *Aspects of Alterity: Levinas, Marcel and Contemporary Debate* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007).

> Faced with this ordinary sort of moral skepticism, a Levinasian response might begin like this: the idea of valuing something presupposes a world in which this something is meaningful or intelligible. If I value something – regardless of the value I assign to it – this implies I have taken its measure, weighed it against other objects or possibilities, and in some manner understood its connection to my own life and to others…. [V]aluing requires and expresses the fact that I am *already reflectively in a world*… Being in a world presupposes an other who has *opened that world to me and with me*. I do not meet the other *in* the world; rather, to have a world (which means being capable of reflection) is already to be in a relationship to the other. Without the other, there is no world; without the world, there is no ego who could be the subject or bearer of experiences within the world. The relation to the other is thus constitutive of my having a world at all. (EEL, pp. 131-3)

Now, Perpich does not use the term 'transcendental argument' here or elsewhere in the book; but I take it that her reading of Levinas's position is meant to have a transcendental flavor, in relation to two claims she makes here: first, that to value anything requires a reflective process of some kind, and second there is a constitutive relation between the self and the other, where therefore both claim that one thing is a necessary condition for the possibility of another – reflection is a necessary condition for valuing, and intersubjectivity is a necessary condition for self-hood. Suggestions of sort of are characteristic of transcendental arguments.

Moreover, so is the way she deploys these claims, and the way she tries to use them against the sceptic, as follows:

> [The argument] now reads in full as follows: (1) The idea of holding anything as a value presupposes a world in which the thing valued is already meaningful or intelligible. To value thus means I am already reflectively situated in a world. (2) Being reflectively in the world is the product of a social relationship, which is to say that the relation to the other is constitutive of my being able to value anything whatsoever. (3) Thus, the other person is not merely something or someone that I can value or fail to value. Without the other, there is no world and no

> meaningful valuing. Hence the skeptic's question of whether I am obliged to value the other and on what grounds always comes *too late*. It mistakes the other for an object within the world, rather than seeing the relationship to the other as the condition of my having a world at all and being able to find value in it. If I value *anything* at all, then, I am already in a relationship to the other. He or she *already* concerns me. What could my continuing to ask for proof of this mean except that I have failed to understand what sort of relationship we have? The other can never be only an object of value within the world concerning which I might rightfully ask why she or her needs should matter to me. By the time I ask these questions, I have already shown myself to be immersed in a complex evaluative practice. In effect, to ask for reasons, to ask why I should concern myself with the other, is itself already indicative of such concern. The skeptic's question thus indicates that the other has already passed that way, already introduced her into a world in which critical reflection is possible. (EEL, p. 134)

Here, to slightly adapt Kant's well-known remark concerning the Refutation of Idealism, the 'game played by the sceptic has been turned against itself'[13] in a way that many take to be distinctive of transcendental arguments, where the sceptic is shown to be guilty of what Apel famously calls a 'performative contradiction'. For, Perpich thinks, what this Levinasian argument shows is that the sceptic, in order to be a subject at all, must already have been embedded in an ethical or social relation to an other, so that in questioning those relations she must already have shown concern towards them, so the question comes 'too late'.

Perpich puts this point as follows:

> From this vantage point, the skeptic's question is put in a new light. The would-be amoralist asks for proof or evidence that the other is his concern: "What is my brother to me or I to him that I should concern

[13] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B276. Kant of course talks about the idealist, rather than the sceptic.

> myself with his welfare?"[14] The skeptic effectively demands a *reason* that would justify the other's demand for care or concern. In so doing, the skeptic implicates herself in the very practices of reflection that indicate just the sort of relation she would like to deny. That is, the skeptic uses a faculty or practice granted to her by the social or ethical relationship in order to question whether such a relation could really be attributed to her. Her question thus involves her in a performative contradiction and is in this sense self-defeating or self-refuting. (EEL, pp. 143-4)

Perpich goes on:

> In demanding a justification, the moral skeptic is trapped in a performative contradiction between the content of her question and its practical conditions. The skeptic's question presumes a neutral, pre-social subject who has no constitutive relation to the other and thus must be provided with reason to take the other into account. But the practices of reason-giving in which the skeptic's own question participates already belie her introduction into a socially or intersubjectively constituted world. When the skeptic asks "Why be moral?" or "What is the other to me?" she demands a reason for acting in one way rather than another. Far from casting doubt on the possibility of ethical life through such questions, skepticism is in fact its prolongation. It is the *enactment* of ethical life. If it were not for the other who opens the world to me, I would not be able meaningfully to ask the skeptic's question. Thus, being chosen before I can choose is the condition for all of my later choosing, for all my affirming or denying. I cannot without contradiction deny my ability to engage in the process of critical reflection, and, by extension, I cannot

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[14] Perpich is here referring to a passage in *Otherwise Than Being*, where Levinas writes: 'Why does the other concern me? What is Hecuba to me? Am I my brother's keeper? These questions have meaning only if one has already presupposed that the ego is concerned only with itself, is only a concern for itself. In this hypothesis it indeed remains incomprehensible that the absolute ego posited for itself speaks a responsibility. The self is through and through a hostage, older than the ego, prior to principles. What is at stake for the self, in its being, is not to be. Beyond egoism and altruism it is the religiosity of the self' (Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence*, translated by Alfonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), p. 117). Cf. EEL, p. 135.

> without contradiction deny my exposure to the other. This inability to turn a deaf ear, this non-indifference to the other, *is* the moment of normativity in Levinas's thought. (EEL, pp. 145-6)

Set out as an argument, therefore, I think the structure of the performative contradiction Perpich has in mind is as follows:

1. To ask 'why concern myself with others?' is to engage in critical reflection
2. To engage in critical reflection is to be a subject
3. To be a subject it is necessary to be concerned with others
4. So to ask 'why concern myself with others?', I must already have concerned myself with them
5. So to ask 'why concern myself with others?' is performatively contradictory

I now want to offer some concerns about this argument, where I will grant premises 1 and 2, but focus on the transcendental claim in premise 3, and worry about whether the final conclusion in 5 really resolves the sceptical issue from which Perpich starts.

Regarding premise 3, the question is this: Suppose the egoist accepts that she could not be a subject at all unless she showed concern to others – how will that satisfy her? One way is that it might give her an egoistic reason to be concerned with others: that is, she might accept that if she could not exist at all unless she showed concern for others, she has every reason to show such concern. But this is presumably hardly a satisfying result to the moralist, as it now just gives the egoist a non-moral reason to be moral, as Prichard and others have feared.

However, it might be said, this is to mistakenly take premise 3 *on its own* to answer the sceptic: but the point is to *use* premise 3 to argue for the performative contradiction in the conclusion, where it is *this* that is meant to answer the sceptic, by showing that she cannot properly doubt if she should concern herself with others, as in doing so she must presuppose such concern has gone on, as otherwise she would not be a subject at all who can even ask this question. As Perpich puts it in a passage we have already cited: 'If I value

anything at all, then, I am already in a relationship to the other. He or she *already* concerns me' (EEL, p. 134).

I am not convinced, however, that this kind of strategy (and indeed performative or retorsive transcendental arguments in general, to use the other term that is sometimes applied to them) can really resolve the issue.[15] For, it seems to me that the sceptic can reply by saying that even if Perpich's transcendental claim in 3 is right, all this leads to is the conclusion that to be a subject at all, I must have gone in for concern for others – but what the sceptic wants to know, is whether she was *right* or *justified* in doing so, or whether to do so was misguided and she was being 'duped'. The fact that she *has to have been concerned* in order to be a subject in the first place would not seem to resolve this worry.

Now, one response might be to go back to the thought that justification for the concern can come from the idea that without this concern, I wouldn't be a subject at all – so I have excellent egoistic reasons for thinking I was right to be concerned, and far from being duped, I have done the right thing. But again, this is to give a grounding for concern that is merely egoistical in nature, which I take it is inadequate to the moralist, who is looking for a grounding which will show the egoist why she *should not* be an egoist, rather than giving her egoistic reasons to be moral.

Another response might be that in a situation where some form of activity – in this case, concern for others – is necessary, then to ask for reasons for engaging in it is idle: if, as a subject, I *must* be concerned for others because otherwise I couldn't be a subject at all, then that is all the justification that is needed, as it shows I have no other option but to be concerned in this way. On its own, however, this seems unpersuasive, because it seems we can ask normative

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[15] For further discussion, see my 'Silencing the Sceptic?' in Jens Peter Brune, Robert Stern and Micha Werner (eds), *Transcendental Arguments in Moral Theory*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, forthcoming. I here distinguish performative or retorsive transcendental arguments which try to convict the sceptic of undercutting their own position by denying what they must presuppose, from deductive transcendental argument which try to establish the falsity of the sceptic's position on the basis of premises that they accept via the claim that the former is a necessary condition of the latter holding true. I also argue that the promise of performative or retorsive transcendental arguments is illusory.

questions regarding features of ourselves and our lives that we see to be necessary, even metaphysically so – for example, death is necessary to creatures such as us, but we can still ask whether it is good or bad to die.

However, this may seem to miss the point; for it could be said that what makes this a performative contradiction is that it is not just necessary to us in a general way, but necessary to being a subject and thus even raising the question at all, which makes it something we must take for granted in all subsequent reasoning – thus, to use a familiar metaphor, on this view the question 'why concern myself with others?' is an 'external' question rather than an 'internal' one, and as such does not even require an answer, any more than the question 'is the principle of non-contradiction valid?' In even raising the question, we are always already committed to this concern, because we could not ask the question at all if we did not. This then explains why I am *obliged* or bound to be concerned by the other: as a subject, I have no alternative option, so it is not possible to cast doubt on this obligation in the way the sceptic tries to do, thereby silencing her. As Perpich puts it: 'Without the other, there is no world and no meaningful valuing. Hence the skeptic's question of whether I am obliged to value the other and on what grounds always comes *too late*' (EEL, p. 134).

But here we meet a familiar worry about such arguments: namely that even if they show that believing or acting in a certain way is some sort of necessary presupposition, this doesn't in itself give a reason to think such presuppositions are true or justified[16] – and because it doesn't, the fact that the argument seems to show that such presuppositions cannot be given up or doubted seems to make the sceptical challenge *worse* not better, as now we seem

[16] Cf. C S Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 8 vols, edited by C. Hartshorne, P. Weiss and A. Burks (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1931-60), vol 2, §113: 'I do not admit that indispensability is any ground of belief. It may be indispensible that I should have $500 in the bank—because I have given checks to that amount. But I have never found that the indispensability directly affected my balance, in the least… when we discuss a vexed question, we hope that there is some ascertainable truth about it, and that the discussion is not to go on forever and to no purpose. A transcendentalist would claim that it is an indispensible "presupposition" that there is an ascertainable true answer to every intelligible question. I used to talk like that, myself; for when I was a babe in philosophy my bottle was filled from the udders of Kant. But by this time I have come to want something more substantial.'

to be compelled to believe or act without being supplied with any grounds to justify these beliefs or actions. So, the sceptic might worry, all I have been shown is that there is no way qua subject not to be concerned by others – but I still haven't been shown I have grounds for such concern that would merit it, and thus that I am not being duped; all I have really been shown is that I am in a situation where I cannot even question this, which may deepen my scepticism rather than alleviate it. Moreover, as an answer to the question of obligation, the argument seems misconceived: for while it may show that I am obligated to concern myself with others in the sense of being unable to do otherwise, it does not show that others have a *legitimate authority* over me and hence obligate me qua rational agent, which is surely what the sceptic is asking to be shown.

Finally, however, it might be said that Perpich's argument can be made stronger than I have presented it so far, if instead of an argument focused on concern for the other, we rather focus it on the *value* of the other – for if we can show the egoist that the other has value, then this might seem to give her a *reason* to feel concern, that we have been missing so far. Thus, we might gloss Perpich's argument as follows:

(1) To ask 'why concern myself with others?' is to engage in critical reflection

(2) To engage in critical reflection is to be a subject

(3') To be a subject it is necessary to be in an ethical and social relation with others

(4') To be in a social relation with others it is necessary to value them

(5') So I must take others to be valuable

(6') So concern for others is justified

In this way, it could be argued, the sceptic's demand for justification that drives the normative question is answered.

However, of course, the difficulty here is with premises (4') and (5'), which again involve the sense in which it is necessary to value others, and what this means. For, of course, one way one might feel that morality could 'dupe' us is if it turned out we were forced into valuing things in ways that were not merited – and by demonstrating merely that one *must* value others, it is hard to see how this worry would be allayed. Of course, if one is sufficiently idealist about value,

one might argue that what it is to *be* valuable is to have value conferred on it by our attitudes and preferences – so if we must have a valuing attitude to X, then X ipso facto possesses value, and to think otherwise is to ask for more than is required. But then, the value of others can no longer serve as the reason for our social and ethical relations with others: rather, it is itself constructed through those relations. However, this would then leave the sceptic who wonders about the reason for such relations without any answer based on the value of others; the reason would only seem to be that such relations are necessary to be a subject at all, thus taking us back to the earlier form of the argument, and the difficulties we identified there.

It would seem, then, that notwithstanding Perpich's undoubtedly very interesting reconstruction of Levinas's position, any insights it may possess still fail when taken as a transcendental argument against the moral sceptic.

2. Løgstrup

Having seen how I think the approach outlined above fails, I now want to turn to Løgstrup, to contrast the way he uses somewhat similar claims and insights, but in a different dialectic which is arguably more successful.

We might begin with the similarities between Levinas and Løgstrup. I think an important basis for this similarity is their shared background in Heidegger, which has been noted. When it comes to Levinas, I think Perpich is right to highlight the indebtedness to Heidegger in his key claim, namely that as subjects we are not 'pre-social' beings who reside outside the social context and choose whether to engage with it (or not), but that we are always already embedded within it from the start:

> To return to our Levinasian argument then: valuing requires and expresses the fact that I am *already reflectively in a world*. To be in-the-world can be understood here with the full richness Heidegger gives to the term. I am immersed in an open-ended system of relationships, many of which I understand and control, some of which I do not, all of which refer to possibilities of the kind of being that I am myself. What are we to say about how I came to be there? While Heidegger takes the question of the world-hood of the world to be one of the fundamental questions of

> ontology, he would no doubt read the question of *how* we come to find ourselves in a world as an ontic question of little direct interest. On the Levinasian account, however, how we answer the question is crucial. Being-in-the-world, for Levinas, is neither the achievement of a self-sufficient subject nor the ontological birthright of *Dasein*. Being in a world presupposes an other who has *opened that world to me and with me*. (EEL, p. 132)

As others have argued,[17] it is possible to give these aspects of Heidegger's thought an ethical construal – even if he resisted any such construal himself – and arguably this forms an important background to Levinas's thinking here.[18]

Likewise, I think the same is true of Løgstrup. For Løgstrup also emphasizes the way in which we are not sovereign when it comes to our own lives but depend fundamentally on others through relations of trust, communication, and care, and equally that when we act in accordance with norms like trust and openness to others, we are not following norms that we have somehow created for ourselves as sovereign individuals – rather, seen as the norms which structure our lives from the outset, they might be said to have a certain degree of sovereignty over us, which is why Løgstrup calls them in his later works 'sovereign expressions of life', and in his earlier works speaks of them as a 'gift' in the sense that they are 'givens'.[19] Thus, for example, in *The Ethical Demand*, Løgstrup writes as follows concerning trust:

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[17] See e.g. Frederick A. Olafson, *Heidegger and the Ground of Ethics: A Study of Mitsein* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[18] This is not to say that he does so with no reservations: cf. *Is it Righteous to Be?*, p. 177: 'In Heidegger, the ethical relation, *Miteinandersein*, being-with-another, is only one moment of our presence in the world. It does not have the central place. *Mit* is always being next to…. It is not in the first instance the face, it is *zusammensein* (being-together), perhaps *zusammenmarschieren* (marching-together)'. Cf. also p. 137.

[19] What precisely Løgstrup means when he speaks of life being a gift in *The Ethical Demand* is somewhat controversial, but I am here following the suggestion of Hans Fink and Alasdair MacIntyre that his argument relies on the idea of 'life being something *given* in the ordinary philosophical sense of being prior to and a precondition of all we may think and do' (Hans Fink and Alasdair MacIntyre, 'Introduction', *The Ethical Demand*, revised translation by Hans Fink and Alasdair MacIntyre (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1997), p. xxxv) [hereafter abbreviated as ED].

> It was said earlier that a person does not arbitrarily deliver himself over to someone else as a matter of trust. Rather, this self-surrender is a part of his life, irrespective of any decision on his part. Also it was said that this implies the demand that we take care of the life which has been placed in our hands… That a person is more or less in the power of another is a fact we cannot alter; it is a fact of life. We do not deliberately choose to trust, and thereby deliver ourselves over to another. We constantly live in a state of being already delivered – either through a passing mood or in terms of something which in a fundamental way affects our entire destiny. (ED, pp. 54-55)

For Løgstrup, relations of trust are not practices that people institute for themselves as individuals. Rather, as what Alasdair MacIntyre has called 'dependent rational animals',[20] we are constantly caught up in relations of trust, not only for information but in the very process of communication itself, which requires what Løgstrup calls 'openness of speech' – i.e. honesty in our engagement with one another. Of course, this does not mean that *all* people are to be trusted, that *all* speech is open, or that therefore we trust everyone all the time: but it does mean (Løgstrup thinks) that unless this were the norm, then human life as we know it would not be possible, making it in this sense a transcendental condition for such life.

Moreover, as we as individuals are subjects embedded in this life, rather than sovereign individuals who somehow create ourselves from scratch, there are clear echoes in Løgstrup of the key thought that Perpich attributes to Levinas, namely that we could not be subjects at all without this ethical and social context in which we exist, so we are constitutively dependent on others in this sense. Thus, Løgstrup writes:

> [I]t is not within our power to determine whether we wish to live in responsible relations or not; we find ourselves in them simply because we exist. We are already responsible, always, whether or not we want to be, because we have not ourselves ordered our own lives. We are born into a life that is already ordered in a very definite way, and this order lays

[20] Cf. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (London: Duckworth, 2009).

> claim upon us in such a manner that as we grow we find ourselves bound to other people and forced into responsible relationships with them. (ED, p. 107)

In the following passage, therefore, Løgstrup explicitly treats the normative structure under which we live, including trust and care for others, as constitutive of our identity:

> [The sovereign expressions of life] reach back into and are given with something for which we are not ourselves the basis. We cannot reserve them for ourselves as our contribution or society's, pleading that they are personal. Yet, we are on intimate terms with them. Our identity is literally due to them. They constitute it. Our identity is due to life-expressions over which we have no power except that we can annihilate them. They reach beyond the regional compartmentalization upon which we otherwise depend. (M1, p. 88, translation modified)[21]

Like Levinas, though also like Levinas without mentioning Heidegger explicitly, there is a Heideggerian element to Løgstrup's thinking here that perhaps explains their common ground. Thus, both can be read as offering a kind of transcendental claim about our necessary prior embeddedness as socially and normatively structured beings, on which our individuality depends.

However, while this much is shared between Levinas (as presented by Perpich) and Løgstrup, there is also an important difference, which is that while Levinas is presented as using these claims against the sceptic in a transcendental argument, to try to convict the sceptic of performative contradiction, Løgstrup seems to have no such ambition. He makes no attempt to defeat or silence the sceptic using an argument of this sort as such, and nor does he write as if such a strategy is required. Thus, despite sharing many premises and assumptions, there is nothing in Løgstrup to mirror the sorts of transcendental arguments we have sketched in relation to Perpich's reading of Levinas.

However, it might now be puzzling why Løgstrup made a point of underlining our condition as socially and ethically embedded individuals, if his

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[21] K E Løgstrup, *Metaphysics*, volume 1, translated by Russell E Dees (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1995) [hereafter abbreviated as M1] . Cf. also ED, p. 66: 'To be an individuality, a self, implies that something is claimed of me'.

aim was not to construct a transcendental argument of a Levinasian sort? For, it could be asked, *unless* we are using these claims against the moral sceptic in a transcendental argument, what is the point of dwelling on them? What useful work could they be made to do otherwise? Isn't their only point to silence the sceptic, otherwise these insights are wasted? It is these assumptions that I think Løgstrup's writings usefully challenge, by showing that there is another (perhaps ultimately more successful) way in which such transcendental insights can be used.[22]

To see this, it is significant first to see the dialectical situation in which Løgstrup thinks he is operating, given that he thinks it does not need to be met by a transcendental argument; what kind of challenge is it, instead? If the challenge is coming from the moral sceptic, won't it need a transcendental argument to address it properly? And if it is not coming from the moral sceptic, how can we take Løgstrup and Levinas to be engaged in the same endeavour at all? To answer these questions requires some care.

As a first step, I think it is useful to go back to Perpich's starting point in her construction of Levinas's transcendental argument, when she cites a question he was asked by an interviewere: 'What would you respond to someone who said that he did not…feel this call of the other, or more simply that the other left him indifferent?', and then gives Levinas's reply: 'I do not believe that is truly possible. It is a matter here of our first experience, *the very one that constitutes us*, and which is as if the ground of our experience'. As we have seen, Perpich thinks that what concerns Levinas's interviewer here, and Levinas himself, is whether there are genuine reasons to care for others, to which the performative contradiction involved in doubting this is supposed to offer some sort of response.

But I think a different reading of Levinas's exchange with his interviewer is possible. For, what is notable is that the latter raises a question about what someone *feels*, where what he asks Levinas is if he thinks anyone could be

[22] For more on the distinction between transcendental arguments and transcendental claims that is developed in what follows, see Robert Stern, 'Taylor, Transcendental Arguments, and Taylor on Consciousness', *Hegel Bulletin* 34 (2013), pp. 79-97.

oblivious to the other, and be left indifferent to them.[23] Now, this looks more like a *phenomenological* question than a question about *reasons*: it seems as if Levinas is being asked to comment on whether he thinks a person could fail to register the call of the other in their experience of the world, not whether a person could see that call as failing to give them a reason to act, which would be a further step. Likewise, Levinas's response seems not to be to claim that no one could see the call as a reason to act, but rather than no one could fail to hear the call in the first place, whether or not they then take it to be reason-giving. What seems 'not to be truly possible' because it is 'a matter here of our first experience' is to fail to feel the call of the other, where this feeling is said to be 'a matter of our first experience' because it is this feeling that 'first constitutes us'. Read phenomenologically (contra Perpich), therefore, the transcendental claim about what constitutes us is not meant to provide us with a reason to heed the call of the other; it is just meant to give grounds for thinking that everyone, including the sceptic who claims to feel indifferent, must at some level feel this call, in order to be a subject at all.[24]

But even if this is perhaps a more accurate reading of this exchange between Levinas and his interviewer, it might still be wondered whether it makes much ultimate difference to what is going on: for, even if we can convince the sceptic that she must at least feel the call of the other, can't she still ask why she should take it seriously – why not ignore it? Surely to address this question, we need reasons why the call is valid or legitimate, so something more like Perpich's argument will be required after all?

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[23] Cf. Gary Gutting, *Thinking the Impossible: French Philosophy since 1960* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 125, who observes that 'Levinas's response to ethical skepticism appeals to experience rather than to argument or linguistic analysis'.

[24] Cf. *Is It Righteous to Be?*, p. 50, where Levinas responds to the question 'How to encounter the other?' by saying: 'To encounter, what does that mean? From the very start you are not indifferent to the other. From the very start you are not alone! Even if you adopt an attitude of indifference you are obliged to adopt it! The other counts for you; you answer him as much as he addresses himself to you; he concerns you!' And for a more general comment, that may be relevant here, cf. ibid, p. 221: 'In reflecting on the transcendental conditions of the poem, you have already lost the poem'.

However, the phenomenological reader might reply: This is to misunderstand what is meant here by 'call'. For, it could be argued, to be called by the other is not just (as it were) to hear some noises, which one may or may not decide to take as reason-giving – as when I hear a creak on the stair at night, and wonder if it give me reason to call the police, or reason to go back to sleep but call the carpenter in the morning to get my floor-boards fixed. Rather, Levinas would surely hold, to feel or experience the other as requiring something of us precisely is to see what is going on *as* reason giving, as otherwise one hasn't really heard it as a call of the other at all – just as some something unconnected to them in any way.[25]

Nonetheless, Perpich might say, questions concerning reasons can still come back in. For, it could be argued, even if Levinas on this phenomenological reading were right to say that everyone in some sense experiences the call or demand of the other on them, and even if this must involve some prima facie sense in which they are being given a reason to act, we can still surely ask whether that prima facie sense is accurate, and whether we are *really* being given a reason – just as, knowing that I am addicted, I might wonder whether the call of the heroin to me to take it is *really* giving me a reason to do so. And faced with this question, Perpich might again suggest, convicting the sceptic of performative contradiction in asking it could ensure it gets a positive answer, by showing that we must value others in such a way as to show we have a genuine reason to heed the call.

However, if my previous discussion was right, unfortunately this is not how things turned out: the transcendental argument did not really seem to

[25] Cf. Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, p. 140: 'If I call out your name, I make you stop in your tracks. (If you love me, I make you come running.) Now you cannot proceed as you did before. Oh, you can proceed, all right, but not just as you did before. For now if you walk on, you will be ignoring me and slighting me. It will probably be difficult for you, and you will have to muster a certain active resistance, a sense of rebellion. But why should you have to rebel against me? It is because I am a law to you. By calling out your name, I have obligated you. I have given you a reason to stop'. Cf. the interview with Levinas cited previously, where he continues: 'However indifferent one might claim to be, it is not possible to pass a face by without greeting it, or without saying to oneself, "What will he ask of me?" Not only our personal life, but also all of civilization is founded upon this' (*Is it Righteous to Be?*, p. 184), and ibid., p. 216: 'When you have encountered a human being, you cannot simply leave him alone'.

supply the right kind of reasons, so this is where we may seem to have reached an impasse. On the one hand, Levinas may have established that no one can fail to experience the call of the other; on the other hand, Perpich's transcendental argument seems to have failed to allay doubts the sceptic may have concerning whether or not she should heed the call, or if in doing so she would be being 'duped'.

However, a way out of this impasse can be found, I think, if we consider an issue which we have left aside up to now, but which Løgstrup can help us see more clearly: namely, we have not yet considered the *grounds* on which the sceptic might question the call of the other. Assuming with the phenomenological argument that no one fails to experience this call because it is a transcendental condition on being a subject at all, but also assuming that there is no satisfactory transcendental argument to show that this alone puts it beyond questioning, nonetheless to take that scepticism seriously, we still need to be convinced that there are *legitimate grounds* the sceptic has for such questioning, and what they might be.

Now, Løgstrup suggests, when we come to think we can rightfully reject the demand of the other, this is usually because we precisely forget the Heideggerian claim about embeddedness, and so easily fall into thinking of *ourselves* as sovereign in ways that we really are not, where we take this to warrant us in rejecting the call that others seem to make on us. This is something that Løgstrup warns us about repeatedly:

> [W]e live in yet another comprehensive illusion. This consists of thinking, feeling and acting as if we ourselves were the power to exist in our existence. In every way, we conduct ourselves as if we owed our existence to ourselves. (M1, p. 72)
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> As already indicated, we live in a fundamental delusion in everything we think, feel and do which is just as grotesque as it is self-evident – namely that we owe our existence to ourselves. It is not a delusion which overpowers only occasionally but one in which we live and breathe, spiritually speaking. (M1, p. 91)

> [I]f a person refuses to acknowledge any demand for unselfishness, he or she thereby also refuses to acknowledge that his or her life has been received as a gift. (ED, p. 116)

Løgstrup's thought might be put this way: While we all hear the ethical demand, we block its reason-giving force by taking it that 'we owe our existence to ourselves' as somehow self-created, sovereign individuals, to whom the demand does not apply – which is how we then come to ask the questions that concern Perpich, namely '"What is the other to me?" or "Why ought I value the other's demands?"'.

However, rather than treating these questions (as Perpich does) as entirely abstract questions, as based simply on denying the prima facie reason-giving force of the other just as such, which means they can only be met by a transcendental argument or not at all, Løgstrup's approach implies that these questions are only ones to be taken seriously insofar as they have some real ground based on assumptions about our sovereignty; this then means that transcendental considerations that show how false this appeal to sovereignty is can be applied at this level instead – not as premises in a transcendental argument directed against a groundless scepticism, but as a transcendental claim concerning how we relate to others which can then undercut the basis on which the sceptic tries to block the moral demand.

Thus, I have suggested, it is a mistake to use the transcendental claim that we are necessarily constituted by others to directly block moral scepticism by trying to convict the sceptic of performative contradiction, as Perpich (and others) try to do. Rather, I have suggested, it is better to use this claim in a different way, to undermine the sceptic's reasons for thinking the claim of others do not apply as reasons to her, insofar as she is a sovereign individual who thinks '[she] is lord and creator of [her] own life, in other words, that [she] has received nothing' (ED, p. 156). What the Heideggerian considerations that both Levinas and Løgstrup appeal to show, therefore, is not only that we must hear the call of the other in so far as we are always already within a social world, but also that this sense of our own sovereignty that we use to block the call is a delusion, for such sovereignty is impossible for us. But what our reading of Løgstrup has likewise suggested is that certainly he, and perhaps also Levinas,

would not have wanted to go further, and offer a direct transcendental argument against moral scepticism based on such claims.

However, a final worry might now be raised: namely, has anything I have said about Løgstrup's argument (and Levinas's on this second interpretation) really done enough to answer the moral sceptic; and if it hasn't, isn't Perpich's approach to be preferred, at least in having the right kind of ambition? For, it could be argued, the moral sceptic is an egoist, who thinks only her interests give her reasons to act; thus, even if she may hear the call of the other, she will think it gives her no reason to heed the call unless doing so will serve her ends. This is, as it were, a theory about practical reasoning. But what do Løgstrup's Heideggerian observations do to block this theory or show it to be false? Even if Løgstrup is right to emphasize that we are not 'worldless individuals, ourselves the authors of our goals – as though there were not a challenge that proceeds to us from the world and its order',[26] why can't the sceptic stick to her account of practical reasoning and so reject as illusory the reasons this world seems to present to us? To address this challenge, won't something more like Perpich's transcendental argument be required?

Here, I think, it is necessary to return to the distinction between kinds of scepticism that I outlined at the beginning. For Løgstrup, and I think also for Levinas, the sceptic that interests them is not (as it were) the pure moral sceptic with her egoistic model of practical reasoning: for very few of us are like that, making the model something of a philosophical construct.[27] Rather, as the opening of *Totality and Infinity* suggests, we become moral sceptics not because we start by thinking only our interests give us reasons, but because we think the

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[26] K E Løgstrup, *Norm og spontaneitet* (1972), partially translated in *Beyond the Ethical Demand*, edited by Kees van Kooten Niekerk (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), p. 95.

[27] That is one way of putting it. Another, suggested by some of Levinas's comments, is that is *some* sense the egoist is just right, and there is a kind of 'madness' or 'irrationality' in responding to the ethical demand – but still not in a way that need trouble us, or that requires some transcendental argument in response. Cf. *Is it Righteous to Be?*, p. 145: 'Now let us approach something truly mad: I must care for *your* being. I cannot allow myself to abandon you to your death. This madness is what is human', and p. 190: '[Charity] is wisdom, which interrupts the good sense of the interested animal', and p. 250, where he calls our responsibility for the other 'madness in a way'.

other kinds of reasons that are presented to us lack sufficient substance in their own right, as the 'debunking' sceptic suggests. Thus, faced with the claim of the other, we do not reject it on the grounds that while the other is perfectly entitled to make the claim, it is nonetheless only a reason for us to act if it coincides with our interests. Rather, we question the entitlement of the claim, on the grounds that we are not responsible for the suffering of the other, or that it can only be legitimate if it involves reciprocity, or that our lives are to be left at our own disposal in so far as we deserve credit for them. It is to these 'moralized' objections to the call of the other that Løgstrup's argument is addressed, by showing that they would only apply to sovereign individuals which we are not and cannot be, and thus cannot be used to block the claim others make upon us. If this sceptical target is less radical than the moral egoist in a way that may seem to devalue this response, Løgstrup would also I think take it to be more real, and thus it is ultimately more important to our moral lives that this is the target that is addressed.[28]

[28] I am grateful to Diane Perpich for her helpful comments on a previous draft of this paper, and also to the editors of this volume.