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A Gift or a Given? On the Role of Life in Løgstrup's Ethics

Robert Stern

> 'In the final analysis, one's thinking about ethics depends on one's way of thinking about the relation between humankind and the universe' – K. E. Løgstrup[1]

If we are going to give nature a place in ethics, do we have to think of it as created by a benign and intelligent creator, as otherwise it must remain normatively neutral – or can we find a basis for value and normativity in nature that is independent of any such theistic conception? This is obviously a fundamental question in ethics, with a long pedigree stretching back through history. My aim in this paper is to outline the issue as it figures in the ethics of the Danish twentieth-century theologian and philosopher K. E. Løgstrup. I have chosen to discuss his work in this context as I think it raises the question in a particularly interesting and acute way; for as we shall see, Løgstrup very much stands at the point of tension between these two options, which has made his thinking on this issue hard to place. To some, it is obvious that he was a creation theorist, basing his ethics on the claim that our lives have been created; but to others, it is equally obvious that this is something he was committed to avoiding by offering a secular and humanistic ethics instead. My aim here is not to settle that interpretative question conclusively – which like comparable questions concerning the place of religious commitments in thinkers like Spinoza, Kant and Hegel is perhaps ultimately unresolvable – but rather to explore the options that are available, thus hopefully shedding light on the kind of complexities this question can raise.

I am aware, however, that Løgstrup is a relatively little-known figure, and that therefore some background is needed. I will thus provide a brief introduction to his life and works in the first section. I will then set out his key ideas, where of particular interest will be his claims about the relation between ethics and his conception of life – and whether that conception requires us to think of life as created if it is to do the work that it required of it within his ethical thinking. Once we see the importance of this issue to

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[1] K. E. Løgstrup, *Beyond the Ethical Demand*, translated by Susan Drew and Heidi Flegal, edited by Kees van Kooten Niekerk (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2007), p. 136/*System og Symbol: Essays* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1982), p. 114.

Løgstrup's ethics, I hope it will then be clear why his writings raise significant issues that are central to this topic: namely, what view we must take of nature if we are to give it any import within our ethical theorizing.

1. Locating Løgstrup

Løgstrup was born in 1905 and died in 1981, and had a significant influence on the thought of his native Denmark, and in Scandinavia more generally, though until recently he was little known in the wider world.[2] Formally educated as a theologian in Copenhagen, he also read widely in philosophy, and used the opportunity to travel before the Second World War to study with Heidegger and other philosophers. His early reading was influenced by Kant and the phenomenological movement (particularly Edmund Husserl, Max Scheler, Hans Lipps, and Heidegger himself), as well as by Kierkegaard, in addition to Lutheran theology. After a few years as a pastor in the Danish state church, he became professor of ethics and philosophy of religion in the theology faculty at the University of Aarhus in 1943, where he spent the rest of his academic career. He published his first major work *Den Etiske Fordring* (*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, metaphysics and philosophy of art (where extracts from 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).[3]

As this sketch suggests, while coming out of a theological background and being engaged with many of the key theological controversies of his time, and while also being himself a committed Christian believer, Løgstrup nonetheless insisted on the need to put theology in dialogue with philosophy, and equally on the need to explore the relation

[2] Philosophers from the English-speaking world who have discussed his work in recent times include Alasdair MacIntyre, Simon Critchley, Zygmunt Bauman and Stephen Darwall. A bibliography of works on Løgstrup in English is available here: http://tinyurl.com/j3xxhhb

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

between ethics, metaphysics, and religious belief. He was therefore explicitly hostile to the more conservative theological forces of his period, and what he perceived as their irrationalist and exclusivist agendas. At the same time, in reading his work it is important to acknowledge that he is not writing as a standard secular philosopher, but is precisely concerned to trace the points at which philosophy requires theology and vice versa – where one of those points is the connection between nature, value, normativity and creation. I will now explore how Løgstrup handles that connection by looking at three central conceptions in his ethics: the radical ethical demand, the idea of life as a gift, and his account of what he calls 'the sovereign expressions of life'.

2. The radical ethical demand

Løgstrup speaks most prominently of a radical ethical demand in his first major work, *The Ethical Demand*, while in later writings from 1968 onwards he talks more about 'sovereign expressions of life' – though as we shall see, there are important connections between the two ideas.

Løgstrup introduces the idea of radical ethical demand by reflecting initially on the religious proclamation of Jesus, and in particular the commandment 'to love thy neighbour as thyself'. However, he says he wants to make sense of this in more than just theological terms, for '[i]f a religious proclamation is not understandable in the sense that it answers to decisive features of our existence, then accepting it is tantamount to letting ourselves be coerced – whether by others or by ourselves – for faith without understanding is not faith by coercion'.[4] Thus, he writes later in the book reflecting on what he has achieved: 'We took the proclamation of Jesus as the point of departure for our reflection on the ethical demand… [and] we have tried [to account for it] in a purely human manner'.[5]

As this suggests, Løgstrup's approach is to examine what ethical outlook is embodied in the love commandment by considering in more detail what it is to love the neighbour, and then to consider how to make sense of that commandment in terms of

[4] K. E. Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, translated by Theodor I. Jensen, revised and edited with an introduction by Hans Fink and Alasdair MacIntyre (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1997), p. 2/*Den Etiske Fordring* (Aarhus: Klim, 2010), p. 10.
[5] *The Ethical Demand*, p. 207/*Den Etiske Fordring*, p. 232.

'decisive features of our existence',[6] which include the metaphysical implications of taking it seriously. It is then in this second phase of the inquiry that questions concerning creation will arise, but where Løgstrup places such questions fundamentally in the context of the first phase, of whether such ideas are required to make sense of the ethical demand and what he takes this demand to involve.

At the outset, Løgstrup states that the 'character of the demand contained in the proclamation of Jesus' is that it is 'silent, radical, one-sided and unfulfillable',[7] characteristics he then goes on to elaborate in the discussion that follows, while also adding some further related features, namely that it is 'invisible', that it is 'isolating', and that no one has a right to make it – while all these characteristics set the ethical demand apart from conventional social demands and norms. In order to understand what comes next, it is therefore important to explain what Løgstrup means by these features of the radical ethical demand.

In claiming that the ethical demand is *silent*, Løgstrup means that it cannot be articulated in two ways: first, in responding to the needs of another person, you cannot just do whatever it is that they ask you to do, as that may not reflect their genuine needs; and secondly, you cannot just appeal to established social norms and conventions, as there may not be any such norms and conventions governing the case, and even if there are, in the ethical situation it is up to you to take responsibility for how you decide to act, rather than just relying on such norms. This thus makes the ethical demand *radical* in the sense that you must determine for yourself how to act and bear responsibility for that, as opposed to cases where one just follows prevailing conventions. As a result, Løgstrup argues, the demand 'isolates' the individual on whom the demand falls, and makes them into 'a singular person', as they cannot then submerge themselves in following these conventions or what the other person wants.[8] Løgstrup also suggests the demand is radical in the sense that it can only be fulfilled unselfishly and so may require us to act in ways that go against our own interests; this means that it may then 'intrude disturbingly

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[6] The Danish term translated as 'existence' here is 'tilværelse', which can also be translated as 'life'. Løgstrup and his wife used it to translate Heidegger's term 'Dasein' into Danish.

[7] *The Ethical Demand*, p. 5/*Den Etiske Fordring*, p. 14. Cf. also p. 207/p. 232.

[8] *The Ethical Demand*, p. 45/*Den Etiske Fordring*, p. 57.

into my own existence',[9] where we in general prefer to be left to just get on with our lives – though Løgstrup makes clear that he does not think this radicality should be confused with 'limitlessness'.[10] Thirdly, Løgstrup claims that '[t]he radical character [of the demand] manifests itself also in the fact that the other person has no right him or herself to make the demand, even though it has to do with the care of his own life'.[11] The demand is also *one-sided*, he argues, in the sense that it does not involve reciprocity or the right to make 'counter-demands', so that if I act for your good, this does entitle me to ask for something in return. Fourthly, Løgstrup says that the demand is *unfulfillable*, but not in the sense that it is exorbitant and limitless, but in the sense that if it is felt *as a demand* and thus as something one is required to do, one has already failed as a moral agent, as to genuinely love the other is not to feel under any obligation act on their behalf. Finally, in addition to these central features of the demand, Løgstrup also mentions that the demand is *invisible* because Løgstrup thinks we can never be entirely sure if we have acted out of love for the other, or for more selfish or conventional motives, where this opacity applies not just to our understanding of others, but equally to ourselves.[12]

Now, up to this point, Løgstrup can be read as 'unpacking' the love commandment and the ethical demand it embodies, taking it for granted that the commandment corresponds to something many people see as a fundamental ethical norm, which Løgstrup summarizes as follows: 'The radical demand says that we are to care for the other person in a way that best serves his or her interests'.[13] He thus takes himself to have brought out how this demand operates and what it asks of us, in ways that he hopes we will recognise and acknowledge. Of course, it might still be argued that he has mischaracterized the demand, or indeed that there is no such demand – for example, it could be objected that such care has to be reciprocal; that it is based on a corresponding right; and that it is too paternalistic in giving insufficient weight to the desires of others in

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[9] *The Ethical Demand*, p. 45/*Den Etiske Fordring*, p. 57.
[10] See Chapter 3, § 2.
[11] *The Ethical Demand*, p. 45/*Den Etiske Fordring*, p. 57.
[12] Cf. Chapter 5, § 1.
[13] *The Ethical Demand*, p. 55/*Den Etiske Fordring*, p. 68. A slightly better translation would be: 'The radical demand says that the other's life should be cared for [varetages] in a way that best serves the other'.

responding to their needs.[14] However, while such questions are certainly pertinent, we will not deal with them here, as they are not directly relevant to the focus of this paper, which emerges more clearly when we turn now to the second phase of Løgstrup's inquiry: namely, if we accept something like the radical ethical demand as characterised above, what are its broader metaphysical commitments? What 'features of our existence' and view of the world do we need to take seriously in order to make sense of the ethical demand as Løgstrup has presented it to us?[15]

One answer Løgstrup offers is relatively straightforward: namely that the love commandment and thus the ethical demand is only really intelligible given the fact that we are dependent on one another – otherwise, it would lose all normative force, as the need for care would not arise at all. Thus, the demand would not hold in a world in which 'human beings were so independent of one another that the words and deeds of one were only a dispensable luxury in the life of another and my failure in the life of the neighbour could easily be made up later';[16] but of course this is not the case, even though in falsely exaggerating our own autonomy and sovereignty, we often overlook this fact, while we are also disturbed by the degree in which (as Løgstrup famously puts it) we hold the life of other people in our hands, and so try to ignore this dependence as much as we can.[17] As Løgstrup emphasizes, however, as soon as one thinks about such a basic phenomenon as trust, one sees immediately the extent to which we rely on others within a thoroughly social world, and that without this reliance we would not be the kind of creatures we are.

While this claim may be highly plausible, nonetheless Løgstrup thinks that more is required to make sense of the ethical demand, where what comes next is more controversial. For, Løgstrup argues, a further metaphysical step is needed, namely to accept that 'life is a gift', where it is this step that raises the question about creation with

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[14] Løgstrup responds to this last worry in Chapter 1, §5.

[15] Løgstrup himself presents the structure of *The Ethical Demand* in roughly this two stage way in a summary of the text in a later work in which he replies to his critics: 'First I analyse how the life of one person is interwoven with the life of another, and from this I deduce the content of the demand, which has to do with taking care of the life of the other person that has been surrendered to us. Some way into the book I make it clear that the one-sidedness of the demand cannot be deduced in this way, but presupposes that life has been given to the individual person' (*Beyond the Ethical Demand*, p. 10/*Kunst og Ethik* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1961), p. 239).

[16] *The Ethical Demand*, p. 5/*Den Etiske Fordring*, p. 13.

[17] *The Ethical Demand*, pp. 15-16/*Den Etiske Fordring*, pp. 24-26.

which we began: does conceiving 'life as a gift' necessarily involve conceiving life as something given by God, and if so how could this be made consistent with Løgstrup claim to be operating in a 'purely human manner'? Or might it be understood in a way that does not require any appeal to the notion of a creator at all, in a form that is straightforwardly humanistic and secular? As we shall see, there are different answers that one can give to these questions, making possible rather different readings of Løgstrup's position.[18]

Given Løgstrup's general approach as outlined above, I think that the right way to address these issues is to ask what work the idea of 'life as a gift' is supposed to do in relation to the ethical demand: how does this idea help us make sense of the demand as Løgstrup conceives it, in the same way that taking note of our interdependence helps us make sense of it? If we can understand what work the idea of 'life as a gift' is meant to do, we can then see what it involves, and thus how far it requires a commitment to a divine creator or whether no such theological conception is necessary and we can understand 'life as a gift' in a more secular manner.[19]

Now, as Løgstrup himself presents it, the idea of 'life as a gift' is primarily brought in to explain three features of the demand: first, why we are required to care for the other person at all and what form that care takes; second, why the demand is one-sided and not reciprocal; and third, why no one has a right to make the demand for care, even though

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[18] A further complication is that in his later 'Rejoinder' to his critics, Løgstrup states that he was wrong to imply that the key distinction is between the 'human' and the 'religious', but rather that it should be between the 'human' and the 'Christian'; so that while he maintains that *The Ethical Demand* does not does not 'belong within the realm of the particularly Christian' (except for Chapter 12 which discusses Jesus's authority), he implies that a more broadly religious ethics that makes room for the 'the religious truth that life is a gift' and for 'questions of creation and absolute authority' would still count as a human and philosophical ethics in this sense, as they do not involve any specifically Christian doctrinal commitments. See *Beyond the Ethical Demand*, pp. 10-11/*Kunst og Ethik*, pp. 238-40.

[19] Because this paper concentrates on whether Løgstrup's conception of 'life as a gift' requires a theological conception, it does not consider whether aspects of the ethical demand that do not directly relate to this conception might also require a theological interpretation – for example, Løgstrup's claim that in face of its apparent unfulfillability 'an ultimate authority' is needed to insist that the demand can still be fulfilled (cf. *The Ethical Demand*, p. 171/*Den Etiske Fordring*, p. 195), where it is again a matter of interpretation whether this commits Løgstrup to treating this authority in theistic terms, or in a more secular manner. These issues will be discussed elsewhere in Robert Stern, *The Radical Demand in Løgstrup's Ethics*, forthcoming.

we are nonetheless required to offer that care to them. Løgstrup argues that insofar as we take the ethical demand seriously in these ways, we are implicitly committed to seeing life as a gift – so by understanding the former, we can see what is involved in the latter.

As regards the first feature, the idea here is this: the demand requires us to care for the other, where that care fundamentally consists in helping their life to go well in some broad sense – so not necessarily in just making them 'happy' by fulfilling their subjective preferences or providing them with sensory stimulation, but enabling them to realize their capacities more fully and develop as living beings. Now, one sense in which that commits us to seeing 'life as a gift' is in assuming that *life* and all that this involves is a *good thing*, rather than a curse, so that in furthering someone's life one is giving something of positive value to them, and not harming them or damaging their well-being. Løgstrup thus takes it as a potential challenge to the ethical demand that one's life might be going so badly that one cannot see it as a gift in this way, but rather as something one would be better without; but while taking the challenge seriously, he argues that in general this cannot be our view of life, as otherwise the ethical demand would have no meaning to us.[20] On the contrary, he thinks one fundamental conception we have of caring for others is to foster what he calls their 'zest for life' or 'courage of life', which is precisely their sense that life is good and worthwhile, and something to be fostered and developed.[21]

Now, clearly, this first way of thinking about life as a gift – namely as something good, rather than as a curse – is entirely compatible with a theological conception of creation, but would not seem to require it, as the secular humanist could also hold that life is a fundamental good which we should foster both in ourselves and in other living beings. It thus seems possible to read 'life as a gift' in this sense in non-creationist terms, as just a claim about the value of life, and the disvalue of what frustrates it.

A second feature of the ethical demand which relates to the idea that 'life is a gift' is its *one-sidedness*, namely that in responding to your needs and providing care to you, I cannot demand anything in return as a quid pro quo. Thus, Løgstrup writes that this 'presupposes – upon this presupposition its one-sidedness depends – that a person has

[20] Cf. Chapter 6, §4.
[21] Cf. *The Ethical Demand*, p. 15/*Den Etiske Fordring*, p. 24.

his life and the world in which it is lived only as something received',[22] and that '[t]he one-sided demand contains an ontology, a fundamental and constitutive definition of being, namely, that human life and the world that goes with it have been given to human beings as a gift'.[23] The question is, therefore, what conception of 'life as a gift' is needed to make sense of the ethical demand's one-sidedness: is a secular understanding sufficient, or is something more religious required?

From the way in which Løgstrup presents the issues, the first option certainly seems available, where he specifies that what it is in life that has been given, namely 'all the different possibilities of life with which the individual has been showered: understanding, speech, experience, love and many others'.[24] On this basis, he argues, we can owe something to the other without having wronged them, but simply because we have received our life as a gift, 'so that nothing which is possessed by a person, no happiness, no endowment, no advantage makes them sovereign over their own life'.[25] Løgstrup insists that this is crucial to his characterization of the ethical demand and particularly its lack of reciprocity:

> In other words, the demand which makes void protest from the viewpoint of reciprocity does not arise exclusively from the fact that one person is delivered over to the other. This demand makes sense only on the presupposition that the person to whom the demand is addressed possesses nothing which he or she has not received as a gift. Given that presupposition, the demand is the only thing which makes sense.[26]

What Løgstrup has said so far about life as a gift does seem open to a perfectly secular understanding: namely, that we are not ourselves completely responsible for our lives and the various good things in them, but that we find these things given to us by the possibilities that life itself offers for understanding, adventure and excitement, love, discussions with others and so on. And while we can control how some of this goes through our various abilities, possessions and advantages, it should be clear to us that this control is very limited and that we remain greatly dependent on these possibilities

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[22] *The Ethical Demand*, pp. 170-1/*Den Etiske Fordring*, p. 194 (translation modified).
[23] *The Ethical Demand*, p. 171 note 2/*Den Etiske Fordring*, p. 194 note 1.
[24] *The Ethical Demand*, p. 116/*Den Etiske Fordring*, p. 134 (translation modified).
[25] Ibid, translation modified.
[26] Ibid.

for our lives to go well, as things we are given rather than what we bring about for ourselves. Much of what makes up our lives is a gift in this sense, which does not require the idea of God as the giver to be intelligible, but just the denial that we are sovereign individuals who entirely determine our own existence, like the people in Hobbes's state of nature who are compared to mushrooms that simply spring out of the earth fully formed.[27]

The question, then, is whether this secular conception of the gift can do the work that Løgstrup requires it to do, which here is to challenge the reciprocity claim; and this would seem quite plausible. One form of response might focus on the talents or capacities you possess which are called upon in a situation where the ethical demand arises: for example, perhaps I suddenly fall ill, and you can use your medical training as a doctor to assist me. In terms of reciprocity, you might think I am only entitled to be given that assistance if you can ask something from me in return. But if your medical talents are something you have received as a gift, in the sense that it is just your good fortune to possess them, then arguably you have no right to lay claim to them here as something for which you can extract a return from me, and so reciprocity fails.

There is, however, an obvious difficulty with this first response, which is that it relies on a sense of life being a gift that may seem implausibly strong to many: for while of course we recognize that some of our talents and capacities are naturally determined in a way that means we cannot claim credit for them, nonetheless we can assert ownership over them if we chose to develop them for ourselves, in a way that then arguably gives us a right to demand something in return for their use. So, if you have trained hard as a doctor and spent many hours devoting yourself to learning your trade, you might then reasonably claim something back from me for the medical help that you are called upon to provide.

Nonetheless, of course, one response to this might be to press the idea of talents and capacities further, and to argue that while you may have worked hard to become a doctor, nonetheless this very capacity itself, of hard work and dedication, is *itself* a kind of

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[27] Cf. Thomas Hobbes, *De Cive*, Chapter VIII, §i: 'Let us return again to the state of nature, and consider men as if but even now sprung out of the earth, and suddainly (like Mushromes) come to full maturity without all kind of engagement to each other'.

gift in the sense that you have been endowed with it from the beginning, and so cannot claim credit for the talents you have then been able to nurture as a result. Moreover, your path in life as a doctor was no doubt made possible by many kinds of good fortune, such a upbringing, education, and cultural influences. In this way, it could be said, in the end *none* of the capacities that I might call upon in making my demand on you are ones you can claim to own for yourself, making any 'counter-demand' illegitimate.

Now, this way of taking Løgstrup's position would bring us into the same kind of territory as familiar debates between John Rawls and Robert Nozick over the relation between desert and ability, where Nozick protested against Rawls's account of justice that it treats our abilities and talents as merely a matter of moral luck, which Nozick claimed then puts too much pressure on our ideas of personhood and self-ownership.[28] And Løgstrup could be read as simply adopting the more Rawlsian view on this matter, but where it is unclear what he might say in response to Nozick's critique.

Nonetheless, there is another way of taking Løgstrup's position here which goes in a somewhat different direction. This is the idea that even if Nozick is right and we can legitimately claim credit for some of our capacities and abilities, such that on their own they might form a basis for reciprocity, nonetheless it is still undeniable that we possess a good deal for which we cannot claim credit, thus putting us in debt – *and also that we cannot repay anyone for those things*, and therefore that *I cannot refuse to help people unless they repay me* because I am in no position to pay off my own debts, making void the demand for reciprocity. Thus, for example, I owe my life to my parents, where it is arguable that this is a debt to them that I cannot repay; I am therefore in no position to refuse help to you in a situation of need unless you can repay that help, or demand reciprocity from you here, as so much of what I have has to be treated as a gift that cannot be recompensed to anyone. Once this is recognized, by its own logic of justice and debt, the demand for reciprocity can be undermined: a person who is a debtor in this way

[28] Cf. Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), pp. 213-31. For an outline of these debates, see Will Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Introduction*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 107-110.

cannot refuse to come to the aid of others unless they receive repayment, given how indebted they are themselves.[29]

Thus, in considering the one-sidedness of the ethical demand, it seems intelligible to account for this by understanding 'life as a gift' in a purely secular manner: insofar as the capacities with which you can help others are not fully owned by yourself and come to you as a matter of good fortune, while one will always remain in debt to others in a manner that cannot be repaid, this then means that you are not entitled to demand anything in return for the use of those capacities in responding to individuals who are in need.

We may now turn to the third feature of the ethical demand which Løgstrup relates to the idea of 'life as a gift', namely that while others may be obliged to care for us in the light of the demand, this is not based on any corresponding right that we possess:

> On the other hand, the other person has no right to make the radical demand that everything that I say or do in our mutual relation, I shall say or do for his sake and not for my own … The fact out of which the demand arises, namely that more or less of his life is in my hands, is a fact which has come into being without his participation or mine, and without him or I being able to say our piece. He therefore cannot identify himself with this – created – fact and make the demand into his own.[30]

This third feature may seem to make a secular understanding of 'life as a gift' particularly problematic, as indeed the final sentence from this passage suggests. For, it could be argued, if we do not ourselves possess this right to make the demand, then surely someone must, where the only alternative may then seem to be God as the creator whose creation we are, who brings it about that we are interdependent in the first place, and who is thus entitled to require that we respond to each other in certain ways, even if we cannot demand this ourselves.

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[29] An argument along these lines has also emerged in some of the literature on birth and reproduction: cf. Lisa Guenther, *The Gift of the Other: Levinas and the Politics of Reproduction* (Albany: SUNY, 2006), p. 161: 'I am responsible not because the Other has done something to earn my response, as if I were merely settling the score or repaying a debt, but rather in response to a gift [of birth] that exceeds measure and disrupts the logic of reciprocity – infinitely'. I am grateful to Alison Stone for drawing my attention to this literature, and to pointing out its possible connections with Løgstrup.

[30] *The Ethical Demand*, p. 46/*Den Etiske Fordring*, p. 58 (translation modified)

However, while I think this way of reading Løgstrup's argument here is certainly possible, I now want to suggest that there is another alternative, which we will be able to see more clearly if we turn from *The Ethical Demand* to his later conception of 'the sovereign expressions of life'.

3. The sovereign expressions of life

As I have mentioned, the idea of 'the sovereign expressions of life' is not explicitly present in *The Ethical Demand*, but is first used in *Opgør med Kierkegaard* (Controverting Kierkegaard) in 1968. However, as we shall see, there is still a fundamental continuity in Løgstrup's thinking here. While he never gives a definitive list, these 'sovereign expressions of life' are said to include mercy, openness of speech, hope, trust and love.[31]

Firstly, we might ask what makes openness, trust, mercy and so on into 'expressions of life'? The Danish term here is 'livsytring', where 'ytring' may also be translated as 'manifestation' as well as 'remark' or 'utterance' – so the suggestion here is that this is how life articulates itself, or properly realizes itself. Thus, through our following norms of trust, openness, mercy and the like, life comes to its full expression through us, as our capacities for life are realized – and it is because this is the case that they *are* norms in the first place. By contrast, opposed to these sovereign expressions of life are alternative forms of acting and thinking that are life-denying and constraining, such as distrust instead of trust, hate instead of love, reserve instead of openness, despair instead of hope. Løgstrup calls attitudes of this sort '"obsessive" or "encircling" phenomena'[32] because they turn the individual back in on themselves in a way that is both harmful to the individual and to the community more generally. On the other hand, 'a person becomes his true self, and concretely so, by realizing himself in the sovereign expressions of life and identifying himself with them',[33] while they also enable us to live together successfully: 'The spontaneous expressions of life exist to allow our coexistence and communal life to endure and develop. They are summoned forth by the very coexistence and communal life that they realize… [I]f distrust [were taken to be]

[31] Cf. *Beyond the Ethical Demand*, p. 125/*System og Symbol*, p. 105 and *Beyond the Ethical Demand*, p. 128/*System og Symbol*, p. 107.
[32] Cf. ibid and *Beyond the Ethical Demand*, p. 51/*Opgør med Kierkegaard* (Aarhus: Klim, 2013), p. 95.
[33] *Beyond the Ethical Demand*, p. 54/*Opgør med Kierkegaard*, p. 99.

preferable to trust, hate to love, lies to truth, then coexistence and communal life cease. We can undermine the expressions of life, and we do, but not without life being destroyed. If trust, openness, compassion between us vanished and no longer broke through our attempts to destroy them, we would be done for'.[34]

Secondly, we might ask what makes these expressions of life 'sovereign'? The key idea is that we ourselves do not bring it about that the world contains trust, openness in speech, mercy and so on, in the way that we bring it about that people can get married or that they can own property: rather, unless life already followed these norms, it would not be possible at all. Thus, as Løgstrup puts it: 'The sovereign expression of life precedes the will; its realization takes the will by surprise. It is one of those offerings in life which, to our good fortune, preempts us, and in whose absence we should be unable to carry on from one day to the next'.[35] In calling the expressions of life 'sovereign', Løgstrup therefore means to contrast this with claims that we might be tempted to make about our sovereignty over these norms as their creators or instigators, which he holds are inapplicable here – a mistake he thinks is made by the character Ulrich from Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*: 'Ulrich… assumes that we are a species of worldless individuals, ourselves the authors of our goals[36] – as though there were not a challenge that proceeds to us from the world and its order. The ethical point of view is not a product of our aspirations but a backlighting effect that illuminates them, engendered by the basic givens of our condition which are not within our power to change'.[37] Thus, regarding the openness of speech, Løgstrup writes: 'The expression of life is indeed mine, but not in the sense that I invest it with its definitive character. My speech is indeed mine, and it is indeed up to me whether I will be open in my speech, but it is not I who have brought it about that the definitive feature of speech is its openness. If I deceive another or raise my guard, I challenge the definitive feature of speech which attaches to it in advance of, and independently of, me'.[38]

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[34] *Beyond the Ethical Demand*, pp. 128-9/*System og Symbol*, pp. 107-8.
[35] *Beyond the Ethical Demand*, p. 68/*Opgør med Kierkegaard*, p. 116.
[36] The Danish word here is 'mål', which also has the implication of a 'standard' or 'measure'.
[37] *Beyond the Ethical Demand*, p. 95/*Norm og Spontaneitet* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1972), p. 29.
[38] *Beyond the Ethical Demand*, p. 55/*Opgør med Kierkegaard*, p. 100.

Now, it is this idea that sovereignty belongs to the expressions of life, and not to us, that I think can be helpful in opening up a more secular understanding of Løgstrup's claim concerning the ethical demand on which we have been focusing, namely 'that the other person has no right to make the radical demand that everything that I say or do in our mutual relation, I shall say or do for his sake and not for my own'.[39] For, it can now be seen that the fundamental contrast Løgstrup is drawing in this passage is between a socially constituted contractual situation where he thinks we *do* possess such rights as something that has been agreed upon between us, and the situation of the ethical demand which comes into being independently of any such agreement, and (like the sovereign expressions of life) is not normatively constituted in this way:

> The radical character [of the demand] manifests itself also in the fact that the other person has no right to make the demand, even though it has to do with the care of his own life. Such demands as the other person – on their own behalf – has a perfect right to make are of an entirely different nature. They are conditioned by the social norms and standards – moral, legal, and conventional – that are implied in our life together with and over against one another. They are well-founded demands of which the other person is either conscious and which he or she is able to formulate, or of which he or she could have been conscious and which he or she could have been able to formulate. At any rate he can lay claim to these demands because he is fully within his right to assume that he and I are in agreement concerning the validity of the morality, the law, and the convention in question. If his demands hold good he must therefore also be able to show that they correspond to the social norms.
>
> On the other hand, the other person has no right to make the radical demand that everything that I say or do in our mutual relation, I shall say or do for his sake and not for my own. This is precisely a demand regarding which we have *not* mutually agreed. Here you can take nothing for granted concerning 'what prevails' or 'what can be claimed'. The fact out of which the demand arises, namely that more or less of his life is in my hands, is a fact which has come into being without his participation or mine, and without him or I being able to say our piece.

[39] *The Ethical Demand*, p. 46/*Den Etiske Fordring*, p. 58 (translation modified).

> He therefore cannot identify himself with this – created – fact and make its demand into his own.[40]

Thus, for example, if I am a patient in a hospital, I have the right to demand that the doctor sets aside their own interests (within limits) and devote themselves to caring for me; but, Løgstrup seems to be suggesting, that right only holds because we are operating within a contractual situation in which the have agreed to relate to each other in this manner, as a result of this constructed social norm. However, the obligation to care represented by the ethical demand does not arise in this way, where in this respect it is akin to the sovereign expressions of life, which we do not and cannot constitute for ourselves, which means that the right to care cannot be said to apply here.

By looking at Løgstrup's conception of the sovereign expressions of life, we can thus see how he can conceive of certain normative structures of care being *given* rather than brought about in a contractual manner, as something we do not ourselves create but which are always already in place – and precisely because we do not create them for ourselves, Løgstrup argues, talk of a right to this care is misplaced.[41] Thus, because the ethical demand differs fundamentally from social norms and conventions which we bring about for ourselves,[42] this means that while we can talk about an entitlement to make the demands associated with the latter, we cannot assert a right to the kind of care and concern associated with the ethical demand, even though others are required to show

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[40] *The Ethical Demand*, pp. 45-6/*Den Etiske Fordring*, pp. 57-8 (translation modified).

[41] Of course, the conception of rights that Løgstrup is operating with here could be challenged, and on different conceptions his position might look less plausible; but that issue is not relevant to our purposes here, where it is the way he employs his view of rights to contrast social norms with sovereign expressions of life that is of primary significance to our current concerns.

[42] This theme can be seen to be present not just in Løgstrup later discussion of sovereign expressions of life, but also in *The Ethical Demand* itself: cf. 'Trust is not of our own making; it is given. Independently of us, our life is created in such a way that it cannot be lived in any other way than that the individual, through trust that is either shown or desired, delivers himself to the other person and thereby places more or less of his life in his hands' (*The Ethical Demand*, p. 18/*Den Etiske Fordring*, pp. 27-8, translation modified), and 'We may compare natural love with the trust which is a basic part of human life. In both cases it would be absurd to say: This is my own achievement! … For this reason trust and love also contain an understanding of the fact that our life and the person who is the object of our love have been given to us as gifts' (*The Ethical Demand*, pp. 138-9/*Den Etiske Fordring*, pp. 158-9).

such care and concern. To make sense of this difference, we have to see 'life as a gift' not in the sense that it is given to us by God who then has a right to make this demand in a way that we do not, but rather that life has forms of normativity that we do not bring about through our human practices, but which are given to us prior to those practices, in ways which (Løgstrup thinks) rule out any talk of rights in this context. Thus, as has been suggested by Hans Fink and Alasdair MacIntyre, it is possible to argue that what Løgstrup says about life being a gift may rely 'merely on life being something *given* in the ordinary philosophical sense of being prior to and a precondition of all we may think and do',[43] in contrast to the social norms and conventions which we construct for ourselves; for as we have seen, it is arguably this secular conception of 'life as a gift' which Løgstrup is appealing to when he claims that the ethical demand does not rest on the rights of the person to whom care is owed.

3. A religious interpretation?

However, although we have seen how there may be an understanding of 'life as a gift' that is both secular and can do the work that Løgstrup wants it to do in relation to the ethical demand, we now need to consider an important challenge that may seem to come from Løgstrup himself: namely, does it make sense to think of life as structured by sovereign expressions of life such as trust, mercy, openness of speech and so on, unless we think of life as created by a benign God? If these normative structures are 'given' without being constructed by us, how can they be inherent in life itself simply as such, unless that life was brought into being with certain purposes by a creator? As John Cottingham has argued recently:

> To spell it out more explicitly, if the pattern after which we are shaped, whether we like it or not, is one that allows us true fulfilment only if the love that is deep in

[43] Hans Fink and Alasdair MacIntyre, 'Introduction', in *The Ethical Demand*, pp. xv-xxxviii, p. xxxv. For an interesting challenge to this view, see Hans S. Reinders, 'Donum or Datum? K. E. Løgstrup's Religious Account of the Gift of Life' in Svend Andersen and Kees van Kooten Niekerk (eds), *Concern for the Other: Perspectives on the Ethics of K. E. Løgstrup* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2007), pp. 177-206; see also the reply by Jakob Wolff in the same volume: 'A Response to Hans Reinders's "Donum or Datum?"', pp. 207-16.

> our nature wells up and overflows towards our fellow-creatures, only then have we the highest and most compelling reasons to live in accordance with that love.[44]

For Cottingham, we only have 'the highest and most compelling reason' to love the other person if there is 'a pattern after which we are shaped' which is properly realized through the exercise of that love; if there were no such pattern, the reason to love the other would be weakened, and could be overridden by reasons stemming from our own interests and concerns, making love optional rather than required. On this account, therefore, without a conception of life as 'patterned' through some kind of creative act, the normativity of the ethical demand and the sovereign expressions of life would seem to lose their force.

Now, it may seem that Løgstrup is in agreement with a view of this sort, and thus in the end his account of ethical normativity is also based on a claim about the created status of life. For, in several places Løgstrup writes that 'the expressions of life suggest a religious interpretation', and where his account of that interpretation may seem to imply that he would accept with something like Cottingham's position, so that he too endorses a creationist conception of ethics:

> Unlike all those things which we ourselves have created through established institutions, such as manufactured products and technological apparatuses, expressions of life – thanks to their goodness and appeal – suggest a religious interpretation… [T]he religious explanation is that expressions of life originate in the power to exist which we ourselves are not but which is closer to us than we are to ourselves.[45]

Like Cottingham, we may take Løgstrup as arguing here that ultimately, because the sovereign expressions of life do not come from us, but are the way in which life is designed by a power that has created it, that this is what gives them their normative force

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[44] John Cottingham, *Philosophy of Religion: Towards a More Humane Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 86. Cf. also John Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension: Religion, Philosophy and Human Value* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 56: 'For the theist…there is a domain of eternal and necessary value, a divine reality that infuses all possible worlds; the purposes of God are necessarily good, and the nature of human beings, qua created beings, is such that that they can only be truly fulfilled by living in conformity with his moral purposes'.

[45] K. E. Løgstrup, *Metaphysics*, volume 1, translated by Russell L. Dees (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1995), pp. 90-2/*Skabelse og Tilintetgørelse: Metaphysik IV: Religionsfilosofiske Betragtninger* (Aarhus: Klim, 2015), pp. 115-6 (translation modified).

which otherwise they would lack, so that Løgstrup is committed to a theistic ethics after all.

Nonetheless, while this is certainly a possible reading of Løgstrup's position, there are also reasons to think that once again his view is more complex than this suggests – where this complexity arises in determining what precisely it is about the sovereign expressions of life that 'suggest a religious interpretation'. On an account like Cottingham's, what does so is the very normativity of those expressions of life, as in his view we would lack 'the highest and most compelling reason' to act in accordance with them if we were not thereby following God's purposes in creation.[46] However, it is not clear that Løgstrup himself would go as far as this, as he seems to hold that the needs of the other are sufficient *in themselves* to generate a reason of this sort, making us responsible for others in a way that does not require us to think that our lives together have been created by God. For example, in *The Ethical Demand*, he speaks of trust as follows: 'As surely as a person with the trust he either shows or desires gives more or less of his life [liv] into the other's hand, so surely does the demand to take care of this person's life [liv] belong to our life [tilværelse] such as it happens to be'.[47] Here, it would seem, the normative basis for the demand to respond appropriately to the trusting person, is that she has made herself vulnerable through this display of trust, thereby giving rise to the demand to respond appropriately and offer the kind of care that is hereby required. It would thus seem that it is this responsibility for others in conditions of this kind that generates the demand, regardless of any appeal to issues of creation. Likewise, in outlining his 'ontological ethics' in an article entitled 'Ethics and Ontology', Løgstrup writes that 'the ethical demand take[s] its content from the unshakeable fact that the existence of human beings is intertwined with each other in a way that demands of human beings that they protect the lives of others who have been placed in their trust'.[48] Again, here it seems that this 'unshakeable fact' of our interdependence is what

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[46] For a similar view, cf. Emil Brunner, *The Divine Imperative: A Study in Christian Ethics* (London: Lutterworth, 1941), p. 124: 'Life claims our reverence not in itself but as the Divine Creation'.

[47] *The Ethical Demand*, p. 17/*Den Etiske Fordring*, p. 27 (translation modified).

[48] K. E. Løgstrup, 'Ethics and Ontology', translated by Eric Watkins in *The Ethical Demand*, pp. 265-93, p. 290/'Ethik und Ontologie', *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, 57 (1960), pp. 357-91, p. 387.

generates the demand on us that comes through trust and the other sovereign expressions of life, in a way that is apparently sufficient to explain that normativity of that demand for Løgstrup, without any appeal to the idea of creation.

However, if this is right, what can he mean by saying that 'the sovereign expressions of life suggest a religious interpretation'? If that 'suggestion' does not come about because we need to ground their normativity in a creationist picture, how else can the 'suggestion' arise? I think this question can be answered if we see that for Løgstrup, even if the normativity of the ethical demand and the sovereign expressions of life do not require us to think that life is created, nonetheless we still need an explanation of how and why it is the case that the world is so ordered as to make trust, mercy and so on possible, namely how it is that the world is hospitable to the good in this way. This is essentially a metaphysical question, not a normative or axiological one – and to answer it 'a religious interpretation is suggested', in the sense that creation can be said to offer an account of this metaphysical fact, though of course it does not amount to a proof, which is why Løgstrup speaks of it as being 'suggested' and as an 'interpretation'. Thus, as Løgstrup puts it in *System og Symbol* (*System and Symbol*): 'When something as unconditional as an expression of life comes from the universe, the thought springs to mind that humankind is not irrelevant to the universe'.[49] That is, given that life for us would be impossible without the sovereign expressions of life being operative in the world, this suggests that the universe is not indifferent to us but has been created in such a way as to make this life possible. Nonetheless, the expression of life does not *rest on* or *require* a religious commitment to creation to ground its normativity as such; this is taken for granted in Løgstrup's account, as what leads us to the idea of creation is the hospitality of the universe *to* this normativity, for otherwise it might seem too incredible for it to be ordered along these lines, as a world in which these goods are realized. It is thus not God's act of creation that *makes* the sovereign expressions of life good at an axiological or normative level, but that he created the universe is nonetheless 'suggested' by them insofar as we live in a universe in which they can be fulfilled and upheld. If we take this approach, we can then see how Løgstrup can hold that ethics may well have implications for the question of creation, but that nonetheless the former does not rest on

[49] *Beyond the Ethical Demand*, p. 139/*System og Symbol*, p. 117.

the latter, but on our nature as living creatures caught up in relations of interdependence and care.