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Kierkegaard, Løgstrup and the conditions of love: from God's grace to life as a gift

Abstract: In this paper, I consider how pride and anxiety can prevent us from loving the neighbour, and how Søren Kierkegaard and K. E. Løgstrup offer two different ways in which these obstacles might be overcome. For Kierkegaard, this is made possible if we stand in the right relation to God, while for Løgstrup it is made possible if we understand life as a gift. The differences and respective merits of both approaches are explored, and in particular whether Løgstrup's approach can claim to offer a secular alternative to the role that Kierkegaard gives to God's grace in making neighbour love possible.

> 'Love is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real' – Iris Murdoch[1]

Let me start with an example.

Suppose I see someone begging on the street, who catches my eye, and I give him some of my loose change. In doing so, I take it, I have done a good thing, in helping a fellow human being. But have I loved my neighbour?

In one sense, the answer might seem obviously to be: yes. For, I have done something for a stranger, not a family member or friend, and I have done so not expecting anything in return, just to help him out.

But still, the question can be asked: have I *loved* my neighbour? On further reflection, the answer may well be: probably not. For it is highly likely – indeed virtually certain – that in giving the man my money, I have done so with a feeling of slight condescension, or pity, or even contempt. For, I might well be thinking: Isn't it rather pathetic that he is in this situation? Isn't his uncleanliness rather repellent? Doesn't the fact that he depends on me make him rather weak? And so on.

Of course, I have still given him my money, so I have done my duty by him, as it were – but still, doing my duty here does not seem to be the same as showing him love. For, in loving another, it would appear, there can be no pride, no sense of superiority, no sense

[1] Iris Murdoch, 'The Sublime and the Good', *Existentialism and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, edited by Peter Conradi (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997), pp. 205–20, p. 215.

that I stand above the one who is loved. Any such pride is an acid that destroys love, not only in the case of natural love (such as love of partners, family, and friends), but also in the case of neighbour love – this just seems to be a fundamental part of the phenomenology of love, which cannot tolerate the sense of hierarchy that comes from pride. Given this phenomenology, it seems highly unlikely that I have succeeded in loving my neighbour here.

If this is right, the question then arises: How is such pride to be taken away, in order that love of the neighbour can be achieved? How is love of the neighbour possible, if pride of this sort stands in the way, as one important blockage to that love?[2] An obvious answer to that question is: by replacing pride with humility.[3] If I felt some humility regarding my differences from the beggar – the fact that I have money and he doesn't, that I am well dressed and he isn't, that I am in a position to spare my change to give it to him, and he can't do the same for me – by feeling that none of this made me superior to him in any way, as really we are not that different after all, then this could undercut my pride, and put us on a par.[4]

But then, of course, a further question arises in its turn: How is this humility itself to be achieved? What has to change in my outlook to make this humility possible?

In this paper, I wish to consider two answers to this question, both of which stand in the broadly Lutheran tradition, but which are different in other respects – where one fundamentally incorporates the role of grace, and is clearly theological, and the other does not, and so is not. The first answer I will consider is given by Søren Kierkegaard, and the second by K. E. Løgstrup. Having explored the differences between them in the first section, in the second section I will then consider whether Løgstrup's account offers a workable secular alternative to Kierkegaard's.

1. Kierkegaard on grace, Løgstrup on life as a gift

In a well-known journal entry from 1851, Kierkegaard writes:

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[2] I am not here claiming it is the only important blockage – another one will be brought into the discussion below in §2, namely anxiety.

[3] It could be asked whether modesty might be an alternative to humility here. This cannot be discussed further, but I am taking them to be broadly equivalent notions in this context.

[4] If humility is understood to mean having a just estimate of one's standing, then it could be argued that it could still leave me feeling superior, as in the case of Aristotle's megalopsychos: more will be said below about why the grounds of humility here will not have that result, so that humility will also involve equality.

> *Christianly* the emphasis does not fall so much upon to what extent or how far a person succeeds in meeting or fulfilling the requirement, if he actually is striving, as it is upon getting an impression of the requirement in all its infinitude so that he rightly learns to be humbled and to rely upon grace… infinite humiliation and grace, and then a striving born of gratitude – this is Christianity.[5]

While Kierkegaard expresses elsewhere his reservations about the way in which Luther has been used (or misused) within contemporary Christendom,[6] the fundamental Lutheranism of his position here is clear and evident. For Luther, one of the central objections to 'justification through works' is that it fuels the pride in our achievement and in our righteousness, thereby setting us above our neighbour and even above God, who is then expected to award us appropriately.[7] This structure must therefore be reversed: we should feel condemned by the law, which strikes down this pride. At the same time, however, being convicted in this way does not leave us anxious about our salvation, an anxiety which would also cut us off from the neighbour and from God; instead, God is not a hard-hearted judge but a gracious source of unearned forgiveness, a forgiveness that frees us from ourselves in such a way as to the overcome our in-turning pride and our anxiety, which then makes possible love of both God and of the neighbour as its fruit.[8] On this account, then, properly understood, the Lutheran position is not indifferent to works of love: on the contrary, it is designed to show how the 'infinite humiliation and grace' that comes with a Lutheran 'theology of the cross' frees us from the kind of pride and anxiety that makes such works impossible by basing our justification upon these works.

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[5] Søren Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, 7 vols (ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967–78), 1, no. 993, pp. 443–4.

[6] For a thorough discussion of Kierkegaard's relation to Luther, see David Lawrence Coe, *Kierkegaard and Luther* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020).

[7] See for example Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, in *Luther's Works*, American edition, 55 vols (St Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress Press, 1958–86), 33, pp. 61–2: 'First, God has assuredly promised his grace to the humble, that is, to those who lament and despair of themselves. But no man can be thoroughly humbled until he knows that his salvation is utterly beyond his own powers, devices, endeavours, will, and works, and depends entirely on the choice, will, and work of another, namely of God alone'.

[8] Cf. Martin Luther, *Sommerpostille*, *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 67 vols in 127 (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau, 1883–1993), 22, p. 15: 'Anyone who does not believe but goes on doubting the grace and love of God will not have the heart to express his love and thanks to God by responding to his neighbour in love. However, this faith which recognizes the great grace and goodness of God which helped him from death to life, always inflames a man's heart to love and to good, even to his enemies, just as God has done for him.'

It is clear, then, that Kierkegaard follows Luther in taking the so-called 'convicting use of the law' to be fundamental in dismantling the pride which is our focus here, where the humbling is two-fold. First, in the face of God and the good he represents, and what he requires of us, we are all sinners, me alongside everyone else. Seen from a certain human perspective, as it were, this may not be immediately obvious – from this level, I may appear to be doing better than others in various ways. But once I think of comparing myself to the goodness of God and of Christ, these differences vanish to insignificance, while in seeing how far I can therefore be justifiably condemned, I lose all authority to condemn others and set myself above them[9] – in this way, as Hegel argues in the *Phenomenology*, the 'hard heart' must break.[10] Second, we are also humbled by God's generosity and love in setting all this aside, and forgiving us, as this means we owe a debt of gratitude to God that we can never repay, a sense of indebtedness that again should take away our pride.[11]

On Kierkegaard's account of the overcoming of pride, therefore, grace plays a central role, as on the one side it is the complement to the convicting use of the law which humbles us in one way through the 'impression of the requirement in all its infinitude', and on the other side it is the source of our indebtedness that humbles us in another way. Taken together, this is the explanation of how we might be enabled to form a relation to the neighbour without pride getting between us, and thus be enabled to truly love them in the way that in my relation to the beggar, I could not.

Turning now to Løgstrup, it is clear that he approaches many of these issues in the same way as Kierkegaard, in a broadly Lutheran manner. Thus, he stresses that we are not made good through our own efforts, for which we can claim some kind of reward that can be used to offset our wickedness.[12] Moreover, while he does not speak of pride and humility

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[9] Cf. Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, I, no. 334, p. 140: '[Christ] comes to save us and to present the example. This very example should humble us, teach us how infinitely far away we are from attaining the ideal'.

[10] See G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (trans. Terry Pinkard; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 387. For further discussion, see Robert Stern, 'Is Hegelian Recognition Second-Personal? Hegel Says "No"', *European Journal of Philosophy*, online publication 2021, §2.

[11] Cf. Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love* (trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 190: '[The individual] remains in the debt [to God], and he also acknowledges that it is his duty to remain in the debt, his duty to make this confession, which in the Christian sense is not the confession of a fanatic but of a humble, loving soul.' For further discussion of these Lutheran themes in *Works of Love*, see Amy Laura Hall, *Kierkegaard and the Treachery of Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), Chapter 1.

[12] 'When speaking of the notion that there is "at least some" good in human beings, one means to subtract something from wickedness and then add it to goodness—on the individual's own account! As if trust and

as explicitly as Luther and Kierkegaard,[13] he does conceive of sin as a turning in on oneself (in Luther's terms: *incurvatus in se*) in a manner that cuts us off from the neighbour, where a central cause for this in-turning is wanting to take credit for our goodness in a way that fuels our pride, setting ourselves above one another while equally treating our lives as something we can control ourselves apart from others[14] – where in a theological context, seeing ourselves as not needing God is central to the vice of *superbia*. For Løgstrup, taking credit for our own goodness also then means that when we are called upon to care for others, we think we are entitled to judge them,[15] and also demand something from them in return,[16] which again puts them in a situation of indebtedness to us and hence in a position of some inferiority, rather than the kind of equality that love for the neighbour requires.

However, while the issues here are broadly parallel in Kierkegaard and Løgstrup, I think their response is interestingly different, in a way that I want to highlight here. For Kierkegaard, as we have seen, 'infinite humiliation and grace' is key to overcoming the pride that gets in the way of love, by inducing humility instead through the convicting use of the law and the divine forgiveness that is then required, for which we owe an infinite debt of gratitude to God. For Løgstrup, by contrast, it is not through the understanding of grace as divine forgiveness that counteracts pride, but the understanding that 'life is a gift' – where this view is summarised in a key sentence at the end of Chapter 7 of *The Ethical Demand*: 'For from the receiving of our own life – if we really do live in receipt of it – spring the works

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natural love were not given to human beings, but were a human being's own achievements and belonged to the account of the self.

But there is nothing to subtract from human wickedness. The self brings everything under the power of its selfishness. The human will is bound in this. The demand to love, that as a demand is addressed to our will, is unfulfillable' (K. E. Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand* (trans. Bjørn Rabjerg and Robert Stern, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 121).

[13] Bjørn Rabjerg has suggested to me that this may be because Løgstrup wanted to avoid the theological associations with these terms – so that instead he uses his own terminology, when he talks about our will to be sovereign over our own lives: see for example *The Ethical Demand*, p. 100, p. 114, p. 117, p. 126, p. 135, p. 148.

[14] 'We say that human beings are unfree in the way they conduct themselves. That is to say that a human being is imprisoned within themselves. – Human beings are their own prisoner; this is the hopelessness of existence, because it means that we are incapable of freeing ourselves – any attempt to do so will only imprison us even further in ourselves. Cf. Luther's struggle with monasticism. Because we ourselves can do nothing but imprison ourselves more and more in bondage and reflection and self-absorption, in short: in pride' (K. E. Løgstrup, Notebook XXV.3.1, p. 34 [1938-89?]).

[15] Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, p. 99: Who says that the life of the other human being is worth more than my life? Why should every judgment of them in terms of culture, character, and morality be ruled out?'

[16] Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, p. 99: 'We justify our protest [against the ethical demand] by introducing the viewpoint of reciprocity. This viewpoint must be used to regulate our lives together and for moderating the demand, so that the person who is placed under it also receives their due'.

of love'.[17] In speaking here of 'works of love', Løgstrup presumably intends his reader to think of Kierkegaard's own seminal text on this issue – but whereas Kierkegaard spoke of 'infinite humiliation and grace' as making these works possible, Løgstrup talks of 'the receiving of our own life' as what is required instead. Thus, while as a Lutheran, Løgstrup is no less convinced of our wickedness than Kierkegaard, he nonetheless does not treat divine grace as fundamental to overcoming our pride, but puts the claim that life is given to us in its place, which then gives gratitude and indebtedness a different role.[18]

What Løgstrup means by talking of life as a gift and as something received is a complex matter, which cannot be gone into fully here.[19] But the two key ideas are that life as such is good and enables us to do the good (as otherwise it would not be a gift, but a curse), and that we are less responsible for our goodness than we like to think; rather, this goodness is something we are given and do not bring about through our own efforts.[20] It is this second idea that is then required as an antidote for pride, as we consequently cannot claim credit for this goodness as our achievement in ways that might set us above others, while also making us indebted for that goodness in a way that should induce the humility needed for love – both in the case of natural love involving partners, family and friends, and in the case of neighbour love, as Løgstrup argues in the passage referred to above.[21] In

[17] Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, p. 123. For comment on the qualification ('if we really do live in receipt of it'), see note 21 below.

[18] Cf. *Opgør med Kierkegaard* (Aarhus: Klim, 2013), p. 78, where Løgstrup argues against Kierkegaard that thankfulness can replace resignation in preventing what we love being turned into an idol.

[19] For further discussion see Robert Stern, *The Radical Demand in Løgstrup's Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), especially Chapter 3 and §12.2.

[20] One thing Løgstrup obviously does *not* mean by calling life a gift is that one can do as one likes with what is given. In a response to a critic on this issue, Løgstrup argues that even most ordinary gifts are not like that, where 'one most certainly does owe the person the consideration of treating the gift as a gift – say, not packing it away if its function is, in fact, to stand, hang, or lie in full view' (Løgstrup, *Beyond the Ethical Demand* (trans. Susan Drew and Heidi Flegal, ed. Kees van Kooten Niekerk, Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2007), p. 46). But more significantly, as we will see, because life is not really to be thought of as personified, one cannot say of what it gives us that it does so in order to let us do what we like with it, as one might do in the human case.

[21] Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, pp. 122–3: 'Just as it is obvious that our lives are understood as given to us when in natural love the other is a vital part of our lives, so the same understanding that our life is received should be just as obvious when the life of another human being depends on us, no matter how alien or hostile they may be to us. For from the receiving of our own life—if we really do live in receipt of it—spring the works of love.' I take Løgstrup qualification 'if we really do live in receipt of it' to signal partly that we can easily deceive ourselves about such things, and partly that seeing life as a gift is no merely theoretical attitude, but a way in which one lives one's life; cf. pp. 100–1: 'In order to avoid any misunderstanding, it should be added that an individual may very well dispute theoretically that their life has been given to them, while yet still in fact taking it as a gift. Likewise, an individual may theorize in a grand fashion that they have received their life, while in fact taking it as if nothing is a gift, but that everything is theirs by right'.

natural love, the love we feel for the beloved is not something we can create or control, but is given to use through the relationship to the beloved, and if we thought otherwise the love would be destroyed; likewise, in neighbour love, we do not bring about this love for ourselves either, and if we thought we did, it would fuel exactly the kind of self-righteous pride that would take it away.[22] So just as when we respond to a beloved with love, this love is given to us, equally when we respond to a dependent being with love, this love is given to us, 'so the same understanding that our life is received should be just as obvious' in both cases. Furthermore, because we cannot claim credit for this response, the demand on us from others must remain one-sided, in the sense that we cannot require any 'payback' in return for that love, as it is not down to us in the first place, but something given.

Thus, while both Kierkegaard and Løgstrup see that pride undermines love, and that humility is required instead, for the former this has its source in an account of grace given to us by God, and in the other in the claim that life is properly seen as a gift.[23] Having highlighted this difference, I now want to consider whether Løgstrup's more secular alternative can be made to work.

2. Divine grace or life as a gift?

In considering how far Løgstrup's approach can claim to be a successful alternative to Kierkegaard's, I am going to focus on four issues. First, it might be said that one advantage of Løgstrup's approach is that it is less committed than Kierkegaard's to theological considerations in making the case for humility – but is this really so? While it can be argued that Løgstrup intended his approach here to be secular (though even that can be

[22] Cf. Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, p. 120: 'For this reason, trust and love also contain within them the understanding that our life and the human being who is the object of our love have been given to us. They cannot be separated from that understanding, however unconscious it may be. They are distorted when I make them "mine", regarding them as my own achievement… [L]ove is stifled when it is turned into a matter of my own meritoriousness'.

[23] I should stress here that in comparing Kierkegaard and Løgstrup, I am focusing just on how far Løgstrup can claim to match Kierkegaard in offering a secularised account of how pride (and anxiety) are to be removed as blockages to love, and thus can provide us with a secular way of understanding the Lutheran thought that certain obstacles need overcoming if it is to be possible for us to love the neighbour. It is a further question, but beyond the scope of this paper, whether a religious or a secular account can best account for neighbour love as an attitude as such, and whether this needs God as a middle term (as on Kierkegaard's account), or just the awareness of the vulnerability of the other which is fundamental to the structure of life (as on Løgstrup's account).

disputed),[24] it can be questioned whether this intention can be realised, which would put both accounts on a par in this respect. Second, we will consider whether Løgstrup's account is caught in a dilemma of either allowing us some achievements on which to base our pride, or being implausibly radical in denying us any hand in our doings at all. Third, we will discuss how far each option deals successfully with an issue that faces all positions in this tradition: namely, in taking away pride, does this approach encourage instead a damaging sort of self-contempt that is also problematic in its own way. Finally, we will examine whether Kierkegaard's approach does better than Løgstrup's in dealing with another key threat to neighbour love, which is anxiety and the self-concern it generates.

2.1 Theological vs 'purely human' arguments for humility

While himself a person of clear religious faith, and while he reflects very interestingly on the relation between ethics and theological themes, nonetheless in presenting his central ethical position in *The Ethical Demand,* Løgstrup purports to be working from a 'purely human' standpoint,[25] which seems to license understanding his position in secular terms. To many readers, this in turn may seem to give his approach to the issues under discussion here an advantage over Kierkegaard's, as of course the latter's position is clearly and emphatically religious, and thus has extra commitments that Løgstrup's approach would seem to avoid. As such, it may seem to offer a different way to understand the grounds for humility which can be adopted by those who wish to drop Kierkegaard's more religious perspective.

However, the question then arises whether Løgstrup approach really can be as secular as it professes, and whether *any* secular understanding of that approach has the resources to achieve what is required here – or whether it is only in a religious framework that thinking of 'life as a gift' can take away pride in a satisfactory manner.

The problem here can be pressed as follows: In talking about 'life as a gift' in a way that implies we are thereby indebted, this only makes sense if there is a *giver* of the gift *to whom*

[24] For further discussion with references to the debate, see Stern, *The Radical Demand in Løgstrup's Ethics*, especially Chapter 3. It should be noted that Løgstrup himself presents his project to operate in 'purely human terms' in *The Ethical Demand* as an 'attempt' or trial (*forsøge*) or 'task' (*opgave*) (see e.g. the title of §1 of the Introduction; p. 5 note 1; and p. 93), which arguably turns out to have some limits that are arrived at in Chapter 12 – but for the purposes of this paper, I too am going to attempt to make his conception work in secular terms.

[25] Cf. Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, Introduction, §1.

we are indebted, and in the context in which we are using such notions, the only available gift-giver is God. There is thus no way to make this strategy work, in could be argued, without doing so in a religious way, and attributing our accomplishments not just to 'life' but to God as the creator and sustainer of that life. Thus, it could be claimed that in the end for his approach to work, Løgstrup's position is no more secular than Kierkegaard's, and any putative advantage it might have on this score is therefore quickly lost.

In response, it can be granted that it may be generally be easier or more common for the religious person to view 'life as a gift', where typically perhaps '[w]hether they excel technically or morally, people with strong religious conviction attribute their ability and accomplishments to God's gifts or to His presence in their lives', as Joseph Kupfer has observed.[26] However, the issue is whether this is the *only* way to come to something akin to this 'understanding of life'. To challenge this claim, the secular account must do three things: (i) explain the goodness of what it is that life gives us, as otherwise this would not be a gift but a curse; (ii) explain what makes this something given by life, rather than brought about through our own efforts; (iii) explain how talk of indebtedness and givenness can make sense in this picture, without hypostasizing life as a giver in a quasi-religious manner. Let me say something about each in turn.

(i) While Løgstrup fully recognises that we might 'protest' against the idea that life is a gift due to the many bad things we find in life, such as 'suffering and death',[27] he still thinks life clearly comprises forms of goodness which this very protest presupposes – where he includes here 'understanding, speech, experience, love'[28] and also what he later calls 'the sovereign expressions of life', such as trust, love, and hope.[29] In all these cases, Løgstrup argues, life provides a framework (as it were) that makes our life possible and enables it to flourish, by providing us with fundamental goods without which we could not function

[26] Joseph Kupfer, 'The Moral Perspective of Humility', *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 84 (2003), pp. 249–69, p. 260.
[27] Cf. Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, §6.4.
[28] Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, p. 100.
[29] Løgstrup first uses this terminology in 'Sartres og Kierkegaards skildring af den dæmoniske indesluttethed' [Sartre's and Kierkegaard's Portrayal of Demonic Self-Enclosedness], *Vindrosen*, 13 (1966), pp. 28–42, which is then incorporated into *Controverting Kierkegaard* (1968) Part III, §IV, which is translated into English in Løgstrup, *Beyond the Ethical Demand*. Løgstrup never gives a definitive list of these sovereign expressions of life, but see *Beyond the Ethical Demand*, p. 70, where Løgstrup identifies sincerity, compassion, and fidelity, and p. 71, where he lists trust, compassion, and openness of speech, while trust and compassion are also mentioned on p. 52. Love is mentioned at p. 128, and hope at p. 125.

properly at all – as is evident when for some reason they are taken away, and we suffer as a result, so that what is bad is really life taking a deficient form. Also (and relatedly) by providing us with this framework, it enables us to *do* the good, which would be impossible without trust, love and hope – which (as a convinced Lutheran) are taken by Løgstrup to be things we cannot generate or cultivate for ourselves as virtues.

(ii) Løgstrup would appear to have two main arguments why these goods must be something given to us, rather that arising from our own efforts. The first is that left to ourselves, we are wicked, and so incapable of bringing about the good. Thus, at the end of §7.6 of *The Ethical Demand*, where Løgstrup is emphasising that wickedness, he argues that goods like trust and love cannot be credited to us precisely because this wickedness means that such goods cannot be 'a human being's own achievements and [belong] to the account of the self', because 'there is nothing to subtract from human wickedness': 'The self brings everything under the power of its selfishness' (p. 121). To put this in a familiar Lutheran metaphor, left to ourselves we are like the bad tree that can only bring forth bad fruit – so we cannot claim credit for what good there is in the world. The second argument is less reliant on these normative claims about human wickedness, but could instead be put in a more transcendental form: namely, our lives depend on certain prior structures like trust and love in order to make them possible at all, and so they cannot be brought into being by our own efforts, as we rely on them to exist and function in the first place. For example, Løgstrup suggests that 'it is integral to being human' that we are able to trust others, arguing that '[w]e simply could not live, our life would wither away and become stunted, if we were in advance to meet each other in distrust' (p. 9). Insofar as there is a transcendental aspect to this claim,[30] and the ability to trust others is being treated as a condition of our existence, then it can be argued that this is not something we have brought about, but in fact have to rely on in order to function at all. However, this transcendental claim does not require grounding in a theological account in order to explain where these conditions for life come from instead.[31] Having established that trust and the other

[30] For further discussion, see Robert Stern, '"Trust is Basic': Løgstrup on the Priority of Trust', in Paul Faulkner and Thomas Simpson (eds.), *The Philosophy of Trust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 272–94, especially pp. 278–83.

[31] In the spirit of Løgstrup's 'attempt' mentioned earlier, he does nonetheless allow that the way in which life provides us with these goods may 'suggest a religious interpretation': but again, I think it is significant that he says that it does not *require* it. See Løgstrup, *Beyond the Ethical Demand*, p. 139; and for further discussion see Stern, *The Radical Demand in Løgstrup's Ethics*, pp. 195–7.

sovereign expressions of life are good and hence gifts in this sense, these arguments thus enable Løgstrup to claim that they are goods that we do not create for ourselves, but are received, thereby also covering this aspect of being a gift but without needing to bring in a divine gift-giver. If successful, this would seem to be sufficient to establish that one cannot claim credit here, and thus to dismantle any pride that might arise on this basis.

(iii) Finally, however, another aspect of the argument against pride may seem harder to substantiate in a secular manner: namely, that this gift giving means that we owe a debt of gratitude – for how is this possible unless the gift comes from an agent *to whom* we are grateful, and thus *to whom* we owe the debt? In response to this worry, several points can be made. First, I think it is possible to argue that gratitude as a general form of *thankfulness* is an attitude we can perfectly well show to what brings us some good, where what brings us that good can be entirely impersonal: for example, I can be thankful for the oxygen in this room because it enables me to breathe, or for the ladder because it stops me falling, or for the nice weather that means I can have a picnic, where in none of these cases do I think there is any person to whom I feel gratitude.[32] Secondly, I think it is significant that while Løgstrup speaks of indebtedness (see ED, p. 100), he claims this is an indebtedness we stand in *towards the person who needs care*, rather than to some gift-giver, where I would argue here Løgstrup is using the term 'debtor' (*skyldner*) in the general sense of 'owing something to another' (where 'skylde' is 'to owe'). Løgstrup's central claim, therefore, is not that we are indebted because of what someone has done for us, but rather that because we are under some obligation to care for others in need, we are indebted to them in that sense – this care is what we owe to the other.[33] Løgstrup then uses his claim about life being a gift to block the suggestion that in fact we do not stand under this debt to others because our capacity for self-creation makes us 'sovereign over our own lives' and hence do not owe anything to anyone. There is thus a way to understand Løgstrup's talk of indebtedness here which again avoids any theological commitments of the sort that Kierkegaard builds into his

[32] It is relevant to note that the Danish term 'taknemlighed' can be used for both gratitude towards someone, and for thankfulness in this more general sense.

[33] In his essay 'Ethics and Ontology' (which was published in German), Løgstrup also uses indebtedness (Schuldigkeit) in this sense: '…the right to demand something of us arises from the fact that we owe something [daß wir etwas shuldig sind]. It is from this aspect that the demands acquire their content. Just as one speaks of demands in purely economic contexts: Due to our debts [Shuldern], one places demands on us… [T]o obey a demand means following it with the knowledge of one's own indebtedness [Schuldigkeit]' ('Ethics and Ontology', trans. Eric Walkins as appendix to *The Ethical Demand* (trans. Theodor I. Jensen and Gary Puckering, edited Hans Fink and Alasdair MacIntyre, Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1997), p. 291.

picture in order to overcome pride. Of course, this does then mean that as there is no indebtedness to a person for our abilities on Løgstrup's account as I am understanding it, *this* kind of indebtedness cannot be used to strike down our pride in those abilities – but then, as we have seen, Løgstrup account of 'life as a gift' arguably offers enough other grounds on which to do that.

2.2. The givenness of divine grace vs the givenness of abilities

However, this may now seem to lead us directly into the second issue I wish to discuss, on which the theological conception offered by Kierkegaard may seem required rather than Løgstrup's more secular approach. As we have seen, for Kierkegaard what is given and what we are to feel grateful for is God's gracious forgiveness of us in the face of our wickedness, for which we all stand equally condemned in a way that undercuts any superiority we may feel, where it is only through God's grace that we are able to do the good. By contrast, on Løgstrup's account, we are to have our pride taken away by realising that the capacities for which we claim credit are not in fact our own doing but are received or given to us. Now, a response to both accounts may be to say that they are exaggerated: against Kierkegaard it can be said that we are capable of some good works in which we can take justified pride, and against Løgstrup it can be claimed that we have some capacities which we have developed for ourselves, and for which we deserve credit. On Kierkegaard's behalf, however, there is a standard Lutheran response which while challengeable, is at least pretty familiar: namely, where good works occur, they only occur as a result of the process of grace Kierkegaard has identified and for the reasons he gives. But Løgstrup may appear to face a trickier challenge: for it may seem undeniable that we are capable of fostering our capacities for ourselves at least to some extent, and to deny this would be to take away our agency to an implausible degree. The dilemma for Løgstrup would thus seem to be: if he treats *all* our capacities as given, then this becomes implausible, but if he treats *some* as developed by the self, won't they then become a source of pride? Going back to my example, if I can think that it is through my hard work at school, or through developing my abilities and thereby getting a good job, that I am now in a better position than the beggar who needs my help, why doesn't this give me a justified sense of superiority over him? But if in response Løgstrup says that all these abilities are also given to me, doesn't that deprive me of my agency to an extreme degree?

Now, it might be possible for Løgstrup to bite the bullet here, and make a case for the extreme position – perhaps by arguing that in the end, it is all a matter of good fortune what abilities we have, what temperament, what opportunities. But another option is for him to make his case without needing to go this far; and that this is his view is perhaps suggested by a comment he makes in this context, where he seems to *allow* that a person may 'possess…their success, their endowments, their advantages' – but to argue that this does not undermine his case. For, he also argues, life has still 'lavished on them' much else, and that this is sufficient to do what is required to show that 'life is a gift' – that 'the individual to whom the demand is addressed has nothing in their existence that was not given to them'.[34] On this reading, Løgstrup here is not claiming that there is *nothing whatsoever* that the individual possesses that was not given to them – for he has allowed that they possess 'their success, their endowments, their advantages'; rather, he is claiming that when it comes to *what they are ethically* asked to do, they cannot respond to this demand without relying on what was given to them, and so can claim no credit for making this response.

What difference does this make? I think it might enable Løgstrup to use the goodness of the demand in a structurally analogous way that Kierkegaard uses God – namely, a measure of goodness which we cannot attain, thereby 'putting us in the wrong'[35] in a way that nullifies all other possible measures of superiority as sources of pride. On this account, Løgstrup does not have to deny that I have achieved various things that perhaps the person I am helping has not – but seen from the perspective of 'life as a gift', given that I cannot act ethically towards another based on these achievements but only by relying on what I have *not* achieved for myself, this measure of esteem disappears, while also avoiding the problematic dilemma outlined above. For, no matter what achievements I might claim to possess, it turns out that to follow the demand, the individual must depend on what is given to them to make this possible, and so cannot claim any credit for doing so – and this is the only basis on which ultimately to feel superior to another, as a moral being, no matter what else one may have achieved elsewhere.

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[34] Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, p. 100.

[35] Cf. 'Ultimatum' of *Either/Or*: 'The Upbuilding That Lies in the Thought That in Relation to God We Are Always in the Wrong', in Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, Part II (trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press), pp. 339–54.

2.3 Pride vs self-esteem

However, this again may seem to lead directly to a third worry that applies to both Kierkegaard's position and Løgstrup's, but which former may be able to handle better than the latter. This worry concerns doubts one might have about their focus on humility, which is that this focus can be damaging to individuals insofar as each of us needs a level of healthy self-esteem and self-love, to avoid feeling crushed and humiliated. Again, while this is a worry that has been directed at Luther and Kierkegaard,[36] they might seem in a better position to handle it than Løgstrup, as while the 'theology of the cross' undoubtedly involves some element of having one's self-esteem taken away, arguably a 'proper self-love' can be restored through the process of then coming to recognise one's reliance on a loving and forgiving God – so while pride is removed, the individual is not left with a sense of debilitating humility, but a humility that is also 'upbuilding' and allows the agent to retain their self-respect as a result of their relation to God. Can Løgstrup's more secular approach achieve anything similar and so offer its own response to this concern?

In the great emphasis Løgstrup puts on our wickedness, it may seem that he just intends to leave us with this as our primary sense of self, and that this must remain our focus if our pride is to be taken away – and to view oneself as irredeemably wicked may indeed seem to threaten all sense of worth in oneself. However, it can be argued that even on Løgstrup's account, while this emphasis on our wickedness is given a crucial role in getting us to see we that cannot claim *credit* for the good we do and thus use this to offset our wrongs, Løgstrup is not claiming that we lack goodness *altogether* – it is just that this goodness cannot be realised through our own efforts. Thus, while he admitted he was not entirely clear on this in *The Ethical Demand*,[37] he later allowed that we can indeed love, trust, hope, and so on, in ways that exemplify goodness – it is just that this goodness is given to us, rather than something we bring about for ourselves. Nonetheless, it is arguable that this is enough to form the basis for a certain kind of self-respect, but one which leaves no room for pride: insofar as I am capable of loving the neighbour, I exemplify goodness and can value myself on this basis, but this is not a value on which I can build a sense of pride in

[36] For a study of this issue in relation to Kierkegaard, see John Lippitt, *Kierkegaard and the Problem of Self-Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
[37] For further discussion of this issue, see Stern, *The Radical Demand in Løgstrup's Ethics*, p. 90.

my achievements, because this love for the neighbour is precisely *not* my achievement, and thus must be viewed with humility – but not a humility that robs me of all self-respect. Thus, while on Løgstrup's account this self-respect is not restored to us through knowing we are forgiven by a loving God, it is arguably restored to us in a different way, by seeing that while we are capable of great wickedness in a way that breaks with the goodness of life, we are also ourselves living beings who still partake in that goodness, a goodness that forms the basis for a 'proper self-love' in which there is no element of pride. Once again, therefore, it would seem that Løgstrup's secular approach can find a way to answer the challenge we have been discussing by using resources that are different from Kierkegaard's.

2.4 Pride vs anxiety

Finally, I would like to turn to another issue on which the theological account offered by Kierkegaard may seem to have an advantage over Løgstrup's more secular approach. Here the objection is: even if what I have said above is enough to defend that secular approach, it is still problematic in being directed at only *one* potential barrier to neighbour love, namely pride – but there are other potential barriers, particularly various forms of anxiety and worry,[38] which are equally significant and which Løgstrup's account does nothing to address, making his account incomplete when compared to Kierkegaard's, who has more resources at his disposal because he takes a theological approach.

The issue here may be illustrated by returning to the example with which I began, where my relation to the beggar can be distorted from one of love not only by my condescending attitude to him fuelled by pride, but also by a failure of attention to him at all, fuelled by a focus on myself that is driven by a kind of anxious self-concern, as I dwell on what faces me today and what it is that I need to achieve, leading me to turn in on myself and away from him. Equally, I might use helping the other as a way to bolster my faltering sense of self, rather than caring for him for his own sake. More dramatically and fatefully, Luther's recounting of his so-called 'tower experience' may be taken as an account of how his anxiety over his own sinfulness cut him off from others and the world around him: to come to love the neighbour, this anxiety has to be dispelled. Iris Murdoch puts these issues

[38] In his work, Kierkegaard talks of both anxiety (angst) and worry or cares (bekymring), and while he does not explicitly draw a systematic distinction between them, the latter seems more associated with social status than the former: see e.g. *Christian Discourses*, Part I.

well when she writes: 'By opening our eyes we do not necessarily see what confronts us. We are anxiety-ridden animals. Our minds are continually active, fabricating an anxious, usually self-preoccupied, often falsifying *veil* which partially conceals the world'.[39] The question is, therefore, whether the difficulties we face here can only be resolved within a religious framework, or whether a secular position is equally able to respond to this challenge.

At first sight, there might seem an easy response for the secularist to make: namely, that it is precisely by moving to a more secular position that some of these fundamental anxieties can be overcome, as they are in fact fuelled by a religious outlook, so that far from solving the problem it is in fact this outlook that causes them in the first place – so it is best just to drop that outlook, and move to the secular approach. For, it can be argued, as the case of Luther makes particularly vivid, a significant source of anxiety within the religious tradition is anxiety regarding one's relation to God, and whether the believer has forfeited his love and forgiveness. It is arguable that the 'reformation breakthrough' which moves from justification through works to justification through grace is precisely designed to overcome this anxiety, and thereby free us from the 'inturnedness' that results to then enable us to love the neighbour.[40] However, even if this shift from works to grace is successful in dealing with this anxiety, it could be argued by the secularist that this anxiety only arises in the first place due to a concern with our God-relation – so if we just drop this relation by moving to a secular perspective, the problem goes away of its own accord, giving the secular approach a clear advantage. Of course, if the God-relation was needed in order to strike down pride, then there might be a reason to retain it for that reason, and then face the problem of anxiety that results – but as argued above, it would appear that Løgstrup's secular account of 'life as a gift' is sufficient to deal with the problem of pride, so this argument would not seem to be enough to motivate the need to retain the theological approach.

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[39] Murdoch, 'The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts', in *Existentialism and Mystics*, pp. 363–85, p. 369. Cf. also: 'Most of the time we fail to see the big wide real world at all because we are blinded by obsession, anxiety, envy, resentment, fear. We make a small personal world in which we remain enclosed' (Murdoch, 'Literature and Philosophy: A Conversation with Brian Magee', in *Existentialism and Mystics*, pp. 3–30, p. 14).

[40] For Luther's recounting of his 'tower experience' and the 'breakthrough' that is associated with it, see *Luther's Works*, vol. 34, pp. 336–7. This issue is of course widely discussed in the literature; for a helpful treatment see Daphne Hampson, *Christian Contradictions: The Structures of Lutheran and Catholic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), Chapter 1.

However, whilst it may be tempting, there is something rather superficial about this secularist response: for, although it seems plausible that anxiety can indeed be fuelled by a problematic sense of our relation to the divine, it can also be argued that anxiety is a more fundamental part of the human condition, which cannot simply be shaken off by dropping any concern with God – rather, that anxiety is what the concern with God is aimed to address, where the question remains how this is to be achieved on a more secular approach. For Luther and Kierkegaard it is possible to put a kind of trust in God, a find a kind of acceptance in God, to feel a kind of joy in the relation to God, that are sufficient to dispel the anxieties that we face, and so can make love of the neighbour possible. Can the secular approach offer any alternative account?

When it comes to Løgstrup, it could be said, no such alternative need be found, as while his account of 'life as a gift' is apparently intended to be secular (in the way we have understood it above), in the last main chapter of *The Ethical Demand*, Løgstrup himself turns to a discussion of God's forgiveness as proclaimed by Jesus – so this could be read as Løgstrup's own attempt to answer this question of anxiety in theological rather than secular terms. However, I think this would be a mistake, for while Løgstrup does make a transition in this chapter from a secular to a theological approach, this is not motivated by a need to deal with the issues of anxiety that we have been raising, but rather in order to make sense of the apparent unfulfillability of the ethical demand, which Løgstrup thinks requires us to accept a role for divine judgement in condemning us for this unfulfillability. Løgstrup makes this move as it allows him to block the inference that because 'ought implies can', as we cannot fulfil the demand,[41] it does not apply to us. For, given the fact that God can still judge us for this failure, we must accept that this unfulfillability is *our fault*, and then that we still ought to fulfil it even if we cannot; and because of our own sinfulness, only a divine being is in a position to judge us here, and hence forgive us in the manner that Jesus proclaims. Thus, in addition to his framework of life as a gift, Løgstrup himself introduces a God-relation in his ethics at this culminating point of *The Ethical Demand*: but he does not do so to deal with the issues of anxiety that concern us here but instead to explain how we can stand under an unfulfillable demand. Thus I think we cannot take it that (in the manner

[41] Løgstrup takes the demand to be unfulfillable because insofar as we experience it *as* a demand, we have already failed to love the neighbour. For further discussion, see Stern, *The Radical Demand in Løgstrup's Ethics*, §5.1.

of Luther and Kierkegaard) he would use this God-relation to explain how as 'anxiety-ridden' animals we can be freed from ourselves. So what account can he provide instead? In closing, I will suggest three ways this question might be answered.

Firstly, as Luther and Kierkegaard also allow, one important source of this anxiety is what might be called 'status anxiety', and which relates closely to the issues of pride we discussed earlier. That is, we are concerned about how our achievements give us standing in relation to others, and seek to preserve that standing through pursuing those achievements. One way in which this sort of anxiety can be taken away, therefore, is when we no longer take any credit for those achievements, and see that others cannot do so either: we then lose the currency on which status depends, and thus the anxiety which goes with it. Moreover, insofar as our fragile sense of self is bound up with these concerns, this fragility can be overcome accordingly once these concerns seem less relevant. The theological account also deals with this kind of anxiety by attributing our merits to God; but it would seem Løgstrup's account can achieve something similar by attributing them instead to life, as we have discussed.

Secondly, a different kind of anxiety can arise from our sense of dependence and consequent vulnerability, where here the comforting sense that 'the Lord will provide' gives the theological position one clear way to respond to this worry, and hence block the kind of self-concerned 'busyness' that may otherwise be our reaction – like the worried wood-dove in Kierkegaard's *The Lilies and the Birds*, who is induced by the tame dove to become concerned about its material security, and so gets busy trying to accumulate food for the future.[42] And, at first sight it may appear that Løgstrup's position can only make this kind of anxiety even worse, as of course his position places considerable emphasis on this dependence, which he thinks we are precisely in danger of forgetting as the anxiety it induces leads us to seek to hide it from ourselves. It may also seem that Løgstrup's only way to address it is to appeal to a kind of trust in the ultimate goodness of life that is really only a form of quasi-theological optimism concerning creation which does not make much sense unless it is ultimately underwritten by appeal to God.

[42] Cf. Søren Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* (trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 174–7.

Now, of course, the theological position has resources here that leaves the secular account at some disadvantage. Nonetheless, Løgstrup can perhaps claim that this anxiety is driven in part by an unrealistic dream of autonomy and self-sufficiency which we must simply learn to renounce – and once we have, we will cease to yearn for what we cannot attain, and accept our dependence for what it is, learning to live with it rather than fly from it in search of some fantasy. Moreover, once we acknowledge how much we have been dependent in the past rather than delude ourselves about our autonomy, we may learn to be less anxious about that dependence for it has sustained us thus far. Here, the humility we learn by seeing life as a gift may also lessen our anxiety, as we become more willing to accept what we cannot change or control, while also recognising a goodness in the structures of life that entitle us to feel some confidence in them.

Thirdly and finally, I think it can be argued that Løgstrup's conception of life as a gift leads him to re-think the conceptual structure of the problem of anxiety: for he holds that one thing that life gives us is precisely freedom from this anxiety by turning us away from ourselves through the encounter with others and the world around us – as he puts in one of his early writings: 'A human being can only escape his self-preoccupation by means of a fellow human being'.[43] On the theological account, the process is a two-stage one: *first* the God-relation frees us from our anxiety, and *then* we come to love the neighbour by seeing them properly for the first time. However, on Løgstrup's account, it is precisely *through* love of the neighbour that we are freed from our anxiety, as in Murdoch's famous example of the kestrel:

> I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious of my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel. And when I return to thinking of the other matter it seems less important.[44]

Likewise, Løgstrup suggests that be freed from the forms of self-imprisonment we have been discussing – pride, and also anxiety – though the experience of other people and their needs, and this itself is not the least of the goods that life gives to us. Given this account of

[43] K. E. Løgstrup, 'Pligt eller anvar', *Kirken og Tiden*, 14 (1938), pp. 206–17, p. 213.
[44] Murdoch, 'The Sovereignty of Good', p. 369.

Løgstrup's position, it can therefore be argued that in his conception of 'life', and more particularly in his conception of our encounter with the other individual, we find a secular analogue of grace: namely, something that serves the same function of drawing us away from ourselves through a process that we cannot control and for which we can claim no credit, but where this process is not attributed to anything divine.[45] [46]

[45] For further discussion of the issues raised here, including some potential difficulties with Løgstrup's position, see Bjørn Rabjerg and Robert Stern, 'Freedom from the Self: Luther and Løgstrup on Sin as "Incurvatus in Se"', *Open Theology*, 4 (2018), pp. 268–80.

[46] I am grateful to Dan Watts for his very helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.