

Løgstrup's Criticism of Kierkegaard – Epistemological and Anthropological Dimensions

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Although the differences between Kierkegaard and Grundtvig both in style and content are undeniable, there are also some important similarities. First, they both criticize romantic philosophy for mediating Christian faith and denying the importance of the unique historical event on which that faith is dependent.¹

Second, both in Grundtvig and Kierkegaard there is a hermeneutic of Christian faith which states the full development of human existence as a necessary condition for attaining faith. Finally, both Kierkegaard and Grundtvig are extremely difficult to interpret in a consistent way. It could be said that while Kierkegaard meant the difficulties to be there, the problem in the case of Grundtvig is that his views on fundamental issues several times underwent dramatic changes, and therefore it is hard to state the *fundamental and genuine* Grundtvigian doctrine.

However, the purpose of this article is not to undertake a comparison between Kierkegaard and Grundtvig, but to describe and discuss the criticism of Kierkegaard by the theologian and philosopher Knud E. Løgstrup (1905-1981). Starting in the *Tidehverv* movement he gradually developed into an ardent critic of both existentialist theology and Kierkegaard. It would, however, be misleading to take this criticism as a starting-point. His main project is not anti-Kierkegaardianism, but a reinterpretation of the Judaeo-Christian doctrine of creation, developed as an ongoing dialogue with, and criticism of, the transcendental idealistic element in post-Kantian continental philosophy (especially in neo-Kantianism and Heidegger).

Although Løgstrup never entered into a serious Grundtvig study, it is adequate to judge his contribution as a modern and actual expression of the main Grundtvigian ideas.² In Løgstrup the controversy

between Kierkegaardianism and Grundtvigianism is about the role of the human agent in defining or creating the boundaries of human life. According to Løgstrup the most important task for philosophy is to describe the overlooked boundaries of uncorrupted life itself. In Kierkegaard the boundaries cannot be separated from immediate life-forces, but are dependent on the ability of reflection and on resignation from involvement in everyday life.³

Løgstrup's Reinterpretation of the Doctrine of Creation

In his dissertation (1942) Løgstrup deals with the epistemological conflict between theology and transcendental idealism, i.e., the neo-Kantianism of Hermann Cohen (1842-1918), Heinrich Rickert (1863-1936), Ernst Cassirer (1874-1945) and the early Heidegger (1889-1976).⁴ Right through all differences these philosophers adhere to a doctrine which states that the formal element in knowledge is dependent on the creativity of the subject, while the material element comes from outside. Applied to the theological knowledge of God, this view creates an insuperable difficulty since a God dependent on man is no longer God. Either the knowledge of God contained in theological doctrine must be given up, or theology must free itself from the epistemological boundaries of critical philosophy.

The first step in Løgstrup's solution is his criticism of the German theologian F.K. Schumann.⁵ Without going into detail, the main point in Løgstrup's criticism is that Schumann (and Johannes Rehmke, whose epistemological theories Schumann is dependent on) reduces the problem of knowledge to the problem of sensation. The problem dealt with by transcendental idealism is the so-called "problem of transcendence", i.e., the problem of understanding: *how can the human mind understand what is not human? Is all knowledge anthropomorphism?* In the conflict between epistemology and theology the problem is not how to describe the process of sensation, but how to describe the possibility of human understanding.

Transcendental idealism solves this latter problem by applying Kant's method of analyzing the a priori element in all knowledge, claiming it to be the product of faculties in the subject. The world as we know it is therefore constituted by us ourselves, al-

though this is not a deliberate act. According to Løgstrup this view of knowledge describes it as *an act which fails to change its object*, an act which “is lost on” the objectively given and therefore alone affects the acting subject. Consequently, the world we know is seen as a world we ourselves have shaped. We are not creators like the God of the Old Testament, but demiurges like the one in Plato’s *Timaeus*, shaping an unshaped material.

The second step in Løgstrup’s discussion is to interpret transcendental idealism as an expression of what he calls the secular life view. The essence of this is that there are no definitive forms not created by man. The cultural endeavour of man is based on a shapeless raw material.

Finally, the third step is the pointing out of the differences between this secular view and the understanding of life presupposed in the Old Testament and manifest in the preaching of Jesus, i.e., the Judaeo-Christian understanding of life. According to this view uncorrupted life contains definite forms originated not by man but by God. The doctrine of creation is not a (scientific) theory of the origin of the universe, but an awareness of the definitive elements involved in the process of life as it takes place in interpersonal situations.

Interpreting the conflict between theology and transcendental epistemology in this way, Løgstrup concludes that since theology does not adhere to the profane understanding of life it is not obliged to respect the epistemological boundaries. In addition, he gives a philosophical *diagnosis* of transcendental epistemology: it is the epistemology of a *lonely* subject confronted with a *silent* material. Following the dialogue philosophy of K. Løwith (1897-1973), Ferdinand Ebner (1882-1931) and Martin Buber (1878-1965), Løgstrup underlines that in the interpersonal situation the subject is not confronted with a silent material, but with a speaking person.

Transcending the sphere of dialogue philosophy, the project of the later philosophy of Løgstrup is to describe the pre-cultural definitive forms presupposed by the Judaic-Christian life-view by using the method of phenomenology developed by Hans Lipps (1889-1941) – an almost forgotten hermeneutic-phenomenological philosopher critical of Husserl and, on some points, Heidegger. Løgstrup starts from concrete phenomenological descriptions of interpersonal phenomena (*spontaneous life-utterances*) like confidence, charity, compassion, etc., and states that their definitive form invites a religious interpretation. That these phenomena have a definitive form means that they

cannot be used for other purposes without destroying them. A charity implemented for other reasons than to help the needy is no longer charity.

Løgstrup's reformulation of the doctrine of creation contains both an element of rethinking the doctrine as it is presented in the Judaeo-Christian tradition (i.e., Old and New Testament), and an effort to show how it is attainable from empirical phenomenological descriptions. The metaphysics of the late Løgstrup consist for a large part of extensions of the phenomenology of interpersonal phenomena to natural phenomena.

Løgstrup's Criticism of Kierkegaard

Løgstrup's criticism of Kierkegaard deals with both Kierkegaard's theological and philosophical views. It is, however, not an internal criticism, focusing on self-contradictions, etc. In the preface to his main book on Kierkegaard (from 1968) he says that what interests him is "the tendency and consequence in his (i.e. Kierkegaard's) understanding of the Christian message, not what he – also – has said." Somewhat simplified it could be stated as that the Kierkegaard criticism serves as an arena for Løgstrup in the process of clarification of his own views on human existence and the meaning of the Christian religion.

A second comment has to be added. In Løgstrup there is a distinction between a philosophical part of theology and a part which deals solely with questions not attainable by human reason. The philosophical part deals with the universal conditions of human life, the non-philosophical part deals with the meaning and importance of Christ.

In the following I deal only with two philosophical questions: (1) Is the epistemology presupposed by Kierkegaard Kantian? And how does this affect his view on the relationship between thinking and existence? (2) Is there also a Kantian anthropology in Kierkegaard, defining human nature as selfish inclination without ethical value?

Epistemological Dimension

At first sight it seems as if there is a stringent epistemology in Kierkegaard, it is conceptualized in dialogue with Platonism. In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846), Kierkegaard (i.e. Climacus) corrects the description of Socrates given in *Philosophical Fragments* (1844) and states that Socrates' relationship to the theory of *anamnesis* (knowledge = recollection) is that he always departs from it for the sake of existence. While Plato represents the paradigm of idealistic speculation, Socrates invents the position of existential faithfulness. Confronted with the possibility of forgetting the existential problems, Socrates chooses to stay in the world of finiteness.

Post-Kantian idealism is similar to Platonism in that it forgets existence in favour of speculation. But according to Kierkegaard there is also another problem connected with it: the philosophical elimination of the existential content of the Christian message. For this double reason he attacks Hegel and speaks in praise of the Socratic ignorance.

Also from the point of view of epistemology Hegelian presuppositions have to be rejected. In *The Concept of Dread* (1844) he (i.e. Vigilius Haufniensis) makes the distinction between (1) classical philosophy and the philosophy of the Middle Ages which took *the reality of thinking* for granted and (2) the Kantian scepticism. The reality of thinking is still an unproved presupposition.⁶

In Kierkegaard's description of the difference between thinking and existence the transcendental presupposition is apparent. He states that while thinking is to translate reality into possibility, existence means to be faithful to one's reality. In *The Postscript* the first part of this sentence is expressed as *the impossibility of identification with the objective*.⁷ There is consequently no such thing in Kierkegaard as a Thomistic theory of knowledge as "assimilation" or of Schelling's theory of "intellectual intuition".

In *The Sickness unto Death* (1849) Kierkegaard (i.e. Anti-Climacus) quotes with approval the older Fichte (1762-1824) for the view that the imagination is the origin of the categories, i.e., the a priori element in knowledge. Imagination is the faculty *instar omnium*, not equal to other faculties, but conditioning their mode. What kind of feeling, knowing and willing there is in a man is dependent on his imagination. The decisive characterization of imagination is that it is the *medium of making infinite*. According to Kierkegaard two *move-*

ments are necessary for the constitution of the *self*: the movement of making infinite and the movement of making finite. Stated in anthropological terms: the movement of infinite resignation and abstraction and the movement of self-acceptance.

In conclusion, when Kierkegaard adheres to the transcendental view of knowledge as productivity based on imagination it is because this view both (1) gives the movement of making infinite (transcending the finite world) its proper role and (2) demonstrates the danger connected with forgetting the movement of making finite. In the world of fantasy man forgets himself, starts to live *fantastically*, not in accordance with the conditions of finite existence.⁸

Since existence is defined as decision and action, putting an end to possibility, from his epistemology Kierkegaard has to conclude that there are no similarities between existence and thinking.

As we have seen, Løgstrup's criticism of this epistemology concluded that it forgets the "speaking" agents confronting man and consequently it has to be supplemented with an epistemology of dialogue. In other words, the transcendental viewpoint has to be limited to our understanding of non-speakers. Applied to Kierkegaard this criticism leads to a revision of Kierkegaard's theory of the relationship between thinking and existence. It points out that philosophical knowledge is not *necessarily* contrary to existence. As description and interpretation of the overlooked interpersonal and natural definitive forms it is relevant for man's existential task of self-acceptance and self-realization. Performing the spontaneous life-utterances, man attains identity and freedom. Knowledge of these definitive forms does not distract us from existence. It gives adequacy to our life-view. Kierkegaard is not right in defining the relationship between thinking and existence as absolute contradiction, the one having no relevance for the other. Knowledge of pre-cultural definitive forms is essential for understanding our life-conditions.

Anthropological Dimension

One of the most important anthropological distinctions in Kierkegaard is the one between living as the individual and living as one of the masses. It presupposes that man unlike the animal is not

governed by instincts, and that in the age of reflection (modernity) he is not governed by authority either. Left to his own choices, man chooses like everybody else and loses his independence and spirituality.

Kierkegaard's authorship can be interpreted as expositions of different ways of overcoming this situation. Although the possibilities of different interpretations of these expositions are numerous, it is hard to deny that *resignation* in some form plays a decisive role for Kierkegaard. In *Fear and Trembling* resignation means to give up one's strongest (life-fulfilling) wish. Faith cannot be reached without resignation because faith actually means the overcoming of this resignation by believing that for God everything is possible: I will receive again what resignation took away. In the generalized theory of *The Postscript*, the overcoming of despair, i.e., of the wish to control what cannot be controlled, is conditioned by obedience to the infinite ethical demand to "die away from immediacy". But this movement of resignation has to be supplemented by a return to, or positive affirmation of, concrete existence.

In short, ethical consciousness according to Kierkegaard presupposes: (1) "reflective transcendence of the initial aesthetic immediacy"; (2) "... an act of resignation through which the individual chooses himself in his concrete determinacy", and (3) "positive affirmation of oneself."⁹

From Løgstrup's point of view two modifications of this view are especially important: (1) Kierkegaard overlooks the definitive forms inherent in life. These confront man with an infinite ethical demand, not to abstract from immediacy, but to fulfill the deeds which the spontaneous life-utterances would have done if they were not corrupted by man; (2) the task of taking over concrete existence is only necessary when the conditions of one's existence are such that the individual is tempted to escape from them (like Kierkegaard himself). Kierkegaard is therefore not right in making absolute resignation a necessary pre-condition for religious faith. Living as an individual and as one in the crowd are therefore not mutually exclusive. There is a third possibility: to identify oneself with the spontaneous life-utterance in taking responsibility for the situation.

In my view Kierkegaard does not see phenomena like love, charity and confidence, etc., as definitive forms. To gain definitive form they must be dependent on man's decision. *Definitive confidence*, on this view, is a confidence man has decided himself for. Its definitive

form is dependent on the spontaneity and sovereignty of his decision.¹⁰

The question whether Kierkegaard is in line with the strict anthropological dualism of Kant must however be negatively answered. A very important point is that in Kierkegaard, ethical decision-making is in continuity with natural inclinations. Definitive love (love for one's neighbour) is possible because it is possible for reason and imagination to *educate* erotic love into love for one's neighbour. This line of thought is essential in Judge William's treatment of aesthetic love in *Either-Or* II. His advocacy of marriage presupposes the possibility of conserving passion and the aesthetic validity of love in marriage. The decision gives substance and definitive form to natural love.

It seems, therefore, that Kierkegaard argues in favour of a modified Kantian ethic. This modification includes (1) an alternative concept of the a priori; and (2) a more adequate view of the relationship between duty and inclination. The ethical life presupposes and transforms the aesthetic.

According to Kant man can be governed by reason although all his *maxims* originate from inclination. But the inclination is never ethical, even if it does the same as the duty compels us to do. Only the deed performed with respect for the categorical imperative is ethical.

Kierkegaard rejects the dualism between inclination and ethical duty. His theory underlines the perfectibility and potentiality for ethical decision inherent in natural inclinations. Starting in *Either-Or* with the question: "Are passions then the pagans of the soul? Reason alone baptized?" his analysis could be seen as different ways of taking care of the true nature of the passions in decision-making.¹¹

New Paradigm or Reformation of the Old?

In this article I have only touched upon a small selection of the problems involved in the Løgstrup – Kierkegaard debate. The justification for the following conclusions is therefore not completely presented in the previous sections.

Danish philosophy has as one of its most obvious characteris-

tics its personalistic and nearness-to-life approach. Kierkegaard is the great representative of this type of philosophy. But inherent in his analysis are some problematic presuppositions. Due to his polemical situation (Hegel), admiration of Socratic modesty and respect of Kantian scepticism, he adhered to epistemological and anthropological presuppositions which do not adequately describe the human situation. When it comes to anthropology I have indicated that the picture is somewhat more complex, placing Kierkegaard somewhere between the strict anthropological dualism of Kant and Løgstrup's vindication of descriptive ethical, definitive pre-cultural phenomena. For Kierkegaard, inclination does not contain fully developed definitive forms, since it is dependent on decision and on the will being "baptized".

Maintaining the task of describing human existence and underlining the importance of the human individual, Løgstrup gives attention to pre-cultural definitive forms and the possible religious interpretation of these. It is very important to see that security and objective relaxation is not attained by this strategy. The existential characteristics of *decision-making*, *becoming* and *responsibility* are still valid according to Løgstrup's description of human existence. Religious faith is not based on total objective uncertainty or on the absurd, but on interpretation of fundamental phenomena which in the end have to be decided for or against.¹²

Løgstrup had the opportunity to learn from and criticize Kierkegaard. Assuming the main task of philosophy to be description and interpretation of reality and the conditions it offers for human existence, there should be no hesitation in using Kierkegaard for the purpose of criticizing the late Løgstrup's metaphysical project whenever it tends to develop into a speculation which loses contact with human existence. However, it is my belief that Løgstrup really did learn from Kierkegaard and that he develops important Kierkegaardian motives with some rightly conceptualized modifications.

To sum up: In this article Løgstrup is presented as a religious thinker belonging to the Grundtvigian tradition in Denmark. His main project, however, was to actualize the Judaeo-Christian doctrine of creation, using the phenomenology of Hans Lipps to describe and interpret fundamental phenomena religiously. In so doing he criticized the transcendental idealism of post-Kantian continental philosophy, focusing on its secular understanding of life. His attack on Kierkegaard must be evaluated against this background. He claimed

that Kierkegaard (1) adhered to the transcendental idealistic view of knowledge; and (2) overlooked or neglected the definitive form of interpersonal phenomena such as charity and confidence. Accepting Løgstrup's epistemological criticism, the article argues in favour of a more nuanced interpretation of the anthropological dimension in Kierkegaard. He does not accept the Kantian dualism between inclination and ethical duty, but argues in favour of a view that emphasizes that it is the intrinsic potentiality and perfectibility of human passions which make decision possible and successful.

Notes

- 1 Grundtvig criticized the young Schelling (1775-1854) for mediating the opposition between good and evil in his theory of evil as belonging only to finiteness, while asserting that in the infinite, eternal and self-identical reality there is no such distinction. For Grundtvig the opposition is eternal and absolute, and the fall of man is not to be interpreted mythically as the necessary spatio-temporal dissension, but as an historical event not at all necessary. Kierkegaard's attack is directed against Hegel's interpretation of faith as a not yet fully developed expression of the absolute, having to give way to philosophy's more adequate understanding and expression of the process in which the absolute is coming to itself.
- 2 Ole Jensen, a Danish theologian strongly influenced by Løgstrup, says: "Without other inspiration from Grundtvig than the indirect through Thanning [Danish Grundtvig specialist] Løgstrup has formulated a theology... which belongs to what we in Denmark label "the Grundtvigian view". But this formulation is very original and independent. It is an up-to-date Grundtvigian theology." [My translation]. See: Ole Jensen: "K.E. Løgstrup og "det grundtvigske i dag"" in: *Vartoubogen*, Copenhagen, 1982, p. 89.
- 3 In Jørgen K. Bukdahl's comments on Løgstrup's criticism of Kierkegaard a similar view is presented: Jørgen K. Bukdahl: *Om Søren Kierkegaard. Artikler i udvalg ved Jan Lindhardt*, Copenhagen, 1981, pp. 202-214; also: Jørgen K. Bukdahl: *I den teologiske kreds. Artikler og afhandlinger samlet og redigeret af Hans Hauge, Kjeld Holm, Poul Henning B. Jørgensen og Jan Lindhardt*, Copenhagen, 1981, pp. 7-25.
- 4 K.E. Løgstrup: *Den erkendelsesteoretiske konflikt mellem den transcendentalfilosofiske idealisme og teologien*, Copenhagen, 1942. Martin Heidegger presents his Kant interpretation in *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, 1929, Frankfurt/Main, 1973.
- 5 Friedrich Karl Schumann: *Der Gottesgedanke und der Zerfall der Moderne*, Tübingen, 1929.
- 6 Søren Kierkegaard: *Samlede Værker*, 2nd edition, Copenhagen, 1920-1931, IV, p. 315f. = SV.
- 7 SV VII, p. 565.

- 8 SV XI, p. 162f. – Løgstrup's comment is to be found in his *Opgør med Kierkegaard*, Gyldendal, Copenhagen, 1968, pp. 148-152.
- 9 George Schrader: "Kant and Kierkegaard on Duty and Inclination" in: Josiah Thompson, ed.: *Kierkegaard A Collection of Critical Essays*, New York, Doubleday, Anchor Books, 1972, p. 338.
- 10 Cf. Jørgen K. Bukdahl: *I den teologiske kreds*, p. 104.
- 11 This section of the article is inspired by Johannes Sløk's analysis of Kierkegaard's view of the transformation of erotic love into love for one's neighbour. See: Johannes Sløk: *Kierkegaard – humanismens tænker*, Copenhagen, Hans Reitzel, 1978. The article by George Schrader (see note 10) argues in favour of a similar view, placing Kant in the tradition of Platonism and Kierkegaard closer to Hegelianism with its positive view of the relationship between ethics and nature.
- 12 K.E. Løgstrup: *Skabelse og tilintetgørelse*, Copenhagen, 1978, p. 214.