

## Løgstrup's Ontological Ethics

### An analysis of human interdependent existence

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This article explores K. E. Løgstrup's<sup>1</sup> ontological ethics, understood as an ethics rooted in *interdependence*. Interdependence, the fact that human beings always hold power over each other, has two very different aspects, which I will call negative and positive, each of them in turn leading to different aspects of ontological ethics. By *negative* and *positive* I mean the two opposing possibilities of all human interaction that we can either destroy the other person's life (to a greater or smaller degree) or cause the other person's life to flourish. We can either be a blessing in the other person's life or a destroyer, as Løgstrup sometimes puts it. The focus of this article is to explore the *positive aspect* of interdependence. This is done for two connected reasons. Firstly, the positive aspect of Løgstrup's analysis of interdependence seems to be largely overlooked because the work done on interdependence has tended to focus on the *negative aspect*, i.e. the *threatening* side of interdependence, which leads to his work on the ethical demand. Secondly, the positive aspect of interdependence actually provides the origin and foundation of Løgstrup's so-called *sovereign expressions of life*. The overall aim is to provide a coherent exposition of Løgstrup's ethics. However, the result is not a normative ethics upon which we may act, but rather a descriptive diagnosis of interdependence as the basic ontological condition of human social life, where the sovereign expressions of life may *enable* us to act.

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<sup>1</sup> Knud Ejler Løgstrup (1905-1981) was a Danish theologian and philosopher. He was very influential in Scandinavia and to some extent in Germany, where he stayed in contact with Martin Heidegger until Heidegger's death in 1976. In the English-speaking world, he has remained mostly unknown, but during the 1990s Alasdair MacIntyre was influenced by his reading of Løgstrup, and results of this are his articles on Løgstrup (cf. MacIntyre 2007 and 2010). Useful introductions to Løgstrup's life and thought are available in Alasdair MacIntyre and Hans Fink's "Introduction" to the 1997 translation of Løgstrup's main work, *The Ethical Demand* (cf. Løgstrup 1997) and in Kees van Kooten Niekerk's "Introduction" in *Beyond the Ethical Demand* (Niekerk 2007).

Useful information is also available at the *Løgstrup Archive*, Aarhus University: <http://loegstrup.au.dk/en/loegstruparchive/>.

### *1. Interdependence as the basis of Løgstrup's ontological ethics*

Establishing interdependence as the basis or foundation of Løgstrup's ontological ethics immediately raises three questions which will serve as a framework for the following analysis:

1. What is interdependence?
2. What is to be understood by Løgstrup's ontological ethics?
3. How does interdependence serve as the basis for Løgstrup's ontological ethics?

Let us begin with the first question, what is to be understood by interdependence?

Løgstrup does not use the term in *The Ethical Demand*, but in 1961, he adopts it from Theodor Geiger in the book *Art and Ethics* [Kunst og etik].<sup>2</sup> Still, interdependence lies at the root of *The Ethical Demand*, this is evident already from the outset, where Løgstrup uses an example to show how the adult has power over the child and that this power can permanently influence the child's life. However, this power and its potentially devastating effects do not only pertain to the child's relation to the adult, Løgstrup states, and he continues: it is

[...] in one degree or another true also of all the relationships in which we deal with one another. An individual never has something to do with another person without him holding something of their life in his hands. It may be a very small matter, involving only a passing mood, a dampening or quickening of spirit, a deepening or removal of some dislike. But it may also be a matter of tremendous scope, such that the individual can determine if the life of the other flourishes or not.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Løgstrup 1961. *Kunst og etik* has not yet been translated to English, but the "Rejoinder" [Replik] which concludes the book is translated in Niekerk 2007. Løgstrup introduces the term *interdependence* [interdependens] on page 137.

<sup>3</sup> Løgstrup 1956, 25 (1997, 15-16, translation modified): "[...] gælder det ikke desto mindre – i alle mulige grader – de forhold, hvori vi har med hinanden at gøre. Den enkelte har aldrig med et andet menneske at gøre uden at han holder noget af dets liv i sin hånd. Det kan være meget lidt, en forbigående stemning, en oplagthed, man får til at visne, eller som man vækker, en lede man uddyber eller hæver. Men det kan også være forfærdende meget, så det simpelthen står til den enkelte, om den andens liv lykkes eller ej". Throughout this article, I choose to modify some of the translations, as especially the current translation of Løgstrup's *The Ethical Demand* (Notre Dame University Press 1997 based on Fortress Press 1971) lacks precision and can be misleading.

Interdependence concerns this fundamental feature of human existence: when somehow involved with other people we are always involved in power relations. It need not be life and death, but it can be. One point I will make just in passing, and which will be important later on, is that until now within the field of Løgstrup research, focus has usually been on the *negative* aspect of interdependence: that we can destroy people's lives, deepen a dislike or dampen the spirit of the other person. And there is a good reason why this has been in focus, because the negative aspect of interdependence is a necessary condition for the ethical demand. It is our failure to act, either our failure to act altogether or our failure to act out of genuine concern for the other, which gives rise to the ethical demand, i.e. the demand to act with the wellbeing of the other person in mind.<sup>4</sup> For now, I just want to point out that the opposite, *positive*, possibility (a quickening of spirit, the removal of a dislike and the flourishing of the other person's life) plays an equal part in the quoted passage and in interdependence.<sup>5</sup>

Proceeding to the second question, we need to understand the term *ontological ethics* as Løgstrup uses it. He uses this term in several places to describe his own ethical position, most notably in the article "Ethik und Ontologie"<sup>6</sup> and in *Ethical Concepts and Problems* [Ethiske begreber og problemer].<sup>7</sup>

In these articles, Løgstrup contrasts the *ontological* tradition with the *deontological* and *teleological* traditions in ethics. Thus, *ontological ethics* constitutes a third type of ethics, different from the two traditional ones, deontology and teleology. One would expect such a novel invention to warrant an elaborate argument and exposition, but this is not the case – at least not at first glance –

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<sup>4</sup> Løgstrup's thought here bears a striking resemblance to Bernard Williams' 'one thought too many' objection. However, Løgstrup wrote this in 1956, 25 years before Williams wrote *Moral Luck* in 1981 (cf. Williams 1981).

<sup>5</sup> Interdependence is of course a singular phenomenon, namely the ontological fact of life that we are always entangled in power relations and depend on each other. However, it is crucial for the purpose of this article to be aware of the duality of possibilities, or aspects, of interdependence (implicit in Løgstrup, but not sufficiently unfolded) that we can have either a positive or a negative influence on other people, just as they can have a positive or a negative influence on us.

<sup>6</sup> Løgstrup 1960, translated to English in the appendix of the 1997 edition of *The Ethical Demand* as "Ethics and Ontology".

<sup>7</sup> Løgstrup 1971.

as Løgstrup uses just three sentences in *Ethical Concepts and Problems* to describe it. The first of these sentences reads:

The ethical demand receives its content from the fundamental condition that we live under and which we are powerless to change, namely that the life of the one person is entangled with that of the other person, and so it consists in taking care of the part of the other person's life which as a result of this entanglement is at one's mercy.<sup>8</sup>

After this, he quotes Luther as stating that “Nature teaches as love does”, emphasising in parentheses that by ‘nature’ he understands “the unchangeable fundamental conditions [of life]”. And finally, Løgstrup repeats the clause from *The Ethical Demand* where he uses the analogy of the prism to show how the ethical demand is refracted through our various types of personal relations, spouse, parent, teacher or pupil, etc. (cf. Løgstrup 1956, 124-125, Løgstrup 1997, 106-108). After having read this very brief characterization of ontological ethics, it is no wonder one might feel at a slight loss, until one realises that in fact the rest of the book is an exposition of ontological ethics, although the exposition is by no means obvious or elaborate.

However, we do learn one central thing here, namely that by *ontological ethics* Løgstrup is referring to an ethics rooted in the fundamental and unchanging condition of our life, and that this condition is that our lives are entangled with one another in various types of relations. The foundation of ontological ethics is thus *interdependence*.<sup>9</sup>

But does Løgstrup not rather see *trust* or *self-exposure* [selv-udlevering] as the basis of his ethics?<sup>10</sup> We may have already quoted Løgstrup as stating that

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<sup>8</sup> Løgstrup 1971, 12, my translation, English translation is ongoing: “Fra det grundvilkår, vi lever under, og som det ikke står til os at ændre, nemlig at den enes liv er forviklet med den andens, får den etiske fordring sit indhold, idet den går ud på at drage omsorg for det af den andens liv, som forviklingen prisgiver en”.

<sup>9</sup> To people familiar with Løgstrup's later writings through the 1970s, this may seem too reductive, as Løgstrup in his late writings broadens the scope of humane existence and its dependencies to include a greater ecosystem than merely other people. Here we find central themes such as *historicity*, *nature* and *sensation* to be crucial elements of human existence and hence parts of the ontological basis of our life (cf. Løgstrup's late works *Creation and Annihilation* and *Source and Surrounding* which are both partially translated into English in Dees 1995).

<sup>10</sup> I translate 'udlevering' and 'selv-udlevering' as *exposure* and *self-exposure* rather than 'surrender' or 'delivery' ('self-surrender' and 'self-delivery' respectively) because the former come closer to signifying the *passive* implication which is crucial to understanding Løgstrup's

interdependence is the fundamental condition or core phenomenon, but we could have found a different passage containing a seemingly different answer:

Regardless of how varied the communication between persons may be, it always involves the risk of one person daring to venture out in the hope of being received. This is the essence of communication and it is the fundamental phenomenon of ethical life.<sup>11</sup>

This passage indicates that the ethical demand is based on trust and self-exposure as its core phenomena, an interpretation found in several places in the secondary literature.

I think that the answer to this particular problem is not to see interdependence and self-exposure as mutually exclusive or different phenomena. Actually, Løgstrup makes one other mention of “the fundamental phenomenon of ethical life” in *The Ethical Demand*, this time in the context of a discussion of how we cannot avoid having power over persons with whom we associate. The fundamental ethical phenomenon cannot be our supposed good deeds, Løgstrup writes:

[...] and therefore the fundamental phenomenon of ethical life is something else. Because power is involved in every human relationship we are always in advance compelled to decide whether to use our power over the other person for serving him or her or for serving ourselves.<sup>12</sup>

Here Løgstrup clearly speaks of interdependence as the fundamental ethical phenomenon in a way that suggests that he understood self-exposure and interdependence as intimately connected. They imply each other: being in inescapable power relations exposes us; and being exposed means being in somebody’s power. There would be no interdependence, if we were not exposing ourselves; and there would be no self-exposure without interdependence.

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position. To be exposed is a passive state, while to *surrender* oneself and to *deliver* oneself involves an active subject. Here we need to keep the passive form in mind, as will be shown.

<sup>11</sup> Løgstrup 1956, 27 (1997, 17 translation modified): “På hvor mangfoldig vis kommunikationen mellem os end kan arte sig, den består altid i at vove sig frem for at blive imødekommet. Det er nerven i den, og det er det etiske livs grundfænomen”.

<sup>12</sup> Løgstrup 1956, 66 (1997, 53): “[...] og det etiske livs grundfænomen er derfor et andet. Fordi der er magt i et hvilket som helst forhold mellem mennesker, er vi altid på forhånd spærret inde – i den afgørelse, om vi vil bruge magten over den anden til hans eller til vort eget bedste”.

*Basic trust* plays a role here, but not as a candidate for being the founding phenomenon of ontological ethics. Løgstrup only brings basic trust to the table because he needs a phenomenon that counter-balances the risks of communication and human interaction: why does communication not break down when it is such risky business? Trust and social norms are his only candidates in *The Ethical Demand*. However, this changes with the introduction of the *sovereign expressions of life*, to which we will return later.

We now turn to the third question, *how* interdependence serves as the basis of Løgstrup's ontological ethics.

In one sense, the answer seems very straightforward. Interdependence means that in all human interaction we hold power over each other, and ontological ethics is just Løgstrup's word for an ethics springing from this ontological fact, an ethics concerned with what we ought to do with the power we have over the other person. I call this answer straightforward because it leads down the well-known path (well-known at least to Løgstrup scholars) to the ethical demand: that we should use this power to take care of the other person's life, a demand that is silent, one-sided, radical, and unfulfillable. Let us briefly explore *this* aspect of ontological ethics before we turn to the possibility of there being more to ontological ethics than this.

## *2. The Ethical Demand. Ontological ethics based on the negative aspect of interdependence*

As mentioned, Løgstrup's analysis of the ethical demand provides four characteristics: it is silent, one-sided, radical, and unfulfillable. Here, I will just add a few remarks to these characteristics:

That the demand is *silent* means that it cannot be captured in any fixed form in language or culture. Any cultural understanding of the ethical demand and any verbal attempt to formulate it in a concrete action-guiding norm are bound to fail. One way to say this is that in *any particular situation* it may be an *open question* whether it is ethically appropriate to lie, steal, or even kill, etc. Here Løgstrup's analysis encourages a terminological distinction between *moral* (morality) and *ethics* – a terminology he unfortunately does not follow himself, but one that we can reconstruct: Any formulation of a cultural *moral* norm or set of cultural moral norms will always have to answer to and are conditioned

by a pre-cultural *ethical* standard, namely the silent ethical demand. The ethical demand tells us *only* that we *have to* act in order to take care of the other person, not *how* to do so.

In the Løgstrup reception, a lot of energy has gone into debating the *one-sidedness* of the ethical demand: that it implies a certain understanding of life as given to us as a gift, whether this implies a giver or not, whether this valuation and high praise of life is accurate or not, etc. I will not go into these debates here, as they serve no purpose for the problem at hand. Here, it should be sufficient to emphasize that the one-sidedness of the ethical demand means that we violate the demand if we use our power to demand something in return from the other person.

This straightforward interpretation of ontological ethics runs into a kind of dead-end when it comes to the radicality and unfulfillability of the demand. These two characteristics are closely interconnected in (at least) two different ways. I will call one of them logical (or necessary) and the other one anthropological (or contingent). Let us begin with the latter, the anthropological connection between radicality and unfulfillability.

To understand the radicality of the demand, we need to remember that *The Ethical Demand* analyses “[...] the relationship to the other person which is contained within the religious proclamation of Jesus of Nazareth” (Løgstrup 1956, 9 (1997, 1)). This relationship consists in the commandment to love the neighbour, a commandment radicalized in *The Sermon on the Mount* where Jesus proclaims that you should also love the enemy. This is fundamental to the radicality of the demand. It demands of us not only to do certain things for certain people, but that we should *love* all people (including our enemies), and from this love the good actions spring forth, just as a good tree brings forth good fruits (here we clearly see Luther’s influence on Løgstrup).<sup>13</sup> Now, as it happens, this runs contrary to human nature, according to Løgstrup. We are unable to love our enemies, and we realize so after reflecting on it, unless we lie to ourselves and indulge in hypocrisy (Løgstrup 1956, 173-177 (1997, 151-154)). The demand may very well call for us to love the person who tortured and killed our loved ones, but here the demand is repelled by our nature (Løgstrup 1956,

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Matt 7:17-18.

67 and 124 (1997, 55 and 107-108). In this respect, the radical demand is unfulfillable because of our human nature, i.e., based on the *anthropological* connection between radicality and unfulfillability.

The *logical* or necessary connection between radicality and unfulfillability consists in the demand's demanding to be superfluous:

By willing to be sovereign in our own life, by refusing to receive life as a gift, we place ourselves in a sharp contradiction: every attempt to obey the demand turns out to be an attempt at obedience *within the framework* of a more fundamental disobedience. In other words, what is demanded is that the demand should not have been necessary. This constitutes its radicality.<sup>14</sup>

The root still lies within Løgstrup's anthropology, that human beings want to be sovereign and refuse to take life as a gift, but here the radicality also points toward a different sense of unfulfillability, constituted by the framework of our anthropological shortcomings. This new unfulfillability is logical (or necessary) in nature, because the framework makes the fulfillability of the demand impossible. When the demand demands that it should not have been necessary, then it is logically impossible to fulfil it, because acting within the framework of the demand does not dismantle the demand in any way. The action should have been the fruit of spontaneous love, and when this did not happen no subsequent action can change this fact.<sup>15</sup>

The straightforward interpretation of ontological ethics is that it is concerned with *what we ought to do* with the power we have over the other person in our interdependent life. As we have seen, it runs into a dead-end because the radicality and the unfulfillability actually undermines the entire project of establishing an ethics that has to do with how *we* ought to act, what *we* should do in order to take care of the other person. What is demanded of us cannot be fulfilled – exactly because it is *demanded of us*. David Bugge refers to this precise problem and suggests that for this reason we should speak of Løgstrup's *critique*

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<sup>14</sup> Løgstrup 1956, 168 (1997, 146): “Med vor modstand imod modtagelsen af vort liv har vi anbragt os selv i den tilspidsede modsigelse, at ethvert forsøg på at lyde fordringen aldrig bliver til andet end et forsøg på at være lydige imod den indenfor en mere fundamental ulydighed. Med andre ord, hvad der fordres er, at fordringen ikke skulle have været nødvendig. Deri består dens radikalitet”.

<sup>15</sup> David Bugge draws a similar distinction in his companion to *The Ethical Demand*; cf. Bugge 2011, 207-208. For further work on Løgstrup's anthropology (and ontology), see Rabjerg 2017.



of *ethics* rather than of Løgstrup's *ethics* (cf. Bugge 2012). This aspect of Løgstrup's ontological ethics has to do with human interaction that has gone wrong, which is also why Løgstrup refers to it as a *substitute ethics* – a substitute for what should actually have been realised in the interdependent relation to the other person.<sup>16</sup> I will therefore propose a different, but supplementary, way of understanding Løgstrup's ontological ethics, namely as an analysis concerned not with what *we should do*, but rather with what can *happen to us* in our interdependent life.

### *3. Sovereign expressions of life. Ontological ethics based on the positive aspect of interdependence*

The interpretation of Løgstrup's ontological ethics that I will present in the following is based on what was earlier called *the positive aspect* of interdependence, namely that the possibilities for a quickening of spirit, the removal of a dislike, and the flourishing of the other person's life also lie within the structure of interdependence. Conversely, the straightforward interpretation, which we discussed earlier, focuses on *the negative aspect*, the threat we pose to each other, that we can cripple, destroy or dampen the spirit of the other person. The importance of the positive aspect of interdependence relies heavily on Løgstrup's anthropology, and therefore this is where we will begin.

Løgstrup is a metaphysical dualist in a very specific sense. His anthropology rests upon a division or a *contraposition* (in a non-logical sense!) between the human being on the one hand and interdependent human life on the other. This means that in order to be able to grasp Løgstrup's anthropology, we have to at the same time understand it through its opposite, his understanding of human life. In the chapter "The wickedness of man and the goodness of human life" in *The ethical Demand*, Løgstrup pinpoints this division or contraposition in his 'doctrine' not as Luther of two *Kingdoms* but of two *accounts*. This doctrine is crucial if we are to be able to understand Løgstrup's conception of both the human being and of human life – and, I will argue, his ontological ethics:

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<sup>16</sup> Løgstrup expands on this in *Controverting Kierkegaard* [*Opgør med Kierkegaard*], cf. Løgstrup 1968, 127-131 (for an English translation: Niekerk 2007, 77-81).

To show trust and to expose oneself, to entertain a natural love is goodness. In this sense goodness belongs to our human life though we are evil. Both apply completely so there cannot be made a reckoning of this. Even though this is done often enough when it is said, there is “at least some” good in man! To this we can only reply, no, there is not! When speaking of the notion that there is “at least some” good in man one means to subtract something from evil and then add it to goodness – on the individual’s own account<sup>17</sup>. As if trust and natural love were not given to man, but were man’s own achievements and belonged to the account of the self.

But there is nothing to subtract from the evil of man. The self brings everything under its selfish power. In it man’s will is bound. The demand to love, which as a demand is addressed to our will, is an unfulfillable demand.

Nor can anything be added to the goodness of human life. It is there and is there in completeness, but beforehand – always beforehand, among other things in the realities of trust and love.<sup>18</sup>

What Løgstrup does here is to distinguish between what we, ourselves, are responsible for (what *we* can do) and what we are not responsible for (what can happen *to us*). The result is the *Doctrine of two accounts*: the ego cannot take credit for trust and love, because the ego is not responsible for their being there, thus trust and love cannot be reckoned as entries on the account of the selfish and wicked self. Therefore, they must be credited to the other account – the account of the goodness of human life such as it is given to us. In this way, Løgstrup can be labelled as an anthropological pessimist (the human being is wicked and does not by itself have the means for doing good at its disposal) *and* an

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<sup>17</sup> Here and in the following, ‘account’ is a translation of the Danish word ‘konto’ which means ‘(bank) account’, not ‘explanation’; so, the quote implies an analogy where ‘the account of the selfish self’ and ‘the account of the goodness of human life’ are seen as two separate (financial) accounts.

<sup>18</sup> Løgstrup 1956, 161 (1997, 140-141, translation modified): “At vise tillid og udlevere sig, at nære en naturlig kærlighed er godhed. I den forstand hører godheden vort menneskeliv til, skønt vi er onde. Begge dele gælder fuldt ud, så der ikke kan gøres et regnskab ud deraf. Skønt det ofte nok sker, når det hedder: “noget” godt er der altså ved mennesket! Hvortil kun er at sige: Nej, der er ikke! I den tale om, at der da er “noget” godt ved mennesket, vil man nemlig trække fra ondskaben og lægge til godheden – på den enkeltes egen konto! Som om tilliden og den naturlige kærlighed ikke var skænket mennesket, men var dets egne bedrifter og hørte hjemme på selvets konto. Men der er ikke noget at trække fra menneskets ondskab. Selvet tager alt i sin selvisheds magt. I den er menneskets vilje bunden. Fordringen om at elske, der som fordring er rettet til vor vilje, er uopfyldelig. Heller ikke er der noget at lægge til menneskelivets godhed. Den er der og er der fuldt ud, men i forvejen – og altid i forvejen, blandt andet i tillidens og kærlighedens realiteter”.

ontological optimist (the ontological basis of our interdependent existence is fundamentally good).<sup>19</sup>

In order to show why this is so, Løgstrup makes the point that love and trust “[...] are distorted when I take credit for them myself, regarding them as my own achievement” (Løgstrup 1956, 159 (1997, 139)). They contain or *imply* (again not in a strictly logical sense) what he calls an *understanding* of our existence – i.e. the understanding that the person whom we love is given to us. Vice versa, our reservation (i.e. our distrust) and selfishness must be understood as our own achievements – they too are distorted (or rather I am) when I take them not as my own fabrication, but as given:

Of course, I can insist that I cannot help my reservation and selfishness, because this is the way I was created. And since I didn't create myself I cannot accept the responsibility or the blame for how I am. But the result of such abstract arguments is that “my” thoughts, “my” actions, “my” feelings etc. are no longer mine, as surely as they are only mine if I assume responsibility for my life by accepting the guilt for who I am and what I do. In short, I become no one.<sup>20</sup>

This understanding, that trust is given of human life and distrust is my fabrication or responsibility, is an *interpretation*, Løgstrup admits. It is not logically necessary or scientifically evident in any positive or demonstrable way. As such Løgstrup acknowledges that the distinction between on the one hand trust and love and on the other hand distrust and selfishness, “[...] is a metaphysical distinction inasmuch as it contains an understanding of human existence in its totality” (Løgstrup 1956, 160 (1997, 140)). We can *claim* that trust and love are our personal achievements, Løgstrup says, but in doing so we stifle trust and love in self-gratulation.

Consequently, it is Løgstrup's point that we have to keep two accounts: an account of the selfish self and an account of the goodness of human life. At the root of this Doctrine of Two Accounts lies Løgstrup's anthropology, where

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<sup>19</sup> For further work on this, see Rabjerg 2014, 135; Rabjerg 2016, 19-25; and Rabjerg 2017, 201-205.

<sup>20</sup> Løgstrup 1956, 159f (1997, 139): “Selvfølgelig kan jeg godt påstå, at jeg ikke kan gøre for min forbeholdenhed og selvished, for sådan er jeg skabt. Og da jeg ikke har skabt mig selv, kan jeg ikke tage ansvaret eller skylden for, hvordan jeg er. Blot bliver resultatet, at 'mine' tanker, 'mine' handlinger, 'mine' følelser o.s.v., ikke længer er mine, så vist som de kun er mine, om jeg overtager mit liv ved selv at være skyld i og tage ansvaret for, hvem jeg er og hvad jeg gør. Kort sagt, jeg selv bliver ingen”.

man is conceived of as a prisoner of his own selfish self. When on our own, we human beings are captives of our own selfish power, because we are at the mercy of our own fabrications, our own self-encircling thoughts and feelings. Løgstrup formulates this for the first time (as far as I am aware) in a journal from the late 1930s:

We are captives within ourselves. We can only be set free by fellow man. [...] Man is his own prisoner; that is the hopelessness of it for it means that we can in no way free ourselves – any attempt to do so will only catch us up even further in our own self. [...]. For on our own we can do nothing but immerse ourselves deeper and deeper into bondage and reflection and self-centeredness, in short in pride. – Liberation only comes through fellow man. And we can only liberate our fellow man – and through him or her be liberated from our own imprisonment within ourselves.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, fellow man can liberate us from being captives of our own selfishness and reflection. This is where the *positive* aspect of interdependence (Løgstrup's ontological optimism) plays a crucial role.

In *The Ethical Demand*, Løgstrup discusses the phenomenon that we can be in the power of another person through his or her mere presence, to be *under the spell* of the other person (Løgstrup 1956, 22f (1997, 13-14)). When separated from other people, we create pictures of them in antipathy:

However, when we are in direct association with that person, the picture usually breaks down; the personal presence of the other dispels it. [...] The actual presence of the other leaves no room for our picture.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, Løgstrup takes this point even further:

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<sup>21</sup> Løgstrup (year unknown), 34, my translation: “Vi er fangne i os selv. Befris kan vi kun af vort medmenneske. [...] Mennesket er sin egen fange; det er det haabløse, for det betyder, at vi ikke paa nogen maade kan befri os selv – ethvert forsøg vil kun fange os endnu mere i os selv. [...] Fordi selv kan vi overfor os selv intet andet end fange os mere og mere ind i ufrihed og refleksion og selvoptagethed, kort sagt i hovmod. Befris kan vi kun af vort medmenneske. Befri kan vi kun vort medmenneske – og ved ham og hende befri fra vort fangenskab i os selv”.

<sup>22</sup> Løgstrup 1956, 22 (1997, 13, translation modified): “Men i det personlige samvær sker det – normalt – at billedet bryder sammen. Den andens personlige nærvær udsletter det. [...] Den andens tilstedeværelse lader der ikke være plads til ens billed”.

Not wanting to let the other person emerge through words, deeds, and conduct, but to hinder this instead by our suspicion, by the picture we have formed of him or her as a result of our antipathy, is to deny life.<sup>23</sup>

Which 'life' is denied by this suspicion and by the picture we refuse to let go of? The answer is *Interdependent life*. The presence of the other person has an effect on us, because our attention is drawn away from our own imagery and fabrications towards the other person. This is what Løgstrup also calls self-forgetfulness and immediacy. Interdependence being the ontological condition of human social life, the mere presence of the other person will influence us, at the very least the possibility of this influence is always there through the presence of the other person. The other person's influence can set us free from our self-imprisonment, and this is the positive aspect of interdependence: the other person can quicken our spirit, remove a dislike and cause our life to flourish, as Løgstrup writes in *The Ethical Demand*. And to fight against this power rooted in interdependence is to deny life, i.e. to deny *human life understood as a life in social relations*, to deny the ontological foundation of ethics.

This line of reasoning, where Løgstrup draws up his Doctrine of Two Accounts and its perspective on ethics, continues in Løgstrup's later work, *Ethical Concepts and Problems* from 1971. Here he counters the misunderstanding that the insistence on the goodness of the ontological account, the account of human social life, in any way inhibits the radical evil of the anthropological account, the ego's account. It is essential to understand, he says, that good and evil are not on the same ontological level. Therefore, the disclosure of our selfishness and destructive egotism can be stressed radically without this being redeemed in any way by the disclosure of the inherent goodness in human life. And vice versa, the goodness of human life can be unfolded to its very core without reducing our selfishness even in the slightest degree. The radical evil of the human being is in no way lessened by the fact that there are such things as love and trust – or *sovereign expressions of life* – as he now calls them.

What are these sovereign expressions of life really, we may ask. Løgstrup gives us a list of phenomena (love, trust, openness of speech, mercy), and he

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<sup>23</sup> Løgstrup 1956, 23 (1997, 13, translation modified): "Ikke at ville lade den anden komme til i ord, gerninger og opførelse, men søge at hindre det med sin mistænksomhed, med sin antipatis billed af ham eller hende, er livsfornægtende".

states that in these sovereign expressions of life man is immediate and free. They are ontological phenomena in which we may act and reflect for the good of the other person, rather than for the good of our ego; in them we are self-forgetful rather than self-absorbed. The fact that they are ontological means that they are rooted in interdependence, i.e. that they are rooted in the other person. The other person is the immediate origin of the sovereign expressions of life. This is exactly what *sovereignty* means. The sovereignty of the sovereign expressions of life lies in their power to penetrate our self-confinement. This means that “my” trust is not caused or constituted by me, but it is an influence or impression caused by fellow man in which I am temporarily relieved of my reservations, self-centeredness and self-reflection, thus *enabling* me to be immediately captured by my fellow man instead of being captured by my own ego. The *passive* form here is crucial! I am *caused to be trusting by the other*. “My” concern for the other is not *my* concern but *my being concerned by* the other. This is the reason why Løgstrup writes in *Norm and Spontaneity* that:

The sovereign expression of life preempts us; we are seized by it. [...] the expressions of life normally sustain all human interaction.<sup>24</sup>

And:

The presence of the other person elicits the trust and sincerity from the first person; the distress of the other person elicits the mercy of the first person.<sup>25</sup>

The two accounts are not on the same ontological level, Løgstrup writes in *Ethical Concepts and Problems*, and this is why, in Løgstrup’s ontological ethics, we must distinguish sharply between the *encircling thoughts and emotions* (e.g. distrust, hatred, jealousy) on the one hand and the *sovereign expressions of life* (e.g. trust, openness of speech, love, mercy) on the other. The encircling thoughts and emotions are written on the account of the self (the anthropological account) because they are *our* fabrications and *our* way of capturing ourselves in our own selfishness. They are what *we* can do in our social life; hence they are

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<sup>24</sup> Løgstrup 1972, 17-18, translated in Niekerk (ed.) 2007, 84, translation modified: “Den suveræne livsytring kommer os i forkøbet, vi gribes af den. [...] de [bærer, BR] ethvert samvær, normalt”.

<sup>25</sup> Løgstrup 1972, 22, translated in Niekerk (ed.) 2007, 88, translation modified: “Den anden persons nærvær kalder den første persons tillid og oprigtighed frem, den anden persons ulykke kalder den første persons barmhjertighed frem”.

expressions of the *self* – not expressions of interdependent of *life*. However, the sovereign expressions of life are entries on the account of human interdependent life (the ontological account) meaning that they are ways of being liberated from ourselves *by* the other. They are what can happen *to us* in our social life. The ontological difference between them is absolute, because they originate from and are caused by two very different sources, namely the self and the other person respectively. Because of this, Løgstrup's ethics is precisely an *ontological* ethics, not an *anthropological*. This means that it is not rooted in what the individual can do, but rather in what can happen to the individual because he or she is part of and entangled in interdependent human life, where *our own selfish power* can be overpowered by the sovereignty of the presence of the other person.

Thus, Løgstrup can subscribe completely to Nietzsche's disclosure of the human being's destructive, egotistical and hypocritical nature (Nietzsche's anthropology) and still criticize Nietzsche's nihilistic ontology. According to Løgstrup, Nietzsche's brilliant disclosure of human nature makes him partly blind. His mistake is that he does not make the ontological distinction between the two accounts:

He does not see that in the midst of the hypocrisy we come together in each other's trust. He has no sense of the fact that when, in spite of all our hypocrisy, we still go through our life together more or less in one piece, we owe it to sovereign expressions of life that we do not owe ourselves.<sup>26</sup>

Nietzsche does not realize that by laying bare our destruction and perversion of life he actually makes the discovery of life's goodness possible. The problem is that Nietzsche keeps only one account, and that is the account of the self, Løgstrup emphasises, “[b]ut there are two accounts to keep and to distinguish from each other, the account of our given life and the account of our ego”.<sup>27</sup> Nietzsche fails to see that human nature stands in opposition to an essential goodness inherent in human life.

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<sup>26</sup> Løgstrup 1971, 23, my translation: “Han ser ikke, at midt i hykleriet mødes vi i hinandens tillid. Han mangler sans for, at når vi trods alt hykleriet alligevel kommer så nogenlunde helskindede fra vort liv sammen, skyldes det livsytringer, som vi ikke skylder os selv”.

<sup>27</sup> Løgstrup 1971, 23, my translation: “Men der er to konti at føre og at holde ude fra hinanden, vort givne livs konto og vort egos konto”.

If Løgstrup's diagnosis of ethics, of the human being, and of interdependent human life is correct it raises the following question: Does it imply a passivity of the ethical subject? Through myself I can only act selfishly, so should I not just live my life and wait for unselfishness (in the shape of sovereign expressions of life) to come along on its own premises? Of course, whenever the sovereign expressions of life fail to materialize I am called to perform *substitute actions*, to act *as if* they had actually materialized. As Løgstrup writes in *Norm and Spontaneity*:

If the sovereign expression of life is wanting, it does not mean that we must abandon the outcome of agency to which it was directed. That can still be aimed at, except that, with the attitude of mind falling short, it is now aimed at as an outcome demanded.<sup>28</sup>  
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It should be noted that speaking of the sovereign expressions of life as a kind of passivity can be misunderstood. They *do enable us* to act, as is the case for the Good Samaritan, so we are active while under their influence. A crucial point here is that their influence means that I am relieved from my selfish preoccupation. However, the passivity has to do with how the sovereign expressions of life and their possibility for self-forgetfulness come into being. Here, the problem is that we cannot cause them to happen, and Løgstrup gives us no advice on how to bring them forward. On the contrary, Løgstrup

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<sup>28</sup> Løgstrup 1972, 19, translated in Niekerk (ed.) 2007, 85: "Udebliver den suveræne livsytring, er dermed ikke sagt, at handlingsresultatet opgives. Det kan stadig tilsigtes, kun bliver det nu, da sindelaget svigter, fordret".

<sup>29</sup> To illustrate briefly, the parable of the Good Samaritan exemplifies a situation where the sovereign expression of life (mercy) carries or *sustains* the interpersonal relationship; according to Løgstrup, this is not an ethical situation but rather a pre-ethical. Had the Good Samaritan failed to act out of mercy then the situation would become ethical, because loving the traveller would now be demanded of him. So maybe the Rabbi and the Levite, while passing the traveller by, *both* quenched the possibility for mercy (causing the sovereign expression of life to be wanting and thus "the attitude of mind falling short" (i.e. love of the neighbour, mercy)) *and* chose not to act on the subsequent ethical demand (the "outcome demanded"); in this way they failed both pre-ethically and ethically. Had one of them stopped and acted *because of the ethical demand* then that person would still have been guilty of lacking the attitude of loving the neighbour, because he would then be acting through *ethical* motivation instead, doing out of duty what he should have done out of mercy or love of the neighbour. Moreover, because the demand demands to be superfluous (as discussed earlier) the ethically motivated act of helping does *not* fulfil the demand.



emphasises that we cannot make ourselves more *prone* or *apt* to receiving them. They elude us, when we try to grasp them or bring them about.

This raises the question concerning the connection between the sovereign expressions of life and the so-called *character traits*. Here Løgstrup stresses that it is crucial to distinguish between character traits and sovereign expressions of life, because according to Løgstrup, any character trait can be a means for both good and bad (in one place he refers to *dependability* as a character trait), whereas the sovereign expression of life can never be subordinated to other goals than the wellbeing of the other person. Herein also lies another difference: While the character trait relates to a task or work, the sovereign expression of life relates to a person.<sup>30</sup> However, if the sovereign expressions of life *cannot* be nurtured (as opposed to character traits, which *can* be nurtured) then what is supposed to keep us from simply waiting for the sovereign expressions of life to happen? Here, we can only supply a very brief answer: Without the sovereign expressions of life, we must live our life using morality as a secondary, albeit inferior, substitute for genuine love of the neighbour. This is a life of action, but of action within the framework of ultimate ethical failure (or fundamental disobedience as we saw above<sup>31</sup>). In this way, our life is governed by the culturally dependent and thus historically and culturally relative social norms, where social practises relieve the ethical pressure of human interaction. According to Løgstrup, *we* have no other option.

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<sup>30</sup> Løgstrup 1972, 22ff, translated in Niekerk (ed.) 2007, 88f.

<sup>31</sup> Løgstrup 1956, 168 (1997, 146), see quote above.

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