

**KNUD LØGSTRUP'S THEORY OF ETHICAL DEMAND.
ARE THERE ANY REASONS TO TALK ABOUT ONTOLOGICAL
ETHICS WITHIN CHRISTIAN ETHICS?**

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Abstract: This paper aims to examine the origin of the dilemmas regarding the concept of ethical demand, as introduced by the Danish theologian and philosopher Knud Ejler Løgstrup. One of the main methodological problems concerns the question of what it means to clarify the role of ethical demand 'in strictly human terms' the attitude towards the other person, which contains in the proclamation of Jesus. Questioning the ambiguity is grounded in analyzing why Løgstrup's ethics can be justified as ontological ethics, as well as how the latter can contribute to outlining what he coins as 'religiously colored ontology'.

Key words: ethical demand, ontological ethics, Christian ethics, dialectical theology, Knud Løgstrup

This paper aims to examine the genealogy of the contradictions regarding the question of how "even without the belief that Jesus is Christ, his life and words exemplify human possibilities that articulate a fundamental demand" [Løgstrup, 1997: XXII], or so-called ethical demand, as introduced by the Danish theologian and philosopher Knud Ejler Løgstrup. One of the main methodological problems concerns the issue of what it means to elucidate the role of ethical demand in defining 'in strictly human terms' the attitude towards the other person; an attitude, which contains in the proclamation of Jesus, insofar as his life and words contribute to triggering "something basic in human life" [Løgstrup, 1997: XXII].

Analyzing the role of ethical demand, I claim that Løgstrup's vision of distinguishing between Christian and human ethics (a distinction, which is borrowed from the Danish theologian and philosopher N. F. S. Grundtvig¹) can

¹ His theory is based on the principle "Human comes first, and Christian next." See [Andersen, 1995: 118].

be examined by interpreting his 'religiously colored ontology'² as religiously colored ontological ethics.

Before going into detail about the concrete implications of ontological ethics, it is important to outline that Løgstrup, in his attempt to clarify the ethical character of the demand, is influenced by the works of Luther, Kant and Kierkegaard³. One of the main methodological parallels can be drawn with Luther's theory of Law⁴, "the ethical normativity" (den etiske normativitet), which is an expression of human life, as considered by the Creator, as well as an expression of man's destruction of it [Andersen, 1995: 56]. Løgstrup clarifies the deeds of the creation (det skabte livs gerninger) by showing them, as they represent themselves in Jesus' life and words [Andersen, 1995: 56]. Regarding ethics, we find further opposition of Law's ethics both in the Old Testament and in creation's deeds represented in the concepts of the 'ethical demand' (den etiske fordring) and the 'sovereign expressions of life' (de suveræne livsytringer) [Andersen, 1995: 56]. In this context, the ethical demand is defined as a 'purely human' (rent human) determination of the way, of the relation to the other person, which is described in Jesus' proclamation [Andersen, 1995: 56].

Løgstrup points out that "Jesus' intensification of the Old Testament law in his Sermon on the Mount is not a proclamation of the importance of his own death on the cross" [Løgstrup, 2007: 36]. That argument is posed as a statement against Wingren's theory that radical demand consists in the preaching of Christ's death [Løgstrup, 2007]. Løgstrup continues arguing that Jesus' ethical

² So-called religiously colored ontology is justified against the background of Løgstrup's metaphysics regarding philosophy of creation (skabelsesfilosofi) [Andersen, 1995: 127]. According to Andersen, the philosophical dimension of religion in Løgstrup's metaphysics is related to the ontological approach [Andersen, 1995]. He emphasizes that in this way of arguing, there is not only polemic with Heidegger's 'exclusion' (udelukkelse) of the thought of God from ontology, but also polemic, on a cultural level, with the "irreligious ontology" (irreligiøse ontologi), which dominates the Western culture [Andersen, 1995].

³ See [Andersen, 1995: 63]. The influence of Kant's and Kierkegaard's ethics can be seen in Løgstrup's complex critical evaluation. While Løgstrup's main argument against Kant concerns Kant's deontological ethics, his critical reception of Kierkegaard's ethics, underrating the relation to the other at the expense of establishing relation to God, is subjected to numerous revisions in time. One of Løgstrup's main methodological concerns is so-called Kierkegaard's fear of spontaneity, which leads to questioning interpersonal relations by justifying an abstract connection to the Creator.

⁴ However, the critical anticipation of Luther's works does not concern only this issue. Andersen argues that Løgstrup chooses exactly the Golden Rule as a formulation of the demand, which Luther regarded as an essence of the natural law [Andersen, 1995: 71]. Furthermore, Løgstrup emphasizes that his 'human' account for the demand and its understanding of life correspond to what Luther claims when he talks about "God's words to us around (udenom) Christ" [Andersen, 1995: 120]. Andersen defines Løgstrup's theory as an attempt to reformulate Luther's law presuming that the ethical demand contains so-called natural theology [Andersen, 1995]. For a more detailed analysis of the ethical implications of Luther's theory regarding Løgstrup's reception, see Ibid: 49-50. Andersen claims that Luther's conception becomes a positive inspiration for Løgstrup's ethics, whose main object of criticism is Kant's deontological ethics [Andersen, 1995: 53].

proclamation is a statement of God's universal demand, emphasizing the role of the scholars of the New Testament who distinguish between its ethical and eschatological messages⁵ [Løgstrup, 2007: 42]. Examining the ethical aspect of proclamation, as known from the Sermon on the Mount and the story of the Good Samaritan, Løgstrup claims that the universal demand has always been "there," although its radicality has been overlooked and was not "heard" until now [Løgstrup, 2007].

In turn, the eschatological message is recognized as a different one, insofar as it is based on Jesus' proclamation about the coming Kingdom of God, making the congregation's faith in him and its proclamation of him, respectively, possible [Løgstrup, 2007: 43]. Løgstrup also adds that the ethical proclamation of Jesus "is not found in the scriptures of the New Testament attributed to John any more than it is found in Paul" [Løgstrup, 2007]. Thus, the deficiency is justified as one grounded in the presumption that God's universal law is not available in their proclamation.

To Hillerdal's critique that his philosophical analysis is "suspiciously well-suited to Christianity's view of ethical matters" [Løgstrup, 2007: 13], Løgstrup replies that such overlapping is not necessarily wrong, since philosophy and theology have a common cause with regard to the law and creation, but not with regard to the gospel [Løgstrup, 2007]. The contradiction that arises is an epistemological rather than an ontological one. Christianity and the human sphere are not initially incomparable, i.e. they are not ontologically contradictory, but may contradict only when they are addressed in an ontologically similar manner regardless of the fact that the gospel is recognized as a historical and the law is understood as a universal entity [Løgstrup, 2007]. If philosophical analysis of "the ethical demand corresponds to Christianity's understanding of universal law" [Løgstrup, 2007], then that fact does not speak against philosophical correctness.

⁵ Løgstrup's interest in examining Christ as Jesus from Nazareth takes place against the background of the discussions from the early 1950s started by Ernst Kjøsemann. In 1953 he delivered a lecture on a conference gathering so-called old Marburgians ('gamle Marburgere'); it was an annual meeting of the supporter of the dialectical theology R. Bultmann with his friends and students. The lecture was called *The Problem of the Historical Jesus (Das Problem des historischen Jesus)*. Løgstrup were one of these participants and also gave a speech. According to Hauge, the protestant theology refers its periodisation to the time before and after Bultmann, which marked the transition from Christ to Jesus [Hauge, 1992: 274]. In turn, dialectical theology, which had a huge impact on Løgstrup's own ideas, were very much dominated by prominent scholars such as K. Barth and Bultmann who both turned their backs on the 'first wave' of research on Jesus, so-called liberal theology ("liberalteologi"), and appealed for going back to the figure of the 'historical' Jesus [Jensen, 2007: 207]. According to Løgstrup himself, it was of crucial importance to revive the latter thesis in order to clarify what particularly Christian is [Jensen, 2007: 208]. The answer is found in his work *Creation and Annihilation (Skabelse og tilintetgørelse)* (1978), where he argued that the Christian belief is the belief that God adopts man's word and deeds as his own ones [Ibid]. In this context, Jensen emphasizes that Løgstrup refers also to Luther and discerns, like him, between God as an impersonal power and God as a person [Jensen, 2007: 226].

In this context, I argue that the necessity of keeping the ethical perspective separate concerns the way one speaks of loving one's neighbor as a matter of religiously colored ontological ethics; namely, as an ontological ethics, which has Christian ethics as a necessary condition to the extent that it derives from the radicality of the demand without acquiring its content from it. Such an ethics stems from God's universal demand, which provides a life possibility that precedes any given life choice whatsoever and, in this sense, it is both radical and immediate.

Introducing the problem within the frame of ontological ethics also contributes to revealing the misconception of responsibility, as referred to within the scope of deontological ethics. Thus responsibility is neglected as a way of addressing the other for the sake of his/her otherness rather than for the sake of an abstract universal law. In turn, the discussion about speaking 'in strictly human terms' does not mean that ethical demand is speakable (if it is not silent, it would not be radical) [Løgstrup, 1997: 22], but rather that the mode of speakability concerns the way natural language is produced but does not belong, as a possession, to men. When the proclamation itself becomes a historical fact, then "we might be able to recognize them [the features of our existence] on our own without seeking refuge in the proclamation" [Løgstrup, 2007: 42]. The recognition takes place through introducing the mode of speaking, which in turn is irreducible to the content of the words themselves, since the universal law provides the existence of so-called sovereign expressions of life such as trust, love, and mercy as existential possibilities.

On the other hand, the influence of Fr. Gogarten in changing the ontological derivation is quite visible while examining Løgstrup's theory⁶. According to the latter, with regard to Jesus' proclamation, the individual relation to God is "determined wholly at the point of his relation to the neighbor" [Løgstrup, 1997: 4]. However, from the fact that the relationship with the neighbor is crucial for our understanding of God, it does not follow that God becomes more approachable, nor the other way around. In Løgstrup's interpretation, through that relation to the Self, God is caring for the other person for his/her own sake.

⁶ Gogarten, being another illuminative representative of the dialectical theology, also appealed for rehabilitating the bridge between the Creator and the creation. Løgstrup himself argues that Gogarten provides a complete and precise characteristic of Jesus' proclamation according to which, the basic relation to God is determined only by the basic relation to the other person [Hauge, 1992: 279]. Hauge pays attention to one of Løgstrup's notes regarding Gogarten's text *Die Verkündigung Jesu Christi (The Proclamation of Jesus Christ)* (1948). Quoting Gogarten, Løgstrup argues that Jesus, with his radical contradiction to religion has put the simplest and fundamental phenomenon of human existence and history, namely, the relation to the other person, to the one and only place, where the relation to God is embodied [Ibid]. In this context, Løgstrup argues that Gogarten's characteristic contributes to underlining the distinction between religion and Christianity [Ibid]. However, he does not uncritically adopt Gogarten's definition, but transforms it due to the purposes of his own research substituting the contradiction between Christianity and religion with the one between religious and human [Ibid: 280].

The degree of dependence should be again evaluated as an ethically derivative rather than hierarchically stated. On a micro-methodological level, the dependence in question signifies the possibility of holding someone's life in one's hands without controlling it. According to Løgstrup, this is a metaphor, which grows from the contrast of holding one's life without possessing it [Løgstrup, 1997: 28]. He claims that in real life, there is always a break between a person's relationship to the demand and the actions and decisions implied by the relationship itself [Løgstrup, 1997: 106].

Judging by the aforementioned investigations, I argue that dependence is a matter of obtaining a certain sort of responsibility, which provides the possibility for taking someone's life in one's hands as a responsibility for the life-possibility mode without reducing it to the content of the life forms as such. The content of responsibility itself concerns the refraction of ethical demand due to the imagination, or the lack of imagination, in recognizing that someone else's life is in my hands. Thus, the imaginative ability, or disability, triggers life to be anticipated as provoking selfishness or unselfishness in Løgstrup's sense. The implications of ontological ethics can be revealed by analyzing his statement that we are always responsible, whether or not we want to be, "because we have not ourselves ordered our own lives" [Løgstrup, 1997: 107]. The argument of not adopting moral determinism in that interpretation can be supported by another statement of Løgstrup, namely, that ethical demand prescribes but does not specify. That is why we must learn from ourselves for the best of the others [Løgstrup, 1997: 56], which in turn means that the normative validity of moral learning draws its potential from the framework of ontological ethics.

1. Methodological Implications of Christian and Human Ethics in Løgstrup's Theory

On a textual level, Løgstrup sees responsiveness to the ethical demand for both believers and unbelievers as something required by the New Testament [Ibid: XXXVIII]. He describes Stangerup's critique saying that Christian ethics gives guidance "to those who have not been endowed with ethical and pedagogical talent" as based on an imaginary argument, to the extent that "human ethics can speak with a great certainty, and does so" [Løgstrup, 2007: 25]. On the other hand, unlike N. H. Søre, Løgstrup prefers the justification to be human and not Christian, because then "Christians and non-Christians can have a common battle to fight", if necessary [Løgstrup, 2007: 28-29].

Furthermore, Løgstrup argues that Jesus' proclamation gives an answer to something in our existence of which we are totally unaware. According to the proclamation, as it has been transmitted to us, here was a "person who could declare as God's demand the demand of existence" [Løgstrup, 1997: 208]. In this context, Løgstrup refers quite specifically to the radicality of the demand refusing "to make any concessions to the obstinate nature of human beings" [Ibid]. The radicality, however, can be clarified by outlining the role of forgiveness in Løgstrup's sense.

In the book *The Ethical Demand* (1956) he discusses Jesus' answer that we should forgive not seven times but seventy times seven [Løgstrup, 1997], empha-

sizing the possibility to examine forgiveness as deriving not from man's individual will but rather from trust as a sovereign expression of life. Expanding that statement, Løgstrup argues that the radicality of the demand will be reduced if "we accept the concession to a person's natural right to live and exalt him or herself in the name of mutuality to make demands upon others" [Løgstrup, 1997]. In other words, subjecting the unspeakability of the demand to speaking 'in strictly human terms' would lead not only to neglecting the role of God's demand as a radical one, but will also result in making the double bindness of the demand affect the wrong substitution of the sovereign expressions of life, in the sense of determining people as sovereign subjects of their lives.

Why is it necessary to talk about religiously colored ontological ethics in this context? I claim that it is relevant to the content of Jesus' proclamation as such, insofar as it concerns the complex disclosure of one's attitude towards one's neighbor, understood both as a human attitude and as a necessity in rehabilitating the role of understandability itself.

Løgstrup points out that giving preference to a religious interpretation would mean that the ones who are not Christians would never be aware of their own existence. Here, the historical figure of Jesus comes onto the scene, since Løgstrup relies on the premises neither to reject the eschatological elements of the proclamation, nor to avoid giving definitions in 'strictly human terms', when ethical and eschatological aspects should be discerned on a textual level. The ontologically relevant understanding of the speaking 'in strictly human terms' mode can be revealed if the idea of understandability presumes to include reflection on the ethical perspective as irreducible to religious faith.

Referring to Løgstrup's statement that "faith without understanding is not faith but coercion" [Løgstrup, 1997: 2], I argue that the ontological frame becomes crucial for that interpretation, because that understandability is not equivalent to meeting our preliminary expectations. It foreshadows the latter not only in time, but also as a mode of being. In this context, imagination clarifies how the understandability is intrinsically connected with the mode of engagement with others as an important life possibility. Similarly to the relationship between understanding and understandability, Løgstrup's interpretation gives me grounds to emphasize the distinction between imagination and wishful thinking, which contradict each other from an ontological point of view, but remain subject to comparison and contrast from an epistemological perspective.

Furthermore, understandability has a direct influence on rehabilitating the role of knowledge and that of ethics in particular. As Løgstrup argues, "Christianity does not endow a person with superior political or ethical knowledge" [Løgstrup, 1997: 111]. On the other hand, he stresses that according to the proclamation of Jesus, God's demand is that in his/her reflection, a person takes a point of departure what serves other people's welfare.

On a macro-methodological level, the impossibility to reduce understandability to a given set of understandings illustrates how the proclamation can be kept in terms of a religious one, that is, without providing a purely religious disclosure; namely, a disclosure showing why loving one's neighbor is not necessarily *only* an issue within Christian ethics. Løgstrup himself claims that a strictly

human definition of the neighbor “set forth in Jesus’ proclamation often has meant and probably will always tend to mean a modification of that attitude”, but this does not trigger the conclusion that “such a modification is *inevitable*” [Ibid: 3-4, Note 1]. Against the objection that the attitude set forth in the proclamation is indefinable ‘in strictly human terms’, he raises the argument that Jesus has actually made an attempt to define it.

As in many other cases, Løgstrup’s line of argument follows the logic of first proving that the opposite hypothesis is wrong, and then making a deductive conclusion that an assertion of the ‘opposite’ of the ‘opposite’ hypothesis should be true as derived from the principle of double negation.

2. Some Challenges in Defining Ontological Ethics

The first problem that arises is: what kind of philosophy should this ethics be based on? [Ibid: XII]. As H. Fink and Al. McIntyre point out, this is a question that does not receive a very specific answer in the works of Løgstrup. They examine it as a philosophy proceeding from the standpoint of our existence [Ibid], as well as from the justification of the phenomenological character of trust, because Løgstrup argues that the background of morality is a matter of interaction presuming basic trust [Ibid: XXIX]. The latter is justified as one of the sovereign expressions of life [Løgstrup, 2007: XIV], defined as “spontaneous, other-regarding impulses or modes of conduct” [Løgstrup, 2007]. In his analysis, Løgstrup faces the criticism of Ole Jensen who accuses him of coupling the ethical demand with trust as a fact, as well as of talking about natural love as “an imaginary entity” [Løgstrup, 2007]. In turn, Løgstrup claims that so-called natural love and trust are realities in human life [Løgstrup, 2007], since their normative validity is recognizable because they are sovereign expressions.

In this context, I argue that there are good reasons for interpreting Løgstrup’s pre-morality as a form of ontological ethics.⁷ According to Løgstrup, the ethical demand belongs to the sphere of morality and differs from the one of pre-moral sovereign expressions of life, but at the same time, it is the pre-reflective morality that makes the contrast between the sovereign expressions of life and morality to disappear [Løgstrup, 2007: XVIII, XXIII]. The sovereign expressions of life themselves, which make people’s actions motivated by a spontaneous preoccupation with the needs of the other, take place without one to reflect on his/her being as a moral person. However, this person should be defined as a moral subject who does not necessarily recognize himself/herself as an ethical agent. On the level of ethical knowledge, it means that we should not contrast insight with reflection, insofar as the idea of moral person is embodied in the spontaneous reoccupation of the human being as such.

The ontological grounding of the expressions in question can be revealed if we explore what it means for them to be sovereign and immediate at once in the sense that ‘they are there’. It is important to specify that sovereignty is not equivalent to radicality because according to Løgstrup, the sovereign expressions of life cannot be projected as inflicting the radicality of the demand itself [Ibid: 86]. Following his line of thought, I argue that the sovereign expressions

of life are autonomous but not radical, since they provide existential possibilities rather than given existential choices. They are radical in the sense that they are not subject to negotiation on man's side, but on the other hand, they are not as radical as the demand itself is.

Analyzing Løgstrup's statement that a situation becomes a moral one "when the sovereign expressions of life fail to materialize" [Løgstrup, 2007: 72], I argue that his definition of pre-morality is irreducible to the one of moral relativism, as well as to what Løgstrup calls situationist ethics. Løgstrup himself is also aware of the fact that situationist ethics does not have the necessarily normative validity because the uniqueness of the situation can not be a subject to any transfer whatsoever [Løgstrup, 2007: 112]. In this context, he emphasizes that the singularity of the situation is one thing, while the question whether it has typical features is a completely different issue. This specification takes place due to the fact that one situation almost always obtains both singular and typical features in itself [Løgstrup, 2007].

3. Conclusion

Analyzing the genealogy of Løgstrup's theory, we should emphasize the influence of the Danish theologian, philosopher, writer and public figure, Nicolaj Frederik Severin Grundtvig, namely, his conception of 'Man first, Christian next', on supporting the justification of Jesus as a historic figure. Introducing the moment of historicity has two methodological contributions. It benefits the reconsideration of the eternity-temporality distinction by rehabilitating the role of the latter, as well as grounds why it is human ethics that provides the correspondence to the ethical demand in a non-contradictory way.

Løgstrup's main argument against the narrowing of ethics to Christian ethics derives from the impossibility for neglecting the role of life as a gift. According to him, if we determine ethical demand on the basis of Christian doctrine, we will accept that what we do not owe God, the same we do not owe our neighbor [Løgstrup, 1997: 109]. The main consequence of such an abstraction, on the one hand, is characterized by him as a problem of theorizing by which human existence is subject to exteriorization. On the other hand, if the ethical demand, understood as a divine one, becomes reflectively articulated, then God will give not life to man, with all its possibilities, but rather certain ideas – a worldview or a certain theology [Løgstrup, 1997: 110].

Secondly, questioning the role of ontological ethics will lead to the misconception of ethical demand and social/moral norms due to the presumption that God will be examined as a law, moral and political reason, which is against Løgstrup's intention.

Extrapolating Løgstrup's theory, I argue that denying the role of religiously colored ontological ethics would provoke the non-contradictory justification of moral absolutism. Absolutism within which social and moral norms will be validated as direct representations of the ethical demand, although they belong to a different ontological order.

The third question is what are the particular implications of interpreting the universal demand as ethical rather than as indefinite? According to Løg-

strup, ethical demand grows out of trust, which encompasses the understanding of human life as a sovereign expression of life.

On a macro-methodological level, one of the most significant consequences of justifying ethical demand is concerned with denying reciprocity; that is, precisely with reducing the reciprocal altruism whose non-contradictory functioning has an impact mainly on social and moral norms. It is the discrediting of reciprocity that reveals the content of so-called empirical fact of the ethical demand. Such content specifically includes the initial ontological necessity of taking the life of the others into our own hands, while being aware of the specificities of the situation, as well as of the specificities of their own character. Løgstrup clarifies that people's decisions concerning the content of the demand in respect of the concrete situation is not equivalent to determining the real implications of the content itself.

In turn, reconsidering life as a gift in an ontological perspective denies the opportunity for the subject to recognize himself as a sovereign subject. Accepting life as a gift, he cannot identify himself as a creator of life. The fact that he has someone else's life in his/her hands is realized as an ontological fact in Løgstrup's sense, since the act does not depend on the wishes of the other, and neither does it depend on the wishes of the Self. That is why I suggest talking about correspondence rather than reciprocity to the extent that the normative reciprocity is discredited at the expense of the face-to-face contact, i.e. at the expense of the ontological openness of the Self, which is achieved within religiously colored ontological ethics.

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