

Booknotes

One of the more interesting and more neglected ethical figures of the twentieth century was the Danish pastor and theological thinker Knud Ejler Løgstrup (1905–81). This neglect is now beginning to be overcome, a symptom of which is *What is Ethically Demanded: K.E. Løgstrup's Philosophy of Moral Life*, edited by Hans Fink and Robert Stern (University of Notre Dame Press, 2017). The book is itself based on two recent international conferences, and contains contributions from philosophers of the stature of Stephen Darwall, Alasdair MacIntyre and Wayne Martin, all of which testify to a sense that Løgstrup is worthy of attention now and outside of Denmark.

One thing that emerges from the collection we are considering is that Løgstrup cannot be considered outside his context. Both his religious orientation and his experiences of Denmark during the Second World War, as well as his phenomenological education, colour his thinking, which is not to say that they invalidate it in any sense, but they help us to understand his claim that the ethical demands made on us are silent, radical and unfulfillable. They are silent in the sense that they go beyond moral rules or demands, but in our encounters with other people they go beyond articulated moral imperatives, just as the Good Samaritan understood on the road to Jericho. They are radical in the sense that ethical demands are unconditional, infinite and absolute, again as the Good Samaritan understood in an intuitive way. And they are unfulfillable, both in the characteristically Lutheran sense that we, as imperfect beings, never rid ourselves of all taint of our fallen nature – so that some self-will and self-admiration may be present even in the most selfless of acts – and also in the more subtle sense that the ethical demands a spontaneous reaction; so that if I have to articulate and justify the demand to myself, and even more have to will myself to do it, I have already failed in its fulfilment.

Løgstrup's ethical stance as something spontaneous and pre-rational clearly brings him into conflict with Kant and also with the Catholic natural law tradition. In his contribution to the collection, MacIntyre criticises Løgstrup for presenting a Lutheran ethic minus its moral demands, an ethical demand cut loose from its rational underpinning, so to speak. He attempts to defend Løgstrup by arguing that the precepts of Thomistic natural law could still be

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seen as underlying the spontaneous behaviour admired by Løgstrup. Like several authors in the collection, MacIntyre notes points of convergence between Løgstrup and Levinas, though whether either of these thinkers of the ethical as a free meeting of free spirits, as Løgstrup puts it, would have appreciated such philosophical assistance is perhaps open to doubt.

Løgstrup sees the ethical essentially in terms of the subject embracing responsibility for the other unconditionally (the Good Samaritan being a key figure in his thought). This may seem to bring him somewhat in the direction of Stephen Darwall, who contributes an interesting piece contrasting what he calls a narrative approach to the other (in which I characteristically objectify the other, and which in Løgstrup's terms would be the province of the moral), with Løgstrup's 'spontaneous expression of the self', where the keynote is openness and trust. What Løgstrup is after is a kind of self-forgetfulness in our ethical life, in which we are moved by the object (or other), and by love and awe, rather than by reasoning and rules. And, in a somewhat undeveloped leap (undeveloped in the Fink-Stern collection anyway), this spontaneous and absolute self-forgetfulness is grounded in the absolute of the divine, from which its awe-fulness derives, and against which we see our own existence as a divine gift to which we respond in our ethical lives.

Not surprisingly Darwall criticises Løgstrup's invocation of the divine. For Darwall the demands of the second person need no such validation. In defence of Løgstrup, at least from his own point of view, it might be urged that self-forgetfulness or spontaneous expressions of the self are not necessarily benign. We can forget ourselves in diabolical spontaneity and emotion; something more than human might be needed here, but this is clearly a point at which Løgstrup's thinking is ripe for further development and examination.