

Principles and Situations

K. E. Løgstrup and British Moral Philosophy
of the Twentieth Century

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INTRODUCTORY REMARKS: THE PHILOSOPHICAL CONTEXT OF LØGSTRUP'S WRITING

The year that Løgstrup's *The Ethical Demand* was published, 1956, was, as it happens, the year in which I began my own philosophical studies in England, and Løgstrup's remarks on British moral philosophy strike many familiar notes. The writers he is interested in were the ones who provided the focus for undergraduate courses in British universities at the time, and these were very much in the analytic, empiricist, indeed logical positivist tradition. The moral philosophers studied and on whom Løgstrup also comments included Bertrand Russell, G. E. Moore, C. L. Stevenson, and P. H. Nowell-Smith, but there was little interest in England at the time in the philosophers who had influenced Løgstrup's own early philosophical studies—existentialists and phenomenologists. Theology, too, was very much a separate study, detached from philosophy, apart from some—mainly skeptical—discussion of the historical proofs of the existence of God. But despite these differences between Løgstrup and those teaching and writing on the subject in British universities, Løgstrup saw a certain unity of purpose in English and Scandinavian approaches on the one hand,

86 as contrasted with German and French traditions on the other. He writes: “Each of these philosophical traditions has its own world and lives in it as if the other did not exist.” But he goes on to say: “One of the most pressing philosophical tasks is thus to connect these two philosophical worlds” (Løgstrup 1997, 281). In pursuing this goal, he hoped that his own work might be a mediating influence, and this is indeed the way in which his remarks on British philosophy are best construed.

Nevertheless, in many ways, the philosophical world as Løgstrup saw it does provide a contrast to the way in which moral philosophy was viewed from England at that time. In its richness and in its constant references to human needs and experience, Løgstrup’s writing contrasts with the somewhat arid approach of mid-twentieth-century English, and more particularly Oxford, philosophy. And, although in *The Ethical Demand*, as Kees van Kooten Niekerk points out, Løgstrup does indeed offer a philosophical ethic rather than a religious or theological one, since the ethical demand is to be understood in terms of *agape*—“love of neighbor”—it remains an essentially Christian ethic (see Niekerk 1999, 415–426). To my mind, it is also suggestive of some more recent trends in moral philosophy, especially the so-called feminist ethic of care, for Løgstrup’s interpretation of neighbor-love in terms of care and responsibility for particular others who are dependent on us—who are, in a sense, in our power—remarkably anticipates the theories developed as a consequence of Carol Gilligan’s empirical findings about the way in which many women approach morality in terms of context and personal responsibility for particular others (see Gilligan 1993).

It is worth noting, too, that Løgstrup is also very much an applied philosopher, in today’s terminology. He writes on human love and relationships, on sexuality, war, politics, economics, and science. He is also disposed to appeal to literature and to illustrate his views by reference to literary examples such as incidents from Joseph Conrad’s *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, E. M. Forster’s *Howards End*, or the plays and novels of Sartre.

All this is a world away from British philosophy of the 1950s, so it is not surprising that references to British philosophers in *The Ethical Demand* are few and fleeting. We meet Russell, Moore, Nowell-Smith, and the American emotivist C. L. Stevenson (for the latter, Løgstrup 1997, 168 n. 1). However, in his later work *Norm und Spontaneität* (Løgstrup

1989), the cast is expanded and Løgstrup describes the course of British twentieth-century moral philosophy in more detail. He sees it as beginning with a revolt against naturalism and, following Blegvad (1959), identifies the stages it passed through as the following:

Stage 1: moral intuitionism. For Løgstrup, this was represented by G. E. Moore (1903), but, as will be argued later, there were other important exponents.

Stage 2: emotivism. For Løgstrup, this was represented by the American philosopher C. L. Stevenson (1944), but from the point of view of British philosophy, it is perhaps better represented by A. J. Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936).

Stage 3: prescriptivism. Løgstrup refers to R. M. Hare's *The Language of Morals* (1952) and *Freedom and Reason* (1963). Hare's *Moral Thinking* (1981) was published too late, of course, to feature in Løgstrup's writings. Løgstrup also discusses Stephen Toulmin (1950), seeing Toulmin's views as contrasting in important ways with those of Hare.¹

Stage 4: ordinary language philosophy and the analysis of meaning as use. This understanding of the function of language is nowadays, of course, particularly associated with the philosophy of the later Wittgenstein, but the idea that moral language should be interpreted like this can be traced back to other writers in the first decades of the twentieth century, including C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards (1923) in the United States and A. Hägerström in Sweden.² The moral philosopher whom Løgstrup discusses in this category is P. H. Nowell-Smith, whose *Ethics* (1954) was designed to study the purposes for which moral language is used: making decisions, advising, warning, and so on.

But behind these named figures hover (for me) some ghosts, whether or not they were significant for Løgstrup: G. E. M. Anscombe (in connection with her 1958 article "Modern Moral Philosophy" in the journal *Philosophy*) and the early Alasdair MacIntyre (his 1957 article "What Morality Is Not" in *Philosophy*). There are also other figures, unconnected with Løgstrup, but pursuing lines of thought which have echoes and resemblances to his own. These might include, for example, John Macmurray, the Scottish philosopher whose Christian communitarian and socialist philosophy was the acknowledged inspiration of the British Prime Minister Tony Blair and hence at least an influence on what became known as Third Way or (in Britain) New Labour politics (see Tony Blair's

- 88 introduction in MacMurray 1996). And in terms of reflection on moral epistemology one might also detect a sympathetic note in the work of the American theologian, Joseph Fletcher, author of *Situation Ethics* (1997).

THE REJECTION OF MORALISM

Before pursuing these connections further, it will be helpful to turn to the starting-point for reflection that Løgstrup himself provided in *Norm und Spontaneität*. His foreword to this book contrasts Cervantes' *Don Quixote* with E. T. A. Hoffman's *Klein Zaches*. Don Quixote, Løgstrup says, is irrational in a world which is itself fundamentally rational; Hoffman's characters, in contrast, are rational beings whose world is bewitched and topsy-turvy. Which, he asks, is the correct representation of the world? Humans have a deep instinct and desire to cling to the idea of the essential rationality of the world, and they link this to a belief that the world is also fundamentally good. Is this so, he asks, and is the evil we encounter in the world attributable to the evil acts of human beings? Or are some bad things beyond human agency? This is the way in which Løgstrup poses the question, and, while acknowledging that such problems as poverty, infant mortality, and overpopulation may be beyond easy human control, he finds much to blame in a besetting tendency to moralism—something he sharply differentiates from morality.

As far as ethical theory is concerned, this moralism is very much connected to thinking of morality in terms of norms or principles—understood by Løgstrup as moral rules of universal application. As he puts it, “they are obligatory not merely in this or that situation . . . they oblige, whomever, wherever, and whenever” (Løgstrup 1997, 280). Later, Løgstrup was to write: “If we believe that part of moral experience consists in reflection on a general principle, and believe further that moral reasoning includes the appeal to a general principle that is logically implied by experience and reasoning, both the experience and the reasoning become moralistic” (SGCN, 105).

Adherence to inflexible principles is, of course, an approach preeminently associated with Kant's deontological ethic, and Løgstrup identifies a non-metaphysical form of the Kantian assumptions in much English moral philosophy (Løgstrup 1997, 280). Perhaps surprisingly, Løgstrup

tect the lives of others who have been placed in their trust” (Løgstrup 1997, 290).

Løgstrup offers us, then, an ethic of trust and responsiveness to dependency and community. It is a compelling vision and one with which it is tempting to sympathize. But, perhaps like Russell, and certainly like most of the authors mentioned here from the English-speaking tradition, we should be extremely cautious about foregoing the hard core of morality that is represented by concepts like rights, duties, and obligations. Situations are diverse and always new in the moral dilemmas that they create. Principles are the guiding torch that we cannot in the end manage without. Stripped of them, we are, morally speaking, left in a state of Heraclitean flux. The point can be illustrated with a trite example, the return of the borrowed book to its owner: Løgstrup suggests that one should consider whether its owner really needs to have it back at the agreed time or will otherwise suffer from the failure to return it. It is difficult to concur with this view, for, as Ross pointed out, these are not the appropriate considerations—the fact that that was the condition on which the book was lent is the salient moral consideration.

In conclusion, then, I would like to suggest that we do necessarily judge for others as well as for ourselves when we make a moral judgment and that we do not need to make these judgments as though we were the first to arrive on the scene—as if we were newborn, nonsocial entities. Instead, we can draw on the wealth of human experience to take our judgments out of the sphere of individual eccentricity and arbitrariness and into the realm of rational acceptability. In the end, and notwithstanding his attack on moralism, it is tempting to suppose that Løgstrup might have agreed with this and, to the extent that that is so, we can agree with him that our initial moral responses should indeed be responses to the facts of situations rather than the initiation of a chain of theoretical reflection.

NOTES

1. For discussion of this sequence, see SGCN, 96–100.
2. See A. Hägerström, “On the Truth of Moral Propositions,” in Hägerström 1964.
3. See A. J. Ayer, “On the Analysis of Moral Judgements,” in Ayer 1954, 237–238.

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