Three Kierkegaard Interpretations

[94] In order to reach a deeper understanding of this, we will now address another study of Kierkegaard, namely K. E. Løgstrup’s *Kierkegaard’s and Heidegger’s Analysis of Existence and Its Relation to Proclamation*, 1950.¹ It should immediately be granted that Løgstrup cannot be accused of superficiality, and this work is indeed both a deep and comprehensive analysis, which one cannot brush aside with a few remarks. Therefore I may repeat that the following argumentation does not deal with the work as a whole, but only with a particular – though certainly fundamental – thought.

According to Løgstrup the kierkegaardian view of existence comes to a head in an explanation of the relation between the finite demand, which life’s many life circumstances place on man, and the infinite demand, in fulfillment of which man alone can become a self. Now, Løgstrup asks, what does the infinite demand consist in? With a quotation from the [Concluding Unscientific] Postscript, Løgstrup answers that it consist in ‘expressing by its existence, that the individual is really capable of nothing, but is nothing before God’ (p. 58). On the following pages he establishes that this means a ‘break with immediacy’, ‘to die away from immediacy’, it is ‘a demand…to abstract away from all existence’, i.e. ‘an inner tearing away from all concrete goals posited by capacities, inclinations and duties’.

[95] After it has been made clear by the following that the demand consists in becoming nothing before God, it is asked how it is now possible to maintain this and at the same time live in the fulfillment of specific obligations and the attempt to achieve definable goals. Based on the ‘edifying divertissement’ in the Postscript, the answer is that it isn’t possible! These two positions are not combinable. Man cannot maintain himself in nothingness, not live with it every moment, and at the same time be busy with doings that are defined by life. It all becomes a ‘cycle of self-observation’, a ‘cycle of anxiety, dissolution of anxiety, and renewal of anxiety’, that it is impossible to interrupt. Concerning this difficulty it is now said that it is a logical one and depends on the fact that ‘the infinite demand does not have a determinate content, in the face of which man fails and before which he recognizes himself as nothing’ (p. 64).

The idea is taken up again in a later context. It is said that the infinite demand just has to come to nothing, as it is only determined from its own infinitude. Like Kant, according to Kierkegaard the demand ‘does not get its content from concrete existence, but asserts only its own infinitude’ (p. 81). However this means that it does not have any content, and that therefore there is no ‘essential relation between the finite and the infinite demand’. The ethical and the religious drift past one another; the ethical is just the occasion for the religious, which then leads its own life. This is illustrated by the guilt relationship. In the ethical-juridical relation one incurs guilt, when in a finite relation one does wrong to another person. According to Kierkegaard the guilt becomes total when it is put together with the idea of God, but thereby ‘this other person, against whom wrong has been committed, is wholly eliminated’. Thus it must necessarily happen that the demand is
contentless; it is only recognized ‘under the infinite abstraction of concrete existence’, it is confined to an ‘annihilation of the individual before God’, indeed, it is in its contentlessness, in its infinite abstraction from concrete existence, just the ‘expression of the exclusivity of the religious relation’. In other words: the one two-place relation, between the guilty person and the one he has wronged, is replaced by another two-place relation between the guilty person and God. The result [96] of this is that the guilt, detached from the ethical relation to the other person, now lives by itself, and now consists in the individual’s inability to retain his awareness of it. ‘Total guilt is this, that the individual cannot live permanently in consciousness of his own nothingness’ (p. 84).

I have to admit – and this is not meant as a criticism – that this whole argument gives me the same feeling as that of the ancient sophist’s arguments: it sounds logically undeniable, but at the same time one has the fervent conviction that it is wrong. But convictions are not sufficient in a discussion, and I must try to establish what the radical error consist in. The overall message is apparently the continually repeated assertion that the demand consists in becoming nothing before God, and all terms like abstraction, dying from immediacy etc are understood in strict conformity with this. The question must therefore be whether Løgstrup is right on this point. I would say that he is not, but that this definition is a ham-fisted and disastrous simplification of Kierkegaard’s views, and that it alone makes it possible to let the whole of Kierkegaard’s way of thinking result in the absurdities which the above quotations express. It is certainly undeniable that Kierkegaard really said all the things that Løgstrup has him saying – and these are also all accompanied with quotations – but it is undeniably wrong that this is all that he has to say on the matter and is therefore a full expression of his view. On the contrary, it is a detached part of the whole problem complex and therefore – if regarded as the whole – a meaningless foreshortening.

What is this demand in reality? First it has its condition in the consideration that any finitude, i.e. everything that can be determined as human content, is conditioned, relation-specific and transient; to build his existence on that will therefore mean to leave it exhaustively characterised by the same properties. But as an individual the human being has an intrinsic requirement to have existence through a grounding in the absolute, or, what for Kierkegaard is the same thing, only in such anchoring can life be valid or real. However, the absolute is not metaphysically an ontological magnitude (cf. what was developed above in connection with Søren Holm),2 a second [97] and eternal ‘world’, that man also is part of and can relate to, but it first appears when man in the inward relation to himself encounters God as the limit of his existence. The demand’s intention is therefore than man in this self-inturned relation shall relate himself to God and thus be anchored in the absolute; when fulfilled the demand makes the given existence in its finitude and relational determination have infinite validity, makes the demands of the given existence authoritative and fills its goals with meaning.

The demand thus consists in a doubling. It requires an infinite abstraction, a dying away from immediacy, a disengagement from everything finite – for only thus is it possible to be brought face to face with God as the absolute. But thereafter it equally demands an infinite return, an absolute becoming concrete in the wholly concrete, a life of responsibility in the completely present – where all these things make up the content of
life. Therefore Kierkegaard speaks about a double movement, through which one is immediately back in what one infinitely leaves, or he calls faith the second immediacy, in which all life is given back etc etc. Now it is not my contention that Løgstrup doesn’t know all this very well. That would be rash, because he has from the beginning of his work set this out excellently. But it is my contention that he miraculously suddenly forgot it, so from page 58 he quite leaves it out of account by relying only on the phrase that the demand consists in nothing, or that it is contentless because it is simply determined through its own infinitude. I must admit that to me it is a mystery how one can construct such a fantastic foreshortening and think that thereby one has done justice to Kierkegaard. But I can very well see what one is out to do, consciously or unconsciously: one is out to present an alternative that may seem obvious, and in which Kierkegaard’s position seems given beforehand. The alternative is thus as follows: either a life in given demands and an understanding of it in which these demands can be said to be infinite, or a life of self-absorbed introversion with an increasingly progressive move away from life’s practical doings. It is undeniable that such an alternative is powerful when used as a basis for ethical considerations; but it strikes me as obvious that it is useless against Kierkegaard’s views. To press them into this problematic is to do violence to them.

[98] Despite all the differences, there is this similarity between Søren Holm and Løgstrup that they both think in terms of the same, in this case irrelevant, contrast. Just as the first cannot imagine other possibilities than Platonism and fictionalism and therefore does not recognize the existence-theological position that is not either, so the latter is not able to imagine an understanding of law that builds on a dialectical grounding relation between the individual’s private views on the absolute and their simultaneous preoccupation with life’s particular circumstances. He establishes a contradiction and let Kierkegaard commit himself to the first option it contains. Only then is it possible to talk of the cycle of self-contemplation, of the religious sublation of the ethical, of the exclusion of fellow human beings in total guilt etc. But because Kierkegaard does not really let the two conditions exclude each other, but the first grounds the other, all Løgstrup portrays is one side of the story. He does not come round to the other side, he refuses to see it, or he conceals it, and in that way the first side is indeed reduced to absurdity.3

Translated by Robert Stern

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Translator’s notes

1 References in the text are to K. E. Løgstrup, Kierkegaards und Heideggers Existenzanalyse und ihr Verhältnis zur Verkündigung (Berlin: Eric Blaschker Verlag, 1950).
2 The earlier part of Sløk’s article, not translated here, discusses Søren Holm’s book Søren Kierkegaards Historiefilosofi (1952).
3 I am very grateful to Hans Fink for his help with this translation. Any errors are my own. (Please send details of any mistakes to r.stern@sheffield.ac.uk)