
[1] The Secularisation of Spiritual Life

Opening address to the proceedings of the Aarhus theological society. 23rd October 1951

Having to find a current starting point for a debate on secularization, in this gathering it would be natural for me to take account of works and thoughts with which at least some of us may be assumed to be familiar. I am hereby referring to Professor Løgstrup’s lectures on Kierkegaard’s and Heidegger’s analysis of existence and its relation to the proclamation, that we now have before us in book form, though regrettably in German. The first five chapters give an account and interpretation of the issues and the last three a critique. I will immediately reassure you that my knowledge of Kierkegaard is quite limited, and that I know absolutely nothing about Heidegger; of course I have nosed around a little here or there, but that is all. I take as my starting point a little way into the sixth chapter of the book, where Kierkegaard’s absolute demand has been severely criticized and undermined as both actually and logically impossible. All this I now put to one side.

Løgstrup is just like Socrates: when he must choose examples, he always chooses them from the everyday, things he knows. There is talk for example of the responsibility we have for one another. Concerning this responsibility, Løgstrup says that it is never just a relationship between two, but that any relationship of responsibility is always a relationship between three. Responsibility means both having responsibility towards the other and being responsible to a third, whomever this third might be. Let us call this third ‘the authority’ [instansen], says Løgstrup, not to dispute a word. The important thing to point out is just that the one that says ‘you shall’ to me is not the same as the one for whom I am responsible. For example in the case of parents and children, it is thus not the children who say ‘you shall’, but it is the authority which requires the parents to be responsible.

This relationship is now illustrated by a series of examples from civic life with its rules and laws, where the authority may be the state or conventions, the prevailing morality or the like. The demand which we encounter here is a conditioned demand; we can meet it, or we can let it go; if we do the latter, we then incur a guilt of a certain magnitude, a quantitative or comparative guilt, as it is called.

However alongside this conditioned demand we find an unconditioned absolute demand, which does not have its source in the norms of social life or the like. And in this unconditioned demand we are faced with responsibility for the other. The responsibility is a relationship, in which the individual finds himself simply because he exists. He is responsible in the different relationships, whether he wants to be or not. And this is so for him, because he has not given himself his life and has not
ordered it himself. The unconditioned demand thus correlates with our very existence, but not with the norms under which for example we live our everyday lives nowadays.

Thus far I think I can adhere to what is being said. What is said after this I shall try to translate verbatim [from the German]: The fact that the relationship of responsibility is given with the prevailing ordinances is part of our concrete existence and is the reason why we can distinguish between two kinds of demands, the conditioned and the unconditioned. I must confess that I do not understand the meaning of this formulation, and I would therefore like to ask whether it is possible to have this point elaborated in some way [in the discussion after the lecture].

In the further development [of thoughts] concerning the finite and well-grounded demands we naturally also encounter the claims of science. The example is again taken from child rearing. Løgstrup argues that modern pedagogy’s strong resistance against authoritarian upbringing is due to the fact that the societal structure is no longer authoritarian but is still developing in the direction of making the individual citizen more and more responsible for the whole, in the democratic way.

One has a peculiar sense that at this point, Løgstrup’s disquiet or anxiety starts to sneak in, concerning where one might end up once one first begins to make concessions to science. The first signs of this anxiety I think I see in the statement I have already mentioned, and which I did not understand, namely that it belongs to the scheme of things that we are able to distinguish between two kinds of claims. Possibly it is because I misunderstand the terminology and am therefore abusing it, but I detect a certain unease that comes over me, when I am at a loss.

After Løgstrup has come close to making concessions to secularizing tendencies in science, he again seeks solid ground by saying: “What we however want to emphasise, is that the laws of which we are speaking [the psychological laws] are laws of the relations in which we live. They are laws that we find, not laws that we hear”. Here again I think we lack detailed justification for the distinction between finding and hearing. Is it not the case that the laws of existence speak to us and that it is precisely in this way that we find out about them? I hope that we can agree to go into detail concerning this point in the debate, so I shall confine myself to suggesting that here again there is something which I have not understood.

The anxiety concerning the march of progress, to which I believe I have traced these different concerns, naturally leads to the question: Can the personal decision which is the answer to the absolute demand, “the inward decision”, possibly play any role. How is it at all possible to bring the law concerning responsibility to bear in the midst of all this purely objective lawfulness, particularly after it has been grounded scientifically to such a high degree? [3]
To cope with this conflict it seems to me that Løgstrup, who now feels defensive, resorts to the same way out as Luther, taking courage in strong words, because he himself is wavering. “It is indeed so”, as is stated on the top of p. 100, but without us getting to know why it is like that, and the same assurance is repeated more times further down the page, to prevent the anxiety from spreading. Generally we are not dealing with laws which can be followed blindly and stupidly, he asserts. Rather there must at times be a considerable leeway for personal judgement. There can be no doubt that in the first instance modern psychology in its relation to pedagogy is what so strongly provokes Løgstrup that he, albeit with great anxiety, rises to the occasion in order to put it in the place where it belongs in the series of ordinances, namely after the authority, which in this case is the law concerning responsibility. And so I return to my starting point and the question which I left unanswered, namely this: what is it that makes one feel obliged to operate with an authority, when the talk is about responsibility. Concerning the conditioned demand it is clear that the relationship of responsibility must involve three people, so one has responsibility over one in relation to another, for example as a citizen in society or as a family man insofar as one’s upbringing commits one to the community and its institutions. But when the demand is unconditioned, what would prevent the identification of the one for whom you are responsible with the one to whom you are responsible, for example the child. Is it not so, that in the case of the absolute demand we are precisely not dealing with an authority, so that the unconditionality is defined by the absence of authority; however as soon as there is an authority, then the conditionality comes into play, because of the authority.

If one wants to argue that in the ‘you shall’ of the unconditioned demand, there must really be a third person who pronounces that ‘you shall’, then I would want to ask whether it is indeed certain that a ‘you shall’ can be found in the unconditioned demand; whether it is not rather the case that the unconditioned demand excludes that ‘you shall’, and that it exactly is this that makes the demand unconditioned. I will try to return to the question in a moment in another context. But let me say finally on this: what prevents us accepting modern pedagogy is the authoritarian upbringing in which we have grown accustomed to doing something for another out of consideration to a third, an authority which says ‘you shall’. Could that not conceivably be why we do not understand the unconditioned demand, because we from our education and from social life transmit expectations concerning an authority, while unconditionality consists precisely in the fact that there is no longer any authority. It is true that the child and our fellow man demand far more of us than just moderation and reasonableness, but where do they say ‘you shall’? In the conditioned demand, but never in the unconditioned demand. In the parable of the merciful Samaritan there is no authority, there is a man who fell among thieves, and then a Samaritan. We are all keen to identify ourselves with the merciful Samaritan, who we prefer to think of as a hero. But in the language of our day, the parable would concern a traffic accident, and the question is whether to call an ambulance and get the man to hospital. There is not a single thought paid to heroics.
I will then try to establish the same hesitant tendency within Løgstrup’s stance towards the problem of secularization in another work, namely the lecture on humanism and Christianity, which was published in *Heretica*, 3rd Volume number 5. I assume you all know [4] the lecture. It is particularly in the introduction that one detects the tremendous passion that the author is in, and which he in the most effective manner manages to impart to us. I have read the lecture through many times, but I still feel heart palpitations every time I read the first pages. I know that such a naïve expression is not appropriate in a learned assembly, where one discusses systematic questions, but I am affected in this manner and affect shows itself among other ways through heart palpitations, so it cannot be helped.

Løgstrup says: We never have to do with another human being without our holding something of their life in our hands. That might be very little, a passing mood, high spirits, that we cause to wither, or to arouse, a disgust that we deepen or increase. But it can also be that a great deal rests on us, whether the other person’s life succeeds or not. We may hope that often very little has depended on us. But for the sake of our peace of mind it is probably fortunate that we do not know what we have held in our hands of another person’s courage to live or self-realization, sincerity or falseness, through what we were and said and did in our relationship with them, but that this is hidden. Here we see the first indication that it yet might not be so hidden as we would like it to be, and that it along with our peace of mind therefore might prove to be an illusion. But still in the next sentence Løgstrup looks to retain the thought concerning hiddenness. We are able then, he says, by exploiting what is crucially hidden, to indulge in the illusion that our contribution to the life that we live together with others is all that we accomplish in a palpable and demonstrable sense. However suddenly something must have happened which causes Løgstrup to abandon the hiddenness; future historians will have to find out what it can be. The hope and the peace of mind and the beautiful illusion are brutally swept aside, and now it is said: but it might happen that science suddenly reveals what otherwise is hidden, exposing to the light of day the degree to which we are involved in one another’s destiny. I am thinking of the way that psychology and psychiatry have established how a child’s life is determined for their whole future by the adults’ behaviour towards it, how parents’ ambition on behalf of their children, which in the ambiguity of bourgeois life is to be considered praiseworthy, nonetheless humanly speaking is a curse, because it means an upbringing that might deprive the child for their whole life of what is most valuable, namely their courage to live. Now as far as daily life is concerned, the adult’s relation to the child is the place where, in the most far reaching sense, the one has the other’s life in their hands, which is precisely why science has been able to observe it here; however it applies equally, to varying degrees, to all those relations in which we have to do with one another.

Here we thought that we were home and dry due to hiddenness; but then suddenly, quite ruthlessly and without transition, we are told that the opposite is the case. The circumstances are quite different, Løgstrup says here, and we know this, or should know this. Poetry has always known this, but philosophy and theology curiously only
rarely. Also in this treatise Løgstrup questions how the law of responsibility can at all be brought to bear amidst all this purely objective regularity, particularly after the latter has been scientifically established to such a high degree. He makes no secret of how strongly he is provoked by psychology, and just as before he ends up where he must end up, and I can add to be clear, so that no one thinks that he must be able to avoid that place where we all end up when we say: there must be some moderation in what the other person can demand, so that what is my rightful entitlement can be retained. Otherwise everything is rendered incomprehensible. We stand in this intractable conflict and we should stay there. We have only one opportunity to move forward, namely to give up being right, and that we cannot do. As a paradigm of a relation where the one party has all the right on its side, we have in psychology the patient-doctor relation, where the patient has all right on his side, as long as treatment lasts. In dogmatic theology the same relation is established in the absolution. Whether therapy and absolution are then the same, or whether as a doctor once said it is indeed easiest to say: take up thy bed and walk, or to say thy sins are forgiven thee. I guess it is all the same.

I have only a couple of things left. The first was that the question whether secularization and sexualisation have anything to do with one another, as the way language uses them might suggest. Let me refer again to Kierkegaard’s Concept of Anxiety, and let me also indicate what Løgstrup says about this point in his lecture. “The secret of our lives is not gender difference and fertility, which connects us with nature and is nature in us. Our life’s secret is not as in nature religions its natural foundation, sex and procreation, but our life’s secret is its humanity, everything which separates us from nature despite the fact that we belong to it”.7 I do not know why it absolutely must be called a secret, but it is perhaps just as with hiddenness; Løgstrup at first dreads what is manifest, he seems to need a bit of a run up, and then he is suddenly in the middle of the arena, amid responsibility.

In the lecture on humanism and Christianity the place is sought where the ways between them part, and it is said very clearly that it is not the unconditioned demand that divides them, but the fact that Christianity teaches that the demand is God’s. To get any further one ought to consider the possibility of an agreement concerning what Christianity is. That is scarcely manageable tonight, and I must therefore confine myself to suggesting a starting point for a discussion of that question. Løgstrup uses two different terms; he says: Christianity proclaims such and such, that the demand is God’s, authority’s, that the demand is silent, etc. In other places he says: Jesus has said. Elsewhere he talks about the content of Jesus’s proclamation and the content of the proclamation concerning Jesus and in the preceding sentence he seems to summarize them both under the designation Christianity. The question arises whether these two statements, what Christianity proclaims and what Jesus has said, can be brought together; whether Jesus’s word is a proclamation from authority or on the contrary a denial of it; whether he is what tradition has made him into, to speak with Servet,8 or whether precisely in this respect is the greatest of all heretics. His fate might perhaps suggest the latter.
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Translators’ notes

1 The first part of this address was published in Studenterkredsen, 19:3 (1951), pp. 35-41. Løgstrup himself was present at these lectures. Lomholt was a professor of medicine in Copenhagen, and married to Margrethe Lomholt who was herself a child psychiatrist and the sister of Løgstrup’s close friend Hal Koch. He and Lomholt had thus been personal friends for some years, which explains his interest in this material – but his lack of professional philosophical position also explains the diffidence with which he often expresses that interest. Thanks to Hans Fink for the historical information.


3 The Danish term ‘instans’ is difficult to translate into English. It is closely related to the German ‘Instanz’, which is the term used by Løgstrup in the lectures to which Lomholt refers (see e.g. pp. 87-88). The English edition of The Ethical Demand uses ‘ultimate authority’ as the translation, and ‘authority’ is given in the dictionary translation. But the English term ‘instance’ is also given in the dictionary, which is acceptable as in Danish and German it is a sort of dummy sortal, like ‘thing’ or ‘entity’. And authority in English can also be misleading, as this can just imply the capacity to make laws or issue commands, whereas in Danish and German it also applies to bodies that pass judgement, as in the court system. This usage has an echo in English in the phrases ‘first instance’ and ‘last instance’, which stems from the first and last steps in a legal proceeding. We have chosen to translate ‘instans’ as ‘authority’ here, but some of these complexities should be born in mind when reading the word, particularly that Løgstrup and Lomholt may intend to be referring to the court of appeal that determines responsibility and thus has power to judge, but not necessarily the power to legislate, while this is not a power held in any personal capacity or which belongs to persons as such. It is thus a matter of further interpretation which of these different aspects of the term Løgstrup and Lomholt had in mind, and while the English term ‘authority’ is probably the best equivalent that can be used in a translation, it rather closes off some of these options in a way that is unfortunate and need to be remembered in connection with these passages.

4 For Løgstrup’s response to Lomholt’s article in print, see The Ethical Demand, translated by Theodor I Jensen, revised and edited with an introduction by Hans Fink

5 *Kierkegaards und Heideggers Existenzenanalyse*, p. 98.


7 'Humanisme og kristendom', *Kulturdebat*, p. 287.

8 A reference to Michael Servetus (c. 1509-1553), who was burnt at the stake as a heretic.

9 The number of translators for what is a short article is rather large, we realize. But the translation was worked on as a group while studying on the Danish Kierkegaard Course offered by the Hong Kierkegaard Library at St Olaf College, under the invaluable supervision of Susanne Jakobsen Tinley. Thanks also to Bjørn Rabjerg and Hans Fink for very helpful further advice. To notify us of any errors in the translation, please contact Robert Stern (r.stern@sheffield.ac.uk).