Evil Understood as the Absence of Freedom

Outlines of a Lutheran Anthropology and Ontology

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*Man is his own prisoner; this is the hopelessness of existence, because it implies that we are powerless in the pursuit of self-liberation – any attempt will only entangle us even further in ourselves. Cf. Luther’s struggle with monasticism.*

*(Løgstrup, Journal XXV.3.1., 34 [my translation])*

It is commonplace to see evil in connection with the freedom of will, so you may argue that the foundations of ethics lie within philosophical and theological anthropology. Correspondingly, evil has to do with choice, that is, with the human being’s administration of freedom of will. This close connection between the moral categories good/evil and the anthropological and metaphysical question of the freedom of will also lies at the root of Rüdiger Safranski’s work of 1997, *Das Böse oder Das Drama der Freiheit* (‘Evil or the Drama of Freedom’), where he analyses evil as the result of our freedom to choose evil over good.

Within the history of moral philosophy, you find a good argument for this close connection between anthropology and ethics, with the *ought-can implication principle* probably being the most well-known example. The principle that *ought implies can* is normally attributed to Kant. A general formulation of it is that moral categories (good/evil) and norms are limited anthropologically (by human nature), by circumstance (contingent on the agents involved and the situation), by the laws of nature and physics, and so on, meaning that the moral imperative *ought* is valid if and only if the person in question actually *can* (meaning *is able to* with respect to abilities, knowledge, physical and situational circumstances etc.) perform what is demanded of him or her. Consequently, if the human being is not able to choose between good or evil then how can he or she be good or evil?¹

In this article I will suggest a counter-analysis to the idea of connecting evil with freedom, where, on the contrary, evil is understood as being captives of our own self, that is, an analysis suggesting that evil is not the drama of freedom, but of the absence of freedom. This counter-

¹ Both the actual meaning of the can-ought principle and its attribution to Kant are debatable. For an overview of both problems, see Stern, Ought.
analysis will begin with an examination of the idea of self-development and self-liberation, which may be found in many different forms nowadays. I will do this by scrutinizing the philosophical anthropology implied in the idea of self-development, and this anthropology will be contrasted with the understanding of the self and of human nature found in the philosophical theology of the Danish thinker K.E. Løgstrup (1905–1981), who is still an influential figure in Scandinavian philosophy and theology. The sharp opposition developed through this contrast will make an analysis and a critique of the idea of self-development and self-initiated self-liberation possible, thereby allowing us to question and clarify what is to be understood by concepts such as evil, good, and the self.

Self-development is closely related to the idea of formation (or what is referred to as Bildung in German). But when speaking of formation, we have to address the question, ‘what are we formed by?’ Is the human being formed by him- or herself, or by resources originating from outside the self? From where do the resources needed for this formation (or re-formation) originate? Seen from Løgstrup’s perspective, it is absolutely crucial to keep this in mind, because according to him, proper formation must be understood as formation caused by outside influence – never as formation caused by the self.

I will focus on a critique of the idea of self-development and -liberation, but in the final part of this article I will touch upon an alternative conception of formation that is not understood as being caused by the self. This will lead to a few critical remarks on Løgstrup’s own conception of the self and an attempt to use Løgstrup against Løgstrup’s own radical rejection of humankind’s possibilities with regard to self-development.

The idea of self-development and self-realization

When trying to grasp the field of self-development, you encounter some typical expressions. Apparently, self-development concerns nurturing inner qualities such as love for one’s neighbour, compassion, or moral responsibility, working with yourself, your formation and spiritual growth (e.g. through analysis of your dreams); it concerns raising your self-esteem and confidence through a personal process, where you find happiness (or get closer to it) while, at the same time, you experience an increase of meaning and meaningfulness. Meditation is often seen as an important tool in the process of ‘getting in touch with oneself’ or of a way of ‘releasing oneself from oneself’, seeing introspection and inward attention as a means for providing outward attention to other persons; ‘you must learn to love and care for yourself, before you can love and care for others’, is a common conception. When thus directing your attention towards inner qualities, you gain access to
the tools needed for mobilizing yourself, enabling you to lead a fuller life – both alone and with others.

The idea of self-development and self-realization rests on a philosophical anthropology where the human being is conceived of as harbouring potential for good, and for realizing and developing the good through his or her own resources (e.g. yoga, psychotherapy, personality-developing courses, gaining particular knowledge or insights, and so forth).

Now, the problem arises if the premise of this anthropology is false. What if human beings harbour something very different from good and its source, and the freedom to pursue them?

**The idea of self-realization rooted in Greek anthropology**

Seen from a certain perspective, the conception of human beings as good is ultimately founded in ancient Greek philosophy and religion.² Greek virtue ethics presupposes an anthropology where we are potentially virtuous and good. This inner goodness must be groomed and nurtured for us to realize our potential, and to succeed as citizens and as individuals.³ Thus, Greek virtue ethics stands in sharp contrast to the ethics found in Løgstrup’s Lutheran-Protestant philosophy and theology – what he calls the ethical demand.

The ethical demand is Løgstrup’s term for the moral imperative, the moral ought, but his analysis differs in various respects from both Greek virtue ethics and from other formulations of the ‘ought’ in moral philosophy.⁴ In *The Ethical Demand* of 1956, Løgstrup describes the ethical demand as silent (not telling us what to do, but only that we have to act), as one-sided (not allowing us to make any demands of our own, e.g. demanding anything in return), as radical (it extends to friends and enemies alike, leaving no room for us to escape our responsibility), and finally – but most importantly – the demand is unfulfillable: we are powerless to accomplish what is demanded, because the demand demands that our actions be motivated by love for the other, but as we all know, when love is demanded, it signifies that there is no love – leaving room for us to only act as though we loved, hence the unfulfillability of the ethical demand.⁵

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² Cf. Løgstrup, Kristendom, 524–526.
³ This grooming and nurturing may require socio-cultural factors such as social education, but the main point is that this education or these tools supposedly provide us with the means to work on this on our own.
⁴ The four characteristics of this demand are the main topic of the analysis in Logstrup’s main work, *The Ethical Demand*. Cf. Logstrup, Demand, 5.
⁵ The unfulfillability (or impossibility) of the demand raises the question addressed by the ought-can implication principle. Robert Stern distinguishes two uses of the principle, a strong and a weak, and he argues that Kant actually advocates the weak use of the principle, meaning that the moral law is not limited by human capacity (or lack of capacity), cf. Stern, Ought. Consequently, I would argue that Logstrup respects the weak use of the principle, and hence
By contrast, Greek ethics has no place for an unfulfillable ethical demand. This difference in ethics is rooted in a difference within the implied philosophical and theological anthropology. In Greek philosophy we find what we might call \textit{solidarity}, or a common existential ground, between human beings and gods. For example, human emotions are seen as manifestations of the very same emotions felt and represented by the gods (whether love, violence, ecstasy, lust, or others) – Plato even speaks of feelings as states where human beings are possessed by the gods. Similarly, there is a common ground between humankind and gods with respect to knowledge. The \textit{nous} in human beings is a reflection of \textit{nous} in the world and in the world of forms, and the truths held in the world of forms and the insights it holds are, in principle, the same for humans and gods. When we perceive truth or knowledge, we perceive reality as it is. A harmonious intellectual connection or relation is established between us as perceivers and the truth perceived. Actually, truth is a part of us all – we already know it, we just need to be reminded of it. As the Greek or Socratic understanding finds no opposition, but instead conjunction, between the true and the good, it follows that intellectual realization of what is true implies moral motivation for the activity of realizing (or doing) good. Through realization of the true and the good, humankind’s perception of truth and its moral motivation to act accordingly harmonize the relationship between human beings and the world (and human beings and gods) in Greek philosophy.

\textbf{Løgstrup’s Lutheran protestant perspective}

The conception of the relationship between human beings, the world and God found in the Lutheran theological anthropology, by which Løgstrup was influenced, is very different from the one found in Greek Socratic philosophy. The human being is created in the image of God, but according to contemporary Danish and German theological existentialism, this \textit{imago Dei} is entirely corrupted by sin: Humankind \textit{was} created in God’s image, but has left God, turned away, and according to Kierkegaard, because the chasm between God and human beings is infinite\textsuperscript{6}, we can find no resources within ourselves enabling us to get closer to God, and thus to attempt the harmonization between God and humans found in Greek philosophy. Thus conceived, in Christianity, the human being is God’s \textit{enemy}, to use Løgstrup’s own words, as found in an article of 1971: The crucifixion is not a necessary condition for Christianity – Christianity would have survived through time and with its essential message intact even if Jesus had died of natural causes, Løgstrup claims. As a

that he does not violate the use of the principle intended by Kant. Thus, the demand retains its meaningfulness and its motivational force in spite of its unfulfillability.

\textsuperscript{6} Cf. Kierkegaard, Indøvelse, 132.
result, Løgstrup continues, we would have been spared all the nonsense concerning pain and suffering and its relation to Christianity, and this would have been a huge benefit! But on the other hand, it would have created a new problem:

(...) we would have been able to knight [to credit, to merit, B.R.] ourselves on our friendship with God, and thus give hypocrisy even better conditions. This was prevented by the animosity between God and humans, which was nailed down [established, B.R.] once and for all with the crucifixion of Jesus.7

Here we find evidence that Løgstrup acknowledges the understanding of Nietzsche’s madman (‘der tolle Mensch’) from The Gay Science, who seeks God, while he runs into the town square carrying a lantern:

The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. ‘Where is God?’ he cried; ‘I’ll tell you! We have killed him, – you and I! We are all his murderers! (…)’ 8

Humankind killed God, and thus any attempt made by humans to harmonize the relationship with God is rejected by Løgstrup, and by contemporary dialectical theology and theological existentialism. Today we cannot hide behind the circumstance that it was human beings 2000 years ago who killed Jesus, because we and our ancestors are equal: Were God to return, we would kill him again, Løgstrup claims. The human being does not possess the resources needed to reconcile with God. Only faith in God’s undeserved forgiveness and love remains.

The contrast between Greek and Lutheran anthropology

Løgstrup’s anthropology is rooted in the Lutheranism found in theological existentialism, even though he also modifies theological existentialism. He does this by maintaining that human beings are powerless when it comes to escaping egotism and inner self-confinement, but that life nevertheless holds the very possibilities for reconciliation that we ourselves lack.9 Here, Løgstrup is referring to reconciliation with both God and with fellow man.10 Good exists, even though we are sinners through and through. Both statements hold: The evil of human beings and the goodness of human life are both parts of existence. The Greek misconception lies in seeing reconciliation and

7 Løgstrup, Han sagde, (my translation).
8 Nietzsche, Science, 119–120 (aphorism 125).
9 Hence, Løgstrup’s ‘school’ of theology is termed creation theology, but instead of seeing Løgstrup’s creation theology as being a complete contrast to theological existentialism I suggest that it is understood as an ontological modification within theological existentialism and dialectical theology.
10 To Løgstrup these two relations are actually the same. He cites Friedrich Gogarten as pointing out that in Christianity, the relation to God is settled in the relation to the neighbour, cf. Løgstrup, Demand, 4.
harmony between human beings as the result of a human effort. Through this misconception they confuse world order (ontology) with human nature (anthropology). Hence, they are unable to realize that any effort made by the self in any relation to other people is already selfish: every moral thought has hidden ulterior motives, according to Løgstrup. 11 Luther experienced this himself, when he entered the monastery. According to him, monasticism is institutionalized selfishness, it is pharisaic, because monastic life is centred on the attempt to secure oneself and one’s relationship to God. One of Løgstrup’s existentialist contemporaries, who specialized in Luther, expresses it like this:

He [Luther, B.R.] knows that he must seek and serve God and fellow man, but he experiences that he is inescapably turned inward on himself [incurravatus in se, Luther’s definition of sin, B.R.], so that he steals any action – even the one appearing to be the most unselfish – for himself, seeks himself in everything, undertakes no action that is not an attempt at securing himself, saving himself, or earning merit, so that he is protected from God. 12

And from another article:

A bit of moral improvement or reformation into a personality infused with Christian fervour does not lift us from sin, death, and judgment. On the contrary, they only entangle us even more deeply. Indeed, real sin is the unwillingness to accept that we are mere sinners before God. 13

Here Christianity’s criticism of any human effort towards reconciliation or harmony with God or fellow human beings is emphasized. The sin committed by monks and nuns alike was specifically that they would not accept being mere sinners. In the eyes of Løgstrup and contemporary theological existentialism, the Greeks and the Catholics were naïve in their belief in humankind and its resources. The Catholics and the Greeks share a mutual anthropological optimism, believing that the abilities and potential inherent in human beings lead upwards in the hierarchy of either Christian faith or Plato’s world of forms (respectively). Like mountain climbers, Greek philosophers engage in maieutics while pursuing the inner, forgotten insight, which may lead them along virtue’s narrow path, out of Plato’s cave, up and towards the summit of the highest peak, where the form of the good shines like the sun upon the hopeful ascendants. By contrast, Christianity must be understood

11 Løgstrup, Tanke.
12 Jensen, Frelsesvished, 45 (my translation).
13 Jensen, Retfærdiggørelse, 93 (my translation).
as a rejection of any conception of such an endeavour, where we seek unity with the good and the true world order:

Here the ground must be cleared. The human being must apprehend its position before God. The uncertainty of our salvation must rise to the desperate certainty that humans can accomplish nothing, that nothing counts before God. (…). Everything a sinner does is sin and deserves only wrath and punishment. When God has confined everything under sin once and for all, and judged us all as sinners, all is lost. Everything we do is under these conditions, and we cannot escape; we can do nothing to change the position and earn God’s love. There is no path from humans to God.\(^\text{14}\)

**Løgstrup’s anthropology**

At this point, where so far Løgstrup has been presented as a theological existentialist, people familiar with Løgstrup’s authorship may ask what this has to do with Løgstrup? It is well known that Løgstrup was critical of the theological existentialism of his time, and of Kierkegaard. Now, it is important to stress that Løgstrup did indeed criticize Kierkegaardian theological existentialism, but his dispute concerned the view of human life (ontology) – not human nature (anthropology). Theological existentialism placed not only the human being within the confines of sin, but the whole of existence, life – or finitude as Kierkegaard calls it – was placed under the sign of sin. That life is created was understood by Danish existentialists to mean that life is alien to God – finitude is godless – because God is transcendent. This ontological disagreement resulted in Løgstrup’s emphasis on the positive valuation of existence; human beings are not first and foremost the subject of God’s wrath, but of God’s love:

This function [that human beings have to earn God’s love through their actions, B.R.] disappears in Christianity. There is nothing, no cult, no ceremony, no moral behaviour, no political order, through which human beings have to secure God’s affection. Christianity begins with God’s affection, it does not have to be earned, meaning that the actions of the individual are not meant to rise up to God to bring his love down to us, but they are meant to go out to fellow man.

\(^\text{14}\) Jensen, Frelsesvished, 45–46 (my translation).
The moral and political order is set free. The sole question is how best to arrange our lives with one another [i.e. our cultural life, B.R.].

The anthropological result is, however, the same for both Løgstrup and Jensen: we cannot and should not try to earn God’s love. So, Løgstrup disputed the inherent (ontological) nihilism of theological existentialism – not its concept of sin, that is, its anthropology. In fact, Løgstrup stresses Luther’s conception of sin in an article from 1940. Here, Løgstrup quotes the following in complete agreement with Luther:

‘Necessarily’ I tell you (everything we do is evil, when God’s work is not present within us), (…). This means that man without the Spirit of God does not do evil against his will, under pressure, as though he were taken by the scruff of the neck and dragged into it, like a thief or footpad being dragged off against his will to punishment; but he does it willingly, intentionally and gladly. And man cannot let go of, tame or alter his lust and will by his own means, but he continues to will it and lust for it.

This quote is not just a young man’s flirtation with theological existentialism! On the contrary, Løgstrup repeats it word for word thirty years later in a book-length article from 1971. At the very time when Løgstrup unfolds his grand ontological project, centred on the concept of the so-called sovereign expressions of life, with which he tries to refute ontological nihilism, he maintains the anthropology of theological existentialism without changing even a comma. It is actually quite remarkable, but it is even more remarkable that it has been almost entirely overlooked – not only today, but also by Løgstrup’s contemporaries. Consequently, Løgstrup’s thoughts concerning the conception of an ethical demand, the exposure of the self in basic trust, and the accentuation of love in The Ethical Demand was misapprehended as a tremendous desertion of, or apostasy with respect to, evangelical Lutheran Christianity, supposedly providing evidence of Løgstrup coming into the open as a Greek-anthropological optimist. However, nothing could be further from the truth. We find this misconception in numerous places in the debate between Løgstrup and Danish existentialists in the 1950s and 60s. The Danish author Henrik Stangerup offers some very clear

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15 Løgstrup, Begreber, 40 (my translation). As a side note, Jensen would of course agree with Løgstrup that human beings are loved by God, but the emphasis on love and wrath differs.
16 Løgstrup, Viljesbegrebet.
17 Martin Luther from On the Bondage of the Will, quoted from Løgstrup, Demand, 141, where Løgstrup reused parts of the text from 1940.
18 Løgstrup, Begreber, 68–69.
examples of this. In a critique of *The Ethical Demand* he labels Løgstrup’s thinking ‘unbelievably banal’ and ‘preacher’s talk in its most diluted form’, before he delivers his most devastating salvo:

Here we have arrived at the greatest problem with *The Ethical Demand*: at its core it is a jubilantly naïve vote of confidence in humankind, in humankind’s *talent* – to be honest, a position any thinker in the 20th century ought to find completely untenable.19

However, what Stangerup and his compatriots fail to realize is that Løgstrup keeps *two accounts*, and that his emphasis on love of one’s neighbour and the goodness of trust do not mitigate the evil of human beings by even a syllable. Had they bothered to read beyond the first few chapters of *The Ethical Demand* they would have found evidence of this:

To show trust and to expose oneself, to entertain a natural love is goodness. In this sense goodness belongs to our human life, though we are evil. Both apply completely, so there can be no reckoning of this, even though this is done often enough when it is said that there is ‘at least some’ good in a person! To this we can only reply, no, there is not! The notion that there is ‘at least some’ good in a person amounts to subtracting something from the evil and adding it to the goodness – on the individual’s own account, as though trust and natural love were not given to the person, but were his or her own achievements, and could be credited to the account of the self.20

In *Ethical Concepts and Problems* we find the notion of the two accounts repeated: ‘But there are two accounts to keep and to distinguish from each other, the account of our given life and the account of our ego’.21

Stangerup confuses these accounts, but Løgstrup certainly does not. Løgstrup’s point is precisely that *when* it is demanded of us that we *ought* to love and care for our neighbour, this demand actually reveals our lack of love – or rather, our love for ourselves:

However, nothing can be subtracted from the evil of man. The self takes everything in its selfish power. In it, man’s will is bound. The demand to love, which as a demand is addressed to our will, is an unfulfillable demand.22

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19 Stangerup, Replik, 44 (my translation).
20 Løgstrup, Demand, 140–141 (my revised translation).
21 Løgstrup, Begreber, 23 (my translation). We could call this Løgstrup’s *two-accounts doctrine*, inspired by Luther’s so-called *two-kingsdoms doctrine*.
22 Løgstrup, Demand, 141 (my revised translation).
Løgstrup’s anthropology is in no way a jubilantly naïve vote of confidence in man! But he maintains that there is more to be said about human existence than the wickedness of human nature. Good exists in spite of our inability to produce it:

Nor can anything be added to the goodness of human life. It is there in completeness, but beforehand – always beforehand, among other things in the realities of trust and love.23

Self-development or self-liberation
What does this anthropological criticism of humankind’s supposed inherent goodness imply for the problem at hand, namely the understanding of evil, good, and self-development? Well, according to Løgstrup the ethical demand reveals two things. Firstly, it tells us that we are selfish, that we love ourselves whereas we ought to love our neighbour. This is also the reason for Løgstrup calling the demand a judgment upon us.24 The demand has the anthropological function of disclosing our selfish nature and ethical inabilities (corresponding to Luther’s second, theological, use of the law).

The disclosure of our selfish nature is not the only thing revealed by the demand. The demand does not just disclose the selfish self (cf. ‘the account of our ego’); it also reveals the possibilities within interrelated (or interdependent) human existence, which could have come to fruition if they had not been suffocated by our self-centeredness. Hence, the demand reveals the love, compassion, trust, honesty, and so on, which could have been realized, had they not been trampled underfoot and destroyed by us (cf. ‘the account of our given life’). In revealing these possibilities, the demand identifies features of human existence that Løgstrup claims may be understood only as good (or blessings, if you like), features that are threatened by human egotism. This kind of disclosure is not a disclosure of the selfish self, but a revelation of value or possibilities within human social life. This revelation may be called the demand’s ontological function. In Løgstrup’s terminology, ontology has to do with the part of existence that is not produced by the self, and hence we cannot take credit for the existence of these ontological possibilities – we do not owe them to ourselves. Ontology has to do with the foundation of existence, which rescues and relieves us from ourselves, because it supports our social existence in spite of our destructive selfishness. This is where Løgstrup introduces the sovereign expressions of life.

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23 Løgstrup, Demand, 141 (my revised translation).
24 Løgstrup, Demand, 120.
In *Etiske begreber og problemer* (‘Ethical concepts and problems’) of 1971, Løgstrup calls his ethical position *ontological*. In doing so, he formulates a position separate from both deontological and teleological ethics. Ontological ethics is an ethics founded on the existential basis of interdependent human life – the existential basis that supports human existence in spite of our selfishness, and that we do not produce ourselves. As mentioned earlier, identifying the basis of human formation is a fundamental philosophical question. Are we formed by our own means, or by something other than ourselves; do human beings hold the resources for this formation, or do the resources lie outside our own reach?

Obviously, if you adopt a Greek-inspired anthropology, you have every reason to be optimistic when it comes to finding potential within human nature that should be nurtured, groomed, and brought forth. This is made possible due to our ability to choose between good and evil, right and wrong. But Løgstrup’s Lutheran anthropology does not allow for such optimism. The reason is that according to Løgstrup, our will is bound to the self – the human being is inescapably selfish and egotistical by nature. Martin Luther describes sin as *incurvatus in se* – being turned or bent inward on oneself. The evil of humankind is our self-orientation and self-centeredness – our self-absorption. Because we are consumed with ourselves, we shut out our fellow man, so that the love we ought to have felt for our neighbour is in fact diverted and perverted because of our love for ourselves. Figuratively speaking, our self may be likened to the centre of a centripetal force. The centripetal force is the opposite of the centrifugal force. Where the centrifugal force pulls away from the centre, the centripetal force pulls towards the centre. Thus, Løgstrup’s conception of the self is akin to the centre of a gravitational field – a black hole – that pulls everything within its reach into its centre and consumes it.

If we apply Løgstrup’s considerations concerning human nature to the idea of self-development we arrive at a very different view from the one inspired by Greek anthropology. Thus conceived, we may very well find resources and power within ourselves, and develop them, but from a moral point of view it is highly questionable whether these resources *ought to be* developed! Thinking along Løgstrup’s lines, the self-development project is in fact a way of facilitating humankind’s ultimate problem – being self-absorbed. Seen in this light, self-development is self-containment, a way of being hopelessly caught in our own gravitational pull, and through the process of development we are pulled further and further into ourselves. This was exactly what Luther experienced in the monastery: the more the monks sought God, the more they were entangled in sin. As in the realm of physics, where the centrifugal force directed outward is in fact a fictitious force, altruism and the
love of one’s neighbour, understood as human achievements, are also fictitious: overly optimistic anthropological illusions. Ironically, the idea of self-development leads to self-entanglement and thus self-containment, while actual self-development is to be understood as self-liberation – to be set free from the entanglement and containment of the selfish self. But focusing on the self and its potential does not liberate – it confines.

Formation by outside resources

Løgstrup’s Lutheran anthropological analysis leaves us with quite a bleak view of humankind and existence. We are captive within ourselves, and we are unable to find a way out of our self-absorption, leaving us equally unable to pursue altruistic neighbourly love (unselfish love of either fellow human beings or of God). Thus it would seem that we are left at the mercy of our own selfishness. However, this is not the case, according to Løgstrup. When assuming this bleak view of human existence, we focus one-sidedly on the anthropological disclosure of our selfishness, and thus forget the ontological function of the demand. The ontological function is the revelation of possibilities within interrelated human existence, which support our existence but are not produced by the self. Løgstrup’s examples are the so-called sovereign expressions of life: love, trust, mercy, and the openness of speech, to name his prime examples. Within Løgstrup’s ontology, that is, his philosophy of created life, we find the positive counter-balance to his negative anthropology. In order for the human being to be able to break away from its destructive, selfish, and evil nature we must never look within ourselves for inner potential, but instead we must look away from ourselves! However, the problem is that we do not possess the resources needed for looking away from ourselves. Any inclination originating from ourselves is already selfish – as we recall, Løgstrup wrote specifically that, ‘The self takes everything in its selfish power’. The only possible way to be caught up in something different from, or other than, ourselves is to be liberated of ourselves, something we ourselves are unable to do. If Løgstrup’s ontology is correct in saying that life holds possibilities for good (such as love, trust, compassion) then how do we break through to them? He already addressed this problem in a sermon in 1937:

Our created life is so excessively wonderful and strange that it seems like we can only endure its strangeness and wonder by forgetting it. If only we could fathom the wonder of hearing – and that we can hear notes. If we were so open, so purely receptive that we could perceive all the beauty and wonder of the notes – then we would forget ourselves in favour of the beatitude of the tone; in
hearing we would be nothing but hearing. (…) If only we could experience the wonder of seeing – and that we can see colours and shapes! (…) then in seeing we would be nothing but seeing, that is, purely receptive (…). If only we could fathom the wonder of language. That man is given to us as fellow man through language and conversation, so that community is formed. If we could really receive fellow man through the words of conversation, then we would forget ourselves, due to the joy and wonder of the community of language.\textsuperscript{25}

If we could receive…; if we were open…. Goodness is there, but we are too self-contained to receive it, according to the early Løgstrup we encounter here.

However, the change brought about in Løgstrup’s system by the introduction of the so-called ‘sovereign expressions of life’ means that humankind’s inability is rectified by the power of interdependent existence. Where humankind fails, the expressions of life prevail – hence their sovereignty. They penetrate our self-confinement; they are a mass that is not produced by the self, and that cannot be taken unconditionally in the self’s selfish power. The sovereign expressions of life are not mystical, free-floating phenomena, but they are cognitive emotional states brought about by the presence of the other (just as love is love for the other, and trust is trust in the other). The sovereign expressions of life hold the power to shatter our reservation and transform us from closed to open creatures. This transformation is not enduring, but it is a recurrent possibility of existence. However, thinking that you can learn how to escape your selfishness is an illusion, according to Løgstrup. No courses or techniques can teach you how to be a more open and receptive vehicle for the sovereign expressions of life. We cannot bring about lasting changes in our nature. At this point, however, I see a way of modifying Løgstrup’s view – and oddly enough, he provides the means for this himself.

The fictitious space
In Løgstrup’s anthropology, self-formation or self-development is conceived as a dangerous dead-end resulting only in furthering the self-confinement and self-absorption which is humankind’s ultimate problem: to engage in self-development projects is to embrace our inclination to narcissism and navel gazing. However, real self-development is to be understood as self-liberation, according to Løgstrup – liberation \textit{from} the self, in order to become captivated by something different from yourself; liberation to be captivated by \textit{the other} or by \textit{something} other than yourself. Contrary to

\textsuperscript{25} Løgstrup, Skabt, 76–77 (my translation).
the thoughts and feelings we produce, and our self-made captivity in reflection and selfishness, the sovereign expressions of life are not produced by the self, but must be understood as possibilities made available by the proximity of the other. Thus, love, trust, compassion, and so on are to be conceived of as ways of ‘opening’ my self-centred existence that are made possible by the other person – to be compassionate is to be released from the self’s selfish confinement, seeing the grief of the other person while forgetting yourself. Hence love, trust, compassion, the openness of speech, and so on, are expressions of interdependent social life – as opposed to hate, vengefulness, distrust, and such; they are our encircling thoughts and emotions, and thus not expressions of life, but of human nature.26

Here, spatiality becomes an important concept or figure to Løgstrup. In his book of 1978, Creation and Annihilation, Løgstrup reflects on the impact of time and space on ethics. When the human being is left to itself, a spatial contraction occurs. Without space, our perspective narrows, confining us to our own inner lives. But this inner space, which Løgstrup calls the fictitious space, may also be expanded – providing openness and perspective.27 This may only come about through an outside force, which penetrates our self-circling thoughts and emotions. In fact, this penetrative outside force is a life necessity, according to Løgstrup.

Through his authorship, Løgstrup indicates three ways in our human existence that this outside influence may occur – three ways for human beings to be formed or shaped by something different from ourselves. Initially he sees only one real possibility. In an unpublished journal record, probably from around 1940, he writes: ‘We are captive within ourselves. Liberation is only possible through fellow man’.28 In the following paragraph, he addresses what has been my main topic here, namely, the impossibility of self-motivated self-development and self-liberation:

Man is his own prisoner; this is the hopelessness of existence, because it implies that we are powerless in the pursuit of self-liberation – any attempt will only entangle us even further in ourselves. Cf. Luther’s struggle with monasticism.29

Hence, the first possible way of opening our self-contained existence is the other person’s ability to penetrate our self-absorption and set us free. Interdependent social life holds the possibility of being influenced and captivated by the other. Art and sensation (the two other ways of liberation from the

26 Cf. Løgstrup, Opgør, 95–100. The passage is translated into English in Niekerk, Beyond, 50–55.
self and the expansion of the inner, fictitious space) are developed later on in Løgstrup’s authorship. ‘If only we could experience the wonder of seeing – and that we can see colours and shapes!’, Løgstrup wrote in the sermon of 1937. In the 1960s Løgstrup withdrew these reservations. The colours, shapes, and sounds affect us, meaning that they have an impact on us – sensation imbues us with energy and vitality, it attunes our spirit. Sensation can pierce our reservations and expand our fictitious inner space. The common feature here is self-forgetfulness. When we are captivated by another person or attuned by sensation, we are liberated from ourselves.

A third kind of outside influence, art, holds the same possibilities. Our self-confinement leads to an existential blindness – a forgetfulness of existence where things lose their power to affect us. Løgstrup calls this triviality. In the monumental novel, My Struggle, Norwegian novelist Karl Ove Knausgård provides us with a description of how this triviality occurs. The narrator realizes that there is a price to be paid for the familiarity with, and confidence in the world one acquires through life and experience:

So when my father raised the sledgehammer above his head and let it fall on the rock that spring evening in the mid-1970s he was doing so in a world he knew and was familiar with. It was not until I myself reached the same age that I understood there was indeed a price to pay for this. As your perspective of the world increases not only is the pain it inflicts on you less but also its meaning. Understanding the world requires you to keep a certain distance from it. Things that are too small to see with the naked eye, such as molecules and atoms, we magnify. Things that are too large, such as cloud formations, river deltas, constellations, we reduce. At length we bring it within the scope of our senses and we stabilize it with fixer. When it has been fixed we call it knowledge. Throughout our childhood and teenage years we strive to attain the correct distance from objects and phenomena. We read, we learn, we experience, we make adjustments. Then one day we reach the point where all the necessary distances have been set, all the necessary systems have been put in place. That is when time begins to pick up speed. It no longer meets any obstacles, everything is set, time races through our lives, the days pass by in a flash and before we know what is happening we are forty, fifty, sixty … Meaning requires content, content requires time, time requires resistance. Knowledge is distance, knowledge is stasis and the enemy of meaning. My picture of my
father on that evening in 1976 is, in other words, twofold: on the one hand I see him as I saw him at that time, through the eyes of an eight-year-old: unpredictable and frightening; on the other hand, I see him as a peer through whose life time is blowing and unremittingly sweeping large chunks of meaning along with it.\(^{30}\)

Time flows, and meaning drowns in the frozen life form, where triviality has led to lethargy. However, according to Løgstrup, art can expose life and give it an expression, a form, in which our attention is re-captured by the parts of life we have forgotten to take notice of, due to our self-absorption. Triviality means that we are blind, even though we still have the ability to see. But a work of art can make us see through the eyes of the artist – turn our attention towards what we are ignoring, because we are too caught up with ourselves. The work of art holds a revelatory force, it reveals existence – brings it into focus again. In art, life may be brought to our attention without it being subjugated to the self and its selfish power. The motif of a painting, the tonality of music, and the fictitious life world of a narrative rest outside our sphere of influence and manipulation when we encounter them (maybe less so, when we try to speak on their behalf). And because we cannot manipulate them, they can involve us. To mention just one example of the revelatory force of art, I will mention the Danish poet, Klaus Rifbjerg, and his 2001 collection of prose poems entitled *70 Epifanier* (*70 epiphanies*). Under the motto ‘Epiphany is a sudden experience, e.g. of the trivial or banal\(^{31}\) he pays homage to the piece of soap, the razor, the toothbrush, the door handle\(^{32}\) and ‘[…]

all the public lavatories you have entered, where somebody recently released himself of his burden’\(^{33}\) – all these are examples of everyday experiences threatened by triviality.

Interestingly, in 2015 Knausgård published the first volume of what he calls a personal encyclopaedia. The complete encyclopaedia will consist of four books, mirroring the four seasons, and here Knausgård tells his unborn daughter about the world she will encounter, when she is born and grows up. In his first *Letter to an unborn daughter* he writes:

This wonder that you will soon meet and get to see is so easy to lose sight of, and there are almost as many ways in which to do that, as there are people. That

\(^{30}\) Knausgård, Struggle I, 11–12.
\(^{31}\) Rifbjerg, Epifanier, 5 (my translation).
\(^{32}\) Rifbjerg, Epifanier, 20.
\(^{33}\) Rifbjerg, Epifanier, 44 (my translation).
is why I write this book for you. I want to show you the world as it is all around us all the time. Only by doing so am I able to see it myself.34

Knausgård calls this the ‘close reality’. Among many other things, we find entries on ‘wasps’, ‘toilets’, ‘tin cans’, and so on. Thus, it bears strong resemblance to Rifbjerg’s project.

Without the penetration and shattering of our self-encircling thoughts and emotions we are left in our own captivity, thus narrowing the fictitious inner space and leaving us at the mercy of time. This self-centred spatial contraction is nurtured by self-development projects; projects where the outside world is set aside due to the focus on promoting your own possibilities and your own self. However, it is only when you forget yourself that you are liberated from the inner confinement caused by the self. This happens when the fictitious inner space is expanded and filled with something different from the self and its own production, that is, by other people, sensation of shapes, smells, sounds, and colours, and the ability of art to turn our attention towards foreign places, conceptions, and points of view. Hence, happiness and true formation do not lie in our own hands, according to Løgstrup, but they lie in the outside world – in the hands of existence as it is provided through the other.

At this point, one might ask Løgstrup this question: Does this ontological and anthropological analysis not provide us with a useful insight? If Løgstrup is correct, then knowledge of our own inabilities and of the possible ways for opening our self-centred existence seem to enable us to act. Even though it would seem almost heretical to Løgstrup, this knowledge might actually make us more receptive vehicles for the sovereign expressions of life – contrary to Løgstrup’s explicit intent. This could leave us with the responsibility of exposing ourselves to these penetrative forces, thus leading to blame or guilt if we fail to act on this knowledge.

Before this humanistic jubilantly optimistic vote of confidence in humankind (to give credit to Stangerup’s characterization above) goes too far, it should be emphasized that this line of reasoning opens the door that Løgstrup so vehemently tries to shut – namely, the self-righteousness often evident in those of us who tend to feel confident about our own efforts and virtues. However, one could argue that the risk of self-sufficient admiration of the vastness of our own inner fictitious space and our perspective on things is no more than a potential risk; we do not necessarily have to relapse into this state of mind.

34 Knausgård, Høsten, 16–17 (my translation).
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