Løgstrup’s Road to *The Ethical Demand*

[9] *The Ethical Demand* (henceforward: ED) was Løgstrup’s first book on ethics. It was this book that made him well-known, initially in Denmark, later also internationally. The book was followed by a number of important works with an ethical content including some that were published after the author’s death in 1981. This fact can easily seduce one into believing that ED marks a kind of starting point for the development of Løgstrup’s ethical thinking. However, that would be a serious misunderstanding. On November 27th 1956, the day on which ED appeared, the author was 51 years old and had been a professor of ethics and philosophy of religion for more than 13 years. His academic career had started as long ago as 1931, when he had written a prize essay about the ethics of Max Scheler. This means that the publication of ED was preceded by at least as many years of ethical thinking as followed afterwards. Therefore ED can also be regarded as the conclusion of a long process of reflection – to be sure, a conclusion that at the same time constituted a point of departure for further development, but nevertheless a kind of conclusion.

In this article I shall give an account of the process of reflection that led to ED. In my opinion such an account is interesting in itself, because it is instructive to see how a great thinker arrived at the thoughts for which he has become noted. But in addition I believe that insight into this thinking process can contribute to the understanding of the book that became its temporary conclusion. I shall try to show this in the last section.

Let me begin with a remark about my method. Løgstrup’s publications prior to ED are read here on the question of how far they contain ideas that can be regarded as stages on the road to the conception [10] of the ethical demand as it is presented in ED. This involves the risk that these ideas are plucked out of their original context and distorted. After all, Løgstrup did not have ED at the back of his mind when he developed them. For him they were part of taking a stand on the questions with which he concerned himself at the moment. I can only say that I have been aware of this risk and that, in my reading and writing, I have attempted to consider both the problem context of those ideas and their place within the text as a whole. On the other hand I have far from always made explicit which aspects of the ethical demand the described ideas point to. I have assumed that the reader has a certain previous knowledge of ED, which enables him or her to see the connections for themselves. If this proves to be an impediment to understanding, it might perhaps prompt the reader to read or re-read ED. And that would be no a bad thing!
1. The preceding history

Løgstrup was concerned about ethics from the very beginning of his academic career. This is apparent from the fact that in his prize essay (for which he got a gold medal), he tackled nothing less than the problem of the foundation of ethics. However, his interest in ethics receded into the background when after the prize essay he set to work on a dissertation project which concerned epistemological questions. In 1933 this project resulted in a work on the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl. However, this dissertation was rejected. The dissertation process did not come to a conclusion until the acceptance of *Den erkenelsesteoretiske Konflikt mellem den transcendentalfilosofiske Idealisme og Teologien* (The Epistemological Conflict between Transcendental Idealism and Theology) in 1943, after two more dissertations had been rejected.2

That Løgstrup deals with epistemological questions should not be taken to show that that he did not occupy himself with ethics in that period. Firstly, his epistemological engagement itself was – at least originally – motivated by an overarching interest in the fundamental questions of ethics. This appears from the introduction to the 1933 manuscript. Here Løgstrup writes that he regards this work as a preliminary study, which is to “clear the way” for a continuation of the investigation of the basic moral concepts and the foundation of ethics which he had started in the prize essay (1933, p. III; cf. p. 252).3 Secondly, in the dissertation [11] period he wrote several articles about ethical questions. Finally, ethics is strongly represented in his posthumously published sermons from Sandager-Holevad (1995).

The 1933 manuscript has significance for our subject not only because it connects Løgstrup’s engagement with epistemological questions with his ethical interest; it is also important because Løgstrup offers an elaborate exposition in it of the phenomenology which was later to constitute the methodological basis of his “human”, that is, philosophical ethics in ED.4 Løgstrup criticizes Husserl’s phenomenology for sticking to a Kantian “epistemological scheme”, which regards cognition as an abstract subject’s detached relation to objects. According to Løgstrup this phenomenology has now been surpassed by Heidegger’s and Lipps’s existential phenomenology. There cognition is regarded from the viewpoint of the involvement of concrete people with the world. Therefore it is fundamentally determined by the different ways in which people are involved. Løgstrup subscribes to this type of phenomenology, especially in Lipps’s version, which describes involved cognition in its diversity, taking its point of departure in the expressions of everyday language.

Two things are especially characteristic of Løgstrup’s early ethics. Firstly it is characterized by thorough analyses of what is going on in and between human beings. These analyses are expressive of Løgstrup’s philosophical interest in human relations. Yet they are not used to lay the foundation of a “human” ethics, but for the clarification of aspects of Christian ethics. Here we meet the other characteristic feature: even though Løgstrup to a great extent proceeds philosophically, he understands himself in this period fundamentally as a Christian ethicist, who finds the final ethical truth in divine revelation. This is connected with the fact that at an early stage he affiliated himself with dialectical theology. This
affiliation shows through already in the prize essay and appears clearly in a lecture about theology and the humanities, which he gave in 1934 in connection with an application for a position as a Reader at the Faculty of Theology in Copenhagen. Here it is claimed that “the subject matter of theology is the relationship to God, who meets the human being in revelation through Jesus”. In the God-given faith in revelation, humans get “a new understanding of existence: that the human being is God’s property”. Theology is based on this faith, which means that “its own situation of investigation [is] itself embraced by this all-embracing understanding of existence” (1938, p. 12).6

[12] I want to call attention to one element of Løgstrup’s early ethics, because this was to become of great importance for the development of his conception of the ethical demand. It is his treatment, in one of his application lectures of 1934, of the question of the ordered nature of social life. This question played an important part in the German theology of the creation ordinances in the 1930s, which revived Luther’s doctrine of the ordinances. Put briefly, this doctrine states that at creation God ordered human life in certain ways, which serve the maintenance of life. Luther made a distinction between three basic ordinances: the household (which includes family life and working life), the state, and the church. Each ordinance contains different vocations or offices (e.g. spouse, parent and provider in the household), and each office has its own rules, which can be recognized by everyone, independently of God’s revelation. The German theology of the creation ordinances in the 1930s elaborated and extended Luther’s doctrine, so that for example the People (“das Volk”) was considered a creation ordinance as well. Moreover, Luther’s doctrine was connected with the idea of an order inherent in social life (German: Eigengesetzlichkeit), which is to the effect that society’s different areas of life such as science, culture, politics and economy have their own, objective laws. From a theological point of view these laws are regarded as the expressions of God’s creation ordinances.7

In his lecture Løgstrup takes his point of departure from the thesis that human beings are social beings in the sense that “human beings from the start are dependent on one another” (1934, p. 2). The reason is that human beings differ in complementary ways and therefore are in need of being supplemented by others. Society meets this need. It contains a number of basic forms such as matrimony, economy, state, people and culture, which correspond to essential forms of human existence. Those basic forms have their own, inherent order, which is determined by objective requirements. Economic life, for example, is bound to the laws that regulate the relationship between supply and demand. However, the requirements are not absolute. People give the basic forms a concrete shape, and here both their moral-religious self-understanding and their selfish striving for power and pleasure play a part. For example, it is up to us to decide whether our economy will involve slavery or not. Now, the Christian understanding of human beings as God’s creatures means that “Christian ethics acknowledges the inherent order of social life, because it is the immanent order of God’s creation ordinances” (1934, p. 16). Yet, at the same time Christian ethics criticizes people’s [13] sinful abuse of this order as a means to pleasure and power. However, it cannot restrict itself to criticizing society. That would be Pharisaism. God calls us to action within the
order that is abused, in faith in God’s forgiveness, which does not entail the acceptance of sin but a permanent effort to counter it.  

It is clear that Løgstrup here subscribes to both the theology of creation ordinances and the idea of Eigengesetzlichkeit. This does not mean that he uses this theology to justify the existing society, as Nazi-oriented theologians did in Germany in the 1930s. The distinction between the inherent order of the creation ordinances and the shape we give to the basic forms of society, allowed him to take a critical stand on the existing society. However, this does not alter the fact that, at that time, he considered himself an ordinance theologian. In the following we shall witness what role this avowal of ordinance theology came to play on the road to ED.

2. The ethics in the dissertation

The final dissertation presents Løgstrup’s definitive dissociation from Kantian epistemology. According to Løgstrup this epistemology’s idea that cognition is the product of our thinking builds on the view that human life in itself is indefinite and shapeless. This implies that the Kantian epistemology is an exponent of our time’s dominant understanding of life, which holds that life has no meaning in itself and that only cultural creation can convey meaning to an otherwise meaningless life. However, this “cultural” understanding of life is contradicted by the Jewish-Christian understanding of life as created by God, which entails that “life is something definite, before and regardless of the shape it acquires in culture. Human life is not primarily and not exclusively cultural life” (2011, p. 131; cf. pp. 113-31). By invoking the Jewish-Christian understanding of life, Løgstrup subjects the Kantian epistemology to a theological critique. This critique prompts him to specify more precisely what the Jewish-Christian understanding of life is like. The specification focuses on what could be called the ethical content of created life. In this way Løgstrup gets into ethical questions in his epistemological dissertation.

[14] To begin with, Løgstrup specifies the Jewish-Christian understanding of created life with reference to the Old Testament laws. The presupposition of this specification is the idea that we, being sinners, have destroyed created life. We no longer live life as God has created it. Therefore we need a law that demands from us that which we ought to have done naturally in created life, and thereby the law makes us aware of the ethical content of created life: “The definitive character of our human life as created life is separated from life itself, and stands opposed to it as laws, because we have used our life’s powers to destroy the definitive character that our life has in its humaneness” (2011, p. 133). Corresponding to the different ways in which we destroy created life, the Old Testament laws are determined as prohibitions to murder, to steal, etc. This does not mean that our destruction automatically makes us aware of these laws. “The destruction is radical, it is a destruction of ethical-religious cognition as much as everything else in human life” (p. 137). Therefore the law had to be revealed as God’s law (pp. 131-140). Even though this law is expressive of created life, the Old Testament does not thematize what the content of created life consists in. This is done
through Jesus’s toughening up of the law in the Sermon of the Mount. By his demanding from us things which, being the humans we are, we cannot fulfil in obedience, we are compelled to ask how that life is constituted, in which that which is demanded from us would be done as a matter of course. We find the answer in Jesus’s life and proclamation, which reveal that created life is “service, mercy, giving and forgiving” (p. 149).

Løgstrup presents his ideas about created life as an account of the Jewish-Christian understanding of life. Yet it is beyond doubt that this account draws on philosophical sources. It is first and foremost marked by a Lebensphilosophie, which advocates a natural, immediate way of life. Løgstrup was influenced early on by Jakob Knudsen’s ideal of immediacy and self-forgetfulness, but in the dissertation it is the influence of Vilhelm Grønbech that prevails.9 This is apparent from the fact that he describes created life with many of the same concepts we meet in Grønbech’s Jesus: Menneskesønnen (Jesus: The Son of Man) from 1935.10 Løgstrup specifies the Jewish-Christian understanding of life further as “life with another human being and not a life a human being can live for himself in isolation. The definitive character that life has in itself is a certain relationship to another human being” (2011, p. 170). By this specification he emphasizes the social nature of being human. We met this idea already in the lecture [15] from 1934, but now it has probably been strengthened by the fact that Løgstrup in connection with his dissertation had occupied himself intensely with the so-called I-Thou philosophy.11

Thus Løgstrup’s account of the Jewish-Christian understanding of life contains a good deal of philosophy.12 Yet this does not lead to a philosophical foundation of ethics. Løgstrup still advocates a Christian ethics. One may be surprised at that, because it is precisely created life that is pointed out as the foundation of the law (and thus of ethics). Doesn’t this imply that natural (in the sense of non-Christian) human beings, thanks to their creatureliness, have an ethical insight, which could serve as the basis of a philosophical ethics? As we have seen, Løgstrup denies this, pointing to the radicalness of sin. Through our sin we destroy created life, and thereby we preclude ourselves from acquiring true ethical-religious knowledge. Therefore we have to resort to revelation. This does not mean that Løgstrup denies every form of ethical insight to natural human beings. In connection with his discussion of the law in the Old Testament he remarks that God’s revealed law could connect with Israel’s folk ethic, which proceeded from the people’s “purely natural social instinct” (2011, p. 138). However, its inclusion in God’s revealed law involved at the same time a thoroughgoing critique of that folk ethic (pp. 138-9). Thus for Løgstrup revelation remains the ultimate source of ethics.

In the dissertation’s reflections on the relationship between the law and created life we meet for the first time what could be called the fundamental structure of Løgstrup’s ethics. It is the idea that our life has been created with an ethical content, which has to be demanded from us when we do not realize it spontaneously or immediately. To be sure, the very idea of such a relation between immediacy and demand was not new. It is already found in Luther. He answers the question as to why the unjust and not the just have been given a law in the following way: “Because the just person does everything and more than any law demands of his own accord. But the unjust do not do anything that is right, therefore they need the law,
which teaches, coerces and presses them to do good”. However, there is an important difference between Løgstrup and Luther. Whereas Luther thinks of love as the fruit of faith, Løgstrup regards love as a part of created human nature. Inspired by the Lebensphilosophie he “naturalizes” Luther’s idea! It should be noted, however, that in this connection he refers to a passage in Friedrich Gogarten’s Politische Ethik, which contains the idea of the correlation between the law [16] and created love (2011, p. 152 note 1, and p. 148 note 1). This gives rise to the supposition that Gogarten was of essential importance for Løgstrup’s formation of the conception of the ethical demand. In the following we shall see that this supposition has not been plucked out of the air.

3. The laws of life

In his correspondence with Hal Koch during the Second World War about the Danish government’s policy of collaboration with the German occupying power, a new concept appears in Løgstrup’s ethical vocabulary, the concept of the laws of life. This concept refers to absolute laws, which God has laid down in created life. These laws command truthfulness and justice, among other things. Løgstrup invokes these laws to justify his rejection of the collaboration policy. In the pamphlet Folkeliv og Udenrigspolitik (Folk Life and Foreign Policy) from 1943 he presents a more systematic treatment of the laws of life. Now these are determined as laws that serve humanity in the different relations to one another in which we can come to be. They are “life’s own inherent laws”, and therefore they are “so natural that we do not discover them until we have broken them, that is to say, when we look for the reason why life in its humanity has been destroyed in our relations to one another” (1943a, p. 11). Examples of the laws of life are that we shall do others the honour of having the confidence that they will behave humanely, that parents shall bring up their children to obedience, and that employers shall treat their workers justly. Thus the laws of life are laws for life in community, and this life has the community of the people as its overarching framework (pp. 7-12). In the article “Præsten og Sognet” (The Pastor and the Parish) from the same year we meet one more law of life. Here Løgstrup calls on the congregation to go to church with the argument “that you shall use, continue and utilize the work you make another do for you” (1943b, p. 90).

Løgstrup’s conception of the laws of life builds on what I have called the fundamental structure of his ethics. The laws of life are laws that are given with life itself, and therefore we primarily comply with them in immediate naturalness. We do not discover them until we have broken them, and then we become aware of them as laws that demand from us to do that which we ought to have done as a matter of course. Notice that Løgstrup now asserts that we discover the laws of life when we have broken them. In other words, he asserts that we are able to find the laws of life on our own accord. In a way this idea fits in with the dissertation’s claim [17] that Israel’s folk ethic was the expression of the people’s “purely natural social instinct”. Yet there is an essential difference. In the dissertation it was said that our destruction of created life is so radical that the law has to be revealed. As a consequence
Israel's folk ethic was in need of critical inclusion into God's revealed law. But now Løgstrup asserts that our breaking the laws of life makes us discover them *ourselves*, indeed as *absolute* laws. In other words, Løgstrup has made the transition from a Christian ethics to a “human” ethics, which is accessible to all people independently of revelation.

Meanwhile, we have to realize what it is that, according to Løgstrup, natural human beings have access to. It is the laws of life as laws that have to regulate our social life in different kinds of relations between one another. That is not the same as a demand of radical love of the neighbour. As regards neighbourly love, Løgstrup for the moment presumably sticks to the dissertation’s thesis that only Jesus’ life and proclamation reveal that that is the real content of created life. Natural human beings are only said to have access to created life insofar as it entails laws for common human living together. In other words, we have to do with a certain specification of the idea of the creation ordinances. In fact Løgstrup understands the laws of life in this context. He says for example in a sermon from 1942 that the laws of life have been given for life “in our vocation and estate”, in order to make it possible that “wicked people live together in spite of their wickedness” (1995, pp. 227 and 229). And in a defence of the church attendance law, he speaks of “God’s secular ordinances and laws, under which ordinances the organization of the church falls as well” (1943c, p. 106). Thus Løgstrup takes up again his preoccupation with the idea of the creation ordinances from 1834, but now he specifies this idea with the help of *Lebensphilosophie*, and uses it expressly to found a philosophical ethics. By so doing he has taken a decisive step on the road to ED.

4. The law of responsibility

In 1947 Løgstrup published an article entitled “Antropologien i Kants etik” (The Anthropology of Kant’s Ethics), in which he criticizes Kant’s ethics on the basis of Luther’s creation ethics. He focuses his critique on Kant’s conception of human nature. For Kant human nature is a bundle of inclinations, which, [18] though they obey the laws of nature, from a moral point of view are mere disorder and lawlessness. Therefore ethics cannot be based on human nature. Ethics is based on reason, which states that the maxims of the will ought to have the form of the law. Kant operates in other words with the alternative that the will is either determined by reason or by nature, and that the latter is the same as lawlessness in a moral sense. But, Løgstrup continues, this alternative does not apply if you take into account that

human nature is an ordered nature, the ordinances of which are ordinances for our life with and against one another, so that we are forced to take part in each other’s lives in responsible relationships. Consequently, the individual is faced with the decision for or against the other (or the others), whether he wants to or not. And here the law is not a formal principle but a material one. It is the law of responsibility telling us that we ought to serve our neighbor. (2017, p. 30; 1947, p. 154)

In this view it is not the task of reason to establish the moral order. This order is already given with the ordinances. Reason’s task is another one: to enable us to obtain clarity about “how
the other can best be served in the given situation and under the given circumstances” (2017, p. 32;1947, p.156).

Løgstrup points out that it is Luther’s ethics that is the prototype of the view from which he criticizes Kant. He refers both to the idea of the ordinances as an expression of created human nature and to the idea that it is in the responsible relations of the ordinances that humans hear the law, “which is material as a lex naturalis” (2017, p. 30; 1947, p. 154). Both the identification of the law of responsibility with lex naturalis (the natural moral law) and the connection of this law with the creation ordinances show that it is Løgstrup’s purpose to put forward a philosophical ethics. In this respect there is continuity with the conception of the laws of life. Moreover there is continuity in that, just as the laws of life were regarded as expressions of created life, so the ordinances are now regarded as expressions of created human nature (though Løgstrup does not explain how the ordinances are expressions of human nature). However, it cannot be denied that there are differences too. The most striking one is that the laws of life have disappeared. Moreover the ordinances have got a new function. They do not merely regulate the different relations between humans in different ways, but by imposing on us responsibility for others they confront us with one law [19] that the other ought to be served. This one law, the law of responsibility, is identical with the Christian commandment of love of the neighbour. This appears both from the reference to lex naturalis (which Luther identified with the love commandment) and from the fact that the law is specified with the statement that “everything the responsible person says and does in this context has to be said and done for the sake of the other and not for the responsible person’s own sake” (2017, p. 32; 1947, p. 156). This specification refers to what Løgstrup in ED calls the radicalness of the demand, which is characteristic of the love commandment. Now it is Jesus’s radical commandment of love of the neighbour that is made the object of “human” moral cognition. And this makes it abundantly clear that we witness here the birth of Løgstrup’s conception of the ethical demand.

The concept of the laws of life was never to return in Løgstrup’s writings. Therefore it is hardly accidental that it does not figure in his article about Kant’s ethics. Its absence must be an expression of the fact that Løgstrup is abandoning it or already has done so. This raises the question why he abandoned it. Løgstrup does not give the answer here. But some years later he indicates it when he writes about the ordinances:

Diese Ordnung der Dinge ist nicht die gleiche von Volk zu Volk, wie sie auch nicht die gleiche alle Zeiten hindurch ist. Sie ist veränderlich. Denn selbst wenn sie ihr Fundament in der Natur des Menschen hat, was zum Beispiel bei der Ordnung der Ehe und der Familie auf der Hand liegt, so geben wir diesen Ordnungen eine bestimmte kulturelle Gestalt; sie sind daher sowohl von der volksmässigen Eigenart als von der geschichtlichen Tradition her bestimmt (1950a, pp. 96-7)

(This order of things is not the same from people to people, or through all time. It is changeable. For even though it has its basis in the nature of human beings, as is obvious for example in the ordinance of marriage and the family, nonetheless we give these ordinances a determinate
Here Løgstrup makes a distinction between the ordinances as such, which are universal insofar as they originate in human nature, and their concrete shape, which is historically and culturally conditioned. As a consequence the norms with which the human relations are regulated in ordinances can no longer be regarded as the expressions of absolute laws of life. This is emphasized by the fact that Løgstrup exemplifies the historical relativity of the norms with the upbringing of children. He points out that modern pedagogy has shown that an authoritarian upbringing in our time has adverse consequences, which it presumably did not have in patriarchal society. Therefore an authoritarian upbringing is no longer satisfactory (p. 97). Obviously this insight makes it impossible to maintain the law of obedience as an absolute, divine law of life. And one may suspect that it was not least this insight that made Løgstrup give up the idea of the laws of life. So the laws of life had turned out to be a blind alley to a philosophical ethics. The law of responsibility has come in their stead.

5. The inspiration from Friedrich Gogarten's Politische Ethik

The general background of the replacement of the laws of life by the law of responsibility lies in Luther's ideas of the ordinances and lex naturalis, to which Løgstrup refers himself. However, there is much that indicates that his specific elaboration of these ideas is indebted to Gogarten's Politische Ethik. We have already seen that he refers to this book in his dissertation in connection with what I have called the fundamental structure of his ethics. In the article on Kant's ethics he refers to it again (2017, p. 33 note 6; 1947, p. 156 note 5). What is more important: among his posthumous papers there are no less than five manuscripts (though two of them are almost identical), which deal exclusively with Gogarten's book. There are good reasons to assume that these manuscripts date from the years before the article on Kant's ethics (cf. the appendix at the end of my article). If this is true – and I take for granted that it is – they show that prior to his article, Løgstrup was greatly preoccupied with Gogarten's book. Of course, taken by itself, this does not mean that this book was also a source of inspiration for the article. However, there are so many material similarities that there can hardly be any doubt that this was the case. I shall try to show this in the following.

Let me first sketch an outline of Politische Ethik. Gogarten starts by giving a philosophical account of what he calls: “das ethische Phänomen” (the ethical phenomenon). This phenomenon is defined as “die Forderung des ‘Du sollst’” (the demand: 'you shall'). The demand's ‘you shall' aspect must be distinguished from its socially conditioned content, which Gogarten characterizes with the words: "Man tut das und das" (one does this and that). The demand is to the effect that it is the human being as a ‘thou’, a whole person, who is demanded (Gogarten 1932, pp. 8-9). It is based on the presupposition that I am “dem andern hörig” (belong to the other as his or her servant), and that I am “ihm dafür verantwortlich, in welcher Weise ich ihm hörig bin” (responsible for the way in which I belong to him or her as
their servant) (p. 18). Since no human being fulfils [21] the demand, that is, serves the other with his entire person, the demand reveals “dass ich vor dem Andern schuldig bin” (that I am guilty before the other) (p. 44). In the second part of his book Gogarten elucidates the demand from the viewpoint of Christian belief. Here it appears that the demand’s fundamental idea is that we love God by loving the neighbour with the immediate love with which God has created us (pp. 101-3). Moreover Gogarten now attributes the concrete, socially conditioned demands to the creation ordinances. The ordinance above them all is the state, because the state maintains the order of God’s creation through its legislation and power, so that human life can go on in spite of sin. There is “kein grösseres Geschenk Gottes” (no greater gift from God) on earth than the state (pp. 112-3). This implies that works that are in conformity with civil law are good works, which please God. Yet such works are always sinful works too, because they only conform to the demand in an external sense, not in the proper sense that we serve our neighbour with our entire person.

Turning to Løgstrup’s article on Kant’s ethics, we find several elements that have a counterpart in Politische Ethik. First, just like Gogarten, Løgstrup gives a philosophical account of the ethical demand. Second, just like Gogarten, he determines the ethical demand by means of the idea of the human being’s fundamental responsibility for the other. Third, Løgstrup’s insistence that we shall serve the other for their own sake and not our own lies not far from Gogarten’s claim that the demand demands the whole human being. Finally, Løgstrup’s claim that it is the ordinances that force us into responsible relations corresponds to Gogarten’s assertion that every human being “sich vorfindet als einen, der je an einen anderen Menschen verantwortlich gebunden ist” (exists as someone who is always bound to another human being in responsibility), which he illustrates with the relationship between husband and wife, parent and child, and master and servant (Gogarten 1932, p. 168).

There is no denying that these similarities contain a lot of common Lutheran ideas. Nevertheless I think that the stress on the idea of responsibility and its connection with the ordinances is so specific that the similarities must be taken as an expression of the fact that Løgstrup drew inspiration from Politische Ethik. This assumption is supported by the fact that he refers to this book in his article. He determines responsibility as a relation in which one has responsibility for somebody and is responsible to a third person, and then adds in a note: “It is curious that Gogarten in his ethics, where all considerations are concentrated on [22] the concept of responsibility, does not make a distinction between being responsible for someone and being responsible to someone” (2017, p. 33 note 6; 1947, p. 156 note 5). This criticism derives from one of the manuscripts that deal with Politische Ethik (M3), where Løgstrup blames Gogarten for “not making a distinction between being responsible for another and being responsible to another” (M3, p. 1). This reproach shows that Løgstrup definitely did not relate uncritically to Gogarten’s ideas, but this does not prevent it being the case, of course, that he also drew inspiration from them.

The presumption of inspiration is confirmed when we turn to ED. Here we do not have to find parallels on our own. In one of the abovementioned manuscripts Løgstrup expounds what he considers the central ideas of Politische Ethik. Comparison of this exposition with ED
uncovers a number of striking similarities. I set them out in the order in which they appear in
the manuscript: (1) According to Løgstrup, Gogarten’s book is based on the recognition “that
also good works and not merely bad ones which a human being might do, are done through
the will to be one’s own master”, and therefore are an expression of human revolt against God
(M2, p. 1). Gogarten’s “recognition” corresponds to the idea in ED that every attempt to obey
the ethical demand is an assertion of the will to be sovereign in one’s own life, which is
contradicted by the demand (ED, pp. 146-7; EF, pp. 167-9). (2) According to Løgstrup,
Gogarten determines the demand’s content as: “humans have to live the life of created beings
receiving life and life’s own good works from [God]” (M2, p. 1). This formulation expresses the
core of what I have called the fundamental structure of Løgstrup’s ethics and it corresponds to
the statement in ED that the demand demands that “each of us is to live by continually
receiving his life as a gift” (ED, p. 146; EF, p. 167). (3) According to Løgstrup, Gogarten asserts
that the demand has the twofold sense that it both makes demands of the whole person and
demands specific works. The demand’s first sense reveals the human being’s radical
wickedness, but this “must in no way rescind the law’s demand that we practice the individual
works specified by it” (M2, pp. 3-4; quotation p. 4). This twofold sense corresponds to ED’s
claim that the demand, being radical, points to our guilt (ED, pp. 164-7; EF, pp. 187-91) and –
in correlation with the social norms – determines what we ought to do (ED, pp. 53-63; EF, pp.
65-76). (4) According Løgstrup, Gogarten points out that the specific demands are
“sociologically conditioned demands”, which speak to the individual as “a member of the
circle within which he belongs by virtue of manners and customs” (M2, p. 8). This view has its
counterpart in Løgstrup’s considerations about the historical changeability of the social
norms in ED [23] (ED, pp. 64-104; EF, pp. 77-121). (5) Løgstrup reproduces Gogarten’s idea
that by virtue of their content, the specific demands establish a relation between humans,
which is “a mediate and inauthentic relation insofar as it is mediated by a matter” (M2, pp. 9-
10). This topic recurs in Løgstrup’s reflections about personal and objective mediation in ED
(ED, pp. 39-43; EF, pp. 51-5).

Some of these similarities could be explained by the fact that they derive from a common
source. (3), for example, has its background in Luther’s distinction between the theological
and the political use of the law, and (4) in common historical and sociological knowledge.
However, the remaining parallels are so specific that they can hardly be explained with
reference to a common source. And as Løgstrup himself in M2 points to the mentioned topics
and ideas in Gogarten and later includes them in ED, it can hardly be doubted that his thinking
on these points has been influenced by Gogarten. This is not to say that he merely copied
Gogarten’s ideas – by no means. We have already seen an example of his subjecting them to
critical reflection. Gogarten’s ideas figure in new contexts and appear sometimes in a
transformed shape in ED. However, this does not alter the fact that Politische Ethik must have
been an important source of inspiration, not only for the article on Kant’s ethics, but also for
the conception of the ethical demand as a whole. 19
6. The ethical demand and the social norms

In the article about Kant’s ethics, Løgstrup does not enter into the question as to how the law of responsibility relates to the concrete laws and norms that order social life. We have seen that Gogarten regarded these norms as specifications of the ethical demand and thus as expressions of God’s will. In the mentioned manuscripts Løgstrup does not take a position on this view. However, it is improbable that he assented to it. The article’s claim that – by putting us into a relation of responsibility for others – the ordinances confront us with the demand, does not imply that he regarded the concrete norms of the ordinances as expressions of the demand’s content. Such a view would hardly be in agreement with the recognition of the historical relativity of the norms, at which he had arrived or at least to which he was on his way. Gogarten’s consideration of the social norms as the demand’s content and thus as expressions [24] of God’s will must have appeared all the more problematic to him as the concomitant glorification of the state had functioned as a theological legitimation of Nazism.20 To all appearances the relation between the ethical demand and the social norms was still an open question for Løgstrup in 1947.

In January 1950 Løgstrup gave a series of lectures in Berlin, which were published in the same year entitled Kierkegaards und Heideggers Existenzanalyse und ihr Verhältnis zur Verkündigung (Kierkegaard’s and Heidegger’s Analysis of Existence and its Relation to Proclamation). As indicated by the title, he makes a comparison between Kierkegaard’s and Heidegger’s understanding of human existence. This comparison gives him the opportunity to put forward his view of the ethical demand. It is here that we for the first time meet this view in an elaborated form. And now he addresses the relationship between the ethical demand and the social norms at length.

Against Heidegger, who, as is well known, keeps ethics out of his existential ontology, Løgstrup agrees with Kierkegaard that being human essentially is being demanded. On the other hand he disagrees with Kierkegaard about the demand’s nature. According to Løgstrup, Kierkegaard regards the demand as a religious demand, which we meet in our internal existence and which demands from us that we express our nothingness in relation to God and live our lives in a permanent consciousness of guilt. In opposition to this view, Løgstrup asserts that the demand is an ethical demand, which we meet in our external existence. It does not stem from the social norms but “ist gegeben mit der Existenz des Anderen selbst” (is given with the very existence of the other; 1950a, p. 86). It states “dass alles was unser gegenseitiges Verhältnis zu sagen und zu tun veranlasst, im Dienste des Anderen und nicht um meiner selbst willens geschienen muss” (that everything that our relationship with one another gives me occasion to say and do must happen in the service of the other and not for my own sake; 1950a, p. 86). It does not specify, however, with which words and deeds the other ought to be served. “[D]ie Worte und Taten [sind] nicht von vornherein definiert, sondern müssen von Situation zu Situation von der Verantwortung bestimmt werden” (the
words and deeds are not defined at the outset, but must be determined from situation to situation by responsibility; 1950a, p. 86). What matters is that the responsible person acts from his own insight, which very well can be contrary to the other’s opinion of what serves him or her best (1950a, pp. 84-90).

Here the question arises of how the responsible person’s determination of what she ought to do is related to the social norms. Løgstrup answers this question by means of a distinction between what he later in ED (ED, pp. 57-8; EF, pp. 70-1) calls the ethical decision’s “inward and (...) outward direction”. The “inward” decision concerns the question of whether [25] one will obey to the demand or not, the “outward” decision concerns the question as to with which words and deeds one will serve the other. In connection with the latter question the social norms are relevant. To be sure, they are historically relative. But this does not mean that they have no validity. The reason is that they also represent a “rein sachliche Gesetzmäßigkeit” (purely objective form of lawfulness; 1950a, p. 99), the more so as they are underpinned scientifically in our time. This does not mean, however, that the “inward” decision has no significance for the concretization of the demand. First, the obedience to the demand plays a role for the personal judgment that the application of the social norms often requires. Second, it may make a great difference for the other whether you serve them for your own profit or for his or her sake. Finally, the demand is superior to the objective laws, so that it is the obedience to the demand that has to decide how far you should go by them in the concrete situation (1950a, 96-101).

By these considerations Løgstrup first and foremost emphasizes the ethical demand’s independence of the social norms: the demand does not stem from the social norms, it has its own content, and it appeals to the responsible person’s insight for its concretization. This implies a clear dissociation from Gogarten, who identified the demand’s content with the social norms, as we have seen. By separating the demand from the norms, Løgstrup avoids Gogarten’s problematic sanctioning of the norms and the state. This does not mean that he gives up the validity of the norms. But unlike Gogarten he bases it on the fact that the norms are the expressions of an objective lawfulness. Thereby he revives the idea of *Eigengesetzhlichkeit* from 1934, even though the does not use the term. Now he speaks of “eine Gesetzmäßigkeit, die mit der Naturgrundlage und der kulturellen Gestalt der Verhältnisse selbst gegeben ist und die sich uns mit Notwendigkeit aufzwingt” (a form of lawfulness that is given with the natural basis and the cultural form of relations themselves and imposes itself on us with necessity), which is specified as “je nach der Art des entsprechenden Verhältnisses biologische, pädagogische, politische oder ökonomische Gesetze” (depending on the kind of relation, (...) biological, pedagogical, political or economic [laws]; 1950a, p. 97). The objective validity of the norms is not inconsistent with the demand’s appeal to the responsible person’s own insight, because insightful concretization involves taking such objectivity into account. At first sight this is an elegant solution of the problem of the relationship between the ethical demand and the social norms. However, the question is how far the idea of the objective lawfulness of the norms reaches, and how far it is compatible with the recognition of their historical relativity. Probably it was questions like these which pushed Løgstrup to go on
thinking about the relationship between the demand and the social norms, until he finally arrived at the determinations we meet in ED.

[26] 7. Humanism and Christianity

In June 1950 Løgstrup read a paper entitled “Humanism and Christianity” to a seminar on humanism, which was organized by Hal Koch at Krogerup Højskole. In this paper Løgstrup described the ethical demand as a demand about which humanism and Christianity are in agreement. That he linked the ethical demand with humanism must be seen in connection with a general interest after the war in humanism as a possible basis of values for the rebuilding of the war-torn Western European societies. Hans Hauge has rightly drawn a parallel between Løgstrup’s paper and the post-war publications about humanism by Sartre, Heidegger, Bultmann and Tage Wilhjelm. However, he has not noticed the fact that Koch already in 1946 had written an article entitled “Humanism”, in which he pointed out that Europe, having survived the war and Nazism, now “stands back with empty hands”. And then he writes: “Humanism and Christianity – whatever their mutual relationship, it is them Europe looks to now that the future has to be built and the alliances and declarations of the politicians are blown down as houses of cards” (Koch 1964, p. 115). Considering that Løgstrup and Koch were close friends who engaged in a regular correspondence, it can hardly be doubted that Løgstrup had read Koch’s article. If he had, the choice of his paper’s title could indicate that he understood his subject in the context of Koch’s analysis.

The post-war quest for new values provided also the background for the establishment of the circle of writers behind the journal named Heretica. Ole Wivel, one of its guiding lights, who had participated in Koch’s seminar, had Løgstrup’s paper printed in this journal. That Løgstrup was willing to have his paper published there is a further indication that he understood the idea of the ethical demand in connection with the value crisis after the war. Yet it would be much too far-reaching to trace back his conception of the ethical demand exclusively to that context. As we have seen, it had its roots in his thinking during and even before the war. Of course this does not invalidate the fact that the idea of an ethical demand, which is shared by Christians and non-Christians, acquired new relevance after the war. And the consciousness of this relevance undoubtedly gave Løgstrup an extra incentive to go on with his project.

In “Humanism and Christianity” Løgstrup develops the ideas of his Berlin lectures further on several points. We have seen that in these [27] lectures, he connected the demand with the other’s mere existence. Yet, at the same time he stuck to the idea from 1947 that the demand arises in the context of concrete, ordinance-determined responsibility for others (see 1950a, p. 96). But now, in “Humanism and Christianity”, he takes his point of departure from the fact, with which we are familiar from ED, that “[w]e never have something to do with another person without holding something of their life in our hands” (HC, p. 1; 1950b, p. 456). This means that “in any encounter between people there is a silent requirement”, which is “a demand to take care of this life” (HC, pp. 1, 3; 1950b, pp. 457, 460). It is important to realize
what is happening here. Whereas Løgstrup earlier connected the demand with concrete, ordinance-conditioned responsibility relations, which were taken for granted, he now links the demand to an elementary fact, which nobody really can deny. The responsibility is no longer taken for granted, but is derived from the fact that, in my dealings with others, I cannot avoid influencing their lives. When I influence their lives, I am responsible for how I do it. And according to Løgstrup, this involves the demand that I use my responsibility to the benefit of the other. In a way he here revives the idea of the Berlin lectures that the demand is given with the other’s mere existence. But now he grounds this idea by drawing attention to the individual’s relation to the other: in my relation to the other, the fact that I inevitably influence the other’s life is the reason that I am subjected to the demand that I take care of his or her life.

In his discussion of the question as to how we should take care of the other’s life, Løgstrup now attaches great weight to personal judgment. That the demand is unspoken or silent means that “I myself with whatever I may have left of insight, imagination and understanding must try to get clear about what it involves”. It is “me to whom it is directed and who determines, from relation to relation and from situation to situation, what its content is” (HC, p. 3; 1950b, p. 460). I have to do this on the basis of my own understanding of life. However, this involves me in a conflict, “the conflict between a consideration that is appeasement, acquiescence and flattery, and a ruthlessness that for our own understanding of life’s sake becomes usurpation and abuse” (HC, p. 4; 1950b, p. 463). There is no straightforward solution for this conflict. One can only attempt to solve it through judgment in the situation.

Løgstrup considers everything he has said so far about the demand to be contained in humanism, which he even defines [28] – though only partly – as “a sense for the conflict” (HC, p. 4, cf. p. 1; 1950b, p. 463, cf. p. 456). This raises the question as to how this humanism is related to Christianity. According to Løgstrup, Christianity and humanism agree in their view of humans as responsible beings and about the ethical demand, even as a one-sided demand (HC, p. 7; 1950b, p. 469). The difference is only religious and consists in Christianity’s proclamation of the demand being God’s, and its one-sidedness being due to the fact that God gives us our life and shows us mercy and forgiveness. This is the only difference. In the proclamation of Jesus there are no moral instructions, “nothing that takes away the responsibility from people by a priori resolving the conflicts with which the demand confronts people”. Christianity does not give us “a divinely guaranteed knowledge about what in the given situation should be said and done and how relationships between us shall be ordered” (HC, p. 9; 1950b, p. 473). That would obviously break the silence of the demand and make Christianity an ideology, which helps one “in leaping over one’s own responsibility, one’s own deliberations and efforts, with all their possibilities of failure” (HC, p. 10; 1950b, p. 474).

When comparing these considerations with those of the Berlin lectures, it strikes one that the concretization of the demand is now delegated completely to the individual and that the fixed point has been moved from the “objective” norms to the “subjective” understanding
of life. Similarly, Christianity is denied any guiding function, and the believers are referred to their own considerations and their own responsibility. It seems that Løgstrup distills out the situation-ethical dimension of the lectures. This does not mean that he does not touch on the social norms, but he does so in connection with the claim that the ordering of civil and political life is a purely secular matter. In this context he remarks that secular thinking “has nothing to do with the thesis of social life called ‘laws of their own’ [Eigengesetzlichkeit]. Thinking in a secular way does not mean that man abdicates in favour of things” (HC, p. 6; 1950b, p. 466).24

Løgstrup’s claim that the ordering of civil and political life is a secular matter does not denote a break with ordinance theology. Precisely as creation ordinances, the ordinances are regarded as being accessible to secular reason. But as we have seen, Løgstrup no longer connects the ordinances with the laws of life as created fundamental norms. Now he dissociates himself from the idea of Eigengesetzlichkeit too. The argument seems to be that when the ordering of social life is a secular matter, it is ultimately humans and not objective necessities that determine the social order. [29] As a consequence the ordering of social life is disconnected further from a previously given normativity. Of ordinance theology, only the abstract idea is left that certain relations or institutions (e.g. marriage and the state) are given with creation. This means however that the foundation of the guiding significance of the social norms that Løgstrup advocated in the Berlin lectures has become void. Presumably this is why he now focuses on subjectivity. Yet this hardly implies that he no longer attributes significance to the social norms for the concretization of the demand. As we know, this significance is reasserted vigorously in ED. But there it was to get quite another foundation.

8. The inspiration from Rudolf Bultmann’s Jesus

Through his situation-ethical specification of the ethical demand in “Humanism and Christianity”, Løgstrup places himself in the neighbourhood of existentialist theology. This is not very remarkable, considering that he was affiliated with Tidehverv in these years.25 Yet I think it is possible to point to a more specific source of inspiration: Rudolf Bultmann’s book about Jesus. In ED Løgstrup refers to this book in connection with an exposition of the idea that the individuals themselves have to specify the demand “in each situation” (ED, p. 56 and note 6; EF, p. 69 and note 1). The importance of Bultmann’s Jesus is supported by the fact that, among Løgstrup’s posthumous papers, there is a typewritten manuscript with an account of this book’s principal ideas (M6) – in line with the account of the principal ideas of Gogarten’s Politische Ethik in M2. As the manuscript probably dates from the time before “Humanism and Christianity” and there are many similarities between the manuscript and Løgstrup’s article, I take it that Bultmann’s book was an important source of inspiration for the article (for a further account of the manuscript, see the Appendix).

Let me briefly list the similarities between the manuscript and the article. In the manuscript Løgstrup describes as views of Bultmann’s that the obedience to God’s demand as proclaimed by Jesus is “incompatible with being bound to a formal authority, in casu the Old
Testament Scriptures” (M6, p. 1); that human beings cannot “evade decision and its responsibility by contenting themselves with realizing some ethical principles” (M6, p. 2); that the insight into what should be done “sprouts up [30] from the very decision situation before God in which the human being is placed” (M6, p. 3); that Jesus “does not give ‘new’ ethical demands, in other words, he does not lay down a new ethic of ordinances” (M6, p. 3); that the demands of the Sermon on the Mount are only examples with which Jesus wants to say “that what matters is the obedience which involves the whole person” (M6, p. 4); and finally that “the love commandment does not say anything about love’s content; it does not say anything about what to do to love one’s neighbour and to love one’s enemy; this is left to the human being’s own decision in the concrete situation” (M6, p. 5).26

The repudiation of a biblical ethics that involves specific rules, the emphasis on the individual’s decision in the situation, the stressing of the individual’s responsibility, the claim that Jesus did not lay down new demands for the ordering of life, the application of these ideas to the love commandment – all this recurs in “Humanism and Christianity”. The inspiration from Bultmann is unmistakable. What Bultmann says about the demand of Jesus is transferred to the “human” demand, on which humanism and Christianity are in agreement. However, there is one point on which Løgstrup distinguishes himself from Bultmann. In Bultmann’s view the insight into what to do arises from the situation. By contrast, Løgstrup points to the importance of the understanding of life. He does so on the basis of an interesting critique of dialectical theology, which he had already propounded in 1941 in Prædikenen og dens Tekst (The Sermon and its Text). This critique is to the effect that both Barthianism and decision theology assume “that human life consists of a sequence of disparate situations and decisions” (1999, p. 120). The problem of this assumption is that “one abstracts totally from understanding, the coherent understanding, which is the continuous and growing aspect of human life” (120). If life consisted of decisions of that kind, it would “utterly be smashed to bits” (120). But this is not what life is like. The fateful decision is “a very rare thing. Normally we live, speak and act out of our continuous understanding” (120). When Løgstrup in “Humanism and Christianity” stresses the decision “from situation to situation”, it seems that he has come closer to Bultmann than is allowed by Prædikenen og dens Tekst. However, his referring to the insight one “may have left” involves an essential correction of Bultmann’s view that the insight arises in and through the decision in the moment.27 Løgstrup has certainly drawn inspiration from Bultmann, but by his pointing to the significance of the continuous and growing understanding of life, he transcends him at the same time.

[31] 9. Elucidation of The Ethical Demand

Knowing about Løgstrup’s road to ED throws a clarifying light on several aspects of the book’s conception of the ethical demand. First and foremost it shows that the conception’s originality does not lie in its fundamental ideas. The idea of a demand to love one’s neighbour, which is accessible to all human beings, and this demand’s twofold function of disclosure of sin and the basis for living with the neighbour was an integral part of the Lutheran tradition. The idea
that it is the love of the neighbour that is given with creation, which is demanded, came from Gogarten. The idea of the demand's silence and its appeal to our own responsibility had its background in Bultmann. Finally, the question of the relationship between the demand and the social norms had the Lutheran doctrine of the creation ordinances as its presupposition. The conception's originality lies elsewhere. It lies in Løgstrup's connecting those ideas with our concrete experience of life, whilst especially the two German theologians mentioned above were assigned the role of sparring partners.

So we have come to ED's phenomenological approach. I do not want to give an account of Løgstrup's phenomenology here.28 I shall only point to two ways in which knowledge of the road to ED can throw light on it. First, even though Løgstrup in the book's methodological section neither speaks of Hans Lipps nor of phenomenology, it is beyond doubt that the approach he describes there is marked by Lipps's phenomenology. Here acquaintance with his endorsement of this phenomenology in his dissertation attempt from 1933 can contribute to a better understanding of ED's method.29 Second, in the methodological section Løgstrup points out that you have to make all the distinctions that are needed to understand the ethical demand and not let a single distinction run away with you. This consideration has a polemical aim at a theology which "fixes on one particular perspective and presses it home with mindlessly rigorous consistency" (ED, p. 6; EF, p. 14). Løgstrup does not specify which theologians he is thinking of, but in the light of the road to ED it is beyond doubt that Gogarten is one of them. We have already met Løgstrup's criticism that Gogarten does not make the necessary distinction between "responsibility for" and "responsibility to". That Gogarten is one of those who are under fire appears even more clearly from Løgstrup's blaming him in one of the mentioned manuscripts for the fact that "his thinking to a much too great extent consists in fixing on a single or couple of particular perspectives and pressing them home with mindlessly rigorous consistency, [32] with the result that justice is not done to the concrete circumstances and phenomena" (M4, p. 9).30

The analysis of trust in ED is a good example of Løgstrup's phenomenological approach. I want to dwell on this analysis for a moment, because knowledge of the road to ED can throw light on it. In "Humanism and Christianity", trust plays a role in connection with a clarification of the fact that the demand is "both incomprehensible and mysterious" (HC, p. 7; 1950b, p. 468). The reason is that it not only demands that we take care of the people who meet us with a trust we appreciate, but also when people meet us with a trust that disturbs us, or with distrust or enmity (HC, pp. 6-7; 1950b, pp. 467-8). Here trust only figures as one of the ways in which people meet. In ED, as is well-known, trust has got a more fundamental significance. The reason is that Løgstrup has discovered that showing trust is surrendering oneself to the other – by the way, again inspired by Gogarten!31 This makes him now characterize trust as nothing less than "the fundamental phenomenon of ethical life", from which the demand arises (ED, p. 17; EF, p. 27). Yet the new role of trust does not annul the demand in those cases where people meet one with distrust or enmity. This idea from "Humanism and Christianity" returns later in the book (ED, pp. 44-5; EF, pp. 56-7). Here it appears that not just the other’s
self-surrender in trust, but rather the very fact of being surrendered, is the fundamental phenomenon of ethical life.32

It is almost superfluous to point out that it is Luther’s and Gogarten’s theological concept of love that makes comprehensible something one otherwise would wonder at: that Løgstrup’s “human” demand is not merely a demand to take care of the other’s life as well as one can, but a radical demand to do so exclusively for the other’s sake. The same theological background also makes comprehensible why Løgstrup regards the demand as unfulfillable: it is the radicalness of sin that prevents us from fulfilling the demand in a radical sense. Therefore our attempts to obey the demand can never be more than a compromise, in which the demanded works are done from all sorts of – more or less selfish – motives other than love. The radicalness of sin stands out especially sharply in what Løgstrup, obviously inspired by Gogarten, calls “the sharpened contradiction”: the very fact that I try to obey the demand is already an assertion of my will to be sovereign, which cuts across the demand that I live my life by continuously receiving it (ED, pp. 143-7; EF, pp. 164-9). Of course it is also Luther who is the one behind the fact that, in Løgstrup, the demand both has [33] the function of convincing us of our guilt and, thereby, referring us to the Gospel (ED, pp. 207-17; EF, pp. 232-43), and the function of serving as the basis of our civil life. When Løgstrup concerns himself with the demand’s latter, practical function, it may sometimes seem that he nevertheless thinks that the demand can be fulfilled in conscious obedience, for example when he speaks of social norms that can be complied with to the other’s benefit, “only if we are indeed moved by concern for him” (ED, p. 61; EF, p. 74). However, acquaintance with his Lutheran background makes clear that this would be a misrepresentation. As he puts it in another context: “[A]t best all kinds of other motives have a way of getting mixed up with the will to obey the demand” (ED, pp. 107-8; EF, p. 125).

It is in connection with a determination of the demand’s practical function that Løgstrup goes into the question of the relationship between the ethical demand and the social norms, which he passed over in “Humanism and Christianity”. First he reprises the idea that the demand’s silence means that it is up to us ourselves to find out how, in a given situation, we serve the other best. In this connection he elaborates on his considerations in “Humanism and Christianity” of the significance of the understanding of life and the conflict between appeasement and abuse (ED, pp. 20-8; EF, pp. 31-9). But now he supplements these considerations with an entire chapter entitled “The Radical Character of the Demand and the Social Norms”. He begins by stating that the demand’s silence implies that it is not expressed by the social norms. The demand leaves the specification to the individual. This statement is clearly directed at Gogarten. Therefore it is hardly accidental that Løgstrup here expressly leans on Bultmann (ED, p. 56 and note 6; EF p. 69 and note 1). Yet, he continues, there is also “the most intimate connection” between the demand and the norms. Here he reprises the idea of the Berlin lectures that the ethical decision has an “inward” and an “outward” direction, and that the outward direction is concerned with taking care of the other’s life through words and actions “of a concrete, appropriate, and reasonable kind” (ED, p. 57; EF, p. 70). This requires one to take account of the social norms. But now their normativity is not founded on
the idea of *Eigengesetzlichkeit*. Instead, Løgstrup points out that you can only serve the other appropriately if you know something about the content of their life and the expectations and problems implied in it. The other’s content of life is itself determined by “the spiritual content” of the different relations and institutions within which they have grown up. Now, it is the function of the social norms to protect these relations and institutions. By protecting them they protect their spiritual content. And since it is precisely this spiritual content that has been determinative for the other’s content of life, the social norms protect the other’s content of life as well. Therefore, Løgstrup concludes, the social norms will in many cases “serve as a guide in helping us to decide what will best serve the other person” (ED, p. 58; EF, p. 71).

This is undeniably a complex argument, which can seem rather abstract. It can be elucidated, however, by elaborating on an example which Løgstrup himself gives further on in his book. He points out that it belongs to our time’s view of passionate love that it can only be fulfilled in free reciprocity (ED, pp. 67-73; EF, pp. 80-87). This idea is a part of the “spiritual content” of our time’s view of love, that is to say, the ideal of life with which our culture has invested it. Now, this ideal co-determines the content of life for those who enter into a love relationship, because they have grown up with our time’s view of love. It determines the expectations they have of a love relationship, and the demands they make on each other. Therefore it is a part of taking care of the other’s life in a love relationship that you respect your partner’s demand for voluntariness. Here the social norms can have a guiding significance, because they protect the “spiritual content” of love relationships. For example, we find it morally reprehensible to encumber a person with whom you have fallen in love with manifestations of love she does not return. And the ideal of voluntariness is protected institutionally by the legal provision that a marriage only can be contracted with the consent of both partners. In this way the social norms can give us guidance on how to concretize the demand that we take care of the other’s life.

Thus Løgstrup justifies the guiding significance of the social norms by connecting them with the insight into what serves the other best, using the “spiritual content” of the relations and institutions as the link. At the same time this justification does full justice to the historical relativity of the norms, because the other’s content of life – and, consequently, that which serves them best – is regarded as a function of changing, culturally conditioned ideals of life. Just as in the Berlin lectures, as a further reason for the guiding significance of the norms, Løgstrup states that scientific critique in our time can lead to their improvement. I shall not dwell on this. More important is the question as to how the idea of the guidance of the norms relates to Løgstrup’s stress on the importance of the understanding of life for the concretization of the demand. After all, a person’s understanding of life is not necessarily in agreement with the social norms. Indeed, if you recognize with Løgstrup that understandings of life can differ individually, will not there then inevitably arise conflicts between these and the norms, which precisely as *social* norms are equal for all? In other words, isn’t there a latent tension between the “subjective”, Bultmannian, and the “objective”, Gogartenian, line of thought?
Løgstrup has seen the problem, of course, and addresses it at the end of the section on the guidance of the social norms. He remarks that the application of a social norm in a concrete situation often requires a judgement, and in that case the understanding of life plays a role. However, in order to be able to play this role, one’s understanding of life must be co-determined by the spiritual content of the relations and institutions. In this way our individual understanding of life is attributed an independent role in relation to the norms, which role is conditional, however, on a fundamental conformity with the ideal of life the norms are to protect. Løgstrup recognizes that such conformity does not always exist. He exemplifies this with the middle-class upbringing of children to be “well-behaved”, which is contrary to the norms that are connected with the ideal that the child be brought up for its own sake. Yet he does not use this discrepancy to problematize the guiding significance of the norms. He restricts himself to stating that one’s personal understanding of life preferably should “be on a level with the understanding of life on which the social norms are based” (ED, p. 59, translation modified; EF, p. 72).

So far the focus has been on the guiding significance of the social norms. This raises the question of whether the “inward” decision, which concerns the very obedience to the demand as the motive of one’s actions, has any significance at all for the content of one’s actions. Løgstrup answers this question by elaborating on some of the arguments of the Berlin lectures. In many cases, he says, compliance with the norms demands judgement, and then the motive plays a role. Some social norms can even be complied with only if you are moved by the demand’s motive: considering the other for the other’s sake. This applies for example to the upbringing of a child to independence. Løgstrup concludes by pointing out that the guidance of the social norms can fail totally. When norms do not follow changes of the spiritual content of the relations and institutions, their protection can turn into violence. The unspoken thought is of course: Here obedience to the demand requires that one act against the norms (ED, pp. 60-63; EF, pp. 73-76).

[36] Through these considerations Løgstrup makes clear that obedience to the demand sets bounds to the guiding significance of the social norms. Obedience to the demand can even turn against the norms. Notice, however, that Løgstrup here thinks of the situation in which the norms do not follow the changes of the spiritual content of the relations and institutions. The demand’s critique does not concern the spiritual content as such. This leaves the impression that, in ED, Løgstrup does not reckon with the possibility that the demand can come into conflict with society’s overarching ideals. This impression is confirmed by his assertion, further on in his book, that the demand is refracted through the spiritual content of the different specific relationships through which we are related to one another, such as spouses, parents and children, etc., and that the demand “is furthered” (ED, p. 108; EF, p. 125) here. By the way, Løgstrup’s speaking of “the specific relationships”³⁵ lays bare the ordinance-theological roots of his view of the guidance by the social norms.

Is not the great importance Løgstrup ascribes to the spiritual content of the relations and institutions for the concretization of the demand, incompatible with the historical relativity of the social norms? We have seen that it was his recognition of this relativity that
made Løgstrup give up the idea of absolute laws of life. In ED, as is well-known, he
demonstrates this relativity with an entire chapter about the changeability of the norms.
However, this does not make the question of the guiding significance of the norms any less
burning. Does not the changeability of the norms mean that they cannot have obligatory
force? Løgstrup addresses this question at the end of the chapter in question, and answers it
with a clear no. The reason is that the spiritual content of the relations and institutions, which
determines our perception of good and evil, has become integrated into our personality.
Therefore we cannot, or only to a very restricted extent, replace it. If we did, we would lose a
part of ourselves. This means that the spiritual content’s specification of good and evil and the
corresponding norms for me as an individual have a kind of absoluteness, regardless of their
being relative from a historical point of view (ED, pp. 100-104; EF, pp. 116-120). Løgstrup
concludes:

[W]e cannot get rid of the traditional content in any area. If we were to lose the tradition in
which we were reared and which has shaped us, we would lose ourselves. We can belabour the
tradition, we can be critical of it and correct it: we can and should [37] judge and criticize it. But
we are not able to replace it.

In the course of history the spiritual content is changeable. But within an individual
person’s own life it is largely unchangeable, in a certain sense absolute. There is no return route
(ED, pp. 104-5, translation modified; EF, p. 120).

Here Løgstrup recognizes on the one hand the possibility of relating critically to the tradition,
indeed, he even urges us to do so. But on the other hand he maintains that in the individual
person’s life the spiritual content cannot, or only to a very restricted extent, be replaced. The
reason is that otherwise we would lose our identity. Thus Løgstrup’s discussion of the guiding
significance of the norms ends with what could be called a pragmatic justification of this
significance.

Løgstrup’s attempt to mediate between Bultmann and Gogarten ends in an almost
Hegelian *Sittlichkeit*, in which the moral subject has herself guided freely by “objective”
historical norms. Løgstrup’s “synthesis” impresses by its integration of many different
notions, such as the individual’s personal responsibility, the role of the understanding of life,
the motive’s significance for the specification of action, the normativity of the social norms,
but also their historical relativity. This is not to say, however, that there are no problems. Let
me mention three.

First, Løgstrup’s justification of the guidance of the norms depends on the idea that, by
virtue of our common socialization, the other and I at least basically are in agreement about
what is good and evil. But isn’t this at variance with the idea that the other and I can have
quite different opinions of what serves them best – which idea, as we have seen, was the
presupposition of Løgstrup’s emphasizing that I have to consult my own understanding of
life? Second, Løgstrup’s defence of the guidance of the norms builds on the conception of a
homogeneous society, where people agree about the spiritual content of the relations and
institutions. But is this a realistic conception? At any rate this does not apply to the pluralistic
society of our time. But even Løgstrup's Danish society was hardly as homogeneous as he makes it look. Actually, this shines through his own reflections about upbringing, as they reveal the presence of at least three different views of the relationship between parents and children: an authoritarian, a middle-class, and what could be called a liberal one (Løgstrup's own). Finally one can ask if there isn't a tension between Løgstrup's assertion that we can replace our traditionally conditioned content of life [38] only to a very restricted extent, and his appeal that we relate critically to the tradition and, if necessary, correct it. Løgstrup would perhaps answer that there is, but that this is an unavoidable tension we must learn to live with. But then one can ask if human beings after all are not more flexible than Løgstrup imagines, so that, to some extent, they can integrate new values in their personality, when they have dissociated themselves from old ones. Didn't Løgstrup himself do this in a way, when he replaced the ideal of authoritarian upbringing with the ideal of a more liberal one?

Through his thesis that the spiritual content of the relations and institutions and the corresponding social norms have a more or less absolute significance for the individual person's concretization of the ethical demand, despite all his criticism, Løgstrup ends up in the neighbourhood of Gogarten. Therefore it is comprehensible that Gustaf Wingren could put Løgstrup's conception of the relationship between the ethical demand and the social norms on the same footing as Gogarten's, and blame both thinkers for supporting an ordinance theology that uncritically accepts the existing social order (Wingren 1958, p. 204 note 5). In a reply in Kunst og etik (Art and Ethics), Løgstrup refers to the fact that, in contrast to Gogarten, he has problematized the relationship between the ethical demand and the social norms in ED. He even contends that the ethical demand can give rise to "a devastating criticism of customary norms and institutions" (2007, p. 36, cf. pp. 34-9; 1966, p. 223, cf. pp. 220-5). Even though this reply can connect with the statements in ED that the guidance of the norms can fail and that we should relate critically to the tradition, it seems to me that Løgstrup by his speaking of a devastating criticism has moved away from ED's basically conservative position. Løgstrup's speaking in this way can be said to initiate a more social-critical development in his ethical-political thinking. But that is another story.36

Appendix

The microfilm collection at the Løgstrup Archive contains 5 manuscripts that deal with Friedrich Gogarten's Politische Ethik, and one manuscript that deals with Rudolf Bultmann's Jesus. For the sake of convenience I dub these manuscripts M1-M6. They can be identified by means of their codes in the collection, which are given in their description.
A hand-written manuscript of 52 pages (XIV.6.9.2.1.2). The manuscript consists of 5 parts: (1) an extract of Politische Ethik with comments (7 pp.); (2) a sermon concerning Luke 15:11-32 for the 3rd Sunday after Trinitatis 1942 [4 pp.]; (3) 4 notes to the following critical reflections [3 pp.]; (4) critical reflections [31 pp.]; (5) critical reflections [6 pp.]. As for the date there are two things that point to the first half of the 1940s. First, in (1) Løgstrup speaks of “Livet selv, det skabte Liv” (life itself, created life), which are central concepts in the dissertation from 1942, and of “Livslove” (laws of life), a concept that appears in 1941 and which Løgstrup dropped at the latest in 1946. Second, (2) dates from 1942. Its inclusion in the manuscript is due to the fact that Løgstrup refers to this sermon in (4). This means that (4) must have been written after (2). Of course there can be a certain spread in time between the component parts. It is for example natural to assume that (1), being an extract, was written before the dissertation, in which Løgstrup refers to Politische Ethik. However, because of the presence of the mentioned concepts this part can hardly date from before 1940. For these reasons the manuscript probably must be dated to the first half of the 1940s.

M2

A type-written manuscript of 12 pages entitled “Gogartens politiske Etik” (Gogarten’s Political Ethics) (XIV.6.9.2.1.4). The manuscript gives a systematic account of the principal ideas of Gogarten’s Politische Ethik. According to the Løgstrup Archive’s data base on the microfilm collection, the manuscript dates from the 1940s. Its systematic and summarizing character makes it natural to assume that it was written after M1. If we take it that Løgstrup wrote an account of the book’s principal ideas before he formulated his criticism of some specific issues in M3 and M4, the manuscript must be dated to the period 1942-1947.

M3

A type-written manuscript of 3 pages entitled “Kritik af Gogartens Tale om Ansvar” (Criticism of Gogarten’s Talk of Responsibility) (XIV.6.9.2.1.3). According to the Løgstrup Archive’s data base on the microfilm collection, the manuscript dates from the 1940s. As its criticism is presupposed in Løgstrup’s considerations about the concept of responsibility in the article “Antropologien I Kants etik” (The Anthropology of Kant’s Ethics), the manuscript probably dates from the time before the article’s publication in 1947.

M4

A type-written manuscript of 32 pages entitled “Gogartens Redegørelse for Embedsæren I ‘Politische Ethik’” (Gogarten’s Account of the Honour Attaching to Offices in Politische Ethik) (XVII.12.1.14). The manuscript consists of two parts, entitled “Fremstilling” (account) and
“Kritik” (criticism), respectively. There are good reasons to assume that this manuscript dates from the first half of the 1940s. The major ones are: (1) Løgstrup speaks about honouring one another through having “den Tillid til hinanden, at vi vil leve, tale og handle menneskeligt” (the trust in one another that we will live, speak, and act humanely; p. 28). This is an idea that we meet in Folkeliv og Udenrigspolitik (Folk Life an Foreign Policy; 1943a, pp. 9-10) in almost the same wording. (2) Løgstrup brings in Luther’s view about the relationship between parents and children, referring to several works of his and citing him for stating that “Gud ikke simpelthen befaler at elske Forældrene, men at ære dem” (God does not simply command you to love your parents, but to honour them; p. 29). The article “Forældre og Børn” (Parents and Children) contains an abstract of Luther’s idea that children ought to honour their parents, with many of the same wordings as in the manuscript (1946, p. 10). As this abstract summarizes Luther’s ideas on this issue, it is probable that the manuscript preceded the article. If so, it must date from before the article’s publication February 1st 1946.

M5

A type-written manuscript of 32 pages entitled “Gogartens Redegørelse for Embedsæren I ‘Politische Ethik’” (Gogarten’s Account of the Honour Attaching to Offices in Politische Ethik) (XVIII.7.9.1.7). The manuscript is identical to M4, but with a few hand-written corrections. The presence of these corrections means that it must be dated to the time after M4.

[41] M6

A type-written manuscript of 12 pages (XXI.13.1.2). The manuscript consists of two parts: (a) an account of the conceptions of decision and the commandment of love in Bultmann’s Jesus from 1926. This part bears the type-written title “Bultmann”. Its pages are numbered 1-7. (b) an account of the concept of casuistry in connection with Bultmann’s view that Jesus’ specifications of love are exemplifications rather than directions. This part bears the hand-written title “Kasuistik” (Casuistry). Its pages are numbered 1-5. As b (which presupposes a) has a reference to N.H. Søe’s Kristelig Etik (Christian Ethics), the manuscript as a whole must date from the time after the publication of this book in 1942. On the other hand the striking similarities between the ideas of Bultmann’s that Løgstrup describes in the manuscript and his article “Humanisme og Kristendom” (Humanism and Christianity) from 1950 indicate strongly that the manuscript preceded the article (unless one assumes the improbable thing that Løgstrup formulated these ideas first in the article and described them afterwards in a special manuscript about Bultmann’s book). For these reasons I date the manuscript between 1942 and 1950.

Translated by Kees van Kooten Niekerk
Notes

1 This version involves some slight revisions of the Danish original.
2 The dissertation process is described in Hansen 1996, pp. 44-9; 77-9; 89-92; 93; 98-103 and 107-10.
3 Here and in the following, years on their own refer to Løgstrup’s publications. However, The Ethical Demand and its Danish original Den etiske fordring are referred to as ED and EF, respectively. Moreover, the English translation of “Humanisme og kristendom” (Løgstrup 1950b) is referred to as HC. Quotations from Danish texts that have not been translated into English are given in my translation.
4 By a “human” (Danish: "human") ethics Løgstrup means a philosophical ethics, which is accessible to all human beings, independently of Christian belief. For this terminology, cf. Løgstrup 2007, pp. 10-11.
5 Løgstrup’s criticizes Scheler’s understanding of love as a human ideal and inherent quality on the basis of the theological view that God creates love in the believer from moment to moment (1931, pp. 137-55). This view was clearly inspired by Karl Barth’s Römerbrief (see Barth 1926, pp. 475-86).
6 For Løgstrup’s relationship to dialectical theology see Widmann 2005, pp. 125-33.
7 For the creation ordinances, see Althaus 1965, pp. 43-8 and Bayer 2003, pp. 110-5. Bayer points out that Luther did not regard the state as a creation ordinance but as an ordinance of necessity made necessary by the fall (pp. 112-3). For Eigengesetzlichkeit, see Rosenau 1999 and Honecker 1999.
8 In these reflections Løgstrup connects with Emil Brunner’s Das Gebot und die Ordnungen from 1932, but he elaborates Brunner’s ideas in his own way.
10 Grønbech describes Jesus’s proclamation of the Kingdom of God as “giving is the law of life”, “giving includes forgiving”, “giving is serving, never commanding” (Grønbech 1935, pp. 20-1), and contrasts this way of living to purposive, cultural life (pp. 61-67), and interprets the “shall” of the love commandment as “the matter of course that shall and must be” (p. 91). Grønbech’s influence by no means implies that Løgstrup embraced his view of life uncritically. Whilst Grønbech characterized Jesus as “the enemy of culture” (p. 61), Løgstrup stated that Jesus did not have a negative attitude to cultural life (2011, p. 151). Moreover, at least later, when he declared that “spontaneity does not figure in human existence as an indeterminate surge of life” (2007, p. 54/2013, p. 99), he dissociated himself explicitly from Grønbech’s notion of “a freely flowing life” (Grønbech 1935, pp. 23-4). Finally, it makes a difference, of course, that Løgstrup interpreted Grønbech’s “natural” life theologically as created life.
11 The I-Thou philosophy, also called philosophy of dialogue, was a movement in German philosophy, which arose in the 1920s. Its main representatives were Martin Buber (1878-1965) and Ferdinand Ebner (1882-1931). In opposition to the dominant philosophical focus on subjectivity, for example in Kantianism, it claimed that a human being can be a true “I”, a self-conscious person, only through a relation of dialogue with the other as a personal “Thou”. In the third part of his dissertation Løgstrup uses this philosophy’s ideas about existing in dialogue as the point of departure for an account of “the Jewish-Christian cognition of God in the dialogue of revelation” (2011, p. 207).
horizon of dialectical theology” (133). Both Brunner and Gogarten wrote books about ethics.

Løgstrup and theology, Peter Widmann notes the inspiration from Gogarten, but he does not specify it (Widmann 2005, p. 127). The article as a whole is fine, but it is not true that “it was he [Løgstrup] alone who was able to develop issues of ethics and philosophy of religion in the horizon of dialectical theology” (133). Both Brunner and Gogarten wrote books about ethics.
In 1933, the year after the publication of *Politische Ethik*, Gogarten declared his support to “Die Deutsche Christen” (The German Christians), who backed Nazism. Still in the same year, however, he withdrew his support.

In 1950 Hal Koch was the principle of Krogerup Højskole (the Folk High School of Krogerup), and it was he who invited (or rather compelled!) Løgstrup to present a paper at the seminar on humanism. Koch’s letter with the invitation has been published in Løgstrup and Koch 2010, pp. 219-20.

See Hauge 1992, pp. 219-221. Tage Wilhjelm was a friend of Løgstrup’s, who, like Løgstrup, was affiliated with Tidehverv at that time. In 1949 Wilhjelm had published an article about Christianity and humanism in Tidehverv’s journal. Tidehverv was a Danish theological movement parallel to Swiss-German dialectical theology. Cf. Niekerk 2007, pp. 62-3.

For further discussion of *Heretica*, Wivel and Løgstrup, see Juul 1998, pp. 11-21 and 70-75.

This idea returns in ED, pp. 109-10 note 3; EF p. 127 note 1.

Cf. Jensen 2007, pp. 33, 36-7 and 65-6. For Tidehverv, see above, note 22.

The quotations relate to Bultmann 1926, pp. 69-92.

Cf. for example Bultmann’s statement: “Jetzt gilt es zu wissen, was zu tun und zu lassen ist, und irgendwelche Masstäbe aus dem Früher oder aus dem Allgemeinen gibt es nicht” (Now you have got to know what to do and what not, and there are no standards from earlier or from the universal at all) (Bultmann 1926, p. 83).

Andersen 2005 gives a fine survey of Løgstrup’s phenomenology.


In EF, p. 14 Løgstrup uses the same expression as here: “at drive et enkelt synspunkt monomant igennem”. To bring out the parallelism in my translation I have followed ED’s free but correct wording.

Løgstrup (ED, p. 9 note 1; EF, p. 18 note 1) refers to Gogarten 1948, p. 108. Gogarten himself does not employ the idea of surrender in trust as the basis of the ethical demand. This connection is Løgstrup’s own achievement. Gogarten proceeds by speaking of the love commandment’s lack of reciprocity (pp. 108-111), and this may very well have inspired Løgstrup’s reflections about the one-sidedness of the demand.


The Danish expression is “det sjælelige indhold”. ED translates alternately: “psychic content” and “spiritual content” (58-9), which is confusing, because it obscures the fact that Løgstrup employs one and the same expression. I prefer the translation “spiritual content”, because Løgstrup thinks of culturally embedded ideals for living rather than merely psychologically entertained ideals. Had he lived in our time, he would probably have spoken of values.

This appears from the fact that, in connection with his considerations about encroachment, Løgstrup reckons with the possibility that the other does not share one’s understanding of life (ED, p. 22; EF, p. 33).

Danish: “egenartede relationer” (EF, pp. 124-5). ED’s translation: “unique relationships” (pp. 107-8) is not correct.

For an account of the development of Løgstrup’s ethical-political thinking the reader is referred to Niekerk 2009.
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