Rival Conceptions of the Self in MacIntyre and Løgstrup

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0. Introduction

In his 2007 paper, Alasdair MacIntyre asks, ‘what might a Thomist learn from reading Løgstrup?’ His answer is that while Aquinas agrees with Løgstrup ‘that there is such a thing as the ethical demand’ built in to our face-to-face encounters, Aquinas ‘does not supply…any account of what it is from a first-person standpoint to be confronted by the ethical demand and consequently of what is involved in recognizing the demand as and for what it is rather than failing to recognize it’ (MacIntyre 2007 150). And since Løgstrup’s 1956 *magnum opus*, *The Ethical Demand*, is centrally concerned to offer a phenomenological account of the ethical demand considered from the first-person standpoint, MacIntyre reasonably concludes that ‘It is here that the work of [Løgstrup] is indispensable’ (*Ibid.*).

The tone of cheery ecumenism adopted here, however, is deceptive. For MacIntyre quickly acknowledges the profound disagreements separating his own brand of Thomism from Løgstrup’s Luther-inspired ethics, which he dutifully itemizes before launching into a swingeing critique of some of the central tenets of Løgstrup’s construal of the ethical demand. Yet, despite these deep-running disagreements, MacIntyre maintains that nonetheless Løgstrup has something important to offer the Thomist. Namely, his perspicuous phenomenological account of the ethical demandingness built in to the face-to-face encounter. Moreover, MacIntyre thinks that he can appropriate aspects of this account into the normative framework of his Thomist ethics in a relatively ‘pain free’ manner.

In this presentation, I will argue that MacIntyre’s Thomism cannot appropriate Løgstrup’s phenomenology of the ethical demand so easily. This is because Løgstrup’s phenomenology of the ethical demand is inextricably rooted in a conception of the self antagonistic to
MacIntyre’s own, where, for Løgstrup, recognizing the demand ‘as and for what it is rather than failing to,’ as MacIntyre puts it, *constitutively involves* recognizing that the self exists in a certain way.

1. *MacIntyre’s Conception of the Self*

I shall begin by outlining MacIntyre’s conception of the self. MacIntyre first articulated his conception of the self in *After Virtue*, where he canvassed a now familiar *narrative* conception of the self. Central to this conception is the thesis that ‘man in his actions and practice is an…essentially story-telling animal,’ where in exemplary cases man, through his actions and practices, engages in the task of unifying the narrative embodied in his life. Thus, as Galen Strawson has put it, the narrative conception of the self is composed of (1) a ‘descriptive, empirical thesis,’ namely; that we are in fact story-telling animals and (2) a ‘normative, ethical claim:’ that we ought to live our lives narratively (Strawson 2004 248). These two claims are in turn underwritten by what MacIntyre earlier in the book characterizes as a threefold teleological scheme definitive of human nature. This threefold scheme consists of three aspects which MacIntyre takes to be necessary for the intelligibility of ethical life. They are: (a) Human-nature-as-it-happens-to-be (i.e., human nature in its untutored state), (b) transformation by the instruction of practical reason and experience, and (c) human-nature-as-it-could-be-if-it-realized-its-*telos*. The narrative conception of the self, then, consists in the claim that what it is to be a self is to engage in actions and practices in light of an awareness of those actions and practices as enactments of one’s developmental journey from an untutored state towards the human *telos*.

In his most recent treatise, *Dependent Rational Animals*, MacIntyre integrates the abovementioned threefold teleological scheme more intimately into his narrative conception of the self. Now, MacIntyre portrays the central narrative of human life in terms of a development from a state of animal dependency towards becoming an independent practical
reasoner. This central narrative motivates MacIntyre’s articulation of the so-called ‘virtues of acknowledged dependence,’ where the virtue of Misericordia – the showing of uncalculating generosity to other humans ‘in extreme and urgent need,’ whomever they are, whether friend or stranger, is a leading example. For MacIntyre, in exercising these virtues we properly acknowledge the way we have in the past and will in the future depend on conditions beyond our power for our own chances to flourish as agents. Thus, to acknowledge that we owe uncalculating generosity to others in need is, for MacIntyre, to have a well-unified narrative conception of ourselves as the fundamentally dependent creatures that we are, notwithstanding our relative independence, here and now. We might say that according to MacIntyre’s view, we are partly dependent in that throughout our lives we depend on others for our own chances to flourish as agents. But that, equally, we are partly independent in that we have the capacity for rational agency.

It is with respect to the virtues of acknowledged dependence, such as Misericordia, that MacIntyre sees the need for Løgstrup’s moral phenomenology. For it follows from MacIntyre’s definition of Misericordia as uncalculating generosity that one’s showing of such generosity in response to the urgent need of the other cannot be motivated out of a sense of one’s having been similarly in urgent need in the past or by the possibility of finding oneself in urgent need in the future, since such rationalizations appear to be precisely calculating. Rather, Misericordia must be expressive of a genuine and spontaneous concern for the other and their well-being. In other words, a primitive responsiveness to the urgent needs of others is constitutive of Misericordia. Plausibly, then, MacIntyre is keen to mine Løgstrup’s phenomenology of the ethical demand for resources to account for the immediate and pre-reflective ethical appeal of the presence of the other presupposed by virtues such as Misericordia.
2. Løgstrup’s Conception of the Self and the Function of the Ethical Demand therein.

But is MacIntyre entitled to Løgstrup’s moral phenomenology, if it is to be put to work in this context? What I now want to suggest is that Løgstrup’s phenomenology of the ethical demand is rooted in a conception of the self that is antagonistic to MacIntyre’s narrative conception, where the availability of Løgstrup’s moral phenomenology for MacIntyre’s project will, thus, be put into question.

Løgstrup’s conception of the self emerges principally out of an intense engagement with Martin Luther’s theology and Søren Kierkegaard’s philosophy of existence. From Luther, Løgstrup took the idea that the self is simultaneously wholly sinful and wholly justified. That is; while in our own eyes we are sinners *through and through* and, as such, there is nothing we can do in order to become righteous, in the eyes of God we are justified – our sins forgiven.

We are, in other words, totally dependent on God’s grace for our salvation. Løgstrup’s ostensibly secular appropriation of this idea has it that while at the ontological level, *life* or human existence is wholly good – as manifest in phenomena such as trust and love, at the anthropological level, the self is wholly selfish and wicked. And, correlative, Løgstrup emphasizes the extent of our dependence on the basic givens of our existence – such as trust and love – and of our dependence on other people for the possibility of goodness. In contrast to MacIntyre’s Thomist conception of the self, then, on Løgstrup’s broadly Lutheran conception there is no possibility of virtuous self-development or self-cultivation. An independent capacity for rational agency, in virtue of which we can move towards the good is alien to Løgstrup’s philosophy. Rather, for him we are *totally* dependent on something external to ourselves for salvation. And, thus, to conceive of our lives *narratively* as lives that we ourselves have in some way crafted with a view to the human *telos* runs directly counter to this Luther-inspired conception of the self.
A further dimension of Løgstrup’s conception of the self begins to emerge from this. Namely that for Løgstrup – as for Luther – the self is relational. What it is to be a self for Luther is to stand coram Deo in an ongoing relation with God, where, again, Løgstrup seeks to offer a ‘strictly human’ version of this in terms of the face-to-face encounter. The embryonic relationality implicit in the Lutheran conception of the self is developed in Kierkegaard’s philosophy, from whom Løgstrup also learned much. As per his notoriously convoluted definition, Kierkegaard conceives of the self as an ongoing synthesizing activity of the finite and the infinite, the temporal and the eternal that relates itself to itself. And in relating itself to itself, it relates to another – namely, the power that established it, which, for Kierkegaard, is God. So construed, the self is seen not as a ‘fixed entity’ or substance but rather as an ongoing ethical task of becoming, where this ethical task is oriented by an infinite demand arising from one’s standing before God as a sinner and as guilty. As Løgstrup puts it in his lecture course on Kierkegaard, ‘it belongs to human existence as finite to be placed under an infinite demand. Only in this way is man a spirit, a self’ (KHE 24). Note well: the ongoing task of becoming a self should not be thought of in teleological terms, but rather as a task that repeatedly renews itself.

As we have anticipated, Løgstrup’s variation on this Kierkegaardian theme is to suggest that we need not – and indeed should not - construe the infinite demand constitutive of selfhood primarily in terms of a relation to God. Rather, we should construe it more concretely in terms of a relation to the other person, where this more concrete relation can then be seen to involve the worldly needs of the other as part of the infinite ethical demand. Thus, Løgstrup writes in opening pages of The Ethical Demand that ‘the individual’s relation to God is determined wholly at the point of his relation to the neighbour’ (ED 4).

From what we have seen, then, we can offer the following Løgstrupian conception of the self. What it is to be – or rather become – a self is to stand in an ongoing relation to the other, characterized in terms of an infinite ethical demand. Contrary to MacIntyre’s
understanding, then, we are not confronted by the ethical demand only in emergencies, but rather *continually* – in virtue of our thoroughgoing wickedness. That is; selfhood is not something to be achieved or a task to be discharged, but it is rather a task that repeatedly renews itself in every iteration of the face-to-face encounter. True; the ethical demand does draw our attention to the other and their needs. But more fundamentally it holds a mirror up to the self, illuminating its selfishness and, thus, stimulating the ethical task and spiritual trial that, for all Lutherans, is the mark of human selfhood.

I hope that the intimacy between Løgstrup’s phenomenology of the ethical demand and his conception of self is beginning to become clear. Their intimacy can be further clarified by drawing attention to Løgstrup’s four-fold characterization of the ethical demand as silent, radical, one-sided and unfulfillable. These four characteristics comprise the core of Løgstrup’s phenomenology of the ethical demand. And to my mind this set of characteristics is really only intelligible when viewed in light of Løgstrup’s Lutheran-inspired conception of the self. By way of illustration, I will briefly consider the demand’s unfulfillability.

This characteristic was singled out by MacIntyre as being ‘incoherent,’ in that it flouts the principle of ‘ought implies can,’ and, thus, is apt to ‘baffle’ the one confronted by an unfulfillable demand, where this may compromise the demand’s normative force. In short, for MacIntyre, the unfulfillability of the demand is un-intelligible. And MacIntyre’s suggestion is that we should simply discard this aspect of Løgstrup’s conception of the demand. Yet, following a broadly Lutheran line of thinking the unfulfillability of the demand makes perfect sense. For what the demand demands is that we love the neighbour. It demands, in other words, uncalculating, selfless generosity. Yet, to be confronted by the needs of the other in terms of a demand is a sign of one’s already having failed to manifest the uncalculating, selfless generosity required for loving the neighbour – and in a way that cannot be recuperated. The demand is a sign of our selfishness. The demand condemns us as guilty before the other in the same way that for Luther the Decalogue, being likewise
unfulfillable, condemns us as guilty before God. As Løgstrup puts it: ‘the demand demands that it be itself superfluous’ (BED 69).

My point is: The unfulfillability of the demand, along with its silence, its radicalness, and its one-sidedness, is not simply an adornment which can be discarded while otherwise retaining Løgstrup’s phenomenology of the ethical demand. Rather these characteristics constitute the core of that phenomenology. And what that phenomenology points to is not just that there is such a thing as an ethical demand – but that we are confronted by the ethical demand in the way that we are because we exist as selves in a particular way that we do.

3. Conclusions

To conclude: what I hope to have shown by this discussion is that what it is to be confronted by and to recognize the ethical demand for Løgstrup is rooted in a conception of the self antagonistic to MacIntyre’s own. For MacIntyre recognition of the ethical demand is seen as a sign of virtue in a self. Indeed, MacIntyre holds that being responsive to the other out of a sense of uncalculating generosity comes as the product of the cultivation of and habituation to Misericordia. In contrast, for Løgstrup being confronted by the ethical demand is a sign of the self’s thoroughgoing wickedness and selfishness. Importantly for Løgstrup, no such possibilities for self-cultivation exist. Rather, the ethical demand, for Løgstrup, signals precisely the impossibility of such self-cultivation given our irrepressible knack for selfishly ‘seeking ourselves in everything’ and, thus, our need for help from outside of ourselves for the possibility of self-transformation. The very essence of Løgstrup’s account of the ethical demandingness of the face-to-face encounter, then, is part and parcel of a particular conception of the self, antagonistic to MacIntyre’s own.

Given this, it seems to me that if MacIntyre strips away the problematic aspects he sees in Løgstrup’s moral phenomenology – and we have considered only one such aspect here; its unfulfillability, he will have stripped away everything distinctively Løgstrupian about the
ethical demand. He will, in other words, be left simply with the assertion that there is such a thing as the ethical demand, with no real clues as to what is involved in recognizing the demand as and for what it is rather than failing to recognize it, where this then returns MacIntyre back to square one.

**Bibliography**

1) Abbreviations


2) Other Texts Referenced


