

Liberation from the Self: Sin as *Incurvatus in Se* in Luther and Løgstrup

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A good place to begin is with the title of the symposium at which this discussion was first aired: 'Liberated by God's grace'. This title captures two important aspects of my focus here: first the idea of liberation and the need for us to be liberated, and second the idea that the vehicle for that liberation is God's grace. The title for the symposium was of course chosen to reflect two key Lutheran themes—but in this discussion, I want to connect those themes to a twentieth-century Danish philosopher and theologian K. E. Løgstrup, to show briefly how Luther's thoughts were taken up and developed within a later context, as just one example of the 'living' nature of the Lutheran tradition.

My aim here is to compare Luther and Løgstrup on the theme of sin and grace, and to argue that while Løgstrup wanted to stay close to Luther in many respects, he offers a secularized version of Luther's picture. This then raises the question of whether Løgstrup's approach can work, and whether he can offer a stable and coherent position. I will begin by saying a little about Løgstrup, who I am sure may be an unknown figure to many of you. I will then briefly outline Luther's view of sin and grace, and then say something about Løgstrup's view. I will end by considering whether Løgstrup's position is stable and satisfactory, and thus how far he succeeds in extending Luther's thinking in a more secular direction.

Who was Løgstrup?

Løgstrup was born in Copenhagen in 1905. He was influenced by the phenomenological movement (including Max Scheler and Martin Heidegger, with whom he studied before the war), as well as Kierkegaard and also Luther and Lutheran theology. He was a Lutheran pastor from 1936 to 1943, and then from 1943 he was professor in the theology faculty at the University of Aarhus, where he stayed until he died in 1981. As is clear from his dates, he lived through the Nazi occupation of Denmark, where he worked on the side of the resistance. His main work is *The Ethical Demand* which was published in 1956 and is available in English;¹



he subsequently published several other books and articles, dealing with ethics, political philosophy, art, and metaphysics, all of which connect to theology in various ways. He is described by the Danes as ‘world famous in Denmark’, by which they mean while he is widely read and studied in Denmark (and to some extent in Scandinavia more generally), he is little known abroad, though international interest in his work is growing, and I personally think he deserves more serious consideration than he has received until now.

As I have mentioned, Løgstrup worked within the Lutheran tradition, and was influenced not only by Luther himself, but also more contemporary Lutherans such as Friedrich Gogarten, Karl Barth, Rudolph Bultmann, and fellow Danish Kierkegaardians who also drew on Luther, such as K. Olesen Larsen. In theological terms, Løgstrup is often classified as a ‘creation theologian’, which means not that he was a creationist, but that he emphasized how God can be found in the created world, and not just outside it in revelation. Here he was partly influenced by the thinking of the nineteenth century theologian and writer N. F. S. Grundtvig, and his slogan: ‘Human comes first, and Christian thereafter’.² This meant that when it comes to Luther, Løgstrup particularly focuses on Luther as a natural law theorist, citing Luther’s remark that ‘nature teaches, as does love, that I should do as I would be done by’.³ At the same time, Løgstrup also draws heavily on Luther’s account of sin and grace.

I will now turn to the second section of my discussion, to an outline of Luther’s position on sin and grace.

Luther on sin and grace

Luther’s account of sin and grace is part of his ‘theology of the cross’, as contrasted with the ‘theology of glory’. To put this distinction in rather schematic terms: according to the theology of glory, the will is able to choose between good and evil; virtue is attainable through human effort; righteousness is internal and deserved; and Jesus’s crucifixion is a helpful exemplary aid to Christianity and the Christian, but not essential to it.

By contrast, according to Luther’s theology of the cross: the will is morally bound; virtue is attainable only through God’s grace; righteousness is therefore external and given; and the cross is a necessary sacrifice to attain human redemption and enlightenment.

Given this contrast, on Luther’s account human beings cannot make themselves good through their own efforts, but require God’s grace, which is undeserved and unearned, leading to a doctrine of ‘imputed righteousness’ as necessary in response to our sinfulness. What is the nature of that sin? For Luther, it is that we are curved



in on our ourselves (*incurvatus in se*), and thus are prideful, anxious, self-concerned, self-absorbed. One of the effects of this sinfulness is to cut us off from God; but another effect is more worldly and ethical: being turned in on ourselves, we are hereby cut off from others, thereby making it impossible to love our neighbour in the way that God requires. It is therefore only if God frees us from this self-concern that we can relate ethically to one another.

What is the source of this sinfulness? At one level, of course, it is the fall. More specifically it is anxiety about God's forgiveness, an anxiety famously reflected in Luther's so-called 'tower experience'. He is freed from this anxiety by coming to see that God's righteousness is not a matter of punishing sinners, and rewarding the faithful based on their works, but rather a matter of grace or unearned forgiveness: 'the passive righteousness with which the merciful God justifies us by faith'.⁴ Given this doctrine of grace, our anxiety about salvation drops away, and thus with it the 'curving in on oneself' that this anxiety fuels. This enables us to open up to others, and so love our neighbours. It is tempting to think that Luther was generalizing from his own case here: having been freed from his own anxiety by his new conception of God's grace, he felt able to leave the life of the monastery in which he had been fixated on his own sinfulness, and go out into the world to become a married family man with wide social and ethical connections.

Luther's view on sin and grace can therefore be nicely summarized by what he writes in the Lectures on Romans: 'Nor can [man] be freed from his perversity (which in the Scriptures is called curvedness, iniquity, and crookedness), except by the grace of God'.⁵

Løgstrup

Turning now to Løgstrup, I will suggest that he accepts Luther's conception of sin as *incurvatus in se*, but does so within a more secular framework, raising the question whether this is compatible with his other Lutheran commitments, and whether Luther's model can be made to work in this secular form and so be incorporated into modern ethics.

How far Løgstrup is working in a secular manner is a disputed matter, and certainly not all his works are intended to be secular. In *The Ethical Demand*, he begins by saying that he is setting out to develop his position in 'purely human terms', and argues that unless we can make sense of Jesus' proclamation to love the neighbour in such terms, it would amount to coercion and obscurantism. He then claims that what makes sense of Jesus' proclamation is a key fact about our existence, namely our interdependence—and in understanding that interdependence, we can understand what the proclamation is asking of us, and



what ‘love of the neighbour’ involves, namely an ‘ethical demand’ that he says is radical, silent, one-sided and unfulfillable.⁶

In broad terms, therefore, Løgstrup may be seen as following Grundtvig’s prescription of ‘human first, Christian thereafter’—namely, rather than beginning with a religious revelation and basing our thinking on that, we should begin by understanding the nature of human existence and seeing what light that sheds on Christian teaching. For, from a religious perspective, that existence tells us as much about God as a creator, as anything we can learn from revelation on its own.

However, while taking this step in a secular direction, Løgstrup seeks to retain the Lutheran conception of sin as *incurvatus in se*, and agrees with Luther that this is a fundamental part of the human constitution. As he puts it in *The Ethical Demand*, in terms clearly designed to echo Luther: ‘Nothing can be subtracted from human wickedness. The self brings everything under the power of its selfishness. The human will is bound in this.’⁷ For Løgstrup, therefore, as for Luther, the self needs to undergo some kind of transformation from outside itself, for it to be freed from its inturnedness—and unless this happens, it will be incapable of any goodness, and thus of meeting the demand to love the neighbour.

Where Løgstrup differs from Luther is in his account of how this transformation of the self from ‘inturnedness’ to ‘outward facing’ can take place. On Luther’s account, as we have seen, this occurs through God’s grace and our consciousness of that grace – and obviously that requires a commitment to a theological framework. But what is interesting is to see how Løgstrup tries to achieve something similar, but in a more secular manner.

To do so, Løgstrup distinguishes what he calls ‘the wickedness of human beings’ from ‘the goodness of human life’. That is, while Løgstrup holds that we are wicked, he holds that life itself is good, and capable of making us good. By ‘life’ here, he means the fundamental way in which our lives as human beings are structured, so that despite everything we may do to mess things up, love, trust, compassion and so on are possible for us. Thus, as Bjørn Rabjerg has put it: Løgstrup was an ‘ontological optimist’ but an ‘anthropological pessimist’—that is, life is good, but we are wicked: life can overcome our wickedness, in a way for which we cannot claim any credit.⁸

This then leads to a secularized Lutheran picture. That is, we are not made good by God, but by life—nonetheless it is still not something we can bring about for ourselves, and we still have bondage of the will. This is still compatible with a theological picture, as of course one could think that life is only good in this manner because it is created by God—but the picture does not *require* this theology to make sense, in a way that Luther’s does. This straddling of the theological and secular, or the ability to sit comfortably within either or both, is a very interesting move.



But still, one might ask, how does life overcome our wickedness? How does this work in Løgstrup's account, if it does not happen through grace? The answer is: it takes place through the ethical encounter with the other person, which enables us to be freed from ourselves. Løgstrup makes this basic idea clear in one of his early notebooks, in a way that is then elaborated through the rest of his work:

We say that human beings are unfree in the way they conduct themselves. This is to say that a human being is imprisoned within themselves. —Human beings are their own prisoner; this is the hopelessness of existence, because it means that we are incapable of freeing ourselves—any attempt to do so will only imprison us even further in ourselves. Cf. Luther's struggle with monasticism. Because we ourselves can do nothing but imprison ourselves more and more in bondage and reflection and self-absorption, in short: in pride. —We can only be freed by our fellow human beings. We can only free our fellow human beings – and through him and her be freed from our imprisonment in ourselves ...

Freedom is given to us by our fellow human beings—by serving him and her, or by getting involved with each other.⁹

So, this is what 'the goodness of human life' consists in: life is structured so that despite our self-concern, this can be overcome through the ethical encounter with others, who from outside free us from our imprisonment within ourselves, through re-focusing our attention from ourselves to the other person. Løgstrup also thought something similar was possible through art and nature (and those who know Iris Murdoch's work on 'attention', and behind that Simone Weil, may notice important similarities here).

Here we find in Løgstrup a secularized analogue of grace, where the individual is transformed from self-concern and inturndness not through grace, but through the encounter with the other, and thus equally through a process beyond their control, and for which they can claim no credit—all the credit here goes to the 'goodness of human life' that makes such encounters possible.

Problems?

I hope I have made Løgstrup's view intelligible, and shown how it fits within the Lutheran tradition while extending it in interesting ways. Finally, and very briefly, let me consider how far it succeeds and raise one worry.

This worry might be put as a question concerning explanation. In Luther's account, as we have seen, there is in effect a 'two stage' process: we are first transformed by grace, and this makes it possible for us to love our neighbour. But in Løgstrup's account, there is just one stage: the 'goodness of human life' means the encounter with the other person overcomes our wickedness. But, the more orthodox



Lutheran might ask—how does this happen? What explanation can Løgstrup give for this transformation? Because Luther’s account is two stage, he can use the first (namely God’s grace) to explain the second—but Løgstrup has no such structure, so seems to have no explanation to offer of how it is we come to love our neighbour? Indeed, Løgstrup’s position may seem incoherent, for if we are really as inturned as he suggests, how can the predicament of the other person get through to us at all?

And likewise, the Lutheran can offer more of an explanation for our wickedness than seems possible for Løgstrup—namely our anxiety about our salvation, which seems a pretty plausible account of why it is that we are ‘inturned’. But Løgstrup may seem to offer no such account, and just claim that we simply are wicked and so inturned, without explaining why—and so he may seem to have an unjustifiably pessimistic view of human beings, as that pessimism seems to be lacking in any grounds.

This dialogue between Luther and Løgstrup thus raises some significant questions, about how far any such secularizing project can go, and thus how far our liberation, if it is to be possible at all, must be through God’s grace, rather through our encounter with other people.¹⁰

Notes

- 1 See *The Ethical Demand*, translated by Theodor I. Jensen and Gary Puckering; revised with an introduction by Hans Fink and Alasdair MacIntyre (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1997). For a more detailed study of Løgstrup’s life and thought, see Robert Stern, *The Radical Demand in Løgstrup’s Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). A new translation of *The Ethical Demand* is forthcoming, translated by Bjørn Rabjerg and Robert Stern (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020)
- 2 See N. F. S. Grundtvig, ‘Menneske Først’, translated in his *Selected Writings: N. F. S. Grundtvig*, edited by Johannes Knudsen, Enok Mortensen, and Ernest D. Nielsen (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), pp. 140–1.
- 3 Martin Luther, *On Secular Authority*, in *Luther’s Works*, American edition, 55 vols (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress Press, 1958–86) [hereafter LW] 45: 128/D. *Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 65 vols in 127 (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau, 1883–) [hereafter WA] 11:279.
- 4 Luther, ‘Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther’s Latin Writings’, LW 34:337/WA 54:186.
- 5 Luther, ‘Lectures on Romans’, LW 25: 313/WA 56: 325.
- 6 See Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, Introduction and Chapter 1.
- 7 *The Ethical Demand*, p. 141, translation modified.
- 8 See Bjørn Rabjerg, ‘Løgstrup’s Ontological Ethics: An Analysis of Human Interdependent Existence’, *Res Cogitans*, 17 (2017), pp. 93–110.
- 9 Løgstrup, Notebook XXV.3.1 (1938-39?), p. 34
- 10 For further discussion of issues raised in this paper, including further references, see Bjørn Rabjerg and Robert Stern, ‘Freedom from the Self: Luther and Løgstrup on Sin as “Incurvatus in Se”’, *Open Theology*, special issue on ‘Rethinking Reformation’, 4 (2018), pp. 267–79.

