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What is human in human beings?

1. Løgstrup Meets Moral Anthropology

In the final discussion at the conference "Moral Engines: Exploring the Moral Drives in Human Life," held at the Aarhus Institute of Advanced Studies in June 2014, philosopher Thomas Schwartz Wentzer asked the anthropologists present if they above all scholars should not satisfactorily answer the question "What is a human being?" before starting to reflect on the question "What is ethics?" My question to Thomas Schwartz Wentzer would be whether the two questions are so closely linked that in offering an answer to the first, we have already answered the second.

In this article I will show the interrelatedness of these two core questions in theology, philosophy, and anthropology, by placing the reflections of the Danish philosopher and theologian K.E. Løgstrup (1905–81) on human beings, human life, and ethics in the context of the large and still expanding field of moral anthropology. Although Løgstrup is well known by some anthropologists working with moral anthropology, the discussion of ethics and human beings in this field has much to gain from an engagement with the central points of Løgstrup's thought, which have not yet been fully developed as he is currently read in moral anthropology. Furthermore, Løgstrup scholars would also find it rewarding to examine his method of phenomenology and his claim about certain universalities in human life in the context of concrete ethnographic fieldwork, with a view to seeing if his phenomenological claims about human life can be verified – or falsified – in this way.

2. Moral Anthropology

In his article of 2002, "For an Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom," anthropologist James Laidlaw criticizes anthropology for not having developed a body of theoretical reflection on the nature of ethics. His article is seen as the starting

point for a new field of research known as moral anthropology, the anthropology of ethics, or the ethical turn in anthropology. Since the turn of the millennium, this field has developed as a fruitful discussion between anthropologists and philosophers, as well as an ongoing debate within the field of anthropology itself.

Central questions are: How can we define "ethics"? What is freedom? What is a human being? What is the place of the ethical in human life? These questions could also be summed up in a paradox, or binary opposition. In anthropologist James D. Faubion's words:

> It has various terminologies. Philosophically, we frequently encounter it as the opposition between "determinacy" and (indeed) "freedom." Social scientifically, it's more familiar as the opposition between "structure" and "agency".[1]

Several anthropologists have pointed to the surprising fact that until the publication of Laidlaw's article in 2002, the concept and indeed the question of freedom had been almost completely ignored by anthropologists. This stems from the very strong influence of Émile Durkheim, whose conception of the social identifies the collective with the good. According to Laidlaw, one consequence of the Durkheimian view is that the concept of "the moral" for anthropologists means both everything and nothing. What Durkheim has left the anthropologists with is "Kant with the freedom taken away".[2] In his most recent book, *The Subject of Virtue*, Laidlaw has pinpointed anthropology's long tradition of a blind spot on the subject of freedom in human life – and brought his own bittersweet comment on this:

> Whatever one thinks one is doing, one is always in fact playing a maximizing game in such a way as to reproduce the structures in which one is placed (…) It is therefore a relentlessly watertight explanation of a world in which it would be a miracle if anything were ever to change, one also from which cruelty, pride, and jealousy are quite as absent as love, and in which, I am pleased to report, we do not in fact live.[3]

Hence, central to the ethical turn in anthropology is a discussion of how, and in what ways, human beings are free ethical subjects.

2.1 Positions

Before the development of the ethical turn, there were two main models for addressing ethics within anthropology. The British tradition, mainly inspired by Durkheim, linked ethics to social rules – so heavily that "anthropologists were

1 Faubion, Anthropologies, 438.
2 Laidlaw, Anthropology, 313.
3 Laidlaw, Subject, 8.

unable to distinguish the ethical from the entire realm of the social".[4] In the American anthropological tradition, relying on Franz Boas, questions of ethics were reduced to debates over cultural relativism.[5] Anthropologist Michael Lambek summarizes both these models as Kantian: "Both the Boasian and the Durkheimian approaches have strong roots in Kant".[6] There was thus a strong focus on the rational in anthropology's treatment of ethics. The ethical turn in anthropology, broadly speaking, went back to Aristotle in order to "take ethics to be fundamentally a property or function of action rather than (only) of abstract reason".[7] This has given rise to a wide variety of "moral anthropologies." Generally, a renewal of virtue ethics has inspired a number of positions, in many of which Michel Foucault plays a central role, for instance in James Laidlaw's recent book. Here, Laidlaw draws both on a Foucault-inspired genealogy and on the Anglo-American tradition of virtue ethics, specifically on Bernard Williams.[8]

In what follows, I will unfold two of the many variations of moral anthropology in order to discuss their definitions of ethics, freedom, and human beings: Laidlaw's *virtue ethics* position, and *ordinary ethics,* as represented by Michael Lambek and Veena Das. I will also briefly touch upon Jarrett Zigon's *ethics of dwelling.* The field of moral anthropology is voluminous and still growing, so a complete overview of it is not possible here.[9] My aim in unfolding two positions which to an extent can be rendered as typical of certain tendencies within moral anthropology is to make possible a conversation between moral anthropology and Løgstrup's thought on ethics and moral anthropology. Hopefully, both Løgstrup's admirers and the anthropologists can benefit from this. As Michael Lambek has put it, anthropologists in these years "attempt a collective conversation" with philosophers on ethics.[10] For a deeper discussion and a more adequate picture of what can be said on such important topics as ethics and human life, this conversation should include theological perspectives as well. Not because theologians claim that the theological human being is the ideal human being; rather, because they claim to be able to see and discuss features in human life that are universal.

4 Lambek, Introduction, 12.
5 For a discussion on and a critic of the idea of moral relativism, see Laidlaw, Subject, 23 ff: "The second obstacle to sustained progress in the anthropology of ethics is the idea of 'relativism' as the anthropologist's ex officio stance on moral life and as a sort of disciplinary membership badge."
6 Lambek, Introduction, 13.
7 Lambek, Introduction, 14.
8 See Laidlaw, Subject.
9 For a survey of the field, see for instance Lambek, Introduction; Fassin/Léze 2014.
10 Lambek, Introduction, 5

2.1.1 Virtue Ethics

In his highly praised book, *The Subject of Virtue,*[11] Laidlaw reaches his own position in the broad field of moral anthropology by criticizing a number of positions, both classic and contemporary. As already noted, he is not impressed by anthropology's previously narrow, almost naive description of ethics either as equated with the social (Durkheim) or dismissed as a question of cultural relativism (Boas). Both positions neglect the obvious and important role of freedom and reflection in human life. And as Laidlaw's subtitle "For an Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom" indicates, he wishes to highlight the role of human freedom when speaking of ethics. Although Laidlaw himself introduces a version of virtue ethics,[12] he also advances a harsh critique of Alasdair MacIntyre's version of virtue ethics[13] for not recognizing the inevitable moral pluralism of people's lives. Moreover, according to Laidlaw, MacIntyre departs from the Aristotelian foundation for virtue ethics when he replaces critical argument and reflection with the authority of the traditions, especially the religious traditions, thus placing all the weight of explaining people's ways of acting and reasons for acting as they do on *habituation:*

> It is possible, according to MacIntyre, to live a life that may be coherently "conceived as a whole" only if the practices, narratives, and institutions one lives within are in turn integrated within what he calls a "tradition".[14]

In formulating his own position, Laidlaw closely follows Foucault and his theory of *subjectivation,* which implies a heavy focus on *techniques of self-formation.* These practices:

> permit individuals to effect, by their own means, a certain number of operations on – their own bodies, their own souls, their own thoughts, their own conduct – and this in a manner so as to – transform themselves, modify themselves, and to attain a certain state – of perfection, happiness, purity, supernatural power.[15]

> (…) ethics: consist of the ways individuals might take themselves as the object of reflective action, adopting voluntary practice to shape and transform themselves in various ways.[16]

11 See the discussion of the book in "Book symposium", HAU Journal of Ethnographic Theory Vol. 4 (1) (2014) 429–506.

12 For a general introduction to virtue ethics, see Laidlaw, Subject, 48ff.

13 His most influential work is *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory.*

14 Laidlaw, Subject, 63.

15 Foucault, Ethics, 177, 255, cited in Laidlaw, Subject, 101.

16 Laidlaw, Subject, 111.

These quotations make it obvious why anthropologist Cheryl Mattingly has named Laidlaw's position "an ethics of the self".[17] Mattingly criticizes Laidlaw, and others on the Foucauldian path in moral anthropology, for placing "such stress on the subjectivation as the primary ethical project"[18] – a critique with which it is hard, from almost any theological point of view, not to agree.

From a narrower Løgstrupian point of view, we must ask, is ethics not first and foremost about the Other rather than about the Self?[19] Doesn't the fact that we can talk about "ethics" show the unfreedom of human beings? Or, looking to Løgstrup's *sovereign expressions of life*, you can even say that this self-shaping and having oneself as the very center of one's own life has nothing to do with ethics at all. On the contrary, being constantly engaged with shaping and transforming oneself in various ways must be seen as something that pulls you away from what human life is really all about. These claims will be further developed below.

"The claim on which the anthropology of ethics rests is not an evaluative claim that people are good: it is a descriptive claim that they are evaluative".[20] Initially, this sounds reasonable. However, anthropologist Webb Keane has criticized the subject who emerges from Laidlaw's reflections:

> The subject of virtue is thus not merely a human who evaluates, but one who is self-constituting. Laidlaw means self-constitution in a specific way: "[H]uman reflective consciousness means that we 'step back' from and evaluate our own thoughts and desires, and decide reflectively which desire we wish to have and to move us to action".[21]

Keane is critical of this way of understanding ethics as "a private feeling about oneself" (2014, 451). He calls for a way to "place ethical life within a social world without going back to the social determinism that Laidlaw rejects" (Keane 2014, 451).[22]

In his attempt to free the ethical subject from being forever trapped in the Durkheimian reproduction of social structure, Laidlaw wishes to show that his subject of virtue is free in shaping their life, their body, their mind, and their soul. Thus what ethics is all about is a free subject's self-shaping.

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17 Mattingly, Deliberation, 477.
18 Mattingly, Deliberation, 479.
19 Laidlaw knows and opposes this critique of Foucault: see Laidlaw, Subject, 115ff.
20 Laidlaw, Subject, 3.
21 Keane, Freedom, 450, citing Laidlaw, Subject, 148.
22 This third way is the project of Keane's own research, which is part of *ordinary ethics,* see Keane, Minds, and below. But according to anthropologist Jarrett Zigon, *ordinary ethics* doesn't solve the problem: "… there must be some way of distinguishing moralities/ethics from social activity in general while at the same time not turning it into a transcendental realm" (Zigon, Ethics, 749).

From a Løgstrupian point of view, however, human beings do not constitute themselves; they are always already constituted as interdependent beings, since human life is first and foremost a life among and with other human beings, with whom one is intertwined. But before going deeper into Løgstrupian perspectives on human beings and ethics, we will turn to the ordinary ethics approach.

2.1.2 Ordinary Ethics

> I argue that ethics is an intrinsic dimension of human activity and interpretation irrespective of whether people are acting in ways that they or we consider specifically "ethical" or ethically positive at any given moment.[23]

Locating the ethical as a dimension of everyday life, and thus grounding it "in agreement rather than rule, in practice rather than knowledge or belief"[24], ordinary ethics builds on the approach of ordinary language philosophy, whose proponents include J. L. Austin, Ludwig Wittgenstein and more recently Stanley Cavell. Ordinary ethics, though siding with Aristotle against Kant in situating ethics in action rather than in reason as a natural and implicit aspect of the human condition, does not at all agree with the Aristotle-inspired positions of virtue ethics. These are criticized on the grounds that they place too much emphasis on the self-shaping element in ethics.

2.2 Michael Lambek

Summing up his experiences in his ethnographical fieldwork over many decades, Lambek concludes that the people he has met have routinely attempted:

> to do what they think right or good (…). Put another way, they have acted largely from a sense of their own dignity; (…) and they have treated, or understood that they ought to treat, others as bearing dignity of their own.[25]

The assumption that people want to *do good* raises the question of criteria. What counts as the ethically good? And whence come criteria? Lambek argues that ethics are intrinsic to human life because there are always criteria already in place: some come from mind or reason, some from experience. Criteria for what counts as good or right are given with life itself. "In the ordinary course of events, criteria are implicit, internal to judgment itself, but they are also available for conscious discernment and deliberation".[26] If ethics and criteria are intrinsic to

23 Lambek, Ethics, 42.
24 Lambek, Introduction, 2.
25 Lambek, Ethics, 40.
26 Lambek, Ethics, 43.

human life, human life must be constituted as something definite prior to and independently of people shaping or defining it. Lambek cites Wittgenstein asserting that “our form of life and our criteria are one”[27], which, according to Lambek, indicates the fundamental given-ness of ethics. So, one could ask from an ordinary ethics point of view, how would human life and human beings be defined? Since everyday speech and everyday action necessarily imply both a speaker/actor and a receiver, it seems that human intertwinement must be recognized as a human condition. Lambek could be influenced here by Hannah Arendt, on whom he draws in order to explain what it means to live and act as a human being.

According to Arendt,[28] beginning, forgiving, and promising are three of the most significant characteristics of human beings. This is closely linked to Arendt’s recognition of human plurality or intertwinement as a human condition – “for no one can forgive himself and no one can feel bound by a promise made only to himself”.[29] Arendt sees the ability to act, to take an initiative, to begin, as a fundamental principle of freedom for human beings. But to begin and to act have consequences, namely the ethical consequence that to act bears the burden of the irreversibility and unpredictability of the act. My actions have consequences for others; I can never undo an act. The only possible redemption from this is the faculty of forgiveness. To forgive is a new, unpredictable, unconditioned act.

Lambek sums up his own understanding of ethics and human life in opposition to both classic and contemporary positions in anthropology:

> By contrast to those who have seen the substance of ethics as either values or rules, or as the freedom to break away from the obligation of adhering to rules, I have argued that the ethical is intrinsic to human action, to meaning what one says and does and to living according to the criteria thereby established.[30]

There is no doubt that ordinary ethics, not least in Lambek’s version, extends the field of the ethical in the direction of the universal, claiming that ethics are internal to human life. In that sense, this way of addressing the ethical is closer to a Løgstrupian view than either that of Durkheim/Boas or Aristotle/Laidlaw. This is clear in ordinary ethics’ immediate recognition of the Other rather than the Self as the central person when talking of ethics, and consequently in Lambek’s critical view on the notion of human freedom:

27 Lambek, Ethics, 44.
28 Arendt, Human.
29 Arendt, Human, 237, cited in Lambek, Ethics, 52.
30 Lambek, Ethics, 61,

> We are never free insofar as we are always already spoken, spoken to, and spoken for; we are always free insofar as we are always already responsible for exercising our practical judgment.[31]

However, the fundamental assumption that people want to do good and are capable of doing it when they act by answering when spoken to, is still too positive a view of human nature, according to Løgstrup. For him, it is even more problematic to talk about human freedom, as I shall show below.

2.3 Jarrett Zigon

An interesting voice in moral anthropology is Jarrett Zigon. Some would place him among the anthropologists of ordinary ethics, since he wishes to critically address both the Durkheimian path in moral anthropology and the Foucault-inspired critique of that path. But according to Zigon himself, he is not a follower of ordinary ethics.[32] Zigon is inspired by Løgstrup and Heidegger, among others, in formulating his thoughts on moral breakdown[33] and on an ethics of dwelling.[34] The human condition is being-in-the-world, which according to Zigon can also be described as involvement or involved dwelling. Dwelling in the unreflective comfort of the familiar; dwelling in one's relationships with others, is the state of being that human beings desire; dwelling is even an ethical imperative for human existence.[35] When this dwelling is interrupted, we can talk of a *moral breakdown,* in which the subject hears the ethical demand and is called to act so as to re-establish the state of dwelling in the unreflective mode of everyday life.[36] Zigon thus focuses on the distinction between the unreflective moral dispositions of everyday life (dwelling) and the conscious ethical actions performed in the ethical moment – in the moral breakdown of the state of dwelling.

Zigon agrees with ordinary ethics in claiming the immanence of ethics in everyday life. He disagrees, however, when it comes to defining what is meant by this immanence. Zigon's suspicion is that ordinary ethics is grounded on the Kantian transcendental moral philosophy that it wishes to overcome:

> (…) there is a built-in assumption to the ordinary ethics approach that "we already know" what ethics/morality is and so there is no need to provide an analytical means for recognizing what counts as morality/ethics in any particular situation.[37]

31 Lambek, Ethics, 62.
32 See Zigon, Ethics.
33 Zigon, Moral breakdown.
34 Zigon, Ethics.
35 Zigon, Ethics, 758
36 Zigon Moral breakdown.
37 Zigon, Ethics, 751.

According to Zigon, advancing an analysis of what counts as ethics and morality is precisely what the anthropological study of ethics should be doing.[38]

It seems that Keane's critique of Laidlaw's virtue ethics for being only a "private feeling about oneself" could also be applied to Zigon's ethics of dwelling, even if Zigon seems to recognize intertwinement as a human condition. Thus, Zigon's focus on a subject's own dwelling in the world fails to recognize the Other as the most important person in the subject's own life, which is one of Løgstrup's main points. For Zigon, the re-established dwelling in one's relations to others is important for a person's own sake, rather than from the point of view of the Other.

Before turning to Løgstrup himself, we will look briefly at the thought of anthropologist Veena Das, which is very interesting in the context of a Løgstrupian discussion.

2.4 Veena Das

Veena Das is usually positioned within the field of ordinary ethics. Perhaps her reflections on the ethics of everyday life as a kind of vague ethics from below are more accurately placed on the border of ordinary ethics. Das draws on philosophers Ralph Waldo Emerson and Stanley Cavell. She pays attention to what is at stake in people's striving throughout life, in which everyday life is seen as an achievement rather than something to be taken for granted. She is highly skeptical of any ethical reflections that rely on rule-following or technologies of self-shaping – broadly speaking, of any kind of idealism. As she puts it:

> I think the usual paths that moral theory takes with its "ought" and "should" simply do not suffice. The paths to a moral life do not lie here in either rule following or taking recourse to technologies of self-making, but rather in the attentiveness through which one ties one's own fate to that of the Other.[39]

Moreover, Das is skeptical about the tendency to set up an opposition between being in the midst of action and standing apart in moments of reflection. The question is whether action and reflection are to be separated in this way. Furthermore, you can ask whether it is ever possible to track the motive for a particular action through critical reflection.

To support her ethics of everyday life, Das tells a story from her fieldwork among low-income families in Delhi:

38 Central in Zigon's critique of *ordinary ethics* for being Kantian is a discussion on the notion of 'dignity'; see Zigon Ethics, 755.

39 Das, Ethics, 492.

> Manju's eldest son was having an affair with a girl in the neighborhood who was from a different caste. Also, rather than being a dutiful son, he was more of a vagabond, a footloose character who could never hold a job for long. In contrast, his younger brother was very sober and stable and contributed consistently to the family income. Manju and her husband were completely opposed to the prospects of a "love marriage" for the elder son, but the boy used all kinds of threats, including that of suicide, so they bent to his will. Unfortunately within two days of the marriage the girl ran away with another man with whom she was also having an affair, taking away with her the jewelry that had been gifted in dowry and also stealing the jewelry that Manju had given her for wearing during the wedding. I will not go into the details of the negotiations with the girl's family, the police reports they had to file, the suicidal depression in which the son fell, but, instead, fast forward to an event one and a half years later. It transpired that the man she had run away with sold all the jewelry. They ran out of cash at the end of the first year, having traveled to various places and lived lavishly in fancy hotels. The girl became pregnant and at that point her lover abandoned her. Neither his parents, nor her parents were willing to give her refuge. Her parents did support her till the birth of the child, but then threw her out of the house. Manju said that one evening she found that the girl had come back and was sitting on the doorstep with her infant daughter in her lap. Manju was furious, but after a few hours of enduring this disturbing scenario, she invited mother and daughter to come into the house. As she explained, she could not bear the idea that the woman might have to turn to prostitution and that this or sexual abuse would mark the infant girl's future. Since the family had kept the details of the elopement secret from the wider kin, though there must have been rumors, Manju was able to receive the girl back in the family without incurring enormous shame. Manju's son, too, said he was reconciled to the fact that in his past birth he had "owed" her and her daughter something—a debt or a restitution for his own bad behavior toward her in an earlier birth—so their conjugal relation was re-established. From a wayward daughter-in–law, the girl became a dutiful wife, mother, and daughter-in–law. Manju said with some ferocity that if the girl had given birth to a boy, she would not have accepted her, for "she should have been punished for what she did".[40]

This story is a perfect example of Das's insistence that ethics is not about sovereign subjects complying with intersubjective contracts; it is about "our willingness to accept responsibility for an Other whom fate has placed in our vicinity".[41]

40 Das, Ethics, 492 f.
41 Das, Ethics, 491.

2.5 Moral Anthropology: Summing Up the Views on Ethics and Human Existence

In moral anthropology, we find a very positive view both of human beings – their nature and existential ways of reflecting and acting ethically – and of ethics. Ethics has to do with the ways in which human beings strive to live well and do well, mostly to themselves but also to others. For instance, being healthy or striving for happiness are examples of acting ethically:

> Whereas an ethics of the extraordinary might posit freedom as its end or even its condition, an ethics of ordinary practice does better stick to happiness (…). For Aristotle, acting ethically, like being healthy, is not a means to an end but constitutes a happy life (…). To be happy is for people to realize their nature, thus to exercise their capacities (…).[42]

Although this passage appears in the context of a description of the roots of the path of virtue ethics, in Lambek's overview of the field in his introduction to his book *Ordinary Ethics,* the generally positive view of human beings and of their will and ability to do good is not really being called into question by him or by other so-called moral anthropologists. Human beings are free ethical subjects: free in shaping themselves and their lives. Differences can be seen within the field as to whether reflection or actions should be stressed when defining what ethics is all about; but there is never doubt about the fact that ethics fundamentally is a positive phenomenon.

Ordinary ethics (and also Zigon) recognizes intertwinement with others as a fundamental condition of human life. Still, the Other is not necessarily the most important person or the main goal of people's ethical actions – except in Das's ethics of everyday life.

3. Løgstrup's Ethics

Central to Løgstrup's philosophy is a fundamental distinction between human beings and life itself. Life itself is something definite, prior to and independent of what human beings think, evaluate or decide about it. For this reason, Løgstrup uses the term "ontological" to characterize his own form of ethics, when forced to categorize it. My claim is that this basic distinction brings new and important perspectives into the discussion of the content and the place of the ethical in human life in moral anthropology. Løgstrup expands on his distinction in several ways:

42 Lambek, Introduction, 20.

> My life made me its own before I made it mine. My life has given me to understand what is good and evil before I take a position on the issue and evaluate it.[43]

> The wickedness of human beings and the goodness of life.[44]

Generally, Løgstrup stresses our fundamental dependence on phenomena given with life itself. He thereby opposes the usual understanding of and emphasis on human independence and autonomy that are dominant in moral anthropology. And yet, Løgstrup claims that it is only because of our dependence on these phenomena – the so-called sovereign expressions of life – that human beings can also be *free* when the expressions of life defy our selfishness and realize themselves in our life spontaneously, as goods given to us.

3.1 Phenomenology

In this brief overview I will focus on two fundamental concepts in Løgstrup's ethics, namely the ethical demand and the sovereign expressions of life. First, I will give a short introduction to his method: phenomenology. This can be seen as standing between clear theoretical thinking and ethnographic fieldwork. The young Løgstrup stated that he was seeking an ethics in the sense of "the study of actual human beings".[45] Unlike Laidlaw, who stated that "The claim on which the anthropology of ethics rests is not an evaluative claim that people are good: it is a descriptive claim that they are evaluative"[46], Løgstrup wants to take a step further back. Working phenomenologically is striving to highlight and describe the universal and pre-cultural phenomena that form the base of the structure of human life. These phenomena, according to Løgstrup, have intimated to us what is good and bad before we consider the matter ourselves and evaluate it: "Whether something is positive or negative, good or evil, is not decided at the moment when we evaluate it; it is not originally decided at the moment when we make it our own".[47]

Taking such phenomenological descriptions as the point of departure for ethical considerations gives a concrete character to Løgstrup's ethics. At the same time, the standard way of seeing the role of the ethical subject in much of traditional ethics is challenged. Løgstrup learned of existential phenomenology from Heidegger and from Hans Lipps. In contrast to more traditional subject object philosophy, Løgstrup shares Heidegger's phenomenological pre-

43 Løgstrup, Beyond, 6.
44 Løgstrup, Demand, 138.
45 Løgstrup, Besvarelse, cf. Andersen, Eyes, 32.
46 Laidlaw, Subject, 3.
47 Løgstrup, Beyond, 6.

supposition that human existence involves a fundamental understanding of one's being-in-the-world. What Løgstrup learned from Lipps's phenomenology is not least to analyze word usage in natural language, because he is convinced that such usage contains a fundamental understanding of human being-in-the-world.[48]

In his principal work, *The Ethical Demand,* written in 1956, Løgstrup opens with a phenomenological analysis of trust, which he finds is precisely the sort of pre-cultural phenomenon from which we learn something fundamental about human life. Trust is described as a positive phenomenon, and it is implicit to this understanding of trust that its positivity is inherent to trust itself; it is not something that we add to it.[49] Hence, implicit in the analysis of trust is the basic assumption of the book – and generally of Løgstrup's thinking – that the difference between good and evil is ontological in character and prior to all decisions and judgments by human beings. A Løgstrupian answer to Laidlaw could then be: "The claim on which the ontological ethics rests is not an evaluative claim that people are good: it is a phenomenological claim that they are wicked whereas life itself is good."

From his analysis of trust, Løgstrup concludes that *interdependency* or interrelatedness is a fact of our way of living. Whereas Kant and the Kantian tradition, according to Løgstrup, picture human beings as isolated individuals, Løgstrup claims that the most fundamental thing there is to say about human beings is that we are mutually dependent on one another; this is a fact that we cannot escape.

> We have the curious idea that a person constitutes his own world, and that the rest of us have no part in it but only touch upon it now and then. … This is really a curious idea, an idea no less curious because we take it for granted. The fact is, however, that it is completely wrong because we do indeed constitute one another's world and destiny.[50]

3.2 The Ethical Demand

Trust is to lay oneself open. Self-surrender goes with it: we are mutually delivered to one another. In Løgstrup's famous words: "A person never has something to do with another person without holding some of the other person's life in his hand" (my translation).[51] From the fact of interdependency and our mutually delivering ourselves to one another grows and springs the ethical demand. The

48 Niekerk, Introduction, xii–xiii.
49 Løgstrup, Beyond, 1–5.
50 Løgstrup, Demand 16.
51 Official translation: "A person never has something to do with another person without also having some degree of control over him or her" (Løgstrup, Demand, 15–16).

content of this is that you are required to take care of, not destroy, that of the other person's life you hold in your hand. The choice is yours, and there is no third or neutral option. The demand

> … is not dependent upon a revelation, in the theological sense of the word, nor is the demand based on a more or less conscious agreement between the persons with respect to what would be mutually beneficial.[52]

The ethical demand takes its content from the fact of the intertwinement of our lives. Our life has been given to us, and it entails certain structures, first and foremost interdependency, to which we are called to respond. Being obedient to the ethical demand means recognizing that, as receivers of the gift, we owe something: namely, taking care of the Other.[53] In this sense, ethics for Løgstrup is both about the relation between the individual and the Other, and about the invisible relation between the individual and the demand itself.[54]

The ethical demand is silent, radical, one-sided, and unfulfillable.[55] In the first place it is silent, because it does not tell you *how* to act in a concrete situation in which you are required to take care of the Other; it only tells you *that* you should do so. Neither the other person, nor the social norms can predict the demand, or tell you how to act. In transforming the demand into concrete actions, each one of us must use our imagination, insight, and experience.

Next, the demand is radical: that is, it is unconditional and absolute. Even if we want to, we cannot negotiate with it. And since it springs from the fact of interdependency and hence stems from the implicit structures of human life, it is also without any special cultural preconditions. Further, the demand is one-sided: it is a demand on you, and you cannot tell other people that they should take care of you. No one can predict the demand, because it is intrinsic to life itself.[56]

52 Løgstrup, Demand, 17–18.

53 For a discussion of Løgstrup's thoughts on life as a gift, see Reinders, Donum and Wolf, Response. For remarks on the difference between Løgstrup's ethical demand and Søren Kierkegaard's "command," see Andersen, Eyes 37.

54 Cf. Andersen, Eyes, 41.

55 According to Hans Fink, these four characteristics oppose the ethical demand to moral demands, because the latter are articulated, relative, mutual, and possible of fulfillment. See Fink, Conception, 16.

56 Even though Jesus of Nazareth predicted the demand, he didn't invent it. The demand was there before Jesus predicted it; the demand is eternal. Jesus does not dissolve the silence of the demand; in Løgstrup's view, not even Jesus says anything concrete about how to fulfill the demand. What Jesus inflicts the demand is an authority: God. Whereas the silence, the radicalness, and the unfulfillability of the demand stem from the fact of interdependency, the one-sidedness stems from the understanding of life that lies inherent in the demand: the givenness of life, see Løgstrup, Demand, 123.

Finally, a very significant characteristic of the demand is that it is unfulfillable. It demands of you to unselfishly do what will benefit the other person most. But because of our wicked nature, this is not possible for us.

> We disregard the silent, radical, and one-sided demand. It is resisted by our self-assertion and will to power, by our ceaseless concern about what we ourselves will get out of what we do (…) On the one hand, it is impossible to escape the demand, inasmuch as we cannot dismiss the fact out of which the demand arises, namely, that one person has been delivered over into the hands of another person. We cannot dismiss this fact any more than we can deny that life has been given us as a gift. Our existence is greater than we are; it is superior to us. In fact we constitute one another's world, whether we wish to or not. On the other hand, we distort the demand through that unnaturalness in which alone we are able – only apparently to fulfill it. The demand is impossible of fulfillment.[57]

Furthermore, the demand always comes too late, because it hits you as a reminder of what you should have done spontaneously but did not. What is called for – the real content of the ethical demand – is for the demand not to have been necessary. The demand demands its own annulment.[58] In that sense, ethical actions that try to respond to the ethical demand are always compensations for actions that should have been taken spontaneously. When the demand is heard, it is already too late: ethics consist in actions to compensate, which remind us that we are selfish individuals. Hence, ethics is not a positive phenomenon after all. It reminds us of what we should have done, but did not do. And it reflects the fact that while life itself is good, we are wicked: we ruin the gift that has been given to us – the interdependent life – because we care so much more for ourselves than for the Other. This we do even though all that we need for taking care of the Other lies implicit in the life we have been given, in the form of trust and love.

> This may also be expressed in another way if we consider the fact from which the demand derives, namely, that we are one another's world, the one being delivered over to the Other – if we consider that this fact is at the same time the blessing of our life. Along with this blessing of our life that we have together, existence has given us everything necessary for the fulfillment of the demand.[59]

This aspect of the ontological grounding of Løgstrup's view on human life becomes even clearer when he develops his concepts of the sovereign expressions of life.

57 Løgstrup, Demand, 164.165.
58 See also Løgstrup, Beyond, 69.
59 Løgstrup, Demand, 207–208.

3.3 The Sovereign Expressions of Life

Løgstrup's thinking on ethics, human beings, and human life is developed mainly in dialog with Heidegger, Lipps, Martin Luther, Kant and Søren Kierkegaard.[60] Though he is also positively inspired by the latter two , Løgstrup develops his thought especially in opposition to central perspectives in Kant and Kierkegaard. This is true both of his thinking on the sovereign expressions of life and of his claim that the ethical demand has its origin in the universal fact of interdependency.

Løgstrup's concept of the sovereign expressions of life emphasizes his basic critique of both Kant and Kierkegaard: that they place too much weight on reflection both in ethics (Kant) and on becoming a self (Kierkegaard). At the same time, Løgstrup rejects the possibility that an ethics of virtue could be a real alternative to Kant's ethics of duty: "Just as duty is a substitute motive, virtue is a substitute disposition." What they substitute is the spontaneous act in which the individual is moved and called to action by the need of the Other, rather than by "the thought and the sense of the rightness of the action." In acting out of duty or virtue, the subject's concern is ultimately for himself—for the wish to be a good person—and not for the Other. Hence, "[d]uty and virtue are moral introversions." Morality is inferior to the sovereign expressions of life, which Løgstrup also describes as *pre-moral.*[61]

Løgstrup uses the biblical story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 25–37) to explain mercy as one of the sovereign expressions of life. The Samaritan is moved by compassion for the victim of the assault as he spontaneously takes care of him. His thoughts are occupied with the victim's needs and the question of how to help him in the best way. This, together with his spontaneity and non-reflective way of acting, constitutes the act as merciful. Furthermore, exactly the story of the Good Samaritan sustains Løgstrup's point in *The Ethical Demand* that there is no such thing as a specifically Christian ethics. The fact of interdependency compels us all to take care of the Other: the demand is universal, not a particular demand for Christians. As a gentile, the Samaritan confirms this point.

As examples of sovereign expressions of life, Løgstrup mentions mercy, trust, love, and the openness of speech. Their sovereign character indicates their ability and power to break through our selfishness and to express themselves in our behavior and actions. They are glimpses of the goodness of life with the power to defeat our wickedness. Therefore, they are not to be taken as the results of our

60 For a survey on the thinkers, whom Løgstrup is inspired by in either a positive or negative way, see Andersen, Eyes, 29–53.

61 Løgstrup, Beyond, 78–79

goodness or our will to be good.[62] The expressions of life do not stem from us: on the contrary, they are blessings in our lives in spite of our selfishness and will to destroy what has been given to us. When the sovereign expression of life breaks through my selfishness and my constant preoccupation with myself, I become a true self. Løgstrup also states this against Kierkegaard, for whom reflection is necessary for a person to become a true self. For Løgstrup, however, reflection has the opposite effect: reflecting on oneself, whether in duty or virtue, means that engagement with the world and the Other is loosened and the Other is forgotten as what they should be in your life, namely, the main character. When the sovereign expression of life breaks through in our lives, however, this allows us to become our true selves. Furthermore, in the sovereign expression of life, we are free. Hence, even more fundamentally than the ethical demand, the sovereign expressions of life respond to the fact of interrelatedness: the gift of life is an interdependent life. When the sovereign expressions of life break through in our behavior and actions so that we act toward the Other in mercy, love, and trust, we live life as it is meant to be, and we realize the blessings of the interdependent life in spite of our wickedness. The ethical demand, on the other hand, is heard when we have not acted spontaneously as we should have done. Therefore the demand is secondary compared to the sovereign expressions of life. Although actions set in motion by the ethical demand might benefit the Other – as the Other might not be able to tell the difference from actions done spontaneously out of mercy – they are still compensational actions.

This fundamental distinction between being occupied with oneself or with the Other, and the basic preoccupation with the importance of spontaneity and immediacy in human life as opposed to reflection, are central in Løgstrup's thinking. They appear long before he developed the concept of the sovereign expressions of life.[63]

4. Conclusion

What then is human in human beings? When Løgstrup encounters moral anthropology, the immediate positive understanding of "human" and "ethics" is problematized because of his basic distinction between life itself, which is good, and human beings, who are wicked. The "human" in human beings is not positive at all, because basically we are unable to answer the demand of the interpersonal life: taking care of the Other. Due to our wicked nature, we are always preoccupied with taking care of ourselves. "Human" is to be understood as some-

62 See Løgstrup, Beyond, 67–68.
63 Cf. Niekerk, Genesis, 63.

thing negative; hence "ethics" is to be understood as substitute actions for what we should have done spontaneously. Rather than what we do to live a good life, ethics is what we do to make up for the fact that we are selfish. This is what the ethical demand reminds us.

A very important point in Løgstrup is his conviction that his phenomenological analyses highlight some features of human life that are universal: our interdependency, the ethical demand, the sovereign expressions of life, and the understanding of life as a gift.

> Eternity has incarnated the demand it imposes upon us in the interpersonal situation and in the sovereign expressions of life that correspond to it. Eternity incarnates itself not, in the first instance, in Jesus of Nazareth, but already in creation and the universality of the demand. Christianity itself contends that the idea of creation is not a peculiarly Christian notion, and it is a Christian contention that the radical demand is not a peculiarly Christian demand.[64]

Moral philosopher Hans Fink supports this view: "… I am convinced that his philosophical argument can, in fact, stand on its own without any specifically Christian presuppositions…".[65]

It makes a significant difference whether human life is seen as something definite and constituted in itself, prior to and independent of our evaluation of it, or whether it is seen as our invention or as the result of our efforts. Are we constituters of ourselves and of our lives, or are we first and foremost receivers of a gift – of a life that is already constituted with certain structures before we do anything with it or to it? This is the central question. And though the discussion of moral anthropology is very broad, a more thorough consideration of this core question could bring in new and important perspectives of ontological character.

One link between moral anthropology and Løgstrup that is both interesting and obvious is Veena Das's realistic ethics of everyday life. This corresponds in many ways with Løgstrup's phenomenological approaches. Das shares Løgstrup's skepticism about justifying moral norms by deriving them from general principles. The central idea in her considerations on ethics is that we live our lives intertwined with one another, and that this fact asks something of us: to act with responsibility toward the Other. Where Løgstrup, in his ethics, uses examples from literature to highlight some of his points, Das – like every anthropologist, I suppose – uses stories from her fieldwork. This adds a concrete and realistic character to her ethical considerations. Her story about Manju, reproduced above, makes a great impression in a Løgstrupian context. The story could be seen as a Hindu version of the story of the Good Samaritan. Just like the Samaritan, Manju broke the conventions about "good behavior" when – moved

64 Løgstrup, Beyond, 71.
65 Fink, Conception, 10–11.

by compassion – she invited her former daughter-in–law and her daughter into her house and let them be part of the family. In this situation, general principles of behavior in Indian society would not have helped the woman at Manju's doorstep. But in a movement of compassion for the woman and her daughter, Manju acted differently, occupied above all with the needs of the two human beings at her doorstep and with the question of how to help them in the best way. Maybe something broke through in her, something that did not come from herself. And in that act, Manju was immediate herself, a true self – living the interdependent life in a spontaneous act. In being bound to the persons whom fate had placed in her vicinity, she was also immediately free.

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