




# 1 Realising Unfulfillable and Impossible Ethical Demands: 2 Løgstrup and Levinas on Trust and Love, Hospitality 3 and Friendship

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## 7 Abstract

8 Based on a reading of K. E. Løgstrup's *The Ethical Demand* and Emmanuel Levi-  
9 nas' *Totality and Infinity*, the paper aims to show that it is respectively through trust  
10 and love, hospitality and friendship that the two thinkers envisage humans as being  
11 capable of realising unfulfillable and impossible ethical demands. It will be argued  
12 that they develop their ethical thinking along similar lines, yet, even when they come  
13 closest to each other conceptually, a difference in their phenomenological analysis of  
14 the I and the other remains, which it is paramount to keep in mind in order to assess  
15 what they may contribute to each other's thinking.

16 **Keywords** Ethics · Demand · Løgstrup · Levinas · Love · Friendship

## 17 1 Introduction

18 Since the most recent English translation of *The Ethical Demand* by the Danish  
19 thinker, K. E. Løgstrup, appeared in 1997 with an introduction by Alasdair Mac-  
20 Intyre and Hans Fink, his work has received more and more attention. Some years  
21 before its publication, Zygmunt Bauman had started reading *The Ethical Demand*  
22 in an earlier English edition and found in it a 'contemporary ethical thought' which  
23 took seriously 'the idea of "unconditional responsibility"' (Bauman 2007: 113).<sup>1</sup> The  
24 book became an important source for his *Postmodern Ethics* in which he draws a

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25 parallel, echoed by MacIntyre and Fink in their introduction, between Løgstrup and  
 26 the French philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas. Since then, others have elaborated on  
 27 the affinity between the two thinkers,<sup>1</sup> who were almost the same age, and they both  
 28 published their major philosophical works around the same time.

29 The present paper inscribes itself within this renewed academic interest in both  
 30 thinkers' philosophical reworking of ethics. As far as we know, they did not read  
 31 each other's work. In 1930, they were both at the University of Strasbourg, Levinas  
 32 as a teacher and Løgstrup as a student, but we do not have any testimonies which  
 33 could confirm that they met, although it is possible that they did: Both were well-  
 34 versed in theology and became acquainted with Jean Hering, who was affiliated with  
 35 the Faculty of Protestant Theology at Strasbourg and probably had a decisive influ-  
 36 ence on both thinkers' orientation towards the German phenomenological tradition,  
 37 spearheaded by Husserl and Heidegger.

38 Although they did not comment on each other's work, the paper will show that  
 39 there is room for bringing them into a critical dialogue by examining one of the cen-  
 40 tral claims advanced by both, namely that the ethical demand is unfulfillable. This  
 41 seemingly wrongheaded affirmation that it is impossible for any single human being  
 42 to fulfil what is ethically demanded of him or her, goes to the heart of their thinking  
 43 and raises two further questions: How is it possible to realise what is, in principle,  
 44 impossible and unfulfillable? On which resources are we human beings supposed  
 45 to rely in order to fulfil what both thinkers call respectively an 'unfulfillable' and  
 46 'impossible' ethical demand?

47 Even without knowing the two thinkers' works, one may, merely by reflecting  
 48 on the questions posed, intuit that religion will at some point in their argumentation  
 49 play a certain role. Because who else than God is able, i.e. has it in him, to real-  
 50 ize what is beyond human possibility? Both thinkers do, in fact, draw on theologi-  
 51 cal sources, Løgstrup on the Gospels and Levinas on Jewish scriptures, but each of  
 52 them also states that ethics is a philosophical endeavour which should be under-  
 53 pinned by rational discourse, not by articles of faith in God.

54 In the introduction to *The Ethical Demand*, Løgstrup explicitly states that his  
 55 book is meant to explain 'in purely human terms' the attitude (*holdning*) towards  
 56 the other entailed in Jesus of Nazareth's religious proclamation (ED, 3/EF, 11).<sup>2</sup>  
 57 Løgstrup seems intent to speak of ethical matters of the highest importance with-  
 58 out building his argumentation on the Christian faith in God's creation. Some of his  
 59 arguments certainly draw their force from Jesus of Nazareth's teachings, and as he  
 60 bases his understanding of the ethical demand on these teachings, it seems coherent  
 61 that he thinks that it can best be understood against the background of the Gospels  
 62 and the Christian cosmology of creation. This means that the religious context is  
 63 precisely held in the background in *The Ethical Demand* which focuses on, as the

1FL01 <sup>1</sup> For the most recent contributions, see the anthology *What is Ethically Demanded?*, edited by Hans  
 1FL02 Fink and Robert Stern in 2016, and *The Monist*, Volume 103, Issue, 2020. In 2020 two new translations  
 1FL03 of *The Ethical Demand* will appear, one in English and the other in Spanish.

2FL01 <sup>2</sup> The first reference is to the English translation, *The Ethical Demand*, the second to the original Danish  
 2FL02 text, *Den etiske fordring*.

64 title indicates, ethical matters of human concern and reads, as Fink and Robert Stern  
 65 have pointed out, as an invitation to theologians as well as secular philosophers and  
 66 the public in general to engage with his work (2016: 2–3).

67 Turning to Levinas, the answer to the question of the relationship between eth-  
 68 ics and religion must follow a different road, as he operates with a closer connec-  
 69 tion between the two. In *Totality and Infinity*, he suggests that the bond between  
 70 the Same, i.e. every form of identity unrelated to alterity, paradigmatically exempli-  
 71 fied by the I, and the Other, i.e. the alterity of the other, should be called ‘religion’.  
 72 He also employs the term ‘ethical’ about the way in which the Other questions the  
 73 Same, which goes to show how closely connected the two spheres are for him (TI,  
 74 40-43/30-33).<sup>3</sup>

75 In a critical side remark to his reading of Levinas, Rudi Visker has stated that  
 76 banning words like ‘god’ and ‘creation’ will reduce Levinas’ philosophy to ‘caric-  
 77 ature’ and ‘moralism’ (2004: 12). These words will not be banned from the fol-  
 78 lowing reading, but, as with Løgstrup, they will be held in the background where  
 79 they belong, according to both thinkers, who maintain that their philosophical argu-  
 80 mentation should be read as standing on its own without any theological scaffold  
 81 sustaining it. For both it is not God, but I, who in my relation to the other am meant  
 82 to fulfil what appears to be unfulfillable and impossible. Rather than on religious  
 83 proclamations and revelations the following interpretation will put the emphasis on  
 84 trust and hospitality and place them in the foreground by analysing them as ethical  
 85 ways in which humans open themselves up to love and friendship.

## 86 2 On Unfulfillable and Impossible Ethical Demands

87 Reading the first ten pages of *The Ethical Demand* and *Totality and Infinity* simul-  
 88 taneously, one is struck by the different starting points which each thinker adopts:  
 89 Løgstrup centers on the sort of trust that is already given beforehand in human life  
 90 and on unselfish love, implicit in Jesus of Nazareth’s teachings, whereas Levinas  
 91 plunges his reader into a sinister world in which war—‘its shadow falls in advance  
 92 over the actions of men (TI, 21/5)’<sup>4</sup>—is ever-present. Although the Second World  
 93 War also left its mark on Løgstrup, who refers to it indirectly in his work, war and  
 94 suffering are more present in Levinas’ thinking, which should not come as a surprise  
 95 considering the latter’s Jewish background and the fact that he was imprisoned in an  
 96 army camp under the Second World War during which many of his family members  
 97 were killed.

98 It thus appears to be more than a colloquial coincidence that Løgstrup employs  
 99 the Danish expression for ‘beforehand’ (*på forhånd*) four times on the first page of  
 100 his description of trust. As he will go on to assert shortly after: ‘An individual never

<sup>3</sup> The first reference is to the English translation, *Totality and Infinity*, the second to the original French text, *Totalité et infini*.

<sup>4</sup> In accordance with the original text, which includes *d’avance*, I have modified the English translation of the quoted passage by adding ‘in advance’.

101 has something to do with another human being without holding something of that  
102 person's life in their hands' (ED, 15/EF, 25). The hand becomes a central metaphor  
103 for him in his attempt to show that we humans are always already interwoven with  
104 each other in interdependence. In contrast to Løgstrup, what constitutes the basis for  
105 Levinas' phenomenological investigation in his first major philosophical work is an  
106 apparently unsurmountable distance between the finite I and the infinite other, which  
107 Levinas acknowledges raises a 'thicket of difficulties' and casts doubt on the ethical  
108 endeavour as such (TI, 29/15).

109 Now, if we take a broader view of the first parts of their seminal works, instead  
110 of focusing merely on their different starting points, and follow them in their initial  
111 circumscription of key concepts linked to the topic of the present paper, common  
112 features of their thinking start to appear, first of all their shared focus on the ethi-  
113 cal significance of the other. Where most philosophical disciplines, including ethics,  
114 until the twentieth century had focused primarily on the I, and how I can come to  
115 truly know the world and act well in it, Løgstrup and Levinas wish to tie the central  
116 ethical and metaphysical questions of human understanding and goodness to how  
117 the other is linked to and defines me, and how I respond to the other's presence. Eth-  
118 ics is for both unthinkable outside the relation in which I already find myself to the  
119 other, which constitutes a deeper level of involvement and commitment than by tak-  
120 ing recourse to the normative force of rights, duties, and norms.

121 Out of being 'one another's world and destiny' (ED, 16/EF, 25-26), as Løgstrup  
122 puts it, springs the radical, silent, one-sided and unfulfillable demand of taking  
123 care of the other. This is the main thesis which Løgstrup defends and expands on  
124 in *The Ethical Demand*, and which shares some resemblance to Levinas' condensed  
125 account in the preface to *Totality and Infinity* of how the ego gets an idea of infin-  
126 ity, namely 'in the improbable feat whereby a separated being fixed in its identity,  
127 the same, the I, nonetheless contains in itself what it can neither contain nor receive  
128 solely by virtue of its own identity.' Following this brief introduction of the cru-  
129 cial and most critical idea of his first major philosophical work, Levinas lays out  
130 its whole plan and purpose: 'Subjectivity realizes these impossible exigencies—the  
131 astonishing feat of containing more than it is possible to contain. This book will pre-  
132 sent subjectivity as welcoming the Other, as hospitality' (TI, 26-27/12).

133 Despite speaking of impossible exigencies, Levinas does not seem to refer to any-  
134 thing else than the one demand which Løgstrup also has in mind, namely of receiv-  
135 ing and taking care of the other. And like the Danish thinker, Levinas emphasizes  
136 that all the weight of these impossible exigencies falls on the assigned ego, who is  
137 called upon to meet the exigencies and take responsibility for the other. Although  
138 Løgstrup refers less to responsibility than Levinas, he does characterize the demand  
139 as "unconditional" and "infinite" (ED, 46/EF, 58) in much the same vein as his  
140 French colleague. Responding to the demand cannot in any way be passed off to  
141 somebody else nor could I begin to negotiate the conditions of my engagement with-  
142 out at the same time evading my responsibilities and, ultimately, failing the other.  
143 Both thinkers share this view on the radicality and one-sidedness of the demand  
144 which, in an inescapable way that for both is related to a transcendent reality, sum-  
145 mons somebody to think and give, in Levinas' words, more than he or she can actu-  
146 ally think and extract from him or herself (TI, 62, 180/56, 196).

147 Yet, neither for Løgstrup nor for Levinas does this mean that it is completely  
 148 impossible for humans to fulfil the ethical demand which they are under. If that  
 149 were the case, it would render the demand utterly ‘meaningless’ (ED, 165/EF, 188),  
 150 and the subjectivity in question would become locked up behind a closed door, as  
 151 Levinas insinuates (TI, 148-149/158-159). Still, in a certain sense, what is ethically  
 152 demanded remains undoable for the ego: Levinas understands the impossibility of  
 153 realizing the demand in the sense that the subjectivity in question does not have it in  
 154 his or her power to receive the other: ‘The sway (*pouvoir*) of the I will not cross the  
 155 distance marked by the alterity of the other’ (TI, 38/28). We shall later see how he  
 156 attempts to resolve this contradiction between realization and impossibility, power  
 157 and powerlessness.

158 In his multi-layered clarification of what makes the ethical demand unfulfillable,  
 159 Løgstrup follows a different path than Levinas, but without moving too far away  
 160 from him. The Danish thinker bases his understanding of the human self on the  
 161 Christian concept of sin, which he interprets along the same lines as Martin Luther  
 162 as *incurvatus in se*. According to this understanding, the will of each human being  
 163 has an inherent tendency to curve and close itself around itself instead of opening up  
 164 towards others (ED, 141/EF, 161).<sup>5</sup> As with Levinas, we shall later follow Løgstrup  
 165 in his attempt to find a way out of the snares of the sinful self.

166 Despite relying on a Christian conception of the sinful self, which is foreign to  
 167 Levinas, Løgstrup occasionally recurs to an explanation of this fundamental feature  
 168 of human existence which is akin to the one we find in *Totality and Infinity*. In one of  
 169 his sermons, which serves as a stepping stone to our interpretation of Levinas’ more  
 170 elaborate, phenomenological account of dwelling, Løgstrup draws attention to how  
 171 we live enclosed within ourselves: ‘We lock ourselves up, because we think of our-  
 172 selves. We lock ourselves up within ourselves. As if inside a house with the curtains  
 173 closed.’ After describing how we wander through this house and only see ourselves  
 174 in our resentment and self-satisfaction, he reaches a conclusion which Levinas can  
 175 be seen as both developing further and taking in a different direction: ‘But it is here  
 176 we all reside. For we do not escape from our own house’ (Quoted from Rabjerg and  
 177 Stern 2018: 274).

## 178 2.1 Levinas on Dwelling and Hospitality

179 Levinas and Løgstrup coincide in viewing the ego as locked within its own circle,  
 180 illustrated by the house, where I withdraw and try to keep a distance to everything  
 181 that comes from the outside. Yet, whereas Løgstrup deploys dwelling as just one  
 182 more metaphor for self-enclosurement, Levinas holds onto it and gives it a prominent  
 183 place in his phenomenological analysis of how the I constitutes itself: It sustains  
 184 itself through an on-going process of turning everything that is not its own into its  
 185 property, building its identity and its power, ‘I can’, on this continuous appropriation  
 186 of things, thoughts and perceptions. By representing and transforming the foreign

<sup>5</sup> See Rabjerg and Stern (2018) for an extended interpretation of Løgstrup’s understanding of sin.

187 into something familiar with which it can identify itself, it establishes itself at home  
 188 around a more or less self-sufficient economy (TI, 36-37, 152-153/26-27, 162-163).  
 189 Levinas is not blind to the fact that there are persons, who feel and are, in fact, impo-  
 190 tent or divided in ways which appear to contradict his analysis, but he maintains that  
 191 negating the world or oneself still depends and feeds on a lust for life and a form  
 192 of power that are bound to what I think and can do. In this part of his analysis, he  
 193 comes close to Løgstrup, who describes self-absorbed thoughts and emotions, such  
 194 as hatred and resentment, as circling around its own curved self, obsessed with get-  
 195 ting rid of its 'object', while remaining, at the same time because of its obsession,  
 196 stuck with itself and its object (ED, 33/EF, 45).

197 For Levinas, who maintains throughout *Totality and Infinity* that the I and the  
 198 other remain separate even in their relatedness, it is absolutely vital that he succeeds  
 199 in demonstrating that the I begins by establishing and conserving its identity and  
 200 egoism without suffering any alteration, i.e. any interference from the other (*alter*),  
 201 who remains outside the closed sphere of the ego (TI, 110-121, 134-135/112-126,  
 202 141-142). Put provocatively, which may show how he differs from Løgstrup, only  
 203 by taking our starting point in egoism, in the self-contained economy of the ego, can  
 204 we make sense of Levinas' purpose with his book, which consists in presenting the  
 205 way in which 'a separated being fixed in its identity' suddenly becomes less tied to  
 206 its own selfish sameness and more connected to the otherness which transcends its  
 207 identity and power.

208 This raises the key question which the rest of *Totality and Infinity* can be read  
 209 as an answer to: 'But how can the same, produced as egoism, enter into a relation-  
 210 ship with an other without immediately divesting it of its alterity?' (TI, 38/27)' It  
 211 is not until much later in his phenomenological analysis, when he introduces the  
 212 feminine, that Levinas starts to formulate an answer: 'In the separated being the  
 213 door to the outside must hence be at the same time open and closed' (TI, 148/159).  
 214 This minimal openness appears to be facilitated by the discrete presence of the femi-  
 215 nine, which Levinas tells us is equal to the woman in the house, whose intimate and  
 216 hospitable reception makes dwelling and separation possible in the first place (TI,  
 217 155/166).

218 Although Levinas is careful to state that this first reception does not depend on  
 219 the factual presence of a woman (TI, 158/169), he himself underlines that the I, in  
 220 building itself an identity, needs 'the light of the face', which shines through in the  
 221 female grace, in order to separate itself. However, Levinas' conceptual conflation  
 222 of the feminine and the woman, which has provoked a lengthy debate on whether  
 223 he reduces female existence to a mere condition of male egoism,<sup>6</sup> and his intro-  
 224 duction of the other into the house without conceding her the full status of other  
 225 leave the reader with a conflictive impasse which he does not seem to resolve. He  
 226 omits explaining fully the contribution of the feminine to the I's openness toward  
 227 the absolute other. Instead, he limits himself to insinuating that the discrete presence  
 228 of the feminine 'contains all possibilities for a transcendent relation to the other'

<sup>6</sup>FL.01 <sup>6</sup> Katz (2003) and Palacio (2008) offer comprehensive discussions of the more or less problematic role  
 6FL.02 of the feminine in *Totality and Infinity*.



229 (TI, 155/166), although in his own analysis it contributes more to the separation and  
230 enclosure of the I than to its connection with and openness toward the outside.

231 The ego is stuck inside its own egoism, incapable of establishing ethical rela-  
232 tions to others merely through its own dwelling, and it is not so easily moved by  
233 something other than itself compared to the Løgstrupian I, which finds itself, despite  
234 being rooted in sin, connected to life as a vital resource. As we shall see, in *Total-*  
235 *ity and Infinity* these resources or powers, of which the ego does not in any way  
236 dispose, can only come from outside its own sphere, from the exterior, mentioned  
237 in the subtitle of the book: *An essay on exteriority*. The ego remains both so fixed to  
238 and fixed on its own doings that even when it ‘dares to come forward’ to put its trust  
239 in somebody else’s hands, as Løgstrup says, it has not necessarily taken a step away  
240 from its own egoism, but it may still cling on to its own beliefs and belongings with-  
241 out having moved beyond its own threshold.

242 For Levinas, if the ego really takes a step beyond its own premises, understood  
243 as the basis for both its material and intellectual life, then it is a sign of the other  
244 already making his or her presence felt. In *The Ethical Demand* the I seems, at  
245 times, to have access to ethical resources independently of the other, although this  
246 calls for a more thorough discussion in the next section. In *Totality and Infinity* the  
247 ego is incapable of realizing any ethical exigency on its own, i.e. independently  
248 of its relations to others, which is why Levinas already in the preface refers to the  
249 ‘impossible exigencies’ that no being can meet ‘in virtue of its identity’. Yet, in the  
250 same passage, Levinas opens up another way out of egoism through hospitality, in  
251 ‘the astonishing feat of containing more than it is possible to contain’.

252 Where does this feat take its beginning: From the inside or from the outside?  
253 As the ego is stuck to its own interior world without being able to overcome the  
254 distance to the other, who is radically different and incomparable to anything the I  
255 knows, it is not from inside, from a sovereign master saying ‘I can’, that a door is  
256 opened up towards the outside. It is the other way around, namely from the other  
257 side of what belongs to the I, i.e. the side of the other, that an opening appears which  
258 transcends its egoistic, self-contained economy: ‘For Levinas there is only one exit.  
259 And the I cannot reach it on its own. It is actually not an exit, but an entrance. Some-  
260 thing enters from outside, offering to rescue the I: ‘God comes to mind [...]’ (Visker  
261 2004: 117).’

262 Visker’s interpretation is not far removed from Levinas’ own understanding of the  
263 infinite dimension which is opened up by the presence of the other, whose face calls  
264 for religious exegesis: ‘the word God comes to the tip of one’s tongue’ (Levinas  
265 1998: xv), Levinas proclaims in the foreword to the book which Visker indirectly  
266 refers to, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*. Returning to *Totality and Infinity*, the ego is  
267 precisely appointed to be the entrance (*entrée*) of the relationship to the other, who  
268 is described as absolute other, infinite and transcendent, a stranger coming from afar  
269 and breaking open the totality of the I’s enclosure by expressing words which offer  
270 assistance in order to be made intelligible (TI, 36, 38, 40, 64-69/25, 28, 31, 60-66).  
271 Yet, how is this moment, where the other speaks to me in the spirit of a teacher,  
272 who constantly explains his or her own words by being present, reconcilable with  
273 the passages, where the other is envisaged by Levinas as coming from a height only  
274 comparable to God’s might, provoking shame in me and commanding me, without

275 uttering a single word, to offer more than I can give? (TI, 41, 100-101, 200/29, 103-  
276 104, 218).

277 There is a tension in *Totality and Infinity* which explains this dichotomy in the  
278 other's manifestation: On the one hand, Levinas draws on the *Old Testament*, when  
279 he evokes the infinity and transcendence of the other, who commands me like 'the  
280 stranger, the widow and the orphan' to open my house and share my belongings (TI,  
281 77-78, 244-245/74-76, 273-275). The felt presence of the other, whose face ques-  
282 tions and judges me for my egoism, provokes shame in me, Levinas contends, but  
283 it also gives me a chance to live up to the occasion and respond ethically to the  
284 other's command. On the other hand, Levinas invests the ethical relation between  
285 the I and the Other with a philosophical and discursive dimension by quoting and  
286 paraphrasing Plato. According to this understanding, the other appears in the guise  
287 of a teacher, who relentlessly comes to his or her own assistance by revealing the  
288 meaning of every word as a sign of the 'the plenitude of discourse', which is the  
289 way Plato describes Socrates' and his own dialogical approach (TI, 70-73, 96/66-70,  
290 98-99).

291 These two sources, which Levinas relies on, are not easily reconcilable. In many  
292 passages of *Totality and Infinity*, in which the other is presented as suffering and  
293 in urgent need of being helped, ethics is almost reduced to covering basic needs.  
294 Levinas would probably insist that this is first of all what ethics is about, and Løg-  
295 strup might not disagree with him. Yet, both thinkers still emphasize that ethics is  
296 also concerned with situations, such as teaching through dialogical discourse, where  
297 survival is usually not an issue for those who engage in expressing themselves and  
298 speaking with each other, although it could become one, but then the dialogue and  
299 the teaching would also immediately end. Even if one concedes that the other speaks  
300 and teaches before uttering a single word, merely by being present and revealing his  
301 face, this can hardly be a complete let alone adequate representation of how a dis-  
302 course comes about, which assists itself and delivers a key for its own interpretation,  
303 as Plato describes it in his dialogues. When we bring Levinas and Løgstrup into a  
304 critical dialogue in section two, we shall return to this tension and see how it may be  
305 resolved.

306 If it is not fully explainable from Levinas' own descriptions how the other, being  
307 both a destitute, poor stranger approaching me from below and an eloquent teacher  
308 addressing me from above, unlocks the door to my egoism, it is clear that this ethi-  
309 cal event can only happen from the outside, as when the idea of infinity is offered  
310 in the form of 'new powers (*pouvoirs*) to a soul, who is no longer paralytic—pow-  
311 ers of welcome, of gift, of full hands, of hospitality' (TI, 205/224). Realizing the  
312 impossible exigencies of hospitality becomes possible for the ego, when it is moved  
313 to receive the other and comes to contain more than it can actually contain, which  
314 only takes place when it faces away from its own interior towards an exteriority that  
315 opens up to the infinite.

316 Levinas intends his whole analysis to be oriented toward metaphysics, but this  
317 does not exclude that it can also be made intelligible through empirical examples,  
318 some of which he has offered himself: Facing somebody is not anything like looking  
319 at a thing. If anyone approaches somebody in this way, he or she will have reacted in  
320 an unethical way to the other's presence which has always already called to be met



321 face-to-face. From a Levinasian perspective, this is one of the reasons why execu-  
 322 tioners confront their victims blindfolded: They want to avoid facing the other as  
 323 another human being, who looks back at them, as this entails being questioned and  
 324 exposed to their own violence. In contrast to murderous acts, many people will have  
 325 experienced acting without thinking—Levinas says that it is equivalent to doing  
 326 something better than thinking (TI, 49/40)—when faced with the misery or just  
 327 the pressing presence of others which call for a caring and loving response without  
 328 being concerned about oneself.

329 When we now turn to Løgstrup's *The Ethical Demand*, the concepts of trust  
 330 and love play a pivotal role for the I's relation to the other. Levinas is more wary  
 331 than Løgstrup of using the term love, although he does employ *charité* to desig-  
 332 nate an ethical form of love.<sup>7</sup> In relation to the Christian conception of love Løg-  
 333 strup often prefers the Danish term *barmhjertighed*, which contains the words for  
 334 bosom (*barm*) and heart (*hjerte*), especially when he interprets the evangelical par-  
 335 able of 'The Good Samaritan', titled '*Den barmhjertige samaritaner*' in Danish.<sup>8</sup> It  
 336 is beyond the scope of the present paper to elaborate further on the concept of *bar-*  
 337 *mhjertighed*. The following reading will focus only on trust and natural love in *The*  
 338 *Ethical Demand*.

## 339 2.2 Løgstrup on Trust and Laying Oneself Open to the Other

340 In *The Ethical Demand* Løgstrup starts out by offering what appears to him as a  
 341 straightforward proof of the primordially of trust in human life, which would  
 342 become crippled, if it were not for the immediate confidence shown by people  
 343 towards each other in everyday life. 'It would be hostile to life to behave otherwise'  
 344 (ED, 8/EF, 17), Løgstrup insists, thereby giving priority to the friendly attitudes  
 345 toward life. Within his framework it makes sense that he favours trust as a more ethi-  
 346 cal response than distrust, in so far as the former confirms the fundamental entan-  
 347 glement which makes up the soil of the ethical demand and of human life as such,  
 348 whereas the latter is either a negation of life or deals with negations of life which  
 349 involve indifference and hostility to the ethical demand.

350 As Paul Faulkner has argued, what Løgstrup wants the concept of trust to reveal  
 351 is the human dimension of laying oneself open and thus being given over to oth-  
 352 ers in our interaction with them (2016: 253–254). When we speak to other people,  
 353 Løgstrup claims, we lay ourselves open and expose ourselves whether we want it  
 354 or not. This openness is seldom thematized, and Løgstrup underlines that it is good  
 355 that life is ordered in this way and is not established by ourselves, nor could we ever  
 356 have created it with our own will. Being exposed to others gives us power over each  
 357 other, Løgstrup concedes, yet, it is from this exposure to each other, which follows

<sup>7</sup> See Levinas' first interview 'Philosophie, justice et amour' in *Entre Nous*, which is also available at <https://esprit.presse.fr/article/emmanuel-levinas/philosophie-justice-et-amour-entretien-avec-emmanuel-levinas-28727>.

<sup>8</sup> In his book *Controverting Kierkegaard*, Løgstrup exemplifies his conception of the sovereign expressions of life by interpreting briefly 'The Good Samaritan'. This cannot be dealt with here.

358 along with everything that we do and is granted us as part and parcel of life, that the  
 359 radical, silent, one-sided and unfulfillable demand arises and demands that we take  
 360 care of that part of another person's life which is placed in our hands (ED, 14-18/EF,  
 361 24-28).

362 Using Løgstrup's metaphor, in distrust we withdraw or have already withdrawn  
 363 our hand so as not to be directly involved in the situation. Still, it is not necessarily  
 364 out of indifference or evilness, which is how Løgstrup often sees it, but it could be as  
 365 a response to what is considered to be best for the other person. Løgstrup is not un-  
 366 aware of the benefits of a certain discretion in dealing with other people, and it leads,  
 367 as others have also highlighted, to a tension in *The Ethical Demand* between unre-  
 368 served and reserved trust.<sup>9</sup> He acknowledges the importance of showing a certain  
 369 reluctance to exposing oneself and the other to the fact of being actually exposed to  
 370 each other. Some reservation is not only in place, lest life become 'unbearable' (ED,  
 371 19/EF, 29), but one might even conclude, considering Løgstrup's darkest description  
 372 of human inclination, that it is also ethically justified given the ever-present sin and  
 373 selfishness of most people. Løgstrup might not go that far, as he insists on the inher-  
 374 ent goodness of coming forward in trust, but are there not situations, as he himself  
 375 concedes at the beginning of *Norm and Spontaneity*, where the ethically best thing  
 376 to do for the other and also for oneself is not to come forward in trust? This does not  
 377 discredit trust or love as original ethical responses, but it does seem to contradict  
 378 Løgstrup's claim that what does not manifest itself as trust in life and towards the  
 379 other is a sign of distrust, enmity or hate.

380 Considering how far one should go in trying to fulfil the demand, Løgstrup  
 381 breaks the silence of the demand, as the Danish commentator David Bugge has put  
 382 it (2015: 57), in a surprising passage, where he almost fleshes out what the silent  
 383 demand demands to do. After having declared that the demand is always also about  
 384 giving the other all the time needed and allowing for his or her world to become  
 385 as wide as possible, Løgstrup takes one step further and adds that 'the demand is  
 386 always also a demand that we use the surrender out of which the demand has come  
 387 in such a way as to free the other person from his or her confinement and to give his  
 388 or her vision the widest possible horizon' (ED, 27/EF, 37). Here the English transla-  
 389 tion does not quite reproduce the meaning of the original text, in which Løgstrup  
 390 employs a stronger Danish term than freeing, namely to 'break open', *sprænge*, to  
 391 denote what is also entailed in the demand of selflessly taking care of the other. One  
 392 could ask how this is possible, considering that a truly ethical response to the radi-  
 393 cal demand for Løgstrup can only be given in trust or love, and also keeping in mind  
 394 that Løgstrup sees the one, who is supposed to break open the confinement of the  
 395 other, as being also confined within the snares of selfishness.

396 The silence of the demand means that it does not spell out what is to be done in a  
 397 given situation nor can the demand be fulfilled by following any norms or what the  
 398 other says. The single requirement of the demand is to take care of the other in the

<sup>9</sup> The tension between unreserved and reserved trust in *The Ethical Demand* was originally commented on by Ole Jensen. For a discussion of this, see Kees van Kooten Niekerk, 'Løgstrup's Conception of the Sovereign Expression of Life', in *What is Ethically Demanded?*

<sup>9FL01</sup>  
<sup>9FL02</sup>  
<sup>9FL03</sup>

399 best way, and in the quoted passage Løgstrup tries to delimit how far one can rea-  
 400 sonably go without taking away the responsibility from the other. However, he still  
 401 seems to go too far in breaking the silence of the demand by distilling a way of how  
 402 to take care of the other without explaining how breaking open the imprisonment  
 403 (*indesperring*) of the other is compatible with forthcoming trust or with letting the  
 404 other be a master in his own world, as he has just claimed.

405 A similar, but slightly different problem arises at a certain point in *Totality and*  
 406 *Infinity*, where Levinas ambiguously states that the other enters non-violently into  
 407 a relation with the I, yet with a violence that forces and breaks open the enclosed  
 408 world of egoism (TI, 47/38). Here it is the other, who appears forceful, whereas in  
 409 the quoted passage from *The Ethical Demand* it is I, who am supposed to force open  
 410 or, more gently, open up and free the other from his or her confinement. One could  
 411 take it that they both, in different ways, force language and perhaps go too far in try-  
 412 ing to break free from the enclosed ego, be it as an appeal to the I (Levinas) or as a  
 413 response to the other (Løgstrup), but that what they are really after is a truly ethical  
 414 response to the other's needs.

415 Yet, even if they both take one step too far beyond their own intentions, they  
 416 point to problems and possible solutions in each other's thinking: Levinas focuses  
 417 almost exclusively on the I covering the other's basic needs, but he hardly ever dis-  
 418 cusses what the I could offer the other in terms of amplifying his or her vision or  
 419 horizon, which is what Løgstrup points to. What Levinas could help shed light on  
 420 in Løgstrup's thinking is how the I, by using his or her understanding and imagina-  
 421 tion, can actually respond ethically to what is demanded in a given situation. When  
 422 confronted with the ethical demand, which isolates the one on which the responsi-  
 423 bility of taking care of the other falls, Løgstrup appears to assume that each person  
 424 is a master in his or her own world and autonomous (*selvstændig*) enough to figure  
 425 out for him or herself what to do (ED, 27-28/EF, 37-39). Levinas' concept of infin-  
 426 ity, which enters into the I and offers new powers, could make it more feasible that  
 427 the Løgstrupian I, who is limited and conditioned by sinful selfishness, can, up to a  
 428 certain point, meet the demand in the situation with the other.

429 For Løgstrup the unfulfillability of the ethical demand has to do with the fact,  
 430 which for him is as undeniable as the entanglement of human lives, that there is no  
 431 way round the sinful human self which cannot wilfully fulfil the radical demand. The  
 432 human self tends to close itself around itself, and when the ethical demand manifests  
 433 itself, it means that the self has already failed to respond trustfully and lovingly.  
 434 Despite his initial descriptions of the reality of trust, Løgstrup returns again and  
 435 again to the incapacity of humans to show unreserved trust and natural love which  
 436 he, on one occasion, calls 'imaginary' (ED, 138/EF, 148)—a view he later modified.  
 437 If one adds to this the silence and one-sidedness of the ethical demand, which offers  
 438 no help in resolving any given situation, but leaves it to each and every human being  
 439 to find out what is best for the other, then it becomes even more difficult to find an  
 440 ethically feasible way out of the deadlock.

441 Like Levinas, Løgstrup is fully aware that the I is not the best candidate for real-  
 442 izing the good in life. But the I is the only one, who the ethical demand has singled  
 443 out to take full responsibility for the other and to figure out for itself what is best in  
 444 any given situation. However, it is precisely my own self which stands in the way of

445 approaching and lending the other a hand openly without having second thoughts.  
 446 Not only that: When I notice and heed the demand, I have already come too late to  
 447 be truly there for the other, because I find myself not fully engaged, but obliged to  
 448 act, instead of realizing it in accordance with the ontological order, being-with-the-  
 449 other, which life testifies to every single moment.

450 At the beginning of chapter five in *The Ethical Demand*, Løgstrup maintains  
 451 that because of the radicality of the demand, it cannot be realized right away (ED,  
 452 105/EF, 122-123), which may sound as if it is to be carried out in a mediated way.  
 453 Although this may not be exactly what Løgstrup intends to say in that context, it is  
 454 not completely off target. The demand cannot be realized by anyone willingly nor  
 455 can the other invoke the demand and claim the right to be helped. Løgstrup explic-  
 456 itly follows Kierkegaard in declaring the demand to be ‘invisible’ and ‘broken’ in  
 457 relation to the one who carries it out. For Løgstrup this leads to a broken ‘realiza-  
 458 tion’ of the demand which consists in living ethically in a constant contradiction:  
 459 The one under the demand is certain that it is fulfillable as the most natural thing  
 460 in life, yet not by him or herself alone. In this way the ‘realization’ is mediated by  
 461 the awareness of one’s own incapacity due to the sinfulness of human nature, which  
 462 allows, however, for another true form of realization to appear that does not origi-  
 463 nate in oneself, but beyond one’s own horizon. It can, according to Løgstrup, only  
 464 be received as a gift in the form of love.

### 465 **3 Love and Friendship: Bringing Løgstrup and Levinas into a Critical** 466 **Dialogue**

467 Love is arguably the most significant interpersonal relationship which Løgstrup  
 468 is heading towards from the beginning of *The Ethical Demand*, but which he only  
 469 mentions and analyses in a few chapters. One of the reasons why he does not focus  
 470 on love is that it is the one phenomenon which makes the ethical demand obsolete  
 471 and so accomplishes what the demand demands too late and thus in vain, namely  
 472 that it should not have been necessary in the first place (ED, 146/EF, 168). In one  
 473 of the clearest and most significant passages in *The Ethical Demand*, Løgstrup fits  
 474 practically all his arguments in favour of an ethically responsible human attitude into  
 475 a short definition of natural love: ‘In natural love [...] the one whose life is to be  
 476 taken care of, and the one, who turns one’s own life into a received life, is one and  
 477 the same person’ (ED, 128/EF, 146).

478 In *Totality and Infinity*, after having developed his conception of subjectivity  
 479 as hospitality, Levinas reaches a conclusion which is congruent with Løgstrup’s,  
 480 namely ‘that the essence of language is goodness, or again, that the essence of lan-  
 481 guage is friendship and hospitality’ (TI, 305/341). Friendship exemplifies for Levi-  
 482 nas the sort of loving and discursively constituted relationship in which the giver,  
 483 animated by the other’s presence, attends the needs of the other generously without  
 484 holding anything back and without wanting anything in return. Levinas’ understand-  
 485 ing of hospitality marks, not unlike trust for Løgstrup, the beginning of ethics in  
 486 that a door is opened up for the I to reach beyond its own egoism and take respon-  
 487 sibility for the other in a caring way. The full realization of these responsibilities is

488 only possible within relationships such as love and friendship, in which the involved  
489 receive resources from one another to open themselves up to each other without hav-  
490 ing second thoughts and thinking about themselves. Outside these relationships eth-  
491 ics meets humans with demands which appear to be impossible to fulfil, because the  
492 ego lives detached from its neighbours, closing itself complacently or violently up in  
493 its self-constructed world.

494 In order to find a way out of the epistemological ‘egology’ and rescue ethics from  
495 the human disasters of selfishness and war, Løgstrup and Levinas know that they can  
496 neither rely on human nature nor presuppose that goodness exists as a full-fledged  
497 reality in any human relationship. The paper argues that Løgstrup’s positing of trust  
498 as a reality which is given beforehand could gain from Levinas’ phenomenological  
499 analysis of receiving the face in hospitality, as it can help to explain how the I opens  
500 itself up to an other by being questioned and confronted with needs that demand  
501 a response. In another context Løgstrup actually highlights the situation of being  
502 called upon to help and of finding oneself unable not to respond to the other’s needs  
503 (Løgstrup 2007: 54).

504 Following Levinas, more than already being ‘one another’s world and destiny’, as  
505 if it were some sort of *fait accompli*, this is something we become, in so far as we  
506 come under the sway of the other meeting us face-to-face as a stranger in need of  
507 being received. Løgstrup also touches briefly on being under the ‘spell’ (*ban*) of the  
508 other’s presence without being able to uphold a picture of him or her (ED, 13-14/  
509 EF, 22-23). Levinas can be said to develop this idea further in his phenomenological  
510 analysis of how the other’s face continuously breaks down any fixed image of itself  
511 and comes to its own assistance by offering a key to understanding its own discourse  
512 (TI, 51, 66-67, 96-97/43, 60-61, 98-99). To come under the sway of the other solves  
513 part of the problem that ‘[T]he sway (*pouvoir*) of the I will not cross the distance  
514 marked by the alterity of the other’ (TI, 38/28). The power to receive is given from  
515 the outside through ‘the ethical exigency of the face’ (*l’exigence éthique du visage*,  
516 TI, 207/228), which not only demands but commands that its needs be met. For Løg-  
517 strup the ethical demand is silent and faceless, but from a Levinasian perspective,  
518 the Danish philosopher is led to break the silence of the ethical demand, as he gives  
519 voice to the naked, vulnerable face of the other, whose presence commands not to be  
520 harmed and killed. Taking care of the other without being concerned about oneself  
521 would remain unfulfillable without facing the other, who has already interpellated  
522 me, when I approach her.

523 Yet, only part of the problem of how the I realizes the impossible and unfulfill-  
524 able is resolved, in so far as the resources coming to the I from outside can be exces-  
525 sive and abusive. If Levinas occasionally goes out of his way to stress the other’s  
526 immense, almost absolutist presence in *Totality and Infinity* which breaks through  
527 to the I, he forces his terminology even further in his second magnum opus, *Other-*  
528 *wise than Being*, where the I is said to be traumatized and held hostage by the other.  
529 As other commentators have pointed out (Kjerschow 1995; Ricoeur 1997; Frand-  
530 sen 2001; Critchley 2015: 80), it becomes difficult to see how Levinas can still rea-  
531 sonably maintain a subjectivity, who is constituted as ethically responsible in rela-  
532 tionships of goodness and friendship, which may not even be possible under these  
533 circumstances. As we have seen, this hyperbolic tendency of pushing the limits of

534 ethics towards transcending them is already manifest in *Totality and Infinity*, where  
 535 the I is said to be forced to receive through the violent intrusion of the other. As  
 536 Robert Stern has remarked, Løgstrup's clear demarcation of ethics as being linked  
 537 to a demand, not a command, could prevent ethical discourse from becoming overly  
 538 forceful and hyperbolic (Stern 2019: 261).

539 Moreover, in contrast to Levinas, Løgstrup maintains that the I is called upon to  
 540 take care of the concrete other, not every other, by using one's own imagination and  
 541 understanding to find out what is best for him or her. Whereas Levinas claims that  
 542 everyone is responsible for everyone else, even for their responsibility, Løgstrup puts  
 543 a limit to responsibility by allowing the I to come forward in a specific situation and  
 544 make the other's life horizon wider. Not only the I, but also the other can become  
 545 receptive to the way in which a human being lays him or herself open by picking up  
 546 on the tone in a given discourse, and so each of them can in turn respond ethically to  
 547 each other's needs (ED, 14-15/EF, 23-24). For Løgstrup, the I also has power over  
 548 the other, yet it finds itself under a demand of using that power for the well-being of  
 549 the other by deliberating and thinking through what is best for him or her.

## 550 4 Conclusion

551 Despite taking their starting point in two different, almost opposite scenarios, Løg-  
 552 strup and Levinas share a common concern of bringing out into the open the ethical  
 553 demands and resources entailed in human goodness and responsibility for the other.  
 554 Both explicitly state that their attempts to rethink ethics—the Danish term *forsøg*,  
 555 employed by Løgstrup in *The Ethical Demand*, means attempt just like the French  
 556 *essay*, present in the subtitle of *Totality and Infinity*—will confront their readers  
 557 with an unfulfillable and impossible ethical demand of receiving the other without  
 558 thinking about anything else than serving and taking care of the other.

559 In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas bases his phenomenological analysis on a separa-  
 560 tion of the I and the other, which he only finds a way across in the I's reception of the  
 561 other through hospitality and friendship. In *The Ethical Demand* Løgstrup takes his  
 562 starting point in the fundamental entanglement of human lives, which is confirmed  
 563 as a reality in trust and love, whereas the ethical demand reveals that there has been  
 564 a breach in the blessed togetherness of human beings. Friendship and love are the  
 565 interpersonal resources which humans rely on in order to realize what appears to be,  
 566 seen from the ego's limited point of view, impossible and unfulfillable.

567 The paper has argued that there is room for a critical and constructive dialogue  
 568 between Løgstrup and Levinas. Both thinkers contribute to a deepened understand-  
 569 ing of how unfulfillable and impossible demands become realizable. Levinas' ethical  
 570 thinking can be brought to bear on Løgstrup's in that it develops a phenomenologi-  
 571 cal analysis of the resources which the I is offered in facing the other, who gives, in  
 572 questioning the I, a key to understanding his or her own discourse. Løgstrup's phe-  
 573 nomenological analysis of the attitude with which somebody receives and picks up  
 574 on the tone of the other, who has dared to come forward, shows how the I can realize  
 575 what is ethically demanded by showing trust. It enriches Levinas' description of the  
 576 face by not forcing the reception of the other onto the I through a command, but by



577 the way, in which the I and the other set the tone, they find themselves under the  
 578 demand to receive each other correspondingly. By focusing on how the I is opened  
 579 up in relation to the other in love and friendship, ethical discourse can help under-  
 580 stand how demands are being fulfilled without being demanded and may prevent the  
 581 discourse itself from sliding into a forceful terminology which makes it difficult to  
 582 see how human beings can still offer an ethical response to the needs of others.  
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## 584 Compliance with Ethical Standards

585 **Conflict of interest** The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

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