Relational Ontology in

Luther, Kierkegaard, and Løgstrup:

Investigating the 'in-between' Self and Other

Seminar, PhD and Postdoctoral Course at Aarhus University

Keynote Speakers

Marius Timmann Mjaaland, Oslo University

Patrick Stokes, Deakin University

Robert Stern, University of Sheffield

Program

Wednesday 25 August

Place: Preben Hornungstuen, Studenternes Hus
Zoom-link: https://aarhusuniversity.zoom.us/j/62259531290?pwd=aURyOXY1bmpmK1V3RUNlR0k3Q25ndz09
          (Meeting ID: 622 5953 1290, Passcode: 014148)

12.00-13.00: Lunch (speakers and organizers)
13.00-14.30: Welcome and Keynote address by Marius Timmann Mjaaland, Oslo University: "Creation, Creature and Creator: Challenges to Relational Ontology in the Anthropocene"
14.30-14.45: Coffee break
14.45-15.45: Reading session 1: Martin Luther's *On the Freedom of a Christian* & *Lectures on Genesis (Gen 1:26)*
15.45-16.00: Coffee break
16.00-16.45: Kinga Zeller, University of Kiel: "Reasoning for a Loving Self-Relation"
16.45-17.30: Sasja Emilie Mathiasen Stopa, Aarhus University: "'Ich werde am Du' – The Role of the Second-Person Perspective and Creative Dialogue in the Relational Anthropologies of Martin Luther and Martin Buber"
17.30-17.45: Coffee break
17.45-18.15: Simon Balle, Aarhus University: "Relational Ontology and Non-Human Others: *Becoming Selves for Humans and Robots*"
18.15-18.45: Mikael Brorson, Aarhus University: "Sin as *Anknüpfung*: Negative *imago Dei* in the Narrated Self"
19.30:   Dinner (speakers and organizers)

Thursday 26 August

Place: Mogens Zielerstuen, Studenternes Hus (9.00–14.00); "Bed og Arbejd" build. 1453, room 415 (14.00-)
Zoom-link: https://aarhusuniversity.zoom.us/j/68676035305?pwd=alJCR0IwOG9lOURvSjc3VVF1SDNBQT09
          (Meeting ID: 686 7603 5305, Passcode: 942361)

9.00-10.30:   Keynote address by Patrick Stokes, Deakin University, Melbourne: "Løgstrup and the Sovereignty of Trust"
10.30-11.30: Reading session 2: Excerpts from Søren Kierkegaard's *Works of Love* and K.E. Løgstrup's *Ethical Concepts and Problems*
11.30-12.00: Lunch
12.00-13.30: Keynote address by Robert Stern, University of Sheffield: "Forgiveness in Luther and Løgstrup: A Groundless Inter-Personal Relation?"
13.30-13.45: Coffee break
13.45-14.30: Bjørn Rabjerg, Aarhus University: "Relational Ontology in K. E. Løgstrup's Thought"
14:30-15:00: Rounding off

<div style="text-align:center; color:#a00;">Everyone is welcome!</div>

NB: Please bring documentation for vaccination against covid-19
or a negative corona-test if you want to participate on site

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Description

In this seminar and course, we will examine theological and philosophical anthropology as 'relational ontology'. This notion characterises Martin Luther's anthropology and models how the Danish Lutheran theologians and philosophers Søren Kierkegaard and K. E. Løgstrup understand human existence.

According to Luther, holiness lies not in the category of substance but rather in relation: "Nec Sanctitas est in praedicamento substantiae sed relationis" (WA 40 II, 354,3-4). This sentence in Luther's 1532 lecture on Psalm 51 summarises his anthropology, which breaks with Aristotelian substance metaphysics and claims that human beings gain their existence not in and through themselves, but outside of themselves in their trusting relationships with God and their neighbours.

This relational constitution of the human being has been discussed by prominent Luther researchers such as Wilfried Joest, Gerhard Ebeling, and Oswald Bayer. According to Joest, Luther understood the person as an eccentric, de-centred creature rather than a 'substantial' and self-sufficient subject defining itself by conscious decisions of the will. Joest termed this anthropology a 'relational ontology' (*Ontologie der Person bei Luther*, 1967) that focuses on the sphere 'in-between' us, which determines or even constitutes the self and the Other in their mutual relationship.

Yet, how to make sense of Luther's more radical formulations pointing to self-contempt, "Die liebe gottes und des nehsten, und sein selbs verachtung" (WA 1, 255,19), or even to self-annihilation and a state in which the self is 'evacuated' from itself to the extent that God lives in it and acts for and instead of it? Can notions of 'faith as agent' or 'the Holy Spirit working within us' replace human subjectivity? Would that not mean downplaying our responsibility for our own actions and omissions?

In *Works of Love* (1847), Kierkegaard develops the notion of love as *Mellembestemmelse* (middle term), which functions, so to speak, as a 'catalyst' that binds the two without fusing them. Moreover, with the help of the concept of *Aand* (spirit), he can account for the dynamics of interhuman and divine-human interconnectedness. However, what happens to the perspectival nature of awareness in this transformative sphere between the 'I' and the 'Thou' – is relationality just enriching my own perspective to the effect that it includes another's, or does it lead to an alternation or oscillation of the first-person and the second-person perspective?

In Løgstrup's analysis of human existence, the so-called sovereign expressions of life (compassion, trust, the openness of speech etc.) constitute the 'in-between' ontological structures that make authentic relations to the other person possible. Løgstrup invokes Luther's creation theology as an ally in pointing to 'created ontological structures' in human existence that make it possible for us to relate authentically to others and let our lives go well. Human existence unfolds in a tension between self-circling and self-forgetful orientation, and thus the self is affected by either self- or other-directedness, where Løgstrup understands the former as a distortion of life and the latter as an opening-up of the self to life as it truly is.

Literature

Literature that will be discussed during the course
- Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian* (The Annotated Luther Study Edition, transl. by Timothy J. Wengert) & extracts from *Lectures on Genesis* (Gen 1:26; LW 1, 60-65)
- Søren Kierkegaard, extracts from *The Concept of Anxiety* (KW VIII, Caput I, §1-3, 25-37; Caput II §2, 60f), *Works of Love* (KW 16, I.III.A., 107 + II.IV., 264-273), *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* (KW XV, 192f) and *The Sickness Unto Death* (Part I, A.A, A.B, KW XIX, 13-17)
- K. E. Løgstrup, extracts from *Ethical Problems and Concepts*: Chapters 2: "The Ethical Demand and the Sovereign Expressions of Life" and 4: "The Ethical Demand and the Norms"

Additional literature for individual preparation

On Luther:
- Wilfried Joest, *Ontologie der Person bei Luther*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1967.
- Gerhard Ebeling, "Luthers Wirklichkeitsverständnis" in: *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 90 (1993), 409-424.
- Tuomo Mannermaa, "Justification and Theosis in Lutheran-Orthodox Perspective" in: Carl E. Braaten & Robert W. Jenson (eds.), *Union with Christ. The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company 1998, 25-41.
- Oswald Bayer, "Luthers Verständnis des Seins Jesu Christi im Glauben" in: Anja Ghiselli, Kari Kopperi, and Rainer Vinke (eds.), *Luther und Ontologie. Das Sein Christi im Glauben als strukturierendes Prinzip der Theologie Luthers*, Erlangen: Martin Luther Verlag 1993, 94-113.
- Sasja Emilie Mathiasen Stopa, "'Through Sin Nature has lost its Confidence in God' – Sin and Trust as Formative Elements of Luther's Conception of Society" in: *Journal of Early Modern Christianity* 5:2 (2018), 151-171.
- Sasja Emilie Mathiasen Stopa, "'Seeking refuge in God against God' – The hidden God in Lutheran Theology and the Postmodern Weakening of God" in: *Open Theology* 2018, 658-674.

On Luther, Kierkegaard, and Løgstrup:
- Svend Andersen, *Løgstrup & Luther,* Aarhus: Klim 2017.
- Bjørn Rabjerg and Robert Stern, "Freedom from the Self: Luther and Løgstrup on Sin as 'Incurvatus in Se'" in: *Open Theology* 4 (2018), 135-146.
- Bjørn Rabjerg, "Introduction" in: K. E. Løgstrup: *Controverting Kierkegaard*. Edited by Bjørn Rabjerg and Robert Stern. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2021 (forthcoming).
- Arne Grøn, 'The Ethical Demand: Kierkegaard, Løgstrup, and Levinas" in: Hans Fink and Robert Stern (eds.), *What Is Ethically Demanded? K.E. Løgstrup's Philosophy of Moral Life*, Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press 2017, 130-147.
- Arne Grøn, "Subjectivity, Interiority and Exteriority: Kierkegaard and Levinas" in: Claudia Welz and Karl Verstrynge (eds.), *Despite Oneself: Subjectivity and Its Secret in Kierkegaard and Levinas,* London: Turnshare 2008, 11-30.
- Claudia Welz, "Identity as Self-Transformation: Emotional Conflicts and their Metamorphosis in Memory" in: *Continental Philosophy Review* 43:2 (2010), 267-285.
- Claudia Welz, "Divine-Human (Dis-)Similarity: Freedom, Sin, and Relational Ontology in Reformation Theology" in: *Humanity in God's Image: An Interdisciplinary Exploration,* Oxford: Oxford University Press 2016, 120-140 (DOI:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198784982.003.0005).

Abstracts

Kinga Zeller, University of Kiel: "Reasoning for a loving self-relation"

When arguing for a positive self-relation in Christian existence, the love commandment quickly comes to mind: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbour *as yourself*" (Lk 10,27; my emphasis). Yet, while it is a theological common place that the relation to the neighbour as well as to God has to be one of love, the relation to oneself is very often less positively connoted. Prominent theologians such as Martin Luther in Reformation Times, as well as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Karl Barth, and Anders Nygren in the last century are deeply suspicious of a loving self-relation, claiming it would alienate the self from God (cf. e. g. Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, Sanctorum Communio. Eine dogmatische Untersuchung zur Soziologie der Kirche (DBW 1), hrsg. von J. v. Soosten, München 1986, 108, or Nygren, Anders, Agape and Eros. Part I, A Study of the Christian Idea of Love, Part II, The History of the Christian Idea of Love, Translated by Philip S. Watson, Philadelphia 1953, 216f.), and demand various forms of self-denial instead (cf. e.g. Luther, Martin, Sermon de duplici iustitia. 1519, WA 2, (143)145–153, 147,12–18). This stands in vast contrast to psychological insights highlighting the importance of a positive self-relation for all other interpersonal relationships (cf. Frankl, Viktor, Man for Himself. An Inquiry into the Psychology of Ethics, New York 1947, 129).

In my paper, I intend to gather and discuss some of the common argumentations for and against a Christian *amor sui*. I start by showing in a brief overview that a self-relation based on self-denial, occasionally even self-contempt, is indeed a guiding principle in prominent strings of protestant traditions. This negative self-relation seems to be the prerequisite to fulfil the love commandment. In the second and main part of my paper, I question these links between self-contempt and love for the neighbour as well as between self-contempt and love for and of God. In doing so, I draw on insights from gift-giving theory and psychology, as they are partly already taken up by feminist theology. It will become evident that while any self-relation might not be the chronological starting point for relationships to others, it is a pivotal element in our way of relating to others, and that there are good reasons for theologians to make room for a loving self-relation in their relational thinking – as well as for its corruptibility by sin. I want to show some outlines of how such a loving self-relation could be modelled and which challenges such a model could face.

Sasja Emilie Mathiasen Stopa, Aarhus University: "'Ich werde am Du' – The role of the second-person perspective and creative dialogue in the relational anthropologies of Martin Luther and Martin Buber"

The second person perspective is fundamental to Martin Luther's theology. One of its key phrases is the *pro nobis*, which occurs 1250 times in his writings, reminding the believers that the incarnation and suffering of Christ happened "for us". Whereas the second person plural emphasises the communal aspects of human dialogue with the divine, the second person singular, *pro te*, is also frequently used by Luther with 327 occurrences. This perspective testifies to the overarching pastoral aim of Lutheran theology, namely to comfort postlapsarian human beings, who live through the experience of God turning against them. Thus, in a sermon from 1525, Luther lends his voice to Christ, who addresses the listener using the second person singular pronoun and gives the comforting promise, which summarises the Gospel: "Du hast gesündet, ich aber will für dich darsteen, du solt weder sünd noch tod fürchten" (WA 17, I., 186b,28).

In this paper, I analyse Luther's relational anthropology focusing on the second-person perspective and attempt to reach a deeper understanding of his anthropology through insights from Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue. Buber's description of interpersonal dialogue as a creative process appears to express important aspects of the human dialogue with God: "Ich werde am Du; Ich werdend spreche Ich Du" (Buber: 1983 [1923],18). Humans receive their existence through this dialogue. Moreover, according to Luther, God becomes God in dialogue with human beings: "Fides est creatrix divinitatis, non in persona, sed in nobis" (WA 40 I, 360a,5-6). Whereas the metaphysical God *per se* utters his truths in monologues and remains unaffected by the sinful self-centeredness of humans, God, who reveals himself *pro te*, invites humans into dialogue and depends on them answering him in praise and glorification, whereby he is recognised as God.

Simon Balle, Aarhus University: "Relational ontology and non-human others: *Becoming* selves for humans and robots"

Contra substance metaphysics, relational ontology understands humans as fundamentally defined through mutual relations. Trinitarian theology substantiates this claim; as images of the triune God who fundamentally is persons-in-relation we *become* human persons through community, with God, humans, and creation (Gunton 1993). If relatedness is the base measure of human ontology, then social interaction is a defining activity for human individuation. Becoming a self is a continuous, dynamic, and social event unfolding throughout a person's engagement with other beings. Ultimately then, becoming a self is not a process within human control. Rather, to use K.E. Løgstrup's terminology, it is something happening 'behind our backs' as we respond to the other in a self-forgetful manner (Løgstrup 2010). Sovereign expressions of life (such as empathy, compassion, trust, openness of speech) thus not only serve an ethical aim, but are also ontologically significant in the way they configure our very becoming (Løgstrup 2013; Niekerk 2017).

Accepting relational ontology as the most suitable mode of thinking about human existence has some interesting and difficult implications when thinking about our relations to non-humans in general, and, in particular, concerning the world of the made: things, artefacts, machines etc. In this paper, I intend to articulate and explore two critical implications in relation to social robots through the lens of Løgstrup's sovereign expressions of life (Løgstrup 1966; 2013). Because, curiously, empirical studies suggest people draw on this ontological structure when responding to sociable robots (Balle 2021).

The first implication emerges as an ethical worry, that if social others co-constitute us as human beings, how might we be further shaped by introducing entirely new kinds of beings as relational nodes in our communities? Similar worries are already represented in the wider debate about the desirability of developing robots as autonomous social actors (e.g. Turkle 2011; Vallor 2015; Nyholm 2020). But in taking the question up within the context of a relational ontology, these worries could amount to a more substantial claim: that sustained reciprocation with social robots affect us on an ontological level.

A second implication following from this is whether the reverse is true: will technological artefacts such as social robots *become* selves in a similar fashion as humans? That is, will robots that we relate to as genuine others – e.g. when empathizing (Rosenthal-von der Pütten et al. 2014) or employing you-speak (Burdett 2020) – *construct* themselves as such? Applying the terminology of Løgstrup, will robots on the receiving end of sovereign expressions of life acquire some ontological status as individual relational beings?

If this seems counterintuitive or an undesirable upshot, it might at least give pause to reflect on what exactly we mean by *relational ontology*, particularly within Theology, and more generally whether this mode exhausts what can be said about human beings. If, in the end, we need to posit some essential quality about humans that uniquely enables us to partake in the created/given goodness while baring other beings, are we not ultimately operating with one foot in essentialism, vitalism, or some similar version of substance ontology?

Literature

Burdett, Michael S. 2020. "Personhood and Creation in an Age of Robots and Ai: Can We Say 'You' to Artifacts?" *Zygon®* 55 (2): 347–60. https://doi.org/10.1111/zygo.12595.

Gunton, Colin. 1993. "The Human Creation: Towards a Renewal of the Doctrine of the Imago Dei." In *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 104–21. Edinburg: T&T Clark.

Løgstrup, K. E. 1966. "Sartres Og Kierkegaards Skildring Af Den Dæmoniske Indesluttethed." *Vindrosen* 13: 28–42.

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Niekerk, Kees. 2017. "Løgstrup's Conception of the Sovereign Expressions of Life." In *What Is Ethically Demanded?: K. E. Logstrup's Philosophy of Moral Life*, 186–215. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvpj755r.13.

Nyholm, Sven. 2020. *Humans and Robots: Ethics, Agency, and Anthropomorphism*. London; New York: and Littlefield International.

Rosenthal-von der Pütten, Astrid M., Frank P. Schulte, Sabrina C. Eimler, Sabrina Sobieraj, Laura Hoffmann, Stefan Maderwald, Matthias Brand, and Nicole C. Krämer. 2014. "Investigations on Empathy towards Humans and Robots Using FMRI." *Computers in Human Behavior* 33 (April): 201–12. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2014.01.004.

Turkle, Sherry. 2011. *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. New York: Basic Books.

Vallor, Shannon. 2015. "Moral Deskilling and Upskilling in a New Machine Age: Reflections on the Ambiguous Future of Character." *Philosophy & Technology* 28 (1): 107–24. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13347-014-0156-9.

Mikael Brorson, Aarhus University: "Sin as *Anknüpfung*: Negative *imago Dei* in the narrated self"

Traditionally, human createdness and, more precisely, the *imago Dei* has been understood as a positive (ethical and/or ontological) qualification of the human being: The human being has something good in him, because he has been created in the image of God. Obviously, relational ontology problematizes this understanding of *imago Dei* as a category of substance, and in this paper, I will attempt to develop what we could call a 'negative *imago Dei*' with inspiration from the anthropologies of Søren Kierkegaard, Rudolf Bultmann, and the Danish theologian K. Olesen Larsen. To them, I will argue, createdness in the image of God is in principle a neutral statement concerning the ability of the human being to relate to God and others. This makes possible 'the Decision' (*Afgjørelsen*), as Kierkegaard would put it, where the human being is exposed as a sinner. Thus, the theological use of this relational *imago Dei* is showing how the createdness of the human being makes sin possible. Therefore, the relationship between the human being and God, which is characterised by human sinfulness and rebellion against God, is the only remnant of the *imago Dei* in sinful humanity. This negative *imago Dei* has been described most pointedly by Bultmann: "*Die Sünde des Menschen ist der Anknüpfungspunkt* für das widersprechende Wort von der Gnade" (Rudolf Bultmann, "Anknüpfung und Widerspruch", *Glauben und Verstehen* II (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1952), 120).

  Furthermore, I will develop this concept narratively by using the thinking of another Danish theologian, Johannes Sløk, and his unique synthesis of existentialist and narrative theology. This points to man's decision not to receive his self from the story of God (i.e. the story told in the incarnation, the story of Jesus) as the relation which constitutes the being of man exactly because of his disobedience: The story of him as a sinner – a justified sinner (*simul iustus et peccator*). In addition, this also points to the *Zwischen* between the self and the other (and The Other) as constituted by narrative.

Bjørn Rabjerg, Aarhus University: "Relational ontology in K. E. Løgstrup's thought"

In K.E. Løgstrup's ontology, *intentionality* and thus *direction* is of crucial importance. Everything hinges on the directedness or *orientation* of the self, whether it relates itself (inwards) to itself or (outwards) to something outside itself. Standing firmly rooted in his reading of Luther, Løgstrup's anthropology sees the self as a pitfall, where we humans inevitably and ultimately lose ourselves to our own devices. The self is an *incurvatus in se* (a self that is curved inwards upon – or thrown back on – itself), and the fundamental human problem is the self's incapacity to free itself. As such, Løgstrup's anthropology consists in the self's inability to properly relate to anything except itself. However, through Løgstrup's understanding of human existence runs a sharp division, where human existence (and ultimately *life* as *created* life) provides what we ourselves – necessarily – cannot provide, namely some*one* and some*thing* other than ourselves: what is absent in his anthropology (the account of the human ego) is available in his ontology (the account of created life). Here, *the sovereign expressions of life* become the backbone of Løgstrup's relational ontology, where he draws attention to basic human phenomena such as trust, compassion and love, and the vital importance they play in human existence. This is a central theme throughout Løgstrup's authorship, and it has deep theological roots and implications. However, in this paper I will argue that Løgstrup's position can also be seen as a much needed *philosophical* Lutheran corrective to Greek-Aristotelean philosophy and thus as providing a philosophical position that the philosophical tradition has been lacking.

[STIK, Angola 3, London (2010). Photo: Boring Lovechild/ Flickr. CC BY-NC-SA 2.0]