



REFLECTIONS ON THE LIVING TRADITION

And We Shall Be Changed

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[Editorial Note: Donna M. Orange’s “And We Shall Be Changed” is presented here as a posthumous testament to her lifelong effort to think across theology, philosophy, and psychology in the face of human suffering. Delivered as a keynote at Seattle University on June 22, 2023, the address emerged from the Cura Psychologia project’s interdisciplinary collaboration among six Jesuit universities—Loyola Marymount University, Georgetown University, Seattle University, Boston College, Fordham University, and the College of the Holy Cross. Though not framed as a talk on Jesuit education per se, Orange’s meditation on radical ethics, vulnerability, and the “suffering other” exemplifies a living tradition deeply resonant with Ignatian concerns for formation, justice, and *cura personalis*. Holding doctorates in philosophy (Fordham University) and clinical psychology (Yeshiva University), she here invites Jesuit higher education into a more daring, receptive stance, one in which our disciplines, our institutions, and our very selves “shall be changed” by those whose vulnerability calls us to responsibility and hope.]

Probably it makes sense to explain at the outset why we are here this evening, at an event organized by participants in the Cura Psychologia Project, even before telling you what a pleasure and honor it is to be here in my old haunt (1978–82) where I got my start teaching philosophy in the days when women were even scarcer in philosophy than they had been during my graduate studies at Fordham. We are here now because we members of this project believe in interdisciplinary conversation, in deepening the dialogue, starting with Jesuit universities, among psychologists, theologians,

and philosophers. By finding our shared history and concerns, we hope to re-ground all three disciplines in the humanities.

But there are obstacles. Each discipline seeks truth in its own way, works by its own methods, carries a fair amount of disdain for the others, and tends—by way of academic departmentalization—to isolate itself, building not a single ivory tower but a collection of them.

Tonight we invite you to join our working group in considering what makes a good human being, a question Aristotle first posed for western philosophy in an organized manner in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. To be sure, Socrates had already placed ethics as the foundation of philosophical thinking. But Aristotle, later dear to medieval theology, gave us more precision as to what constitutes human well-being (*eudaimonia*). He described virtue as consisting in moderation, in finding the so-called “golden mean”¹ between the extremes to which we often resort under pressure and without deliberation. Perhaps his most famous example: courage stands as the moderate point between cowardice and rashness.² In addition, his ethics includes a careful catalog of the virtues proper to a good human life: prudence, justice, fortitude or courage, and temperance. He concludes with his famous treatise on friendship, crucial component of a good human life.³

Yes, most of us studied all this in our school and university years. So why do we begin with Aristotle now? For at least two reasons: 1) the question of human well-being remains central to all three disciplines involved in this project, as well as to Jesuit education generally; and 2) because Aristotle, though the first to systematize an answer to the question of the good human life, has not been the last. From medieval theology through the rationalist and calculative ethics of the modern period to the separation of psychology from philosophy more recently, new answers—religious, philosophical, and psychological—have dominated. Does good human living consist in submission to the divine, however that may be conceived of in various traditions? Is goodness a matter of “the moral law within”⁴ to be approached through reason, or perhaps a calculus of goods and evils, benefits and risks, as we find in the utilitarians (now called the consequentialists)? Does “the virtuous person” refer to an egoism characteristic of Western modernity generally, focused on Pascal’s single individual for whom “my place in the

1 See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Martin Ostwald (Prentice Hall 1999), Book 2, 42.

2 See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 3, 68–77.

3 See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*.

4 See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Stephen Engstrom (Hackett Publishing Company, 2002), 203.

sun is the destruction of the earth?”⁵ This individualism, updated by Kant and the utilitarians, long seemed fully compatible with colonialism and enslavement, and now justifies oppression and privilege.

Individualism, as the two philosophers of radical ethics we consider tonight believed, made possible the horrors of the World War II era. Knud Ejler Løgstrup and Emmanuel Levinas asked how we needed to think about ethics, i.e. our relation to our fellow humans, if we were to stop living in Hobbes’s world of the “war of all against all.”⁶ From individualism they accepted the idea that each single person is unique, irreplaceable, and inviolable. Against individualism, they claimed that we are related, one to the other, in solidarity and responsibility. Let us consider them in turn.

First, let us consider the Danish philosopher Knud Ejler Løgstrup. Perhaps the most important Danish philosopher since Kierkegaard, Løgstrup was born in 1905, lived through the Nazi occupation of Denmark, taught philosophy and theology at the university of Aarhus, and died in 1981. His magnum opus, translated into English as *The Ethical Demand*, claims that the impossible command to love one’s neighbor, as heard in Christianity, need not be linked to institutional religion or dogma, but instead must be understood humanly as *silent, radical, one-sided, and impossible*.⁷ He believed that the basic phenomenological fact of human trust in each other, absent abuse of this trust, means that our lives come to us as a gift and that we have a fundamental duty to take care of each other. He wrote of utter vulnerability:

The other person must be to such a degree dependent upon me that what I do and say in the relationship between us—I alone and nobody else, here and now and not at some other time or in some other manner—is of decisive importance. If my relation to the other person is the place where my relation to God is determined, then it must at the same time be the place where that person’s existence is so totally at stake that to fail them is to fail them irreparably.⁸

Immediately we hear an unusual voice: clear, straightforward, uncompromising, without philosophical or theological jargon. Løgstrup addresses me by saying I am involved. The other is at my mercy. Let us look more closely.

5 See Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (E. P. Dutton & Co., 1958), 85, §295.

6 See Thomas Hobbes, “Of the Natural Condition of Mankind as Concerning Their Felicity and Misery,” in *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

7 See Knud Ejler Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand* (Notre Dame Press, 1997), 7, 160, 164, 173, 207.

8 Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, 5.

Løgstrup called the ethical demand silent because it comes to us without words in two senses. Unspoken but implicit in all conversation, the other's dependence on me means I must not mistreat or abandon this raw vulnerability. "Regardless of how varied the communication between persons may be," he wrote, "it always involves the risk of one person daring to lay himself or herself open to the other in the hope of a response."⁹

The silent demand, though it commands response, does not specify exactly what must be done, but leaves each of us to work that out. Like the humanitarians—among these we could mention doctors, nurses, teachers, social workers—to whom we may recommend both Løgstrup and Levinas, the recipient of the demand must find the demand's content in the specific context. An ethical response, one that takes care of the vulnerability of the other, differs depending on the age of the child, the illness and capacities of the patient, the resources of the surrounding world, and the precarity that Judith Butler's work¹⁰ foregrounds. Precarity in her terms means fragility and vulnerability: the tendency to be regarded as ungrievable, not a human life worth mourning. The demand remains silent on its content but does not permit or exonerate bystanding.

Though the ethical demand remains silent and pervasively implicit, still Løgstrup insists on its radicality, not in words and actions but in the demand itself. This ethics requires that what I do and say in relation to the other be done unselfishly, for the sake of the other:

The demand, precisely because it is unspoken, is radical. This is true even though the thing to be done in any particular situation may be very insignificant. Why is this? Because the person confronted by the unspoken demand must determine how they are to take care of the other person's life. If what they do is to result in something of real value to the other person, they must think and act unselfishly.¹¹

The response demanded may be small and seem insignificant. We can remember from our clinical work that the patient remembers something we did or said that seemed to us routine or minor. If we responded unselfishly or openheartedly to the ethical demand, to the abandoned or precarious patient, this moment may take on infinite significance in the life of the patient or in the therapeutic relationship. Sometimes, the demand upon me, or its intrusion into my busy life, seems enormous, but I may not walk

9 Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, 17.

10 See Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (Verso, 2004); and Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (Verso, 2010).

11 Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, 44.

away. The other person, perhaps my patient, depends upon me utterly in that moment.

Finally, Løgstrup concludes, as if he had studied Levinas on the ethical constitution of subjectivity: “the demand has the effect of making the person to whom the demand is directed a singular person. Ethically speaking the demand isolates him or her.”¹² I respond, therefore I am. Ego-centeredness must go, as I surrender my own sense of possession and control. Moving beyond Aristotelian and all later ethical systems, a radical ethics replaces the normalizing of everyday character building and habit formation with self-diremption, self-emptying not for its own sake, or to make me virtuous, but to make room for the other. It is not about me, but for the other.

Løgstrup notes that we are not required to “turn ourselves inside out . . . to abandon all spiritual reticence.”¹³ We are allowed to, indeed we must, find time and resources to nourish our inner lives—whether meditation, spiritual reading, or liturgy—if only so that we can live out a radical ethics. We must protect the life of the other who has been delivered over into our hands. Løgstrup cautions that our responsibility for the other does not mean taking over the responsibility for the other’s own responsibilities. He further cautions that mistaking radical responsibility for limitlessness can easily lead us to encroach on the other in the name of taking care. The radicality of the demand may require us to do less-than-radical actions.

Besides being silent and radical, the demand is one-sided and asymmetrical because it can claim nothing in return. If, as Løgstrup took as axiomatic, my life is a gift, I have nothing to which I am entitled. I possess nothing that I have not received and cannot, as he said, make counterdemands. Levinas, to whom we turn later, would have said that seeing our lives as gifts means accepting that we are creatures, not self-made or lords of the universe. Both thinkers share a biblical and prophetic inspiration, despite their different traditions.

Some will object, Løgstrup knew, to characterizing life as a gift, especially in the face of suffering and death, loss and despair. But, he concluded, “the thing that makes us dispute that life is a gift is not death or suffering, it is our own will to be worshiped and feel our own power.”¹⁴ By characterizing life as gift, he seems to mean unearned, and thus not grounding any sense of entitlement or priority of my life over that of the other. Quite the contrary.

12 Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, 45.

13 Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, 16.

14 Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, 122.

So the question of reciprocity, what does the other owe to me, receives almost the same answer from Løgstrup as from Levinas: that is his affair.¹⁵ My only concern is that the other comes first. The common or divergent sources of their convictions on this one-sidedness or asymmetry would make a larger study than I can undertake here. I suspect that Levinas, whose later work insists that we are passively born into an utterly persecutory and prior responsibility, took the more radical position. But both equally opposed any social contract ethics based on reciprocity or mutual recognition. These ideas can pretend to be humanistic, but they reduce ethics to an exchange economy.

And last, the demand is impossible or unfulfillable because it so seems to contradict our acquired selfishness. Nobody can live so generously, you may say. The demand is further impossible because we can never know whether we have truly acted unselfishly. The demand does not tell us *how* we are to take care of the other—sometimes the other would seem to prefer to be left in the rubble—but that we *must* take care. Nor can we know if we have done enough. Løgstrup acknowledges that the demand sometimes involves us in knotty problems of thinking we know better (like a parent) what is good for the other but insists that these problems cannot allow us to become bystanders. The good Samaritan is Løgstrup's model. The ethical demand does not prescribe what exactly we who observe injustice should do; it requires that we respond and leaves us all the problems of practical wisdom.¹⁶ The needs are infinite and we are not. We thus live divided between the demand and our possibilities.

He described a radical vulnerability into which we are born and in which we live. Trust, he wrote, "is essential to every conversation. In conversation as such we deliver ourselves over into the hand of another."¹⁷ Parenthetically, we might note that misunderstandings and ruptures, therapeutic and in intimate relationships, occur when the other feels some important nuance unheard, and trust breached. The silent demand is to protect trust, the pre-condition for everything. We protect and restore trust, as best we can, by the careful and receptive way we listen to the other, even when the other accuses us of not listening.

It might be tempting to think that Løgstrup denies moral complexity, and the difficulty inherent in some situations. What he contests, I believe, is substituting endless deliberation and calculation for ethical response. In

15 Emmanuel Levinas and Philippe Nemo, *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Duquesne University Press, 1985), 98.

16 Hans Fink and Robert Stern, ed., *What is Ethically Demanded?: K. E. Løgstrup's Philosophy of Moral Life* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2017).

17 Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, 14.

radical ethics, the commitment to respond to the other both comes before *and* structures Aristotelian *phronesis* (practical wisdom). Patrick Stokes: “moral deliberation . . . a sort of phronetic practical reason only comes into play once one has already *implicitly* and non-reflectively committed oneself to meeting the ethical demand.”¹⁸ Wisdom and prudence cannot serve as excuses for doing nothing, for leaving the stranger to die alone in the ditch. We are first responders (ambiguity intended).

Løgstrup’s ethical philosophy, like that of Emmanuel Levinas with whom he begs to be compared, mostly emerged from his reflections on the behavior of bystanders and of courageous people during the Nazi period. He wrote of the differences in the ethical decisions required in Norway and Denmark during World War II. In Denmark, he thought, the presence of a government that persisted between the people and the Nazis meant time for deliberation. In Norway, with nothing but Nazi government, people constantly faced radical choices where protecting the vulnerable meant immediate risk of death or concentration camp for themselves or their families. This meant, Løgstrup thought, that their previous patterns of response to the ethical demand would probably predominate in their choice to collaborate, resist, or protect the lives of vulnerable others. “There is a psychic maturity,” he wrote, “which can make the direction of many an instant decision a foregone conclusion. Even where much is at stake, a person need not therefore necessarily be in doubt about what they will do.”¹⁹ Although we may, in our present moment, still have time to deliberate, to “sleep on it,” I find it useful to realize that every choice I make may be preparing a direction for fiercer challenges. Løgstrup himself, by the way, involved himself in much more active and dangerous resistance to the Nazi occupiers than many of his Danish colleagues were willing to do.

Another aspect of Løgstrup’s thinking helps to make his radicality clear. He raged—as much as his reserved philosophical voice would let him—against Kierkegaard, dearly beloved ancestor of so many of us who grew up in the sixties and seventies with existentialism. In his view, Kierkegaard, putting away Regina Olsen and his love for her, focused much too much on his own purity of heart. (Others, of course, may view Kierkegaard differently, or view these two as much closer.) In Løgstrup’s view, ethics has little to do with how holy and pure the individual can become. Instead, ethics means hearing the moans of the stranger in the ditch or beggar on the street as addressed to me.

18 Patrick Stokes, “The Problem of Spontaneous Goodness: From Kierkegaard to Løgstrup (via Zhuangzi and Eckhard),” *Continental Philosophy Review* 49 (2016): 145.

19 Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, 150.

Emmanuel Levinas and Knud Ejler Løgstrup

Emmanuel Levinas, born in Lithuania in 1906, student and early admirer of Heidegger, came to mount an ethical and phenomenological critique of what he called “totalizing:” every form of reducing people to things or categories, a tendency he found both violent and endemic to the western tradition.²⁰ From the time Hitler came to power, with Heidegger enthusiastically endorsing him, Levinas contrasted this murderous totalizing with response and responsibility toward infinity and transcendence, to the face of the other, commanding me, accusing me. Presentiment and memory of the Nazi horror, he wrote, haunted all his work. In his second great book²¹ substitution, or the other’s life before mine, the other’s death of more concern than mine, takes center stage. Ethical saying—*hineni* (*me here, yes*)—disrupts the objectifying, categorizing “said”, now treating the naked and vulnerable other as of ultimate value. The face of the other now bears the trace of the infinite, and only in the other—the widow, the orphan, the stranger—can the infinite be found and heard.

So how do these two thinkers of radical ethics compare and contrast? Rooted in religion (Løgstrup was Lutheran²² and Levinas was Jewish), both intended to work as phenomenologists but picked up different strains. Influenced by Bergson, Husserl and Heidegger, both lived at the same times in Strasbourg (where Levinas was teaching when Løgstrup arrived as a student) and Freiburg (both Husserl and Heidegger were there in the early 1930’s), but they seem never to have met. Heideggerian thrownness became for Løgstrup basic trust, only destroyed by betrayal and trauma. The basic trust exerts an almost instinctual hold. He justified his view of the ethical demand on grounds of experiences with which the reader or hearer could easily identify.

Levinas, directly Heidegger’s student, but even earlier a translator and student of Husserl, found another phenomenological voice: “The self is a sub-jectum: it is under the weight of the universe . . . what is incumbent upon me from all sides, regards me, is my affair [Incumbent means already there, already obligating me, holding me responsible.]”²³ Here we find a prophetic voice challenging the whole philosophical tradition. The first-person perspective so beloved by phenomenologists finds itself no lon-

20 See Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1979).

21 Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Springer, 2010).

22 Bjørn Rabjerg and Robert Stern, “Freedom From the Self: Luther and Løgstrup on Sin as ‘Incurvatus in Se,’” *Open Theology* 4 (2018): 268.

23 Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, 89.

ger agentic, no longer the agentic constructor of experience, but subject as subjected, under the weight of incumbency, obligated from all sides, “more passive than all passivity.”²⁴ Because Levinas (1906–95) outlived Løgstrup (1905–81) into the digital age, we have additional access to Levinas’ distinctive voice in the form of interviews from his later years easily accessible to us. We can hear him repeat the importance of returning to texts, and, like a mantra: “la sortie du soi, la sortie du soi” (the exit from self). Each thinker describes a radical ethical demand of responsibility to care for the vulnerable other in his own idiom. Both phenomenologists challenge what Critchley names the “autonomy orthodoxy”²⁵ of Western moral theory; both describe ethical experience, rather than justifying ethical choices.²⁶ Both, in addition, share a Hebrew and Christian sensibility shaping their preference for the poor and the abandoned ones. Phenomenology gives both thinkers a secular language, one might say, for communicating their radical ethics in human terms.

Levinas was raised in an intellectual strain of Judaism in Kovno, Lithuania, and ever allergic to more mystical forms. He was profoundly educated in Russian literature in exile in Ukraine in his Gymnasium years, and in phenomenology in Europe with Husserl and Heidegger. Levinas emerged from five years in captivity during the war to study Talmud with the famous Chouchani, also the teacher of Elie Wiesel. Headmaster of a Jewish school (the École Normale Israélite Orientale) in Paris, Levinas gave weekly Rashi commentaries, produced Talmudic commentaries, and published with a different publisher from his philosophical work. These, as well as his explicitly philosophical works, show a fascinating interdisciplinary voice, with a strong resistance to theologizing.

The Danish Lutheran Løgstrup, for his part, began his best-known work, *The Ethical Demand*, by framing its purpose as making the basic message of Jesus—love thy neighbor—accessible in human terms. How many times should I forgive my brother? Seventy times seven. A radical, one-sided, and unfulfillable demand, like the Levinasian ethic, this inordinate, excessive demand seems to echo “be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48).

24 Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, 14.

25 See Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (Verso Books, 2007).

26 See Donna M. Orange, “Another Voice From Radical Ethics: Denmark’s Knud Løgstrup,” in *Race, Rage, and Resistance: Philosophy, Psychology, and the Perils of Individualism*, ed. David M. Goodman, Eric R. Severson, and Heather Macdonald (Routledge 2020), 158.

But Løgstrup did not quote these words. Educated in theology and philosophy, he, like Levinas, avoided theologizing, preferring description and narrative of ethical experience. He knew we could not be perfect and relied on his Lutheran faith to believe that we are always already forgiven. “The Christian message does not solely take into account what a person actually is but also takes into account what a person is in light of the message: a forgiven human being.”²⁷ The demand is impossible: it requires of forgiven sinners that we be perfectly good. Faith provides him not content, but context.

He saw people living out their acceptance of the ethical demand in the present and struggling with it. Levinas would speak of a split in subjectivity, with the demand originating in the immemorial past, a demand to which I am always inadequate, thus torn apart by it. In Judith Butler’s straightforward words, “Let’s face it. We’re undone by each other. And if we’re not, we’re missing something.”²⁸

For both Levinas and Løgstrup, Western religious sensibility grounded and shaped what they came to understand as the human ethical relation. How much either would be able to engage in interfaith dialogues beyond their partially shared traditions remains, for me, an open question. Both profoundly challenged the individualism underlying Western ontologies, colonialism, and other forms of reductive and murderous violence. Løgstrup substituted trust, Levinas solidarity. Both seem close to Buddhist compassion and to African *Ubuntu*, though to my knowledge, neither mentioned these ideas.

A striking similarity between these two thinkers, absent from other well-known moral philosophers, is one-sidedness (Løgstrup) or asymmetry (Levinas). The ethical demand is on me, not you. This stupefying, excessive, exorbitant quality defies the logic of justification. Only stories demonstrate its possibility, and even reasonableness. But I must mention that in his last years Levinas tended to call these examples of the ethical response “holiness.” Løgstrup, more reserved, thought they simply demonstrated true humanity. Perhaps these two labels are closer than they may sound.

Despite the striking parallels, we find in Løgstrup an emphasis on human interdependence underpinning his constant talk of basic trust, for him a phenomenological fundamental that finds no exact equivalent in Levinas, for whom an anarchic responsibility refuses all appeal to something foundational. But do they differ so much? Both stress one-sidedness and asymmetry, but the vulnerability of Løgstrup’s speaker, and the nakedness of the face of Levinas’s widow, orphan, and stranger share a common

27 Knud Ejler Løgstrup, *Beyond The Ethical Demand* (Notre Dame Press, 2007), 32.

28 Butler, *Precarious Life*, 23.

fragility and impose a common demand. You shall not turn away, you shall not remain indifferent, you shall not murder me with your categories, you shall not leave me to die alone. To my ears, these messages from a Lutheran and a Jewish phenomenologist sound equally demanding; others, lacking such voices, must turn to practical philosophers like Dorothy Day, whom both Løgstrup and Levinas would have very well understood.

Returning to where we began tonight, we should ask what has changed between Aristotelian and radical ethics. Despite Aristotle's insistence that we are naturally social (as well as rational) animals,²⁹ his ethical focus remains the well-being (*eudaimonia*) of the individual. By contrast, radical ethics does not place the other first, it finds the other always already first and by this shift in focus we are changed. Here are some words that came to me in my last years of psychoanalytic practice:

Allowing ourselves to be affected by our patients' suffering in a Levinasian spirit means trusting them to lead us within a complex dialogic process. It will lead us down paths we did not expect to go and change us profoundly. "The trumpet shall sound," proclaims the basso in G. F. Händel's famous aria, "and we shall be changed."³⁰ In psychoanalysis, we may not hear the trumpet of theological expectation, but if we surrender ourselves to the intersubjective complexity into which our patients invite and challenge us, we will be profoundly changed. To tell a clinical story now I must describe what both parties bring to the field, how complex and interdependent are the processes of mutual influence and asymmetric (Levinasian) role responsibility. I must relate how both of us have been changed by each other and by the work/play/ struggle we have done together.

By you who walk through my door in the next hour with your unique need to be met and embraced, despite whatever I may bring that hinders or complicates my compassion, I am humbled and changed. In the face of your grief so immense that it seems a dying of sorrow right here before me, I am transformed in ways for which I have no words. In the face of your challenge not to ignore your despair by taking up easier problems, I am changed. In the face of your apparent wealth and privilege that reawakens my rotten shame, I am changed. In the face of your history of violence and abandonment that reminds me of my own degradation but also that we share a common humanity, I am changed. In the face of your soul murder by parents who unleashed their hatred and cruelty upon you, and who even now thwart all my capacity and desire to comfort and protect,

29 See Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Carnes Lord, 2nd ed. (University of Chicago Press, 2013).

30 George Frideric Händel, *Messiah*, HWV 56, "The Trumpet Shall Sound," composed 1741.

I am humbled. In the face of your need and desire, child and adult, to be uniquely loved and cherished, and my own complex needs to love and to cherish as well as to be loved, I am challenged and changed. As a result of our personal meeting of the suffering of the patient “we shall be changed.”³¹ Understanding all this, I owe first to my patients, and secondarily to my beloved teachers and philosophers.

31 Händel, “The Trumpet Shall Sound.”