



KIERKEGAARD ON RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE

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INTRODUCTION

Kierkegaard is generally recognized as one of the most important thinkers of the nineteenth century. Scholars remain largely ignorant, however, of the substance of his epistemology. Many works touch on the issue of Kierkegaard's views on the nature of knowledge, but there is at present just one book specifically devoted to his epistemology, Anton Hügli's *Die Erkenntnis der Subjektivität und die Objektivität des Erkennens bei Søren Kierkegaard*,¹ which has, unfortunately yet to be translated into English.

So little is known about Kierkegaard's views on the nature of knowledge that prominent Kierkegaard scholars still debate such fundamental issues as whether, according to Kierkegaard, it is possible to know—in the sense of have propositional knowledge—that God became man in the person of Christ. A recent issue of *Kierkegaardiana*, the Danish journal devoted exclusively to the publication of scholarly work on Kierkegaard, includes two articles which constitute a debate between the authors, Steven M. Emmanuel and Louis P. Pojman, on precisely this issue.² Pojman defends the claim he made in *The Logic of Subjectivity*, that not only is such knowledge possible, on Kierkegaard's view, it actually provides the foundation for what he refers to as Kierkegaard's irrationality. Emmanuel contends, however, that this claim is inconsistent with Kierkegaard's secular epistemology as well as with his theology or 'epistemology based entirely on Christian terms'.³ Emmanuel argues that Christian knowledge, according to Kierkegaard, is not of the propositional sort, but is rather equivalent to a skill or practice, which, in this case is the ability to live a certain kind of life. Pojman responds, however, by citing Kierkegaard's claim that 'knowing the truth follows as a matter of course from being the truth', (TC, 201/SV XII, 189)⁴ and that thus leading the right kind of life must give rise to abstract or propositional knowledge, which is, in turn, knowledge of the truth.

I will argue, in the pages which follow, that Emmanuel is correct in his claim that Kierkegaard's epistemology precludes the possibility of knowledge that God became man, and that Pojman is correct in his claim that there is such a thing as Christian knowledge—i.e., propositional knowledge—which follows as a consequence of Christian experience. I will also argue, however, that it appears that Emmanuel is not correct to the extent that he claims Christian knowledge is

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equivalent to a certain kind of action and that it appears Pojman is not correct in his claim that the knowledge to which Christian experience gives rise is equivalent to, or indeed even includes, propositional knowledge that God became man.

I will begin by presenting a brief outline of the nature of Kierkegaard's views on knowledge with special reference to the question of the possibility of knowledge that God became man. It is my intention to argue that while there is, according to Kierkegaard, clearly such a thing as Christian knowledge, this knowledge cannot include the divinity of any particular human being.

I

Knowledge (i.e., *Erkjendelsen*), on Kierkegaard's view, is the result of reality being brought into relation to ideality.⁵ That is, it is the expression of reality in thought. When the reality in question is itself abstract, or ideal, and thus agrees, in its essence, with the medium in which it is expressed, then knowledge of it is unproblematic. This is the case with respect to the class of what Kierkegaard, following Leibniz, identifies as truths of reason or necessary truths.⁶ Knowledge becomes problematic, however, when the reality which is its object is not abstract but rather actual or concrete.

To put it briefly, knowledge of what Kierkegaard, again following Leibniz, calls truths of fact,⁷ is not, on his view, possible. This is because, in contrast to truths of reason, whose opposites are impossible, truths of fact do not preclude the possibility of their opposites. This means, to take a classical example, that even though it may be true that Caesar crossed the Rubicon, this does not mean that it is logically impossible for him not to have crossed it.⁸ No matter how much data one has which would support the claim that Caesar did indeed cross the Rubicon, that is, no matter how much evidence may support the purported truth of the statement, one cannot be *certain* of this truth. That is, it is not possible to collect enough data to preclude the possibility that Caesar did not cross the Rubicon. This is not merely a practical problem. That is, it is not merely a question of there not being enough time to collect the data in question (although Kierkegaard often speaks as if this were, in fact, the problem), it is a question of the relation of the data to the fact. No amount of data will establish, for example, that Caesar *must* have crossed the Rubicon, that no alternative course of action was possible and that hence no other interpretation of the data could be correct. Thus there remains at least the formal possibility, which is to say the possibility for thought, that the belief that he did cross the Rubicon is false. That is, it is conceivable that the belief is false, even if it is not actually or concretely false. Only abstract reality, or concepts, can be known with certainty according to Kierkegaard. The categories of thought, because of their abstract nature, cannot encompass contingent, or actual, facts as such. According to Kierkegaard, the categories of thought are linguistic categories; hence thought is, again, an expression of reality. But where the reality in question is concrete, or actual, rather than abstract, no expression of it can capture it in its uniqueness, or particularity,⁹ and thus preclude the possibility that it is other than it is represented as being.

While *knowledge*, according to Kierkegaard, is the result of reality having been

brought into relation to the abstract categories of thought, *truth*, on his view, is the *agreement* between thought and reality (CUP, 169/SV VII, 157).¹⁰ Hence truth can be defined as either an agreement between some ideality and thought, or as an agreement between some actuality and thought. It is thus possible to have true beliefs about actuality, even though knowledge of actuality is not possible.

According to Kierkegaard, again, all thought consists of language.¹¹ Hence when the agreement, which constitutes truth, between reality and ideality is established *in thought*, truth becomes a property of sentences or propositions. The activity of knowledge, as we saw, is precisely the bringing of reality, whether that reality is ideal or actual, into relation to thought; thus *all* knowledge, according to Kierkegaard, would appear to be of the propositional sort. This is the case whether truth is constructed as agreement between ideality and thought, as in the case of mathematics, or whether it is construed as agreement between actuality and thought, as in the case of historical scholarship. That is, truth is not what is the case about the world, but rather agreement between a particular expression, or proposition about the world and what is the case. The truth of whether Caesar crossed the Rubicon, for example, is the property of a proposition relating to this event, not of Caesar, or of the past.¹²

II

The traditional interpretation of Kierkegaard is that it is not possible to know that God became man because this claim represents a combination of the mutually exclusive categories of eternal and historical truth. This is, as is well known, Kierkegaard's position in the *Fragments* where he argues that 'no knowledge can have as its object the absurdity that the eternal [i.e., God] is the historical [i.e., man]' (PF 62/SV IV, 227). This is what Kierkegaard refers to as the 'paradox of Christianity'.¹³ Christianity is not alone, however, according to Kierkegaard, in exhibiting this paradoxical character. '[T]he paradox always arises', he argues, 'by the joining of existing and eternal truths' (JP 3, 3085/*Pap.* VI B 45). 'I do not believe', he continues, 'that God exists [*er til*] (the eternal), but I know it; whereas I believe that God has existed [*har været til*] (the historical).'¹⁴ . . . [E]ven from the Greek point of view', he argues, 'the eternal truth, by being for an existing person, becomes an object of faith and a paradox' (JP 3, 3085/*Pap.* VI B 45).

Pojman argues that Kierkegaard believes 'he is serving a *doctrine* that is objectively true but can only be appropriated subjectively with the help of God'.¹⁵ The question is whether he is correct in his claim that it is Kierkegaard's view that this doctrine (i.e., that God became man) can be *known* to be true.

Pojman argues that, according to Kierkegaard, '[d]ivine law and order prevails in the world of spirit, so that seekers after truth and righteousness gradually approach their object'.¹⁶ And that '[i]f this is true, it would appear that not only can we be assured of finding immanent truth, we should also be granted revelatory truth'.¹⁷ Such a seeker after truth, continues Pojman, 'should finally have the truth manifested to him, and—presuming Christianity is true—should come to see that the doctrine of the absolute paradox is the truth'.¹⁸ There is also no question that Kierkegaard claims that 'knowing [*at vide*] the truth is something which follows as

a matter of course from being the truth' (TC, 201/SV XII, 189) and, further, that since the knowledge in question is distinguished from a way of being, that it is a representation, in thought, of that way of being, and that it is thus of the propositional sort. The question is: What is the proposition? 'Christianity', argues Kierkegaard, 'is not a doctrine' (JP 2, 1880/Pap. X³ A 454) it is a way of life, a way of being or existing.¹⁹

The truth which, according to Kierkegaard, is the property of sentences, is the expression of reality in thought, i.e., in language and this, again, according to Kierkegaard, is the activity of knowledge (i.e., *Erkjendelsen*). Knowledge, according to Kierkegaard, is thus essentially descriptive.²⁰ Ethics and religion, on the other hand are, according to Kierkegaard, essentially *prescriptive*. This means that while ethical or religious 'knowledge' may be possible in the sense that an abstract representation of the prescriptions, or the prescribed way of life, is possible, '[a]ll Christian knowing [Erkjenden]', according to Kierkegaard, 'is not what it is'²¹ when it is separated from its situation. A situation', he continues, '(namely actuality, or to express that which is known in actuality) is the *conditio sine qua non* for ethical knowing' (JP 1, 978/Pap. X¹ 610). That is, ethical or religious truth is not the property of abstract representations or propositions about what is the case ethically or religiously; it is the reduplication, or repetition, of what is 'known' in the existence of the individual. It is the agreement between the ideality of ethical, or religious, prescriptions and the actuality of the individual's existence.

The truth of Christianity is not, according to Kierkegaard, a property of the proposition that God became man, it is a way of being which was the very life of Christ. 'It is in this sense', argues Kierkegaard, 'that Christ is the truth, that to *be* the truth is the only true explanation of what the truth is' (TC, 187/SV XII, 189). The 'knowledge' which follows as a matter of course from being the truth is the abstract representation of that way of being in thought. Thus Christian 'knowledge', on Kierkegaard's view, is still knowledge of ideality rather than actuality. The 'knower' can propose that truth is *a way of being*, but the statement itself is neither true nor false. It is not false because it is uttered by a 'knower' (i.e., one whose existence has the prescribed character), and it is not true because the truth in question cannot be the property of a statement. This truth cannot be found abstractly at all, but only concretely in the life of the individual.²² Thus Kierkegaard argues that 'Christian experience [*Erfarings*], rather than reason, seeks its corroboration in other experience' (JP 2, 2251/Pap. II C 46).

III

Kierkegaard does occasionally refer, however, to knowledge of Christ, as in the *Fragments* where the believer is said to 'know' Christ 'as he was known' (PF, 68/SV IV, 231). This would appear to support Pojman's claim that knowledge of the truth of the proposition that this particular individual is God is possible. If we turn to the original text, however, it is clear that this is not what Kierkegaard meant. That is, the expression here is '*kjende*'²³ and not '*erkjende*' or '*vide*' as one would expect to find if the knowledge in question were of the propositional sort.²⁴ To know something, or someone, in the sense of '*kjende*', is to be acquainted with it.²⁵

Pojman rightly points out that there is a strong relation between acquaintance knowledge and propositional knowledge. That is, he argues '[i]f I claim to know Professor Emmanuel, I must be able to give some description of him'.²⁶ Such acquaintance is clearly not *equivalent*, however, to propositional knowledge of that person, animal or thing. If I am acquainted with Prof. Emmanuel, for example, I will undoubtedly be able to give a description of him. I may claim, for example, that he is soft-spoken and kind. I may, however, be mistaken in my assessment of his character. It may be that he only appears this way to me because I have only seen him a few times when he was relaxed and in a particularly good mood. Certainly my acquaintance knowledge can be translated into propositions about Prof. Emmanuel. This does not mean, however, that acquaintance knowledge and propositional knowledge are coextensive, or that I have exhaustive propositional knowledge of Prof. Emmanuel because I am acquainted with him.

The same thing is clearly true, on Kierkegaard's view, of Christ. If we were acquainted with Christ, then there would presumably be much we could say about him. We could *say*, for example, that this man we had met was God. The question is, could we know whether this statement were true? It would appear that, according to Kierkegaard, we could not. That is, Christ, to the extent that he is a particular individual, cannot be an object of knowledge, because, as we saw earlier, knowledge, on Kierkegaard's view, is restricted to concepts or universals. Even Christian 'knowledge' as we saw, appears to be restricted in this way.

IV

Emmanuel argues that the claim that propositional knowledge of Christ's divinity is possible not only goes against Kierkegaard's secular epistemology, but also against traditional Christian doctrine that this must be an object of faith and thus that it is an unlikely view for Kierkegaard to hold. Pojman counters, however, that, on the contrary, nothing 'could be more Christian than to hold that the believer knows that God became man in Jesus Christ[.] The Gospel of John', he continues, 'certainly holds this position'.²⁷ Pojman then proceeds to quote passages from John that he believes substantiate this view.

It is not my intention to argue that the position that Pojman claims may be found in the Gospel of John cannot, in fact, be found there, but rather to argue that there is good reason to believe that Kierkegaard did not interpret John in this way. Pojman cites John 7:17 as a reference to the possibility of propositional knowledge of Christ's divinity. 'If any man's will is to do his [i.e., God's] will, he shall know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority'.²⁸ When Kierkegaard quotes this passage, however, he translates it as: 'If any man's will is to do the will of God he shall *experience* [*erfarer*] whether the teaching is from God or on my own authority' (JP 2, 1881/Pap. X¹ A 455).²⁹ And this reference supports his observation, cited earlier, that 'Christian experience [*Erfaring*] rather than reason [*Fornuft*] seeks its corroboration in other experience' (JP 2, 2251/Pap. II C 46).

It would appear that Kierkegaard considers '*erfare*' and '*kiende*', or 'experience' and 'know' in the sense of 'be acquainted with', to be roughly equivalent since the

authorized translation of the *New Testament* of his day used 'kiende' rather than 'erfarer',³⁰ and Kierkegaard, does not acknowledge, when quoting this passage, either that he has in any way altered the existing translation, or that there is anything problematic with this translation.

It would appear, further, that Kierkegaard considers that either 'kiende' or 'erfare' are acceptable translations of the various verb forms associated with 'gnosis'. That is, the Greek expression that is translated as 'know' at John 7:17 is 'gnosetai', and Kierkegaard also translates the inscription over the oracle at Delphi, 'gnothi seauton' as 'know, [i.e., kjende]' yourself (JP 5, 5100/Pap. I A 75, p. 56). But if it is the case that Kierkegaard considers either 'erfare' or 'kiende' to be appropriate translations of the various verb forms associated with 'gnosis', then the passages from the *New Testament* that Pojman cites cannot serve to discredit Emmanuel's argument that propositional knowledge of Christ's divinity would be inconsistent, in *Kierkegaard's mind*, with the Christianity of the *New Testament* because in every single instance where Pojman cites a reference to knowledge of Christ's divinity in John, the Greek expression in question is one of the verb forms associated with 'gnosis'.

CONCLUSION

It was not my intention here to provide a developed account of the nature of Christian knowledge, but merely to point out that while Kierkegaard does indeed, as Pojman observes, 'hold to propositional knowledge of [at least some] metaphysical truths',³¹ these propositions do not appear to include the claim that God became man. One who *believes* in the divinity of this particular individual Christ (for this, again, is not something which, according to Kierkegaard, one can know) and thus endeavors to bring his or her life into line with Christ's teachings, can come to represent the kind of life that Christ prescribes in thought and to the extent that his or her life actualizes these prescriptions, the 'knowledge' in question may be said to be *of* the truth, although it cannot, in itself, be said to *be* true.

It should now be clear that Kierkegaard does not subscribe to the view that it is possible to have propositional knowledge of Christ's divinity. Faith does, on Kierkegaard's view, yield 'knowledge' to the extent that the Christian may be said to possess a conception of the ideality of Christian existence, but the divinity of Christ is not among the 'knowledge' to which faith gives rise.

It would appear that Pojman argues that propositional knowledge that God became man is possible because he either fails to appreciate, or outright rejects, the distinction Kierkegaard assumes between necessary and contingent truths, or as Emmanuel explains, between the objects of knowledge and those of faith.³² This distinction is, indeed, now widely considered to be at best confused and at worst hopelessly anachronistic. But if Pojman rejects this distinction, it is important to appreciate that it is fundamental to understanding the substance of Kierkegaard's thought. Kierkegaard would indeed be espousing an irrationalist position if he set up our situation as knowers such that Christ's divinity did not belong to the class of possible objects of knowledge, and then claimed that we could know it despite this. This is, however, not what he does. Pojman's quarrel with Kierkegaard would

appear not to consist of the fact that Kierkegaard contradicts himself, but rather of the fact that some of Kierkegaard's most fundamental assumptions do not agree with some of his own. It is hardly legitimate, however, to label someone as irrational simply because his views happen to depart, in some respect, from one's own, no matter how inclined one may be to do so.

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Acknowledgement—An earlier version of this paper was presented at the meeting of the Søren Kierkegaard Society that was held in conjunction with the annual meeting of the American Philosophical Association, Washington, DC, 27–30 December, 1992.

NOTES

1. Anton Hügli, *Die Erkenntnis der Subjektivität und die Objektivität des Erkennens bei Søren Kierkegaard*, Basler Beiträge zur Philosophie und ihrer Geschichte (Basel: Editio Academica, 1973).
2. The articles are 'Kierkegaard on Knowledge and Faith', by Stephen M. Emmanuel and 'Kierkegaard's Epistemology', by Louis P. Pojman, *Kierkegaardiana*, 15 (Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel, 1991), pp. 136–146 and pp. 147–152, respectively.
3. Emmanuel, *op. cit.*, p. 79; cf., JP 3, p. 496/Pap. I A 94.
4. This passage is quoted by Pojman on p. 150 of his article.
5. JP 1, 891/Pap. IV B 13:18.
6. Leibniz, *Monadology*, §33.
7. cf., note 6.
8. Of course, whatever is factually true precludes its opposite in some respect, even if not logically. It is for this reason that Kierkegaard argues that while truths of fact are not necessary (*nødvendige*), they are unchangeable (*uforanderlige*) (PF, 76–78/SV IV, 240–242).
9. cf., 'Wo das Einzelne ausgesagt wird, wird von ihm stets gesagt daß es nicht ein Einzelnes, sondern ein Allgemeines sein soll. Das Allgemeine aber sag nichts über das Einzelne als Einzelnes, sondern nur etwas über das Einzelne im allgemeinen'. Hügli, *op. cit.*, 84. and SV IV, 347; Pap. X' A 328, and Pap. IV C 96.
10. The expression here is actually 'being' (i.e., *Væren*) and not 'reality' (i.e., *Realitet*). These two expressions are, however, used by Kierkegaard more or less interchangeably. That is, both include actual *and* ideal entities, in contrast to actuality (i.e., *Virkelighed*), which is a sub-category that includes only actual entities.
11. CI, 247/SV XIII, 322.
12. Despite the fact, however, that knowledge of actuality is not possible on Kierkegaard's view, he often uses the expressions 'historical knowledge' and 'scholarly' or 'scientific knowledge' without qualifying them in any way, as is the case, for example, when he asserts that 'all knowledge is either knowledge of the eternal, . . . or it is purely historical knowledge', (PF, 62/SV IV, 227). It would appear that what he actually means is that all knowledge *claims* relate either to truths of reason or to truths of fact.
13. The references to 'the Paradox of Christianity' are too numerous, in Kierkegaard's works, to be listed here. The expression appears most often, however, in the *Fragments* and *Postscript*.

14. This use of 'believe' and 'know' may seem peculiar to those who follow the contemporary practice of viewing knowledge as a particular kind of belief. It is important to appreciate, however, that knowledge and belief are quite different and indeed, as this reference shows, even mutually exclusive cognitive states according to Kierkegaard.
15. Pojman, *op. cit.*, p. 151 (the italics are mine).
16. Pojman, *op. cit.*, p. 149; cf., CD, 248. Pojman does not give a reference to the *Samlede Værker* and I have not, as yet, been able to find the passage he refers to in the Danish text.
17. Pojman, *op. cit.*, p. 149.
18. cf., note 17.
19. JP 2, 1880/*Pap. X*³ A 454; TC, 201FF/SV XII, 188ff.
20. cf., Rorty's claim in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* that the traditional (at least since the time of the enlightenment) view of thought is that it mirrors the world.
21. The italics are mine.
22. It is for this reason that I have placed 'knowledge' or 'know' here in quotation marks. That is, ethical or religious knowledge shares with objective—i.e., descriptive—knowledge its abstract character, but it departs from the traditional view of knowledge in that it cannot, as an abstraction, be said to be true.
23. Danish spelling was not standardized during Kierkegaard's lifetime. The expression 'kjende' was thus also occasionally spelled 'kiende'. The contemporary spelling of this expression is actually 'kende'.
24. cf., Hermann Vinterberg and C.A. Bodelsen, *Dansk-Engelsk Ordbog* (Danish-English Dictionary), 2nd ed. (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1966), vol. I, p. 273 and vol. II, pp. 796–798, respectively.
25. cf., Vinterberg-Bodelsen, *op. cit.*, vol. I, pp. 668–669.
26. Pojman, *op. cit.*, p. 150.
27. Pojman, *op. cit.*, p. 149.
28. This wording, which differs slightly from the wording of Pojman's reference, is that of the Revised Standard Version.
29. The English translation of this reference from Kierkegaard's journals unfortunately translates 'erfarer' as 'know'. This is not, however, an acceptable translation of 'erfarer', that is, it is not one of the possible translations listed in the standard Danish to English dictionaries (cf., Vinterberg-Bodelsen, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 271).
30. *Vor Herres og Frelsesers Jesu Christi Nye Testament, ved Kong Frederik den Siettes christelige Omsorg* (Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ's New Testament, by His Majesty King Frederik the Sixth's Special Command) (Copenhagen, 1825), p. 251.
31. Pojman, *op. cit.*, p. 151.
32. Emmanuel, *op. cit.*, p. 141. I have not developed here the argument that Emmanuel develops in his article, that the paradoxical character of the claim that God became man distinguishes it from other statements of fact. All that is required, however, to place the claim that God became man outside the class of possible objects of knowledge on Kierkegaard's view, is to show that it is a statement of fact.