
Kierkegaard's Epistemology

*A Response to Professor Steven M. Emmanuel's Paper
"Kierkegaard on Knowledge and Faith"*

by Louis P. Pojman

Steven M. Emmanuel claims to find "compelling reasons" for rejecting my argument in *The Logic of Subjectivity* (henceforth, LS) that according to Kierkegaard the truth of Christianity can be rationally known. According to him, two of my premises are false: (1) "that Kierkegaard embraced the Platonic doctrine of recollection"; and (2) "that Kierkegaard thought that there could be objective knowledge of the historical existence of God" (the incarnation). Emmanuel makes an initially plausible case and has important things to say. Others have questioned my arguments for similar reasons. So I am delighted to have this opportunity to respond to Prof. Emmanuel, clarifying my position. I will argue that on the first point (recollection) Emmanuel misrepresents me and on the second point (knowledge of the incarnation) he misrepresents Kierkegaard.

First a few preliminary words on methodological procedures in interpreting Kierkegaard. One of the things that weakens Emmanuel's critique is his neglect of the progression of the dialectic of existential thought through the stages of existence. He doesn't separate Kierkegaard's use of Socrates in the ethical stage, where irony seems to function, from Socrates in the religious sphere where faith seems the leading motif, from that stage beyond-the-Socratic, the Christian-religious sphere, where faith *sensu eminenti* reigns. It would take more space than I have to sort out Emmanuel's textual evidence using the hermeneutic of the stages, and I can only refer you to what I have written in Chapters 1, 4, and 5 of LS and "Kierkegaard on the Stages of Existence" in *Faith, Knowledge, and Action*, ed. George Stengren (Copenhagen: Reitzels, 1984). If Emmanuel took this matter seriously, I think that he would see that Kierkegaard's use of Socrates in *The Concept of irony* are not the same as his uses of Socrates in the Climacus writings. It would also help him see that his statement "the epistemological reading of Kierkegaard assumes an intellectual and aesthetic element that stands in direct opposition to all that Kierkegaard admired and emulated in Socrates" needs to be qualified within a fuller understanding of the development of the self within the stages of life.

Secondly, a lot seems to hang on Emmanuel's interpretation of

Kierkegaard's use of *Samviden* (co-knowledge) as opposed to *Viden*. How this is supposed to infirm my thesis is a mystery to me, which Emmanuel hasn't explained. Emmanuel refers to the Postscript (p. 138; SV IX p. 129), but the discussion there is clearly about the *ethical* not the religious. The passage reads like this. "The ethical is [opposed to the abstractions of the historical] a correlative to individuality, and that to such a degree that each individual apprehends the ethical essentially only in himself, because the ethical is his *co-knowledge* (*Samviden*) with God." Emmanuel infers from this that Kierkegaard's concept of knowledge is not propositional but closer to Russell's theory of knowledge by acquaintance.

There are three problems with this sort of reasoning. First of all, the passage isn't referring to religious knowledge at all, only the ethical. Secondly, it seems an invalid inductive generalization to infer from one or two uses to a general theory of epistemology – especially if there is good evidence on the other side. Thirdly, Russell's theory of acquaintance won't help here, since Russell thought (when writing *The Problems of Philosophy*) that all propositional knowledge could be reduced to anatomic sensory acquaintances and from the acquaintance we could build up all the propositions that we knew. If Emmanuel wants to tie Kierkegaard with this kind of epistemology, he needs to do a lot more work. If he only wants to say that acquaintance of reality precedes descriptive knowledge, he still has a problem since he wants to get rid of descriptive knowledge regarding God or the incarnation. So what is left with acquaintance and conscience? I fail to see how it infirms my theses in the least. We can have *both* conscience (*Samviden*) about ethical matters and inner knowledge (*Viden*) of God's existence and immortality.

Now let me address Emmanuel's first charge that I argue that "Kierkegaard's believes the truth of Christianity can be recollected through the passionate subjectivity of faith." The fact is that I never assert that and do not argue for it and my argument does not depend on it. I distinguish between immanent and "revelatory" truths. What can be known through *recollection* is the existence of God and immortality, not the *incarnation*. Key texts, some of which Emmanuel quotes in part and does not comment on are cited LS pp. 68 ff. Take for example, the passage from *Papirer V B 40* "Both [proving and being convinced by an argument for the existence of God] are equally fantastic, for just as no one has ever been an *atheist*, although many have never willed to allow their *knowledge* of God's existence to get power over their mind. It is the same with immortality ... With regard to God's existence, immortality, and all problems of *immanence*, *recollection is valid*; it is present in every man, only he is not aware of it; however, this in no way means that his concept is adequate." (my emphasis).

Or again "I do not believe God exists. I know it, but I believe God existed (the historical)" (*Papirer VI B 45*). Kierkegaard is talking about

concepts and propositions, not simply mystical acquaintances or moral conscience.

What I did state is that “there is ... something self-corrective about intense subjectivity, so that by a process of elimination false goals and actions are annulled” (LS p. 69) and that “Maximal subjectivity seems sufficient to bring one to the truth ... ‘truth manifests itself to the ones who love truth’ [*Papirer* X³ 438]. Divine law and order prevails in the world of spirit, so that seekers after truth and righteousness gradually approach their object [*Christian Discourses*, p. 248]. If this is true, it would appear that not only can we be assured of finding immanent truth, we should also be granted revelatory truth. The truly passionate person should finally have truth manifested to him, and – presuming Christianity is true – should come to see that the doctrine of the absolute paradox is the truth” (p. 69 f.). I said that both immanent truth and revelatory truth may be *self-authenticating* for Kierkegaard, but I never identified them.

I conclude my response to the first charge that I believe that Kierkegaard thought that Christian doctrine could be known through recollection. I neither believe it, nor argued it in my paper, but Kierkegaard did, contrary to Emmanuel, hold to a doctrine of recollection regarding the immanent metaphysical truths. What I did argue was that Kierkegaard thought that God would lead the truth seeker (subjectively seeking the truth) to the objective truth.

I turn to Emmanuel’s second charge that I hold that Kierkegaard thought that we could know that God became a man (“the historical existence of God”). Emmanuel rejects thesis, arguing in part that it would be inconsistent with Kierkegaard’s “epistemology based entirely on Christian terms.” But what could be more Christian than to hold that the believer knows that God became man in Jesus Christ? The Gospel of John certainly holds this position.

There Jesus teaches that he is the “way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me. If you had known me, you would have known the Father also, and henceforth you know him and have seen him.” (Jn 14:7). Epistemic consideration surround the person of Christ and his claims on his disciples in John. “You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed and have come to know that you are the Holy One of God,” Peter confesses to Jesus’ glad approval (Jn 6:69). “If any man wills to do his will, he will know whether my doctrine is from God or whether I speak on my own authority” (Jn 7:17). “And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free” (Jn 8:32); “I am the resurrection and the life, he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live ... Do you believe this?” Jesus asks Martha (Jn 11:25). What is it to have the life of eternity? “This is eternal life, that they know thee the only true God and Jesus Christ whom thou has sent” (17:3).

To make sense out of Emmanuel’s existential interpretation of ‘truth’ in the Gospel of John we must distinguish *acquaintance* knowledge and

skill knowledge from *descriptive* knowledge. Knowing a person, knowing how to live and knowing *that* something is the case, but these are all aspect of epistemology and are inter-related concepts. If I claim to know Prof. Emmanuel, I must be able to give some description of him, and if I know *how* to speak English, I must have a good bit of information about word meaning and grammar (even if it is mainly implicit).

It may be true that the Gospel of John concerns itself primarily with *acquaintance* knowledge rather than propositional knowledge, but, first of all acquaintance knowledge is still knowledge, and secondly, it doesn't make much sense to say, "I know S (some person) but have no idea whether the proposition 'S exists' is true and don't even care about it.

In *Training in Christianity* Anti-Climacus explains his understanding of the biblical phrase "Christ is the Truth." "Truth in its very being is not the duplication of being in terms of thought, which yields only the thought of being ... No, truth in its very being is the reduplication in me, in thee, in him, so that my, that thy, that his life, approximately, in the striving to attain it expresses the truth, so that my, that thy, that his life, approximately, in the striving to attain it, is the very being of truth, as a *life*, as the truth was in Christ, for He was the truth. And hence, Christianly understood, the truth consists not in knowing the truth but in the truth" (TC p. 201).

So far it seems that Emmanuel is correct to emphasize the notion of the lived truth. But Anti-Climacus does not leave the matter in a neutral noncognitivism. He says that although truth is first to be defined as 'the way', it becomes knowledge afterwards. Commenting on Christ's silence before Pilate when he was asked, "What is truth?" Anti-Climacus answers, "Not as thought Christ did not know what the truth is; but when one is the truth and when the requirement is to be the truth, this thing of knowing the truth is untruth. For *knowing the truth is something which follows as a matter of course from being the truth, and not conversely.*" (TC, p. 201, my emphasis).

The direction is not the Socratic formula: 'first knowledge then being' but 'first being then knowledge'. "For knowing the truth is something which follows as a matter of course from being the truth."

Likewise, the difference between the Socratic way and the Christian way in the *Fragments* is not that one has an objective content or cognitive object and the other doesn't, but that for Socrates choice is a consequent of knowledge, whereas for Kierkegaard inner knowledge is a consequent of choice. This echoes Jesus words in the Gospels "If any man will do God's will, he shall know whether the doctrine (*didaxeis*) is from God" (Jn 7:17). Kierkegaard replaces the Socratic 'Virtue is Knowledge' with the Christian-existential formula 'Knowledge is Virtue'. We may call this *Virtue-Cognitivism*, but not *Non-Cognitivism*, as Emmanuel seems to hold.

Emmanuel, like many interpreters of Kierkegaard, is so dazzled by the existential motifs in Kierkegaard's work so that he doesn't notice the

cognitive aspect. Kierkegaard has a method to his madness. He thinks that he is serving a doctrine that is objectively true but can only be appropriated subjectively with the help of God. Emmanuel's dichotomy is to separate the objective from the subjective in Kierkegaard and to ignore the former. But the subjective and the objective complement each other in his work. Apparently people made the same mistake in Kierkegaard's own day, for he directs a comment at his contemporaries that seems to have Prof. Emmanuel's name on it. "In all that is usually said about J. Climacus being purely subjective ... people have forgotten in addition to everything else concrete about him, that in one of the last sections he shows that the curious thing is: that there is a *how* which has this quality, that if it is truly given, then the *what* is also given; and that is the *how* of *faith*. Here, quite certainly we have the inwardness at its maximum proving to be objectivity once again" (Pap. X 2 299).¹

Perhaps a set of distinctions will help here.

1. A subject (S) can know that p and be certain that p.
2. S can know that p but not be certain that p.
3. S can know that p and know that he knows that p.
4. S can be certain that p but not know that p (since his belief is produced in an inappropriate way).
5. S can believe that p but not know it, but live his life passionately according to p.

Let *p* be the proposition that God became man.² Then it seems that all of these theses are espoused or implied in different parts of the Kierkegaardian corpus. Perhaps they are all existential possibilities for the believer (according to Kierkegaard). The point is, for Kierkegaard, not that we can't know that God became man, but that we can only know it through passionate subjectivity.

So I conclude against Emmanuel that Kierkegaard does believe like the author of the Gospel of John, consistent with a Christian epistemology, that we can know that God existed as a human being. We can come to this knowledge through a subjective process of passionate discipleship.

I have argued that Emmanuel's first charge (that I argue that Kierkegaard holds that we can discover the truth of Christianity through recollection) is misfires because I haven't argued that thesis, and I have argued that Emmanuel's second charge fails because there is strong evidence that Kierkegaard believed that we could somehow know that God became man consistent with the New Testament doctrine. Along the way, I have argued, against Emmanuel, that Kierkegaard does hold to propositional knowledge of metaphysical truths. If my arguments here are sound, Emmanuel has failed to give "compelling reasons for rejecting" my claims.

1. Indeed, Kierkegaard seems to think that there is an invisible hand guiding those who ask existential questions existentially, so that the correct *how* leads to the correct *what*:

My Either/Or does not in the first instance denote the choice between good and evil; it denotes the choice whereby one chooses good *and* evil/ or excludes them. Here the question is under what determinants one would contemplate the whole of existence and would himself live ... It is, therefore, not so much a question of choosing between willing the good *or* the evil, as of choosing to will, but by this in turn the good and the evil are posited ... The crucial thing is not deliberation but the baptism of the will which lifts up the choice into

the ethical ... In making the choice it is not so much a question of choosing the right as of the energy, the earnestness, the pathos with which one chooses. Thereby the personality is consolidated. Therefore, even if a man were to choose the wrong, he will nevertheless discover, precisely by *reason of the energy with which he chose*, that he had chosen the wrong. For the choice being made with the whole inwardness of his personality, his nature is purified and he himself brought into immediate relation to the eternal Power whose omnipresence interpenetrates the whole of existence" (E/O II 171,73, my italics).

2. It need not be Jesus for Climacus, *Fragments* p. 130.