

# Revelation in Kierkegaard as the Transcendental Condition for Knowledge

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Revelation—communication between a human and God—is knowledge that is neither rational nor empirical, given that it is received neither through deduction nor induction. How then, can this religious knowledge be justified? Clearly it cannot be justified rationally or empirically, but our rational knowledge of concepts and our empirical knowledge of sense data together comprehend all that we can say we know. Religious knowledge can only therefore be more fundamental than either rational or empirical knowledge, so that it would not *fail* to meet the rational-empirical criteria for knowledge, but rather would be necessarily “beyond” the rational-empirical framework. Religious knowledge can be neither proven nor disproven by that which it is beyond because religious knowledge makes the frameworks that it is beyond possible. Within these frameworks, proof applies, but only to what according to the rules of the framework count as objects of investigation. The rules that determine the framework however cannot be justified (though nor can they be disproved) within that framework<sup>1</sup>. Kierkegaard’s argument will show that

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<sup>1</sup> “We know the truth not only through our reason but also through our heart. It is through the latter that we know first principles, and reason, which has nothing to do with it, tries in vain to refute them... For knowledge of first principles, like space, time, motion, number, is as solid as any derived through reason, and it is on such knowledge coming from the heart and instinct, that reason has to depend and base all its argument... Principles are felt, propositions proved, and both with certainty though by different means. It is just as pointless and absurd for reason to demand

religious knowledge is beyond the rational-empirical frameworks in this way, in that it makes them possible. Therefore religious knowledge cannot be “false” because it cannot be called into account by any framework in which falsity is a possibility.

First I will offer a preliminary clarification of how rational-empirical knowledge cannot be its own foundation, that it requires a transcendental foundation; then I will proceed to examine the role of revelation in Kierkegaard’s philosophy.

We know that knowledge of the form “S is P” can be valid in the rational-empirical framework by our knowledge of the rules of the framework (the fundamental laws of logic). However, when confronted with the question of how the rational-empirical framework itself can be justified, that is, how its rules can be justified, we have no answer. We know that nothing *within* the framework can justify these rules, because everything in this framework depends on these rules, is admitted into the framework because it can be considered as an object according to these rules. And we know that the rational-empirical framework comprehends all of our knowledge. If anything can be said to be known, it is known *in* the framework as an object, determined by the rules of this framework

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proof of first principles from the heart before agreeing to accept them as it would be absurd for the heart to demand an intuition of all the propositions demonstrated by reason before agreeing to them” (*Pensées*, Blaise Pascal, #110).

(otherwise we call it nonsense). If nothing *in* the framework (i.e. nothing *known*) can justify the rules, then only something outside the framework can, i.e. something *unknown*. This is how we can say that logical (i.e. rational-empirical) knowledge depends on religious knowledge (which is at this point merely a name we have given to knowledge of the unknown). It remains for us to work out what is involved in this dependence of the known on the unknown, and if or how revelation can be a knowing of this unknown. Let us now examine Kierkegaard's employment of this concept.

In *Philosophical Fragments*, under the pseudonym Johannes Climacus, Kierkegaard offers a discussion of maieutics, the Socratic theory of pedagogy according to which learning is recollection. The teacher does not impart knowledge, but plays midwife to the learner who brings knowledge out of him or herself, knowledge that he or she has always already known in some way. This theory, though apparently strange and counter-intuitive, allows Socrates to evade the contradiction inherent in the idea of seeking knowledge: that is, one cannot seek what one does not know in any way, and one does not need to seek what one does know. The maieutic theory engenders an idea of epistemically self-sufficient humans, humans that always already have what is required for the acquisition of knowledge and truth.

Kierkegaard objects to the Socratic theory, but not in favor of the paradox Socrates wanted to avoid. Kierkegaard offers instead another theory that gets around the paradox in a way different from the Socratic argument. In Kierkegaard's theory an encounter with God (in other words, revelation) provides the learner with the condition for knowledge by showing the learner that he or she is in a state of untruth.

The state of untruth is the state in which truth is not a possibility. We must distinguish at this point different orders

of truth. We said earlier that a relation between a state of affairs and a proposition that we call "true" is possible within the rational-empirical frameworks because of religious knowledge. This relation between a state of affairs and a proposition is a logical truth, a human truth. That is, it is a truth that humans can understand and prove on their own, without recourse to anything outside their own minds. This gives rise to a notion of epistemic self-sufficiency as exemplified in the Socratic theory, which, we may add, deals only with rational-empirical truths. For Kierkegaard, to have this mistaken notion of epistemic self-sufficiency is to be in a state of untruth because for truth to be not a possibility is for the transcendental condition for truth to be not present or not acknowledged. In this state, even the derivative truth of correspondence between a proposition and a state of affairs cannot be truly understood, given that what *makes* it true is ignored.

The problem of being in a state of untruth is that it is precisely a problem of not realizing that one has a problem. Recall that logical truth and falsity only apply within the rational-empirical framework, and therefore they only apply to the objects that are admitted into that framework (to concepts and sense data). Religious truth is what allows us to see that we are in a state of untruth, but religious truth is excluded from the framework in that it cannot be present *as an object* in the framework. So long as we remain in the rational-empirical framework therefore, we will have no reason to believe that there is anything outside the framework (because anything that counts as a reason is limited in its objects to what is inside the framework), and we will have no indication that we are in a state of untruth<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> "Reason would never submit unless it judged that there are occasions when it ought to submit" (St. Augustine, as quoted by Pascal in his *Pensées* #174).

How does religious truth let us see that we are in untruth? We realize we are in untruth when we encounter the limits of our understanding. The idea that humans are finite beings is implicit even in the Socratic view. This finitude means that we are not perfect, and we do not have perfect, unlimited knowledge. In fact, as Socrates recognized, we know ourselves least of all. This is a paradox because thought strives to be infinite yet we, the thinking beings, are bound in our finitude. Thus thought drives itself toward the inevitable collision with its limits. Kierkegaard asks:

what is this unknown against which the understanding in its paradoxical passion collides, and which even disturbs man in his self-knowledge? It is the unknown. But it is not a human being, insofar as he knows man, or anything else that he knows. Therefore let us call this unknown *the god* (*Philosophical Fragments*, 39).

We are necessarily led by thought therefore, to an experience of our finitude, an encounter with the radically other, which is God.

First of all, then, religious truth—the truth that is outside the rational-empirical framework, which we now see is called “God”—allows us to see that we are in untruth because this encounter with God is an experience of how we are limited and impotent. We are able to see—rationally—that there is a limit to rationality, though we do not rationally know what lies beyond this limit. This limitation appears incongruous with the self-assurance we enjoyed in the Socratic understanding. This incongruity is the first indication that we have been in a state of untruth.

But perhaps we still cling to the Socratic understanding and are unwilling to accept that there is something our logic cannot conquer. We may try to reach an understanding of God

by feeling around the frontiers of our intellect. Here Kierkegaard would prompt us to clarify to ourselves exactly what is implied by the *absolute difference* between ourselves and God. He says: “if the human being is to come truly to know something about the unknown (the god), he must first come to know that it is different from him, absolutely different from him” (46)—if you recall, with Kierkegaard, all we know about God is that it is not the sort of thing that we can know (in the ways of knowing we are used to). Kierkegaard continues: “The understanding cannot come to know this by itself (since... it is a contradiction)” —and a contradiction cannot be an object of rational-empirical knowledge—“if it is to come to know this, it must come from the god” (ibid). In other words, we depend on God to let us see our untruth. Kierkegaard writes:

Just to come to know that the god is the different, man needs the god and then comes to know that the god is absolutely different from him. But if the god is to be absolutely different from a human being, this can have its basis not in that which man owes to the god (for to that extent they are akin) but in that which he owes to himself... What then is the difference? ...what else but sin (46-47).

That is, we are *aware* that we know what we know in the derivative rational-empirical framework solely by virtue of that which cannot be known in this rational-empirical way. Our consciousness of the finitude of our thought is contradictory<sup>3</sup>, and we come to see it only in an encounter with God (as we

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<sup>3</sup> It is contradictory in that consciousness of the finitude of consciousness implies that the unknown (which determines consciousness in its finitude) is known in a way (viz. as unknown). Our encounter with God is what makes us conscious of our finitude, and this consciousness allows us to transcend our finitude (by letting us know the unknown *as* unknown). Thus God, who, as the unknown, had previously determined us in our finitude, allows us to transcend our finitude in a way (that is, to be no longer determined by it).

have seen, the experience of our finitude and the encounter with God are one and the same). We know however, that this difference is not due to God, because insofar as we are related to God at all, the relation is one of similarity. This shred of similarity between ourselves and that which is absolutely different is what allows us to encounter the absolutely different *as* absolutely different. Without this shred of similarity (a miraculous relation, which consists of the fact that we “know” God as something unknowable for us), we would not be able to encounter the absolutely different at all, because we would have no relation to it, and we would never experience our fundamental finitude. By virtue of this connection with the unknown, the human being is able to encounter the unknown *as* unknown, i.e. as something questionable<sup>4</sup>. Now we can see that Kierkegaard does not completely reject the maieutic theory, though Climacus professes to. For Kierkegaard, as for Plato, what is “known” *as* unknown is known in a way. Thus the idea of seeking knowledge is made intelligible.

There is not therefore a problem of a radical incommensurability between God and humans. We can say two things about God: first, we cannot understand him; second, we are nevertheless epistemically related to him (as to something we know as unknowable). What is left is to work out what is involved in this relationship: whether our relation to something we cannot know can give us the divine knowledge revelation claims to provide.

We have seen that there is a difference between human and divine knowledge, and that the latter provides the transcendental foundation for the former. Revelation is not comparable to rational or empirical knowledge, but is above them in the sense of logical priority (although this priority is

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<sup>4</sup> “The question is asked by one who in his ignorance does not even know what provided the occasion for his questioning in this way”(9).

even beyond logic) or below them in the sense of forming their foundation. The problem is that the absolute authority of faith is based on its radical exteriority. This radical exteriority seems to make the communication of the command (i.e. the revelation) problematic. It seems that any taking of physical form or use of human language to communicate in an understandable way would undermine God’s transcendent status and thus his authority. Kierkegaard says in another work, also under the name Climacus: “Everything that becomes historical is contingent, inasmuch as precisely by coming into existence, by becoming historical, it has its element of contingency, inasmuch as contingency is precisely the one factor in all coming into existence” (*The Essential Kierkegaard*, 195). God’s authority is based on his incomprehensibility (recall that Kierkegaard calls what cannot be understood “the god”) and total separation from the world. Is there then an irreducible incongruity between our relation to God and the physical or linguistic form revelation would have to take<sup>5</sup>? Even if rational-empirical truth depends on religious truth, does the latter shine through in the former in an understandable way? Does Kierkegaard’s concept of revelation explain how knowledge can pass from the transcendental framework into a lower one where it can be stated explicitly in human language and examined as a logical truth?

At this point it should be clear that we cannot speak of “knowledge” in this higher framework. We admit that

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<sup>5</sup> To explain why the oracle at Delphi had fallen silent, Plutarch said “God is not a ventriloquist” (*The Echo of Greece*, 205). That is, in order for God to communicate with humans, he had to use worldly, fallible means (the speech of the priestess, rather than speaking through the priestess with his own voice, as a ventriloquist does). These worldly means could not be relied upon always to provide perfectly clear knowledge, nor, in the end, anything at all. The question then, is whether or not the Christian theory can provide a more robust concept of revelation than the Greek theory did.

revelation makes knowledge possible, but knowledge as we know it (i.e. logically) must be restricted to the comparatively lower frameworks. We can no longer say what we may have previously assumed: that there is something in the higher framework resembling knowledge that through revelation is given to us in the language of the lower frameworks. Revelation cannot be a sort of alchemy that translates divine “knowledge” into human knowledge. But then how can we “know” religious knowledge?

Religious knowledge is not and cannot be, nor does Kierkegaard claim it to be, an accurate translation of God’s will into terms the intellect can understand. This does not mean however that revelation is a fiction. Given that all logical knowledge presupposes contact with the unknown (and unknowable) and is incomprehensible without this contact with divinity, revelation is present in all knowledge, but cannot be made explicit.

In other words, revelation is therefore the condition for the possibility of truth, but cannot be examined in the same way as the logical truths it makes possible. The truth of revelation (by which we mean man’s essential relation to God) cannot be finally put into language (and cannot be made unambiguous) without losing its absolute validity. Since for Kierkegaard humans are utterly dependent on God, any truth that appears complete must not be real (i.e. transcendental) truth, and any truth that is comprehended by a finite being is not absolute religious truth. The proper response to revelation therefore is openness to the unknown, the refusal to accept any human, logical truth as final or absolute, i.e. the refusal of idolatry.

Kierkegaard—to his credit—does not therefore offer a defense of the common idea of revelation (an idea which is fundamentally confused), of God “speaking” to humans.

Revelation can be thought of as the brute fact that thought and language are possible, a fact which can be understood neither by thought nor language; to put it another way, revelation is the encounter of logical thought with what it cannot comprehend, and should not even be able to encounter. Revelation for Kierkegaard is wonder at aporiae: it is not a solution of aporiae—as the common idea of revelation presents itself—any more than it is a scientific denial of aporiae.

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