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Paul Edwards: A Rationalist Critic of Kierkegaard's Theory of Truth

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the chapter's first paragraph.

Best known as the editor-in-chief of the monumental *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Paul Edwards (1923-2004) was a modern *philosophe*. Like the Enlightenment writers he himself so admired, Voltaire, Diderot, and D'Alembert, he spent his career defending the ideas of rationalism, freethought, materialism, and the application of scientific methodology to philosophy. In addition, deeply influenced by the Vienna Circle, he used his editorship of the *Encyclopedia* to keep alive the memories of many of the philosophers connected with that particular Logical Positivist movement. As a Positivist of sorts himself, he had no love for philosophers whom he considered to lack clarity, and like the *philosophes*—especially Voltaire, whose work he anthologized in a volume entitled *Voltaire Selections*—he had a gift for using biting humor to attack those with whom he disagreed. One of his foremost targets was Søren Kierkegaard, whom he considered to be the very model for how one should not do philosophy. While he referred several times in his writings and lectures to Kierkegaard's life and work, Edwards' best-known critique is found in the 1971 article "Kierkegaard and the 'Truth' of Christianity," published in *Philosophy: The Journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy*.

Disciplines

History of Philosophy | Philosophy

Comments

Excerpted from 'Paul Edwards: A Rationalist Critic of Kierkegaard's Theory of Truth', in *Kierkegaard's influence on philosophy: Tome III, Anglophone philosophy*, ed. Jon Stewart (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), pp. 71-85. Copyright © 2012.

Paul Edwards: A Rationalist Critic of Kierkegaard's Theory of Truth

Timothy J. Madigan

I. Paul Edwards

Best known as the editor-in-chief of the monumental *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Paul Edwards (1923–2004) was a modern *philosophe*. Like the Enlightenment writers he himself so admired, Voltaire, Diderot, and D'Alembert, he spent his career defending the ideas of rationalism, freethought, materialism, and the application of scientific methodology to philosophy. In addition, deeply influenced by the Vienna Circle, he used his editorship of the *Encyclopedia* to keep alive the memories of many of the philosophers connected with that particular Logical Positivist movement. As a Positivist of sorts himself, he had no love for philosophers whom he considered to lack clarity, and like the *philosophes*—especially Voltaire, whose work he anthologized in a volume entitled *Voltaire Selections*¹—he had a gift for using biting humor to attack those with whom he disagreed. One of his foremost targets was Søren Kierkegaard, whom he considered to be the very model for how one should *not* do philosophy. While he referred several times in his writings and lectures to Kierkegaard's life and work, Edwards' best-known critique is found in the 1971 article "Kierkegaard and the 'Truth' of Christianity," published in *Philosophy: The Journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy*.²

Paul Edwards (whose original name was "Eisenstein") was born to well-to-do Jewish parents in Vienna, Austria on September 2, 1923, the youngest of three brothers. Austria was in a state of turmoil during this time, and there was great unrest among the citizenry, particularly regarding the intentions of Germany. A gifted student, he was admitted to the prestigious *Akademisches Gymnasium*. But after the Nazi annexation of Austria in 1938 his parents sent him to stay with friends in Scotland. He later joined his family in Melbourne, Australia, where they had fled to avoid the horrors of the Holocaust, and where they changed their surname to "Edwards" to disguise their Jewish origins—for even in that country so far from

¹ *Voltaire: Selections*, ed. by Paul Edwards, New York: Macmillan Publishing Co. 1989 (*Great Philosophers*).

² Paul Edwards, "Kierkegaard and the 'Truth' of Christianity," *Philosophy: The Journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy*, vol. 46, no. 176, 1971, pp. 89–108.

Hitler's reach they feared the implications of anti-Semitism. While in Australia Edwards continued to explore analytic philosophy, which he had first gleaned as a precocious young man in Austria. He had been intrigued by the views of Moritz Schlick (1882–1936), often called the founding father of the Vienna Circle, whose assassination by a former student and member of the Austrian Nazi Party was a topic Edwards often mentioned, feeling that above all else Schlick had never received the recognition that was due him for his work on Logical Positivism.

Edwards studied philosophy at the University of Melbourne and was much influenced by the analytic tradition that held sway there. He received his B.A. (1944) and M.A. (1946) in philosophy at the University of Melbourne. After World War II he originally intended to do further studies in the United Kingdom, but decided to complete a doctorate in philosophy at Columbia University in New York City after being offered a lectureship there. He did postgraduate teaching at Columbia after completing his dissertation and was to spend the rest of his life in New York City, becoming a professor at such institutions as New York University, the New School for Social Research, and Brooklyn College. In 1979 he received the Nicholas Murray Butler Silver Medal for distinguished contributions to philosophy from Columbia University.

Edwards published several articles relating to analytic philosophy, and also became a friend and editor of Bertrand Russell, arguably the founding father of that particular movement. Edwards had originally contacted him in 1947, shortly after Russell's return to England from an unhappy time in the United States, where he had been denied a position at the College of the City of New York because of his radical views on religion and morality. In 1957 Edwards would edit a collection of Russell's previously scattered writings dealing with religion, entitled *Why I Am Not a Christian and Other Essays*, which became a seminal work in the promotion of unbelief and which has never gone out of print. There is a long afterword written by Edwards on the City College case,³ which he considered to be a gross violation of Russell's civil rights and a miscarriage of justice in general.

Edwards is primarily known for editing the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, which originally appeared in 1966. With its 1,500 entries and nearly 500 contributors, most of whom constituted a veritable "Who's Who" of contemporary philosophers themselves, it remains the essential reference work for the field of philosophy. While he authored many other books and articles, his name will forever be synonymous with this particular work, for which he wrote several entries himself. Using his editorial prerogative, Edwards made sure that there were plentiful entries on atheism, positivism, materialism, and critiques of God's existence, and he himself co-wrote the long entry on his own philosophical hero, Bertrand Russell. However, very aware of his own biases, he made it a point to try to find what he considered to be the best experts in the field to write entries on the various figures and topics discussed in the encyclopedia, and attempted to be scrupulously fair to those philosophers he himself disagreed with. Whether he was successful in this remains a bone of contention.

³ Paul Edwards, "How Bertrand Russell Was Prevented From Teaching at the College of the City of New York," appendix to Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian and Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects*, New York: Simon and Schuster 1957, pp. 207–59.

For instance, the entry on Kierkegaard in the *Encyclopedia* was written by Alasdair MacIntyre, whose own interpretation of Kierkegaard has been the subject of much debate.⁴

Those who knew Edwards will always remember his erudition and his wicked sense of humor. An admirer of Voltaire and Russell for their great wit as well as their philosophical acumen, Edwards had a special fondness for the life and works of David Hume, the man he considered to be the best exemplar of a learned individual who lived life to the fullest and who remained to the day of his death a cheerful nonbeliever. He particularly admired Hume's clarity, and his willingness to expose what Edwards considered the nonsensical implications of metaphysical speculation. His own skeptical views regarding morality, human knowledge, and religious belief were quite close to Hume's, which did not always jibe well with his more Positivistic leanings. Edwards never married but, like his hero Hume, he reputedly had many lady friends throughout his life, and was something of a *bon vivant* himself. His dinner parties in the 1960s were legendary. They brought together many leading intellectuals, including those then writing entries for the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, and were a sort of modern-day salon.

Shortly before his death, Edwards published a collection of essays entitled *Heidegger's Confusions*,⁵ dedicated to demolishing the legacy of the man whom Edwards considered to have done the greatest damage to the field of philosophy in the twentieth century. The book brought together five essays he had previously published, with such titles as "Heidegger's Quest for Being" and "Double-Talk about Life after Death." He especially abhorred Heidegger's confusing writings on the nature of death and his cryptic comment that "Only a God can save us."⁶ For Edwards, such an expression was beneath contempt. Moreover, he put Heidegger's approach to philosophy in direct line of descent from Kierkegaard, and made it a point to compare the two men's views on the topic of human existence, stating that "we are assured that Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and other existentialists have achieved a proper understanding of death."⁷ For Edwards, this was the height of nonsense, and while the bulk of the book takes Heidegger to task for such a claim, he clearly considers Kierkegaard to be equally culpable.

Edwards also wrote a biting critique of reincarnation, entitled *Reincarnation: A Critical Examination*,⁸ in which he scornfully looked at both popular and esoteric attempts to describe human existence after death. Interestingly enough, he makes only one reference to Kierkegaard in the book, and that a positive one. When discussing parapsychologist Ian Stevenson's writings on reincarnation, Edwards remarks: "a rational person will conclude either that Stevenson's reports are seriously

⁴ See, for instance, *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre*, ed. by John Davenport and Anthony Rudd, Chicago: Open Court 2001.

⁵ Paul Edwards, *Heidegger's Confusions*, Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books 2004.

⁶ Martin Heidegger, "Nur noch ein Gott kann uns retten," *Der Spiegel*, vol. 30, May 1976, pp. 193-219.

⁷ Paul Edwards, "Heidegger and Death," in *Heidegger's Confusions*, p. 65.

⁸ Paul Edwards, *Reincarnation: A Critical Examination*, Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books 1996.

defective or that his alleged facts can be explained without bringing in reincarnation. An acceptance of the collateral assumptions would, to borrow a phrase from Søren Kierkegaard, amount to the 'crucifixion' of our intellects."⁹

The volume which Edwards co-edited with Arthur Pap, *A Modern Introduction to Philosophy*, went into three editions. It contained copious selections from such unbelievers as Paul Rée, John Stuart Mill, Clarence Darrow, Bertrand Russell, David Hume, Ernest Nagel, and A.J. Ayer, as well as Edwards' own insightful introductions and annotations. Yet there are many selections from philosophers with whom Edwards disagreed, especially in Chapter V, "On the Existence of God," including St. Anselm, Thomas Aquinas, F.C. Copleston, John Hick, and Kierkegaard, with long selections from Book I, Chapter I and Book II, Part II, Chapters I and II of the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.

Never one to hide his own unbelief, Edwards often commented that his two main goals as a philosopher were to demolish the influence of Heidegger and keep alive the memory of Wilhelm Reich, the much-reviled psychoanalyst whose critiques of religion Edwards felt remained valid. He had undergone therapy with Reich himself in the late 1940s, and continued to practice various Reichian techniques throughout his life. While his admiration for Reich was considered by his friends to be one of his personal quirks, Edwards always made it clear that he considered Reich to be one of the world's foremost critics of organized religion. He shared Reich's view that religion had caused much more harm than good by alienating people from the natural world and from understanding their own natural selves. For all their philosophical differences, this was a point of view shared by such disparate figures as Voltaire, Hume, Nietzsche, Freud, Russell, and, of course, Edwards himself. Edwards always made it clear that he was not only a nonbeliever, but someone with a visceral dislike for religion. Shortly before his death he was gladdened to know of the rise of what has come to be called "The New Atheism," identified with such thinkers as Daniel C. Dennett, Christopher Hitchens, and Richard Dawkins, all of whose work he closely followed in such publications as *The New York Review of Books*, *The Nation*, and *The Times Literary Supplement*. These and many other newspapers, thoroughly annotated in his often indecipherable handwriting, would be found throughout his huge book-laden apartment in the Apthorp at 390 West End Avenue on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, where he was known by everyone as "the Professor" and where he lived for the last thirty years of his life.

A hard-headed realist with a concern for the proper use of language, Edwards despised philosophers—particularly so-called "existentialists"—who, he felt, engaged in deliberate obfuscations to cloud their real meanings. Death is not, as Heidegger would put it, "our capital possibility"¹⁰—it is the end of one's existence. Or, as Bertrand Russell once so memorably put it: "When I die, I shall rot and nothing of my ego will survive."¹¹ It is perhaps not surprising that one of the entries that Edwards personally wrote for *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* was entitled

⁹ Paul Edwards, "More about Dr. Ian Stevenson, the 'Galileo of Reincarnation,'" in *Reincarnation: A Critical Examination*, p. 255.

¹⁰ Paul Edwards, "Heidegger and Death," in *Heidegger's Confusions*, p. 78.

¹¹ Bertrand Russell, *What I Believe*, New York: Routledge 2004, p. 13.

"My Death."¹² Like Epicurus, what he most feared was not eternal punishment or reincarnation into another body, but rather a long and painful demise. Mercifully, while his health issues did cause him much distress (particularly severe and recurring back pain which originated from his falling from a ladder in his apartment while retrieving a book on a high shelf), he did not, as he had dreaded, spend his last days in a hospital, but died in his living room while reading—a very Epicurean way to go.

Paul Edwards died on December 9, 2004. His final book, entitled *God and the Philosophers*, a summation of the views of many of the major Western philosophers on the subject of the deity, was published posthumously.¹³ He worked on it continuously for the last decade of his life, rewriting each chapter obsessively. Given his many health problems, which led to his having to—much against his desires—retire from teaching (the genuine love of his life), he rightly suspected that this would be the last book he would work on. He was loath to complete it, knowing that it was unlikely he would have the energy to devote to starting a new project. However, Edwards was assured by his literary executor that the book would appear, and he was glad to know that it would likely place him in the company of the "New Atheism" movement whose writers had all been influenced by his own lifelong defense of materialism and rationalism. It finally appeared in 2009, five years after his death.

II. Edwards' Critique of Kierkegaard

Given Edwards' animus towards Kierkegaard's approach to philosophy, one might be surprised to learn that he wrote a not unsympathetic short biography of Kierkegaard in his widely-used textbook, *A Modern Introduction to Philosophy*.¹⁴ Interestingly enough, it is by far the longest entry on all the philosophers whose works are excerpted in that text. Edwards was fascinated by Kierkegaard's tortured life, especially his unsuccessful romantic endeavors and his painful relationships with the Danish State Church. Furthermore, he considered him to be the precursor to the existentialist movement which played such a dominant role in the Western World following World War II. Kierkegaard's analysis of guilt and dread, Edwards writes, "and his discussions of the ways in which human beings seek to avoid taking ultimate decisions concerning their lives have strongly influenced the philosophies of Heidegger and Sartre."¹⁵

In his introduction to Chapter Five, "On The Existence of God," Edwards discusses Kierkegaard's views on "the absolute paradox" of the Incarnation and why it is disturbing to both theists and critics of theism:

¹² Paul Edwards, "My Death" in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vols. 1–8, ed. by Paul Edwards, New York: Free Press and Macmillan Publishing Company 1966, vol. 5, pp. 416–419.

¹³ Paul Edwards, *God and the Philosophers*, ed. by Timothy J. Madigan, Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books 2009.

¹⁴ Paul Edwards, "Søren Aabye Kierkegaard," Biographical Note, in *A Modern Introduction to Philosophy*, ed. by Paul Edwards and Arthur Pap, New York: Free Press 1957, pp. 588–92.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 588.

Kierkegaard had no time for theologians who tried to explain away difficulties and thus “shirk something of the pain and crisis of decision.” Kierkegaard did not indeed think that the evidence against the existence of God was stronger than the favorable evidence, but he did regard belief in the “absolute paradox” (the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus) as “absurd.” While it is not entirely clear what he meant by this, it is certain that Kierkegaard regarded belief in the incarnation as highly objectionable from a logical or rational point of view. He nevertheless taught that faith in the absolute paradox was both possible and highly desirable. The person who has this faith achieves the highest kind of life attainable for human beings. Moreover it is only by attaining such faith that one can become a Christian and only a Christian can gain eternal happiness. To be told that one ought to believe something although or perhaps even because it is “logically repellent” sounds like strange advice, but it is an essential part of Kierkegaard’s defense of Christianity and it is intimately connected with his doctrine, celebrated by contemporary existentialists as a major contribution to human thought, that “truth is subjectivity.”¹⁶

The notion attributed to Kierkegaard that “truth is subjectivity” is dealt with in detail below, in the discussion of Edwards’ 1971 *Philosophy* article. There is also a chapter on “Fideism” in Edwards’ final, posthumously published work *God and the Philosophers*, in which the views above are further explicated. But there are only three fleeting references to Kierkegaard himself in that book, perhaps because its emphasis is on philosophers who were nonbelievers and/or critics of theism rather than on theism’s defenders.

In the chapter on “Fideism” Edwards makes a direct connection between Kierkegaard’s “leap of faith” concept and William James’ essay “The Will to Believe”—a rather uncharitable comparison, since James goes to some trouble in the essay itself to differentiate his views from those of Kierkegaard. Edwards writes:

This new interpretation of the idea of “truth” has been hailed as a momentous contribution to philosophy and religion. A little reflection shows, however, that it is nothing but a confusing redefinition. From the fact that a person sincerely and passionately believes in God, it does not follow that there is a God, and the disagreement between the believer and the unbeliever obviously concerns the latter question. As we shall see shortly, Kierkegaard’s attempt to save religion by redefining truth reappears in William James, and Kierkegaard is a forerunner of various contemporary philosophers who deny that there is such a thing as objective truth.¹⁷

One might expect Edwards to criticize Kierkegaard more in his various writings, given his unsympathetic attitude toward fideism and existentialism, both of which he strongly identified with Kierkegaard. The best reason for such a lack of written references is most probably due to the fact that he thought the bulk of his specific criticisms against the Dane and his influence could be found in his article “Kierkegaard and the ‘Truth’ of Christianity” which appeared, as previously mentioned, in the April 1971 edition of *Philosophy: The Journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy*.

¹⁶ Paul Edwards, “Fideism,” in *A Modern Introduction to Philosophy*, p. 505.

¹⁷ Paul Edwards, “Fideism,” in *God and the Philosophers*, pp. 165–6.

Often anthologized, a slightly edited version of the article appears in his *A Modern Introduction to Philosophy* as well.¹⁸

What are the main points of the article? Edwards begins by using the phrase "The Alleged Turning Point" in European Philosophy to describe Kierkegaard's major contribution. Modern-day followers of such thinkers as Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers, he writes, have initiated a campaign against "scientism," "scientific rationalism," and "positivism" as defective and inadequate ways of arriving at truth, and utilize Kierkegaard's writings to provide an alternative route to truth. As one of the last great defenders of Positivism himself, these were fighting words for Edwards, who in the essay devotes the bulk of his argument to attempting to prove that there is only one kind of truth, "objective scientific truth." Kierkegaard's writings do not mark a turning point in the understanding of the nature of truth, but rather a retreat from rationality and, perhaps an even worse cardinal sin in Edwards' view, a misuse of language by redefining the meaning of "truth" itself.

Most of the examples used in the article come from the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Edwards points out that he is fully aware that attributing the views of Johannes Climacus to Kierkegaard himself is highly problematic, and he admits that he is not qualified enough in Kierkegaard scholarship to make a learned judgment on this. But since most of the existentialist writers he quotes *do* attribute the concept of "truth as subjectivity" to Kierkegaard rather than to characters created by Kierkegaard, Edwards feels entitled to do the same. "I am concerned with the soundness or otherwise of the doctrine that truth is subjectivity as it has been interpreted by contemporary existentialists who regard it as a momentous contribution," he writes. "Whether or how far Kierkegaard himself really believed it or any of the other theories proposed in the pseudonymous writings is quite another matter."¹⁹

As far as Edwards could see, Kierkegaard's underlying concerns with objective scientific truth were due to the fact that he desired certainty, and science cannot give this. There were three basic inadequacies of using the scientific method to arrive at certainty. First, it relies upon probability, which can only give approximation, and which furthermore has no connection with "passion." Probable knowledge cannot impel someone to believe. Second, science does not give evidence for or against the truths of religion. For instance, no matter what evidence one relies upon, the question of the existence of God cannot be proven or disproven. And third, the specific doctrines of Christianity, the religion that Kierkegaard is passionately committed to, are by scientific standards literally "absurd." Kierkegaard's defense of the subjective truth concept is therefore an amalgamation of all three criticisms directed against science. Edwards adds:

It is unnecessary for our purposes to inquire into the sense or senses in which Kierkegaard uses "absurd," "breach with all thinking," and similar expressions.... Whatever their exact meaning, there is no doubt that Kierkegaard regarded the doctrine

¹⁸ Paul Edwards, "Kierkegaard and the 'Truth' of Christianity," in *A Modern Introduction to Philosophy*, pp. 505–22.

¹⁹ Paul Edwards, "Kierkegaard and the 'Truth' of Christianity," *Philosophy: The Journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy*, vol. 46, no. 176, 1971, p. 108.

of the incarnation as highly objectionable from the point of view of reason so that it would have to be rejected if it were simply a matter of rational considerations.²⁰

One senses in reading the essay that Edwards is not really so willing to overlook the exact meaning of such terms, since another of his arguments is that Kierkegaard opens up a philosophical floodgate by both changing the common meaning of terms and allowing the usage of vague and ambiguous definitions—the very sort of linguistic inexactitude that would set a Positivist on edge. Nonetheless, by then focusing on the central concept of the Incarnation—which Edwards stresses is Kierkegaard's main objective in his goal to redefine "truth"—the essay returns to the question asked at its beginning: *is this really a "turning point" or rather a return to a confusing way of talking that the Vienna Circle and other linguistic philosophers had sought to rectify?*

Here Edwards focuses on what does seem to be a genuine contribution in Kierkegaard's thought: an elaborate attempt to explain the difference between *what* is believed (which Kierkegaard is willing to grant is "objective content") and *how* this is believed, which relates to the subjective attitude of the believer. Edwards concurs that this can be a fruitful avenue to pursue, especially by focusing on the question of "what is believed." He writes:

Kierkegaard here evidently thinks of the kind of situation in which we might agree with what a particular person is saying and yet find it odd and even distasteful that *he* of all people, should be saying it. Sometimes we might even refer to such people as "living lies" although what they say is quite true or the sort of thing that we ourselves approve of.²¹

Edwards gives the example of theologians who talk a great deal about "love" but seem to be cold and uncaring individuals themselves.

Yet, while this topic, which relates to the field of the ethics of belief, is a rich one to investigate, there does not seem to be anything new to it added by Kierkegaard's writings. Furthermore, it is the second half, relating to "how one believes," that seems to be more pertinent to Kierkegaard's defense of subjectivity. But here, too, Edwards argues, Kierkegaard makes no great contribution to understanding the nature of truth itself, but rather develops in great detail the concept of "faith." Kierkegaard's understanding of "faith" does indeed seem to be radically different from that of many other writers in the Christian tradition, especially the view that there can be no such thing as faith without risk. Edwards writes: "It is risk which gives faith the kind of tension that Kierkegaard regards as extremely desirable. A feeling of security is neither admirable nor any indication that the person has attained the right God-relationship."²² But the emphasis on "insecurity" as a necessary stage of belief, as well as the related famous concept of the "leap of faith," are matters of debate regarding levels of commitment, rather than—as Kierkegaard's defenders claim—saying anything central to the concept of truth itself.

Edwards then adds that Kierkegaard argues for two senses of being "in the truth"—an objective and a subjective sense. Kierkegaard insists that science has

²⁰ Ibid., p. 92.

²¹ Ibid., p. 93.

²² Ibid., p. 94.

"demoralized" people by only stressing the first, which tries to provide logical arguments that will allow a person to calmly and carefully commit to a belief, based upon preponderance of evidence and a satisfactory chain of reasoning. But it is only in the subjective sense of "being in the truth" that there is actual decisiveness. It is clear, Edwards points out, why this view would appeal to theologians who recognize—thanks primarily to the devastating logical critiques of David Hume and Immanuel Kant—the flaws in the traditional arguments for God's existence, but it is not fair to scientists, who caution against committing oneself to causes that lack objective verification.

Kierkegaard's confusion regarding "subjective truth," in Edwards' view, relates to the fact that he does not have a single theory, but rather an amalgamation of theories, which are inadequately differentiated from each other. This lack of clarity makes it difficult to criticize the concept, even putting aside the question as to whether it is really Kierkegaard's actual argument or only one put forth by an imaginary character. "Perhaps," Edwards states,

we should begin by pointing out that although much of the time Kierkegaard appears to tell us that we should forget about the objective questions except as a means of heightening the tension of inwardness, he does revert to these issues and as a Christian he must do so. Putting it in different words, Kierkegaard reverts and must revert, from the new sense of "true" in which to say that a belief is true means no more than that it is held sincerely and without reservations, to the old sense in which it means that it is in accordance with the facts or with reality.²³

So, when Kierkegaard speaks of "the truth of Christianity" he is *not* jettisoning objectivity. It is crucial to him that Jesus really must *be* the son of God—it is not enough that one just believes it to be so. The Incarnation would lose its importance if it was simply a deeply held belief, and not a matter of fact.

At this point in the essay, Edwards has some fun by "resurrecting" none other than his own hero, David Hume. Imagine a scenario in which Hume and Kierkegaard both arrive at the Pearly Gates to be judged as to whether they deserve immortal life: something Hume was skeptical about, and which Kierkegaard made the centerpiece of his philosophical hopes. Suppose that God, rather than respecting passionate commitment, prizes intellectual rectitude instead. Hume, therefore, while not believing in God or eternal life, had based his beliefs upon the best available evidence he had, and is rewarded with eternal bliss. But Kierkegaard is condemned by God for concocting cowardly schemes to shield himself from the evidence before him. "I very much doubt," Edwards writes, "that Kierkegaard would reply, 'I stand vindicated. The fact that you are about to annihilate me and that unlike David Hume I shall miss out on eternal happiness is of no importance. I believed what I did without reservations. Hence I was in the truth. Hence I achieved the highest kind of life. The rest is of no consequence.'"²⁴

So, while Kierkegaard may praise inwardness and a lack of reservations as the highest form of life, this does not have any actual bearing upon the truthfulness

²³ Ibid., p. 97.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 98.

of one's beliefs. It is a value judgment, not a truth judgment. Furthermore, such commitment is fully consistent with views that would have likely appalled Kierkegaard. A follower of Ayn Rand, for instance, may demonstrate just as much commitment to selfish capitalism. Sidney and Beatrice Webb demonstrated their complete commitment to Socialism throughout their lives. Surely they were all just as committed to their causes or beliefs as a Kierkegaardian Christian would be to belief in the Incarnation. Such a "highest form of existence," therefore, is no justification of the truths of Christianity *per se*. Indeed, Kierkegaard himself realizes that the implications of appealing to sincerity can lead to utter chaos. Inwardness can easily be equated with madness. Don Quixote, for example, was sincere in his beliefs about giants. Kierkegaard distinguishes, therefore, between genuine versus aberrant inwardness. The type of absurdity he advocates is not congruent with delusions of grandeur, or economic or political systems, no matter how utopian. Rather, for Kierkegaard, commitment to the absurd must be to the *absolute*, to the ultimate meaning of existence, namely, eternal life. That would rule out Don Quixote, Ayn Rand and the Webbs, since whatever the strength of their commitments, their focus is not upon the ultimate. But even if one grants Kierkegaard such a distinction, there are many other versions of the Savior and the Incarnation which are passionately upheld by Christians and other theists who *do* have the ultimate as their aim. Is not objective reality still the deciding factor as to which such belief one should commit to, rather than which is most passionately adhered to?

Ultimately, then, Edwards holds, Kierkegaard is talking not about truth but about commitment. And the only justifiable commitments are to propositions that are not merely strongly felt but also are in accord with the facts. Thus, regardless of what existentialists may claim, there is, after all, no new concept of truth found within Kierkegaard's writings. At best, there is a new, or at least unconventional, analysis of the meaning of "passion." At worst, there is a deliberate misuse of language. Rather than offering a "new" meaning of truth, Kierkegaard merely gives us a misleading redefinition, a "verbal fog." He is guilty of committing the age-old logical fallacy of *ignoratio elenchi* (or "red herring"). Instead of leading us to a better understanding of the meaning of truth, Kierkegaard and his advocates throw us off the scent. In conclusion, Edwards writes: "We can now regard a person as in the truth if, in addition, to feeling infinite concern, it is also the case that the object or objects appropriate to this infinite concern do in fact exist."²⁵ That is the only sort of existentialism to which a pro-Positivist like Edwards would passionately commit himself.

III. Edwards and Kierkegaard

While "Kierkegaard and the 'Truth' of Christianity" remains the primary work by which Edwards' criticism of Kierkegaard will be known, it is clear that he continued to grapple with the thought and influence of Kierkegaard for many years thereafter. Edwards' personal files, including his dictated notes (which he had typed up for him and which he used in teaching his courses in philosophy) may be found in

²⁵ Ibid., p. 105.

the archives at the Center for Inquiry in Amherst, New York. The Center is the home of two publications founded by Edwards' friend Paul Kurtz (with whom he once co-taught a course in philosophy at the New School for Social Research), *The Skeptical Inquirer* and *Free Inquiry*. Unfortunately, while they are a rich resource of materials, especially relating to the history and compilation of *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, the Edwards' archives are not yet catalogued. I was able to do research in the archives, under the auspices of Center for Inquiry archivist and chief librarian Timothy Binga. While there, I found Edwards' files relating to Kierkegaard. Given his obsessive working habits, it is not surprising that among these were several drafts of "Kierkegaard and the 'Truth' of Christianity," as well as his rewrites of the article which later appeared in various publications. All of the changes are fairly minor and do not alter in any way the content of his criticisms. It was always Edwards' technique to test his articles ahead of time by sending drafts to friends and fellow philosophers for their opinions, and by discussing the works-in-progress with his students.

In the Edwards' archives at the Center for Inquiry there are also several files labeled "Class Notes." In these, which Edwards used for the various courses he taught over the years at Columbia University, New York University, Brooklyn College, and the New School for Social Research, there are points he makes about Kierkegaard which are either not found in any of his published writings or strengthen some of the points he does make on the written page. Unfortunately, the notes are not dated, and it is impossible to tell when they were delivered or how specifically he used them in the classroom. Nonetheless, they should be of interest to those desiring further information on Edwards' views about Kierkegaard as a philosopher. Below are some of the choicest examples.

In relationship to Kierkegaard's views on sincerity of belief, Edwards notes:

Various Small Points Relating to K. In the exposition where K. has a good point about people advocating a certain view which they themselves do not adequately feel or believe in, like my friend when he praises the Jews—in this connection the word to use is "it rings false in his mouth." This is exactly the right phrase and what I have now is not very good.

Here Edwards comments upon a position of Kierkegaard's that he initially agrees with, the concept of what constitutes a "true believer," although as usual he makes it clear that he must ultimately part company with him:

On the point where K. is right—that what makes up a true believer are emotions and actions rather than intellectual sophistication, something needs to be said as to why he is right. I suppose in the long run all I can say is that this is the way in which we normally use the word "belief" or "genuine belief" when it comes to belief in religions or ideologies or anything else where not only verbal responses count (as they might in the case of belief in certain metaphysical systems). Our chief criterion is not what a person says or how intelligently he can support what he says, but how he acts and feels.

Edwards does express an ongoing desire not to overstate Kierkegaard's views regarding the subjective nature of truth, and thereby portray him too much as a strawman:

I suppose I should watch out that I do not misrepresent K. in that “truth is subjectivity” is a doctrine that is meant to apply only to religious, metaphysical and I assume moral issues and not to straightforward empirical and scientific questions. That such a division is not justified is in effect the main point of almost all of my objections, especially the point concerning the misleading re-definition of “truth.”

But, as always, he wants to take issue with what he feels to be Kierkegaard’s continuing misuse of language. Still, even Edwards is willing to concede that the word “truth” can be used in differing ways: “There is no doubt that ‘truth’ in the philosophically most interesting sense of ‘corresponding to fact’ is not the only one in everyday life. This in no way helps Kierkegaard or makes his various moves or tricks any more defensible.”

Nonetheless, Edwards in his notes to himself for classroom use stresses that his criticisms of Kierkegaard are not trivial, and that in defining truth one must always be cautious of falling into ambiguities:

It is important that when I write up some of the above comments I should emphasize that these are *not* pedantic points, but they are quite central, especially the criticisms of Kierkegaard and the various ambiguous uses of “truth.” All of this shows that being clear about the meanings of word is not something trivial, but in philosophy at least something extremely important and people who don’t learn the art of attending to redefinitions, linguistic shifts, etc. are apt to become the victims of their own or other people’s redefinitional games. I should also bring in as much of my material on James as possible. This is the place—the two things are very similar and readers can be persuaded more easily about the enormities of the Kierkegaard type of confusion when the same sort of thing is demonstrated in James.

Here again one can see his conflating Kierkegaard’s “leap of faith” with William James’ concept of “The Will to Believe.”

What seemed to primarily motivate Edwards’ animus towards Kierkegaard’s philosophy was what he considered to be a conflation between commitment to a cause and the assumption that such commitment *justified* the truth of the cause itself:

All of this needs to be done more clearly if at all. The main point is the contrast between blind and informed commitments. In general I should point out that I am not opposed, in suitable situations, to a person’s giving himself entirely to a therapist, a doctor, a teacher, a singer. No opposition to such complete giving is involved in my criticisms of K. I am opposed to total giving in unsuitable situations—a movement like the Communist Party or Christianity which has not been adequately investigated or as making this some sort of argument for a baseless conclusion like the existence of God.

And in conclusion, while expressing some cautious admiration for Kierkegaard’s sincerity, Edwards distanced himself from what he felt to be the dark side of existential commitment: the espousal of beliefs that were untenable or even atrocious:

Finally, though here one can do little more than express one’s own feelings, I find certain aspects of K.’s value-judgment quite horrifying. I will grant that sincerity is usually admirable and that in certain contexts unreserved commitment is much to be preferred to doubts and reservations (e.g. the way Churchill threw himself into the fight during the

second World War) but I cannot see that this is necessarily and always the case. K. gives us a blank check for any and every kind of fanaticism and, although he does not see this, for the indulgence of any and every kind of intellectual and emotional cowardice.

As these notes demonstrate, Edwards remained fascinated by Kierkegaard, particularly his psychological approach to philosophy. While he had no truck for Kierkegaard's fideism or belief in eternal life, he does express grudging admiration for Kierkegaard's zest for life ("I feel some sympathy," he writes in his classroom notes, "for the value judgments that are implicit in K—a life without passion doesn't seem very worthwhile and a life in which a person doesn't deliberately decide and allows himself to be driven by events is not the kind of life I admire").

There is one connection between the two thinkers which might otherwise go unobserved: their shared puckish sense of humor. Edwards surely appreciated Kierkegaard's use of laughter as a weapon. Most of all, just as Edwards used such a weapon in his life-long campaign against Heidegger, he admired Kierkegaard's similar campaign against Hegel, whom Edwards likewise considered a master of obfuscation (or in Schopenhauer's memorable term "the intellectual Caliban").²⁶ In his files on Kierkegaard, Edwards saved the following quotation from Karl Popper:

Although Kierkegaard never freed himself entirely from the Hegelian tradition in which he was educated, there was hardly anybody who recognized more clearly what Hegelian historicism meant. "There were," Kierkegaard wrote, "philosophers who tried, before Hegel, to explain... history. And providence could only smile when it saw these attempts. But providence did not laugh outright, for there was a human, honest sincerity about them. But Hegel? Here I need Homer's language. How did the gods roar with laughter! Such a horrid little professor who has simply seen through the necessity of anything and everything there is, and who now plays the whole affair on his barrel-organ: listen, ye gods of Olympus!" And Kierkegaard continues, referring to the attack by the atheist Schopenhauer upon the Christian apologist Hegel: "Reading Schopenhauer has given me more pleasure than I can express. What he says is perfectly true: and then—it serves the Germans right—he is rude as only a German can be." But Kierkegaard's own expressions are nearly as blunt as Schopenhauer's: for Kierkegaard goes on to say that Hegelianism, which he calls "this brilliant spirit of putridity," is the "most repugnant of all forms of looseness": and he speaks of its "mildew of pomposity," its "intellectual voluptuousness," and its "infamous splendour of corruption."²⁷

Given Edwards' own love for blunt and often rude expressions, and his animus toward the sort of writing style Hegel and the Hegelians exemplified, it is not surprising that he adds "This is good stuff." On this issue, he and Søren Kierkegaard were in passionate agreement.

²⁶ Arthur Schopenhauer, Preface to the Second Edition, *The World as Will and Representation*, vols. 1–2, trans. by E.F.J. Payne, New York: Dover Editions 1966–69, vol. 1, p. xxi.

²⁷ Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, vols. 1–2, London: Routledge 1945, vol. 2, p. 275.

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