

# Kierkegaard on Belief and Credence

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Abstract: Kierkegaard's pseudonym Johannes Climacus famously defines faith as a risky "venture" that requires "holding fast" to "objective uncertainty." Yet puzzlingly, he emphasizes that faith requires resolute conviction and certainty. Moreover, Climacus claims that all beliefs about contingent propositions about the external world "exclude doubt" and "nullify uncertainty," but also that uncertainty is "continually present" in these very same beliefs. This paper argues that these apparent contradictions can be resolved by interpreting Climacus as a belief-credence dualist. That is, Climacus holds that beliefs and credences (i.e., degrees of belief) are two irreducibly distinct types of mental states. Beliefs are resolutions that close inquiry, thereby excluding doubt and reflecting subjective certainty by disregarding the possibility of error. Credences, by contrast, reflect assessments of evidential probabilities, thereby encoding a recognition of "objective uncertainty" by acknowledging the possibility of error. In addition to solving a vexing interpretive puzzle and showing how Kierkegaard anticipates contemporary views about the nature of belief and credence, this paper demonstrates that Kierkegaard developed a sophisticated account of the nature of belief, doubt, and certainty that merits serious philosophical consideration.

## 1. Introduction

Many of us have firm convictions—in religion, ethics, politics, or other domains—about which we are tempted to say that we are certain and have no doubt. But we can nonetheless consciously acknowledge that these beliefs are not *guaranteed* to be true by our evidence, and that we could be mistaken. On its face, this commonplace phenomenon of holding a belief with certainty while consciously acknowledging the possibility of error seems incoherent. Yet given the apparent ubiquity of this combination of states, explaining its psychological possibility and vindicating its rational coherence is a desideratum in a philosophical theory of belief.

Beliefs that reflect certainty while simultaneously acknowledging the possibility of error are a central concern in Søren Kierkegaard's writings, especially in the texts published under the pseudonym

Johannes Climacus.<sup>1</sup> Yet many of Climacus’s remarks about such beliefs are deeply puzzling. Climacus famously defines faith as a risky “venture” that requires “holding fast” to “objective uncertainty,” but (apparently paradoxically) he also emphasizes that faith involves resolute conviction and certainty. Moreover, Climacus asserts, all beliefs about contingent propositions about the external world “exclude doubt” and “nullify uncertainty,” yet uncertainty is “continually present” in these very same beliefs. These claims seem contradictory: how can belief—including, but not only, religious faith—exclude doubt and nullify uncertainty while simultaneously acknowledging, even holding fast to, uncertainty?

In this essay, I propose a solution to this interpretive puzzle by arguing that Climacus should be read as a belief-credence dualist.<sup>2</sup> That is, Climacus holds that beliefs and credences (i.e., degrees of belief or confidence) are two irreducibly distinct types of mental states. Beliefs are resolutions that close inquiry, thereby excluding doubt and reflecting “subjective certainty” by disregarding the possibility of error. By contrast, credences reflect assessments of evidential probabilities and can thereby encode a recognition of “objective uncertainty” to the degree that they acknowledge the possibility of error. What emerges is a philosophically sophisticated picture of the relationship between belief, credence, inquiry, doubt, and certainty, which not only anticipates numerous views in contemporary analytic epistemology but also constitutes a compelling account worthy of serious philosophical consideration.

Here is a brief outline of what follows. In §2, I explain the interpretive puzzle. In §3, I taxonomize four potential solutions to the puzzle and argue that no existing version of these solutions in the secondary literature adequately addresses the puzzle. In §4, I draw on recent work in analytic

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<sup>1</sup> While I think that Kierkegaard himself—and some of his other pseudonyms, such as Johannes de Silentio and Anti-Climacus—accepts the views I will attribute to Climacus, I will not assume that here. Instead, my interpretive claims here are limited to characterizing Climacus’s views.

<sup>2</sup> I take this term from Elizabeth Jackson (2020).

epistemology to develop an interpretation of Climacus's account of the nature of beliefs, the nature of credences, and the descriptive relationship between beliefs and credences. In §5, I conclude by showing how this interpretation solves the puzzle.

## 2. The Puzzle

In the “Interlude” of *Philosophical Fragments*, Johannes Climacus develops a fascinating—albeit perplexing—account of belief (*Tro*) about contingent, *a posteriori* propositions about the external world.<sup>3</sup> Climacus claims that “Belief [*Troen*] is the opposite of doubt [*Tvivlen*]” (PF: 84), for belief is a “resolution” [*Beslutning*] in which doubt is “excluded” and “terminated” (PF: 82-84).<sup>4</sup> Climacus explains, “This is precisely the nature of belief [*Tro*], for continually present as the nullified in the certitude [*Vished*] of belief is the incertitude [*Uvished*] that in every way corresponds to the uncertainty of coming into existence” (PF: 81). Yet this statement is puzzling: if belief excludes doubt and nullifies uncertainty, in what sense is uncertainty continually present in belief?

After developing this general account of belief, Climacus distinguishes between two types of belief: first, in its “direct and ordinary meaning” (e.g., a belief that I have hands, or a belief that Caesar crossed the Rubicon), and second, in its “wholly eminent sense” (i.e., Christian faith) (PF: 87).<sup>5</sup> While each of these two species of belief possesses some differentiating properties, he seems to regard them as belonging to an overarching genus and thus sharing the essential properties constitutive of that genus.<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting that the Danish term for “belief”—*tro*—can also be translated in English as

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<sup>3</sup> *Tro* pertains only to contingent, *a posteriori* matters about the external world because Climacus holds that we can know—rather than merely believe—necessary, *a priori* truths as well as immediate sense data. Climacus treats *tro* as incompatible with knowledge in the strict sense, and thus doesn't regard belief as a generic attitude of “taking to be true.” (See Piety 2010 for further discussion.)

<sup>4</sup> All translations are from the Hong editions published by Princeton University Press. Sigla for Kierkegaard's texts in parenthetical citations follow the standard conventions from the *International Kierkegaard Commentary* and are noted in the bibliography. The number following the sigla indicates the page number in the relevant Hong edition.

<sup>5</sup> See Evans (1983: chapter 12; 1992: chapter 8) for further discussion of Climacus's distinction between belief in the “ordinary sense” and belief in the “wholly eminent sense.”

<sup>6</sup> While this paper addresses the doxastic component of Climacus's account of faith, this does not exhaust Climacus's account of faith. Climacus also takes faith to have interpersonal, volitional, and affective dimensions, for instance.

“faith.” Unlike in English, there is no distinction between these terms in Danish. While the translations referenced below sometimes render *tro* as “belief” and sometimes as “faith,” the terms “belief” and “faith” correspond to the same Danish word. (For the sake of terminological consistency, I will henceforth use the term “faith” to refer specifically to “Christian faith” as a species of *tro*. And unless otherwise noted, I will use the term “belief” to refer to the genus of *tro*.) The important point for our purposes is that because faith is a species of belief which shares its essential properties, any contradictions between Climacus’s account of belief (as a genus) and faith (as a species of that genus) pose a serious problem for the coherence of Climacus’s view, which cannot be dismissed as applying to two unrelated phenomena.

Consequently, the puzzle about belief’s relationship to uncertainty is deepened when we examine Climacus’s account of Christian faith in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*. Throughout the *Postscript*, Climacus closely associates faith with uncertainty and risk. Climacus famously defines “subjective truth”—which he also describes as a “paraphrasing of faith”—as “an objective uncertainty, held fast through appropriation with the most passionate inwardness” (CUP: 203). Climacus continues:

Without risk, no faith. Faith is the contradiction between the infinite passion of inwardness and the objective uncertainty...If I want to keep myself in faith, I must continually see to it that I hold fast the objective uncertainty, see to it that in the objective uncertainty I am ‘out on 70,000 fathoms of water’ and still have faith. (CUP: 204)

As this passage brings out, Climacus regards what I will call “the phenomenology of risk”—feeling as if one is “out on 70,000 fathoms of water”—as a central aspect of faith. Indeed, Climacus’s frequent description of faith as a “venture” implies that genuine faith *requires* risk and uncertainty:

What is it to venture? To venture is the correlative of uncertainty; as soon as there is certainty, venturing stops. If, then, [one] gains certainty and definiteness, [one] cannot possibly venture everything, because then [one] ventures nothing even if [one] gives up everything...If that of which I am to gain possession by venturing is certain, then I am not venturing, then I am *trading*. (CUP: 424-425, emphasis Climacus’s)

Whereas Climacus holds in *Fragments* that in belief uncertainty is “continually present as the nullified,” in the *Postscript* he makes the stronger claim that the venture of Christian faith *requires holding uncertainty fast*. In addition to the puzzle in *Fragments* of how uncertainty remains continually present in belief as the nullified, Climacus’s remarks in the *Postscript* raise the even more perplexing question of how faith (as a species of belief) can simultaneously nullify uncertainty and hold it fast.

At face value, then, Climacus’s statements about the relationship between belief and uncertainty appear contradictory. While belief excludes doubt and nullifies uncertainty, uncertainty remains continually present in belief and sometimes (in the case of faith) must be positively embraced and held fast. To solve this puzzle, we must provide an interpretation of Climacus’s account of the genus of belief that explains the sense in which belief simultaneously *excludes* doubt and uncertainty while continually *preserving* uncertainty such that believing can (especially in the case of faith) feel like a risky venture to the believer.

### **3. Attempts to Solve the Puzzle**

This puzzle has not been discussed at length in Anglophone Kierkegaard scholarship. However, numerous commentators briefly address this puzzle either explicitly or implicitly. In this section, I taxonomize four candidate solutions to the puzzle which are discernible in the literature. I argue that the first three fail to solve the puzzle, and that while the fourth solution is promising, it has not been developed in a way that provides a satisfactory solution to the puzzle.

#### **3.1 Solution #1: Faith is a non-Doxastic, Practical Attitude**

One initially tempting solution—endorsed by Wrathall (2019)—is to claim that Climacus holds that faith should be construed as a *practical* attitude—such as a decision to *accept* a proposition in one’s practical reasoning, or act “as if” a proposition were true—rather than a doxastic attitude. Wrathall claims that Climacus holds that “‘belief’ [*tro*] is ambiguous, and can refer either to a cognitive state or attitude of holding-to-be-true, or to a practical stance of trust or reliance” (2019: 244). On Wrathall’s

interpretation, belief in “the direct and ordinary sense” corresponds to the attitude of holding-to-be-true, while belief “in the wholly eminent sense,” i.e., Christian faith, corresponds to the practical stance of trust or reliance.<sup>7</sup> This interpretation could be developed to solve the puzzle as follows: if faith is a non-doxastic attitude, then Climacus’s characterization of belief as “excluding doubt” and “nullifying uncertainty” does not apply to faith. Thus, there is no contradiction between Climacus’s account of belief in *Fragments* and his account of faith in the *Postscript*.

However, this solution faces two serious problems. First, as I argued in §2, Climacus holds that Christian faith is a *species* of belief, so we should not interpret Climacus as regarding faith as a non-doxastic state. Faith shares the essential features of the genus of belief—such as excluding doubt and nullifying uncertainty—and so the puzzle remains. Second, as we saw, the puzzle about how uncertainty is simultaneously nullified and continually present in belief arises for *all* beliefs, not just for Christian faith. This solution cannot provide a complete answer to the puzzle because it cannot explain how belief in the ordinary sense simultaneously nullifies and preserves uncertainty.

### 3.2 Solution #2: Belief does not Involve Uncertainty *While* One Believes

On Marilyn Piety’s interpretation, Climacus takes faith to exclude uncertainty while one has faith but to involve uncertainty before and after “the moment of faith” (i.e., when one lacks faith) (2010: 148).<sup>8</sup> If faith requires uncertainty *before* one believes but certainty *while* one believes, the apparent contradiction is resolved. According to this second solution, then, rather than simultaneously bearing two contradictory relationships to uncertainty, belief requires uncertainty at one time and certainty at another time.

While this interpretation is more promising than Solution #1, it nonetheless fails to provide a satisfactory solution to the puzzle. It cannot solve the problem with respect to the genus of belief

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<sup>7</sup> Wisdo (1987) likewise denies that Climacus understands Christian faith as a type of belief, albeit for different reasons than Wrathall does.

<sup>8</sup> Evans (1983: 265) also seems to endorse a version of this solution.

because Climacus holds that uncertainty is *continually present* in belief, rather than present before or after one believes. And it fares even worse in accounting for Climacus's definition of faith as requiring *holding fast* to uncertainty. Climacus makes it clear that someone who has faith does not overcome uncertainty but rather continually holds uncertainty fast *while* they believe. Climacus claims, "Faith has, namely, two tasks: to watch for and *at every moment to make the discovery of improbability*, the paradox, in order then to hold it fast with the passion of inwardness" (CUP: 233, emphasis mine). If faith involves the awareness of improbability *at every moment*, this entails that it involves uncertainty while one believes. Solution #2 is thus susceptible to serious textual objections.

### **3.3 Solution #3: Uncertainty is Indexed to a Perspective or Body of Evidence**

Another potential solution to our puzzle holds that faith involves recognizing objective uncertainty not in the sense of regarding the proposition one believes as genuinely epistemically uncertain, but rather in the sense of recognizing that a different agent in an epistemically inferior position would regard this proposition as uncertain. C. Stephen Evans (1992, 2022) provides one way of developing this solution.<sup>9</sup> Evans (1992) argues that Climacus's discussion of the probability or improbability of historical events (such as the incarnation) should not be understood as referring to the "objective probabilities" of these events' occurring (such as the probability that a fair coin will land heads, or that a pair of dice will roll a 4). Rather, Climacus intends to refer to "subjective probabilities," which Evans regards as an individual's estimates *about* objective probabilities. In Evans's words, "The improbability of the incarnation must be seen as relative to the perspective from which it is viewed" (1992: 162). Thus, the uncertainty of faith is indexed to a perspective which the believer does not accept. So, faith involves recognizing objective uncertainty in the sense that the believer recognizes that "from an 'objective' or 'detached' standpoint, the proposition believed is uncertain" (Evans 2022: 74).

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<sup>9</sup> Sylvia Walsh (2009: 52) seems to endorse a similar interpretation.

Importantly, on Evans’s interpretation, the “subjective,” committed perspective of Christian faith is epistemically superior to the “objective,” detached perspective, which is distorted by sinful “offense” at the paradoxical claim of the incarnation. Whereas the committed believer’s psychological certainty is epistemically warranted because it is produced by God via religious experience (and hence produced by a reliable belief-forming process), the uncommitted unbeliever’s psychological uncertainty is not epistemically warranted because it is the result of sinful offense (and hence produced by an unreliable belief-forming process) (1992: 117). From the perspective of Christian faith, this sinful, uncommitted perspective should be dismissed as mistaken. Believers therefore can recognize the objective uncertainty of the proposition they believe—i.e., its uncertainty indexed to this sinful, uncommitted, “objective” perspective—while simultaneously being psychologically certain themselves.<sup>10</sup>

An alternative way of developing this solution is to claim that the propositions believed in Christian faith are uncertain conditional on the publicly available evidence (e.g., historical evidence and philosophical arguments), but certain conditional on the private evidence of subjective religious experience. On K. Brian Söderquist’s interpretation, Climacus holds that religious faith is based on essentially private grounds. That is, belief is “grounded in subjective religious experience; the only ‘proof’ is what [Kierkegaard] calls the *argumentum spiritus sancti*, the ‘proof of the holy spirit’” (Söderquist, 2019: 228). This idea from Söderquist could be developed to say that uncertainty is “objective” in the sense that it is uncertain conditional on the objective, i.e., *publicly available*, evidence, such as historical or philosophical arguments. But conditional on the believer’s total evidence—which includes “subjective,” i.e., *private*, religious experience—the proposition believed is certain. Because

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<sup>10</sup> While some passages in Evans (2022) indicate that he still endorses this interpretation, other passages suggest an alternative interpretation—closer to the interpretation I will ultimately develop in §4—on which objective uncertainty refers to the degree to which the evidence supports a proposition (2022: 71) and subjective certainty refers to one’s dispositions to act on a belief (2022: 76).



the believer's evidential situation is better than that of someone who lacks the private evidence the believer possesses, the believer's psychological certainty is epistemically warranted.<sup>11</sup>

Both versions of Solution #3 offer a deflationary solution to the puzzle by attributing neither psychological uncertainty nor epistemic uncertainty to the believer. Instead, Solution #3 indexes uncertainty to the psychology of a *different* agent whose perspective is epistemically inferior (either because the agent's belief-forming process is distorted by sin, according to Evans's view, or because the agent lacks relevant evidence, according to my development of Söderquist's view). Consequently, Solution #3 avoids part of my objection to Solution #2 by giving an account of how holding a belief involving certainty is compatible with simultaneously recognizing objective uncertainty.

However, because this solution only explains the respect in which one species of belief—Christian faith—is objectively uncertain, it cannot solve the puzzle of how belief *as a genus* can simultaneously exclude doubt and recognize uncertainty. In *Fragments*, Climacus insists that *all* beliefs about contingent propositions—including, but not only, belief in the incarnation—involve uncertainty and risk: “When belief resolves to believe, it runs the risk that it was an error, but nevertheless it wills to believe. One *never* believes in any other way; if one wants to avoid risk, then one wants to know with certainty that one can swim before going into the water” (PF: 83, n53, emphasis mine). The risk of error involved in ordinary beliefs about contingent propositions—e.g., regarding ordinary perceptual or historical matters—cannot plausibly be attributed to our adopting a sinful, uncommitted “objective” perspective or lacking dispositive private evidence. Rather, as Climacus's discussion of skepticism shows, he regards the risk of error as a genuine feature of our epistemic situation, as there is a risk of error inherent in any judgments we make about contingent propositions about the external

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<sup>11</sup> My development of Söderquist's interpretation departs from his view in two respects. First, Söderquist is reluctant to countenance the possibility of private evidence (2019: 235). Second—and more significantly for our purposes—while Söderquist frequently speaks of “conviction,” he never claims that conviction involves certainty (so Söderquist does not himself outright endorse a solution to our puzzle).

world (as Rudd 1998 emphasizes).<sup>12</sup> So, this solution cannot explain how uncertainty and the risk of error is continually present in all beliefs about contingent matters.

Moreover, even if this interpretation can explain the respect in which faith is objectively uncertain, it cannot account for the *riskiness* of faith. Evans's view implies that the phenomenology of risk will be present only to the extent that we take offense at the paradoxical claims of Christianity and thus regard these claims as unlikely to be true. But this makes the phenomenology of risk seem like an *obstacle* to faith which would ideally be overcome. Just as Climacus claims that faith involves holding fast to uncertainty, so too does faith involving *embracing* its riskiness. If faith appears risky only from a point of view one regards as mistaken (on Evans's view) or conditional on only part of one's total evidence (on my development of Söderquist's view), it's difficult to see how faith involves embracing genuine risk. Solution #3 therefore does not provide a satisfactory response to the puzzle.

### **3.4 Solution #4: Subjective Certainty is Compatible with Epistemic Uncertainty**

A fourth solution is that Climacus holds that belief can simultaneously involve subjective certainty and genuinely epistemic uncertainty (such that belief feels risky to the believer). That is, one can believe with psychological certainty even though one's evidence does not rule out the possibility of error. This appears to be the most widely endorsed interpretation among Kierkegaard scholars. Perhaps the clearest statement of this interpretation has been developed by Alastair Hannay.<sup>13</sup> On Hannay's reading, Climacus takes faith to involve subjective certainty coupled with an *awareness* of objective uncertainty and risk: "The objective uncertainty is *neither replaced nor obscured* by the subjective certainty, rather it is a necessary condition of the latter" (1982: 127; emphasis mine). Hannay identifies objective

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<sup>12</sup> Evans (2022: 75) acknowledges this point and extends his earlier (1992) account of the relationship between subjective certainty and objective uncertainty to the *genus* of belief. However, once Evans makes this move, it becomes unclear why the committed believer is justified in regarding the "objective," uncommitted perspective as epistemically inferior with respect to ordinary beliefs.

<sup>13</sup> Others who seem to endorse this interpretation include Louis Pojman (1984: 98), Michael Raposa (1986: 99), Robert Roberts (1986: 110), Steven Emmanuel (1996: 67, 71, 93), and Merold Westphal (2014: 180).

uncertainty with epistemic uncertainty and subjective certainty with one's psychological certainty (1982: 102). Consequently, "attributions of belief carry the suggestion that the believer may be wrong" (1982: 103). So, on this solution, a belief can reflect psychological certainty about a proposition which is simultaneously epistemically uncertain for the believer.

However, neither Hannay nor any other proponents of this solution specify precisely what sort of psychological certainty "subjective certainty" reflects or what sort of epistemic uncertainty "objective uncertainty" entails, and neither does Hannay explain how subjective certainty is compatible with *recognizing* objective uncertainty. On one plausible interpretation of these phrases, being "subjectively certain" that  $p$  entails having a credence of 1 in  $p$ , and  $p$  is "objectively uncertain" just in case it is epistemically possible that not- $p$  because one's evidence does not rule out the possibility that not- $p$ . In order for subjective certainty to be compatible with recognizing objective uncertainty, then, having credence 1 in  $p$  must be compatible with recognizing the epistemic possibility that not- $p$ . So, on this interpretation, Climacus must hold that one's credence in  $p$  does not necessarily correspond to one's assessment of the evidential probability that  $p$ . That is, it's possible to be subjectively certain that  $p$ —i.e., to have credence 1 in  $p$ —while simultaneously acknowledging that  $p$  is objectively uncertain—i.e., acknowledging that the probability of  $p$  conditional on one's evidence is less than 1.<sup>14</sup>

This interpretation is more promising than the first three solutions we have considered. It takes seriously Climacus's claim that faith involves holding fast to objective uncertainty in full

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<sup>14</sup> Westphal (2014: 140) could be read as endorsing a different interpretation on which being *subjectively* certain that  $p$ —or "being sure" that  $p$ , in Westphal's words—entails having a credence of 1 in  $p$  (i.e., being 100% confident that  $p$ ) and denying the possibility that not- $p$ , whereas *objective* uncertainty regarding  $p$  reflects the epistemic possibility that not- $p$ , i.e., that one's evidence does not rule out the possibility that not- $p$ . However, to avoid offering a contradictory description of the believer's mental states—as simultaneously and consciously *denying* the epistemic possibility that not- $p$  and *acknowledging* the epistemic possibility that not- $p$ —this interpretation must take belief to require denying the possibility of error and thereby denying that the proposition believed is objectively uncertain. But this is inconsistent with Climacus's frequent statements asserting or implying that believers often are aware of the possibility of error (especially in the case of Christian faith), and it cannot explain the sense in which belief involves *recognizing* objective uncertainty. Moreover, this interpretation of subjective certainty cannot accommodate the phenomenology of risk. The mere fact that one's evidence leaves open the possibility that not- $p$  is insufficient to generate the phenomenology of risk; rather, the phenomenology of risk requires *consciously recognizing* that one could be mistaken.

awareness of the riskiness of believing. Moreover, it has strong textual support, as there are numerous passages in which Climacus describes faith as simultaneously involving psychological certainty and epistemic uncertainty (e.g., PF: 81; CUP: 55, 506-507).

However, this interpretation faces a serious problem: it provides a contradictory description of the believer's mental states. It seems psychologically impossible to *simultaneously* and *consciously* express complete confidence that  $p$  and acknowledge that there is a chance that not- $p$ . There is thus an incoherence between the believer's confidence in  $p$  and their assessment of their epistemic situation. Statements of the form "I am 100% confident that  $p$  is true, but it's possible that  $p$  is false, so I could be mistaken" sound paradoxical and irrational. It is difficult to envision agents who are fully transparent to themselves sincerely making such assertions,<sup>15</sup> so self-deceptively "hiding" the part of oneself that acknowledges the possibility that not- $p$  seems necessary to remain certain that  $p$ . Thus, subjective certainty requires hiding from oneself one's acknowledgement of the epistemic possibility that not- $p$ . Attributing to Climacus a view endorsing this form of self-deceptive hiding is inconsistent with Kierkegaard's frequent exhortations to overcome self-deception. Worse still, *contra* Hannay's claim that objective uncertainty is neither replaced nor obscured by subjective certainty, it seems that one's acknowledgement of objective uncertainty must be obscured after all. It is very difficult to see how it is psychologically possible to have a credence of 1 in  $p$  and hide one's acknowledgement of the epistemic possibility that not- $p$  while consciously attending to—and *holding fast to*—the epistemic possibility that not- $p$ .

While the observation that Climacus holds that belief involves a subjective certainty that neither replaces nor obscures one's recognition of a genuinely epistemic objective uncertainty is on the right track, these problems should lead us to look for an alternative interpretation of the meaning of "subjective certainty." In §4, I will show that there is another way of interpreting Climacus such

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Worsnip's (2018) account of incoherence.

that being subjectively certain that  $p$  does not require having credence 1 in  $p$ , but rather involves having a belief that *disregards* the possibility that not- $p$ .

## 4. Climacus on Belief and Credence

In this section, I develop an alternative interpretation of Climacus's view about the nature of subjective certainty and its relationship to recognizing objective uncertainty.<sup>16</sup> In short, my proposal is that Climacus holds that beliefs and credences are distinct and compatible types of mental states—neither of which is reducible to the other—that bear different relationships to uncertainty. Beliefs exclude doubt and thereby reflect subjective certainty by disregarding the possibility of error, while credences reflect uncertainty to the extent that they acknowledge the possibility of error. This interpretation has the notable advantage of preserving the central insight of the second interpretation of Solution #4—that belief is compatible with simultaneously recognizing the objective, epistemic uncertainty of the proposition believed—while avoiding attributing either contradictory mental states or self-deception to the believer.

### 4.1 Climacus on Belief

It is sometimes claimed that Kierkegaard (and Climacus) takes belief to be a high degree of confidence in a proposition. For instance, Steven Emmanuel seems to assume that Kierkegaard accepts what Emmanuel calls “the standard view of belief,” according to which “our beliefs are properly a function of the set of basic propositions we accept and the degree of confidence we have in those propositions” (1996: 41). M. Jamie Ferreira (1991, 1998) develops a more sophisticated version of this interpretation, arguing that Climacus's conception of the transition to faith—and belief formation more generally—can be understood as a *Gestalt* shift involving a qualitative change from one state to another.

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<sup>16</sup> My interpretation of Climacus in this section is influenced by Robert Merrihew Adams (1977, 1987). However, Adams's interpretation does not on its own provide a solution to our puzzle, so here I develop his interpretation further to provide an explicit and systematic response to the puzzle.

Nonetheless, Ferreira argues that there is a “critical threshold” of evidence at which a qualitative transition from a degree of confidence to a belief occurs, such that the belief is “anchored in what precedes it” (1998: 217).

However, I think it is a mistake to interpret Climacus as holding that belief is reducible to a high degree of confidence (even if, as Ferreira emphasizes, this reduction is compatible with saying that belief has emergent properties that are qualitatively different from those of a high degree of confidence). A central claim in both *Fragments* and the *Postscript* is that there is no psychologically necessary transition from a philosophical argument or an assessment of historical evidence—even very strong arguments or very strong historical evidence—to a belief about contingent, *a posteriori* matters. Following the Greek and Roman skeptical tradition (especially Sextus Empiricus’s Pyrrhonian Skepticism), Climacus argues that none of our outright doxastic attitudes—belief, disbelief, or suspension of judgment—are psychologically necessitated either by pure theoretical reason or by the way that things appear to us. Instead, Climacus insists, both suspension of judgment (i.e., doubting) and forming a belief (i.e., terminating doubt) occur due to a decision, an “act of will” (PF: 82).<sup>17</sup> The possibility of error can never be eliminated; it can only be disregarded. That is, “the conclusion of belief is no conclusion [*Slutning*] but a *resolution* [*Beslutning*], and thus doubt is excluded” (PF: 84, emphasis mine). This statement expresses what I take to be the two central and distinctive features of Climacus’s conception of belief: that belief is 1) a resolution which 2) excludes doubt.<sup>18</sup> Let’s examine these two features in turn.

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<sup>17</sup> Ferreira (1991, 1998) argues that Climacus construes the “leap” to faith in perceptual terms, as a *Gestalt* shift. However, *pace* Ferreira, on my interpretation Climacus holds that a *Gestalt* shift does not suffice for forming a new belief. Rather, forming a belief in accordance with this *Gestalt* shift requires a further step: assenting to the way that things appear to you.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Stokes (2008: 445).

First, on Climacus's view, belief that *p* is partly constituted by a resolution<sup>19</sup> to halt further theoretical deliberation into the question of whether *p*.<sup>20</sup> In the *Postscript*, Climacus explains that a decision to cease reflecting—or, to use a contemporary locution, a decision to close inquiry—occurs only via a “leap” [*Spring*],<sup>21</sup> a free, qualitative transition from one state to another:

Reflection can be stopped only by a leap...If the individual does not stop reflection, he will be infinitized in reflection, that is, no decision is made...[R]eflection cannot be stopped objectively, and when it is stopped subjectively, it does not stop of its own accord, but it is the subject who stops it. (CUP: 115-116)<sup>22</sup>

While one continues to inquire (i.e., to reflect or deliberate) about the question of whether *p*, one suspends judgment. By closing inquiry and thereby settling the question of whether *p*, one forms a belief. But crucially, Climacus holds that there is no degree of confidence and no “critical threshold” of evidence that can either psychologically or rationally compel us to close inquiry about any contingent proposition about the external world. Rather, a decisive resolution is necessary to form a belief in *both* the “ordinary” and the “eminent” senses. This means that belief is *not* merely a high degree of confidence. Instead, belief is differentiated from a degree of confidence in virtue of being partly constituted by a resolution that closes inquiry.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, the resolution constitutive of belief not only closes one's present inquiry but also involves a commitment to *foreclose* future inquiry (Stokes 2010: 39).<sup>24</sup> Consequently, beliefs are (by default) diachronically stable.<sup>25</sup> While some degree of commitment to foreclosing future inquiry is an

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<sup>19</sup> Another plausible interpretation is that Climacus takes beliefs to be *necessarily accompanied by* (e.g., by being caused by) a resolution, rather than being *partly constituted by* a resolution. Most of my interpretation of Climacus's conception of belief in the rest of this section is consistent with either account of the precise relationship between beliefs and resolutions.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Friedman (2017, 2019) and Fraser (forthcoming).

<sup>21</sup> See Ferreira (1991, 1998) for further discussion of Climacus's concept of a “leap.”

<sup>22</sup> Cf. CUP: 335-337.

<sup>23</sup> As I interpret Climacus, this resolution can, but needn't necessarily, involve an occurrent act of judging. Following Hume, Climacus thinks that we are naturally and habitually disposed to form many of our beliefs without conscious deliberation (Evans 1989: 179; Rudd 1998: 81). Thus, we often *find ourselves* having already resolved to believe, rather than consciously resolving to believe.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Hannay (1982: 104).

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Holton (2014).

essential property of the genus of belief, not all species of belief require the same degree of commitment. As Adams (1977: 234) argues, Climacus seems to hold that Christian faith (i.e., belief in the “eminent sense”) requires *unconditional commitment*, i.e., a commitment to *never* revise one’s beliefs, even in light of compelling counterevidence. However, Climacus doesn’t seem to regard this as a feature of belief in its “ordinary meaning.” For ordinary beliefs, the resolution to close inquiry constitutes only a conditional commitment not to reopen inquiry (and thereby revise one’s belief).<sup>26</sup> While believing that *p* precludes a disposition to *arbitrarily* reopen inquiry into the question of whether *p*, Climacus does not rule out the possibility that upon receiving new evidence, for instance, it can be appropriate to reopen inquiry and revise an ordinary belief.<sup>27</sup>

Let’s turn now to Climacus’s claim that belief excludes doubt.<sup>28</sup> While there is a sense of our ordinary language term “doubt”—as having a credence of less than 1—in which it is compatible with belief, in Climacus’s technical sense, doubt is incompatible with belief. While Climacus does not define doubt in *Fragments* or in the *Postscript*, in *Johannes Climacus, or De Omnibus Dubitandum Est* Climacus provides an account of doubt as a state in which one is “interested” in a question (in a technical sense) but has not concluded deliberation about the answer to the question.<sup>29</sup>

In *Johannes Climacus*, Climacus argues that “consciousness” [*Bevisthed*] and “interest” [*Interesse*] are conditions of the possibility of doubt.<sup>30</sup> Climacus explains that in “immediacy” (JC: 167)— i.e., passively received, “unmediated sense-data” (Stokes 2010: 32)—there is not yet any conscious experience. Along broadly Kantian lines, Climacus argues that conscious experience requires

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. Piety (2010: 60-61).

<sup>27</sup> In Fraser’s (forthcoming) terminology, receiving new evidence can constitute an “unsettling circumstance” making it rational to reopen inquiry.

<sup>28</sup> My interpretation of Climacus here follows Rudd (1998) and Stokes (2008; 2010: chapter 2).

<sup>29</sup> While *Johannes Climacus* was not written under the pseudonym Johannes Climacus, this earlier, unpublished, and incomplete text is typically thought to be closely associated with Climacus. (See Howard and Edna Hong’s introduction to *PF* and *JC*; Rudd 1998; and Stokes 2008, 2010. For a dissenting view, see Strawser 1994.) For this reason, I consider it both appropriate and illuminating to appeal to *Johannes Climacus* to interpret Climacus’s views.

<sup>30</sup> Stokes (2008, 2010) argues that Climacus regards “consciousness” and “interest” as equivalent terms, but I won’t assume that here.



conceptually structured representations of sense data, i.e., representations of a particular thing as falling under a general concept. As Patrick Stokes summarizes Climacus's view, "Raw sensibilia only become experience through the agency of consciousness, which serves to structure conceptually the raw products of sensation" (2010: 33).<sup>31</sup> Climacus refers to this "agency of consciousness" as "interest" (JC: 170). Climacus emphasizes that interest must be distinguished from "reflection," which merely creates the *possibility* of a "dichotomous" relationship of correspondence or non-correspondence between ideality (i.e., a mental representation, in this case a proposition)<sup>32</sup> and reality (i.e., the world) (JC: 169). By contrast, interest involves a trichotomous relationship between ideality, reality, and a subject who brings ideality and reality into relation, and thereby *actualizes* this possibility by representing the world as being a certain way (JC: 170).<sup>33</sup> Consequently, interest is a condition of the possibility of doubt.<sup>34</sup> Questions of truth or falsehood do not arise in immediacy but arise only when an interested subject forms a mental representation that can either correspond or not correspond to reality.<sup>35</sup>

While all conscious representational thought involves interest, the species of interest with which Climacus is primarily concerned is a higher-order form of interest: interest in the question of whether some mental representation (namely, a proposition) corresponds to reality (i.e., interest in the question of whether  $p$ ). Accordingly, interest in the question of whether  $p$  can take two forms: either *doubting* whether ideality and reality correspond (i.e., doubting whether  $p$ ), or *judging* that ideality and reality either correspond or do not correspond (i.e., either believing or disbelieving  $p$ ). This implies

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. Rudd (1998: 76).

<sup>32</sup> As Piety (2010: 46-47) argues, Climacus regards propositions as mental representations.

<sup>33</sup> Climacus thus associates interest [*interesset*] with the Latin *inter esse*—"being between" or "between being"—because it involves a subject mediating *between* ideality and reality.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Raposa (1986: 97) and Furtak (2019: 379).

<sup>35</sup> This implies that strictly speaking, "disinterested," objective reflection—in which a proposition is related to the world immediately, i.e., unmediated by a subject bringing them into relation—is impossible. When Climacus criticizes objective, disinterested thinkers, he is speaking loosely and mocking their quixotic attempt to abstract themselves out of existence. See Stokes (2008: 457) and Piety (2010: 44-45) for further discussion.

that while interest is a condition of the possibility of doubt, interest does not entail doubt (since interest is also compatible with belief). In *Fragments*, Climacus claims that belief is a passion that “excludes doubt,” and that “belief is the opposite of doubt...and they are opposite passions” (PF: 84). Thus, coming to either believe  $p$  or disbelieve  $p$  is incompatible with doubting whether  $p$ . In *Johannes Climacus*, Climacus claims that doubt can also be neutralized by the cancellation of interest: “As soon as the interest is canceled, doubt is not conquered but is neutralized” (JC: 170). One’s interest in some question might be canceled because one ceases to care about or think about that question. When interest is canceled and doubt is “neutralized” (rather than “conquered” in belief or disbelief), one ceases to have a doxastic attitude at all (i.e., one neither believes that  $p$ , believes that not- $p$ , nor suspends judgment about whether  $p$ ). Thus, on Climacus’s view, there are two ways to cease to doubt: 1) to “exclude” (or “conquer”) doubt by settling the question of whether  $p$  and forming a belief that  $p$  or not- $p$ , or 2) to “neutralize” doubt by “canceling” one’s interest in the question of whether  $p$  and thereby ceasing to consider whether  $p$ .

This picture from Climacus can be compared with Jane Friedman’s (2017) view that inquiring into the question of whether  $p$  involves holding an interrogative attitude—such as wondering or being curious—about the question of whether  $p$ . On this view, by ceasing to hold an interrogative attitude, one ceases to inquire. Moreover, Friedman argues that inquiring into the question of whether  $p$  entails suspending judgment about  $p$  and is thus rationally incompatible with believing that  $p$ . So, by ceasing to inquire, one ceases to suspend judgment.

Similarly, on Climacus’s view, having an “interest” in the question of whether  $p$  without having settled that question—or holding an interrogative attitude towards this question, in Friedman’s terminology—entails and is entailed by doubting whether  $p$ . Since Climacus regards doubt as the “opposite passion” of belief, Climacus takes doubt and suspension of judgment to be mutually

entailing.<sup>36</sup> Climacus likewise seems to hold that having an interest in a question one has not yet answered—i.e., doubting—entails trying to answer—i.e., inquiring about—this question.<sup>37</sup> And finally, as I argued above, Climacus claims that inquiring (i.e., “reflecting” or “deliberating”) entails suspending judgment and is psychologically incompatible with belief. Consequently, Climacus regards all of these attitudes as mutually entailing. In sum: one suspends judgment on  $p$ , inquires into the question of whether  $p$ , considers whether  $p$ , and doubts whether  $p$  if and only if one a) has an interest in the question of whether  $p$ , and b) has not settled the question of whether  $p$  by resolving to believe that  $p$  or not- $p$ .

Furthermore, on Climacus’s view doubting whether  $p$ —and thereby leaving open and continuing to deliberate about the question of whether  $p$ —involves a disposition to take the possibility that not- $p$  into account in one’s reasoning. That is, doubting whether  $p$  involves a disposition to not automatically or by default rely on  $p$  or treat  $p$  as true in one’s practical and theoretical reasoning. This explains why Climacus associates doubt, reflection, and deliberation with inaction and evading one’s ethical obligations.<sup>38</sup> Considering the possibility that important premises in one’s practical reasoning could be mistaken leads one to continue practical deliberation indefinitely instead of acting decisively.<sup>39</sup>

By contrast, Climacus holds that belief that  $p$  entails *disregarding* the possibility that not- $p$  in one’s reasoning. For example, when deliberating about how to act in light of the Christian commandment to love your neighbor, someone with Christian faith will not take into account the possibility that Christianity is false and therefore that this commandment is not morally binding. In

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<sup>36</sup> Here Climacus and Friedman disagree. Friedman takes doubt to be compatible with belief (and knowledge) and denies that doubt entails suspending judgment (2019: n14).

<sup>37</sup> This is evidenced by passages (e.g., CUP: 335-337) in which Climacus closely associates doubt and skepticism with continued reflection.

<sup>38</sup> See especially the chapter of the *Postscript* entitled “Actual Subjectivity, Ethical Subjectivity; the Subjective Thinker.”

<sup>39</sup> See Stokes (2010) and Compaijen and Vos (2019) for further discussion of this point in Climacus and elsewhere in Kierkegaard’s authorship.

virtue of closing inquiry into the question of whether Christianity is true and thereby excluding doubt regarding its truth, the believer disregards the possibility that Christianity is false.<sup>40</sup>

Yet importantly, disregarding the possibility of error in one's reasoning is compatible with *recognizing* the possibility of error (as Adams 1977: 230 emphasizes). Although believing that *p* entails settling the question of whether *p* and disregarding the possibility that not-*p*, belief is nonetheless consistent with (and, in the case of Christian faith, *requires*) acknowledging that one's evidence doesn't guarantee that *p* is true. In this respect, Climacus's view bears notable similarities to Jacob Ross and Mark Schroeder's "reasoning disposition account of belief," according to which "believing that *p* defeasibly disposes the believer to treat *p* as true in her reasoning" (2014: 267-268). On Ross and Schroeder's view, belief that *p* is compatible with uncertainty about whether *p* is true. However, belief that *p* does entail a disposition to disregard the possibility that not-*p* in one's practical and theoretical reasoning.<sup>41</sup> In other words, uncertainty about whether *p* does not inform one's reasoning.<sup>42</sup>

This interpretation of Climacus enables us to make sense of his puzzling claim that uncertainty is "continually present as the nullified" in belief.<sup>43</sup> Uncertainty is "continually present" in the sense that it is acknowledged, but "nullified" in the sense that it is disregarded in one's practical and theoretical reasoning.<sup>44</sup> When Climacus speaks of "the certitude of faith (which at every moment has within itself the infinite dialectic of uncertainty)" (CUP: 55), and refers to uncertainty as the "mark" and "form" of certitude (CUP: 507), this means that belief simultaneously acknowledges but disregards

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<sup>40</sup> Attending to the connection between belief and reliance illustrates one notable way that Climacus thinks we can deceive ourselves about what we believe. Even if you occurrently judge that *p*, if you are not disposed to rely on *p* in your reasoning, this indicates that you have not genuinely resolved to close inquiry into the question of whether *p* and consequently do not genuinely believe *p*. (Cf. Evans 2022: 67-68.)

<sup>41</sup> On Ross and Schroeder's view, when the practical costs of error are high, one's disposition to disregard the possibility of error in one's reasoning can be defeated without compromising one's belief. By contrast, Climacus insists that faith requires disregarding the possibility of error even when the stakes are high because one's eternal happiness is at stake.

<sup>42</sup> See Fantl and McGrath (2012) and Fraser (forthcoming) for defenses of a similar view. Cf. also Nguyen's (2022) account of trust as an attitude of unquestioning reliance.

<sup>43</sup> To state this point in Hegelian terms, uncertainty is "sublated" in belief.

<sup>44</sup> While on this interpretation belief involves disregarding the possibility of error in both practical and theoretical reasoning, Climacus is especially concerned with disregarding the possibility of error in one's practical reasoning. (See Oliveira 2013.) Cf. Wedgwood's (2012) notion of having a "practical credence" of 1.

uncertainty. This interpretation also addresses the challenge facing the existing versions of Solution #4 by explaining the *sense in which* belief involves subjective certainty and *how* subjective certainty is compatible with simultaneously and consciously recognizing objective uncertainty. “Objective uncertainty” refers to epistemic uncertainty, i.e., the epistemic possibility of error. By contrast, “subjective certainty” is the result of a resolution that “nullifies,” i.e., disregards, the objective uncertainty that *p* while still acknowledging its presence. Moreover, this interpretation of Climacus’s account of the nature of belief explains *why* belief involves subjective certainty: *in virtue of* resolving to settle the question of whether *p* and thereby excluding doubt regarding *p*, the believer disregards the possibility of error and is thus subjectively certain. Notably, on this interpretation the genus of belief (not just the species of Christian faith) involves subjective certainty. Thus, by distinguishing between these two different senses of uncertainty, Climacus can coherently speak of belief (as a genus) as simultaneously involving subjective certainty and the recognition of objective uncertainty.

We now have a picture of the relationship between the various components of Climacus’s conception of belief. Believing that *p* 1) settles the question of whether *p*, which entails 2) ceasing deliberation about whether *p* and foreclosing future inquiry into the question of whether *p*, which entails 3) ceasing to consider the question of whether *p*, which entails 4) excluding doubt regarding *p* (while maintaining interest), which entails 5) disregarding the possibility that not-*p* in one’s reasoning, which entails 6) being subjectively certain that *p*.

## 4.2 Climacus on Credence

The simplest statement of my interpretive claim in §4.1—that Climacus regards belief as a resolution that closes inquiry—is endorsed in some form by several Kierkegaard scholars.<sup>45</sup> However, its implications for the difference between outright beliefs and degrees of belief—and for the puzzle with which we began—have not been adequately appreciated in the secondary literature. One notable

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<sup>45</sup> See Rudd (1993: 38-39; 1998: 74), Westphal (1996: 90), Piety (2010: 76, 82), and Stokes (2010: 39-40; 2019: 275).

exception is constituted by R.M. Adams's claim that Climacus thinks that in addition to outright beliefs, we also have "partial beliefs," which Adams refers to as "probability assignments" (1987: 43-44). This section builds on these suggestive remarks from Adams to develop an interpretation of Climacus's account of *degrees* of belief.

Both to employ consistent terminology and to highlight what I take to be an important similarity between Kierkegaard's views and contemporary analytic epistemology, I will refer to "probability assignments" and "partial beliefs" as "credences." A credence is just a degree of belief, or a reflection of how likely one takes a proposition to be.<sup>46</sup> So, while Kierkegaard lacked the contemporary concept of a "credence," I suggest that this term from analytic philosophy captures what Climacus means when he refers to mental states involving quantitative relationships to propositions (e.g., believing "to a certain degree," assessing probabilities, and making "approximations").

The strongest textual evidence for interpreting Climacus as holding that we have *both* full beliefs (which are resolutions that close inquiry) and credences (which reflect our assessment of how probable a proposition is) comes from passages in the *Postscript* in which Climacus contrasts quantitative attitudes—believing a proposition "to a certain degree," regarding a proposition as "probable," or striving for an "approximation"—with the decisive commitment of belief. While I will not provide an exhaustive discussion of Climacus's treatment of these quantitative attitudes here, I will examine several relevant passages.

Throughout the *Postscript*, Climacus associates the concept of "approximation" with assessing probabilities and believing "to a certain degree." Near the beginning of the *Postscript*, Climacus remarks, "Nothing is easier to perceive than this, that with regard to the historical the greatest certainty is only

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<sup>46</sup> I will use the term "credence" broadly to refer to either precise, point-valued degrees of confidence or fuzzy, "thick" levels of confidence (Sturgeon 2008). (Climacus does not seem to have a view about whether credences are precise or fuzzy.)

an *approximation...*” (CUP: 23, emphasis Climacus’s). Climacus thus takes historical inquiry to be fraught with imprecision and uncertainty. Climacus explains, “A study of Greek skepticism is much to be recommended. There one learns thoroughly...that sensate certainty, to say nothing of historical certainty, is uncertainty, is only an approximation...” (CUP: 38). As Anthony Rudd observes, in these passages, “The reference to ‘approximation’ suggests that my experiences may make a conclusion increasingly likely...but still never certain” (2010: 175-176).<sup>47</sup> The aim of historical investigation is thus to determine the probabilities of various hypotheses (conditional on the historical evidence) in order to most accurately approximate the truth. For a historian employing the methods of historical-critical Biblical scholarship, for example, “the important thing...is to secure for himself the greatest possible reliability” (CUP: 24) and to “reach the greatest possible certainty” (CUP: 575). As the historian acquires new evidence or re-evaluates their existing evidence, they will update their credences in the various hypotheses they are considering for the sake of achieving this reliability. For instance, they might study philological evidence bearing on the authenticity of Scriptural texts or the reliability of historical witnesses (CUP: 24-25), or they might examine whether the length of time a religion has survived makes its claims more likely to be true (CUP: 47). On the basis of the historian’s assessment of various pieces of historical evidence, they will become more or less confident in relevant hypotheses.

While the evidence “is never in in any final and definitive sense” (Westphal 1996: 50), eventually the historian may cease inquiring and resolve to believe a particular hypothesis that they judge to be supported by sufficiently strong evidence,<sup>48</sup> or they may keep inquiry open indefinitely. As long as the historian (or the philosopher) continues their investigation in search of a greater degree of certainty, they postpone committing to a conclusion. With respect to matters of merely “academic”

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<sup>47</sup> Cf. Westphal (2014: 184).

<sup>48</sup> See Piety (2010: 60-61) for a discussion of the “loose sense” in which historical beliefs based on assessments of probabilities can be epistemically justified.

interest, this is unproblematic. Indeed, Climacus praises “the learned researcher's scrupulousness about the most insignificant detail, which is precisely to his credit, that scientifically he does not consider anything to be insignificant” (CUP: 25). But in ethically or religiously significant matters, risky, decisive commitment that goes beyond an assessment of probabilities is necessary. For this reason, Climacus calls it a “temptation” for a believer to “substitute probabilities and guarantees” for the risk of faith (CUP: 11-12).<sup>49</sup> As Westphal puts it, throughout “the process of historical scholarship...the odds in favor of any particular hypothesis may rise or fall quantitatively, but the qualitative gap between an ongoing temporal process and its completion is never closed” (1996: 50). Closing this qualitative gap requires a “leap”: a resolution to close inquiry and believe.

Later in the *Postscript*, Climacus contrasts the subjective thinker, who believes passionately and decisively, with “the speculative thinker” who “believes only to a certain degree” (CUP: 230). Climacus asks:

What does it mean to assert that a decision is to a certain degree? It means to deny decision. Decision is designed specifically to put an end to that perpetual prattle about ‘to a certain degree.’ So the decision is assumed—but lo and behold, assumed only to a certain degree. Speculative thought is not afraid to use expressions of decision; the only thing it fears is thinking something decisive with them.” (CUP: 221-222)

By “deciding” (i.e., believing) only to a certain degree, objective, speculative thinkers leave open the possibility that their current partial understanding will be sublated in a more complete, holistic, and synthetic understanding of the topic about which they are inquiring (in this case, the paradoxical doctrine of the incarnation). But Climacus argues that those speculative thinkers who *take* themselves to have decided (“use expressions of decision”) to affirm the paradoxical doctrine of the incarnation while believing only to a certain degree are deceiving themselves, for they have merely made a

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<sup>49</sup> This is a general point about the relationship between assessments of probability and belief. But Climacus frequently draws an even sharper contrast between making a probability assessment and believing the “absurd,” “paradoxical” doctrine of the incarnation (e.g., CUP: 211, 233-234). On some interpretations (e.g., Hannay 2003), Climacus holds that faith cannot be even *partly* based on assessments of probabilities.



“simulated” pseudo-decision (CUP: 226). By refraining from resolving to close inquiry, the speculative thinker continually doubts and suspends judgment, thereby remaining only with a credence rather than an outright belief. Climacus insists that believing only to a certain degree—without *also* resolving to close inquiry and thereby believing outright—is incompatible with the decisive commitment required by faith.

The upshot for our purposes is that Climacus holds that whether one is attempting to answer historical questions, philosophical or theological questions, or mundane questions of everyday life, credences reflect one’s assessment of the probability that some proposition is true, and should be continually updated in light of new evidence. Assessments of probability are qualitatively different states from resolutions that close inquiry; that is, believing “to a certain degree” is qualitatively different from believing outright. But crucially, credences and beliefs are psychologically compatible states, as one can simultaneously assess a proposition’s probability and believe it outright.

If Climacus understands credences as assessments of probability, this raises the question of the type of probability that credences assess. On Evans’s (1992) interpretation (mentioned above in §3.3), credences—which Evans refers to as “subjective probabilities”—reflect our estimates of objective probabilities, which Evans seems to regard roughly as objective chances (such as the chance that a fair coin will land heads or that a dice roll will be a 5). However, there are both philosophical and textual reasons to reject this interpretation. First, it is not philosophically plausible that credences always reflect our estimates of objective probabilities. Suppose that you think that the objective probability that  $p$  is either 0 or 1, yet you don’t know which. This assessment doesn’t require having a credence in  $p$  of either 0 or 1; rather, your credence in  $p$  should be somewhere *between* 0 and 1. And on textual grounds, it seems clear that Climacus’s discussion of probability assignments does not rely on assumptions about objective probabilities. Climacus often speaks of assessments of probabilities regarding historical occurrences, so the interpretation of probability that we attribute to Climacus must

be consistent with the probability assignments historians make. Given Climacus's emphasis in *Fragments* on the contingency of historical events—especially events caused by agents with free will<sup>50</sup>—he doesn't deny that we can *know* the objective chances of historical events but rather denies that historical events *have* objective chances like coin flips or dice rolls do. Consequently, Climacus cannot hold that the objective probability that  $p$  is the content of credences.

Instead, I propose that Climacus takes the content of one's credence in  $p$  to simply be how likely it is that  $p$  is true, where one's estimation of how likely it is that  $p$  is true is immediately determined by how strongly one takes the evidence to support  $p$ . This interpretation does not require reference to objective probabilities, so it avoids the problems facing Evans's interpretation. Moreover, this interpretation fits well with Climacus's discussion of how historians form and revise their assessments of the probability of historical events on the basis of the evidence they encounter. So, on my interpretation Climacus takes credences to reflect estimations of evidential probabilities rather than estimations of objective probabilities.<sup>51</sup>

#### 4.3 The Psychological Relationship between Belief and Credence

We now have two of the central pieces in place to solve the puzzle with which we began. Beliefs exclude doubt and reflect subjective certainty by disregarding the possibility of error in virtue of closing inquiry, while credences reflect one's acknowledgement of objective uncertainty. In virtue of this acknowledgement of objective uncertainty—i.e., this acknowledgment of “epistemic risk”—any belief can feel risky (PF: 83, n53). However, we must still account for Climacus's claim that faith doesn't merely feel risky in the generic sense that any belief can feel risky, but it feels *extremely risky* (as

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<sup>50</sup> See also Kosch (2006: chapters 5-6) and Piety (2010: 84-87).

<sup>51</sup> One might be tempted to attribute to Climacus a “belief-first” view—defended by Harman (1986: chapter 3) and Moon (2017), among others—on which we don't have credences at all but instead have two different types of beliefs: beliefs about how the world is, and beliefs *about* evidential probabilities. However, Climacus cannot identify credences with beliefs about evidential probabilities for the following reasons. First, it's possible to have a credence without having an interest in questions about evidential probabilities. Second, it's possible to have credences without closing inquiry into the question of how strongly the evidence supports a first-order proposition.

if one is “out on 70,000 fathoms”). To explain why faith feels so risky, let’s consider Climacus’s account of the descriptive, psychological relationship between belief and credence.

As I argued in §4.1, Climacus claims that it is psychologically possible to recognize that a philosophical argument or piece of historical evidence makes  $p$  very probable while still inquiring into—and thus suspending judgment about—whether  $p$  is true. In conjunction with the claim that one’s credence in  $p$  reflects how likely one takes  $p$  to be, this entails that Climacus holds that it is psychologically possible to suspend judgment about propositions in which one has a very high credence.

More importantly for our purposes, Climacus seems to think that it is also psychologically possible to believe propositions in which one has a low credence.<sup>52</sup> Climacus often asserts that Christian faith requires believing propositions—paradigmatically the doctrine of the incarnation—that the believer takes to be not only objectively *uncertain* but objectively *improbable*. If Climacus thinks that regarding  $p$  as objectively improbable entails having a low credence in  $p$ , then he takes faith to require believing propositions in which one has a low credence. It is admittedly unclear *how* improbable (conditional on our evidence) Climacus estimates the doctrine of the incarnation to be, and I won’t take a decisive stand here on this subtle interpretive question.<sup>53</sup> Nonetheless, Climacus’s frequent descriptions of this doctrine as “improbable,” “absurd,” and “paradoxical” suggest that he regards it as *likely false*, i.e., as having an evidential probability of less than .5.<sup>54</sup> If this interpretation is correct, Climacus thinks it is psychologically possible to believe a proposition in which one has a credence of less than .5. Consequently, Climacus regards beliefs and credences as highly psychologically (or

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<sup>52</sup> Cf. Hawthorne, Rothschild, and Spectre’s (2016) view that “belief is weak.”

<sup>53</sup> Some commentators (e.g., Schönbaumsfeld 2007: chapter 4; Fremstedal 2022: esp. chapter 12) argue that Climacus denies that *any* evidence can even *in principle* bear on whether the doctrine of the incarnation is true. However, these interpretations have difficulty making sense of Climacus’s frequent references to this doctrine’s improbability. If there’s no evidence either for or against the doctrine of the incarnation, it’s unclear in what sense it is improbable.

<sup>54</sup> Climacus repeatedly makes such claims throughout the *Postscript*; see especially the chapter entitled “Subjective Truth, Inwardness; Truth Is Subjectivity.”

descriptively) independent,<sup>55</sup> such that it is psychologically possible to believe a proposition in which one has a low credence or disbelieve a proposition in which one has a high credence.<sup>56, 57</sup>

Nonetheless, Climacus seems to accept that beliefs and credences bear some descriptive, psychological relationships to each other. While Climacus takes Christian faith to require an unconditional commitment to preserve one's belief by not reopening inquiry, he also holds that faith involves a commitment which is difficult to both make and sustain (Piety 2010: 148). Pojman holds that Climacus views faith as an "unsettled...wrestling with the evidence" that "struggles to keep the ship afloat" (Pojman 1984: 93-94). This is partly because our sinful nature takes "offense" at the claims and demands of Christianity. But for the believer who recognizes Christianity's objective improbability, faith is also difficult to sustain because it involves believing a proposition in which one has a low credence.

So, I suggest that Climacus holds that our credences affect our dispositions to believe. This interpretation receives further support from Climacus's claim that the Skeptical Modes—which aim at "making the opposite equally probable"—serve as "outer fortifications" that facilitate suspending judgment (PF: 84). Climacus seems to think that when an ancient Skeptic's credence in a proposition was sufficiently high that he was tempted to assent to it, he used the Modes to lower his credence and thereby reduce the temptation to assent. Generalizing from this, on Climacus's account the lower your credence in a proposition about which you are inquiring, the greater your disposition not to close

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<sup>55</sup> Jackson (2020) calls this view "strong dualism" about the descriptive relationship between belief and credence. See Jackson (2022) for discussion of various contemporary views that posit a significant degree of descriptive and normative independence between belief and credence.

<sup>56</sup> One explanation of the significant psychological independence of beliefs and credence is that, on Climacus's view, their *bases* differ. If credences simply reflect one's assessment of how likely a proposition is conditional on the evidence, credences are entirely based on one's assessment of the evidence. By contrast, Climacus argues that theoretical reason is insufficient to psychologically necessitate opening or closing inquiry, so our outright doxastic attitudes (belief and suspension of judgment) are (at least partly) based on the will. As Evans (1989) argues, though, this does not *necessarily* entail that Climacus accepts direct doxastic voluntarism.

<sup>57</sup> While I lack the space to fully defend this claim, on my interpretation Climacus also takes beliefs and credences to be significantly *normatively* independent. That is, it can be rational 1) to believe a proposition in which one has a fairly low credence, and 2) for one's beliefs to be more resilient than one's credences (such that significantly revising one's credence in *p* does not always rationally require revising one's belief about *p*).

inquiry by coming to believe that proposition.<sup>58</sup> Likewise, the lower your credence in a proposition you believe, the greater your disposition to revise your belief by reopening inquiry.<sup>59</sup>

Moreover, Climacus plausibly holds that our dispositions to believe are affected by our assessment of the practical stakes of believing. When we think that forming a false belief about some question would be practically costly, we will be less disposed to form this belief. For instance, Climacus takes faith to involve an absolute, unconditional commitment on which the believer stakes their prospects for eternal happiness (CUP: 23). If one's belief in the doctrine of the incarnation turned out to be false, this would be extremely practically costly because it would ensure that one would fail to acquire eternal happiness.<sup>60</sup> Since the doctrine of the incarnation is objectively improbable and believing in the doctrine of the incarnation involves very high practical stakes, believing in the incarnation involves overcoming strong dispositions not to believe this proposition. Even after forming this belief, one will be continually disposed to reopen inquiry and thereby cease to have faith. But since Climacus considers it possible to acquire and maintain a belief in the incarnation, these dispositions can be overcome by a continual volitional commitment to keep inquiry closed.<sup>61</sup>

This account of the descriptive relationship between belief and credence sheds light on how Climacus understands the phenomenology of risk. I suggest that Climacus takes the strength of one's disposition to not believe  $p$  to correspond to the degree to which believing  $p$  would feel risky. That is, Climacus regards the degree to which one's belief that  $p$  feels risky as a function of one's assessment of both the objective uncertainty of  $p$  (i.e., one's credence in  $p$ ) and the practical stakes involved in believing  $p$ .<sup>62</sup> This explains why Climacus thinks that Christian faith feels extremely risky: it involves

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<sup>58</sup> Cf. Piety (2010: 71).

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Pojman (1984: 137).

<sup>60</sup> For further discussion, see Adams's interpretation of Climacus's "Approximation Argument" (1977: §1).

<sup>61</sup> While the human will plays a central role in forming and preserving a belief in the incarnation, Climacus insists that divine grace is also necessary for believing in the incarnation (e.g., PF: 14-15).

<sup>62</sup> See Schönbaumsfeld (2019: §4) for discussion of epistemic angst in Kierkegaard's authorship, and Nagel (2010) for a contemporary account of how the combination of high practical stakes and epistemic risk tends to generate epistemic anxiety.

both believing a proposition in which one has a low credence (i.e., a credence that encodes a recognition of a *significant* degree of objective uncertainty) and taking this belief to have very high stakes (because it requires staking one's prospects for eternal happiness on this belief).<sup>63</sup>

## 5. The Solution to the Puzzle

§4 argued that Climacus regards an outright belief that  $p$  as a resolution that closes inquiry by settling the question of whether  $p$ , thereby excluding doubt (in Climacus's technical sense) as to whether  $p$ . By contrast, one's credence in  $p$  reflects one's assessment of how likely  $p$  is conditional on the evidence. With this picture in view, we can spell out a solution to the puzzle: one can coherently simultaneously have 1) a belief that  $p$  which excludes doubt, disregards the possibility of error, and thereby reflects subjective certainty, and 2) a credence in  $p$  which encodes a degree of uncertainty and thereby acknowledges the possibility of error. And to the extent that one regards  $p$  as both objectively uncertain and takes believing that  $p$  to involve high practical stakes, one's belief that  $p$  *feels* risky. Climacus holds that this is precisely what (for example) faith involves: a resolute commitment reflecting subjective certainty at the level of belief, coupled with a recognition of a significant degree of objective uncertainty and a corresponding feeling of risk at the level of credence.

This solution avoids the problems faced by Solutions #1 and #3 because it generalizes beyond Christian faith to solve the puzzle for the genus of belief. This solution avoids the central problem with Solution #2 by explaining how it is possible for belief to *simultaneously* reflect certainty and acknowledge objective uncertainty. While believing that  $p$  "nullifies uncertainty" in *disregarding* the possibility that not- $p$ , this is consistent with *recognizing* the possibility of error to the degree that one's credences reflect uncertainty. And unlike Solution #3, this solution preserves the phenomenology of

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<sup>63</sup> Climacus's view implies that all beliefs that combine a recognition of objective uncertainty with high practical stakes feel risky. Climacus remarks, "Without risk, no faith, not even the Socratic faith" (CUP: 210). However, due to its significant degree of objective uncertainty and its extremely high practical stakes, Christian faith feels *exceptionally* risky.

risk. One's perception of the epistemic risk—which, in conjunction with one's assessment of the practical stakes associated with believing, determines how risky a belief feels—is proportionate to the degree to which one's credences reflect uncertainty. Finally, this solution avoids the problem of incoherence faced by Solution #4. Because beliefs and credences are different types of mental states, it is psychologically possible and rationally coherent to simultaneously and consciously have beliefs reflecting certainty (in the sense of disregarding the possibility of error) and credences reflecting uncertainty (in the sense of acknowledging the possibility of error) about the same proposition.

Not only does this interpretation solve a vexing puzzle in Kierkegaard scholarship, but it also demonstrates how Kierkegaard anticipated views which have recently been defended and popularized in analytic epistemology, such as belief-credence dualism and the view that beliefs are mental states that close inquiry. But more significantly, I hope to have shown that via his pseudonym Climacus, Kierkegaard developed philosophically interesting views about the nature of doubt, uncertainty, belief, and religious faith which are worth taking seriously in their own right. The conjunction of these views constitutes a systematic way of making sense of and vindicating the phenomenon referenced in the introduction to this essay: firm convictions about which we are certain and have no doubt yet can consciously acknowledge could be mistaken.<sup>64</sup>

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