

# Resolving to Believe: Kierkegaard’s Direct Doxastic Voluntarism

Z Quanbeck

Forthcoming in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*.

Penultimate draft. Please cited published version if possible.

**Abstract:** According to a traditional interpretation of Kierkegaard, he endorses a strong form of direct doxastic voluntarism on which we can, by brute force of will, make a “leap of faith” to believe propositions that we ourselves take to be improbable and absurd. Yet most leading Kierkegaard scholars now wholly reject this reading, instead interpreting Kierkegaard as holding that the will can affect what we believe only indirectly. This paper argues that Kierkegaard does in fact endorse a restricted, sophisticated, and plausible version of direct doxastic voluntarism. On Kierkegaard’s view, when we take ourselves to be in an epistemically permissive situation, we have the ability to form outright beliefs (but not credences) at will in virtue of our ability to voluntarily 1) open or close inquiry and 2) determine our attitude towards epistemic risk.

## 1. Introduction

According to a traditional interpretation of the nineteenth-century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, he holds that we can, by brute force of will, make a “leap of faith” to believe propositions that we ourselves take to be improbable and absurd.<sup>1</sup> On this interpretation, Kierkegaard endorses a simplistic and extreme version of “direct doxastic voluntarism” (DDV), the view that (in at least some cases) we have direct voluntary control over our beliefs. Yet most leading Kierkegaard scholars now reject this traditional interpretation, instead interpreting Kierkegaard as endorsing only “indirect doxastic voluntarism” (IDV), the view that the will can affect what we believe only indirectly.<sup>2</sup> Proponents of the IDV interpretation argue that the passages in which Kierkegaard speaks of belief in voluntaristic terms do not force us to attribute to him the (purportedly) implausible view that we can simply decide what to believe in the same way that we can decide to raise our hand. Appealing to

---

<sup>1</sup> Proponents of this interpretation include Allison (1967: 452-453), Mackey (1971: 142), (possibly) MacIntyre (1981: 40-41), Penelhum (1983: 75-84), and—most prominently—Pojman (1984: chapter 5, 1986: 70-74).

<sup>2</sup> C. Stephen Evans (1989, 1992) and M. Jamie Ferreira (1991, 1998) played the most significant role in establishing the IDV interpretation as the dominant reading of Kierkegaard. Other proponents of the IDV interpretation include Wisdo (1987), Westphal (1996: 71-77, 2014: 201-202), Kosch (2006: 188-189), Rudd (2010: 178-179), Watts (2013, 2022), and Fremstedal (2022: 176-177).

the principle of interpretive charity, they argue that we should instead attribute to Kierkegaard the view that the will can only indirectly affect what we believe.

This paper argues that the now-dominant IDV interpretation is mistaken. On the interpretation I defend, Kierkegaard endorses a principled, cogent, and moderate version of DDV which is embedded within a sophisticated account of the nature of belief and the norms governing belief. Kierkegaard holds that when we take ourselves to be in an epistemically permissive situation—in which our evidence permits forming more than one outright doxastic attitude, i.e., belief, suspension of judgment, or disbelief—we can voluntarily form outright beliefs—but not credences, i.e., degrees of confidence—in virtue of our ability to voluntarily 1) open or close inquiry and 2) determine our attitude towards epistemic risk. Not only is there strong textual evidence for reading Kierkegaard as endorsing DDV, but the sophisticated, moderate version of DDV I attribute to Kierkegaard is much more philosophically plausible than the simplistic, extreme version of DDV traditionally attributed to Kierkegaard. Thus, there is no reason to refrain from attributing this view to Kierkegaard on grounds of interpretive charity.

To develop this systematic interpretation of Kierkegaard's account of our doxastic agency, I will draw on a variety of signed and pseudonymous texts written throughout the course of Kierkegaard's authorship, especially texts written under the pseudonym Johannes Climacus. I will also employ terminology from contemporary analytic epistemology to explicate and clarify Kierkegaard's views when Kierkegaard's philosophical concepts correspond to concepts in contemporary analytic epistemology.

This approach has several significant interpretive payoffs. First, my interpretation provides evidence supporting Rudd's (1999) claim that Kierkegaard himself endorses Climacus's central views regarding epistemology and related parts of philosophical psychology (even if Kierkegaard does not share all Climacus's views about other matters). Second, it indicates that Kierkegaard maintained (largely) consistent views about these topics throughout much of his authorship,<sup>3</sup> and that several of the writings from Kierkegaard's "second authorship" (such as *Works of Love* and *The Sickness unto Death*) constructively build on ideas developed in the "first authorship" (especially in the Climacus writings). Third, it reveals that Kierkegaard's authorship taken as a whole offers a richer, more sophisticated account of doxastic agency than any single text (or even single pseudonym) does. Fourth, it not only demonstrates the coherence and philosophical plausibility of Kierkegaard's account of doxastic agency

---

<sup>3</sup> In the following footnotes, I indicate several (relatively minor) diachronic inconsistencies in Kierkegaard's views.

but also suggests that Kierkegaard provides a distinctive, promising view which merits serious philosophical consideration in its own right.

Here is an outline of what follows. §2 explains the motivations for the traditional DDV interpretation and the reasons it was abandoned in favor of the now-dominant IDV interpretation. §3 sketches two of Kierkegaard's views—regarding the nature of belief and the permissiveness of epistemic norms—that inform his account of DDV. §4 defends the claim that Kierkegaard accepts DDV by developing an interpretation of Kierkegaard's account of the role of the will in forming beliefs in ordinary cases the believer takes to be epistemically permissive, and arguing that this account is philosophically plausible. §5 extends this account to address Kierkegaard's views regarding the role of the will in believing the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation and in forming beliefs that one takes to be epistemically irrational. §6 concludes.

## 2. Extant Interpretations

### 2.1 The Traditional DDV Interpretation

Throughout his authorship, Kierkegaard often explicitly asserts that the will (*villie*) is involved in forming a belief (*tro*). This claim is made especially forcefully in the Climacus writings. In the “Interlude” of *Philosophical Fragments*, Climacus explains that we can have certainty, and hence knowledge (*Erkjenden* or *Viden*), regarding many necessary, *a priori* truths as well as immediate sense data.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, we cannot doubt such truths. By contrast, Climacus insists, we can never know any contingent proposition about the external world with complete certainty (PF: 79-86 SKS 4: 278-285).<sup>5</sup> Thus, he infers, it is always possible to doubt any contingent proposition about the external world. And whether we doubt or believe is determined by the will. Climacus claims, “doubt [*tvivlen*] can be terminated only in freedom, by an act of will [*Villies-Akt*]” (PF: 82/ SKS 4: 281). He continues, “belief [*troen*] is not a knowledge [*Erkjendelse*] but an act of freedom, an expression of will [*en Villiens-Yttring*]” (PF: 83/SKS 4: 282). So, Climacus explains, “The conclusion of belief is no conclusion [*Slutning*] but a resolution [*Beslutning*], and thus doubt is excluded” (PF: 84/SKS 4: 283). Moreover, Climacus claims, the will plays an especially central role in believing the Christian doctrine of the

---

<sup>4</sup> See Rudd (1993: chapter 2) and Piety (2010) for further discussion of Kierkegaard's epistemology.

<sup>5</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. References to the Hong editions are followed by references to the authoritative scholarly Danish edition of Kierkegaard's writings, *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter* (SKS).

Incarnation (according to which the eternal God entered time, became Incarnate in the person of Jesus, and assumed a human nature) (e.g., CUP1: 212/SKS 7: 194).

On the basis of such passages, some interpreters have concluded that Kierkegaard endorses an extreme version of DDV on which the will has an unrestricted (or nearly unrestricted) capacity to determine what we believe. For instance, Henry Allison argues that Climacus takes faith to involve voluntarily believing a proposition—namely, the doctrine of the Incarnation—that the believer herself takes to be absurd, paradoxical, and nonsensical (1967: 452-453). Similarly, Terence Penelhum claims that Kierkegaard takes the leap to faith “to be the sheer wilful acceptance of the logically impossible by an act of will” (1983: 82). On Allison’s and Penelhum’s readings, then, Kierkegaard holds that we can voluntarily form beliefs that we ourselves take to be *irrational*.

Defending a different version of the traditional interpretation, Louis Mackey asserts that Kierkegaard takes the decision to believe to be an *arational* “act of will *incalculably arbitrary* in relation to the infinite possibilities ever to be considered” (1971: 142, emphasis mine). Mackey’s reference to the “incalculable arbitrariness” of this act of will suggests that he interprets Kierkegaard as holding that we can believe *any* proposition at will. Similarly, Alasdair MacIntyre (1981) (in)famously claims that Kierkegaard thinks we must make an arbitrary, criterionless choice about whether to adopt an aesthetic, ethical, or religious way of life. On MacIntyre’s interpretation, this choice admits of no reasons either for or against it (1981: 40-41). Although MacIntyre does not say whether this involves a choice about what to believe, it would very plausibly involve choosing one’s fundamental beliefs about how one ought to live. In any case, beyond MacIntyre’s own reading of Kierkegaard, the popular interpretation of Kierkegaard as a proto-Sartrean existentialist who emphasizes the inevitability of arbitrary choice and the radical freedom of the human will naturally lends itself towards interpreting Kierkegaard as endorsing an extreme version of DDV.

Yet perhaps the most influential proponent of the traditional interpretation is Louis Pojman (1984: chapter 5, 1986: 70-74, 146). Pojman attributes a somewhat more moderate version of DDV to Kierkegaard.<sup>6</sup> Pojman acknowledges that Kierkegaard does not think we have direct voluntary control over our beliefs about propositions that we are in a position to know with apodictic certainty

---

<sup>6</sup> Pojman distinguishes between “direct descriptive volitionism”—which “asserts that believing *is* an act of will, that in every belief the will is operative”—and “direct prescriptive volitionism”—which “asserts that one *ought* to will to believe certain propositions,” and argues that Kierkegaard endorses both views (1984: 105, emphasis Pojman’s). Most interpreters since Pojman have focused primarily on whether Kierkegaard endorses descriptive DDV. Although I think Kierkegaard regards the descriptive and prescriptive versions of DDV as closely related, due to space constraints I will largely set aside Kierkegaard’s views regarding prescriptive DDV in this paper.

(namely, immediate sense data and many *a priori* truths) (1984: 100). And Pojman claims that in order for us to believe the (apparently) paradoxical doctrine of the Incarnation, Kierkegaard thinks a miraculous gift of divine grace is necessary (1984: 101). But these exceptions aside, Pojman seems to interpret Kierkegaard as holding that we can decide to believe or doubt *any* contingent proposition about the external world at will (1984: 99, 1986: 73, 146).<sup>7</sup>

Pojman proceeds to raise two objections to Kierkegaard's DDV.<sup>8</sup> First, he argues, it is inconsistent with the phenomenology of believing. As Pojman puts it, "Acquiring a belief is a *happening* in which the world forces itself upon a rational subject," rather than something one *does* or *chooses* (1984: 106, emphasis mine). Second, Pojman argues, it is neither psychologically possible to initially *form* a belief without taking there to be some "'truth connection' between your believing and the object of your belief" nor to *maintain* a belief while consciously recognizing that one did not initially form the belief based on grounds indicating that the belief is true (i.e., evidence) (1984: 110). That is, beliefs formed voluntarily will be *reflectively unstable*.<sup>9</sup> So, Pojman concludes, Kierkegaard is committed to an implausible version of DDV.

## 2.2 The IDV Interpretation

In response to Pojman's influential interpretation and critique of Kierkegaard, numerous prominent Kierkegaard scholars argue that Kierkegaard only endorses an indirect version of doxastic voluntarism. Indeed, this is now the dominant view in Kierkegaard scholarship.

Proponents of the IDV interpretation often argue that Kierkegaard takes the will to play a causally upstream role in belief-formation, e.g., by influencing our desires or passions, which influence what contemporary epistemologists call our "epistemic standards," which then influence our beliefs. For instance, C. Stephen Evans argues that Climacus follows Hume in holding that "how we interpret evidence, weight evidence, even what we consider to be good evidence, is heavily shaped by our desires" (1989: 181). In turn, our desires or passions can be cultivated by the will over long periods of time (1989: 179). Similarly, on Merold Westphal's interpretation of Climacus, the will plays a role in cultivating the "policies," "dispositions," "habits," and "passions" that determine whether we believe

---

<sup>7</sup> While Pojman is standardly taken to endorse the interpretation I attribute to him in the main text, some passages suggest that he actually reads Kierkegaard as holding a weaker view—closer to the interpretation I develop in §4—on which the will can directly determine what we believe only "when a situation of insufficient reason occurs" or regarding propositions whose truth is "not clear and distinct and beyond the possibility of deception" (1984: 99).

<sup>8</sup> Elsewhere, Pojman (1985) develops both arguments against DDV in more detail.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Bernard Williams's (1973) influential critique of DDV.

or doubt in light of indeterminate evidence (1996: 75-77). On Evans's and Westphal's interpretation, then, the will's influence on belief is indirect and significantly mediated.

Moreover, Evans argues that Climacus thinks that the will can serve as the basis for belief (or suspension of judgment) when we use evidence as a mere *means* to believe (or suspend judgment) (1989: 180, 1992: 136).<sup>10</sup> For instance, Climacus claims that the ancient Skeptics used the Skeptical Modes as “outer fortifications, human accommodations” to *induce* suspension of judgment (PF: 84/SKS 4: 283). On Evans's interpretation, our assessment of such evidence (e.g., philosophical arguments) is the *direct* cause of our beliefs, so the will only indirectly influences our beliefs.

M. Jamie Ferreira (1991, 1998) likewise reads Kierkegaard as an indirect doxastic voluntarist but defends a distinctive interpretation of Kierkegaard's account of the will. Contrary to standard readings of Kierkegaard, on Ferreira's interpretation the will is not an independent faculty of choice. Instead, Ferreira argues, the faculties (or “factors of existence”) of thought, imagination, and feeling are not “counterparts to, or prolegomena to, or consequences of willing” but are rather *suffused* by the will (1991: 43). That is, “will’ can be predicated of” thinking, imagining and feeling “as a remark on the *freedom* of any of these activities” (1991: 43, emphasis Ferreira's). Thus, while forming a belief constitutes a “leap”—a free, qualitative transition—which implicates the will, this leap doesn't consist in the decision or choice to believe. Rather, the leap to belief is akin to a *Gestalt* shift (or a paradigm shift) in which the will-infused imagination enables us to *perceive* the object of belief in a new way after a “critical threshold” of evidence is exceeded (Ferreira 1991: 35, 1998: 217).

Although the details of these interpretations differ, the most influential proponents of the IDV interpretation all appear to be motivated by a strong version of the principle of interpretive charity according to which one ought to attribute to others not merely *internally coherent* views but also *substantively plausible* views. For instance, Evans sets out to defend Kierkegaard from Pojman's charge that he holds an “indefensible” version of DDV (1989: 180). Similarly, Ferreira aims to avoid attributing to Kierkegaard the “simplistic” and “one-sidedly volitionist” traditional picture (1991: 10). Likewise, Westphal argues that “there is *no need* to follow Pojman in interpreting [the aforementioned passages in *Fragments*] as an expression of direct volitionism” (1996: 73, emphasis mine), a view that Westphal considers “problematic” (1996: 52). Rather, Westphal claims, interpreting Kierkegaard as endorsing IDV is “the most charitable and ha[s] the best textual support” (2014: 202).

---

<sup>10</sup> See Rinard (2019) for a similar view in contemporary analytic epistemology.

Several commentators dissent from the now-dominant IDV interpretation. Emmanuel (1996: 91-93) and Johnson (1997: 164-168) object to Ferreira’s interpretation on the grounds that experiencing a *Gestalt* shift does not suffice for making the leap to faith. Rather, they claim, this leap involves a voluntary decision. Similarly, Kemp (2018: 218-222) argues (*contra* Ferreira) that Kierkegaard regards the will as a *distinctive* faculty which is responsible for assenting to the truth or falsity of contingent propositions about the external world.<sup>11</sup> And Wyllie (2013: 557) reads Climacus as holding that when we are faced with anxiety, we can voluntarily choose to believe by suppressing doubts and “staking” something significant on the truth of a proposition.

Yet none of these dissenters provides a detailed account of *how* Kierkegaard takes the will to play a role in belief-formation nor shows how reading Kierkegaard as endorsing DDV is *consistent* with employing the principle of interpretive charity. In this paper, I will undertake both tasks to bolster the case for the DDV interpretation. Before doing so in §4, however, I’ll first briefly sketch two of Kierkegaard’s views—regarding the nature of belief and the permissiveness of the epistemic norms governing belief—that provide the foundation for his account of DDV.

### 3. Belief and Epistemic Norms

#### 3.1 Belief as Closing Inquiry

Throughout his authorship, Kierkegaard maintains that philosophical arguments or empirical evidence never strictly psychologically necessitate belief in any contingent proposition about the external world. Kierkegaard makes this claim most forcefully in the Climacus writings. As we saw above, Climacus insists that the will plays an indispensable role in suspending judgment (i.e., doubting) and forming a belief (i.e., conquering doubt) (PF: 82-83/SKS 281-282). The possibility of error can never be eliminated; it can only be disregarded. Consequently, “The conclusion of belief is no conclusion [*Slutning*] but a resolution [*Beslutning*], and thus doubt is excluded” (PF: 84/SKS 4: 283).

Examining this sentence helps to illuminate Climacus’s conception of belief—which I think Kierkegaard endorses as well—as involving a resolution that excludes doubt.<sup>12</sup> First, Climacus regards belief as involving a resolution in the sense that it halts further deliberation about whether *p* is true. Climacus explains that terminating reflection or deliberation about whether *p*—or to use a

---

<sup>11</sup> Strikingly, though, Kemp’s central argument (2018) emphasizes the *passivity* of the will in ethical transformation, so he seems to regard the will as playing a much *more* significant role in belief-formation than in other domains.

<sup>12</sup> I defend this interpretation at greater length in Quanbeck (forthcoming a: §4). See also Adams (1987: 43-44), Rudd (1993: 38-39; 1998: 74), Westphal (1996: 90), Piety (2010: 76, 82), and Stokes (2010a: 39-40; 2019: 275).

contemporary locution, settling the question of whether  $p$  by *closing inquiry*<sup>13</sup>—involves a “leap” (*spring*): a free, qualitative transition from one state to another (PF: 42-43/SKS 4: 247-249; CUP1: 112-116, 335-338/SKS 7: 109-112, 306-309). As long as one continues to inquire (i.e., to reflect or deliberate) about whether  $p$ , one suspends judgment on  $p$ . Inquiring also entails doubting. In the (unpublished and incomplete) manuscript *Johannes Climacus, or De Omnibus Dubitandum Est*, Kierkegaard characterizes doubt as a state in which one is “interested” in the question of whether  $p$ —i.e., one is consciously considering whether  $p$ —but has not concluded deliberation about whether  $p$  (JC: 170/SKS 15: 57).<sup>14</sup> One can “neutralize” doubt by “canceling” one’s interest in the question of whether  $p$  and thereby ceasing to consider whether  $p$  (JC: 170/SKS 15: 57). But by closing inquiry into the question of whether  $p$  and thereby settling the question of whether  $p$  by forming a belief that  $p$  or a belief that not- $p$ , doubt is “excluded” (PF: 84/SKS 4: 283) and “conquered” (JC: 170/SKS 15: 57). In virtue of excluding doubt, believing  $p$  entails *relying* on  $p$  in one’s reasoning, so beliefs *guide action*. Moreover, on Climacus’s view, beliefs also involve diachronically stable *commitments* such that “the possibility of future reflection be closed off” (Stokes 2010a: 39). That is, beliefs involve resolutions not only to close inquiry at a time but to *foreclose* future inquiry.

Kierkegaard holds that in addition to outright doxastic attitudes (belief, disbelief, and suspension of judgment), we have another irreducibly distinct type of mental state, which I will refer to as a “credence” (i.e., a degree of confidence). The strongest textual evidence for interpreting Kierkegaard as holding that we have *both* outright beliefs and credences comes from the numerous passages in which he contrasts quantitative attitudes—believing a proposition “to a certain degree” (*til en vis Grad*), estimating a proposition’s “probability” (*Sandsynlighed*) or striving for “approximation” (*Approximation*)—with the decisive commitment of belief.<sup>15</sup> Kierkegaard frequently refers to estimations of probability in the context of historical inquiry. As noted above, Kierkegaard takes the results of all historical inquiry to involve uncertainty and a risk of error. Historical investigation thus aims to determine the probabilities of various hypotheses (conditional on the available evidence) to most accurately “approximate” the truth. As the historian acquires more evidence, they will raise or

---

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Friedman (2019).

<sup>14</sup> Kierkegaard makes very similar claims about the relationship between doubt and “interest” in published, signed texts written around the same time—e.g., the 1843 discourse “Every Good and Every Perfect Gift is from Above” (EUD: 125-139/SKS 5: 129-142)—demonstrating that Kierkegaard himself endorses Climacus’s view about the relationship between interest and doubt. See Poláčková (ms.) on the relationship between the account of doubt in this discourse and in *Johannes Climacus*.

<sup>15</sup> For instance, see Climacus’s discussion of probability in the chapters of the *Postscript* entitled “The Historical Point of View” and “Subjective Truth, Inwardness; Truth is Subjectivity.”



lower their confidence in relevant hypotheses. Generalizing from this discussion of historical inquiry, I suggest that Kierkegaard regards a credence as an estimation of how likely a proposition is conditional on one's evidence.<sup>16</sup>

However, Kierkegaard maintains that having a particular credence does not *psychologically* necessitate either suspending judgment or believing any contingent proposition about the external world. Rather, a “leap” to close inquiry is necessary to form a belief. For instance, a historian may eventually cease inquiring and resolve to endorse a particular hypothesis that they take to be supported by sufficiently strong evidence, or they may keep inquiry open indefinitely. As long as the historian continues their investigation in search of a greater degree of certainty, they postpone committing to a conclusion and continue suspending judgment. Only when the historian resolves to close inquiry do they believe. Consequently, belief is *not* merely a high degree of confidence. Rather, belief is differentiated from credence in virtue of involving a resolution that closes inquiry. Moreover, believing by closing inquiry does not require modifying one's credence, as it is a qualitatively different mental state that one can have *in addition to* a credence.

### 3.2 Epistemic Permissivism

Furthermore, Kierkegaard holds that having a certain (rational) credence (other than 0 or 1) never *rationally* necessitates either suspending judgment or believing. In the terminology of contemporary epistemology, Kierkegaard endorses a strong version of “epistemic permissivism” about outright belief: the view that there are cases in which a given body of evidence epistemically permits adopting more than one outright doxastic attitude regarding a certain proposition.<sup>17</sup> More specifically, I suggest that Kierkegaard endorses *intrapersonal, synchronic* permissivism about outright belief.<sup>18</sup> Kierkegaard's permissivism about outright belief is *intrapersonal* because a given body of evidence can permit the *very same agent* to adopt more than one outright doxastic attitude towards a proposition, and *synchronic* because a given body of evidence can permit the very same agent *at a given time* to adopt more than

---

<sup>16</sup> Evans (1992: 161-162) defends a similar interpretation on which Kierkegaard regards “subjective probabilities” (i.e., credences) as estimations of objective probabilities rather than evidential probabilities.

<sup>17</sup> I develop this interpretation in more detail in Quanbeck (forthcoming b: §3.2). See also Rudd (1999) and Lippitt (2013: 139, 2020: 94).

<sup>18</sup> This term comes from Jackson (2021).

one outright doxastic attitude towards a proposition.<sup>19</sup> Kierkegaard's permissivism has two primary motivations.<sup>20</sup>

First, given that suspending judgment and inquiring are mutually entailing and that beliefs close inquiry, suspending judgment is epistemically permissible just in case inquiring is epistemically permissible, and believing is epistemically permissible just in case closing inquiry is epistemically permissible. In the Climacus writings, Kierkegaard insists that theoretical reason alone cannot determine when one ought to open or close inquiry (e.g., PF: 79-86 SKS 4: 278-285; CUP1: 112-116, 335-338/SKS 7: 109-112, 306-309). In fact, Climacus's (and Kierkegaard's) view seems to be that doubting, inquiring, and suspending judgment about any contingent proposition about the external world is *always* epistemically permissible. For example, when a diligent historian who has already acquired strong evidence for their hypothesis nonetheless continues to inquire about its truth—and thereby suspends judgment—their attitude is epistemically permissible. Yet even without a change in the historian's evidence, it could be epistemically permissible *for this particular historian* to close inquiry—and thereby believe their hypothesis—at a given time.

Second, Kierkegaard takes there to be multiple epistemically permissible ways to weigh the aim of forming a true belief against the aim of avoiding a false belief. In the terminology of contemporary analytic epistemology, Kierkegaard thinks there can be multiple epistemically permissible attitudes towards epistemic risk. As we have seen, Kierkegaard takes all beliefs about contingent propositions about the external world to involve some risk of error and hence to be epistemically risky (e.g., PF: 83, n53/SKS 4: 282).<sup>21</sup> In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard writes, “We can, of course, be deceived in many ways. We can be deceived by believing what is untrue, but we certainly are also deceived by not believing what is true” (WL: 5/SKS 9: 13). Climacus argues that the ancient Skeptics were extremely averse to the risk of being “deceived by believing what is untrue,” i.e., the risk of forming false beliefs. By suspending judgment, they aimed to avoid false beliefs at all costs, reasoning, “If I can only avoid drawing conclusions, I shall never be deceived” (PF: 82/SKS 4: 281-282). The skeptic is thus *epistemically risk-averse*. By contrast, in *Works of Love* Kierkegaard describes how a loving person (who is disposed to believe the best of others) is much more averse to the danger of

---

<sup>19</sup> While some passages in *Works of Love*—e.g., those referencing the “infinite” “equality” and “indifference” of knowledge (WL: 231/SKS 9: 232-233)—suggest that Kierkegaard might think that a given body of evidence sometimes rationally permits *any* outright doxastic attitude (belief, suspension of judgment, *or* disbelief), his view about this is unclear. I will remain neutral on this interpretive question here.

<sup>20</sup> Notably, neither motivation presupposes *credal* permissivism.

<sup>21</sup> See Rudd (1998) for further discussion.

being “deceived by not believing what is true,” i.e., of failing to form a true belief that reflects well on others, than to the risk of being deceived by forming false beliefs that reflect well of others. The loving person is thus (at least in this context) *epistemically risk-tolerant*. Consequently, even if the skeptic and the loving person have the same credence in  $p$ , due to their different epistemic risk attitudes, the skeptic might suspend judgment on  $p$  while the loving person believes  $p$ .

Crucially, Kierkegaard does not regard either the skeptic or the loving person as (necessarily) making an epistemic mistake: “indifferent” knowledge (i.e., evidence) only places the options of believing or suspending judgment in “equilibrium [*Ligevægt*]” (WL: 231/SKS 9: 232-233) and does not specify how one ought to weigh the risk of forming a false belief against the cost of failing to form a true belief.<sup>22</sup> For instance, if the skeptic and the loving person both had a rational credence of .8 that someone acted in a praiseworthy manner, they might both be epistemically rational in suspending judgment and believing, respectively. Moreover, the skeptic is *epistemically* permitted to adopt the loving person’s epistemic risk attitudes *at the time* when they are deliberating about whether to believe well of someone.<sup>23</sup> Consequently, Kierkegaard thinks that it can be epistemically permissible for the very same agent at a given time to adopt different attitudes towards epistemic risk and thereby form different doxastic attitudes.

## 4. Kierkegaard’s Direct Doxastic Voluntarism

The interpretation sketched in §3 is consistent with reading Kierkegaard as endorsing either DDV or IDV. However, I will argue that Kierkegaard’s views regarding the nature of belief and the norms governing belief provide the foundation for a sophisticated, philosophically plausible account of how we can exercise significant—albeit constrained—direct voluntary control over our beliefs (but not our credences) in virtue of our ability to voluntarily 1) open or close inquiry and 2) determine our epistemic risk attitudes. Kierkegaard’s account of direct doxastic voluntarism thus builds on and complements his two motivations for epistemic permissivism about outright belief discussed above.

### 4.1 Inquiry

I propose that Kierkegaard takes there to be three distinct ways in which we exercise direct voluntary control over our doxastic attitudes via our direct control over whether we inquire: 1) by deciding

---

<sup>22</sup> While Kierkegaard thinks that there is a *range* of permissible epistemic risk attitudes, this does not imply that *all* epistemic risk attitudes are permissible.

<sup>23</sup> Notably, this does not imply that both the skeptic’s and the loving person’s epistemic risk attitudes are both *all-things-considered permissible*. On Kierkegaard’s view, the skeptic’s epistemic risk attitude is (in this context) morally impermissible and therefore all-things-considered impermissible. See Quanbeck (forthcoming b: §4.1) for further discussion.

whether to take an “interest” in some question and thereby adopt a doxastic attitude (namely, suspension of judgment), 2) by deciding whether to close inquiry and thereby believe, and 3) by deciding whether to reopen inquiry and thereby suspend judgment. While Kierkegaard himself never explicitly distinguishes between these three ways in which we can voluntarily open or close inquiry, I think this taxonomy provides a helpful way of systematizing and regimenting the various claims he makes on this topic throughout his authorship (especially, but not only, in the Climacus writings). Let’s consider each way in turn.

First, Kierkegaard’s view allows that we sometimes have direct voluntary control over *whether* to adopt any doxastic attitude towards some proposition. As I explained in §3.1, Kierkegaard holds that a necessary condition of having any doxastic attitude towards  $p$  is having an “interest” in  $p$ . Kierkegaard’s conception of “interest” (*interesse*—from the Latin “being between” or “between being”) is broader than the ordinary English sense of this term.<sup>24</sup> Roughly, the sense of “interest” relevant for our purposes involves a conscious subject *considering whether* ideality—i.e., their mental representation of a proposition—corresponds to reality, or *positing* a relationship of correspondence or non-correspondence (JC: 169-170/ SKS 15: 56-57). The former kind of interest involves suspending judgment about whether  $p$ , and the latter kind involves believing or disbelieving  $p$ . Consequently, having an interest in  $p$  doesn’t require caring about whether  $p$ . For instance, one’s perceptual experiences might involuntarily lead one to consider certain questions or form certain beliefs, yet this still involves interest.

While Kierkegaard isn’t committed to the view that we have *complete* voluntary control over which propositions we take an interest in, his account allows that we *often* possess some such voluntary control. In the first place, we can decide to take an interest in the question of whether some proposition we have never considered before is true. For instance, a “shrewd, sly, foxy” person might decide to take an interest in—and consequently attempt to discover—whether someone else committed a certain evil act or manifests a particular vice (WL: 283/SKS 9: 281). In doing so, they thereby suspend judgment about this question. Moreover, once we have taken an interest in the question of whether  $p$  is true, we can will to *maintain* our interest in this question and thus continue to suspend judgment about it. If we judge that it’s practically important to form a belief about  $p$ , for instance, we can choose to continue deliberating about whether  $p$  is true. Alternatively, sometimes we can voluntarily decide to “cancel” our interest in  $p$  by ceasing to consider whether  $p$  is true, and thus

---

<sup>24</sup> See Stokes (2010a) for more detailed discussion of Climacus’s conception of interest.

“neutralize” doubt about  $p$  and cease to have any doxastic attitude towards  $p$  (JC: 170/SKS 15: 57). We might do so for a variety of reasons: e.g., because we think it’s a waste of time to try to figure out whether  $p$  is true, we take ourselves to have moral reasons against taking an interest in  $p$  (e.g., when  $p$  reflects poorly on someone else’s character) (WL: 282-288/SKS 9: 280-286), or (like the ancient Skeptics) we want to attain a state of tranquility (JC: 170/SKS 15: 57).<sup>25</sup>

Second, Kierkegaard holds that the will can play a direct role in determining *which* doxastic attitude one holds. In particular, as we have seen, Kierkegaard frequently claims that the will plays a role in determining whether one doubts or believes. On Climacus’s interpretation of the ancient Skeptics in *Fragments* and the *Postscript*, they voluntarily *chose* to doubt (and thus suspend judgment) in order to attain tranquility (PF: 82-85/SKS 4: 281-284; CUP1: 318, 352, 399/SKS 7: 289, 322, 363). Although the Skeptics sought to cultivate habits or belief-forming dispositions that facilitated doubting, Climacus claims that they were not able to *effortlessly* doubt. Instead, they withheld assent via continual, effortful acts of will. For this reason, Climacus writes of the Skeptic that “by the power of the will he decides [*men i Kraft af Villien beslutter*] to restrain himself and hold himself back from any conclusion [*Slutning*]” (PF: 85/SKS 4: 283).<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, in pseudonymous texts, signed texts, and journal entries throughout his authorship, Kierkegaard repeatedly insists that doubt (and thus inquiry, reflection, and deliberation) does not stop itself (e.g., EO2: 211-213, 346-354/SKS 3: 203-205, 326-332; EUD: 134-137/SKS 5: 137-140; JP 2: 2296/SKS 20: 79-80; FSE: 70/SKS 13: 91-92; JFY: 190-191/SKS 16: 237-238). Rather, Kierkegaard claims, an agent must *voluntarily resolve* to cease doubting and believe.<sup>27</sup> In the terminology of contemporary analytic epistemology, to believe  $p$  an agent must voluntarily close inquiry into the question of whether  $p$  by deciding to judge that  $p$  is either true or false. In particular, when  $p$  *appears* to us as likely to be true but not completely certain, such that we take ourselves to have sufficient evidence to *permit* belief but not sufficient evidence to *compel* belief—as Kierkegaard thinks is often the case,

---

<sup>25</sup> In the passage of *Johannes Climacus* referenced above, Climacus seems to interpret the ancient Skeptics as striving to *overcome doubt*. In *Fragments* and the *Postscript*, by contrast, he seems to interpret the ancient Skeptics as striving to *continually doubt*.

<sup>26</sup> See Rudd (1998, 2010) and Furtak (2013) on Kierkegaard’s treatment of ancient Skepticism.

<sup>27</sup> The consistency with which Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms makes this claim provides very strong evidence that Kierkegaard endorsed it throughout his authorship. Interestingly, however, Kierkegaard’s later writings (e.g., *Practice in Christianity*, *For Self-Examination*, and *Judge for Yourself*) emphasize the importance for overcoming doubt of not merely *resolving* to believe but *acting* in accordance with the normative prescriptions of the propositions one resolves to believe. These later writings thus arguably place a greater emphasis on what Soter (ms.) calls “back-end doxastic voluntarism,” according to which we can voluntarily control our beliefs not (only) by voluntarily controlling our *judgments* but by voluntarily controlling the *dispositions* constitutive of belief.

due to his commitment to epistemic permissivism—we can decide either to continue inquiring about whether  $p$  is true or terminate our inquiry and resolve to believe  $p$  or not- $p$ .

Climacus makes this claim especially forcefully when criticizing the “spurious infinity” [*slette Uendelighed*] of “Hegel and all Hegelians” (CUP1: 112/SKS 7: 109),<sup>28</sup> who, Climacus charges, mistakenly believe that their reflection will eventually terminate itself when they have attained a complete, holistic understanding providing objective certainty regarding the phenomenon in question.<sup>29</sup> Climacus writes:

Reflection [*Reflexionen*] has the notable quality of being infinite. But being infinite must in any case mean that it cannot stop of its own accord, because in stopping itself it indeed uses itself and can be stopped only in the same way as a sickness is cured if it is itself allowed to prescribe the remedy, that is, the sickness is promoted. Perhaps this infinity of reflection is the bad or spurious infinity. (CUP1: 112/SKS 7: 109)

Climacus continues:

What do I mean by speaking of the spurious infinity? I am charging the individual in question with not willing [*ville*] to stop the infinity of reflection. Am I requiring something of him, then? But on the other hand, in a genuinely speculative way, I assume that reflection stops of its own accord. Why, then, do I require something of him? And what do I require of him? I require a resolution [*Beslutning*]. And in that I am right, for only in that way can reflection be stopped...[I]f a resolution is required, presuppositionlessness is abandoned. The beginning can occur only when reflection is stopped, and reflection can be stopped only by something else, and this something else is something altogether different from the logical, since it is a resolution. (CUP1: 113/SKS 7: 109-110)

Just as Climacus claims in *Fragments* that belief is a resolution that excludes doubt, so too does he argue in the *Postscript* that a resolution is required to cease reflecting and believe the propositions constituting the “beginnings” or “presuppositions” of one’s philosophical system.

This resolution is needed because, as we saw above, Climacus denies (*contra* Hegel and the Danish Hegelians) that we can ever (even retrospectively) attain a presuppositionless, “absolute beginning” that enables us to know with objective certainty.<sup>30</sup> For this reason, Climacus argues, the transition to belief occurs only via a free, qualitative leap:

‘What if, rather than speaking or dreaming of an absolute beginning, we speak of a leap [*spring*]? [...] If the individual does not stop reflection, he will be infinitized in reflection, that is, no decision [*Afgjorelse*] is made. [...] Yet it is assumed that reflection can stop itself objectively, whereas it is just the other way around; reflection cannot be stopped objectively, and when it

---

<sup>28</sup> Here Climacus is referring especially to Johan Ludvig Heiberg (Stewart 2003: 488-496).

<sup>29</sup> See also CUP1: 335-338/SKS 7: 306-309.

<sup>30</sup> See Westphal (2010, 2014: chapters 9-10) and Halvorson (2023) for further discussion of Climacus’s critique of Hegelian epistemology.

is stopped subjectively, it does not stop of its own accord, but it is the subject who stops it. (CUP1: 115-116/SKS 7: 111-112)

As Westphal puts it, Climacus's point here is that "Only by a leap of faith...could the [Hegelian] system be considered finished and thus in fact a system" (2014: 205).

These passages have been largely ignored by proponents of the IDV interpretation (with the exception of Westphal), who tend to focus on the "Interlude" of *Fragments*. But Climacus's claim that the *decision* of an active subject is required to terminate reflection is central to his direct doxastic voluntarism. *Pace* Ferreira, the "leap" that ends reflection is not just a *Gestalt* shift that occurs when a "critical threshold" of evidence is exceeded. And *pace* Evans and Westphal, neither is the leap to belief psychologically determined by the subject's antecedent epistemic standards in conjunction with their assessment of how strongly the evidence supports some proposition. Rather, Climacus's use of voluntaristic language—e.g., his references to the will (*Villie*), resolution (*Beslutning*), and decision (*Afjorelse*)<sup>31</sup>—strongly indicates that he takes the leap to belief to consist in a *free, voluntary decision* to cease reflecting, close inquiry, and settle the question of whether *p*.

Third, the will can play a role in deciding whether to reopen inquiry and thus suspend judgment. Since beliefs involve resolutions not only to close inquiry but to foreclose future inquiry, *maintaining* this resolution sometimes requires the will.<sup>32</sup> The resolution in belief typically remains in place by default and often does not require volitional effort to maintain. But sometimes we encounter "unsettling circumstances"<sup>33</sup>—paradigmatically, counterevidence to our belief—and must determine whether to preserve our belief or revise it by reopening inquiry. Especially when we take the evidence to epistemically permit revising our beliefs by reopening inquiry, we may need to make a volitional effort to maintain the resolution of belief.<sup>34</sup>

In his 1844 upbuilding discourse "Patience in Expectancy" (published roughly three months before *Fragments*), Kierkegaard discusses the form of despair constituted by losing one's "expectancy," i.e., coming to doubt whether one's desired future outcome will occur.<sup>35</sup> Kierkegaard observes that we

---

<sup>31</sup> See Strand's (2014, 2015) discussion of the strongly voluntarist connotations of these terms in Kierkegaard's authorship. Kierkegaard's conception of the will (*Villie*) thus corresponds roughly to Kant's conception of *Willkür* (the power of free choice) rather than *Wille* (practical reason).

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Strand's (2014) discussion of Kierkegaard's conception of resolve (*Beslutning*) as an ongoing commitment to stick to one's original choice to act.

<sup>33</sup> I take this term from Fraser (forthcoming).

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Davenport's (2007) Kierkegaard-influenced account of the will as involving diachronic commitment and resolve, and Holton's (2014) and Fraser's (forthcoming) respective accounts of the role of *resolve* in belief.

<sup>35</sup> In this discourse, Kierkegaard sometimes seems to speak of losing expectancy as not merely doubting but positively *disbelieving* that one's desired future outcome will obtain. This form of losing expectancy thus consists in succumbing to the temptation to prematurely close inquiry.

are often tempted to give up our expectancy that the desired future outcome will occur when we encounter evidence that it will not occur. When such evidence appears, Kierkegaard asks, “Would a doubting person [*Tvivler*] and a person in despair [*Fortvivlel*] continue to be in the right?” (EUD: 214-215/SKS 5: 214). Kierkegaard’s answer to this question is a decisive “No,” and he reasons as follows:

The error of the one doubting [*Tvivlende*] and of the one despairing [*Fortvivlende*] does not lie in cognition [*Erkjendelsen*], since cognition cannot decide with certainty anything about the next moment, but the error lies in the will [*Villien*], which suddenly no longer wills but on the contrary wants to make the indeterminate into a passionate decision. (EUD: 215/SKS 5: 215)

On one plausible interpretation of this passage which renders it consistent with Climacus’s view in *Fragments*, Kierkegaard means that the person who gives up expectancy ceases to will to believe and instead wills to doubt. Kierkegaard thus takes being “patient in expectancy” to involve steadfastly holding to one’s belief that the desired outcome will occur in the face of the temptation to doubt when one encounters counterevidence. In Kierkegaard’s words, “one must strain oneself to the utmost to hold on to expectancy” in such circumstances (EUD: 214/SKS 5: 214). This “straining” involves volitional acts of *resolve* in which one chooses to maintain one’s belief.<sup>36</sup>

The interpretation developed in this section indicates that Kierkegaard endorses a *multi-stage* account of belief-formation in which there are several conceptually and psychologically (though not necessarily temporally) distinct phases of belief-formation. On this picture, we first take an “interest” in *p* (thereby suspending judgment about it) and deliberate about whether *p* is true. Second, we either continue suspending judgment on *p* or terminate our deliberation by believing *p* or believing not-*p*. Third, we either maintain our belief or revise it by reopening deliberation about whether *p* is true.

As I’ve noted in various places above, Kierkegaard frequently references the ancient Skeptics when developing his account of belief and doubt. I suggest that not only Kierkegaard’s epistemology but also his philosophical psychology—especially his account of belief-formation—is indebted to that of the ancient Stoics (which both the Academic and Pyrrhonian Skeptics largely adopted). In short, on the Stoics’ picture, we passively receive propositionally structured impressions that represent the world as being a certain way, but then we must exercise our rational capacity of voluntary choice (*prohairesis*) to assent, dissent, or withhold assent from these impressions. Similarly, for Kierkegaard, the way things appear to us is outside of our direct voluntary control.<sup>37</sup> But the will is operative in

---

<sup>36</sup> Similarly, Kierkegaard takes faith to involve a continual volitional commitment to preserve one’s belief in the Incarnation amidst the temptation to revise it. I will return to this point in §5.2.

<sup>37</sup> One difference between Kierkegaard and the Stoics and Skeptics is that Kierkegaard, as a post-Kantian philosopher, places greater emphasis on the active (albeit non-volitional) role of the cognizer in perception (Rudd 1998; Stokes 2010a: chapter 2).



determining whether to doubt, inquire, and suspend judgment about whether these appearances correspond to reality, or whether to judge that they do (or do not) correspond to reality. Consequently, on both the Stoics' view and Kierkegaard's view, the role of the will in forming beliefs is in central respects analogous to the role of the will in forming intentions.<sup>38</sup> My interpretation thus locates Kierkegaard in a long tradition of direct doxastic voluntarists with roots in ancient Stoicism.<sup>39</sup> *Pace* Ferreira (1991, 1998) and Watts (2022), then, Kierkegaard follows the Stoics in regarding the will as a *distinctive* faculty—which is not simply *part* of other faculties—that plays a unique and direct role in belief-formation.<sup>40</sup>

Yet one important point that my interpretation so far has left open is whether, as Pojman argues, Kierkegaard holds that a *conscious*, volitional act of judging or resolving is necessary to form a belief. While in my view the textual evidence does not decisively settle this interpretive question, I think the most plausible (and most charitable) interpretation is that Kierkegaard does not think this is necessary. Following Hume, Kierkegaard holds that we habitually form many beliefs about the world without consciously choosing to do so by passively assenting to the way things appear to us (Evans 1989: 179; Rudd 1998: 81). Kierkegaard writes, “The individual first begins his life with ‘ergo,’ with *belief*. But most people live so negligently that they do not notice at all that in one way or another, every minute they live, they live by virtue of an ‘ergo,’ of a belief” (WL: 230/SKS 9: 232, emphasis Kierkegaard’s). Indeed, Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms frequently claim that doubting (and thereby suspending judgment) often involves a greater conscious volitional effort than believing does (e.g., FT: 5-8/SKS 4: 101-104; CUP1: 318, 399/SKS 7: 289, 363). This is because Kierkegaard (and some of his pseudonyms) holds that our volitions can be *unconscious* to varying degrees.<sup>41</sup> We often act freely and voluntarily without consciously deliberating or forming an occurrent intention to act. I suggest that the same holds true of belief. Thus, despite Kierkegaard’s commitment to a multi-stage picture of belief-formation in which an “interested” subject is always involved, he allows that the transition

---

<sup>38</sup> Kierkegaard frequently claims that practical reasoning involves weighing the reasons for and against different courses of action, but that such reflection can only be terminated by a decisive act of will. For one especially forceful statement of this point with clear parallels to Kierkegaard’s account of the role of the will in belief, see JP 3: 3707/SKS 21: 239-241. See also Evans (1991) and Strand (2015) on Kierkegaard’s account of the role of the will in forming intentions.

<sup>39</sup> See Barnes (2006) for discussion of this tradition of DDV and its influence on Patristic philosophy and theology. This tradition of DDV was revived in (or arguably continued into) early modernity (most famously by Descartes; see Schüssler 2013).

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Kemp’s (2018: 216-218) criticisms of Ferreira’s interpretation.

<sup>41</sup> Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms who hold this view include Anti-Climacus (SUD: 29/SKS 11: 145) and Judge William (EO2: 164/SKS 3: 161). See Evans (1995) and Rudd (2012: chapter 9) on Kierkegaard’s views regarding the unconscious. Of course, how precisely Kierkegaard understands the nature of unconscious volitions (in belief-formation and in other contexts) is a complex, subtle matter which I lack the space to address here.

between the different stages often occurs unconsciously and nearly instantaneously. Observing that Kierkegaard endorses an expansive conception of the will on which the consciousness of our volitions comes in degrees thus makes Kierkegaard's account of DDV much more plausible.

## 4.2 Epistemic Risk Attitudes

Recall that Kierkegaard takes our beliefs to be partly determined by our attitudes towards epistemic risk. Someone who is maximally epistemically risk-averse will refrain from believing  $p$  as long as they take their evidence to leave open the possibility that  $p$  is false (i.e., as long as their credence in  $p$  is less than 1). By contrast, someone who is very epistemically risk-tolerant will believe  $p$  when their credence in  $p$  falls far short of 1. For this reason, a second way that Kierkegaard thinks we can exercise direct voluntary control over our beliefs is by voluntarily choosing our epistemic risk attitudes.

Kierkegaard interprets the ancient Skeptics as having (or striving to have) a *global*, context-independent aversion to epistemic risk. That is, he interprets them as being extremely averse to the risk of forming false beliefs in any context. Yet he thinks that most people's epistemic risk attitudes are *localized* and context-dependent, such that they are epistemically risk-averse in some contexts but epistemically risk-tolerant in others. In the chapter of *Works of Love* entitled "Love Believes All Things—and Yet is Never Deceived," Kierkegaard argues that how much we fear making *particular* epistemic errors—e.g., the errors of falsely believing well of others, falsely believing ill of others, failing to form true beliefs that reflect well on others, and failing to form true beliefs that reflect poorly on others (WL: 231-232/SKS 9: 232-233)—affects whether we believe or suspend judgment in the relevant contexts. Moreover, Kierkegaard argues, our epistemic risk attitudes can *disclose* our character. In particular, they can reveal whether we are mistrustful (and thus hesitant to believe well of others, lest they deceive us) or loving (and thus willing to believe the best of others).

Crucially, while Kierkegaard holds that both our global and localized epistemic risk attitudes often reflect our settled dispositions or standing policies, they are not merely passive, habitual features of our psychology. Rather, they can be active choices. Kierkegaard writes:

Mistrustingly to *believe* [*troe*] nothing at all (which is entirely different from *knowledge* [*Viden*] about the equilibrium of opposite possibilities [*binanden modsatte Muligheders Ligevægt*]) and lovingly to *believe* [*troe*] all things are not a cognition [*Erkjendelse*], nor a cognitive conclusion [*Erkjendelses-Slutning*], but a choice [*Valg*] that occurs when knowledge [*Viden*] has placed the opposite possibilities in equilibrium; and in this choice, which, to be sure, is in the form of a judgment of others, the one judging becomes disclosed. That light-mindedness, inexperience, and naiveté believe all things is a cognition, that is, a fatuous cognition; *lovingly to believe* all things is a choice [*Valg*] on the basis of love. (WL: 234-235/SKS 9: 236, emphasis Kierkegaard's)

Kierkegaard claims here that our *voluntary choice* (*Valg*) about whether to believe or doubt some particular proposition—and not merely the epistemic risk attitudes that we are antecedently *disposed* to have—discloses our character.<sup>42</sup> But just as our character can influence (and thus be reflected in) our intentions without psychologically necessitating them, likewise our character can influence (and thus be reflected in) our epistemic risk attitudes, and consequently our beliefs, without psychologically necessitating them. In this passage Kierkegaard describes how, when we take our evidence to underdetermine what we ought to believe, we can *voluntarily choose* which epistemic risk attitude to adopt on a particular occasion. The decision about which epistemic risk attitude to adopt needn't be arbitrary, as we might make this decision on the basis of moral considerations (i.e., considerations affecting whether it would be morally worse to form a false belief or fail to form a true belief). Regardless of whether our choice about which epistemic risk attitude to adopt is based on moral (or other practical) considerations, though, in virtue of adopting a certain epistemic risk attitude we *thereby* voluntarily choose whether to believe or suspend judgment about that proposition.

But just as Kierkegaard is not committed to the claim that all beliefs are formed by a *conscious* resolution to close inquiry, neither is Kierkegaard committed to the claim that when forming a belief we *always* consciously choose to adopt a certain epistemic risk attitude. As I discussed above, Kierkegaard holds that in many contexts our default policy is to be fairly epistemically risk-tolerant and believe most propositions which seem *prima facie* plausible. For this reason, Kierkegaard thinks, over the course of many years the ancient Skeptics sought to cultivate extremely epistemically risk-averse dispositions to facilitate reliably suspending judgment. As I noted in §4.1, however, Kierkegaard thinks that the ancient Skeptics' dispositional epistemic risk-aversion sometimes needed to be supplemented with a deliberate act of will to withhold assent. Consequently, on Kierkegaard's view while we *typically* do not consciously choose to adopt certain epistemic risk attitudes on a case-by-case basis, we *can* consciously choose to do so.

How does Kierkegaard think our voluntary control over our epistemic risk attitudes relates to our voluntary control over opening and closing inquiry? While Kierkegaard does not provide a clear answer to this question, a plausible interpretation is that he thinks that whether we decide to close inquiry (and thus believe) or inquire (and thus suspend judgment) is often partly determined by our epistemic risk attitudes. That is, in virtue of adopting an epistemically risk-tolerant attitude, one *thereby*

---

<sup>42</sup> See Thonhauser's (2013) discussion of Kierkegaard's use of the term "choice" (*Valg*). As Thonhauser shows, Kierkegaard's discussion of the choice to *believe* in *Works of Love* parallels his discussion of the voluntary choice to *act* elsewhere in his authorship. This supports a voluntaristic reading of this passage in *Works of Love*.

resolves to close inquiry and believe. Alternatively, in virtue of adopting an epistemically risk-averse attitude, one *thereby* decides to keep inquiry open and suspend judgment. Thus, Kierkegaard could plausibly be interpreted as holding not that there are two independent mechanisms by which we can exercise direct voluntary control over our beliefs, but rather that we can exercise voluntary control over our beliefs partly in virtue of our voluntary control over whether we inquire, and that we can exercise voluntary control over whether we inquire partly in virtue of our voluntary control over our epistemic risk attitudes.

One might object here that I haven't shown that Kierkegaard endorses *direct* doxastic voluntarism. Because my interpretation claims that our voluntary control over our beliefs is mediated by our voluntary control over whether we inquire and which epistemic risk attitudes we adopt, one might worry that I'm simply attributing to Kierkegaard a *different version* of an IDV interpretation.

In reply, while this may be partly a stipulative terminological matter, I don't think that claiming that we have *unmediated* voluntary control over our beliefs is necessary to count as endorsing DDV. Rather, the crucial difference between my interpretation and the IDV interpretation is that, on my interpretation, Kierkegaard holds that *as we are deliberating about what to believe*—without undertaking activities to induce belief which are *external* to this deliberation, e.g., selectively exposing ourselves to evidence, or changing our settled dispositions—we can voluntarily decide which epistemic risk attitudes to adopt and whether to close inquiry. Consequently, these decisions partly *constitute* (rather than merely *cause*) forming a belief.<sup>43</sup> Hence, there is a good sense in which my interpretation counts Kierkegaard as a direct doxastic voluntarist while the interpretations defended by commentators like Evans, Westphal, and Ferreira do not.

### 4.3 The Plausibility of Kierkegaard's Account of DDV

Given the conjunction of Kierkegaard's conception of belief as a resolution to close inquiry and his synchronic, intrapersonal permissivism about outright belief, I think that his account of DDV is very plausible. Consequently, the principle of interpretive charity provides no reason to refrain from reading Kierkegaard as a proponent of this more moderate, sophisticated version of DDV. Here's why.

First, *pave* Pojman, the view that the will can play a direct role in opening and closing inquiry and determining one's epistemic risk attitudes—especially when one takes oneself to be in an

---

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Jonathan Bennett's (1990: 48) appeal to the contrast between causation and constitution to distinguish between IDV and DDV.

epistemically permissive situation—is plausibly consistent with the phenomenology of belief-formation. Suppose that you are inquiring (and thus suspending judgment) about whether  $p$  is true. You have gathered quite a bit of evidence bearing on the question of whether  $p$  is true, and you currently have a credence of .8 in  $p$ . You think that it would be epistemically permissible to continue inquiring and gathering more evidence, or to cease inquiring and thereby believe  $p$ . Moreover, you deliberate about whether it would be *morally* worse to form a false belief or fail to form a true belief now. (That is, you deliberate about which epistemic risk attitude you morally ought to adopt.<sup>44</sup>) After concluding that you should make up your mind now rather than holding out for more evidence, you resolve to close inquiry and thereby believe  $p$ . Your belief isn't *forced* on you by your evidence (since you take your evidence to permit either believing or suspending judgment), nor is the formation of your belief an entirely passive matter.<sup>45</sup> Rather, you form your belief in virtue of actively resolving to cease inquiring and judging that  $p$  is true.<sup>46</sup> If this is a plausible description of a realistic agent's psychology, it shows that Kierkegaard's version of DDV cannot be easily refuted by appealing to the phenomenology of belief-formation.

Second, contrary to Pojman's critique, Kierkegaard's DDV (as stated so far) entails neither that we can form beliefs without regard to their "truth connection" (i.e., that we can disregard our evidence when forming beliefs) nor that beliefs formed voluntarily must be reflectively unstable. This is because, in light of his epistemic permissivism, (*pace* Watts 2013: 531) Kierkegaard rejects the claim known as "transparency," according to which the question of "whether to believe  $p$ " *reduces* to the question of "whether  $p$  is true," such that only considerations that bear on the answer to the latter question can bear on the answer to the former question.<sup>47</sup> On Kierkegaard's view, the question of whether to believe  $p$  does not reduce to the question of whether  $p$  because the sum of the considerations bearing on the latter question—i.e., one's total evidence—sometimes *underdetermines* the answer to the former question. The evidence doesn't determine whether one should take an "interest" in the question of whether  $p$  and thus doesn't determine whether one should adopt a doxastic attitude towards  $p$  at all. Furthermore—and more importantly for responding to Pojman's criticism—when one's evidence permits either believing  $p$  or suspending judgment about  $p$ , the evidence doesn't settle the question of whether one should all-things-considered believe  $p$ . Rather, practical, non-evidential

---

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Murray and Buchak's (2019) account of the role of the will in determining our risk attitudes in practical reasoning.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Roeber (2019, 2020) and Jackson's (2023) defense of DDV in cases one takes to be epistemically permissive. See also Roeber's and Jackson's bibliographies for references to other analytic philosophers who defend a similar view.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Fraser's (forthcoming) account of the role of the will in belief.

<sup>47</sup> The term "transparency" comes from Moran (2001).

considerations that affect whether one should inquire into  $p$  and which epistemic risk attitudes one should have towards  $p$  also bear on the question of whether one should believe  $p$ .<sup>48</sup> Consequently, one's belief can *both* be based on considerations indicating whether it is true (i.e., the evidence) and, when one takes the evidence to permit more than one outright doxastic attitude, formed voluntarily (sometimes, though not necessarily, on the basis of practical considerations). As long as one takes oneself to have sufficient evidence to justify believing  $p$ , one can voluntarily choose to believe  $p$  while reflectively taking it to be adequately based on the truth-relevant considerations. Beliefs formed at will thus needn't be reflectively unstable.

Third, *pave* Kosch (2006: 188-189), interpreting Kierkegaard as endorsing DDV does not require reading Kierkegaard as holding a subjectivist view on which we can determine at will whether we are subject to certain moral or religious obligations.<sup>49</sup> On Kierkegaard's view, whether we can directly control our beliefs is orthogonal to whether we are bound by such obligations. That is, the capacity to control one's beliefs does not entail the capacity to voluntarily bind oneself to or free oneself from moral or religious obligations. Nowhere does Kierkegaard indicate that we can, for instance, release ourselves from the obligation to love our neighbor simply by voluntarily believing that we lack this obligation.

Finally, Kierkegaard's account of DDV notably does *not* imply that we have direct voluntary control over our credences. Holding one's credences fixed, Kierkegaard thinks, it's possible to decide to believe or suspend judgment in virtue of deciding whether to inquire and deciding which epistemic risk attitudes to adopt. Indeed, I suggest, Kierkegaard *denies* that we have direct voluntary control over our credences. This asymmetry between our voluntary control over our beliefs and credences thus reflects deep differences between Kierkegaard's conception of outright belief and his conception of credence: outright beliefs are *active, committal* representations of the world, while credences are *passive, non-committal* reflections of how strongly we estimate our evidence to support certain propositions. In my view, this is an agreeable feature of Kierkegaard's account since (for the reasons discussed above) I take direct *doxastic* voluntarism to be much more plausible than direct *credal* voluntarism.

---

<sup>48</sup> See Quanbeck (forthcoming b: §4) for further discussion.

<sup>49</sup> While Kosch doesn't argue for this claim, it's possible that she associates the DDV interpretation with MacIntyre's (1981) notoriously subjectivist reading of Kierkegaard—on which Kierkegaard holds that one is only subject to ethical or religious norms *conditional* on choosing to commit oneself to an ethical or religious life, respectively—and wishes to avoid tainting Kierkegaard with this association.

## 5. The Leap to Faith

In this section, I will show how Kierkegaard's general account of the role of the will in belief can, with some added complications, be extended to shed light on Kierkegaard's views regarding the role of the will in Christian faith. While Kierkegaard does not take belief in the doctrine of the Incarnation to be *sufficient* for genuine Christian faith (which requires subjectively appropriating this belief and striving to live in accordance with Christianity's ethical prescriptions), he takes belief to be a *necessary* component of faith. Yet there is significant interpretive disagreement regarding how Kierkegaard construes the relationship between the individual's will and divine grace in forming the beliefs partly constitutive of faith, largely because Kierkegaard himself makes apparently incompatible claims about this throughout his authorship.<sup>50</sup>

While I cannot settle this complex interpretive dispute here, I will sketch an interpretation that builds on Steven Emmanuel's (1996: chapter 5) and Timothy Jackson's (1998) readings, according to which Kierkegaard endorses a broadly "Arminian" view on which God provides the necessary conditions for faith, namely revelation and grace, and the individual must then respond by freely choosing whether to believe. I will first argue that this picture both finds significant textual support in *Fragments*, the *Postscript*, and *The Sickness unto Death* and coheres well with Kierkegaard's general account of the role of the will in believing. Second, I will show how examining Kierkegaard's account of the role of the will in faith can illuminate Kierkegaard's views regarding the possibility of believing at will in cases where one has a low credence and regards belief as epistemically irrational.

### 5.1 The Role of the Will in Faith

In *Fragments*, Climacus contrasts Christianity with Socratic religion (which he later calls "Religiousness A" in the *Postscript*). Climacus explains that according to Socratic religion, each individual already possesses the truth and must simply *recollect* it (as Plato famously describes in the *Meno*). Christianity, by contrast, holds that we do not possess the truth within us, so it must be externally provided via divine revelation.

Climacus insists, however, that receiving divine revelation does not suffice for having faith. Climacus writes, "Now, if the learner is to obtain the truth, the teacher must bring it to him, but not only that. Along with it, he must provide him with the *condition* [*Betingelsen*] *for understanding it*" (PF: 14/SKS 4: 223, emphasis mine). Given that Climacus denies that we can fully understand the concepts

---

<sup>50</sup> See Barrett (2013: chapter 6, 2021) for a good overview of both the vastly different interpretations in the secondary literature and the numerous apparently incompatible claims Kierkegaard makes.

constitutive of the doctrine of the Incarnation,<sup>51</sup> it's not entirely clear in what sense the “teacher” (namely, God) enables us to understand it. But Climacus plausibly means that a divinely granted “condition” enables one to *recognize* Jesus as (potentially) being God, thereby making the doctrine of the Incarnation *appear* to be a potential object of belief.<sup>52</sup> In the absence of this “seeming” that Jesus is God, one cannot believe this proposition. Climacus explains:

Faith [*Troen*] is not an act of will [*Villies-Akt*], for it is always the case that human willing is efficacious only within the condition. For example, if I have the courage to will it, I will understand the Socratic—that is, understand myself, because from the Socratic point of view I possess the condition and now can will it. But if I do not possess the condition (and we assume this in order not to go back to the Socratic), then all my willing is of no avail, even though, once the condition is given, that which was valid for the Socratic is again valid. (PF: 62-63/SKS 4: 264)

When Climacus says here that “faith is not an act of will,” he means that faith is not solely an act of will because the condition is *necessary* for faith. But in keeping with his general views about the relationship between appearances and beliefs, Climacus insists that having a seeming that Jesus is God does not *compel* assenting to this seeming. That is, once one possesses the condition, the “Socratic point of view” is valid: one must freely, actively respond by either ceasing to take an “interest” in the question of whether Jesus is God, or else believing, suspending judgment about, or disbelieving this proposition. Hence, the condition is not *sufficient* for faith.<sup>53</sup> Attending to Kierkegaard’s multi-stage picture of belief-formation thus sheds light on Climacus’s account of the role of the will in faith in *Fragments*.

Similarly, in the *Postscript* Climacus argues that faith requires resolving to close inquiry and adopting an epistemically risk-tolerant attitude regarding the doctrine of the Incarnation. Throughout the *Postscript*, Climacus admonishes those (especially Hegelians) who refuse to believe the doctrine of the Incarnation until the historical evidence and/or philosophical arguments provide them with objective certainty of its truth. By continuing to inquire about whether (for instance) the testimony of the Gospels is reliable or whether philosophical arguments support the truth of Christianity, they refrain from choosing to make the leap to faith.<sup>54</sup> Likewise, Climacus criticizes those who refuse to “venture” to form a belief about the nature of the highest good—for instance, by believing in the

---

<sup>51</sup> See Evans (1983: chapter 11).

<sup>52</sup> Stokes (2010b: 302) and Wyllie (2013: 546-547) defend versions of this interpretation.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Jackson (1998: 241)

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Adams’s (1987) interpretation of Climacus. See also Kierkegaard’s satirical illustration of the utter practical infeasibility of Hans Lassen Martensen’s exhortation to doubt everything in *Jobannes Climacus*, and Stewart’s (2003: chapter 5) discussion thereof.



Incarnation—on the grounds that they are insufficiently attuned to the cost of failing to form a true belief and thus too epistemically risk-averse (e.g., CUP1: 203-204, 404-405/SKS 7: 186-187, 368). Only by choosing to adopt an epistemically risk-tolerant attitude towards the Incarnation—and making a risky venture in which one holds fast to objective uncertainty—can one believe it.<sup>55</sup>

Appealing to Kierkegaard’s multi-stage account of belief-formation also illuminates Anti-Climacus’s distinction between three ways of taking offense at the doctrine of the Incarnation—and thereby failing to have faith—in the concluding paragraphs of *The Sickness unto Death*. Anti-Climacus writes, “The lowest form of offense...is to leave the whole issue of Christ undecided [*uafgjort*], concluding as follows: I am not going to make any decision [*domme*] about it; I do not believe [*troer*], but I am not going to decide [*dommer*] anything [...] I do not want to have any opinion [*Mening*] about it” (SUD: 129/SKS 11: 240). This first form of offense plausibly involves receiving the condition (i.e., having a “seeming” that Jesus is God) but then ceasing to have any “interest” in whether this seeming is veridical. Because interest is a necessary condition of doubt, one’s lack of interest towards the doctrine of the Incarnation entails that one does not count as doubting (or suspending judgment). The lowest form of offense thus involves lacking any doxastic attitude at all regarding the doctrine of the Incarnation.

Anti-Climacus continues:

The next form of offense is negative but in the form of being acted upon, of suffering. It definitely feels that it cannot ignore Christ, is not capable of leaving Christ in abeyance and then otherwise leading a busy life. But neither can it believe; it continues to stare fixedly and exclusively at one point, at the paradox. It honors Christianity insofar as it expresses that the question “What do you think of Christ?” is actually the most crucial of all questions. A person so offended lives on as a shadow; his life is devastated because deep within himself he is constantly preoccupied with this decision [*Afgjorelse*]. (SUD: 130-131/SKS 11: 241-242)

This constant preoccupation—which takes the “form of being acted upon”—is indicative of a state of doubt in which one *cannot help* but take an intense interest in whether the doctrine of the Incarnation is true. While the person Anti-Climacus describes here has the ability to terminate his doubt by deciding to form a belief about whether it is true, he lacks the courage to make this decision.

Finally, one can manifest the most advanced form of offense by resolving this state of doubt by “declar[ing] Christianity to be untrue, a lie” (SUD: 131/SKS 11: 242) and thereby choosing to disbelieve the doctrine of the Incarnation. Alternatively, one can overcome offense by responding

---

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Adams’s (1977: §1) interpretation of Climacus.

with belief. Crucially, neither of these responses is forced upon us, Anti-Climacus insists, but either is a voluntary decision.<sup>56</sup>

On this broadly “Arminian” interpretation, then, Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms regard the role of the will in faith as a special case of the role the will plays in forming *any* belief: after it appears to the agent that some proposition is true, the agent can (in at least some cases) voluntarily determine both whether to adopt any doxastic attitude in response and which doxastic attitude to adopt. This interpretation’s consistency with Kierkegaard’s general views regarding the role of the will in believing provides a reason to favor it over alternative interpretations that treat the role of the will in faith as entirely dissimilar from the role of the will in forming ordinary beliefs.<sup>57</sup>

## 5.2 Voluntary Belief against the Evidence

On the interpretation I defended in §4, Kierkegaard thinks we can believe at will when we take ourselves to be in an epistemically permissive situation. But does he think that we can likewise believe at will when we take belief to be epistemically impermissible? The answer may depend on Kierkegaard’s views about the relationship between faith and reason. This is perhaps the longest standing interpretive controversy in Kierkegaard scholarship, so I make no claim to resolve this dispute now. Instead, I will examine how this question might be answered conditional on each of the two dominant families of interpretation of Kierkegaard’s views regarding the relationship between faith and reason.

According to the “supra-rationalist” family of interpretations, faith is “above reason” such that faith is neither rationally required nor rationally forbidden. On Fremstedal’s recent supra-rationalist interpretation, Kierkegaard regards the doctrine of the Incarnation as having a rational status akin to Kant’s practical postulates: *in principle* theoretical reason cannot determine whether the doctrine of the Incarnation is true, as there can be no evidence either for or against it (2022: chapter 12).<sup>58</sup> Consequently, theoretical reason permits any outright doxastic attitude. Fremstedal’s interpretation allows us to straightforwardly apply the account developed in §4 to explain how, after receiving the condition, one can voluntarily choose to believe the doctrine of the Incarnation: when one takes belief to be epistemically permitted (but not required), one can voluntarily choose to believe.

---

<sup>56</sup> Similarly, in *Practice in Christianity* Anti-Climacus argues that whether one believes in the Incarnation is a *choice* that is not compelled by historical evidence or philosophical arguments (PC: 95-96/SKS 12: 104-105).

<sup>57</sup> On one such interpretation, Kierkegaard endorses the orthodox Lutheran view on which the human will is entirely passive in acquiring faith (Malantschuk 1971: 355-356). On another such interpretation, Kierkegaard endorses a broadly Kantian (and arguably semi-Pelagian) view on which we must first ethically prepare ourselves to receive the “condition.” (See Davenport 1995: 77 and Come 1997: 334 for different versions of this interpretation.)

<sup>58</sup> Other proponents of supra-rationalist interpretations include Evans (1983, 1992) and Jackson (1987).

However, many commentators argue that the numerous passages in which Kierkegaard's pseudonyms seem to oppose faith and reason support an "anti-rationalist" interpretation on which faith is "against reason."<sup>59</sup> According to one specification of this interpretation, faith is against reason in the sense that it involves believing a proposition for which one lacks sufficient evidence to epistemically justify belief *in full recognition* of this fact. On one way of further specifying this interpretation, having the seeming that Jesus is God provides one piece of evidence for the truth of the Incarnation. But the *total evidence*—including, e.g., historical data bearing on the reliability of the Gospels, or philosophical arguments regarding the plausibility of Chalcedonian Christology—indicates that this paradoxical, absurd doctrine is *probably false*, which implies that belief would be irrational.<sup>60</sup> Since Kierkegaard thinks that having faith is psychologically possible,<sup>61</sup> one might worry that combining this anti-rationalist interpretation with the claim that Kierkegaard thinks we must will to have faith troublingly implies that Kierkegaard does ultimately endorse the extreme version of DDDV the traditional interpretation attributes to him.

While I am not aware of any passages in which Kierkegaard claims that it is *psychologically impossible* for someone to solely of their own volition believe propositions they take to be objectively improbable—and thus regard as epistemically irrational to believe—Kierkegaard seems to think that this is typically *psychologically infeasible*. Consequently, I suggest that even if an anti-rationalist interpretation is correct, Kierkegaard thinks that only with the assistance of divine grace is it feasible to believe at will when one has a low credence and takes believing to be epistemically irrational.<sup>62</sup> On this interpretation, then, Kierkegaard thinks divine grace is necessary not only to provide the "condition" for having the seeming that Jesus is God but also to make it feasible to believe this proposition while simultaneously recognizing its objectively improbability.<sup>63</sup> But since God does not (typically) provide grace to believe ordinary objectively improbable propositions, it isn't psychologically feasible to do so at will.

---

<sup>59</sup> For instance, see Carr (1996), Buben (2013), McDaniel (2020: §4), and Kemp and Della Torre (2022).

<sup>60</sup> However, proponents of the supra-rationalist interpretation might deny that this implies that faith is irrational if they also attribute to Kierkegaard a strong permissivist view on which it can be epistemically permissible to believe propositions with an evidential probability of less than .5. (See fn. 19.)

<sup>61</sup> On this interpretation, Kierkegaard regards belief as "weak" (cf. Hawthorne, Rothschild, and Spectre 2016) in the sense that it is psychologically possible to believe a proposition in which one has a fairly low credence. (However, in another sense Kierkegaard does *not* regard belief as weak because he thinks it involves a firm, stable commitment rather than a mere "guess".)

<sup>62</sup> Here I agree with Penelhum (1983: 82-83) and Pojman (1984: 101, 1986: 73).

<sup>63</sup> Largely because providing a detailed philosophical explanation of the precise relationship between divine grace and the human will doesn't serve Kierkegaard's fundamentally *edifying* authorial purposes, Kierkegaard doesn't provide such an account (Barrett 2013: chapter 6, 2021).

A plausible explanation of why Kierkegaard thinks that God's assistance is needed to believe in the Incarnation while having a low credence is that he thinks our credences (along with our assessment of the epistemic rationality of believing) affect our *dispositions* to believe.<sup>64</sup> To the extent that one has a high credence in *p* and takes believing *p* to be epistemically rational, one is psychologically disposed to believe *p*. Likewise, to the extent that one has a low credence in *p* and takes disbelieving *p* to be epistemically rational, one is psychologically disposed to disbelieve *p*. And to the extent that one has a middling credence in *p* (close to .5) and takes neither belief nor disbelief to be epistemically rational, one will be disposed to suspend judgment on *p*.<sup>65</sup>

Here again, I suggest that Kierkegaard regards the role of the will in forming intentions and in forming beliefs as analogous in important respects. Just as Kierkegaard holds that our desires and perceptions about which potential courses of action are good or bad dispose us to form certain intentions without psychologically necessitating these intentions,<sup>66</sup> likewise our assessment of the evidence (encoded in our credences) disposes us to form certain outright doxastic attitudes without psychologically necessitating these attitudes. Moreover, just as intending to perform an action one regards as bad is more difficult than refraining from intending to perform an action one regards as good, likewise believing a proposition in which one has a low credence is more difficult than suspending judgment about a proposition in which one has a high credence.

Consequently, Kierkegaard thinks that even with the assistance of grace, it is very difficult to both form and maintain the beliefs partly constitutive of faith.<sup>67</sup> Throughout his authorship, Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms continually emphasize the difficulty of faith. While faith is difficult in numerous respects, a central difficulty is cognitive. For example, Johannes de Silentio describes

---

<sup>64</sup> However, Kierkegaard does not take our credences and assessments of the epistemic permissibility of believing to be the *only* things that affect our dispositions to believe. As I noted in §2.2, proponents of the IDV interpretation rightly observe that Kierkegaard thinks our desires, emotions, and other non-doxastic states influence our dispositions to believe. Moreover, the “offense” that our sinful human nature takes at both Christ’s selfless kenosis—which “simply appears to be too good to be true” (Evans 1992: 107)—and the ethical demandingness of Christianity makes it harder to believe the doctrine of the Incarnation. Additionally, Kierkegaard thinks that our assessment of the *practical stakes* associated with believing (e.g., the practical costs of forming a false belief) affect our dispositions to believe (Quanbeck forthcoming a: §4.3).

<sup>65</sup> This explains why—*pace* Evans (1989)—Climacus’s claim that the ancient Skeptics used the Skeptical Modes as “outer fortifications” (PF: 84/SKS 4: 283) doesn’t entail that Kierkegaard thinks that the Modes were a *psychologically necessary means* for them to suspend judgment. Rather, Kierkegaard regards the modes as a *facilitating means* to suspend judgment because (on his reading) the ancient Skeptics used the Modes to change their credences and thereby modify their belief-forming dispositions in order to reduce the temptation to assent and thus make it *easier* to suspend judgment.

<sup>66</sup> For instance, in the *Concept of Anxiety*, Vigilius Haufniensis argues that we possess libertarian free will while denying the existence an unbounded *liberum arbitrium* (which would enable us to choose the good as *easily* as we can choose evil) (CA: 49, 112/SKS 4: 355, 414). See Ferreira (1991: 37), Jackson (1998: 249), and Watts (2022: 771) for discussion.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Pojman (1984: 93-94) and Piety (2010: 148).

faith as “the greatest and most difficult of all” (FT: 52/SKS 4: 145), partly because Abraham’s faith involves believing God’s absurd promise that even after sacrificing Isaac, he would get Isaac back in this life (FT: 36/SKS 4: 131). Climacus explains that he aims to “do away with introductory observations, reliabilities, demonstrations from effects, and the whole mob of pawnbrokers and guarantors, in order to get the absurd clear—so that one can believe if one will—I merely say that this must be extremely strenuous” (CUP1: 212/SKS 7: 194). Anti-Climacus likewise stresses the importance of overcoming the *intellectual* offense we naturally take at the paradoxical doctrine of the Incarnation (esp. PC: 94-102/SKS 12: 103-110).

In sum: Kierkegaard’s account of DDV places significant constraints on our ability to believe at will by emphasizing that our credences, along with our assessment of the epistemic permissibility of believing, affect the *difficulty* (and hence the *feasibility*) of believing at will. Yet Kierkegaard’s account makes space for the psychological *possibility* of believing propositions in which we have a low credence (especially with the assistance of divine grace).

## 6. Conclusion

Contrary to the dominant interpretation on which Kierkegaard endorses only an indirect form of doxastic voluntarism, I have argued that Kierkegaard holds that we can exercise direct, albeit constrained, voluntary control over our beliefs (but not our credences) in both ordinary and religious contexts in virtue of our ability to voluntarily choose whether to inquire and which epistemic risk attitudes to adopt. In addition, I have argued that attending to the subtleties of Kierkegaard’s account of DDV shows that, contrary to Pojman’s criticisms, Kierkegaard’s view is sophisticated and philosophically plausible. Thus, we have no reason to refrain from interpreting Kierkegaard as a direct doxastic voluntarist on grounds of interpretive charity.

My interpretation of Kierkegaard as a proponent of DDV also has two notable implications for Kierkegaard’s ethics of belief. First, it reveals a crucial difference between Kierkegaard’s conception of outright beliefs and his conception of credences: outright beliefs involve active, voluntary resolutions, while credences are (comparatively) passive, involuntary states. This is one reason why Kierkegaard takes our outright beliefs to be ethically and religiously significant in ways that our credences are not. Second, it explains how Kierkegaard thinks we can be responsive to practical (i.e., non-epistemic) reasons for belief. A prominent objection to the claim that there are

practical reasons for belief is that we cannot believe *on the basis of* practical considerations.<sup>68</sup> But if we can believe at will, then we can believe on the basis of practical considerations.

Furthermore, my interpretation suggests that Kierkegaard offers a philosophically interesting and distinctive account of our voluntary control over our beliefs which merits serious consideration in its own right. As I've observed in the footnotes above, aspects of Kierkegaard's account have been defended in recent years in analytic epistemology. But (to my knowledge) there are no contemporary accounts of DDV which show how these views can combine and complement each other to constitute a systematic, plausible account of the role the will plays in forming and maintaining beliefs. In addition, Kierkegaard maintains that we have distinctively *practical* agency over our beliefs in virtue of our ability to believe at will. This differentiates Kierkegaard's view both from an influential conception of doxastic agency in contemporary analytic philosophy on which our doxastic agency is restricted to responsiveness to *epistemic* reasons and does not involve any direct voluntary control over our beliefs,<sup>69</sup> and from the views of many of Kierkegaard's predecessors (such as Kant and Hegel) who anticipate this contemporary conception of doxastic agency.<sup>70</sup> I will thus conclude by suggesting that Kierkegaard offers a promising account of our agency over our beliefs which contemporary analytic epistemologists could profit from engaging with.<sup>71</sup>

---

<sup>68</sup> See Kelly (2002), among many others, for this objection.

<sup>69</sup> Proponents of this view include Hieronymi (2008, 2009) and Korsgaard (2009), among many others.

<sup>70</sup> For Kant, belief in the existence of God and the immortality of the soul constitute exceptions, as we can form these beliefs on the basis of practical reason and thus voluntarily. On Kant's account of doxastic agency, see Cohen (2013) and Kohl (2015). On Hegel's characterization of free, practical agency as involving reasons-responsiveness rather than voluntary control—which his account of doxastic agency arguably parallels—see Pippin (2008: esp. chapter 5).

<sup>71</sup> For valuable comments on this paper, I'm grateful to Lara Buchak, Andrew Chignell, Anthony Rudd, and two anonymous referees at *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*. For helpful discussion, thanks to Michael Au Mullaney, Rosalind Chaplin, John Davenport, Hans Halvorson, Markus Kohl, Yifan Li, Austen McDougal, Carla Merino-Rajme, Alan Nelson, Ram Neta, Conner Schultz, Leah Suffern, Sarah Stroud, and Alex Worsnip, as well as participants in Rosalind Chaplin's and Carla Merino-Rajme's spring 2023 Dissertation Research Seminar at UNC-Chapel Hill, participants in John Davenport's fall 2023 Kierkegaard Workshop at Fordham, and participants in Andrew Chignell's fall 2023 Religion and Critical Thought Workshop at Princeton. Finally, special thanks to Sebastian Surom (to whom this paper is dedicated) for sparking my interest in this topic through our many discussions about Luther's and Kierkegaard's views about the human will's freedom and capacities (or lack thereof).

## References to Primary Texts by Kierkegaard

English editions of Kierkegaard's writings (trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong and published by Princeton University Press unless otherwise noted):

- Kierkegaard, Søren (1829-1855/1967–1978). *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers* [JP] (7 volumes). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (unpublished manuscript from 1842 or 1843/1985). *Johannes Climacus, or De Omnibus Dubitandum Est* [JC].
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1843/1988). *Either/Or* [EO], Parts I and II.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1843/1983). *Fear and Trembling* [FT].
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1843-1844/1990). *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses* [EUD].
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1844/1985). *Philosophical Fragments* [PF].
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1844/1981). *The Concept of Anxiety* [CA], trans. Reidar Thomte.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1846/1992). *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments, Volume I* [CUP1].
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1847/1995). *Works of Love* [WL].
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1849/1980). *The Sickness unto Death* [SUD].
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1850/1992). *Practice in Christianity* [PC].
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1851/1990). *For Self-Examination* [FSE].
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1851/1990). *Judge for Yourself* [JFY].

Danish edition of Kierkegaard's writings:

- \_\_\_\_\_ (1997–2013). *Søren Kierkegaard's Skrifter* [SKS] (55 volumes), ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn et al. Copenhagen: Gads Forlag.

## References to Secondary and Contemporary Literature

- Adams, Robert Merrihew (1977). "Kierkegaard's Arguments Against Objective Reasoning in Religion." *The Monist* 60: 228-243.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1987). "The Leap of Faith." In *The Virtue of Faith and Other Essays in Philosophical Theology*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Allison, Henry (1967). "Christianity and Nonsense." *The Review of Metaphysics* 20: 432-460.
- Barnes, Jonathan (2006). "Belief is Up to Us." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 106: 187-204.
- Barrett, Lee (2013). *Eros and Self-Emptying: The Intersections of Augustine and Kierkegaard*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2021). "Human Striving and Absolute Reliance upon God: A Kierkegaardian Paradox." *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook* 26: 139-164.
- Bennett, Jonathan (1990). "Why Is Belief Involuntary?" *Analysis* 50: 87–107.
- Buben, Adam (2013). "Neither Irrationalist nor Apologist: Revisiting Faith and Reason in Kierkegaard." *Philosophy Compass* 8: 318-326.
- Carr, Karen (1996). "The Offense of Reason and the Passion of Faith: Kierkegaard and Anti-Rationalism." *Faith and Philosophy* 13: 236–51.
- Cohen, Alix (2013). "Kant on Doxastic Voluntarism and its Implications for Epistemic Responsibility." *Kant Yearbook* 5: 33-50.
- Come, Arnold (1997). *Kierkegaard as Theologian: Recovering Myself*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.

- Davenport, John (1995). "The Meaning of Kierkegaard's Choice Between the Aesthetic and the Ethical." *Southwest Philosophical Review* 11: 73-108.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2007). *Will as Commitment and Resolve: An Existential Account of Creativity, Love, Virtue, and Happiness*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Emmanuel, Steven (1996). *Kierkegaard and the Concept of Revelation*. Albany: SUNY University Press.
- Evans, C. Stephen (1983). *Kierkegaard's Fragments and Postscript: The Religious Philosophy of Johannes Climacus*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (1989). "Does Kierkegaard Think Beliefs can be Directly Willed?" *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 26: 173-184.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (1991). "Where There's a Will There's a Way: Kierkegaard's Theory of Action." In *Writing the Politics of Difference*, ed. Hugh Silverman. Albany: SUNY Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (1992). *Passionate Reason: Making Sense of Kierkegaard's Philosophical Fragments*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (1995). "Kierkegaard's View of the Unconscious." In *Kierkegaard and Post/Modernity*, ed. Martin Beck Matušík and Merold Westphal. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Ferreira, M. Jamie (1991). *Transforming Vision: Imagination and Will in Kierkegaardian Faith*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (1998). "Faith and the Kierkegaardian Leap." In *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon Marino. Cambridge: CUP.
- Fraser, Rachel (forthcoming). "The Will in Belief." *Oxford Studies in Epistemology*.
- Fremstedal, Roe (2022). *Kierkegaard on Self, Ethics, and Religion: Purity or Despair*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Friedman, Jane (2019). "Inquiry and Belief." *Noûs* 53: 296-315.
- Furtak, Rick Anthony (2013). "Kierkegaard and Greek Philosophy." In *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, eds. John Lippitt and George Pattison. Oxford: OUP.
- Kelly, Thomas (2002). "The Rationality of Belief and Some Other Propositional Attitudes." *Philosophical Studies* 110: 163-96.
- Halvorson, Hans (2023). "The Philosophy of Science in *Either/Or*." In *Cambridge Critical Guide to Either-Or*, eds. Ryan Kemp and Walter Wietzke. Cambridge: CUP.
- Hawthorne, John, Daniel Rothschild, and Levi Spectre (2016). "Belief is Weak." *Philosophical Studies* 173: 1393-1404.
- Hieronimi, Pamela (2008). "Responsibility for Believing." *Synthese* 161: 357-373
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2009). "Believing at Will." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* Supplementary Volume 35: 149-187.
- Holton, Richard (2014). "Intention as a Model for Belief." In *Rational and Social Agency: Essays on the Philosophy of Michael Bratman*, ed. Manuel Vargas and Gideon Yaffe. Oxford: OUP.
- Jackson, Elizabeth (2021). "A Defense of Intrapersonal Belief Permissivism." *Episteme* 18: 313-327.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2023). "A Permissivist Defense of Pascal's Wager." *Erkenntnis* 88: 2315-2340.
- Jackson, Timothy (1987). "Kierkegaard's Metatheology." *Faith and Philosophy* 4: 71-85.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (1998). "Arminian Edification: Kierkegaard on Grace and Free Will." In *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*.
- James, William (1896). "The Will to Believe." In *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*. New York: Longmans, Green, and Co.
- Johnson, Ronald (1997). "The Logic of Leaping: Kierkegaard's Use of Hegelian Sublation." *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 14: 155-170.
- Kemp, Ryan (2018). "The Role of Imagination in Kierkegaard's Account of Ethical Transformation." *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 100(2): 202-231.
- Kemp, Ryan, and Frank Della Torre (2022). "Kierkegaard's Strong Anti-Rationalism: Offense as a Propaedeutic to Faith." *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook* 27: 193-214.



- Kohl, Markus (2015). "Kant on Freedom of Empirical Thought." *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 53: 301-326.
- Korsgaard, Christine (2009). "The Activity of Reason." *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 83: 23-43.
- Kosch, Michelle (2006). *Freedom and Reason in Kant, Schelling, and Kierkegaard*. Oxford: OUP.
- Lippitt, John (2013). *Kierkegaard and the Problem of Self-Love*. Cambridge: CUP.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2020). *Love's Forgiveness: Kierkegaard, Resentment, Humility, and Hope*. Oxford: OUP.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair (1981). *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Mackey, Louis (1971). *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Malantschuk, Gregor (1971). *Kierkegaard's Thought*, trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- McDaniel, Kris (2020). "Teleological Suspensions in *Fear and Trembling*." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 100: 425-451.
- Moran, Richard (2001). *Authority and Estrangement: An Essay in Self-Knowledge*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Murray, Dylan and Lara Buchak (2019). "Risk and Motivation: When the Will is Required to Determine What to Do." *Philosophers' Imprint* 19.
- Piety, Marilyn (2010). *Ways of Knowing: Kierkegaard's Pluralist Epistemology*. Waco: Baylor University Press.
- Penelhum, Terence (1983). *God and Skepticism*. Dordrecht, Netherlands: Reidel.
- Pippin, Robert (2008). *Hegel's Practical Philosophy: Rational Agency as Ethical Life*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Pojman, Louis (1984). *The Logic of Subjectivity: Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Religion*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1986). *Religious Belief and the Will*. London: Routledge.
- Poláčková, Anna (ms.) *Two Ways of Relating to Doubt in Kierkegaard's Existentialism*.
- Quanbeck, Z (forthcoming a). "Kierkegaard on Belief and Credence." *European Journal of Philosophy*.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (forthcoming b). "Kierkegaard on the Relationship Between Practical and Epistemic Reasons for Belief." *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*.
- Rinard, Susanna (2019). "Believing for Practical Reason." *Noûs* 53: 763-784.
- Roeber, Blake (2019). "Evidence, Judgment, and Belief and Will." *Mind* 128: 837-859.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2020). "Permissive Situations and Direct Doxastic Control." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 101: 415-31.
- Rudd, Anthony (1993). *Kierkegaard and the Limits of the Ethical*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1998). "Kierkegaard and the Skeptics." *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 6: 71-88.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1999). "'Believing All Things': Kierkegaard on Knowledge, Doubt, and Love." In *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Works of Love*, ed. Robert L. Perkins. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2010). "The Skeptics: Kierkegaard and Classical Skepticism." In *Kierkegaard and the Greek World, Tome II: Aristotle and Other Greek Authors*, ed. Jon Stewart and Katalin Nun. Farnham: Ashgate.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2012). *Self, Value, and Narrative: A Kierkegaardian Approach*. Oxford: OUP.
- Schüssler, Rudolf (2013). "Descartes' Doxastic Voluntarism." *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 95: 148-177.
- Soter, Laura (ms.). "A Defense of Back-End Doxastic Voluntarism."
- Stewart, Jon (2003). *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Strand, Narve (2014). "Decision/Resolve." In *Kierkegaard's Concepts, Tome II*, ed. Steven Emmanuel, William McDonald, and Jon Stewart. London: Routledge.

- \_\_\_\_\_ (2015). "Will." In *Kierkegaard's Concepts*, Tome VI, ed. Steven Emmanuel, William McDonald, and Jon Stewart. London: Routledge.
- Stokes, Patrick (2010a). *Kierkegaard's Mirrors: Interest, Self, and Moral Vision*. Houndmills: Palgrave MacMillan.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2010b). "'See For Your Self': Contemporaneity, Autopsy and Presence in Kierkegaard's Moral-Religious Psychology." *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 18: 297-319.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2019). "Consciousness, Self, and Reflection." In *The Kierkegaardian Mind*.
- Thonhauser, Gerhard (2013). "Choice." In *Kierkegaard's Concepts*, Tome I, ed. Steven Emmanuel, William McDonald, and Jon Stewart. London: Routledge.
- Watts, Daniel (2013). "Kierkegaard and the Search for Self-Knowledge." *European Journal of Philosophy* 21: 525-549.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2022). "Participation in Grace: Kierkegaard's Corrective to Luther." *Studies in Christian Ethics* 35: 765-785.
- Westphal, Merold (1996). *Becoming a Self: A Reading of Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2010). "Climacus on Subjectivity and the System." In *Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript: A Critical Guide*, ed. Rick Anthony Furtak. Cambridge: CUP.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2014). *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith*. Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans.
- Williams, Bernard (1973). "Deciding to Believe." In *Problems of the Self: Philosophical Papers 1956-1972*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Wisdo, David (1987). "Kierkegaard on Belief, Faith, and Explanation." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 21: 95-114.
- Wyllie, Robert (2013). "Kierkegaard's Eyes of Faith: The Paradoxical Voluntarism of Climacus's *Philosophical Fragments*." *Res Philosophica* 90: 545-564.