

# Kierkegaard on the Relationship between Practical and Epistemic Reasons for Belief

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**Abstract:** On the dominant contemporary accounts of how practical considerations affect what we ought to believe, practical considerations either *encroach* on epistemic rationality by affecting whether a belief is epistemically justified, or constitute distinctively practical reasons for belief which can only affect what we ought to believe by *conflicting* with epistemic rationality. This paper shows that a promising alternative view can be found in a surprising source: the writings of Søren Kierkegaard. I argue that in light of two of his central epistemological commitments—belief-credence dualism and epistemic permissivism about outright belief—Kierkegaard holds that practical considerations can affect what we ought to believe without either encroaching on or (necessarily) conflicting with epistemic rationality. The central idea is that practical considerations can determine which among the epistemically permitted outright doxastic attitudes one should all-things-considered adopt. In addition to constituting a novel, systematic interpretation of Kierkegaard’s account of how practical considerations affect what we ought to believe, this suggests that Kierkegaard holds a distinctive and underexplored view that constitutes a serious philosophical rival to dominant contemporary views.

## 1. Introduction

A central concern animating Søren Kierkegaard’s writings is the question of *what we ought to believe*. Kierkegaard (and many of his pseudonyms) consistently maintains that this question often is not settled solely by theoretical reason. Rather, practical—especially ethical and religious—considerations can play an important role in determining what we ought to believe. Yet it is not always clear *how* Kierkegaard thinks practical and theoretical considerations interact to determine what we all-things-considered ought to believe. Contemporary analytic epistemologists have developed sophisticated accounts of how practical considerations affect what we ought to believe. By analytically reconstructing Kierkegaard’s views using concepts and terminology from these contemporary theories, I aim to 1) develop a new, systematic interpretation of Kierkegaard’s account of how practical considerations affect what we ought to believe which avoids attributing to Kierkegaard an objectionable form of irrationalism, and 2) show that Kierkegaard holds a distinctive and

underexplored view which constitutes a serious philosophical rival to contemporary accounts of how practical considerations affect what we ought to believe.<sup>1</sup>

On my interpretation, Kierkegaard's account relies on two crucial epistemological views. First, Kierkegaard accepts a version of "belief-credence dualism" on which outright beliefs qualitatively differ from and are irreducible to credences (i.e., degrees of confidence) in virtue of involving resolutions that close inquiry and thereby exclude doubt (in a technical sense).<sup>2</sup> Second, Kierkegaard is committed to "epistemic permissivism" about outright belief: the view that there are cases in which a given body of evidence permits more than one outright doxastic attitude (viz., belief, suspension of judgment, or disbelief). In light of these epistemological commitments, Kierkegaard holds that practical considerations can affect what we ought to believe without necessarily conflicting with theoretical (i.e., epistemic) rationality. They can do so by constituting three types of practical reasons—reasons for or against 1) adopting a certain attitude towards epistemic risk, 2) opening or closing inquiry, and 3) directly believing a proposition—that determine which among the epistemically permitted outright doxastic attitudes one should all-things-considered adopt.

The picture that emerges constitutes a promising and largely overlooked account of how practical considerations affect what we ought to believe. While some philosophers deny that practical considerations can affect what we ought to believe, there are two dominant contemporary approaches to account for how they might do so. On the first view—pragmatic and moral "encroachment"—practical considerations *encroach* on epistemic rationality by affecting whether a belief is epistemically justified or constitutes knowledge. On a second view, practical considerations constitute distinctively practical reasons for belief which do not affect epistemic rationality and can only make a difference to what we ought to believe by *conflicting* with epistemic rationality. This paper suggests that Kierkegaard's account—on which practical considerations can affect what we ought to believe without either encroaching on or necessarily conflicting with epistemic rationality—constitutes a distinctive, compelling third alternative.

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<sup>1</sup> Kierkegaard published many texts using pseudonyms, while he signed other texts using his own name. I will draw on both signed and pseudonymous texts here, especially those published under the pseudonym Johannes Climacus. When referring to a view expressed by one of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms, I will attribute the view to that pseudonym. Although I do not assume that Kierkegaard himself endorses all of Climacus's views, I agree with Rudd (1999) that Kierkegaard accepts and develops the central features of Climacus's epistemological views in signed texts such as *Works of Love*. If successful, my attempt to develop a consistent, systematic interpretation of Kierkegaard's account of how practical considerations affect what we ought to believe that combines ideas from Climacus's writings (and texts by other pseudonyms) and Kierkegaard's signed texts provides further evidence that Kierkegaard himself endorses many of Climacus's epistemological views and that Kierkegaard maintained a fairly consistent epistemology throughout much of his authorship.

<sup>2</sup> I take the term "belief-credence dualism" from Jackson (2020).

In what follows, §2 considers—but ultimately rejects—a *prima facie* plausible interpretation on which Kierkegaard endorses a version of encroachment. §3 examines the two epistemological views informing Kierkegaard’s ethics of belief: belief-credence dualism and epistemic permissivism about outright belief. §4 develops an interpretation of Kierkegaard’s account of the three types of ways in which practical considerations can affect what we ought to believe. §5 concludes.

## 2. Kierkegaard and Encroachment

### 2.1 The Case for Interpreting Kierkegaard as a (Proto-)Encroacher

For the last two decades in contemporary analytic epistemology, perhaps the most influential account of how practical considerations affect what we ought to believe has been (pragmatic and moral) encroachment.<sup>3</sup> According to this view, practical considerations affect what we ought to believe by affecting epistemic justification or knowledge. On the most common version of encroachment, when believing (or relying on a belief) is actually or potentially practically costly, more evidence is needed to epistemically justify belief (or for a belief to constitute knowledge) than when believing (or relying on a belief) is not actually or potentially practically costly.<sup>4</sup>

Some passages in Kierkegaard’s authorship suggest that Kierkegaard might accept a view like encroachment. Perhaps the strongest evidence for this interpretation comes from Kierkegaard’s pseudonym Johannes Climacus’s discussion at the beginning of the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* of the absurdity of basing one’s eternal happiness (*Evig Salighed*; alternatively translated as “eternal blessedness”) on a mere approximation to certainty. Robert Merrihew Adams (1977) calls Climacus’s argument for this claim the “Approximation Argument.” Adams reconstructs the Approximation Argument as follows:

- (1) The greatest degree to which a belief can be justified by objective historical reasoning is only an approximation to certainty (that is, a probability of less than 100 percent).
- (2) A degree of justification that only approximates certainty is wholly inadequate as a basis for [a belief on which one stakes] an eternal happiness.

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<sup>3</sup> Notable proponents of encroachment include (among many others) Fantl and McGrath (2002), Pace (2011), Schroeder (2012), Basu (2019), and Basu and Schroeder (2019).

<sup>4</sup> While some philosophers (e.g., Basu 2019) insist on sharply distinguishing pragmatic encroachment (regarding prudential considerations) from moral encroachment (regarding moral considerations), I take prudential considerations and moral considerations to be two species of practical considerations and so will group the two together under the label “encroachment.” One complication, however, is that Kierkegaard arguably takes the practical considerations that can affect what we ought to believe to include eudaimonistic, moral, and religious considerations, and to exclude narrowly prudential considerations. (See footnote 7 below.)

(3) Therefore an eternal happiness cannot be based on objective historical reasoning. (1987: 42-43)<sup>5</sup>

Let's examine this argument in more detail. The question Climacus is considering here is whether Christian faith—on which a believer stakes their prospects for attaining eternal happiness—can be based on a historical proposition: namely the doctrine of the incarnation (which holds that Jesus was fully God and fully human).<sup>6</sup> As I read him, Climacus's endorses a perfectionist, eudaimonistic conception of eternal happiness.<sup>7</sup> Climacus assumes that a necessary (but not sufficient) condition of flourishing both now and (potentially) eternally—i.e., fulfilling one's "absolute *telos*" (CUP: 387)<sup>8</sup> as a human being and properly relating oneself to the highest good (CUP: 15)—is having true beliefs about the highest good. Christianity provides one such conception of the highest good. Consequently, if Christianity is true, venturing to have faith is a necessary condition for acquiring eternal happiness (in Climacus's specific, eudaimonistic sense). But if Christianity is false, having faith ensures that one will fail to acquire eternal happiness because one has a false belief about the highest good.

However, the prospective Christian's predicament is that the central doctrine of Christianity—the incarnation—is a historical, and hence uncertain, proposition. Climacus remarks, "With regard to historical issues it is of course impossible to reach an objective decision of such a nature that no doubt would be able to insinuate itself" (CUP: 42). In fact, Climacus holds that we can never know any historical proposition—or any contingent proposition about the external world (PF: 79-86)<sup>9</sup>—with

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<sup>5</sup> This is Adams's later (1987) reconstruction of his earlier (1977) interpretation. Stewart (2003: chapter 11) provides a similar interpretation of Climacus.

<sup>6</sup> Climacus regards the doctrine of the incarnation as a paradox claiming that God entered time and became a historical being, contrary to God's nature as an eternal being. However, the Approximation Argument doesn't depend on the premise that the doctrine of the incarnation is paradoxical but only depends on the premise that it is a historical proposition.

<sup>7</sup> As Evans (2004: chapter 4; ms.) emphasizes, Kierkegaard distinguishes eudaimonistic reasons—regarding one's flourishing—from the narrower notion of prudential reasons—regarding the acquisition of pleasure or the satisfaction of one's "worldly" desires. In fact, Climacus seems to regard faith as *imprudent* even if Christianity is true because its rigorous demands are at odds with prudence in the narrow sense (as Buben 2013 and Kosch 2015 emphasize). Consequently, this eudaimonistic reading of the Approximation Argument opposes Adams's claim that the Approximation Argument "gives a practical, *prudential* reason for believing, to someone who has a certain desire" (1977: 243, emphasis mine). Climacus's Approximation Argument also differs from Pascal's Wager in virtue of its eudaimonistic (rather than prudential) conception of the practical stakes associated with believing in Christianity. (However, for a dissenting interpretation on which Kierkegaard and Climacus reject eudaimonism, see Fremstedal 2022: chapters 4-5.)

<sup>8</sup> All translations are from the Hong editions published by Princeton University Press. Sigla for Kierkegaard's texts in parenthetical citations follow the standard conventions from the *International Kierkegaard Commentary* and are noted in the bibliography. The number following the sigla indicates the page number in the relevant Hong edition.

<sup>9</sup> By contrast, Climacus holds that we can have certainty, and hence knowledge, regarding necessary, *a priori* truths as well as immediate sense data. See Piety (2010a: 58-59) and Rudd (1993: chapter 2) for further discussion.

complete certainty. Any such belief involves some risk of error and can at best *approximate* certainty. Climacus explains:

If the inquiring subject were infinitely interested in his relation to this truth, he would here despair at once, because nothing is easier to perceive than this, that with regard to the historical the greatest certainty is only an approximation [*Approximation*], and an approximation is too little to build his happiness on. (CUP: 23)

In low-stakes contexts—in which one doesn't have a significant practical interest in the truth of the proposition believed because the accuracy of one's belief doesn't carry any significant practical consequences—small risks of error can be disregarded, and an approximation to certainty can be an adequate basis for belief. But Climacus continues: “In relation to an eternal happiness and an impassioned, infinite interest in this (the former can be only in the latter), an iota [of evidence] is of importance, of infinite importance” (CUP: 26). This is because the practical stakes—and one's corresponding passionate interest—associated with believing in the incarnation are extremely high. By forming a true belief, one has the potential to gain eternal happiness. But by forming a false belief, one is guaranteed to lose eternal happiness. Since the practical stakes are so high, one should not believe in the incarnation when this belief would involve even the smallest possibility of error. Combined with the premise that all beliefs about contingent propositions about the external world involve some risk of error, it follows that (as Adams 1977 puts it) “objective historical reasoning”—involving the impartial assessment of historical evidence—cannot be an adequate basis for Christian faith.

We are now in a position to explicate an interpretation of Climacus as a proto-encroacher. The crucial step in the argument for this reading is premise 2 of Adams's reconstruction. As it stands, premise 2 does not yet imply that Climacus accepts encroachment. However, it can be modified slightly to indicate that Climacus is a proto-encroacher by specifying that the practical stakes encroach on the *epistemic* adequacy of belief:

(2') A degree of justification that only approximates certainty is wholly **epistemically** inadequate as a basis for a belief on which one stakes an eternal happiness.

Premise 2' depends on a view like encroachment, such that the extremely high practical stakes raise the evidential threshold for epistemic justification so much that one's evidence must make the relevant proposition epistemically certain for belief to be epistemically justified.<sup>10</sup> If this interpretation is

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<sup>10</sup> This implies that Climacus thinks Christian faith cannot be epistemically justified because the epistemic certainty required for belief to be epistemically justified is impossible to attain. But this might seem puzzling: while Climacus insists that he is not himself a Christian, he nonetheless commends Christianity. Yet Climacus sometimes seems to commend Christianity

correct, Climacus should be credited with anticipating an influential contemporary view of how practical considerations affect what we ought to believe.

## 2.2 The Case against the Encroachment Interpretation

While the best *prima facie* evidence for interpreting Climacus (and Kierkegaard) as a proto-encroacher comes from Adams’s interpretation of the Approximation Argument, there are grounds for doubting this interpretation. As I will argue at much greater length in §4, Climacus (and Kierkegaard) holds that practical considerations can affect what we ought to believe not only by increasing how much evidence is required for permissible belief<sup>11</sup> when having a false belief is practically costly, but also by *decreasing* how much evidence is required when *not believing* is practically costly. That is, in a high-stakes case where the practical costs of not believing—e.g., being guaranteed to miss out on the practical benefits of having a true belief<sup>12</sup>—are greater than the practical costs of having a false belief, the evidential threshold for permissible belief is *lower* than the evidential threshold for permissible belief in a low-stakes case where neither believing nor not believing involves a significant practical cost.

Since some versions of encroachment (e.g., Pace 2011, Schroeder 2012, and Basu 2019) allow that the practical costs of not believing can lower the evidential threshold for epistemic justification, the fact that Kierkegaard thinks that such costs can affect how much evidence is required for permissible belief doesn’t itself indicate that Kierkegaard rejects encroachment. However, interpreting Kierkegaard as *both* endorsing this version of encroachment *and* holding that not forming a true belief about the highest good is practically costly is inconsistent with a crucial presupposition of premise 2’ of the Approximation Argument: that *only* the practical costs of having a false belief about the highest good affect this belief’s epistemic justification. If missing out on a true belief about the highest good would also be extremely practically costly, then this would lower the evidential threshold for epistemic justification enough that belief could be epistemically justified in the absence of epistemic certainty.<sup>13</sup>

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not merely despite, but *because of*, its irrationality. If the high stakes associated with Christian faith render belief *even more* epistemically irrational than it would be if the stakes were lower, the Approximation Argument would contribute to Climacus’s aim of showing that Christian faith involves extreme epistemic irrationality.

<sup>11</sup> My use of the term “permissible belief” in the rest of this paragraph is intentionally ambiguous between “epistemically permissible belief” and “practically permissible belief.” On the encroachment interpretation, the relevant notion of permissibility is epistemic. On the alternative interpretation I develop in §4, the relevant notion of permissibility is practical.

<sup>12</sup> While using the term “cost” to include missing out on benefits may seem a bit unnatural, one might think of this as analogous to “opportunity costs” in economics.

<sup>13</sup> Adams himself objects to Climacus’s Approximation Argument along similar lines: when not believing (e.g., by suspending judgment) guarantees missing out on significant benefits of having true beliefs, we can be justified in disregarding even significant possibilities of error and thereby justified in believing (1977: 231-232).

Indeed, Kierkegaard's frequent remarks regarding the practical costs of refusing to "venture" to form a belief about the highest good (e.g., CUP: 203-204, 404-405) indicate that he takes not believing in Christianity (or another conception of the highest good) to involve an *even greater* practical cost than believing. In short, since Climacus holds that having a true belief about the nature of the highest good is a necessary condition for attaining eternal happiness, suspending judgment *guarantees* that this condition will not be satisfied and thus ensures that one will not attain eternal happiness. Premise 2' is therefore false by Climacus's own lights: a degree of justification that only approximates certainty *can* be an adequate basis for a belief on which one stakes an eternal happiness when not believing is even more practically costly. Consequently, Adams's reading of the Approximation Argument does not ultimately support the encroachment interpretation.

There are thus good reasons to pursue an alternative interpretation of Kierkegaard's account of how practical considerations affect what we ought to believe which does not depend on this interpretation of the Approximation Argument.<sup>14</sup> §4 develops such an interpretation. First, however, we need to examine two of Kierkegaard's epistemological views—regarding the nature of belief and the permissiveness of the epistemic norms governing belief—which provide the foundation for his account of how practical considerations affect what we ought to believe.

### 3. Kierkegaard's Epistemology

#### 3.1 Belief-Credence Dualism

First, Kierkegaard endorses a version of belief-credence dualism on which outright beliefs qualitatively differ from and are irreducible to credences (i.e., degrees of confidence) in virtue of involving resolutions that close inquiry and thereby exclude doubt.<sup>15</sup> Throughout both *Philosophical Fragments* and the *Postscript*, Climacus maintains that there is no psychologically necessary transition from a philosophical argument or an assessment of historical evidence—even very strong arguments or very strong historical evidence—to a belief about contingent, *a posteriori* matters. Climacus argues that none

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<sup>14</sup> Fortunately, compelling alternative interpretations of the Approximation Argument are available. Ten years after publishing his original interpretation, Adams himself developed a different interpretation on which the Approximation Argument does not pertain to "the degree of justification of the belief in question, but to the belief itself" (1987: 43). On Adams's (1987) later interpretation, regardless of whether a belief on which one stakes an eternal happiness can be *justified* on the basis of an approximation to certainty, it cannot be *psychologically based* solely on a probability assignment. Rather, such a belief requires a "leap" from a probability assignment to an outright belief that cannot be based (solely) on even very strong historical evidence (1987: 44). (Evans (1998a: 108) and Hannay (2003) endorse a similar interpretation of the Approximation Argument.)

<sup>15</sup> I explain and defend this interpretation in greater detail in Quanbeck (forthcoming). And while my interpretation here focuses on Climacus, there is strong evidence that Kierkegaard himself also accepts Climacus's version of belief-credence dualism.

of our outright doxastic attitudes—belief, disbelief, or suspension of judgment—are psychologically necessitated either by theoretical reason or by the way that things appear to us. Instead, Climacus insists, both suspending judgment (i.e., doubting) and forming a belief (i.e., terminating doubt) occur due to a decision, an “act of will” (PF: 82). The possibility of error can never be eliminated; it can only be disregarded. That is, “the conclusion of belief is no conclusion but a *resolution*, and thus doubt is excluded” (PF: 84, emphasis mine).

Examining each part of this sentence helps to illuminate Climacus’s conception of belief (*tro*) as involving a resolution that excludes doubt. First, Climacus regards belief as involving a resolution in the sense that it halts further theoretical deliberation.<sup>16</sup> In the *Postscript*, Climacus explains that a decision to cease reflecting—or, to use a contemporary locution, a decision to close inquiry<sup>17</sup>—occurs only via a “leap” (*spring*): a free, qualitative transition from one state to another (CUP: 113-116, 335-337). Climacus holds that someone who is in an (either occurrent or dispositional) state of trying to figure out whether *p* is true is inquiring (i.e., reflecting or deliberating) about whether *p*. In virtue of inquiring about *p*, one has not yet settled the question of whether *p*, so one thereby suspends judgment on *p*. By terminating one’s inquiry by settling the question of whether *p*, one thereby forms the belief that *p* or not-*p*.

Second, on Climacus’ view, in addition to entailing suspending judgment, inquiring entails doubting. *Johannes Climacus, or De Omnibus Dubitandum Est* provides an account of doubt as a state in which one is “interested” in the question of whether *p* (JC: 170)—i.e., one is considering whether *p*—but has not concluded deliberation about whether *p*.<sup>18</sup> One can “neutralize” doubt by “canceling” one’s interest (*interesse*) in the question of whether *p* and thereby ceasing to consider whether *p* (JC: 170). 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) and “conquered” (JC: 170). In virtue of excluding doubt, believing *p* entails *relying* on *p* in one’s reasoning, so beliefs *guide action*. Moreover, Climacus takes beliefs to involve diachronically stable *commitments* such that “the

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<sup>16</sup> Other commentators who endorse a similar interpretation include Adams (1987: 43-44), Rudd (1993: 38-39; 1998: 74), Westphal (1996: 90), Piety (2010a: 76, 82), and Stokes (2010: 39-40; 2019: 275).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Friedman (2017, 2019) and Fraser (forthcoming).

<sup>18</sup> Climacus’s conception of “interest” (*interesse*) is broader than the ordinary English sense of this term. On his view, having in interest in *p*—by either considering whether *p* or believing *p* or not-*p*—doesn’t require caring about whether *p*. Our perceptual experiences might involuntarily lead us to consider certain questions or form certain beliefs, yet these mental states still involve “interest.” See Stokes (2010) for more detailed discussion of Climacus’s conception of interest.



possibility of future reflection be closed off” (Stokes 2010: 39). That is, beliefs involve resolutions not only to close inquiry but to *foreclose* future inquiry.<sup>19</sup>

On my interpretation, Climacus holds that in addition to outright doxastic attitudes, 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 Climacus as accepting that we have *both* full beliefs (involving resolutions that close inquiry) and credences (assessments of probabilities) comes from the numerous passages in the *Postscript* in which Climacus contrasts quantitative attitudes—believing a proposition “to a certain degree,” regarding a proposition as “probable,” or striving for “approximation”—with the decisive commitment of belief.<sup>20</sup> Climacus most frequently refers to assessments of probability in the context of historical inquiry. As I explained in §2.1, Climacus takes historical inquiry to be fraught with imprecision and uncertainty. The aim of historical investigation is thus to determine the probabilities of various hypotheses (conditional on the historical evidence) in order to most accurately “approximate” the truth. On the basis of the historian’s assessment of various pieces of historical evidence, they will become more or less confident in the relevant hypotheses. Generalizing from Climacus’s discussion of historical inquiry, I suggest that he regards a credence as an estimation of how likely a proposition is conditional on one’s evidence.<sup>21</sup>

Importantly, though, Climacus maintains that having a certain credence does not psychologically necessitate either suspending judgment or believing any contingent proposition about the external world. Rather, a resolution making the “leap” to close inquiry is necessary to form a belief. For instance, the historian may eventually cease inquiring and resolve to endorse a particular hypothesis that they judge 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. It is only when the historian resolves to close inquiry that they believe. This means that belief is *not* merely a high degree of confidence. Instead, belief is differentiated from credence in virtue of involving a resolution that closes inquiry. And crucially, believing by closing inquiry requires neither modifying nor abandoning one’s credences. Rather, it is a qualitatively different mental state that one can have in addition to a credence.

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<sup>19</sup> As I interpret Climacus, this resolution can, but needn’t necessarily, involve an occurrent act of judging.

<sup>20</sup> See especially the chapters entitled “The Historical Point of View” and “Subjective Truth, Inwardness; Truth is Subjectivity.”

<sup>21</sup> See Evans (1992: 161-162) for a similar—albeit subtly different—interpretation on which Climacus regards “subjective probabilities” (i.e., credences) as estimations of objective probabilities rather than evidential probabilities.

### 3.2 Epistemic Permissivism about Outright Belief

With Kierkegaard's belief-credence dualism in place, we can now turn to his second relevant epistemological view regarding the epistemic norms governing belief. In this subsection, I argue that Kierkegaard holds that theoretical reason—closely related to what Climacus calls “objective thought”—often underdetermines what we ought to believe.<sup>22</sup> In the terminology of contemporary analytic epistemology, Kierkegaard is committed to “epistemic permissivism” about outright belief: the view that there are cases in which a given body of evidence about a proposition epistemically permits more than one outright doxastic attitude (belief, disbelief, or suspension of judgment) towards that proposition.

As noted in §2.1, Climacus concurs with the ancient Greek and Roman Skeptics that all our judgments about contingent propositions about the external world are fallible and involve some risk of error. Climacus thereby infers that any proposition (beyond “immediate sensation and immediate cognition”) can be doubted (PF: 81). As Rudd (1999) demonstrates, Kierkegaard develops and applies Climacus's epistemological views in the chapter of *Works of Love* entitled “Love Believes All Things.”<sup>23</sup> In this chapter, Kierkegaard contrasts a mistrusting perspective—involving a disposition to suspend judgment about others' character or trustworthiness—with a loving, trusting perspective—involving a disposition to trust others and believe the best of them. Kierkegaard insists that our “knowledge” (*Viden*) about the “objective” or “indifferent” evidence often underdetermines what we ought to believe about other people's inner motives and character:

[Mistrust] summarily converts this knowledge into a belief and pretends that nothing has happened, pretends that it is something that does not even need to be noticed, ‘since everyone who has the same knowledge must necessarily come to the same conclusion,’ as if it were therefore eternally certain and entirely decided that when knowledge is given then how one concludes [*slutter*] is also given.

The deception is that from knowledge (the pretense and the falsity are that it is by virtue of knowledge) mistrust concludes, assumes, and believes what it concludes, assumes, and believes

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<sup>22</sup> In the chapter of the *Postscript* entitled “Subjective Truth, Inwardness; Truth is Subjectivity,” Climacus argues that “objective thought” (or “objectivity”) aims to attain “objective truth” by making ideality (i.e., one's beliefs) correspond to reality (i.e., the world). That is, objective thought aims at forming true beliefs. By contrast, practical reason is closely related to what Climacus calls “subjective thought” (or “subjectivity”), which aims to attain “subjective truth” by making reality (i.e., one's character and volitions) correspond to ideality (i.e., normative prescriptions). Accordingly, subjective thought involves a passionate concern with one's eternal happiness (in the eudaimonistic sense discussed in §2.1) and with living in accordance with ethical and religious prescriptions. See Evans (1978: chapter 3), Emmanuel (1996: chapters 2-3), and especially Fremstedal (2022: chapters 9-13) for defenses of the interpretation that Kierkegaard accepts some version of Kant's distinction between theoretical and practical reason (associated with “objectivity” and “subjectivity,” respectively). See Evans (1983: chapter 7), Rudd (1993: chapter 2), and Piety (2010a: chapters 3 and 5) for discussion of Kierkegaard's views regarding the relationship between “objective truth” and “subjective truth.”

<sup>23</sup> For similar views in earlier upbuilding discourses, see EUD: 59, 215.

by virtue of the disbelief inherent in mistrust [*Mistroiskbeden*], whereas from the same knowledge, by virtue of belief [*tro*], one can conclude, assume, and believe the very opposite. (WL: 227)

Just as Climacus insists that the ancient Skeptics “doubted not by virtue of knowledge but by virtue of will” (PF: 82), in *Works of Love* Kierkegaard likewise holds that trust (involving belief) or mistrust (involving doubt) does not reflect the conclusion of objective, disinterested theoretical reason but rather reflects an individual’s character, passions, and/or will.<sup>24</sup>

When Climacus and Kierkegaard claim in *Philosophical Fragments* and *Works of Love*, respectively, that one can always doubt any contingent proposition about the external world and form more than one doxastic attitude on the basis of the same “knowledge,” it is admittedly not entirely clear whether they mean only that multiple attitudes are *psychologically possible* to form, or whether they also think that multiple attitudes are *epistemically rationally permissible* to form. But I agree with the commentators who interpret Kierkegaard as making both claims.<sup>25</sup> In John Lippitt’s words, “Trust or mistrust is often justifiable by the same evidence in roughly equal measure; which way we go is an existential choice” (2013: 139). To develop and defend the interpretation that Kierkegaard is committed to epistemic permissivism about outright belief, I will briefly highlight two of his views that entail permissivism.

First, Kierkegaard takes there to be multiple epistemically permissible ways to weigh the aim of believing the truth against the aim of avoiding false beliefs. That is, (in the terminology of analytic epistemology) Kierkegaard thinks there are multiple epistemically permissible attitudes towards epistemic risk. As we have seen, Kierkegaard regards all beliefs about contingent propositions about the external world to involve some risk of error and hence to be epistemically risky. In Climacus’s words, “When belief resolves to believe, it runs the risk that it was an error, but nevertheless it wills to believe. One never believes in any other way; if one wants to avoid risk, then one wants to know with certainty that one can swim before going into the water” (PF: 83, n53).<sup>26</sup> The importance that Kierkegaard himself attributes to this point is evidenced by its place in the first paragraph of the first chapter of *Works of Love*: “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). The

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<sup>24</sup> Kierkegaard repeatedly claims (e.g., WL: 14, 230) that we are especially poorly positioned epistemically to even approximate certainty in our judgments about other people’s motivations or character because the same action can be performed from very different motives, and we have no direct epistemic access to the underlying motivation. (See Piety 2003.)

<sup>25</sup> Rudd (1999) and Lippitt (2013: 139; 2020: 94) clearly endorse this reading, and Hannay (1982: 103-104), Ferreira (2001: 142-144), and Piety (2003: 163-169; 2010a: 73; 2010b: 210-212) could plausibly be construed as endorsing this interpretation.

<sup>26</sup> See Rudd (1998) for further discussion.

ancient Sceptics, Climacus explains, 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). 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 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. Consequently, even if the skeptic and the loving person have the same credence in  $p$ , due to their different attitudes towards epistemic risk, 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*) 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 (WL: 231). For instance, if the skeptic and the loving person both had a credence of .7 that someone acted in a praiseworthy manner, they would plausibly both be epistemically rational in suspending judgment and believing, respectively. Moreover, Kierkegaard implies, the skeptic is epistemically permitted to adopt the loving person’s epistemic risk attitudes (or vice versa) *at the time* when they are deliberating about whether to believe well of that person (WL: 234-235).

This is not to say that *any* attitude towards epistemic risk is permissible. One plausible interpretation of Climacus is that he regards Christian faith as “against reason” precisely because the believer manifests an irrational attitude towards epistemic risk in virtue of venturing to believe a proposition they regard as improbable (i.e., more likely to be false than true). Nonetheless, Kierkegaard seems to hold that there is a *range* of epistemically permissible attitudes towards epistemic risk. So, the evidence often does not determine which unique doxastic attitude one epistemically ought to have. Rather, it is permissible to adopt different attitudes towards epistemic risk and thereby form different outright doxastic attitudes.<sup>27</sup>

Second, given Climacus’s (and Kierkegaard’s) views that suspending judgment, inquiring, and doubting are mutually entailing and that beliefs close inquiry, suspending judgment is epistemically permissible just in case inquiring and doubting are epistemically permissible, and believing is

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<sup>27</sup> Kierkegaard’s views about the epistemic permissibility of multiple attitudes towards epistemic risk anticipates both William James’s (1896) famous discussion of the twin epistemic goals of believing truth and shunning error—as Emmanuel (1996: chapter 3) and Ferreira (2001: 142) observe—and contemporary permissivists (e.g., Kelly 2013) who appeal to James to defend permissivism.

epistemically permissible just in case closing inquiry is epistemically permissible. This implication of his view may seem trivial, but it can help to explain and motivate his permissivism. Climacus holds that objective thought (i.e., theoretical reason) alone cannot determine when one ought to open or close inquiry or when one ought to doubt (PF: 82-84, CUP: 115-116, 335-337), and therefore cannot fully specify when one ought to suspend judgment or believe.<sup>28</sup> In fact, Climacus’s view—which I think Kierkegaard shares—seems to be that doubting, inquiring, and suspending judgment about any contingent proposition about the external world is *always* epistemically permissible.<sup>29</sup> For example, when a diligent historian who has already acquired strong evidence for their hypothesis nonetheless continues to doubt and inquire into the truth of their hypothesis—and thereby suspends judgment—their attitude is epistemically permissible. Yet the epistemic permissibility of suspending judgment doesn’t entail the epistemic impermissibility of believing. Even without a change in the historian’s “knowledge” (i.e., their evidence), ceasing to doubt and closing inquiry—and thereby believing their hypothesis—could likewise be epistemically permissible. Because Kierkegaard takes there to be cases in which either belief or suspension of judgment is epistemically permissible given the same “knowledge” (i.e., evidence), Kierkegaard accepts permissivism about outright belief.

Each of these two claims—regarding the epistemic permissibility of multiple attitudes towards epistemic risk and the epistemic permissibility of either continuing inquiry or closing inquiry—individually entails that more than one outright doxastic attitude can be permitted by a given body of evidence. But these two dimensions of Kierkegaard’s permissivism are complementary and closely related to each other. If you are highly epistemically risk-averse, you will continue inquiring about whether  $p$ —and thereby suspending judgment about  $p$ —until you take yourself to have very strong evidence for  $p$  (i.e., when you have a very high credence in  $p$ ). But if you are highly epistemically risk-tolerant, you will close inquiry about whether  $p$ —and thereby believe  $p$ —once you take yourself to have only moderately strong evidence for  $p$  (i.e., when you have only a moderately high credence in  $p$ ).

We can now state more precisely the version of permissivism to which Kierkegaard is committed. Since Kierkegaard thinks that, at a given time, it is sometimes epistemically permissible for the very same agent to either continue inquiring, doubting, and suspending judgment *or* to close inquiry and believe, Kierkegaard endorses synchronic, intrapersonal belief permissivism: the view that

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<sup>28</sup> Judge William also seems to endorse this view in Part 2 of *Either/Or*. See Halvorson (2023: §5) for discussion.

<sup>29</sup> This is of course a strong claim, reflecting the significant influence of skepticism on Kierkegaard’s views. However, see Nelson (2010) for one contemporary defense of the view that there are no positive epistemic duties.

“there are evidential situations in which a particular time-slice of an agent can rationally adopt more than one belief-attitude toward a proposition” (Jackson 2021: 323).<sup>30</sup> (Kierkegaard’s belief permissivism is intrapersonal because a given body of evidence can permit the *very same agent* to adopt more than one 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 one attitude towards a proposition.) In light of the strong version of permissivism to which I’ve argued Kierkegaard is committed—on which suspending judgment about any contingent proposition about the external world is epistemically permissible for any agent at any time<sup>31</sup>—there is good sense in which Kierkegaard regards *all* such beliefs (not just religious faith) as “above” theoretical reason.<sup>32</sup>

Given Kierkegaard’s view that all beliefs about contingent propositions about the external world are fallible, in conjunction with his infallibilist conception of knowledge (on which knowledge requires epistemic certainty), one might object that Kierkegaard should be interpreted as embracing a strong form of skepticism that denies not only the possibility of knowledge but also the possibility of rational belief regarding all contingent propositions about the external world.<sup>33</sup> According to the permissivist interpretation developed above, suspending judgment is always (at least) epistemically permitted, and believing (or disbelieving) is sometimes epistemically permitted. But on an alternative skeptical reading, the *only* epistemically permissible doxastic attitude to have regarding any contingent proposition about the external world is suspension of judgment.<sup>34</sup> Of course, Kierkegaard is not a

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<sup>30</sup> Kierkegaard can also plausibly be read as endorsing diachronic intrapersonal credal permissivism (the view that there are cases in which at least two different time-slices of an agent can rationally adopt more than one credence towards a proposition on the basis of the same evidence). Commentators such as Evans (1983: 267), Roberts (1986: chapter 4), Piety (1993: 368-369; 2010a: 60), and Rudd (1998: 80) can be construed as arguing, roughly, that Kierkegaard holds that it’s both psychologically inevitable and rationally permissible for our background beliefs to inform how we interpret how strongly a body of evidence supports a proposition. In conjunction with my claim that Kierkegaard takes credences to reflect one’s assessment of how strongly the evidence supports a proposition, this implies that Kierkegaard is committed to diachronic intrapersonal credal permissivism.

<sup>31</sup> It is unclear whether Kierkegaard thinks that a body of evidence can ever rationally permit *any* outright doxastic attitude (belief, suspension of judgment, or disbelief), or whether he thinks that a body of evidence can, at most, permit two different outright doxastic attitudes. Beyond expressing agreement with Westphal’s remark that Kierkegaard thinks that “not all beliefs are equally warranted” or equally rational (2014: 193), I will remain neutral here regarding the strength of the permissivist thesis that Kierkegaard accepts.

<sup>32</sup> Kierkegaard could thus be regarded as endorsing a *synchronic* version of the view Callahan (2021) calls “epistemic existentialism.”

<sup>33</sup> Given Kierkegaard’s view that beliefs about others’ character or motivations are *particularly* susceptible to error, one might be especially tempted to interpret him as a strong skeptic regarding such matters.

<sup>34</sup> Interpreters who seem to defend some version of this strong skeptical interpretation include Popkin (1951: 275), Mackey (1971: 192), Pojman (1984: 117), and Neto (1995: 74). Kosch endorses the strong skeptical interpretation regarding *Fragments* but not the *Postscript* (2006: 188). Proponents of the strong skeptical interpretation typically appeal to the influence of Hume’s skepticism on Kierkegaard via his reading of Jacobi and Hamann. Another way to motivate the strong skeptical interpretation would be to read some of Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms (e.g., Judge William and Climacus), and (more contentiously) perhaps Kierkegaard himself, as holding a Hegelian view on which theoretical reason *requires* engaging in

strong skeptic in the traditional sense of advocating for global suspension of judgment, since he clearly rejects the ancient Skeptics' conclusion that we always all-things-considered ought to suspend judgment.<sup>35</sup> So, the most plausible version of the strong skeptical reading interprets Kierkegaard as endorsing a version of the view Rinard (2022) calls “pragmatic skepticism,” according to which beliefs about contingent propositions about the external world are always epistemically irrational, but there are often practical reasons to believe, and so we often all-things-considered ought to believe.<sup>36</sup>

In response to this strong skeptical interpretation, it's worth noting that the permissivist interpretation is compatible with reading Kierkegaard as offering a pragmatic (or more precisely, ethico-religious) response to skepticism in two significant ways. First, on the permissivist interpretation developed here, Kierkegaard does not regard the skeptic who suspends judgment about all propositions about the external world as epistemically irrational. In this respect, Kierkegaard is concessive to the skeptic. Rather, Kierkegaard criticizes the skeptic on *practical* grounds. (Contrary to the ancient Skeptics, Kierkegaard does not take human flourishing to consist in attaining tranquility by suspending judgment.) Second, the permissivist interpretation is compatible with acknowledging that there is a good sense in which Kierkegaard is a skeptic: due to his infallibilist conception of knowledge *in the strict sense*, he denies the possibility of knowledge of contingent propositions about the external world. However, as Evans (1998b: 165) observes, Kierkegaard often speaks of knowledge in a looser sense, sometimes using the phrase “approximation-knowledge” (e.g., CUP: 81). Piety thus argues that Kierkegaard distinguishes between two types of knowledge: knowledge in a strict sense—which requires certainty—and knowledge in a loose sense—which Piety claims consists in a “justified true mental representation,” where a belief is justified just in case it is sufficiently probable given the evidence (2010a: 61).<sup>37</sup> That Kierkegaard is willing to speak of knowledge in a loose sense strongly indicates that he does not regard all beliefs that fall short of certainty as irrational. It would be

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impartial inquiry until one has attained a God's-eye perspective involving complete understanding and objective certainty (cf. Westphal 1996: chapter 5; Halvorson 2023).

<sup>35</sup> Even proponents of the strong skeptical interpretation acknowledge this point (e.g., Popkin 1951: 278-279; Neto 1995: 74).

<sup>36</sup> More specifically, on the most plausible strong skeptical interpretation, Kierkegaard does not endorse the full-blooded skeptical claim that we have no evidence for our ordinary beliefs. Rather, he endorses a more moderate version of skepticism on which (in Rinard's words) “our evidence does favor ordinary beliefs over alternatives, it's just that the degree of evidential support doesn't suffice for knowledge” or rational belief (2022: 435).

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Westphal's interpretation that on Climacus's view, “for all practical purposes, we can treat the results of our best approximations as knowledge, even if strictly speaking they fall short of meeting the criterion [of certainty]” (2014: 193). See Davis (2007) for a somewhat similar view in contemporary analytic epistemology, on which knowledge ascriptions can be used loosely to implicate that a subject is warranted in asserting  $p$  and relying on  $p$  in their practical reasoning.

exceedingly odd to claim that a belief is epistemically irrational despite constituting knowledge (even in a loose sense).<sup>38</sup>

But if Kierkegaard does accept that beliefs falling short of certainty can be rational, this could lead to a second objection: that Kierkegaard is neither a strong skeptic nor a permissivist, but his view is rather that belief is epistemically required (and so suspension of judgment is epistemically forbidden) if and only if you are in a position to know in the “loose sense.” However, if this were his view, one would expect Kierkegaard to criticize skepticism on *epistemological* grounds. But to my knowledge, he only objects to skepticism on practical grounds and never implies that skeptics are epistemically criticizable for suspending judgment.

#### 4. How Practical Considerations Affect What We Should Believe

With Kierkegaard’s two key epistemological views in place, in this section I develop a novel interpretation of Kierkegaard’s account of how practical (e.g., eudaimonistic, ethical, or religious) considerations affect what we ought to believe in epistemically permissive cases.<sup>39</sup> On this interpretation, rather than either necessarily *conflicting* with epistemic rationality or *encroaching* on epistemic rationality by affecting the epistemic status of a belief, practical considerations can determine which doxastic attitude, among the epistemically permitted options, one all-things-considered ought to hold.<sup>40</sup> I argue that there are three primary ways that Kierkegaard takes practical considerations to affect what we ought to believe:<sup>41</sup> 1) by affecting the attitude we ought to adopt towards epistemic risk, 2) by constituting reasons for or against inquiring (and thereby reasons for or against suspending judgment), and 3) by directly constituting reasons for or against belief.<sup>42</sup> While Kierkegaard himself

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<sup>38</sup> See Anderson (1997) and Carson (2013) for additional objections to the strong skeptical interpretation.

<sup>39</sup> See Wylie (2013: §4) for an interesting interpretation on which Climacus takes *aesthetic* considerations to affect what we should believe.

<sup>40</sup> One might worry that, in light of Kierkegaard’s (and Climacus’s) repeated claim that our reasoning about what to believe should involve subjective concern and passion, he does not distinguish between epistemic and practical rationality as clearly as my interpretation implies. In reply, I think Kierkegaard (and Climacus) accepts some version of Kant’s distinction between theoretical and practical reason (associated with objective and subjective thought, respectively). (See footnote 22 above.) Consequently, to say that subjective concern should affect what we believe entails that distinctively practical considerations should affect what we believe. Nonetheless, someone who finds this response unpersuasive could still accept the core features of my interpretation while recasting it as follows: when what one ought to believe is underdetermined relative to one subset of the relevant considerations—namely, one’s evidence—practical considerations can help to determine what one ought to believe *simpliciter* (i.e., taking into account all of the relevant considerations).

<sup>41</sup> For the sake of space, I will neither explain *why* Kierkegaard takes these practical considerations in particular to affect what we ought to believe nor provide an exhaustive list of *which* practical considerations he takes to affect what we ought to believe.

<sup>42</sup> I use the term “reason” here in a broader sense than Kierkegaard often does. When referring to “a reason” to  $\phi$ , I simply mean a consideration that counts in favor of  $\phi$ -ing (where  $\phi$  can range over both actions and attitudes). By contrast, Kierkegaard sometimes speaks of “reason” (*Fornuft*) as a human faculty. (See Helms 2017, Westphal 2018, and Fremstedal 2022: chapters 12 for further discussion of Kierkegaard’s conception of the faculty of reason.) I will not take a stance here



does not explicitly identify or distinguish between these three ways that practical considerations can affect what we ought to believe—and it’s admittedly sometimes unclear how to categorize certain kinds of practical considerations, as I note on several occasions below—I take this taxonomy to provide a useful analytical reconstruction and systematization of Kierkegaard’s views. This section considers these three ways in turn and shows how each of them allows practical considerations to affect what we ought to believe without (typically) conflicting with epistemic rationality.

#### 4.1 Epistemic Risk Attitudes

As I argued in §3.2, Kierkegaard holds that a range of attitudes toward epistemic risk is epistemically permissible. However, he does not take all epistemically permissible attitudes towards epistemic risk to be *all-things-considered* permissible, as some attitudes towards epistemic risk are either required or prohibited by practical—e.g., ethical or religious—norms.<sup>43</sup> This subsection will examine three types of practical considerations which can affect the attitude towards epistemic risk that we all-things-considered ought to adopt: the practical costs of believing falsely, the practical costs of failing to form a true belief, and the practical value of holding epistemically risky beliefs *per se* (independent of the costs of forming a false belief or failing to form a true belief).

In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard argues that we have a moral duty to express Christian agapic love—involving a selfless concern for others’ flourishing—towards others. One important component of agapic love, Kierkegaard argues, is that it “hides a multitude of sins.” That is, love involves a variety of dispositions—including doxastic dispositions—to “hide” others’ putative faults by minimizing the significance of their actual faults, refraining from falsely attributing to them faults they lack, and accurately attributing to them excellences they possess. In the chapter of *Works of Love* entitled “Love Believes All Things,” Kierkegaard provides an account of how this duty affects the attitude that we ought to adopt towards epistemic risk.

First, Kierkegaard holds that when falsely believing  $p$  would be morally costly, we should be averse to the risk of believing  $p$  falsely and therefore suspend judgment on  $p$  in the absence of very strong evidence for  $p$ . But Kierkegaard laments that people are often too averse to the risk of falsely believing well of others, associating this form of epistemic risk aversion with the vice of “sagacity.”

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on the details of Kierkegaard’s view about the relationship between “reasons” and the faculty of “reason.” However, I should note that my appeal to this broader conception of “reasons” in interpreting Kierkegaard is by no means idiosyncratic. For instance, a number of contributors to Davenport and Rudd’s (2001) edited volume *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre* argue that Judge William (and Kierkegaard) takes there to be “reasons” to choose an ethical life over an aesthetic life.

<sup>43</sup> By contrast, some proponents of encroachment (e.g., Pace 2011 and Schroeder 2012) argue that practical considerations affect the epistemic risk attitude that one *epistemically* ought to adopt.

By contrast, Kierkegaard argues, we are often *insufficiently* averse to the risk of falsely believing ill of others (and thereby violating a moral duty):

We human beings have a natural fear of making a mistake—by thinking too well of another person. On the other hand, the error of thinking too ill of another person is perhaps not feared, or at least not in proportion to the first. But then we do not fear most to be in error, then we are still in error by having a one-sided fear of a certain kind of error. (WL: 232)

Because falsely believing ill of others (and thereby falsely attributing to others a fault they don't have) would violate the moral duty to hide others' putative faults, we should be very averse to the risk of falsely believing ill of others. As M. Jamie Ferreira puts it, "Kierkegaard's view is that the fear of misjudging someone, of attributing fault where it is not justified, should lead us to be generous in our believings" (2001: 144). So while believing ill of others on the basis of reasonably strong evidence may be *epistemically* permissible, it is often *morally* impermissible.<sup>44</sup>

Given Kierkegaard's emphasis on the moral risks of believing ill of others in conjunction with his view that suspending judgment about contingent propositions about the external world is always epistemically permissible, one might be tempted to interpret Kierkegaard as holding that we *never* all-things-considered ought to believe ill of others. However, other passages in *Works of Love* make it clear that this is not his view. Kierkegaard holds that the loving person will believe that someone has acted wrongly when the evidence very strongly supports this proposition, yet "hide" this fault by offering a "mitigating explanation" or a "lenient interpretation" that lessens their culpability while acknowledging their wrongdoing (WL: 291-292). Moreover, as Ferreira (2001: 175) points out, in order to forgive others—which Kierkegaard exhorts his reader to do—one must have first judged them to be culpable; otherwise, there would be nothing to forgive. Finally, as Ferreira (2001: 110-112) emphasizes, Kierkegaard takes love to obligate us to "fight the imperfection, overcome the defect" in others (WL: 166), which (arguably) requires believing that others have imperfections and defects. Indeed, refraining from ever negatively judging others involves its own moral danger, as it may prevent us from lovingly helping others to recognize their faults and improve themselves. So, on Kierkegaard's view we have moral reasons to be averse to the risk of forming a false belief when doing so could

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<sup>44</sup> Kierkegaard seems to hold that the moral obligation to hide others' faults applies primarily in interpersonal relationships. As Rudd (1999: 135) argues, Kierkegaard thinks that we should be "ruthless" and uncharitable in interpreting our own behavior (though see Lippitt 2013: 146-147 for a dissenting view). Moreover, Kierkegaard implies that those occupying certain social roles—e.g., judges and "servants of justice"—ought not to be charitable in interpreting others' behavior (WL: 233, 293), as Rudd (1999: 136) and Lippitt (2013: 142) observe.

violate a moral duty, but this is counterbalanced by the potential moral costs of failing to have true beliefs about others' faults.<sup>45</sup>

This brings us to the second type of practical consideration that should affect our attitude towards epistemic risk: the practical costs of failing to have a true belief. As Kierkegaard emphasizes throughout the chapter “Love Believes All Things,” one can make the error of “thinking too ill of another person” (WL: 232) not only by outright believing ill of them, but by failing to believe well of them. Consequently, the duty to love others requires not only refraining from interpreting their actions uncharitably, but positively interpreting their actions charitably. In this chapter, Kierkegaard’s central contrast is between the loving person who “believes all things”—i.e., the person who always gives others the benefit of the doubt and is therefore disposed to believe well of others—and the mistrusting person who “believes nothing at all” and refuses to ever believe well of others lest they be deceived (WL: 226). As Rudd (1999: 122) and Lippitt (2020: 92) observe, Kierkegaard’s mistrustful character does not outright believe ill of others. Rather, the mistrusting perspective involves skepticism: a refusal to *either* believe well or believe ill of others. Mistrust, Kierkegaard explains, uses “its acumen to safeguard itself in believing nothing” (WL: 235). That is, mistrust is characterized by the aim to “safeguard” oneself from the error of forming a false belief. In this respect, the mistrustful person shares (at least within a certain domain) the ancient Skeptics’ aversion to the risk of forming a false belief.<sup>46</sup> Just as Kierkegaard takes the ancient Skeptics’ doubt to be motivated by their practical aim of attaining tranquility, the mistrustful person’s aversion to forming false beliefs stems from their (conscious or unconscious) practical aims. For instance, they might aim to avoid the vulnerability to deception and manipulation that trust engenders (WL: 227), or they might aim to avoid being regarded by others as foolish, stupid, simple-minded, or naïve (WL: 226-228).

However, Kierkegaard argues that in an important respect, the mistrustful person—who, in virtue of “believing nothing at all,” precludes participating in loving, trusting relationships—is the one who is *most* deceived: “And yet, even though one is not deceived by others, is one not deceived, most terribly deceived, by oneself, to be sure, through believing nothing at all, deceived out of the highest, out of the blessedness of giving of oneself, the blessedness of love!” (WL: 235).<sup>47</sup> In Mark Tietjen’s words, Kierkegaard thinks that those who mistrustfully “make suspicion a default position” incur the significant moral cost of closing themselves off to “a relationship of love, respect, and concern for the

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<sup>45</sup> For discussion of the tension between Kierkegaard’s injunctions to *name* sin and to *hide* sin, see Green (2013: 574-575).

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Furtak’s (2013: 136-138) discussion of Kierkegaard’s treatment of the ancient Skeptics’ epistemic risk aversion.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. William James’s criticism of W.K. Clifford’s extreme epistemic risk aversion: “[H]e who says, ‘Better go without belief forever than believe a lie!’ merely shows his own preponderant private horror of becoming a dupe” (1896: 18).

other” (2010: 100). This moral cost associated with failing to form true beliefs that reflect well on others is typically greater than the moral risk of being deceived by falsely believing well of others.<sup>48</sup> So, on Kierkegaard’s view we should be more averse to the potential moral costs we would incur by missing out on a true belief that reflects well on others than to the moral risks of falsely believing well of others.<sup>49</sup>

The same principle explains Climacus’s critique of those who refuse to “venture” to form a belief about the highest good in the *Postscript* (e.g., CUP: 203-204, 404-405). As I argued in §2.1, Climacus holds that lacking a true belief about the highest good guarantees that one will fail to gain eternal happiness. Consequently, we have practical reasons to be averse to the cost of missing out on a true belief about the highest good, and we therefore have practical reasons to adopt a risk-tolerant attitude with respect to our beliefs about the highest good. Notably, though, this is not merely a variant of the encroachment interpretation developed in §2.1 on which the practical costs of missing out on a true belief make adopting an epistemically risk-tolerant attitude *epistemically* required. Rather, the practical cost of missing out on a true belief provides a distinctively *practical* reason to adopt an epistemically risk-tolerant attitude.

Finally, Kierkegaard could plausibly be interpreted as arguing that we also have practical reasons to form epistemically risky beliefs *in virtue of* their epistemic riskiness. That is, we have practical reasons to believe epistemically risky propositions simply because they are epistemically risky, *independently* of the practical costs of failing to believe a true proposition. The basic thought is that risky beliefs—especially about high-stakes matters—incite passion, and passion is practically valuable. This is one of the reasons why Climacus insists that faith is a risky venture requiring holding fast to objective uncertainty such that the believer feels like they are out on 70,000 fathoms of water (CUP: 204). Climacus explains, “Uncertainty...is precisely what intensifies the infinite passion of inwardness...Without risk, no faith. Faith is the contradiction between the infinite passion of inwardness and the objective uncertainty” (CUP: 203-204).

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<sup>48</sup> On another plausible interpretation of Kierkegaard’s claim that “love believes all things—and yet is never deceived”—especially as this claim is developed in the second half of the chapter—Kierkegaard holds that we ought to form trusting beliefs that reflect well on others *even when these beliefs are false*. That is, in virtue of forming loving, trusting beliefs—regardless of their truth value—one avoids the most important form of deception, in which “to be deceived simply and solely means to refrain from loving, to let oneself be carried away as to give up love in itself and to lose its intrinsic blessedness in that way” (WL: 236). (See Ferreira 2001: 144-145 for further discussion of the tension between the different notions of deception Kierkegaard appeals to in this chapter.) According to this alternative interpretation, then, our reasons to trust others are (at least in some cases) instances of *direct* practical reasons for belief (discussed below in §4.3).

<sup>49</sup> On this interpretation, a loving, trusting perspective is not necessarily *epistemically* superior to an unloving, mistrustful perspective (*pace* Furtak 2005). However, neither does love constitutively involve epistemic irrationality.

Adams (1977) calls this Climacus’s “Passion Argument,” and reconstructs it as follows:

- 1) The most essential and the most valuable feature of religiousness is passion, indeed an infinite passion, a passion of the greatest possible intensity.
- 2) An infinite passion requires [a belief involving] objective improbability.
- 3) Therefore that which is most essential and most valuable in religiousness requires objective improbability. (1977: 236)

We can generalize from this specific argument regarding religious faith to an account of the practical value of being epistemically risk-seeking in other contexts. First, the principle motivating premise 1 generalizes beyond the domain of religion and beyond the domain of infinite passion. Kierkegaard consistently regards passion not only as religiously valuable but also as more generally existentially valuable (e.g., in *Two Ages*). Likewise, finite passion—corresponding to matters of finite significance—can also be practically valuable.<sup>50</sup> Second, premise 2 also relies on a more general principle: that passion is proportionate to epistemic risk (i.e., the epistemic probability of error). In Adams’s words, “Acceptance of risk can thus be seen as a measure of the intensity of passion” (1977: 237).<sup>51</sup> However, the degree to which a belief feels risky—and correspondingly incites passion—isn’t determined solely by its epistemic riskiness. Rather, it is a function of both the epistemic risk and the practical stakes (including both the costs of a false belief and the benefits of a true belief).<sup>52</sup> Consequently, beliefs which involve both high practical stakes and significant epistemic risk *feel* especially risky and thereby incite passion.

Climacus arguably takes his paradigmatic example of a proposition which is risky to believe—the doctrine of the incarnation—to be sufficiently improbable that believing it requires adopting an epistemically irrational attitude towards epistemic risk. Adams’s specific version of the Passion Argument thus doesn’t explain how practical considerations can determine which among the epistemically permitted attitudes towards epistemic risk we ought to adopt. However, the generalized versions of the principles underlying premises 1 and 2 also support the claim that epistemically permissible forms of risk-seeking in belief formation can likewise be practically valuable. So, the practical value of having beliefs that incite a greater degree of passion can provide practical reasons to adopt epistemically permissible yet still risk-seeking attitudes.

## 4.2 Reasons for and against Inquiry

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<sup>50</sup> See Adams (1977: 235-238) for further discussion.

<sup>51</sup> Adams seems to assume that Kierkegaard takes passion to *require* epistemic risk. However, on my reading Kierkegaard takes epistemic risk to *facilitate* and *intensify* passion, rather than being a strictly necessary condition for passion. For instance, in at “At a Graveside” in *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*, Kierkegaard insists that earnestly thinking about the certainty of death can incite passion.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Westphal (2014: 202).

A second way that Kierkegaard thinks practical considerations affect what doxastic attitude we ought to adopt is by affecting whether we ought to inquire. As I argued in §3.1, Kierkegaard holds that belief involves a resolution that closes inquiry, and that suspending judgment, doubting, and inquiring are mutually entailing. Consequently, reasons to inquire entail reasons to suspend judgment. In §3.2, I suggested that Kierkegaard takes inquiring further about any contingent proposition about the external world—and thereby suspending judgment—to always be epistemically permissible. However, this does not entail that inquiring and suspending judgment is always all-things-considered permissible; suspending judgment may be either practically forbidden or practically required. We can distinguish between three levels at which there are practical reasons for and against inquiry: 1) opening inquiry into a question about which one doesn't already have a doxastic attitude, 2) continuing an ongoing inquiry, and 3) reopening inquiry into a question one has already settled. This subsection examines each level in turn.

Let's start by considering Kierkegaard's account of practical reasons for and against opening inquiry into a question about which one doesn't already have a doxastic attitude. According to the interpretation of Kierkegaard sketched in §3.1, having an "interest" in the question of whether  $p$  is a necessary condition of having a doxastic attitude towards  $p$ . Initially having an interest in the question of whether  $p$ —without yet settling on an answer to that question—entails inquiring into and suspending judgment on  $p$ . So, reasons for or against initially having an interest in the question of whether  $p$  entail reasons for or against inquiring into and suspending judgment on  $p$ .

In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard argues that lovingly "hiding" others' faults precludes attempting to discover their faults (WL: 282-288). Kierkegaard observes, "We do of course distinguish between discovering that is the conscious and deliberate effort to find and seeing or hearing that can occur against one's will" (WL: 285). So, while the loving person may unwillingly gain evidence indicating that someone possesses a fault, they will not make a "conscious and deliberate effort" to discover others' faults, i.e., they will not be disposed to intentionally inquire into others' (putative) faults. The moral duty to love by hiding others' faults therefore provides moral reasons against inquiring into others' faults. In addition to cases in which we ought not to inquire into certain "concerned," morally fraught questions (such as others' faults), Kierkegaard also holds that we ought not to inquire into "indifferent" matters when such inquiry precludes or hinders fulfilling our ethical or religious duties. More innocently, such inquiry can distract us from more important matters; less innocently, it can

serve as a (conscious or unconscious) way of evading one's duty.<sup>53</sup> So, on Kierkegaard's view, we can have practical reasons not to inquire into such matters.

Likewise, on Kierkegaard's view we can have reasons *to* inquire about certain ethically or religiously relevant matters, including (perhaps surprisingly) individuals' faults. This is because Kierkegaard seems to restrict the moral requirement not to inquire into others' faults (like the moral requirement to interpret others' behavior charitably) to interpersonal relationships. For instance, certain professions require inquiring into others' faults: "Let the judge appointed by the state, let the servant of justice work at discovering guilt and crime; the rest of us are called to be neither judges nor servants of justice" (WL: 293). Likewise, throughout his authorship Kierkegaard frequently exhorts his readers to inquire into their *own* faults. Kierkegaard takes very seriously the Delphic injunction to know thyself (e.g., SUD: 31), and he takes inquiry into own's shortcomings to be a primary way of attaining (or at least approximating) self-knowledge.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, while Kierkegaard is critical of excessive reflection that replaces action, Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms are likewise critical of the unreflective action associated with certain forms of "immediacy."<sup>55</sup>

Notably, on this interpretation none of these practical reasons for or against inquiring about (and thus taking an interest in and suspending judgment about) the question of whether *p* can conflict with epistemic rationality. I am inclined to interpret Kierkegaard as holding that *whether* one ought to initially take an interest in the question of whether *p*—and thereby adopt any doxastic attitude at all regarding *p*—falls outside of the scope of epistemic rationality and is determined only by practical norms.<sup>56</sup> One is only subject to epistemic norms—governing *which* doxastic attitude one ought to have—with respect to propositions in which one has an interest. Consequently, practical norms that determine whether one ought to have any doxastic attitude at all regarding *p* cannot conflict with epistemic rationality.

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<sup>53</sup> See Gouwens (1996: chapter 1), Piety (2010a: 81), Stokes (2010: chapter 9), and Carson (2013: 40) for further discussion.

<sup>54</sup> For example, see Kierkegaard's claim in "On the Occasion of a Confession" (in *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*) that we can gain self-understanding by subjecting our conduct to the judgment of God and our conscience (where conscience literally means "knowing with"), and his insistence in "To Need God is a Human Being's Highest Perfection" (in EUD) on recognizing our need for God by attending to our particular failures and weaknesses. Kierkegaard's exhortation in *For Self-Examination* to see oneself as implicated by the prescriptions and judgments found in the "Mirror of the Word" likewise aims at acquiring self-knowledge. See Stokes (2010: chapters 6-7) and Lippitt (2017) for further discussion of Kierkegaard's views regarding self-knowledge.

<sup>55</sup> For instance, see Anti-Climacus's discussion of unconscious despair in *The Sickness unto Death*, and Judge William's critique of certain forms of aesthetic immediacy (paradigmatically exemplified by Don Giovanni) in *Either/Or*. (Unreflective immediacy is not essential to the "aesthetic" sphere of existence, however, as some aesthetes—paradigmatically Johannes the Seducer—are highly reflective.)

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Feldman's view that epistemic rationality is silent regarding the questions that we ought to investigate (2000: 690) and Harman's "Interest Condition" on theoretical reason (1986: chapter 6).

Let's turn to the second level at which there are practical reasons for or against inquiry: continuing ongoing inquiry. Kierkegaard holds that we are sometimes morally required to engage in careful, extensive inquiry before forming a belief. For instance, lovingly hiding others' faults involves being slow to judge them by concluding that they have acted wrongly or culpably after a question regarding their putative faults has been opened (WL: 233). Even if we have fairly strong evidence that someone has acted wrongly or culpably, before believing ill of them we have a moral duty to seek out further (potentially exculpatory) evidence, or alternative "lenient" or "mitigating" interpretations of our current evidence (WL: 292).<sup>57</sup>

Kierkegaard also thinks that there are numerous types of practical reasons to close inquiry (and thereby form a belief) rather than inquiring further. I'll briefly note two here. First, Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms repeatedly insist that making commitments (which involve belief) regarding ethically and religiously significant matters—paradigmatically regarding one's conception of the highest good—is essential to becoming a well-integrated self and realizing one's *telos* as a human being (Rudd 1993, 2001, 2012). One of Climacus's central criticisms of Hegelian philosophers (especially Hans Lassen Martensen) throughout the *Postscript* is that they refuse to make the "leap" to close inquiry, instead continuing to doubt, reflect, and deliberate about matters of fundamental ethical and religious significance.<sup>58</sup> Similarly, according to some interpretations of *Either/Or* (e.g., Rudd 1993: chapter 3, 2001), Judge William's fundamental critique of the aesthete A is that he lacks commitments that would give his life a coherent, unifying purpose. Because continuing to inquire and holding out for further evidence "postpones" commitment indefinitely (Adams 1977), we have reasons to cease inquiring and form the beliefs constitutive of such commitments. Second, Kierkegaard holds that just as inquiring into practically irrelevant matters can be a mode of evading one's duties, inquiring into morally or religiously relevant matters longer than one ought to can likewise be a way of evading one's duties. This line of thought occurs repeatedly throughout Kierkegaard's authorship in both signed and pseudonymous texts (e.g., FSE: 32; CUP: 200; TA: 96).<sup>59</sup> So, Kierkegaard thinks that we can have practical reasons to close inquiry when decisive action is required.

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<sup>57</sup> See Berger (ms.) for a version of pragmatic encroachment on which an agent's belief is *epistemically* unjustified if they ought to inquire further.

<sup>58</sup> See also Kierkegaard's satirical illustration of the utter practical infeasibility of Martensen's exhortation to continually inquire about and doubt everything in *Johannes Climacus*. See Stewart (2003: chapter 5) for further discussion.

<sup>59</sup> For further discussion, see Roberts (1984), Marino (1996: 58-59), Gouwens (1996: chapter 1), Kosch (2006: 195), Stokes (2010), Compaijen and Vos (2019), and Halvorson (2023).



Notably, practical reasons both for and against inquiring can affect which doxastic attitude we ought to have without necessarily conflicting with theoretical reason. Because Kierkegaard holds that continuing to inquire about contingent propositions about the external world is always epistemically permissible, practical requirements to continue inquiring never conflict with theoretical reason. Practical requirements to close inquiry, by contrast, can—but do not necessarily—conflict with theoretical reason (depending on whether suspending judgment is epistemically required in a particular case).

Finally, let's turn to the third level: practical reasons for or against reopening inquiry into a question one has already settled by forming a belief. Two dimensions of Kierkegaard's account of belief discussed in §3.1 are worth recalling here. First, since belief and inquiry are psychologically incompatible states, reopening inquiry about whether  $p$  entails ceasing to believe  $p$ . Second, as resolutions, beliefs involve a commitment not to arbitrarily reopen inquiry, but not necessarily to never reopen inquiry (e.g., when significant counterevidence arises). In some cases, though, Kierkegaard takes there to be distinctively practical reasons not to reopen inquiry even in light of counterevidence. For instance, as we saw above, Kierkegaard takes trust—in both interpersonal contexts and religious contexts—to be an important good which is incompatible with doubt. Consequently, reopening inquiry into (and thereby doubting) someone's reliability or trustworthiness undermines trust. Similarly, Kierkegaard takes faith—and perhaps other foundational commitments that are partly constitutive of having a well-integrated, diachronically stable self—to constitute a total, unconditional commitment to *never* revise one's belief or reopen inquiry, as Adams (1977: 233-235) argues. This means, of course, that reopening inquiry would undermine this faith. Furthermore, just as inquiring into “indifferent” matters and continuing inquiry into ethically relevant matters longer than one ought to can constitute a form of ethical evasion, so too can reopening inquiry into a question regarding ethically relevant matters that one has already settled (e.g., CD: 205; SUD: 94).

In light of Kierkegaard's emphasis on the importance of having diachronically stable commitments and his frequent criticisms of skeptical doubt and inquiry, one might think that Kierkegaard would reject the view that there are *any* practical reasons to reopen inquiry. Yet one of the central aims of Kierkegaard's authorship is to stir his readers out of their complacent, unexamined beliefs. According to Kierkegaard's interpretation of the early Platonic dialogues in *The Concept of Irony*, via his negative, ironic use of the elenchus Socrates sought to induce doubt that undermines his interlocutors' conventional beliefs and thereby “deliver listeners from the unexamined life as he questioned their seemingly unassailable convictions” (Söderquist 2013: 356). Likewise, Kierkegaard

regards himself as a Christian Socrates of sorts, who seeks to undermine his readers' unduly casual, conventional beliefs about "concerned," ethically and religiously significant matters. I suggest that Kierkegaard regards coming to doubt one's beliefs as valuable not only when these beliefs are epistemically unwarranted but *also* when these beliefs are unexamined: i.e., when one has not adequately grappled with the intellectual difficulties and practical demands that accompany these beliefs. While we ought not to remain in a permanent state of doubt, grappling with doubt is a dialectically important stage that must ultimately be "conquered" (JC: 170) by believing. So, the existential value of grappling with doubt can provide a practical reason to reopen inquiry into beliefs which were initially formed without adequately contending with doubt (and were therefore initially *practically* unjustified).

I suggested above that on Kierkegaard's view suspending judgment about contingent propositions about the external world is always epistemically permitted, which entails that reopening inquiry about such propositions is always epistemically permitted. But keeping inquiry closed and thereby continuing to believe can also be epistemically permitted, provided that belief was epistemically rational in the first place and that one has not encountered sufficiently strong new counterevidence to require reopening inquiry. Thus, practical reasons against reopening inquiry often will not conflict with theoretical reason. However, if Kierkegaard holds that faith involves a dogmatic commitment *never* to revise one's beliefs even in light of very strong counterevidence (as Adams 1977: 234 argues), this may require epistemic irrationality. So again, while Kierkegaard's view makes space for practical considerations to affect what we ought to believe without necessarily conflicting with theoretical reason, it does not preclude the possibility of such conflict either.

### 4.3 Direct Reasons for and against Belief

Kierkegaard also arguably takes there to be cases in which we have practical reasons for (or against) believing a proposition when this belief would be valuable (or disvaluable) *regardless* of whether it is true or false. I will call these "direct" practical reasons for or against belief since they *directly* affect whether one ought to believe  $p$  without being mediated by the attitude towards epistemic risk that one ought to adopt regarding  $p$  or by whether one ought to inquire about whether  $p$ .<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> These direct reasons for or against belief may also *indirectly* constitute reasons for or against adopting certain attitudes towards epistemic risk or for or against opening or closing inquiry. To believe any epistemically uncertain proposition, one must take a risk and close inquiry. Accordingly, the distinction between "direct" and "indirect" reasons for belief can be understood in terms of which attitude the reason *fundamentally* supports and which attitude the reason *derivatively* supports. Reasons which directly, fundamentally count for or against adopting a certain attitude towards epistemic risk or inquiring can be considered indirect, derivative reasons for or against believing. Likewise, reasons which directly, fundamentally

For instance, in the chapter of *Works of Love* entitled “Love Builds Up,” Kierkegaard argues that we ought to “presuppose” love in others—i.e., to believe that love is present in others—regardless of whether such love is actually present. As Ferreira puts it, to presuppose love in the other “is to trust them, to have more confidence in them than they have in themselves” so that they are more likely to actualize their potential to *become* loving (2001: 139). That is, Kierkegaard holds that we ought to therapeutically trust others, to help them “to become trustworthy by trusting [them]” (Lippitt 2013: 138).<sup>61</sup> Another example of direct practical reasons for belief can arguably be found in *Fear and Trembling* where Kierkegaard’s pseudonym Johannes de Silentio takes Abraham to have non-epistemic religious reasons—perhaps deriving from God’s commandments, or perhaps deriving from his trusting relationship with God—to believe God’s promise that he will get Isaac back in this life despite God’s commandment to sacrifice Isaac.<sup>62</sup>

Yet the most significant proposition for which Kierkegaard arguably thinks we have direct practical reasons for belief is the doctrine of the incarnation. Kierkegaard’s view about whether, or on what grounds, Christian faith is justified is among the longest standing debates in Kierkegaard scholarship.<sup>63</sup> Although I cannot settle this debate here, on one plausible interpretation Kierkegaard (and some of his pseudonyms) regards faith as justified on practical grounds.<sup>64</sup> While I will pass over the details of Kierkegaard’s account of what the practical reasons for faith consist in—for the sake of space, because different texts by Kierkegaard and different pseudonyms spell out the details differently, and because commentators endorsing this line of interpretation disagree about the details—the central idea is that faith is the only solution to despair.<sup>65</sup> We have practical reasons of some sort (either eudaimonistic reasons<sup>66</sup> regarding our flourishing or non-eudaimonistic, broadly Kantian moral reasons) to overcome despair. Faith is partly constituted by belief in the incarnation. So, we have practical reason to believe in the incarnation.

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count for or against believing can be considered indirect, derivative reasons for or against adopting a certain attitude towards epistemic risk and/or inquiring.

<sup>61</sup> See Preston-Roedder (2013: 676-680) for a similar argument.

<sup>62</sup> See McDaniel (2020: §4) for a defense of this reading and references to other commentators who endorse similar interpretations of *Fear and Trembling*.

<sup>63</sup> See Buben (2013) for an overview of this debate.

<sup>64</sup> Emmanuel (1996: chapter 3) and Fremstedal (2022: chapter 13) explicitly endorse this interpretation, and Roberts (1986: 142), Rudd (1993: chapter 4), Kosch (2006: chapter 6), Söderquist (2019), and Kemp and Della Torre (2022) seem to endorse an interpretation in this neighborhood. I will set aside here fideistic interpretations on which Kierkegaard holds that there are no normative reasons of any kind for faith.

<sup>65</sup> For instance, see Anti-Climacus’s account of faith as a solution to despair in *The Sickness unto Death*. See also CUP: 200.

<sup>66</sup> For the reasons discussed in footnote 7, these eudaimonistic reasons should not be conflated with prudential, Pascalian reasons for faith.

Depending on how the details of this argument are filled in, Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms might be interpreted as taking faith to be a solution to despair—and therefore taking belief in the incarnation to be valuable—only if Christianity is true.<sup>67</sup> On this interpretation, there are practical reasons to embrace a very risk-tolerant attitude in believing in the incarnation (which fall under the first category of practical reasons for belief discussed in §4.1). But if faith would be the only solution to despair even if Christianity is false, then this argument provides a direct reason for believing in the incarnation.<sup>68</sup>

In either case, this interpretation can be developed along “supra-rationalist” lines, such that rather than conflicting with theoretical reason, faith is “above” theoretical reason but justified by practical reason. That is, faith is a special case of a belief which is neither forbidden nor required by theoretical reason, required by practical reason, and therefore all-things-considered required. According to Roe Fremstedal’s recent version of this interpretation (2022: chapter 12), 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. Because theoretical reason in principle cannot determine its truth, it neither requires nor prohibits any outright doxastic attitude. Consequently, propositions that are in principle undecidable on theoretical grounds can be justified on practical grounds without a conflict between theoretical and practical reason. On Fremstedal’s interpretation, then, Kierkegaard accepts what we might call “Kantian permissivism.”<sup>69</sup> If Fremstedal’s interpretation is correct, Kierkegaard regards faith as a special case in which practical considerations affect what we ought to believe when theoretical reason underdetermines what we ought to believe: not because there is evidence for and against the proposition in question which permits more than one outright doxastic attitude, as in the typical cases discussed above, but rather because there *cannot* be evidence either for or against the truth of the proposition in question. Fremstedal’s interpretation provides one intriguing way of extending the interpretation I have developed above to make sense of Kierkegaard’s account of the relationship between faith and reason.

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<sup>67</sup> The reading of Kierkegaard developed in §2.1—on which having a true belief about the highest good is a necessary condition of flourishing—fits naturally with this interpretation, especially if having a true belief about the highest good is also necessary to overcome despair.

<sup>68</sup> This interpretation arguably fits better with a reading on which Kierkegaard posits non-eudaimonistic, broadly Kantian practical reasons for faith (Fremstedal 2022: chapter 13).

<sup>69</sup> If permissivism is construed narrowly—as claiming that there are cases in which, given a *non-empty set of evidence*, epistemic rationality permits more than one doxastic attitude—this view does not count as permissivist. But on a broader construal of permissivism—as claiming that there are cases in which *theoretical reason* does not uniquely require adopting one particular doxastic attitude—this view does count as permissivist.

However, some interpreters argue that an “anti-rationalist” interpretation—on which Kierkegaard takes faith to be “against” reason—can better accommodate the numerous passages in which Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms (especially Climacus and Anti-Climacus) seem to oppose faith and reason.<sup>70</sup> According to one promising version of this interpretation, faith is “against” theoretical reason yet still justified practically.<sup>71</sup> On this reading, practical and theoretical reason conflict in the case of faith, and practical reason overrides theoretical reason.<sup>72</sup> If this version of the anti-rationalist interpretation is correct, Kierkegaard’s view is that practical considerations can, when the actual or potential practical costs or benefits of belief are sufficiently significant, affect what we all-things-considered ought to believe even in epistemically impermissive cases.

I will not take a stand here on whether the supra-rationalist or anti-rationalist version of this interpretation is correct. I will simply note (once again) that Kierkegaard’s account of direct practical reasons for belief allows practical considerations to affect what we ought to believe without typically conflicting with theoretical reason by determining which among the epistemically permissible doxastic attitudes we should adopt in epistemically permissive cases. Kierkegaard’s view thus avoids positing pervasive conflicts between epistemic and practical rationality. Yet his account allows for the possibility that in exceptional circumstances there can be conflicts—when practical reason requires holding an epistemically impermissible attitude—in which practical reason overrides theoretical reason.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper has developed a systematic interpretation of Kierkegaard’s account of how practical considerations affect what we ought to believe. Despite the *prima facie* plausibility of interpreting Kierkegaard as a proto-encroacher, I have argued that Kierkegaard instead combines epistemic permissivism with a view on which practical considerations can constitute reasons for and against adopting certain attitudes towards epistemic risk, opening or closing inquiry, and directly believing a proposition. Thus—contrary to a common caricature of Kierkegaard as a thoroughgoing irrationalist—on Kierkegaard’s view practical considerations can affect what we ought to believe without either encroaching on or necessarily conflicting with theoretical reason.

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<sup>70</sup> For instance, see Carr (1996), Buben (2013), and Kemp and Della Torre (2022).

<sup>71</sup> Emmanuel (1996: 60) could be construed as endorsing this interpretation.

<sup>72</sup> Granting primacy to practical reason does not entail that Kierkegaard thinks theoretical reason lacks genuine normative authority. Rather, practical reason can “override” theoretical reason *without* “silencing” it (as McDaniel 2020 argues).

While I have not extensively defended here the philosophical merits of this view, I hope to have shown that this reconstruction of Kierkegaard's views is not merely of historical interest. Rather, Kierkegaard provides a distinctive and attractive view which has been largely overlooked in contemporary analytic epistemology.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, in virtue of the central role that practical reasons for and against inquiry play in Kierkegaard's ethics of belief, Kierkegaard offers an intriguing account of the relationship between zetetic (i.e., inquiry-related) norms and the norms governing belief.<sup>74</sup> Consequently, regardless of whether one accepts all the details of Kierkegaard's account, its broad contours provide a promising alternative to dominant contemporary views about how practical considerations affect what we ought to believe.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> In Quanbeck and Worsnip (forthcoming), we develop and defend a view that resembles (and, for my part, is influenced by) the view I attribute to Kierkegaard in this paper.

<sup>74</sup> See Friedman (2020) on the "zetetic turn" in normative epistemology.

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