KIERKEGAARD, SKEPTICISM, AND (EPISTEMIC) FAITH

BY ANTHONY RUDD

Abstract: Kierkegaard—in signed writings as well as the Climacus works—seems to advocate a voluntarist response to skepticism: the skeptic is right that all contingent knowledge-claims are uncertain, but we can choose to believe, despite that uncertainty. This seems problematic in various ways. I argue that we can see the epistemic "belief" that Climacus opposes to skepticism as (partly) analogous to faith in *Fear and Trembling*. It too is a "second immediacy," a "getting back" of our connection to the world that had been called in question by skepticism; and is based, not on sheer willpower, but on an attitude of trust in what is beyond our control, and thus on a willingness to accept vulnerability. I discuss Alexander Quanbeck's recent argument that Kierkegaard does endorse a sophisticated form of Direct Doxastic Voluntarism, and I argue for the ultimately ethical nature of Kierkegaard's response to skepticism.

Keywords: Kierkegaard, Skepticism, Doxastic Voluntarism, Quanbeck

Johannes Climacus claims in the *Postscript* that ancient Greek Skepticism provides us with a salutary reminder of the uncertainty of all our knowledge-claims about contingent matters.[1] This does not mean that he is recommending skepticism; in the *Philosophical Fragments* he argues that the uncertainty that the Skeptics rightly note leaves open the question of whether we should believe what is uncertain or suspend belief in it. Skepticism is primarily a *will* to doubt and its opposite, "belief" (*Tro*), is also "an act of freedom, an expression of will."[2] This seems to suggest that reason can only set out the options and must then leave it to the will to decide whether or not to believe something. And this is not just Climacus' view—it is asserted by Kierkegaard in signed works and in the *Papirer*.[3]

[1] SKS 7, 44 / CUP 1, 38.
[2] SKS 4, 282 / PF, 83.
[3] See e.g. SKS 9, 229–236 / WL 227–235. I can see no reason to doubt that Climacus speaks for Kierkegaard on strictly epistemological matters. On this see Marilyn Gaye Piety, *Ways of Knowing: Kierkegaard's Pluralistic Epistemology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), pp. 17–19 and *passim*; also Anthony Rudd, "Believing All Things: Kierkegaard on Knowledge, Doubt and Love" in *International Kierkegaard Commentary Vol 16: "Works of Love,"* ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1999). So, though I will refer

It seems problematic in various ways, however. It would seem to make those willed decisions arbitrary (why should I decide one way or the other if reason can't tell me?); and it would also seem to make it impossible to say that someone has unreasonable beliefs. (So long as someone isn't deluded about the nature of the options, it seems that reason leaves them all open and has nothing more to say.) And can I, in any case, just *decide* to believe something? Can beliefs be directly willed, or can I, at best, only use certain psychological strategies to nudge myself towards belief? Most Kierkegaard scholars, I think, now incline (and think Kierkegaard inclined) to the latter view, but the issue has recently been reopened in a very interesting way in a series of papers by Z Quanbeck.[4] In this paper I will suggest a way to understand Kierkegaard's epistemology, its insights and its problems, that is inspired by some of what Johannes de Silentio says about faith (also *Tro*) in *Fear and Trembling*. I shall not be engaging in any detailed exegesis of *Fear and Trembling;* all I need for current purposes is a brief reminder of the basic structure of Johannes de Silentio's account of faith there.

Faith in *Fear and Trembling* is presented as, most fundamentally, a matter of trust. Abraham obeys God's command because—despite the appalling nature of that command—he trusts God to ensure that, in the end, all will be well.[5] But this faith is not a merely blithe or naïve confidence. As Johannes de Silentio says, "Faith is not the first immediacy but a later immediacy. The first immediacy is the aesthetic. . . . But faith is not the aesthetic."[6] One's initial aesthetic confidence in life is easily shattered, whether by rational criticism or personal misfortune. Moving beyond the specific case of Abraham, we can say that faith is what enables us to come back to ourselves once this first immediacy has been lost. But this faith is not a desperate leap in the dark, but a renewed and deepened trust:

to "Climacus" as the author of the works ascribed to him, this does not mean that I think there is any significant distinction to be made between Kierkegaard and Climacus with respect to these issues.

[4] See Z Quanbeck, "Kierkegaard on Belief and Credence," *European Journal of Philosophy* 32, no. 2, (2024): pp. 394–412, https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12891; "Resolving to Believe: Kierkegaard's Direct Doxastic Voluntarism," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 109, no. 2 (2024): pp. 548–574, https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.13055; and "Doubt, Despair, and Doxastic Agency: Kierkegaard on Responsibility for Belief" in *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, forthcoming.

[5] John Davenport has argued very convincingly for this reading of *Fear and Trembling*; see in particular, his "Faith and Eschatological Trust in *Fear and Trembling*" in *Ethics, Love and Faith in Kierkegaard*, ed. Edward F. Mooney (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), pp. 196–233 and "Eschatological Faith and Repetition: Kierkegaard's Abraham and Job" in *Kierkegaard's "Fear and Trembling": a Critical Guide*, ed. Daniel Conway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 79–105.

[6] SKS 4, 172 / FT, 82. See also SKS 4, 188 / FT, 98, which describes sin as likewise a "second immediacy" and SKS 4, 161 / FT 69, which talks about a first and a later "interiority."

one that enables us to "get the world back," to live joyfully and confidently in the world, in full knowledge of the vulnerability and insecurity of human life.[7] I will argue that Kierkegaard's epistemology traces a similar "double-movement"; or, indeed, that it is in part, concerned to map the same process, but from a specifically epistemic angle. Our initial naïve trust in our beliefs gives way under critical scrutiny to a realization of the fragility of our epistemic relation to the world, the vulnerability of our beliefs to skeptical questioning. What enables us, nonetheless, to continue to live our epistemic lives, is not a theoretical refutation of skepticism, but it is also not an arbitrary act of sheer willpower. Rather, it is a renewed and now conscious trust in our cognitive faculties, held to in full awareness of the possibility of doubt. Although Kierkegaard does give an important role to the will, and I think sometimes does move too far in a voluntarist direction, what is most basic for him is not decisionism, but an attitude of trust in what is ultimately beyond our control. I am not trying to identify what Climacus calls belief in "the ordinary sense" with the religious faith considered in *Fear and Trembling*.[8] But there are, I think, some suggestive parallels between them,[9] and I shall argue, there is a sense in which for Kierkegaard ordinary belief does ultimately rest on belief in the religious sense. I will start, in section 1, by giving an overview of Climacus' views on skepticism and belief; I will then, in section 2, consider the questions of doxastic voluntarism and the (un)reasonableness of belief, engaging both appreciatively and critically with Quanbeck's account; and in section 3 I will consider a response to the at least quasi-Kierkegaardian account that emerges from that discussion, one that comes from a more radical form of skepticism than Kierkegaard explicitly deals with. I will conclude by suggesting a reply to that radical skepticism that is at least implicit in Kierkegaard's writings.

1.

Kierkegaard develops his epistemology in implicit, and sometimes explicit, dialogue with ancient Greek philosophy and, in particular, with the Stoics and Skeptics. He agrees with

[7] This is particularly stressed in Sharon Krishek, "The Existential Dimension of Faith" in *Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling: a Critical Guide*, ed. Daniel Conway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) pp. 106–121.

[8] Climacus explicitly distinguishes belief in the ordinary sense from belief "in the eminent sense," by which he means Christian faith. See SKS 4, 285–286 / PF, 87–88.

[9] Though there are also important differences. I am not suggesting that epistemic belief in the ordinary sense is "on the strength of the absurd" or anything like that.

the Stoics that perception is not a mere confrontation with a brute sensory given, but is the (sensory, of course) presentation to us of a putative fact.[10] A perceptual state has propositional content: it presents to us, e.g., that the book is on the table. It is then up to us to give or refuse assent to that presentation. Most of us do tend, hastily and unthinkingly, to assent to presentations that are not clearly correct and indeed to do so without really being aware that we are doing so. The Stoics recommended that we should become conscious of what we are doing, and that we should suspend judgement (about the truth of the presentation, not, of course, about the fact of it being presented to us) until we come to a presentation that really is certain; that carries its correctness on its sleeve, as it were. (These they called "kataleptic" presentations, from the Greek word for grasping. These are what we can really grasp.) But even this falls short of full knowledge, which only the wise can have; that seems to involve connecting the truths we have gathered from kataleptic presentations, and what we can infer logically from them, into a cohesive system.[11] Stoic epistemology was sharply criticized in ancient times by the Skeptics. Their debate focused on the question of kataleptic presentations. The Skeptics, in accordance with their general practice of avoiding positive philosophical commitments of their own,[12] did not have any theory about the nature of sensory presentation; but they did agree that it was possible—although difficult—to refuse to assent to what sense-experience (or popular opinion, etc.) suggested was the case. But, unlike the Stoics, they denied that there were any kataleptic presentations. Hence, as Peter Adamson puts it: "The difference between the two schools [is] that the Stoics thought we should suspend judgement when we are not certain. The Skeptics agreed, but added that as far as we can tell, certainty is never available, so we should always suspend judgement."[13] (Both schools also gave accounts of how we could operate practically in the world even without

[10] See Quanbeck, "Resolving to Believe," p. 560. As Piety notes, "Sense experience, according to Kierkegaard . . . is, in a way, an interpretation of the reality we believe lies behind. It is only because it is an interpretation that it can be mistaken." Piety, *Ways of Knowing,* p. 75.

[11] See the selections in Brad Inwood and Lloyd P. Gerson, eds., *Hellenistic Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1997), pp. 112–114, 124–125, 126. Although the Stoics thought all knowledge began with sense-perception (ibid., 128–129), they did also allow for presentations that were not directly sensory—as when general opinion in my society presents some course of action as good or bad—and analyzed them in the same way.

[12] Of course, they faced the uncomfortable question of whether this was itself a positive philosophical commitment.

[13] Peter Adamson, *Philosophy in the Hellenistic and Roman Worlds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 61.

giving assent to (many or any) presentations; both thought that we could properly allow ourselves to be guided by appearances, even without endorsing them as true.[14])

Kierkegaard—in the Climacus writings and elsewhere—agrees with the Stoics and Skeptics about the possibility of suspending judgement. It is part of our finitude that we are sensibly affected beings, but part of our "infinitude" that we are able to step back and assess whether we should give assent to sensible (or emotional, or other) presentations. And on the issue of kataleptic presentations, he sides explicitly with the Skeptics; at least in principle, judgement can be suspended in all cases.[15] In the *Postscript* he asserts that from the "study of Greek skepticism . . . one learns . . . that sensate certainty, to say nothing of historical certainty, is uncertainty."[16] He explains this more carefully in the *Fragments*, where he notes that "the Greek skeptic did not deny the correctness of sensation and immediate cognition, but, said he, error has an utterly different basis—it comes from the conclusions I draw. If I can only avoid drawing conclusions I shall never be deceived."[17] He illustrates this with familiar examples of sensory illusions—a stick looks bent, but I draw no conclusion as to whether it really is bent.[18] So the point is that I don't doubt that that appearances are as they are (that is what is given by "sensation and immediate cognition") but I refrain from drawing the natural conclusion that things really *are* as they appear. So the "sensate certainty" that is dismissed as an illusion is the idea that we can draw conclusions from our sense-experience that can be certain.

Climacus agrees with the Skeptics that to conclude from things appearing thus-and-so to their being thus-and-so is natural for us—so natural that we usually aren't conscious of making any such step—and that it requires self-conscious attention to become aware of and then inhibit this natural tendency. As he says, to properly recognize the uncertainty of all sensory-based belief "will always require time and practice and discipline."[19] For the Skeptics, universal doubt was not a merely intellectual exercise, but a means to the attainment of *ataraxia*, peace of mind, and was therefore something that needed to be *appropriated* (in Kierkegaard's sense); deeply internalized and made a basis for living one's

[14] For the Stoics, of course, this was a sometimes practically unavoidable second-best, when kataleptic presentations were not available; for the Skeptics it was what we needed to do all the time.
[15] See SKS 4, 243–244, 248, 280–284 / PF 38–39, 42–43, 81–85; SKS 7, 44, 81, 288 / CUP 1, 38, 81, 316.
[16] SKS 7, 44 / CUP 1, 38. This is, of course, a general claim about the uncertainty of sensory presentations as a class.
[17] SKS 4, 281–282 / PF, 82.
[18] SKS 4, 282 / PF, 82–83.
[19] SKS 7, 44 / CUP 1, 38.

life. Climacus notes, quite correctly, that ancient Skepticism was motivated by a (broadly speaking) ethical commitment; a vision of the good life as one free from belief. (It is, of course, questionable whether the Skeptics could really be consistent in basing their recommendation of a universal suspension of judgement on such an ethical commitment; shouldn't they also be suspending belief about the desirability of *ataraxia*?[20]) According to Climacus, "the skeptical *ataraxia* was . . . an existence-attempt to abstract from existing."[21] This is obviously paradoxical; like Stoicism, Skepticism tried to use the "infinite" power of the mind to step back from the immediate deliverances of experience in order to gain freedom from the vulnerability that we feel through being dependent on contingencies. Hence, both philosophies were attempts to "abstract from existence." This is, indeed, why Kierkegaard in the end rejects them; he sees them as forms of escapism, driven by a desire to be in control at all costs, a fear of vulnerability, dependence, that is deeply at odds with Kierkegaard's own ethico-religious views.[22] But he does admire the way in which Stoicism and Skepticism presented their project as a difficult and demanding task, one which was supposed to transform the lives of its adherents; hence they were both existential philosophies, rather than merely theoretical ones. (Climacus sarcastically continues: "In our day, one abstracts in print, just as in print one doubts everything once and for all."[23])

That everything *can* be doubted (that there are no "kataleptic presentations") is for Climacus (and Kierkegaard) true, though it is exceedingly difficult to hold to and fully appropriate that truth. But it doesn't follow that we *should* always suspend judgement. Climacus emphasizes that the Skeptics

> doubted, not by virtue of knowledge but by virtue of will . . . This implies that doubt can be terminated only in freedom, by an act of will, something that every Greek skeptic would understand, but he would not terminate his skepticism, precisely because he *willed* to doubt . . . Greek

[20] They were aware of the problem and tried (not very convincingly in my view) to respond to it. See e.g. Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 1.12, in Inwood and Gerson, *Hellenistic Philosophy*, pp. 307–308.
[21] SKS 7, 289 / CUP 1, 318.
[22] For a detailed comparison of Stoicism with Kierkegaard—and a Kierkegaardian critique of Stoicism—see Rick Anthony Furtak, *Wisdom in Love: Kierkegaard and the Ancient Quest for Emotional Integrity* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), though I don't think Furtak really does justice to the underlying metaphysical and religious motivation of Stoicism—the concern to live in harmony with the deep rational order of the universe.
[23] SKS 7, 288 / CUP 1, 318.

> skepticism . . . unfailingly used cognition only to preserve the cast of mind which was the main consideration.[24]

Presumably with "time, practice and discipline" the Skeptic may become habituated to suspending judgement, so that it may come naturally, without the need for conscious acts of will. (Though this endpoint may never fully be reached, just as for many of the Stoics, the state of the sage with full knowledge and free from passions was an ideal to be approached rather than one which could be fully attained.)

Climacus uses this account of doubt in order to sketch a contrastive account of the opposite state, belief (*tro*). He is careful to explain in this context that he is discussing belief/faith in the "ordinary" sense as opposed to the "eminent" sense where it refers to religious and indeed specifically Christian faith.[25] Epistemologists usually think of (ordinary-sense) belief as a component of knowledge (knowledge as true belief plus various bells and whistles) but Climacus contrasts belief and knowledge: "Belief is not a knowledge, but an act of freedom, an expression of will."[26] This distinction seems to depend on his using "knowledge" in a "strict" sense which implies necessity and (therefore) certainty. As Marilyn Piety notes, Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms sometimes use "knowledge" in this way, but also sometimes use it in a looser sense, where we can be said to "know" something if it is sufficiently probable.[27] "Belief," by contrast to strict-sense knowledge, is the term for our cognitive grasp of contingent matters which can never be entirely certain. To call it an "act of freedom" does make it sound like a deliberate conscious act, a decision, taken after one has recognized the possibility of doubt, to set that possibility aside. (So the denial that belief is "knowledge" refers not simply to its lack of certitude, but to its arising from a personal decision, rather than emerging automatically as a conclusion from necessitating premises.)

A little later Climacus reiterates, "Belief and doubt are not two kinds of knowledge,"[28] and continues that "for neither of them is a cognitive act, and they are opposite passions.

[24] SKS 4, 281–282 / PF, 82–83.

[25] See SKS 4, 285–286 / PF, 87. *Tro*, like the German *Glaube*, has the same ambiguity in this respect as the English "belief" and "faith."

[26] SKS 4, 282 / PF, 83.

[27] See Piety, *Ways of Knowing*, pp. 71, 79. Piety notes similar shifts in Kierkegaard between "strict" and "loose" senses of truth and justification as well as knowledge; see ibid., pp. 53, 60. See also C. Stephen Evans, "Realism and Anti-Realism in Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*" in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 165.

[28] It might seem odd that someone would think doubt to be a kind of knowledge, but presumably the idea is that doubt would be the knowledge that contingent matters do not admit of certainty.

Belief is a sense for coming into existence and doubt is a protest against any conclusion that wants to go beyond immediate sensation and immediate knowledge."[29] A "sense for coming into existence" might seem to be something more intuitive and immediate than an "act of freedom"; something that might describe our initial unconscious acceptance of the deliverances of our senses, prior to the raising of doubts. Perhaps then one could further articulate Climacus' account by sub-dividing "belief in the ordinary sense" further into two kinds: firstly, a basic intuitive trust in our senses (but also in the deliverances of our reason, our consciences, our memory, in testimony, etc.); and secondly, a consciously chosen commitment to affirm that trust even in the face of doubts that cannot simply be refuted on an intellectual plane. Some such distinction is, I think, in any case necessary; it is very implausible to suggest that a conscious act of will is needed whenever we form sensory beliefs, especially the ones we simply act on without formulating explicitly to ourselves. So, Climacus' picture is that we start, unreflectively, with trust in our experience. Even this is not simply a basic animal response to stimuli;[30] once we have learned as young children to conceptualize and thus make sense of our experience, what our experience then gives us are indeed "presentations" in the Stoic sense—appearances that things are thus-and-so. We naturally tend to accept these presentations at face value and do so without conscious awareness that we are doing so. But doubts *can* be raised and Climacus agrees with the Skeptics that they cannot be dismissed on a purely intellectual level. But this remains an intellectual result; it remains up to us to decide what significance it should have. Being averse to error, and drawn by the promise of a tranquility that can come from remaining uncommitted, the Skeptic chooses the (arduous) path of training him or herself to refuse assent to all presentations (whether simple, neutral sensory ones, or emotionally toned ones, e.g. "the tiger is dangerous!"). But one can also choose, once skeptical possibilities have been raised, to refuse them; this is belief in the second sense, as a conscious act of will. "Doubt can be terminated only in freedom, by an act of will."[31] Such an act is not arbitrary (at least not in the sense of random, whimsical); what underlies it, though, is not knowledge but "passion" and—ultimately—the passionate judgement that the life of suspension and *ataraxia* recommended by the Skeptics is

[29] SKS 4, 283 / PF 84. Presumably he means that they are not *exclusively* cognitive acts; clearly they do involve an element of cognition.

[30] I will set aside the important and interesting question of how more complex non-human animals make sense of their experience; cats, dogs, monkeys, and dolphins are not mere stimulus-response machines, but I wouldn't attribute full-blown conceptual consciousness to them either.

[31] SKS 4, 281 / PF, 82.

not a good life. Climacus' (Kierkegaard's) critique of skepticism is, therefore, essentially an ethical one.

2.

The account of Climacus so far makes him sound decisionistic; even if my basic perceptual beliefs are acquired without any conscious decision, to affirm them in the face of doubts (belief in the second sense) does require a deliberate act of will. This raises the question of doxastic voluntarism. Can I *decide* to believe something? Kierkegaard has sometimes been interpreted as holding a kind of Direct Doxastic Voluntarism (DDV), according to which I can, by a conscious act of willing, make myself believe that something is the case.[32] I think most Kierkegaard scholars would now agree that Kierkegaard/Climacus accepts only a kind of Indirect Doxastic Voluntarism (IDV).[33] I can try to make myself believe something by choosing to direct my attention in certain directions, choosing to ignore certain considerations, making an effort to see things in one light rather than another; as a result, belief may come (though that isn't guaranteed). Jamie Ferreira has influentially compared the transitions between the spheres of existence to gestalt shifts; I come to see this situation as requiring ethical action from me, where I had previously seen it simply as offering me amusement as a spectator. And just as I can make a conscious effort to see an ambiguous figure as a duck, rather than a rabbit, so I can make an effort to "see" or interpret things around me more generally in one way rather than another. But I cannot simply decide to see a figure as a duck and have that happen; and similarly with the more general case.[34]

[32] See e.g. Louis P. Pojman, *The Logic of Subjectivity: Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Religion* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1984), ch. 5, and *Religious Belief and the Will* (London: Routledge, 1986), pp. 70–74, 146.

[33] See e.g. C. Stephen Evans, "Does Kierkegaard Think Beliefs can be Directly Willed?" *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion 26*, (1989): pp. 173–184, https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00142862.

[34] See Jamie M. Ferreira, *Transforming Vision: Imagination and Will in Kierkegaardian Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) pp. 34–36, 72–76, 109–110 and "Faith and the Kierkegaardian Leap" in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay & Gordon Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 216–221. One could say that all the objects of perception (let alone those of thought) are ambiguous figures—that is, capable of being interpreted differently. The disanalogy would be that a) at least in many cases (simple perceptual beliefs) we are (almost?) all likely to just take one interpretation as obvious, without even considering the possibility of other options and b) while a duck-rabbit figure is neither "really" a duck nor "really" a rabbit, we do assume that things generally really do have one character or nature

Quanbeck has recently reopened this issue, arguing that a sophisticated form of DDV is both attributable to Kierkegaard and philosophically defensible in its own right. He recognizes that many of our beliefs are acquired involuntarily, and accepts that the IDV account does explain some of our more deliberate belief-formation. However, he argues that, according to Climacus, we can sometimes will to believe more directly: "Climacus's use of voluntaristic language—e.g., his references to the will (*Villie*), resolution (*Beslutning*), and decision (*Afgjørelse*)—strongly indicates that he takes the leap to belief to consist in a *free, voluntary decision*."[35] This does not involve gritting our teeth and just making ourselves believe in some proposition by sheer willpower. Firstly, Quanbeck doesn't think that such decisions need always be consciously introspectable acts of will; as he notes, most of our voluntary actions do not involve any such standing-at-the-crossroads moment of deliberate choice, but are still voluntary for all that.[36] And, secondly, he thinks that doxastic decisions can be direct without being unmediated. The "free voluntary decision" he refers to is not *immediately* a decision to believe p, but "to cease reflecting, close inquiry, and settle the question of whether *p*."[37] On this view "our voluntary control over our beliefs is mediated by our voluntary control over whether we inquire and which epistemic risk attitudes we adopt."[38]

Quanbeck admits that it may be, to some extent, a terminological issue whether what he is proposing is really a form of DDV, or a new form of IDV.[39] But in either case, his substantial proposal is interesting and important. On his view,

> Kierkegaard takes there to be three distinct ways in which we can exercise direct voluntary control over our doxastic attitudes via our direct control over whether we inquire: 1) by deciding whether to take an "interest" in some question and thereby adopt a doxastic attitude

rather than another. (Perhaps we can see some forms of radical anti-realism in philosophy as questioning this assumption.)

[35] Quanbeck, "Resolving to Believe," p. 559. It should be said that Quanbeck thinks (as I do) that Kierkegaard is expressing his own epistemological views in the Climacus writings: see "Resolving to Believe," p. 549.

[36] "Kierkegaard (along with some of his pseudonyms) holds that our volitions can be *unconscious* to varying degrees. We often act freely and voluntarily without consciously deliberating or forming an occurrent intention to act." Quanbeck, "Resolving to Believe," p. 561.

[37] Ibid., p. 559.

[38] Ibid, p. 563.

[39] Ibid.

> (namely, suspension of judgment), 2) by deciding whether to close inquiry and thereby believe, and 3) by deciding whether to reopen inquiry and thereby suspend judgment.[40]

This supposes that when I am (sincerely) investigating whether some proposition is true, I am (necessarily) suspending judgement about it (stage 1).[41] I may, during my investigation, assign a probability to the proposition and increase or decrease it as the investigation continues, but I don't reach a state of belief until I *decide* to conclude the investigation and take the proposition as a settled result (stage 2). My "credence"—my sense of the probability of the proposition—does not automatically determine my belief in it:[42]

> Belief is *not* merely a high degree of confidence. Rather, belief is differentiated from credence in virtue of involving a resolution that closes inquiry. Moreover, believing by closing inquiry does not require modifying one's credence, as it is a qualitatively different mental state that one can have *in addition to* a credence.[43]

Exegetically speaking, this distinction between the hypothetical, probabilistic activity of the intellect and the act of will that closes inquiry does seem a plausible articulation of what Climacus is getting at when he asserts that "[empirical] truth is an approximating whose beginning cannot be established absolutely . . . every beginning, when it is *made* . . . does not occur by immanental thinking, but is made by virtue of a resolution, essentially by virtue of faith."[44] And it fits with what Kierkegaard asserts under his own name when he writes: "Knowledge places everything in possibility . . . there is no decision in knowledge; the decision, the determination and the firmness of personality are first in the 'ergo,' in belief."[45]

Closing inquiry for now and deciding to believe that Quanbeck is exegetically right about Kierkegaard's views, I want to raise some questions about the plausibility of

[40] Ibid., p. 556.
[41] This could be questioned. Couldn't someone seriously inquire into whether God exists, or whether there are human rights, while continuing to believe in those things?
[42] Of course, as Quanbeck is well aware, there are interesting regress problems that emerge. If I take the proposition p that is under investigation to be 65% likely, is *that* proposition (call it q = "p is 65% probable") one that I *believe* or merely hold to be probable? (and how probable? 65%? 99%?) If the latter, then what about r (the proposition that q is x% probable)? And so on. This can indeed be used as an argument that a decision is needed to end the regress.
[43] Quanbeck, "Resolving to Believe," p. 554. See also Quanbeck, "Kierkegaard on Belief and Credence."
[44] SKS 7, 174 / CUP, 1, 189.
[45] SKS 9, 232 / WL 230–231.

Kierkegaard's position, so construed. Firstly, I wonder whether such decisions to close inquiry necessarily (or perhaps ever) lead to *belief*. An alert inquirer who is aware of making a "*free, voluntary decision*" might describe it as a decision to accept p for now as the best working hypothesis we have, rather than a decision to *believe* it. The inquirer's judgement is that continuing to investigate p itself is a less worthwhile use of time than taking p as the basis for developing further hypotheses and going on to investigate them. None of this need involve *belief* that p. (Popper warned scientists against actually believing in any of their "conjectures.") Some of the Greek Skeptics (the Academics, as opposed to the Pyrrhonists) were willing to accept the use of probability in forming judgements, given that nothing appeared to be certain; one might say that they were content to work with claims that had a high credence, but without venturing to believe them. This also applies in many practical cases; we need to decide what's best to do (which path to take while wandering lost in the forest) but that isn't really deciding what to believe/what to hold as true. Believing involves more than simply taking a hypothesis as the best basis for action[46] (*pace*, perhaps, an extreme version of Pragmatism) but, granted that one can will the latter, can one also will the former?

One might also criticize the idea that we can decide to believe from an opposite angle. While some scientific and historical propositions are adopted tentatively, without belief, aren't there others which are now so firmly established that the possibility of doubting them—and thus the need for a *decision* to close further inquiry into them—comes to seem at best purely notional? An investigator may decide to adopt p tentatively, as a working hypothesis; but as he or she gets used to working with the assumption that p, and finds it fruitful, he or she may come to abandon any Popperian hesitations and to simply feel, "OK, this is true." This is belief, but was there a *decision* to believe? Perhaps, depending on how broadly we construe the notion of decision, but it seems more like one of Ferreira's gestalt shifts than an act of will. In any case, it is something different from, and subsequent to, the initial decision to close inquiry.[47] So in such cases, the initial decision leads to belief, but in an indirect (IDV) way. Furthermore, investigators never start from scratch. Many scientific/historical claims are simply taught as established fact in schools, textbooks, etc. (e.g. heliocentrism, or the claim that Napoleon was Emperor of France in the early 19th Century). Most students dutifully come to believe them as such (and are, I

[46] Including the "action" of continuing one's theoretical inquires in a certain way.

[47] One starts by accepting p tentatively, thus closing inquiry into p (decision without belief) and then, as one works with p one gradually comes to take it as true (belief without decision).

think, right to do so). As with basic perceptual beliefs, the skeptic would have to make an effort to remind him or herself that they are not *absolutely* certain; but, as also in the perceptual case, the non-skeptic might simply shrug off such doubts as unreasonable and unprofitable. Of course, this is still a voluntary movement of some sort. Is it properly construed as an act of will, *rather* than an epistemic act, though?

Quanbeck does want to argue that, for Kierkegaard, it is always something extra-epistemic that closes inquiry. "Climacus's (and Kierkegaard's) view seems to be that doubting, inquiring, and suspending judgment about any contingent proposition about the external world is *always* epistemically permissible."[48] Hence, whether one does suspend judgement, or end the suspension by believing, must depend on extra-epistemic factors (we can call them "practical," taking the term in a broad sense).[49] I wonder, though, whether a clear distinction between what is practical and what is epistemic can be maintained. Suppose someone refuses to believe that that the Earth is round, or that Napoleon actually existed rather than being a purely legendary figure. Suppose that person continues to doubt, despite patient recitals of all the relevant evidence. Surely a scientist or historian would say that this person was being unreasonable. Kierkegaard, as Quanbeck interprets him, would agree that the person would be unreasonable if he/she refused to adjust his/her credences in accordance with the evidence. But what if the person says: "Yes, I know that it is 99.9999 . . . % probable that the Earth is round, but I'm still suspending judgement"? Or even: "Yes, I know that it is 99.9999 . . . % probable that the Earth is round, but I'm still choosing to believe that it is flat"? According to Quanbeck, "Kierkegaard holds that having a certain (rational) credence (other than 0 or 1) never *rationally* necessitates either suspending judgment or believing."[50] I would want to say that it can be irrational not to believe something, even if one is not rationally necessitated to believe it—as I suppose "2+2" would rationally necessitate me to believe "4." Is this, however, a case of practical, rather than epistemic (ir)rationality? A teacher might say to

[48] Quanbeck, "Resolving to Believe," p. 555.

[49] I am using "practical" pretty much as a shorthand for "non-epistemic." Quanbeck does claim that the relevant extra-epistemic factors will sometimes but not necessarily be practical ones ("Resolving to Believe," p. 564). I'm not quite sure what he thinks the non-epistemic but non-practical factors might be, but it does seem that he thinks the practical ones are the most important. In another paper he claims that "the Pyrrhonian Skeptics intentionally *chose* to doubt for practical (rather than theoretical) reasons" ("Doubt, Despair, and Doxastic Agency," p. 17). And it matters for his overall position that "Kierkegaard maintains that we have distinctively *practical* agency over our beliefs in virtue of our ability to believe at will" ("Resolving to Believe," p. 571).

[50] Quanbeck, "Resolving to Believe," p. 554.

a skeptically inclined child, whose doubts about fundamentals cannot be non-question-beggingly refuted: "You just have to accept this if you are going to get on in science/history!" Well, that is no doubt true, but the reason to accept the sphericality of the Earth is surely that all the evidence points that way, not just that we will get on better if we accept it. The child is being epistemically irrational, not just practically obstreperous.

Kierkegaard certainly does think there are cases where practical—in the sense of ethical—considerations should make me decide to believe something, even when strictly epistemic considerations leave the options open. In the section of *Works of Love* titled "Love Believes all Things,"[51] he argues that I am required, as part of my duty to love my neighbor, to interpret his or her behavior lovingly—i.e., as generously or charitably as possible. I should form beliefs about others that are based on love, rather than mistrust. And in this context it seems that these must be *beliefs*: I don't just decide to *act* as though you are innocent, although I continue to suspect that you may well not be; love required me to actually believe in your innocence. In his argument here Kierkegaard relies on precisely the epistemological principles set out in more detail in the Climacus works. Knowledge, strictly speaking, is hypothetical, concerned with possibilities. The observable facts about somebody's behavior could always be interpreted either cynically or charitably; hence we need something beyond knowledge to make the decision—not in this case whether to trust my senses, but whether to trust or mistrust another person. "Love is the very opposite of mistrust and yet it is initiated into the same knowledge. In knowledge they are, if you please, indistinguishable . . . only in the conclusion, and in the decision, in *faith* (to believe all things and to believe nothing) are they the very opposite."[52]

I think Kierkegaard has an important point here, which he (partly) obscures by exaggerating it. As in the more theoretical cases considered above, it seems that, while knowledge of the observable facts about someone's behavior may *sometimes* leave open a genuine multiplicity of possibilities for interpretation, it does at other times point overwhelmingly to the likelihood that the person in question really has (let us say) acted despicably. Kierkegaard says that the choice between love and mistrust occurs once "knowledge has placed the opposite possibilities in equilibrium,"[53] but at least much of the time, knowledge *doesn't* leave everything in equilibrium, and the fact that I can't be *absolutely* certain does not mean that I should never conclude that someone has acted

[51] SKS 9, 227–245 / WL, 225–245.
[52] SKS 9, 230 / WL, 228.
[53] SKS 9, 236 / WL, 234.

badly. Indeed, sometimes it would be ethically wrong of me to give them the benefit of whatever residual doubt there may be, as when trusting someone too much may put not only myself, but others, in danger.[54] But although what Kierkegaard says may be an exaggeration, it is a salutary one. Kierkegaard reminds us that when something seems obvious to us about another's moral behavior, that may be due to the assumptions—and perhaps the vices (cynicism, mistrust)—that we are bringing to the situation and using as interpretive lenses. And what he says stands as an injunction to us to judge as generously as is compatible with intellectual and moral responsibility.

One might also still wonder whether, even when the objective evidence is in something like equilibrium, it is right to talk of *deciding to believe* lovingly. As in other case, both perceptual and more theoretical, one usually starts not with complete uncertainty, but with appearances that solicit some belief or other. I see someone acting suspiciously (as it seems to me)—but then I can step back and question that seeming. Is he really up to no good, or is it just my nasty suspicious mind? In such a case, I might well have to exercise a conscious act of will, telling myself: "Come on! I don't really know what happened here. Maybe it's just gossip. I should try to be charitable." Certainly volition is playing an important part here, but it seems to me that this is still most plausibly interpreted in IDV terms: I am making an effort to look at the situation in a way that I hope will induce me to acquire charitable beliefs, but I'm not willing those beliefs directly. But while most of us may have to consciously struggle to see things charitably, one may think of the loving person, someone who has really acquired and internalized the virtue of love (and I think Kierkegaard does regard love as a virtue[55]) as needing to make no decision. He or she just naturally responds to others with the most charitable interpretation. (The saint, one might think, has made the gestalt-shift from mistrust to love and become habituated to immediately see everything and everyone lovingly.) But although no decision is involved—even in an IDV sense–the saint's perception is not a purely intellectual affair—it involves an affective state of the whole person.

[54] Perhaps we could act on the balance of probabilities without belief in someone's depravity? Psychologically that would not be easy, though it might be possible. But in some cases—e.g., when a spiritual advisor is trying to get someone to face up to his real guilt rather than evading it—a full belief in the other's guiltiness is required for a properly loving response to the person in question.

[55] I have argued elsewhere that Kierkegaard has a fairly traditional view of faith, hope, and love as theological virtues, not so far, in some ways, from Aquinas' account of them: see Anthony Rudd, "Kierkegaard on Hope and Faith," *Religions* 14, no. 12 (2023), https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14121458.

The saint, on my view, always perceives lovingly, but doesn't always believe the best of people. He or she has the ability to see when it is *reasonable* (broad-sense rationality) to conclude that someone has acted badly. It is possible for someone to judge reasonably in this way, but not lovingly; but the saint's epistemic strength is that his or her ability to see what is really going on is not distorted by malice or wishful thinking or any of the other vices that warp our perception of (moral) reality. So I think we can say that the saint's virtue includes an element of *intellectual* virtue, which enables him or her to know or see better what is going on in the world.[56] Kierkegaard doesn't investigate the intellectual virtues and vices as a distinct topic,[57] but he is very much concerned with the epistemic functioning of moral virtues and vices: "Vanity, conceit, complacency believe everything flattering that is said; envy, malice, corruption believe everything evil that is said; mistrust believes nothing at all . . . but love believes all things."[58] The moral vices he mentions here function as intellectual vices also, in that they interfere with knowledge or the pursuit of truth; what the vain or malicious person is inclined to believe may in fact be true, but that person is inclined to form such beliefs whether or not they are true, so vanity and malice are dispositions that inhibit our ability to see the world truthfully.

I do think the notion of intellectual virtue may be the key to resolving Quanbeck's question about when to close (or open) inquiry.[59] For even in epistemic cases, such as

[56] Though there are specifically intellectual virtues, it is also true that general moral virtues have intellectual components. I shall not try to sort out the complex but intimate relation between moral and intellectual virtues here, but I would certainly want to avoid any position that would make moral virtues such as charity or generosity into intellectual vices, which would prevent us from seeing things as they are. On intellectual virtue (and vice) in general see Linda Zagzebski's important book, *Virtues of the Mind; an Inquiry Into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[57] There has been a good deal of recent work on Kierkegaard as a virtue theorist in ethics: see e.g. Robert C. Roberts, *Recovering Christian Character: The Psychological Wisdom of Soren Kierkegaard* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2022); also the special edition of the journal *Religions* (Vol. 14, 2023), *Kierkegaard, Virtue and Vices*. There has been less attention paid to the topic of Kierkegaard and *intellectual* virtue, though see Eleanor Helms, "Thoughtlessness as an Intellectual Vice in Kierkegaard and Aristotle," *Religions* 14, no. 11 (2023), https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14111401; and Robert C. Roberts, "Kierkegaard's Virtue Epistemology: a Modest Initiative" in *Why Kierkegaard Matters*, ed. Marc Alan Jolley and Edmon L. Rowell (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2010).

[58] SKS 9, 228 / WL, 226.

[59] I should perhaps make it clear that I am (like Zagzebski) concerned here with intellectual virtues in a "rich," Aristotelian sense, as states of character, and not just with well-functioning cognitive faculties, as in Ernest Sosa's "virtue-reliabilist" theory. See Ernest Sosa, *A Virtue Epistemology: Apt Belief and Reflective Knowledge, Vol 1* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

scientific or historical ones, which are not (at least not obviously) ethically freighted, the intellectual virtues (and vices) are involved.[60] When one scientist or historian says that another is being "unreasonable" in either withholding or forming beliefs (given the relevant evidence) it's really a complaint that the other is failing to find the Aristotelian mean between the intellectual vices of credulity and suspicion.[61] To be reasonable is not just to give one's assent to the conclusions of strict deductive arguments, and nor is it just about giving one's assent to probable propositions when the probabilities reach a precise, defined-in-advance limit. The intellectually virtuous researcher (whether in academic or in everyday contexts) is one whose beliefs are sensitive to the evidence in algorithmically unformalizable ways, whose gestalts shift when the *right* amount or kind of evidence has come in—that *rightness* being something that cannot be quantifiably specified in advance.[62] One could say that the "reasonable" person is one who can sense a pattern before all the evidence is in.[63] Rather than *deciding* to believe, he or she follows this unfolding pattern, trusting his or her developing perception of where things are going. This is voluntary activity, and it may sometimes involve an act of conscious will (to set aside doubts, to follow one's sense of things). But it is still epistemic (not *merely* practical) for all that.

Although this account of reasonableness and intellectual virtue might seem to go against some of what Climacus says when he uses "knowledge" and "reason" in the "strict" senses, it actually fits well with what he says in other places. For instance, he considers the example of a serious philological scholar preparing an edition of Cicero.[64] Such a scholar, is, at every turn, faced with some measure of uncertainty, but the choices he makes are not blind decisions; rather, they are guided by his "acumen," "ingenuity," "diligence," and "competence," and by the sense of likelihood shaped by his extensive background knowledge of classical culture. Although he doesn't say so explicitly, Climacus is clearly talking about intellectual virtues here. We should note that he is happy to

[60] Of course, even when the subject matter of the inquiry is ethically neutral, *moral* vices like vanity or malice may lead me to believe my own pet theory too quickly, or disbelieve my colleague's, and moral virtues may be necessary to combat such tendencies.

[61] Robert Roberts and W. Jay Wood take this mean to be a combination of courage and caution; see their *Intellectual Virtues: An Essay in Regulative Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), ch. 8.

[62] In other cases, of course, the intellectually virtuous person may not form a belief, but still decide that the hypothesis looks plausible enough to work with for now, as in the sorts of cases mentioned above.

[63] Of course, as the Skeptics pointed out, we never are in a state when we can be sure that literally all the evidence is in.

[64] SKS 7, 33 / CUP 1, 25–26.

talk about the scholar's "intimate knowledge of antiquity"[65]—this is knowledge in the "broad sense," derived from the exercise of rationality in the broad sense (since it clearly isn't, for the most part, a matter of deductive rational necessitation). In this looser, non-algorithmic sense of rationality, to hold egregiously false beliefs about Cicero's text—let alone to believe that Napoleon never existed, or that the Earth is flat—is not reasonable, and indicates a lack of intellectual virtue. Such judgements about the reasonableness or unreasonableness of an inquirer seem to me to be both epistemic and practical, for the category of intellectual virtue in general blurs the line between the epistemic and the practical. I do think Kierkegaard's/Climacus' insistence (at times) that reason or knowledge is motivationally inert and that belief always requires something extra-epistemic, depends on his using (at times) a narrow view of reason (or knowledge). What his reminders of the importance of volitional and evaluative factors in belief-formation really point to is not that we need to supplement reason (narrowly conceived) with an extra-rational decisionism, but that we need a richer and more flexible notion of reasoning, one which includes elements of interest, passion, and virtue.[66] We need to think of reasoning as an activity carried on by existing human beings, and bound up with their senses of what is significant, perspicuous and valuable.

3.

So, either coming to believe, or continuing to suspend belief, may, depending on the circumstances, be unreasonable—even though its wrongness can't be strictly *proved*. And in some cases, either belief or suspension may be morally wrong as well. So an investigator demonstrates his or her intellectual virtues or vices in the judgements that he or she makes about when to close, or not to close inquiry; and, in many cases, a person may demonstrate his or her moral virtues or vices in doing so as well. To some extent in the last section I have turned away from the issue of philosophical skepticism, which aims to doubt all our presentations, and have been considering things from the perspective of an engaged inquirer (e.g., a scientist or historian) for whom some beliefs are clearly more reasonable than others. And from this perspective, the skeptic who is determined to *always* suspend belief because there is always at least a notional possibility of doubt in any

[65] SKS 7, 33 / CUP 1, 26.

[66] See Marilyn Gaye Piety, "Kierkegaard on Rationality" in *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre: Essays on Freedom, Narrative, and Virtue*, ed. John J. Davenport and Anthony Rudd (Chicago: Open Court, 2001), pp. 59-74.

presentation, is being both unreasonable and immoral.[67] Perhaps this is unfair to the skeptic, though; for, as Climacus reminds us, the philosophical skeptic is not just an overly scrupulous empirical inquirer, but someone driven by a vision of the good life, one that rejects on ethical (or at least, more broadly evaluative) grounds the aim of increasing knowledge that drives the scientist or historian. What is reasonable from the perspective of the skeptic's desire for *ataraxia* is something different from what is reasonable from the perspective of a working scientist. And a further, meta-skeptical, question now arises: How can we decide which of these senses of what is reasonable is itself the more reasonable one to adopt? To put the point in another way: what counts as a virtue (moral or intellectual) ultimately depends on what view of the good one has.[68] (The good of inquiry or the good of a human life as a whole, though the former will ultimately need to be an aspect of the latter.[69]) If two people differ in their view of what the good is, they may disagree as to whether the skeptic's disposition to suspend judgement whenever there is uncertainty is a virtue or a vice. But how, without circularity, is such a disagreement to be resolved? And if we admit that it is rationally unresolvable, then it seems that the skeptic wins.

We can further strengthen this renewed case for skepticism if we if we distinguish between the kind of skepticism that Climacus mostly considers—which points to the ineradicable presence of doubt in each particular presentation—and a more radical kind. For even if we did agree that it would be crazy (intellectually vicious) for someone within the framework (paradigm, episteme, language-game) that constitutes scientific or historical inquiry to doubt whether the Earth orbits the Sun or that Napoleon existed, those frameworks themselves can be doubted. And, more fundamentally still, perhaps, we can doubt whether our faculties (sense, reason, memory) put us in touch with any independent reality at all.[70] Kierkegaard doesn't very clearly or explicitly distinguish between such radical, global skepticism and skepticism about particular presentations, but he was

[67] Sometimes it is morally required that I trust and believe someone, so it is morally wrong to say I should never do so.

[68] This does not mean that one can specify what the good is entirely independent of the virtues; on Aristotle's view, developing certain virtues is constitutive of the good life, not just a means to a distinct end.

[69] As Kierkegaard keeps reminding us: to make scholarship, with its distinctive goods, central to one's life, is itself an existential decision, not a scholarly one.

[70] When I talk about our "faculties" I mean that in a loose common-sense way; I am not committing myself to any controversial "faculty psychology."

certainly aware of the former kind.[71] And—although this requires some extrapolation—I think his response to it, like his response to the skepticism that focuses on particular presentations, is basically a moral, or evaluative, one. I want to approach this by looking briefly at the debate between Hume and Thomas Reid; I hope it will become clear that this is not a digression.

Hume was an unusual kind of skeptic, and there is a scholarly controversy as to whether he was really a skeptic at all, or, rather, a naturalist. I think the answer is that Hume carried out a naturalistic (empiricist, associationist) inquiry into the workings of our belief-forming faculties, which resulted in the radically skeptical conclusion that we had no reason to suppose that the beliefs that those faculties produced were true.[72] This conclusion was, he agreed, impossible to hold on to in one's everyday life;[73] one naturally and unavoidably fell back into relying on those faculties. Skepticism, therefore, "can have no other tendency than to show the whimsical condition of mankind, who must act and reason and believe; though they are not able, by their most diligent enquiry, to satisfy themselves concerning the foundation of these operations, or to remove the objections that may be raised against them."[74] Finding this conclusion unacceptable, Reid was provoked into developing an anti-skeptical philosophy based on trust in our faculties. On his account, sensations immediately give rise to "that conception and belief in the external object that we call perception"[75] so immediately that we are not usually aware of any distinction between the sensation itself and the belief that is "suggested" by it. Reid uses "suggestion" as a technical term for the process that immediately, without conscious inference, gives rise to belief when certain sensations are given. For instance, "certain

[71] These are sometimes distinguished as "Cartesian" and "Pyrrhonian" Skepticism. The Greek Skeptics didn't use scenarios as "globally" disconcerting as the Evil Demon or the Brain in a Vat, though they did make fairly radical claims about the (un)reliability of our faculties in general. Globally disconcerting scenarios are certainly pre-Cartesian, though; see e.g. Al-Ghazali, "The Rescuer From Error" in *Medieval Islamic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Muhammad Ali Khalidi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 61–64.

[72] Hume's skepticism therefore is based on what a classical Skeptic would have considered a "dogmatic" naturalistic outlook, which is, however, itself undercut by the skeptical conclusions it leads to. The classical Skeptic could, however, argue that it is *possible* that Hume's naturalistic theory is correct, in which case our faculties would not be reliable. Whether or not they are is itself something we cannot rationally determine.

[73] See David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature* (London: Penguin Books, 1984), pp. 316–317 (Book I, Part 4, section 7).

[74] David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1993), p. 111.

[75] *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man,* in Thomas Reid, *Inquiry and Essays*, ed. Ronald E. Beanblossom and Keith Lehrer (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1983), p. 207.

sensations of touch, by the constitution of our nature, suggest to us extension, solidity and motion, which are nowise like to sensations."[76] The term "suggestion" is perhaps unfortunate, as it makes the process sound tentative and hypothetical; but for Reid it produces immediate, unhesitating certainty.

So far this sounds rather like Climacus' account of our initial, unreflective belief-acquisition. And like Climacus, Reid does acknowledge (even if a bit grudgingly in his case) that, although such beliefs are immediate and natural, we *can* step back from them and subject them to skeptical questioning.[77] In particular, he concedes that the object of perception and the mental act by which I perceive it are distinct, so that the latter (my mental state of *apparent* perception) could exist without the former.[78] Why then should I infer the former from the latter? Reid gives three answers. Firstly, it isn't in my power to cease doing so. The faculty of suggestion is irresistible and can't simply be turned off at will. Secondly, even if I could suspend judgement about external objects, it would not serve me well in practical matters if I did so. As Reid was aware,[79] Hume would agree with both these points, but would add that the psychological impossibility of doing without a belief does not show that it is true.[80] Reid's third answer, however, is very un-Humean: "I consider this instinctive belief as one of the best gifts of Nature. I thank the Author of my being, who bestowed it upon me . . . I yield to the direction of my senses, not from instinct only, but from confidence and trust in a faithful and beneficent Monitor."[81] So Hume and Reid agree that our minds naturally produce beliefs, which we cannot in practice resist holding, although they give different accounts of how they do this.[82] The important difference, though, is that Reid insists that the beliefs in question are (generally)

[76] *An Inquiry Into the Human Mind* in Thomas Reid, *Inquiry and Essays,* ed. Ronald E. Beanblossom and Keith Lehrer (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1983), p. 25.

[77] Although at times he seems to argue that skeptical doubts are parasitic on the post-Cartesian "Way of Ideas" (of which he sees Hume's philosophy as an unintended *reductio*) and will simply fade away if we reject that (see e.g. *An Inquiry*, pp. 3–12) at other times he concedes that skepticism cannot be exorcised quite so straightforwardly. (Nor indeed do I think he breaks quite as decisively from the Way of Ideas as he takes himself to do.)

[78] See Ibid., p. 84. Or perhaps some object causing my perceptual state might exist but be radically different from the apparent object I experience.

[79] E.g., Ibid., p. 40.

[80] Nietzsche would concur: "Life is not an argument; the conditions of life might include error." (*The Gay Science*, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), sec. 121.

[81] Reid, *An Inquiry*, pp. 86–87.

[82] Hume gives a detailed, though clearly inadequate, empiricist/associationist account; Reid doesn't really give any explanation for how sensations "suggest" beliefs, and even calls the process "a natural kind of magic" (Reid, *An Inquiry,* p. 43).

true. And, although he only occasionally makes the point explicitly, this insistence is grounded theologically. God has given us this nature to ensure that we track the truth, so its functioning is not just a brute-fact psychological mechanism. Ultimately, it is trust in God's benevolence that underpins Reid's conviction that the beliefs our minds produce are in fact true, rather than just what we are (practically, unavoidably) stuck with.

As far as I know there is no evidence that Kierkegaard had read either Hume or Reid,[83] but they were both discussed by German thinkers he was familiar with, including Kant, Hamann, Jacobi, and Hegel, and he was certainly aware of Hume's main ideas from secondary sources.[84] Both Hamann and Jacobi appealed explicitly to Hume in arguing that our epistemic relation to reality depends on extra-rational factors that they both call "faith" (*Glaube*).[85] Jacobi, annoyed that his critics had taken this appeal to "faith" to involve a religiously-based irrationalism, wrote a book provocatively titled *David Hume on Faith*, in which he insists that

> only the assertion of identical propositions is apodeictic and carries absolute certainty . . . any assertion of the existence of a thing in itself, outside my representation, can never be of this kind or carry absolute certainty with it. So an idealist, basing himself on this distinction, can compel me to concede that my conviction about the existence of real things outside me is only a matter of faith. But then, as a realist, I am forced to say that all knowledge derives exclusively from faith, for things must be given to me before I am in a position to enquire about relations.[86]

This passage could have been written by Climacus.[87] (Although the *Postscript*'s attitude to Jacobi is rather ambivalent, I suspect that he was indeed a significant direct influence

[83] Although they had both been translated into German, so it wouldn't have been impossible.

[84] See Thomas Miles, "David Hume: Kierkegaard and Hume on Reason, Faith, and the Ethics of Philosophy" in *Kierkegaard and the Renaissance and Modern Traditions*, ed. Jon Stewart, Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources, vol. 5, tome 1 (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 23–32; and Jyrki Kivelä, *On the Affinities Between Hume and Kierkegaard* (Helsinki: Philosophical Studies From the University of Helsinki, , 2013), ch. 2. On the widespread interest in Reid and Scottish Common Sense philosophy in Germany see Manfred Kuehn, *Scottish Common Sense in Germany, 1768–1800: A Contribution to the History of Critical Philosophy* (Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987).

[85] Hume talks about "belief," which, although it can have a specifically religious application, has a more secular feel to it than "faith" (though that can be used in secular contexts too.) *Glaube,* like *Tro*, can be translated either way.

[86] Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, "David Hume on Faith, or Idealism and Realism: a Dialogue," in *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel "Allwill,"* ed. and trans. George di Giovanni (Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994) p. 256.

[87] Note that the sharp distinction between reason and faith made in this passage depends on a "narrow" construal of reason. Jacobi, like Kierkegaard, goes back and forth between broader and narrower senses,

on Kierkegaard's epistemological thinking.[88]) As with Reid, knowledge here is seen as depending on a basic trust in our faculties as reaching out to an independent reality. But although he was familiar with Reid,[89] Jacobi doesn't explicitly distinguish here between Hume's brute-fact acceptance that our faculties will compel us to believe what is against reason (the reality of an external world), and Reid's grateful celebration of them as God-given means of putting us in touch with reality—even if we cannot prove that they do. Kierkegaard does not, as far as I know, explicitly address this difference either. But both Jacobi and Kierkegaard were both realists and theists, and I think it is clear that when they appeal to *Glaube/Tro* they are not referring to a mere (though irresistible) psychological mechanism.[90] In rejecting (without claiming to have disproved) skepticism, they consciously affirm (belief in the second sense) that the psychological mechanisms (which give us belief in the first sense) do genuinely connect us to reality.

But is that affirmation reasonable? Kierkegaard certainly doesn't think it is possible to "prove" the external world or to "refute" skepticism using reason in the narrow (strictly deductive) sense. But nor do I think he would even take our trust in our faculties to be reasonable in a probabilistic sense. With a great many background assumptions in place, we can decide that heliocentrism is overwhelmingly probable; but, if all background assumptions are erased by radical skepticism, I don't know how we could then decide that the likelihood of our being brains in vats, say, was a mere 0.00001% and therefore something we could safely dismiss.[91] I would suggest, though, that Kierkegaard would consider such trust in our faculties to be virtuous, and the opposite state, skeptical mistrust, to be a vice—or an expression of a deeper underlying vice. In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard condemns the attitude of mistrust in others' moral character. Such a mistrustful person is

though it has been plausibly argued that his ultimate aim is not to oppose or even limit reason, but to develop a "substantive, less formalistic conception of reason, one that takes into account its organic context and the psychological conditions that anchor its operation." Benjamin Crowe, "F. H. Jacobi on faith, or what it takes to be an irrationalist," *Religious Studies* 45, (2009): p. 320.

[88] See SKS 7, 98–101, 227–228 / CUP 1, 100–104, 250–251.

[89] See George di Giovanni, "Introduction," in Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel "Allwill,"* ed. and trans. George di Giovanni (Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994), pp. 28–30.

[90] This means that Jacobi's appeals to Hume—like Hamann's—are both tactical and somewhat ironical.

[91] Of course, we could conclude that, because they arise outside of all frameworks, radical skepticism's doubts become unreal or even meaningless. On such a view, our only conception of reality is what our faculties give us access to, so we can't even raise the possibility that they might fail to connect us to reality. But this is the anti-realist response to skepticism (pioneered by Berkeley); Kierkegaard, as a realist, would not be willing to take this route.

not as such a philosophical skeptic. But, as Quanbeck has argued, the philosophical skeptic can be seen as guilty of a higher-level mistrust, based on an ultimately sinful desire for self-sufficiency, a refusal to accept vulnerability, dependence. Quanbeck argues that various doxastic attitudes can be mapped onto the forms of despair distinguished in *Sickness Unto Death*, and that Pyrrhonian Skepticism can be seen as manifesting the despair of defiance.[92] The Pyrrhonians' active, voluntary, and practically rather than theoretically motivated doubt "reflect[s] a prideful insistence on maintaining one's own autonomy and self-sufficiency by seeking to avoid vulnerability to and obligations towards others."[93]

By contrast, a higher-level philosophical trust in my—our—cognitive faculties (the opposite of the higher-level mistrust of the Skeptics) would open me to a wider reality, and make possible a deeper relation to it than the merely provisional and pragmatic going-along-with-appearances, which the skeptic recommends. I have argued that conscious epistemic belief (belief in the "ordinary sense," but the second form of that) is more a matter of trust than of willpower; and we can now see the trust that underlies our beliefs as a virtue, both moral and intellectual. (It would indeed be the most basic of intellectual virtues; the one that makes all the others possible.) The opposite of mistrust in *Works of Love* was (of course) love. But love trusts. And it is closely connected in Kierkegaard with faith (in "the eminent sense"—religious faith) which is itself a kind of trust. I'm not suggesting that the trust that underlies ordinary-sense belief can be equated to religious faith; Climacus, indeed, as I noted before, takes pains to distinguish them. There is a structural parallel between them: faith/belief in both senses is a "second immediacy." But I think there is more than just that to connect them, and I will try to indicate this briefly by expanding on Quanbeck's point that for Kierkegaard our basic epistemic attitudes to reality are underpinned by evaluative/existential ones. And it is not just skepticism that is expressive of a despairing (=sinful) mindset. To see the world in a Schopenhauerian way, as if "underlying everything were only a wild fermenting power that writhing in dark passions produced everything . . . if a vast, never appeased emptiness hid beneath everything";[94] or, as in standard atheistic materialism, as a mere conglomeration of material objects interacting mechanistically without value or purpose; or

[92] Quanbeck, "Doubt, Despair, and Doxastic Agency," section 3.3. This connection of doubt with despair does depend on there being a voluntary element in our doxastic attitudes, but doesn't, I think, require (though it obviously fits well with) Quanbeck's specific form of DDV.
[93] Ibid., p. 17.
[94] SKS 4, 112 / FT, 15. This was written before Kierkegaard had read Schopenhauer, but this passage expresses eloquently something very close to Schopenhauer's view of things.

monistically, as in Spinoza's pantheism (or panentheism); these would be non-skeptical, indeed realist views, but they would, for Kierkegaard, still be expressive of despairing attitudes. Such views do not arise, any more than skepticism does, from a purely neutral examination of objective data, but from a schema, expressive of the inquirer's basic evaluative attitude, which determines how the data are interpreted. (I am talking here about ultimate metaphysical schemas, not the more specialized ones used in the particular sciences.) And this is true of all basic worldviews. They are not formed by a mythological faculty of "pure thinking"[95] but by human beings whose relation to the world is fundamentally affective and evaluative, and whose narrow-sense reasonings are themselves exercised in contexts set by broad-sense rationality.

So to point out that a certain metaphysical or epistemological outlook is an articulation of a more basic affective/evaluative stance, is not by itself a debunking move. (Though it can serve to debunk a philosophy which claims, self-deludingly, that it *is* based on "pure thinking.") But it does open up the possibility of an ethical and/or religious critique of those affective/evaluative stances—as with Kierkegaard's response to Greek Skepticism, which had, for him, at least the merit of being open about its ultimately practical, evaluative underpinnings. Kierkegaard's own worldview is, of course, also based on such underpinnings; according to *Sickness Unto Death*, the opposite of despair in all its forms is faith (in the religious sense), and faith, like despair, has its epistemic consequences. For Kierkegaard, the right schema to bring to our (ultimate, metaphysical) interpretation of the physical world is one based on (religious) faith. In his view, the world should be seen as a gift, and our faculties also as gifts which enable us to experience and appreciate the world:

> Surely no one would seriously think that what the lily and the bird rejoice over, and comparable things, are nothing to rejoice over! Therefore, that you came into existence, that you exist . . . that you became a human being; that you can see—bear in mind, that you can see!—that you can hear, that you can smell, that you can taste, that you can feel; that the sun shines for you and for your sake, that when it becomes weary, the moon begins to shine, and the stars are lit; that winter comes, that all nature disguises itself, plays the game of stranger, and in order to delight you; that spring comes, that the birds return in great flocks, and in order to give you joy.[96]

[95] SKS 7, 276–282, 285–286, 299–309 / CUP 1, 304–309, 313–314, 328–338.
[96] "The Lily in the Field and the Bird of the Air" in SKS 11, 43–44 / WA, 39–40.

One can see this as a more passionate and lyrical version of Reid's trust in God as grounding our epistemic self-confidence. And this attitude is the basis for Kierkegaard's ultimate answer to skepticism: to deny the (basic) reliability of our faculties, and to doubt the reality of the world they make available to us, is an act of ingratitude. By contrast, for him, belief in the ordinary sense—both our initial trust in our senses, and our conscious reaffirmation of that trust—does depend on, and is an expression of, belief in God.[97] I don't think Kierkegaard wants to say that one cannot reject skepticism without endorsing this religious attitude. His strictly epistemological analysis leads to the conclusion that skepticism cannot be directly refuted, but that its rejection is not an arbitrary act of will; it is rather expressive of a basic trust in our faculties. For him, that basic trust is bound up with his wider religious outlook, but for others, such a trust may be contextualized differently.

The skeptic will still retort that such trust is not itself reasonable; it is a (rationally) arbitrary attitude, even if not an arbitrary act of conscious willing. Clearly, one cannot answer the radical skeptic by a rational argument to prove the reliability of our reason (as Descartes tried to). But one could, more modestly, start from a basic trust in our faculties, and then try to show that there is a plausible explanation for our having the faculties we do which would also (unlike Hume's explanation) establish that they were in fact (basically) reliable. So our trust in them would be non-arbitrary at least in the sense that it would be grounded integrally in a coherent overall philosophical or religious worldview. One might also try to show that some worldviews should be preferred in that they can give us more confidence in the reliability of our faculties than others, or even that some worldviews can be ruled out by showing that their explanations of our faculties undermine our confidence in their reliability and thus undermine themselves. (Plantinga and Nagel have tried to show that this is the case with standard atheistic naturalism, for instance.[98]) If such a plausible positive account of our faculties can be given (or, indeed,

[97] What Climacus defines as faith in "the eminent sense" (SKS 4, 285–286 / PF, 87–88) is specifically Christian faith—belief in the Incarnation. What underpins his epistemology is a more generic faith in God as Creator. Although, if faith in the specifically Christian sense is needed to overcome despair, and if despair inevitably expresses itself in the epistemic, as well as other, attitudes of fallen humanity, the specifically Christian faith would have an epistemological significance.

[98] See Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), ch. 10; Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), ch. 4. Plantinga and Nagel disagree about whether the best alternative is theism (Plantinga) or an immanent teleology (Nagel).

several competing ones[99]) that would show reliance on them to be (broad-sense) reasonable, rather than just something we cannot, psychologically, avoid, even though none of this would amount to a knock-down refutation of the skeptic.

So reason does have a part to play, and the trust in our faculties can (if rationally contextualized in this way) be considered a reasonable trust. But in the end, the skeptic can still point out the necessarily circular nature of that reasoning (as I noted, it *starts* from trust in our faculties) and refuse the invitation to trust. Ultimately the objection to such a determined skeptic remains practical—in the sense of ethical. The skeptic can go along with appearances, but without belief for everyday pragmatic purposes. But what good is he or she achieving by such an uncommitted, detached life? Kierkegaard's unfinished narrative *Johannes Climacus* was intended to show that the attempt to doubt everything would lead to a diminished life, while *The Concept of Irony* and *Either/Or* were intended to indicate the human costs of what one might call practical or ethical skepticism—radical ironism and reflective aestheticism. Kierkegaard's ethical critique of skepticism is based on his trust in our knowledge of God/the Good—a knowledge that is, in his view, innate in us all, though often buried and repressed.[100] The skeptic will, of course, question that trust too, arguing that it is intellectually irresponsible and based on wishful thinking; and Kierkegaard will respond by questioning the skeptic's motives for making these charges. The dispute between them is, in the end, unavoidably an ethical one.

[99] If there are several plausible accounts of how our faculties might be reliable, even if we are not able to choose between them, that might properly increase our confidence that they are in fact reliable (one way or another).

[100] See e.g., Piety, *Ways of Knowing*, pp. 116–125; C. Stephen Evans, "Kierkegaard, Natural Theology, and the Existence of God," in *Kierkegaard and Christian Faith*, ed. Paul Martens and C. Stephen Evans (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), pp. 25–38. This is true up to the level of Religiousness A, at least; what is distinctively Christian comes to us from outside, through revelation. Whether Christianity, on Kierkegaard's view, is against, above, or in accord with reason is far too large a question to address here—but I don't think it is necessary to address it for my current purposes.