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Doubt, Despair, and Doxastic Agency: Kierkegaard on Responsibility for Belief

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Abstract: Although doubt (*Tvivl*) and despair (*Fortvivlelse*) are widely recognized as two central and closely associated concepts in Kierkegaard's authorship, their precise relationship remains opaque in the extant interpretive literature. To shed light on their relationship, this paper develops a novel interpretation of Kierkegaard's understanding of the connection between despair and our agency over our beliefs, and its significance for Kierkegaard's ethics of belief. First, I show that an important yet largely overlooked form of Kierkegaardian despair involves either failing to take ethico-religious responsibility for one's practical agency over one's beliefs, or misusing one's practical agency over one's beliefs by refusing to recognize or comply with externally given ethico-religious norms governing belief. Second, I argue that Kierkegaard takes properly exercising one's agency over one's beliefs to matter because beliefs are partly constitutive of the theological virtues (faith, hope, and love) that Kierkegaard regards as the cure for despair.

Keywords: Despair, Doubt, Doxastic Voluntarism, Ethics of Belief, Kierkegaard

1 Introduction

Doubt (*Tvivl*) and despair (*Fortvivlelse*) are widely recognized as two central concepts in Kierkegaard's authorship. Although doubt and despair may initially seem like quite different phenomena, as many commentators observe in passing, Kierkegaard closely associates doubt and despair both linguistically and conceptually.[1]

1 For instance, see Thulstrup 1980, 332; Westphal 1996, 79–80; Stewart 2003, 265, 586; Theunissen 2005, 46–47; Podmore 2011, 20–21; Bernier 2015, 65; Brake 2015, 53; Wood 2019, 341; Stokes 2022, 72. As some of these commentators observe, Kierkegaard follows figures such as Fichte, Hegel, and Martensen in closely associating these concepts. (Doubt (*Zweifel*) and despair (*Verzweiflung*) are also closely linguistically related in German.) As we will see, though, Kierkegaard develops a distinctive account of *how* doubt and despair are related.

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Because the Danish prefix 'for' denotes an intensification of the word it modifies,[2] some commentators claim that Kierkegaard regards despair as the maximal 'intensification' or 'totalization' of doubt.[3] But beyond the observation that despair constitutes an intensification or totalization of doubt, it remains opaque in the interpretive literature how precisely Kierkegaard conceives of the relationship between doubt and despair.

To shed light on Kierkegaard's account of the relationship between doubt and despair, this paper develops a novel interpretation of both *how* Kierkegaard understands the relationship between despair and our agency over our beliefs, and *why* it is significant for Kierkegaard's ethics of belief. Building on Michelle Kosch's (2006a, 2006b) interpretation of Kierkegaardian despair as a misrelation to one's agency (which I will call the 'agential interpretation' of Kierkegaardian despair), I argue that an important yet largely overlooked form of Kierkegaardian despair (which I will call 'doxastic despair') involves a misrelation to one's agency over one's beliefs. Drawing on a variety of signed and pseudonymous texts written throughout the course of Kierkegaard's authorship, I show how the genus of doxastic despair can be divided into three species, admitting of further sub-species, corresponding to the three forms of despair as defined by "the constituents of the synthesis" of the self in *The Sickness unto Death*: unconscious doxastic despair, conscious doxastic despair of weakness, and conscious doxastic despair of defiance. Unconscious doxastic despair involves holding ethico-religiously significant beliefs unreflectively. The doxastic despair of weakness involves a failure to take ethico-religious responsibility for one's doxastic agency (that is, one's *practical* agency over one's beliefs, consisting in an ability to voluntarily believe or doubt on the basis of practical reasons). And the doxastic despair of defiance involves misusing one's doxastic agency by refusing to recognize or comply with ethico-religious norms governing belief. Furthermore, I argue that Kierkegaard takes our doxastic agency to *matter* because beliefs are partly constitutive of the theological virtues (faith, hope, and love) that Kierkegaard regards as the cure for despair.

This interpretation has a number of notable payoffs. First, it illuminates how Kierkegaard takes our doxastic agency to bear important similarities to our agency over our bodily actions. Second, it reveals both substantial similarities and

2 See MacDonald 2014, 159.

3 For example, Stokes (2022, 72) characterizes despair as the intensification of doubt. Theunissen takes Kierkegaardian despair to be the "totalization" of doubt in the sense that "it implies that one lets go of *all* hope" (Theunissen 2005, 46, emphasis Theunissen's; see also 91–95). Bernier (2015, chapter 4) likewise argues that Kierkegaardian despair consists both in hopelessness and in a totalization of doubt, where the latter "is no mere intellectual exercise, but is directed toward the meaning and identity of the self" (Bernier 2015, 61).

subtle differences among the various forms of doubt (exemplified by different kinds of skeptics) discussed in both signed and pseudonymous texts throughout Kierkegaard's authorship. Third, it indicates that there is significant continuity in Kierkegaard's views regarding the significance of doubt throughout his authorship. Fourth, it illustrates how specifications of two prominent yet *prima facie* incompatible interpretations of Kierkegaardian despair – Kosch's 'agential' interpretation and a widely endorsed 'perfectionist' interpretation on which despair consists in failing to perfect or actualize one's nature – are not only consistent with each other but complementary. Fifth, it shows how Kierkegaard takes changing our relationship to our doxastic agency to play a central role in the dialectical transition through different stages of despair *en route* to overcoming despair by cultivating faith, hope, and love. Sixth, it sheds light on Kierkegaard's ethics of belief by showing that Kierkegaard takes our doxastic attitudes to be ethico-religiously significant at least partly in virtue of constituting more fundamentally ethico-religiously significant attitudes (such as faith, hope, and love). Finally, it reveals that Kierkegaard offers both an intriguing account of our distinctively practical/ethico-religious responsibility for our beliefs which does not reduce to theoretical/epistemic responsibility, and an insightful diagnosis of the various ways in which we misuse or fail to acknowledge this responsibility.

My argument proceeds as follows. § 2 presents Kosch's interpretation of Kierkegaardian despair as consisting in a misrelation to one's agency and suggests that Kosch's interpretation provides a fruitful framework for understanding doxastic despair. § 3 applies this framework to develop an account of the three primary forms of doxastic despair. § 4 argues that integrating Kosch's agential interpretation with a perfectionist interpretation of Kierkegaardian despair provides the resources to explain why Kierkegaard takes properly exercising one's doxastic agency to be necessary to overcome despair by cultivating the theological virtues. § 5 con-cludes.

2 Despair and Agency

2.1 An Overview of Kierkegaardian Despair

While Kierkegaard's interest in despair can be traced to early journal entries from 1835, Kierkegaard's first extensive treatment of despair occurs in *Either/Or* (published in 1843).[4] In part 2 of *Either/*Or, the 'ethicist' Judge William examines the

4 See MacDonald (2014, 159) for discussion.

'aesthete' A's despair as he enjoins A to choose an 'ethical' form of life. Following the publication of *Either/Or*, despair continues to be an important topic in Kierkegaard's authorship, culminating in 1849 in Kierkegaard's most developed and systematic treatment of despair in *The Sickness unto Death*.[5] At the beginning of this text, Kierkegaard's pseudonym Anti-Climacus famously defines the self as a relation that relates the poles of the synthesis constitutive of the human being: infinitude and finitude, temporality and eternity, and possibility (or freedom) and necessity (SUD 13/SKS 11, 129).[6] Anti-Climacus proceeds to characterize despair – that is, the spiritual 'sickness unto death' – as a *misrelation of the self*. According to Anti-Climacus's first taxonomy of the forms of despair – which considers despair with regard to the constituents of the synthesis – despair involves a failure to properly relate the constituents of the synthesis. For instance, possibility's despair involves overemphasizing one's freedom, whereas necessity's despair involves inadequately embracing one's freedom. According to Anti-Climacus's second taxonomy of the forms of despair – which considers despair with regard to consciousness – one can despair either consciously or unconsciously. Unconscious despair involves ignorance that one is a self; conscious despair of weakness (*Svaghed*) involves not willing to be oneself; and conscious despair of defiance (*Trods*) involves willing to be oneself in the wrong way.

Yet interpreters disagree about how to further specify Kierkegaard's claim that despair is a misrelation of the self. On perhaps the most common interpretation, Kierkegaard endorses a *perfectionist* (and *eudaimonic*) account of despair on which despair is not fundamentally a psychological state but rather a failure to be (and failure to will to be) the self one ought to be, and thereby a failure to perfect one's nature or flourish.[7] As Hannay puts it, "[W]e can say quite generally that despair in Kierkegaard's pseudonyms is unwillingness to live up to an expectation of selfhood" (Hannay 1998, 338). While interpreters differ in precisely how they characterize this 'expectation' (or norm, or *telos*) of selfhood, it is often taken to involve (roughly) being wholeheartedly oriented towards and stably commit-

5 Although *The Sickness unto Death* was published under the pseudonym Anti-Climacus, in this paper I will follow the widespread scholarly consensus and assume that Kierkegaard himself endorses Anti-Climacus's views.

6 All translations are from the Hong editions published by Princeton University Press. Sigla for Kierkegaard's texts in parenthetical citations follow the standard conventions from the International Kierkegaard Commentary and are noted in the bibliography. References to the Hong editions are followed by references to the authoritative scholarly Danish edition of Kierkegaard's writings, *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter* (SKS).

7 It is worth observing that reading Kierkegaard as endorsing a broadly perfectionist, eudaimonic account of despair does not entail attributing to Kierkegaard the more specific eudaimonist view that the only *reason* we have to be moral is that it promotes our flourishing.

ted to the Good,[8] such that one properly relates to oneself, one's neighbor, and God.[9]

However, a prominent alternative to the perfectionist interpretation is Kosch's (2006a, 2006b) 'agential interpretation' of Kierkegaardian despair.[10] On Kosch's interpretation, despair does not fundamentally consist in failing to perfect one's nature or failing to flourish, but rather fundamentally consists in *misrelating to one's agency.*[11] In Kosch's words, "Despair in the most general sense [is] the unwillingness to accept human agency with all of its particular conditions" (Kosch 2006a, 97). In § 4, I will argue that Kosch's agential interpretation can ultimately be synthesized with the perfectionist interpretation. But first, I aim to show that Kosch's interpretation can be extended to shed light on Kierkegaard's views regarding the relationship between despair and doubt. Let me begin by spelling out Kosch's interpretation in more detail.

2.2 Kosch on Kierkegaardian Despair

On Kosch's reading, Kierkegaard holds that one can misrelate to one's agency by being unwilling to accept either of two conditions on one's agency: first, one's responsibility for deciding how to act, and second, ethical obligations with a source external to one's own will. By unconsciously rejecting the first condition, one manifests unconscious despair. By consciously rejecting the first condition, one manifests the passive despair of weakness. And by rejecting the second condition, one manifests the active despair of defiance.

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8 As MacDonald (2014, 159) notes, the Danish word '*tvivl*' derives from the Germanic '*twi-fla*,' meaning 'double.' Despair (as well as doubt) thus involve *double-mindedness* (as Kierkegaard argues especially forcefully in 'Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing').

9 For various specifications of this interpretation, see, for example, Rudd 1993, 2001, 2012, 2022; Hannay 1996, 1998; Davenport 2001, 2013; Westphal 2014, chapter 12; Walsh 2018; Fremstedal 2022; Krishek 2022, 2023.

10 Other notable alternative interpretations include Lübcke 1991 and Theunissen 2005. These interpretations are less germane to the topic of this paper, however, so I will not engage with them here.

11 Perhaps because Kosch's interests lie primarily in Kierkegaard's engagement with German Idealism, Kosch often characterizes her interpretation in intellectualist terms: e.g., that despair consists in "misconstruing" (Kosch 2006a, 143) or having the "wrong conception of" the nature of one's agency (Kosch 2006a, 154). But Kierkegaard does not say that having the correct conception of one's agency *suffices* for overcoming despair, and his analysis of despair is intended to apply to non-philosophers as well. Accordingly, I think the most plausible specification of Kosch's interpretation regards Kierkegaardian despair as a 'misrelation' to one's agency, where this misrelation typically *involves* false beliefs about the nature of one's agency but is neither analyzable solely in terms of nor reducible to false beliefs.

Kosch argues that unconscious despair and passive despair of weakness are the primary forms of despair that Judge William diagnoses A as manifesting in *Either/Or*. Kosch writes, "Despair, for the Judge, is the conscious or unconscious assumption of a passive or fatalistic attitude towards one's existence, motivated by a misconstrual of the nature of one's agency" (Kosch 2006a, 143). Kosch shows that Judge William's criticisms of A are also intended to target the German Idealist (especially Hegelian and Schellingian) compatibilist conception of free agency. Kosch explains that Kierkegaard objects to compatibilism on the grounds that "seeing one's activity as part of a deterministic historical process [...] cannot be reconciled with the forward-looking standpoint of agency which forces deliberation and choice" (Kosch 2006a, 149). Consequently, Kosch claims, "The conversion to an ethical standpoint" – and thus the overcoming of despair – "is, in the Judge's characterization, equivalent to the acceptance of choice, the taking up of responsibility" (Kosch 2006a, 150).[12]

Kosch proceeds to argue that Kierkegaard's fundamental critique of 'the ethical' later in his authorship – particularly his critique of the German Idealist (especially Fichtean) 'ethics of autonomy' – is likewise that it misconstrues the nature of human agency.[13] Because proponents of the ethics of autonomy take the individual's self-legislating will to be the source of ethical norms, they refuse to countenance any sources of normative authority external to the individual's will (Kosch 2006a, 169–174). And by failing to recognize any ethical norms beyond the will's "own sovereign self-determination," the proponent of the ethics of autonomy manifests active, defiant despair (Kosch 2006a, 173).

2.3 Despair and Doxastic Agency

Yet a striking absence from Kosch's (2006a) agential interpretation of Kierkegaardian despair is any discussion of the relationship between despair and *doxastic agency*. While it is possible that Kosch would grant that misrelating to one's doxastic agency could be a form of despair and simply does not discuss this, a more principled explanation of this absence is that Kosch takes Kierkegaardian despair to consist only in the failure to properly exercise one's agency in performing bodily actions, not in forming beliefs. This is because Kosch argues that Kierkegaard denies direct doxastic voluntarism (the view that we have direct voluntary control

12 See Davenport 1995 and Krishek 2023 for related, complementary interpretations of *Either/Or*.
13 Kosch (2006c; 2015) argues that Fichte is the central figure informing Kierkegaard's account of 'the ethical.'

over our beliefs analogous to the direct voluntary control that we have over our bodily actions). Kosch claims that if Kierkegaard were to endorse direct doxastic voluntarism,

> [this] would have serious consequences for the sort of normative criterion Christianity could be, since the claims it would make on an individual's conduct would have what force they have on the basis of that individual's decision to put credence in them. On such an interpretation, the individual himself becomes the source of the bindingness of the imperatives that guide his conduct. (Kosch 2006a, 188–189)

Kierkegaard rejects the view that the individual is the source of the bindingness of the imperatives that guide his conduct. By modus tollens, Kosch infers, Kierkegaard rejects direct doxastic voluntarism.[14]

However, it is unclear why Kosch thinks that Kierkegaard endorses the conditional claim this argument relies on, namely that *if* direct doxastic voluntarism is true, *then* one is obligated to φ only if one believes that one is obligated to φ.[15] Perhaps Kosch associates direct doxastic voluntarism with the 'ethics of autonomy's' emphasis on the sovereignty of the individual's will and its denial of obligations with a source external to the individual's will. But having voluntary control over one's beliefs as a *psychological* matter does not entail having the capacity to voluntarily bind or free oneself from moral obligations as a *normative* matter. While Kierkegaard holds that we possess practical agency over what we believe – as we will see in § 3 – to my knowledge there is no textual evidence indicating that he thinks this agency over our beliefs constitutes a *normative power* enabling us to bind or free ourselves from moral obligations at will.

To the contrary, there are good reasons to think that Kierkegaard endorses a sophisticated version of direct doxastic voluntarism on which our agency over our beliefs parallels our agency over our bodily actions in central respects.[16] In the Climacus writings, Kierkegaard insists that we can never know any contingent proposition about the external world with complete certainty (PF 79–86/SKS 4, 278–285). Thus, he infers, it is always possible to doubt any contingent proposition about the external world. And whether we doubt or believe is determined by the will. Climacus claims, "doubt (*tvivlen*) can be terminated only in freedom, by an act of will (*Villies-Akt*)" (PF 82/SKS 4, 281). He continues, "belief (*troen*) is not a knowledge

14 Elsewhere, however, Kosch remarks that in *Fragments*, Kierkegaard holds that "doubt and belief are expressions of will and voluntary in a perfectly ordinary sense" (Kosch 2006b, 93 n16).

15 It is unclear whether Kosch intends to rely on an even stronger implicit premise: that S is obligated to φ *if* and only if S believes that S is obligated to φ. But the weaker implicit premise is sufficient to establish the conditional claim above.

16 For defenses of this interpretation, see Wyllie 2013; Kemp 2018, 218–222; Quanbeck 2024c.

(*Erkjendelse*) but an act of freedom, an expression of will (*en Villiens-Yttring*)" (PF 83/SKS 4, 282). So, Climacus explains, "The conclusion of belief (*Troens Slutning*) is no conclusion (*Slutning*) but a resolution (*Beslutning*), and thus doubt is excluded (*Tvivlen udelukket*)" (PF 84/SKS 4, 283).

Examining this sentence helps to illuminate Kierkegaard's conception of belief as involving a *voluntary* resolution that excludes doubt.[17] Kierkegaard regards belief as involving a resolution in the sense that it halts further deliberation about whether *p* is true. In the Climacus writings, Kierkegaard claims that terminating inquiry, reflection, or deliberation about whether *p* involves a "leap" (*spring*): a free, voluntary, and qualitative transition from one state to another (PF 42–43/SKS 4, 247–249; CUP1 112–116, 335–338/SKS 7, 109–112, 306–309). As long as one chooses to inquire, reflect, or deliberate about whether *p,* one suspends judgment on *p*. Inquiring also entails doubting. In the (unpublished and incomplete) manuscript *Johannes Climacus, or De Omnibus Dubitandum Est,* Kierkegaard characterizes doubt as a state in which one is "interested" in the question of whether *p* – i.e., one is consciously considering whether *p* – but has not concluded deliberation about whether *p* (JC 170/SKS 15, 57). One can "neutralize" doubt by "canceling" one's interest in the question of whether *p* and thereby ceasing to consider whether *p* (JC 170/SKS 15, 57). But by voluntarily resolving to close inquiry into the question of whether *p* and thereby settling the question of whether *p* by forming a belief that *p* or a belief that not-*p*, doubt is "excluded" (PF 84/SKS 4, 283) and "conquered" (JC 170/SKS 15, 57).

In light of Kierkegaard's claim that we can voluntarily resolve to believe or doubt just as we can voluntarily resolve to act, I suggest that we can extend Kosch's interpretation of the relationship between agency and despair to shed light on Kierkegaard's understanding of the relationship between doubt and despair.[18] I aim to show in the following section that Kierkegaard takes the failure to properly exercise one's *doxastic* agency – especially, but not exclusively, by doubting – to manifest an important form of despair which has been largely overlooked in Kierkegaard scholarship.[19] These failures to exercise our doxastic agency come in three

17 This interpretation draws on Adams 1987, 43–44; Rudd 1993, 38–39; 1998, 74; Westphal 1996, 90; Piety 2010, 76, 82; Stokes 2010, 39–40; Quanbeck 2024a, § 4.

18 While the interpretation I develop in this paper proceeds on the assumption that Kierkegaard endorses direct doxastic voluntarism, this assumption typically is not necessary for my argument to go through. Most of this interpretation could be recast by construing our agency over our beliefs as being indirect (as Evans 1989, Ferreira 1991, and Westphal 1996 interpret Kierkegaard).

19 Theunissen remarks that "People surrender to disbelief either through the illusory view that everything is possible for them or through their fixation on the fact that nothing is possible for them" (Theunissen 2005, 87), but does not elaborate in further detail.

basic forms which are instances of unconscious despair, the despair of weakness, and the despair of defiance, respectively.[20] The movement from unconscious doxastic despair to doxastic despair of weakness to doxastic despair of defiance thus represents an increasing intensification of despair which simultaneously constitutes dialectical progress towards overcoming despair.[21] The following section will draw on a variety of signed and pseudonymous texts written throughout the course of Kierkegaard's authorship to examine these three forms of doxastic despair in turn.

3 Doxastic Despair

3.1 Unconscious Doxastic Despair

Kierkegaard takes a ubiquitous form of doxastic despair to consist in holding, unreflective, unexamined beliefs about ethico-religiously significant matters. Like Hume, Kierkegaard holds that we habitually form many beliefs about the world without consciously choosing to do so by passively assenting to the way things appear to us.[22] For instance, in *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard writes, "The individual first begins his life with 'ergo,' with *belief* (*Troen*). But most people live so negligently (*skjødesløst*) that they do not notice at all that in one way or another, every minute they live, they live by virtue of an 'ergo,' of a belief (*Troen*)" (WL 230/SKS 9, 232, emphasis Kierkegaard's). That is, Kierkegaard thinks that most people fail to recognize that they are freely making an inference from how things appear to how they really are.

It may typically be unproblematic to believe unreflectively, for example, that our sense perception of the middle-sized dry goods around us is veridical. However, holding unreflective beliefs about ethico-religiously significant matters – paradigmatically by habitually accepting the ethical and/or religious views common in

20 Anti-Climacus's distinction between unconscious despair, conscious despair of weakness and conscious despair of defiance occurs in his second taxonomy of despair, "despair as defined by consciousness." However, these forms of despair typically roughly correspond to the two forms of despair as defined "with regard to the constituents of the synthesis", unconscious despair and conscious despair of weakness typically correspond to the despair of finitude/necessity, and conscious despair of defiance typically corresponds to the despair of infinitude/possibility. (Cf. Theunissen 2005, 96–97; Bernier 2015, 61–62; for discussion of various complications in mapping Anti-Climacus's different taxonomies of despair onto each other, though, see Krishek 2022, chapter 6.) In what follows, the close relationship between these different taxonomies of despair will be apparent.

21 On the dialectical structure of Anti-Climacus's account of despair, see Stewart 2003, chapter 13.

22 See Evans 1989, 179; Rudd 1998, 81.

one's society – is a central aspect of the unconscious despair that Anti-Climacus describes in *The Sickness unto Death*. According to Anti-Climacus's second taxonomy of despair – "Despair as Defined by Consciousness" – unconscious despair is the most immediate, least reflective, and least dialectically advanced form of despair. Unconscious despair is characterized by both *ignorance* of having a self and *indifference* towards this ignorance. Anti-Climacus writes, "it is far from being the case that men regard the relationship to truth, relating themselves to the truth, as the highest good, and it is very far from being the case that they Socratically regard being in error in this manner as the worst misfortune – the sensate in them usually far outweighs their intellectuality" (SUD 42–43/SKS 11, 157–158). The person in unconscious despair thus demonstrates a lack of concern for exercising their agency in numerous respects, including with respect to their beliefs.[23]

Kierkegaard's concern with unconscious doxastic despair can be traced back to his *Magister's* thesis, *The Concept of Irony*. Kierkegaard argues that via his negative, ironic use of the elenchus, Socrates sought to induce doubt to reflectively distance his interlocutors from their unreflective ethico-religious beliefs.[24] Kierkegaard argues that proper Socratic irony (irony "in the eminent sense") does not simply aim to undermine specific beliefs, but rather targets "the entire given actuality (*Virkelighed*) at a certain time and under certain conditions" to undermine one's fundamental ethical worldview (CI 254/SKS 1, 292). That is, irony aims to *suspend* one's views about morality (*Moral*) and ethics (*Sædelighed*) (CI 283/SKS 1, 318). In K. Brian Söderquist's words, by inducing doubt about his interlocutors' conventional beliefs about ethico-religious matters, Socrates sought to "deliver listeners from the unexamined life as he questioned their seemingly unassailable convictions" (Söderquist 2013, 356).[25] Indeed, much of Kierkegaard's authorship can plausibly be interpreted as aiming to stir his readers out of their unreflective beliefs and thereby help them overcome unconscious doxastic despair. Thus, the reflective doubt that Socrates (and Kierkegaard *qua* 'Christian Socrates') seeks to induce constitutes dialectical progress in overcoming despair.

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23 While the paradigmatic form of unconscious doxastic despair consists in holding unreflective beliefs about ethico-religiously significant matters, arguably another form of unconscious doxastic despair consists in lacking doxastic attitudes about ethico-religiously significant matters by never taking an "interest" in such matters (e.g., the immortality of the soul; EO2 168–169/SKS 3, 165) or losing one's interest in such matters (e.g., the doctrine of the incarnation; SUD 129–130/SKS 11, 240–241).

24 See also JC 166–172/SKS 15, 53–59 for Climacus's account of how doubt involves a departure from immediacy.

25 For further discussion of Kierkegaard's account of Socratic irony, see Söderquist 2007, chapter 2.

3.2 Doxastic Despair of Weakness

Nonetheless, Kierkegaard insists that the person who doubts regarding fundamental ethico-religiously significant matters still remains in despair. Although Kierkegaard allows that skeptical doubt about ordinary empirical matters is often unobjectionable, both totalizing, global skepticism – expressed by H. L. Martensen's Cartesian dictum '*De omnibus dubitandum est*' ('Everything must be doubted') – and skepticism about particular ethico-religiously significant propositions can manifest despair. Kierkegaard argues that a common pathological, despairing response to doubt is to take doubt to be out of one's agential control, whether this is due to one's own personal psychological proclivities or because one takes doubt to be psychologically and/or rationally necessitated by theoretical reason.

Kierkegaard consistently asserts that one can passively doubt in two different ways: by engaging in "scientific" (*videnskabelig*), disinterested, objective speculative doubt, or by engaging in "personal" (*personlige*), interested, subjective, existential doubt (e.g., EO2 95/SKS 3, 97–98; FT 110/SKS 4, 198). Speculative doubt is exemplified by the Danish Hegelian philosophers (especially Martensen) who take philosophy to begin with doubt and hold that we ought to continue deliberating, reflecting, and doubting until we have acquired knowledge involving objective certainty. Yet due to their epistemological holism – according to which one cannot know part of reality in isolation from an understanding of the whole – they remain (or purport to remain) in a state of universal doubt until they have attained 'presuppositionless' knowledge of the entirety of reality.[26] And because speculative doubters regard doubt solely as a theoretical, intellectual enterprise, they lack a properly 'interested,' personal, passionate concern with their doubt.[27]

By contrast, beginning in his early journal entries and continuing throughout at least his first authorship, Kierkegaard takes passionate, existential doubt to be

26 See Westphal 1996, chapters 5–6; 2014, chapters 9–10; Stewart 2003, 488–496; Halvorson 2023.

27 Kierkegaard also holds that the ideal of speculative doubt is never fully instantiated, and those who claim to be engaged in speculative doubt are typically engaged only in a form of *pseudo-doubt*. That is, while the speculative doubter (paradigmatically, Martensen) may claim to doubt everything while standing at the lecture podium or sitting in the seminar room, like Hume the speculative doubter leads an ordinary life unaffected by skeptical doubt and thus lacks the *dispositions* constitutive of doubt. As *Johannes Climacus* illustrates, genuinely engaging in universal skeptical doubt is extremely psychologically difficult. In Jon Stewart's words, this text is a "literary refutation in the form of a reductio ad absurdum of the position of universal doubt" (Stewart 2003, 239). (See also Strawser 1994 and Stokes 2010.) Moreover, because speculative doubt is "disinterested" and does not permeate one's personality, overcoming speculative doubt does not suffice to overcome despair (EO2 212/SKS 3, 204).

exemplified by the character of Faust.[28] A explains, "Faust is a doubter (*Tvivler*), but [unlike the speculative doubter] he is no vain fool who wants to make himself important by doubting what others believe; his doubt has an objective foundation (*objectiv Grund)* in him" (EO1 208/SKS 2, 203). Lisi (2014) argues that Kierkegaard understands Faustian doubt (both in A's remarks in *Either/Or* and elsewhere in his authorship) as involving an attempt to find a principle to unify experience, whether this is a practical principle that gives structure to one's own personal experiences or a theoretical principle enabling one to attain knowledge of the whole of reality. A explains, "[Faust's] doubting soul (*tvivlende Sjæl*) finds nothing in which it can rest, and now he grasps at erotic love (*griber han Elskoven*), not because he believes (*troer*) in it but because it has an element of presentness in which there is a momentary rest and a striving that diverts and that draws attention away from the nothingness of doubt (*Tvivlens Intethed*)" (EO1 206/SKS 2, 201). Because Faust's endless quest for such a principle to structure and unify his experience manifests an existentially consuming form of doubt, Faust exhibits a totalizing, existential form of doubt that manifests despair. Existential doubt is thus a deeper, more intensified form of doubt than speculative doubt.

Yet despite their differences, both speculative and existential forms of passive doubt involve taking oneself to be compelled to continue suspending judgment indefinitely. In *Either/Or* and the Climacus writings, Kierkegaard argues especially forcefully that doubting in this way manifests despair by constituting a failure to take responsibility for one's doxastic agency.[29]

In *Either/Or,* A's existential, Faustian doubt exhibits the doxastic despair of weakness.[30] Not only does A express a fatalistic unwillingness to take responsibility for his bodily actions (as Kosch argues), but he is unwilling to assume responsibility for his beliefs.[31] In the 'Diapsalmata,' A writes, "I have, I believe, the courage to doubt everything; I have, I believe, the courage to fight against everything; but I do

28 See, e.g., KJN 1, 14/SKS 17, 19, AA: 12; EO1 204–214/SKS 2, 200–209; FT 107–110/SKS 4, 195–199. For further discussion of Kierkegaard's treatment of Faustian doubt, see Lisi 2014 and Rush 2016, 221–226.

29 Kierkegaard also claims that passive doubt can be a form of despair in texts signed under his own name (e.g., EUD 214–215/SKS 5, 214–215). Anti-Climacus's description of negative, doubting offense at the doctrine of the Incarnation resembles Faustian doubt and also has the hallmarks of the despair of weakness (SUD 130–131/SKS 11, 241–242).

30 While on my interpretation A *primarily* manifests the despair of weakness, his despair is also inflected with aspects of defiance – e.g., in his attempts to avoid commitments – resembling the Romantic ironists' defiant despair (which I will discuss in § 3.3). This evidences Anti-Climacus's claim that defiance is always present in weakness and weakness is always present in defiance (SUD 49/SKS 11, 164).

31 Cf. Rudd 1993, 69–70; Halvorson 2023.

not have the courage to acknowledge (*erkjende*) anything, the courage to possess, to own, anything" (EO1, 23/SKS 2, 32).[32] That is, A's skepticism results from the vice of cowardice, rather than a judgment that he is epistemically required to doubt. And because of his doubt, A despairs. He laments, "my soul's poisonous doubt consumes everything (*min Sjæls giftige Tvivl fortærer Alt*)" (EO1 37/SKS 2, 46). In this respect, A seems to regard his doubt as closely resembling Faust's doubt (EO1 204–214/SKS 2, 200–209). His various attempts to avoid boredom and nihilism – chronicled throughout part 1 of *Either/Or*[33] – thus partly function as ways of both distracting himself from his consuming doubt and evading responsibility for forming the *beliefs* partly constitutive of ethical commitments. So, I suggest, just as A despairs by incessantly deliberating about how to *act* without decisively choosing to form committal intentions or resolutions (EO2 165/SKS 3, 162),[34] A likewise despairs by incessantly *doubting* and refusing to take responsibility for resolving to conclude his deliberation about what to believe about ethically significant matters.

One *prima facie* challenge for this interpretation of *Either/Or* is that while Judge William diagnoses A's refusal to take responsibility for his agency in *acting* as a form of despair, he appears to affirm A's views regarding the necessity of doubt and thus appears to deny that we have agency in believing. Judge William writes, "Choose despair, then, because despair itself is a choice (*Valg*), because one can doubt (*tvivle*) without choosing it, but one cannot despair (*fortvivle*) without choosing it" (EO2 211/SKS 3, 203). He continues:

> Doubt is thought's despair; despair is personality's doubt. (*Tvivl er Tankens Fortvivlelse, Fortvivlelse er Personlighedens Tvivl.*) That is why I cling so firmly to the defining characteristic "to choose" (*Bestemmelse at vælge*); it is my watchword, the nerve in my life-view (*Livs-Anskuelse*), and that I do have, even if I can in no way presume to have a system (*System*). Doubt is the inner movement in thought itself (*indre Bevægelse i Tanken selv*), and in my doubt I conduct myself as impersonally (*upersonligt*) as possible. I assume that thought, when doubt is carried through, finds the absolute (*Absolute*) and rests therein; therefore, it rests therein not pursuant to a choice (*Valg*) but pursuant to the same necessity (*Nødvendighed*) pursuant to which it doubted, for doubt itself is a qualification of necessity, and likewise rest. (EO2 211–212/SKS 3, 203)

Doubt is a qualification of necessity because it is thought's despair, and the realm of thought is governed by necessity. By contrast, despair pertains to the realm of

32 While the Hongs translate *erkjende* as 'acknowledge,' following Alastair Hannay's translation Schönbaumsfeld (2023) argues than *erkjende* should be translated as 'know.' This alternative translation indicates that A lacks the courage to form the *beliefs* constitutive of knowledge.

33 For discussion, see Harries 2010.

34 Cf. Davenport 1995, 83.

personality, which is governed by freedom. For this reason, Judge William explains, "[T]here is much truth in a person's saying 'I would like to believe, but I cannot – I must doubt' (*jeg kan ikke, jeg maa tvivle*)" (EO2 212/SKS 3, 203).

Yet with the distinction between existential doubt and speculative doubt in view – which Judge William introduces earlier in Part 2 of *Either/Or* (EO2 95/SKS 3, 97–98) – it is clear that this passage pertains not to the entire genus of doubt but only to the species of speculative doubt. Judge William here prefaces his discussions of doubt with a reference to Martensen's speculative doubt: "There has been more than sufficient talk in modern philosophy about all speculation beginning with doubt (*Tvivl*), but insofar as I have been able on occasion to be occupied by such deliberations, I sought in vain for some enlightenment on how doubt is different from despair (*Fortvivlelse*)" (EO2 211/SKS 3, 203). So although Judge William claims that speculative doubters take themselves to be psychologically and rationally compelled to doubt, this does not imply that genuine existential doubters lack agency over whether they doubt. Rather, Judge William is mocking those (namely, Martensen and his students) who have "recommended and promoted" doubt yet "hardly understood what they were saying" (EO2 212/SKS 3, 203). Indeed, the speculative doubter's claim that doubt is psychologically and rationally compelled is part of what Judge William distances himself from when he denies that he is "a logician (*Logiker*)" and claims that he has "only one category" – namely, "the significance of choosing (*Betydningen af det at vælge*)" (EO2 213/SKS 3, 205).[35] Judge William can therefore be interpreted as criticizing both the Hegelian philosopher's speculative doubt and A's Faustian, existential doubt for denying the significance of choice regarding their beliefs.[36]

In the sermon at the end of *Either/Or* – the 'Ultimatum' – the Jutland pastor further develops Judge William's view by arguing that we have a *free choice* about whether to believe or doubt (in an existential rather than speculative sense) that we are in the wrong in relation to God.[37] You will only believe that you are in the

35 Cf. Halvorson's (2023) discussion of Judge William's critique of the Hegelian epistemic ideal (which *inter alia* includes inquiring and reflecting *ad infinitum*).

36 Kosch takes this passage from *Either/Or* to be "an early and still confused expression" of Climacus's better developed account of doxastic agency in *Philosophical Fragments* (Kosch 2006b, 93 n16). This interpretation is further supported by the fact that Anti-Climacus provides a discussion of doubt with striking similarities to Judge William's (PC 81 n1/SKS 12, 91), evidencing significant continuities between Judge William's views regarding doubt and the treatment of doubt in a later pseudonym whose views Kierkegaard himself more clearly endorses.

37 While I will remain neutral here about whether the Jutland pastor is identical to Judge William, Judge William clearly commends the Jutland pastor's views: "In this sermon he has grasped what I have said and what I would like to have said to you; he has expressed it better than l am able to" (EO2 338/SKS 3, 318). We can therefore infer that Judge William endorses the Jutland pastor's

wrong in relation to God, the Jutland pastor argues, if you love God and wish to be in the wrong in relation to God. He explains, "You did not arrive at this acknowledgment out of mental toil (*Tankens Besværlighed*); you were not forced (*Du nødsagedes ikke*), for when you are in love (*Kjærlighed*) you are in freedom (*Frihed*)" (EO2 349/SKS 3, 328). That is, the wish to be in the wrong in relation to God "is love's wish and consequently a matter of freedom (*Frihedens Sag*), and you were by no means forced to acknowledge that you were always in the wrong. Thus it was not through deliberation (*Overveielse*) that you became certain that you were always in the wrong, but the certainty (*Visheden*) was due to your being built up by it" (EO2 350/SKS 3, 328). And by lovingly and freely *choosing* to believe that you are always in the wrong in relation to God, the Jutland pastor claims, "[A]n end is put to doubt (*Tvivlen standset*), for the movement of doubt consisted precisely in this: that at one moment (*Øieblik*) he was supposed to be in the right, the next moment in the wrong, to a degree (*til en vis Grad*) in the right, to a degree in the wrong" (EO2 352/SKS 3, 330–331). The Jutland pastor thus anticipates Climacus's claim that we can freely choose to overcome doubt by resolving to terminate our deliberation and believe.

Indeed, as we saw above, in *Fragments* Climacus insists that whether one believes or doubts is determined by the will. Climacus develops and applies this view in the *Postscript*, where he argues that the person who chooses to doubt rather than form a belief about the nature of the highest good is in despair.[38] In the first paragraph of the first chapter of the *Postscript* ("The Historical Point of View"), Climacus remarks that the "infinitely interested" (*uendeligt interesseret*) person who seeks to base their eternal happiness on a historical claim such as the doctrine of the Incarnation – that is, an existential doubter – must despair, as objective historical inquiry can never provide the certainty they seek (CUP1 23/SKS 7, 30). The only way to overcome this despair is to resolve to make a 'leap' (*spring*) to believe despite the objective uncertainty of the historical evidence.[39] Without making this leap, inquirers who remain in a state of doubt by continually searching for more

claims about our doxastic agency. Nonetheless, readers who are unconvinced that Judge William is only discussing speculative doubt in the aforementioned passage might take the Jutland pastor's account of our doxastic agency to depart from Judge William's (cf. Watts 2023). Because this alternative interpretation implies that Kierkegaard's own view resembles the Jutland pastor's view more closely than it resembles Judge William's view, it is consistent with my central argument in this paper.

38 Doubt is also the central topic of the (incomplete manuscript) *Johannes Climacus, or De Omnibus Dubitandum Est*. Although Kierkegaard does not explicitly discuss the relationship between doubt and agency in this text, Kierkegaard wrote in an early draft that Climacus's attempt to doubt everything results in despair (JC Supplement, 234–235/Pap IV B. 16).

39 See Adams 1987; Quanbeck 2024a, 2024c. See also Poláčková (ms.) for discussion of similar claims in Kierkegaard's upbuilding discourses.

historical evidence regarding the reliability of Christian doctrine and take themselves to be compelled to doubt until they have attained objective certainty fail to properly exercise their doxastic agency and thereby despair.

Similarly, Climacus argues that speculative doubters (paradigmatically Hegelian philosophers) fail to accept responsibility for their beliefs for (at least) two reasons. First, the speculative doubter fails to recognize that they are a *subject* who doubts by mediating between ideality and reality (that is, by mentally representing reality as actually or possibly having particular properties).[40] In the *Postscript*, Climacus writes, "Speculation (*Speculationen*) does everything – it doubts everything (*tvivler om Alt*) etc. The speculative thinker, on the other hand, has become too objective (*objektiv*) to talk about himself. Therefore he does not say that he doubts everything but that speculation does it and that he says this of speculation – he says no more, as in a case of private proceedings" (CUP1 51/SKS 7, 56). However, Climacus explains, this is a mistake: "As is well known, Socrates states that when we assume flute-playing, we must also assume a flutist, and consequently if we assume speculative thought (*Speculation*), we also have to assume a speculative thinker (*Speculant*) or several speculative thinkers" (CUP1 51–52/SKS 7, 56). That is, by attempting to abstract away from their individual perspective to attain a god's-eye point of view, the speculative thinker ignores the fact that the individual thinking subject plays an ineliminable role in the act of thinking.[41]

Second, speculative thinkers must either take themselves to be compelled to remain in a state of skeptical doubt until they have attained objective certainty by reaching a complete, holistic understanding of reality or (perhaps more commonly) mistakenly believe that they have already attained this complete, holistic understanding (CUP1 34/SKS 7, 40). They thus remain in despair unless they make the leap to believe in full recognition of objective uncertainty (CUP1 105–106, 112–116, 335–338/SKS 7, 102–103, 109–112, 306–309).[42] Regarding belief in the doctrine of the Incarnation, Climacus explains:

> While the understanding despairs (*Forstanden fortvivler*), faith (*Troen*) presses forward victoriously in the passion of inwardness (*Inderlighedens Lidenskab*). But when the believer uses all his understanding (*Forstand*), every last turn of despair, just to discover the difficulty of the paradox, then truly no part is left with which to explain (*forklare*) the paradox – but for all that, there can indeed be the ample firmness of faith (*rigeligt Troens*) in the passion of inwardness. (CUP1 225 n1/SKS 7, 207)

40 Cf. Climacus's claim that consciousness and doubt presuppose an "interested" subject who mediates between ideality and reality (JC 169–170/SKS 15, 56–57). For further discussion, see Stokes 2010, chapter 2.

41 See Halvorson 2023.

42 For further discussion, see Westphal 1996, 78–81.

Embracing this "passion of inwardness" involves terminating one's doubt by accepting one's doxastic agency and resolving to form a belief about whether the doctrine of the Incarnation is true, despite its persistent objective uncertainty and one's inability to understand it. Consequently, by taking theoretical reason to compel doubt, the disinterested, objective speculative philosopher (like the interested, subjectively concerned historical inquirer) refuses to take responsibility for their doxastic agency and thereby exhibits the doxastic despair of weakness.

3.3 Doxastic Despair of Defiance

We have seen that Kierkegaard takes a common form of doxastic despair to consist in either unconsciously or consciously failing to assume responsibility for one's doxastic agency by passively taking one's doxastic attitudes to be determined by society, habit, one's own psychological proclivities, or theoretical reason. Yet an intensified, more dialectically advanced form of doxastic despair is the active doxastic despair of defiance. Just as Kosch argues that the despair of defiance involves refusing to recognize or comply with ethico-religious norms with a source external to one's own will, the doxastic despair of defiance consists in embracing one's doxastic agency yet *misusing* it by refusing to recognize or comply with externally given ethico-religious norms governing belief. Kierkegaard takes the doxastic despair of defiance to reflect a prideful insistence on maintaining one's own autonomy and self-sufficiency by seeking to avoid vulnerability to and obligations towards others. Correspondingly, in addition to distinguishing between two forms of *passive* doubt – disinterested, speculative doubt exemplified by Martensen and passionate, existential doubt exemplified by Faust – Kierkegaard also takes there to be a third, *active* form of doubt exemplified by the ancient Pyrrhonian Skeptics and by the German Romantic ironists.[43]

Unlike speculative doubters, the Pyrrhonian Skeptics related to doubt personally and existentially, Kierkegaard claims. And unlike both passive speculative doubters and passive existential doubters, the Pyrrhonian Skeptics intentionally *chose* to doubt for practical (rather than theoretical) reasons. On Kierkegaard's

43 It is worth observing, however, that the despair of weakness and the despair of defiance are not strictly opposed or mutually incompatible. Anti-Climacus explains, "[T]he opposites [of the despair of weakness and the despair of defiance] are only relative. No despair is entirely free of defiance; indeed, the very phrase 'not to will to be' implies defiance. On the other hand, even despair's most extreme defiance is never really free of some weakness. So the distinction is only relative" (SUD 49/SKS 11, 164). See Theunissen 2005 for extensive critical discussion of Anti-Climacus's account of the relationship between the despair of weakness and the despair of defiance.

understanding of the Pyrrhonian Skeptics, they were extremely epistemically risk-averse – that is, they were extremely averse to the risk of forming false beliefs – because they thought that forming false beliefs would inhibit their flourishing,[44] and because they sought to attain self-sufficient tranquility (*ataraxia*) by reaching a state of universal doubt and suspension of judgment.[45] Moreover, the Pyrrhonian Skeptics did not take their doxastic attitudes to be necessitated by theoretical reason. Rather, Kierkegaard repeatedly claims in the Climacus writings, the Pyrrhonian Skeptics doubted actively and voluntarily (PF 82–85/SKS 4, 281–284; CUP1 318, 352, 399/SKS 7, 289, 322, 363). Because the Pyrrhonian Skeptics both embraced their doxastic agency and doubted for practical reasons, Kierkegaard often expresses admiration for them.[46]

Of course, Kierkegaard does not ultimately endorse Pyrrhonian Skepticism. But his disagreement with the Pyrrhonian Skeptics is not about whether global suspension of judgment can be epistemically rational.[47] Rather, Kierkegaard thinks that they have a mistaken conception of human flourishing. Our flourishing does not consist in engaging in speculative thought or contemplation to gain knowledge and understanding, avoiding at all costs the epistemic error of forming a false belief, or attaining a state of tranquil self-sufficiency.[48] Instead, Kierkegaard argues, flourishing requires believing claims one cannot fully understand (paradigmatically, the doctrine of the Incarnation), taking epistemic risks, and depending both on other human beings and on God not merely *despite* but partly *because of* the vulnerability this reliance engenders.[49]

Similarly, in *The Concept of Irony* Kierkegaard interprets the German Romantic ironists (especially Schlegel and Tieck) as actively and defiantly taking Socrates's negative ironic doubt to an extreme.[50] Just as Socrates sought to induce doubt by undermining his interlocutors' fundamental ethical views without replacing them

44 While A is also epistemically risk-averse (Schönbaumsfeld 2023), his epistemic risk aversion is passive to a greater degree than the Pyrrhonian Skeptics' epistemic risk aversion.

45 Elsewhere, however, Climacus describes the Pyrrhonian Skeptics as striving not to doubt but rather to *overcome* doubt by "canceling" their interest (JC 170/SKS 15, 57).

46 On Kierkegaard's treatment of ancient Pyrrhonian Skepticism, see Rudd 1998; Furtak 2013.

47 While Kierkegaard seems to think it is neither psychologically possible nor epistemically rational to choose to doubt necessary propositions we are in a position to know *a priori* with apodictic certainty, he seems to think it is both psychologically possible and epistemically permissible to suspend judgment about any contingent proposition about the external world. For further discussion, see Rudd 1993, chapter 2; 1998; Quanbeck 2024b, § 3.2.

48 See, e.g., CUP1 55–56/SKS 7, 59–60.

49 Cf. Adams 1977; Rudd 1993, chapter 2; 1998.

50 Kierkegaard describes the Romantic ironists as expressing "a new mode of irony," which results "from the assertion of subjectivity in a still higher form" (CI 242/SKS 1, 282).

with alternative, positive views – thereby leaving his interlocutors in a state of *aporia* – so too do the Romantic ironists negate and doubt dominant social and ethical views without replacing them with positive alternatives. Kierkegaard thus characterizes both irony (in the eminent sense) and speculative doubt's attempts to doubt everything as involving an "infinite absolute negativity (*uendelig absolute Negativitet*)" (CI 254/SKS 1, 292). However, Kierkegaard clarifies:

> It might seem now that as the absolute negativity [irony] would be identical with [speculative] doubt. But one must bear two things in mind – first, that doubt is a conceptual qualification (*Tvivl er en Begrebsbestemmelse*), and irony is subjectivity's being-for-itself (*Ironi en Subjectivitetens Forsigværen*); second, that irony is essentially practical (*practisk*), that it is theoretical (*theoretisk*) only in order to become practical (*practisk*) again. (CI 257/SKS 1, 295)

Although Kierkegaard explicitly contrasts irony's subjective, practical character with speculative doubt's conceptual (and objective), theoretical character, his characterization of irony here bears a striking resemblance to defiant, existential doubt.[51] As such, I suggest that the Romantic ironists can be classified as defiant doubters.

Indeed, Kierkegaard characterizes the Romantic ironists as choosing to remain in a state of doubting negativity because they want to be "independent not only of the ethical limitations imposed by an empty cultural convention, but also of any limitation that might originate outside [their] own subjective will and the impulses of mood" (Söderquist 2007, 163).[52] As Söderquist explains, the Romantic worldview "implies a completely empty nihilistic closure within oneself (*Indesluttehed*)" (Söderquist 2007, 163) and thereby exhibits the hallmarks of the despair of defiance (Söderquist 2007, 227–229). Consequently, an essential aspect of Kierkegaard's critique of the Romantic ironists' refusal to accept externally given ethico-religious norms governing their actions is his critique of their ironic, defiant doubt.

Motivated by the aim of attaining self-sufficient autonomy, the Pyrrhonian Skeptics' doubt reflects a global form of epistemic risk aversion, and the Romantic ironists' doubt reflects a global form of negative irony. Yet Kierkegaard thinks many people are similarly motivated by the aim of attaining self-sufficient autonomy to engage in *local* forms of risk-averse or ironic doubt.

For example, in the chapter of *Works of Love* titled "Love Believes All Things – and Yet is Never Deceived," Kierkegaard describes mistrust as using "its acumen

51 Cf. CI 326/SKS 1, 354–355.

52 As Söderquist (2007) explains, Kierkegaard's argument here builds on Hegel's and Poul Martin Møller's critiques of the Romantic Ironists' appropriation of Fichtean ethics. See also Rasmussen 2005, chapter 1; Rush 2016, chapter 3.

(*Skarpsindighed*) to safeguard itself in believing nothing (*Intet at troe*)" (WL 235/SKS 9, 236). That is, mistrust is characterized by the aim of "safeguarding" oneself from the error of forming a false belief and being deceived by others. In this respect, the mistrustful character shares (within a restricted domain) the Pyrrhonian Skeptics' aversion to the risk of forming a false belief. Moreover, Kierkegaard argues that the mistrustful person's aversion to forming a false belief is neither psychologically nor rationally compelled. "Indifferent" knowledge (that is, evidence) only places the options of believing or suspending judgment in "equilibrium (*Ligevægt*)," and it is a "choice (*Valg*)" whether one believes or doubts (WL 234–235/SKS 9, 236). Consequently, just as the Pyrrhonian Skeptics' doubt is motivated by their practical aim of attaining self-sufficient tranquility and the Romantic ironists' doubt is motivated by their practical aim of attaining negative freedom and self-enclosed autonomy, the mistrustful person's aversion to forming false beliefs stems from their (conscious or unconscious) practical aims. For example, they might aim to avoid the vulnerability to deception and manipulation that trust engenders (WL 227/SKS 9, 229), or they might aim to avoid being regarded by others as foolish, stupid, simple-minded, or naïve (WL 226–228/SKS 9, 228–230).[53]

Likewise, Kierkegaard claims, doubting God – in particular, doubting whether God is love – reflects a presumptuous defiance. In the 1847 discourse "The Joy of It That in Relation to God a Person Always Suffers as Guilty," Kierkegaard returns to the topic of *Either/Or*'s 'Ultimatum': namely, whether our suffering reflects the fact that God is love and we are in the wrong, or whether God is in the wrong by unlovingly permitting our suffering. Kierkegaard writes, "[D]oubt (*Tvivlen*) indolently and with brazen obtrusiveness (*fræk Paatrængenhed*) wants to force itself into the nature of God and demonstrate (*bevise*) that God is love. But the demonstration will never in all eternity succeed, because it begins with presumptuousness (*Formastelighed*)" (UDVS 279/SKS 8, 375). That is, the person who doubts whether God is love in the absence of a demonstrative proof is defiantly unwilling to acknowledge either their guilt before God or God's love, and is thus in despair (UDVS 278/SKS 8, 374).

Furthermore, Kierkegaard observes, defiant *doubt* tends to develop into an intensified form of defiant *belief* in which one does not simply aim to avoid the risks of forming a false belief and having one's reliance on others disappointed, but positively sets oneself against others by believing ill of them. For instance, in *Works of Love* Kierkegaard argues that the doubting, negative suspicion that "believes nothing at all" has an inherent tendency to turn into a positive suspicion that believes the worst of others:

53 Cf. Rudd 1999, 122.

> Mistrust (*Mistroiskheden*) [...] has a preference for evil (*Onde*) (not, of course, through its knowledge (*Viden*), which is the infinite indifference (*uendelige Lige-Gyldighed*), but through itself, through its unbelief (*Vantroe*)). To believe nothing at all (*Intet at troe*) is the very border where believing evil (*at troe Ondt*) begins; in other words, the good (*Gode*) is the object of belief, and therefore someone who believes nothing at all begins to believe evil. To believe nothing at all is the beginning of being evil, because it shows that one has no good in oneself, since belief (*Troen*) is the good in a person that does not come with much knowledge (*Viden*), nor is it necessarily lacking because the knowledge is meager. Mistrust (*Mistroiskheden*) cannot maintain knowledge in equilibrium (*Ligevægt*); it defiles (*besmitter*) its knowledge *and therefore verges on envy, malice, and corruption, which believe all evil.* (WL 233–234/SKS 9, 235, emphasis mine)

Just as the "infinitely indifferent" evidence does not compel mistrustful doubt, it does not compel cynical belief in others' wickedness. Yet Kierkegaard astutely observes in this passage that it can be very psychologically difficult to remain in a continual state of suspended judgment, and that vicious character traits (such as being mistrustful) are self-reinforcing and tend to intensify over time.

Similarly, in *The Sickness unto Death*, Anti-Climacus asserts that the most intensified form of defiant despair involves responding to the 'offensiveness' of the Incarnation by "declar[ing] Christianity to be untrue, a lie" (SUD 131/SKS 11, 242), and thereby *disbelieving* it rather than merely suspending judgment about it. As Anti-Climacus explains in part 2 of *Practice in Christianity*, disbelief reflects prideful offense (*Forargelse*) at either the 'loftiness' (*Høiheden*) or the 'lowliness' (*Ringheden*) of the Incarnation.[54] Anti-Climacus claims that we tend to be especially tempted to take offense at the 'loftiness' of Christ's claim to forgive sins (PC 101/SKS 12, 109),[55] and at the 'lowliness' of the commandment to follow Christ's self-sacrificial example and thereby suffer and incur the world's scorn (PC 106–109/SKS 12, 114–117). And crucially, Anti-Climacus argues, whether one overcomes offense and believes in the Incarnation or takes offense and disbelieves is a *choice* that is not compelled by historical evidence or philosophical arguments (PC 95–96/SKS 12, 104–105). Because belief is not rationally compelled, the person who disbelieves in the Incarnation is making an *ethico-religious* mistake rather than an *epistemic* mistake.[56] In sum, then, the most intensified form of doxastic despair involves defiantly 'willing to be oneself' by positively rejecting ethico-religious requirements to form the beliefs necessary to properly relate to one's neighbor and to God.[57]

54 For further discussion, see Evans 1992, chapters 6–7.

55 Cf. SUD 113–124/SKS 11, 225–236.

56 For further discussion, see Quanbeck 2024b.

57 I would note, though, that while Kierkegaard does not seem especially interested in diagnosing failures to comply with *epistemic* norms governing belief – e.g., epistemic norms forbidding belief

4 The Theological Virtues as the Cure for Despair

4.1 An Objection

I have argued so far that Kierkegaard takes the failure to properly exercise one's doxastic agency to manifest an important form of despair. Yet a natural objection to my interpretation is that I have *misidentified the attitude* with respect to which Kierkegaard thinks one must properly exercise one's agency in order to overcome despair. Despite Kierkegaard's close association of doubt and despair, numerous passages throughout his authorship indicate that Kierkegaard does not regard having the correct beliefs about ethico-religiously significant matters as sufficient to overcome despair. Rather, he considers cultivating the theological virtues – faith, hope, and love[58] – to be the cure for despair.[59] Anti-Climacus famously claims that the opposite of sin (*Synd*) – that is, despair before God (SUD 77/SKS 11, 191) – is faith (*Tro*) (SUD 82/SKS 11, 196).[60] Moreover, in numerous passages Kierkegaard treats hope (*Haab*) as the opposite of despair (for example, WL 248–263/SKS 9, 248–262; SUD 38–42/SKS 11, 153–157; FSE 82–83/SKS 13, 103–104).[61] And Kierkegaard argues in *Works of Love* that we can overcome despair by loving others with dutiful, agapic,

in the absence of sufficient evidence – in my view his account of the doxastic despair of defiance could fruitfully be extended to encompass failures to comply with epistemic constraints on the exercise of our doxastic agency.

58 While I lack space to fully address Kierkegaard's account of the relationship between the *virtues* of faith, hope, and love and the *attitudes* (or *psychological states*) of faith, hope, and love, I will assume that these virtues are partly constituted by *having* certain core attitudes with fairly general content (e.g., faith that God is trustworthy, hope in the possibility of the good), and involve being *disposed* to have related attitudes with more specific content (e.g., faith in God's particular promises, hope that some particular good outcome will be realized; cf. Rudd 2023). Additionally, I will assume that both the attitudes with general content and the attitudes with specific content are complex attitudes constituted by other, simpler attitudes (e.g., beliefs, affects, desires, and intentions) that involve both occurrent and dispositional components. Finally, although I think that Kierkegaard is in some good sense a virtue theorist (*pace* Walsh 2018, chapter 3), because my focus here is on the *theological* virtues, my interpretation is neutral about whether Kierkegaard takes the 'pagan' virtues to be genuine virtues.

59 In McDonald's words, the theological virtues "amount to collective antidotes to despair" (McDonald 2014, 164). Cf. Walsh 2018, chapter 5.

60 Interpretations on which Kierkegaard regards faith as the opposite of despair are ubiquitous in the secondary literature. See Hanson 2022 for one recent example.

61 On hope as the solution to despair, see Fendt 1990; Theunissen 2005; Fremstedal 2012, 2020; Bernier 2015; Lippitt 2020, chapter 8.

neighbor-love (*Kjerlighed*) rather than spontaneous, erotic, self-interested love (*Elskov*) (WL 40–43/SKS 9, 45–50).[62]

To address this objection, I suggest that we need to look beyond Kosch's *agential* account of Kierkegaardian despair and appeal to the *perfectionist* (or *eudaimonic*) interpretation of despair as a failure to perfect one's nature or flourish. Kosch frames her agential interpretation of Kierkegaardian despair as an alternative to this perfectionist interpretation.[63] But in my view, Kosch is too quick to conclude that the agential and perfectionist interpretations are incompatible. While developing a complete account of the relationship between the agential and perfectionist interpretations is beyond the scope of this paper, in § 4.2 I will adduce some reasons for thinking (1) that Kosch's objections to the perfectionist, eudaimonic interpretation are not dispositive, and (2) that a restricted version of Kosch's agential interpretation is in fact consistent with the perfectionist interpretation. In doing so, I aim to show that synthesizing the perfectionist and agential interpretations of despair explains *why* properly exercising our doxastic agency is necessary to overcome despair, and thereby provides a compelling response to the objection that I have misidentified the attitude with respect to which we must properly exercise our agency to overcome despair.

4.2 Integrating the Agential and Perfectionist Interpretations

Kosch's first three objections address Judge William's account of despair in *Either/Or*.[64] First, Kosch argues that if Judge William held a perfectionist, eudaimonic conception of despair, "he should be unwilling to say of those immediate individuals for whom nothing had gone awry that 'these people were indeed happy' [EO2 192/SKS 3, 186] – yet this is precisely what he does say. Those individuals who do succeed according to aesthetic criteria are happy, enjoy themselves, etc. – and they are in despair" (Kosch 2006a, 146–147). Yet throughout his authorship, Kierkegaard distinguishes between a temporal, prudential notion of happiness, and an eternal, perfectionist, eudaimonic notion of happiness.[65] Similarly, Judge William claims only that these individuals living in immediacy are happy in the 'aesthetic,' pruden-

62 On Kierkegaard's account of how love enables us to overcome despair, see Danko 2016; Krishek 2022, chapters 6–7.

63 Kosch targets Rudd's (1993, 2001) interpretation in particular.

64 For these three objections, see also Kosch 2006b, 90.

65 For further discussion, see Evans 2004, chapter 4; forthcoming. For an apparently dissenting interpretation of Kierkegaard as an anti-eudaimonist, see Fremstedal 2022, chapters 4–5. However, Fremstedal acknowledges that Kierkegaard's critique of eudaimonism primarily targets a narrow Kantian conception of eudaimonism (which is concerned with temporal, prudential happiness

tial sense. Indeed, his claim that they are nonetheless in despair indicates that they are *not* happy in the 'ethical,' eudaimonic sense.

Second, Kosch claims, if Judge William endorsed a eudaimonic account of despair, his view "should be that the lower pleasures of the aesthetic life are replaced in the forefront of the ethical individual's life by the higher satisfactions of the exercise of virtue. Instead we find him arguing at length that what he himself labels 'aesthetic' satisfactions are consistent with and preserved in the life of duty (for instance, in his 'aesthetic defence of marriage')" (Kosch 2006a, 147). But it is entirely consistent with Judge William's *dialectical* account of human flourishing to say that aspects of 'aesthetic,' prudential happiness are sublated (cancelled yet preserved in a higher form) in 'ethical,' eudaimonic happiness.[66]

Third, Kosch rejects the eudaimonic interpretation (which she associates with reading Judge William as a Hegelian) on the grounds that "the position of 'the German philosophers' – and it is clear from the discussion that the German philosophers in question are none other than Hegel and his school – is yet another form of despair" (Kosch 2006a, 147). Yet reading Judge William as having a eudaimonic conception of despair does not require regarding him as a thoroughgoing Hegelian. Instead, Judge William can be read as both defending a eudaimonic conception of despair grounded in an account of human flourishing with Hegelian elements, and also departing from Hegel in crucial respects.[67]

Kosch's fourth objection addresses the perfectionist interpretation of *The Sickness unto Death* on which Anti-Climacus regards despair as the "failure to live up to the personal ethical task that has been set for one by God" (Kosch 2006a, 204). Kosch argues this interpretation "can make little sense of the despair of wanting to be oneself. If 'oneself' is oneself-as-normative-ideal, there is no available sense of 'wanting' or 'willing' such that wanting to be oneself itself constitutes normative failure" (Kosch 2006a, 205). But on a very natural perfectionist reading of Anti-Climacus, the despair of defiance – that is, the despair of willing to be oneself – precisely involves *not* willing to be oneself-as-normative-ideal but rather willing to be someone *other than* the self that one ought to be.

Fifth, Kosch objects that on the perfectionist interpretation, "the entire discussion of the self's structure in the first part of [*The Sickness unto Death*] is strictly irrelevant to the characterization of the forms of despair" (Kosch 2006a, 205). Yet it is unclear why Kosch thinks that Anti-Climacus's discussion of the structure of

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rather than eternal, perfectionist happiness). Evans's and Fremstedal's interpretations are thus ultimately largely consistent with each other.

66 For defenses of the interpretation that Judge William takes aspects of the aesthetic to be sublated in the ethical, see Stewart 2003, chapter 4; Davenport 2017.

67 See, e.g., Rudd 1993, chapter 3; Stewart 2003, chapter 4.

the self would be irrelevant to his characterization of the forms of despair on the perfectionist interpretation. To the contrary, the perfectionist interpretation seems extremely well-positioned to explain why it is relevant to characterizing despair: if despair *consists in* failing to perfect one's nature and thereby failing to be the self one ought to be, understanding the structure of the self is immediately relevant to understanding despair.

Because proponents of the perfectionist interpretation have good responses available to Kosch's objections, accepting a more modest, restricted version of Kosch's interpretation can *enrich* the perfectionist interpretation of Kierkegaardian despair – rather than replacing it – by illuminating the role that misrelating to one's agency plays in failing to perfect one's nature. Although Kosch is correct that Kierkegaard takes misrelating to one's agency to be central to despair, we can take this point on board without saying that Kierkegaardian despair must be defined or analyzed *simply* as a misrelation to one's agency. Instead, I suggest that for Kierkegaard, being in despair – by failing to wholeheartedly orient oneself towards and be stably committed to the Good such that one properly relates to oneself, one's neighbor, and God – constitutively *involves* misrelating to one's agency without *consisting solely* in misrelating to one's agency.

To illustrate this broader claim about the relationship between the agential and perfectionist interpretations of Kierkegaardian despair, I will argue that Kierkegaard takes our beliefs to play a significant role in perfecting our natures by orienting our whole person towards the Good and thus properly relating to ourselves, others, and God. Consequently, failing to properly exercise our doxastic agency partly constitutes being in despair without being identical to being in despair. Correspondingly, properly exercising one's doxastic agency is necessary (albeit not sufficient) to overcome despair.[68] Although developing a complete explanation of why Kierkegaard takes our beliefs to be ethico-religiously significant goes beyond the scope of this paper, I will sketch the outlines of an interpretation on which Kierkegaard takes our beliefs to be *derivatively* ethico-religiously significant in virtue of partly constituting other attitudes – such as faith, hope, and love – that play a more fundamental role in constituting our relationships to ourselves, others, and God.[69] Let us examine the role of belief in each of these attitudes in turn.

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68 It is not *constitutively* sufficient because the theological virtues also have necessary non-doxastic attitudinal components, and it is not *causally* sufficient because Kierkegaard takes divine grace to play a necessary causal role in cultivating the theological virtues. For further discussion of Kierkegaard's account of the relationship between the will and divine grace in faith, see Jackson 1998; Kemp 2018; Quanbeck 2024c, § 5.

69 Kierkegaard takes the theological virtues to be closely connected and endorses at least a weak version of the 'unity of the virtues' thesis (Fendt 1990, 168; McDonald 2014, 162; Fremstedal 2020,

4.3 Despair and the Theological Virtues

Although Kierkegaard develops a multi-faceted account of *faith* (*Tro*) and emphasizes different aspects of faith in different texts,[70] Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms consistently maintain that (Christian) faith is partly constituted by belief in the doctrine of the Incarnation. For instance, in *Fragments* Climacus distinguishes between two types of belief (*Tro*): belief in its "direct and ordinary meaning" (for example, a belief that I have hands, or a belief that Caesar crossed the Rubicon), and belief in its "wholly eminent sense" (that is, Christian faith) (PF 87/SKS 4, 285).[71] While Kierkegaard also takes faith to have affective, volitional, and interpersonal dimensions, Kierkegaard regards belief as an essential component of faith. Moreover, Kierkegaard often claims that unreflective belief – which does not grasp the objective uncertainty and absurdity of the paradoxical doctrine of the Incarnation and has not grappled with the possibility of offense towards the Incarnation – is insufficient for genuine faith.[72] Consequently, failing to properly exercise one's doxastic agency – by unreflectively believing the doctrine of the Incarnation, doubting it, or defiantly disbelieving it – precludes faith (SUD 129–131/SKS 11, 240–242). Having a stable, resilient commitment to the Good requires faith.[73] Thus, faith is necessary to overcome despair.

Kierkegaard also consistently takes *hope* (*Haab*) to involve a doxastic component. In *Works of Love,* Kierkegaard writes, "To relate oneself expectantly to the possibility of the good is to *hope* (*At forholde sig forventende til det Godes Mulighed er at* haabe)" (WL 249/SKS 9, 249, emphasis Kierkegaard's).[74] By contrast, "To relate oneself expectantly to the possibility of evil (*Ondes*) is to *fear* (frygte)" (WL 249/SKS 9, 249, emphasis Kierkegaard's).[75] Throughout the chapter "Love Hopes All Things – And Yet is Never Put to Shame," Kierkegaard maintains that those who fear rather than hope fail to properly orient themselves towards the good and thereby despair. And one way in which we can fail to hope is by disbelieving in the possibility of the good. Kierkegaard writes, "The person in despair (*Den Fortvivlede*) also knows what lies in possibility, and yet he gives up possibility (*opgiver han Muligheden*) (to

84–86; Lippitt 2020, 163 n3; Rudd 2023). However, because Kierkegaard does not regard the theological virtues as identical, I will discuss each virtue separately.

70 See Westphal 2014.

71 For further discussion of Climacus's distinction between belief in the 'ordinary sense' and belief in the 'wholly eminent sense,' see Evans 1983, chapter 12; 1992, chapter 8; Westphal 1996, chapter 6.

72 While faith involves a second, 'new immediacy,' this presupposes a reflective departure from the 'first immediacy' of unreflective belief. See Schreiber 2013 for discussion.

73 See, e.g., Adams 1977, 1987; Rudd 1993, 2012; Fremstedal 2022.

74 For detailed discussion of Kierkegaard's conception of hope, see Bernier 2015, chapter 5.

75 Kierkegaard also claims that genuine hope requires relating oneself to an eternal good rather than a temporal good (WL 249/SKS, 9, 249).

give up possibility is to despair) or, even more correctly, he is brazenly so bold as to assume the impossibility of the good (*antage det Godes Umulighed*)" (WL 253/SKS 9, 253).[76] Similarly, in *The Sickness unto Death* Anti-Climacus characterizes necessity's despair (which plausibly roughly corresponds to the despair of weakness here) as involving a lack of belief in the possibility of the good. What distinguishes the hopeful person from the despairing person, Anti-Climacus explains, "is whether he will believe that for God everything is possible, that is, whether he will *believe* (*om han vil* troe)" (SUD 38/SKS 11, 153, emphasis Kierkegaard's). He continues, "The *believer* sees and understands (*Den* Troende *seer og forstaaer*) his downfall, humanly speaking (in what has happened to him, or in what he has ventured), but he believes. For this reason he does not collapse. He leaves it entirely to God how he is to be helped, but he believes that for God everything is possible (*er Alt muligt*)" (SUD 39/SKS 11, 154, emphasis Kierkegaard's).

At first glance, it might seem that the doxastic condition on relating oneself expectantly to the possibility of the good is simply having a non-zero credence in the proposition that God could bring about the good, and that correspondingly the person who despairs in virtue of failing to satisfy the doxastic condition irrationally has a credence of zero in the proposition that God could bring about the good. However, Kierkegaard endorses a stronger doxastic condition on hope. While there is not space to develop or defend this interpretation in detail, I suggest that by extending Li and Chignell's (2023) interpretation of *Either/Or* – on which A holds a 'focus theory' of hope, such that hoping that *p* involves not only believing that *p* is possible and desiring that *p*, but also involves a disposition to attend to *p* under the aspect of its 'unswamped' possibility[77] – we can see *why* Kierkegaard himself also takes hope to preclude disbelief.

In short, relating oneself *expectantly* to *p* involves being disposed to attend to *p as possible* rather than *as improbable.* But Kierkegaard takes belief that *p* to be a state in which one is disposed to *rule out* or *disregard* the possibility that not-*p* in one's reasoning.[78] Consequently, one cannot hope that *p* while disbelieving *p.* For example, if Abraham believed that he would not get Isaac back in this life after sacrificing him, he would not be disposed to consider getting Isaac back as a live possibility in his reasoning even if he had a non-zero credence in its possibility, so he would not be disposed to attend to it under the aspect of its unswamped probability. We can spell out this argument as follows:

76 As McDonald puts it, "Despair is implicitly a disbelief in the eternal God for whom all things (including the good) are possible" (McDonald 2014, 162).

77 See Chignell 2023 for a contemporary defense of the focus theory of hope.

78 See Adams 1977, 1987; Quanbeck 2024a.

1. Hope that *p* entails being disposed to attend to *p* under the aspect of its unswamped possibility.
2. Belief that not-*p* entails being disposed to *disregard* the possibility that *p* in one's reasoning.
3. Being disposed to disregard the possibility that *p* precludes being disposed to attend to *p* under the aspect of its unswamped possibility.[79]
4. Therefore, believing that not-*p* precludes hoping that *p*.[80]

Attending to the connection between hope and belief thus reveals another respect in which Kierkegaard thinks failing to properly exercise one's doxastic agency constitutively entails despairing. Disbelieving that the good will obtain precludes relating oneself expectantly to the good by being disposed to attend to the good under the aspect of its unswamped possibility. Failing to be disposed to attend to the good under the aspect of its unswamped possibility precludes properly orienting oneself towards the good. And by failing to properly orient oneself towards the good and thereby failing to perfect one's nature, one despairs.[81]

Finally, Kierkegaard takes *loving* – and thereby properly relating to – God, one's neighbor, and oneself to constitutively involve having (and being disposed to have) certain beliefs. This is partly because Kierkegaard (WL 225/SKS 9, 227) follows Paul in regarding love (*Kjerlighed*) as the "greatest" of the theological virtues (1 Corinthians 13:13) and takes love to involve both faith and hope. But Kierkegaard also takes love to involve beliefs in numerous ways that do not (in any straightforward way) reduce to faith or hope. In particular, Kierkegaard takes love to involve *trusting* others and refraining from wrongly *blaming* them, and Kierkegaard regards trust and love as partly cognitive states.

In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard argues that "love believes all things" (*Kjerlighed troer Alt*) – that is, the loving person believes the best of others – partly because

79 Because Kierkegaard thinks that having a very low credence in *p* neither psychologically entails nor rationally requires disbelieving *p* (Quanbeck 2024a, 2024b), this account allows that it can be psychologically possible and rationally permissible to hope that *p* while having a very low credence in *p*.

80 As Rudd 2023 argues, Kierkegaard sometimes appears to characterize hope as not merely relating expectantly to the *possibility* of the good but rather expecting that the good will *actually* be realized, e.g., in the 1843 discourse "The Expectancy of Faith." For our purposes, however, we do not need to settle which doxastic attitude Kierkegaard thinks is partly constitutive of hoping. The important point is that on Kierkegaard's view, if having doxastic attitude X about *p* is a necessary constitutive component of hoping that *p,* and one ought to hope that *p* because hoping that *p* is necessary to overcome despair, then one ought to have doxastic attitude X.

81 Cf. Bernier's (2015) argument that Kierkegaard takes hoping to be *constitutive* of fulfilling the task of becoming a self.

believing well of others is partly constitutive of *trusting them*. The central contrast Kierkegaard draws in this chapter is between the trusting person and the mistrustful person. While the loving, trusting person believes all things, "[M]istrust believes nothing at all (*Mistroiskhed troer slet Intet*)" (WL 226/SKS 9, 228). As we saw above, defiant doxastic despair – including its instantiation in the mistrustful person – is paradigmatically motivated by the aim of attaining autonomous self-sufficiency and avoiding vulnerability to others. However, Kierkegaard argues that although the mistrustful person avoids being deceived or betrayed by others, in virtue of "believing nothing at all," the mistrustful person is ultimately *more* deceived than the trusting person: "And yet, even though one is not deceived (*bedrages*) 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 (*Kjerlighedens Salighed*)!" (WL 235/SKS 9, 236). 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 other" (Tietjen 2010, 100). Thus, misusing one's doxastic agency by refraining from believing the best of others (especially by refusing to form the beliefs partly constitutive of trust) fosters interpersonal alienation and precludes properly loving and relating to others.

Kierkegaard also argues that we ought to refrain from believing ill of others by lovingly "hiding a multitude of sins." As M. Jamie Ferreira observes, Kierkegaard's rationale for the injunction to hide others' sins "seems to include the cultivation of relationships and community" (Ferreira 2001, 175). That is, a primary reason why love hides others' sins is that, to the extent that we judge others to be culpable or guilty and thereby *blame* them, we are alienated from them and our relationship is impaired. When it seems highly probable that another person has sinned, the loving person will typically believe that they have sinned yet proceed to "hide" their sin by forgiving it and thereby repairing their relationship (WL 294–297/SKS 9, 291–294).[82] Yet Kierkegaard holds that our evidence never decisively settles the question of whether others have engaged in culpably wrongdoing (WL 231/SKS 9, 232–233). Accordingly, there is always some danger of falsely judging another person to be culpable and thereby *wrongly* impairing our relationships. For this reason, Kierkegaard argues that the loving person is averse to making "the error of thinking too ill (*troe for ondt*) of another person" (WL 232/SKS 9, 233).[83] Consequently, Kierkegaard argues, the loving person is disposed to give others the benefit of the doubt either by refraining from believing that they have acted wrongly in the

82 For further discussion, see Ferreira 2001, chapter 11; Lippitt 2020, chapter 3.

83 See Rudd 1999; Ferreira 2001, 142–144; Lippitt 2013, 139; 2020, 94; Quanbeck 2024b.

first place, or by believing a "mitigating explanation" or a "lenient interpretation" of their behavior (WL 291–294/SKS 9, 289–291) to lessen one's judgment of their culpability and thereby refrain from blaming them.

Similarly, Kierkegaard characterizes the loving person who wishes to be in the wrong with respect to their beloved as lacking the disposition to blame their beloved for their suffering. As Sharon Krishek argues, the "upbuilding thought of the [Jutland pastor's] Sermon – that is, that 'in relation to God we are always in the wrong' – is the thought that we are wrong whenever we *blame or even tend to blame* God for causing us loss or suffering" (Krishek 2009, 62, emphasis mine).[84] As we saw above, doubting whether *p* entails treating not-*p* as *a live possibility*. Consequently, as Kierkegaard explains in "The Joy of It That in Relation to God a Person Always Suffers as Guilty," the person who doubts whether they are in the wrong in relation to God "deliberate[s] (*overveie*) upon whether God is indeed love" and thereby treats *blaming* God as a live possibility (UDVS 273/SKS 8, 369–370). In Krishek's words, "To be in doubt here means to *accept the possibility* that we are right in relation to God, we are right in blaming him for doing us wrong" (Krishek 2009, 72, emphasis mine). But such doubt is incompatible with properly loving and relating to God. Accordingly, Kierkegaard holds that overcoming despair by loving and properly relating to both other human beings and God entails not only being disposed to refrain from believing ill of them and thereby refrain from blaming them, but (in at least some contexts) also entails being disposed to refrain from doubting their love and thereby refrain from regarding blaming them as a live possibility.

In sum, I have argued that perfecting one's nature – and thereby overcoming despair – requires cultivating the theological virtues, and the theological virtues are partly constituted by beliefs. Properly exercising one's doxastic agency by forming the beliefs constitutive of the theological virtues is therefore necessary to overcome despair.

5 Conclusion

This paper has sought to clarify Kierkegaard's account of the relationship between doubt and despair by showing that an important yet largely overlooked form of Kierkegaardian despair involves misrelating to one's doxastic agency, paradigmatically (but not exclusively) by doubting. Furthermore, I have argued that because Kierkegaard takes belief to be partly constitutive of the attitudes necessary to over-

84 Cf. Carlisle 2005, 64.

come despair – faith, hope, and love – attending to the close relationship between agency and despair does not threaten the perfectionist interpretation of Kierkegaardian despair but rather enriches it. While despair does not most fundamentally consist in misrelating to one's agency, correctly apprehending and employing one's agency – including one's doxastic agency – is partly constitutive of cultivating the theological virtues, perfecting one's nature, and thereby overcoming despair. Kierkegaard thus offers both a distinctive account of our practical agency over and moral responsibility for our beliefs, and an astute analysis of the myriad ways we fail to properly exercise this agency.

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