# WILL, BELIEF AND FAITH: KIERKEGAARD'S VOLITIONALISM IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY DEBATES



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# KIERKEGAARD'S VOLITIONALISM

# IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY DEBATES

by

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## ABSTRACT

Many of the participants in the analytical debate on the relation between belief and will have closely considered Søren Kierkegaard's volitionalist account of the issue. I argue that the attempt to understand the nature of volitionalism requires a closer investigation of Kierkegaard's perspective on the nature of faith.

In Chapter One, I offer the conceptual framework in which I will discuss the problem of volitionalism, distinguishing between the epistemic and the foundational role of belief. I show that the will has an important role to play in relation to our beliefs, especially when we lack epistemic justification.

In Chapter Two, I investigate the main features and issues in volitionalism. I address the distinctions between direct vs. indirect volitionalism, and descriptive vs. prescriptive volitionalism, in order to integrate correctly Kierkegaard's account into the contemporary debate on the nature of volitionalism.

In Chapter Three, I argue in support of my thesis that Kierkegaard's volitionalism is a special sort of direct volitionalism, which is concerned with the role of the will, not in relation to the *acquisition* of belief, but rather to its *actualization*. The conclusion reached in this thesis is that Kierkegaard claims that the will enables us to move, through choice, from a set of belief possibilities characterized by "objective uncertainty" to the subjective actuality of belief and existential commitments.

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# INTRODUCTION

Volitionalism is essentially the theory that confers a determinative role on the will in relation to belief. This theory can be formulated in various ways. Volitionalism can be characterized as direct (strong sense) or indirect (weak sense) with respect to the emphasis it puts on the role of the will in belief. And it can be either descriptive or prescriptive, maintaining that the will either simply influences or actually demands certain beliefs. Many of the participants in the analytical debate on belief and will have closely considered Søren Kierkegaard's account of the issue of the nature of belief and faith. There has been a great deal of debate for instance on the question of whether Kierkegaard is an exponent of direct or indirect volitionalism. The controversy has involved many contemporary philosophers, such as L. P. Pojman, C. S. Evans, G. Schufreider, R. Holyer, and M. J. Ferreira, to name only a few, whose views are often diametrically opposed.

I argue that central to this attempt to understand the nature of volitionalism and to spell out Kierkegaard's standpoint is the problem of the correct interpretation of Kierkegaard's response to the case of skeptical "objective uncertainty," i.e., the impossibility of reaching the objective truth. Further considerations regarding the relation between belief and faith necessitate a closer investigation of Kierkegaard's perspective on the nature of faith in relation to what he calls "the absolute paradox" of Christian belief,

which, in this context, is nothing but an insuperable objective uncertainty.

Before addressing these questions more closely, I first give a brief sketch of the conceptual framework that circumscribes the on-going debate on the nature of belief and its relation to knowledge. Thus in the first chapter of this thesis I describe belief within the confines offered by the traditional definition of knowledge as justified, true belief. Since it would be very difficult to accommodate here a thorough discussion of the problem of truth-conditions, I mainly focus on the condition of justification and argue that it is a very important feature in the context of the way knowledge claims are developed. The main problem to be addressed is the problem of justification where evidential support is lacking. In this context, the considerations regarding the situation where we have only inconclusive evidence arguably allow for my claim, in agreement with Kierkegaard's, that belief occurs when doubt rules out any possibility of knowledge *qua* "objective certainty" and requires subjective voluntary involvement. One decides to believe *quia absurdum.*

An investigation on the nature of belief will also have to consider the questions and distinctions discussed by H. H. Price in his classical account of the concept of belief. These include the question whether belief should be regarded as an occurrence or a disposition, so that the place of the will in the relation to the issue of the formation of beliefs is determined accordingly. If the will plays no role in the generative process then it may be the case that this has some consequence in relation to the way beliefs are determinative for actions, especially when we are confronted with little or no available evidential justification. The fundamental question then is: does the agent deliberately

choose to believe the grounds of his or her subsequent actions?

My aim in this thesis is to analyze and defend Kierkegaard's perspective on the issue of volitionalism. I show that, for Kierkegaard, the will has an important role to play in relation to our beliefs, especially when we lack evidential justification. Kierkegaard identifies voluntary choice as a means to move from a set of belief possibilities characterized by "objective uncertainty" to an appropriate actuality that fits our subjective purposes. The relevance of Kierkegaard's account of the nature of faith is that, although faith is a gift from God, it still requires a choice and subjective commitment. I submit that in the light of Kierkegaard's account of modal categories, choice is necessary for the actualization of what was initially offered only as a possibility. This supports the conclusion I reach in this thesis, namely that Kierkegaard holds a particular sort of direct volitionalism which is concerned with the role of the will in relation to the actualization (not acquisition) of beliefs, as they shape and define our individuality and our existential standpoint.

# CHAPTER ONE

## Conceptual Framework

### Introductory Note

My aim in this chapter is to reopen and investigate one path that has not been extensively explored in the last two decades, namely, the role played by the will in relation to the justification of one's beliefs. I will try to identify the cognate controversies and integrate the arguments into contemporary debate on the nature of knowledge and the dispute over the way religious beliefs are formed.

The traditional epistemological endeavor developed distinctions of great value, like the differentiation between mere belief (*dóxa*) and genuine knowledge (*epistéme*), and the "correspondence theory of truth." It eventually formulated the "tripartite analysis of knowledge," which is the most influential and broadly accepted epistemological theory today, and which states that "propositional knowledge is, by definition, justified true *belief* [my emphases]."[1] I will take this formula for granted, aware of contemporary objections and adjustments, and try to determine the place belief has in this equation.

My contention is that one can easily distinguish between an epistemic and a

[1] P. K. Moser, D. H. Mulder, J. D. Trout - *The Theory of Knowledge. A Thematic Introduction*, New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 14.

foundational aspect of belief. The former is concerned with our knowledge claims, whereas the latter determines our actions. The question is whether our will has an important role to play in relation to our beliefs.

After discussing some of the necessary distinctions about the nature of knowledge and belief, and ascribing an important role to justification, I will undertake an introductory analysis of the relation between knowledge, belief and doubt. It is also necessary to sketch an introduction to the different perspectives on the nature of belief, and to discuss the difference between "propositional belief" ("belief that") and "evaluative belief" ("belief in"), as well as the role of evidence vs. the role of trust. My main concern will be to investigate the role of will in belief and, if there is such a role, determine whether it is a direct or an indirect one.

## Defining Knowledge: Belief, Truth, and Justification

In the tripartite theory of knowledge, truth and justification are conditions that any belief needs to satisfy in order to qualify as genuine knowledge. These two predicates are themselves subject to various interpretations, although one thing seems to be beyond any doubt: knowledge requires belief, as its logically necessary condition. It is a common fact that "philosophers have rarely disagreed about whether belief is required for knowledge, but they have often disagreed about the nature of belief itself."[2]

[2] P. K. Moser, D. H. Mulder, J. D. Trout - *The Theory of Knowledge*, p. 16.

Yet belief *qua* belief is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of knowledge. There must be something else added to belief in order for it to be knowledge. Traditionally, the other necessary ingredients are, as already mentioned, "truth" and "justification," although more recent studies show that they are nonetheless far from being sufficient. The nature of truth is continuously disputed between philosophers from various traditions, and too broad a topic to be investigated here. I will assume that truth alone is not a sufficient condition for a belief to be considered knowledge. A lucky guess will never have epistemic value. My conjecture that "Today is Monday," for instance, will never have a strong epistemic value despite any fortunate coincidence unless I have a strong justification for that.

It is necessary that our belief also satisfy the condition of being adequately related to the truth claim in question by means of strong evidence available to others or by some other form of justification. H. H. Price holds that "we should all agree that a person can only believe reasonably when he has evidence for the proposition believed," and that "it would be unreasonable to believe a proposition with complete conviction if our evidence [...] falls short of being conclusive."[3] It is, therefore, the latter of the two predicates of belief, i.e., justification that I intend to address in particular detail. I shall try to establish what sort of justification one can have in order to support one's epistemic claims.

It should be emphasized however that even justification based on strong evidence could deceive. Contemporary epistemologists endorse the idea of fallibilism,

[3] H. H. Price - *Belief*, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1969, p. 92.

acknowledging that "a proposition can enjoy overwhelming evidence or justification but still be false."[4] Thus justification is subject to change in the light of additional evidence that is offered. But this is not a problem provided that no absolute epistemic claims based on the currently available evidence are made.

## The Nature of Belief

As regards the epistemic role of belief, I have already indicated that understanding belief is a *sine qua non* for understanding knowledge and formulating an epistemology. Perhaps one of the most important areas in the investigation of the nature of "belief" is the relation it establishes with "meaning." This is considered to be an "intentional" feature, for every belief is about something, and, as a consequence, "beliefs are *representational*, functioning as maps by which we portray and navigate the world."[5]

The fact that beliefs are representational is one of the most significant aspects of the nature of belief, and it amounts to the idea that they constitute the framework of how we represent the world to ourselves. Individual beliefs are responsible for the various interpretations that can be encountered from one individual to another. The way one represents the world may be dramatically different from the way another one represents it, and this fact alone appears to authorize epistemic relativism.

Contemporary theories maintain that beliefs belong to the category of

[4] P. K. Moser, D. H. Mulder, J. D. Trout - *The Theory of Knowledge*, p. 78.
[5] Cf. P. K. Moser, D. H. Mulder, J. D. Trout - *The Theory of Knowledge*, p. 42.

psychological states that are characterized by an attitude or disposition towards a certain propositional content. As a consequence, beliefs are also called "propositional attitudes."[6] Being thus a psychological feature, belief certainly allows differentiations. Different individuals but also the same individual can have different attitudes toward the same proposition concomitantly.

Traditional vs. modern analysis of belief

According to Price, there are two different ways of analyzing belief. There is, on the one side, the way belief is traditionally treated (e.g., Hume), and, on the other, the way contemporary thinkers approach the issue (e.g., Price). The former, I would say, is basically concerned with belief under its definitional aspect. Thus what I find in the traditional treatment of belief is either the search for the very condition of the possibility of there being any belief whatsoever, or, at least, once the *genus proximus* is broadly recognized, according to Price, as "introspectible mental occurrence,"[7] there is the attempt to identify the *differentia specifica* peculiar to belief, i.e., the specific aspects that particularize it amongst other such "mental occurrences."

The alternative way of analyzing belief understands belief not as a mental occurrence but rather as a "disposition." Price thinks that this is the contemporary counterpoint of the traditional analysis, but, in fact, it is no more than a discussion related to the nature of belief under its functional aspect. In other words, it seems that the modern perspective abandons the attempt to offer a definition of belief and focuses on the effects

[6] Cf. P. K. Moser, D. H. Mulder, J. D. Trout - *The Theory of Knowledge*, p. 42.
[7] H. H. Price - *Belief*, p. 20.

of belief and the way they affect human actions.

The fact that one believes that there might be a storm tomorrow would indeed affect one's plans of going fishing, for instance. But it would not help clarify the *haecceitas* of that very belief. In the search for a *principium individuationis*, a search for that which uniquely distinguishes each individual thing from others in the same genus, my claim is that it is not of primary importance whether a particular belief is an indifferent one, in the sense that it has no effect on one's plans of action, or if it immediately determines certain actions. The question is: what is a belief in either case? Consequently, as regards Price's main distinction, my claim is that the traditional way of analyzing belief is more fruitful and appropriate, but that the functional aspect of belief should be acknowledged as a very important factor in determining the way belief enters in relation to human actions. Price adopts the modern view and contends that belief is an "attitude" oriented towards action. It is precisely under this aspect that I will argue that belief is a matter of will.

Hume's analysis

Price claims that Hume is "the most celebrated exponent" of the traditional Occurrence Analysis of belief, which describes belief as a mental event that influences our attitude towards a certain proposition. In the *Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume refers "most of the time [to] the sorts of belief which are relevant to his problem about the Idea of Necessary Connection, [...] the sort of belief which we have when we take a perceived event or situation as a sign of another event or situation which is not at the moment

perceived."[8]

In his analysis, Hume basically distinguishes between two different attitudes that one may have towards a proposition: belief and incredulity (the latter including both disbelief and indifference). The question is what differentiates them. Firstly, Hume indicates that it is not ideas about the content of a particular proposition (e.g., whether it is indeed going to rain or not in the "believed" proposition "It is going to rain tomorrow") that produce the difference. For, as he accurately remarks, a particular attitude towards a given proposition may vary at different times and different individuals. Hume claims that "believing does not consist in adding some extra idea to those which were before our minds already."[9] It is rather a difference that lies in the "manner of conceiving." The way in which an individual "conceives" a certain content of a proposition does not rely on the ideas that she has before her mind (i.e., the conceived content):

> For when I believe that there is a dog outside the door [when I hear a barking sound] but you are incredulous about it, there is no difference between the 'ideas' we conceive of. To put it otherwise, what you are thinking of is the same as what I am thinking of. The difference is that you think of it in an incredulous manner and I in a believing manner. Similarly, if I come to believe something which I previously disbelieved or doubted, the change which occurs in me is just a change in my manner of conceiving - not in what I conceive of.[10]

The difference made in the manner of conceiving, as Price puts Hume's position, amounts to maintaining that "an idea which we believe is conceived in a lively or vivacious manner, or presents itself to our minds in a lively or vivacious way; whereas an idea which is not believed does not present itself to our minds in this lively way, but in a faint

[8] H. H. Price - *Belief*, pp. 157-158.
[9] H. H. Price - *Belief*, p. 162.
[10] H. H. Price - *Belief*, p. 164.

or feeble way."[11]

According to Price, the reason why Hume does not admit that new ideas may be added to those considered in the first instance and that they may change our attitude towards a proposition is that "it would [then] be in our power to believe whatever we pleased."[12] What Hume holds to be true about the nature of belief *in genere* is that belief is "something which arises in us independently of our choice."[13] As Price notices, Hume considers this an obvious idea and offers no examples. Therefore, Price tries to help and provides a couple. For instance, he says that "when you look through the window and see rain falling heavily, you cannot help believing that the streets outside are wet." Nevertheless, it may well be the case that this is not true in all possible worlds, for I could easily imagine a situation in which urban development solutions were applied in order to prevent that from happening. Further, considering the illusory content of my perceptions, I cannot rely on the proof of my senses either. Consequently, Price's examples fail to offer conclusive grounds for claiming that belief is not an object for choice, and is thus involuntary.

## "Belief-that" and "Belief-in"

Price distinguishes "belief-that" from "belief-in." As he puts it, "what we

[11] H. H. Price - *Belief*, p. 165.
[12] H. H. Price - *Belief*, p. 161.
[13] H. H. Price - *Belief*, p. 161.

mean by belief *in* someone or something and how believing 'in' is related to believing 'that' "[14] are essential questions when approaching the issue of faith, for instance. Based on Price's distinction regarding the English use of the term "evidence,"[15] it could be easily noticed how "belief that" is scarcely ever understood as having "self-evident" grounds. It follows that propositional belief is always founded on "evidence." If and only if sufficient evidence for the truth of a particular proposition is available could one make an epistemic claim.

Summarizing Price's distinctions, Louis. P. Pojman points out that "believe-in" statements go beyond "believe-that" statements. Belief-that statements are ontological. Belief-in statements are evaluative in that they add "an extra feature, that of value or importance."[16] In his paper, Pojman prefers to discuss only 'belief-that' utterances, since many 'believe-in' statements are reducible, he says, to 'believe-that' statements. When a 'believe-in' statement is the expression for faith as trust, it generally presupposes a 'believe-that' statement, although it usually says something more than that. However, this extra feature is the most intriguing one.

'Believing-in' sometimes occurs without the support of 'believing-that.' Certainly, from the radical claim that *de omnibus dubitandum est*, and from the assumption that belief is opposed to doubt (as is also the case in Kierkegaard), the conclusion that belief is never possible could be easily drawn. But we do have beliefs, all

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[14] H. H. Price - *Belief*, p. 23.

[15] Later in this paper, I will address Price's distinction and discuss its relevance to the analysis of the nature of belief.

[16] Louis P. Pojman – "Belief and Will", in *Religious Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1, March, Cambridge University Press, 1978, p. 4.

the same, and this is a good reason to re-examine the status of "believing in," even if from a skeptical perspective uttering knowledge claims in the form of "believe-that" statements is not possible.

"Believing in" – from doubt to subjective certainty

Beliefs should be differentiated together with the distinct objects that they refer to. On the one hand, beliefs about the existence of God, for instance, may vary radically. On the other hand, it is largely acceptable that the truth of other beliefs such as "1+1=2" is not a matter of dispute. But, as everything is to be doubted, it is not totally inconceivable, at least in other possible worlds, that even mathematical truths are not serious candidates for the status of objective truths.

In the end, any form of propositional belief, i.e., of "belief-that" arguably relies on one form or another of "belief-in," that is, on trust. Not even the principle of identity offers absolute certainty, for even logical principles like the principle of identity ("A = A") must satisfy a strong requirement, i.e., that "A" be considered at the same time and from the same point of view. The issue of identity proves itself to be even more complicated if investigated in the area of selfhood. As a consequence, a critical analysis is required, filtered through our dubitative mechanism, before any logical truth with absolute value be accepted.

On the one hand, as I will show, Kierkegaard clearly distinguishes belief from doubt: "belief is the opposite of doubt."[17] They are both "passions," in

[17] Søren Kierkegaard - *Philosophical Fragments*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985, p. 84.

Kierkegaard's terms, but, whereas doubt suspends choice and action, belief facilitates them. On the other hand, from Kierkegaard's perspective, what separates belief from cognition in relation to doubt, the main reason why the former is distinct from the latter, is that belief and cognition look for and reach different ends. Cognition seeks to eliminate doubt and reach to a conclusion (*Slutning*), whereas the conclusiveness of belief is a resolution (*Beslutning*) that resolves doubt and encourages choice.

Many of our beliefs are, first and foremost, based on a greater or smaller amount of trust. In order to avoid a *regressus ad infinitum* (trying to find the ultimate "evidence for" the truth of a particular proposition), we are often compelled to accept various truth-claims without further justification. For instance, it is only in relation to my choosing to trust and believe in my senses that any sensory evidence can be accepted and ground my beliefs derived from the world of senses.

Price points to the fact that modern English has almost lost the etymological sense associated with *e-vide*(nce), which is present only in the term "self-evident." He contends that "a self evident proposition is one which is 'evident of itself'."[18] This requires a necessary distinction between "evidence of" a proposition and "evidence for" it. The latter consists of "those considerations which support that proposition or confer some degree of probability upon it, great or little."[19]

One can have varying degrees of confidence about the truth of some proposition. But one's confidence is a subjective psychological state. That definitely indicates at least the fact that particular beliefs have varying degrees of probability. The

[18] H. H. Price - *Belief*, p. 92.
[19] H. H. Price - *Belief*, p. 92.

degree of probability of a belief can either be strengthened or weakened, as in the case of inductive arguments, by means of additional information acquired during the process of justification.

In many cases of "belief-that," besides taking into account the available evidence, I also rely on a form of trust. That is to say, in many cases "belief-that" necessitates "belief-in" and together they shape our beliefs. Evidence could indeed be necessary for the occurrence of belief, but is not a sufficient condition. It is under the agent's control to offer or withhold assent, by means of voluntarily choosing to do so. To illustrate this situation when evidence is not conclusive let us suppose, for instance, that only a few scientists have direct access to complete evidence of there once being water on Mars. They might end up eventually formulating a scientific theory accordingly. Now, I don't have that evidence. Besides, some other theory denies that the evidence provided by the Martian soil samples is completely determinative and conclusive. What Evans rightly points out is that "it is perfectly conceivable that I might decide to believe [that there was water on Mars, in my example], even though the evidence *to me* is less than conclusive or even points the other way [my italics]."[20]

Price points to another characteristic feature of one's belief-in. According to Price, evaluative belief-in is "always an *interested* attitude, never a disinterested one."[21] Kierkegaard too talked about the necessity of a form of "interest" (*Interesse*), as involvement in one's existence. According to Schellenberg, Kierkegaard considers that

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[20] C. Stephen Evans - "Book Review: Louis P. Pojman's *Religious Belief and The Will*", in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 28, no. 1, August, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1990, p. 50.
[21] H. H. Price - *Belief*, p. 161.

interest is "necessary for the apprehension of ethical and religious truths." God uses the method of indirect communication, in order to, on the one hand, "stimulate the proper sort of subjective involvement in our existence as human beings, and, on the other hand, in order to prevent situations and states incompatible with such involvement."[22] As Schellenberg puts it, "the subjective individual [in Kierkegaard] focuses his interests on some idea and, through his own decisions, brings his life into conformity with it."[23] In other words, the individual appropriates and integrates the idea in his life, through choice. If objective certainty is not to be attained, then it is the subjective one that needs to be looked for. But this certainty is a certainty of the will.

This thesis argues that will is an essential feature of belief, especially in the case of the lack of direct evidence, when one is forced to choose to act relying largely on trust, i.e., confidence in one's own discernment or in the evidence advanced by others. Take, for instance, the existence of God, life after death, extraterrestrial intelligence, the existence of other ideas, or even the existence of "ideas," *in genere*. Various types of arguments have been offered, but, eventually, as I will try to show, it takes the believer a "leap of faith" to believe in the existence of such entities. This certainly relativizes our beliefs, demanding careful consideration and preventing us from absolutizations of knowledge.

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[22] J. L. Schellenberg - *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 1993, p. 153.

[23] J. L. Schellenberg - *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, p. 154.

## An Introduction to Kierkegaard's View

As regards the role of the will in relation to belief, Schellenberg claims that "Kierkegaard's understanding of faith seems clearly to presuppose that belief is voluntary: we are told that to have intense inwardness, we must choose to believe propositions viewed as improbable."[24] Schellenberg does not accept this volitionalist presupposition. For him, belief is logically involuntary. Schellenberg argues that this is so in the sense that "we cannot believe a proposition at a moment's notice."[25] Additionally he says that "we would know that our 'beliefs' were the result of our decisions and not determined by how things are." But, in Price's terms, Schellenberg's use of "belief" falls, precisely, under the sense of "belief-that" or, at best, under the one of "factual belief-in," which ultimately is reducible to the belief-that.

The keynote of Kierkegaard's understanding of the nature of belief resides in the contention that "belief is not a knowledge but an act of freedom, an expression of will."[26] Under this voluntary aspect, "belief resolves to believe [even when] it runs the risk that [what it believed] it was an error."[27] But this is far from being broadly accepted. In Hume's perspective on the nature of belief, as shown before, belief is regarded as "something which arises in us independently of our choice."[28]

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[24] J. L. Schellenberg - *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, pp. 163-164.
[25] J. L. Schellenberg - *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, p. 9.
[26] S. Kierkegaard - *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 83.
[27] S. Kierkegaard - *Philosophical Fragments*, note 53, p. 83.
[28] Cf. H. H. Price - *Belief*, p. 161.

## Conclusion

I have pointed out thus far that belief can be primarily described within the confines of the traditional definition of knowledge. The problem of the justification-condition becomes more difficult in the context of the lack of evidential support when skepticism calls for belief suspension. I also tried to determine the relevance of Price's distinction of "believe-that" and "believe-in" statements in relation to the condition of justification. In addition, I submitted that belief has a determinative role for actions, for on the basis of it one deliberately chooses on what to ground subsequent actions. Kierkegaard's anticipated response is that doubt not only rules out the possibility of uttering any knowledge claim, but it does incite voluntary involvement. This implies that the will determines the pursuit of actions grounded on subjective beliefs.

I have already indicated in the introduction that a theory that confers a determinative role on the will in relation to belief is called "volitionalism." There is a great deal of controversy here, in part generated by the various ways in which Kierkegaard's volitionalist claims are interpreted. It will now be useful to ponder the dispute over the characteristics of volitionalism and try to determine the value of the important distinctions made in contemporary debates (e.g., direct vs. indirect volitionalism), in order to integrate correctly Kierkegaard's account into the overall picture of volitionalism.

## CHAPTER TWO

## A Critical Account of the Problems in Volitionalism

### Introductory Note

As a philosophical theory, volitionalism can be broadly defined as a thesis which claims that our will has a determinative role (either direct or indirect) in relation to our beliefs. The contemporary debate surveys more specific issues like the distinction between "descriptive" (which only reports the role of the will in belief) and "prescriptive" volitionalism (which demands that we voluntarily believe that something is the case). This distinction needs discussion, since on the basis of it volitionalism can be validated or criticized as "morally wrong." For instance, some of the participants in the analytical debate on belief and will describe Søren Kierkegaard's volitionalism and his account on the nature of faith as prescriptive and thus as an unacceptable form of volitionalism. Also, distinguishing between strong and weak volitionalism, some have argued that Kierkegaard holds a weak volitionalism. There has been an inconclusive dispute over these issues. A closer examination is required.

I will first sketch the conceptual framework of the above-mentioned distinctions and disputes. I will try to support the claim that in some cases a deliberate choice to believe a certain proposition is necessary in order to proceed to action. I point to

cases where only irrelevant evidence, or none at all, is available and when relying on trust becomes the sole justification. Thus the evaluative component of belief ("believing-in") becomes the only reliable practical guide.

There are several problems regarding the role of the will in relation to belief that need discussion. In the late eighties, a new philosophical debate developed around the issue of the relation between will and belief. For instance, Robert Holyer indicates two opposite views in the philosophy of mind, as regards the constitutive role of will in belief. He specifies that "most of the classical accounts of religious belief [...] have accorded the will an important, if not decisive, role."[29] According to Holyer, the discussion of belief and will addressed "the question whether we can believe at will apart from any sort of evidence – what has been called *belief by fiat* [my italics]."[30]

As one of his opponents puts it, Holyer's contention is that "the debate carried on by Price, Williams, Classen, [Pojman] and others has focused too exclusively on whether we can obtain beliefs directly by the will, by fiat, as it were, without appreciating that there are other ways in which the will may directly influence belief acquisition."[31] Thus the focus of the debate has been unfruitfully narrowed to the issue of the formation of beliefs by fiat.

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[29] Robert Holyer – "Belief and Will Revisited", in *Dialogue. Canadian Philosophical Review / Revue canadienne de philosophie*, vol. XXII, no. 2, June 1983, p. 273.
[30] R. Holyer – "Belief and Will Revisited", p. 273.
[31] Louis P. Pojman – "A Critique of Holyer's Volitionalism", in *Dialogue. Canadian Philosophical Review / Revue canadienne de philosophie*, vol. XXIII, no. 4, December 1984, p. 695.

## Volitionalism: Distinctions

In *Religious Belief and the Will*, Pojman attempts a thorough examination of volitionalism[32], i.e., the standpoint that considers our beliefs to be under the direct or the indirect control of our will, which is also called 'descriptive volitionalism.' As C. Stephen Evans briefly renders it, "direct volitionalism treats the action by which a belief is formed as a basic action which can simply be willed, [whereas] indirect volitionalism regards the formation of a belief as an outcome of doing other actions."[33]

In an earlier paper, Pojman describes two versions of volitionalism: direct and indirect. Yet he introduces a couple of supplementary notes which generate controversy and complicate the problem. On the one hand, Pojman distinguishes direct or descriptive volitionalism that he describes as "the thesis that we can will directly to believe propositions."[34] This is certainly acceptable as an adequate definition for direct volitionalism. On the other hand, Pojman defines indirect volitionalism as "prescriptive," holding that it is "the thesis that *we ought to will to believe indirectly*, get ourselves in the state of mind where we will come to believe what we do not now believe [my emphasis]."[35] Pojman's definition of indirect volitionalism is seriously misleading, for Pojman inappropriately transforms it into an unacceptable theory that in some of its

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[32] Louis P. Pojman – *Religious Belief and the Will.* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986.
[33] C. Stephen Evans – "Does Kierkegaard think beliefs can be directly willed?" in *Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 26, no. 3, Dec., 1989, p. 173.
[34] L. P. Pojman – "Belief and Will", p. 2.
[35] L. P. Pojman – "Belief and Will", p. 2.

versions allows prescriptivism.

According to Pojman, the direct and indirect positions are confused and morally suspect, respectively. Nonetheless, my contention is that indirect volitionalism can be outlined without reference to any alleged prescriptive character, simply by removing "ought to" from the above definition. The prescriptive position as he presents it is wide open to a trenchant rebuttal of volitionalism. But what is the real nature of such claims, if any, in a volitionalist approach? Kierkegaard's volitionalism is one of the main targets of the contemporary debate over this issue. He represents a "more extravagant dual position,"[36] at the edge between descriptive and prescriptive volitionalism. What I will later try to determine is the sort of "prescriptivism" he in fact introduces.

Pojman challenges Wisdo's claim that Kierkegaard holds a weak volitionalism. He defines strong volitionalism as the view that maintains that "we may choose to believe anything we wish to believe that is not contradictory for us,"[37] whereas weak volitionalism only holds, like Wisdo, that "the uncertainty of our contingent beliefs must be negated by the will."[38] Pojman fears that this is a distinction without any differentiation and rejects Wisdo's view. But in fact Wisdo's remark is relevant as regards the role that Kierkegaard allows to subjective involvement, more specifically to the will, in assenting to and assuming a certain proposition. Wisdo thus brings out the need for subjective certainty that enables one to believe a proposition, especially when confronted

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[36] L. P. Pojman – "Belief and Will", p. 3.

[37] Louis P. Pojman – "Kierkegaard on Faith and Freedom", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 27, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1990, p. 57.

[38] David Wisdo – "Kierkegaard on Belief, Faith, and Explanation", in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 21, no. 2, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1987, p. 98.

with "objective uncertainty" and act accordingly.

In his review of *Religious Belief and the Will*, Evans highlights Pojman's brief but careful investigation of the occurrence of the concepts of faith, belief, and the will in a large number of philosophical writings, from antiquity to developments on the issue of whether will controls belief in contemporary analytic philosophy. Evans shows that Pojman considers Kierkegaard a direct, descriptive volitionalist, being said to "hold the extreme position that all of our beliefs are acquired by direct acts of will"[39], independently of evidential considerations. Evans amends Pojman's "most uncharitable interpretation of the volitionalism,"[40] especially in relation to Pojman's attributing the thesis that beliefs are under the direct control of the will to Kierkegaard. Against that, Evans makes clear that in the *Philosophical Fragments* (*Philosophiske Smuler*), Kierkegaard's pseudonym, Climacus, discusses the role of the will, as a subjective contribution to the formation of beliefs, in the context of a "skeptical epistemology, in which it is argued that objective evidence is always insufficient to determine beliefs about [...] matters [of fact]."[41]

Due to so many controversies, the issue of Kierkegaard's volitionalism is complicated. A more detailed discussion of the main arguments in the debate is therefore necessary. So I will address some of the main arguments in the dispute over the nature of the role of the will in belief, in the light of the above distinctions and considerations.

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[39] C. S. Evans – "Does Kierkegaard think beliefs can be directly willed?," p. 173. Cf. Pojman, *Religious Belief and the Will*, p. 146.
[40] C. S. Evans – "Book Review: Louis P. Pojman's *Religious Belief and The Will*", p. 49.
[41] C. S. Evans – "Book Review: Louis P. Pojman's *Religious Belief and The Will*", p. 48.

## The Debate

### The role of the will

Pojman considers that belief can be defined as a "judgement about the truth value of propositions,"[42] holding that belief aims at truth about objective states of affairs independently of subjective wishes, will or desire. He writes: "If I could believe simply by willing to, my beliefs would not be reliable guides for action. Beliefs would not report states of affairs in the world but would simply be records of my wants. If believing aims at truth, it is hard to see what the will could possibly have to do with it – in any direct sense at least."[43] This rebuttal of direct volitionalism has the same grounds as Schellenberg's, for both Pojman and Schellenberg emphasize that our willed beliefs have a paralyzing effect on our actions since realizing that they rely on no other evidence than the justification of the will would prevent us from taking them seriously and acting upon them. My contrary contention is that sometimes it is in fact necessary to choose to believe a certain proposition in order to proceed to action, especially when there is only weak or indecisive evidence available and relying simply on trust becomes the unique justification. Also, "aiming at truth" refers to the epistemic or propositional component of belief ("believing-that") but, as long as doubt is possible, it is difficult to reach objective certainty with regard to the truth. As a result, it is mainly the evaluative component ("believing-in") of belief that takes the lead as a practical guide for our actions.

[42] L. P. Pojman – "Belief and Will", p. 3.
[43] L. P. Pojman – "Belief and Will", p. 5.

Nevertheless, Pojman admits that all believing involves the will, but only in an indirect manner, for sometimes "the beliefs we arrive at are finally the result of our policy decisions,"[44] i.e., the way we choose to live our lives eventually brings about what we believe in. Pojman accepts a form of indirect volitionalism in which one is held responsible for the beliefs resulting from the decisions made; yet he argues against prescriptivism, which he considers to be an unacceptable form of indirect volitionalism. Pojman claims that Kierkegaard is one of the extreme examples of prescriptive volitionalism.

Prescriptivism

Pojman states that prescriptivists' disregard for the truth may be considered immoral. In his ethics of belief *in nuce*, he claims that "whereas the truth seeker's advice is: if you would have true beliefs, pay attention to the evidence, test hypotheses, judge impartially, and so forth; the prescriptivist's advice is: if you would be happy (or saved or whatever), believe that *p*."[45] Here Pojman criticizes the instrumental role of a view of belief that, disregarding the truth, aims at happiness. Prescriptivism is morally suspect, for it attempts "to treat belief instrumentally."[46] Let us discuss prescriptivism in more detail.

In one of his articles published in 1954, Price admits that one can properly be said to choose what to believe from several alternative answers when confronted with a complex question. However, he says, some philosophers have gone further, maintaining

[44] L. P. Pojman – "Belief and Will", p. 9.
[45] L. P. Pojman – "Belief and Will", p. 11.
[46] L. P. Pojman – "Belief and Will", p. 14.

that "belief is at least sometimes a matter of moral obligation; that there are circumstances in which a man *ought* to believe a proposition *p* or disbelieve a proposition *q* [...], [meaning that] he is morally obliged to believe [that proposition and] that he will be morally blameworthy if he fails to believe it, and still more so if he disbelieves it."[47]

Moreover, Price notes that those who hold such doctrines about the duty to believe "even think that in some circumstances a man is morally obliged to believe a proposition *p* even though the evidence which he has may be unfavourable to it; or that he is morally obliged to go on believing it as firmly as before, even when the evidence for the proposition is weakened, or the evidence against it is strengthened, as a result of some new piece of information he has acquired."[48] Under these premises, this doctrine says that we have a moral duty to hold fast to our beliefs, even when we are confronted with some irrefutable piece of evidence to the contrary and despite the strong inclination to discharge our obsolete beliefs. In this case, as Price puts it, the doctrine of moral obligation urges us to resist such inclinations: "you can resist them, if you try hard enough."[49] The problem is that because it is possible to make such an effort, it does not imply that it is also necessary to do it, so there is no moral obligation to believe. Therefore, any attempt at configuring an "ethics of belief" is for Price inappropriate.[50]

In this context, Price admits that "if or to the extent that believing is something under our voluntary control, it does at any rate make sense to say that X ought,

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[47] H. H. Price – "The inaugural address. Belief and Will", in *Aristotelian Society Proceedings*, Suppl. vol. 28, London: Harrison and Sons, Ltd., 1954, p. 1.
[48] H. H. Price – "The inaugural address. Belief and Will", pp. 1-2.
[49] H. H. Price – "The inaugural address. Belief and Will", p. 15.
[50] Cf. H. H. Price – "The inaugural address. Belief and Will", p. 26.

is morally bound, to believe a proposition *p*, and ought not to believe *q* or has no moral right to believe it."[51] This doctrine can have horrifying consequences (e.g., the punishments of the Inquisition), unless we admit that this sort of "prescriptivism" is only relatively acceptable. For example, from a Hindu ethical-religious perspective (i.e., from a relative standpoint), it is both a moral and a religious duty to hold certain beliefs about the necessity of protecting all living creatures and, more importantly, act in conformity with those beliefs. But should one be punished in case of disbelief? Of course not, if only deeds are imputable. The way one chooses to make use of one's freedom of thought is to be evaluated only after one's subsequent actions. It seems that Price agrees with this when he writes: "But though we may sometimes have a moral obligation to express belief or to act as if we believed [or not] – things which certainly are under our voluntary control – it will not of course follow from this that we ever have a moral obligation to *believe* (or not to believe, as the case may be)."[52]

Although the project of an ethics of belief is controversial, it still introduces the idea that beliefs are to be entertained and accepted or rejected in accordance with specific criteria. Let us see now what criteria have been claimed to offer a good and reasonable justification of our beliefs.

### Criteria for the reasonableness of (non-)belief

It is very likely that what Schellenberg has called the "reasonableness of

[51] H. H. Price – "The inaugural address. Belief and Will", p. 11.
[52] H. H. Price – "The inaugural address. Belief and Will", p. 13.

non-belief"[53] can be well described in Price's terms: "what prevents a man from believing a proposition *p*, what makes him unable to believe it, is just the fact that he is taking a reasonable attitude to this proposition."[54] Price lists two criteria that determine the reasonableness of belief: consistency and evidence, and he suggests that "when the proposition we are considering is about matters of fact (i.e., is not a proposition of logic or pure mathematics) the evidential criterion of reasonableness, and not the consistency criterion, is much the more important between the two."[55] Price uses the example of a duck-billed platypus in order to illustrate this view, saying that despite its currently testified presence in the animal world, all available zoological justification once prevented scientists from believing that such a creature ever existed. For Price, "the policy of believing in accordance with the evidence is the only one which will ensure that the propositions we believe are more *likely* to be true than false."[56]

When Price describes the problem of the reasonableness of our beliefs, he indirectly offers strong arguments for skeptical epistemological claims. On the one hand, as Price remarks, "what one is reasonably incapable of believing may nevertheless be true."[57] Scientists once reasonably believed that the duck-billed platypus did not exist, although later evidence did confirm the contrary. On the other hand, "if or so far as you are reasonable in your believing, the propositions you are *unable* to believe are likely to be on the whole and in the long run false rather then true."[58] Rejecting the idea that the

[53] I shall discuss Schellenberg's view separately, in Chapter Three.
[54] H. H. Price – "The inaugural address. Belief and Will", p. 3.
[55] H. H. Price – "The inaugural address. Belief and Will", p. 5.
[56] H. H. Price – "The inaugural address. Belief and Will", p. 26.
[57] H. H. Price – "The inaugural address. Belief and Will", p. 5.
[58] H. H. Price – "The inaugural address. Belief and Will", pp. 5-6.

earth is flat indeed seems to be a reasonable attitude towards the beliefs about its shape. In conclusion, as Price puts it, on the one hand "what makes me unable to believe a proposition *p* may be pure prejudice or stupidity or sheer cussedness; but *p* may be false for all that, [whereas, on the other hand] what makes it easy for me to believe another proposition *q* may be something equally unreasonable; nevertheless, *q* may happen to be true."[59]

Disposition vs. occurrence and assent

Price supports a dispositional view of belief. But although for him believing a proposition is a disposition and not an occurrence, there is nevertheless "a characteristic sort of mental occurrence ["assent"] which we may sometimes notice when we are in process of *acquiring* such a disposition."[60] That amounts in fact to saying that "once belief-disposition has established itself, one of the many different ways in which it may manifest itself thereafter is by subsequent acts of assenting or assent-occurrences."[61] It is not entirely clear what "established itself" means here, other than indicating an occurrence, but if it meant more the whole theory of dispositional belief would have to be restructured, and this is what Price does not allow. Assent has a *preferential* character, Price says, and because of that it may sometimes be understood as a voluntary choice, although "it is not in your power to avoid assenting to the proposition which the evidence (your evidence) favours, or to assent instead to some other proposition when the evidence

[59] H. H. Price – "The inaugural address. Belief and Will", p. 6.
[60] H. H. Price – "The inaugural address. Belief and Will", p. 15.
[61] H. H. Price – "The inaugural address. Belief and Will", p. 15.

(your evidence) is manifestly unfavourable to it."[62]

Volitional control

Price admits that, up to a point, one *can* voluntarily control one's beliefs, but "indirectly, though not directly, and over a period of time, though not instantaneously,"[63] by means of a gradual cultivation of beliefs. When adverse evidence confronts us with the threat of losing our belief, "we [nevertheless] have in our power to weaken our doubts little by little, until at last they fade away and are felt no longer [...], a thing that one can do (usually) if one tries hard enough and long enough, and thereby one can voluntarily restore or revive a belief which one was in danger of losing."[64]

The ground for this "gradual belief-restoring procedure" can indeed be offered by the fact that evidence is often inadequate, or by the possibility of there being some missing alternative explanation. Sometimes the missing alternative cannot prevent us from believing a proposition, for, as Price puts it, "we only need beliefs at all as a *substitute for knowledge* where knowledge is not available, or not at present available [my emphasis]."[65] This is often the case with the evidence offered in court. The jury is compelled to choose believing something on the ground of available evidence, even if it might well be the case (and it frequently is) that new evidence might eventually prove the contrary.

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[62] H. H. Price – "The inaugural address. Belief and Will", p. 16.
[63] H. H. Price – "The inaugural address. Belief and Will", p. 16.
[64] H. H. Price – "The inaugural address. Belief and Will", p. 17.
[65] H. H. Price – "The inaugural address. Belief and Will", p. 17. This will be relevant for Kierkegaard's distinction between belief and knowledge.

Price points to another procedure of volitional control of beliefs, a method that is "not concerned with the evidence for or against the proposition one wishes to believe or to go on believing."[66] In various religions (but this can easily be the case also in some fancy restaurant kitchens too), the "Word" of the sacred books (or the recipe book for that matter) is taken to be holy and beyond any shade of doubt. This type of commitment can occur as the result of a reiterated effort to dwell on the proposition that one wants to believe, but it can be also produced involuntarily, as the outcome of education. All things considered, this is the sort of belief that does not require any evidential justification (*pro* or *con*), for it is grounded on an unshakeable commitment based on trust.

Direct vs. indirect volitional control

Holyer does not consider that the differentiation between direct and indirect influences is a clear-cut distinction though, for he argues that "it is impossible to admit certain kinds of indirect influence without also admitting some degree of direct influence."[67] Holyer also argues that "many forms of indirect control involve a degree of direct control"[68], except in the cases of the strictly indirect control in which "I want to believe *p*, search for evidence of its truth without turning my back on relevant contrary evidence and come to believe *p* only when I have found sufficient evidence for it."[69] The controversy as regards the direct vs. indirect influence of the will is of minor import for

[66] H. H. Price – "The inaugural address. Belief and Will", p. 19.
[67] R. Holyer – "Belief and Will Revisited", p. 274.
[68] R. Holyer – "Belief and Will Revisited", p. 281.
[69] R. Holyer – "Belief and Will Revisited", p. 282.

Holyer as regards the attempt to determine the way in which the will affects our beliefs, for it makes an irrelevant distinction the core of the issue. Despite that, he acknowledges that a great deal of the debate focuses on that problem, especially when trying to label certain philosophies, like Kierkegaard's for instance, as "direct" or "indirect volitionalism."

As defined by Holyer, "a direct influence is understood simply as choosing to believe or disbelieve a certain proposition," whereas, "indirect influence is more a matter of choosing to act or to direct one's attention in a certain way or to submit oneself to certain strong influences, [which will] in the long term [...] affect the beliefs a person holds."[70] The controversy bears on the possibility of the former, i.e., the possibility of a direct influence of the will on belief, especially in the case of belief by fiat. In other words, as Pojman puts it, whereas "direct volitionalism is contested, indirect volitionalism is uncontroversial."[71] The problem is that the opponents of direct volitionalism narrowly focus their criticisms on the case of beliefs by fiat. But, as Holyer appropriately argues, ruling out beliefs by fiat does not automatically exclude the possibility of there being any directly volitional element in belief whatsoever.

Holyer asserts that belief is volitional without claiming that "it always involves a conscious choice, but rather that there are ways in which our beliefs could be different as a direct result of our own agency."[72] He argues that "knowledge as well as

[70] R. Holyer – "Belief and Will Revisited", p. 274.
[71] L. P. Pojman – "A Critique of Holyer's Volitionalism", p. 695.
[72] R. Holyer – "Belief and Will Revisited", p. 276.

belief is voluntary."[73] In other words, the will has a direct influence on our beliefs and our knowledge. The alternate position (Classen, Pojman) suggests that "we can choose to deliberate and to investigate and indirectly to control our beliefs, but we can in no sense choose to believe."[74] But as Holyer points out, "if we deny that belief is in any direct sense voluntary, the alternative we face is either to deny that we can avoid beliefs by putting them out of mind [...] or to say of one who does that he is really a believer."[75]

Holyer considers that beliefs that cannot be based on empirical evidence, and cannot be inferred from other beliefs or be self-evident, are traditionally viewed as 'first principles', i.e., "a wide range of beliefs including fundamental moral and metaphysical beliefs as well as basic epistemic norms (e.g., true beliefs are those supported by evidence; the contradiction of a belief with other strongly evidenced beliefs counts against it, etc.)."[76] The justification of these beliefs appeals to the existence of "some form of intuition," the "light of nature" (or reason), the "fitness of things," etc. These kinds of beliefs cannot be chosen, though, and, as a consequence, there is no question of direct influence of will on such beliefs. As Holyer's main concern is not with the logic of intuitive beliefs[77], I suspect that, when he describes believing any first principle as "a matter of choice,"[78] he refers to our assent to believe, separating the way first principles are acquired from the way they are accepted as truths. This is challenged by one of his critics.

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[73] R. Holyer – "Belief and Will Revisited", p. 279.
[74] R. Holyer – "Belief and Will Revisited", p. 280.
[75] R. Holyer – "Belief and Will Revisited", p. 280.
[76] R. Holyer – "Belief and Will Revisited", p. 284.
[77] Cf. R. Holyer – "Belief and Will Revisited", p. 285.
[78] R. Holyer – "Belief and Will Revisited", p. 289.

Holyer's argument

Louis P. Pojman offers a brief outline of Holyer's argument and rejects most of his contentions. Pojman identifies five central theses in Holyer's "account of a reconstructed version of direct volitionalism:"[79]

> 1. Certain kinds of indirect influence on belief entail some degree of direct influence. Hence, since it is uncontroversial that we have indirect control of our believing, it must be admitted that we have some direct control over our belief acquisitions also.
> 2. To deliberate over a proposition is to directly control our beliefs, for in investigating and in terminating deliberation we cause our beliefs to be formed. When we are deliberating, we are exercising direct control of our beliefs.
> 3. Choosing criteria through which to assess a belief is a volitional act. Hence, since the criteria are directly involved in assent, we have some direct influence on our beliefs.
> 4. We can easily separate our wants and intentions from our belief states. They are tied together in a more direct manner than those who have rejected direct volitionalism have understood.
> 5. One of the ways in which we can affect our belief acquisitions is by directly preventing the belief from taking hold on us through a sort of veto power on the proposed belief.

Pojman thinks that most of what Holyer contends can be regarded as a non-volitional account of belief formation which only emphasizes the distinction between direct and indirect causal effects of the will on belief acquisition. Pojman dismisses most of Holyer's arguments, with the exception of the one in which Holyer considers our "ability to withhold assent through turning away from the evidence."[80] But even this has a non-volitional aspect, Pojman argues.

Pojman claims that "our veto powers can circumscribe our beliefs,

[79] L. P. Pojman – "A Critique of Holyer's Volitionalism", pp. 695-696.
[80] L. P. Pojman – "A Critique of Holyer's Volitionalism", p. 699.

preserving the status quo and preventing new candidates from making entry,"[81] without endowing the will with a causal role. Pojman adds that "there is a veto-power of the mind which is volitional and does closely affect the beliefs we obtain, but this negative action can be construed as a fencing in of a belief, a protecting it rather than a volitional act."[82] Relying on the distinction between cause and condition, Pojman concludes that what a non-volitionalist maintains is "not that there is no *direct influence* of the will on belief, but that the will does not *directly cause* belief."[83] In this case, the real problem is to assess if there is a *causal* relation, i.e., if the will has a role to play in the formation of beliefs. If not, then we would only need to evaluate the *influence* of the will and determine its place in relation to belief.

## A Critique of the Debate

Against the claim that any form of prescriptivism is inappropriate, I hold that a minimal ethics of belief is nonetheless necessary. Without that, it would be difficult to assess the relation between an employee and the specific set of job related duties, for instance. In difficult weather conditions, an air pilot has to rely exclusively on the guidance from the control tower, and thus voluntarily believe the directions that are said to be necessary. Contrary evidence can be misleading. Let us consider some additional

[81] L P. Pojman – "A Critique of Holyer's Volitionalism", p. 699.
[82] L P. Pojman – "A Critique of Holyer's Volitionalism", p. 699.
[83] L. P. Pojman – "A Critique of Holyer's Volitionalism", p. 699.

examples. The cruise ship commander who chooses not to trust the maps and the radar but rather his or her instincts or the vague empirical evidence of a lighthouse weakly gleaming out of the fog might end the journey in shipwreck, for which only he or she is responsible.

The above situations are some of the many in which it can be easily admitted that at least on certain occasions we can ground our beliefs only voluntarily, on trust. Let us consider the situation of a blind man who chooses to trust the guide dog without questioning the surrounding noises that only seem to offer contrary evidence. Or, he can choose to follow his instincts or any other evidential support and thus correctly identify the danger and trust the testimony of the walking stick instead. This ambiguity is actually the main reason why, from a skeptical perspective, objective evidence cannot be trusted nor can objective truth be easily reached. But on many "blind choice occasions" action is immediately necessary, as any military commander will testify. A decision has to be without delay made *in situ*, and when there is not enough evidential justification for our beliefs, the will is all there is. That certainly implies trust and a certain amount of risk; but the quest for knowledge is a struggle and is never effortless.

There is indeed a problem with relying only on material evidence. To do so would annihilate progress in the sciences. For example, it is often the case in science that only after theoretical hypotheses have been theoretically established are they tested by means of empirical procedures, in order to gain material evidence. A theory can be false, of course, but it is not unusual to admit that "sometimes we cannot acquire true [beliefs]

without holding false ones first, and then testing them and finding them to be false."[84]

As regards the issue of direct vs. indirect control, in my view the indirect volitional control of our beliefs is nothing but a direct one extended over a longer period of time. Some beliefs occur instantaneously, and we must decide whether to assent to them or not and immediately act accordingly. But there are also beliefs *in statu nascendi* that need to germinate first before entering the fabric of one's existence. In both cases it is under the direct control of our will to entertain, assent, and cultivate such beliefs and therefore we are unquestionably responsible for them and for the dispositional behaviour and actions associated with them. For instance, it can be the case that my environmental awareness occurred spontaneously and I directly willed to believe and assented to it. Or it may be that it was in fact inculcated by social conditioning and I voluntarily but indirectly cultivated it over a long period of time. But what is particularly important is that I am responsible for each and every subsequent action I take.

Some additional remarks are necessary with regard to the nature of assent. I agree with Holyer's contention that one of the real issues in asserting or denying a direct role for the will in belief is "whether assent follows automatically from an understanding of the evidence."[85] He argues that it does not always follow instantly, for "in the matter of belief we are not simply the unwitting victims of the evidence we encounter."[86] After carefully entertaining a certain proposition we usually express our agreement or disagreement with it, our assent to it or our refusal to believe that it is a true proposition.

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[84] H. H. Price – "The inaugural address. Belief and Will", p. 25.
[85] R. Holyer – "Belief and Will Revisited", p. 275.
[86] R. Holyer – "Belief and Will Revisited", p. 275.

We can also withhold our evaluation or postpone it until new evidence is obtained.

We should all agree that such delay is not invariably acceptable due to once in a while life-threatening time constraints. For example, a lifeguard does not systematically ponder whether the swimmer who seems to be in trouble decided to fake the danger or is indeed at jeopardy, for immediate action is believed to be necessary. When the decision making process needs to be brief, a choice is always made, which in this case is to intrude into the development of events and make sure the swimmer finds himself at no risk whatsoever. The choice to interfere is due to a previous commitment though; it is a reiterated choice that disregards the (un)likely misleading appearances. The lifeguard willingly assents to and commits herself to her duty.

On the question of whether belief is an occurrence or a disposition, it is worth noticing that, against Pojman, Evans states that "belief is an occurrence, not an act we can directly control and be responsible for."[87] They both claim that belief is an occurrence but disagree about whether the will has a role to play in relation to it. My claim is that in a sense they both are right: belief is indeed an occurrence, for it is acquired independently of our choice, but it also requires our voluntarily choosing to cultivate or discharge that belief.

Evans does not accept Pojman's interpretation of volitionalism in terms of "self-deception, or 'lying to oneself'."[88] Pojman's volitionalist knows that something is not so, or at least has strong evidence for that, but despite that voluntarily decides to

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[87] C. Stephen Evans – "Louis P. Pojman, *The Logic of Subjectivity: Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Religion*", in *Christian Scholar's Review*, XIV: 3, 1985, p. 304.

[88] C. S. Evans – "Book Review: Louis P. Pojman's *Religious Belief and The Will*", p. 49.

believe the contrary. From this, Pojman concludes that the will plays only an indirect and conditional role in the formation of belief. On this point though, as Evans explains, the volitionalist might claim that even in the situation when good and sufficient evidence is provided for a belief "the agent still must choose to believe."[89] That implicitly amounts to saying that the believer is only potentially so. For example, in the situation when I have reasonably reliable evidence for believing that I see an iceberg in the distance, I can still suddenly be haunted by an obsessive *de omnibus dubitandum est* and as a consequence withhold assent to that proposition. Nevertheless, if I choose to believe that proposition, trusting and relying on the testimony of my senses, then I can surely make plans for jumping in a boat and try taking pictures.

## Conclusion

I have tried to show that belief is an occurrence that has to be entertained and offered assent. I also argued in support of the view that there is a certain prescriptive character of volitionalism that cannot be uncritically dismissed, offering the framework for a minimal ethics of belief in which only associated actions are imputable. I offered examples and discussed the fact that, in general, but especially in the case of insufficient evidential support, one willingly decides whether to grant or withhold assent to certain propositions. I thus indicated that beliefs are determined by means of a direct application of the will. I now turn to the controversial case of Kierkegaard's volitionalism.

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[89] C. S. Evans – "Book Review: Louis P. Pojman's *Religious Belief and The Will*", p. 50.

## CHAPTER THREE

## Kierkegaard's Psychology of Belief and Faith

MOTTO: "When Johannes Climacus[90], master of inactivity, lit up a new cigar in the cafe in Frederiksberg Gardens, he resolved to make things more difficult for humanity."[91]

### Introductory Note

In Kierkegaard, "belief" or "faith" (i.e., *Tro* [Danish], in both cases) is "the expression for man's existential relation to 'the eternal,' [but as] the eternal can show itself to man in different shapes, [there are] also different forms for belief/faith."[92] There are two basic meanings of the Kierkegaardian term *Tro*. In Danish, the word *Tro* signifies both 'belief' (in the sense of 'belief-that', to use Price's terminology) and 'faith' ('belief-in'). The two different meanings are reflected in Kierkegaard's own use of the term. He distinguishes between, on the one hand, a direct and ordinary meaning, and, on the other hand, what he designates as being the "wholly eminent sense"[93] of the word (i.e., 'faith' or 'belief in', like in 'belief in God' [*Tro paa Gud*]). Thus, faith is a species of belief or,

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[90] The problem of pseudonymity in Kierkegaard's authorship should be mentioned. While recognizing its great importance, I will nonetheless ignore it here for practical purposes, since it would unnecessarily complicate the exposition of the arguments involved. Therefore I will refer indifferently to both Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms.

[91] Lee C. Barrett – "Subjectivity is (un)truth. Climacus 's dialectically sharpened pathos", in *Søren Kierkegaard. Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers*, Daniel W. Conway and K. E. Gover, ed. (vol. II: "Epistemology and Psychology: Kierkegaard and the Recoil from Freedom"), London; New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 22.

[92] Gregor Malantschuk – *Nøglebegreber i Kierkegaards tænkning*, Copenhagen: Reitzel, 1993, p. 193. (my translation)

[93] S. Kierkegaard – *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 87.

as Evans puts it, "faith is ordinary belief which is also faith or belief in the eminent sense."[94] Pojman indicates that "there is no clear conceptual analysis of these terms, and [that] the Danish word (*Tro*) [...] is similar to the English term 'faith' and 'belief', including both the propositional aspect of 'belief' and the trustful emphasis of 'faith'."[95] Actually, the English word 'trust' is considered to be of Scandinavian origin, one more reason to describe 'belief in' as a form of 'trust.' Kierkegaard uses *Tro* in a manifold manner but in this thesis, for practical purposes, I will distinguish only between three different senses of belief: ordinary sense ("belief that"), belief as trust ("belief in"), and a special case of "belief in," i.e., Christian faith, which is precisely what Kierkegaard calls "the wholly eminent sense" of belief.

There has been a great deal of debate on the overall design of Kierkegaard's authorship, *in genere*, but also with particular reference to what his position relative to the the matter of *Tro* is. I will try to show that investigating Kierkegaard's perspective can be very helpful in determining the relation of will to belief.

Let us first examine Kierkegaard's position, focusing on what he terms "objective uncertainty," and its role in relation to belief in what he calls the "absolute paradox," i.e., the object of faith in Christianity. I shall then try to offer a brief account and assessment of the relation between belief and knowledge in Kierkegaard. Finally, I will try to defend the claim that religious belief is not a form of knowledge but a gift of

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[94] C. S. Evans – "Does Kierkegaard think beliefs can be directly willed?", p. 175.

[95] L.P. Pojman – "Kierkegaard on Faith and Freedom", p. 45. It is worth noticing in fact, with Pojman, that "Kierkegaard has at least seven different uses of the concept [of *Tro*] which are regulated – in large measure – by their context within the stages" (p. 44). According to Pojman, *Tro* has a wide range of significations, including aesthetic faith, ethical commitment, religious and Christian faith, but also opinion (*Mening*), faith as hope, and "belief as an organ of apprehension of the past" (p.45).

grace which requires a choice and subjective commitment, for it shapes and defines our individuality and our "view of life" (Kierkegaard's *Livsanskuelse*).

## Kierkegaard's Argument

Evans contends that "to Pojman Kierkegaard does the sort of things contemporary analytic philosophers do: he sets forward theses and defends them by analyzing concepts and constructing arguments for his theses."[96] In particular, what Pojman says is that Kierkegaard advances "an argument designed to prove the truth of Christianity,"[97] an argument unwrapped by Pojman into the following claims: "(1) objectivity and subjectivity are mutually exclusive ways of knowing absolute truth; (2) objectivity fails, so subjectivity is the only viable route; (3) Christian faith provides the only proper kind of subjectivity to achieve this truth."[98]

Evans argues that Pojman lacks support for his claims and that his criticisms are, in the end, only "valuable against popular 'Kierkegaardianism,' even if they do not devastate [Kierkegaard] himself."[99] Evans concludes: "Reading Pojman's book is a frustrating reminder of how elusive and hard to understand [Kierkegaard] really is."[100] Let us therefore explore some of the main interpretations of Kierkegaard's account of the

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[96] C. S. Evans – "Louis P. Pojman, *The Logic of Subjectivity*, p. 303.
[97] C. S. Evans – "Louis P. Pojman, *The Logic of Subjectivity*", p. 303.
[98] C. S. Evans – "Louis P. Pojman, *The Logic of Subjectivity*", p. 303.
[99] C. S. Evans – "Louis P. Pojman, *The Logic of Subjectivity*", p. 304.
[100] C. S. Evans – "Louis P. Pojman, *The Logic of Subjectivity*", p. 304.

nature of faith.

Gregory Schufreider acknowledges that, while reading Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, he has been struck by the presence of a "rational argument imbedded in the central section which claims that truth is subjectivity."[101] Kierkegaard's claim is that "subjectivity is the truth."[102] Schufreider maintains that "the logic of that reasoning" can be summarized in a series of numbered claims[103], some of which I will discuss below.

Objective uncertainty and the paradox

Let us see first what Schufreider says about the controversial Kierkegaardian "objective uncertainty." The starting point is the contention that "objective uncertainty is conceptually related to belief, and is a condition for the appropriateness of belief claims such that if an idea is objectively certain, this precludes the possibility of belief, in the relevant sense, that is, where 'belief' signifies my decisively committing myself."(claim 3). We need to separate belief on two different levels: epistemic and foundational. On the one hand, epistemic belief aims at objective certainty, but when it fails and as a consequence we end up in intolerable uncertainty with regard to objective truths, then the only way out from the cul-de-sac of epistemic skepticism is foundational belief. Thus, it can be easily gathered that objective uncertainty promotes the growth of subjective

[101] Gregory Schufreider – "Kierkegaard on Belief Without Justification", in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 12, no. 3, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1981, p. 149.
[102] S. Kierkegaard – *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968, p. 191.
[103] See claims 1-14, in G. Schufreider - "Kierkegaard on Belief Without Justification", pp. 149-150.

certainty: the greater the objective uncertainty, the stronger the subjective certainty that it conditions (claim 6: "The greater the degree of objective uncertainty an idea enjoys, the greater its potency for fostering subjectivity."). To follow Price's distinction, what separates the propositional aspect of belief from the evaluative is the real import the latter has on the way we ground and structure our existence, for "in the relevant sense" belief points to voluntary commitments and actions.

Schufreider's claim 4 is: "If an idea is uncertain objectively, and therefore a possible object for belief, I may base that belief nonetheless on the degree of objective certainty shown by evidence for it, or it may be of such a sort that there is no evidence for it. In either case, the category of belief remains appropriate." It follows that evidence is not necessarily indispensable for foundational beliefs. We might have some evidence for the object of our foundational belief and even use it, but it is sometimes the case that at least direct empirical evidence is very difficult or even impossible to get. In that situation we choose to believe a certain proposition (e.g., the earth is flat) and base our image of the world we live in relying on one or another form of trust, whether the testimony offered by others or the "light of reason."

In claim 5 ("Faith is that species of belief in which my commitment cannot be mediated by objective evidence."), belief suffers a sudden metamorphosis and turns itself into faith, i.e., the "eminent sense" in which Kierkegaard envisages *Tro*. But in my view this is just another name for the case discussed above in claim 4, for religious belief also relies on trust in case of total lack of objective evidence as regards the object of faith.

Schufreider indicates a very important distinction within the sphere of

objective uncertainty itself. In claim 7, he writes that: "Ideas which are necessarily uncertain objectively have a greater potency for inciting subjectivity than ideas which are contingently uncertain; i.e., ideas which are in principle unverifiable are superior to ideas which are in principle verifiable but have not yet been verified, for inciting the subject into its subjectivity.") Thus Schufreider holds that when faced with the definite impossibility of obtaining evidence, i.e., when the possibility of verifiability is ruled out with necessity, this condition stimulates subjective interest, for in this case belief-choices have to be made relying simply on trust. Accordingly, contingency matters less.

Schufreider also points to some of the features of belief in the eminent sense of faith[104]. Not only does the object of faith lack objective evidence, but objective evidence is necessarily impossible to obtain (claim 7, see above), because the object of faith, i.e., what Kierkegaard calls "the absolute paradox," is a "necessarily uncertain idea" (claim 9: "[...] i.e., an idea which while self-contradictory is acknowledged by reason to stand outside its domain, thus necessarily remaining uncertain objectively.").

It is quite difficult in fact to assess at this point whether Kierkegaard designates a form of logical paradox, a logical contradiction, or some other type of contradiction (*Modsigelse*) as the object of faith. For present purposes, I will take it that Kierkegaard does not hold that "the absolute paradox" is a logical contradiction. Rather, he holds that it is an ontological contradiction, in that in Christianity the object of faith is a unity of irreconcilable opposites: the eternal and the temporal. Kierkegaard indicates the same opposition at the core of many other Christian beliefs as well. For example,

[104] See especially Schufreider's claims 8-11, in G. Schufreider - "Kierkegaard on Belief Without Justification", p. 150.

Kierkegaard holds that "the forgiveness of sin is indeed a paradox insofar as the eternal truth is related to an existing [and thus temporal or "historical"] person."[105] Certainly, it might be argued that there is nothing ontologically "paradoxical" about the synthesis of time and eternity in that way. Nevertheless, the object of faith (and the belief in the forgiveness of sin, for that matter) still remains a "necessarily uncertain idea."[106] The object of faith is "objectively uncertain."

## Faith and Paradox

As the "absolute paradox" designates the presence of an eternal God in time, Kierkegaard holds that "faith [*Tro*] is not a knowledge, for [...] no knowledge can have as its object this absurdity that the eternal is the historical."[107] In this context, Schufreider claims that Climacus develops a "distinctive category of faith."[108] According to Schufreider, Kierkegaard's contention that "if a subject believes with infinite and unconditional passion, then the object of that belief must be of a sort that it is a suitable candidate for such passion"[109] amounts to the claim that only something like the "absolute paradox" can be the object of faith (i.e., belief in the sense of unconditional commitment).

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[105] See "Selected entries from Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers pertaining to *Philosophical Fragments*" (*Pap.* VI B 45), in S. Kierkegaard – *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 222.
[106] See Schufreider's claim 9 above.
[107] S. Kierkegaard – *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 62. It is worth noting that Kierkegaard uses the term 'historical' in a twofold manner. In a broader sense, everything that comes into existence is contingent and thus historical, but *stricto sensu* there are certain events (e.g., human history) that occur due to, Kierkegaard says, "a possibility of coming into existence within a coming into existence." (p. 76)
[108] G. Schufreider – "Kierkegaard on Belief Without Justification", p. 161.
[109] G. Schufreider – "Kierkegaard on Belief Without Justification", p. 156.

In Kierkegaard's words: "the absurd [of the "absolute paradox"] is the object of faith, and the only object that can be believed."[110] The will has a crucial role to play here, since it is hard to believe that the eternal has become temporal. For Christians, according to Kierkegaard, it is foundational and essential to believe in the significance of this paradox. Despite the lack of evidence for such a belief, the Christian believer is obliged volitionally to control it. The only way to believe it is by means of voluntarily choosing to do so. This is the central feature in Kierkegaard's account of the relation between will and belief.

Evans contends that "Climacus' point is not the indefensible claim that beliefs are always simply willed into being, regardless of the evidential situation of the believer, [but] rather the subtler claim that there is a logical gap between whatever totally objective, certain evidence we have for matters of fact, and our beliefs about these matters."[111] Thus what Kierkegaard maintains about the importance of subjective factors in the formation of our beliefs is that, according to Evans, "our beliefs always contain an element of risk, because the objective evidential situation always contains an element of uncertainty, uncertainty which we resolve in the formation of our beliefs."[112] Thus faith requires "the leap." In a very persuasive way, Evans contends: "What is required in the leap of faith is not an immoral attempt to manipulate my beliefs so as to make myself believe what I know is untrue. Rather, I am asked to transform myself so that I can be

[110] S. Kierkegaard – *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 189.
[111] C. S. Evans – "Does Kierkegaard think beliefs can be directly willed?", p. 180.
[112] C. S. Evans – "Does Kierkegaard think beliefs can be directly willed?", p. 181.

open to an encounter with the truth which will totally transform my life."[113]

Schufreider holds that, according to Kierkegaard, "faith cannot embrace the absurd because it takes it to be objectively true; it cannot hold to its matter for any reason, since faith cannot know, but is called upon blindly to believe."[114] In accordance with Schufreider's claim, we can not only differentiate between an "epistemic" and a "foundational" aspect of belief, but we can even argue that there is, actually, no sense in which we can talk about an epistemic aspect of belief in Kierkegaard. Belief occurs only where it is impossible to arrive at knowledge, due to what Kierkegaard terms "objective uncertainty." Let us examine in more detail Kierkegaard's position on the relation between belief and knowledge.

## Belief, Faith, and Knowledge

It has been already shown that, according to Kierkegaard, faith is not to be defined in epistemic terms. Kierkegaard states that "faith is not a knowledge, for all knowledge is either knowledge of the eternal, which excludes the temporal and the historical as inconsequential, or it is purely historical knowledge."[115] Kierkegaard says that the historical is characterized by the "illusiveness [*Svigagtighed*] of coming into

[113] C. S. Evans – "Does Kierkegaard think beliefs can be directly willed?", p. 183.
[114] G. Schufreider – "Kierkegaard on Belief Without Justification", p. 163.
[115] S. Kierkegaard – *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 62.

existence, [which] cannot be sensed immediately."[116] For him, no coming into existence is necessary; therefore, the historical is contingent. Furthermore, Kierkegaard submits, "All coming into existence occurs in freedom, not by way of necessity."[117]

Pojman does not accept the validity and coherence of Kierkegaard's argument about the nature of belief[118], nor the way in which Schufreider unpacks it, and tries to prove its inconsistency by means of drawing out several passages from Kierkegaard's *Papers*. Challenging Schufreider's position, Pojman argues that "it seems that Kierkegaard and his pseudonym both allow that subjectivity can result in objective truth, in spite of what Climacus says in some more extravagant passages."[119] Thus, for Pojman, Kierkegaard's argument suggests that "subjectivity results in objective knowledge or at least approaches it."[120] More problematic though, for Pojman, is the issue of the paradox. In the quest for the knowledge of the absurd, Pojman says, Kierkegaard allows subjectivity to result in objective truth. I hope that it has become already clear during my analysis that this is not so, although more relevant arguments are still to come.

Schufreider correctly insists that for Kierkegaard faith is not a form of knowledge. It follows that truth, as regards the object of faith, can be known neither objectively nor subjectively. If we accept the mediation of objectivity in relation to the matter of faith, then faith ceases to be faith and turns itself into mere ordinary belief. Schufreider points out that a clear-cut distinction between faith and knowledge is

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[116] S. Kierkegaard – *Philosophical Fragments,* p. 81.
[117] S. Kierkegaard – *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 75.
[118] Pojman says: "I don't think Kierkegaard's arguments are coherent." L. P. Pojman – "Kierkegaard, Subjectivity and Paradox: A Response to Gregory Schufreider", in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 12, no. 3, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1981, p. 165.
[119] L. P. Pojman -"Kierkegaard, Subjectivity and Paradox", p. 166.
[120] L. P. Pojman -"Kierkegaard, Subjectivity and Paradox", p. 167.

necessary, since they lead to different ends and since each of them serve "an indispensable role in the sphere in which it belongs, neither capable of substituting for the other."[121] Under these circumstances, there is no sense in which knowledge can be described as "justified true belief," at least not in the sense Kierkegaard discusses belief. Not only is the distinction between faith and knowledge necessary, but my claim is that it is essential to regard it as an exclusive disjunction of the type Kierkegaard often employs, i.e., "either-or." We *either* have knowledge, *or* we have faith, for where there is doubt and objective uncertainty, subjectivity takes the lead and grounds our beliefs. Let us develop this view on the relation between doubt and faith.

The influence that skeptical arguments have on the acceptance of religious belief is strong. Richard H. Popkin maintains that Kierkegaard may have seen this "intimate and basic relation" and may have realized that "skepticism [is] not necessarily the enemy of religion, but could be, rather, its truest friend and ally."[122]

Kierkegaard puts 'belief' (*Tro*) in opposition to 'doubt' (*Tvivl*). Doubt is then "reduced to nothing" (*tilintetgjort*) by a resolution. But the resolution to believe does not overcome the theoretical grounds for skeptical doubt. As Popkin puts it, the resolution to believe "only enables one to affirm on the practical level."[123] The skeptical problem is still open and objective uncertainty still there, but what resolution does is to cut the Gordian knot of skepticism. Belief is thus a *substitute*[124] for doubt.

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[121] G. Schufreider - "Kierkegaard on Belief Without Justification", p. 163.
[122] Richard H. Popkin – "Kierkegaard and Scepticism", in *Søren Kierkegaard. Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers* (vol. II), p. 237.
[123] R. H. Popkin – "Kierkegaard and Scepticism", p. 250.
[124] See above, in Chapter Two, Price's contention that belief is a *substitute for knowledge*. (p. 30)

Kierkegaard clearly opposes belief to doubt: "belief is the opposite of doubt."[125] Belief and doubt can occur when we have indiscernible or totally inconclusive evidence for the truth of a certain proposition, as in the case of belief in the existence of a *Deus absconditus*. Yet if we only ground belief on direct empirical evidence but are confronted, as in the case of the divine existence, with the lack of such evidence, we can easily hold that the belief in God's existence is doubtful and groundless. On this basis, J. L. Schellenberg has formulated an argument for the "reasonableness of non-belief." In considering that argument it is important to remember that some of us still hold the belief in the existence of God (even a hidden one). The question then is: "What makes the belief in the existence of this hidden God possible?" "What is the sort of justification one finds for holding such a belief?"

Schellenberg is primarily concerned with the issue of the possibility of a personal relation to God. From Schellenberg's perspective, this relationship is problematic if that God is a hidden God. Since we do not have enough evidence to ground our belief in the existence of such a hidden God, we consequently cannot appropriately relate to him. If that is the case, then the impossibility of a relationship contradicts God's *agapē*, which requires, according to Schellenberg, a personal relation with every human being, as a *conditio sine qua non* of God's perfect nature. Hence, God is not perfectly loving, and therefore God does not exist. Thus Schellenberg claims that "we can argue from the reasonableness of nonbelief to the nonexistence of God."[126] According to Schellenberg, the proposition "God seeks to be personally related to us" is essential to

[125] S. Kierkegaard – *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 84.
[126] J. L. Schellenberg – *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, p. 3.

any adequate explication of the proposition "God loves human beings." On that basis, Schellenberg maintains that "God, if loving, seeks *explicit*, reciprocal relationship with us [my emphasis]."[127] This is one of the central claims in Schellenberg's argument.

Schellenberg's argument against the existence of a "hidden God" is irrelevant, for it in fact restricts the justification attempt only to the use of empirical evidence. It is appropriate and indeed reasonable to hold that it is difficult to come to a legitimate conclusion regarding the existence of God, due to our lack of strong evidence that he exists. But, if not direct evidence, what else then determines that belief? Kierkegaard's answer to the even more complicated issue of the paradoxical faith in the existence of Christ is: "grace and will." God offers "the condition of faith," i.e., the possibility to believe in the revealed existential paradox of Christ, in spite of the "objective uncertainty" that characterizes it. The will then "resolves to believe"[128] what has initially occurred as a gift of grace. Faith is a gift (*Gave*); if we are offered this gift and accept it, then it is our task (*Opgave*) to believe.

Before addressing the issue of "the condition of faith," let us draw a preliminary conclusion from the previous analysis and notice how it has become clear that, in order to be able to formulate an accurate interpretation of Kierkegaard's volitionalism, one needs to focus more closely on his perspective on the nature of faith. Hitherto, I tried to show that, according to Kierkegaard, there is no sense in which we can truly believe something that we already know to be indubitably true. "Objective

[127] J. L. Schellenberg – *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, p. 18.
[128] S. Kierkegaard – *Philosophical Fragments*, note 53, p. 83.

uncertainty" demands subjective involvement, that is, in the case of faith, choosing to believe in the paradoxical nature of the Christian God. But how is that possible? The main question becomes: "What is the necessary condition for believing the paradox?" This is the most important issue in determining the nature of faith and the role of the will in relation to it.

## The Condition of Faith

Kierkegaard writes that "faith is not an act of will, for it is always the case that all human willing is efficacious only within the condition [*Betingelse*], [...] but if I do not posses the condition [...] then all my willing is of no avail."[129] This crucial passage in the *Philosophical Fragments* has received various interpretations. Evans maintains that "faith is [...] explicitly identified as 'the condition' for understanding the truth, the condition that Climacus has [...] assumed that human beings lack and must receive from the god."[130]

The question then is: "How does one acquire faith and arrive at the condition in which reason can understand the reasonableness of recognizing its limits?" Kierkegaard's answer is that "God must grant the condition."[131] Evans argues that "this transformation is not an act of will on the part of the believer, even though [...] an act of

[129] S. Kierkegaard – *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 62 ff.
[130] C. Stephen Evans – "Reason and the paradox", in *Søren Kierkegaard. Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers* (vol. II), p. 93.
[131] Cf. S. Kierkegaard – *Philosophical Fragments*, pp. 55-56 (222).

will (or perhaps repeated acts of will) is necessary for it to occur, because it is not an act which the agent can simply carry out on his or her own, [since] the ability to believe requires something which the believer can only receive directly from the god."[132]

On this basis, David Wisdo argues that faith is a miracle and not a species of belief. Therefore, the will plays no role in the determination of faith. The believer is the passive agent who enjoys the miracle of faith. Wisdo attempts to demonstrate that Kierkegaard solely understands faith in terms of a miracle[133], i.e., the gift of the privileged "condition" for understanding the truth about God, and therefore he contends that "any epistemological reduction of faith distorts its true character."[134] In other words, faith cannot be analyzed, according to Wisdo, as a special case of belief[135].

As a consequence, Wisdo contends that Pojman's philosophical account is fundamentally misguided, for it suggests that Kierkegaard allows that the acquisition of faith be explained by appealing to the will. However, as I have previously shown, Kierkegaard's view of faith involves the will and subjective involvement. I would only add, together with Pojman, that in Kierkegaard faith not only involves the will, but "a form of direct (or indirect version which is nearly direct) volitionalism is regnant in the process."[136]

My claim is that Kierkegaard's view can be described as a direct volitionalism but not in the traditional sense of the term, where it is held that "the will is

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[132] C. Stephen Evans – "Reason and the paradox", p. 104.
[133] S. Kierkegaard, p. 65: "Faith itself is a wonder."
[134] D. Wisdo – "Kierkegaard on Belief, Faith, and Explanation", p. 96.
[135] Cf. D. Wisdo – "Kierkegaard on Belief, Faith, and Explanation", p. 108.
[136] L.P. Pojman – "Kierkegaard on Faith and Freedom", p. 58.

responsible for the *formation* or the *acquisition* of beliefs." On the contrary, Kierkegaard holds that the will has a direct role only in the *actualization* of beliefs. In my Introduction, where I have offered the definition of volitionalism, I have purposely designated it as "the theory that confers a *determinative* role on the will in relation to belief,"[137] without mentioning the specific way in which the will *determines* our beliefs. Thus Kierkegaard's volitionalism is direct, in the sense stipulated above. The indirectness of Kierkegaard's volitionalism is denoted by the fact that, although beliefs are not voluntarily acquired or directly willed into being, they are indirectly *influenced* by the will. Their possibility is actualized through volitional choice.

According to M. Jamie Ferreira, it is Wisdo's contention that "there is no describable human activity at work in the acquisition of faith."[138] On the one hand, over against Wisdo's interpretation of Kierkegaard's views on this matter, Ferreira maintains that "one cannot use the claim that faith is a wonder to refute the claim that it is a choice." Equally, Ferreira also rejects Pojman's interpretation, on the grounds that Kierkegaard's perspective is not a volitionalist account of the *acquisition* of faith, [but rather] a volitionalist account of the *response* to the gift of faith."[139] Belief is an occurrence that has to germinate in the soil of our convictions and existential commitments. Like in a seed, belief is there only as a possibility that needs to be cultivated and thus actualized. The volitional control of a certain belief is our response to its occurrence. If and only if we voluntarily choose to cultivate that particular belief, it then ceases to be only possible

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[137] See p. 1 above.
[138] M. Jamie Ferreira – "Kierkegaardian faith: 'the condition' and the response", in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 28, no. 2, October, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1990, p. 66.
[139] M. J. Ferreira – "Kierkegaardian faith: 'the condition' and the response", p. 68.

and it becomes actual, as a part of our existential commitments.

In this context, Ferreira suggests a view in which "faith is neither passive and ineffable nor the direct result of a deliberate decision,"[140] relying on the distinction between passive acquisition and response to the gift of faith, as shown above. Using the visual metaphor, Ferreira argues that the gift of the necessary condition for faith opens the agent's eyes. Yet the agent's free activity is still needed. In other words, "faith involves an agent's actualization (enabled by God) of a bestowed capacity."[141] In this context, Kierkegaard's use of the modal categories of possibility and actuality has a crucial import on the understanding of the nature of faith.

There has been a good deal of debate about Kierkegaard's understanding of modal categories. Much of the controversy stems from the lack of clarity concerning his use of the terms "actuality" and "possibility." Kierkegaard writes that a "being [*Væren*] that nevertheless is a non-being [*Ikke-Væren*], is possibility [*Mulighed*], and a being that is being is indeed actual being or actuality, and the change of coming into existence [*Tilblivelses Forandring*] is the transition from possibility to actuality."[142] Thus, Kierkegaard dialectically defines coming into existence as a transition from possibility to actuality. The same thing happens with faith which requires individual's agency, in order to actualize and make use of its condition.

Ferreira's most important suggestion is that the "condition" can be understood in a twofold manner: "either in terms of the conferral of a potentiality to be

[140] M. J. Ferreira – "Kierkegaardian faith: 'the condition' and the response", p. 64.
[141] M. J. Ferreira – "Kierkegaardian faith: 'the condition' and the response", p. 74.
[142] S. Kierkegaard – *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 74.

actualized, a capacity to be exercised, or in terms of the conferral of the actualized ability or capacity."[143] If we apply Kierkegaard's understanding of modal categories to this issue, then we can surely gain some support for the first view. On what she calls 'model A', Ferreira admits that the potentiality of faith "still needs to be actualized or exercised by the agent, [and thus] the realized possession of the truth would be the exercise of the gift of the capacity, the actualizing of the potential which requires some activity on the part of the agent."[144]

The gift of the "condition" is indeed a *sine qua non* for faith, but it is not sufficient. It only offers the disposition, the possibility to choose to make the leap of faith. As Ferreira remarks, model A "allows the possibility of giving some content to the notion of free, responsible activity in the acquisition of faith (suggested by 'leap' or 'decision'), for it implies that one still has to do something by way of response to the condition."[145] My contention is that this is a central claim in Kierkegaard's argument and that it illuminates both acquisition and cultivation of faith. Faith is a 'gift' (*Gave*) that has to be taken up as a 'task' (*Opgave*), as a necessary existential commitment; it is a possibility that has to be chosen, cultivated, and thus actualized. This is the sort of direct prescriptivism Kierkegaard holds, based on the idea that the appropriation of beliefs through choice is the only way in which they can actually determine the content of one's personality. The prescriptive character resides in the relation between 'gift' and 'task' that Kierkegaard illuminates, which seems to be easier to grasp in Danish. The possibility of

[143] M. J. Ferreira – "Kierkegaardian faith: 'the condition' and the response", pp. 69-70.
[144] M. J. Ferreira – "Kierkegaardian faith: 'the condition' and the response", p. 70.
[145] M. J. Ferreira – "Kierkegaardian faith: 'the condition' and the response", p. 71.

faith is laid down at our feet, but it is our responsibility to pick it up, to actualize it, and to walk with it.

## Beliefs and Existential Commitments

For Kierkegaard, the individual's actuality is "not the external action but an interiority in which the individual annuls possibility and identifies himself with what is thought in order to [believe and] exist in it."[146] Let us examine the following assertion that could be developed from such a view: "You are what you actually believe." This can be developed into: (1) "You are what you actually believe you are, i.e., what you actually believe yourself to be" and (2) "You are what your actual beliefs are."

Now, I will overlook the former formula, as being too broad an existentialist claim, different from Kierkegaard's contention. As regards the latter, I take that to mean the following: "You are your commitments, your existential projects, your actualized possibilities of individual becoming." It can be said in this context that the psychology of belief embraces the view that the deepest beliefs are foundational and responsible for the development of one's personality. This is so regardless of whether those beliefs are involuntarily and unconsciously inherited from so-called "social conditioning," or are voluntarily chosen and cultivated. In both cases, our beliefs shape the way we see the world in which we live, i.e., they directly determine our individuality and our view of life

[146] S. Kierkegaard – *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 339.

(*Livsanskuelse*).

It would be indeed very difficult to admit that we have only one definite answer when faced with the existential issue of deciding whether one way of living our life is better than another. Therefore the objective uncertainty, in this case the impossibility of reaching the objective truth about the most appropriate existential standpoint, urges us to admit "the need to live out some option [and] makes the risk of choosing necessary."[147] Besides, since embracing different existential standpoints is not a very practical solution in one's limited lifetime, it seems that the "concern for the shape of one's life, and the concomitant risk of committing oneself to the actualization of a possibility"[148] becomes utterly indispensable.

Existence can be described as a "movement" of the individual towards the actualization of "unique possibilities by means of qualitative transitions from possibility to actuality,"[149] and one's existential beliefs are analogously arrived at, as well. The will has an important function during this process. As I argued in Chapter Two, it does at least allow us to choose what to do when evidence is scarce, irrelevant, or totally inexistent. The gift of our condition is that we can believe something when evidence is not available. This is in fact one of the most progressive features in our lives. It enables us freely to choose the basis for our actions when objective uncertainty would solely suspend them *sine die*.

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[147] Lee C. Barrett – "Subjectivity is (un)truth. Climacus 's dialectically sharpened pathos", p. 26.
[148] Lee C. Barrett – "Subjectivity is (un)truth. Climacus 's dialectically sharpened pathos", p. 27.
[149] G. J. Stack – *Kierkegaard's Existential Ethics*, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1977, p. 50.

## Conclusion

I have tried to show that one of the major claims in Kierkegaard's argument is that there is no sense in which we can talk about an epistemic aspect of belief in the "eminent sense," as faith. Belief occurs only when it is impossible to arrive at knowledge. Thus belief occurs under the pressure of what Kierkegaard terms as "objective uncertainty." As faith, it originates in the divine grace.

The problem regarding the role of the will in relation to our beliefs has been elucidated in the light of a brief reconsideration of Kierkegaard's interpretation of modal categories, in particular actuality and possibility. I have shown that Kierkegaard's volitionalism is generally misinterpreted, since what he contends with regard to the role of will in relation to belief is that a belief is an occurrence, prior to and requiring the agent's direct and voluntarily choosing to believe. Thus the will determines the transition of a belief from possibility to actuality, through choice. In the light of Kierkegaard's metaphysics, my final comments have focused on the relation between our beliefs and our existential commitments.

Let us now go over the whole course of reasoning, in order to draw the various points of my argument together. For that, it will be necessary to use again the language I have introduced in the first two chapters.

In Chapter One, I pointed out that belief could be circumscribed, in the first

instance, within the limits of the traditional definition of knowledge. I introduced some basic conceptual distinctions regarding the nature of belief (epistemic vs. foundational belief, propositional belief vs. evaluative belief, "belief that" vs. "belief in" or "faith," belief as occurrence vs. belief as disposition). I submitted that belief has a determinative role for actions, and, in this context, I claimed that the problem of belief justification is much more difficult to assess in the context of inconclusive evidential support, when skepticism calls for the suspension of belief.

In Chapter Two, I argued that, particularly in the case of the absence of evidence, the application of the will has a determinative role for beliefs (the view of volitionalism). I claimed that belief is an occurrence that has to be entertained and offered assent. I also argued that there is a certain prescriptive character of volitionalism that offers the framework for a minimal ethics of belief. I aimed at accurately unpacking the bundle of arguments in the dispute over volitionalism. I have closely investigated the debate over some of the most significant issues in volitionalism, such as the distinctions between direct vs. indirect volitionalism, descriptive vs. prescriptive volitionalism. In this context, I tried to integrate Kierkegaard's account of volitionalism into the contemporary debate.

In Chapter Three, I indicated that the contemporary debate over the nature of Kierkegaard's volitionalism has a major importance in the effort to assign the proper place to the will, but I argue that the dispute has been partially misguided due to the attempt to identify the role of the will in relation to the *acquisition* of belief. For Kierkegaard, belief as faith is not voluntarily *acquired* but only *actualized.* I also tried to

show that, for Kierkegaard, there is an exclusive disjunction between belief and knowledge, for belief occurs only when it is impossible to arrive at knowledge. Thus belief is an occurrence accompanied by "objective uncertainty."

I conclude that Kierkegaard's volitionalism is a direct volitionalism, defined according to the distinction between cause and condition of belief. With that important restriction that belief is not *caused* by the will but only *influenced* by it, Kierkegaard's volitionalism holds that belief in "the most eminent sense" of faith is a gift of grace that needs to be willingly believed. This indicates the prescriptive character of Kierkegaard's volitionalism: the appropriation of beliefs through choice is the only way in which they can actually determine the content of one's personality. As such, belief is a possibility that needs to be actualized by means of voluntarily choosing to believe it and, more importantly, to believe *in* it. The will has no role in the formation of beliefs, it does not *cause* either "belief-that" nor "belief-in," but it determines the deliberate choice of believing either of them.

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