

# The Will to Believe

## 0.1 Summary

The picture we've developed thus far of the human person is of an individual that has the following traits:

1. fallible - since all knowledge is based on observation and inference rather than intuition, it is always possible to be wrong about any given proposition
2. committed to the cognizability of reality (idealism) - since we have no conception of the incognizable, the only meaningful conception of reality is one that can be cognized
3. understanding the private self and the mind through inference from external facts (e.g. behaviors, emotions, ignorance, etc.) - since we lack a power of introspection, our knowledge about the mind is based upon hypothetical reasoning from observation
4. a product of a natural (biological) and intellectual history - since we lack a power of intuition, all thought is determined by prior thought, and since all thought is in signs, any sign is the result of the development of prior signs
5. forward-looking in that meaning is understood in terms of the development of signs - since the meaning of any sign is found in its interpretant, and interpretants can be understood as thoughts, and all thoughts are in signs, the ultimate meaning of any sign is found in its future interpretation.

Next, we will consider what if, anything, American philosophers have to say about the nature of faith. In particular, we will look at a defense of the rationality of faith by the American philosopher William James.

## 0.2 Introduction

“The Will to Believe” was an address to the Philosophical Clubs of Yale and Brown Universities. It was later published with changes in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, Longmans, Green & Co., 1897.<sup>1</sup> The essay is a classic in the field of epistemology and as a defense of religious faith. It argues against the principle of evidentialism put forward most explicitly by English philosopher and mathematician William Kingdon Clifford (4 May 1845 – 3 March 1879). The

<sup>1</sup>See Jennifer Welchman. 2006. William James's "The Will to Believe" and the Ethics of Self-experimentation. *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 42(2):229-241. Arnold E. Johanson. 1975. "The Will to Believe" and the Ethics of Belief. *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*. VOLUME XI, NO. 2. G. L. Doore. 1983. William James and the Ethics of Belief. *Philosophy*. Vol. 58, No. 225. pp. 353-364.

title of the essay underwent multiple changes: “duty to believe”, “the right to believe”, etc.

James's essay can be seen in contrast to the view that one ought to only believe a proposition P if one has sufficient evidence for P. This position was famously espoused by William Clifford who wrote that “it is wrong always, everywhere, and for any one, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence” (1877:295).<sup>2</sup> It has also been put forward by Bertrand Russell who wrote that “it is undesirable to believe a proposition when there is no ground whatever for supposing it true” (1958:38).<sup>3</sup>

**Example 1** *Beliefs that were instilled in our childhood, beliefs we ignore exploring the validity of despite the implications of authorities, beliefs that we have our own doubts concerning, and beliefs that simply lack the time to explore, all serve as examples where sufficient evidence is lacking for justifiably holding that a given situation is how we think it to be.*

For both Clifford and Russell, the determination of whether a given position counts as sufficiently probable depends on its proportional relation to evidence, and in cases where there lack no sufficient grounds for positive (or negative) opinion, “the ordinary man would do well to suspend his judgment” (Russell 1958:39; see Clifford 1877:295). In short, in the fact of a lack of evidence, Clifford and Russell contend that one ought to be **agnostic**.

In “The Will to Believe”, William James argues that the Clifford-Russell thesis errs in its universality. For while in matters that lack vital importance (such as the majority of scientific investigations) belief has no role, **situations where we are faced with a genuine option**—one that is forced, momentous, and living (or of significant meaningfulness to us)—our passionate nature serves as the lawful determinant of our choice (1956:11,19).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup>see William K. Clifford. 1877. The Ethics of Belief. Contemporary Review, 1877. Reprinted in *Lectures and Essays* (1879).

<sup>3</sup>Russell, Bertrand. 1958. The Will to Doubt. New York: Philosophical Library.

<sup>4</sup>Russell's position is not entirely equivalent with Clifford's. With respect to “[h]ow far could or should men's actions be rational?”, Russell writes that “some of the most important departments of life are ruined by the invasion of reason” (1958:48). Such departments include the romantic, filial, or friendly relationships, the creative products of the arts, and non-conventional morality. The application of rationality has the potentiality of distorting such departments. Russell writes “[c]ontrol has been applied to the very things which should be free, while envy, cruelty, and hate sprawl at large with the blessing of nearly the whole bench of Bishops” (1958:50). Russell's appeal is that we ought to try to parse out, if possible, the conflation that regularly occurs among the beliefs of the lunatic, the lover, and the poet. For Russell, this requires that we be attentive to two sides of our instinctive apparatus: “one tending to further our own life and that of our descendents, the other tending to thwart the lives of supposed

### 0.3 Introductory Section: Sermon on Justification by Faith

In the introductory section, James asserts that his lecture is an “essay in justification of faith, a defense of our right to adopt a believing attitude in religious matters, in spite of the fact that our merely logical intellect may not have been coerced” (WB1-2). In short, he aims to argue that it is rational/defensible to believe in some proposition P without sufficient evidence for P.

**Discussion 1** *Before we begin analyzing James’s position, it is worthwhile to think of what reasons there might be for the position James rejects. Take a moment to consider any argument you can create in support of the claim that you ought only to believe what you have sufficient evidence for.*

### 0.4 First Section: Preliminary Distinctions

In this section, James makes a number of distinctions.

**Definition 1 (hypothesis)** *Anything that may be proposed to our belief*

Hypotheses can be **live** or **dead**

- live: a hypothesis that is a real possibility to the person to whom it is proposed, e.g. that Liverpool FC will win the Premier league
- dead: a hypothesis that is not a real possibility to the person to whom it is proposed, e.g. that Donald Trump is a martian (logically possibility but extremely unlikely).

James notes that the property of being *living or dead* is *relative to the thinker* and is measured by that individual’s *willingness to act*. And so, a maximally live hypothesis is one that the individual would always act upon (belief).

Next, James defines an option.

**Definition 2 (option)** *Decision between at least two hypotheses*

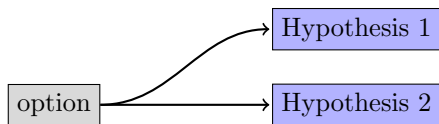


Figure 1: An option is a decision between at least two hypotheses.

rivals” (1958:50). Russell is thus much closer to James than Clifford insofar as both James and Russell argue that rationality and its lawful insistence on that belief be proportional to the evidence fails to apply in certain circumstances. While Russell fails to count religious faith as falling into this sphere, he and James both earmark the departments of friendship, romantic relations, and morality as among those where belief is valid despite it not being guided by conventionally rational principles. But while James would contend that all positions are valid within this sphere, Russell refuses to countenance the ravings of the lunatic and instinctive malice as being justifiable.

James notes that there are of several kinds of options:

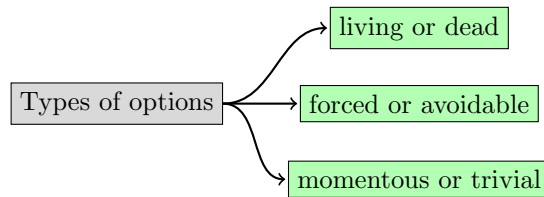


Figure 2: James contends that options may be (i) living or dead, (ii) forced or avoidable, and (iii) momentous or trivial.

- a **living option** is a decision between two live hypotheses. A dead option would thus be a decision between two dead hypotheses or one dead and one living hypothesis.
- a **forced option** requires you to choose one of the two hypotheses. A non-forced option is an option where you could pursue some other hypothesis
- a **momentous option** is a decision between hypotheses that involves some level of uniqueness or significance such that failing to choose would mean losing out on something significant. A trivial option is a decision between hypotheses that does not involve anything unique such that one could fail to choose and nothing of significance would be lost

**Example 2 (live option)** *Some potentially live options include:*

1. *Be a Christian or be an agnostic.*
2. *You should vote for Trump or vote for Hillary*
3. *You should read “The Will to Believe” or do something else*

**Example 3 (forced option)** *Some forced options include:*

1. *Do something or do nothing*
2. *Either vote or don’t vote*
3. *You should believe in God or not believe in God*

**Example 4 (momentous option)** *James notes that most scientific hypotheses are trivial in that we don’t miss out on anything if our hypothesis fails (and that we could always run other tests). Some momentous options include:*

1. *The decision to go to the moon/mars or not*
2. *The decision to go see some famous musician’s final show or not*
3. *The decision to go to the North Pole or not.*

James defines a **genuine option** as an option that is (i) forced, (ii) living, and (iii) momentous

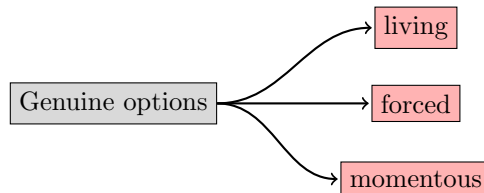


Figure 3: A genuine option is an option that is a decision between hypotheses that is (i) forced, (ii) living, and (iii) momentous

**Example 5 (Soul mate)** *There is a beautiful person is quickly walking past you that you think you have a chance with and think maybe he/she will be the one that you will ultimately marry (live and momentous). You can either go up and talk to her/him or you can do nothing (forced).*

**Example 6 (Drowning child)** *There is a child drowning in a lake and you think you might be able to swim out there and save him yourself (live). This is a momentous occasion, if you save him, you might be doing something great (or you could be heralded as a hero). There is no one else around, so you have the option to swim and save him or let him drown*

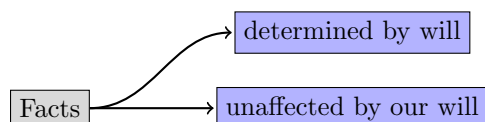
**Discussion 2** *Try to devise two genuine options.*

## 0.5 Second Section: the root of conviction

James begins the second section by noting that

1. some facts might be determined by our will (our passionate/volitional nature)
2. some facts are completed unaffected by our will

In short, James distinguishes between reality and our will.



But the question is which (if any) facts are potentially determined by our will. There are a number of possible options:

1. all facts are determined by our passionate nature
2. no facts are determined by our passionate nature
3. some facts are determined by our passionate nature and some facts are not determined by our passionate nature

James begins his analysis by considering two sorts of cases where we ought not simply believe whatever we want. That is, two types of facts that **not** determined by our passionate nature

The **first case** involves beliefs that are **matters of fact** or established **relations between ideas** (analytic truths). His examples illustrate this case well.

Can we, by just willing it, believe that Abraham Lincoln's existence is a myth, and that the portraits of him in McClure's Magazine are all of some one else? Can we, by any effort of our-will, or by any strength of wish that it were true, believe ourselves well and about when we are roaring with rheumatism in bed, or feel certain that the sum of the two one-dollar bills in our pocket must be a hundred dollars? We can *say* any of these things, but we are absolutely impotent to believe them;

In short, certain facts seem to be dead hypotheses upon which our wills can have no influence. They are settled matters of fact or analytic truths.

The **second case** involves *dead hypotheses* won't be settled by experience. Our will or passionate nature plays no role in determining the truth or falsity of the hypothesis because we have no volitional attitude toward that hypothesis.

James considers Pascal's wager but the wager has no effect if the hypothesis is dead. First, consider Pascal's wager (see [Table 2](#)).

	God exists	God does not exist
Belief in God	gain everything	lose nothing
Non-belief in God	lose everything	gain little

Table 1: Pascal's wager

However, consider the same line of reasoning for attending mass.

	God exists	God does not exist
Attend mass	gain everything	lose nothing
Not attend mass	lose everything	gain little

Table 2: Pascal's wager for attending mass

And, again, consider the same argument uttered by the Mahdi (the redeemer of Islam who will appear some number of years before judgment day):

As well might he Mahdi write to us, saying, "I am the expected One who God has created in his effulgence. You shall be infinitely happy if you confess me; otherwise you shall be cut off from the light of the sun. Weigh, then, your infinite gain if I am genuine against your finite sacrifice if I am not!" His logic would be that of Pascal; but he would vainly use it on us, for the hypothesis he offers us is dead (WB:6).

Depending upon the individual, the passionate nature (or will) plays no role in determining the truth or falsity of the proposition nor does it compel an individual to believe or not believe. The individual simply has no opinion on the matter.

At this point, we might consider the possibility that the will (passionate / volitional nature) **should not play any role** in determining what we believe. We might contend that belief by volition/passion is silly, vile, and sinful. That free-will and simple wishing have no bearing upon what belief should be.

Let's call this view **evidentialism**.

**Definition 3 (evidentialism)** *The intellect should always determine what one believes and not the passionate or volitional nature.*

## 0.6 Third Section: The Role of Non-Intellectual Nature on our Convictions

We will skip this section.

## 0.7 Fourth Section: The Thesis

James asserts his thesis in this fourth section:

The thesis I defend is, briefly stated, this: *Our passionate nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say, under such circumstances, “Do not decide, but leave the question open,” is itself a passionate decision, — just like deciding yes or no, — and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth* (WB:11).

Let’s summarize this thesis:

- there are cases that our passionate / volitional must decide
- these cases involve genuine options that cannot be decided on intellectual grounds
- the claim that we should be agnostic about the question is itself a passionate decision
- that passionate decision has no more worth than another passionate decision

## 0.8 Fifth Section: Two Dogmatisms: Empiricism and Absolutism

James contends that he is ignoring the systematic skeptic because he postulates that “there is truth, and that it is the destiny of our minds to attain it” and that he adopts “the faith that truth exists” (WB:12). However, he holds there are two different ways this non-skeptical view might be taken:

1. the empiricist way
2. the absolutist way

**Definition 4 (absolutism)** *Absolutists contend that not only can we know the truth but we “can know when we have attained to knowing it”* (WB:12)

**Definition 5 (empiricism)** *Empiricists contend that we can know the truth but we “cannot infallibly know when”* (WB:12)

James here is making a distinction between first-order and second-order knowledge. Let’s suppose that there is a proposition P where P is “snow is white”. Now let’s consider three different propositions:

1. P
2. I know P
3. I know that I know P

Both absolutists and empiricists agree that it is possible to know P (first-order knowledge) but they disagree about whether they know that they know P (second-order knowledge). Empiricists contend that there is no infallible second-order knowledge while absolutists contend that second-order knowledge is possible.

James contends that we are **naturally absolutists**. This is because we have a belief in **objective evidence**. That is, we have beliefs like “we exist here and now” or “two plus two equals

four” that (i) we take ourselves to be unable to doubt and (ii) because these “things illumine my intellect irresistibly” (WB:13).

Those that take themselves to be empiricists are *empiricists in reflection or in speech* although not in *practice*. James’s target here is William Clifford arguing that Clifford claim that we ought not to believe in God is not reflective of the empiricist mindset but instead reflective of the absolutist mindset in the other direction. As James puts it:

When the Cliffords tell us how sinful it is to be Christians on such ‘insufficient evidence,’ insufficiency is really the last thing they have in mind. For them the evidence is absolutely sufficient, only it makes the other way. They believe so completely in an anti-christian order of the universe that there is no living option: Christianity is a dead hypothesis from the start (WB:14)

## 0.9 Sixth Section: Abandonment of Objective Certitude

James takes himself to be a complete empiricist. He believes he has knowledge and lives as such, but also accepts that any one of his beliefs may be wrong

I am, therefore, myself a complete empiricist so far as my theory of human knowledge goes. I live, to be sure, by the practical faith that we must go on experiencing and thinking over our experience, for only thus can our opinions grow more true; but to hold any one of them — I absolutely do not care which — as if it never could be reinterpreted or corrigible, I believe to be a tremendously mistaken attitude, and I think that the whole history of philosophy will bear me out (WB:14)

Despite claiming to be a complete empiricist, James contends that there are a number of certain truths that resist even the most sceptical of philosophers. He points to two such truths:

1. “the truth that the present phenomenon of consciousness exists” (WB:15)
2. “abstract propositions of comparison (such as two and two are the same as four)” (WB:15)

James offers a number of reasons for adopting empiricism over absolutism.

1. no concrete test of absolute truths, e.g. divine revelation, *consensus gentium* (agreement of the people), natural instincts, clear and distinct ideas guaranteed by God, common-sense, the inconceivability of the opposite, verification by sense experience, etc.
2. a wide number of contradictory opinions have claimed to be supported by objective evidence, e.g. God exists vs. God doesn’t exist, the physical world can be immediately known vs. the physical world is only known via ideas, etc. (see WB:16)

However, while James contends that the empiricist gives up on the doctrine of objective certitude, s/he does not give up on the

“quest or hope of truth itself” (WB:17). For James then there is a difference in the way that empiricists and absolutists approach truth. For the absolutist, we start with some propositions that we have absolute certainty concerning and then work our way toward other truths. For the empiricist, we start with whatever hypotheses that are available and then work our way toward truth.

Practically, this difference in approach also comes with a difference concerning how we evaluate hypotheses. For James the empiricist is much more open to the origin of the hypothesis while the absolutist will only accept hypotheses that emerge from the system itself.

It matters not to an empiricist from what quarter an hypothesis may come to him: he may have acquired it by fair means or by foul; passion may have whispered or accident suggested it; but if the total drift of thinking continues to confirm it, that is what he means by its being true

### Discussion 3

## 0.10 Seventh Section: Two Distinct Ways of Opinion, Rhetorical/Practical Argument

James contends that this seventh section is the last **introductory section**. He introduces a distinction between two attitudes (or duties) toward belief. That is, if we think that there is a kind of **ethics of belief**, he considers two different rules.

The **first attitude is the avoidance of error attitude**. This is the attitude most aligned with the evidentialist. This approach places certain restrictions on what one should believe for it contends that one should only believe what one has sufficient evidence to support.

The **second attitude is the chase-for-truth attitude**. This approach is more permissive in that it allows, in certain circumstances, for the possibility of believing without sufficient evidence.

James makes a number of additional points once this distinction is drawn:

- James contends that while the choice between the attitudes is not mutually exclusive; however, we treat one as more primary than the other.
- One might contend that the risk of being wrong is great when compared with the benefit of being right
- One might contend that the risk of being wrong is small when compared with the benefit of being right

James contends that he adopts the **chase-for-truth attitude**.

1. there is no objective way to decide which attitude is better: the difference is practical
2. The avoidance of error attitude is reflective of someone who fears becoming a dupe, but James contends that there are

worse things in life than being a dupe: “It is like a general informing his soldiers that it is better to keep out of battle forever than to risk a single wound” (WB:19)

3. the chase-for-truth attitude is more practical on the basis that it is healthier because the chase-for-truth attitude comes with a kind of “lightness of heart” rather than an “excessive nervousness” (WB:19)

## 0.11 Eighth Section: The judicial intellect

James begins section 8 by reiterating his thesis from section 4:

not only as a matter of fact do we find our passional nature influencing us in our opinions, but that there are some options between opinions in which this influence must be regarded both as an inevitable and as a lawful determinant of our choice (WB:19).

James’s main goal in this section is to restrict the scope of his thesis. That is, he contends that there are some matters where we ought not let our passional nature decide our beliefs. These are matters where the option is not momentous, or not forced, or the choice between hypotheses is not living.

1. In the majority of scientific matters, the decision between hypotheses is not momentous and it is not forced and so we can simply continue to investigate the matter without deciding before all of the evidence is available.
2. In a lot of legal matters, there is no real consequence (not momentous); case can be decided on any acceptable principle.

**Note 1** *While James notes that we can adopt a wait-and-see approach to the majority of scientific matters, he notes that with respect to scientific discovery this is not the case. That is, he suggests that scientific discovery is often fueled by individuals pursuing their pet hypotheses even when those hypotheses are not supported by evidence.*

In short, when there is no forced option “the dispassionately judicial intellect with no pet hypothesis, saving us, as it does, from dupery at any rate, ought to be our ideal” (WB:21–22).

## 0.12 Section Nine: Moral Questions and Personal Relations

Despite the above caveat, James raises the following: are there not some speculative questions where we cannot dispassionately wait for an answer? That is, there are some forced options in our speculative questions that we must decide before all of the evidence is available.

### 0.12.1 Moral questions

One type of question of this sort are **moral questions**. Not a question of existence, but value of existence (an x's goodness)

**Definition 6 (moral question)** *A question not about what exists (which is the task of science) but what would be good if it did exist.*

James asserts that (i) moral beliefs are determined by our will / passionate nature and that (ii) even the decision to have moral beliefs at all is determined by our will / passionate nature.

He contends that just as intellectual skepticism cannot be refuted, neither can moral skepticism be refuted. But, at the same time, neither can the skeptic refute moral belief.

For James, the decision to believe or not believe in morals comes down to whether one wishes to adopt the **doubting attitude** or **believing attitude**

### 0.12.2 Questions about personal relations

Another example involves questions of fact relating to personal relations. Here James notes that the belief in some fact can play a role in bringing that fact about (self-fulfilling prophecy).

For consider Tek and Liz. Suppose Tek asks “does Liz like me”. According to James, whether you like me or not sometimes may depend on whether I adopt a preliminary faith that you like me. Suppose the two different attitudes:

- Suppose Tek takes the attitude that he will believe Liz likes him. He adopts this attitude without any evidence. Because of this, he invites her out, is friendly to her, etc. This belief leads to actions that makes Liz like him.
- Suppose Tek takes the attitude that he will wait and see if Liz like him. He adopts the attitude that he needs sufficient evidence to believe she likes him. According to James, “if I stand aloof, and refuse to budge an inch until I have objective evidence, until you shall have done something apt, [...], ten to one your liking never comes” (WB:24).

In short, according to James, “the desire for a certain kind of truth here brings about that special truth’s existence; [...] [h]is faith acts on the powers above him as a claim, and creates its own verification” (WB:24).

### 0.12.3 Social organism

A third case that James considers involve communities or various forms of collective action, e.g. governments, armies, sports teams, colleges, political organizations, gangs.

According to James, these organizations are capable of existing because “each member proceeds to his own duty with a trust that the other members will simultaneously do theirs” (WB:24). In short, the cooperative behavior of groups depends upon our initial choice to believe in one other. That is, we do not simply wait and see if our neighbors will do their part and then realize

we can trust them. Rather, we have faith in them and that makes various forms of collective action possible. James gives two related examples.

**Example 7 (thieves)** *Consider a group of highway robbers. They are capable of robbing a large group of people because each believes the other will due what needs to be done to make the robbery successful. If the robbers didn't trust each other, then the collective robbery wouldn't work. However, the fact that each believes the other is committed to pulling off the crime makes it possible for the crime to occur.*

**Example 8 (the victims)** *Consider the passengers on a train that are to be robbed by highway robbers. According to James, no single passenger can stop the group of highway robbers but the group of passengers could stop the robbers. If each passenger waited to have sufficient evidence for the belief that the other passengers will stop the robbery, then no one will stop the robbers. However, if every passenger believed (even without evidence) that the other passengers will come to their aid, then each passenger would rise and stop the train robbing.*

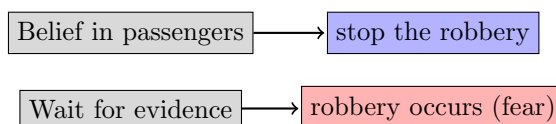


Figure 4: Results given the different attitudes that might be taken concerning a robbery

James thus reiterates his point that “[t]here are, then cases where a fact cannot come at all unless a preliminary faith exists in its coming” (WB:25).

**Discussion 4** *James gives three examples involving personal relations where*

1. *it is permissible to let our passionate nature decide over our intellectual nature, viz., to risk truth rather than shun error*
2. *where our antecedent faith that P is true plays a role in making P is true.*

*According to James, the absolutist would argue that faith in a fact cannot create a fact.*

1. *do you agree with James or the absolutist?*
2. *can you think of other examples that James might point to where faith that P is true plays a role in making P true.*

## 0.13 Section Ten: Religious Faith

In the final section, James begins by noting that perhaps his earlier examples are “childish human cases” and do not have anything to do with things of importance. James then proceeds to consider religious hypotheses.

Consider that there are three different religious hypotheses:

1. theist: that God exists
2. atheist: that God does not exist

- agnostic: that we ought to wait and see whether or not God exists

We might imagine a number of other variations and additions to these hypotheses, e.g. the belief in Christ, or religious experience, or redemption, or ultimate salvation. And, we might believe them, deny them, or abstain from belief concerning them.

The **agnostic** may argue that their position is preferable. They are “scientific” about the religious hypothesis. They contend that we ought to wait-and-see, gather evidence, consider the weight of evidence, and only after we have sufficient evidence should we either adopt the theist or atheist position.

In this section, James denies that the agnostic position is anything more than a passional decision and there is no objective justification for it over the theistic or atheistic alternatives.

### 0.13.1 Religious hypotheses are genuine options

First, James notes that religion says two things:

- “the best things are the most eternal things” (WB:25).
- “we are better off *even now* if we believe her first affirmation [the first thing] to be true” (WB:26, my emphasis)<sup>5</sup>

Second, James argues that provided that the religious option is a live option, then it will be a **genuine option**.<sup>6</sup> He argues that it is a **momentous option** in that we “are supposed to gain, **even now**, by our belief, and to lose by our non-belief, a certain vital good” (WB:26, my emphasis). He argues that it is a **forced option** because the abstaining from belief has the same consequence as disbelief. That is, he contends that since the good potentially comes from belief, the agnostic (wait-and-see) solution is the same as disbelief.

	hypothesis is true	hypothesis is false
belief	benefit	error
disbelief	error	benefit
agnostic	error	benefit

Table 3: Outcomes if the religious hypothesis is true vs. false

James illustrates how the agnostic runs the same risk as the non-believer.

**Example 9** *Suppose Tek wants to marry Liz but is not sure if he should ask her because he isn’t “sure that she would prove an angel after he brought her home” (WB:26). He doesn’t disbelieve she will be an angel but nor does he believe. Instead, he adopts the agnostic (wait-and-see) approach. Because of this, he waits indefinitely to ask her.*

<sup>5</sup> “faith is “more precious than gold that perishes” (1 Peter 1:7), faith brings salvation and eternal life (Ephesians 2:8,9; John 3:16), it is said to give your life meaning, peace, confidence, the capacity to endure certain hardships, security in mind, and so on.

<sup>6</sup> James notes that his following argument will have no weight if the religious option is not a **live option** for you. If it is not, then his example/argument will be somewhat pointless.

*In engaging in this agnosticism, Tek cuts himself out from the “angel-possibility” just as much as if he believed she would not be an angel, e.g. if he went out and married someone else.*

### 0.13.2 Agnosticism as a passional decision

If the religious option is a genuine option, then James contends that the debate between the agnostic and the theist boil down to a difference in passional attitudes:

- Better to risk loss of truth than chance of error
- Better to chance error than risk loss of truth

In other words, the skeptic (agnostic) isn’t avoiding the hypothesis, but instead engages in a different kind of risk, namely the skeptic’s attitude is that it is better to risk a loss of truth than to chance error. Or, as James puts it, the agnostic contends “to yield to our fear of its being error is wiser and better than to yield to our hope that it may be true” (WB:27).

The debate then between the theist and the agnostic is not a debate between those who are letting their beliefs be determined by the intellect (on the one hand) and the passions/will (on the other). Rather, it is simply a difference in two different passions.<sup>7</sup>

### 0.13.3 Agnostic Rule a Roadblock to Truth

James levels a second argument against the agnostic. Namely, that if the religious hypothesis is true and there are benefits to be gained from accepting it, the charge that one ought not undertake it until one has sufficient evidence would amount to blocking an individual off from the benefits/truths potentially associated with believing in that hypothesis. As James puts it:

“a rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were really there, would be an irrational rule” (WB:28).

The idea here is that by treating the agnostic/skeptic approach as though it were the only rational approach, one would be (to use Peirce’s terms) blocking the road of inquiry.

## 0.14 Some Concluding Remarks and Objections

<sup>7</sup>To put this another way, if the choice of believing or not believing a truth-statement is a “genuine option” (i.e. one that is living, forced, and momentous), and the truth of the statement cannot be established on intellectual grounds, then one has an intellectual right to believe.