

Different views as to
when an individual
can consider a belief
knowledge of fact ...

[Philosophy](#)



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Different views as to when an individual can consider a belief knowledge of fact /truth , rather than just unsubstantiated opinion

The Philosophy of Belief or Fact Throughout the ages man has searched for knowledge and admirably pursued accurate knowledge, not only opinion.

The Renaissance was a period of great intellectual discoveries, but philosophers were also wary of ideas that were accepted by men but could not be substantiated with facts. The research and techniques of three philosophers in search of accurate knowledge, Renee Descartes (1596-1650), William Kingdon Clifford (1849-1879) and William James (1842-1910) span three centuries, and can be applied to science as acceptable research methodology. 1. Gravity exists In Meditations I, Descartes revealed the beginning of his intellectual journey of doubt by writing, “ Several years have now elapsed since I first became aware that I had accepted, even from my youth, many false opinions for true, and that consequently what I afterward based on such principles was highly doubtful; and from that time I was convinced of the necessity of undertaking once in my life to rid myself of all the opinions I had adopted, and of commencing anew the work of building from the foundation, if I desired to establish a firm and abiding superstructure in the sciences.” By discarding all previously accepted notions, the philosopher was left with the foundation of matter and his own “ being.” His synthetic method built upon his basic “ I think therefore I am” to conclude the existence of mankind was related to Archimedes problem that in order for him “ to draw the terrestrial globe out of its place and transport it elsewhere, ... one point should be fixed and immovable; in the same way I

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shall have the right to conceive high hopes if I am happy enough to discover one thing only which is certain and indisputable.” (Durant 639). Descartes’ resulting standard was that if even a segment of an idea was proven false, then the entire idea had no foundation for truth. Using this line of reason, it is likely that Descartes would have been intrigued and accepting of Newton’s Law of Gravity published almost 40 years after the French philosopher’s death. Newton not only began with observation of the principle between two objects in space, but proved his theory mathematically, Descartes area of expertise, with the inverse-square law of gravity. William Kingdon Clifford, would most likely have accepted the Law of Gravity had he been alive two hundred years earlier. His logic would have been based on his belief in inquiry and the presentation of new evidence using Newton’s calculations of force at the distance of the Moon, an accepted heavenly body. Though William James’ *The Will to Believe* is mainly a “ defense of religious faith,” his belief to use intellect when evidence is available as opposed to making a “ forced,” “ momentous,” or “ living” decision based more on a passionate response seems likely in the case of gravity.

2. Slavery is bad

The moral question of whether or not slavery was good was a pertinent issue to the economy in the southern United States of the 1800s. For that reason, all sides must be weighed. Raising doubt to the validity of the important element of morality, it is questionable whether Descartes would have thought it to be an entirely beneficial institution. His belief that if any part of an issue is without foundation, that issue is false, provides the argument that slavery, while economically beneficial for the south, was not good for individuals. Plantation owners provided homes and food for their slaves,

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though history has uncovered many cases of abuse. This raises strong questions about whether there might have been a better solution to the cotton industry of that era. Clifford could have likened slavery to his sinking ship analogy. Regardless of the outcome, was slavery morally condonable? In the end, his research, if complete, would no doubt have uncovered whippings, children out of wedlock, and poor living conditions. His conclusion would have had to be, according to evidence, for an end to slavery. James' inquiry might have been passionate, relying on a hypothesis that, one; the institution of slavery is a tradition and necessary to the survival of the south, or two; that slaves are human beings and the plantation system is inhumane. It is believable that James may have decided in favor of freedom for slaves based on his "live" option. "a live hypothesis is one that you might seriously wind up believing as a result of an inquiry." If he made a study of the affects and conditions of slavery in his day, he would have accurate knowledge to base his decision on. If his option was forced, "in general, an option of the form "do x now or don't do x now" will always be forced, since to decline is in effect to choose not to do x." he might still have sided against slavery and finally chosen the momentous option, "a great deal hangs on how you choose, and especially if the opportunity is fleeting. ." ("The Will to Believe" Princeton. edu). While James was neither a member of the southern plantation class, nor under pressure to make a hurried choice, slavery was a topic in his day that carried huge consequences. Many in the world who followed its events were compelled to choose a side, however, according to James' own three options, his own choice, for us, is hard to discern. 3.

Extraterrestrials exist The existence of life on another planet is a topic of

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interest to many people today, but during the lifetime of Descartes, it is not likely to have been debated as hotly as earthbound topics of a religious nature. By stripping away all beliefs previously held, and without any evidence of any sort to begin his inquiry such as, hot air balloons or air born devices by the government, Descartes most likely would have quickly dismissed such a notion. Clifford, who believed that research was the necessary and moral path to take in order to prove one's hypothesis would most likely not find enough supporting evidence for extraterrestrial life. James, on the other hand, believes that ones non-rational nature can win out over logic. If he was like many today, who will not entertain the possibility that there could not be life in space, then the issue is not even "living" for those people, it is just accepted. If however, James felt "forced" to either accept or reject the possibility of extraterrestrial life, then either response falls into the "forced" category. His choice would be momentous if there were consequences depending on his choice, or if he had to decide before a particular time limit ran out, or something would happen. There doesn't seem to be actual evidence in favor of extraterrestrial life, yet many people are firm believers and take any coincidental event as fact and evidence. James required evidence, so it is unlikely he would cast his opinion on the side of "wishful thinking" or on "intellectual grounds." ("The Will to Believe" Princeton. edu). 4. God exists In the age of Descartes' life there were many debates over issues of faith, but they were generally amongst the existing divisions of Christianity. In Durant, Descartes is paraphrased, "I have, he says, a conception of a perfect being, omniscient, omnipotent, necessary, and eternal. But that which exists is more nearly perfect than that

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which does not; therefore a perfect being must include existence among his attributes.” (640). The Bible, at Romans 1, verse 20, can be quoted as agreeing with his deduction. “ His invisible qualities are clearly seen from the world’s creation onward, because they are perceived by the things made.” (New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures, Ro. 1. 20). Descartes is quoted as believing, “ It is not possible that ... I should have in myself the idea of a God if God did not veritably exist.” He continues to reason that “ if God were a deceiver, He would not be perfect. Therefore he does not deceive us when we have clear and distinct ideas, nor when He allows our senses to reveal to us an external world.” (qtd. In Durant 640). Psalm 19, verse 1, in the Bible states, “ The heavens are declaring the glory of God; and of the work of his hands the expanse is telling.” And in the book of Numbers, chapter 23, verse 19 it states, “ God is not a man that he should tell lies, ...” (New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures, Ps. 19. 1). It would be logical, considering his education and upbringing in a Jesuit College, that Descartes was familiar with the scriptures and by his own reasoning, agreed with the existence of God. Clifford’s position on the existence of God is likely positive also. His theory of evidentialism requires that a person set aside his previously held beliefs if they do not sufficiently provide proof to the issue. Though James believed that Clifford did not believe in God, Clifford’s belief in the continual inquiry when there is doubt, suggests a belief in a Christian God, but also in the continual search by individuals regarding the truth of long believed doctrines. (The Will to Believe, Princeton. edu). Clifford condones, even considers it a social responsibility, to research available published material. His philosophy closely resembles the beginnings of

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Descartes who disassociated himself from all previously held beliefs in order to begin his inquiries using only substantiated facts. James, in the issue of the existence of God, does not believe the decision can be intellectual, but believes in the existence of God only because he wants to. The belief that God exists is more beneficial than what could happen if it is proven His existence is not true. The biblical, scientific and historic evidence proves otherwise, that there is evidence of the existence of many of the people, places and events recorded in the Bible, but much of that evidence, except for the biblical, may not have been available in James' day, not having been discovered until later. Ancient ruins, however, did exist, and many of these ancient cities are mentioned in the Bible, for instance Jerusalem, and they play an important part in the Bible's purpose. These three philosophers constructed intellectual frameworks that assist in weighing complex issues. Most questions, contemporary or historic, will fall into one of the patterns described to assist our coming to a logical and moral conclusion. Works Cited Durant, Will and Ariel Durant. *The Story of Civilization VII: The Age of Reason Begins*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1961. Print. James, William. "The Will to Believe." Web. June 17, 2011. Manley, David B. and Charles S. Taylor. "Descartes' Meditations. Meditation I. Of the Things of Which We May Doubt." A Trilingual HTML Edition. 1996. Web. June 17, 2011. New World Bible Translation Committee. *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures*. New York: New World Bible and Tract Society, 1961. Print. Mager, Brad. "Newton's Law of Gravity." *Pluto: The Discovery of Planet X*. Web. June 17, 2011. The Purdue OWL. Purdue U Writing Lab, 2010. Web. June 17, 2011.

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