

1-Page "Will to Believe"

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The essential points William James makes in his essay on the will to believe begins with three criteria in making a genuine choice. The choice must be:

1. **Live**, in that it has some internal, subjective emotive appeal, not necessarily rational. A "dead" choice would be a matter that has no internal, subjective appeal at all.
2. **Forced**, in that you are confronted by an either-or situation, not multiple choice. If you choose one you must necessarily go without the other. In a multiple choice situation you are not forced to make a decision, because you can choose other options or none at all.
3. **Momentous**, in that it isn't a trivial matter. It is momentous in that what you choose is a once in a lifetime opportunity or situation and that it matters a great deal to you.

James's thesis is that **when we cannot make a decision on the basis of the intellect, the rational mind, then we not only may, but we necessarily must make the decision based on the internal feeling of what is right.**

Refusing to make a decision, according to James, doesn't solve the problem; it is in itself a "passional" decision.¹ He goes on to point out that although we are born with absolutist tendencies, **we must always search for the truth.** We must search for truth **even as we know there are no concrete tests for the truth**, that truth constantly changes, and that there is really only *one truth*, "...the present phenomenon of consciousness exists."² Nothing more.

James goes on to say that we have the right to believe any hypothesis that is "alive" to us (see the above criteria of choice). **In making momentous choices, those who are afraid of looking foolish by making the "wrong" choice or waiting for scientific certainty will live with nothing.** We are showing gratitude to our god, who or whatever it is, by earnestly believing, even if faith is required. **Faith creates facts. It is with faith that we embark on any enterprise.** This idea is important enough to quote James directly:

"Whenever a desired result is achieved by the cooperation of many independent persons, its existence as a fact is a pure consequence of the precursive faith in one another of those immediately concerned. **A government, an army, a commercial system, a ship, a college, an athletic team, all exist on this condition, without which not only is nothing achieved, but nothing is even attempted.**"

¹ William James, "The will to Believe," an Address to the Philosophical Clubs of Yale and Brown Universities. Published in the *New World*, June, 1896.

² *ibid*