

# BELIEF

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## Belief

**Primary Disciplinary Field(s):** Philosophy (Epistemology), Psychology, Cognitive Science, Sociology

### 1. Core Definition and Psychological Function

The concept of **belief** represents a fundamental mental state of holding a proposition or premise to be true or valid. In its broadest sense, a belief is the acceptance that a statement is real or that something is trustworthy, serving as a psychological foundation for interpreting the world and making decisions. Philosophically, belief is often categorized as a propositional attitude--a mental state expressing an attitude toward a proposition, regardless of whether that proposition is objectively true or false. This intrinsic acceptance is what allows individuals to function efficiently, as accepting certain premises as true provides a framework for expectations and interactions.

Within psychology, the definition narrows slightly, emphasizing its role as the psychological basis for an **attitude** associated with a characteristic attributed to an object or person. As noted in the source material, when an individual accepts a premise--such as "This equipment is reliable" or "This person is trustworthy"--they are forming a belief that anchors their subsequent emotional and behavioral reactions toward that object or person. These underlying cognitive premises are crucial because they inform the valence and intensity of the attitude; if a belief is strongly held (i.e., the reliability of the equipment is deemed absolute), the resultant positive attitude will be robust, influencing behavioral outcomes such as continued use or recommendation.

Furthermore, the psychological function of belief is intrinsically linked to consistency and stability. Beliefs operate within a broader cognitive system, often organized hierarchically, ranging from peripheral beliefs (easily changed, e.g., believing a restaurant is currently open) to core beliefs (deeply ingrained and resistant to change, e.g., religious or moral convictions). When people hold a premise to be true, they place their trust and confidence in this premise as a belief, reducing cognitive dissonance and providing a stable foundation from which to navigate an uncertain environment. This reliance on internal validity streamlines cognitive processing, allowing rapid assessments of incoming information based on pre-established mental models.

### 2. Epistemological Foundations of Belief

In the field of epistemology, which is the theory of knowledge, belief occupies a central yet contentious position. Historically, belief has been viewed as one of the three necessary components of knowledge, famously encapsulated by the "Justified True Belief" (JTB) model, which posits that for a person (S) to know a proposition (P), three conditions must be met: S must believe P; P must be true; and S must be justified in believing P. Thus, while belief is a necessary condition for knowledge, it is not sufficient; one can believe something strongly, but if that premise

is false or the justification is flawed, it does not constitute knowledge.

The distinction between belief and knowledge hinges primarily upon the criteria of truth and justification. A belief is a subjective psychological state, whereas knowledge is generally considered an objective achievement requiring external verification of truth and sufficient rational justification. Epistemology explores the nature of justification--what kind of evidence, reasoning, or sensory experience transforms a mere belief into warranted knowledge. This exploration ranges from internalist views, which focus on internal mental states and introspective evidence, to externalist views, which emphasize reliable external processes (like perception or memory) that lead to true beliefs, even if the believer is not fully aware of the reliability of the process.

The philosophical rigor applied to belief highlights its importance in determining rational agency. A rational agent is expected not only to hold beliefs but to hold them in proportion to the available evidence. This raises questions regarding probabilistic beliefs, where an individual assigns a certain degree of confidence (a probability) to the truth of a proposition rather than absolute acceptance. Bayesian epistemology, for example, models belief revision as a continuous process where the degree of belief (credence) is updated mathematically in response to new evidence, demonstrating that belief is not a binary state (true/false) but often a spectrum of conviction tethered to degrees of certainty.

### 3. Typologies and Domains of Belief

Beliefs manifest across various domains of human experience and can be classified according to their content and function. One primary distinction is made between descriptive, prescriptive, and evaluative beliefs. **Descriptive beliefs** concern facts about the world, often verifiable through empirical means (e.g., "The sun rises in the east"). **Prescriptive beliefs** pertain to what should be done or what is morally right, forming the basis of ethical systems and social norms (e.g., "It is wrong to steal"). **Evaluative beliefs** involve subjective judgments about the quality or merit of an object, person, or idea (e.g., "Democracy is the best form of government").

Another significant category is **religious faith**, explicitly referenced in the source content. Religious beliefs are often characterized by their reliance on revelation, tradition, or spiritual experience rather than empirical evidence or rational deduction. These beliefs typically address transcendent matters, the meaning of life, and moral frameworks. The psychological strength of religious beliefs often surpasses that of factual beliefs due to their deep integration into self-identity, community cohesion, and emotional coping mechanisms, rendering them highly resistant to counter-evidence or intellectual challenge.

Furthermore, sociological analysis identifies shared or collective beliefs, which are propositions accepted by a group or society. These collective beliefs underpin social institutions, political ideologies, and cultural practices. Examples include the belief in the legitimacy of a governmental

structure or the shared understanding of historical narratives. The study of how these shared beliefs are formed, transmitted, and maintained is crucial for understanding social stability and conflict, as challenges to core collective beliefs frequently lead to societal upheaval or polarization.

#### 4. The Interplay of Belief, Attitude, and Behavior

In social psychology, beliefs serve as the cognitive foundation of attitudes, providing the informational base upon which evaluations are made. The classic tripartite model of attitudes posits that attitudes consist of affective (emotional), behavioral (action-oriented), and cognitive (belief-based) components. Specifically, an individual holds various beliefs about an attitude object--attributes, consequences, or values associated with it. These beliefs, weighted by their subjective evaluation of the attribute, summate to form the overall attitude. For instance, if a consumer holds the belief that a specific car model is **fuel-efficient** (positive belief) and **expensive** (negative belief), the resulting attitude toward the car is a function of the relative importance the consumer places on efficiency versus cost.

The theory of reasoned action and its successor, the theory of planned behavior, formalize the relationship between belief and action. These models assert that specific beliefs about the consequences of performing a behavior (behavioral beliefs) influence one's attitude toward that behavior. This attitude, combined with subjective norms (beliefs about how others view the behavior) and perceived behavioral control (beliefs about one's ability to perform the behavior), ultimately leads to the intention to act, which is the most proximate determinant of the actual behavior. This psychological framework explains the utility of the source example: if a person holds the belief that a piece of equipment is **reliable**, they form a positive attitude toward its use, leading to the behavioral intention of trusting and utilizing that equipment.

However, the relationship is complex; while beliefs often precede and dictate behavior, the reverse is also true. Behavioral commitments can solidify and reinforce pre-existing beliefs or even generate new ones, particularly to maintain cognitive consistency. When individuals engage in behaviors that contradict their stated beliefs, they often modify the belief system to rationalize the behavior, a process central to resolving cognitive dissonance. Thus, beliefs are both predictors of action and consequences of action, creating a dynamic feedback loop essential for personal and psychological coherence.

#### 5. Cognitive Mechanisms and Formation of Belief

The formation and maintenance of beliefs are governed by complex cognitive processes, many of which involve simplifying heuristics and susceptibility to specific biases. Initial beliefs are often formed through direct experience, testimony from trusted sources, or deductive reasoning based on prior knowledge. However, once established, beliefs exhibit significant resilience, primarily

maintained through mechanisms designed to protect the integrity of the existing cognitive structure.

One of the most potent mechanisms is **confirmation bias**, the psychological tendency to seek out, interpret, favor, and recall information in a way that confirms or supports one's pre-existing beliefs or hypotheses. This bias ensures that individuals selectively attend to evidence corroborating their current views while discounting or actively ignoring contradictory information, thereby cementing the conviction of the belief regardless of objective evidence. This process explains why strongly held political or cultural beliefs often persist even when factually refuted.

Furthermore, motivated reasoning plays a critical role, wherein the processing of information is biased toward achieving a desired outcome or conclusion, often related to protecting one's self-esteem or social identity. If a belief is integral to one's identity or social standing, cognitive resources are mobilized to defend that belief rather than objectively assess its truth value. The influence of memory bias--where one recalls instances that support the belief more easily than instances that contradict it--further ensures the robustness and longevity of cognitive premises, reinforcing the trust and confidence placed in them as true.

## 6. Philosophical Debates: Justification and Truth

The core of philosophical debate surrounding belief centers on the criteria needed to elevate a mere belief to the status of knowledge. Since Plato, the definition of knowledge relied on the JTB framework; however, this framework was critically challenged by Edmund Gettier in 1963. The Gettier problem demonstrated that one could hold a true belief that is justified by all available evidence, yet still fail to possess knowledge, typically due to lucky coincidence or justified false premises leading to a true conclusion.

The Gettier problem spurred extensive epistemological investigation into alternative conditions for knowledge, leading to theories such as infallibilism (requiring absolute certainty), reliabilism (focusing on the reliable process that generated the belief), and evidentialism (emphasizing the evidence possessed by the believer). These debates underscore the complexity of belief validation: simply accepting a premise as true is insufficient for rational acceptance; the pathway to that acceptance--the justification--must withstand stringent scrutiny to avoid being relegated to mere opinion or unwarranted conviction.

Contemporary philosophy of mind also debates the metaphysical status of belief, questioning whether beliefs are discrete, sentence-like mental entities (the sentential theory of belief) or simply dispositional states reflecting how an agent is prepared to act under certain circumstances (the functional theory of belief). Understanding what a belief essentially is--whether a distinct cognitive object or merely a predictive label for behavior--has profound implications for how rationality and intentionality are defined in cognitive science and artificial intelligence.

## Further Reading

[Belief \(General Overview\)](#)

[Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Epistemology](#)

[Theory of Planned Behavior](#)

[Confirmation Bias](#)

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