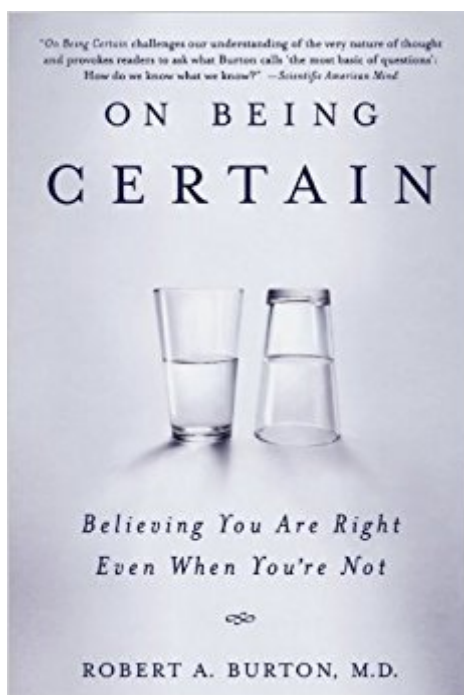


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# On Being Certain: Believing You Are Right Even When You're Not



## Synopsis

You recognize when you know something for certain, right? You "know" the sky is blue, or that the traffic light had turned green, or where you were on the morning of September 11, 2001--you know these things, well, because you just do. In *On Being Certain*, neurologist Robert Burton shows that feeling certain—feeling that we know something—is a mental sensation, rather than evidence of fact. An increasing body of evidence suggests that feelings such as certainty stem from primitive areas of the brain and are independent of active, conscious reflection and reasoning. In other words, the feeling of knowing happens to us; we cannot make it happen. Bringing together cutting-edge neuroscience, experimental data, and fascinating anecdotes, Robert Burton explores the inconsistent and sometimes paradoxical relationship between our thoughts and what we actually know. Provocative and groundbreaking, *On Being Certain* challenges what we know (or think we know) about the mind, knowledge, and reason.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“On Being Certain challenges our understanding of the very nature of thought and provokes readers to ask what Burton calls “the most basic of questions”: How do we know what we know?” • Scientific American Mind • In his brilliant new book, Burton systematically and convincingly shows that certainty is a mental state, a feeling like anger or pride that can help guide us, but that doesn't dependably reflect objective truth | In the polarizing atmosphere of the 2008 election, *On Being Certain* ought to be required reading for every candidate -- and for every citizen. •

•ForbesLife• What do we do when we recognize that a false certainty feels the same as certainty about the sky being blue? A lesser guide might get bogged down in nail-biting doubts about the limits of knowledge. Yet Burton not only makes clear the fascinating beauty of this tangled terrain, he also brings us out the other side with a clearer sense of how to navigate. It's a lovely piece of work; I'm all but certain you'll like it.

•David Dobbs, author of Reef Madness; Charles Darwin, Alexander Agassiz, and the Meaning of Coral• Burton has a great talent for combining wit and insight in a way both palatable and profound.

•Johanna Shapiro PhD, professor of Family Medicine at UC Irvine School of Medicine• A new way of looking at knowledge that merits close reading by scientists and general readers alike.

•Kirkus• This could be one of the most important books of the year. With so much riding on 'certainty,' and so little known about how people actually reach a state of certainty about anything, some plain speaking from a knowledgeable neuroscientist is called for. If Gladwell's Blink was fascinating but largely anecdotal, Burton's book drills down to the real science behind snap judgments and other decision-making.

•Howard Rheingold, futurist and author of Smart Mobs• A fascinating read. Burton's engaging prose takes us into the deepest corners of our subconscious, making us question our most solid contentions. Nobody who reads this book will walk away from it and say 'I know this for sure' ever again.

•Sylvia Pagan Westphal, science reporter, The Wall Street Journal• Burton provides a compelling and thought-provoking case that we should be more skeptical about our beliefs. Along the way, he also provides a novel perspective on many lines of research that should be of interest to readers who are looking for a broad introduction to the cognitive sciences.

•Seed Magazine

You recognize when you know something for certain, right? You "know" the sky is blue, or that the traffic light had turned green, or where you were on the morning of September 11, 2001--you know these things, well, because you just do. In *On Being Certain*, neurologist Robert Burton challenges the notions of how we think about what we know. He shows that the feeling of certainty we have when we "know" something comes from sources beyond our control and knowledge. In fact, certainty is a mental sensation, rather than evidence of fact. Because this "feeling of knowing" seems like confirmation of knowledge, we tend to think of it as a product of reason. But an increasing body of evidence suggests that feelings such as certainty stem from primitive areas of the brain, and are independent of active, conscious reflection and reasoning. The feeling of knowing happens to us; we cannot make it happen. Bringing together cutting edge neuroscience, experimental data, and fascinating anecdotes, Robert Burton explores the inconsistent and sometimes paradoxical relationship between our thoughts and what we actually know. Provocative

and groundbreaking, *On Being Certain*, will challenge what you know (or think you know) about the mind, knowledge, and reason. ROBERT BURTON, M.D. graduated from Yale University and University of California at San Francisco medical school, where he also completed his neurology residency. At age 33, he was appointed chief of the Division of Neurology at Mt. Zion-UCSF Hospital, where he subsequently became Associate Chief of the Department of Neurosciences. His non-neurology writing career includes three critically acclaimed novels. He lives in Sausalito, California. Visit his website at <http://www.rburton.com/>

“What do we do when we recognize that a false certainty feels the same as certainty about the sky being blue? A lesser guide might get bogged down in nail-biting doubts about the limits of knowledge. Yet Burton not only makes clear the fascinating beauty of this tangled terrain, he also brings us out the other side with a clearer sense of how to navigate. It’s a lovely piece of work; I’m all but certain you’ll like it.” --David Dobbs, author of *Reef Madness; Charles Darwin, Alexander Agassiz, and the Meaning of Coral*

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Burton provides a compelling and thought-provoking case that we should be more skeptical about our beliefs. Along the way, he also provides a novel perspective on many lines of research that should be of interest to readers who are looking for a broad introduction to the cognitive sciences. --Seed Magazine

“This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.”

Wise, witty, and well written. Let’s put absolutism in its place: unwarranted. My favorite Burton quote, “If possible, both science and religion should try to adopt and stick with the idea of provisional facts. Once all facts become works-in-progress, absolutism would be dethroned. No matter how great the ‘evidence,’ the literal interpretation of the Bible or Koran would no longer be

the only possibility. By exploring and making common knowledge of how the brain balances off contradictory aspects of its biology, we might gradually turn absolutism into an untenable stance of ignorance." (197)

Ranging from neuroanatomy to religious faith, Dr. Burton assembles an entertaining and informative - if sometimes rambling - picture on what it means to be convinced, to know, to believe. Relevant quotes and citations expose his interest in and research on the topic. Whetted my appetite for more on the topic.

Great book, fascinating and insightful. Well written and is relevant to anyone who is interested in the many facets and problems of seeking an understanding of how we arrive at what we think is "truth" and being truthful/certain. Clearly presents the problem of being certain and how being so closes ones mind to other options. Very good description of the way the brain is thought to work and the logic/support behind his premise about being certain. Excellent for science teachers and, in fact, anyone interested in science and the process of scientific thought. This should be mandatory reading for every politician-- if they are capable of reading--- and if not then it should be read to them.

Dr. Burton's book is one of the most extraordinary and valuable I've read. The depth and breadth of commentary it has generated by other readers is testament that you cannot read this book without having strong reactions, both intellectual and emotional. Dr. Burton, as alleged by other reviewers, neither "attacks science" nor argues that his is the last word on the neurobiology of certainty. Indeed, his postulation of a "hidden layer" (similar to Freud's "subconscious") and its machinations, while "believable," is still part of the great unknown of neuroscience. This is a book that invites the reader to challenge the author and him/herself about our judgments and beliefs. Some things, as the color of the sky, can be known with a high level of certainty; others, as whether an embryo is human, and when, not only cannot be known with objective, rational certainty, but may not be knowable in the sense that they can be proved using scientific methods. Although most of the judgments and values that become part of our "hard-wiring" (whether genetic or acquired) fall into the category of the unknown, unknowable, not-yet-known, or just plain inaccurate, we nevertheless "know" them to be true. Prayer cured my cancer. Politicians cannot be trusted. Organic foods are healthier. God wants me to kill infidels. Businesspeople are crooks. Your mother hates me. The essence of the argument: 1 - beliefs that we "just know" to be true are based (Burton persuasively

argues but cannot yet prove, based on the current state of scientific knowledge) on a mental sensory function (NOT emotion) that the brain's "hidden layer" uses to determine when it has enough information to reach a conclusion; 2 - that however ardently we defend these conclusions to ourselves or others, these things we know to be true are NOT founded on reason or objectivity, but on a complex neurological process that works itself out largely outside our conscious awareness; and 3 - these things that we "just know" to be true persist even in the face of compelling contrary evidence. Our faulty memories are just the tip of the iceberg. Dr. Burton is a clinical neurologist, not a research scientist, and clearly a student of philosophy. His writing is narrative, approachable and contemplative. This book, he reveals late in the text, started out as a personal journal of discovery, and the final product reflects a disciplined intellect wrestling with a highly-personal and weighty question: how can I trust what I believe to be true? In light of how little we truly know about what Nobel laureate Gerald Edelman calls "the most complicated material object in the known universe," Dr. Barton's essay is a compelling contribution to our understanding of ourselves and our fellow, fallible mortals.

Fascinating, engaging, inspiring -- a bit heady at times -- but a thoroughly enjoyable book. Especially if you're inclined to latch on tightly to beliefs -- whatever they are! -- this book is a must read. Particularly the middle chapters called Genes and Thought and Sensational Thoughts! I can't imagine anyone reading this book and not coming away with new insights into how the human brain functions -- unless of course you already know this stuff (those who've read this book will see what I did there -- haha).

If there is any hope for dealing with echo chambers, rationalization and smugness, it lies in understanding how many ways there are to get a sense of certainty other than actual correctness. It sounds like a little thing, but I believe that a little skepticism about what we believe could go a long way to fixing the ills of the world and of individuals. Burton talks about the survival advantages of conviction (as distinct from correctness) and the neural sources of that warm fuzzy feeling of knowing. Add this book to the short shelf of essential works using modern neuroscience to explain key aspects of how we tick.

When I took a few psychology courses years ago, we did not cover the feeling of knowing as a mental state associated with positive emotion. It has an association with many of life's experiences -- those involving self-righteousness, thirst for learning, over-confidence in one's memory, and

confirmation bias. Dr. Burton has created an enjoyable book with an eye-opening (for me) approach to understanding my emotional attachment to what I think I know.

Interesting but kind of long for the message.

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