

Lecture I.

THE NATURE AND THE USE OF ABSOLUTE TRUTH.

I propose, in these lectures, to undertake a task of a somewhat definitely limited interest and scope. I want to define and defend the concept of Absolute Truth. In particular, I want to show: First that we all use the conception, or idea, or, if you prefer another word, the Ideal, of absolute truth as a concept, an idea, an ideal, that is of use to us for the purposes both of common sense and of science. Secondly, I want to show *why* this ideal of absolute truth is a useful ideal, — useful for the purposes of daily life, useful for the purposes of scientific inquiry, and useful for any ethical, or metaphysical or religious interests that any of us may chance to possess; and Thirdly, I want to indicate the sense in which, as I suppose, our ideal of absolute truth is an ideal of something that is, in some regions of our life and in some degree accessible, to us. I have called this task limited in character and scope. Some of you will regard it, in advance, as a hopelessly vast and vague undertaking. Yet I call it limited, because in my mind it is closely connected with other philosophical tasks of which as I prepare these lectures, I shall inevitably be almost constantly aware, but [2] which I must not here attempt to accomplish or even to discuss. As I speak, I shall be thinking of numerous logical and metaphysical problems whose solution is bound up with the particular problem here in question, and I shall be tempted to discuss those other problems with you; while, you, if you take interest in those other problems, will yourselves have them in mind, and will be estimating what I here say in the light of what you think about these other issues. Therefore, whatever I say you will at the end of these lectures find to have been very fragmentary. I shall have suggested to you countless questions that I shall here have no time to answer, even if I had the power to answer them. I shall leave you dissatisfied. My argument, after it has been stated, will appear to you to have been, if I may adapt a well-known phrase, a mere playing with pebbles on the shore of the great ocean of truth, while the ocean itself is left unexplored beyond us. This is the sort of limitation that I mean when I call my present task limited. Let me admit all this at the outset. I shall not content you. But if I leave you with a sort of discontent which may help, however little, to make you better explorers in the ocean of truth in the future, I shall have done all that in these lectures I can hope to do. [3]

I.

I have chosen to use the expression “Absolute Truth” in my title partly because this phrase is, at the moment, extremely unpopular. Of course unpopularity is not in itself an unmixed good. But sometimes, it helps one to be frank and independent. And this is such a time. What is often called “Absolutism” is nowadays a favorite target for the joyous ridicule of skillful humorists and for the more serious scorn of impressive public teachers. Of the leaders of the thought of the day, and of all who are, so to speak, in the fashion. It seems fair of course to suppose that if a man is a believer in what he calls Absolute Truth, he must be some sort of “Absolutist.” And you all know in advance what the leaders of

opinion today counsel you to think of Absolutists and Absolutism. One who declares any truth to be absolute, appears, in Mr. Schiller's eyes, to be assuming that he is personally in very much the same position as that which the dogma of Papal Infallibility attributes to the Pope, whenever the pope is solemnly and officially defining the faith of the Church. And such infallibility is something that plainly no merely mortal philosopher speaking as an individual ought to attribute to himself. And so an absolutist seems to be (to say the least), intolerably presumptuous. Meanwhile, you all know other [4] attributes which have been declared by high authority to belong to Absolutism and to Absolutists. Absolutism is futile, for who, as they say, can find the Absolute either in the market place or in the laboratory. And who would know what to do with it if he found it. As for the Absolutist himself, he is variously yet quite authoritatively, characterized in current literature as a fantastic dreamer and also as a cold and barren intellectualist, as a mystic and also as a logic-chopper, as a partisan of the merely abstract reason, and also as a sentimental obscurantist. All these things you have heard. Of course I do not think these statements to be correct, or I should be no Absolutist. But, I accept quite deliberately and cheerfully this present unpopularity of the name Absolutist. Some people, who are fond of whatever happens to be the latest tendency in correct opinion, are also fond, as they say, of watching the "passing of Absolutism." Some of them say that they like to be "in at the death" of Absolutism. Now I confess that I was much affected in my childhood by that now so antiquated and threadbare word about how "Truth crushed to earth shall rise again." That old word by itself proves nothing, solves no problem, has no sort of authority, being merely a phrase of a good poet. But I confess that, seeing some reason to believe, as I shall try to show you, that that old word expressed in its way a real fact. I am personally fond of going out to see [5] truth rise again! I believe that I have often seen it rise again. It has the divine halo of Resurrection. And whenever I see truth, it has to my mind a certain character of absoluteness about it which makes [illegible] to share the present unpopularity of the word absolute.

I.

So much for a mere suggestion of my programme. And next for a preliminary sketch of some features of our problem.

Common sense is well acquainted with the predicates *true* and *false*. No doubt these words are used more or less equivocally by common sense. But without repeating the efforts so often made to distinguish the principal senses attributed to the predicates *true* and *false*, I am here quite ready to agree with many of my opponents in this discussion so far as to say that, in these lectures, I shall mean by the words *true* and *false* predicates that are properly applied to assertions, to affirmations and denials, to judgments, to propositions, and to ideas only in so far as ideas are of the nature of assertions or of propositions, or of analogous complexes. Thus we commonly say that the assertion " $2 + 2 = 4$ " is true.

We should very generally agree that the assertion “ $2 + 2 = 5$ ” is false. A mining promoter may give you a true or false account of his mine. That is, he may make true or false statements about it. A man may make a true or false [6] complaint when he brings a suit in court against a man or against a corporation. A lover or a business man may make a true or false promise: but his promise is true or false, for our present purposes, because he says: — “I will do thus and so,” that is, truth or falsity belongs to his promise in so far as it involves an assertion about his intended acts. Now you know that, by a certain more or less natural transfer, we often do indeed apply the adjectives true or false to mere feelings, to emotions, to moods, to appearances, and on occasion to physical things, or to still other objects which we do not regard as assertions, or as directly partaking of the nature of affirmations or denials. Thus one may speak of a true lover, or of a false friend, or of true and false emotions of love or hate. One may ask whether a broken line should be called a true curve, or may talk of a true gentleman, or of false that is of counterfeit money. In countless other instances, and with very various motives, one may thus transfer the predicates true and false to physical and to moral or to mathematical or to psychological objects which are not viewed as ideas or as assertions about any object. It is however no part of my present purpose to discuss the variety of such transferred meanings of the words true and false, or to define or to defend or to assail such transfers. The predicates *true* and *false* shall here be used in their natural application to ideas about objects, in so far as these ideas involve some form of affirmation or of denial regarding their objects. [7]

Now common sense does not confine itself to using merely these predicates *true* and *false* as the sole one which can be applied where the truth or falsity of assertions is in question. Common sense also knows of various other predicates which seem to be closely related to the predicates *true* and *false*, but which are not intended to be identical in meaning with these predicates. An assertion may be offered for my assent or dissent. The assertion may be an assertion that such a man (I will not here mention names) is to be the next President of the United States. Instead of saying, “This assertion is true” or “This assertion is false,” I may comment upon it by saying: “This assertion is doubtful”; “This assertion is probable”; “This assertion is very highly improbable”; or finally, “This assertion is conditionally or relatively true.” What I ordinarily mean by such comments, — by the predicate *doubtful*, *probable*, *improbable*, *more or less probable or improbable*, *relatively or conditionally true*, — what, I say, such comments and predicates mean for ordinary common sense, it is not altogether easy to define in a few words. But I call attention to these alternative predicates here, first because their relation to the predicates “true” and “false” has been, I think, too much neglected in many recent discussions of the problem as to the nature of truth [8] and secondly because the vagueness which some people appear to feel regarding the meaning of those alternative predicates, and about their relation to the predicates *true* and *false*, is responsible for the need that I myself find for using, on the present occasion, the term *absolute truth*. As you will later see, while I am quite willing to use the term “absolute truth,” and to enjoy its unpopularity, I do so with a

feeling that, as a fact, the expression is redundant. In my opinion, while there are the most varied sorts and degrees of probability and while the probability of given assertions varies in the most interesting way, with time and with the state of our experience, and with all sorts of human fortunes, there is only one sort of truth. That is to say, a perfectly determinate assertion, with a precise meaning, is to my mind just either true or false. To call it “absolutely true” finally means no more than ought to be meant by calling it “true.” And this I say with the fullest recognition of the difficulties of the problem before us, and without any desire to prejudice your own minds in advance of our further study. What the predicate *true* means is not easy to define. My assertion that I mean precisely the same by truth and by absolute truth, viewed as a property of a given perfectly determinate assertion, is meant simply as a preliminary confession of a thesis which I am going to explain in what [9] follows. I do not say that this thesis is in the least obvious or axiomatic. I have for years been familiar with the reproaches that my dear friend James heaped upon all who loved or made anything that they called absolute. And yet I insist that, as a fact, this is my thesis. I will soon tell you why. When however I mention, in this preliminary sketch, the alternative predicates *probable*, *improbable*, and the rest, I do so to hint that even an absolutist who defines truth as a predicate which has a precise and absolute meaning, and who sees no difference whatever between the predicate “true” and the predicate “absolutely true,” when these predicates are rightly applied to assertions whose meaning is precisely determinate, need not on that account fail to recognize that most of the assertions of daily life and of the sciences in so far as they deal with empirical data, are for us men only probable, just because they *are not certainly known by us to be true*. An absolutist, as I shall show you, — an absolutist of my own type, — need make no more pretense to infallibility than does any other rightly considerate person. Moreover, with James, he can recognize all those endlessly fluent variations of human experience which so often turn the confident assurances of one generation into the mere probabilities, or the improbabilities, or the errors, — perhaps into the exploded and abandoned superstitions, — of a [10] generation of men. Probability, for reasons that we shall later see, is often the most fluent and shifting of predicates. Of probability as a predicate of beliefs, can therefore be truly asserted what James asserts of the predicate truth. Probability namely *happens* to ideas and to assertions. It is an incident of their fortunes. It often waxes and wanes like the temperature of the seasons. Sometimes it abides long without notable alteration. But again it changes with the “cosmic weather.” It comes and goes. Some of the human hypotheses, some of the assertions that men make, it long favors so that, as the pragmatists say, they “work,” and proper for their time as they work, and grow fat with assurance. Then perhaps fortune changes: probability takes wings like riches, and leaves the plundered hypotheses so poor that none do them reverence. They die and are forgotten. Whoever has what James calls the dramatic temper, which James thinks characteristic of all pragmatists, and which was certainly characteristic of himself, can truthfully take all the joy that he wishes in watching the fortunes of the predicate *probable*. Why this is

true, we shall later see. And one of such dramatic temper can say, and can once more, truly say, that probability is upon one side of our life, indeed the guide of our life. Probability is the predicate applicable to a vast class of financial, of social, and of scientific propositions, — propositions [11] whereof we know not whether they are true or not. And whatever you can now say about who is to be the next President of the United States has at present, at best, only some degree of probability; and all such probabilities as you know are subject to large possible surprises before the next Presidential year. But all the while, in my opinion, these variations of probability are not variations in truth. Let X be any determinate individual man. Then for any absolutist the assertion “X will be the next President of the United States” is even now absolutely true or absolutely false. But for us men in our present state of knowledge *probable* may be the best predicate to use.

A complete theory of truth, therefore, must take account not only of the predicates “true” and “false,” but of the other predicates “probable” or “improbable.” Most of the recent confusions regarding our topic might have been avoided had this work been carefully done. I have noticed with surprise how little attention many recent writers give to the concept of probability. Meanwhile, I have suggested, in the foregoing list of predicates, another alternative predicate, namely the predicate *relatively true*, or *conditionally true*. Now here again is a predicate which, despite its somewhat technical character, common sense frequently recognizes. Thus someone might comment upon the proposition: “X will be the next President of the United States,” by saying: — “Yes that proposition is true not unconditionally but conditionally, and relatively, hypothetically, or with reference to certain possibilities. If, namely, he lives, becomes a candidate in due time, is nominated, accepts nomination, is elected, inaugurated, etc., *then* he will be next president.” I mention this somewhat unfruitful instance of so called relative truth, merely to illustrate the sort of thing that some people seem to have in mind when they oppose the absolutist. “Unfruitful [12] as this instance of relative truth is” they may say, “we have to confess that we mortals have access not to absolute truth, but only to some such relative truth as the foregoing instance suggests. Our most fruitful assertions are at best only relatively true, conditionally true. The eclipses predicted for the coming year or years, will occur, *if* the laws of nature remain uniform, *if* the computations have been correctly made, and so on. Nothing nearer the absolute than this sort of thing is knowable to us mortals. Our truth is then relative, — never absolute.”

Now if anything is meant by such relative truth as opposed to absolute truth, or, as I should also say, to simple truth, I must later attempt to discuss more at length. In this opening sketch I may simply point out in passing that an absolutist such as I am may assert, and that in fact shall assert this, viz.: — The truth of any hypothetical proposition, such as, “If A, then B,” is precisely the same in its character as the truth of any so-called categorical proposition. Whatever truth is, it does not alter its character because the assertion that is in question is long, or complex, or hard to understand, if only the whole proposition

whose truth or falsity is to be considered, when once understood, or when taken as a whole, turns out to have a precisely definite meaning. When I assert: — “If A, then B,” I do not assert A, nor yet do I assert B. Hence no question about the truth of A or the truth of B is so far before most of all. What I assert is that the antecedent A implies the consequent. For all that I so far say they might both be [13] false or both true, or the antecedent may be false and nevertheless the consequent may be true. About all that, in asserting “If A then B,” I assert nothing. Hence it does not help me much to say that, in case I can know this sort of proposition to be, B may be said to possess a peculiar sort of truth, called conditional truth, — a sort of truth, which is as such opposed to absolute truth. The whole issue regarding our knowledge of the truth of conditional propositions is this: — Can we know any of them to be true at all? If we can, then the whole proposition: “If A then B” is itself known to be not conditionally or relatively true, but true, whatever this may mean. And that truth of conditional assertions, if they are true at all, is of the same sort as the truth of categorical assertions.

One more preliminary remark is needed regarding the predicates which common sense applies to propositions. I have spoken of the predicates “probable” and “improbable.” We are all of us familiar with still another predicate, namely the predicate “certain.” Now, in my opinion, the predicate “certain” does not mean the same as the predicate “true.” “We shall win,” says the college leader sometimes to the team or to his fellows: “we shall win, that is certain.” Now often common sense, and alas, not infrequently, the philosophers, in their discussion of the meaning of truth, confuse the predicate “true” or “absolutely true” with the predicate “certain” or “absolutely certain” and hence accuse an absolutist of being a person [14] who is peculiarly prone to assert that any truths which more cautious theorists believe to be only more or less probable or improbable, are “absolutely certain.” Now an absolutist, like anybody else, should be aware that he, as an individual may feel certain of many propositions that, as they say, are in truth “not so” at all. Moreover, whatever truth is, there need be no question that “certainty” is as variable a predicate in its application to propositions as any human predicate can be. And an individual man’s “certainties” are just as much subject to criticism when he defines it in any other terms. Certainty is a predicate applicable to propositions in so far as the mind of some human being has feelings of assurance when he considers his own views about those propositions. In so far, certainty is a private affair. No assertion that is true, even if it be absolutely true, need appear certain to any individual man, unless he has the good fortune to acquire the private state of mind called certainty, regarding that assertion. And no false statement can be found so absurd that some human being may not feel perfectly certain of its truth. Certainty, like probability, comes and goes, only with more capriciousness than does the predicate “probable,” for reasons which we shall later see. For the rest, what is often called “self-evidence,” or “absolute and immediate certainty,” is a predicate of propositions which is often assigned to them because [15] a state of mind which no absolutist of any type regards as a really enlightened or enlightening state of mind. This I can say in

advance of all the rest of our discussion of truth, viz. that if any proposition about any topic in heaven or earth seems to you “self-evident,” or “immediately certain,” you may regard such self-evidence as an excellent ground for the presumption that you do not understand the so called self-evident proposition, and do not comprehend the matter that is in question, and do not yet know whether or why that proposition is true. “Self-evidence” viewed just as a state of mind practically is often a wholesale state, — a result of the play of mere instinct of blind habit. But it is never the result of wisdom. It is never the expression of enlightenment, for reasons which we shall later see, can ever be understood by us mortal in terms of mere self-evidence. And all sorts of falsities can seem self-evident to this or that individual.

Do not then confound a tendency to define truth in absolute terms with the assertion that truth is either self-evident, or otherwise, to any one man, certain. Of course whoever believes that we are reasonable beings at all, or that any proposition is true, holds that certainty and truth can be brought into some more or less close relation. But what that relations is, we have yet to see. [16]

II.

This our preliminary survey of the predicates which common sense applies to propositions has been intended to prepare the way for a more careful study of the predicates *true* and *false*. What do we mean by these predicates, in their application to the assertions, to the affirmations and denials which fill human life?

I presuppose that most if not all of you know the answers to this question which Professor James, and other representatives of Pragmatism, have in recent times propounded. A distinguished colleague has within a few weeks presented to you his own version of such answers. I am here to state my own case, and do not wish to waste your time by any unnecessary controversy. But since I must indeed mention my general relation to current discussion, there is one word here to be said about the number and range of the alternative answers to the question: What is truth? which the discussions of the last few decades contain. It is a favorite contention of some Pragmatists that their opponents are, in the main, or altogether, a set of persons who are rightly to be named absolutists, but also Intellectualists. Then the case is so stated the sole or the main alternative to Pragmatism appears to be this so called Intellectualism. I will not stop to discuss with you at length what the term [17] is said to mean. I want merely to deny, and very definitely, that my own answer to the question “What is truth” is any proper sense an intellectualist answer. Intellectualism is *not* the sole opponent of current pragmatism. That is to say, I myself do not believe that the predicate true belongs to assertions for any reasons that can be defined in terms of the so called “pure intellect.” I have earnestly asserted for many years that the so called “pure intellect” is a myth. I believe, and so far quite in harmony with recent pragmatism, that all our thinking is a part of our conduct, that the life of our intellect is always a constructive process, an activity, a fashioning of ideas, a committing of

ourselves to assertions and denials, and adjustment of ourselves to our situation, — in brief, I believe that our intellectual life is part of the expression of our will. I decline then from the start to be classified with the so-called mere intellectualists. And now this position of my own is no recent concession of a half repentant absolutist to the novel contentions of the popularly triumphant pragmatists. I expressed in print this general view about the relation of thought to activity more than twenty-five years ago. My own form of philosophical idealism has ever since been based upon it. I stated the outline of a theory of truth in the first book that I wrote. And my theory of truth [18] was then no intellectualism, and is not today. Of course what I chanced to say about this topic long ago will not interest you here: and I do not ask that it should interest you. But I confess to a certain restlessness when I hear or read this simple statement of alternatives, as if the only choice were between committing yourself to recent pragmatism, and maintaining that the predicates true and false are due to something called the pure intellect. The view that I have to state to you is in its essence a voluntaristic or activistic view of the nature and meaning of truth. It was more elaborately and very explicitly set forth more than ten years ago in my book called “The World and the Individual,” some years before the recent pragmatist movement began. And if I may preface this present restatement of my view by one more word of general observation, I will venture to say that I should have no objection to defining my own view of the nature of absolute truth as a form of Pragmatism: only that I should insist upon calling it Absolute Pragmatism. And I should not in the least admit that it is, as Mr. Schiller affirmed in 1908 at the Heidelberg Congress, a doctrine that makes or is due to certain “concessions” to recent Pragmatism. As a fact my own views about truth, in the 80’s of the last century, largely under the influence of Professor James’s own Activism, as he then held and stated the doctrine, — [19] Kant, Fichte, Schopenhauer, and Fouillée, and then only later and much less decisively Hegel, being the other influences that then most affected my thoughts. To recent Pragmatism, in so far as I understand its position, I have no concessions to make, just because I imagine that its true features were anticipated and discounted long ago, by a great many modern philosophers. To be sure I have repeatedly tried to learn from it, and I hope that I shall keep on trying. Nobody’s serious efforts to come to clearness about the truth problem ought to be unwelcome. And if I seem, to you, in these mere suggestions of controversy, to be austere or antiquated in my temper, believe me that I am merely trying to make for clearness in my own way, and am attempting to prevent misunderstandings.

III.

Our assertions, our propositions, can be true or false? But when we make assertions, what happens? I reply, some sort of will is expressed. Something is done. Our assertions are bits of conduct. I fully agree that they are part of our effort to comprehend, to make clear, to define our situation. And these efforts are made in the interest of all the rest of our conduct. Our assertions and denials are acts of

accepting or of rejecting some characterization or [20] classification, or acknowledgement or prediction of an object. In general they are *acceptances or rejections of some interpretation of our experience*. And nobody can assert more earnestly that I do that, whatever we assert or deny, it is our experience and our purposes that we are trying to interpret. Moreover, any sincere effort at interpretation has always a relation to proposed conduct. When you assert or deny that things are or that they are so or so, you are endeavoring to solve a problem that is never one of the mere copying of an indifferent fact, or a mere repetition of a world of fact which you conceive to be independent of all your purposeful relations to it. Purely theoretical truth, that is, truth having no bearing upon conceived modes of conduct, is as such an impossibility, a contradiction in terms, as is the so called pure intellect. A man lives. And as he directs his life, he becomes aware of his own conduct. And his intellectual life is that portion or aspect of his conduct which is due to his effort to clarify and direct the rest of his conduct. He clarifies and directs his conduct by interpreting his experience, and by defining his plans of action in terms of his interpretations of his experience.

So far, as I suppose, I agree with at least many of my [21] pragmatist opponents, although, in my own mind, this view is certainly not due to the recent discussions. Let me next come to closer quarters with the question: What are the special purposes that guide us in our affirmations and denials? These special purposes have always been defined as involving some sort of “correspondence” or “agreement” between our assertions and what we call their objects. We affirm or deny something about some reality, or about some present or past event, or about a content of experience, given or conceived. That about which we affirm or deny is called our object. It is said by the usual tradition about truth that when we make assertions, we intend our ideas to “agree” with their objects, or to “correspond” to them. And it is further said that the truth of our assertions consists in our success in so arranging the ideas in terms of which we characterize our objects that the required agreement or correspondence of idea and object obtains or takes place or is won. And consequently an ancient definition of truth declares it to consist in the agreement of thought or assertion or idea with the object that is in question.

You probably know at least some of the criticisms which have been passed, both by pragmatists, and by some absolutists, upon the adequacy of this definition of truth in terms of mere agreement or correspondence. That some [22] sort of correspondence or agreement of idea and object is in question, is indeed generally admitted; but the critics of the foregoing view rightly insist that the real issue is joined only when one defines, better than the foregoing abstract formula does, *what* correspondence, *what* agreement is in question. In our various efforts to characterize and to interpret our experience, very different modes, degrees, and types of correspondence or of agreement between thoughts and their objects are in question. The truth of a ledger entry viewed, as an account of a business transaction, the truth of the assertion that a given man’s portrait by a given artist is well done, the truth of the binomial theorem, the

truth of a legal opinion, or of a botanical description, or of a psychological analysis, or of a political prediction, — what different sorts of truth these seem to be, if you judge them in terms of the different types and degrees of agreement of idea and object which are in question? Whoever tries to define truth in general terms, must therefore attempt to seize upon some deep and common feature in terms of which all of these various sorts of correspondence or of agreement between idea and object are justly to be characterized.

The conditions of any such general definition of the truth-relation seem to me to depend upon a consideration which I must next emphasize, — a consideration upon which I insisted in my own first effort to define truth, in the book which I just mentioned, — a book printed in 1885. Any assertion [23] that you please, if it is somebody's sincere effort to tell the truth, is *an act which selects its own object, and which expresses, as far as it goes, its own intentions about that object, and that which also determines, from the point of view of the one who asserts, precisely the sort of correspondence with its object that is in question and that is intended*. No assertion can be declared to be true or false except with a full acceptance of the precise point of view of the one who means and who makes just that assertion and who chooses its object. If I look at a portrait, and say that it is a good portrait of a given man, you must know precisely what I have in mind when I see that portrait and precisely of whom I am thinking when I say that the portrait is good, and precisely the standard of value to which I appeal, before you can have the whole evidence, before you which enables you fully to verify or to refute just my assertion about just my object. Of course if I am an ignoramus about portrait painting (as, in fact, I am), and if you are an expert of a portrait painter you may think that my judgment about such things is worthless for anybody but myself. But that view of yours about me, a view which itself may be perfectly true, does not suffice to refute the assertion that I make about the [24] portrait of which I am mindful; for I make assertions about the object about which I intend to make assertions. I can sincerely judge about no other objects. And until you fully take into account of just my interpretation of just my object, as I select and define the object, and, as I mean and define my interpretation of it, you cannot have before you the evidence that, in my assertion, I am failing to accomplish what I myself am intending and undertaking. My assertion is my own venture. You must judge me by my own intent.

So far then, everybody is the definer and asserter of precisely what he himself intends to define and assert. And his account of his object has or fails to have truth according to whether or not it has just that sort, that form, that degree of agreement with its object which he himself intends it to possess when he selects and defines that object. Nobody can set the truth standard for another man *unless*, — and here is precisely the centrally important condition of all fair criticism, — unless the critic fully shares, fully takes over, and assumes, the precise intentions of the thinker who is criticized. I myself aim to get this thought of mine into some sort of correspondence with some determinate object. This is what happens

whenever I judge. I select the object. I define it as far as I do define it. I intend to agree with it in a way which my intent predetermines, and which no truth-standard which I have not by own choice made my [25] own can possibly be set for me from without.

So far the truth appears, and is, a thoroughly democratic affair. You can make assertions about no objects which are not your own objects. They become your own objects in so far as you intend them to be your own objects. Your will, your choice, defines what you intend, precisely in so far as your assertion expresses your deliberate opinion. And what agreement you intend your ideas to have with their objects, it is yours to define and assert. And whoever judges your success in getting at truth or in avoiding error must judge you by your own standards.

But now what are your standards? In terms of what ideals of truth do you define your own ideas and assertions? Here I can only just now sketch your situation in general terms, and must for the moment leave you to verify my sketch, as well as you can, for yourself. Remember, however, that I am here only attempting to characterize your ideals as a truth seeker. I am not talking about your certainties but about your ideals. Your assertions are, in general, I have said, a part of your conduct. Now why do you make assertions? Why do you intend, define, characterize, interpret, seek to know, objects at all? On the whole, — and I am here speaking quite tentatively and empirically, — I [26] may fairly suppose that you do all this because you have not just now, all the insight and all the satisfaction that you want. Or again, as I may say, you have not the hold upon experience that you desire. You are seeking (and here again I agree with the pragmatists), — a control that at the moment you do not possess. You are using your assertions to guide your conduct. Because you judge your objects thus or so you are disposed to act thus or so about it. Or again because you need guidance in conduct in order to set the results that you want, you try at any moment to define for yourself your ideas and to make your assertions about your object true. In seeking for truth you seek then for the right guidance of your conduct. And of course the right guidance is, for you, just that guidance which you, with your intents, purposes, interests, then and there demand, as the guidance which, if right, will lead you to do what you want and intend.

I hope that this sketch will show you how completely relative to your own purposes, intents, definitions, interests, desires, and active concerns, your ideal of truth in my opinion must indeed be. What room, you may say, what room does this account leave for any conception of absolute truth? I answer, it is precisely this reference to your own intentions, interests, and conduct which is best expressed for you by a definition of your ideal of truth in absolute terms. [27] This is what I want to show you. The whole affair is of the simplest character, but is today deeply and almost constantly misinterpreted. What is your view, as an active being about the nature of your conduct? If you do anything whatever, what is it which your deed accomplishes? What ideal of your own life as a being who acts governs all your special ideals? What is your own notion of the nature of a deed? Remember, I am still not here expounding a metaphysic.

I am not now talking of certainties at all. I am asking you simply to note a certain character that you in ideal attribute to your acts, whenever you conceive your acts as real acts.

Whoever does anything whatever, and intends to do it, supposes that he thereby *gets something done*. How commonplace this observation seems! Yet I am not here propounding this statement as the statement of a self-evident proposition. I am simply calling your attention to a certain ideal of what conduct is, — an ideal which is so practical, so common sense, and yet so deep and full of meaning, that everybody who is indeed a person of a decisive character lives in the light of this ideal, while, in my own opinion the whole fabric of the exact sciences depends upon understanding what this ideal means. I repeat, whoever intentionally acts, *proposes to get something done*, — that is, he proposes to [28] accomplish, in each of his deeds, something that from his own point of view is to be henceforth simply *irrevocable*. Indecisive and untrustworthy people can indeed make plausible promises to which, as the phrase is, “a string is tied,” so that they hope to withdraw their promises at pleasure. But men of decisive wills, however careless they may be about their promises, act in the light of the ideal principle *that what is once done cannot be undone*. However it may be with men’s promises, to your individual deeds, as you conceive them, no string can be attached. Once done they are yours no longer. To conceive your deeds thus is involved in willing to do them. You cannot say: — I *will* that this which I have done shall no longer be my deed. I can wish that I had not done something that I have done. But to wish is not to will. I assert this principle, at present, not as a self-evident principle which I at this point require you to accept as itself absolutely certain. I only point out that the ideal postulate according to which this is the real nature of action, is a postulate in terms of which action itself gets for us some of its deepest values. What would be the value of acting if a deed once done could suddenly be undone at pleasure? The irrevocableness of your deeds may of course sometimes appear to us as a sad fate: —

“The moving finger writes, and, having writ

Writes on. Not all your piety or wit

Can lure back to cancel half a line.

[29] Not all your tears wash out a word of it.”

Yes; but suppose that it is *my* moving finger that writes. Suppose that what I write are the chosen deeds of my life. Suppose that I intend them, and mean them as mine. Then, as the moving finger writes on, conceive in ideal that I am all the while coming to my own. I am winning what I can no longer lose. I am building my sure foundation. What I have done, so I say, is mine. Nobody shall take it away from me. It is my accomplishment: my treasury of deeds. My past is the safest of storehouses. Of course I cannot enjoy the safety of this ideal treasure house without accepting the consequences of viewing my life thus. But, on the other hand, no view of life is more practically useful, for people who have wills at all, than just this belief in the absolutely irrevocable nature of all our deeds. This view makes life for the first time

real to one who in childhood for the first time comes to the consciousness that whatever he has once done, he can never undo that. Surely the “dramatic temper” needs just this ideal as to what life is in order to make voluntary life appear truly and not fantastically dramatic. This life of ours is one in which they do not murder in jest, poison in jest, do loving deeds for naught, make and unmake as in a dream. [30] When we act we believe that we get deeds done: and that is why we can be content to sleep a little when the days work is over, because our little accomplishments of the day are in any case safe. So much is completed. We can never have the trouble and responsibility of doing this day’s work over again. This we can recall, and sleep. And if the sleep is death, still life itself has been, as we conceive, an indestructible accomplishment of deeds. Now, as we thus naturally view our voluntary life, no truth can be mentioned that seems to us more absolute, than in this supposed truth that deeds once done cannot be undone. In any case, whether rightly or wrongly, we all do conceive that in reality our life is of this character; and so to conceive life is useful for the formation of every clear sense of personal identity, responsibility, and effectiveness.

Without here inquiring further whether this postulate is indeed wholly unquestionable, let us for the time being simply accept the postulate, to see to what further ideal it leads us regarding the nature of truth. Let us see namely, in what sort of relation to our postulate the truth of our assertions about any object that interests us inevitably stands. I am interested in certain objects. I judge that they are such and such. Why do I make such judgments [31] at all? Because I want my conduct to be guided by my judgments. My judgments are assertions that undertake to guide me. They tell me in essence this: — “Since the object that interests you is thus and thus to be characterized, you are to act thus and so.” Suppose that I follow my judgment. Well then I act. I do something. This deed, however, is, according to the foregoing postulate, something irrevocable. Once done, it is, as I conceive, beyond undoing. Now, in conceiving it as thus irrevocable, I conceive it as possessed of its own little part in a system of indestructible real values. It either was what, in view of my purposes, I willed or meant to accomplish, or it was not. If it was not, then the assertion, the judgment, the opinion in the light of which I undertook that deed, was in so far a mistake. If the judgment was right, then I interpreted my object so that in acting according to my judgment I did what I meant to do. In that case my assertion was just in so far right. Now just as the irrevocable deed remains something that I can never undo, so, in case this irrevocable deed is a failure to meet my own purpose, the mistaken opinion that expressed itself by requiring me to do just that deed remains forever and irrevocably and absolutely a mistake, — a mistake, of course, from *my own* point of view, and with every reference to *my* choice and *my* inter- [32] est, — but none the less a mistake whose character is as incapable of being removed from the unchangeable deed, as the deed is incapable of being undone. And precisely so, if my deed, directed by my own judgments, accomplishes what I meant it to accomplish, then the truth of the judgment that guided me to this success is indeed through and through

relative to my interests, but is also as absolutely irrevocable a character of the opinion that guided me as my deed itself, thus guided to success, is irrevocable.

Common sense often expresses this by the maxim: — “There is a right way and a wrong way to do everything.” The maxim appears to be a commonplace. But it is not barren. Set your will upon whatever you choose. Then turn to your real world for objects wherewith to express your will. You hereupon judge the objects to be such and such. You therefore adjust your acts to them thus and thus. Now each deed is but a small part of your whole adjustment; a success in doing what you so far and just then have intended, or else a failure to do what you have intended. And, precisely so, the judgment that has guided you to each individual deed, just because it has counselled this one irrevocable act, — yes just because it is itself an irrevocable act of self guidance, — must remain for all time either a success or a failure in self guidance, a hit or a miss in the form of [33] ideas, as the deed which it counsels is a hit or a miss in the form of a more or less external expression of your ideas in outer actions.

If your deeds are irrevocable, each one of them is an irrevocable success or failure as an expression of so much of your intent as it has undertaken to express. And if your deed, as a voluntary deed, has been guided by an idea, that is by an assertion, about objects, then this idea is as irrevocably responsible for its share of the success or failure of the deed which it has guided, as the deed itself is irrevocably its own expression of such a guidance.

Let us go back to our former definition of truth. My judgment is true if it so characterizes and interprets my chosen object as I myself, selecting that object, really intend to have that object interpreted and characterized. But I myself, as a voluntary agent, want to interpret my object so as to be guided by my interpretation to the deeds that my point of view duly express my will. If my idea of the object, if my assertion, guides me to what I intend to accomplish when I think of my object, my judgment is therefore in just so far, and from my point of view, true, — otherwise false. But every deed of mine is an irrevocable hit or miss in the expression of my will. Presumably in so far, then, as my deeds, when done, are such that they cannot be undone, and precisely in so far as they [34] are voluntary deeds that have been due to the guidance of my opinions, my opinions, in so far as they have guided me to just those deeds, are as irrevocably true or false, are as irrevocably guides to success or guides to failure as my deeds themselves, once done, are unchangeable.

All this, I insist, is precisely as true as is that postulate of irrevocability of deeds once done, — the postulate which I am here assuming. That postulate, for the moment, I here take as an ideally interesting and valuable assertion about deeds. I do not now call it certain. I do insist that it is prodigiously useful in giving sense, coherency, decisiveness, to all the ideal of our life. Now precisely as useful is the ideal of the absoluteness of truth which have just defined in terms of this ideal. Every assertion is true or false according as it does or does not guide the one who asserts it to deeds which

successfully express his genuine will. But since each and every deed is individual, is irrevocable, and once done is unchangeable as a hit or a miss, as a won or a lost opportunity, as a deed in place or not in place, — every assertion, once made, and so determinately formulated as to guide to the choice of these and these acts, is an unchangeably and absolutely true or false to its own intent, as the deed to which it guides is irrevocable. Here is our postulate of the absolute- [35] ness of the truth or falsity of every assertion whose sense that is whose guidance is determinate. This postulate expresses, so far in our discussion, just an ideal regarding the business of assertions. This ideal is that it is indeed their business to guide us to the expression of our purposes. And, further, this ideal is that they either do this their business or do not, — that they give us a right guidance or else a wrong guidance, precisely in so far as it expresses itself in deeds which once done are never afterwards to be undone.

And now what is the use of having this ideal of the absolutely true or false character of each determinate guidance such as an assertion gives us? I reply, — the use of this ideal is before you when I state the ideal, and when I thus link it with the practical postulate of the irrevocable character of each act. Whoever is guided by this ideal says, in each assertion: “I shall pass this way no more. Never again shall I have this deed to do. Once done, it belongs to the absolute reality, and embodies unchangeable and individual success or failure in just this instance. Hence I want, I intend, I propose, I demand a guidance from my ideas that shall be as absolute as the deed is in essence irrevocable. [36] There is just no other question before us as to whether such absolute guidance is accessible enough, I want it. I try to get it. I estimate my ideas by comparison with that standard. And what do I thus gain? Coherency, sense, seriousness, unity, the sense of order and responsibility, — yes and the satisfaction of my “dramatic temper” as I survey life. For thus conceiving my ideas, I conceive that something critical and positive happens at every moment of my life as a thinker. I conceive that my ideas have indeed business and that they win or lose, fail or conquer, — and do so, in each moment of their activity. Life is no mere wandering from one joy or sorrow to another feeling more. It becomes a struggle for something that is each time lost or won, attained or not attained. It is new in each deed. It is unchangeably in the possession of the treasures that have once become its own. Let anybody who has ever tried to train an office boy, or to save a soul, or to choose a task in life, or to think clearly, about anything, or to live loyally, let any such person decide whether such an ideal of the right way and the wrong way of doing as ways once for all absolutely different in each individual case, and in view of each individual will, is not indeed a most useful ideal, — useful to the office boy because it sets him to choosing faithfully, — useful in every [37] calling in life because it means just clearness, and good faith and decisiveness. People talk of the abstractness of the absolute. But is anything more concrete or more absolute than a decisive deed?