

Introduction to
The Nature and Accessibility of Absolute Truth
Harrison Lectures 1911

Historical Context

Josiah Royce (1855-1916) delivered the Harrison Lectures in February 1911 at the University of Pennsylvania.¹ Originally, the Harrison Lectures were intended to continue the “battle of the absolute” in the form of a debate between Royce, the leading American proponent of absolute idealism, and William James, the popularizer of pragmatism and a critic of absolutism. After the death of James on 26 August 1910, the “battle of the absolute” came to an end before the two friends could have their final debate. As a result, the Harrison Lectures were reimagined as a presentation on the problem of truth from competing perspectives. John Dewey agreed to present the instrumentalist position on truth in a series of three lectures, *The Problem of Truth*, which were delivered in December 1910; and Royce followed with his series of three lectures, *On the Nature and Accessibility of Absolute Truth*. Hence, the occasion was no longer a debate, and whether Royce was even aware of the contents of Dewey’s lecture is unlikely. Regardless, Royce was familiar with Dewey’s instrumentalism and probably could anticipate his objections because of Dewey’s vocal opposition to Royce’s absolutism the previous decade.

Dewey’s public criticism of Royce’s absolutism began with a review of the first series of *The World and the Individual* in 1900 and continued with a review of the second series in 1902.² The crux of Dewey’s criticism concerns the passage from the third to the fourth conception of being, or the transition from Kant’s critical rationalism to Royce’s absolute idealism. According to Dewey, a misinterpretation of critical rationalism occurs because Royce equivocates reality, validity, and possible experience, a set of terms between which Kant precisely distinguishes. The critical rationalist, according to Royce, identifies reality with the abstractly general, and abstract generality with the merely possible, and mere possibility with valid ideas. The internal meaning of an idea is thus the abstract generality signified in its purpose, and its external meaning is the concrete particularity in which that purpose is fulfilled. As a consequence, validity is ambiguous. On the one hand, an idea is valid if it intends a general purpose that holds for possible experience; and yet, on the other hand, the test of validity is whether the general purpose an idea intends is

¹ For a discussion on the background and themes of the Harrison Lectures see Clendenning, John. *The Life and Thought of Josiah Royce*. Nashville & London, Vanderbilt University Press 1999: 325-328.

² Dewey, John. ‘The World and the Individual by Josiah Royce’ in *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 9, no. 3. Duke University Press, May 1900: 311-324. ‘The World and the Individual by Josiah Royce’ in *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 11, no. 4. Duke University Press, July 1902: 392-407. For a brief discussion of these two reviews, see Clendenning 1999: 268-270.

empirically verifiable in actual experience. But, since the actual experiences of a finite consciousness are partial and fragmentary, no purpose is ever completely fulfilled; and consequently, reality, on the critical rationalist's account, must therefore remain incomplete. To avoid this consequence, Royce argues that critical rationalism requires supplementation: We must suppose there is an infinite consciousness for whom the purpose intended by each idea is completely fulfilled, such that the internal meaning of every idea corresponds perfectly with its external meaning; a correspondence that a finite consciousness can only experience partially. Only then would an idea qualify as valid, and only the totality of every valid idea within an infinite consciousness could preserve the possible experience of a complete reality that each finite consciousness experiences as incomplete in actuality.

The actual but partial experiences of every finite consciousness, according to Royce, suppose a merely possible but complete experience of an infinite consciousness that constitutes the absolute reality within which each finite consciousness is a momentary perspective. Such a resolution, Dewey responds, depends on a separation of possible from actual experience that is completely foreign to critical rationalism. The critical rationalist, according to Dewey, regards reality as the phenomenal content of sensation, mediated by ideas, which are not directly experienceable, but are supposable as valid only on the assumption that they might refer to a possible experience *actualizable in sensation*. Consequently, the critical rationalist's position concerns "only a construction of the present," within which there is an empirical synthesis of actual and possible experiences — or sensations and valid ideas — for a finite consciousness, and therefore, "*the present apart from such construction* is, in turn, meaningless."³ The infinite consciousness, and absolute reality, is thus not a necessary supposition because actual and possible experiences, the external and internal meaning of ideas, are not rigidly separated by the critical rationalist but are each an aspect subject to the present synthetic activity of a single yet finite consciousness. Furthermore, since absolute reality is the totality of ideas validated in the actual experiences of every finite consciousness, then it must be valid for each finite consciousness or it cannot be valid for the infinite consciousness. Yet, then, there is no need to posit the infinite consciousness, since validity would occur within the limits of finite consciousness. Since Royce presupposes that finite consciousness is too fragmentary to completely test for this validity, then Royce assumes, by definition, the necessity of an absolute reality. Therefore, not only does Royce

³ Dewey 1900: 320.

beg the question, but his putative solution also leads to contradiction: No finite consciousness is sufficient to establish validity for itself, but is so sufficient to establish validity from the perspective of the infinite consciousness.

Dewey suggests, rather than devise a more coherent conception of the absolute, we ought to reject Royce's presupposition that finite consciousness is unable to establish validity for itself. What we require instead is a "reconsideration of the facts of struggle, disappointment, change, consciousness of limitation, which will show them, as they actually are experienced by us (not by something called Absolute) to be significant, worthy, and helpful."⁴ What, in other words, is meaningfully valid (or true) for a consciousness with finite, but not hopeless, limitations; and not a meaningless validity (or truth) for an absolute whose experience is not, and cannot be, ours. Royce did not directly respond to Dewey's criticism, but he must have been aware of his and similar objections. For in the ensuing decade, Royce would more clearly focus on the practicality and accessibility, indeed the logical necessity, of absolute truth and reality for each and every finite consciousness in the face of struggle, disappointment, change, and limitation — including the pragmatist. A pivotal essay, in this regard, is the 1904 keynote address, *The Eternal and the Practical*, to the American Philosophical Association.⁵ Besides offering incisive criticism of the "pure" pragmatism common to James, Dewey, and Schiller, — arguing that their theory of truth is circular and self-refuting, — the essay attempts to relate truth to conduct, and determine how far knowledge is an expression of our practical needs.

The pragmatist argues that thinking is the active response of a rational organism to the demands of their present situation to satisfy some practical need; and therefore, is a type of purposive conduct, which aims to recognize, control, and thereby overcome, limitation, change, disappointment, and struggle. Royce agrees with the pragmatist insofar as he regards thinking as both volitional and practical, — and even recounts his early pragmatic commitments prior to his absolutism,⁶ — but argues that once the problem passes from thinking to truth, no theorist can

⁴ Dewey 1900: 323.

⁵ Royce, Josiah, 'The Eternal and the Practical' in *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 13, no. 2. Duke University, March 1904: 113-142. For an online version, see <http://royce-edition.iupui.edu/online-royce-articles/>. For a brief discussion of the address, see Clendenning 1999: 286-287.

⁶ Contrary to Dewey's criticism, Royce held the central tenets of pure pragmatism at least since 1881. Royce 1904: 117. "I still am of the opinion that judging is an activity guided by essentially ethical motives. I still hold that, for any truth-seeker, the object of his belief is also the object of his will to believe. I still contend that the truth cannot possibly be conceived as a merely external object, which we passively accept, and by which we are merely moulded. I still maintain that every intelligent soul, however confused or weak, recognizes no truth except the truth to whose making

remain a *pure* pragmatist. For the pure pragmatist, truth is simply this satisfaction of some practical need by the purposive conduct of an individual rational organism: Whatever presently satisfies such a need is true, whatever does not is false. But, what if we apply this criterion of truth to pure pragmatism itself: Does the proponent believe that pure pragmatism is true simply because this theory satisfies presently some practical need? If so, then pure pragmatism is true only in that moment and for that theorist; and cannot prove whether any competing theory, such as absolutism, is false because this would entail only that absolutism does not satisfy *their* needs at *this* moment. The question is thus left open whether pure pragmatism is false and absolutism true for any other rational organism according to their needs at the present moment. If not, then pure pragmatism requires modification.

Of course, even pure pragmatists must concede their theory requires modification. For, in advancing the theory of truth, pure pragmatists do not merely intend to claim that the theory only satisfies needs at certain moments; but that the theory *ought* to satisfy the needs of their fellows, and not momentarily, but *ought* to serve as a standard to evaluate every moment. Pure pragmatists, in other words, advance their theory of truth because they think that their fellows *ought* to agree with them. If they dispute this claim, then pure pragmatists would contradict themselves: For they must then say that others *ought not* agree, that the theory *ought not* to serve as a standard for every moment, and *ought not* satisfy the needs of their fellows — all of which are claims that transcend the restriction to the present satisfaction of individual needs. To modify their theory, pure pragmatists must therefore admit that truth is not merely the present satisfaction of an individual need, but a normative ideal, which guides, and may thus satisfy, the practical need for *social* agreement. Namely, truth is a property of those propositions which are purported as valid generally for the assertor and all the selves which ought to agree; and consequently, each of them are “partial functions in a process whose unity is subject to one rule, the ought of the truth-seeking activity.”⁷ This ought signifies precisely what the pure pragmatist cannot admit, that truth transcends the

and to whose constitution it even now contributes, - no truth except that which genuinely embodies its own present purpose. I earnestly insist that knowledge is action, although knowledge is also never mere action. I fully accept the position that the judgment which I now make is a present reaction to a present empirically given situation, a reaction expressing my need to get control over the situation, whatever else my judgment may also express. I fully accept the position that the world of truth is not now a finished world and is now in the act of making.” See also Royce, Josiah. ‘Kant’s Relation to Modern Philosophic Progress’ in *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, vol. 15, no. 4. Penn State University Press, October 1881: 360-381. For an online version, see <http://royce-edition.iupui.edu/online-royce-articles/>. Royce therein states his early pragmatic commitments and also offers an interpretation of Kant similar to that of Dewey in his first and second reviews, despite the charge of misinterpretation levied at Royce.

⁷ Royce 1904: 136.

partial perspective of our purposive conduct and its momentary needs and manifests itself only in the higher self of the community. But, is there a higher self with a more complete perspective? There must, Royce concludes, for all we have done is multiply the number of partial perspectives with momentary needs: In order to satisfy the practical need for social agreement, and thereby establish the practical basis of our truth-seeking activity, we need a supratemporally eternal and all-inclusive perspective to which our individual and communal selves ought to loyally strive to conform.

To remain a pragmatist, Royce concludes, the theorist must forgo *pure* for *absolute* pragmatism. Thus, the argument of *The Eternal and the Practical* offers a defense of absolute truth and reality from a consideration of our practical needs as truth-seekers in the face of struggle, disappointment, change, and limitation; but, the essay explains neither how that truth and reality is accessible to us, nor the logical necessity. As regards the latter, Royce attempts to prove the logical necessity of absolute truth and reality in the 1908 address, *The Problem of Truth in Light of Recent Discussion*, to the Congress of Philosophy at Heidelberg, where the pragmatist theory of truth was the dominant topic of discussion.⁸ Royce there identifies three recent perspectives on truth, that of instrumentalism, individualism, and the theories of modern logic. Regarding instrumentalism, Royce offers the same type of criticism outlined above: The instrumentalist theory of truth entails relativism, which, once applied, becomes self-refuting. Whereas the individualist, typified by James, advances a criteria of truth in terms of our immediate experience as living and willing individual agents. Yet the individualist still believes in facts which transcend such experience; and, since we cannot, as mere individuals living and willing within the confines of our immediate experience, verify these facts — such as the reality of other minds and a reality external to ourselves — the individualist cannot consistently maintain that we are justified in believing them even on “credit” because their “cash value” is not redeemable in immediate experience. To avoid such relativism and subjectivism, Royce therefore turns to the theories of modern mathematical logic, which he believes, once properly understood, will lead to a synthesis of voluntarism and absolutism, pragmatism and constructive idealism — namely, an absolute pragmatism.

⁸ Royce, Josiah. ‘The Problem of Truth in Light of Recent Discussion’ in *Bericht über den III. Internationalen Kongress für Philosophie zu Heidelberg*. Heidelberg, Carl Winter’s Universitätsbuchhandlung 1909: 62-93. For an online version, see <http://royce-edition.iupui.edu/online-royce-articles/>. For a brief discussion of the address, see Clendenning 1999: 307-309

As in *The Eternal and the Practical*, Royce outlines the points of agreement between him and the instrumentalist: Namely, that thinking is purposive conduct and truth is a practical, and not merely an intellectual, affair. Concerning individualism, Royce also agrees that truth is immanent to the living and willing experiences of a finite consciousness. Contrary to instrumentalism and individualism, Royce claims that there are absolutely true propositions, the denial of which leads to their reaffirmation: Such as, for example, the denial of absolute truth is asserted as an absolute truth itself. The affirmation in denial of absolute truth is already to *will* the eternal as that to which our conduct must eventually conform in practice. A similar case in mathematical logic is the distinction between affirmation and denial — the denial of which merely reaffirms the distinction — and, as a corollary, the doing and not doing of a deed — since to not do a deed is itself a deed, while doing a deed cannot be undone. Royce characterizes such absolute truths as collectively forming the absolute context that sustains, and within which significance is made possible for, our living and willing activity. For these are not mere frustrations of our purposes, but discoveries to which our purposes must conform if we are to preserve the laws of logic that guide our conduct to the satisfaction of our needs; and whose very denial always leads to their eventual reaffirmation in practice.

To take a recent example, consider Gödel's incompleteness theorem: Deny that no consistent system of axioms set by algorithmic procedure is capable of proving all truths about the natural numbers, and still some truths will remain unprovable; or deny some truths are unprovable, and discover that no consistent system of axioms set by algorithmic procedure is capable of proving all truths about the natural numbers. This is not a mere frustration of the practical needs of some inquirer, but the discovery of an absolute truth we cannot willfully deny without reaffirming in our conduct. Thus even if all truths are relative to the practical needs of truth-seekers and for the living and willing experiences of every such finite consciousness, Royce concludes, these truths for those living and willing experiences are still subject to logical conditions which are themselves absolute; and, without which our living and willing activity could not retain its significance nor our practical needs attain satisfaction. There are absolute truths, in other words, and consequently an absolute reality to which they refer, which are indeed logically necessary for every finite consciousness in the face of struggle, disappointment, change, and limitation. All that remains is to explain how this absolute truth and reality is accessible to us, an explanation Royce will attempt to supply in the Harrison Lectures while continuing to expand upon the practical utility

and logical necessity of an absolute truth and reality for every such living and willing finite consciousness.

Manuscript

The first two Harrison Lectures are in Harvard Archives Royce Papers (HARP) Box 83, in manuscript and typescript copies, and the third lecture is in HARP Box 85 along with additional typescript copies of the first and second lecture and two undated documents. The first lecture, *The Nature and the Use of Absolute Truth*, is the first and third document in HARP Box 83 and the third document in HARP Box 85. The first document is a seventy-three page manuscript with no handwritten insertions, except the addition by E.F. Wells of '48' on page 49 to correct a pagination error by Royce. The third document in HARP Box 83 is a thirty-seven page typescript with a manuscript insertion on page 11; while the third document in HARP Box 85 is the same thirty-seven page typescript, except for a handwritten paragraph inserted on the final page. The second lecture, *Theoretical and Practical Truth*, is the second and fourth document in HARP Box 83 and the fourth document in HARP Box 85. The second document is a forty-nine page manuscript, heavily edited with handwritten insertions by Royce, and pages 22 through 31 renumbered. The fourth document in HARP Box 83 is a twenty-seven page typescript with minor edits of handwritten insertions and underlining by Royce. The fourth document in HARP Box 85 is a thirty-eight page text, the first twenty-seven pages are typescript interspersed with manuscript insertions, and the last eleven pages are manuscript. The third lecture, *The Accessibility of Absolute Truth*, is the fifth and final document of HARP Box 83. The fifth document is a twenty-seven page typescript and edited with handwritten insertions by Royce.⁹

Harrison Lectures 1911

The first lecture, *The Nature and Use of Absolute Truth*, proposes to consider the ordinary and scientific utility of absolute truth as an ideal, why this ideal is so useful, and how that ideal is accessible to us. To clarify the meaning of the phrase 'absolute truth,' Royce first considers the use of the adjectives 'true' and 'false' in ordinary language. Commonly, the adjectives 'true' and 'false' are used to specify properties belonging to propositions insofar as they refer to their objects. Royce proposes to follow ordinary language in this regard, and restricts his analysis to this

⁹ All the information on the manuscript is in Oppenheim's Comprehensive Index, in Boxes 1-98 of the Folio Volumes. See <http://royce-edition.iupui.edu/docu/index.pdf>, pp. 670-672.

common usage. There is a second set of adjectives commonly applied to propositions in ordinary language, namely, ‘doubtful,’ ‘probable’ or ‘improbable,’ ‘conditionally’ or ‘relatively true,’ and ‘certain.’ Royce believes this second set is often neglected in discussions on truth, and that such neglect distorts the genuine meaning of the phrase ‘absolute truth.’ For once we admit this second set, the phrase ‘absolute truth’ appears redundant: As any absolutely true (or false) proposition is merely a proposition which is true (or false) *simpliciter*. Whereas, for example, a probable (or improbable) proposition does not specify a property that belongs to the proposition *in itself* but signifies the epistemic status that proposition has *for us*. Suppose that ‘ x will be F ’ is a future contingent. According to the absolutist, insofar as this proposition has a determinate meaning, and therefore, a precise truth-value, that proposition is either true or false *simpliciter*. Since, for us, the proposition has an indeterminate meaning, — or a *vagueness* because, prior to the actual occurrence of that event, either x is or is not F is supposable — and therefore, an imprecise truth-value, either alternative is more or less probable for us, but is in itself either true or false and not both.

The phrase ‘absolute truth’ and the adjective ‘true,’ Royce concludes, signify the same *logical* property that may belong to any determinate proposition; whereas, ‘probable’ and ‘improbable’ specify an *epistemic* relation to propositions whose meaning, and therefore, precise truth-value, are indeterminately known by us. But what of the other adjectives in the second set? A critic may respond that propositions of the form ‘If x is F then G ’ are true only in a conditional or relative sense; namely, if the conditions necessary for x to qualify as an F are met, only then would G follow. This confuses grammatical with logical form. For we can reduce a conditional to a conjunctive proposition: Namely, ‘If x is F then G ’ is true just in case it is false that the antecedent is true and the consequent false. Of course, for us we may not know the precise truth-value of the antecedent or consequent; but the conditional itself is either true or false *simpliciter* according to logical conditions which are themselves absolute. Perhaps, a critic would respond that we cannot have any *certainty* whether such a conditional will be true or false *simpliciter* and that every such proposition is therefore *doubtful*. Royce responds that this has no bearing upon the logical conditions of conditional propositions, nor that every such proposition is either true or false: For the adjectives ‘certain’ and ‘doubtful’ specify our *psychological* feelings of assurance concerning a proposition, which is just as variable as its relative probability, but does not affect the *logical* properties of truth and falsity *simpliciter*.

The adjectives of the second set specify either *epistemic* or *psychological* relations, or are otherwise reducible to the *logical* properties of propositions themselves, which are absolute in nature and dependent upon conditions which are also. But what is the practical utility of such properties and conditions in human life? Royce's answer begins with a reaffirmation of his decades-long pragmatic commitments, but in the context of his distinctive absolutism: Thinking is purposive conduct, and truth is an expression of our practical needs; but our truth-seeking conduct, as a practical activity, *wills* the eternal as the absolute context within which such conduct has any significance at all. To assert a proposition is to will a deed, while asserting a proposition as true is to willfully propose a general type of conduct that we *ought* to perform a certain type of deed. Such a proposal is an intention, and the intention selects an object, and if the proposition is true, then the intention ought to correspond with the object, and therefore, the purported conduct ought to match the expected deed. Once done, that deed is irrevocable. For every deed done cannot willfully be undone. Therefore, every purported conduct that fails to match its expected deed, and so, every intention which fails to correspond to its object, *always* and *irrevocably* fails; conversely, every successful match or correspondence *always* and *irrevocably* succeeds. Our irrevocable deeds, whether successes or failures, are thus forever written on the scoreboard of eternity. This is merely another way to say that every proposition is either true or false *simpliciter*. Hence, the practicality of absolute truth as an ideal, whether in ordinary or scientific activity, consists in the guidance that ideal affords to direct conduct toward successful deeds and avoid error. An ideal as concretely useful and accessible as the practical maxim, 'There is a right way and a wrong way to do everything.'

The second lecture, *Theoretical and Practical Truth*, reviews the results of the preceding lecture, expands upon the nature, use, and value of absolute truth as an ideal that guides conduct, and then considers how this theory differs with the pragmatism of James. To appreciate that difference, Royce will consider the theoretical and practical aspects of truth. The preceding lecture denies there is a *pure* intellect, and therefore, rejects that anything is *purely* theoretical. Indeed, the first lecture explicitly states that all thinking is volitional and every true proposition is a counsel that guides our conduct toward successful deeds and avoids error. This is the practical aspect of truth. Royce will now consider the theoretical aspect of thinking and thus truth; but both aspects are inseparably apart of the thinking-process and hence our truth-seeking conduct. A theory, according to Royce, is the general portrayal of a system of propositions and relations among them,

such that certain properties are logically deducible from these. Now, truth is the determinate relation a proposition stands to its object and, according to its practical aspect, this relation depends upon the decisive will of the assertor to intend certain relations rather than others as a part of their purported conduct. Insofar as propositions are arrangeable into systematic order, consequences are logically deducible from them if assumed true. Thus, every proposition has a theoretical as well as a practical aspect. Royce's contention is that the pragmatism of James, and similar perspectives, cannot satisfactorily account for this theoretical aspect of truth.

The pragmatist theory of truth often relies on certain sayings, such as 'an idea is true if it agrees with its expected workings.' The problem with this and other such sayings is that they are far too vague to adequately capture the significance of truth. An expectation is a more or less definite psychological state, but most often a capricious mood; while the workability of something radically varies depending on the instrument and problem in need of solution. What truth requires is a *decisive counsel*, and not a mere expectation, and that counsel is not simple workability but the entailment of a *determinate deed* that ought be done. The theoretical aspect of truth therefore concerns its *logical* implications, and not its psychological expectations or workability, nor a physical workability. Of course, implications are a matter of deduction; thus, the theoretical aspect of truth requires a logically precise understanding of deduction and its role in the evaluation of theories. Such a precise understanding pragmatism either neglects or cannot satisfactorily appreciate with its vague criteria of truth. The principles of Newtonian mechanics are not true because they "work," even less so because they "worked" for Newton himself. These principles are true because other propositions are logically deducible from them, which give decisive counsel to the physicist that entails determinate deeds, which aid physical research. Some deeds led to irrevocable successes, others to irrevocable errors, but in either case, theoretical progress was made because of the decisive counsel propositions and their logical implications gave to the physicist in terms of determinate deeds done (or not done) irrevocably and forever.

Such a criteria of truth in terms of a decisive counsel that logically entails a set of determinate deeds cannot, as the pragmatism of James and similar perspectives contend, consist in an event nor in a series of events. For such deeds are logical entailments of a general type of purported conduct, and therefore, will always exhaust the number of events in which those deeds are actually fulfilled. If 'all x 's are F 's' is the decisive counsel, and the class O is the set of determinate deeds entailed, then no actual series of events will ever exhaust the number of deeds

which *O* proscribes as ought to occur. Suppose the proposition is ‘If all *x*’s are men, then we ought to observe mortality.’ This proposition means for *every* actual *or* possible *x* that *x* is a man and will be observably mortal, even if there are some *x*’s we cannot now nor ever will have an opportunity to observe. Therefore, the event of our observing that an *x* is a man, which is observably mortal, nor any number of such events, could exhaust the determinate deeds entailed from the truth of that decisive counsel. Instead, every such proposition entails an ideal unity of events signifying a whole course of life that both *is* in some instances and *would be* for many others, and thus *supratemporally* holds for an indefinite number of actual and possible events.

The third and final lecture, *The Accessibility of Absolute Truth*, addresses how absolute truth and reality is accessible to us finite consciousnesses in our living and willing experiences. Royce’s strategy is to appeal to his principal opponent, but also lifelong friend and mentor, by appealing to a famous example of James’ in *The Will to Believe* and prove how this example illustrates the practical utility and accessibility of absolute truth and reality. The example is a mountaineer who comes to a point where retreat is impossible but a decision to continue is necessary: The wanderer can choose to continue, and risk death, or to avoid the risk and yet still face near certain death. Such a decision is not intellectual — as there is no decidable procedure that can guarantee a right answer — but rather depends upon the resolve of the agent to act as if success were certain despite the absence of any conclusive evidence. Does the mountaineer, James asks, have a *right* to believe in their success? Clearly, a *scientific* warrant for belief is meaningless in such a situation, since the mountaineer’s *will* is the decisive factor for success, and thus, James concludes, the mountaineer has a very meaningful *practical* right to believe.

The upshot of James’ example is not only that a scientific warrant for belief is an absurd demand in such a situation but also that absolute truth has equally no bearing: Our knowledge of the circumstances is doubtful, the chance of our success is more or less probable, and whether our deed is ultimately successful is conditioned on our will to believe — and all of these are *relative* rather than *absolute* qualifications. These relative qualifications belong to the second set of adjectives dealt with in the first lecture. Whatever is *doubtful* or *probable* is not a logical property of propositions *in themselves* but the *psychological or epistemic* value a proposition has *for us*. The first lecture also found the *conditionally* true is reducible to the *logical* property of truth or falsity *simpliciter*, which is an absolute distinction. Similarly, the fact that a successful deed is conditioned on our will to believe is also reducible to an absolute distinction, as Royce aptly points

out James' central insight: To not decide is itself a decision. The mountaineer may decide on his will to believe, and thus resolve to do a deed; but the will not to believe is itself a will, and thus not to do a deed is itself a deed. *This* is an absolute truth, and no different in kind from the absolute distinction between truth and falsity *simpliciter*, since every deed is irrevocably done whether we decide to do or not do the determinate deed in question; therefore, each is forever written upon the scoreboard of eternity alongside every proposition which is determinately true or determinately false. Therefore, contrary to James' intention, the situation has significance for the mountaineer only if there is an absolute distinction between a deed irrevocably done or not done, that not to decide is itself a decision, that the will not to believe is itself a will. For such a distinction is an absolute truth to which the mountaineer's conduct must conform because its denial always leads to its eventual reaffirmation: A refusal to decide is a decision to refuse and thus an irrevocable deed of refusal.

What the foregoing proves is that absolute truth is not an abstract issue separate from the practical needs of life and the demands living and willing individuals confront throughout the course of their lives. On the contrary, absolute truth is accessible to us as finite consciousnesses whenever we confront a dilemma such as the mountaineer; that is, whenever we face a concrete situation which admits of no third option but demands an answer of 'yes' or 'no' right then and there, where that 'yes' is a deed irrevocably done and that 'no' a deed irrevocably not done. Such deeds are themselves the outcome of propositions, which counsel our conduct toward irrevocable successes and irrevocable failures. Such propositions are in themselves irrevocably true or false *simpliciter*. Since these propositions entail a unity that supratemporally holds for an indefinite number of possible and actual events, the collection of such propositions form the course of a single life — with its many deeds done and not done, successes found and failures endured, and true or false propositions willed — which is viewable synoptically only as an ideal and only known partially at any time. Partially viewed, the past course of our lives as willing individuals appears as collection of such deeds, successes, failures, and propositions willed; while the future course of our lives appears as an indefinite number of deeds, successes, failures and propositions yet to be willed. Thus the ideal and accessibility of absolute truth is the guidance we shall seek once we confront a situation where an answer of 'yes' or 'no' is demanded: Aware that we must act irrevocably and forever, we seek the counsel of truth in the hope are deeds are irrevocably successful and that we may forever avoid failure. Despite the fact we can never know the outcome

in advance, and are therefore condemned to failure, we seek the counsel of truth to avoid failure in those forced and momentous decisions of which James spoke so elegantly and Royce appreciated completely as practical occasions of absolute truth and reality.

Written by Joseph Dillabough
January 2019