

## MIND

A QUARTERLY REVIEW

OF

PSYCHOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY

## I.—‘ABSOLUTE’ AND ‘RELATIVE’ TRUTH.

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§ 1. THE view, which I wish to attack, may be put roughly as follows: Every judgment is either true or false, and what is true is true always and absolutely and completely. What is true is *eo ipso* “absolutely” true. “Relative truth” is a contradiction in terms, and “absolute” is an otiose addition to “truth”. There may be truth about the Relative—all truth, indeed, is about Relations—but the truth about the Relative is itself absolute, *i.e.* true neither more nor less. A “partial truth” is a judgment which contains complete and absolute truth, but which, as compared with another judgment, covers with its truth part only of the subject-matter of the latter. The same “partial truth,” looked at from the point of view of the larger judgment and wrongly taken as equivalent to it, is an “error”. Hence a “partial truth” is the same thing as a true, but indeterminate, judgment. The determinate judgment is the whole truth about a matter where the indeterminate judgment affirms only part of the truth. But the part affirmed is true absolutely and completely, and remains true to all eternity: it is the whole truth about part of the matter. It is added to, increased, supplemented by the determination: but in the supplementation it is not annulled, nor even altered. Its truth remains, and remains *quâ* truth precisely what it was.

Three types of judgment may be taken in illustration. (1) “The interior angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles,” “ $2 + 2 = 4$ ”. Such judgments remain true, and true without alteration of their truth, however much may be added to them by the development of geometrical and arithmetical knowledge. (2) “This tree is green,” “the roof of my house is wet”. Such judgments are true under the relations and at the time involved in their affirmation. And their truth remains unalterable, provided you are careful to remember what is affirmed in them: *i.e.* what “their truth” is. No doubt the content of these judgments, as they are expressed, is indeterminate. Their content is fixed and defined by a complex of relations: but though the judgments thus imply this complex, they do not (perhaps could not) fully express it. The truth expressed in them is vague and slight and capable of infinite further

determination. But any further determination—even *e.g.* that which Omniscience would give to them—would supplement, *but would not alter*, the truth which they contain for you and me when we make them. If we say, *e.g.*, “This tree is green,” “*this*” for our knowledge (for discursive thinking) is indeterminable. But if Omniscience were to determine “this,” what is true for us of “*this tree*” (as fixed for us now by perception) would remain true of “*this tree*” as fixed by the infinity of relations forming the content of that Omniscience: though no doubt *more* would be true for that Absolute Knowledge of “*this tree*” than merely what is now true for us. Again, “*this tree*” persists through a period of time and changes its properties. In the winter “*this tree*” is brown, in the night it is black, and always (while it exists) it is much besides “green”. But still “This tree *is* green”: and the fact that it is much more besides, and that its greenness changes and vanishes, does not annul nor alter the fact that it *is* green here and now, *viz.* under the conditions in which the judgment claims truth. Nor, lastly, is the truth of the judgment rendered “relative” by the fact that “green” is relative to the normal human vision. For that too is implied in the content of the judgment as affirmed and as claiming truth. We mean to predicate of “*this tree*” a quality, which to the present normal human vision appears as “green”: and this fact—the fact affirmed in our judgment—will hold and hold unaltered, even though the appearance would be different to the colour-blind, or to the eye of a fly, or to the normal human vision as it may be two thousand years hence. (3) Lastly, certain negative judgments afford a good illustration of the view which we are to attack. For if it is true that “I did not play golf yesterday,” can the truth of that judgment be altered or in any sense vanish even for infinite knowledge? And if it is true now that “the walls of this room are not a mile apart,” can that truth be said to have altered or vanished when further acquaintance with the room enables me to judge that “the walls of this room are twenty feet apart”?

§ 2. The above is the view, as nearly as I can state it, which I wish to attack. It appears to me to be itself an instance of a “relative” truth: *i.e.* though it is, in a sense and within limits, a true account of the nature of true judgment, it is not *the* truth of the matter. It is possible—as I hope to show—to formulate a view which, while doing justice to the truth contained in the view in question, will also reveal its deficiencies. The relatively completer view, which thus swallows and digests the first, will doubtless itself fall short of complete, final and unalterable truth. But if it can be shown to explain the shortcomings of the first view and to contain the truth of that view in a modified and supplemented form, at least it will be clear that the first view, so far from being “absolute truth,” is further removed from an ideally complete understanding than the view which, in condemning it, supplements it. For if of two judgments (or systems of judgment) A and B, A overrides B and, in overriding it, reveals where B falls short and the

ground of our mistaken acceptance of B, though A may not be “absolute” truth, clearly B will be so still less. B for the future may be disregarded *per se* and in itself. All further investigation will start with A: *i.e.* with B *quâ* overridden, *quâ* altered and supplemented. If therefore I am to overturn the view that “all truth *quâ* truth is absolute,” I need not maintain that my own view as to truth is “absolute”. I require only to show that my own view does justice to such truth as the opposing view possesses, whilst absorbing it in its own fuller truth. No doubt if we say, “View A is truer than view B,” we must have some kind of apprehension of complete truth: and to say that “A covers B and more,” involves some sort of notion of what is to be covered and what would completely cover it. But it is not necessary *here* to state *what* kind of apprehension or notion, nor to formulate any view as “absolute”. That Euclid’s knowledge of a triangle is fuller and more complete than that of the boy who knows only that it is “a plane figure bounded by three straight lines, whose interior angles are equal to two right angles”:—this we may surely assume, without asserting that Euclid’s knowledge is exhaustive, complete or absolute. And I presume it will not be denied that Euclid’s knowledge does full justice to the truth of the propositions known by the boy.

§ 3. (1) Our opponents will welcome the example just chosen. “Quite so,” they will say, “Euclid’s knowledge does full justice to the boy’s. It includes the boy’s knowledge and more: but the boy’s knowledge remains true and unaltered. Doubtless it is only a part of the complete knowledge of the triangle: but *as a part of knowledge* it is itself true always and without qualification. Euclid knows more parts of the whole knowledge: but his *knowledge* does not override, annul or alter the lesser knowledge. It adds, supplements and fulfils. And the case is at least as strong in arithmetic. The simple arithmetical truths are unalterably true whether they be taken *per se* and alone, or whether they form constituent parts of the whole system of arithmetical knowledge. ‘ $2 + 2 = 4$ ’ is an immediate and yet necessary truth, an immediate inference, or an *intuitus* as Descartes rightly called it. In such judgments we are stating an implication: and the implication holds unalterably, though fresh implications may subsequently be revealed in our data. The addition of two to two units *implies* the sum four, a plane three-sided figure *implies* the equality of its interior angles to two right angles: and these implications remain, whatever else the data may also imply.”

Such arguments, if we are to press them, seem to involve a theory which some at least of our opponents would contemptuously reject. For if *e.g.* in the science of arithmetic there are contained simple propositions, each of which is true *per se* without reference to any others, and true *in precisely the same sense* whether taken *per se* or taken as the basis of further propositions which are inferred from it, what becomes of “the science of arithmetic”? Arithmetic seems to be

a whole, some at least of the parts of which retain in the whole the identical character which they possess *per se*. If so, is the advance of knowledge—the development of a science—merely the *addition* of truth to truth? Is geometry neither more nor less than the *aggregate* of geometrical truths: and are the simple arithmetical truths merely “collected” into the science of arithmetic, itself the “class” of arithmetical propositions? To treat a science as a “class,” “aggregate” or “collection” of single truths, each of which is what it is in its singleness and remains unchanged in the collection, is (I venture to think) utterly inadequate as a theory of knowledge. It is as if one were to treat the Choral Symphony as a “collection” of beautiful sounds, Hamlet as an “aggregate” of fine ideas, or a picture by Rembrandt as a “class” of colours and lines.

But this is a view which our opponents will reject, and will attribute 5 to our misunderstanding. “Geometry,” they will say, “is certainly not, on our view, a mere class or collection or aggregate of propositions. It is through and through a *system* of truth: and precisely for that reason the parts of that system must themselves be true. The nature of Space reveals itself in every fragment of the Extended. To know a triangle, even if you only know that it is a plane three-sided figure whose internal angles are equal to two right angles, is *so far* to know the nature of Space: and that knowledge is not altered. As you learn more about the triangle and about other forms of figure, you are indeed increasing and completing your knowledge of Space: but this is to confirm and fulfil your previous knowledge, not to condemn nor in any sense to change it. It is your view (and not ours) which renders it impossible to conceive knowledge as a system. For a system implies elements with determinate natures in determinate relations. But in your ‘system’ of knowledge which is ‘the complete truth,’ there are no determinate elements or relations, but all is shifting. Or, if you take the elements as determinate, on your view everyone of them is false: and a system of falsities cannot be the Truth. If every note is out of tune—or again if each note shifts its pitch to meet the shifting pitch of each of the others—there will be no symphony. And so, unless  $2 + 2$  are 4 and remain 4 unalterably, your ‘system’ of arithmetical truth will be nonsense.”

Now here there seems to be a confusion. For (i.) if, in knowing the triangle, I really knew the nature of Space as expressing itself therein, my knowledge of the triangle would be “complete”:—*i.e.* as full and perfect as geometrical science can make it. It might be called “absolute,” if it were not misleading to call knowledge of Space (*i.e.* knowledge of the Universe in respect *only* to its extendedness) absolute. But such knowledge of the triangle could not be expressed in a single judgment. It would be complete knowledge of Space in its systematic totality, and nothing short of the whole system of geometrical reasoning would be adequate to express it. On the other hand (ii.) if I know

the triangle only as the boy knows it, in that fragmentary knowledge my grasp of the nature of Space is correspondingly vague and subject to modification. Knowledge of the Whole and knowledge of the Parts, where the Parts form an intimate Whole like that of the spatial system, involve one another. But each involves the other at the same level. Immature knowledge of some or all of the Parts is immature knowledge of the Whole, and full knowledge of the Whole is full knowledge of each and all of the Parts. Nor is the passage from the boy's knowledge to that of the geometer the addition of perfect knowledge, bit to bit. The passage is not an increase by aggregation, but a growth by expansion from within. 6

Certainly a System must be a whole of interrelated elements: and the elements and their relations must have distinguishable and determinate characters. But those characters attach to them, and are determinate, *in the System*: and in the System they are certainly not the same as they are outside, if outside they are at all. The notes of the symphony must have and retain a determinate pitch: but their pitch is determined by the functions which they fulfil *in the symphony*. In a sense, no doubt, the pitch of the several notes could be fixed in terms of vibrations without reference to the harmonies which they constitute in the symphony. But the nature of the notes, as constituents of the symphony, is through and through determined by their harmonic relations in the symphony, and is in those relations not what it would be if the several notes were sounded in isolation. And though  $2 + 2$  are 4 and remain 4 unalterably, the whole significance of this assertion—and therefore its truth—depends upon the numerical system in its totality, and ultimately upon the character of the Universe within which the numerical system is a necessary subject of human thought.

§ 4. But our opponents, as I understand them, would deny our right to the assumption that the truth of a judgment must alter with the alteration of its significance.

“This,” they will say, “is the very question in dispute. If you alter the significance of a judgment, you are simply making a fresh judgment. You are not affecting the truth of the original judgment; for that possessed its determinate significance, and in that significance it still is true. Thus the judgment ‘ $2 + 2 = 4$ ’ is true, because it adequately expresses certain elements in their relations. It is a form of expression which corresponds to a certain matter of thought: and its truth lies in this correspondence. If you choose to signify something else by this form of expression, your judgment, though linguistically the same, is different in its meaning. You are in fact ‘thinking of’ or ‘judging about’ something quite different, and whether your new judgment is true or false has nothing whatever to do with the truth of the original judgment.”

I confess that I do not understand precisely the conception of “truth” which the above reply involves: and I suspect that I have not

fairly presented our opponents' position. I do not know, for example, exactly what (on their view) are the two factors whose correspondence is truth: nor whether that correspondence, as they understand it, necessarily excludes varying degrees of exactness: nor, if so, what are the grounds of this necessary exclusion. Accordingly it seems best not to attempt to criticise where I cannot be sure that I have understood, but rather to try to make my own position clear. For it is evident that we have been beating about the bush, and that the real trouble between us is as to the meaning of "truth". It would be impossible, even if I were competent, to discuss this adequately within the limits of an article. But I will attempt to sketch, however imperfectly, what I understand by "truth".

"Absolute Truth," as I understand the matter,<sup>1</sup> remains for us an Ideal which, just because *in one sense* we realise it, we know cannot be completely realised in discursive thinking—*i.e.* in knowledge which proceeds by judgment and inference. For in judging and inferring we set ourselves over against an Other: and our endeavour is to overcome this division, which yet is and remains the necessary condition of our knowing. *Until* this endeavour is accomplished, we shall always be trying to supplement and to alter our system of judgments so as to render it entirely "adequate" to the Other, which it can never exhaustively express. But *if* this endeavour were accomplished, knowledge—*i.e.* judgment and inference—would no longer be, for thought would be no longer distinguishable from its object: the Other, as other, would have vanished, and with it the condition of our knowledge.

<sup>1</sup> The following rough sketch of the conception of "truth," with which I am working, in no sense claims originality. But any errors in exposition must be attributed to me, and not to the writers whom I am more or less consciously following.

As an Ideal we may, I suppose, conceive an Absolute or Infinite Subject, whose being or life is an unbroken movement through the circle of its differences: differences, which are constituted by its own life-movement, and yet in that life-movement are reduced to what they always were or are, *viz.* to moments in the Subject's own unity. We might call that whole movement, as the return upon unity from differences, the "Absolute Self-Consciousness" or "Absolute Truth": but any such expressions are really misleading. For in such an Ideal there is no "Other" and therefore no "Self". And since there is here no movement out of unity to difference which is not *eo ipso* its own recall, there is no "return upon unity from differences". Hence it only confuses the issue to speak of this unbroken continuity of the life-movement of the infinite Subject as "absolute truth," if by "absolute truth" we are to mean truth which our discursive thought can achieve or even profitably strive after.

We are here concerned with the Ideal of Truth for our discursive thought, the aim and partial achievement of human judgment and in-

ference. This is Truth to which in one sense we always are attaining, or of which (if you prefer to put it so) we always are in possession. But it is Truth which, even if *per impossibile* it were completely achieved, would yet require its object over against it as an Other, and would therefore still not be the Ideal of which we have just been speaking. And again it is Truth which never is *completely* achieved, but in the possession of which we always are advancing. We, in our different sciences, and also at the different stages of the development of our knowledge in any branch of science, are “in possession” of this Truth in very different degrees. And the criterion for the degree of our “possession” is the relative self-coherence of the science or stage of scientific knowledge in question. In order to prevent misunderstanding, I hasten to add that “the Truth” of which I am speaking is not something to which our knowledge may approximate in various degrees, whilst itself is unchangeable and complete in sublime aloofness and independence of our knowledge. It lives and expresses itself in human knowledge, and in human knowledge only:<sup>1</sup> though the expression is never final nor complete, and varies infinitely in degree. The “complete truth” would be a completely self-coherent system of judgments: and it might be called “the absolute truth,” with the double reservation that it remains for us an Ideal, and an Ideal for discursive thought only. For our knowledge, fortunately for us, never actually is a completely self-coherent system of judgments: though fortunately it tends—at least in appearance—to grow in completeness of inward logical coherence. And even if that growth could attain the fulfilment of its ideal, that perfected knowledge would still be a system of judgments and inferences. It would remain the true thinking “about” an object other than itself, and its object would retain in its being features or aspects or qualities which the true thinking could not adequately express.

<sup>1</sup> Under “human knowledge” here and throughout I include the knowledge of any finite intelligence there may be.

I am aware that this account will lay me open to many criticisms. I shall be accused, perhaps, of embracing Scepticism without shame or reservation. The denial that discursive knowledge can be absolute and final, in the sense in which the complete and undivided apprehension of the infinite subject would be so, might be allowed to pass: though even so my critics will ask whence I derive sufficient knowledge of the infinite apprehension to condemn the Ideal of discursive thought. But I have further denied that the latter Ideal can ever be completely realised: and if that is Scepticism, I must admit that I am a sceptic. But I should ask my critics what it is that they wish to maintain. Do they suggest that a finite intelligence—or all finite intelligences together—can grasp the entire nature of things, and express it in a system of judgments without possibility of omission or error, and without at any point a failure of logical coherence? If to deny this is to be a

sceptic, I shall be a sceptic in good company. Or are they merely insisting that the Ideal, which on my view can never be fully realised in our discursive thought, must yet *somehow* be known to us? If so, they are insisting upon something which I have never doubted. But to say that it must be “somehow known” is very different from saying that it must be actual as reasoned knowledge.

Then (I may be asked) can *no* judgment be final and unalterable truth? And, if so, is the judgment that “knowledge is true in so far as it is self-coherent” itself a relative truth, condemned in the end to show itself partly false? And what is the meaning of “self-coherence”? A system, I should reply, possesses “self-coherence” (*a*) in proportion as every constituent element of it logically involves, and is involved by, every other: and (*b*) in so far as the reciprocal implications of the constituent elements, or rather the constituent elements in their reciprocal implications, constitute alone and completely the significance of the system. And though I am primarily concerned to maintain that *not all* truth is absolute, undoubtedly the thesis that “knowledge is true in so far as it is self-coherent” carries with it the view that *no judgment* in and by itself is absolutely true. Hence the thesis itself, taken in and by itself, cannot be on my theory the final and complete account of the nature of the truth attainable in discursive thought: nor is it possible to say with complete precision how far and in what manner the final account would involve a modification of the thesis. But I should maintain that any truth is final *for human knowledge*, the alteration of which would render human knowledge impossible. In that sense the doctrine conveyed in the thesis seems to me to be “final” truth; though its expression *in the form of a judgment* is clearly inadequate, and though that judgment itself is destined to modification if not to complete destruction. 10

§ 5. The position which I have sketched is open to many other criticisms besides those just mentioned. For I have treated truth as an ideal “which lives and expresses itself in human knowledge, and in human knowledge only”: and the whole question as to the relation of the individual and the universal aspects of knowledge and truth is on our hands, if any critic chooses to raise it. But for the present I cannot attempt any further justification of my position. I will draw certain consequences with regard to the mathematical judgments, and then pass on to consider the judgments of perception.

Any judgment—*e.g.* the judgment that “the interior angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles” or that “ $2 + 2 = 4$ ”—is to be considered as essentially a constituent of a system of judgments. In so far as the judging subject explicitly recognises the dependence of the judgment (in its significance and its truth) upon the other judgments which along with it form such a system, he may be said to read in the single judgment the system which it implies: and precisely so far the judgment possesses for him the most complete truth of which it is in



its nature capable. That truth may be called “absolute,” “final” or “complete”: but it is so only with certain reservations, since no system of knowledge as actual for any human subject is completely self-coherent or final truth. And since “truth” for us means articulate knowledge—for we are speaking of the truth of discursive thought—we must look for such relatively complete truth not in isolated judgments, but rather in explicit systems of judgments: *i.e.* not in the single judgment that “ $2 + 2 = 4$ ,” but in the body of reasoned knowledge which we call “the science of arithmetic”. The judgment “ $2 + 2 = 4$ ” may be to the arithmetician a short-hand symbol for the whole science of arithmetic as known at the time: in *his* thinking, it may signify all that could be read in it and expressed by the best arithmetical knowledge hitherto attained. But if so, “ $2 + 2 = 4$ ,” as *he* judges it, is very different in its significance and its truth from the judgment of the child who is learning the tables of addition, in spite of the identity of linguistic expression. The relatively final truth, which the arithmetician expresses, attaches not to the, single judgment *as expressed*, but to the whole system of arithmetical science which the judgment is for him. And if arithmetical science is to be taken as final and absolute, truth for us, that again must mean that in arithmetical science we read that fuller and more self-coherent system of judgments, which is—as nearly as we can render it in discursive thought—human experience in its essential form. For though the most complete system, which we can attain, falls short of that ideal of self-coherence, of individual systematic totality, which alone would constitute “absolute truth” for discursive thought, clearly no less complete system—*a fortiori* no single judgment—can stand as final and absolute truth. 11

§ 6. (2) A judgment of perception, such as “this tree is green,” comes in principle under what has been said. What it affirms is subject to a complex mass of conditions unexpressed and yet implied. Its significance, and therefore its truth, must in the end depend upon this inarticulate background. It could claim unalterable or final truth, only if it were entitled to stand as an integral constituent in the ideally self-coherent system of judgments which would be complete human knowledge. And the judgment of perception, as such and as formulated, is entitled less than most judgments to claim such a privilege. For the judgment of perception is the product of a comparatively low grade of experience. It does not persist as such and unaltered in the thought which has risen above the level of everyday conversation, of historical narrative, of matter of fact, and of the practical affairs of life. Even here, indeed, there is more than the judgment of “this” “now” and “mine”: and the more does not leave the judgment of perception pure and unadulterated and without internal modification. And at any rate the judgment of perception is a totally inadequate vehicle for the expression of knowledge which has any claim to be exact. In the main, and broadly speaking, scientific thought moves in univer-

sals. "This" and "that," and the distinctions fixed by reference to the individual subject, give place in science to reflective determinations, which are revealed by analysis in the sensuous given, but which are not identical with it. Knowledge, in short, begins with the discovery and the formulation of universal and necessary connexions of content. And the advance of knowledge leaves no vague sensuous subject (no "this tree"), no vague sensuous attribute, and no mere coincidence of attribute and subject. The more adequate knowledge of "this tree" is not an accumulation of judgments of perception, but a revolution in which "this tree" is swept away and determinate connexions between determinate universal concepts are substituted. In the science of botany our judgments of perception *as such* find no place.

Nor will it do to protest "But the fact expressed in the judgment of perception remains unalterable. For suppose our knowledge to expand until it covers all Time and Space: suppose even that it becomes Omniscience. Yet, within that complete and all-embracing experience, the original judgment will persist as a clear, if somewhat attenuated, truth:—a thread of pure gold within the infinite consciousness." There is indeed a sense in which this contention is true: but in that sense it hardly seems relevant. Omniscience, we may admit, must be knowledge of everything: and in the infinite experience nothing can be lost. And so every fact and every feeling—everything in any sense real—as an element in that experience is invested with the timeless necessity which defies change or destruction. Nothing, we may agree, is "lost": and in this sense the past and the future "are" no less and not otherwise than the present, error and sin possess the same necessary being as truth and goodness, and there is no difference between the trivial and the important.

But *in what precise sense* is the fact expressed in a judgment of perception unalterable? "This tree is green" expresses what is matter of immediate experience to you here and now and to other sentient subjects under the same conditions. It is true within a narrowly restricted area: and beyond that area its truth is liable to modification and perhaps to destruction. The experience, and the expression of it, are no doubt necessary incidents in the world-process, or necessary elements in the infinite experience. But they are "necessary" precisely as and when and how they occur in the process or subsist in the experience. In so far as the infinite experience is complete and all at once, all the elements thereof are *for the infinite subject* timelessly actual. But in so far as the infinite experience appears as a world-process and unrolls itself in time and space, the elements have that actuality which belongs to them as such appearances: *i.e.* they occur under determinate limitations of time and place, and not otherwise. Thus the immediate experience and its expression in the judgment of perception are "unalterable facts" in their actuality: *viz.*, as possessing their determinate position in the series of events. And if the world-process were, so to say, to go

back upon itself, and to unroll its series of events afresh from the beginning, these experiences and their expressions would recur in their positions with “unaltered” actuality. The mummies would walk the earth again, and give expression to their feelings in “the same” judgments of perception that were passed by the ancient Egyptians: and thus (but not otherwise) the “unalterable truth” of a judgment of perception might be vindicated. For the judgment “this tree is green” expresses what is actually matter of direct experience to you and to other sentient subjects. A hundred years hence you and your vision, they and their experiences, “this” tree and its state, have vanished into the past: and cannot for human knowledge be restored *as such*. 13

It is irrelevant to insist upon the ineffaceable reality of all the elements of the infinite experience: and it is a confusion to identify their “reality” as elements in that experience with their “truth” as entering into the texture of human knowledge. The sentient subjects of the past, their immediate experiences, and the “truth” of their judgments of perception as expressing those experiences, have as such vanished for us. They are at best for us the precarious products of a most elaborate inferential reconstruction, which in any case can never actually *reinstate* them. But the matter of their experiences as the content of their judgments has passed over into the fabric of our knowledge. In that fabric their judgments of perception persist and cling to life. But the distinctive features of those judgments, their individualities are lost: and the life, to which by a metaphor you may say “they cling,” is not *their* life which they formerly enjoyed. The sciences of botany, of the physiology of the senses, of the physical conditions of colour, etc.:—these may be said to absorb and to preserve the “truth” of such judgments as “this tree is green”. But the sciences neither contain any judgments of perception *as such*, nor preserve their “truth” in an unaltered form.

§ 7. (3) Of the negative judgments which were quoted in § 1, the first (“I did not play golf yesterday”) does not require any special consideration. It comes in principle under what has been said about the judgments of perception. The “yesterday” and the “I,” to which the judgment refers, will vanish: and though they may in some sense be reconstructed by a system of inferences, they will never be *as such* reinstated. And even if the “truth” of the original judgment is preserved in the sense that its content is absorbed and used as material for a system of knowledge, the judgment most certainly is not enshrined there as an unaltered truth in its ancient form.

In the second example (“the walls of this room are not a mile apart”) a further point more clearly emerges. For the knowledge which that judgment conveys, or the truth which it expresses, is obviously not what it carries on its face. It professes to give us a decisive piece of information, though in a negative form. Really it gives us a vague and indeterminate positive, which the negation implies and on which 14

it rests. The implied positive information is so vague that it can hardly be stated. For in order to state it at all clearly, we should have to rise above the level at which the negative judgment could significantly—or indeed sanely—be made. But as our knowledge of the room grows in definition and completeness, the implied positive develops into the completer affirmation “the walls are twenty feet apart”. And in the greater significance and fuller truth of this positive judgment, there is in no intelligible sense a “survival” of the “absolute truth” that the walls are not a mile apart. The walls of this room “are not less than an inch apart,” they “are not made of gold,” nor are they “formed by elephants standing shoulder to shoulder”: but is it really suggested that complete knowledge of the walls and their relation contains all these “absolute truths” surviving in itself?

I am not maintaining that in an ideally complete system of knowledge the negative judgment can find no place. On the contrary, I am firmly persuaded that “System” is meaningless without distinction, and that negation is no less indispensable than affirmation in discursive thought. But the apparent finality of the negative judgment in the instance quoted is due to the thinness of the positive content implied. The judgment in fact approximates to the “infinite” judgment. And we must not infer from its apparent decision that it expresses an absolute unalterable truth. Whatever distinctions may or may not persist and be emphasised in the system of knowledge as it grows in concreteness and self-coherence, clearly negative judgments of the type which has been instanced are trivial and provisional and have no special claim to finality.