

TRUTH.

BY F. H. RANDLE, A. M., LL. D.

THERE seems to be a great discussion about a very simple matter. "What is truth?" The more this is defined by metaphysicians, the more obscure it becomes. We quote from the reply of Professor James, the pragmatist, to one of his critics, Marcel Hébert, as cited in *The Monist* of January. "The relation to its object that makes an idea true in any given instance, is, we say, embodied in the intermediate details of reality which lead towards the object, which vary in every instance, and which in every instance can be concretely traced." The words here are simple and plain, but the sentence is obscure. I fail to grasp his meaning. He goes on: "The chain of workings which an opinion sets up is the opinion's truth or falsehood, or irrelevancy as the case may be." Here an opinion is represented as possessing truth or falsehood, and that truth is the chain of workings the opinion sets up. I do not think any one can be enlightened by this definition.

Dr. Paul Carus, commenting upon these quotations,¹ gives a much better definition of truth. "A truth is always a formulation of the essential features of a set of facts. Truths are not concrete realities, but ideas that appropriately describe certain characteristics of realities, so as to make our anticipations tally with experience in the past and present and even in the future. While facts are always particular, truths are always general; facts are verified by the senses, truths by the mind; facts change, truths remain true forever."

Facts are always particular but I do not see how a fact can possibly change. "It is a fact that John shot a bird": Can that fact ever be changed? A fact is something done. Neither can I see that truths are always general; but if Dr. Carus means *laws* he is correct. Many truths are laws. "All bodies set free above the ground fall to the earth": this is a truth and a law. I told the truth

¹ See "A Postscript on Pragmatism" in *The Monist*, Jan., 1909, p. 93.

when I said, "John shot a bird." But the shooting of the bird was a fact and not a truth.

In all statements there are two things to be considered; one, the statement itself; the other, the thing spoken of. "The earth revolves around the sun once every year." This statement covers only nine words, while the object spoken of covers an orbit of about 190 million of miles in diameter. Truth is the correctness of statement, and pertains to the statement only; or, more particularly, a truth is a statement made in accordance with certain facts, conditions or laws. The truth is in the *statement*. It may be made in writing, in spoken language, or by signs or gestures or in any way an idea may be conveyed.

We must be careful in definitions, for every prominent word has many secondary meanings. Green, for instance, means one of the prismatic colors and applies in its original sense only to color, yet we say green fruit (not ripe), or a green youth (one not up-to-date). Green paint may refer to the color or it may refer to paint not dry. There may be a dozen different colors in a newly painted house; one will say as you enter, "Be careful, all the paint in the house is green—not dry."

In dealing with truth we must define truth in its original sense, its most important sense and not in any secondary sense. The opposite of a truth is a lie, each one is exactly what the other is not. A lie is a statement intended to deceive, and it is in the statement, not in the facts or conditions referred to. There are two kinds of each. One may purpose to state the truth and state a falsehood. This might be called an honest lie; or he may purpose to state a lie and that for mischief, and tell the truth, this may be called a dishonest truth. Honest and dishonest as here used, however, will hardly bear close criticism, but I have conveyed my meaning. The purpose of a truth is to benefit; the purpose of a lie is to injure. There is every grade of each as to importance.

Truth prefers to fight "naked," that is without armor. It needs no *cuss* words of any kind to strengthen it. A lie is often clothed with such armor. The adjective *true* is used in a wider sense than truth, that is it has more secondary meanings.

The propositions in geometry are both truths and laws, but the word proposition implies that the statement is to be proven. The three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles. This statement is true or it tells the truth; it is also a law of mathematics. Laws are universal, truths are particular or universal, in this case the truth is coextensive with the law. In laying off a state into

counties, it may be so small as to cover only one county, it and the county having the same limits may become one. Something like this may represent the difference, or rather oneness of the *truth* and the *law* in the statement. Whenever truth is used in other senses than in the correctness of a statement, it is a secondary sense of truth.

EDITORIAL COMMENT.

Mr. E. H. Randle is right when he says that every prominent word has many secondary meanings. This becomes obvious in our use of the term "truth." I do not think that there is any disagreement between his conception of truth and mine, but truth like other words has many secondary meanings, and certain meanings are used with definite phrases and connections. I trust that every thoughtful reader will read the passage quoted and criticized by Mr. Randle in the correct sense. Truths are always mental and general, facts are always concrete and particular. Truths are identical with laws and if true are true forever. Facts are the fleeting phenomena in the flux of events that pass by and change, which means there are always new facts filling the present moment and commanding our attention. I do not think that rightly understood Mr. Randle will find fault with this statement, but I grant that the word "truth" is used also with reference to single statements, and in this connection I will call attention to the fact that if the statement be true that "John shot a bird," we never would call it *a truth*, but we would say of the man who says so that he told *the truth*. To "tell the truth" means that the statement of a special case is true, but to tell, or better to state, *a truth* has a different meaning, which shows that the phrase "to tell the truth" is idiomatic, and we cannot make use of it for the purpose of formulating an exact definition of the term "truth."

Accordingly I object to Mr. Randle's expression when he says, "The three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles; this statement is true and it tells the truth." Instead of saying, "it tells the truth," he ought to say, "it states a truth."

The opposite of "telling the truth" is "telling a lie," always having a moral significance, but the opposite of "truth" in the scientific sense of the word is not "lie" but "error" or "that which is not true."

Mr. Randle unconsciously proves his own contention that "every prominent word has many secondary meanings"; thus if an author now and then uses a word in more than one sense, we must be charitable and understand the use of it according to the context.