

## Preliminary comments from Mr. Peterson

Truth is perhaps the most important idea that we will deal with in this course. Believe it or not, there is a lot of confusion about in today's culture. Much of what you will read here is a detailed explanation of what we already know through common sense.

This may be more advanced reading than you are used to. Do not be discouraged. Definitely do not give up. Let me give you a few practical tips to help you through the process.

1. Ask questions while you are reading. Write them down. Bring them up in your forum posts.
2. People get weary when reading is above their head. But that's the only reading that is worthwhile. Pull yourself up to its level.
3. Here's the big one. Do you want the secret to being smarter than ever before? - To being a successful student? - to being a success generally? This is it. This is how you learn and retain what you learned. → Only think about what you are reading right now. This seems obvious, but most people don't do it. As soon as you start thinking about something else, catch yourself, and bring yourself back to the task at hand. It applies to listening too. As soon as you think about something else, STOP. Get back to listening. This is the single most important tip to becoming a successful and brilliant student.
4. Take your time. If you get bogged down, or you're too tired, go away and do something else. Then come back when you're ready.

## How to Think about Truth

Today we are going to consider The Great Idea of Truth. As beauty is connected in our minds with art, as goodness is connected in our minds with the character of men and their actions, *so truth is* connected with the pursuit of knowledge, with all of the attempts that

men make to *know* in science, in philosophy, in religion. All earnest and serious efforts at inquiry comprise the pursuit of truth.

I'm sure you've heard people say, "I would like to know the truth about that." I wonder if you've stopped to think how redundant that expression is, "to know the truth." Because the very meaning of the phrase "to know" is to have in one's mind the truth about the object one is trying to know. It is perfectly obvious-is it not?-that "false knowledge" is impossible. It wouldn't be knowledge if it were false. And "true knowledge" is redundant. To know is to have the truth. And those who doubt man's ability to know anything are skeptical, therefore of his ability to possess the truth about anything.

Now, *skepticism* is just one of the attitudes that men take toward the problem of the pursuit of truth. There are others. Let me summarize for you quickly some basic oppositions in the attitudes that men take toward truth. First is this attitude that I have just mentioned, skepticism. The skeptic thinks that there is nothing true or false, or that everything is equally true and false and that we are unable to know what is true or what is false, that we simply don't have knowledge or possess the truth.

The opposite position here is taken by those who think that men can inquire and can succeed in inquiry and can come to have some grasp of the truth about things. For example, let me read you what Freud says against the skeptic. He speaks of the skeptic or skeptics as nihilists who say that there is no such thing as truth or that it is only the product of our own needs or desires. They make it absolutely immaterial what views we accept. All of them are equally true or false. And no one has the right to accuse anyone else of error. And Freud comments on this: "If it were really a matter of indifference what we believe, then we might just as well build our bridges of cardboard as of stone, or inject a tenth of a gram of morphine into a patient instead of a hundredth, or take teargas as a narcotic instead of ether; but the intellectual anarchists

themselves”-here Freud is calling the skeptic an intellectual anarchist-”but the intellectual anarchists themselves would strongly repudiate any such practical applications of their theory.”

Another attitude toward the truth is *relativism*. And according to this view, some things that are true for you are false for me, and what may be true for me is false for you, and what was once true in some other period of history or in some other culture is no longer true. Against this position of the relativity of truth to individuals or cultures, there is the opposite view that truth is objective, not subjective and relative, that it is absolute and immutable, always and everywhere the same for all men.

Then there is the *pragmatic* attitude toward truth which says that truth consists in those ideas or those thoughts of ours which bear practical fruit in action, that truth consists in the things which *work*. (For the pragmatist), truth is what works in the way of our thinking. And as against this emphasis on action and practical results as the measure of truth; there are those who say that such practical verification in action or experience is not needed at all for man’s having a grasp of the truth.

Now the problems raised by these basic oppositions that I’ve just summarized for you are in one way easy and in one way hard. There are two distinct questions here that are often confused. One is the question, “What is truth?” a question that calls for the definition of truth. And the other question is a question-listen to the difference-not “What is truth?” but “What is true in a particular case?” or “What is true?” It is a question that calls upon us to say whether this statement is true or that statement is false, and to state the criteria or the standards by which we judge that a given statement is either true or false.

## TRUTH DEFINED

The easy question or at least the easier question of the two is the

question, “What is truth?” This is the question supposedly that Pontius Pilate asked, and wouldn’t wait for an answer. But if he had wished to, he could have waited because he wouldn’t have had to wait too long. And the hard question, the much harder question, is the other question, namely, “What is true?” This other question asks how we can *judge* that something is true or false.

I want to deal with the easier question first, the question of defining “truth,” the question, “What is the truth, or what is truth itself?” Then we’ll go from that to the harder question, the question about how we know whether a statement is true or false. And then if there is some time left, I’d like to deal quickly at the end with the problem of the relativity and mutability of truth.

You all have a pretty clear notion of what truth is. Let me show you that you do by reminding you of the distinction between truth telling and lying. Everyone of us has told a lie. Everyone of us knows how to lie. And everyone of us knows the difference between lying and telling the truth. We know that if we say something is the case when it is not, or that it is not the case when it is, we are lying. That substitution of *is* for *is not* or *is not* for *is*, is telling a lie. That is why Josiah Royce defined a liar as “a man who willfully misplaces his ontological predicates.” And you can see then that lying is a lack of correspondence between what one thinks and what one says.

When one takes an oath in a courtroom and tells the whole truth and nothing but the truth, what one is taking an oath to do is to put into speech faithfully what one thinks, to let there be no discrepancy between speech and thought. Now this doesn’t imply at all, that when a person speaks truthfully it follows necessarily that what he thinks is true in fact. For a person who speaks “truthfully” may be in error; he may suppose he knows something that in fact he does not know. But I want you to consider this question: can a person lie deliberately without at least thinking that he knows something to be true, that he has some grasp of the truth? Could he

tell a lie if he didn't think that he had a grasp of the truth? This is a good question for the skeptic to consider.

Now there is another mode of truth other than this business of telling the truth as opposed to telling a lie which exists in the communication of men, that men are talking to one another. And when individuals talk to one another and speech words pass between them, it is possible for those words to be used by them in such a way that they have the same ideas in mind. Or sometimes, when communication fails, it is possible for them to use the same words and to have quite different ideas in mind.

We say that truth lies between, there is a truth of understanding or a truth in communication when using words brings their minds in correspondence to one another. When there is a correspondence through the language they use of what one person thinks with what another person thinks, then there is truth in communication. Notice here again that there is a correspondence between one mind and another as in the first case there is a correspondence between what a person thinks and what a person says. And only if there is such a correspondence, can you speak of there being truth in their communication.

Now these two considerations of truth telling and truth in the communication between persons bring us to the difficult question, prepare us in a way for defining what truth is in statements about the world, when we make statements that something is or is not the case.

And perhaps I ought to recapitulate what I have just said so that I can bring you up to this problem with the advantage of understanding the simple points we have already seen together. Remember now in telling the truth, in order to tell the truth, we must achieve a correspondence between our words, our speech, and our thought. We speak truthfully when our speech corresponds or con-

forms to what we think. And there is truth in communication between persons when, in using words, their two minds correspond with one another. The ideas in one person's mind correspond to the ideas in the other. What remains then, what is the third and difficult case? It is the case in which there is a correspondence between the mind itself and reality, the world in which we live. And when there is this kind of correspondence between the mind and reality, then the mind has truth in it about the world that it is trying to know or understand.

### THE EASY PROBLEM OF TRUTH

**This definition of truth as *correspondence between the mind and reality*** is, I think, one that is generally agreed upon in European thought. I would like to read you a number of quotations from great authors in the ancient world, the Medieval world, and the modern world, to show you how they all are saying the same thing in defining truth as this kind of correspondence between the mind and reality.

Let me begin with Plato, in some sense the forerunner of all the rest of European thought. Plato says, "A false proposition," that is, a false statement, "is one which asserts the nonexistence of things which are or the existence of things which are not." And Aristotle amplifies that just a little. Listen carefully now to this next statement. Aristotle says, "To say of what is that it is or of what is not that it is not, is to speak the truth or to think truly; just as it is false to say of what is that it is not or of what is not that it is." See again, that goes back to that remark of Josiah Royce's that a liar is a man who misplaces his ontological predicates. And Aquinas, with this background of Plato and Aristotle, in one single sentence says that **truth in the human mind consists in the mind's conformity to reality to that which is.**

Later, in modern times, we have John Locke saying, "Though our words signify nothing but our ideas, yet being designed by them to

signify things, the truth they contain will be only verbal when they stand for ideas in the mind that do not agree with the reality of things.”

And then in the twentieth century an American philosopher by the name of William James was very much concerned with the theory of truth. In fact, he wrote a book called *The Meaning of Truth* and he is associated in all of our minds with having spent a good part of his life worrying about the whole problem of truth. James—and he by the way is a leading pragmatist who developed the pragmatic theory of truth—referring to the pragmatist view that an idea’s working successfully is a sign of its truth, warns his critics that this is not a new definition of the nature of truth. Notice that the idea’s working is a sign of its truth; it’s not a new definition of the nature of truth, but only a new interpretation of what it means to say that the truth of our ideas consists in their agreement with reality as their falsity means their disagreement with reality. “Pragmatists and intellectuals,” James goes on to say, “both accept this definition as a matter of course.” But he also points out that the theory of truth begins rather than ends with the simple definition of truth as agreement with reality; many problems remain.

The rather remarkable fact here is the extent of the agreement across the centuries among philosophers of quite different persuasions concerning the nature of truth. It is a really remarkable agreement. “How then,” you may ask, “is there any problem of truth left for us to consider?” If they do agree about this, what is the problem of truth that disturbs them and concerns them so much? What do philosophers quarrel about in regard to truth, not about what truth is, but about what is true? The problem they are concerned with is how we tell whether something in question is true or false. And that is the difficult problem.

Let’s assume for a moment that what truth is the correspondence of one thing with another. **The truth in the mind is the correspondence of the mind with reality, or the truth of our**

**speech is a correspondence of what we say with what we think.**

If this is the case, then in the simple problem of telling the truth everyone except the pathological liar is able to know quite directly whether his own words faithfully express what he thinks. That correspondence between my speech and my thoughts is something that I myself can directly inspect. I have no problem of seeing whether or not my speech corresponds with my thought.

And in the case of communication between two human beings, which of course is a little more difficult, nevertheless it is still possible for the two human beings, by talking to one another patiently and painstakingly, to discover whether or not they are getting a correspondence between what they think. They ask one another questions, they test each other's use of words. And by this careful, patient, methodical effort they can detect whether or not in their efforts to communicate there is a correspondence between their minds and so whether they have truth in their communication.

Let me show you these two cases in a guide. In the simple case of truth-telling where speech corresponds with thought, where what I say corresponds with what I think, there is no difficulty about detecting the correspondence at once, because it is all within my own mind. I understand what I say, I understand what I think, and I can see the correspondence between them, can I not?

Or when I lie, I know quite well that what I say does not correspond with what I think.

And here is a slightly more difficult case of two persons, *a* and *b*, mind *a* and mind *b*. Speech connects them. They are in communication. And by speech they can tell whether their thought is the same, whether there is a communication in thought, whether they have communicated thought from one another, they have thought in common, the ideas of one man correspond with ideas or thoughts of the other. There again, it is possible because they can



speak to one another and try each other out, to test the presence or absence of the correspondence of their minds.

## THE DIFFICULT PROBLEM OF TRUTH

Now then, let's take the really difficult case. That difficult case is the case in which you ask, How do I test the correspondence between my own mind and reality, the world, to find out whether what I think is true? Let me show you why this is such a difficult case. Here we have the mind and here we have reality; and the mind is trying to know reality. In the mind is thought. Reality consists of existences. And those existences are things to be apprehended or known. But the thought, "Is that reality in my mind?" that thought is the reality that is apprehended. I don't have in my mind two things, my thought and the object of my thought. Whatever is in my mind is in my mind, and I can't know any "grasp of reality." I have no way of getting hold of reality except by knowing it. But then I can't test whether I know it or not by comparing what I know with what I am trying to know. Don't you see that in this case you can't make the comparison? There is no way of making a direct test between the two things that are supposed to correspond.

Let me put it to you another way. I express my thoughts in statements or propositions. Reality consists of the facts about which I am trying to make the propositions. And the propositions are true if they correspond with the facts. And the facts are the things to be known. The facts not as known, but to be known. The propositions are the facts as I think I know them. It isn't as if I had in one hand the propositions and in the other hand the facts and could look at them and say, "Oh, I see. My propositions correspond to the facts," because I have no grasp of the facts except in my own propositions about them. Hence I have no way of making a direct comparison between my propositions and the facts they are trying to state. So there is no direct or even indirect way of telling whether what I think, what I say, my propositions and

judgments, correspond with the way things are.

And there is not even an indirect way of doing this because I can't ask "reality" questions the way I can ask another person questions and find out whether what I think agrees with what he thinks. I can't ask reality questions. Or, I can ask the questions, but I can't get any answers. Reality won't speak back to me. And so there is no way of getting by communication the direct or indirect test of whether what I think, what is in my mind, corresponds with reality and the way things are. That is the problem of truth. It's not the problem of knowing what truth is, but the problem of telling whether what I think is true is really true, if truth consists in the correspondence of my mind with reality.

### CONSISTENCY IS NEEDED FOR TRUTH

There is the beginning of a solution to this problem. Staying within my own mind, let's suppose I make two statements. Let me call one of them proposition  $p$  and the other proposition  $q$ . Those are two separate statements. Anything you want to say. Suppose these two statements are contradictory. Suppose they are like the statements " $a$  is  $b$  and  $a$  is not  $b$ ," or "two plus two equal four and two plus two does not equal four." Now we know, don't we, that both can't be true? In fact, one must be true and one must be false. And this test of contradiction or noncontradiction, or consistency, is the beginning of a sign within our own minds, just staying within our own minds and having nothing but the things we think ourselves, our own thoughts; we know that if we contradict ourselves or if we think contradictory things, we are missing the truth somewhere. And this is an interesting point, because for consistency or coherence or the absence of contradiction to be a sign of truth and falsity, or a difficulty about truth and falsity, it self-presupposes that there can be a correspondence between the mind and reality. For if reality were full of contradictions, then the presence of contradictions in the mind would not be a test or a sign of truth or falsity. Only if reality is non-contradictory, if there are in

the world of existence no contradictions, are we committed to thinking that when we find a contradiction in our own minds, we have at least come into contact with one thing which is true and one which is false.

Most philosophers are not satisfied with this sign of truth. I say most, there are some exceptions; some philosophers think this is quite sufficient. For example, Descartes takes the view that when our own ideas are quite clear and distinct, when they are so clear and distinct that they are free from all contradiction, then we know we have the truth, then we are sure, we are certain of our possession of the truth. And Spinoza says, for example, "What can be clearer or more certain than a true idea as the standard of truth? Just as light reveals both itself and the darkness, so truth is the standard of itself and of the thoughts."

But this is not sufficient, I think. And I would like to show you why it is not. Suppose these two propositions are contradictory. What we know then is that one must be true and one must be false. But which? Either one could be true, either one could be false; we don't know which is true or false from knowing that their being contradictory makes one of them true and one false. How do we solve that problem? We could solve that problem only if in our mind there are some propositions or principles which are given as true, which we are certain about as true; so that these can be used as the measure or standard of the truth in other propositions. If, for example, we were absolutely sure that proposition  $p$  is true, then we would know that if  $q$  contradicts it,  $q$  is false. But we have to know first that  $p$  is true. And we can't know that simply from the fact that  $p$  contradicts  $q$ . To solve this problem fully we must have some assurance about certain propositions as true and use them to measure truth and falsity in others.

Aristotle makes this point, I think, very clearly when he says, "The human mind uses two kinds of principles. There are the unquestionable truths of the understanding which are axioms or self-

evident truths and there are the truths of perception, truths which we know, which we possess, when we perceive matters of fact, such as, "Here is a piece of paper in my hand," or "Here is a book, I see a book, I observe a book." That is a matter of fact I can't have any doubt about, just as the self-evident truth that the whole is greater than the part is a truth of my understanding about which I can have no doubt.

Now all that moderns have added to this is an elaborate, carefully, worked-out logic of the methods of empirical verification. But all the truth can be tested by finding whether or not anything else agrees with the facts we know by observation or agrees with the principles which are self-evident to our understanding. With these two at either extreme, we can tell whether anything else we think is true by seeing that it doesn't contradict this or this. I think if you will reflect about what I have said, you will see that it begins to solve the problem of how we tell whether a given statement is true or false in terms of the way that statement accords or disagrees with self-evident truths or truths of immediate perception of matters of fact.

## THE IMMUTABILITY OF TRUTH

I think the time is almost up, but I would like to spend a moment more on that very interesting problem about the mutability of truth. Is truth eternal or does it change? There's no question that people change their minds, that the human race in the course of centuries passes from knowledge to error or from error to knowledge in the opinions that it holds. But this is a change in the human mind and not a change in the truth or in what is true. For example, the opinion that the earth was flat, if it ever was false, is always false. And the opposite opinion, that the earth in which we live is round, if it ever was true, is always true. The fact that people have changed their minds about whether the earth is flat or round doesn't make the truth of the matter itself change at all.

But you may say to me, Suppose that the earth tomorrow or next year were to change itself and suddenly become flat or oblong or something else, wouldn't the proposition that the earth is round become false? No, because if I were careful and exact enough, I would say that from the beginning until this year, the earth has been round. So that if next year the earth changed its shape, my proposition still would be true, because it would always remain true that up to this year the earth had been round. Hence I think it is fair to say that truth itself is immutable, even if we as humans in our thinking do not possess the truth immutably.