

doctrines as "truths." The question is not one of the value or importance of the doctrines, but of the meaning of words and of the correct employment of language. A proposition which, for whatever reason, does not admit of demonstration, although it may be firmly held and conscientiously acted upon, is properly described not as a "truth," but as an "opinion." I have already defined an opinion to be "a persuasion of the mind, without proof or certain knowledge," and it will be manifest, on slight reflection, that to this category may be referred most of the mental conditions which govern our conduct. And it must be remembered that such mental conditions, persuasions with regard to religious doctrines or duties for example, will be just as effectual to govern our conduct when we call them by a right name as when we call them by a wrong one. We do not render an opinion any more likely to besound by calling it a truth; nor do we weaken the demonstration of a truth by calling that truth an opinion. To return to a former illustration, the nurse who had fathomed the limitations of her own knowledge, and who said she "thought" that a certain rise of temperature had been caused by a certain article of food, would nevertheless feel that her opinion ought to determine her actions; and she would be just as solicitous to prevent this food from being given again, as she would have been if she had said that the rise "had" been so occasioned, or as she would have been even after the use of a still more frequent form of feminine locution, by which she would assert that she was "sure," or perhaps "quite certain," as to the existence of the assigned relation between the antecedent and the consequent. In the latter cases, indeed, not separating in her mind her knowledge from her opinion, she would be more likely to lose sight in the wrong direction of the difference between the two, to hold the former as lightly as she ought to hold the latter, and to be ready to yield assent, with or without sufficient evidence, to a suggestion that there had been an error in the reading, and that the temperature had not risen after all. Sir William Hamilton long ago objected to mathematics, as an instrument of education, on the ground that, by accustoming the mind to demonstration, it would render it less willing to accept the guidance of high probability, which, in most of the relations of life, is the best or even the only guidance which is attainable. I fail to realise the force of this objection; and see no difficulty whatever in accepting the guidance of high probability, a guidance which, as a matter of fact, we all of us accept every hour of the day. My point is simply that we ought to know this guidance for what it is, and that we ought habitually to think of it,

and to speak of it, in accordance with such knowledge.

The slipshod forms of common talk, which fail to mark any distinction between what we know and what we conjecture, are not only destructive of the power, which we should all possess and cultivate, of accurately defining the limits of our knowledge, but they also tend to diminish the confidence which will be placed in our statements by any who listen to them carefully. As regards nurses, this element in the question has a twofold and highly important application. It is part of a nurse's duty to observe carefully any changes in the condition of her patient, and to report them accurately to the doctor: the necessary accuracy being attainable in no other way than by habitual truthfulness. It also constantly devolves upon her to reply to the questions of the patient and of his friends; people whose perceptions will be sharpened by anxiety, and who will readily note the full significance of modes of speech which might escape their attention at other times, and which indicate that the speaker only speaks certainly of that which is certain, and always doubtfully of that which is doubtful. The habitual use of such forms as "I cannot tell," or "I do not know," or "I am not sure," for the many occasions on which such forms will be true and applicable, has an inevitable tendency to assure listeners that, when these forms are dispensed with, it is because they are applicable no longer, and that the speaker is on firm ground. The last fifty years have been fruitful in the demonstration and establishment of truths, chiefly in the domain of physical science; and these truths are of daily and constantly-increasing applicability in all departments of the healing art. It is therefore the privilege of those who are engaged in the practice of that art to have a more effectual grasp of certainty, a larger experience of truth, than perhaps falls to the lot of the members of any other calling; and also to have corresponding opportunities of learning to recognise its value. The history of medicine is full of records of erroneous conjectures which, by reason of insufficient investigation in the first instance, have prevailed for a time, which have influenced practice more or less prejudicially, and which have then fallen into merited oblivion. It is also full of the records of discoveries which have stood the tests of time and trial, which, in other words, have been proved to be true; and upon which, therefore, we may confidently rely. In all other professions, in law, in politics, in the conflicts of so-called theologians, some kind of purpose may be fulfilled, some temporary or even permanent victory may be won, by the successful promulgation of error; as when an unjust decision is secured in a court of law by some skilful mis-

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)