

§ 2. Indefectibility of Certitude

1 IT is the characteristic of certitude that its object is a truth, a truth as such, a proposition
2 as true. There are right and wrong convictions, and certitude is a right conviction; if it is
3 not right with a consciousness of being right, it is not certitude. Now truth cannot
4 change; what is once truth is always truth; and the human mind is made for truth, and
5 so rests in truth, as it cannot rest in falsehood. When then it once becomes possessed
6 of a truth, what is to dispossess it? but this is to be certain; therefore once certitude,
7 always certitude. If certitude in any matter be the termination of all doubt or fear about
8 its truth, and an unconditional conscious adherence to it, it carries with it an inward
9 assurance, strong though implicit, that it shall never fail. Indefectibility almost enters into
10 its very idea, enters into it at least so far as this, that its failure, if of frequent occurrence,
11 would prove that certitude was after all and in fact an impossible act, and that what
12 looked like it was a mere extravagance of the intellect. Truth would still be truth, but the
13 knowledge of it would be beyond us and unattainable. It is of great importance then to
14 show, that, as a general rule, certitude does not fail; that failures of {222} what was
15 taken for certitude are the exception; that the intellect, which is made for truth, can
16 attain truth, and, having attained it, can keep it, can recognize it, and preserve the
17 recognition.

18 This is on the whole reasonable; yet are the stipulations, thus obviously necessary for
19 an act or state of certitude, ever fulfilled? We know what conjecture is, and what
20 opinion, and what assent is, can we point out any specific state or habit of thought, of
21 which the distinguishing mark is unchangeableness? On the contrary, any conviction,
22 false as well as true, may last; and any conviction, true as well as false, may be lost. A
23 conviction in favour of a proposition may be exchanged for a conviction of its
24 contradictory; and each of them may be attended, while they last, by that sense of
25 security and repose, which a true object alone can legitimately impart. No line can be
26 drawn between such real certitudes as have truth for their object, and apparent
27 certitudes. No distinct test can be named, sufficient to discriminate between what may
28 be called the false prophet and the true. What looks like certitude always is exposed to
29 the chance of turning out to be a mistake. If our intimate, deliberate conviction may be
30 counterfeit in the case of one proposition, why not in the case of another? if in the case
31 of one man, why not in the case of a hundred? Is certitude then ever possible without
32 the attendant gift of infallibility? can we know what is right in one case, unless we are
33 secured against error in any? Further, if one man is infallible, why is he different from
34 his brethren? unless indeed he is distinctly marked out for the prerogative. {223} Must
35 not all men be infallible by consequence, if any man is to be considered as certain?

36 The difficulty, thus stated argumentatively, has only too accurate a response in what
37 actually goes on in the world. It is a fact of daily occurrence that men change their
38 certitudes, that is, what they consider to be such, and are as confident and well-
39 established in their new opinions as they were once in their old. They take up forms of
40 religion only to leave them for their contradictories. They risk their fortunes and their
41 lives on impossible adventures. They commit themselves by word and deed, in
42 reputation and position, to schemes which in the event they bitterly repent of and

renounce; they set out in youth with intemperate confidence in prospects which fail them, and in friends who betray them, ere they come to middle age; and they end their days in cynical disbelief of truth and virtue any where;—and often, the more absurd are their means and their ends, so much the longer do they cling to them, and then again so much the more passionate is their eventual disgust and contempt of them. How then can certitude be theirs, how is certitude possible at all, considering it is so often misplaced, so often fickle and inconsistent, so deficient in available criteria? And, as to the feeling of finality and security, ought it ever to be indulged? Is it not a mere weakness or extravagance, a deceit, to be eschewed by every clear and prudent mind? With the countless instances, on all sides of us, of human fallibility, with the constant exhibitions of antagonist certitudes, who can so sin against modesty and sobriety of mind, as not to be content with probability, {224} as the true guide of life, renouncing ambitious thoughts, which are sure either to delude him, or to disappoint?

This is what may be objected: now let us see what can be said in answer, particularly as regards religious certitude.

1.

First, as to fallibility and infallibility. It is very common, doubtless, especially in religious controversy, to confuse infallibility with certitude, and to argue that, since we have not the one, we have not the other, for that no one can claim to be certain on any point, who is not infallible about all; but the two words stand for things quite distinct from each other. For example, I remember for certain what I did yesterday, but still my memory is not infallible; I am quite clear that two and two make four, but I often make mistakes in long addition sums. I have no doubt whatever that John or Richard is my true friend, but I have before now trusted those who failed me, and I may do so again before I die. A certitude is directed to this or that particular proposition; it is not a faculty or gift, but a disposition of mind relatively to a definite case which is before me. Infallibility, on the contrary, is just that which certitude is not; it *is* a faculty or gift, and relates, not to some one truth in particular, but to all possible propositions in a given subject-matter. We ought in strict propriety, to speak, not of infallible acts, but of acts of infallibility. A belief or opinion as little admits of being called infallible, as a deed can correctly be called immortal. A deed is done and over; it may be great, momentous, effective, anything {225} but immortal; it is its fame, it is the work which it brings to pass, which is immortal, not the deed itself. And as a deed is good or bad, but never immortal, so a belief, opinion, or certitude is true or false, but never infallible. We cannot speak of things which exist or things which once were, as if they were something *in posse*. It is persons and rules that are infallible, not what is brought out into act, or committed to paper. A man is infallible, whose words are always true; a rule is infallible, if it is unerring in all its possible applications. An infallible authority is certain in every particular case that may arise; but a man who is certain in some one definite case, is not on that account infallible.

I am quite certain that Victoria is our Sovereign, and not her father, the late Duke of Kent, without laying any claim to the gift of infallibility; as I may do a virtuous action,

without being impeccable. I may be certain that the Church is infallible, while I am myself a fallible mortal; otherwise, I cannot be certain that the Supreme Being is infallible, until I am infallible myself. It is a strange objection, then, which is sometimes urged against Catholics, that they cannot prove and assent to the Church's infallibility, unless they first believe in their own. Certitude, as I have said, is directed to one or other definite concrete proposition. I am certain of proposition one, two, three, four, or five, one by one, each by itself. I may be certain of one of them, without being certain of the rest; that I am certain of the first makes it neither likely nor unlikely that I am certain of the second; {226} but were I infallible, then I should be certain, not only of one of them, but of all, and of many more besides, which have never come before me as yet. Therefore we may be certain of the infallibility of the Church, while we admit that in many things we are not, and cannot be, certain at all.

It is wonderful that a clear-headed man, like Chillingworth, sees this as little as the run of everyday objectors to the Catholic religion; for in his celebrated "Religion of Protestants" he writes as follows:—"You tell me they cannot be saved, unless they believe in your proposals with an infallible faith. To which end they must believe also your propounder, the Church, to be simply infallible. Now how is it possible for them to give a rational assent to the Church's infallibility, *unless they have some infallible means to know that she is infallible?* Neither can they infallibly know the infallibility of this means, but by some other; and so on for ever, unless they can dig so deep, as to come at length to the Rock, that is, to settle all upon something evident of itself, which is not so much as pretended." [Note]

Now what is an "infallible means"? It is a means of coming at a fact without the chance of mistake. It is a proof which is sufficient for certitude in the particular case, or a proof that is certain. When then Chillingworth says that there can be no "rational assent to the Church's infallibility" without "some infallible means of knowing that she is infallible," he means nothing else than some means which is {227} certain; he says that for a rational assent to infallibility there must be an absolutely valid or certain proof. This is intelligible; but observe how his argument will run, if worded according to this interpretation: "The doctrine of the Church's infallibility requires a proof that is certain; and that certain proof requires another previous certain proof, and that again another, and so on *ad infinitum*, unless indeed we dig so deep as to settle all upon something evident of itself." What is this but to say that nothing in this world is certain but what is self-evident? that nothing can be absolutely proved? Can he really mean this? What then becomes of physical truth? of the discoveries in optics, chemistry, and electricity, or of the science of motion? Intuition by itself will carry us but a little way into that circle of knowledge which is the boast of the present age.

I can believe then in the infallible Church without my own personal infallibility. Certitude is at most nothing more than infallibility *pro hac vice*, and promises nothing as to the truth of any proposition beside its own. That I am certain of this proposition today, is no ground for thinking that I shall have a right to be certain of that proposition tomorrow; and that I am wrong in my convictions about today's proposition, does not hinder my having a true conviction, a genuine certitude, about tomorrow's proposition. If indeed I

128 claimed to be infallible, one failure would shiver my claim to pieces; but I may claim to
129 be certain of the truth to which I have already attained, though I should arrive at no new
130 truths in addition as long as I live. {228}

131 2.

132 Let us put aside the word "infallibility;" let us understand by certitude, as I have
133 explained it, nothing more than a relation of the mind towards given propositions:—still,
134 it may be urged, it involves a sense of security and of repose, at least as regards these
135 in particular. Now how can this security be mine,—without which certitude is not,—if I
136 know, as I know too well, that before now I have thought myself certain, when I was
137 certain after all of an untruth? Is not the very possibility of certitude lost to me for ever
138 by that one mistake? What happened once, may happen again. All my certitudes before
139 and after are henceforth destroyed by the introduction of a reasonable doubt, underlying
140 them all. *Ipso facto* they cease to be certitudes,—they come short of unconditional
141 assents by the measure of that counterfeit assurance. They are nothing more to me
142 than opinions or anticipations, judgments on the verisimilitude of intellectual views, not
143 the possession and enjoyment of truths. And who has not thus been balked by false
144 certitudes a hundred times in the course of his experience? and how can certitude have
145 a legitimate place in our mental constitution, when it thus manifestly ministers to error
146 and to scepticism?

147 This is what may be objected, and it is not, as I think, difficult to answer. Certainly, the
148 experience of mistakes in the assents which we have made are to the prejudice of
149 subsequent ones. There is an antecedent difficulty in our allowing ourselves to be
150 certain of something {229} today, if yesterday we had to give up our belief of something
151 else, of which we had up to that time professed ourselves to be certain. This is true; but
152 antecedent objections to an act are not sufficient of themselves to prohibit its exercise;
153 they may demand of us an increased circumspection before committing ourselves to it,
154 but may be met with reasons more than sufficient to overcome them.

155 It must be recollected that certitude is a deliberate assent given expressly after
156 reasoning. If then my certitude is unfounded, it is the reasoning that is in fault, not my
157 assent to it. It is the law of my mind to seal up the conclusions to which ratiocination has
158 brought me, by that formal assent which I have called a certitude. I could indeed have
159 withheld my assent, but I should have acted against my nature, had I done so when
160 there was what I considered a proof; and I did only what was fitting, what was
161 incumbent on me, upon those existing conditions, in giving it. This is the process by
162 which knowledge accumulates and is stored up both in the individual and in the world. It
163 has sometimes been remarked, when men have boasted of the knowledge of modern
164 times, that no wonder we see more than the ancients, because we are mounted upon
165 their shoulders. The conclusions of one generation are the truths of the next. We are
166 able, it is our duty, deliberately to take things for granted which our forefathers had a
167 duty to doubt about; and unless we summarily put down disputation on points which
168 have been already proved and ruled, we shall waste our time, and make no advances.
169 Circumstances indeed may arise, when a {230} question may legitimately be revived,

170 which has already been definitely determined; but a re-consideration of such a question
171 need not abruptly unsettle the existing certitude of those who engage in it, or throw
172 them into a scepticism about things in general, even though eventually they find they
173 have been wrong in a particular matter. It would have been absurd to prohibit the
174 controversy which has lately been held concerning the obligations of Newton to Pascal;
175 and supposing it had issued in their being established, the partisans of Newton would
176 not have thought it necessary to renounce their certitude of the law of gravitation itself,
177 on the ground that they had been mistaken in their certitude that Newton discovered it.

178 If we are never to be certain, after having been once certain wrongly, then we ought
179 never to attempt a proof because we have once made a bad one. Errors in reasoning
180 are lessons and warnings, not to give up reasoning, but to reason with greater caution.
181 It is absurd to break up the whole structure of our knowledge, which is the glory of the
182 human intellect, because the intellect is not infallible in its conclusions. If in any
183 particular case we have been mistaken in our inferences and the certitudes which
184 followed upon them, we are bound of course to take the fact of this mistake into
185 account, in making up our minds on any new question, before we proceed to decide
186 upon it. But if, while weighing the arguments on one side and the other and drawing our
187 conclusion, that old mistake has already been allowed for, or has been, to use a familiar
188 mode of speaking, discounted, then it has no {231} outstanding claim against our
189 acceptance of that conclusion, after it has actually been drawn. Whatever be the
190 legitimate weight of the fact of that mistake in our inquiry, justice has been done to it,
191 before we have allowed ourselves to be certain again. Suppose I am walking out in the
192 moonlight, and see dimly the outlines of some figure among the trees;—it is a man. I
193 draw nearer,—it is still a man; nearer still, and all hesitation is at an end,—I am certain it
194 is a man. But he neither moves, nor speaks when I address him; and then I ask myself
195 what can be his purpose in hiding among the trees at such an hour. I come quite close
196 to him, and put out my arm. Then I find for certain that what I took for a man is but a
197 singular shadow, formed by the falling of the moonlight on the interstices of some
198 branches or their foliage. Am I not to indulge my second certitude, because I was wrong
199 in my first? does not any objection, which lies against my second from the failure of my
200 first, fade away before the evidence on which my second is founded?

201 Or again: I depose on my oath in a court of justice, to the best of my knowledge and
202 belief, that I was robbed by the prisoner at the bar. Then, when the real offender is
203 brought before me, I am obliged, to my great confusion, to retract. Because I have been
204 mistaken in my certitude, may I not at least be certain that I have been mistaken? And
205 further, in spite of the shock which that mistake gives me, is it impossible that the sight
206 of the real culprit may give me so luminous a conviction that at length I have got the
207 right man, that, were it decent towards the court, or consistent with self-respect, {232} I
208 may find myself prepared to swear to the identity of the second, as I have already
209 solemnly committed myself to the identity of the first? It is manifest that the two
210 certitudes stand each on its own basis, and the antecedent objection to my admission of
211 a truth which was brought home to me second, drawn from a hallucination which came
212 first, is a mere abstract argument, impotent when directed against good evidence lying
213 in the concrete.

215 If in the criminal case which I have been supposing, the second certitude, felt by a
216 witness, was a legitimate state of mind, so was the first. An act, viewed in itself, is not
217 wrong because it is done wrongly. False certitudes are faults because they are false,
218 not because they are (supposed) certitudes. They are, or may be, the attempts and the
219 failures of an intellect insufficiently trained, or off its guard. Assent is an act of the mind,
220 congenial to its nature; and it, as other acts, may be made both when it ought to be
221 made, and when it ought not. It is a free act, a personal act for which the doer is
222 responsible, and the actual mistakes in making it, be they ever so numerous or serious,
223 have no force whatever to prohibit the act itself. We are accustomed in such cases, to
224 appeal to the maxim, "Usum non tollit abusus;" and it is plain that, if what may be called
225 functional disarrangements of the intellect are to be considered fatal to the recognition
226 of the functions themselves, then the mind has no laws whatever and no normal
227 constitution. I just now spoke of the growth {233} of knowledge; there is also a growth in
228 the use of those faculties by which knowledge is acquired. The intellect admits of an
229 education; man is a being of progress; he has to learn how to fulfil his end, and to be
230 what facts show that he is intended to be. His mind is in the first instance in disorder,
231 and runs wild; his faculties have their rudimental and inchoate state, and are gradually
232 carried on by practice and experience to their perfection. No instances then whatever of
233 mistaken certitude are sufficient to constitute a proof, that certitude itself is a perversion
234 or extravagance of his nature.

235 We do not dispense with clocks, because from time to time they go wrong, and tell
236 untruly. A clock, organically considered, may be perfect, yet it may require regulating.
237 Till that needful work is done, the moment-hand perhaps marks the half-minute, when
238 the minute-hand is at the quarter-past, and the hour hand is just at noon, and the
239 quarter-bell strikes the three-quarters, and the hour-bell strikes four, while the sun-dial
240 precisely tells two o'clock. The sense of certitude may be called the bell of the intellect;
241 and that it strikes when it should not is a proof that the clock is out of order, no proof
242 that the bell will be untrustworthy and useless, when it comes to us adjusted and
243 regulated from the hands of the clock-maker.

244 Our conscience too may be said to strike the hours, and will strike them wrongly, unless
245 it be duly regulated for the performance of its proper function. It is the loud
246 announcement of the principle of right in the details of conduct, as the sense of certitude
247 is the clear witness to what is true. Both certitude and conscience {234} have a place in
248 the normal condition of the mind. As a human being, I am unable, if I were to try, to live
249 without some kind of conscience; and I am as little able to live without those landmarks
250 of thought which certitude secures for me; still, as the hammer of a clock may tell
251 untruly, so may my conscience and my sense of certitude be attached to mental acts,
252 whether of consent or of assent, which have no claim to be thus sanctioned. Both the
253 moral and the intellectual sanction are liable to be biassed by personal inclinations and
254 motives; both require and admit of discipline; and, as it is no disproof of the authority of
255 conscience that false consciences abound, neither does it destroy the importance and

256 the uses of certitude, because even educated minds, who are earnest in their inquiries
257 after the truth, in many cases remain under the power of prejudice or delusion.

258 To this deficiency in mental training a wider error is to be attributed,—the mistaking for
259 conviction and certitude states and frames of mind which make no pretence to the
260 fundamental condition on which conviction rests as distinct from assent. The multitude
261 of men confuse together the probable, the possible, and the certain, and apply these
262 terms to doctrines and statements almost at random. They have no clear view what it is
263 they know, what they presume, what they suppose, and what they only assert. They
264 make little distinction between credence, opinion, and profession; at various times they
265 give them all perhaps the name of certitude, and accordingly, when they change their
266 minds, they fancy they have given up points of {235} which they had a true conviction.
267 Or at least bystanders thus speak of them, and the very idea of certitude falls into
268 disrepute.

269 In this day the subject-matter of thought and belief has so increased upon us, that a far
270 higher mental formation is required than was necessary in times past, and higher than
271 we have actually reached. The whole world is brought to our doors every morning, and
272 our judgment is required upon social concerns, books, persons, parties, creeds, national
273 acts, political principles and measures. We have to form our opinion, make our
274 profession, take our side on a hundred matters on which we have but little right to speak
275 at all. But we do speak, and must speak, upon them, though neither we nor those who
276 hear us are well able to determine what is the real position of our intellect relatively to
277 those many questions, one by one, on which we commit ourselves; and then, since
278 many of these questions change their complexion with the passing hour, and many
279 require elaborate consideration, and many are simply beyond us, it is not wonderful, if,
280 at the end of a few years, we have to revise or to repudiate our conclusions; and then
281 we shall be unfairly said to have changed our certitudes, and shall confirm the doctrine,
282 that, except in abstract truth, no judgment rises higher than probability.

283 Such are the mistakes about certitude among educated men; and after referring to
284 them, it is scarcely worth while to dwell upon the absurdities and excesses of the rude
285 intellect, as seen in the world at large; as if any one could dream of treating as
286 deliberate assents, {236} as assents upon assents, as convictions or certitudes, the
287 prejudices, credulities, infatuations, superstitions, fanaticisms, the whims and fancies,
288 the sudden irrevocable plunges into the unknown, the obstinate determinations,—the
289 offspring, as they are, of ignorance, wilfulness, cupidity, and pride,—which go so far to
290 make up the history of mankind; yet these are often set down as instances of certitude
291 and of its failure.

292 4.

293 I have spoken of certitude as being assigned a definite and fixed place among our
294 mental acts; it follows upon examination and proof, as the bell sounds the hour, when
295 the hands reach it,—so that no act or state of the intellect is certitude, however it may
296 resemble it, which does not observe this appointed law. This proviso greatly diminishes

the catalogue of genuine certitudes. Another restriction is this:—the occasions or subject-matters of certitude are under law also. Putting aside the daily exercise of the senses, the principal subjects in secular knowledge, about which we can be certain, are the truths or facts which are its basis. As to this world, we are certain of the elements of knowledge, whether general, scientific, historical, or such as bear on our daily needs and habits, and relate to ourselves, our homes and families, our friends, neighbourhood, country, and civil state. Beyond these elementary points of knowledge, lies a vast subject-matter of opinion, credence, and belief, viz. the field of public affairs, of social and professional life, of business, of duty, of literature, of taste, nay, of the {237} experimental sciences. On subjects such as these the reasonings and conclusions of mankind vary,—"*mundum tradidit disputationi eorum*;"—and prudent men in consequence seldom speak confidently, unless they are warranted to do so by genius, great experience, or some special qualification. They determine their judgments by what is probable, what is safe, what promises best, what has verisimilitude, what impresses and sways them. They neither can possess, nor need certitude, nor do they look out for it.

Hence it is that—the province of certitude being so contracted, and that of opinion so large—it is common to call probability the guide of life. This saying, when properly explained, is true; however, we must not suffer ourselves to carry a true maxim to an extreme; it is far from true, if we so hold it as to forget that without first principles there can be no conclusions at all, and that thus probability does in some sense presuppose and require the existence of truths which are certain. Especially is the maxim untrue, in respect to the other great department of knowledge, the spiritual, if taken to support the doctrine, that the first principles and elements of religion, which are universally received, are mere matter of opinion; though in this day, it is too often taken for granted that religion is one of those subjects on which truth cannot be discovered, and on which one conclusion is pretty much on a level with another. But on the contrary, the initial truths of divine knowledge ought to be viewed as parallel to the initial truths of secular: as the latter are certain, so too are the former. I cannot indeed deny that a decent {238} reverence for the Supreme Being, an acquiescence in the claims of Revelation, a general profession of Christian doctrine, and some sort of attendance on sacred ordinances, is in fact all the religion that is usual with even the better sort of men, and that for all this a sufficient basis may certainly be found in probabilities; but if religion is to be devotion, and not a mere matter of sentiment, if it is to be made the ruling principle of our lives, if our actions, one by one, and our daily conduct, are to be consistently directed towards an Invisible Being, we need something higher than a mere balance of arguments to fix and to control our minds. Sacrifice of wealth, name, or position, faith and hope, self-conquest, communion with the spiritual world, presuppose a real hold and habitual intuition of the objects of Revelation, which is certitude under another name.

To this issue indeed we may bring the main difference, viewed philosophically, between nominal Christianity on the one hand, and vital Christianity on the other. Rational, sensible men, as they consider themselves, men who do not comprehend the very notion of loving God above all things, are content with such a measure of probability for

341 the truths of religion, as serves them in their secular transactions; but those who are
342 deliberately staking their all upon the hopes of the next world, think it reasonable, and
343 find it necessary, before starting on their new course, to have some points, clear and
344 immutable, to start from; otherwise, they will not start at all. They ask, as a preliminary
345 condition, to have the ground sure under their feet; they look for more than human
346 reasonings {239} and inferences, for nothing less than the "strong consolation," as the
347 Apostle speaks, of those "immutable things in which it is impossible for God to lie," His
348 counsel and His oath. Christian earnestness may be ruled by the world to be a
349 perverseness or a delusion; but, as long as it exists, it will presuppose certitude as the
350 very life which is to animate it.

351 This is the true parallel between human and divine knowledge; each of them opens into
352 a large field of mere opinion, but in both the one and the other the primary principles,
353 the general, fundamental, cardinal truths are immutable. In human matters we are
354 guided by probabilities, but, I repeat, they are probabilities founded on certainties. It is
355 on no probability that we are constantly receiving the informations and dictates of sense
356 and memory, of our intellectual instincts, of the moral sense, and of the logical faculty. It
357 is on no probability that we receive the generalizations of science, and the great outlines
358 of history. These are certain truths; and from them each of us forms his own judgments
359 and directs his own course, according to the probabilities which they suggest to him, as
360 the navigator applies his observations and his charts for the determination of his course.
361 Such is the main view to be taken of the separate provinces of probability and certainty
362 in matters of this world; and so, as regards the world invisible and future, we have a
363 direct and conscious knowledge of our Maker, His attributes, His providences, acts,
364 works, and will, from nature, and revelation; and, beyond this knowledge lies the large
365 domain of theology, metaphysics, and ethics, {240} on which it is not allowed to us to
366 advance beyond probabilities, or to attain to more than an opinion.

367 Such on the whole is the analogy between our knowledge of matters of this world and
368 matters of the world unseen;—indefectible certitude in primary truths, manifold
369 variations of opinion in their application and disposition.