FALSITY IN PRACTICE

JAMES K. FEIBLEMAN

In this study I propose to examine the use of falsity and then to suggest remedies intended to replace it with truth. We shall need to know first how these words and some related ones are to be employed, and so a few definitions will be in order. Truth is the correspondence between propositions and the objects to which they refer. Such objects may be concrete, as for instance material objects, or they may be abstract, as for instance the properties of material objects, classes of material objects, or classes of classes. Falsity is the absence of correspondence. This may occur either through a fault in the proposition or because of a substitution for the object. It may be added parenthetically that while truth is both subjective and objective, falsity is subjective only: falsity refers quite literally to nothing. There is then something in the world to which a truth refers but nothing for the reference of a falsity. On the other hand, both truths and falsities may be concepts in the human mind. This gives truth two locations and falsity only one.

Knowledge is the recognition of truth; but there is also false knowledge, which consists in mistaking falsity for truth in the recognition. Ignorance is not the absence of knowledge but the possession of false knowledge. The ignorant man is not one who thinks that he knows nothing but one who is mistaken in what he knows. Belief is the feeling that a proposition is true, and so it can apply as easily to false propositions as to true ones.

In Part I of what follows we shall consider some of the characteristics of falsity, and of truth in its relation to falsity, characteristics which lend themselves to peculiar advantage in practice. In Part II we shall observe how falsity is actually used in the daily affairs of the world. And in Part III we shall
address ourselves to the question of how truth can be substituted for falsity as a matter of strategy.

I

Most people are not attracted to the truth simply because it makes demands on them which they find arduous. Besides, in the hurly-burly the truth becomes more palatable when alternated with falsity and so somewhat diluted. To be in favor of something—a program or a principle—on one occasion and against it on another shortly after, is not troublesome because not noticed. A man with emotional reasons or prejudices does not keep track of his earlier states and sees no need for consistency. But the struggle between knowledge and ignorance is an old one and not likely to be decided in a hurry.

Everyone knows that. But what is not equally well known is that ignorance is not the mere absence of knowledge: it involves rather the presence of false knowledge. Ignorance is not a void. The man who “knows” that the world is flat, that it is bad luck to walk under a ladder, that it is possible to tell his future from the stars, or that the Koran was written by God, neither thinks nor acts like one who does not have knowledge.

The state of ignorance usually consists either in having no opinion or in holding false knowledge. The absence of opinion is usually not very extensive. Ignorance consists largely in false knowledge. There simply are no ignorant people, no empty minds, nobody who is without his or her share of beliefs. Since thoughts, feeling and actions are always guided by beliefs, we all seem to behave as though we were in possession of very large amounts of knowledge.

Belief itself is not a thought but a feeling, and the feeling is one of conviction. If an individual believes in the truth of a statement, that means he feels it to be true. A belief itself is always authentic; belief is belief, whatever it may be belief about. A belief in the truth of a false statement is equally a belief, even though it is a mistaken belief. Where a belief is wrong, it is the content of the belief which is at fault, not the