

## BELIEF AND KNOWLEDGE IN GUSTAVE LE BON AND JOSÉ ORTEGA Y GASSET

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### RESUMEN

El concepto de creencia ha desempeñado un papel central en las modernas ciencias sociales. En este trabajo se analiza este concepto en el pensamiento de Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955), para ponerlo después en relación con la doctrina desarrollada por el psicólogo y sociólogo francés Gustave Le Bon (1841-1931), de la que aquél es seguramente deudor. Tras presentar la noción orteguiana de creencia a la luz de distinción terminológica que hace el filósofo español entre "ideas" y "creencias", se estudia la función contrapuesta que ambos desempeñan en la vida humana, el tema nuclear de su pensamiento. Una distinción entre ideas y creencias que presenta numerosas conexiones con ésta es la propuesta por Gustave Le Bon como instrumento para entender el comportamiento individual y los grandes acontecimientos históricos. A pesar de que el carácter metafísico que el concepto de creencia tiene en el pensamiento orteguiano se halla ausente por completo de la obra de Le Bon, un análisis comparativo entre las doctrinas de ambos autores arroja un cierto número de semejanzas que resultan del mayor interés, como la utilización que uno y otro hacen del concepto para subrayar la naturaleza histórica y social del hombre y la base inconsciente de su comportamiento.

### ABSTRACT

The concept of belief has played an essential role in modern social sciences. The aim of this paper is to analyze such a concept in the

philosophy of Ortega y Gasset, and to compare it with Gustave Le Bon's doctrine -to which Ortega's is probably indebted. After presenting Ortega's terminological distinction between "ideas" and "beliefs", the different role played by these two concepts in human life is then examined. A closely related distinction between ideas and beliefs was previously advanced by the French psychologist and sociologist Gustave Le Bon, who used them as instruments to understand both individual behavior and major historical events. Although the essentially metaphysical character of this concept in Ortega's thought is entirely absent in Le Bon's, a comparative analysis of both doctrines yields a number of interesting similarities. For instance, the emphasis given through the concept of belief to the social and historical nature of human beings, as well as to the unconscious basis of their behavior.

The concept of belief has played a central role in modern social sciences. It has been used in a variety of contexts, contributing to the enlightening of such different matters as the origins of philosophy, generational change, perceptual knowledge and wide historical world views.

#### IDEAS AND BELIEFS IN ORTEGA Y GASSET'S THOUGHT

In recent times, a precise terminological distinction between "beliefs" and "ideas" has been advanced by the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955). According to his view, ideas and opinions are intellectual responses consciously made by the subject in order to cope with certain situations and problems. On the other hand, beliefs are those basic convictions on which the individual stands; they are neither contents nor thoughts, but rather those assumptions that are taken for granted and unconsciously introduced into his/her action. For instance, the existence of the street is taken for granted by a man going out from his house. A healthy bodily-condition is also taken for granted (or believed in) by a non-neurotic person when enjoying himself.

Beliefs, Ortega writes, present things as real and unquestionable. On the other hand, the contents presented by ideas appear rather as constructs; therefore, they have a problematic character, requiring proof or demonstration.

In Ortega's theory, two psychological functions are formally opposed: the function of "thinking of" and the function consisting in "relying on". While the former refers to the construction of ideas by the thinker, the latter

consists in taking something for granted, introducing it into our lives in an unconscious way without properly questioning its role. The object of belief is thus taken automatically into account by our behavior (Ortega, 1954, V, 397).

Furthermore, ideas and beliefs are related to each other in a peculiar, vicarial way. According to Ortega, human life comes to rest primarily on beliefs. Only when beliefs fail do ideas merge up to fill the resultant void or gap. Therefore, conscious ideas (consciousness, in short) come to solve those problems that cannot be solved by means of the automatism of beliefs. Opposed to every kind of intellectualism, Ortega sustained that the ground of our existence is not made up of conscious ideas, but rather of unconscious, unexpressed assumptions or beliefs that are only evidenced either when the actions of an individual are analyzed, or when life enters into a period of historical crisis.

#### LE BON'S DOCTRINE OF BELIEF

Ortega's doctrine of belief was likely influenced by the ideas of the French psychologist and sociologist Gustave Le Bon (1841-1931). Le Bon was a very influential author in the social psychology of his time, particularly through his book on *The psychology of crowds* (1895). Strongly influenced himself by positivist ideas, specifically by those of Durkheim and Tarde, Le Bon has been largely credited with the idea of the existence of a collective mind transitorily acting upon a crowd, mainly in emotional situations. Crowd members become unified through a mental contagion that brings forth a mind common to them all.

In order to understand both individual and historical behavior, Le Bon made a distinction between "ideas" and "beliefs". Knowing and believing were for him different mental functions, each stemming from a different origin. Comparison between them is illuminating: "Belief and knowledge are two very different forms of mental activity with separate origins. The former is an unconscious intuition; it is generated by certain causes that are independent from our will. The latter represents a conscious acquisition that is exclusively built up by means of rational methods, such as experience and observation" (Le Bon, 1911, 5-6).

Thus, beliefs are not controlled by reasoning, although they are governed by a logic of their own. They mostly rest on feelings, shaping or mishaping the subject's world view. In Le Bon's own words, "a belief is an act of faith of an unconscious origin, forcing us to admit an idea, an opinion, an explanation or a doctrine as a whole" (id., 5). Knowledge is a very different kind of function, though: "It is a conscious operation being slowly built up

by observation and experience" (Le Bon, s.a., 27-28). Knowledge is thus governed by the rules of traditional logic, and both its function and structure have been deeply analyzed by rationalist philosophy.

Le Bon made use of the concept of belief when approaching the study of great historical events. In his opinion, the rise of the Islamic empire, for instance, as well as the diffusion and strengthening of both Christianity and French revolutionarism at the end of the 18th century, cannot be properly understood without resorting to such a concept.

In history, beliefs go through modifications but they do not wholly disappear. Man is credited by Le Bon with a "need to believe"; "destroyed dogmas are always replaced" (id., 8), he stated, for reason has no power whatsoever over such a need. Religious creeds, for instance, have been historically replaced by socialist and anarchist creeds.

In one of his books, Le Bon asserted that civilizations are guided but by a few ideas; for instance, the Middle Ages were ruled by both "the feudal and the religious idea" (Le Bon, 1919, 146). But he also maintained that ideas can only act upon peoples "when [...] they come down from the unsteady regions of thought to the steady, unconscious region of feeling, where the motives of our actions come to be elaborated" (id., 145).

According to Le Bon, the individual human being gets unconsciously embedded in the collective dimension of his/her group; from it does he/she receive the beliefs that will inspire his/her actions and mold his/her character and personal way of behaving.

Human behavior is determined by feelings. Feelings emerge from the unconscious or subconscious; they govern knowledge and intelligence and make up "the roots of our opinions and behavior" (Le Bon, s.a., 36). To Le Bon, then, "modern science has established that unconscious phenomena often play a more important role than intellectual phenomena" (id., 36). Thus, materials are first elaborated by the unconscious; by the time they reach the intellect, they are already molded.

The subconscious beliefs and their lines of force may be only seen through action, as they are not open to intellectual reflection. This is why Le Bon says that "acting is learning to know oneself"; or, even more strongly: "The only way of discovering one's real self is... action" (id., 67). Unconscious factors are very deeply buried, indeed, and they render introspection useless.

Affections are vague and, above all, contagious. To a certain extent, they are common to all human groups. Affections, moreover, lay the foundations of human character and personality. Le Bon goes as far as to admit the existence of collective characters: "All peoples have certain collective characters that are common to the great majority of their members;

this turns the various nations into true psychological species" (id., 57). Thus, according to Le Bon, national characters have a real existence; they are grounded on differential dimensions in their emotional and affective organization. The individual follows the lead of the group (id., 65); the group, in turn, is supportive of individual behavior. Furthermore, personality "depends (...) on two undetachable factors, the being itself and its environment" (id., 63).

According to Le Bon's social psychology, individuals are made out of a common social substance. In historical events, people are largely determined by a prestigious minority ("a small number of apostles", he calls them) who act on the others "rather by suggestion than by demonstration" (Le Bon, 1919, 147); they appeal to authority or passion, not to reason, since masses can only be persuaded "by assertions", that is, by dogmas, not by demonstrations nor complex rational arguments (id., 148). In every society, the agitator or social apostle (that is to say, the historically active minority group) will carry out his task of "creating a faith" (Le Bon, 1903, 141) (of a religious, social or political nature), of finding new words capable of awaken illusions that, through suggestion, may make the crowd take the contents referred to by such new rhetoric as though they were real.

Le Bon's aim was to offer an interpretation of social dynamics in terms, not of rational ideas, but of emotional and unconscious beliefs. Essential to his view is the articulated interaction of some active minority groups offering ideals to be assumed and believed by the receptive and acquiescent masses.

To sum up, Le Bon came to understand social facts mainly on the basis of such individual psychological structures as suggestibility and affectivity. These structures lay on a ground of unconscious beliefs capable of activating the individual personality when they were properly stimulated by those minorities governing history.

#### LE BON'S AND ORTEGA Y GASSET'S DOCTRINES: A COMPARATIVE VIEW

An analysis of the concept of belief in Ortega y Gasset's thought leads straight to the core of his philosophy. According to him, philosophy itself is a great intellectual effort made in order to replace a dubious, not yet believed-in world view by a system of ideas rationally constructed. While there is an essential metaphysical outlook in Ortega's approach (Marías, 1960), such is not the case in Le Bon's theorizing. His positivist stance placed him very far away from such philosophical purposes.

Strong similarities stand up, however, in both approaches. For both Le Bon and Ortega, individual personality is socially grounded. Beliefs support the whole person, giving it a social and historical character. They are mechanically and irrationally acquired by individuals. Out of introspective reach, beliefs have a dynamic and motivational nature that, to a large extent, guide choices, decisions and ultimately conscious behavior.

Although very far from psychoanalytical assumptions, both authors explicitly acknowledge the importance of unconscious determinations in individual and group behavior.

Through the concept of belief, both of them also stress the historical and social nature of the individual human mind.

In our opinion, the conceptual pair "idea vs. belief" can still play an important role in present day social psychology.

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