

CHAPTER I

BELIEF AND SUPERSTITION

§ 1. SUPERSTITION

INASMUCH as the influence of superstition upon the history of society can hardly be exaggerated, it must be worth while to inquire into its origin and nature. But this inquiry leads into a quagmire of ambiguous words: and to attempt to define them for all purposes would entangle the discussion in endless controversies. So it will be best to explain merely in what sense certain words will be used in this book. "Superstition," for example, means in common use (I think) false beliefs concerning supernatural powers, especially such as are regarded as socially injurious, and particularly as leading to obscurantism or cruelty: but it is often extended to cover beliefs of a negligible or frivolous kind, such as stories about "fairy-rings," or the unluckiness of seeing the new moon for the first time through glass. Plainly the injuriousness of a false belief is often in dispute, and at any rate is a question of time and place. "Superstition," then, is here used merely as a collective term for the subjects of the ensuing chapters—Magic (or the belief in occult forces) and Animism (or the belief in the activity of spirits).

The consequences of a belief, again, whether good or evil, cannot affect its psychological character: in trying to explain its nature and origin, one cannot take account of its social values. The explanation of superstitions must hold of all false beliefs, whatever their utility or disutility. Nay, further, whether a belief is false or true does not necessarily affect its psychological character: for a man may hold two doctrines, one true and the other false, both derived from the sincere testimony of the same person, and he may not be

able to discern any difference in the degrees of confidence with which he holds them or in their influence upon his conduct. The understanding of false belief, then, requires an examination of belief in general.

Still, whilst in the mind of any given man a true and a false belief may have the same character and origin, considered generally they must surely have different origins and grounds; and to make the sequel clearer, I will anticipate its conclusions so far as to say that true beliefs seem to rest on perception or on inference verified by perception, and false beliefs seem to depend upon imagination that cannot be verified. This general statement will need several qualifications. But I rely upon it at present so far as to say that superstitions are essentially imagination-beliefs.

We shall find that these superstitions, though often held by whole tribes with the utmost assurance, differ in some subtle way from the perception-beliefs of their common sense, as that "fire burns" and that "water quenches fire." They are unstable: (1) they become active on occasions, and otherwise are apt to be forgotten—as ghosts are only thought of at night. (2) They are modifiable merely for the sake of economy or other convenience. (3) They lose their hold on a tribe, fall off and die in course of time without any change in the evidence for them. (4) They depend a good deal upon the assent of a crowd. (5) They often vary in neighbouring countries or families, or amongst the members of a family. This is not like common sense. Superstitions or imagination-beliefs are unstable, in spite of being often held with great obstinacy (so that people die for them), and of their enduring, in the simpler forms and at a certain level of social life, for thousands of years. There is something wanting in the hold-fast or anchorage of imagination-beliefs.

It is necessary to explain what I mean by "imagination."

§ 2. IMAGINATION

Is it enough to define "imagination" as merely the having of mental "images," pictures before the mind's eye? This would confine imagination to visual representations, to the

CAUSES OF BELIEF

3

exclusion of auditory, olfactory, etc., which are all a man born blind can have, and which sometimes occur to those who can see, though the visual are commonest. The word "images," therefore, is sometimes used to cover all these modes of representation; though "phantasmata" would be better.

Again, a mental image or phantasm, visual or auditory, is improperly called an imagination, if there is nothing more than the reproduction of a single sense-quality. Imaginations represent not abstract sensations, but perceptions. To see an armed knight is not merely to have a visual impression of him, but to perceive a living, solid, heavy object definitely in space; and imagination reproduces the whole of this, and otherwise would be quite uninteresting. What would the tournament in *Ivanhoe* amount to if the knights were only phantoms?

Further, imagination, merely as a reproduction of perception, is not distinguished from memory; but, in use, the two are always contrasted. Memories are recognised (in their complete form) as returning to us from earlier experience, both their component pictures and the order of them, and they are relatively stable; imaginations are felt to be more or less novel, and can easily be modified. Probably all the elements of an imagination might have occurred in a memory; but the arrangement of these elements is often so different from any actual experience as to baffle every attempt to redistribute them amongst their sources. Hence, in normal cases, our attitudes toward a memory and toward an imagination are entirely different. If a seeming memory prove false, we say it was only an imagination.

But, once more, a good many men never have images or phantasmata (except words), or very few or faint ones, or only when falling asleep, and so on. Yet they are not wanting in imagination: words or other signs serve them instead of images to carry all meanings, as if by pure thought; and they enter into the spirit of poetry and literary fiction: so that imagination may be active without images. And the fact seems to be that the effectiveness of mental processes depends very little upon phantasmata, but upon something much

1-2

deeper in the mind; and that there exist in men all degrees of concrete representative power, from those who picture everything they think of with vivid and definite detail, down, through many stages of decreasing realisation, to those who have only faint or fragmentary “images,” or even none at all: without its being possible to say (at present) that one type of mind is better or worse than another; though they may be adapted to different tasks.

Expectation and reasoning, which are closely allied (for every definite expectation is a sort of inference), are often carried on in pictures—“picture-thinking”—and this also is called imagination. Tyndall’s brilliant address on *The Scientific Uses of the Imagination* is well known. It greatly helps some men in thinking to form pictures of what they think about, such as a machine or an anatomical specimen, as if they had the thing before them; or even of an atom, which no man ever has before him, and which cannot be imagined by reproducing the percept, but only by constructing a picture from much grosser materials according to concepts. The picture thus formed necessarily falls short in some ways of the thing thought or meant, and can only be prevented from misleading us by guarding it with definitions, or rules, or abstract ideas; and this shows that the effectiveness of thought, the deeper process mentioned above, is a concatenation or evolution of meanings or general ideas, and that it is, in part, by illustrating these that pictures are useful: they also serve to fix attention, as words do, though not so well.

Thus reasoning may express itself in imaginations. On the other hand, imagination is more frequently contrasted with reason, as dealing in fiction, not reality. Our confusion is shown thus: to call an historian imaginative is depreciatory; yet it is as bad to say he is wanting in imagination. In the latter case, we mean that he fails adequately to conceive the events he treats of; in the former, that he embellishes or distorts them with unverifiable representations.

Again, the term “imagination” is sometimes confined to intellectual processes in the fine arts, and dramas, novels, etc., are works of imagination. Now dramas and novels all proceed upon one method, namely: they begin by stating or

CAUSES OF BELIEF

5

insinuating an hypothesis concerning certain persons in a given situation, and then deducing (that is reasoning out) the consequences, occasionally helping the plot by further assumptions : at least that is how it appears, though probably the main incident of the plot is thought of first, and then an hypothesis is framed that conveniently leads up to it. And if the reasoning is feeble, and if the subsidiary assumptions are too numerous or too facile, we say the work is flimsy or improbable—allowing for the *genre* ; for a romance is not expected to be as probable as a modern novel. *Gulliver's Travels* afford the most perfect example of this method ; for each voyage begins with a frank absurdity—men six inches or sixty feet high, a flying island, rational horses ; but this being granted, the sequel makes tolerable logic. Well, many scientific investigations seem to follow exactly the same method—begin with an hypothesis, deduce the consequences, and occasionally help out the argument with further hypotheses: and here again the facts to be deduced have usually been considered first, and the hypothesis is invented to explain them. If it be said that the scientist believes his hypothesis to be true, whilst the romancer does not, it may be replied that the scientist sometimes expressly warns us that his assumption is only a “working hypothesis,” which may not be true (though he thinks it may be), whereas early epic poets and minstrels often regarded their work as by no means without a ‘foundation in fact.’

Imagination and reasoning, then, are closely allied or interwoven, and the contrasting of them depends entirely upon this, that there is a sense in which imagination is not a presentation of truth or matter-of-fact, whether it is believed to be or not ; and a sense in which reasoning is devoted solely to the discovery of truth concerning facts, and to that end is protected by a methodology, carefully comparing its premises, carefully verifying its conclusions ; whereas the imagination that is contrasted with reasoning knows nothing of a methodology nor of verification. Even the modern novelist, a great part of whose hypothesis is usually true—the present state of society, facts of history or geography, etc.,—does not pretend to present a truth of fact. It belongs

6 ORIGIN OF SUPERSTITIONS

to his art to play at reasoning; he has learnt to play the game very well; but it remains play: he aims at, and attains, not truth but verisimilitude. And when we look back on the history of fiction we see (on the whole) the verisimilitude growing, age by age, slighter and fainter; till in early romance and poetry it is disturbed and broken and destroyed by stories about monsters, impossible heroes, magicians and gods, believed at one time to be true, and just the same as stories still believed by barbarians and savages, but which we believe no longer.

It is such stories as these last, including all superstitions, that I especially call "imagination-beliefs." The term includes all false beliefs, but with the rest I am not directly concerned. How are imagination-beliefs possible?

§ 3. BELIEF

Belief is here used to denote the attitude of mind in which perceptions are regarded as real, judgments as true of matters-of-fact, actions and events as about to have certain results. It is a serious and respectful attitude; for matter-of-fact compels us to adjust our behaviour to it, whether we have power to alter it or not. Hume describes belief as having a certain "force, vivacity, solidity, firmness, steadiness; influence and importance in governing our actions";¹ and these terms are quite just, but most of them are synonyms; and the whole dictionary will not make anybody understand what belief is who has never felt it. However, there is no such person.

The quality of this attitude (or the "feeling" of it) as a specific "state of consciousness" is difficult to observe, because (like pleasure or displeasure) it is always marginal to something else in the focus of attention, some object, judgment or action; but we can appreciate it in its variations by considering the very different degrees of "force, steadiness," etc., which characterise several beliefs regarded as more or less probable. The degree of belief ought to correspond with

¹ *Treatise of Human Nature*, Part III. § 7. For the recent psychology of Belief see James Sully's *The Human Mind*, ch. xiii., and James Ward's *Psychological Principles*, ch. xiv.

CAUSES OF BELIEF

7

the weight of evidence: if evidence for any judgment is complete and uncontradicted, it may be called 1, and the corresponding state of mind should be "certainty"; if evidence for it there is none, or if evidence for the contradictory judgment is complete, it may be called 0, and the state of mind "disbelief." Between these extremes there is room for an infinite series of fractions, and for corresponding shades of doubt (of which some only are consciously distinct); and in the middle, at $\frac{1}{2}$, there should be suspension of judgment. But most of these refined attitudes are the luxury of a few men severely trained in estimating evidence, and by them enjoyed only in the departments they have been trained in. For the mass of mankind, a very few shades of confidence or dubiety fill up their scale of judgment-values (which, again, may be far from corresponding as they should do with the quantity or quality of the evidence); and the nearest they get to suspension of judgment is a state of hesitation between alternatives that by turns seem equally likely. Disbelief, though the opposite logically to belief, as rejection to acceptance, has, nevertheless, much in common with it—the character of finality and positiveness, which is often (perhaps always) derived from belief in something else which is incompatible with the given judgment.

When the attitude of belief is established in one's mind by evidence clearly conceived, whether by the examination of facts or the weighing of arguments, it is called "conviction," and so is the process of bringing it about; but if it results from considerations imperfectly appreciated, and from emotional appeals, especially when urged by another person, it may be called "persuasion," though the word describes the process rather than the result. Most imagination-beliefs, including all superstitions, are persuasions.

It is generally considered that the test of the strength of one's belief is its influence upon our actions—where the test is practicable. With full belief one acts "confidently" (a significant verbal proposition!); in doubt, hesitatingly or cautiously; in disbelief, not at all, or in the sense of the contrary belief. But we cannot always judge of a man's beliefs from his actions; for he may be actuated by several

8 ORIGIN OF SUPERSTITIONS

beliefs, and we do not know what they are. And popular actions that involve no loss or hardship may express mere assent without belief.

There is a kind of imagination-belief, and the purest kind, which has nothing to do with evidence: it is often called "make-believe" or "play-belief": the entering into or contemplating some activity, which we know to have no direct bearing on our necessary interests, with as much ardour and absorption as if it were the only important thing in the world: as in games and sports, especially in drama and romance. This is one of the many things that do not astonish because they are so common; and the usual (and probably the true) explanation of it is, that this state of mind is of the utmost utility in giving zest to play, especially during youth. For many animals share in this spirit; and the young of the higher animals, which enjoy a long protected youth, pass the time chiefly at play, and thereby develop and train all their faculties, physical and mental. It somewhat outlasts youth in many animals, and conspicuously in ourselves, some having nothing better to do (and they might do worse), and others relieving from time to time the strain or tedium of work and, in some sort, prolonging youth into middle age; till play becomes gradually less engrossing.

This play-belief depends entirely upon imaginative excitement; and it shows that the attitude of belief may be adopted voluntarily, or fall upon us (as it were) by surprise and maintain itself for a time in great strength: with many at a melodrama it runs to anxiety, weeping and anguish; and this not only without evidence, but in spite of the knowledge that this is London, whose magistrates would never permit such doings: only one forgets London, with all its dull conventions of law and order. Attention is engrossed by the play.

Play-belief has the same traits as were said above to mark superstitions: (1) it becomes active on occasions, and otherwise disappears; (2) it is always modifiable for convenience or by a change of taste; (3) it loses its hold and tends to die out in a man as time goes on; (4) it is strengthened by the assent of an excited crowd; (5) the objects of such beliefs are very variable. We shall find that in other ways there

CAUSES OF BELIEF

9

is a close alliance between superstition and play. But, certainly, superstition has a much deeper hold upon our nature; for it not only excites hope, fear, anxiety, but itself is born of those passions: the desire of security and confidence, the dread of impending and unknown perils, these are its life and strength. So that the wonder is that superstitions are not more enduring. And the truth seems to be that the tendency to adopt superstitions does endure at a certain level of mentality, though particular superstitious beliefs are mutable; just as in the individual, a disposition to play outlasts many particular modes of recreation.

Belief, then, is an attitude of mind in which we may find ourselves for good reasons, or for bad reasons, or for none at all; sometimes even slipping into it voluntarily or involuntarily when we know the situation is unreal; indeed, an attitude in which, in play or earnest, we pass our lives, unless something happens to arouse doubt or criticism.

§ 4. CAUSES AND GROUNDS OF BELIEF

The source, direct or indirect, of all belief is perception. In perception must be included, for subjective studies, introspection; though, being difficult to keep steady, to repeat and to compare with the observation of other minds, it carries less conviction. As to perception we say that "seeing is believing"; and, in fact, an object holds the eye in a way that vouches for its own reality; but, if we suspect that our eyes deceive us, reassurance comes with the handling of the thing. Belief has sometimes been discussed as if it were chiefly concerned with ideas or the relations of ideas; and systems of philosophy have sought justification in the coherence of ideas, with little or no regard (not to say with contempt) for the coherence of ideas with perceptions. But nearly the whole of every man's life (savage or philosopher) passes in an attitude of unquestioning belief in the evidence of his senses; and it is thence that belief extends to ideas on a presumption of their representing reality. We know that perception may be deceptive; yet perceptions and the comparison of perceptions in the long run overrule everything

10 ORIGIN OF SUPERSTITIONS

else; and experimental methods consist in taking precautions against the errors of perception, and in bringing every hypothesis to the test of perception.

Further causes of belief are either Evidentiary, which (though often misleading) may generally be justified on reflection as raising some degree of probability, and which may, therefore, be called "grounds"; or Non-evidentiary, which (though very influential) cannot, on reflection, be justified as having any logical value, and are, therefore, causes only and not grounds.

(1) Evidentiary grounds of belief are (*a*) memory, which is plainly indispensable if we are to learn by experience; and (*b*) testimony, which must be trusted if language is not to be useless and social co-operation impossible: both these grounds are supposed to rest upon the primary rock of previous perception, but are slippery and treacherous. Memory is only valid so far as it truthfully represents original experience, and testimony only so far as it presents (i) a valid memory, (ii) correctly reported. Hence in serious matters precautions must be taken against their fallibility: otherwise they are not good evidence. A specious memory, so far as it is false, is imagination; and false testimony, so far as it reports (i) a false memory or (ii) an invention of the reporter, is also imagination. Testimony gathers force, as a cause of belief, with the numbers and consideration of those who support it, and is especially strengthened by their unanimity; but, as a ground of belief, it depends only on their knowledge and truthfulness. A third ground of belief is (*c*) inference; which is necessary to all original adjustment of our conduct to the future or to unperceived circumstances, but highly fallible, and constituting the chief problem for the exercise of Logic when that science arises: especially to explain the conditions of valid observations and experiments, of probability, of the conclusion of an argument being covered by its premises, and of the sufficiency of verification. Inferences, true or false, that cannot be verified are imaginations.

As the growing mind of society deals with true beliefs they are piled up and classified in systems of science and philosophy: in which systems each belief or judgment