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BELIEF

FRENCH *croyance*
 GERMAN *Glaube*

- CROYANCE, FAITH, and CLAIM, DOXA, GLAUBE, MATTER OF FACT, PERCEPTION, PROPOSITION, SOUL, TRUTH

"Belief" has undergone an evolution characteristic of certain terms in English that pass from a mental and moral meaning (as affect or feeling) to a cognitive and propositional meaning (belief gradually detached from faith and assent). This process of objectivization was accompanied by major changes in the grammar of belief. The problem raised by the translation of "belief" has to do with the term's lack of definition, which allows it to move from the emotional to the logical and from the epistemic (degree of conviction, subjective) to the cognitive (conditions of validity, objective).

I. "Belief"/"Faith"

"Belief" is related etymologically to German *Glaube* (via *glauben*, thirteenth to fourteenth century, then *ilve-leve*, the prefix *be-* being added by analogy with the verb *bileve*; cf. *Middle English Dictionary*). The first meaning of "belief," which was identical with that of "faith" (cf. *fides, pistis*), belonged to the same semantic field as "reliance" and "confidence"; it referred to a mental or affective condition that was connected with *confiding*, passively relying on someone or something. Thus we read this in Hobbes: "Faith is a gift of God, which man can neither give nor take away"), or in Cardinal Newman: "To have faith in God is to surrender oneself to God." In addition to this theological dimension that closely associated the word first of all with faith, "belief" has a psychological or emotional meaning; it refers more to an affect than to a relation with a proposition. In its first meaning, "belief," like *Glaube*, designated a sense of adhesion that did not need to be justified rationally (see GLAUBE). In the seventeenth century, "belief" and "faith" began gradually to diverge. "Faith" supplanted "belief" in the area of religion, the latter designating a process that differentiated itself from faith, on the one hand by a lesser intensity, and on the other hand by a more intellectual dimension, or even a judgment. This intellectualization of belief (which becomes a state or act of mind) that started in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries developed without abandoning—and this is the interest of the way the semantic field of "belief" was constituted in English, and also a factor contributing to its untranslatability—the first meaning's dimension of affect or passivity. The French term *croyance*, which is still used to translate "belief" even in its most sophisticated recent uses, raises a problem because it accounts for neither the sensible nor the objective dimension of "belief."

II. Belief and Feeling: Hume

Does "belief" refer to a feeling or to a proposition? Is it subjective or objective? The interplay of these elements determines the term's different senses. Thus it would be problematic to use contemporary distinctions to divide "belief" into psychological and propositional elements and to make belief a "mental state" belonging to the category of the propositional attitudes that Russell defines as associating a (mental or emotional) attitude with a "content" (a proposition or statement). For Hume, "belief" designates both a feeling and a judgment, indissolubly linked, and his use of the term has become a constant point of reference for contemporary theories of belief.

- See Box 1.

The "belief"/"assent" pair defines a set of problems that deviates from the traditional hierarchies of *savoir/croyance* and *Wissen/Glaube*. Thus it would be a mistake to think of "belief" and "assent" as representing degrees of knowledge, even if probabilistic interpretations of belief tend in this direction. Hume's notion of an intensity of belief that is variable though not measurable may be the origin of the term's semantic deviations, along with his formulation of the problem of knowing "matters of fact," which misleadingly associates the definition of "belief" with the problems of skepticism and of confirming empirical knowledge.

