HOW TO CONDUCT RESEARCH INTO HISTORY BY ASSEMBLING CERTAINTIES: SOME GUIDELINES DRAWING FROM WITTGENSTEIN'S AND ORTEGA Y GASSET'S LATER WORKS

CÓMO INVESTIGAR EN HISTORIA RECOPILANDO CERTEZAS: ALGUNAS ORIENTACIONES A PARTIR DE LAS OBRAS TARDÍAS DE WITTGENSTEIN Y ORTEGA Y GASSET

JOSÉ MARÍA ARISO
Doctor en Filosofía
Profesor Titular
Universidad Internacional de La Rioja
Facultad de Educación
Logroño/España
josemaria.ariso@unir.net
ORCID: 0000-0003-4594-6388

Abstract: José Ortega y Gasset relied on his notion of 'belief' to argue that historical studies should consist, above all, in assembling the distinctive and characteristic beliefs of a historical period: for, in this way, we could know what was regarded as reality within that context, which might allow us to gain a better understanding of the historical events under study. As I will show in this paper, Ludwig Wittgenstein did not evince an interest in historical studies; yet his notion of 'certainty' is very similar to Ortega y Gasset's conception of 'belief', in addition to which certainty in Wittgenstein's sense may be of great help to better understand not only how historical studies can be conducted by following Ortega y Gasset's suggestions, but also which risks are entailed by such studies.

Keywords: History; Certainty; Belief; Wittgenstein; Ortega y Gasset.

Resumen: José Ortega y Gasset se basó en su noción de 'creencia' para argumentar que los estudios históricos deberían consistir sobre todo en compilar las creencias características y distintivas de un período histórico: pues de ese modo sabríamos qué se consideraba como realidad en aquel contexto, lo cual nos permitiría entender mucho mejor los eventos históricos

objeto de estudio. Como mostraré en este artículo, Ludwig Wittgenstein no mostró interés por los estudios históricos, pero su noción de 'certeza' es muy similar a la concepción que Ortega y Gasset tenía de 'creencia', además de lo cual la certeza en sentido wittgensteiniano puede ser de gran ayuda para entender mejor no sólo cómo se pueden llevar a cabo los estudios históricos siguiendo las orientaciones de Ortega y Gasset, sino también qué riesgos presentan dichos estudios.

Palabras Clave: Historia; Certeza; Creencia; Wittgenstein; Ortega y Gasset.

INTRODUCTION

"What has history to do with me? Mine is the first and only world". As Sluga (2017, p. 417) pointed out, these words, written by Ludwig Wittgenstein (NB, p. 82) in his wartime notebook on 2 September 1916, might reflect not only his expectation of dying in the First World War, but also a common European feeling at that time, i.e. that Modern Europe was saying goodbye to the history of its last four hundred years in order to enter a new and unforeseen world. But this anti-historical feeling was also reflected on his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, where Wittgenstein presented a timeless world of static facts without drawing attention to its origin and evolution: after all, Wittgenstein denies in this work the "passage of time" (TLP §6.3611), the "causal nexus" (TLP §5.136) and the dependence of one fact on another (TLP §§2.061, 2.062). More specific comments by Wittgenstein about History can be found in his remarks on Oswald Spengler, whom he included in the list of the ten thinkers who "influenced" him (CV, p. 16) even though paradoxically Wittgenstein added later that Spengler is "not great" (CV, p. 53). As a proof of the difficulty of clarifying how Spengler influenced Wittgenstein, neither Janik and Toulmin (1974) nor Malcolm (1967), two of the most influential studies regarding the philosophical influences on Wittgenstein, make reference to Spengler. Furthermore, the appearance of Spengler's name in the above-mentioned list of ten thinkers also seems surprising keeping in mind the low esteem in which his work is widely held (DeAngelis, 1994). Be that as it may, and according to Haller (1988) and Monk (1990), Wittgenstein inherited from Spengler methodological resources such as morphological descriptions and instructive comparisons. Yet Wittgenstein's references to Spengler were mostly related to the distinction between cultures and civilizations. Specifically, Spengler (1926) likened the evolution of cultures to the ages of human life, but highlighting that, in its later stage, culture ceases to be a living organism and becomes a civilization – that is, a rigid and dead structure in which the flowering of the arts is replaced by the predominance of physics, mathematics and mechanics. Wittgenstein (CV, p. 9) thought that he lived in a decadent civilization "characterized by the word progress", thus sharing Spengler's cultural pessimism. However, Wittgenstein's remarks on culture and civilization placed particular

emphasis on how to live in the spirit, which led him to obsessively meditate on how he might live in such spirit (*see* Ariso, 2012).

Subsequently, Wittgenstein did not write much more about historical issues, not even about the history of philosophy. In fact, Glock (2006, p. 289) noted that "Wittgenstein's attitude towards the study of past philosophers ranged from indifference to hostility". Nonetheless, comparisons between Wittgenstein and previous philosophers or even some of his contemporaries have often proved to be enlightening. A clear example of this can be found in Mulligan (2012), who described relevant connections between Wittgenstein's notion of "certainty" and very similar concepts developed by continental philosophers such as Edmund Husserl, Max Scheler, Herbert Leyendecker, Adolf Reinach, and José Ortega y Gasset. Indeed, Ortega y Gasset not only provided an inspiring conception of "belief" [*creencia*], but also indicated how this concept could be used to conduct research into History. In this paper, I aim to show how Wittgenstein's notion of "certainty" can be employed to this end by building on Ortega y Gasset's work. Hence, I will start by explaining some similarities and differences between Wittgenstein's notion of "certainty" and Ortega y Gasset's conception of "belief" taking as a reference Ariso (2011)[1], after which I will offer a set of guidelines which, although they do not make up a systematic procedure for the study of History, will at least allow us to better understand how research can be conducted in this field by assembling certainties and which risks must be taken into account.

1. CERTAINTY AND BELIEF APPLIED TO THE STUDY OF HISTORY

According to Ortega y Gasset (2007), beliefs are taken for granted in our daily life without us being aware of them, to the extent that they constitute what we regard as reality. However, he adds, when we no longer believe something, or when we lose a belief, a hole is opened in our layer of beliefs, which leads us to consciously build an idea or thought in order to fill such hole. While Ortega y Gasset thus distinguishes between "belief" and "idea", Wittgenstein (OC §308) carries out a categorial distinction between "certainty" and "knowledge", emphasizing that they are not "mental states". From Wittgenstein's standpoint (OC §569), inner experiences do not allow us to distinguish whether we know something, for "a mental state of conviction […] may be the same whether it is knowledge or false belief" (OC §42). Regardless of how emphatically someone may utter the expression "I know…", this will not make it possible to objectively establish that the possibility of making a mistake about that has been logically excluded (OC §§15, 194). As Ariso (2020, pp. 659-660) pointed out, this logical exclusion is not located "in the traditional and context-independent logic which

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1   See also Wagner (2021), Wagner and Perona (2018), and Wagner and Ariso (2016).

is valid in all possible worlds, but in the particular logic that emanates from our linguistic practices or language-games", as they show what we consider as a mistake in daily practice (OC §196). Within a particular world-picture, which is constituted by all our certainties (OC §§93-96), everything must speak for – and nothing against – them (OC §§93, 118), so that people who share this world-picture will be unable to explain or understand what could be regarded as the discovery of being wrong about its certainties. While the expression "I know" is used when someone has to demonstrate the truth by giving compelling grounds that are surer than her assertion (OC §243), certainty cannot be grounded because, even though we might offer a number of grounds for it, there would be "none as certain as the very thing they were supposed to be grounds for" (OC §307). Hence, we can be wrong when we have previously claimed to know something: that is just why Wittgenstein (OC §12) recommended that the expression "I know…" be replaced by "I thought I knew". Yet certainties cannot be called into doubt. In such a case, says Wittgenstein (OC §§419, 490, 494), we could not be certain of any judgment. Seemingly, we might go on judging, but our judgments would then not be based on the "inherited background" against which we all distinguish between true and false (OC §§514-515). If a certainty were lost or seriously called into doubt, this would also involve calling into question the whole background or world-picture. For, far from being intrinsically convincing, our certainties are "rather held fast by what lies around" them (OC §144). Therefore, if one of our certainties were called into question, the rest of our certainties would be toppled with it (OC §§234, 274), as a result of which we could not be certain of the meaning of our words either (OC §§114, 158, 456, 506).

Meanwhile, Ortega y Gasset (2007) does not even consider whether the idea or thought developed to fill the hole in the layer of our beliefs really makes sense. In his view, the key is that it is just then that the individual starts to think, that is, when the individual experiences genuine doubt – I mean genuine inasmuch as it is actually felt and not simply thought. Just as beliefs become reality itself for the individual, genuine doubt is also as real as any other reality. Yet no one can discern when an idea transforms into a belief. The adhesion to any given thought requires an act of will: hence, it is not reality for us because Ortega y Gasset (2007, p. 31) contemplates reality as counterwill [*contravoluntad*]. It is not possible for us to become aware of our own beliefs as such, for they cease to be reality for us as soon as we try to think about them. That is why Raley (1971, p. 90) was wrong when claiming that a set of beliefs is "accepted" by people who share it. As said above, an act of acceptance necessarily requires not only to think about such system of beliefs, but also to decide to accept some ideas instead of a whole system of beliefs. As Ariso (2016, p. 578) noted regarding certainties, such a decision would not go beyond a mere "willingness towards the conversion" because the acquisition of beliefs is not something we do, but something that simply "*happens*" to us. As regards certainties, there are at least

four reasons as to why they cannot be acquired at will. Firstly, certainties are ungrounded, so that they cannot be reached through a particular reason or explanation. Secondly, certainties are not mental states, as a result of which it is irrelevant that the individual who wishes to acquire a certainty shows a specific mental state. Thirdly, mere willingness towards conversion does not suffice to assimilate a certainty. And last but not least, the fact of trying to act according to the certainty involved does not guarantee at all that it will be acquired.

What I have said so far may already help us to glimpse some basic differences between the tasks of the novelist and those of the historian. As Ariso (2017) showed regarding Miguel de Unamuno's novel *Niebla*, the novelist is certain not only of what goes on at any time in the minds of his characters, but also of which their certainties are. Even though the novelist never thinks in terms of certainties in Wittgenstein's sense or beliefs in Ortega y Gasset's sense – and even if he is not acquainted with any similar concept advanced by any other philosopher – he will continuously indicate, albeit implicitly, which doubts and mistakes are regarded as unintelligible by his characters. Conversely, the historian and the biographer know what happened to a specific individual, or even what he was certain of, because of the grounds or proofs collected in their investigations. Of course, the historian is not expected to share the certainties he has detected in a particular community; in fact, although he wished to acquire such certainties – at least temporarily in order to better understand the mentioned community – this would not depend on his will. Every one of us may test this by trying to attain, even for a while, the certainty of Ancient Egyptians according to which the Earth is square: at most we will be able to show our willingness to attain such certainty. But curiously, in the educational field it is often expected, albeit implicitly, that pupils acquire countless certainties on diverse issues (Ariso, 2019a), including historical ones. By way of example, a History teacher will more or less reluctantly accept that one of his pupils makes a small mistake and says that the Battle of Lepanto took place in 1575, but he would be shocked if another pupil claimed that the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine occurred before the reign of the Catholic Monarchs in Spain. Regardless of whether the teacher never became aware of Wittgenstein's conception of "certainty" or Ortega y Gasset's notion of "belief", he would be fully convinced that such a mistake is so large that it should not be regarded as a mere error, but as a folly characteristic of someone who does not know what he is talking about or has even gone mad. Admittedly, it is also conceivable that some political regimes intend to indoctrinate pupils by trying to make them assimilate certainties that are not matched by reality. At this point it might be argued that such certainties would be false, but even though those propositions that are expected to be assimilated as certainties can be false, certainties can be neither true nor false because, as noted above, they make up the background against which we distinguish between true and false. As Moyal-Sharrock (2004, p. 71) pointed out, our

certainties "do not reflect truth" because they "are not reflections of how the world is".

It should be added that certainties are, in a sense, so fundamental that they cannot be uttered *qua* certainties. I should like to illustrate this point by telling an anecdote. Whenever I have prepared a stay abroad, I have been contacted taking for granted that I was a woman because my middle name is "María", so that I had to make clear that I was a man. In this case there was room for doubt, and my remark was aimed precisely at removing this doubt. However, if I suddenly told my relatives and friends "My name is José María and I am a man", they would be astonished because they would not understand why I was making such an obvious claim. In this regard, Moyal-Sharrock (2004, p. 8) notes that certainties can be verbally rendered for "heuristic" purposes, be it for "philosophical analysis" – as I will do in this paper – or for "linguistic instruction" – as is the case with parents who teach their child. Meanwhile, Ortega y Gasset (2007) considered beliefs as ineffable because, as they cease to be reality for us as soon as we try to think about them, we can only refer to them as ideas. If I concentrated on uttering "My name is José María" or "I am a man" *qua* belief, I would be making an effort of will, so that counterwill – characteristic of belief in Ortega y Gasset's sense – would be missed. But even though we cannot utter beliefs as such, the task of their collecting may be, according to Ortega y Gasset (2008), the best way of becoming acquainted with the reality of an individual, a community, or even a long time period. Let us see, then, how this task can be carried out by assembling certainties.

2. GUIDELINES TO CONDUCT RESEARCH INTO HISTORY THROUGH CERTAINTIES

In view of what I have just said, it might seem that the task of the historian – at least in relation to certainties – should merely consist in listing all the certainties that characterize a community or a given epoch. But some important nuances should be kept in mind. As Ortega y Gasset (1985, p. 12) already warned, it is of utmost importance to show an adequate *sensitivity* [*sensibilidad*] to the historical period under study. Let us analyze piecemeal what this sensitivity consists of. To begin with, this analysis should not be confined to identifying a single certainty, however important it might be: for, if this is a very distinctive or characteristic certainty of a given historical period, it is expected that it will significantly affect other relevant certainties of the same period. If this influence on other certainties did not exist, or if such influence were so slight that it could hardly be detected, there would be room to seriously doubt whether it was a truly relevant certainty, or even whether it was a certainty at all. To this it should be added that certainties are not shared irrespective of other ones: instead, they make up a system (OC §141) by becoming mutually supportive (OC §§142,

144). Meanwhile, Ortega y Gasset (1985) notes that beliefs are not organized in a logical way, but in a vital one: that is why beliefs may sometimes turn out to be incongruous, contradictory, or at least disjointed from one another. The way I see it, Ortega y Gasset's conception of belief systems thus facilitates that attention focuses on a specific belief because, from this standpoint, a novel and distinctive belief could be shared without being supported by other beliefs, and even conflicting with the rest of beliefs: in fact, the examples provided by Ortega y Gasset usually revolve around a particular belief. For instance, he states that the relationship between man and world was based on the belief in God from the Middle Ages up to its weakening in the 15th century and subsequent loss in the 16th century: at that time belief in God was substituted by belief in reason, whose decline at the beginning of the 20th century leads Ortega y Gasset to conclude that vital and historical reason should then start guiding us (Ortega y Gasset 2008, pp. 16-21). In my view, such categorical statements about how a single belief is replaced by another one as the benchmark in Europe for several centuries may provide a very biased and superficial view of reality, so that much more detailed explanations should be offered to justify these statements. It should be acknowledged that the rise of rationalism and physical-mathematical reason influenced the weakening of belief in God: yet this occurred in very complex and diverse ways depending on the context, to the extent that this influence could be regarded as null in many relevant contexts. Nonetheless, Ortega y Gasset (2008, p. 20) seems to remove this complexity by referring to "a collective state of belief" [*un estado colectivo de creencia*] that constitutes "a reality independent from individuals, […] and with which they must count whether they want it or not" [*una realidad independiente de los individuos, […] y con la cual los individuos tienen que contar quieran o no*]. Of course, Ortega y Gasset does not mean by this that belief in God ceased to exist in the 15th and 16th centuries: instead, he meant that it lost its role as benchmark within European society, such role being subsequently assigned to belief in physical-mathematical reason. Yet, even though the latter had a clear predominance in some contexts, it is of the utmost importance to consider the relevance and scope of the former in order to understand many events and even the very sensitivity of a large part of Europe from the 15th century on.

When a very relevant belief is detected, one may be tempted to focus on it to such an extent that the limits of its scope and impact are lost sight of, so that it may even be contemplated as the only predominant belief within that context. Ortega y Gasset (1985, p. 12) himself warned of the danger of idealizing a country or a race by presenting them as "norms of perfection" [*normas de perfección*], thus banishing them from time and thereby showing them in an ethereal atmosphere as if they were cult objects that are adored but not explained. But we have already seen that Ortega y Gasset offered very superficial explanations focused on specific beliefs, which led him to provide too categorical conclusions. Against this background, it seems to me very

commendable to create classifications of beliefs that allow us to become more sensitive towards a wide variety of beliefs. In this vein, Ortega y Gasset (1985) distinguished between "living faith", "inert faith" and "doubt"; but there are other classifications that can also serve as examples: I am referring, above all, to the classifications of certainties carried out by Moyal-Sharrock (2004) and Kusch (2021), who published an interesting study of the certainties characteristic of Nazi concentration camps (see Kusch, 2017). It should be noted that the fact of detecting diverse types of certainties also entails being able to identify what seems to be a certainty or a belief, but is not. A clear example of this can be found in the assimilation in Nazi Germany of the certainty according to which killing Jews was not wrong but necessary. In principle, one might think that this certainty was unanimously assimilated in Nazi Germany; but this was not the case:

> [T]here arose a number of local moral – or rather, immoral – certainties encouraged by the Third Reich and assimilated by the population to varying degrees, e.g. that killing Jews was not wrong but necessary. Some may have shared this certainty; others may have tried to do so unsuccessfully; still others may have pretended to share it, just to avoid problems; many others abhorred it; and there may even have been people who remained indifferent to the matter. (Ariso, 2022, p. 69)

Furthermore, we should not forget the possibility that what seems to be a certainty is really a grounded knowledge-claim, as is the case with people who cling to an idea *because* a text or a person regarded as an authority has taught them so. It would therefore be wrong not to analyze in detail the complex variety of forms that a specific idea or conviction has taken within a community, as it can range from certainty to indifference itself. This complexity of human history is also hidden by the macro-interpretations that tried to bring order into world history. To give one pair of examples, Spengler (1926) and Toynbee (1934) contemplated human history as a process in which civilizations should pass through stages of rise, maturity, and fall. Spengler and Toynbee endeavoured to adjust very diverse historical events to these stages; but even though the resulting interpretations can often be rather stimulating, human history is too complex to be explained through a single factor. In this vein, Wittgenstein showed in his sharp criticism of Freud's work to which extent the search for a mono-causal explanation can become problematic:

> [Freud] wanted to find some one explanation which would show what dreaming is. He wanted to find the *essence* of dreaming. And he would have rejected any suggestion that he might be partly right but altogether so. If he was partly wrong, that would have meant for him that he was wrong altogether – that he had not really found the *essence* of dreaming. (LC, p. 48)

I should like to highlight here the implicit assumption – characteristic of the work of many renowned authors – that any great enigma can only and thoroughly be solved by finding out an ultimate cause, which confers a special charm and beauty upon it. Once someone seems to have found such cause, he may be tempted to adjust any event to it by forcefully defending it before any form of criticism, and, what is worse, without considering alternatives. This led Wittgenstein (LC, p. 45) to wonder: "Couldn't the whole thing have been differently treated?" Of course, this question should be taken into account from the very moment in which someone envisages to account for several centuries of human history through one only factor that is expected to drive history. In fact, it would be highly recommendable to suspect from the outset every mono-causal explanation of complex historical events or stages, as thought-provoking as such explanation may seem.

Regarding the sensitivity necessary to understand a community through its certainties, we should also keep in mind that certainties, strictly speaking, are something we *show* in what we say and do. In other words, certainties are "enacted" because they cannot be meaningfully said (Moyal-Sharrock, 2004, p. 98). This entails that the collection of certainties in historical studies should not consist in making a list of propositions, but in precisely describing how certainties are shown in our most spontaneous ways of acting, particularly before the seeming doubts that we do not consider as such because there is no room for them within our language-games. Admittedly, this procedure is rather cumbersome: for, to give just one example, it is much more comfortable to confine oneself to noting that "The Earth is square" was one of the certainties shared by Ancient Egyptians. But this option brings at least two problems. On the one hand, it is likely that the fact of considering a certainty as a statement out of its original context or from the standpoint of our own world-picture leads us to conclude that it may be either true or false, so that Egyptians would just be wrong regarding this issue. Yet, obviously, if this were really a certainty for the Egyptians, it would be neither true nor false within their world-picture, but an unquestionable assumption that allowed them – together with countless certainties – to distinguish between true and false. On the other hand, we might think that the fact that two world-pictures differ only in one certainty is almost irrelevant. By way of example, and taking for granted that at least some Flat-Earthers are really certain that the Earth is flat, there seem to be no more differences between their world-picture and ours. However, there are more certainties concerned. As regards Flat-Earthers, their certainty that the Earth is flat is also linked to certainties like "the only way of travelling in a straight line from South America to Australia is necessarily through the North Pole, and in no case through Antarctica" (Ariso, 2021, p. 7). Additionally, the Egyptians' certainty that the Earth is square should have decisively influenced "their projects and even some of their fantasies and fears" (Ariso, 2019b, p. 1037). Hence, the Egyptian culture and way of thinking cannot be thoroughly

understood without taking into account how it is conditioned by its certainties, above all those that more overtly differ from ours.

With this in mind, it should come as no surprise that Ortega y Gasset (2008) notes that the best method for checking the state of beliefs at a given time consists in comparing such state with different ones: indeed, he adds that it would be most appropriate to discern which the fundamental belief – i.e. the belief that vitalizes all others – was within a given community. Nonetheless, I think that a problem underlies this interesting remark: specifically, it should be clarified whether we intend either to compare lists of beliefs – say certainties – or to detect how they were shown in their original context. In the first case, we would run the above-mentioned risk of making all too sweeping generalizations. Thus, it would be imprudent to strongly assert that all Egyptians shared the certainty according to which the Earth was a square in which some mountains supported at the edge the vault of the sky. Can it be ensured that this certainty was shared by the vast majority of Egyptians? Although the representation of the Earth as a square appeared in some paintings of the time, does this entail that it was the prevailing certainty in Ancient Egypt instead of an idea held by a group of wise people? Is it not reasonable to wonder whether a large part of the population was certain of the existence of an underworld, and that, in comparison, the specific form of the Earth was indifferent to them? This invites us to think that historical studies should compare how people reacted in different cultures before similar situations paying special attention to the doubts that were regarded as unintelligible in each context. Undoubtedly, this way of proceeding would yield results less striking than the ones provided by the fundamental and vitalizing belief mentioned by Ortega y Gasset; yet this course of action would likely produce results more adjusted to reality, even though they would not be as striking as the ones provided by a mono-causal explanation. After all, while it is difficult to verify whether a specific certainty is being shared in our current society – where we have access to a huge wealth of information – it is particularly difficult to check this regarding a civilization that disappeared thousands of years ago.

A further problem is that the most widely shared certainties are not formulated, so that their literal expression should not be expected to be found in historical documents: instead, certainties characteristic of that stage would be implicit in those texts or representations. As a result, this context would not be appropriate for attempting to detect a certainty through direct evaluation, i.e. by basing on a guiding question aimed at bluntly checking whether a particular individual shares a specific certainty. Instead, it would be more suitable to resort to indirect evaluation, which focuses on spontaneous reactions in order to discern which doubts are regarded as meaningful (Ariso 2018). In this vein, the fact that Ancient Egyptians represented the Earth as square-shaped should lead us to wonder if this representation was intended to reflect an idea about which

they had doubts. Stated otherwise, the question arises whether it would make sense to represent something about which one is certain. When Ancient Egyptians represented the God Geb lying as if it were the flat Earth over which the Goddess Nut rose arched, thus representing the vault of sky, it is reasonable to think that, as it happened in other cultures, they had the intention to educate the uninitiated, and, above all, to worship gods. For, if we rule out both these goals, it is not at all clear why people should wish to represent something about which they were certain. Conversely, it is entirely understandable that a certainty is explicitly represented or verbalized when there are alternative certainties within such context. By way of example, when Christopher Columbus sought funding for his voyage, it made sense not only to claim that the Earth is round, but also to show pictures of his planned path along a spherical surface, for many people still took for granted that the Earth is flat. In that context, as is often the case, each position was manifested in many different ways: indeed, the corresponding advocates might become certain of it, they could know it through reasons, range between both positions, and even lose interest in this issue.

Be that as it may, I disagree with Ortega y Gasset (1982, p. 128) when he claims that the standard situation is that someone holds ideas that challenge her own beliefs. For, in such a case, I would add, the very concepts of "belief" and "certainty" would cease to fulfil the functions that Wittgenstein and Ortega y Gasset attribute to them. Nevertheless, I admit that it can sometimes be very helpful to check whether an individual holds an idea that turns out to be incompatible with his own beliefs. Such ideas could be regarded as "resistances", but not in the sense of resistances to change that, as Medina (2013) suggested, are derived from the very certainties which are shown by someone. Medina (2016) refers to resistances that generate defence mechanisms that may lead someone to become fully reluctant to standpoints that question his own. This may happen, for instance, when someone is certain that his race is superior to another one, and therefore he feels uncomfortable with people who remark that such conviction is absolutely absurd. Conversely, I am referring to those resistances generated towards one's own certainty, as is the case when someone falls prey to the certainty according to which his race is superior to another one although he holds time and again the idea that such certainty is abhorrent, which will not necessarily be sufficient to get rid of it.

Arguably, communities that have shared certainties about racial superiority seem to be guilty of having become certain thereof. Yet it should be remembered that if a community or even a whole civilization ended up acquiring a specific certainty, such assimilation did not depend on people's will. This is the case both in individual and collective acquisitions of certainties, as a result of which neither an individual nor a whole country – like Nazi Germany – should be condemned for having acquired a specific certainty, however heinous it might be. Of course, it is of the utmost importance to study processes of assimilation of certainties;

but even when it were obvious that a community clearly encouraged a strong willingness towards a heinous certainty, it would be a serious mistake to confuse willingness – which, of course, would be extremely reprehensible – with the acquisition of a certainty.

CONCLUSION

Ortega y Gasset`s proposal to conduct research into History by assembling beliefs had some similar precedents. Aside from the mentioned contributions of Spengler and Toynbee, the Annales school – created by Bloch (1963) and Febvre (1932), and currently led by Chartier (1996) – focused on the history of mentalities in order to discern how people perceived and operated within the world in a specific historical period. Yet, in my view, it can be particularly interesting to analyze which certainties are characteristic of a historical period because we have the advantage of what I regard as a precision tool: I am referring to the fact that certainties in Wittgenstein's sense are identified through the logical exclusion of mistake within the corresponding world-picture. The rigour of this logical exclusion should allow us not only to detect certainties, but also to clearly distinguish a number of nuances: for example, variations and developments of certainties, exceptions to them, convictions that cannot be considered as certainties, grounded knowledge, more or less reasonable doubts, and even lies, among others. From this it follows that this kind of research may help to identify certainties characteristic of the sensitivity of a former age; but, in many cases, the result will consist in a complex patchwork of certainties mixed with very different elements. As if this were not enough, this procedure will require a very extensive research work, in addition to which the result will not be as spectacular as the unveiling of a hidden certainty that seems to suddenly explain the whole enigma; nonetheless, avoiding such expectations will facilitate that we accept a view of past cultures much more adjusted to reality. According to Ortega y Gasset (1985, p. 217), the simpler a belief, the more consistent and fundamental its contribution to the concerning community will be. However, I think that this should not lead us to conclude that a world-picture will not be interesting when it is made up of complex certainties due to their fuzzy nuances, and particularly if such certainties are mixed with a number of ideas and opinions that seem to be certainties, but are not. Although this overview appears to be less dazzling than the perspective derived from the finding of a mono-causal explanation, the priority is to find out the certainties shared in a specific period, however disappointing they may seem. After all, it can be extraordinarily interesting to discover that a community or even a whole culture was not driven by a single and basic certainty, but by a bunch of puzzling certainties mixed with a number of diffuse fears and fantasies.

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