

Session 10 explores Chesterton's startling claim that modern skepticism has already reached its end. When everything is questioned, even reason itself begins to collapse, leaving humanity uncertain not only about truth, but about meaning, morality, and even the self. Chesterton then turns to the modern worship of will and personal desire, asking whether freedom without limits can ever truly guide human life. Along the way, this reading wrestles with ego, imagination, morality, and the restless search for meaning in an age determined to keep every possibility open.

Full Transcript:

Welcome.

I'm glad you're here.

This is *Orthodoxy* by G. K. Chesterton, using the Project Gutenberg edition—read slowly, aloud, and in company.

These readings aren't lectures, and they aren't explanations. They're an invitation: to listen carefully, to follow an argument that wanders on purpose, and to allow surprise to do some of the work. So, let's take our time—and see where Chesterton leads us today.

Last time, Chesterton explained how Christianity does not shrink the world, but enlarges it, holding together mystery and reason, freedom and order, wonder and common sense in a way that keeps both the mind and the soul alive.

Today, we find Chesterton asserting that the age of questioning, of skepticism, is not beginning, but is at an end. With the collapse of reason and the rise of ego and will, the anchor of morality seems detached, setting the boat of human thought adrift. With everything being questioned, can even materialism escape relativity? Can a purely hedonistic life of doing what I will provide answers that lead to a meaningful existence?

Let's turn now to the reading.

Reading 9 – lines 1101 through 1201 of Chesterton, G. K. *Orthodoxy* (1908). Project Gutenberg eBook no. 16769.

To sum up our contention so far, we may say that the most characteristic current philosophies have not only a touch of mania, but a touch of suicidal mania. The mere questioner has knocked his head against the limits of human thought; and cracked it. This is what makes so futile the warnings of the orthodox and the boasts of the advanced about the dangerous boyhood of free thought. What we are looking at is not the boyhood of free thought; it is the old age and ultimate dissolution of free thought. It is vain for bishops and pious bigwigs to discuss what dreadful things will happen if wild scepticism runs its course. It has run its course. It is vain for eloquent atheists to talk of the great truths that will be revealed if once we see free thought begin. We have seen it end. It has no more questions to ask; it has questioned itself. You cannot call up any wilder vision than a city in which men ask themselves if they have any selves. You cannot fancy a more sceptical world than that in which men doubt if there is a world. It might certainly have reached its bankruptcy more quickly and cleanly if it had not

been feebly hampered by the application of indefensible laws of blasphemy or by the absurd pretence that modern England is Christian. But it would have reached the bankruptcy anyhow. Militant atheists are still unjustly persecuted; but rather because they are an old minority than because they are a new one. Free thought has exhausted its own freedom. It is weary of its own success. If any eager freethinker now hails philosophic freedom as the dawn, he is only like the man in Mark Twain who came out wrapped in blankets to see the sun rise and was just in time to see it set. If any frightened curate still says that it will be awful if the darkness of free thought should spread, we can only answer him in the high and powerful words of Mr. Belloc, "Do not, I beseech you, be troubled about the increase of forces already in dissolution. You have mistaken the hour of the night: it is already morning." We have no more questions left to ask. We have looked for questions in the darkest corners and on the wildest peaks. We have found all the questions that can be found. It is time we gave up looking for questions and began looking for answers.

But one more word must be added. At the beginning of this preliminary negative sketch I said that our mental ruin has been wrought by wild reason, not by wild imagination. A man does not go mad because he makes a statue a mile high, but he may go mad by thinking it out in square inches. Now, one school of thinkers has seen this and jumped at it as a way of renewing the pagan health of the world. They see that reason destroys; but Will, they say, creates. The ultimate authority, they say, is in will, not in reason. The supreme point is not why a man demands a thing, but the fact that he does demand it. I have no space to trace or expound this philosophy of Will. It came, I suppose, through Nietzsche, who preached something that is called egoism. That, indeed, was simple-minded enough; for Nietzsche denied egoism simply by preaching it. To preach anything is to give it away. First, the egoist calls life a war without mercy, and then he takes the greatest possible trouble to drill his enemies in war. To preach egoism is to practise altruism. But however it began, the view is common enough in current literature. The main defence of these thinkers is that they are not thinkers; they are makers. They say that choice is itself the divine thing. Thus Mr. Bernard Shaw has attacked the old idea that men's acts are to be judged by the standard of the desire of happiness. He says that a man does not act for his happiness, but from his will. He does not say, "Jam will make me happy," but "I want jam." And in all this others follow him with yet greater enthusiasm. Mr. John Davidson, a remarkable poet, is so passionately excited about it that he is obliged to write prose. He publishes a short play with several long prefaces. This is natural enough in Mr. Shaw, for all his plays are prefaces: Mr. Shaw is (I suspect) the only man on earth who has never written any poetry. But that Mr. Davidson (who can write excellent poetry) should write instead laborious metaphysics in defence of this doctrine of will, does show that the doctrine of will has taken hold of men. Even Mr. H.G. Wells has half spoken in its language; saying that one should test acts not like a thinker, but like an artist, saying, "I _feel_ this curve is right," or "that line _shall_ go thus." They are all excited; and well they may be. For by this doctrine of the divine authority of will, they think they can break out of the doomed fortress of rationalism. They think they can escape.

But they cannot escape. This pure praise of volition ends in the same break up and blank as the mere pursuit of logic. Exactly as complete free thought involves the doubting of thought itself, so the acceptance of mere "willing" really paralyzes the will. Mr. Bernard Shaw has not perceived the real difference between the old utilitarian test of pleasure (clumsy, of course, and easily misstated) and that which he propounds. The real difference between the test of happiness and the test of will is simply that the test of happiness is a test and the other isn't. You can discuss whether a man's act in jumping over a cliff was directed towards happiness; you cannot discuss whether it was derived from will. Of course it was. You can praise an

action by saying that it is calculated to bring pleasure or pain to discover truth or to save the soul. But you cannot praise an action because it shows will; for to say that is merely to say that it is an action. By this praise of will you cannot really choose one course as better than another. And yet choosing one course as better than another is the very definition of the will you are praising.

The worship of will is the negation of will. To admire mere choice is to refuse to choose. If Mr. Bernard Shaw comes up to me and says, "Will something," that is tantamount to saying, "I do not mind what you will," and that is tantamount to saying, "I have no will in the matter." You cannot admire will in general, because the essence of will is that it is particular. A brilliant anarchist like Mr. John Davidson feels an irritation against ordinary morality, and therefore he invokes will--will to anything. He only wants humanity to want something. But humanity does want something. It wants ordinary morality. He rebels against the law and tells us to will something or anything. But we have willed something. We have willed the law against which he rebels.

I must admit that it took me several readings, not counting the many times I have read this passage before, to understand Chesterton. He opens with the collapse of pure skepticism. But why does Chesterton believe that endless questioning finally destroys the very freedom it seeks? Is he suggesting that when everything is called into question, nothing can be known? Without some fixed point of reference, does the whole geometry of human understanding begin to pull apart?

Considering this, Chesterton moves from questioning everything to the subject of the will. I wondered at how relevant this was to our age. Do we worship at the altar of will and ego? Are we the product of this very thinking of will and ego that can best be summed up by the Nike phrase of "Just do it"? Does what we will matter in the end, or is the will an expression of a deeper guide than random thought and mutated logic? And perhaps Chesterton would ask whether imagination itself is meant to guide the will, not by crushing it, but by opening it toward a larger and truer world.

Next time, Chesterton turns from the collapse of endless skepticism toward a startling idea: that freedom itself depends upon limits, and that meaning, morality, art, and even revolution can only exist when human beings are willing to choose something definite instead of trying to keep every possibility open forever.

Let's meet again in two weeks. Until then, God bless and keep well.

Session: 10

Reading: 9

Project: Chesterton Orthodoxy Reading Series

Primary Text: G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (1908)

Edition Used: Project Gutenberg eBook #16769

Reading Lines: 1101 through 1201