

Chesterton argues that the modern world is not evil but filled with virtues that have been torn from their balance and allowed to run wild. Truth without mercy becomes cruelty, pity without truth becomes sentimentality, and humility itself can shift into a corrosive doubt that undermines conviction. When reason turns inward and begins to doubt its own foundations, the mind risks destroying its ability to know anything at all. This session explores Chesterton's warning that both virtue and logic must remain anchored within a larger harmony if they are to sustain faith, reason, and a livable world.

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 invited us to consider breaking free of circular thinking by embracing the unlimited expansiveness of the mystery of the cross.

Today he invites us to consider the danger when thought becomes too extreme. Virtues, the positive attributes of life, when singularly lifted to an ultimate place, can be far more damaging than a vice. Chesterton suggests that justice without mercy, love without accountability, peace without truth can lead to greater abuses than any criminal might imagine. Does this mean that any good thing that is an end in itself, is, well, the end?

It is interesting that modern *New York Times* best selling author and columnist, Ross Douthat, in his book, *Bad Religion*, expands on Chesterton's observations when he says:

"The great Christian heresies vary wildly in their theological substance, but almost all have in common a desire to resolve Christianity's contradictions, untie its knotty paradoxes, and produce a cleaner and more coherent faith. Heretics are often stereotyped as wild mystics, but they're just as likely to be problem solvers and logic choppers, well-intentioned seekers after a more reasonable version of Christian faith than orthodoxy supplies."

The question is, once the tension is broken, can we ever go back? Once the virtues run wild, what constraint is there on divergent Christian understandings?

So, let's turn now to the reading.

Reading 7 – lines 859 through 974 of Chesterton, G. K. *Orthodoxy* (1908). Project Gutenberg eBook no. 16769.

The modern world is not evil; in some ways the modern world is far too good. It is full of wild and wasted virtues. When a religious scheme is shattered (as Christianity was shattered at the Reformation), it is not merely the vices that are let loose. The vices are, indeed, let loose, and they wander and do damage. But the virtues are let loose also; and the virtues wander more wildly, and the virtues do more terrible damage. The modern world is full of the old Christian virtues gone mad. The virtues have gone mad because they have been isolated from each other and are wandering alone. Thus some scientists care for truth; and their truth is pitiless. Thus some humanitarians only care for pity; and their pity (I am sorry to say) is often untruthful. For example, Mr. Blatchford attacks Christianity because he is mad on one Christian virtue: the merely mystical and almost irrational virtue of charity. He has a strange idea that he will make it easier to forgive sins by saying that there are no sins to forgive. Mr. Blatchford is not only an early Christian, he is the only early Christian who ought really to have been eaten by lions. For in his case the pagan accusation is really true: his mercy would mean mere anarchy. He really is the enemy of the human race--because he is so human. As the other extreme, we may take the acrid realist, who has deliberately killed in himself all human pleasure in happy tales or in the healing of the heart. Torquemada tortured people physically for the sake of moral truth. Zola tortured people morally for the sake of physical truth. But in Torquemada's time there was at least a system that could to some extent make righteousness and peace kiss each other. Now they do not even bow. But a much stronger case than these two of truth and pity can be found in the remarkable case of the dislocation of humility.

It is only with one aspect of humility that we are here concerned. Humility was largely meant as a restraint upon the arrogance and infinity of the appetite of man. He was always outstripping his mercies with his own newly invented needs. His very power of enjoyment destroyed half his joys. By asking for pleasure, he lost the chief pleasure; for the chief pleasure is surprise. Hence it became evident that if a man would make his world large, he must be always making himself small. Even the haughty visions, the tall cities, and the toppling pinnacles are the creations of humility. Giants that tread down forests like grass are the creations of humility. Towers that vanish upwards above the loneliest star are the creations of humility. For towers are not tall unless we look up at them; and giants are not giants unless they are larger than we. All this gigantesque imagination, which is, perhaps, the mightiest of the pleasures of man, is at bottom entirely humble. It is impossible without humility to enjoy anything--even pride.

But what we suffer from to-day is humility in the wrong place. Modesty has moved from the organ of ambition. Modesty has settled upon the organ of conviction; where it was never meant to be. A man was meant to be doubtful about himself, but undoubting about the truth; this has been exactly reversed. Nowadays the part of a man that a man does assert is exactly the part he ought not to assert--himself. The part he doubts is exactly the part he ought not to doubt--the Divine Reason. Huxley preached a humility content to learn from Nature. But the new sceptic is so humble that he doubts if he can even learn. Thus we should be wrong if we had said hastily that there is no humility typical of our time. The truth is that there is a real humility typical of our time; but it so happens that it is practically a more poisonous humility than the wildest prostrations of the ascetic. The old humility was a spur that prevented a man from stopping; not a nail in his boot that prevented him from going on. For the old humility made a man doubtful about his efforts, which might make him work harder. But the new humility makes a man doubtful about his aims, which will make him stop working altogether.

At any street corner we may meet a man who utters the frantic and blasphemous statement that he may be wrong. Every day one comes across somebody who says that of course his view may not be the right one. Of course his view must be the right one, or it is not his view. We are on the road to producing a race of men too mentally modest to believe in the multiplication table. We are in danger of seeing philosophers who doubt the law of gravity as being a mere fancy of their own. Scoffers of old time were too proud to be convinced; but these are too humble to be convinced. The meek do inherit the earth; but the modern sceptics are too meek even to claim their inheritance. It is exactly this intellectual helplessness which is our second problem.

The last chapter has been concerned only with a fact of observation: that what peril of morbidity there is for man comes rather from his reason than his imagination. It was not meant to attack the authority of reason; rather it is the ultimate purpose to defend it. For it needs defence. The whole modern world is at war with reason; and the tower already reels.

The sages, it is often said, can see no answer to the riddle of religion. But the trouble with our sages is not that they cannot see the answer; it is that they cannot even see the riddle. They are like children so stupid as to notice nothing paradoxical in the playful assertion that a door is not a door. The modern latitudinarians speak, for instance, about authority in religion not only as if there were no reason in it, but as if there had never been any reason for it. Apart from seeing its philosophical basis, they cannot even see its historical cause. Religious authority has often, doubtless, been oppressive or unreasonable; just as every legal system (and especially our present one) has been callous and full of a cruel apathy. It is rational to attack the police; nay, it is glorious. But the modern critics of religious authority are like men who should attack the police without ever having heard of burglars. For there is a great and possible peril to the human mind: a peril as practical as burglary. Against it religious authority was reared, rightly or wrongly, as a barrier. And against it something certainly must be reared as a barrier, if our race is to avoid ruin.

That peril is that the human intellect is free to destroy itself. Just as one generation could prevent the very existence of the next generation, by all entering a monastery or jumping into the sea, so one set of thinkers can in some degree prevent further thinking by teaching the next generation that there is no validity in any human thought. It is idle to talk always of the alternative of reason and faith. Reason is itself a matter of faith. It is an act of faith to assert that our thoughts have any relation to reality at all. If you are merely a sceptic, you must sooner or later ask yourself the question, "Why should *anything* go right; even observation and deduction? Why should not good logic be as misleading as bad logic? They are both movements in the brain of a bewildered ape?" The young sceptic says, "I have a right to think for myself." But the old sceptic, the complete sceptic, says, "I have no right to think for myself. I have no right to think at all."

Humility. Is Chesterton asking us to consider the prospect of self-doubt in juxtaposition to the doubt of the goals of faith? To say that I do not trust God enough as compared with God is not to be trusted? Is this what it means to realign humility in the right organ, the self?

Alzheimer's Disease in close family members piqued my curiosity in how the mind functions. Most of us can recognize that when a patterned tile floor changes from a light to a dark color, it is just the extension of the pattern on the same level of the floor. A close family member suffering from Alzheimer's spent the last years of their life tapping floors. Was the pattern a cliff or solid surface?

The need to interpret the world had not ceased, it had changed, as logic shifted, but did not evaporate. This raised for me Chesterton's paradoxical question: "Why should not good logic be as misleading as bad logic?"

I find that I now spend more time tapping floors, asking questions, not despairing of reality, but letting it interrogate me. Chesterton raises the question, the point of tension, how much are our perceptions restrictions? Are we able to progress down the patterned hallway of life, tapping away, or do we stop when the pattern changes and doubt the hallway leads to any place but a cliff? Where is the middle point that gives us enough forward momentum to progress, but still able to not fall off a real cliff?

Next time, Chesterton will show why Christianity preserves reason by refusing to simplify reality into easy either-or answers.

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

Session: 8

Reading: 7

Project: Chesterton Orthodoxy Reading Series

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

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Reading Lines: 859 through 974