In Session 9 of *The Paradox of Common Sense: Walking with Chesterton*, we follow Chesterton into one of his sharpest critiques of modern thought: the moment when reason begins to question the very tools that make reasoning possible. From materialism and evolution to pragmatism and the worship of change itself, Chesterton argues that some philosophies do not merely challenge belief—they undermine thought, standards, and even the idea of objective truth. Along the way, we consider whether modern humanity has mistaken endless adjustment for genuine progress, and whether, like sweepers in the sport of curling, we have begun subtly altering not merely the path, but the target itself.

Full Transcript:

Welcome.
I'm glad you're here.

This is *Orthodoxy* by G. K. Chesterton, using the Project Gutenberg edition—red 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 proposed that good ideals elevated to ultimate principles can be far more damaging than vices.

Today, he looks at the dissatisfying meal he has already mentioned, as illustrated by the circularity of the serpent devouring itself. Reason, the tool of the logician and material observation, can be subject to the same relative arguments used "…to pull the mitre off pontifical man." Is this the descent of a questioned organ, the brain, into a subjective quagmire?

So, let's turn now to the reading.

Reading 8 – lines 975 through 1100 of Chesterton, G. K. *Orthodoxy* (1908). Project Gutenberg eBook no. 16769.

There is a thought that stops thought. That is the only thought that ought to be stopped. That is the ultimate evil against which all religious authority was aimed. It only appears at the end of decadent ages like our own: and already Mr. H.G. Wells has raised its ruinous banner; he has written a delicate piece of scepticism called "Doubts of the Instrument." In this he questions the brain itself, and endeavours to remove all reality from all his own assertions, past, present, and to come. But it was against this remote ruin that all the military systems in religion were originally ranked and ruled. The creeds and the crusades, the hierarchies and the horrible persecutions were not organized, as is ignorantly said, for the suppression of reason. They were organized for the difficult defence of reason. Man, by a blind instinct, knew that if once things were wildly questioned, reason could be questioned first. The authority of priests to absolve, the authority of popes to define the authority, even of inquisitors to terrify: these were all only dark defences erected round one central authority, more undemonstrable, more supernatural than all--the authority of a man to think. We know now that this is so; we have no excuse for not knowing it. For we can hear scepticism crashing through the old ring of authorities, and at the same moment we can see reason swaying upon her throne. In

so far as religion is gone, reason is going. For they are both of the same primary and authoritative kind. They are both methods of proof which cannot themselves be proved. And in the act of destroying the idea of Divine authority we have largely destroyed the idea of that human authority by which we do a long-division sum. With a long and sustained tug we have attempted to pull the mitre off pontifical man; and his head has come off with it.

Lest this should be called loose assertion, it is perhaps desirable, though dull, to run rapidly through the chief modern fashions of thought which have this effect of stopping thought itself. Materialism and the view of everything as a personal illusion have some such effect; for if the mind is mechanical, thought cannot be very exciting, and if the cosmos is unreal, there is nothing to think about. But in these cases the effect is indirect and doubtful. In some cases it is direct and clear; notably in the case of what is generally called evolution.

Evolution is a good example of that modern intelligence which, if it destroys anything, destroys itself. Evolution is either an innocent scientific description of how certain earthly things came about; or, if it is anything more than this, it is an attack upon thought itself. If evolution destroys anything, it does not destroy religion but rationalism. If evolution simply means that a positive thing called an ape turned very slowly into a positive thing called a man, then it is stingless for the most orthodox; for a personal God might just as well do things slowly as quickly, especially if, like the Christian God, he were outside time. But if it means anything more, it means that there is no such thing as an ape to change, and no such thing as a man for him to change into. It means that there is no such thing as a thing. At best, there is only one thing, and that is a flux of everything and anything. This is an attack not upon the faith, but upon the mind; you cannot think if there are no things to think about. You cannot think if you are not separate from the subject of thought. Descartes said, "I think; therefore I am." The philosophic evolutionist reverses and negatives the epigram. He says, "I am not; therefore I cannot think."

Then there is the opposite attack on thought: that urged by Mr. H.G. Wells when he insists that every separate thing is "unique," and there are no categories at all. This also is merely destructive. Thinking means connecting things, and stops if they cannot be connected. It need hardly be said that this scepticism forbidding thought necessarily forbids speech; a man cannot open his mouth without contradicting it. Thus when Mr. Wells says (as he did somewhere), "All chairs are quite different," he utters not merely a misstatement, but a contradiction in terms. If all chairs were quite different, you could not call them "all chairs."

Akin to these is the false theory of progress, which maintains that we alter the test instead of trying to pass the test. We often hear it said, for instance, "What is right in one age is wrong in another." This is quite reasonable, if it means that there is a fixed aim, and that certain methods attain at certain times and not at other times. If women, say, desire to be elegant, it may be that they are improved at one time by growing fatter and at another time by growing thinner. But you cannot say that they are improved by ceasing to wish to be elegant and beginning to wish to be oblong. If the standard changes, how can there be improvement, which implies a standard? Nietzsche started a nonsensical idea that men had once sought as good what we now call evil; if it were so, we could not talk of surpassing or even falling short of them. How can you overtake Jones if you walk in the other direction? You cannot discuss whether one people has succeeded more in being miserable than another succeeded in being happy. It would be like discussing whether Milton was more puritanical than a pig is fat.

It is true that a man (a silly man) might make change itself his object or ideal. But as an ideal, change itself becomes unchangeable. If the change-worshipper wishes to estimate his own progress, he must be sternly loyal to the ideal of change; he must not begin to flirt gaily with the ideal of monotony. Progress itself cannot progress. It is worth remark, in passing, that when Tennyson, in a wild and rather weak manner, welcomed the idea of infinite alteration in society, he instinctively took a metaphor which suggests an imprisoned tedium. He wrote--

"Let the great world spin for ever down the ringing grooves of change."

He thought of change itself as an unchangeable groove; and so it is. Change is about the narrowest and hardest groove that a man can get into.

The main point here, however, is that this idea of a fundamental alteration in the standard is one of the things that make thought about the past or future simply impossible. The theory of a complete change of standards in human history does not merely deprive us of the pleasure of honouring our fathers; it deprives us even of the more modern and aristocratic pleasure of despising them.

This bald summary of the thought-destroying forces of our time would not be complete without some reference to pragmatism; for though I have here used and should everywhere defend the pragmatist method as a preliminary guide to truth, there is an extreme application of it which involves the absence of all truth whatever. My meaning can be put shortly thus. I agree with the pragmatists that apparent objective truth is not the whole matter; that there is an authoritative need to believe the things that are necessary to the human mind. But I say that one of those necessities precisely is a belief in objective truth. The pragmatist tells a man to think what he must think and never mind the Absolute. But precisely one of the things that he must think is the Absolute. This philosophy, indeed, is a kind of verbal paradox. Pragmatism is a matter of human needs; and one of the first of human needs is to be something more than a pragmatist. Extreme pragmatism is just as inhuman as the determinism it so powerfully attacks. The determinist (who, to do him justice, does not pretend to be a human being) makes nonsense of the human sense of actual choice. The pragmatist, who professes to be specially human, makes nonsense of the human sense of actual fact.

“If it means that there is a fixed aim”: And so we find ourselves in a world of poor shots! Where aims and goals are either left undefined or redefined. It kind of reminds me of the art of curling. The aim is clear: get the stone as close as possible to the center of a twelve-foot circle and be closer to the goal than others in the game. The shooter aims and releases the stone. The sweepers use their brushes to alter the stone's path by polishing the ice. This is gentle path correction. The sweepers polish one side first, then the other, but the goal is the same.

Is Chesterton recounting and critiquing the enlightenment of his age? Suggesting that the intellectual sweepers have done more than tend the path forward, which history and exceptionalism guide the future of humanity in the direction of the promised land of our creation? Has our materialistic pragmatism caused us to be myopic? Do we enter the competition with an altered goal that has already excluded what is essential to our nature? Has modern existence become, to borrow E. F. Schumacher’s expression, incompatible with the human need for creativity, let alone grounding in the ultimate?

Next time, Chesterton will turn from the collapse of reason and the worship of will to something far stranger: the possibility that mystery, rather than certainty, is what keeps the human mind sane.

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

Session: 9

Reading: 8

Project: Chesterton Orthodoxy Reading Series

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

Edition Used: Project Gutenberg eBook #16769

Reading Lines: 975 through 1100