

Session 11, "The Limits of Yes," explores Chesterton's claim that every real act of will is also an act of limitation. To choose one path is to reject others, and this is not a failure of freedom but part of its very nature. Chesterton argues that art, action, morality, and even revolution require boundaries, because without definite commitments, we lose the ability to affirm or oppose anything meaningfully. The session reflects on how modern skepticism can leave us stranded at the crossroads, unable to say a real "yes" because every "yes" also carries a necessary "no."

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 suggested that unbridled skepticism calls into question the very organ of rationalization that produces all thought. He then considered the will and the ego as ends in themselves.

Today, Chesterton investigates the limiting nature of the world of facts. He asks us to consider the seriousness of what it means to say "yes" in a world where "no" is easier, if not even more welcome. Within the skepticism of our age, even our ability to commit becomes suspect.

Let's turn now to the reading.

Reading 10 – lines 1202 through 1320 of Chesterton, G. K. *Orthodoxy* (1908). Project Gutenberg eBook no. 16769.

All the will-worshippers, from Nietzsche to Mr. Davidson, are really quite empty of volition. They cannot will, they can hardly wish. And if any one wants a proof of this, it can be found quite easily. It can be found in this fact: that they always talk of will as something that expands and breaks out. But it is quite the opposite. Every act of will is an act of self-limitation. To desire action is to desire limitation. In that sense every act is an act of self-sacrifice. When you choose anything, you reject everything else. That objection, which men of this school used to make to the act of marriage, is really an objection to every act. Every act is an irrevocable selection and exclusion. Just as when you marry one woman you give up all the others, so when you take one course of action you give up all the other courses. If you become King of England, you give up the post of Beadle in Brompton. If you go to Rome, you sacrifice a rich suggestive life in Wimbledon. It is the existence of this negative or limiting side of will that makes most of the talk of the anarchic will-worshippers little better than nonsense. For instance, Mr. John Davidson tells us to have nothing to do with "Thou shalt not"; but it is surely obvious that "Thou shalt not" is only one of the necessary corollaries of "I will." "I will go to the Lord Mayor's Show, and thou shalt not stop me." Anarchism adjures us to be bold creative artists, and care for no laws or limits. But it is impossible to be an artist and not care

for laws and limits. Art is limitation; the essence of every picture is the frame. If you draw a giraffe, you must draw him with a long neck. If, in your bold creative way, you hold yourself free to draw a giraffe with a short neck, you will really find that you are not free to draw a giraffe. The moment you step into the world of facts, you step into a world of limits. You can free things from alien or accidental laws, but not from the laws of their own nature. You may, if you like, free a tiger from his bars; but do not free him from his stripes. Do not free a camel of the burden of his hump: you may be freeing him from being a camel. Do not go about as a demagogue, encouraging triangles to break out of the prison of their three sides. If a triangle breaks out of its three sides, its life comes to a lamentable end. Somebody wrote a work called "The Loves of the Triangles"; I never read it, but I am sure that if triangles ever were loved, they were loved for being triangular. This is certainly the case with all artistic creation, which is in some ways the most decisive example of pure will. The artist loves his limitations: they constitute the *thing* he is doing. The painter is glad that the canvas is flat. The sculptor is glad that the clay is colourless.

In case the point is not clear, an historic example may illustrate it. The French Revolution was really an heroic and decisive thing, because the Jacobins willed something definite and limited. They desired the freedoms of democracy, but also all the vetoes of democracy. They wished to have votes and *not* to have titles. Republicanism had an ascetic side in Franklin or Robespierre as well as an expansive side in Danton or Wilkes. Therefore they have created something with a solid substance and shape, the square social equality and peasant wealth of France. But since then the revolutionary or speculative mind of Europe has been weakened by shrinking from any proposal because of the limits of that proposal. Liberalism has been degraded into liberality. Men have tried to turn "revolutionise" from a transitive to an intransitive verb. The Jacobin could tell you not only the system he would rebel against, but (what was more important) the system he would *not* rebel against, the system he would trust. But the new rebel is a sceptic, and will not entirely trust anything. He has no loyalty; therefore he can never be really a revolutionist. And the fact that he doubts everything really gets in his way when he wants to denounce anything. For all denunciation implies a moral doctrine of some kind; and the modern revolutionist doubts not only the institution he denounces, but the doctrine by which he denounces it. Thus he writes one book complaining that imperial oppression insults the purity of women, and then he writes another book (about the sex problem) in which he insults it himself. He curses the Sultan because Christian girls lose their virginity, and then curses Mrs. Grundy because they keep it. As a politician, he will cry out that war is a waste of life, and then, as a philosopher, that all life is waste of time. A Russian pessimist will denounce a policeman for killing a peasant, and then prove by the highest philosophical principles that the peasant ought to have killed himself. A man denounces marriage as a lie, and then denounces aristocratic profligates for treating it as a lie. He calls a flag a bauble, and then blames the oppressors of Poland or Ireland because they take away that bauble. The man of this school goes first to a political meeting, where he complains that savages are treated as if they were beasts; then he takes his hat and umbrella and goes on to a scientific meeting, where he proves that they practically are beasts. In short, the modern revolutionist, being an infinite sceptic, is always engaged in undermining his own mines. In his book on politics he attacks men for trampling on morality; in his book on ethics he attacks morality for trampling on men. Therefore the modern man in revolt has become practically useless for all purposes of revolt. By rebelling against everything he has lost his right to rebel against anything.

It may be added that the same blank and bankruptcy can be observed in all fierce and terrible types of literature, especially in satire. Satire may be mad and anarchic, but it presupposes an admitted superiority in certain things over others; it presupposes a standard. When little boys in the street laugh at the fatness of some distinguished journalist, they are unconsciously assuming a standard of Greek sculpture. They are appealing to the marble Apollo. And the curious disappearance of satire from our literature is an instance of the fierce things fading for want of any principle to be fierce about. Nietzsche had some natural talent for sarcasm: he could sneer, though he could not laugh; but there is always something bodiless and without weight in his satire, simply because it has not any mass of common morality behind it. He is himself more preposterous than anything he denounces. But, indeed, Nietzsche will stand very well as the type of the whole of this failure of abstract violence. The softening of the brain which ultimately overtook him was not a physical accident. If Nietzsche had not ended in imbecility, Nietzscheism would end in imbecility. Thinking in isolation and with pride ends in being an idiot. Every man who will not have softening of the heart must at last have softening of the brain.

This last attempt to evade intellectualism ends in intellectualism, and therefore in death. The sortie has failed. The wild worship of lawlessness and the materialist worship of law end in the same void. Nietzsche scales staggering mountains, but he turns up ultimately in Tibet. He sits down beside Tolstoy in the land of nothing and Nirvana. They are both helpless--one because he must not grasp anything, and the other because he must not let go of anything. The Tolstoyan's will is frozen by a Buddhist instinct that all special actions are evil. But the Nietzscheite's will is quite equally frozen by his view that all special actions are good; for if all special actions are good, none of them are special. They stand at the cross-roads, and one hates all the roads and the other likes all the roads. The result is--well, some things are not hard to calculate. They stand at the cross-roads.

I like to keep my options open. I know that I am not alone in feeling that way. More and more, we have become an opportunistic society. Nobody wants to commit even to the best of activities until the last minute. But I did not connect this with Chesterton until this moment. We truly live in an age where we understand that to say "yes" to one thing is to say no to everything else. Saying "yes" is perhaps the most self-limiting word we can ever use.

I almost get a sense of the fierceness of the word from Chesterton. Every "yes" is a bond that makes all other calls on time, talent, or treasure a "no," a limit. But, according to Chesterton, we live in a world of such limits: "The moment you step into the world of facts, you step into a world of limits." Can Chesterton also be asserting that, in a way, the modern skeptic seeks to have his cake and eat it too? Does infinite skepticism unravel the very fabric of fact, and therefore of limitation? Can the modern person truly know "yes" to be "yes" and "no" to mean "no"? If our "yes" is no longer definitive, do we not only destroy our limits, but also undermine our ability to choose and commit? Are we stuck at the crossroads, not because we choose to stay there, but because we have surrendered the ability to discern a way forward? For even to move forward is too much of a choice.

Next time, Chesterton leads us into "The Ethics of Elfland," where fairy tales, childhood wonder, and the ordinary miracle of existence begin to show us how the world can be both strange and deeply our own.

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

Session: 11

Reading: 10

Project: Chesterton Orthodoxy Reading Series

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

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Reading Lines: 1202 through 1320