

In this session, Chesterton argues that democracy and tradition are not enemies but kin. If democracy means trusting the common sense of ordinary people, then tradition means extending that trust across time, giving a voice even to those who have gone before us. From there, Chesterton turns to fairy tales, nurses, and the nursery as places where common sense, wonder, and moral imagination are preserved.

Full transcript below.

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 the first principle of democracy, defined as a rightful voice in the deepest matters of life that belong to all humans, a principle he defined as “the essential things in men are the things they hold in common, not the things they hold separately.”

This week, Chesterton continues by describing the second principle. As you read and listen, is he saying that what drives us together is a basic instinct not to uniqueness, but to similarity and belonging? Despite our predilection toward standing out, fitting in seems, to be common seems is what Chesterton suggests holds us together. It is the paradox of modernity that individuals, as wayward atoms, seek to fly apart even as a mysterious force, commonality, holds us together.

Let's turn now to the reading.

Reading twelve – lines one thousand four hundred thirty-five through one thousand five hundred fifty-five of Chesterton, G. K. *Orthodoxy* (1908). Project Gutenberg eBook no. 16769.

This is the first principle of democracy: that the essential things in men are the things they hold in common, not the things they hold separately. And the second principle is merely this: that the political instinct or desire is one of these things which they hold in common. Falling in love is more poetical than dropping into poetry. The democratic contention is that government (helping to rule the tribe) is a thing like falling in love, and not a thing like dropping into poetry. It is not something analogous to playing the church organ, painting on vellum, discovering the North Pole (that insidious habit), looping the loop, being Astronomer Royal, and so on. For these things we do not wish a man to do at all unless he does them well. It is, on the contrary, a thing analogous to writing one's own love-letters or blowing one's own nose. These things we want a man to do for himself, even if he does them badly. I am not here arguing the truth of any of these conceptions; I know that some moderns are asking to have their wives chosen by scientists, and they may soon be asking, for all I know, to have their noses blown by nurses. I merely say that mankind does recognize these universal human functions, and that democracy classes government among them. In short, the

democratic faith is this: that the most terribly important things must be left to ordinary men themselves--the mating of the sexes, the rearing of the young, the laws of the state. This is democracy; and in this I have always believed.

But there is one thing that I have never from my youth up been able to understand. I have never been able to understand where people got the idea that democracy was in some way opposed to tradition. It is obvious that tradition is only democracy extended through time. It is trusting to a consensus of common human voices rather than to some isolated or arbitrary record. The man who quotes some German historian against the tradition of the Catholic Church, for instance, is strictly appealing to aristocracy. He is appealing to the superiority of one expert against the awful authority of a mob. It is quite easy to see why a legend is treated, and ought to be treated, more respectfully than a book of history. The legend is generally made by the majority of people in the village, who are sane. The book is generally written by the one man in the village who is mad. Those who urge against tradition that men in the past were ignorant may go and urge it at the Carlton Club, along with the statement that voters in the slums are ignorant. It will not do for us. If we attach great importance to the opinion of ordinary men in great unanimity when we are dealing with daily matters, there is no reason why we should disregard it when we are dealing with history or fable. Tradition may be defined as an extension of the franchise. Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about. All democrats object to men being disqualified by the accident of birth; tradition objects to their being disqualified by the accident of death. Democracy tells us not to neglect a good man's opinion, even if he is our groom; tradition asks us not to neglect a good man's opinion, even if he is our father. I, at any rate, cannot separate the two ideas of democracy and tradition; it seems evident to me that they are the same idea. We will have the dead at our councils. The ancient Greeks voted by stones; these shall vote by tombstones. It is all quite regular and official, for most tombstones, like most ballot papers, are marked with a cross.

Now, I have to put together a general position, and I pretend to no training in such things. I propose to do it, therefore, by writing down one after another the three or four fundamental ideas which I have found for myself, pretty much in the way that I found them. Then I shall roughly synthesise them, summing up my personal philosophy or natural religion; then I shall describe my startling discovery that the whole thing had been discovered before. It had been discovered by Christianity. But of these profound persuasions which I have to recount in order, the earliest was concerned with this element of popular tradition. And without the foregoing explanation touching tradition and democracy I could hardly make my mental experience clear. As it is, I do not know whether I can make it clear, but I now propose to try.

My first and last philosophy, that which I believe in with unbroken certainty, I learnt in the nursery. I generally learnt it from a nurse; that is, from the solemn and star-appointed priestess at once of democracy and tradition. The things I believed most then, the things I believe most now, are the things called fairy tales. They seem to me to be the entirely reasonable things. They are not fantasies: compared with them other things are fantastic. Compared with them religion and rationalism are both abnormal, though religion is abnormally right and rationalism abnormally wrong. Fairyland is nothing but the sunny country of common sense. It is not earth that judges heaven, but heaven that judges earth; so for me at least it was not earth that criticised elfland, but elfland that criticised the earth. I knew the magic beanstalk before I had tasted beans; I was sure of the Man in the Moon before I was certain of the moon. This was at one with all popular tradition.

Modern minor poets are naturalists, and talk about the bush or the brook; but the singers of the old epics and fables were supernaturalists, and talked about the gods of brook and bush. That is what the moderns mean when they say that the ancients did not "appreciate Nature," because they said that Nature was divine. Old nurses do not tell children about the grass, but about the fairies that dance on the grass; and the old Greeks could not see the trees for the dryads.

But I deal here with what ethic and philosophy come from being fed on fairy tales. If I were describing them in detail I could note many noble and healthy principles that arise from them. There is the chivalrous lesson of "Jack the Giant Killer"; that giants should be killed because they are gigantic. It is a manly mutiny against pride as such. For the rebel is older than all the kingdoms, and the Jacobin has more tradition than the Jacobite. There is the lesson of "Cinderella," which is the same as that of the Magnificat -- *exaltavit humiles*. There is the great lesson of "Beauty and the Beast"; that a thing must be loved *before* it is loveable. There is the terrible allegory of the "Sleeping Beauty," which tells how the human creature was blessed with all birthday gifts, yet cursed with death; and how death also may perhaps be softened to a sleep. But I am not concerned with any of the separate statutes of elfland, but with the whole spirit of its law, which I learnt before I could speak, and shall retain when I cannot write. I am concerned with a certain way of looking at life, which was created in me by the fairy tales, but has since been meekly ratified by the mere facts.

Driverless cars. Some people see them as a welcome future; others see them as a nightmare in the making. Where you stand on that issue is not the point here. The deeper question is whether human life is best understood as guided or unguided.

Chesterton seems to begin with the conviction that we are guided by common sense, by tradition, by story, by inherited wisdom, and perhaps most deeply by grace. What he resists is leaving the world to the automaton of materialism.

Then he makes an even stranger move. He suggests that a traditional worldview includes the legends and lore of fairy tales. Really? Is Chesterton asking us to put aside the gains of science and go back to looking for fairy circles in the yard? Probably not. Rather, he is challenging the modern mind to recognize that facts alone do not exhaust meaning. Fairy tales, for Chesterton, preserve a way of seeing that materialism forgets: wonder, moral imagination, and the sense that the world is more gift than machine.

Perhaps this is the beginning of his attempt to bring imagination into the slurry of material facts. And perhaps Chesterton believes that this odd mixture—reason, wonder, tradition, and common sense—offers a way of understanding the world that is more faithful both to reality and to the human soul.

Next time, Chesterton presses deeper into the logic of fairyland, arguing that nature is not made less wonderful by its patterns, and that what scientists call "laws" may be better understood as repeated enchantments, ordinary miracles we have simply grown used to seeing.

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

Session: 13

Reading: 12

Project: Chesterton Orthodoxy Reading Series

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

Orthodoxy: Session 13 "The Democracy of the Dead"

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Reading Lines: 1435 through 1555