

THE INNER NECESSITY OF PARADOX IN CHESTERTON'S HUMBLE ORTHODOXY

THOMAS MÖLLENBECK

“[T]he most frequent danger we have to avoid might be the development of a bad metaphysical habit, an egotistical pride counteracting the natural sanity of mind Chesterton experienced in childhood.”



1. DISCOVERING THE VARIETY OF PARADOXES

One look at *The English Oxford Dictionary* confirms what Aristotle likes to state at the beginning of his investigations: “paradox” can be used in many different ways. The first definition listed does not reflect how John Henry Newman often uses the word, namely as a “self-contradicting proposition or statement that is against reason or ascertained truth, and is therefore, in short, essentially absurd and false.”¹ Only fifty years later, the most frequent use in the English language, dating back to the sixteenth century, seems to focus on the generally surprising character of

1. The definitions of “paradox” can be found in *The Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. 7 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933), 450–51.

paradox. As the dictionary states, a paradox is “a statement or tenet contrary to received opinion or belief; often with the implication that it is marvellous or incredible; sometimes with unfavourable connotation, as being discordant with what is held to be established truth, and hence absurd or fantastic; sometimes with favourable connotation, as a correction of vulgar error.”²

This is probably the most frequent use of “paradox” in the hundred books G. K. Chesterton has written.³ Yet the “vulgar error” he delights in contradicting is not the opinion of the common man, for whom Chesterton has great respect. The error he attacks with his paradoxes is rather the popular opinion held by members of his own intellectual strata—journalists, artists, philosophers, politicians—all engulfed by the maelstrom of the zeitgeist. The spirit of Chesterton’s age opened to such a cornucopia of misunderstandings of man in this world (and the world to come) that the author always found a paradox to illustrate his point, surprising his readers by turning topsy-turvy, as he liked to say, the “received opinion or belief” of his time.

In view of the absence of a clear notion of the good in Henrik Ibsen’s work, George Bernard Shaw expressed his appreciation in a paradox that Chesterton likes to quote because it characterizes the “negative spirit” of his time: “The golden rule is, that there is no golden rule” (*H*, 50). Chesterton’s critique of contemporary pessimism and its self-contradictions can be brief and serious. For instance, he comments on the poet Algernon Charles Swinburne and “the monstrously muddled pantheism of ‘Hertha’; in which a later Swinburne absurdly attempted to deduce a revolutionary ethic, of the right to resist wrongs, from a cosmic monism which could only mean that all things are equally wrong or right” (*A*, 266). But when Chesterton wants to illustrate the common opinion that it does not matter whether “a man is a pessimist or an optimist, a Cartesian or a Hegelian, materialist or a spiritualist,” he opts for a more elaborate and humorous approach:

2. *Ibid.*

3. The following works by G. K. Chesterton will hereafter be cited in-text as follows: G. K. Chesterton, *Collected Works* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986): *Heretics* (= *H*); *Orthodoxy* (= *O*); *The Everlasting Man* (= *E*); *The Autobiography of G. K. Chesterton* (= *A*); *St. Thomas Aquinas* (= *TA*).

At any innocent tea-table we may easily hear a man say, "Life is not worth living." We regard it as we regard the statement that it is a fine day; nobody thinks that it can possibly have any serious effect on the man or on the world. And yet if that utterance were really believed, the world would stand on its head. Murderers would be given medals for saving men from life; firemen would be denounced for keeping men from death; poisons would be used as medicines; doctors would be called in when people were well; the Royal Humane Society would be rooted out like a horde of assassins. Yet we never speculate as to whether the conversational pessimist will strengthen or disorganize society; for we are convinced that theories do not matter. (H, 40)

The easiest case for any controversialist is the historically refutable paradox. An interesting example of the paradox as contradiction to "received opinion or belief" given in an old dictionary (in 1616) is "the earth moves round and the heavens stand still." In our time, however, the sentence illustrates a third type of "paradox": something that has always seemed to be a paradox can turn out to be true later on, discovered by science and philosophy or theologically revealed in the course of history. In *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, John Henry Newman points out that the allegedly indefectible certitude of the faithful concerning their religious beliefs is generally criticized by reminding us of the historical fact that what at the time of Copernicus or Galileo was considered to be a "paradox" we now all believe, because it is received as common sense. The dictionary quotes Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (the drama of the prince's uncertainty as to what one ought to think of, and consequently should do about, the death of his father) in view of the change in a person's relations: what appeared to be a "paradox" (the love of Hamlet and Ophelia) can turn out to be the case later—"This was sometime a paradox, but now / the time gives it proof" (act 3, scene 1, lines 124–25).

For some time Chesterton had shared the belief of his contemporaries that such expressions as "enlightened Middle Ages," "a happy nun," or "a miracle has happened" must be paradoxical. It took some time to gain enough experience and to read the right books to convince him that these so-called paradoxes could be truths.

My own case for Christianity is rational; but it is not simple. It is an accumulation of varied facts, like the attitude of the ordinary agnostic. But the ordinary agnostic has got his facts all wrong. He is a non-believer for a multitude of reasons; but they are untrue reasons. He doubts because the Middle Ages were barbaric, but they weren't; . . . because miracles do not happen, but they do; because monks were lazy, but they were very industrious; because nuns are unhappy, but they are particularly cheerful; because Christian art was sad and pale, but it was picked out in peculiarly bright colours and gay with gold; because modern science is moving away from the supernatural, but it isn't, it is moving towards the supernatural with the rapidity of a railway train. (O, 354)⁴

4. I have left out Chesterton's remark that Darwinism had been refuted, because it reflects on the impression he had after reading Herbert Spencer, a fervent advocate of Darwinism, whose arguments concerning the origin of human intellect and free will are very deficient. In the first part of *The Everlasting Man*, Chesterton explains in detail that what we know of prehistoric man is very little and that what we know is overwhelming proof for decisive difference of man from other animals, which—contrary to evolutionistic philosophies—cannot be the result of a gradual transition. The same insight can already be found in his earlier works from the beginning of the century. His remark on science moving toward the supernatural cannot be a reflection on theories of quantum physics, since these came later. It might be inspired by this observation: "More supernatural things are alleged to have happened in our time than would have been possible eighty years ago. Men of science believe in such marvels much more than they did: the most perplexing, and even horrible, prodigies of mind and spirit are always being unveiled in modern psychology. Things that the old science at least would frankly have rejected as miracles are hourly being asserted by the new science" (O, 331). And this is explained by some reflections in his autobiography: "This progress of the preternatural has gone on spreading and strengthening through my whole life. Indeed my life happens to cover the precise period of the real change; not realised by those occupied only with later changes or alternative spiritual solutions. When I was quite a boy, practically no normal person of education thought that a ghost could possibly be anything but a turnip-ghost; a thing believed in by nobody but the village idiot. When I was a young man, practically every person with a large circle had one or two friends with a fancy for what would still have been called mediums and moonshine. When I was middle-aged, great men of science of the first rank like Sir William Crookes and Sir Oliver Lodge claimed to have studied spirits as they might have studied spiders, and discovered ectoplasm exactly as they discovered protoplasm. At the time I write, the thing has grown into a considerable religious movement, by the activity of the late Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, much less of a scientist, but much more of a journalist. I hope nobody will think me such a fool as to offer these fragments of random experience as affecting the real controversy. In the controversy, indeed, through most of my life, I have defended Spiritualism against scepticism; though I should now naturally defend Catholicism even against Spiritualism" (A, 89–90).

As to the fact of miracles, Chesterton seems to have interpreted the sudden full recovery of his mind after having lost consciousness for three months in his long and very severe illness in 1914 as a miracle, but as one underlining the miraculous workings of the continuous creation:

My mind, such as it is, had suddenly become perfectly clear; as clear as it is now. That also was something of a lesson in the paradox of real things, so different from many modern and merely theatrical things. Since then I have known that everything is not a slow and graduated curve of evolution; but that there is in life and death an element of catastrophe that carries something of the fear of miracle. (A, 235)

Chesterton found his vocation not merely in being a journalist and controversialist, debunking the self-contradictions, or reality-contradicting certainties, of his time. In his very own way, he also served as an apologist of the Christian faith. And this involves two additional notions of “paradox” and their different uses in his writings. The twofold task of the common apologist is complicated, for he has to demonstrate that some things (such as miracles, sacraments, etc.) are not only reasonable and possible but are in fact actual and historical facts, even though they are generally regarded as “paradoxes” in a further sense of the word: “A phenomenon that exhibits some contradiction or conflict with preconceived notions of what is reasonable or possible; a person of perplexingly inconsistent life or behavior.”⁵ The dictionary speaks of very different beings: things and persons. Of course, the actual fact of inconsistencies in the life and behavior of Christians cannot be explained like cause and effect in things, and therefore it cannot be excused, since it is the result of either a lack of faith, will, or both. But even this explanation would lack something, for it is the inevitability of sin, a weakness of intellect and free will, that constitutes some evidence for the truth of the Christian religion by indicating its necessity: man would be lost without the hope of divine redemption and forgiveness. For this reason, Chesterton’s approach to apologetics is broader. It involves not only the three meanings of “paradox” we have already considered, but also a fourth: “A statement or proposition

5. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. 7, 450.

which on the face of it seems self-contradictory, absurd, or at variance with common sense, though, on investigation or when explained, it may prove to be well-founded (or, according to some, though it is essentially true).⁶ This type of paradox might remain and even become more important after it has been explained or understood.

What Newman said about man in this world is such a paradox (a term he did not use): “Our earthly life then gives promise of what it does not accomplish. It promises immortality, yet it is mortal; it contains life in death and eternity in time; and it attracts us by beginnings which faith alone brings to an end.”⁷ This promise finds its clearest expression in the Christian martyr. Chesterton is very rigorous when it comes to denial of this in “a solemn flippancy by some freethinker [who] said that a suicide was only the same as a martyr” (*O*, 276). His answer is not given in view of the individual person, but on the same theoretical level as the false statement:

The open fallacy of this helped to clear the question. Obviously a suicide is the opposite of a martyr. A martyr is a man who cares so much for something outside him, that he forgets his own personal life. A suicide is a man who cares so little for anything outside him, that he wants to see the last of everything. One wants something to begin: the other wants everything to end. (*Ibid.*)

For Chesterton, it is not only an essential part of his philosophy of gratitude to reject suicide; it is also important to see the difference between a suicide and a martyr, because it is one of many instances in which the Christian religion preserves the equilibrium of passions that is called virtue. In the chapter titled “The Paradoxes of Christianity,” Chesterton discusses the difference between the pagan and the Christian solutions. For the pagan, virtue is balance; for the Christian, it is “conflict: the collision of two passions apparently opposite” (*O*, 297). There, he follows the clue of the martyr and the suicide and takes the case of courage, “almost a contradiction in terms” (*O*, 297). This is an instance of

6. *Ibid.*, 450.

7. John Henry Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, vol. 4 (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1909), Sermon 14, p. 216.

an apparent paradox in the person of a Christian, which involves a new appreciation of the person of Christ, a paradox in himself: "Orthodox theology has especially insisted that Christ was not a being apart from God and man, like an elf, nor yet a being half human and half not, like a centaur, but both things at once and both things thoroughly, very man and very God" (O, 296).

Of equal importance for Chesterton's conversion to Christianity is the paradoxical way. Atheism was propagated in his time by accusing Christianity of many vices: "Not only (as I understood) had Christianity the most flaming vices, but it had apparently a mystical talent for combining vices which seemed inconsistent with each other. It was attacked on all sides and for all contradictory reasons" (O, 289). One of his examples for "self-contradiction in the sceptical attack" is the following:

They did prove to me in Chapter I (to my complete satisfaction) that Christianity was too pessimistic; and then, in Chapter II, they began to prove to me that it was a great deal too optimistic. One accusation against Christianity was that it prevented men, by morbid tears and terrors, from seeking joy and liberty in the bosom of Nature. But another accusation was that it comforted men with a fictitious providence, and put them in a pink-and-white nursery. . . . One rationalist had hardly done calling Christianity a nightmare before another began to call it a fool's paradise. (O, 289)

At a certain point in his intellectual development, Chesterton realized that, if all these accusations were true, Christianity would be very curious indeed, even mysterious. Could it be that this is a question of perspective, and that the perspective of the outsider might be deficient?

The very man [Swinburne] who denounced Christianity for pessimism was himself a pessimist. I thought there must be something wrong. And it did for one wild moment cross my mind that, perhaps, those might not be the very best judges of the relation of religion to happiness who, by their own account, had neither one nor the other. (O, 290)

The first three kinds of paradoxes can be shown to be nonessential and neither necessary nor desirable, because they consist in self-contradictions (in thinking or acting) or because

they are only apparent paradoxes that can be explained away or are dissolved with time. But the last kind of “paradox” can mean a contradiction that is merely apparent and not real, if one looks at reality from the right angle and thinks about it correctly, the seeming contradiction can be resolved into complementary aspects belonging to the—sometimes mysterious—object of our contemplation. One such object of contemplation is the man Chesterton himself.

2. THE CHESTERTON PARADOX: HUMBLY JOKING ORTHODOXY

There are objects that cannot be seen by all people alike, believers and nonbelievers. Thus, understanding the paradoxes of reality might not suffice to open the eyes of the nonbeliever: “Truth can understand error; but error cannot understand Truth” (*A*, 248). Moreover, for Chesterton it is not an exclusive characteristic of the theosophical or theological mindset to acknowledge mysterious objects; it is a natural shibboleth of sane minds, of sound philosophy, to embrace “mysticism,” since the rationalism of the preceding centuries had collapsed and left behind a confused intelligentsia elaborating their narrow-minded ideas into a state of mental insanity. The healthy mind of a normal man

has always believed that there was such a thing as fate, but such a thing as free will also. Thus he believed that children were indeed the kingdom of heaven, but nevertheless ought to be obedient to the kingdom of earth. He admired youth because it was young and age because it was not. It is exactly this balance of apparent contradictions that has been the whole buoyancy of the healthy man. (*O*, 231)

This balance of apparent contradictions is not achieved by looking through everything, knowing all the causes and being able to explain rationally the functions of every part of reality. In a paradoxical, almost Augustinian, play on words Chesterton sums this up: “The whole secret of mysticism is this: that man can understand everything by the help of what he does not understand” (*O*, 231). It is typical that he includes man’s own self in this. Chesterton might be thinking of the “name” spoken of in Revelation 2:17: “I will give him a white stone, with a new

name written on the stone which no one knows except him who receives it.” His reflection reminds us of the book on memory in the *Confessions*, where Augustine propounds that we know ourselves and understand our lives only through God, with him, and in him:

And, indeed, on this point I am all for the higher agnosticism; its better name is Ignorance. We have all read in scientific books, and, indeed, in all romances, the story of the man who has forgotten his name. This man walks about the streets and can see and appreciate everything; only he cannot remember who he is. Well, every man is that man in the story. Every man has forgotten who he is. One may understand the cosmos, but never the ego; the self is more distant than any star. Thou shalt love the Lord thy God; but thou shalt not know thyself. We are all under the same mental calamity; we have all forgotten our names. We have all forgotten what we really are. All that we call common sense and rationality and practicality and positivism only means that for certain dead levels of our life we forget that we have forgotten. All that we call spirit and art and ecstasy only means that for one awful instant we remember that we forget. (O, 257)

Chesterton is convinced that his mysticism is true, that man can understand everything by the help of what he does not understand. But, of course, an author could play with words, composing paradoxical expressions not because the subject matter is a paradox but because he wants to attract the attention of his reader to matters easily overlooked and bring it into focus by stressing or even exaggerating the paradoxical nature of the things observed. Such an author risks being accused of writing in a “flippant” way. Chesterton’s collection of observations published under the title *Tremendous Trifles*⁸ would be one example

8. G. K. Chesterton, *Tremendous Trifles* (= *TT*) (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2007). An illustration of this are his reflections on visiting “The Orthodox Barber.” Chesterton’s mind seems to have been very fertile, like fireworks ready to be ignited by the smallest spark. The innocent remark of the barber, that people are now talking of new methods of shaving and new instruments for it, leads to an absurd dialogue speculating about these and culminating in Chesterton’s rejection of the irrational principles commonly applied in his time, charging them with the noncontradiction principle of a sane mind, inherited from antiquity: “In the first and darkest of its books it is fiercely written that a man shall not eat his cake and have it; and though

of this. Another enjoyable one is the following memory from his childhood in a typical Victorian middle-class home, which Chesterton cannot in general identify as having been Christian:

Above all, so far from being stiff with orthodox religion, it was almost the first irreligious home in all human history. Theirs was the first generation that ever asked its children to worship the hearth without the altar. This was equally true, whether they went to church at eleven o'clock . . . or were reverently agnostic or latitudinarian, as was much of my own circle. (*A*, 30)

But even this defect of the Victorian age seems to him preferable to contemporary hypocrisy:

It would not be fair to say all I have said in praise of the old Victorian middle-class, without admitting that it did sometimes produce pretty hollow and pompous imposture. A solemn friend of my grandfather used to go for walks on Sunday carrying a prayer-book, without the least intention of going to church. And he calmly defended it by saying, with uplifted hand, "I do it, Chessie, as an example to others." The man who did that was obviously a Dickens character. And I am disposed to think that, in being a Dickens character, he was in many ways rather preferable to many modern characters. Few modern men, however false, would dare to be so brazen. And I am not sure he

all men talked until the stars were old it would still be true that a man who had shaved had lost his beard; and that a man who had lost his razor could not shave with it. But every now and then men jump up with the new something or other and say that everything can be had without sacrifice, that bad is good if you are only enlightened, and that there is no real difference between being shaved and not being shaved. The difference, they say, is only a difference of degree; everything is evolutionary and relative. Shavedness is immanent in man. Every ten-penny nail is a Potential Razor. The superstitious people of the past (they say) believed that a lot of black bristles standing out at right angles to one's face was a positive affair. But the higher criticism teaches us better. Bristles are merely negative. They are a Shadow where Shaving should be. 'Well, it all goes on, and I suppose it all means something. But a baby is the Kingdom of God, and if you try to kiss a baby he will know whether you are shaved or not. Perhaps I am mixing up being shaved and being saved; my democratic sympathies have always led me to drop my "h's.'" In another moment I may suggest that goats represent the lost because goats have long beards.' This is growing altogether too allegorical. 'Nevertheless,' I added, as I paid the bill, 'I have really been profoundly interested in what you told me about the New Shaving. Have you ever heard of a thing called the New Theology?' He smiled and said that he had not" (*TT*, 116).

was not really a more genuine fellow than the modern man who says vaguely that he has doubts or hates sermons, when he only wants to go and play golf. Hypocrisy itself was more sincere. (*A*, 30)

The paradox in which this humorous account culminates is typical of Chesterton, but he acknowledges this to be an exaggeration by adding, "Anyhow, it was more courageous" (*A*, 30). The reader of Chesterton knows that he uses the words "paradox" and "paradoxical" in many ways and that he uses paradoxes and paradoxical expressions very frequently; it is part of his personal style as an author. Some of his readers enjoy this immensely; others do not. The accusation of being flippant is often leveled against his style of writing and his person. Yet, while liberally providing the reader with disparaging remarks on his own books in general, Chesterton defended himself vigorously on this point:

Mr. McCabe thinks that I am not serious but only funny, because Mr. McCabe thinks that funny is the opposite of serious. Funny is the opposite of not funny, and of nothing else. The question of whether a man expresses himself in a grotesque or laughable phraseology, or in a stately and restrained phraseology, is not a question of motive or of moral state, it is a question of instinctive language and self-expression. . . . Whether a man preaches his gospel grotesquely or gravely is merely like the question of whether he preaches it in prose or verse. . . . The truth is, as I have said, that in this sense the two qualities of fun and seriousness have nothing whatever to do with each other, they are no more comparable than black and triangular. Mr. Bernard Shaw is funny and sincere. Mr. George Robey is funny and not sincere. Mr. McCabe is sincere and not funny. The average Cabinet Minister is not sincere and not funny. (*H*, 159–60)

At times the accusation of being "flippant" has had a religious origin:

Numbers of clergymen have from time to time reproached me for making jokes about religion; and they have almost always invoked the authority of that very sensible commandment which says, "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain." Of course, I pointed out that I was not in any conceivable sense taking the name in vain.

To take a thing and make a joke out of it is not to take it in vain. It is, on the contrary, to take it and use it for an uncommonly good object. To use a thing in vain means to use it without use. But a joke may be exceedingly useful; it may contain the whole earthly sense, not to mention the whole heavenly sense, of a situation. (*H*, 160)

Chesterton is cherished by many as both a witty and very wise apologist of Christianity. Yet to some who earnestly attempt to think and live as Christians his wit is not palatable at all. Famously, T. S. Eliot had difficulties appreciating Chesterton's style of writing and humor: the latter he could not appreciate, and the former he found to be "exasperating to the last point of endurance,"⁹ although he considered Chesterton to be one of the greatest literary critics of the century. Almost every year one of my brighter students confesses finding Chesterton's style hard to bear: "Saying three clever things in every paragraph—it's obnoxious"; "no clear, straightforward proposition—paradoxes all the time, everywhere!" Making matters worse, many of the clever insights in Chesterton's writings are introduced paradoxically, demanding a great concentration on the part of the reader so as to keep track of how exactly Chesterton arrives at his conclusion.

It is the more impressive when great authors who did not share Chesterton's view of the world, neither politically nor religiously, admired his literary skills and great common sense: Franz Kafka, Ernst Bloch, Bertolt Brecht, André Gide, Kurt Tucholsky, Bernard Shaw, Robert Musil, and Vladimir Nabokov are among those named by Gisbert Kranz, the President of the German Inklings' Society, in his book on Chesterton.¹⁰ He also reminds us of Jorge Luis Borges, who confessed that no other author had given him as many happy hours of reading as Chesterton because of his amusing and witty expression; he quotes André Maurois's defense of Chesterton, which itself is pronounced by turning the paradox around: "Many have thought Chesterton

9. In *G. K. Chesterton: The Critical Judgments. Part 1: 1900–1937*, ed. D. J. Conlon (Antwerp, Belgium: University of Antwerp, 1976), 67. Quoted in Randall Paine's introduction to his edition of *The Autobiography of G. K. Chesterton* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), 15.

10. Gisbert Kranz, *Gilbert Keith Chesterton: Prophet mit spitzer Feder* (Augsburg: Sankt Ulrich Verlag, 2005), 10.

to be not really serious, because he is humorous; in reality he is humorous, because he is serious. Being certain of truth, he can afford to joke. Certainty creates mirth.”¹¹

I propose that we not dismiss the partly paradoxical reactions of these famous readers simply as a matter of literary taste or of the inability of some to understand ironic remarks, such as “I am concerned with him as a Heretic—that is to say, a man whose view of things has the hardihood to differ from mine” (*H*, 46). Could the reason for it not be Chesterton’s certainty, which is especially annoying to some readers, even if they are Christians in earnest? Could it not be the certainty expressed in witty paradoxes? Some readers might find it hard to be so very certain of their faith in a world that is so very obviously contrary to it. They might not find it easy to enter into Chesterton’s mirth or cheerfulness because they wish for a more serious attempt to enable his reader to make the Christian view of the world plausible to the many who are far from it, who are not reached by the Church’s teaching. Yet Chesterton writes debunking and propounding paradoxes with mirth because he is skeptical about the efficiency of those systematic apologetics designed to convince skeptics by adopting the standards of rationalism.

I suggest we consider three aspects of Maurois’s judgment further: the accusation of not being serious because he is humorous, Maurois’s reversion (Chesterton is humorous because he is serious), and his assertion that Chesterton’s certainty creates his cheerfulness. Chesterton, as we have already seen, is very conscious of the first two aspects. In his *Autobiography* he recalls a remarkable misunderstanding of his defense of free will in the controversy with Mr. Blatchford. This socialist gentleman relied heavily on a pamphlet written by the monist and evolutionist Ernst Haeckel. Blatchford, as a socialist, wanted to vindicate the poor and refute the common capitalistic argument by denying the reality of free will: their situation simply cannot be their own responsibility. Chesterton is convinced that totalitarianism will come of this, even though it is the Christian impulse of charity that carries Blatchford’s mind to this extreme. Therefore, Chesterton asserts, paradoxically, Blatchford “really is the enemy of the human race—because he is so human” (*O*, 234).

11. *Ibid.*

His extensive dispute with Blatchford had given Chesterton the reputation of a controversialist. Yet an academic from Cambridge, sitting next to him at a dinner, felt compelled to ask him, "Excuse my asking, Mr. Chesterton, of course I shall quite understand if you prefer not to answer, and I shan't think any the worse of it, you know, even if it's true. But I suppose I'm right in thinking you don't really believe in those things you're defending against Blatchford?" (*A*, 172–73). Back then it seemed unthinkable that an intelligent member of the press should not share the deterministic materialism or monism of his age. It was a "heresy" to insist on the existence of free will in the universe or in man. Nevertheless, after publishing his books *Heretics* (1905) and *Orthodoxy* (1908), Chesterton was still surprised that nobody was taking him seriously. He was not surprised, however, that when his contemporaries finally did, it was the turning point of his career:

And through this experience I learned two very interesting things, which serve to divide all this part of my life into two distinct periods. Very nearly everybody, in the ordinary literary and journalistic world, began by taking it for granted that my faith in the Christian creed was a pose or a paradox. The more cynical supposed that it was only a stunt. The more generous and loyal warmly maintained that it was only a joke. It was not until long afterwards that the full horror of the truth burst upon them; the disgraceful truth that I really thought the thing was true. And I have found, as I say, that this represents a real transition or border-line in the life of the apologists. Critics were almost entirely complimentary to what they were pleased to call my brilliant paradoxes; until they discovered that I really meant what I said. Since then they have been more combative; and I do not blame them. (*A*, 172)

He cheerfully entered into combat, never ceasing to introduce new paradoxes in his many books, and adamantly defending his method:

Seriousness is not a virtue. It would be a heresy, but a much more sensible heresy, to say that seriousness is a vice. It is really a natural trend or lapse into taking one's self gravely, because it is the easiest thing to do. It is much easier to write a good *Times* leading article than a good joke in *Punch*. For solemnity flows out of men naturally; but laughter is a leap.

It is easy to be heavy: hard to be light. Satan fell by the force of gravity. (O, 326)

Agreeing with Chesterton on this point does not necessarily entail understanding his levity. In addition to the difficulty of comprehending the many paradoxes in his writings, we are confronted with the paradoxical appearance of Chesterton himself: How does he do it? How can he speak so lightly of grave matters and so humorously of most serious subjects? How can he criticize his colleagues so severely without losing his respect for them or without losing their respect and even friendship? He never made any enemies. And, what is more, how can he be called a humble man by so many of his contemporaries while he was an apologist of Christianity and a prolific author of controversial literature who established himself as a great and very clever champion of orthodoxy—a position usually not associated with meek personalities? Étienne Gilson, the great scholar of medieval philosophy, praised Chesterton's book *St. Thomas Aquinas* very highly and at the same time explained how the difficulties of his works and humorous style are connected with his humility:

I consider it as being without possible comparison the best book ever written on St. Thomas. Nothing short of genius can account for such an achievement. Everybody will no doubt admit that it is a "clever" book, but the few readers who have spent twenty or thirty years in studying St. Thomas Aquinas, and who, perhaps, have themselves published two or three volumes on the subject, cannot fail to perceive that the so-called "wit" of Chesterton has put their scholarship to shame. He has guessed all that which they had tried to demonstrate, and he has said all that which they were more or less clumsily attempting to express in academic formulas. Chesterton was one of the deepest thinkers who ever existed; he was deep because he was right; and he could not help being right; but he could not either help being modest and charitable, so he left it to those who could understand him to know that he was right, and deep; to the others, he apologized for being right, and he made up for being deep by being witty. That is all they can see of him.¹²

12. Gilson's praise can be found in G. K. Chesterton, *Collected Works*, vol. 2 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), "General Editor's Introduction," 8.

Gilson is completely right, but I would like to add that Chesterton's interpretation of St. Thomas was not so much "guesswork" because his own metaphysical approach to reality was formed in such a way that, out of a kindred spirit, he could understand Thomas congenially, as I will try to show in the following pages.

3. CHESTERTON'S LEVITY AND THE METAPHYSICAL GIFT OF CHILDHOOD

Chesterton's frequent and varying use of paradoxes is due to what Wassily Kandinsky called the "inner necessity" in the composition of a piece of art. In the case of Chesterton, part of understanding his art is understanding the paradox of the artist. We can find the reason for his style in Chesterton's autobiographical account of the perfect sanity of mind in the bright light of wonder that illuminated his childhood. When he was studying at the Slade School of Art (1892–94), this experience was darkly overshadowed by the clouds of pessimism and skepticism leading him very near to the point of despair. "All I had hitherto heard of Christian theology had alienated me from it. I was a pagan at the age of twelve, and a complete agnostic by the age of sixteen" (*O*, 288). Chesterton confessed that in boyhood and youth his "morbidities were mental as well as moral" and that he "sounded the most appalling depths of fundamental scepticism and solipsism" (*A*, 330). While the materialist thought there was nothing but matter, he thought there might be nothing but mind. Everything could be a dream; he felt this "not only as a mood but as a metaphysical doubt" (*A*, 95). He carried the skepticism of his time "as far as it would go. And I soon found it would go a great deal further than most of the sceptics went" (*A*, 95). Finally, he could imagine to have "projected the universe from within, with its trees and stars; and that is so near to the notion of being God that it is manifestly even nearer to going mad" (*A*, 95). Pride forming the core of his thought at the time, despair unavoidably followed presumption. He spent some time in Giant Despair's castle and experienced the spiritual temptations coming with it:

As Bunyan, in his morbid period, described himself as prompted to utter blasphemies, I had an overpowering impulse to record or draw horrible ideas and images;

plunging in deeper and deeper as in a blind spiritual suicide. I had never heard of Confession, in any serious sense, in those days; but that is what is really needed in such cases. I fancy they are not uncommon cases. Anyhow, the point is here that I dug quite low enough to discover the devil; and even in some dim way to recognise the devil. (*A*, 96)

To get out of the “darkest depths of contemporary pessimism,” Chesterton had “little help from philosophy and no real help from religion” (*A*, 96), but he found two ways: revolt and flight. After some time he “had a strong inward impulse to revolt; to dislodge this incubus or throw off this nightmare” (*A*, 96). His self-made “mystical theory” was this:

Even mere existence, reduced to its most primary limits, was extraordinary enough to be exciting. Anything was magnificent as compared with nothing. I hung on to the remains of religion by one thin thread of thanks. I thanked whatever gods might be, . . . for my own soul and my own body, even if they could be conquered. (*A*, 96–97)

He decided to look “at things, with a sort of mystical minimum of gratitude” (*A*, 97). This is not to be confused with some sort of theosophism, mystically dissolving the transcendentals of being (one, true, good, and beautiful): “Good and evil, truth and falsehood, folly and wisdom are only aspects of the same upward movement of the universe. Even at that stage it occurred to me to ask, ‘Supposing there is no difference between good and bad, or between false and true, what is the difference between up and down?’” (*A*, 154).

Whereas the revolt involving a decision against pessimism might have been a slow development that cannot be dated exactly, Chesterton very clearly remembered an evening in those days when he took flight from evil. In “The Diabolist,” a short piece published in *Tremendous Trifles*, he recalls going for a walk near the academy with an intelligent young student, who surprised him with the question of why he was becoming orthodox. Chesterton had not noticed it in himself before, “but the moment he had said it I knew it to be literally true” (*TT*, 181). Consequently, he answered, “Because I have come to the old belief that heresy is worse even than sin. . . . I hate modern doubt because it is dangerous” (*TT*, 181). It was because of the danger

for morality that it had to be avoided, and the other student agreed, but retorted, “But why do you care about morality?” Chesterton realized that this man was dead serious, and he “had an unmeaning sense of being tempted in a wilderness” (*TT*, 181). As Chesterton expounded on his recovered “mystical theory” and mystical minimum of gratitude for life in this world, including the bonfire at the place they were standing, this followed:

He had a horrible fairness of the intellect that made me despair of his soul. A common, harmless atheist would have denied that religion produced humility or humility a simple joy: but he admitted both. He only said, “But shall I not find in evil a life of its own? Granted that for every woman I ruin one of those red sparks will go out: will not the expanding pleasure of ruin. . .” “Do you see that fire?” I asked. “If we had a real fighting democracy, some one would burn you in it; like the devil-worshipper that you are.” “Perhaps,” he said, in his tired, fair way, “only what you call evil I call good.” (*TT*, 182)

At this point Chesterton leaves him, not taking flight yet. But as he returns later to the academy to fetch his hat, he suddenly hears the voice of this student, talking in the dark passage, to his cronies:

And then I heard those two or three words which I remember in every syllable and cannot forget. I heard the Diabolist say, “I tell you I have done everything else. If I do that I shan’t know the difference between right and wrong.” I rushed out without daring to pause; and as I passed the fire I did not know whether it was hell or the furious love of God. (*TT*, 183)

In his revolt against pessimism and in his flight from evil, Chesterton was relying on his childhood experience that pre-figured his first “rude and primitive religion of gratitude” (*A*, 330), which “produced humility,” and which in turn gave rise to a simple joy. When he had fully recovered his sanity of mind, he “was full of a new and fiery resolution to write against the Decadents and the Pessimists who ruled the culture of the age” (*A*, 97). Consequently, he began to criticize the modern pride in being heterodox. Sometimes this culminated in the opinion that “everything matters—except everything” (*H*, 40). There is

something to be feared by modern man: "He may turn over and explore a million objects, but he must not find that strange object, the universe; for if he does he will have a religion, and be lost" (*H*, 40). Chesterton published *Heretics* to uncover the paradoxes of the zeitgeist, insisting on the necessity of pursuing the search for dogmatic truth. When he was accused of not revealing his own philosophical view of man, he responded with *Orthodoxy*, which described the way back to sanity in an age of dire confusion by following the line of thought laid out by great writers in the various dogmatic systems of his time (rationalism, skepticism, materialism, Nietzscheanism, etc.), only to discover that—paradoxically—all of them end up contradicting themselves.

Bernard Shaw, who became a lifelong friend of Chesterton's, is an important example of this, because the "whole force and triumph of Mr. Bernard Shaw lie in the fact that he is a thoroughly consistent man" (*H*, 64). He is dogmatic; he does not change the principles of his philosophy opportunistically, and he does not apply them inconsistently. But his principles are wrong and lead to paradoxes. Chesterton insists that his first rule, "the golden rule is there is no golden rule," might be thought to be a paradox in itself, since it is a rule, but at least it does not really contradict Shaw's later "religion of the Superman," as his contemporaries tended to think. The merely apparent paradox is the following: Shaw's golden rule intended to set man free to see the world as it is and to act accordingly without being hampered by "ideals," yet Friedrich Nietzsche's "Superman" obviously is an "ideal" of sorts. He "who had to all appearance mocked at the faiths in the forgotten past discovered a new god in the unimaginable future. He who had laid all the blame on ideals set up the most impossible of all ideals, the ideal of a new creature" (*H*, 67). Chesterton uncovers the common denominator of Shaw's early and later philosophy: he had never seen and admired man for what he is, namely a free and intelligent being that uses his liberty to generalize about his world and to create laws for what constitutes a free people. Therefore, Shaw did not bend his knee before man: "Mr. Shaw, not being easily pleased, decides to throw over humanity with all its limitations and go in for progress for its own sake" (*H*, 69). But he was disappointed with man for a reason:

He has always had a secret ideal that has withered all the things of this world. He has all the time been silently comparing humanity with something that was not human. . . . Now, to have this inner and merciless standard may be a very good thing, or a very bad one, it may be excellent or unfortunate, but it is not seeing things as they are. (*H*, 67–68)

Chesterton opts for the opposite, and this is one source of his humility.

It is only the quite arbitrary and priggish habit of comparison with something else which makes it possible to be at our ease in front of him. A sentiment of superiority keeps us cool and practical; the mere facts would make our knees knock under us with religious fear. It is the fact that every instant of conscious life is an unimaginable prodigy. It is the fact that every face in the street has the incredible unexpectedness of a fairy-tale. (*H*, 68)

In the preface to *Orthodoxy*, he compares his book to Newman's *Apologia pro vita sua* in that he "has been forced to be egotistical only in order to be sincere."¹³ However, Newman explains how the development of his religious ideas has led him personally to his conversion to the Roman Catholic Church, whereas Chesterton attempts an "explanation, not of whether the Christian Faith can be believed, but of how he personally has come to believe it."¹⁴ The plot is different, too. While Newman (already raised in the Christian faith) starts with his conversion to an earnestly religious life, beginning with the discovery of what conscience really is, Chesterton starts "with the writer's own solitary and sincere speculations," which "were suddenly satisfied by the Christian Theology."¹⁵ Yet these speculations had their fundamentals in his childhood. In the chapter titled "The Ethics of Elfland," Chesterton consciously provokes the critical contemporary by admitting that his philosophical and moral

13. The preface to *Orthodoxy* is taken from *The Wit, Whimsy, and Wisdom of G.K. Chesterton*, vol. 4: *Heretics, Orthodoxy, What's Wrong with the World* (Landisville, PA: Coachwhip Press, 2009), 167.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*

principles have their basis in the fairy tales he had been told in the nursery:

My first and last philosophy, that which I believe in with unbroken certainty, I learnt in the nursery. 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. (O, 252)

Then follows a convincing analysis of the morals and metaphysics of fairy tales in comparison with the implicit morals and metaphysics of his unconsciously dogmatic scientific age; it is well-informed and quite consistent, for example, when he comes to speak of our abstraction of the “laws of nature” and the dogmatic faith of many contemporaries in the impossibility of miracles. However, it is only in his last book, his *Autobiography* (1936), that Chesterton gives an account of this metaphysical experience of childhood that enabled him—later in life—to opt consciously for the reality and unity of being, goodness, and beauty in this world. For one, the child is not bribed into being good by the promise of a reward: “For the child is not a Manichee. He does not think that good things are in their nature separate from being good” (A, 52). Later he realizes fully that this world is creation: a personal “maker” is responsible for the world as his father was responsible for the toy theater of his youth. Still later, he comes to understand that history is the unfolding drama of mankind in time, and that, just as his father directed the drama of the young prince crossing a bridge over a deep abyss, a golden key in his hand to free the princess in the tower, in the same way God directs the story of his own life. (We will see in whose hands this key will end up at the end of our investigation.)

Chesterton protests against psychoanalysis and the “modern Cult of the Child at play”: for a child there is a difference between “make-believe and belief. A Child does not confuse fact and fiction” (A, 51). The reality behind the scenes, the other world, does not eliminate the wonder of what is happening on the scene. The fact that God is ruling the world in divine providence

does not eliminate the drama of free will, the importance of human action in this world. Reflecting on his attitude toward the fictional drama of the toy theater, Chesterton realizes,

I was pleased, and not displeased, when I discovered that the magic figures could be moved by three human fingers. And I was right; for those three human fingers are more magical than any magic figures; the three fingers which hold the pen and the sword and the bow of the violin; the very three fingers that the priest lifts in benediction as the emblem of the Blessed Trinity. There was no conflict between the two magics in my mind. (*A*, 55)

Chesterton admits his difficulties in conveying the meta-physical insights of childhood experience:

For the sequel of the story, it is necessary to attempt this first and hardest chapter of the story: and I must try to state somehow what I mean by saying that my own childhood was of quite a different kind, or quality, from the rest of my very undeservedly pleasant and cheerful existence. Of this positive quality the most general attribute was clearness. (*A*, 53)

He remembers “a sort of white light on everything, cutting things out very clearly, and rather emphasizing their solidity. The point is that the white light had a sort of wonder in it, as if the world were as new as myself; but not that the world was anything but a real world” (*A*, 53). The theme reappears in *The Everlasting Man*, where Chesterton stresses the necessity of seeing things as they are, and the difficulty of doing this:

In order to strike, in the only sane or possible sense, the note of impartiality, it is necessary to touch the nerve of novelty. I mean that in one sense we see things fairly when we see them first. . . . There must be in it for working purposes a great deal of tradition, of familiarity, and even of routine. So long as its fundamentals are sincerely felt, this may even be the saner condition. But when its fundamentals are doubted, as at present, we must try to recover the candour and wonder of the child; the unspoilt realism and objectivity of innocence. . . . We must invoke the most wild and soaring sort of imagination; the imagination that can see what is there. (*E*, 148)

In his small book *Unless You Become Like This Child*, Hans Urs von Balthasar summarizes his view of the metaphysical experience in early childhood and its importance for religion. He tries to show that metaphysical experience and philosophy have the same common source in all human beings: the child comes to the consciousness of himself in a surprising moment when his mother smiles at him, provoking the recognition of the “Thou and the I” in a single spiritual realization of the full horizon of being: the good and the beautiful are in truth one. His subsequent experience of the world will always be made in comparison with this transcendental openness to the fullness of being, a mirror of the glory of the Creator; it will be an experience of many kinds of “differences,” intimations of the beauty that constitutes the finite forms of being in our world. There are many similarities to Balthasar’s transcendental experience of being in the original realization of the I and the Thou of the mother. But Chesterton does not want to establish the general philosophical fundamentals of a Christian apologetic theology. He does not exclude a possible universal element in his own experience, but, like C. S. Lewis in *Surprised by Joy* and *The Pilgrim’s Regress*, he focuses on his personal history, on a conscious realization in his childhood, the experience of something that forced him to transcend himself and, consequently, this world.

As we have seen, Chesterton’s book on Aquinas earned the greatest praise from Étienne Gilson, even though Chesterton was not an expert in scholastic philosophy. It might well be that his metaphysical experience in childhood enabled him to understand that the firm defense of the goodness of creation forms the center of Thomas’s philosophy: the anti-Manichaeism acknowledgment of the unity of the moral and the beneficent, of the fact that God is the good Creator of a good creation, which has fallen away from God’s friendship but can be saved in body and soul. The way Chesterton sums it up in the central chapter, “A Meditation on the Manichees,” mirrors his own mind:

And yet there was something else, very vast and vague, to which I have tried to give a faint expression by the interposition of this chapter. It is difficult to express it fully, . . . passing from religion to religiosity. But there is a general tone and temper of Aquinas, which it is as difficult to avoid as daylight in a great house of windows. It is that

positive position of his mind, which is filled and soaked as with sunshine with the warmth of the wonder of created things. . . . In this sense, the man we study may specially be called St. Thomas of the Creator. (*TA*, 494)

Chesterton's positivity of being and gratitude for existence leading to humility before God and his fellow man sharing the "country of common sense" explain his very critical attitude toward a mindset ruled by pride. But why attack it by way of paradoxes? The obvious answer is that paradoxes have been the way Chesterton has found back to the sanity of mind. He has chosen to give a narrative of this way in order to explain "how he personally has come to believe" the Christian faith, as Newman did, when he saw no other way to prove his sincerity. But though it seems to be madness retold, there is a method to it: Chesterton, like Newman, does not believe in the modern rationalistic standards of rationality. John Henry Newman wrote his *Grammar of Assent* in order to complement his "University Sermons," both aiming to justify the faith of the ordinary Christian: implicit reasoning is sufficient to give a real assent, in the form of a reasonable and indefectible conviction. This does not entail that the ordinary Christian, when asked for his reasons by a skeptical disbeliever, will be able to reason explicitly toward a notional, conceptual assent like that of the theologian. But even a genius like Chesterton did not believe that his own, less systematic, personal narrating way of apologetics could convince anyone in such a situation:

In another chapter I have indicated the fallacy of the ordinary supposition that the world must be impersonal because it is orderly. A person is just as likely to desire an orderly thing as a disorderly thing. But my own positive conviction that personal creation is more conceivable than material fate, is, I admit, in a sense, undiscussable. (*O*, 354)

However, he does not want this conviction to be mistaken as some sort of emotion. For this reason he does not call it faith or intuition. It really is an intellectual conviction and "a primary intellectual conviction like the certainty of self or the good of living" (*O*, 355). If asked "as a purely intellectual question" why he believes in Christianity, he would give the apparently paradoxical answer: "For the same reason that an intelligent

agnostic disbelieves in Christianity. I believe in it quite rationally upon the evidence" (O, 348). The crucial point is that "evidence" in this case cannot take the form of a demonstration. It consists "in an enormous accumulation of small but unanimous facts. The secularist is not to be blamed because his objections to Christianity are miscellaneous and even scrappy; it is precisely such scrappy evidence that does convince the mind" (O, 348). Chesterton very often comes back to the image of the key and the lock when he wants to illustrate that Christian theology was the traditional, but to him unknown, answer to the complex riddle of man and his world, which he had partly solved on his own—but not entirely. If a stick fits a hole or a stone a hollow, that might be by accident, he writes. But his was a complex problem "like a key and a lock," and his discovery of the Christian solution convinced him because "if a key fits a lock, you know it is the right key" (O, 287).

Newman expressed the same idea in a less provocative way, adding that we need a special instrument of the intellect (which he called "illative sense") to bind the single-but-converging evidences together. Once bound together, the conviction gains a great strength that enables our mind to reject opposing arguments spontaneously and with ease. Chesterton might have had this in mind when he asserted,

I mean that a man may well be less convinced of a philosophy from four books, than from one book, one battle, one landscape, and one old friend. The very fact that the things are of different kinds increases the importance of the fact that they all point to one conclusion. . . . I can only say that my evidences for Christianity are of the same vivid but varied kind as [the disbelievers'] evidences against it. (O, 348)

But rejecting an opposing opinion spontaneously and with ease is quite a different thing than proving it. Again Chesterton chooses a seemingly paradoxical expression: "But a man is not really convinced of a philosophic theory when he finds that something proves it" (O, 287). He gives a convincing illustration for the fact that it is difficult to give a new logical form to what Newman called "implicit reasoning," changing from informal inference to formal inference in order to reason explicitly:

He is only really convinced when he finds that everything proves it. And the more converging reasons he finds pointing to this conviction, the more bewildered he is if asked suddenly to sum them up. Thus, if one asked an ordinary intelligent man, on the spur of the moment, "Why do you prefer civilization to savagery?" he would look wildly round at object after object, and would only be able to answer vaguely, "Why, there is that bookcase . . . and the coals in the coal-scuttle . . . and pianos . . . and policemen." The whole case for civilization is that the case for it is complex. It has done so many things. But that very multiplicity of proof which ought to make reply overwhelming makes reply impossible. (*O*, 287)

The decisive difference between the evidence of the believer and the disbeliever is, of course, that the disbeliever's evidence of his allegedly anti-Christian truths are not true at all. Chesterton's way of dealing with them is to take the strings of the cord, one by one, and prove them to be untrue, as, many years ago, he had found them to be untrue when he was not in the least trying to find the truth about man and the world in Christianity. The philosophical books he had consulted were all the scientific and skeptical literature of his time that he could lay his hands on—nothing else. But, paradoxically, these books renewed his faith:

It was Huxley and Herbert Spencer and Bradlaugh who brought me back to orthodox theology. They sowed in my mind my first wild doubts of doubt. . . . The rationalist made me question whether reason was of any use whatever; . . . As I laid down the last of Colonel Ingersoll's atheistic lectures the dreadful thought broke across my mind, "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian." (*O*, 288)

One crucial example: it was common in his time to suggest "that primeval religion arose in ignorance and fear, . . . that all that we call divine began in some darkness and terror" (*O*, 348–49). Human sacrifice was given as an example, but it is rare in the history of religion and in the oldest record it is introduced (and often rejected) as something new,

as a strange and frightful exception darkly demanded by the gods. . . . When I did attempt to examine the foundations

of this modern idea I simply found that there were none. Science knows nothing whatever about pre-historic man; for the excellent reason that he is pre-historic. (O, 349)

And, what is more, almost all human religions agree that the earth was a better place once but has since experienced a catastrophic Fall. “Amusingly enough, indeed, the very dissemination of this idea is used against its authenticity. Learned men literally say that this pre-historic calamity cannot be true because every race of mankind remembers it. I cannot keep pace with these paradoxes” (O, 350).

Had this Fall and its physical, intellectual, and moral consequences been the last word in human religion—pagan virtues not being able to solve the paradox of man in this world—a certain gloom would overshadow human existence. Chesterton developed his experience of childhood into a philosophy of gratitude for existence after having refuted skepticism, pessimism, “progressive” evolutionism, etc., in addition to his flight from evil. His levity—opposed to the gravity of the diabolist—might have been restored. And he was quite certain of his philosophy. As we have seen, André Maurois tried to explain Chesterton’s style by way of it: “Being certain of truth, he can afford to joke. Certainty creates mirth.”¹⁶ Obviously, it is not merely any certainty that does that. The joy Chesterton expresses in *Orthodoxy* implies not only what we might call, with Hans Urs von Balthasar, *verdankte Existenz*, that is, living consciously the fact that one’s life is a gift. Ours is still the existence of a fallen creature with all of its paradoxes. The source of Chesterton’s mirth is Christ himself: in him, he has found the Christian answer to these paradoxes.

In *St. Thomas Aquinas*, Chesterton relates a very telling story about St. Thomas praying at St. Dominic’s Church in Naples and hearing a voice from the cross offering him a reward for work well done, “whatever you will choose.” The monk does not choose anything or anyone among all the desirable things of this world, which, as Chesterton has shown in this book, had regained their original value in the philosophy of “Thomas of the Creator.” Chesterton reveals and comments on Thomas’s answer,

16. Kranz, *Gilbert Keith Chesterton: Prophet mit spitzer Feder*, 10.

which might have been what he himself would have liked to be able to say:

The Creator himself offering Creation itself; with all its millionfold mystery of separate beings, and the triumphal chorus of the creatures. That is the blazing background of multitudinous Being that gives the particular strength, and even a sort of surprise, to the answer of St. Thomas, when he lifted at last his head and spoke with, and for, that almost blasphemous audacity which is one with the humility of his religion; "I will have Thyself." Or, to add the crowning and crushing irony to this story, so uniquely Christian for those who can really understand it, there are some who feel that the audacity is softened by insisting that he said, "Only Thyself." (*TA*, 506)

4. CHESTERTON'S MIRTH: FAITH IN GOD'S PERSONAL HISTORY WITH MAN

In Chesterton's story *The Man Who Was Thursday: A Nightmare*, an unemployed poet is called to become a member of Scotland Yard to fight anarchism as an undercover agent. He successfully infiltrates a secret local branch of anarchists and is elected to represent them in their highest circle of seven men, named after the days of the week—Sunday being their formidable chairman. The story has been called a "metaphysical thriller," since the paradoxical windings of the plot with a final judgment scene all to mind Franz Kafka's haunting stories. In his *Autobiography* Chesterton recalls that most reviewers simply overlooked or ignored the subtitle: "A Nightmare." He insists,

The point is that the whole story is a nightmare of things, not as they are, but as they seemed to the young half-pessimist of the '90s; and the ogre [i.e., the superhuman chairman] who appears brutal but is also cryptically benevolent is not so much God, in the sense of religion or irreligion, but rather Nature as it appears to the pantheist, whose pantheism is struggling out of pessimism. (*A*, 103)

However, the book was written in 1908, after Chesterton had converted to Christianity, and at the end the poetical protagonist awakes from his nightmare in the presence of a lovely lady, Rosamund—*rosa mundi*, thus reminding the Christian reader of

the Virgin Mary. This, I think, should be interpreted as a grateful end credit to Chesterton's wife Frances, who certainly played a great role in his conversion. Thus we are not meant to think merely of Goethe's "the eternally female draws us onward"—because Goethe's Faust, who wanted to know it all, might well escape damnation at the final judgment in spite of his contract with the nihilistic Mephistopheles, but he does so without any personal conversion to Christ or even (sacramental) confession of sins. His merit is his never ending search for knowledge and activity—of whatever kind. The distinction would be decisive for Chesterton's conversion to the Roman Catholic Church. Not only was it his search for the metaphysical truth about man in this world that led to his first conversion; it was the Roman Catholic Church's sacrament of penance that brought him into her fold. This is underlined by a late commentary Chesterton gives on the final judgment scene of *The Man Who Was Thursday*:

Even in the earliest days and even for the worst reasons, I already knew too much to pretend to get rid of evil. I introduced at the end one figure who really does, with a full understanding, deny and defy the good. . . . I put that statement into that story, testifying to the extreme evil (which is merely the unpardonable sin of not wishing to be pardoned), not because I had learned it from any of the million priests whom I had never met, but because I had learned it from myself. I was already quite certain that I could if I chose cut myself off from the whole life of the universe. My wife, when asked who converted her to Catholicism, always answers, "the devil." (*A*, 103–04)

There exists some debate as to whether *Heretics* and *Orthodoxy* should be viewed as an apology of Christianity or as a defense of the intellectual sanity of mind.¹⁷ By the year 1908, when *The Man Who Was Thursday* and *Orthodoxy* were published, it becomes clear that Chesterton had found more than just a sane

17. There is no room to do justice to the participants in the debate summarized by David Dooley in his Introduction to the edition of these works by Ignatius Press referenced above. Indispensable essays collected by Dorothy Collins, Chesterton's secretary, and the first biography of Chesterton by Maisie Word find due consideration in the new magisterial work of Ian Ker, *G. K. Chesterton: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), which was able to make use of additional material that had not been available before.

mind, that is, some sort of personal metaphysical piety or belief in the Creator. He certainly was a Christian by that time, probably not a Roman Catholic (not even unconsciously). Nevertheless, he had discovered the necessity of a “living teacher” of Christianity, since his own way of trial and error as well as sin had resulted from ignorance and unformed virtues; he may have given a hint in *Orthodoxy* that he did not yet identify this discovery with faith in the Roman Catholic Church: “The Christian Church in its practical relation to my soul is a living teacher, not a dead one. It not only certainly taught me yesterday, but will almost certainly teach me to-morrow. Once I saw suddenly the meaning of the shape of the cross; some day I may see suddenly the meaning of the shape of the mitre” (O, 359).

Although Chesterton does not provide a book of classical Christian apologetics, *Orthodoxy* is not only professedly a personal “spiritual autobiography” but de facto a more general apology, and it has been understood to be this, as Étienne Gilson testifies: “When it came out I hailed it as the best piece of apologetic the century had produced. In a sense all his later works are a variation on the same theme.”¹⁸ This is so because the book is arranged “upon the positive principle of a riddle and its answer,” and the riddle is the paradox of man in this world, which is common to all human beings—as is the answer to the riddle offered in the revealed paradox of Jesus Christ, and consequently the paradox of Christianity. These apparent paradoxes differ from real paradoxes. The self-contradictions that Chesterton discovered in the writings of his contemporaries could be debunked as the philosophical, political, and for the most part irreligious claims of the contemporary intelligentsia. But there would not be an end of all paradoxes in this world, even if all these self-contradictions were discovered and all minds were restored to sanity.

The apparent paradoxes of man in this world and of the Christian religion will remain until the end of the world; yet they can be understood by something that cannot be understood: the paradox of Christ. Obviously, it is Christ who is at the center of Chesterton’s mind. The philosophical and theological idea unfolded in *The Everlasting Man* can already be found in

18. Cyril Clemens, *Chesterton as Seen by His Contemporaries* (1939; New York: Gordon Press, 1972), 149–50.

Orthodoxy. Heaven had to come down to earth twice: intervening in the evolution of things and animals to create man in the image of God, and intervening in the history of man to incarnate God in man.

The first divine intervention that Chesterton discovered to be necessary in a historical and metaphysical analysis of man is his undeniable difference from beasts, which cannot be explained by a gradual transition: man is the image of God. This paradox could have remained intelligible in a living relationship, in friendship with God: the paradox of a created finite free will, “the valour and dignity of the soul” (*H*, 94), which is intended to exist infinitely, could make sense if it were lived in an uninterrupted union with the infinite liberty of the Creator. The dignity of human liberty is realized by obedience to conscience, the echo of God’s voice in man. This original paradox can only be understood by something we cannot understand: the special love of the Creator who created us, because *vult habere condiligentes*, that is, he wanted to have co-lovers (Duns Scotus). Chesterton emphasizes the inexplicable nature of our spiritual soul destined to live forever:

The obvious truth is that the moment any matter has passed through the human mind it is finally and for ever spoilt for all purposes of science. It has become a thing incurably mysterious and infinite; this mortal has put on immortality. Even what we call our material desires are spiritual, because they are human. (*H*, 117)

Even though Chesterton is conscious of a new perspective on the relationship between God and man in the revelation of the New Testament, this original novelty is part of the Jewish-Christian religion in comparison with the pagan view of man:

All humility that had meant pessimism, that had meant man taking a vague or mean view of his whole destiny—all that was to go. We were to hear no more . . . the awful cry of Homer that man was only the saddest of all the beasts of the field. Man was a statue of God walking about the garden. Man had preeminence over all the brutes; man was only sad because he was not a beast, but a broken god. The Greek had spoken of men creeping on the earth, as if clinging to it. Now Man was to tread on the earth as if to subdue it. Christianity thus held a thought of the dignity of

man that could only be expressed in crowns rayed like the sun and fans of peacock plumage. (O, 299)

But the original created paradox, created by God's first intervention, has been obviously perverted, and a new paradox appeared that could not be solved without a new intervention in the history of man. The new paradox of man is manifold, death and sin being only its most obvious expressions. One of them has already been mentioned: as Newman put it, "Our earthly life then gives promise of what it does not accomplish. It promises immortality, yet it is mortal; it contains life in death and eternity in time; and it attracts us by beginnings which faith alone brings to an end."¹⁹ This paradox will remain until the end of time, in contrast to the one Chesterton discovered in Shaw, who "calls the desire for immortality a paltry selfishness, forgetting that he has just called the desire for life a healthy and heroic selfishness. How can it be noble to wish to make one's life infinite and yet mean to wish to make it immortal?" (O, 333).

However, the paradox of the desire for immortality in a mortal being might not even be the most obvious from a religious perspective: "The primary paradox of Christianity is that the ordinary condition of man is not his sane or sensible condition; that the normal itself is an abnormality. That is the inmost philosophy of the Fall" (O, 363). Chesterton, like Newman, is inclined to call the dogma of original sin the only one that needs no proof, because everyone experiences it. From a religious perspective, the sinfulness of man might even promote the danger that a pessimistic evaluation of oneself could prevail: "When one came to think of one's self, there was vista and void enough for any amount of bleak abnegation and bitter truth" (O, 299). But Chesterton acknowledges the ability of the Christian religion to save man from condemning himself for his sins and forgetting about his dignity or his liberty to inhabit the earth as the image of God:

Let him say anything against himself short of blaspheming the original aim of his being; let him call himself a fool and even a damned fool (though that is Calvinistic); but he must not say that fools are not worth saving. He must not say that

19. Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, vol. 4, Sermon 14, p. 216

a man, *qua* man, can be valueless. Here, again, in short, Christianity got over the difficulty of combining furious opposites, by keeping them both, and keeping them both furious. The Church was positive on both points. One can hardly think too little of one's self. One can hardly think too much of one's soul. (O, 299)

Chesterton is not devaluing the human person as such by speaking of the self in contrast to the soul. He clarifies this in emphasizing the "intellectual abyss between Buddhism and Christianity":

For the Buddhist or Theosophist personality is the fall of man, for the Christian it is the purpose of God, the whole point of his cosmic idea. . . . But the divine centre of Christianity actually threw man out of it in order that he might love it. . . . We come back to the same tireless note touching the nature of Christianity; all modern philosophies are chains which connect and fetter; Christianity is a sword which separates and sets free. No other philosophy makes God actually rejoice in the separation of the universe into living souls. But according to orthodox Christianity this separation between God and man is sacred, because this is eternal. That a man may love God it is necessary that there should be not only a God to be loved, but a man to love him. (O, 337)

But what does Chesterton mean when he says that one should think little of one's self but very much of one's soul? He does not only think of the obvious alternative between "egoism," turning the person away from the other and toward himself, and "altruism," preparing us for the communion of saints. "What are you?" and "what is meant by the Fall?" Having read these two questions in a small catechism, Chesterton realized that he tended toward seemingly agnostic answers: "God knows," and "That, whatever I am, I am not myself" (O, 363). Obviously, we can think of the self as the seat of consciousness and the realization of responsibility for one's acts. And if my bad conscience tells me that I am not what I should be because my acts have not been what they should have been, and if I want to become what I should be, I can easily arrive at the assertion that I am not myself. St. Paul knows this, but he expresses it differently: "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what

I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me” (Rom 7:19–20). In this situation we can despair or ignore it and continue on the same path, or we can decide to convert. However, the most frequent danger we have to avoid might be the development of a bad metaphysical habit, an egotistical pride counteracting the natural sanity of mind Chesterton experienced in childhood:

Human beings are happy so long as they retain the receptive power and the power of reaction in surprise and gratitude to something outside. So long as they have this they have as the greatest minds have always declared, a something that is present in childhood and which can still preserve and invigorate manhood. The moment the self within is consciously felt as something superior to any of the gifts that can be brought to it, or any of the adventures that it may enjoy, there has appeared a sort of self-devouring fastidiousness and a disenchantment in advance, which fulfils all the Tartarean emblems of thirst and of despair.²⁰

Orthodoxy is a spiritual autobiography because in it Chesterton has given a narrative of his conversion after he had experienced this despair (see the chapter “The Maniac” in *Orthodoxy*, 216–32; and compare it with the chapter “How to Be a Lunatic” in *Autobiography*, 85–106):

This is the prime paradox of our religion; something that we have never in any full sense known, is not only better than ourselves, but even more natural to us than ourselves. And there is really no test of this except the merely experimental one with which these pages began, the test of the padded cell and the open door. It is only since I have known orthodoxy that I have known mental emancipation. But, in conclusion, it has one special application to the ultimate idea of joy. (O, 363)

This joy of Christians and the mirth of Christ is connected with a central motif in Chesterton’s books *Orthodoxy* and *The Everlasting Man*: this motif is the “key” that opens all doors. There are

20. Quoted from “If I Had Only One Sermon to Preach,” which has appeared in the posthumous collection: G. K. Chesterton, *The Common Man* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1950), available at http://www.gkc.org.uk/gkc/books/Common_Man.html.

two corresponding chapters in Chesterton's *Autobiography*: "The Man with the Golden Key," which narrates his childhood experience of clarity and wonder, and its last chapter, "The God with the Golden Key," which summarizes how his own life's story brought him into the fold of the Catholic Church. This key has been forged by God's revelation of himself in Christ, who is "very God and very man," and thus is the key not only to understanding the seemingly paradoxical Christian virtues but also to the paradox of man while he is in himself a paradox that cannot be dissolved by understanding him. Christ has overcome death and sin, the central paradoxes of human life. This truth cannot be understood without faith, thus making faith the "one key which can unlock all doors" (O, 331). Christian, the protagonist in John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, who is incarcerated in Giant Despair's castle, near to dying and severely tempted to commit suicide, can free himself and hope when he finds the key that can open all the doors in his chest—the name of the key is "promise."

Chesterton ends his autobiography by recalling that the riddle had begun with the wonder in the "sensational experience of sensation" (A, 331) when he had looked—through the window of his father's toy theater—at the prince walking over the bridge, with the key in his hand to free the maiden. He has told his own story as a detective story, "with its own particular questions answered and its own primary problem solved" (A, 330), and he is convinced that many different stories with their totally different problems have ended "in the same place with their problems solved." He detected the Christian answer to what he himself had meant by "Liberty" but "did not really understand, until I heard it called by the new name of Human Dignity" (A, 330).

Existence is still a strange thing to me; and as a stranger I give it welcome. Well, to begin with, I put that beginning of all my intellectual impulses before the authority to which I have come at the end; and I find it was there before I put it there. I find myself ratified in my realisation of the miracle of being alive; not in some hazy literary sense such as the sceptics use, but in a definite dogmatic sense; of being made alive by that which can alone work miracles. I have said that this rude and primitive religion of gratitude did not save me from ingratitude; from sin which is perhaps most horrible to me because it is ingratitude. But here

again I have found that the answer awaited me. Precisely because the evil was mainly of the imagination, it could only be pierced by that conception of confession which is the end of mere solitude and secrecy. I had found only one religion which dared to go down with me into the depths of myself. (*A*, 329)

Only in the Roman Catholic Church is this dignity restored, in spite of original and personal sin, in a miraculous way. When asked why he had become a Roman Catholic, Chesterton used to retort, “To get rid of my sins” (*A*, 319). This is the negative side. In his *Autobiography*, he explains the positive side more eloquently, namely renewal, new beginning, restoration of liberty, that is, human dignity:

Well, when a Catholic comes from Confession, he does truly, by definition, step out again into that dawn of his own beginning and look with new eyes across the world to a Crystal Palace that is really of crystal. He believes that in that dim corner, and in that brief ritual, God has really remade him in His own image. He is now a new experiment of the Creator. He is as much a new experiment as he was when he was really only five years old. He stands, as I said, in the white light at the worthy beginning of the life of a man. The accumulations of time can no longer terrify. He may be grey and gouty; but he is only five minutes old. (*A*, 320)

For this reason, the key that unlocks all doors, in Chesterton’s *Autobiography* is to be found in the hands of the one man, “who is called Pontifex, the Builder of the Bridge, [who] is called also Claviger, the Bearer of the Key; and . . . such keys were given him to bind and loose when he was a poor fisher in a far province, beside a small and almost secret sea” (*A*, 331). To meet the suspicion of triumphalist “popery” at this point, we should remember that for Chesterton the divine gift of the truth in the Catholic Church is closely connected to the principle of democracy, because tradition is not guaranteed by human excellence but by keeping the faith of all the faithful who have shared and lived it through the last twenty centuries:

When Christ at a symbolic moment was establishing His great society, He chose for its cornerstone neither the brilliant Paul nor the mystic John, but a shuffler, a snob,

a coward—in a word, a man. And upon this rock He has built His Church, and the gates of Hell have not prevailed against it. All the empires and the kingdoms have failed, because of this inherent and continual weakness, that they were founded by strong men and upon strong men. But this one thing, the historic Christian Church, was founded on a weak man, and for that reason it is indestructible. For no chain is stronger than its weakest link.” (*H*, 70)

In his *Autobiography*, Chesterton insists that he is not “defending such doctrines as that of the Sacrament of Penance; any more than the equally staggering doctrine of the Divine love for man. I am not writing a book of religious controversy” (*A*, 320). The same is true for *Orthodoxy*, as we have seen in its preface and as is clear from Chesterton’s reply to a skeptical objection concerning his method of elaborating on paradoxes. The skeptic might concede the consistency of Chesterton’s position. He might say,

You have found a practical philosophy in the doctrine of the Fall; very well. You have found a side of democracy now dangerously neglected wisely asserted in Original Sin; all right. . . . Granted that all modern society is trusting the rich too much because it does not allow for human weakness; granted that orthodox ages have had a great advantage because (believing in the Fall) they did allow for human weakness, why cannot you simply allow for human weakness without believing in the Fall? (*O*, 347)

This very general objection focuses upon the ideas preserved in the Christian dogma, but even supposing that those doctrines do include those truths,

Why cannot you take the truths and leave the doctrines? . . . If you see clearly the kernel of common sense in the nut of Christian orthodoxy, why cannot you simply take the kernel and leave the nut? Why cannot you . . . simply take what is good in Christianity, what you can define as valuable, what you can comprehend, and leave all the rest, all the absolute dogmas that are in their nature incomprehensible? (*O*, 347)

Why would we need the historical facts as the basis of dogma?

First, Chesterton answers that he is a rational being, preferring “some intellectual justification for my intuitions. If I am

treating man as a fallen being it is an intellectual convenience to me to believe that he fell; and I find, for some odd psychological reason, that I can deal better with a man's exercise of free will if I believe that he has got it" (O, 347). Second, he reminds his readers: "The more I saw of the merely abstract arguments against the Christian cosmology the less I thought of them. I mean that having found the moral atmosphere of the Incarnation to be common sense, I then looked at the established intellectual arguments against the Incarnation and found them to be common nonsense" (O, 347). In addition to debunking this paradoxical nonsense, it would, of course, itself be a paradox to "simply take" the mere "idea of Incarnation" without insisting on it as a historical fact. How could a mere idea be the "incarnation," the "becoming flesh," of a spiritual reality? And how could a mere idea solve the factual paradox of death and sin in man? And, of course, it is not possible to love a person who is not real. All the more when we do not talk about the theology of the Incarnation but about a Christian's love for Christ. "Truth can understand error; but error cannot understand Truth" (A, 248).

Although Chesterton does not intend to prove the historical reality of Christian dogma, because he is only giving an account of his own "growth in spiritual certainty" without turning his book "into one of ordinary Christian apologetics" (O, 347), there is a great necessity for Christian facticity because of something Chesterton has detected hidden in the gospels: the mirth of Christ. It could appear naive had he been only a man, and cynical, had he been only a "god" like the ogre in *The Man Who Was Thursday*—merely appearing to be embodied. He knew passion and showed it: his tears were real, as was his anger, and they were visible. But his mirth, Chesterton likes to think, he has hidden: "There was something that He hid from all men when He went up a mountain to pray" (O, 365). The last dogma Chesterton presents in *Orthodoxy* is "the ultimate idea of joy": "Man is more himself, man is more manlike, when joy is the fundamental thing in him, and grief the superficial" (O, 364). And he is convinced that Christians have a better chance to become "more manlike," because "the tremendous figure which fills the Gospels towers in this respect, as in every other, above all the thinkers who ever thought themselves tall" (O, 365).

Through him, the Christian can—as we have seen—transcend a merely pagan approach to virtue by becoming more like Christ: “Christianity is a superhuman paradox whereby two opposite passions may blaze beside each other. The one explanation of the Gospel language that does explain it, is that it is the survey of one who from some supernatural height beholds some more startling synthesis” (O, 352). In his “Introduction” to the book of Job,²¹ Chesterton maintains that even the archaic Christian epics like the “Song of Roland” were able to express the idea “that Christianity imposes upon its heroes a paradox: a paradox of great humility in the matter of their sins combined with great ferocity in the matter of their ideas” (J, xxv). To see this, however, the paradox of Christ must be acknowledged: “His insane magnificence and His insane meekness” (O, 248); the fact that he angrily attacked those who had made the house of his Father into “a den of thieves” (Mk 11:17) and also allowed himself to be led “like a lamb to the slaughter” for the sins of man (Is 53:7; Acts 8:32). If the Incarnation were only an idea, the Passion, death, Resurrection, and Ascension of Christ would only be ideas, too—and the hidden mirth of Christ would be a cynical wisdom hidden in the gospels. But the Gospel is not merely a dream; it is a drama.

However, the “joy, which was the small publicity of the pagan, is the gigantic secret of the Christian” (O, 365), as was Christ’s joy: “There was some one thing that was too great for God to show us when He walked upon our earth; and I have sometimes fancied that it was His mirth” (O, 366). Why this secret of Christ and the Christians? Because the drama that took place in Palestine two thousand years ago takes place today: every Christian is called to take his cross and follow Christ. Of course, Chesterton is right: “The early Christian martyrs talked of death with a horrible happiness” (O, 247). And, yes, “life (according to the faith) is very like a serial story in a magazine: life ends with the promise (or menace) ‘to be continued in our next’” (O, 341). Yes, creation can find its end by way of salvation. The paradox of man in this world can now be understood by something we

21. *The Book of Job, with an Introduction by G. K. Chesterton* (London: Cecil Palmer & Hayward, 1916), Introduction. Hereafter, this introduction will be cited in-text as *J*.

cannot understand: Incarnation, Passion, Resurrection, and Ascension. The salvation of man in the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross, his Resurrection and Ascension, as well as the historicity of it, can be understood as the solution to the problem of all men's paradoxical history whose end is their beginning and whose creation as image of God coexists with their sin. But man can only be understood by something he cannot understand. Yet the key that opens all doors is not knowing by seeing but by faith. Faith in creation—God's word setting man, as his image on earth, apart from the world—and faith in Christ: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the men of old received divine approval. By faith we understand that the world was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was made out of things which do not appear" (Heb 11:1–3).

The paradox to be believed in creation seems to be the reverse of the paradox in the Incarnation: the Word of God, the Son, who cannot be seen, is made a man who can appear in the flesh. Here Chesterton treads on thin ice (and he knows it), philosophically and theologically, when he wants to express "the sense that things do really differ, although they are at one" by quoting "a Catholic writer, Coventry Patmore," who expressed it in this way: "God is not infinite; He is the synthesis of infinity and boundary" (*A*, 327). Chesterton suggests cautiously what Hans Urs von Balthasar has tried to think through theologically in his *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter*,²² namely the experience of Christ in his death on the Cross, leading us into an even deeper paradox: God apparently forsaken by God. Chesterton expressed it in his own way thus:

There were solitudes beyond where none shall follow.
There were secrets in the inmost and invisible part of that
drama that have no symbol in speech; or in any severance
of a man from men. Nor is it easy for any words less stark
and single-minded than those of the naked narrative even
to hint at the horror of exaltation that lifted itself above the
hill. Endless expositions have not come to the end of it, or
even to the beginning. And if there be any sound that can

22. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter*, trans. with an introduction by Aidan Nichols, OP, 2nd ed. (1990; San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000).

produce a silence, we may surely be silent about the end and the extremity; when a cry was driven out of that darkness in words dreadfully distinct and dreadfully unintelligible, which man shall never understand in all the eternity they have purchased for him; and for one annihilating instant an abyss that is not for our thoughts had opened even in the unity of the absolute; and God had been forsaken of God. (*E*, 344)

In striking parallel to the fall of man, Chesterton imagines in *Orthodoxy* and *The Everlasting Man* that this takes place in Gethsemane:

In a garden Satan tempted man: and in a garden God tempted God. He passed in some superhuman manner through our human horror of pessimism. When the world shook and the sun was wiped out of heaven, it was not at the crucifixion, but at the cry from the cross: the cry which confessed that God was forsaken of God. (*O*, 343)

Thus we have to take a last glimpse at the paradox of the book of Job where Satan comes into play suggesting that he tempt Job the just, and thus initiates a philosophical riddle that receives a religious answer:

“But what is the purpose of God? Is it worth the sacrifice even of our miserable humanity? Of course it is easy enough to wipe out our own paltry wills for the sake of a will that is grander and kinder. But is it grander and kinder? Let God use His tools; let God break His tools. But what is He doing and what are they being broken for?” It is because of this question that we have to attack as a philosophical riddle the riddle of the Book of Job. (*J*, xvi)

Chesterton wrote his very insightful “Introduction” to the book of Job in 1916 after he had recovered from his severe illness and six years before his official conversion to the Roman Catholic Church. God does not answer Job’s questions to defend himself, his creation and providence, against the accusation of injustice or a flawed design. God turns on Job and asks questions himself, cross-examining the chief witness. He accuses the friends of Job who wanted to comfort Job by “saying that everything in the universe fits into everything else” (*J*, xix). Chesterton calls them “mechanical optimists,” because they endeavor

“to justify the universe avowedly upon the ground that it is a rational and consecutive pattern. He points out that the fine thing about the world is that it can all be explained” (*J*, xxii). But the opposite is true. Chesterton distinguishes three stages of God’s reply: skepticism of enlightened criticism, experience of the divine presence, and wonder at contingency. First,

In dealing with the arrogant asserter of doubt, it is not the right method to tell him to stop doubting. It is rather the right method to tell him to go on doubting, to doubt a little more, to doubt every day newer and wilder things in the universe, until at last, by some strange enlightenment, he may begin to doubt himself. (*J*, xxi)

When God, in his cross-examination, asks Job who he is, the just man realizes that he does not even know himself. But, curiously, he is comforted by the first speech of God, asserting himself to be—beyond any doubt—God; and therein lies the religious solution of the philosophical riddle:

Job was comfortless before the speech of Jehovah and is comforted after it. He has been told nothing, but he feels the terrible and tingling atmosphere of something which is too good to be told. The refusal of God to explain His design is itself a burning hint of His design. The riddles of God are more satisfying than the solutions of man. (*J*, xxii)

Finally, God’s reply inspires wonder. Chesterton summarizes it congenially:

God says, in effect, that if there is one fine thing about the world, as far as men are concerned, it is that it cannot be explained. He insists on the inexplicableness of everything; . . . He goes farther, and insists on the positive and palpable unreason of things; . . . God will make man see things, if it is only against the black background of nonentity. God will make Job see a startling universe if He can only do it by making Job see an idiotic universe. To startle man God becomes for an instant a blasphemer; one might almost say that God becomes for an instant an atheist. He unrolls before Job a long panorama of created things, the horse, the eagle, the raven, the wild ass, the peacock, the ostrich, the crocodile. He so describes each of them that it sounds like a monster walking in the sun. The whole is a sort of psalm or rhapsody of the sense of wonder. The maker of all things

is astonished at the things He has Himself made. . . . Job puts forward a note of interrogation; God answers with a note of exclamation. Instead of proving to Job that it is an explicable world, He insists that it is a much stranger world than Job ever thought it was." (*J*, xxiiif)

In this "drama of skepticism," God accepts to play a part: "The everlasting adopts an enormous and sardonic humility. He is quite willing to be prosecuted" (*J*, xixf). In Job, the philosophical

question is really asked whether God invariably punishes vice with terrestrial punishment and rewards virtue with terrestrial prosperity. [And the] Book of Job is chiefly remarkable . . . for the fact that it does not end in a way that is conventionally satisfactory. Job is not told that his misfortunes were due to his sins or a part of any plan for his improvement. (*J*, xxvif)

But there is a deeper significance of this book of the Old Testament: Job is a type of him who will institute the New Testament: "what is prefigured in the wounds of Job" is the Passion of Christ. This connection is created in the prologue that explains,

Job [is] tormented not because he was the worst of men, but because he was the best. It is the lesson of the whole work that man is most comforted by paradoxes. Here is the very darkest and strangest of the paradoxes; and it is by all human testimony the most reassuring. I need not suggest what a high and strange history awaited this paradox of the best man in the worst fortune. (*J*, xxvii)

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THOMAS MÖLLENBECK is professor of dogmatic theology at the Philosophisch-Theologische Hochschule of the Capuchins in Münster, Germany, as well as visiting professor at the Hochschule Benedikt XVI in Heiligenkreuz and at the Catholic University-ITI in Trumau, Austria.