

Discussion Notes from September 21, 2008, Chapter 2: Keeping One's Wits G. K. Chesterton's *Orthodoxy*

Discussion questions:

Questions posted in advance of the discussion:

What is the main proposition of the chapter, "II. The Maniac"?

How is the main proposition supported?

Regarding the discussion quotations:

Which ones do you challenge, and why?

With which ones do you agree, and why?

Which ones surprise you?

Which ones are like/unlike statements that are commonly made in contemporary discourse?

After reading this chapter, would you say that you believe in yourself?

What are the sources of optimism and pessimism? Of love? Of joy? Of fun?

Opening discussion question:

Which, if any, of Chesterton's statements in the chapter are favorites of yours?

Discussion notes:

My favorite quotations: (Page 15) "Somehow his [the materialist's] scheme, like the lucid scheme of the madman, seems unconscious . . . of the real things of the earth, of fighting peoples or proud mothers, or first love or fear upon the sea."

(Page 17) "Similarly, you may say, if you like, that the bold determinist . . . is not free to raise, to curse, to thank, to justify, to urge, to punish, to resist temptations, to incite mobs, to make New Year resolutions, to pardon sinners, to rebuke tyrants, or even to say 'thank you' for the mustard."

One could argue that such occurrences as pride in mothers is naturally derived from physical forces, such as in evolution.

Chesterton points out that it is commonplace to begin the process of developing one's philosophy, to begin with the problem of evil—but Chesterton begins with the problem of madness.

Materialism vs. materialist: Materialism, in the sense of placing first importance upon satisfying our material wants, is a primary emphasis of our day, but Chesterton is speaking in this chapter of the philosophy of materialism, that is, that nothing exists except matter and its movements and modifications, and, therefore, consciousness is wholly due to the operation of material causes. [Does materialism result from an implicit adoption of the philosophy of the materialist?]

The madman has lost everything *but* reason.

Faith is supernatural, not merely rational.

Neither the madman nor the materialist has doubts.

The context of the time in which Chesterton wrote *Orthodoxy* was one of rising Marxism, materialism, a civil unrest in many places (including here in Idaho, around the time of the assassination of Gov. Steunenberg).

The chief mark of insanity is reason in the void.

The existentialist never finds anything outside himself.

At pp. 20-21 Chesterton wrote, "As we have taken the circle as the symbol of reason and madness, we may very well take the cross as the symbol at once of mystery and of health. . . . For the circle is perfect and infinite in its nature; but it is fixed for ever in its size; it can never be larger or smaller. But the cross, though it has at its heart a collision and a contradiction, can extend its four arms for ever without altering its shape. Because it has a paradox in its centre it can grow without changing."

Mysticism cares more for truth than for consistency. Mysticism "sees in stereo".

If one is going to be happy as a Christian, he or she must become comfortable with paradox. Things don't fit into a box. If we live in a box, reason turns in upon itself. Life is full of contradictions.

At p. 13, Chesterton wrote, about the madman who thought himself to be Christ: "If we said what we felt, we should say, 'So you are the Creator and Redeemer of the world: but what a small world it must be! What a little heaven you must inhabit, with angels no bigger than butterflies! How sad it must be to be God, and an inadequate God! . . . How much happier you would be, how much more of you there would be, if the hammer of a higher God could smash your small cosmos, scattering the stars like spangles, and leave you in the open, free like other men to look up as well as down!'"

There is a leap of faith, an absurdity of faith.

It's not so much a leap of faith as a step of faith, based upon the evidence which we have.

The flip rejection of the possibility of existence and reality beyond the material leads to boredom.

I once dealt with a mentally ill person who fit Chesterton's description; this person had a construct within which he could answer every objection and meet every argument, but he could not see anything outside that construct.

Some think faith is blind, but it allows room for the ambiguities of life.

The Bible says, “In the beginning, God . . .” but science says to begin with the facts.

We need something outside and greater than ourselves. Ideas come from outside ourselves.

The atheist points to contradictions in the Bible, but in doing so they actually prompt believers to persist in seeking to resolve those contradictions. We are a reasoning people who are driven forward by the contradictions.

Because as believers we have the freedom to think, our boundaries are expanded.

At p. 11, Chesterton wrote, “If any human acts may loosely be called causeless, they are the minor acts of a healthy man; whistling as he walks; slashing the grass with a stick; kicking his heels or rubbing his hands.” This is an example in which Chesterton “begins with the facts”, and he does so by seeing the small facts of life which most would ignore. He uses these to point to the healthy person’s freedom, and to say that not everything is predetermined or that everything is material.

How can God be sovereign while man is free?

At p. 6, Chesterton wrote, “Complete self-confidence is not merely a sin; complete self-confidence is a weakness.” Is it a sin?

We live in a self-esteem age.

I wonder whether Chesterton is referring there to self-sufficiency rather than to self-esteem. A healthy self-image is derivable from the knowledge that one is created in God’s image. That knowledge should lead to sufficiency in God rather than to self-sufficiency.

The person who believes in himself, as Chesterton said the madman does, is not happy. He is stuck in a box. The happy man is not self-contained.

In the days of the holiness revival period in America, there was so much legalism, and that destroyed self-esteem. It seems that people were taught to demean themselves.

In *Pygmalion* or *My Fair Lady*, Henry Higgins couldn’t fathom being in love with Eliza, because he was so absorbed in the minute details of class. For that reason, it took him a long time before he could begin to see the broader picture, and to get out of his self-contained box.

At the time at which Chesterton wrote, great faith was being placed in the ability of science to understand, systematize and categorize *everything*, and that was a dominant view among the educated upper class.

As science grew more dominant, the belief grew that we could reason ourselves out of needing God—and that scientific rationalism was much of the underlying cause of World War I.

The Unibomber was an example of the kind of person Chesterton describes in this chapter: purely logical and rational, but crazy.