

**Discussion Notes**  
**from**  
**October 5, 2008, Chapter 4: The Ethics of Fairy Tales**

“(The Ethics of Elfland”)  
**G. K. Chesterton’s *Orthodoxy***

**Discussion questions:**

The discussion quotations below from pages 38-41 primarily deal with Chesterton’s view of democracy. Do you agree with his conclusions? Does his reasoning give you any greater calm about the election cycle in which we as Americans are now involved?

Beginning with the discussion quotations below at p. 41, Chesterton tells the story of the derivation of his philosophy from what he heard and learned as a child from nursery tales. He argues that what he learned from nursery tales, or fairy tales, makes more sense than the arguments of rationalists do. Try to put into your own words what his argument is, and then tell why you agree or disagree.

Chesterton derives part of his argument from what he sees as “an almost pre-natal leap of interest and amazement.” (See below, for the discussion quotation at page 46 in the text.) He argues that rationalist thought has lost its ability to be astonished and its sense of adventure. That leads to his “Doctrine of Conditional Joy.” (See quotation below from p. 47 of the text.) In making this argument, Chesterton has looked into a forgotten corner of life as we know it. Does this make sense to you?

Chesterton argues that repetition of a fact does not make a law, but instead implies intention and purpose. Again, try to put his argument into your own words, and then tell whether you agree or disagree.

In maybe his most stunning conclusion, Chesterton explains the repetition in nature by a child’s request to “do it again” and God’s having said, every day, “Do it again.” (See discussion quotation below from p. 52 of the text.) He says, “Our Father is younger than we,” meaning that, like a child, God does not tire of re-energizing the cosmos every day. Does this reasoning appeal to you?

At pp. 56-57 in the text, Chesterton speaks of man, and the whole cosmos, as being analogous to a remnant from Crusoe’s ship; he says that this “cosmos is indeed without peer and without price: for there cannot be another one.” On this and the preceding reasoning Chesterton reached his philosophical position without having taken Christian theology into account. Could you make the same journey? With the same reasoning?

**Discussion notes:**

A synthesis of the chapter:

We can begin to develop a synthesis of the chapter by the example of a not-quite-two-year-old boy named Josiah, who, when taken for a walk, may take an hour to walk one city block, as he stops to inspect each little thing along the way, with fascination and wonder: a bug on the sidewalk, a twig, whatever, just as Chesterton described at pp. 45-46. Also at p. 46, Chesterton refers to “an almost pre-natal leap of interest and amazement”, suggesting that a child’s sense of wonder is innate.

A second step in our development of a synthesis of the chapter can be illustrated by the Disney movie “Enchanted”, in which the princess-to-be (“Giselle of Andalasia”) in an animated world finds herself in New York City, to which her animated prince must come, too, to rescue her. Just as Chesterton described at pp. 45-46, these characters evidenced “the ancient instinct of astonishment”, and, at pp. 46-47, “(I)t was good to be in a fairy tale.”

These illustrate Chesterton’s journey from fairy tales to his mature philosophy, a path which at p. 53 he links to “a profound emotion, always present and sub-conscious”. He reiterated that notion at p. 57, where he said about his conclusions, “These in some dark way I thought before I could write, and felt before I could think.” He was not embarrassed to describe the development of his philosophy as being based more on feelings than on a rational construct.

His lack of embarrassment about the process through which he developed his philosophy may in part because, as he suggests at p. 46, the rationalists have “forgotten our names”, and “what we really are”, because of their loss of the ability to be astonished and their sense of wonder. According to them (here he is speaking of “determinists”, at p. 51, “nothing ever really had happened since the beginning of the world.” In their view (p. 51), there was simply “unavoidable repetition in things”. It was the unavoidability of that repetition which Chesterton disputed, such as with his example, at p. 51, of the oddity of there being an elephant with a trunk, “but for all elephants (to have) trunks looked like a plot. . . . The recurrences of the universe rose to the maddening rhythm of an incantation, and I began to see an idea.”

Chesterton said that the determinists thought repetition made things more rational and unremarkable (p. 51), but Chesterton said repetition becomes all the more remarkable the more it occurs.

[Comparison: An event that could occur as either “A” or B”, occurs, hundreds and thousands of times in sequence, only as “A”. A statistician could argue that if the event could go either way but always goes one way, the probability becomes very high indeed that something is causing the event always to be “A” and never to be “B”.)]

Comparison: The “black swan” principle, which economists and others cite: It used to be said that “all swans are white”, so the phrase, “black swan”, was a metaphor for something that could not exist—but the discovery of just one black swan would prove the proposition wrong.

Similarly, the determinists’ belief that repetition meant unavoidability would be falsifiable by the demonstrated existence of just one event that was avoidable.

For his discussion of avoidability or unavoidability, Chesterton turned first, at p. 52, to the “false assumption” of the materialists, that if there were something personal or alive behind events, they would vary rather than repeat. Chesterton said variation is due more to death or fatigue than to life or vitality. He cites children’s “abounding vitality” and their desire to “Do it again.” Grown-up people, he said, “are not strong enough to exult in monotony. But perhaps God is strong enough” to do so. “It is possible that God says every morning, ‘Do it again’ to the sun; and every evening, ‘Do it again’ to the moon,” thereby re-energizing the cosmos on a daily basis. At p. 53, he said, “Repetition may go on for millions of years, by mere choice, and at any instant it may stop.” Sin makes us too old to exult in repetition.

Chesterton’s conclusion about the re-energizing of the cosmos relates to the physical principle of entropy, the tendency of things in nature to wear out.

This chapter reminds me of Alice in Wonderland; it’s like going through the mirror with her, so that predictability becomes unimportant. The paradoxes which occur in Chesterton’s recounting of the development of his philosophy are paradoxes only if you live in the mundane.

We must juggle wonder and the mundane.

There is repetition in *our* nature, as we repeat our mistakes, for which I am glad that God is patient with us.

Why does Chesterton discuss democracy in this chapter (including his famous term at p. 40, “the democracy of the dead”, or tradition)? The reason may begin with his assertion at p. 39 that the essential things are the things people hold in common, and that the most important things are left to common people (the mating of the sexes, the rearing of the young, the laws of the state). It may be that Chesterton is saying that *he* is a common man, and as such he has the right to develop his own philosophy. It may be, too, that Chesterton is pointing out that he learned the most important things in the nursery, as he learned about democracy and tradition there, so he could equally validly derive in the nursery the intuitions that led to his adult philosophy.

I am baffled by Chesterton’s definition of democracy. Democracy is a pooling of wisdom. The ordinary person *can’t* deal with the most important things. It is through the pooling of the wisdom of many, that democracy enables wise things to be done.

This book is not about orthodoxy. When one picks up a book with this title, one would expect a book about the components of the orthodox faith. This is an extremely eccentric book.

The book is more about Chesterton’s journey *to* orthodoxy, than it is about the components of orthodox belief.

We have settled for too little in our sense of what is orthodox; God’s orthodoxy is greater than ours.

Orthodoxy says we live in a rational world, but Chesterton says we don’t live in a world that’s strictly rational.

Chesterton said that the most important things are not left to experts, such as an Astronomer Royal (p. 39). One could say, though, that when it comes to knowing how to live life as we ought, Jesus is our expert guide, our “Astronomer Royal”.

Chesterton says at p. 41, “Fairyland is nothing but the sunny country of common sense.” I’ve often wondered how “common” (that is, how widespread) common sense is, but Chesterton definitely attributes that to ordinary people.

As with Chesterton’s fairyland, God’s whimsy, God’s mind, and God’s actions are so far above ours that they will confound us, and always be ahead of us.

Chesterton’s emphasis on gratitude in this chapter is very important, such as at pp. 46-47, when he says, “Could I not be grateful to Santa Claus when he put in my stockings the gift of two miraculous legs. We thank people for birthday presents of cigars and slippers. [No one ever gave me cigars, though.] Can I thank no one for the birthday present of birth?”

Chesterton’s “Doctrine of Conditional Joy”, at p. 47, “the second great principle of the fairy philosophy”, is explained at p. 48, “In the fairy tale an incomprehensible happiness rests upon an incomprehensible condition.”

This is very clarifying for me: most joyous moments rest on conditionality. Joy is achievable only when it is conditioned by limitations.

Freedom is not an absence of restraints. We have forgotten Eden, and forgotten who we are. Much of life is an attempt to forget. I would have said it is an attempt to remember, but I think you are right; most people would be uneasy with the idea of recovering their childhood sense of wonder and astonishment, and the innocence that went with them.

In Chesterton’s summation at p. 57, he says that “this world does not explain itself,” just as fairy tales don’t explain themselves; you take them as they’re told, and the world doesn’t come with a laid-out explanation either. Repetition in nature, which was taken as an explanation, is only an observation, not an explanation for the observation, as Chesterton points out. Chesterton’s sense of wonder—which he implies is innate if only we don’t suppress it—allows him to intuit a purpose behind what he sees, and to intuit that a Magician is making this magic. And all of this, as his summation says, came to him with no consideration of Christian theology.

Just as fairy tales can do so, fiction can reveal truth better than mere facts can.