

THE ETHICS OF ELFLAND

I thank God for the grace of having been born.

St Clare

Our forebears saw no limits to the world. In contrast, we of the twenty first century know that in the vast scheme of material being, the earth is an insignificant plot. But we seem not to realise what modern science has revealed. In all the immensity of the material universe there is but one place, *one envelope not six miles deep* around the terrestrial globe, in which living things can exist.¹ We are so affected by the determinism which accompanies the stifling materialism of the age that we never see, never hear, a studied consideration of the miracle of living existence, of the *impossible* daily made possible by the Author of our being.

In his *Orthodoxy*, written at the threshold of our demented age, Gilbert Chesterton tackled the issues squarely. Here is an extract from one of its chapters. The reader will see that he is particularly critical of the philosopher Herbert Spencer. It is worthy of note that it was from Spencer that Darwin got his (determinist) theory of biological evolution.

M.J.B.

May 23, 2010—*Pentecost Sunday*

“Just as we all like love tales because there is an instinct of sex, we all like astonishing tales because they touch the nerve of the ancient instinct of astonishment. This is proved by the fact that when we are very young children we do not need fairy tales: we only need tales. Mere life is interesting enough. A child of seven is excited by being told that Tommy opened a door and saw a dragon. But a child of three is excited by being told that Tommy opened a door. Boys like romantic tales; but babies like realistic tales—because they find them romantic. In fact a baby is about the only person, I should think, to whom a modern realistic novel could be read without boring him...

“We have all read... 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... We have all forgotten what we really are... we walk the streets with a sort of half-witted admiration... [and the] wonder has a positive element of praise... [T]he strongest emotion [for me] was that life was as precious as it was puzzling. It was an ecstasy because it was an adventure; it was an adventure because it was an opportunity. The goodness of the fairy tale was not affected by the fact that there might be more dragons than princesses; it was good to be in a fairy tale. The test of all happiness is gratitude; and I felt grateful, though I hardly knew to whom. Children are grateful when Santa Claus puts in their stockings gifts of toys or sweets. Could I not be grateful to Santa Claus when he put into my stockings the

¹ Without extraordinary support, and then only for a short period of time.

gift of two miraculous legs? We thank people for birthday presents of cigars and slippers. Can I thank no one for the birthday present of birth?

“There were, then, these two first feelings, indefensible and indisputable. The world was a shock, but it was not merely shocking; existence was a surprise, but it was a pleasant surprise. In fact, all my first views were exactly uttered in a riddle that stuck in my brain from boyhood. The question was, *What did the first frog say?* And the answer was, *Lord, how you made me jump!* That says succinctly all that I am saying. God made the frog jump; but the frog prefers jumping. But when these things are settled there enters the second great principle of the fairy philosophy.

“Anyone can see it who will simply read ‘Grimm’s Fairy Tales’ or the fine collections of Mr Andrew Lang. For the pleasure of pedantry I will call it the Doctrine of Conditional Joy. Touchstone² talked of much virtue in an ‘if’: according to elfin ethics all virtue is in an ‘if’. The note of the fairy utterance always is, ‘You may live in a palace of gold and sapphire, *if you do not say the word cow*’; or ‘You may live happily with the King’s daughter, *if you do not show her an onion*’. The vision always hangs upon a veto. All the dizzy and colossal things conceded depend upon one small thing withheld. All the wild and whirling things that are let loose depend upon one small thing that is forbidden... In the fairy tale an incomprehensible happiness rests upon an incomprehensible condition. A box is opened, and all evils fly out. A word is forgotten, and cities perish. A lamp is lit, and love flies away. A flower is plucked, and human lives are forfeited. An apple is eaten, and the hope of God is gone.

“This is the tone of fairy tales, and it is certainly not lawlessness or even liberty, though men under a mean modern tyranny may think it liberty by comparison... Cinderella received a coach out of Wonderland and a coachman out of nowhere, but she received a command—which might have come out of Brixton—that she should be back by twelve. Also, she had a glass slipper; and it cannot be a coincidence that glass is so common a substance in folk-lore. *This* princess lives in a glass castle, *that* princess on a glass hill, *this* one sees all things in a mirror; they may all live in glass houses if they will not throw stones. For this thin glitter of glass everywhere is the expression of the fact that happiness is bright but brittle, like the substance most easily smashed by a housemaid or a cat. And this fairy-tale sentiment also sank into me and became my sentiment towards the whole world. I felt, and feel, that life itself is as bright as the diamond, but as brittle as the window-pane...

“Remember, however, that to be breakable is not the same as to be perishable. Strike a glass, and it will not endure an instant; simply do not strike it, and it will endure a thousand years. Such, it seemed, was the joy of man, either in elfland, or on earth; the happiness depended on *not doing something* which you could at any moment do and which, very often it was not obvious why you should not do. Now, the point here is that to me this did not seem unjust. If the miller’s third son said to the fairy, *Explain why I must not stand on my head in the fairy palace*, the other might fairly reply, *Well, if it comes to that, explain the fairy palace*. If Cinderella says, *How is it that I must leave the ball at twelve?* her godmother might answer, *How is it that you are going there till twelve?*...

² The court fool or jester in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*. Cf. Act V, sc. iv. Line 90 et seq.

“For this reason (we might call it the fairy godmother philosophy) I could never join the young men of my time in feeling what they called the general sentiment of *revolt*... I did not feel disposed to resist any rule merely because it was mysterious. Estates are sometimes held by foolish forms, the breaking of a stick or the payment of a peppercorn: I was willing to hold the huge feudal estate of earth and heaven by any such feudal fantasy. It could not well be wilder than the fact that I was allowed to hold it at all... The aesthetes touched the last insane limits of language in their eulogy on lovely things. The thistledown made them weep; a burnished beetle brought them to their knees. Yet their emotion never impressed me for an instant, for this reason, that it never occurred to them to pay for their pleasure in any sort of symbolic sacrifice. Men (I felt) might fast forty days for the sake of hearing a blackbird sing. Men might go through fire to find a cowslip. Yet these lovers of beauty could not even keep sober for the blackbird. They would not go through common Christian marriage by way of recompense to the cowslip. Surely one might pay for extraordinary joy in ordinary morals. Oscar Wilde said that sunsets were not valued because we could not pay for sunsets. But Oscar Wilde was wrong; we *can* pay for sunsets. We can pay for them by not being Oscar Wilde.

“Well, I left the fairy tales lying on the floor of the nursery, and I have not found any books so sensible since... I found that the modern world was positively opposed on two points to my nurse and to the nursery tales. It has taken me a long time to find out that the modern world is wrong and my nurse was right... I have explained that the fairy tales founded in me two convictions; first, that this world is a wild and startling place which might have been quite different, but which is quite delightful; second, that before this wildness and delight one may well be modest and submit to the queerest limitations of so queer a kindness. But I found the modern world running like a high tide against both my tendernesses; and the shock of that collision created two sudden and spontaneous sentiments, which I have had ever since and which, crude as they were, have hardened into convictions.

“First, I found the whole modern world talking scientific fatalism; saying that everything is as it must always have been, being unfolded without fault from the beginning. The leaf on the tree is green because it could never have been anything else. Now, the fairy tale philosopher is glad that the leaf is green precisely because it might have been scarlet. He feels as if it turned green an instant before he looked at it. He is pleased that snow is white on the strictly reasonable ground that it might have been black. Every colour has in it a bold quality as of choice; the red of garden roses is not only decisive but dramatic, like suddenly spilt blood. He feels that something has been *done*. But the great determinists of the nineteenth century were strongly against this native feeling that something had happened an instant before. In fact, according to them, nothing ever really had happened since the beginning of the world. Nothing ever had happened since existence had happened; and even about the date of that they were not very sure.

“The modern world as I found it was solid for modern Calvinism, for the necessity of things being as they are. But when I came to ask them I found they had really no proof of this unavoidable repetition in things except the fact that the things were repeated. Now, the mere repetition made the things to me rather more weird than more rational. It was as if, having seen a curiously shaped nose in the street and dismissed it as an accident, I had seen six other noses of the same astonishing shape... [O]ne elephant having a trunk was odd; but all elephants having trunks

looked like a plot... The grass seemed signalling to me with all its fingers at once. The sun would make me see him if he rose a thousand times. The recurrences of the universe rose to the maddening rhythm of an incantation, and I began to see an idea.

“All the towering materialism which dominates the modern mind rests ultimately upon one assumption; a false assumption. It is supposed that if a thing goes on repeating itself it is probably dead; a piece of clockwork. People feel that if the universe was personal it would vary; if the sun were alive it would dance. This is a fallacy even in relation to known fact. For the variation in human affairs is generally brought into them, not by life, but by death; by the dying down or breaking off of their strength or desire. A man varies his movements because he is tired of walking; or he walks because he is tired of sitting still. But if his life and joy were so gigantic that he never tired of going to Islington, he might go to Islington as regularly as the Thames goes to Sheerness. The very speed and ecstasy of his life would have the stillness of death. The sun rises every morning. *I* do not rise every morning; but the variation is due not to my activity, but to my inaction. Now, to put the matter in a popular phrase, it might be true that the sun rises regularly because he never gets tired of rising. His routine might be due, not to a lifelessness, but to a rush of life.

“The thing I mean can be seen, for instance, in children, when they find some game or joke that they specially enjoy. A child kicks his legs rhythmically through excess, not absence, of life. Because children have abounding vitality, because they are in spirit fierce and free, therefore they want things repeated and unchanged. They always say, ‘Do it again’; and the grown-up person does it again until he is nearly dead. For grown-up people are not strong enough to exult in monotony. But perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning *Do it again* to the sun; and every evening *Do it again* to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never got tired of making them. It may be that He has the eternal appetite of infancy... The repetition in Nature may not be a mere recurrence; it may be a theatrical encore... Repetition may go on for millions of years, by mere choice, and at any instant may stop. Man may stand on the earth generation after generation, and yet each birth be his positively last appearance.

“... I had always vaguely felt facts to be miracles in the sense that they are wonderful: now I began to think them miracles in the stricter sense that they were *wilful*. I mean that they were, or might be, repeated exercises of some will. In short, I had always believed that the world involved a *magician*. And this pointed a profound emotion always present and subconscious; that this world of ours has some purpose; and if there is purpose, there is a person. I had always felt life first as a story: and if there is a story there is a story-teller.

“... [M]odern thought... loved to talk about... expansion and largeness. Herbert Spencer would have been greatly annoyed if anyone had called him an imperialist, and therefore it is highly regrettable that nobody did. But he was an imperialist of the lowest type. He popularised this contemptible notion that the size of the solar system ought to overawe the spiritual dogma of man. Why should a man surrender his dignity to the solar system any more than to a whale? If mere size proves that man is not the image of God, then a whale may be the image of God; a somewhat formless image; what one might call an impressionist portrait. It is quite futile to argue that man is small compared to the cosmos; for man was always small

compared to the nearest tree. But Herbert Spencer... would insist that we had in some way been conquered and annexed by the astronomical universe...

“But the expansion of which I speak was much more evil than all this. I have remarked that the materialist, like the madman, is in prison; in the prison of one thought. These people seemed to think it singularly inspiring to keep on saying that the prison was very large. The size of this scientific universe gave one no novelty, no relief. The cosmos went on forever, but not in its wildest constellation could there be anything really interesting; anything, for instance, such as forgiveness, or free will. The grandeur or infinity of the secret of its cosmos added nothing to it. It was like telling a prisoner in Reading gaol that he would be glad to hear that the gaol now covered half the country... In fairyland there had been a real law; a law that could be broken, for the definition of a law is something that *can be* broken. But the machinery of this cosmic prison was something that could not be broken; for we ourselves were only a part of its machinery. We were either unable to do things, or we were destined to do them. The idea of the mystical condition quite disappeared; one [could] neither have the firmness of keeping laws nor the fun of breaking them...

“...I have said that stories of magic alone can express my sense that life is not only a pleasure but a kind of eccentric privilege. I may express this other feeling... by allusion to another book always read in boyhood, *Robinson Crusoe*,... which owes its eternal vivacity to the fact that it celebrates the poetry of limits, nay, even the wild romance of prudence. Crusoe is man on a small rock with a few comforts just snatched from the sea: the best thing in the book is simply the list of things saved from the wreck. The greatest of poems is an inventory. Every kitchen tool becomes ideal because Crusoe might have dropped it in the sea. It is a good exercise... to look at anything, the coal-scuttle or the book-case, and think how happy one could be to have brought it out of the sinking ship on to the solitary island. But it is a better exercise still to remember how all things have had this hair-breadth escape: everything has been saved from a wreck. *Every man* has had one horrible adventure: as a hidden untimely birth he had not been, as infants that never see the light. Men spoke much in my boyhood of restricted or ruined men of genius: and it was common to say that many a man was a Great Might-Have-Been. To me it is a more solid and startling fact that any man in the street is a Great Might-Not-Have-Been.

“But I really felt (the fancy may seem foolish) as if all the order and number of things were the romantic remnant of Crusoe’s ship. That there are two sexes and one sun was like the fact that there were two guns and one axe. It was poignantly urgent that none should be lost; but somehow, it was rather fun that none could be added. The trees and the planets seemed like things saved from the wreck: and when I saw the Matterhorn I was glad that it had not been overlooked in the confusion. I felt economical about the stars as if they were sapphires (they are called so in Milton’s Eden): I hoarded the hills. For the universe is a single jewel, and while it is a natural cant to talk of a jewel as peerless and priceless, of this jewel it is literally true. This cosmos is indeed without peer and without price: for there cannot be another one.”³

³ G K Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, The Bodley Head, London, 1908, chapter IV, ‘The Ethics of Elfland’; my copy, Fontana Books, 1963, pp. 45-64. I have italicised one or two words to reinforce the sense G.K.C. intended.