

SOME RANDOM THOUGHTS ON MATERIALISM

G K Chesterton in his *Orthodoxy*

“As an explanation of the world, materialism has a sort of insane simplicity. It has just the quality of the madman’s argument; we have at once the sense of it covering everything and the sense of it leaving everything out... You can explain a man’s detention at Hanwell¹ by an indifferent public by saying that it is the crucifixion of a god of whom the world is not worthy. The explanation does explain. Similarly you may explain the order in the universe by saying that all things, even the souls of men, are leaves inevitably unfolding on a utterly unconscious tree—the blind destiny of matter. The explanation does explain, though not, of course, so completely as the madman’s. But the point here is that the normal human mind not only objects to both, but feels to both the same objection. Its approximate statement is that if the man in Hanwell is the real God, he is not much of a god. And, similarly, if the cosmos of the materialist is the real cosmos, it is not much of a cosmos. The thing has shrunk. The deity is less divine than many men...

“For we must remember that the materialist philosophy... is certainly more limiting than any religion. In one sense, of course, all intelligent ideas are narrow. They cannot be broader than themselves. A Christian is only restricted in the same sense that an atheist is restricted. He cannot think Christianity false and continue to be a Christian; and the atheist cannot think atheism false and continue to be an atheist. But as it happens, there is a very special sense in which materialism has more restriction than spiritualism. Mr McCabe² thinks me a slave because I am not allowed to believe in determinism. I think Mr McCabe a slave because he is not allowed to believe in fairies... The sane man knows that he has a touch of the beast, a touch of the devil, a touch of the saint, a touch of the citizen. Nay, the really sane man knows that he has a touch of the madman. But the materialist’s world is quite simple and solid, just as the madman is quite sure he is sane. The materialist is sure that history has been simply and solely a chain of causation, just as the interesting person before mentioned is quite sure that he is simply and solely a chicken. Materialists and madmen never have doubts.

“Spiritual doctrines do not actually limit the mind as do materialistic denials. Even if I believe in immortality I need not think about it. But if I disbelieve in immortality I must not think about it... [W]hen materialism leads men to complete fatalism (as it generally does), it is quite idle to pretend that it is in any sense a liberating force. It is absurd to say that you are advancing freedom when you only use free thought to destroy free will... You may say, if you like, that the man is free to think himself a poached egg. But it is surely a more massive and important fact that if he is a poached egg he is not free to eat, drink, sleep, walk, or smoke a cigarette. Similarly, you may

¹ The Middlesex County Lunatic Asylum

² Joseph McCabe (1867-1955) a lapsed Catholic, was ordained a priest in the Franciscan Order in 1890 but left the Order and forsook his religion in favour first of agnosticism and then atheism. He is mentioned in Chesterton’s *Heretics*. He took Chesterton to task for including humour in his serious writings. Chesterton responded: “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.” Cf http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_McCabe

say, if you like, that the bold determinist speculator is free to disbelieve in the reality of the will. But it is a much more massive and important fact that he is not free to praise, 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.”³

Dr Michael Denton in his *Nature’s Destiny*

“Because this book presents a teleological interpretation of the cosmos which has obvious theological implications, it is important to emphasize at the outset that the argument presented here is entirely consistent with the basic naturalistic assumption of modern science—that the cosmos is a *seamless unity which can be comprehended ultimately in its entirety by human reason and in which all phenomena, including life and evolution and the origin of man, are ultimately explicable in terms of natural processes...* Contrary to the creationist position, the whole argument presented here is critically dependent on the presumption of the unbroken continuity of the organic world—that is, on the reality of organic evolution and on the presumption that all living organisms on earth are natural forms in the profoundest sense of the word, no less natural than salt crystals, atoms, waterfalls, or galaxies.”⁴

Chesterton in *Orthodoxy* (again!)

“In fairyland we avoid the word ‘law’; but in the land of science they are singularly fond of it. Thus they will call some interesting conjecture about how forgotten folks pronounced the alphabet, Grimm’s Law. But Grimm’s Law is far less intellectual than Grimm’s Fairy Tales. The tales are, at any rate, certainly tales; while the law is not a law. A law implies that we know the nature of the generalisation and enactment; not merely that we have noticed some of the effects. If there is a law that pick-pockets shall go to prison, it implies that there is an imaginable mental connection between the idea of prison and the idea of picking pockets. And we know what that idea is. We can say why we take liberty from a man who takes liberties. But we cannot say why an egg can turn into a chicken any more than we can say why a bear could turn into a fairy prince. As ideas, the egg and the chicken are further off each other than the bear and the prince; for no egg in itself suggests a chicken, whereas some princes do suggest bears. Granted, then, that certain transformations do happen, it is essential that we should regard them in the philosophic manner of fairy tales, not in the unphilosophic manner of science and the “Laws of Nature”. When we are asked why eggs turn into birds or fruits fall in autumn, we must answer exactly as the fairy godmother would answer if Cinderella asked why magic mice turned to horses or her clothes fell from her at twelve o’clock. We must answer that it is *magic*. It is not a ‘law’ for we do not understand its general formula. It is not a necessity, for though we can count on it happening practically, we have no right to say that it must always happen. It is no argument for unalterable law (as Huxley⁵ fancied) that we count on the ordinary course of things. We do not count on it; we bet on it. We risk the remote possibility of

³ G K Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, The Bodley Head, London, 1908; my copy, Fontana Books, 1963, pp. 22-5

⁴ *Nature’s Destiny: How the Laws of Biology reveal Purpose in the Universe*, The Free Press, New York, 1998, Note to the Reader, pp. xvii-xviii; emphasis in original.

⁵ Thomas Henry Huxley (1825-1895) supporter, and propagator, of Charles Darwin’s evolutionary theory.

a miracle as we do that of a poisoned pancake or a world destroying comet. We leave it out of account, not because it is a miracle, and therefore an impossibility, but because it is a miracle, and therefore an exception. All the terms used in the science books, 'law', 'necessity', 'order', 'tendency' and so on, are really unintellectual, because they assume an inner synthesis which we do not possess. The only words that ever satisfied me in describing Nature are the terms used in the fairy books, 'charm', 'spell', 'enchantment'. They express the arbitrariness of the fact and its mystery. A tree grows fruit because it is a magic tree. Water runs downhill because it is bewitched..."⁶

⁶ G K Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, op. cit., pp. 51-2