

The Gift of Wonder: Chestertonian Resources for Creation Stewardship?*

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Introduction

CHESTERTON IS, as Quentin Lauer put it in his marvelous little book, a “philosopher without portfolio.”¹ Or, as Stephen Clark put it, he is “an excellent philosopher of a non-academic sort” who can also make academic sorts of philosophical arguments.² Happily, since he was not an academic philosopher, his writings are a joy to read. Unhappily, since he was not an academic philosopher, one must look for his philosophy everywhere in his writings, his dictum being that in order to talk about anything, one must talk about everything. And since his premises are not always neatly lined up, and his conclusion may be interrupted by the opportunity to tell a good joke or criticize another writer, one must pay attention and follow the thread of argument oneself. In this paper I want to line up three important philosophical aspects of Chesterton’s thought that are important for anyone trying to think about how it is that we care for the cosmos in which we dwell: (1) Chesterton’s emphasis on metaphysical realism and the goodness of creation; (2) proper ordering of our love of the Creator and Creation; and (3) the necessity of self-limitation for proper care of Man and his environment.

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¹ Quentin Lauer, S.J., *G. K. Chesterton: Philosopher without Portfolio* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1991).

² Stephen R. L. Clark, *G. K. Chesterton: Thinking Backward, Looking Forward* (Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation, 2006), ix.

Metaphysical Realism and the Goodness of Creation

Realism and Knowledge

Quentin Lauer notes that in talking about Chesterton as a realist or even as a Thomist one has to be very careful. Was Chesterton indeed a realist of a Thomist stripe?

If that means one who constantly emphasizes the primacy of the idea (ideal, exemplar) over its exemplification in the concrete world of particulars, no one of which measures up to the idea, the answer has to be yes. If that means one whose feet were not always firmly planted in the homely—and homey—solidity of material reality, the answer is a resounding no. In the sense that he considered reality—including but not exclusively material reality—as really real, yes. In the sense that material reality is real without any reference to mind as its source, a very strong no.³

This set of distinctions is very important. Chesterton insists on the reality and the goodness of the material creation. Concerning the reality of things he notes that “the philosophy of St. Thomas stands founded on the universal common conviction that eggs are eggs. The Hegelian may say that an egg is really a hen, because it is a part of an endless process of Becoming; the Berkeleian may hold that poached eggs only exist as a dream exists; since it is quite as easy to call the dream the cause of the eggs as the eggs the cause of the dream; the Pragmatist may believe that we get the best out of scrambled eggs by forgetting that they ever were eggs, and only remembering the scramble.” But Thomists stand “in the broad daylight of the brotherhood of men, in their common consciousness that eggs are not hens or dreams or mere practical assumptions; but things attested by the Authority of the Senses, which is from God.”⁴ We see in nature not mere chaos that we adjust through the filters of our minds, though sometimes parts of nature may appear so, but quite often cosmos: an ordered creation the designs of which we intuit and do not merely create or assume.

Is this a naïve realism? As Lauer notes, Chesterton was not a realist with reference to the idea that reality—material and spiritual—is real apart from reference to a mind. As has been made clear, he doesn’t think reality is all in our minds, but it is in God’s mind first. So reality is not dependent on our minds, but Chesterton does believe that this reality is perceptible—perhaps “comprehensible” is too strong—by our minds at some level. We might note the placement of the word “strange” in the follow-

³ Lauer, *Philosopher without Portfolio*, 36–37.

⁴ G. K. Chesterton, *St. Thomas Aquinas* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1956 [1933]), 148.

ing statement: “[T]he essence of the Thomist common sense is that two agencies are at work; reality and the recognition of reality; and their meeting is a sort of marriage. Indeed it is very truly a marriage, because it is fruitful. . . . It produces practical results, precisely because it is the combination of an adventurous mind and a strange fact.”⁵ Facts are strange; our ability to know many facts about created things does not mean that we know them in the same way that God knows them. Turkeys and humans, Chesterton argues, are “ships that pass in the night” since we know as little of their ultimate meaning in the universe as do they of ours. “A turkey is more occult and awful than all the angels and archangels.”⁶ But we can know a great deal of things about them. For Chesterton, the boy who is brought up to ride horses knows that “horse and man together” make a “human and civilized” image. And further, he will know that “ill-treatment” is not something that should be given to horses.⁷

This condition of knowing something but not everything can be applied to our knowledge of ourselves as humans as well. As Chesterton points out many times, we ourselves are a part of nature and we can know something about ourselves, but not everything. And because of original sin, Chesterton argues, knowledge of ourselves is often the most difficult to gain. “One may understand the cosmos,” he tells us in *Orthodoxy*, “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.”⁸ If we are talking about resources for the stewardship of the rest of the creation, which we are, then the problems we face are much deeper than technical knowledge. Self-knowledge is key to promoting practical steps to ensure that horses and turkeys, as well as wetlands and forests, are properly taken care of. Chesterton suggests that “there ought to be a real study called Anthropology corresponding to Theology.”⁹ One might note that John Paul II, whose writings in various encyclicals were driven by his own theological studies, encouraged both a carefulness in the treatment of humans as well as of the world in which they dwell.

Goodness of the World

What we can know, again, from our own experience of the world and from revelation, is the thesis of St. Thomas, in Chesterton’s words, that concerning material things, “there are no bad things; but only bad uses of

⁵ Chesterton, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, 185.

⁶ Chesterton, *All Things Considered* (London: Methuen, 1908), 220.

⁷ Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* (Garden City, NY: Image, 1955 [1925]), 17.

⁸ Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Garden City, NY: Image, 1959 [1908]), 54.

⁹ Chesterton, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, 161.

things.”¹⁰ “The work of heaven alone was material;” he says, “the making of a material world. The work of hell is entirely spiritual.”¹¹ This is, we might say, a philosophical-theological thesis, since it is something that one might discover on one’s own, apart from Christian or Jewish faith, simply from the wonder that the world evokes—or should evoke—in us. But it is especially seconded by the doctrine of Creation and emphasized and illuminated yet again in the re-creation of the world in Jesus Christ. Even if much of the early Christian philosophical work was done under the influence of Plato, things were, says Chesterton, bound to change. “After the Incarnation had become the idea that is central to our civilisation, it was inevitable that there should be a return to materialism; in the sense of the serious value of matter and the making of the body. When once Christ had risen, it was inevitable that Aristotle should rise again.”¹² We know the world is good according to Christian tradition, not only because God made it (and said it was good, by the way) but because God chose to be a part of that world, not for a time, but for all time. The Ascension of Christ, a feast that is often ignored these days by bumping it to Sunday, is key to understanding Christian materialism. A man, or more properly “Man,” is now joined to God in the body that God made and made again imperishable. Christian doctrine is not that God’s creation of the earth was a lark that interrupted the pure spirituality of eternity. God made the material creation and intends to keep it around—forever.

This theological angle also reveals something else about the goodness of creation. It is not the thesis that we live in a world of the best possible things, for as Chesterton says, “The defect we see, in what is, is simply that it is not all that is. God is more actual even than Man; more actual even than Matter; for God with all His powers at every instant is immortally in action.”¹³ Even in a world of the best possible things, we would be able to say this sentence because God alone *Is* unconditionally. We exist only because of him. This leads us into our second topic.

Proper Ordering of Our Love of the Creator and Creature

Two special emphases of Chesterton suggest themselves to us as we try to formulate how it is that we approach the cosmos around us. We have noted first of all that only God truly has being—and if being itself is

¹⁰ Ibid., 107.

¹¹ Ibid., 108.

¹² Ibid., 119.

¹³ Ibid., 171.

goodness, then only God is truly Good, capital “G.” Also we have noted that our own knowledge of the created order, solid and helpful as it is, runs up against a barrier when we come to the knowledge of that strangest of all creatures, ourselves. But if proper knowledge of ourselves is necessary in order to face the various problems and indeed crises of our day in our stewardship of nature around us, then what are we to do? The answer, it would seem, is not simply to study the world around us or even to study ourselves. The answer is to study God.

Chesterton’s own concern about the destructive aspects of nineteenth- and twentieth-century industrialism was great. His belief in the abilities of mankind to understand the world was also great. But as great was his skepticism about the ability of a world, no matter how technologically advanced, to confront our problems, particularly ecological problems, unless there was a great turning toward God. As Richard Gill notes, Chesterton believed that the world was not capable of confronting its ecological problems out of its own resources.¹⁴

One observes the common utterance that someone is “too heavenly minded to do any earthly good.” Yet, in Chesterton’s view, the exact opposite is true. One’s attitude to the earth is dependent on one’s heavenly-mindedness. Who could be more heavenly minded than St. Francis? And yet who was more zealous for the care of Mother Earth than he? Of Francis, Chesterton wrote that he “was content to call himself the Troubadour of God; but not content with the God of the Troubadours.”¹⁵ Of St. Francis and St. Thomas together: “It seems to be strangely forgotten that both these saints were in actual fact imitating a Master, who was not Aristotle, let alone Ovid, when they sanctified the senses or the simple things of nature; when St. Francis walked humbly among the beasts or St. Thomas debated courteously among the Gentiles.”¹⁶ In order for Christians to play a part in the solution of various this-worldly problems, what Christians bring to the table is not more scientific knowledge about the way the world works—though Christians who are scientifically able should do their part there, too—but the gift of knowing and loving this world in proper order. I noted that Chesterton’s suggestion about the need for a separate branch of study called anthropology was met in, among others, the body of writing of John Paul II. It is no coincidence that John Paul’s key to the understanding of the human person fits well with

¹⁴ Richard Gill, “Hannah Arendt, G. K. Chesterton and Ecological Populism,” Ph.D. thesis, Keele University (U.K.), Chapter 2, “Chesterton on Wonder and the Theory of Thanks,” www.angelfire.com/folk/richardjgill/two.html.

¹⁵ Chesterton, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, 28.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

Chesterton's citation of Thomas and Francis as imitators and followers of the "Master"—Christ. John Paul relentlessly cited the Second Vatican Council's declaration that "In reality it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear."¹⁷

Christian faith is not extrinsic to questions of how to face the problems of the world; it is necessary to facing them. It tells us that we are to love God first above all things, then each other, and finally, in the light of those loves, to take care of the rest of the world. I think that despite his love of St. Francis's poetic references to Brother Sun and Sister Moon, Chesterton would agree with the contemporary theologian Thomas Sieger Derr's warning against making love of nature a sort of third great commandment, since "love and reverence are due nature only derivatively, as the creation of a good God, and that nature may not be personified, endowed with selfhood, or otherwise treated on a par with man in Biblical religion."¹⁸ Christian faith tells us not that man and turkey are brothers, but that man has a special place in the creation as a steward of God. The good of creation is not simply an egalitarian good. It is hierarchical. Man's dignity is greater even than that of the lilies of the field since, as Christ taught us, God cares even more for us than he does for them. And if God loves us more than he loves other parts of the creation, then it is our duty to treat man as the highest priority. The problem with attempting to bring the level of animals up to our own in order to induce better treatment of them is that precisely the opposite happens. To say that humans and animals demand the same dignity may bring about in certain cases a better treatment of animals, but this is almost always accompanied by the worse treatment of humans. The "instinct against cannibalism," Chesterton notes, "is founded on the Divinity of Man."¹⁹ Or to put it the other way around, "Wherever there is Animal Worship there is Human Sacrifice. That is, both symbolically and literally, a real truth of historical experience."²⁰ For to say that all creatures whatsoever are equal ends in absurdity since, as Robert Royal notes, this would mean "the AIDS virus has as much 'right' to fulfill its own needs as the AIDS patient."²¹

¹⁷ *Gaudium et Spes*, 22.

¹⁸ Thomas Sieger Derr, *Ecology and Human Liberation: A Theological Critique of the Use and Abuse of Our Birthright* (New York: World Student Christian Federation Books, 1973), 33.

¹⁹ *The Thing*, in *Collected Works* 3 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 280.

²⁰ *Illustrated London News* column, January 17, 1914, in *Collected Works* 30:26.

²¹ Robert Royal, *The Virgin and the Dynamo: Use and Abuses of Religion in Environmental Debates* (Washington, DC and Grand Rapids, MI: Ethics and Public Policy Center and Eerdmans, 1999), 36.

Self-limitation for Proper Care of Man and His Environment

In *Chesterton and the Romance of Orthodoxy: The Making of GKC, 1874–1908*, the very talented study of the early maturity of Chesterton's vision, William Oddie remarks on the "love of frames and limits" that "runs like a leitmotif throughout his intellectual life."²² Oddie quotes a 1904 essay of Chesterton's in which he declares his allegiance to limited things: An empire is above all "utterly undefined and unlimited. Not to see how this frustrates genuine enthusiasm is not to know the alphabet of the human heart. There is one thing that is vitally essential to everything which is to be intensely enjoyed or intensely admired—limitation. Whenever we look through an archway, and are stricken into delight with the magnetic clarity and completeness of the landscape beyond, we are realizing the necessity of boundaries. Whenever we put a picture in a frame, we are acting upon that primeval truth which is the value of small nationalities."²³ I am told that the modern secular commentator on ecology, Michael Pollan, has declared that the prime category for thinking about nature is not wilderness but the garden. Chesterton would no doubt agree. He believed that for humans to care about and learn to care about anything, as he learned as a child building and maintaining a toy theater with his father, one must be able to see it within manageable limits.

What would he make of the argument that the move to the cities has allowed a lower impact on much land in the US and Europe? After all, current patterns of movement to cities have allowed large areas of land to be preserved from human contact. I think he would respond that the alienation of so many people from the natural order makes the trade-off inadequate, since the goal is not to preserve land from use entirely, but to ensure that humans know and are able to care for nature. If men and women grow up thinking of nature as something completely alien, then what can the future hold for the land that has been "preserved" from use? This is not to say that he would disapprove of parks or commons areas. These are preserved not from use but for use. The key is to see them as our own rather large gardens, with clear and definite borders. And all people, city and country, should have the opportunity to see these frames and learn how to care for them at some level. They need to be able to know the natural order to know when to plant and when to leave fallow.

²² William Oddie, *Chesterton and the Romance of Orthodoxy: The Making of GKC, 1874–1908* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 21.

²³ Chesterton, *England: A Nation*, ed. Lucian Oldershaw (London: R. B. Johnson, 1904), 16–17. Cited in Oddie, *Chesterton*, 21.

While the seemingly untamed areas of deserts and mountains have always held an attraction for humans, since they symbolize the complete otherness of God,²⁴ nevertheless for Chesterton the essential attitudes to human life come from the biblical bookends of the Garden of Genesis and the heavenly city of the book of Revelation. The command of the Lord in the beginning is not to preserve the land from use, but to till it and make it fruitful. The ending is similar. Chesterton would no doubt agree with St. Irenaeus that “the world itself, restored to its original state, facing no further obstacles, should be at the service of the just.”²⁵ The “original state” to which the earth is restored is not the low-density living of Eden; instead, it is the life of a city crowded with people and “at the service of the just.” Chesterton writes, “A city is, properly speaking, more poetic even than a countryside, for while Nature is chaos of unconscious forces, a city is a chaos of conscious ones.”²⁶ The heavenly city does not put a stop to the use of creation, but is its true beginning. Then, as St. John’s vision tells us, we will see “the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.”²⁷ In the New Jerusalem, the chaos of conscious forces has become cosmos. The indispensable good that the Christian tradition brings to questions of environmentalism and stewardship is its moral vision, its understanding of the relations of God, man, and creation. This vision can then serve as a foundation from which to plan out and assess practical plans to address difficulties. In the glimpse of our end is the beginning of our action. N V

²⁴ On this theme, see Belden C. Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

²⁵ Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, 5, 32, 1, quoted in *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §1047.

²⁶ G. K. Chesterton on *Detective Fiction*, compiled and edited by John Peterson (Sauk City, WI: Battered Silicon Dispatch Box, 2010), 14.

²⁷ Rv 22:1–2.