

G. K. Chesterton and the Insanity of the Absurd

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Gilbert Keith Chesterton stands apart from many thinkers because he does not shake his fist at the universe after seriously confronting its most heartbreaking realities or the indifference with which it seems to greet human suffering and pain. Nor does he shrink from the universe as one who accepts his own worthlessness before it. Instead, he laughs at it, or, as he might prefer, with it. The universe and its plethora of questions are comical to him (Chesterton, *Blatchford* 373).

In keeping with his comedic tendencies, he uses hilarious fictional stories to capture his audience and say what is on his mind. In *The Man Who Was Thursday*, for instance, Chesterton is doing more than writing an incredibly engaging book; he is telling his own story. It is the story of his struggle in his younger years as he moved from pessimism to hope. But it is more. At first it looks like a classic struggle between good and evil, but the lines soon blur and the reader begins to wonder who, if anyone, can be trusted and if any Higher Being is really good. *The Man Who Was Thursday* presents the confusion of a certain time period—the one Chesterton grew up in—but it also wrestles with what is, at least for a theist, one of the most difficult questions ever asked: In light of overwhelming human suffering, how can there be any such thing as a good God? Chesterton does not offer any trite answers. Instead, he acknowledges the problem and offers the hope of an answer.

In his autobiography, Chesterton writes a chapter entitled “How to Be a Lunatic” that describes a period in his life in which he wandered through many philosophical quandaries, at times doubting the existence of any reality but his own mind. His days in art school during the early 1890’s were the most difficult time for him, what he calls “a period of life in which the mind is merely dreaming and drifting; and often drifting onto very dangerous rocks” (86). The ideas that confronted him were not his unique struggle but were widely shared.

In the time of which I write it was also a very negative and even nihilistic philosophy.

And though I never accepted it altogether, it threw a shadow over my mind and made me feel that most profitable and worthy ideas were, as it were, on the defensive. (86)

Though oppressed with mysteries that burdened his mind, he rebelled and sought to develop a different conception of life “even if it were one that should err on the side of health” (97). He writes:

I even called myself an optimist, because I was so horribly near to being a pessimist. It is the only excuse I can offer. All this part of the process was afterwards thrown up in the very formless piece of fiction called *The Man Who Was Thursday*. (98)

The story begins innocently enough. The setting is a London suburb that draws people of artistic dispositions. The protagonist is Gabriel Syme, who in Safron Park meets one Lucian Gregory, a fellow poet and self-proclaimed anarchist. Syme is a man of order and propriety—a poet of respectability (11). Gregory calls such a poet a contradiction in terms, for to his mind, [a]n artist is identical with an anarchist. ... You might transpose the words anywhere. An

anarchist is an artist. The man who throws a bomb is an artist, because he prefers a great moment to everything. He sees how much more valuable is one burst of blazing light, one peal of perfect thunder, than the mere common bodies of a few shapeless policemen. (12)

Syme does not take the man seriously and tells him so. He is the opposite kind of man. His is the way of respectability, propriety, and tidiness, and he has offended Gregory.

Unknown to Syme, Gregory is a real anarchist who has discovered that the best way to hide this fact is to tell everyone his beliefs, knowing that no one will take him seriously. But in order to prove to Syme his genuine loyalty to his cause, Gregory swears him to secrecy and takes him to a meeting of anarchists at which the members are about to vote to fill the position of Thursday on the Supreme Council of Anarchy. The seven-member council, each named for a day of the week, decides where and when and at whom the next bomb will be thrown.

What Gregory does not know, at least right away, is that Syme is a member of an elite anti-anarchist branch of Scotland Yard. The two men find themselves in a predicament of being bound by their oaths not to tell their respective peers what they have discovered about one another. Syme succeeds in getting himself elected to the Anarchist Council, much to Gregory's dismay, but it is too late. Syme is off to his first meeting with the other six days of the week.

As the story unfolds, more and more of the members of the council turn out to be policemen, all of them sent on their missions by a mysterious man who sits alone in a dark room. Following an unforgettable chase across the countryside of France, the members finally discover that each of his supposed fellow council members is in fact a fellow policeman, except for the president, Sunday. Every strange turn in the story pales by comparison to their pursuit of this enigmatic man, if that is indeed what he is.

Syme's struggle throughout the story is one of fighting for the good and the right while all the time coming to the conclusion that the rest of the world has gone mad. Once four of the council members know each other's true identities, they discover that only Sunday and his secretary, Monday, are out to get them (Sunday had exposed the seventh man as a spy and turned him out of the council). As they seek to flee along the coast of France from the pursuing secretary and the mob with him, they are dismayed to see the good, honest people join the mob and try to kill them. Believing their end has come and the whole world has thrown off constraint and decency, they prepare to make their stand on a pier jutting into the English Channel.

Syme turned to him and said—"You are quite hopeless, then?" Mr. Ratcliffe kept a stony silence; then at last he said quietly—"No; oddly enough I am not quite hopeless. There is one insane little hope that I cannot get out of my mind. The power of this whole planet is against us, yet I cannot help wondering whether this one silly little hope is hopeless yet." "In what or whom is your hope?" asked Syme with curiosity. "In a man I never saw," said the other, looking at the leaden sea. (148)

But the man they are looking for, the man who made them what they are and sent them out, does not come. Instead, they rush the mob with the thought of killing as many as they can, but the secretary, Monday, stops them short and tells them that they are under arrest, just before he reveals that he too is a policeman who was chasing them down as anarchists.

"There never was any Supreme Anarchist Council," [Dr. Bull] said. "We were all a lot of silly policemen looking at each other. ...I knew I couldn't be wrong about the mob," he said, beaming over the enormous multitude which stretched away to the distance on both sides. "Vulgar people are never mad. I'm vulgar myself, and I know." (151)

The obvious questions remain to be asked. Who is Sunday? And who is the mysterious man

in the dark room? The men, along with the sixth day of the week whom they find, decide to confront Sunday the next morning at their council meeting:

“I?” “What am I?” roared the President, and he rose slowly to an incredible height, like some enormous wave about to arch above them and break. “You want to know what I am, do you? Bull, you are a man of science. Grub in the roots of those trees and find out the truth about them. Syme, you are a poet. Stare at those morning clouds. But I tell you this, that you will have found out the truth of the last tree and the top-most cloud before the truth about me. You will understand the sea, and I shall be still a riddle; you shall know what the stars are, and not know what I am. Since the beginning of the world all men have hunted me like a wolf—kings and sages, and poets and lawgivers, all the churches, and all the philosophers. But I have never been caught yet, and the skies will fall in the time I turn to bay. I have given them a good run for their money, and I will now.” (155)

With that, he jumps off the balcony where they had been meeting, but he holds himself up on the railing long enough to say, “There’s one thing I’ll tell you, though, about who I am. I am the man in the dark room, who made you all policemen” (156). The men are stunned for a moment but quickly recover enough to chase after him.

Such a revelation seems incredible at first, if not completely unexpected. Clues lead up to this revelation, but they do not take away the mystery of real identity. The idea of a man whom the doomed men put their hope in though they had never seen him points to God, but the head of an anarchist council who is described as being of colossal size and uncertain temperament seems to destroy the theory. If it does not destroy it, the way is open for a great deal of speculation as to what kind of god Chesterton might be portraying.

In an article published the day before his death in 1936 (and later reprinted in some editions of the novel, including the text I am citing), Chesterton wrote about the way some had misinterpreted the book and especially his character, Sunday:

It was a very melodramatic moonshine, but it had a kind of notion in it; and the point is that it described, first a band of the last champions of order fighting against what appeared to be a world of anarchy, and then the discovery that the mysterious master both of the anarchy and order was the same sort of elemental elf who had appeared to be rather too like a pantomime ogre. This line of logic, or lunacy, led many to infer that this equivocal being was meant for a serious description of the Deity; and my work even enjoyed a temporary respect among those who like the Deity to be so described. (187)

The interpretation is not without textual support, however. In several instances qualities are attributed to Sunday that make him appear god-like, including his colossal size (55). In other passages, the thought is that Sunday never sleeps, that he is able to read the mind—“When the President’s eyes were on him he felt as if he were made of glass” (63)—and he seems to be able to be in half a dozen places simultaneously.

Sunday also possesses the characteristics of great evil. Most notably, he is the head of an organization bent on killing mankind. He appears cruelly, coldly indifferent, as his words to the first exposed spy, Gogol, reveal:

Now listen to me. I like you. The consequence is that it would annoy me for just about two and a half minutes if I heard that you had died in torments. Well, if you ever tell the police or any human soul about us, I shall have that two and a half minutes of discomfort. On your discomfort I will not dwell. Good day. Mind the step. (72)

The result is a most paradoxical character. Is he God? Is he the Devil? Or perhaps he is some

mixture of the two, the yin and yang of eastern thinking. Each of the exposed council members has his own thoughts about him, which they discuss as they chase Sunday across the outskirts of London. And yet each man's perspective somehow fits together with that of the others.

Syme is the last to state his thoughts and the first to begin to make sense of them. He still must face the mystery of Sunday, but he begins to emerge from the depths as he discusses his ideas about this enigmatic character:

"Have you noticed an odd thing," he said, "about all your descriptions? Each man of you finds Sunday quite different, yet each man of you can only find one thing to compare him to—the universe itself. ... This is queer, but it is queerer still that I also have had my odd notion about the President, and I also find that I think of Sunday as I think of the whole world." ... "When I first saw Sunday," said Syme slowly, "I only saw his back; and when I saw his back, I knew he was the worst man in the world. His neck and shoulders were brutal, like those of some apish god. His head had a stoop that was hardly human, like the stoop of an ox. In fact, I had at once the revolting fancy that this was not a man at all, but a beast dressed up in men's clothes." (169)

The back of Sunday helps to unravel the mystery, but it must be kept distinct from the man in the dark room. A mistake that at least two Chesterton biographers, Michael Ffinch and Dudley Barker, make concerning Sunday is to say that the six policemen only saw the back of the mysterious police chief who sent them out to fight the anarchists when, in fact, Chesterton makes it clear that this man was always in a room so dark that nothing of him could be seen (Barker 176; Ffinch 160). Syme discovers this during his interview as the man speaks:

"Are you the new recruit?" asked a heavy voice. And in some strange way, though there was not the shadow of a shape in the gloom, Syme knew two things: first, that it came from a man of massive stature; and second, that the man had his back to him. (48)

Yet he never sees him, and this is an important detail concerning the identity of both Sunday and this police chief, who are, of course, one and the same person. But Syme continues:

And then the queer thing happened. I had seen his back from the street, as he sat in the balcony. Then I entered the hotel, and coming round the other side of him, saw his face in the sunlight. His face frightened me, as it did everyone; but not because it was brutal, not because it was evil. On the contrary, it frightened me because it was so beautiful, because it was so good. (169)

His words seem to go against all that the men know about Sunday, but Syme will not be put off. What he calls "the mystery of Sunday" is to him also "the mystery of the world." He explains that the back seems to be a joke in light of the face, for "Bad is so bad that we cannot but think good an accident; good is so good that we feel certain that evil could be explained" (170). But his description of what he saw as Sunday ran in front of them is more disturbing:

I was suddenly possessed with the idea that the blind, blank back of his head really was his face—an awful, eyeless face staring at me: And I fancied that the figure running in front of me was really a figure running backwards, and dancing as he ran. ... It was exactly the worst instant of my life. And yet ten minutes afterwards, when he put his head out of the cab and made a grimace like a gargoyle, I knew that he was only like a father playing hide-and-seek with his children. (170)

On more than one occasion, Chesterton bemoaned the fact that people had read this story without bothering to read the whole title (*Autobiography*, 98). In the essay mentioned above, he writes that the subtitle "A Nightmare" is the key to understanding the story (187), and he elaborates:

I have sometimes had occasion to murmur meekly that those who endure the heavy labour of reading a book might possibly endure that of reading the title-page of a book. For there are more examples than may be imagined, in which earnest critics might solve many of their problems about what a book is, merely by discovering what it professes to be. ...The book was called *The Man Who Was Thursday: A Nightmare*. It was not intended to describe the real world as it was, or as I thought it was, even when my thoughts were considerably less settled than they are now. It was intended to describe the world of wild doubt and despair which the pessimists were generally describing at that date; with just a gleam of hope in some double meaning of the doubt, which even the pessimists felt in some fashion. (188)

Sunday is not Chesterton's complete picture of who God is. He is God as He often appears in the natural world of created things—horrible, brutish, and harshly uncaring. This is Nature, the backside of God's dealings, being turned around for the pursuers' sake, to reveal a little part of the mystery of God and maybe to get them to keep looking for more. Martin Gardiner expands on this idea and comments on the comical side of Sunday:

Chesterton liked to imagine God has a sense of humor. Sunday is described as a "Thing" capable of shaking with laughter "like a loathsome and living jelly." Nature has its wildly comic side. It enjoys playing "good-natured tricks" "so big and subtle" that we could never have thought of them until we see them—jokes like the pelican, the hornbill, the elephant. (4)

Yet this explanation, while an important part of the answer and fitting most of what is told about Sunday, does not answer the harder question about the truly horrible things that happen in the world, those things that are interchangeably called "natural disasters" and "acts of God." Gardiner notes the common intellectual ground these events create:

Atheists and theists alike must face the fact that Nature cares not a rap whether you or I live or die, or even whether the human race will survive. There is no guarantee that some day a giant comet or asteroid will not strike the earth and obliterate all life. We may destroy ourselves with nuclear war. There is no assurance that man will not ultimately vanish like the dinosaurs. (3)

Arriving at Sunday's house does nothing to clear the minds of the weary pursuers, but this man, or thing, that they have been chasing has made preparations for their visit. Each one is taken in his own coach to Sunday's magnificent house and shown to his own room where refreshments and a change of clothes are laid out. The changes of clothes are one more pointer to the suspicion that Sunday is in some way God. He knows enough about each man to clothe him in the appropriate costume, each of which corresponds to the man's day.

"Well, I don't understand anything," said Syme, sighing. "I have been used so long to uncomfortable adventures that comfortable adventures knock me out. Still, I may be allowed to ask why I should be particularly like Thursday in a green frock spotted all over with the sun and moon. Those orbs, I think, shine on other days. I once saw the moon on Tuesday, I remember." "Beg pardon, sir," said the valet, "Bible also provided for you," and with a respectful and rigid finger he pointed out a passage in the first chapter of Genesis. Syme read it wondering. It was that in which the fourth day of the week is associated with the creation of the sun and moon. Here, however, they reckoned from a Christian Sunday. (175)

Each of the other men finds that he too is to be clothed in garments that correspond to what was created on his given day in the Genesis account. Each one also discovers that his garment

perfectly matches who he is at the deepest level. Each one “seemed to be for the first time himself and no one else.” And it was so, “[f]or these disguises did not disguise, but reveal” (176).

The banquet Sunday has prepared is the place to ask the final questions. The six are seated in thrones at the head of the festivity grounds where dancers dressed as every kind of thing—ships, trees, and animals—dance. The narrator says, “One would have thought that the untamable tune of some mad musician had set all the common objects of field and street dancing an eternal jig” (178). The central and seventh throne is empty. Soon Sunday arrives and, after watching the dance for a long while with the six, turns to them to take their questions.

To the Secretary’s bold, “Who and what are you?” Sunday replies, “I am the Sabbath...I am the peace of God.” The Secretary’s retort is representative of many who struggle with the problem of evil and suffering in the world alongside a God who claims to be good:

If you were the man in the dark room, why were you also Sunday, an offence to the sunlight? If you were from the first our father and our friend, why were you also our greatest enemy? We wept, we fled in terror; the iron entered into our souls—and you are the peace of God! Oh, I can forgive God His anger, though it destroyed nations; but I cannot forgive Him His peace. (181)

Each of the others displays varying reactions to this paradox. Syme does not feel angry at Sunday, but he says, “My reason is still crying out. I should like to know.” Ratcliffe finds it silly that Sunday was on both sides and fought himself. Dr. Bull understands nothing, saying, “[B]ut I am happy. In fact, I am going to sleep.” The Professor neither understands nor is happy, for Sunday had let him “stray a little too near to hell.” And Gogol, last to speak, can only say with childlike simplicity, “I wish I knew why I hurt so much.” From happiness to anger, the spectrum of responses is that of the human race (181-82).

Before he can respond, Sunday is interrupted by one last questioner. It is the poet Gregory (whose first name, Lucian, is likely a clue to his identity). He has come to bring his charges against these men who had set out to defeat him and his kind: “‘Now there was a day,’ murmured Bull, who seemed really to have fallen asleep, ‘when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan came also among them’” (182). Gregory’s accusation is that none of the council members had ever suffered or been broken. He throws at them the accusation of those who say that in order to be good, one must not have ever been confronted by evil or overcome by calamity. Gregory yells, “The unpardonable sin of the supreme power is that it is supreme. I do not curse you for being cruel. I do not curse you (though I might) for being kind. I curse you for being safe!” (183).

Syme responds that indeed they have suffered. In so doing, he strikes on the answer to their varied questions. They each needed to suffer in order to answer this accuser:

“So that each man fighting for order may be as brave and good a man as the dynamiter. So that the real lie of Satan may be flung back in the face of the blasphemer, so that by tears and torture we may earn the right to say to this man, ‘You lie!’ No agonies can be too great to buy the right to say to this accuser, ‘We also have suffered.’” (184)

This idea that suffering is not merely inevitable but useful sounds a note of unfairness. Why should humans have to suffer? The question is difficult, and Chesterton does not pretend to have a complete answer. He even hints that it truly is unfair unless, of course, the God who set the world in motion was willing to suffer too.

As he ends his tirade against Gregory, Syme almost claims that none of them have escaped from suffering, but he stops.

He had turned his eyes so as to see suddenly the great face of Sunday, which wore a strange smile. "Have you," he cried in a dreadful voice, "have you ever suffered?" As he gazed, the great face grew to an awful size.... Only in the blackness before it entirely destroyed his brain he seemed to hear a distant voice saying a commonplace text that he had heard somewhere, "Can ye drink of the cup that I drink of?" (184)

Mark Knight follows the line of Stephen Medcalf's thinking in regard to this last line:

Medcalf suggests not only that God suffered through the Cross but also that God may have chosen to suffer through the act of creation: "Sunday's answer to Syme makes it clear that, certainly in the Passion, possibly in the very act of creation, God knows isolation such as Gregory knows." (487)

Knight also deserves credit for picking up on a passage from Chesterton's *Orthodoxy* that brings out Chesterton's own understanding of how the Christ on the cross discloses something of God's nature and willingness to suffer. *Orthodoxy* was published in the same year as *Thursday*. In it Chesterton writes:

Christianity is the only religion on earth that has felt that omnipotence made God incomplete. Christianity alone has felt that God, to be wholly God, must have been a rebel as well as a king.... In this indeed I approach a matter more dark and awful than it is easy to discuss; and I apologise in advance if any of my phrases fall wrong or seem irreverent touching a matter which the greatest saints and thinkers have justly feared to approach. But in that terrific tale of the Passion there is a distinct emotional suggestion that the author of all things (in some unthinkable way) went not only through agony, but through doubt. (254)

In Chesterton's story, Sunday is God to the person who is struggling to believe in Him. This is not meant to be a presentation of God as revealed in Scripture, but God as viewed through the troubled eyes and crying heart of one who is pursuing but has not yet caught Him. The six men represent Chesterton in his art school days, but they are also those in every age who seek to find God. This is the view of those who, as he says in his essay on the novel, doubt but "with just a gleam of hope in some double meaning of doubt."

Chesterton recounts a story in his autobiography about a psychoanalyst who had found the book to be useful for treating his patients:

I know a number of men who nearly went mad," he said quite gravely, "but were saved because they had really understood *The Man Who Was Thursday*." He must have been generously exaggerative; he may have been mad himself, of course; but then so was I. But I confess it flatters me to think that, in this my period of lunacy, I may have been a little useful to other lunatics. (100)

The world could use a few more lunatics like G. K. Chesterton.

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