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Interpretation of Freedom in the Works of G. K. Chesterton

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Abstract

In this article, we analyze G.K. Chesterton's perspective on freedom. In his works, Chesterton emphasizes the importance of defining freedom and accepting its existence. He describes different types of freedom, including freedom of will and freedom of thought, and examines them from both scientific and philosophical perspectives. Chesterton does not believe that free will is merely about fulfilling human desires, nor does he deny its existence due to the presence of cause-and-effect relationships. For Chesterton, freedom of thought must also strike a balance to prevent it from becoming a dull and predictable process by following a rigid causal logic. It is important to consider the potential for abuse when exploring the idea that concepts and beliefs are relative and the concept of relativism. This relativistic approach, Chesterton argues, can lead to a disregard for the reality of the world. Both Kant and Chesterton believe that the defense of freedom is closely tied to the existence and defense of dogma.

Chesterton highlights the distinctiveness of Christian dogma in comparison to other teachings of his era. He believes that the Christian creed safeguards human freedom by mirroring the Creator. Drawing from his personal experiences, Chesterton defends the presence of both a logical and mystical element in human life.

Key Words: Chesterton, freedom, dogma, thought, will.



The concept of freedom has always been of interest to people from various perspectives, including philosophy and theology. Philosophical, literary, and cultural representatives have discussed this topic, and what is noteworthy is that sometimes people from different schools of thought agree on fundamental concepts. For example, the Slovenian culturologist and social philosopher Slavoj Žižek points out similarities in the understanding of freedom by Kant and Chesterton. Žižek highlights that Chesterton argues that the “struggle for freedom” necessitates a certain indisputable dogma, which aligns with the view expressed by Kant in “What is Enlightenment.”¹

Chesterton, born in 1874 and passing away in 1936, was an exceptional writer who played a significant role in the English Catholic revival. He was famously known as the “prince of paradox” among English writers, and his writing style was admired for its ability to turn proverbs, sayings, and allegories inside out. Chesterton's legacy is studied

1 Slavoj Žižek, “From Job to Christ: A Paulinian Reading of Chesterton,” in *Indiana in the Philosophy of Religion: St. Paul Among the Philosophers*, edited by John D. Caputo and Linda Martin Alcoff (Indianapolis and Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 54.

worldwide by many Chesterton societies in various countries, including non-English-speaking ones. These societies are located in individual cities and colleges, and they focus on research and education related to the Chesterton legacy. The largest Chesterton society is surprisingly located in America, where it organizes conferences, book discussions, and publishes articles and related information. Additionally, there is a significant network of Chesterton schools that offer education to those interested in his work.²

Chesterton was a prolific writer who authored several popular detective series featuring Father Brown and other amateur investigators. In addition to his detective stories, he wrote numerous critical and journalistic articles, books, and novels. Through his studies and reflections, he expounds on the concept of freedom, pondering its essence.³ Chesterton often attempts to view the idea of freedom through the lens of common sense. He defines the most basic form of freedom as the ability to differentiate between a free person and a slave. This is determined by the free person's ownership of their own body and the ability to control their own physical actions.⁴ Chesterton offers an interesting perspective on freedom, where he regards the family as a test for one's ability to grasp it. He believes that the family is the only thing that a free person creates by and for themselves.⁵

In Chesterton's works, freedom is viewed from different angles and analyzed in various ways. One of the most significant aspects of freedom in his writing is the concept of free will. The author expresses his belief in the existence of this capacity of man, which had been questioned by many of his contemporaries. He even claims that it is easier for him to discuss free will because of the peculiarity of his psychology. From the context of his statements, it is apparent that Chesterton also relies on his reason and rationality. He connects his intuition and reason and seeks reasonable grounds for his intuitions and finds them.⁶

Once again, he explains his rationale in an ironic tone. He uses the same thought process that connects freedom and religion to the concept of original sin. He states, "If I am treating man as a fallen being it is an intellectual convenience to me to believe that he fell..."⁷

2 "Hope for the Future: The Chesterton Schools Network," The Chesterton Schools Network, accessed March 8, 2024, <https://chestertonschoolsnetwork.org/>.

3 Gilbert Keith Chesterton, *Heretics* (New York: Press of Norwood, Massachusetts, 1919), chap. 1, <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/470/pg470-images.html>.

4 Gilbert Keith Chesterton, *Fancies versus Fads* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1923), chap. "Prohibition and the Press," <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/60164/pg60164-images.html>.

5 Ibid., chap. "A Defence of Dramatic Unities."

6 Maciej Wąs, "There Is an 'Is': Intuition of Being in the Thought and Writings of Gilbert Keith Chesterton (a Maritainian Perspective)," *Roczniki Filozoficzne* 67, no. 2 (2019): 103.

7 Gilbert Keith Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (London and Beccles: William Clowes and Sons, Limited, 1908), chap. 9, <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/16769/pg16769.txt>.

In his writing, Chesterton argues that freedom of will is a characteristic that is inherent to humans to a significant extent. This characteristic distinguishes humans from animals since humans have greater freedom of will than any animal. Chesterton also addresses accusations made by atheists against Christianity, particularly their belief that humans and animals are very similar. Chesterton debunks this belief and emphasizes that humans are still very different from animals. According to Chesterton, man is the only wild and free animal. Therefore, the ability to understand and use free will is potentially greatest in humans.⁸

According to Chesterton, free will is a crucial test that every person must pass in their lifetime, regardless of their desire. He compares it to a fairy tale where the hero has to go through a series of tests to protect their life or achieve something, such as winning the love and trust of their loved ones. However, unlike a fairy tale, the cost of such trials for a person with freedom is the salvation of their own soul.⁹ It is also important that Chesterton defends freedom¹⁰ and insists that its flow will not be diluted, nor will it dry up, figuratively speaking. This was a belief doubted by writers and thinkers of the 18th and 19th centuries, as evidenced by the literature of this time.¹¹ Moreover, to a large extent, Chesterton's contemporaries tried to expel the ideals of freedom and order from their books.¹² In his study of Charles Dickens, Chesterton notes that Dickens already saw that the times were coming when people would beg the state for protection from freedom, viewing it as the most terrible foreign invader.¹³ Another problem noted by the writer is that the very concept of freedom is often misunderstood.¹⁴ Thus, for example, regarding the skeptics' understanding of freedom, Chesterton notes that such lovers of freedom left freedom undefined while believing they were making it unlimited.¹⁵

Chesterton mentions his ideological opponents, Mr. R. B. Suthers and Mr. Blatchford, who deny the existence of free will. Chesterton argues against their perspective primarily on the basis of practical experience than speculative logic. Suthers' rejection of free will is based on deterministic reasoning. According to Suthers,

8 Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, chap. 9.

9 Gilbert Keith Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* (London: Hodder and Stoughton Limited, 1925), chap. 5, <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/65688>.

10 Ian Ker, 'Controversy', *G. K. Chesterton: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford Academic, 2011).

11 Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, part II, chap. 6.

12 Gilbert Keith Chesterton, *Heretics* (New York: Press of Norwood, Massachusetts, 1919), chap. 1, <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/470/pg470-images.html>.

13 Gilbert Keith Chesterton, *Appreciations and Criticism of the Works of Charles Dickens* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, Ltd, 1911), chap.1, <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/22362/pg22362-images.html>.

14 Joseph F. Babendreier, "Modern Values in the Apologetics of G. K. Chesterton" (PhD diss. (extract), University of Navarra, 1988), 27 (337), 39 (349), <https://dadun.unav.edu/handle/10171/11461>.

15 Gilbert Keith Chesterton, *Eugenics and Other Evils* (London, New York, Toronto & Melbourne: Cassell and Company, Limited, 1922), chap. 6. <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/25308/pg25308-images.html>.

as expressed by Chesterton, free will is irrational because it implies causeless actions, and the actions of a lunatic would be causeless.¹⁶ In comparing the statements of Suthers and Chesterton, we observe that Suthers' statement appears to be absolute, whereas Chesterton's argument is more flexible and emphasizes the importance of logic in gaining knowledge, even in the context of determinism. Chesterton also employs the concept of insanity, using terms such as "maniac," "maniacal," "lunacy," and "lunatic" in both his reflections on the human condition and in his critique of his ideological opponent. By using qualifiers such as "often" and "commonly," as well as the measure of quality "great," Chesterton avoids making categorical statements. It follows that not all logical people are mad, and not all mad people are logical.¹⁷

In "Orthodoxy," Chesterton reflects on the spiritual and mental state of his contemporary society while discussing insanity. He notes that a clear sign of insanity is the combination of comprehensive logic with spiritual narrowness. Chesterton compares medicine with religion, as both treat mental illnesses in a way similar to how religion treats heresy – they do not argue but rather free individuals as if from a spell. Although Chesterton is generally distrustful of his contemporary philosophical sciences and the state of science, he seems to hold a sense of piety and respect for medicine. This is because medicine deals with a person's health, which can be determined based on several signs and years of experience. In contrast, Chesterton believes that the humanities of his time lack such clear signs and are highly relative. In this text, Chesterton suggests that certain fields of science tend to move towards more speculative knowledge to the point where it becomes increasingly difficult to verify their achievements. When a person's mind refuses to function properly, Chesterton compares the situation to that of someone suffering from insanity. In such cases, only willpower or faith can help, as the mind becomes an organ that has ceased to function. The concept of will in such cases includes freedom of choice, as the patient can choose to remain insane or to return to a healthy state. Chesterton compares such a self-obsessed mind to a person in a third-class carriage, who will continue to go round and round the Inner Circle unless he makes an act of will get out at Gower Street. He sees such a voluntary act as a decisive decision.¹⁸

In his writings, Chesterton highlights the belief in the free will of the common man as a crucial component that helps him maintain his sanity. According to Chesterton, this belief in free will must be inextricably linked to the belief in fate, which guarantees that an ordinary person has a certain mystical view of life. This perspective often reconciles two opposing truths, such as the belief in free will and the belief in fate, and accepts them both together despite a contradiction. This creates a broader spiritual vision and allows one to see both perspectives better. At the same

16 Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, chap. 2.

17 Frederick Black, "Chesterton and Madness," *The Chesterton Review* 15, Issue 3 (August 1989): 327–8, <https://doi.org/10.5840/chesterton198915310>.

18 Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, chap. 2; Mark James Knight, "The concept of evil in the fiction of G. K. Chesterton: with special reference to his use of the grotesque" (PhD diss., King's College London, 1999), 130.

time, it should be noted that Chesterton emphasizes the importance of a person possessing free will. This does not reduce a person to the role of a mere toy in the hands of God, as Omar Khayyam suggests.¹⁹

Freedom of will for Chesterton is valuable, and its value becomes even more evident when it is neglected in favor of a materialistic picture of the world, which hides the principles of imperialism by implying that more in terms of size should have more importance than that which is smaller. Chesterton denies such thoughts: “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.”²⁰

Chesterton makes a comparison that helps illustrate the role of free will in human life, involving the fruits of creativity. He compares that spark, the wind of adventure, which brings free will into human life, to religion and to a literary work. The writer notes that free will marks an important turning point in a person’s destiny. A person at the crossroads is both the essence of Christianity and what excites us and maintains the intrigue in a story, novel, or book: “But the point is that a story is exciting because it has in it so strong an element of will, of what theology calls free-will.”²¹

Speaking about the will, Chesterton seeks to give a true and non-idealized picture of what constitutes the will and the freedom of the will, emphasizing that it tends to limit itself at the same time. He draws attention to supporters who in some sense oppose determinists with their iron logic. Recognizing that, as Chesterton calls it, “wild reason” leads to spiritual destruction, they proclaimed the creativity of the will, thus finding a way to restore the heathen health of the world. In their opinion, the highest authority belongs to the will, not to the mind. Chesterton does not shy away from the fact that the praise of will (volition) ends in the same emptiness and collapse as unquestioningly following only logic. He draws parallels to what happens if one accepts absolutely free thought, or pure will, “willing”: just as the introduction of absolutely free thought casts doubt on thought itself, so does the adoption of pure will (“willing”) paralyze the will itself.²²

Chesterton reminds supporters of the absolutization of will about its essence, which consists of choosing a path. The writer emphasizes that absolutizing the will as such leads to oppression. Proponents of the will say that the will spreads out and bursts outward, while in real, daily life, through the discovery of one’s own will, the decision of determination occurs, which flows into self-restraint. For example, if we take the situation of revealing the will concerning family life and marriage – by giving preference to one woman, you automatically close off the opportunity to build close relationships with all others. These self-limitations apply to any act. By accepting one option, you are inevitably giving up all others.²³

19 Chesterton, *Heretics*, chap. 7.

20 Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, chap. 4.

21 Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, chap. 8.

22 *Ibid.*, chap. 3.

23 *Ibid.*; Joseph F. Babendreier, “Modern Values in the Apologetics of G. K. Chesterton,” 39.

Chesterton gives an example of an anarchist supporter of the will of the poet Mr. John Davidson. This poet called to disregard prohibitions. However, as Chesterton notes, “it is surely obvious that ‘Thou shalt not’ is only one of the necessary corollaries of ‘I will.’ ‘I will’ go to the Lord Mayor’s Show, and thou shalt not stop me.”²⁴ When anarchists call on people to be audacious creators and not think about limits and laws, it is worth remembering that art is a limitation, since the essence of any picture is a frame, as Chesterton notes.²⁵

The writer shows that the use of will has its limitations in another aspect: you can free things from random and uncharacteristic features, but not from natural properties. For example, a giraffe without a long neck would no longer be a giraffe, and a camel without a hump would no longer be a camel.²⁶

In his writings, Chesterton argues that free will originates from God’s presence in the world. He shares his childhood impressions and reflects on the idea that everything is brought into existence by a certain will. Chesterton writes, “I had always believed that the world involved magic: now I thought that perhaps it involved a magician.”²⁷ He believes that the source of will, including free will, is God. The existence of a will to create implies that there is a goal in the world, which in turn implies a person who manifests this will and pursues a certain goal. Chesterton, especially through his artistic works, emphasizes the freedom of humanity to be a creator, or a co-creator of the world, and to give it a certain meaning.²⁸ In his works of art, Chesterton creatively exercises the freedom of the creator. He even creates something ugly to uncover a meaningful truth.²⁹

Chesterton’s free will also implies the existence of a moral law. He mentions several times that the will exists to fulfill (or not fulfill) the law.³⁰ Chesterton cites the example of the anarchist Mr. John Davidson, who, denying ordinary morality and being annoyed by it, calls for freedom of will in the sense of freedom from law. However, Chesterton emphasizes that a person also has the freedom to follow the law, to obey the law.³¹ The author highlights the immense freedom that individuals have in choosing to obey or violate the law, so much so that they can even opt to stumble.³²

Although Chesterton acknowledges that free will is a complex problem, he recognizes its importance in shaping social institutions and relationships. The writer

24 Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, chap. 3.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid., chap. 4.

28 Allison Milbank, “The Theopolitical Vision of G. K. Chesterton and J. R. R. Tolkien and its Contemporary Relevance,” *Open insight* 12, no. 24 (2021): 63.

29 Adam Carnehl, “G.K. Chesterton’s recovery of the Catholic-mystical tradition and his position in relation to Victorian aesthetics” (MTh(R) thesis, University of Glasgow, 2018), 88, <http://theses.gla.ac.uk/8883/>.

30 Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, chap. 4.

31 Ibid., chap. 3.

32 Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, chap. 5.

notes that the concept of free will opposes the understanding of crime as a disease and the belief in the scientific treatment of sin. Sin, unlike disease, is the result of free choice, and this is an important feature that sets it apart from disease. Chesterton draws attention to the fact that the term “patient,” used to describe someone who suffers, is a passive word, while “sinner” is an active word. This means that if someone wants to recover from an illness like the flu, they need to be patient. On the other hand, if someone wants to overcome sins like alcoholism or lying, they need to actively reject those behaviors. In other words, they need to be intolerant of them. This shows that making a moral change starts with making a free choice.³³

The notion of free will is intricately tied to the art of making choices. Chesterton boldly asserts that his contemporaries have distanced themselves even further from the concept of making choices, which he identifies as a significant challenge for contemporary thought. He asserts that European philosophical and revolutionary thought has been severely weakened since the republican days of Franklin and Robespierre due to the rejection of any form of choice because of the associated limitations.³⁴

In his writing, Chesterton discusses the signs of choice that can be observed in the world, arguing that they were created by the Creator. The author maintains a certain sequence in his storytelling, increasing its intensity and leading to a solution. Firstly, he notes that in every color we feel a sense of choice, a bold quality that suggests choice. He gives an example of red roses, which not only symbolize determination but also evoke drama. He associates the color of roses with the color of blood that unexpectedly splashed in a stream. Twenty pages later, Chesterton notes that a certain color is not merely an accident but rather a choice, and it was the divine choice.³⁵

Chesterton believed that the recognition of human dignity is associated with the ability and freedom to make free choices in society. He gives the example of elections, where giving the opportunity to participate in them to ordinary people who do not believe in themselves demonstrates courage and humility. Chesterton argues that it is noble to take into account and try to find out the opinion of unknown people, as it encourages the downtrodden. He considers it more difficult to rely on the opinion of famous people.³⁶

A person’s ability to make choices and the recognition of this freedom by a person, as Chesterton emphasizes, are what shapes society. Thus, he contrasts a society where God and man are different individuals, separated from each other, with societies where pantheism reigns. The ability to distinguish, laid down by religion, in which

33 Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, chap. 3; Amanda Hasbrouck Blackman, “G. K. Chesterton: Twentieth Century Catholic Reformer” (M. A. diss., North Texas State University, 1976), 36.

34 Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, chap. 3; G. K. Chesterton, *What’s Wrong with the World* (Ignatius Press, 1994), chap. 2, <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/1717/pg1717.txt>.

35 Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, chap. 4.

36 *Ibid.*, chap. 7.

God and man are different things, not one, is evident in the fact that a person is able to distinguish not only God, but also to recognize who is the ruler over him. According to Chesterton, social and political changes were natural in European societies with Christian beliefs, while tyrants were never overthrown in Asian countries, at least during Chesterton's lifetime.³⁷

According to Chesterton, if society desires genuine transformation, it should prioritize adherence to orthodoxy and the concept of God's transcendence. This notion of transcendence instills curiosity in individuals, as well as political and moral decision-making abilities, a sense of wonder, and helps to avoid the "wheel of destiny."³⁸ However, if individuals concentrate on God's immanence (which is most likely understood by Chesterton as extreme immanentism), they might fall into quietism, isolation, and indifference to social life.³⁹

In his writings, particularly in "Orthodoxy," Chesterton expresses his personal views on freedom of thought. It should be noted that Chesterton's ideas on this issue are not related to political freedoms. He discusses freedom of thought in the religious and scientific context and argues that neither old religion nor modern science recognizes absolute freedom of thought. Chesterton points out that theology condemns blasphemous thought and gives the example of some religious communities that advised people to think less about sex due to their special respect for the human body. According to Chesterton, contemporary science condemns unhealthy thought. For instance, the writer mentions the scientific community's reluctance to think about death, which is considered taboo. However, he argues that the concept of death is thought-provoking and thoroughly explored by Chesterton. While science avoids the topic due to the fear of triggering mania in some individuals, Chesterton examines death from different angles, considering it in relation to a madman's threat. He categorizes people into those who are open to adventure, change, and surprise, and those who are consumed by thoughts of death, which they tend to avoid.⁴⁰

Chesterton reflects on the philosophical teachings of his time and observes that materialism leads to absolute fatalism. This fatalism makes the talk of freedom meaningless, and the unhealthy notion of absolute freedom of thought kills freedom of will. However, Chesterton demands freedom of thought, but still believes that certain prohibitions should be in place. These prohibitions should not hinder a person's independent thinking. According to Chesterton, the only limitation that should be imposed is on the way one treats the freedom of thought. Freedom of thought becomes problematic when there is an issue with having the right to think at all. The problem arises due to the dominance of complete skepticism. It turns out that a person who is a

37 Ibid.; G. K. Chesterton, *A Miscellany of Men* (Ihs Press, 2003), chap. 'The Separatist and Sacred Things', <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/2015/pg2015-images.html>.

38 Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, chap. 6.

39 Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, chap. 8.

40 Ibid.; G. K. Chesterton, *St. Thomas Aquinas* (Dover Publications, 2009), chap. 7, <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/c/chesterton/aquinas/cache/aquinas.pdf>.

complete skeptical not only has no right to think in their own way, but also has no right to think at all. This is the only thought that, according to Chesterton, is subject to prohibition because it stops the work of thought. Chesterton credits Mr. H.G. Wells' work, "Doubts of the Instrument," as an expression of a tendency to doubt one's ability and right to think. This work reflects a certain pattern that typically appears during decadent times, including Chesterton's own era. In "Doubts of the Instrument," Wells questions the brain itself and separates reality from his thoughts, past, present, and future, as Chesterton observes.⁴¹

In his writings, Chesterton identifies several theories that limit freedom of thought and prevent further exploration of ideas. Skepticism is one such theory. Chesterton argues that skepticism undermines reason and the authority of established knowledge. Instead, Chesterton emphasizes the importance of protecting reason and preserving the connection between religion and logic. He believes that religion and logic are inherently linked and that they cannot be separated. This connection between religion and logic is a type of proof that cannot be proven, that is, something that must simply be accepted as a given through authority. Chesterton also notes the significance of authority, drawing a parallel between human and divine authority. According to Chesterton, the rejection of divine authority undermines the legitimacy of human authority. As a result, even the simplest tasks and problems, such as those encountered in school, can become impossible to solve. Additionally, when we consider the skeptical worldview which questions the reality of the world and demands proof for everything, it is difficult to find anything to ponder. In such a scenario, it becomes challenging to have freedom of thought.⁴²

Chesterton also discusses the concept of freedom of thought from the perspective of materialism. He argues that if the mind is viewed as a mere machine, then thinking loses its appeal and significance. Furthermore, Chesterton highlights that the modern worldview of evolution contradicts itself, as it undermines the very essence of life itself. When we consider evolution beyond the idea of a gradual transformation of one being, such as a monkey, into another being, such as a human (which does not necessarily contradict religious beliefs, since God may act both quickly and slowly, being at the beginning of time), we realize that it implies there is no clear distinction between an ape and a human, and there is no such thing as a fixed entity. In such a case, the only constant is the fluidity of everything in the world. Therefore, it becomes difficult to conceive of anything at all when there is nothing definite to hold on to. Evolutionists argue that because one does not exist, one cannot think, which denies the possibility of thinking, effectively turning Descartes's famous saying "I think, therefore I am" upside down.⁴³

41 Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, chap. 3.

42 Ibid.; G. K. Chesterton, *All Things Considered* (FQ Books, 2010), chap. "Humanitarianism and Strenght," <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/11505/pg11505.txt>.

43 Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, chap. 3.

In his writings, Chesterton represents a kind of skepticism that refutes the possibility of thinking and, consequently, the freedom of thought. This is similar to what Wells believed, as he denied the categorical nature of thinking and claimed that each thing is “unique.” Chesterton analyzes this approach and argues that thinking combines phenomena and stops when they cannot be combined, which ultimately refutes the possibility for a person to express himself. For instance, Wells’ statement that “All chairs are completely different” is not only false but also terminologically contradictory. One cannot say “all chairs” if all chairs are completely different.⁴⁴

Chesterton examines the concept of freedom of thought in relation to the theory of progress. He argues that this theory assumes that ideals and aspirations change over time in accordance with the changing eras. In this context, Chesterton may be referring to the theories of Spencer who identified different goals during the two phases of societal development: military and industrial. In one phase, Spencer prioritized the good of the group over the individual, while in the other, he prioritized production and trade in which the good of the individual was considered the highest value. Chesterton challenges the idea that what is considered right in one age may be considered wrong in another by analyzing the goals and methods of the theory of progress. He argues that phrases used by progressives to describe the difference between what is right and wrong in different eras are only valid if they are a reflection of different approaches to achieving the same goal. Each era seeks to attain this goal in its unique way. According to Chesterton, progress can only exist if there is an ideal that is neither entirely stable nor straightforwardly defined by progressives.⁴⁵

What stops thought, depriving it of its freedom, is also, as Chesterton writes, extreme pragmatism (which sometimes also means a complete lack of conviction, which, as the writer ironically notes, can give freedom and liveliness⁴⁶), and which assumes a complete absence of truth. The author endorses moderate pragmatism and applies its techniques himself. He views this approach as the starting point for reaching the truth. On the other hand, extreme pragmatism disregards the importance of contemplating the Absolute and focuses solely on fulfilling one’s needs. Chesterton argues that humans have a fundamental desire to transcend pragmatism and strive for something greater.⁴⁷

In his analysis of freedom of thought, the author also examines the concept of free thinking. Chesterton argues that free thinking is in a state of decline rather than in one of development or birth. Thus, there is no need to fear it excessively. Paradoxically, true freedom of thought requires certain restrictions to ensure that the mind is

44 Ibid.; G. K. Chesterton, *Autobiography* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1936), chap. 7, <https://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks13/1301201h.html>.

45 Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, chap. 3.

46 Chesterton, *Heretics*, chap. 4.

47 Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, chap. 3; Ibid., chap. 2; Knight, “The concept of evil in the fiction of G. K. Chesterton: with special reference to his use of the grotesque,” 30.

protected. Chesterton asserts that “free thought has exhausted its own freedom. It is weary of its own success.”⁴⁸

In his writings, Chesterton warns against the dangers of freethinking. Although it is often seen as a way to promote freedom of thought, freethinking can actually have the opposite effect by undermining true freedom. Chesterton believes that this is particularly true in modern times, when the emphasis on individualism can lead people to become too focused on their own desires and needs. He argues that by encouraging people to constantly question their own thoughts and desires, we actually prevent them from truly freeing themselves. In other words, he cautions that we need to be careful not to confuse freethinking with true freedom. It seems that Chesterton uses the example of an uneducated black man to highlight how clerks and workers in Britain (and beyond) can become enslaved to various rebellious thoughts, such as Marxist or Nietzschean ideas or beliefs in the superman, leading them to doubt and mental distress, and thus become “too mentally worried to believe in freedom.”⁴⁹ The diversity of such rebellious thoughts enslaves them, as books filled with such speculations fill their minds with doubts. Chesterton emphasizes that “as long as the vision of heaven is always changing, the vision of earth will be exactly the same.”⁵⁰

In this piece of writing, the author discusses the importance of sticking to a certain ideal and observes that many young people today are preoccupied with constantly changing their beliefs.⁵¹ The author argues that it does not matter how much a person falls short of their ideal, what truly matters is the steadfastness of the ideal. There is no benefit in changing one’s ideal. To illustrate this point, the author cites the example of the famous American impressionist artist Whistler, who used to throw away his previous drawings out of the window twenty times while painting. The author poses the question, what would have happened if Whistler had thrown away the model instead of the failed canvas drawings? The author explains that in this comparison, the drawings represent attempts to achieve an ideal, while the model is the ideal itself that a person sets before themselves.⁵²

The author emphasizes the significance of having a stable ideal in life. According to Chesterton, when an individual has a constant ideal in mind, they can strive towards it despite making mistakes and facing failures. In contrast, a person who frequently changes their ideals is unable to effect any changes in their life or fight for freedom. Such a person lacks both time and opportunities for it. However, having a stable ideal already provides a person with a significant amount of freedom. Chesterton’s previous thoughts lead to this conclusion. The inappropriate freedom of thought, which is sometimes interpreted as a constant change of ideals, can ultimately destroy freedom.⁵³

48 Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, chap. 3.

49 Ibid., chap. 7.

50 Ibid.

51 Chesterton, *Heretics*, chap. 1.

52 Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, chap. 7.

53 Ibid.; Chesterton, *Heretics*, chap. 20.

Chesterton also explains what a free-thinker means in modern Europe, defining them as a person who does not have their own views and does not think in their own way. According to the writer, this is a person who once thought in their own way but then chose for themselves some set of dogmas, such as the material origin of the world, the impossibility of personal immortality, and miracles, etc. All these ideas relate to issues of faith and orthodoxy, and the writer shows that these ideas (the material origin of the world, the impossibility of personal immortality and miracles, etc.) lead to the deprivation of the worldview of the element of spirituality. They deprive a person of freedom, including freedom of thought, because they rigidly determine a person. Chesterton proves that these ideas are not free.

The writer discusses miracles, even though this topic is not commonly explored in academic discussions of the 20th and 21st century. Chesterton expresses surprise at the notion that people who do not believe in miracles are considered more free-thinking compared to those who do. Chesterton also applies this belief in miracles to the context of the priest and continues to be surprised, stating that a “broad” or “liberal” clergyman always wants to decrease the number of miracles, not increase them, and this seems to be for an inexplicable reason.⁵⁴

The writer acknowledges the increase in the ability to recognize and attribute miracles compared to eighty years prior. He observes this primarily in the field of science, especially psychology. The writer is surprised by the new theology that denies miracles, as he believes it is a superstitious belief that lacks connection, and is not based on freedom of thought, but rather on materialistic dogma. Continuing his reflections on miracles and freedom of thought, Chesterton, resorting to allegory and personification, claims that “in so far as the liberal idea of freedom can be said to be on either side in the discussion about miracles, it is obviously on the side of miracles.”⁵⁵ The writer provides a logical explanation and clarification of his opinion. For this, he uses both commonly used academic approaches, terms, and categories, as well as rather unusual phenomena from the ordinary daily life of an ordinary person (for example, stating that a holiday, like liberalism, means human freedom). Thus, he begins with the concept of progress, and proceeds from the meaning of this word in the sense of the consistent power of spirit over matter. In this case, Chesterton suggests looking at a miracle as the momentary power of spirit over matter. He also recommends looking at a miracle as an embodiment of God’s freedom.

In his works, Chesterton argues that denying the existence of miracles and God cannot be considered a triumph of free thought. He also points out a troubling trend in the denial of liberty. While the Catholic Church recognizes the freedom of both man and God, Calvinism and materialism both deprive humans of freedom. Calvinism removes man’s freedom, leaving it to God, while materialism goes even further by taking away freedom from God. These reflections by Chesterton have implications not only for science, philosophy, and thought in general, but also for theology. Chesterton’s

54 Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, chap. 8.

55 *Ibid.*

perspective involves a sense of organicity and logic regarding the considerations in question.⁵⁶

Let us delve into another complex aspect of Chesterton's question of freedom, which relates to dogma. While Kant believes that dogma and the struggle for freedom are connected by a one-way cause-and-effect relationship, Chesterton sees a paradox in everything, and therefore believes that such a relationship exists in both directions. According to Chesterton, freedom of the will is necessary for a person to recognize dogma, and dogma is necessary to ensure freedom of will and thought.⁵⁷

Chesterton notes that one way or another, a person who submits to any call for freedom, seeking not to limit it in any way, falls into a certain trap.⁵⁸ He emphasizes the need for the existence of certain restrictions, and therefore dogma. The writer appreciates the importance of dogma so highly that he states that man can be described as an animal that creates dogmas.⁵⁹ At the same time, it should be noted that the freedom of will about which Chesterton speaks requires the presence of Christian dogma (the importance of which in the mental progress of a person was, in his view, often rejected by his contemporaries, in his opinion),⁶⁰ since the writer notes a certain doctrinarism and dogmatism in other widespread teachings and philosophies of his time. However, this type of dogmatism often denies freedom rather than allowing or defending it.

In his writings, Chesterton discusses Christian dogma and its role in bringing light, cheerfulness, and vitality to life. He compares and contrasts this healthy dogma with other doctrines, such as the scientific, monistic, pantheistic, Arian, deterministic, and those associated with the concept of necessity. Chesterton opposes these teachings to the Christian orthodox dogma, which is associated with the Catholic Church. He also observes the existence of various dogmas and teachings that were prevalent during his time.⁶¹ The writer further discusses the issue of orthodoxy and the need to clarify its understanding. He dismisses the debated question of where our faith comes from and attributes orthodoxy to what mankind received through the Apostles' Creed. The writer points out that until recently, these beliefs were shared by all who considered themselves Christians.⁶²

Chesterton presents his approach to the concept of orthodoxy to his readers: "If anyone is interested in learning how the flowers of the field, the phrases in an omnibus, the accidents of politics or the pains of youth came together in a certain order to produce a certain conviction of Christian orthodoxy, he may read this book."⁶³ Thus, to the variety of Christian orthodoxy, Chesterton attributes very different concepts and

56 Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, chap. 8; Chesterton, *What's Wrong with the World*, chap. 5.

57 Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, chap. 8.

58 Chesterton, *Eugenics and Other Evils*, chap. 6.

59 Chesterton, *Heretics*, chap. 20.

60 *Ibid.*

61 Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, chap. 8.

62 *Ibid.*, chap. 1.

63 *Ibid.*

events of human life, including flowers, phrases in the omnibus, suffering, and politics. In “Orthodoxy,” the writer emphasizes vitality, health and a healthy beginning, conformity to life, lack of boredom, openness to various life challenges. The health of orthodoxy is also evidenced by the fact that it has a certain limit in showing its adaptability to life and political events. “I may, it is true, twist orthodoxy so as partly to justify a tyrant. But I can easily make up a German philosophy to justify him entirely.”⁶⁴

According to Chesterton, orthodoxy is the foundation of stability as well as the healthy renewal of forces and reforms, not of any “new theology.” The author highlights that the primary advantage of orthodoxy is that it serves as a source of revolutions and reforms, although it may appear abstract at times. Moreover, orthodoxy is the only dependable protector of order and ethics that guarantees renewal through revolutions, changes, and freedom. Chesterton strongly advocates for orthodoxy on these principles. He notes that the new belief that human nature is perfect will not help overthrow the tyrant, but the ancient conviction of original sin can achieve that. Innate cruelty cannot be eliminated by the belief that only material things matter, but it can be overcome by the concept of the spiritual component being more important – which is what Christian orthodoxy teaches. The separation between God and humanity, also known as transcendence, can motivate a person to overcome laziness and achieve great things.⁶⁵

Chesterton discusses the role of dogma in protecting Christianity. He argues that dogma serves as a protective shield for Christianity. In Chesterton’s time, a Puritan-leaning newspaper attempted to remove this shield, which would have turned Christianity into a weak doctrine of the Inner Light and the presence of God in every person, similar to that of Quakerism.⁶⁶

Chesterton discusses the concept of dogma by associating it with mysticism. He suggests that dogma is something that ordinary people may not fully comprehend. By linking dogma with mysticism, Chesterton highlights that both involve the mystical, the mysterious, and the incomprehensible. He describes how mysticism tends to leave some things unexplained, which helps clarify everything else. Therefore, Chesterton believes that dogma also has a shade of mysticism because it reflects the truth, or at least claims to do so, and contains elements that go beyond rationality.⁶⁷

According to Chesterton, dogma contains both comprehensible and incomprehensible elements. Unlike his opponents who believe only in taking the comprehensible part of Christian dogma and discarding the rest as a husk, Chesterton views dogma as an important belief system because it contains elements that cannot be fully explained logically but are crucial to understanding many things that are otherwise incomprehensible. Chesterton insists that dogma is the only thing that makes explanation and argumentation possible.⁶⁸ Thus, when Chesterton speaks of

64 Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, chap. 8.

65 Ibid.; Chesterton, *Heretics*, chap. 13.

66 Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, chap. 5.

67 Ibid., chap. 2; G. K. Chesterton, *Twelve Types* (London: Arthur L. Humphreys, 1902), chap. ‘Thomas Carlyle’, <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/12491/pg12491.txt>.

68 Chesterton, *Appreciations and Criticism of the Works of Charles Dickens*, chap. 8.

Christian dogma, he means Christian orthodoxy, specifically the teaching affirmed by the Apostles' Creed. This teaching leaves unchanged only the most essential things, while allowing freedom to respond appropriately to the challenges of life in matters of secondary importance.⁶⁹

Chesterton shares his thoughts on Christian dogma and the concept of freedom as understood in Christianity.⁷⁰ He compares the views and beliefs of determinists and Christians and explores how these ideas apply to everyday life. To illustrate his point, Chesterton uses the example of a maid. He notes that a determinist, who is guided by the theory of causality, may feel uncomfortable saying "please" to his maid. The determinist may believe that such an address is inappropriate, could cause misunderstandings in their relationship, or might show excessive familiarity on the part of the maid. This, according to Chesterton, is in stark contrast to the Christian perspective on freedom, which places a greater emphasis on personal responsibility and mutual respect in relationships. For a Christian, this kind of attitude towards the maid and addressing her with words of request is quite natural, as the Christian allows free will to remain a sacred secret. The Christian reserves the right and the opportunity to violate social conventions and, if necessary, to return to the original state of those aspects that are necessary to maintain balance in society, separating human nature and dignity on the one hand from social relations and hierarchy on the other. Chesterton writes: "He puts the seed of dogma in a central darkness; but it branches forth in all directions with abounding natural health."⁷¹ In this context, dogma is closely related to mysticism, darkness, obscurity, and free will, which manifests itself in healthy natural relationships. On the other hand, Chesterton points out that dogma, despite all that some may consider irrational, gives more confidence in freedom than does trying to ground freedom in causality.⁷²

Chesterton speaks of the importance of a healthy, mystical-realistic truth that allows one to see reality, integrating the necessary element of mysticism, something that cannot be seen with the eyes or received through other senses – into human life. He reminds us that people used to preserve for themselves the freedom to believe in gods (unlike the agnostics of Chesterton, as well as our times) along with the freedom to doubt them. The writer emphasizes that truth was more important to such people than logic, so here we are talking about a certain dogma, which may lack logic and evidence, but which nonetheless appears as truth.⁷³

Chesterton also defends the dogma from the point of view of its immutability, presenting evidence from the realm of ordinary human common sense. The writer notes a strange and, in his opinion, stupid argument that something can be believed in

69 Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, chap. 9.

70 David Pickering, "Chesterton's Epistemology: A Study in the Development of Newman's Doctrines," *Journal of Inklings Studies* 12, issue 1 (2022): chap. V, <https://www.eupublishing.com/doi/full/10.3366/ink.2022.0137>.

71 Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, chap. 2.

72 Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, chap. 5.

73 Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, chap. 2.

at one time, in one century, but that it makes no sense to believe in it at another time or century. A certain dogma is good for, say, the 12th century, but unacceptable in the 20th. According to Chesterton, this is like saying that a certain philosophical system is good for Monday, but not acceptable for Friday.⁷⁴

In defending the dogma, Chesterton dissects widespread denials of its possibility by his eminent contemporaries. He cites the opinion of Herbert Spencer, calling him an imperialist in the sense that he compares the sizes of the solar system and man, and emphasizes his teaching that the supposed size of the solar system can and should suppress the spiritual powers of man. Chesterton writes that, with the same success, writes Chesterton, it could be said that man must yield his dignity to the whale because the latter is larger. According to the writer, this is similar to how supporters of the empire do not recognize the ideals and interests of Ireland, which is considered a small and therefore unimportant nation.⁷⁵

In his discussion about understanding dogma, Chesterton believed it was essential to clarify certain aspects of God and the divine. For him, the dogma concerning the personality of God and the distinction between God and man was critical. This was because some of his contemporaries taught that God was present within every individual and in the world, which blurred the lines between divine and human nature, and promoted pantheism, the idea that the divine is pervasive throughout the universe. As a result, Chesterton strongly defended the transcendentality of God and denied the concept of his immanence, considering the term to mean the inseparability of God from man.⁷⁶

According to Chesterton, this truth, the dogma about the separation of God from man, explained to him the world in which he lived and which he could not understand since childhood. The writer's statements indicate that in Christianity he found a solution to the riddle that aligned his understanding of the world and filled its gaps. Thus, according to the writer, it was necessary to find some way to love the world without showing complete trust in it and without belonging to it. For the writer, the world and Christianity were two completely different, big, cunning constructions, which were unrelated to each other; however, the existence of both, side by side, allows one to understand one's life and the path in it. For the writer, accepting the existence of a personal God who created and continues to sustain the world is a matter of dogma that intersects with a worldly problem. This intersection allows for a glimpse into another world. Everything else falls into place when these two parts—the point of dogma and the worldly problem—come together. This understanding clarifies why roses are red and grass is green. It suggests that a divine arbitrary choice exists in the world that is not determined by anything else, implying that this choice could have been different.⁷⁷

74 Ibid., chap. 5; Chesterton, *Heretics*, chap. 20.

75 Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, chap. 4.

76 Ibid., chap. 8.

77 Ibid., chap. 4.

Chesterton testifies that in his life, acceptance of the doctrine of Christianity gave him the opportunity to find a solution to the mysteries of existence that he faced as a child. The writer emphasizes that he was right in his feelings when he believed that he would rather say that the grass was the wrong color than admit that the grass was necessarily that color. This also gives him insight into the problems associated with happiness. It explains the doctrine of the fall of mankind, the willful yielding to temptation, and original sin. Then, for Chesterton, what he calls the shapeless monsters of concepts, which he finds difficult to describe, took their place. This approach to the world, recognizing the action of an unconditioned God who implements the canons of life by his will, affects its perception, as Chesterton himself testifies. It is no longer the boundless, hostile, cold world of the cosmos, but the cozy world of man, which also has a deep inner core that can be relied upon in an effort to understand the wider world around us.⁷⁸

Chesterton refers to another aspect of Christian dogma, which concerns the struggle between good and evil. The recognition of this struggle between the divine and the devil makes it possible to explain the existence of a balance in feelings and various phenomena in the world. The writer speaks of a set of feelings that arise from this balance, and thus by the presence of different, often directly opposite feelings. Chesterton asserts the importance of having the experience of feelings in order to understand both life and art. To emphasize the importance of this point, the writer compares the approach of Christianity and the average anarchist aesthete. The latter falls into a trap because he seeks formless freedom of feeling. As a result, he cannot understand the homesickness of the hero of the "Odyssey." Chesterton argues that a person needs not a universality that goes beyond normal feelings, but a universality that exists within their limits. This issue was resolved by the church by accepting the paradox of parallel feelings. The accepted dogma of the struggle between the divine and the devil in the world, as well as the events of rebellion and destruction within the world, and the simultaneous presence of optimism and pessimism in the experience of these events, provided a breakthrough in accepting the whirlwind of feelings that a person experiences without losing vitality and strength. It is this dogma that gives, according to Chesterton, the Catholic St. Francis the freedom to glorify all good things more joyfully than Whitman, and St. Jerome the freedom to be more gloomy than Schopenhauer in exposing evil.⁷⁹

Chesterton also sees fidelity to dogma as the key to social justice. If society remains faithful to the part of the dogma that states that no wise man or hero was ever crucified on the cross, then it becomes possible to respect the dignity of the poor and protect them. The writer interprets this in his own way and in the spirit of his time: "The rules of a club are sometimes in favor of the poor member. The drift of a club is always in favor of the rich one."⁸⁰

78 Ibid., chap. 5.

79 Ibid., chap. 6.

80 Ibid., chap. 9; Chesterton, *Heretics*, chap. 11.

In the context of the social approach to dogma and its role in preserving and developing society, Chesterton points out that the Christian dogma of original sin enables a person to maintain sobriety, including social sobriety. The Christian dogma, along with respect for a person's rank, wealth, and influence, allows and even requires treating wealthy people with sobriety. It reminds us that they are the same as us and can succumb to temptations and take bribes. Chesterton was particularly impressed by the fact that some of his contemporaries believed that wealthy people were inherently superior and deserved all the power. These individuals portrayed those who were less fortunate as being less human and less capable. Chesterton views this as a tactic used by the rich to support the belief that one's environment and genetics determined their abilities and social status.⁸¹

The writer reflects on the significance of dogma and religion, particularly in a historical context. In his book "Eternal Man," Chesterton illustrates how the old religion serves as a source of strength in the creation of new social relationships. After the collapse of feudalism, the most innovative and liberating force that emerged was, and still is, the old religion.⁸²

The writer discusses the purpose of dogma through a metaphor drawn from the lives of ordinary people. He likens dogma to a rake, which by itself may not be appealing. However, the important thing is not the rake's appearance, but rather its purpose as a tool for caring for grass and flowers, maintaining order and keeping the garden in good condition.⁸³

Chesterton has defined various types of freedom which include freedom of will and freedom of thought, and he considers them in philosophical and scientific contexts. The author has skillfully avoided the extremes while discussing free will, not reducing it to mere submission to human desires, nor denying it due to the presence of cause-and-effect relationships. When it comes to freedom of thought, Chesterton emphasizes the importance of maintaining freedom and resisting the temptation of seeking absolute freedom. Absolute freedom is not desirable because it can lead to a denial of the ability to reason, evaluate, and make decisions. This is because it undermines the existence of the real world, instead throwing a person into the oblivion of a realm of relative considerations. In his work, Chesterton highlights the connection between freedom and Christian dogma, demonstrating how they are intertwined. He also compares various dogmas that played a role in shaping and defending human freedom in different aspects. By giving examples from everyday life, he warns of the traps that pose a danger to the preservation of human freedom and society and suggests ways to avoid such risks. In discussing human freedom, Chesterton also draws parallels with the freedom of the Creator, who shares his power and freedom with his creation, thus bestowing it with great dignity. Chesterton highlights the benefits of Christian dogma in a society where various types of dogmas exist. Christian dogma not only

81 Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, chap. 7.

82 Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, chap. 6.

83 Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, chap. 9.

provides the freedom to make decisions and think independently, but also enables one to exist peacefully in the world. By balancing their emotions and mastering various aspects and manifestations of the world, individuals can find harmony and fulfillment.

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