

The Man Who Was Thursday

Revisiting Chesterton's masterpiece.

The Man Who Was Thursday, a masterpiece by G. K. Chesterton, revolves around two of the deepest of all theological mysteries: the freedom of the will and the existence of massive, irrational evil. The two mysteries are closely related.

In Chesterton's comic fantasy, which he calls on the title page "A Nightmare," free will is symbolized by anarchism. Man's freedom to do wicked things, as Augustine and so many other theologians of all faiths have said, is the price we pay for freedom. If our behavior were entirely determined by how our brain is wired by heredity and environment, then we would be mere automatons with no more genuine free will or self-awareness—two names for the same thing—than a vacuum cleaner. But we are not automatons. We have a knowledge of good and evil and a freedom to choose, within limits, of course, between the two. Somehow our choices are not totally determined, yet somehow they also are not random, as if decisions were made by shaking tiny dice inside our skull. This is the dark, impenetrable paradox of will and consciousness. "I see everything," Gabriel Syme shouts in the book's last chapter. "Why does each thing on the earth war against each other thing? ... So that each thing that obeys law may have the glory and isolation of the anarchist."

The anarchist movement of Chesterton's time, with its fanatical bomb tossers, has happily faded, but individual anarchists are still with us. A Timothy McVeigh blows up a federal building because he hates the federal government. A Ted Kaczynski blows up strangers because he hates modern technology. Islamic extremists blow up buildings and airplanes because they hate Israel and the United States. Irish Catholics and Protestants explode bombs because they hate each other. Such are some of the horrors we pay for the mysterious gift of free will.

Henry James, the father of William, said it eloquently in a letter quoted by Ralph Barton Perry in the first volume of his *Thought and Character of William James* (1935, p. 158):

Think of a spiritual existence so wan, so colourless, so miserably dreary and lifeless as this; an existence presided over by a sentimental deity, a deity so narrow-hearted, so brittle-brained, and putty-fingered as to be unable to make godlike men with hands and feet to do their own work and go their own errands, and content himself, therefore, with making spiritual animals with no functions but those of deglutition, digestion, assimilation. ... These creatures could have no *life*. At the very most they would barely *exist*. Life means individuality or character; and individuality or character can never be *conferred*, can never be *communicated* by one to another, but must be inwardly wrought out by the diligent and painful subjugation of evil to go in the sphere of one's proper activity. If God made spiritual sacks, merely, which he might fill out with his own breath to all eternity, why then of course evil might have been left out of the creature's experience. But he abhors sacks, and loves only men, made in his own image of heart, head and hand.

The 168 persons murdered by McVeigh's fertilizer bomb were just as irrationally killed as if an earthquake had leveled the building. And this takes us to the other deep mystery of Chesterton's nightmare, the mystery of natural evil. Of course, this is no mystery for an atheist. It's just the way the world is. But for the theist of any faith it is the most terrifying of all riddles. How can an all-powerful, benevolent God permit so much needless pain? As Gogol asks Sunday, like a small child questioning his mother, "I wish I knew why I was hurt so much."

The reality of such vast amounts of suffering provides atheists with their most powerful argument. Earthquakes, made inevitable by stresses in strata below the earth's surface, can snuff out the lives of thousands. Little children die of cancer. Millions can be killed by epidemics such as the Black Death of the fourteenth century.

The only possible way a theist can escape from the atheist's charge—either God is malevolent or there is no God—is to view Nature as the back of reality. Beyond what Lord Dunsany liked to call "the fields we know" there is a larger, wholly other unseen realm. Logic cannot prove its existence, and science is helpless in efforts to penetrate it, but by a leap of faith we can escape despair by looking forward to a life beyond the grave where God will in some manner, utterly beyond our understanding, rectify the mad injustices of the fields we know. This is the great hope that glows at the heart of theism and at the core of Chesterton's melodrama.

Many readers over the decades have found it difficult to understand who Sunday is. In the first chapter of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise*, the protagonist is said to have liked *The Man Who Was Thursday* but without understanding it. An unsigned reviewer in the *Aberdeen Free Press* (March 12, 1908) ended his review by saying he was entertained by G. K.'s "brilliant prose" but put the book down "with no earthly idea" of what it was all about.

Who, then, is Sunday? Chesterton himself made it plain enough, not only in his novel but also in scattered comments about the novel. Sunday is simply Nature, or the Universe when seen as distinct from the Creator. The God of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam has two aspects that theologians like to call transcendence and immanence. God is totally beyond the universe and our comprehension yet at the same time closer to us than breathing, as the Bible says, or, in the Koran's words, closer than the main artery in our neck. Sunday is God's immanence. He is Nature, the Universe, with its unalterable God-given, God-upheld laws that seem so obviously indifferent about our welfare.

Sunday, like Nature, has a front and back side. From the back he resembles what Chesterton calls in *The Uses of Diversity* (chap. 9) a "semi-supernatural monster." From the front he looks like an angel. Nature lavishes on us a thousand gifts that make us happy and grateful to be alive, yet the same Nature can destroy entire cities with seemingly random earthquakes. It can drown us with floods, kill us with tornadoes and diseases. Ultimately it will execute us.

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.

Throughout Chesterton's nightmare are numerous hints that Sunday is pagan Nature. He is monstrously huge and shapeless. When he stands he seems to fill the sky. His room and clothes are neat, but he is absent-minded and at times his great eyes suddenly go blind. Did G. K. make his eyes blue because that is the color of the sky? Sunday's white hair suggests his great age. We are told he never sleeps. Like God's omnipresence, he can be in six places at once. He is capable of smashing a person "like a fly." He resembles a human but actually "is not a man." Like Pan he is half human, half animal.

"We are not much," Ratcliffe says, "in Sunday's universe." Those who come in contact with Sunday fear him the way they fear the "finger of God." Who can contemplate the universe—billions of flaming stars in every galaxy and billions of galaxies—without being profoundly disturbed by a sense of wonder combined with sheer terror? This is a sampling of how the six men, Monday through Saturday, react to Sunday. He arouses in them that strange mixture of awe and fear which Rudolf Otto, in *The Idea of the Holy*, calls the *mysterium tremendum*.

Chesterton liked to imagine that 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.

Einstein once said, in an often quoted remark, that God (by which he meant Nature, or the "God" of Spinoza) is subtle but not malicious. It is not generally known that later in life, after the development of quantum mechanics, Einstein admitted in a letter that perhaps he was mistaken. God may be malicious after all.

Einstein was not thinking of such malicious actions as earthquakes and pestilences—Spinoza's God is indifferent about such things—but of the many subtle paradoxes of quantum theory. Consider the notorious EPR paradox, the letters standing for Einstein and two colleagues who first discovered it. A pair of particles are produced by an event that sends them off in opposite directions. Their production requires that they have opposite spins. In quantum theory spins have no direction until they are measured. Yet no matter how far apart the particles go, perhaps light years from each other, they remain "entangled" in such a way that when the spin of one is measured, the wave function of the two-particle system is said to "collapse," and the other particle instantly acquires a spin opposite to that of the particle measured.

Einstein called this "spooky action at a distance." The paradox is not resolved by saying that the particles are always part of the same quantum system with a single wave function that collapses when one particle is measured. The mystery is how the particles manage to stay entangled, or "correlated," when relativity theory makes it impossible for information to travel faster than light. For Einstein, in his later years, the EPR paradox was one of the "Old One's" malicious little jokes.

Nature swarms with a thousand other good-natured pranks that remain unexplained. When scientists ask questions about them, they often get answers that appear to be nonsense. At the moment astronomers are mystified by evidence that seems to imply that the universe is younger than some of its stars. In the Old Testament's Book of Job, of which Chesterton was especially fond, Job does his best to force God to explain why he, Job, a good man, must suffer such agonies. God answers Job's riddles by flinging other riddles at him. Who do you think you are, God says, to question the wisdom and intentions of your creator? Where were you when I made the universe? "The *Iliad* is only great," wrote G. K. in an essay on nonsense (*The Defendant*, 1907), "because all life is a battle, the *Odyssey* because all life is a journey, *The Book of Job* because all life is a riddle."

In 1907, the year before *Thursday* was published, Chesterton wrote an introduction to the Book of Job. (It is reprinted in *GK as MC*, 1929.) Garry Wills, in his introduction to *The Man Who Was Thursday* (Sheed & Ward, 1975), calls this Chesterton's "most important essay, written on the book that most profoundly influenced him all his life." This essay, writes Wills, "could almost stand as a commentary on the novel":

The "Council" and the "Accuser" are, in the last scene, direct references to the Book of Job. The final chase through monstrous scenes, thronged with trumpeting and incredible beasts, is a glimpse of that animal world which Jehovah called up for Job. Syme is answered by the elephant, as Job was by Behemoth. These echoes multiply in the final chapter as the Sons of God shout for joy in the strange dance the Council witnesses. The parallels are finally established by Bull's quotation: "Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan came also among them."

God's evasive, irrelevant replies to Job are parodied by the nonsense messages Sunday flings at his pursuers while he is being chased across London. Nature is forever confronting scientists with phenomena they cannot fathom. No one can catch Sunday. No one can discover the ultimate reasons for why the universe exists or why it is structured the way it is.

"What am I?" Sunday roars in chapter 13. (Note: he says "what" not "who.") He goes on to add that science will never discover everything. "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. ... But I have never been caught yet, and the skies will fall in the time I turn to bay."

This is the same Voice that spoke to Job from the whirlwind. There are truths about existence as far beyond our feeble brains as our knowledge of the world is beyond the mind of a robin. Today Sunday could have shouted: "You may learn that matter is made of particles that in turn are made of superstrings, but that will not tell you why there are superstrings. If you ever succeed in reducing physics to a single equation, or a small set of equations, you will still not know the reason for those equations. You will never be able to explain why there is something rather than nothing, or why, as Stephen Hawking recently put it, the Universe 'bothers to exist.'"

"Listen to me," Syme cries in chapter 14. "Shall I tell you the secret of the whole world?" His speech wonderfully capsules the heart of G. K.'s nightmare as well as the heart of Plato. "It is that we have only known the back of the world. We see everything from behind, and it looks brutal. That is not a tree, but the back of a tree. That is not a cloud, but the back of a cloud. Cannot you see that everything is stooping and hiding a face?"

Nature has two sides, a front and back, and all of Nature is the back of God. In Plato's famous analogy, we see only shadows on the wall of the world's cave. In the boundless realm of all there is, beyond the fields we know, lies our only hope of escape from ultimate despair and death. At the close of Chesterton's nightmare, when Sunday begins to merge with God, he is able to call himself the Sabbath, the day on which God rests, the final peace of God.

In Exodus 33:20-23, God says to Moses:

Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me and live. And the Lord said, Behold, there is a place by me, and thou shalt stand upon a rock: And it shall come to pass, while my glory passeth by, that I will put thee in a cleft of the rock; and will cover thee with my hand while I pass by: And I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back parts: but my face shall not be seen.

We know that Chesterton knew these verses. In his introduction to *The Man Who Was Thursday*, Wills calls attention to a passage in G. K.'s book *G. F. Watts* (1904) in which he speaks of Watts's unusual interest in painting human figures from behind. Here is what Chesterton writes on pages 62-63:

Before we quit this second department of the temperament of Watts, as expressed in his line, mention must be made of what is beyond all question the most interesting and most supremely personal of all the elements in the painter's designs and draughtsmanship. That is, of course, his magnificent discovery of the artistic effect of the human back. The back is the most awful and mysterious thing in the universe: it is impossible to speak about it. It is the part of man that he knows nothing of; like an outlying province forgotten by an emperor. It is a common saying that anything may happen behind our backs: transcendently considered the thing has an eerie truth about it. Eden may be behind our backs, or Fairyland. But this mystery of the human back has again its other side in the strange impression produced on those behind: to walk behind anyone along a lane is a thing that, properly speaking, touches the oldest nerve of awe. Watts has realized this as no one in art or letters has realized

it in the whole history of the world: it has made him great. There is one possible exception to his monopoly of this magnificent craze. Two thousand years before, in the dark scriptures of a nomad people, it had been said that their prophet saw the immense Creator of all things, but only saw Him from behind. I do not know whether even Watts would dare to paint that. But it reads like one of his pictures, like the most terrific of all his pictures, which he has kept veiled.

"Sunday," Wills adds, "is Chesterton's attempt to paint that picture." Syme says it this way:

"Then, and again and always," went on Syme, like a man talking to himself, "that has been for me the mystery of Sunday, and it is also the mystery of the world. When I see the horrible back, I am sure the noble face is but a mask. When I see the face but for an instant, I know the back is only a jest. 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."

If Chesterton had ended his fantasy with Syme's outburst about Nature as God's backside, his book would have been no more than an apology for philosophical theism, unlinked to any religious creed. But he does not stop there. The book closes with a dream sequence, a dream within a dream, involving a great costume ball in which the six policemen are clothed in ways that resemble the first six days of Genesis. Gregory, the book's authentic anarchist, becomes a symbol of Satan, the supreme destroyer. After he and Syme cross verbal swords, Syme denies Gregory's charge that humanity has not suffered. Turning to Sunday, whose face wears a strange smile, he asks, "Have you ever suffered?"

Sunday's face expands until it fills the sky. Everything goes black. Nature, God's back, blurs and vanishes. God's transcendent face no longer can be seen. Only his voice can be heard as he asks, "Can ye drink of the cup that I drink of?" It is the only passage in the book from the New Testament. Chesterton's nightmare ends with a reference to the Incarnation—God taking a human form to experience human pain and to prepare for our eternal life. This is what Syme calls the "impossible good news," the gospel that makes "every other thing a triviality, but an adorable triviality."

Chesterton's point is this. If one manages that mysterious leap of faith, one escapes in the only possible way from what Miguel de Unamuno called the "tragic sense of life." Nature's evil backside fades in the light of God's peace. Commonplace things such as lamp-posts, apple-trees, windmills, balloons, ships, hornbills, elephants, the moon—one of Chesterton's essay collections is titled *Tremendous Trifles*—take on a kind of gaiety they never had before. "About the whole cosmos," Chesterton wrote in *Heretics* (1905), "there is a tense and secret festivity—like preparations for Guy Fawkes day. Eternity is the eve of something." No longer are objects things that will forever be lost to our experience. Everything is seen with a new sense of wonder and gratitude. It would be many years before Chesterton could believe that the Good News was embodied and preserved by the Roman Catholic Church. He was received into the Church in 1922. His wife followed four years later.

Lecture 10: The Man Who Was Thursday

by DALE AHLQUIST

At first glance, *The Man Who Was Thursday* is a detective story filled with poetry and politics. But it is mystery that grows more mysterious, until it is nothing less than the mystery of creation itself. This is Chesterton's most famous novel. Never out of print since it was first published in 1908, critics immediately hailed it as "amazingly clever," "a remarkable acrobatic performance", and "a scurrying, door-slamming farce that ends like a chapter in the Apocalypse." One reviewer described how he had read it in one sitting and put it down, "completely dazed." Thirty years later, Orson Welles called it "shamelessly beautiful prose" and made a radio dramatization of it with his Mercury Radio Theater of the Air. (Unfortunately, he upstaged himself two weeks later with a production of H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*.)

Gabriel Syme is a poet and a police detective. Lucien Gregory is poet and a bomb-throwing anarchist. At the beginning of the novel, Syme infiltrates a secret meeting of anarchists and gets himself elected to as "Thursday," one of the seven members of the High Council of Anarchists. If you think it is paradoxical that there should be a governing body of those dedicated to destroying governing body, a hierarchy for blowing up hierarchies, you might be right. You might also note that the main reason Syme becomes a detective in the first place is because he is a rebel against rebellion. The policeman who recruits him explains that there is a difference between the real anarchists and the innocent ones who merely think rules are bad and should be broken. The real anarchists are something far worse than that. "They mean death. When they say that mankind shall be free at last, they mean that mankind shall commit suicide. When they talk of a paradise without right or wrong, they mean the grave. They have but two objects, to destroy humanity and then themselves." This is a prophetic description of the philosophy of the "real anarchists" who really would bring us the Culture of Death.

As the story unfolds, Syme soon learns that he is not the only one in disguise. The comparison with the Apocalypse is not unwarranted; this is a book of Revelation, as one symbolic surprise after another is revealed. But even as the masks come off, the biggest question – for both the reader and the characters – is who is Sunday? What is the true identity of the larger than life character who is the supreme head of the anarchists?

“I confess that I should feel a bit afraid of asking Sunday who he really is.”

“Why,” asked the Secretary, “for fear of bombs?”

“No,” said the Professor, “for fear he might tell me.”

But have no fear, I won't tell you who Sunday is, even if you think you already know the answer. But I will happily give away a bigger surprise, the revelation that this story is not to be compared with the biblical book of Revelation, but rather with the book of Job, the book which Chesterton considered the greatest riddle in all of literature. And even if you know that going in, it won't help you one bit.

Along the way to the final confrontation, we also get a taste of Chesterton's social philosophy. Barely noticed by most readers is the enormous common sense that a person with property is not an anarchist. But it's not just bomb-throwers who are the anarchists and the enemy of the common man. There is another class of people dedicated to a more deceitful destruction of society. They, too, think they can live outside the rules. They are the very rich. “The poor object to being governed badly. The rich object to being governed at all.”

This book is Chesterton at his best. Every scene is perfect. Every line is a gem. His brilliant wit shines in the episode where Syme is looking for any pretense to challenge another council member to a duel. But then he describes with great poignancy Syme's feelings as he is about to fight the duel in which he will most likely die: “He felt a strange and vivid value in all the earth around him, in the grass under his feet; he felt the love of life in all living things.”

Look through those eyes for a while