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Chesterton on Play, Work, Paradox, and Christian Orthodoxy

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Abstract

In this essay we attempt to accomplish two things related to the work of G.K. Chesterton. The first is to use one of his favorite ploys to articulate the nature of play. We discuss several paradoxical characteristics of play and attempt to show how seemingly contradictory features actually help us to understand play's allure and other values. We introduce the second topic of theological analyses of work and play with a review of the Christian literature on these subjects. We then employ Chesterton's paradoxical theology to see how these two aspects of living might come to life and how people of faith should experience them.

Introduction

G.K. Chesterton was a fan of paradox. He loved to show how seemingly incompatible elements were not only compatible but keys, as he put it, to the truth about things. Among those things was Christian orthodoxy. We will employ a similar strategy in investigating another one of Chesterton's favorite topics—namely play and see how play, work, and orthodoxy are related.

Much of Chesterton's brilliance can be traced to his unique epistemology. His approach revealed strong tendencies toward realism and holism. His philosophic realism was based on his faith in reason and drove him to strongly criticize materialists, relativists, and skeptics of various stripes. His holistic tendencies required that reason venture into new and sometimes uncomfortable places. Where many thinkers like Aristotle championed the logic of the excluded middle and saw A and not-A as mutually exclusive options, Chesterton often saw them as part of a difficult-to-comprehend whole. Much like Dewey, Chesterton never met a dualism that he liked. Yet his holism was not one that focused on the ambiguous middle as some American pragmatists, and later, Merleau-Ponty, were inclined to do. Rather he shed light on the colorful extremes and the exciting tensions that exist between them.

While Chesterton wrote about play (more about that later), it is useful to note that his play commitments included his penchant for conducting his own inquiries playfully. In addition to his masterful use of language that teased, surprised, challenged, entertained, and enlightened, he loved to take the slower, circuitous—but arguably more enjoyable—route to the truth. The patient unraveling of a paradox was one of his favorite intellectual ploys.

Chesterton would often begin his analyses by rehearsing the “truths” of others and concluding that they seemed reasonable enough. But then he would challenge us with the paradox. How could something that seemed to be so patently true not be true at all? And conversely, how could claims that often bordered on the outrageous actually be right? Chesterton, in short, engaged Christian theology as if it were a giant puzzle, one that was irresistibly and enjoyably challenging. What fun, he seemed to be saying, to enter such a labyrinth! What fun to find one’s way, amidst many false starts, to the distant and difficult-to-reach exit that revealed the truth!

Chesterton’s epistemological commitment to realism and holism is perhaps most clearly reflected in his well-known volume, Orthodoxy, in particular Chapter VI, “The Paradoxes of Christianity.” He begins with a review of several charges leveled by certain skeptics or agnostics against orthodox Christianity. These charges portrayed Christianity as “oddly shaped” and inconsistent, if not utterly incoherent. Chesterton was quick to reply, “Whenever we feel that there is something odd in Christian theology,” he wrote, “we shall generally find that there is something odd in the truth” (88).

Chesterton provided examples. Some critics described Christianity as unduly optimistic, others as fatally pessimistic; some regarded Christianity as a progenitor of

haughtiness, others as cause for extreme humility. Some, citing historical events as evidence, described Christians as overly aggressive and hostile; others claimed they were long-suffering, enduring, and naively passive.

Rather than fall into the dualistic trap of deciding which of these A's and not-A's was true and which was false, Chesterton argued that there is truth in both extremes. That is, as hard as it might be to comprehend, both conclusions could be true at the same time.

Once again, such paradoxes were not to be solved by locating the average of the two or some other middle position. The truth, in other words, did not lie at the mean. It could be grasped only by embracing the extremes in their gloriously contrasting colors, even by exaggerating them. Christianity got over the problem of contradiction, Chesterton wrote, by "combining furious opposites, by keeping them both, and keeping them both furious" (101). Chesterton resolved the paradox by suggesting that the truth of the extremes is the product of the stance or perspective one takes on Christianity.

[From one perspective, the Christian] "was to be haughtier than he had ever been before; in another way he was to be humbler than he had ever been before.

Insofar as I am Man I am the chief of creatures. Insofar as I am *a* man I am the chief of sinners. . . The Church was positive on both points. One can hardly think too little of oneself. One can hardly think too much of one's soul." (*italics original*, 100-1).

Interestingly, this is the same kind of answer provided in a different domain by quantum physics. Scientists had puzzled for centuries over whether the ultimate stuff of the universe is a wave or a particle. Quantum, paradoxically, said it was both . . . at the same time. Measured one way, its particle qualities are evident. Measured another way, its wave-like features are visible. It is the perspective employed, in other words, that accounts for the different ways in which matter reveals itself. So too, the tenets of Christianity and certain aspects of Christian behavior reveal themselves in radically different ways depending on the perspective employed to view them.

Furious Opposites and Play

Play is often depicted as a paradoxical phenomenon. It seems to be horribly important in one sense but utterly insignificant in another. It is said to create its own time and space but everyone knows that play occurs in the real world of minutes and hours, mornings and afternoons, nearby playfields and distant mountains. It is a domain of frivolity, of dancing around the Maypole, but also one that can demand complete concentration and warrant an attitude of utter seriousness. Play, according to some, is of lesser importance than work and should take place, at least among mature adults, after work is completed. But some individuals recommend play before working, while working, and instead of working. More than a few poets, philosophers, and theologians have argued that play is the proper end of life. Chesterton himself was among them.

It is not only possible to say a great deal in praise of play; it is really possible to say the highest things in praise of it. It might reasonably be maintained that the true object of all human life is play. Earth is a task garden; heaven is a playground. (“Oxford From Without” in All Things Considered, 1908)

However, as we will see, Chesterton was also a strong advocate for reformation and the intense work that goes into making our “task garden” a better place in which to live. It would seem that Chesterton might once again be hinting that his formula of retaining furious opposites would get at the truth about the place and value of work and play for Christians. Be that as it may, we will attempt to flesh out the characteristics of play using Chesterton’s holistic, oppositional strategy—that is, by “retaining the furious opposites and by keeping them both furious.”

The Nature of Play

Huizinga argued that play is freely chosen. In other words, it has nothing to do with necessity, compulsion, moral duty, or any other kind of extrinsic motivation. As Huizinga (1950) put it succinctly, “play interrupts the appetitive process.” We play, in short, because we want to play. Play is autotelic. The doing is its own reward. When at play we can do anything we want, whenever we want, for as long as we want to do it. Players are motivated intrinsically, not extrinsically.

However, the opposite may also be true. When we are under the spell of play, or at least when we are under the influence of what some have called deep play (e.g.,

Ackerman, 1999), we are decidedly unfree. In fact, when in the grip of a powerful play experience, we may well lose our very ability to make rational decisions. A Bacchanalian-like spell is cast over us. We forget what time it is. We take risks we would not normally take. We dance to the point of exhaustion, . . . and then dance some more. We neglect family and friends to play yet another few holes of golf before the sun sets. We, like Nero, get caught wiling away our time at play when propriety or duty say we should be doing other things.

We may see part way through this paradox if we separate two moments in many play experiences. Choosing to play seems to emphasize our freedom. Being chosen by play, being captivated by play experiences emphasizes the forfeiture of our freedom. We choose to play while, at the same time, expecting that play will return the favor and choose us.

By choosing to play, we encounter ourselves as fully in control, as masters of our play fate. We select tennis, not baseball. We expect to play for 45 minutes during our lunch break and return to the office for a one o'clock meeting.

However, in being chosen by play, we risk forfeiting that control. We lose ourselves, as we say, in our playground. We get carried away on the wings of delight. We fall under the spell of the ritual, the celebration, the game, the contest. We capitulate and then rationalize that very surrender. We say to ourselves that we can make up the missed work later, trying desperately to make sense of our commitment to this silly interlude, perhaps also trying to convince ourselves that we were in control all the time when quite the opposite was the case.

Thus, one paradox of play could be this: We use our freedom in order to lose it. We hold off necessity in order to experience an even stronger sense of compulsion. We honor certain playgrounds by choosing them over others only to have the playground surprise us by carrying us away to unexpected places of delight. Play, in other words, seems to involve a reciprocal experience of giving and taking, of choosing and being chosen—an experience similar to what Buber (1958) found in the I-Thou interactions of “will” and “grace.”

“Will” speaks to human agency and capability, to putting oneself in a position to receive, to laying the groundwork, as it were, for the possible relationship. It may require relinquishing one’s agendas, being still, listening carefully. “Grace,” on the other hand, speaks to human passivity and incapability, to receiving the gift, the blessing, the unmerited confirmation by the other—whether that be a lover, a friend . . . or a playground. When both “will” and “grace” do their appointed work, we lose ourselves in play . . . and we are grateful.

On some occasions, play falls flat. We may be preoccupied by issues at work and the quality of our “will” was not what it needed to be. On other occasions, “will” is up to the task, but it is a one-way relationship. “Grace” does not make an appearance. We are not carried away by the play experience. Once again we tend to rationalize in order to locate some value in the still-born play experience. “At least we got in some exercise,” we may say to ourselves. But in our hearts we know that nothing special happened. We never really fell under the spell of play. We had to settle for increased heart rates and the expenditure of a few extra calories when we were hoping for something more. The freedom showed up. The un-freedom did not.

Two other contraries have been used to describe play. Play is said to be useful and useless. Evolutionary theory would suggest that it has to be useful. This is so because any physical traits or behavioral tendencies (what anthropologists call phenotypes) that are maladaptive would have extinguished themselves across generations. In other words, if play reduced the likelihood that players would reach reproductive maturity and thus lessened opportunities for passing on one's genes, the play tendency would slowly be lost to the human genome. Those who embodied a stronger sense of prudence and duty and thus, were less likely to be distracted by play, would survive and pass on their work-a-day genes to the next generation. Under this scenario, the population would shift in the direction of prudentially-prone individuals. However, because play tendencies have been preserved across the animal kingdom, it would seem that play is adaptive and thus useful, albeit in some hard-to-determine way.

It is hard to determine for at least two reasons. First, energy is a scarce commodity, particularly in times of need. Because play expends this precious energy, it leaves less for more important ends. Second, play is, or at least can be, dangerous. This fact was immortalized in Aesop's Fables in the characters of the ant and the grasshopper. The ants were the sensible creatures, those who stored up food and prepared for the coming winter. They refused to waste their precious time on play. On the other hand, the profligate grasshopper could not resist the play impulse. He played foolishly and paid a dear price for it when winter finally arrived.

While this fable was more about ethics than evolution and was intended to celebrate the virtues of prudence and planning over self-indulgence and spontaneity, the point remains that play can be found across the much of the animal kingdom. Perhaps

then it is both dangerous and useful, a potential cause of our demise and a resource for human flourishing. On the plus side, some anthropologists have argued that play prepares children and adults to meet future challenges by presenting them with novel circumstances that require new skills. Play is also said to recharge our batteries. Most of us have experienced the refreshment that comes with play, a kind of revitalizing force that counteracts the grinding routine of work. At the end of a long week in the office we realize that we need to relax; we need to play. If asked if play served a useful purpose in our lives, we would have to respond affirmatively.

Still, play *is* silly and useless. It is doing something for “no good reason,” just because we want to do it. It is a serendipity, an oasis, a break in the action, a time to “go offline,” a diversion. It carries us away from the grind of duty, work, and worries about survival. That is its nature; that accounts for much of its charm; that lies at the heart of its distinctiveness as play. Play is fundamentally useless!

This conclusion is supported when we consider activities that begin as play and then take on added importance. Some sporting experiences are like this. A young boy or girl learns to play tennis, falls in love with it, and develops a good degree of skill in playing. But then pressures are added by cheering crowds, meddling parents, offers of scholarships, win-at-all-cost coaches, and excessive practice regimens. Sadly, the original joy in playing fades away. The once delightful playground recedes to the background. In some cases, it is lost forever. A number of college athletes have reported that, once their last game is over, they will never return to what were previously their beloved childhood playgrounds. In a word, play became too useful, too much like work. In point of fact, it was no longer play.

Conclusions about Play

As we have seen, two sets of contraries have been attributed to play. First, play can be understood to require maximal freedom as well as result in utter captivation. We freely choose to play; and play, in turn, “chooses us” and puts us under its intoxicating spell. In one sense, play is an aspect of life that requires full control and agency, but it is also a place of full surrender. Second, play is useful from one perspective, but from another point of view it is, and must be, utterly useless. In some ways it contributes to our fitness, our humanity, of love of life. But in other ways it contributes absolutely nothing of consequence. To play is to enjoy the experience, not to bargain for a future payoff. As Novak (1976) put it, it is to participate in the Kingdom of Ends not the Kingdom of Means.

If Chesterton is right about the retention of “furious opposites” as a key to understanding the truth about some things, and if play is one of those things, we should be able to resolve these twin paradoxes. We should be able to see that there is a sense in which play required maximal freedom, the kind of freedom we see in children who have no cares in the world, who give themselves to their playgrounds, who are utterly free to accept play invitations. This is unfettered agency. But at the same time, we can acknowledge the other extreme, the grip that play can have on us, a grip that is even stronger on occasion than the moral force of duty and work requirements for survival and well-being. Aesop’s grasshopper who plays to his own demise symbolizes the absolutely powerful and delightful foolishness of play.

We should also be able to unravel the second paradox about the utility and uselessness of play. It could be the case that play is maximally useful, when (and only when) it is experienced as maximally useless. In other words, play may adorn life best when no thought of adornment is given to it by the players. Play may also carry the most fitness benefit when no thought of survival or Darwinian fitness enters the play landscape.

In play then we are freely captivated, in charge of our own surrender, at once the chooser and the chosen. In play we find the greatest utility in the most thoroughly useless activities. We care most about things that hardly matter at all. In play, we seem to be most passionate about projects that produce nothing important. By retaining furious opposites and by keeping them both furious, we may have captured a little more of what Chesterton kept finding in Christian orthodoxy—namely, an oddly shaped truth.

Play, Work and Christian Theology¹

Given Chesterton's musings on the existence of paradox and the need to retain furious opposites furiously within the Christian life, a brief reflection on the main theological positions with regard to play and work is warranted. In our age, philosophers and theologians have lamented the loss of playfulness (and festivity and joy) in industrialized western civilization. Sport is perhaps the cultural artefact that best demonstrates what the historian of sport, Allen Guttman (1978/2004), describes as an aggressive 'ludic

¹This section is heavily reliant on: Watson, N.J., and Parker, A. (2014) Theologies of Play in Sport, in N.J. Watson and A. Parker., *Sport and the Christian Religion: A Systematic Review of Literature*, Newcastle Upon-Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing: 15-26.

diffusion'. Writing in the middle of the twentieth century, nearly fifty years after the publication of Chesterton's Orthodoxy, the German Lutheran Theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer asks:

I wonder whether it is possible (it almost seems so today) to regain the idea of the Church as providing an understanding of the area of freedom (art, education, friendship, play), so that Kierkegaard's 'aesthetic existence' would not be banished from the Church's sphere, but would be re-established within it? (1944, in Johnson, 1983).

Arguably, Bonhoeffer taps into the narrative of paradox that characterizes Chesterton's work, as this is something we all may experience in creating/observing art, playing and loving others in human relationships and learning via diverse pedagogies/epistemologies. In turn, Bonhoeffer identifies how the Church, especially the American protestant evangelical institutions over the last two-hundred years, have often dichotomized theological reflection and praxis. The widespread influence of the dualistic Greek philosophy of Plato² on Christian doctrine in the early centuries of the Church, especially in the writings of Church Father, Origen (182-251c.), is the main reason for this. As the Hebrew-Christian scholar, Marvin Wilson (1989: 131) suggests, "... the American Church has struggled vainly to support itself by a variety of artificial roots. Consequently, its growth has been stunted, its fruitfulness impaired", mainly because it has been "severed from its biblical Hebraic roots." And so, historically, the importance

² Plato's dualistic philosophy has of course been entrenched in the 'modern mind' by Cartesian-Kantian dualism from the enlightenment period.

of the body in Christian theology and life, has been sidelined, as has, knowledge of the sacred dimension of play. However, this is something clearly alluded to in Huizinga's seminal work on play in 1950³:

We may well call play a 'totality' in the modern sense of the word ... In all its higher forms [play] at any rate belongs to the sphere of festival and ritual—the sacred sphere ... The Platonic identification of play and holiness does not defile the latter by calling it play, rather it exalts the concept of play to the highest regions of the spirit ... In play we move below the level of the serious, as the child does; but we can also move above it—in the realm of the beautiful and sacred.

Following Huizinga's seminal work on play in 1950, in which he argues that play is imbued with a sacred and spiritual dimension, a number of Christian theologians have taken up the Bonhoeffer challenge. Hugo Rahner, a theologian and Church historian within the Jesuit tradition, locates God in the role of the creator as the 'ultimate player in his book, Man at Play (1972). He also emphasizes 'the lightness of spirit' and builds bridges to the concept of 'grace' that may be attained through humans playing. David Miller (1969, 1971) and Robert Neale (1969) have also contributed notable studies around this time, Gods and Games: Towards a Theology of Play and In Praise of Play: Toward a Psychology of Religion, respectively. These works both support and challenge Rahner's theology of play on several conceptual and doctrinal points.

However, it was the well-known German Protestant Theologian, Jürgen Moltmann (1972, 1980), who published the text, *Theology of Play*—which was followed

³This quote is taken from Mathisen (2005: 281).

by a broader analysis of the Olympic Games—whom (who?) has perhaps had the most significant impact on the development of theologies of play, work and sports. Not unlike Chesterton's appeal to maintain a 'fierce delight' in our human endeavors and to celebrate furious opposites, Moltmann advocates a whole-hearted passion for those athletes competing in sports events. That said, he also warns of the dangers of an unhealthy obsessive commodified work-ethic (a Marxist position) in sporting competition, which at its worst, ends in an idolatrous quest to find one's worth and significance in the activity—an approach that typically leads to the alienation of the other/opponent on a range of fronts. Rahner, Miller, Neale, Moltmann and in the early 1980s Robert Johnston, were all, to varying degrees, influenced by the protestant liberal theologian, Paul Tillich—who pioneered the theological investigations of culture in the twentieth century.

Johnston's book, *The Christian at Play* (1983), provides arguably the most in-depth examination of play, drawing on literature from across the Christian traditions. Interestingly here, there is significant discussion in Johnson's work surrounding C.S. Lewis's autobiographical work, Surprised by Joy, which like Chesterton's Orthodoxy, champions joy, freedom and playfulness as bulwarks of the authentic Christian life that are more often than not experienced in paradox. Charting the theological reflection of play from the Church Fathers (e.g., Augustine) through to the modern era, Johnston provides a biblical model of play (and work) that is routed (rooted?) in Hebraic, Greek, Protestant and Catholic thought. In particular, Judaic theology and history is important in understanding how Chesterton urges us to retain furious opposites furiously, embrace

existential paradox and be generally playful in life, is rooted in his *Judeo-Christian* starting point.

In his treatment of play, Johnston also warns against humanizing or deifying play, that is, conceiving a ‘theology of play’ as another ‘pop theology’ (e.g., the death of God and human potential movements) and therefore erroneously adopting ‘current opinion’ and identifying it with the religion of Christianity *per se*. That said, Johnston is very positive about the necessity and worth of play but acknowledges, as did Bonhoeffer, the Church’s historical suspicious (e.g., Augustine and the Puritans) and ambivalent (and at times avowedly negative) approach to pleasure, play and sport. However, given that the Catholic tradition has generally been more consistent in advocating the positive dimensions of play, sports and pleasure (as evidenced in the writings of Chesterton, Novak, Pieper and Rahner), Johnston identifies an important caveat in the historical development of theologies of play: “... evangelical Christians are so prone to ‘instrumentalize everything’” (ix), including play and sport.

Since the late 1960’s this claim that has been levelled at the protestant community, has been a central point of scholarly debate, in particular in North America. Catholic voices, such as Michael Novak, in his seminal text, The Joy of Sports, (1976) contends that the protestant work-ethic (rooted in individualistic Calvinistic doctrine) and the philosophy of Marxism, are the major forces in initiating the secularization of sporting experience and the subsequent loss of playfulness, creativity, freedom and joy. In agreement with Novak, Huizinga states that ‘... we have an activity nominally known as play but raised to such a pitch of technical organization and scientific thoroughness that the real play-spirit is threatened with extinction’ (1950:199). The ‘sweet tension’ (not

unlike Chesterton's 'fierce delight') that Kretchmar suggests exists in healthy sporting competition, is then lost in a quest to dominate at all costs, to win-at-all-costs—dichotomies then prevail in the sporting encounter and Chesterton's holistic oppositional strategy is trumped! Play and sport have become work.

Building on devastating Marxist critiques of the modern sporting institution, by Bero Rigauer (1981) and Jean-Marie Brohm (1978), which contend that sacred play moments in sports have been lost through the aggressive forces of industrial capitalism, scholars, such as, Allen Guttman and Steve Overmann (2011)—building on Weberian theory—have persuasively argued that 'sport is now work'. This model of professional sport is characterized by quantification, commercialism and dry rationality, which is a seed-bed for the multitude of ethical and moral problems that exist in modern sports. This is the very antithesis of what has been called *The Riddle of Joy* (1989) that permeates Chesterton's and C.S. Lewis's writings on play and work. Chesterton's personal and scholarly journey into the riddle of joy is based on an anthropological and rational holism that rejects the sea of dualisms that have polluted Christian theology and practice in the modern era, and in particular, American religious institutions.

In examining theories of embodiment and theological and philosophical dichotomies (an insufficient epistemology that underplays the complexity of things—Chesterton's main point), a growing number of scholars have suggested the need for a holistic Judea-Christian and Pauline theological paradigm when examining play, work and sport (e.g., Kretchmar, 2011). The writings of Thomist philosopher, Joseph Pieper, have informed this work and are again demonstrative of the generally more balanced epistemological stance of Catholic scholars over time. Drawing mainly on Aquinas

(1225-1274c) and thus Aristotle, Pieper champions the worth and necessity of both leisure and play and bemoans the ‘cult of work’ that is now embedded in our culture. His holistic anthropology and theory of embodiment closely mirror—if presented in a very different style—Chesterton’s views on play and work articulated in Orthodoxy. Both Pieper and Chesterton, alongside Rahner, Novak, Moltmann, Johnston and others, have helped to counter the epistemological and theological error of dualism and its manifestation in theology and modern-day sports.

Chesterton’s View of Play and Work

Christianity, according to Chesterton, extends two invitations at the same time—namely, to become radically sober *and* experience full intoxication. Chesterton called life on earth, as we noted, “a task garden,” a world in which we must acknowledge “danger and honour and intellectual responsibility.” We are not permitted, he argued, “to [simply] enjoy the pleasures and deny the perils.” He argued that Christians should experience a “fiercer discontent” than others with the sorry status of the world and the suffering it includes. (excerpts from “Oxford From Without”)

On his view, discontent should lead to work—specifically to reformation. Chesterton contrasted reformation with two other ways of dealing with the broken world. The first is evolution, a coping with the inevitable, a far too passive reaction to a negative turn of events. The second is a rigid sense of progress which can lead to movement in the wrong direction. Chesterton suggests a third option. He is an epistemological realist who

believes that we have the God-given power to discern better destinations from those that are less desirable.

He wrote, “Reform is a metaphor for reasonable and determined men: it means that we will see a certain thing out of shape and mean to put it into shape. And we know what shape.” (Orthodoxy, p. 112) He expressed his confidence in the powers of reformation. He wrote, we have been and are “slow but sure in bringing justice and mercy among men.” (Orthodoxy, 112) Christians, in short, have serious work responsibilities guided by a “vision fixed on Eden.” (Orthodoxy, 117) Paradoxically then, one of the fruits of the spirit is a “furious discontent.”

On this analysis, Christians should be, in one sense, angrier than non-believers with legal injustices, suffering, economic discrimination, racism, cheating, and all other harms that we find in the world. Christian athletes and others who love sports should be less patient with the economic exploitation of athletics, distortions of games for nationalistic purposes, selfish mining of sport for personal gain, instrumental ethical attitudes that pay little heed to the quality of games, cheating, and any number of other problems that are seen regularly in our sporting venues. There is work to do. There is no time to waste.

This speaks to the importance of what might be called a Christian ethics of athletic stewardship. But whether this stewardship is grounded in Christian faith or secular ethics, it would involve an unwavering commitment to preserving what is best about sport, improving sport, making sure that sport is a cultural jewel that can be enjoyed by generations to come. In short, we will see sport as “a certain thing out of shape and mean to put it into shape. And we know what shape.” While no sporting Eden

is likely to be reached, it is nevertheless important to keep the goal in mind and pursue it . . . with fervor!

This, however, is not the whole of the story for Chesterton. As noted, he argues that Christians also have cause to exhibit a “fiercer delight” as a foundation for celebration and other forms of play. He argues that there is no better cause for dance and celebration than the “good news.”

The Christ figure then is both the Lord of Reformation and, as the popular hymn puts it, “Lord of the Dance.” Faith inspires the greatest obligations known to humankind and the most joyous celebrations . . . once again, at the same time. Christianity solved the work-play problem, at least on Chesterton’s terms, by keeping them both and retaining them in their brightest colors.

Chesterton rails against the times in which we put up with a mixture of good and evil with a “decent satisfaction and a decent endurance” (Orthodoxy, 77). He writes:

I know this feeling fills our epoch, and I think it freezes our epoch. For our Titanic purposes of faith and revolution, what we need is not the cold acceptance of the world as a compromise, but some way in which we can heartily hate and heartily love it. We do not want joy and anger to neutralize each other and produce a surly contentment. . . We have to feel the universe at once as an ogre’s castle, to be stormed, and yet as our own cottage, to which we can return at evening. (Orthodoxy, 77)

The paradox, however, is still troubling. How can one be sober and intoxicated, driven by need and captured by serendipity at the same time? As always, Chesterton has

an answer. He argues that both are based on an inherent loyalty, love, commitment—the subject of fairy tales. He sees both delight and discontent being grounded in “a primal loyalty to life” (Orthodoxy, 75).

Chesterton continues to unravel the paradox by railing again suicide as “the ultimate and absolute evil, the refusal to take an interest in existence; the refusal to take the oath of loyalty to life. . . . The suicide insults everything on earth.” He insults work, hope for improvement, goals, duties. But he also insults play by “defiling every flower and refusing to live for its sake” (Orthodoxy, 78).

The commitment to life can provoke us to hate enough to work and love enough to play. The martyr, who risks her life for a cause, and in stark contrast to the suicide, lives closer to the truth than the Stoic who merely endures and misses the vibrant colors at life’s work and play extremes.

Chesterton argues that the ethical strictures of Christianity produce a place in which it is safe to play. Once again Chesterton uses paradox to instruct us.

Catholic doctrine and discipline may be walls; but they are the walls of a playground. Christianity is the only frame which has preserved the pleasure of Paganism. We might fancy some children playing on the flat grassy top of some tall island in the sea. So long as there was a wall round the cliff’s edge they could fling themselves into every frantic game and make the place the noisiest of nurseries. (Orthodoxy, 152)

Sport, Work and Playgrounds

Christian traditions, as we have seen, have been ambivalent regarding the value of play. Some have argued that play is inappropriate, at least for adults. Reformations

should trump celebrations. Restrained gratitude should trump any tendencies to sing, dance, and drink. Discipleship is full-time work.

However, if Chesterton is onto something, a Christian theology, and perhaps by extension, *any* theology, should pay more heed to delightful physical activity. If the ultimate purpose of a theology is to make sense of a commitment to life, to live life as if it really mattered, a story that accommodates and celebrates the most extreme forms of love and duty, sufficiency and need, the desired and the distasteful, might be very compelling.

To be sure, it is a weird world in which the ultimate stuff of the universe is both a wave and a particle at the same time. And it is a weird world that pulls us humans in two opposite directions at once, toward freedom and dependency, toward love and reformation, toward celebration and duty. But it is a good world, one that allows us to play sport as among the most and least important things we do. In honor of Chesterton, we might call this the orthodoxy of the spiritual athlete.

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