

Attaining Moral Turpitude Is Not a Sudden Thing: G.K. Chesterton's Insights about “Evil Friendships in History”

(This article by Dr Robert Hickson was written on the feast of St Leonard of Limoges and of St Leonard of Reresby, 6th November 2013. It has been posted on the *Apropos* website: www.apropos.org.uk)

Epigraph

“Nemo repente fuit turpissimus” (Juvenal, *Satire II*, 83)
[No one has been—or was— completely vile all of a sudden]

“Nemo repente fit turpissimus” (G.K. Chesterton, *As I was Saying* (1936), p.44)
[No one suddenly becomes thoroughly base]

Extirpating Dialects

Not long before his widely lamented death on 14 June 1936, G.K. Chesterton had published a fresh collection of his essays, entitled *As I Was Saying*, an anthology expressing some of his well-pondered judgments after his fourteen fertile and grateful years as a Roman Catholic.¹

In his essay, “About Shamelessness,” Chesterton is especially concerned with the leveling and homogenizing effects of certain institutions and fashionable trends of modern society and culture, especially the leveling effects of the State Schools in England—to include their gradual extirpation of the variety of differentiated Country Dialects. After first mentioning the desirable matter of preserving these manifold dialects of England, he will go on to deeper things of good taste, manners and morals, and thereby prepare us better to receive what he also earnestly tries to convey in his trenchant essay, “About Voltaire,” which is also about Pontius Pilate and Herod, and one of Voltaire's cynical and sneering “Teutonic friends,” the highly cultured and atheistical Frederick the Great of Prussia.

We shall have much to consider there, but Chesterton shall first speak on the issue of Dialects:

There are some who actually like the Country dialects which State education is systematically destroying. There are some who actually prefer them [e.g., those “of Sussex or Suffolk”] to the Cockney dialect which State education is systematically spreading.... Among the eccentric reactionaries [like G.K.C.] who have actually observed this [leveling] change with regret, a further and more curious fact has been remarked more than once..... In short, this [reductive, leveling,

¹ G.K. Chesterton, *As I Was Saying* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1936). This collection, also published in 1936 in London by Methuen & Company, contains 228 pages of text, in 36 varied chapters (individual essays), with all chapter-titles beginning with “About”—from “About Mad Metaphors” to “About Royal Weddings.” The current essay proposes to consider and counterpoint only two of these essays, one entitled “About Shamelessness” and the other “About Voltaire”—which essays are to be found in Chapters VI (pp. 37-42) and IX (pp. 55-61), respectively. All future page citations will be to the 1936 American Edition of *As I Was Saying*, and placed in parentheses in the main body of the text above. Moreover, all bold or italicized emphases in the text will be my own, and not Chesterton's, unless otherwise specifically indicated.

Cockney] sort of thing is not a variation or a form of variety; on the contrary, **it is an inability to see that there is any variety**. It is not a difference in the sense of distinction [amongst other dialects], **it is a sudden failure in the power to make any distinction**. Whatever is distinct may possibly be distinguished [and, as the clear-minded Scholastics used to say: “the opposite of *Distinctio*, or *Distinguo*, is *Confusio*”]. (37-38)

Pride in new insensibility

As is his way, and in his longstanding combat against Hebetude, our Chesterton will gradually now take us further into the deeper mental and cultural implications:

*But the [reductionist and leveling] change here in question is something **much more formless and much more formidable** than anything that could arise from the most uncouth or unlucky of local or rustic accents. **It is a certain loss of sharpness**, in the ear as well as the tongue; **not only a flattening of the speech, but a deadening of the hearing**. And though it is itself a relatively small matter, especially as compared with many parallel matters, **it is exactly this quality** that makes it **symbolic of the social problems of to-day**. (38)*

Almost two hundred years later, and going somewhat further, I think, than David Hume's own famous 1757 essay “Of the Standard of Taste,” Chesterton says:

*For **one of the deepest troubles** of the day is this fact: that something is being commended as a new taste which is **simply the condition which finds everything tasteless**. It is sometimes offered almost as if it were a new sense; but it is not really even a new sensibility; **it is rather a pride in a new insensibility**. (38)*

Vivacity versus dullness

Moving now into the realm of morals and manners, as well as of nuanced perceptual art, he touches upon other aspects of numbing nonchalance—in the contrast between vivacity and dullness:

*When some old piece of decorum [, for instance,] is abolished,...it is always supposed to be completely justified **if** people become **just as dull in accepting the indecency** as they [purportedly] were in accepting the decency [i.e., of the abandoned decorum]. If it can be said that the grandchildren “soon get used” to something that would have made the grandfathers fight duels [of honor] to the death, it is always assumed that the grandchildren have found a new mode of [better] living....But **the psychological fact** is exactly the other way. The duellists **may have been fastidious or fantastic, but they were frightfully alive**. That [paradoxically] is why they died. **Their sensibilities were vivid and intense**, [and] by the only true test of the finer sensibilities, or even of the five senses. And that [test] is that **they could feel the difference between one thing and another** [such as the doctrinal Catholic Faith in its entirety, and something distinctively otherwise]. It is **the livelier eye** that can see the difference between peacock-blue and peacock-green; it is **the more fatigued eye** that may see both of them as something very like grey [or ecumenically, and essentially, one and the same]. It is **the quicker ear** that **can detect** in any speech **the shade between innocence and irony, or between irony and insult**. It is **the duller ear** that hears all the notes [tones] as monotone, and therefore monotonous. (38-39)*

Indifferent anarchy in manners and morals

With a final bit of expected playfulness, he compares someone—even an uppity swaggerer—who may still be able and disposed to “sniff the different smells of the world, and perhaps [even] to detect their difference,” with the man with a “drearier and more detached sense of pride [or insensibility],” the sort of man who “may be said to turn his nose down [not up] at everything,” which is only “a more depressing way of turning everything down.” (39) Dullness leads to apathy and despondency. For, he importantly adds: “Even the mere senses...**attest to this truth** [, namely,] about **vivacity going with differentiation.**”

After giving examples about the “absence of taste” in diet, as in the matter of wine, which “robs them of a reasonable taste in vintages,” Chesterton returns us to something more important, all things considered:

*But what most people do not see is that **this dullness in diet, and similar things, is exactly parallel to the dull and indifferent anarchy in manners and morals.** Do not be proud of the fact that your grandmother was shocked at something which you are **accustomed** to seeing or hearing **without being shocked**....It may mean that your grandmother was an extremely lively and vital animal, and that you are a [physical and moral] paralytic. (40)*

Prosaic paralytics

Further illustrating his meaning, he considers the sophistry of some “very prosaic paralytics that call themselves Nudists” and who claim that “**people 'soon get used' to being degraded...to the habits of the beasts of the field.**” Ironically, Chesterton thus replies:

I have no doubt they do; just as they soon get used to [“grow accustomed to”] being drunkards or drug-fiends or jail-birds or people talking Cockney instead of talking English. Where the argument of the [sophistical] apologist fails is in showing that it is better to get used to an inferior status after losing a superior one. (40-41—emphatic italics in the original)

Blunting of the sentiment – a cultural defeat

Among “innocent and simple and yet very sensible people,” there was once “a feeling, strangely enough, that men and women **might not feel** comfortable [or entirely unembarrassed] when they met as total strangers **to discuss some depraved and perhaps disgusting aspect** of their natural [or even quite intimate] sexual relation.” (41)

Indeed, as in the traditional court system, it was respected that

The case against mixed juries [in certain intimate matters] was a case of embarrassment; and that embarrassment [or modesty and pudency] is far more intelligent, far more civilized, far more subtle, far more psychological than the priggish brutality [or scurrility] that disregards it...The question is not whether the embarrassment can be so far overcome [being “soon get used to”] somehow that a good many people [a weighty quantity of people] can discharge their duty somehow. The question is whether the blunting of the sentiment really is a victory for human culture, and not rather a defeat for human culture. Just as the question is not whether millions of little boys, in different districts [of England] with different dialects, can all be taught the same [Eastender-Cockney] dialect of the Whitechapel road, but whether that dialect is better than others; and whether it is a good thing to lose the sense of difference between dialects. (41-42)

Chesterton says that the contumaciously “freethinking” or untroubled “latitudinarian” seem to omit or to have lost some important factors which intimately link together human “vivacity” and

mental “differentiation”—especially the nuanced qualities of good taste to be seen in a highly differentiated mind. Indeed, he adds humorously, and morally, near the very end of his own reflections:

*To lose the sense of **repugnance** from one thing, or [the sense of] **regard** for another is exactly **so far as it goes to relapse** into the vegetation [or thus back into “the unconsciousness of the grass,” as he once wrote] or to return to the dust. But for about fifty years [i.e., 1886-1936] **nearly all our culture and controversial trend** has been **conducted on the assumption that**, as long as we **could get used to** [i.e., to habituate ourselves to, to indulgently tolerate and soon to be effectively complicit with] **caddishness**, we **could be perfectly content in being cads** [bounders, rogues, dishonorable exploiters and deceivers, especially of women]....for it is **not a case against** a citizen that a man **can [is able to]** grow accustomed to [or even “soon get used to”] **being either a savage or a slave** [complacent or crudely coarsened within “The Servile State,” as H. Belloc himself also so well understood it]. (42—emphatic italics in the original)*

A sign of debasing cravenness

In light of the foregoing development and interrelation of his moral insights, how may we now better understand Chesterton's deftly chosen title for his essay, which, we will recall, speaks of “shamelessness”? At first reading I was not so sure, until I suddenly considered how inertly “getting used to” bad things—like caddishness—without our lively, persistent and varied forms of moral and psychological resistance is itself a sign of our debasing cravenness and apathy, and even a lack or loss of Honorable Shame. When we predominantly show a languid dullness—the inertia of hebetude—we lose our vivid discernments of certain slowly eroding, subversive processes which come to permeate our ambience or our cultural atmosphere “drop by drop” as in a gradual titration whose concealed but cumulative “instillings” suddenly produce a different color.

Only live animals swim against the stream

It would seem that Chesterton, by inspiring our robust vivacity and our disciplined cultivation of differentiated thought and action, truly hopes to help us resist intellectual and spiritual sloth; and to form our deep resistance to any circumambient amorphous drift, which he so unmistakably detected (even in 1936) in “**the dull and indifferent anarchy in manners and morals.**” (40) For, as he once wrote elsewhere, **only a live animal** (like a lively hunting dog!) **can swim against the stream.** (Nor would Chesterton want us even to be a dead dog in God's stream!)

Evil friendships in history

As we now consider the clarifying counterpoint of Chesterton's even more sobering essay “About Voltaire,” we are perhaps at first stunned by the way he allusively begins his view of “evil friendships” in history—especially political “friendships”—as well as their immediately malign, but often unforeseen, fuller effects. With suddenness and deftly understated irony, he is also modest and implicit in the way he presents us with a Biblical scene of unmistakably great moment to man:

*All Christian history began with that great social occasion [sic!] when Pilate and Herod shook hands. Hitherto, as everybody knew in Society circles, they had hardly been on speaking terms. Something led them to seek each other's support, **a vague sense of social crisis**, though **very little** was happening **except** the execution of **an ordinary batch** of criminals. The two rulers were **reconciled** on the very day when **one** of these convicts was **crucified.** (55)*

Now that Chesterton has our attention, if not yet our receptive docility, he will continue with his additional modes of irony—to include unsuspected capitalizations:

*This [reconciliation between the Roman and the Jew] is what many people mean by Peace, and the substitution of a reign of Love for one of Hatred [and Strife!]. Whether or no there is honour among thieves, there is always **a certain social interdependence and solidarity among murderers** [or what Georges Bernanos calls the solidarity of the “*communio peccatorum*,” as distinct from the analogous “*communio sanctorum*”]....Many political friendships—nay, **even democratic relationships**, are of this [equivocal] nature; and their [flagitious, thimblerrigging] representatives are really distressed when we [the detectors of deceit!] decline to identify this form of Love with the original [Christian] mystical idea of Charity. (55)*

As Chesterton is further warming up to his finely differentiated theme, he presents us now with one of his theses, along with his graciously ironic tonalities:

*It **sometimes** seems to me that **history is dominated and determined by these evil friendships**. As Christian history begins with the **happy** reconciliation of Herod and Pilate, so all modern history, in the **recent** revolutionary sense, begins with that strange friendship [between Voltaire and Frederick of Prussia] which ended in a quarrel, as that first quarrel [between Herod and Pilate] had ended in a friendship [sic]. (56)*

The “spiritual marriage” which brought forth the modern world

Chesterton will now be more specific as to his meaning here:

*I mean that the **two** elements of **destruction**, which make the modern world [as of 1936] more and more **incalculable**, were loosened with the light [sic] of that forgotten day when a lean French gentleman in a large wig, by name M. [Monsieur Francois-Marie] Arouet, travelled north with much annoyance [as with the peevish Erasmus of Rotterdam earlier towards England] to find the palace of the Prussian King [Frederick the Second, Frederick the Great] **far away in the freezing Baltic plain**....The actual name of the Frenchman was Arouet, but he was better known as Voltaire [1694-1778]. The meeting of these two men, **in the mid-winter of eighteenth-century scepticism and secularism**, is **a sort of spiritual marriage which brought forth the modern world**. (56)*

A monstrous combination

To describe the nature—or at least the appearance—of this bad omen and ugly incongruous combination of “scepticism and secularism,” Chesterton gives a fuller Latin quotation from Vergil's *Aeneid* (Book III, 658), which compactly describes how the Cyclops, Polyphemus, conducted himself and what he looked like, after Ulysses had blinded him in his cave: “*monstrum, horrendum, informe, ingens, cui lumen ademptum*” (“a monster, shockingly dreadful, hideous, and vast, deprived of sight [and light]”). Chesterton now adds an important distinction between true and false friendship:

*But because that birth [and putatively “spiritual marriage”] was monstrous and evil, and because true friendship and love are not evil, it [the Voltaire-Frederick alliance] did not come into the world to create a united thing, but two [dialectically] conflicting things, which, **between them**, were to shake the world to pieces. From Voltaire the Latins [the Latin nations] were to learn **a raging scepticism**. From Frederick the Teutons [the Germanies, especially Prussia and the Prussianized nations] were to learn **a raging pride**. (56)*

Helping through pity, not love

In proceeding to characterize these two giants more specifically, Chesterton will also resort to paradoxes:

*Neither of them cared very much about his own country **or traditions**. Frederick was a German who refused even to learn German. Voltaire was a Frenchman who wrote **a foul lampoon about Joan of Arc**. They were cosmopolitans; they were not in any sense patriots. But there is this difference; that the patriot does, however stupidly, like his country: whereas the cosmopolitan does not in the least like the cosmos. They neither of them [charming fellows!] pretended to like anything very much. Voltaire was the more really humane of the two; but Frederick also could **talk** on occasion **the cold humanitarianism** that was **the cant of the age**. But Voltaire, **even at his best**, really began **that modern mood that has blighted** all the humanitarianism he honestly [not insincerely!] supported. He started **that horrible habit of helping** human beings **only through pitying** them, and never through respecting them. Through him the oppression of the poor became a sort of cruelty to animals, and a loss of all the mystical [Christian] sense that to wrong the image of God [the created *Imago Dei*] is to insult the ambassador of a King [a Divine King]. Nevertheless, I believe that Voltaire had a heart; I think that Frederick was **the most heartless when he was most humane**. (57)*

Both rooted in unbelief and sneering scepticism

After these preparatory, partly contrastive characterizations, Chesterton will describe the setting and atmosphere of their personal encounter as if it were their first and only one—though some historians say, upon evidence, that they actually met on five separate (sometimes extended) occasions over the years:

*Anyhow, these two great sceptics met **on the level**, on the **dead solid plain**, as **dull** as the Baltic Plain; **on the basis** that there is **no God, or no God who is concerned with men any more than with mites** [microscopic parasites] **in cheese**. On this basis they agreed; on this basis they disagreed; their quarrel was personal and trivial, but it ended by **launching** two [destructive] European forces **against** each other, **both rooted in the same unbelief**. (57-58)*

We have come to see more and more of the ill fruits of that intimately devastating Revolutionary Dialectic—the thesis and the antithesis “both rooted in same unbelief” and in “the same sneering scepticism.” (58)

As Chesterton saw this destructive division and cynical commonality, Voltaire thought his brand of scepticism could “produce a Revolution and a Republic and **everywhere** the overthrowing of thrones [and altars!].” (58) But, Frederick, with his own brand of “sneering scepticism,” saw how he could use it “as easily to resist Reform, let alone Revolution” (58) and “be the basis of support for the most tyrannical of thrones [but not sacred altars!]” and “for **the bare brute domination** of a master over his slaves.” (58)

Secret societies and pompous politicians

Now going to a deeper level, as it concerns the unforeseen flowering or twisted fruits of “evil seeds,” Chesterton will bring to us more sobriety and timeless as well as timely insights:

*Of every **evil** seed it may be noted that the seed is different from the flower, and the flower from the fruit. **A demon of distortion** always twists it [the evil seed] even out of its own unnatural [or perverted] nature. It may turn into almost anything, except anything really good.... These [evil-seeded] things not only do not produce what they [deceitfully or delusively] promise; they do not even produce the **special** evil they threaten. [For example,] the Voltairean revolt promised to*

produce, and even began to produce, the rise of mobs and overthrow of thrones; but it was **not the final form of scepticism**. The actual effect of what we **call** democracy has been the disappearance of the [undirected and variegated] mob.... That Voltairean influence has **not** ended in the rule of mobs [ochlocracy], **but in the rule of secret societies** [largely hidden, yet indispensable, oligarchies, as Francois Furet has also himself empirically, and convincingly, demonstrated].... Voltaire has produced hypocritical and pompous professional politicians, at whom he would have been the first to **jeer**. (58-59)

A sneer - eternal as the smile of a skull

Given his strong, and somewhat unjust and inordinate, prejudices against the Prussian ethos and power, Chesterton will expectedly be harsher in his judgment of Frederick of Prussia as “a much wilder and wickeder wrong” (59) than that of Voltaire and his propagations:

*For the evil spirit of Frederick the Great has produced not only all other evils [fomented by Voltaire], but what might seem to be the very opposite evil. He who worshipped nothing has become a god who is quite blindly worshipped. He who cared nothing for Germany has become the battle-cry for madmen who care for nothing except Germany [as of 1936]. He who was a cold cosmopolitan has heated seven times a hell of narrow national and tribal fury which at this moment [in 1936] menaces mankind with a war [provoked by Perfidious Albion, too?] that may be the end of the world. **But the root of both perversions** [Voltairean and Frederickean] **is in the common ground of atheist irresponsibility**; there was nothing to stop the [French] sceptic from **turning democracy into secrecy**; there was nothing to stop him [the Teutonic sceptic] **interpreting liberty as the infinite license of tyranny**. [Indeed,] **the spiritual zero of Christendom** was at **that freezing instant** when those two, dry, thin, hatchet-faced men **looked** into each other's **hollow** eyes **and saw the sneer that was as eternal as the smile of a skull**. **Between them** [Voltaire and Frederick and their dialectically malignant influences], **they have nearly killed the thing** [the Faith and the Church, and also the Christendom] **by which we live**. (59-60)*

As he draws to the end of his essay, he will return us to the minatory present [in 1936, three years after Adolf Hitler, as well as Franklin Roosevelt, had come, **unlike** Stalin, legitimately into public power], and Chesterton now considers the then-contemporary afterlife of those earlier “two [18th-century] **points of peril or centres of unrest**,” both of which “do doubtless...contribute to the instability of [current] international relations, and threaten us [Great Britain?] all the more **because** they [France and Germany] threaten each other.” (60)

Chesterton's biases come once again to the surface, in his concluding admonitions:

*The main modern fact emerges [, however,] that the danger is mostly on one side [on the German National Socialist side], and that we have long been taught [in England] to look for it only on the other side [the side of the French Revolution, but not, or not yet, at the ongoing Soviet-Bolshevik **International Socialist** Revolution].... But many such Protestant ministers [in England and America] really were [have been] under the impression that Frederick the Great was a Protestant Hero. None of them realized that Frederick [compared with Voltaire] was **the greater atheist of the two**. None of them certainly foresaw that Frederick, in the long run, would turn out to be **the greater anarchist of the two**.... General Goering [the Air Force Chief and Minister of the German **National Socialist** Regime] may be trusted to teach us better [about Carlyle's “pious Prussia” and its saints and mystics], **till we learn at last that nothing is so anarchical as discipline divorced from authority**; that is, [discipline divorced] **from right [from justice]**. 60-61)*

Despite G.K. Chesterton's incomplete and sternly biased analysis of the scale of threats that seemed impending in the first half of 1936, he enhances our understanding of the debasing effects of unbelief. He shows us how two forms of constricted and truncated ideology are both “rooted in unbelief”—both Voltaire's often mocking orientation and Frederick the Great's even more cynical military regimentation of society. In the words of Chesterton's earlier essay “About Shamelessness,” the Frenchman's and the Prussian's own sceptical and atheistic “reductionisms” to a debased sameness were, indeed, “**something more formless and much more formidable**” (38) to deal with than the problem with the depreciation of most of the vivid English dialects.

Irreverent, cynical, and destructive ideas

The two highly cultured men—Voltaire and Frederick—could not be justly accused of “a loss of sharpness” or “a flattening of speech” or “a deadening of the hearing” (38)—except for their blunted perceptions of a revealed supernatural religion whose Faith is said to come “*ex auditu*”—and they showed no sign of being in “the condition which finds everything tasteless.” (38) Indeed, “their sensibilities were vivid and intense” (39) and they could discerningly detect in speech “the shade between innocence and irony, or between irony and insult.” (39) But their cultured ideas were irreverent and cynical and destructive, in part because they were full of pride and prone to sardonic condescension and sneering. In many ways they lived off a deep Christian culture and gracious formation, both of which they ungratefully and shamelessly set off to destroy. And their kind of shamelessness, whenever and wherever it appears, is to be perseveringly resisted.

Without humility you can't enjoy anything, even pride

In addition to his lifelong spirited combat against hebetude and vague nonchalance and ungrateful insensibility, G.K. Chesterton had a detestation of arrogance and insolence and presumptuous spiritual pride (*superbia*). He knew, moreover, that “without humility you can't enjoy anything, even pride”; and that “the test of all happiness is gratitude.” Most of his life, he conveyed the view that “the greatest form of giving is thanksgiving.” Because of these strong and joyful convictions, he was attentive to, and magnanimously disapproving of, the opposing fundamental dispositions and their grim fruits: such as the condign and easily discoverable “**desolation of ingratitude.**” From such a standpoint and standard Chesterton could thus clearly see and politely chasten what was missing in the lives and thoughts of Frederick the Great and Voltaire—or in those of Herod and Pontius Pilate. Thus, the two separate and differentiated essays—“About Shamelessness” and “About Voltaire”—have been conveniently and fittingly counterpointed and considered robustly together. May we continue to draw from their fresh and encouraging insights—both vivacious and differentiated—about many matters of moment to man, which are also of importance to the Faith and to the deeper Culture of the Faith. For, as Chesterton had said in 1925 about the “trinity of truths” concerning the Faith: “while it is local [and intimate] enough for poetry, and larger than any other philosophy, it is **a challenge and a fight.**”²

© 2013 Robert D. Hickson

2 G.K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1925), p. 221—my emphasis added.