‘Nearer to the Roots of Things’: 
Nature in the Ideological Imagination of G.K. Chesterton

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the role of nature in the political and historical imagination of writer and Catholic apologist G.K. Chesterton (1874-1936). Chesterton’s attitude towards the natural world, expressed in both his fiction and non-fiction, inflected his thinking about economics, national identity and the role of science and reason in the modern world. This thesis employs the tools of intellectual history to interrogate existing historiography and to explore previously uncharted aspects of Chesterton’s work, in particular, the role of ‘nature’ in his attempted conciliation between free will and determinism. He believed that nature and landscape influenced human character but denied that geography could be wholly determinative, arguing that it was a heresy to cede one’s authority to the ‘laws of nature’. He believed that modern thinkers were particularly susceptible to bowing before nature through the application of nature’s laws to human society. From the style of nationalism that allowed blood to rule destiny to the scientism that established immutable laws to govern human society, everywhere Chesterton looked he saw biology becoming the master of society.

In leveling these accusations he was charging modernity with failing to manifest the principles of the Enlightenment. Chesterton believed that, in seeking to defeat superstition and undermine faith, modern men and women had instead become slaves to new and even less satisfying dogmas, and specifically to the belief that historical progress, evolution or conformity to the laws of nature would lead humanity inevitably to a better future. Chesterton clearly felt that modernity was a failed experiment, but had no patience for common manifestations of counter-modernity that he felt were equally in thrall to dangerous and false beliefs. For Chesterton, as for many others, the modern world was a battleground between the forces of rational thought and illogical
superstition. Despite his commitment to the Catholic Church and his reliance on traditional authority, he claimed for himself a position on the side of reason because he felt he stood against one of the animating superstitions of his time – the overwhelming power of nature. In making this claim for himself he illuminates some of the complexities of counter-modern movements in twentieth-century Britain – movements that require further study.
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Introduction

On 14 June 1936, Gilbert Keith Chesterton died at the age of sixty-two. At the time of his demise, he was a colossal figure in England’s literary and journalistic circles. Posthumously, he has been subjected to curious critical treatment, characterised by an outpouring of hagiography (unceasing in the eighty-or-so years since his death) interspersed with exposés of his anti-Semitism and the occasional passing mention in the academic histories that cover his era. In recent years he has frequently been drafted into ideological debates and mobilised to serve both progressive and conservative causes.

One such cause is environmentalism. Despite expressing only tangential concerns with the specifically environmental issues of his day, Chesterton recently inspired a doctoral thesis on the application of his ‘philosophy of nature’ to ecology, an initiative in which he was posthumously paired with Hannah Arendt.

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2 See for example L. Cunningham on the possibility that Chesterton’s work could be the foundation for a new concern for ecology: ‘Chesterton as Mystic’, *American Benedictine Review*, Vol. 26(1), 1975, pp. 16-24; E. Block Jr on the possibility that Chesterton’s *Orthodoxy* might refute ‘some of the most pernicious claims of late twentieth-century post-modernism’: ‘G.K. Chesterton’s *Orthodoxy* as intellectual biography’, *Renascence*, Vol. 49(1), Fall 1996, p. 41; and J. McNamara and D. O’Keeffe on bringing Chesterton’s insights to bear on some of the ‘wilder’ ideological ‘incantations’ of the twentieth century, such as that ‘all cultures are equal’: ‘Roots of Madness: G.K. Chesterton on the Twentieth Century’, *Encounter*, vol. 71(3), 1988, p. 46.

did not translate to any great degree into involvement on his part in environmental movements. He was only hurriedly and absent-mindedly involved in conservation issues, although on any given question appeared likely to choose preservation over development. Nevertheless, his textual legacy (including over 100 books, countless newspaper articles and a large archive held by the British Library) contains much musing on the proper relationship between humanity and the natural world.

An examination of Chesterton’s writing reveals much new material on his approach to the natural world and its influence on his broader political and philosophical views. This material fills gaps in existing Chesterton critique and also challenges many of its common habits and assumptions. An analysis of some of the key elements of this critique will be included in this study. Mining Chesterton’s work for what might be of use to present-day ecologists could well be a fruitful project for environmental philosophers but in this thesis the more pressing task is to discover his answers to questions posed by the existence of ‘nature’. What dangers face scientists trying to demystify the non-human world? Is a life lived according to nature’s rhythms a more satisfying existence? How are citizens shaped by the particular landscape of their countries? Does nature provide a guide to how people should live their lives? In short, the thesis will examine Chesterton’s writings on nature, the ‘natural’ and the landscape and consider what broader ideological implications arise from these ideas. It will explore how social Darwinist ferocity competed with nostalgic reminiscence, ‘romanticism’ with ‘realism’, and harmony with struggle in Chesterton’s writings on the English countryside.


See, for example, British Library, G.K. Chesterton Papers, Add. MS 73240, Vol. 55, correspondence with Mr. Langley Taylor of the Council for the Preservation of Rural England, 1 July, 1931.
Questioning approaches to ‘nature’ is valuable in part because it makes it possible to inspect the ideological baggage carried by the term. What a person considers to be a ‘natural’ way to behave and how they interact with their environment can provide invaluable insight into their political and religious convictions. This thesis explores how rules and examples from nature can be used to construct a version of reality that is ostensibly fundamental, unarguable and ‘natural’ but which is in fact highly political and constructed. G.K. Chesterton - forthright public intellectual, controversial journalist, Catholic convert and conservative rhetorician of counter-Enlightenment tendencies - is a particularly rewarding subject for such exploration. He is a useful study partly because his work contains so much complicated material on nature, but also because of his place in broader Catholic and British historiography. Despite his influence as a public intellectual in the first decades of twentieth-century Britain, his major biographers have mostly been Catholics and other historians have until recently usually let him be, or referred to him as part of a specifically Catholic (and therefore slightly isolated) tradition in British history. Yet his work contains much interesting material that can shed light on the relationship between nature and landscape, and British counter-modern protest.

Chesterton’s views on nature evoke questions that have not previously been explored in any detail despite the vast amount that has been written about Chesterton. It

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prompts a split from much existing historiography, departing from the various reified incarnations arising from the interpretations of both his detractors and his admirers, and seeking to recover some of the complexity and contradictions found in his work. His ideas about nature establish the outlines of a new Chesterton, who is conflicted about fundamental ideas of free will and determinism. More than once he implied that people are shaped by the landscapes to which they belong, and that nature plays a determining role in the development of the human character. He repudiated, however, the logical implications of this claim, setting out a cosmic hierarchy in which people were separate from, and superior to, the non-human world and calling the idea that humans should ‘follow nature’ or allow themselves to be determined by it a blasphemy and a superstition. The inconsistency in his approach to nature is the foundation of a bigger contradiction in his ideas about modernity.

For Chesterton, ideas of nature were closely related to his consciousness of living in modern times. The years which formed him intellectually and creatively have been described as a time when ‘consciousness of living in a new age, a new material context, and a form of society totally different from anything that had ever gone before was by the turn of the century so widespread as to constitute a genuine and distinctive element in the mental culture of the period.’\(^6\) During this period, ‘in a myriad of mundane but basic ways the regime of nature slackened its hold on human life.’\(^7\) Chesterton, however, believed that, once nature’s bonds were loosened, modern people inexplicably set out reattaching them and creating new theories to support the subordination of society to the natural world.\(^8\) Chesterton’s Britain has also been

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\(^7\) Harris, *Private Lives*, p. 33.
\(^8\) Here, Chesterton has at least some backing from later historians. Harris wrote that ‘precedent declined
described as a society in which ‘rootlessness was endemic.’ It was a time of change and uncertainty. Notions of individualism and collectivism were evolving. The country was centralising. The role of women was changing, and new methods of mass politics were emerging. Chesterton, although as a journalist he benefited significantly from modern forms of technology, communication and mass persuasion, was nonetheless troubled by them and by many reforms that marked his age.

Methodology

This thesis employs the tools of intellectual history to interrogate existing historiography and to explore previously uncharted aspects of Chesterton’s work. Quentin Skinner’s seminal methodological work on the history of ideas is a fruitful approach to help establish Chesterton’s ideological intentions by situating the latter’s utterances in their wider intellectual and political context rather than by using his work in present-day philosophical controversies.

There are many dangers that dance attendance on the history of ideas. It is easy to impose a simplicity and timelessness on Chesterton’s work by smoothing out the
bumps in his ideology until it becomes a one-dimensional ageless wisdom. This thesis will resist the urge to ‘supply or find in [...] texts a coherence which they appear to lack’. In doing so it will depart from much of the existing secondary literature on Chesterton. This work will also seek to avoid the ‘Whiggishness’ that has often accompanied intellectual history, and which plagues discussion about Chesterton. The latter point is particularly important because much of the broader context that shrouds the questions in this study relates to ‘modernity’ and Chesterton’s place within it. If the use of the term modernity itself drags history-writers towards a Whiggish view of history then one must be especially careful to question the dichotomy of ‘progressive’ and ‘reactionary’ and the characterisation of Chesterton as one or the other.

The term ‘modernity’ is a complicated one, but needs a definition for the purposes of this study. The term has been used variously as ‘historical periodisation, as a socio-cultural experience, and as a historical / ideological project’. Defined ideologically, it is closely associated with ideas arising from the Enlightenment including secularism, reason and human ascendancy over nature; socio-economically it is identified with industrialisation and capitalism; and temporally it emerged around the eighteenth century, although some consider the ‘modern’ to have started much earlier. A commonly perceived trait is a self-reflective awareness of historical change, or a

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15 Skinner, ‘Meaning and Understanding’, p. 16.
19 Bell, The Magical Imagination, p. 20.
'conscious[ness] of historicity’. Chesterton used the words ‘modern’ and ‘modernity’ promiscuously, as vague descriptors applied to that which he disliked. Opposition to modernity in the British context is still less clearly defined, since a peculiar duality of thought maintains simultaneously that British history is littered with the corpses of modernity’s *leitmotifs* and at the same time that ‘anti-modernity’ in Britain in the twentieth century is a phenomenon barely worth studying.

This thesis is also broadly informed by the practice of ecocriticism, described recently as the ‘environmental turn in literary studies’. Ecocriticism (or environmental criticism) has been defined broadly by leading practitioner Cheryll Glotfelty as ‘the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment’. Glotfelty dates the development of ‘ecologically informed criticism and theory’ to the 1970s, and the formation of this discourse into an ‘identifiable group’ later than that. Environmental critic Lawrence Buell has pointed out that if environmental criticism is still considered ‘emergent’, its ancestry is lengthy: the ‘idea of nature’ has been ‘a dominant or at least residual concern for literary scholars and intellectual historians ever since these fields came into being.’ Ecocriticism has developed a multiplicity of voices, exploring avenues such as language, representation and the relationship between text and ‘reality’ but remains committed to provoking humanity into a reconsideration of ecologically destructive practices.

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The present work is not concerned with the political objectives of ecocriticism, although the thesis is a study of ideology. What the thesis borrows from ecocriticism are its techniques of critical analysis, its insights into the political meaning of ‘nature writing’ and its problematizing of the relationship between the ‘human’ and the ‘natural’. Like nature itself, ecocriticism means something specific in the British context, where the term ‘wilderness’ has evoked a very different imagery than it might carry in the United States or Australia.

The historical interest in studying the politics of nature arises from the latter’s capacity to illuminate hidden ideology. Taken at his word, Chesterton would be described as a democratic, rational, free-thinking (and certainly not anti-Semitic) individual. Scratching at what he understands to be the natural way of the world, however, one can reveal some of the tensions and contradictions that lay beneath his easy manner and lighthearted prose. He believed in free will - but he believed too that people’s characters and choices were, if not determined, then at least guided by their connection to the land. These beliefs were formed from broader historical currents.

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25 These political objectives are not in any case not uniform across the literature. For some, the ‘ethical politics’ of ecocriticism is one that challenges the ‘dogma that culture will always master nature’, which has ‘long directed Western progress, inspiring the wars, invasions, and other forms of conquest that have crowded the earth and strained its carrying capacity’: W. Howarth, ‘Some Principles of Ecocriticism’, in Glotfelty and H. Fromm (eds), The Ecocriticism Reader, p. 77. See also Greg Garrard on the politics of ecocriticism: Ecocriticism, London, Routledge, 2004.

26 It will be clear throughout that Chesterton’s cloud-gazing (and land-gazing, and tree-gazing...) are manifestations of ideology. Robert Stuart outlines useful requirements for studying history and ideology: ‘a clear definition of ideology as representation of social order; [...] theoretically informed sensitivity to the internal nuances and intricacies of representation - perception of connotation as well as denotation, of silence as well as emphasis, of contradiction as well as coherence; and [...] comprehension of ideologies in their time and place’: Marxism at Work: Ideology, Class and French Socialism during the Third Republic, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992, p. 19.

27 In the British context, ecocriticism has located its roots in the work of Raymond Williams (in particular The Country and the City, Chatto and Windus, London, 1973) and then Jonathan Bate, who offered a ‘green reading’ of William Wordsworth which aimed both to ‘historicis[e] the idea of an ecological viewpoint’ and to offer the poet’s insights to contemporary problem-solving (Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition, Routledge, London, 1991). One critic has described Bate as one who, ‘more than any other literary scholar, [...] has influenced the rise of British ecocriticism’: L. Buell, ‘The Ecocritical Insurgency’, New Literary History, Vol. 30(3), 1999, p. 700.
(such as counter-modern traditions in Britain and the public reception of science) in which Chesterton’s role has not been carefully explored. Approaching him in a manner that uncovers this complexity is more likely to do justice to Chesterton as a historical figure, but also allows for a richer appreciation of the times in which he made his mark by making visible some of the complexities in British conservative and radical right politics.

**Historiography**

The material uncovered by addressing nature and politics in Chesterton’s work challenges some of the major secondary literature on Chesterton. Very few studies have specifically addressed Chesterton’s relationship with nature, although some have discussed it briefly in broader studies. Of the former, the two most relevant studies are a doctoral thesis by Richard Gill, and an article in the *Chesterton Review* by Chesterton Society member and town planner Frank O’Hara.

Richard Gill’s thesis brings together the insights of Hannah Arendt and G.K. Chesterton to demonstrate a form of ecology based on wonder and gratitude. Gill suggests that ‘Chesterton’s own answer to what he believed was the malaise of a secular, industrial, capitalist modernity was, in a sense, a form of political ecology.’ This political ecology was, Gill argues, founded on gratitude and wonder at the world - an ‘existential amazement at the fact of Being’. The philosophy was also founded on an awareness and acceptance of limits, and on valuing difference and separation. This thesis will draw on Gill’s work regarding Chesterton’s ecological imagination, in particular his

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28 Gill, *The wonder of the world*, accessed online on 5 April 2014, no page numbers supplied.
insights about Chesterton’s sense of wonder and perception of magic in nature, but will adopt an historical rather than a philosophical approach. Gill uses Chesterton’s (and Arendt’s) work to propose a way of looking at the world that is relevant to the twenty-first century – a valuable study for environmental philosophy, but not an approach adopted here.

An article by Frank O’Hara published in the *Chesterton Review* in 1990 and titled ‘G.K. Chesterton and the Environmental Ethic’\(^{30}\) remarked on a theme that occupied Gill years later – the way that Chesterton described an ‘experience of astonishment and wonder’ when contemplating nature. Chesterton’s attitude was rooted, according to O’Hara, in a ‘traditional Christian conception of *miracle* [...] an attitude that the world around us is a gift, not capable of human understanding or control, something to be appreciated and respected.’\(^{31}\) The argument that Chesterton’s interaction with nature occurred in a spirit of amazement is a persuasive one, but needs expansion and contextualisation to illuminate its broader political meaning.

Although there is limited material specifically about Chesterton and nature, there is a mountain of more general work on Chesterton. The exploration of Chesterton and nature leads to a substantial departure from much of this material, with a few, usually recent, exceptions. One of the first of these more general works, published while Chesterton was still alive, concluded that he was ‘primarily a propagandist, the preacher of a definite message to his own time’.\(^{32}\) There are two striking things about

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\(^{32}\) Anonymous, *G.K. Chesterton: A Criticism*, A. Rivers, London, 1908. Originally published anonymously, the work was later revealed to be that of Chesterton’s brother Cecil. It was the first book-length study of G.K Chesterton.
this comment. The first is the extent to which Chesterton's political, 'propagandist' thought is considered paramount. The second is the use of the phrase 'his own time'. Chesterton has, since his death, featured in a mass of works of literary criticism, history and biography. In much of this work, he features as a kind of literary fairy, flitting through history dropping epigrams, paradoxes and the occasional eternal truth. Ageless, ahistorical, benevolent and, above all, harmless, with the unsightly stains of anti-Semitism and militarism hastily scrubbed out of his costume, this Chesterton is, in large part, a construction of his largely Catholic defenders.

Conversely, one finds amongst secondary literature another Chesterton. This version of Chesterton was partly born from the backlash against the other. He is portrayed as an anti-Semite, a racist, an unthinking nationalist whose reputation lent weight and respectability to the nascent radical right of Edwardian Britain. The present study, by contrast, does not aim to inflate the 'great man'; neither is its purpose to excoriate him for political and philosophical sins. Chesterton's critics and defenders share a tendency to alienate him from his historical context as well as a failure to engage with the complexities of his thought.

While Chesterton was alive, debate about the 'rightness' of his opinions was robust. Although he developed an enormous literary and journalistic reputation quite early in his career, during his lifetime he was considered a fair target for criticism and writers

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such as his brother Cecil Chesterton could pose the question of whether he was worth listening to at all. Similarly, Julius West in *G.K. Chesterton: A Critical Study*, took Chesterton to task both for his apparent anti-Semitism and for what West saw as his 'patronising' attitude towards working people.\(^\text{36}\) Reviews and criticisms of Chesterton while he was alive usually offered, besides assessments of his literary talent, discussions of the ‘correctness’ of his views on political, religious, and philosophical questions.\(^\text{37}\)

In his day, Chesterton attracted criticism about the adequacy of his responses to the problems of his day. Although sycophantic and laudatory works by friends and contemporaries were published while he was alive,\(^\text{38}\) there was plenty of material that was critical. On Chesterton’s death, the tone of much of the analysis shifted and it became a task of some urgency to construct a memory of him that excluded those aspects of his thought that were not considered worth remembering – including more often than not his political entanglements.\(^\text{39}\) Far from emphasising the importance of ideology and ‘propaganda’, as his brother Cecil had done, the project after Chesterton’s death became to reduce his politics to naïve dabbling\(^\text{40}\) (an excursion in


\(^\text{40}\) See, for example, Las Vergnas, *Chesterton, Belloc, Baring*, pp. 22, 25 and H. Kingsmill, cited in Las Vergnas, *Chesterton, Belloc, Baring*, p. 29. Interestingly, an exception to this trend was one of the last personal reflections on Chesterton – that of his sister-in-law, Ada Chesterton (published as Mrs Cecil Chesterton, *The Chestertons*, Chapman and Hall, London, 1941). Her book, dealing with Cecil as well as Gilbert, was both a reminiscence by one intimately connected to the Chesterton family and a criticism of
to the public sphere for which friend and partner-in-politics Hilaire Belloc was
frequently blamed)\textsuperscript{41} or to let it be forgotten as an ephemeral distraction.\textsuperscript{42}

With the publication of Maisie Ward's biography \textit{Gilbert Keith Chesterton} in 1944, the
phase of Chesterton literature characterised by largely personal reminiscences more or
less came to an end. Since its publication, Ward's biography has maintained almost
unchallenged its place as the 'definitive' work on Chesterton.\textsuperscript{43} No-one writing on him
since that point has been able to proceed without acknowledging their debt to Ward's
detailed and painstaking exposition of his life. Gentle and sympathetic, Ward –
ineffectually – emphasised Chesterton's status as a philosopher and, based on her
conversations with Hilaire Belloc himself, pointed out that any influence between the
two was certainly mutual.\textsuperscript{44} Pre-empting the controversies that were to follow, she
interrogated Chesterton's attitudes towards Jewish people (returning the verdict that
he was not an anti-Semite) and explained his alleged admiration for Mussolini as

\textsuperscript{41} George Bernard Shaw coined the term 'Chesterbelloc' to refer to the relationship between the two,
although he meant to illuminate the incongruity rather than the synchronicity of the beast. Since then,
and to the annoyance of many critics, the term became one referring to the similarity between the two –
with the Chesterbelloc voicing a single opinion, formed by Belloc, on matters of society and ideology.
Many have lamented the malign impact that Belloc had on Chesterton. Margaret Canovan argued that
Chesterton's reverence for the French Revolution was something he 'caught from Hilaire Belloc' –
Belloc's politics being akin to a contagious disease: \textit{G.K. Chesterton, Radical Populist}, Harcourt Brace


\textsuperscript{43} Recently, however, major new biographies have started to emerge: see Ker, \textit{G.K. Chesterton} and
Oddie, \textit{Chesterton and the Romance of Orthodoxy}.

\textsuperscript{44} Ward, \textit{Gilbert Keith Chesterton}, p. 114.
coming from an 'anxiety to be fair to Fascism'. She claims further that 'having given the case for it he went on to give the case against it – a much stronger case than that usually given by its opponents.' In making these arguments, Ward set out the major discussion points for Chesterton scholars that have more or less remained in place to the present day.

Within five years of his death, the major themes and approaches of Chesterton criticism were well entrenched. Although the effusive praise characteristic of personal accounts was to an extent tempered after the end of half a decade of lamentations over his death, to this day Chesterton retains a staunch army of loyalists, who are both profuse and prolific, and who largely fight within the boundaries established by Ward.

In recent years, a spate of books has marked a new approach to Chesterton scholarship. Each has remarked on the failure of past work to take him seriously, and each has sought to redress that failure, depart from previous literature and forge a new style of criticism. Julia Stapleton, in her 2009 book on Chesterton, defines her purpose as being ‘to map [Chesterton’s] place within the cultural and political landscape of Britain during the first four decades of the twentieth century more clearly.

46 Ward, Gilbert Keith Chesterton, p. 492.
47 Exceptions, however, exist. One important exception is John Coates’ Chesterton and the Edwardian Cultural Crisis, Hull University Press, Hull, 1984. Coates’ intention was to ‘restore some of the partially lost cultural context’, and he gives a thorough analysis of Chesterton’s world, examining cultural and artistic currents such as impressionism, the impact of Nietzsche and Tolstoy, and the rise of evolutionary theory, all of which contributed to his general sense of ‘cultural crisis’.
than in the existing literature on Chesterton'. Stapleton connects the three key themes of Christianity, patriotism and nationhood in Chesterton’s work.

William Oddie also focuses clearly on the significance of Chesterton’s faith. In his 2008 work, *Chesterton and the Romance of Orthodoxy*, Oddie provides a detailed and focussed study of Chesterton's intellectual development, up to the publication of *Orthodoxy* in 1908. From the outset, Oddie is critical of much of the existing Chesterton scholarship, stating that 'with one exception, [Maisie Ward's biography] I have found existing biographies of little help in my own study'. Oddie, like Stapleton, is critical of the manner in which others have alienated Chesterton from his cultural, political and religious context. However, unlike Stapleton, Oddie is more interested in examining the religious than any other context, at times to the detriment of his treatment of Chesterton’s overall intellectual development. In connecting Chesterton to his religious context – examining the influence of figures like Bishop of Birmingham Charles Gore, Catholic convert Conrad Noel and Catholic modernist George Tyrrell, and the role of the debate over theological modernism in the Catholic Church - Oddie provides a useful reminder that Chesterton, often seen as being solely reactive against the dominant cultural themes of his time, also on occasion gave 'positive' responses to his more reform-minded contemporaries.

Oddie's chief argument is that by the time Chesterton published *Orthodoxy*, his mind was more or less made up on key issues. Oddie demonstrates that Chesterton's ideas

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48 Stapleton, *Christianity, Patriotism, and Nationhood*. A much weaker attempt to reassess Chesterton’s worth is Joseph Mc Cleary's *The Historical Imagination of G.K. Chesterton*, Routledge, New York, 2009, which will be discussed in more detail in a later chapter.

49 Oddie, *Chesterton and the Romance of Orthodoxy*, p. 11.

50 Oddie, *Chesterton and the Romance of Orthodoxy*, pp. 96, 296.

51 Oddie, *Chesterton and the Romance of Orthodoxy*, p. 7.
were far less dependent on the influence of Belloc than previously believed, arguing convincingly that Chesterton’s views in many important respects were formed before the two met.\textsuperscript{52} Indeed Oddie consistently makes a case for the basic philosophical continuity of Chesterton’s thought from a very young age, at times to the detriment of an examination of the complexities and contradictions in Chesterton’s thought. For example, Oddie holds that Chesterton was consistently disgusted by anti-Semitism, and somewhat naively professes surprise at writers who have claimed that Chesterton was prejudiced.

The most recent major biography of Chesterton is Ian Ker’s \textit{G.K. Chesterton: A Biography}. He argues that Chesterton is a much ‘bigger’ figure than his treatment by the academic world implies and that he should be considered as a natural heir to Cardinal Newman. Ker’s Chesterton is a brave and independent figure, a singular voice calling out against the ‘evil nonsense’ of his time, and battling ‘almost alone in defence of the common man and against the intellectuals’.\textsuperscript{53}

While this thesis sits apart from some of the main historiographical debates concerning Chesterton, its task is made easier by these attempts to establish Chesterton as a legitimate topic of historical study. This thesis attempts to move beyond Chesterton’s personality (and arguments about the true size of the ‘big man’) and seek insight from his context and his relationship with his time.

\textbf{Structure}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{52} Oddie, \textit{Chesterton and the Romance of Orthodoxy}, pp. 184-5.
\item \textsuperscript{53} Ker, \textit{Gilbert Keith Chesterton}, p. 92.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
This thesis is arranged thematically rather than chronologically and does not repeat the detailed narratives of Chesterton’s life that have been offered by his biographers. The first chapter will situate the study in the context of modern attitudes to nature. It will describe how ideology lurks in seemingly apolitical descriptions of the natural world and our relationship to it, and the different political possibilities that arise from attempts to overcome the sense of separation and dislocation that have arisen in post-Enlightenment relationships with the non-human world.

Chapter two addresses nature and the scientific project in Chesterton’s world. Chesterton refused to accept that the march of science could (or should) penetrate the secrets of nature. According to Chesterton, this barrier to complete understanding was caused in part by scientists’ obstinate privileging of the material over the spiritual and their denial of the miraculous. In Chesterton’s mind, their wilful refusal to see what was in front of their noses prevented scientists from comprehending a crucial part of human interaction with nature – mystery. He also worried about the use of science to direct society, in particular the fashion for using the ‘laws of nature’ as a guide for human morality. He viewed these trends not as evidence of Enlightenment ‘progress’ but as a regression to barbarism, and opposed them because he believed that scientists (a category of person that he failed to treat with much subtlety) sought to abdicate the human will and intellect to some spurious interpretation of nature.

Chesterton believed that scientific theories inhibited the full realisation of human potential and responsibility. His critique of the scientific disenchantment of nature was a lament for mystery and magic. Despite its frequently lighthearted and frivolous tone, it was also a serious challenge to the prejudices and class politics that frequently
informed efforts to improve the human race in accordance with ideas of natural selection or evolution. Chesterton tested a kind of materialist supernaturalism, an idea that he could retain a sense that nature was magic but without abandoning a commitment to the importance of material truths observed in the world around him. The result was a difficult compromise between infinite possibility and grounded determinism, where human agency could operate freely unbounded by natural so-called ‘laws’ but within boundaries established by nature, ultimately delimiting the possibilities of the world.

Chapter three discusses the approach to nature propounded in Chesterton’s Distributist philosophy. Distributism was an interwar political movement spearheaded by Chesterton – one of a range of ‘back to the land’ movements of the time. Drawing on principles of ‘small capitalism’, in which property and wealth would be distributed to the largest possible number of people, Chesterton proposed a life that was rooted in place and in touch with the cycles of nature. This approach was sometimes described with a sneer as ‘muck and mysticism’, but Chesterton believed that under these conditions humanity could flourish, and he picked up some disciples on the strength of his shrewd expositions of the weak points of the modern economy, picking at the broken promises and unfulfilled expectations of industrial capitalism. He called on people to return to the land, but did not advocate a ‘back to nature’ philosophy as strict as that of some of his colleagues, such as Arthur Penty or Father Vincent McNabb (who both opposed the use of machines).

Chesterton believed that although material conditions mattered, people had the spirit to build attachments to local places in the city as well as in the country, and in built
landscapes as well as in ‘natural’ ones. Although he wanted fewer machines he felt that it was really the collective psyche that needed to change rather than the accessories of modernity. He did think that the structures of the modern economy made it difficult to access a life close to nature, and wavered on the question of how much a person’s will and spirit could really be bent by these material circumstances.

The fourth chapter examines the impact on Chesterton’s politics of the idea that nations and citizens were shaped by their landscapes. Prior to the Great War, Chesterton was resisting the fashion for organic and biological metaphors of the state, arguing that transforming people into a sort of natural organism occluded the role of spirit and will in the formation of political units. By the interwar period, he was increasingly concerned about cosmopolitanism and foreign elements (both ideologies and people) in Britain, and was taking an interest in the rise of fascism in Italy (although by contrast he was never attracted to Nazism). Throughout his career, he held to his sense that the English landscape was crucial to constructing an ideological defence against some of these alien elements. The nation itself, however, could not rely solely on geographic embeddedness and had ultimately to be constituted through the human will. His writings on authenticity and attachment to the soil are evocative of the radical right, and yet Chesterton attained the first half of the ‘blood and soil’ equation that characterised this group only intermittently, being loath to fully commit to the idea that blood was determinative.\(^{54}\) The result was an approach to nature and nation that rested simultaneously on geographical determinism and a reinforcement of the importance of free will, in which people were partly free agents and partly at the mercy of their geographical circumstances.

\(^{54}\) See discussion in Chapter Four.
The fifth chapter investigates how Chesterton based his historical imagination on ideas about nature. He believed that medieval citizens had a balanced approach to nature, which involved respecting it but not subordinating themselves to it. Medieval life was attuned to nature and its institutions were shaped by it, but at the same time people still took their ordained place as the masters of nature and its creatures. It is not clear from Chesterton’s work how this compromise operated in practice, and where the balance between volition and submission lay. Nevertheless, he thought that the balance that he saw in the Middle Ages was disrupted by the Reformation and the Industrial Revolution, events which led the world off its proper path. Instead of staying rooted in tradition and historical structures, people destroyed them with an over-zealous enthusiasm for reason.

Chesterton believed that twentieth century ideologues frequently failed to honour Enlightenment values of autonomy, reason and freedom by handing power over the direction of human society to ‘nature’. He believed that modernity had betrayed the Enlightenment project because nature had triumphed over the human will. In the practice of science, for example, he saw a society that seemed willing to cede its decision-making function to a notion of the laws of nature. On the other hand, he diagnosed much the same error in some of the common counter-modern tendencies of his time, such as attempts to ‘live naturally’ by repudiating all the trappings of the modern world and the propensity to mysticism and a belief in ghosts, spirits and fairies in the garden. Attempts to live in accordance with nature (such as Arthur Penty’s, his colleague in Distributism) were in fact deeply ‘unnatural’, since humanity’s natural place in the world was at the top of the hierarchy and cultural behaviour was natural
to human societies. The humane governance of nature, and the manipulation and
husbandry of the landscape was in itself the ‘natural’ role of humans. He attempted to
craft a third way through modernity, in which people were separate from, but still
embedded within, nature. Similarly, one had to exercise reason and one’s
independence from nature but within certain limits - an alternative that was both a
challenge to, and accommodation of, modernity.

This thesis argues that Chesterton’s approach to nature was an attempt at a
conciliation between free will and determinism. He often argued that humans were
shaped by their landscapes and that nature played a determining role in the
development of human character. On the other hand he explicitly repudiated the
logical conclusion of this argument, claiming that it would be a superstition and an
abdication of responsibility to allow nature to control people. In levelling this
accusation, he charged his contemporaries with succumbing to the darkness that the
Enlightenment project aimed to defeat. In particular, the emancipation promised by
the pursuit of reason had become instead enslavement to new and less satisfying
dogmas - and most especially to the idea of following nature. He condemned the
privilege accorded to science, progress and secularism because in his view these
emblems of modernity were the ultimate superstitions of his age, whose common
motif was privileging nature as a force in life. From the style of nationalism that
allowed blood to rule destiny to the scientism that established immutable laws to
govern human society, everywhere Chesterton looked he saw biology becoming the
master of society. For Chesterton, as for many others, the modern world was a
battleground between the forces of rational thought and illogical superstition. Despite
his commitment to the Catholic Church and his reliance on traditional authority, he
claimed for himself a position on the side of reason. His manner of shielding himself from the errors of modernity, however, was by constructing a wall of dogma within which his reason was free to play like a child.55

55 Chesterton wrote a story about how children on a hill could play happily when surrounded by walls to prevent them from falling from the high place. Take the walls away and they huddle in the centre, too frightened to run around. Similarly, free thought could apparently operate happily within the bounds of dogma, without which it became disoriented and disconnected: Orthodoxy, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1986 (first published 1908), pp. 248-9.
Chapter One
Key Concepts and Historiography

G.K. Chesterton had a vivid imagination when it came to the non-human. He penned evocative descriptions of the landscape that indicated a great attachment to the scenery of his home country. This dimension of Chesterton’s writing is heavily ideological: the rolling hills and quiet hamlets of his England cast their shadows over his historical, political and economic outlook.

Studying the politics of nature including what societies consider ‘natural’ and ‘unnatural’ can help to penetrate these shadows by yielding insights into aspects of ideology so deeply embedded in a community’s ‘common sense’ that they may not even be recognised as political. Similarly, attempts to reconnect with nature after the dislocations associated with the advent of modernity have also been steeped in ideology, both left and right. Within the right, there have been both conservative and revolutionary approaches to nature, with Chesterton at different times in his career having a foot in each camp. There are a range of questions to ask about politics and nature in Chesterton’s writing, which necessitate first establishing what the idea of nature meant in the time and place in which Chesterton worked.

Exploring ideas of ‘nature’ is a complex and difficult task since, as environmental theorist Kate Soper has pointed out, it is near-impossible to define the empirical reality of nature without becoming involved in the complex ideological and theoretical assumptions that mediate its ‘reality’. Nature, as Soper argues, carries ‘an immensely complex and contradictory symbolic load; it is the subject of very contrary ideologies;
and it has been represented in an enormous variety of ways.\textsuperscript{56} While noting the
difficulties of the term, Soper offers a definition of nature in its most common usage as
‘everything which is not human and distinguished from the work of humanity’,\textsuperscript{57} and as
referring to the uncultivated, ‘wild’, landscape.

This basic definition of nature establishes at the outset a set of dichotomies that need
further consideration. Is there now any space on earth that could be considered
‘uncultivated’, or unaffected by humanity? Do the products of human ‘culture’ share
no characteristics with plants and animals? Is the work of humanity always separate
from the ‘natural’ world? The nature / culture dichotomy also creates difficulties, such
as that posed by agricultural landscapes, inhabited by non-human plants and animals
but nonetheless established by humans in accordance with processes that are deeply
cultural and constructed. This study will be alive to these questions, and to the
sometimes surprising challenges that Chesterton’s work offers to Soper’s definition of
nature.

Notwithstanding the difficulties of pinning nature’s clouds to the wall, investigations of
ideas and ideologies about the non-human world are important for the illumination
they can shed on the unspoken ontological and cultural assumptions carried within any
society. A person’s musings on the natural world, for example, can provide insight into
their understanding of human culture, the existence or otherwise of human nature,
and the roles of nature versus culture in the development of human individuals.\textsuperscript{58}

\textsuperscript{57} Soper, \textit{What is Nature?}, p. 15.
\textsuperscript{58} Soper, \textit{What is Nature?}, p. 2.
Broader societal ‘givens’ relating to nature can, in turn, enhance understanding of intellectual and ideological movements at different points in history.

Since writing about nature in post-Enlightenment times is substantively different to writing about nature in other periods, it is important to define what nature ‘means’ in the modern world that Chesterton (sometimes reluctantly) inhabited. In 1945, English philosopher and historian R.G. Collingwood produced one of the early major works on the evolution of ‘the idea of nature’ towards modern times, starting with the ancient Greeks. Collingwood identified three main periods of Western thought regarding nature. The Greek period was characterised by an understanding of the natural world as a living organism or rational animal. ‘Renaissance’ cosmology on the other hand was characterised by a denial that the world of nature is an organism: it was conceived rather as a machine, governed by ‘laws of nature’. These laws were believed to be imposed by an intelligent being, but did not indicate the presence of intelligence within nature itself. Lastly, Collingwood argued that the modern period involved a conception of nature as progressive rather than cyclical, and as biological rather than mechanical. According to the historiography of ideas of nature, the scientific revolution is commonly understood to have brought forth a ‘mechanistic’

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60 Collingwood, *The Idea of Nature*, p. 3.
61 It is important to clarify Collingwood’s understanding of the term ‘Renaissance’, which he associates with the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Other writers have referred to this period as characterised by a cosmology developed by the Scientific Revolution, rather than by the Renaissance. Collingwood acknowledges that ‘the name [Renaissance] is not a good one, because the word “Renaissance” is applied to an earlier phase in the history of thought … the cosmology I have now to describe might … be more accurately called “post-Renaissance”; but this is a clumsy term” (p. 4).
62 Collingwood, *The Idea of Nature*, pp. 13-14. Collingwood’s characterisation of the modern view of nature was less precise than his sections on Greek and Renaissance cosmology, partly because at the time of his writing ‘the movement is still young and has not yet had the time to ripen its ideas for systematic statement’ (p. 9). His account of Greek and Renaissance views of nature has, however, remained important and *The Idea of Nature* was still recommended as a ‘concise, philosophical treatment of the idea of nature’ by Neil Evernden, a writer in the field of environmental studies, in 1992 (N. Evernden, *The Social Creation of Nature*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1992, p. 168).
understanding of nature typified by Francis Bacon and René Descartes. Clarence Glacken in his mammoth and oft-quoted Traces on the Rhodian Shore wrote that this movement represented a ‘growing optimism throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that man’s accumulating knowledge was increasing his control over nature’. The Enlightenment brought more sophisticated scientific methodologies to consolidate this power over nature. Chesterton, however, believed that after the Enlightenment people had actually lost rather than gained control over nature.

With the increasing power of Enlightenment ecology came the development of significant counter-ideologies. As part of the response to the Enlightenment’s mechanisation of the world, counter-Enlightenment movements developed alternative perspectives on the non-human realm. This was achieved through the ‘valorisation of the natural and animal world, [expressing] dissent from the standard Enlightenment conceptions of the natural and animal world as a lower order to be exploited in the

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63 C. Glacken, Traces on the Rhodian Shore, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1962, p. 471. Similarly, David Pepper has described Bacon as the ‘first figure in the scientific revolution to draw out the full implications [...] of the “new science” [...]’. It was Bacon who asserted the creed that scientific knowledge equals power over nature: The Roots of Modern Environmentalism, Croom Helm, London, 1984, p. 54. Italics in original.

64 Donald Worster, in Nature’s Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas, describes an ‘imperial’ view of nature, characterised by naturalist Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778) and his followers aiming to ‘establish, through the exercise of reason and by hard work, man’s dominion over nature’: D. Worster, Nature’s Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1977, p. 2. Worster argued that there were two main attitudes toward nature in the Enlightenment: the ‘arcadian’ and the ‘imperial’. The ‘arcadian’ view ‘advocated a simple, humble life for man with the aim of restoring him to a peaceful co-existence with other organisms’ (p. 2). Max Oelschlaeger followed this distinction in his work and argued that both perspectives were undermined by the publication of Charles Darwin’s The Origin of Species (1859) and George Marsh’s Man and Nature: or, Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action (1863). These texts dismantled, according to Oelschlaeger, ‘the idea of a pre-established harmony between humankind and the natural world’ and rendered untenable the notion of God’s handcrafted earth: The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1993, p. 106.
interests of humanity and attempting to curb some of the excesses of that era. For the Romantics, nature represented a rejection of the abstract in favour of the concrete and provided an alternative to the alienation of human relationships, the mechanismisation of the world and absolute rationality. Symbols of nature were mobilised in a generalised, and ideological, critique of modernity.

There is a strand of contemporary environmentalism that argues that, in the modern world, the value of nature has been irreparably undermined with dire consequences for the human life that depends on it. John Meyer, a theorist of environmental politics, has noted that some writers believe that modernity heralded the separation of humanity from nature in a way that has had profound and damaging effects on both people and nature. As part of the ‘disenchantment’ of the modern world of which Weber wrote, nature lost its magic to an onslaught of scientific discovery and categorisation. Chesterton believed the reverse. He argued that modernity was, far from being disenchanted, a deeply superstitious time. Although he also relied on...

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66 T. Walsh, ‘Enlightenment, Counter-Enlightenment and Beyond’, International Social Science Review, Vol. 68(2), Spring 1993, pp. 60-71. Developing in the late eighteenth century, the Romantic movement in particular valorised the ‘wild’ world. Roderick Nash sums up the Romantic view of nature as follows: ‘In regard to nature Romantics preferred the wild. Rejecting the meticulously ordered gardens at Versailles, so attractive to the Enlightenment mind, they turned to the unkempt forest. Wilderness appealed to those bored or disgusted with man and his world. It not only offered an escape from society but was also an ideal stage for the Romantic individual to exercise the cult that he frequently made of his own soul’: Wilderness and the American Mind, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2001 (first published 1967), p. 47. Max Oelschlaeger has pointed out that Romanticism had social as well as aesthetic connotations. Noting Roderick Nash’s contention that, paradoxically, Romanticism developed in the cities, Oelschlaeger wrote that ‘Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s concept of the natural man was grounded in his observation of the social conditions in which most of humanity lived’: Oelschlaeger, Idea of Wilderness, p. 110.
68 This argument will be discussed in more detail in the sixth chapter of this thesis. Chesterton has had recent support for his belief that modernity is a superstitious time. See, for example, Patrick Curry’s article on magic and enchantment, in which he argues that modernity is an age very much subject to enchantment: ‘Magic vs. Enchantment’, Journal of Contemporary Religion, Vol. 14(3), 1999, pp. 401-12.
nature to re-mystify his disenchanted world, he alleged that ‘moderns’ themselves were thoroughly enchanted by, and indeed in thrall to, nature.

These modern times produced, as well as disenchantment, an awareness of the environment as a realm that needed protection through political means. The Industrial Revolution and its accompanying urbanisation of English society increased a sense of rural ‘nostalgia’ and a fear of the loss of the countryside landscapes that previously had been a constant part of English life. Some historians have located the origin of the ‘countryside ideal’ in the Industrial Revolution. Others have remarked that rural nostalgia has existed for as long as the English landscape has been considered under threat – in other words, for centuries. Nevertheless, the 1880s (when Chesterton was a mere child, although already writing) is usually cited as the starting point for the form of environmental consciousness that prompted political action to protect cherished landscapes.

Chesterton’s vision of the English landscape was guided by many influences, many of which seem to have been tugging him away from the modern world. He was labelled,

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In both Chesterton’s and Curry’s argument, the purported rationality of the modern age is a facade, screening a deep reliance on myth-making and magic.

71 Philip Lowe and Jane Goyder describe three waves of the British environmental movement - the 1880s to 1890s, the interwar years, and the late 1950s to early 1960s: P. Lowe and J. Goyder, Environmental Groups in Politics, Allen & Unwin, London, 1983. Similarly, Anna Bramwell in Ecology in the Twentieth Century: A History, cited the 1880s as the starting point for the ecological movement, with roots in the change from mechanist to vitalist thought that was occurring around that time: A. Bramwell, Ecology in the Twentieth Century: A History, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1989, p. 14. As arguments for environmental protection became more widespread, their scientific and philosophical basis became more sophisticated. From the end of the nineteenth century, the field of natural history evolved into the study of systems, communities and processes that is known now as ecology. The term ‘ecosystem’ itself was refined in 1935 by English botanist Arthur Tansley to refer to ‘populations of both plants and animals together with a number of abiotic materials which are cycled through the system’: A. Tansley, Introduction to Plant Ecology, Allen and Unwin, London, 1935, cited in A. Brennan, Thinking About Nature, Routledge, London, 1988, p. 48.
for example, a twentieth-century romantic.\textsuperscript{72} He was considered by some a descendant of those who were uneasy about the changes in the economy and landscape arising from the Industrial Revolution, of which one evident manifestation was the flow of people from rural to urban areas. In a study of the roots of Green politics, Peter Gould noted that ‘in the rapidly industrialising Britain of the late eighteenth century many exhorted the re-establishment of the physical and spiritual links that had once existed between Nature and society. Romantic poets wrote of the indissoluble and desirable unity between Nature and mankind’.\textsuperscript{73} The extent to which these ‘physical and spiritual links’ existed outside the imaginations of urban-dwellers is a matter for debate, but nevertheless this land-humanity connection is fundamental to many expressions of English national identity, and the process of industrialisation no doubt generated a distinct sense of discomfort amongst segments of the English population.

In part, this anxiety about industrialisation and also the implications of the Scientific Revolution was reflected in the rise of Romanticism, both in England and overseas. Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s ‘State of Nature’ from his 1755 Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality came to epitomise the Romantic movement’s use of a myth of the ‘natural’ to advance a political critique of rational and industrial society, nostalgically reminiscent of an idyllic ‘human existence in harmony with the natural world’.\textsuperscript{74} In the English manifestation of romanticism, ‘Romantic poets were to suggest

that scientific investigation of Nature was divesting her of mystery and making men presumptuous and arrogant’.75

Chesterton’s classification as a Romantic arose from his apparent repudiation of modern living, and has lent weight to the impression that he was part of a revolt against modernity. Substantive works on Chesterton’s nationalism, including Julia Stapleton’s Christianity, Patriotism and Nationhood and Joseph McCleary’s The Historical Imagination of G.K. Chesterton, have largely concurred with the view that the local and organic community was the fundamental building block of Chesterton’s nationalism.76 In Stapleton’s analysis - more sophisticated than McCleary’s - the ‘collective will’ that Chesterton envisaged as underwriting the nation was a descendant of Rousseau, although developed in a slightly different direction. Instead of being rooted in a ‘return to nature’, community was framed by ‘archaic structures of nationhood - a reflection of the “supernatural” in the “natural” that constituted the missing link of Rousseau’s theory and offered greater safeguards of personal freedom than contract.’77 Stapleton likened this ‘organic approach to the community’ to that of Idealists inspired by T.H. Green.78

In the inter-war period when Chesterton was very energetically involved in politics, the suspicion of industrialisation persisted. In particular, parts of the rural southern landscape (excluding London), mythologised and eulogised by rural writers such as H.J.

75 Gould, Early Green Politics, p. 3.
76 McCleary put it that ‘the interlocking themes of locality, patriotism, and nationalism constituted the essential elements of the philosophy of history that informed much of G.K. Chesterton’s critical and literary work. Patriotism and nationalism can be distinguished as twin outgrowths of locality’: The Historical Imagination of G.K. Chesterton: Locality, Patriotism, and Nationalism, Routledge, New York, 2009, p. 1.
78 Stapleton, Christianity, Patriotism and Nationhood, p. 118.
Massingham, constituted an ideal type. According to Catherine Brace, the Cotswolds, for example, were constructed through non-fictional rural writing and travel books as being a ‘more authentic version of England; one unsullied by industrialisation, urbanisation and twentieth-century progress’. In the inter-war period, argues Simon Miller, the ‘dominant discourse of English ruralism ... established an icon of the countryside as a natural landscape in which agricultural production was at best incidental and at worst antagonistic’. D.N. Jeans has confirmed that this interwar rural idyll was indeed an ‘illusion, ignoring endemic change, the sale of large estates, the rise of owner-occupiers, the agricultural depression, and the outmigration of rural workers’. Writing about ‘English culture and the Romantic Countryside’, Amanda Gilroy discussed inter-war campaigns to protect rural walking paths used by tourists and ‘ramblers’. She noted that

If farming is central to English cultural identity, it is nevertheless striking that while farmers, and all around them, were losing their livelihoods, it was the closure of rural footpaths that riveted the national imagination, they became “zones of reproach”. The “recovery of the countryside” primarily connoted a metropolitan perspective which was concerned with the access of non-rural inhabitants to the countryside, a view that was often in tension with that of agricultural workers.

It is not surprising that he mythologisation of the countryside, a pastime which Chesterton frequently indulged in, persisted throughout times of great upheaval in rural landscapes. Martin Wiener famously argued that ‘in the world’s first industrialised nation, industrialism did not seem quite at home’. He traced the roots

of this unease to a process whereby ‘In Britain ... the transition to modernity was relatively smooth and involved no political upheaval. However, that very mildness ... fostered a self-limiting element in Britain’s development’.\(^85\) The indigeneity of industrialisation in Britain, Wiener argued, meant that it was ‘more easily accommodated to existing social structures’ and therefore these structures did not need to make radical adjustments.\(^86\) Wiener responded to the historical problem of England’s ‘economic decline’ by pointing to the influence of English elites on public opinion, with the ruling classes disinclined to disturb the ‘natural’ order by embracing industrialisation.\(^87\) In Wiener’s view, mistrust of industrialisation has had a largely negative impact, retarding the growth of the English economy. Wiener’s narrative of economic decline, written in 1980, and his search for explanations for this English ‘failure’ has been criticised as being produced with a view to a ‘Thatcherite economic and cultural programme’.\(^88\)

Wiener’s case rested on the idea that by and large the English have been, since the birth of the Industrial Revolution, nostalgic for an agrarian past. Indeed, it is easy to criticise the totality of English rural writers for their essentially romantic, uncritical view of English nature and English history. Historians such as David Matless, however, have pointed to the complexity of rural myth-making. Matless has claimed that there is ‘a tendency to lump all cultural expressions of ruralism together as representing a simple, nostalgic and conservative longing for a “rural idyll”.’ He continued that ‘while there are undoubtedly a range of cultural phenomena which warrant this label, I am

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suspicious of its value as an analytical category.89 Indeed, in some ways, the
pervasiveness of rural myths and their analysis has obscured the varying meanings
lurking behind seemingly politically innocent rural homilies. David Lowenthal claims
that

Harping on the quaint and exotic, nostalgia exaggerates discontinuities with the
past and scants its living persistence. Detractors assail it for these misreading.
But it is wrong to imagine that there exists some non-nostalgic reading of the
past that is by contrast “honest” or authentically “true”.90

Too great a focus on the nostalgia of much nature writing can obscure the pragmatic
and realistic solutions often proposed by writers and the fairly unromantic view that
those such as Chesterton took of nature, and the connection between ‘anti-modernity’
and concern for the land has been challenged.91 Cultural historian Peter Mandler has
challenged the overwhelming bulk of writing that has assumed that the English have a
romantic and nostalgic attitude towards nature. In 1992 he wrote that between the
wars England became ‘a kind of “post-urban” culture, but not in the backward-looking
way so often assumed and [one that was] less tempted by true rural nostalgia than
other European cultures.’92 Mandler did not seek to deny the existence of the ‘rural-
nostalgic’ vision of the countryside between the wars: he believed on the contrary that
it existed, but was less dominant than the rural imagery propagated by those classes
that ‘conformed with or facilitated rapid urbanisation, the collapse of the countryside

89 Matless, Landscape and Englishness, pp. 16-7.
91 Paul Readman, for example, has argued that ‘patriotic concern for land and landscape ... was not suffused with antipathy for modernity, as Wiener and those influenced by him have suggested; rather it represented a desire to come to terms with the rapid pace of social and economic change by maintaining a sense of continuity with the English past, so preserving a durable sense of national belonging’: Land and Nation in England: Patriotism, National Identity, and the Politics of Land, 1880-1914, The Boydell Press, Suffolk, 2008, pp. 2-3.
and the commercialisation of the culture.\textsuperscript{93} In other words, there was a ‘nostalgic’ and a ‘non-nostalgic’ way of looking at the countryside; and the more dominant and important was the latter.

Historian of conservation David Evans argued that ‘only in the last forty years have scientific arguments lent their support to nature conservation’.\textsuperscript{94} In fact, scientific, or at least pseudo-scientific, theories were present in English analyses of nature preservation since at least the late Victorian period, especially in the growing area of ‘scientific’ race theories. Environmental historian Alun Howkins identified the late 1870s through to the early 1900s as a moment in which ‘a group of factors came together which created a new image both of urban and rural England’.\textsuperscript{95} He pointed to a ‘growing belief in an industrial, urban and racial crisis’ which ‘led to a search for alternatives to the apparently unbreakable cycle of urban poverty.’\textsuperscript{96} As the twentieth century dawned, urban problems were increasingly perceived as a result of race degeneration, arising from the ‘rise in pessimistic theories, theories of social decline, of degeneration, of the survival of the unfittest’.\textsuperscript{97} Alun Howkins wrote that the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was also a time when ‘a strain emerged within English politics and ideas ... which linked the rural to a general crisis in urban society’.

Howkins continued that

This [trend] in turn produced a cultural response from the 1890s and 1900s which, by 1914, had spread far across English art and letters, music and architecture, producing a ruralist version of a specifically English culture.\textsuperscript{98}

\textsuperscript{93} Mandler, ‘Against Englishness’, p. 164.
\textsuperscript{96} Howkins, ‘Discovery of Rural England’, p. 67.
\textsuperscript{98} Howkins, ‘Discovery of Rural England’, p. 63.
Towards the end of the Victorian era, solutions to this crisis emerged in more scientific terms. Howkins, drawing parallels between the late Victorians’ vision of their own culture and the narrative of decline produced by Edward Gibbon in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, pointed out that ‘Gibbon, of course, had no “scientific” racial theory but the late Victorians did. Thus Gibbon’s notion of decay within “the vitals of the Empire” producing a “puny breed” found echoes in eugenics and corrupt forms of Darwinism.’

Environmentalism in the latter half of the twentieth century was still connected to broader social and political criticism, again with profound implications for the manner in which the concept of ‘nature’ is historically understood and critiqued. As part of this process, the political implications of different cosmologies have been more carefully examined, a critical exercise which has been applied in hindsight to earlier historical moments. In 1973, Marxist cultural theorist Raymond Williams wrote *The Country and the City*, exploring the myths and meanings of human attitudes towards nature. Williams historicized the myths of the countryside, pointing out that scepticism was needed in the face of ‘sentimentalised and unintellectualised accounts of an unlocalised “Old England”’. He traced the ways in which romanticised versions of an agrarian past tended to be ahistorical, inventing utopian landscapes without regard to historical reality. He noted a series of books which, like Chesterton’s *A Short History of England*, lamented the loss of the ‘organic community’ – a community, it seemed, which had always ‘just’ been lost, a product of unsettling contemporary developments.

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100 For example, theorists such as André Gorz have argued for the incorporation of ecologism into a broader political framework: A. Gorz, *Ecology as Politics*, Pluto, London, 1983.
102 Chesterton, *Short History of England*.
which led one to look for safety ‘just back, we can see, over the last hill’. Chesterton was not alone in lamenting the loss of the living community rooted in place and its replacement with an atomised and alienated body of individuals.

Throughout the evolving phases of Western understandings of the non-human world, the impact of nature’s appropriation as a discursive tool has been profound. The nature / culture divide has been used in the public sphere to defend particular mechanisms of authority, truth and objectivity. Within the moral domain, debates over whether humans ‘ought’ to follow nature have proliferated, and within the spheres of morality and aesthetics conformity to what is ‘natural’ has long been a popular principle. Linking apparently neutral or aesthetic values to their ideological contexts can illuminate the underlying political ideas that support the construction of particular images of nature. Contra historian Anna Bramwell’s controversial statement in 1989 that ‘those who want to reform society according to nature are neither left nor right but ecologically-minded’, to be ecologically-minded is emphatically to be ideologically-minded - although the particular hue of that ideology is variable. As Bramwell herself implicitly acknowledges, to ‘reform society according to nature’ is a...

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103 Williams, The Country and the City, p. 9. In the latter half of the twentieth century, other political ecologists, philosophers and feminists have explored the ideological meanings of myths of nature and rural simplicity. Eco-feminist Carolyn Merchant, for example, lamented the loss of the ‘organic’ world and its replacement with a ‘mechanistic’ one, and blamed Francis Bacon for that cosmology which, far from being politically innocent, was responsible for the subjugation and exploitation of both women and nature (see her much-quoted book The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution, Harper & Row, San Francisco, 1979). Eco-feminists and environmental philosophers have begun to deconstruct what is seen as a value-laden system of dualisms, which assigns complex ideas to either the ‘natural’ or ‘civilised’ world, and in doing so helps to maintain hierarchical structures. Others have begun to deconstruct the Western view of nature, examining its effects on humanity’s treatment of the non-human world: see, for example, M. Northcott, The Environment and Christian Ethics, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996; and J. Passmore, Man’s Responsibility for Nature: Ecological Problems and Western Traditions, Scribner, New York, 1974.

104 As an example, Ylva Uggla discusses the nature / culture divide in the context of environmental protection and argues that, while ‘protecting the natural may seem neutral or congenial, it is complex and deeply value-laden’: ‘What is this thing called “natural”? The nature-culture divide in climate change and biodiversity policy’, Journal of Political Ecology, Vol. 17, 2010, p. 79.

phrase bearing more than its capacity in ideological implications. These consequences are in turn radically different depending on one’s perspective on the application of nature’s prescriptions to the human world.

Frank Uekoetter drew attention to the varying understandings of the natural world when he argued that the ‘Nature’ relied on by Hitler to support his racial programmes was ‘completely different from the one that the conservationists were seeking to protect’. 106 Chesterton himself was of the view that to reform society according to nature was indeed a political project, and one which he explicitly and vehemently disavowed. 107 Despite his protestations, however, Chesterton’s relationship with the non-human world relied on an implicit acceptance that some ways of life were ‘natural’ and to be encouraged, while others would simply never strike root in the rich soil of England. Chesterton, too, was ‘ecologically-minded’ – a term which will turn out to be unhelpful even if it is accurate, since it elides the complexity and density of social and economic prescriptions arising from ecological politics.

Andrew Dobson, in a book on nature and politics, wrote that ‘politics has always been defined by its relation to nature’. 108 There is, inherent in every type of politics, an idea of nature. Making these ideas explicit can bring into focus underlying ideological ‘workings-out’. Chesterton, for example, had a sharp awareness of instances of appeals to nature being used to win political arguments, and makes a point of noticing these tricks. He challenged the way in which ideologues attempted to render their claims unarguable or invisible by shifting them into the realm of the ‘natural’. He was

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107 And yet, as will be seen below, he too relied on ideas of what is ‘natural’ and ‘unnatural’ to argue the defensibility or otherwise of particular political positions.
very aware of the way that nature in his time was used as an ethical exemplar in many debates about how best to manage society. This practice was especially evident to Chesterton in the space where science interacted with society, and particularly in the application of scientific theories (such as eugenics) to political questions. As will be discussed in the next chapter, Chesterton relentlessly criticized the manner in which the ethics of sex and procreation were subordinated to nature and to the notion that responses to ethical questions should be crafted in the context of what best suited nature.

Chesterton used the non-human realm as a shield to inhibit scrutiny of his own political vision. In nature, one can find those beliefs which Chesterton believes to be unarguable. The connection between the English people and their land, and the organic, holistic approach to the world that was fundamental to his Distributism, rested on the idea (only rarely explicitly articulated) that there was a ‘natural’ way of going about things in England that should be left undisturbed. Capitalism, for example was an ‘unnatural ... disproportion’,\(^\text{109}\) and its ‘natural’ culmination was in slavery.\(^\text{110}\)

Nature, then, ‘underlies several crucial nodes of political argument: ideas of justice, of the desirability of change, of freedom and the limits of human action, of the source and possibility of knowledge, all involve differing senses and aspects of nature’.\(^\text{111}\) Appeals to nature can set the parameters of human action: they can distinguish the ‘natural’ from the ‘cultural’ or ‘political’ and therefore narrow the range of what is


contestible. The term ‘natural’, applied to cultural practices, serves to sever that practice from its cultural context and embed it within the world of nature. Consider, for example, arguments in Chesterton’s time about the ethics of birth control. The work of Marie Stopes (1880-1958), a pioneer in the field, was much-discussed prior to the first world war. Chesterton, a vocal contributor to the debate, wrote that birth control was ‘a name given to a succession of different expedients ... by which it is possible to filch the pleasure belonging to a natural process while violently and unnaturally thwarting the process itself.’ The term ‘unnatural’ which Chesterton attaches to the practice of birth control immediately indicates his position on the matter. If birth control is ‘natural’ then its practice might be legitimate. If not, then it was unethical.

The extent to which the concept of nature is derived from politics is contested, as is the manner in which this intellectual process takes place. If conceptions of nature are fundamental to understanding politics and in some ways define the terrain on which politics can be enacted, there are yet a multitude of interpretations that one can apply to the political questions that arise from discourses of the non-human world. The challenges associated with understanding nature and politics were brought into focus by John Meyer, who wrote an article and a seminal book on this topic. In his article ‘Interpreting nature and politics in the history of Western thought: the environmentalist challenge’, Meyer described the way in which certain approaches to nature have been considered fundamental to Western thought in general, and to modernity specifically. He distinguishes between the ‘derivative’ and the ‘dualist’

112 J. Bennett and W. Chaloupka note that nature discourse rests ‘upon an appeal to nature either as ethical model or as pliable field of human action’: In the nature of things: language, politics, and the environment, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1993, p. ix.
interpretation of the way nature has been conceptually appropriated in modern times as follows:

A number of environmentalists have argued that a gulf between nature, on the one hand, and culture or politics, on the other hand, is deeply rooted in Western thought. By contrast, other environmentalists have read the history of Western thought as replete with social and political understandings derived from particular (albeit incorrect) conceptions of nature.¹¹⁴

By explaining how these two traditions are mutually exclusive (if the dualist strand of Western thought divides nature from culture and relegates the former to secondary status, then it seems incompatible with the derivative strand, which draws political lessons from the realm of the natural), Meyer is in effect warning against assuming the ‘totalizing’ nature of one or other tradition in ‘Western approaches to nature’. He ultimately finds neither tradition wholly dominant. These distinctions are important to help unpick various approaches to nature in modern thinkers. For example, in the case of Chesterton, one will find that he moves through the full spectrum of four possible approaches to dualist versus derivative approaches. He accuses ‘moderns’ of a derivative approach by drawing political lessons from nature, yet he adopts this approach himself in defining his own ethics and politics. He dismantles the strict nature / culture divide by arguing that people are embedded in nature, are ‘naturally unnatural’ and that it is ‘natural’ for people to develop culture; but also conforms to it in his strict (theologically-based) distinction between humanity and nature. The recognition of the existence of more than one approach to nature, not only within one time period but in the writings of one person, is important to understanding how complex the relationship between politics and nature can be.

Those who engage in politics are asking questions about how to arrange human societies. According to John Meyer, ‘one of the monumental questions confronted ... by political thinkers over the millennia’ is ‘what is and what should be the relationship between the order of human communities and the order of nature?’ Meyer argues that ‘human interaction with the rest of the natural world is inescapably central to the decisions made within the polity and ought to be recognized as such’. The answers that have been offered over the centuries are often unclear or internally inconsistent. There is a danger in looking for the ‘attitude toward nature’ in an age or even in one thinker, if one does not recognize the duplicitous miscellany of available possibilities.

Some of the most interesting aspects of nature and politics are those that arise from and shape conservative thought. Conservatives, according to political ecologist Andrew Dobson, ‘generally oppose the Enlightenment view that humans can control their environment’. Chesterton, too was suspicious of the idea that science and industry could between them fully comprehend and manage the natural world, and this sense that humans should interfere less in the environment was one motivation for the conservative strands of environmentalism. A strong body of literature has developed that explores this connection between the political right and the environment. Jonathon Olsen in 1999 lamented the still-entrenched idea that ecology belongs ‘naturally’ on the political left, and the equally widespread conception of ecology as

117 As Meyer put it, ‘a diversity of attitudes toward nature can be - and frequently is - present both within the philosophical thought and within the broader culture of a particular period’: Political Nature, p. 9.
118 Dobson, Green Political Thought, p. 159.
being altogether beyond the political spectrum.\textsuperscript{119} He, and others, have pointed out that parts of the environmental movement have had a long and deep association with ideologies of the right and, in some cases, of the radical right (with which Chesterton has been associated). For Chesterton, ideas about nature formed and were formed by his underlying sense of the inadequacy of the modern world and the need for a fundamental rethinking of the way forward.

Chesterton, although starting out as a Liberal, quickly became disillusionsed with business-as-usual politics and turned towards a radical rejection of parliamentary democracy, thereby becoming associated with the Edwardian political right.\textsuperscript{120} The extent and slant of this radicalism has been debated, partly in the form of an argument over whether he was pro- or anti-fascist.\textsuperscript{121} Chesterton and his associates gave a name to their particular form of revolt - Distributism. This movement manifested a particularly close connection between politics and nature, in the form of a call back to the land and a sense that industrial society had snapped the intimate link between people and their landscape.

This type of association between right-wing thought and ecology dates back to the very commencement of conscious environmental movements. Social ecologist Peter

\textsuperscript{121} Key protagonists of the debate about the nature of Chesterton’s politics are Julia Stapleton (see particularly ‘The Limits of Pro-Fascism and Anti-Fascism: G.K. Chesterton and Arthur Bryant’, in N. Copsey and A. Olechnowicz (eds), \textit{Varieties of Anti-Fascism: Britain in the Inter-War Period}, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2010, pp. 224-44); Dan Stone, who aimed to move beyond the question of whether Chesterton and his contemporaries were pro- or anti-fascist and consider instead the broad spectrum of responses to Nazism in Britain (see \textit{Responses to Nazism in Britain, 1933-1939: Before War and Holocaust}, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2003, esp. pp. 122-9); and Tom Villis (\textit{Reaction and the Avant-Garde: The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy in Early Twentieth-Century Britain}, Tauris, London, 2006).
Staudenmaier has drawn attention to early ecological thinkers who epitomised the ‘peculiar synthesis of naturalism and nationalism forged under the influence of the Romantic tradition’s anti-Enlightenment irrationalism’. Staudenmaier was referring specifically to Ernst Arndt and Wilhelm Riehl, nineteenth-century German thinkers who, according to Staudenmaier, were instrumental in laying the intellectual foundations of the ‘völkisch’ movement. Arndt and Riehl exemplified a mode of thought which merged ‘nature mysticism’ with soil-rooted racism and an almost hysterical opposition to manifestations of modernity. Staudenmaier saw their influence in aspects of Nazi ideology, and Nazi ecology is indeed one of the better-explored facets of the conjunction between ecology and the political right.

In 2001, historian Philip Conford wrote *The Origins of the Organic Movement*, which explored the roots of contemporary organicist organisations in England. Conford examined a set of radically right-wing thinkers and activists from the inter-war period. He argued that the insights in Robert Wohl’s *The Generation of 1914*, which examined the young European men who fought in the Great War, could equally be applied to the English organic movement. ‘There was the same sense of the menace of industrialism’, Conford argued, ‘which drove people into impersonal cities and gave free rein to rootless speculators ... There was a dream of cultural renewal and national community, and a sense of the adult world’s lies and hypocrisy; a desire for ethical purity and spiritual growth’. Chesterton shared much of this discomfort with the modern world. Through his fictional works he dreamt of older, simpler and more

intimate times, where communities were knitted tightly together, moral truths blazed across the sky, and life was constant and deep.

In the English context, a strong historical case has been made for the connection between the early organic and soil-protection movements and far-right thinkers. The importance of healthy soil to the protection of the English nation was a clear theme of inter-war organicism in England. It was not possible, according to figures such as right-wing politician Viscount Lymington, to conceive of English blood without considering the soil in which it was cultivated: ‘If our stock improves the stock of other lands, but deteriorates in a few generations abroad … is it too much to suppose that the land of England had something to do with this?’ To support his campaign for the protection of the English soil, Lymington used scientific arguments that, he later claimed in his autobiography *A Knot of Roots*, prefigured those of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* by some three decades.

Chesterton himself, although taking the occasional stand against environmental destruction, did not rely on science to make his case. Rather, he let broadbrush verbal imagery of an exquisite English landscape, counterposed with depictions of the aimless tearing up of the countryside, speak for him. In this respect he shared (at least to an extent) the rejection of Enlightenment confidence in progress identified by some as characteristic of romantic thinkers. Jonathan Olsen, amongst others, has identified romantic and neo-romantic movements as in turn an influence on ultra-nationalism and the ultra-right. In this respect, the particular manner in which romantic and far-

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128 He chose more often to criticise its practitioners. Chesterton’s relationship to science is the subject of the next chapter of this thesis.
right intellectuals expressed their opposition to the march of modernity was important. ‘Within a right-wing ecological framework’, Olsen argues, ‘the key to solving environmental problems lies in a rejection of Enlightenment universalism and the recovery of the natural and rooted – that is to say, the ethnic and / or culturally pure nation’.129

This romantic nature-worship does not necessarily belong to the far right, but when manifested in that political milieu it can display a ferocity that seems incompatible with a reverence for all living things. Romantic perspectives on nature on the far right can exhibit a suspicion of modernity and a ‘politics of cultural despair’130 - a sense that industry, technology and progress are advancing at the expense of respect for a community rooted in the natural world. The rejection of science in favour of a mystical nature-worship exposes a tension between those far right ecologists who mobilise scientific discourse in support of their aims and those who eschew reliance on the mentality of the industrial world.

It is important, however, to remain wary of the works that have ‘exposed’ the ‘environmentalism’ of regimes and groups such as those of Nazi Germany in a manner which elides the complexities and inconsistencies essential to intellectual history. Michael Zimmerman, in one of the few articles dealing specifically with so-called ‘ecofascism’, has sought to illuminate the cavalier manner in which the term is applied to ecologists opposing some aspect or other of progress or industrialisation.131 Similarly, an ecological bent in authors such as Chesterton should not be enough on its own to

129 Olsen, Nature and Nationalism, p. 35.
diagnose total nausea in the face of modernity, especially in a writer so full of contradictions.

Right-wing environmentalism does not have to be associated with ‘eco-fascism’, and there are much less radical philosophical approaches to protecting nature. Conservative philosopher Roger Scruton outlined a connection between conservatism and conservation:

As a conservative ... I bow to the evidence of history, which tells me that human beings are creatures of limited and local affections, the best of which is the territorial loyalty that leads them to live at peace with strangers, to honour their dead and to make provision for those who will one day replace them in their earthly tenancy.\(^{132}\)

Chesterton was influenced both by the radical right and by this more conservative approach to environmental protection. He located himself within a tradition that was both conservative and radical. As a conservative, he believed in a more thoughtful approach to the landscape, in which people allowed themselves to be guided by their surroundings and were slow to change them. As a radical, he believed that modernity had sunk so deeply into thoughtlessness and subservience to nature that only the total reformulation of the mass psyche could return the world to the way it should be. He was influenced by a range of movements in forming this challenge to modernity. He was tempted by radical right and conservative traditions but declared himself a liberal; he was sympathetic to romantic alternatives to approaching nature but claimed a much more practical and utilitarian relationship with nature than they did.

Chesterton’s political ecology lays bare some of these fractures in his political beliefs, bringing into focus some of his subtler ideas and pulling out some of the precepts that were to him unquestionable. An analysis of the approach towards nature of authors like Chesterton can help to reveal their position within these ideological and social communities, exposing some of the hidden assumptions and beliefs that lay underneath explicit statements of political purpose. Ultimately this type of analysis can build a picture of how Chesterton responded to ideas of nature in the modern world, as he tried both to protect natural and organic traditions and define himself separately from the non-human world. This process challenges even the definition of nature. Understood as all that is distinct from humans and human culture, Chesterton wondered in the end if being cultural was itself the natural way for people to be.
Chapter Two
Chesterton, Science and the Natural World

In abstract terms, G.K. Chesterton professed a high regard for scientific endeavour. When pinned down to particulars, however, he usually received specific theories with hostility or disinterest. When Chesterton was in the outdoors contemplating nature, he did not carry any amateur scientific equipment. His imagination was equipment enough, allowing him to stay faithful to the notion of the world as ‘Elfland’, where no scientific laws could demystify the enchanted world. Chesterton believed (and not just rhetorically) that nature had magic in it, and it served as a source of sincere wonder and enjoyment.

Chesterton, more agnostic in his youth, moved in adulthood to an unwavering commitment to Christianity accompanied by a sceptical approach to Darwinism.\(^\text{133}\) He claimed, however, to entertain certain scientific propositions. For example, he explained that he could accept parts of evolutionary theory provided that it meant merely that God’s design had unfolded slowly rather than suddenly, and provided that the soul was excluded altogether from evolution. He also believed that nature was a source of wonder which science risked undervaluing. Nature’s very separateness from people presented the opportunity for mystery. Nature therefore came to serve a vital

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\(^{133}\) Chesterton’s brother, writing anonymously, cited G.K.’s public dispute with Robert Blatchford as the first time that he ‘publicly avowed his belief in the central doctrines of orthodox Christianity’: Anonymous (Cecil Chesterton), G.K. Chesterton: A Criticism, J. Lane, London, 1908, p. 95. This debate between Chesterton and the atheist Blatchford took place in the pages of the Clarion, which Blatchford edited, in 1903-4. Chesterton’s side of the argument was published with Heretics and Orthodoxy in the Ignatius Press series (San Francisco, 1986), and Ian Ker gives an account of it in his biography: G.K. Chesterton: A Biography, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2011 p. 115. Chesterton gave credit for this conversion not to religious apologists but to skeptics and atheists. Herbert Spencer got a special mention – when Chesterton had finished reading him, Chesterton ‘had got as far as doubting (for the first time) whether evolution had occurred at all.’ Chesterton, Orthodoxy, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1986 (first published 1908), p. 288.
function in Chesterton’s philosophy - reminding people of how extraordinary the world was, and steering them away from pessimism and cynicism. Although he believed the world was magical, the emergence of the ‘new physics’ challenged Chesterton’s commitment to surprise. Einstein’s theories (at least as they were understood in the popular mind) shook Chesterton and represented the possibility that the world, having taken the erroneous path of scientific materialism, had now started to swing in the other direction, towards the dissolution of external reality.

Chesterton respected the natural world as a creation of God, and since God had endowed people and no other creature with the capacity for reason, a hierarchical relation existed between humanity and the rest of creation. Given the relative status of different parts of creation, Chesterton refused to accept any theories that appeared to him to subordinate humanity’s God-given intelligence to the ‘laws’ of the natural world. In the earthly realm, humans must reign supreme. Chesterton saw many examples of scientists proposing a cosmology that reversed this hierarchy, thus suggesting that humans should follow and draw lessons from nature when deciding how to order their society. Chesterton’s critique of science therefore rested partly on his conviction that scientists and their disciples were in thrall to nature to such a degree that it directed their political decision-making and affected the lives of ordinary people. For example, he believed that the use of scientific theories to delimit the acceptable physical characteristics of English society, leading to attempts to enshrine eugenic principles in law, was an unjustifiable abuse of power in the name of scientific standards. The deferral to nature on questions of ideology constituted in Chesterton’s mind a betrayal of rational thought and, further, a subversion of the principles of the Enlightenment which science was supposed to advance. Science should have been
assisting the process of rational decision-making; instead, in Chesterton’s mind, it was subverting it.

Chesterton therefore had a multi-faceted dispute with science. He believed that scientists drew moral lessons from nature which could not be legitimately defended from the evidence that they found. He also felt that the advance of knowledge left bare and banal the inner workings of nature. These two disagreements with science were united by a strong sense that nature was strange and irreconcilably different to people, based on a religious belief that God created the world according to a particular hierarchy. Science challenged his world-view, and in this respect he was but one of the many minds of his time seeking to come to terms with a scientific endeavour that seemed constantly to call into question received truths about life on planet earth.134

Chesterton had the habit of criticising science using its own standards of enquiry. He wanted to use logical argument to show that modern rationalists were nothing of the sort. He tried to establish that scientists used their endless accumulation of knowledge to make arguments about moral questions, which demonstrated a failure to adopt proper rigorous standards of investigation. This problem seemed important to Chesterton, who came of age in the late Victorian period at a time when ‘the ideas of

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134 B.T. Gates, ‘Ordering Nature: Revisioning Victorian Science Culture’, in B. Lightman (ed), Victorian Science in Context, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1997, p. 179. It was no wonder that, as Chesterton grew up, people were questioning the nature of the world, given that the period immediately prior to his birth was, according to one historian, subject to a ‘sweeping change in what a large and increasing number of educated British people believed, or found believable, about the world. It was a change in the most fundamental assumptions that gave their lives meaning and coherence, a change comparable to the collapse of bourgeois idealism and the belief in progress after the First World War’. J.R. Moore, ‘Freethought, Secularism, Agnosticism: The Case of Charles Darwin’, in G. Parsons (ed), Religion in Victorian Britain, Volume I: Traditions, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1988, p. 276.
Science were helping to form the general view of the nature of “reality” itself.\textsuperscript{135} It mattered, therefore, that this view of reality was based on a solid foundation of genuine evidence. Chesterton believed that scientists often failed as modern reasoners, because where they had a responsibility to use their own minds they instead ceded their intellectual authority to plants and animals by proposing that humans follow the ‘laws of nature’, which seemed an enormous collapse of reason and logic. Chesterton saw this abdication of responsibility as a failure of modern people to adequately embrace the possibilities of an enlightened society. He also, however, seemed to see scientists’ enthralment to nature as evidence that, perhaps, true enlightenment might be out of reach of the human mind.\textsuperscript{136} Fundamental limits to human understanding of the world in the end made science a flawed pursuit.

\textbf{Science, Nature and Chesterton’s historians}

Although there is no major work specifically addressing the role of nature in Chesterton’s scientific understanding, there are some significant studies that generally cover Chesterton and science. A common practice in much of this body of work is to leave unchallenged Chesterton’s assertions that he was not critical of science itself\textsuperscript{137}

\textsuperscript{136} Chesterton grew up at a time when suspicions of science were becoming more widespread. One historian has described the late nineteenth century, when Chesterton was a young man, as a time when ‘an unusual alliance of clerical, academic and philosophical interests subjected science to bitter attack. Science, it was claimed, was “bankrupt”’: R. MacLeod, \textit{The ‘Creed of Science’ in Victorian England}, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2000, p. 2. According to MacLeod, these sceptics argued, as Chesterton was later to do, that science was not only failing to live up to its promise to deliver material improvements to lives, but also that its ‘analytical assumptions were themselves self-destructive’: p. 2.
\textsuperscript{137} See, for example, \textit{The Everlasting Man}, in which Chesterton wrote that ‘In this book which is merely meant as a popular criticism of popular fallacies, often indeed of very vulgar errors, I feel that I have sometimes given the impression of scoffing at serious scientific work. It was however the very reverse of my intentions. I am not arguing with the scientist who explains the elephant, but only with the sophist who explains it away’: Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1986 (first published 1925), pp. 406-7.
but of its misappropriation by modern forces to political ends.\textsuperscript{138} Maisie Ward was one who took Chesterton at his word when he said he did not oppose science \textit{per se}.\textsuperscript{139} She wrote of Chesterton’s interest in the human ‘will’ over the ‘mechanics’ of science and technology. The ‘will of God’, she explained, ‘had created the laws of nature and could supersede them: the will of Man could discover these laws and harness them to its purposes.’\textsuperscript{140} In the end, Ward argued, Chesterton was not passing judgement on science itself but on the ‘will of man’ that directed its hunt.\textsuperscript{141} Chesterton thereby constructed an abstract idea of science, whose realisation was constrained by the limitations of human society – a neat way to dismiss any real and practical science while appearing to defend it in its pure form.

It is certainly possible to find instances where Chesterton’s suspicions about different theories have in hindsight been proved at least respectable, if not always correct.\textsuperscript{142}

However, it is difficult to find the praise for instances of honourable scientific practice that would bolster the claim that Chesterton only objected to some types of scientific

\textsuperscript{138} A major study that addresses Chesterton’s views about science is \textit{Chesterton, Seer of Science}, by Stanley Jaki: University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1986. Jaki’s stated aim in writing his book was that ‘Chestertonians will now find one more important reason to be proud of G.K.C’: (p. x) and he hyperbolically concluded that Chesterton’s essay ‘The Ethics of Elfland’ was ‘one of the most penetrating discourses on the nature of scientific reasoning that has been so far produced’: p. 13. A second monograph which focuses at some length on Chesterton and science is Stephen Clark’s \textit{G.K. Chesterton: Thinking Backward, Looking Forward}, Templeton Foundation Press, Philadelphia, 2006. Clark, like Jaki, defends Chesterton’s approach to science.

\textsuperscript{139} Maisie Ward in her biography does not go as far as Jaki, but still defends Chesterton’s engagement with science, arguing that his attacks were not directed at the scientific endeavour as such but at its misappropriation by malign forces: \textit{Gilbert Keith Chesterton}, Sheed & Ward, London, 1944, see especially pp. 531-534. Following Ward’s argument, Ian Ker in his recent major biography noted that ‘popular scientism was a regular butt of Chesterton’, his use of the term ‘scientism’ rather than ‘science’ implying that Ward was right that Chesterton’s objection was to the popular misappropriation of science rather than science itself: \textit{G.K. Chesterton}, p. 426.

\textsuperscript{140} Ward, \textit{Gilbert Keith Chesterton}, p. 533.

\textsuperscript{141} Ward, \textit{Gilbert Keith Chesterton}, pp. 532-3.

\textsuperscript{142} John Coates, for example, argued that ‘it is a truism that history, and scientific and social thought in [Chesterton’s] time were dominated by myths which were not recognised as such’, pointing to Chesterton’s attacks on ‘Superman, on eugenics, on doctrines of racial superiority and inferiority, on the abuses of evolutionary theory [and] on the historicism that proved the “inevitable” rise or decline of civilisations’: \textit{Chesterton and the Edwardian Cultural Crisis}, Hull University Press, Hull, 1984, p. 167.
study, although it would be false to say they did not exist at all. He wrote, for example, an appeal for a children’s hospital in Bath, saying that ‘There is perhaps no case in which modern science can more really and rightly fulfil the ideal of prevention as well as cure, than in the avoidance of deformities threatening the very young; there is no more fitting place for such a work than the most beautiful of English cities whose healing waters derive, with all British history, from the very fountains of Rome’. ¹⁴³ These comments are relatively rare, however, and more common are repudiations of the scientific project. In fact, Chesterton’s beliefs about nature frequently prevented him from accepting scientific conclusions and limited his support for scientists.¹⁴⁴ Chesterton argued that this opposition to science reflected not a failure of reason but rather his broader feeling that Enlightenment rationalism was delivering, instead of free-thinkers and independent spirits, new generations of citizens in thrall to malicious superstitions about nature.

¹⁴⁴ It is a common assumption that Chesterton was implacably opposed to science because he was a reactionary with no interest in the potential of reason to deliver a more enlightened world. See, for example, Tim Burns, ‘The Rationalism of Father Brown’, Perspectives on Political Science, Vol. 34(1), Winter 2005, p. 39. See also R. Las Vergnas, Chesterton, Belloc, Boring, Sheed & Ward, London, 1938, p. 8. Similarly, Chesterton’s peers sometimes regarded him as reactionary rather than reasoned. A contemporaneous unsigned review of Orthodoxy in the Times Literary Supplement argued that Chesterton’s philosophical drivers were ‘not rational, but wholly aesthetic’. Chesterton, according to the reviewer, rejected Darwinism not reasonably but because ‘it is mentally inconvenient’. Chesterton failed to ‘understand the fine romantic incalculability of true reason’. He refused to accept ‘the first postulate of science, the uniformity of Nature’ because it was ‘too dull to believe in’: ‘G.K. Chesterton’s Orthodoxy’, unsigned review, The Times Literary Supplement, 1 October 1908, cited in D.J. Conlon (ed), G.K. Chesterton: The Critical Judgements: Part 1, 1900-1937, Antwerp Studies in English Literature, Antwerp, 1976, p. 170. Maisie Ward attributed this perception that Chesterton opposed science per se to his impishness: ‘Where he saw a long white beard he felt like tweaking it’, she explained: Gilbert Keith Chesterton, p. 533. Chesterton’s brother, however, was not of this view. Cecil Chesterton was excited about advances in science, but worried that his brother was not. ‘Nothing in our civilisation’, he wrote, ‘has seemed to most people more unmistakably creditable than our advance in physical science. Of that advance G.K.C. had in his earlier days spoken with respect - even enthusiasm. ... But in his later books the words “science” and “scientists” are used only as terms of flippant abuse’: G.K. Chesterton, pp. 124-5.
Fatalism, scientific materialism and the loss of wonder in nature

Chesterton’s religious development was closely related to the love of surprises of which nature was an inexhaustible source. The late Victorian household in which Chesterton grew up has been described as ‘vaguely Unitarian and even more vaguely nothingarian,’\textsuperscript{145} although Chesterton did note in his autobiography that his parents were ‘rather exceptional, among people so intelligent, in believing at all in a personal God or in personal immortality.’\textsuperscript{146} Chesterton, envisioned as the product of late Victorian agnosticism, is thus generally perceived to have absorbed his later religious convictions from somewhere other than his childhood home. Recently, however, William Oddie has written a study of Chesterton’s formative years (covering the period until the publication of \textit{Orthodoxy} in 1908) and has suggested that Chesterton’s childhood did, after all, provide a crucial intellectual atmosphere from which he imbibed some of his later moral world-view. One such influence was that ‘permanent anticipation of surprise [which] was induced by Chesterton’s father in a number of ways; and it was an aspect of his influence that encouraged what was to become an essential characteristic of Gilbert’s adult intellect and imagination.’\textsuperscript{147}

\textsuperscript{147} W. Oddie, \textit{Chesterton and the Romance of Orthodoxy: The Making of GKC, 1874-1908}, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008, p. 19. Oddie also convincingly makes the case that Chesterton’s Unitarian background had more of an impact on his development than has been previously assumed, especially via the influence of the Reverend Stopford Brooke, whom Chesterton listened to regularly at the Bedford Chapel in Bloomsbury: p. 68.
Chesterton’s suspicion of science was therefore partly attributable to his very strong sense that the natural world that surrounded him was mysterious, remote and quite magical. The wonder and gratitude that he felt in the presence of nature threw up instinctive defences against scientists’ attempts to unlock its secrets. He believed that scientists’ work explaining nature was part of a broader cultural shift towards materialism and the excision of the supernatural from nature. Chesterton believed in the supernatural, and believed that nature was the best source of evidence for this belief. Chesterton’s expressive poetry exhibited his foundational belief in gratitude from very early in his career. In his second book of poems, published in 1900, Chesterton included a poem ‘By the Babe Unborn’ which read

I think that if they gave me leave
Within that world to stand,
I would be good through all the day
I spent in fairyland

They should not hear a word from me
Of selfishness or scorn,
If only I could find the door,
If only I were born.

For Chesterton, gratitude was a means by which he could transcend prevailing pessimism and solipsism, on one hand, and the crass materialism of modern science, on the other, and so become oriented towards the external world. This gratitude manifested itself very early in Chesterton’s career. Indeed, one has the sense that

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149 Chesterton, The Wild Knight and Other Poems, Brimley Johnson and Ince, London, 1906 (first published 1900), p. 3. Even before he was formally religious, there was a theistic sensibility that infused his work. Over time, he progressed from uncertainty to (encouraged by his wife Frances) a commitment to Anglo-Catholicism and eventually conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1922. For many ‘Chestertonians’, too, the most important of his works are his apologetics, the best known of which remain Heretics (1905) and Orthodoxy (1908) as well as The Everlasting Man. C.S. Lewis famously credited the latter with assisting his own conversion to faith: C.S. Lewis, Surprised by Joy, Geoffrey Bles, London, 1955, p. 222. Chesterton’s religious development has been the subject of some substantial work, and it is thus not necessary to explore it in detail here. The reader is referred especially to Oddie, Chesterton and the Romance of Orthodoxy; and Nichols, G.K. Chesterton: Theologian.
Chesterton felt grateful before he had arrived at a clear idea of what he was grateful for or to whom he was giving thanks. In a letter to his friend E.C. Bentley, written in 1893, Chesterton asked Bentley to

Face for a moment the conception of the world being a sham, of the sum of all things being barren, and you will feel it is impossible. Whatever the secret of the world may be, it must in the face of feelings that are in me, be something intelligible and satisfying. This instinct of the hidden meaning is the eternal ground of all religions: every deity and heaven ever conceived was only an embodiment of the ultimate or central victory of right.150

In Chesterton’s thought, gratitude was also inextricably linked with gratuity, of being the lucky recipient of a gift – the world – that one neither expects nor deserves. In another letter to Bentley, dated 1895, he wrote:

A cosmos one day being rebuked by a pessimist, replied, “How can you, who revile me, consent to speak by my machinery. Permit me to reduce you to nothingness and then we will discuss the matter.” Moral. You should not look a gift universe in the mouth.151

By 1900, Chesterton’s first two books – both volumes of poetry – had been published: first Greybeards at Play,152 and then The Wild Knight and other Poems.153 These volumes contained intimations of Chesterton’s philosophy of gratitude, which he elaborated throughout his life and retained even amid the period of psychological despair during which he struggled to find a workable philosophy of the world.154

Although Chesterton did not seem to think that Greybeards, his first book of poetry, had much to recommend it, he was later to write that nevertheless these ‘bad poems’ with which he ‘began life’ all ‘expressed the same moral philosophy’,155 one that he

153 Chesterton, Wild Knight.
154 Apart from Chesterton’s own Autobiography, see also the third chapter of Oddie, Chesterton and the Romance of Orthodoxy, pp. 84-125.
155 British Library, G.K. Chesterton Papers, Add. MS 73239, Vol. 54, Letter to a Mr. Rothenstein, providing advice on the latter’s friend’s manuscript, copy of letter, undated, c. 1913.
stood by throughout his writing career. One poem that was published in 1900 in The Wild Knight was entitled ‘The Ecclesiates’ and read:

There is one sin: to call a green leaf grey,
Whereat the sun in heaven shuddereth.
There is one blasphemy: for death to pray,
For God alone knoweth the praise of death.

There is one creed: ‘neath no world-terror’s wing
Apples forget to grow on apple-trees.
There is one thing is needful – everything –
The rest is vanity of vanities.\footnote{Chesterton, The Wild Knight, p. 21.}

For Chesterton, nature represented something that is demonstrably ‘other’ than ourselves: he wanted to prove that there are concretely existing beings outside of our own minds. He tried to restore a sense of wonder amongst his readers, leading them to the conclusion that the very ‘otherness’ of nature demonstrated that each person was surrounded by beings who exist independently of that person.

Much has been written of the theology of this intense gratitude and joy and Chesterton’s fierce rejection of despair, but these beliefs have interesting implications specifically for the study of science and nature.\footnote{In addition to Nichols and Oddie, see also A. Milbank, Chesterton and Tolkien as Theologians: The Fantasy of the Real, T&T Clark, London, 2007.} Chesterton’s mood of wonderment and gratitude toward the world led him down the path of rejecting any scientific knowability, and he accused scientists of at best having too much confidence in their conclusions and, at worst, of simply making things up. For Chesterton, the mystery of nature constituted an unanswerable challenge to materialism. He believed that there was more to the natural world than could be explained simply by natural processes. A corollary of his belief that there was an element of the supernatural in nature was his idea that science would never reach the point of explaining everything in nature with
scientific laws. His rejection of materialism led him to the conclusion that any scientific certainty drawn from nature was based on prejudice rather than logic.

In his first book of essays, *The Defendant*, he wrote about nature with sheer astonishment:

> So long as we regard a tree as an obvious thing, naturally and reasonably created for a giraffe to eat we cannot properly wonder at it. It is when we consider it as a prodigious wave of the living soil sprawling up to the skies for no reason in particular that we take off our hats, to the astonishment of the park-keeper.\(^{158}\)

One had to understand that nature was magical, and that it was ‘extraordinary that a pumpkin is always a pumpkin’; only then had one ‘begun philosophy.’\(^{159}\) He believed that nature could not be counted on to behave rationally, and, given that it behaves as it does for ‘no reason in particular’, that it was not possible for the human mind to fully understand it. Chesterton believed that people had no right to assume that nature would repeat itself indefinitely and argued that it was always possible to be surprised by it. Remarking on the possibility that nature could so easily have been other than what it is, he wrote that:

> I found the whole modern world talking scientific fatalism; saying that everything is as it must always have been, being unfolded without fault from the beginning. The leaf on the tree is green because it could never have been anything else. Now, the fairy-tale philosopher is glad that the leaf is green precisely because it might have been scarlet.\(^{160}\)

The ‘fairy-tale philosopher’ was not held back in these musings by knowledge of the function of chlorophyll and in general Chesterton confused things he did not know


\(^{159}\) Chesterton, *The Blatchford Controversies*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1986 (first published 1904), pp. 387-8. In Ker’s recent biography of Chesterton, he credited Chesterton with ‘correcting’ Blatchford on this point of science when Chesterton ‘points out that to say, for example, that “it is a law of nature that pumpkins should remain pumpkins” only really means that no pumpkin has ever been known to change into anything else, not that there is actually a “law of nature” that one can point to’: G.K. Chesterton, p. 117.

\(^{160}\) Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, p. 262.
with things that were unknowable. Some years later in *Orthodoxy*, Chesterton invented a place called ‘Elfland’ to further explain his approach to science and the natural world. Elfland was a place characterised by a combination of hard reason and mystery. On one hand, 'we in fairyland' acknowledge that 'if the Ugly Sisters are older than Cinderella, it is (in an iron and awful sense) necessary that Cinderella is younger than the Ugly Sisters.'\(^{161}\) On the other hand, there are areas that are not governed by these laws, and the way to tell the difference between the two is the test of 'imagination': 'you cannot imagine two and one not making three. But you can easily imagine trees not growing fruit; you can imagine them growing candlesticks or tigers hanging on by the tail.'\(^{162}\)

Chesterton felt that retaining the possibility of the surprising and miraculous in nature was to retain the capacity for free thought and liberty:

> The assumption that there is something in the doubt of miracles akin to liberality or reform is literally the opposite of the truth. If a man cannot believe in miracles there is an end of the matter; he is not particularly liberal, but he is perfectly honourable and logical [...]. But if he can believe in miracles, he is certainly the more liberal for doing so; because they mean first, the freedom of the soul, and secondly, its control over the tyranny of circumstance.\(^{163}\)

Here, he was careful to defend the miraculous on the grounds of free thought. Indeed, one of Chesterton’s rhetorical strengths was the care that he took to critique science according to its own terms, and not explicitly on the basis of received theological truth.

Although Chesterton was often patently confused about the science itself, he exhibited more clarity about the politics of science. He established a reputation amongst many as a strong defender of democracy and ‘ordinary people’ on the back of his campaign.

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\(^{161}\) Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, p. 253. Italics in original.
\(^{162}\) Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, p. 254. Italics in original.
\(^{163}\) Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, p. 218.
against abuses of scientific theory in the public realm. He was particularly scornful of allegedly rational decision-making applied rigidly to some members of the population but ignored by the powerful.

Although Chesterton never categorically denied the value of scientific knowledge, he was reluctant to acknowledge that the scientific study of nature could penetrate to the depths of the natural world. He believed that scientists’ reliance on reason would never be sufficient to really understand nature, and was frustrated by the dichotomy they constructed between faith and reason, with only the latter considered of any use in understanding the world. Chesterton claimed that this was a false dichotomy because ‘reason is itself a matter of faith. It is an act of faith to assert that our thoughts have any relation to reality at all.’

Chesterton maintained that the mysteries of the non-human world would remain shrouded, and be the better for it, and was sceptical of the belief in the ultimate knowability of God's creation. For Chesterton, then, not only was Elfland a place in which reason and imagination were both present, but it also assisted in his project of dismantling what he characterised as an unworkable dichotomy between what is known and what is merely believed. He found that what scientists claimed as ‘knowledge’ was frequently just ‘faith’. Chesterton’s foundational principle in approaching nature, therefore, was based on a kind of dazed wonderment. Nature was mysterious and its full depths unreachable by science.

Chesterton claimed that a key problem with the practice of science was that it failed to attain its own standards of evidence. By adopting a ‘fatalistic’ attitude in which

\[^{164}\text{Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 236.}\]
outcomes in the natural world are pre-determined, advocates of the scientific method did not meet the requirements for scientific rigour because they did not accept the limitations of their own knowledge. Chesterton’s sense of wonder seemed to act as a shield against this perceived flaw of reasoning because it prevented him from making certain connections about the world. Chesterton believed that scientists were falling short of their self-professed standards by too credulously taking a pattern and turning it into a law. Chesterton was not alone in voicing these concerns: indeed, some of his criticism of the ‘infallibility’ of science is reminiscent of epistemological critiques being advanced by such contemporaneous philosophers as Bertrand Russell (of at least some of whose work Chesterton was aware). Chesterton, for example, wrote that ‘all the terms used in the science books, “law,” “necessity,” “order,” “tendency,” and so on, are really unintellectual, because they assume an inner synthesis which we do not possess.’ Bertrand Russell proposed in 1912 that

The man who has fed the chicken every day throughout its life at last wrings its neck instead, showing that more refined views as to the uniformity of nature would have been useful to the chicken. [...] The mere fact that something has happened a certain number of times causes animals and men to expect that it will happen again. Thus our instincts certainly cause us to believe that the sun will rise tomorrow, but we may be in no better a position than the chicken which unexpectedly has its neck wrung.

People, like Russell’s chicken, are liable to fatal miscalculation if they attempt to predict everything that comes from nature on the basis of a principle of uniformity.

Chesterton constructed an argument similar in appearance to Russell’s, but used it to reject the possibility that there was such a thing as uniformity of nature. The
conclusion of Chesterton’s critique was that scientists could in fact come up with no natural laws at all. The only laws that applied in Fairyland were the laws of things that were right in front of one’s nose. If Chesterton could see it or count it then it was real. The scientific conclusions that Chesterton refused to accept were usually the ones that were based on theories that he could not test simply by poking his head out of a window.

Chesterton’s discussions of science, materialism and wonder led Jaki to conclude that Chesterton should be considered alongside Pierre Duhem and Émile Meyerson as a theorist of science. In particular, Jaki was impressed with the ‘Ethics of Elfland’ and specifically its ‘stunning insistence’ that ‘science as such gives only logical identities but no realities’. Jaki’s critique, however, accepts at face value both the intent and the substance of Chesterton’s position. Chesterton accused scientists of inventing laws about invisible natural processes. They allegedly filled in gaps in the observable world with guesswork, but Chesterton equated ‘observable’ with ‘observable to Chesterton’. Chesterton assumed many natural processes were invisible to human inquiry because he had no particular understanding of them. Russell’s warning to be wary about assuming uniformity in nature was appropriated by Chesterton and rendered as an argument that there was no such uniformity at all, leaving the latter free to wonder,

Jaki’s jovial and slightly patronising tone (similar in some ways to Chesterton’s own) is used to lubricate his sweeping dismissal of scientific knowledge. He does not offer much hope that Chesterton had a solid basis on which to make pronouncements about science, however, noting merely that ‘whether Chesterton did in fact attend some science classes is, of course, a matter of conjecture. Yet, he himself stressed that he grew up in times when it was impossible not to take note of science’: p. 5.

169 Duhem (1861 – 1916) was a French physicist and philosopher of science who had an interest also in the science of the Middle Ages. Meyerson was also both a philosopher of science and a scientist. He published several books including *Identity and Reality* (1908).

amazed, at every move nature made. As Chesterton put it: ‘you should not look a gift
universe in the mouth’.  

The Divine Cosmos

If it was possible in Fairyland that a tree could grow tigers hanging on by the tail (as
Chesterton argued it should be), there must be one to whom the idea of tigers in trees
was pleasing, and who had the capacity to bring it about: the Magician. In this sense,
Chesterton’s observations of nature led him directly towards a form of argument from
first cause (a matter that Chesterton dealt with in his biography of Thomas Aquinas).
Chesterton argued that

we do not need even St. Thomas, we do not need anything but our own
common sense, to tell us that if there has been from the beginning anything
that can possibly be called a Purpose, it must reside in something that has the
essential elements of a Person.  

Chesterton did not believe that nature, mediated by science, was fully accessible to
the human intellect. He did, however, believe that nature was revealing in other ways.
His project was to demonstrate the existence of a divine being through observation of
nature and then, having concluded that nature was a project of God, to argue for the
protection of nature based on a stewardship principle. He was not trying to construct a
kind of ecology; rather, he constructed a theological argument for respect for nature,
based on a firm commitment to anthropocentrism and a rejection of the idea (that he
thought was gaining credibility in his time) of ‘following’ nature or living according to
nature’s laws.

171 British Library, G.K. Chesterton Papers, Add. MS 73191, Vol. 5, undated letter from Chesterton to E.C. Bentley. This letter was written when Chesterton was around twenty-one.
Without a detailed cosmological theory, Chesterton still had the sense that whatever the ‘secret’ of the world was, it was good. But the goodness of nature was located not in its beauty, but in its ugliness and its humour:

> There is a peculiar idea abroad that the value and fascination of what we call Nature lie in her beauty. But the fact that Nature is beautiful in the sense that a dado or a Liberty curtain is beautiful, is only one of her charms, and an almost accidental one. The highest and most valuable quality in Nature is not her beauty, but her generous and defiant ugliness.\(^{173}\)

Thus, nature is still ‘good’ even when it is not pretty. This goodness, according to Chesterton, arises from nature being exactly what it is and nothing else:

> Men who live in the heart of nature, farmers and peasants, know that nature means cows and pigs, and creatures more humourous than can be found in a whole sketch-book of Callot. And the element of the grotesque in art, like the element of the grotesque in nature, means, in the main, energy, the energy which takes its own forms and goes its own way.\(^{174}\)

The idea that nature develops of its own volition indicates that, for Chesterton, the non-human world is valuable for its own sake, and not only for its utility or aesthetic interest to people. Nature was good even when it was ugly or cruel because it was what it was supposed to be. Its value to people lay precisely in it being indifferent to humans, existing in ignorance of human meanings or intentions and thereby proving that there was something external to people, acting as a barrier against running over a cliff into a nihilist or solipsistic void.

Even though he believed that nature was empty of value and morality, Chesterton’s writing did not evoke a lonely or indifferent cosmos, or one that was made frightening by ruthless ‘red in tooth and claw’ savagery.\(^{175}\) In fact, Chesterton’s idea of a divine

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nature was a defence against the vision of a meaningless universe, explicitly disavowing what he took to be Lord Tennyson’s outlook:

Tennyson, a very typical nineteenth century man, uttered one of the instinctive truisms of his contemporaries when he said there was faith in their honest doubt. There was indeed. Those words have a profound and even a horrible truth. In their doubt of miracles there was a faith in a fixed and godless fate; a deep and sincere faith in the incurable routine of the cosmos.176

Tennyson’s godless universe ran, like a machine, in a horrible repetition without any will or life. This universe is as indifferent to its inhabitants as a clockwork train to its miniature passengers, and is as different from Chesterton’s as it is possible to be. A materialist professor (whose name was Lucifer, to avoid any confusion about where the sympathies of the reader should lie) in conversation with a religious man in the novel The Ball and the Cross described the kind of universe that Chesterton thought science had established:

We are up in the sky. In your religion and all the religions as far as I know (and I know everything), the sky is made the symbol of everything that is sacred and merciful. Well, now you are in the sky, you know better. Phrase it how you like, twist it how you like, you know that you know better. You know what are a man’s real feelings about the heavens, when he finds himself alone in the heavens, surrounded by the heavens. You know the truth, and the truth is this. The heavens are evil, the sky is evil, the stars are evil. This mere space, this mere quantity, terrifies a man more than tigers or the terrible plague. You know that since our science has spoken, the bottom has fallen out of the Universe. Now, heaven is the hopeless thing, more hopeless than any hell. Now, if there be any comfort for all your miserable progeny of morbid apes, it must be in the earth, underneath you, under the roots of the grass, in the place where hell was of old. The fiery crypts, the lurid cellars of the underworld, to which you once condemned the wicked, are hideous enough, but at least they are more homely than the heaven in which we ride. And the time will come when you will all hide in them, to escape the horror of the stars.177

In response to this tirade, the religious character (Michael) merely points out that Lucifer’s spaceship in which they are currently flying is about to hit something. The something turns out to be St. Paul’s Cathedral, and Lucifer’s horrible esoteric picture of

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176 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 332.
the cosmos is brought back to earth by a solid materialisation of faith. Chesterton’s was a comforting vision, in part because he did not address in any detail the problem of evil, except to defend a religious conception of ethics against what he viewed as a scientific propensity to reduce morality to questions of hygiene or breeding. He did not, however, think that evil was a product of nature. Rather, nature was the stage on which great battles of heaven and hell were enacted. The possibility of human evil was what brought nature to life:

If optimism means a general approval, it is certainly true that the more a man becomes an optimist the more he becomes a melancholy man. If he manages to praise everything, his praise will develop an alarming resemblance to a polite boredom. He will say that the marsh is as good as the garden; he will mean that the garden is as dull as the marsh. He may force himself to say that emptiness is good, but he will hardly prevent himself from asking what is the good of such good. This optimism does exist - this optimism which is more hopeless than pessimism - this optimism which is the very heart of hell. Against such an aching vacuum of joyless approval there is only one antidote - a sudden and pugnacious belief in positive evil. This world can be made beautiful again by beholding it as a battlefield. When we have defined and isolated the evil thing, the colours come back into everything else. When evil things have become evil, good things, in a blazing apocalypse, become good. There are some men who are dreary because they do not believe in God; but there are many others who are dreary because they do not believe in the devil. The grass grows green again when we believe in the devil, the roses grow red again when we believe in the devil.178

Even though it was an evil of modernity to follow nature, evil itself was not nature’s product. In the same way that he shied away from subordinating the human spirit to nature, he did not source human bad behaviour from the natural world. To do so would be to accord nature too much power. Nature was fundamentally good, only because it was itself. It stayed good because, unlike people, it had no capacity to do otherwise. Evil was an act of will and imagination of which nature was not capable. Professor Lucifer’s horrifying and cruel universe could not represent a real image of nature. It could only be the product of a horrifying and cruel mind.

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The New Physics and the loss of certainty in nature

If Chesterton was disturbed by the base materialism that stripped wonder from the world, one might expect him to be comforted by the dizzying implications of twentieth century developments in physics. The new physics, personified in the popular consciousness by Albert Einstein, dissolved the ground beneath previous materialist certainties. Some religious thinkers welcomed the new physics as the ‘nemesis of materialism’, but, according to historian of science Peter Bowler, ‘philosophers and the more thoughtful theologians both urged caution when interpreting the implications of the new theories.’\(^{179}\) Although advances in physics were almost impossible for non-experts to follow, the cultural impact of these developments was profound.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, Albert Einstein was developing and disseminating the theory of relativity, comprised of two related theories: special relativity and general relativity. In 1905, he published ‘On the Electrodynamics of Moving Bodies’, which set out the foundations of special relativity. The general theory of relativity was published in 1916.\(^{180}\) In the 1905 special relativity paper, ‘Einstein calmly walked his reader through a complete reorganization of the concepts of space and time’.\(^{181}\) He showed that space and time are not absolute, but relative, and


explained his belief in the ‘complete artificiality of space and time and the interdependence of four of these dimensions with velocity’.\textsuperscript{182}

Among the general population, understanding of relativity theory was extremely limited in any technical sense, although the general flavour of relativity became widely known (or more accurately, widely discussed) after the First World War. Einstein himself became quite famous. In fact, after the results of a study of an eclipse were published in 1919, bearing out a prediction that he had made regarding the bending of light by a gravitational field, he became, according to one historian, the ‘most famous scientist of the twentieth century’.\textsuperscript{183} The \textit{Illustrated London News}, to which Chesterton contributed a regular column for decades, carried an article after this ‘eclipse test’ titled ‘A New Theory of the Universe’.\textsuperscript{184} Chesterton let the event pass without comment in his own columns for that month, although he did pen an article in the following year outlining his version of the recent history of science, starting with ‘something [that] happened towards the end of the nineteenth century’:

\begin{quote}
There were still great discoveries, but of a new kind. We were woken up at night by a loud explosion; and told there was a great discovery; and there was no conservation of energy. People rushed up to us waving their hands and saying that matter was \textit{not} composed of atoms. Many people heard of these things for the first time when they heard they were not true. But there were other things of which everybody has heard, and even these began to look dicky. Einstein has appeared; and even gravity has begun to behave with levity. Darwin is dead and his Missing Link with him; and even the evolutionist is now shy of explaining evolution. Today the scientific temper is scientific doubt. It is not, as it was, scientific doubt of religion. It is scientific doubt of science.\textsuperscript{185}
\end{quote}

A year later, Chesterton wrote that ‘[s]cience was supposed to bully us into being rationalists; but it is now supposed to be bullying us into being irrationalists.’ He

\textsuperscript{182} Everdell, \textit{The First Moderns}, p. 235.  \\
\textsuperscript{183} S.G. Brush, ‘Why was Relativity Accepted?’, \textit{Physics in Perspective}, Vol. 1, 1999, p. 196.  \\
defined the science of Einstein as ‘following our unreason as far as it will go, seeing whether the brain will crack under the conception that space is curved, or that parallel straight lines always meet.’

In the popular imagination Einstein became the ‘prophet who proclaimed that all values are merely relative and that nothing in this world is really certain’. A theory about physics became broadly relevant, and had a cultural impact that was profound. In fact, according to Peter Bowler, historian of science, there was a ‘cultural shock administered by atomic physics [and] reinforced by Einstein’s discovery of the principle of relativity’. Although ‘few understood it, […] everyone felt that the foundations of the old order of nature had been threatened’. Indeed, many thinkers of the time were persuaded that ‘the foundations of the traditional world-view had been shattered’. It seemed that nature, which Chesterton had considered at risk from being ruled by scientists too dull and materialist to support his vast imagination, had become the plaything of erratic and ungrounded speculation.

The physicist and the linguist who together produced a study of Einstein’s popular reception do not understate the intellectual shift brought about by twentieth century

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187 P. Bowler, The Non-Darwinian Revolution: Re-interpreting a Historical Myth, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1988, p. 194. Some thinkers have felt that the encroachment of science on ‘common sense’ ideas about the foundations of the world is unjustified regardless of its scientific inaccuracy. Jaki, for example, wrote that Chesterton’s ‘common sense remained rightfully suspicious of the threat which customary phrasings of relativity posed to the truth of commonsense perception as the ultimate assurance of objectivity and normalcy’: Chesterton, A Seer or Science, pp. 38-9. Here, the value of science seems to lie not in truth but in utility.
188 Bowler, The Non-Darwinian Revolution, p. 194.
190 Bowler, The Non-Darwinian Revolution, p. 194.
191 In addition to making nature more unpredictable and unreal, the new physics also supplied material for Chesterton’s other bugbear - the idea of the world’s degeneration or decay. See P. Fayter, ‘Strange new Worlds of Space and Time: Late Victorian Science and Science Fiction’, in B. Lightman (ed), Victorian Science in Context, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1997, p. 263.
physics. ‘Revolutions were occurring’, they argued, ‘which went beyond the usual temporary revolts of a younger generation against the rules of its elders. In less than three decades, these revolutions overthrew metaphysical and epistemological assumptions which had been deeply ingrained in human thinking for centuries.’

These scientific developments were reflected in some of the art and philosophy of the time in a ‘family of ideas’ in which ‘twentieth century literature grew up in the same environment with relativity, quantum theory, process philosophy, and modern art’. Nature had become a source of magic again, but not in a way that pleased Chesterton. He was not alone in this unease. Those who failed to find this new environment congenial ‘often expressed outrage and disgust over the new forms. Riots frequently occurred at exhibits and performances of modern works, mainly because the rioters did not understand what was going on. Comparable vehemence accompanied Einstein’s entry into public awareness.’ There were some, apparently, who failed to enjoy nature becoming a place of endless possibility.

Given Chesterton’s impatience with the stubborn materialism of modern science, he might have been expected to welcome Einstein’s theories with excitement. Here, after all, was a theory of the world that destroyed previous certainties about the nature of things. Chesterton was, however, a sceptic. It is not clear from his writing precisely how much he understood about discoveries in physics. He was certainly aware of them, probably from the popular press. He did not display, however, any detailed knowledge or understanding of physics and was clearly subject to the ‘popular

194 Friedman and Donley, Einstein as Myth, p. 3.
195 Friedman and Donley, Einstein as Myth, p. 8.
misconceptions’ that ‘Einstein taught everything is relative, including truth; that all observations are subjective; that anything is possible’. In any case, Chesterton knew at least enough about physics to decide that he did not like it. He wrote that

> It is really true that the perspective and dimensions of the man’s bedroom have altered; the disciples of Einstein will tell him that straight lines are curved and perhaps measure more one way than the other; if that is not a nightmare, what is? It is really true that the clock has altered, for time has turned into the fourth dimension or something entirely different [...] It is true that the pattern of the paper has changed, for the very pattern of the world has changed; we are told that it is not made of atoms like the dots but of electrons like the spirals. [...] But the vital point is, not that science deals with what we do not know, but that science is destroying what we thought we did know. Nearly all the latest discoveries have been destructive, not of the old dogmas of religion, but rather of the recent dogmas of science. The conservation of energy could not itself be entirely conserved. The atom was smashed to atoms. And dancing to the tune of Professor Einstein, even the law of gravity is behaving with lamentable levity.  

To Chesterton, the obsession with ‘facts’ that characterised his youth had been replaced by extraordinary ‘fancies’, and scientific propositions that seemed wildly improbable. In 1921, he discussed the ‘whole trend of natural philosophy in the last twenty or thirty years’ which culminated in the bottom falling out of the cosmos. Chesterton wrote that he attempted ‘no controversy about any of the particular cases’. Rather it was the ‘cumulative effect of all of them that makes the impression one of common sense.’ A critic could point out that this was a fortuitous approach given that Chesterton plainly lacked the skill to attempt any controversy in the field of physics. The overall effect of these scientific developments tended in Chesterton’s mind towards the impression that the world was being asked to believe in fairy tales again. He thought it ironic that science had disproved religious histories of nature (such as the biblical version of the formation of the earth) but now the scientific

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version of the history of the cosmos was, in Chesterton’s view, even more magical than the religious one:

Some of the most aged among you were told, a long while ago, that the world was made in six days. Most of you are now told that Modern Science contradicts this; a statement which is certainly much more of a lie than the statement it contradicts. It also shows that what these people call their Modern Science is not very modern. The ancient science, the Victorian science of the days of Darwin, did indeed entertain a queer idea that anything was credible so long as it came very slowly. As if we were to say we could believe in a hippogryph if a horse only grew one feather at a time; or in a unicorn, if its horn was not too rapidly exalted, but began as a little knob like a pimple. But that is not Modern Science, whatever else it is. The real Modern Science, the new science, for what that is worth, tends more and more to an idea of mystical mathematical design, which may well be outside time. So far as the latest science goes, the cosmos might have appeared in six days; or in six seconds; or more probably in minus six seconds; or perhaps in the square root of minus six.¹⁹⁹

It seemed that the universe was constantly shifting, and, when Chesterton came across a treatise on nature and cosmology that seemed to represent a shift back to certainty and solidity, he embraced it, gladly drafting an introduction to the new work:

It may be said that while the universe changes with the publication of each treatise on nature, it is still the same old world. New categories for old would seem to be the motto of twentieth-century philosophers or, worse still, no categories at all, for in these restless days the up-to-date mind will brook no finality. The world is supposed to be “in the making” and only a dynamic philosophy of evolution can interpret it. Thus we have events in place of entities, space-time instead of matter, and creativity or emergence in lieu of causation. Nothing standard, absolute, or fixed is admitted by our contemporaries. As Wickham puts it in The Unrealists, “There are no longer any principles save the principle that there is no principle.” Everything is relative and in evolution. In the words of G.B. Shaw “the golden rule is that there is no golden rule” and Paul Elmer More tells us that the moderns having discovered no absolute standards fallaciously assume that there are absolutely no standards.

The present volume contains a presentation of an old-fashioned point of view. It teaches a doctrine that is diametrically opposed to much that is in present vogue in non-Scholastic circles. To the mathematical philosophers who seem to be in the ascendancy today it says: A scientific method is after all a way of looking at things and any thinker or spectator is at liberty to look the way he prefers. Choose your own window. Look only to the north if you like, but do not presume to deny the existence of that which can only be seen looking

southward. The world has other than quantitative or metrical aspects. It has qualitative and substantial features.\footnote{British Library, \textit{G.K. Chesterton Papers}, Add. MS 73285, Vol. 100, introduction to \textit{Cosmology} by a D. O’Grady, 1931.}

The intellectual upheavals of these years were reflected in Chesterton’s fiction as well as his non-fiction work. His numerous novels frequently evoke the absurd, meaningless or discontinuous, but usually come to a resolution that brings sense back to the world. Most famously, \textit{The Man who was Thursday}, published in 1908 and therefore at the start of Einstein’s revolution, depicted a strange world in which nothing was as it seemed. The protagonist Syme, a secret policeman attempting to thwart a council of anarchists, finds that each member of the council that he fights is actually a false radical who is on the same side as the protagonist. The book ends when Syme returns to the ‘real’ world from what appears to have been a dream. Chesterton mused in his autobiography that many appeared to miss the point of the novel, despite it being explicitly stated on the cover: ‘hardly anybody who looked at the title ever seems to have looked at the sub-title; which was “A Nightmare,” and the answer to a good many critical questions.’\footnote{Chesterton, \textit{Autobiography}, p. 105.} Chesterton would be aghast to think of his books as modernist, and any ‘ontological discontinuity’ produced in his novels is typically explained or repudiated in endings which favoured solidity and finality.\footnote{In Chesterton’s Father Brown stories, for example, Brown can typically see through apparent impossibility to the solid reality of things when no one else can: see the stories contained in the Father Brown collections, Chesterton, \textit{The Innocence of Father Brown}, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1969 (first published 1911); Chesterton, \textit{The Father Brown Stories: Part II}, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2005 (first published between 1926 and 1936).} In this novel, nature plays tricks but the ground never gives way entirely beneath one’s feet.

The new physics, as Peter Bowler has pointed out, made it difficult for citizens of the twentieth century to hold to the view that ‘everything was rigidly predictable’.\footnote{Bowler, \textit{Reconciling Science and Religion}, p. 102.}
Chesterton, despite his appetite for the surprising, did not rejoice at this development, having decided (at the same time as concluding that Darwinism was dying) that the new metaphysical imbalance was not so much in favour of materialism and rationalism as it was in irrationality and the dissolution of the ‘real’. Chesterton had not intended, when he was complaining about materialism, to dent faith in the importance of the natural and material world, although his preoccupation with ‘Fairyland’ gives the impression that he had no faith at all in the probability of nature behaving as it should.

The miracles in which Chesterton firmly believed were meant to be the exception, rather than the rule, and if the material and the super-natural became imbalanced then the result was either rigid rationalism or the vague solipsism with which Chesterton diagnosed many leading thinkers of the turn of the century. Chesterton connected atomic physics with the engulfing self-centredness of the ‘decadence’ in which one could be sure of nothing but oneself (or perhaps not even that). His response to this problem was to energetically reaffirm the existence of the solid, natural world. Despite his position on Darwinism and eugenics he did not, however, reject natural determinism altogether. He sought a balance between heaven and earth, between gazing upwards and staying rooted in the ground. This precarious act formed the foundation of much of his politics, and of his critique of the modern world.

**Pessimism and eugenics**

While Chesterton pondered the fine balance between the material and the supernatural, he also worried about scientists exceeding their intellectual licence. He believed that science had ceased to fulfill the function of objective investigation (if it
had ever done so) and had started to draw unjustifiable ethical conclusions from nature. Chesterton saw a manifestation of this phenomenon in the apprehension about physical degeneration which characterised some intellectual circles in the first decades of the twentieth century. Scientific and medical theories about the degenerative tendency of modern society saw a rise in pessimism about the future of humanity, and also fuelled theories (such as eugenics) which prescribed scientific intervention in the lives of citizens. Here was the point that, Chesterton felt, science crossed the line. He believed that eugenics propagandists moved from scientific to political intervention, turning scientific ‘facts’ into answers to questions of values and ethics. Chesterton believed that the human world should not draw ethical conclusions from what it saw in nature, and believed that to do so would be to excise the supernatural from the material world and prostrate society before nature.

Social historian of the Edwardian era José Harris has noted the vogue amongst Edwardians for theories of degeneration and decline, manifested in the fashion for eugenics. She argued that from the 1880s onwards, ‘evolutionary thought led to a

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204 If scientists were indeed drawing ethical conclusions from nature, they were not alone in doing so. Historian John Hedley Brooke has written that ‘if the English were peculiar in the determination with which they drew moral lessons from nature, the peculiarity may lie with the English landscape, deficient as it is in earthquakes and volcanoes. It was surely more difficult to rejoice over nature as the work of benevolent design in those countries wracked by natural disasters’: Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, p. 198.

205 Peter Bowler has described the early decades of the twentieth century as a time which ‘saw thinkers from diverse backgrounds turning their backs on the hope of gaining certain knowledge. Science, the arts, and philosophy all seemed to reflect a concern that the human race had to make its own way in a basically incomprehensible world.’ The ‘mood of pessimism’ that arose from these circumstances ‘was fuelled by the sense of cultural degeneration which swept through Europe at the turn of the century’: Evolution: The History of an Idea, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2003 (first published 1983), p. 319.

206 J. Harris, Private Lives, Public Spirit: Britain 1870-1914, Penguin Books, London, 1993, p. 233. A key text on eugenics in Britain is Geoffrey Searle’s Eugenics and Politics in Britain 1900-1914, Noordhoff International Publishing, Leyden, 1976. Searle writes that, in Britain, ‘eugenics was by no means a peripheral concern, appealing to a small coterie of enthusiasts and cranks, but an important challenge to politicians and academic theorists alike’ (p. 2). Harris notes, however, that even amongst pessimistic thinkers, there was a predominance of environmental rather than biological theories - that is, that most people believed that race feebleness could be ameliorated by improving conditions rather than through
certain amount of pessimistic determinism about the human condition’. 

There was an interest during the period in what was going wrong with the English race, and what the long-term implications would be of the lessening virility and health of English men and women. This decline seemed to come with increasing industrialisation: the conditions of the slums, the lack of contact with nature, and the mechanisation of labor caused some thinkers to despair, feeling that the modern world lacked energy and virility, and that it was impossible to be vigorous human specimens in those conditions. During the Boer War (1899-1902), widespread concern arose from a finding that many British recruits for the war were considered unfit to serve. It appeared that the conditions of modernity were indeed causing the degeneration of the human race, particularly amongst its most humble members.208 This ‘fin de siècle Darwinian pessimism’ was exemplified by, inter alia, the ‘Edwardian “vogue” for eugenic ideas’.209 Social Darwinism could, in these circumstances, imply a deep pessimism rather than an optimism about the progressive nature of evolution.210

breeding: p. 233. Indeed, historian Mathew Thomson argued that although racial discourse was prevalent, characteristics of thought at the turn of the century and the decades leading up to the outbreak of war in 1939 were the ‘relative lack of interest (particularly domestically) in this issue and [...] the withdrawal from hardline positions on innate biological inequality to an emphasis instead on the cumulative influence of culture on mind’: M. Thomson, ‘“Savage Civilisation”: Race, Culture and Mind in Britain, 1898-1939’, in W. Ernst and B. Harris (eds), Race, Science and Medicine, 1700-1960, Routledge, London, 1999, p. 251.

207 Harris, Private Lives, pp. 33-4.

208 This phenomenon was observable not only in the biological sciences but also in physics. By the 1920s, in the words of historian of the ‘morbid age’ Richard Overy, ‘the principle of entropy [expressing increased disorder and randomness] promised a slow end to the universe’ – evolution turned to ‘de-evolution’ and there were dire predictions that ‘civilization was more vulnerable the more sophisticated it became, prone to unavoidable lapse into barbarism’: The Morbid Age, Allen Lane, London, 2009, p. 375. On decline and degeneration see also M. Hawkins, Social Darwinism in European and American Thought, 1860-1945: Nature as Model and Nature as Threat, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, p. 3, 219-22; J. Chamberlin and S. Gilman (eds), Degeneration, Columbia University Press, New York, 1985; and D. Pick, Faces of Degeneration, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989.


210 See Hawkins, Social Darwinism in European and American Thought. Hawkins argued that belief in historical progress is not ‘an essential attribute of Social Darwinism’. Some ‘preoccupations’ of social Darwinists including thermodynamics, the cooling of the earth, and so on were ‘wedded to evolutionary theory, giving rise to modes of Social Darwinism in which progress was either seen as a rare and contingent phenomenon of else denied outright’: p. S. Chesterton observed both pessimism and optimism arising from (what he thought of as) Darwinian theory, and was impatient with both: p. 3, 219-222.
Chesterton believed that eugenicists were allowing nature to control one’s destiny, and he believed that the idea of long-term societal degeneration defeated his (inconsistently applied) belief that one could transcend one’s nature and choose one’s own path for society.

By the turn of the twentieth century, many intellectuals were concerned about the loss of energy that seemed to be attendant on increasing industrialisation. Chesterton, while concerned about real world conditions, never accepted that material conditions like slum life and poor nutrition could cause the degeneration of the human soul. He considered the idea to be a kind of blasphemy, ceding power over the human spirit to nature. It was vital both for his faith and for his politics that the possibility of free will be maintained, although he confused his readers by also insisting that contact with nature was important. He thought that ideas of progress and degeneration were ways of approaching the world that assumed an inevitability about the course of the future that he could never accept.

Chesterton, therefore, disparaged the gloominess he sensed in his time. He believed that the human race was not declining inexorably, because this process would subordinate human agency to laws of nature. He thought it vacuous to think that a whole civilisation could degenerate, and that it was foolish to think of nations as having life-cycles as if they were biological organisms. He described as a ‘gaping absurdity’ the practice of ‘perpetually talking about “young nations” and “dying nations”’, as if a nation had a fixed and physical span of life. [...] Nations consist of people; the first generation may be decrepit, or the ten thousandth may be
vigorously.\textsuperscript{211} The idea that whole nations and their people could decline to decrepitude based on the industrialisation or technologisation of the world did not sit comfortably with Chesterton because it accorded too much determinative power to one’s proximity to nature. Although sharing a concern about the living conditions of the working classes, he did not subscribe to an idea of wholesale degeneration and rejected eugenics as a solution to the problem. For Chesterton, humans alone had will and consciousness, and the idea that physical conditions, such as proximity or otherwise to nature, could fundamentally alter the course of a person’s development was anathema.\textsuperscript{212} When he came to deal with this period in his autobiography, he wrote that ‘when I did begin to write, I was full of a new and fiery resolution to write against the Decadents and the Pessimists who ruled the culture of the age.’\textsuperscript{213} In Chesterton’s mind, this culture was attaining ascendancy, with the complicity of the majority of the scientific profession.

Eugenics won a considerable degree of support in Britain and the United States, and societies were formed whose members lobbied energetically for suitable reform.\textsuperscript{214} The movement won support from prominent intellectuals, including the Fabian leader Sidney Webb who was worried about the birth rate in less ‘desirable’ quarters. The Fabians produced a pamphlet that concluded that in ‘order that the population may be recruited from the self-controlled and foreseeing members of each class rather than of those who are reckless and improvident; we must alter the balance of considerations

\textsuperscript{212}He had clearly arrived at this opposition to gloom very early in his life – in papers dated circa 1892, he had written a list of likes and dislikes on which ‘pessimism’ was listed against ‘what dislike most’: British Library, \textit{G.K. Chesterton Papers}, Add. MS 73319B, Vol. 134, \textit{circa} 1892.
\textsuperscript{213}Chesterton, \textit{Autobiography}, p. 99.
\textsuperscript{214}Coined by Sir Francis Galton (1820-1911; a statistician, biologist and relative of Charles Darwin), the term referred to the application of theories of natural selection to human life, and to encouraging human breeding in a manner that fostered or impeded particular characteristics.
in favor of the child-producing family’. 215 A contemporary observer, Professor S.J. Holmes, calling himself the ‘sanguine eugenist’, could not imagine how one could fail to perceive that it is ‘one of the greatest misfortunes to be ill-born, especially if this should cause one to be hopelessly deformed, blind, idiotic or insane’. Conversely, it was ‘one of the greatest blessings to be well born, to inherit a fine endowment of physical, intellectual and emotional characteristics’.216 The facts seemed so obvious to the campaigner for the ‘improvement of the inborn qualities of the race’ that ‘he has difficulty in understanding how any intelligent and normally constituted person can fail to share his own enthusiasm for this cause’.217 And yet, despite these best efforts, there was opposition to eugenics even at the height of its popularity.

Holmes provided a categorisation of the opposition that had so far manifested itself to the theory. There were those who were ‘indifferent to the welfare of posterity’. There were those whose ‘prejudice in favour of egalitarianism’ led them to object to the ‘doctrine of the natural inequality of man’ on which eugenics was founded. There was the ‘fear that applied eugenics would involve a sacrifice of fundamental human rights’ (in which category Chesterton was listed), and finally there was opposition on religious grounds.218 Chesterton opposed eugenics violently, relentlessly and wordily, and produced a book-length study on the subject. He observed its rise with a combination

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215 S. Webb, ‘The Decline in the Birth-Rate’, Fabian Tract No. 131, The Fabian Society, London, 1907, p. 18. Webb offered a left-wing contribution to the debate, but there were eugenic voices from across the political spectrum and a diversity of views in the movement. In particular, debate existed about the extent of involvement the state should have in supporting eugenic policies, with some favouring ‘benign (or malign) neglect’ and others supporting ‘positive policies of selective breeding and sterilization of the unfit’: Harris, Private Lives, p. 232. There was also argument about the extent to which eugenicists called for strictly biological solutions to social problems. In fact, according to José Harris, the Edwardian eugenics movement was dominated by ‘an environmentalist model of social thought’. In other words, perceived defects in the population were ‘seen as reversible by wise social policies’: Harris, Private Lives, p. 243.


of astonishment and the weariness with which he was learning to respond to the tenacious stupidity of the powerful. Although he had a number of objections to eugenics (including religious ones) what unified Chesterton’s writings on the matter was his belief that humans should not take advice on moral questions from animals and plants. To improve the stock of the human race, eugenicists proposed breeding humans in a similar manner (in Chesterton’s mind) to the way in which animals were bred, on the assumption that what worked in animal husbandry, and in nature, would work in human society. Chesterton challenged this logic, arguing that to direct human societies in accordance with what worked in the animal world was quite a horrible confusion in which the observation of facts in nature led scientists to conclusions about what values should be applied to human society.

This shocking supposition that humans could be bred like animals signified to Chesterton a blasphemy of the highest order, partly because it indicated that humans, like animals, were part of nature and subject to its laws just as any animal was. In this sense, eugenics was simply a manifestation of a broader trend in science, to which he strongly objected.\(^{219}\) He was quick to point out the class implications of this proposition.\(^{220}\) In his experience, scientific innovations were often applied selectively and oppressively, disproportionately affecting the poor (his newspaper G.K.’s Weekly, for example, waged a long campaign against the ‘feeble-minded laws’ which the paper accused of causing children of poor families to be removed into state care on flimsy

\(^{219}\) Searle argues that ‘in a sense, eugenics in its modern form originates with Charles Darwin. The notion that man is part of the world of organic life and subject to the same processes of evolution and decay was essential to the development of the new subject’: *Eugenics and Politics in Britain*, p. 4.  
\(^{220}\) Chesterton placed a much greater emphasis on class than on race in his discussions of eugenics. When it came to race, he was, as Dan Stone noted, tempted by the idea of ‘race-memory’ or ‘racial instinct’ (although he usually eschewed ‘scientific’ race theories), and this will be further discussed in a later chapter: D. Stone, *Breeding Superman: Nietzsche, Race and Eugenics in Edwardian and Interwar Britain*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 2002, p. 116.
Chesterton was firmly convinced that eugenics, and any attempt to impose the laws of the natural world on people, was a plot against the working classes—a capitalist scheme to breed workers who were ever more efficient and more subservient.\textsuperscript{222} His narrative was that capitalists, growing disappointed with the inefficiencies of a working class depressed and unhealthy as a result of industrial working conditions, had the choice of either improving their conditions (with the distasteful possibility that this might lead to more independence on the part of the workers) or changing the nature of the workers themselves. They inevitably chose the wrong option, and eugenics was an outcome of this mistake. Chesterton explained that:

Giving property, giving leisure, giving status costs money. But there is one human force that costs nothing. As it does not cost the beggar a penny to indulge, so it would not cost the employer a penny to employ. He could not alter or improve the tables or the chairs on the cheap. But there were two pieces of furniture (labelled respectively “the husband” and “the wife”) whose relations were much cheaper. He could alter the marriage in the house in such as a way as to promise himself the largest possible number of the kind of children he did want, with the smallest possible number of the kind he did not. He could divert the force of sex from producing vagabonds. And he could harness to his high engines unbought the red unbroken river of the blood of a man in his youth, as he has already harnessed to them all the wild waste rivers of the world.\textsuperscript{223}

In a long passage in a book about the rise of eugenics, Chesterton outlined his concerns with the dominance of the scientific project in the early twentieth century,

\textsuperscript{221} The Mental Deficiency Act of 1913 was a United Kingdom law that provided for the institutionalization of the ‘feeble-minded’ and ‘moral defectives’. Chesterton campaigned strongly and wrote wittily in opposition to the Act. On the connection between class and eugenics see, for example, G. Jones, \textit{Social Darwinism and English Thought: the Interaction between Biological and Social Theory}, The Harvester Press, Sussex, 1980, p. 103. On the ‘anxieties’ associated with the rise of democracy to which eugenics was one response, see M. Thomson, \textit{The Problem of Mental Deficiency: Eugenics, Democracy and Social Policy in Britain c. 1870-1959}, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1998.

\textsuperscript{222} Chesterton also objected to the presentation of eugenics in patriotic terms, which he saw as another attempt to hoodwink people. Chesterton was scathing of the work of eugenicists such as Karl Pearson who, as Julia Stapleton pointed out, had in Chesterton’s view ‘robbed patriotism of its moral grandeur by tying it to selective breeding and international thuggery under the scientific pretext of “following nature”’: \textit{Christianity, Patriotism, and Nationhood: The England of G.K. Chesterton}, Lexington Books, Lanham, 2009, p. 69.

disputing claims that the established church had too much power over the political process. He believed that science had come to dominate discussions of values:

All I assert here is that the Churches are not now leaning heavily on their political establishment; they are not using heavily the secular arm. [...] They are not specially using that special tyranny which consists in using the government. The thing that really is trying to tyrannize through government is Science. The thing that really does use the secular arm is Science. And the creed that really is levying tithes and capturing schools, the creed that really is enforced by fine and imprisonment, the creed that really is proclaimed not in sermons but in statutes, and spread not by pilgrims but by policemen – that creed is the great but disputed system of thought which began with Evolution and ended in Eugenics. Materialism is really our established Church; for the Government will really help it to persecute its heretics. Vaccination, in its hundred years of experiment, has been disputed almost as much as baptism in its approximate two thousand. But it seems quite natural to our politicians to enforce vaccination; and it would seem to them madness to enforce baptism.

Chesterton did not wholly invent this narrative, in the sense that a few scientists did have pretensions to dominate the polity. José Harris, citing an 1874 speech of physicist John Tyndall, noted that, ‘for some, [modernity] entailed militant scientific positivism.’ She quotes Tyndall as saying that ‘We claim, and we shall wrest from theology, the entire domain of cosmological theory. All schemes and systems … which infringe upon the domain of science must … submit to its control and relinquish all thought of controlling it.’ Tyndall, however, represented a position outside the norm, one which came to seem ‘crude and untenable even to fellow positivists’. Chesteron, adept at the mobilisation of the straw man, took this extreme vision and assumed it represented the mainstream of the scientific project. Many of his biographers have let this vision of science stand and endorsed on that basis his deconstruction of its

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224 Chesterton found support for this theory from later historians, one of whom wrote that proponents of scientific naturalism in particular ‘sought to displace the existing clerical and literary intellectual elite. A culture based on science must replace one founded on religion’: F.M. Turner, Between Science and Religion: the Reaction to Scientific Naturalism in Late Victorian England, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1974, p. 34.
225 Chesterton, Eugenics and other Evils, p. 345.
226 Harris, Private Lives, p. 35.
227 Harris, Private Lives, p. 35.
arrogance and totalitarian pretensions. And yet, many other citizens of Chesterton’s time perceived what he did not: that ‘Scientific modernity was indeed never a history of unalloyed progress; science provoked profound ambiguity and was popularly understood to do so.’

Chesterton thought that a belief in the material nature of the world, which excised the spiritual from the discussion, fuelled the appetite to reform the world according to this unimaginative outlook. The appropriation of nature into ethical arguments also, in Chesterton’s view, restricted the free will of humanity:

Scientific materialism binds the Creator Himself; it chains up God as the Apocalypse chained up the devil. It leaves nothing free in the universe. And those who assist this process are called the “liberal theologians.”

By entertaining the possibility that not only physical characteristics but also behavioural traits could be at least partially controlled, eugenics eliminated both human spirit and free will, which Chesterton thought was a ‘humiliating heresy’. He did not accept that eugenics represented a triumph of the human will over biological circumstance, except to the extent that the will of the tyrannous minority was prevailing over the humble majority. Their individuality, which was Chesterton’s concern, was to be crushed by the so-called ‘experts’ who were to give themselves the power (belonging properly to God) to judge the worthiness of their fellows.

Although Chesterton was by no means alone in disparaging eugenics (the Catholic Church for example was important in opposing it, and in ‘holding out’ against

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228 Overy, The Morbid Age, p. 4.
229 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 218.
materialism more generally),\textsuperscript{231} he was more unusual in the extent to which he identified eugenics as an imperative of capitalism. The impacts of industrialisation on the poorer classes, which caused some of his fellow citizens to give up entirely on the poorer classes, led Chesterton instead to give up on industrialisation. Chesterton believed that the correct order of things, in which people occupied a position in the cosmic hierarchy superior to other creatures, had been disrupted by modernity. Nature, interpreted through science, was coming to dominate. Eugenics was just another example of the application of natural laws (mediated by science and the imperatives of capitalism and industrialisation) to people.

**Darwinism and the humanist critique of science**

Chesterton believed that Darwinism, like eugenics, had become another means of the domination of people by scientists. In *The Everlasting Man*, he described some of the scientific conclusions drawn from fossil records, noting that even very early humans had the habit of drawing on walls, whereas animals have never acquired a taste even for bad art:

> It is useless to begin by saying that everything was slow and smooth and a mere matter of development and degree. For in the plain matter like pictures there is in fact not a trace of any such development or degree. Monkeys did not begin pictures and men finish them [...] the wild horse was not an impressionist and the race-horse a Post-Impressionist [...] All we can say of this notion of reproducing things in shadow or representative shape is that it exists nowhere in nature except in man; and that we cannot even talk about it without treating man as something separate from nature.\textsuperscript{232}

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\textsuperscript{232} Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, pp. 166-7. Chesterton treats ‘man’ as an exception. For another account of Chesterton’s view of the difference between people and other animals, see Ker, G.K. Chesterton, p. 208.
This was the premise on which Chesterton based his critique of evolution: that humanity was something separate from nature. Although he did not tend to follow the technicalities of scientific developments very closely, like many of his countrymen he found the rise of Darwinism and the theory of natural selection impossible to ignore and in his case he thought it extremely disturbing. He followed this topic attentively enough to become involved in an argument about the defensibility of the relevant scientific theses, and he made a project of undermining the idea of human evolution and all that was implied by it.

Chesterton’s anger about the advent of evolution was not matched by any attention to detail, especially when it came to terminology. Chesterton did not differentiate between evolution, the theories of Darwin and the application of evolutionary and Darwinian theories to social problems. He was also careless about distinguishing ‘Darwinism’ from what is broadly termed ‘social Darwinism’. If anything, he saw the latter as so innate to a belief in the former that there was little point marking a distinction between them. Broadly (although he never explicitly defined his terms) Chesterton used ‘evolution’ and ‘Darwinism’ to mean both a process where living beings are modified over generations through natural selection, as well as a social process of defining and selecting desirable characteristics and imposing them on the

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233 There is disagreement over the definition of the term ‘social Darwinism’, and scholars also contest ‘the relationship between social Darwinism and Darwin himself, broadly dividing between those who see a connection and those who insist on a radical difference between the work of the English naturalist and the ideological uses to which his ideas were put’: Hawkins, *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought*, p. 3. Hawkins defines and distinguishes Darwinism and social Darwinism, and argues that a Darwinist world view has four crucial elements: (i) biological laws governed the whole of organic nature, including humans; (ii) the pressure of population growth on resources generated a struggle for existence among organisms; (iii) physical and mental traits conferring an advantage on their possessors in this struggle (or in sexual competition), could, through inheritance, spread through the population; (iv) the cumulative effects of selection and inheritance over time accounted for the emergence of new species and the elimination of others’: p. 31. He argues that social Darwinist thought has a ‘crucial fifth assumption, namely that this determinism extends to not just the physical properties of humans but also to their social existence and to those psychological attributes that play a fundamental role in social life, e.g. reason, religion and morality’: p. 31.
population at large. He assumed in his discussions that Darwinism relied on an ‘is – ought fallacy’. That is, he accused proponents of defending the position that existing patterns of power and privilege are necessarily the preferred modes of structuring society because humanity has ‘evolved’ that way.\(^{234}\) Humans ‘are’ a certain type of being as a result of evolution, therefore that is how they ‘ought’ to be. The latest phase of evolution is, by virtue of being the most recent, the most preferred state of the human person.

Ironically, given his own inattention to the details of evolutionary theory, Chesterton believed evolution manifested a formlessness and lack of clarity that made it difficult to pin down and therefore hard to dispute. Chesterton argued that ‘evolution really is mistaken for explanation’.\(^{235}\) He believed that it was the sort of popular theory that prompted knowing nods in parlour rooms, despite a general lack of detailed understanding of the theory amongst even the educated populace. Evolution had ‘the fatal quality of leaving on many minds the impression that they do understand it and everything else; just as many of them live under a sort of illusion that they have read the *Origin of Species*’.\(^{236}\)

Chesterton felt that evolution implied that the direction of humanity was set in nature, and that therefore human society lost its ability to decide for itself what its values were and in what direction it wished to move. Evolution implied, to Chesterton, a complacent belief that the progress of human society could be left to nature.

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\(^{234}\) This confusion has generally not been addressed in the literature, although one scholar has pointed out that Chesterton’s understanding of the biological sciences was quite ‘simple-minded’: Bowler, *Reconciling Science and Religion*, p. 397. Chesterton was not the only one to be reckless about the terminology. The terms ‘evolution’, ‘Darwinism’, and ‘natural selection’ were used popularly with little consistency or regard to accuracy: Bowler, *Evolution*, p. 179.

\(^{235}\) Chesterton, *Everlasting Man*, p. 156.

\(^{236}\) Chesterton, *Everlasting Man*, p. 156.
Chesterton’s theory of joy, on the other hand, was founded on happiness in the face of *contingency*. It was gratitude for life as an unexpected and undeserved gift, not a comfortable self-satisfaction in the knowledge that society would continue to progress effortlessly towards perfection. Life was an extraordinary privilege and a miracle, and came therefore with an obligation to understand its value. To fulfil one’s potential and obligation to God, one had to work to make one’s life mean something. To make this work meaningful, one had to allow the possibility that the world could go wrong, because otherwise there was no need to work at anything. Chesterton was determined to defend society’s right to ruin things, to hinder itself, and, most importantly, to start again. He rejected, therefore, what was to him the logical conclusion of evolution – that human beings were changing and improving, not as a result of anything they wilfully did, but because it was their nature. In a book of essays published early in the 1920s, Chesterton wrote of the inattention and inactivity bred from relying on evolution to move the world forward:

> It is a common and recurrent mood to regard man as a hopeless Yahoo. But it is not a natural mood to regard man as a hopeful Yahoo, as the Evolutionists did, as a creature changing before one’s eyes from bestial to beautiful, a creature whose tail has just dropped off while he is staring at a far-off divine event. This particular compromise between contempt and hope was an accident of Tennyson’s time, and, like his liberal conservatism, will probably never be found again.237

The transformation ‘from bestial to beautiful’ was a Pyrrhic victory, won at the cost of free will. The beauty of the end product was shallow, arriving as it did while the transformed were gazing absently into space and letting nature run their affairs. Scientists posited a world in which humans were unable to determine their own path, rendering them no more advanced than any other of Earth’s creatures - an insult that was compounded by the frankly nefarious ideological uses to which Chesterton

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believed this doctrine was being put. Evolution therefore became for Chesterton another fundamental confusion between facts and values. It was assumed that humans were changing over time, and that the newest manifestation of the human form was the best simply because it was the most recent point on the evolutionary road.

Chesterton believed that Darwinism implied an acceptance that whichever human form arose from nature was better, because more evolved, than what had gone before. This belief necessitated an acceptance (at least according to Chesterton’s hasty logic) that the whole human being was improved from previous models, and therefore that functions like the soul could improve over time. This idea that nature could, over time, make people better versions of themselves was discordant with Chesterton’s belief in original sin. In his book *Heretics*, published in 1905, he wrote that Thomas Carlyle, the Scottish writer, had once said that men were mostly fools. Chesterton added that ‘Christianity, with a surer and more reverent realism, says that they are all fools. This doctrine is sometimes called the doctrine of original sin. It may also be described as the doctrine of the equality of men.’

As Bury argued contemporaneously with Chesterton in the 1920s, original sin represented

an insuperable obstacle to the moral amelioration of the race by any gradual process of development. For since, as long as the human species endures on earth, every child will be born naturally evil and worthy of punishment, a moral advance of humanity to perfection is plainly impossible.

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For Chesterton, it was impossible to think that humanity would progress towards a future in which it had attained perfection. Each generation was born fallen, and would have to commence the lonely process of improving themselves alone. Chesterton was bound to reject evolution, because he believed it assumed the human race would evolve into a more perfect species, morally as well as physically. It would do so according to some plan, not of God, but of nature: a terrible blasphemy.

**Nature, science and the loss of democracy**

Chesterton was aware of the political implications of assigning meaning to nature. He believed, as Maisie Ward observed, that the inflation of the value of science in the modern world saw it elevated above other disciplines. In mediaeval times, Ward wrote, ‘science was fascinating as Philosophy’s little sister: it was to Philosophy what Nature was to man.’ Just as to St. Francis of Assisi nature was a ‘little lovely, dancing sister’, science was to St. Thomas Aquinas the ‘handmaid of philosophy’. In modernity, however, these proportions were considered ‘fantastic’. Huxley ‘used Nature as a word for God. Physical Science had ousted Philosophy.’

Chesterton believed that the ascendancy of science in public policy manifested itself in the class implications of Darwinism. Like in the case of eugenics, he believed that the association between society and nature allowed political and scientific elites to prescribe biological solutions for political problems, and that those solutions were more often imposed on the poor than the rich. This frustration is illustrated in the *A Short History of*...

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240 Chesterton constructed a straw man of progress, in that he assumed that the aim of progress was the attainment of utopia or perfection. He argued that perfection was impossible and therefore that progress was a chimera.

241 Ward, Gilbert Keith Chesterton, p. 531.

242 In Chesterton’s mind, the affront to human dignity represented by evolution was strongly associated with capitalism. Darwinism and capitalism jointly represented a significant moral challenge, made all the
England, published in 1917. Chesterton described how he had met, ‘in his wanderings’, a man who was raised in the servants’ quarters of a big house, ‘fed mainly on its leavings and burdened mostly with its labours’. The story of evolution added up to an attempt to dupe this man in a process which Chesterton sarcastically described as follows:

I know that his complaints are stilled, and his status justified, by a story that is told to him. It is about how his grandfather was a chimpanzee and his father a wild man of the woods, caught by hunters and tamed into something like intelligence. In the light of this, he may well be thankful for the almost human life that he enjoys; and may be content with the hope of leaving behind him a yet more evolved animal. Strangely enough, the calling of this story by the sacred name of Progress ceased to satisfy me when I began to suspect (and to discover) that it is not true. I know by now enough at least of his origin to know that he was not evolved, but simply disinherited. His family tree is not a monkey tree, save in the sense that no monkey could have climbed it; rather it is like that tree torn up by the roots and named “Dedischado,” on the shield of the unknown knight.244

In this story, it is common humanity who is duped by scientific story-telling. The position of the average, non-elite, person is defended - their status justified - by soothing scientific stories that function as implicit vindications of the status quo. Evolution, in Chesterton’s mind, undermined the possibilities for political action. In a discussion of the Victorian poet Tennyson, who he called ‘par excellence the poet of popular science’, Chesterton claimed that he

grasped at Evolution, not because it was definite, but because it was indefinite; not because it was daring, but because it was safe. It gave him the hope that man might one day be an angel, and England a free democracy; but it soothed

more difficult because the doctrines were unchallenged by political and economic elites. Chesterton’s much-loved Father Brown, discoursing in a respectable drawing-room, charged his interlocutors with taking Capitalism for granted; ‘or rather the vices of Capitalism disguised as a dead Darwinism’. ‘Do you recall’, Father Brown demanded, ‘what you were all saying in the Common Room, about life being only a scramble, and nature demanding the survival of the fittest, and how it doesn’t matter whether the poor are paid justly or not? Why that is the heresy that you have grown accustomed to, my friends; and it’s every bit as much a heresy as Communism: Chesterton, The Scandal of Father Brown, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2005 (first published 1935), p. 486. Here was a specific example of meaning assigned to nature justifying political positions.

243 Sic. Chesterton is referring to Desdichado, the unknown knight in Walter Scott’s 1820 story, Ivanhoe.
him with the assurance that neither of these alarming things would happen just yet.\textsuperscript{246}

Chesterton challenged this position, identifying the political implications of the appropriation of scientific facts. In doing so, he bolstered his own reputation as a democratic thinker.\textsuperscript{247}

Chesterton’s reputation in this respect is partly founded on his refusal to countenance the placement of human beings within the natural world. Chesterton believed that human beings were universally and uniquely set apart from the rest of the world. They were not entirely independent of it – they had a responsibility to care for it and relied on harmonious relations with it – but they could not be fully contained within it. Chesterton believed that all the theories that he labelled ‘Darwinism’ embedded human beings within nature, and therefore that all that was distinctively human could be explained by material forces without the need for any super-human intervention.\textsuperscript{248}

Chesterton’s belief that humans were separate from nature was applied to everyone, and it therefore gave rise to a universal democratic spirit. This expansiveness spawned some surprising ideas on, for example, the French Revolution. Chesterton, despite his

\textsuperscript{246} Chesterton, The Uses of Diversity, p. 31.
\textsuperscript{247} Oddly for one who so firmly rejected parliamentary democracy, Chesterton has developed a reputation as a defender of democracy. In spite of his sympathy for Italian fascism, for tradition and authority as guides for modern decision making, and for feudalism and aristocracy, he is held up as a defender of the ‘common’ people, or the ‘secret people’ of England that the powers that be would be wise not to forget. Indeed, one of Chesterton’s better known poems is ‘The Secret People’, which reads in part: ‘Smile at us, pay us, pass us; but do not quite forget / For we are the people of England, that never has spoken yet’ (published in Poems, Burns and Oates Ltd, London, 1917, pp. 120-4). Emile Cammaerts argued that Chesterton ‘stood for true democratic principles, the protection of individual freedom, small business, and small property, against the encroachments of capitalism and State control’: The Laughing Prophet: The Seven Virtues and G.K. Chesterton, Methuen, London, 1937, p. 31. See also Oddie, Chesterton and the Romance of Orthodoxy, p.191; and St. John Ervine, ‘Some Impressions of My Elders: G.K. Chesterton’, North American Review, Vol. 214, 1921, p. 536.
\textsuperscript{248} He was not alone in this belief. The English historian J.W. Burrow noted in his 1968 book on evolutionary theory that an implication of the theory was that ‘man, by his kinship with the animals, is part of nature, not outside it’: Evolution and Society: A Study in Victorian Social Theory, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1968, p. 114.
reverence for tradition and authority, announced himself a friend of Robespierre. Discussing the Eighteenth century Irish politician Edmund Burke, commonly regarded as a founding thinker of modern Conservatism, Chesterton’s surprising view was that ‘in the quarrel over the French Revolution, Burke did stand for the atheistic attitude and mode of argument, as Robespierre stood for the theistic’. Supposing? Because, according to Chesterton, Robespierre was a universalist, and Burke was not. Burke said, according to Chesterton, that ‘I know nothing of the rights of men […] but I know something of the rights of Englishmen.’ There, according to Chesterton, is the ‘essential atheist’. If the French Revolution stood for ‘abstract and eternal justice, beyond all local custom or convenience’, then Burke stood for the opposite, specifically the application of justice and privilege only to the Englishmen with whose rights Burke was narrowly concerned. Chesterton’s belief that the human race as a whole was different to, and better than, nature led him towards a sense of democracy and universality. Once he arrived at this point, Chesterton took a flying logical leap so that he could establish an argument that evolution is incongruous with the inherent dignity of each human being, and drew a direct link between Darwinism and the French Revolution. According to Chesterton, Burke attacked Robespierre’s ideas, not with ‘the old mediaeval doctrine of jus divinum’, but with ‘the modern argument of scientific relativity; in short, the argument of evolution’. Chesterton claimed that by distinguishing between different types of person, Burke was positing a form of evolutionary theory. ‘His argument’, Chesterton claimed,

is that we have got some protection by natural accident and growth; and why should we profess to think beyond it, for all the world as if we were images of God! We are born under a House of Lords, as birds under a house of leaves; we

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249 Chesterton, What’s Wrong with the World?, p. 203.
250 Cited in Chesterton, What’s Wrong with the World?, p. 203.
251 Chesterton, What’s Wrong with the World?, p. 203.
252 Chesterton, What’s Wrong with the World?, p. 203.
live under a monarchy as niggers live under a tropic sun; it is not their fault if they are slaves, and it is not ours if we are snobs.\footnote{Chesterton, \textit{What’s Wrong with the World?}, p. 203.}

Claimed by a conservative history website as a ‘Conservative thinker \textit{par excellence}’\footnote{Conservative History Journal blog, accessed on 22 July 2012 at http://conservativehistory.blogspot.com.au/2012/05/happy-birthday-to-g-k-chesterton.html.} Chesterton nonetheless launched an attack on evolution that simultaneously refuted and relied on precepts associated with the Enlightenment – and assaulted Burke’s Conservatism along the way.

The appearance of this type of Christian universalism in Chesterton’s work is not surprising. It was not a new idea and had indeed, according to sociologist Milan Zafirowski been ‘considered and rejected’ by the Enlightenment.\footnote{M. Zafirowski, \textit{The Enlightenment and its effects on modern society}, Springer, New York, 2011, p. 45.} Part of this process of rejection, Zafirowski argues, is that the Enlightenment both ‘initially appropriates and eventually transcends Christian theological egalitarianism and universalism’.\footnote{Zafirowski, \textit{The Enlightenment and its effects on modern society}, p. 45.} It achieves this transcendence by ‘landing’ universalism from the heavenly realms into the material world. Christianity was once accused by Eighteenth century Romantic Jean-Jacques Rousseau of being other-worldly to the point that the defence of liberty becomes both impossible and pointless and the injunction to ‘turn the other cheek’ becomes an invitation to passively accept tyranny.\footnote{A. Melzer, ‘The Origin of the Counter-Enlightenment: Rousseau and the New Religion of Sincerity’, \textit{The American Political Science Review}, Vol. 90(2), June 1996, p. 347.} The ‘deepest goal of the Enlightenment critique of religion’, according to Arthur Melzer, was ‘to re-attach men’s hearts to the earth, to their political communities, and to themselves.’\footnote{Melzer, ‘The Origin of the Counter-Enlightenment’, p. 345.} To reground Christian universalism in the Earth meant to apply the universal conception of rights favoured by the Enlightenment to political questions – something which Rousseau did not think traditional Christianity capable of doing. It also meant avoiding the trap of
allowing injustice on Earth to reign in the expectation of a cosmic balancing of the books in the afterlife. Chesterton’s response to this theological dilemma was to reaffirm the importance of nature, but as a realm subordinate to the human spirit. Chesterton believed that exploring humanity under the umbrella of scientific investigation of nature excised the universal dignity and unique value of each person, and allowed people to be divided into scientific categories which in turn helped justify treating classes of persons differently from one other. The judgements about who belonged in these different categories and how they should be valued were, in effect, value judgements, concealed within long scientific arguments inaccessible to the average person on the street.259

For Chesterton, Darwin represented the scientific arm of a complex of ideas that well predated the scientist himself. Both Burke and Darwin were simply different embodiments of the same idea. So, ‘long before Darwin struck his great blow at democracy, the essential of the Darwinian struck his great blow at democracy’260 - the 'essential of the Darwinian' being Burke. Burke said ‘in effect’ that

Man [...] must adapt himself to everything, like an animal; he must not try to alter everything, like an angel. The last weak cry of the pious, pretty, half-artificial optimism and deism of the eighteenth century came in the voice of Sterne,261 saying “God tempers the wind to the shorn lamb.” And Burke, the iron evolutionist, essentially answered, “No; God tempers the shorn lamb to the wind.” It is the lamb that has to adapt himself. That is, he either dies or becomes a particular kind of lamb who likes standing in a draught.262

259 According to his habit, Chesterton presented his argument with rhetorical flourish and scant evidence. He gave, for example, no indication that Burke based his particularist approach to the world on a belief that the English had ‘adapted’ to their environment by ‘natural accident and growth’ (as opposed, say, to a belief that the English had been chosen particularly by God to fulfil their role in the world).

260 Chesterton, *What’s Wrong with the World?*, p. 203.

261 Laurence Sterne (1713-1768), the Irish novelist whose character Maria in the novel *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy* (The Floating Press, Auckland, 2010) had journeyed across Italy and France without shoes and without money. She could not explain how she had managed it, except to say that God tempered the wind to the shorn lamb: pp. 201-2.

262 Chesterton, *What’s Wrong with the World?*, p. 203.
Chesterton believed that the only way to defend the inherent dignity of humanity was to separate people from nature. Chesterton believed that the consideration of people as part of nature was the top of a slippery slope leading down to a society in which people were viewed as explicable, malleable and ultimately at the service of others’ ends.

Writing on Chesterton and science, philosopher Stephen Clark devoted much of his argument to suggesting that Chesterton was correct to be suspicious of Darwinism, because, in Clark’s words, what ‘Darwinism and Malthusianism actually meant in living political thought and practice was that justice did not matter.’ Evolution, for both Clark and Chesterton, stole any transcendent meaning from human ethics by implying that philosophy was a product of biology. The best manifestations of the human spirit – morality, art, and so on – lost their force, becoming merely the latest fancy evolutionary development. It seemed impossible to Chesterton that the vivid and soaring beauty of the human mind was something that could be explained with reference only to nature. Chesterton believed that humans were not simply more advanced than animals, but were categorically different from them. He argued that

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263 Stephen Clark is one of the few who has written at length on Chesterton’s attitude to science, in this case through an analysis of Chesterton and science fiction. Clark, an academic who has specialised in moral philosophy, the philosophy of religion and the status and rights of animals, describes himself as a modern Christian Platonist and is sceptical of evolution. In G.K. Chesterton: Thinking Backward, Looking Forward, Clark accepts Chesterton’s claim that his opposition to Darwinism was based on a defence of universal ethical standards. Clark wrote that ‘the Darwinism that [Chesterton] opposed was an ethical and metaphysical doctrine that denied the ancient standards of justice, love, and chastity. It was also a doctrine that the ruling classes chose to impose upon the public’: Thinking Backward, p. 130. Clark is not concerned to show whether the ‘Darwinism that Chesterton opposed’ bore any relationship to the theories propounded by Darwin himself, or even to the theory as understood by the general population. The ‘real’ science is not important to this argument, as it wasn’t to Chesterton himself. Clark accepted at face value, as many others have, Chesterton’s version of the science. In fact, in a strangely post-modern way, the ‘real’ science ceases to matter at all – only the meaning that Chesterton derived from it is important. Clark himself remains suspicious of Darwinism, writing that ‘the neo-Darwinian theory of evolution through natural selection is now widely believed, and maybe rightly so. It isn’t known for certain’: Thinking Backward, p. 138.

It is the simple truth that man does differ from the brutes in kind and not in
degree; and the proof of it is here; that it sounds like a truism to say that the
most primitive man drew a picture of a monkey and that it sounds like a joke to
say that the most intelligent monkey drew a picture of a man. Something of
division and disproportion has appeared; and it is unique. Art is the signature of
man.\textsuperscript{265}

Clark put it that, for Chesterton, ‘the mystical sense of human dignity was enough to
prove that we should not imitate nature, nor consider ourselves – or others – as
animals to be bred, controlled, or vivisected’.\textsuperscript{266} Chesterton’s approach to nature, in
short, reveals to a large extent his objection to evolution. He refused to accept that
humans were part of the natural world.

Chesterton believed that the unjust social outcomes of embedding humans in nature
were so obvious that they were bound to be rejected by the mass population. Almost
as soon as he heard of it, Chesterton became persuaded that common sense would
require the rejection of evolutionary theory. He was convinced of a deep democratic
instinct in the English population that would reflexively rebuff the scientists. This
‘subconscious popular instinct’ was not merely piqued at ‘the grotesque notion of
visiting one’s grandfather in a cage in the Regent’s Park’. Rather, the imagined uprising
arose from a ‘deeper and more valuable’ instinct, namely the feeling that ‘when once
one begins to think of man as a shifting and alterable thing, it is always easy for the
strong and crafty to twist him into new shapes for all kinds of unnatural purposes’.\textsuperscript{267}

By the 1920s, Chesterton felt that a backlash against science had started. After its
invasion and domination of public discourse, the public had started to wonder whether
the scientific paradigm was enough to make a fulfilled life. Added to this feeling was

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{265} Chesterton, \textit{Everlasting Man}, p. 166.
\footnotetext{266} Clark, \textit{Thinking Backward}, p. 142.
\footnotetext{267} Chesterton, \textit{What’s Wrong with the World?}, p. 204.
\end{footnotes}
the profound popular impression that scientific materialism, at the end of its hundred years, is found to have been used chiefly for the oppression of the people. Of this the most evident example is that evolution itself can be offered as something able to evolve a people who can be oppressed.268

Chesterton envisaged that this revolt would come suddenly, reversing the theory’s previous high status:

As Darwinism came with a rush, so anti-Darwinism has come with a rush; and just as people who accepted evolution could not be held back from embracing natural selection, so it is likely enough that many, who now see reason to reject natural selection, will not be stopped in their course until they have also rejected evolution. They will merely have a vague but angry conviction that the professors have been kidding them.269

With hindsight’s clear view, it becomes obvious that Chesterton gravely underestimated the force of the scientific case for evolution, although he was right about the existence of a strong campaign against its acceptance.270 He predicted the popular rejection not only of natural selection, but also of evolution itself. This was supposedly inevitable once the populace understood the fundamentally anti-democratic premise of this strand of science.271 Chesterton saw himself as a defender of the ordinary folk of England, and imagined that he held in trust the aspirations and interests of these ‘little people’. He presumed that the application of Darwinism (or pseudo-Darwinism) to social questions would make its ethical bankruptcy so clear to these common citizens of England that they would reject it out of hand. Despite his valiant efforts, however, evolution has (mostly) survived Chesterton’s and others’ efforts to discredit it. But in Chesterton’s imagined battle against Darwin, his choice of weapon and the terrain on which he chose to fight remain interesting, and important in understanding the source of his objection to evolution.

269 Chesterton, Fancies versus Fads, p. 214.
270 Bowler, Evolution, p. 277.
271 Chesterton, Fancies versus Fads, p. 214.
Conclusion: Keeping science in its place

Chesterton thought that, in its best moments, science could facilitate a return to common sense, but more often it inhibited it. In defying popular wisdom, however, it risked the loss of widespread acquiescence to its findings. He seemed to hope that he could choose to endorse certain types of science and attack others, and paid little attention to the incoherence that approach produced. Chesterton firmly believed that if science were doing its job properly, its results would accord with the everyday observations of nature by the ‘man on the street’. According to this unexalted view of science:

The deepest researches seem to end where the most superficial impressions would of themselves begin. That is, in a faith in the average; and a doubt even about the exceptions.

Thus, our simple pride in having a monkey for a father has been of late so complicated and so drawn out, with doubts about the process and difficulties about the time, that the old Darwinian solidity has been almost eaten away: and we come, in the main, back to a vision of man akin in many ways to the other animals, but mysteriously separated from them: which is what any average heathen or Christian would have seen from the beginning.

In short, according to Chesterton, the populace did not like being descended from monkeys and therefore was bound to back away from Darwinism and from any scientific theories which underestimated the common sense of the population at large. Chesterton rejected the Enlightenment premise that through scientific endeavour,

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272 Chesterton used the following as an example of this phenomenon in an unpublished chapter that was to have been part of *Eugenics and other evils*: ‘[The principle of regression] holds that in the long run the strongest tendency is a tendency to return to the average; whatever the achievements or disasters of individuals may be. Thus Galton [Francis Galton, see above section on eugenics] maintained (what the experience of many of us will support) that the child of a genius is seldom or hardly ever another genius. He also maintained (what our own researches have left comparatively unexplored) that the child of an unnaturally stupid man is slightly more intelligent than his father’: British Library, *The Chesterton Papers*, Add. MS 73252, Vol. 67. Chesterton thought this theory held up quite well to the scrutiny of common sense and was thus prepared to support it.

273 Except when it came to miracles, which Chesterton also believed in.

274 British Library, *The Chesterton Papers*, Add. MS 73252, Vol. 67, deleted chapters from *Eugenics and Other Evils*. These deleted chapters further develop Chesterton’s argument linking eugenics to capitalism.
humanity could develop the tools to demystify the world. He held this confidence to be a conceit of the modern age that could only end in humiliation. He rejected a range of scientific theories because he wanted to bring enchantment back to the world, against the current of secularism and rationalism. To support his critique of science, Chesterton argued that all of humanity was categorically separate from nature. He opposed his view to what he saw as the logical conclusion of some strands of science – that humans are embedded within nature and are therefore similar in important respects to animals. He, on the other hand, believed that people were special and different from animals and were universally endowed, by virtue of their humanity, with a special status. He accused those who failed to support this premise of being atheists.

Chesterton’s campaign to break nature’s hold over the spirit of scientific enquiry led him to the prejudice that any scientific study of nature was the first step on the path to a subjected and robotic human community. This anxiety left him unable to support the scientific endeavour and undermined his claim that it was not science itself, but the distortion of science, that he opposed.275 Chesterton’s status as a campaigner against myth and superstition should not overshadow his own reliance on mythology. Many critics have let Chesterton’s caricature of science stand for the whole of the discipline. Chesterton allowed sub-disciplines of science, such as eugenics, to act as stand-ins for the whole of scientific practice. Those who have defended his approach to science have frequently failed to notice or challenge this intellectual sleight-of-hand.276 Few respectable minds would today be caught defending the compulsory and punitive

275 Although Jaki, as always, is prepared to take Chesterton at his word, concluding that ‘in this century overawed and mesmerised by the marvels of science … nothing is more tempting than to make much of Chesterton’s occasional barbs at science.’ However, Jaki continues, ‘Chesterton had in fact an exalted notion of science and of great scientists’: Chesterton, Seer of Science, pp. 44-5.
276 See, for example, Clark, Thinking Backward, Looking Forward.
forms of eugenics of Chesterton’s time or the ‘feeble-minded laws’ against which he campaigned so vociferously. But Chesterton did not confine his criticism to outrageous abuses of scientific authority. Despite professing great respect for ‘serious’ scientific work, he rarely noted examples of it. He did not trouble himself overmuch to distinguish between ‘science’ and ‘scientism’ – alongside eugenics on the list of scientific work that he ridiculed were natural selection, physics as theorised by Einstein, and palaeontology. Chesterton often appears as a lone campaigner against prevailing intellectual trends, excising him from the complex of ‘counter-modernity’ thinking in twentieth century Britain, which included many individuals and institutions who criticised science (not the least being the Catholic Church itself). But towering figure though he was, Chesterton was but one amongst many critics of modernity. Before Chesterton took the stage in the early 1900s, science had already been subjected to intense and sustained criticism.

The triumph of the Enlightenment in Britain was neither complete nor unambiguous, but Chesterton’s detractors and supporters alike assume that it is by allowing Chesterton’s definition of science to stand. To elaborate, Chesterton’s obstinate refusal to accept many scientific conclusions, representing pig-headedness to some

277 Margaret Canovan uses a typical formulation, writing that ‘Chesterton formulated his own views in opposition to those current at the time’: G.K. Chesterton: Radical Populist, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, London, 1977, p. 26. Doubtless true, this statement nevertheless neglects those that influenced Chesterton and those that shared his position – not least among whom were other Catholics. This sense of singularity was itself a part of the identity of those of Chesterton’s persuasion. Amongst Catholics, for example, there was a sense of defensiveness and a self-perception that the Church was the ‘only remaining bastion against the rising tide of materialism’: Bowler, Reconciling Science and Religion, pp. 322-3. Contemporary depictions of Chesterton as a solitary and brave defender of tradition are possibly more revealing of recent narrators’ continuing sense of besiegement against prevailing forces than it is of Chesterton’s philosophy.

278 See Roy MacLeod, who has argued that ‘Between 1880 and 1895, perhaps 40 years after the natural sciences had begun to enter the secondary school and university curricula of most European countries, an unusual alliance of clerical, academic, and philosophical interests subjected science to bitter attack’: ‘The “Bankruptcy of Science” Debate: The Creed of Science and its Critics, 1885-1900’, Science, Technology and Human Values, Vol. 7(41), p. 2.
and a shining light of common sense to others, is used to prop up a linear conception of the spread of ‘Enlightenment’ in England whereby the Enlightenment (ominously or bounteously according to taste) spreads a defined set of precepts against the stubborn but ultimately unsuccessful opposition of Chesterton and friends. A straight intellectual pathway is assumed, along which the English mind progressed. For better or worse, human society accumulated knowledge, shed ignorance, and evolved towards a more Enlightened state of mind. This symbolism of spreading radiance is both powerful and misleading. It is a trope that has recently been challenged by revisionist British historian J.C.D. Clark, who criticised the tendency in historical discussions of Enlightenment in England to measure ‘the triumph of a new mind set’ against ‘a parody of preceding ages’ credulousness in their subscription to an old one.’ While Clark does not dispute the ‘development of astronomy and physics’ or ‘the spread of statistical analysis and actuarial science’, he does pose a question: ‘are historians entitled to say that the optimists won a battle that they had so defined, and that the world view available to educated Englishmen between Newton and Darwin rested on securely ordered certainties?’ Clark gives the following answer to his own question: ‘[i]t will be argued here that the observable pattern of belief was on the contrary diverse, predictability and unpredictability being locked in unresolved conflict’. Chesterton perceived himself to be a minority voice against an overwhelming force of modernity. He constructed straw moderns with whom to do battle and has been obligingly assisted in this task by later defenders only too keen to accept his characterisation of modernity as homogeneous, strident and extremist. This

280 Clark, ‘Did the Enlightenment fail?’, p. 560.
process has hampered the visibility of the diversity and unpredictability that Clark described.

The fact that Chesterton’s understanding of science was limited by his failure to read very much of it did not aid his campaign against it.\textsuperscript{281} The advent of the new physics made it even harder, even for the most diligent non-expert observers, to follow the developments of science. From Chesterton’s perspective, this added layer of complexity also constituted a reversal of the scientific paradigm. It shed its optimistic nineteenth-century claims to certainty and measurability in the face of the strange new world of general relativity. In Ward’s words, ‘the “sure conclusions” of Science that had stood foursquare in [Chesterton’s] boyhood had become like a dissolving view.’\textsuperscript{282} Nature became an unreliable companion on the road to understanding.

Chesterton’s knowledge of science was limited, and necessarily so. He was a commentator, not a practitioner. But although his objection to the science was primarily ideological,\textsuperscript{283} he (like many of evolution’s sceptics)\textsuperscript{284} made an attempt to defeat the theory on its own scientific terms. He was hindered in this effort, however, by his lack of scientific understanding. In the 1920s, a controversy arose partly in the pages of \textit{G.K.’s Weekly} between Hilaire Belloc and H.G. Wells. Belloc tried to demonstrate that the science in favour of Darwinism was flawed, and Chesterton’s paper concluded that

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\item \textsuperscript{282} Ward, \textit{Gilbert Keith Chesterton}, p. 623.
\item \textsuperscript{283} Chesterton, as we have seen, argued that he opposed Darwinism on scientific rather than ideological grounds. There were scientific arguments against evolution, many of which ‘seemed plausible at the time’: Bowler, \textit{Evolution}, p. 178. There is scant evidence, however, that Chesterton was interested in this scientific debate.
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The third round in the duel between Mr. H.G. Wells and Mr. Belloc has ended in a rather sensational stroke. It seems to us perfectly obvious that Mr. Belloc has rammed his original proof up to the hilt, not only through a hole in the science of Mr. Wells, but (what is much more arresting and astonishing) through an equally gaping hole in the science of Sir Arthur Keith.285

Constrained by lack of knowledge, Chesterton also appeared hampered by prejudice when it came to judging the fruit of scientific labour. Although he was careful never to reject science solely on theological grounds, and professed general respect for scientific endeavour, it is hard to find examples of his support for individual scientific projects or discoveries.

He was addicted to sweeping generalisations, proposing in an essay on ‘Science and Religion’ that ‘physical science is like simple addition: it is either infallible or it is false.’286 This essay drew the comment from a historian of science and religion in the twentieth century that Chesterton ‘proposed a vision of science almost as simple-minded as [Hilaire] Belloc’s’ – sharp criticism indeed.287 Another historian of religion and science, Don O’Leary, concluded that ‘despite their proficiency in the art of polemics, Belloc and Chesterton had a poor understanding of the natural sciences, and they were out of touch with new developments in biology.’288 Chesterton’s errors arose in part from confusing his own lack of knowledge with fundamental unknowability, and his critique of science was limited both by this blind spot, and by his failure to acknowledge his own ideological bent while he was busy criticising everyone else’s.

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287 Bowler, Reconciling Science and Religion, p. 397.
288 O’Leary, Roman Catholicism and Modern Science, p. 132.
Despite (or perhaps because of) these impediments, Chesterton was steadfast in his activism, tirelessly campaigning against alleged political manipulation of the scientific process. Chesterton, rhetorically at least, defended the principles of free enquiry and universal equality that he felt were under attack by letting human nature be controlled by nature itself. Writing in defence of the Enlightenment, philosopher Tzvetan Todorov described a process where Enlightenment principles were violated by ‘moralism’ and ‘scientism’. He considered the latter to be a doctrine ‘born with modernity’. Scientism assumes that the world is ultimately knowable and can therefore be ‘transformed to meet the objectives that we set for ourselves, which are themselves deduced from our knowledge of the world. In a sense it assumes that the good derives from truth’.²⁸⁹

Many years earlier Chesterton also accused scientists of appropriating nature to draw the ‘ought’ from the ‘is’ and explained that scientists were thereby betraying their own standards of reason and enlightened exploration. Chesterton was not only making the point, true to the point of banality, that not every act performed in the name of science was scientific to any meaningful degree. His observations also imply that these perversions of the ideals of science were endemic in – and in fact characteristic of – the modern world. Nature was the rhetorical tool that allowed this problem to arise, offering to scientists an explanatory paradigm that could simultaneously explain all phenomena with material forces, and explain human beings themselves. Locked in contradiction with itself, Chesterton could not imagine the world on its current path ever living up to inherited Enlightenment standards. Only by rejecting the scientific

project and letting certain mysteries remain mysterious could humanity avoid the nightmares that he thought were taking hold of the world.
Chapter Three
The Distributist Solution

As Chesterton grew more frustrated with mainstream politics, he and his comrades developed a movement of their own – Distributism. Distributism was one among a number of inter-war political groups, often called ‘back to the land’ movements, concerned with the re-organisation of society away from the industrial and towards a simpler way of living. One major theme in Distributism was the role of nature and particularly the land. Theoreticians constantly puzzled over the best way to parcel it up, how to make it productive, and how to live in harmony with it. To Chesterton and his Distributist friends, ‘nature’ (and the idea of ‘living naturally’) signified sometimes an aspiration, sometimes a threat, and occasionally a straw man.

As yet, there has been no work dealing in depth with nature and landscape in Distributism. In general, secondary sources on Distributism are sparse, with much of the history written by members of or sympathisers with the group, and there is no detailed study that specifically addresses Distributism and the land outside short articles produced for Distributist-oriented organs such as the Catholic Land Association’s The Cross and the Plough. Work written by these supporters and

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291 A series of articles by Distributist Harold Robbins appeared in this journal in 1948. The major Distributist sources are the books by Chesterton and Bello, and G.K.’s Weekly. Key documents include some written by Distributists: Anthony Cooney for example understands Distributism as a kind of neo-romanticism and gives an outline of the development of Distributist thought that lists its influences as
fellow-travellers usually takes the form of basic factual history, and there is little substantive historiographical work. Despite the influence that Distributism had on the organic movement, and, according to historian Jay P. Corrin, its profound importance as a manifestation of Catholic social thought there has been no detailed historical study concerned specifically with the Distributists. Apart from these sympathetic texts, many histories mention Distributism only in passing, as part of a broader study of back-to-the-land ideologies. Commentators frequently dismiss Distributism as a manifestation of collective nostalgia or as an insignificant lament for the past from people ill-equipped to function in modernity. Although a more detailed study of Distributism is soon to appear, the field remains nascent. An examination of the attitude towards nature that Chesterton incorporated into his Distributism challenges existing assumptions in the historiography of a movement that, although it attracted thousands at the time, now seems ‘one of history’s dead-ends: a “back-to-the-land” movement which got as far only as suburbia’.  

Cobbett, Ruskin, the Pre-Raphaelites and the Romantics: A. Cooney, ‘Distributism’, Gild of St. George, 1986, p. 35. Outside the circle of Distributists or sympathisers, sources are sparse. In 2000, Dennis Hardy in his Utopian England: Community Experiments 1900-1945 described Chesterton and Belloc as ‘archetypal English eccentrics’ and their movement as one aiming to ‘turn the tide’ against the drift of the world: p. 217.  

The development of Distributism

The road that Chesterton took towards Distributism involved political detours. He explored and ultimately rejected other movements and eventually came to understand Distributism as the best possible alternative. In 1924, he drafted a letter accompanying a proposal related to G.K.’s Weekly. ‘The next few years,’ he wrote, ‘will be emphatically a field for an alternative to Socialism. My friends and I have always believed in such an alternative to Socialism; and we now believe that our time has come.’

During the years before the Great War, Chesterton with his friend Belloc and his younger brother Cecil Chesterton were vociferous political warriors. They became increasingly isolated from mainstream party politics, and ever surer that parliamentary democracy was a bankrupt paradigm. Chesterton felt that any distinctions between the parties were overwhelmed by their common penchant for the centralisation rather than the dispersal of power. Movements of the ‘right’ and ‘left’ contained no space for families to lead their lives autonomously: authority rested in corporations for capitalists and in the state for socialists. Distributism was constructed as a form of shelter from these prevailing political winds, and after many years of searching for a political home he found the place that he had belonged all along - if he had only known what to call it. Later he said that even amongst his first tentative political steps

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297 British Library, G.K. Chesterton Papers, Add. MS 73230, Vol. 45, Letter addressed to ‘Dear Sir’, November 1924. In fact, he had not ‘always’ believed in such an alternative. In the 1890s, he called himself a socialist and later described his commitment thus: ‘I called myself a Socialist; because the only alternative to being a Socialist was not being a Socialist. And not being a Socialist was a perfectly ghastly thing. It meant being a small-headed and sneering snob, who grumbled at the rates and working-classes; or some hoary horrible old Darwinian who said the weakest must go to the wall’: The Autobiography of G.K. Chesterton, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2006 (first published 1936), p. 114. His socialism did not last long, however; by the early 1900s he was feeling uneasy in his politics. He called himself a socialist and imperialist, but, he wrote later, ‘nothing of my heart or my imagination went with these wide generalisations’ and when the Boer War commenced it ‘woke me from my dreams like a thunder-clap, but like a lightning-flash revealed me to myself’: Chesterton, Autobiography, p. 115. He supported the Liberals in the 1902 and 1906 elections, but then split from them as well.
as a socialist, he ‘was what has since been called a Distributist, though I did not know it’. 298

Although Distributism as a distinct political movement was not underway until the mid-1920s, 299 many of what were to become its principles were articulated well before that time. G.K. Chesterton and Belloc attracted attention with articles that they wrote in *The New Age* which challenged Fabian socialism and shared some principles with guild socialism. 300 Belloc’s *Servile State*, published in 1912, outlined his opposition to the centralising nature of the modern state. 301 In the book, Belloc diagnosed a basic instability in the manner in which capitalism undermined ‘all possible systems of law’ and denied sufficiency and security to citizens. 302 The pre-Great War background of a heightened concern over corruption and ‘parliamentary rot’, anti-statism and labour unrest helped to foster receptivity to the notion of a Distributive State, 303 with a land politics deemed more authentic and less alienated.

The *New Witness* ceased publication after Cecil Chesterton (a soldier) died of illness in a military hospital a few days after the end of the Great War. It was not until the

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299 The movement was launched in 1926, a year of significant labour unrest. The Distributists, via their newspaper, were on the side of the strikers.
300 Hardy, *Utopian England*, p. 215. *The New Age*, edited from 1907 to 1922 by Alfred Orage, was a radical weekly paper.
301 *The Servile State*, T.N. Foulis, London, 1912, pp. 5-6. The tensions thus created led to an intolerable situation to which Belloc presented ‘the only three possible solutions:-
(a) Collectivism, or the placing of the means of production in the hands of the political officers of the community.
(b) Property, or the re-establishment of a Distributive State in which the mass of citizens should severally own the means of production.
(c) Slavery, or a Servile State in which those who do not own the means of production shall be legally compelled to work for those who do, and shall receive in exchange a security of livelihood’: pp. 5-6.
302 Belloc, *The Servile State*, pp. 5-6. Crucially, Belloc argued for the reestablishment of a Distributive State, because he believed that such an arrangement had existed in England’s past, but had been disrupted by the unsettling process of industrialisation.
303 Corrin, *Catholic Intellectuals*, p. 113.
advent of *GK’s Weekly*, a paper which Chesterton launched in 1925 to perpetuate his brother’s legacy, that an organised movement arose under the name of Distributism.\(^{304}\)

The primary principles of the League, as described by Chesterton,\(^{305}\) were twofold:

1. That the only way to preserve liberty is to preserve property; that the individual and the family may be in some degree independent of oppressive systems, official or unofficial.
2. That the only way to preserve property is to distribute it much more equally among the citizens; that all, or approximately all, may understand and defend it. This can only be done by breaking up the great plutocratic concentration of our time.\(^{306}\)

*The Outline of Sanity*, which appeared in 1926,\(^{307}\) is the clearest outline of Chesterton’s own understanding of Distributism. The book contains Chesterton’s views on big business, the land, machinery, and emigration. It outlined his defence of private property and decentralisation, based on a rejection of both capitalism and socialism.\(^{308}\)

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305 Notwithstanding his presidency of the League, Chesterton’s own role in Distributism has been disputed. In 1970, author and conservative politician Christopher Hollis alleged that Chesterton was only associated with the Distributist movement by the accident of his younger brother’s death in the war, and that when he spoke on matters of social reform, ‘he spoke only as an obedient disciple, repeating what Belloc told him to repeat’: C. Hollis, *The Mind of Chesterton*, University of Miami Press, Florida, 1970, p. 15. Chesterton, though, appeared to have a thoughtful and active political commitment in his own right, and published his own book on Distributism, based on articles that he had written for *GK’s Weekly*. Belloc himself disputed claims that Chesterton was a mere follower: *On the Place of G.K. Chesterton in English Letters*, Sheed & Ward, London, 1940.


307 *Methuen & Co.*, London.

308 Capitalism, Chesterton averred, ‘ought to be called Proletarianism. The point of it is not that some people have capital, but that most people only have wages because they do not have capital’: Chesterton, *Outline of Sanity*, p. 6. Socialism, on the other hand, represented for Chesterton an
Chesterton wanted to map a ‘third way’ between the perils of socialism and capitalism. The foundation of his proposal was the restoration of a sense of proportion in life. Chesterton maintained that both ‘big business’ and ‘state socialism’ tended toward homogeneity.\(^{309}\) Without action, he prophesied that business and government would merge together into a ‘business government’ which would combine ‘everything that is bad’.\(^{310}\) He offered as an alternative a programme in which action could be taken to restore in Britain a sense of the intrinsic worth of small, private property. The key to Chesterton’s Distributism in this respect was heterogeneity: the value of keeping things small. Chesterton believed that an ideal society should contain a proper mixture of trades, crafts, land use and lifestyles, reflecting the individual tastes of citizens responsible for them.\(^{311}\) This economic strategy would be mirrored in the distribution of land, which would be parcelled out in small blocks, reducing the anonymity and disconnection that arose from large landholdings, and allowing for more diverse approaches amongst individual farmers and agriculturalists. The land distribution process would help achieve a society in which the ordinary citizen lived in closer proximity to nature.

Between them, League members produced an impressive array of books, pamphlets and articles. It was perhaps the sheer volume of words that poured from the Distributists that has led commentators to conclude that the core of Distributism was

‘extreme enthusiasm for authority’ in which nothing exists outside of the state, and a socialist government is one ‘which in its nature does not tolerate any true and real opposition. For there the Government provides everything; and it is absurd to ask a Government to provide an opposition’: Chesterton, *Outline of Sanity*, p. 8.

\(^{309}\) Despite their opposing political beliefs, Chesterton believed that capitalism and communism were inextricably linked: ‘there is no longer any difference in tone and type between collectivist and ordinary commercial order; commerce has its officialism and communism has its organization. Private things are already public in the worst sense of the word; that is, they are impersonal and dehumanized. Public things are already private in the worst sense of the word; that is, they are mysterious and secretive and largely corrupt.’ Chesterton, *Outline of Sanity*, p. 218.

\(^{310}\) Chesterton, *Outline of Sanity*, p. 218.

obscure.\textsuperscript{312} One area in which Distributism was indeed intellectually evasive was the mechanism by which the ‘distributive state’ would be enacted. One reason why the political structure of Distributism was left relatively undeveloped was that, for Chesterton and many of the Distributists, the distributive state was ‘natural’ to humankind. Anthony Cooney, a Distributist who in 1986 wrote a short history of the movement, argued that “Distributism is not an academic theory, but the commonsense of the Folk, who know instinctively that “Property like muck, must be spread”.’\textsuperscript{313} Cooney self-consciously separated himself from discourses that seemed too ‘academic’ or ‘intellectual’ and claimed instead that Distributism was not an abstract theory, but a natural state of being.

Lacking a coherent alternative political structure, many Distributists – including Chesterton – were prepared to consider the merits of fascism.\textsuperscript{314} In Chesterton’s case,

\textsuperscript{312} Chesterton’s sister-in-law Ada Chesterton, for example, concluded that Distributism was a ‘pious hope and no more’ (A. Chesterton, The Chestertons, Chapman and Hall, London, 1941, p. 282). If her husband Cecil Chesterton had lived, she believed, ‘the dogma of the theory would have been thrashed out. He was too keen a rationalist to tolerate loose thinking. But without his help Distributism has remained a roseate hope lacking shape or form, and quite without first principles’ (p. 123). For her part, biographer Maisie Ward was frustrated that Distributists were never organised enough to focus on ‘constructive work towards a Distributist world’ instead of quarrelling amongst themselves: Ward, Gilbert Keith Chesterton, p. 520. Later, historian of utopian experiments Dennis Hardy summed up the movement as ‘no more than a talking shop’ which ‘failed to respond [to its gathering popular support] with even a promise of action’, instead turning ‘inwards to spend its energies on such hypothetical issues as whether there would be a place for machinery in their ideal world’: Hardy, Utopian England, p. 218. In these debates, Chesterton habitually acted as an unofficial moderator, encouraging argument and keeping the pages of the Weekly available for continuation of the controversy: Corrin, Catholic Intellectuals, p. 182.

\textsuperscript{313} Cooney, ‘Distributism’, p. 35.

\textsuperscript{314} Many supporters of Chesterton have sought to defend the reputation of his movement from allegations of pro-fascism. Academic and Catholic Owen Dudley Edwards, for example, wrote that ‘to see Distributism as being close to economic fascism because of “its rejection of both capitalism and socialism” is to state that because yellow is not red or blue, it must be green’: O. D. Edwards, ‘Book Review: Gilbert: The Man who was G.K. Chesterton by Michael Coren’, in A. Nichols (ed.), Chesterton and the Modernist Crisis, The Chesterton Review Press, Saskatchewan, 1990, p. 222. Edwards is certainly right that rejection of capitalism and socialism does not equate to fascism. Jay P. Corrin has recently pointed out, however, that by the 1930s it was not just the most intransigent Distributists who were abandoning democracy. Corrin noted that ‘in August 1935 Chesterton could write that as things now stand, he was prepared to examine the offerings of fascism. Parliamentarianism, on the other hand, was not worth looking into at all’: Corrin, Catholic Intellectuals, pp. 174-5. Even earlier in fact, in 1926, Chesterton wrote that ‘I believe I have a very open mind about Fascism’. G.K. Chesterton, ‘Straws in the
fascism was interesting to the extent that he felt it was anti-modern (he thought that
Nazism, on the other hand, was a product of German modernity and despised it). Passionately critical of parliamentary politics from early on, Chesterton eventually abandoned any idea of achieving change through parliamentary processes. Although Distributism is usually placed on the radically right side of the political spectrum, absent from most Distributist writings is a persistent strain of the ‘blood and soil’ attitudes found in some of the groups discussed by historian Dan Stone in his 2004 study of right-wing back-to-the-land movements. In part, the absence of the connection between the land and race is a result of the particular kind of Catholicism that influenced the group. In 1939, Viscount Lymington (later Earl of Portsmouth), who was a prominent rural writer and member of the English Mistery, a far right back to the land group, wrote that the ‘English Catholics have a strong sense of Boden, but

Wind: The Mystery of Mussolini’, G.K.’s Weekly, Vol. 3(58), Saturday 24 April 1926, p. 112. The most useful summary of Chesterton’s attitude to fascism comes from Tom Villis’ recent contribution to the history of Catholicism. Villis writes that ‘The best way, therefore, of conceiving Chesterton and Belloc’s thought is as a rival form of anti-materialist and anti-parliamentary politics which intersected with fascism, particularly in the polarised world of inter-war Europe. As such it could provide a rigorous critique of some aspects of fascism – particularly the eugenics, racism and social Darwinism in Nazism and the violent Futurism of Italian Fascism – while remaining sympathetic to other aspects of the movement’: T. Villis, British Catholics and Fascism: religious identity and political extremism between the wars, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2013, p. 78.

315 This is perhaps one reason why Chesterton was not attracted by Mosley’s British Union of Fascists (BUF). Mosley, according to his biographer Robert Skidelsky, thought of the fascists as ‘the modern movement’: Oswald Mosley, Macmillan, London, 1975, p. 257. See also R. Skidelsky, ‘Reflections on Mosley and British Fascism’, in K. Lunn and R. Thurlow (eds), British Fascism: Essays on the Radical Right in Inter-War Britain, Croom Helm, London, 1980, pp. 78-99. Chesterton received a letter from the BUF in 1933 asking him to consider joining; there is no evidence that he did: British Library, G.K. Chesterton Papers, Add. MS 73240, Vol. 55, Letter from representative of the BUF to Chesterton, 29 August 1933. He was, however, ambiguous about the BUF, seeing some overlap in objectives between them and Distributism: see Villis, British Catholics and Fascism, p. 88.

316 Early in the life of his paper, Chesterton was already writing that Liberal politicians ‘have only themselves to thank’ for the rise in Fascism in Italy, and he had ‘precious little sympathy’ with the victims of Fascism: Chesterton, ‘Straws in the Wind: Our Critics: The Case against Mussolini’, G.K.’s Weekly, Vol. 2(51), March 6, 1926, p. 619.

317 Corrin, Catholic Intellectuals, pp. 174-5.

318 Much writing from the Distributist movement is found in the pages of the journal G.K.’s Weekly; once the movement had become an official League, there were also pamphlets and other material published. Additionally, important sources for the ideas of Distributism are Belloc’s The Servile State, and Chesterton’s The Outline of Sanity.

seem to be forbidden to have any sense of Blut.\textsuperscript{320} Chesterton and most of the other prominent Distributists did indeed have a sense of the importance of being ‘rooted’ to the landscape, but largely failed to make a link between the authenticity that comes from a close connection to the soil and the kind of racial theories that had currency amongst other contemporary groups such as the Array.\textsuperscript{321} After Chesterton died, the League continued to drift rightward and ultimately declined, although there have been various attempts to resurrect Distributism in the UK and overseas.\textsuperscript{322} Distributism remains mostly ignored except by those sympathetic either to the movement itself or to Catholicism.

The country and the city

There was division within the Distributist movement over the extent to which the movement’s utopian vision could accommodate the urban. This seemingly aesthetic debate relates in fact to a fundamental ideological question: did Chesterton repudiate all of the products of Western industrial development, or was he prepared to come to a compromise? The dispute is not easily settled: Chesterton’s descriptions of the countryside were evocative, but his political programme for land reform was quite non-specific. Despite his devotion of an entire chapter of \textit{Outline of Sanity} to the ‘land

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  \item \textsuperscript{320} Viscount Lymington, letter to H.J. von Houten, dated 2 August 1939, from files of English Array correspondence, F182, Wallop Archives, Hampshire Record Office, ref. HRO/15M84/F182. This material was kindly provided to me by Philip Conford.
  \item \textsuperscript{321} This is not to say that anti-Semitism, for example, wasn’t widespread amongst Distributists. References to the ‘Jewish problem’ occur frequently in the pages of \textit{G.K.’s Weekly} and occasionally an article would appear that more overtly echoed the racialist sentiments of the Distributists’ cousin movements. For example, an unsigned ‘note of the week’ in 1926 discussed ‘The Dying English Race’, worrying that ‘the birth-rate is now lower in London than in any other part of England, and in England than in any other part of the world.’ The note urged that ‘we repent, as individuals and as a nation’, as ‘the Russians, the Germans and the Jews are increasing and multiplying, and […] there will be plenty of them to run England when the last Englishman […] dies.’ Vol. 2(48), February 13, 1926, p. 38.
  \item \textsuperscript{322} Corrin, \textit{Catholic Intellectuals}, p. 213.
\end{itemize}
question’, readers are left confused about the specifics of Chesterton’s view on the matter. His first concern in *Outline of Sanity* was to assure his readers that

we do not propose that every acre should be covered with cows; and do not propose to eliminate townspeople as they would eliminate rustics. [...] [E]ven my ideal, if ever I found it at last, would be what some call a compromise. Only I think it more accurate to call it a balance.323

Chesterton said that his views on the land represented a trade-off - a settlement in which the peasantry would be re-established, but those who preferred to remain city-dwellers could do so. To accomplish this compromise, Chesterton proposed the reclamation of land for the peasantry (the details of this operation were left undisclosed) leaving those who were not suited to a life on the land to live in the cities. He also believed that the adoption of Distributist principles would affect the city as well as the country, writing in the *Weekly* that

we do not think that all citizens can be peasants and [...] we are quite ready to face the parallel problem of the city. We propose to follow the present series with another similar series on the problem of applying our principle to industrial or at any rate to urban life.324

The proposed series was apparently abandoned. Chesterton was also interested in a balanced approach to the development of the landscape: ‘I do not want the nearest human house to be too distant to see; that is my objection to the wilderness. But neither do I want the nearest human house to be too close to see; that is my objection to the modern city.’325 Chesterton indicated that there were specific qualities inherent in rural and in city life that made each necessary to a balanced society.

To Chesterton, country living represented the historical norm in England. He firmly believed that the ‘League for the Restoration of Liberty by the Distribution of Property’

(as the Distributist League was more grandiosely known) presented ‘the social idea which nine men out of ten would probably in normal circumstances regard as normal’.\textsuperscript{326} Peasant societies naturally flourished in ‘places where there had previously been a distributive civilisation’.\textsuperscript{327} Metaphorically, it was the peasants and villages themselves that were the natural products of the English countryside, and only when they were absent could industrialism spread like a weed.\textsuperscript{328} Thus, to Chesterton, what was natural included humans. He believed that there were certain natural products of humanity that belonged in the English landscape, but other manifestations of the human race were alien.

Chesterton was of the view that plenty of people would be willing to return to a pre-industrial state, if they had the opportunity (although he based this opinion on intuition rather than statistics).\textsuperscript{329} Chesterton guessed that there existed a desire – especially amongst those souls who had been discarded in the nastiest slums of the big cities – to exchange their urban lives for ones lived on the land. The rural life that Chesterton had in mind seemed so obvious - so natural - that it was evident that people would migrate towards it if given the chance. Chesterton attributed part of this latent desire to a rejection of urban rootlessness, which proliferated in the ‘drifting and dehumanised conditions of the majority of mankind in modern industrialism’.\textsuperscript{330} He claimed that

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{326} Chesterton, Outline of Sanity, p. 11.
\item \textsuperscript{327} Chesterton, Outline of Sanity, p. 11.
\item \textsuperscript{328} In the matter of the peasantry Chesterton exhibited his usual disregard for the facts of history. He took it as a given that there had been in England’s past a strong and flourishing peasantry, and seemed to believe that somewhere in England the spirit of this peasantry still lurked, ready to be reawakened.
\item \textsuperscript{329} On the question of whether England had any potential or actual peasants, he wrote that ‘like all questions of this sort, it cannot be answered by statistics. Statistics are artificial even when they are not fictitious’: Outline of Sanity, p. 122.
\end{itemize}
[T]he number of people who would like to get out of the tangle of mere ramifications and communications in the town, and get back nearer to the roots of things, where things are made directly out of nature, I believe to be very large.\textsuperscript{331}

Chesterton attributed a ‘simplicity’ to rural life that was also ‘complete’. Farming entailed the kind of completeness that came from knowing the causes of things (for example, by following the process of breeding from birth, to death and ultimately to consumption by humans, preferably the farmer and his family).\textsuperscript{332} Despite the lightheartedness of his account of the problem of incompleteness (Chesterton invoked the example of a cockney who wanted milk from a clean shop and not a dirty cow),\textsuperscript{333} he sincerely believed that rootedness, connectedness to the land, and simplicity and self-containment of life were goods in themselves that would ultimately increase human happiness. With a ‘core’ of ‘simplicity [and] completeness’ restored to England, modern civilization could rediscover some of the unity that had been lost.\textsuperscript{334} It was possible, although less likely, to find this sense of connection away from rural areas. The ‘integrated’ existence that Dermot Quinn has described as an ideal of the Distributist movement depended on a ‘dignity of frugal self-sufficiency and independence’. This existence was founded in ‘elementary things - property, self-respect, provision for kith and kin’.\textsuperscript{335}

Chesterton emphasised constantly the ‘use’ of the countryside, and in both his fictional and non-fictional writings, he rarely focussed at length on unpopulated or unmanaged landscapes. He usually described landscapes that were not picturesque or romantic but utilitarian. Chesterton was relatively uninterested in ‘wilderness’

\textsuperscript{331} Chesterton, \textit{Outline of Sanity}, p. 123.
\textsuperscript{332} Chesterton, \textit{Outline of Sanity}, p. 133.
\textsuperscript{333} Chesterton, \textit{Outline of Sanity}, p. 133.
\textsuperscript{335} Quinn, ‘Distributism as Movement and Ideal’, pp. 158-9.
landscapes. He could see ‘no objection, in itself, to England being built over by men, any more than there is to its being (as it is already) built over by birds, or by squirrels, or by spiders’, provided that human civilisation was not so thickly distributed that humans were forced to live in too close a proximity to each other. Chesterton refused to accept the embeddedness of humans in nature, but also used the language of nature to describe what is right. Chesterton assessed nature according to its value for people, subject to the responsibility of humankind to care for it:

The old morality, the Christian religion, the Catholic Church, differed from all this new mentality because it really believed in the rights of men. That is, it believed that ordinary men were clothed with powers and privileges and a kind of authority. Thus the ordinary man had a right to deal with dead matter, up to a given point; that is the right of property. Thus the ordinary man had a right to rule the other animals within reason; that is the objection to vegetarianism and many other things.

In keeping with this utilitarianism, Chesterton imagined the English countryside as a very unromantic realm. In fact, Chesterton believed that it was cities that were romantic, not wilderness landscapes:

For us real old country people the country is reality; it is the town that is romance. Nature is as plain as one of her pigs, as commonplace, as comic, and as healthy. But civilisation is full of poetry, even if it be sometimes an evil poetry. The streets of London are paved with gold; that is, with the very poetry of avarice.

The physical manifestations of Distributism (small farms, small-scale enterprise, diverse economies) grew naturally in England, and most easily in areas historically populated by the kinds of societies that Chesterton favoured. Chesterton’s attachment to the country was sincere, but sometimes conceptually incoherent and mutable.

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336 Chesterton, Alarms and Discursions, p. 164.
337 Chesterton, Outline of Sanity, pp. 227-8.
338 Chesterton, Alarms and Discusions, p. 145.
His tributes to country life notwithstanding, the categorisation of Chesterton as a champion of rural England has been disputed by historian Anna Vaninskaya, who observed recently that Chesterton’s ‘favoured locales in his fiction and essays [...] were urban, and his metaphors more often than not London-based’.\footnote{A. Vaninskaya, ““My mother, drunk or sober””: G.K. Chesterton and patriotic anti-imperialism’, History of European Ideas, Vol. 34, 2008, p. 546.} Chesterton had been embracing the ‘poetry of London’ for some time before the advent of Distributism, writing in his first published collection of essays that a ‘city is, properly speaking, more poetic even than a countryside, for while nature is a chaos of unconscious forces, a city is a chaos of conscious ones.’\footnote{Chesterton, The Defendant, R.B. Johnson, London, 1901, p. 159.} The possibility for poetry in the city is demonstrated in his novel \textit{The Napoleon of Notting Hill}, in which a young native of Notting Hill raises an army to defend it from the imperialist encroachments of modern business interests. One of the characters of the novel, King Auberon, reviews an imaginary volume of poetry called ‘Hymns on the Hill’, which celebrated ‘the poetry of London as distinct from the poetry of the country.’\footnote{Chesterton, \textit{The Napoleon of Notting Hill}, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1982 (first published 1904), p. 66.} The third-person narrator of the novel notes that, although this sentiment was ‘sometimes exaggerated, and sometimes artificial’, it was not ‘without a great truth at its root, for there is one respect in which a town must be more poetical than the country, since it is closer to the spirit of man’.\footnote{Chesterton, \textit{Napoleon of Notting Hill}, p. 66.} Only when the cities became overcrowded, as Chesterton believed they undoubtedly had done in modern times, did they become a symbol of the decadence from which he believed his England was suffering. ‘It is not humanity that disgusts us in the huge cities’, he wrote, ‘it is inhumanity. It is not that there are human beings; but that they are not treated as
such. We do not, I hope, dislike men and women; we only dislike their being made into a sort of jam.\(^3\)

In Chesterton’s mind the ideal English vista would encompass not only undeveloped countryside, but also manifestations of civilisation. He was as uninterested in romantic wilderness as he was in any ‘back to nature’ ideology that rejected civilisation in favour of nature. He did not accept a definition of ‘natural’ that failed to include the effects of human activity. Chesterton believed that a life lived closer to the land and to nature could provide the kind of unity and completeness lacking in modern city life, but his beliefs in this respect were complicated by his own attachment to the urban world, and the fact that he connected romance, poetry and beauty primarily with human constructions rather than with the wilderness. One of the things he admired in the poet Robert Browning was that (in Chesterton’s mind at least) Browning was the type of man who would be ‘quieted and exalted’ by the ‘rowdiest waggonette of trippers’, not by escaping from the waggonette into a ‘small wayside field’.\(^4\) Browning was happy in human company, not in the quiet of nature.

Chesterton professed a great love for London, and genuinely enjoyed the time he spent there. Sometimes, however, he wrote of London as if it were a tumour growing on the English landscape, the physical evidence that capitalism had terminally sickened. Chesterton seemed to object not to London itself, but London run rampant. Allowed to grow out of balance, London would become a place where capitalism too would spin out of control and become an artificial growth on England’s skin, ‘a

\(^3\) Chesterton, *Alarms and Discursions*, pp. 164-5.

monster that grows in deserts’. This problem would arise where there was no flourishing natural system to arrest the spreading disproportion. Chesterton claimed (providing scant evidence) that

industrial servitude has almost everywhere arisen in those empty spaces where the older civilization was thin or absent. Thus it grew up easily in the North of England rather than the South; precisely because the North had been comparatively empty and barbarous through all the ages when the South had a civilisation of guilds and peasants.346

Chesterton did not believe that, in themselves, cities could corrupt a person’s soul, although conditions there could certainly make it difficult to lead a ‘complete’ life. He argued, however, that even in over-crowded inner-city housing people could form attachments and import individuality into their lives. As evidence for this claim, he offered the ‘Limehouse affair’, in which some of London’s notorious slums were cleared and their inhabitants moved to flats. Chesterton argued that policies like these impeded the possibility of returning to the land:

We are told again and again that the slum-dwellers of the big towns cannot merely be turned loose on the land, that they do not want to go on the land [...]. And then, when a whole crowd of them want to keep chickens, we force them to live in flats. [...] When these very hopeless slum-dwellers do actually set all their hopes on a rural occupation, which they can still practise even in the slums, we tear them away from that occupation and call it improving their condition.347

Chesterton’s stated belief in free will meant that he believed that people could transcend their circumstances. Cities could not, in themselves, cause people to become degenerate or corrupted. He freely adopted the unique virtues of the city - the creative products of the cacophony of city voices - and balanced these modern virtues against traditional notions of the rural, stability and order to establish an ideology based on compromise and contradiction.

345 Chesterton, Outline of Sanity, p. 11.
346 Chesterton, Outline of Sanity, pp. 11-2.
347 Chesterton, Outline of Sanity, p. 121.
Vaninskaya’s proposition that Chesterton favoured the city over the country is at odds with the judgements of some other historians. Chesterton did, however, situate many of his novels in an urban setting and he wrote glowingly of the romance that one could have in the city; on the other hand, stories such as The Flying Inn presented an idealised version of the English countryside steeped in tradition and relatively untouched by modernity. In fact, Chesterton’s reaction to country and city depended less on the location itself and more on the extent to which citizens were able to live rooted and connected lives regardless of where they lived, although his point of view on this issue remained confused and changed in emphasis over time.348 Jay P. Corrin argued that ‘[a]ll Distributists were anti-urban; the metropolis removed individuals from “the life-blood of the soil.”’349 It is certainly true in Chesterton’s case that whether his protagonists were located in the country or the city, the most sympathetic characters were those who exhibited rootedness in the soil – even if that soil was a tiny patch of precious earth buried in the city. There was a form of urbanity, therefore, to which Chesterton did not object - one in which, for example, the poor could keep chickens even in small properties.350 The anonymous metropolis, however, of condensed living in large apartment blocks and lack of contact with nature, was much less attractive. Conversely, there was a type of rurality that Chesterton had always found unconvincing, which was the unreal sort of rusticity practised by a certain type of city person. Early in his career Chesterton wrote that:

349 Corrin, Catholic Intellectuals, p. 182. To the extent that all Distributists disdained the city, they were not unusual in doing so. As Dermot Quinn put it, ‘Distributism ... was far from unique in its intellectual flight from the city, any more than it was unusual in finding plutocratic Capitalism intolerable’: Quinn, ‘Distributism as Movement and Ideal’, p. 160.
350 Chesterton, Outline of Sanity, p. 121.
The people are not going ‘back to the land’ but the cultivated classes are. But there is something about these intellectual people in flannel shirts who come out and live in the country, where they play tennis and read Thoreau, which gives me a haunting notion that they do not really belong to the country; they dwell rather than live in it. Now this is very false. Go into the country for your health; go into the country for your children; go into the country because the police are after you; go into the country because you like painting in water-colours, or because you like keeping chickens, or because you like spearing otters, or because you want beauty or contentment or the continual presence of cows. But do not go into the country because you like liberty, for there is of necessity less liberty in the country than anywhere else. The pressure of society on the individual must be much greater in a village than in a city. Public opinion must be much stronger; personal eccentricity much more difficult. And if the aesthetic people in the flannel shirts do not feel this pressure it is because they are not really living in the life of the village – that is to say, not really living in the life of the country. Liberty is a thing of the town; any Roman or Greek would have understood that. It is in the places where men live an intense and complicated life that they find the necessity for liberty, and that which is almost the same as liberty – loneliness. The routine of rural life, happy, dignified, sensible, but not inventive, and not free, has been going on almost unchanged from the beginning of the world.\footnote{351}

Chesterton’s Distributism did not alter this view, developed early in his career, that there was a right and a wrong way to go back to the land. He wrote a foreword for a pamphlet that his friend Father Vincent McNabb had written about the Catholic Land Association and explained how important it was to go back to the land in the right spirit:

It is well therefore that in this pamphlet, which Father McNabb and Commander Shove have used so lucidly to expound the fundamentals of the Catholic Land Association, its principle is primarily stated in primary or spiritual terms. It deals first with the fact that men are spiritually unhappy, which comes before the fact that they are now economically and materially unhappy; though this is quite as much of a fact. An entirely practical proposal, that men should seek the most solid of things, which is the earth, for the most useful of things, which is food, is none the less dependent on the principle that it must not be sought in a servile or bestial or merely mechanical manner. If it were, it would not give the normal degree of human happiness, which it is the object of such an experiment to give. You can treat a man like a machine, but you cannot make him an unfeeling machine; you can treat a man as a beast, but you cannot

at the same time produce out of mere food the sensation of freedom. This pamphlet presupposes, not merely that men should live on the land, not merely that they should own the land, but that they should work it and own it with a certain status of domestic dignity and decency, without which a completely civilised man will always lose his self-respect. I was asked only today whether such a scheme (or schemes of the same kind which I have defended elsewhere) must be regarded as a purely economic scheme; or whether we did not conceal in it (sly and unscrupulous devils) certain moral and religious implications. I answered that our proposal is a purely economic proposal, in the sense that we can state in purely economic terms, what it is that we propose. But we could not possibly state in purely economic terms our reason for proposing it. For that reason ultimately refers not to land but to life; not to prosperity but to happiness; not to the body but the soul.352

In the end, although the Distributists overall favoured the country over the city, Chesterton found it difficult to commit to the idea that the human spirit would always flourish in one location or always wither in another. The problems facing the human race fundamentally related, in Chesterton’s view, to the spirit and the will. Chesterton, through his Distributist writings, objected to the modern city, but left open the possibility that the human race could create another kind of city - paradoxically, an anti-modern city - which recreated the urban villages that Chesterton created through his fiction.

The machine and the mind

Much space in G.K.’s Weekly was devoted to discussing the role of machinery in a distributive state,353 leading some readers to become frustrated with a movement that seemed to waste its time on what might have seemed to the outsider to be trivialities. To those involved in the fray, however, the issue was anything but trivial. The question of mechanisation, not just of the land but of all aspects of the world, informed the

353 See especially issues of May, June, October and November 1925 and September 1927.
discussions of League members about how they expected people should interact with nature in a future distributive state, and the extent to which humanity had a right to interfere with natural processes. These were crucial questions for a movement aiming at the total reorganisation of the philosophical basis of their society.

Views on machinery within the League differed markedly. Positions ranged from those of the Catholic priest and Distributist Father Vincent McNabb, who refused to use any kind of machinery and made his own clothes, to those who frankly enjoyed the fruits of innovation and technology. Chesterton’s stated view was that machinery itself did not concern him: he argued that the problem lay in the minds of men. He became alarmed when he thought that people were allowing themselves to think that machinery controlled them, rather than the other way around.

*The Outline of Sanity* contained a chapter on machinery, in which Chesterton wrote that

we do not necessarily wish to destroy a certain sort of machinery. But we do desire to destroy a certain sort of mentality. And that is precisely the sort of mentality that begins by telling us that nobody *can* destroy machinery. Those who begin by saying that we *cannot* abolish the machine, that we must use the machine, are themselves refusing to use the mind.

To cede the sovereignty properly belonging to the human race to machines would be a heretical affront to the hierarchy established by God, in which man held sovereignty over the earth. Chesterton thus laid out his fundamental claim:

[that] if we *really* conclude that machinery is hostile to happiness, then it is no more inevitable that all ploughing should be done by machinery than it is

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354 Ada Chesterton believed that Cecil Chesterton would have taken this latter position in the Distributist movement, claiming that he enjoyed new technology: *The Chestertons*, pp. 174-5. She believed that it was ‘one of Gilbert’s chief paradoxes that while he used all available machinery […] he always argued against them, whereas Cecil revelled in every new invention’; pp. 174-5.


inevitable that a shop should do a roaring trade on Ludgate Hill by selling the instruments of Chinese tortures.\(^{357}\)

Chesterton believed that the instinct to smash all of the machinery in the world, which he attributed (possibly unfairly) to Arthur Penty,\(^{358}\) was a ‘more or less healthy human malady, as it was in the Luddites.’\(^{359}\) However, such a revolt sprang ultimately from ignorance and fear. It was ‘blind revolt as against some ancient and awful dragon, by men too ignorant to know how artificial and even temporary was that particular instrument, or where was the seat of the real tyrants who wielded it’.\(^{360}\)

Chesterton thought that the idea that machinery was always dangerous implied a belief that humanity could be held in thrall to the purely material realm of life, a view that violated the notion of free will. Apart from being philosophically objectionable, the idea was also counter-productive. Chesterton ridiculed the idea that objecting to machinery necessitated dispensing with it altogether, because ‘the truth is that nobody could hope to reform our society at all, if he never used anything he thought in need of reform’.\(^{361}\) Having dispensed with this ‘superstition’, Chesterton advised that, if asked what he would do with machinery right now, he would distribute it in the same manner by which he would see all property distributed. That is, that ‘any such necessary machine should be owned by a small local guild, on principles of profit-sharing, or rather profit-dividing: but of real profit-sharing and real profit-dividing, not

\(^{357}\) Chesterton, *Outline of Sanity*, p. 146.

\(^{358}\) Arthur Penty was a Fabian Socialist, then played a key role in Guild Socialism. Although expressing early doubts about his place within Distributism (he believed, unlike Chesterton, that all forms of private property were unwelcome, as precursors to Capitalism) he produced its manifesto, which was published posthumously in 1937. By the time of his death, however, he had become attracted to the ideas of the far Right.

\(^{359}\) Chesterton, *Outline of Sanity*, p. 147.

\(^{360}\) Chesterton, *Outline of Sanity*, p. 147.

to be confounded with capitalist patronage. He avoided stating what kind of machinery he believed to be ‘necessary’.

Chesterton believed that Arthur Penty was according machines the power to rule human society by being overwhelmed and frightened by them. In Chesterton’s mind, however, the dangers of machinery were in people’s souls, not in the machines themselves. He wrote in 1905 that the problem of machinery was not ‘that engines are mechanical, but that men are mechanical’. His proposed response to the machinery question was therefore fundamentally psychological. He wanted to establish the ‘experience of small property, the psychology of small property, the sort of man who is a small proprietor’. Chesterton did not seem troubled that he was proposing to remould the basic psychology of his fellow citizens, which is what he frequently accused his opponents (such as eugenicists) of doing. Once the distributive state was established in a psychological sense, Chesterton seemed to believe that machinery would to a great extent die out ‘naturally’. If society were restored to what Chesterton believed was the natural balance desired by most people, then they would be in a better position to use their freedom to decide how best to use machinery, and in Chesterton’s view they would naturally tend towards minimising its use. It was only to the extent that people were emulating machinery that it became, in Chesterton’s eyes, a barrier to authenticity – standing between people and the state to which, according to Chesterton, they were suited. Although Chesterton was not after a McNabb-style ‘return to nature’, in which men should live entirely without machines, and with total

dependence on their land, he did ascribe some good to the idea of a life lived more authentically and less distracted by ‘modern’ trappings.

As well as being able to understand the desire to smash all machinery, Chesterton also professed the capacity to understand how one could become enchanted with it. He had, he wrote in Outline of Sanity, ‘a great deal of sympathy with what I may call the sentimental argument for machinery’. He listened supportively to those who enjoyed machinery as a child enjoys toys, and certainly did not want to be the one to take them away from such people. In The Outline of Sanity, he gave a curious account of the emancipatory possibilities of the Ford car (although he did not have much time for Henry Ford himself). He wrote that

if possessing a Ford car means rejoicing in a field of corn or clover, in a fresh landscape and a free atmosphere, it may be the beginning of many things – and even the end of many things. It may be, for instance, the end of the car and the beginning of the cottage.

Chesterton did not deny the ‘romance of machinery’. He did, however, warn that those who were so enamoured of machinery were living in a society badly placed to fulfill that romance. The modern world allowed for no joyful and masterful interaction with machines, and instead machines were overwhelming nature and disconnecting people from their environment. Machinery became dangerous when relied on in a way that threatened autonomy and the capacity to generate the means for one’s own survival:

It is almost too broadly comic that an essential of life like water should be pumped to us from nobody knows where, by nobody knows whom, sometimes nearly a hundred miles away. It is every bit as funny as if air were pumped to us

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365 Chesterton, Outline of Sanity, p. 152.
366 Chesterton, Outline of Sanity, p. 179.
367 Chesterton, Outline of Sanity, p. 151.
from miles away, and we all walked about like divers at the bottom of the sea. The only reasonable person is the person who owns his own well.368

The unchecked proliferation of machinery would lead to the ‘Leisure State’, Chesterton’s idea of hell, in which everything would be done by machines, leaving no room for human creativity and excising nature from human experience.369 He was concerned that left undirected, machines would destroy invention, through the standardisation and mechanisation of all aspects of human society.

Chesterton was unable to state his position on machinery as clearly as Distributists like McNabb. Machines were sometimes ‘romantic’ but their use should be limited, and ‘a wiser society would eventually treat machines as it treats weapons, as something special and dangerous and perhaps more directly under a central control.’370 He cautiously noted that ‘it does appear true that a simpler life in large areas of the community might leave machinery more or less as an exceptional thing.’371 On the other hand, ‘there may be, and we ourselves believe there are, a certain number of things that had better be always done by machinery. Only we are trying to find those things amid a muddle and welter of quite needless things.’372 Chesterton did not accept that people could be damned by their material surroundings (although he acknowledged the effect of material injustice and misery).373 He thought, also, that it would be impossible to transform society if reformers removed themselves entirely from the present day. All this left his position on machinery ill-defined, and not all of

368 Chesterton, Outline of Sanity, pp. 171-2.
369 Chesterton, Outline of Sanity, p. 164.
370 Chesterton, Outline of Sanity, p. 163.
371 Chesterton, Outline of Sanity, p. 161.
373 Chesterton, Outline of Sanity, p. 34.
his critics accepted his word that he did not object to machinery tout court.\textsuperscript{374} His vision for the place of machines in a world of free and self-reliant human beings was at times inarticulate and sometimes disingenuous. For example, he argued that although he did not mind machines, the reformation of the human psyche that he envisaged would tend towards their limitation in any case. That is, he did not want the state to limit machines, but was prepared to propose the manipulation of the human mind to ensure that people rejected machines themselves.

\textbf{Nature and the Politics of Distributism}

Distributism is often depicted as a movement that is romantic, backwards-looking, anti-modernity, rural in outlook and obsessed with medievalism.\textsuperscript{375} In 1986 Anthony

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\textsuperscript{374} Chesterton’s brother, for example, argued that ‘there is in Mr. Chesterton’s later work a tone towards machinery which reminds one sometimes of Ruskin. He seems to see, not merely in the abuse of machinery, not merely in its ownership and exploitation by a limited class, but in the machinery itself a menace to the human soul’: C. Chesterton, \textit{G.K. Chesterton: A Criticism}, A. Rivers, London, 1908, p. 186. Some later critics agreed with the younger Chesterton’s assessment: see, for example, E. Cammaerts, \textit{The Laughing Prophet: The Seven Virtues and G.K. Chesterton}, Methuen, London, 1937, p. 189 and D. Sewell, \textit{Catholics: Britain’s Largest Minority}, Penguin, London, p. 57. On the other hand, others, starting with Maisie Ward in 1944, were more prepared to take Chesterton at his word. Ward wrote that ‘Chesterton himself felt that machinery should be limited but not abolished’; \textit{Gilbert Keith Chesterton}, p. 439. Margaret Canovan wrote that ‘the vexed question of machinery is entirely typical of [Chesterton’s] attitude. He did not share the hatred of the extreme Distributists for anything more complicated than a hand loom. On the contrary, he emphasised the fascination and romance of machinery, and its potentiality for increasing the power and independence of men. His quarrel with the modern world was simply that machinery was being used not to free men but to imprison them’: \textit{G.K. Chesterton: Radical Populist}, Harcourt Brace Jovanich, London, 1977, p. 91. See also J. Corrin, \textit{G.K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc: The Battle against Modernity}, Ohio University Press, Athens, 1981, p. 127; Hardy, \textit{Utopian England}, p. 218; Corrin, \textit{Catholic Intellectuals}, p. 181; and J. L. Finlay, ‘Distributism ”...an ugly long word”’, \textit{Queen’s Quarterly}, Vol. 76(3), Autumn 1969.

\textsuperscript{375} Historian Nigel Copsey neatly summarised this point of view: ‘Distributism had been a fringe political gathering of the interwar years in Britain grouped around the two leading literary figures of Hilaire Belloc and G. K. Chesterton [...]. It advocated a rural-oriented “peasant state”. Anti-modern, anti-urban, its revolutionary alternative was the resurrection of small rural medieval guilds (such was its abhorrence of the modern, atomistic industrial state). It was also strongly imbued with Catholicism and anti-Semitism’: N. Copsey, ‘A Comparison between the Extreme Right in Contemporary France and Britain’, \textit{Contemporary European History}, Vol. 6(1), 1997, p. 114n. Similarly, Kester Aspden characterised Distributism as a defensive movement, arguing that it was of an ‘anti-urban, medievaalist orientation:’ \textit{Aspden, Fortress Church}, p. 183. The characterisation of Distributism as ‘medievalist’ is not uncommon (See Armstrong, ‘Economics after God’s own Image’; and C. McDaniel, ‘Chesterton’s Distributism and the Revaluation of Progress’, \textit{Christian Scholars’ Review}, Vol. 35(4), Summer 2006, p. 522). Chesterton is often credited with a certain prescience in his critique of modernity. For example, Charles McDaniel
Cooney listed a number of influences on the movement, including Catholicism, the ‘Nineteenth Century’s re-discovery of the Middle Ages’ and the ‘Romantic Revival’.376 Sometimes these descriptors are appropriated by Distributists themselves, including Cooney, proud of what they think of as a fundamental challenge to modernity. More often, however, ‘backward-looking’ and similar expressions are used pejoratively to condemn the Distributist movement as a silly irrelevance.377

In most of this criticism, Distributism is treated as regressive and conservative because of its practitioners’ suspicion of industrialisation and vision of rural utopia. The doubts about human progress that are found in Distributists’ work seem evidence enough of the movement’s lack of seriousness or depth. Yet the sense that rural life could

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377 Dennis Hardy, in his treatment of ‘utopian England’, wrote of Chesterton’s and Belloc’s status as ‘archetypal English eccentrics’, proponents of a philosophy of ‘apparent naivety’: Hardy, Utopian England, pp. 216-7. Cultural historian and broadcaster Patrick Wright argued that Chesterton’s attachment to the past was dangerously defensive. The twenty-first century should be on guard against a resurfacing of his ideas: ‘this vision of England as a beleaguered organic community does nothing to clarify the problems it addresses. Instead, it wraps them in a grossly simplified narrative of (old) authenticity and (new) corruption, and then sends out its followers in search of scapegoats. In 1914, Chesterton’s roving commonsensical publican Pump made do with a pub sign, a cheese and a barrel of beer. But […] his instinctive, fox-hunting descendants prefer to dump dead animals in the streets of Brighton, and to snarl anti-semitic insults at [UK MP] Gerald Kaufman’: P. Wright, ‘Last Orders’, The Guardian, Saturday 9 April 2005, accessed online (no page numbers) on 1 October 2009. Wright argues that Chesterton’s ‘beleaguered community’ establishes a dichotomy between ‘authenticity’ and ‘corruption’, and between ‘old’ (good) and ‘new’ (bad): Wright, ‘Last Orders’. Political philosopher John Gray argued in similar terms in The New Statesman, claiming that ‘Chesterton looked backwards not forwards for inspiration, finding his utopia in a romanticised vision of the “organic” societies of medieval Europe’: J. Gray, ‘Lost in the Labyrinth: G.K. Chesterton’s metaphysical nightmare’, The New Statesman, 6 December 2010, p. 48. Gray objects to this vision of perfection. It is delusive, he argues, and tends towards exclusion. Chesterton’s ‘love affair’ with medievalism is merely an ‘attempt to find progress in an idealised past’, and a ‘creepy’ one at that: Gray, ‘Lost in the Labyrinth’, p. 48.
provide something lacking in the modern world was widespread across the political spectrum. Recently, the association between an attachment to the rural and an aversion to the modern has been questioned and a new historiography of Distributism has started to develop. Dermot Quinn, for example, has argued that ‘there is more to Distributism than rural fantasy’ and that the movement is an ‘expression of ... political radicalism’. Quinn argues stridently that Distributism was ‘not ... luddism; it was not advocacy of pre-industrialism; it was not nostalgic (indeed amnesiac) medievalism; it was not a retreat from “the modern”.’

Some recent studies of Distributism have pinpointed aspects of Distributism that are more pragmatic than romantic and that are not as ‘anti-modern’ as some critics of Distributism have assumed. In a 2007 article about Chesterton’s Distributism, Richard Gill described an approach to the landscape that was far more utilitarian than romantic. He referred to Chesterton’s approving evocation of the type of mythology that did not personify the forces of nature, but rather, displayed nature as stewarded by man: ‘it was the god of the corn and not of the grass, of the cattle and not of the wild things of the forest; in short the cult was literally a culture, as when we speak of it as agriculture.’ Vaninskaya argued that ‘though he was no Wells, Chesterton did enjoy some technical aspects of modernity that would have horrified the stereotypical

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379 Jay P. Corrin’s Catholic Intellectuals has categorised Chesterton’s Distributist vision as ‘comparatively liberal and pluralistic’: Corrin, Catholic Intellectuals, p. 4. Corrin is convinced that, ‘contrary to the views of many historians, Distributism was not an oddity, out of step with modern culture, nor was it the mere whimsical infatuation of two clever publicists. In my view it represented the single most important synthesis of Catholic social and political thinking to emerge in the English-speaking community in the early twentieth century’: Corrin, Catholic Intellectuals, p. 3. Similarly, Richard Gill argued that ‘Chesterton’s mediaeval point of reference for social criticism was thus neither irrational nor romantic’ and that Chesterton was not interested in returning to the past’: R. Gill, ‘Oikos and Logos: Chesterton’s Vision of Distributism’, Logos, Vol. 10(3), Summer 2007, p. 66.
381 Quinn, ‘Distributism as Movement and Ideal’, p. 163. Emphasis in original.
luddite’ and wondered ‘what was so anti-modern’ about Chesterton’s political attitudes.383

Chesterton himself might have been buoyed by Vankinskaya’s redefinition of his thought. He never accepted criticism that he was merely backwards-looking about the world. He claimed not to want to abandon all aspects of modernity, and believed that the Distributist movement was alone in dispassionately assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the modern age:

[W]e seem to be alone of our generation in wishing to examine to-day in the light of the past and with an eye to the future. We believe in tradition without desiring to restore the dead past. We believe in living according to a set of virtues which include charity and justice, of qualities which include common-sense and proportion; we shall attack until we die a system which divorces a man from his stomach, his mind and his will. And so we shall continue to praise the practical things of to-day which are good, but not the abstract virtue which is modernness.384

Chesterton claimed that his vision of society was balanced between urban and rural life, and that his position was based on a conception of what was healthy for the human soul, not around a notion of rejecting or embracing modernity. He mocked the idea of ‘progress’ as an end in itself, and believed that he had transcended debates

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383 Vankinskaya wrote, ‘[o]ne may well ask what was so anti-modern about the opinion that Parliament was “secret government by the rich,” and democracy a “legal fiction” to cover the reality of “centralised Capitalist States” and global finance’: Vankinskaya, ‘My Mother, Drunk or Sober’, p. 546. Dan Stone has made a case for the ‘ideological instability’ of ‘back to the land’ movements in Britain that undermines the sharp distinction between modernity and bucolic rurality: Stone, ‘The Far Right and the Back-to-the-Land Movement’, p. 185. Pyrs Gruffudd, writing about back to the land movements in Wales, argued that ‘these various “back to the land” philosophies, far from being anarchonic responses to “modernisation”, actually represented utopian fusions of tradition and modernity which challenged the polarised notion of rural stagnation and urban modernisation’: P. Gruffud, ‘“Back to the Land: Historiography, Rurality and the Nation in Interwar Wales’, Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, New Series, Vol. 19(1), 1994, p. 62. Gruffud argued that movements in Wales could not be characterised as reactionary, but rather sought to change understandings of what ‘progressive’ really meant: ‘The move back to the land was not necessarily a regressive or reactionary step, but one which challenged dominant ideas of ‘progress’: ideas based on industrial capitalism and urban life. It asserted that certain values of community and artistry, apparently denied by urban civilisation, could be re-captured in the rural areas. [...] Whilst modernity is generally cast in opposition to notions of romanticism or nostalgia, this move back to the land advocated its own version of progress, founded on an utopian fusion of past and future’: Gruffud, ‘Back to the Land’, p. 73.
about moving forwards or turning back the clock by providing a goal which appropriated what was useful from both the past and the present.

Chesterton’s writings on the peasantry displayed a deeply conservative vision whose proposed enactment was articulated in a revolutionary manner. He believed that the creation of a peasantry would mean also the creation of a ‘traditional’ and ‘conservative populace’.385 This populace would not be conservative in merely a negative sense, but also ‘in a positive sense; they conserve customs that do not perish like fashions, and crafts less ephemeral than those artistic movements which so very soon cease to move.’386 The formation of conservative institutions, however, was paradoxically not itself a conservative act. It would involve sacrifice on an immense scale, danger and a fundamental reorientation of the economic system. ‘The sort of call that must be made on the modern English’, Chesterton wrote, ‘is the sort of call that is made before a great war or a great revolution.’387 The sacrifices and hardships would, Chesterton believed, be worth making and would be easier to bear because the goal was to return to a more natural society.

Chesterton wanted a way of living that was more harmonious with the landscape than modern industrial society. Dickensian industrial terrains were blights on the English countryside that he loved deeply, and disrupted the instinctive attachment that he believed the English had with their land. However, not all interference with nature was evil. Chesterton wanted Man to impose his will on the world: people had both a right and an obligation to work the land and shape it in a way that suited their purpose. This

385 Chesterton, Outline of Sanity, pp. 110-11.
386 Chesterton, Outline of Sanity, p. 113.
387 Chesterton, Outline of Sanity, p. 116.
was the ‘balance’ which Distributism intended to attain. It was a compromise between living harmoniously with nature and exercising control over it.
Chapter Four

Chesterton, Nature and the Nation

Chesterton held the value of patriotism very near to his heart. Even a brief scan of his writing leaves no doubt about his attachment to England. Chesterton imagined the English landscape as being intimately connected to the English soul. Some of his most sympathetic fictional characters - Humphrey Pump in *The Flying Inn* for example - appear to have sprouted directly from the English soil, with personalities and physical characteristics that closely reflect Chesterton’s picture of the land. Thus, according to Chesterton, the interplay between the English and their natural surroundings helped, in a gentle way, to form their national character. People and structures flourished in their ‘native’ environment, nurtured by the land. In this field, however, Chesterton adds layers of complications to these ideas and frustrates the reader with the subtleties, elisions and flat-out self-contradictions that are the artefacts of a long and voluminous writing life. Ideas about nature, landscape and the nation in his work traverse received categories of interactions with the English landscape: romantic, utilitarian, radically right-wing and religious. Chesterton posthumously evades and challenges all of his followers and biographers who have attempted to locate him in particular ideological paradigms.

Although the form and content of Chesterton’s idealisation of the English nation has been studied by scholars, the role played by nature and the English landscape in this national feeling has not been carefully examined. There is, however, a deep

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388 Throughout this chapter the term ‘English’ rather than ‘British’ will be used as Chesterton was a defiant Little Englander who would have preferred to see Irish, Scottish and Welsh nationalisms flourishing on their own terms, and separated from the destiny of England. Chesterton himself rarely used the term British.
connection between Chesterton’s nationalism and his appreciation of nature. The foundation stone of this philosophy is a principle that he laid down in one of his first forays into the idea of English national identity. ‘The essential principle of Nationalism,’ he wrote, is ‘that the institutions which are the growth of the soil have an advantage as such.’  

There is one short and lesser-known Chesterton story that introduces many of the themes of this chapter - *The Trees of Pride*, published in 1922. It concerns the follies of Squire Vane, an aristocrat in Cornwall whose tenants (an ancient Cornish peasantry) are angry about his decision to import foreign trees and shrubs into his grounds. In particular, the peasants are deeply unsettled by the presence of some foreign peacock trees, which they blame for a series of illnesses and deaths in the area. The trees had been imported from Barbary by an ancestor of Squire Vane. The legend attached to them was that a saint of the Dark Ages (St. Securis) lived in Barbary amongst these trees, and grew to love them, and so prayed that they ‘might be loosened from time to time to walk like other things.’ Chesterton wrote that

[T]he trees were thus freed under strict conditions of discipline. They were to return at the sound of the hermit’s bell, and, above all, to copy the wild beasts in walking only to destroy and devour nothing [sic]. Well, it is said that one of the trees heard a voice that was not the saint’s; that in the warm green twilight of one summer evening it became conscious of something sitting and speaking in its branches in the guise of a great bird, and it was that which once spoke from a tree in the guise of a great serpent. As the voice grew louder among its murmuring leaves the tree was torn with a great desire to stretch out and snatch at the birds that flew harmlessly about their nests, and pluck them to pieces. Finally, the tempter filled the tree-top with his own birds of pride, the

[391] Chesterton firmly believed in the existence of a peasantry. He idealised the peasant lifestyle and believed that historical processes (especially of the Reformation and the advent of modernity) had stripped away the rights and ultimately the existence of the peasant class.
[392] Barbary is an old term for the North African region that includes Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco.
starry pageant of the peacocks. And the spirit of the brute overcame the spirit of the tree, and it rent and consumed the blue-green birds till not a plume was left, and returned to the quiet tribe of trees. But they say that when spring came all the other trees put forth leaves, but this put forth feathers of a strange hue and pattern. And by that monstrous assimilation the saint knew of the sin, and he rooted that one tree to the earth with a judgement, so that evil should fall on any who removed it again.\footnote{Chesterton, \textit{Trees of Pride}, p. 11.}

In removing the trees from their place, and taking them to England, Squire Vane’s ancestor had awakened a great evil (which explains why, according to the legend, when the ancestor’s boat reached England it was found that everybody on board was dead). Despite the grisly discovery of the sailors’ bodies, the trees were planted on the estate, and had been making the local peasants uncomfortable ever since.

When the daughter of Vane’s woodman dies, and the woodman blames the trees, Vane (impatient with the ‘superstition’ of the peasantry) decides to challenge the legend of the trees once and for all, by agreeing to spend the night nestled in the branches of one of the specimens. The reader is unsurprised when the next morning the Squire is dead. The rest of the story takes the form of a murder mystery, as the remaining characters attempt to find a natural explanation – and a culprit - for the Squire’s death. As in any mystery, suspicion falls on a number of people in turn, before finally settling on the young doctor who had been treating the woodman’s daughter. When the doctor is caught, he admits that the death of the Squire was a hoax (and the remains that had been thought to be the Squire’s were planted by the doctor, and belonged to an anonymous skeleton that he had in his possession). The Squire is still alive but had agreed to ‘disappear’ in order to reappear later on, making a mockery of the superstition that the trees would kill him.
The doctor’s motivation for the trick was more pragmatic - he knew that, once the Squire was thought to be dead and his daughter had inherited his estate, she would cut down the trees in accordance with the peasants’ wishes. Although agnostic on the question of the mystic nature of the trees, the doctor trusted peasant wisdom enough to accept that the malaise that the trees caused to the locals was real enough. At the moment of the final dramatic revelation of the truth, the doctor points out that none of the aristocratic or wealthy players in the drama - the lawyer, for example, or the Squire - were prepared to accept the evidence of the peasants that the trees did not belong in Cornwall. And yet, he says, the peasants had more wisdom than often assumed by their social superiors.395

The story displays a strong sense of the ‘rooted’ nature of English identity. In the tale, those who have an ancient and continuing attachment to the English land have the strongest sense of ‘Englishness’. The reader is encouraged to approve of the mistrust that the peasantry have for ‘foreign’ shrubs, and to share their belief that the importation of trees from far-off shores will disrupt the ‘natural’ state of the English landscape (and by implication the people who are dependent on it). The reader is also encouraged to enjoy the mockery made of scientific rationalism, with its narrow-minded materialism and hostility to the possibility of the supernatural (or even the unexplained).

Chesterton envisioned a slightly confusing but nonetheless important role for the English landscape in forming national character. He considered patriotism to be an innate and fundamentally natural state of mind, and one which in his view had been

395 Chesterton, *Trees of Pride*, p. 11.
disrupted (rather than enhanced) by the ideological forces of modernity. Chesterton discarded many popular foundations for nationalism - such as scientific theories of race and the expansion of Empire. Chesterton defined his idea of ‘nationalism’ early in his career, as part of a collection of papers issued by a group called the Patriots’ Club. In it, he defended national sentiment against two perceived major threats: universalism and the exhortation to extend love to all mankind (personified by Tolstoy), and imperialism and the desire to explore smaller nations of the world and then swallow them (exemplified for Chesterton by Rudyard Kipling). He declared nationalism a ‘psychological necessity’. He wrote that, ‘spiritually’, a ‘healthy man ... demands something which is more or less roughly represented by Nationalism. That is to say, he demands a particular relation to some homogeneous community of manageable and imaginative size, large enough to inspire his reverence by its hold on history, small enough to inspire his affection by its hold on himself. Not much can be read into his use of the term ‘nationalism’ rather than ‘patriotism’ in this passage, as he used the terms mostly interchangeably, as here: ‘the fundamental spiritual advantage of patriotism and such sentiments is this: that by means of it all things are loved adequately, because all things are loved individually. Cosmopolitanism gives us one country, and it is good; nationalism gives us a hundred countries, and every one of them is the best’. Peter Mandler, amongst others, has noted a distinction between patriotism and nationalism, observing that ‘there is a school of thought that argues that England was a pioneer of the weaker forms of national consciousness - especially patriotism - and that this early development of patriotism saved it from, or deprived it

of, the stronger forms such as nationalism or national character.\textsuperscript{399} Chesterton (as was his habit) used the terms quite loosely but was generally more inclined to an inward looking and less aggressive form.\textsuperscript{400} Indeed, Julia Stapleton suggests that he picked one of the two terms ‘depending on which he felt had been least corrupted at the time of writing’.\textsuperscript{401} For the more chauvinistic, aggressive or domineering forms of national sentiment Chesterton preferred the term ‘jingoist’ and explicitly dissociated himself from this ‘deaf and raucous’\textsuperscript{402} feeling. To Chesterton, the more important distinction was between nationalism / patriotism and imperialism. He viewed the latter as a perversion of the former - an ‘opportunist cosmopolitanism’ which ‘seeks to destroy patriotism’.\textsuperscript{403}

Chesterton’s patriotism was closely related to his ideas about nature, and he was representative of his time in this preoccupation with the English landscape and its effect on the national soul. In 1991, environmental historian David Lowenthal wrote that in no place outside of England is ‘landscape so freighted as legacy. Nowhere else does the very term suggest not simply scenery and genres de vie, but quintessential national virtues.’\textsuperscript{404} This bold statement illustrates the extent to which nature, landscape and rural ideologies are crucial to understanding English national identity

\textsuperscript{400} Joseph McCleary, in his \textit{The Historical Imagination of G.K. Chesterton: Locality, Patriotism, and Nationalism}, distinguished between patriotism (which he defined as inward-looking and ‘characterised by protective impulses and government’) and nationalism (‘outwardly directed and driven by aggressive impulses’): New York, Routledge, 2009, p. 1.
and its historiography, although arguments continue as to the meanings and sources of this rural obsession.

In recent times, comprehensive studies have been published on the nature of rural myths in England and their relationship to English identity. These studies have shown the ways in which engagement with the past and with the landscape can be simultaneously genuinely felt and artificially constructed. The effect of these works and others on the same subject was to enable a more complex exploration of the meanings of English national identity as they relate to rural England. Some critics have viewed Chesterton’s patriotism as essentially benign. Others have characterised it as dangerously defensive, and almost vicious. These opposing theories can, to an extent at least, be reconciled: in Chesterton’s geographic imagination, England is surrounded by enemies on all sides. Violence and force against the outside world is necessary to maintain the peace and tranquillity of the inner. The holistic English community that Chesterton describes depends for its completeness on an understanding of whom to exclude from the nation.

No major works have substantially addressed the topic of Chesterton, nature and the nation. The addition of this point of reference can shed further light on Chesterton’s political principles. How ‘romantic’ was his attachment to the English landscape? By what historical process had the English struck root in their soil - and who was constitutionally capable of doing so?


406 An article by Patrick Wright is a good example of the latter opinion: ‘Last Orders’, in The Guardian, Saturday 9 April 2005, accessed online on 1 October 2009.
Nature and the English nation

Chesterton had a deep love for his country and sincerely believed that nationalism was a natural and innate idea (although he rejected its manifestation as imperialism and aggressive jingoism). Connection to landscape was, importantly, connection to the English landscape. Specifically, the English landscape recognisable in Chesterton’s work was domestic rather than wild; gentle and unthreatening, as described in this passage from *Tremendous Trifles*:

> It was a burning blue day, and the warm sunshine, settling everywhere on the high hedges and the low hills, brought out into a kind of heavy bloom that *humane* quality of the landscape which, as far as I know, only exists in England; that sense as if the bushes and the roads were human, and had kindness like men; as if the tree were a good giant with one wooden leg.  

Chesterton aligned the English landscape (by which he really meant the landscape of southern England) with the values of kindliness, moderation and predictability. In her biography, Maisie Ward describes the pride that Chesterton had in the house that he and Frances built in Beaconsfield. It was the ‘special pride taken by all men in houses built by themselves.’ Chesterton’s attachment to England resembled in some ways an extension of this domestic and placid pride he felt in his home. Ward wrote that ‘most of his pride went out to the fact that his home was intensely English. He quoted a lover of Sussex who said among the beech trees of Buckinghamshire, “this is really the most English part of England.”’ Chesterton, Ward wrote, had a strong attachment to the beech forests that surrounded Beaconsfield. Whereas oak trees ‘suggested adventure and the British lion, the beeches suggest rather the pigs that

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408 M. Ward, *Gilbert Keith Chesterton*, Sheed and Ward, London, 1944, p. 529. The house was not so much built by the Chestertons as imagined by them and then built by someone else.
feed upon their mast and villages that grow up in the hollows and slow curves of the hills’.\footnote{Ward, Gilbert Keith Chesterton, pp. 529-30.}

Chesterton’s cosy and domesticated localism has been both criticised and praised as an insular and introverted form of ‘romantic nationalism’.\footnote{I. Boyd, The Novels of G.K. Chesterton, Paul Elek, London, 1975, p. 26.} Historian J. H. Grainger has offered ‘nineteenth-century Romantic nationalism’ as an influence on Chesterton, noting that the ‘provenance’ of his ‘patriotic idea’ was therefore liberal as well as Christian. ‘The 
\textit{patria},’ observed Grainger, ‘was located in either the achieved or the aspiring nation which was for him, as it was for Renan, a spiritual entity’.\footnote{J.H. Grainger, Patriotisms: Britain 1900-1939, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1986, p. 107.} Grainger also cited William Cobbett as a source for Chesterton’s historical stories.\footnote{Grainger, Patriotisms, p. 111.} Historian Tom Villis, writing two decades later, noticed the same ghostly shadow cast over the anti-corruption journal the \textit{New Witness}.\footnote{The \textit{New Witness} was a journal founded in 1912 after its predecessor, the \textit{Eye-Witness}, folded. The \textit{New Witness} sought to expose corruption in government, most famously during the Marconi affair, the reporting of which left Cecil Chesterton with a criminal conviction: T. Villis, \textit{Reaction and the Avant-Garde: The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy in Early Twentieth-Century Britain}, Tauris, London, 2006, pp. 26-7. Vaninskaya has cited the same influences on Chesterton, commenting that ‘if in its outward aspect Chesterton’s patriotism was a recrudescence of romantic nationalism, in its domestic populist expression it was a restoration of eighteenth and early nineteenth century radical patriotism, the patriotism of Cobbett, the Chartists and the French Revolution’: A. Vaninskaya, ‘“My mother, drunk or sober”’: G.K. Chesterton and patriotic anti-imperialism’, \textit{History of European Ideas}, Vol. 34, 2008, p. 538.} Villis described the ‘romantic radicalism’ of Cobbett and his contemporaries as espousing ‘radical reform coupled with romantic, medieval economic principles and nativism’.\footnote{Villis, \textit{Reaction and the Avant-Garde}, p. 144.} The journal promoted a version of nationalism that was ‘irrational and anti-materialist’.\footnote{Villis, \textit{Reaction and the Avant-Garde}, p. 144.} Chesterton’s patriotism has been understood as ‘a deeply oppositional patriotism - not only outside the Constitution but outside the history of the last three hundred years.’\footnote{Grainger, Patriotisms, p. 113.}
According to Chesterton, British geography supposedly had a visible and profound effect on the inhabitants of the British Isles. Its people had become attuned to their surroundings; in Chesterton’s words, ‘the islanders are of a kind with their islands.’\(^{418}\)

He wrote that ‘there is something common to all the Britons, which even acts of union have not torn asunder. The nearest name for it is insecurity, something fitting in men walking on cliffs and the verge of things. [...] Their souls are fretted like their coasts.’\(^{419}\)

There is a defensiveness about this description of England’s geography, with the warm, damp, kindly land bounded on all sides by foreign and dangerous powers.

Two important themes arise from Chesterton’s views on the relationship between the English landscape and the formation of the English national character. The first is that people who are connected to their lands are affected by it, and find a harmony with their natural surroundings. The second theme is the nature of the landscape and how it has affected specifically the English character. A reading of Chesterton’s works shows that, for him, the specificity of the landscape in England was its combination of inner security and outer wildness.

Chesterton was not unusual in his belief that the landscape in England was a peaceful and domesticated place. He believed, however, that this safe space was bordered by turbulence, and emphasised the importance of boundaries around his little island. To Chesterton, the geographical situation of England / Britain was a perfect metaphorical representation of the English national character - a space that was homey, peaceful and tranquil, but that was edged by danger and unruliness.


Chesterton’s idealised version of this peaceful and tranquil England was made apparent in his 1914 novel *The Flying Inn*. In this novel, an Irishman (Patrick Dalroy) has been fighting on behalf of a small Greek island (Ithaca) against invading Turkish forces, but despite his brave efforts he has been instructed by his adopted compatriots to negotiate a peaceful settlement. A character named Oman Pasha represents the Turks, and the European community has requested that England (represented by the less-than-subtly-named Lord Ivywood) oversee the negotiations. The peace that is brokered is deeply unsatisfactory, and involves some kidnapped Greek women being abandoned in a Turkish harem. The immensely strong Dalroy tears up three olive trees and throws them into the ocean, saying that ‘I have seen something today that is worse than death: and the name of it is Peace.’

Dalroy returns to England and visits his old friend Humphrey Pump, the keeper of the very English inn “The Old Ship”. There, he discovers that Lord Ivywood has begun to enforce prohibition in England. Pump receives a letter from the “Committee of the Imperial Commission of Liquor Control” notifying him that he has violated the “Act for the Regulation of Places of Public Entertainment”. The Act restricts the circumstances in which alcohol can be served to the public (and the restrictions only apply to common drinking houses, while the drinking holes of the wealthy such as the Criterion Bar and Claridge’s Hotel are granted exemptions).

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421 Chesterton, *Flying Inn*, pp. 30-1.
Dalroy and Pump discover that Lord Ivywood is acting under the influence of a Turkish prophet named Mishyra Ammon (or, unsubtly, M. Ammon) and is supporting the inculcation of ‘Eastern’ values into England. Ammon is the darling of the “Simple Souls”, a society drawn from the wealthiest class that promotes simplicity and the melting together of Christianity and Islam in the name of an ill-formed notion of ‘progress’. The story details the adventures of Dalroy and Pump as they tear around England evading Ivywood’s increasingly stringent prohibition laws. The book is notable for the songs sung by the travelling Englishmen, some of which have become more famous than the novel itself. One such song makes explicit the meaning of Ivywood’s name:

The Druids waved their golden knives
And danced around the Oak,
When they had sacrificed a man;
But though the learned search and scan
No single modern person can
Entirely see the joke;
But though they cut the throats of men
They cut not down the tree.
And from the blood the saplings sprang
Of oak-woods yet to be.

But Ivywood, Lord Ivywood,
He rots the tree as ivy would,
He clings and crawls as ivy would
About the sacred tree.

Chesterton portrays England as an old tree that is being threatened from the outside by poisonous ivy. Geographically, England is surrounded by wild seas. Politically, England is surrounded by foreign ideologies which besiege the ‘real’ England, strangling it as the ivy strangles the tree. The English, although calm by nature, will fight when threatened, and ferociously: *The Flying Inn* culminates in a battle (almost all of Chesterton’s novels do) in which a spontaneously mobilised army of ‘real’

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423 Chesterton may have been satirising the ‘Oxford Souls’.
424 Chesterton, *Flying Inn*, p. 298.
Englishmen following Pump and Dalroy repel the invading Turkish hordes. One character remarks on the possibility that the ‘ivy’ might have underestimated the wisdom of the ‘tree’, the latter representing the ancient spirit of the English people.\textsuperscript{425}

The Englishmen are victorious, and a perfunctory love story sees Dalroy contentedly paired off with one of Chesterton’s interchangeable and bland female characters. Ivywood, on the other hand, goes insane.\textsuperscript{426}

The contrast between what belongs outside England and what belongs in it could not be more stark: against Ivywood’s undiscerning and eventually all-consuming cosmopolitanism is set the insular and taciturn Englishness of Pump. The latter is described as

one of those handy men who seem to have a hundred hands like Briareus; he made nearly everything for himself and everything in his house was slightly different from the same thing in anyone else’s house. He was also as cunning as Pan or a poacher in everything affecting every bird or fish, every leaf or berry in the woods. His mind was a rich soil of subconscious memories and traditions; and he had a curious kind of gossip so allusive as to almost amount to reticence; for he always took it for granted that everyone knew his country and its tales as intimately as he did; so he would mention the most mysterious and amazing things without relaxing a muscle on his face, which seemed to be made of knotted wood. His dark brown hair ended in two rudimentary side whiskers, giving him a slightly horsey look, but in the old-fashioned sportsman’s style. His smile was rather wry and crabbed; but his brown eyes were kindly and soft. He was very English.\textsuperscript{427}

In this passage Pump is described as being tree-like in looks and in nature; grown from his native land and drawing without conscious effort on the vast and ancient wisdom accessible to those who are rooted in place. He is ‘kindly’ and ‘soft’ but, crucially, he is no pacifist: he is prepared in circumstances where England is threatened to go to war,

\textsuperscript{425} Chesterton, \textit{Flying Inn}, p. 298.
\textsuperscript{426} Chesterton, \textit{Flying Inn}, p. 320.
\textsuperscript{427} Chesterton, \textit{Flying Inn}, p. 33.
although noble wars in Chesterton’s mind are ideological or religious rather than materialist or imperialist in nature.

In these passages and throughout his stories, Chesterton attempts to normalise the English nation and to render it so natural as to be part of the very landscape. Chesterton was not alone in this project to ‘naturalise’ England by strengthening associations between country and countryside. Raymond Williams’ seminal *The Country and the City* examines the meanings behind some of these rural mythologies. For Williams, rural mythology was ‘an idealisation, based on a temporary situation and on a deep desire for stability, serv[ing] to cover and to evade the actual and bitter contradictions of the time.’\(^{428}\) He argued that rural ideas needed to be held up against the material facts of rural history, 'at times to be confirmed, at times denied.'\(^{429}\) Imposed on the countryside by rural writers was a sense of consensus and co-operation in which each understood and was content with his place. Even in Chesterton’s apparently socially radical books in which the English people rise up against oppression (as in *The Flying Inn*), the complaint of the ordinary folk is not against hierarchy and class difference *per se* but is instead the feeling that those in authority have lost their roots and ancient sense of responsibility and, swayed by external influences, have started to abuse their positions. What Chesterton seems to want is simply a return to how things were (or were in Chesterton’s imagining of the


\(^{429}\) Williams, *The Country and the City*, p. 45. Following Williams, historians began to examine the ways in which rural myths differed from the actual realities they purported to represent. Environmental historian Fraser Harrison produced *Strange Land: The Countryside, Myth and Reality*, which started from the premise of a ‘largely discrepant relationship between ideas of the countryside and the actuality of rural existence’: F. Harrison, *Strange Land: The Countryside: Myth and Reality*, Sidgwick and Jackson, London, 1982, p. 21. Similarly, in *Early Green Politics*, Peter Gould referred to the ‘eulogies’ made to the country by ‘conservative writers on rural affairs’ in which ‘the features of rural society which were emphasised were those which were absent in the city: social stability, a secure, hierarchical social system with close relations between employers and employees; a sense of common purpose; the pervasiveness of Christian values’: P. Gould, *Early Green Politics: Back to Nature, Back to the Land, and Socialism in Britain*, The Harvester Press, Sussex, 1988, pp. 137-8.
past) - traditional structures founded on respect for authority and responsibility for the well-being of the powerless.

These narratives of peace and stability are evasively ideological, frequently produced by city people haunted by the ‘urge to flee the city in search of the “village of the mind”’. They draw their ‘inspiration from highly selective historical memory, which robs today’s farm worker of a crucial part of his past’. The urban search for the mythical village ‘also incidentally strengthens the myth that [the farm worker’s] perennially low pay is somehow compensated for by privileges unavailable to the worker in industry’ - privileges such as access to a deep and continuing tradition of Englishness and connectedness to the land. The silences and gaps imposed on the ‘real’ countryside, as well as manufactured consensus around hierarchy and traditional (usually class) structures, can assist in exposing the meaning of various rural myths. For example, it is striking that, in the presentation of the countryside to tourists in the inter-war period, rural workers and modern methods of farming were largely absent. Chesterton himself - a firmly city personage who loved the countryside - was fundamentally uninterested in modern, industrial farming techniques.

Chesterton’s feelings about the nation were therefore often expressed apolitically. He argued that nationalism was innate to the human species. The love of country is ‘ancient’ and, at its worthiest, is free from artifice. Chesterton believed that people, undisturbed by the disruptive forces of industrialisation and capitalism, would naturally become deeply attached to (or rooted in) the places where they lived, and

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430 Harrison, Strange Land, p. 34.
431 Harrison, Strange Land, p. 34.
432 Harrison, Strange Land, p. 34.
433 Chesterton, The Defendant, p. 165.
that this bond represented a love for, and pride in, their country. For Chesterton, those in England who best represented this tradition were the peasantry, and he was frequently accused of wishing to return England to the Middle Ages, a time when, he believed, such a class of people still existed.\footnote{In some of his fiction, such as The Trees of Pride, he seemed to assume that an English peasantry still did exist, at least in some form, in his own time.}

Chesterton was suspicious of anyone who he thought rejected nationalism. For example, he criticised Tolstoy, writing that ‘it is difficult to believe that a poet in prose who has so powerfully exhibited the earth-born air of man, the essential kinship of a human being, with the landscape in which he lives, can deny so elemental a virtue as that which attaches a man to his own ancestors and his own land.’\footnote{G.K. Chesterton, The Simplicity of Tolstoy, Arthur L. Humphreys, London, 1912, p. 12.} The philosophy of Tolstoy, then, ‘with all its earnestness, with all its honorable lucidity, we find, from our point of view, to be a frigid and arbitrary fancy, incomparable in its moral value to that intensity which has bound living men to an actual and ancient soil.’\footnote{Chesterton, ‘The Patriotic Idea’, p. 12.} Chesterton argued that ‘nationalism is a nobler thing even than patriotism; for nationalism appeals to a law of nations; it implies that a nation is a normal thing’.\footnote{G.K. Chesterton, Irish Impressions, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2001 (first published 1919), pp. 146. It is not clear in this passage on what basis Chesterton was distinguishing patriotism from nationalism since (as previously discussed) he normally used the terms interchangeably.}

Chesterton believed that nationalism was not something that was constructed and artificial, but went further and argued that it was vacuous to believe that the fruits of human craftsmanship were ‘cultural’ rather than ‘natural’. Chesterton mobilised the language of the ‘natural’ and the ‘normal’ to legitimise his argument in favour of the primacy of the nation as a way of organising human life. He painted the nation as the most obvious way to divide the human race into units, and believed that the desire to
split the world in this way was innate in people. His understanding of nationalism was, though, quite specific: he defined ‘real’ nationalism as a force that was small, local and rooted. He strongly believed that these roots that fastened the English to their country were timeless, indigenous and authentic. He crafted a version of English national identity founded on organic communities and proximity to the landscape. He attempted to elbow aside overtly political or ideologically constructed nationalisms in favour of a version that was felt, rather than reasoned, and that sprouted effortlessly from the land. Chesterton’s vision, however, rested on ideological foundations, not self-contained but relying on exclusions, unable to function without enemies. Chesterton’s carefully constructed rural nation was therefore heavily political in what it excluded: he most particularly, for example, resented the flourishing of ideas that he considered ‘alien’. The depth and longevity of Chesterton’s attachment to land makes the connection seem natural and ahistorical although it was political and constructed.

438 The use of nationalistic language stripped of overtly political symbols was part of a broader trend in English history. Tom Shippey noted the anomaly of England’s lack of symbolic national icons which, Shippey claims, reflects maturity and confidence: T. Shippey, London Review of Books, July 6, 1990, cited in D. Lowenthal, ‘Heritage and the English Landscape’, History Today, Vol. 41(9), 1991, p. 8. Reflecting on Shippey’s article, environmental historian David Lowenthal explained that ‘to Continentals, perplexed by the paucity of such icons, British spokesmen explain that national continuities render them superfluous’, but continues that ‘this interchange itself betokens a particularly English heritage’: p. 8. Lowenthal suggests that denying the existence of a constructed ‘English’ identity is a pastime of which the English are fond. He goes on to argue that, far from lacking potent symbols of national identity, in fact, ‘no aspect of life or letters more staunchly supports the national heritage than the well-bounded, long-crafted, durably ordered English landscape’: Lowenthal, ‘Heritage and the English Landscape, pp. 8, 10.

439 The sense of timelessness that features in some manifestations of rural mythology should signal a warning for historians, as apparent timelessness can give an impression of rootedness. Indeed, so important are evocations of England’s rural past to national myth-making that at times they are almost impossible to distinguish from innate ‘knowledge’ of one’s Englishness. Paul Readman, in ‘The Place of the Past in English Culture, c. 1890 – 1914’, claimed that the English idealisation of a previous, non-industrialised state of history, is ‘probably best understood outside the “invention of tradition” paradigm: far from being an artificial imposture, mediated through ritualised ceremony at the behest of the ruling classes, public engagement with the past was genuine and deep-rooted’: P. Readman, ‘The Place of the Past in English Culture, c.1890-1914’, Past and Present, Vol. 186, 2005, pp. 149-50.

440 This idea of English ‘rootedness’ in their past, and in their soil, is crucial to understanding the political meanings of English national identity but, as in Readman above, historians digging in English soil can themselves fail to recognise the contingency of rural ideologies as mythmaking processes. An important aspect of politics of the landscape is that which relates to perceived connections between the land and the nation. Thomas Lekan developed Eric Hobsbawm’s arguments about the nation as a constructed
Nature and the Jewish and Islamic nations

The antipathy between English and ‘Eastern’ values, treated fictionally in The Flying Inn, is expressed in non-fiction in The New Jerusalem, in which Chesterton described his travels to the Middle East. The Christian Englishman inhabits fertile and moderate landscape: the Muslim, on the other hand, is the ‘man of the desert’, a place empty of solid ideas where nothing of value can take root.\footnote{G.K. Chesterton, The New Jerusalem, George H. Doran Company, New York, 1921 (first published 1920), p. 48.} The Jews were a similarly rootless people (although Chesterton believed that the Jews were urban and rootless rather than desert people like the Arabs). Chesterton believed that Islam (which he often discussed as if it was interchangeable with any non-Christian religion) was conditioned by this association with the desert. Unlike the English, who were influenced but not strait-jacketed by their geography, inhabitants of the ‘East’ were unable to transcend theirs. An exchange between Lord Ivywood of the aforementioned The Flying Inn and his love interest, Joan, is illustrative in this respect:

[Ivywood]: “There is a kind of freedom that consists in never rebelling against Nature; and I think they understand it in the Orient better than we do in the West. You see, Joan, it is all very well to talk about love in our narrow, personal, romantic way; but there is something higher than the love of a lover or the love of love.”

“What is that?” asked Joan, looking down.

“The love of Fate,” said Lord Ivywood, with something like spiritual passion in his eyes. “Doesn’t Nietzsche say somewhere that the delight in destiny is the mark of the hero? We are mistaken if we think that the heroes and saints of Islam say ‘Kismet’ with bowed heads and in sorrow. They say ‘Kismet’ with a shout of joy. That which is fitting - that is what they really mean. In the Arabian tales, the most perfect prince is wedded to the most perfect princess - because

\footnote{T. Lekan, Imagining the Nation in Nature: Landscape Preservation and German Identity, 1885-1943, Harvard University Press, Massachusetts, 2004, p. 5.}
it is fitting. The spiritual giants, the Genii, achieve it - that is, the purposes of Nature.\footnote{Chesterton, *The Flying Inn*, pp. 305-6.}

Chesterton made several conceptual connections in this passage. Firstly he associates Islam with the idea of a mindless submission to fate. The citizens of the desert bow before greater forces than themselves, but Chesterton prefers those individuals who forge their own futures and who are damned or saved on the strength of their own moral decision-making.

Secondly, Chesterton is connecting ‘fate’ as understood by these ‘Eastern’ intellectuals with the purpose of nature. He believed that fads like Darwinism as appropriated by the likes of Herbert Spencer subordinated humanity’s literally God-given intelligence and free will to the ‘laws’ of the natural world. He firmly rejected ideas gaining currency in his time of ‘following’ nature or living according to ‘the laws of nature’. He pointed out that, like submission to fate, submission to nature abnegated moral choice. People looking for moral guidance would not find it in the natural world. ‘Obviously’, he wrote, ‘it will not do to take our ideal from the principle in nature; for the simple reason that [...] there is no principle in nature. [...] Inequality, as much as equality, implies a standard of value.’\footnote{Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, pp. 307-8.} Finally, he draws a connection between Eastern philosophy and the philosophy of Nietzsche (whom Chesterton persisted in describing as a ‘Prussian’ thinker).\footnote{Chesterton used the term ‘Prussian’ as an insult, and used the term ‘German’ fairly rarely. Here he attempts to explain how he distinguishes the two terms: ‘I never said a word about Germany. I certainly never said a word against Germans. Germans are a vast and very human European race which has lived under all sorts of small and large governments, and at its best perhaps under the Holy Roman Empire and its remains in the charming civilisation of Innsbruck or Vienna. What we now call ‘Germany’ means the limited number of Germans that could be dragged after the Prussian Junkers in 1870 into a policy that will always sooner or later mean war. This ‘Germany’ did follow them. It followed them blindly into Belgium yesterday, and it will presumably follow them blindly into Poland tomorrow. But this ‘Germany’ is a new and Prussian thing. It is exactly four years older than I am. They may well call it their Fatherland;}

\[\text{Footnote text}\]
'whatever else it is, not English. It is, perhaps, somewhat Oriental, it is slightly Prussian'.\textsuperscript{445} As The Flying Inn progresses, Ivywood comes more and more to resemble a parody of the Nietzschean “Superman”, but Chesterton does not envision that the struggle to attain the status of a ‘superman’ represents the triumph of the individual over their circumstances. It represents rather a perverse version of evolution in which humanity becomes more than human and therefore less than human. Again, he associates the vision of Ivywood as the superman with the influence of the Turkish prophet who has Ivywood’s ear.

In The Flying Inn constant and unsubtle explicit connections are made between the English people and the fertile soil and rolling hills of their country, and between ‘Eastern’ people and the barren desert which in Chesterton’s mind Muslims inhabited. He believes that the English national character is forged at least in part by the English landscape. There is a contradiction, however, in Chesterton’s simultaneous pride in the refusal of the English to be determined by nature. He alludes to nature having an effect on the English character but not a final or complete one: nature guides the English but does not control them. This distinction is, however, unclear and implicit. Chesterton had a clear conviction that the people of England had come to reflect their landscape. He contrasted the geographies of East and West to support his contention that ‘foreign’ winds would blow ill in England. The peacock trees of The Trees of Pride for it is scarcely so old as their grandfathers’: British Library, \textit{G.K. Chesterton Papers}, Add. MS 73186, Vol. 1, Letter from Chesterton to the editor of the \textit{Times}, dated 28 March 1933.
will never grow right, and the garish mish-mash of ideas representing Chesterton’s understanding of the ‘East’ will be forcibly rejected.

Chesterton baulked, however, at ascribing determinative power to the land. Despite the vivid evocations of the effect of the landscape in *The Flying Inn* he held to his unwillingness to cede power over the human spirit to material factors, including the natural environment. *The Flying Inn*, published in 1914, and *The Trees of Pride*, published in 1922, belied the scorn that he heaped over his friend George Bernard Shaw in 1909 for falling for environmental theories of nations. If the ‘modern theory of race’ was ‘a piece of stupid materialism’, then even more ‘obscure and senseless than this theory’ was ‘the doctrine of the omnipotence of climate’.\[^{446}\] The environment and climate counted for something,

> but the true key to national differentiations is the key of the will. ... It never crosses the modern mind to fancy that perhaps a people is chiefly influenced by how that people has chosen to behave. If I have to choose between race and weather I prefer race; I would rather be imprisoned and compelled by ancestors who were once alive than by mud and mists which never were. But I do not propose to be controlled by either; to me my national history is a chain of multitudinous choices. It is neither blood nor rain that has made England, but hope, the thing that all those dead men have desired.\[^{447}\]

This contradiction between all he wrote about the impact of the landscape and his rejection of the environmental theory of race was a product of Chesterton’s attempt at an ideological third way. Chesterton dabbled in various theories of national character in his fiction and non-fictional work, but ultimately rejected them all in favour of a nebulous notion of the national will.

Race itself held some ambiguity for Chesterton. According to Maisie Ward, when Chesterton was asked by a doctor to write something (to see if he could use a pen after an arm injury), he wrote:

I am fond of Jews
Jews are fond of money
Never mind of whose
I am fond of Jews
Oh, but when they lose
Damn it all, it’s funny. 448

Ward maintained that it was ‘really true that Gilbert was fond of very many Jews’ 449 - but only those Jews of the right type. There ‘was another kind of Jew’, apparently, that ‘he very heartily disliked’. 450 Chesterton’s magnanimous acknowledgement that only a particular type of Jew was objectionable was enough to satisfy Ward that allegations of anti-Semitism were unfounded - but many have differed with her on this point. There has been extensive debate over whether or not Chesterton was an anti-Semite which has partly revolved around the question of whether he ‘liked’ Jewish people and was capable of genuine friendship with them. 451 Chesterton himself pointed to his own friendships with Jewish people as defence against accusations of prejudice, charges

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448 Ward, Gilbert Keith Chesterton, p. 264.
449 Ward, Gilbert Keith Chesterton, p. 264.
450 Ward, Gilbert Keith Chesterton, p. 264.
451 Maisie Ward wrote in defense of Chesterton that ‘in his original group of J.D.C. friends, four Jews had been included and with three of these his friendship continued through life. ... There was another kind of Jew he very heartily disliked but he was at great pains to draw this distinction himself’: Gilbert Keith Chesterton, p. 227. Quentin Lauer explicitly disavowed this ‘“some-of-his-best-friends-were-Jews” type of argument’ but concluded somewhat confusingly that ‘anti-Semitism here means either opposition to or hatred of the Jewish people (looked upon as a “race”) or ethnic group as such. Chesterton did not hate any race or ethnic group, even though he had many unkind things to say about Americans, or Prussians, or Scotsmen, or Japanese, or Jews - race was not the reason; how he experienced people as people was the reason’: G.K. Chesterton: Philosopher without Portfolio, Fordham University Press, New York, 1988, pp. 141-2. Chesterton himself, however, was clear when discussing Jewish people that he was not talking about how he ‘experienced’ them. He wrote, when arguing that it should be compulsory for Jews to dress distinctive so that one could identify them, that ‘if my image is quaint, my intention is serious; and the point of it is not personal to any particular Jew. The point applies to any Jew, and to our own recovery of healthier relations with him. The point is that we should know where we are; and he would know where he is, which is in a foreign land’: Chesterton, The New Jerusalem, pp. 278-279. See also R. Royal, ‘Our Curious Contemporary, G.K. Chesterton’, Wilson Quarterly, Vol. 16(4), Autumn 1992, p. 92; J. Coates, Chesterton and the Edwardian Cultural Crisis, Hull University Press, Hull, 1984, pp. 14-15; and T. Kushner and K. Lunn (eds), Traditions of Intolerance: Historical perspectives on fascism and race discourse in Britain, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1989.
which he explicitly rejected.\textsuperscript{452} Whether or not Chesterton was inter-personally amenable to Jewish people, however, he did write in a manner which indicates that he did not feel they truly belonged in England. In fact, for this reason he professed to be a Zionist.\textsuperscript{453} He preferred generally that Jews be concentrated in a specific homeland (which he was happy to locate in Palestine subject to certain conditions), and those that remained in England should be treated as guests.\textsuperscript{454} He felt that Jewish people were eternally foreign to England and, although he claimed good relations with members of the Jewish community, did not accept them as belonging to his country.\textsuperscript{455}

Nature again played a vital role in both the problem and its solution: in *The New Jerusalem* he described how the Jewish people must learn to love their land in order to earn the support of the international community for Zionism; conversely, if Jews could demonstrate a sincere attachment to the soil then the international community would be morally obliged to support them in their aspirations to nationhood:

> It is our whole complaint against the Jew that he does not till the soil or toil with the spade; it is very hard on him to refuse him if he really says, “Give me a soil and I will till it; give me a spade and I will use it.” It is our whole reason for distrusting him that he cannot really love any of the lands in which he wanders; it seems rather indefensible to be deaf to him if he really says, “Give me a land and I will love it.” I would certainly give him a land, or some instalment of the land, (in what general sense I will try to suggest a little later) so long as his conduct on it was watched and tested according to the principles I have suggested. If he asks for the spade he must use the spade, and not merely employ the spade, in the sense of hiring half a hundred men to use spades. If he asks for the soil he must till the soil; that is he must belong to the soil and not merely make the soil belong to him. He must have the simplicity, and what many would call the stupidity of the peasant. He must not only call a spade a spade, but regard it as a spade and not as a speculation. By some true

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\textsuperscript{452} In his autobiography he wrote that ‘oddly enough, I lived to have later on the name of an anti-Semite; whereas from my first days at school I very largely had the name of a Pro-Semite. I made many friends among the Jews, and some of these I have retained as life-long friends; nor have our relations ever been disturbed by differences upon the political or social problem’: *The Autobiography of G.K. Chesterton*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2006 (first published 1936), p. 76.

\textsuperscript{453} Chesterton, *The New Jerusalem*, p. 269.

\textsuperscript{454} Chesterton, *The New Jerusalem*, pp. 302-3.

\textsuperscript{455} A typical trope of the time was that of Jews being unrooted because they were thought of as desert people. Chesterton associated the desert more with Islam and did not elaborate much on the reasons why he thought Jews were not capable of belonging properly in England.
conversion the urban and modern man must be not only on the soil, but of the soil, and free from our urban trick of inventing the word dirt for the dust to which we shall return.\footnote{Chesterton, \textit{The New Jerusalem}, pp. 298-9.}

Chesterton magnanimously conceded that this state was not impossible for the Jews to achieve: ‘Nobody who has seen a Jewish rural settlement, such as Rishon,’ he wrote, ‘can doubt that some Jews are sincerely filled with the vision of sitting under their own vine and fig-tree, and even with its accompanying lesson that it is first necessary to grow the fig-tree and the vine.’\footnote{Chesterton, \textit{The New Jerusalem}, p. 296.}

Chesterton’s conception of this English national community and the emphasis on particular exclusions and inclusions evolved over time. Prior to the Great War, he was preoccupied to a significant extent with defending the individual. After the War and the death of his brother Cecil his focus shifted slightly. There was no radical change of direction, but the more defensive, closed and exclusive aspects of his ideology came to the fore. This development coincided with the official advent of Distributism which, though apparently benign, had undertones of exclusivity and defensiveness.

While his nationalism became more organic and communitarian, he still mostly rejected theories of race that were propagated by scientists and popularisers of science. Chesterton thought that racial theory was profoundly unintelligent, writing (again in \textit{Heretics}) that ‘of all the forms in which science, or pseudo-science, has come to the rescue of the rich and stupid, there is none so singular as the singular invention of the theory of races.’\footnote{Chesterton, \textit{Heretics}, p. 172.} Chesterton referred disparagingly to the work of the French
theorist Arthur de Gobineau, who developed racialist theory in his *An Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races*.\(^{459}\)

Chesterton associated racial theories with Darwinism, and described the latter as a ‘servile’ philosophy, and one that was identifiably modern.\(^{460}\) The ideas of both Darwinism and race arose when the modern world lost its grip on traditional certainties and ancient wisdom, and began flapping around looking for something to fix their minds on (much in the same manner as Ivywood fell on the Nietzschean Superman in *The Flying Inn*). ‘England and the English governing class’, Chesterton wrote, ‘never did call on this absurd deity of race until it seemed, for an instant, that they had no other god to call on’.\(^{461}\) Race was a philosophy of ‘stupid materialism’\(^{462}\) and as such Chesterton felt bound to reject it in order to preserve the sanctity of the soul.

Chesterton’s rejection of ‘scientific’ racism did not mean that he rejected the idea of race altogether: in *George Bernard Shaw* he wrote that ‘of course there is a reality in race; but there is no reality in the theories of race offered by some ethnological professors. Blood, perhaps, is thicker than water; but brains are sometimes thicker than anything.’\(^{463}\) Chesterton was apparently bothered more by the presence of professors and technical types in the debate than he was by the idea that physical characteristics could in some deep and essential way impact on the cultural and social life of a community. Chesterton believed that there was something real and


\(^{460}\) Chesterton, *What I saw in America*, p. 299.


\(^{463}\) Chesterton, *George Bernard Shaw*, p. 166.
meaningful in being born in England to English parents. He would not accept, however, that this intangible quality was something that could be measured by science, but relied instead on some conception of national identity that lay part way between environmental and philosophical explanations.464

Nature and the imperial nation

In the second Boer War of 1899-1902 Chesterton found himself on the side of the Boers, and so earned himself the epithet ‘Little Englander’.465 It was a label he wore with pride - at least for a time.466 Nationalism for Chesterton was ideally small and local. He thought that it was impossible for true nationalism to flourish in large entities such as empires. He believed that one thing that was missing in the modern world was a sense of connectedness to place, and thought of ‘cosmopolitanism’ as a superficial creed, rushing around the world indefinitely and pointlessly. ‘And under all this vast illusion of the cosmopolitan planet’, he wrote,

the real life of man goes on concerned with this tree or that temple, with this harvest or that drinking-song, totally uncomprehended, totally untouched. And it watches from its splendid parochialism [...] motor-car civilisation going its triumphant way, outstripping time, consuming space, seeing all and seeing nothing, roaring on at last to the capture of the solar system, only to find the sun cockney and the stars suburban.467

Modern, cosmopolitan civilisation was capable only of finding images of itself everywhere it goes, because that was all it was equipped to look for. If it allowed itself

465 Note that Chesterton did not oppose the conflict because he disapproved of fighting per se. In fact, he quite approved of war as a manifestation of loyalty and love. In his paper for the Patriots’ Club, he wrote that ‘[m]any humane moderns have a horror of nationality as the mother of wars. So in a sense it is, just as love and religion are. Men will always fight about the things they care for, and in many cases quite rightly’: ‘The Patriotic Idea’, pp. 7-8.
466 Chesterton quickly found himself parting ways with his little England fellow-travellers.
467 Chesterton, Heretics, p. 53.
to ‘take root’ somewhere, it would see the true reality of the place, but blowing around the world like a tumbleweed equipped a traveller to understand nothing that was authentic or true. The dangers of cosmopolitanism were thus serious, and of a kind with the dangers of the free flow of capital and finance. Like international finance, imperialism was foreign - ‘Asiatic’ in fact. Europe by contrast was the home of the nationalist ideal, the only place where there was ‘the sanctity of a nation’.\textsuperscript{468} On the British approach in Africa, he wrote that people resented their policy because of ‘the alien and grotesque nature of the power of wealth, the fact that money has no roots, that it is not a natural and familiar power, but a sort of airy and evil magic calling monsters from the ends of the earth.’\textsuperscript{469}

Chesterton frequently discussed the importance of ‘striking root’ - ‘if you talk intelligently to the nearest tree’, he wrote in 1921, you will find that ‘there is an advantage in root; and the name of it is fruit. It is not true that the nomad is even freer than the peasant.’\textsuperscript{470} Those who have successfully become connected to a place can tap its ancient wisdom, like the peasants in Chesterton’s \textit{The Trees of Pride}. In that story the daughter of Squire Vane, sympathetic to the concerns of the peasants, says to a friend that

\begin{quote}
I am perfectly certain [...] that nobody can save this perishing land and this perishing people but those who understand. I mean who understand a thousand little signs and guides in the very soil and lie of the land, and traces that are almost trampled out. [...] There are powers, there is the spirit of a place, there are presences that are not to be put by. Oh, don’t fancy I am
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{468} Chesterton believed that the ‘very best and most intellectual’ manifestation of ‘Asiatic’ imperialism was China. Only in Europe, by contrast, ‘is there this sense of the sanctity of a nation. In other places men fight for the independence of their own tribe. In our Nationalist Europe only is there any notion of respecting the independence of another tribe’: ‘The Patriotic Idea’, p. 20. Strangely, this idea seems to have survived the Great War - but it does provide an explanation for why Chesterton constantly insisted that Germany (which he called Prussia) was beset by ‘foreign’ and even ‘Oriental’ influences.

\textsuperscript{469} Chesterton, \textit{Tremendous Trifles}, pp. 51-2.

sentimental and hanker after the good old days. The old days were not all good; that is just the point, and we must understand enough to know the good from the evil. We must understand enough to save the traces of a saint or a sacred tradition, or, where a wicked god has been worshipped, to destroy his altar and to cut down his grove.471

Connected to the idea of ‘rootedness’ is the idea of the importance of limits. In Chesterton’s view, people should be connected to a specific place, should love it and have loyalty for it and not forsake it:

There is one thing that is vitally essential to everything which is to be intensely enjoyed or intensely admired - limitation. Whenever we look through an archway, and are stricken into delight with the magnetic clarity and completeness of the landscape beyond, we are realizing the necessity of boundaries. Whenever we put a picture in a frame, we are acting upon that primeval truth which is the value of small nationalities. [...] All Imperial poetry, even the very best (as in the earlier work of Rudyard Kipling) must be psychologically false, for when a man really loves a thing he dwells not on its largeness, but its smallness.472

It followed from this idea of limitations that imperialism was not an ideology which he could support. Imperialism failed to contain the loyalties of men and women within confined spaces. Its advocates sought to expand the horizons of citizens to take in the rest of the wide world, and in doing so would sever the bonds that link us to our own gardens, counties and country.

He was a Little Englander who believed that if Englishmen loved England, then they should stay there and leave the rest of the world to be loved and looked after by its own peoples. He did not believe that it was possible for people to flourish by trying to make homes far from England, which was one reason why the art and culture of the new countries would always be a poor relation to that of the old:

The first-rate writers of the new countries are really almost exactly like the second-rate writers of the old countries. Of course they do feel the mystery of the wilderness, the mystery of the bush [...] But when they write most sincerely

471 Chesterton, Trees of Pride, pp. 43-4.
and most successfully, it is not with a background of the mystery of the bush, but with a background, expressed or assumed, of our own romantic cockney civilisation.473

Chesterton’s perspective on the role of Britain in the wider world thus differed from that of Rudyard Kipling. Chesterton, calling the imperialist Kipling a ‘man of the world’, wrote of Kipling being ‘imprisoned’ in that world. Kipling, for Chesterton, did not ‘belong’ anywhere, and the proof of this rootlessness was that Kipling ‘thinks of England as a place. The moment we are rooted in a place, the place vanishes. We live like a tree with the whole strength of the universe’.474 According to Chesterton, once committed to a place the true nationalist will fail to realise that the place even exists. Nationality for Chesterton was thus a totalising force, hegemonic in its obliteration of all other possible commitments and loyalties.

Chesterton was suspicious of economic and technological globalisation as much as he was of imperialism. He expressed doubt about whether nations should be ‘drawn together, or rather dragged together, by the brute violence of the engines of science and speed’.475 He believed that the collective psyche of a community was bounded by the physical boundaries of the land to which the community was innately suited.

473 Chesterton, Heretics, pp. 261-2. See also Maisie Ward’s biography, which argued that Chesterton ‘hated Imperialism yet he glorified Napoleon; himself ardently patriotic he accused Kipling of lack of patriotism on the ground that a man could not at once love England and love the Empire. For there was a curious note in the anti-Imperialism of the Chesterbelloc that has not always been recognised. The ordinary anti-Imperialist holds that England has no right to govern an Empire and that her leadership is bad for the other dominions. But the Chesterbelloc view was that the dominions were inferior and unworthy of a European England’: Gilbert Keith Chesterton, p. 160.
474 Chesterton, Heretics, 1905, p. 49. Chesterton could not at this point have read Puck of Pook’s Hill as it was not published until 1906 (Macmillan & Co, London); if he had, he might have revised his opinion of Kipling.
475 Chesterton, What I saw in America, p. 209.
Spencer's amoeba and the organic nation

The obliteraton of the specific in favour of the universal was connected in Chesterton's mind to the fad for biological metaphors for the nation. Chesterton professed a profound disgust at the idea of defining society as some kind of biological organism, which became the fashion in certain circles during his life. In the context of Chesterton's lifetime, organicism is defined by H.S. Jones as 'the belief that the state or society possesses a systematic unity comparable to that of organisms in the natural world.' Jones continues that 'this was a fashionable doctrine in the late Victorian and Edwardian period,' to the point where 'the language of politics in [that period] was saturated with evolutionary and organic metaphors,' although there was little agreement about the political implications of the use of this trope.

Chesterton associated this fashion primarily with Ernst Haeckel and Herbert Spencer, and in 1902 he wrote that

Mr. Herbert Spencer is a respectable, almost a dapper figure [...] And yet he threw himself into a task more insane and gigantic than that of Dante, an inventory or plan of the universe itself; the awful vision of existence as a single organism, like an amoeba on the disc of a microscope.

A contrasting approach was provided by his much-admired Saint Francis of Assisi, and in his biography of that saint Chesterton wrote that Francis 'wanted to see each tree as a separate and almost a sacred thing, being a child of God and therefore a brother or

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476 Chesterton was, as often, inconsistent on the question of universality. See the discussion earlier in this thesis concerning Chesterton's description of Edmund Burke as an 'atheist' because he believed that rights should be applied specifically, not universally.
478 Jones, Victorian Political Thought, p. 74.
479 Jones, Victorian Political Thought, p. 74.
sister of man.\textsuperscript{481} This was Chesterton’s stand against what he viewed as a common feature of his own intellectual and cultural context - the propensity to view all of humanity as one entity, whether absorbed into the natural world, as in biological holism,\textsuperscript{482} or by economic collectivism which absorbed the individual into the state. This kind of metaphysical absorption was not what Chesterton saw as the proper approach to the non-human world; rather, he preferred a theologically-based theory of the primacy of the individual being.

The strong sense of gratitude that Chesterton always carried in his philosophical repertoire required the existence of something to be grateful for, something that had an existence independent of one's own. This feeling necessitated in turn a sense of separation between humanity and the 'natural' world and inclined Chesterton against some of the holistic theories of nature that were gaining currency in his time. This sense of separation applied not only to the gap between human souls but to that between humanity and the rest of creation.\textsuperscript{483} Chesterton's understanding of democracy – to which he always proclaimed himself to be committed - shared little with that of the liberal political tradition of which he formed a part, but was rather balanced quite precariously on the idea of the sacred status of individual souls. The

\begin{footnotes}
\item[482] Ecological holism appeals to ‘ecology and quantum mechanics in order to argue that there is no significant distinction between self and the world’: J. O’Neill, \textit{Ecology, Policy and Politics: Human Well-being and the Natural World}, London, Routledge, 1993, p. 149. Holism relies on a perception of humanity as indistinguishable from the rest of the natural world in order to draw various conclusions about the respect with which people must treat the non-human realm. These holistic systems are not ‘merely’ the aggregate of their individual elements; rather, the ‘whole is more than the sum of its parts’: P. Anker, \textit{Imperial Ecology: Environmental Order in the British Empire, 1895-1945}, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2001, p. 158. The holistic model of the environment and humanity evokes a curiosity about the organisation of society with respect to the role and power of individual parts of the whole. Holism does not of necessity lead to authoritarian systems, but in its extreme form can suggest a political state in which the needs and decisions of the individual are subordinated to the goals, such as racial purity, of the whole.
\item[483] Chesterton gives a good account of his understanding of the importance of individuality and separateness in \textit{St. Francis of Assisi}.\end{footnotes}
idea of individuality was extremely important to Chesterton, and his disgust with Herbert Spencer stemmed from what he viewed as Spencer's neglect of this notion of separateness in which each soul, lovingly created, exists independently of each other and apart from the rest of Creation.

This perspective led Chesterton to scornfully reject the concept of the 'social organism' as a site of national identity, as early as the publication of his What's Wrong with the World in 1910.484 Indeed, gentle ridicule of the notion of the melting of humanity into an organism, and especially in the sense of being 'one with nature' was present even in Chesterton's very first published work, a book of poetry which contained the verses:

The million forests of the Earth
Come trooping in to tea.
The great Niagara waterfall
Is never strong with me.
[...]
I am akin to all the Earth
By many a tribal sign:
The aged Pig will often wear
That sad, sweet smile of mine.
[...]
My niece, the Barnacle, has got
My piercing eyes of black;
The Elephant has got my nose,
I do not want it back.485

Associations between landscape and the nation quite easily lend themselves to essentialist versions of nationalism, in which the nation is a pre-ordained community connected organically to its geographical surroundings.486 Central to this type of

486 Political scientist Daniel Deudney views ‘topophilia’ (love of place) as on the rise in contemporary times in which ‘the progressivist, rationalist, and technologically dynamic societies cast in the Enlightenment mold suddenly have been confronted with massive destruction of the earth’s ecological life-support system’: p. 129. These forms of nationalism are unlikely to decline, according to Deudney, who claims that they ‘are not likely to be captured by existing state and ethno-based nationalism, but will rather either alter or displace them’: D. Deudney, ‘Ground Identity: Nature, Place and Space in
connection between nature and the nation is the sense of the latter as both alive and complete:

Here the nation is conceptualised as a living organism, complete, unique, and self-contained. Within this version of nationalism all individuals within the nation are seen as mere parts of the national organism, subordinate and incomplete in and of themselves.\footnote{J. Olsen, \textit{Nature and Nationalism: Right-Wing Ecology and the Politics of Identity in Contemporary Germany}, Macmillan Press, London, 1999, p. 25.}

Chesterton frequently expressed his disgust at this biological organicism,\footnote{Despite the complexities of the ideas of 'organicism', there are some dominant strands that can be identified. One of these dominant types was the biological, which has most often been associated with philosopher and liberal political theorist Herbert Spencer. This biological variant of the organic argument has been termed by James Meadowcroft 'sociological organicism' and occurs when 'the structure and development of biological organisms were used to model social features' and 'the continuity between biology and sociology was emphasised': J. Meadowcroft, \textit{Conceptualising the State: Innovation and Dispute in British Political Thought 1880-1914}, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1995, pp. 59-60. This type of organic theory was most directly related to developments in science, especially in the context of evolutionary theory, and was mistrusted by some, including Chesterton, as being born of an unjustified certainty and faith in the infallibility of scientific knowledge, as well as neglecting the role of human determination in the organisation of societies. The theory was also the basis for concern about the decline of religion in Victorian England: J. Harris, \textit{Private Lives, Public Spirit: Britain 1870-1914}, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1993, pp. 170-1.}
because he associated it with the kind of materialistic vision inspired by Ernst Haeckel. Haeckel's 1899 work \textit{The Riddle of the Universe} threatened, in Chesterton's view, a world in which human behaviour could be entirely explained by biology and human souls were elided into one amorphous mass.\footnote{A good example of Chesterton's attitude to Haeckel is found in \textit{Orthodoxy}: '[a]nd, similarly, if the cosmos of the materialist is the real cosmos, it is not much of a cosmos. The thing has shrunk. The deity is less divine than many men; and [according to Haeckel] the whole of life is something much more grey, narrow, and trivial than many separate aspects of it. The parts seem greater than the whole': p. 27.} In Haeckel's ideas, Chesterton perceived an organicism that was completely holistic in nature – that is, the whole organism was not only more than the sum of its parts, but the parts themselves were of little importance when the health of the whole was considered. Eugenics, which was rising in popularity early in Chesterton's career, was, as far as he was concerned, the logical outcome of a society which cared little for individual lives and souls. Additionally, holistic theories that made an association between state and nation were naturally anathema to
Chesterton, who made no such connection and had very little interest in the political institutions of the state as a source of democracy.\footnote{Although Spencer was frequently abused by Chesterton for Haeckel’s crime (of erasing the individual in favour of one monstrous organism) Spencer is now more often associated with a severe form of individualism which used organic analogy to demonstrate the very serious dangers posed by states who interfered with individual affairs. One of Spencer’s justifications for this belief was that as an evolving organism, society should be left to grow and change in its own manner, and not be interfered with by overbearing government policies; nor, famously, should the weaker members of society be protected: J.D.Y. Peel, \textit{Herbert Spencer: the Evolution of a Sociologist}, Heinemann, London, 1971, pp. 169-70; see also Meadowcroft, \textit{Conceptualising the State}, p. 62.} Chesterton was of the view that Haeckel’s theory involved the subordination of the human spirit to nature. In an examination of the German ‘Monist’ movement and its impact on Nazi ideologues, \textit{The Scientific Origins of National Socialism}, Daniel Gasman argued that Monism, like National Socialism, demanded an acknowledgement of the ‘literal supremacy of nature’.\footnote{D. Gasman, \textit{The Scientific Origins of National Socialism: Social Darwinism in Ernst Haeckel and the German Monist League}, Macdonald and Co., London, 1971, p. 165.} Monism emphasised ‘the literal continuity between the laws of nature and the laws of society’.\footnote{Gasman, \textit{The Scientific Origins of National Socialism}, p. 34.} Although the theories of Haeckel and the German Monist League were clearly reminiscent of social Darwinism, Gasman argues that Monism represented a peculiarly ‘German’ form of social Darwinism that was more important to Hitler than the theories of Darwin himself. Social ecologist Janet Biehl has also written of the difference between ‘German’ and ‘Anglo-American’ social Darwinism, claiming that ‘where Anglo-American social Darwinism conceived the “fittest” as the individual entrepreneur in a “bloody tooth and claw” capitalist jungle, German social Darwinism overwhelmingly conceived the “fittest” in terms of race’.\footnote{J. Biehl, “”Ecology” And the Modernisation of Fascism in the German Ultra-Right’, in J. Biehl and P. Staudenmaier (eds.), \textit{Ecofascism: Lessons from the German Experience}, AK Press, Edinburgh, 1995, pp. 31-73.} Chesterton would certainly have shared this view that the monism which he despised was more German (or Prussian as he more often termed it) than English, and believed that the ‘Prussian’ spirit was one peculiarly vulnerable to bowing to the authority of nature rather than keeping faith with the human will. Of monism specifically, he wrote that:
Monism means, of course, that all things are really only one thing. But there are a great many Monists who are by no means Materialists. The sort of metaphysics which appeals to the mystical tradition of Buddha, for instance, is the very reverse of materialist; but it is in the true sense Monist. It suggests in various ways that all differences are delusions. It does not say that men have immortal souls; but that men will, at best, lose their souls in one immortal soul.494

The political elasticity of the organic analogy is significant, and if organicism could be used to justify Spencerian individualism, it could equally be used to support political collectivism.495 The organic analogy in its collective incarnation was often a tool of the philosophical Idealists, a philosophical movement centred at Oxford around T.H. Green and F.H. Bradley.496 Politically, Idealism was influential in New Liberalism, a more 'organic' style of political Liberalism. According to Peter Weiler, whilst 'old Liberals thought of society as simply an aggregate of individuals', New Liberals ‘thought of society as an organism, a unity of political, social, and economic forces. But society was more than just the sum of its parts; it had an independent existence.'497

Chesterton, coming from a late Victorian, liberal household, was immersed in debates about the future of political liberalism from early on in his writing career. Chesterton’s response to New Liberalism was skeptical, because he believed that in its tendency

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495 Meadowcroft, Conceptualising the State, p. 65; Jones, Victorian Political Thought, p. 74.
496 The Idealists relied heavily on philosophical theory from Germany, especially that of Hegel. In Sandra den Otter’s words, the Idealists ‘found in the Hegelian system a compelling alternative to an atomism of individuals’ which seemed to be prevailing in political theory and social life. In response to the rise of what seemed an extreme kind of individualism, ‘they discovered a philosophy of unity’: S. den Otter, British Idealism and Social Explanation: A Study in Late Victorian Thought, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1996, p. 30. This unity was tied to the Idealists’ understanding of the state, which adherents such as T.H. Green believed was based on a 'general will’ (for an outline of Green's philosophy, see D.P. Leighton, The Greenian Moment: T.H. Green, Religion and Political Argument in Victorian Britain, Imprint Academic, Exeter, 2004). The 'social organism' in this case fulfills the function of binding each member of society into a whole, each driven by the desire for the greater good.
497 P. Weiler, The New Liberalism: Liberal Social Theory in Great Britain, Garland Publishing, New York, 1982, p. 17. New Liberalism was a movement that arose in response to a sense of dissatisfaction with the Old Liberalism, which, it was felt by the New Liberals, was too negative and individualistic. It was New Liberalism which 'inspired the social legislation enacted by the Asquith government [1908-1916] before war came in 1914': M. Richter, The Politics of Conscience: T.H. Green and his Age, Thoemmes Press, Bristol, 1964, p. 267.
towards greater state action it was betraying the liberal commitment to freedom of the individual and private property. He did, however, share the New Liberals’ commitment to rejecting the form of individualism that undermined the possibility for collective identity and spiritual community. He wanted to (as he so often did) forge a middle path, a critique of New Liberalism that still retained a sense of the primacy of the community.498

Chesterton’s response to ideas of organicism is illustrative of the context in which he was writing. Influenced variously by liberalism, Anglicanism,499 Catholicism500 and ideologies of science, his attitudes reflected the varied and competing discourses of his time. His attitudes to certain things also changed over time, rendering his thought sometimes ambiguous and self-contradictory. Thus, the language that Chesterton uses when discussing individuality and organicism appears at times conflicted. Although, as is evident in the case of Herbert Spencer, it is possible to proclaim both a commitment

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498 In Tom Villis’ words, ‘it is precisely the binding strength of the centrality of liberal individualism in British culture that has led people to underestimate the extent to which anti-liberal ideas could inform critiques of New Liberalism and collectivism. Guild Socialism and Distributism claimed to re-centralise the individual against the power of the state. Yet they also wanted to provide a sense of togetherness and community that had been lost in the process of modernisation. This spiritual, religious or national harmony could be resurrected by revolt against system, and then retained through political or religious authority in the future. It is in this tension, as much as in the more clearly reactionary calls for the people to be kept in their place, that a revolt against the principles of liberal democracy in early twentieth-century Britain can be found’: Villis, Reaction and the Avant-Garde, p. 701.

499 The organic metaphor was influential not only in the political sphere, but in other realms in the late Victorian and Edwardian periods. If Matthew Grimley is correct in characterising religion in the early twentieth century as the ‘principal battleground on which the boundaries of the state were determined’ (M. Grimley, Citizenship, Community and the Church of England: Liberal Anglican Theories of the State between the Wars, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2004, p. 25), then it will come as no shock that various theological movements of Chesterton’s time were also concerned with variations of the organic analogy. Grimley has discussed the role of the liberal Anglican tradition, of which Chesterton’s family was a part – although Chesterton progressed from a Liberal Unitarianism to Anglo-Catholicism, and then Catholic orthodoxy during his career: Grimley, Citizenship, Community and the Church of England, p. 25. Julia Stapleton has claimed that Liberal Anglicanism was an influence on Chesterton: Christianity, Patriotism and Nationhood, p. 118.

500 In the religious context, David Matless has also pointed out the connection between organicism and Catholicism (the faith to which Chesterton converted in 1922). He has argued that later organicists, some of whom were influenced by the Distributist movement that Chesterton and his friend Hilaire Belloc had been involved in, embraced Roman Catholicism in the inter-war period as an institution representing localness, community and authority, and as a church which was based on a ‘locally rooted universalism’: Matless, Landscape and Englishness, pp. 127-8.
to individualism and an organic understanding of the world, in Chesterton's case the relationship between the two was complicated by an attempt to develop a sense of transcendence at the same time as maintaining a commitment to the inviolability of each individual.

Conclusion

Julia Stapleton has argued that when Chesterton was writing about the organic nation, 'the preponderant influence at work on [him] here might well be seen as Anglican, the Church of England having turned to an organic English nation and away from the British state in maintaining its authority from the 1880s onward.'501 She does not discuss the issue any further, and, despite her acknowledgement that Chesterton's sense of nationalism is linked to religion, Stapleton downplays the religious context within which Chesterton was operating.502 It is true that Chesterton was associated with Anglicanism early in his career. It is also true that he was moving, from a very early stage, towards if not Catholicism itself, then to a conservative, dogmatic version of religious faith which culminated in his official conversion to the Church of Rome in 1922.

The Catholic Church itself was in the midst of the Modernist crisis when Chesterton was publishing his first books. The Church hierarchy, concerned to 'keep modernity at bay', used its authority to 'create a mediaeval cultural enclave.'503 Gabriel Daly, in his work on Catholicism and the Modernist crisis, has described the Catholic Church

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501 Stapleton, Christianity, Patriotism, and Nationhood, p. 118.
502 Historians of Catholicism have complained about a tendency of non-religious historians to sideline religious issues: see, for example, Leighton, The Greenian Moment, p. 4.
between the two Vatican Councils (of 1869 and 1965 respectively) as like a 'walled village', within which a 'system of taboos and cautionary tales severely discouraged [the villagers] from venturing beyond the wall which both protected and imprisoned them.'\textsuperscript{504} Even though Chesterton was opposed to modernism within the Catholic Church, it is doubtful whether he would have seen his adopted Church in those terms. It is possible, however, that he found in the Catholic Church the sense of community, unity of purpose and will that he found lacking in the Anglican Church, in part due to the lessening hold of dogma in the latter establishment. It seems that Chesterton adopted aspects of the 'social organism' from the New Liberals with whom he was familiar, and reoriented them, away from the state about which he professed extreme skepticism, and towards a type of religion which, he maintained, was distinctly English.

That Englishness, faith and the land were explicitly linked by Chesterton is evident when one looks at his response to the problem of how to create nations out of colonies. He wrote that 'I confess I know only one thing that will thus give to a new soil the sanctity of something already old and full of mystical affections. And that thing is a shrine – the real presence of a sacramental religion.'\textsuperscript{505} An extract from \textit{Heretics} illustrates Chesterton’s belief that land and faith are intimately connected:

If we ever get the English back on to the English land they will become again a religious people, if all goes well, a superstitious people. The absence from modern life of both the higher and lower forms of faith is largely due to a divorce from nature and the trees and clouds. If we have no more turnip ghosts it is chiefly from the lack of turnips.\textsuperscript{506}

It was Chesterton’s belief that this ‘divorce’ had come about as part of the industrialisation and modernisation of England.

\textsuperscript{504} Daly, 'Catholicism and Modernity', p. 777.
\textsuperscript{506} Chesterton, \textit{Heretics}, 1905, p. 101.
Chesterton’s vision of nature and nation represented an attempt at reconciliation between freedom and determinism, or between transcendence of or embeddedness within nature. In the end he felt obliged to protect the notion of ‘will’ as forming the centre of the nation:

If I had ever talked all the mean materialism about living nations and dying nations, I should say that England was certainly dying. But I do not believe that a nation dies save by suicide. To the very last the problem is a problem of will; and if we will we can be whole. But it involves facing our own failures as well as counting our successes; it means not depending entirely on commerce and colonies; it means balancing our mercantile morals with more peasant religion and peasant equality; it means ceasing to be content to rule the sea, and making some sort of effort to return to the land.507

Chesterton safeguarded the possibility of transcending the limitations of place: he argued that both blood and soil were inadequate explanations for the existence of an undeniable English character and posited in its place a sense of the willed nature of national communities. On the other hand, he attributed to foreigners, such as Arabs, a much more limited ability to transcend place. In a circular piece of reasoning, the capacity to transcend geography seemed limited to the English people, whose ability accrued to them by virtue of the very geography that Chesterton denied had determinative power. Even the English, however, were not immune from being affected by their surroundings, and Chesterton was persuaded that there was some genuine connection between the land and its people which helped in some way to determine their character. Ultimately, however, it was God that sat above all, offering the possibility, through the Church, of establishing connections where none previously existed and the opportunity to create embeddedness in the land through its sanctification.

Chapter Five
A Natural History

Chesterton’s historical imagination was moulded by his perception of the role of nature and the landscape in shaping the past. St. Francis of Assisi, and other historical personages, modelled a different way of interacting with nature than that prominent in modernity. Chesterton believed that ‘natural’ and organic social institutions that grew out of the Middle Ages had been destroyed by modern capitalism. He did not believe that humankind had ‘progressed’ historically since that time. He did not believe that the past should not be left behind on the journey to a glorious future. Rather, the present was rooted in the past. People could not escape their history and should always treat tradition with respect. The past was a source of wisdom for the future, and should, in Chesterton’s opinion, shape the course of his country. England indeed had a ‘natural’ historical course - one which had been disrupted by some wrong turnings taken since the Middle Ages and the Reformation. Chesterton thought that before these historical diversions, citizens had a more balanced approach to nature in which they respected it but remained its master. The connection to land and earth had been severed in a series of historical mistakes which culminated, Chesterton believed, in the high absurdity of modern life.

A key text for this aspect of Chesterton’s thought is his A Short History of England, published in 1917. On its publication, an anonymous critic complained that it would be vain to review this book as a history of England, for it is interesting only as an expression of Mr. Chesterton’s mentality and as an illustration of the whimsical visions of the past which appear to the agitated and the agitators.

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Note that although Chesterton objected to the notion of an organicist nation (see previous chapter), he did have a favourable attitude to a certain sense of an organic community. Chesterton, A Short History of England, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2001 (first published 1917).
The historian is well aware that he can only see the past through a glass of many colours, but he knows that the business of his science is to dispel, as far as possible, the distortions of the various media through which historical knowledge is transmitted. But to Mr. Chesterton the distortion is the reality; credulity with regard to legends is, he says, more sane than incredulity. The colour in the glass is more important than the light which penetrates the colour; the fiction that is believed is more vital than the fact, the Arthurian legends than Anglo-Saxon history.510

Chesterton’s history of England was a campaigning book which laid claim to truth but not necessarily to objectivity. In this book Chesterton clearly defined the friends and enemies of the English people and, amongst the latter, the most prominent were Protestantism and Prussianism whose historical impact had been damaging had blown through England, bringing with it the ‘cannibal theory of a commonwealth, that it can of its nature eat other commonwealths’.511 By the nineteenth century, England had achieved the ‘final fulfilment of that gathering influence which began to grow on us in the seventeenth century, which was solidified by the military alliances of the eighteenth century, and which in the nineteenth century had been turned into philosophy - not to say a mythology’.512 By this point, according to Chesterton, English history had been simply ‘annexed’ by German history, which swamped the English spirit up until the Great War, when the English awakened to their folly.513

Chesterton considered ‘Prussianism’ part of what he thought of as Eastern-style thinking. England’s countryside, gentle and settled, was compared to the landscape of Prussia which, by contrast, reflected the cruelty of the Prussian people:

The best squire I know in fiction is Duke Theseus in “The Midsummer Night’s Dream,” who is kind to his people and proud of his dogs; and would be a perfect human being if he were not just a little bit prone to be kind to both of them in the same way. But such natural and even pagan good-nature is

consonant with the warm wet woods and comfortable clouds of South England; it never had any place among the harsh and thrifty squires in the plains of East Prussia, the land of the East Wind. They were peevish as well as proud, and everything they created, but especially their army, was made coherent by sheer brutality.514

The allegedly barren and cold landscape of Prussia reflected the character of its people, who were prevented by the limitations of their geography from developing a rooted and settled life. They were unfettered by the land or their history, an awful freedom which had a grave impact on their historical understanding and their moral development. Chesterton wrote that ‘I urged that the Prussian is a spiritual Barbarian, because he is not bound by his own past, any more than a man in a dream’.515

Protestantism was a related and equally disruptive force in English history. Well before his formal conversion, Chesterton was seeking to rescue England’s Catholic past from the disdain of its modern present. Protestantism and the influence of Germany comprised between them Chesterton’s vision of the modern world. It was a vision which was cold and scientific, and which had heartlessly shorn itself of what was popular and marvellous in England’s history. These alien and disruptive movements carried a particular relationship to nature that Chesterton deemed unhealthy, although he seemed unable to consistently express his preferred alternative. He believed that Prussians, Protestants and other unsavoury sources of influence were prone to worshipping nature and according it authority over human lives, an error that arose from the lack of any sane philosophy to defend themselves from the majesty of nature. Chesterton’s project in his historical writing was to establish a means to salvage what had been lost and revive the absent English spirit in order to forge a defence against false prophets. Part of this restoration was the reconstruction of social

and political institutions that were genuinely rooted in the English landscape, paradoxically in Chesterton’s mind the best protection from nature itself.

**Chesterton and the historians**

Although some students of Chesterton’s legacy have addressed his philosophy of history, the connection between history and landscape has been largely neglected. The exploration of this connection can therefore fill some gaps in the current literature as well as challenging some of its suppositions. John McCarthy’s ‘The Historical Vision of Chesterbelloc’, for example, discussed Chesterton’s opposition to the ‘prevailing’ historiography of Chesterton’s day, which McCarthy described as characterised by an assurance that ‘technological power and natural and social scientific knowledge seemed to be the keys to the future.’\(^{516}\) McCarthy concluded that ‘Chesterton’s childlike clarity of perception and decency enabled him to see through and stand on their head the fashionable intellectual absolutes of his age and ultimately make his way to Catholicism with its quite different historical perspective.’\(^{517}\) Although not explicitly addressing nature, McCarthy does imply a distinction between an authentic approach to history and a false or artificial one. He wrote that ‘Chesterton’s democratic populism enabled him to grasp certain everyday fundamentals about humanity that were reflective of human experience from time immemorial, but which fashionable theorists blindly disregarded’, implying that there were timeless and

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\(^{516}\) J.P. McCarthy, ‘The Historical Vision of Chesterbelloc’, *Modern Age*, Vol. 26(2), Spring, 1982, p. 175. McCarthy discussed the importance of history to Chesterton’s view of the world, arguing that he and Belloc were ‘best appreciated by examining their historical perspective’: p. 175.

absolute truths which were not contestable and which were more authentic than modern ideas.518

Joseph McCleary, author of The Historical Imagination of G.K. Chesterton: Locality, Patriotism, and Nationalism,519 has a similar limitation to McCarthy in his analysis. Both McCleary and McCarthy adopt Chesterton’s habit of absolutism in ideological categorisation. Chesterton constructed grand divisions between good and bad ideas, for example, between the nasty forces of Prussianism and the wholesome spirit of the real England. McCarthy and McCleary accept his description of these enemies without demur, and then laud him for fighting enemies which he has to an extent invented.520 Both praise Chesterton’s vision without confronting his elision of complexities.521 McCleary did, however, notice that the English landscape and the physical locality of a person were crucial in shaping Chesterton’s historical perception of individuals and

519 New York, Routledge, 2009. McCleary argued that the ‘essential elements’ of Chesterton’s philosophy of history were the ‘interlocking themes of locality, patriotism, and nationalism’, with the latter two being ‘outgrowths’ of the former: p. 1. McCleary also argued that Chesterton understood historical change to be driven by individuals, rather than ‘larger systems, ideologies, institutions or governments’: p. 6. This theory was an inverted version of a ‘great man’ approach to history, since Chesterton usually chose to emphasise the ‘ littleness’ or ordinary nature of his subjects.
520 Also incongruous is the way that McCleary defined these ideological enemies largely in terms of historical movements that came after Chesterton’s death, rather than examining where Chesterton belonged in the historical schools of his own time. Absent, for example, is a discussion of Chesterton’s position in relation to theories of historical progress and decline. There is only a brief mention of historical progress (p. 22), where McCleary wrote that for ‘Chesterton [in contrast to H.G. Wells], history was not a linear movement of constant improvement but rather a story with setbacks, victories, and tragedies, all with a dramatic center in the Incarnation.’ McCleary noted, only in passing, that Chesterton ‘did not subscribe to the Whig theory of history’: p. 22. McCleary includes, however a comparison of the post-structuralist historian Hayden White with Chesterton: pp. 130-1.
521 McCleary, in particular, is blind to Chesterton’s ideological bent. He concludes, in fact, that Chesterton’s history, based as it allegedly was on the particularity of things rather than on generalisation, was the opposite of ‘ideological’ history. Discussing Chesterton’s account of Chaucer, McCleary wrote that Chesterton’s enormous ‘imaginative capacity’ enabled him to reach ‘common sense conclusions’: p. 65. This seems an odd conclusion to reach about someone as polemical as Chesterton, whose explicit project in writing his history of England was to restore the voice of ‘the people’, by redressing an imbalance in previous history-writing in which what were called ‘popular histories’ were nearly all in fact ‘written against the people; and in them populace is either ignored or elaborately proved to have been wrong’: Chesterton, Short History of England, p. 423.
acknowledged his feeling that ‘climate, terrain, language, religion, family and friends all combine to shape a person’s soul.’

**Nature and the Middle Ages**

Chesterton admired many aspects of medieval society, although he always repudiated the label ‘Merrie Englander’ and claimed that he was aware of its faults. It was an age, though, that had achieved some of the fundamental philosophical sanity that Chesterton was always unsuccessfully seeking. He wrote that

> The medieval world was far ahead of the modern world in its sense of the things in which all men are at one; death and the daylight of reason and the common conscience that holds communities together. Its generalisations were saner and sounder than the mad materialistic theories of to-day; nobody would have tolerated a Schopenhauer scorning life or a Nietzsche living only for scorn.

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522 McCleary, *Historical Imagination*, p. 7. McCleary does not elaborate much on the specific role that ‘terrain’ plays in this formulation.


524 G.K. Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1986 (first published 1923), p. 79. Chesterton believed that the Middle Ages were more rational than many people thought. On the subject of reason in the Middle Ages, see Anna Bramwell, who argued that many writers fail to notice the ‘shift from Aristotelian rationalism of the Middle Ages to the mysticism of Dee and Newton’: A. Bramwell, *Ecology in the Twentieth Century: A History*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1989, p. 25.
In Chesterton’s view the Middle Ages were also a time marked by a remarkable alignment with nature. It was an age of rootedness in the land, whose social institutions were organic and harmonious with nature. He distinguished, however, between rootedness in the land and the slavish adherence to the ‘laws of nature’ that he thought distinguished his own era. This differentiation resulted in a philosophy precariously balanced between, on the one hand, respecting and understanding nature and, on the other, maintaining the self-assurance of humanity’s higher place in the hierarchy than animals and landscapes.

Chesterton believed that in the Middle Ages, social institutions such as the guilds arose naturally from their surroundings. The institutions of medieval England could be ‘compared to corn or fruit trees in one practical sense at least’ - that they ‘grew upwards from below’. Although there might have been better societies than this one, ‘it is doubtful if there was ever so spontaneous a society.’ On the other hand, ‘Modern local government always comes from above; it is at best granted; it is more often merely imposed.’ These medieval social institutions, which had sprung up spontaneously, ‘rose in the streets like a silent rebellion; like a still and statuesque riot.’ According to Chesterton, in the modern world there was only one still-living remnant of these structures, ‘attenuated and threatened, but enthroned in some power like a ghost of the Middle Ages: the Trades Unions.’ The people of the Middle Ages, including those in the Guilds, had a special appreciation of the productive society: ‘what was really arresting and remarkable about the Middle Ages’, Chesterton wrote, ‘was precisely its positive social scheme of production, of the making, building

525 Chesterton, Short History of England, p. 484.
526 Chesterton, Short History of England, p. 484.
and growing of all the good things of life'. This vision of a holistic and connected community has been an important one to generations of conservative activists in Britain.

In medieval England, the peasants, too, grew out of the land. According to Chesterton they were a social class like a landslide, but one in which the land went uphill, and society improved, and there ‘appeared - like a subterranean race cast up to the sun, something unknown to the august civilisation of the Roman Empire - a peasantry.’ With no apparent conscious decision-making, society spontaneously grew the best and most natural institutions possible.

For Chesterton, there was something special and sacred about a life lived close to the land and to the sources of nourishment and growth - a ‘special spiritual meaning in the simple sustaining things of existence’. The English peasantry, a casualty of modernity, was in touch with this type of spirituality but the bulk of the ‘moderns’ were not. Further, Chesterton argued that modern poets were not just oblivious to this way of being, but that they actively denied its value. To a ‘semi-scientific pessimist’, there is no second meaning in [...] daylight any more than in a deathray. He need not regard the chemical wave called a sunbeam otherwise than he regards X-rays or ultra-violet rays or any rays which are for him at best utilitarian, like rays to

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529 Chesterton, Short History of England, p. 484.
531 Many historians now question whether the British ever boasted a social group to whom the term ‘peasantry’ can be applied. For a very brief outline of the history and historiography see the entry on ‘peasantry’ in J. Cannon (ed.) The Oxford Companion to British History, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1997, pp. 735-6. Chesterton had no doubt about the existence of this class of people and used peasants as central figures in many a moral tale, both fictional and otherwise.
cure cancer. And then, if he is a very modern poet, he would probably prefer to describe the cancer; a growth which he prefers to the grass.\footnote{British Library, G.K. Chesterton Papers, Add. MS 73268A, Vol. 83A, leaves removed from Chesterton’s autobiography.}

Chesterton believed that the absolute primacy of the material, characteristic of the post-Enlightenment scientific mentality, had obscured the true value of nature. The English of the past had much to teach those of the present about authentic attachments to the earth.

On the other hand, he simultaneously drove home the importance of being independent from nature. In heraldic symbolism, for example, he observed that the ant represented industry, and the lion represented courage. ‘But if the medievals’, he lectured, ‘had been convinced that a lion was not courageous, they would have dropped the lion and kept the courage […] The old moralists, I say, permitted the ant to enforce and typify man’s morality; they never allowed the ant to upset it.’\footnote{G.K. Chesterton, \textit{What’s Wrong with the World?}, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1987 (first published 1910), p. 205.} The age that the ants could not conquer was, according to Chesterton, a ‘rational epoch’ because it was an ‘age of doctrine’. His own age was, at best, a ‘poetical epoch’ because it was an ‘age of prejudice’.\footnote{Chesterton, \textit{What’s Wrong with the World?}, p. 48. Chesterton believed that one could either be rational and commit to a dogma or unreasonable and be left with nothing but prejudice.}

Chesterton had a strong a sense of the ‘natural’ growth of social institutions in medieval times. The corollary of this conviction was that those social institutions, once sprouted, modelled a particular way of interacting with nature that was respectful, traditional and organic. As some medievalists maintained, that age was a time when
society was, to an extent, ‘governed by the cycles of nature’.

Chesterton believed that medievals (such as St Francis of Assisi whom he much admired) were attuned to nature but did not prostrate themselves before nature’s laws. ‘To St. Francis’, Chesterton argued, ‘Nature is a sister, and even a younger sister: a little, dancing sister, to be laughed at as well as loved.’ Nature was at once governor and governed - it was owed respect but not diffidence. St. Francis modelled an approach worth emulating because he was ‘a man that did not want to see the wood for the trees.’ Chesterton eschewed the notion that St. Francis could be considered a ‘lover of nature’ or, worse, a ‘nature-worshipper’ because this would be a misapplication of contemporary notions to medieval times.

Chesterton instead characterised his philosophy as based on ‘the noble thing that is called Praise; which no one will ever understand while he identifies it with nature-worship or pantheistic optimism.’ The core of this ‘praise’ is gratitude for the ‘passage or transition from nonentity to entity’, or the fact of simply coming to be. In tune with his vision of the ‘separateness’ of all things, Chesterton believed that St. Francis understood that each ‘coming to be’ was an individual process, concerning the development of a separate and individual soul. Thus, Chesterton argued, ‘St. Francis was not a lover of nature. Properly understood, a lover of nature was precisely what he was not. The phrase implies accepting the

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539 G.K. Chesterton, St. Francis of Assisi, p. 82.
540 Chesterton wanted, therefore, to restore Francis to what he thought was a better rendering of medieval context. In doing so, Chesterton predated contemporary complaints, expressed by Roger Sorrell, that ‘[t]oday, Francis has proven too relevant - some of his ideas and attitudes seem to relate to current thought so well that they almost demand to be plucked out of context and taken up into contemporary modes of thinking that distort their original sense and place them at the mercy of modern values and expectations’ - Sorrell was referring particularly to the popular construction of St. Francis as an ‘ecological’ saint, and a forerunner to modern campaigners for nature protection and environmentalism: R. Sorrell, St. Francis of Assisi and Nature: Tradition and Innovation in Western Christian Attitudes toward the Environment, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1988, p. 5.
541 Chesterton, St. Francis of Assisi, p. 74.
542 Chesterton, St. Francis of Assisi, p. 74.
material universe as a vague environment, a sort of sentimental pantheism.\footnote{Chesterton, \textit{St. Francis of Assisi}, p. 81.}

According to Chesterton, there was nothing vague about St. Francis' interaction with other people or with the non-human world. He addressed each creature individually with a view to its uniqueness.\footnote{Chesterton wrote that '[t]his is the quality in which, as a poet, he is the very opposite of a pantheist. He did not call nature his mother; he called a particular donkey his brother or a particular sparrow his sister. If he had called a pelican his aunt or an elephant his uncle, as he might possibly have done, he would still have meant that they were particular creatures assigned by their Creator to particular places; not mere expressions of the evolutionary energy of things': Chesterton, \textit{St. Francis of Assisi}, p. 82.}

Saint Francis 'wanted to see each tree as a separate and almost a sacred thing, being a child of God and therefore a brother or sister of man.'\footnote{G.K. Chesterton, \textit{St. Francis of Assisi}, p. 82.} This was Chesterton's stand against what he viewed as a common feature of his own intellectual and cultural context: the propensity to view all of humanity as one entity.

In his engagement with the Middle Ages, Chesterton was part of a broader medieval revival that was developing in the years before he commenced his own writing career.\footnote{Although this context is often lost in work on Chesterton. In 1974, Przemyslaw Mroczkowski produced one of the few books dealing specifically with Chesterton's medievalism. This book made the case that judgements of Chesterton must change to take into account political events since his death, such as the integration of Britain into Europe, which Chesterton would strongly have opposed. In this way the modern reader can discern 'on what points he was sound and guided by genuine spiritual intuition': P. Mroczowski, \textit{The Medievalism of G.K. Chesterton: A Critical Enquiry}, Vol. 1, Polskie Akademii Nauk, 1974, p. 5. This anachronistic approach is not unusual in material on Chesterton. Chesterton's relationship to the modern age was summed up differently by Gerald Bullet as being 'generally in conflict with the spirit of the age. Hating many of the characteristic qualities of that spirit, he began his career by leaping into the van of the modern movement, whatever that may be, in order to unseat the driver and turn the horse's head in the direction of the Middle Ages': G. Bullet, \textit{The Innocence of G.K. Chesterton}, Gloucester, 1923, p. 8. Bullet's approach is unusual: it is this 'contact' between Chesterton and the spirit of his own age that is generally overlooked by the secondary literature (on this and other topics) in favour of an approach that dislocates Chesterton entirely from his own context. An early example of this tendency comes from A.G. Gardiner, who wrote of Chesterton as a 'visitor out of some fairytale', a 'wayfarer from the ages' (p.331), and as 'not of our time but of all times': \textit{Prophets, Priests and Kings}, Dent, London, 1917 (first published 1914). For a useful example of a secondary source that describes Chesterton as a product of his age, see M. Evans, \textit{G.K. Chesterton}, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1938.}

There was, according to Mark Girouard, a rebirth of medieval chivalry in England\footnote{M. Girouard, 'A Return to Camelot', \textit{Wilson Quarterly}, Vol. 5(4), October 1981, p. 180.} which was manifested in the idealisation of attitudes of gallantry, bravery,
courtesy and the protection of women and children.\textsuperscript{548} The Middle Ages came to represent ‘whatever a critic perceived most lacking or imperfect in the present.’\textsuperscript{549} Paul Rich has argued persuasively that the popular English rural ideal (discussed in the previous chapter) represented a ‘retreat towards the ideal of “merrie England” and a pre-industrial and medieval culture in which human relationships had not yet been complicated by the cash nexus or the demands of profit.\textsuperscript{550} Indeed, much writing on the countryside affirmed the principles of the pre-industrial over those of modern society.\textsuperscript{551} Rich goes so far as to claim that it is in the retreat to ‘merrie England’ that ‘we should look for the roots of the English national idea’, representing as it did an ‘assertion of a sense of English cultural and national identity at a time when this appeared to be threatened by more cosmopolitan forces within industry or empire building.\textsuperscript{552}

It is frequently assumed that Chesterton’s day-to-day concerns, those that seem unimportant or confusing to his readers today, no longer matter and that by extension

\textsuperscript{549} M. Baer, ‘The Memory of the Middle Ages: From History of Culture to Cultural History’, in L. Workman (ed), Medievalism in England, D.S. Brewer, Cambridge, 1992, p. 291. History, though important in this movement, was conceived as being quite static. According to Julie Pridmore, ‘the Middle Ages seem not to have been related by their admirers to the present by any process of historical change, but were simply set over against the present as an ideal or paradigm’: J. Pridmore, ‘Reconstructing the Middle Ages: Some Victorian “medievalisms”’, Kleio, Vol. 33, 2000, p. 90. This turning towards the Middle Ages has been dismissed as a ‘Victorian fantasy’, but recent scholarship has convincingly argued that there was something more complicated at work than simple-minded nostalgia: See, for example, L. Workman, ‘Editorial’, in L. Workman (ed), Medievalism in England, D.S. Brewer, Cambridge, 1992, p. 2. To point to the artificiality of concepts such as ‘medieval’ is banal to the extent that, clearly, writers such as Chesterton were relying on modern reconstructions of the past when they addressed themselves to the medieval world. It is helpful, however, to remember that Chesterton could not have written his works in any other time but his own. His ‘Middle Ages’ was deliberately constructed, built with institutions that could grow ‘naturally’ in the right conditions but which relied still on human intervention, and the institutions that structured Chesterton’s medieval society addressed problems that Chesterton was preoccupied with in his own time.
\textsuperscript{552} Rich, ‘The Quest for Englishness’, p. 25.
his context is no longer worth detailed consideration.\textsuperscript{553} And yet he clearly represented a thread in British political thought that had many supporters, and ideas that proved, as Rich noted, remarkably successful at surviving modernity.\textsuperscript{554} Chesterton’s vision of the medieval English landscape, as historically inaccurate as it was, represented an alternative to the whiggish narrative of progress and a utilitarian approach to the landscape. This approach did not belong to Chesterton alone: Chester Scoville, writing about Tolkien’s Middle Ages and comparing Tolkien with William Morris, wrote of their positions of ‘resistance and marginalization relative to the liberal, industrial, capitalist mainstream that was in control of the country’s history and development.’\textsuperscript{555} Chesterton privileged continuity over dislocation and organic growth over artifice.\textsuperscript{556} He valued democracy, but in a spiritual rather than political sense,\textsuperscript{557} and suspected that some sources of knowledge (such as ‘natural’ and timeless peasant wisdom) should be accepted as authoritative rather than challenged or, worse, treated patronisingly. To make this critique, Chesterton drew on existing counter-hegemonic traditions that formed part of a challenge to the seemingly inexorable forces of


\textsuperscript{554} Rich, ‘The Quest for Englishness’, p. 30. Chesterton himself had a deep association with this renewed interest in the Middle Ages. Indeed, he has been credited by Michael Alexander with ‘originating’ a new wave of interest in medievalism in the early twentieth century: M. Alexander, \textit{Medievalism: The Middle Ages in Modern England}, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2007, p. 213. The medieval period, ‘disparaged’ by the Protestant English Reformation (J. Vidmar OP, \textit{English Catholic Historians and the English Reformation, 1585-1954}, Sussex Academic Press, Brighton, 2005, p. 91.), was not only revivified by Chesterton, but, due to his popular writing, was ‘associated with Catholicism for the first time since Pugin’: Alexander, \textit{Medievalism}, p. 215. Augustus Pugin (1812 - 1852) was an architect important to the Gothic Revival in England.


\textsuperscript{557} That is, he ascribed great worth to each individual soul, but placed little importance on the mechanisms of voting and parliamentary traditions.
progress.\footnote{Writing about medievalism in the work of Tolkien, Jane Chance and Alfred K. Siewers argue that a ‘more serious acknowledgement is required’ of the ‘political role of medievalism as a response to modernism than scholarship has provided to date.’ Chance and Siewers discuss the social and political implications of medievalism, most importantly the way in which the past is mined for ‘organic alternatives to modern institutions’. This way of approaching the past, rather than being simplistically reactionary, can cross and confuse political boundaries and categories of modern political thought - leading Chance and Siewers to conclude that categories of ‘medieval’ and ‘modern’ are at least in part artificially constructed: J. Chance and A.K. Siewers, ‘Introduction: Tolkien’s Modern Medievalism’, in Chance and Siewers (eds), Tolkien’s Modern Middle Ages, p. 2.} These idealisations of pre-modern values were, as well as being naive about life in the Middle Ages, in themselves expressions of modernity, reflecting the hopes and frustrations of Chesterton’s time more than the reality of England past.

**Reason, History and Nature**

Chesterton felt that people in the Middle Ages, who lived before the winds of Protestantism and Prussianism blew through Britain, were far superior to modern times in their approach to reason. Unlike their historical counterparts, Chesterton feared that his modern colleagues were subject to failures of logic resulting from common sense becoming untethered from reason. For himself, he claimed a commitment to reason that he believed had been abandoned in modern times. His musings on the role of reason in history and politics arose largely from his study of St. Thomas Aquinas - a not especially surprising preoccupation given the time in which he was writing.\footnote{In the decades leading up to the twentieth century, Thomism was being revived in the Catholic Church, as the Thomist method was thought by neo-Thomist theologians to offer a way of negotiating the relationship between faith and reason - a key preoccupation of Chesterton. On neo-Thomism, see G. McCool, Nineteenth-Century Scholasticism: The Search for a Unitary Method, Fordham University Press, 1989, p. 2. Pope Leo XIII went as far as prescribing neo-Thomism as the methodological system to be used in the education of Catholic priests: McCool, Nineteenth-Century Scholasticism, p. 2.} Especially after his conversion to Catholicism, Chesterton was forced to wrestle with the question of whether, as a religious man, he could also be a rational one. In response to the idea that once he had converted to Catholicism he would exhibit unthinking obedience rather than critical thought, he wrote, in *The Catholic*
Church and Conversion, that ‘to become Catholic is not to leave off thinking, but to learn how to think.’\textsuperscript{560} It is important that, from his own perspective, Chesterton did not abandon reason when he embraced the Catholic faith. Instead, in his own mind it was exactly his reason that had led him, in the end, to that creed. His approach to reason was slightly unorthodox, however. In a typical Chestertonian attempt to defy apparent contradiction, he defined reason in a way that suited his purposes, by finding a way to root reason in history, authority and the land.

Chesterton characterised Aquinas’ medieval philosophy as being accepting of both reason and of faith, each confined to their proper spheres, a system in which

the scientist should go on exploring and experimenting freely, so long as he did not claim an infallibility and finality which was against his own principles to claim. Meanwhile the Church should go on developing and defining, about supernatural things, so long as she did not claim a right to alter the deposit of faith, which it was against her own principles to claim.\textsuperscript{561}

Chesterton believed that Aquinas offered a solution to the problem posed by the relationship between reason and faith, because the latter acknowledged that there was more than one path towards the truth. This was, he believed, the moderate and balanced approach to reason which had historically held sway in England but which had declined in influence after the Reformation. Chesterton argued that Aquinas proposed limits to reason in the form of respect for the ‘magical’ properties of nature, but that Aquinas did not object to the pursuit of reason within these bounds. Although Chesterton denied the ethical authority of science to delve too deeply into nature, he was nevertheless persuaded that nothing they would find there would undermine the tenets of his faith. He wrote that

St. Thomas was willing to allow the one truth to be approached by two paths, precisely because he was sure there was only one truth. Because the Faith was the one truth, nothing discovered in nature could ultimately contradict the Faith. Because the Faith was the one truth, nothing really deduced from the Faith could ultimately contradict the facts. It was in truth a curiously daring confidence in the reality of his religion; and though some may linger to dispute it, it has been justified. The scientific facts, which were supposed to contradict the Faith in the nineteenth century, are nearly all of them regarded as unscientific fictions in the twentieth century.562

Nature was a source of evidence for the tenets of faith. It had magic in it, but a very tame kind of magic that could be trusted not to throw up any facts that would undermine faith. Chesterton’s disingenuous conclusion that any scientific developments (such as evolution) that undermined his faith would inevitably be disproved allowed him to construct a reconciliation between reason and religion founded on an historical attitude to nature. This synthesis allowed his religious conviction to flourish undisturbed by the modern challenges of science and reason.

The neo-Thomists who used Aquinas as a weapon in the campaign against the liberalisation of Catholicism have been charged with attempting the same intellectual sleight-of-hand.563

Chesterton’s book on Aquinas is vital to understanding the former’s project of using nature to reconcile faith and reason and thereby find a humane place in the modern

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562 Chesterton, Thomas Aquinas, pp. 474-5.
563 F. Kerr, After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism, Blackwell, Oxford, 2002, pp. 17-20. Etienne Gilson, a scholar of Aquinas, had no doubts about Chesterton’s reliability, however, famously commenting that ‘I consider it [Chesterton’s biography of Aquinas] without possible comparison the best book ever written on St. Thomas. Nothing short of genius can account for such an achievement. Everybody no doubt will admit that it is a “clever” book, but few readers who have spent twenty or thirty years in studying St. Thomas Aquinas and who, perhaps, have themselves, published two or three volumes on the subject, can fail to perceive that the so-called “wit” of Chesterton has put their scholarship to shame’: E. Gilson, cited in the introduction to the Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton Volume III, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1986, p. 8. As noted by theologian J. Mark Armitage, Gilson’s praise of Chesterton has often been cited as evidence that ‘Chesterton’s treatment of Aquinas has in some sense been declared “authoritative”. The reality is a little more complicated’ (p. 160). Armitage points out that, despite displaying a ‘blissful ignorance’ of theological politics, Chesterton produced a work that was in many respects in harmony with Gilson’s own neo-scholastic project to mobilise Aquinas against the perversities of modern philosophy and so Gilson’s praise of it was, then, not surprising: J. M. Armitage, ‘Chesterton, Gilson and St. Thomas: Chesterton as “Christian Philosopher”’, Chesterton Review, Vol. 1-2, 2007, p. 160.
world. Science could not provide the basis from which to reason one’s way through the mysteries of nature, and attempts to do so were arrogant. Reason had to accept its limitations and be ‘rooted’ in a wider framework of faith; otherwise it would veer dangerously towards madness. Chesterton found that England’s past was a good source of balance and sanity. Chesterton professed himself concerned with ‘what actually is the chief mark and element of insanity; we may say in summary that it is reason used without root, reason in the void.’\textsuperscript{564} Chesterton therefore believed himself not to be \textit{attacking} reason, but in fact \textit{defending} it from the corruption of the modern world which excised reason from its framework of history and tradition. Reason needed to be ‘rooted’ in a similar sense that Chesterton believed the English were ‘rooted’ in their land.

Chesterton did not see reason’s embeddedness as limiting intellectual freedom but as moderating and locating it. Similarly, the connection between the English and their land did not define their national character but shaped and delimited it. In \textit{Orthodoxy}, he noted as a ‘fact of observation’ that

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what peril of morbidity there is for man comes rather from his reason than his imagination. It [a previous section of \textit{Orthodoxy}] was not meant to attack the authority of reason; rather it is the ultimate purpose to defend it. For it needs defence. The whole modern world is at war with reason; and the tower already reels.\textsuperscript{565}
\end{quote}

For Chesterton, the twentieth century needed more reason, not less – as long as it was confined to its proper place.\textsuperscript{566} Reason and faith in balance could enable one to

\textsuperscript{564} Chesterton, \textit{Orthodoxy}, p. 230.
\textsuperscript{565} Chesterton, \textit{Orthodoxy}, p. 235.
\textsuperscript{566} In \textit{Thomas Aquinas}, he wrote ‘as the nineteenth century clutched at the Franciscan romance, precisely because it had neglected romance, so the twentieth century is already clutching at the Thomist rational theology, because it has neglected reason’; p. 425. Chesterton would have won friends amongst conservatives with his warning that the problem of atheism was not the risk that people would believe in nothing, but that they were liable to believe in anything at all: see R. Nisbet, \textit{Conservatism: Dream and Reality}, Open University Press, Milton Keynes, 1986, p. 73.
properly appreciate the natural world because faith enabled one to appreciate nature from the perspective of the ‘permanent anticipation of surprise’: it prevented one from assuming that one could always know what was coming. Reason, on the other hand, enabled ‘man’ to assert his ascendancy over the natural world because it was a faculty which was not possessed anywhere on earth outside of man. For Chesterton, those who believed in the supernatural also had an advantage in that they were able to embrace both the natural and the supernatural, whereas ‘naturalists’ or ‘materialists’ were forced to choose the former:

[I]t was the whole point of St. Thomas that he did exalt the supernatural, but did not despise the natural. But the naturalistic philosopher, who only exalts the natural, does necessarily despise the supernatural.567

One way to embed and limit reason was in the land. One should think freely, but also remember the ancient historical wisdom of the English landscape as did the characters in The Trees of Pride, whose peasants ‘understand a thousand little signs and guides in the very soil and lie of the land’.568 Those who can understand these signs and guides are figures such as the story’s woodsman, ‘naturally a rougher and even wilder figure than the gardener.’569 The woodsman’s ‘face was also brown, and looked like an antique parchment, which was really a fashion fifty years ago, but might have been five thousand years old or older’.570 Characters like these are ‘as much a corner of Cornwall as Cornwall is a corner of England; a tragic and unique race, small and interrelated like a Celtic clan.’571 They represent a source of Englishness: not everyone needs to be one of these rural characters (Chesterton was not) but they needed to exist in historically unbroken form in order for England to exist. Modern people

569 Chesterton, Trees of Pride, pp. 3-4.
570 Chesterton, Trees of Pride, pp. 3-4.
571 Chesterton, Trees of Pride, pp. 3-4.
following the trails of nature are liable to get lost, thinking they have found the secrets of the world in fossils or blood. Knowledge attained through processes of reasoning is fickle and uneasily distinguished from fiction. And, in a curiously circular manner, the way to tell the difference between real and false insight is to turn to nature. The deepest and most truthful lessons can only be learned from the land and those who dwell on it.

Chesterton has been described as one who favoured religion over reason. He attempted, however, to cast himself as a defender of reason, assisted in this rhetorical project by the ascendancy in the Catholic world of a neo-Thomist theology that strove to incorporate rational thought into faithfulness. In his very first appearance, Chesterton’s famous Father Brown (a Catholic priest and amateur detective) has a conversation with a thief pretending to be a fellow priest. How did Father Brown know that the villain was not a real priest but was in fact a criminal? ‘You attacked reason’, said Father Brown. ‘It’s bad theology’. Chesterton’s precarious balancing of the supernatural against the natural in his treatment of the non-human world was an attempt to be faithful and reasonable at the same time. His articulation of limits founded in history on the reach of rationality damaged his claim that he was a defender of reason and contributed to a feeling that ‘the general basis of Chesterton’s essentially romantic project to foster the credibility of the imagination and undermine the power of rationalist assumptions is [...] apparent.’ Chesterton’s approach to nature is both a source and an example of this contradiction. He believed nature to be simultaneously magical and ordinary, and both surprising and docile. It was

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572 See, for example, Las Vergnas, *Chesterton, Belloc, Baring*, p. 8.
supernatural enough to prove the possibility of miracle, but tame enough to be counted on not to challenge the pillars of his faith. Ultimately, nature set boundaries on what was accessible to human understanding, despite Chesterton’s claim that nature was subordinate to the human will.

The Industrial Revolution

The result of the privileging of reason and abandonment of history was a series of economic and social errors, one of which was the Industrial Revolution. In his published books, Chesterton apparently only used the term ‘Industrial Revolution’ three times in total, and not at all in his history of England. For one responsible for the development of Distributism, this seems an anomaly, as does the absence of the term in the indexes of some key secondary literature on Chesterton. If Chesterton fails to make much of the Industrial Revolution itself, however, it is partly because England’s great historical error was, to him, not the event itself but the shift in culture, including the rise of Protestantism and Prussianism, which allowed it to happen. The economic problems that Chesterton saw in his own time arose from a culture and religion which defeated the natural institutions of the past and replaced them with

577 In an analysis of the historiography of Chesterton’s friend Belloc, Victor Feske noted Belloc’s view that ‘a system of economic exploitation of the working classes for the aggrandizement of a wealthy landed oligarchy was in place long before the onset of the Industrial Revolution’: V. Feske, From Belloc to Churchill: Private Scholars, Public Culture, and the Crisis of British Liberalism, 1900-1939, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill and London, 1996, p. 35.
those that did not belong. As was often the case for Chesterton, the dominant forces in histories were cultural movements and ideas, rather than economic or material conditions. In his *Short History*, he started his narration of the most recent centuries of English history as follows:

> The revolution that arose out of what is called the Renascence, and ended in some countries in what is called the Reformation, did in the internal politics of England one drastic and definite thing. That thing was destroying the institutions of the poor. It was not the only thing it did, but was much the most practical. It was the basis of all the problems now connected with Capital and Labour.578

The Puritans stood as an example of the disruptive potential of Protestantism and its inability to connect in any deep way with (Chesterton’s version of) English culture.

Adopting a curious metaphor, Chesterton wrote that

> Puritanism was originally a thing of the towns, especially of the rich merchants and the first modern capitalists. In fact, the Puritan chapels were distributed then just as the petrol pumps are distributed now. That is, they became numerous, but they never became natural. They never, in the true historic sense, became normal. Puritanism always stood towards paganism or papistry as a petrol pump stands to a tree; it may have a reason, but it has not a root; nor can it grow anywhere of itself.579

Even though the broader culture that allowed the Industrial Revolution to occur was the main historical culprit, the Industrial Revolution itself was a disaster. Chesterton and Belloc, according to historian Richard Griffiths, blamed this event for ‘all social evil, including the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few powerful capitalists’.580 In *William Cobbett*, Chesterton described the spread of the new economic order:

> The new capitalistic phase of England was coming to a crisis, especially in the North. The industrial revolution was already producing the anti-industrial revolution – which is likely to be a much more real revolution. Machines were busy and men were idle. Some men indeed were not idle; but those who were most busy were the political economists, who were busy proving on paper that the machinery that had made people poor must really have made them rich.

Very soon something began to happen that anybody might have foreseen, whether he was on the side of the machines or the men, so long as he understood that men are not machines. Cobbett realised it, though he did not approve of it. The men began to destroy the machines; to destroy them as if they were dragons that had come in to destroy the paradise of innocence and liberty.  

Chesterton described what he saw as the wanton destruction of the existing social order in stark terms:

But it is the paradox of the whole position that the Utilitarians who were always preaching prudence committed this country to one of the most really reckless revolutions in history – the industrial revolution. They destroyed agriculture and turned England into a workshop; a workshop in which the workers were liable at any moment to be locked up and left to eat hammers and saws. The Radicals who did that were as picturesque as pirates, so far as pirates become specially picturesque when they burn their boats. In truth they were not so much metaphorically burning their boats: they were almost literally burning their barns. But there is something fitting in the accident by which the term Free Trader used to mean a smuggler. If romantic recklessness be the test, Cobden and Bright should always have appeared brandishing cutlasses and with a belt full of pistols.  

The Industrial Revolution wrought havoc on the natural world and on humanity’s relationship with it. Chesterton even went as far as claiming in 1932 that modern people no longer recognised the symbolism of spring in the celebration of Easter:

Three things at least, peculiar to the present time, prevent us from identifying that hope [of Easter] with a revival or riot of vegetation. First, the beautiful condition to which a few centuries of progress have reduced half the landscapes of the land. Remembered summer does not shine along the grass in Pudsey or Wigan, because there is no grass to shine. The natural life of things does not proclaim the Resurrection in Sheffield and Huddersfield, because the life of things is not natural […] Nature cannot help us now, even as a symbol; for industrialism has destroyed the natural.

Chesterton had a clear idea that only certain institutions and cultures are ‘natural’ or ‘normal’ and a naturalistic conclusion that these institutions and cultures are therefore the right ones. This idea is perplexing when compared to Chesterton’s insistence that medieval men and women were not slaves to nature, unlike their modern

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582 Chesterton, William Cobbett, p. 213.  
counterparts. William Cobbett, in Chesterton’s view, understood the real state of things in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century. His ‘clear mind’ meant that he ‘did see the Reformation as the root of both squirearchy and industrialism, and called on the people to break away from both’. Such attempts as were made by the people to do so (and Chesterton argued that these were more common than many thought) were, as ‘embers of the revolutionary epoch’, ‘trodden out very brutally’. This destruction of the popular spirit was predictable and a necessary part of industrialism which, Chesterton believed, was incompatible with democracy:

The democratic ideal of countries like America, while it is still generally sincere and sometimes intense, is at issue with another tendency, an industrial progress which is of all things on earth the most undemocratic. America is not alone in possessing industrialism, but she is alone in emphasising the ideal that strives with industrialism. Industrial capitalism and ideal democracy are everywhere in controversy; but perhaps only here are they in conflict. France has a democratic ideal; but France is not industrial. England and Germany are industrial; but England and Germany are not really democratic.

The Reformation made possible the advent of an industrial culture which Chesterton plainly mistrusted, although he did not provide a great deal of historical analysis to explain why. As he often did, Chesterton cast historical figures and movements as either heroic or villainous, with little middle ground. Through the story of William Cobbett, Chesterton described how the industrial revolution produced a counter-revolution, one which was ‘likely to be a much more real revolution’. In Chesterton’s narration, the first of these two upheavals created a shift in the economy that privileged machines over men - with the former busy while the latter became idle. That state of things could not last long. Soon, people began to destroy machines - ‘to destroy them as if they were dragons that had come in to destroy the paradise of

584 1763 - 1835; Cobbett was a radical journalist who defended labouring people.
585 Chesterton, Short History of England, p. 573.
587 Chesterton, What I saw in America, pp. 70-71.
innocence and liberty.\textsuperscript{590} The invasion of machines threatened to disconnect people from the land and their traditional lifestyle. The common folk so often evoked in Chesterton’s historical analysis responded to this threat by promptly and properly (though not successfully) rejecting the new economy, seeing clearly that it was antagonistic to the protection of their rights and lifestyles.\textsuperscript{591}

This wholesale rejection of modern ideas was not, in Chesterton’s mind, a simple-minded or superstitious one. After all, it was not ‘rational’ for a society to develop as England had done after the Industrial Revolution, when roads are designed not to go to places but rather through places, and where ‘if there were still growing an oak sacred to the Druids, or a market-cross carved with the signatures of the Crusaders, it would be to these [modern] innovators merely an obstacle to their getting through to they know not what.’\textsuperscript{592} It was a ‘rational’ thing in Chesterton’s mind to commit to a dogma that would give a basis on which to challenge these absurdities but one must approach the right dogma not only through abstract thought but through tradition, authority and a sense of history. There is a conceptual tension in this idea that one should think freely, but within a dogmatic framework: the mind should be free to reason its way through the world, but within an overarching set of limits, beyond which it is neither healthy nor fruitful to venture. This tension is also apparent in Chesterton’s notion that one should exercise authority over nature, within some vaguely outlined limits of what constitutes a ‘natural’ way for English men and women

\textsuperscript{591} Note that Chesterton’s argument that the common people rejected the Industrial Revolution, although often left unchallenged, is not universally agreed. Raymond Williams, for example, who was the son of a railway worker, wrote that ‘at home we were glad of the Industrial Revolution, and of its consequent social and political changes’: \textit{Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism}, Verso, London, 1989, p. 10.
to behave. This incongruous idea of freedom within walls is one of Chesterton’s animating contradictions. 593

The modern ‘mechanistic’ approach to developing the countryside that characterised industrial society was a form of ‘barbarism’, and a ‘fundamental unreason; for the most fundamental unreason, as the mediaeval philosophers saw, is to refuse to consider the end; and these journeys have really no end. 594 If the south of England was akin to an earthly paradise (as Chesterton believed) then it was all the more horrifying when it was proposed to open a vast and devastating arterial road through the very heart of this particular countryside; not because somebody wanted to visit that particular countryside, not even because somebody wanted to cross it to some particular town or homestead; but because there was a vague idea that everybody must move on; like loiterers admonished by the police. 595

This disruption was, to Chesterton, clearly a product of industrialisation, a process which was not yet finished wreaking havoc on the English land. In a letter to the editor, which was an apparent response to an article written by Dean Inge, Chesterton posed a question:

What in the world can he [Dean Inge] mean by saying that the Industrial Revolution was “an episode in our history which broke up for a time our natural habits”? Does he think the episode of industrialism is over? I can only say that, if Dr. Inge does not know that our beautiful countryside is being cut up and destroyed by industrial expansion more ruthlessly than ever, he is the only Englishman alive who does not know it. Does he think our big towns are being ruralised, when everybody know that our countryside is being urbanised? I happen to share his taste for a quiet country life. But I also have a taste for

593 In Orthodoxy, Chesterton wrote ‘[w]e 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. But the walls were knocked down, leaving the naked peril of the precipice. They did not fall over; but when their friends returned to them they were all huddled in terror in the centre of the island; and their song had ceased’: p. 350.
facing facts; and it is simply a stark staring fact that England has lost that country life, much more than any other country in the world.\textsuperscript{596}

His analysis of industrialisation was, then, more or less as follows. The technological advances and economic upheavals characterising the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in England were a product of the rise of an alien culture - Protestantism - which had destroyed the rooted and organic institutions of England’s Middle Ages and replaced them with functional and utilitarian structures. Industrialism, while powerful, lacked depth. Its disadvantage, which was fundamental and which struck Chesterton forcibly when travelling in the American mid-west, was that ‘industrialism is spreading because it is decaying; that only the dust and ashes of its dissolution are choking up the growth of natural things everywhere and turning the green world grey.’\textsuperscript{597}

Although Chesterton mourned the lost past, he did so with knowledge of the inevitability of historical discontinuity, and he had an awareness of historical change. He wrote that:

We do not realize what the past had been until we also realize what it might have been. We are merely imprisoned and narrowed by the past, so long as we think that it must have been. For that is only the provincial presumption that it must have been what it was because it had to produce what it did; that is, our own precious and priceless selves. It is difficult for us to believe that the huge human thing called history might actually have taken another turn and done without us.\textsuperscript{598}

There is a tension here, in that Chesterton had a strong sense of the ‘rightness’ of a particular path through history, but also an awareness that history can go wrong. He

\textsuperscript{596} British Library, \textit{G.K. Chesterton Papers}, Add. MS 73186, Vol. 1, Letter to the Editor, name of the newspaper and date not provided.
\textsuperscript{597} Chesterton, \textit{What I saw in America}, p. 91.
was also aware that in order to turn things back to the way they were, one needed radical change.599

Perhaps this realisation was inevitable, since Chesterton found himself usually on the losing side of history. He makes his case, however, that his version of history is not only the truthful, but the natural one. He wielded the language of ‘nature’ and ‘the natural’ like a weapon, to make a cut through English history at the point of the Reformation, where things took an unnatural course. The Catholic Church ‘belonged’ in the English soil in a way that the Protestant could not and never would. Until the English reversed the course of their history and returned to these lost roots, life would be characterised by a sense of disconnection and loss which to Chesterton was so evocative of modernity. Cultures, then, while belonging to the realm of ideas, were walled in by the facts of geography and material life. Despite his commitment to the power of the human will and intellect, there were boundary conditions of the life of the mind that were made solid in the landscapes of England.

**Nature and Historical Progress**

Chesterton’s commitment to gratitude and joy was strong, and strikingly ideological. His fervour did not, however, manifest itself in optimism about progress towards human perfection that marked the age into which he was born.600 Chesterton did not

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599 For a discussion on Chesterton’s radical conservatism, see Ker, *G.K. Chesterton*, p. 223.

600 The idea of ‘progress’ permeated the intellectual atmosphere in which Chesterton grew up and, he believed, represented the past as a series of inevitable progressions towards ever greater enlightenment and human well-being. Peter Bowler has written of how the Victorians were ‘obsessed’ with the idea of progress: P. Bowler, *The Invention of Progress: The Victorians and the Past*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1989, p. 3. Not all citizens shared this sense of hope, however. Some were plagued by worry about the decline and degeneration of the human race although José Harris that this was less common than a sense of hope that ‘science … was making it more and more possible for social
share the faith of some Victorians that science could resolve the ills of society and correct the course of human history. Presented with the two putative ideological camps of the Victorian era - the devotees of progress and the sceptics of industrialism - Chesterton would have fallen in with the latter, although he was always ultimately uncomfortable in any political grouping he joined except for the one that he and his friends invented for themselves. He felt that the believers in progress allowed human society to be determined by nature, a view which he felt to be blasphemous. He thought the idea of progress quite incomprehensible as a political goal. ‘As enunciated today’, he wrote in *Heretics* in 1905, ‘progress is simply a comparative of which we have not settled the superlative’. He meant that the term ‘progress’ was often tossed about as if it were both inevitable and desirable, but was rarely, if ever, defined explicitly. Chesterton also failed to define the idea of ‘progress’ very rigorously. The definition of progress that he used was not one shared by many of the proponents of progress and was rather an extreme version easy to ridicule. Nevertheless, Chesterton worried that people were convinced that their society was moving forward, but without a clear idea of the desirability, or even location, of the destination.

Although Peter Bowler noted that the idea of inevitable progress was undermined in the Edwardian years and finally shattered in the First World War, ‘progress’ remained one important way of understanding history, especially in Chesterton’s youth and early adulthood. J.B. Bury, writing in the 1920s, called progress the ‘animating and controlling idea of western civilisation. For the earthly Progress of arrangements to be brought under rational, purposive human control’: *Private Lives*, pp. 33-4. ‘In the 1900s’, Harris argued, ‘there were some who saw Britain as decadent and doomed, others who saw her as the pioneer and pattern of the future of the human race’: p. 4.


602 Bowler, *The Invention of Progress*, p. 201.
humanity, is the general test to which social aims and theories are submitted as a matter of course.\(^603\)

Chesterton was suspicious of Whig history\(^604\) and posited in its place a vision of English history that was local, constant and ‘natural’. In his eyes, material circumstances could change but individuals themselves were each born fallen. Souls could be neither saved nor damned by the historical era into which they were born; each had the same capacity to change and grow. Ideas about historical progress and decline often seemed to Chesterton to involve the reduction of human history to a shallow interpretation of Enlightenment reason. The life of humanity seemed to be moving inexorably, in accordance with some vague scientific law. Chesterton denounced this tendency to treat contingent historical developments as inevitable – but had his own, very clear, idea of the correct unfolding of English history. In his version of the story, however, the ‘right’ and ‘natural’ historical path had been lost. Far from being inevitable, therefore, the course of English history had to be contested each step of the way.

In setting his mind against these historical precepts, Chesterton was disdaining some of the animating ideals of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Britain. Although the idea of inevitable improvement was arguably undermined in the Edwardian years and finally shattered in the First World War,\(^605\) ‘progress’ remained an important way of understanding history. Chesterton refuted the idea that the past

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\(^{603}\) J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry into its Origin and Growth*, Macmillan and Co, London, 1924, p. vii. See also Robert Nisbet, who wrote that the idea of progress permeated the years up to 1950 in the Western world, with ‘skeptics and outright antagonists’ to the idea in a ‘small minority’: *History of the Idea of Progress*, Basic Books, New York, 1980, p. 178. Bowler argued that ‘the dominant theme of late-nineteenth-century thought was progress, and evolutionism became popular because it was perceived as a scientific expression of this broader principle’: *Evolution*, p. 275.


\(^{605}\) Bowler, *The Invention of Progress*, p. 201.
must be left behind as humanity strides boldly towards the future. To his mind, the obsession with progress was a mindless commitment to change for its own sake. He wrote that

if a man only believed the world was round because his grandmother said it was flat, another man had only to say it was spiral in order to be a more advanced idiot than either of them. But, after all, the world is one shape and not another [...] and will be when we all die, and would have been if no worm or weed had ever lived.\(^{606}\)

For Chesterton, truth was absolute, timeless and not subject to the vagaries of the modern temperament. The organic institutions of England’s past should not be discarded simply for the sake of progress. It was for that reason that he was concerned about the inclination of the modern world to lose sight of what was valuable in the past, devaluing the truths that could be found there merely because they were old. ‘Have you ever seen a fellow fail at the high jump because he had not gone far enough back for his run?’ he asked rhetorically. ‘That is Modern Thought. It is so confident of where it is going to that it does not know where it comes from.’\(^{607}\) The scornful dismissal of the past by modern thinkers represented to Chesterton an example of the artificiality of the modern world. The very natural and organic world of England prior to the industrial revolution was distorted by the patronising lens of modern theories of development.

Another objection to the idea of progress was that it tended, in Chesterton’s mind, to slackness. ‘It is clear’, he wrote, ‘that no political activity can be encouraged by saying that progress is natural and inevitable; that is not a reason for being active, but rather


\(^{607}\) Chesterton, *Uses of Diversity*, p. 123.
a reason for being lazy.’\textsuperscript{608} He had another objection to a belief in progress directed by nature: that the world was too complicated to have arisen from nature:

\[\text{[I]f we suppose improvement to be natural, it must be fairly simple. The world might conceivably be working towards one consummation, but hardly towards any particular arrangement of many qualities. To take our original simile: Nature by herself may be growing more blue: that is, a process so simple that it might be impersonal. But Nature cannot be making a careful picture made of many picked colours, unless Nature is personal. If the end of the world were mere darkness or mere light it might come as slowly and inevitably as dusk or dawn. But if the end of the world is to be a piece of elaborate and artistic chiaroscuro, then there must be design in it, either human or divine. The world, through mere time, might grow black like an old picture, or white like an old coat; but if it is turned into a particular piece of black and white art - then there is an artist.}\textsuperscript{609}

Notwithstanding his objection to progress, Chesterton did have a sense that the world could change for the better, although he preferred to term this process ‘improvement’.\textsuperscript{610} He made this rather fine distinction as follows:

\[\text{Even when we improve we never progress. For progress, the metaphor from the road, implies a man leaving his home behind him; but improvement means a man exalting the towers or extending the gardens of his home.}\textsuperscript{611}

For Chesterton, inherent in ‘development’ but absent in ‘progress’ was a sense of human rootedness in the past, and a direct and intimate connection with all that has come before. There was something inherently vacuous about a style of modern thought that (in his view) sought to repudiate all that had gone before in order to serve a mindless cult of the future.

The role of nature in Chesterton’s approach to ‘improvement’ was important. The Enlightenment had brought an attitude towards nature that was fundamentally

\textsuperscript{608} Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 315.  
\textsuperscript{609} Chesterton, Orthodoxy, pp. 315-6.  
\textsuperscript{610} Chesterton’s idea of progress could be described as a straw version of the concept. He frequently constructed exaggerated versions of modern ideas in order to knock them down to be replaced with his own, eminently reasonable, thoughts. One could therefore argue that his ‘improvement’ was similar to what at least some people had in mind when they referred to ‘progress’.  
dynamic, founded on evidence of changes in nature over long periods of time.\textsuperscript{612}

Nature itself became accessible to science in a way that it had not been before.\textsuperscript{613}

Chesterton failed to see why, even if theories of evolution were true, observed changes in nature necessitated a human, political commitment to constant movement. The exposure of nature to the eyes of science was enthralling to some, leading them, in Chesterton’s mind, down a path of secession from moral responsibility and rational thought towards a slavish following of nature. If, then, the idea of progress was merely the historical equivalent to the scientific theory of evolution, then Chesterton was bound to reject it.

Nature, according to Chesterton, could be ‘improved’: it could change and be built on. Landscapes could be managed. But Chesterton was severely conservative about the manner and extent of this interference. There was a ‘true’ landscape for England that sprouted the true social institutions and nourished the true people. Political movements had to be constructed in a manner sympathetic to the past, just as roads and buildings should not unduly disrupt the beauty of a landscape. Otherwise, change would become insensitive and disruptive. This prescription for political action was both conservative and radical. Prevailing intellectual currents had moved so far from this approach that it would take broad and deep change to bring things back into the balance that people had come closest to attaining during the Middle Ages.

Chesterton objected to the habit that progressives had of looking complacently back on history as evidence of the impressive improvement of human society. He had,

however, his own way of using history as a weapon in his moral crusades, picking metaphors from the natural world to justify his ideological decisions. Objecting to the possibility that the human soul could be shaped by nature, he nevertheless believed that the social institutions of the Middle Ages had been founded on, and affected by, the land on which they grew. To Chesterton, history was the living tradition from which England’s culture and identity were drawn. History was the root from which England grew and drew life.  

The Putrefaction of England’s Organic Community: Decadence and Nature

The culmination of the negative forces of historical progress and change was a society that had withered into decadence. ‘There is a black mood of civilisation’, Chesterton wrote, ‘when everything seems thin and fictitious, when all the houses seem cut out of cardboard and all the women made out of wire’. This moment was, for Chesterton, immortalised in the work of Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898), the ‘boy-genius illustrator of fin de siècle Decadent Aestheticism’. Chesterton disdained the work of Beardsley and friends, seeing in his art a spirit that was ‘utterly alien and heathen: a yellow, Oriental devil’. The men and women of the aesthetic and decadent movement of the 1890s seemed exhausted and prematurely aged. If Chesterton had no patience with those who believed that the world was progressing to a better place, neither was he interested in the pessimistic or sometimes indifferent tone of some of the philosophy of his day, or for the self-referential and doubting texts produced by some

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614 Chesterton, Victorian Age in Literature, p. 12.
of his fellow writers. A particular target for his criticism was the solipsistic tendency of some modern thinkers, who failed to accept nature even as an external reference point to provide evidence of the existence of the outside world. He wrote in *Orthodoxy* in 1908 that ‘there is a sceptic far more terrible than he who believes that everything began in matter. It is possible to meet the sceptic who believes that everything began in himself.’\(^{618}\) Later in the same volume Chesterton continued on this theme, criticising his friend and fellow writer H. G. Wells:

> There is a thought that stops thought. That is the only thought that ought to be stopped. That is the ultimate evil against which all religious authority was aimed. It only appears at the end of decadent ages like our own: and already Mr. H. G. Wells has raised its ruinous banner; he has written a delicate piece of scepticism called “Doubts of the Instrument.” In this he questions the brain itself, and endeavours to remove all reality from all his own assertions, past, present, and to come.\(^{619}\)

Chesterton had equally little time for the pessimistic world view that he thought underlay Wells’ work. Wells, in his novel *The Time Machine*, explored a future where human civilization had evolved into two distinct categories, the frail Eloi (descendants of the idle upper classes) and the murderous Morlocks (descendants of the working classes).\(^{620}\) Close to the end of the novel, Wells’ time traveller sees an even more distant future in which the earth had reached maximum entropy and suffered ‘heat death’. By contrast, in Chesterton’s foray into futuristic novels, both the physical world and the human soul were more or less the same, although the further deterioration of political circumstances had increased the difficulty of living fulfilled lives. *Napoleon of Notting Hill* was a further manifestation of Chesterton’s hostility to evolutionary determinism. In this book, Chesterton defended a vision of unchanging human nature, impervious to the slow erosion of human character that nature wrought in the bleak

\(^{618}\) Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, pp. 228-9.

\(^{619}\) Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, pp. 236-7.

\(^{620}\) First published 1895.
evolutionism of *The Time Machine*. He rejected the desirability and possibility of historical changes to human beings, and the power of nature to weak such changes.

Chesterton saw in writers like Wells, Oscar Wilde and George Moore the kind of doubt that was profoundly destructive - not only of religious certainty but of any kind of certainty at all – and fatal to human happiness. In response, Chesterton ideologically mobilised the natural world to offer a particular kind of concrete reality - a world that could be shown undeniably to *exist* and which one could not doubt if one truly and completely experienced it. Chesterton enlisted the natural world to demonstrate an outward-looking view, one which could assist him in his project of rescuing himself and his fellows from a nightmare in which the only certainty in the world was the existence of one’s self. This nightmare was powerfully depicted in a poem, ‘On the Disastrous Spread of Aestheticism in all the Classes’, in which nature itself succumbed to aestheticism. Over the course of the poem, Chesterton developed this theme and then extended it to nature. The very absurdity of the scenario is a reminder of nature’s potency. Everyone, no matter how decadent or doubtful, relies on nature existing and on its remaining itself:

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Impetuously I sprang from bed,
Long before lunch was up,
That I might drain the dizzy dew
From day’s first golden cup.

In swift devouring ecstasy
Each toil in turn was done;
I had done lying on the lawn
Three minutes after one.

For me, as Mr. Wordsworth says,
The duties shine like stars;
I formed my uncle’s character,
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Decreasing his cigars.

But could my kind engross me? No!
Stern Art - what sons escape her?
Soon I was drawing Gladstone’s nose
On scraps of blotting paper.

Then on - to play one-fingered tunes
Upon my aunt’s piano.
In short, I have a headlong soul,
I much resemble Hanno.

(Forgive the entrance of the not
Too cogent Carthaginian.
It may have been to make a rhyme;
I lean to that opinion).

Then my great work of book research
Till dusk I took in hand -
The forming of a final, sound
Opinion on The Strand.

But when I quenched the midnight oil,
And closed The Referee,
Whose thirty volumes folio
I take to bed with me,

I had a rather funny dream,
Intense, that is, and mystic;
I dreamed that, with one leap and yell,
The world became artistic.

The Shopmen, when their souls were still,
Declined to open shops-
And Cooks recorded frames of mind
In sad and subtle chops.

The stars were weary of routine:
The trees in the plantation
Were growing every fruit at once,
In search of a sensation.

The moon went for a moonlight stroll,
And tried to be a bard,
And gazed enraptured at itself:
I left it trying hard.

The sea had nothing but a mood
Of ‘vague ironic gloom,’
With which t’explain its presence in
My upstairs drawing-room.

The sun had read a little book
That struck him with a notion:
He drowned himself and all his fires
Deep in the hissing ocean.

Then all was dark, lawless, and lost:
I heard great devilish wings:
I knew that Art had won, and snapt
The Covenant of Things.

I cried aloud, and I awoke,
New labours in my head.
I set my teeth, and manfully
Began to lie in bed.

Toiling, rejoicing, sorrowing,
So I my life conduct.
Each morning see some task began,
Each evening see it chucked.

But still, in sudden moods of dusk,
I hear those great weird wings,
Feel vaguely thankful to see the vast
Stupidity of things. 622

The poem draws attention to the exclusivity and self-absorption that Chesterton saw in aestheticism, and the implications of ordinary people following the example of the aesthetes. The incongruity of the images of nature taking an aesthetic turn serve to remind the reader of the simplicity and beauty of nature, and that its existence outside of ourselves, often taken for granted, is a necessary condition for the self-regarding lives of the decadents. The failure of historical imagination and abandonment of pre-industrial relationships to nature left no defence against this aestheticism.

When Chesterton used the term ‘decadence’, as he frequently did, he was referring to more than simply a gnawing uncertainty about the reality of the world. In Christianity,

Patriotism, and Nationhood: The England of G.K. Chesterton, Julia Stapleton discussed Chesterton’s response to ‘the Decadence’. She argued that Chesterton’s outrage was primarily directed at the separation of art and life that characterised the aesthetes of the fin-de-siècle.\textsuperscript{623} Chesterton always maintained that art should be directed toward some end; he felt that the most important thing about a person was their morality, and abhorred as a symptom of decadence any allegiance to a purely aesthetic approach to the world. In Heretics, he wrote that

> there are some people, nevertheless – and I am one of them – who think that the most practical and important thing about a man is still his view of the universe. We think that for a landlady considering a lodger, it is important to know his income, but still more important to know his philosophy. [...] We think the question is not whether the theory of the cosmos affects matters, but whether, in the long run, anything else affects them.\textsuperscript{624}

The point of directing art towards a moral purpose was always to move outwards from the self. If one was not reminded of the existence of nature, then contemplation could become inward-looking, leaving people in the desolate gloom of being certain of nothing but themselves. It is a short step from that style of introspection to a self-worship that Chesterton found especially despicable. He believed that there was a modern tendency towards the encouragement of ‘self-belief’ in two senses – that of being certain of the existence only of oneself, and that of encouraging oneself and having faith in one’s own capacities. In this world view, nature becomes simply a figment of one’s cannibal dreams. Chesterton found both of these faiths fatally misplaced, writing that

> what we suffer from today is humility in the wrong place. Modesty has moved from the organ of ambition. Modesty has settled upon the organ of conviction; where it was never meant to be. A man was meant to be doubting about himself, but undoubting about the truth; this has been exactly reversed. Nowadays the part of a man that a man does assert is exactly the part he ought

\textsuperscript{624} Chesterton, Heretics, p. 41.
not to assert – himself. The part he doubts is exactly the part he ought not to doubt – the Divine Reason.625

The outcome of all of this self-belief was an unfortunate tendency to self-worship:

[t]hat Jones shall worship the god within him turns out ultimately to mean that Jones shall worship Jones. Let Jones worship the sun or moon, anything rather than the Inner Light; let Jones worship cats or crocodiles, if he can find any in his street, but not the god within.626

Although in reality Chesterton frowned upon actually worshipping nature, he would still prefer that people look outside themselves for faith and inspiration. If one was under threat from dissolving into oneself, then the sun, cats or crocodiles could all provide beacons to light the path back to sanity. His own dance with madness he described as follows:

At a very early age I had thought my way back to thought itself. It is a very dreadful thing to do; for it may lead to thinking that there is nothing but thought. At this time I did not very clearly distinguish between dreaming and waking; not only as a mood but as a metaphysical doubt, I felt as if everything might be a dream. It was as if I had myself projected the universe from within, with its trees and stars; and that is so near to the notion of being God that it is manifestly even nearer to going mad. Yet I was not mad, in any medical or physical sense; I was simply carrying the skepticism of my time as far as it would go.627

The possibility of nature existing only in one’s mind was to Chesterton a foul blasphemy. It was one which he diagnosed not only in the decadents, but in the agnostics and moderns who attempted to understand nature without really believing in it:

But, after all, the world is one shape and not another (I don’t care which myself, but certainly one), and will be when we all die, and would have been if no worm or weed had ever lived. And it amuses me to notice that the very Agnostics who still quote Galileo’s phrase about the earth, “And yet it moves!” are the very people who talk as if truth could be different from age to age - as if the whole world was a different shape when you or I were in a different frame of mind. Progressives of this kind cannot say “And yet it moves” save in the sense that their own foot can roll it about like a football, or that their own

625 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, pp. 234-5.
626 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 279.
finger can stop it as Joshua’s stopped the moon. They may control Nature like witches; but they cannot appeal to Nature like Galileo. They have no abiding objective fact to which to appeal.628

Historical progress seemed to Chesterton only to cause a growing gap between people and the ‘real’ external world. Chesterton used the non-human world to help him challenge this trend and feel his way back to psychological and spiritual health, and described its dazzling and miraculous properties at length in an effort to persuade his fellows to follow him through the darkness into Elfland.629

Stephen Clark has claimed that in his evocation of a world with no objective certainties Chesterton predicted the rise of post-modernism,630 and Robert Royal claimed that Chesterton ‘anticipated’ post-structuralism and aspects of today’s ‘post-modern condition’.631 Similarly, Ed Block Junior wanted to mobilise Chesterton’s work against the ‘pernicious’ aspects of post-modernism.632 If post-modernity is a time when nature is associated with an ‘infinite malleability’633 and therefore total absorption into the vision and will of human beings, then the whole era would certainly sound like a horror show to Chesterton. But in fact, Chesterton’s doubt-ridden adversaries were, temporally speaking, much closer to home and were representatives of a world-view that, to Chesterton, seemed a sickness to which a healthy appreciation of nature was an antidote. He believed that pessimism, as part of a wider, ‘decadent’ malaise, was widespread and he wrote that ‘pessimism is now patently, as it always was essentially,

629 See the ‘Elfland’ passages in *Orthodoxy*, starting p. 249.
more commonplace than piety. Profanity is now more than an affectation – it is a
convention. The curse against God is Exercise I. in the primer of minor poetry.\textsuperscript{634} To
Chesterton, the loss of meaning and direction, the doubts about the solid existence of
nature and the sick pessimism that shrouded the world were modern afflictions (and
therefore, the post-modern skepticism that Chesterton’s critics believed he was
predicting were merely the flowering of seeds sown in modernity). What Chesterton
felt was offered by a theological reading of nature was a worldview that perfectly
balanced spiritualism and materialism and that could defeat this nauseating
decadence. Chesterton’s understanding about the operation of historical forces
prevented him from believing in progress; but neither did he think that England’s
historical path led downwards into decadence and despair.

One explanation that Chesterton offered for the prevalence of decadence in his own
time was the alienation from the local. A sense of connection to one’s small piece of
the English landscape engendered the virtues of loyalty and sympathy. In a discussion
of decadence, Chesterton wrote of the value of small communities (including the
family) - not because they were ‘peaceful, pleasant and at one’ but because these
small units were ‘not peaceful and not pleasant and not at one’\textsuperscript{635} In a small
community a person ‘knows much more of the fierce varieties and uncompromising
divergences of men’, because ‘in a large community we can choose our companions. In
a small community our companions are chosen for us’\textsuperscript{636} Therefore the narrowing of
choice associated with attachment to a specific place necessitates the development of
sympathy, loyalty and fellow-feeling. It was the loss of rootedness which allowed

\textsuperscript{635} Chesterton, \textit{Heretics}, p. 136.
\textsuperscript{636} Chesterton, \textit{Heretics}, p. 136.
decadence to flourish, which in turn led to a decline of belief. More specifically, it was the lack of rootedness in, and connection to, nature: ‘the absence from modern life of both the higher and lower forms of faith is largely due to a divorce from nature and the trees and clouds.’

Conclusion

Chesterton’s interest in history was typical of his time; indeed, historian Billie Melman wrote recently of the extent to which it has now become ‘commonplace’ to note that ‘nineteenth-century and early-twentieth century English culture was soaked in history’ and that ‘pasts[...] became ubiquitous precisely during the era and experiences which we have come to define as “modernity”’. Another commonplace is to assert that the history which has so preoccupied the English has been curiously (for a country which birthed modern industry) rural in nature.

Although Chesterton sometimes criticised Edmund Burke, he shared with him a sense that (in the words of historian J.W. Burrow) ‘political wisdom, and the identity of a society, and hence in some measure the appropriate conduct of its affairs, are found essentially in its history.’ In that sense at least, Chesterton was part of a

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637 Chesterton, Heretics, pp. 89-90.
640 Chesterton, What’s Wrong with the World?, pp. 203-4.
mainstream. Paul Rich’s essay on the ‘quest for Englishness’ in fact located Chesterton as a populariser of a certain view of Englishness and English history that united the appeals of English history and rural values in an attempt to undermine the pretensions to imperial grandiosity, though it was largely unsuccessful in demolishing the dominant school of Whig history at Oxford and Cambridge.642

Rich locates Chesterton then as a leader of a broader historical movement.

Chesterton created a version of history that drew on historiographical traditions available in his own time. These historical traditions posited a version of the past that was organic, rooted in place and land, and that continued to exist despite the interference of capitalism and the industrial economy. This version of history was not ‘natural’ in the sense of striving for simplicity in life or following some strangled version of the laws of nature. Rather, to Chesterton it was natural for humanity to cultivate the land, to live in harmony with it but to manage it as part of a tradition of English stewardship and husbandry that was un-romantic and un-interested in the notion of ‘wilderness’. ‘Natural’ human institutions are rooted in the land, organic, decentralised and in keeping with cultural tradition. Chesterton, keen to point out the

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642 Rich, ‘The Quest for Englishness’, p. 30. As Paul Readman has noted in a recent article, locating English national identity in some version of the English past was a very widespread practice in the early twentieth century. This approach to history was so widespread and ‘deep-rooted’ in fact that, according to Readman, it is ‘best understood outside of the “invention of tradition” paradigm’: P. Readman, ‘The Place of the Past in English Culture, c. 1890-1914’, Past and Present, No. 186, February 2005, pp. 149-50. Readman depicts an approach to English history that was popular at the time. Indeed, if the work of McCarthy and McCleary (cited above) had contextualised Chesterton’s historical imagination a little further, it would have become clear that he was not standing alone as a defender of tradition in an age obsessed with progress. The work of John Coates, too, which is valuable in demonstrating the ways in which Chesterton challenged historical myths of his time, neglected to situate Chesterton in a context where challenges to ‘whig’ history were multiple and varied. Following the work of many historians, including David Lowenthal, an interest in the past is no longer seen as a ‘merely’ nostalgic activity - and nostalgia itself can not be assumed to be only regressive in nature. Indeed, Lowenthal claims, there is no such thing as a ‘non-nostalgic’ view of the past. D. Lowenthal, ‘Nostalgia tells it like it wasn’t’, in M. Chase and C. Shaw (eds), The Imagined Past: History and Nostalgia, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1989, pp. 28-30. Sadly, little of this work of complicating assumptions about the relationship between Chesterton’s contemporaries and their past has filtered through to work on the man himself. The scholarship on Chesterton has continued largely to assume that he existed outside of his own history, leaving unexplored the paradox that Chesterton is considered both to be a writer of popular history and simultaneously an out-of-touch anachronism.
way that others mobilised ‘nature’ in their justification of political stances, was quick to do the same. To him, there was a version of history steeped in ‘common sense’, tradition, and authority (with authority located in those who were closest to the land) that should be accepted as the right and, in his view, the most democratic approach to history. This version of the past should be common sense and should not need the stamp of rationality granted by the use of scientific methodology or the reliance on sources (which might be charitably offered as a reason for his failure to do any historical research).

This version of history was, as was common in his time, fundamentally agrarian, and was used to justify a political stance that opposed the rampant monopolies and factory culture that Chesterton associated with Protestantism and modernity and which he believed had come to characterise the England of his day. It was a historiography that was conservative in the sense that it saw much that was of value in the past, and yet revolutionary in that it would require a massive re-ordering of society in order to achieve.
Conclusion

The Nature of Modernity

Chesterton believed that England had lost its way. The consequences of this break with destiny were severe, leaving a country adrift and defenceless. He described at length the pathologies of modern life that infiltrated his weakened homeland: in fact, ruminating on a world gone wrong was the unifying theme of his work. Chesterton offered a diagnosis of these problems in which nature was central, as well as a prescription for how best to be with the non-human world in modernity. He was keenly aware that he was living in modern times: his sense of the continuity of English history and its connection to the landscape was destabilised by his awareness of contingency and the possibility of change. In that respect he was a product of the modern age, if a reluctant one. His attachment to continuity, tradition and a peaceful rural life were all the stronger for his knowledge that they were not lasting, and that in order to re-create and maintain these conditions there needed to be constant, revolutionary effort.

Chesterton was known for his use of paradox, although he denied this proclivity.\textsuperscript{643} He retained a commitment to one big truth that would resolve all contradictions, banish mistakes of all ideological hues and map out a route to righteousness in a compromised world. This truth, which he found finally in the Church, would confound categories of ‘left’ and ‘right’ or modern and traditional, and show people how to be at home in the world. This model cohered around a way of interacting with nature that, Chesterton hoped, would resolve the inconsistencies on which it was built and become

something that was transcendentally right. Chesterton was not overly concerned, then, with adherence to specific ideological categories. His critique of the modern age was itself constructed in modern terms and his criticism of contemporary views about nature were phrased as a defence of reason and independent thought in the face of the superstition and naivety of the modern world. On the one hand, he thought that modernity had produced an unhealthy relationship with nature. On the other, he was uncomfortable with common counter-modern manifestations - such as spiritualism and mysticism - which he thought were just as much in thrall to nature as were science and atheism. Reason without natural limitations led to insanity; unreasoning adherence to such limitations led to slavery. Chesterton’s synthesis was an approach to nature that respected its influence and yet defied it. He confronted nature within certain limitations of tradition and most importantly divinity. In practice this meant that he eschewed any talk of following the ‘laws of nature’ but still felt that life should be, somehow, closer to nature. The trick was to be close to nature without falling into it.

Chesterton issued repeated warnings about the consequences of the pathologies of modernity and was quick to propose remedies. He was constantly shining a light on the phenomena on display in wonderful, enchanted nature – illuminating the world for which he believed people should be grateful. This idée fixe led him to the conviction that there existed a purposeful Being outside of humanity. It seemed a logical requirement of the prominence of gratitude in his thought that there should be someone to whom one could express one’s thanks. Chesterton did not explicate this chain of thought much further, but it seemed to him too unlikely that he could have received a world filled with such wonderful presents and there could be no one he
could look to in gratitude. Thus, Chesterton progressed ‘logically’ from the existence of the world to its creation by an external being. 'I had always vaguely felt facts to be miracles in the sense that they are wonderful', he wrote in Orthodoxy; 'now I began to think them miracles in the stricter sense that they were wilful'.644 In Chesterton's view, the miracles of nature required a miracle-worker, the magic required a magician, and it was to him inconceivable that the world could have come about without it having been willed to be so.645 In Fairyland, Chesterton chose to suspend some (although not all) natural laws, and replace what must be with what could be. In this way, divine involvement was necessitated in a way it was not if the natural world, following evolutionary laws, was capable of arranging its own affairs. The whole of the natural world was a source of joy for Chesterton, but he believed that patterns of thought in modernity had overshadowed this happiness with the advent of scientific, rational and industrial approaches to nature.

The ability to wonder at nature that Chesterton wanted all to share was reliant on humanity’s fundamental separation from the non-human world. For Chesterton, nature could best remain mysterious if it was something demonstrably other than us. Developments in science, however, most notably evolution as theorized by Darwin, threatened the assumption that humans were fundamentally different from animals. Chesterton was set on this distinction for a number of reasons, including his faith: he

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644 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 264.
645 If it was possible in Fairyland that a tree could grow tigers hanging on by the tail (as Chesterton argued it should be), there must be one to whom the idea of tigers in trees was pleasing, and who had the capacity to bring it about: the Magician. In this sense, Chesterton’s observations of nature led him directly towards a form of argument from first cause (a matter that Chesterton dealt with in his biography of Thomas Aquinas). Chesterton argued that ‘we do not need even St. Thomas, we do not need anything but our own common sense, to tell us that if there has been from the beginning anything that can possibly be called a Purpose, it must reside in something that has the essential elements of a Person’: Chesterton, St. Thomas Aquinas, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1986 (first published 1933), p. 536.
believed firmly in the hierarchy of God’s creation with men and women standing above animals and nature.646 He was also committed to the inviolability of the human soul; the soul was a sacred and individual thing, which could not possibly have evolved and which equally could not be said to reside in other creatures. Evolution placed people in a chain starting with animals. For some reason, in Chesterton’s imagination it also violated the dignity of each individual creature. He painted a picture in which the whole Darwinian world collapsed in on itself and individuality faded away. Chesterton believed that evolution was predicated on a notion of inevitability and the loss of a sense of purpose, the latter being replaced with something formless, indifferent and unavoidable. Discussing William Blake, Chesterton wrote that ‘Blake really insisted that man as the image of God had a right to impose form upon nature. He would have laughed to scorn the notion of the modern evolutionist – that Nature is to be permitted to impose formlessness upon man.”647 He felt that, with the loss of a creator and its replacement with an impersonal evolutionary force, nature was no longer a display of the will of God – it no longer meant anything, in fact. This ‘formlessness’, in Chesterton’s mind, resulted from the application to people of the laws of nature, and was imposed on humanity by scientists who ignored what, to Chesterton, seemed to be the obvious differences between people and animals.

There was much going on in the modern era that represented to Chesterton an improper relationship with nature. Distributism formed part of his response to this imbalance. As a Distributist, Chesterton proposed a life that was rooted in place and in touch with the cycles of nature. He believed that under these conditions, humanity

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646 For another account of Chesterton’s view of nature and the cosmic hierarchy, see I. Ker, G.K. Chesterton: A Biography, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2011, p. 119.
could flourish once again. In practice, however, he tended to respond amiably to the city as much as to the country, having created a particular vision of the metropolis in which citizens inhabited small, local sub-sections of the city which were less anonymous, and closer to the roots of things, than the London that Chesterton knew. He was also not as dubious about technology and machinery as some of his fellow Distributists. If, for ‘the people of the Enlightenment, evil resided not in man but in social conditions, ignorance, superstition, and poverty’, for Chesterton the reverse was true. He claimed that his dispute was not so much with technology itself but with a certain mindset that allowed machine to become master. He observed this mindset, he claimed, both amongst the cheerleaders for technology and those (such as his colleague Arthur Penty) who seemed afraid of it.

In the modern world, the presence of ‘otherness’ that was so important to him was at risk of collapsing as a result of scientific enquiry and industrialisation. Chesterton was concerned to retain a sense of the alien, in his approach to nature and in his approach to nations. His objections to industrial economics and to science shared with his outlook on nationalism a sense that the best things in the world were small, local and proudly different. At the turn of century, this sense of the primacy of local patriotism led Chesterton to take a stance against Empire and against the Boer War. Prior to the First World War, he resisted the fashion for organic and biological metaphors for the state, arguing that transforming a people into a sort of natural organism elided the role of spirit and will in the making of a state. By the interwar period, he was becoming more and more concerned about cosmopolitanism and foreign elements (ideologies and people) in Britain, and was taking note, quite favourably, of the rise of fascism in

Italy - although by contrast he was much more critical of Nazism. Although by contrast he was much more critical of Nazism. Across his entire career, he never stopped believing that the English landscape was crucial to understanding English national identity, although he stopped short of seeing the land as totally determinative of his country’s character. He believed that nature played a role in establishing nations, but that there needed to remain room for the human will or spirit - in this belief he was influenced, again, by his Catholicism which directed him at times towards conservatism and tradition but also to ideas of equality and the rights of individuals more often associated with progressive political forces. His failure to succumb entirely to biology (a trait which he associated not with the forces of tradition and conservatism but with modernity) was shared with some other Catholic thinkers - leading to Lord Lymington’s complaint that the English Catholics had got as far as the ‘soil’ but were uninterested in ‘blood’.

The belief that in modern times humanity had succumbed to biology contrasted with Chesterton’s beliefs about the English in times past. Chesterton believed that ideologies that were considered ‘modern’ in the twentieth century repudiated rather than furthered Enlightenment values of autonomy, reason and freedom because they frequently involved (or so it appeared to him) handing power over the direction of human society to ‘nature’ in various manifestations. Chesterton himself, of course, also used ‘nature’ as a justification for a particular view of historical progress, believing that the social institutions of the Middle Ages had developed organically and had then been destroyed as a result of the English Reformation and the development of an industrial economy. He believed though that in the past the English peasantry had

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650 Viscount Lymington, letter to H.J. von Houten, dated 2 August 1939, from files of English Array correspondence, F182, Wallop Archives, Hampshire Record Office, ref. HRO/15M84/F182. As noted previously, this letter was kindly provided to me by Philip Conford.
lived harmoniously with nature but was not subordinate to it and that this hierarchy had been reversed in modern times. Paradoxically, he believed that the humane governance of nature, and the manipulation and husbandry of the landscape was in itself the ‘natural’ role of humans. The way in which some intellectuals in the twentieth century proposed ‘following nature’ rather than stewarding it was regarded by Chesterton as ‘unnatural’. His responses to the study of history, economics, politics and science were guided by this overarching belief that there was a right way to approach nature, which had been lost in the modern world.

This loss of direction when it came to the treatment of nature manifested itself in a tendency to follow or to worship nature. Chesterton, however, explained that it was inadvisable for a person to worship nature given that they differed from animals in kind not just in degree:

No human being was ever really so unnatural as to worship Nature. No man, however indulgent (as I am) to corpulence, ever worshipped a man as round as the sun or a woman as round as the moon. No man, however attracted to an artistic attenuation, ever really believed that the Dryad was as lean and stiff as the tree. We human beings have never worshipped Nature; and indeed, the reason is very simple. It is that all human beings are superhuman beings. We have printed our own image upon Nature, as God has printed His image upon us. We have told the enormous sun to stand still; we have fixed him on our shields, caring no more for a star than for a starfish. And when there were powers of Nature we could not for the time control, we have conceived great beings in human shape controlling them.651

In this passage is Chesterton’s specific formulation that humanity must be separate from nature. After all, separation from nature was, according to Chesterton, a prerequisite for even thinking about the non-human world. ‘You cannot think’, he wrote, ‘if you are not separate from the subject of thought.’652 Ironically, the dislocation of people from the natural that to many people marked the modern age

652 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 238.
resulted in an absorption of people into nature, because people had forgotten the fundamental facts of their own existence and could no longer tell where their selves ended and the rest of the world began.

Chesterton believed humanity to be the only thing in the world endowed with reason and moral judgment. Nature for Chesterton was darkly inscrutable to the cogitations of the human mind, and so there was little point in looking there for guidance on moral questions. If the non-human realm is indeed one that is separate from but subordinate to humankind, it follows that it is dangerous to attempt to draw moral lessons from phenomena observed in it. Chesterton often expressed disdain at the notion of ‘following nature’ in any moral sense. Criticising ‘the simplicity of Tolstoy’, Chesterton wrote that

this heroic desire to return to nature is, of course, in some respects, rather like the heroic desire of a kitten to return to its own tail. A tail is a simple and beautiful object, rhythmic in curve and soothing in texture; but it is certainly one of the minor but characteristic qualities of a tail that it should hang behind.653

Nature could be a source of much joy – it is evident from his writing that Chesterton found it so – but humanity must never be made obedient to it, for the simple reason that ‘the sense of the sacredness of every human being, the sense that he is different from nature, that he is above nature, is the whole essence and power and force of Christianity.’654 ‘Man’ alone was endowed with the power to make moral judgements. In nature, on the other hand, there is no meaning that we have not put there ourselves. Chesterton wrote that:

Obviously, it will not do to take our ideal from the principle in nature; for the
simple reason that (except for some human or divine theory), there is no
principle in nature. For instance, the cheap anti-democrat of to-day will tell you
solemnly that there is no equality in nature. He is right, but he does not see the
logical addendum. There is no equality in nature; also there is no inequality in
nature. Inequality, as much as equality, implies a standard of value. To read
aristocracy into the anarchy of animals is just as sentimental as to read
democracy into it. Both aristocracy and democracy are human ideals.\footnote{Chesterton,\textit{ Orthodoxy}, pp. 307-8.}

Another reason that Chesterton avoided searching for meaning in nature was that in
his experience the meaning that people did find in nature could be quite nasty. Often,
nature-worship – most especially in the form of Social Darwinist ‘survival of the fittest’
fantasies – had a habit of extracting nature’s cruellest habits as examples for human
society. He argued

\begin{quotation}
that Nature-worship is more morally dangerous than the most vulgar man-
worship of the cities; since it can easily be perverted into the worship of an
impersonal mystery, carelessness, or cruelty. Thoreau would have been a jollier
fellow if he had devoted himself to a green-grocer instead of to greens.\footnote{G.K. Chesterton,\textit{ Alarms and Discursions}, Dodd, Mead and Company, New York, 1911, p. 17.}
\end{quotation}

Chesterton saw, in the austerity and vegetarianism of his good friend George Bernard
Shaw, a trend of adopting simpler lives that were closer to ‘nature’. Chesterton was
sceptical of both the motivation behind and the outcomes of such trends. Chesterton
was frustrated with what he thought was a particularly artificial and unnatural
simplicity – he believed that if one had to develop complicated theories to support
one’s eating habits, then it was unlikely that one was acting ‘naturally’ in any
meaningful sense.\footnote{Britain produced ‘the first vegetarian society in the modern western world in 1847’. By 1899, it had
several thousand members. People were moved to vegetarianism for a range of reasons, including
temperance, hygiene, ‘the growth of “humane” feeling’, animal welfare and non-violence, and the belief
that it was preferable medicinally: J. Gregory,\textit{ Of Victorians and Vegetarians: the Vegetarian Movement

In 1905 he wrote that

\begin{quotation}
It does not so very much matter whether a man eats a grilled tomato or a plain
tomato; it does very much matter if he eats a plain tomato with a grilled mind.
The only kind of simplicity worth preserving is the simplicity of the heart’.\footnote{G.K. Chesterton,\textit{ Heretics}, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1986 (first published 1905), p. 111.}
Chesterton’s quest for ‘simplicity of the heart’ led him away from following nature. In so doing he sought to avoid a mistake that he believed the ancient Greeks had made. This community ‘started out with the idea of something splendidly obvious and direct; the idea that if man walked straight ahead on the high road of reason and nature, he could come to no harm; especially if he was, as the Greek was, eminently enlightened and intelligent.’

Unfortunately, ‘no sooner did the Greeks themselves begin to follow [...] their own notion of being natural, than the queerest thing in history seems to have happened to them.’ The Greeks, according to Chesterton, found that the ‘immediate effect of saluting the sun and the sunny sanity of nature was a perversion spreading like a pestilence’, because to worship something means immediately to undermine it: ‘people who worship health cannot remain healthy.’

People are naturally political animals, and to deny this ability and ‘follow nature’ is an inherently unnatural thing to do.

Many theorists argue that nature lost meaning in modernity, and that the modern period was characterised by a separation of culture from nature. Modernity is typically considered an era harbouring a ‘growing conviction the humans were unique and qualitatively separate from the rest of the natural world’. Chesterton was convinced that the reverse was true. He believed that modernity was responsible for the dissolution of human souls into nature. The only way to avoid this error (and to keep a sense of human dignity) was to maintain a sense of separation between humans and the natural world. Additionally, to avoid becoming subject to any of the modern

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660 Chesterton, St. Francis, p. 38.
661 Chesterton, St. Francis, p. 38.
superstitions one had to find a dogma and commit to it. If one failed to do so, one risked falling to one of the defining superstitions of the modern age:

I am inclined to think now that the chief modern danger is that of a slow return towards barbarism. [...] Civilisation in the best sense merely means the full authority of the human spirit over all externals. Barbarism means the worship of these externals in their crude and unconquered state. Barbarism means the worship of Nature; and in recent poetry, science, and philosophy there has been too much of the worship of Nature. Wherever men begin to talk much and with great solemnity about the forces outside man, the note of it is barbaric. When men talk too much about heredity and environment they are almost barbarians.663

Chesterton believed that, in modernity, people had become slaves to nature in a manner that would have been inconceivable to his medieval exemplars such as St Francis of Assisi. Paradoxically, the process of human mastery of nature led to an outcome where nature comprehensively mastered humanity. This reversal was due to the modern propensity to cede control over one’s thought-processes to the wrong kind of dogma. The Enlightenment project was designed to expose everything which nature had been keeping hidden. Chesterton believed that rationalism and science were becoming aggressive and ruthlessly dominating in their mission to become the ruling ideology of the twentieth century.664

Chesterton did not of course advocate relativism as a way out of the ideological maze of the twentieth century. Resistance to grand theories of modernity could only come from a grand theory of one’s own. Chesterton’s critique often seemed to centre on the fact that moderns were thinking both too hard, and too imprecisely, to arrive at a good answer to the question ‘how shall I live?’ According to Chesterton, if they spent less time chasing rabbits down holes and more time observing the natural harmonies which God had created on earth (and respecting the wisdom and authority accessible

through the history of England’s Middle Ages), then there would be a possibility of arriving at a balanced life, lived simply and ‘naturally’. For Chesterton, the irony of modernity was that, for all its exaltation of reason, people by nature needed faith - and so reason itself became an article of faith rather than of sceptical inquiry. For Chesterton, of course, the ‘correct’ dogma turned out ultimately to be Catholicism, which he believed had a sane and balanced relationship with nature.665

Jan Marsh argued in 1982 that back to the land movements sometimes represented alternatives to religion at a time when faith was becoming less secure, with ‘earth as the source of all goodness in place of God’.666 For Chesterton and many Distributists, however, the earth was evidence that God existed and that he was good. Chesterton believed that it was possible to access the divine through an examination of the natural and also that the natural could be sanctified through the presence of the divine. In *Outline of Sanity*, he wrote a lengthy passage explaining this connection, in which he argued that pioneers in new lands could bring their history and culture with them to the new land by making it sacred. Religion could ‘thus rapidly give a sort of accumulated power of culture and legend to something that is crude or incomplete.’

He continued that

in a sense a new world can be baptized as a new baby is baptized, and become a part of an ancient order not merely on the map but in the mind. Instead of crude people merely extending their crudity, and calling that colonization, it would be possible for people to cultivate the soil as they cultivate the soul. But

665 There are a number of works that challenge the idea that the Catholic Church was merely a fortress constructed to keep the modern world out, with reference to the Catholic ‘modernist crisis’. See, for example, D. Jodock (ed), *Catholicism Contending with Modernity: Roman Catholic Modernism and Anti-Modernism in Historical Context*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000; also J. Komonchak, ‘Modernity and the Construction of Roman Catholicism’, *Christianesimo nella storia*, Vol. 18(2), 1997, pp. 353-85.
for this it is necessary to have a respect for the soil as well as for the soul; and even a reverence for it, as having some associations with holy things.  

Soil can be sanctified by a living church, lending the landscape the heft of tradition and history. This way of bringing the church to the soil, however, required not only respect for the church, but also reverence for the soil. Philip Conford has examined Judeo-Christian traditions in the context of his work on the organic movement in Britain. The organic movement was, according to Conford, influenced by Distributism and by the Catholic ideas of Belloc and Chesterton. Conford’s work on the ‘Christian context of organic husbandry’ is instructive in its treatment of the religious influence on the early organic movement. He wrote that it was received wisdom in current ‘New Age’ spiritual thought that the ‘Judaeo-Christian tradition is incompatible with reverence for the environment, and that only through renewal of pantheistic or pagan religion will industrial societies find their way back to a harmonious relationship with nature.’ Conford pointed out that there have been many Christian thinkers in Britain concerned with the preservation of England’s landscape. Their number included H.J. Massingham, who was the son of H.W. Massingham, a Liberal newspaper editor and colleague of Chesterton. In 1943, Massingham published a book entitled The Tree of Life, in which he argued that Christianity, and particularly Protestantism, had betrayed its roots by abandoning its interest in the natural world.

Massingham’s book, which contains a number of references to work by Chesterton, suggests a manner of viewing nature from a Christian perspective that bears some similarities to Chesterton’s vision of Distributism. Massingham, like McNabb and other

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Distributists, believed that the ‘natural law’ of the Middle Ages provided a model for interaction with nature. He understood the work of theologians of that period to reveal directions for a system in which

Private property was permissible because man had fallen from the state of primal innocence in the bosom of nature, but only as a stewardship and in trust [...]. Thus, government, which is non-natural and so the result of sin, can only justify itself in so far as it controls the appetites let loose by the fall from nature and the divine grace.\(^{671}\)

When Conford wrote, then, that ‘Distributism was essentially a Catholic movement’,\(^{672}\) he meant more than merely that many of its leaders and members adhered to the Church of Rome. Catholic ideology was inseparable from Distributism, and was a source of its complex relationship with the land. Both the respect for the land and a strong sense of human elevation over nature can be traced to Catholic influence.

Although Chesterton was not a nature-worshipper, he did occasionally lend his weight to nature conservation causes. The early environmental movement was not, however, his main motivation.\(^{673}\) Nevertheless, Richard Gill has summed up his contribution to ecological philosophy as follows:

> [o]ut of the common ground between Arendt and Chesterton I believe we can begin to sketch an ecological politics which avoids the irrationalism and pantheism of the so-called “deep ecology” as well as the conformism of an “environmentalism” which would leave us both cut off from appreciating the objective value in nature as well as living a more humanly satisfying life.\(^{674}\)

\(^{671}\) Massingham, Tree of Life, p. 45.

\(^{672}\) Conford, Origins of the Organic Movement, p. 155.


The sense of gratitude that is the focus of Gill’s work led Chesterton to want to protect
the natural world. This feeling was a driver for what involvement Chesterton had in the
political preservation campaigns of his time. In 1932, Chesterton agreed to write an
introduction to a book on Penn county, Buckinghamshire. He noted that the book had
a connection to the Society for the Preservation of Rural England. He feted the work of
this Society, noting that protests largely coming from its membership had succeeded in
stopping an unnamed ‘project coming from usual anonymous and mechanical forces
that are laying waste to this country’. He reassured his readers, too, that ‘there are
more of these little victories of local patriotism than anybody looking at the general
devastation of the national landscape would suppose’. He waxed lyrical about the
beauty of the landscape ruined by industrial modernity:

Now England, especially this southern part of England, is very near to being the
Earthly Paradise. I mean that, so far as being something to look at is concerned,
there is hardly a country in the world in which it is so well worth a traveller’s
while to pause and look. […] Anybody who defaces it might just as well be
wrecking the Parthenon or slashing across the pictures of Titian and Velasquez.
Yet the process of destroying it, of cutting down its woods, of cutting through
its countryside, of altering the whole shape of the land against the sky, is left
today to dull and random mechanical enterprises, undertaken by some obscure
official nobodies; who have not even the imagination to appreciate their own
glory and infamy as standing among the great vandals of history.

Chesterton gave a vivid description of the enemies of the beautiful English landscape,
in terms that made it quite clear that he saw the forces of development as grotesque:

It is needless to describe in detail here the very strange and abnormal force
that is in this matter the enemy. It is marked everywhere by one form of
intellectual blindness or uncanny contradiction. It does not feel the faintest
shame in moving only in ruts; so long as it moves rapidly in these ruts. So long
as its ruts are called rails, so long as they are in fact simply grooves, it is totally
indifferent to the rails being of the very narrowest gauge. So long as it can

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Country, 24 April 1932. Chesterton uses the term ‘Society’ although it is possible he was referring to the
‘Council for the Preservation of Rural England’.
Country, 24 April 1932.
Country, 24 April 1932.
produce a monster that can run quicker than a race-horse, it cares nothing that
the animal always runs in blinkers. Certain notions that are narrow to the point
of monomania, notions about speed or trade or traffic or what not, have
completely shut in the mind, as the more modern make of motor-cars
completely shuts in the motorist. And just as actual invading enemies might
travel in a tank or an armoured car, shut in by walls and shooting out of
loopholes at people or places they could hardly see, so the new and narrow
type of trader or traveller spreads ruin and destruction along his essentially
solitary journey, precisely because it is essentially solitary; and the more
introspectively he looks inward at his speedometer or his road book, the more
certainly and sweepingly does he in practice wither the woods on the remote
horizon or shake the very shrines in the heart of every human town. 678

These forces of development that Chesterton described were also quite alien.
Chesterton wrote in one of his romances of a little village, to date untouched by
modernity. ‘Down in the little village of Grayling-Abbot, in Somerset’, Chesterton
wrote, ‘men did not know that the world we live in had begun. They did not know that
all we have come to call “modern” had silently entered England, and changed the air of
it.’ 679 Chesterton saw in modern movements that brought change and disruption a
most virulent form of irrationality. He considered that many of his contemporaries had
lost their compass, and had lost their ability to distinguish between sense and
nonsense. One can, then, following Gill, propose that Chesterton’s desire to protect
nature and the land represented nascent ecological thinking. For Chesterton, however,
this instinct to protect was not particularly radical. Environmental protection was part
of a broader package of values that derived partly from religion, and was not
comprehensible apart from his faith or his conservatism. Chesterton’s disinterest in
modern approaches to nature obviously did not translate into a lack of care for it. He
wanted to exercise this care, however, with a certain lightness and from a definitely
anthropocentric perspective. He wrote that

Country, 24 April 1932.
The essence of all pantheism, evolutionism, and modern cosmic religion is really in this proposition: that Nature is our mother. Unfortunately, if you regard Nature as a mother, you discover that she is a step-mother. The main point of Christianity was this: that Nature is not our mother: Nature is our sister. We can be proud of her beauty, since we have the same father; but she has no authority over us; we have to admire, but not to imitate. This gives to the typically Christian pleasure in this earth a strange touch of lightness that is almost frivolity.680

Chesterton’s approach to nature bears the imprint of the ideas of stewardship, the notion that ‘man, sinful though he be, occupies a position on earth comparable to that of God in the universe, as a personal possession.’681 Environmental historian Clarence Glacken calls this idea ‘one of the key ideas in the religious and philosophical thought of Western civilization regarding man’s place in nature.’682 A key tenet of the stewardship tradition is that humans, who are responsible for nature, should never become so besotted with it that they forget that nature is just another creation of God, one which is not endowed with humanity’s gifts of reason and self-reflection.683 Stewardship, in short, is anthropocentric,684 which does not of course prevent it from being conservationist. Chesterton hated to see the English countryside torn up to make highways.685 To him, this kind of practice represented an abdication of responsibility for the natural world, and an inevitable one in modernity, when ‘man’s’ rightful control over nature was being wrested from him by the modern state.686 But although he valued the land and felt a sense of responsibility towards it, he did not seek to attain any particular unity or ‘oneness’ with the world.

680 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 317.
682 Glacken, Traces on the Rhodian Shore, p. 155.
683 Glacken, Traces on the Rhodian Shore, p. 155.
686 This control was wrested from people via, amongst other things, the Game Laws. Chesterton, Eugenics and Other Evils, p. 369.
Although Chesterton cared for the landscape, he did so in a way that tended to the utilitarian. While not insensitive to the aesthetic appeal of the landscape (indeed he frequently wrote descriptive passages about the beauty of the English countryside), he did not on that basis oppose the development of the land. He believed that people had both a duty and an obligation to interfere in the landscape (‘we have printed our own image upon Nature’) and had no particular yen for the wilderness (‘[t]he unmeaning wilderness is not even impressive’, he wrote. ‘But the garden of childhood was fascinating, exactly because everything had a fixed meaning which could be found out in its turn’). He did however believe that the type of development characteristic of industrialisation was dirty and unhealthy, and he would prefer rural England to maintain the old ways.

This light-touch approach to conservation was not unusual in his time. By the 1880s - well before Chesterton was active as a writer - unease about industrialisation and nostalgia had already crystallised into projects for protecting the rural landscape, a realm that came to appear as a lush mirage in the desert of urban existence. Many Victorians realised that the dominion of the rural idyll was itself threatened by the processes of industrialisation, as cities expanded and encroached on the surrounding countryside, and in response to this threat created new nature protection societies which were of a distinctly ‘modern’ flavour.

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687 Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, pp. 360-361.
688 Gould and others have marked this era as the origin of overtly political manifestations of landscape protectionism, noting the establishment of Victorian societies such as the Commons Preservation Society (1865) and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (1889): P. Gould, *Early Green Politics: Back to Nature, Back to the Land, and Socialism in Britain*, The Harvester Press, Sussex, 1988, p. vii; and P. Lowe and J. Goyder, *Environmental Groups in Politics*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1983, p. 16. Although Romantic understandings of humanity and nature had existed since the late eighteenth century, these new organisations were quite pragmatic, reflecting, according to Peter Mandler, ‘strong Victorian
Chesterton agreed that industrialisation threatened the countryside, and that there had been a dislocation between people and the natural world in the modern era. His call to return to the land, however, was weakened both by his own disinterest in the practicalities of rural life and also by his sense that geography alone could not be a response to the problems of the world. There was a difference between Chesterton and more radically rural figures such as Arthur Penty, a Distributist much stricter than Chesterton about how the ideal rural life should be made manifest. Chesterton did not believe that a return to the land could itself resolve the problems of modernity, whereas Penty seemed preoccupied with the rejection of modern life as a solution to its challenges. Chesterton maintained that the state of the soul could not be determined entirely by the physical location of its human container, leading to an odd contradiction in his approach to the importance of the land.

Chesterton’s call to return to the land contained something more than simple rural nostalgia and it challenges the assumed connection between the rural and the ‘anti-modern’. Historian of the English landscape David Matless has questioned the assumption that ‘the rural, the natural and the historical are at odds with the modern’.\(^{689}\) He claims that ‘the use of “rural idyll” as a category of understanding seems often to reproduce that ease and slackness which it purports to diagnose’.\(^{690}\) Discussing the English preservation movement in the 1920s and 1930s and in particular the publications of the Council for the Preservation of Rural England (CPRE), David

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\(^{690}\) Matless, _Landscape and Englishness_, p. 17.
Matless points out that the ‘polar opposites of notions of tradition and modernity, of looking-to-the-past and being-up-to-date, or preservation and progress, and of “image” and “reality”’ require revision.\(^6^9^1\)

Chesterton’s work, and his reactions to science, capitalism, industrialisation, nationalism and historical progress, support this re-complication of ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’. Chesterton had a strong sense that he was living in a very ‘modern’ era (a notion he shared with many of his contemporaries).\(^6^9^2\) He also drew from his milieu a strong sense of unease about the pace and nature of changes that had occurred in England, which led one contemporary critic, Patrick Wright, to conclude that Chesterton’s attitude to his own times was basically defensive. Chesterton’s sense of Englishness, Wright argued, was essentially ‘opposed to the prevailing trends of the present’, and was a ‘semi-instinctive theory of encroachment that allows even the most well-placed man of the world to imagine himself a member of an endangered aboriginal minority’, or as a ‘freedom fighter striking out against “alien” values and the infernal works of a usurping state’.\(^6^9^3\)

Wright’s summary of Chesterton’s vision of England is that of a ‘beleaguered organic community’, under attack from all sides.\(^6^9^4\) There are indeed many examples in Chesterton’s work of pugnacious opposition to the rotting decadence of modern life and pleas to return to a life closer to the land. Wright showed no sympathy for the approach that he attributed to Chesterton. He found it ‘thoroughly defensive’, characterised by ‘retreat and denial’. Further, Wright believed it was impossible to

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\(^6^9^4\) Wright, ‘Last Orders’.
commit to the values of Chesterton’s England without ‘also recognising a current of fear and loathing that brings a whole series of “alien” destroyers streaming by’\(^{695}\) (and in this respect Wright refers specifically to Chesterton’s anti-Semitism). Inadequate and yet persistent in the modern world, the ‘native commonsense’ of this Englishness became ‘indistinguishable from “unspoken” prejudice’, sometimes turning ‘militant and vicious’.\(^{696}\) Chesterton’s belief in the English people’s connection to their land often became a conviction that those individuals not sprouted from that land could never belong.

On the other hand, Chesterton was a journalist whose fame was made possible by the rise of the mass media. He loved London and embraced wholeheartedly many of the developments of the industrial age. Despite his concern for protecting the landscape and living closer to nature, he could not contain his childlike delight in such inventions as the motor car. In a 1997 article, Joseph Komonchak made the point that the ‘paradox’ of Catholicism and modernity was that ‘at the very moment in which the Church was repudiating the effects of the Enlightenment on society and culture, it was making use of important features of it in the articulation of its own life.’\(^{697}\) In this respect, ‘anti-modern Roman Catholicism was very modern indeed’.\(^{698}\) Roman Catholicism was not merely a throwback to an earlier age, destined to fade away as time wore on. It was deeply implicated in - indeed, inextricable from - modernity.

\(^{695}\) Wright, ‘Last Orders’.


\(^{697}\) Komonchak, ‘Modernity and the Construction of Roman Catholicism’, p. 378.

\(^{698}\) Komonchak, ‘Modernity and the Construction of Roman Catholicism’, p. 378.
In *The Anti-Enlightenment Tradition*, Zeev Sternhell argued that if the various Enlightenments ‘produced the great intellectual revolution of rationalist modernity, the intellectual, cultural, and political movement associated with the revolt against the Enlightenment constituted not a counterrevolution but a different revolution.’ He continued that ‘it was not a countermodernity but a different modernity that came into being.’ Sternhell, like Chesterton, views history in terms of a battle (although they are plainly on different sides) and also accords significant power to ideas. Sternhell, however, is unequivocally in favour of Enlightenment (and makes what Chesterton would argue to be the great mistake of having faith in human progress). Importantly, however, he points out that many conservative traditions live not outside of modernity but within it.

Often Chesterton has been viewed as sitting outside his age - or even outside of time itself. Wright’s article, for example, is infused with the tacit assumption that Chesterton is a defensive and muttering lurker, out of place in an enlightened and progressive England. One is left with an image of Chesterton jealously guarding a suburban garden in which he cultivates anti-Semitism, xenophobia, and regressive nationalism (a garden that is always under threat from developers and destined ultimately to be razed and replaced with council housing or modern apartments). Chesterton, however, had become an expert in using the terminology of his opponents against them, often to great effect. He successfully drew attention to the superstition and failure of critical thinking that characterised some elements of the modern world’s

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701 Similarly, Duguid argued that modernity has always carried its alternative within itself. Duguid terms this path a ‘shadow modernity’ or the ‘losing option’ within modernity - a ‘romantic, holistic, small-is-beautiful version that was to be overwhelmed in the nineteenth century’: *Nature in Modernity*, p. 150.
702 Wright, ‘Last Orders’.
approach to the non-human, attempting at the same time to defend the possibility of independent thought and existence from the collapse of the human race into nature.

In 1927, Chesterton published the following poem, entitled ‘By a Reactionary’:

Smoke rolls in stinking, suffocating wrack
On Shakespeare’s land, turning the green one black;
The crowds that once to harvest would come
Hope for no harvest and possess no home,
While poor old tramps that liked a little ale,
In natural procession pass to gaol;

Because the world must, like the tramp, move on,
There does not seem much else that can be done.
As Lord Vangelt said in the House of Peers:
“None of us want Reaction.” (Tory cheers.)

So doubtful doctors punch and prod and prick
A man thought dead; and when there’s not a kick
Left in the corpse, no twitch or faint contraction,
The doctors say: “See... there is no Reaction.”

Although Chesterton did not frequently refer to himself as a reactionary or as a conservative - in fact, he denied the labels at times - from time to time his frustration at the modern world boiled over and he let fly at the forces that he believed were blackening his land and crushing its spirit. In another poem entitled ‘The Judgment of England’, Chesterton adapted lines from Oliver Goldsmith:

“Ill Fares the land, to hastening ills a prey
Where Wealth accumulates and Men decay.”
So rang of old the noble voice in vain
O’er the Last Peasants wandering on the plain,
Doom has reversed the riddle and the rhyme,
While sinks the commerce reared upon that crime,
The thriftless towns litter with lives undone,
To whom our madness left no joy but one;
And irony that glares like Judgment Day
Sees Men accumulate and Wealth decay.”

704 Chesterton, Collected Poems, p. 3.
Chesterton saw so much to despise in his own times, and self-consciously avoided the ‘degrading slavery of being a child of his age’. Alan O’Shea has listed modern strategies for the realisation of the ‘Enlightenment project’: ‘industrialism, powerful economic systems, secular nation states and their expansion through militarism, the destruction of tradition and the rational (bureaucratic) organisation of society’. Chesterton disliked all of these elements of modernity, and in fact disputed all of the modern world’s ‘grand narratives’, including reason, science, and progress. He believed that what these goals had in common was their promise of the liberation of the human race, and their necessary and immediate betrayal of that promise through a transformation into yet another form of enslavement of the human soul and intellect. Modernity promised liberation from nature but inevitably delivered humanity’s total enslavement to it.

In a lecture Chesterton gave in the late 1920s, he said that ‘those great men who so gloriously founded the modern institutions of knowledge and enlightenment did not see all the evils or all the difficulties that even their own movement would produce, let alone the evils and difficulties which the world would bring against it’. Chesterton perceived evil in the wholehearted embrace of modernity, but also in the forces that rose up against the modern world. He criticised industrialisation, for example, but also the occult movements that arose in response to the disenchantment of the world. Both of these pathways relied on a perversion of the relationship between humanity

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and nature. Chesterton made an attempt at mapping a third route between these dangers, using reason and will - couched in an awareness of what is natural and an attunement to the land - to determine the best path forward. This attempt at conciliation led to contradiction: the idea, for example, that one must use one’s reason but that it must be ‘rooted’ in some form of dogma; or the sense that English society needed to become closer to nature but maintain still a strong sense of separation. This separation, so important to Chesterton’s faith and philosophy, was one reason why he was so reluctant to accord scientists the right to explore nature: too close an investigation of the non-human would cause the distinction between the two realms to collapse, and the fundamental ‘otherness’ of nature to be lost.

Chesterton’s attempts to find the right road to traverse the modern landscape were shallow at times. The ‘rural England’ eulogised by Chesterton and many English writers never really existed and was in some ways simply a lazy fantasy. But it was important to Chesterton to maintain that the countryside had once been idyllic, traditional, quiet, in tune with the rhythms of nature, and non-industrialised. He showed no desire, however, to inhabit such a space himself. He had a genuine love of London, with all its noise and crowds, although he acknowledged its imperfections, writing:

> It appears to us that of all the fairy-tales none contains so vital a moral truth as the old story, existing in many forms, of Beauty and the Beast. There is written, with all the authority of a human scripture, the eternal and essential truth that until we love a thing in all its ugliness we cannot make it beautiful. This was the weak point in William Morris as a reformer: that he sought to reform modern life, and that he hated modern life instead of loving it. Modern London is indeed a beast, big enough and black enough to be the beast in the Apocalypse, blazing with a million voices. But unless the poet can love this fabulous monster

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708 Quite specific perversions in fact. Chesterton wrote that in Greek society ‘there had appeared in more and more flagrant fashion that flower of evil that is really implicit in the very seed of nature-worship, however natural it may seem’. He was referring to homosexuality. G.K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1986 (first published 1925), p. 291.

709 Chesterton and his wife did move out of London to Beaconsfield, a small town nearby, but his life there was one lived more in the garden than ‘on the land’.
as he is, can feel with some generous excitement his massive and mysterious ‘joie-de-vivre,’ the vast scale of his iron anatomy and the beating of his thunderous heart, he cannot and will not change the beast into the fairy prince.\footnote{G. K. Chesterton, \textit{Twelve Types}, Arthur L. Humphreys, London, 1902, pp. 25-6.}

Chesterton seemed simply to want to know that the rural idyll existed, and that it was protected. That way, he could enjoy the thought of it (and, after moving to Beaconsfield, be closer to it although he was hardly a farmer) from the vantage point of a happy life in the modern city or its satellite towns - a contradictory, but not unusual, view from modernity.

At the end of \textit{The Anti-Enlightenment Tradition}, Zeev Sternhell wrote that ‘to prevent the people of the twenty-first century from sinking into a new ice age of resignation, the Enlightenment vision of the individual as creative of his or her present and hence of his or her future is irreplaceable.’\footnote{Sternhell, \textit{Anti-Enlightenment Tradition}, p. 443.} Sternhell divides the history of ideas into the forces of reason and the forces of irrationality, with the latter ultimately responsible for the most evil crimes perpetrated against humanity in the twentieth century. The close investigation of figures such as Chesterton can make such divisions uncomfortable and difficult to defend. In his approach to nature, Chesterton crossed between the reactionary and the progressive. He undermined the nature / culture distinction by attempting to show that cultural artefacts of modern life were natural products of a human civilization, but also conforms to the dualism by drawing a strict, theologically-based division between humanity and nature. He accused moderns of deriving moral lessons from nature, and adopts this approach himself in defining his own ethics and politics. Chesterton was a reactionary uncomfortable with the modern world, and yet he accused Edmund Burke of being an atheist for failing to commit to
humanist universality. He drew on the insights of modernity and the tools of the Enlightenment to make his critique of his modern and modernist time.

Nature had wonder and magic in it, but like the porridge of Goldilocks it had to be just right. With too little enchantment, scientists could make fools of themselves by thinking that everything was predictable. With too much enchantment the world became vague and intangible, and Einstein could turn the planet mad. The imperative to restore the ‘otherness’ and mystery of nature was balanced by a need for solidity and predictability, and Chesterton sought to restore what he saw as moderation in approaches to nature. He was frustrated by the ways in which an enlightened approach to nature had morphed in modern times into two extremes. He rejected the scientists’ over-reasoned investigation of the natural world, and the decadents’ failure to believe in it at all. He believed in an enchanted nature, as long as the magic stayed within boundaries.

In 1927, Arthur Conan Doyle wrote a letter to Chesterton which read, in part:

> Your views are always of interest to me save when you touch upon religion for these they may be predicted. Naturally you think of Spiritualism as your school of thought thinks of it. I only object to one sentence in your article upon “Phineas Speaks”. [Phineas [or Pheneas] Speaks: Direct Spirit Communications in the Family Circle, published in 1927, was Conan Doyle’s account of his family’s communications with the spirit world, including with deceased members of his family.] It is that in which in some strange way you link up the Boar [sic] War and my views upon religion. The Boar war [sic] began in 1899. It was in 1879, or just twenty years earlier that I came to the conclusion that the Almighty was not the Patron of anyone [sic] sect and that all were equally His children.712

It is unclear now what connection Chesterton had formed between the Boer War and the spiritualism of Phineas. Chesterton was clearly skeptical of Conan Doyle’s

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spiritualism, however, and more than once needled the latter about his beliefs in the pages of the *Illustrated London News*.\(^{713}\) Conan Doyle was disappointed at Chesterton’s apparent closed-mindedness towards the spiritualism that was becoming common in the early twentieth century.\(^{714}\) These attempts to re-enchant the world saw a turn towards spiritual communication with the dead and ‘psychical research’ that has been described by one historian as a form of opposition to the materialism of modern thought.\(^{715}\) With the advent of spiritualism, the irreligious could participate in the feeling that there was more to nature than could be discovered by science, and could admit new and exciting possibilities to their contemplation of landscapes and animals.

Chesterton did believe that the world could play host to the supernatural. He defended the possibility of miracles and wrote in *Orthodoxy* that ‘I had always believed that the world involved magic.’\(^{716}\) But although the landscape of England had its own mysterious properties, its enchantment was not unbounded. He wrote that the ‘West also has its magic landscapes, only through our incurable materialism they look like landscapes as well as like magic.’\(^{717}\) Chesterton enjoyed the company of fairies, as long as they had their feet planted firmly on the ground.

Chesterton opposed the materialism of modern thought in a robust and vehement manner. As has been described previously, he regularly took aim at the various

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\(^{713}\) See, for example, his ‘Our Notebook’ columns in the *Illustrated London News*, in: Issue 4171, Saturday 29 March 1919, p. 434; Issue 4621, 18 December 1920, p. 1016; and 22 April 1922, p. 570.

\(^{714}\) Conan Doyle’s attraction to this realm, and his proclamation of his belief in the existence of fairies, are well-documented. See M. Saler, ‘“Clap if you Believe in Sherlock Holmes”: Mass Culture and the Re-Enchantment of Modernity, c. 1890-1940’, *Historical Journal*, Vol. 46(3), 2003, pp. 599-622.


\(^{716}\) Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, p. 264.

twentieth-century schools of thought that denied the existence of the supernatural. Chesterton, however, viewed the burgeoning interest in the psychic realm not as a repudiation of modernity but as a symptom of it. The undermining of old certainties, he believed, had left the ‘moderns’ flapping around for new ones like dying fish gasping for air. What the hapless citizens of the twentieth century found, however, could never (as far as Chesterton was concerned) measure up to the orthodoxy that they had largely lost at the time of the English Reformation. Chesterton’s orthodoxy was, he felt, the perfect balance. It allowed for both the predictability of a solid and material nature, and the occasional flight of benign fancy (in the form of magic) to keep things interesting.

In *The Trees of Pride*, Chesterton wrote a passage in which the squire of an estate reflects on his tenants. ‘The fact was’, Chesterton wrote,

that the Cornish peasantry, who composed his tenancy and domestic establishment, were far from being people with no nonsense about them. There was, alas! a great deal of nonsense about them; with ghosts, witches, and traditions as old as Merlin, they seemed to surround him with a fairy ring of nonsense. But the magic circle had one center: there was one point in which the curving conversation of the rustics always turned. It was a point that always pricked the Squire to exasperation, and even in this short walk he seemed to strike it everywhere. He paused before descending the steps from the lawn to speak to the gardener about potting some foreign shrubs, and the gardener seemed to be gloomily gratified, in every line of his leathery brown visage, at the chance of indicating that he had formed a low opinion of foreign shrubs. “We wish you’d get rid of what you’ve got here, sir,” he observed, digging doggedly. “Nothing’ll grow right with them here.”

The particular vegetation that most upset the tenants of the estate were the peacock trees. The peasants were persuaded that they would fail to flourish in this foreign soil and that they would bring evil to residents of the property. Interestingly, however, at the conclusion of the story it is revealed that while the peasants may have been

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718 Discussed in detail in Chapter Four; Waking Lion Press, Utah, 2006 (first published 1922).
correct in spirit (the trees did in a sense bring harm) they were wrong in fact. The physical damage was not wrought by the trees themselves but by the psychosomatic effects of their presence on the locals. The reader is not encouraged to dwell on this fine distinction, however, and the story’s happy conclusion brings the destruction of the trees and a strong sense that regardless of physical evidence, the squire should have taken the peasants at their word. Readers are encouraged not to enquire too deeply into the science and to accept that there are forces beyond their ken, and an ancient wisdom that existed for the betterment of all.

In the end, Chesterton backed away from writing a story in which trees were imbued with genuinely magical powers. The magic that Chesterton believed resided in nature was not powerful enough to penetrate the ‘iron cage’ of his reason.\textsuperscript{720} He reached instead an uneasy accord between ‘reason’ and ‘enchantment’. Historian of modernity Michael Saler has described how Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes became ‘an icon of modernity precisely because he served as an example of, and provided the means to, re-enchant the modern world.’\textsuperscript{721} Via the persona of Holmes, themes of modernity (such as rationalism, secularism, urbanism and consumerism) are mingled with imagination, enthrallment and a ‘sense of wonder’.\textsuperscript{722} Holmes’ methods of deduction may ultimately depend upon the application of cold reasoning, but the process delights and enchants the reader.

Chesterton, too, seeks in his fiction to bring magic to the modern age. His preoccupation with the magical properties of street lamps, for example, is well known.

\textsuperscript{721} Saler, ‘Clap if you Believe in Sherlock Holmes’, p. 616.
\textsuperscript{722} Saler, ‘Clap if you Believe in Sherlock Holmes’, p. 603.
He saw almost as much supernatural potential in those symbols of the modern age as he did in ancient oak trees.\textsuperscript{723} Although Chesterton’s method differs markedly from that of Arthur Conan Doyle, he also offered an enchantment of nature. Environmental historian Frank Zelko has argued that, in modernity, the world was not disenchanted but rather among a section of the population ‘the locus of enchantment shifted from the supernatural to the natural.’\textsuperscript{724} Modernity, then, did not necessarily mean a loss of enchantment. Chesterton’s sense of wonder and the playfulness of his universe were not unlike the games that many moderns have played with themselves.

Spiritualism and the various arts of enchantment took advantage of criticisms that were being levelled at science at the time - capitalising on what Chesterton termed the ‘mystical minimum in human history and experience, which is at once too obscure to be explained and too obvious to be explained away.’\textsuperscript{725} Stubbornly, the denizens of England’s early twentieth century declined to leave the magic show, no matter how repeatedly science exposed the hidden levers and pulleys that really made things go. The fairies refused to vacate the bottom of the garden.

To Chesterton, those scientists who adhered strictly to a materialist view of the world (and Chesterton wrote as if they all did) did not challenge those spiritualists who insisted in putting the ‘super’ back in the ‘natural’. The scientists had not eliminated imagination, they had merely replaced one set of imaginings with another:

\begin{quote}
the nineteenth century prided itself on having lost its faith in myths, and proceeded to put all its faith in metaphors. It dismissed the old doctrines about the way of life and the light of the world; and then it proceeded to talk as if the
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{723} See, for example, \textit{The Uses of Diversity}, pp. 12-4.
\textsuperscript{724} F. Zelko, ““A Flower is your Brother!”: Holism, Nature, and the (Non-Ironic) Enchantment of Modernity”, \textit{Intellectual History Review}, Vol. 23(4), 2012, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{725} Chesterton, \textit{The Uses of Diversity}, p. 18.
light of truth were really and literally a light, that could be absorbed by merely opening our eyes; or as if the path of progress were really and truly a path, to be found by merely following our noses.\textsuperscript{726}

So the privileging of science was just one more type of superstition rather than a departure from superstition. In a peculiar kind of way, those who tried to steal nature’s secrets instead came under its spell. Thus, the Darwinists who tried to understand the process of evolution instead came to be slaves to it, trying to re-order their lives and the lives of the population to fit their theory (in a particularly bullying way). For example, the development of the science of racial theory led, according to Chesterton, to a worsening of conditions for slaves in the United States. According to the ‘facts’ (the substance and source of these facts is a matter left to the reader’s imagination), in the American south, ‘the eighteenth century was more liberal than the nineteenth century. There was more sympathy for the negro in the school of Jefferson than in the school of Jefferson Davis.’\textsuperscript{727} The reason for this decline in sympathy was that science had advanced to the point of claiming that ‘negroes in themselves were bad’.\textsuperscript{728} Nineteenth-century thinkers had been able to reach this conclusion by attempting to uncover the secrets of nature - and coming upon the ‘great and growing modern suspicion that nature is unjust’.\textsuperscript{729} Scientists, attempting to learn how to control nature, had finished by importing what they concluded were its ‘laws’ into human society - and had themselves become enslaved. In this way, nature in modernity had become both victim and victor.

Observing the natural world, Chesterton found himself confronted with feelings of wonder at the mysteriousness of this realm. He refused to accept that the march of

\textsuperscript{727} Chesterton, \textit{What I Saw in America}, p. 298.
\textsuperscript{728} Chesterton, \textit{What I Saw in America}, p. 298.
\textsuperscript{729} Chesterton, \textit{What I Saw in America}, p. 298.
science could (or should) penetrate the secrets of nature, and in fact denied the possibility that the scientific endeavour could ever really understand the non-human realm. According to Chesterton, this barrier to complete understanding was in part caused by obstinate privileging by scientists of the material over the spiritual and their denial of the miraculous, which prevented scientists from comprehending or even seeing what was (to Chesterton) a crucial part of human interaction with nature - mystery.

According to Chesterton, in dismantling this mystery the Enlightenment project had betrayed itself - failing to live up to its own promise of the primacy of reason and the development of the capacity, in the words of Immanuel Kant, to emerge from ‘self-incurred immaturity’.\(^{730}\) In a complaint that would be voiced later and more famously by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*,\(^{731}\) Chesterton argued that the Enlightenment had become exactly what it set out to defeat - the emancipation promised by reason had become enslavement to new and less satisfying dogmas, science had become a tool of prejudice and exploitation, and humanism had become Superhumanism.\(^{732}\)

The works that deal with the life of Gilbert Keith Chesterton have with few exceptions concluded that their subject was a representative of anti-modernity.\(^{733}\) A few have attempted an alternative approach, suggesting that Chesterton in fact was not so anti-


\(^{732}\) This argument has reappeared in different times. See, for example, A. Horowitz and T. Maley (eds), *The Barbarism of Reason: Max Weber and the Twilight on Enchantment*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1994.

\(^{733}\) See, for example, Wright, ‘Last Orders’. See also Heyck, ‘Myths and Meanings of Intellectuals’, pp. 192-221.
modern. This question of Chesterton’s relationship to modernity is in many ways made clearer by an investigation of Chesterton’s response to nature. He was self-confessedly contemptuous of ‘modernity’ but used all of its tools and discursive practices to mount a challenge from the inside, claiming that modern people were incapable of living up to the standards of the Enlightenment and had ceded their intellectual sovereignty to nature. He believed that those who embraced the ‘progress’ of the modern world were victim to a limiting and uncritical admiration of nature, itself born of faith rather than reason. Conservative that he was, however, his solution was not a more perfect reason but a return to dogma: the Catholic Church that he maintained until his last days was a truly English church.

Chesterton assumed that self-consciously ‘modern’ thinkers were unaware of or ill-equipped to deal with criticisms that he and others made of modernity, being blinded by superstitions about nature. He took the mood of overwhelming self-satisfaction of some of his contemporaries as emblematic of the mood of the whole of the Enlightenment philosophy that had assisted in bringing about the England of his day. A.C. Grayling recently argued that ‘Enlightenment thinkers well understood that reason itself has imperfections and limits, and demands responsibility and care therefore in its use’. Chesterton denied the Enlightenment this self-awareness, constructing a set of philosophies that was perverse and thoughtless, calling it ‘Modern Thought’ and then dismantling it. Chesterton viewed the modern world as a battleground, so for those who wish to join the fight, his work is exceedingly useful, by providing both a ‘straw Enlightenment’ to hack to pieces and an alternative vision of

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the pathway that is ‘natural’ for humanity to choose. For this reason he has become a champion of later conservative anti-modernists, many of whom offer critiques of civilisation that are actually less sophisticated than Chesterton’s.

The exploration of Chesterton and the ideological mobilisation of nature can be helpful in understanding the counter-Enlightenment and anti-modern movement(s) of the twentieth century. Rather than seeking either to assign sole blame for the atrocities of the twentieth century to those who were critical of the Enlightenment or to its defenders, the study of figures like Chesterton can illuminate the complexities inherent in these movements (especially in the history of Britain, where counter-Enlightenment and anti-modern movements are comparatively under-studied). If there is room in the historiography of Britain’s counter-Enlightenment for an acknowledgement of complexity, diversity and ambiguity then Chesterton offers a crucial case study.
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