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The Crisis of Meaning: A Chestertonian Response

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Abstract: One of the main cultural achievements of modernity, according to Hartmut Rosa, is that it has nearly perfected "human beings' ability to establish a certain distance from the world while at the same time bringing it within our manipulative reach". Although this 'achievement' has ensured many remarkable scientific and technological developments, the consequences for culture have been more negative, often taking the form of what is often referred to as the malaise of modernity. Over time, this malaise has intensified to make way for what is now commonly known as the crisis of meaning, which pivots around the erosion of three orders of meaning, named and discussed by John Vervaeke: the nomological order, the narrative order, and the normative order. The work of G. K. Chesterton is consulted, in this article, to grapple with the deeper theological meaning of the modern malaise and the present crisis of meaning. In Chesterton's work, it is better to interpret any cultural crisis, like the Edwardian cultural crisis he saw first-hand, as well as the current meaning crisis, through theology, and especially in relation to the doctrines of God's goodness, the goodness of created order, and the doctrine of original sin, narrated as the fall of man. Through this, it becomes possible to better understand and articulate Chesterton's theological mediation of culture as a more specific aspect of his larger hermeneutical awareness.

Keywords: G. K. Chesterton; John Vervaeke; hermeneutics; modernity; modern culture; anti-culture; meaning crisis

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1. Introduction

According to Bernard Lonergan, theology has an important role as a "mediator between a cultural matrix and the significance of the role of religion in that matrix" (Lonergan 1990). With this in mind, Paul Rowan looks to G. K. Chesterton's writings as demonstrating that this "mediation is a mutual self-mediation" between "the timeless truths (about human beings and God) of the Christian tradition" and "the cultural matrix in which that tradition is being expressed" (Rowan 2017). Chesterton (1874–1936) was uniquely positioned to offer such a two-way mediation, given that his theology developed alongside his writings on social and cultural matters as a professional journalist. Indeed, it is not possible to completely disentangle his thinking on matters of faith from his thinking on more worldly concerns, although it is important to recognize that theological truths are granted hermeneutical priority over other matters in his thought. There is no necessary antagonism between theology and culture. However, if culture is to be rightly understood and reclaimed when it goes wrong, it must serve something higher than itself; for, as Étienne Gilson claims, "In its highest form, culture is spiritual" even though it requires "all kinds of material objects to be established, developed, and spread" (Gilson 2023).

For Chesterton, what is valuable in culture is valuable insofar as it stems from and points back to Christian truth and tradition (Chesterton 1990). Nevertheless, the question

should be asked about the precise nature of Chesterton's theological mediation of the cultural, as well as the cultural mediation of the theological, as a more specific aspect of his larger interpretive awareness and hermeneutic (Reyburn 2016). To answer this, which is my aim here, is also to discover one way to think theologically about our own global cultural milieu, which is distinguished and stained by what is frequently referred to as a crisis of meaning. This crisis of meaning encourages not a culture formed around myth, taboo, and ritual, which are the typical markers of any culture with religious roots, but what Philip Rieff called "anti-culture" in (Trueman 2020), which pivots around (1) psychological identitarianism, unreason, and radical permissiveness (Han 2017; Sarah and Diat 2019; Trueman 2020); (2) demythologization and denarrativization (Han 2020); (3) and what Byung-Chul Han names the "disappearance of rituals" (Han 2020, 2024).

In the argument that follows, I first describe something of Chesterton's experience of the cultural crisis of his own time, named the "Edwardian cultural crisis" by John Coates (Coates 1989), which exemplifies the malaise of modernity. I then explore the meaning of Chesterton's theological diagnosis of this malaise, especially in relation to his understanding of the inherent goodness of being dependent on God's goodness while also being obscured by original sin. After this, I turn to the present crisis of meaning, which I define, via the work of John Vervaeke et al., as pertaining to a degradation in three inter-related orders of meaning, namely (1) the nomological order, (2) the narrative order, and (3) the normative order (Vervaeke et al. 2017). Already, in naming these orders, we find a further distillation and clarification of the three pivots of the current global anti-culture. Finally, I present what I call Chesterton's hermeneutic of redemption. This hermeneutic allows us to take seriously the decay in the three orders of meaning named by Vervaeke while also suggesting a possible Catholic response.

2. Chesterton and the Edwardian Cultural Crisis

As Aidan Nichols notes, Chesterton worked and wrote "from out of a very definite cultural conjuncture, into which he was closely bound by his life as a journalist" (Nichols 2009). This 'cultural conjuncture' has been interpreted as a cultural crisis (Coates 1984, 1989). It was a time of "increased intellectual and moral instability among the educated class in England" (Nichols 2009). In the wake of various philosophical and scientific cataclysms, together with an array of shifting social and material conditions, the very place of the human being in the cosmos was at stake (Coates 1989). We see signs of this cultural crisis starkly in the somewhat irrational but also strikingly perceptive anti-Enlightenment critique offered by Thomas Carlyle (Carlyle [1843] 2023), who Chesterton discusses and praises in a 1902 essay (Chesterton 1991).

A nineteen-year-old Gilbert Chesterton was first confronted with the force of this cultural crisis when, in 1893, already rootless and despondent, he entered the Slade Art School of University College London. He was hoping at the time to turn his natural artistic ability into a way to make a living. That institution suggested to him a microcosm of a larger trend in Edwardian culture. It offered, he admitted, an atmosphere of solipsism, moral relativism, and scientism, as well as the temptation of "a very negative and even nihilistic philosophy" that caused him a great deal of psychological distress (Chesterton [1936] 2006). During that time, Chesterton wrote a letter to his lifelong friend E. C. Bentley in which he expressed how, for a not-insignificant duration, he had succumbed to "a meaningless fit of depression, taking the form of certain psychological worries" (Oddie 2008). Something of the atmosphere of doubts and sufferings of the time is captured in *The Man Who Was Thursday: A Nightmare* (1908), which he dedicated to Bentley. That novel offers a retelling of the book of Job in a modern context, where anarchism acts as a symbol of severe moral and cultural degeneration (Chesterton [1908] 1999). It is noteworthy that, while at the Slade,

Chesterton had no deep faith to speak of. He was agnostic at best. He had few personal resources to make sense of his experience.

It was common for intellectuals in those days to answer the existential angst and emptiness that Chesterton was experiencing along Nietzschean lines by encouraging "passionate self-assertion" (Coates 1989). If everything was, as many found it to be, inherently meaningless, then it was up to the atomized individual "to [decide] to 'live dangerously' and 'at war with [one's] peers and [oneself]'" (Coates 1989). Put bluntly, if real meaning was not discoverable in the real world, as many assumed was the case, they believed it would need to be created by everyone who found themselves staring into the proverbial abyss. The "highest" and most definite manifestation of Nietzsche's "will to power" was, in that author's view, the will to "posit being"; the will, that is, to create meaning ex nihilo in the image of the creative individual (Nietzsche 2003). In essence, such or some similar subjectivism would be required to make up for what was sensed to be lacking in the objective world. Since meaning was commonly found to be lacking, meaning would need to be imposed from the outside.

Preempting the discussion on the crisis of meaning, we should keep in mind that the collective result of this subjectivism has been, to put it mildly, less than ideal. But already in his own time, Chesterton saw this. In his writings from after his surviving of that time of psychological disintegration, we often find him giving this Übermenschean power of supplying meanings seemingly absent from reality the name "superstition" (Ker 2011). He recognized such superstition as taking many forms; it could be found in reorganizing relations, as in the superstition of divorce, or in the manic seeking out of facts, in the form of the superstition of science, to name just two examples (Chesterton 1986, 1987, 1990). Nevertheless, all of it remained superstition, in Chesterton's view, because something would be adopted as a substitute for the search for meaning and truth. This is to say that he found the Nietzschean proposition inadequate. One could not simply supply what was not there and then pretend that one's own imaginings were sufficient to make up for what was so deeply and disturbingly felt. It was not enough to resort to mere fantasies to deal with what was taken or mistaken to be lacking in reality. Given how his time at Slade affected him, his first solution was strikingly practical: he left and looked for something else to do with himself.

Chesterton would only later articulate the specifics of the shape of the cultural nightmare he encountered at the Slade. However, already from that period of "struggle against the blight of [. . .] pessimism" (Oddie 2008), the many "doubts and morbidities and temptations" he endured left in his mind "forever a certitude upon the objective solidity of Sin" (Chesterton [1936] 2006). Moreover, he recognized that simply having a sense of the solidity of sin falls short. One needs to have not only a feeling for what is wrong but should also have a vision of what is right (Chesterton 1987). In metaphysical terms, sin has no reality in itself, of course; evil remains always parasitic upon some real good. Nevertheless, this realization of the 'solidity of Sin' was an important facet of Chesterton's understanding of the time he was living in, and it remains vital for coming to terms with his reading of the cultural crisis around him. It is also helpful for articulating how his perspective might be relevant to interpreting and responding to the present crisis of meaning, which, in many ways, is an echo and intensification of what Chesterton endured.

It is significant that Chesterton resisted regarding what he perceived to be going wrong in his own time along merely psychological lines, even while being more than mindful of the psychological effects of inhabiting that milieu. He resisted the symptomatic assessment, in other words, possibly given that such a reading fitted too easily within the very mythos of modernity, which naturally resisted asking deeper metaphysical questions about what is good or ideal (Chesterton 1986). The very mythos of modernity allows one

to launch at even the feeblest solution to even the most poorly understood problem; it gestures towards the future and away from the past and does not require any discussion of what is good (Chesterton 1986). "Every one of the popular modern phrases", Chesterton wrote in 1905, "is a dodge in order to shirk the problem of what is good" (Chesterton 1986). When one carefully considers Chesterton's perspective on his age, articulated throughout his prodigious body of work, it becomes evident that he did not see modernity itself as the cause—in the sense of being a sufficient reason—for his own experiences of anguish and disconnection. Modernity itself was a symptom of a much deeper and more pressing problem. The problem, Chesterton insisted, was sin.

This problem was, he believed, more concrete than the moderns tended to realize, even while it may have had clear and distinct features in distinct contexts. To identify and name sin as the real cause for modern disarray and unhappiness was and is to throw the usual framing of modernity into question. Granted, critics of modernity are right to notice that modernity can exacerbate a sense of disconnection from God, reality, culture, people, and the world in general. But even the myriad ways that modernity contributes to any malaise suggests an intensification of a prior problem. The deeper question is not what modernity causes, even if this is a question worth asking and answering. The deeper question concerns what causes modernity. In other words, what bothered Chesterton was not just how to interpret and understand modernity but how to interpret and understand reality. His concern was certainly historical but also, more importantly, metaphysical and theological.

There is, as Chesterton saw, a definite sense of joy, mingled with relief, that emerges from naming the cause rightly, and this will turn out to be a foundational idea for understanding his hermeneutic—his mode of interpretation (Chesterton 1986). One reason for this joy is that naming the cause rightly invites a clearer sense not only of the nature of what one is dealing with but also a clearer sense of how to respond to the deep fissures at the heart of the human experience; that includes the human experience of the modern world. What was required for dealing with the concrete problem of sin, as Chesterton intuited early on, cannot be some merely abstract response but ought to be something "actual and tangible" (Oddie 2008). One cannot merely suture the sin, which suggests a profoundly desperate existential state. One must have some very real way of healing it. In his young adult life already, we see many signs of Chesterton's "distaste for the abstract and high-flown", as William Oddie calls it (Oddie 2008). If a problem is real, meaning that it has inescapable ontological (and not just political and cultural) implications, it requires an answer that is at least equally, if not substantially more, real.

To put the matter plainly, against the reign of skepticism, what is needed is a trustworthy reason; against the rule of aestheticism, what is needed is a healthy imagination; against the reign of atmospheres and abstractions, what is needed is the right way to live and act; and against pessimism, what is needed is not another delusional grasping for immediate emotional relief, which is what Nietzsche's overconfidence in the will to power suggests, but a definite reason for joy. In other words, what is needed is a triumph over the perennially corrosive force of sin. This triumph would be, as Chesterton saw particularly perspicaciously, a moral one. Indeed, his response to the crisis of Edwardian culture was unabashedly moral. It pertained to the ordering of the soul in relation to the ground of being. However, this claim needs some qualifying given the common tendency now to confuse *moralism*, the tendency to critique the morality of others based on rigid and often arbitrary ideological coordinates, with *morality*, which is marked by a desire to live by the divinely granted natural law. What I call *moralism* here is what Chesterton called "modern morality" (Chesterton 1986).

As alluded to above, Chesterton noted that the cultural crisis of his time was inextricably linked with the "modern morality" that could "only point with absolute conviction

to the horrors that follow breaches of law", resting only on "a certainty of ill" (Chesterton 1986). Without a clear image of "perfection", this modern morality and drift towards ideological moralism could "only point to imperfection" (Chesterton 1986). Religion, in contrast, speaks "plainly" about both evil and good, with the former being parasitic upon the latter (Chesterton 1986). It is the genius of Christianity that it offers three "moral instruments" such as those Dante imagines and portrays, "Heaven, Purgatory, and Hell", which offer, in turn, "the vision of perfection, the vision of improvement, and the vision of failure" (Chesterton 1986). It is very like the moderns, however, to retain only the vision of failure—a vague and poorly defined sense, that is, of what is not ideal. One of the implications of this is that modernity encourages the collapse of religion (a concern with fundamentals, say) into ideology (mere calcified, decontextualized fundamentalism). Chesterton writes, "The human race, according to religion, fell once, and in falling gained the knowledge of good and evil. Now we have fallen a second time, and only the knowledge of evil remains" (Chesterton 1986). The task of the thinker, who may well be an Edwardian-era lay theologian disguised as a Fleet Street journalist, is as practical as it is urgent. The task is to rediscover what is enduringly true beyond all fugitive moods.

For Chesterton, this task cannot be taken up on the fringes of modern life but must occur in its midst. It must transcend the trends of the time even while it prepares to duel and dance with them. His answer was therefore not to develop some strictly parallel world of faith operating separately from society but a faith that thrives amid political and cultural pressures and antagonisms. He recognized something of the nature of his own fervor very early on in his career: "when I did begin to write, I was full of new and fiery resolution to write against the Decadents and the Pessimists who ruled the culture of our age" (Chesterton [1936] 2006). To this end, he was "pugnacious" as well as "didactic" (Scott 1912). Nevertheless, because he viewed the cultural crisis of his day primarily in theological rather than sociological or psychological terms (although without explicitly dismissing the potential relevance and benefits of attending to sociological and psychological insights), he was able to suggest an approach that would have lasting relevance.

3. God, the Goodness of Being, and the Fall of Man

Chesterton held that being as such is good: "God 'looked on all things and saw that they were good'. It is the thesis that there are no bad things, but only bad uses of things. If you will, there are no bad things, but only bad thoughts; and especially bad intentions" (Chesterton 2002). Having said this, Chesterton challenged the idiom claiming that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. That "is exactly one thing it cannot be paved with. But it is possible to have bad intentions about good things; and good things, like the world and the flesh, have been twisted by a bad intention called the devil" (Chesterton 2002). Implicit in this pronouncement and echoed in his contentions around the centrality of the ideal to his interpretations of the world (Chesterton 1986, 1987) is his granting of the Christian Platonist priority of mind over being. While mind and being remain interdependent and mutually open to each other in their self-giving, it is the realm of ideals in the mind of God that ultimately shapes what reality is and how it manifests. Stated more poetically, it is the "wind that moves the trees" and not, as some child in a state of reverie might contend, the trees that move the wind (Chesterton [1909] 2007). There "must always be a battle in the sky before there is a battle on earth" (Chesterton [1909] 2007).

That God calls all things good suggests his nature as goodness itself, as well as suggesting an intention towards creation that maintains it rightness before him. God cannot be anything other than good, and so his minding of the goodness of being remains firmly enmeshed in his ongoing relationship with creation. For Chesterton, this divine intention is unchanging. He writes: "It is possible that God says every morning, 'Do it

again' to the sun; and every evening, 'Do it again' to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never got tired of making them" (Chesterton 1986). All repetitions in creation, all repeated expressions of a divine idea, which by their expression suggest various ways in which God can be imitated (Davison 2019), are reminders of the perpetual presence of God to and in the world. The cosmos is not merely some opaque entity but is like a stained-glass window through which divine light continuously shines. At every moment, God calls every existent thing out of nothing (Chesterton 2002). At every moment, as the Being of beings, God imparts his own goodness to his creation. At every moment, creation is dependent upon him for its existence.

Chesterton's stress on repetition becomes a hermeneutical key for understanding his posture towards interpreting the world. He criticizes the "towering materialism" of his day for wrongly assuming that repetition is a sign of lifelessness (Chesterton 1986). It is wrong to think that if "a thing goes on repeating itself it is probably dead; a piece of clockwork" (Chesterton 1986). In contrast, as an indication of its own lifelessness, modernity is anxiously hunkering after the new, the now, and the next, as Remi Brague puts it (Brague 2019). Modernity seems to operate almost out of a terror of repetition, despite the fact that it is repetition, better understood as non-identical repetition, that grants stability, in perception, to any reality (Pickstock 2013). "It is supposed", Chesterton writes, "that if people feel that if the universe was personal it would vary; if the sun were alive it would dance. This is a fallacy even in relation to known fact" (Chesterton 1986). He points to children who, out of their "abounding vitality" and "because they are in spirit fierce and free", want things "repeated and unchanged" (Chesterton 1986). This is an echo and analogy of God's own vitality, which in endless, generous self-giving is eternally new and so eternally childlike. From this we can learn that we as God's children ought not to mind having old truths endlessly repeated. However, sin stops us from giving ourselves over to this ever-new divine vitality. "[W]e have sinned and grown old", says Chesterton, "and our Father is younger than we" (Chesterton 1986). It is sin that causes us to lose our ability to have things endlessly renewed in non-identical quotations of the ideas that inhabit the mind of God. It is sin that will have us look for answers to our own existential and ontological crises where no real prevailing answers can be found.

Chesterton's own examples of repetition imply something that is not strictly rigid, like dead clockwork. "Rigidity yielding a little, like justice swayed by mercy, is the whole beauty of the earth", he writes (Chesterton 1910a). In the distinction and interplay between essence and existence is a space within which a graceful malleability is allowed; a space within which every existence retains its specificity and variability even while participating in and thus confirming the divine ideas. By virtue of its reliance upon willfulness, the kind of repetition Chesterton means is not stale and dead but vital and alive. Thus, he uses the word "revolution" to qualify his understanding of the importance of repetition (Chesterton 1907, 2012). "If you want a white house", he reminds us, "you must continually be painting it white, beginning all over again and re-creating your ideal. In other words, if you want your old white house you must have a new white house. You must have a revolution" (Chesterton 1907, 2012). Having a "fixed" vision or ideal, which is necessary for any genuine progress, does not suggest being "conservative" if conservativism is taken to mean "the idea that if you leave things alone you leave them as they are" (Chesterton 1986). The truth is quite the opposite. Leaving things alone amounts to leaving them "to a torrent of change. If you leave a white post alone it will soon be a black post. If you particularly want it to be white you must always be painting it again; that is, you must always be having a revolution" (Chesterton 1986).

The upshot of all this, hermeneutically speaking, is that "reading and interpreting" the gift of being in its givenness must require a sense of structure and even some rigidity; and yet allowance must also be made for "movement" (Reyburn 2016). Reading and interpreting must mean seeking out those non-identical repetitions that draw us nearer to what is ideal and godly. One way to understand this is via the Platonist doctrine of *methexis* or participation, which is not explicitly discussed by Chesterton but which is implied in his work. While essence (being) retains transcendent duration, residing as it does in the mind of God, existence (becoming) has room to play. Chesterton is not denying the role of becoming, therefore; he is simply granting a priority to being. What is most real remains invisible, hidden in God; and yet its invisibility is detectable through the visible. One of the crucial implications of Chesterton's sense of final and formal causation is found in his own interpretive approach, where he takes up the question of what things ought to become and be, as well as seeing where human responsibility and involvement may be required to assist the participation of existence in essence (McLuhan and McLuhan 2011; Reyburn 2025).

However, because of the divine gift of human freedom, the possibility was always there and remains for us to misinterpret being in distorted and contorted ways. What is real and true may be staring us in the face and yet we may still miss it. Our warped intentionality towards being can transform and manipulate the goodness of being into its counterfeit. We may misunderstand ends and thus may adopt disastrous means. We may, as this suggests, step beyond the limitations granted in the mediation of being. This is precisely what is revealed in the Genesis account of the fall of man. Chesterton insists that one of the reasons we go wrong is because we forget the truths of this story (Chesterton 2020). Perhaps, he suggests, it really is an allegory; and yet it is not less true if it is one (Chesterton 1926b). Indeed, "the truth itself can be very well allegorized as a garden", the "point of which is that Man, whatever he is, is certainly not merely one of the plants of the garden that has plucked its roots out of the soil and walked about them like legs [. . .] He is something else, something strange and solitary, and more like the statue that was once the god of the garden" (Chesterton 1926b).

By drawing attention to the uniqueness of the human being within that paradise, unique like any statue placed in a garden, Chesterton insists on two important truths. The first is that the human being, like a statue, has been "stamped with an image, deliberately and from the outside; in this case the image of God" (Chesterton 1926b). The second "is that this image has been damaged and defaced so that it is now both better and worse than the mere plants in the garden which are perfect according to their own plan" (Chesterton 1926b). While various additional speculations can be offered on the meaning of this story, its two most obvious and "fixed points" are that "man was uplifted at the first and fell" (Chesterton 1926b). Chesterton goes on to say that the "Fall" is not only "enlightening" but "encouraging" as a "view of life" because it "refers evil back to the wrong use of the will and thus declares that it can eventually be righted by the right use of the will. Every other creed except that is some form of surrender to fate" (Chesterton 1926b). It is not just a story of despair but a story of hope. If good things have gone wrong, then goodness can be reclaimed. The fall, metaphorically speaking, is recognizable only against the backdrop of a sense of height. Elsewhere, in the year his book *What's Wrong With the World* (1910) was published, Chesterton takes the view that what is "right with the world is the world" while "nearly everything else is wrong with it" (Chesterton 1910b).

Against the progressive insistence that in the end everything will be alright, although reasons and details on this are not supplied, it is closer to certain that in the beginning, in its primordiality, the world is good. "You cannot have evil life", Chesterton writes, "though you can have notorious evil livers. Manhood and womanhood are good things, though men and women are often perfectly pestilent" (Chesterton 1910b). When Chesterton says

that God made man “to come into contact with reality” (Chesterton 2002), he means that God made man to know the primordial, foundational goodness of being. This has the further implication that “things must be loved first and improved afterwards” (Chesterton [1901] 2012). It is in having a clear image of the good that one can better love things as having fallen into a desperate state away from that good. As intimated already, it is also in having a clear image of the good that one has something to aim for in restoring things. One implication of this for culture is that the various participations in culture, together with forms of culture making or cultural production that are likely to arise, will inevitably occur in relation to some idea of what is good. It is a fact of human nature that we can become used to almost anything; and, without a clear sense of real goodness, it is possible that we may grow accustomed to what does nothing to elevate us or remind us of the original goodness of being.

One of Chesterton’s more famous contributions to philosophical thought is referred to as Chesterton’s fence; it is the idea that one should not tear down a fence without first having understood why it was put up (Chesterton 1990). If one sees a fence but does not immediately understand the reason why it is there, it is better to first figure out the reason before removing the fence. By ignorantly removing the fence, one may be inadvertently granting monsters room to roam where they ought not to. Unfortunately, as Chesterton discusses, modernity operates in the spirit of abandoning whatever happened last week for the sake of what is happening now or what might happen tomorrow. That the moderns do not, on the whole, care much for pausing long enough to figure out why certain lines were drawn indicates a much deeper problem that modernity remains the symptom of: again, it is sin, most commonly manifest in the modern concern with ceaseless movement and endless multiplicity (Sarah and Diat 2019).

With all of this in mind, we might begin to understand Chesterton’s particular interpretation of the meaning of the distinction between the goodness of being and the fall of man as a distinction between two ways of relating to being, an echo of St. Augustine’s ways of conversion and aversion. “You can use poppies to drug people, or birch trees to beat them, or stones to make an idol, or corn to make a corner”, for example (Chesterton 1910b). To be separated from the world in such a way that we might intend evil is therefore primarily not a matter of world-alienation or malaise, as modern sociologists and philosophers would claim. It is not, in other words, reducible to a mere problem of psychological ‘dis-ease’, even if there is some truth to this widespread experience of ‘dis-ease’. Rather, it is a problem of a disconnection that is deeper and more spiritual: a separation from God. This separation causes us to undervalue everything. Chesterton’s interpretation of the fall is summarized, in his own words, as follows:

> “There runs a strange law through the length of human history—that men are continually tending to undervalue their environment, to undervalue their happiness, to undervalue themselves. The great sin of mankind, the sin typified by the fall of Adam, is the tendency, not towards pride, but towards this weird and horrible humility. This is the great fall, the fall by which the fish forgets the sea, the ox forgets the meadow, the clerk forgets the city, every man forgets his environment and, in the fullest and most literal sense, forgets himself. This is the real fall of Adam, and it is a spiritual fall. It is a strange thing that many truly spiritual men [. . .] have actually spent some hours in speculating upon the precise location of the Garden of Eden. Most probably we are in Eden still. It is only our eyes that have changed” (Chesterton [1901] 2012).

We should interpret Chesterton poetically here. He is not saying that pride is not involved in ensuring the fall but that the result of this fallen state is ‘this weird and horrible humility’. Moreover, that our ‘eyes [. . .] have changed’ does not primarily mean that we

do not recognize Paradise even when it is right in front of us; it means that we do not perceive God and the kingdom of God as near us and within us. It is significant that many developments in modernity attempt to overcome this felt spiritual and existential distance as if it were a mere problem of altered material conditions, as in the Marxian notion of alienation, even though this begins to address the problem at the wrong end. It is not without theological significance that so many modern inventions have involved speeding up travel and enhancing communication, all of which has as its object the destruction of distance (Chesterton 1930).

However, such things attempt at one level to address what has occurred at a different, if still analogous, level. Such inventions, in typical modern reductionist fashion, treat as a symptomatic problem something that can only be dealt with at the root, which is spiritual. This trend is noticed in many cultural offerings, Chesterton observes, such as in the endless obsession with novelties; or, in our own time, in the endless concern with recovering any fleeting experience of wonder in a film or series through endless reboots and sequels. Chesterton even names music in restaurants as an infernal irritation; to fill up every silence or lull in a conversation with ceremonious noise is not, as seemingly intended, to close the distance between ourselves and the world but to increase it (Chesterton 1933, 2011). In fact, this is the trend in modernity: the 'solution' to the (unrecognized or poorly understood but predominantly) spiritual problem makes the problem manifestly worse; the cure is worse than the disease, probably because the disease itself makes reaching for a real cure more difficult.

However, does Chesterton not exemplify something of the modern frenzy for speaking about and to each and every event or novelty? He is often characterized as a writer whose subject was anything and everything that happened to catch his attention; and it seems nothing of his age escaped his attention. The readiest explanation for this tendency in his writing would be that it was a hazard of his journalistic vocation. Journalism is, even today, often slavishly at the service of relevance. However, to put this more positively, Chesterton's mindfulness of his audience, which Marshall McLuhan notes as one of Chesterton's more remarkable skills (McLuhan and McLuhan 2011), meant speaking to his audience about their shared world. His already remarkable ability to grapple with and grasp a vast range of subjects was therefore clearly encouraged by his work as a journalist.

I would speculate that Chesterton felt the weight of the cultural crisis especially acutely precisely because of this demand to be always hopping from one subject to the next, often without much continuity and with a definite feeling for the ephemerality of the task. Nevertheless, from early on, Chesterton was clear on his need to always anchor the ephemeral. In other words, it was not mere journalism that concerned him, even while he worked as a journalist. To recall the discussion above, he did so by endlessly repeating himself. His discussions on so many novelties never drift so far out of the usual orbit that he loses a sense of what is most intimate or most ultimate. Like the child forever desiring things to be repeated, he does not tire of returning to first principles and causes; he never tires of searching for the metaphysical significance behind any frenzy of shadowy appearances. "I have always engaged", he says, "and always shall engage, in any sort of discussion on the first principles of human existence", he wrote (Chesterton 1906, 2012).

Furthermore, even sheer multiplicity could be a sign for him of the unity beneath all things; and it was to this ultimate unity that he wished to draw his reader's attention. No matter what you talk or write about, Chesterton contends that you "cannot evade the issue of God" (Chesterton 1903, 2012). Even the most trivial subject signals transcendence "if Christianity should happen to be true" (Chesterton 1903, 2012). "Things can be irrelevant to the proposition that Christianity is false", he contends, "but nothing can be irrelevant to the proposition that Christianity is true" (Chesterton 1903, 2012). It is significant, therefore, that

he characterizes the fall of man and thus also the concept of sin as involving an alteration in how we relate to the world, most evident in a change in consciousness and perception. To lose a sense of God causes people to not only undervalue everything they encounter but also to misunderstand it.

Chesterton, by his approach to writing, suggests that even scattered attention can be redeemed in the service of God. It is up to us to take seriously, therefore, the story of the redemption of man through Christ and his church and, furthermore, to become participants, as members of his church, in redeeming the world in whatever way we can. One of our more important roles is to reclaim a sense of God in the world and to help others to do the same. Without a doubt, culture is one arena in which this can happen. Chesterton, being a journalist, sees his power to carry this out in writing. Through reinterpreting everything in the light of the faith, whether implicitly or explicitly, he helps his audience to see things anew and to recover, that is, a sense of the eternal vitality of God and the childhood of humanity.

4. The Crisis of Meaning Defined

Although many thinkers have discussed and continue to discuss what has become known as the crisis of meaning—this is usually performed in connection with discoveries and discourses in psychology, cognitive science, and neuroscience—my focus here is only on something of John Vervaeke's contribution to the discussion, together with his co-authors, Christopher Mastropietro and Filip Miscevic. My primary reason for this focus is simple: Vervaeke has been the most adamant about the need to clearly define the nature of the meaning crisis. It is this act of definition that concerns me most, since if Chesterton is to be of any help, we must know, first, what the nature of the 'problem' is and, second, in what way his approach is fitting.

The meaning crisis can be described, to begin with, as essentially disintegrative, implying the breaking apart and shrinking of meaning (Vervaeke et al. 2017). This loss of meaning is often attributed to the value-eroding effects of modernity itself. Chesterton would have, I suspect, said much the same of the meaning crisis today: "It is only our eyes that have changed" (Chesterton [1901] 2012). The modern intensification of this original sin—this ontological–hermeneutical blindness—echoes the trend in modernity towards disciplinary specialization, together with 'scientific' reductionism and demythologization. In other words, modernity itself, while building on certain pre-modern trends, such as nominalism, voluntarism, and the reduction of being to univocity, has certified a trend away from holistic meaning and, ultimately, therefore, away from contact with truth and reality. The crisis of meaning implies "a disorienting sense that we have forgotten some essential dimension to reality and lost our relationship to what is good, true, and beautiful" (Vervaeke and Mastropietro 2024).

The meaning crisis pervades all the other crises we face. It is complex and multifaced, although its disintegrative nature already suggests that problems pertaining to our whole posture towards reality are often mistaken for being separate problems requiring separate, often merely technological, interventions. Nevertheless, it is possible—I would say it is advisable—to regard said problems as one, albeit with several facets. Vervaeke et al. suggest that the meaning crisis stems from the breakdown of three inter-related orders: the nomological, normative, and narrative orders (Vervaeke et al. 2017). To these, Vervaeke adds Csikszentmihalyi's notion of 'flow', which, to my mind, represents a mistaken diagnosis of a problem relating to awe, which in Chesterton's work is embodied in his unceasing call to wonder. Nevertheless, for the sake of limiting an already lengthy discussion, I focus only on the three orders of meaning in turn, as framing what needs to be covered regarding the

recovery of meaning. The category of awe (or its lack) is taken as implicit in the erosion of the normative order.

The first order of meaning to break down is the nomological order, the order of the *logos*, reason, and the power of language to order the world. The nomological order is also the order of law, which presumes the complex interweaving of subjective perception and the objective world. This nomological view of the world, assumed by Vervaeke et al. to mainly be a thing of the past, “had two components: an account of how the mind viewed the world, and an account of how that world was structured” (Vervaeke et al. 2017). One might indicate towards any coherent, if not quite complete, philosophical system or worldview as an example of this order of meaning. One such example is found in Aristotle’s famous fourfold nexus of causality, which offers not only an explanation of material causes and effects but also a way to account for why things are the way they are. Being does not escape reason here, since the artificial division of ontology from semiology has not yet happened, historically speaking. In fact, Aristotle’s fourfold suggests that ontology and semiology are always interwoven. In the modern era, and this still holds today, causation has been reduced to the realm of material causes and effects. Final and formal causation are typically denied any significant part in the ordering of being. Causation has thus been ‘de-meaned’, along with other nomological approaches. One of the main reasons that the world now may seem unintelligible is because, in the absence of a nomological consensus or even a nomological hope, the so-called rules are forever shifting.

The somewhat contemporary example of videogames is instructive, given how, in the absence of a coherent worldview or philosophical approach to discovering the order of reason in the cosmos, substitutes are sought out. Videogames provide one example of such a substitute—an ersatz simulation of meaning. They are compelling because, among other reasons, each game offers a set of rules that are discoverable. The rules are sensible enough that each videogame world is congruent. According to this congruence between the virtual world and its rules, the suspension of disbelief and thus also immersion in the game-world become possible. The laws of the game-world render it intelligible. It is therefore experienced as intrinsically meaningful, and perhaps even as more meaningful than anything else. The videogame addict may even begin to choose videogames over the rest of their own life, simply because they can seem more reasonable and coherent than anything beyond them. But no one can live by the nomological order alone.

The second order of meaning to break down is the narrative order, the order of *mythos*, which implies the power of stories to order the world. As Vervaeke et al. say, a “metanarrative teleology, which we will call the Narrative Order, provided an overarching story into which the minutia of the cosmos—individuals and their own stories—could fit and belong” (Vervaeke et al. 2017). This sense that life fits into a story has, over the course of history, taken on many different forms, including cyclical and linear forms. Whatever the form of the story, however, the sense has been ever-present for most of human history that every person’s life, both individually interpreted and communally expressed, is part of a larger narrative; every life has, for most of human history, been interpretable as connected to cosmic destiny. Progressive and utopian ideologies often gain their plausibility because they create false senses of such a story by invoking hope as a nebulous wish. The problem with such stories being somewhat disenchanted themselves is that the progress they suggest offers only “a comparative of which we have not settled the superlative” (Chesterton 1986). In other words, while our need for stories remains, the sense that we are part of a big story has decayed to a significant degree. One might say that incredulity towards metanarrative has given birth to a rather excessive credulity towards micronarratives.

Towards the end of the twentieth century, the screenwriter and screenwriting teacher Robert McKee noted how story has been severely under threat for quite some time, es-

pecially because the meaning of "the essential values" is constantly in question (McKee 1999). This "erosion of values has brought with it a corresponding erosion of story", says McKee (McKee 1999), because it is around values that every story is built. More recently, Byung-Chul Han has made explicit what is implied in McKee's observation, namely that the decline of story is not only evident in the stories that are told but in the lives people live (Han 2024). What Han calls the "crisis of narration" implies a movement away from a structured narrative or life-story towards "information", which has no story and can be endlessly reconfigured to suit the aims of whoever is making use of it (Han 2024). The example of videogames, as substitutes for a larger story, is again instructive. The 'gamification' of story requires a certain adherence to traditional story structures and tropes (Skolnick 2014), which work, it seems, because they appeal to our natural capacity for narrative. Videogames must have a strong narrative structure and sense of purpose to work well. The hero's journey, popularized by Joseph Campbell as a model for structuring stories commonly employed by videogame designers, offers some clue into this, even if not perfectly; it suggests working with a clear conflict, a clear sense of aim, and a deepening of character (Skolnick 2014). To be compelling, every story must have a clear structure of values. There are many reasons why videogames become addictive, especially among boys and young men, but one of the main ones is that they supply a sense of narrative. Again, however, even the destruction of this order of meaning in culture, together with the decay of the nomological order, is not yet sufficient to account for the meaning crisis.

A further reason for the meaning crisis pertains to what is already found woven into the first and second orders of meaning, namely the breakdown of the normative order (Vervaeke et al. 2017), which can be regarded as a crisis of *ethos*, just as the first and second orders suggest a crisis of *logos* and *mythos*. All three orders of meaning here are interwoven and mutually supporting. The normative order, in particular, grants to us a sense of "rational transcendence", and implies an ever-deepening "connection with reality" (Vervaeke et al. 2017). Vervaeke suggests that the primary consequence of the breakdown of this order is found in the loss of a sense of what it means to "level up"—another idea from videogaming. In the Christian heritage, this 'leveling up' is found in ideas such as *sanctification* and *theosis*, implying ongoing repentance and progress. The restoration of goodness, through increasing in virtue and nearness to God, as well as in loving others, is regarded as essential; in contrast, abandoning oneself to sin, in the Aristotelian view of narrative, is the essence of the tragic. As suggested above, Chesterton pays particularly close attention to the normative order; much of his approach to addressing the cultural crisis of his day involved alerting his audience to the importance of the moral structure of reality. Nevertheless, as I elucidate below, he was aware of how intertwined this structure was with the orders of *logos* and *mythos*.

Vervaeke is aware of how sweeping these categories are, as well as of the fact that they may be dismissed prematurely. The plausibility of these categories is assured, however, based on a great deal of scholarship, which attends closely to historical developments. It becomes especially clear, through Vervaeke's research, that modernity has exacerbated the meaning crisis (Vervaeke et al. 2017). Even if the problem of 'man's search for meaning', as Viktor Frankl called it, is as old as humanity itself, there is no doubt that the severity of the widespread severance from meaning has worsened. A great deal of research by others supports this by narrating how this crisis, or at least certain aspects of it, came about. I will not attempt to even briefly summarize this vast body of scholarship. Suffice it to say, then, that Vervaeke's and his co-authors' analysis of the meaning crisis—especially as pertaining to the nomological, narrative, and normative orders—is sufficient to suggest a direction regarding what needs to be addressed if such a crisis is to be transcended. This analysis suggests an interpretive framework to work with. Any hermeneutic of the meaning crisis

would need, at the very least, to accommodate the categories suggested by Vervaeke et al. Indeed, such an accommodation is evident in Chesterton's work. It is thus to his work that I now turn.

5. Chesterton's Hermeneutic of Redemption

I mentioned above that there is a trend, evident in the work of those who focus on the meaning crisis, in keeping with the "triumph of the therapeutic" studied by Rieff as one of the primary markers of the general self-understanding of people in the twentieth, and by extension also the twenty-first, century (Rieff 1966). Thus, the crisis is interpreted from a distinctly psychological perspective, albeit with reference to cognitive science and neuroscience. As much as Vervaeke and his co-authors offer many brilliant insights on the nature of the meaning crisis, they follow suit. Their perspective, with the combination of the psychological and the scientific, often has the unwelcome side-effect of reframing religion in self-satisfying utilitarian terms. Religion can be regarded as a mere tool that ought to be employed to solve the crisis—a technical salve for an existential wound. Addressing the meaning crisis, in other words, becomes the final cause of faith rather than a symptom of a loss of faith. This approach amounts to what Chesterton refers to as "thinking backwards" (Chesterton 1912), by which he means any thinking that starts at the wrong end and reasons its way towards a (faulty) conclusion. This is not to deny that a living faith has a significant influence on whether they find meaning in life or not. Nevertheless, to reduce the issue of meaning to what one subjectively feels is meaningful is surely a mistake. After all, the life of faith includes periods—even very long periods—of dryness or desolation. St. Theresa of Calcutta's famous fifty-yearlong spiritual drought is one example, and a reminder, among other things, of the importance of not reducing meaning, and indeed truth-seeking, to mere subjective enjoyment (St. Theresa of Calcutta 2003). Meaning must be subordinate to truth—that is, true participation in reality—so that even where meaning is not felt, it can nevertheless be lived.

Chesterton avoids the trap of thinking backwards by adopting, as I have intimated above, a paradoxical or metaxological stance towards the mediation of being (Reyburn 2016, 2025). This is in contrast with the observably dialectical approach of Vervaeke et al. Dialectic, in the modern sense, implies an attempt to wrestle with the univocal and equivocal senses of being, mindful of both identity (univocity) and difference (equivocity) (Desmond 1995). Nevertheless, this dialectical wrestling ultimately sides with self-mediation over intermediation. This is evident in Vervaeke's and Matropietro's stress on "meaning-making" (as opposed to meaning-finding) which suggests that it is ultimately up to the individual to reclaim meaning in the face of the meaning crisis (Vervaeke and Mastropietro 2024). In contrast with this, Chesterton attempts to remain true to the 'betweenness' of being, mindful that sin suggests that we cannot save ourselves. To be is always to be in between, caught between identity and difference, and reliant on the porosity of beings to Being. "A Catholic", he writes, "is a person who had plucked up courage to face the incredible and inconceivable idea that something else may be wiser than he is" (Chesterton 1990). For Chesterton, God is that 'Other' who constantly calls the self beyond itself, while also healing and filling in for our inherent brokenness and tendency to sin. The sacramental life of faith is not at all about self-mediation but is about self-surrender to that which transcends us, both the tradition and God. In this we find priority given to intermediation over self-mediation. Perhaps Vervaeke's stress on the psychological state of flow is meant to suggest the possibility of a transcendence beyond the realm of self-mediation, that is, with being found in meaning—in something saturated with meaning—and not just with making meaning. Nevertheless, this potential is undermined, in my view, by his own insistence on scientific proceduralism, verifiability, and philosophical and religious syncretism.

I have already suggested something of Chesterton's approach to the cultural crisis of his own day. In summary, I have noted that the central crisis in culture pertains, more than anything else, to a forgetting of God, as well as to the forgetting of the original goodness of being; that the need for redemption thus means restoring and continually working to restore this original contact with God and creation; that this redemption is provided by that which transcends us, by God, through Christ, and his church, existing in the love between the Father and the Son that is the Holy Spirit; and that the Church has a part to play in this tremendous restoration. Chesterton, as I have said, saw his role as a journalist as the site for his own contribution. He interpreted the world around him for his reader; he acted as a mediator. Given that his work involves accommodating a vast multiplicity of subjects, he sees his job as centrally concerned with restoring to his readers, via something like a training of perception, a sense of God and his goodness in the world. To recall the discussion above, repetition serves an important function in this. The play between existence and essence in this repetition remains a vital consideration. Therefore, Chesterton takes up the repetition of first principles to anchor the many in the One.

Beyond this, Chesterton's hermeneutic relates to the defining issues of the meaning crisis, namely, the restoration of the nomological, narrative, and normative orders in culture. To somewhat further define Chesterton's approach, it helps to consider his own differentiation of the classic opposition between civilization and culture. "Civilisation", he writes, "is the end of Culture, even in the sense of the death of Culture" (Chesterton 1934, 2011). While culture suggests "growth" and "the original sprouting of man's spiritual and artistic nature as it appears in the native folklore or primitive architecture of whole people", civilization "is rather the limit or compromise laid upon this by the discovery that there are other peoples or other methods of production" (Chesterton 1934, 2011). He suggests that there is a certain personality and intimacy to culture, since it grows around homegrown concerns and local loves. It is therefore hermeneutically situated, aware of its dependence upon contact with the immediate world of relationships:

> "[T]rue Culture, like true Charity, begins at home, and generally stays at home. With Civilization there appears something that is not only purely public, but a little homeless. Culture is growing such flowering trees as you prefer in your own front garden, and plating them where you like. Civilisation is having a law-suit with the next-door neighbour about whether your trees overshadow his garden, or calling in the policemen to throw him out if he becomes violent upon the question. [. . .] Culture, in the connotation used by the writers I mention, is something interior and imaginative and almost sacred, which, when it takes form, we recognize as the characteristic work of a particular people; as we recognize certain art as the characteristic work of a certain artist" (Chesterton 1934, 2011).

As this suggests, Chesterton sees civilization—at least in terms of this contrast—as the ossifying of life and imagination through those impersonal concerns that take hold. By implication, globalization poses a threat to culture simply because it is not at all concerned with local loves and relationships and entirely concerned with the more impersonal realm of civilization (Chesterton 1926a). In fact, much of what passes as culture is arguably its counterfeit double, mass produced to suit merely civilizational ends. It is not difficult to see what Chesterton saw; that mass culture erodes culture, just as it contributes to the erosion of the three orders of meaning. Étienne Gilson notes that the tendency to mistake what is publicized and mass produced for being culture represents a simple sophism, which takes reproductions of works of art as equal or of the same ontological species as the works of art themselves (Gilson 2023). But "[t]here is no truth to that. The least statuette fashioned by a child is sculpture. The most beautiful photograph or photoengraving of a Greek marble is not A crude sketch is a painting. The photograph of the most beautiful painting is not"

(Gilson 2023). What is needed, as implied by Chesterton's way of looking at things, is not to attempt to remedy the meaning crisis at the level of some or other false universal. What is needed is, first and foremost, to come home.

As with the doctrine of the fall of man, Chesterton's understanding of redemption is perfectly orthodox, while also being true to his unique perspective on the meaning of the fall and the need to recover wonder as an antidote. His most stark pronouncements on what is needed to save us from our desperate predicament are found in his play, *The Surprise* (1932), as well as in his masterwork *The Everlasting Man* (1925). *The Surprise* offers a two-part story, echoing the contrast discussed above between the primordial goodness of being and the fall of man. During the first part of the play, the dramatized story is introduced by the Author character, who explains that he took a bet that he could tell a compelling story with no villain or villainy. And, indeed, as actors take the stage to give his words flesh, the story succeeds because each one of the characters makes every attempt to outdo one another in showing honor (Chesterton 1989).

During the second act of the play, we find the same drama acted out, only this time the Author allows each character total freedom, which previously they were not allowed. According to this freedom the characters can therefore elect to break from his original intentions. The operative principle involves every character moving away from the primordial goodness of the first act. Chaos ensues. At last, the Author, who has been watching the play from a great height, is exasperated by the mess his characters have been making. He offers the greatest surprise of all. He informs everyone that he is "coming down" to fix the mess they have made. The way to fix everything, a metaphor for the incarnation, is to let the Author enter the text (Chesterton 1989). This reveals the chief intention of Chesterton's hermeneutical perception, which is to make the word flesh; to take what is distant and bring it nearby. The only way any cultural or meaning crisis can be addressed, hermeneutically and practically speaking, is by the incarnation and its logic, echoed in the life and work of the Church.

In his masterwork, *The Everlasting Man* (1925), a book written somewhat as a rebuttal of H. G. Wells' overtly materialistic *The Outline of History* (1920), Chesterton seeks to highlight the two most significant points in history, namely the uniqueness of the creature called man, and the uniqueness of the man called Christ. I do not plan summarize the argument Chesterton puts forward in that book. Rather, I want to sketch his central hermeneutical approach, which builds on what has already been discussed, and takes us towards a more concrete understanding of what a Chestertonian interpretive approach to the meaning crisis might look like, as well as suggesting, if only by inference, what a certain Catholic approach to culture making might look like, even now.

Given that we can perceive things rightly only by being at a certain distance from them, Chesterton argues that the reader should take up a surprising distance from the subject under discussion. He suggests, for instance, that most critics of Christianity are, against our usual intuitions, too attached to their own vision of the thing; and, moreover, that if they were really detached and viewing it from a suitable (rather than unsuitable) distance, they would see it far more clearly. By analogy, if a boy is standing too close to an especially large giant, he may mistake the giant for a landscape. But when he stands far enough away, he can see that it really is a giant. He is brought nearer to understanding by standing farther away. The same is true, Chesterton argues, for Christianity. He writes, "The moment we are impartial to it, we know why people are partial to it" (Chesterton [1925] 1993). If we can be impartial enough, our impartiality will allow us to see it clearly enough to create a sort of intimacy with what we are perceiving. By analogy, it seems that Vervaeke is in a similar position to those moderns that Chesterton is addressing. He wants to properly solve the meaning crisis but, unfortunately, he will not stand far away

enough to see that his own paradigm remains too thoroughly modern. It sides, overall, with civilization over culture, as Chesterton defines them in relation to each other.

At the start of *The Everlasting Man*, Chesterton understands the problem of his culture, in addition to its failure to recognize sin, as one of being at the wrong distance from what he is relating to; he therefore proposes a right relation to what is being explored. This offers a good starting point given that modernity, as Hartmut Rosa has noted, itself sets up certain expectations around the issue of distance. One of the main achievements of modernity, he notes, is that it has nearly perfected "human beings' ability to establish a certain distance from the world while at the same time bringing it within our manipulative reach", to allow us to know it more proximately, to master it, conquer it, and render it more transparent and useful (Han 2015; Rosa 2021). Although this 'achievement' has ensured many remarkable scientific, and technological developments, the consequences for culture and the more personal aspects of human life have been more ambivalent, typically more negative. Retaining this distance has meant ensuring a "withdrawal of the world" such that it becomes "mute" and "unreadable" (Rosa 2021). In other words, the very meaning of the world becomes inaccessible owing to a certain careless hermeneutical posture. Chesterton's approach is highly deliberate; in effect, in response to the problem of distance, he proposes standing at the right distance. The antidote, in other words, is found in being neither too far away nor too close. If we really are far enough away, our desire to manipulate everything according to our will or dialectical predispositions can no longer be satisfied. The right distance, Chesterton maintains, would grant us a paradox: both intimacy and objectivity, both wonder and reasonability (Chesterton [1925] 1993). In this, Chesterton implies that it is best to be deliberate about one's interpretive posture. This is likely to result in a better understanding of what we are interpreting.

With the right distance in place, Chesterton takes up the first central claim of the book: "It is exactly when we do regard man as an animal that we know he is not [merely] an animal" (Chesterton [1925] 1993). Chesterton uses an analogy to make his point clearer: "[i]t is precisely when we do try to picture him as a sort of horse on his hind legs, that we suddenly realise that he must be something as miraculous as a winged horse that towered up into the clouds of heaven" (Chesterton [1925] 1993). Chesterton adopts a typically 'modern' categorization through which he can examine the creature called man, and in the process demonstrates, again and again, that the stale formula does not work. To take the most common designation of man as a primate, Chesterton observes that a monkey "does not draw clumsily and man cleverly; a monkey does not begin the art of representation and man carry it to perfection. A monkey does not do it at all; he does not begin to do it at all; he does not begin to begin to do it at all" (Chesterton [1925] 1993). The qualitative difference between 'primate' and 'man' is so vast that the category 'animal' is soon revealed to be entirely inadequate. The lower category of 'animal' is insufficient to account for the higher category, 'man'. However, importantly, this is not just a matter of names. This is about being true to reality as it manifests and mediates itself to us. The repetition of the scientist's category, and therefore the claim, that man is merely an animal may work only if we do not think about most of what people do. What is needed is a higher principle that attends to the very creature that we are considering. What is needed, in other words, is a principle that accommodates the actual identity of the human being and, indeed, draws it towards its own perfection. Notably, this search for the right principle is essentially part of the normative order, the order of values. The very act of interpretation involves a recognition and, if necessary, a reordering of values. Through interpretation, taken as both an active seeking and a passive allowing, we already find ourselves attuned to a normative order.

The hermeneutical principle in all of this is that one cannot interpret something rightly apart from knowing what it is; the act of interpretation is an act of searching for the

quiddity of things. We cannot find meaning if we are using the wrong terms; these reinforce wrongheaded expectations. Moreover, to interpret rightly requires refusing to let what is lower overthrow what is higher. Chesterton sees no reason to let what is "sordid overthrow [. . .] what is magnanimous" (Chesterton [1925] 1993). In fact, Chesterton noted already in Orthodoxy (1908) the tendency to give in to "gravity" (Chesterton 1986). It is easy to be "heavy" and difficult to be "light" (Chesterton 1986). We should never tire of seeking transcendence. In *The Everlasting Man*, he writes, "Pessimism is not in being tired of evil but in being tired of good. Despair does not lie in being weary of suffering, but in being weary of joy. It is when for some reason or other the good things in a society no longer work that the society begins to decline; when its food does not feed, when its cures do not cure, when its blessings refuse to bless" (Chesterton [1925] 1993). Chesterton's tireless search for the good, his endless repetitions of first principles and causes, allows him the freedom to reclaim what is highest so that he may raise what is lowest. Again, what is highest raises what is lowest. The modern dialectical journey towards generating and/or discovering emergent properties will not suffice to take us where we need to go.

When Chesterton looks carefully at the human being over the course of history, he notices that man is, by his very nature, the creature that seeks God. The human being is naturally religious, he observes (Chesterton [1925] 1993). The person seeks 'God', or attempts to, in two ways: by using imagination—that is, by finding a suitable narrative order—and, also, by using reason—that is, by finding a suitable nomological order. By tracing the outline of these two orders, Chesterton notices the striking tendency of people to consistently treat these orders separately. As domains of concern or as paradigms of understanding, reason and imagination, historically speaking, operate independently; that is, this is how they operate until the historical advent of Christ. In fact, mythopoeists and philosophers have tended, throughout the ages, to distrust each other. Then, in addition to this observation, Chesterton sees that reason and imagination seem incomplete not just on their own but because they struggle to find each other. To use Vervaekean terms, it has proven difficult to get the nomological and narrative orders to fit together. This changes with the incarnational apocalypse.

In the second part of *The Everlasting Man*, Chesterton applies the same hermeneutical approach as the above to the man called Christ. The moderns, in keeping with their largely materialist assumptions, usually think of Jesus of Nazareth only as a man. His divine nature, they assume, must be something imposed on the story of his real life. The trouble with this is that it explains too little about the Gospel stories, for instance, as well as about the sudden and remarkable rise of Christianity in the first century. No other great religious leader was mistaken for God, Chesterton notes, so "Why was this claim alone exaggerated unless this alone was made?" (Chesterton [1925] 1993). The present article, however, is not an apologia in the vein of Chesterton's *The Everlasting Man*. My aim here is simply to provide a sense of Chesterton's hermeneutic and what it means for the crisis of meaning. What I have said thus far is sufficient for this purpose, albeit keeping the more detailed argument Chesterton is making.

By summing up man as man and by reclaiming Christ as both man and as much more than man, Chesterton allows the human being's story to be summed up in Christ. The lower is taken up and completed in the highest. The nomological order is fulfilled in a true myth, which is also a true philosophy. In other words, in Christ, the normative, nomological, and narrative orders are also summed up. Thus, for the first time, as Chesterton notes, reason and imagination are perfectly and harmoniously united:

> "The Catholic faith is the reconciliation because it is the realization of both mythology and philosophy. It is a story and in that sense one of a hundred stories; only it is a true story. It is a philosophy and in that sense one of a hundred philosophies;

> only it is a philosophy that is like life. But above all, it is a reconciliation because it is something that can only be called the philosophy of stories. The normal narrative instinct which produced all the fairy tales is something that is neglected by all the philosophies—except one. The Faith is the justification of that popular instinct; the finding of a philosophy for it or the analysis of the philosophy in it. Exactly as a man in an adventure story has to pass various tests to save his life, so the man in this philosophy has to pass several tests and save his soul" (Chesterton [1925] 1993).

Chesterton reads the human story through Christ, in whom we are reconciled to God. This challenges what I noted above about Vervaeke's stress upon "meaning-making" as an answer to meaning crisis. Chesterton's account demonstrates that no matter how gifted we are regarding our reasoning and imagining, on our own we simply cannot scale the heights required to bring our philosophies and stories to sufficient completeness. On our own, we cannot achieve the moral coherence needed to address the various normative deficits of our own lives and age. That which is transcendently Other to us needs to take up and finish the job, because this Other started the job. The highest calls down to what is lowest, and our interpretive awareness ought to align with this fact.

6. Conclusions

It is significant that archaic religion can be understood as having three dimensions, which match the three core facets of the meaning crisis defined by Vervaeke et al., namely myth (*mythos*), taboo (*logos*), and ritual (*ethos*). It is especially significant, as I have outlined above, that all three find their completion and redemption, first in Christ and, second, in his church. My argument, following Chesterton, has suggested that the core problem at the root of the meaning crisis is the same as that of the Edwardian cultural crisis; it is a problem at the root of all human deficiencies and difficulties. It is sin. Certain other norms and entrenchments do help to reinforce this core problem but even noticing this requires us to have a more than symptomatic response. Our disconnection from God, the world, and others, is not caused by modernity per se even if modernity is one expression of the human tendency towards sin. This does not mean everything in modernity is bad; rather, it means noting that even where goods are desired, they are desired without reference to ultimate ends. Modernity tends to 'de-teleologize' being; it tends, also, to divorce our understanding of being from any reference to formal causation. Only a religious 'solution' that becomes a whole way of life would suffice to deal with all that is disintegrative within us and our world. But the logic of this 'solution' (as a response to the meaning crisis) is surprising. It involves stepping entirely beyond the modern paradigm. The meaning crisis can only be properly addressed if it is not the meaning crisis that we are focused on. The 'solution' must, in every respect, precede any attempt to address the problem if we are to avoid reducing it to a mere temporary fix for a temporal conundrum.

It is to Chesterton's work that I have turned to suggest the shape of this solution. He explains that his own conversion to Catholicism could be answered quite simply: "to get rid of my sins" (Chesterton [1936] 2006). This is an apt summary of the creed and of Chesterton's final response to the cultural crisis of his own day. In an uprooted world, which encouraged yet more uprootedness, his answer was not to turn to yet more culture, especially when culture itself was being swallowed up in civilizational concerns. He shows us a hermeneutic of repetitions and redemption that constantly seeks to understand things in the context of the created order and thus places the lower in service of the higher out of a recognition that the higher cannot emerge from the lower. This approach is distinctly interpretive. Chesterton is showing us how to make sense of things in general. His approach is a fitting answer in that it also shows us what conditions would be needed for a restoration

of culture, even while such a restoration would not be the chief aim of religious devotion. Reason and imagination are insufficient on their own. What is needed is a recapitulation of reason and imagination at a higher level than what any individual, on their own, can reach. Those who contribute to culture-making must adopt something like this hermeneutical approach, in that their work ought to help nudge others to realign themselves with higher things. While my chief contribution here has been to supply a Chestertonian hermeneutic with the crisis of meaning in mind, there is certainly room to still develop a detail in the vein of a practical theology.

"The core of common culture is religion", Roger Scruton reminds us (Scruton 2000). "Tribes survive and flourish", he says, "because they have gods, who fuse the many wills into a single will, and demand and reward the sacrifices on which social life depends" (Scruton 2000). With this in mind, it is possible to contend, contentiously perhaps, that the highest culture to have emerged—the one that produced greater art, music, architecture, literature and the like—was Catholic. This, again, is not to say that religion serves culture only as if the former is merely the tool by which the latter is achieved. Rather, it is to say that Catholicity in faith transcends culture—Cardinal Sarah has said that "The death of God for love of us is beyond any culture. It submerges all culture" (Sarah and Diat 2016). Without a living faith, we can only have what we have now: an anti-culture that serves to erode rather than support the three orders of meaning, especially because it turns against the intimate (the local, the personal, and so on) in the name of a false universal (the global, mass culture, liberalism, and so on).

Chesterton's own hermeneutic suggests some surprising possibilities with regard to resuscitating the imaginative lives of people. His proposal of a certain kind of distance as a means for recovering intimacy, for instance, together with his continuous insistence that what is highest ought to be the guide for what is lowest, suggests that the answer to problems in mass culture is not to try and achieve something better from below but to stand somewhat apart from what is happening in mass culture and to return to simple devotion. What is inspired or encouraged by this will be seen, then, in the light of what transcends culture. Moreover, Chesterton's insistence on the local against the global suggests that cultural forms are more likely to take shape on a small scale, in personal settings. While Chesterton's work is widely available thanks to mass culture, his own inventiveness and contribution to culture emerged out of precisely the constraints he suggests. Those influenced by Chesterton, like CS Lewis, JRR Tolkien, and Charles Williams, drew much of their own mythopoeic inspiration from precisely such hermeneutical parameters that Chesterton exemplified.

Over a century ago now, Chesterton noted, with dismay, what was happening in his own time: "We are living on Catholic capital" and "we are running out" (Chesterton 1990). However, Chesterton was never one to despair. Even the growing awareness of the crisis of meaning now is a sign of what Chesterton knew very well: "Christianity has died many times and risen again; for it had a God who knew the way out of the grave" (Chesterton [1925] 1993). What is needed when a trend seems to be pulling us one way, towards furthering the meaning crisis, is a way to transcend it in order to go against it. For this reason, it is good to return to the source of life. For "[a] dead thing can go with the stream, but only a living thing can go against it" (Chesterton [1925] 1993). Whether the meaning crisis will be solved or not, at scale, is a question to tarry with. The answer will become plain soon enough. In the meantime, we might at least return to the wisdom that allows charity to begin at home.

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