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## Devils in My Heart: Chesterton's View of Human Nature through Father Brown

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# INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume VII

A Collection of Essays Presented at the Seventh  
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## Devils in My Heart *Chesterton's View of Human Nature through Father Brown*

Mark Eckel

“I had murdered them all myself.”<sup>1</sup> Father Brown perhaps comes closest to true, biblical mystery. While a crime may have been solved, the good padre still wondered after the human penchant toward sin. Sherlock Holmes fans are used to deductive reasoning: a scientific analysis, assessing problems from the outside, in. Father Brown *became* the murderer because he *was* a murderer. Chesterton's sleuth, a Catholic priest, saw people as they were, from the inside, out. The mystery of our own nature continues: “The heart is hopelessly dark and deceitful, a puzzle that no one can figure out.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> G. K. Chesterton, “The Secret of Father Brown,” *The Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton* (Ignatius, 1986): 217.

<sup>2</sup> Jeremiah 17:9, *The Message*.

## Devils in My Heart

### Chesterton's View of Human Nature through Father Brown

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“A fact as practical as potatoes,” Chesterton calls sin, “The only part of Christian theology which can really be proved” (*Orthodoxy*, 24). He argues in his first chapter of *Orthodoxy* that people may deny the existence of sin but accept the existence of mental hospitals: the latter as an obvious, albeit mysterious, outcome of the former. Herein is the essence of Chestertonian thought: the clarity of human sinfulness is a marker of mystery. Woven in and through *The Father Brown* stories, G.K. Chesterton exposes homicides piecing together the errant human heart.

Sherlock Holmes fans are used to deductive reasoning: a scientific analysis, assessing problems from the outside, in. Father Brown *became* the murderer because he *was* a murderer. Asked how he understood murder, Father Brown exclaims, “I had murdered them all myself” (*Omnibus*, 217). Chesterton’s sleuth, a Catholic priest, saw people as they were, from the inside, out. The mystery of our own nature continues: “The heart is hopelessly dark and deceitful, a puzzle that no one can figure out” (*The Message*, Jeremiah 17:9). Because of their link to the human condition, Chesterton’s detective stories unveil mystery (*Omnibus*, 131).

Human nature and Super nature seem to be the twin progenitors of Chesterton’s detective stories. Heaven’s Wisdom is imprinted in mystery; human depravity is the other side of the coin. Chesterton used one side of the coin to show the other. It is by the negative that we know the positive; sin leads us toward salvation, falsehood points us toward Truth. So Father Brown can say in *The Honour of Israel Gow*, “We have found

the truth; and the truth makes no sense;” (Omnibus, 112) because describing sin’s mystery in *The Wrong Shape*, “this business is anything but simple.” Yet his response to a potential suspect’s exclamation, “Are you a devil?!” in *The Hammer of God* is also true, “I have devils in my heart” (Omnibus 174-75).

Father Brown is comfortable in others’ skin because he wears his own. Or, choosing another metaphor from the story *The Wrong Shape*, “As one knows the crooked trail of a snail, I know the crooked track of a man” (Omnibus, 132). “The secret is,” Father Brown advocates in *The Secret of Father Brown*

It was I who killed all those people. . . . You see, I had murdered them all myself, so of course I knew how it was done. . . . I had planned out each of the crimes very carefully. I had thought out exactly how a thing like that could be done, and in what style or state of mind a man could really do it. And when I was quite sure that I felt exactly like the murderer myself, of course I knew who he was (Omnibus, 638).

Inherent corruption inhabits our decision-making being.

But Chesterton does not stop there. When his friend tries to accept Brown’s criminal culpability as “a figure of speech” Father Brown shows his annoyance. He refers to his explanation as discussing “deep things.”

I mean that I really did see myself, and my real self, committing the murder. . . . I mean that I thought and thought about how a man might come to be like that, until I realized that I really *was* like that, in everything except actual final consent to the action (Omnibus, 638).

Comparing his internal, inherent, corruption Father Brown then addresses “the science of detection.”

What do these men mean . . . when they say criminology is a science? They mean getting *outside* a man and studying him as if he were a gigantic insect; in what they would call a dry impartial light; in what I should call a dead and dehumanized light. . . . I don’t try to get outside the man. I try to get inside the murderer. . . . Indeed it’s much more than that, don’t you see? I *am* inside a man. . . . I wait till I know I am inside a murderer, thinking his thoughts, wrestling with his passions; till I have bent myself into the posture of his hunched and peering hatred; till I see the world with his bloodshot and squinting eyes . . . to the pool of blood. Till I am really a murderer. . . . (Omnibus, 639-40).

Father Brown refers to the detection process as “a religious exercise”—his soul was a “diver” into the depths of human depravity.

Last summer I delivered a paper in St. Louis. While there my wife and I visited a casino: a first time event. Immediately upon entering the facility, I felt a pall fall upon me. My immediate response to Robin: “I’m afeared woman, I’m afeared.” Father Brown seemed also to have a sensate, sensual awareness knowing that places exist where “badness” and evil are resident. In *Sins of Prince Saradine* the padre becomes agitated saying “we have taken a wrong turning, and come to a wrong place.” Later, he wishes to be in “happier places and the homes of harmless men” (Omnibus 142, 157).

Yet, in the same story, Brown maintains “things that happen here . . . mean something somewhere else” (Omnibus 146). If retribution does not come upon offenders in this life, it will in the next. Speaking of Kalon the sun priest in *The Eye of Apollo* the

Father cements supernatural punishment by saying “Let Cain pass by because he belongs to God (Omnibus 189-90). While evil may inhabit a place, Father Brown knows there is a place where evil will live no more.

The mysterious nature of our own sinfulness suggests practical approaches to a number of subjects. My penchant is to wed ideas with practice, to suggest how after why.

1. We should form an apologetic of human corruption. The Chestertonian approach to The Gospel is to find common ground. Inherent sinfulness is our collective origin. If there is one thing that is normal, woven through the fabric of life, it is the black thread of trespass. Father Brown is at ease with sin, assumes it, counts on it, expects it, and finds it an easy pattern to follow. As a priest, hearing men’s confessions about men’s real sins, makes the good Father wholly aware of human evil; that is how he explains himself to Flambeau in *The Blue Cross*.

2. Once we agree on corruption we can establish an ethic of equality. All people are the same; we are worms from the same field. Equality ought not be a focus on diversity but unity. Equality is the unity of our DNA—our fallen nature knows no color, ethnicity, culture, time, or place. Chesterton ends an essay with this statement, “I have long believed that the only really happy and hopeful faith is a faith in the Fall of Man (Maltreating, 470). And as the priest says in *The Secret of Father Brown*, “No man’s really any good till he knows how bad he is” (Omnibus 639-40).

3. Knowing that we are all the same inside transforms our message to those outside. Writing for a human audience without chapter and verse, we should speak to

people as people, not souls to be saved. So Chesterton closes *Orthodoxy* by considering The Church

As a truth-telling thing . . . Alone of all creeds [Christianity] is convincing where it is not attractive. . . . As it preaches original sin. But when we wait for its results, they are pathos and brotherhood, a thunder of laughter and pity. For only with original sin we can at once pity the beggar and distrust the king” (*Orthodoxy*, 291-92).

So the message is sent as the Father explains in *The Queer Feet* “with an unseen hook and an invisible line” (*Omnibus*, 61).

4. Comparisons to other religions dispatch human perfectibility. In *The Eye of Apollo* Flambeau sarcastically quips concerning a cult, “It’s one of those new religions that forgive your sins by saying you never had any.” Not to be outdone, Father Brown announces that there is only one spiritual disease, namely, “thinking one is quite well” (*Omnibus*, 177). Utopian beliefs based on human goodness and identified through all manner of government programs cannot sustain answers to human sin or mystery.

5. “Tolerance” is an empty cultural doctrine when our sameness trumps our difference. Chesterton attacked our current display of false civility in this way, “Tolerance, is the virtue of a people who don’t believe anything” (*America*, 5). In *Heretics* G.K. argued our humanity rests on our development of doctrine. Some insist, on the other hand, that acceptance of all beliefs is acceptable. Chesterton would point out in contradistinction such a perspective would lower us to “the unconsciousness of the grass. Trees have no dogmas. Turnips are singularly broad-minded” (*Heretics*, 286). Whereas today’s doctrine of tolerance is built upon the structures of human perfectibility,

Chesterton stood on the inherent corruption of humanity. Simply put in *The Three Tools of Death*, “Nothing poisons a life like sins” (Omnibus, 226).

6. Science alone cannot address human depravity. In *The Wrong Shape* the man of science admits in the end that his belief has abandoned him (Omnibus 136).

Chesterton, his opposite, maintains in his statements that truth is more important than facts. Particulars must be corralled by universals. *The Hammer of God* addresses the point as Brown says, “Fairy tales are the nearest thing to real truth” adding about the killer “then something snapped in your soul” (Omnibus 172, 175). To see the blackness of a man’s soul is exposed by the white light of righteousness—not a white lab coat.

7. Educators should push back against programs or curricula which seek to change from the outside, in. “Just say ‘no’ campaigns,” anti-smoking warnings, or safe-sex promotions do not engage our internal corruption. *The Invisible Man* detective story seems to suggest that we are liable to overlook sin in others because we do not “see them” as sinners. The private confessional at the end of the story reiterates the theme—no one saw the man for who he was save Father Brown. Those who blend into the canvas of the human portrait “have passions like other men,” Father Brown reminds. The human condition cannot be dressed up on the outside. Our inherent corruption must be redressed from the inside.

8. Original sin is inexorably linked with mystery. “As long as you have mystery you have health; when you destroy mystery you create morbidity” says Chesterton (Orthodoxy, 48). As he maintains in *What I Saw In America*, a man “has no right to laugh at mystery as incomprehensible since he does not believe in the incomprehensible” (America, 5). So G.K. uses the term “romance” to describe Christianity’s sense of



mystery since life is full of the dark realities of evil together with the joy of obedience to Christ. Again from *Orthodoxy* “man can understand everything by the help of what he does not understand” (*Orthodoxy*, 49). Flambeau links mystery to sin saying in the story *The Wrong Shape* of the good Father, “He gets a mystic cloud about him when there was evil quite near” (*Omnibus*, 131).

9. Original sin allows for priestly compassion. The wonder of Father Brown is the gentleness with which he treats the malefactors. “We can sometimes do good by being the right person in the wrong place” Brown says in *Sins of Prince Saradine* (*Omnibus*, 142). So the priest can cajole the murderer into a confession in *The Wrong Shape* (*Omnibus*, 130, 135-36). Or, in the case of *The Invisible Man*, the Father could walk “those snow-covered hills under the stars for many hours with a murderer, and what they said to each other will never be known” (*Omnibus*, 100).

10. Father Brown’s “I murdered them all myself” belief continues to be the best apologetic through mystery novels and film noir. The attraction, the draw to mystery brings the reader to a precipice, a moment of decision. Jack Englehard’s *Indecent Proposal*, Scott B. Smith’s *A Simple Plan*, or Robert B. Parker’s *Jesse Stone* stories, remind us of human depravity—looking in so we can look up. A reviewer of *The Scandal of Father Brown* stories said it best, “The souls and hearts and consciences of men were so important to Chesterton that [sometimes] he preferred to leave the crime out altogether (Finch, 341.)

What makes a literary mystery, a strong Christian apologetic? I believe my daughter, at age 9, answered the question best. When I asked her some fifteen years ago what made a mystery, a mystery she said, “Someone has to kill someone or steal

something.” Pressed further to know why mysteries were important for Christians to read, Chelsea replied, “Because they show us that we are sinners.”

Father Brown would be proud.

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