



Faith, Fact, and Fairy Tale

If a paradox is a *seeming self-contradiction* that is actually *true*, what, then, might we call a *seeming truth* that is really a *self-contradiction*? What might we call a mysterious miracle of a man who rejects the very mystery and miracle of his own being, only to conclude unkindly that all of humankind are simply highly evolved, self-conscious molecular configurations which are no more than advanced, arbitrary animals rather than aspiring spirits moving a little lower than the angels; that all things tangible and intangible—including his very reasoning—are the resulting culmination of a continual, colossal, cosmic accident; and that all talk of religion and faith is just a fairy tale?

My first reaction to such a marvel would be to point out that his conclusions were much more complicated than I might have expected from a cosmic accident like himself. Granting the veracity of his professed materialism for the sake of argument, my second reaction would be to ask him to consider why he deemed it so important or worth his while to enlist the *faith* of another cosmic accident to believe in his own accidental cosmic conclusion? My third reaction would be to express sincere regret that he did not seem to believe in fairy tales.

The world is full of worldly debunkers, whose objective is often to unmake the mysterious, the marvelous, the miraculous, and the moral, in favor of the fashionably mundane, the miserable, the material, and sometimes even the malevolent. The realms of Faith and Fairy Tale—which have much good in common, since the latter often mirrors the former—are frequent targets of such deconstruction, and three materialist wrecking balls of choice against them are (1) the assertion that faith and fairy tale are *unreal-*

istic, (2) the insistence upon preclusive scientific *theory*, i.e., presumed “facts” in place of faith and fiction as vessels of truth, and (3) invectives charging narrow-minded, *childish nonsense*—all swung and flung to discourage the believer into defensive silence or shamed unbelief.

Concerning the charge that faith and fairy tale are *unrealistic* or escapist, my own experience tells me that they are both fearfully and wonderfully realistic in both honoring and depicting ineffable virtues and finer qualities of character. When I was a young boy, my mother took my sisters to see Disney’s 1959 adaptation of *Sleeping Beauty*, and because she could not leave me at home by myself, I was dragged along with them, though I had no desire to see it whatsoever, since it held no promise of rockets, dinosaurs, or Hot Wheel cars. Had I known there was a fire-breathing dragon involved, it might have been an easier sell.

Once in the theater, any unfounded prejudice against the fairy tale in me would be turned inside-out and upside-down, as *Sleeping Beauty* would be the first story in my life that kept me awake at night, for it provided a clear vision of how *good* might triumph against all odds over *evil* by rendering images of innocence and goodness worth protecting and defending in Aurora, of monstrous and murderous vindictiveness and envy worth confronting in Maleficent, and of courage sprung from unrelenting love and loyalty in Prince Phillip to set things aright. Far from any escape from reality, what I remember feeling most profoundly when I left the theater that day was how deeply I desired to be as good, brave, and true as Prince Phillip, and as worthy as he of the blessedness and beauty he cher-

ished in Aurora. While it may seem unrealistic for fairy tales to depict virtue and vice as both Edenic and infernal archetypes, the virtues and vices figured and expressed in them are very real indeed.

Regarding preclusive scientific theory which asserts presumed “facts” as blanket replacements for faith and fiction as vessels of truth, it never occurred to me in my science classes, even as a child, that the discovery of any scientific fact should necessarily diminish or negate the *mystery* and *miracle* of any other given subject, any more than mystery and miracle should necessarily undermine scientific discovery—a testament to the true objectivity of the science teachers I was blessed to have in my youth. Such mutually exclusive thoughts never entered my mind until I read and heard other grown-ups pushing the presumed enlightenment of scientific *theories* such as evolution and social Darwinism as secular gospel and preclusive “proof” that religious and moral beliefs, such as creationism and sin, were superstitious and stupid.

This conclusion seemed rashly and unfairly subjective as a dimly misguided, myopic way of looking at science, without rightly considering how scientific theory itself demands the bright light of true faith necessary for its own advancement, in very much the same way that religious conviction and artistic expression do. Far from threatening my faith in any way, scientific discovery has always deepened my sense of wonder rather than the opposite, just as it has always heightened the awe I feel in considering how fact, faith and fable might well work in concert to complement and reinforce one another, rather than negate one another; for without faith, it is impossible

to assume the possible facts and truths of theories in the lab, theosophy in the liturgy, or theme in the literature, which cannot always be scientifically proven or logically articulated.

What really seems wholly unobjective is the utter failure and even refusal to consider that the given laws of science in our world may well be the work of a masterful, artistic Creator—that the realm of Science might be rendered as a work of Art, rather than art as a supposed random accident of science amid the aforementioned ever-continuing, cosmic pageantry of chaos. Albert Einstein once famously asserted, “Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited, whereas imagination embraces the entire world.”¹¹ This makes sense to me, since all scientific, sacred, and storied pursuits necessarily require the faith and creative artistry of an engaged and practiced *imagination*, a mystery and miracle in and of itself, which scientists do not fully understand, though they continue to use it without understanding it.

As for debunkers who charge that matters of faith and fairy tale are narrow-minded, overly-simplistic, childish nonsense at direct odds with cold, hard, fact, I feel compelled to counter the charge itself as a narrow-minded, oversimplified, and unfair characterization of the faithful and fantastical. While faith itself is only one among the three theological virtues—Faith, Hope, and Charity—it doesn’t take a rocket scientist to call these virtues into heroic action. Regardless, there is nothing overly simple, narrow-minded, or nonsensical about any of these three things that last,² for all of them require an open mind, moral discernment, and even the artful play of imagination—not unlike that of a child—in order to triumph. Such wondrous virtues are not quantifiable or provable in a Physics or Chemistry lab, but we know them when we feel them, as they are commonly experienced in life and in story as the very things that make life worth living and its story worth telling, for they are the very stuff of fairy tales.

Faith is necessary for believing, not in those things which are logical certainties, but in those things which are *not provable*, for Faith is the “assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen”,³ and *Faith* is tantamount to belief, *without* logical proof, in ineffable, impalpable truths—like *Love*, for instance; *Hope* is necessary for prevailing, not when all is certain and expected, but when all stands precariously upon a razor’s edge amid the risk that all could be lost—no oddsmaker could fathom betting on the impossible hope that one pacifist, conscientious objector of an American doughboy behind two lines of enemy defenses could defeat nearly 160 German soldiers in a single action in the Great War, unless he shared the same faithful hope and humility as Sergeant Alvin York, who not only dared to fathom the astonishing feat, but actually accomplished it; *Charity* is necessary for Mercy as it always seeks to bless others even when it is undeserved and unearned. When Jean Valjean in Victor Hugo’s *Les Miserables* is caught for stealing Bishop Myriel’s silver, the Bishop, in an act of undeserved grace, tells the police that he gave Valjean the silver and then adds two candlesticks to Valjean’s haul, which both satisfies the police and astonishes Valjean as a deliberate act of charitable mercy that changes his life for good, forever.

Curiously and unpredictably, in both life and in story, each of these three theological virtues operates as a paradox—a seeming contradiction that is actually true—that offers unexpected, inestimable blessing resulting from a seeming illogical obedience to them. Likewise, in G. K. Chesterton’s masterpiece, *Orthodoxy*, he asserts in “The Ethics of Elfland” that both faith and fairy tale mirror two mysterious wonders in life that we all experience in common: (1) conditional joy and (2) the surprise of being, which he articulates best as an “incomprehensible happiness rest[ing] upon an incomprehensible condition. A box is opened, and all evils fly out [as in Pandora’s Box]. . . . A lamp is lit, and love flies away [as with Cupid and Psyche]. . . . An Apple is eaten, and the hope of God is gone [as in

Genesis].”⁴ Here, Chesterton also emphasizes that while we seem to have no trouble taking the incomprehensible surprise of life for granted, the full joy of life is only felt and realized if the incomprehensible, surprising and often paradoxical condition to be obeyed is honored *first*.⁵

The problem for us here is that the incomprehensible conditions to be obeyed—the closed box, the unlit lamp, the uneaten apple—are not as easily honored as the promised reward bound by the limit—especially in our fallen state. Honing and shaping our characters in honoring and obeying such conditions by free-will are more like artistic choices, unlike scientific laws, such as gravity, to which we comply involuntarily whether we want to or not. As we make these choices, they are making us, too. This is one reason why stories of both faith and fairy tale move us and inspire us to goodness, beauty and truth in ways that a physics textbook cannot. We all know that the choices involved in honoring the incomprehensible conditions are true in life because we can actually experience them, despite the fact that the paradoxical conditions and the joyful rewards for honoring them are often things which could not have been predicted or expected. In this way, they resemble the willful, skillful, and playful lines of limitation drawn by an artist more closely than the more predictable logical pattern of scientific proof, since “art, like morality begins by drawing the lines somewhere”:⁶ for example, if we give love without expectation (the incomprehensible condition), we will receive it (the incomprehensible joy);⁷ if we humble ourselves, we will be exalted;⁸ if we forgive those who sin against us, we will be forgiven in the same measure;⁹ if we first seek the Kingdom of God, all things will be added unto us;¹⁰ if we lose our lives for Our Savior’s sake we will save them;¹¹ if we have the faith of a child, we shall know heaven.¹²

But the opposites are true as well: if we compel love by taking it, we will lose it; if we exalt ourselves, we will be humbled;¹³ if we do not forgive others, we will not be forgiven;¹⁴ if we seek second things over first

things we will risk losing both first and second things;¹⁵ if we live only for ourselves, we will be brought to ruin;¹⁶ if we betray the faith of a child to harm, it is better for us that we have a millstone tied around our necks and that we be thrown into the sea.¹⁷

Thus, we are moved by both the faith of scriptures and the faithful script of fairy tales amid their astonishing, unpredictable, paradoxical conditions and joys, not because they are narrow-minded, wishful fantasy as some sad materialists might argue, but because *we are actually living them!* “Narrow-minded” is the last thing children and Christians are, as both childhood and Christianity require minds wide open amid all of the sacred and scientific mystery of the universe in order to consider that God *spoke into being* light, the world, and all souls who can freely choose the gift and grace of his incomprehensible conditions for joy or reject them, rendering possible the chance for true love and life. After all, the first words of Genesis as well as the Gospel of John reveal that God is a Supreme Artist who loves a good story, which He not only spoke into being,¹⁸ but entered into, Himself, in order to be the light amid the darkness of our fallenness,¹⁹ so that we may come into the light²⁰, possess light, walk in the light, keep faith in the light,²¹ become the light ourselves, and shine the light so that others may follow and shine also:²²

In the beginning was the Word;
the Word was in God’s presence,
and the Word was God.
He was present to God in the beginning.
Through Him all things came onto
being,
and apart from Him, nothing came to be.
Whatever came to be in Him found life,
life for the light of men.
The light shines on in the darkness,
a darkness that did not overcome it. . . .²³
The Word became flesh
and made His dwelling among us,
and we have seen His glory:
The Glory of an only son coming from
The Father,
Filled with enduring love.²⁴

Of his fullness
We all have had a share—
Love following upon love.²⁵

Even in reconciling such astonishing faith to scientific fact, it feels like no accident that Christ Himself refers to Divinity, to Himself, and even to redeemed souls as *Light*, since the mysterious physics of light behaving paradoxically as both energy and matter, wave and particle, at once mirror the very mystery of Christ’s Divinity who is both fully God and fully man. In this vein, the Light of the Risen Son in the redemption of the Fall in our own Story is the Light by which we both presently and ultimately see all good things else most clearly, and by which we may navigate our own individual stories rightly and well, especially as we endeavor to reflect that Light for others to see and follow.

No one in his right mind would deny the wild and wondrous surprise of life or the very reality, mystery, and light of “love following upon love”, life’s greatest, incomprehensible, and everlasting condition for eternal, incomprehensible joy; for we know love when we feel it, give it, and receive it, even without requiring logical explanation or proof, and its presence is as central to comedy as its absence is central to tragedy, both in life and in story. Such stories—even fairy tales like *Sleeping Beauty*—present to us pictures of unfathomable goodness confronting and triumphing over unfathomable evil, as all the best and truest stories do, and just because the fantastical and paradoxical joys and conditions of faith and fairy tale may seem counterintuitive or even unreasonable in our fallen state, it does not then follow that the faith or fairy tale containing them is devoid of reason or truth.

Thankfully, love’s mercy does not preclude reason’s justice in the same way that purely cold reason may defy or deny love; for love transcends reason, and mercy transcends justice, just as faith and fairy tale transcend mere facthood by expressing truths that cannot be logically explained, such as love’s incomprehensible joy, which every child readily and gratefully feels,

knows, and believes, not because a science text has been cracked open to explain away faith in Fairy Tale, but because children who best understand fairy tales have the common faithful sense that they are actually *living in one*, that is, until some indeterminate and mysterious miracle of a man who rejects the very mystery and miracle of his own being suggests otherwise.

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References

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