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# CHESTERTON'S ONTOLOGY AND THE ETHICS OF SPECULATION

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## Abstract

This article considers the ontology of the British journalist GK Chesterton with respect to its implications for the interpretation of visual texts, referred to here as the *ethics of speculation*. This exploration takes place under the assumption that Chesterton's ontology, as that which relates to understanding the meaning of things, and his ethics, as that which examines the uses and abuses of things, have a dialogical connection. While Chesterton is not formally considered a philosopher, art historian or visual theorist, it is proposed that his ideas as a post-Victorian cultural commentator remain relevant to visual theory today. Unfortunately, Chesterton does not explicate his ontology systematically; this paper suggests that it may be considered in the light of three interlinking considerations: the riddle, the answer and the romance of being. It is in contemplating the interrelationship between these three considerations of being that specific ethical implications concerning visual interpretation become evident. In order to unpack the finer points of this ethics of speculation, reference is made to a single photograph taken during the South African War, *A few dead British soldiers in the aftermath of the Battle of Spioenkop*, 24 January 1900.

## Key terms:

Chesterton, GK; Chesterton's ontology; dramatology; ethics of speculation; visual hermeneutics; visual interpretation

But don't let the eye rest. Why should the eye be so lazy? Let us exercise the eye until it learns to see the startling facts that run across the landscape as plain as a painted face. Let us be ocular athletes

– GK Chesterton (2007:v-vi).

## Introduction

In this article, I outline a portion of the ontology of the British journalist GK Chesterton (1874-1936) in order to highlight some of the ethical implications of his ontology for what he calls 'speculation' (Chesterton 1986:249, 308). Chesterton's use of the word *speculation* refers to the fact that that one does not merely observe with one's eyes, but also understands what is seen through various processes of the mind (Jay 1993:29). Speculation is therefore not merely the means by which an encoded image is decoded, but also a larger process by which the reader fits in with the tonality of the image and considers the consequences of the image for his own being in the world. In short, it is concerned as much with self-discovery and self-revelation as it is with uncovering meaning.

It is my contention that while Chesterton is not formally considered a philosopher, art historian or visual theorist, his ideas as a post-Victorian cultural commentator are still relevant to visual theory today. The following discussion is rooted in the assumption that in Chesterton's



**Figure 1:** *A few dead British soldiers in the aftermath of the Battle of Spioenkop, 24 January 1900,*  
Photographer unknown (Battle of Spioenkop [s.a.]

work, ontology, as discourse concerning what is, is deeply connected to ethics, as discourse concerning what ought to be. For Chesterton (1994:17; 2002:98,100), ontology and ethics operate in dialogue, and a discussion about the one automatically implies a discussion about the other. Put differently, the meaning of things is, in his mind, directly related to doctrines concerning the uses and abuses of things (Chesterton 1994:19).

Chesterton's ontology may be called an 'ontology of peace' rather than an 'ontology of violence' in that it is rooted in a philosophy of reconciliation and connection that operates in the presence and affirmation of difference (Chesterton 1986:238; 1993:84; Hart 2003:36). Additionally, he figures reality as a drama, and therefore implies that being itself has a dramatic structure

(Chesterton 1986:282; 1994:129; Millbank 2009:10-11). This in turn suggests that (visual) hermeneutics is a collaborative, dramatic activity, since the meaning of being is never isolated from other beings. In fact, this dramaturgical hermeneutics or dramatology<sup>1</sup> rests on the idea that meaning is present in the totality of the drama of being and is therefore something understood *within* the drama and not just from outside. Accordingly, Chesterton (1986a:362; 1993:9) suggests on more than one occasion that if one wants to see clearly it is necessary to be both inside and outside the text that is being interpreted.

Unfortunately, Chesterton does not explicate his ontology systematically. However, I would say that the dramatic structure of being in his ontology may be

understood in terms of three considerations, namely the riddle, the answer and the romance of being. It is in contemplating the interrelationship between these three considerations of being that certain ethical implications regarding speculation become evident. In order to unpack the finer points of this ethics of speculation, reference is made to a single photograph taken during the South African War, *A few dead British soldiers in the aftermath of the Battle of Spioenkop, 24 January 1900*, hereafter referred to simply as *A few dead* (Figure 1). This photograph has been selected because it depicts something of the consequences of a situation that Chesterton, a pro-Boer, vehemently disapproved of, even while insisting upon his British patriotism (Chesterton 1986:272; Oddie 2008:210). Nevertheless, the following reading of this image must be taken as conjectural, since it is rooted in my own subjective application of Chesterton's ideas.

## Being as a riddle

To begin with, Chesterton finds that being is first and foremost a riddle. Being remains a slippery subject in that the presence or absence of things is not the result of any kind of obvious, logical inevitability. Chesterton's vision of the world is rooted in a kind of awe at the surprising existence of anything. He argues that to assume the givenness of anything is to miss the fact that everything is just as likely to have never existed and is therefore always eclipsed by the possibility of its own nonexistence (Chesterton 1986:267). This recalls Gottfried Leibniz's (1646-1716) (1989:639) famous question of why there is something rather than nothing. But Chesterton's (1986:254; 1993:39) view is contrary to Leibniz's, since he suggests that the mere presence of anything does not automatically assume its necessity. Necessity is not the mother of all invention, but some hidden and generous mystery. This indicates that being

is fundamentally a disruptive concern – a revelation that cannot be assumed or expected despite its conspicuousness (Chesterton 1952:155; 1986:268).

Accordingly, if the drama of being is a riddle, then its very nature cannot be bound to any kind of perfect, Platonic, theoretical consistency or predictability. Thus, Chesterton (1986:249-250) is particularly critical of any mindset that proposes turning various laws in nature into absolutes because he is aware of the way that the language of apparently pure objectivity, particularly in the sciences, is a means for dulling the senses to the marvel of perception. Conceptual frameworks of any kind ought to be there to serve speculation rather than be served by speculation.

To Chesterton even the obvious is not obvious. Therefore, he writes: 'As the reader's eye strays, with hearty relief, from these pages, it probably alights on something, a bed-post or a lamp-post, a window blind or a wall. It is a thousand to one that the reader is looking at something that he has never seen: that is, never realised' (Chesterton 2007:v). It is precisely the 'lazy eye' (Chesterton 2007:v) – the eye that is adamant on merely seeing rather than engaging in conscious, considered speculation – that prevents one from understanding both what one is looking at and one's own hermeneutic prejudices; for familiarity breeds unfamiliarity, fatigue and even, as the old adage goes, contempt (Chesterton 1993:14-15). This intimates that fatigue as over-familiarity is a kind of contempt because it robs the perceiver of his appreciation of what is being perceived. In reminding his reader of this, Chesterton is foreshadowing the psychological phenomenon of habituation, where repeated stimulation results in a diminished response (Madigan & Thomson 2005:15), and is therefore proposing that one ought to develop a deeper awareness of the unfamiliar in the familiar (Chesterton 1986:264). This awareness may be considered the first component of an ethics of speculation.

Arguably, it is by stressing the inexplicable, miraculous nature of being that Chesterton is asking his readers to move beyond thinking of seeing as merely observing to the possibility that seeing itself is a dramatic moment in which meaning is both discovered and created. Speculation, then, is not so much about encountering only what is there as it is about encountering what may not have been there and what should be there. It is also about re-encountering the self that sees. It is an imaginative act of considering the familiar as other and the 'settled' as 'strange' (Chesterton 2005:53). Put differently, ethical speculation may be an act of defamiliarisation. It advocates 'unlearning' and recovering one's 'ignorance' in order to encounter the world and the image anew (Chesterton 2008a:40, 41). The nature of this defamiliarisation is illustrated by Chesterton's (2005: 162) recounting of an incident during which a friend asks him where he is planning to spend his holiday. His response is to say that he is going to "Battersea", which happens to be the name of the very place that he is already in. He then explains the following:

I cannot see any Battersea here [by staying here in Battersea]; I cannot see any London or any England. I cannot see that door. I cannot see that chair: because a cloud of sleep and custom has come across my eyes. The only way to get back to them is to go everywhere else; and that is the real object of travel and the real pleasure of holidays. Do you suppose that I go to France in order to see France? Do you suppose that I go to Germany in order to see Germany? I shall enjoy them both; but it is not them I am seeking. I am seeking Battersea. The whole object of travel is not to set foot on foreign land; it is at last to set foot on one's own country as a foreign land (Chesterton 2005:163).

By juxtaposing the anaphoric 'I cannot see' with that which is obviously visible, Chesterton is automatically suggesting a difference between seeing and perceiving and between observation and speculation. However,

his process is not estrangement for the sake of estrangement alone, but estrangement for the sake of welcome. His defamiliarisation affirms difference only to stress the value of participation. It is only in difference – not the persistent negation of arrival, but rather the persistent acknowledgement of the necessity of separateness – that the hospitality of speculation gains ground. After all, it is only the separate other that can be appreciated or loved (Chesterton 1986:337). It is only in division that reconciliation, so central to Chesterton's view of the world, becomes possible. By being enveloped in a 'cloud of sleep and custom', the perceived world becomes stale and unwelcoming, and what was once present comes to embody absence. Nonetheless, in moving beyond familiarity into the territory of defamiliarisation, one is able to know the generosity of the ordinary once again. Speculation, for Chesterton (1993: 14; 2005:162), is therefore an issue of empathy. By being estranged from the visual object, one is able to empathise, as an outsider, with the strangeness of the commonplace (Chesterton 1957:148). By implication, it is only when one can come to terms with the alterity of the text that the text can be read for all it is worth.

Speculation is therefore a movement or a drama that is constantly in a process of renewal, return and revolution. It is not an act of pure conservatism, which leaves things alone to be open to a 'torrent of change' and degradation (Chesterton 1986:320). It is a process, so to speak, of repainting a white surface with white paint year after year so that it does not fall into the ruin and decay of absent-mindedness (Chesterton 1986:320). Chesterton is always concerned with living mindfully and deliberately. His ethics, therefore, revolves around constant reform, and relies on persistently asking questions regarding one's ideals and the practical ways in which such ideals may be carried out (Chesterton 1986:253).

Accordingly, one appreciates the riddle of being in order to recover a sense of apprehending the (visual) world afresh; in doing this, speculation becomes a symbolic expression of gratitude: that is, of not taking things for granted or simply as given. Indeed, the principle of gratitude is at the root of Chesterton's (1986: 258) ethics. It is in gratitude that one sees the opportunity, the surprise and the adventure of encountering what is there (Chesterton 1986:258). In gratitude, the image is interpreted, not as a corpse to be dissected, but as a living, breathing expression that can speak directly or indirectly to the human condition. Gratitude denounces sentimentalist, optimistic or pessimistic interpretive lenses by insisting on the complexity of meaning. Arguably, to avoid complexity is to promote the very fatigue of familiarity that Chesterton opposes. The principle of gratitude, then, while being perhaps easier to apply neatly to apprehending the rhetoric of ordinary, everyday objects, is still useful when dealing with an image such as *A few dead* (Figure 1).

As a piece of journalistic history, this black and white photograph primarily serves a descriptive function: it shows six unnamed, dead British soldiers, sprawled out on a grassy piece of land under a clear sky. It tells very little if anything of the 'bungling and confusion' or shoddy leadership that resulted in the British army's defeat that left around 300 dead, 1,000 wounded and 200 captured (Knight 1997:34). However, very simply, it does portray something of a tragedy, and one may rightly ask how Chesterton's principle of gratitude may be applicable to such an image of disaster. Chesterton (1986:267) insists that when one sees anyone fall, one should first remember that the fall is preceded by an existence that may never have been. It is in remembering, or re-remembering, that one puts together what has been fragmented in order to realise that the weight of any cataclysmic loss is felt with horror precisely because it is a stark reminder of what one was given.

It is dreadful that life has been squandered only because life is precious. The calamities of war or death are so deeply felt only because of what is deemed valuable. Even when one recognises something as being wrong or undesirable, one can at least be grateful for the ability to notice what is wrong or undesirable. In this, therefore, the ontology of the image automatically calls into question the ethics of what the image represents.

In the face of the riddle of being and the death of any human being, one is compelled to acknowledge that questions always outnumber answers and that understanding is an exception rather than the rule. Questions remain that concern life, the nature of human beings and even the possibility of transcendence. Speculation, then, becomes a humble, even mystical act of recognising that one 'can understand everything by the help of what [one] does not understand' (Chesterton 1986:231). Even something like a clear insight is shrouded in enigmas and hunches. In the light of this realisation, the possibility of understanding and interpreting an image in any absolute or comprehensive way becomes unrealistic. However, this is not to say that Chesterton is guilty of radical indecision, but rather that he simply allows interpretation to operate in a tension between understanding and non-understanding, thus avoiding both absolutism and absolute relativism. In the end, the kind of truth that the image reveals to the viewer is not only a correspondence of thought and thing in an algebraic sense, but correspondence in the sense that being operates in fellowship with other beings, always overlapping, intertwining, moving apart and reconvening.

By avoiding the fact that being is a riddle, one may slip into believing that only one correct interpretation of a visual text is in fact possible. But the sovereignty of a single viewpoint is precisely what Chesterton problematises. This is especially evident in the case of his

critique of British imperialism. In Chesterton's (1994:66) view, jingoism of any kind, whether personal, as in the case of reading an image, or political, as in the case of an empire that is always trying to expand, is highly bothersome in that it is an 'illusion of comfort'. It is an illusion, in other words, of false security rooted in a sense of ideological superiority. In fact, the Battle of Spioenkop and the photograph of *A few dead* speak of this very same idea. British arrogance resulted in a devastating loss. I would suggest that the 'illusion of comfort' ties in with the 'cloud of sleep and custom' mentioned above: it roots epistemological and interpretive understanding in the absence of attention and thus the divorcing of mind (theory) and matter (praxis), as well as separation of the self from the drama. It enforces a hermeneutic prejudice built on a hegemonic state of unquestioning unawareness that limits and restricts imagination.

Accordingly, the image of *A few dead* cannot be dealt with merely as a static, one-dimensional image. Instead, it is a gateway to a creative engagement with an entire scenario. Inasmuch as the image is descriptive of a particular situation at a single moment in a time far removed from our own, it is also loaded with mystery. No record remains of who these men are, what their stories, worldviews and beliefs were, or even what their attitudes towards the war may have been. Consequently, the reader is left, in gathering clues and fragments gleaned from the rest of the drama, to piece together what remains of the mystery. The act of speculation cannot therefore be merely a problem to be solved but is a story to be entered into. Moreover, it is not a single event offered in an instant as if interpretation were only an automatic response, but is the culmination of a series of actions and thoughts; it is, as I have already stressed, a drama in its own right. This article may be an example of such a culmination of actions and thoughts: it appears as a product or a whole that may be read

in a single sitting, but it is the result of more actions, discussions and processes than can be named or even explained, and even in its own being is not absolutely complete, but is part of a much larger conversation.

For Chesterton, being is a quest concerned with discovery and rediscovery. If mystery underpins all of life, then understanding cannot be worn out and cannot run dry. In keeping with Chesterton's reasoning, the fatigue of familiarity is an illusion perpetuated by a refusal to engage imaginatively with the world that is there (Chesterton 1993:14). Consequently, one cannot explain mystery away merely by citing or insisting upon simplistic plausibility. It is the very riddle of being that produces awe or perhaps bewilderment at the presence of anything. It is the very condition of the drama of being that is required before the reader can open himself up to the possibility of an answer.

## Being as an answer

This brings me to the second consideration of Chesterton's ontology, namely the fact that inasmuch as being is a riddle, it is also a kind of answer. Being is both mysterious and revelatory in character. The riddle or question of being is given validity by the presence of things, even while the presence of things does not necessarily solve the riddle of their being (Chesterton 2006:150). The primary underlying assumption of this component of my reading of Chesterton's ontology is that the drama of being, and thus of his dramatology, is not merely a construct even while construction, especially through language, is present. This particular consideration, as a means by which being may be understood, is bound to two further distinctions, namely that beings are separate and yet interconnected. Regarding this, Chesterton affirms the difference between objective and subjective realities, but not in the simplistic

sense that pure objectification is considered possible or even desirable. Chesterton's use of the word *objectivity* considers the act of apprehension as a complex event that in no way divorces the objective from the subjective. Chesterton does not view being as self-sufficient or self-existent, but as a web of interconnected meanings.

Chesterton (2002:158) argues that being, in the sense of *existence*, is 'secondary' in that it is an effect, the product of an inexplicable process of nature and supernature. Moreover, he suggests that being is 'dependant' in that it is bound to the being of other beings (Chesterton 2002:158). Finally, he claims that it is precisely in 'looking at being' that one is able to consider the relationship between the separateness and the interconnectedness of being. After all, one is only able to reflect on the drama of being in relation to one's own perceptions of the drama (Chesterton 2002:137). In this, Chesterton seems to be intimating that the division between the perceiving mind and perceived matter is not that clear cut. Reality and one's recognition of the reality are 'two agencies at work' and their meeting may be taken as 'a kind of marriage' (Chesterton 2002:169). The two become one. As a result, even the act of 'looking at' something is an act of 'looking with' or 'looking from within'. A similar idea is reflected in William Desmond's (1995: 468) contention that one's interpretation of "truth" is a 'community of mind and being' rather than the simplistic collaboration of distinct, univocal essences.

Chesterton (2002:168) considers the dichotomy of subjectivism and objectivism and arrives at the conclusion that subjectivism forces the imagination inwards and objectivism, outwards, causing a split between the subject and the object of his contemplation. To transcend this dichotomy, Chesterton (2002:169) suggests that in contemplating an object, the mind does not merely think about the object as if it were a self-sustaining

entity, but in a sense the mind 'actually becomes the object'; it

becomes the object but does not create the object. In other words, the object is an object; it can and does exist outside the mind, or in the absence of the mind. And therefore it enlarges the mind of which it becomes a part. The mind conquers a new province like an emperor; but only because the mind has answered the bell like a servant. The mind has opened doors and windows, because it is the natural activity of which is inside the house to find out what is outside the house. If the mind is sufficient to itself, it is insufficient for itself. For this feeding upon fact is itself; as an organ it has an object which is objective; this eating of the strange strong meat of reality.

Chesterton uses the terms *objective* and *subjective* in such a way that fracturing mind from matter is avoided. In this, the human mind is not merely a receptive *tabula rasa* that is 'wholly servile' to its environment, nor is it entirely 'creative in the sense that it paints pictures on the windows and then mistakes them for a landscape outside' (Chesterton 2002:139). This is to say that while the reaction of a person to an image, say, of *A few dead* may be uniquely subjective in that it may differ from the reaction of another person, the image remains, objectively, still a photograph of six dead men on a piece of land. If we take the source of the image to be truthful, the objective reality of the image cannot be read, for example, to be a picture of a few lazy clowns, snoozing on a hot summer's afternoon. Chesterton's reasoning emphasises the fact that being is simultaneously separate and interconnected, implying that the production of meaning is just as reliant on the dramatic horizon of the image as it is on the dramatological context of the one who is looking at it. It is precisely this tension between the separateness and interconnectedness of being, and thus of meaning, that gives rise to a particular problem related to the ethics of speculation. It is to this problem that I now turn.

Chesterton's ontology suggests that in apprehending the visual object, the viewer becomes intertwined in the drama of the image just as much as the image becomes intertwined in the drama of the reader. In this meeting of reader and image, language strains to explain the complexity of what seems at first to be a simple interaction. It is not just a transaction between an image and an audience, but a dramatic overlapping of two entire worlds of meaning. This implies that the viewer becomes an active participant in an image simply by looking at it. If a person is handed a photograph like that of *A few dead* without warning, he or she may be appalled or possibly unsurprised at all that it may signify but just by looking at the image, he or she is already implicated in its drama. The reader is tainted by the image in beholding it, guilty of the "crime" of witnessing the horror in the image even before contemplating what the image may mean. This intimates that by participating in the meaning of the image, the reader becomes a part of a larger problem, namely the problem of collective guilt. He or she becomes, in other words, a member of the race that is capable of this kind of horror rather than just a passive onlooker.

By insisting upon the impossible split between the subjective and the objective, the reader can assume distance from the image and thus a false sense of moral innocence. This would presuppose that speculation concerns only the reader's conscious thoughts and opinions on the ethics of the image apart from unconscious prejudices. Moreover, the split between the subjective and the objective assumes that it is possible for the reader to be wholly creative or wholly servile to the meaning of the text. Thus, meaning may be mistaken as something either totally constructed or absolutely obvious. Additionally, this split of the subjective from the objective affirms the positivist bias that one's historically affected consciousness can be separated from the meaning of what one sees. This would then allow

the reader to pronounce his or her views on the ethics of the image as if he or she were absent from the production of meaning. Moreover, in treating the interplay between subjectivity and objectivity as a dichotomy, the reader shrugs off responsibility for the meaning decoded in the act of seeing. But Chesterton treats speculation as a paradox, meaning that there is a tension between the subjective and the objective that needs to be kept, even while the line between them remains invisible and indiscernible. This tension suggests that speculation both liberates the reader from and subjugates him or her to the text. Again, in Chesterton's terms, the reader is both outside and inside what is being perceived. Therefore, the critical or moral high ground over the interpretation or the ethics of the image cannot be claimed insofar as other interpretations exist that remain true to the text's objectivity.

In Chesterton's (1944:178) view, and in keeping with the idea of collective guilt singled out above, moral guilt is not merely a matter of material details. Consequently, while acknowledging degrees of responsibility, ethics is not simply concerned with pointing fingers at a culprit but with moral culpability that stretches beyond the domain of individuals into the drama of the collective. To use an example, ethical judgments are not simply about accusing a man of lying or committing murder, but of acknowledging that the potential for committing such crimes is found in every human being. This is why Chesterton (2000:33) argues that judicial systems focus on punishing crimes and not just people. A terrible crime, after all, may be committed even by someone who may generally be considered "good" and good can be done even by someone who is generally considered "bad" (Chesterton 2000:34). The ethics of speculation, therefore, ought to acknowledge specificity, and thus culpability, in the distinctness of the reading subject and the visual text. But it also needs to acknowledge collective responsibility in that



the act of seeing bridges the distance between the drama of the one who reads and the drama of what is read.

This ethics is perhaps difficult to relate to an image such as *A few dead* since this particular image may appear to be fairly tame when compared to some of the more vivid images of human suffering in both visual fiction and in contemporary journalism. One may be haunted or distressed by the image, but hypothetically it may still be possible to view the image as being commonplace and tame. However, such a stoic view would simply be another example of the fatigue of familiarity. Arguably, one's apparent distance and objectivity would be the result of disposing of the tension between the subjective and the objective reality of this drama of interpretation. Unexpectedly, however, desensitisation is not the result of objective speculation, but of an overly subjective speculation; the viewer looks, but does not see since over-familiarity, and thus over-subjectivity has rendered him or her complacent. This, ironically, is the real violence of images: they can be so consistently violent in their insistence upon difference as to leave other images to appear serene and unthreatening. To use an analogy, they cry wolf so loudly and incessantly as to render the audience deaf to genuine distress. To counter such complacency, Chesterton (2008a:103) suggests that partiality and bias, whether accurate or not in their pronouncements, may be more of a sign of mental activity than impartiality, which he equates with indifference. Partiality requires persistently revisiting and checking one's original assumptions in order to ascertain their relevance to what is currently being perceived. Self-acknowledged bias is therefore vital to Chesterton and to any Chestertonian reading of a (visual) text.

Perhaps Chesterton seeks to disrupt perception precisely because it is in complacency that the line between what is right and wrong becomes irrelevant. His writings constantly promote a movement, as in the example of his travels to Battersea above, away and back. His philosophy supports a constant return or anamnesis, not for the sake of remaining objective, but rather for the purpose of ensuring that speculation remains personal. It is in the personality of things as we perceive them that they attain their significance (Chesterton 1993:104). This is to say that inasmuch as speculation does not happen apart from a community, it is still vital that the individual consider his or her own relationship with what is being perceived. Thus, the cure for impartial seeing lies in recovering one's personal connection to it. This again requires an act of the imagination: one needs to imagine what it may have been like to live inside the drama, not only to figure out the mechanics of the battle, but also, perhaps more importantly, to understand what it may have been like to have been involved in the drama that produced this image. The point is not simply to be able to list the order of events, but to be able to offer honest opinions on what such events say regarding our humanity.

Chesterton's ethics specifically opposes any scientific language that renders everything abstract and impersonal since such language enforces the illusion that reality is experienced impersonally (Chesterton 1993: 104). In this, he suggests that ethics is not concerned primarily with rules or laws, but with mysteries bound to one's entire rational and aesthetic experience of the world. In other words, it is evil that renders everything impersonal, whereas for Chesterton, the good is always personal; it is in the romance of being discussed in conclusion that the recovery of this personal good becomes the central impetus behind the ethics of speculation.

## Conclusion: Being as a romance

In considering being as a riddle, speculation is bound to the idea that the mysterious underpins what is manifest. The primary ethical response to this mystery is that of gratitude. Then, in considering the answer of being, speculation is bound to a paradoxical tension between the objective and the subjective that is always present, even when the reader is unaware of it. The ethical response to this answer of being is one of humility, which seeks to participate in this paradoxical tension while remaining aware of the personal and communal implications of the production of meaning. Finally, the riddle and the answer of being operate in an amicable tug of war that may be termed the romance of being. The romance of being is that innate desire in human beings for a sense of home or belonging in the company of what is being perceived. Chesterton (1993:9) writes that there are 'two ways of getting home; and one of them is to stay there. The other is to walk around the whole world till we come back to the same place'. This mirrors his introduction to his spiritual autobiography *Orthodoxy*:

I have often had a fancy for writing a romance about an English yachtsman who slightly miscalculated his course and discovered England under the impression that it was a new island in the South Seas. I always find, however, that I am either too busy or too lazy to write this fine work, so I may as well give it away for the purposes of philosophical illustration. There will probably be a general impression that the man who landed (armed to the teeth and talking by signs) to plant the British flag on that barbaric temple which turned out to be the Pavilion at Brighton, felt rather a fool. I am not here concerned to deny that he looked a fool. But if you imagine that he felt a fool, or at any rate that the sense

of folly was his sole or his dominant emotion, then you have not studied with sufficient delicacy the rich romantic nature of the hero of this tale. His mistake was really a most enviable mistake; and he knew it, if he was the man I take him for. What could be more delightful than to have in the same few minutes all the fascinating terrors of going abroad combined with all the humane security of coming home again? What could be better than to have all the fun of discovering South Africa without the disgusting necessity of landing there? What could be more glorious than to brace one's self up to discover New South Wales and then realize, with a gush of happy tears, that it was really old South Wales (Chesterton 1986:211-212).

Chesterton (1986:212), whose thinking here reflects his journey away from Battersea for the sake of getting to Battersea, then suggests that this parable captures for him the main problem for philosophers – a problem that I believe is particular to visual culture theorists as well: 'How can we contrive to be at once astonished at the world and yet at home in it? ... [H]ow can this world give us at once the fascination of a strange town and the comfort and honour of being our own town?' What Chesterton (1993:83) is looking for is a unity unlike that of 'modern industrial monotony and herding, which is rather congestion than communion'. He is aiming for the affirmation of difference in community without a totalisation or excess of difference (Chesterton 1993:83). He is looking for the boundaries of a playground – a sense of order 'to give room for good things to run wild' (Chesterton 1986:300).

For Chesterton, this romance as a preoccupation with coming home to the good involves constantly realigning oneself with the riddle of being in order to apprehend the answer. One steps into the unknown, perhaps to search for New South Wales, in order to discover the

known. Ultimately, it is precisely that which is hidden that allows one to perceive what is seen (Chesterton 1986:231). In other words, clear speculation is made possible because aspects of objective reality are concealed. This principle may even be found, for example, in the basic theory of colour: orange, for instance, is perceived as orange because a whole range of other colours in the spectrum of light – red, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet – have been absorbed and withheld (Bleicher 2005:6). Indeed, the human eye is capable of seeing only a small fraction of available frequencies of light. Therefore, just as staring into the sun produces blindness because too much light is seen, so being that is all answer and no riddle produces a kind of conceptual blindness: one sees too much and thus ceases to see. In excess, perception is reduced to nothing.

Therefore, when the reader encounters any image, he or she ought to begin with a deep awareness that what is seen is made possible – not only physiologically, but also conceptually – by what is unseen. What is evident is directly reliant upon what is mysterious. What is visible in an image such as *A few dead* is made possible because a great deal of visual and historical information, especially concerning the rest of the drama of the Battle of Spioenkop, is out of sight. To understand the image and to see properly what may appear at first to be obvious, one needs to align oneself with that hidden drama. This same principle may be applied to the ethics of speculation. For Chesterton (1986:268), goodness as a response to the given is primarily disclosed by means of restraint. Goodness is made manifest by whatever is held back. The corollary of this, of course, is that what is understood as unethical is that which is not restrained or that which gives way to excess, for excess

dulls both gratitude and humility (Chesterton 1986:261). The good, like the sun, cannot be seen, but is a light that allows one to see (Chesterton 2007:12). Thus, one may argue that the final piece of Chesterton's ethics of speculation is the call to the reader to align himself with the good that is so often concealed.

Chesterton (2008a:19) observes that 'when we really worship anything, we love not only its clearness but its obscurity. We exult in its very invisibility'. In this, he stresses the importance of the inner life of the individual. Even when one perceives excesses and wrongdoing, as in the image of *A few dead*, which records the consequences of human ignorance, cruelty or pride, one's concern for what is good can still remain intact. In the end, therefore, Chesterton (1986:310) is an idealist. He argues that ideals are required if anything is to be improved. He suggests that 'a thing must be loved before it is lovable' and that we must be clear about the kind of picture that we, as readers of the world, want to create in order to hope for any kind of reform (Chesterton 1986:253):

We need not debate about the mere words of evolution or progress: personally I prefer to call it reform. For reform implies form. It implies trying to shape the world in a particular image; to make it something that we already see in our minds. Evolution is a metaphor for a mere automatic unrolling. Progress is a metaphor from merely walking along a road – very likely the wrong road. But reform is a metaphor for reasonable and determined men: it means that we see a certain thing out of shape and we mean to put it into shape. And we know what shape (Chesterton 1986:310).

Chesterton's parable of the English yachtsman captures the essence of the romance of being in that it suggests that one needs, in a sense, to constantly lose what one

possesses in order to reclaim it as a gift. Additionally, one needs to continue to move away from and return to the text in order to ask questions relating to how the drama of its being relates to one's own drama: questions relating to what is concealed or revealed, what restraints or excesses are evident that speak to the heart of the human condition, what in the image contributes to one's desire to feel at home both in the riddle and the answer of being, and, finally, questions relating to how this act of speculation may contribute towards the good, not only in one's understanding, but also in one's utterances and actions. It is in such questions that one may recharge one's awareness of the art of speculation and thus become what Chesterton (2007:vi) calls an 'ocular athlete'. Chesterton (2008b:13) observes, 'If you look at a thing nine hundred and ninety-nine times, you are perfectly safe; if you look at it a thousandth time, you are in frightful danger of seeing it for the first time'. I believe this remark points to the heart of Chesterton's views on speculation, namely that by considering the way that one sees, one is nudged to take another look in the hope that what is too easily overlooked, especially that which is 'mentally invisible', may be properly noticed as if for the first time (Chesterton 2003:107).

## Note

1 The word *dramatology* is a neologism that serves two primary purposes in this article. In the first place it highlights the fact that Chesterton's hermeneutics is rooted in a dramatic understanding of the nature of being. Then, in the second place, it stresses the fact that Chesterton's hermeneutics is in no way connected to the hermeneutical tradition of Continental Philosophers like Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911),

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) and Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) and should therefore, in my view, be treated as a separate discourse.

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