

Chesterton on Sceptics, Maniacs and Materialists

Introduction

Scepticism is a subject upon which Chesterton spilled a considerable amount of ink. He was certain that there are some things we can be certain about. He was a staunch defender of the possibility of knowledge. He advanced several arguments against the sceptic, but I will be chiefly concerned with just one. Chesterton's other arguments are interesting, but are not so original. I will however, give a brief summary of some of them at the outset.

In the first chapter of *Orthodoxy*,¹ entitled "The Maniac," G.K. Chesterton offers an account of his reaction to that philosophy variously known as "materialism", "naturalism", and "physicalism". Strictly speaking, what he offers there is not an argument against materialism, but simply a parallel, or perhaps more strictly still, a parody of it. He puts the materialist alongside the maniac, the madman, and says that though he cannot persuade either of the falsehood of their beliefs, he senses that they both commit a common error. If one insisted upon saying that Chesterton was *arguing* against materialism, it would, I suppose, be an argument from analogy: the madman's beliefs are commonly held to be untenable, and they also have feature F which, according to Chesterton, is a sign of that untenability; but the materialist's beliefs also have feature F, and ought, therefore, to be considered equally untenable.²

But here I do not wish to defend a Chestertonian argument against materialism, at least not directly. Rather I want to take his thoughts about the maniac, and apply them to the sceptic. Not to the religious sceptic, but to the wholesale sceptic who claims to doubt not only the existence of God, but even the existence of his best friends. In doing this I'm not doing any violence to Chesterton's work, since one can easily extract from "The Maniac" the idea that a madman is simply a person who believes that one of those infamous sceptical scenarios is actually true.

Scepticism and Madness: The Problem

The reason why applying Chesterton's thoughts on madness to scepticism might be an interesting thing to do is that scepticism is - on all accounts - very difficult, if not impossible, to refute.

Any philosopher worth his salt is familiar with the kind of scenarios that epistemologists dream up, and which seem to have outrageously sceptical consequences. To prepare the way for these scenarios, we are first told that if we can point to nothing in our experience which justifies a belief we hold over the other possible beliefs on the same subject matter, then we

¹*Orthodoxy* was originally published in 1908. Unless otherwise stated, all this chapter's references to *Orthodoxy* will be to the edition contained in *G.K. Chesterton: Collected Works, Volume 1* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986) edited by David Dooley.

²My grounds for thinking that Chesterton does not see himself as presenting an argument against materialism and my further grounds for thinking that if he were, this is the kind of argument he is best seen as presenting are found in the same passage.

I do not for the present attempt to prove ... that materialism is untrue ... I merely remark here on the fact that both cases [madness and materialism] have the same kind of completeness and the same kind of incompleteness. You can explain a man's detention at Hanwell [the location of an assylum to the west of London] by an indifferent public by saying that it is the crucifixion of a god of whom the world is not worthy. The explanation does explain. Similarly you may explain the order in the universe by saying that all things are leaves inevitably unfolding on an utterly unconcious tree - the blind destiny of matter. The explanation does explain, though not, of course, as completely as the madman's. But the point here is that the normal mind not only objects to both, but feels the same objection. (*Orthodoxy*, p. 226)

can't be justified in believing what we do. This seems indisputable. For example, if I point to a bird and say that I can tell it's a blackbird since it is both black and a bird, someone could justifiably reply that many other birds which are not blackbirds are nevertheless black - crows and ravens for instance - and they could then go on to say that if I can't see anything in the bird I'm pointing to that would distinguish it from a crow and from a raven, then I'm not justified in claiming, or believing, that the bird in question is in fact a blackbird.

Now, here's one of the possible situations that, given the above, seems to show we can't be justified in believing anything at all. The scenario to be imagined is that our brains, having been removed from our skulls and placed in little jars, are now being manipulated by mad scientists who, by these manipulations, give us the illusion of living in a perfectly normal world. In other worlds, according to this scenario we are simply brains-in-vats.

But if we were brains-in-vats, then things would appear to us much as they do appear to us, for that is how the scientists want them to appear. Put this together with the previous point and a serious problem emerges, for since we cannot distinguish between the truth of the I-am-a-brain-in-a-vat scenario and the truth of what we ordinarily believe, we aren't justified in holding to those common sense beliefs.

Other favourites among philosophers include the dreaming hypothesis (couldn't it all just be a big dream?), the evil demon (couldn't a malicious demon, much like the mad scientists, be manipulating our experiences to make things appear normal when in fact they are not?), conspiracy theories (couldn't the people in my life all be mere actors and actresses put there for my sake? After all, if they were good actors they would always stay in character and never reveal their "off stage" identity).³

Chesterton saw this problem as keenly as anyone else. He writes that

The madman is not the man who has lost his reason. The madman is the man who has lost everything except his reason. The madman's explanation of a thing is always complete, and often in a purely rational sense satisfactory. Or, to speak more strictly, the insane explanation, if not conclusive, is at least unanswerable; this may be observed specially in the two or three commonest kinds of madness. If a man says (for instance) that men have a conspiracy against him, you cannot dispute it except by saying that all the men deny that they are conspirators; which is exactly what conspirators would do. His explanation covers the facts as much as yours. Or if a man says that he is the rightful King of England, it is no complete answer to say that the existing authorities call him mad; for if he were the King of England that might be the wisest thing for the existing authorities to do. Or if a man says that he is Jesus Christ, it is no answer to tell him that the world denies his divinity; for the world denied Christ's.

(*Orthodoxy*, p. 222.)

In another passage he says ...

For the sake of simplicity, it is easier to state the notion by saying that a man can believe that he is always in a dream. Now, obviously there can be no positive proof given to him that he is not in a dream, for the simple reason that no proof can be offered that might not be offered in a dream. (*Orthodoxy*, p. 229.)

It seems, then, that by the normal criteria of an adequate response, when dealing with scepticism such is not available. What I intend to do, therefore, is to extract from "The Maniac" the materials necessary for a response to scepticism which takes a totally different approach. Let me first clear up a possible confusion. While some philosophers have taken on scepticism directly, and tried to show that it is somehow incoherent or nonsensical, this is not

³Such scenarios are essential part of the plot in the recent films *The Matrix* and *The Truman Show*.

the only way in which we might argue against the sceptic. And it is not the kind of argument I will be drawing from Chesterton. The other way of arguing is to first say that common sense is against the sceptic, and thus that the burden of proof is upon him, and then to show that the arguments for scepticism are not convincing. The sceptic's argument had two stages it first claimed that there is an evidential parity between the "realist" hypothesis and any sceptical scenario. It is then claimed that in cases of evidential parity between the relevant possibilities, we should suspend judgement. So the first way to resist this argument will be to attempt to refute scepticism is by saying we've got evidence which cannot be accommodated by any sceptical scenario. But as we have already seen, this tactic is unlikely to succeed. The second way to resist the argument is by denying that the presence of this evidential parity should (in every case) make us suspend judgement. But there is something odd about this denial, too. We should, after all, treat like cases alike, and if there really is a parity between the two cases then this would seem to require that we suspend judgement. After all, to believe one and/or disbelieve the other would be to treat the cases differently. The only hope, then, is that there is some non-evidential disparity between the two cases, which would nevertheless be relevant to the justification of believing one over the other. It is just such a disparity that I intend to draw out from Chesterton's "The Maniac." But before this I have two other tasks to complete. The first is to outline Chesterton's general stance against scepticism. The second is to do some further ground work which is necessary if the central argument of this chapter is to make any sense.

Some of Chesterton's thoughts about Scepticism

Chesterton himself had been something of a sceptic in his teenage years. But so seriously did he take his philosophy that this inevitably brought him to a place of despair. Looking back Chesterton later believed he had been, literally, on the brink of madness. He reached a point where if he hadn't rid himself of his scepticism, his scepticism would have rid the world of him. Perhaps strangely, it was through his reading of a number of sceptically minded atheists that his mind began to move in after a different pattern. It was these thinkers, he said, who "sowed in [his] mind [his] first wild doubts of doubt." (*Orthodoxy*, p. 288.)

The idea of doubting ones doubts is a central theme in many of Chesterton's polemics against scepticism. Consider, for example, the following passage.

In dealing with the arrogant asserter of doubt, it is not the right method to tell them to stop doubting. It is rather the right method to tell him to go on doubting. To doubt a little more, to doubt every day newer and wilder things in the universe, until at last, by some strange enlightenment, he may begin to doubt himself.

Something like this has been a very popular form of argument against the sceptic. It forces the fundamental doubter to ask whether he ought to doubt that his doubts are justified.⁴ Chesterton clearly thought the answer was "no". In his work on St. Thomas Aquinas he writes...

⁴C.S. Lewis also used this form of argument. In "Fern-seed and Elephants" (in *Christian Reflections* (London: Fount, 1991) as well as in many other edited collections of Lewis's writing), He says that "Everywhere, except in theology, there has been a vigorous growth of scepticism about scepticism itself." A more precise formulation of the problem for scepticism is found in Lewis's "De Futilitate" (also in *Christian Reflections*).

There is ... no question of a total scepticism about human thought. We are always prevented from accepting total scepticism because it can be formulated only by making a tacit exception in favour of the thought we are thinking at the moment.

[E]ven those who appreciate the metaphysical depth of Thomism in other matters have expressed surprise that he does not deal at all with what many now think the main metaphysical question: whether we can prove that the primary act of recognition of any reality is real. The answer is that St. Thomas recognised instantly, what so many modern sceptics have begun to suspect rather laboriously, that a man must either answer that question in the affirmative, or else never answer any question; never ask any question; never even exist intellectually, to answer or to ask. I suppose it is true in a sense that a man can be a fundamental sceptic; but he cannot be anything else; certainly not even a defender of fundamental scepticism. ... Most fundamental sceptics appear to survive, because they are not consistently sceptical and not at all fundamental. ... That is what some of us call common sense. Either there is no philosophy, no philosophers, no thinkers, no thought, no anything, or else there is a real bridge between the mind and reality.⁵

I could continue to quote Chesterton on scepticism ad nauseum, but I close this short review of his thought with one final extract, from his essay “The Extraordinary Cabman.”

My best friends are all either bottomless sceptics or quite uncontrollable believers, so our discussion at luncheon turned upon the most ultimate and terrible ideas. And the whole argument worked out ultimately to this: that the question is whether a man can be certain of anything at all ... So we shouted at each other and shook the room; because metaphysics is the only thoroughly emotional thing. And the difference between us was very deep, because it was a difference as to the object of the whole thing called broad-mindedness or the opening of the intellect. For my friend said that he opened his intellect as the sun opens the fans of a palm tree, opening for opening’s sake, opening infinitely for ever. But I said that I opened my intellect as I opened my mouth, in order to shut it again on something solid ... And as I warmly pointed out, it would look uncommonly silly if I went on opening my mouth infinitely, for ever and ever.⁶

This final quote brings to mind a humorous and insightful remark made by a good friend⁷ to the effect that having an open-mind is alright, so long as it isn’t open at both ends. Seeing open-mindedness and scepticism, or open-mindedness and relativism as somehow equivalent is not only, I think, bad philosophy, it is also profoundly dangerous. If scepticism requires us to doubt the veracity of our own beliefs it should also lead us to doubt the veracity of other people’s beliefs. But if we all ought to doubt the veracity of other people’s beliefs, then it is far from clear why anyone should take any notice of what those around them say. Much the same goes for relativism. Far from being an outworking of open-mindedness both will, in fact, naturally lead to their protagonists being singularly closed-minded.⁸ I will leave the reader to assess the arguments presented in this section, for I must move on to the groundwork for this chapter’s main theme.

William James and Our Epistemic Aims

In his famous paper, “The Will to Believe”⁹, William James offers what might easily be understood as a response to scepticism generally but it actually offered as a response to those who make the following two claims:

⁵G.K. Chesterton, *St. Thomas Aquinas* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1943), pp. 119-20.

⁶G.K. Chesterton, “The Extraordinary Cabman” in *The Prophet of Orthodoxy*, (ed.) Russell Sparkes (London: Fount, 1997).

⁷Namely Michael Ramsden, of the Zacharias Trust.

⁸For more on this theme see Allan Bloom’s classic critique of American education, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987). For a brief presentation of the same idea, see Francis J. Beckwith and Gregory Koukl, *Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air* (Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 1998), pp. 73-4.

⁹William James’s paper “The Will to Believe” is available in many collection of James’s work, or that of pragmatists more generally. My references are to its appearance in *Pragmatism: The Classic Writings*, (ed.) H.S. Thayer (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1982).

- (a) we should never believe anything without sufficient evidence, and
- (b) on matters of religion there is no evidence either way, the issue is not evidentially decidable.

James' concedes the truth of (b), and so it would seem that, if he is to defend the rationality or at least acceptability of religious belief, he has to deny the truth of (a). But obviously there's a sense in which (a) is analytic, for "sufficient" means the same as "enough", and this in turn means "enough to justify holding the belief in question". And clearly if we don't have enough evidence to justify holding the belief in question we cannot be justified in holding that belief. The big question about (a), when interpreted in this way, is whether a state of having no evidence could be considered a state of having enough evidence. If (a) read in the analytic fashion then there is no way to rule it out ... but if the truth of (a) is intended to rule out this possibility then, (a) becomes something which can be debated.

In debating (a), James's strategy is to first point out that our two epistemic aims are to believe truths, and avoid believing falsehoods.

There are two ways of looking at our duty in the matter of opinion - ways entirely different, and yet ways about whose difference the theory of knowledge seems hitherto to have shown very little concern. *We must know the truth*; and *we must avoid error* - these are our first commandments as would-be knowers; but they are not two ways of stating an identical commandment they are two separable laws. ... Believe Truth! Shun Error!¹⁰

He points out that the attitude that is behind (a) holds that the latter of these two aims is the more important; losing the possibility of gaining the truth is preferable to risking the possibility of error. He grants that this might be the correct attitude in a great many cases, but holds that there are cases in which it is not. According to James, an option between two competing hypotheses (which cannot be decided on the basis of the evidence) is a *genuine* option if, and only if, it is *living* (both the hypotheses make a genuine appeal to our intellect, and we can't just dismiss either of them), *forced* (we cannot avoid both the hypotheses by embracing a third hypothesis or agnosticism) and *momentous* (a lot hangs upon which of the two hypotheses is true, and we can only reap all the benefits of believing the truth if we choose to believe immediately). In the case of genuine options, we can, says James, allow the aim to believe truths to take precedence over that of avoiding error, and in this way we can be justified in taking the religious position even in the absence of evidence. Something similar could, I take it, be applied to scepticism in general. James reinforces his point by the use of examples which show that there are a great many cases in which

- (i) there are beliefs we could form, the forming of which would make them more likely to be true.
- (ii) there are questions we could ask, upon which a sceptical attitude will inevitably preclude us from attaining any further evidence with which to settle that question.

James illustrates (i) with cases similar the the following: A person is out hiking on a cold and lonely mountain when he realises that he has taken a wrong turn, and that unfortunately for some reason he cannot retrace his steps. He must plough ahead and hope to find his way back to the correct path that way. But he soon comes to a place where the path has fallen away leaving a large gap which just be jumped if he is to survive, but the jump is a long and

¹⁰William James, "The Will to Believe", p. 198.

dangerous one. Our explorer could simply sit tight. But then even if he didn't freeze to death within a few days, he'd certainly die of starvation before long. He realises that his only chance of survival is to attempt the jump and the sooner the better. Being something of a pessimist our man can't help but ask himself whether or not he'll succeed. But what should he think? Given that he hasn't done the long jump for a good many years he's no well evidenced idea of how far he could jump ... but surely he's all the more likely to succeed if he believes he will, indeed we could suppose that whether he believes he'll succeed or not will make all the difference: if he believes he'll succeed he will, and if not he won't. In such a circumstance it is surely rational for him to believe he can jump far enough, even though he has no good evidence for this.

Point (ii) is illustrated by examples more like this: Suppose Joe is wondering if his friend Bill is trustworthy. How can he really find out if Bill is a good friend who ought to be trusted, without trusting them? More pertinently, suppose Joe is of a sceptical mind and begins to ask whether he can really trust anyone. This would mean that, for Joe, a person's (honest) oath of truthfulness would be just as up for question as anything else they say ... At some level trust must be fundamental, and without it Joe will get no-where. He may get duped, or he may not, but at least that way he'll find out.

Now cases like this can arise in which nothing much is lost if we withhold belief, but in cases where a lot hinges upon which is the correct attitude James says that "a rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were really there would be an irrational rule."¹¹

I think there is something profoundly right about what James is saying here, and the line of thinking I want to draw from Chesterton's work has a great deal in common with it. First, however I want to make something of a critique.

These are not our Epistemic Aims

My critique is simple, James is wrong when he says that our epistemic aims are to believe truths and avoid believing falsehoods. What I mean by this is, of course, that these are not our *only* aims. It would be absurd to deny that we had the aims that James attributes to us. The problem is that one can pursue them well without being epistemically responsible. A simple example is enough to illustrate this. Consider the case of a serious trivia fanatic, who from dawn until dusk has his head buried in encyclopedias, phone directories, train timetables, trivia books and the like. As a result of this activity he forms a huge number of true beliefs, and very few false ones. Here is a man who, if anyone does, fulfils those two epistemic aims that James has talked about. But something is clearly going wrong. It isn't just that the person in question isn't fulfilling any of his non-epistemic ends, though that is undeniably true, he isn't fulfilling his epistemic ends either. The trivia fanatic knows a lot, but none of what he knows is worth knowing.¹²

It would seem to be quite absurd that something wholly countenanced by our epistemic ends would turn out, from an epistemological perspective, not to be worth pursuing. Indeed, it is absurd. One cannot meaningfully say that one's ends are not worth pursuing. The conclusion we ought to draw, therefore, is that since trivia is not worth pursuing; our epistemic aims cannot be such as to wholly endorse that pursuit. Therefore, James was wrong in

¹¹William James, "The Will to Believe", p. 206.

¹²James was, I think, onto something when we said that the distinction between a trivial and a momentous option was an important one. Indeed, I'm suggesting that this distinction is essential to a proper understanding of our epistemic aims. This, of course, is not precisely what James thought, for he held that the aim to form beliefs on momentous (or non-trivial) matters was not itself an epistemic aim, I hold that it is.

characterising our epistemic ends as he did. It would seem then, that at the very least we must adjust our conception of our epistemic aims to (something like): believe non-trivial truths, and avoid believing falsehoods.

Chesterton says something very close to this in his introduction (“Introduction in Defence of Everything Else”) to *Orthodoxy*, where he writes, “One searches for truth, but it may be that one instinctively pursues the more extraordinary truths.”

Wagering on Common Sense “Realism”

With the point above in play, I can explain the logic of what follows in advance, but the content will need some further work. The common-sense realist (who disbelieves the sceptical scenarios) and the madman (who believes one of them) are on a logical par when it comes to satisfying our epistemic ends as James sees them, either may be right, and we’ve no evidence either way. However, if it is part and parcel of our epistemic aims that we only ought to pursue truths worth pursuing, this fact may act as a decider. Are there, one is inclined to ask, any truths worth pursuing if I’m a brain in a vat? Were it to turn out that I’m alone in the world with only my dreams (or an evil demon) for company, would there be any truths worth pursuing? Wouldn’t the truth of one of the sceptical scenarios reduce everything to the level of mere trivia?

If the implication of these rhetorical questions is right, then even if we were brains in vats (or whatever) we could never satisfy our epistemic aims by believing that we were. The only chance we have of satisfying our epistemic aims would be to believe, as we all already do, that there is a world full of people and things out there that we can observe with our senses and with which we can interact.

In other words, I’m suggesting a wager after the fashion of Pascal. The standard interpretation of whom would have us believe that he says we are to believe in God not because the evidence compels us to, but because in doing so we maximise our chances of happiness: for were we wrong in supposing God to exist our loss would be minimal, but were we wrong in supposing that He didn’t we would miss out on eternal bliss.

The parallel argument against the madman and in turn against scepticism says that in holding our common sense beliefs we maximise our chances of satisfying our epistemic aims, which could only be met if common sense realism were both true and believed to be true, under no other possible scenario are our epistemic ends fulfilled.

Objection #1: The Wager is Beside the Point

One might respond that all this is really beside the point, for such an argument couldn’t possibly show that we ought to believe as we do, but rather that we ought to hope we are right in believing as we do. One cannot simply assume, the objection goes, that the world is such as to meet our epistemic aims, though one would be fully justified in hoping that it is.

But in fact it is this objection that is entirely beside the point, hoping that the world is such as to enable us to satisfy our epistemic ends does nothing to further those ends. If we accept the ends, we are compelled to do our best to satisfy them, and as justified as hope might be, it will not help us in that respect, only belief will.

Objection #2: The Argument Incorrectly Characterises the Trivia Fanatic’s Failing

A more pertinent objection, and one which will require me to reformulate the argument somewhat, is that even after the adjustment from James I haven’t correctly characterised our epistemic ends. There is, after all, another kind of fanatic who makes much the same error as the first, but manages to meet our aims as I’ve characterised them above. This fanatic also buries his head in books, but not in trivia books, but history and science books. He acquires

facts, and significant and important facts such as how old the universe is, the causes of the Second World War and the like. Still, all he does is acquire facts, without any attempt to piece them together, to arrange them in such a way as to allow those facts to illuminate one another. In other words, according to this objection, the problem is not that the fanatics are not acquiring significant or important truths; it is that though having *knowledge* they lack *understanding*. What we aim at, according to this objection is not the acquisition of knowledge, but the acquisition of understanding, to which the acquisition of knowledge is a means. But, the objection continues, since the truth of a sceptical scenario doesn't rule out the possibility of arranging true beliefs in such a way as to illuminate one another, the disanalogy between common-sense realism and madness is removed, and the wager fails.

Again I'm willing to grant a lot of this, what I deny is that the two fanatics are exactly parallel. They do both fail to acquire understanding, and that is, I admit, an epistemic failing. But I suggest that where the first fanatic differs from the second is in the subject matter of their beliefs, and that the subject matter does make a difference. Suppose that the second fanatic did come to arrange their belief in a way which allowed them to illuminate one another, they would then seem to be a model epistemic agent. But is this true of the first fanatic? The subject matter has remained unchanged, and it remains trivial. We earlier complained that he knew a lot, but that none of it was worth knowing, can't we equally say that even with the proposed changes while he understands a great deal, none of it is worth understanding? This does seem to be the case, or at least it seems that way to me. Even if one denies that this is true of the revamped trivia fanatic one might still hold that it is true of the maniac. One might still go on to say that there is the possibility that some understanding is not worth having, and that the maniac seems to be someone who reveals such a possibility. Indeed, Chesterton thought this held for the materialist too.

As an explanation of the world, materialism has a sort of insane simplicity. It has just the quality of the madman's argument; we have at once the sense of it covering everything and the sense of it leaving everything out. Contemplate some able and sincere materialist ... and you will have exactly this unique sensation. He understands everything, and everything does not seem worth understanding. His cosmos may be complete ... but still his cosmos is smaller than our world. (*Orthodoxy*, p. 225.)

Now, at the moment I'm not concerning myself with the implications for materialism, but rather with the implications for madness and scepticism. Chesterton clearly thought that the madman's world had this same feature, that even if we came to fully understand such a world, that understanding wouldn't be worth having. You might come to understand everything and everything not be worth understanding.

As before, if Chesterton is right we once more have the material for constructing a wager in favour of common sense. If our chief epistemic aim is to have understanding, and indeed to have understanding worth having (again there are paradoxes involved in saying that things wholly endorsed by our epistemic ends might not, even from an epistemic point of view, be worth pursuing), then this may be an aim that could only be satisfied if we stick with our common sense beliefs about the world. If we wager upon the truth of a sceptical scenario, then even if we are right we won't satisfy our epistemic ends, for our ends are more than truth, and more than understanding. For the understanding must be understanding worth having, and, if Chesterton is right, we can only have this if we are right in our common sense beliefs.

But is Chesterton right? Is it true to say that if any of the sceptical scenarios are true then the world is not worth understanding? I think the answer must be a resounding yes. Isn't this, after all, precisely what we feel the first time we encounter scepticism? We inhale sharply as

we ask ourselves, “what if the world really were that way?” We worry that not only would all our current activities be pointless, but that all possible activities would be pointless ... even the activity of coming to understand the world around or - if it’s the dreaming hypothesis which is true - within us. A way to bring this out is to realise that significant understanding has to do with the understanding of significant things, and there are very few, if any, things of significance within the madman’s world. The world of the madman is just a pale imitation, hardly deserving to be called a world at all. Chesterton refers to such a world as “thin” or “small”, with maniacs, he says there is an

exhaustive reason with a contracted common sense. They are universal only in the sense that they take one thin explanation and stretch it very far. But a pattern can stretch for ever and still be a small pattern. They see a chess-board white on black, and if the universe is paved with it, it is still white on black ... they cannot alter their standpoint; they cannot make a mental effort and suddenly see it black on white.

(*Orthodoxy*, p. 225.)

This is surely right, for the maniac’s *whole world* consists in, or at least in something akin to, “the mad scientists make it appear as if” Such a world is indeed a thin, small one. Chesterton comments that the world of the madman, and of the materialist is, “the smallest hole that a man can hide his head in.”

Objection #3: Some of the Sceptical Scenario’s Mentioned Don’t make the World a “Small” or “Thin” One.

One might be tempted to reply that a number of the maniacal scenarios don’t seem to make the world “small” at all. If I believe myself to be God, surely (the objection goes) I take at least one thing, namely myself, to be of utmost importance and of genuine significance. Something similar might be argued in the case of conspiracy theories, the one conspired against becomes incredibly important.

A good response would be that I needn’t hold that all manic scenarios have the consequence if everything being unimportant, but that in reality I only need to hold that the more stringent of the scenarios do.¹³ Still it seems that even in the case of conspiracy theories and God complexes one might hold Chesterton to be fundamentally correct.

Let’s take the God-complex first. Believing oneself to be god requires a rather odd view of things. It requires a person to believe that there is nothing else in existence as great, good, important or powerful as they are. Suppose that this were indeed the case, it wouldn’t necessarily follow that the person in question was very great, good, important or powerful. It might rather be the case that everything, including “god” is rather pathetic. For if I turned out to be god, and nothing were greater than me, since I am not much of a god, this could not be much of a world. This point also was made by Chesterton: “if the man in Hanwell is the real God, he is not much of a god ... The deity is less divine than many men.” (*Orthodoxy*, p. 226.) Moving on to the “conspiracy theorist”, doesn’t he regard himself as incredibly important? At first sight it would seem odd to say no, for if he didn’t how could he possibly explain why the conspiracy is against him rather than anyone else? So I’ll grant, just for a moment that the conspiracy theorist does regard themselves as important. But if that is correct we must surely go on to say that no-one else in such a world would be very important ... for everyone else is always attending to the “madman’s” business. But then just as with the God-complex, if I turn out to be the most important person that must mean that there are no genuinely important

¹³Such as, the evil demon, the dreaming hypothesis, the brains-in-a-vat scenario. Other forms of madness at least leave the “external world”, and our contact with it intact.

people. One might try to argue that if the conspiracy is against a certain person the conspirers must at least regard that person as important in some sense, and perhaps being important and being regarded as such are too closely linked to make the move suggested above. But it can surely be questioned whether someone who is the centre of attention, whose life is being subtly controlled and manipulated is being regarded as important. Did the press regard Princess Diana as important? Was Truman, in the film *The Truman Show* (see footnote 3) being regarded as important? The answer is clearly “no”. In fact these people are being regarded as so trivial that their real wishes just don’t matter. Surely if you really regarded someone as important you would tell them the truth once in a while.

Objection #4: The Wager Overlooks James’s Second Epistemic Aim

According to this objection the argument appears to work because it has shifted our attention onto the way that James misformulated our positive epistemic aim. He said that that aim was to pursue truths, but this has been shown to be incorrect. But little has been said against James’s formulation of the negative aim, to avoid believing falsehood’s. The argument has shown that a person who truly believes that he is a brain-in-a-vat still fails to satisfy his epistemic aims, but it has not been shown that the sceptic fails to do so, for he does satisfy James’s second epistemic aim, he doesn’t form any false beliefs. Therefore, though the wager may help someone decide what to believe, it won’t help them decide whether to believe anything at all.

This is a cunning objection indeed. But I suspect that while having a very good point, which does need a response, it is really a cheat. The first way in which the objection cheats is that while pointing out that the wager has overlooked the fact that the sceptic satisfies James’s second epistemic aim, it overlooks the fact that if common sense is correct, this aim is also satisfied by the belief in the external world. Consider the following table.¹⁴

Scenario Under Consideration	Are the Aims Satisfied?					
	Realist		Sceptic		Maniac	
	Aim 1	Aim 2	Aim 1	Aim 2	Aim 1	Aim 2
Realist is correct	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No
Maniac is correct	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
Satisfaction Totals	Yes=2	No=2	Yes=2	No=2	Yes=1	No=3

While placing the realist and the sceptic on a par in terms of the satisfaction of our aims, this table at least shows that scepticism isn’t more preferable than realism due to satisfying the second of our aim. This may be thought insufficient, since it doesn’t show that we should wager on realism, but this overlooks the fact that, as mentioned earlier, there are two ways of arguing against scepticism. The first was to attempt to show directly that we are justified in holding the beliefs that we do. The second was to point out that the burden of proof is on the sceptic, and then to show that his arguments don’t demand us to agree. Scepticism rears its head due to a parity between the realists beliefs and those of the maniac, but now it is being objected that the wager fails because there remains a parity between the realists commitments and those of the sceptic. This may be true, but it is not the point at issue.

¹⁴I’m using “realist” here to mean a person who believes what we all do believe, that there is a real world out there which is much as we seem to experience it to be. The Maniac, is (as previously) someone who believes a sceptical scenario to be true. By “Aim 1”, I mean the aim to achieve understanding worth achieving, and by “Aim 2” I mean the aim not to form any false beliefs.

But much more can be said here. Firstly, some of James' comments are again pertinent. Near the outset I pointed out that it is the parity of two cases that makes it (logically) difficult to treat them differently, but in that case what justification does the sceptic have for preferring his scepticism over realism? The only obvious answer is that somehow the second epistemic aim is more important than the second, but this is far from obviously true. But the most important reply to this objection must be that once we have introduced understanding (worth having) as an epistemic aim, it may turn out that the second aim is in fact redundant. Of course, this will still mean that one should try to avoid forming false beliefs but only as a means to gaining understanding (worth having) but if one refrains from forming any beliefs at all, then the purpose of the injunction not to form false beliefs is undermined. Thus the objection fails, because it assumes that the discussion of our epistemic aims has left the aim not to form false beliefs untouched, and this assumption is at least gratuitous and indeed probably false. The result will be that if the table above is reformulated to accommodate this thought, only realism will have any chance of satisfying any epistemic aims, and is therefore, the only credible option.

Conclusion

The central argument of this chapter began by exploring our epistemic ends. We began with William James, but by the time we had accommodated some evident counter-examples (namely the various kinds of trivia fanatics) our understanding of our epistemic ends had changed immensely. The crucial, and in a sense obvious, observation was that our epistemic ends must (from an epistemic point of view) be worth satisfying, and that if our formulation of our epistemic ends countenanced a pursuit in which it is not worth succeeding, that formulation must be incorrect. The other important point was that if a sceptical scenario turned out to be true, our epistemic ends could not be satisfied, because a world such as these scenarios describe is a world which is not worth understanding. Thus the only hope we have of satisfying our epistemic ends is in continuing to believe what all sane men and women have believed all along.

One final point is worth making. If this argument against scepticism and the rationality of the maniacs position succeeds, it still isn't the kind of thing one should necessarily confront the true sceptic or maniac with. Rather the argument may be seen as something which justifies Chesterton more effective strategy...

[I]f you or I were dealing with a mind that was growing morbid, we should be chiefly concerned not so much to give it arguments as to give it air, to convince it that there was something cleaner and cooler outside the suffocation of a single argument. Suppose, it were the case of a man who accused everybody of conspiring against him. If we could express our deepest feelings of protest and appeal against this obsession, I suppose we should say something like this: "Oh, I admit that you have your case and have it by heart, and that many things do fit into other things as you say. I admit that your explanation explains a great deal; but what a great amount it leaves out! Are there no other stories in the world except yours; and are all men busy with your business? Suppose we grant the details; perhaps when the man in the street did not seem to see you it was only his cunning; perhaps when the policeman asked you your name it was only because he knew it already. But how much happier you would be if you only knew that these people cared nothing about you! How much larger your life would be if your self could become smaller in it; if you could really look at other men with common curiosity and pleasure; if you could see them walking as they are in their sunny selfishness and their virile indifference! You would begin to be interested in them, because that were not interested in you. You would break out of this tiny and tawdry theatre in which your own little plot is always being played, and you would find yourself under a freer sky, in a street full of splendid strangers." (*Orthodoxy*, P. 223)