

The Axiom Murder Case



or

He Was Only

a Poached Egg



Will post-postmodern man get away with murder?

An oldfashionedhistory™ commentary by
Bill Kitchens

It was late and I was tired, but not sleepy. So I settled into my easy chair to continue reading English writer, raconteur, and “Apostle of common sense” G. K. Chesterton’s old fashioned remedy for the world’s perennial problem of cosmic confusion – **Orthodoxy**. Chesterton was deeply concerned with the moral, and mental, state of the world in his day; but he faced a problem trying to communicate serious, eternal truths to people of the modern world.

Or rather, the modern world has a problem seriously considering such matters. When Chesterton began to ponder how to convince a madman that he (the madman, that is) was not a poached egg, my mind began to wander into its own schemes to deal with that all too relevant question. After all, Chesterton’s approach, although a model of logic, was terribly dated (written in 1909) and not at all suitable for today.

Now, Chesterton’s dilemma was that philosophical ‘Modernism’ has rendered objective facts, or objective truth if you will, irrelevant. However, there was still, at that time, a distinction to be understood between sane and insane. Chesterton proposed that all intellectual argument begin in the search for a philosophy of sanity, and that “begins at the gate of the madhouse”. Chesterton obligingly conceded that while ‘A’ had every right to consider himself a poached egg, he did not have a right to behave in an un-poached egg like fashion – walking, talking, smoking a cigarette, etc.

I’m afraid that today though, with our world having struggled through Modernism, Postmodernism, and now plunging headlong into Post-Postmodernism, even the distinction between sane and insane has become irrelevant. So new approaches must be discovered to engage the modern world in the age old quest for truth.

The problem runs like this: ‘A’, formerly Mr. A, after painful soul searching, has come to the conclusion that he is really a poached egg. His friend, we’ll call him ‘Mr. B’, is very disturbed for his friend’s sake and tries to dissuade him of that idea.

“My dear friend,” Mr. B begins, “let us look at this logically. You stand on two legs, walk and talk, read and write, eat and drink, even smoke cigarettes; poached eggs don’t do that. So you are certainly not a poached egg.”

But to that apparently irrefutable logic, ‘A’ replies huffily, “It is you, sir, whose logic is gravely in error. As you correctly note, I do those activities you list, even down to smoking this cigarette. It should be apparent, then, even to someone of the lowest intellect, that poached eggs most certainly do engage in those activities.”

A thrust of irrefutable logic parried by irrefutable logic – a draw. No one is so sure of his reason as a madman, Chesterton quipped. He was quite right; appeals to reason and logic are often rather limited in effect. Chesterton likened logic to circles, all logical arguments make a closure, like a circle – but some circles are larger than others. The circles of a lunatic’s logic are quite small, sometimes centering on only one point, excluding all others.

So what to do about the logical impasse between A and B? A rule of logic tells us that contradictory truths cannot exist, one must be correct, the others must be false. But in the postmodern world where nothing is absolute except the reign of relativism, we are not allowed to distinguish between true and false; thus it must be the rule of logic that is abandoned.

The problem, of course, goes far deeper than the frailties of logical argument. What the modern western world suffers from is a case of bad axioms. Axioms are the bedrock certainties upon which logic operates. Axioms lay beneath the plow layer of reason, everything else has to be arranged around them. They are tough to dig out, tough even to recognize; as everything is arranged to fit them, they seem perfectly natural and correct. Yet axioms, like the logical circle that is too small, often simply don’t fit the facts.

Mr. B holds to old fashioned axioms, that there are objective truths, and that something is what it objectively appears to be. ‘A’ on the other hand, is into more subjective axioms; he is what he feels that he is, or ought to be in a perfect world.

What are we to do with these conflicting axioms? A few scenarios readily come to mind, let's test them out. For argument's sake, strictly for argument's sake, let us assume that 'A' really is mistaken in his belief that he is a poached egg. Shall we say: "You sir, are obviously not a poached egg. Be so good as to cease pretending to be one."

No, no, noooo! That is an argument from authority and is unthinkable in today's world. Even to humor such a one would be considered insensitive and judgmental – "Well, even a poached egg must behave in society in a certain way old fellow; you mustn't take a knife and fork and consume yourself for breakfast." No, no, NO!

Today we must patronize such a one; "Well, as you...(by the way, how do you prefer to be addressed?) Well, 'Sunny', as you are the poached egg, not I, what can I do to make you feel more at ease and welcome? Knife and fork? Why, in the drawer I believe."

And so we have the tragedy of the former Mr. A, who came to believe that he was a poached egg, and society was forced by its own rules of behavior to accept that. It was the old axioms that led to the rise of civilization – that there was a Creator, whose created universe operated upon immutable truths, discoverable by reason and observation. But those old axioms were considered too dangerous for moderns to play with. The new axiom of axioms is that there is no absolute truth and it is impermissible even to refer to them.

So Mr. A can become a poached egg if he feels like it, males can become female if in the mood, and vice versa, white can be black or "native American" at will and those choices are only the beginning. Arms and legs that "don't feel like they belong to me" can be cut off at will. The boundaries of insanity are receding into the far distance. Zealots wielding the new axioms are rapidly chopping down the pillars of society – and it is collapsing upon us.

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