The Perfect Game

Essay · 5 min read

“The moment the game is perfect the game disappears.” G. K. Chesterton

The fourth piece in G. K. Chesterton’s *Tremendous Trifles* is built on a simple game of croquet. The author is being badly beaten in a match against his opponent, Parkinson, yet despite the defeat he carries the argument with undoubted superiority. And the subject of the argument is nothing other than the game they are playing. Chesterton says that for all his talent and skill at the game, Parkinson does not really love it. That he plays so well is itself the sign that he does not love the game. The one who really loves the game is Chesterton himself, though he plays badly. Because of the two of them, only he can reach the unseen, unfelt metaphysical pleasure of the game.

We hold a stubborn idea that greatness must come together with being one of a kind. I have no idea why this is, but some theological ideas may be waiting in the background. We believe that perfection and greatness can only be found in God, and that God is one of a kind. In some cases this goes beyond a simple belief, and so we tie these two ideas together with bonds that cannot be broken. But is that really so for us mortals?

Any work comes with the wish, the longing and the effort put into it. So when someone who fails at something keeps at it anyway, it is out of pure love for the pursuit. Take a musician, for example, and imagine that this musician plays the guitar very well. Suppose their fingers dance on the strings more beautifully than the most gifted dancer, and that with every delicate touch the guitar finds its voice. A musician like that cannot possibly love music and music alone. On the contrary, this musician loves being a musician. The person who has never touched a guitar before, who touches the strings without knowing how and yet keeps at it in spite of the noise, is the one in love with music itself, because for them it is labour and effort.

To stay with the same example: when a musician gets better through long practice, effort and toil, it is because their way of seeing music has changed and music has been pushed into second place. The pure pursuit of music was no longer enough for them. They had to be better. We watch their priorities change over time. And so what is left in their hands is only a reflection of the love for the nature of the act, a pale piece without any shine. Yet the pursuit itself is the true measure of being good, and it is what fills the act. Fingers wandering thoughtlessly over the strings are, quite simply, not worth doing. Because an act done without thought is wrong in itself.

There is a hidden meaning inside the meaning of a pursuit. Those who succeed at it get so caught up in material things that they cannot see what is hidden. Those who cannot succeed give themselves to understanding what is abstract. So the truth shows itself only to those who keep at a pursuit just because they love it, even if they are not good at it. This alone shows how noble a pursuit the imperfect lose themselves in. Those who seek perfection, on the other hand, lost among show and splendour and stuck between the formal moulds of the material universe, will never reach the true pleasure of the pursuit.

Like music, reading has to be done only for the sake of reading. Only then can words come together into meaningful wholes and open new paths in the mind. Otherwise a person stays a mere reader. A good reader reads, but a bad reader loves to read. This brings us back to how priorities change in the things we are good at. Being good, being skilled, at anything gives rise to illusions in the mind. And so a person loves what they do not for the plain reason of doing it, but for what will come after.

“It is only we who play badly who love the Game itself.”

At first I took these words of Gilbert Keith Chesterton for the relentless self-justification of someone who cannot do his work well. But once you really start to think about what he says, you realise Chesterton is right. The next question you cannot help asking is: what about those who do what they love very well, precisely because they love it? On this the author answers you at once: “If you could put this blue ball through that distant hoop as easily as you could

pick it up with your hand, then you would not put it through that hoop any more than you pick it up with your hand; it would not be worth doing. If you could play unerringly you would not play at all."

At this point it has to be said that we really are surrounded by a simple blindfold. Our mind convinces us that we are doing the things we want to do. It wants us to fall asleep easily when we lay our heads on the pillow at night. It does this so deeply and so quietly that we do not realise we spend our whole lives among delusions. We believe we love the things we do well, but this is a simple illusion. Look again at the things you do. Did you draw your drawings to feel the pleasure of really drawing? Did you write your writing to rebuild the meanings of words?

It is worth saying that in daily life we see all too often that people who do something for what they will get in return do not succeed at it. What prize or money could be worth more than the very act a person takes pleasure in doing? I will even dare to take my claim one step further and ask: what treasure could be worth more than an act a person does badly but keeps on doing?

That is why the amateur spirit is praised, and always remembered with the excitement of the heart. Being good at anything blocks the way to true happiness and turns the act into a habit. If you are bad at what you do, keep doing it, because that shows you love the thing itself.

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Translated from my Turkish original for this site. Chesterton is quoted in his own words, from the Project Gutenberg edition of Tremendous Trifles.