

CHESTERTON'S MIND AND METHOD

dgboland © 2008

There are two characteristics of Chesterton's thinking that stand out against the background of the thinking of his opponents. They happen to coincide with the two characteristics of St. Thomas's mind highlighted by the late Pope John Paul II in an address he gave to Catholic youth. "The philosophy of St. Thomas deserves to be attentively studied and accepted with conviction by the youth of our time by reason of its spirit of **openness** and **universalism**; characteristics which are hard to find in many trends of contemporary thought." (highlighting mine) Interestingly enough, the present pope has in recent days pointed to the same characteristics of St. Paul's mind: "The universalistic vision typical of St. Paul's personality, at least of the Christian Paul after the event on the road to Damascus, certainly owes its basic impetus to faith in Jesus Christ, inasmuch as the figure of the Risen One goes beyond that of any particularistic restriction." (*Benedict XVI Gen. Aud. 02/07/08*)

In fact the lack of these characteristics of mind generally and in particular in the academic world go a long way to explaining the lack of acceptance of Chesterton's due place in the general culture and in the intellectual society of the universities (something incidentally he has in common with St. Paul and St. Thomas). He is admired for his "brilliance" and then ignored because he defends principles and institutions which are, to the modern mind, "indefensible". His ideas are accepted, and his propositions quoted in great number, but out of their context in which is being defended some universal truth (unpalatable to the modern mind).

Such principles and institutions, however, are not defensible only to a closed mind imbued as a consequence with "particularism". It is not the concentration on the particular, however, that is a fault; only the denial or ignoring of the universal. This goes with the fundamental closing of the mind that characterises much of modern thinking.

Ever since the beginning of modern thought, going right back to Descartes, we have been "sold" the sceptic's presupposition, that we have to begin with doubt, from which we cannot reach objective reality. The modern mind has been closed to the world outside and therefore is no longer open to truth. Descartes's argument for this has seemed to be unanswerable. We are deceived in some things. Must it not be at least possible that we are deceived in all things? And if this is a possibility how can we be sure that anything is true?

It is not possible to imagine a more totally closed mind. Upon such an abysmal basis it is not possible to defend any principles whether theoretical or practical. This includes, from a social point of view, the impossibility of defending the fundamental integrity of any institution, human or divine (a position that is most convenient when criticising the Catholic Church). Most, of course, do not, since one cannot, operate upon this sceptical presupposition. But, when it comes to the crunch, many have difficulty in

defending their “beliefs” in first principles and in justifying social institutions, no matter how basic, such as the family. For the discussions are required to be conducted in a sceptical manner, which, according to the sophistical mode of deception, is referred to euphemistically as “critical thinking”.

As is evident from its long-standing prominence in modern thinking, it is not easy to dislodge this kind of mental blindness. But to a truly open mind the sophistry of the modern position is obvious. The sceptical presupposition is self-refuting and the fallacies in the argument are palpable. But the refutation will be convincing only if one retains a healthy universalism.

It is not the place here to go fully into refuting this mental dead end. We can, however, indicate some of the obvious deficiencies of adopting such a mental stance. If one person is mistaken in some respects does it necessarily follow that he is mistaken in all respects? The illogical transit is patent. The same applies if we translate that into a problematic argument: it is possible to be mistaken sometimes, therefore it is possible to be mistaken always. But in the way the argument is presented there is a transit from an assertion of a fact in the premises to the assertion of a possibility in the conclusion, which gives the conclusion an air of verisimilitude. The argument as such however has clearly no logical worth.

Moreover, one is arguing from particular evils (falsehoods) to a universal evil (total lack of any awareness of truth). This is self-refuting for one cannot know what falsity means unless one knows what truth is. Therefore it is intrinsically impossible to recognise a falsity if there is no knowledge of truth. The very fact that we are aware of deception in some cases, then, is proof of being able to recognise the truth.

Following upon this, one cannot know the meaning of truth without knowing things other than the mind. For, if it is anything, truth is a matching of thought and things. Apart from being self-refuting, the denial of our knowledge of things in themselves amounts not only to a closing of the mind but also to a closing of one's eyes (indeed of our senses generally). That is to say it is refusal to accept the evidence of our senses and intellect, the very two kinds of knowledge that we operate by, and this is imposed upon us by those who pride themselves upon being moved only by evidence.

Chesterton had his own method of dealing with this modern refusal to acknowledge the universality of truth and the particularity of error, to which we will advert below. Sufficient for our purposes here is to draw attention to the fact of his having to operate in an intellectual culture characterised to a large extent by a mentality opposed to openness and universalism. Another way of putting this is to say that he was engaging in debate in an intellectual culture that was decidedly anti-catholic. This need not be taken in the religious sense for “catholic” is simply the Greek for “universal”.

My purpose here is to look at the situation with which Chesterton had to deal mainly from the level of reason or philosophy. For it is here that the mental breakdown

has occurred. It is no coincidence that it is connected with an anti-catholicism in the religious sense, which of course he also famously contended with. But we are talking here primarily about openness and universalism in philosophical discussion. Thus it is that Chesterton saw the modern problem in his time more as a mental breakdown (analogous to insanity) than a moral one. Of course, he could see and was thus able to predict the serious consequences for society, of the difficulties of being able to defend and retain its moral principles and safeguard its fundamental institutions, without a firm grasp on reality and a commitment to the truth. But, at least in his day, it was apparent that the defence of reason was the urgent need.

Those who know Chesterton will be aware of his association of logic and reason with lunacy rather than sanity. But such use of paradox derived from the nature of the intellectual problem with which he had to deal. For, his opponents, like the lunatic, were operating beyond the range of reason in the sense of logic. They were supposing the inexistence of the immediate principles of the human intellect, upon which logic has to depend. Chesterton's primary task, then, was not to argue from premises universally acknowledged as true or agreed upon to necessary conclusions, but somehow to show the idiocy of denying the obvious. This provides the clue to his method. To accuse him therefore of not being logical (or deductive) is rather to miss the point of what he was trying to do. He did not of course eschew the use of logic in the strict sense where called for but he was a master not only of Analytic but of all the rational arts which Aristotle listed as also including Dialectic (and Sophistic, i.e. in detecting it) Rhetoric and Poietic (or the literary arts), come to be known as Liberal Arts.

He brought his natural genius in all these arts to bear upon moving his compatriots away from their self-imposed exile from normal human company, in the form of absolute scepticism. To do this he used all the means of argument persuasion and enticement we have at our disposal, and did so with a brilliancy that could not be denied. Of strict or direct logical proof there was little call for, because he needed to find a way not to conclusions but to principles. Refutation or indirect logical proof was called for, to show the absurdity of the position adopted by his opponents, virtually all his intellectual compatriots of any note. It also meant the use of dialectical reasoning rather than analytical, the approach of Socrates rather than that of Aristotle, if you like. Typically, the academic world would accuse him of being a sophist, as was the accusation against Socrates by his contemporaries.

When it comes to matters of faith beyond reason strict logical proof, direct or indirect, is not appropriate, but Chesterton here used all the other liberal arts to telling effect. In regard to the liberal arts there has probably been no more complete genius than Chesterton. He was equally, if not more so, at home in the literary arts which would be covered by what Aristotle called Rhetoric and Poietic. These too he brought to bear in defence of the whole truth.

Chesterton was just as telling in his defence of the Catholic faith as in his defence

of reason. Indeed, at the end of his life Pope Pius XI conferred upon him the title “Defensor Fidei”. But as already noted we are not primarily concerned here with his defence of the Faith, though it should be kept in mind that many combine a virulent anti-Catholicism (rationalism) with their anti-catholic (particularist) philosophy.

Many wonder why, if Chesterton was such an intellectual genius, he was not also a professor, but contented himself with being a mere journalist. One can perhaps see from the above some reason why he would not have been offered an academic post or, if he had, obtained academic honours. But one also has to remember that it is only in relatively recent times that intellectual excellence has been generally associated with a university position. In fact the particularism that dominated and still dominates academic studies (with the closure of the mind adverted to almost a pre-requirement) is inimical to the universalism of people such as Chesterton. He was in this regard a victim of his own catholicity in more senses than one.

But even today literary and poetic productions are more to be found outside academia than within it. So it is not surprising that he found his place in the intellectual culture of the time outside the universities. As it was, journalism was the most accessible way for someone such as Chesterton to communicate his ideas and defend his faith. The universalist issues were such as to affect everyone and of the greatest practical social significance. They were more than matters of “academic interest”; the fate of western civilization (derived as it was from Catholicism) was under threat.

This is relevant to Chesterton's championing of the common man as the last repository of common sense and sanity in a world where the so called sages or men of science had lost touch with reality. For the clever may be able to dupe the leaders of a society, but they cannot fool all the people, especially those closest to the ground (reality). Similarly, he saw the oppressed poor as the last refuge of honesty and justice. In the world of practical politics he exercised his own “option for the poor”.

Some see Chesterton's thoughts in this regard as overly romanticized – something akin to his belief in the symbolic truth of fairy tales. But they fail to see, as he did, the fund of natural wisdom and prudence that belongs to human nature despite the effects of original sin. In our day, with the extent of brainwashing carried out through the modern means of communication, one may begin to doubt how any wisdom and goodness could remain. But it is impossible to eradicate entirely the natural goodness and insight of the common people.

This is counter to the conventional wisdom that financial success and social position are the marks of intelligence and enterprise and the fact that the equivalent of particularism in the social order, namely, the politico-economic theory of Capitalism, would want us to believe that the poor are victims of their own ignorance or lack of initiative. It is in defence of the poor that Chesterton's anger almost got the better of him: “Most of the excuses which serve the capitalists as masks are, of course, the excuses of hypocrites.” (*Utopia of Usurers*)

Finally, we might note a difference between the universalist and the particularist in the approach to the discussion of matters. The former is interested, as Aristotle noted, more in the essentials than in the accidentals, and in the substance of things rather than in the details. Moreover, such a one is more concerned to know the truth about things than the opinions people (no matter how expert) hold on the matter. As St. Thomas remarks in this regard: "*Studium philosophiae non est ad hoc quod sciatur quid homines senserint, sed qualiter se habet veritas rerum*". (In de caelo, bk. I, l. 22, n. 8) Elsewhere St. Thomas made this clear in other terms: "it does not belong to the perfection of my intellect to know what many have said but how the truth of things has itself."

The particularists, by contrast, are dedicated to detail and citation of opinions on the question. Almost of necessity they are more interested in discussing the opinions of those expert in the subject than in addressing the truth or otherwise of the subject itself. For they exclude, a priori, the possibility of arriving at the truth. Hence, their works are loaded with bibliographies of great length.

This is not to say that learning is unimportant. Aristotle, St. Thomas and Chesterton were prodigious in their knowledge of what had been said on the subjects discussed by them. It is rather a question of the relative importance to be given to learning as opposed to the ascertainment of the truth of the question, i.e. to the acquisition of wisdom with regard to the matter concerned. Chesterton, like St. Thomas, relied on his memory for much of his use of authorities. The modern scholar may be able to point to instances where Chesterton or St. Thomas has misquoted, or cited the wrong author. But this is not an essential defect; it does not necessarily affect the substance of the argument.

Chesterton's conversion to Catholicism simply completed in his mind, and in truth, the openness and universalism which belonged to his philosophy. Nothing seemed more natural to him than the marriage of reason with faith to be found in Catholicism. Yet the anti-catholicism in both senses of the age in which he lived, and of our own age, refused and will continue to refuse him his rightful claim to greatness.