

CHESTER THOUGHT

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In his book “The Common Man” Chesterton has a chapter entitled “The Revival of Philosophy – Why?” It begins:

“The best reason for a revival of philosophy is that unless a man has a philosophy certain horrible things will happen to him. He will be practical; he will be progressive; he will cultivate efficiency; he will trust in evolution; he will do the work that lies nearest; he will devote himself to deeds, not words. Thus, struck down by blow after blow of blind stupidity and random fate, he will stagger on to a miserable death with no comfort but a series of catchwords; such as those which I have catalogued above. Those things are simply substitutes for thoughts. In some cases they are tags and tail-ends of somebody else’s thinking. That means that a man who refuses to have his own philosophy will not even have the advantage of a brute beast, and be left to his own instincts. He will only have the use of scraps of somebody else’s philosophy; which the beasts do not have to inherit; hence their happiness. Men have always one of two things: either a complete and conscious philosophy or the unconscious acceptance of broken bits of some incomplete and shattered and often discredited philosophy. Such broken bits are the phrases I have quoted: efficiency and evolution and the rest.”

Later he goes on to say:

“Some people fear that philosophy will bore and bewilder them: because they think it is not only a string of long words, but a tangle of complicated notions. These people miss the whole point of the modern situation. These are exactly the evils that exist already; mostly for want of a philosophy. The politicians and the papers are always using long words. It is not a complete consolation that they use them wrong. The political and social relations are already hopelessly complicated. They are far more complicated than any page of medieval metaphysics; the only difference is that the medievalist could trace out the tangle and follow the complications; the moderns cannot. The chief practical things of today, like finance and political corruption, are frightfully complicated. We are content to tolerate them because we are content to misunderstand them, not to understand them. The business world needs metaphysics – to simplify it.”

Then he goes on to consider how we do in fact tend to handle the complicated problems of economic and political life. Referring to what he has said about the need for philosophy, and as an introduction to his further remarks he says: “I know these words will be received with scorn, and with gruff reassertion that this is no time for nonsense and paradox; and that what is really wanted is a practical man to go in and clear up the mess.”

In what follows I have virtually only substituted the more modern phrases “expert Manager” and “management expert” for what Chesterton calls “the practical man”¹, and altered his grammar slightly to reflect modern (mis)usage². The aptness of

¹ It is to be understood that we are here talking about a type which Chesterton called “the practical man”, and for which I have substituted “the expert Manager” who at the highest level is called “the chief executive officer (CEO). We are not necessarily referring to any particular individual (who may in fact not be true to type).

“The practical man” that Chesterton describes had evidently come to the fore in his time (circa 1900) in both the commercial and political fields. If anything the type is more pronounced and prominent today

his description of those managerial wizards who today see themselves as the ones to save the business organizations, and their political counterparts, who fancy themselves as experts in economics, is uncanny.

“And a management expert will doubtless appear, one of the unending succession of expert managers; and they will doubtless go in, and perhaps clear up a few millions for themselves and leave the mess more bewildering than before; as each of the other such managers have done. The reason is perfectly simple. This sort of crude and unconscious person always adds to the confusion; because they themselves have two or three different motives at the same moment, and do not distinguish between them.

Such a person has, already entangled hopelessly in their own mind:

- (1) a hearty and human desire for money;
- (2) a somewhat priggish and superficial desire to be progressing, or going the way the world is going;
- (3) a dislike of being thought too old to keep up with the young people;
- (4) a certain amount of vague but genuine patriotism or public spirit;
- (5) a misunderstanding of a mistake made by Mr. H.G. Wells, in the form of a book on Evolution.

When a person has all these things in their head, and does not even attempt to sort them out, they are called by common consent and acclamation an expert Manager. But this kind of manager cannot be expected to improve the mess; for they cannot clear up the muddle in their own mind, let alone in their highly complex community and civilization.”

Chesterton sums up by saying: “What we need, as the ancients understood, is not a politician who is a business person, but one who is a philosopher”. We need, of course, doers and not just thinkers (philosophers); but we need doers who are also thinkers, not the current set of highly paid muddle-headed managers mouthing catchwords like “efficiency”.

in our modern “captains of industry”. The “management expert” is first of all found among business managers but, with a little poetic licence, is extended here to a certain type of politician.

² It is rather painful to mutilate Chesterton’s impeccable English usage in this fashion. But, the current abuse has become so entrenched that, in my view, attention needs to be drawn to it at every opportunity. I trust that Chesterton’s many admirers will understand that such use of modernized language is purely ironical.