

G.K. Chesterton, Modern Ethics, and the Anti-Smoking Crusade

We've all seen them, haven't we? I mean those ugly shots of lungs featured in anti-smoking campaigns. It's not likely that a cigar-smoking G.K. Chesterton ever caught this particular act. After all, in his day tobacco was still a century away from achieving its current—and much vaunted—status as the great moral evil of our time. But if Chesterton was spared those gruesome shots, he was fully aware of the flawed thinking behind them.

Let's examine that thinking by looking at his collection of essays "Heretics" and, of all things, a lamp post. What might that ancient structure have to do with diseased lungs?

Chesterton used the lamp post as a symbol in his writings. His real focus was less the lamp post itself than a proposal by "influential people" that it be pulled down. Enter a monk who objects to their designs with a statement reflective of the "spirit of the middle ages": "My brethren, let us first consider the value of light . . ." Before he can say another word the lamp post is stormed and dismantled, leaving the destroyers to congratulate themselves on their "unmedieval practicality."



And that was that—except that it wasn't. Crucial differences among the anti-lamp post crew soon became apparent. Some among the "influential" wanted electric light instead. Others looked forward to darkness, "because their deeds were evil." Still others anticipated installing a bigger and better lamp post, while a few stragglers simply wanted to smash something.

In the midst of their haggling it suddenly dawns on the assembled that perhaps the monk had a point: everything does depend on the philosophy of light—except now they are left to contemplate matters in the dark.

Where do diseased lungs figure in all of this? Did someone pull out a cigarette, strike a match, and restore light? No.

Chesterton asks his readers to stay with the beleaguered monk and the besieged lamp post for just a bit longer. What was the monk doing, if not pointing to perfection, the perfection that is light?

Modern morality, Chesterton was saying, does not point to perfection. To be sure, it does point “with absolute conviction,” but not to perfection. It can—and often does—point to this or that “horror,” usually following the breaking of this or that law. But modern morality does not point to perfection, because it cannot do so. And it cannot do so, because it cannot conceive that perfection exists.

Nonetheless, Chesterton still cannot get away from the monk and his meditations. Whether the monk is meditating on Christ or on Buddha makes no difference; he at least has in his mind an image of perfect health. He may well go mad with his meditating, concedes Chesterton, but if so, he will go mad “for the love of sanity.”

And the modern student of ethics? Even if he remains sane, Chesterton continues, he will remain sane “from an insane dread of insanity.”

Here we come to Chesterton’s point: “A young man may keep himself from vice by continually thinking of disease. Or he may keep himself from vice by continually thinking of the Virgin Mary.”



Chesterton did concede that there might be some question as to which method was more reasonable or more efficient. But he insisted that there could be no doubt as to which method was more wholesome.

Is that shot of those badly damaged lungs firmly in your mind's eye? It wasn't for Mr. Chesterton. But then the great moral campaign of his day was being waged against booze, not tobacco. Given that order of progressive business, he did recall meeting a "sincere secular Puritan," who thought it was absurd to resort to religion when dealing with the problem of drink. For Chesterton's puritan, a picture of a "drunkard's liver would be much more efficacious than prayer."

Chesterton concluded by conceding that his puritan friend had taken a position that was a picture of perfection—at least of some sort. His position "perfectly embodied the incurable morbidity of modern ethics."

The same thing might be said today about those perfectly morbid shots of badly diseased lungs. Something else might be said as well, namely that the possessor of those lungs might well possess a healthy disregard for modern ethics.