

'What's Wrong with the World?'

Just over a century ago G. K. Chesterton wrote a book that is as relevant today as it was then. In fact, its title remains as relevant today as it was then: "[What's Wrong with the World.](#)"

Would Mr. Chesterton be surprised and/or disappointed to learn that there are still things wrong today? Not at all. Would he be surprised and/or disappointed to learn that some of the wrongs of his day are still with us today? Not at all.

Does all of this consign Chesterton to the category of unreconstructed pessimist? Once again, the same response applies: Not at all.

An important hint as to why that answer still applies can be gleaned by revealing Chesterton's answer to his own question. Whenever he was asked to account for what's wrong with the world, his immediate answer was always the same: "I am."

Actually, he thought that answer should be the same for everyone—then, now, and always. In all likelihood, this had something to do with his belief in original sin, which, by the way, was the only doctrine of Christian theology he believed could actually be proved!

Given this belief, provable or otherwise, Chesterton had his suspicions about progress, both as an idea and as a historical reality. The world, he often repeated, didn't progress; it "wobbled." For a time, it might wobble in one direction, and then it might wobble in a different direction. But no matter the direction, it wobbled.

Before diving into the more general wrongs of then and now

(meaning wrongs others than those embedded in each one of us), it's important to keep in mind another wrong that was often on Chesterton's mind, namely our persistent failure to ask what is right about the world, or, better yet, to ask what *should* be right about it.

As far as Chesterton was concerned, the "dignity of man" requires asking such a question. Only then can we cease our wobbling. (Yes, Chesterton did believe in limited progress.)

On this score, Chesterton did frequent battle with the real pessimists of his day. He especially battled with those he termed the "declinists." Declinism was very much in the air just before the Great War of 1914-1918. It was suffocating in the aftermath of that war. And it has certainly drifted into the American air of recent decades.

To Chesterton, declinism was a product of what he termed "our modern madness for biological metaphors." The madness that he had in mind was a tendency to think of nations as social organisms. This was especially the case with those inclined to think in terms of societal decline.

To Chesterton, such thinking was fallacious, because it led to the "gaping absurdities" of presuming that there are such entities as young nations or dying nations. Does a nation really have a fixed span of life? Not that Chesterton could determine. Nations, he liked to point out, consisted of people, and while a nation's "first generation may well be quite decrepit, its ten thousandth generation may well be quite vigorous." In Chestertonian terms a cheese may well decay, but a nation does not, at least not so long as its citizens exercise their free will to cure what ails it.

Chesterton went on to point to an even greater error when it comes to applying biological metaphors to nations. Medical science might be able to restore an individual to health. But can a social scientist restore a nation to health? Chesterton

thought not—or at least not necessarily.

The chief problem is this: when it comes to solving public problems, what some see as cures others see as worse maladies. For example, Chesterton knew that some Englishmen wanted to introduce German efficiency to England. Chesterton, however, was not among them. He preferred German measles to German efficiency.

Or this: The English might agree that a lazy aristocracy is a bad thing. But would Englishmen agree that an active aristocracy is a good thing? Once again, Chesterton thought not.

In sum, there are all sorts of ways whereby things can go wrong. Chesterton would be the first to concede that. But he would be far from the first to suggest that the next step should be find a highly practical person to fix things.

Once again, a Chesterton paradox comes into play. When things go wrong, what's most needed is an "UNpractical man to set us right."

Is Rome burning? If so, fiddling would not be a good idea, but studying the theory of hydraulics might well be!

Of course, in the meantime the existing fire might do a good deal of damage to the existing Rome. Nonetheless, the point stands, and so might a rebuilt Rome. Ideas do have consequences. That applies to right ideas and to wrong ones.

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