What’s the Best Way to Deal with a ‘Political Animal’?

G. K. Chesterton was that rarest of political animals. He was a fellow of firm views and well decided certainties. But he was also someone who always treated those of differing views and certainties with fairness and kindness. (We could use many more of his type these days, couldn’t we?)

How did Chesterton manage to pull this off? Was it simply an act?

Not at all. It was traceable to something else, namely this: His approach to issues—and to others—was the result of having arrived early in life at a firm and decided idea about how to deal with his fellow man.

A glimpse of this decision can be found in the first paragraphs of an essay he wrote shortly before Christmas of 1933 at the end of Adolph Hitler’s first year as German Chancellor. The subject was “man, the fighting animal.” He began by noting that there are always a number of serious public issues about which one might hold strong views, while also realizing that a strong case could be made for the opposite point of view. At the same time, the realization that there is much to be said on both sides should not weaken one’s own conviction that he is right and his opponent is wrong.

Chesterton’s immediate example was his certainty that a second great European war of the 20th century could surely be prevented if his British government could summon the “moral courage” to threaten Hitler with British support for France and Poland the moment that Hitler attacked either of them. He remained certain that there would have been no Great War in 1914 if England had issued a similar threat to the Kaiser “openly and from the beginning,” instead of “half-secretly and

too late."

Chesterton then moved on to the general subject of peace and war by first clearing away the "rubbish" of being told that all wars are horrible and that the next war will be the most horrible of all. To Chesterton, such rubbish was a special feature of "progressives" (his word), who believed two contradictory things at once: 1) humanity is always improving; and 2) the next war will be more scientific and far worse than anything the world had yet seen.

Chesterton did not entirely disagree with the second belief. The next war would likely be worse, far worse, because it would be "more cold and calculated, more remote, more impersonal, and more indifferent to the individual." Here Chesterton was not entirely right. But his summary statement was far more right than not: The next war promised to be worse, because it would prove to be "more like peace."

Then he turned to one more lingering piece of "rubbish," namely the mistaken notion that man, the political animal, is also "man, the fighting animal." Chesterton did not believe the latter was true. Man certainly did not fight because a "purely animal appetite" had overcome him. He was most certainly not "driven" to take up bayonets as he might well be "driven" to consume bacon and eggs.

It was Chesterton's decided belief that a "fatal fallacy" had somehow attached itself to the idea that man was a fighting animal. It amazed him that those most opposed to war were those most likely to accept the "absurd animal parallel," as they urged those who favored war to kill their "inner ape" or "inner tiger." Meanwhile, the actual ape of the jungle was content to go about his business, rather than engage in anything as "wicked as a massacre" or assume anything as "noble as martyrdom."

No, the real problems of war and peace had little to do with

man, the fighting animal, and everything to do with man, the political animal, that is to say with things that are "quite peculiar to man." After all, only man is bad enough—and good enough—for war.

Whatever it is that is best in man is found only in man. More than that, and most emphatically worse than that, what is worst in man "springs from some mysterious root that is found only in man."

For Chesterton, it was not just useless, but wrongheaded, to regard the tiger as a "type of tyrant." To be sure, the tiger kills. And he kills to eat, because he is carnivorous. But it is not his fault that he is carnivorous.

The same might be said of the lion. Such an animal may live in a pride. But the lion is not a tyrant, for the essence of a tyrant is not living in a pride, but pride itself. And Chesterton reminds us that pride is the "poison in every other vice."

He also reminds us that pride "truly can be evil," but it is "purely a spiritual evil." As such, this evil is unique to man, who is much more marvelous—and much more dangerous—than any mere fighting animal.

The last time Chesterton checked he had not discovered any animal that had organized an army. No wolf had ever tried to persuade other wolves of the tribe to all wear the same "military muzzle." Animals were not so stupid as to do this, declared Chesterton. And it is this view that may help explain why Chesterton was kind and fair-minded to any and all of his opponents.

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