

*CRITICISM OF MODERN PHILOSOPHY BY G. K. CHESTERTON:*



*Chesterton writes:*

*The fact that Thomism is the philosophy of common sense is itself a matter of common sense. Yet it wants a word of explanation, because we have so long taken such matters in a very uncommon sense. For good or evil, Europe since the Reformation, and most especially England since the Reformation, has been in a peculiar sense the home of paradox. I mean in the very peculiar sense that paradox was at home, and that men were at home with it. The most familiar example is the English boasting that they are practical because they are not logical. To an ancient Greek or a Chinaman that would seem exactly like saying that London clerks excel in adding up their ledgers, because they were not accurate in their arithmetic. But the point is not that it is a paradox; it is that paradoxy has become orthodoxy; that men repose in a paradox as placidly as in a platitude. It is not that the practical man stands on his head, which may sometimes be a stimulating if startling gymnastic; it is that he rests on his head; and even sleeps on his head. This is an important point, because the use of paradox is to awaken the mind. Take a good paradox, like that of Oliver Wendell Holmes: 'Give us the luxuries of life and we will dispense with the necessities.' It is amusing and therefore arresting; it is a fine air of defiance; it contains a real if romantic truth. It is all part of the fun that it is stated almost in the form of a contradiction in terms. But most people would agree that there would be considerable danger in basing the whole social system on the notion that necessities are not necessary; as some have based the whole British Constitution on the notion that nonsense will always work out as common sense. Yet even here, it might be said that the invidious example has spread, and that*

*the modern industrial system does really say, 'Give us luxuries like coaltar soap, and we will dispense with necessities like corn.'*

*So much is familiar; but that what is now even realised is that not only the practical politics, but the abstract philosophies of the modern world have had this queer twist. Since the modern world began in the sixteenth century, nobody's system of philosophy has really corresponded to everybody's sense of reality; it what, if left to themselves, common men would call common sense. Each started with a paradox; a peculiar point of view demanding a sacrifice of what would call a peculiar point of view demanding the sacrifice of what they would call a sane point of view. That is the one thing common to Hobbes and Hegel, to Kant and Bergson, to Berkeley and William James. A man had to believe something that no normal man would believe, if it were suddenly propounded to his simplicity; as that law is above right, or right is outside reason, or things are only as we think them, or everything is relative to a reality that is not there. The modern philosopher claims, like a sort of confidence man, that if once we will grant him this, the rest will be easy; he will straighten out the world, if once he is allowed to give this one twist to the mind.*

*It will be understood that in these matters I speak as a fool; or as our democratic cousins would say, a moron; anyhow as a man in the street;... Thomist philosophy is nearer than most philosophies to the mind of the street. 'For St. Thomas it is impossible that contradictories should exist together, and again reality and intelligibility correspond, but a thing, must first be, to be intelligible.'*

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*Let the man in the street be forgiven, if he adds that the 'remarkable difference' seems to him to be that St. Thomas was sane and Hegel was mad. The moron refuses to admit that Hegel can both exist and not exist; or that it can be possible to understand Hegel, if there is no Hegel to understand. And this is what I mean by saying that a modern philosophy starts with a stumbling-block. It is surely not too much to say that there seems to be a twist, in saying that contraries are not incompatible; or that a things can 'be' intelligible and not as yet 'be' at all.*

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*Against all this the philosophy of St. Thomas stands founded on the universal common conviction that eggs are eggs. The Hegelian may say that an egg is really a hen, because it is a part of the endless process of Becoming; the Berkeleyian may hold that poached eggs only exist as a dream exists; since it is quite as easy to call the dream the cause of the eggs as the eggs the cause of the dream; the Pragmatist may believe that we get the best out of scrambled eggs by forgetting that they ever were eggs, and only remembering the scramble. But no pupil of St. Thomas needs to addle his brains in order to adequately to addle his eggs; to put his head at any peculiar angle in looking at eggs, or squinting at eggs, or winking the other eye in order to see a new simplification of eggs. The*

*Thomist stands in the broad daylight of the brotherhood of men, in their common consciousness that eggs are not hens or dreams or mere practical assumptions; but things attested by the Authority of the Senses, which is from God.*

*Thus, even those who appreciate the metaphysical depth of Thomism in other matters have expressed surprise that he does not deal at all with what many now think the main metaphysical question; whether we can prove that the primary act of recognition of any reality is real. The answer is that St. Thomas recognized instantly what so many modern sceptics have begun to suspect rather laboriously; that a man must either answer that question in the affirmative, or else never answer any question, never ask any question, never even exist intellectually, to answer or to ask. I suppose it is true in a sense that a man can be a fundamental sceptic, but he cannot be anything else; certainly not even a defender of fundamental skepticism. If a man feels that all the movements of his own mind are meaningless, then his mind is meaningless, and he is meaningless; and it does not mean anything to attempt to discover his meaning. Most fundamental sceptics appear to survive, because they are not consistently sceptical and not at all fundamental. They will first deny everything and then admit something, if for the sake of argument-or often rather of attack without argument. I saw an almost startling example of this essential frivolity in the professor of final scepticism, in a paper the other day. A man wrote to say that he accepted nothing but Solipsism, and added that he had often wondered it was not a more common philosophy. Now Solipsism simply means that a man believes in his own existence, but not in anybody or anything else. And it never struck this simple sophist, that if his philosophy was true, there obviously were no other philosophers to profess it.*

*To this question ‘I there anything?’ St. Thomas begins by answering ‘Yes’ if I he began by answering ‘No,’ it would not be the beginning, but the end. That is what some of us call common sense. Either there is no philosophy, no philosophers, no thinkers, no thought, no anything; or else there is a real bridge between the mind and reality. But he is actually less exacting than many thinkers, much less so that most rationalist and materialist thinkers, as to what that first step involves; he is content, as we shall see, to say that it involves the recognition of *Ens* or *Being* as something definitely beyond our selves. *Ens* is *Ens*. Eggs are eggs, and it is not tenable that all eggs were found in a mare’s nest.*

*~ Excerpts from G. K. Chesterton’s *The Approach to Thomism*” in *St. Thomas Aquinas: “The Dumb Ox”* (New York: Doubleday, 1933, 1956), 118-23.*