

Article

"Charles De Koninck and Wit"

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Charles De Koninck and Wit

None except the Maker of history could "narrate" to us the life of Charles De Koninck. This sentence, slightly altered from a quodlibetum he himself wrote, underlines the point that no testimony, however eloquent or personal, can ever transcend the level of appearance. I think this is why Charles De Koninck, far more than any person I have known, was totally unaffected by personal tribute and resolutely shunned anything resembling adulation.*

One has to be a special sort of person to be good in this way, to have the virtue of never dwelling on what virtue one has while unfailingly discerning the virtue one finds in others. It requires an uncommon combination of magnanimity and humility to become like that, and we need have no hesitancy in ascribing particularly these traits to Charles De Koninck as he so often appeared to us. I learned from him long ago not to expect a "sufficient reason" for whatever happens in this world — or why this person is like that in thought and action and that person like this. None the less, this much ought to be clear: a person who can be at once magnanimous and genuinely humble must be a man of great wisdom and wit.

There are many ways in which a person's wisdom can be revealed. One of the lesser known ways consists in grasping and appreciating the utter irrationality and absurdity of so much that happens in the world. To a mind not sufficiently objective, such irrationality is infuriating; such a state of affairs must not be, and therefore it must be systematically ruled out. But this manner of taking things may be the folly of which Scripture speaks. A man whose wisdom lies not in imposing its own demands on everything else but rather in letting it rest first on what is, in order to gain an appreciation of what should be, is congenially at home in a world of absurdity. This is why the man of wisdom is a man of wit, and why wit is humor, yet something more than humor.

The incongruity of reasonably grasping the irrational is the common basis of wisdom and wit, and a man cannot have in full measure the one without the other. Charles De Koninck had more wit than any person I knew.

This is perhaps why he could speak so sensibly about God. The wisdom of God does not principally consist in establishing the best of possible worlds nor in recognizing necessary laws operating according to the demands of human science — which, not too surprisingly, have an unreasonable way of changing in the history of thought, and hence lead to an unreasoning way of knowing God that often issues in eventual agnosticism, if not atheism. “... the absolutely universal causality of God, as well as His properly divine wisdom, appear most strikingly in the intrinsic contingency and the inherent absurdity of the world ; for only God is the determinate, per se cause of that, too, which in itself is contingent.” It takes a deal of wit to have such perception. With that kind of wholesome employment of reason, the basis is laid for discerning, in the way man can, “Le Scandale de la médiation,” “La Piété du Fils,” and how “Ego sapientia” can be attributed to Our Lady. The universe is hollow, but only in a certain direction.

A saving grace about Charles De Koninck is that he never took himself too seriously. How could he, having written : “when we view it in the light of created causes alone, the generation of this individual in particular is so unlikely as to verge on the impossible.” The person who regards himself as indispensable is so often the one most other persons find so readily dispensable. The converse often holds. Though dispensable, a few persons become increasingly indispensable precisely by never becoming wholly so. Charles De Koninck grew along these lines, as a great teacher invariably does. Though he need not ever have been, and though, having been, it was most unlikely, viewed in a certain perspective, that he would be as he did become, now that he is no longer among us it seems unlikely that he could have been otherwise. This occasions at once the sorrow and joy we all feel. Our sorrow lies in not having him visibly to turn to ; our joy rests in his having

been with us, and that in the midst of so much contingency, with which he had a passing acquaintance, he did what he was intended to do.

“The certainty of life beyond death leaves in our historical being — it is truly a being towards the death in which our lot shall be established once and for all — a supreme concern about the one thing necessary: to be good in the absolute sense.” To be or not to be, is not, after all, the pertinent question. If it is a question that can be fairly asked, we might in human fancy ascribe it to God. But to be in a certain way or not — that is the question — and it remains the abiding one while we live in this Day of man, separated by a gulf from the Day of the Lord. In spite of the element of “inaccessibility” connected with any narration of the life and actions of “our neighbor,” we can with a high measure of confidence presume such a “concern about the one thing necessary” in the life of Charles De Koninck, not least because it gave every evidence of humility and hope, wherein “the Christian sense of humour is ultimately rooted.” His wisdom and wit remained inseparable to the end, in order to begin anew.

John A. OESTERLE

* “The Nature of Man and His Historical Being,” *Laval Théologique et Philosophique*, Vol.5, 1949, n.2, pp.271-277. All quotations are taken from this same article.