

Two Phrases

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Someone ought to. Someone ought to do something so that the situation will improve. Someone ought to provide a stimulus so that the world will do something. Someone ought to speak seriously to those in charge. Something ought to be done before it is too late. Someone ought to take the initiative in this matter. These and similar statements we hear several times daily, and the more often they're heard, the more serious the times; ordinarily there is a hint, in the main outline, of what this someone ought to do, so that everything will change for the better and all difficulties will be resolved; all that remains more or less unresolved is who actually ought to do it. But someone ought to.

As opposed to this, almost nobody says: I ought to do such-and-such; I ought to do something grand and effective. Nor do you very often hear the following said: All of us sitting here ought to see to this or that ourselves; all right, now, what are we going to do about it? Human imagination and intelligence frankly exhaust themselves devising tasks that someone else ought to do; as opposed to this, we are uncommonly miserly when it comes to what we ourselves ought to do or what we ought to attempt. For some reason the very idea that we ourselves ought to do something applies the brakes – and hard – to the free flight of our ruminating about what ought to be done; what someone else ought to do, however, isn't limited by any such obstacles.

Yet things and actions don't result because someone ought to have done them, but because someone actually does them. Columbus didn't say that someone ought to sail to the west, but that he would sail there himself if he got a ship. When someone is sinking, the sensible opinion that someone ought to leap into the water after him isn't enough. History is in greater need of people who do something than people who suggest what someone else ought to do.

Things aren't that simple. This saying is, to a certain degree, the counterpart of the previous one; ordinarily it is employed by whoever it is that ought to do something. Try to suggest to someone that perhaps he's the one who ought to do this or that for the salvation of the world or something equally grand; immediately he grows solemn and promptly replies: "Yes, but things aren't that simple." And immediately he explains to you just why things are difficult, awkward and, indeed, from a practical point of view, thoroughly impractical. A thing is simple and obvious only so long as people recognize that someone ought to do it; but as soon as you say to somebody or other that he's the one who ought to, it is immediately pointed out that things aren't that simple. Great heaven, man, there are tremendous difficulties here. You have no idea of the snags you could run into. It simply can't be done. Why? Because things aren't that simple.

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*insofar as we know,*

Yet, nothing in the world is that simple; and when nevertheless in the course of events this or that thing (at least one of the hundreds of thousands that someone ought to do) is actually done, it seems as if there aren't sufficient obstacles to justify our "things aren't that simple." We might say that almost all of the useful or significant things that have been done in the past thousand years weren't quite that simple. If people consider things as impossible only because "they aren't that simple," there probably would be far fewer of what are called human accomplishments.

From which it follows that a person himself ought to do whatever ought to be done, instead of thinking that things aren't that simple.

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