37. Equality v. Equal Rights

To John Taylor

1814

I believe that none but Helvetius will affirm that all children are born with equal genius.

None will pretend that all are born of dispositions exactly alike,—of equal weight; equal strength; equal length; equal delicacy of nerves; equal elasticity of muscles; equal complexions; equal figure, grace, or beauty.

I have seen, in the Hospital of Foundlings, the "Enfants Trouvés," at Paris, fifty babes in one room;—all under four days old; all in cradles alike; all nursed and attended alike; all dressed alike; all equally neat. I went from one end to the other of the whole row, and attentively observed all their countenances. And I never saw a greater variety, or more striking inequalities, in the streets of Paris or London. Some had every sign of grief, sorrow, and despair; others had joy and gayety in their faces. Some were sinking in the arms of death; others looked as if they might live to fourscore. Some were as ugly and others as beautiful as children or adults ever are; these were stupid; those sensible. These were all born to equal rights, but to very different fortunes; to very different success and influence in life.

The world would not contain the books, if one should produce all the examples that reading and experience would furnish. One or two permit me to hint.

Will any man say, would Helvetius say, that all men are born equal in strength? Was Hercules no stronger than his neighbors? How many nations, for how many ages, have been governed by his strength, and by the reputation and renown of it by his posterity? If you have lately read Hume, Robertson or the Scottish Chiefs, let me ask you if Sir William Wallace was no more than equal in strength to the average of Scotchmen? and whether Wallace could have done what he did without that extraordinary strength?

Will Helvetius or Rousseau say that all men and women are born equal in beauty? Will any philosopher say that beauty has no influence in human society? If he does, let him read the histories of Eve, Judith, Helen, the fair Gabrielle, Diana of Poitiers, Pompadour, Du Barry, Susanna, Abigail, Lady Hamilton, Mrs. Clark, and a million others. Are not despots, monarchs, aristocrats, and democrats, equally liable to be seduced by beauty to confer favors and influence suffrages?

Socrates calls beauty a short-lived tyranny; Plato, the privilege of na-
ture; Theophrastus, a mute eloquence; Diogenes, the best letter of recommend-
dation; Carneades, a queen without soldiers; Theocritus, a serpent
covered with flowers; Bion, a good that does not belong to the possessor,
because it is impossible to give ourselves beauty, or to preserve it. Ma-
dame du Barry expressed the philosophy of Carneades in more laconic
language, when she said, “la véritable royauté, c’est la beauté.”—the
genuine royalty is beauty. And she might have said with equal truth that
it is genuine aristocracy; for it has as much influence in one form of gov-
ernment as in any other; and produces aristocracy in the deepest democ-
rary that ever was known or imagined, as infallibly as in any other form
of government. What shall we say to all these philosophers, male and
female? Is not beauty a privilege granted by nature, according to Plato
and to truth, often more influential in society, and even upon laws and
government, than stars, garters, crosses, eagles, golden fleeces, or any
hereditary titles or other distinctions? The grave elders were not proof
against the charms of Susanna. The Grecian sages wondered not at the
Trojan war when they saw Helen. Holofernes’s guards, when they saw
Judith, said, “one such woman let go would deceive the whole earth.” . . .

That all men are born to equal rights is true. Every being has a right
to his own, as clear, as moral, as sacred, as any other being has. This is
as indubitable as a moral government in the universe. But to teach that
all men are born with equal powers and faculties, to equal influence in
society, to equal property and advantages through life, is as gross a fraud,
as glaring an imposition on the credulity of the people, as ever was prac-
ticed by monks, by Druids, by Brahmins, by priests of the immortal
Lama, or by the self-styled philosophers of the French Revolution. For
honor’s sake, Mr. Taylor, for truth and virtue’s sake, let American philoso-
phers and politicians despise it.

Mr. Adams leaves to Homer and Virgil, to Tacitus and Quintilian, to
Mahomet and Calvin, to Edwards and Priestley, or, if you will, to
Milton’s angels reasoning high in pandemonium, all their acute specula-
tions about fate, destiny, foreknowledge absolute, necessity, and predesti-
nation. He thinks it problematical whether there is, or ever will be, more
than one Being capable of understanding this vast subject. In his princi-
bles of legislation, he has nothing to do with these interminable controver-
sies. He considers men as free, moral, and accountable agents; and he
takes men as God has made them. And will Mr. Taylor deny that God has
made some men deaf and some blind, or will he affirm that these will
infallibly have as much influence in society, and be able to procure as
many votes as any who can see and hear?

Honor the day, and believe me no enemy.