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Equality

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CHAPTER 15 | Document 3**Thomas Gordon, Cato's Letters, no. 45**

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Men are naturally equal, and none ever rose above the rest but by Force or Consent: No Man was ever born above all the rest, nor below them all; and therefore there never was any Man in the World so good or so bad, so high or so low, but he had his Fellow. Nature is a kind and benevolent Parent; she constitutes no particular Favourites with Endowments and Privileges above the rest; but for the most part sends all her Offspring into the World furnished with the Elements of Understanding and Strength, to provide for themselves: She gives them Heads to consult their own Security, and Hands to execute their own Counsels; and according to the Use that they make of their Faculties, and of the Opportunities that they find, Degrees of Power and Names of Distinction grow amongst them, and their natural Equality is lost.

Thus Nature, who is their Parent, deals with Men: But Fortune, who is their Nurse, is not so benevolent and impartial; she acts wantonly and capriciously, often cruelly; and counterplotting Justice as well as Nature, frequently sets the Fool above the wise Man, and the Best below the Worst.

And from hence it is, that the most Part of the World, attending much more to the noisy Conduct and glaring Effects of Fortune, than to the quiet and regular Proceedings of Nature, are misled in their Judgment upon this Subject: They confound Fortune with Nature, and too often ascribe to natural Merit and Excellency the Works of Contrivance or Chance. This however, shews that Reason and Equity run in our Heads, while we endeavour to find a just Cause for Things that are not just; and this is the Source of the Reverence which we pay to Men whom Fortune sometimes lifts on high, though Nature had placed them below. The Populace rarely see any Creature rise, but they find a Reason for it in his Parts; when probably the true one will be found in his own Baseness, or another Man's Folly.

From the same Reasoning may be seen why it is, that, let who will be at the Head of a Party, he is always extolled by his Party as superior to the rest of Mankind; and let who will be the first Man of his Country, he will never fail being complimented by many as the first of his Species. But the Issue and their own Behaviour constantly shew, that the highest are upon a Level with the rest, and often with the lowest. Men that are high are almost ever seen in a false Light; the most Part see them at a great Distance, and through a magnifying Medium; some are dazzled with their Splendor, many are awed by their Power. Whatever appears shining or terrible, appears great, and is magnified by the Eye and the Imagination.

That Nature has made Men equal, we know and feel; and when People come to think otherwise, there is no Excess of Folly and Superstition which they may not be brought to practise. Thus they have made Gods of dead Men, and paid divine Honours to many while they were yet living: They saw them to be but Men, yet they worshipped them as Gods. And even they who have not gone quite so far, have yet, by their wild Notions of Inequality, done as much Mischief; they have made Men, and often wicked Men, to be Vice-Gods; and then made God's Power (falsly so called) as irresistible in the Hands of Men as in his own, and much more frightful.

It is evident to common Sense, that there ought to be no [Volume 1, Page 512] Inequality in Society, but for the Sake of Society; but these Men have made one Man's Power and Will the Cause of all Men's Misery. They gave him as far as they could the Power of God, without obliging him to practise the Mercy and Goodness of God.

Those that think themselves furthest above the rest, are generally by their Education below them all. They are debased by a Conceit of their Greatness: They trust to their Blood; which, speaking naturally, gives them no Advantage; and neglect their Mind, which alone, by proper Improvements, sets one Man above another. It is not Blood or Nature, but Art or Accident, which makes one Man excel others. *Aristotle*, therefore, must either have been in Jest, when he said, that he, who naturally excelled all others, ought to govern all; or said it to flatter his Pupil and Prince, *Alexander* the Great. It is certain, that such a Man never yet was found in the World, and never will be found till the End of it. *Alexander* himself, notwithstanding the Greatness of his Spirit, and his Conquests, had in his own Army, and perhaps among the common Soldiers, Men naturally as great and brave as himself, and many more wise.

Whoever pretends to be naturally superior to other Men, claims from Nature what she never gave to any Man. He sets up for being more than a Man; a Character with which Nature has nothing to do. She has thrown her Gifts in common amongst us; and as the highest Offices of Nature fall to the Share of the Mean as well as of the Great, her vilest Offices are performed by the Great as well as by the Mean: Death and Diseases are the Portion of Kings as well as of Clowns; and the Corpse of a Monarch is no more exempted from Stench and Putrefaction, than the Corpse of a Slave.

Mors aequo pulsat pede.

[Pale Death with foot impartial knocks at poor men's hovels and princes' citadels.]

All the Arts and Endowments of Men to acquire Preeminence and Advantages over one another, are so many Proofs and Confessions that they have not such Pre-eminence and Advantages from Nature; and all their Pomp, Titles, and Wealth, are Means and Devices to make the World think that they who possess them are superior in Merit to those that want them. But it is not much to the Glory of the upper Part of Mankind, that their boasted and superior Merit is often the Work of Heralds, Artificers, and Money; and that many derive their whole Stock of Fame from Ancestors, who lived an Age or many Ages ago.

The first Founders of great Families were not always Men of Virtue or Parts; and where they were so, those that came after them did frequently, and almost generally, by trusting to their Blood, disgrace their Name. Such is the Folly of the World, and the Inconvenience of Society, to allow Men to be great by Proxy! An Evil that can scarce ever be cured. The Race of *French* Kings, called by their Historians in Contempt, *Les Rois faineants* and the Succession of the *Roman Caesars*, (in both which, for one good Prince they had ten that were intolerable, either for Folly, or Cruelty, and often for both) might be mentioned as known Proofs of the above Truth; and every Reader will find in his own Memory many more.

I have been told of a Prince, who, while yet under Age, being reprov'd by his Governor for doing Things ill or indecent, used to answer, *Je suis Roy; I am King*; as if his Quality had altered the Nature of Things, and he himself had been better than other Men, while he acted worse. But he spoke from that Spirit which had been instilled into him from his Cradle. *I am King!* What then, Sir? The Office of a King is not to do Evil, but to prevent it. You have Royal Blood in your Veins: But the Blood of your Page is, without being Royal, as good as yours; or, if you doubt, try the Difference in a Couple of Porringers next Time you are ill; and learn from this Consideration and Experiment, that by Nature you are no better than your People, though subject from your Fortune to be worse, as many of your Ancestors have been.

If my Father got an Estate and Title by Law or the Sword, I may by Virtue of his Will or his Patent enjoy his Acquisition; but if I understand neither Law nor the Sword, I can derive Honour from neither: My Honour therefore is, in the Reason of Things purely nominal; and I am still by Nature a *Plebeian*, as all Men are.

There is nothing moral in Blood, or in Title, or in Place: Actions only, and the Causes that produce them, are moral. He therefore is best that does best. Noble Blood prevents neither Folly, nor Lunacy, nor Crimes: but frequently begets or promotes them: And Noblemen, who act infamously, derive no Honour from virtuous Ancestors, whom they dishonour. A Man who does base Things, is not noble; nor great, if he do little Things: A sober Villager is a better Man than a debauched Lord; an honest Mechanick than a Knavish Courtier.

. . . *Nobilitas sola est atque unica virtus. Prima mihi debes animi bona; sanctus haberi
Justitiacque tenax factis, dictisque mereris?*

Juv. Sat. 8.

[Virtue is the only and sole real nobility. . . . You owe first the virtues of the mind--
do you deserve to be accounted honest, and tenacious of justice, in word and deed?]

We cannot bring more natural Advantages into the World than other Men do; but we can acquire more Virtue in it than we generally acquire. To be great is not in every Man's Power; but to be good is in the Power of all: Thus far every Man may be [u]pon a Level with another, the Lowest with the Highest: and Men might thus come to be morally as well as naturally equal.

The Founders' Constitution

Volume 1, Chapter 15, Document 3

<http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch15s3.html>

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