

GENIUS

30 October 1793

Man, as an individual, is a being who differs from others of his own species not naturally but accidentally. By nature we are all equal. Let the man of learning shake his head and say it is impossible—let the most celebrated logicians of the day unanimously declare the proposition to be false—let the opinions of ages that are past, and the judgment of that which is present be collected and compared, and they will stand for nothing when they are opposed by truth and experience, by fact and observation.

That which is common to us all as men—that in which the equality of our nature originally consists and which is equal in all is not any inherent principle of ability or genius above others; but it is a simple faculty or power given to every man, by the cultivation of which every excellency and every perfection may be generated that is possible to be produced by the application and exertion of rational beings.

Men are fond of placing to the credit of superior abilities and extraordinary gifts those acquirements which they have obtained only by dint of industry and application, or through the medium of advantages, or fortunate circumstances and occurrences, which thousands of their fellow creatures have never experienced. As far as the influence of the animal spirits may extend in the process of generation, so far may every subsequent generation be indebted to the preceding one for some portion of its share of animal strength, health, vigour, and activity. But beyond this no chain of reasoning will enable us to go with any, the least, degree of probability. The decendancy of the animal powers is natural; but the decendancy of the national ones is not so. The former implies derivation, and may reasonably enough be supposed to have been transmitted to us from something of the animal kind that had a priority of existence. But the latter implies creation, and, in every man that is not merely an animal or an idiot, is altogether underivable but from the Creator himself. How else should it happen that the connection of two rational beings, of the brightest endowments, should be as liable to generate a fool, as two of an inferior order in society should be? Or, how else should it happen that the son of a peasant, if exchanged in his infancy for the son of a king, should be made as capable of filling so elevated a station as the king's son himself would have been, had he not have changed places—that is to say advantages—with him? And that the king's son, on the contrary, should not, in all probability, arise to one perceptible degree of excellence, either in genius or ability, above that of the sons of the peasants which might surround him? Is it not time for men to look about them and explode opinions that are founded in error? Is a man to set himself down contented with an opinion that his children, if they have no appearance of idiotism about them, are not as capable of being as learned, as able, and as ingenious as any and every other person's children, provided they are but permitted to have the same advantages, the same opportunities, and are supposed likewise to possess the same eager desire of improvement that those other person's children enjoy?

The principal reason why there is so great a difference discernable in the genius, acquirement, and capacities of men, whose education, circumstances, and situations in life have been nearly or perfectly similar, and whose advantages have been equal, is to be attributed principally to that degree or earnestness of desire which each may have felt for improvement. Place what subject you will in the view of young people, whether it be philosophy, physic, poetry, law, divinity, or anything else, and if they have but a real desire to make themselves masters of that subject, such desire will beget in each of them a capacity for the subject each is willing to undertake, be it what it will; and the capacity so produced will increase in proportion to the degree of earnestness that accompanies desire. This observation is the result of experience, and its importance is such as to deserve the serious attention of every thinking being. The inference deducible from this observation is that whatever trade or profession in life a young man has an ardent desire to pursue, that desire will contribute, more than anything else possibly could do, to produce in him a capacity suitable to that particular trade or profession which he wishes to be master of. And if, when a desire of this kind has taken a strong root in the mind, the attention of a youth is necessarily and unavoidably directed to some other object, he may not only never arrive at mediocrity in his trade or profession, but he may very probably sink far below it.

In the path of learning, a youth whose memory is not good labours under a very great disadvantage when he sets out on equal terms with companions whose memories are more retentive than his own. It will be said that memory is improvable. I grant it is. but if a bad memory is improvable, so likewise is a good one. In the pursuit of learning a young man of this description must always labour hard without receiving a proportional advantage; for memory is the power that supplies reason with ideas, about which the intellectual faculties are to be exercised. Place such an one with his fellow students in a profession where it is necessary that memory and knowledge should be equally progressive, and they will always leave him in such a situation, that they can look back to him. At the bar, such an one, without interest, will not rise into notice so soon as his competitors. But place him in a situation (on the stage

for instance) with his companions, where memory only is progressively necessary, and he will then be enabled to keep pace with them; because his whole attention will be employed in strengthening and improving his memory only; and what he is thus enabled to retain by dint of industry, he is not in danger of losing by any necessity or obligation he is under to increase his stock of knowledge.

It is a very common notion, and has for ages been a standing maxim, that to be a poet, a man must be born with a genius for poetry. That the notion is commonly received does not lessen the absurdity of it. And it is matter of serious regret that nonsense is made palatable only when it is sanctioned by men of eminence. Thus we are told that Pope was born a poet; Pascal a geometrician, and Vandyke a painter. We might as well maintain that Whitbread was born a brewer, Young a farmer, and Lackington a bookseller. Such opinions will not bear examination. Poets, geometricians, and painters are not productions of nature but art. Men can never feel a natural turn of mind or particular propensity of disposition for pursuits, concerning which they have obtained no acquired knowledge. Nature has no more to do with poetry than she has with law or politics, with trade or commerce, with agriculture or navigation. It is true that without natural power, or the faculty of reason, we can do nothing. But with it we can do anything and everything that can be done by man, in proportion to the materials, or stock of ideas, which we have to work with. The instruments by which we work are in every respect similar; but the mode of using them is not so; for this is formed by art and education. The more we use them the more serviceable they will be to us. The man who in the present age would arrive at any tolerable degree of literary excellence must condescend to labour almost without intermission. He must study while others sleep; and reason when there is no one else to reason with him. He who every day adds somewhat to the knowledge he had before acquired is in a fair way to excel at last. For knowledge, like money, after a certain stock is acquired, accumulates by the advantages it produces. Great abilities are acquired by a process that is regular rather than rapid; by an attention that is strict rather than lasting; by a perception that is just rather than quick; by a reasoning that is close rather than elegant; by a clearness of understanding rather than a brilliancy of imagination; and by a correctness of judgment rather than a facility of invention.

Men who have arrived at the highest degree of excellence that has been attained appear to have had extraordinary endowments, principally because we are ignorant of the intermediate steps of labour and study, of thought and reflection, of reasoning and examination, of experience and application, which must necessarily have taken place as they proceeded from proposition to proposition, from one train of reasoning to another, from one kind of experiment to another, and, consequently, from one degree of knowledge to another. Could all the intermediate steps, fortunate incidents, casual occurrences, favourable circumstances, and indefatigable applications be seen and examined that were neither immediately nor remotely necessary to the success of Sir Isaac Newton's researches, we might cease to estimate him as a genius of a superior order to his brethren. It might then appear plainly enough that he was only a man of extraordinary perseverance and industry. And extraordinary perseverance and industry will generally produce extraordinary characters; which men of ordinary application readily convert into prodigies of genius. And because they will not attempt to approach them, very willingly allow them to be unapproachable. There is nothing which is in the power (if it was the inclination) of the writer of these lucubrations to say that can in the least diminish that respect and veneration in which the memories of great and celebrated men are justly and deservedly held. He is only desirous to caution mankind against entertaining notions that are evidently founded in imagination or error; and that are consequently inimical to that spirit of application which is necessary to be exerted by everyone who would become famous in his day. Take away the hope of success, and the desire of obtaining it will no longer subsist. Tell the world it is to expect no more Newtons, Bacons, Lockes, Miltons, and Shakespeares and none will arise. If we content ourselves with the opinion that nothing greater can be done, nothing so great will again be attempted. Why have we not another Newton? Partly because we are satisfied with the Newton we have already had, and principally because another Newton cannot scientifically go beyond the truth. He cannot now demonstratively prove that he should have been a Newton had no Newton preceded him. Why have we not another Shakespeare? Because in the present age, in which a delicacy of composition, a chastity of diction, a taste for propriety, and a refinement of expression is required, which our predecessors were strangers to, we shall not find a man in whom knowledge (I do not mean learning) and judgment are properly combined that would venture as much as Shakespeare has ventured. He is at once the philosopher, the historian, the poet, and the buffoon. His knowledge of the human heart was correct and extensive. His descriptions of the various passions to which we are subject, and the train of consequences attendant on them, bespeak the pen of a master. Had he not seen or felt them he could not have painted them as he has done. The likenesses are exact, and the colouring truly natural. He may be equaled, but it is difficult to conceive how he may be excelled. For when our copy of life is true we have arrived at a point beyond which it is impossible for anyone else to go who would excel either as a poet or a painter.

Genius is a power of invention; and this power is more or less circumscribed in proportion as men are more or less informed. Genius can neither show nor exercise itself to advantage on subjects that its possessor has not been tolerably conversant in. The existence of genius is as discernible in boys as in men; only its operations are more limited, and less regarded. It is indeed, in those early periods, more under the influence of the passions and less subject to the control of the understanding and the judgment. But it repeatedly breaks forth under all the disadvantages that are implicated in ignorance, penury, and restraint, and becomes visible in a variety of instances which many may think too unimportant for observation because they are not referable to learning. But, independent of learning, whatever we have an inclination to we pursue with pleasure. This pleasure increases by being enjoyed. And the very act of performing what pleases us renders the performance agreeable. Labours of this kind we depart with regret from, and return to with delight. Our duty is performed with sensations of felicity that sweeten care, and facilitate labour. But when inclination draws our attention one way, and duty demands it another, we must call in the assistance of reason, and revert to the principles and precepts of moral virtue. We must consider that inclination must be sacrificed to duty, and that pleasure must give place to utility. What is proper and expedient to be done must be preferred to that which is pleasing and desirable, but not necessary. The obligations we are under to perform, the duties of the station we are in, must be seriously and attentively considered. It is not an ardent desire to excel in pursuits that are laudable or even useful that will justify us in neglecting the one in which we are actually engaged in order to attain to a proficiency in others that are not equally objects of our concern. Something is due to the welfare of our relations and dependents; something to our patrons and benefactors; something to our neighbours and friends; something to the nature of our connection in life, and to society in general; and more still to our own immediate welfare and approbation.

Those who have a capacity to learn what is pleasing to themselves must necessarily possess a capacity to learn what is pleasing to others. In the one case it is certain that they follow the impulse of their inclination; in the other it is only probable that they are moving in a direction entirely opposite to it. The difference of the result of their application in circumstances so dissimilar must be great indeed. Let us suppose, for example, that two lads, A and B, set out as students or apprentices at an appointed time, with the same qualifications, acquirements, endowments, advantages, and abilities, and only this difference, that A brings with him an inclination for the business he is entering on, and that B does not. The object which each has in view is to be the same. The attainment of this object, let us say, shall be measured by a line C–D, which shall be divided into eighty-five equal parts, which shall present as many degrees of improvement, and shall be supposed to comprehend a space of seven years, in which time let it be supposed that every apprentice is capable of arriving at the eighty-fifth degree of improvement. Next let us suppose a line E–F divided in the same manner, to represent the additional progress of A, occasioned by acting in concert with the impulse of inclination; and a similar line G–H to represent the retrograde motion of B, owing to the repulse he may reasonably be supposed to meet with by acting in opposition to his inclination. That no unfair advantage may be taken of either, we will admit that the inclination of B to follow some other pursuit shall be just as forcible as the inclination of A is to follow the business or profession he is entered upon. We will now, for argument's sake, allow ten hours in the day to each for study, or the discharge of necessary duties. The impulse of inclination in A, we will say, will inspire him with a spirit of diligence that shall carry him forward in the regular pursuit of his object at the rate of one hour per day, which in the course of seven years will be nearly equivalent to one degree of improvement in ten, over and above the customary degrees of improvement which we have already numbered. Besides this advantage, we may fairly suppose that the same impulse of inclination will induce him to add one hour per day in the study or practice of his favourite employment, over and above the customary hours of attendance required by his master; which will produce, within a fraction, one degree of improvement extraordinary in every ten. Allowing these two advantages in favour of A, it will follow that we must likewise allow two disadvantages on the side of B. Whoever then will undertake to resolve the difference that will be found to exist between A and B, at the expiration of seven years, will find A to have passed the standard point, or eighty-five degrees, and to have arrived to a point which is seventeen degrees beyond it; while B will have fallen short of it by seventeen degrees; and will have reached no further than the sixty-eighth degree; so that A will have gained thirty-four degrees of him, which is exactly one half of the total sum that B had attained in all. Now supposing these advantages to continue through life in favour of A, which is a very reasonable supposition, and that A and B should live to the age of sixty-three, A will in that time have acquired an advantage over B in point of knowledge or industry of two hundred and four degrees. And if to this we add on the one hand the many extra hours which A, from the mere impulse of inclination will apply to study and business in preference to trifling amusements or sluggish indifference; and allow on the other hand for the numberless inattentions and neglects which always accompany those who feel no pleasure in fulfilling the proper duties of their station, we shall find no reason to be surprised at the amazing difference that is to be found between men of equal abilities, where interest fills the scale

on one side, while indifference (not to say aversion) is employed in lightening it on the other. By overlooking obstructions and advantages that may be thus accounted for, we are very frequently led into errors of judgment and opinion, in estimating the abilities of mankind; and are tempted to draw conclusions that are neither favourable to industry nor improvement. For while we assign extraordinary genius and abilities to successful diligence and perseverance, we damp that spirit of emulation which gives rise to exertion, and kindles in its stead a flame of despondency which gradually consumes all vigour of intellect, and all hope of success. I wish, for the honour of mankind, that the absurd doctrine of natural inequality, as far as it respects the intellectual faculties, was entirely exploded. I can never suppose my natural abilities to be superior to those of any other man without doing violence to my feelings. Then cries my reader (smiling) you can never suppose another person's natural abilities to be superior to your own. True. But I can suppose any person, very consistently with my doctrine, to be much—very much—my superior in point of general, scientific, and professional knowledge. In point of classical erudition and polite literature. In point of reasoning, elegance of composition, and perspicuity of argument. In short, the doctrine of natural equality does not affect that necessary and unavoidable inequality which is occasioned by negligence in some and industry in others; by penury in a low station and affluence in an elevated one; by the perseverance of the prudent and the inconstancy of the capricious; by the sunshine of prosperity or the gloom of adversity; by partaking of the pleasures of social life, or living in the obscurity of retirement. To these and innumerable other causes, the greatest inequalities that are discernible in the rational world may be justly attributed. It is not, therefore, to the advantage of the rising generation, nor to that of the world in general, that inclination should be opposed by interested views. Those who design their children for the pulpit or the bar principally because they have a prospect of procuring preferment for them in those professions may live to lament that want of attention which is due to inclination. He might have shone as a counselor who perhaps will disgrace the pulpit; or he who might have done honour to the clerical character may probably never excel as a student of the law.

Separate inclination from duty and you give a mortal stab to the progress of genius, and to the spirit of industry. You check the ardour of pursuit, and weaken every principle of action. You remove the object of desire, and deprive the mind of those energies which hope inspires, and labour improves. You give to virtue the privilege of acting, but deny to the agent that freedom of choice, which is necessary to make virtue successful, and obedience reasonable. You give to knowledge the opportunity of being useful, but deny to its possessor the means of being great. You demand an implicit submission to inclinations of your own, but forget the importance of a rational indulgence to those of others.

Place inclination and duty on the same side and you give a spur to industry that time will not injure and age will not weaken. You give a security for diligence that disappointment cannot shake, and pleasure cannot undermine. You give a permanency to happiness that wealth and preferment cannot purchase, nor novelty affect. You give to passion an uniformity of pursuit that nothing can destroy; and to principle a motive for action that time will invigorate and judgment improve. You give to expectation a prospect of success unmingled with doubt, and to merit a probability of reward unsullied with the meanness of solicitation. You give to art all the assistance that wisdom can claim, and to nature all the advantages that reason can demand, or prudence bestow. You give to life the means of making business agreeable and study delightful; and on man you bestow a fund of gratifications, a succession of enjoyment, and a durability of pleasure, that will sweeten the possession of the present, and contribute to heighten the happiness of the future. By such an union, individuals will enjoy the most probable means of becoming famous in their several stations, and the community will reap the advantages arising from the celebrity of its members. By such an union domestic property will be insured, social harmony produced, national eminence preserved and maintained, slavery and dependence gradually removed, and rational liberty every where sanctioned and protected. And if, where inclination is ardent and sincere, such an union cannot be effected by an individual, it should be performed by the assistance of society. For there is no method so likely to promote the honour and happiness of a people, as that of promoting the honour and happiness of individuals.

“The Moralist Number IV,” *The Kentish Register* (November 1793).