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75. Angelina Grimké on Women's Rights (1837)

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In response to Catharine Beecher's criticism, Angelina Grimké wrote a series of twelve letters forthrightly defending the right of women to take part in political debate. The final one addressed the question of women's rights directly. "I know nothing," she wrote, "of men's rights and women's rights." "My doctrine," she declared, "is that whatever is morally right for man to do, it is morally right for woman to do." The Grimké sisters soon retired from the fray, after Angelina married the abolitionist Theodore Weld. But their writings helped to spark the movement for women's rights that arose in the 1840s.

SINCE I ENGAGED in the investigation of the rights of the slave, I have necessarily been led to a better understanding of my own; for I have found the Anti-Slavery cause to be the high school of morals in our land—the school in which human rights are more fully investigated, and better understood and taught, than in any other benevolent enterprise. Here one great fundamental principle is disinterred, which, as soon as it is uplifted to public view, leads the mind into a thousand different ramifications, into which the rays of this central light are streaming with brightness and glory. Here we are led to examine why human beings have any rights. It is because they are moral beings; the rights of all men, from the king to the slave, are built upon their moral nature: and as all men have this moral nature, so all men have essentially the same rights. These rights may be plundered from the slave, but they cannot be alienated: his right and title to himself is as perfect now, as is that of Lyman Beecher: they are written in his moral being, and must remain unimpaired as long as that being continues.

Now it naturally occurred to me, that if rights were founded in moral being, then the circumstance of sex could not give to man higher rights and responsibilities, than to woman. To suppose that it did, would be to deny the self-evident truth, "that the physical constitution is the mere instrument of the moral nature." To suppose that it did, would be to break up utterly the relations of the two natures, and to reverse their functions, exalting the animal nature into a monarch, and humbling the moral into a slave; "making the former a proprietor, and the latter its property." When I look at human beings as moral beings, all distinction in sex sinks to insignificance and nothingness; for I believe it regulates rights and responsibilities no more than the color of the skin or the eyes. My doctrine then is, that whatever it is morally right for man to do, it is morally right for woman to do. Our duties are governed, not by difference of sex, but by the diversity of our relative connections in life, and the variety of gifts and talents committed to our care, and the different eras in which we live.

This regulation of duty by the mere circumstance of sex, rather than by the fundamental principle of moral being, has led to all that multifarious train of evils flowing out of the anti-christian doctrine of masculine and feminine virtues. By this doctrine, man has been converted into the warrior, and clothed in sternness, and those other kindred qualities, which, in the eyes of many, belong to his character as a man; whilst woman has been taught to lean upon an arm of flesh, to sit as a soul arrayed "in gold and pearls, and costly array," to be admired for her personal charms, and caressed and humored like a spoiled child, or converted into a mere drudge to suit the convenience of her lord and master. This principle has spread desolation over the whole moral world, and brought into all the diversified relations of life, "confusion and every evil work." It has given to man a charter for the exercise of tyranny and selfishness, pride and arrogance, lust and brutal violence. It has robbed woman of essential rights, the right to think and speak and act on all great moral questions, just as men think and speak and act; the right to share their responsibilities, dangers, and toils; the right to fulfill the great end of her being, as a help meet for man, as a moral, intellectual and immortal creature, and of glorifying God in her body and her spirit which are His. Hitherto, instead of being a help meet to man, in the highest, noblest sense of the term, as a companion, a co-worker, an equal; she has been a mere appendage of his being, and instrument of his convenience and pleasure, the pretty toy, with which he wiled away his leisure moments, or the pet animal whom he humored into playfulness and submission. Woman, instead of being regarded as the equal of man, has uniformly been looked down upon as his inferior, a mere gift to fill up the measure of his happiness. In the poetry of "romantic gallantry," it is true, she has been called the "last best gift of God to man;" but I believe I speak forth the words of truth and soberness when I affirm, that woman never was given to man. She was created, like him, in the image of God, and crowned with glory and honor; created only a little lower than the angels,—not, as is too generally presumed, a little lower

than man; on her brow, as well as on his, was placed the "diadem of beauty," and in her hand the scepter of universal dominion...

Measure her rights and duties by the sure, unerring standard of moral being, not by the false rights and measures of a mere circumstance of her human existence, and then will it become a self-evident truth, that whatever it is morally right for a man to do, it is morally right for a woman to do. I recognize no rights but human rights—I know nothing of men's rights and women's rights; for in Christ Jesus, there is neither male or female; and it is my solemn conviction, that, until this important principle of equality is recognized and carried out into practice, that vain will be the efforts of the church to do anything effectual for the permanent reformation of the world. Woman was the first transgressor, and the first victim of power. In all the heathen nations, she has been the slave of man, and no Christian nation has ever acknowledged her rights. Nay more, no Christian Society has ever done so either, on the broad and solid basis of humanity. I know that in some few denominations, she is permitted to preach the gospel; but this is not done from a conviction of her equality as a human being, but of her equality in spiritual gifts—for we find that woman, even in these Societies, is not allowed to make the Discipline by which she is to be governed. Now, I believe it is her right to be consulted in all the laws and regulations by which she is to be governed, whether in Church or State, and that the present arrangement of Society, on those points, are a violation of human rights, an usurpation of power over her, which is working mischief, great mischief, in the world. If Ecclesiastical and Civil governments are ordained of God, then I contend that woman has just as much right to sit in solemn counsel in Conventions, Conferences, Associations, and General Assemblies, as man—just as much right to sit upon the throne of England, or in the Presidential chair of the United States, as man....

...

I believe the discussion of Human Rights at the North has already been of immense advantage to this country. It is producing the

happiest influence upon the minds and hearts of those who are engaged in it;... Indeed, the very agitation of the question, which it involved, has been highly important. Never was the heart of man so expanded; never were its generous sympathies so generally and so perseveringly excited. These sympathies, thus called into existence, have been useful preservatives of national virtue. I therefore do wish very much to promote the Anti-Slavery excitement at the North, because I believe it will prove a useful preservative of national virtue....

The discussion of the wrongs of slavery has opened the way for the discussion of other rights, and the ultimate result will most certainly be "the breaking of every yoke," the letting the oppressed of every grade and description go free—an emancipation far more glorious than any the world has ever yet seen, an introduction into that liberty wherewith Christ hath made his people free....

Questions

1. Why does Angelina Grimké call the abolitionist movement the nation's foremost "school [of] human rights"?
2. What role does she think the difference between the sexes should play in determining a person's rights and obligations?