

# The Importance of Individuals

The previous Essay, on Great Men, etc., called forth two replies,—one by Mr. Grant Allen, entitled the 'Genesis of Genius,' in the *Atlantic Monthly*, vol. xlvii. p. 351; the other entitled 'Sociology and Hero Worship,' by Mr. John Fiske, *ibidem*, p. 75. The article which follows is a rejoinder to Mr. Allen's article. It was refused at the time by the *Atlantic*, but saw the day later in the *Open Court* for August, 1890. It appears here as a natural supplement to the foregoing article, on which it casts some explanatory light.

Mr. Allen's contempt for hero-worship is based on very simple considerations. A nation's great men, he says, are but slight deviations from the general level. The hero is merely a special complex of the ordinary qualities of his race. The petty differences impressed upon ordinary Greek minds by Plato or Aristotle or Zeno, are nothing at all compared with the vast differences between every Greek mind and every Egyptian or Chinese mind. We may neglect them in a philosophy of history, just as in calculating the impetus of a locomotive we neglect the extra impetus given by a single piece of better coal. What each man adds is but an infinitesimal fraction compared with what he derives from his parents, or indirectly from his earlier ancestry. And if what the past gives to the hero is so much bulkier than what the future receives from him, it is what really calls for philosophical treatment. The problem for the sociologist is as to what produces the average man; the extraordinary men and what they produce may by the philosophers be taken for granted, as too trivial variations to merit deep inquiry.

Now, as I wish to vie with Mr. Allen's unrivalled polemic amiability and be as conciliatory as possible, I will not cavil at his facts or try to magnify the chasm between an Aristotle, a Goethe, or a Napoleon and the average level of their respective tribes. Let it be as small as Mr. Allen thinks. All that I object to is that he should think the mere *size* of a difference is capable of deciding whether that difference be or be not a fit subject for philosophic study. Truly enough, the details vanish in the bird's-eye view; but so does the bird's-eye view vanish in the details. Which is the right point of view for philosophic vision? Nature gives no reply, for both points of view, being equally real, are equally natural; and no one natural reality *per se* is any more emphatic than any other. Accentuation, foreground, and background are created solely by the interested attention of the looker-on; and if the small difference between the genius and his tribe interests me most, while the large one between that tribe and another tribe interests Mr. Allen, our controversy cannot be ended until a complete philosophy, accounting for all differences impartially, shall justify us both.

An unlearned carpenter of my acquaintance once said in my hearing: "There is very little difference between one man and another; but what little there is, *is very important*." This distinction seems to me to go to the root of the matter. It is not only the size of the difference which concerns the philosopher, but also its place and its kind. An inch is a small thing, but we know the proverb about an inch on a man's nose. Messrs. Allen and Spencer, in inveighing against hero-worship, are thinking exclusively of the size of the inch; I, as a hero-worshipper, attend to its seat and function.

Now, there is a striking law over which few people seem to have pondered. It is this: That among all the differences which exist, the only ones that interest us strongly are those *we do not take for granted*. We are not a bit elated that our friend should have two hands and the power of speech, and should practise the matter-of-course human virtues; and quite as little are we vexed that our dog goes on all

fours and fails to understand our conversation. Expecting no more from the latter companion, and no less from the former, we get what we expect and are satisfied. We never think of communing with the dog by discourse of philosophy, or with the friend by head-scratching or the throwing of crusts to be snapped at. But if either dog or friend fall above or below the expected standard, they arouse the most lively emotion. On our brother's vices or genius we never weary of descanting; to his bipedism or his hairless skin we do not consecrate a thought. *What* he says may transport us; that he is able to speak at all leaves us stone cold. The reason of all this is that his virtues and vices and utterances might, compatibly with the current range of variation in our tribe, be just the opposites of what they are, while his zoölogically human attributes cannot possibly go astray. There is thus a zone of insecurity in human affairs in which all the dramatic interest lies; the rest belongs to the dead machinery of the stage. This is the formative zone, the part not yet ingrained into the race's average, not yet a typical, hereditary, and constant factor of the social community in which it occurs. It is like the soft layer beneath the bark of the tree in which all the year's growth is going on. Life has abandoned the mighty trunk inside, which stands inert and belongs almost to the inorganic world. Layer after layer of human perfection separates me from the central Africans who pursued Stanley with cries of "meat, meat!" This vast difference ought, on Mr. Allen's principles, to rivet my attention far more than the petty one which obtains between two such birds of a feather as Mr. Allen and myself. Yet while I never feel proud that the sight of a passer-by awakens in me no cannibalistic waterings of the mouth, I am free to confess that I shall feel very proud if I do not publicly appear inferior to Mr. Allen in the conduct of this momentous debate. To me as a teacher the intellectual gap between my ablest and my dullest student counts for infinitely more than that between the latter and the amphioxus: indeed, I never thought of the latter chasm till this moment. Will Mr. Allen seriously say that this is all human folly, and tweedledum and tweedledee?

To a Veddah's eyes the differences between two white literary men seem slight indeed,—same clothes, same spectacles, same harmless disposition, same habit of scribbling on paper and poring over books, etc. "Just two white fellows," the Veddah will say, "with no perceptible difference." But what a difference to the literary men themselves! Think, Mr. Allen, of confounding our philosophies together merely because both are printed in the same magazines and are indistinguishable to the eye of a Veddah! Our flesh creeps at the thought.

But in judging of history Mr. Allen deliberately prefers to place himself at the Veddah's point of view, and to see things *en gros* and out of focus, rather than minutely. It is quite true that there are things and differences enough to be seen either way. But which are the humanly important ones, those most worthy to arouse our interest,—the large distinctions or the small? In the answer to this question lies the whole divergence of the hero-worshippers from the sociologists. As I said at the outset, it is merely a quarrel of emphasis; and the only thing I can do is to state my personal reasons for the emphasis I prefer.

The zone of the individual differences, and of the social 'twists' which by common confession they initiate, is the zone of formative processes, the dynamic belt of quivering uncertainty, the line where past and future meet. It is the theatre of all we do not take for granted, the stage of the living drama of life; and however narrow its scope, it is roomy enough to lodge the whole range of human passions. The sphere of the race's average, on the contrary, no matter how large it may be, is a dead and stagnant thing, an achieved possession, from which all insecurity has vanished. Like the trunk of a tree, it has been built up by successive concretions of successive active zones. The moving present in which we live with its problems and passions, its individual rivalries, victories, and defeats, will soon pass over to the majority and leave its small deposit on this static mass, to make room for fresh actors and a

newer play. And though it may be true, as Mr. Spencer predicts, that each later zone shall fatally be narrower than its forerunners; and that when the ultimate lady-like tea-table elysium of the Data of Ethics shall prevail, such questions as the breaking of eggs at the large or the small end will span the whole scope of possible human warfare,—still even in this shrunken and enfeebled generation, *spatio aetatis defessa vetusto*, what eagerness there will be! Battles and defeats will occur, the victors will be glorified and the vanquished dishonored just as in the brave days of yore, the human heart still withdrawing itself from the much it has in safe possession, and concentrating all its passion upon those evanescent possibilities of fact which still quiver in fate's scale.

And is not its instinct right? Do not we here grasp the race-differences *in the making*, and catch the only glimpse it is allotted to us to attain of the working units themselves, of whose differentiating action the race-gaps form but the stagnant sum? What strange inversion of scientific procedure does Mr. Allen practise when he teaches us to neglect elements and attend only to aggregate resultants? On the contrary, simply because the active ring, whatever its bulk, *is elementary*, I hold that the study of its conditions (be these never so 'proximate') is the highest of topics for the social philosopher. If individual variations determine its ups and downs and hair-breadth escapes and twists and turns, as Mr. Allen and Mr. Fiske both admit, Heaven forbid us from tabooing the study of these in favor of the average! On the contrary, let us emphasize these, and the importance of these; and in picking out from history our heroes, and communing with their kindred spirits,—in imagining as strongly as possible what differences their individualities brought about in this world, while its surface was still plastic in their hands, and what whilom feasibilities they made impossible,—each one of us may best fortify and inspire what creative energy may lie in his own soul.<sup>1</sup>

This is the lasting justification of hero-worship, and the pooh-poohing of it by 'sociologists' is the everlasting excuse for popular indifference to their general laws and averages. The difference between an America rescued by a Washington or by a 'Jenkins' may, as Mr. Allen says, be 'little,' but it is, in the words of my carpenter friend, 'important.' Some organizing genius must in the nature of things have emerged from the French Revolution; but what Frenchman will affirm it to have been an accident of no consequence that he should have had the supernumerary idiosyncrasies of a Bonaparte? What animal, domestic or wild, will call it a matter of no moment that scarce a word of sympathy with brutes should have survived from the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth?

The preferences of sentient creatures are what *create* the importance of topics. They are the absolute and ultimate law-giver here. And I for my part cannot but consider the talk of the contemporary sociological school about averages and general laws and predetermined tendencies, with its obligatory undervaluing of the importance of individual differences, as the most pernicious and immoral of fatalisms. Suppose there is a social equilibrium fated to be, whose is it to be,—that of your preference, or mine? There lies the question of questions, and it is one which no study of averages can decide.

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1. M. G. Tarde's book (itself a work of genius), *Les Lois de l'Imitation, Étude Sociologique* (2me Édition, Paris, Alcan, 1895), is the best possible commentary on this text,—'invention' on the one hand, and 'imitation' on the other, being for this author the two sole factors of social change.

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