

EQUALITY i

The thirst for equality is a characteristic of modern mores. In the Middle Ages inequality was postulated in all social doctrines and institutions. There were some "prophets" who arose to talk of equality in the way of poetry, and some popular leaders who used the notion in popular revolts, but they were rebels and heretics, and they preached to deaf ears. The church also, which never failed to have a prescription for every human taste or appetite, had its construction of equality. Ecclesiastics and inquisitors treated all men as equal before the church, sometimes with great effect, when an unpopular king or prince was also a heretic. The doctrine of equality flattered ecclesiastical vanity.

Modern notions of equality are no doubt to be explained historically as revolts against mediaeval inequality and status. Natural rights, human rights, equal rights, equality of all men, are phases of a notion which began far back in the Middle Ages, in obscure and neglected writings, or in the polemical utterances of sects and parties. They were counter-assertions against the existing system which assumed that rights were obtained from sovereigns, from which it resulted that each man had such rights as his ancestors and he had been able to get — with the further result that perhaps no two men had the same or equal rights. The case became different when, in the eighteenth century, the mediaeval system was gone, the fighting value of the doctrine of equality was

¹ For approximate date, see Preface.

exhausted, and it was turned into a dogma of absolute validity and universal application.

The assertion that all men are equal is perhaps the purest falsehood in dogma that was ever put into human language; five minutes' observation of facts will show that men are unequal through a very wide range of variation. Men are not simple units; they are very complex; there is no such thing as a unit man. Therefore we cannot measure men. If we take any element of man and measure men for it, they always fall under a curve of probable error. When we say "man" for human being, we overlook distinctions of age and sex. Males of different ages are not equal; men and women are not equal in the struggle for existence. Women are handicapped by a function which causes disabilities in the struggle for existence, and this difference produces immense disparity in the sexes as to all interests through all human life.

The ground is then shifted to say that all men should be equal before the law, as an ideal of political institutions. They never have been so yet in any state; practically it seems impossible to realize such a state of things. It is an ideal. If this doctrine is a fighting doctrine, if it means that the law should create no privileges for one, or some, which others do not obtain under the same legal conditions, we should all take sides with it for the purposes of the fight. Even this, however, would remain an ideal, an object of hope and effort, not a truth.

When we come nearer to the real thing which men have in mind we find that they actually complain of inequality of fortune, of realization, of earthly lot, of luxury and comfort, of power and satisfaction. This is what they want and this craving is what is in the mores. Nearly all, when they say that they want equality, only use another form of expression to say that they want more

welfare than they have, because they take as a standard all which any one has and they find many who have more than themselves. In the nineteenth century, the eighteenth-century rhetoric about natural rights, equal rights, etc., gradually took on the form of a demand for the materialistic equality of enjoyment. Every change by which rhetorical phrases are set aside and real meaning is revealed is a gain. The fact of the mores of present-day society is that there is in them an intense craving for something which is a political phantasm. There is no reason whatever why it should be expected that men should enjoy equally, for that means that all should have means of enjoyment equal to the greatest which any one has; there is nothing in history, science, religion, or politics which could give warrant for such an expectation under any circumstances. We know of no force which could act for the satisfaction of human desires so as to make the satisfaction equal for a number of men, and we know of no interference by "the State," that is, by a committee of men, which could so modify the operation of natural forces as to produce that result. There is an old distinction between commutative and distributive justice which goes back to the Greeks, and which some writers of the nineteenth century have brought out again. Distributive justice is justice in which all personal circumstances are duly allowed for so that all are made "equal" on an absolute standard. Of course equality must necessarily be carried to some such conception at last. It is evident that God alone could give distributive justice; and we find, in this world in which we are, that God has not seen fit to provide for it at all.