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Human Nature in Mercy Otis Warren (1727–1814)

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Fortified with knowledge from ancient and Enlightenment philosophy, history, and her own insights, Mercy Otis Warren defined human nature as being universally endowed with the natural rights of life, freedom, equality, and freedom of conscience. Human nature is God given, is shaped by practice, and is the same in both sexes with the “same conflicts of soul.” Warren reasoned that to exercise individual freedom and human rights requires being free from despotic rule of government. To preserve natural rights depends on democratic rule and on “equal representation of a free people.”

The principle of democratic rule is based on this universal concept of human nature. Equality crosses race and sex; differences result from education and other external conditions, and so women and men are alike in having political opinions. In marriage, however, a hierarchy is adopted, though it exists in appearance only. Humankind, endowed with a soul that is imperfect in its egoistic urges for distinction over benevolence, is also endowed with reason which acts as a moral sense. Reason is dependent on freedom in order to fulfill the aim of human action, i.e., acquiring virtue. Thus freedom is also required to improve upon the “characteristics of human nature,” namely “passion, prejudice, and error.” Human virtue improves best when “uncontaminated by luxury,” because wealth and power can weaken reason. Still, the possibility exists for the principles of self-defense and distinction to also foster virtue over vice.

Natural rights, maintained by the practice of private virtue, transfer into public *civil* rights. Since natural leaders arise from those of intellectual superiority and of philosophic mind, women with those talents cannot be dismissed if political theory and practice is to improve. Warren used her talents and efforts to define and ensure that human rights inherent in human nature endure.

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