



Natural Equality of Sexes in Antoinette Brown Blackwell (1825-1921)

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The “central theory” of Antoinette Brown Blackwell’s essay “Sex and Evolution” is that “the sexes in each species of sentient beings compared upon the same plane, from the lowest to the highest, are always true equivalents—equals but not identicals.” She demonstrated her principle of balance and co-operation in natural equality with biological facts. Blackwell also claimed that even with atoms there is co-operation and harmony. “The universal law of balanced action and reaction,” she argues, “dominates all aggregates, inorganic and organic alike.” So nature “is forced to provide for a balanced expenditure between the sexes of all the greater divisions of force.” Structure and function differences gain complexity in ascending species. Evolution, having been “carried forward by small successive stages,” is carried forward with a “cooperative constitution of things,” for the one “implies to the initiation, the other to the preservation, of offspring,” the one “direct nurture,” the other “compensating action.” As “the first woman to publish a feminist critique of evolutionary theory,” Blackwell countered Herbert Spencer and Charles Darwin’s “unbalanced” claims to natural hierarchy with the male sex being superior. Spencer offered a false theory when he argued that since women in being mothers of the race had arrested development, they were not the thinkers. Rather, Blackwell explains, women’s “direct perceptions” of the “thing itself” balance men’s “indirect method of acquiring truth by reasoning.” Darwin argued that men developed “muscles and brains” superior to women. But, Blackwell argued, physical and psychic differentiation is compensated. The chain of evolution allows for “two halves of the connected whole.” Evolution gives “to woman an increasing complexity of development” to exercise her powers, so to “exercise her powers,” it behooves women to have a life both inside the home and outside as do men, “a broader” though “not a higher, life.”

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