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A Few Words to the Writer in a Paper Called 'the Circular' on the Sovereignty of the Individual

Josiah Warren

1850s

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*This is a single page from the Labadie Collection. It is evidently directed at the periodical of the Oneida community, the **Circular**, in which John Humphrey Noyes had criticized Modern Times and Warren (as well as Andrews) by name. That would date this published letter from the 1850s, though it could be later. I have so far not located the exact passage that Warren is replying to, but Noyes was quite hostile to and acerbic about the notion of individual sovereignty. It strikes me that the type is Warren's, so I don't think it is from the **Circular** itself. It's a lively little statement, however. Warren gives a version of one of his favorite arguments: that to deny individual sovereignty is to assert it, so that the negation of the claim that individuals possess sovereignty over their opinions is a contradiction, so that the claim is true, and is entailed by any assertion of opinion. As well, he uses a favorite argument of mine: sadly, the locus of pain is the individual.*

I am not fond of disputes — I think the time has passed for long, hard-wrought, and far-fetched argumentation, and that the truth and soundness of any propositions must be pretty nearly self-evident to be of much benefit to the public. As there seems, however, to be a good deal of straightforwardness and honesty in your opposition to the sovereignty of the individual, I am inclined to think a few words may be serviceable.

I might legitimately say to you, well, sir, if you do not like “the sovereignty of the individual” as a formula, why, then reject it.

But in doing so you would be acting on that very principle you theoretically reject. You would be practicing the very thing you object to the practice of. You stand upon the very ground you endeavor to undermine. You place yourself in the predicament of the man who stood on that part of the plank which he was sawing off: he did not discover his mistake till he found himself landed in the cellar. Perhaps you and some others may be able to profit from his experience.

I might leave the whole matter here as having said enough, but I wish to put you and others right in regard to several mistakes that are very common and which may as well be corrected here.

I have no right to speak for all the friends of the equity movement without consulting them, yet some of us do not choose to be classed as “reformers.” We think that word has become too much disgraced for our purpose; and from what we have experienced, we should expect to be better appreciated by those generally classed as conservatives. Again: Mr. Warren is not “Chief” (in the common and offensive sense of that term) of any “school of reformers” — there is no chief in that sense of the word, where all are sovereigns.

You reason logically from your premises in the main argument, but your premises are false.

You say, in effect, that if one member of my body suffers the whole suffer, and as it is with the individual, so it is with the race: that all humanity suffers for the disease or wickedness of any individual, and then you logically conclude that an individual cannot act in anything at his own cost. Now neither of the premises is true and your conclusion is consequently a fallacy.

It is not true at all that, when I have a toothache, my foot or any other limb suffers. And if this were a fact, it by no means follows that all the people even in the same town will ever suffer or know anything about it.

The absurdity of this reasoning is only equalled by that of the green immigrant who, finding a ten cent piece as soon as he stepped on shore, immediately asserted that the whole country was covered over with money.

As “free criticism” is in so much favor with you I advise the study of A.B. Johnson’s Treatise on Language, by which you may learn that general propositions, however loud sounding, may, may have very few and very insignificant applications.

[Signed] An Individual