2015

Herbert Spencer and His American Audience

Joel F. Yoder
Loyola University Chicago

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss

Part of the United States History Commons

Recommended Citation
https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss/1660

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses and Dissertations at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact ecommons@luc.edu.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License.
Copyright © 2015 Joel F. Yoder
LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

HERBERT SPENCER AND HIS AMERICAN AUDIENCE

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN HISTORY

BY
JOEL F. YODER
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS
AUGUST 2015
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my advisory committee for their unstinting support through the sometimes difficult process of research and writing. Timothy Gilfoyle, who served as chair, provided feedback that was timely and specific. Patricia Mooney-Melvin gave encouragement when I needed it most, and advice that I often waited too long to follow. Aiden Forth bravely stepped in midway, though he did not know what he was letting himself in for. I would also like to thank the members of the Loyola University graduate history Dissertation Working Group for reading and commenting on the first four chapters. Steve Catania, Anthony Di Lorenzo, Erin Feichtinger, Devin Hunter, Will Ippen, Pete Kotowski, Chris Ramsey, Amelia Serafine, Jeff Wing, and others made helpful comments on one chapter or another; I would like to thank Amy Oberlin especially for both her comments and for organizing the group. A week in Loyola’s dissertation boot camp helped me get words on paper, so I thank Dina Berger and Jessica Horowitz for organizing that. The staff at Loyola’s Cudahy Library were also helpful, especially Jane Currie and Jennifer Stegen.

Lastly, I would like to thank my wife Teresa Yoder, whose patient, unflagging confidence was more significant than any dedication can express.
To Teresa
Who supported me in countless ways
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ................................................................................................................... iii

LIST OF FIGURES .......................................................................................................................... vi

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS ........................................................................................................ vii

INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................................................... 1

CHAPTER ONE: HERBERT SPENCER’S EARLY LIFE AND WRITINGS ........................................... 22

CHAPTER TWO: SPENCER IN HIS THIRTIES ................................................................................. 86

CHAPTER THREE: FIRST PRINCIPLES ...................................................................................... 159

CHAPTER FOUR: BIOLOGY AND PSYCHOLOGY .......................................................................... 227

CHAPTER FIVE: HERBERT SPENCER AND AMERICAN FAME ..................................................... 286

CHAPTER SIX: A GIANT IN WINTER ........................................................................................... 360

CONCLUSION: A MAN FOR HIS TIME ......................................................................................... 434

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY ....................................................................................................... 452

VITA ............................................................................................................................................... 470
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. “Our distinguished guest—Herbert Spencer holds the mirror up to our political system.” J. Kepler, Puck 12, no. 295 (Nov. 1, 1882), 136 ........................................ 394

Figure 2. “A Disciple of the Great Philosopher” Frederick Burr Opper, Puck 12, no. 298 (Nov. 22, 1882), 182 .................................................................................. 397
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations have been used for frequently cited sources. Full publication information for each book is given in a footnote where it is first cited in a chapter, and in the bibliography.

DE     The Data of Ethics. New York, 1879.
FP2    First Principles of a New System of Philosophy. 2nd ed. New York, 1869.
MvS    The Man versus the State. New York, 1885.
PS     The Principles of Sociology. 3 vols. New York, 1877-1896.
SS     Social Statics. London, 1850.
Study  The Study of Sociology. New York, 1873.
INTRODUCTION

British philosopher Herbert Spencer has fallen into such obscurity that his
tremendous popularity among his contemporaries is difficult to believe. Though he was
an “independent scholar” in the truest sense of the word—refusing all institutional
affiliation and almost all public recognition of any kind—he was famous not just among
intellectuals, but among educated readers worldwide. He was, quite possibly, the only
philosopher in history whose books sold more than a million copies during his lifetime.¹
Spencer’s work was translated into more than a dozen languages, first into Russian, then
to French, German, Italian, and Spanish, and eventually to Hungarian, Bohemian, Polish,
Dutch, Swedish, Greek, Japanese, Chinese, and possibly even Mohawk.² For many non-
Western readers he stood for science, rationality, and progress against backwardness
and mysticism; his anti-imperialism took some of the sting out of his affirmations of
European superiority.³ Educated men and women all over the world considered Spencer
the master thinker of the age, whether or not they agreed with him.


Spencer wrote on an incredible variety of topics, from physics to metaphysics, from biology to aesthetics. His greatest work, and the one which cemented his fame, was his ten-volume Synthetic Philosophy, which covered all scientific phenomena from the beginning of the cosmos to its end, embracing biology, psychology, sociology, and ethics. He also wrote on topics as diverse as style, manners, music, art, health, and parenting. Yet today his books sit in libraries unread. One brave explorer, reporting that he was the first to read the Royal Society’s copy of The Principles of Biology, described the volumes as “thicker and squarer than Gibbon’s, each bound in a cloth which has acquired with age a reptilian colour and texture, so putting one in mind of some great extinct monster of philosophic learning.”

The metaphor is pervasive: in a book on Spencer’s sociology, J. D. Y. Peel referred to Spencer’s works as “the fossil remains of an extinct megasaur,” while Richard Hofstadter called them “a fossil specimen from which the intellectual body of the period may be reconstructed.” Spencer’s work no longer lives for modern readers. However, a study of its petrified remains provides a window into the intellectual culture of the Victorian era. This is particularly true of the American scene, for Spencer was more popular in the United States than in his home country, especially at the beginning of his career.

---

5 Peel, Herbert Spencer, 4; Richard Hofstadter, Social Darwinism in American Thought (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992 [1944]), 31.
Spencer and Social Darwinism

Today, if Spencer is known at all, it is as an extreme conservative, the architect behind the doctrine of social Darwinism. This is particularly true for students of American history. Since the publication of Richard Hofstadter’s Social Darwinism in American Thought, it has been a commonplace that the Gilded Age was a time of intense and savage economic competition in which robber barons used the notion of the “survival of the fittest” to justify their rapacity and greed.⁶ Spencer, who coined the phrase, is more closely associated with social Darwinism than any other thinker, including Charles Darwin himself. In fact, some scholars have suggested that a more accurate term would be “social Spencerism.”⁷ However, since Hofstadter wrote there has been much scholarly disagreement about the extent of social Darwinism’s influence in America.⁸ Furthermore, Spencer scholars do not unanimously agree in considering

---

⁶ Taken as a whole, Hofstadter’s view is more nuanced than this; this simply represents a commonly accepted historical perspective. See Peter J. Bowler, Evolution: The History of an Idea, 25th anniversary ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 274.


Spencer a social Darwinist himself.9 Spencer’s popularity in America is not in doubt, so
the question becomes, on what was this popularity founded?

It is my contention that in America, Spencer was known first and foremost as a
philosopher and evolutionist. His political theories were discussed less frequently than
his metaphysical beliefs and his doctrine of evolutionary progress. When they were, it
was almost always his stance on the value and purpose of government that was of
interest. Spencer was clearly a social Darwinist, and repeated his insistence that
allowing natural selection to work improved the human race in many of his books.
Nevertheless, references to this aspect of his thinking were relatively rare in nineteenth-
century America. Far from demonstrating social Darwinism’s wide acceptance, the
American reception of Spencer reveals a general indifference to naturalistic social
thought. What Americans responded to above all was the philosophical and progressive
side of Spencer, in the shape of the metaphysical, ontological, and scientific ideas
introduced in the first volume of the Synthetic Philosophy, First Principles. Where
political and social doctrines were at issue, it was not dour forecasts of racial doom in
the form of swarming paupers that attracted Americans, but optimistic promises of
continuous social and ethical progress based on rational scientific principles.

---

9 Mark Francis, Herbert Spencer and the Invention of Modern Life (Ithaca: Cornell University Press,
Taylor (London: Routledge, 2015), 9; Offer, Herbert Spencer and Social Theory, 17-19.
The Spencerian Philosophy

Spencer’s first published work was on politics and ethics. In *The Proper Sphere of Government* (1843) he argued in favor of what is sometimes called the “night-watchman state”—a political system whose only function is to protect individuals and their property from physical harm or theft, and to enforce contracts. In *Social Statics* (1850) he grounded these proposals in a theory of individual rights based on what he called “the law of equal freedom,” which called for personal autonomy limited only by the rights of others to the same liberty. Spencer made his first arguments for social Darwinism in *Social Statics*, almost a decade before Darwin published his *Origin of Species*:

Inconvenience, suffering, and death, are the penalties attached by nature to ignorance, as well as to incompetence—are also the means of remedying these. . . . Partly by weeding out those of lowest development, and partly by subjecting those who remain to the never-ceasing discipline of experience, nature secures the growth of a race who shall both understand the conditions of existence, and be able to act up to them.10

However, *Social Statics* was not all negative. Spencer also tried to develop a scientific ethics based on the individual’s right to fulfill all his needs and desires, and predicted the future perfection of man and society.11

Spencer adopted the theory of evolution as a young man. In his next major work, *The Principles of Psychology* (1855) he firmly identified the mind with the brain, and

---

10 Herbert Spencer, *Social Statics; Or, the Conditions Essential to Human Happiness Specified, and the First of them Developed* (London: John Chapman, 1850), 378 (hereafter cited as SS).

11 SS 409-411, 436.
explained intelligence through evolution, as the accumulation of countless interconnected experiences from a long line of ancestors, human and animal. Most of the work, however, was a detailed analysis of the basic operations of subjective thought. Hard work on the *Psychology* led Spencer to have a mental breakdown which left him unable to work for over a year. During this time the idea of evolution grew in importance for Spencer, and in 1857 he published “Progress: Its Law and Cause” which argued that “the law of organic progress is the law of all progress.”

Spencer combined the nebular hypothesis (which argued that stellar and planetary bodies formed through the coalescence of finely distributed matter), biology, anthropology, and socio-cultural development to argue that all phenomena develop from a relatively homogeneous and simple state to a heterogeneous, complex state thanks to the law that each individual force has multiple effects. These ideas formed the core of his evolutionary philosophy.

Inspired, Spencer developed a grand plan to explain evolution’s workings over the course of ten volumes. His previous books had not been remunerative, so he devised a method to fund this project: he would solicit subscribers, and publish the work in sections before combining them in volumes. It was this system that came to be known as *The Synthetic Philosophy*. Many Americans were among the subscribers, thanks to the efforts of a few American enthusiasts, most notably author and scientific

---


13 The prospectus Spencer worked up can be found in many of his volumes, including his autobiography. Herbert Spencer, *An Autobiography*, vol. 2 (London: Williams & Norgate, 1904), 479-484.
lecturer E. L. Youmans. Spencer’s American publisher issued a short volume of his essays on education in 1860, which garnered much American attention. The first volume of the *Synthetic Philosophy, First Principles of a New System of Philosophy* (1862), was even more popular. The book began with a statement about the limits of human knowledge in which Spencer attempted to prove the existence of an Absolute, Infinite Power underlying phenomena that is impossible to comprehend: the Unknowable. Most of the book discussed the various aspects of universal evolution, physical, biological, and social. Spencer developed a definition of evolution, which, after some modification in the second edition of *First Principles* (1867), read like this: “Evolution is an integration of matter and concomitant dissipation of motion; during which the matter passes from an indefinite, incoherent homogeneity to a definite, coherent heterogeneity; and during which the retained motion undergoes a parallel transformation.” Spencer extrapolated many sub-laws from this and gave copious examples of each one in action.

In the next few volumes of the *Synthetic Philosophy* Spencer summarized current knowledge of biology (2 volumes), psychology (2 volumes), and sociology (3 volumes), adding many theories of his own. These works were supposed to illustrate the law of evolution, and they sometimes did, although much of Spencer’s ordering of phenomena and hypotheses thereon were not dependent on development from the simple to the

---

14 The book was not published in America until 1864, but the sections available to subscribers had attracted attention long before this.

complex. In *The Principles of Biology* (1864, 1867) Spencer adopted Darwin’s theory of natural selection, coining the phrase “the survival of the fittest” as an alternate expression. However, he argued that another process was also responsible, the inheritance of characteristics acquired during the life of the parent. *The Principles of Psychology* (1870, 1873) expanded his original work into two volumes, including a great deal of speculation on what today we would call neuroscience. In *The Principles of Sociology* (1876, 1883, 1897) Spencer traced the growth of complex modern societies from simple, primitive social systems, finding the origin of many contemporary institutions and habits in ancient ones. Spencer compared society to an organism, with many different organs (division of labor), a nervous system (leadership), and a circulation system (trade). Generally speaking, Spencer regarded cultural phenomena like political and religious ceremonies from a functional perspective, as encouraging organization, cooperation, and steady leadership, all essential in societies subject to the dangers of war.

Spencer argued that societies are not made, but grow, and can only change slowly, as the character of the citizen changes. This justified his distaste for the state’s attempts to “fix things” by regulation. The final volumes of the *Synthetic Philosophy, The Principles of Ethics* (1892, 1893) explored this more fully. In his ethical writings Spencer elaborated on *Social Statics*, but also developed basic ideas of morality that were

---

missing from his earlier work. Spencer’s ideas about justice were still tied to the law of equal freedom, but in his second volume he discussed charity as well. To Spencer, justice occurred when each individual experienced the natural consequences of his actions without interference, whether positive or negative. Charity, or beneficence as Spencer called it, should be restricted to helping the unfortunate who suffered hardship through no fault of their own. Spencer’s core social and political values did not change, nor did his belief that human improvement necessitated suffering.

**Social Darwinism as American Mythology**

Modern belief in the importance of social Darwinism in the Gilded Age can be traced back to Richard Hofstadter’s influential book *Social Darwinism in American Thought*. Hofstadter wrote as if the term “social Darwinism” were unproblematic; to him, perhaps, it was, because scholars rarely used the expression before the appearance of his book. The term originated in France as “Darwinisme sociale” in 1880; it first appeared in an American academic setting in the mid-1890s, in reviews of European works that used the term.17 Only in the context of World War II and the struggle against fascism did the concept of social Darwinism solidify in the academic community. From the beginning, usage was almost entirely pejorative.18 The appearance of Hofstadter’s book did much to promote the use of the term, as well as furthering its association with

---


Herbert Spencer, which had been rare before the book appeared in 1944.\textsuperscript{19} To the extent that he defined it at all, Hofstadter understood social Darwinism as the application of Darwinian or other biological theories to social thought.\textsuperscript{20}

While noting that the Darwinian theory of evolution could be used to support a number of different ideologies, Hofstadter believed that the first to do so in America were conservative defenders of the status quo, who “wished to reconcile their fellows to some of the hardships of life and to prevail upon them not to support hasty and ill‐considered reforms.”\textsuperscript{21} Hofstadter, perhaps influenced by a streak of political radicalism nursed by a childhood in the Great Depression,\textsuperscript{22} saw America as the perfect breeding ground for Darwinian ideas:

With its rapid expansion, its exploitative methods, its desperate competition, and its peremptory rejection of failure, post‐bellum America was like a vast human caricature of the Darwinian struggle for existence and survival of the fittest. Successful business entrepreneurs apparently accepted almost by instinct the Darwinian terminology which seemed to portray the conditions of their existence.\textsuperscript{23}

However, as Irvin Wyllie pointed out in an influential paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Philosophical Society in 1959, Hofstadter’s citations of actual

\textsuperscript{19} Hodgson suggests that this was because Social Darwinism was originally associated with imperialism, to which Spencer was adamantly opposed. Ibid., 447.

\textsuperscript{20} Hofstadter, \textit{Social Darwinism}, 4-5; Bannister, \textit{Myth of Social Darwinism}, 5.

\textsuperscript{21} Hofstadter, \textit{Social Darwinism}, 5. For Darwinism as value neutral see p. 201.

\textsuperscript{22} For Hofstadter’s background and its influence on his thought see Foner, “Introduction,” x-xiv.

\textsuperscript{23} Hofstadter, \textit{Social Darwinism}, 44.
businessmen were rather few. Wyllie’s thorough reading of statements made by Gilded Age businessmen suggested that they were not well educated enough to be comfortable with the new evolutionary ideas. Typically, businessmen credited traditional values such as industry, frugality, and good character as crucial to their success, rather than intelligence, ruthlessness, or some other variety of innate fitness.

Some of the scholarly debate about social Darwinism’s role in America and in the thought of Herbert Spencer results from a disagreement about the meaning of the expression itself. In Social Darwinism: Science and Myth in Anglo-American Social Thought, Robert Bannister expanded Wylie’s argument to include intellectuals as well. Bannister found that few Gilded Age writers actually cited Darwin or used phrases such as “survival of the fittest” or “struggle for existence” to bolster their social theories. Instead, the invocation of a Darwinian social order was typically a strategy used by critics of laissez-faire conservatism to demonize their opponents. However, many scholars have criticized Bannister’s definition by key phrase or citation as too narrow. For example, in Social Darwinism in European and American Thought, 1860-1945, Mike

25 Ibid., 630-634.
26 Bannister, Social Darwinism, xvi-xvii, 9-12, 110-114.
27 Bannister, xvii, recognizes this criticism but states that he is simply using the definition implied by those who began the use of the term.
Hawkins proposed a broader definition of social Darwinism based on concepts rather than phrases. According to Hawkins, social Darwinists assumed the following:

(i) biological laws govern the whole of organic nature, including humans; (ii) the pressure of population growth on resources generates a struggle for existence among organisms; (iii) physical and mental traits conferring an advantage on their possessors in this struggle (or in sexual competition) can, through inheritance, spread through the population; (iv) the cumulative effects of selection and inheritance over time account for the emergence of new species and the elimination of others. These are essentially the tenets of biological evolutionism; but Hawkins added a fifth assumption to social Darwinism, the belief that biology also rules the social existence of human beings and conditions psychological or cultural domains like religion and morality.  

A problem that both of types of definition share is that Darwin’s work did not appear out of thin air, but grew from a large body of pre-existing evolutionary thought, much of it non-scientific. For example, Darwin gained a key insight into his theory of natural selection from a famous work of classical economics, Thomas Malthus’s *Essay on the Principle of Population*. Ideas about the necessity of struggle are as least as old as Adam Smith (whom Darwin also read); the idea that the poor perish because they are

---


30 Bowler, *Evolution*, 161-162
unfit or unworthy existed before Darwin as well.\textsuperscript{31} To put it simply, social Darwinism as most people understand it was not a product of Darwin’s thought alone. In many cases Darwinian biological models simply reinforced currently existing habits of thought.\textsuperscript{32} Thus concepts that can be considered Darwinian, such as population pressure on resources or life as a competitive struggle, may be shared with older belief systems. Furthermore, Darwin was not a strict Darwinist in the modern sense of the word.\textsuperscript{33} The definition of Darwinism has changed over time; in scholarly usage it is synonymous with the theory of natural selection that is Darwin’s main claim to fame, while historically it was often used to refer to evolutionary thinking in general, whatever the mechanism that drove it forward.\textsuperscript{34} Darwin himself believed that the inheritance of acquired characteristics also played a role in species change.

For present purposes, Darwinism will be used in its modern sense; the older idea will simply be called evolutionism (which, it should be noted, encompasses more than just biological evolution). Social Darwinism will be defined as a theory that “transposed

\begin{itemize}
\item[33] Bowler, \textit{Evolution}, 179.
\item[34] Michael Ruse, “Darwinism,” in \textit{Keywords in Evolutionary Biology}, eds. Evelyn Fox Keller and Elisabeth A. Lloyd (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 74-80. As Spencer’s onetime assistant William Henry Hudson wrote, “in the common speech of the day the word Darwinism is almost invariably employed as if it were absolutely synonymous with the word evolution…” William Henry Hudson, \textit{An Introduction to the Philosophy of Herbert Spencer: With a Biographical Sketch}, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge/Thoemmes Press, 1996 [1897]), 55.
\end{itemize}
the Darwinian ‘struggle for survival’ from the animal kingdom into the social sphere, and held that the evolution of society depended upon the operation of the law of natural selection of favourable heritable variants, a process best secured by allowing unfettered *laissez-faire.*”35 This definition, like Bannister’s, preserves a conservative meaning and strict ties to natural selection without ruling out statements that do not use Darwin’s name or contain specific phrases. The definition can be further simplified: social Darwinism is the belief that natural selection should be allowed to operate within and between societies in order to improve the human race. As we will see, Spencer was clearly a social Darwinist in this sense, though his thought was too nuanced for the label to be applied without some qualification.

**Studying Spencer’s American Reception**

This study is premised on the idea that Spencer’s texts had multiple possible interpretations for American readers. Since Roland Barthes announced “the death of the author” students of literature have felt free to ignore writers’ supposedly singular, conscious intentions and explore a medley of possible meanings for literary texts.36 I wish to extend this privilege to works of non-fiction, namely, Spencer’s writings. It is true that some texts are more “open” to multiple interpretations than others, which are

---


more “closed” and straightforward. However even relatively closed texts like works of non-fiction can be understood differently by different readers. The variance is often slight, but in writings as complex as those of Spencer, readings can diverge enough to result in interpretations which are noticeably dissimilar.

Not that Spencer’s intended meaning can be completely ignored. Knowledge of an author’s purpose is one restraint or perspective on individual interpretation; as an “author-function,” awareness of which can affect the sense of the text for the knowing reader. However, even if a reader could know the writer’s intention perfectly, this would not completely control the text, because writers do not always say what they intend to say. Once Spencer’s works were finished he had limited influence over how they would be decoded and appropriated—although Spencer, more than most authors, attempted to combat what he considered “misrepresentation” by critics. Envisioning meaning in this fashion ultimately puts the burden on the reader rather than the writer—after all, a book only “signifies” for particular readers at particular times. Whether this is freeing or frustrating for an interpreter is a matter of personal disposition. A work can be understood not as an object but as an event, endlessly

37 For “open” and “closed” texts see Umberto Eco, The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semitics of Texts (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), 47-66.


repeated with each reading but never in the same way twice. \(^{40}\) Spencer was read, and sometimes re-read, but these readings were separate events that led to a variety of understandings.

Two of the most important elements accounting for differences in interpretation were the reader’s system of beliefs and values, and their style of reading. Religious faith was the most important determiner of attitudes towards Spencer in his nineteenth-century audience, whether orthodox or flexible, conservative or liberal, active or passive, strong or weak. A second important factor was how the reader understood science and its value. In his work, Spencer positioned himself as both a philosopher and a man of science, who was interested in facts, not faith. Sometimes his writing made it explicitly clear that he was not a Christian, and he could be highly intolerant of what he saw as Christian hypocrisy. Thus beliefs about science and religion greatly influenced the attitude Spencer’s audience adopted towards the work, whether positive, questioning, critical, or dismissive. The way reading was done was also important. Spencer was perused, scanned, browsed, examined, and studied. Each individual reader came away with a picture of what Spencer had written whose comprehensiveness largely depended on how much time was spent with a book. Both of these elements combined to determine what readers found memorable about Spencer’s work, which could be a turn of phrase, a line or two, an argument, a theory, or something larger and more vague. To

put it simply, what a reader absorbed from one of Spencer’s books varied in amount based on reading style, and in content based on beliefs and interests.

Obviously, there are great difficulties in the way of turning such a theory of reception into the practice of analyzing particular readings of Spencer. Determining what the average reader thought is problematic, because records of these opinions either do not exist or are buried deep in archives and family collections, in diaries and letters. “The dead do not speak very openly or extensively about their reading acts,” as James Machor writes. There is one accessible source for multiple readings of Spencer, however: reviews of his books. These are primarily found in periodicals of the period, though occasionally newspapers ran substantial critiques as well. Reviewers were different than ordinary readers in a number of ways: they were usually better educated than much of their audience, and they often had a limited time to read the book. However, there are advantages to looking at critics as well. The space they had available to discuss a particular text was restricted, making selectivity necessary and thus making it easy to see what they thought most vital. More importantly, their roles put them in a position to influence readers. Critical reaction reveals not just what the writers thought, but also what messages they sent to their audience. To put it more generally, it is

41 James L. Machor, Reading Fiction in Antebellum America: Informed Response and Reception Histories, 1820-1865 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), ix. Machor continues, “we get at historical readers and their responses to texts, that is, only by doing readings of readings, and such doings can only obliquely be called finding.”
important to remember that periodicals are constructive of culture as well as reflective of it.\textsuperscript{42}

Discussion of Spencer’s work appeared in a variety of periodicals, from the general interest magazines that covered everything from politics to art to the scholarly quarterly reviews. Religious publications took a particular interest in Spencer; these ranged from quarterlies aimed at clergymen and educated laymen to popular weeklies in newspaper format. Many “secular” periodicals were religious in tone and might even be associated with a particular denomination. Likewise, many “religious” magazines had a great deal of secular content. Interest in science was general in the nineteenth century and many publications of both varieties had departments for scientific news or at least printed the occasional scientific article. There was no sharp division between “serious” science and that published in mainstream periodicals for most of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{43}

The years before the Civil War have been called “the golden age of periodicals” in America.\textsuperscript{44} During this period, the cylinder press and other technological advances combined with the growth of the literate population to encourage a “veritable magazine


tsunami."\textsuperscript{45} There were less than 100 in 1825, while about 600 were published in 1850.\textsuperscript{46} The short lifespan of periodicals during this period (two years was about average) implies that four to five thousand may have existed at one time or another during these antebellum decades, many of which have left no trace of their existence.\textsuperscript{47} The emergence of a railway network into the West encouraged broad distribution of magazines, and a number of general interest publications with comparatively large circulations, such as \textit{The Atlantic Monthly}, \textit{Harper’s Monthly}, and \textit{Putnam’s Monthly} appeared in the decade before the Civil War.\textsuperscript{48} \textit{Harper’s} and \textit{Putnam’s} were associated with the publishing houses of the same name, and served to promote and retail literary material.\textsuperscript{49} It was a profitable arrangement and other publishers soon followed, resulting in \textit{Scribner’s Monthly}, \textit{Appletons’ Journal}, \textit{Potter’s American Monthly} and the like. By the time of the Civil War, when Spencer began to attract serious notice in America, there were many points from which his views could be reshaped and rebroadcast.


\textsuperscript{46} Mott, \textit{American Periodicals}, 1:341-342. On periodicals versus magazines see Mott 1:5-7.

\textsuperscript{47} Heather Haveman has collected data for 2,679 different magazines in this period, which she estimates is about half of those in existence. 1,475 more were founded in the ten years before the civil war. The average of 2 years is the median, not the mean. Heather A. Haveman, “Antebellum Literary Culture and the Evolution of American Magazines,” \textit{Poetics} 32, no. 1 (Feb., 2004), 6, 8, 11.


Let me summarize several points on my methodology. First, only the most important of the periodicals and newspapers can be covered with any regularity here. In theory this means those with the largest circulations (like *Harper’s Monthly*) and those with the most influence (like the *North American Review*). In practice it has meant whatever can be found in text-searchable digital format. Typically the two categories overlap, although exceptions have been made for important periodicals like *Popular Science Monthly* and the *National Quarterly Review*. Second, I have paid attention to the use of Spencer’s name outside of review articles as well. This includes casual references and articles that are not reviews of any particular book, but discuss Spencer’s ideas either in a general sense or as part of a topical argument. Important books that discuss Spencer’s theories are also included in this study. It is important to remember that for every reference in the most important publications there were hundreds of similar ones in smaller, local magazines and papers—and also many singular, idiosyncratic takes on Spencer that are lost to history. Third, the presentation is chronological, for several reasons. Chronological order vividly reveals changes in Spencer’s reputation over time. Equally important, most studies of Spencer divide his work by topic, making it difficult to see how his views evolved, and reinforcing the belief that his later books were simply written to prove an ideology preserved from his youth.

One aim of this work is to understand Spencer and his philosophy in a complex and nuanced way. Social Darwinism was only a small part of Spencer’s thought. In fact, emphasizing such statements, though necessary, has a distorting effect. Contemporaries
of Spencer were not necessarily primed to notice such utterances or, if they did, to give them the interpretation a modern reader might. Before the term “social Darwinism” was coined, the concept existed as a set of ideas which only gradually coalesced and came into focus. One might say that the idea of social Darwinism evolved, in a broad, Spencerian sense, from an inchoate mass into an orderly set of distinct concepts connected in a particular fashion. As this occurred, Americans became more aware of the Darwinistic aspect of Spencer’s beliefs about the poor and unfortunate. Even so, Spencer’s religious ideas and his doctrine of evolution were much more widely discussed in America during his lifetime than any other factor of his thought. Americans knew Spencer as a philosopher and scientific thinker first and foremost. It was in these arenas that reactions to his work played out.
CHAPTER ONE

HERBERT SPENCER’S EARLY LIFE AND WRITINGS

The past is a lost continent whose inhabitants can only be known through the texts they leave behind—messages in bottles to which there is no possibility of reply. Among these texts are those which purport to narrate the writer’s life—poems, diaries, autobiographical fiction, and autobiographies. These fascinating yet fragmentary, narratives often tell the reader as much about how the writer wanted to be remembered as they do about his actual life and personality. Certainly this is the case with Herbert Spencer’s massive An Autobiography, and to a certain extent also true of his authorized Life and Letters, written by onetime assistant David Duncan. To insure his posthumous privacy, Spencer gathered most of his correspondence for these works, and stipulated their destruction upon publication. A few letters escaped the general conflagration; comments by his contemporaries also give clues. But for the most part, what we know of Spencer is what he and his biographer wanted us to know.

No autobiography is wholly trustworthy. While complete objectivity is not to be expected in any text, the autobiography is especially slippery in this regard because the materials of its construction are human memories. Further, autobiographies are often written as much for the writer as for the reader. Spencer’s autobiography is no exception. Spencer called it “a natural history of myself,” implying an objective,
scientific perspective.1 He believed that autobiography could avoid the factual errors and mistaken interpretations to which biography was prey.2 The author of his Life and Letters, David Duncan disagreed, writing “to say nothing of the limitations of memory, the mere assumption of the attitude of narrator of one’s own life is unfavourable to correct representation.”3

Students of Spencer have taken a range of positions on An Autobiography. Some are uncritical; others argue that it is at least in part a consciously fabricated work. According to Michael Taylor, “its primary purpose [was] to ensure that the image he sedulously cultivated during his own lifetime would persist beyond the grave: that of a world-famous philosophical genius who had spun his system from his unaided brain as a spider spins his web.”4 Mark Francis, on the other hand, saw the Autobiography was a warning to future readers about the dangers of repressed emotions.5 While there is an element of truth to both claims, some of the features that strike the modern reader as odd—especially the often detached quality of the work—were endemic to the genre of autobiography in the Victorian period. Spencer’s Autobiography may have been one of

---

2 AB, 1:xi.
5 Mark Francis, Herbert Spencer and the Invention of Modern Life (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 17, 33.
the most extreme examples of Victorian tendencies (it was certainly one of the longest) but it is at least partially explicable via these expectations.6

The Victorian era witnessed an efflorescence of autobiographies. By the end of the period it was *de rigeuer* for a major writer to produce some sort of autobiographical work, whether non-fictional, fictional, or poetic.7 What caused the newly felt need to leave a literary epitaph? Many Victorians undoubtedly lost faith in a literal resurrection; “self-authorship” may have provided a substitute in an “authorless world.”8 The Romanic Movement made such emphasis on the self more acceptable.9 However, where the Romantic writer idealized unleashed individual potential, the Victorian tempered this with the notion that progress was only possible through responsibility and productivity.10 Victorian autobiographers were expected to be sincere while

---

6 An Autobiography was published in two volumes, each over five hundred pages exclusive of the many appendices, making it one of the longest Victorian autobiographies according to Clinton Machann, *The Genre of Autobiography in Victorian Literature* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 117.


10 Carolyn A. Barros, *Autobiography: Narrative of Transformation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 207-208. In Spencer’s autobiography the transition from Romantic to Victorian self can be seen in Spencer’s development from willful child to self-contained adult through the agency of his aunt and uncle. Under external restraint, and through the internalization of his family’s goals and values, Spencer transformed himself into an independent-minded but self-controlled adult (see discussion below).
concealing personal details and the elements of their interior lives not relevant to their public positions and ideas.\textsuperscript{11} If they did discuss mental development it was primarily to explain their public engagement, which for professional writers meant explaining the origins of their works.\textsuperscript{12} For the Victorians, there was a “strong sanction against self-revelation” in an autobiography—it was not a means of self-expression but a public document.\textsuperscript{13}

Spencer generally conformed to these expectations in \textit{An Autobiography}. The development of his character and beliefs concerned him most—external events were important for the man of action, but internal events were the key to the man of thought.\textsuperscript{14} He was mainly focused on the sources of his ideas and intellectual tendencies. For example, like John Stuart Mill, Spencer included few details about his mother in his autobiography, because unlike his father, she was not an intellectual companion to him.\textsuperscript{15} Nor did he discuss his personal relationship with either parent. As Duncan put it, Spencer “shrank from parading the more attractive and lovable aspects

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{11} Machann, \textit{Genre of Autobiography}, 10.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 165.
\textsuperscript{13} Fleishman, \textit{Figures of Autobiography}, 313.
\textsuperscript{14} AB, 1:505-506.
\end{flushright}
of his character—thus permitting an apparent justification for the opinion that he was ‘all brains and no heart.’”\textsuperscript{16} After all, a natural history of the self required observation, not sentiment. Personal revelation was low on Spencer’s list of priorities, while tracing his development as a thinker was high.

Spencer’s focus on his intellectual trajectory led to two major distortions. First, he engaged in “Whig history.” He believed that the seeds of his later thought were latent in his earlier work, which led him to exaggerate the importance of some of his early ideas while downplaying others. Mostly this manifested itself as a tendency to identify evolutionary thought in material written before his ideas about universal evolution had been formed. For example, Spencer considered his first book, \textit{Social Statics}, to contain an evolutionary argument about humanity’s gradual adjustment to the social state.\textsuperscript{17} But not all change over time is evolution, even by Spencer’s broad definitions. Second, Spencer was obsessed about his own originality. This led him to focus on those elements of his personality that made him an original thinker while downplaying the role of reading and discussion in the development of his ideas. Spencer’s extremely sensitivity about his debts to Auguste Comte is only the most conspicuous of numerous examples.\textsuperscript{18} By taking these distortions into account, it is

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{LL}, viii.

\textsuperscript{17} \textit{LL}, 540. The reference is to Spencer’s essay “The Filiation of Ideas” which he wrote as a brief intellectual biography.

\textsuperscript{18} Spencer’s relationship with Comte will be discussed in chapter 2.
possible to reach a view of Spencer’s intellectual development that is more balanced than the vision of an untutored genius he himself offered.

**A Child of Nature Tamed: Spencer’s Youth**

While most autobiographers discuss their families to demonstrate their status or explain the conditions of their childhood, Spencer had an additional goal. He believed that mental characteristics are in large part inherited, not just developed through personal experiences. Thus the tendencies of his ancestors could explain much about his personality. He thought that his disrespect for traditional ways of thinking was derived from the religious dissenters found on both sides of his family tree. His mother’s ancestors were Bohemian Hussite refugees to France who later became French Huguenot refugees to England. The family eventually turned to Methodism and several became Wesleyan preachers. His father’s side was also Methodist and included some of Wesley’s earliest followers. Spencer believed that religious nonconformity in his family translated into his personal mental nonconformity.

Spencer did not credit his ancestors for his intellectual gifts, however. He did not consider any of his grandparents intellectually superior, but those he knew best (his paternal grandparents) he praised for their fine moral qualities, good temper, and

---

19 AB, 1:3.

20 AB, 1:4-7.

21 AB, 1:12; as Mark Francis points out, however, Spencer’s ancestors were Methodists, not Quakers or Brethren. Francis, *Herbert Spencer*, 21-22.
conscientiousness. The same focus on moral characteristics such as sympathy and gratitude characterized Spencer’s treatment of his father’s siblings, with the exception of one brother and sister he considered self-serving and egotistic. Simply put, in these passages Spencer gave primacy to character over intellect, though he did not explicitly claim to have inherited any of this moral superiority. Spencer also noted that his uncles were, as Duncan put it, “characterized by individuality almost amounting to eccentricity, by pugnacious tenacity in holding to their opinions, by self-assertiveness and by disregard for authority,” all of which qualities their nephew inherited with interest.

Spencer’s description of his father fell just short of hero worship. William George Spencer was a teacher, like his father before him. He also had some investment capital, putting him solidly in the ranks of the respectable middle class. He was an imposing man, 6 feet tall, with a good walk and a serious demeanor. He took the family nonconformity seriously, and would never take off his hat for anyone or address them by a title other than “Mr.” In fact, Herbert Spencer considered himself inferior to

---

22 AB, 1:19-21.  
23 AB, 1:23.  
24 LL, 5.  
25 He went by “George Spencer” in deference to a younger brother also named William.  
26 AB, 1:49.  
27 AB, 1:53.
his father, save for certain intellectual abilities. George Spencer’s biggest flaw was his impatience with his wife Harriet, who was sweet, self-sacrificing, and guileless. In a rare display of emotional honesty, the son wrote of his mother:

The familiar truth that we fail properly to value the good things we have, and duly appreciate them only when they are gone, is here well illustrated. She was never sufficiently prized. Among those aspects of life which in old age incline the thoughts towards pessimism, a conspicuous one is the disproportioning of rewards to merits. Speaking broadly, the world may be divided into those who deserve little and get much and those who deserve much and get little. My mother belonged to the last class; and it is a source of unceasing regret with me that I did not do more to prevent her inclusion in this class.

More than one scholar has blamed a difficult home environment for Spencer’s emotional detachment. However, little evidence suggests that Spencer was mistreated by his parents or that his childhood was anything other than happy. Spencer wrote that “irritability and depression checked that geniality of behavior which fosters the affections and brings out in children the higher traits of nature.” Yet he still admired his father, wrote frequently, and visited home often as an adult. He believed that his moral and intellectual traits were inherited from his father and not his mother.

---

28 AB, 1:48.

29 AB, 1:67-68.


31 AB, 1:31.

32 AB, 1:161-162.
Herbert Spencer was born on April 27, 1820, little more than a year after his parents’ marriage. His place of birth was Derby, a small but thriving industrial town in England’s Midlands. Spencer was, in effect, an only child: he had four brothers and four sisters but all died in infancy except his younger sister Louisa, who died aged two. Spencer scarcely mentions these siblings, nor does he discuss his own feelings or those of his parents regarding them, except to say that “it was one of my misfortunes to have no brothers, and a still greater misfortune to have no sisters.”33 He was not baptized, nor was a name decided upon, until about half a year after his birth. His father’s disdain for convention was demonstrated by his disapproval of the ritual used in Church baptism and of naming children after their relatives or ancestors.34

Spencer was sickly as a child—or at least his parents thought he was. Anxiety over children was no less common in the late Georgian period than today; in fact, given that around a third of children died before the age of 10 throughout most of the nineteenth century, parental anxiety was probably significantly worse.35 As a result, Spencer was kept out of school because his father felt he could not bear school discipline. Instead, like Hawthorne’s Pearl, he was a child of nature, allowed to wander

33 AB, 1:73; LL, 10 (note 1). Duncan claimed that Spencer was mistaken about the number of his siblings. However, in the passage in question Spencer was only referring only to those born after his sister Louisa died.

34 Letter from William George Spencer to Thomas Spencer, June 1, in AB, 1:71-72.

through the gorse bushes and bluebell-filled meadows near home. Neither parent made any serious attempt to educate him. As a result, he scarcely knew his letters at age five and did not learn to read well until he was seven years old.\(^{36}\) Such parental pampering was merely an extreme form of a parenting style encouraged by magazines and manuals in the late Georgian and early Victorian age. In this vision of the family, parents guided their children by friendship, encouragement, and example rather than through anger, passion, and punishment. Rational explanation and persuasion took the place of command and control.\(^{37}\) George Spencer played this role in the classroom as well as at home.\(^{38}\)

Some of Spencer’s adult qualities made their first appearances in his youth. He developed a love of nature, and his father encouraged him to make drawings of his entomological discoveries.\(^{39}\) Natural history was a British national obsession during much of the nineteenth century, and collecting and preserving specimens was a hobby shared by many.\(^{40}\) From his childhood Spencer also dated his respect for personal freedom (which manifested itself as a dislike of bullies), his aversion to rote learning,

\(^{36}\) AB, 1:76-77, 87.


\(^{38}\) For more on George Spencer’s pedagogy and its influence on his son see chapter 2.

\(^{39}\) AB, 1:84.

and his rich interior life, or as he put it, a tendency for “castle building.”  

On the subject of learning by rote, Spencer wrote “The mere authoritative statement that so-and-so is so-and-so, made without evidence or intelligible reason, seems to have been from the outset constitutionally repugnant to me.”  

As he grew older, Spencer began to read widely. His father received various periodicals, from medical journals like the *Lancet* to general interest weeklies like *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal*, and young Spencer read in these haphazardly.  

His expositor William Henry Hudson contrasts his upbringing to John Stuart Mill’s: “Mill’s mind was forced as in a hot-house; Spencer’s was allowed to develop in the open air with the least possible pressure from without.”  

Spencer learned by absorption rather than by application, a habit he carried over to his adulthood. He also learned to think for himself about the causes of things, a predilection he credited to his father’s tutelage in his autobiography.  

Spencer was a not an obedient child, and he admitted as much. In his autobiography he acknowledged the grief his disobedience caused his parents. He also noted that he was not punished as other children were, but simply scolded, which had

---


42 *AB*, 1:95.

43 *AB*, 1:99.


45 *AB*, 1:101.
little effect on him at that age. In 1833, soon after he turned thirteen, his parents arrived at a solution to both his behavior problems and his desultory education. They agreed to board and educate the son of his uncle Henry, while sending young Herbert to be educated by another uncle, Thomas, an Anglican clergyman. Such arrangements were not uncommon, especially if the purpose was educational. Visiting was an important part of middle-class family life in nineteenth-century Britain, and on average ten percent of the adult residents of a household were family members staying for extended periods. However, Spencer was not informed of the arrangement. Instead, on the pretext of taking a midsummer vacation, the whole family spent a month with Thomas Spencer and his wife Anna at Hinton, close to Bath. Herbert was surprised to learn that rather than chasing butterflies, he was to spend the month studying Euclid. He was even more surprised at the end of the month when his parents left for home without him.

As Spencer put it in his Autobiography “I had never before been under anything like so strong a control.” He was also homesick, as an undated letter from father to uncle makes clear. One morning he woke at six and with nothing more than a couple

---

46 AB, 1:89, 93.


48 AB, 1:106.

49 William George Spencer to Thomas Spencer, n.d., in LL, 17.
of shillings in his pocket began to walk home. He completed his journey three days later, having walked one hundred and fifteen miles with very little food and water.\textsuperscript{50} Letters from his father and mother to his aunt and uncle show just how emotionally overwrought young Spencer was after his ordeal.\textsuperscript{51} However, in his \textit{Autobiography} Spencer merely comments that the physical strain must have had a permanent effect on his system, resulting in “a falling short of ultimate perfection of structure.”\textsuperscript{52} In a few weeks, when he was judged to have recovered, his parents took Spencer back to his aunt and uncle’s house.\textsuperscript{53}

Spencer learned to cope with life away from his parents’ house, and later considered the three years he spent at Hinton profitable. He had a tendency to laziness and lack of self-direction, and would not apply himself unless pushed, especially when it came to subjects he disliked, such as Latin.\textsuperscript{54} As a result, he never learned much Latin or Greek, his French was inadequate, and he knew no German. However he worked harder at geometry and mathematics, and learned what he could of the physical

\textsuperscript{50} AB, 1:109-110.

\textsuperscript{51} AB, 1:110-111.

\textsuperscript{52} AB, 1:109.

\textsuperscript{53} AB, 1:112.

\textsuperscript{54} AB, 1:123.
sciences. Spencer also noted in his autobiography that there were moral benefits to his aunt and uncle’s tutelage:

It was better to be under a control which I no doubt resented, but to which I had to conform, than to be under a control which prompted resistance because resistance was frequently successful. The best results would have been achieved by one who had my father’s higher ideal along with my uncle’s stronger will.

Far from feeling that his spirit had been broken, Spencer thought he owed his aunt and uncle thanks for making such an effort with “intractable material—an individuality too stiff to be easily moulded.” Duncan remarked that it was this individuality which allowed him to hold his own against the constant flow of advice and moral suasion to which he was subject.

It was during his stay with his uncle and aunt that Spencer wrote his first published articles. Thomas Spencer was a writer of “tracts” or small pamphlets on religious, political, and social issues. These were sixteen pages long and sold for two pence; eventually he published almost two dozen, most of which sold between ten and twenty thousand copies. During Herbert’s stay, Thomas was working on the proofs for

---

55 AB, 1:117.
56 AB, 1:132.
57 The argument that Spencer’s spirit was broken is from Francis, *Herbert Spencer*, 31; the quotation is from *AB*, 1:133.
58 *LL*, 22.
59 These were republished after his death as *The Tracts of Rev. Thomas Spencer, M.A.* (London: Houlston and Stoneman, 1853). Since the pagination remains in its original form, citations will be of the individual pamphlets.
some of these, and asked his nephew to check them for typographical errors (it is a
measure of his self-confidence and lack of reticence that he critiqued his uncle’s style as
well.)60 Herbert was inspired by this, and when a small local periodical invited his uncle
to contribute material, young Spencer secretly sent in a letter himself. “Crystallization”
duly appeared in *The Bath and West of England Magazine*; it described the results of an
experiment in crystallizing salt through evaporation. Upon seeing his letter in print, with
the initials “H. S.” below, the fifteen-year-old Spencer “began shouting and capering
around the room until my uncle and aunt did not know what was amiss…”61 Spencer had
discovered the joys of authorship. Reading in that same issue a short article in support
of poor laws, he quickly wrote a letter in reply, which was published in its turn.62

Though Spencer did not learn much of languages, history, or literature while
staying with his aunt and uncle, his years there were very valuable in other ways. His
grasp of mathematics and geometry would serve him well in the next stage of his life.
He learned how to write carefully and well by imitating his uncle. Most importantly,

---

60 AB, 1:128. The initial publication dates of these pamphlets are hard to determine. They were printed
in lots of one thousand, with each “thousand” dated according to its time of printing. A few give an
original publication date or the date the work was finished: for example the first gives the time of writing
as May 1, 1840, though the “twelfth thousand” was printed in 1843. This would mean Spencer was just
turning 20 when it was written, and no longer living with his uncle. It may be that the pamphlets were
revised at some point between printings, or that the publication process was lengthy. Or perhaps
Spencer’s memory was faulty, and he projected work he did on a later visit further back into his
childhood.

61 H[erbert] S[pencer], “Crystallization,” *Bath and West of England Magazine* 1, no. 2 (Feb. 1836), 37;
Herbert Spencer to William George Spencer, Jan. 1836, in LL, 5.

62 H[erbert] S[pencer], “Poor Laws: Reply to ‘T. W. S.,”’ *Bath and West of England Magazine* 1, no. 3
(Mar. 1836), 81-83. This essay is considered below.
Thomas Spencer instilled the self-discipline and work ethic that made his nephew’s voluminous writings possible. Thankfully, this did not come at the price of repressing young Spencer’s intellectual independence. His impatience with received authority combined with brash self-confidence led him to constantly seek new explanations for the phenomena around him.

“My Miscellaneous Life”: Early Adulthood

Spencer “graduated” from his uncle’s tutelage in 1836. Now sixteen years old, he was uncertain about what profession to pursue. His father provided little guidance, other than to suggest that Spencer try teaching. At that time, children of the middle classes were often given space to experiment with various occupations before marriage necessitated settling on a respectable career. Spencer became an assistant to his childhood teacher for a short while, but a boom in rail building soon provided him with another career opportunity. The London and Birmingham Railway was under construction, and one section of track was under the care of a former pupil of his father’s, Charles Fox (later famous as the designer of the Crystal Palace). Fox had formed a favorable opinion of young Spencer during a visit to the Spencer household; but as Spencer modestly noted, “friendship for my father was, I suspect, the chief motive for offering me the appointment.” Family connections gave Spencer a start in life, and

---

63 Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, 225.
64 AB, 1:142.
would serve him well at several crucial junctures in the future.65 However, hard work and ability were the ultimate keys to success. Spencer proved himself a model employee: sober, hard-working, and intelligent—though something of a know-it-all, unafraid to critique even the work of his superiors.66 By 1838, he was in charge of drawing up plans for new railway stations and supervising eighty laborers.

Spencer decided to quit engineering in 1841, despite his success. He returned to his parents’ home in Derby with his modest savings. In An Autobiography he wrote that engineering was a “loss of time” as far as his future progress was concerned, and he seems to have had a similar intuition as a young man.67 He had greater ambitions, which at that point meant a career as an inventor, for Spencer had gotten into the habit of daydreaming about patents and the wealth that potentially flowed from them.68 His father was working on an “electro-magnetic engine” and father and son corresponded about this for some time.69 Bringing this project to fruition was a major reason for the younger Spencer’s abandonment of engineering. However, after his return to Derby, research in scientific magazines convinced him that electro-magnetism would never be

---


66 LL, 30-35 gives a portrait of the young Spencer; see also AB, 1:148, 162-163.

67 AB, 1:211-12.

68 AB, 1:199.

69 AB, 1:207.
as efficient as steam power.\textsuperscript{70} After this disappointment he worked on various projects, a young man at loose ends whose “constitutional idleness” made it difficult to work without some large goal in mind.\textsuperscript{71} At one point he thought of founding a weekly paper called \textit{The Philosopher}.\textsuperscript{72} Another moment found him working on a system of shorthand devised by his father, with a view towards publication.\textsuperscript{73} He read Thomas Carlyle’s \textit{Sartor Resartus} and a section or two of John Stuart Mill’s \textit{System of Logic}.\textsuperscript{74} He enjoyed Ralph Waldo Emerson, but put down Kant’s \textit{Critique of Pure Reason} mostly unread because he disagreed with its fundamental principles.\textsuperscript{75} He sculpted a creditable bust of his uncle Thomas, and even suffered from “the verse-making disorder” for a brief period, later commenting “no one should write verse if he can help it.”\textsuperscript{76} Spencer also continued to dream of taking out a patent. He invented a machine to make printing type by compression rather than casting, and a “cephalograph” to make accurate phrenological measurements.\textsuperscript{77}

\textsuperscript{70} \textit{AB}, 1:216.
\textsuperscript{71} \textit{AB}, 1:215.
\textsuperscript{72} \textit{AB}, 1:274.
\textsuperscript{73} \textit{AB}, 1:275-276.
\textsuperscript{74} \textit{AB}, 1:276-277.
\textsuperscript{75} \textit{AB}, 1:289.
\textsuperscript{76} The bust is described in \textit{AB}, 1:235-237, and pictured between pages 33 and 34 (American edition). For the poetical Spencer see \textit{AB}, 1:259-60; the quotation is from p. 302.
\textsuperscript{77} \textit{AB}, 1:279-81; \textit{AB}, 1:634-639.
Writing also found its place in this mishmash of activities. During his stint as an engineer, Spencer published several short articles on technical subjects such as viaducts and arches. Most of these proposed new methods of performing common engineering and surveying tasks, or described improved tools and instruments.\(^7\) He published a few more articles in 1842. One of them, “On Architectural Precedent,” was a short stab at those architects who reworked classical designs—in typical fashion Spencer argued for abstract principles of beauty and fitness to purpose.\(^9\) In a follow-up letter in the next issue, Spencer complained about the British system of classical education, which produced men “infected with the admiration for martial glory” who knew “little or nothing of the grandeur of modern science...of the gigantic mass of knowledge collected by the philosophers of the present day.”\(^8\) The articles show Spencer’s distaste for intellectual conservatism and militarism, and his vast respect for modern science.

During this period Spencer’s became directly involved in political activities, not surprising for a young man with ideals and time on his hands. He became honorary secretary of the Derby branch of the Complete Suffrage Union, founded by anti-slavery

---

78 Some of these pieces Spencer had reprinted in his autobiography (appendices A-D, G, see also 188-189), others he did not republish.


activist and Quaker Joseph Sturge in 1841. The Union was intended as a bridge between radical, working-class Chartism and the middle-class Anti-Corn Law League. It called for an extension of suffrage partly based on the belief that the alternative was revolution in the French style. Spencer wrote a number of articles on the social and political turmoil of the day for a weekly paper, The Nonconformist, whose publisher Edward Miall was a close ally of Sturge. Perhaps copying the style of other writers for the Nonconformist (whose slogan was “The Dissidence of Dissent and the Protestantism of the Protestant Religion”), Spencer indulged in some extended exhibitions of purple prose. “The framework of legal regulations, within which the soul of freedom lies encaged, is everywhere being cracked and shivered—its timbers giving way before the irresistible expansion of its occupant,” Spencer wrote, and

> The buoyant spirit of independence can never more be repressed; and we defy all the legislators that either are or have been in the world, with all their cunning and sagacity, their wily statesmanship and subtle policy, their regulations and enactments, their soldiers and police, and the multitudinous appliances of state manoeuvring, to subdue its now rising power, to refetter it with the shackles of aristocracy, or to crush it beneath the stern heel of despotism.

—

81 AB, 1:249.


83 Spencer’s uncle Thomas gave him a letter of introduction that led to his publication in the Nonconformist; see AB, 1:242-243.

84 A quotation from Edmund Burke, as Spencer pointed out in his autobiography. AB, 1:272.

85 Herbert Spencer, “Effervescence—Rebecca and Her Daughters,” Nonconformist 3, no. 119 (June 28, 1843), 457.
The only way to stop social dissolution was to give justice to the people, Spencer advised.

Letters from the period show that his more conservative friends were concerned about his future prospects if he continued his radicalism. They had little reason to worry. Spencer’s political phase did not last long. As David Wiltshire puts it, “his enthusiasm, though genuine, was consolidated by no long-term temperamental or intellectual commitment.” Such enthusiasm was not often found in his later works, though he occasionally summoned up the fire of his younger days in his more polemical writing. The importance of Spencer’s period of political involvement lies not in what it augured for his future work but in how it demonstrates his youthful uncertainty. He did not have fully formed political and social opinions when he left home. On the contrary, he explored possible social and political stances just as he explored different professions: teacher, engineer, inventor, and writer. Ultimately he chose a less emotional and direct approach to politics. This was augured in a set of articles he wrote for The Nonconformist in 1842, a numbered series of eleven letters which he republished (at his own expense) the following year as a pamphlet entitled “The Proper Sphere of Government.” These letters put logical argument above rhetorical

---

86 AB, 1:254-55.

87 Wiltshire, Social and Political Thought, 32.

88 There were eleven letters, but as the fourth letter was published in two parts, there were twelve separate publication dates. Spencer reorganized the whole into twelve letters when he published them.
flourishes, and rested on basic principles rather than emotional language. They began a trajectory that led to Spencer’s first book, *Social Statics*, eight years later.

In 1843 Spencer left Derby for London “in the hope of finding something to do.” By that point he had become interested in writing as a career. However, he had no luck finding literary work, and his pamphlet sold only 100 copies in the first year of its release, which, at four pence apiece, meant a vanishingly small return on an investment of over £10. Spencer looked for an engineering position, but found nothing long term. For a short time he worked for *The Pilot*, a weekly newspaper published for the Complete Suffrage Union of Birmingham. However, he was not a firm enough Christian to suit the proprietor. Spencer lost his religious beliefs gradually during his young adulthood—so gradually that he was later unable to pinpoint exactly when he ceased being a Christian. In his autobiography he cited a number of factors, from his dislike of learning hymns to his growing appreciation for natural law.

---


89 *AB*, 1:257.

90 *AB*, 1:264.


92 *AB*, 1:283-284.

93 *AB*, 1:296.

94 *AB*, 1:170-173.
Another reason Spencer left *The Pilot* was a new boom in railway construction. Experienced engineers were in great demand by the end of 1844, and so Spencer spent the next two years of his life on one railroad project or another. As was true of his first period of engineering, the work left him little time for writing anything but letters to friends and family. The “railway mania” was in full swing, and Spencer kept busy. During this period his employment varied widely; he did surveying work, drew up plans, assisted in getting those plans approved by Parliament, walked the course of the track with a level to check its grades, and eventually supervised an office with twenty assistants.\(^95\) However, rampant speculation turned the railway boom into a railway bubble, which inevitably popped. Not only was Spencer left without a job, but he was required to testify when his erstwhile employer sued various railway companies for promised remuneration.

Fortunately, Spencer had some financial resources—his supervisory position had paid him £24 per week, a not inconsiderable sum. His financial position gave him the wherewithal to enter another of those periods of Derby idleness that punctuated his young life. Once again, he determined to pursue the life of an inventor. His ideas ranged from the ambitious (a flying machine, quickly abandoned) to the mundane (a “binding pin” to hold the pages of a newspaper together during reading).\(^96\) The latter was his only

\(^{95}\) *AB*, 1:295, 312-313, 328-329, 333-334.

\(^{96}\) *AB*, 1:346-348, 352-354.
successful patent, and was profitable enough to offset the losses he incurred in researching and seeking patents on other inventions. Though he now had time to write, Spencer did not produce much during this period of his life—only two short articles from 1845 to 1847. One was an attack on state education, once again railing against aristocratic greed and dishonesty. 97 Another, reprinted in his autobiography, was strictly scientific in nature. 98 Spencer always had a diverse array of interests; political theory and natural history were two of the biggest.

In 1848, a new phase of Spencer's life began when he became employed as a sub-editor on an Anti-Corn Law journal, The Economist. Looking back, Spencer considered his life beforehand “miscellaneous and rather futile,” though it did give him experience and time to increase his knowledge. 99 Of course, this is the kind of judgment that could only be made in hindsight—at the time, he did not know that he was not destined to become an engineer or an inventor. Also, Spencer did some significant writing in this period, all in the form of articles for newspapers and journals. This forced him to develop and articulate ideas that were of vast importance to his later thought. These articles demonstrate how early Spencer developed some of the convictions of his mature thought, but also make clear that some of these ideas were in flux. Spencer's

---


98 AB, 1:641-643.

99 AB, 1:369, 385.
young adulthood may not have added up to much financially or professionally, but it was a vastly important time for his intellectual development.

**Seeking the Laws of Life: Early Social and Political Writing**

Numerous Spencer scholars have argued that Spencer’s mature political philosophy was an explication and defense of attitudes he absorbed in his youth. As one writer put it, “Herbert Spencer’s theory of natural and social evolution emerged out of, and scientifically rationalized, a set of previously formed socio-political principles.”

While family opinion and cultural environment certainly had an impact, they were not the source of all of Spencer’s ideas. An examination of Thomas Spencer’s tracts, which scholars have largely ignored, provides some insight into Spencer’s adoption of familial attitudes. However, it should not be forgotten that Herbert received some of his education from his father, and learned much from listening to the conversations of his father with his uncles or with other visitors.

Unsurprisingly, Herbert Spencer’s 1843 letter on poor laws owed much to the ideas of his uncle. Thomas Spencer felt that poor laws corrupted the morals of the people and encouraged idleness, not an uncommon attitude among the middle classes at the time. He wrote, “All experience goes to prove that by far the greater part of the poverty incident to human nature, is the result of idle, dissolute, and improvident

---

100 Wiltshire, *Social and Political Thought*, 3.

101 *AB*, 1:96-97.
conduct; and they who, by their injudicious treatment, encourage such conduct, are the poor man’s enemies, and not his friends.”102 Similarly, his nephew argued that “there is a natural tendency in human nature to lean upon any support that may be afforded” and that the administration of the New Poor Law demonstrated that many supposedly infirm people would readily work when the alternative was the workhouse.103 On the cause of poverty in Ireland they were both in agreement—whisky.104 Herbert Spencer also quoted scripture, though not as freely as his uncle, who talked about the “depravity of human nature” in Biblical terms and believed that “the destitution of age is generally the consequence of idleness, vice, and improvidence in early life, and that the Divine Being intended that is should be so.”105 One major difference was that Thomas Spencer spoke from years of personal experience administering relief funds locally and in Bath, so his work was dotted with anecdotal evidence. His nephew would later use his uncle’s experience with the New Poor Law, which eliminated most relief outside of workhouses, as evidence for his own views about poverty.

102 Thomas Spencer, “The Outcry Against the New Poor Law; or, Who is the Poor Man’s Friend?” (London: John Green, Bath: Samuel Gibbs, 1843), 2.

103 S[pencer], “Poor Laws,” 81-82.

104 Ibid, 82; Thomas Spencer wrote “When the people of Ireland become sober, there will be no need of a Poor Law.” In “Reasons for a Poor Law Considered, Part I” (London: John Green, Bath: Samuel Gibbs), 8. This pamphlet was first printed June, 1841. See also “Evils of Undue Legislative Interference” (London: Charles Gilpin, and Bath: Samuel Gibbs, 1848), first printed May 15, 1848, for an extended diatribe against the Irish.

105 Thomas Spencer, “Reasons for a Poor Law Considered: Part III” (London: John Green; and Bath: Samuel Gibbs, 1843), 3. This pamphlet was first printed in June, 1841.
Thomas Spencer espoused very conservative opinions about charity, but he was liberal in many other ways. He supported the abolition of the Corn Laws because they raised the price of food for the working class, and also on the general principle that landlord and laborer have no right to legislate against each other.\textsuperscript{106} He preached in favor of international peace and free trade. He believed in the extension of the suffrage to the lower classes, and in government reform generally.\textsuperscript{107} Yet intermingled with the progressive was the regressive, sometimes stated in terms the modern reader cannot help but find shocking from a man of the cloth. He defended child labor, approving of children being sent to work in the fields when eight or nine years old, and wrote that such children could attend school in the evening, which would seem like recreation after a long day’s work.\textsuperscript{108} He argued against a ten hour day, and complained of government that “in its pity it has dismissed women from collieries and children from factories, where they earned their own living.”\textsuperscript{109} He considered labor a commodity, believed that those who were underpaid should simply emigrate elsewhere, and wrote that “A labourer has to let, not the strength of a horse, but the strength of a man, which, being

\textsuperscript{106} Thomas Spencer, “The Prayer Book Opposed to the Corn Laws” (London: John Green and Bath: Samuel Gibbs, 1843), 7.

\textsuperscript{107} In fact Thomas Spencer included the \textit{Declaration of Independence} in his pamphlet on “The People’s Rights: And How to Get Them” (London: Charles Gilpin and Bath: Samuel Gibbs, 1844).

\textsuperscript{108} Thomas Spencer, “Reasons for a Poor Law Considered: Part II” (London: John Green, Bath: Samuel Gibbs, 1843).

\textsuperscript{109} Thomas Spencer, “Evils of Undue Legislative Interference,” London: Charles Gilpin, and Bath: Samuel Gibbs, 1848 [Dated Nov 25, 1848; first printed May 15, 1848], 16.
less than that of a horse, is let for less price...” After his uncle’s death in 1853, Herbert Spencer wrote of him:

The uniform success which attended him throughout the whole of his life until within the last few years, and the consciousness that this success was due to his own intelligence, energy, and uprightness, had generated in him the belief that good conduct would, in all cases, insure prosperity, and this led him to pass somewhat severe judgments on the unsuccessful. His intimate knowledge of pauperism, which he saw to be in nearly all cases traceable to idleness and vice, confirmed him in this view.111

Despite the implicit tone of reproach, Herbert Spencer certainly acquired his uncle’s habit of tactlessly passing “severe judgments on the unsuccessful.” His books contain passages of great hope and optimism—but also passages of astonishing cruelty.

While Herbert Spencer agreed with many of his uncle’s social positions, some important differences developed. Political and social involvement was a lifelong commitment for Thomas Spencer. By contrast, Herbert dropped his direct involvement in causes while still young. He gradually stopped referring to a Creator or Deity. Most importantly, he based his social view on a very different foundation than his uncle. Where Thomas Spencer used religion as the basis for his views, Herbert Spencer slowly came to feel that he needed some other justification. He came to the conclusion that the natural laws of the universe dictate human social arrangements. This belief developed over a long period—in 1850 he was still citing God’s will as warrant for his

---


111 AB, 1:38.
basic axioms of social life—but ultimately it led Herbert Spencer to new moral theories as well as modifying some older ones. For example, both men strongly believed that individuals must bear personal responsibility for their actions. Both agreed that those who acted foolishly should suffer the consequences and those who acted providently should not be denied the full rewards. But Herbert’s belief in inevitable social evolution absolved him and his readers of direct responsibility, while personal involvement in reform movements was a way of life for Thomas. Furthermore, social progress implied a better future, perhaps even a perfect one, an idea foreign to Thomas Spencer’s religious worldview.

The move from God’s law to natural law had already begun by 1842, when Spencer wrote his most substantial early work, the letters collected as “The Proper Sphere of Government.” These discussed a variety of subjects, from poor laws to state subsidized religion to education. For the first time Spencer based his arguments on a single principle: that government’s sole purpose is to defend man’s natural rights—“in a word, to administer justice.”

Following Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Spencer wrote that early government developed out of man’s need to protect himself and resolve disputes with his fellows. But rather than understanding government as an abstract “social contract,” he argued that the laws that govern society


113 On Spencer’s debt to Hobbes and Locke see Alberto Mingardi, Herbert Spencer (New York: Continuum, 2011), 36.
are of the same kind as those that govern the rest of nature, from inorganic matter to living things. In fact, Spencer already had vague ideas about “the laws of the social organism,” foreshadowing his later use of organic analogies in discussions of human society.\textsuperscript{114} Much as with Adam Smith’s laws of the marketplace—and Spencer owed much to Smith—the laws of society tend to keep things in balance. Social ills generally rectify themselves without the interference of political powers. In fact, because of this self-regulating tendency legislation often does more harm than good: “as the interference of man in external nature often destroys the just balance, and produces greater evils than those to be remedied, so that attempt to regulate all the actions of a community by legislation, will entail little else but misery and confusion.”\textsuperscript{115} In short, a government’s sole job should be to protect rights by ensuring justice, and attempting anything else would do more harm than good.

Most of “The Proper Sphere of Government” explored the consequences of these basic ideas. Not surprisingly, Spencer applied them first to the Corn Laws, the established church, and the Poor Law, echoing his Uncle Thomas’ interest in the same subjects. However, though he reused many arguments both he and his uncle previously made, the underlying logic was different. Spencer continued to assert that no person “whose wickedness or improvidence has brought him to want” can claim a right to

\textsuperscript{114} Herbert Spencer, “Mr. Hume and National Education,” \textit{Nonconformist} 3, no. 124 (Aug. 2, 1843), 537.

\textsuperscript{115} Spencer, \textit{Proper Sphere}, 5.
relief. But the basis for this conclusion was no longer common sense or the Bible, but a developing idea that rights are based on freedom from interference rather than on positive entitlements. The transition from scriptural sanction to abstract principle let Spencer in some new directions. He argued that even the victims of misfortune have no natural right to the property of others. He also proposed that man’s “natural birth-right—the charter given to him at his creation” is “a subsistence derived from the soil.” In other words, men have no basic right to food and shelter, but they do have the right to work for their own support. Spencer’s concept of rights in “The Proper Sphere of Government” was not fully formed—he did not explain their basis nor enumerate them, but simply adopted the natural rights theories of other sources, including the Declaration of Independence. He did not develop his theory of rights fully until his first book, Social Statics, published in 1850.

“The Proper Sphere of Government” was an early work, and contained many of Spencer’s political ideas in chrysalis. For example, he showed a strong dislike for war, violence, and the aristocracy he considered responsible for them. Armed conflict, Spencer wrote, is an atavism of the feudal spirit which takes man’s energy away from

116 Ibid., 7.
117 Ibid.
118 Ibid., 12.
119 Spencer, always eager to point out the continuity in his ideas, discussed these in his autobiography. AB, 1:238-241.
industry, commerce, science and the arts. Without war the nobility would be exposed as “mere drones in the hive, and long since would they have ceased to glory in their shame.”\textsuperscript{120} In another article from this period, Spencer declared:

Religious freedom will never be secured until mankind shall be wholly governed by moral power. Every resort to brute force—every exhibition of violence, however good may be the cause which begets it, will delay the advent of this happy era, and each friend of humanity must grieve over every such check to our progress.\textsuperscript{121}

However, at this period he was still content to refer to Christianity—and beating swords into plowshares—as the main warrant for this conclusion. Likewise, he condemned state support for colonial ventures on the grounds voluntary settlers unprotected by the military might of the mother country would be more likely to respect the rights of “the aborigines.” “Our colonial history, to our shame be it spoken, is full of the injustice and cruelty, to which the original possessors of the soil have been subjected,” Spencer wrote, and gave myriad examples.\textsuperscript{122} Yet again, he was content to appeal to moral feeling and Christian values rather than to any rationally developed principle.

Spencer wedded his belief in the laws of nature to a vision of nature as harmonic, beneficent, and progressive. Allowing society to operate naturally brought the most efficiency because nature itself was efficient. Efficiency let to happiness, and

\textsuperscript{120} Spencer, \textit{Proper Sphere}, 17.

\textsuperscript{121} Herbert Spencer, “The Non-Intrusion Riots,” \textit{Nonconformist} 3, no. 134 (Oct. 11, 1843), 689.

\textsuperscript{122} Spencer, \textit{Proper Sphere}, 22.
ultimately to a higher development. “The grand and irresistible law of human existence, is progressive improvement,” Spencer wrote.123 Thus allowing social development to take its natural course might seem unkind at times, but would lead to greater happiness for future generations.124 Far from repeating the shibboleths of his youth, Spencer advanced an idea of secular progress that was foreign to the Christian worldview of his Uncle Thomas.125

Science and Pseudo-Science: Early Scientific Writing

One of Spencer’s first published articles dealt with social problems; the other concerned physical science. The first led to a series of articles, then a book. The second also bore fruit, though at first its produce was somewhat meager. These can be divided into two classes. The first was a pair of articles on the prehistoric period, on of paleontology and one on geology. The former, originally published in The Philosophical Magazine in February, 1844, argued that the proportion of plant to animal life was higher in the past, and thus the atmosphere contained less oxygen.126 Greater oxygen has enabled “superior orders of beings”—warm blooded birds and mammals—to

123 Ibid., 24.

124 Ibid., 34.

125 Thomas Spencer eventually wrote his own tract against government meddling, but it was not published until 1848. Thomas Spencer, “Evils of Undue Legislative Interference” (London: Charles Gilpin, and Bath: Samuel Gibbs, 1848).

126 AB, 1:625-626. The article, “Remarks on the Theory of Reciprocal Dependence in the Animal and Vegetable Creations as Regards its Bearing upon Palæontology,” is republished as appendix F in An Autobiography, along with a note pointing out some errors.
develop. Spencer saw this as a gradual change, pointing to geological data as a warrant for his deduction, but he also used the word “creation” several times, blunting any evolutionary implications. The Philosophical Magazine published another article of Spencer’s three years later, “The Form of the Earth No Proof of Original Fluidity.” This article, whose title summarizes its argument, is less interesting from a modern perspective.128

Besides these scientific articles Spencer wrote articles of another class, on phrenological theory. While phrenology is considered a pseudo-science today, in the nineteenth century many people believed it had scientific legitimacy. The theory was invented in Germany by Franz Joseph Gall at the end of the eighteenth century, and popularized in part by his disciple Johann Gaspar Spurzheim. In 1931 Spurzheim gave a series of lectures on the subject at the Derby Philosophical Society, which the eleven-year-old Spencer attended with his father.129 Spencer became a convert, and remained one for several decades. Phrenologists thought that the brain was divided into many “organs,” and that the personality of the individual was dependent on the size of these organs. They believed that the shape of the skull corresponded to the shape of the brain within. Thus by consulting a chart which showed the function of each organ, the

127 AB, 1:628-629.
128 Spencer reprinted this essay in An Autobiography as appendix J, again noting his miscalculations. AB 1:641-644.
129 AB, 1:231.
phrenologist predict various personality traits, including intelligence, by the shape of the head and by slight protrusions in the skull—bumps. The ability to “read heads” was one of the features of phrenology that made it a very popular science and later the element that attracted the most scorn. Yet the most basic phrenological beliefs—that the brain is the organ of the mind, and that specific regions of the brain account for different mental functions—are basic assumptions of modern neuroscience. These were ideas Spencer kept long after he lost interest in the specifics of head shape and cranial capacity.

In the 1840s many scientifically minded people accepted phrenology as a valuable though controversial advance in human knowledge. Phrenologists made grand claims, boasting that their “science” provided certain knowledge of man’s inner workings, since humans were a part of the natural world and could be understood like any other natural phenomenon. Large numbers of doctors and other men of science supported phrenology, especially those who were young and not yet professionally established. In phrenology they found a new realm of knowledge that challenged the orthodoxies of established authorities and offered a “shortcut” to scientific prestige. Phrenological doctrines also threatened inherited power and wealth by providing a test

---


of mental talents and deficiencies that took no account of rank or position.\textsuperscript{133} Spencer was young, scientifically minded, independent, and not fixed in a career—exactly the kind of person phrenology attracted.\textsuperscript{134}

Spencer was taken enough with phrenology to write three articles on the subject. Originally he submitted them to the \textit{Edinburgh Phrenological Journal}, founded by leading phrenologist George Combe, but they were rejected.\textsuperscript{135} This may explain why Spencer never cited Combe’s enormously popular book \textit{The Constitution of Man Considered in Relation to External Objects}, though some scholars argue that he owed a lot to Combe, especially with regard to his ideas about the mental faculties.\textsuperscript{136} Spencer found another journal to publish his work, \textit{The Zoist}. \textit{The Zoist} became one of the more important and long lasting phrenological journals, but it was in its infancy when it printed Spencer’s work. It was founded by John Elliotson, onetime Chair of Medicine at

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{133} Cooter, \textit{Cultural Meaning of Popular Science}, 116-117.


\textsuperscript{135} Cooter, \textit{Cultural Meaning of Popular Science}, 336.

\textsuperscript{136} Taylor, \textit{Philosophy of Herbert Spencer}, 33; Robert J. Richards, \textit{Darwin and the Emergence of Evolutionary Theories of Mind and Behavior} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 251. Van Wyhe thinks Spencer’s first book, \textit{Social Statics}, “reads like a gloss” of Combe, but offers no direct evidence that Spencer ever read the book. Furthermore, Combe’s belief that nature is progressive and that natural laws govern society were hardly unique to him. Van Wyhe, \textit{Phrenology}, 194; see also 174-175.
\end{flushright}
University College in London, after he was forced to resign because of his support for another controversial new science, mesmerism.\textsuperscript{137}

Each of Spencer’s articles considered a particular organ of the brain as delineated in a phrenological chart, and suggested that the characteristic located there should be changed. In the first, he argued that the organ of benevolence was really an organ of “sensitiveness” used to experience pleasure and pain.\textsuperscript{138} Since this organ was located next to the organ of Imitation, whose root is sympathy, Spencer determined that interaction between the two explained benevolence: that is, sympathy for someone in distress causes pain in the organ of sensitiveness, thus leading to a benevolent act to relieve the pain. Ultimately, Spencer argued, this “evolution of kind and compassionate feeling” will be secondary to the organs’ functions in a more morally developed race: “the direct multiplication of happiness.”\textsuperscript{139} The connection between sensitivity and concern for others was something Spencer had imbibed from Adam Smith’s \textit{Theory of Moral Sentiments}.\textsuperscript{140} It would reappear in one form or another throughout his writings, as would his faith in the future moral development and happiness of humanity.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{137} Jennifer Ruth, “‘Gross Humbug’ or ‘the Language of Truth’? The Case of the ‘Zoist’,” \textit{Victorian Periodicals Review} 32, no. 4 (winter, 1999), 300-302. The Zoist also printed articles on mesmerism.
\item \textsuperscript{138} Herbert Spencer, “A New View of the Functions of Imitation and Benevolence,” \textit{Zoist} 1, no. 4 (Jan., 1844), 373.
\item \textsuperscript{139} Ibid., 375.
\item \textsuperscript{140} \textit{AB}, 1:262-63.
\end{itemize}
In the second article, Spencer suggested moving the function of Amativeness (or “sexual instinct”) from the cerebellum elsewhere, as the cerebellum was a separate structure while Amativeness itself was not distinct from the other mental powers.141 In the third essay, he renamed the organ of “Wonder” “Reviviscence” and argued that it was the basis of imagination and memory.142 Spencer expressed confidence that observation would bear out his new theories.143 The editor of the journal disagreed. In a short rebuttal to Spencer’s second article he cited many examples of relationship between sexual feeling and size of the cerebellum, as well as appealing to the authority of Gall on the matter.144 Spencer began his third article with a disclaimer:

By way of apology for opposing a received phrenological doctrine, it may be urged that considering the comparatively short time that has elapsed since the discovery of a true system of mental philosophy, it is extremely improbable that the details of that system should be all of them, or nearly all of them, correct.145 Sciences need time to develop, Spencer argued. Eventually the mental powers would be defined in simple, easily comprehensible and exact ways. Spencer was confident in the future and in his own ability to correcting scientific problems and discover new truths. However, Phrenologists were not eager to discard the work of Gall and Spurzheim and

141 Herbert Spencer, “On the Situation of the Organ of Amativeness,” Zoist 2, no. 6 (July, 1844), 186.
142 Herbert Spencer, “A Theory Concerning the Organ of Wonder,” Zoist 2, no. 7 (Oct., 1844), 319-320.
143 Spencer, “Organ of Amativeness,” 188.
144 Ibid., 189.
revise their charts. This hidebound attitude was one of the reasons Spencer lost interest in phrenology.

Spencer’s phrenological articles reflect his habits of thought in another way: by their use of *a priori* argumentation. Spencer often reached his conclusions by beginning with axiomatic principles and deducing their consequences. He typically listed many examples to justify his hypotheses, but they were just that—examples, and not points of data from which a general law was derived through induction.\(^{146}\) Of course, conclusions reached in this way are only as strong as the principles they are based on. Spencer’s theories were laid on a foundation of basic phrenological concepts; for example, the law that mental organs with similar functions are found next to each other and effect each other.\(^{147}\) Today’s neuroscience is based on different principles, making these articles completely unconvincing. Actually they stopped being relevant for Spencer himself when he gave up phrenology, and he never had them reprinted, though he included some of his other obscure early essays in *An Autobiography*.

However, all Spencer’s early work is useful to the extent that it reveals Spencer’s character, methods, and sources. Spencer’s brash confidence (bordering on arrogance) has already been noted. The breadth of his interests, too, is fairly obvious; it is interesting to see how easily these can be segregated into the socio-political and the

\(^{146}\) Spencer, “Organ of Amativeness,” 188.

\(^{147}\) Spencer, “Organ of Wonder,” 320.
purely scientific. Some of Spencer’s core ideas, which he held throughout his life, clearly belong to his young manhood. His ideas about poverty, work, and responsibility bear clear similarity to those of his uncle Thomas. But by his early 20s Spencer was developing ideas about progress and human development that were foreign to the religion of his father and uncle. And though he learned from his father to look for natural rather than supernatural causes of physical phenomena, he was developing a rationalism and devotion to scientific explanation that was all his own. Of course, science meant something different to Spencer than it does today, because it included a priori deduction as well as induction based on observation and experiment. The distinction was never clearer than in Spencer’s first book, *Social Statics*, which he understood as a scientific exploration of politics and morality.¹⁴⁸

“The Moral Euclid”: Social Statics

In 1847 Spencer was nearing the end of his 20s and still not settled into a career. With the decline of railway mania, engineering work was scarce, while literary work was nowhere to be found. Spencer thought of founding a school, and even considered immigrating to New Zealand.¹⁴⁹ Fortunately his uncle Thomas came to the rescue once again, with a letter of introduction to James Wilson, the new owner of *The Economist*.¹⁵₀

---

¹⁴⁸ Herbert Spencer, *Social Statics; Or, the Conditions Essential to Human Happiness Specified, and the First of them Developed* (London: John Chapman, 1850) (hereafter cited as SS).

¹⁴⁹ AB, 1:370.

¹⁵₀ AB, 1:378-379.
Once an organ of the Anti-Corn Law League, the publication was a money-losing proposition until Wilson bought it and turned it into a respected economic journal.

Thanks to his letter of introduction, Spencer was able to show Wilson The Proper Sphere of Government. Wilson was a dedicated adherent of free trade and laissez-faire principles, and he approved. He asked Spencer if he would be interested in an editing position should one open up. Five months passed, during which Spencer wrote several more political articles unfriendly to the aristocratic class and supporting the extension of suffrage.\(^\text{151}\) At last, at the end of 1848, Spencer was offered a position as sub-editor of The Economist.

Spencer’s new position was ideal because it gave him plenty of time to write. He could usually get his work done in the morning, relax during the afternoon, and write in the evening.\(^\text{152}\) Spencer also found a new set of influences, for The Economist had a laissez-faire philosophy of economics that suited him well. Besides James Wilson himself, Spencer came into contact with several important economic thinkers, most notably co-editor Thomas Hodgskin, whose ideas greatly influenced his first book.\(^\text{153}\) Hodgskin, twenty years Spencer’s senior, was an anarchist libertarian who supported

---


\(^{152}\) AB, 1:392-393.

\(^{153}\) Wiltshire, Social and Political Thought, 48, 50.
both free trade and trade unions, and looked forward to a cooperative future society.\textsuperscript{154}

Precise details about his influence are hard to pin down since Spencer never admitted to them, but Hodgskin may have contributed arguments against utilitarianism and ideas about private land ownership.\textsuperscript{155} He must also have encouraged Spencer’s ideas about future human cooperation.

Spencer used his writing time to work on a book, an expansion of his earlier work on government. He felt that his political ideas were flawed because there was no common ethical justification for them. There must be some basis for moral behavior besides Christian revelation, which Spencer no longer put much faith in. “I already felt, in a vague way, that there must be a basis for morals in the nature of things—in the relations between the individual and the surrounding world, and in the social relations of men to one another,” Spencer later wrote.\textsuperscript{156} Several years earlier Spencer had remarked to a friend that the “moral Euclid” had yet to be written, a statement that caused great mirth.\textsuperscript{157} Now he began to think seriously about combining his politics and his science into a unified whole. With \textit{Social Statics}, Spencer hoped to develop “a strictly

\textsuperscript{154} Mingardi, \textit{Herbert Spencer}, 14-15.


\textsuperscript{156} \textit{AB}, 1:351.

\textsuperscript{157} \textit{AB}, 1:305. The statement elicited loud laughter.
scientific morality.” Not a few scholars have seen this as an attempt to ground the values of his youth as set down in *The Proper Sphere of Government* in a scientific (or more accurately, rationalistic) epistemology. This is fair to a certain extent. Spencer certainly did not abandon any of the political positions he adopted in his earlier work. Nevertheless, some surprising and original ideas appeared in *Social Statics*, many of which were deduced from primary principles rather than simply justified by them. Spencer’s book was more than an attempt to rationalize “ideas he had already adopted by instinct and absorption from his uncle.”

The title Spencer chose for his book caused him some grief later in his career. After rejecting titles such as “Demostatics” and “A System of Social and Political Morality” he accepted a suggestion of Hodgskin’s and called the book *Social Statics* (the subtitle was *The Conditions Essential to Human Happiness Specified, and the First of Them Developed*). This was unfortunate, because as Spencer later learned, “Social Statics” was the name of a division of Auguste Comte’s sociology. The notion that he

---

158 SS, 3.


161 Mingardi, *Herbert Spencer*, 16; *AB*, 1:412-413. Spencer explained that “social statics” has to do with the equilibrium of a perfect society, while “social dynamics” treats those forces which move society towards perfection. However, he rarely used the terms, and a reader could easily miss this explanation, especially as it came late in the book. SS, 409.

162 *AB*, 1:414. Spencer claimed that he was unaware of Comte’s work at the time he wrote *Social Statics*. Either the same was true of Hodgskin, or he simply did not tell Spencer the origin of the phrase.
was deeply indebted to Comte would dog Spencer for the rest of his days for a variety of reasons, and using one of Comte’s terms for his first book certainly did not help Spencer’s case, no matter how inadvertent it might have been.

*Social Statics* opened with an attack on Utilitarianism, which Spencer referred to as “the expedience-philosophy.” This doctrine, first developed by Jeremy Bentham, classified moral actions as those which lead to the greatest good for the greatest number. Utilitarians argued that there is no transcendental moral law which makes particular actions “right” or “wrong” regardless of their consequences. Spencer proposed to find such a moral law, but on the basis of science rather than religion. A true moral law, Spencer contended, cannot be based on a theory of the greatest good, because the definition of “greatest good” and “greatest happiness” varies from culture to culture and even from person to person. And even if it was possible to know what the greatest happiness is, human judgment alone would be incapable of determining how to achieve it. That being so, the idea that government must exist to ensure greatest happiness is ludicrous, a conclusion that suited Spencer’s dislike of government interference well.

163 *SS*, 11.


165 *SS*, 3-4.

166 *SS*, 8.

167 *SS*, 11.
Next, Spencer laid the foundations for his own theory of morals. Paradoxically, one of the tenets of Utilitarianism was central to this new system: the desirability of the greatest happiness for all. Spencer came to this conclusion via two paths. The first was the doctrine of the moral sense, thanks to which a “moral law of society” could be derived from an “instinct of right.” Spencer did not believe that the moral sense alone was a good guide to right behavior, since people from different cultures believed different things about right and wrong. But he argued that the moral sense could “originate a moral axiom, from which reason may develope [sic] a systematic morality.” This was the desirability of greatest happiness. Spencer argued that this conclusion was also the basic idea of religion: “human happiness is the Divine will.” Again, he explained that reason could build on this basic truth: “The realization of the Divine Idea being reduced to the fulfilment of certain conditions, it becomes the office of a scientific morality, to make a detailed statement of the mode in which life must be regulated so as to conform to them. On each of these axiomatic truths it must be possible to build a series of theorems immediately bearing upon our daily conduct...” The greatest happiness principle, whether derived from the moral sense or from the
Deity, was not a rule of thumb for judging actions but a goal, which from which rational analysis could derive unassailable moral laws.

Spencer later wrote that his use of Deistic terms in *Social Statics* was not necessary for the argument.\(^\text{173}\) In fact, his religious faith had been waning since his late teens, and he had already lost one friend because of it.\(^\text{174}\) So why then did he use religious language so often? When his father questioned him on this subject, Spencer replied that “some words to signify the ultimate essence, or principle or cause of things, I was obliged to use, and thinking the current ones as good as any others, I thought best to use them rather than cause needless opposition.”\(^\text{175}\) However, despite his attempt to downplay it, Spencer could not escape from metaphysics, for the desirability of the greatest happiness principle had to rest on something. If it was not the intention of the Creator, than it was a moral sense for which Spencer had no rational explanation as yet. Spencer’s desire to be scientific clashed with the traditional, value-laden way he grounded his theories.\(^\text{176}\) He had not yet fully enunciated his basic belief in natural laws, “one that regarded them as regulative principles of a well-ordered cosmos” beneficial to

---

\(^{173}\) *AB*, 1:415. Spencer rarely used the word “God” in *Social Statics*, usually substituting “The Deity” or “The Creator.” There were exceptions, however, for example on pp. 76-77.

\(^{174}\) *AB*, 1:315-316. Spencer remarked that he experienced no conscious rejection of beliefs, but they gradually lost their hold on him. Once he left home he spent his Sundays reading or walking in the country. *AB*, 1:171.

\(^{175}\) Letter to George Spencer, n.d., in *LL*, 78.

\(^{176}\) Peel, *Herbert Spencer*, 83.
man. In a universe ruled by beneficent laws, surely man’s greatest happiness would be the ultimate goal.

But what is happiness? Spencer fell back on his phrenological studies to answer this question: “happiness signifies a gratified state of all the faculties. The gratification of a faculty is produced by its exercise. To be agreeable that exercise must be proportionate to the power of the faculty” and therefore perfect happiness is exercising all of the faculties precisely in proportion to their power. The idea that happiness comes from exercise of the faculties can be found in Combe’s The Constitution of Man. Another of Combe’s ideas was that failure to obey moral law inevitably brought pain, or as Spencer explained it, evil resulted from “want of congruity between the faculties and their spheres of action,” which given the above definition meant unhappiness.

This understanding of happiness led Spencer to the centerpiece of Social Statics, what he called “The Law of Equal Freedom.” In order to be happy, Spencer wrote, an individual had to exercise his faculties to their fullest extent. To do so he needed freedom from constraints. But to ensure the greatest happiness for all, each must restrict his freedom so as not to interfere with the freedom of others. Thus the law,

---

177 Taylor, Philosophy of Herbert Spencer, 51.
178 SS, 5; Richards, Darwin, 251.
179 SS, 59; Taylor, Philosophy of Herbert Spencer, 34. Spencer never cited Combe directly, but as Taylor points out Hodgskin was an admirer of Combe’s, so it may have been through their conversations that Spencer picked up these ideas.
180 SS, 80.
which Spencer stated in various ways, but whose clearest definition is this: “Every man has freedom to do all that he wills, provided he infringes not the equal freedom of any other man.”\textsuperscript{181} Spencer’s concept of rights was weak in “The Proper Sphere of Government,” but the Law of Equal Freedom gave him a basis from which to derive a series of more specific rights.\textsuperscript{182} It also gave him a clearer definition of justice—protecting the individual from infringement. This stance justified Spencer’s belief that the state should be restricted to enforcing justice in order to avoid infringing freedoms unnecessarily.

Spencer contended that to know whether an action is right or wrong simply requires determining whether it infringed on someone else’s freedom to pursue happiness (though he admitted that this was not always easy to do.)\textsuperscript{183} Rights he derived as “corollaries, or specifications, of the principle of equal freedom.”\textsuperscript{184} Whatever was necessary for a person to exercise his faculties, and did not interfere with another’s ability, Spencer considered a right.\textsuperscript{185} According to Spencer, the rights to life and liberty

\hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{181} SS, 103. The concept was not new to Spencer; versions of it can be found in the writings of Hobbes, Kant, Rousseau, and J. S. Mill. D. Weinstein, Equal Freedom and Utility: Herbert Spencer’s Liberal Utilitarianism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 38.

\hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{182} Weinstein, Equal Freedom and Utility, 69.

\hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{183} SS, 110.

\hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{184} “What we call rights, are nothing but artificial divisions of the general claim to exercise the faculties...” Spencer’s ideas about rights are explored thoroughly in Weinstein, Equal Freedom and Utility; see in particular pp. 67-81.

\hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{185} SS, 154.
were self-evident. Others were less obvious. For example, Spencer believed in the
right to own property, but only concerning those things a person produced or improved
himself. Natural things, he argued, belonged to all, and thus no one could legitimately
own land, though they might “rent it” from society as a whole since each other person
had the freedom to do likewise. For similar reasons Spencer defended the right to
free speech and free exchange, for neither action kept another from exercising a similar
right.

The logical implications of making The Law of Equal Freedom the basis for all
morality led Spencer to some conclusions that startled many readers of his day and
age. For one, he declared that women should have all of the rights of men. It is
absurd, Spencer wrote, to believe that women should have only a portion of the rights
of men, for how could one determine the ratio, or where exactly their rights are
circumscribed? For Spencer, such a conclusion followed necessarily from a theory of
scientifically derived moral laws. Two sets of scientific principles could not be operative
for two parts of the human race. But Spencer also argued that women were the

---

186 SS, 112.
187 SS, 126-127.
188 SS, 123. Spencer did not explore the question of how “society” is represented in this transaction.
189 As Francis points out, Social Statics was published several years before Mill and Taylor’s Vindication
of the Rights of Women. Francis, Herbert Spencer, 69.
190 SS, 156.
intellectual equals of men, and gave a number of examples.\textsuperscript{191} He applied the same logic to the rights of children, who, as he pointed out, have faculties which needed exercise just like adults.\textsuperscript{192} A civilization’s level of advancement, Spencer wrote, could be judged by its treatment of women and children.\textsuperscript{193}

Spencer also came to some radical conclusions about the role of government. He had already concluded, in his essays on “The Proper Sphere of Government,” that government should be limited to carrying out justice, that is, to punishing violations of rights. Now he had a rationale in the moral law. If the government exceeded its bounds, not only would the protection of citizens suffer, but it would restrict people’s freedoms, either positively by controlling speech, religion, commerce, and religion, or negatively by taking away one man’s property to provide for others. Here Spencer covered some of the same ground as his earlier essays, but he also went farther. He contended that government should not concern itself with sanitation, for if problems arose people would help themselves, and if they could not, then perhaps it was part of nature’s plan that they die of disease.\textsuperscript{194} He lobbied against a national currency and postal system.

\textsuperscript{191} SS, 155, 157-158. During his lifetime Spencer met several women he considered his intellectual peers; given his egotism this was quite an admission.

\textsuperscript{192} SS, 172.

\textsuperscript{193} SS, 160, 177.

\textsuperscript{194} SS, 390-394, 378-380.
And from the Law of Equal Freedom he deduced a “right to ignore the state” and choose “a condition of voluntary outlawry,” much as Thoreau did in “Civil Disobedience.”

Spencer knew many of his ideas would seem radical, or perhaps ludicrous, to his readers. But he had an explanation ready to hand: such absolute and stringent moral laws could only be followed by perfect men. Since humanity was far from perfect, disobedience to the laws could be expected. This did not mean that the disobedient would escape the consequences of their actions, however. Spencer believed that denying the faculties or exercising them too much would inevitably cause pain; furthermore, those who interfered with the rights of others were maladapted which meant unhappiness even without the threat of punishment by the state.

Disobedience was inevitable, but disobedience brought pain—therefore unhappiness was inevitable.

Nevertheless, Spencer was optimistic, because he believed that “progress...is not an accident, but a necessity.” He reasoned that organisms always adapt to their environment, both physically and mentally, and the environment of modern man was

---

195 SS, 206. Spencer had read Emerson; it is just possible he read Thoreau’s essay as well (it was first published in 1849). Thomas Hodgskin may also have been a source for this idea. Note, however, that Spencer later repudiated this chapter as impracticable.

196 SS, 51.

197 SS, 443-447.

198 SS, 38.

199 SS, 65.
society.\textsuperscript{200} Human beings were not yet perfectly adapted because we still had characteristics left over from the days when aggression was necessary for survival.\textsuperscript{201} But natural law said humanity was slowly adapting to new conditions, and Spencer saw evidence for this in history, especially in the history of European countries.\textsuperscript{202} For Spencer, this was a crucial reason to avoid government meddling—because it interfered with adaptation when people did not suffer the consequences of their maladaptation.\textsuperscript{203} “Inconvenience, suffering, and death, are the penalties attached by nature to ignorance, as well as to incompetence—are also the means of remedying these,” Spencer wrote.\textsuperscript{204} Pain taught individuals to take care of themselves, while pleasure taught them which faculties could be safely gratified to the fullest and which could not.\textsuperscript{205} Eventually, through this process, the faculties of all human beings must become balanced. Faculties that could only be exercised at the expense of others would atrophy to nothingness when they were no longer needed, while those that are helpful to the self and society must grow larger. With no need to enforce justice any more, the state itself would wither away:

\begin{footnotes}
\item[200] SS, 59-62.
\item[201] SS, 410-413.
\item[202] SS, 33-36.
\item[203] SS, 281.
\item[204] SS, 378.
\item[205] SS, 83.
\end{footnotes}
To the bad it is essential; to the good, not. It is the check which national wickedness makes to itself and exists only to the same degree. Its continuance is proof of still-existing barbarism. What a cage is to the wild beast, law is to the selfish man. Restraint is for the savage, the rapacious, the violent; not for the just, the gentle, the benevolent.\(^{206}\)

Spencer’s anti-government stance now had not just a practical but a philosophical basis, in a vision of a future utopia where man was perfectly adjusted to coexist with man.

This gave Spencer’s moral system a circular nature. Reason showed the perfect moral law should be followed, must be followed, and the process of adaptation meant that it was inevitable that it would be followed. There was a suspicious concurrence between what should be and what, by Spencer’s reasoning, would inevitably come to pass. However, Spencer saw no conflict because he believed the laws of the universe were beneficent.\(^{207}\) Though he did not make such a conception of laws central to his thesis, the idea was lurking behind the scenes, ready to emerge as a justification as soon as Spencer’s Theism faded completely. This idea of an ordered, progressive, and beneficent universe would become a touchstone for Spencer in his later work.

This beneficence was in pursuit of an ultimate goal, however, and it meant that humankind had to pay a price. In the future might come lofty heights, for “our advance must be towards a state in which this entire satisfaction of every desire, or perfect

\(^{206}\) SS, 14.

\(^{207}\) SS, 322.
fulfilment of individual life, becomes possible.” In the present, “the forces which are working out the great scheme of perfect happiness, taking no account of incidental suffering” must necessarily act through pain and death to diminish irresponsible behavior. Social Statics was at times inspiring and visionary, but just as often Spencer was harshly pitiless about the realities of his day. Spencer believed poverty was the result of idleness and improvidence, and argued “were there no drunkenness, no extravagance, no reckless multiplication, social miseries would be trivial.” Thus those who supported poor laws were like physicians who allowed a patient to die because operating would cause pain:

That rigorous necessity which, when allowed to act on them, becomes so sharp a spur to the lazy, and so strong a bridle to the random, these paupers’ friends would repeal, because of the wailings it here and there produces. Blind to the fact, that under the natural order of things society is constantly excreting its unhealthy, imbecile, slow, vacillating, faithless members, these unthinking, though well-meaning, men advocate an interference which not only stops the purifying process, but even increases the vitiation—absolutely encourages the multiplication of the reckless and incompetent by offering them an unfailing provision, and discourages the multiplication of the competent and provident by heightening the prospective difficulty of maintaining a family.

Passages like these, found in several places in Social Statics, were primarily responsible for Spencer’s later reputation as a social Darwinist.

---

208 SS, 434.
209 SS, 416.
210 SS, 353.
211 SS, 322.
Two strands of thought that run throughout Social Statics mitigate the harshness of this stance. First, Spencer argued only that the natural consequences of physical and mental weakness and incapacity should be allowed to operate. Spencer had no desire to see the strong dominate the weak, which is why he proposed that the state must dedicate itself to opposing injustice. He despised the use of force, and considered even the punishment of criminals “remedial measures for a diseased moral state.”

“Unquestionably war is immoral” he wrote, “but so likewise is the violence used in the execution of justice; so is all coercion.” In marriage, Spencer wrote, “command is a blight to the affections” and presciently noted that “even as we loathe those barbarian manners which forbid a woman to sit at table with her lord and master, so may mankind one day loathe that subserviency of wife to husband, which existing laws enjoin.”

Spencer was also an avowed anti-imperialist, and argued that metropolitan rule was not good for colonists and especially not good for aboriginal populations. Though he held Europeans to be mentally superior to other races, he insisted that “morality knows nothing of geographical boundaries, or distinctions of race” and that all should be treated as if they were neighbors.

---

212 SS, 113.
213 SS, 269.
214 SS, 165, 163.
216 SS, 297-298.
Secondly, Spencer believed that concern for the happiness of others was necessary for perfect happiness to be achieved. Not only would men’s full understanding of their rights make them fully respectful of the rights of others, but also their happiness would increase if those around them were happy, thus ensuring good behavior.\textsuperscript{217} Spencer called this desire to help others “positive beneficence,” and termed the desire not to annoy or irritate others “negative beneficence.”\textsuperscript{218} Thus personal acts of charity, though they slowed the development integral to the natural order of things, more than made up the balance by increasing the positive qualities of the giver—a benefit that is not supplied by anonymous government supported relief.\textsuperscript{219} Though the idea of beneficence did soften Spencer’s moralizing somewhat, it must be noted that Spencer rarely referred to this concept in Social Statics. As the subtitle made clear, the book was only supposed to develop the first of the conditions of human happiness—justice. References to beneficence were so infrequent that a reader could easily miss them, or at the very least fail to incorporate them into a lasting impression of the book. The passages on the necessity of suffering for progress were also scattered, but longer and much more striking. Spencer did suggest that a book on beneficence might follow.\textsuperscript{220} And it did, but only much later, as part of his massive Synthetic Philosophy.

\textsuperscript{217} SS, 410.
\textsuperscript{218} SS, 68-69.
\textsuperscript{219} SS, 318.
\textsuperscript{220} SS, 72.
Spencer’s Intellectual Milieu

*Social Statics* marked Spencer’s entrance into London intellectual and literary society. It was widely reviewed and elicited positive critical notice. In his *Autobiography* Spencer claimed that it was the best reviewed of all of his books.\(^{221}\) The positive comments must have been gratifying, since his publisher, John Chapman, required Spencer to shoulder the burden of any unpaid publishing costs.\(^{222}\) Spencer met Chapman a few years prior, and had become part of a literary circle centered on the Chapman household at 142 Strand (very near *The Economist’s* offices).\(^{223}\) The success of *Social Statics* cemented his place at Chapman’s soirees, as well as garnering him a small measure of public recognition. He became a topic of conversation at Cambridge, was asked several times for his autograph, and was even compared to John Stuart Mill.\(^{224}\) At Chapman’s gatherings Spencer met a number of young but well-regarded writers Chapman published, including James Froude, author of the controversial *The Nemesis of*

\(^{221}\) Spencer makes this observation in *AB* 1:421-22, but it must be taken with a grain of salt for countries other than Britain. It is doubtful that he knew much about critical reaction to his later work in America.

\(^{222}\) Herbert Spencer to George Spencer, Mar. 1850, in *AB*, 1:410-411. I suspect that Spencer was pleased at the time, though when writing the *Autobiography* he included a review that he wrote himself to demonstrate what a less superficial treatment that analyzed the book’s arguments would have looked like. *AB*, 1:415-421.

\(^{223}\) Most of Spencer’s recollections of Chapman come from the chapters in his autobiography dealing with the period from 1848-1850. Duncan puts the meeting sometime in 1846 or 1847. *LL*, 69.

Faith (1849) and F. W. Newman, brother of John Henry Newman and author of Phases of Faith, or Passages from the History of my Creed (1850).²²⁵ The well-known writer of fiction and political economy Harriet Martineau visited on occasion; during this period she was working on a translation of Auguste Comte’s Positive Philosophy, which Chapman published in 1853. However, Spencer never mentioned meeting her, though he read some of her didactic stories from Illustrations of Political Economy as a boy.²²⁶

A member of Chapman’s coterie also wrote one of the most enthusiastic reviews of SocialStatics: George Henry Lewes. Lewes was a fiction and nonfiction writer and the literary editor of the weekly The Leader. Spencer first met him in the spring of 1850, and before long the two were going on country rambles and discussing scientific and intellectual subjects.²²⁷ One result of the friendship was that Spencer read Lewes’ Biographical History of Philosophy, published in 1846; it was an early inspiration for what would be his next book, The Principles of Psychology. The Psychology in turn inspired Lewes’ own work, The Problems of Life and Mind, written in the 1870s. In his autobiography, Spencer described Lewes as a quick witted, critical, and original

²²⁵ Both books argued for greater religious authenticity. Mark Francis refers to these writers as part of a movement called “The New Reformation” and claims that Spencer was inspired by and reacted to their work. Francis, Herbert Spencer, 111-112, 121. However, Spencer cannot reasonably be labeled a “spiritualist” since he did not write about faith or inspiration.

²²⁶ AB, 1:125. Spencer referred to the book as Tales of Political Economy. Martineau, a devotee of Adam Smith and laissez-faire, might be considered an early influence, though Spencer admitted he read more for the stories than for any economic lessons.

²²⁷ AB, 1:399, 435-36.
thinker—high praise indeed considering Spencer’s preoccupation with his own originality.\textsuperscript{228} Lewes, in turn, felt that Spencer inspired him at just the right moment: as he wrote in his journal,

My acquaintance with him was the brightest ray in a very dreary, \textit{wasted} period of my life. I had given up all ambition whatever, lived from hand to mouth, and thought the evil of each day sufficient. The stimulus of his intellect, especially during our long walks, roused my energy once more and revived my dormant love of science. His intense theorising tendency was contagious, and it was only the stimulus of a theory which could then have induced me to work.\textsuperscript{229}

Lewes was genuinely enthusiastic about Spencer’s work, and regularly made space for his essays in \textit{The Leader}.

During the fall of 1851 Spencer met another of Chapman’s circle who had an equally profound effect on him: Marian Evans, now better known by her pen-name, George Eliot.\textsuperscript{230} Evans was not yet a writer of fiction, but was known instead as the translator of David Strauss’ controversial \textit{Life of Jesus}, published by Chapman in 1846. Born a year apart in the English midlands, Spencer and Evans were much alike; both

\textsuperscript{228} \textit{AB}, 1:437 for Spencer’s appraisal of Lewes. On the relationship between the two men see Diana Postlethwaite, \textit{Making it Whole: A Victorian Circle and the Shape of their World} (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1984), 178-179. Spencer’s obsession with originality is more germane to the period in which he wrote his autobiography; he had no doubts on the subject in his twenties and thirties.

\textsuperscript{229} The excerpt can be found in J. W. Cross, ed., \textit{George Eliot’s Life as Related in Her Letters and Journals}, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1885), 76.

\textsuperscript{230} \textit{GEL}, 1:364. Eliot’s letters put the meeting before October 4, 1851. Spencer gives the impression that it happened during the summer of 1852, probably because this was the period of their greatest intimacy. \textit{AB} 1:456.
were from Dissenting backgrounds and both were largely self-educated.\textsuperscript{231} What Evans described as a “deliciously calm new friendship” began.\textsuperscript{232} Spencer’s status as a journalist entitled him to free admission to theaters and the opera house, to which he took Evans frequently.\textsuperscript{233} They also walked together at a quiet spot near the Thames, “discussing many things.”\textsuperscript{234} Evans was yet another intellectual peer with whom Spencer could consult about his theories and arguments. In a letter to a friend, he called her “the most admirable woman, mentally, I ever met,” and praised “the greatness of her intellect conjoined with her womanly qualities and manner.”\textsuperscript{235}

This proved to be a troubled relationship, however.\textsuperscript{236} At the beginning, Evans wrote to her friends Charles and Cara Bray “we have agreed that we are not in love with each other, and that there is no reason why we should not have as much of each other’s society as we like.”\textsuperscript{237} But others noticed their frequent rendezvous and rumors


\textsuperscript{232} \textit{GEL}, 2:29.

\textsuperscript{233} Eliot’s first mention of these excursions is in a letter of March 30, 1852, in \textit{GEL} 2:16. Previously Spencer had taken her and Chapman both to the theater at least once, according to a letter of November 24, 1851, in \textit{GEL}, 1:376.

\textsuperscript{234} \textit{AB}, 1:462.

\textsuperscript{235} \textit{AB}, 1:457.

\textsuperscript{236} For a thorough if overly psychological interpretation see Francis, \textit{Herbert Spencer}, 57-65. For an overview of their intellectual relationship see Paxton, \textit{George Eliot and Herbert Spencer}, 5-18. However, Paxton focuses primarily on their ideas on gender.

\textsuperscript{237} \textit{GEL}, 2:22.
circulated that they were engaged.²³⁸ The truth was that Evans had fallen in love with Spencer. In an emotionally charged letter, she wrote of her “hopeless wretchedness” and stated “if you become attached to some one else, then I must die, but until then I could gather courage to work and make life valuable, if only I had you near me.”²³⁹ But Spencer was unable to reciprocate. His reason told him to respond, but his instincts would not obey. The situation was painful for him, especially since she did not believe they should stop seeing each other socially. He even suggested that they should marry, despite his lack of feelings, but she rejected the idea. Eventually she and G. H. Lewes became enamored of each other, for which Spencer felt great relief.²⁴⁰

In *An Autobiography*, Spencer blamed his lack of interest on her plain looks, about which she was very sensitive.²⁴¹ “Moral and intellectual beauties do not by themselves suffice to attract me,” he wrote, “and owing to the stupidity of our educational system it is rare to find them united to a good physique.”²⁴² But would he have felt differently if he found her attractive? Spencer was always ambivalent about marriage. There were times when he considered it a positive good: he expressed

²³⁸ *GEL*, 2:35.

²³⁹ *GEL*, 8:56-57.

²⁴⁰ *GEL*, 8:42-43 for Spencer’s letter of February 1881, to E. L. Youmans, giving a brief account of the affair.

²⁴¹ On Evans’ sensitivity about her looks see Paxton, *George Eliot and Herbert Spencer*, 22.

²⁴² *AB*, 1:559. Spencer was never intentionally dishonest, even when it would have been more polite to be so.
jealousy for his newly married friends in several of his letters, for example, and when he briefly considered immigration to New Zealand in his younger days, the possibility of marriage weighed heavily in favor.\(^{243}\) But he had only one experience that even approached being a love affair. When he was twenty, he spent time in the company of a young lady, and he judged that relations between them would have grown more serious had she not been engaged.\(^{244}\) Otherwise his relationships with women were strictly Platonic.\(^{245}\) A letter he wrote to his friend Laurencina Potter is suggestive:

> You are doubtless perfectly right in attributing my present state to an exclusively intellectual life; and in prescribing exercise of the affections as the best remedy. No one is more thoroughly convinced than I am that bachelorhood is an unnatural and very injurious state. Ever since I was a boy (when I was unfortunate in having no brothers or sisters) I have been longing to have my affections called out. I have been in the habit of considering myself but half alive: and have often said that I hoped to begin to live some day. But my wandering, unsettled life, my unattractive manners towards those in whom I feel no interest, my habit of arguing and of offending opponents by a disrespectful style of treating them, have been so many difficulties in my way.\(^{246}\)

Here Spencer gave his usual excuses for not marrying, but the real truth may have been that he really was “half alive” and his wait for someone to rouse his affections would...

\(^{243}\) For Spencer’s envy of his friend Lott, see \textit{AB}, 1:306; for envy of Huxley, \textit{LL}, 78; for Spencer’s thoughts on emigration, \textit{AB}, 1:429.

\(^{244}\) \textit{AB}, 1:191-194. Spencer felt it fortunate that her fiancée returned before any “harm was done,” since she had no money and he had few prospects.

\(^{245}\) By his own account, at least, but as Peel notes, “it is impossible to suppose that Spencer, like some other Victorians, had a secret sex-life to which neither he nor anyone else made any reference.” Peel, \textit{Herbert Spencer}, 23.

\(^{246}\) \textit{AB}, 1:560.
necessarily be in vain. Similarly, Evans wrote to him “no credit to me for my virtues as a refrigerant. I owe them all to a few lumps of ice which I carried away with me from that tremendous glacier of yours.” It may be that Spencer was simply not capable of romantic love.

In 1852 Spencer met another lifelong friend who profoundly influenced his intellectual development: Thomas Henry Huxley. Huxley, newly returned from his voyage to Australia as assistant surgeon on the Rattlesnake, was presenting some of his scientific work while seeking funding to publish the findings from his voyage. Spencer had recently written an essay on the “Theory of Population”; feeling that Huxley’s work supported the theories therein, he sent him a copy. The intellectual overture was the beginning of a long if sometimes tempestuous friendship. Like Lewes, Huxley acted as a sounding board for Spencer. As a professional scientist whose area of expertise was biology, Huxley corrected Spencer’s scientific errors and put a damper on some of his wilder flights of theoretical fancy. For example, before the publication of Darwin’s Origin of Species, evolution was a much-maligned theory. Spencer believed the theory was true because the alternative was supernatural creation, which was unsupported by facts and “intrinsically incredible.” Huxley, with his superior knowledge of biology, was able to

---

247 GEL, 8:30.

248 AB, 1:465-466.
continually demolish Spencer’s arguments in favor. Of course, this did not keep Spencer from trying to convince him.\footnote{AB, 1:591-592.}

Spencer’s years at The Economist were formative, if not transformative. He published a book that clarified some of his earlier ideas and pointed the way to future work. He made some lifelong friends that were also important to his continuing intellectual growth. Finally, time as an editor cemented his decision to pursue a career in letters. Spencer himself acknowledged the importance of this period in crystalizing his ideas.\footnote{AB, 1:491.} However, an immensely important area of his thought was still underdeveloped: his ideas about evolution. It was the work of Spencer’s thirties that finally cemented this last piece of the puzzle into place.
CHAPTER TWO

SPENCER IN HIS THIRTIES

By 1850, when Spencer turned thirty, his adult personality and intellectual tendencies were fairly well fixed. He had launched his career as a writer and was making a name for himself. He was beginning to acquire a circle of friends in London that sustained him emotionally as well as intellectually. Though he was not settled domestically—instead leading a peripatetic life in which he divided his time between boarding houses, his parents’ home, the estates of wealthy friends, and other vacation spots—certain places became regular haunts, such as his friend Octavius Smith’s house on Loch Aline in Scotland, and the country estate of Richard and Laurencina Potter. He minimized his personal possessions as much as possible, “my love of freedom showing itself, among other ways, in aversion to that passive tyranny which material possessions exercise over one.”

In his career as an engineer Spencer was brash, confident in his own abilities, unafraid to criticize his superiors, and always looking for better ways of doing things. As a writer, these tendencies manifested themselves as fearlessness about proposing new

---

theories, and as confidence that he had something new and valuable to say. Similarly, he was bold enough to retain some of the eccentricities of dress that were a hold-over from the radical days of his youth—days when ignoring the social niceties due to the upper classes was intended as a political statement.\footnote{Mark Francis, \textit{Herbert Spencer and the Invention of Modern Life} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 91-93.} Yet he was punctilious about certain types of polite behavior. According to Spencer, he did not swear until he was 36 years old (a tangled fishing line was to blame.\footnote{\textit{AB}, 1:570.}) He did not drink to excess, gamble for money, or have any scandalous love affairs. As J. D. Y. Peel notes, he internalized the moral assumptions and obligations of his evangelical roots until they seemed natural; he espoused personal freedom yet his own life was “quaintly consistent and rule governed.”\footnote{J. D. Y. Peel, \textit{Herbert Spencer: The Evolution of a Sociologist} (New York: Basic Books, 1971), 24.} Many of his contemporaries noted that Spencer had a keen sense of justice. He could be persnickety, as when he insisted that a coachman drop him off at a milepost rather than at his inn to avoid paying an extra fare.\footnote{Justin McCarthy, “Science and Orthodoxy in England,” \textit{Galaxy} 9, no. 1 (Jan., 1870), 39.} 

Mark Francis argues that Spencer was “a precursor of the modern taste for self-doubt and alienation.”\footnote{Francis, \textit{Herbert Spencer}, 12.} However, it is strange to think of the egotistical Spencer nursing an inferiority complex. It is more accurate to describe, as Francis does elsewhere, Spencer as overly analytical and not afraid to point out his own flaws—at least, some of
them. For example, he recognized his tendency to be argumentative and his confidence in his own opinions. Spencer knew he lacked tact, and admired those like Richard Potter with affable dispositions. His “irritabilities and perversities” grew with the nervous ailment that afflicted him more and more as he aged, but the seeds existed long before.

Spencer was not short of social contacts despite his sometimes querulous nature. As his onetime assistant David Duncan remarked, “he was not made to be alone.” I can do pretty well without seeing friends for some time, if I am within hail of them,” Spencer remarked, “but the consciousness that they are inaccessible is soon followed by depression.” Sometimes he even went so far as to board with a family, for he felt that living alone was not good for his psyche and he enjoyed exercising his “philoprogenitive instinct” by caring for children. He especially liked little girls, and regretted not having any sisters. The fact that family life appealed to Spencer is just

---

7 Ibid., 107.
8 AB, 1:45, 298.
9 AB, 1:572.
11 AB, 1:534.
12 Spencer never explained why he preferred girls in his Autobiography, though he made this point several times. I suspect he found them more tractable than boys. Spencer did not believe in corporal punishment, or indeed, in compulsion of any kind, which Western cultures commonly feel is more necessary to control boys than girls.
more evidence of a lack of sexual impulses on his part. Love of children gave him a powerful reason to marry, yet he continued as a bachelor.

Spencer may have lacked romantic instincts, but he was not an emotionally shriveled human being. By his 30s, Spencer enjoyed a busy social life. He liked games, especially billiards. He had a good sense of humor, and at the theater preferred comedies and farces to dramas.\(^\text{13}\) While on vacation, besides his usual walks, he sunbathed, collected and examined biological specimens, and, fished.\(^\text{14}\) Spencer had a passion for fly fishing, and he pursued it in his own unique way. Not content to rely on the advice of local fishermen, he would tie flies to his own specifications and then judge their success by the number of fish caught.\(^\text{15}\) Once he told his friend Marian Evans about his theories, explaining that did not try to mimic particular insects, but aimed for an average or ideal fly. She responded “yes, you have such a passion for generalizing, you even fish with a generalization.”\(^\text{16}\) In most areas of his life, Spencer had healthy appetites.

---

\(^{13}\) AB, 1:394.


\(^{15}\) AB, 1:569.

\(^{16}\) AB, 1:203.
A Love for Generalization: Spencer’s Intellectual Style

Spencer’s intellectual tendencies were fully developed by his thirties. This does not mean his opinions were fixed, for he revised several of his works in later years. But all of his basic habits of mind were by this time on display: his self-confidence, lack of respect for authorities, and rejection of traditional ways of thinking. Such attributes are essential for an original thinker, and Spencer very much saw himself in this role. He believed strongly in independent thought, admired it in his friends, and felt it should be encouraged in education and in professional life. He was quite sensitive about his reputation in this regard, especially later in his life, but the tendency to forget the contributions of others can be seen in his failure to acknowledge Thomas Hodgskin as the source of some of the ideas in *Social Statics*.19

This reticence about intellectual debts must be understood in its context. Scholarly works of the Victorian age did not have anything like the kind of intellectual apparatus that takes up so much room in modern books. At this stage of his life Spencer did not take elaborate notes, nor did he write even so technical a work as *The Principles of Psychology* with a library by his side.20 What books he did read he usually borrowed.

---

17 In this I dissent from David Wiltshire, who writes that “by 1860, Spencer had virtually ceased to function as a speculative thinker.” David Wiltshire, *The Social and Political Thought of Herbert Spencer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 72.

18 AB, 1:387-388.

19 On Spencer’s sensitivity see *LL*, 84-85.

20 Spencer wrote some of the book in Paris, reasoning that “easy access to other books was not requisite; for its lines of thought had scarcely anything in common with lines of thought previously pursued; and of such material as was needed for illustration, my memory contained a sufficient stock.”
In any event, he was unable to read scholarly material for long periods of time, even as a boy—he likened this to having a small intellectual digestive system.\textsuperscript{21} Much of his knowledge came from conversations with friends, snippets of data he picked up here and there, and haphazard skimming of what materials came his way.\textsuperscript{22} Similarly, for Spencer the process of developing his own ideas involved a great deal of unfocused thinking, both in solitude and with peers. He especially liked to think (and talk) during walks, noting that “the quickened circulation consequent on moderate exercise, produced in me...a flow of ideas difficult, if not impossible, to stop.”\textsuperscript{23} His racing mind was one cause of the insomnia he suffered from a young age.\textsuperscript{24} As he noted in one of his early essays, “scenes vividly pictured to the mind, in direct opposition to the will” are well known to anyone who has suffered sleepless nights.\textsuperscript{25}

Spencer’s method of developing theories was not to seek solutions to problems, whether through research or reason, but to let facts and ideas run freely through his brain until some type of synthesis arose. The process might take weeks or even months. In the early days of their companionship Evans once expressed surprise that, after all

\textsuperscript{21} AB, 1:91-92.

\textsuperscript{22} Spencer scarcely discusses his sources in his autobiography, or in the essay “the filiation of ideas” in \textit{LL}. It is clear from quite a few of his comments, however, that he often did not finish books.

\textsuperscript{23} AB, 1:540-541.

\textsuperscript{24} Spencer had to move from his chamber at the \textit{Economist} because of sleeplessness, \textit{AB}, 1:400.

\textsuperscript{25} Herbert Spencer, “A Theory Concerning the Organ of Wonder,” \textit{Zoist} 2, no. 7 (Oct., 1844), 320.
the thinking he must have done in writing *Social Statics*, there were no lines in his forehead. “I suppose that is because I am never puzzled,” Spencer replied, which Evans not surprisingly took as a sign of arrogance until he explained what he meant.\(^{26}\) Spencer was an intellectual magpie, whose beak only seized facts likely to demonstrate a larger rule of nature.\(^{27}\) Ultimately evidence would suggest a general rule, and various rules would suggest even broader rules, until all the disparate bits of knowledge were pieced into one theoretical structure. As Peel puts it, Spencer was “a cultural handyman on an enormous scale.”\(^{28}\) It is clear, then, how he could have been unaware of what he borrowed from others. When he argued for priority, he was not simply being defensive, but was genuinely convinced of his own originality. “He visualized a stream of autonomously-developing theory with a few tributary sources,” as David Wiltshire puts it.\(^{29}\)

Spencer’s love of theories made him popular with readers. He seemed to have a logical explanation for everything. However, he sometimes built his speculative structures on very little evidence. As a friend once wrote to him, “You talk of your power of writing a long letter with very little material; but that is a mere trifle to your facility

\(^{26}\) Though his explanation might be considered arrogant in itself. See *AB*, 1:463-464 for the incident and Spencer’s lengthy discussion of this habit of thought.

\(^{27}\) Robert M. Young also calls Spencer a magpie, in “Herbert Spencer and ‘Inevitable’ Progress,” *History Today* 37, no. 8 (Aug., 1987), 20.

\(^{28}\) Peel, *Herbert Spencer*, 29.

\(^{29}\) Wiltshire, *Social and Political Thought*, 67.
for building up a formidable theory on precious slight foundations.”30 Spencer valued deduction more than induction. It was not enough for him to discover what is true, he needed to know why it was true, and he needed to find other laws which could be deduced from its truth. A reader once noted that the inductive part of one of Spencer’s arguments stand without his deductions; Spencer was “struck with the strangeness of his implied belief that the empirical stage of a generalization may be contentedly accepted as its final stage.”31 Gathering facts was only the first and less important part of developing a theory that accounted for them, not just as regular and predictable phenomena, but as signs of a higher organization to the cosmos.32 In his writing, this orientation manifested itself as a tendency to put a conclusion first and then follow it up with evidence demonstrating its truth. But by doing so, he conveyed the impression that facts were used as examples of a theory rather than its basis.

Spencer was often reluctant to revise his conclusions once he made them, despite any evidence that might later appear. As Huxley once quipped, “Spencer’s idea of a tragedy is a deduction killed by a fact.”33 To use an oft cited example, in a letter to a friend Evans reported “I went to Kew yesterday on a scientific expedition with Herbert Spencer, who has all sorts of theories about plants—I should have said a proof-hunting

---

30 Herbert Spencer to E. A. B., n.d., in LL, 45.

31 AB, 1:588.

32 AB, 1:464.

33 Spencer was aware of his proclivities, and used this quote in his autobiography as an example of Huxley’s wit. AB, 1:467.
expedition. Of course, if the flowers didn’t correspond to the theories, we said, ‘tant pis pour les fleurs.’”\(^{34}\) Spencer believed that observations would always be distorted or incomplete without a true principle to guide them, as he argued in one of his essays, “The Valuation of Evidence.” Without knowledge of what to look for, he wrote, sense-impressions are random and misleading.\(^ {35}\) One should put his use of evidence in context, however. Spencer was not a working scientist by today’s definition. Only one of his many publications was the result of careful observation under controlled conditions. He did not do much fieldwork of his own. Nor was he a member of the most important British scientific societies, the Royal Society and the British Association for the Advancement of Science. Spencer’s source of facts were the books he read, his personal experiences, scientific and medical journals, and what he gleaned from newspapers, magazines, and other popular sources of information. He himself admitted that those bits of information which fit into a theoretical structure he readily absorbed; evidence that did not fit into his system, while not rejected, might be treated with indifference and soon forgotten.\(^ {36}\)


\(^{36}\) Spencer judged this the nature of those who think for themselves. AB, 1:277-278.
The Final Pieces: Spencer’s Evolutionary Ideas Coalesce

After finishing *Social Statics* Spencer spent “an idle year” in 1851 without literary production. He continued working at *The Economist*, not certain that he could make a living from writing alone. He had ideas for books and articles, but made no effort to get them into print. The next year his literary output was much greater, but he had turned from books to essays. His new literary contacts helped when it came to publication: Chapman became publisher of a quarterly review in 1852, and G. H. Lewes was already editor of *The Leader*. Spencer contributed anonymously to both. For a review like the *Westminster* anonymity was the standard; *The Leader* did include signed letters from correspondents but Spencer had was reluctant to have his name appear in a weekly that supported socialism.

Spencer’s contributions to *The Leader* began in January 1852, and went under the collective name of “The Haythorne Papers.” The first was “Use and Beauty,” in which Spencer argued that in the course of human progress things once useful become ornamental, and thus beautiful, while anything practical to modern life cannot be beautiful. Further editions of the Haythorne papers for 1842 discussed “A Theory of

---

37 *AB*, 1:426. This is the interpretation Spencer had when he was older, of course. At the time he may have felt he was busy enough.


Tears and Laughter,” “The Sources of Architectural Types,” and “Gracefulness.” These were organized like the first, with Spencer positing a theory and then elaborating upon it and giving examples. On tears and laughter, for example, he began with the general rule that visible emotions are signs of biological processes, such as quickening of the circulation or respiration.\(^40\) After a many examples of situations causing laughter and tears, he described the working of the circulatory system. Spencer’s conclusion was that tears are caused by “temporary cerebral congestion” and are “a spontaneous and economical kind of blood-letting,” while laughter’s role is to expel air, reducing oxygen in the blood and thus relieving “high cerebral excitement.”\(^41\) Similarly, in his essay on architecture Spencer determined that classical architecture is inspired by the symmetry of animal forms, gothic by vegetable forms, and castles by mineral forms.\(^42\)

With regard to Spencer’s later work, the most important Haythorne paper was the second, on “The Development Hypothesis,” published in March. Here he made a bold statement in support of the theory that species change over time—the theory of evolution.\(^43\) He argued that special creation was not supported by any facts, that its partisans could not explain or even visualize how it might have actually happened, and

---

\(^40\) *Essays*, 1:400.

\(^41\) *Essays*, 1:403, 405.

\(^42\) *Essays*, 1:396.

\(^43\) Some writers still feel it is necessary to debunk the belief that Charles Darwin “invented” evolution. See for example a recent book by Rebecca Stott, *Darwin’s Ghosts: The Secret History of Evolution* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2012).
that it was unlikely that the 10 million different species he estimated had walked the earth were all created separately.\textsuperscript{44} Needless to say, the article was more rhetorical than scientific. Still, it created a sensation, or so Spencer assured his father, and copies were sent to prominent scientists like Charles Lyell, Richard Owen, and Adam Sedgwick.\textsuperscript{45}

Spencer did not use the word evolution at the time because it had not yet taken on its modern meaning for most readers. The Latin evolvere refers to unfolding, as with a scroll; the word came to be associated with embryonic development at a time when the embryo was understood to contain all the features of the adult organism in miniature.\textsuperscript{46} Extending the term to cover species change was not yet common in 1852. Spencer did use “evolution” in this sense in a letter to his lifelong friend Edward Lott less than a month before his article appeared. It is typical of Spencer’s preoccupations that he used the word in a progressive sense, calling humanity “the highest result yet of the evolution of life on the earth.”\textsuperscript{47} He also changed the words “the theory of Lamarck and his followers” to “the Theory of Evolution” in the version of the article published in the first volume of his collected essays, published in 1857.\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{44} Essays, 1:389-390.

\textsuperscript{45} Herbert Spencer to George Spencer, March 25, 1852, in Duncan, 65-66. Lyell, Owen, and Sedgwick were all opponents of evolution at this point in their careers.


\textsuperscript{47} Herbert Spencer to Edward Lott, April 23, 1852, in LL 61-62. The context was a discussion of a “true theory of humanity.”

\textsuperscript{48} Essays, 1:389; Peter J. Bowler, “Herbert Spencer and ‘Evolution’--an Additional Note,” Journal of the History of Ideas 36, no. 2 (April, 1975), 367.
Spencer had been an evolutionist at least since his early twenties, though the source of his evolutionary ideas is subject to some debate. His father was a member of the Derby Philosophical Society, founded by Erasmus Darwin, Charles Darwin’s grandfather and an early evolutionary thinker. Erasmus was one of the first to integrate his belief in progressive species change with a theory of cosmological development.\(^{49}\) His opening address, which included a summary of his evolutionary views, was printed in the front of every edition of the Society’s library catalogue.\(^{50}\) Since William George Spencer was honorary secretary, it would be surprising if he had not read this address. However, it is not clear whether George Spencer agreed with the evolutionary viewpoint or discussed it with his son. Herbert Spencer was always careful about his reputation for originality, and later denied that his father taught him anything about the development hypothesis.\(^{51}\) The most that can be said with certainty about the influence of the Derby Philosophical Society is that young Spencer read haphazardly among its books and journals, and listened to conversations between his father and other members.\(^{52}\)

Spencer’s most important source of evolutionary knowledge was the work of Jean-Baptiste-Pierre-Antoine de Monet, Chevalier de Lamarck. A nobleman, philosophe,

---


\(^{50}\) Ibid., 200.

\(^{51}\) *AB*, 1:646-647.

\(^{52}\) *AB*, 1:98-99.
freethinker, and collector of shellfish, Lamarck preached evolution in books and lectures in the early nineteenth century. His most influential work was *Philosophie zoologique*, first published in 1809, in which he argued that organisms pass on traits they acquire in life to their offspring, leading to gradual species change over time. This theory is known as “Lamarckism” today. The classic example is that of a giraffe: by stretching its neck to get leaves at the tops of trees, it slightly elongates it, causing its children to have longer necks. Before Darwin developed his theory of natural selection, this was the only complete and consistent evolutionary theory available.

Lamarck was marginalized in his own country by the great French naturalist Georges Cuvier, a conservative who disliked the radical and atheist tenor of his theories. Lamarck, however, found followers in England. Ironically, the most important channel for his influence was a long refutation of his claims made in the 1830s by geologist Charles Lyell as part of his groundbreaking *Principles of Geology*. Lyell’s uniformitarian theory of geology was aimed against the currently popular catastrophism, which attributed geological formations to vast natural disasters and encompassed the entire history of the earth in six thousand years. Lyell believed the

---


contours of the earth to be the product of uniform, ongoing natural processes, such as the movement of wind and water—processes no different than those which could currently be observed in nature. Despite the fact that his arguments for an “old earth” opened the door to long-term processes like evolution, Lyell rejected Lamarck’s ideas.\(^{57}\) However, he treated evolution at such length and with such fairness that not a few of his readers became converts, including Charles Darwin, who read *Principles of Geology* on his famous voyage on the *Beagle*.

Spencer read Lyell when he was twenty, and with his usual contrariness dismissed Lyell’s objections to evolution.\(^{58}\) From then on he was a convinced evolutionist. Spencer was also influenced by another book that used Lamarck’s ideas, *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, published in 1844.\(^{59}\) The author, who long remained anonymous, was Scottish publisher, writer, and phrenologist Robert Chambers. As a result of its controversial subject matter and the mystery of its author, *Vestiges* caused a sensation when it appeared.\(^{60}\) This bestselling, skilfully written book Michael Ruse has called “the Big Mac of popular science—very tasty, very filling, very

\(^{57}\) Charles Lyell, *Principles of Geology: Or, the Modern Changes of the Earth and its Inhabitants, Considered as Illustrative of Geology*, 6th ed., vol. 3 (London: John Murray, 1840), book III chapter I. Spencer most likely read this edition or the previous one.

\(^{58}\) *AB*, 1:200-201; 2:7.

\(^{59}\) *AB*, 1:399-400.

accessible, and (in the opinion of the authorities) of very dubious value to one’s health.” Chambers took a cosmic view of space and time. He envisioned a universe where nebulous dust formed into our “astral system” (galaxy) and many others, each formed out of the same elements by the same physical laws as our own. He posited many worlds, and suggested that all of them (including the moon) were capable of supporting life. Like Lamarck, he believed the development of complex life forms was linear and progressive by nature, a many-stepped pyramid culminating in Man. Unlike Lamarck, Chambers’ theories had a distinctly religious slant; he argued that the gradual development of intelligence was all part of God’s grand design for the world. Still, *Vestiges* was attacked as impious by religious writers and as shoddy science by scientifically minded reviewers. This did not keep it from being wildly popular, of course, especially after a cheap “people’s edition” was printed. While Spencer’s

---


64 [Chambers], *Vestiges*, 252-253.

65 Secord, *Victorian Sensation*, 134-146.

66 Ibid., 147-49. Secord notes that Vestiges outsold the Origin for most of the 19th century.
attitude toward the book was ambivalent, his cosmological and progressive form of evolution certainly owed something to Chambers.67

Practical Evolution: Writing for the Reviews

Spencer’s interest in evolution surfaced again in his first attempt at “review writing” for the quarterly reviews, those most prestigious of Victorian periodicals, the bearers of culture of all types to the educated classes. Writing for reviews was a mainstay for many intellectuals, especially those just embarking on a career. The reviews generally paid well and accepted surveys of books on a wide variety of subjects.68 This included scientific subjects, since for most of the Victorian period science was not a specialist enterprise restricted to niche magazines and the publications of professional societies.69 Spencer’s entree into this field came through John Chapman, who purchased the Westminster Review in 1851 and restarted the publication with volume one at the beginning of 1852.

The Westminster was founded almost thirty years previously by Jeremy Bentham and James Mill as a radical alternative to the Whig Edinburgh Review and the Tory

---

67 Spencer recommended the book to his friend Lott (AB 1:308) but rejected its view of evolution in a discussion with Lewes (AB 1:399-400).


It went through a number of owners and editors, including John Stuart Mill, who continued to be a contributor after Chapman purchased it. The new Westminster was to have the same intellectual heft as the old. Marian Evans was brought in as an editor; later Huxley joined the enterprise as science editor. The first issue contained a prospectus, mostly written by Evans, which explained the review’s broad scope and its liberal political stance. It is hard not to see Spencer’s influence in statements like “the fundamental principle of the work will be the recognition of the Law of Progress” and “the institutions of Man, no less than the products of nature, are strong and durable in proportion as they are the results of gradual development.” However, a draft of the prospectus was circulating by June of 1851, before Spencer and Evans met. Evans may have been inspired by Social Statics, but the depth of influence in the other direction should not be underestimated.

---

70 Shatock, Politics and Reviewers, 8.


72 Among other things, the review was to support the extension of suffrage, free trade, judicial reform, and national education. [Marian Evans], “Prospectus of the Westminster and Foreign Quarterly Review, Under the Direction of New Editors,” Westminster Review 1, no. 1 (Jan., 1852), i-iii.

73 Ibid., i.


75 Evans did not mention reading Social Statics but sent a copy to a friend on March 8, 1852. GEL, 2:14.
Spencer’s first task at the Westminster was a review of six books on biology, one of which, the third edition of William Carpenter’s *Principles of Physiology* (1851) was an important source for Spencer in his later works. Spencer used the occasion as an excuse to launch into a theory of population pressure, a reaction to the ideas first put forth in Thomas Malthus’ famous *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798). The strategy was a time-honored one among writers for the reviews, as Joanne Shattock points out: the book or books were known as a “peg” from which to “hang” the essay, in order to preserve the illusion that it was really a review.\(^\text{76}\) Since the essay both shows the persistence of some of Spencer’s early ideas and introduces some new concepts, it is worth treating at some length.

Spencer’s view of nature in “A Theory of Population” was no less idealistic than it was in *Social Statics*: he continued to believe that the natural order of things was beneficent. Thus a theory that concludes that humanity must suffer from some imbalance forever cannot be a correct one (Malthus’ theory is clearly indicted here, though Spencer does not do so by name).\(^\text{77}\) Every species is affected by two influences: the natural tendency towards death and the maintenance of life through the organism’s natural abilities and through reproduction. These forces tend towards equilibrium, since the greater the species’ numbers the more starvation and hungry predators will affect


it.\textsuperscript{78} So much is familiar from Malthus. Spencer diverges in considering that the complexity of “higher organisms,” especially those with complex nervous systems, gives them a greater ability to maintain their own equilibrium between life and death without the need for natural regulation.\textsuperscript{79} In large part this is because more complex organisms reproduce more slowly.\textsuperscript{80} Thus, “from the fact that the human race is in a state of transition, we may suspect that the existing ratio between its ability to multiply, and its ability to maintain life, is not a constant ratio.”\textsuperscript{81} Advancing in civilization and technology to meet the needs of greater numbers of people means advancing in mechanical skill, intelligence, and morality, which all lead to decreased breeding, either through biological adjustments or self-discipline.

Thus as human beings progress they will achieve an equilibrium of population, with couples producing only enough children to replace themselves. However, Spencer did not believe that all were destined to share in the coming golden age of balance and satisfaction of human needs:

All mankind in turn subject themselves more or less to the discipline described; they either may or may not advance under it; but in the nature of things, only

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 475-476.

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 486.

\textsuperscript{80} The idea that fertility is inversely proportional to intellectual ability was not new, being found in Hippocratic writings among others. See Robert J. Richards, \textit{Darwin and the Emergence of Evolutionary Theories of Mind and Behavior} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 272. Spencer had his own elaborate justification for the idea. He believed that the male sperm cell contributed coordinating matter while the female “germ-cell” contributed nutritive matter. Thus Spencer’s biological studies led him to posit a difference between men, who have more of the coordinating power, and women whose nutritive system predominates. See Spencer, “A Theory of Population,” 489-490.

\textsuperscript{81} Spencer, “A Theory of Population,” 496.
those who do advance under it eventually survive. For, necessarily, families and races whom this increasing difficulty of getting a living which excess of fertility entails, does not stimulate to improvements in production—that is, to greater mental activity—are on the high road to extinction; and must ultimately be supplanted by those whom the pressure does so stimulate. . . For as those prematurely carried off must, in the average of cases, be those in whom the power of self-preservation is the least, it unavoidably follows, that those left behind to continue the race are those in whom the power of self-preservation is the greatest—are the select of their generation.82

This cogent expression of the law of natural selection predated the publication of the *Origin of Species* by seven years. However, Spencer did not link selection to species change.83 Also, as he admitted in his autobiography, at that time he did not think to extend the application of the theory beyond the human race.84 Still, it is notable that once again Spencer expressed the core ideas of social Darwinism before Darwinism even existed. But in this case a key principle was lacking—Spencer did not argue against human interference in the process, only that what he would later call “the survival of the fittest” was the natural order of things, at least for the present.

“A Theory of Population” was pregnant with ideas to which Spencer would return in the future. His next essay for the *Westminster, “The Philosophy of Style,”* does not so well illustrate the development of his ideas. It was one of Spencer’s most popular essays, however. As before, a review of a number of books on grammar and style served

---

82 Ibid., 499-500.


84 *AB*, 1:450-451.
as an excuse to theorize. Since “no general theory of expression seems yet to have been enunciated,” Spencer wrote, it would be helpful to find “some simple first principle” from which all other rules could be deduced.\(^8^5\) The principle found was a theory of mental scarcity—Spencer argued that intellectual effort is a limited commodity, so that the clearest and simplest language, which taxes the mind least, leaves the most brainpower left over to contemplate the images or ideas conveyed.\(^8^6\) Poetry naturally follows this rule, Spencer felt, and complimented Coleridge, Shelley, Carlyle, and others.

In January 1853 Spencer’s uncle Thomas Spencer died of a stroke. Spencer inherited 500 pounds, which gave him enough financial security to resign from the \textit{Economist}, a step he had been contemplating for some time. It was now two years after the publication of \textit{Social Statics}, yet he was spending only part of his time writing.\(^8^7\) Still, he recognized that his tenure at the \textit{Economist} had been valuable, for developing ideas and friendships that would influence his life and work.\(^8^8\) Spencer did not immediately get to work, but used his new resources to fund a two month walking tour of Switzerland with his friend Lott. This was supposed to be partially for his health, but he overexerted himself several times on the trip despite his resolution not to do so. On returning he felt an “enfeebled action of the heart,” from which he never fully

\(^{85}\) \textit{Essays}, 1:229.

\(^{86}\) \textit{Essays}, 1:229-230, 256-257.

\(^{87}\) \textit{AB}, 1:474-475.

\(^{88}\) \textit{AB}, 1:491.
recovered. During that year and the next Spencer worked on expanding the number of reviews that employed him. The Westminster Review continued to be his mainstay, but he eventually placed articles in the North British Review, the British Quarterly Review, and the prestigious Edinburgh Review.

Spencer’s topics continued to vary, from primitive religion to politics to business practices. For the Westminster he wrote a piece on “Over-Legislation” that expanded on the arguments made in On the Proper Sphere of Government and Social Statics. In those works he concentrated on the duties of government in the abstract; here he focused on its failings in reality. The state, he argued, has a miserable record when it takes on tasks outside of its mandate to protect its citizens. “Non-governmental agencies” like cooperatives or private enterprises are more efficient, because those that are not simply cease to be employed. Furthermore, they are formed with greater spontaneity and thus better equipped to meet the immediate needs of citizens. Spencer reasoned that needs should not be met until it is profitable for private enterprise to do so—the market is the most efficient way of determining which needs are most pressing, and thus which should be addressed given limited resources.

---

89 *AB*, 1:496-502.

90 Wiltshire argues that Spencer’s individualism rested on two pillars—government incompetence and the beneficence of the processes of nature. I would only add that the law of equal freedom is deduced from the principle that human happiness is the highest good. Wiltshire, *Social and Political Thought*, 145-146.

91 *Essays*, 1:323-324.

Adulation for the free market was nothing new. What made the essay interesting to readers were the many examples of government follies, corruption, waste, and unintended consequences. “Officialism is stupid,” Spencer complained, and it invariably becomes corrupt. “Despotism would have its advantages could we ensure a good despot.”93 Dependence on government makes people timid and pacified.94 But Spencer doubted whether most would perceive the truth of his arguments. Faith in the state is organic; it cannot be changed, but must be outgrown. The worship of power, Spencer believed, was simply natural given the current stage of human evolution.95 Spencer voiced a similar sentiment in Social Statics, where he argued that humanity’s transformation into perfect social beings had to be long and painful.

Yet Spencer was not blind to the faults of private enterprise. In “Railway Morals and Railway Policy,” published in the Edinburgh Review of October 1854, he excoriated railroad companies, their managers, and their boards for their corruption and greed. Most of these men were no worse than average, Spencer wrote. The large corporate enterprise encouraged dishonesty because ownership was divided from control and because the harm of corruption was indirect, felt mostly by stockholders too ignorant and too isolated from each other to effectively object.96 Some modern scholars have

---

93 Essays, 1:324, 327, 331.
94 Essays, 1:353-354.
95 Essays, 1:358.
96 Essays, 1:63.
used “Railway Morals” as proof that Spencer did not support big business as is often claimed. However, Spencer’s criticism of capitalist enterprise must be put into its proper context. He had personal experience with the industry, both as an employee and as advisor to his father and his Uncle Thomas, both of whom invested in railway stocks. In this instance Spencer succumbed to the temptation to protect his own family from the harsh realities of natural selection, which weed out the gullible and ill-informed no matter how good-hearted they may be. As Wiltshire points out, Spencer did not return to the issue of corruption in free enterprise in his later writings.

Furthermore, Spencer identified similarities between the workings of railway companies and the workings of the State, and in both cases argued that their actions should be restricted to their proper functions. Though Spencer did not make this explicit, there is clearly an analogy between a rail company constructing an expensive and unnecessary extension and a government undertaking a new social program. Spencer’s proposed solution was the same for both: restrict the organization to its original purpose. For business, this meant that a company would not be permitted to do


98 Spencer advised both of them against this; Thomas Spencer lost quite a bit of money on his shares. *AB*, 1:331-32, 374-375.


100 Ibid., 44.
anything other than what it had originally been founded to accomplish.\textsuperscript{101} Spencer did not see any contradiction in calling on the government to enforce such restrictions, because he interpreted it as the enforcement of a contract, which fell within the government’s purview of administering justice.\textsuperscript{102}

For the most part, Spencer’s political and economic theories from this period simply elaborated on arguments he previously made. Other articles plumbed original territory. He had touched on man’s transition from savagery to civilization in \textit{Social Statics}; now he spun theories to explain the details. In the \textit{Leader}, he published an article on “The Use of Anthropomorphism” which argued that religious conceptions such as the concept of a personal Deity are simply those which are needed at early states of human development, just as despotism, slavery, and warfare were necessary or even beneficial to primitive man.\textsuperscript{103} The savage needs a savage god; the dread of torture for those who misbehave is all that keeps him in check.\textsuperscript{104} Spencer did not specifically reference Christianity, but the connection is clear.

In a longer essay in the \textit{Westminster} for April 1854, Spencer elaborated on the development of human culture, this time in regard to “Manners and Fashion.” Spencer was always an iconoclast when it came to dress and comportment; one can only

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item \textit{Essays}, 1:90-93.
\item \textit{Essays}, 1:96-97, 108.
\item \textit{Essays}, 1:430-431.
\item \textit{Essays}, 1:432-433.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
imagine his glee as he demolished current usages for being atavisms of ancient despotism. “All regulations, formal or virtual,” he announced “have a common character: they are all limitations of men’s freedom.”

105 Spencer’s overarching theory here was that law, religion, and manners have the same origin; worship of a deity, chief, and priest who were one and the same person. 106 Manners have their origins in signs of respect for this leader; over a long period of time, they have come to apply to a greater and greater number of the people, and have likewise attenuated in severity. 107 The bow is simply an abbreviated form of prostration, as is curtsying or kneeling in church. 108 Fashion is simply our attempt to imitate the leader, and as with manners it has spread down the social ranks. 109 Spencer believed that both manners and fashion would fade away as democracy increased and humanity fully adjusted to social conditions. 110

Sources: Spencer’s Intellectual Debts

One further essay bears mentioning. At the beginning of 1854, at the urging of his friends Evans and Lewes, Spencer read Auguste Comte’s positive philosophy, now available to him in a translated and greatly condensed form courtesy of Harriet

105 Essays, 1:112.
106 Essays, 1:112-114.
107 Essays, 1:118-122.
Martineau.\textsuperscript{111} At least, he read the first few sections, for in his autobiography he claimed never to have read Comte’s biological and social divisions.\textsuperscript{112} The foundation of Comte’s work was the idea that human knowledge has passed through three stages: the theological, where phenomena are explained by reference to supernatural entities; the metaphysical, where phenomena are explained by reference to abstract forces, and the positive, where absolute notions like first causes are rejected, and the search for knowledge only encompasses the scientific laws of nature.\textsuperscript{113} Comte divided human knowledge into a number of departments, from mathematics and astronomy through biology and ultimately to “sociology,” a term he coined to replace his earlier term “social physics.” He arranged these sciences in the order in which they became “positive” or fully scientific, which was determined by their complexity and independence from the other departments.\textsuperscript{114} Sociology, being the most involved of the sciences, has not yet reached the stage of positivity, Comte stated, but when it does the Positive Philosophy will serve as the basis for social reorganization.\textsuperscript{115}

Never one to respect received authority, Spencer immediately dissented from the fashion in which Comte divided the sciences. In “The Genesis of Science,” published

\textsuperscript{111} *AB*, 1:517.

\textsuperscript{112} *AB*, 1:518.


\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 6.

\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 14-15.
in the July edition of the *British Quarterly Review*, he complimented Comte on his far-reaching views and his clear reasoning but disagreed with his partitioning of knowledge.\textsuperscript{116} Each science is dependent on discoveries in the others, he argued, and thus cannot be arranged in a linear order.\textsuperscript{117} To demonstrate this, Spencer gave a detailed account of their development, starting with the first intellectual processes of primitive man—the concepts of likeness, number, measure, and the like.\textsuperscript{118} Ultimately, he concluded that divisions in the sciences are not just abstract but arbitrary, for there are no such divisions in nature.\textsuperscript{119}

Spencer was more indebted to Comte than he wanted to admit. The historian Michael Taylor correctly argues that the *Synthetic Philosophy* was an attempt to merge evolutionary deism with the positivism of the Chapman circle.\textsuperscript{120} However, this does not mean that Spencer’s entire philosophical system was essentially Positivist.\textsuperscript{121} In his later work, he categorized certain metaphysical questions as “Unknowable,” but this did not lead him to reject all metaphysics. For Spencer, the law of evolution was both a first and final cause: it explained both the current state of the universe and its endpoint or goal in a teleological sense. Furthermore, Comte rejected the reduction of phenomena in the

\textsuperscript{116} Essays, 1:171.
\textsuperscript{117} Essays, 1:183.
\textsuperscript{118} Essays, 1:184-209.
\textsuperscript{119} Essays, 1:219.
\textsuperscript{120} Michael W. Taylor, *The Philosophy of Herbert Spencer* (London: Continuum, 2007), 20.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., 45.
universe to a single law, given the limitations of the human mind.\textsuperscript{122} By the time he began his Synthetic Philosophy, Spencer believed that he had formulated such a law. Still, looking at Spencer’s great project, with its divisions of biology, psychology, sociology, and ethics, it is difficult to believe Spencer was not influenced by Comte’s earlier attempt to organize all human knowledge. Spencer claimed that his only debt to Comte was “the indebtedness of antagonism,”\textsuperscript{123} but antagonism can inspire just as surely as agreement. To disagree with how a project is managed implies that the project is worth doing in the first place.

Comte was not the only influence on Spencer during the first half of the 1850s; these were years in which Spencer incurred some of his deepest intellectual debts. Two books contributed greatly to shifts in his thought in the years leading up to the writing of \textit{The Principles of Psychology}: Lewes’s history of philosophy and John Stuart Mill’s \textit{Logic}. Taylor exaggerates when he argues that the remainder of Spencer’s career as a philosopher was spent “filling in the details” of a system conceived in conversations with his friends in the Chapman circle revolving around Comte, Mill, and phrenologist George Combe.\textsuperscript{124} But there is an element of truth here; intellectual foundations for the future were being laid. Both Evans and Lewes were impressed by Comte’s \textit{Philosophie Positive},

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{122} Comte, \textit{Positive Philosophy} 16, 141. Comte did state that this was the proper goal of the philosopher, impossible though it was.
\item \textsuperscript{123} \textit{AB}, 1:517.
\item \textsuperscript{124} Taylor, \textit{The Philosophy of Herbert Spencer}, 27. Taylor judges this the only period of sustained study in Spencer’s life. Ibid., 17.
\end{itemize}
and tried to kindle enthusiasm in Spencer. Spencer was reintroduced to Mill’s System of Logic by Evans, who loaned him her copy.\(^{125}\)

George Combe may also have been an important influence, though the evidence is circumstantial. Combe’s book The Constitution of Man (1828) was incredibly popular, and a young man with Spencer’s interest in phrenology most likely would have read it. However, given Spencer’s reading habits it is not safe to make categorical statements about anything Spencer “must have read.” Even books that are cited in his work or mentioned in his Autobiography are not above suspicion about how thoroughly they were studied. Spencer did not always finish the books he started. He certainly would not have spent hours on the kind of close reading James Secord describes in his book on Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation.\(^{126}\)

Spencer used phrenological terms and concepts like “the faculties” in Social Statics and The Principles of Psychology. But here we must tread carefully as well. The historian Robert Richards is persuasive in his argument that Combe was likely the originator of the idea, expressed in Social Statics, that the exercise of mental faculties and their adjustment to fit the environment leads to happiness.\(^{127}\) However, Spencer also used the word “faculties” multiple times in Principles of Psychology, yet he had

---

\(^{125}\) AB, 1:452-53.

\(^{126}\) For example, Secord gives an extended account of Thomas Hirst (later a friend of Spencer’s) who read the book with great intensity. Secord, Victorian Sensation: 343.

\(^{127}\) Richards, Evolutionary Theories of Mind and Behavior, 251.
quietly but firmly rejected phrenology by the time it was written, instead arguing that
“Intelligence has neither distinct grades, nor is constituted of faculties that are truly independent...the classifications current in our philosophies of the mind, can be but superficially true.”128 The same can be said for the concept of adaptation to the environment, which has a major source in the work of 18th century French naturalist Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon. The fact is that it is difficult to demonstrate Combe’s influence conclusively, but Spencer’s knowledge of his work seems likely. Combe was part of the circle around Chapman; he knew Evans well and had even studied her skull.129 Spencer was a good friend to Cara and Charles Bray, phrenology advocates and friends of both Combe and Evans.130 The evidence suggests he knew George Combe and his work.

Whatever the case may be, Spencer’s interest in phrenology was waning in the years leading up to his work on The Principles of Psychology. In part this was due to his reading of Lewes’s Biographical History of Philosophy, which gave him new sources for ideas that he had once seen as phrenological in origin. Lewes was not as enthusiastic about phrenology as Evans; though he accepted the basic idea of mind as manifestation of the brain, he did not agree with specific claims about the localization of faculties in

128 Herbert Spencer, The Principles of Psychology, 1st ed. (London: Longman, Brown, Greene, and Longmans, 1855), 486 (hereafter cited as PP). See also pp. 606-610 where Spencer is more equivocal, dissenting from phrenology’s specific findings while accepting some sort of localization in the brain.

129 Taylor, Philosophy of Herbert Spencer, 33.

130 Offer, Herbert Spencer and Social Theory, 55.
various organs. In Lewes’ book Spencer could read about the subjective, introspective way of studying the mind that had been a feature of Western philosophy since Descartes. He was also able to learn about Kant secondhand, after giving up on his *Critique of Pure Reason* when younger. In *The Principles of Psychology*, Kant’s notion of the necessity of fixed mental categories for abstract ideas such as time, space, and causality replaced the phrenological view of fixed modes of thought corresponding to organs of the brain.

Spencer conjured up a school inspired by John Locke in opposition to the school of Kant. Locke’s theories were extended in the work of John Stuart Mill, whose book *A System of Logic* had a great impact on Spencer and others of his circle. Mill, like other utilitarians before him (including his father James), took Locke’s position that the mind starts as a “tabula rasa” and that all knowledge and thought processes are the result of sensations that have impressed themselves on the mind (a theory also called “associationism”). In his *Logic* he tried to establish a system of objective thought on associationist principles. Spencer admired the attempt and outlined his own idea on

---


133 See Lewes, *Biographical History*, 546-547 for his view of Kant’s relationship to Locke. For Spencer’s use of Kant and Locke as shorthand for opposing schools see for example *PP*, 577.

134 It was Evans that originally loaned Spencer a copy. Postlethwaite, *Making it Whole*, 201.
how to derive truth from subjective experience in an essay for the Westminster in October 1853, “The Universal Postulate.” This was purportedly a review not just of Mill’s Logic, but of works by Thomas Reid, William Whewell, George Berkeley, and Henry Mansel, with David Hume’s A Treatise on Human Nature and Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason thrown in for good measure. However, as usual, most of the essay was taken up with Spencer’s own ideas. While he agreed with Mill’s basic position, that all thoughts and beliefs are the consequences of basic sense perceptions, he proposed his own standard of truth. Spencer argued that the fundamental test of truth is whether it is possible to believe otherwise. In other words, if we cannot conceive of the negation of a belief—if we cannot imagine a state in which the opposite of a belief is the case—then the belief must for all intents and purposes be true (though Spencer, guided by Mill, stopped short of saying that the belief necessarily corresponds to objective reality).

A Philosophy of Mind: The Principles of Psychology

“The Universal Postulate” gave Spencer a foundation from which to work out his theories about the processes of the human mind, and in a slightly modified form it became the first section of his next project, The Principles of Psychology. After getting a hydropathic cure at the end of June, 1854, he was ready to devote himself to the


Thanks to the inheritance from his uncle, he could afford to do some of his writing in France, at the seaside and in Paris. But Spencer’s command of the language was not good, and he pined for the intellectual stimulus provided by his friends. He was back in London by the end of October. Discovering that no publisher would take a risk on an abstruse work on the philosophy of the mind, Spencer understood that once again he would have to foot the publishing bill, and moved back to Derby to economize. With the exception of an excursion to Wales, it was there that he wrote the rest of his book.

It may seem surprising that a self-educated man with no clinical pedigree should write a book on psychology, and even more strange that he expected people to read it. But in the 1850s psychology was a new field of knowledge, not yet bounded by the academy or professional organizations. Even the word seemed modern, having rarely been used at the turn of the century. As Rick Rylance points out, this “high-Victorian psychology” of the period from 1850-1880 was a discourse open to an audience of generalists, who did not consider the issues discussed to be of only specialized

---

137 AB, 1:520-21, 524. Spencer did not believe the “water cure” did him any good, but that the stress-free environment, time spent outdoors, and healthy food was responsible for any improvement. Nevertheless he occasionally used hydroopathic remedies to cure his insomnia—see AB I, 554.

138 AB, 1:536.

139 AB, 1:539-540.

interest.\textsuperscript{141} Knowledge of the mind, especially that which spoke to the problem of the mind’s relation to the body and the freedom of the will, was considered of interest to all.\textsuperscript{142} Spencer’s book addressed both issues, but also engaged in the kind of psychology that from a modern perspective we might rather call “the philosophy of the mind.” Incidentally, this was the kind of psychology Comte disapproved of—as he put it, “it pretends to accomplish the discovery of the laws of the human mind by contemplating it in itself,” a fair enough description of Spencer’s method and that of many contemporary students of the subject.\textsuperscript{143}

Spencer divided \textit{The Principles of Psychology} into four parts, each taking a separate viewpoint on the same “great aggregate of phenomena.”\textsuperscript{144} Part I, the “General Analysis,” was the essay on the “Universal Postulate” with a few changes and additions. Thus from the outset Spencer made it clear that this was a work whose foundation would be an introspective analysis of the workings of consciousness—an examination of the experience of sensation, thought, and belief. Having demonstrated that the universal postulate, though it cannot be proved, must be taken as true for there to be any possibility of rational argument, Spencer moved on to the “Special Analysis” in

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{141} Rick Rylance, \textit{Victorian Psychology and British Culture, 1850-1880} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 7-8.
\item \textsuperscript{142} Smith, “Physiology of the Will,” 81.
\item \textsuperscript{143} Comte, \textit{Positive Philosophy}, 11.
\item \textsuperscript{144} PP, iii.
\end{itemize}
part II.145 This was a fine-toothed inspection of various mental processes, from qualitative and quantitative reasoning (the mental act of determining equality and ratio) to classification to the perception of space, time, motion and resistance. Spencer posited that the fundamental mental act used in reasoning is not establishing the equality of two things, but the equality of two relations, such as the relations between the lines and angles of an isosceles triangle (which always has two equal sides).146 In Spencer’s words, “every ratiocinative act is the establishment of a definite relation between two definite relations.”147

As for our perceptions, Spencer wrote that to consciously perceive an object is to classify it or recognize it, and he considered the classification of things to involve the same mental process as reasoning.148 Perception of an object is always complex, because it always involves unconscious classification and combination of a thing’s various attributes (like height, width, number of sides, color, etc.) from the raw visual data.149 As for the perception of space, time, motion, and resistance, as well as coextension, coexistence, “cointension” (two things alike in intensity), and “connature” (abstract feelings of warmth, blueness, sweetness, etc.) Spencer attempted to trace

---

146 PP, 87-88.
147 PP, 168, 170. An “intuition” is “any cognition reached by an undecomposable mental act.” 78, fn.
148 PP, 172, 185.
149 PP, 200, 203. “Raw visual data” is decidedly not Spencer’s terminology.
these back to the way they first manifest themselves to the infant consciousness, to demonstrate that they are not conceptions pre-fixed in the mind, but are modes of thought built up from unfiltered experience. For Spencer there was a “unity of composition” in intelligence that made it resolvable into intuitions about similarity and dissimilarity. “These intuitions are foreshadowed in the very first steps of an incipient consciousness,” he wrote, and argued “that the very earliest and simplest experiences are those which furnish the raw material of these intuitions.” Thus Spencer took the side of the associationists, like Mill, against what he identified as the school of Kant. From infancy, our intelligence is built up out of constant experiences of likeness and unlikeness in the relations between things connected in time, space, through qualities, etc.

Spencer’s technique in this section is elaborate, exhaustive, and exhausting. Take for example the following example of perception:

...when watching the evolutions of a ballet, there is a consciousness not only of the multiplied relations of coexistent positions which constitute our notions of the distance, size, figure, and attitude of each dancer—not only of the various like relations between each and the several colours of her dress—not only of the relations of position among the respective dancers; but also, of the numerous relations of sequence which the body and limbs of every dancer exhibit in their movements with respect to each other; and of those yet more involved relations of sequence exhibited in the movements of every dancer with respect to the rest.  

---

150 PP, 329.

151 PP, 277.
Spencer was thorough because he was trying to disassemble the mechanisms of thought into the smallest possible component pieces, and then demonstrate how these mental atoms could have arisen out of primitive sense perceptions acting on a receptive medium. This set the stage for the second half of the book, where he demonstrated how these pieces are assembled in the first place, through an evolutionary process.

In the second half of *The Principles of Psychology* Spencer relied less on forensic examination of mental states and more on external, biological minds, as they have developed over time:

> It is a dominant characteristic of Intelligence, viewed in its successive stages of evolution, that its processes, which, as originally performed, were not accompanied with a consciousness of the manner in which they were performed, or of their adaptation to the ends achieved, become eventually both conscious and systematic.152

What were once instincts have become thoughts, and thoughts have developed into more complex forms as the stages of rationality are ascended, from the primitive classifications of aborigines to “methods”—consciousness of what reasoning processes are used and systematization of them—of which Spencer regarded science as a high form.153 Spencer did not comment on his use of the word “evolution” here, but he made it clear later in the book that he was referring to the growth of intelligence itself through

152 *PP*, 339.

153 *PP*, 339-341, 343.
various gradations over time, not the development of an infant into an adult.\textsuperscript{154} However, we should beware of assuming that Spencer used the word in its modern sense. There is no clear reference to species change, heredity, or ancestry, so Spencer could have been referring to human development alone.

Spencer argued that the various grades of intelligence exhibited by humans and animals shade into each other so imperceptibly that it is impossible to say exactly where “intelligence” begins. He cited the apes, “hosts of whose actions are quite as rational as those of school-boys” and domesticated animals as particularly exhibiting limited reasoning powers.\textsuperscript{155} Spencer’s object was to show the link between intelligence and corporeal processes like reflex action, to demonstrate that mental and physical life are aspects of the same thing. His definition of life elaborated on Coleridge’s, expressed in \textit{Hints Towards the Formation of a More Comprehensive Theory of Life}, that life is “the principle of individuation, or the power which unites a given \textit{all} into a \textit{whole} that is presupposed by all its parts.”\textsuperscript{156} Since Coleridge saw life as a continuum, from the barely alive stone to the fully alive human, Spencer modified this idea to be more specific, coming up with the definition “the definite combination of heterogenous changes, both simultaneous and successive, in correspondence with external coesxistences and

\textsuperscript{154} As Richards has points out, nineteenth century writers might use the word in both ways simultaneously. Richards, \textit{Meaning of Evolution}, 16.

\textsuperscript{155} PP, 350.

sequences.” That is, living beings continually internally coordinate with external events. This definition remained central to Spencer’s concept of life in all his future writing.

Spencer kept Coleridge’s idea of progressive levels of life, however, for it fit his tendency to think of complex forms of life like humans as superior to lower forms. Tracing the levels of life from simple protozoans through plants to increasingly complex animals, he demonstrated that divisions between grades of life are subtle, not clear cut. Repeated use of the word “evolution” in these sections, as well as terms such as “primordial tissue” and “the purely physical processes with which life commences” against suggests that Spencer was speaking of species change over time, though again he did not mention of heredity or give any mechanism for the changes. Without doing much violence to the text, it is possible to imagine that Spencer was simply tracing out a great chain of being, with infinitesimal steps between immutable species. Evolution would thus mean “unfolding” or “unrolling,” its original definition before it came to be used of the development of the embryo.

In Spencer’s view, human beings were the highest example of the various specialized correspondences needed in more and more complex environments. As the

---

157 A particularly fine bit of Spencerese, found in PP, 368. Spencer used a similar definition in his essay on population.

158 Coleridge, Theory of Life, 67. PP, 376. Spencer did not refer to forms of life as better or worse, but the use of terms such as “high,” “low,” and “perfect life” implies a hierarchy.

159 PP, 397, 404, 405, 423, etc.
senses advanced in sophistication so did the ability to judge correspondences like
distance and time. “Even the most transcendent achievements of rationality are but the
carrying still further that specialization of the correspondences between the organism
and its environment, which is displayed in the evolution of life in general,” Spencer
wrote.\textsuperscript{160} Intelligence was simply highly developed reflex. Psychology and Physiology
were aspects of the same thing.\textsuperscript{161} For Spencer, the mind was a property of the physical
brain.

Intelligence is different than other physical properties in some ways, and
Spencer used part IV of his book to elucidate. He pictured consciousness as multiple,
with “a great number of nascent consciousnesses, of different intensities, existing at the
same moment.”\textsuperscript{162} Multiple strands make up the thread of consciousness, but these
threads are united so that intelligence seems to be a series of changes rather than many
simultaneous occurrences.\textsuperscript{163} Spencer defined psychology, then, as the principles
underlying this series of mental acts. To discover these principles, he traced the
evolutionary path of mental abilities, from reflex action to instinct, then to memory, and
finally to their highest form, reason.

\textsuperscript{160} PP, 435-36.
\textsuperscript{161} PP, 487.
\textsuperscript{162} PP, 502.
\textsuperscript{163} PP, 491, 504-505.
This is where the most important and original aspect of Spencer’s psychology finally becomes clear—his use of evolution as a way to bridge the gap between Locke’s associationism and Kantian “forms of thought.” In his discussion of instinct, Spencer pointed out that organisms which often experience the same mental states in a particular order will associate them in that order, until the tendency becomes an automatic connection.164 Suggesting that readers had probably already noticed that he supported “the development hypothesis,” he declared his belief that life arose “by a progressive, unbroken evolution.”165 Gradual changes took place not just in physical form, but in mental abilities as well. In short, in a Lamarckian fashion reflexes developed during the lifetime of one individual could be transmitted to its successors, who might develop more complex reflexes on those foundations, eventually evolving into instincts, memories, and finally, human reason.166 As Spencer put it, “the brain represents an infinitude of experiences received during the evolution of life in general.”167 All its contents originate from the formation of mental associations, but the associations made by many ancestors count as much as the experience of the individual.

Clearly Spencer “buried the lead.” His reconciliation of Locke and Kant, which he promised at the beginning of the book, was dispensed with in less than ten pages at the

---

164 PP, 548. Pavlov’s famous experiments with dogs demonstrated the truth of this idea.

165 PP, 577.

166 PP, 578, 583.

167 PP, 583.
end of a chapter on reason. Spencer later pointed to this section as containing the fundamental argument of the book, but this was hindsight.168 The remaining two chapters were on the feelings and the will. Like some phrenologists, Spencer denied the freedom of the will. He argued that actions are free, but the desires that lead to actions are determined by the psychical connections made through the experiences of the individual or his ancestors.169 The ego is nothing more than the existing state of consciousness, and its changes obey natural laws. Spencer pronounced these laws beneficent, as leading to greater and greater complexity, which, by allowing increasingly complete adjustment to the environment, meant higher life and greater happiness.170 Thus the psychology ends on the same note as Social Statics, with a vision of future human perfection.

“A Sensation in my Head”: Spencer’s Breakdown

“One morning soon after beginning work, there commenced a sensation in my head—not pain, nor heat, nor fulness, nor tension, but simply a sensation, bearable enough but abnormal,” Spencer wrote.171 He was in Wales, working on the last part of the Psychology; careful about overwork, he had been writing only five hours a day, but did not take into account the time spent thinking during his afternoon walk, correcting

168 See his “review” of his own work, and AB, 2:11.
169 PP, 617.
170 PP, 620.
171 AB, 1:544.
proofs in the evening, and reading Thackeray’s latest novel at night.\textsuperscript{172} Feeling that something was seriously wrong, he threw down his pen, resolved to take a week’s rest, and went fishing. But the damage had been done—a “break-down” commenced, from which he never fully recovered.\textsuperscript{173} The next eighteen months he considered lost, though he did manage, painfully, to finish \textit{The Principles of Psychology}.

Spencer was always sensitive about his health, but after 1855 he grew more and more obsessed with his symptoms. These were mostly mental, involving insomnia, frayed nerves, and inability to concentrate. Physically he remained fairly healthy and active until very late in life—his remedies for his health often involved exercise, such as riding, fishing, and even splitting up tree-stumps.\textsuperscript{174} This suggests something beyond simple hypochondria, subtle as his symptoms may have been at times, for hypochondriacs are generally at least partially bedridden.\textsuperscript{175} Psychosomatic illness might be a better way to characterize it, as several writers on Spencer do.\textsuperscript{176} But ruling out the possibility of a real physical malady is a mistake, given the paucity of the evidence.

\textsuperscript{172} \textit{AB}, 1:541. A detailed account of authors’ use of their proofs can be found in Allan C. Dooley, \textit{Author and Printer in Victorian England} (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1992), 20-51.

\textsuperscript{173} \textit{AB}, 1:545.

\textsuperscript{174} For the tree-stump incident see \textit{AB}, 1:561; Spencer judged it the best exercise he ever tried. \textit{LL} 80.


\textsuperscript{176} Taylor, \textit{The Philosophy of Herbert Spencer}, 19; Francis, \textit{Herbert Spencer and the Invention of Modern Life}, 101-102.
outside Spencer’s own *Autobiography*. Neuroscientist Martin M. Raitiere, in a flawed but intriguing book, suggests epilepsy, or more accurately “Autosomal Dominant Partial Epilepsy with Auditory Features,” perhaps caused by a lesion.\(^{177}\) However, much of his argument rests on the identification of characters in George Eliot’s work that are partially based on Spencer, a dangerous procedure especially since Eliot was mostly silent on the matter.\(^{178}\) Whatever the cause may have been, the physical symptoms Spencer suffered were real enough.

Spencer blamed his nervous collapse on overwork. For the next eighteen months, reading or writing for any length of time produced the mysterious “abnormal sensations,” “feeling in the head,” or “fulness in the head” that told him something was wrong.\(^{179}\) Social occasions at which there was likely to be intellectual conversation or argumentation he avoided.\(^{180}\) He saw a doctor, who could prescribe nothing better than living in a farmhouse where there were horses to ride, a remedy Spencer duly tried.\(^{181}\) Some of his friends prescribed marriage, which Huxley facetiously called “gynœopathy” while admitting “the remedy had the serious inconvenience that it could not be left off

\(^{177}\) Raitiere, *Complicity of Friends*, 350.

\(^{178}\) Raitiere argues that Spencer knew he was epileptic but carefully hid the evidence from all but his closest friends. This is difficult to believe given his scrupulous honesty and his willingness to subject the reader of his autobiography to endless theories about his symptoms and their causes. If Spencer had a special form of epilepsy, he was not aware of the fact.

\(^{179}\) *AB*, 1:580; *LL* 530.

\(^{180}\) *AB*, 1:553, 559, 581.

\(^{181}\) *AB*, 1:556.
if it proved unsuitable.”182 There were phases to Spencer’s illness: at times he was optimistic about his improvement, but some ill-advised behavior would always cause another relapse. It was something of a vicious cycle which continued throughout his life: impaired judgment due to a failing nervous system led him to take on more than he could handle, which in turn led to worse symptoms.183

Spencer was not alone in suffering from nervous disorders. Many Victorian intellectuals, such as Darwin, Huxley, J. S. Mill, Faraday, and Kingsley suffered such ailments at one time or another in their lives. The symptoms often started in their thirties, as they did with Spencer, and some, like Darwin, were affected quite severely.184 Because of his own health problems Spencer thought he saw the signs of overwork everywhere, especially in his own family. He blamed it for his father’s illnesses, his mother’s chronic exhaustion later in life, and his uncle’s death at age 56.185 The Victorian context is also important. As historian Mark Francis points out, Spencer’s obsession with his health was not odd to his contemporaries—it was socially acceptable to talk about migraines, weakness, and the like—and some of his “cossetting” of

182 AB, 1:578.
183 AB, 1:571, 566.
184 Peel, Herbert Spencer: The Evolution of a Sociologist, 22. Francis suggests that his symptoms would not have seemed extreme during the nineteenth century. Francis, Herbert Spencer, 101.
185 AB, 1:35, 65, 74-75.
himself, such as his habit of taking his pulse, was regarded as an amusing eccentricity, especially by his friends.\footnote{Francis, \textit{Herbert Spencer}, 35, 94.}

In January of 1857 Spencer had not made a complete recovery, but felt that more rest was not the answer. He had written nothing remunerative in over two years—\textit{Principles of Psychology} had only sold 200 copies out of the 750 printed, which meant Spencer had to absorb a loss.\footnote{\textit{AB}, 1:564. An older and wiser Spencer noted that his publishers were wise not to take a risk on the book.} In part this was because of the abstruse nature of the book, in part because it was perceived as atheistic and materialist.\footnote{Wiltshire, \textit{Social and Political Thought}, 57.} Spencer wrote an answer to one such review, in the \textit{Nonconformist}, arguing that his book showed that both internal and external phenomena could not be perceived in themselves, but only through the relationships between them. Thus science ultimately ends in insoluble mystery, an early statement on what he would later term “the Unknowable.”\footnote{Herbert Spencer, “Letter to the Editor on Charge of Atheism,” \textit{Nonconformist} 16, no. 534 (Jan. 23, 1856), 869.}

Doubtless the editors would have been relieved to learn that Spencer was only an agnostic, had Huxley yet publicized the word.

Spencer went back to work on an essay on development that he had promised the \textit{Westminster Review} years before. He made painfully slow headway, a page a day if that. Three hours was the most he could hope for without wrong feelings in the head,
and the three-hour workday became part of his routine from then on. However, by the end of three months he had “Progress: Its Law and Cause” ready to publish. This was one of Spencer’s most important essays because it set the stage for his massive system of philosophy. However, at the time it was just a step towards his return to full functionality as a writer. The ideas he set out in “Progress” continued to develop, resulting in a prospectus for his system in 1860. Meanwhile, Spencer published essays on a variety of subjects, some in the Westminster, some in other reviews.

**A Theory for Everything: Return to Review-Writing**

Spencer continued to be an irrepressible theorist. For Frazier’s Magazine, he wrote an essay on “The Origin and Function of Music” which argued that music developed from emotional expressions like howls and shouts. Things like loudness, timbre, and pitch Spencer connected with the intensity of a feeling and its changes and the mental state involved. Spencer’s historical evidence was scanty—which was true of much of his early work, done before he had research assistants to gather historical and ethnographical references. His argument hung on his theory’s ability to explain why music rouses emotion in us. Spencer could be emotionally self-contained, but in this essay he praised music for its ability to evoke feelings and stressed the importance of

---

190 *AB*, 1:180.

191 *AB*, 1:585.

192 *Essays*, 1:361.

193 *Essays*, 1:363-68.
emotional language for human happiness, since sympathy for others undergirds the social system.\(^{194}\)

Spencer later used his essay on music as an example of the evolutionary tenor of his thought at that time. However, the development of an art form over time is not “evolutionary” by most standards. Another of his essays provides a more fitting example. “The Ultimate Laws of Physiology” (later retitled “Transcendental Physiology”) dealt with general principles of life common to many organisms—for example, the fact that organisms primarily descend from a “fertilised germ” and resemble their parents.\(^{195}\) Evolution, Spencer argued, involves differentiation of an organism’s mass into specialized organs, each with its own structure.\(^{196}\) This specialization is what separates higher organisms from lower. Higher organisms are more differentiated from their environments, for example, mammals are not surrounded by a substance that carries nourishment like aquatic animals, and maintain a body temperature different than their environment.\(^{197}\) Specialization is a process that begins with the development of the seed, which is a homogenous body and thus inherently unstable (a notion that became central to Spencer’s later evolutionary thinking.)\(^{198}\) Heredity explains why the germ

\(^{194}\) *Essays*, 1:380-84.

\(^{195}\) *Essays*, 1:262, 263-65.

\(^{196}\) *Essays*, 1:265-266.

\(^{197}\) *Essays*, 1:271-75.

\(^{198}\) *Essays*, 1:280-82.
develops into a particular organism, a process Spencer did not think science would ever be able to explain. However, he did make the case that that offspring inherit the adult characteristics of their parents. Like Lamarck, he argued that the use or disuse of individual organs or parts in reaction to environmental conditions has hereditary ramifications.199

At the end of his essay on physiology Spencer drew an elaborate parallel between societies and organisms, going so far as to argue that this is a time-honored way of investigating physiological phenomena. For example, he noted that both complex organisms and complex societies work on the principle of the division of labor. Both contain parts that are codependent and others that are rivals, growing at each other’s expense.200 Spencer’s view of organisms as collections of semi-independent parts meliorates the obvious conflict between his belief in the social organism and his extreme individualism.201 The use of organic analogies became central to Spencer’s work, underwriting his idea that societies are not made, but grow. Spencer clarified his views in an 1860 essay, “The Social Organism.” In “Transcendental Physiology” Spencer did not enumerate the differences between social and organic, creating the impression that the relationship was more than just an analogy. In “The Social Organism” he listed

199 Essays, 1:288-290.

200 Essays, 1:300-305.

many important distinctions, correcting this view. Spencer did not reason directly from biological to social—that is, he did not argue that a social structure must behave a certain way because a corresponding biological structure did so. Though the line was blurry at times, Spencer understood his concept of the social organism as a useful comparison, not a positive fact of nature. The social and organic worlds worked in the same fashion because they both were subject to the law of evolution, not because society was literally an organism.

In “The Social Organism” Spencer pointed out that both societies and organisms start out as small simple aggregations and grow immensely larger. During this process, both become more complex and diversified, and as they do, parts become interdependent while others become rivals for resources.202 Both societies and organisms also continue to live as their parts gradually die off and are replaced. Spencer also made the distinctions clear: most important is the fact that unlike the body, a society is composed of individual parts that are conscious, but is not conscious itself. Thus while the parts of the body live for the whole, the society exists for the sake of individuals.203 The difference seems fundamental, but Spencer did not discuss it, turning instead to vacuous though entertaining comparisons between the blood and commerce, circulatory systems and railways, and nerves and telegraph wires.204 Spencer did not

---

203 *Essays*, 1:276.
204 *Essays*, 1:291-301.
theorize about organisms based on his observations of societies, or come to new conclusions about society by referencing biology, so the comparisons seem like little more than interesting coincidences. At most, the similarities cemented the truth of his theories in Spencer’s mind.

Spencer’s interest in political and economic issues resurfaced during this period, and he wrote a number of essays on government and the financial system for the *Westminster Review* between 1857 and 1860. In “Representative Government: What is it Good For?” Spencer returned to some of the themes he first explored in his early work, *The Proper Sphere of Government*. Representative Government was seen as weak because citizens do not pick representatives wisely (and here Spencer echoed a common complaint of the time, that the British House of Commons, supposed to represent the people, was stocked with the titled nobility, military officers, and other members of the upper classes).205 The representatives chosen are too diverse a body, with too many individual interests and little wisdom necessary to coordinate or carry out the diverse plans they attempt.206 A personal monarch is more efficient, because one man makes the decisions and he is liable to select the most able councilors, for his own sake.207 But personal rule is only fit for a “vicious” state of man; Spencer argued that “no human being, however wise and good, is fit to be sole ruler over the doings of

---

205 Essays, 3:292-298.


207 Essays, 3:305.
an involved society,” for even with good intentions terrible results are likely to occur.208

The dilemma is resolved by noting that the people are at least likely to pick representatives that will protect their persons and property. Representative government is thus the best form for ensuring simple justice, which is the only function government should really be assigned.209

The social Darwinism apparent in Social Statics emerged again in another Westminster article, “State Tamperings with Money and Banks.” As in the previous essay, Spencer sought to demonstrate the failure of government regulations, in this case of cash and credit. He argued that the financial market must be allowed to regulate itself naturally, for it is impossible for government to prevent a financial crisis, though it can certainly cause one.210 State regulation cannot turn bad individuals good, and it cannot prevent men from being dishonest, rash, or stupid and thereby endangering their own financial security and that of others. Furthermore, it should not, for insuring against risk simply makes people more willing to expose themselves to ruin. “We have no patience with the mawkish philanthropy which would ward-off the punishment of stupidity,” Spencer writes. “The ultimate result of shielding men from the effects of folly, is to fill the world with fools.”211 Discussing this essay in his autobiography,

208 Essays, 3:311, 315.


210 Essays, 3:334.

211 Essays, 3:354.
Spencer is even clearer: “This was a tacit assertion, recalling like assertions previously made, that the survival of the fittest operates beneficially in society.”212 For human beings to evolve, failure must bring its natural consequences.

Yet Spencer did not glorify success at any cost. His standard of fitness did not include cunning, rapacity, or greed. In his 1859 essay “The Morals of Trade,” he complained that the mendacity of the commercial world meant that even honest men must sacrifice their principles or “go to the wall.”213 Once a crooked practice is adopted as a standard in an industry, employees are forced to adopt it by their employers, and business owners in related industries must put up with it or lose trade. “It has been said that the law of the animal creation is—’Eat and be eaten;’ and of our trading community it may similarly be said that the law is—Cheat and be cheated,” Spencer wrote.214 “Why in this civilized state of ours, is there so much that betrays the cunning selfishness of the savage?” he asked, and answered: the indiscriminate respect for wealth, however gained, is to blame, for social status is the real enticement behind the desire for the full wine cellar and fashionable address.215 But he had hope, for as society matures it becomes increasingly self-aware, and less tolerant of dealings that are not above

212 AB, 2:5.

213 Essays, 3:131.


215 Essays, 3:143, 145. On the other hand, Spencer argues that respect for honestly acquired wealth is good because it implies for intelligence, energy, and self-control, 148.
board. However, Spencer ended on a negative note: this current state of things seemed necessary to the current level of progress, in which social activity is focused on material development through industrial growth. This was an oft repeated refrain for Spencer, who thought real social progress was only possible in the long term.

In 1860 Spencer published yet another essay in the *Westminster*, this one on “Parliamentary Reform: The Dangers and the Safeguards.” This essay, like “Representative Government,” shows that Spencer’s political principles had not changed much in the decade since *Social Statics*. Spencer still believed that all classes were about equal in moral qualities; the poor might steal, but the wealthy did too, if only indirectly through dishonest trade practices and class-specific legislation. Thus in his essay, Spencer maintained that the danger of expanding the franchise was not that property rights may be violated, but that the working classes would do what the upper classes had been doing all along, and pass legislation that favored themselves. The activities of trade unions showed what this legislation was likely to be: laws restricting working hours and mandating certain levels of pay. In his arguments against trade unions and their attempts to restrict freedom of contract Spencer was at his most conservative:

> Men who render up their private liberties to the despotic rulers of trades-unions, seem scarcely independent enough rightly to exercise political liberties. Those

---

216 *Essays*, 3:140.

217 *Essays*, 3:149-50; Spencer’s comment about Americans’ worship of “the almighty dollar” is apropos; 20 years later he would preach a sermon with a similar moral and much the same conclusions to an American audience.
who so ill understand the nature of freedom, as to think that any man or body of men has a right to prevent employer and employed from making any contract they please, would almost appear to be incapacitated for the guardianship of their own freedom and that of their fellow-citizens.218

Like many nineteenth-century thinkers, including his Uncle Thomas Spencer, Herbert Spencer understood labor as a commodity which the worker sells and the capitalist buys. *Laissez-faire* principles demanded that the cost of labor be left to regulate itself.

The essays Spencer wrote in the five years from 1856 to 1860 show that his political and social views had not changed much since his youth. Yet there were subtleties in his thinking which indicated that his allegiance to English Radicalism was waning and a cynical conservatism was taking its place. Spencer’s loathing for government was the same as before, but where once he railed against specific legislation, like the Corn Laws and the Poor Law, now his fulminations were more vague and amorphous, suggesting a nameless fear of an advancing threat he would later label “socialism.” He still complained of the idle rich, but his distrust of the lower classes was more evident as well. And where his early essays were imbued with a powerful sense that change was coming, the essays of this later period displayed a certain pessimism about the development of civilization.

One reason for this change was Spencer’s class interests. He clearly identified with the middle class, having absorbed its culture and values in his youth. In those younger days, Spencer was passionate about the extension of democracy in part

---

because it was middle-income, educated families like his that stood to benefit. At middle age, he was less zealous, for it was the masses who stood to benefit from further liberality of the franchise. Spencer’s belief system had a great deal to do with these developments. His support for natural rights was sapped by his dismay over how people used those rights. Furthermore, he had seen previous extensions of political power fail to bring many hoped-for changes. What his earlier books had suggested, Spencer was beginning to take to heart: that social development takes place over extended periods of time, and that political institutions may change on the surface, but real political change can only keep pace with shifts in social mores and expectations.

**Early American Reactions to Spencer**

*Social Statics* caused scarcely a ripple in the American literary pond upon publication. Horace Greeley’s *New-York Tribune* briefly noticed it in a column on English works, and quoted the law of equal freedom. But for the most part the media ignored the book, though a few almost random references did appear. One periodical printed one of Spencer’s arguments against Proudhon, while several others repeated his observation that Englishmen no longer took of their hats for “God Save the Queen.”

*Social Statics* was sometimes misread as “social statistics,” leading one writer to

---


mention a new essay on population “from the pen of the great statistician, Herbert Spencer.”

A few Americans did read *Social Statics* later in the 1850s. *De Bow’s Review*, not yet an advocate of secession, published an article by G. F. Holmes which stated “modern abolitionism and modern political economy have but one panacea for those threatened with starvation: by the mouth of Herbert Spencer, both say, let them die or rot. With such an alternative, slavery is the more rational and the more humane.” Holmes had obviously been reading Spencer with a critical eye, and he later cited him on crooked trade practices and land reform. Doubtless few of his readers would have known what “by the mouth of Herbert Spencer” meant, but the general argument was a long familiar one: that slaves, fed and cared for in old age, were better off than Northern factory hands discarded when they could no longer work. There was some irony here, because *De Bow’s*, one of the South’s most important periodicals, was a champion of commercial and industrial development.

---

221 “Pamphlets and Periodicals,” *New York Evangelist* 23, no. 19 (May 6, 1852), 76.


224 George Fitzhugh, who popularized this pro-slavery argument, also wrote for *De Bow’s Review.*

Principles of Psychology had few readers in England beyond a small circle of the cognoscenti. It received even less attention in America. One of the few reviews from the period simply stated “Mr. Herbert Spencer has published ‘The Principles of Psychology,’ wherein he thinks he has annihilated Scepticism, and evolved the fundamental principles of human knowledge.”

A review of Sara Sophia Hennell’s Thoughts in Aid of Faith argued that she adopted Spencer’s psychology uncritically, especially his “sterile” definition of life, suggesting at least some knowledge of Spencer’s work on the part of the reviewer. Hennell was a good friend and frequent correspondent of Marian Evans; she knew Spencer and often asked after him in her letters. Her interest in his psychology is easily explained. In America, however, Spencer did not have intellectually curious acquaintances to spread the word about his book.

Thus despite the shift in his interests towards the phenomenon of development, in the late 1850s Americans continued to associate Spencer with political and social policies—when he was mentioned at all. For example, in 1857, Social Statics was cited in support of an article arguing that education does not reduce crime. The next year, the


227 “Herbert Spencer’s sterile dictum, that ‘life is the continuous adjustment of internal relations to external relations,’ is seized by Miss Hennell as a key to the whole grand mystery of Being; and is applied, as a standing explanation, to each successive phase of organic, intellectual, and moral evolution.” Review of Thoughts in Aid of Faith, by Sara Sophia Hennell.” Christian Examiner 69, no. 2 (Sept., 1860), 282.

228 GEL 2:216, 3:97.

North American Review, a Boston-based quarterly with connections to Harvard, published a review essay arguing the opposite.\textsuperscript{230} The North American was America’s most important quarterly review, having since 1815 published contributions from the “cream of New England intellectuals.”\textsuperscript{231} Despite its pedigree, in the 1850s it had a small circulation and a reputation for dullness.\textsuperscript{232} Still, it was influential with the educated elite, and its discussion of Spencer was likely to be the first its readers had heard of him. The North American’s critic took Spencer to task for his anti-government theories, linking him to the ideals of The Economist and disparaging the idea that a long, slow reformation of men’s natures was the only way to truly end crime.\textsuperscript{233}

Spencer’s distaste for “over-legislation” was the most noticed aspect of his writing, though the brief comments in the North American article show that some had picked up on his view of social development, if only in a cursory fashion. Unitarian minister Joseph Henry Allen’s review of the first volume of Spencer’s essays in the Christian Examiner of 1859 was even more vague, noting the merit of thinkers who apply scientific principles and methods to the study of humanity, but warning “their

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{232} Mott, American Periodicals, 2:241-242.
\item \textsuperscript{233} [C. A. Cummings], “Reformatory Institutions at Home and Abroad,” North American Review 86, no. 178 (Jan., 1858), 80-82.” Also reviewed in this issue: G. H. Lewes’ Biographical History of Philosophy and E. L. Youmans’ The Household Book of Science.
\end{itemize}
fault or danger is a hard, excessively intellectual, somewhat dry and materialistic way of regarding the phenomena of human life, passion, will, and history.”234 The Christian Examiner was one of the most successful of the many religious periodicals which comprised a large proportion of the antebellum magazine market, making up with sheer variety what they lacked in circulation.235 Like the North American, it was loosely associated with Harvard, and some of its editors and contributors were Harvard faculty. The Examiner, and Allen himself, became regular, though not uncritical, supporters of Spencer.

**Becoming Known to the People: American Reactions to Education**

Spencer’s American reputation would never have reached the heights that it did without the patient efforts of E. L. Youmans. The son of a farmer and wagon-maker, Youmans, like Spencer, was almost entirely self-educated. He became interested in science at a young age, and despite recurrent episodes of blindness (which were at least partially psycho-somatic) he immersed himself in the scientific knowledge of the day. He became a sort of missionary, sublimating the religious urges instilled by his upbringing into a crusade for recognition of the value of science.236 As his friend and fellow writer

---


John Fiske put it, “In Youmans the approaching better era found its John the Baptist.”

He believed that scientific practice was dedicated to truth, and the best route by which to find truth, and thus argued that scientists must be allowed autonomy and professional respectability, rather than being labeled as atheists, materialists, and infidels. These beliefs, and the drives they fostered, made Youmans the ideal promoter of Spencer’s works; and in addition, he was also a skilled popular lecturer and an able promoter. Furthermore, he had a close relationship with a publisher, D. Appleton & Co., whom he advised on scientific matters.

Youmans’ introduction to Spencer came through a reading of The Principles of Psychology. When Spencer began looking for supporters for his great system of philosophy, Youmans became a sort of unofficial spokesman. The two began to correspond, and the connection ripened into a friendship that went far beyond a simple relationship of disciple and master. Youmans pressed Spencer to publish some of essays he had written on education in America, for as he told Spencer, “upon taking hold of the matter I encounter the difficulty to which I anticipated: it is that you are almost unknown to the people.” Eventually four essays on education and child-rearing were

---


239 Haar, “E. L. Youmans,” 197.

240 E. L. Youmans to Herbert Spencer, 1860, in LL, 129.
collected into a book, which was published in America the year before it was available in Britain. *Education: Intellectual, Moral, and Physical* was a call for modern educational techniques and modern subjects. The first essay, “What Knowledge is of Most Worth?” threw down the gauntlet before classical education, comparing it to the tattoos, colored beads, and trinkets favored by native peoples.²⁴¹ Spencer argued that education should be useful for more than impressing one’s peers; it should aid in the attainment of personal welfare and happiness. He proposed to study, in a systematic way, the comparative worth of different kinds of knowledge and the difficulty in attaining them.²⁴² His ultimate conclusion was that in all ways, from the cultivation of the aesthetic senses to understanding of the self and the workings of the body, science is the best knowledge to have.²⁴³

The remaining three essays explored education in the broadest sense of the child’s mental, emotional, and physical well-being. “Intellectual Education” argued that the content of education must conform to the level of development of the child, citing Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi as the source of this doctrine.²⁴⁴ Since the mind grows “like all things that grow...from the homogeneous to the heterogeneous,” education must also go from the simple, concrete, and empirical to the complex, abstract, and


²⁴² *Edu*, 7-11.


²⁴⁴ *Edu*, 103.
rational.\textsuperscript{245} Allowing a student to learn in self-directed fashion makes the process one of “self-evolution” and gives the child “moral culture”: perseverance, concentration, courage, and the like. Furthermore, this method make education pleasurable, and “unless we are to return to an ascetic morality, the maintenance of youthful happiness must be considered in itself a worthy aim.”\textsuperscript{246} Punishment, if it must come, should be in the form of natural consequences, to teach correct conceptions of cause and effect—otherwise, children will just misbehave again when adults are not around.\textsuperscript{247} Spencer’s attitudes about discipline and control were the same as when he wrote \textit{Social Statics}: Anger between parent and child weakens the sympathy which makes authority beneficent.\textsuperscript{248} Nevertheless, Spencer tried to remain realistic: with society as it is, some parental anger and blows are natural consequences of juvenile delinquency, for “the barbarous children of barbarous parents are probably only to be restrained by the barbarous methods which such parents spontaneously employ.”\textsuperscript{249}

A number of critiques ran throughout Spencer’s four essays. He complained that the typical educational regime did not prepare children for happy lives as adults. For example, Spencer noted that children were not taught about being parents, and thus

\textsuperscript{245} Edu, 115-119; the quotation is from 115.

\textsuperscript{246} Edu, 155-157. Spencer cites Horace Mann among others as an originator of this idea.

\textsuperscript{247} Edu, 189-91, 220-21.

\textsuperscript{248} Edu, 195.

\textsuperscript{249} Edu, 182-83.
ignorant mistakes were repeated rather than corrected.\textsuperscript{250} Students were taught little about the physiology of their own bodies, making it harder to take proper care of their health.\textsuperscript{251} Similarly, without knowledge of physiology parents did not understand the harm of pushing their children too hard. Spencer felt that play is necessary for strong, healthy bodies, and that girls as well as boys should engage in “sporting activities” outdoors.\textsuperscript{252} But instead, many parents kept their children inside studying, leading inevitably to weakness and break-downs. Spencer cited his own case as a sad example:

Various degrees and forms of bodily derangement, often taking years of enforced idleness to set partially right, result from this prolonged over-exertion of mind. Sometimes the heart is chiefly affected: habitual palpitations; a pulse much enfeebled; and very generally a diminution in the number of beats from seventy-two to sixty, or even fewer. Sometimes the conspicuous disorder is of the stomach: a dyspepsia which makes life a burden, and is amenable to no remedy but time. In many cases both heart and stomach are implicated. Mostly the sleep is short and broken. And very generally there is more or less mental depression.\textsuperscript{253}

Here Spencer’s concern for overworked children invoked his obsession with his own health, so that the two threads blend--for Spencer was certainly not overworked as a child himself.

\textit{Education} was well written, and contained numerous entertaining epigrams. For example, Spencer wrote of “the transcendental distinction between right and wrong, of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{250} \textit{Edu}, 39-44.
\item \textsuperscript{251} \textit{Edu}, 22-26.
\item \textsuperscript{252} \textit{Edu}, 267-73.
\item \textsuperscript{253} \textit{Edu}, 291.
\end{itemize}
which wise men know so little, and children nothing;” and said “the first requisite to success in life, is to be a good animal.”254 However, many of the ideas were not original, though they may have been more strongly stated here than elsewhere. He owed much to his father, though he did not acknowledge this debt in his essays.255 William George Spencer’s pedagogical technique emphasized cooperation, collaboration, and conversation; disciplinary measures were often determined by a jury of the offender’s peers, with the teacher’s role to moderate the resulting sentence.256 It is fair to say that Herbert Spencer had internalized his father’s methods and opinions to such an extent that he looked on them as his own.257 However, as with his political ideas he found general laws, usually physiological or psychological, which explained the superiority of his methods.

William George Spencer’s ideas had their origins as well, and Herbert Spencer cited many of these authorities in Education, a practice that was by no means usual for him at this stage of his career. His main sources were Pestalozzi, Irish reformer Thomas Wise, and French consul Claude Marcel, all of which he relied on heavily.258 Spencer’s

---

254 Edu, 226, 95.

255 For example, the idea that educations should be self-directed to make it more pleasurable he attributes to his father’s practice, AB, 1:508.

256 AB, 1:136-137.

257 Lillie B. Lamar, “Herbert Spencer and His Father,” The University of Texas Studies in English 32 (1953), 62.

258 For a compact account of Spencer’s influences see Norman T. Walker, “The Sources of Herbert Spencer’s Educational Ideas,” Journal of Educational Research 22, no. 4 (Nov. 1930), 299-308. Like Walker,
own teaching experience, and his personal observation of children should not be ruled out.\textsuperscript{259} Spencer argued that an outside observer sometimes has a better vantage point, and he spent plenty of time among families with small children, most significantly Laurencina and Richard Potter’s troupe of daughters.\textsuperscript{260} It is hard not to think of these girls when Spencer writes “every botanist who has had children with him in the woods and the lanes must have noticed how eagerly they joined in his pursuits, how keenly they searched out plants for him, how intently they watched whilst he examined them, how they overwhelmed him with questions.”\textsuperscript{261} Yet some critics have claimed that “Spencer hardly ever thought of education in terms of the child” or that he did not understand children.\textsuperscript{262}

*Education* proved popular in America and Spencer’s name began to mean something to Americans, just as Youmans predicted. Because it was published by an American company—and for reasons of copyright, published a year before the British version became available—*Education* was much more widely reviewed in America than Spencer’s earlier works. Furthermore, the subject of scientific education was one

---

\textsuperscript{259} In a letter to his father, Spencer noted that some of his educational ideas “are new even to you.” Herbert Spencer to William George Spencer, Oct. 31, 1843, in *LL*, 38-39.

\textsuperscript{260} *AB*, 1:583-84.

\textsuperscript{261} *Edu*, 135.

Americans found interesting. Even before *Education* was in circulation, “What Knowledge is of Most Worth?” was reprinted in whole or in part by several American periodicals. Not only did magazines like *The Eclectic Magazine of Foreign Literature* run it, but a sizable portion also appeared in the *New York Times*, which called the essay materialistic but practical. In general, this first essay was the most popular in Spencer’s book, though excerpts from the other sections found their way into other periodicals.

Reviews of *Education* were cursory at best. One of the first of these appeared in the *Albion*, another recycler of British and other foreign material. The *Albion* had recently republished Spencer’s essay “The Physiology of Laughter” from *MacMillan’s Magazine*, where Spencer argued that the signs of mirth were physiological expressions of excess nervous excitement, often caused by something incongruous interrupting the normal train of thoughts and feelings. With regard to *Education*, the reviewer was short and vague, applauding the republication of such useful articles, “though the bold thinking and plain speaking of the author may startle a certain number of timid and sluggish minds.” The reviewer noted that the book introduced many ideas that were already widely known, without specifying what these were, and praised Spencer for

---


arranged his concepts into a complete system resting on inductions from recognized laws. Similarly, a Massachusetts teachers’ magazine called the work a boon to educators, noted that Spencer was not well known in America, and mentioned his projected philosophical system and its list of distinguished subscribers, all without discussing the essays themselves. A reviewer in *The Crayon*, a monthly journal of art, considered the book especially important for Americans, who received instruction at school but little of what he called education. “Our outward and material life impoverishes our family growth,” he complained, and “our pride, independence, ambition, and even in many cases, our avarice, provoke us to make frightful sacrifices to get money, as without money, according to our present standard of thinking, there is no place for us in society.” The reviewer considered Spencer’s book a tonic, but again discussed its actual contents little.

A more substantial critique appeared in *The Biblical Reparatory and Princeton Review* in 1861. Founded and edited by Princeton Seminary professor Charles Hodge, this quarterly was the main voice of the Old School Presbyterians and expounded a

---


brand of orthodox Calvinism that would become known as “the Princeton theology.”

The article criticized Spencer’s upcoming system of philosophy as “deeply tinctured with sensism, utilitarianism, and positivism,” but found *Education* valuable despite the fact that it ignored religious education. The author disagreed with Spencer’s more extreme proposals, such as eliminating education in grammar for young children, but endorsed what Spencer’s arguments against overworking young minds. The curriculum was to blame; science education was demanded along with everything else, causing “wear and strain upon the cerebral functions.”

The overall impression found in these reviews is contradictory. On the one hand, many praised Spencer’s writing as forceful and clear, but complained that his educational ideas were not particularly original. On the other hand, Spencer was praised as a thinker, sometimes extravagantly, as when the New Orleans *Daily Picayune*

---

268 Mott, *American Periodicals*, 1:529, 531. According to Mott, Hodge contributed 142 articles to his review over the course of his life.


270 Ibid., 186-187.

271 Ibid., 206.

labeled him “eminent among the pioneer thinkers of the age.” Some publishers gave their readers the opportunity to make up their own minds, by printing excerpts of the book. *Scientific American* published one encouraging the teaching of science in schools. The weekly *Saturday Evening Post* began publishing a series of excerpts at the beginning of 1861, starting with the first line of the first essay and ranging throughout the book over three months. Each magazine brought Spencer to the attention of thousands of subscribers. *Scientific American* was more of a mechanic’s and artisan’s magazine than the forum for popular science it became later; still, its New York location and lavish illustration attracted a circulation of 14,000 by 1850. The *Saturday Evening Post* was not yet into its glory days, but still claimed 20,000 subscribers in the 1860s. *Education* hardly became a blockbuster as a result, but it sold respectably for a specialized work. In 1864 the *Christian Examiner* claimed that 6,000 copies had sold in America while only 200 were purchased in England—“this, too, at a time when the general mind here was supposed to be possessed with civil fury, and driving straight to


275 “Education,” *Saturday Evening Post* (Feb. 9, 1861), 4. The articles continued weekly until May 18, 1861.


barbarism."\textsuperscript{278} Spencer’s name was now “known to the people” and interest in his System of Philosophy began to grow.

CHAPTER THREE

FIRST PRINCIPLES

As Spencer was writing the many essays he published between 1857 and 1860, a larger conception was growing in his mind—an idea that would tie all his work together as fruits of the same tree. Spencer laid the foundation for this system in 1857, in his Westminster Review essay “Progress: Its Law and Cause.” Shortly thereafter he developed a master-plan for the massive undertaking that absorbed most of his working hours for the rest of his life. He called it, simply, A New System of Philosophy. Later he devised a less generic title: The Synthetic Philosophy. This mammoth project gained Spencer a worldwide reputation as a philosopher and thinker; above all, Spencer’s philosophical system was what captured the imagination of Americans.

Dress Rehearsal: “Progress: Its Law and Cause”

Spencer’s essay “Progress: Its Law and Cause” was an immensely important step in the development of his thought. Executed in the first three months of 1857, the article was the first piece of work Spencer attempted after his breakdown. In it he pieced together his ideas about universal evolution for the first time.¹ The structure of

¹ In his autobiography Spencer notes that he used a word that generally applies to human beings (“progress”) for his universal process because he did not yet recognize its teleological implications. His later shift of emphasis to the word “evolution” was an attempt to make the process seem less goal-
overarching principles that informs all of his later work descended, with modification, from this article. Spencer himself recognized the centrality of the essay for his later thought, and incorporated parts of it into the first volume of his System of Philosophy. The article also featured prominently in the various intellectual biographies he sketched out during his lifetime.² In “Progress,” Spencer argued that the law of evolution is the law of all processes in the universe, from the formation of stars and planets out of nebular matter to the development of language, art, and culture by human beings. All progress is a development from simple to complex, necessitated by the basic physical laws of the universe, both inevitable and good.

The basis for “Progress” was embryologist Karl Ernst von Baer’s observation that every organism develops from a structurally homogenous state (the seed) to a structurally heterogeneous one.³ Spencer learned of von Baer’s theories from William Carpenter’s Principles of General and Comparative Physiology, which he read in 1851 or 1852 (he was putatively reviewing the fourth edition of Carpenter’s work, among other things, in the original article written for the Westminster Review.)⁴ In “Progress,”

---


³ AB, 2:8-9.

Spencer argued that this physiological principle is simply one example of a broader and more profound law governing all development in the universe. Much of the essay consisted of various examples of this development from homogeneity to heterogeneity, whether in the physical structure of the universe, the evolution of more complex organisms through time, or the evolution of man.⁵

Spencer’s use of the word “evolution” in this essay is important because it was he, not Darwin, who popularized the term. “Evolution” in the sense of species change was a neologism, which Darwin among others did not at first embrace. In fact, Darwin only employed the term once in the first edition of the *Origin of Species*, in the passive voice on the last page.⁶ Most of Darwin’s reviewers and critics took his lead and did not use the term either.⁷ “Progress,” on the other hand, discussed “evolution” both in the sense of species change, as Lyell did in *Principles of Geology*, and of embryonic development, as Hamilton did in *Principles of Physiology*.⁸ Spencer treated the term

---


⁶ See The *Origin of Species by Charles Darwin: A Variorum Text*, ed. Morse Peckham (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1959). “Evolved” is the last word in the last line, so dramatic emphasis does make up for scarcity somewhat. This closing paragraph is found almost verbatim in Darwin’s 1842 sketch of his theory.


similarly in *The Principles of Psychology*. Such a usage was not peculiar to Spencer—most of those who wrote of “evolution” at all tended to use the word for both the growth of a single organism and of new species from old, often in the same text. But Spencer made the connection explicit by taking embryological development as a singular case of an all-pervasive pattern which covered species change as well.

But if evolution was the law of progress, why was this so? Spencer’s intellectual predilections always led him to look behind patterns of phenomena to their causes. In “Progress” he argued that just as Kepler’s laws of planetary motion are explained by the fundamental principles of gravitation, so the various cases of evolution are explained by an equally fundamental physical law: “every active force produces more than one change—every cause produces more than one effect.” Thus homogeneity must ever turn to heterogeneity as the forces that act on homogenous bodies multiply. For Spencer, the principle he later called “the multiplication of forces,” explained the condensation of stellar gas, the evolution of complex organisms from simple ones, and above all the development in human society. In effect, the more complex the society, the more complex the forces acting upon it.

Spencer never argued that change from simple to complex is good in and of itself in this early essay. However, the examples he used ensured that readers would make

---

9 Ibid., 16.

10 *Essays*, 1:36-37.

the connection. His nineteenth-century British audience was almost certain to do so—Victorians were quite confident in their place at the pinnacle of human progress. While belief in historical progress has a long history, stretching back at least as far as Greek and Roman culture, it was the dominant secular idea in Western social, political, and economic thought by the mid-eighteenth century.¹² All cultures were put on a linear scale, which for the British culminated in them. More primitive civilizations were simply less developed versions of European ones, the cultural equivalent of England’s own primitive cultures thousands of years ago according to current anthropological theory.¹³ Greater civility, advances in education, political freedoms, and economic growth fostered by laissez-faire capitalism all provided signs of society’s improvement for anyone to see.¹⁴ Thus Spencer was compelling when he argued that thanks to the fundamental laws of the universe, “progress is not an accident, not a thing under human control, but a beneficent necessity.”¹⁵

The development hypothesis already had some progressive connotations because of its connection to French radicalism. After all, Lamarck was stifled by the politically conservative Cuvier in part for his free-thinking and his radical political sympathies. In early nineteenth-century England, evolution was a fringe belief; few

---


¹⁴ Nisbet, *Progress*, 171-175.

¹⁵ *Essays*, 1:60.
respectable people believed in the idea.16 Part of the reason was lack of scientific legitimacy; as Michael Ruse argues, evolution was a pseudo-science, not backed by proper inductive methods but attractive to some because of its cultural relevance in the struggle against the conservative Anglican establishment. Evolution, as part of a whole structure of anatomical knowledge imported from France, was supported by political and social outsiders in the field of medicine, and struggles over issues of professionalization and place also entered into the debates among men of science.17

Spencer’s detailed discussion of the “nebular hypothesis” in his essay also linked his theories about the behavior of matter to social progressivism. This hypothesis grew from Pierre Simon Laplace’s astronomical calculations and William Herschel’s observation of stellar nebulae. The theory was that these nebulae were remnants of the particulate material that, in our own galaxy, had congealed and compressed to become stars and planets. In spite of Herschel’s prestige the hypothesis was initially rejected by mainstream astronomy, in part because it both replaced divine creation and fostered a view of cosmic progression which some conservative establishment figures found threatening.18 A modified version called “the nebular cosmogony” also played an

16 A businessman like Robert Chambers was afraid to openly avow his evolutionism, for example.

17 For evolution as a pseudo-science see Michael Ruse, Monad to Man: The Concept of Progress in Evolutionary Biology (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 8-12, 82. For the social and professional concerns of early evolutionists see Adrian J. Desmond, The Politics of Evolution: Morphology, Medicine, and Reform in Radical London (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 3-9, 374.

important role in the controversial *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, which postulated a “universal Fire Mist” as the source of all creation. Nevertheless, despite observations from newer, more powerful telescopes that cast doubt upon the theory, the nebular hypothesis grew in popularity. In America, in particular, amateur scientist and mathematician Daniel Kirkwood developed a formula which seemed to provide strong evidence in its favor. Spencer’s use of the theory in “Progress” and other work, and his defense of it in the face of cutting-edge telescopic observations, was a sign of his commitment to a progressive view of the universe.

However it may look to the modern reader, Spencer believed he had reached the general theory of evolution from homogeneity to heterogeneity inductively. Various classes of phenomena showed similar patterns, he believed, patterns that could be described with broader terminology. The explanation for these patterns—the law of the multiplication of effects—he reached by a shift from empirical investigation to a rational, deductive method, something Spencer considered essential to any complete explanation. Spencer continued to write essays on mundane topics for the next several

---

19 [Robert Chambers], *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, 6th ed. (London: John Churchill, 1847), 11-13, 17. For more on *Vestiges* see below.


22 AB, 2:12. For a defense of this view see Valerie A. Haines, “Spencer’s Philosophy of Science,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 43, no. 2 (June 1992), 162.
years, but all the while he was considering how his work could all be mustered together under the banner of a universal cosmic law.

“Make No Small Plans”: The Prospectus

After writing “Progress” Spencer felt that the ideas underlying his various essays and books, which he had been developing for years, were now coming together as a coherent set of principles. In the first week of 1858 he drew up a plan for a new system of philosophy, enumerating the principles in which he had come to believe, and encompassing the many subjects on which his written work had touched. Afterwards, he wrote to his father: “Within the last ten days my ideas on various matters have suddenly crystalized into a complete whole. Many things which were before lying separate have fallen into their places as harmonious parts of a system that admits of logical development from the simplest general principles.”

Evolution, Spencer found, was a universal pattern seen in a wide variety of phenomena, and the basic laws of force and matter were the cause.

However, serious obstacles confronted Spencer. One was his continuing ill health. Spencer had recovered somewhat from the time when he could write only a few pages a day; now, as he wrote his mother, he could work all morning without strange feelings in his head. But this only amounted to some three hours a day, and there

---

23 Herbert Spencer to William George Spencer, Jan. 9, 1858, in AB 2:16; see also Herbert Spencer to J. D. Hooker, December 13, 1858, in LL, 89.

24 Herbert Spencer to Harriet Spencer, Feb. 19, 1858, in AB, 2:19.
were still some days when he could not work at all. The other problem was financial.

Having “frittered away” most of his legacy from his Uncle Thomas—much of it searching for health through travel during his time as an invalid—he was ill equipped to begin a venture that did not pay his way. As he later wrote, “I am obliged to admit that to any unconcerned bystander my project must have seemed almost insane.”

What he did have was a network of friends and contacts. Initially, he hoped to leverage these into a government position with light duties that would leave him enough time to labor on his grand scheme. But John Stuart Mill was not sanguine, and testimonial letters from Mill, T. H. Huxley, John Tyndall, and others were of little use. More fruitful was another idea—to publish by subscription, which would provide a sure income if Spencer could attract enough subscribers. Spencer spent some time soliciting the opinion of friends, including “the Leweses”—by then Marian Evans and G. H. Lewes were married in all ways except before the law, and she preferred to use his last name. Recently, the scrupulously honest Spencer had unwillingly “outed” Evans by declining to reply when his old publisher John Chapman asked point blank if she was


26 AB, 2:56.

27 Given Spencer’s views on government, this was more than a bit ironic. Apparently he felt that his work was a public benefit.

28 Herbert Spencer to John Stuart Mill, July 29, 1958, in AB, 2:24-25. For an account of the testimonials see p. 39, along with LL, 90-91.

29 Spencer first refers to the pair as “the Leweses” in AB, 2:51 where he recounts their discussion of his plan for a prospectus.
George Eliot. Despite some hard feelings over this, the three remained friends, and the Leweses were among those that helped Spencer work out the details of his new plan.

The prospectus that finally emerged bore a strong resemblance to the outline Spencer showed his father in 1858. It introduced the ten volume series book by book, listing the major divisions within each book as well. The first volume was to be titled *First Principles*, and following would be two volumes on biology, two on psychology, three on sociology, and two on morality (in the 1858 draft this was termed “rectitude”). Gone were the sections on Astronomy and Geology, for the work was already ambitious enough, Spencer noted, and the need to deal with “Organic Nature” was more pressing. However, Spencer would put many speculations on stellar formation and geological processes in *First Principles*. At the end of the manuscript Spencer described the individual parts (5 or 6 sheets octavo, 80-96 pages,) listed the price per part (half-a-crown) and provided a form for the recipient to cut out and send in requesting a subscription. By the time Spencer published this program, he had solicited friends and acquaintances and so was able to attach an impressive list of subscribers. Heading the list was John Stuart Mill, always a steadfast supporter of Spencer’s work. Many other names stand out, as well—among them classical scholar George Grote, Charles Darwin,

---

30 Spencer’s account can be found in *AB*, 2:38. He felt that even had he denied it, his eyes would have given him away. See Gordon S. Haight, ed., *The George Eliot Letters*, vol. 2 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), 494, 505.
William B. Carpenter, Charles Lyell, Charles Babbage, Charles Kingsley, and Spencer’s friends Huxley, Hooker, Tyndall, Evans, and Lewes.\textsuperscript{31} The response was gratifying. Spencer attracted between 300 and 400 British subscribers by the end of spring, and he eventually reached 440. He felt this was sufficient response to merit going ahead with the project. Spencer was certainly being too sanguine; later he had to remove some from the rolls for non-payment, while some gave up their subscriptions after he finished First Principles.\textsuperscript{32} Spencer later pilloried his less-than-faithful subscribers in The Study of Sociology: he expressed surprise that such well-educated and presumably moral individuals would accept something for which they did not pay. He calculated that clergymen, physicians, and secularists were all about equal in the percentage that never paid anything—about thirty percent for each group. Spencer used this as proof that education does not necessarily promote morality.\textsuperscript{33}

Fortunately for Spencer, some Americans were willing to support his ambitious project. After asking an American acquaintance whether any subscribers were likely to be found in his country, he learned that an American writer and lecturer, E. L. Youmans, was working on his behalf. Thanks to these efforts more than 200 American subscribers were brought into the fold, giving Spencer hope that a sufficient income would be left to

\textsuperscript{31} The two documents are reproduced in AB, 2:15-16, 479-84.

\textsuperscript{32} AB, 2:132. Mark Francis judges that Spencer had less than 400 subscribers, making the project a financial failure, and that he tried to cover this up in his autobiography. Mark Francis, Herbert Spencer and the Invention of Modern Life (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 144.

\textsuperscript{33} Herbert Spencer, The Study of Sociology (New York: D. Appleton, 1873), 419-20.
him after printing costs. Many of these subscribers were churchmen, professors, and other men of letters—“most of our leading scientific and literary men” according to one paper. Among them were many Americans who are still remembered today, such as William H. Seward, Millard Fillmore, Charles A. Dana, Horace Greely, Benjamin Silliman Jr., Asa Gray, Henry Ward Beecher, John William Draper, and George Bancroft.

Spencer clearly had the attention of many prominent Americans when he began his project.

**Evolution in America**

Spencer’s prospectus was attractive to Americans in part because interest in evolution was high, thanks to Charles Darwin’s groundbreaking book *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (1859). Though the initial program for Spencer’s *System of Philosophy* did not emphasize the centrality of his theory of evolution, his summary of his intentions for *The Principles of Biology* certainly made his adherence to biological evolution clear. A scientifically robust argument for the development hypothesis of species change could only help Spencer’s cause. Furthermore, the timing was

---

34 AB, 2:52-54.


36 A three page list of American subscribers can be found in Herbert Spencer, *Education: Intellectual, Moral, and Physical* (New York: D. Appleton, 1864), vii-x as part of the American version of Spencer’s prospectus.
propitious. Darwin’s book was released on November 24, 1859, while Spencer’s prospectus was printed in January of the next year and distributed in March.37

Darwin’s theories had a great impact on Spencer. Darwin had been working on his theory since 1838, but it was 20 years before it was publically presented as a paper before the London Linnaean society, along with a paper outlining a similar theory developed by Alfred Russell Wallace. Hearing of these developments, Spencer sent Darwin a copy of his first collection of Essays (Essays: Scientific, Political, and Speculative, published in 1857) calling the naturalist’s attention to the opening piece, “Progress: Its Law and Cause.” Darwin returned a flattering letter—too flattering for Spencer to print in his autobiography, though he made sure his biographer David Duncan had access to it. “I treat the subject simply as a naturalist, and not from a general point of view; otherwise, in my opinion, your argument could not have been improved on, and might have been quoted by me with great advantage,” Darwin wrote.38 He reciprocated by sending Spencer a copy of the Origin once it was published. Spencer was quite pleased about Darwin’s defense of biological evolution, and read the book as soon as it reached him.39 Origin changed his biological thinking drastically.

37 Herbert Spencer to William George Spencer, Jan. 10, 1860, in AB, 2:50. A copy of the original prospectus can be found in First Principles of a New System of Philosophy (London: Williams & Norgate, 1862), v-x. It was also reprinted in a number of Spencer’s other works.

38 Charles Darwin to Herbert Spencer, Nov. 25, 1858, in Duncan, 87. Spencer’s supporters sometimes argued that Darwin was a specialist in a subject developed in its general aspects by Spencer.

39 The copy Darwin sent Spencer was delayed, but letters in Spencer’s Life and Letters show that Spencer had begun reading it by February 10. Charles Darwin to Herbert Spencer, Feb. 2, 1860; Herbert Spencer to Edward Lott, Feb. 10, 1860, both in LL, 98.
Though he retained his faith in the hereditary transmission of acquired characteristics, he saw instantly that natural selection explained a lot about species change.40

The reception of *Origin* shows that an audience existed for Spencer’s work. *Origin* was a complex book, containing considerable detailed biological evidence that Darwin had amassed over decades. Yet all 1,250 copies printed were purchased by booksellers by the end of the first day.41 *Origin*’s popularity illustrates a feature of mid-nineteenth-century intellectual life in both Britain and America: the educated lay reader’s interest in science. Science was not a cloistered trade in Darwin’s day, but rather a field comprised mostly of amateurs. In fact, the word “scientist” itself was not coined by William Whewell until 1833, and used irregularly before the end of the century.42 Terms like “natural philosopher” or “man of science” were employed to describe someone with a keen interest in scientific subjects, and that person was more likely to be a country squire (like Darwin) or an Anglican priest (like Whewell) than to be a professional scientist.43 Men of science typically had broad interests. They wrote their

40 Other than his pleasure at seeing his own evolutionary theory bolstered, Spencer could not remember what he felt by the time he wrote his autobiography. He hints that it might have been jealousy or annoyance at his failure to reach the same conclusion in his 1852 population essay. *AB*, 2:50.

41 Peter J. Bowler, *Evolution: The History of an Idea*, 25th anniversary ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 177. Technically, not all of the copies printed went to booksellers, as a number were sent to reviewers or used for other purposes.


43 “Professional” can mean many things. Here I am simply using it to denote someone who supports him or herself by working in a particular field. T. H. Huxley is a prime example of one of the earliest
books to appeal to the scientifically-minded reader, for there were few specialists in any field. Even a multi-volume work like Lyell’s Principles of Geology was written with an eye to public accessibility. Spencer’s success as a review-writer depended on the educated reader’s interest in scientific topics and willingness to accept the work of a self-educated outsider. His System of Philosophy, steeped in the latest scientific principles, also assumed a general interest in scientific subjects.

Since the transmutation of species was already a widely known hypothesis, Darwin’s task was to convince more than to explain. And of course, he was trying to convince his readers of two things: that species change was a real phenomenon with great explanatory power, and that natural selection was the mechanism that caused it. The development hypothesis was gaining popularity in England. Fifteen years previously, Robert Chambers felt it necessary to publish anonymously despite the fact that his book was overtly theistic. Now even a wealthy country squire like Charles Darwin could publish a defense of evolution which said very little about God, yet still maintain his social position. In part, of course, this was because Darwin was a respected man of science thanks to his book on the voyage of the Beagle and his work on barnacles.

[scientific professionals, though he disliked the word “scientist.” See Paul White, Thomas Huxley: Making the “Man of Science” (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).]

Origin, unlike Vestiges, was taken seriously by most readers from the beginning. Darwin had gathered a mountain of evidence over twenty years, some of it from odd sources such as cattle breeders and pigeon fanciers. Those twenty years also gave him time to hone his arguments and anticipate objections. Altogether, Darwin elevated evolution from a pseudo-scientific hypothesis, held by political radicals and progress-worshiping theists, to a working theory worthy of being debated by men of science. This is not to say that Darwin’s theory was entirely scientific by the standards of the day. Some argued that Darwin’s method was not properly inductive because no observer could witness one species turning into another, or the beginning of life on earth.

On the Origin of Species caused a different kind of stir than Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation. Reviewers could not summarily reject it for lacking scientific rigor. They had to take its arguments seriously or risk appearing to take a stand against science itself. This does not mean that scientists all lined up to support the book. A number of key figures in the British scientific community harshly criticized Darwin’s work, including Richard Owen, then curator of the scientific collection at the British Museum.

---

45 Ruse, Monad to Man, 172. Ruse argues that many of Darwin’s supporters, including Huxley and Spencer, wanted the theory to remain value-laden so it could be used to promote political and social reform. See Michael Ruse, “The History of Evolutionary Thought,” in Evolution: The First Four Billion Years, eds. Michael Ruse and Joseph Travis (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009), 26-27.

Museum and a very influential figure in the London scientific community.\(^47\) Besides writing a hostile critique in the *Edinburgh Review*, Owen publically clashed with Huxley, Darwin’s most vociferous supporter, over the origin of man—which was of central importance to the debate, even though Darwin skirted the issue in *Origin* and did not fully engage it until he published *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* in 1871.\(^48\)

Many of the arguments against the *Origin* came from scientists who were also clergymen, such as geologist Adam Sedgwick and botanist John Henslow; evolution as Darwin preached excluded God’s direct influence over nature in favor of natural law.\(^49\) Most of the negative reviews were cautious and balanced; rather than damning Darwin outright, they disputed his evidence, raised counter-examples, or simply cast doubt on the possibility of evolution, natural selection, or both. Reviews came from many supporters as well, of course, such as botanist Joseph Hooker, physiologist William Carpenter, and Huxley (writing in both the *Westminster* and the *Times*).\(^50\) As for the

\(^{47}\) Hull, *Darwin and His Critics*, 6-7.

\(^{48}\) Note that although Spencer was unable to convert Huxley to the doctrine of evolution, Darwin’s more scientific work did. Spencer’s belief in the development theory was based less on its scientific merits than on its usefulness as an alternative to special creation. See *AB* 1:591.


\(^{50}\) A variety of excerpts, with comments, can be found in Hull, *Darwin and His Critics*. 
general public, their interest waxed and waned; it was particularly strong whenever man’s ape-like ancestors were discussed.\footnote{Alvar Ellegård, \textit{Darwin and the General Reader: The Reception of Darwin’s Theory of Evolution in the British Periodical Press, 1859-1872} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990 [1958]), 26-28, 43.}

In America, the presidential campaign, secession crisis, and ultimately the Civil War distracted attention from \textit{Origin of Species}.\footnote{Edward J. Pfeiffer, “United States,” in \textit{The Comparative Reception of Darwinism}, ed. Thomas F. Glick, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 186.} Thus reaction was somewhat delayed, and more muted when it came. Among men of science, the chief advocate of Darwin’s work was botanist Asa Gray, while his chief opponent was America’s leading naturalist, Louis Agassiz—both on the faculty at Harvard College. Gray was one of the few men with whom Darwin discussed his theory prior to presentation before the Linnaean society; Agassiz was a former pupil of Lamarck’s nemesis Georges Cuvier. Both were devout Christians, though neither was a biblical literalist. Their debate began in early January, 1860, at a meeting of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in Boston; from there it progressed to dueling reviews in the \textit{American Journal of Science}.\footnote{For a detailed account that includes the lengthy debate between Agassiz and William Barton Rogers, later the first president of MIT, see Ibid. 176-181.} Gray eventually published a long review stretching over three issues of the \textit{Atlantic Monthly}, bringing the scientific issues before a larger audience. The \textit{Atlantic} was a new but already highly respected magazine from Boston, edited by James Russell Lowell.\footnote{\textit{The Atlantic Monthly} was founded in 1857. It was somewhat provincial in its first few years, publishing local writers like Emerson, Longfellow, Beecher-Stowe, Lowell, and Holmes Sr. For a summary of its career see Frank Luther Mott, \textit{A History of American Periodicals}, vol. 2 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957), 493-512.}
appearance of Gray’s article is a good example of how easily serious scientific debate
made its way into the public realm through magazines for the educated layman.

There was plentiful discussion of the religious issues as well. At that time, both
two and worked to preserve it. In the
the two and worked to preserve it. In the
antebellum period, American Protestants maintained a broad consensus about the
relationship of science and religion which borrowed much from natural theology. The
book of nature was a complement to the book of revelation; science was considered a
practical field, not an appropriate source for metaphysics. A few events shook this
consensus: there was a flurry of controversy over Vestiges, and concern that new
gerological theories contradicted the Bible. But Chambers’ book was condemned by most
scientists, and geology and the Bible were reconciled by means of compromises like the
“day-age” theory imported from Europe by Yale geologist Benjamin Silliman. This theory
argued that the seven days of creation in Genesis were not literally days, but could each
have been hundreds of thousands of years long.

55 Frank M. Turner, “The Late Victorian Conflict of Science and Religion as an Event in Nineteenth-
Thomas Dixon, Jeffrey Cantor and Stephen Pumphrey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 91-
96.

56 Walter H. Conser, *God and the Natural World: Religion and Science in Antebellum America*
(Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), 4-5, 10.

57 Rodney L. Stiling, “Scriptural Geology in America,” in *Evangelicals and Science in Historical
Perspective*, eds. David N. Livingstone, D. G. Hart and Mark A. Noll (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999),
179, 185-86.
Darwin’s book was not as easy to fit into a system of theology. The idea that God did not directly create life, but brought it into existence through natural law, overlapped and intersected other naturalist theories such as the nebular hypothesis, which explained the existence of the earth and stars by reference to the basic qualities of matter. The implications for human kind, on the other hand, were more difficult. If human beings were made of normal matter and subject to natural law, what did this say about human intelligence? Or about the soul? What did it portend for man’s relationship with God? Also troubling were the implications of Darwin’s mechanism, natural selection. If evolution occurred only when unfit organisms perished, that suggested that pain and death were necessary evils. Natural selection replaced “the benevolent, spirit-impregnated nature of the transcendental vision” with “endless panoramas of anguish and extinction.”58 And it replaced the guiding hand of a heavenly father with the essential randomness of a material universe where life and death could only be understood as statistical probabilities.

Still, the idea of an all-out war between science and Christianity was mostly a figment of the nineteenth-century imagination, fostered above all by two books: John William Draper’s History of the Conflict between Religion and Science (1874) and Andrew Dickson White’s A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom

Modern historians have mostly debunked the “conflict theory” as an overstated and simplistic view of what was a multifaceted and continuously negotiated relationship. The traditional view that Darwinism caused “fear and shock” and that religious critics were “overwhelmingly hostile” must be substantially revised. Religious intellectuals were not eager to be seen as zealous bigots, and so took the theory of evolution seriously, arguing against it on scientific as well as religious grounds. The less well-educated may have been less concerned about seeming to keep an open mind, but they were also less interested in the debate in general, content to understand evolution as portrayed in popular culture and as preached from the pulpit.

Critiques of Darwin in American religious reviews tended to be cautious, even complimentary, but ultimately negative. This was especially true of periodicals that sought an audience beyond those interested in doctrinal matters. For example, The Methodist Quarterly Review’s editor, D. D. Whedon, had an interest in politics, literature, and science, and the review provided positive notices of Darwin’s earlier work. The reviewer of Origin showed respect for the basic idea of the mutability of species, and recognized that Darwin marshaled “innumerable facts” to support it, but


60 Russett, Darwin in America, 21, 26.


62 Mott, American Periodicals, 1:299-300.
also raised a number of sticking points he felt Darwin did not adequately address. A later, more detailed critique from the same publication noted the book’s great success and its treatment, positive and negative, by various critics (many of whom he categorized by religious inclinations.) In the end, the author complimented himself that debating Darwin’s ideas on scientific rather than theological grounds was sufficient to discredit them:

We have discussed this as a scientific question only, to be decided upon its merits without reference to its theological bearings. It will be time enough to consider it from this latter point of view when it appears likely to become established as a true scientific theory, of which there seems now to be but little need of apprehension.

Similarly, the author of a review in the Presbyterian weekly New York Evangelist disclaimed any need to discuss the religious ramifications of Darwin’s work, relying on science alone to discredit it.

Catholic treatment of Darwin followed a similar course. As a writer in The Catholic World noted, “we believe it to be useless to mix up theology with scientific debates, at least when it is not directly attacked.”

---


64 The writer noted the “infidel proclivities” of the Westminster Review when discussing Huxley, but showed more generosity to Asa Gray. “Darwin on the Origin of Species,” Methodist Quarterly Review 12 (October 1861): 605-606, 610.

65 Ibid., 627.


by one of the founding members of the Paulist Fathers, Father Isaac T. Hecker, sought to orient the church in the direction of American middle-class culture. For Catholics Darwinism was more than just a theory, it was one more rock to navigate on the river leading to American acceptance—and Catholics were already perceived as enemies of science. Like those in other denominations, Catholic thinkers softened the issue of religious compatibility by denying that Darwin’s theory was a valid scientific hypothesis in the first place. For example, Orestes Brownson, one of the most well-known Catholic thinkers of the time, professed his willingness to bow to the authority of science, but considered Darwin’s theory an induction based on few facts and much speculation. While Brownson declared in no uncertain terms that Darwinism was incompatible with Christianity, he did not regard this as an attack on science itself, but only a rejection of unverified opinions. As the century wore on, more and more Catholics came to question whether evolution really was irreconcilable with their faith.

Most Christian reviews at this time preferred to label Darwin’s book bad science rather than bad for religion. The reviewer in the Unitarian Christian Examiner was as

---


70 [Orestes Brownson], “Review of Origin of Species and Descent of Man, by Charles Darwin,” Brownson’s Quarterly Review 1, no. 3 (July 1, 1873), 348-351.

firm as Brownson about the negative theological implications of Darwin’s work, yet chose to discuss the nature of hybrids and the geological evidence instead.72 D. R. Goodwin, president of Trinity College in Connecticut, admired Darwin’s collection of so many useful facts but felt that his conclusions did not logically follow, were dependent on too much evidence that was missing or unobservable, and thus did not call for a re-evaluation of the theory of theistic creation.73 Even the extensive reaction in *Theological and Literary Journal*, which contained a six-page explication of the Biblical account of creation, ultimately spent more time on the current state of scientific knowledge about prehistoric species than on Christian doctrine.74 Except for a more religious orientation, these reviews were not much different from those that appeared in popular secular publications like *The Atlantic Monthly* and *The North American Review*.75

Of course, the early reviews of *Origin of Species* differed from discussions five, ten, or more years in the future. In the first years after publication no one knew what the long term impact of the book would be. Reviews by Christian intellectuals did not


explore the religious implications of Darwin’s theory because they assumed that any hypothesis that was incompatible with Christianity could not be true. Only later, when it became clear that evolution was gaining rather than losing adherents among scientists did theologians begin to take the implications for doctrine seriously.

Uncertain and inchoate opinions about the development hypothesis formed the backcloth before which reactions to Herbert Spencer’s New System of Philosophy played out. Important scientists like Agassiz and Gray took opposite sides on the issue, while Christian writers, unwilling to seem reactionary, forswore the *odium theologicum* for detailed scientific debate. Many felt that Darwinism, if accepted, would destroy belief in a loving creator. The ambivalence created a challenging environment for Spencer’s theories. He was skillful enough at aligning his philosophy with the latest in scientific theories to avoid outright condemnation. On the other hand, he was clearly not a Christian, and, like Darwin, provided very little room for God’s active presence in the world. As with Darwin, those critics who had religious reasons to reject Spencer were constrained to treat him with respect. They had to find flaws in his arguments rather than simply dismissing him as anti-Christian.

**Laying the Foundation: Spencer’s *First Principles***

When Spencer began to write *First Principles* in 1860 he felt that he was finally passing the “miscellaneous” period of his existence and beginning “something like unity

---

of occupation.” Yet this did not engender a feeling of calm. Putting his ambitious plan in motion had caused another relapse of his nervous condition. Midway through the first installment of *First Principles* he broke down again. His solution, as usual, was to go on vacation and let relaxation put his head right. These vacations generally involved a tour of familiar haunts—vacation spots like Llandudno in Wales and Tréport in France, the Potters at Standish House, Octavius Smith’s estate at Loch Aline. Fortunately this sufficed, and Spencer managed to finish the first installment of his system by the middle of September. A recent discovery helped; he found that if he dictated rather than wrote, he could work for a longer period of the day without congestion in his head. Once he discovered this, he never worked without a secretary again. Using an amanuensis gave him the freedom to engage in some rather bizarre work habits in an effort to stave off his symptoms. He took to working in a boat, alternating dictation with vigorous rowing. Or, he would play “racquets” (squash) and dictate a page or two between games. Still, his productivity was not as great as he wished, and he had to tell his subscribers that he could not stick to the schedule. *First Principles* was not finished until 1862.

*First Principles* was divided into two major sections. The first was the most controversial. At the end of “Progress, Its Law and Cause” Spencer had written “ultimate knowledge is impossible” because the reason the universe’s laws are as they are is

---

77 AB, 2:59-60.

78 AB, 2:61-62.

unknowable. In part I of First Principles this “unknowable” became “The Unknowable,” the Absolute that lay outside of the scope of human understanding and was the originator and Power behind force and matter. Here Spencer was reacting to the ideas of Thomas Hamilton and Henry Mansel, who argued that human beings cannot have knowledge of the infinite; Spencer’s “Unknowable” is essentially what Hamilton called “the unconditioned.” Spencer claimed that although all knowledge is relative and limited, and human beings cannot have definite consciousness of the Absolute, some indefinite ideas about it are necessary to the processes of thought. No one can conceive themselves as not existing, so the meaning of “existence” must be comprehensible on a basic level. Spencer argued that this basic idea of existence is common to all conceptions, thoughts, and impressions, and thought would be impossible without it. Thus, he concluded, the Absolute which underlies and explains all sense impressions must have real existence. Spencer used similar logic in his essay on “The Universal Postulate”—something is true when the human mind cannot conceive of it being false. Of course, such logic begs the question of what humans can and cannot conceive, and leads to the subjective psychological realm explored in Principles of Psychology. Indeed, much of Spencer’s argument hangs on epistemology as much as

80 Spencer capitalized terms such as “Absolute,” and “Infinite” when referring to the Unknowable.


82 FP, 88-89.

83 FP, 95-96.
ontology. Such uncertainty about the status of knowledge is quite different from the brash confidence Spencer displayed about science in *Social Statics.*

By this method Spencer ruled out atheism, pantheism, and theism as thinkable alternatives, since each in turn either required creation of something out of nothing or eternal existence, neither of which was conceivable by the human mind. Since these are the only three possible explanations for the origin of the universe, Spencer argued that some sort of ultimate substance or energy must exist that we are incapable of understanding. What made his analysis controversial was his refusal to assign a personality to this “Power,” “Absolute,” “Ultimate Cause,” or “Unknowable.” He suggested that it could transcend such things; to Spencer, belief in an intelligent Absolute was a bit like an intelligent watch believing its creator has springs and mechanisms. Spencer believed that true religion should teach that the phenomena we perceive are the manifestations of an omnipresent power that acts on us but is incomprehensible—this is the common basis of all past and present religions. All other facets of religion are simply attempts to understand what cannot be understood. Spencer went so far as to suggest that religion should be grateful to science for the process of purification. This was unlikely, for as George Santayana pointed out,

84 Peel, *Herbert Spencer,* 112–113.

85 *FP,* 108–11.

86 *FP,* 99.

87 *FP,* 101, 107.
“genuine religion professes to have positive knowledge and to bring positive benefits: it is an art; and to ask it to be satisfied with knowing that no knowledge can penetrate to the heart of things is sheer mockery: the opposite is what religious instinctively asserts.”

Spencer highlighted the limits of scientific knowledge as well. He believed that science was no more capable than religion of comprehending ultimate realities. For example, space and time must be things—otherwise they are nothing—but no one can represent them in thought, because things are conceived of through their attributes, and what attributes do space and time have? Likewise matter, motion, and force are at root outside human comprehension. Even Descartes’ Cogito ergo sum will not save us, for how can we perceive our consciousness from outside, as object? What then does the perceiving? For Spencer, all thought was relational, not absolute, connected to previous ideas and sensations rather than simply existing in itself. Such relativism weakened the bulwarks of Spencer’s unified system of knowledge in some ways, but it also eliminated certain questions from the realm of science, thus clearing some epistemological ground. Furthermore, Spencer believed these limitations on knowledge

---


89 FP, 47-50.

90 FP, 63-66.

were something upon which religion and science could agree. “If Religion and Science are to be reconciled,” he wrote, “the basis of reconciliation must be this deepest, widest, and most certain of all facts—that the Power which the Universe manifests to us is utterly inscrutable.”

Spencer wrote his section on the Unknowable to forestall charges of materialism and atheism, but it had other purposes as well. In a way, Spencer was laying out a philosophy of science, noting what data was admissible and what was not. This philosophy of science was somewhat different from today’s, for like nineteenth-century scientist and philosopher William Whewell, Spencer believed that logical deduction from necessary first principles was a legitimate scientific procedure. As in his section on the Unknowable, facts which are ratified by the universal postulate and thus form the foundation of consciousness are treated as axioms, from which further deductions are possible. Thus the remainder of First Principles followed a particular method: Spencer deduced a broad generalization about the laws of the universe, then gave many examples as inductive evidence that his generalization was, in fact, true.

Having said what could be said about the Unknowable, Spencer turned to the “The Laws of the Knowable.” As in his first section, he argued that science cannot

---

92 *FP*, 46.

93 Haines, “Spencer’s Philosophy of Science,” 156.

94 Richard Yeo notes the connection between science and *scientia* or systematic knowledge (logic, theology, and grammar were considered “sciences” in the early 19th century). Yeo, *Defining Science*, 33.
explain what is behind sense perceptions, but it can grasp the order in which they are manifested, discovering what are known as laws.\textsuperscript{95} Spencer’s ideas about manifestation are not always clear. At times it seems that what is perceived are simply emanations from the one unknowable reality, fundamentally unreal, while elsewhere matter and energy seem to be real things separate from but caused by the Unknowable.\textsuperscript{96} The question is a theological one, and led to Spencer being called a pantheist on more than one occasion. Spencer would no doubt have argued that either way, the order of manifestations is the same, so human minds derive the same laws from them.

Chief among these laws is the law of evolution. Here Spencer reprinted most of his essay “Progress: Its Law and Cause” with few changes.\textsuperscript{97} Spencer claimed these changes were unimportant, but there was one crucial difference between the two texts. In both, Spencer noted that the word “progress” implies changes that lead to increased human happiness; in \textit{First Principles} this led him to substitute “evolution” in its place.\textsuperscript{98} Spencer was essentially giving up the idea that evolution must always be beneficial to humankind, in order to make it a broader, value-neutral, and thus more scientifically acceptable concept.\textsuperscript{99}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[95] \textit{FP}, 127.
\item[97] \textit{FP}, 146.
\item[98] \textit{FP}, 146-148.
\item[99] Spencer did not discard the idea that evolution increases human happiness in his later works, however.
\end{footnotes}
He also admitted that changes that increase heterogeneity can be steps towards dissolution, as in the case of cancer or social rebellion. To differentiate between evolution and dissolution, Spencer imported an idea from his essay “Transcendental Physiology”: that growth is not just an increase in the complexity of matter, but also implies the development of structural differences through the aggregation and integration of matter into specialized organs.\textsuperscript{100} In broader terms, change that ends in greater heterogeneity is only evolution when it is also a development from the indefinite and chaotic to the definite and orderly—that is, when the transformation results in an increasing number of distinct, separate structures.\textsuperscript{101} Spencer thus eventually defined evolution as “a change from an indefinite, incoherent homogeneity, to a definite, coherent heterogeneity; through continuous differentiations and integrations.”\textsuperscript{102} This is a universal process, he argued, which has, is, and ever will go on. It can be seen in many phenomena, and Spencer provided pages of examples, from the formation of the earth, to the development of the embryo, to the social differentiation in modern society.\textsuperscript{103}

Once Spencer had established that the law of evolution can be seen acting everywhere, he sought to explain why these patterns recur. To do this he used

\textsuperscript{100} Essays, 1:265-266.

\textsuperscript{101} FP, 175-176.

\textsuperscript{102} FP, 216.

\textsuperscript{103} FP, 179-190.
deduction from the necessities of thought. Spencer argued that no one can truly conceive of matter coming from nothing or turning into nothing. This jibed with current scientific thought about matter’s indestructability.104 Another recent scientific postulate, the conservation of energy, must also be fundamental based on the experience of the Unknown Power—though Spencer preferred to call this the persistence of force.105

Force can change—motion can become heat through friction, for example—but modern science shows that when force is “spent” equivalent amounts of force are always generated.106 Force and motion follow various subsidiary patterns, such as following the line of least resistance (and this can be seen in man as well as nature, and in the actions of societies as well).107 These basic facts are what makes evolution necessary; they explain the instability of homogenous bodies and the multiplication of forces, here called the “multiplication of effects.”108 Thus increasing heterogeneity is inevitable.

Spencer believed that evolution is most likely to take place where the whole is semi-solid, capable of internal movement and development but not so flexible that it is

---

104 FP, 238-41. Of course, science since Einstein has established that matter can become energy. Spencer anticipated this by noting that we are aware of matter only through the force it exercises on us, suggesting that matter is really force in another guise.

105 FP, 254-58. Spencer disliked the use of “conservation” because it implies a conserver—exactly the complaint he registered against “natural selection,” which led him to invent the phrase “the survival of the fittest.”

106 FP, 259-64. Here Spencer cites Joule, Neumann, and others in support.

107 FP, 294, 301-302.

108 FP, 388.
incapable of taking more definite form.\textsuperscript{109} Thus living creatures are highly subject to evolution, as are societies that are somewhat organized but not as structurally frozen as Oriental societies—England of course being the best example.\textsuperscript{110} What makes this transformation evolution and not dissolution is the fact that forces tend to separate parts based on likeness, like a wave separates sand from pebbles, leading to differentiation of different parts from each other and their integration with similar parts. For example, since men always act on one another by physical or mental force, there must always be a struggle for supremacy which some will win and some will lose—that is, the formation of social classes.\textsuperscript{111} And these classes, tending to adhere together, lead to a society with segments that are integrated but clearly differentiated from other segments.

In the final chapters, Spencer returned to flesh out some of his concepts—“the multiplication of force,” “differentiation and integration,” and most importantly, “equilibration.” He wrote each chapter using the same pattern. He explained the effect. He provided many examples, starting with the birth of planets as described by the nebular hypothesis and running through chemical, geological, biological, psychological, and social evolution. Finally, he deduced the necessity of the effect given the persistence of force. This method gave the book a sweeping quality, as Spencer

\textsuperscript{109} FP, 337-340.

\textsuperscript{110} FP, 339-340.

\textsuperscript{111} FP, 380.
constantly returned to the birth of the solar system and worked his way up to the most complex phenomena of society—the effects of the introduction of the locomotive, for example.\footnote{FP, 408-13.} In his penultimate chapter, on “equilibration,” Spencer reasoned that evolution always tends towards a system of moving equilibrium, such as is seen in our solar system, but that since every moving equilibrium has some instability, all matter ultimately reaches a state of motionlessness and “omnipresent death...a universe of extinct suns round which circle planets devoid of life.”\footnote{FP, 447-51, 468, 441, 472.}

Spencer was not content to end with such a vision. Instead, he imagined that the power of gravitational attraction might eventually cause these suns to collide, generating great heat and causing most of the matter in the galaxy to be diffused into a thin gas, which could then evolve again.\footnote{FP, 474-480. It is hard not to relate this to modern scientific theories of “the big bang” and “the big crunch”.} For all we know, these alternate eras of evolution and dissolution may go on forever. As for humanity, Spencer envisioned a great destiny, just as he had been doing since \textit{Social Statics}. Great perfection and happiness that will inevitably come when man’s mental workings are perfectly adapted to the conditions of his existence in society.\footnote{FP, 486.} One is irresistibly reminded of the ending of \textit{Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation}, where Chambers predicted a continual

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
  \item \footnote{FP, 408-13.}
  \item \footnote{FP, 447-51, 468, 441, 472.}
  \item \footnote{FP, 474-480. It is hard not to relate this to modern scientific theories of “the big bang” and “the big crunch”.}
  \item \footnote{FP, 486.}
\end{itemize}
moral and intellectual advance, perhaps ending in a higher type of humanity. One important point must be stressed, however: Spencer’s rejection of a personal, intervening deity meant that the will of the creator could no longer serve as an explanation for why things tend towards universal perfection as it had in *Social Statics*. Instead of a divine master plan of creation, Spencer’s view implied that progress is simply a necessary effect given the basic laws of the universe. To his way of thinking, the persistence of force and the indestructability of matter meant that universal evolution must take place, and since evolution in humans and their societies meant better adjustment to conditions, ever-increasing happiness was necessarily one result.

From a modern point of view, a number of Spencer’s deductions are problematic. Putting aside metaphysical and theological issues for the moment, Spencer’s doctrine of evolution is foreign to the modern idea of science because it is not clear how a hypothesis as general as Spencer’s could be tested by experiment or observation. No data could falsify it, for several reasons. First, Spencer provided no means to predict how long a particular case of evolution might take, or whether it would end in equilibrium or dissolution. Anything that did not seem to be evolving could simply be transforming at a very slow rate, or in equilibrium, or dissolving. Second, Spencer used extremely vague terminology. For example, his idea that a homogenous

---

116 [Chambers], *Vestiges*, 271-273.

117 See chapter 1.
whole is unstable begs the question: what is a whole? Sometimes the parts of the whole closely interrelate and are distinct from other bodies, as with an organism, and other times they are loosely connected and it is difficult to draw boundary lines, as with a society.

Even if Spencer’s hypotheses were deducible directly from the basic laws of matter, no warrant existed for applying them to larger and more complex systems. When Spencer leapt from physics and chemistry to biology and sociology he retained all the laws of matter and motion he had derived from simpler processes. For example, he tried to demonstrate that force follows the line of least resistance, whether the subject was water flowing, organisms moving, or nervous energy driving emotions. But clearly the complexity of the human mind makes tracing the millions of forces buzzing through the nervous system an impossible and pointless enterprise. Spencer simply ignored these complexities, treating the line of least resistance as more than an analogy. For example, in *The Principles of Biology* explained the genesis of nerves in terms of nerve force following lines of least resistance, leading to channels that eventually became distinct.\(^{118}\)

Because he integrated recently discovered scientific principles such as the conservation of energy, because he used evidence from the latest scientific studies, and because his System of Philosophy included books on biology and psychology, Spencer’s

readers gave him credit for broad scientific learning. This fact is central to an understanding of the reception of First Principles and of Spencer’s work in general. For many, criticizing Spencer meant criticizing the modern, scientific way of thinking. Hindsight suggests that it should have been easy to debunk First Principles as a scientific work. But because the field of science was not yet rigorously limited to specialists working with quantitative data, few of those who critiqued Spencer seriously questioned his scientific credentials.

_Religion and Science: The American Response_

After 1860, Spencer’s American reputation grew exponentially, despite the fact that so many Americans’ attention was drawn by the drama of secession and civil war. Life goes on even during wartime, and intellectual life is no exception. Spencer’s growing fame came despite the difficulty experienced by the American press in these years, especially the publishers of periodicals. The panic of 1857 had already thinned the ranks; now war brought higher labor costs and the loss of all Southern subscribers to the North, and vice versa.\(^{119}\) Newspapers sold their coverage of the vicissitudes of war, but reviews and even most magazines at the time did not cover current events, and many continued this practice—such as _The Atlantic Monthly_ and Harper’s New Monthly Magazine, which “neither poetized nor propagandized the conflict.”\(^{120}\)

---


Monthly, founded in 1850 to aid the Harper Brothers’ publishing firm, was the most successful magazine in America by the time of the Civil War, printing 200,000 copies a month. Any difficulties it had during the war were more than made up for by Harper’s Weekly, which reached 90,000 subscribers when the war began, and kept growing thanks to its stirring engravings of Civil War scenes.121

Most articles on Spencer written during the Civil War years concerned either Education or First Principles. But name recognition tempted some critics to rediscover his earlier work. A long critique of Social Statics that appeared in the Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review in the fall of 1861 opened with a statement of the law of equal freedom.122 The critic complained that Spencer intended this to be a logical proposition with the certainty and exactness of a mathematical axiom. Such a system must necessarily be a failure: men can be understood only through experience since they are beings created by God, not machines constructed to obey a priori law.123 Applying this scheme only to the perfect man means that almost all people must be left out—the perfect code of laws is only possible when its subjects are ideal, not real.124 The writer

---

121 Tebbel, American Magazine, 107-110.
123 Ibid., 726-27, 730-32.
124 Ibid., 723, 725-26, 728.
also criticized Spencer for attacking obedience to social authority, since such obedience is not only universal, but also intended by God for our own good.125

Overall, the reviewer put together a poorly organized rag-bag of criticisms and complaints, some with so little logical force that they were the written equivalent of clucking one’s tongue. However, he had a few worthwhile insights. The writer criticized Spencer for arguing that civilization must follow a particular path of development and then loudly condemning past and present laws and institutions.126 This strikes at the heart of Spencer’s dilemma, for in Social Statics he was caught between a desire to prescribe and a pessimistic sense that only description is possible. But for the most part the review is notable only for what is absent: Spencer’s attitude towards the poor, for example, or his arguments against state charity. Spencer’s anti-government stance was hardly mentioned. If there was a general argument in the review, it was that a society of imperfect human beings cannot be analyzed rationally, but only on the basis of experience and natural sentiments. Spencer’s view of progress through pain was not discussed.

Spencer’s new American popularity even led to some discussion of the first edition of Principles of Psychology, at least among those with an interest in the subject. A series of articles in the American Phrenological Journal brought up his work several times, mostly in opposition. Spencer’s had criticized phrenology in his work, though he

125 Ibid., 739-741.
126 Ibid., 725.
shared a number of assumptions with phrenologists: that different sections of the brain rule different modes of thought and emotion, for example. The author of the articles was one of Spencer’s subscribers, Levi Reuben; he criticized Spencer in turn, for his account of the development of the concepts of space and time and the origin of the idea of equivalence. Reuben argued that Spencer wanted to reduce knowledge to a combination of sensations; but sensation is really only the cause of ideas, which have the psychic actions of the mind itself as their source.127 Another article in the same journal was more positive, calling Spencer “one of the most profound thinkers of our day” and quoting Principles of Psychology at length in support of cerebral localization of specialized brain functions.128 Spencer even appeared in an Encyclopedia, one issued by his publisher D. Appleton and Co., which unaccountably summarized his psychology but none of his other works.129

Most of the discussion of Spencer in the American press concerned First Principles, however. “For the Victorians Herbert Spencer was pre-eminently the philosopher of First Principles,” historian Michael Taylor has written. “Notwithstanding the popularity of some of his other works, like Education and the Study of Sociology...in the 1870s and 1880s Spencer’s towering intellectual reputation rested on this one

129 New American Cyclopaedia, s.v. Spencer, Herbert [1862]
book.”\textsuperscript{130} William James, who used the book in the classroom, agreed with this assessment of Spencer’s American reputation.\textsuperscript{131} And indeed, Spencer’s work generated such interest that critiques were written before the book in its entirety was available. Spencer’s American publisher, D. Appleton, did not issue the book in a single volume until 1864. Yet reviews appeared discussing the sections issued by subscription, or, after 1862, based on the English edition. The earliest of these reviews obviously concerned themselves with the first part of the book, where Spencer outlined his philosophy of the Unknowable. This first principle of \textit{First Principles} was the most interesting and controversial aspect of Spencer’s work for many of his contemporaries, especially for religious writers.

The earliest reactions in Christian reviews varied between tentative acceptance and outright hostility.\textsuperscript{132} The \textit{Christian Examiner} was guardedly optimistic. The \textit{Examiner} was the most important Unitarian periodical at the time, with frequent submissions from faculty members at Harvard. One such contributor was theology professor Charles Carroll Everett, who introduced Spencer as a promoter of the positive philosophy, and cheered the attempt to reconcile science and religion from this “wisest and most honorable of opponents”:

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{131} William James, “Herbert Spencer,” in \textit{Memories and Studies} (London, 1912), 126.
\end{flushright}
Herbert Spencer comes, in good faith, from what has been so long a hostile camp, bringing a flag of truce and proposing terms of agreement meant to be honorable to both parties. Let us give him a candid hearing, and perhaps the terms he offers, though we may not accept them in their first and full form, may lead to a better understanding, and open the way to a final adjustment.  

D. A. Wasson, writing in the same journal a year later, was less sanguine. Wasson was a Unitarian minister and inexhaustible source of material for the periodicals of the day. Here he complained of the “spiritual timidity” of a certain class of writers, who believe “the soul can furnish only fancies, that the senses alone afford a safe foothold.” In the same issue, however, Editor Joseph Henry Allen praised Spencer’s scientific reasoning and his definition of life. First Principles might ignore the soul and find no greater meaning in existence, but Allen felt this was simply characteristic of the thought of the present which prepared the way for the fuller philosophy of the future.

Support for Spencer’s view of religion and science was not confined to Unitarian periodicals. The New Englander was a Congregationalist publication with ties to Yale; its aim was to be “simply a magazine expressing the views of free Christian men, on

---

133 [C. C. Everett], “Spencer’s Reconciliation of Science and Religion,” review of First Principles by Herbert Spencer, Christian Examiner 72, no. 3 (May 1862), 337. This was a review of the first four sections of the book.


whatever happens to come up for discussion.” Its reviewer, J. E. Barnes, praised Spencer as a “Positivist who does not treat the subject of religion with supercilious neglect,” though he felt that awe at the Unknowable, while it might satisfy some, was too weak a religion for “earnest thinkers.” Spencer, sensitive as always about his debts to Comte, responded with a letter pointing out that “positivist” had become a general term for men of science who opposed religious explanations of phenomena, that he had already published objections to Comte’s system, and that no British scientist he knew considered himself a disciple of Comte.

The most thorough of these early reviewers of First Principles, Everett and Barnes, made two arguments that would become common methods of approaching Spencer’s idea of the Unknowable. First, they pointed out that the Absolute could choose to make Himself known by revelation. Everett went so far as to say that “science will demonstrate the fundamental truths of revelation, and will settle the meaning of it.” Second, both argued that even if direct knowledge of the Absolute is impossible, man can know some of His attributes by studying those phenomena that

---


140 Barnes, 710-711.

141 Everett, 351-35.
point to His existence. To Barnes, this meant humanity’s religious and moral instincts, which prove that the Absolute is a personal lawgiver.\textsuperscript{142} Everett made an even more ingenious argument: if sense perceptions are only symbols of ultimate reality, what a person thinks and feels must also be a projection of this ultimate reality, implying that it contains mind and thought.\textsuperscript{143} Both points would be made in a variety of forms by later critics who sought to prove that the Absolute was not as unknowable as Spencer believed.

On the other hand, some early critics mistook Spencer for a simple materialist, despite his venture into metaphysics. The reviews that were more in-depth, like that of Barnes, usually pointed out that Spencer was an improvement on Hamilton and Mansel because he argued that absolute being must exist.\textsuperscript{144} Shorter and assumedly more hurried reviews were less likely to consider such nuances. A critic in the \textit{Methodist Quarterly Review} complained that the Unknowable was “a nothingness to us,” and that Spencer only thought objects that could be pictured were real.\textsuperscript{145} Spencer had already strenuously denied these charges in several letters to the British weekly \textit{The Athenaeum}; he pointed out that he considered atheism just as impossible to truly

\textsuperscript{142} Barnes, 718-720.

\textsuperscript{143} Everett, 348.

\textsuperscript{144} Barnes, 702-706.

\textsuperscript{145} “Foreign Literary Intelligence,” \textit{The Methodist Quarterly Review} 15 (Jan. 1863), 147. See also “Philosophy, Metaphysics, and General Science,” review of \textit{First Principles}, by Herbert Spencer, \textit{Methodist Quarterly Review} 16 (Oct. 1, 1864), 690. The \textit{Methodist} is described below.
conceive as theism, and affirmed the existence of an omnipresent power not just as a backdrop, but as the cause for all physical phenomena.\textsuperscript{146} One American writer summarized these letters, but ended by simply noting that Spencer denied Christian revelation.\textsuperscript{147} That was apparently enough to convict him of materialism for this author.

Early reviews of \textit{First Principles} were not common in the secular press. One striking exception was the work of John Fiske, later the author of \textit{Outlines of Cosmic Philosophy} among other books. In an article reviewing H. T. Buckle’s \textit{History of Civilization in England} Fiske positively gushed over Spencer, putting his theory of evolution on a par with Newton’s theory of gravity. For Fiske, the theory explained all of nature and human history.\textsuperscript{148} In 1863 \textit{The North American Review} published Fiske’s review of \textit{First Principles} and two books on language which applied Spencer’s theories to the development of human speech.\textsuperscript{149} He credited Spencer with extending the concept of evolution and praised his “stupendous induction, from all classes of phenomena,” giving numerous examples from Spencer’s book.\textsuperscript{150} Tracing the development of

\textsuperscript{146} \textit{Atheneum} no. 1830, Nov. 22, 1862, 663-664.

\textsuperscript{147} “Herbert Spencer’s Theology,” \textit{The American Presbyterian and Theological Review} 1, no. 4 (Oct. 1863), 682-83.


\textsuperscript{149} John Fiske, review of \textit{First Principles}, by Herbert Spencer, \textit{North American Review} 97, no. 201 (Oct. 1863), 412, 414. The other books reviewed were \textit{Lectures on the Science of Language, delivered at the Royal Institution of Great Britain, in April, May, and June, 1861} by Max Muller, and \textit{De l’Orgine du Langage} by Ernest Renan.

\textsuperscript{150} Ibid., 428-429.
language in terms of growing heterogeneity and integration, Fiske came to the conclusion that English was the most highly evolved language, while the gesticulations common to “lower races” like Negroes and Chinamen were remnants of a primitive, homogenous proto-language.\footnote{151} Interestingly, Fiske ended the essay with a vision of a future “absolute community of causation” where generalization would ally all phenomena; then “science and religion will be in complete accord.”\footnote{152} Reviewers this familiar with Spencer’s evolutionary theory were few in the early 1860s, however.

Almost all of the critics, even those who had not read Spencer thoroughly, agreed that he was an important thinker and a skilled and careful writer, and he merited attention.\footnote{153} The Saturday Evening Post declared him “a writer whom thinking men are bound to read, if for no other reason than to keep up with their times,” and added “Herbert Spencer’s ideas will soon by in everybody’s mouth, and everybody will be called upon to say yea or nay to them.”\footnote{154} The New York Times reported that Spencer had gained a high position as an original thinker, and praised his analytical power and clear style. Interestingly, the Times recommended Spencer’s political essays, just then emerging in American form, above all others.\footnote{155} Some periodicals recognized Spencer’s

\footnote{151} Ibid., 439, 448.

\footnote{152} Ibid., 450.


\footnote{154} “New Publications.” Saturday Evening Post (June 11, 1864): 2.

particular attractiveness to Americans. Amidst fulsome praises of Spencer’s contribution to the advance of civilization, The Atlantic Monthly declared that “in America we may even now confess our obligations to the writings of Mr. Spencer, for here sooner than elsewhere the mass feel as utility what a few recognize as truth.” The Christian Examiner noted the importance of his educational precepts in a country that relied on the capacity of all men to take part in civic life. Spencer seemed peculiarly useful for Americans, perhaps because his notions of progress spoke to American ideas about their destiny.

These early reviews are important because they were written before the contents of First Principles were widely known in America. Thus they represent reactions uninformed readers might have had when coming to the book with few pre-conceived notions. Some readers, like Fiske, succumbed completely to Spencer’s grand vision. Others, who appraised the book purely through religious lenses, rejected it as materialist and atheist. The more careful religious reviewers found First Principles valuable as a first step but ultimately too limited to be accepted by Christians. Ironically, as years passed and positions on the book hardened, none of these approaches came to represent mainstream opinion. As Christian opinion-makers became more and more

---

156 [J. P. Quincy], “Spencer’s Illustrations of Progress,” Atlantic Monthly 13, no. 80 (June 1864), 775.
concerned about a movement they called “modern thought,” neither outright condemnation on religious grounds nor partial acceptance seemed to offer the right antidote against this new type of secular and scientific thinking. It was not enough to say that Spencer stopped too short; he had to be proven wrong. Meanwhile, more secular reviewers, unable to swallow Spencer’s entire system, usually found it easier to criticize than to compliment. Thanks in part to Spencer’s emphasis on the systematic nature of his project, those who carefully scrutinized Spencer’s work found it difficult to single out any of his theories for praise without ratifying his entire system. With some exceptions, neither religious nor secular writers were willing to go that far. The irony is, the more the critics criticized the more Spencer’s popularity seemed to rise.

**Spencer’s Essays in American Guise**

In 1864 Appleton published the first American collection of Spencer’s essays, entitled *Illustrations of Universal Progress*. The title was a bit of revisionist history, for Spencer thought that many of his early essays showed his theory of evolution in rudimentary form. However, unless one takes Spencer’s conception of evolution to include all development over time, essays like “Manners and Fashion,” “The Genesis of Science,” and “Use and Beauty” cannot be considered evolutionary. Some of the essays in *Illustrations* did address issues directly connected with the doctrine of evolution.

---

“Progress: Its Law and Cause” and “The Development Hypothesis” were both included, as was “Illogical Geology” and “The Nebular Hypothesis.” An “American Notice of a New System of Philosophy” describing Spencer’s plans and goals came immediately after title page and statement of copyright.160

Most of these essays were unfamiliar to Americans. They were originally published in British magazines, and neither volume one nor volume two of Essays: Scientific, Political, and Speculative were yet published in an American edition.161 As such, Illustrations evoked a small flurry of critical attention. The Round Table understood the essays as illustrative parts of a larger system that emphasized universal progress or the law of evolution based on the correlation of physical forces, and focused on Spencer’s scientific evidence for the nebular hypothesis and for evolution.162 However, by the end, the reviewer’s focus returned to religious matters. He directed the reader to First Principles for Spencer’s full views, and suggested that the theological issues raised might convince theologians to stop wrangling with each other and unite to

160 Spencer, Illustrations, v-xxii. Spencer’s letter to the New Engander and a private letter to Youmans, both disassociating himself from Comte, were included here, as were a number of excerpts from positive reviews, some from American magazines (the Christian Examiner, the New Engander, and the North American Review).

161 Though in 1863 a few copies of the second volume had been imported in sheets, bound, and issued by Appleton, selling out in a few weeks. See the editor’s preface to Herbert Spencer, Essays: Moral, Political, and Aesthetic (New York: D. Appleton, 1864), 2; also “Announcements,” American Literary Gazette and Publisher’s Circular 2 no. 2 (Nov. 16, 1863), 49.

162 “Mr. Herbert Spencer’s New Work,” review of Illustrations of Universal Progress, by Herbert Spencer. Round Table 1, no. 18 (Apr. 16, 1864), 277-278.
defend their common faith.\textsuperscript{163} This was somewhat ironic, as the \textit{Round Table}, a short-lived but influential New York journal which averaged around 4,000 subscribers, was infamously contrarian.\textsuperscript{164} \textit{The Christian Examiner}, still feeling positive about Spencer, recommended the book for filling out a harmonious and complete system superior to that of Comte, but noted that it did not include Spencer’s essays on more popular topics like politics and ethics.\textsuperscript{165} J. P. Quincy, writing in \textit{The Atlantic Monthly}, praised Spencer highly for his abilities and his dedication to his vast undertaking. Satisfied that the system provided a foundation for the religious feelings, Quincy recommended the book not only to the educated but to “the mass of working men and women who make time for a solid book or two in the course of the year,” who might not understand the whole but would find things to interest them in the parts.\textsuperscript{166} The recommendation is worth noting for its rarity—Spencer’s audience was generally assumed to be the educated classes.

As in the early reviews of \textit{First Principles}, reviewers of \textit{Illustrations} were quick to praise Spencer’s originality, clarity, and boldness. At times the acclamations were fulsome indeed. One reviewer wrote “the thought which pervades this book is, beyond

\textsuperscript{163} Ibid., 279.

\textsuperscript{164} Mott, \textit{American Magazines}, 3:323-324.

\textsuperscript{165} [Joseph Henry Allen], “Review of Current Literature: Philosophy and Science,” \textit{Christian Examiner} 76, no. 3 (May 1864), 442.

\textsuperscript{166} [J. P. Quincy], review of \textit{Illustrations of Universal Progress}, by Herbert Spencer, \textit{Atlantic Monthly} 13, no. 80 (June 1864), 776.
doubt, in a philosophic point of view, the most important that the human mind has yet reached” and, like Fiske, compared Spencer to Isaac Newton. Even those who rejected Spencer’s doctrine of evolution could find intriguing theories and striking facts in the various essays. Recognition of Spencer’s growing popularity was also general. The Round Table discussed Appleton’s promotional and publication strategy, and credited E. L. Youmans as well. Even the United States Service Magazine felt the necessity of introducing Northern soldiers to Spencer and his Illustrations, if only to warn them against a philosophy which traded a personal God for an anonymous force acting on a homogenous medium.

D. Appleton published the remainder of Spencer’s review articles at the end of 1864, in a book titled Essays: Moral, Political, and Aesthetic. This collection reprinted Spencer’s essays on political and social topics, like “Over-legislation,” “Representative Government” and “Parliamentary Reform: The Dangers and the Safeguards.” A few

167 [Theodore Tilton], “Editor’s Book Table,” review of Illustrations of Universal Progress, by Herbert Spencer, Independent 16, no. 803 (Apr. 21, 1864), 2.


169 “Literary Notes,” Round Table 1, no. 10 (Feb. 20, 1864), 154.

170 “Literary Intelligence and Notes on New Books,” United States Service Magazine 2, no. 1 (July 1864), 71-72.

171 Herbert Spencer, Essays: Moral, Political, and Aesthetic (New York: D. Appleton, 1864). The copyright for the American edition is 1864 but the title page bears the date 1865. The Louisville Daily Journal published an excerpt from the book in mid-December. Herbert Spencer, “Relation between Beauty of Features and Beauty of Mind,” Louisville Daily Journal, Dec. 26, 1864. Apparently the Daily Journal could still get newly published books from New York during wartime. However, the newspaper was one of the many publications that did not survive the Civil War.
miscellaneous pieces were also included, such as “The Philosophy of Style” and “Gracefulness,” as well as Spencer’s screeds against marketplace fraud, “Railway Morals and Railway Policy” and “The Morals of Trade.” This collection received considerably less attention than the last. A number of possible reasons present themselves. Appleton’s issue of First Principles earlier in the year surely distracted the attention of reviewers. Perhaps the political essays, with their constant, detailed citation of English examples, did not appeal to Americans.

Whatever the reason, notices of the book tended to be short, when they appeared at all. The Ladies’ Repository praised Appleton for making Spencer’s writings available to Americans, since many of them were applicable to the American scene.172 The author was no more specific than this, however. The Cincinnati-based Repository, like other popular women’s magazines of the day, was aimed at middle- and upper-class educated women.173 Despite its religiosity (it was firmly Methodist) it was not shy about recommending Spencer to its readership, and would continue to do so in years to come.174 Not all of its contributors followed this policy, however: Francis Willard wrote a


173 The Repository was not the only member of its class to recommend Spencer; for example, Godey’s Lady’s Book commented favorably on Illustrations of Universal Progress. “Literary Notices,” Godey’s Lady’s Book and Magazine 68 (June 1864), 580-582.

piece bashing Spencer among other “men whose reason has become their deity” for considering religion the domain of the ignorant and misguided.175

The New-York Tribune published a review that promoted Spencer as particularly good for American readers. The reviewer quoted at length from “The Philosophy of Style,” cleverly linked Spencer’s notions about economy of attention with his suggestions about economy of movement (“Gracefulness”), and, after a long quote from “Overlegislation,” summarized Spencer’s views on representative government.176 However, much of the column was quotation and summary with a minimum of comment. The New-York Tribune’s guiding force was the influential Horace Greeley, who was controversial at the time for supporting a negotiated peace between North and South. The Tribune reached 400,000 people in the 1860s by Youmans’ estimate, making its endorsement quite valuable.177 Whether Greely himself was a disciple of Spencer is doubtful. Greely did not mention Spencer in his autobiography and was cool to the idea of serially publishing Spencer’s sociological work.178 Nevertheless, thanks in part to Youmans’ evangelism, the Tribune was a firm supporter of Spencer for many years.


177 E. L. Youmans to Herbert Spencer, Apr. 12, 1864, in Fiske, Edward Livingston Youmans, 177.

The range in religious opinion about Spencer’s political essays was starkly illustrated by the notices in the *American Quarterly Church Review* and the *Christian Examiner*. The former, edited by Episcopalian priest Nathanial Smith Richardson, was the foremost periodical of its denomination.179 Its critic declared Spencer a “schemer pushing his dangerous sentiments to their natural result, in their application to the Moral and Political interests of Society”—an application which could only lead to vandalism, lust, and the enormities of the French Revolution.180 The Unitarian *Examiner*, on the other hand, praised Spencer as a wise and vigorous writer whose essays were recommended reading—though noting that the age of some of the essays meant the abuses they exposed had been rectified.181 Clearly, some religious writers were willing to bracket Spencer’s religious opinions when reviewing his essays and others were not.

**The Dust Settles: Developing Critiques of *First Principles***

After Appleton finally issued the American edition of *First Principles* in 1864, a flurry of new critiques appeared. Spencer’s popularity was duly noted. *The New York Evangelist*, a Presbyterian weekly which began as an anti-slavery journal, stated that demand for *First Principles* was even higher in America than in England, “a somewhat remarkable fact, especially when we consider that we are now involved in civil war, and

---


181 “Essays, etc.” *Christian Examiner* 78, no. 1 (Jan. 1865), 140.
England is at peace with all the world.” The American Presbyterian and Theological Review, which conflicted with Hodge’s Princeton Review on desirability of union between the branches of Presbyterianism, pointed to Spencer’s bold and comprehensive plan as part of the reason for his success. One sign of Spencer’s growing visibility was a notice of First Principles that appeared in Harper’s Monthly. Though circulation had declined thanks to the war, this still brought Spencer’s name before tens of thousands of readers. There were, of course, some who disagreed with the common assessment. “We sometimes see a man of middle size, who, by justness of proportion, and erectness of carriage, conveys the impression of rather commanding height,” wrote a critic in the radical Friend of Progress. “Such a man is Herbert Spencer.”

Interest in Spencer’s work continued to be highest among religious writers. Over the next few years, reviews continued to range the gamut from friendly to hostile. Some critics still did not make fine distinctions between Spencer’s denial of knowledge and simple materialism. For example, a writer for the New Englander stated that Spencer’s

---

183 Mott, American Magazines, 2:516-17; Review of First Principles, by Herbert Spencer,” American Presbyterian and Theological Review 7 (July 1864), 516. This review also linked Spencer to positivism.
185 Mott, American Magazines, 2:391. Mott lists Harper’s Weekly as one of the few American magazines that topped 100,000 subscribers in the decades after the Civil War. Ibid., 3:6-7.
doctrines were not theistic and thus were anti-Christian. He acknowledged that Spencer had devoted admirers but griped “it would seem that the editors of religious newspapers ought to know whether the books which they recommend teach Theism or Atheism, on principle.”187 Another called Spencer’s system “one of the most fascinating and most mischievous systems of Materialistic Atheism.”188 The writer was still willing to engage Spencer in lengthy debate, however.

Most critics recognized the complexity of the issues, and highly detailed and critical discussions predominated. Though the assessment was generally negative, religious reviewers willingly engaged Spencer on his own terms to see if his philosophy stood up to scrutiny. Sometimes, theologically inclined reviewers found something of value in Spencer, for all their disagreements. In the revised edition of his Intuitions of the Mind, James McCosh, a transplanted Scottish divine who later became president of Princeton University in 1871, described Spencer’s system as the attempt of a powerful mind to reach an impossible height. Though doomed to failure, McCosh wrote, “his bold generalizations are always instructive, and some of them may in the end be established as the profoundest laws of the knowable universe,” a statement later used by D. Appleton to advertise Spencer’s work.189 Lyman H. Atwater, another Princeton

---

187 “Herbert Spencer’s New System of Philosophy,” review of First Principles, by Herbert Spencer, New Englander 23, no. 88 (July 1864), 552-553. This was the second review of First Principles printed by the New Englander.

188 “Herbert Spencer’s ‘First Principles’ and ‘Illustrations of Progress,’” American Quarterly Church Review, and Ecclesiastical Register 16, no. 3 (Oct. 1864), 426.

189 James McCosh, The Intuitions of the Mind, Inductively Investigated, new and rev. ed. (London: MacMillan, 1865), 347. An American edition had to wait until 1867, when it was published by Robert
Presbyterian, accepted development from homogeneity to heterogeneity as true of organisms, physical and cosmic phenomena, and in some ways of society as well. On theological grounds, however, he considered Spencer a hair’s breadth away from materialism. To believe force can neither be created nor destroyed is to deny the Creator, he pointed out, as is identifying mind with matter as Spencer did in his *Psychology*. As Atwater put it, even if Spencer was not technically an atheist, his vision of God was “an exceedingly thin, dead abstraction—a ghost of a shadow.” That Spencer’s Unknowable God was scarcely worth worshipping was a sentiment shared by many religious writers.

*The Methodist Quarterly Review* expressed what would become a common critique of Spencer’s thought from a Christian standpoint: that the realm of the “Unknowable” was simply an epistemological ghetto where theological issues could be set aside and forgotten. The *Methodist Quarterly* was the most important Methodist review magazine, and during the lengthy term of editor D. D. Whedon one of the most important religious magazines in the country. The reviewer found Spencer’s claims to

---

Carter & Brothers. The Appletons’ advertisement can be found at the back of Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Sociology*, vol. 1 (New York: D. Appleton, 1881) among other places.


191 Ibid., 245, 262.

192 Ibid., 253.


reconcile science and religion empty; pruning away Christian doctrine to reach a purified, abstract religion was simply destructive to religion itself.\textsuperscript{195} He argued that Spencer’s theory of the physical world was completely independent of his theological arguments, and wrote “his Universe is an awful tenement to inhabit. It is not until it is warmed and cheered by a living, ruling God that we can feel safe, or make it an endurable home.”\textsuperscript{196} Another article in the same periodical noted with some sarcasm that Spencer generously allowed God to reign over whatever part of the universe science could not understand.\textsuperscript{197} Unitarian minister and philosopher Francis Ellingwood Abbot made a similar critique. Though many Unitarians found value in Spencer, Abbot was a foe from the beginning, despite taking a radical position on many aspects of the Christian faith. Writing in the \textit{Christian Examiner}, Abbot complained that Spencer’s attempted reconciliation quietly snuffed out religion, dismissing its positive results while allowing those of science to stand.\textsuperscript{198} Unsurprisingly, a sense of awe at the unknowable nature of the universe was too weak a religious sentiment to appeal to many of Spencer’s Christian readers.

Another common method of dealing with Spencer’s arguments was to attack his conceptions of what was conceivable and what was not. The critic in the \textit{Quarterly Review of First Principles}, 690, 692.

\textsuperscript{195} Ibid., 693.

\textsuperscript{196} “The Origin of Revolutions in Public Opinion,” \textit{Methodist Quarterly Review} 18, no. 31 (Oct. 1866), 12.

\textsuperscript{197} [Francis Ellingwood Abbot], “Positivism in Theology,” \textit{Christian Examiner} 80, no. 2 (Mar. 1866), 253.
Church Review criticized Spencer for confusing physical sensation with perception, one an act of the body, the other an act of the mind. Further, the reviewer felt that Spencer confounded imagination, which has to do with specific objects, with the conception of general things such as the properties of a triangle. Other critics made similar attempts to exalt understanding and comprehension above the realm of the physical senses.

Theology professor Laurens P. Hickok proposed a distinction between sense-objects and reason-objects; Spencer could not comprehend the infinite only because he confined himself to the former. Congregationalist minister Jesse H. Jones, employing the “rational psychology” of Hickok, argued that a faculty called “the pure reason” could see the truth directly, bypassing the senses and the understanding. “WE KNOW that we stand on the eternal Rock. Our eye is illuminated with the unwavering Light which radiates from the throne of God,” Jones wrote. McCosh came to similar conclusions, labelling Spencer’s theory of the Unknowable “The Nescience Theory,” the belief that nothing can come from nothing (as opposed to belief in creation). McCosh argued that Spencer’s universal postulate (a belief is true if its negation is impossible to

199 “Herbert Spencer’s ‘First Principles’ and ‘Illustrations of Progress’ [Concluded],” American Quarterly Church Review, and Ecclesiastical Register 16, no. 4 (Jan. 1865), 357-58.


202 Ibid., 125.

203 McCosh, Intuitions of the Mind, 344-45.
conceive) was secondary to the ability of the mind to know directly, to see some beliefs as self-evident, impossible not to know.204

Most critiques of Spencer’s work, even those from the pens of Protestant divines, were civil in tone and treated Spencer’s arguments with respect. Spencer might be called a rationalist atheist and his works condemned as insidious and anti-Christian, but only after demonstrating that his metaphysical structures were unsound and did not keep him clear of materialism as he claimed. Occasionally, however, arguments of a different sort were tried. Attacking Spencer’s ignorance of philosophy and theology outside his own narrow confines was one tactic. Given Spencer’s dislike of reading and his disregard for authorities it is surprising that this weakness was not exploited more often than it was. Another avenue of assault was Spencer’s use of words, which some felt was tricky and deceiving. Examples of both strategies can be found in a review of First Principles in the Round Table. The reviewer wrote that Spencer was simply retreading ground that had already been covered by Kant, Spinoza, and Hegel, and that his ignorance of the great Christian theologians was “pitiable.”205 He attacked Spencer’s psychological conceptions as vague, ill-defined, and inconsistent. “The author who rests a grand discovery on what is a mere thimble-rigging in the use of terms in which he cannot always clear himself from linguistic blunders is not to be trusted,” he wrote.206

204 Ibid., 346.

205 Review of First Principles, by Herbert Spencer, Round Table 2, no. 32 (July 23, 1864), 84-86.

206 Ibid., 85.
The idea that Spencer’s logic was mere verbal trickery was attractive to other critics; unfortunately, many of them could not clearly define what Spencer’s inconsistencies were. Congregationalist minister Edward Beecher, one of Lyman Beecher’s sons, wrote an article for *The Independent* entitled “Verbal Jugglery” which claimed “perhaps no more striking example of such jugglery can be found than is furnished by the verbal processes used by Herbert Spencer to cheat men out of the knowledge of God as a personal God, with whom they can commune.”

The *Independent*, a Congregationalist weekly paper founded on antislavery sentiment, was one of the most important religious periodicals in the country, both for its circulation (perhaps 75,000) and for its contributors, the most famous of whom was Edward’s brother Henry Ward Beecher (a supporter of Spencer).

Edward Beecher’s objection hung on Spencer’s use of “juggling words” such as absolute, unconditioned, and infinite, terms perfectly acceptable to most philosophers and theologians.

Some critics tried arguments against Spencer that were unique to themselves. Lyman Atwater disputed the universality of development from homogeneity to heterogeneity. In the higher spiritual and moral realms, he wrote, progress is from heterogeneity to homogeneity, as education and political rights spread and moral

---


harmony is achieved. In Christ, after all, we are all brothers.\textsuperscript{210} Perhaps for this reason the article ended with a call to arms of the faithful, to fight the spread of skeptical ideas from Great Britain.\textsuperscript{211} Another dismissed biological evolution (though not before treating it at length) and considered Spencer’s more general theory too vague to be useful.\textsuperscript{212} But he seemed to accept the nebular hypothesis, proposing only that God to set the diffused atoms in motion.\textsuperscript{213} Like some previous writers, he pointed to the results as positive evidence of God’s wisdom and goodness.\textsuperscript{214} Many other reviews put forward their own arguments—criticism of \textit{First Principles} was rarely purely negative in the 1860s.

Critiques of Spencer in secular publications were no less critical. For example, a number of negative reviews appeared in the \textit{North American Review}, America’s most prestigious quarterly. These were penned by members of “The Metaphysical Club,” a group of young men more or less connected to Harvard College that included Francis Ellingwood Abbot, William James, Charles Peirce, Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., and John Fiske.\textsuperscript{215} Abbot wrote a piece giving his ideas about the human conception of space and

\textsuperscript{210} Atwater, “Herbert Spencer’s Philosophy,” 259-60.

\textsuperscript{211} Ibid., 269-70.

\textsuperscript{212} “Herbert Spencer’s ‘First Principles’ and ‘Illustrations of Progress’ [Concluded],” 530-35

\textsuperscript{213} Ibid., 432-34.

\textsuperscript{214} Ibid., 438.

time and critiquing those of Spencer along the way. Abbot’s central argument was that extension—that is, continuity of matter in space—is essentially different than space itself. Like Spencer, he divided ideas of space into two classes. One originated with Kant and understood space as a basic function of mind, the other argued that the concept of space was developed through empirical experience. Spencer’s reconciliation of the two hypothesis failed, Abbot argued, because for Spencer experience was still the source of the concept, even if it was experience of ancestral organisms in the distant past. In the same issue, Abbot’s good friend Chauncey Wright discussed the nebular hypothesis, with much reference to Spencer’s theories. Wright was a convert to Darwin’s theory of natural selection but not to the theory of evolution, which he understood in Spencerian terms as implying growth and development. Though he felt Spencer made some contributions in psychology Wright did not think he had mastered the technical knowledge of science, and pointed out various errors Spencer made in his essay on the nebular hypothesis.


217 Ibid., 95-96.

218 Ibid., 106. Abbot’s argument has some justice, but it should be remembered that Spencer’s theory clearly entails an à priori idea of space in the individual, related to brain structure and not to immediate experience or memory.


Spencer was something of a “bête noire” for Wright, and less than a year later he wrote another article on the philosopher for the *North American*. Here Wright’s main criticism was that Spencer tried to follow scientific and metaphysical methods at the same time. Wright argued that positive science deals with facts, and with theories that can be converted into facts by verification of the senses, not by reason alone. Spencer’s idea of proof depended on two unproven hypotheses: that there are absolute uniformities in nature and that their effects produce invariable beliefs. As in his essay on the nebular hypothesis, Wright rejected the idea of universal evolution. Besides embryology, he did not consider any of Spencer’s sources of examples strictly scientific:

> To us Mr. Spencer’s speculation seems but the abstract statement of the cosmological conceptions, and that kind of orderliness which the human mind spontaneously supplies in the absence of facts sufficiently numerous and precise to justify sound scientific conclusions. Progress and development, when they mean more than a continuous proceeding, have a meaning suspiciously like what the moral and mythic instincts are inclined to...  

Wright also complained that Spencer used scientific terms in non-scientific ways, such as his adoption of “the persistence of force” as a universal law, or his concept of force in

---


223 Ibid., 442. Later in his article, Wright said “there is no evidence that the law of gravity is exact, or more than approximately true, or that the force of gravity subsists at all between the remotest stars” (466).

224 Ibid., 454.
In the end, Wright found Spencer’s abstractions lacking, and did not think him competent to succeed in his encyclopedic undertaking.\textsuperscript{226}

Wright’s criticisms were remarkable. Few others were so particular about Spencer’s scientific merit, though the untestable nature of his hypothesis seems obvious from a modern standpoint. Unfortunately, Wright’s writing lacked the clarity of Spencer’s, and it is often hard to divine his precise intentions. Furthermore, his essay was wide ranging, summarizing Spencer’s work from \textit{Social Statics} to the latest issue of \textit{The Principles of Biology}, critiquing everything from Spencer’s derivation of moral values to his classification of the sciences.\textsuperscript{227} Contemporary readers were exposed to Spencer’s considerable eclecticism and intellectual breadth, but probably did not understood many of Wright’s criticisms.

Spencer had his supporters as well, as Christian reviewers never tired of pointing out. \textit{The New-York Tribune} declared that Spencer had discovered the universal law of all growth and development by generalizing from the evolution of organisms.\textsuperscript{228} The \textit{Tribune} saw Spencer as the epitome of scientific inquiry and at the center of a reorganization of thought which nobly revealed a bright future for humanity. The paper also reported that 17,000 copies of Spencer’s works had already sold in America, and

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{225} Ibid., 456-460. \\
\textsuperscript{226} Ibid., 476. \\
\textsuperscript{227} Ibid., 447-48, 468-69. \\
\end{flushright}
opined that he was more in tune with forward looking Americans than the tradition-loving English.\footnote{229 "The Philosophy of Herbert Spencer," review of First Principles and The Principles of Biology v1, by Herbert Spencer, New-York Tribune, Apr. 12, 1866.} Other supporters popped up in a variety of places. In the pages of the newly resuscitated De Bow’s Review G. H. Holmes praised Spencer for serving the cause of philosophy, science, morals, and religion by demonstrating the necessity of a First Cause.\footnote{230 G[eorge] F[rederick] Holmes, “Modern Philosophical Systems,” De Bow’s Review 5, no. 3 (Mar. 1866), 235.} Godey’s Ladies Book, edited by the redoubtable Sarah Josepha Hale, told its readers that Spencer’s system of philosophy “certainly deserves the candid investigation and respectful consideration of all thinkers,” whatever its defects might be, and noted “Mr. Spencer now occupies a high and commanding position in the domain of metaphysical speculation.”\footnote{231 “Literary Notices,” Godey’s Lady’s Book and Magazine 73 (July 1866), 83-85.} In the Atlantic Monthly, Charles Sprague praised those who were working out the natural laws which act in the universe and quoted Spencer at length about seeking after and declaring the truth.\footnote{232 Charles J. Sprague, “The Darwinian Theory,” Atlantic Monthly 18, no. 108 (Oct. 1866), 424-425.}

Spencer’s reputation was high during the 1860s. His most devoted followers considered him the greatest thinker of the age, and if most readers were not so enthusiastic, they still credited him with a powerful mind and vast scientific learning. Even many religious writers praised his honesty, acumen, and powers of generalization. One went so far as to say “we greatly regret that this rare genius is not baptized by the
same spirit of reverence for the supernatural, as was that of Sir Isaac Newton, who was none the less a philosopher for being a Christian.”²³³ Although references were still made to Education, most of this reputation rested soundly on the first volume of his new system, First Principles. And the argument that the power responsible for the physical universe is unknowable would continue to occupy the minds of theologians for decades, even after Spencer himself turned to other subjects.

²³³ “Literary Notices,” Zion’s Herald and Wesleyan Journal 37, no. 19 (May 9, 1866), 76.
CHAPTER FOUR
BIOLOGY AND PSYCHOLOGY

Finishing *First Principles* does not seem to have caused Spencer any mental or physical distress, though he did begin to take opium, “commonly under the form of morphia,” to treat his insomnia.¹ After a short interval of rest he provided his subscribers with sections of the next division of his System of Philosophy, *The Principles of Biology*, at regular intervals. He finished the first volume in 1864, but a relapse of his nervous condition that year delayed volume two until 1867. Spencer was no expert in biology, though he had shown an interest in the subject, and especially in entomology, since he was young. But once again, he felt that as an outsider he had some advantages; he had not needed to become a specialist in any one branch of the subject and thus could see broad truths applying to all groups of organisms.² And he had the help of two of the foremost men in their fields: botanist J. D. Hooker and zoologist T. H. Huxley.

By the time the *Biology* was written Spencer counted a number of the eminent scientific men of the day as friends. One reason was the formation of the “X Club” in the

¹ Herbert Spencer, *An Autobiography*, vol. 2 (London: Williams & Norgate, 1904), 90, 92-93, 95 (hereafter cited as AB). Opium and the various pharmaceutical preparations made with it were not illegal in the 19th century, and were sold in stores and at markets. See Virginia Berridge, “Victorian Opium Eating: Responses to Opiate use in Nineteenth-Century England,” *Victorian Studies* 21, no. 4 (Summer, 1978), 437-38.

² AB, 2:103-104.
fall of 1864. This group of young scientists, all converts to the theory of evolution, included not only Huxley and Hooker, but John Tyndall, John Lubbock, Edward Frankland, George Busk, Thomas Archer Hirst, and William Spotiswoode. The club dined together once a month. According to Spencer, they met for purely social reasons, a statement confirmed by Huxley. However, the group shared a particular perspective—evolutionary naturalism—and various members had previously worked together towards common professional goals. At the dinners, talk of the doings of the British Association for the Advancement of Science (BAAS), the Royal Society, or other scientific societies was inevitable. Spencer felt the club was given more credit for influence than was really due—a misconception that was not surprising, given that three of its members became presidents of the Royal Society and five presidents of the BAAS. Membership in the club increased Spencer’s scientific credibility and added to the resources he could call upon when dealing with scientific questions. It probably encouraged him to present his own work to the Linnaean society in 1866 (the paper was

---

3 Also known as the “x-club.” “X Club” is Spencer’s usage.

4 Herbert Spencer to William George Spencer, in AB, 2:115.


7 Spencer wrote “these consultations had their effects, though in what way I do not know.” But he noted that “lively talk” and “badinage” formed the bulk of the conversations. AB, 2:116.

read by X Club member George Busk.) This paper, on the vascular structures in plants, is one of the few pieces of Spencer’s published work that looks like science to modern eyes. The essay contained a literature review, accounts of his experiments with plant sections and dyes (detailed enough to be easily replicated), and even a further experiment to counter possible objections.9

Spencer encountered serious financial difficulties during this period, and almost gave up on his System of Philosophy. After First Principles was finished, the number of his subscribers declined to 350; some terminated their subscriptions, others were removed from the rolls for non-payment.10 Youmans raised money among some of Spencer’s American admirers for the purpose of paying D. Appleton & Co. to publish Social Statics and the two volumes of Spencer’s Essays, but Spencer refused to accept royalties until all costs of publishing were repaid, so this arrangement hardly improved his financial position.11 Obviously, at this early date the Appletons did not consider these volumes a good risk. Appleton was fairly generous with its British authors—which included Darwin and Tyndall—especially considering the lack of an international copyright agreement between England and America.12 Many publishers paid the British


10 AB, 2:132.

11 Herbert Spencer to E. L. Youmans, Dec. 17, 1863, in AB, 2:97; see also Herbert Spencer to E. L. Youmans, Dec. 17, 1864, in AB, 2:118 where he refused to accept $242.81 for this reason.

12 George Putnam and Sons was the first large American publisher to pay consistent royalties to British writers; D. Appleton & Co. was the second. Youmans in particular insisted upon this policy, which allowed
authors they pirated no royalties at all, but Appleton typically gave Spencer a 15 percent royalty on his books. However, Spencer paid for the plates and thus bore some of the initial cost. With less money coming in from subscribers, these costs became too great to bear. In 1865, he decided to cease publication of his System of Philosophy, and wrote a note to that effect for insertion into the latest installment of *Principles of Biology*. When John Stuart Mill offered to indemnify the publisher against losses, Spencer replied that it was his living expenses, and not simply the costs of publication, which were eating up his capital. Though Spencer lived simply, he felt responsible for his aging parents, a considerable burden for a man who still roomed in a boarding house.

In 1866, Spencer’s father died, and his mother passed away the following year. His father’s death came as a shock; his mother’s was the occasion for melancholy, for she had suffered from dementia for years. To his friend Youmans he wrote “I am now alone in the world.” Later, when writing his autobiography, he remembered his regret: “In human life as we at present know it, one of the saddest traits is the dull sense of filial obligations which exists at the time when it is possible to discharge them with

---

13 See *AB*, 2:98. Spencer figured that his royalties on his later works published in England were about 30-40% of the cost of each book, depending on how many copies sold. The percentage was high because he published on commission—his publisher only got 10% of the gross—which meant that he had to deal directly with printer, paper maker, and binder. *AB* 2:164. On typesetting and stereotyping see Allan C. Dooley, *Author and Printer in Victorian England* (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1992).

14 John Stuart Mill to Herbert Spencer, 4 Feb. 1866; Herbert Spencer to John Stuart Mill, 7 Feb. 1866 in *AB*, 2:134-35. Other British supporters were prepared to aid Spencer as well; see *AB*, 2:136-137.
something like fulness, in contrast with the keen sense of them which arises when such discharge is no longer possible.” The formality of style cannot hide a depth of feeling Spencer rarely displayed, either in his autobiography or in his life. His wonted objectivity was swept away by his parents’ deaths; an emotional reaction was the only response possible.

During this trying time in Spencer’s life, his American admirers intervened yet again to keep him afloat, this time more successfully. They raised a $7,000 “testimonial” which Youmans presented to him in person along with a gold watch. The donation took the form of bonds in Spencer’s name; despite his reluctance, he was compelled to accept what was already legally his or risk offending his friends. The American press duly reported the generous gift, though they sometimes mistook the details. Youmans wrote several letters explaining the circumstances; nevertheless, a narrative developed in which Spencer was kept afloat by his American supporters while Britain ignored him. Many Americans took pride in the fact that they were the first to recognize


17 AB, 2:141-42.

18 A number of sources mistakenly reported the donation at $5,000, for example “Literariana,” *Round Table* 3, no. 44 (July 7, 1866), 426; “Notes: Literary,” *Nation* 3, no. 58 (Aug. 9, 1866), 124-125.

Spencer’s greatness, however unfair this was to his British friends. Whatever the merits of the case, with the American testimonial and a small bequest from his father Spencer was once again financially prepared to continue with his *System of Philosophy*.

**Incorporating Darwin: The Principles of Biology**

The American edition of the first volume of *The Principles of Biology* was finally published in the spring of 1866, and both British and American versions of volume two came out the following year.\(^\text{20}\) The *Biology* was Spencer’s first truly scientific book by today’s standards, presenting the minute observations of many natural historians at great length. Latin names, technical details, and detailed descriptions abounded in both volumes. Spencer made arguments, generally in the form of causal explanations for the data he presented, but he also admitted it when his evidence was thin or inconclusive.\(^\text{21}\)

Spencer also spent considerable space generalizing from specific results to broadly explanatory theories, often based on the dictates of his theory of evolution. Reading the *Biology* provides crucial insight into Spencer’s beliefs about biological evolution, beliefs which affected both his psychological and his sociological ideas.

Spencer began *The Principles of Biology* at the lowest level of organization, with the organic molecules (which he called “atoms”) that make up cells. Little was known about these molecules at that time, but Spencer surmised that they must be very

\(^{20}\) “List of Books Recently Published in the United States,” *American Literary Gazette and Publishers’ Circular* (May 1, 1866), 12.

\(^{21}\) See for example *PB*, 2:412-415.
mobile to provide “the conditions necessary to that re-distribution of Matter and Motion which constitutes Evolution.”22 Somehow these conditions also created “nerve-force,” a somewhat mysterious power which nineteenth-century natural philosophers believed was what made living tissue different from dead matter.23 In organic matter, he wrote, small disturbances of nerve-force can cause large redistributions of matter, which are continually adjusted to balance outer changes. This is life, by Spencer’s definition: the continuous adjustment of inner to outer conditions, also referred to as a “moving equilibrium.”24 This definition had not changed since *The Principles of Psychology*, and in fact Spencer simply reused three chapters from that work to elucidate this theory.25

Spencer argued that life which is more completely adjusted to conditions is “higher” or “more complete” than other “lower” types of life, and this is only possible when complexity is greater.26 Since evolution always increases complexity (differentiated heterogeneity) evolution has generally led from lower to higher organisms, ending in man. Use of such value laden terms suggests that Spencer

---

22 *PB*, 1:15-22; quotation is from page 22.


24 *PB*, 1:255.


26 Spencer explained his use of “higher” and “lower” for organisms more clearly in Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Psychology*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (New York: D. Appleton, 1871), 293-294 (hereafter cited as *PP2*).
conceived of biological evolution as goal-directed, in contrast to Darwin, whose mechanism of natural selection was essentially random.\(^{27}\) However, though Spencer believed in Lamarckian use-inheritance he summarily rejected Lamarck’s ascription of variation to the innate tendency of an organism to follow nature’s plan, calling it “a shaping of ignorance in to the semblance of knowledge.”\(^{28}\) And Darwin both accepted use-inheritance as a supplement to natural selection and retained a somewhat progressive view of evolution himself.\(^{29}\) Neither Darwin’s nor Spencer’s version of biological evolution was teleological in the sense of implying goals or a master plan, but Spencer emphasized evolution’s positive outcomes more than Darwin.\(^{30}\) His prediction of future perfection and his quest for a scientific morality were always in tension with this rejection of teleology.\(^{31}\)

Biology as defined by Spencer was a description of all the phenomena involved in the way matter changes to perform life functions like growth and development, waste


\(^{28}\) PB, 1:402-404.


\(^{30}\) Efforts to separate and contrast Spencer’s and Darwin’s views are common. See, for example, Derek Freeman et al., “The Evolutionary Theories of Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer [and Comments and Replies],” *Current Anthropology* 15, no. 3 (Sep., 1974), 211-237. Freeman argues that the two theories are unalike in origin, use of logic, and their recognition of progress. The numerous replies give a good sense of the range of positions on this issue.

and repair, reproduction, heredity, variation, and more. The bulk of volume one gave details about these functions. Spencer wrote that biological evolution implies both growth and development, since increased structure is necessary to support larger size and vice versa. Evolution occurs when changes in the environment require a particular function to be emphasized, leading to the growth of the organs or structures involved. Spencer’s idea of a singular, abstract environment with which each organism interacts was a fairly new one; in the future he would extend the idea to the psychological and sociological realms as well. For Spencer, the external environment necessitated certain internal adjustments from organisms, i.e. the exercise of certain functions, which could in turn lead to changes in the structures responsible for these functions. Like Lamarck, Spencer believed that these structural changes made during the life of an organism could be passed to its offspring. Spencer called this process “direct equilibration.” He also praised Darwin’s theory of natural selection, but felt that the term suggested that someone or something was doing the selecting. He thus substituted “indirect equilibration,” as well as the more felicitous phrase “the survival of the fittest.”

---

32 PB, 1:94-95.

33 PB, 1:111-12, 133, 156.

34 PB, 1:184-189, 197-99.


36 PB, 1:434-35.

37 PB, 1:443-446. On the later use of this phrase see below.
Spencer argued that though indirect equilibration explains most of the facts of evolution, direct equilibration is more prominent when a particular environmental pressure is frequent or continual, and when organisms are comparatively complex.38 Thus with man, whose social arrangements shield his incapaibles, little indirect equilibration takes place.39 To put it simply, Spencer observed that the survival of the fittest no longer functioned in modern society.

Spencer admitted that “to prove the transmission of those structural peculiarities that have resulted from functional peculiarities, is, for several reasons, comparatively difficult.”40 Lacking such proof, Spencer sought to explain heredity, a task which Darwin had not yet attempted (though he would soon do so.)41 Spencer’s argument involved “small sets of physiological units in a fit state for obeying their proclivity towards the structural arrangement of the species they belong to,” whose “special polarities” could be modified by changes in the parent organism’s structure.42 These physiological units come from both parents, and they may combine in different

---

38 PB, 1:463, 468-69.
39 PB, 1:468-69.
40 PB, 1:244-47. Spencer noted here that Darwin also conceived a role for “functional inheritance.”
42 PB, 1:254-56.
ways, thus explaining variation.\textsuperscript{43} Spencer was at his most theoretical here, having almost no facts to go on. Such flights of fancy were not common in the work as a whole, however. Spencer’s usual method was to gather as many facts as possible before generalizing.\textsuperscript{44} For example, in support of biological evolution he gathered evidence given by embryology, morphology, and the classification and distribution of species. Spencer argued that a Darwinian, branching version of classification is implied by the similarities in overall structure between related species, and reinforced by Von Baer’s theory that embryos diverge from each other only as they develop.\textsuperscript{45} Evolution also explains the distributions of organisms on the earth: groups spread to new environments when population pressure overcomes the counteracting resistance of new conditions, then change to better fit these environments.\textsuperscript{46}

The second volume of Spencer’s \textit{Biology} concentrated less on theory and more on description. For example, in his section on the forms of plants Spencer gave an account of the various types of branches, leaves, and flowers.\textsuperscript{47} Spencer’s theorizing originated from his attempts to explain the attributes of individual species or genera in

\textsuperscript{43} \textit{PB}, 1:266-72. Spencer seems quite close to the modern view at times: his physiological units could be called DNA and his description of variation hints at the work of Gregor Mendel, which was not widely known until the turn of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. See \textit{PB}, 1:183.

\textsuperscript{44} Mark Francis, \textit{Herbert Spencer and the Invention of Modern Life} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 197-98.

\textsuperscript{45} \textit{PB}, 1:358-59, 364-66, 380.

\textsuperscript{46} \textit{PB}, 1:317, 327-28, 390.

\textsuperscript{47} \textit{PB}, 2:138-158. [Check these numbers]
terms of indirect or direct equilibration. So, he argued that ruminants have organs to hold unchewed food because it allows them to consume more when there is competition over a limited supply, and he explained vertebrae in terms of the long-term results of a body flexing from side to side.\textsuperscript{48} At the back of it all was the persistence of force and its corollaries: differently acting forces explain why an animal has a diversity of parts while the presence of equivalent forces explain why so much symmetry exists in nature.\textsuperscript{49}

At the end of the second volume Spencer discussed the implications of his biological theories for human beings. He thought that increased complexity in an organism mandates diminished reproductive capacity, a theory held over from his early essay on population in the \textit{Westminster Review}.\textsuperscript{50} He provided a great deal more detail here, touching on both sexual and asexual reproduction, nutrition, self-maintenance, and so on. The essential idea was that the organs and cells of the body compete with each other for nutrition and other resources, so that growth and complexity of parts come at the expense of reproduction.\textsuperscript{51} In humans, the outcome for Spencer was that the larger the brain, the more restricted the ability to reproduce, which explained why

\textsuperscript{48} PB, 2:314-16; 192-98.

\textsuperscript{49} PB, 2:158, 169, 128-129, passim.


“flat-chested girls who survive their high-pressure education” have poorly developed babies they cannot nurse and why men who do much brain-work often leave no children.\(^{52}\) Spencer envisioned a sort of reverse-feedback loop: human fertility leads to population density, which advances technology and civilization, increasing demand for mechanical skill, intelligence, energy, and self-control, all requiring larger brain size, which causes reduced fertility.\(^{53}\) Thus advanced civilizations eventually approach equilibrium, with births almost balancing deaths—a state of harmony, as Spencer called it.\(^{54}\)

Ultimately, Spencer believed that biological evolution moved in a positive direction. He admitted that devolution is possible, but spent very little time discussing scenarios in which it might occur.\(^{55}\) Throughout *The Principles of Biology* there is a tacit link between evolution and progress that a modern biologist would not make. However, it would be a mistake to think that Spencer’s biology was simply an extension of his general theory of evolution as seen in *First Principles*. Though he used concepts like

---

\(^{52}\) *PB*, 2:486.

\(^{53}\) *PB*, 2:496-97, 502-503. The equation of high evolution with infertility does not seem very Darwinian, as Laurie Godfrey points out. Still, it is true that the class of animals we consider most evolved (mammals) includes the largest and most complex creatures, which generally have comparatively few children. Laurie Godfrey, “Darwinian, Spencerian, and Modern Perspectives on Progress in Biological Evolution,” in *What Darwin Began: Modern Darwinian and Non-Darwinian Perspectives on Evolution*, ed. Laurie Godfrey (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1985), 47-48. As the previous few pages show, I fundamentally disagree with Godfrey’s opinion that “conceptually, Spencer’s selection was different from that of Darwin. It would be impossible to derive Darwinian selection from it” (46).

\(^{54}\) *PB*, 2:504-505. Unlike in his essay on population, however, Spencer argues that gradual changes in conditions such as climate make perfect equilibrium impossible.

\(^{55}\) See *PB*, 1:189-90 for one example.
force, equilibration, and the rhythm of motion, these were usually used to explain things like morphological development. The mechanisms behind evolution itself were adopted almost completely from Lamarck and Darwin, though given a Spencerian twist. One way to envision this is to say that for Spencer, the laws of physical forces determined what possible forms could arise, while direct and indirect equilibration determined which ones would arise and which would survive. But this is an oversimplification of a theory that is in reality quite complex.

Spencer’s Lamarckism has led some critics to declare that he could not have been a social Darwinist. His own words say otherwise—at times he seemed to forget his own argument that human complexity entailed evolution by direct equilibration. Though Spencer saw struggle and competition as morally beneficial in ways that could be passed on to offspring, he rarely made this connection explicit. In his political and sociological work, Spencer tended to focus more on the “undeserving poor” than on the unfortunate and underpaid. In other words, his assessment of poverty was negative rather than positive, focused on what to do about idlers and wastrels rather than on how to help victims of misfortune and the working poor. Thus although Spencer’s biological theory might have encouraged him to focus on promoting good habits that

---

56 See for example PB v2, chapter 17 where morphology is seen as the result of unequal forces leading to processes of integration and differentiation.

could be passed to offspring, his social preoccupations meant he was more interested in seeing that the biologically degraded did not reproduce.

**A Felicitous Phrase: “The Survival of the Fittest” and Social Darwinism**

The phrase “the survival of the fittest” when applied to human society is a key marker for social Darwinism.\(^5^8\) Since Spencer coined the phrase, it seems obvious that Americans would tend to connect him to the doctrine. This assumption is problematic for a number of reasons. First, American readers were not necessarily aware of the phrase’s origins. As we have seen, Spencer initially coined “survival of the fittest” strictly as a replacement for Darwin’s concept of “natural selection.”\(^5^9\) Use of the word “selection” created problems because it implied a selector, whereas the most original, radical, and controversial element of Darwin’s theory was that life and death in nature is a matter of chance—with the odds stacked slightly in favor of those animals and plants better adjusted to their environment.\(^6^0\) “Survival of the fittest” better reflects the cruel irrationality of this mechanism, and Darwin adopted the phrase as an alternate (most prominently, as the subtitle to Chapter IV, “Natural Selection”) in the fifth edition of

---


Origin of Species, published in 1869.\(^6\) Since Darwin’s book was more widely read than Spencer’s, the origin of the phrase was not clear to many.

Reviews of The Principles of Biology usually mentioned the phrase. For example, the reviewer in The North American Review wrote “for the phrase natural selection employed by Mr. Darwin, Mr. Spencer occasionally substitutes the phrase survival of the fittest, which is in some respects a clearer and more scientific name for the great principle indicated.”\(^6\) In other contexts, writers were liable to leave Spencer’s name out. In 1868, an essayist in Lippincott’s Magazine wrote that neither “Darwin’s principle of survival of the fittest” nor Lamarck’s theory was sufficient to explain development without the guiding hand of a Creator.\(^6\) Philadelphia based Lippincott’s was a general interest magazine with much literary content and the usual articles on art, travel, politics, which shows how widespread the idea of “the survival of the fittest” became in just a few years.\(^6\) The metaphorical use of the phrase was another sign of its popularization. The Methodist Quarterly Review judged a theory about salvation “the counterpart in theology to Mr. Darwin’s ‘natural selection’ in science,” in that “the

---


\(^6\) Francis Ellingwood Abbot, review of The Principles of Biology, by Herbert Spencer, North American Review 107, no. 221 (Oct. 1868), 397.


attainment of eternal life by the blessed is simply ‘the survival of the fittest.’” Similarly, *Every Saturday*, an eclectic magazine owned by the publisher of *The Atlantic Monthly* and *The North American Review*, used the term as a metaphor for recruiting in collegiate athletics. In neither case did Spencer’s name appear.

The expression “the survival of the fittest” only gained currency in the 1870s. Usually the phrase was used in scientific contexts, but it did not take long for writers to extend the concept to the human realm. Sometimes the context was racial. *Appletons’ Journal*, a monthly miscellany from Spencer’s publisher covering “literature, science, and art,” suggested that blacks and whites seeking to adjust to postwar conditions in the South would both be subject to the law of the survival of the fittest. In his novel *Overland*, serialized in the highly successful New-York magazine *The Galaxy* (best known at the time for Mark Twain’s “Memoranda” section) J. W. De Forest wrote “the contempt and hatred of white men for yellow, red, brown, and black men has worked all over earth, is working yet, and will work for ages. It is a motive of that tremendous tragedy which Spencer has entitled ‘the survival of the fittest,’ and Darwin, ‘natural selection.’” At other times simple competition in the business of life was

---


contemplated, as when Titus Munson Coan (son of a famous missionary to Hawaii) wrote “disguise it as you will, most success is the result of cruel internecine warfare. Success is natural selection, the survival of the fittest and the destruction of the unfit. The purest successes are won by competition, and at somebody’s expense; alike in plant and animal they involve victory and death.” Such pure examples of social Darwinism were few and far between in the media, however. Protests against such attitudes were more common. The Rev. Thomas K. Beecher, one of Lyman Beecher’s brood, complained that the theory of evolution took the struggle for life as the central source of all improvement, a doctrine of selfishness worthy of Satan himself. Neither Coan nor Beecher mentioned Spencer, however.

Far from being an indicator of social Darwinist thinking, in the 1870s and 1880s the phrase “the survival of the fittest” was most commonly found in discussions of biological evolution or in casual, metaphorical contexts. In both cases, Darwin was more often mentioned than Spencer. For example, In the space of a few years, from 1879-1881, writers in *Harper's Monthly* used the phrase to explain Charles Sumner’s political career, changes in clothing styles, and relationships among life insurance companies. In the article on Sumner, the phrase was connected to Darwin; in the latter two, it was

---


70 Thomas K. Beecher, “Let’s Think it Over,” *Christian Union* 7, no. 6 (Feb. 5, 1873), 104.

simply used without comment. While it is true that Spencer originated a term that came to characterize social Darwinism, he intended it simply as a reference to Darwin’s theory; to the extent American readers connected the phrase to any thinker at all, it was to Darwin, not Spencer.

The fact is that the central concept of social Darwinism—that natural selection does and should apply to human beings—was not yet a part of the American mental vocabulary. This made it difficult for Americans to recognize the idea when they saw it. Reviews of the American edition of *Social Statics*, published in 1865, bear this out. Magazines ranging from *Godey’s Ladies Book* to the Methodist weekly *Zion’s Herald* printed notices.72 However, most American periodicals passed up this opportunity to analyze Spencer’s defense of liberalism and *laissez-faire*. Those that did review the book often noted that *Social Statics* was fifteen years old and thus not up to date either with events or with Spencer’s current views—something Spencer himself was careful to point out in the preface to the American version.73

American reviews of *Social Statics* generally did not comment on Spencer’s callousness towards the inferior and unfortunate. *The Atlantic Monthly*, in fact, praised

---

72 “Literary Notices,” *Zion’s Herald and Wesleyan Journal*, (May 4, 1864), 70; “Literary Notices,” *Godey’s Lady’s Book and Magazine*, (June 1864), 580. Spencer’s name continued to appear in *Godey’s* after this point, a sign of his widening popularity.

73 [Edward E. Hale], “Spencer’s Social Statics,” *Christian Examiner* 79, no. 2 (Sept. 1865), 265-66; Review of *Social Statics*, by Herbert Spencer, *New York Evangelist* 36, no. 17 (Apr. 27, 1865), 6; Herbert Spencer, *Social Statics; Or, the Conditions Essential to Human Happiness Specified, and the First of them Developed* (New York: D. Appleton, 1865), xiii-xiv. Spencer specifically singled out the chapters on the rights of women and children as those he would amend if time permitted.
Spencer as a defender of higher values against cynics who believed that only money and power are important in life.\textsuperscript{74} S. N. Tufts, writing in the \textit{Freewill Baptist Quarterly} (published by the northern branch of the Freewill Baptists) agreed that God wills man’s happiness, and thought that although Spencer did not give enough scope to divine revelation in the development of the moral sense, many passages from \textit{Social Statics} “have drawn their force, consciously or unconsciously to the author, from that fountain of truth.”\textsuperscript{75} Another writer argued that happiness is just a side effect of humanity’s real goals, such as obedience and holiness, and professed to see in this early book the seeds of rationalism that bore fruit in Spencer’s later writing.\textsuperscript{76} However, the review in the \textit{Ladies Repository} was more typical in considering Spencer’s social ideals apart from his metaphysics. As in other reviews, the \textit{Repository} critic praised the book for its arguments against utilitarianism and in favor of a moral faculty, and emphasized the law of equal freedom as a “first principle of social morality.”\textsuperscript{77}

Not all reviewers mentioned the anti-government stance of \textit{Social Statics}. Those that did rarely understood it as a doctrine aimed at fostering the brutal struggle

\textsuperscript{74} [J. P. Quincy], review of \textit{Social Statics}, by Herbert Spencer, \textit{Atlantic Monthly} 16, no. 95 (Sept. 1865), 383.

\textsuperscript{75} S. N. Tufts, “Herbert Spencer,” review of \textit{Social Statics}, by Herbert Spencer, \textit{Freewill Baptist Quarterly} 13, no. 50 (Apr. 1865), 233, 235-236.

\textsuperscript{76} “Literary,” \textit{New York Observer} 43, no. 15 (Apr. 13, 1865), 117. See also the review which appeared in \textit{New Englander and Yale Review} 24, no. 92 (July 1865), 593-594, which considered the book flawed, superficial, and anti-Christian.

\textsuperscript{77} “Literary Notices,” \textit{Ladies’ Repository} 25, no. 7 (July 1865), 444.
necessary for progress. Edward Everett Hale’s review in the *Christian Examiner* is a case in point. Hale was a Unitarian minister in Boston, best known at the time for his pro-Union short story “The Man without a Country,” published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1863.78 His review recognized the law of equal freedom as the “first principle” of the book, and emphasized Spencer’s argument that human progress makes the state less and less necessary.79 Hale pointed out that American government had fewer flaws than English. He also felt that even perfectly moral men would desire some government, since relying on multiple privately constituted organizations just results in conflict and confusion.80 In short, Hale found that the state would be necessary even for a fully evolved humanity. Like most other critics, he did not make any connection between reduced governance and ruthless competition.

Spencer’s social Darwinism was sometimes recognized—just not very often. One example was published in the *American Quarterly Church Review*, which under longtime editor Nathanial Smith Richardson was the chief Episcopalian review in the nation. In an article on church policy towards southern blacks, the anonymous author argued that interference in Southern affairs would only trigger a “War of the Races” in which the weaker race would be exterminated, citing several passages in *Social Statics* in this...
regard.81 Another writer quoted Spencer’s passage about nature’s stern discipline being cruel to be kind, though with little comment.82 But most critics of Social Statics were not concerned about natural selection being applied to man. They were more drawn to the positive Spencer who preached that God wills man’s happiness, though the religious might mutter that happiness depends on obedience to the laws of God.83

A Technical Treatise: The American Response

The two volumes of The Principles of Biology were probably the least read division of Spencer’s System of Philosophy, and are not often cited by scholars today. Spencer anticipated this. He recognized that even among educated people, few were interested in the subject or even knew what “biology” was.84 Nevertheless, scattered discussions did appear. Some were short notices; this was especially true of the popular magazines that discussed the book, such as The Ladies Repository and Hours at Home, Scribner’s literary monthly. Both complimented Spencer but ruled that his theories did not explain life any better than special creation.85 Some longer reviews appeared as well. Critics, even the religious ones, almost always treated Spencer’s evolutionary


82 [William Rounseville Alger], “Emerson, Spencer, and Martineau,” Christian Examiner 84, no. 3 (May, 1868), 272.


84 AB, 2:105.

doctrines with respect. Exceptions were rare, but did occur. *The American Quarterly Church Review*, whose dislike of Spencer almost seemed to be an editorial policy, opined “Herbert Spencer is one of the most openly pronounced infidels of the age; and in his writings he represents very distinctly the present mode and plan of attack upon Christianity,” and called biological evolution “sheer humbuggery.”86 On the other hand, there was some uncritical admiration, usually from secular sources. Leading sanitary reformer John Griscom, writing in one of the country’s premier medical journals, praised Spencer as a profound thinker and master of the knowledge of biological organization and function. Griscom also reassured readers that the *Biology* was not atheistic for those who could see God working through nature.87

Despite the *Biology*’s scientific nature, many reviewers could not help bringing up metaphysical issues. The most egregious offenders barely discussed biology at all. Such a review appeared in *The Round Table*, newly restarted after suspending operations for the last year of the war. The critic praised Spencer for his boldness in taking on such a great enterprise, and acceded to his law of evolution from homogeneous to heterogeneous, but complained that without an explanation of the relationship between absolute and finite being, Spencer’s whole explanation of the

---

86 Review of *The Principles of Biology*, by Herbert Spencer, *American Quarterly Church Review, and Ecclesiastical Register* 18, no. 2 (July 1866), 290-291. The writer also suggested that Spencer was abandoning his system of philosophy because his readers were smart enough to see through him.

known was simply materialistic pantheism.\textsuperscript{88} The reviewer critiqued Spencer’s definition of life but then fell back into epistemological issues in an argument for special creation.\textsuperscript{89} That same month, \textit{The Nation} published a rather unfocused review that similarly slighted biological evolution. An intellectual weekly journal of opinion, \textit{The Nation} was at that time not quite a year old, but under redoubtable editor E. L. Godkin it attracted 5,000 subscribers by its third issue.\textsuperscript{90} Its critic barely paused to list the parts of the \textit{Biology} before rushing into an account of Spencer’s entire system, concluding that his cosmological principle of evolution was unnecessary to science and did not confirm any facts or suggest any inductive investigations. While praising Spencer’s clear statement of the arguments in favor of species change, the reviewer found Spencer’s broader idea of evolution teleological—not in the sense that the goal of human happiness determined the laws of nature, but in a more vague sense “as a cosmological theory...charged with a mission.”\textsuperscript{91} Significantly, both magazines were secular, though the positions of their reviewers on science and religion could not have been farther apart. \textit{The Nation}’s review was in fact rather singular in its criticism of Spencerian evolution’s usefulness as a scientific theory.

\textsuperscript{88} “Mr. Herbert Spencer’s Biology,” review of \textit{The Principles of Biology}, by Herbert Spencer, \textit{Round Table} 3, no. 39 (June 2, 1866), 338.

\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., 339.

\textsuperscript{90} However, in its first 50 years its circulation was never greater than 12,000. Mott, \textit{American Magazines}, 3:338-339.

\textsuperscript{91} “Herbert Spencer’s Biology,” review of \textit{The Principles of Biology}, by Herbert Spencer, \textit{Nation} 2, no. 55 (June 7, 1866), 724-725.
Though Spencer’s promotion of “direct equilibration” is one of the most salient aspects of the *Biology* from a modern perspective, most commentators at the time did not discuss it, nor did they make any clear distinction between Spencer and Darwin.92 Sometimes this was because Darwinism was interpreted more broadly than Darwin himself would have liked, as the theory of natural law acting in the universe, or as merely a continuation of the work of earlier evolutionists.93 At least one critic, writing in the new quarterly *The Southern Review*, made a distinction between the two based on their theories of the origin of life rather than their views on natural selection. This critic saw Darwin as the more reticent of the two, leaving room for a miraculous creation of the first living forms.94 Spencer, on the other hand, tried to explain too much about the causes of life and of variation, thus virtually denying the possibility of a creative plan.95 “What is true in his theory of Organic Evolution is not new, and what is new is not true,” the writer concluded.96 *The Southern Review* was the brainchild of unreconstructed sectionalist Albert Taylor Bledsoe and represented a firmly Southern opinion.97

---

92 For a clear, if brief, exception see the review of the *Annual of Scientific Discovery*, ed. Samuel Kneeland, *Methodist Quarterly Review* 19 (July, 1867), 474. The reviewer distinguished three camps: believers in Darwin’s natural selection, Spencer’s followers, and those that accepted Huxley’s views.


95 Ibid., 421, 431, 437.

96 Ibid., 439.

in the article considered here, this did not differ overly much from Northern opinion: Darwin’s theory was considered a viable but unproven hypothesis that did not necessarily conflict with revealed religion.\textsuperscript{98} While there was some resistance to evolution in the post-bellum, pre-fundamentalist South, there were many that kept open minds, especially in academic communities.\textsuperscript{99} It was possible for James Woodrow, a Presbyterian, to serve as president of the University of South Carolina despite having lost a hard fought battle against heresy charges for his belief in human evolution, for example.\textsuperscript{100}

Francis Ellingwood Abbot made a similar conflation of Darwin and Spencer in his discussion of the Biology in the North American Review for October, 1868. Despite the fact that James Russell Lowell and Charles Eliot Norton took over in 1864, the North American still had only three to four hundred subscribers. But they were the type of subscriber that could appreciate a long essay on Spencer, and Abbot obliged. Abbot, who helped found the Free Religious Association the previous year, was forced to resign from his pulpit that spring for being insufficiently Christian.\textsuperscript{101} However, he was still a

---

\textsuperscript{98} “Evolution Hypothesis,” 419.


\textsuperscript{100} Ibid., 126-130.

strong believer in immortality and a personal God. In his review he accepted Spencer’s arguments against special creation and even his grand ideas for a scientific philosophy, writing “in no way does Philosophy, as co-ordinating intelligence, more irresistibly prove her right of eminent domain over the mind of man than by compelling science itself to become philosophical in spirit and form.” Yet Abbot felt Spencer’s work was only a preliminary step and not without its problems. For Abbot, the central lesson of First Principles was that all phenomena are composed of matter and motion continuously redistributed according to the law of evolution—a disappointingly mechanistic conclusion that did not follow the unity in nature to its logical conclusion. Similarly, The Principles of Biology promoted a view of living organisms as mechanisms. Abbot argued that the development of an organism from a germ is not explicable in the same terms as the development of a solar system from a nebula. “It is life in the organism, not incident forces outside of it, which must be regarded as the primary and unknown cause of biological development and adaptation,” he wrote, a phrase which earned him praise from the Methodist Quarterly Review despite his dismissal of creationism. Ultimately, Abbot felt that Spencer’s answers to the primary problems of biology—the origin of life, the origin of species, and the causes of evolution—were

102 Francis Ellingwood Abbot, “A Radical’s Theology,” Radical (June, 1867), 596-597.
103 Abbot, review of The Principles of Biology, 379-380.
104 Ibid., 381, 398.
insufficient. By denying modern evidence for the spontaneous creation of organisms, both Spencer and Darwin sidestepped issue one; they had the same answer to issue two; and neither had a good explanation for issue three (Abbot was highly critical of both Spencer’s “polarities” and Darwin’s “pangenesis”).

Clearly, even among those who accepted the merits of evolutionary arguments, discussion of *The Principles of Biology* often turned on issues extra-scientific by today’s standards. In part this was because those of scientific standing mostly ignored the book. No doubt many never read it—after all, it made no pretense of being a work of original research. Those that did may have felt like Darwin, who declared himself “astonished at its prodigality of original thought,” but added “the reflection constantly recurred to me that each suggestion, to be of real value to science, would require years of work.”

Few were willing to do Spencer’s work for him. Mentions of Spencer’s ideas in technical journals like *American Naturalist* were few, and brief. Occasionally someone borrowed Spencer’s neologisms, such as his distinction between “recipio-motor” and

---

106 Abbot, review of *The Principles of Biology*, 382, 384-85, 389, 419. Abbot presented much evidence in favor of spontaneous generation, and criticized both Spencer and Darwin as scientists because they denied its occurrence. Ibid., 391-397.


“dirigio-motor” nerves, but none of these caught on like “the survival of the fittest” did.¹⁰⁹

The Principles of Biology was the least influential part of Spencer’s system of philosophy. Few readers understood the difference between Spencer’s position and Darwin’s, so the Origin of Species remained the leading text in support of biological evolution. Spencer’s theory about the mechanism of heredity was no more successful than Darwin’s; this piece of the Darwinian puzzle remained missing until the twentieth century. As Spencer moved into the realms of psychology, anthropology, social science, and ethics, few continued the discussion of his Biology.¹¹⁰ Ernst Mayr writes “it would be quite justifiable to ignore Spencer totally in a history of biological ideas because his positive contributions were nil.”¹¹¹ He is not far wrong, though Spencer did have some slight influence on Darwin’s mature thought.¹¹² But as Robert J. Richards points out, those whose theories are ultimately accepted were products of an intellectual

¹⁰⁹ Meredith Clymer, “A Lecture on some Points in the Clinical History and Pathogeny of Locomotor Ataxy,” Chicago Medical Examiner 11, no. 3 (Mar. 1870), 165. In the same issue of this journal another writer attributed disease to an upsetting of the equilibrium of the redistribution of matter and motion. F. Homer Blackman, “Remarks on Relations of the Physical Forces to Disease,” Chicago Medical Examiner 11, no. 5 (May 1870), 268.

¹¹⁰ However, Spencer continued to rely on biological explanation in the later volumes of his system of philosophy, especially in The Principles of Psychology.


¹¹² For examples see Haines, “Reciprocal Influence,” 422-430.
environment that includes the ideas that fell by the wayside. Though little of
Spencer’s work remains part of the modern biological consensus, he did contribute to
the scientific atmosphere of his day.

**Completing the Formula: *First Principles* Again**

With the biology finished Spencer’s next goal was a new version of his 1855 work
*The Principles of Psychology*. But first, he wanted to revise *First Principles*, and make its
publication the occasion for rechristening his system *The Synthetic Philosophy*, a title he
found more precise. In the five years since its original publication in England, Spencer
recognized some flaws, and as stocks of the first edition fell low he saw the opportunity
to correct them. One part he did not change was the section on the Unknowable,
indicating either that he was satisfied with it, or he was not concerned about it—
probably a little of both. Meanwhile, he rearranged the section on the Knowable and
added nine new chapters. The biggest effect of the new ordering was that the chapters
explaining the law of evolution were pushed back, after the sections on space and time,
matter and motion, and the persistence of force. Since Spencer derived his law by
deduction from these primal realities, this arrangement made logical sense. However,

---


114 Herbert Spencer to E. L. Youmans, June 7, 1867, in *AB 2*:157.
for the reader it meant going through half the book without an adequate explication of evolution.\textsuperscript{115}

To the beginning of the section on the Knowable Spencer added two chapters on philosophical knowledge. He defined it as knowledge of the highest generality, that which fuses the contributions of the several sciences into a whole. Spencer wrote, “knowledge of the lowest kind is un-unified knowledge; Science is partially-unified knowledge; Philosophy is completely-unified knowledge.”\textsuperscript{116} He remained a relativist: the truth philosophy concerns itself with was for him simply perfect agreement between our mental representations and our sense impressions.\textsuperscript{117} But he noted that philosophy must assume that the foundational beliefs of consciousness are true, for example, that the manifestations we sense correspond in some way to Unknowable reality.\textsuperscript{118} These fundamental beliefs, now considered philosophical truths, included the persistence of force, the indestructability of matter, the continuity of motion, and all other things from which Spencer derived the law of evolution.\textsuperscript{119}

Spencer had a new definition of evolution which took into account the movement involved: “Evolution is an integration of matter and concomitant dissipation

\textsuperscript{115} For a summary of the changes see Herbert Spencer, \textit{First Principles} (New York: D. Appleton, 1869), ix-xi (hereafter cited as FP2)

\textsuperscript{116} FP2, 131-134; quotation on p. 134.

\textsuperscript{117} FP2, 142.

\textsuperscript{118} FP2, 142, 157

\textsuperscript{119} FP2, 272, 277.
of motion; during which the matter passes from an indefinite, incoherent homogeneity to a definite, coherent heterogeneity; and during which the retained motion undergoes a parallel transformation.\textsuperscript{120} He wrote that he had erred in seeing evolution as the transformation of the homogeneous to the heterogeneous, since this was simply a secondary effect of the primary process, integration, where incoherent (unorganized) matter becomes coherent.\textsuperscript{121} This process could be simple or compound, depending on whether integration was rapid or slow—it usually included differentiation of parts from each other, but could be more straightforward.\textsuperscript{122} Evolution was highly compounded in organic material. Spencer also put greater emphasis on the process of dissolution, which always accompanied its opposite and must someday predominate. So all organisms die, and so one day the earth will disintegrate as well. However, Spencer did not alter his suggestion that a new universe might arise after the death of the old.\textsuperscript{123}

To the casual reader these seem like minor alterations. Certainly the majority of American readers saw them this way. The second edition of First Principles was not published in America until 1869, and when it finally emerged, the media made no distinction between the new volume and the old. However, Spencer took the changes very seriously. In his autobiography he described the genesis of the law of evolution as a

\textsuperscript{120} FP2, 396.

\textsuperscript{121} FP2, 330, 337, 360.

\textsuperscript{122} FP2, 287-88, 298, 305.

\textsuperscript{123} FP2, 522, 527-37.
seventeen-year process that began with his discovery of Milne-Edwards and von Baer and ended with the second edition of *First Principles*—noting that although his ideas seemed to have reached equilibrium at that point, he had been wrong about this before.\(^{124}\) Nevertheless, Spencer’s future work was not much affected by his more precise definitions. He might start the new edition of *The Principles of Psychology* by putting the nervous system into the context of movement, but this inquiry into matter and motion soon gave way to discussion of the different types of nerve tissue and the parts of the brain.\(^{125}\) Secondary redistribution of retained motion, conservation of the relations between forces, compound evolution—Spencer rarely used these concepts in the rest of the Synthetic Philosophy.

Discussion of *First Principles* in the press continued to follow the paths blazed by previous critics. By the end of the 1860s the book was almost entirely the province of philosophers and theologians, who were most interested in Spencer’s doctrine of the Unknowable. In 1867 Hegelian philosopher William Torey Harris inaugurated his new *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* with a discussion of Spencer. This journal, improbably enough, was founded in St. Louis, “a city which is generally supposed to be more interested in the price of wheat than in Metaphysics, and more alive to the merits of Mr.
McCoole, the pugilist, than to those of Hegel” as one commentator put it.126 Nevertheless, it grew to be the most important American philosophical journal, publishing the work of writers like Charles S. Peirce, William James, and Josiah Royce alongside translations of German thinkers.127 In his discussion of Spencer, Harris gave him credit for sincerity and courage but made a number of criticisms. On the subject of epistemology, Harris rejected conceivability as a criterion for knowledge, arguing that we can know things logically (such as that matter is infinitely divisible) without being able to conceive them.128 Furthermore, Harris believed the mind capable of contemplating pure being without relying on faith.129 Both were common enough arguments; Harris blazed little new ground, but his language was clear and he summarized Spencer well. Despite his negative assessment, Harris found it encouraging that Americans were reading Spencer.130

Harris avoided Spencer’s definition of evolution until the very end of his article, and then made no attempt to analyze it.131 Religious writers, too, continued to display


127 Mott, American Magazines, 3:89, 386.

128 [William Torrey Harris], “Herbert Spencer,” Journal of Speculative Philosophy 1, no. 1 (Jan. 1867), 11-12. Harris’s grasp of the laws of physics was shaky; see also pp. 15-16.

129 Ibid., 14-15.

130 [William Torrey Harris], “Preface,” Journal of Speculative Philosophy 1, no. 1 (Jan. 1867), n.p. This was written for the collected first volume. Harris estimated that 20,000 Spencer books had been sold in America.

131 Ibid., 22.
little interest in cosmic evolution, typically confining themselves to the observation that it excluded anything but matter and motion from consideration. Few asked whether or not Spencer’s formula was valid; the issue was whether or not it was materialistic. Despite his protestations to the contrary, some determined that Spencer was an atheist. Even writers who wrote about his work at length sometimes came to this conclusion. Francis Ellingwood Abbot, for example, accepted that Spencer moved scientific naturalism very close to religion, writing “thus is accounted for the otherwise inexplicable phenomenon of religionists appearing among Mr. Spencer’s warmest admirers.” Abbot even quoted Spencer’s formula for evolution. But rather than discussing its validity as a description of the universe, he attacked Spencer for describing mental phenomena in mechanical terms and for denying that absolute force had a personality. Abbot was in favor of blending science and religion, just not in the way Spencer proposed. Spencer, he wrote, did not understand the atheistic implications of his own theory.

Prolific Catholic writer Orestes Brownson took a similar position against Spencer. In a review of *The Principles of Biology* which Catholic World founder Isaac Hecker asked him to prepare, he criticized *The Principles of Biology* for ruling out a “vital principle”

---

132 [Francis Ellingwood Abbot], “Positivism in Theology,” *Christian Examiner* 80, no. 2 (Mar. 1866), 239.
133 Ibid., 241-243.
134 Ibid., 252-254, 266. Abbot wrote, “The only way to make science more religious is to make religion more scientific.” Ibid., 259.
135 Ibid., 248, 252-54.
and relying solely on chemical, mechanical, and electrical forces to explanation the phenomena of life.\textsuperscript{136} In a review of \textit{First Principles}, Brownson claimed that non-religious supporters of science liked Spencer because he disguised his atheism successfully.\textsuperscript{137} According to Brownson, Spencer’s Unknowable was not something, it was a negation, just as atheism is the negation of religion. Brownson pointed out that religion seeks to explain in supernatural terms what Spencer claimed could not be known by unassisted human thought about physical laws.\textsuperscript{138} Brownson considered relative knowledge no knowledge at all, but argued that it is possible to understand real, concrete being, and to “apprehend” things one could not “comprehend.”\textsuperscript{139} He did use part of his review to examine the Knowable, but even there he kept things on a metaphysical level. For example, though he did quote the law of evolution, he attacked it by denying that the persistence of force and the indestructability of matter are facts of consciousness that must be true.\textsuperscript{140} Like Abbot, Brownson did not discuss Spencer’s many examples of evolution, not even his arguments for species change.

\begin{flushright}

\textsuperscript{137} [Orestes Brownson], “The Cosmic Philosophy,” review of \textit{First Principles}, by Herbert Spencer, \textit{Catholic World} 14, no. 83 (Feb. 1872), 634.

\textsuperscript{138} Ibid., 635.

\textsuperscript{139} Ibid., 637-638.

\textsuperscript{140} Ibid., 639-642.
\end{flushright}
Those religious writers who felt inspired by Spencer did not necessarily delve into the Knowable. Unitarians were the ones most likely to see the positive side of Spencer, Abbot notwithstanding. One writer in the Unitarian *Monthly Religious Magazine* called Spencer a worker for truth and endorsed him as a careful and reverential student “who, having gained at least a glimpse of the law which prevails in all life and in all work, is now trying, humbly and faithfully, to open our minds, that we also may see this uniting, harmonizing, governing law.”¹⁴¹ This writer believed that faith could know what science could not; he was interested in Spencer’s scientific claims only so far as they showed the limits of scientific knowledge.¹⁴² Likewise, Unitarian minister William Rounseville Alger understood Spencer as a “philosophical scientist” and a “generalizing observer,” yet used most of his article to discuss the Unknowable.¹⁴³ Where Abbot and Brownson emphasized Spencer’s negations, Alger focused on his theistic elements. Alger believed that the Unknowable could be a basis for religion, because those emotions classified as religious are reactions to mystery and the thought of the infinite.¹⁴⁴ He even agreed that religion needed purification, God having become too anthropomorphic. After all, he pointed out, God is not man on an infinite scale;

¹⁴² Ibid., 479-81.
¹⁴³ [Alger], “Emerson, Spencer, and Martineau,” 264-65.
¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 277-280
unlike man, God has no environment to which to respond.\textsuperscript{145} Liberal clergyman O. B. Frothingham agreed, noting that a less definite concept of God had the advantage of avoiding the irreverence brought by familiarity and giving men more scope for free action.\textsuperscript{146} Such concessions were rare indeed among religious men, confined to the most radical of Unitarians and free religionists. The fact that both Abbot and Rounseville wrote in the \textit{Christian Examiner} demonstrates that it was willing to host a diversity of opinions on Spencer.

Most Christian writers passed over Spencer’s views on evolution, but not all. A writer in the \textit{Baptist Quarterly}, Heman Lincoln, described Spencer’s use of organic development as a universal law covering human life and society, but noted that Spencer’s ideas were more philosophical than scientific.\textsuperscript{147} The Philadelphia-based \textit{Baptist Quarterly} was one of its denomination’s most important reviews, though it only lasted from 1867-1877.\textsuperscript{148} Lincoln’s rejection of evolution was thorough and well informed, and generally even-handed. Similarly, an article in the same journal five years later discussed Spencer’s arguments against special creation along with Darwin’s. The writer argued that Darwinism did not conflict with scripture because an intelligent force behind development was still possible, and chided Spencer for ruling out such an

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid., 281-282.
\item [O. B. Frothingham], “The Religion of Humanity,” \textit{Radical} (Apr. 1872), 11-15. The article was part of a series, republished as O. B. Frothingham, \textit{The Religion of Humanity} (New York: David G. Francis, 1873).
\item Heman Lincoln, “Development versus Creation,” \textit{Baptist Quarterly} 2, no. 3 (July 1, 1868), 262-263.
\item Mott, \textit{American Magazines}, 3:72.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
explanation.\textsuperscript{149} J. S. Jewell, writing in \textit{The Methodist Quarterly Review}, even tackled the conservation and correlation of forces, and quoted Spencer’s law of evolution. Jewell concluded that basic forces could not produce organic phenomena but did not dismiss the law entirely.\textsuperscript{150} Congregationalist minister and prolific author Horace Bushnell, writing in \textit{Hours at Home}, showed particular fascination with Spencer’s ideas of progress as a natural law and his vision of alternating periods of universal evolution and dissolution, though he found these conceptions cold without a loving God.\textsuperscript{151}

Opinions varied among mainline Protestants as well. While none agreed with him fully, some accepted the value of certain of his ideas. Three books published in 1871 by three of the most important religious leaders in the country provide an illustration. Charles Hodge, a conservative Presbyterian and Principal of Princeton Theological Seminary, brought out the first volume of his \textit{Systematic Theology}. James McCosh, President of Princeton College, published a series of lectures he had delivered for the “Elias P. Ely Lectures on the Evidences of Christianity” about the relationship of science and religion as \textit{Christianity and Positivism}. Finally, Congregationalist Noah Porter, who became President of Yale College in 1871, published \textit{The Sciences of Nature Versus the

\begin{flushleft}
\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{149} C. Nisbet, “Darwinism: I. Development Theories are Ancient and Protean,” \textit{Baptist Quarterly} 7, no. 1 (Jan. 1, 1873), 75-81.


\textsuperscript{151} [Horace Bushnell], “Progress,” \textit{Hours at Home} 8, no. 3 (Jan. 1869), 197-201; Mott, \textit{American Magazines}, 3:32-33.
\end{footnotesize}
\end{flushleft}
Science of Man, portions of which reprinted an addresses given before the Theta Beta Kappa society at Harvard.

None of the three writers accepted Spencer’s delimitation of the Knowable. Hodge agreed that the object of Christian worship must be infinite and thus incomprehensible, but made a distinction between what could be understood and what could be known (much as Brownson did) with faith based on the latter.152 As fellow Presbyterian and Auburn Theological Seminary professor R. B. Welch put it, faith is not counter to reason because belief is based on the type of spiritual evidence affirmed by Spencer’s universal postulate, like awareness of the self.153 McCosh also found an element of truth in Spencer, acknowledging that God is mostly unknown to us.154 But he was much more sanguine about what is knowable than Spencer, contending that human minds can conceive of an uncaused, self-existent God and comprehend Him through His works.155 The contradictions, McCosh wrote, were in the minds of the metaphysicians and not in the laws of human thought. Porter was the most original of the three on this subject. Rejecting Spencer’s “incomprehensible somewhat” as an object of worship, he suggested that Spencer’s own methods of knowing might be relative rather than


154 James McCosh, Christianity and Positivism: A Series of Lectures to the Times on Natural Theology and Apologetics (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1871), 148.

155 Ibid., 143-146, 363-364.
absolute, the products of a physiology and psychology which might evolve new modes of thought in the future. To Porter, Spencer’s axioms could only be accepted as foundational to science if they were more than the product of an ephemeral set of interior relations.\(^{156}\) Porter’s use of Spencer’s theories of knowledge was somewhat ironic, given his earlier dismissal of *The Principles of Psychology* as a book of “great pretension and small results.”\(^{157}\)

While none of the writers called Spencer an atheist or materialist, Hodge and McCosh found materialistic elements in his doctrines. Much of this was centered on Spencer’s ideas about life and human intelligence. In a chapter on materialism, Hodge quoted a number of passages from *First Principles* where Spencer stated the close relations between mental and physical processes.\(^{158}\) The mistake of materialists, Hodge declared, is that they start with dead matter and try to explain how it has so many amazing properties, instead of beginning with the infinite, intelligent God that is responsible for matter and for mind as well.\(^{159}\) However, Hodge admitted that Spencer claimed not to be an atheist, remarking only that Spencer called miscalled something


\(^{158}\) Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 273.

\(^{159}\) Ibid., 298.
“God” which did not have attributes like thought. Unlike Hodge, McCosh had read Spencer’s biological and psychological work. However, he too found Spencer’s ideas about life unsatisfactory. He felt Spencer’s biological work was valuable for describing the elements that make up organisms, but did not explain how these elements produce life as such. Nor did he believe that Spencer successfully showed how the persistence of force and instability of the homogenous could produce sensations of pleasure and pain. Porter, on the other hand, did not discuss the physiological side of Spencer’s psychology. Instead he praised Spencer for seeing that psychology is fundamental to philosophy’s ability to develop necessary principles. But he felt that Spencer’s promise was unfulfilled because he suborned his thought to a metaphysical hypothesis, the law of evolution, which was neither self-evident nor proven.

In some ways the writers were very different from each other, and they arrived at different conclusions about Spencer. Hodge treated him the least, and when he did it was to disagree with him. He made no comprehensive statement on Spencer. McCosh was the most knowledgeable about Spencer’s work and the most positive. He accepted Darwin’s ideas about evolution, noted that the world is filled with conflict and suffering, and even agreed that natural selection works in human society—though he contended

---

160 Ibid., 241.

161 McCosh, Christianity and Positivism, 364-365.

that it is the morally strong and Godly who are the fittest.163 McCosh highlighted Spencer’s ideas about progress, something few religious writers did. However, he pointed out that the thought of a world free from pain fifty million years in the future is small comfort to someone who is grieving now.164 Furthermore, Spencer could not prove that progress was inevitable; his physical forces could just as easily lead to destruction without regulation by his unknown reality, and such regulation implies goodness and wisdom.165 As Thomas Hill, former president of Harvard, put it, “the order of the universe is intelligible and beneficent; and we are hence led to the induction that its Cause is intelligent and benevolent.”166 Despite all his criticism, McCosh agreed that Spencer was a “powerful speculative thinker,” and suggested “it may be safely said of some of his high speculations, that they will not be either proven or disproven for ages.”167

Porter’s assessment, on the other hand, was ultimately dismissive. He recognized that Spencer’s familiarity with physics and natural history was unique among philosophers, and wrote that Spencer was not “a sophist or a charlatan, for the reason

163 McCosh, Christianity and Positivism, 70-72.
164 Ibid., 87.
165 Ibid., 369.
167 McCosh, Christianity and Positivism, 363.
that he instructs in too many single and important truths.”

Nevertheless Porter complained about the vagueness of terms like evolution, differentiation, and the like, called Spencer “a dexterous juggler,” and implied that Spencer overawed credulous readers with his knowledge and confidence. Ultimately, Porter wrote, any student of philosophy could see that Spencer’s knowledge was shallow, and that “notwithstanding the zeal of his admirers, he will cease to be the wonder of the hour; that so soon as the secret of his plausibility is exposed he will suffer a more complete neglect than he will fairly deserve.” Porter may have been correct in the long term, but in the short term he could not have been more wrong.

Hodge, McCosh, and Porter were fairly representative of mainstream theological opinion about Spencer. All three took Spencer seriously, though ultimately rejecting many of his ideas. Henry Ward Beecher, a Congregationalist minister and one of the most famous preachers in America, shared this sentiment. In The Christian Union, a magazine founded as a forum for Beecher in 1870, he wrote:

I am sorry to see men read Herbert Spencer, and Huxley, and Tyndall, as though they were the end of the law. I read them, too; and I believe much that they say. A great many things in their works will be found to be a part of the truth. But in order to get the truth which they contain I do not propose to forgo the Bible.

168 Porter, Sciences of Nature, 76-78; quotation is on p. 78.

169 Ibid., 67-68, 77.

170 Ibid., 79.

Beecher ultimately found Spencer’s work valuable, but as he said vis-a-vis Spencer on another occasion, “there never was a field of wheat that ripened which did not have a good deal of straw and husk with it.”172 None of those who wrote about Spencer from the mainline Christian perspective could accept Spencer completely, though the amount of chaff one found varied from person to person.

Some writers found little in Spencer besides a danger to faith. The Presbyterian weekly *New York Evangelist*, a frequent critic, warned “no one need read Herbert Spencer with any doubt of the fact that in so doing he steps into a poisonous atmosphere, against whose careless inhalation he should be on his guard.”173 A writer in the *Southern Review* evoked a great conflict between light and darkness, Christians and Atheists, with Spencer on the side of the latter.174 Such attacks were not the norm, however. Writers were more likely to try to expose Spencer’s mistakes than to condemn him. And by the 1870s, most recognized that Spencer posited a power or absolute that underlay and explained all perceptions—a valuable admission by one perceived to be in the camp of science. To reject Spencer completely was to lose the use such admissions for polemical purposes.

---


The Problem of Mind: Extending *The Principles of Psychology*

After the biology, the next step in Spencer’s journal was a reframing of *The Principles of Psychology*. Spencer planned to greatly expand this into a two volume work, more than doubling the size of the first edition. He began this work in 1867, and even hired a young Scotsman, David Duncan, as a research assistant and secretary. But before Spencer accomplished much, he had another breakdown; severe insomnia seems to have been the worst symptom. Hydropathic cures, skating, and racquets were not very helpful, so in the spring of 1868 he decided to take a tour of Italy. As usual, Spencer’s physical health was fine: he was able to chase down a twenty-year-old pickpocket (his sense of justice overcoming any thoughts of the dangers involved) and climb an erupting Mt. Vesuvius. In his autobiography he critiqued everything from the Sistine chapel to the Italian scenery, though he did admire Pompeii. In a letter to Youmans he cited his independent-mindedness: “not looking at things through the spectacles of authority, I often find but little to admire where the world admires, or professes to admire, a great deal.”

Spencer returned after six weeks with his health unimproved, but did feel that a break from work helped him in the long run. For the next five years Spencer worked on

---

176 *AB*, 2:180-185.
the *Psychology*, dictating on the racquet courts, in rowboats, and during walks.\(^{179}\) Even with all these precautions, his capacity for work was not high, and worked only in the early part of the day. Spencer was elected to London’s prestigious Athenaeum Club in 1868, and spent much of his afternoon there, playing billiards, skimming the latest periodicals and books, and chatting with friends.\(^{180}\) The first volume of the *Psychology* was not published until 1871; the second came out in 1873.

*The Principles of Psychology* was a foundational piece of the *Synthetic Philosophy*. Spencer never abandoned the idea that traditional introspective methods of psychological analysis are empirically valid.\(^{181}\) The Universal Postulate, which based truth on the human ability to conceive, undergirded *First Principles*, and the idea that innate ideas are inherited from ancestors was fundamental to his sociology and ethics. In the second edition, Spencer did not abandon these ideas, but built on them, and connected them more thoroughly to other parts of his grand philosophy. In particular, he added much more biological detail and discussed the ramifications of psychology for morality. Additionally, Spencer carried over his denial of free will from the first volume. Though he never emphasized this finding, it underlay his fatalism and sociological determinism. His objections to the historical emphasis on “great men,” for example, was based in part on his preference for environmental explanations over human agency.

\(^{179}\) *AB*, 2:199-201.

\(^{180}\) *AB*, 2:177, 225-226.

\(^{181}\) Francis, *Herbert Spencer*, 186.
Spencer’s additions to the first volume of *The Principles of Psychology* mostly took the form of a biological examination of the nervous system. In part I, “The Data of Psychology” he examined its structures and functions, and the connection to subjective experience. In an overview, he invoked evolution to explain psychological facts as “incidents in the continuous re-distribution of Matter and Motion,” an approach that led many critics to label his philosophy of mind materialistic. However, in the concluding chapter of the section he noted that

> Though accumulated observations and experiments have led us by a very indirect series of inferences...to the belief that mind and nervous action are the subjective and objective faces of the same thing, we remain utterly incapable of seeing, and even of imagining, how the two are related. Mind still continues to us a something without any kinship to other things...  

Spencer and his supporters could point to this and similar passages as evidence that he did not equate mind with matter.

However, in Spencer’s *Psychology* the separation between physiology and thought was razor thin. For him, the development of intelligence mirrored the growing complexity and centralization of nervous tissue. Spencer went into great detail about the composition and arrangement of the nerves, much of which was highly theoretical. For example, he explained the transmission of nervous signals by a “wave of isomeric transformation” (that is, a reversible chemical reaction) and proposed that the cerebellum coordinates objects in space while the cerebrum coordinates objects in

---

182 PP2, 1:13.

183 PP2, 1:140.
time. Basic principles of evolution explained the genesis of nerves: “nerve force” following lines of least resistance eventually carved out channels of molecules whose symmetric “orientation” and “polarities” better carried nervous waves. Over long periods “compound” and “doubly-compound” nervous systems evolved, and reflex action evolved into more complex instinct and thus into consciousness. None of these positions was justified by the available evidence, but Spencer was not the type to forgo explanations that were plausible because solid facts were lacking. A priori deductions from basic physical principles helped fill in these gaps. For Spencer, the development of complex nervous systems was a prime example of the law of evolution in action. The progression from small, simple coordination of nerves in minor ganglia to increasingly large and more compound coordination in vertebrate centers implied a progressive integration of motions that grew in heterogeneity and definiteness. The first principles of evolution were never far from Spencer’s mind, though much of his physiological information was too specific to illustrate such general laws.

184 PP2, 1:21, 61-62.
185 PP2, 1:511-518.
186 PP2, 1:521-559.
188 PP2, 1:67.
Bringing brain and mind even closer together was Spencer’s chapter on “Aestho-Physiology,” a word he coined for the study of the connection between nervous action and thought. Though he stated clearly that mental experiences do not have any conceivable similarity to biological processes, Spencer narrowed the gap considerably. He pointed out that things which inhibit nervous action, like pressure or poor circulation, also reduce feelings. Spencer wrote,

We have good reason to conclude that at the particular place in a superior nervous centre where, in some mysterious way, an objective change or nervous action causes a subjective change or feeling, there exists a quantitative equivalence between the two; the amount of sensation is proportionate to the amount of molecular transformation that takes place in the vesicular substance affected.

Emotions, Spencer felt, obey the same general laws. For example, he described desires as imagined feelings aroused when the corresponding real feelings have not recently been experienced. These imagined feelings correspond to nerves which have not been discharged, becoming unstable and sensitive to the general reverberations of the nervous system until they are either exercised or until gradually the sensitivity ends and the corresponding desires fade.

In the second part of his Psychology Spencer explored the basic elements of mind, much as he had explored the basic composition of the brain before. He suggested
a new theory: that all feelings can be deconstructed into tiny elemental “shocks,” like the feeling of exposure to electricity or a loud noise but on a much smaller scale. As nerves act in pulses, so these tiny feelings of shock combine in various ways to create the mind. Again, Spencer carefully pointed out that what these elemental particles of feelings are is unknown, so they cannot simply be translated into the physical firing of nerves. The difference between mind and matter was preserved, though Spencer narrowed the gap tremendously. However, he did not pursue this line of thought further, instead turning to the kind of subjective analysis of the psyche familiar from the first edition of The Principles of Psychology.

Each feeling, Spencer wrote, occupies a portion of consciousness large enough to make it distinct from others. Thus individual feelings could be minutely analyzed. In their individual states they could be primary—either centrally initiated (emotions) or peripherally initiated (external and internal sensations)—or secondary, recollected versions of these. Together they formed clusters, such as with an “idea” which Spencer interpreted as a combination of vivid and faint feelings. Spencer thought that feelings and the relations between them tended to cluster together with similar predecessors, according the law of association. This arrangement worked beneficially in

---

193 PP2, 1:150-158.
194 PP2, 1:164.
195 PP2, 1:165-167, 228, 240.
196 PP2, 1:175-182.
nature in the form of pleasure and pain. Survival of the fittest favored organisms in which pain accompanies actions harmful to the individual or group, and pleasure accompanies helpful actions likewise.\textsuperscript{197} This conception was foundational to Spencer’s later social and ethical theory; as he pointed out here, human beings have not yet fully adjusted to their social environment (thanks in part to the elimination of natural selection) and so still find some harmful things pleasurable and some helpful things painful.\textsuperscript{198}

Spencer included the sections “General Synthesis” and “Special Synthesis” from the first edition with few changes. This included his view that intelligence is simply highly developed instinct, that basic modes of thought are inherited from a long line of ancestors, that the self is simply a composite of all current states of consciousness, and that free will is illusory. In his second volume he expanded on some of these ideas. He began with his “Special Analysis” from the first edition, with a few minor changes having to do with reasoning and spatial perception.\textsuperscript{199} The “General Analysis,” which discussed the Universal Postulate, was greatly expanded and its core reworded. At root it was defense of realism against idealism, ending in a doctrine Spencer called “Transfigured Realism.” Against “metaphysicians” Spencer argued that reason is just a re-coordination of already coordinated states of consciousness, not categorically different than

\textsuperscript{197} PP2, 1:280.

\textsuperscript{198} PP2, 1:281-285.

\textsuperscript{199} PP2, 1:86-97, 178-206.
observation as a way of knowing.\textsuperscript{200} Thus reason was not competent to overrule the reports of the senses. Furthermore, Spencer noted that the division between “self” (subject, ego) and “not-self” (object, non-ego) is primordial to consciousness and directly and vividly felt, while Idealism, the outcome of a chain of reasoned arguments, could only be vague.\textsuperscript{201} Spencer’s ultimate argument against Idealism was the Universal Postulate, which he altered slightly to deal with some of John Stuart Mill’s criticisms. The real change from the first edition was that Spencer now connected his postulate to his other psychological theories. To Spencer, cohesions among thoughts could be stronger or weaker; the Universal Postulate simply singled out cohesions that could not be broken apart as necessarily true beliefs.\textsuperscript{202} After examining the conceptions of subject and object innate to the human mind, Spencer explained Transfigured Realism: the reality of objective existence is a necessity of thought, but this does not mean that things are exactly as they seem to the observer.\textsuperscript{203} This brought Spencer back to the conclusion he had reached in \textit{First Principles}: the universe is a manifestation of an Unknowable Reality.\textsuperscript{204}

\textsuperscript{200} \textit{PP2}, 1:308-309, 313-317.

\textsuperscript{201} \textit{PP2}, 1:369-374, 375-81.


\textsuperscript{203} \textit{PP2}, 1:494.

\textsuperscript{204} \textit{PP2}, 1:503.
Spencer ended the new *Principles of Psychology* with a section of miscellaneous corollaries from what had gone before. Most of this section concerned “the special psychology of Man, considered as the unit of which societies are composed.”

Here Spencer explored a number of conceptions that would be crucial for his sociology and especially for his ethical system. First, he categorized thoughts and feelings into overlapping categories: presentative (sensation), presentative-representative (identification), representative (recollection), and re-representative (abstract thought).

To Spencer, these categories corresponded to degrees of mental evolution. He argued that primitive man could not think abstractly, in terms of law, because his way of life gave him little chance to observe precise equality or the exact repetition of events. Spencer also considered primitive man deficient in imagination and originality, both requiring recollection. He based these ideas on his categorical scheme rather than on anthropological evidence, a very different procedure from his later sociological work.

Society, Spencer argued, requires sympathy or fellow-feeling, which can only be strong where the higher thoughts and feelings make it possible for the individual to

---

205 *PP2*, 1:508.


207 *PP2*, 2:516-520.


209 *PP2*, 2:532-535.
represent to himself the pleasures and pains of others.\textsuperscript{210} Spencer divided these re-representations into egoistic, ego-altruistic, and altruistic sentiments, giving Auguste Comte due credit for the word “Altruism.”\textsuperscript{211} The egoistic type included the enjoyment of possessions, love of freedom, feelings of pride, and the like—all requiring abstract thought.\textsuperscript{212} Ego-altruistic sentiments were those tied to social approbation; right and wrong being socially determined and backed by love of admiration and fear of punishment both in this life and the next.\textsuperscript{213} Finally, the most evolved type of sentiment, present only in civilized men living in highly civilized societies, was the purely altruistic one. These sentiments transcended the merely relatively right and wrong for absolute ethics.\textsuperscript{214} For Spencer, complete altruism was only possible in societies that had evolved beyond military and industrial conflict, for such conflict inevitably meant the hardening of the sympathies.\textsuperscript{215} The most complex of the altruistic sentiments, Spencer wrote, was the sense of justice.\textsuperscript{216} In this way Spencer came full circle: his psychological doctrines justified the political doctrines he set down in his earliest work.

\textsuperscript{210} PP2, 2:562-566.

\textsuperscript{211} PP2, 2:607. Spencer felt the word lent more clarity to the discussion that “benevolence” or “beneficence”.

\textsuperscript{212} PP2, 2:578-589.

\textsuperscript{213} PP2, 2:598-603.

\textsuperscript{214} PP2, 2:608-609.

\textsuperscript{215} PP2, 2:611-612.

\textsuperscript{216} PP2, 2:616.
The enlarged version of Spencer’s psychology ranged widely, and sometimes the pieces fit together uneasily. He came very close to identifying mind with brain. But using subjective analysis to explore one and physiological data to describe the other made them seem very different indeed. Spencer argued that both the mind and the brain of man had evolved from lower forms by steady steps: as nervous centers became more complex, “involved forms of consciousness which are the correlatives of these complex structures and functions must have arisen by degrees.”217 Yet his interest in physiology apparently stopped after volume one, and his sections on primitive man in volume two were almost devoid of physical data. This makes it difficult to assess how influential his biology was on his sociology and ethics. Finally, Spencer ended the book with some of his weakest material, on the mentality of primitive man. His hypotheses in earlier sections at least had the benefit of being plausible.

The Mental and the Material: Critiques of the New Psychology

Before the first volume of the second edition of the Psychology was published the New-York Tribune discussed its first section, The Data of Psychology, based on the periodical segments still being sent to subscribers.218 The short article was complimentary to Spencer, but its main concern was to show, with quotations, that

217 PP2, 1:292.

218 Several periodicals refer to The Data of Psychology as published by D. Appleton in 1869, including Appleton’s own house magazine: “Literary Notes,” Appletons’ Journal of Literature, Science and Art 1, no. 1 (Apr. 3, 1869), 26. However, no such publication is listed in Robert G. Perrin’s bibliography and I have been unable to locate it elsewhere. Robert G. Perrin, Herbert Spencer: A Primary and Secondary Bibliography (New York: Garland, 1993). It was likely the subscription version which was reviewed.
Spencer did not equate consciousness and nervous activity.\textsuperscript{219} This was an important issue for many critics, especially religious writers. For example, \textit{The Independent} also discussed the first section briefly, concluding that it was valuable in part for the “strictly scientific demolition of the doctrine of materialism which the concluding chapters contain.”\textsuperscript{220} \textit{The Ladies’ Repository}, still taking an approving interest in Spencer, pointed out the difference between Comte, who rejected psychology as metaphysical, and Spencer, who recognized it as something different than pure physiology.\textsuperscript{221}

However, reviews of the complete volumes were few. In part this was because Spencer, concerned about misrepresentation of his views, stopped sending copies of his books to the press. The extremely technical nature of the material also contributed. Spencer’s highly speculative physiological theories were panned by a writer in \textit{The Methodist Quarterly Review}, who quoted a long section about the evolution of nerves and observed “can any one say they have ever met with a more fanciful, or artificial, or minute account of a process, the details of which are mostly beyond the power of the microscope, and of which, for this reason as well as for others, we know almost nothing?”\textsuperscript{222} Perhaps for this reason, few reviews appeared in medical journals, and


\textsuperscript{220} “Book Table,” \textit{Independent} 21, no. 1062 (Apr. 8, 1869), 6.

\textsuperscript{221} “Contemporary Literature,” \textit{Ladies’ Repository} 29 (May 1869), 396-398.

\textsuperscript{222} J. S. Jewell, “Conservation, Correlation, and Origin of the Physical, Vital, and Mental Forces,” \textit{Methodist Quarterly Review} 24 (July 1872), 433-435; the quotation is on p. 435.
those that did were brief. A critic in Harper’s Monthly worried that Spencer’s abstruse style could lead to misunderstandings, and maintained that Spencer was not an atheist or skeptic, but a pantheist and realist who founded knowledge on intuition.

The most important discussion of Spencer’s psychology appeared five years after the fact: an article by William James in The Journal of Speculative Philosophy. James was worried about the impact of Spencer’s theory of mind: “Probably a large proportion of those hard-headed readers who subscribe to the Popular Science Monthly and Nature, and whose sole philosopher Herbert Spencer is, are fascinated by it without being in the least aware of what its consequences are,” he wrote. James’ was primarily concerned with Spencer’s determinism. An idea of mind as nervous adjustments of internal to external conditions for the sole purpose of survival left out important human interests like aesthetic feelings and religious emotions. Furthermore, group survival required many of these human interests to contradict individual well-being. Bravery and self-sacrifice, for example, were elements of the personality that were good for the group but not for the individual. James argued that these diverse elements of the human

---

223 “Modern Psychology,” Medical and Surgical Reporter 29, no. 10 (Sept. 6, 1873), 176-177.


225 William James, “Remarks on Spencer’s Definition of Mind as Correspondence,” Journal of Speculative Philosophy 12, no. 1 (Jan. 1978), 1.

226 Ibid., 2-3, 5, 7.

227 Ibid., 8-9.
mind were often in conflict, so no normative theory of correct behavior was possible.\textsuperscript{228}

He concluded that the mind is not a passive reflector but an actor, with a “vote” in the conflict.\textsuperscript{229} Clearly, James did not agree with Spencer’s position on free will.

Americans mostly ignored the second edition of \textit{The Principles of Psychology}, but this did not mean that Spencer’s popularity was waning. In the 1870s, interest in \textit{First Principles} was just as great as ever. And by the middle of the decade, Spencer had begun publishing his work on human societies, first in the enormously popular \textit{The Study of Sociology} and then in the volumes of \textit{The Principles of Sociology}. Spencer had gained popular fame as well, as evidenced by the many references to him in articles, books, and even in stories and poems. Herbert Spencer’s stock continued to rise.

\textsuperscript{228} Ibid., 13, 16.

\textsuperscript{229} Ibid., 17.
CHAPTER FIVE

HERBERT SPENCER AND AMERICAN FAME

She was a girl of education and sense, and she no more believed in ghosts than does Professor Huxley or Herbert Spencer.

--Justin McCarthy, “The Tread of Invisible Feet”

Herbert Spencer had a reputation which extended beyond the ranks of academics and clergymen. The first book he published in America, Education, ensured it.

As Spencer’s System of Philosophy gained him repute as a philosopher, popular recognition also grew. From 1864, when the first American edition of First Principles was published, to 1874, when the highly popular The Study of Sociology appeared, Spencer became a household name for millions of Americans. Some casual readers came to know him as the epitome of the intellectual, a philosopher and man of science on a fearless quest for the truth who had dedicated his life to a great work. Others saw him as the greatest menace to religion in the modern world. Many understood him as both. One thing was clear: Herbert Spencer had a message for Americans. But was it one they could comprehend?

---

The Popular Philosopher: The Breadth of Spencer’s Audience

Information about Spencer spread in a variety of ways. The print media was one; word of mouth was another. Personal conversations are impossible to reconstruct, but sermons and speeches were sometimes preserved in newspapers, journals, and books. These reveal the wide range of venues in which Spencer was discussed. In a Fourth of July speech given in Boston in 1863, Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. cited Spencer as a recent thinker who expounded a “law of simultaneous intellectual movement” which could explain the changes in thinking and feeling that led to the Civil War. In a discussion of “negro suffrage” at New York’s 1867-68 Constitutional Convention, one speaker, claiming blacks were a “younger race,” proclaimed “Herbert Spencer recognizes the education of races by the reiteration of impressions made hereditary by their action upon successive generations.” W. C. Flagg, President of the Illinois State Farmers’ Association, argued against Spencer on government ownership of railroads in an address to the National Agricultural Congress’ fourth annual session in Cincinnati. In the cities and on the prairies, farmers, politicians, and ordinary citizens became familiar with Spencer’s name and with his ideas.

---

2 Oliver Wendell Holmes, *Oration Delivered before the City Authorities of Boston, on the Fourth of July, 1863* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: ProQuest I&L Research Collections), 14.

3 *Proceedings and Debates of the Constitutional Convention of the State of New York Held in 1867 and 1868 in the City of Albany* (Albany: Weed, Parsons, [1868]).

Spencer’s theories continued to be debated by religious thinkers throughout this period. Sometimes such debates took place at gatherings of clergymen. In an address to a conference of Unitarian ministers, Orville Dewey discussed Spencer at some length, observing that “to be all the while writing, thinking of infinitude and yet to deny that it is thinkable seems a strange thing.”5 A year earlier Dewey wrote to a friend, “I have fought, in these later years, through Mansel and Herbert Spencer, as hard a battle as I have ever had. But I have come, through all, to the most rooted conviction of the Infinite Rectitude and Goodness.”6 Papers on Spencer were presented at a variety of such conferences, from Methodist conclaves to institutes for Congregationalist seminarians.7 Interest in Spencer was not confined to the leading theologians of these denominations, but extended to the clergy in general and from them to the laymen in their flocks.

Seminary students sometimes heard lectures discussing Spencer as part of their curriculum. For example, James McCosh delivered a lecture on Spencer to the students of Union Theological Seminary in 1871, which was reprinted in the New York Times.8 Secular institutions, too, hosted discussions of Spencer. In 1868, former Ohio Governor

---


James Dolson Cox gave a critical review of *Education* to the learned societies of Miami University of Ohio.⁹ At the 1872 Vassar College commencement, one of the students read an essay on “The Conservation of Thought” based on Spencer’s ideas about the persistence of force.¹⁰ Spencer’s books were not adopted by many schools, in great part because he was perceived as an enemy of Christian religion. However, American papers did report that Oxford had adopted some of Spencer’s works as required reading, and that questions about him appeared on qualifying exams.¹¹

Religious radicals took an interest in Spencer as well. In 1867, at Boston’s Free Religious Club (later the Free Religious Association), Lizzie Doten, a spiritualist who had published poems purportedly dictated by the spirits of William Shakespeare, Robert Burns, and Edgar Allen Poe, discussed the Unknowable before an audience that included Bronson Alcott and his daughter Louisa May, Julia Ward Howe, D. A. Wasson, Lucretia Mott, and Robert Dale Owen.¹² Owen, a spiritualist himself, used Spencer’s suggestion that long-held beliefs must contain an element of truth as an argument for belief in the

---

⁹ “College Record,” *New York Evangelist* 39, no. 29 (July 16, 1868), 8.


afterlife in the pages of *Atlantic Monthly*.\(^\text{13}\) Owen later compared his youthful theological ideas to Spencer’s—”a confession of incompetence to grasp in thought the cause of all things.”\(^\text{14}\) Philosophical societies also sometimes “tackled” Spencer.\(^\text{15}\)

Physicians frequently discussed Spencer. At a conference of the American Dental Association, a section on dental chemistry turned into an impromptu debate about modern science in which one doctor quoted Spencer at length on evolution and the advance of knowledge, and defended him against accusations of materialism.\(^\text{16}\) A speech read before the Ohio State Medical Society in 1872 discussed the persistence of force as fundamental to human thought. “It would be out of place in this paper to elucidate the great doctrine referred to,” the speaker announced, “but we may safely say that upon this field is to be fought the final battle of Truth against Error.”\(^\text{17}\) Medical men often took opposite sides in this battle, as when an article disparaging Spencer prompted a doctor to write a letter declaring him the greatest philosopher of the age.


\(^{15}\) “They Tackled Herbert Spencer,” *Sunday Times (Chicago, IL)*, October 11, 1874.


\(^{17}\) J. B. Hough, “Medical Societies: Report on Medical Chemistry,” *Medical and Surgical Reporter* 27, no. 6 (Aug. 10, 1872), 126.
for his unification of all phenomena under one law. Such discussions concerned Spencer’s general philosophy rather than any specific biological or psychological theories. Medical men rarely cited Spencer in their professional papers, except in vague terms. Sometimes the terms could be very vague indeed. One writer referred to Spencer’s great law as “the continuous redistribution of matter and motion.” Another wrote that Spencer would attribute the arrangement and movement of the heart to “external forces;” the writer preferred Hegel’s idea of “opposing forces.”

Indefiniteness about Spencer’s arguments and beliefs was common in the popular print media as well. Often Spencer was simply used as an example of scholarly intellect. George William Curtis, writing from his perch on the “Editor’s Easy Chair” at Harper’s Monthly, thought Spencer would be puzzled at how railroad conductors become invisible at any sign of trouble. Sarah Josepha Hale, doing similar duty at Godey’s, imagined that even Spencer would be unable to explain the development of her pet rabbit, and would classify such questions as unknowable. Spencer was often seen as the prototypical impractical, abstruse philosopher. The Chicago Tribune, for

---

18 “Does Marriage Prolong Life?” Medical and Surgical Reporter 27, no. 20 (Nov. 16, 1872), 447-448; H, “Marriage and Long Life,” letter to the editor, Medical and Surgical Reporter 27, no. 25 (Dec. 21, 1872), 541.

19 F. Homer Blackman, “Remarks on Relations of the Physical Forces to Disease,” Chicago Medical Examiner 11, no. 5 (May 1870), 268.

20 “Further Flights in Anatomy,” Medical and Surgical Reporter 28, no. 8 (Feb. 22, 1873), 179.

21 [George William Curtis], “Editor’s Easy Chair,” Harper’s New Monthly Magazine 30, no. 179 (Apr. 1865), 673; [Sarah Josepha Hale], “Editors’ Table,” Godey’s Lady’s Book and Magazine 71 (July 1865), 83.
example, pictured him in his library, sitting in an easy chair, “elevated above the plain of ordinary mortals.”

Another writer imagined him returning from his metaphysical roaming to “old paths” of Christianity thanks to his childhood faith.

Sometimes writers highlighted the technical nature of Spencer’s writing, as when D. A. Wasson used him as an example of “the Dryasdust of science” and wrote:

It is true that Mr. Herbert Spencer, having, by diligent, heroic self-desiccation, got his mind into the purely adult, dried-beef condition, well freed from all boy-juices of imagination, has discovered that all Fact in this universe, which cannot be verbally formulated and made a scientific dogma, is without significance to man’s spirit, however it may be negatively implied as a vacant somewhat by his logic. For which discovery the incomparable man will please accept my profoundest ingratitude.

On the other hand, a commentator in the Chicago Tribune wrote “he has frosted over the naked, wintry landscape of philosophy with glistening rainbow flakes of poetry and beauty, and enlivened its desolation with music.”

Clearly there was room for disagreement about Spencer’s attractions as a writer.

In fiction, Spencer’s works were often used as examples of the complex and abstruse. In a poem about her daughter being “commonplace,” popular writer Constance Fenimore Woolson asked if she should “take her stories—simple tales which her few leisure hours beguile— / And give her Browning’s Sordello, a Herbert Spencer, a

---


23 “Old Paths,” Zion’s Herald 51, no. 17 (Apr. 23, 1874), 132.


Carlyle?”26 In a later story Woolson demonstrated the intellect of a character by having him study Spencer with careful attention to each word. She observed that both the scientific and the illiterate read this way, unlike those of the middle-class, who look only for the general meaning.27 Similarly, Spencer sometimes served as an example of the dangers of modern thought. In one of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s stories, the narrator explained “my mother and aunt had read together Lecky, and Buckle, and Herbert Spencer, with the keen critical interest of fresh minds. Had it troubled their faith? Not in the least. . . .There is a certain moral altitude where faith becomes knowledge, and the bat-wings of doubt cannot fly so high.”28 Whatever nuances intellectuals and theologians might find in Spencer, to many Americans he was known as a danger to faith, and little else.

Nevertheless, Americans were eager to learn what Spencer was really like. In 1870, British writer Justin McCarthy, a frequent contributor to American magazines, wrote “during the first few weeks of my sojourn in the United States I heard more inquiries and more talk about Spencer than about almost any other Englishman living.”29

Under McCarthy’s pen Spencer emerged as an outwardly prosaic, respectable

---


28 Harriet Beecher Stowe, “My Wife and I; Or, Harry Henderson’s History,” Christian Union 3, no. 3 (Jan. 18, 1871), 35.

gentleman who had a “pure, rigorous, anchorite-like devotion to knowledge” and an uncompromising love of justice—a moral and intellectual superman in the guise of a Victorian Clark Kent.³⁰ A year earlier, another writer made a similar report after meeting Spencer: New-York Tribune editor George Ripley. Of Spencer’s manner, Ripley wrote,

> Without any formal and pedantic precision, he evidently weighs his expressions with the conscientiousness of one who wishes to make his language the exact representation of his ideas. He speaks fluently, but not volubly, and with a certain grave earnestness that is more impressive than any attempt at conversational eloquence.

Spencer’s careful choice of words was noticed by many of those who admired him. Ripley also made it clear that Spencer was no materialist. He cited Spencer’s oft-repeated comment that if he had to choose between pure materialism and pure spiritualism he would choose the latter.³¹

An early biographical sketch appeared in the Independent in 1864, attributed to “Mrs. Tracy Cutler.” Cutler got her information from a visit she paid to Spencer’s parents a dozen years before. During their conversation, William George Spencer reportedly said that he would have been proud to give his son a “profound classical education” but felt it would ruin the boy’s health. So he educated his son by referring to physical objects and their laws instead. No doubt Herbert Spencer would have been surprised to learn that the teaching methods and subjects he cherished were actually his father’s second choice. Also, according to Cutler, Spencer senior regretted not giving his son a deeper

---

³⁰ Ibid., 38-40.

education in moral philosophy. But when he loaned his son a copy of Johnathan Dymond’s *Essays on the Principles of Morality* the young man said he could do a better job himself, and several months later sent his father a copy of *Social Statics*.32

Mistaken information about Spencer circulated all too commonly. Usually such errors were innocuous, as when he was referred to as a “statistician” or as “Sir Herbert Spencer.”33 Other times they were more serious. In the 1870s, a rumor spread that Spencer had educated George Eliot, a piece of misinformation that took years to dispel.34 Even the Appletons’ own magazine claimed that the two met in her teens and that “under Spencer the future novelist probably learned to think.”35 Other reports had Spencer engaged to marry an American heiress, or to become president of a college in Cincinnati.36 Sloppy reporting is not a modern invention. Spencer himself learned to accept such misstatements as inevitable. He only took them seriously if they reflected badly on himself or on people he cared about. Mistaken interpretations of his work, on the other hand, drew his immediate attention.

---


33 “Pamphlets and Periodicals,” *New York Evangelist* 23, no. 19 (May 6, 1852), 76; *The Louisville Daily Journal*, June 6, 1864.

34 “George Eliot,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, Dec. 29, 1872. I am fairly certain this was not the source of the rumor, thought the Chronical claimed to have confirmed the story with people who should know. See also “Literary News,” *Literary World* 3, no. 2 (Apr. 1, 1873), 175.

35 “Editor’s Table,” *Appletons’ Journal of Literature, Science and Art* 9, no. 206 (Mar. 1, 1873), 313-314.

Some periodicals and newspapers took an interest in Spencer’s publishing history. It became a point of pride to many that Americans supported Spencer when the British did not. “The first money that Herbert Spencer ever received in his life from his books was sent to him in 1861 by the Appletons as his share of the proceeds of his ‘Essays upon Education’” James Parton bragged in *Atlantic Monthly*. Nor was this all: according to Parton, Spencer’s works were particularly well adopted to the American mind, and *Social Statics* was “Jeffersonian Democracy, illustrated and applied.”37 The exaggerations became so great that Youmans felt compelled to set the record straight in the *New-York Tribune*. If American support of Spencer was to be “boasted of as a national honor,” Youmans wrote, then at least the facts should be known, and Spencer’s English supporters not slighted.38

Spencer was quoted regularly, often to give an article a little panache or scholarly heft. Since Spencer wrote on a range of subjects, his name appeared in a wide variety of contexts. Some writers cited his essays on business ethics and bemoaned the scarcity of moral values in American commercial dealings.39 One quoted Spencer on the moral nature of children.40 *Every Saturday* repeated his views on the cost and trouble of

---


38 E. L. Youmans, “Herbert Spencer and His American Friends,” *New York Tribune*, June 7, 1872. See also *Christian Union* 5, no. 25 (June 12, 1872), 504; *Chicago Tribune*, June 13, 1872.


following convention, while *Scientific American* used him as an authority on intellectual property and patent rights. Sometimes Spencer’s miscellaneous scientific work was discussed, like his theories about electricity or sunspots. Even a general-interest magazine like *Scribner’s Monthly* might reprint one of Spencer’s scientific arguments. Such attention put Spencer before a multitude—*Scribner’s*, another of the great publisher-owned periodicals, printed 40,000 copies of its first issue in 1870 and had print runs of more than 100,000 by the end of the decade. Newspapers, too, discussed Spencer’s scientific theories. The *Chicago Tribune* reported on an amateur scientist in Britain who tried to verify Spencer’s ideas about inherited instinct by putting wax in the ears of newborn chicks, and hoods on their heads. The experimenter reported that as soon as the impediments were removed the chicks used their senses properly to locate food, although they had never used them before. This kind of experimental verification of Spencer’s ideas was rare, however.


Spencer’s *Education* remained a landmark text in the decades after its publication. It continued to be recommended, at least by those not put off by Spencer’s religious views. The *Southern Review*, belatedly reviewing *Education* in 1867, announced that all parents should read the sections on the management of children.\(^{46}\) Another Southern periodical, *De Bow’s Review*, used the book as part of an argument in favor of practical and science-based education in the South.\(^{47}\) Teachers discussed the book in journals of education and at teachers’ associations and conferences.\(^{48}\) One writer even called Spencer “the greatest living writer on education,”\(^{49}\) but such hyperbole was not typical. However, general appreciation for Spencer’s work was common, even among those who disagreed on one or two points. For example, a writer in *Massachusetts Teacher* agreed with Spencer that knowing the meanings of words does not teach cause and effect, but argued that learning Latin was useful for exercising the mind.\(^{50}\)

---

\(^{46}\) Review of *Education: Intellectual, Moral, and Physical*, by Herbert Spencer, *Southern Review* 2, no. 4 (Oct. 1867), 316. However, *Education* was mostly used as “peg” on which to hang the author’s own argument.


bearing on ethics and religious instruction. Spencer argued that education did not in itself make a person moral, an issue that was taken up, pro and con, by numerous writers. Of course, Spencer’s neglect of spiritual training was an issue for those who felt that religious values should be considered the knowledge of most worth, since they determined the soul’s destination.

The Practical Philosopher: Spencer’s General Readership

Education was Spencer’s most popular book among women. At ladies’ clubs and churches, women discussed the book and urged others to read it. Often the context of consumption was quite domestic. One woman described herself darning socks while her husband read Education aloud: “that homely embroidery fitted well with Herbert Spencer’s genial philosophy, and while I gained new ideas about my boy’s education, I had a certain satisfaction in feeling that I was making comfortable provision for his toes also.” The scene was mirrored in fiction in the sentimental tale “Dr.


53 It was quite possibly Spencer’s most-read book among men, too, especially after a cheap edition was published. But in print it was little discussed except among educators.


Thorne’s Confession.” The titular character, having married a sweet and beautiful young wife, tried to “discipline her mind” by reading Spencer’s “Social Status” aloud to her by the fire in the evenings.\textsuperscript{56} Women’s reaction to Education was not always positive, however, for it sent mixed messages about the education of girls. Sarah Josepha Hale chided Spencer in Godey’s Lady’s Book for writing that men prefer rosy cheeks to intellectual achievements. She replied that while physical and moral health is important, intelligent companionship is just as attractive. Hale, a dedicated supporter of female education, also argued for women’s place in intellectual history, and contended that women could make contributions in the sciences if they were properly trained.\textsuperscript{57}

Women read Spencer’s other books as well. Sometimes writers used knowledge of Spencer as shorthand for general intellectual ability, as when Justin McCarthy observed that he had heard “American girls” talking about Spencer in a way that showed that they had not only read him, but understood him.\textsuperscript{58} Scribner’s ran a poem which described romancing an educated women who “knows by heart John Stuart Mill / And likewise Herbert Spencer!”\textsuperscript{59} Such knowledge could be couched in negative terms as well: one writer, presumably male, conjured up a vision of a women’s rights advocate

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{56} Amanda M. Hale, “Dr. Thorne’s Confession,” Flag of our Union 23, no. 50 (Dec. 12, 1868), 2. Thorne lectures her after she dozes: “Herbert Spencer, dear, is one of the best writers of the day. It would be an excellent discipline for you, Katherine, to read all his works consecutively.” “’O!’ in a groan.”

\textsuperscript{57} [Sarah Josepha Hale], “Editors’ Table,” Godey’s Lady’s Book and Magazine 72, no. 38 (June 1866), 550-551.

\textsuperscript{58} Justin McCarthy, “American Women and English Women,” Galaxy 10, no. 1 (July 1870), 27.

\textsuperscript{59} “Debonair,” “A Blue-Stocking,” Scribner’s Monthly 17, no. 6 (Apr. 1879), 919.
\end{flushleft}
with pale, doughy skin, thoughtful eyes, and a flat chest, discussing Bismarck and Herbert Spencer with the men—a description that echoed Spencer’s own account of the effects of high-pressure education on women. Some women did write articles about Spencer. “Mrs. A. E. Barr” contributed an excellent summary of the first part of First Principles to the Christian Union, a magazine founded as a vehicle for Henry Ward Beecher in 1870. Barr concluded that religion and science agree that ultimate reality is inscrutable, a more charitable view than that taken by most of her male colleagues. Marie Howland, while acknowledging Spencer as “one of the first intelligences that the world has known,” contended that his arguments against government did not apply to a republic like the United States, where the welfare and liberty of citizens was a fundamental principle. Additionally, despite the fact that Spencer partially retracted his defense of women's rights in the American edition of Social Statics, some continued to cite him as an advocate for women. At least one writer mistakenly claimed that Spencer signed the petition on the right to vote that John Stuart Mill created and presented to Parliament in 1867.

---


64 Lander, Meta [Margaret Woods Lawrence], “Talks about the Woman Question,” Ladies’ Repository 31, no. 3 (Mar. 1871), 215. A letter from Spencer to Mill makes it clear that he had not. Herbert Spencer
Evidence exists that some African-Americans read Spencer as well. Fanny Jackson Coppin, a former slave, Oberlin College graduate, and Principal of the Philadelphia Institute for Colored Youth, boasted that in the evening many patrons of the school’s reading room asked for Mill, Hamilton, or Spencer, and read and re-read them.\textsuperscript{65} That African-Americans would read the books of a decided racist may be surprising, but most of Spencer’s comments on race were made in his sociological work. Spencer’s arguments in favor of individual freedom would have appealed to black Americans. Nor were Spencer’s ideas about race discussed in the print media, in part because they were not remarkable for the time. Interestingly, Spencer was on the committee that elected Edward Wilmot Blyden, the Liberian minister to England, an honorary member of the Athenaeum Club, as reported by \textit{The African Repository}, long-running journal of the American Colonization Society.\textsuperscript{66} Spencer did not mention the incident in his autobiography or surviving letters, so his attitude about the election is unclear.

Spencer had a large and diverse audience, despite the fact this his books were universally considered heavy reading. As \textit{Every Saturday} put it, “who reads Herbert Spencer in June, or speculates very deeply upon ‘fate and foreknowledge’ in the dog-

\footnotesize{
to John Stuart Mill, Aug. 9, 1867, in David Duncan, \textit{Life and Letters of Herbert Spencer} (London: Methuen, 1908), 138-139.

\textsuperscript{65} http://explorepahistory.com/hmarker.php?markerid=1-A-381; “Institute for Colored Youth in Philadelphia,” \textit{Old and New} 1, no. 6 (June, 1870), 839.

}
Some suspected that many who read Spencer did not fully understand him. One writer in the Galaxy wrote “they praise Herbert Spencer, because he is direct and interesting, and makes each of his readers think that they have solved the riddle of the universe, and that they know more than they did before they were introduced to ‘first principles.’” A writer in the Round Table believed that thanks to the diffusion of education combined with democratic principles, Americans liked to buy books they knew they would not be able to understand, like those of Spencer, Mill, and Comte:

The American has an idea, fixed though vague, that such and such writers are in the van of contemporaneous thought, and that therefore he should possess their works. He may not have time to understand them just yet, but he hopes to do so by-and-by. Meanwhile he is gratified at being able to get at the sense of a passage here and there, and has a profound reverence for not being able to understand the whole of it.

The passage is snobbish, but has an element of truth. Not everyone who read Spencer finished his books, or understood what they had read. Unfortunately, this was also true of those who wrote about him.

Pastors and other religious authorities worried that their youth were reading Spencer and other unhealthy books. “A young man of consecrated purpose and powerful intelligence, who wants to learn how to live most largely in accordance with truth, will frequent the lecture-room of science rather than the conventicle of tradition.

---

67 “The Summer Campaign,” Every Saturday 1, no. 30 (July 23, 1870), 466.

68 Eugene Benson, “About the Literary Spirit,” Galaxy (July 15, 1866), 489.

69 “The Future of the Publishers,” Round Table 6, no. 149 (Nov. 30, 1867), 353.
He will not hear C. H. Spurgeon; he will study Herbert Spencer,” worried one concerned writer.\(^70\) The New York YMCA refused to accept a magazine because it had articles by Spencer in it.\(^71\) On the other hand, in an 1867 article the *Independent* recommended “awakeners” for its young male readers, whether it be *Sartor Resartus*, Mill’s *Logic*, or Spencer’s *First Principles*.\(^72\) Possibly the influence of Henry Ward Beecher was responsible, for he remained attached to the weekly until 1870.

**The True Believers: Spencer’s American Disciples**

Spencer’s supporters were quick to defend him from hostile criticism. In 1869 a critic in *The Nation*, reviewing a book by Henri Taine, wrote “it is Herbert Spencer’s reputation over again, all very well for the ‘general public’ but the chemists and the physicians, the painters and the architects are disposed to scoff at the new light.”\(^73\) Over the next few months, the magazine printed several responses. Publisher Henry Holt pointed out that Spencer never claimed to be an expert in any one field, and that men like Hooker, Huxley, Lewes, and Mill found his work valuable.\(^74\) John Fiske added that the real “scoffers” were literary men without the scientific training to understand


\(^73\) Review of *The Ideal in Art*, by Henri Taine, *Nation* 8, no. 200 (April 29, 1869), 338.

\(^74\) H[enry] H[olt], “Herbert Spencer’s Reputation,” *Nation* 8, no. 203 (May 20, 1869), 394-395.
Spencer—revealing that he did not think the general public competent to form an opinion of Spencer’s books.\(^{75}\) Youmans wrote a long piece in *Appletons’ Journal*, which he edited at that time, in agreement but with more detail. He cited positive reactions in a number of reviews, and even quoted James McCosh’s praise from *Intuitions of Mind*. To Youmans any critics of Spencer were “nameless newspaper scribblers,” “philosophic fledglings,” and “prejudiced adherents of old traditions.”\(^{76}\) A similar debate occurred when an editor at *The Chicago Tribune* suggested that “involution” from heterogeneous to homogenous was just as common as evolution.\(^{77}\)

Youmans continued to be Spencer’s main champion. He had the advantage of various editorial positions, but he also had contacts in the publishing world that gave him influence in newspapers like *The New-York Tribune* and periodicals like the *Christian Examiner*. In the latter he wrote a long article defending Spencer in 1867. He began by simply observing that preconceived notions and deference to the common wisdom could create bias. “Carelessness of statement, gratuitous imputation of evil motives, misrepresentations of meaning, and all the petty tricks by which a writer seeks to bring an author into reproach, should be sternly reprobated,” Youmans lectured.\(^{78}\) It was

\(^{75}\) John Fiske, “Herbert Spencer and the Experts,” *Nation* 8, no. 205 (June 3, 1869), 434.

\(^{76}\) [E. L. Youmans], “Herbert Spencer as a Thinker,” *Appletons’ Journal of Literature, Science and Art* 1, no. 10 (June 5, 1869), 313-314.


\(^{78}\) [E. L. Youmans], “Herbert Spencer and His Reviewers,” *Christian Examiner* 82, no. 2 (Mar. 1867), 201.
common for Spencer to claim that he had been “misrepresented”; here and elsewhere Youmans was following the master’s lead.79 Youmans critiqued a number of reviews, including one from the Examiner itself. His main contentions were two. First, he noted that Spencer’s system did not depend on the first section of First Principles; those who thought creating doubt about the doctrine of the Unknowable was sufficient to demolish the entire philosophy were wrong.80 Second, he criticized those who called Spencer a materialist, marshalling a variety of evidence to show this charge was untrue.81 It was an impressive performance: now meeting his adversaries point-by-point and arguing terminology to a hair’s breadth, now making sweeping utterances about science and truth, Youmans dispatched Spencer’s critics one by one—at least, to his own satisfaction. He ended with an undated letter in which Spencer essentially said that he did not mind opposition from the truly religious, as long as they understood what they were opposing.82

Youmans was the editor of Appletons’ Journal in its first year, before disappointment with its lack of science coverage caused him to resign.83 He edited the “Scientific Miscellany” section in The Galaxy, New York’s answer to The Atlantic

79 Ibid., 220; for Spencer’s use see ibid., 223.
80 Ibid., 204-206.
81 Ibid., 210-218.
82 Ibid., 222-223.
Monthly, from 1871-1874.84 Both posts gave him ample scope to promote Spencer. The “Table-Talk” section at Appletons’ quoted “Judge Arrington, of Chicago” as saying “Herbert Spencer’s ‘First Principles’ is one of the greatest pieces of thinking that the ages have produced. Spencer is the Aristotle of modern thought.”85 Later that year, Youmans inserted a short piece on Spencer’s character.86 And of course there was the defense of Spencer mentioned above. Even after he left Appletons’ Journal Youmans had enough influence there to get a “puff piece” on Spencer published there. He made sure that American readers knew that men like Darwin and Mill considered Spencer an important thinker, and described the core of the Synthetic Philosophy as “the law of Universal Evolution.”87 And he emphasized, again, that Spencer was not an atheist. Youmans described Spencer’s reconciliation as an admission of the truth at the core of religion. But he never grappled with the question of Christianity and its teachings.88

At The Galaxy, a number of scientific articles mentioned Spencer’s ideas, such as his conception of isomeric changes in nerves, his theories about instinct, and his phrase

---

84 Ibid., 3:363.


88 Ibid., 735.
“survival of the fittest.”89 Youmans also “puffed” Spencer directly, as when he lauded Spencer’s one major scientific paper, on circulation in plants.90 Youmans was a relentless promoter and could worm Spencer into any conversation. For example, he began an article on “International Education” for the *Christian Union* with a discussion of the multiplication of forces.91 However, for various reasons *The Galaxy* balked at serially publishing Spencer’s *The Study of Sociology* in 1872. Youmans responded by starting his own journal with the backing of the Appletons. *Popular Science Monthly* debuted in May 1872, and printed more than 10,000 copies by the year’s end.92 It was a dream come true for Youmans—a periodical under his control that printed nothing but articles on science. And it was a forum for Spencer’s sociological work, much of which was serialized in its pages prior to its publication in complete volumes.93

“The Spirit of Individuality”: Americans Debate Spencer’s Political Vision

“The Spirit of Individuality, this desire to throw off all trammels, and to live in the atmosphere of one’s own personality” inspired Spencer’s most remarkable essays,

---


90 [E. L. Youmans], “Herbert Spencer,” *Galaxy* 12, no. 5 (Nov. 1871), 594. See also [E. L. Youmans], “Scientific Miscellany,” *Galaxy* 14, no. 1 (July 1872), 133.


93 The serialization was done simultaneously with one or another British magazine.
according to one magazine.94 Not all Americans were this excited about Spencer’s individualism. Spencer was sometimes compared to John C. Calhoun for his desire to restrict government, and this was not intended as a compliment.95 Americans considered their government different than Britain’s: more representative, more reflective of the spirit of the people.96 Furthermore, some of Spencer’s ideas were extreme. At various times writers pointed out that Spencer objected to the postal service, public education, public sanitation, compulsory vaccination, capital punishment, and labor laws.97 Given the long list of government services Spencer found objectionable, it was easy for writers to find something to criticize.

Some agreed with Spencer’s basic premises, if not all of his specific conclusions. For example, a writer in Appletons’ Journal supported Spencer’s definition of government’s proper function and paraphrased the law of equal freedom.98 The Christian Union felt that Spencer’s basic arguments were sound, but followed to absurd conclusions; the writer thought legislation must be reduced on a case by case basis, not

94 “Buckle, Draper; Church and State,” Continental Monthly 6, no. 1 (July 1864), 56.


according to a sweeping generalization. Disagreement was more common, however. A letter to the editor in the Chicago Tribune mocked Spencer for his “fine-spun theories” and noted that on his principle the Erie Canal would not have been built. The writer argued that education’s true purpose is to teach people their rights and how to maintain them. Another letter, this time to The Round Table, suggested that readers would be surprised that “one of the most advanced and radical thinkers of the age, one consulted and accepted as of almost apostolic authority by many of our reformers, strenuously opposes the practice of free or government school education altogether.” This writer felt public education was a fait accompli.

Sometimes the source of the disagreement was the power of big corporations, which populist thinkers felt the government needed to regulate. In 1875, President of the Illinois State Farmers’ Association W. C. Flagg gave an address at the National Agricultural Congress in Cincinnati in which he addressed the role of government. Flagg agreed with Spencer’s law of equal freedom, equating it with Americans’ rights as individuals. However, he disagreed with the advocates of laissez-faire who preached “‘every one for himself and the devil take the hindmost.’” Such a doctrine might have

---

99 “Administrative Nihilism,” Christian Union 5, no. 12 (Mar. 13, 1872), 246. This was a reaction to Huxley’s essay “Administrative Nihilism,” which was not much covered by the press. For a summary of the essay and Spencer’s response see [E. L. Youmans], “Science and Government,” Galaxy 13, no. 3 (March, 1872), 414-415.


101 O B B, “Our Public School System,” Round Table 5, no. 125 (June 15, 1867), 376.
worked in the past, but with capital concentrated and given special privileges, the state—which after all was just the people united—should intervene. One of Flagg’s suggestions was for the government to take over the railroads and other means of transport. It was a typical producer’s argument: too much of the wealth went unfairly to traders, bankers, and shippers thanks to legal advantages and combinations.102

*Old and New* provided a rare look at the way Spencer’s ideas about the state were debated by printing an account of a discussion in their offices about the role of government. *Old and New* was the brainchild of Boston Unitarian minister Edward Everett Hale, and absorbed the *Christian Examiner* before itself being merged with *Scribner’s Monthly* in 1875.103 In the conversation, a pro-government man mocked Spencer for thinking that fishermen should pay for lighthouses and that mailmen should negotiate the price to send a letter. Another participant opined that the first job of government was not to protect citizens, but to enable communication between them by building roads and public buildings.104 Hale himself joined the conversation a few years later with a long essay on Spencer’s ideas, originally read before the public at Horticulture Hall in Boston. This included many of the critiques noted above: that in American the people governed the governors, and that private enterprise would not

---


ensure that roads were built and elderly people supported.105 Ultimately, Hale felt that Spencer overstated the power and rights of the individual: “to define terms with precision, so soon as society exists, there cease to be ‘individuals.’ From the necessity of the case, the ‘individual’ surrenders his ‘individuality.’ Government is the willing organization of the methods of that surrender,” Hale wrote.106 In a footnote he argued that the state can take peoples’ labor if necessary, echoing a phrase he used ten years before in a critique of Social Statics: “Society has a right to the utmost efforts of all of its members.”107 Few had such an exaggerated faith in government, however.

At times Spencer’s anti-government stance was seen as callous, as with one writer who declared that a true republic cares for its citizens, though Spencer might disagree.108 However, Spencer’s political arguments were seldom put in the framework of social Darwinism. Dislike of government does not automatically imply approval of a social struggle which weeds out the weak. Spencer could be quoted in favor of altruism, even by those who had read Social Statics.109 Spencer’s social Darwinism was little remarked upon in the 1860s and 1870s. There were a few exceptions—enough to prove

---

106 Ibid., 524.
that some people noticed Spencer’s conviction that the survival of the fittest was a boon for humanity. An article in the New York Times reported Spencer’s belief that the ancient Greek practice of killing unwanted infants had improved the human race. As part of a plea for better sanitation at schools, the author argued that whatever humanity’s distance from Spencer’s imagined state of perfection, the practice was currently unnecessary since unsanitary conditions were killing so many children.\footnote{110} The Christian Union summarized one of Spencer’s comments about “good-for-nothings,” “storing up miseries,” and “maudlin philanthropy” but made no comment.\footnote{111} A very strong statement against Darwinian social thinking appeared in The Independent in 1873. “I know what says that benign philosopher, Herbert Spencer—that charity ought not to save the weak from the doom to which they are appointed by the law of natural selection,” wrote this critic. “Doubtless there is a natural law by which the stronger and shrewder live while the feeble die. But it is the office of Christianity to mitigate the action of natural law.”\footnote{112}

Perhaps most revealing is an article by Presbyterian minister William A. Holliday on labor reform in the Presbyterian Quarterly and Princeton Review for July, 1876.\footnote{113}


\footnote{111} “Foreign Notes,” Christian Union 8, no. 9 (Aug. 27, 1873), 178.

\footnote{112} Edward Aggleston, “The Greeks at our Doors,” Independent 25, no. 1305 (Dec. 4, 1873), 1509. Aggleston gave no specific source in his remarks, but coming so late in 1873, this may have been a reaction to portions of The Study of Sociology published in Popular Science Monthly.

\footnote{113} Willis J. Beecher and Mary Beecher, Index of Presbyterian Ministers (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1888), 252.
Holliday understood evolution as a positive force, and found that both Darwin and Spencer agreed. But, he noted, the improvement of society as a whole is not the same things as individual welfare:

And the doctrine of evolution has no tenderness for individuals....Natural selection, survival of the fittest—these may be watch-words to cheer an aristocracy of physical strength and mental power, but they are a _vae victis_ to the struggling, to those overborne in the rude and fierce contest for existence.

Holliday denigrated such conclusions, arguing against a method for improving the poor’s condition based on the idea “that improvement consists in starving them out and killing them off.” In a footnote, Holliday cited a lecture by social reformer Moncure Conway where Conway told a story about Spencer. The two men were observing boys running alongside a canal chasing a boat for pennies. When some of the boys tired and lagged behind, Spencer told Conway that he would soon see the exercise of pity, and showed satisfaction when pennies were thrown to the lagging boys. In his speech, Conway declared that an evolutionist philosopher should not feel such satisfaction, and noted that Spencer certainly did not feel the same when pity was exercised on a larger scale.

The note is intriguing for several reasons. It gives evidence that Spencer’s harsh social attitudes were sometimes addressed in speeches. It also implies that a connection was made between evolutionary thinking and such attitudes. Both the speech and the article as a whole suggest that at least a vague understanding of the ideas behind social Darwinism was widespread.

Articles about Spencer’s social policies were rare in the 1860s and 1870s. Most Americans perceived Spencer as a philosopher, an intellectual, and an evolutionist, not
as a political reactionary. This despite the fact that he continued to argue that practices in the world’s most civilized societies supported the unfit, to the detriment of the human race. The next subject in Spencer’s Synthetic Philosophy gave him scope to explore this issue. Spencer’s sociological work included much discussion of political topics, and used the evolution of society over time to explained governing institutions. And his book *The Study of Sociology*, as a work of popular science, brought his political ideas before a wider audience.

**“Is There a Social Science?”: Popularizing Sociology**

Spencer began his sociological work while he was writing *The Principles of Psychology*. One of the reasons he hired David Duncan as his assistant was to gather material for *The Principles of Sociology*. He trained Duncan in what to look for in “books of travel”: information on climate, geographical features, flora and fauna, and local knowledge and beliefs in places all around the globe.\(^{114}\) Unfortunately for Spencer, Duncan was offered a position in India as a professor of logic and Spencer lost his services in 1870.\(^ {115}\) He found not one replacement but two: James Collier, who took charge of Spencer’s dictation, and Richard Scheppig, a German.\(^ {116}\) By this time Spencer’s books had become remunerative, especially those sold in Britain, where he paid the

\(^{114}\) Herbert Spencer, *An Autobiography*, vol. 2 (London: Williams & Norgate, 1904), 173 (hereafter cited as *AB*).

\(^{115}\) Herbert Spencer to E. L. Youmans, Mar. 9, 1870, in *AB*, 2:215.

\(^{116}\) *AB*, 2:263-266.
publishing costs himself and reaped the majority of the rewards. He could afford to keep researchers “on staff,” which made his sociology very different from the earlier divisions of the Synthetic Philosophy. To put it baldly, it was much more inductive, based on mountains of evidence rather than a priori arguments and the conclusions of a few specialists.

Spencer had the information gathered by Duncan, Collier, and Scheppig compiled into large tables, arranging and classifying the data according to his specifications. He felt this provided an objective view of the facts, which anyone could use to verify his conclusions, or to make investigations of their own.117 Convinced of the value of this material, Spencer arranged to have it published under the title Descriptive Sociology. The first volume, on the English, was published in Britain and America in 1873, and from then on a volume appeared every year until the eighth volume, in 1881.118 These were large books, twenty inches by thirteen, and expensive to produce. Spencer quickly found that they lost money. He estimated that the first volume cost him £648, £296 in pay to Collier and £351 for stereotyping and printing 1,000 copies.119 Eight months after it was printed Spencer wrote to Youmans that less than 200 copies had


119 Herbert Spencer to E. L. Youmans, Sept. 1873, in AB, 2:267.
been sold. Still, he felt it was his duty to continue, in part because of promises he had made to Collier and Scheppig, in part because he considered the work a public benefit. By this period Spencer’s profits from his other works were enough to offset these costs, and he turned down several offers by Americans to help fund the project. However, by the time the eighth volume was published in October of 1881, Spencer estimated he had lost approximately £3,250 in total on the books (around $370,000 today). Spencer thought the cost too heavy and called a halt to the project.

Americans showed only slight interest in Descriptive Sociology. A few positive notices appeared around the time the first volume was released. A Chicago Tribune reviewer believed the work would answer critics who accused Spencer of not having enough facts to support his inductions. He considered the book free from bias, filled with “facts, pure and simple.” Interestingly enough, this critic also reprinted a long extract from Education pleading for what we would today call social and cultural history. R. W. Raymond, mining engineer, legal scholar, author, and member of Henry Ward Beecher’s Plymouth Church, wrote in the Christian Union that this was Spencer’s great work, published purely for public benefit. “He has injected no theories into his

---

120 Herbert Spencer to E. L. Youmans, Mar. 1874, in AB, 2:268.

121 AB, 2:265-266, 269.

122 For price comparisons see http://www.measuringworth.com.

tables,” Raymond wrote.\textsuperscript{124} The Nation was not so sure; though approving of Spencer’s need for such facts it worried that many of his ancient sources were unreliable. The writer thought Spencer should make this clear so that “ardent” and “impetuous” disciples would not exceed their cautious master.\textsuperscript{125} The fact that Spencer himself decided which facts were useful and arranged them into categories of his choosing did not seem to bother this writer or any other. Soon enough the book dropped from the public consciousness, although it saw occasional use. For example, an address by education advocate Jabez Lamar Monroe Curry cited Spencer’s tables as proof that agriculture had improved over the ages thanks to better observation and reasoning.\textsuperscript{126}

Before Spencer continued with the Synthetic Philosophy another project arose. Youmans was travelling England, Scotland, France and Germany, trying to arrange a new series of books called the International Scientific Series which would publish work from leading British, American, and European scientists for popular consumption at home and abroad.\textsuperscript{127} Acknowledging his debt to his American promoter, Spencer reluctantly agreed to suspend his work to write a popular treatise on sociology.\textsuperscript{128} The result was


\textsuperscript{125} “Spencer’s Descriptive Sociology,” Nation 19, no. 487 (Oct. 29, 1874), 288-289.


\textsuperscript{128} AB, 2:242-243.
The Study of Sociology, which Youmans founded Popular Science Monthly to serialize. It became one of Spencer’s most popular books, and one of the most financially rewarding.\textsuperscript{129}

The Study of Sociology assumed nothing, starting with the fundamental question of whether a science of society was necessary or even possible. Spencer argued the need by demonstrating that few people understood political and economic systems—proven by how few agreed with his political and social shibboleths, such as the impotence of government and the destructiveness of indiscriminate charity.\textsuperscript{130} As for the possibility, Spencer criticized both those who felt God was responsible for what happens in human affairs and those who followed the “great-man-theory of History.”\textsuperscript{131} The great man is the product of his society, he argued, and needs the “material and mental accumulations” of his society to function.\textsuperscript{132} There must be forces which dictate how society grows and functions, otherwise political and economic prediction would be impossible, Spencer reasoned.\textsuperscript{133}

\textsuperscript{129} AB, 2:254-255.

\textsuperscript{130} Herbert Spencer, The Study of Sociology (New York: D. Appleton, 1873), 1-4 (hereafter cited as Study).

\textsuperscript{131} Study, 30-34.

\textsuperscript{132} Study, 33-35.

\textsuperscript{133} Study, 46-47.
Spencer described the nature of these forces by reference to the social organism, making sure that his readers understood that it was only an analogy. Like organisms, he wrote, societies have their own taxonomy—in a way, Spencer was trying to create a “genealogy of types of social structure,” not a history. He argued that, although societies came in various recognizable varieties, they nevertheless share certain structures, which develop and become distinct as society grows and social roles become fixed. Ultimately, Spencer felt that growth and its attendant structural development was a good thing, writing “if there does exist an order among those structural and functional changes which societies pass through, knowledge of that order can scarcely fail to affect our judgments as to what is progressive and what retrograde—what is desirable, what is practicable, what is Utopian.” Thus, the typologies of society Spencer developed in his sociological work should be considered as a hierarchy—with Britain at its apex, of course.

Having established the possibility of a science of society and its nature, Spencer devoted the remainder of his book to describing the problems in the way of its proper study. In his chapter headings he classified these into three types: difficulties (objective, subjective/intellectual and subjective/emotional), biases (educational, political,

134 Study, 58.


136 Study, 60-66.
theological, and the like) and necessary preparation (in biology and psychology). The main challenge, objectively, was the difficulty of predicting human behavior. Spencer made an apt analogy to a baby: precise predictions about its future life are impossible, but predictions about the general pattern of events can be made based on physiology.137 Other problems highlighted were the lack of trustworthy sources, the potential to confuse facts with inferences, and the length of time over which social changes occurred.138 On the latter subject, Spencer wrote “true conceptions of sociological changes are to be reached only by contemplating their slow genesis through centuries . . . basing inferences on results shown in short periods, is as illusory as would be judging of the Earth’s curvature by observing whether we are walking up or down hill.”139 But he reaffirmed that despite these issues, general results are obtainable.

Under the heading “subjective” Spencer discussed the difficulty of understanding thoughts and feelings foreign to our own.140 Here he took a clear stand in favor of the rationality of primitive peoples. Beliefs that seem irrational must make sense for a certain time and place, given the information available.141 The investigator must try to be objective about these beliefs and the actions they prompt, though it impossible to

137 Study, 52-58.
138 Study, 75, 92, 102-104.
139 Study, 111.
140 Study, 114, 132.
141 Study, 116.
eliminate sympathy for certain institutions and customs and dislike for others. But since the sentiments of citizens must harmonize with their current social organization to prevent social dissolution, some bias in sociological conclusions is inevitable.

This bias came in many forms, which Spencer discussed in detail. Patriotism, for example, is necessary for social cohesion but makes it difficult to understand one’s own society as one among many. Class, too, could make a writer value one form of government over another, or favor a particular form of labor organization. Here Spencer attacked all classes of society for short-sightedness. Workers fail to understand economic realities and waste what wages they already get. The upper classes, whose only purpose is to regulate society so that the lives of all are better than they would be otherwise, have too many “worthless descendants” who are rich and idle. Thanks to political bias, many think that legislation can solve such problems, but Spencer repeated his contention that political arrangements, however cunningly devised, can do nothing if they are not compatible with national character. He pointed to the United States and its problem with bribery and corruption as an example. As with the economic system,

142 Study, 150.
143 Study, 173-175.
144 Study, 204-205.
145 Study, 243-248.
146 Study, 246-250.
147 Study, 255-260.
148 Study, 275.
the failures of the political system were due to imperfect human nature. Better results would come from forms of organization based on individual cooperation, but these were not currently possible.\textsuperscript{149} Spencer argued that some middle path was needed between the radical reformer and the conservative. One must acknowledge that the established order serves a purpose given current human nature, the other must realize that what is good for a moment is not good forever. The radical was necessary for progress, even though his political dreams were not possible to fulfill.\textsuperscript{150}

Spencer saved theological bias for last. Throughout his book, he was very critical of religion. He suggested that Christian civilizations had two religions, one of “amity” based on the New Testament and one of “enmity” inherited from the Greeks and Romans.\textsuperscript{151} This was possible only because Christians did not attempt to make their conflicting beliefs agree with each other; in other words, Christians were inherently hypocrites, preaching peace and self-sacrifice while supporting war. Spencer believed that as civilization advanced, the morality of institutions and actions came to be judged more and more on whether they improved human happiness, rather than “their apparent congruity or incongruity with the established cult.”\textsuperscript{152} He felt that members of religious communities were unable to perceive that these institutions were a natural

\textsuperscript{149} Study, 250-252, 281.

\textsuperscript{150} Study, 290-291.

\textsuperscript{151} Study, 178-181.

\textsuperscript{152} Study, 296.
part of society, and the value of their teachings relative, and thus not capable of judging
men of other religious communities. But he also noted that an “anti-theological bias”
was possible, which encouraged throwing out the truth at the core of religion along with
everything else. Religion, he declared, cannot be destroyed, only refined into a
“higher and fitter form.”

Spencer believed that though it was impossible to overcome these difficulties completely, they could be mitigated with the proper preparation. First, a general understanding of the sciences would provide the necessary discipline and habits of thought. Second, knowledge of biology was needed, since social actions are determined by individuals, whose actions conform to “the laws of life”. Furthermore the analogy between society and organism made study of physiology useful, though Spencer pointed out that the connection was not immediate since society was made up of individual organisms. Finally, knowledge of psychology was vital, because feeling causes action (and Spencer maintained that it was not knowledge, but the emotion that went with it, that caused men to act). Spencer argued here as elsewhere that

---

153 Study, 298-302.
154 Study, 309.
155 Study, 313.
157 Study, 330.
158 Study,
education in and of itself does make an individual moral—even education in ethics.\textsuperscript{159}

Moral habits could only be formed by connecting actions with feelings—for example, by allowing people to suffer the natural consequences of bad behavior.\textsuperscript{160}

While *The Study of Sociology* was supposed to concern sociological methodology, it also retailed a number of Spencer’s political and social beliefs. Often these had developed little since they were first set down in *Social Statics*. At several points, Spencer made arguments that clearly qualified as social Darwinism. However, unlike in his earlier work, here the context was both intra and extra-social: when weak societies were killed off or conquered it benefitted mankind, just as when weak individuals did not reproduce. He imagined what aboriginal tribes felt about being dispossessed by “that tide of civilization which sweeps them away”—from their perspective this was an evil, but from a wider point of view these events were “steps towards a higher life.”\textsuperscript{161}

Nevertheless, Spencer remained a passionate critic of colonialism, both because of the cruelty of British policies towards other races and because he thought that, once a certain level of civilization was reached, militarism kept a society from progressing. As he wrote,

Severe and bloody as the process is, the killing-off of inferior races and inferior individuals, leaves a balance of benefit to mankind during phases of progress in which the moral development is low. . . . But as there arise higher societies, implying individual characters fitted for closer co-operation, the destructive

\textsuperscript{159} *Study*, 363-365.

\textsuperscript{160} *Study*, 367, 372-373.

\textsuperscript{161} *Study*, 204.
activities exercised by such higher societies have injurious re-active effects which outweigh the benefits resulting from extirpation of inferior races. After this stage has been reached, the purifying process, continuing still an important one, remains to be carried on by industrial war—by a competition of societies during which the best, physically, emotionally, and intellectually, spread most, and leave the least capable to disappear gradually, from failing to leave a sufficiently-numerous posterity.\footnote{Study, 199.}

Spencer developed this reasoning at much greater length in \textit{The Principles of Sociology}, devoting several chapters to a typological distinction between militant and industrial societies.

Spencer believed that only small modifications to human nature were possible in the short term, but in the longer term changes could be immense. His social Darwinism grew in part from a natural anger at those who did not do their share, but also from his concern with future human evolution. Thus, Spencer displayed intemperate hostility towards those he considered a drain on society. “Fostering the good-for-nothing at the expense of the good, is an extreme cruelty,” he wrote. “There is no greater curse to posterity than that of bequeathing them an increasing population of imbeciles and idlers and criminals. To aid the bad in multiplying, is, in effect, the same as maliciously providing for our descendants a multitude of enemies.”\footnote{Study, 344-345.} He felt agencies which indiscriminately handed out charity interfered with “that natural process of elimination by which society continually purifies itself.”\footnote{Study, 346.} Here Spencer forgot his Lamarckism
completely. There was no recognition that encouraging good habits could lead to improvements passed to offspring, only the keen edge of natural selection.

*The Study of Sociology* was aimed at a popular audience, and its style was much simpler and more emotional than in his other works. It was a polemical book, filled with shots against political and cultural sacred cows. Spencer engaged in heavy sarcasm from time to time, as when he imagined merchants and aristocrats declining to serve in Parliament, pleading lack of the decades’ worth of study needed to understand government policies.\(^{165}\) The book had an overabundance of examples, often superfluous to the argument but entertaining nonetheless. For instance, at one point Spencer imagined what a person from tens of thousands of years in the future, when society was completely harmonious, might think of present-day England (which, incidentally, revealed the time-frame of his utopian visions). This led to an elaborate expose of the foibles of the present.\(^{166}\) He gave a complex account of all the social and technical processes that were needed to develop the press used at the London Times, and spent a half-dozen pages denigrating Napoleon.\(^{167}\) Despite all of this the book was barely over four hundred pages, excluding notes, which was short by Spencer’s standards.

Spencer was not sanguine about the lasting influence of *The Study of Sociology*, however. He agreed that personal beliefs and actions are important because they direct

\(^{165}\) *Study*, 356-357.

\(^{166}\) *Study*, 139-144.

\(^{167}\) *Study*, 126-131, 153-159.
society’s changes, but felt it was not possible to speed up development (though it could be hindered by ignorance.) Would his doctrines convince people not to bother working for social change? “Doubtless it is true that on visionary hopes, rational criticisms have a depressing influence. It is better to recognize the truth, however,” Spencer wrote.  

“The man of the higher type...has to see how comparatively little can be done, and yet find it worth while to do that little: so uniting philanthropic energy with philosophic calm.” Spencer clearly placed himself in the role of the higher man. His *laissez-faire* political liberalism now flew against the political winds. Spencer tried to bear this with patience and do what little he could.

**American Critical Reaction to The Study of Sociology**

According to *The Nation*, Spencer’s articles in *Popular Science Monthly* attracted attention because he addressed the topic of man “in the cold-blooded fashion with which science now approaches everything.” Whatever the reason, the articles prompted a response from the press, in publications as varied as the *Chicago Tribune* and *Forest and Stream*. Spencer’s comments on America raised some hackles, especially his depiction of the West as a wild place where vigilante justice was law.

---

168 *Study*, 102.

169 “Notes,” *Nation* 17, no. 434 (Oct. 23, 1873), 272.

170 “What Herbert Spencer Thinks of Us,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 19, 1873; “Trespass,” *Forest and Stream* 1, no. 6 (Sept. 18, 1873), 89.

171 “Mr. Herbert Spencer on California,” *New York Times*, June 23, 1873; *San Francisco Chronicle* (July 9, 1873), 2.
However, most of the discussion of *The Study of Sociology* came after the publication of the book. Unlike with the volumes of the *Psychology*, the Appletons did send copies to reviewers, and this remained their policy towards all of Spencer’s later works as well.

Most reviews were complimentary. The *Chicago Tribune* considered *The Study of Sociology* the most important book in the International Science Series so far.\(^1\)\(^{72}\) The *Galaxy* declared that whatever one might think of Spencer’s other works, the information in this one needed to be spread rapidly.\(^1\)\(^{73}\) Even *The Prairie Farmer* advised its readers that, sociology being the science of the future, they should buy Spencer’s latest, noting that thanks to Spencer’s easier style “the work is as interesting as a romance.”\(^1\)\(^{74}\) Few religious periodicals reviewed the book, but those that did agreed that it was thought-provoking.\(^1\)\(^{75}\) However, there were exceptions. One critic called the book “commonplace” and marked by “crudity and juvenility” compared to Spencer’s other works (though without giving specific examples). He blamed Youmans for diverting Spencer into the project, which was a complete waste of time.\(^1\)\(^{76}\) Youmans replied with an article that was reprinted in *Appletons’ Journal*. He noted the success of

---


\(^{1}\)\(^{73}\) Review of *The Study of Sociology*, by Herbert Spencer, *Galaxy* 17, no. 1 (Jan. 1874), 141.

\(^{1}\)\(^{74}\) “The Study of Sociology,” *Prairie Farmer* 45, no. 46 (Nov. 14, 1874), 364.

\(^{1}\)\(^{75}\) Review of *The Study of Sociology*, by Herbert Spencer, *Universalist Quarterly and General Review* 11 (Jan. 1874), 131; Review of *The Study of Sociology*, by Herbert Spencer, *Western Christian Advocate* 41, no. 5 (Feb. 4, 1874), 35.

\(^{1}\)\(^{76}\) “Spencer on Sociology,” review of *The Study of Sociology*, by Herbert Spencer,” *Daily Graphic* (Dec. 20, 1873), 330.
the published chapters and the high demand for the book in both Britain and America. For Youmans, *The Study of Sociology* was simply a way to get Spencer’s ideas to a wider audience.\(^{177}\)

Appreciation for Spencer’s honesty about the limitations of sociology was general. The *Chicago Tribune’s* critic thought the student of sociology must be almost an “impossible individual” and not very amiable.\(^{178}\) The *Tribune’s* critic agreed with Spencer that politicians tended to act without understanding all of the facts; the *Universalist Quarterly and General Review*, leading quarterly of the Universalist denomination, believed educated men sometimes made hasty deductions, and that legislators and those dealing with poverty and crime should be aware of what Spencer had to say.\(^{179}\) Some reviewers noticed that Spencer himself suffered from some of the biases he described. *The Prairie Farmer* perhaps said it best when it noted “he has crotchets as well as other folks.”\(^{180}\) *The Nation* agreed, observing that Spencer convicted so many people of bias that one expected him to finish by accusing himself.\(^{181}\)


\(^{178}\) “Herbert Spencer’s Last Work,” 8.


\(^{180}\) “The Study of Sociology” (*Prairie Farmer*), 364

Most reviews ignored Spencer’s Darwinian social ideals and his hard-heartedness towards those he conceived to be on the wrong side of evolution. In part this was because critiques of Spencer’s book were generally confined to one or two pages in the general interest magazines. The day of the serious review was over. Even the *North American Review* shifted to a more popular format after James Russell Lowell left in 1872. Under Henry Adams and Henry Cabot Lodge it featured shorter and less scholarly discussions of politics, economics, and history, ascending to an audience of 1,200 subscribers by 1876. The trend only continued when it moved to New York and changed to a bimonthly format. The *National Quarterly Review* remained until 1880, but had never shown much interest in Spencer. The days of fifty page review-articles in secular quarterlies was over. The field of serious, in depth study of intellectual issues was left to the religious quarterlies, and they were still more interested in metaphysical issues than in Spencer’s positions on social policy.

**A New Interest in Evolution: The Continuing Religious Reaction**

In the 1870s the attention of religious periodicals shifted away from the Unknowable and the limits of knowledge. Though metaphysical and epistemological battles were still waged, religious writers gradually shifted their interest to Spencer’s evolutionary thought and its import. In 1872, a long article by John Bascom on this subject appeared in the *Presbyterian Quarterly and Princeton Review*, a merger of one-time foes *The American Presbyterian Review* and *The Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review*. Charles Hodge had left the helm of the *Princeton* in 1871, and Lyman Atwater
was slowly steering the magazine in a more popular direction. Bascom’s twenty-page article was anything but light, however. Bascom was a professor of rhetoric who was later appointed President of the University of Wisconsin (in 1874). He made both his rhetorical abilities and his position on Spencer plain at the outset:

The fairly penetrative mind of average indolence is thus floated down what seems to it a magnificent stream of thought, finds no place to pause, and, soon out of sight of familiar land-marks, glides away into the great ocean of speculation, under the guidance of one who has quietly and with unmistakable confidence taken the helm.

To Bascom, Spencer’s Unknown Reality was just another word for physical force. Giving Spencer’s definition of evolution (from the 1st edition of First Principles) he observed that Spencer tried to make the same laws cover physical and mental phenomena, though without adequate proof. Bascom argued against Spencer’s specific examples of evolution, such as the development of language and societies. Some of Bascom’s findings were strange, for example his insistence that the correlation of forces did not include gravity, making evolution a law pertaining to gravity and matter but nothing else. Towards the end of his essay he lapsed back into an attack on

---


183 John Bascom, “Evolution, as Advocated by Herbert Spencer,” *Presbyterian Quarterly and Princeton Review* 3 (July, 1872), 496.

184 Ibid., 496. Bascom’s critique is sprinkled with flowery phrasings, creating confusion that plain speaking could have avoided.

185 Ibid., 497, 500-502.

186 Ibid., 502-503.

187 Ibid., 504-506.
Spencer’s epistemology. Though not the best argument against Spencer’s work, Bascom’s article shows that some writers still considered Spencer’s evolutionary ideas materialistic.

A stronger argument came in the form of a trio of essays by Borden Parker Bowne, a philosopher and Methodist pastor studying advanced philosophy and theology in Germany (he became chair of the department of philosophy at Boston University in 1876.) Bowne’s articles appeared in the *New Englander*, a Congregationalist quarterly with ties to Yale, in 1872 and 1873. In “Laws of the Unknowable,” Bowne called Spencer’s arguments for God’s existence a “Trojan horse” and thus a worse danger to faith than atheism.188 He attacked along the usual channels, claiming that both self-existence and the absolute are conceivable, and that objects can be known in themselves.189 He also briefly raised the argument from revelation, contending that the infinite must have a mind and have the power to reveal itself to man, or else it is limited—“able to sow space with suns and systems, to scatter beauty broadcast like the light, and maintain the whole in everlasting rhythm, but utterly unable to reach the human soul.”190 Along the way he accused Spencer of confusion, contradiction, and

---

188 [Borden Parker Bowne], “Herbert Spencer’s Laws of the Unknowable,” *New Englander* 31, no. 118 (Jan. 1872), 86.
189 Ibid., 90-91, 96, 100, 104.
190 Ibid., 107.
“jugglery,” also a typical tactic in religious reviews, though not universally practiced by any means.191

Bowne continued his series of articles with a long look at Spencer’s conception of the Knowable. Bowne noted the difference between Positivism, which sought to know how the universe works, and Spencer’s doctrines, which tried to explain why as well.192 However, Bowne stuck mostly to the “how” in his article, and since his knowledge of science was much more limited than Spencer’s he did not fare very well. For example, he accused Spencer and scientists in general with confusing force and motion, showing ignorance of Newton’s second law, and complained that Spencer thought heat and vitality were the same thing, though modern biology did not recognize “vitality,” “life force” or any such terms as useful descriptions of reality.193 Bowne was more successful in his arguments against Spencer’s use of forces to explain life and mind. Bowne argued against the idea that the inorganic could produce the organic, or that physical forces could produce mental ones, both things Spencer could not adequately explain.194 Furthermore, Bowne felt that Spencer’s formula for evolution did

---

191 Ibid., 104 for “jugglery.”


193 Ibid., 9, 11.

194 Ibid., 12-17.
not cover all phenomena, and did not explain why the heterogeneity emerging from homogeneity was organized and not chaotic.195

Bowne covered quite a few of Spencer’s psychological ideas in the middle portion of his essay on the Knowable; he focused his attention on the same issues in his review of *The Principles of Psychology*. Here he claimed that evolution in some forms was compatible with theism, just not in the form Spencer proposed.196 Theistic evolution must be guided by intelligence, while at heart Bowne considered Spencer’s theory to be that “a cloud of atoms, if shaken together long enough, will hit upon living forms; will provide eyes and ears, and adapt them to light and sound; will furnish all the internal organs, and balance their several functions; will become self-conscious, and capable of thought and emotion.”197 As for Spencer’s doctrine of mind, Bowne objected that though a qualitative agreement between nervous and mental processes might exist, Spencer could not show that a quantitative relationship existed—that is, he could show a relationship but not an identity.198 Bowne also felt that Spencer’s depiction of the actions of the nervous system and the formation of the nerves was unproven and did not form a secure basis for solving the problems of the theory of mental association (which argued that all knowledge comes from perceiving relations between

195 Ibid., 28-30.

196 [Borden Parker Bowne], “Herbert Spencer’s *Principles of Psychology,*” *New Englander* 32, no. 124 (July 1873), 468-469.

197 Ibid., 475.

198 Ibid., 482-485.
sensations). Experiences cannot give us our intuitions of the reality of the world, the truth of logic, and the omnipresence of causation, and Spencer’s attempt to explain these things via the development of the race was useless because these intuitions are simply not the result of sensations. Bowne ended his essay by directly attacking Spencer, asking whether his work might be an “elaborate satire upon the loose reasoning and baseless assumptions of much that calls itself science,” and accusing him of “intellectual buffoonery” among other things. Such attacks only created the suspicion that Bowne, sensing that he had not bested Spencer intellectually, was forced to resort to contradiction and name-calling.

Whatever the weaknesses of Bowne’s arguments, he was lauded by some in the religious press. The Presbyterian paper The New-York Evangelist noted that many considered Spencer the principle exponent of “modern thought” and gleefully praised Bowne for demolishing him. Bowne published his essays as a book in 1874, with an introduction that clearly stated his view that whatever beliefs Spencer might personally have, his system was materialistic and atheistic. The Evangelist again showed its

199 Ibid., 487-491.

200 Ibid., 500-501.

201 Ibid., 504-506.

202 “Herbert Spencer and ‘Modern Thought,’” New York Evangelist 44, no. 8 (Feb. 20, 1873), 4; “Among the Quarterlies,” New York Evangelist 44, no. 31 (July 31, 1873), 8.

support, calling Spencer’s followers idolaters and intimating that Bowne was America’s champion facing off against the Englishman Spencer. Other reviewers were similarly positive, although several suggested that Spencer’s theory of evolution was true enough to have the strength to withstand being purged of error. The book was praised even in some secular contexts, as when G. Stanley Hall, a foundational figure in American psychology, recommended Bowne’s criticisms as “subtle” and “forcible.”

Bowne’s book, however, hardly put Spencer’s philosophy to rest. Arguments about the Unknowable, universal evolution, and the nature of the mind continued to appear in articles and books. In fact, the year after Bowne’s book was published three more long discussions of Spencer’s philosophy appeared in the New Englander. These and most of those that followed retreaded the same themes: the nature of the conceivable, the assignment of personality to the absolute, the cause of development, and the connection between brain and thought. Curiously, accusations of atheism, which seemed to have died away for a time, made a resurgence. Everyone acknowledged that Spencer denied being an atheist, but many argued that his system

---


was materialistic, whatever his intentions. For example, in his book *What is Darwinism?* Charles Hodge called Spencer “the speculating mind of the new school of science” and argued that Spencer’s philosophy boiled down to an identification of God with Force.  

“What is Darwinism? It is Atheism,” Hodge wrote on his final page.  

Sometimes religious thinkers simply threw up their hands at all this philosophy and simply declared belief in the spiritual and in a personal God a necessity for Christianity. A writer in the *Christian Union* denied that “God holds his seat by the favor of Herbert Spencer.” Rather, faith was not based on argument but on personal experience, and the best solution for modern skepticism would be a new Pentecost. Another writer simply pointed to belief in the supernatural as the ultimate test of Christian theism. James Thompson Bixby defined science as systematized knowledge of the physical universe and religion as belief that the human soul and a “Sovereign Over-soul” relate to each other. For Bixby science and religion were two ways of understanding reality that could not rightly invade each other’s realms; Spencer’s

---


209 Ibid., 177.

210 “The Best Remedy,” *Christian Union* 8, no. 6 (Aug. 6, 1873), 110-111.

211 “The Ultimate Question,” *Reformed Church Messenger* 40, no. 36 (Sept. 9, 1874), 1.

Unknowable was not scientific. Having established that, however, Bixby made no attempt to prove the Over-soul knowable.

*First Principles* thus lived on, continuing as a topic of discussion for years to come. More and more attention was focused on evolution as a growing number of scientists came to accept it. But concern about the Unknowable lingered on, because despite the arguments against it, religious leaders continued to feel they were losing church members, especially young people, to something that was a pale substitute for Christian belief. This anxiety came more into focus when the word “agnosticism” became popular. Spencer was seen by many as the central philosopher of this new system of unbelief, though he had not argued about metaphysical issues for some time. In fact, as he continued his Sociological work, Spencer gave Christian leaders something else to worry about: the anthropological and historical contextualization of religion.

**From Method to Practice: The Principles of Sociology, Volume One**

After *The Study of Sociology* Spencer began issuing individual numbers of his Synthetic Philosophy, with the first one published in June of 1874. Appletons’ decided to print these simultaneously with the British versions, but did not start until the spring of 1875. Each number cost sixty cents, or two dollars for a year of four issues (around

---

213 Ibid., 21, 33-34.

\$40 today).\textsuperscript{215} The chapters were also printed individually in \textit{Popular Science Monthly}. The first volume of \textit{The Principles of Sociology} did not appear until December of 1876, with the American version published in 1877; a supplementary section was sent out in June of 1877 and added to subsequent printings.\textsuperscript{216} This, number 44, was the last of the subscription parts, for Spencer stopped this method of distribution thereafter.\textsuperscript{217} During the two and a half years he worked on the book Spencer had only one short relapse, but otherwise his health was good.\textsuperscript{218}

Spencer wrote \textit{The Principles of Sociology} with a great mass of data on hand. His method of organization was to have each piece of information on a separate piece of paper, which he then divided up according to the parts of his book, and further divided by chapter, occasionally adding chapters if his evidence suggested a topic he had not envisioned.\textsuperscript{219} One of his secretaries, James Howard Bridge, recalls Spencer sitting in the middle of a semi-circle of folders, distributing his notes, occasionally launching into discourses on subjects as diverse as medieval cavalry and the flowering of Aloe in his usual careful speech.\textsuperscript{220} Bridge served as Spencer’s research assistant as well as taking

\textsuperscript{215} “Literary,” \textit{Appletons’ Journal of Literature, Science and Art} 13, no. 319 (May 1, 1875), 567; the monetary conversion is based on relative purchasing power: see http://www.measuringworth.com.

\textsuperscript{216} Perrin, \textit{Bibliography}, 121.

\textsuperscript{217} \textit{AB}, 2:300.

\textsuperscript{218} \textit{AB}, 2:294-296.

\textsuperscript{219} \textit{AB}, 2:276-278.

dictation. Often enough, it was his job to find examples of social phenomena that fit his employer’s theories.\textsuperscript{221} Because he had so much evidence from so many different sources available, the sociological volumes of the Synthetic Philosophy were unlike any others. They were filled with a wealth of examples, and sometimes even counter-examples which Spencer would explain away. They also contained many debates with other scholars of folklore, anthropology, and history. In a way, the changes in Spencer’s methods mirrored a shift in social thinking in general. Thanks to a greater awareness of non-rational behavior, deduction based on a few essential propositions about human nature was no longer acceptable—rejection of the conception of society as a system of rational relationships calculated to bring advantage was widespread.\textsuperscript{222} Spencer’s early political work was essentially deductive; his sociology depended on a great deal of data about actual human thought and behavior.

From the beginning, Spencer grounded his work in evolution. He explained historical and modern social structures by studying the way they developed from their origins with primitive man. Every society has characteristics that can be ascribed to the environment and the character of the individuals that live in it, Spencer wrote.\textsuperscript{223} Social

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{221} Ibid., 4-6, 18.
  \item \textsuperscript{223} Herbert Spencer, \textit{The Principles of Sociology}, vol. 1 (New York: D. Appleton, 1881), 9-10 (hereafter cited as \textit{PS}).
\end{itemize}
evolution is the adaption of the one to the other.\textsuperscript{224} While noting the difficulties in reconstructing these factors for ancient man, Spencer outlined a number of external factors, like temperature, aridity, and terrain, and internal factors, like physical hardiness, emotional simplicity, and intellectual childishness.\textsuperscript{225} Though Spencer believed that modern native peoples probably represented retrogression from higher types, he often used them as examples of primitive thinking.\textsuperscript{226} As in \textit{The Study of Sociology}, he stressed the necessity of repressing modern civilized ideas to see things as early man might have. “We must set out with the postulate that primitive ideas are natural, and under the conditions in which they occur, rational,” he wrote.\textsuperscript{227}

Spencer had a number of theories about early mental evolution, but the most important was his “ghost theory” of religion. Spencer argued that because primitive thinkers often erred in their classification of objects, they believed that their shadows, reflections, and echoes were like them, suggesting that each person has a double.\textsuperscript{228} This double must go away and return during dreams, trances, and faints, leading to the idea that death is the same.\textsuperscript{229} After discussing ideas about resurrection, ghosts, and the afterlife, Spencer came to the heart of his theory: that the double of a dead man, his

\textsuperscript{224} \textit{PS}, 1:106-108.

\textsuperscript{225} \textit{PS}, 1:17-37, 49-55, 61-67, 97-103.

\textsuperscript{226} \textit{PS}, 1:106, 116-118.

\textsuperscript{227} \textit{PS}, 1:110-111.

\textsuperscript{228} \textit{PS}, 1:112-118, 130-135.

\textsuperscript{229} \textit{PS}, 1:147-157, 164-165, 167-168.
spirit, is believed to be able to interact with the living, causing fits, insanity, disease, possession, and death. As a result, primitive people felt the need to propitiate their dead ancestors with altars, sacrifices, and prayers—ancestor worship. As Spencer put it, “it is unquestionably true that the first traceable conception of a supernatural being is the conception of a ghost.” From this core belief, the worship of idols, animals, nature, and eventually of deities arose. The latter came about because important men were treated with great respect after death, just as they had been in life. Fear of the living became the basis of political control, while fear of the dead became the basis of religious control, Spencer argued.

The next section of the first volume was an extended discussion of society as an organism. Much of this was a more complex version of arguments Spencer had made before. While he titled one chapter “Society is an Organism,” he made sure that the limitations of the comparison were clear. Because all units of the social organism were conscious, “it results that the welfare of the aggregate, considered apart from that of the units, is not an end to be sought,” Spencer wrote. “The society exists for the benefit of its members; not its members for the benefit of society.”

---

230 *PS*, vol. 1, chapters 16-18.
232 *PS*, 2:305.
235 *PS*, 2:479.
analogy a “scaffolding to help in building up a coherent body of sociological inductions.”\textsuperscript{236} Previously, in his 1871 essay “Specialized Administration,” he had argued that such analogies existed because both organisms and societies relied on systems organized into a mutual dependence of parts.\textsuperscript{237} In other words, both had evolved through differentiation and integration. David Wiltshire argues that Spencer by this point had abandoned the literal interpretation of the social organism.\textsuperscript{238} Whether he had understood the comparison literally in the first place is subject to debate.\textsuperscript{239} Whatever the case, it was in this manner that Spencer tried to retain his organic metaphor without jeopardizing his individualism; nevertheless, the perceived contradictions were the basis of much of the criticism of Spencer’s system.\textsuperscript{240}

Spencer essentially equated size with level of evolution. He argued that large societies only grow from combinations of smaller ones, through conquest or absorption, resulting in compound, doubly-compound, and trebly-compound societies where social

\textsuperscript{236} PS, 2:614.


\textsuperscript{239} See chapter 4; also John Offer, \textit{Herbert Spencer and Social Theory} (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 220-221.

and economic roles were further and further differentiated. For Spencer, warfare was an essential motive force behind these changes. The initial differentiation in most societies was between warriors and subordinates like women and slaves. Governing structures arose because war between societies required further organization, eventually developing into a military and productive system (which acted like the limbs of an animal) and a leadership system, usually military in origin (similar to the nervous system). Thus warfare played a vital part in the early development of society. However, Spencer believed that more complex societies actually lost more than they gained by engaging in war. He made a typological distinction between the “militant type” and the “industrial type” of society, though observing that real societies were always some mix of the two. While Spencer recognized that the balance between the two could shift in a society, he clearly believed that industrial societies were an advance over those of the militant type, and that a shift towards militancy was retrograde. Nevertheless, Spencer would develop this system of classification at much greater length in the second volume of his Sociology.

241 PS, 1:482-492.

242 PS, 1:510-512.

243 PS, 1:540-565.

244 PS, 1:576.

The remainder of *The Principles of Sociology* was to cover various social institutions—domestic, ceremonial, political, ecclesiastical, professional, and industrial. Spencer started with the family. He defined various types of relations between the sexes: endogamy and exogamy (marriage within and outside of the social group), promiscuity, polyandry, polygyny, and monogamy.246 Spencer judged these institutions according to specific criteria: their benefit to the society, to the young, and to the parents, with the first being most important. To Spencer the family was a dynamic unit where the needs of different members did not always agree—especially the needs of parents and children—but he felt that the best family types diminished this conflict.247 Using these criteria, Spencer ranked marriage relations. He found endogamous monogamy superior, entailing the most clarity and strength in the links between family members and the most clear male line of succession, important to both political and religious stability.248 Spencer linked polygyny with the militant type and monogamy with the industrial type of society.249

Spencer’s discussion of the family was quite Darwinian, with the emphasis put on biological drives and competition between social groups rather than on culture or

---

246 Of Spencer’s terminology, the *Youth’s Companion* said “think of a man being caught out along with that essay in some country town, and no unabridged dictionary within forty miles!” “The Jujube Tree,” *Youth’s Companion* 50, no. 14 (Apr. 5, 1877), 112.

247 *PS*, 1:626-629.

248 *PS*, 1:659-660, 700-703.

249 *PS*, 1:706-710.
individual preference (Spencer’s psychology denied free will, after all, although this point was left unspoken in his sociology.) For Spencer, unsettled promiscuity gave way to more defined relationships between men and women because children from such relationships were generally superior—in other words, because of the survival of the fittest. Polyandry favored smaller families, which might be best in harsh environments where each child needed more care and protection. Polygyny might be superior when males often died in battle, and in any event it allowed stronger males to have more children than weaker ones. Spencer emphasized power in much of his sociology—men seemed always to do whatever they had the power to do. This included the subjection of women. As Spencer wrote:

Perhaps in no way is the moral progress of mankind more clearly shown, than by contrasting the position of women among savages with their position among the most advanced of the civilized. At one extreme a treatment of them cruel to the utmost degree bearable; and at the other extreme a treatment which, in certain directions, gives them precedence over men.

In his final chapter on the family, “Domestic Retrospect and Prospect,” Spencer predicted that in societies that continued to advance, greater equality between the

---


251 PS, 1:669-671.

252 PS, 1:677-78.

253 PS, 1:689-91.

254 For a further discussion of power relationships in Spencer’s sociology see Turner, “Herbert Spencer’s Sociological Legacy,” 71-79.

255 PS, 1:746.
sexes could be expected, including educational, professional, and political equality. However, he believed most women would continue their domestic roles, and men would continue to have a preponderance of power in marriage.\(^{256}\) A close knit family which took charge of all its children’s needs, strengthening bonds and ensuring care for the parents in old age, was Spencer’s ideal of the future, and he ended his first volume on this note.\(^ {257}\)

Quite a few reviews of the first volume of *The Principles of Sociology* appeared, varying vastly in quality. The simplest stuck to summarizing the book’s contents, sprinkling in a few compliments or criticisms. For example, the *Literary World*, a Boston monthly founded as an aid to readers of all sorts, considered the book the most valuable part of the Synthetic Philosophy yet published, but otherwise stuck to summary.\(^ {258}\) Such treatment was not out of the ordinary for some magazines and newspapers.\(^ {259}\) The newly popular *North American Review*, which once had room for fifty-page critiques of Spencer, now only allowed space enough for its critic to treat Spencer’s theories on monogamy.\(^ {260}\) There was also at least one case where the reviewers had clearly not

\(^{256}\) *PS*, 1:791-794.

\(^{257}\) *PS*, 1:796-797.

\(^{258}\) “Spencer’s Principles of Sociology,” *Literary World* 8, no. 1 (June 1, 1877), 4.


read Spencer’s book. In the *American Catholic Quarterly Review*, a Philadelphia journal edited by theologian James A. Corcoran, the critic described Spencer as a follower of Comte (mistaking *Social Statics* for a book about Comte’s sociology) and focused on a passage on the Real Presence that was insulting to Catholics rather than discussing Spencer’s theories.  

The reviewer did at least know what the ghost-theory was, though he thought it depended in part on an assumption of man’s animal descent, making the book “pernicious.”

Some reviews were more detailed and conscientious. A writer for *The Universalist Quarterly* read *The Principles of Sociology* thoroughly enough to notice that despite having abundant data Spencer used certain sources repeatedly (the reviewer pointed to a particular Sandwich Island tribe which was often referenced). The critic thought Spencer’s speculations were ingenious, entertaining, and probably true, but wrote that any philosophy that did not see a plan to the universe was shallow. Two even more substantial reviews, one from the New York weekly of literary criticism *The Library Table* and the other from the *New York Times*, hint at what readers of the book might have found most interesting. In the former, T. B. Wakeman, who from his comments on Christianity was obviously a skeptic, praised Spencer’s Synthetic

\[261\text{ Review of *The Principles of Sociology*, by Herbert Spencer, *American Catholic Quarterly Review* 2, no. 7 (July 1877), 565-566.}\]

\[262\text{ Ibid., 566-567.}\]

\[263\text{ A, review of *The Principles of Sociology*, by Herbert Spencer, *Universalist Quarterly and General Review* 14 (July 1877), 385-386.}\]
Philosophy. The Times also paid its compliments, maintaining that familiarity with Spencer’s thought was necessary for anyone who wanted to understand the “thought of the age,” and must not be opposed on theological grounds. Both authors emphasized Spencer’s intriguing ideas about primitive thought and the origin of religion in ancestor worship, and both briefly discussed the family. The Times’ review went into great detail about Spencer’s organic analogy; Wakeman stressed its importance but gave little detail. Wakeman alone noticed Spencer’s invocation of Darwin and the survival of the fittest (“or ‘fight-i-est,’” Wakeman wrote) in his account of family life. Neither review commented on the struggle between societies, or on Spencer’s understanding of war as a civilizing force.

Discussion of Spencer’s social Darwinism was limited in reviews, but this did not mean that all writers were unaware of it. In the last years of the 1870s several articles appeared critiquing Spencer’s draconian social ideals for sapping the moral will. D. Appleton reprinted the American edition of Social Statics in 1877, which may partially explain the sudden upsurge, though not many of the articles quoted it. George Washington Julian, one-time abolitionist and radical Republican Representative, wrote a piece in the North American Review asking “Is the Reformer any Longer Needed?” He acknowledged the truth of evolution in the physical world, but complained that some

---

264 T. B. Wakeman, “The Synthetic Philosophy,” review of The Principles of Sociology, by Herbert Spencer, Library Table 3, no. 6 (July 1877), 86. For comments on the Christian religion see p. 87.

applied its teachings literally to politics and ethics. Julian criticized the idea that society is an organism whose development could not be hurried, only hindered. He felt this was not only a false doctrine, but demoralizing to those who might be tempted to accept it “as a welcome scapegoat for their laziness or moral indifference,” trading “a sickly moral fatalism for those deeds of heroism and self-sacrifice which have glorified human nature and lighted the world on its way to higher truth.”

To Julian, social evolution was the result of conscious individual effort; both individuals and communities were “architects of their own fortunes.” A respondent in the *Christian Advocate* agreed, adding that evolutionists of a certain class (of which Spencer was the leader) were hostile to reforms because Christianity was responsible for most of them. According to this writer, God worked in the world through the cooperation of social reformers.

Other writers were more equivocal. In 1879, F. D. Hoskins, professor and Episcopalian minister, wrote in the *American Church Review* (which had dropped “Quarterly” from its name) that “a certain school of philosophers” believed nature rid itself of the worthless, and quoted *Social Statics* about the shouldering aside of the weak. Hoskins observed that the poorest among the poor were multiplying rapidly: “we

---


267 Ibid., 238-239, 244.

268 Ibid., 241.

shall therefore not be rid of the pauper by any kindly interference of physical law.” But he also pointed out that “the philosophers” were not quite ready to ignore the miseries of the poor, since they acknowledged that the instinct to help was healthy. Hoskins ended with an argument against indiscriminate charity.\textsuperscript{270} Similarly, a writer in Catholic World that same year complained that the theory of competition pictured society as a collection of sharks and tigers in which the stronger survived by preying on the weaker. He argued that the fittest were not necessarily the best. He also put a Catholic slant on the issue by arguing that Spencer put too much emphasis on rights and not enough on duties, an error any Catholic child could correct by quoting his catechism. The writer insisted that idleness, both voluntary and involuntary, was a “crime against society” and any obstacles that kept men idle were flagrant evils. It was a man’s duty to earn his bread by the sweat of his brow.\textsuperscript{271}

Though it is difficult to draw solid conclusions from a few isolated articles, it seems that Spencer’s Darwinian social thought was becoming more widely noticed. These articles also show that the vocabulary of social Darwinism was becoming fixed, involving “the survival of the fittest” and the perishing of the weak. More and more Americans knew what social Darwinism was and what it argued, though as a set of ideas it still did not have a name. However, these articles also suggest that the issue of racial

\textsuperscript{270} F. D. Hoskins, “Pauperism and its Treatment,” American Church Review 31, no. 2 (Mar./Apr. 1879), 135-136.

\textsuperscript{271} “The Material Mission of the Church,” Catholic World 28, no. 167 (Feb. 1879), 662-663.
improvement was scarcely addressed. Spencer’s doctrines were arraigned because they were cruel and morally enervating, but his theories about what would improve the human race were allowed to stand. In the future, it was this dichotomy that allowed the eugenics movement to flourish. For eugenicists, race improvement could be effected by sterilization, rendering the process less cruel.

**Continuing the Sociology**

During the winter of 1877-78, while Spencer was working on the second volume of his sociology, he experienced recurring bouts of illness. He suffered a series of colds and fevers, one of which kept him indoors for eleven days. The ailments made him seriously consider whether he would live to complete his *Synthetic Philosophy*. Spencer felt the last two volumes, on morality, were the culmination of his work and its most important part. He believed that in an age of receding faith, an ethics based on scientific principles was greatly needed. So on January 9, 1878, he began working up ideas for the *Data of Ethics*, the first part of *The Principles of Ethics*. However, he continued his sociological work as well, since it was being serialized as the last volume had been, only stopping when the first section of volume two was finished. This section was published separately as *Ceremonial Institutions* in 1880.

---


274 *AB*, 2:369.

Ceremonial Institutions was the slightest of the sections of Spencer’s sociology. It took up only 250 pages of volume two, and was filled with countless examples of the usages of aboriginal, historical, and modern peoples but comparatively little analysis.276 Spencer’s basic argument was that ceremony was the earliest form of government, in the sense that it controlled conduct towards other people.277 More definite forms of control—political, religious, and social—evolved from ceremonial restrictions, specifically from behavior expressing subordination to a ruler.278 The remainder of the section was filled with explanations of specific types of behavior. Some was self-aggrandizing, such as taking trophies, mutilating slaves, and displaying badges, costumes, and fashionable dress. Spencer related this behavior to class distinctions. The elite, which originally meant the strongest warriors, tried to demonstrate their power over others and also to create visible distinctions between themselves and their subordinates.279 Other types of ceremony expressed subservience to a better, such as giving presents, paying visits, prostrating oneself, and using certain titles and forms of address. All such ceremonious acts, in other words, were prompted by the exercise or acknowledgement of power. As Spencer wrote, “From the beaten dog which, crawling

276 In the serialized chapters there were even more examples; on the advice of friends Spencer removed some, but, as he noted, the goal of sociology was scientific truth and not artistry—facts were needed. PS, 2:vi.

277 PS, 2:2-3.

278 PS, 2:6, 12.

279 PS, 2:77, 180, 209.
on its belly licks its master’s hand, we trace up the general truth that ceremonial forms are naturally initiated by the relation of conqueror and conquered, and the consequent truth that they develop along with the militant type of society.” It was an idea Spencer explored at greater length in the next section of his sociology.

_Ceremonial Institutions_ was not discussed at any great length. Most of the reviews that appeared were short summaries with little analysis. For example, the review in _Appleton’s Journal_, after explaining the revised publication schedule of Spencer’s books, gave a long account of Spencer’s main findings with extensive quotations. The writer was generally positive in tone but had no specific assessments of any of the arguments. The _New York Times_, too, gave an excellent and succinct summary but offered no commentary. A few reviews were more critical, especially about Spencer’s use of his material. A reviewer in the _Chicago Tribune_ felt that Spencer’s evolutionism made a difference in his selection and interpretation of facts. The reviewer for the _Independent_ likewise thought that Spencer’s arrangement of facts came from his view of progress as advance by differentiation and integration, and his

---


281 Review of _Ceremonial Institutions_, by Herbert Spencer, _Appletons’ Journal_ 8, no. 48 (June 1880), 569-571.


inductions would stand or fall on the merits of his data and his skill at organizing it.\textsuperscript{284}

Overall, response to the book was muted. The press was interested in other things.

As reviews of \textit{Ceremonial Institutions} trickled out, another event focused attention on Spencer’s sociological work. In January 1879 Yale Professor William Graham Sumner, America’s first professor of sociology, began using \textit{The Study of Sociology} as a textbook in one of his classes. The book was popular with students, which annoyed some of the faculty. In December 1879 President Noah Porter privately objected in a letter to Sumner and in conferences with him.\textsuperscript{285} Citing academic freedom, Sumner refused to drop the book in the spring, and was supported by a majority of the faculty. The conflict became public when the New York papers caught wind of it. “Yale as a Battle-Ground,” read the \textit{New York Times}’ headline. “Scientific Research Face to Face with Dogmas of Faith.” The \textit{Times} announced that the issue’s resolution would decide the college’s attitude towards science, faith, and the modern search for truth.\textsuperscript{286} Youmans was delighted at the controversy, and sent Spencer two copies of the paper.\textsuperscript{287}

However, the \textit{Times} coverage of Spencer was cacophonous. One article did little more than criticize his lack of religion, while another declared “the facts, so far as

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{284} “Sociology,” review of \textit{Ceremonial Institutions}, by Herbert Spencer, \textit{Independent} 32, no. 1635 (Apr. 1, 1880), 9.
\item \textsuperscript{286} “Yale as a Battle-Ground,” \textit{New York Times}, Apr. 4, 1880.
\item \textsuperscript{287} John Fiske, \textit{Edward Livingston Youmans, Interpreter of Science for the People} (New York: D. Appleton, 1894), 364.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
established, must be accepted . . . The philosophy that a master mind like that of Spencer builds upon them is an obtrusive fact that cannot be overlooked or brushed aside.”

In a third article, the writer, believing that most educated Americans knew Spencer only as the “White Czar of Agnosticism,” described the contents of *The Study of Sociology* and gave a measured view of both sides of the debate. Ultimately the whole affair was a tempest in a teapot. After proving his point Sumner quietly dropped the book for the following academic year, and no more was heard about it in the press.

Not a few general discussions of Spencer’s sociological ideas appeared in the years around 1880. One was from the pen of Noah Porter himself, and appeared in the *Princeton Review*. Though not as meaty as it had been in the past, the review still had the space for a 29-page resume of Spencer’s work, especially if the author was the president of the college. Porter made his distaste for *The Study of Sociology* clear from the start, and at various points called it unorganized, rambling, sensational, indecent, “positively flippant if not blasphemous,” and as offensive to Christians as the works of Voltaire and Thomas Paine. He considered Spencer vague in his conceptions of

---


290 For a complaint about how the media exaggerated the affair see “The Outlook,” *Christian Union* 21, no. 15 (Apr. 14, 1880), 399.

organic structure, organization, and growth as applied to society, and in his very concept of sociology itself.\textsuperscript{292} Porter believed Spencer’s main point to be that “everything we call human nature in its holiest and most refined judgments is the product of circumstance.”\textsuperscript{293} Moreover, Porter spent most of his article complaining about Spencer’s attitude towards Christianity and little discussing the specifics of political institutions, family dynamics, and social ritual.

Another significant discussion of Spencer’s sociology appeared in \textit{The Atlantic Monthly}—William James’ article “Great Men, Great Thoughts, and the Environment.” As with Spencer’s psychology, James disliked the way evolutionary sociology reduced the importance of individual will and action. As James wrote,

\begin{quote}
Social evolution is a resultant of the interaction of two wholly distinct factors: the individual, deriving his peculiar gifts from the play of physiological and infra-social forces, but bearing all the power of initiative and origination in his hands; and second, the social environment, with its power of adopting or rejecting both him and his gifts. Both factors are essential to change.\textsuperscript{294}
\end{quote}

James used Shakespeare as an example: if he had died of cholera, would another like him have been born?\textsuperscript{295} Ultimately, he decided that evolutionary philosophy was not a scientific method but a metaphysical “mood”—that of “fatalistic pantheism.”\textsuperscript{296} John

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{292} Ibid., 274-275, 279-280.
\textsuperscript{293} Ibid., 283.
\textsuperscript{294} William James, “Great Men, Great Thoughts, and the Environment,” \textit{Atlantic Monthly} 46, no. 276 (Oct. 1880), 448.
\textsuperscript{295} Ibid., 449-450.
\textsuperscript{296} Ibid., 458.
\end{quote}
Fiske, feeling called upon to respond, made a number of points: first, that Spencer acknowledged that social change was the result of many individual actions; second, that even a genius could accomplish little in an unsupportive environment; and third, that sociology had to do with large groups and general truths, not particular occurrences.297

As Spencer’s sociological volumes slowly emerged, Americans began to develop a conception of what his science of society was all about. It was evolutionary, that was certain. It discussed the development of society over time, from the dawn of man to the present. It was deterministic, and thus excluded the effects of God’s will on history, which to some made it profoundly anti-Christian. So far, however, there was not much comment on Spencer’s specific theories. What Americans would focus on, and what they would ignore, remained to be seen.

---

CHAPTER 6

A GIANT IN WINTER

In 1879, Spencer published the first and most important part of his work on morality, *The Data of Ethics*.¹ Like *Social Statics*, this was an attempt to deduce a rational system of morals from scientific principles—or, to be more accurate, to find a scientific way to defend “politico-ethical conclusions” already held. Spencer had come full circle, as he himself recognized.² He was returning to the task of his youth, but this time he had prepared himself by studying biology, psychology, and sociology. As for publishing out of order, Spencer had this to say:

I am the more anxious to indicate in outline, if I cannot complete, this final work, because the establishment of rules of right conduct on a scientific basis is a pressing need. Now that moral injunctions are losing the authority given by their supposed sacred origin, the secularization of morals is becoming imperative. Few things can happen more disastrous than the decay and death of a regulative system no longer fit, before another and fitter regulative system has grown up to replace it.³

Spencer, a man of no small ego, meant to provide this replacement.

The Science of Righteousness: A New Ethics

The first chapters of *The Data of Ethics* concerned conduct. Spencer defined this variously as “acts adjusted to ends,” or “the aggregate of all external coordinations.” Good conduct was well adjusted to reach intended goals, bad the reverse, just as a good knife was sharp and a bad knife dull. Spencer understood ethical conduct to involve personal welfare, the welfare of offspring, and the welfare of other citizens. Good ethical conduct thus meant actions conducive to these kinds of welfare, with the first being the most important. Spencer considered good acts more evolved than bad ones since they involved greater adjustment of organism to environment. Thus good ethical conduct was the most highly evolved form; as Spencer put it, “ethics has for its subject-matter, that form which universal conduct assumes during the last stages of its evolution. . . . those displayed by the highest type of being, when he is forced, by increase of numbers, to live more and more in the presence of his fellows.” Only the highest type of man in the highest type of society could practice purely ethical behavior, a subject to which Spencer returned at the end of his book.

---

4 *PE*, 1:5, 10.
5 *PE*, 1:21.
6 *PE*, 1:22.
7 *PE*, 1:25, 44.
8 *PE*, 1:20.
Spencer next looked at ethics from the physical, biological, psychological, and sociological points of view. He found that, just as the theory of evolution suggested, the highest conduct (the ethically good) was the most definite, coherent, and heterogeneous—focused, self-restrained, and adjusted towards a variety of obligations simultaneously.9 Biologically, Spencer harked back to Social Statics and the importance of exercising the faculties. For him it was a moral obligation to exercise animal functions, maintain health, and strive for “complete life.”10 “Sentient existence can evolve only on condition that pleasure-giving acts are life-sustaining acts,” Spencer wrote.11 To put it another way, evolution ensures that those actions necessary for life are pleasant and those that are harmful are painful. Spencer contended that this was not always true of man because he had not yet fully adapted to his social environment.12

Evolutionary psychology was at the heart of Spencer’s ethical code. He argued that as the mind evolved, complex adjustment of acts to ends became possible, including the ability to focus on long term goals.13 This was the key to the moral consciousness: the ability of some feelings to dominate others.14 Such self-control

---

9 PE, 1:64-71. See also 105-107.
10 PE, 1:75-77.
11 PE, 1:83.
12 PE, 1:85-87.
13 PE, 1:105-109.
14 PE, 1:113.
became innate in the individual if it was exercised continually by a long series of ancestors. Again, Spencer was trying to build a bridge between those who believed in an intuitive moral sense and those who conceived of mind as something built up through the association of experiences.\(^{15}\) Organisms’ reactions to occurrences could become hard-wired into the brains of their descendants, and because humans lived with their fellows, much of this experience was of social interactions. “The life of the social organism must, as an end, rank above the lives of its units,” Spencer wrote, though adding that preservation of society was a “proximate aim taking precedence of the ultimate aim, individual self-preservation,” which was only necessary in the presence of enemy societies.\(^{16}\) Thus higher ethical behavior, expressed in voluntary as opposed to mandatory cooperation, was only possible when militant society gave way to the industrial type.\(^{17}\)

At the midpoint of *The Data of Ethics* Spencer switched course, developing a critique of Utilitarianism. Like the Utilitarians, Spencer believed that “the good is universally the pleasurable.”\(^{18}\) Though he agreed that the greatest happiness for all was the universal aim of ethics, he did not agree that this should be the immediate aim of ethics, for several reasons. Some of Spencer’s reasoning was similar to that found in

\(^{15}\) *PE*, 1:121-124.

\(^{16}\) *PE*, 1:133-134.

\(^{17}\) *PE*, 1:148-149.

\(^{18}\) *PE*, 1:30.
Social Statics, though his arguments gained in sophistication over the years. First he argued that ratios of pains and pleasures are hard to determine, especially since men had different needs, different tolerations for pain, and different definitions of pleasure.\textsuperscript{19} Second, he pointed out that what is good for the people of one society might be bad for another, based on environmental conditions and level of social advancement.\textsuperscript{20} The standard of justice, on the other hand, was essentially related to equality and thus much easier to judge. It was also necessary for harmonious cooperation, which all societies needed.\textsuperscript{21} To Spencer, the pursuit of justice was the best way to secure the utilitarian goal, the greatest happiness for the greatest number.

However, the pursuit of justice did not necessarily mean individual self-sacrifice. Spencer argued that justice required each individual to reap the rewards (or penalties) intendant upon their actions.\textsuperscript{22} The superior, with their greater abilities, would naturally gain more happiness than the incapable. If higher types multiplied at the expense of lower, this meant that future society would enjoy a greater aggregate of happiness, especially since the ability to enjoy life to the fullest was also heritable.\textsuperscript{23} Besides, egoism was necessary for altruism, which in the second edition of The Principles of

\textsuperscript{19} PE, 1:163, 174-180.  
\textsuperscript{20} PE, 1:169, 180-184.  
\textsuperscript{21} PE, 1:164-165, 170.  
\textsuperscript{22} PE, 1:188-189.  
\textsuperscript{23} PE, 1:190-193
Psychology Spencer attributed to the highest type of mind. Excessive self-sacrifice was damaging, eventually lessening an individual’s ability to care for others.24 Furthermore, Spencer maintained that in a society, personal welfare depended on the welfare of all, good treatment of peers was often reciprocated, and besides, the altruistic state of mind was pleasurable in itself.25 Thus some sort of compromise between egoism and altruism was necessary. Spencer concluded that the greatest happiness for all was mostly achieved by individuals adequately seeking their own pleasure, but that individuals gained happiness in part by promoting the general good.26

Whatever the ideal balance between egoism and altruism might be for present society, Spencer believed that among ideal men in an ideal society self-sacrifice would be unnecessary. His utopian visions had not been dampened by the passing of years since Social Statics. Though it is true that he was never more than vague about his society of the future, he did make a few aspects of his utopia clear.27 First, Spencer thought that the sense of duty originated with fears of legal, social, and supernatural consequences, inherited from ancestors in an amorphous form.28 He believed this feeling, whose origin was coercion, would dissolve as evolution gradually made moral

---

24 PE, 1:193, 200.
26 PE, 1:238.
actions pleasurable in themselves.\textsuperscript{29} In the future, men would be perfectly adjusted to their social environment and would enjoy necessary activities, like work, while feeling revulsion for what was harmful.\textsuperscript{30} Going even further, Spencer suggested that opportunities for pure altruism would become scarce when most members of society took pleasure in the things that made them self-reliant.\textsuperscript{31} He even imagined a state where individuals voluntarily limited their altruism so that everyone had a chance to do good to others.\textsuperscript{32} Spencer wrote,

\begin{quote}
Far off as seems such a state, yet every one of the factors counted on to produce it may already be traced in operation among those of the highest natures. What now in them is occasional and feeble, may be expected with further evolution to become habitual and strong; and what now characterizes the exceptionally high may be expected eventually to characterize all. For that which the best human nature is capable of, is within the reach of human nature at large.\textsuperscript{33}
\end{quote}

It was a stirring vision of what a society composed of only the best of us could be.

Spencer, however, was realistic about the present. In the current, imperfect state of man, often there was no right action, only a least wrong one.\textsuperscript{34} For example, Spencer noted that no society can be ideal if surrounded by aggressive neighbors,
because the need for self-defense entailed the need to inflict pain. As he put it, “the limit of evolution can be reached by conduct only in permanently peaceful societies.” Even a perfect man would be unable to act completely ethically in an imperfect society without bringing dire consequences on himself. Still, as he had in Social Statics, Spencer argued that an understanding of the ethical ideal was necessary to the determination of relative ethics, just as a physician needed to understand a healthy body in order to treat disease. Ethical science could help determine which compromises were least bad.

*The Data of Ethics*, though intriguing and at times inspiring, has one serious problem: it does not explain why the imperfect man should strive to follow the Spencer’s ethical guidelines. Or to put it more simply, why do right when doing wrong brings more personal pleasure? In answer to this question, Spencer argued that moral action is necessary for “complete” or “highest” life. This contention can be broken down into two parts: first, that moral individuals are more evolved and thus superior, and second, that complete life implies maximum happiness. But, the imperfect individual might ask, does either superiority or the attempt to approximate highest life bring

---

35 *PE*, 1:137, 261.

36 *PE*, 1:19.


38 *PE*, 1:276-277.

39 *PE*, 1:283-284.
happiness? If so, no ethical code is needed—men will naturally pursue these things through egotism. If not, selfish men will not seek to be ethical without the legal, social, and supernatural controls Spencer sought to supplant. Spencer considered an argument against pure egotism unnecessary, because it would lead to “universal conflict and social dissolution.”40 This is only true if everyone in a society is perfectly selfish, however. It is no argument against one person being selfish in a society that is mostly moral.

Spencer never made it explicit, but part of what he argued in The Data of Ethics was that complete egotism was impossible. Because of the experiences of ancestors, feelings of duty were inescapable. Moral self-restraint was heritable.41 Furthermore, thanks to the continuing adjustment of man to society, humanity’s moral improvement was inevitable. Thanks to evolution, human beings in the future would actually enjoy acting ethically. On this view, The Data of Ethics was more of an overview of past and future moral development than a guide to right living—in fact, it made ethical handbooks seem rather pointless. Spencer reserved specific moral injunctions for later parts of The Principles of Ethics, which tends to support such an interpretation. Whether Spencer himself was aware of this potential reading of his book is another question.

40 PE, 1:219.

41 PE, 1:114-115.
Evolutionary Ethics: The American Response

The Data of Ethics triggered a greater reaction than any of Spencer’s works since First Principles. Biology, psychology, and even sociology might seem like esoteric topics to many, but morality was everyone’s concern. Furthermore, the subject attracted the interest of religious thinkers, for Spencer was propounding an ethical system founded upon evolution and not Christianity. Since many of the conclusions of the new system were the same as the old, the New York Times suggested that Christians should welcome the book, which showed that Jesus’ teachings did not diverge from the principles that regulated human life.42 But as Spencer predicted, religious reactions were mostly negative.43 Any ethics that did not take God’s will into consideration could not be accepted by most Christian, however similar its ultimate lessons might be.

Most of the reviewers appear to have read the book carefully. Summaries tended to notice most of the salient points—that happiness was Spencer’s primary desideratum, that he saw duty as descended from fear of legal, religious, and social penalties, that egoism and altruism must be balanced, and that relative ethics were different from but based on absolute ethics. Sometimes these points were oversimplified, as when the New York Evangelist’s critic wrote “Mr. Spencer believes in utilitarianism as the basis of morals.”44 The Christian Advocate was more accurate,


43 PE, 1:x.

highlighting the difference between empirical utilitarianism, which Spencer rejected, and rational utilitarianism, though the latter was a somewhat curious name for what Spencer actually argued.\textsuperscript{45}

Unfortunately, there were a few critiques that showed basic ignorance of Spencer’s positions. For example, S. L. Beiler, a Methodist minister, pictured Spencer as a spider weaving a web to entrap the unwary, and claimed that his ethics understood men as automata and defined right as what succeeded best.\textsuperscript{46} Some simply dismissed Spencer, as when C. H. Payne, president of Ohio Wesleyan University, said in a baccalaureate speech “there is no need of entering into a learned discussion with Herbert Spencer, or any of [the] agnostic philosophers concerning the ‘data of ethics.’ It is plain to [the] common sense of common men that there is no such thing as duty if there is no such a being as God.”\textsuperscript{47} Most educated religious writers seemed to think it was their duty to what was obvious to common men.

One basic criticism of Spencer was that he did not give scope for “free moral agency in man.”\textsuperscript{48} This was Noah Porter’s main reproach. In a review in the \textit{Independent} Porter complained that Spencer relied on complex structure and function as an


\textsuperscript{46} S. L. Beiler, “Ethics of Evolution,” \textit{Western Christian Advocate} 47, no. 30 (July 28, 1880), 233.

\textsuperscript{47} C. H. Payne, “Dr. Payne’s Baccalaureate Discourse,” \textit{Western Christian Advocate} 47, no. 26 (June 30, 1880), 206.

explanation for human behavior, and thus, failed to understand that morality was primarily a matter of the intention behind voluntary action. Unfortunately, Porter’s reading of Spencer was sometimes willfully obtuse; for example, he took Spencer’s claim that conduct arose by insensible degrees from unconscious action to imply that inanimate objects could also have conduct. Much of Porter’s critique hung on Spencer’s denial of free will, something germane to his psychology but not discussed in the work at hand.\footnote{Noah Porter, “Herbert Spencer’s Data of Ethics,” Independent 31, no. 1614 (Nov. 6, 1879), 9-10.} Lyman Atwater, writing in the Independent the following year, made a similar point. He noted that an evolutionary system that accounted for man in terms of blind material forces must explain his conscience. Atwater felt that Spencer failed to show how the sense of right and wrong could be extrapolated from sensations of pleasure and pain—the moral sense was something more than just a development of the instinct to seek one and avoid the other.\footnote{L. H. Atwater, “Evolutionism and Ethics,” review of The Data of Ethics, by Herbert Spencer, Independent 32, no. 1633 (Mar. 18, 1880), 3.}

Many critics agreed with Atwater: there was something more to moral feelings than evolution could explain. A critic in the Christian Union complained “to Mr. Spencer there is no difference between what is natural and what is moral. They are both the same, only the moral is the more evolved.”\footnote{“Mr. Herbert Spencer’s Data of Ethics,” Christian Union 20, no. 26 (Dec. 24, 1879), 557.} In a lengthy review in the Universalist Quarterly, one writer argued that humanity’s ancestors were superstitious and inclined
towards evil, thus mistaken in most of their ethical judgments. Any ethical system with ancestral heritage as its centerpiece was suspect.\(^52\) This critic made a distinction between intelligent action, based on reasoning about ends, and moral action, based on knowledge of the intrinsic rightness or wrongness of behavior. Adultery, for example, was wrong intrinsically, not just because it hurt wives and children.\(^53\) Similarly, William Taylor Stott, President and Professor of Mental and Moral Philosophy at Indiana’s Franklin College, wrote in the *Baptist Review* (successor to the *Baptist Quarterly*) that ethical conduct was not “earth-born.” Stott contended that conscience was not a matter of experience and observation, but of an intuitional moral sense, given by God, allowing men to know what to do without making calculations about happiness.\(^54\)

Stott rejected Spencer’s prophesies for the future, contending that moral regeneration would come from above, not below.\(^55\) A few other critics were willing to accept the improvement of ethics over long periods of time. The *New York Evangelist*, usually hostile to Spencer, agreed that “civilization is the natural product of the deposited virtues, the tastes, the refinements, the faith and devotion of all the ages, funded in the human organism.” The writer put this in terms of the growth of


\(^{53}\) Ibid., 180-181.


\(^{55}\) Ibid., 162.
conscience through Christianity, noting that Spencer could have put his system into Christian terms if he had wished.56 James McCosh, writing in *The Princeton Review* (which had dropped “Presbyterian Quarterly” from its name when it became bimonthly in 1878), imagined the conscience as a “germ” planted by God. Its growth might depend on its ancestry and environment but its origin was divine. McCosh agreed with Spencer that development had led to increasing happiness as higher creatures evolved—and pointed to this as evidence of a benevolent creator.57 Those who accepted evolution did so marginally, and only with the proviso that God’s will was a factor.58

Another critique concerned Spencer’s ideas of happiness, justice, and “higher life.” D. McGregor Means, a professor at Middlebury College in Vermont, wrote a long essay in which he complained that Spencer could not measure any of these things with any precision.59 This appeared in *The Bibliotheca Sacra*, a quarterly published at Andover Theological Seminary that was aimed at clergymen and theology students.60 Means protested that he could not tell the difference between Spencer’s ethics and


58 Review of *The Data of Ethics* (*Christian Advocate*), 202.


utilitarianism and thus that Spencer’s system was not new. He doubted, given the complexity of the problem, that Spencer could know that happiness is increasing or that conditions would become fixed in a certain way in the future. Likewise, he cast doubt on the ability to rationally weigh means against ends, present unhappiness against future happiness, and work against rewards. In *The Unitarian Review*, C. C. Everett made a similar point, even going so far as to attempt to calculate the best life by multiplying the length of the life by its complexity. In the same review a few months later, Unitarian minister Minot J. Savage criticized Everett and other critics for misunderstanding Spencer, and tried to demonstrate that the complexity of life could indeed be objectively calculated.

A few writers criticized Spencer’s system for not offering enough incentive for good behavior. This was one of Everett’s main critiques. He argued that if Spencer’s principles of morality were correct, they should increase virtue in a society. He suggested a test for this: go through the thought processes of a young man subject to temptation. Everett found that Spencer offered little incentive to do right; Christian

---

62 Ibid., 493-96.
63 Ibid., 488-489, 492, 497.
teachings had improved society much more than Spencer’s ethics could.\textsuperscript{66} Means, oversimplifying a bit, complained that the only punishment Spencer envisioned for acting wrongly was being out of harmony with nature.\textsuperscript{67} Reviewers did not bring up the subject of God’s commandments, Jesus’ teachings, or the afterlife, however. As usual, they were eager to pick apart Spencer’s system with reason rather than resorting to the \textit{odium theologicum}.

Despite their criticisms, many of these religious writers demonstrated a sneaking admiration for Spencer’s work. Even Noah Porter, a devout foe, praised Spencer’s style and use of illustrations, called his system “stimulating and instructive,” and gave him credit for keen analysis of utilitarianism.\textsuperscript{68} Another writer thought Spencer logical, thorough, and knowledgeable; his mistake was attempting the impossible task of bridging the chasm between man’s moral nature and animal’s lack thereof.\textsuperscript{69} James McCosh began a long critique in the pages of \textit{The Princeton Review} by admitting “Herbert Spencer commands our respect by his terrible earnestness. He has an end to live for and he lives for it. . . . He is to a large extent the author, and is certainly the organizer, and the very embodiment, personification, and expression of

\textsuperscript{66} Everett, “The Data of Ethics,” 51-53; 55-56.

\textsuperscript{67} Means, “‘Data of Ethics,’” 499-500.

\textsuperscript{68} Porter, “Data of Ethics,” 9.

\textsuperscript{69} “Ethics and Evolution” (\textit{Universalist Quarterly}), 176.
development.” McCosh reaffirmed his praise from *Intuitions of Mind*; he seemed to regret finding Spencer’s system a failure.

McCosh’s review was probably the best that appeared: carefully written, thorough, and almost always fair. However, he made his position clear at the outset:

> Thinking men see that if development cannot meet the requirements of ethics, which are quite as valid and certain as heredity or any other laws of physiology, evolutionists will have to modify their theory, and allow that, while it can do much, it cannot accomplish everything, and that it leaves many important facts to be explained by other, and I may add higher, laws.

For McCosh, a committed evolutionist, ethics were a last refuge for God’s law acting in the universe. There was little chance that he would accept Spencer’s system. Despite the inevitability of a guilty verdict, however, McCosh gave Spencer a fine trial. He began with Spencer’s psychology, which in a rare display of passion he called “about the greatest philosophic abortion of our day.” McCosh agreed that the brain might be the organ of the mind and constrain it in some ways, but he rejected the idea that rationality was a direct result of the brain. Man’s primary intuitions, both mathematical and ethical, could not be proved to exist even in the highest animals.

---

70 James McCosh, “Herbert Spencer’s ‘Data of Ethics,’” *Princeton Review* 55, no. 6 (Nov. 1879), 607.

71 Ibid., 609.

72 Ibid., 613.

73 Ibid., 617-618.
to animals physically but not in mind, McCosh wrote; ethics were the province of the human.\textsuperscript{74}

McCosh agreed with Spencer that the ability to gain and feel happiness had increased through the ages, like some others who reviewed \textit{The Data of Ethics}. McCosh felt that nature had a moral purpose, showing design, and that the process culminated in the arrival of man, a moral creature who could appreciate that purpose.\textsuperscript{75} However, he was not sure Spencer was correct in arguing that these processes eventually led to the disappearance of evil.\textsuperscript{76} Furthermore, the development theory could not explain why one person should promote happiness in others. Intuitive morality, on the other hand, understood that promoting the greatest happiness was a duty given by a divine lawgiver.\textsuperscript{77} “Love is the grand, the essential virtue,” an end in itself that promoted happiness according to McCosh.\textsuperscript{78} Ultimately McCosh found that without God, the new ethics removed one motive for virtue without providing others likely to influence most people.\textsuperscript{79} But he held out hope that Spencer’s fuller treatment of ethics would address some of his criticisms.

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 625-626.
\item\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 621-624.
\item\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 634.
\item\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 631.
\item\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 626-628.
\item\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 635.
\end{itemize}
Not all reviews of *The Data of Ethics* were negative; this was especially true of the few that appeared in secular publications. For example, *The Nation* felt the book exposed the muddled nature of current ethical thought and concluded it was Spencer’s best book yet.\(^{\text{80}}\) The reviewer highlighted something that others ignored: that evolutionary thinking had not made Spencer warlike, but brought an “almost Quakerish humanitarianism and regard for peace.”\(^{\text{81}}\) The critic did have some complaints, however. The most compelling was the notion that some might prefer struggles, joys, sorrows, and life’s “delicious mess of fears and strivings” to Spencer’s “milk-and-water paradise.”\(^{\text{82}}\) A similar criticism was leveled by a few other reviews. Everett, for example, complained that Spencer had nothing worthwhile to say about suffering, which was a necessary part of life in an imperfect world.\(^{\text{83}}\) As another critic put it, Spencer’s system precluded heroism, courage, sacrifice, faith, and endurance as virtues.\(^{\text{84}}\)

Most of those who wrote about *The Data of Ethics* had reservations. They recognized the book’s ability and intriguing ideas, but few felt that it met the ambitious goal of providing a replacement for Christian virtue. There were, of course, a few who embraced Spencer’s book wholeheartedly. Minot Savage wrote “it is one of the few

\(^{\text{80}}\) “Herbert Spencer’s Data of Ethics,” *Nation* 29, no. 741 (Sept. 11, 1879), 179.

\(^{\text{81}}\) Ibid.

\(^{\text{82}}\) Ibid.

\(^{\text{83}}\) Everett, “The Data of Ethics,” 54.

\(^{\text{84}}\) “Ethics and Evolution” (*Universalist Quarterly*), 186-187.
volumes of the world that will stand as a mile-stone of human progress. It marks the transition from theoretic, metaphysical, speculative ethics, to the scientific morality of the future.” However, Savage included Christ and Christianity as part of the human racial experience inherited by modern man, thus sneaking in religion through the back door.85 For most, Spencer’s ethical system was thought-provoking, but hardly provided a firm basis for everyday decisions.

**Systems of Legal Control: Political Institutions and its American Reception**

*Political Institutions* first appeared in the United States in the pages of *Popular Science Monthly*, starting in November of 1880.86 The book was not published until 1882; the following year the Appletons combined it with *Ceremonial Institutions* as the second volume of *The Principles of Sociology*.87 In some ways *Political Institutions* was like Spencer’s other political work. His basic ideas about government had not changed. However, Spencer focused on description rather than prescription this time. He defined various types of government, explained their advantages and disadvantages in different environments and for different social types, and discussed their effects on the behavior of citizens. Rather than extrapolating from rational laws of behavior, Spencer examined actual institutions and attempted to classify them. The fact that his most important

---


distinction, between the militant and industrial type of society, reinforced his views about positive social development shows how deeply his beliefs affected his categorization.

Spencer began with an argument for objectivity in social science. Thought and feeling could not be disconnected completely, Spencer wrote, but we should try to study men’s actions “as those of alien creatures, which it merely concerns us to understand” rather than to judge. In this way Spencer prepared his readers for some of his potentially controversial findings: that war played a significant role in the advance of civilizations, and that it was sometimes necessary in the past for the strong to force the weak into submission. The struggle for existence between societies had encouraged their evolution, Spencer argued, but this would not necessarily be true in the future. He did not provide any clear reasons why war should cease to operate beneficially, however.

For Spencer, the essence of society was cooperation towards a goal, usually food production and warfare. Cooperation required organization, which usually meant

---

88 PS, 2:229-230.
89 PS, 2:231-232.
90 PS, 2:241-242.
political headship.\textsuperscript{92} Spencer understood social development in terms of his general theory of evolution. As a homogenous social group grew, there must be political integration (merging of tribes by conquest or in mutual self-defense) and differentiation (divisions between men and women, rulers and ruled, conqueror and slave).\textsuperscript{93} Political leadership became more complex with growth, as greater organization was needed to keep these various groups and classes of people organized. However, Spencer pointed out that leaders essentially focused the will and feeling of the living community, and even more so the will of the dead, since they mainly enforced inherited rules of conduct.\textsuperscript{94}

Spencer divided governing bodies into four classes. Rule could be individual, by one leader, or compound, with multiple leaders of separate groups cooperating when necessary. A combination of the two was also possible, which Spencer called a consultative body, in which a chief ruler cooperated with a council of leading men. Finally, representative bodies formed when popular power, which grew with trade and with concentration in towns, became great enough to force concessions about self-rule.\textsuperscript{95} Spencer determined that governing institutions were more stable when positions were hereditary, but more amenable to change when rank was based on personal

\textsuperscript{92} PS, 2:244-249.
\textsuperscript{93} PS, 2:266, 278-80, 289-291.
\textsuperscript{94} PS, 2:321-323.
\textsuperscript{95} PS, 2:420-424.
ability, since office holders would be younger and less conservative.\textsuperscript{96} He went into some depth about these various types of government, discussing government functionaries, ministries, and local government. Throughout, Spencer painted a picture of struggle, as various factions and groups sought to gain control or maintain their power.\textsuperscript{97} He gave little space to the role of culture, tradition, and loyalty in maintaining a government’s authority.

For Spencer, differentiation could be seen in the separation of the military and judicial systems from the governing system. The military separated from the rest of society for several reasons: disconnection of military obligations from citizenship, political leaders who were not fit for military service, and the increasing civil duties of leaders.\textsuperscript{98} Judicial systems grew when the king was not absolute and when secular, military, and ecclesiastical justice became separate.\textsuperscript{99} Spencer cited four sources for laws: quasi-religious inherited customs, the commands of dead leaders, the will of the current leader, and popular opinion.\textsuperscript{100} Depending on the source, ideas about crime could differ—for example, murder could be seen as a sin, as a loss for the family of the

\textsuperscript{96} PS, 2:258-260, 344-348.

\textsuperscript{97} See for example PS, 2:446-447 where Spencer discussed the relationship between ruler and ministers.

\textsuperscript{98} PS, 2:474-482, 490.

\textsuperscript{99} PS, 2:496-497, 505.

\textsuperscript{100} PS, 2:523-524.
victim, as a rejection of the will of the ruler, or as an injury the community.101 Spencer also discussed the desire for property, which he saw as rooted in man’s animal ancestry, and the collection of revenue which he associated with warfare.102

The last sections of Political Institutions were some of the most important. Here Spencer explained his conception of the militant and industrial types of societies. This distinction could be found as far back as the first edition of First Principles, where Spencer described a change from “the military or predatory type of social structure, to the industrial or mercantile type” which he saw ongoing in European societies.103 According to Spencer, almost all societies in history have been of the militant type, including most of those still surviving. Spencer argued that among societies engaging in military conflict those that were most efficient in fielding and supporting the maximum number of fighters are bound to be victorious, and destroy or swallow up their neighbors. Certain attributes are a necessary prerequisite for such dominance: centralization of power, a status system with grades of authority based on military ability, and regimentation for both military forces and the community at large.104 The ultimate result is that the individual is owned by the state, shown in part by the prevalence of “positively regulative” legislation: laws telling a person what they must

101 PS, 2:531-532.
102 PS, 2:538, 558.
104 PS, 2:569-73.
do, rather than defining what they cannot do, leading to what Spencer termed “compulsory cooperation.”105 The citizens of such societies might be strong, courageous, and even virtuous, but they are also vengeful and destructive, with little regard for the liberty or property of others.106 Patriotism, obedience, and loyalty are lauded in such societies, while individual initiative and private enterprise are smothered.107 Social norms and cultural values thus develop from environmental conditions which include outside threats, a type of determinism that is typically Spencerian.108

Spencer’s industrial type of society was almost a photographic negative of the militant type. In the absence of serious external threats, self-sustenance and reproduction were the only remaining necessities. Individuality was the essential value defended by the state, for where “life, liberty and property” are protected greater prosperity follows, and prosperity is how industrial societies compete with each other.109 Laws were only “negatively regulative,” meant to protect citizens from harm rather than to control behavior, and to enforce contracts, which replace status as a

105 PS, 2:572, 574.
106 PS, 2:592-95.
107 PS, 2:596-98.
108 Sharlin, “Herbert Spencer and Scientism,” 463. Sharlin argues that Spencer did not see the need to justify favoring one set of social values over another, because there was a general consensus in Victorian Britain about the direction of modern social progress.
109 PS, 2:606-08.
means of formalizing social relations.\textsuperscript{110} Clearly, the industrial type of society is simply another version of Spencer’s future utopia, where each is rewarded according to his virtue and voluntary cooperation for a common good takes the place of state projects and regulations. Spencer’s belief in government’s limitations, the efficiency of private enterprise, and the importance of personal freedom, absorbed during his boyhood in a Dissenting family in the English midlands, he simply blended with his concept of progressive evolution.\textsuperscript{111} The citizen under such a regime would have a strong love of personal freedom and of justice, both for self and others, and be humane where the military type was vengeful and coercive.\textsuperscript{112}

These types seem mutually exclusive, but Spencer argued that militant traits are often found mixed with industrial, especially in Western societies that were making the long, slow transition between the two.\textsuperscript{113} Furthermore, militant societies can also have industry and commerce; their type is based on their organization, priorities, and ethos, not their productive capacity.\textsuperscript{114} Still, Spencer clearly considered the industrial type higher on the evolutionary scale than the militant type, and capable of out producing it.


\textsuperscript{111} Many writers have discussed the context of Spencer’s political ideas; see for example John Offer, Herbert Spencer and Social Theory (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 33-35. Alberto Mingardi discusses the congruence between Spencer’s evolutionary and social theories in Herbert Spencer (New York: Continuum, 2011), 29.

\textsuperscript{112} PS, 2:628-630.

\textsuperscript{113} PS, 2:632.

\textsuperscript{114} Offer, Herbert Spencer and Social Theory, 244-245.
Since evolution was inevitable for Spencer, the transformation of societies from warlike to peaceful and freedom loving must be inevitable too. In Spencer’s future, more and more material and human resources will be committed to production and trade, making the world more and more peaceful. At the time he wrote the second volume of *The Principles of Sociology*, Spencer felt that Britain was moving in the right direction. Public criticism of the nation’s actions towards the Afghans, Boers and Zulus was one sign of this; the increasing honor paid to industrial and commercial over military careers was another.\(^\text{115}\)

The hubbub surrounding Spencer’s American visit overshadowed critical notice of *Political Institutions*, but reviews did appear, though some of them were delayed until after the visit. A few organs of the press even covered the articles as they appeared in *Popular Science Monthly*. For example, *The Salt Lake City Herald* commended Spencer for demonstrating the effects of militancy on liberty, national character, and the progress of civilization.\(^\text{116}\) *The Friend’s Intelligencer* also showed itself eager to comment where the virtues of peace were concerned, and summarized Spencer’s analysis of personal character in the militant society.\(^\text{117}\) Most comments on Spencer’s typology came after the publication of *Political Institutions*, however. These tended to focus on

---

\(^{115}\) PS, 2:635-36.


\(^{117}\) “Herbert Spencer on Militarism,” *Friends’ Intelligencer* 38, no. 47 (Jan. 7, 1882), 740-741. This appears to be a reprint from the *Herald of Peace*, but I have been unable to track down the original.
Spencer’s arguments for limited government, but his discussion of the role of war in social evolution was also addressed. This was especially true in religious magazines, which enjoyed great popularity in the nineteenth century. A reviewer in the Methodist Christian Advocate wrote that Christians would find much to agree with in Spencer’s latest book, including its tendency “to fortify the Christian position as to war and other disasters of the militant type of society.” The Christian Union argued that applying evolution to society was not theologically objectionable, and considered the military/industrial dichotomy to be the heart of Spencer’s book. Both reviewers were careful to disassociate themselves from Spencer’s metaphysics.

Secular periodicals discussed Political Institutions as well, and as with Christian periodicals they noted Spencer’s stance on war. W. W. Crane Jr.’s review in the Californian and Overland Monthly was among the most insightful. The Overland Monthly was the most famous Western periodical thanks to Bret Harte’s brief tenure as editor; it had merged with the Californian earlier in 1882. In his article, also read before the Berkeley club, Crane focused almost entirely on Spencer’s distinction between militant and industrial types. He argued that Spencer paid too little attention to family


119 “Herbert Spencer as a Political Philosopher,” review of Political Institutions, by Herbert Spencer, Christian Union 26, no. 15 (Oct. 12, 1882), 301-302.


121 “William Watrous Crane, Jr.,” Overland Monthly 2, no. 12 (Dec. 1883), 655.
relationships in his explanation of early human organization, and put too much stress on war.\textsuperscript{122} Furthermore, he suggested that since political rights devolve on those willing to fight for them, war can be a cause of development even in larger, modern nations.\textsuperscript{123} Finally, he disputed the idea that industrialism could lead to diminished laws and regulations. While militarism does lead to government control of the individual, Crane felt that growing industrialism does the same by fostering increasingly complicated relationships between individuals and businesses, which necessitates more complex legislation.\textsuperscript{124} Ultimately, Crane was ambivalent about this process, writing “the ulterior effect is that the citizen really becomes more and more the slave of the State. Apparently, we are free; actually, we are restrained of our liberties at every turn.”\textsuperscript{125} Spencer would have agreed wholeheartedly with this sentiment, at least. Other critics were more affirmative about Spencer’s message of peace. The Dial, a modern and much changed incarnation of the mouthpiece for the Boston transcendentalists, published a highly positive review by Walter R. Barnes. Barnes accepted Spencer’s fundamental ideas about evolution and the regularity of law, even

\footnotesize{122} W. W. Crane Jr., “Herbert Spencer’s Political Institutions,” Californian and Overland Monthly 6, no. 35 (Nov. 1882), 414.

\footnotesize{123} Ibid., 415-16.

\footnotesize{124} Ibid., 416-18.

\footnotesize{125} Ibid., 420.
to the extent of invoking the homogeneous and the heterogeneous.\textsuperscript{126} As for militancy, he wrote, "not he who fights the personal quarrels of a master, but he who causes two blades of grass to grow where before there was but one, is the true patriot. These lessons, and more, are the teachings of this philosophy.\textsuperscript{127} Another reviewer argued that Spencer put too much emphasis on trade as a civilizing force. Moral forces, especially Christianity, also played a large role in social improvement.\textsuperscript{128} These and other reviews revealed that readers were quick to pick up on Spencer’s anti-war sentiments; not all agreed with his assessments, however.

\textbf{The Philosopher Honored: Spencer Visits America}

In August of 1882 Herbert Spencer paid a three month visit to America, in the company of his longtime friend Edward Lott. Spencer was, by this time, a celebrity to the American public, and great interest was aroused by his visit. As David Duncan reported in Spencer’s \textit{Life and Letters}, “the managers of great railways vied with one another in offering him luxurious travelling facilities. Hotel proprietors showed in every possible way their desire to welcome him as an honoured guest.”\textsuperscript{129} However, this was not a publicity tour for Spencer, and certainly not a “victory lap” as Barry Werth styles it,

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{126} Walter R. Barnes, “The Political Philosophy of Herbert Spencer,” review of \textit{Political Institutions}, by Herbert Spencer, \textit{Dial} 3, no. 29 (Sept. 1882), 1-5.
\item \textsuperscript{127} Ibid., 5.
\item \textsuperscript{128} “Spencer’s Political Institutions,” \textit{Literary World} 13, no. 24 (Dec. 1882), 422.
\item \textsuperscript{129} David Duncan, \textit{Life and Letters of Herbert Spencer} (New York: D. Appleton, 1908), 223 (hereafter cited as \textit{LL}).
\end{itemize}
but a vacation meant to improve his health, and he denied interviews to the press.\textsuperscript{130} As he complained, some reporters filled the gap by simply making things up; this was more common in newspapers, but some magazines were not above reporting that Spencer carried a pillow full of hops for his insomnia, and ate almost nothing but dry toast and sardines.\textsuperscript{131}

It was common knowledge that Spencer was better known in America than in his home country, and Americans were greatly interested to learn what Spencer thought of them in return. As one writer put it in \textit{Century Illustrated Magazine} (the newly rechristened \textit{Scribner’s Monthly}):

> Few of his many admirers, indeed, are likely to see him; for he comes without any intention of speaking in public, and expects generally to go about very quietly. But, whether one actually sees him or not, there is a certain sort of pleasure in feeling that one to whom we owe so much is at last in our country, and is coming into daily contact with our ways of living and thinking.\textsuperscript{132}

Unfortunately for Americans, Spencer’s insomnia was worsened by shipboard noise on the trip across the Atlantic. An interview with “an old friend of Herbert Spencer” by a \textit{New York Post} reporter revealed that Spencer was “broken-down” from the voyage over, could not sleep or calm down, and would not accept visitors or even read their


\textsuperscript{131} “Fact and Rumor,” \textit{Christian Union} 26, no. 16 (Oct. 19, 1882), 326. The previous month the \textit{Christian Union} reported, with regard to another Spencer sighting, that Spencer looked normal to the point of anonymity: “Fact and Rumor,” \textit{Christian Union} 26, no. 13 (Sept. 28, 1882), 262. For Spencer’s opinion of the press see \textit{AB}, 2:474-475.

\textsuperscript{132} “Herbert Spencer in America,” \textit{Century Illustrated Magazine} 24, no. 5 (Sept. 1882), 789.
letters.\textsuperscript{133} Spencer’s ill-health was confirmed by other papers as well.\textsuperscript{134} Spencer had little to say to the American people for quite a while.

Spencer spent most of his time in America relaxing and sightseeing. As usual, his solution for his health problems was vigorous physical activity, so he left New York via the Hudson for five days of walking in the Catskills. His travels eventually took him to Montreal, Niagara Falls, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Washington, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Boston, among other places. Along the way he visited Johns Hopkins and Yale, met with such people as O. C. Marsh, Asa Gray, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and John Fiske, and spent much time with E. L. Youmans, his wife, and his sister.\textsuperscript{135} His visit to Pittsburgh was at the behest of Andrew Carnegie, a disciple of Spencer’s who dined with him on the voyage from Europe. Spencer found polluted Pittsburgh repulsive, confiding to Carnegie “six month’s residence here would justify suicide.”\textsuperscript{136} It should be noted that although Carnegie claimed Spencer as his “master teacher” he did not refer to him about public issues before his article on “Wealth,” where he criticized another follower of Spencer


\textsuperscript{135} \textit{AB}, 2:387-406.

\textsuperscript{136} This is quoted in a number of books; all cite Joseph Frazier Wall’s 1970 biography of Carnegie as the source. The quote is not found in Spencer’s autobiography or Carnegie’s. Joseph Frazier Wall, \textit{Andrew Carnegie} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 386.
for giving money to a panhandler. The extent to which Carnegie understood Spencer is subject to debate.

Spencer did eventually make a statement to the American press, in the form of an interview conducted by Youmans in which Spencer answered the questions he himself preferred. As usual, Spencer thought he knew how to arrange things better than the experts. Youmans sent the interview to several New York and Chicago newspapers, and also printed it in in *Popular Science Monthly*. In the interview, Spencer made a number of comments on the American character: he noticed the “do or die attitude,” the determination, and the capacity for work. He criticized the infringements on freedom that were the inevitable result of machine politics, and suggested that Americans “tolerate various small interferences and dictations” because it would be too troublesome to oppose them, a habit which might ultimately endanger their free institutions. Finally, he denied that he promoted laissez-faire approaches to government. As he put it, “I have contended that in its special sphere, the maintenance

---


141 Ibid., 16.
of equitable relations among citizens, governmental action should be extended and elaborated.”142 Spencer was consistent in his belief that government should provide equal protection to all, but aid to none.

The press treated Spencer’s judgments on America as those of a moral reformer. The New York Times felt that the profound sociologist was so on-target that “his words leave in us a vague sense of awe, as if we had listened to the voice of a prophet.” The Times agreed with Spencer that America’s paper-constitution was weak because it had been made and not grown, but took comfort in the fact that The Data of Ethics showed moral sentiments to be based on humanity’s experiences of utility. Momentary failures simply indicated periods of adjustment; problems would correct themselves as moral feelings rose once more.143 The Chicago Tribune on the other hand was disappointed that Spencer only repeated what was common knowledge, without shedding new light on the problems or showing how to solve them. The Tribune writer too had faith in Americans’ eventual ability to deal with railroad corruption and rigged political primaries.144 The Christian Index was pleased that Spencer stressed moral strength over education as the primary need for citizens of a republic.145 Others noted Spencer’s

---

142 Ibid., 18.
145 “Herbert Spencer on America,” Christian Index, Nov. 2, 1882.
comments about political bosses with approval (see figure 1).\textsuperscript{146} Henry Cabot Lodge was certainly not alone in recalling with pleasure the final words of Spencer’s interview: “I think that whatever difficulties they may have to surmount, and whatever tribulations they may have to pass through, the Americans may reasonably look forward to a time when they will have produced a civilization grander than any the world has known.”\textsuperscript{147}

\textsuperscript{146} “Herbert Spencer on America,” \textit{New York Evangelist} (Nov. 2, 1882), 4.

\textsuperscript{147} Henry Cabot Lodge, “Colonialism in the United States,” \textit{Atlantic Monthly} 51, no. 307 (May 1883), 626.
The culmination of Spencer’s American visit was a banquet given in his honor at Delmonico’s in New York. Attending were influential men from all walks of life: businessmen, academics, scientists, and even ministers. Andrew Carnegie was there, as well as Spencer’s strongest supporters: Youmans, Fiske, and several members of the Appleton family. New York mayor Abraham Hewitt attended, as did statesmen like Congressman Perry Belmont, future congressman Chauncey Depew, Carl Schurz, future Secretary of State Elihu Root, and former treasury secretary Benjamin Bristow. Writers and editors included E. L. Godkin, Parke Godwin, and Charles A. Dana. Besides Carnegie and the Appletons, businessmen included Henry Holt, Samuel J. Colgate, and Cyrus Field, prime mover behind the transatlantic cable. Even some clergymen attended, including Henry Ward Beecher, his successor at Plymouth Church Lyman Abbott, and Minot J. Savage. And of course there were scores of prestigious attendees whose names are less well known today. Altogether nearly 200 people attended, filling Delmonico’s banquet hall to capacity.

Youmans published the guest list, along with Spencer’s “interview” and the text of the speeches made at the banquet, in a short book entitled *Herbert Spencer on the Americans, and the Americans on Herbert Spencer.* In 1973, the book was reissued by

---

148 Youmans, *Herbert Spencer on the Americans.* The guest list is on pp. 22-24.

The inside cover had this description of the banquet:

...a gathering of eminent scientists, industrialists, educators and political economists assembled at Delmonico's to hail the thinker who had synthesized from Darwinian biology and Comtean sociology a cosmic vindication of the industrial tycoon as the fittest to survive in nature's competitive struggles.

In fact, the speech Spencer gave did not praise relentless competition. Instead, Spencer argued that Americans worked too hard, risking the dangers of nervous collapse. This was completely in character for Spencer; overwork had long been an obsession with him, and he blamed it for the early deaths of both his father and his uncle.

Demonstrating the strength of his Lamarckian beliefs, he warned his audience, “damaged constitutions reappear in children, and entail on them far more of ill than great fortunes yield them good.” In short, he said, there has been altogether too much of the “gospel of work,” “It is time to preach the gospel of relaxation.”

According to historian Richard Hofstadter, this speech was “somewhat disappointing.” Historian Stephen Shapin referred to it as a “disaster” and “a slap to


150 AB, 1:41, 74.

151 Youmans, Herbert Spencer on the Americans, 32, 35.

the face of national virtue.” But as Robert Bannister points out, the speech would only have disappointed those who assumed that Spencer, and the evolutionary doctrine

---

153 Steven Shapin, “Man with a Plan,” *New Yorker* (Aug., 2007), 75-79. See also Werth, who describes Spencer’s audience as “baffled” and “affronted,” without providing any evidence that this was so. Werth, *Banquet at Delmonico’s*, 281.
in general, defended modern competitive society. Instead, the public reaction both at the time and years later was quite favorable.\textsuperscript{154} Magazines reacted to “the gospel of relaxation” in a variety of ways. Some thought Spencer’s words should be taken to heart.\textsuperscript{155} For others, the concept was ripe for good-natured fun (see figure 2). One writer, while accepting that the comments were made in a friendly fashion, wondered whether they were appropriate for Americans as a whole, or just those of the upper classes.\textsuperscript{156} While the toasts in Spencer’s honor were complimentary to the highest degree, the subject of the speeches was revealing. Evolution was toasted repeatedly; again and again, Spencer was lionized as the originator of evolution as a universal doctrine. Spencer was introduced with the comment that his system “aims at the highest results in virtue; that it treats evil not as eternal, but as evanescent.”\textsuperscript{157} William Graham Sumner likewise saw in the philosophy of evolution a way to find sweeping solutions to all social problems.\textsuperscript{158} Spencer earned high praise as a champion of science against tradition, and as an original thinker who proposed evolution as the law of all progress long before Darwin explored it in the biological realm.\textsuperscript{159} The speakers scarcely

\textsuperscript{154} Bannister, \textit{Social Darwinism}, 78.


\textsuperscript{156} Alfred Wheeler, “Herbert Spencer on Relaxation,” \textit{Overland Monthly} 1, no. 2 (Feb. 1883), 190.

\textsuperscript{157} Youmans, \textit{Herbert Spencer on the Americans}, 28.

\textsuperscript{158} Ibid., 39.

\textsuperscript{159} Ibid., 45, 48, 69-72.
mentioned Spencer’s social and political views, the phrase “survival of the fittest” was never used, and where there was any hint of social Darwinism, it was in the context of a joke.\textsuperscript{160}

Spencer later admitted he should never have made the trip. He had hoped the change of scenery would improve his health, but that did not happen. Sleepless nights aboard ship and the stresses and strains of American travel left him “in a worse state than I went: having made another step downwards towards invalid life.”\textsuperscript{161} His health deteriorated thereafter. Spencer described his condition as a series of relapses and recoveries, each cycle leaving him less sound than the last.\textsuperscript{162} His work suffered. He produced some important articles over the rest of the decade, and managed to get through another section of the sociology, \textit{Ecclesiastical Institutions}, but the remaining volumes of the Synthetic Philosophy were not published until the 1890s.

\textbf{The Prophet versus the State}

In 1884, Spencer published a series of four political essays in the British monthly \textit{The Contemporary Review}. These were reprinted in \textit{Popular Science Monthly}, and republished as \textit{The Man Versus the State} in Britain in 1884 and in America in 1885.\textsuperscript{163} In some ways these essays reiterated political positions Spencer had held since he was a

\textsuperscript{160} Ibid., 25.
\textsuperscript{161} \textit{AB}, 2:409.
\textsuperscript{162} \textit{AB}, 2:411.
\textsuperscript{163} Herbert Spencer, \textit{The Man versus the State} (New York: D. Appleton, 1885) (hereafter cited as \textit{MVS}).
young man. However, his perspective on these views had changed. Thanks to his sociological work, what he had once seen as immediately desirable he now saw as ill-suited to the present nature of civilized man. Institutions which he disliked he now saw as necessary evils preventing even worse conditions from developing. Secondly, Spencer had grown more pessimistic about the inevitability of evolution. He had become concerned that retrogression against the flow of evolution was possible, at least in the short term. As David Weinstein puts it, these fears remained as an “undercurrent of anxiety” which were not integrated into his system of evolution as described in the Synthetic Philosophy. In The Man Versus the State Spencer explored these issues at length.

In the first of his essays, “The New Toryism,” Spencer contributed to an ongoing discussion about the meaning of liberalism. Spencer complained that liberals had once struggled against Tories to reduce compulsory cooperation and restrictions on action. This increased happiness in society, so Liberalism became identified with promoting the general welfare. In pursuit of this aim, Liberals became coercive in turn. As Spencer noted, neither altruistic motives nor popular support make regulations

---


166 MVS, 5-7.
less restrictive. In “The Coming Slavery” Spencer explored this subject. He argued that the lower classes had come to expect government to provide them with things they should be earning for themselves, while politicians pandered to them with promises.169 Each law passed led to further expectations, adding momentum to the governmental machine.170 The inevitable result would be state socialism.171 To Spencer, socialism implied slavery; just as a slave was forced to work for a master, the socialist citizen was forced to work for a state which owned all land, transportation systems, and industries.172 Obviously, Spencer was greatly exaggerating for the sake of effect. As the Chautauquan (journal of the eponymous movement) suggested, Spencer should try being a slave long enough to correct his error.173 However, The Man Versus the State was a polemical book, and Spencer was delivering a jeremiad, not a careful discourse.

The final two essays discussed the actions of lawmakers. In “The Sins of Legislator” Spencer wandered familiar paths. He accused politicians of making laws

---

167 MVS, 16-17.
168 MVS, 14.
169 MVS, 30-31.
170 MVS, 23-27.
171 MVS, 33-34.
172 MVS, 34-35, 39.
173 “Editor’s Note-Book,” Chautauquan 4, no. 9 (June 1884), 549.
without an understanding of social science and complained that reformers did not understand that people’s limited capacity for change made it impossible to remake the world through legislation.174 “The Great Political Superstition” argued that elected governments are no more entitled to absolute obedience than kings.175 The majority’s rule over the minority must be limited by individual rights.176 Spencer ended where he began, with liberalism. He wrote, “the function of Liberalism in the past was that of putting a limit to the powers of kings. The function of true Liberalism in the future will be that of putting a limit to the powers of Parliaments.”177

In a postscript, Spencer explained that he did not expect to convince many people of his views, in part because the dramatic restriction of government he proposed was only possible for a purely industrial type of society, a type nowhere yet existing.178 In other words, he did not believe society was yet ready to accept his ideas. Nor would it be for quite a while, because the military social type was necessary to train citizens to work steadily, follow instructions, and organize for large works—training that was still needed.179 Furthermore, imperialism blocked transition to the higher social type: “it is impossible to unite the blessings of equity at home with the commission of inequities

174 MVS, 47-48, 60, 74-76.
175 MVS, 78-79.
176 MVS, 96.
177 MVS, 107.
178 MVS, 108.
179 MVS, 110.
abroad,” Spencer wrote. He confided to Youmans, “we are on the highway to communism, and I see no likelihood that the movement in that direction will be arrested.”

Running through several of these essays was a pervasive thread of social Darwinism. Much of the legislation Spencer complained of was that designed to help the poor. Of the unemployed, Spencer wrote: “‘They have no work,’ you say. Say rather that they either refuse work or quickly turn themselves out of it. They are simply good-for-nothings, who in one way or other live on the good-for-somethings.” Spencer blamed the poor for their misfortunes, writing “is it not manifest that there must exist in our midst an immense amount of misery which is a normal result of misconduct, and ought not to be dissociated from it?”

He reprinted a section from Social Statics which discussed the shouldering aside of the weak by the strong, and commented that he still believed in “the beneficial results of the survival of the fittest.” Spencer made his usual concessions about the benefits of private charity, but briefly and in much less striking fashion. A reader might easily miss such passages, while Spencer’s disallowance of public aid was unmistakable.

---


181 MVS, 18.

182 MVS, 19.

183 MVS, 67-68.

184 MVS, 66, 71.
There was little immediate reaction to *The Man Versus the State* in the American press. Americans did discuss Darwinistic social ideas at times, and Spencer’s name was sometimes raised on these occasions. In March of 1883 William Graham Sumner gave a talk before New York’s famous Nineteenth Century Club in which he declared that the struggle for existence affected all animals. Sentimentalists and reformers simply did not understand sociology, Sumner opined. “If we do not like the survival of the fittest,” he said, “we have but one alternative—the survival of the unfittest, and this would be working backward, not forward.” However, Sumner did not cite Spencer. Despite the fact that he used Spencerian terminology, had used *The Study of Sociology* in his classes, and gave a speech at the banquet at Delmonico’s, Sumner was not a devout disciple.185 He did not mention Spencer once in his book *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other*, for example.186

Responding to Sumner’s speech, Isaac L. Rice, a recent graduate of Columbia College, criticized Spencer’s sociology and argued that society must take care that only the most worthy survive.187 The true purpose of sociology, Rice said, was to promote brotherhood.188 Two days later, an anonymous article in the *Times* poked fun at Rice for thinking sociology any more moral than gravity or the multiplication table. For Rice, the

---


187 Rice later founded a company that made submarines for the U. S. Navy.

article said, it was not good enough for men like Spencer to learn facts and discern laws; “they should make the facts and laws preach as well as teach.”189 Rice took a further opportunity to criticize Spencer’s sociological work in an article in the June issue of The North American Review. Rice argued that evolution was a half-truth that must be combined with its opposite. Sometimes social phenomena went from coherence to incoherence, as when a nation develops at the expense of family bonds.190 In addition, Rice criticized Spencer’s conception of the state. Spencer did not give the state the right to prevent the strong from exploiting the weak; “on the basis of false inductions and self-contradictory dogmas, he exalts private interests above public needs, and subordinates the most sacred rights of all to the supposed advantages of a few.”191 It was typical of those who criticized Spencer’s social ideals to ignore the fact that he expected the state to prevent violence, trespass, and the breaking of contracts; hardly a recipe for unlimited exploitation. As was often the case, Youmans rode to the rescue, but he concerned himself more with Rice’s disparagement of Spencer’s understanding of Plato than with Rice’s attack on individualism.192

191 Ibid., 566.
Reviews of *The Man Versus the State* were confined mostly to the secular press. One exception was a survey of the book appearing in the Congregationalist *Independent*. *The Independent* had grown more religious under editor Henry Chandler Bowen. Still, it continued to feature a variety of secular content, and was one of the few religious periodicals that appealed to an audience outside the denomination. Its discussion of the book was mostly summarization, by the writer did argue that “The Great Political Superstition” was the most important chapter, though the least popular. A review in *The Critic* took more time to discuss the issues Spencer raised. *The Critic* was a newer magazine, founded in 1881, which printed literature along with its criticism—including works from Walt Whitman, Joel Chandler Harris, Emma Lazarus, and Julia Ward Howe. Its critic felt that by criticizing state regulation Spencer was opposing the spirit of the time, making him a voice “crying in the wilderness.” The reviewer acknowledged that real problems with government existed, but noted that popular government’s advantage is that it can correct its mistakes. A reaction the other way was bound to occur.

Neither of these reviews discussed Spencer’s attitude towards the poor. However, it did not go completely unnoticed. *The Dial*’s critic, J. A. Jameson, considered

---


196. Ibid.
Spencer’s social and political writings the most worthy of attention since those of Aristotle, but he felt that some of Spencer’s theories must be rejected or at least not acted upon until conditions changed. Jameson wrote that no Christian people could accept Spencer’s belief that the suffering of criminals and the impoverished was deserved and necessary. Jameson noticed that Spencer allowed private charity, but concluded that this conflicted with a desire to be rid of the unfit. Otherwise he recommended the book highly. Jameson clearly recognized Spencer’s social Darwinism and understood how incompatible it was with Christian teachings. He was not alone in doing so, but he was in the minority.

Some discussions of The Man Versus the State revolved around his attacks on socialism. In the anarchist magazine Liberty a commentator pointed out that it was incorrect to tie socialism to state power. Voluntary socialism was also possible. Liberty had previously claimed Spencer as an anarchist (“if only he knew it”) but now, the writer said, “I begin to be a little suspicious of him. It seems as if he had forgotten the teachings of his earlier writings, and had become a champion of the capitalistic class.” Liberty felt Spencer was right to attack government attempts at reform, but wrong to ignore laws protecting wealth and monopoly: “He is greatly shocked that the rich should

---

197 J. A. Jameson, “Herbert Spencer as a Prophet of Society,” review of The Man versus the State, Dial 5, no. 54 (Oct. 1884), 127-128.

198 Ibid., 129.

199 “On Picket Duty,” Liberty (Not the Daughter but the Mother of Order) 1, no. 10 (Dec. 10, 1881), 1; T, “The Sin of Herbert Spencer,” Liberty (Not the Daughter but the Mother of Order) 2, no. 16 (May 17, 1884), 4.
be directly taxed to support the poor, but that the poor should be indirectly taxed and bled to make the rich richer does not outrage his delicate sensibilities in the least."200 In 1886, several more discussions of socialism appeared that revolved around Spencer. Nicholas Gilman, writing in The Unitarian Review, understood it as putting group welfare first, as opposed to individualism, which put individual welfare first.201 Spencer was mistaken about liberalism, Gilman thought; just because liberals traditionally focused on freeing the lower classes does not mean they should not help them once they are freed.202 Gilman did not support state ownership, but he did not think government a wasteful, oppressive monster, either. Economist Edward W. Bemis understood the growing popularity of socialism as a reaction against laissez-faire doctrines.203 Though he thought socialism a fallacy for its labor theory of value, he believed its ideals were good, and moderate state action advisable.204


202 Ibid., 222-223.


204 Ibid., 42.
“A Battle of the Skeptics”: Spencer Returns to Religious Controversy

If few were discussing Spencer’s social Darwinism, what did they discuss? The doctrine of evolution was an important subject, as was Spencer’s attitude towards religion and morality. On the subject of religion, while discussion of the Unknowable continued, Spencer’s next book, *Ecclesiastical Institutions*, gave plenty of new fodder for conversation. This was the next section of *The Principles of Sociology*, published separately just as the last two had been. While *Ecclesiastical Institutions* did not come out in the United States until 1886, Spencer released sections of it in magazines just as he had been doing with all his sociological work. In January 1884 he published the last section of the book, “Religious Retrospect and Prospect,” in the British review *The Nineteenth Century* and in *Popular Science Monthly*. A response came from British positivist Frederick Harrison, and a “controversy” between the two men began, stretching over several articles from each, and only ceasing when Spencer allowed Harrison to have the last word. Sensing Americans’ interest, and fearing some other company would publish first, Youmans had the entire series of articles issued in a book, *The Nature and Reality of Religion*, with his own partisan introduction attached. It outraged Harrison, for it was done without his consent. Eventually Spencer felt obliged to telegraph the Appletons and request that they stop selling the book and destroy the

---

plates, charging him with any expense.\textsuperscript{206} The series of events was reported in the \textit{New York Times} among other papers.\textsuperscript{207} Of course, the coverage excited American interest, and a pirated reprint of the series of articles appeared soon after.\textsuperscript{208}

The debate started with Spencer’s essay “Religion: A Retrospect and Prospect.” In this essay, Spencer traced religion forward from primitive ghost-worship through more and more complex systems of gods, to the unification of all godlike attributes in one God. It is absurd, Spencer wrote, to think that development will simply stop at this point.\textsuperscript{209} He felt that in advanced societies the concept of God was undergoing “de-anthropomorphisation” (a term of Fiske’s) was would continue to do so.\textsuperscript{210} This meant doctrinal changes, like jettisoning hell and original sin, but it also meant widening of the conception of the first cause until it was without limits like personality and intelligence, inspiring (with the help of science) a sense of wonder in man.\textsuperscript{211} Spencer argued that such a conception could develop from the ghost theory because the germ of it was

\textsuperscript{206} David Duncan gives a detailed account of the affair, in \textit{LL}, 251-266. For Fiske’s account of the sequence of events see Fiske, \textit{Edward Livingston Youmans}, 387-390.


\textsuperscript{208} Herbert Spencer, Frederic Harrison and Gail Hamilton, \textit{The Insuppressable Book} (Boston: S. E. Cassino, 1885).

\textsuperscript{209} \textit{NRR}, 17-23

\textsuperscript{210} \textit{NRR}, 24.

\textsuperscript{211} \textit{NRR}, 24-28, 31-33.
there, in the understanding that “the power which manifests itself in consciousness is but a differently-conditioned form of the power which manifests itself beyond consciousness.”²¹² He ended his essay by calling this force “an Infinite and Eternal Energy, from which all things proceed.”²¹³ It was a very religious turn of phrase, which stood out for many writers.

Frederic Harrison disliked the theological phrasing of Spencer’s last words, but this was hardly his main objection in his rejoinder, “The Ghost of Religion.”²¹⁴ It was Spencer’s conception of religion that was the most problematical for Harrison. He believed that religion had three elements: belief, worship, and influence on conduct. One could not believe or worship something that could not be known, not could it inspire changes in behavior.²¹⁵ As a positivist, Harrison thought a creed focused on humanity as a whole could provide these things. In “Retrogressive Religion,” Spencer replied that the Unknowable was hardly nothing, as Harrison implied, and that he had hinted that it possessed something higher than consciousness.²¹⁶ Spencer trod on dangerous ground in this essay, edging the Absolute closer than he ever had towards the domain of God. As Sydney Eisen puts it, “Spencer, wounded by ridicule for raising

²¹² NRR, 29.
²¹³ NRR, 35.
²¹⁴ NRR, 41.
²¹⁵ NRR, 49.
²¹⁶ NRR, 64–69.
aloft as an object of reverence a mere emptiness, puffed up the Unknowable with attributes which brought it dangerously close to the anthropomorphic Deity he had rejected.”217 As for the religion of humanity, Spencer considered this a transformation of the ancient worship of the dead, and thus a regression.218 Spencer was harshly critical of man, both ancient and modern, and in addition found Comte’s instructions on how to worship humanity the product of an imbalanced mind.219

In “Agnostic Metaphysics” Harrison astutely pointed out that the difference between the two men was in their concept of religion: for Spencer, it was philosophical, for Harrison, it was practical.220 Nevertheless, Harrison made some effort to meet Spencer on his own ground, and explored Spencer’s vagueness about whether the Absolute created the material world, manifested the material world, or was the material world.221 Harrison also objected strongly to Spencer’s ghost-theory of religion, calling the Descriptive Sociology “a pile of clippings made to order,” and to Spencer’s portrayal of Comte’s religion of humanity, claiming Spencer had not read Comte.222 These


218 RR, 77-78.

219 RR, 74-77; 80-85.

220 RR, 105

221 RR, 112-114.

222 RR, 124 (for the quotation), 125 (for the accusation about Spencer’s knowledge of Comte). Harrison was correct that Spencer had not read much of Comte’s work, but that does not mean that Spencer was unfamiliar with Comte’s doctrines: he had read secondary sources and argued the issues with friends who were sympathetic to positivism, like George Eliot and G. H. Lewes.
accusations upset Spencer, especially the aspersions against the *Descriptive Sociology*, on which he had spent so much toil and treasure.\(^{223}\) Spencer’s “Last Words about Agnosticism and the Religion of Humanity” defended his work and used it to quantify the prevalence of ghost-worship.\(^{224}\) He also argued that that he had never said the Unknowable should be worshipped.\(^{225}\) Spencer seemed to recognize the point Harrison had made: that a religion is more than just a metaphysical belief system, but must have applications in real life. Spencer hardly wanted to found a new religion around the Unknowable, which to him must stir a feeling of awe, not of worshipfulness.

Despite Spencer’s later protestations, religious writers in America took his initial admissions as a positive sign. The *Independent*, always interested in Spencer’s religious ideas, approved of his stress on the failures of humanity, his use of the idea of a “Creative Power,” and his admission of the limitations of science.\(^{226}\) Another critic felt the argument showed the emptiness of both positions compared to the gospel, but was pleased that Spencer continued to recognize the necessity of self-existent being.\(^{227}\) Even among religious writers that did not refer to the Spencer-Harrison debate directly, there seemed to be a thawing of attitudes towards Spencer. Few were as positive as Henry

\(^{223}\) Herbert Spencer to Frederic Harrison, June 13, 1885, in *LL*, 263-264.

\(^{224}\) *NRR*, 153.

\(^{225}\) *NRR*, 161-162.


\(^{227}\) “A Battle of the Skeptics,” *Andover Review* 2, no. 9 (Sept. 1884), 304.
Ward Beecher, who wrote in his book *Evolution and Religion* that in the future “Herbert Spencer will be found to have given the world more truth in one lifetime than any other man that has lived in the schools of philosophy in this world.” However, Beecher’s admiration had its limits; he scarcely referred to Spencer at all in the rest of his book. Another clerical supporter, Minot Judson Savage, believed Spencer had used science to do what religion could not: disprove materialism.

Even Catholics, who in the past had sometimes dismissed Spencer as a problem for Protestants, had some positive things to say. Jesuit Father John J. Ming, in an impressively clear review of Spencer’s religious ideas, found that Spencer went beyond agnosticism in framing his own view of religion which assigned a number of positive properties to the Unknowable, such as existence and an intrinsic relation to the material world. However, Ming concluded that Spencer’s Unknowable was merely indefinite, not infinite, and had no identity with the Christian God. F. S. Chitard was more enthusiastic. Chitard praised Spencer for his service to religion, and discussed some

---


232 Ibid., 392.
ways in which Spencer’s attacks on Christian dogma—for example, his disdain for portrayals of God as having emotions and desiring worship—were similar to the ideas of some Catholic theologians.233 Chitard ended on an optimistic note, writing of Spencer “we hope and pray that his earnest and manly truthfulness will be rewarded by a still greater knowledge—the knowledge which surpasses all earthly knowledge and which so satisfies man's yearnings.”234 Ultimately, Christian writers could not accept an unknowable God; nevertheless, some felt Spencer journeyed in the direction, but simply stopped too soon.

Secular newspapers and magazines had a few things to say about the debate as well. The New York Times considered it strange that though both Spencer and Harrison had given up what most people considered religion, they were still fighting over the use of the word. The Times’s critic thought that Spencer’s position suggested a possible compromise with Christianity, which explained Harrison’s reaction.235 A writer in Overland Monthly declared the book to be an important work that would be referred to for years to come. Ultimately this reviewer believed that the religious value of the Unknowable was a personal issue, but felt that the trend in religion was away from

234 Ibid., 583.
intense personal ideas of God and towards Spencer’s position. Reviews in secular sources were generally positive. Those who were less theologically hidebound—or, some might say, scarcely Christian—found promise in Spencer’s attempts to shake hands across the aisle. The *Open Court* (whose subtitle proclaimed it “Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea”) had this to say: “In Herbert Spencer’s *Retrospect and Prospect* are indices of better times ahead when the evolved social organism and its individual components will have loftier aims, ideas, and methods.”

*Ecclesiastical Institutions* appeared in its entirety in America in 1886. It was a short book, less than 200 pages. A meager work considering it had been three years since *Political Institutions* was published, *The Chicago Tribune* said, but not in the sense of argument, where Spencer was just as “keen” and “crushing” as ever. Spencer began with a clear statement about institutions: “There can be no true conception of a structure without a true conception of its function.” Spencer’s sociology was above all practical. To him social arrangements existed because they served the interests of the

---


237 Untitled, *Open Court* 1, no. 16 (Sept. 15, 1887), 436.


240 *PS*, 3:3.
group and/or the individuals participating in them. Religious organizations were no different; thus, Spencer had to determine what needs they served before he could explain them. Beginning at the beginning was standard operating procedure with Spencer, so he started his explanation with a further exploration of his ghost theory of religion. First, Spencer used anthropological evidence and a few modern accounts of the deaf to show that untutored man had no innate predisposition to develop religious ideas.241 As before, Spencer explained their origin by the ghost-theory. Much of this explanation was not new; however, Spencer did significantly expand his argument that the Hebrews’ worship of “Jahveh” was no exception to the rule.242 Christianity, then, Spencer treated as one religion among many, declaring that he must “part company” with those who believed otherwise.243

The remainder of the book dealt with specific aspects of religion, from practitioners such as medicine-men and priests, to religious organizations and their hierarchies, to the relation of the church and the state. The most interesting sections were Spencer’s conception of the ecclesiastical system as a strengthener of social ties and his discussion of nonconformity. Spencer argued that the community ties based on sacred rites and places were just the social arrangements typical of funerals writ large. At a funeral, family gathered, old squabbles were repressed, and wishes of the deceased

241 PS, 3:4-6.
242 PS, 3:16-35.
243 PS, 3:36.
were respected. Similarly, communities could form from repeated gathering around particular sacred locations, such as the burial place of a chief or holy man, where fighting was prohibited and the injunctions of the ghost or god were reinforced in rites. Spencer felt that this made religion essentially conservative:

...we may say that ecclesiasticism, embodying in its primitive form the rule of the dead over the living, and sanctifying in its more advanced forms the authority of the past over the present, has for its function to preserve in force the organized product of earlier experiences versus the modifying effects of more recent experiences.

Far from denying the value of this role, Spencer claimed it was essential, for what worked in the past was likely to work in the present, barring drastic changes in conditions. Nevertheless, he saw Nonconformity as superior, in the sense that it was possible only in high states of civilization featuring monotheistic religions, or in isolated cases like that of Socrates. Spencer thought that forms that simply exchanged one structure of ecclesiastical authority for another were low. The highest type of nonconformity involved individual judgment on religious questions, which meant denying religious authority altogether—a type Spencer connected with industrial societies. It is no surprise that Spencer would put free religious judgment at the

244 PS, 3:95-96.
245 PS, 3:97-102.
246 PS, 3:105.
247 PS, 3:105-106.
248 PS, 3:134.
249 PS, 3:135, 139.
pinnacle of his religious system, given his own religious background, his individualism, and his dislike for authority.

*Ecclesiastical Institutions* was another of Spencer’s books that, for various reasons, did not attract much critical attention. What reviews appeared were generally short. Partly this was because many of its most important theories were not new, but elaborations on previous ideas explored in other works. As a reviewer for the *Overland Monthly* observed, the book was based on a theory already explained in the first part of *The Principles of Sociology* and in “Religious Retrospect and Prospect,” pushed only a little farther in the present volume. Another reason was certainly that one of the most interesting sections of the book had already been published and discussed. In addition, some writers were tired of Spencer’s interventions into religious thought, a task for which many thought him ill-prepared. In the *Dial*, John Bascom complained,

> The mind of Mr. Spencer, as far as any spiritual insight or sympathy is concerned, belongs to the most irresponsible and tuneless order. He interprets, not knowing what he interprets; and destroys, in ignorance of the living things destroyed....few men by constitution are less fitted to fathom these questions of faith.  

Likewise, an otherwise poor review in the *Universalist Quarterly* contained one good line: “Mr. Spencer's agnosticism is necessitated by his rejection of revelation, and his assigned reasons therefor are so puerile that if his great name had not been attached to

---


this book its contents would receive general condemnation.”252 Neither of these reviewers felt the need to take Spencer’s ideas seriously.

Not all discussions were short, however. James T. Bixby devoted almost ten pages to the book in an article in the *New Englander* (which added the suffix “and Yale Review” in 1885.)253 To Bixby, Spencer’s great abilities and erudition were for naught in the realm of religion, because he did not acknowledge the spiritual reality of the power whose actions he was tracing.254 Nevertheless, he engaged Spencer on his own ground. He attacked Spencer on the facts, questioning his knowledge of the philological origins of words and the facts of Egyptian, Chinese, and Indian religion. He also complained that Spencer took myths and customs from many different places and times and piled them up in support of his pet theory.255 However, it turned out that Bixby’s own theories about the origin of religion were not so different from Spencer’s. Bixby contended that primitive man was aware of his inward self and felt its unity with “the life that circles within all the forms and masses around us,” just as Spencer suggested a similarity between inner and outer manifestations of the Unknowable was at the root of religious

---


255 Ibid., 1011-1013.
belief. Bixby also believed that religion must need some real human need or else it would lose in the struggle for existence between human institutions, a concept that echoed Spencer’s ideas about the function of structures.

An Aging Titan: Spencer’s Late Work

In 1886, Spencer suffered another collapse. This one brought with it a severe bout of depression. He stopped all writing, even putting a halt to his work on An Autobiography, which effectively ended with his American visit in 1882. His gloom was heightened by the death of his longtime champion, Edward Livingston Youmans, in 1887. Spencer had begged Youmans to stop overworking himself for years. Now he was vindicated, in the worst possible way. His last letter to Youmans, dated on the first of the year, was filled with melancholy: “Though the day suggests it, it is absurd for me to wish you, or for you to wish me, a happy New Year. There is not much happiness remaining in store for either of us.” The situation was dire. Yet Spencer recovered enough life and health to begin work again. Both physical and mental health improved; at the beginning of 1888 Huxley reported in a letter to Hooker, “Spencer was here an hour ago as lively as a cricket.” Slowly, Spencer began to work on the Synthetic Philosophy once more.

---

256 Ibid., 1115.

257 Ibid., 1016.


Progress was slow, but in 1891 part IV of the ethics, *Justice*, was published, and in 1892 and 1893 the two volumes of *The Principles of Ethics* appeared in America. In the introduction to the first volume, Spencer reported that he was anxious to complete the next, which would have sections on negative and positive beneficence. “In its full scope, the moral system to be set forth unites sternness with kindness; but thus far attention has been drawn almost wholly to the sternness. Extreme misapprehensions and gross mis-statements have hence resulted,” Spencer wrote. However, these sections, dealing with self-restraint and positive action for the benefit of others, comprised less than 100 pages each, while the section on justice itself was over 250 pages long.

The first volume began with “The Data of Ethics,” which had already been published more than ten years previously. In the next section, “The Inductions of Ethics,” Spencer wrote that the confusion of thought on morality was part of its evolution from the incoherent and chaotic to the comprehensive and comprehensible. Specifically, he noted a conflict between the “ethics of enmity” necessary for dealing with enemy societies and the “ethics of amity” which fostered cooperation within the social group.260 After this introduction Spencer dived into a series of chapters dealing with individual moral issues such as aggression, industry, and obedience. As with much of Spencer’s sociological writings, these were festooned with evidence from a variety of

---

societies, ancient and modern, primitive and advanced. Spencer generally connected higher moral standards with industrial development. Not only was aggression in forms like revenge, treachery, and robbery an accompaniment of the militant type; peacefulness encouraged justice, generosity, and humanity. For Spencer, ideas about rights could only grow as warfare decreased.261 Spencer thus tied his ideas about ethics into his political and social ideals. More advanced societies fostered moral values in individuals that in turn made further social progress possible.

At the end of “The Data of Ethics” Spencer split ethics into categories. The first division was between behavior towards the self and that towards others; the latter was further separated into justice, which concerned whether a person reaped the rewards or consequences of his conduct, and beneficence, which concerned altruistic behavior. Beneficence was further divided into the negative and positive categories, the first having to do with refraining from harm, the second with actively helping others.262 For the remainder of the work Spencer followed these guidelines, starting with a section on “The Ethics of Individual Life.” Here, as he had often before in both public and private, he stressed the duty of self-care, including periods of rest. Life is either a good thing or it is not, Spencer wrote, and if it is good then those activities which preserve and heighten life must also be morally approved.263 This is especially true since personal health and

261 PE, 1:376-377.
262 PE, 1:281-282.
263 PE, 1:478.
welfare are foundational to the performance of other moral actions like care of dependents and positive contribution to society.\textsuperscript{264} Self-care, for Spencer, involved a balance between activity, recreation, and relaxation. Spencer found that the positive value of “race-maintenance” through marriage had to be balanced with the loss of bodily resources that an individual used for reproduction.\textsuperscript{265} Spencer was indirect in the best Victorian manner, but what he was really talking about was limiting sex within marriage (he believed that chastity was essential outside of marriage). In his chapter on parenthood Spencer discussed population control as another reason to limit the number of children, noting that even the bloodthirsty tribes of New Guinea “show us a deep consciousness of the truth that too frequent child-bearing is injurious to the race.”\textsuperscript{266} However, Spencer urged his reader not too be too self-critical about self-restraint, since given the current advancement of humanity there was only so much one could do.\textsuperscript{267}

Spencer considered his section on “Justice” of high importance, which was why he executed and published it first, in case his health did not allow him to finish the rest.\textsuperscript{268} He began with “animal-ethics,” since, if ethics is about conduct and its helpful or detrimental effect on self or others, ethics must apply to animals as well as people.\textsuperscript{269}

\textsuperscript{264} PE, 1:481-483.
\textsuperscript{265} PE, 1:542-543.
\textsuperscript{266} PE, 1:553.
\textsuperscript{267} PE, 1:561.
\textsuperscript{268} PE, 2:iix.
\textsuperscript{269} PE, 2:3-4.
Again, Spencer judged conduct based on its results, and not based on the intention behind it. For animals he determined that survival of a species required that each gained or suffered according to conduct, which included conduct towards others in gregarious animals.\footnote{PE, 2:6-7, 12-15.} Thus he found a biological source for this familiar rule, which he applied equally to human beings. Among men, Spencer found that justice could be attained in two ways: by the artificial distribution of rewards to the meritorious, typical of military societies, and by the natural distribution characteristic of the industrial type.\footnote{PE, 2:40} Natural distribution implied the law of equal freedom, unchanged since Social Statics, which enjoined all from interfering with another’s right to do as he pleased and face the consequences, good or bad.\footnote{PE, 2:45-46.} Most of the section on justice concerned itself with deductions from these principles. Spencer candidly noted in his preface that the evolutionary view had not led him to differ markedly with common sense principles, and it showed here.\footnote{PE, 2:v.} The rights Spencer enumerated are familiar ones: freedom of movement, exchange, belief, speech, and the right to possess property. Much of this was familiar from Social Statics. Spencer’s conclusions about the rights of women had changed, however. He continued to defend certain rights for women, such as choice of
profession, but he now linked political rights with capability for military service, arguing that basic fairness required men to be rewarded for the risk of bodily harm they ran.\textsuperscript{274}

The final sections of ethics dealt with positive and negative beneficence. No drastic changes to Spencer’s opinions had occurred, though further space allowed him to develop his ideas in more detail. Under the heading of negative beneficence, Spencer called for self-restraint when it came to things like competition, displays of ability, praise, and blame. The result was that sometimes people should refrain from exercising their rights to the fullest extent allowed.\textsuperscript{275} The purpose of negative beneficence was to avoid hurting others when possible, in order to promote the health of society and the species.\textsuperscript{276} Spencer looked for positive beneficence in individual acts towards family, the sick, and those in danger, as well as general acts that benefited society. As for aid to the loafer and the weakling, Spencer felt private charity was beneficial to the giver as well as the received, but counseled restraint here too. He wrote,

If left to operate in all its sternest, the principle of the survival of the fittest, which, as ethically considered, we have seen to imply that each individual shall be left to experience the effects of his own nature and consequent conduct, would quickly clear away the degraded. But it is impracticable with our present sentiments to let it operate in all its sternest. No serious evil would result from relaxing its operation, if the degraded were to leave no progeny. A shortsighted beneficence might be allowed to save them from suffering, were a longsighted beneficence assured that there would be born no more such. But how can it be thus assured? If, either by public action or by private action, aid were given to the feeble, the unhealthy, the deformed, the stupid, on condition that they did

\textsuperscript{274} PE, 2:160, 184.

\textsuperscript{275} Michael W. Taylor, The Philosophy of Herbert Spencer (London: Continuum, 2007), 119-120.

\textsuperscript{276} PE, 2:229-230.
not marry, the result would manifestly be a great increase of illegitimacy; which, implying a still more unfavorable nurture of children, would result in still worse men and women. If instead of a “submerged tenth” there existed only a submerged fiftieth, it might be possible to deal with it effectually by private industrial institutions, or some kindred appliances. But the mass of effete humanity to be dealt with is so large as to make one despair: the problem seems insoluble.277

Perhaps Spencer would have agreed with the eugenicists, that sterilization was a solution to the problem he pondered. Then again, the idea of state-supported, forced interference with the reproductive capacities would probably have horrified him.

Many of the reactions to Spencer’s statement on ethics came early, after the publication of *Justice* as a stand-alone volume. Most reviewers were complimentary of Spencer’s abilities and of the book as a whole, but found fault with the details. An anonymous reviewer in the *Social Economist*, a new magazine founded by politico-economic theorist George Gunton, wrote

> Any work by Mr. Spencer is sure of wide and laudatory notice, and "Justice," his latest work, has been received with a chorus of plaudits calculated to make any author proud. The praise has been rather indiscriminate, as indeed it usually is when a man writes on a subject relating to morals and finds that morality is a good thing . . . 278

Critics noticed that many of Spencer’s findings were quite similar to those in *Social Statics*. For example, the reviewer in the *Critic* observed that Spencer’s views on government were well known and his latest volume did not add anything to them.279

---

277 *PE*, 2:393.

278 “‘Justice’ by Herbert Spencer,” *Social Economist* (Dec. 1891), 105.

279 “Herbert Spencer’s ‘Justice,’” *Critic* 16, no. 401 (Sept. 5, 1891), 116.
Lewis G. Janes, who wrote several articles on Spencer’s ethics and sociology in the early 1890s, suggested that *Justice* was supposed to replace *Social Statics*.280 Spencer clearly did not think so, as he developed a revised and abridged version of the latter which the Appletons combined with *The Man Versus the State* and published in 1892. A number of critics, including Janes, felt that Spencer was becoming more conservative and more aware of the limitations of man’s ability to develop ideal social institutions.281

Some of the criticisms of *The Data of Ethics* were repeated in reviews of *Justice* as well. One major sticking point with many writers was Spencer’s derivation of moral feelings from the experiences of ancestors, including animals and primitive man. A reviewer in the *Literary World* complained that Spencer viewed animal behavior through his knowledge of man, thus imagining humanlike motivations where none existed.282 Similarly, J. H. Hyslop, a Colombia College professor who wrote several reviews of Spencer’s ethical system for *The Andover Review*, thought that it was the distinctions between human justice and animal justice that needed an explanation, not the elements that were similar. Hyslop admitted that Spencer was probably right about the

---


development of justice, but noted that Spencer also tried to deduce morals from general principles, which two enterprises did not necessarily align.283

Some critics tried to interject their own systems into the discussion. In the Dial, John Bascom argued that Spencer’s system was too narrow. He used the metaphor of a honeycomb: each individual in Spencer’s system is in a cell, bounded by cells of equal size that represent the equal freedoms of others. This view was too narrow to encompass cooperation, Bascom thought, and likened society to a body, as St. John described it.284 This was ironic given the organic analogy Spencer used elsewhere. An even more elaborate theory was developed by the anonymous critic in the Social Economist. He argued that justice was a social matter, “rooted in the exchange of economic equivalents,” but, somewhat inconsistently, that a “great race” would make sure that each gets whatever additional benefits others can provide, and that each suffers to a minimum degree from his limitations.285

The complete volumes of The Principles of Ethics, published in 1892 and 1893, roused less interest. Critics felt that the truly interesting parts of Spencer’s ethics had already been published.286 Most of the remainder was made up of concrete moral guidelines about things like temperance and flattery. The Chicago Tribune found

\[\text{\textsuperscript{283}} \text{J. H. Hyslop, review of Justice, by Herbert Spencer, Andover Review (Feb. 1892), 216.} \]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{284}} \text{Bascom, “Herbert Spencer on the Principles of Justice,” 2-3.} \]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{285}} \text{“‘Justice’ by Herbert Spencer” (Social Economist), 106, 108.} \]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{286}} \text{“Herbert Spencer’s Principles of Ethics,” Literary World 23, no. 19 (Sept. 10, 1892), 307.} \]
Spencer’s ethics similar to the “Golden Rule of Christ,” while others simply talked of “platitudes.”287 Several critics worried that Spencer’s volumes on ethics would mislead those who failed to read him closely. In the Dial, a reviewer worried that the advantages of Spencer’s scientific truths did not outweigh “the distinctly anti-ethical associations that they necessarily convey to the majority of readers.”288 J. H. Hyslop felt most readers would interpret Spencer’s books as advocating the relativity of morality; they would not realize that Spencer corrected this by referring to man’s inner feelings as a guide.289 Such reviews were not negative, per se, just concerned about the book’s effect on the average reader.

Those who wrote on Spencer in the 1890s increasingly felt that, now that his system was nearly complete, final judgment must await the passage of time. As one critic put it,

The Synthetic Philosophy is undeniably the popular philosophy of the day, but more than one day before this has had its philosophy fully as popular. The gradual subsidence of the Synthetic Philosophy into its proper place in the history of philosophy is now going on, and it is highly desirable that neither eulogy nor detraction of Mr. Spencer himself should interfere with a just settlement.290


290 Nicholas P. Gilman, review of Essays: Scientific, Political, Speculative and Social Statics, Abridged and Revised, Together with the Man Versus the State, by Herbert Spencer, New World 1, no. 4 (Dec., 1892), 763-764.
However, Spencer did not put the last stone in place until 1896, when he finished volume three of *The Principles of Sociology*. This contained *Ecclesiastical Institutions* and two new sections, one on the professions and one on industrial institutions. In the former, Spencer discussed occupations as varied as medicine, music, acting, history, law, and teaching. He found that professions generally had roots in the political and ecclesiastical system, especially the latter, since priests were a leisure class supplied by society at large, and thus with time and energy to devote to intellectual work and art.\(^{291}\)

As for industry, Spencer found that advances were accelerating while environmental obstacles fell away at a similar rate.\(^{292}\) However, Spencer spent little time discussing technology, and much discussing the various ways labor has been organized, by systems of production, regulation by authority figures, and ultimately, by free contract.

Spencer felt that the age of freedom, at its high point at the middle of the century, was ebbing away in the West before a rising tide of state interference which was leading inevitably to regimented socialism.\(^{293}\) Nevertheless, he still held out hope for a more distant future. Spencer believed that regression would end either in revolt or in conquest by superior people “who have not been emasculated by fostering their feebles.”\(^{294}\) He imagined a future federation of the most civilized nations could put an

\(^{291}\) *PS*, 3:183-184.

\(^{292}\) *PS*, 3:327-328.

\(^{293}\) *PS*, 3:605-607.

\(^{294}\) *PS*, 3:608.
end to wars, leading to greater social advance and the ultimate appearance of men of the highest type.\textsuperscript{295} Despite his pessimism and his frustration with his countrymen, Spencer did not give up his utopian dreams altogether.

Spencer’s secretary Walter Troughton described the scene as the seventy-six year old Spencer dictated the last word of the Synthetic Philosophy:

Rising slowly from his seat in the study at 64, Avenue Road, his face beaming with joy, he extended his hand across the table, and we shook hands on the auspicious event. “I have finished the task I have lived for” was all he said, and then resumed his seat. The elation was only momentary and his features quickly resumed their customary composure.\textsuperscript{296}

Congratulations came from all over the world. Notices appeared in the papers, though it was generally not front page news. Compliments were duly paid. “It is an achievement probably without a parallel in English philosophical writing,” the \textit{Chicago Tribune} observed.\textsuperscript{297} A few Christian periodicals, reporting the news, made one last effort to bring Spencer into the fold. This usually took the form of musing on the development of Spencer’s religious beliefs, with quotations from “Religion: Retrospect and Prospect” and other sources.\textsuperscript{298} Spencer remained a puzzle for religious thinkers. His work

\textsuperscript{295} \textit{PS}, 3:610-611.

\textsuperscript{296} \textit{LL}, 380.


contained hints of religious feeling yet his sentiments about Christianity were no less clear in the last volume of the Synthetic Philosophy than in the first.

Herbert Spencer lived for another seven years after completing his life’s work. He continued to write, but mostly this meant making final revisions and penning responses to criticisms, letters to the editor, and other short pieces of miscellaneous material. He remained physically healthy until his last year, when several serious episodes kept him in bed for long stretches of time. Spencer died in his bed early in the morning of December 8, 1903. Condolence letters and telegrams poured in from all corners of the globe.299 An Indian admirer, Shyamaji Krishnavarma, donated a thousand pounds to Oxford to found a lectureship in his honor. The first lecture was given in 1905 by Frederic Harrison, Spencer’s old sparring partner of twenty years before.300 There was an unsuccessful campaign to inter Spencer in Westminster Abbey, something he would have abhorred.301 Spencer’s cremated remains were deposited in a sarcophagus in Highgate Cemetery. As per his instructions, the stone bears only his name, his birth date and the date of his death, and his age.302

299 LL, 482.


301 LL, 483-488.

302 LL, 482.
CONCLUSION

A MAN FOR HIS TIME

He is not dead; his mighty thought still lives,
And shall live through the ages yet to come,
Our tongues most eloquent seem strangely dumb
To tell what he to human knowledge gives.

--from “Herbert Spencer,” by Howell S. England.1

News of Herbert Spencer’s death prompted an outpouring of reminiscences and comments. Newspapers published long articles in tribute to a man many called the “last of the great thinkers of the Victorian age.”2 The New York Times, which followed Spencer’s illness, reported on the funeral arrangements, cremation, and internment.3

Obituary articles in the press typically contained a short biography, a description of Spencer’s work, and a judgment, usually positive yet vague. The Chicago Tribune, for example, judged the Synthetic Philosophy “one of the mightiest monuments that ever pure intellect has raised.”4 Scientific American declared that the world was indebted to

---


2 The phrase was used extensively, as the The New York Times pointed out. “Herbert Spencer Dead,” New York Times, Dec. 9, 1903.


4 “Herbert Spencer is Dead,” Chicago Daily Tribune, Dec. 9, 1903. The paper erred in reporting that Spencer was “a comparatively poor man” whose writings paid little.
Spencer for overturning old traditions and prejudices.\textsuperscript{5} As for reminiscences, one of the most important came from Spencer’s onetime assistant William Henry Hudson. Hudson judged the Synthetic Philosophy unmatched in its display of sustained intellectual force, and believed its influence deep and far-reaching. His portrayal of Spencer touched on both the negative and positive sides of his personality: his warmth towards friends, his coolness towards strangers, his punctilious sense of justice, his nervous irritability, and above all his courage in pushing his great work forward in the face of all obstacles.\textsuperscript{6}

Religious papers, many of which had been among Spencer’s greatest foes, expressed mixed feelings. Often enough, there was some regret that Spencer had never manifested deep religious sentiments or given credence to the Christian faith. “That Herbert Spencer knew so much and yet remained so ignorant of many necessary facts, will always remain a matter for profound regret on the part of his discriminating admirers,” one writer reflected.\textsuperscript{7} Many religious writers felt that Spencer simply did not look in the right places for answers. If he had he would have come to a different conclusion about God and immortality.\textsuperscript{8} On the other hand, some pointed out that Spencer was a religious-minded man in his own way, though the faith that satisfied him

\textsuperscript{5} “The Death of Herbert Spencer,” \textit{Scientific American} 89, no. 25 (Dec. 19, 1903), 459.


\textsuperscript{7} “Passing of a Great Agnostic,” \textit{New York Observer and Chronicle} 81, no. 51 (Dec. 17, 1903), 799.

was not enough for most.\footnote{\textit{“Herbert Spencer,” Friends’ Intelligencer} 60, no. 51 (Dec. 19, 1903), 807.} One critic wrote that Spencer’s influence had harmed religion for the most part, but the religious elements in his thought had led other men, such as John Fiske, to go even farther towards deism.\footnote{\textit{“Herbert Spencer,” Congregationalist and Christian World} 88, no. 51 (Dec. 19, 1903), 916.} For the most part, religious writers balanced appreciation for what Spencer had accomplished in the scientific realm with dissatisfaction about his metaphysics.

As the release of the last volume of The Synthetic Philosophy had been, Spencer’s death was the occasion for some general summing up of his career and legacy. Modern writers on Spencer, who have the benefit of hindsight, often argue that Spencer’s reputation was already fading by the time of his death. As J. D. Y. Peel puts it,

Posterity is cruelest to those who sum up for their contemporaries in an all-embracing synthesis the accumulated knowledge of their age. This was what Spencer did for the Victorians. So of all the great Victorian sages, Spencer lost his repute soonest . . . . When he died in 1903 he was already a figure of the past whose synthesis of knowledge was not so much disproved as needed no longer.\footnote{J. D. Y. Peel, \textit{Herbert Spencer: The Evolution of a Sociologist} (New York: Basic Books, 1971), 1.}

However, it was not true, as Michael Taylor suggests, that Spencer’s reputation followed him to the grave.\footnote{On Spencer’s reputation being buried with him see Michael W. Taylor, \textit{The Philosophy of Herbert Spencer} (London: Continuum, 2007), xi.} In America, his books continued to be widely read. Evidence comes from the public library of Muncie, Indiana, the subject of Robert and Helen Lynd’s classic...
During the period from 1891 to 1902 Spencer’s books were checked out 97 times by 74 different patrons. For comparison, readers borrowed works by Darwin 64 times in the same period. The book of Spencer’s that was taken out the most, interestingly, was *The Principles of Psychology*. Unfortunately, records after 1902 are not available, but it is doubtful that readership in Muncie plummeted abruptly after his death.14

**Debating Spencer’s Legacy**

Comments at the time of his death show that the longevity of Spencer’s reputation was still an open question to his contemporaries. Some suggested that more time was needed to assess the impact of Spencer’s work—as a writer in *Zion’s Herald* said, Spencer’s admirers should postpone wholesale adoption of his philosophy until both science and metaphysics were more “ripe” for the kind of blending he attempted.15 Others suggested one or another aspect of Spencer’s system would remain influential, if not the whole. In the same magazine, the Rev. Charles Dwight judged that Spencer never advanced much beyond a civil engineer’s idea of the universe. A weak metaphysical foundation caused Spencer’s system to lose influence, Dwight thought, but added that he succeeded in coordinating thought and systematizing previously

---


inchoate areas of knowledge.\textsuperscript{16} Mary Whiton Calkins, a philosophy and psychology professor as Wellesley College, found Spencer’s ethics and sociology of lasting value. She found Spencer’s strength was that he traced the growth of moral ideas and then applied his findings rigorously to society.\textsuperscript{17} These and other writers accepted certain aspect of Spencer’s system without feeling the necessity to embrace the whole.

Some writers felt otherwise, and were ready to make a judgment on Spencer’s thought as a whole. “Herbert Spencer had outlived both his fame and his influence,” wrote one, then immediately contradicted himself by noting the large changes in religious conceptions due to Spencer.\textsuperscript{18} The Rev. James J. Fox, writing in The Catholic World, argued that the many praises of Spencer’s work that appeared after his death recognized Spencer’s broad influence but either explicitly or implicitly accepted that his philosophical system was losing its relevance.\textsuperscript{19} Such judgments usually came from religious men, while Spencer’s adherents typically thought of themselves as men of science. Some put the distinction in sharp terms. A writer in the Medical News thought a reaction against Spencer was rising, and declared “the fate of science, and with it possibly the fate of modern civilization, may depend more than we perceive on the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{16} C. A. S. Dwight, “The Great Synthesizer,” Zion’s Herald 81, no. 50 (Dec. 16, 1903), 1601.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Mary Whiton Calkins, “The Life and Teachings of Herbert Spencer,” Outlook 75, no. 16 (Dec. 19, 1903), 955.
\item \textsuperscript{18} “Herbert Spencer,” Outlook 75, no. 16 (Dec. 19, 1903), 933.
\item \textsuperscript{19} James J. Fox, “Herbert Spencer,” Catholic World 78, no. 467 (Feb. 1, 1904), 574.
\end{itemize}
courage with which scientific men adhere to the principles of Spencer.”20 For some, Spencer’s system was still a worthy defense of scientific truth against dogma.

At the time of Spencer’s death, no consensus existed about the direction in which Spencer’s legacy might lie, or whether it would exist at all. Two practitioners of the human sciences in which Spencer took such a large hand in organizing and systematizing can be allowed to have the last word here. Professor of psychology William James, often a critic, suggested that Spencer’s influence was wide and immediate rather than deep and distant. “Thousands of readers who are not technical students know him in the original; and to such readers he has given . . . a simple, sublime, and novel system of the world,” James wrote.21 But James found Spencer’s lasting contributions harder to pin down. His scientific work was already becoming obsolete, but James predicted that The Data of Ethics would continue to be read, along with the political writings, which appealed to an “antique spirit of English individualism” that would continue as a factor in human thought whatever developments in the sciences might occur.22

Franklin H. Giddings, professor of sociology at Columbia University, was more impressed by Spencer than James. “There is no surer mark of human greatness than the inability of a great man’s contemporaries to define his genius and to say wherein his

---

22 Ibid., 23.
supremacy consists,” Giddings wrote. Giddings believed that the doctrine of evolution had become so widely believed and internalized that even specialists used it in their work without realizing its origin in Spencer. He felt that Spencer’s sociological work, seen through the lens of First Principles and The Principles of Psychology, was the highest of Spencer’s productions, demonstrating as it did that an ideal type of liberalism must win out over authoritarian centralization if the highest peaks of the evolutionary process were to be reached. Though James and Giddings differed somewhat in their assessment of what in Spencer’s system would last, they agreed about the breadth of his impact. Spencer’s name might not be uttered so much in the future, but the intellectual and theological world would never be the same thanks to his works.

Ironically, Spencer’s name continued to be uttered after the body of work was forgotten, because many American parents named their children after the great philosopher. These men bore Spencer’s name into the twentieth century. Some were well known in the field of science, such as Herbert Spencer Jennings, a zoologist, geneticist, and eugenicist; Herbert Spencer Jennings, creator of the “Golden Guide” series of nature books; and Herbert Spencer Gasser, who won the Nobel Prize in 1944 for his work on the nervous system. Others were more obscure: Herbert Spencer


24 Ibid., 2960.

25 Ibid., 2962.
Hadley, who prosecuted Standard Oil in Missouri; Herbert Spencer Simpson, author of 
Thoughts Along the Way (1955), Herbert Spencer Davis, who studied diseases in fish, 
and myriad unheralded men like H. S. Barber, Preston, Ratner, Salsibury, and on and on. 
It is a tribute to the profound impact Spencer had on many of his readers that some 
chose to name their children after him. The philosopher was honored in America like no 
place else in the world.

**Spencer’s Star Falls**

Late in 1915, as the nations of Europe strained their industrial muscles to 
support warfare on an unprecedented scale, a series of articles on Spencer’s collection 
of essays The Man versus the State began appearing in Forum magazine. Obviously, 
some felt that Spencer’s political ideas were still relevant—and this included important 
Americans like Elihu Root, Henry Cabot Lodge, Charles Eliot, and William Howard Taft. 
While the ostensible subject was Spencer’s views on government, several of the authors 
veered from the path to discuss his views on war. Many of the writers approved of 
Spencer’s stance on military aggression, including Taft.26 Lodge among others identified 
modern Germany with Spencer’s description of the militant type of society.27 David 
Jayne Hill argued that the militant and industrial types could not be clearly 
distinguished—while the militant governments abroad had the greatest control of their

---


industries, America and other industrial states were dealing with the militant labor forces within.28 Perhaps the most prophetic comment came from Eliot. He saw the war as a test of whether spontaneous cooperation or centralized control was the more efficient social system. Eliot himself chose the “side of freedom.”29

Yet by 1933 it was possible for historian Crane Brinton to ask “who now reads Spencer?”30 Sociologist Talcott Parsons quoted Brinton in his 1937 book The Structure of Social Action, and continued “we must agree with the verdict. Spencer is dead.”31 In 1950 historian Edward S. Corwin wrote “Spencer’s influence is today extinct. No intellectually respectable person would wish to be caught in the company of the ‘synthetic philosophy.’”32 While these writers were clearly exaggerating for dramatic effect, it remains true that Spencer was read by a smaller and smaller group of people each year. J. D. Y. Peel has found, based on Robert Perrin’s bibliography, that a quarter of all posthumous references to Spencer come from 1903-1912; thereafter, sharp decline leads to a nadir in the 1940s.33 What was the reason for this? Brinton believed

28 David Jayne Hill, “Herbert Spencer’s ‘Postscript’ to ‘the Man Vs. the State,’” Forum, Feb. 1916, 246.


30 Crane Brinton, English Political Thought in the Nineteenth Century, 226.


that thought had simply evolved beyond Spencer. Parsons blamed suspicion of
Spencer’s ideas about progress, the industrial future of society, and the origins of
science and religion in primitive man. Corwin felt that the quasi-religious aspect of
Spencer’s system made Darwinism palatable; ultimately, Darwin got the credit, not
Spencer.

In fact, a number of factors combined to encourage Spencer’s decline. One
obvious point is that, because of his lack of academic position and his increasing
reclusiveness, Spencer had no students. Most of his disciples were his own age or close
to it; he outlived both Youmans and Fiske, for example. This is not to say that he did not
influence men who were important in their fields. In psychiatry, for example,
neurologist John Hughlings-Jackson was open about his debts to Spencer; other possible
connections include Ivan Pavlov and B. F. Skinner. William James, too, was
influenced—mostly through opposition, though his idea of the “stream of
consciousness” may have descended from a similar metaphor in First Principles. In

34 Parsons, Structure of Social Action, 3-5.
biology, Spencer influenced contemporaries like Edward Drinker Cope and E. G. Conklin, and later figures like geneticist Sewell Wright and sociobiologist E. O. Wilson.\textsuperscript{38} In sociology Spencer has been linked to Émile Durkheim, and Americans William Graham Sumner and Lester Frank Ward developed their sociological ideas in response to Spencer’s.\textsuperscript{39} Progressivism in American education has been attributed to Spencer’s influence by one writer.\textsuperscript{40} Lawrence Cremin’s suggestion is more reasonable: that Spencer’s \textit{Education} acted as an accelerant on tendencies already developing in American educational thought.\textsuperscript{41} However, Spencer’s impact on these thinkers and movements was not great enough to maintain his own reputation. In great measure this was because his influence was wide, but diffuse. In no one particular field was he acknowledged as a pathbreaker.

As one writer put it shortly after Spencer’s death, “the present always looks forward to the future with confidence, but it is to be doubted if it will give birth to minds that will take all knowledge for their province. That was the heritage of the past . . . .


\textsuperscript{40} Kieran Egan, \textit{Getting it Wrong from the Beginning: Our Progressivist Inheritance from Herbert Spencer, John Dewey, and Jean Piaget} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 4, 11.

This is the day of specialization.”42 During Spencer’s lifetime, science changed from an avocation to a profession. The shift is perhaps best seen by comparing Charles Darwin (1809-1882) and Thomas Henry Huxley (1825-1895). Darwin, the scion of a wealthy family, received a classical education. An important part of his biological training took place while he was the gentleman companion to the captain of the HMS Beagle. Huxley, like Spencer, was the son of a school-teacher and largely self-taught. He worked as the assistant surgeon during his training voyage on the HMS Rattlesnake. Thanks to his position, Darwin was able to practice science at his leisure, while Huxley struggled to make science his profession, teaching university classes and occupying various positions in Britain’s scientific societies. Needless to say, the path of science was in a direction away from Darwin and towards Huxley, and part of the change was the growth of greater and greater specialization among professional scientists, whose employment depended on small and specific contributions to the edifice of human knowledge.

Spencer, with his grand generalizations and audacious theories, was out of place even during his lifetime.

Another factor in the demise of Spencer’s reputation was the rejection of some of his key theories by the scientific community. The most serious case was the successful case against Lamarckism made by August Weisman and others, confirmed by the rediscovery of the work of Gregor Mendel. Much of Spencer’s system depended on

the inheritance of acquired characteristics. It went beyond his biology; in his psychology he put great stress on the extent to which the experiences of forebears contributed to modern human thought patterns. This then affected his sociology, because it suggested that human beings readily became adapted to their particular social conditions over time. Strict Darwinism on the other hand, denied that learned behavior could be passed on to children as instinct. This meant that mental evolution must be much slower than Spencer anticipated. Paradoxically, it also undermined Spencer’s reservations about rapid social change. If mental evolution was so slow, then it could no longer account for most of the adaptation to changing social conditions that was constantly going on. A great deal of social conduct that Spencer considered “hard wired” into the brain was obviously learned behavior, which could be unlearned, or learned differently. However, it is possible to overestimate such difficulties to Spencer’s system. His contemporaries generally did not recognize the centrality of his Lamarckian beliefs. Furthermore, Spencer himself was not consistent on the matter. Much of his social Darwinism was presaged purely on natural selection; there was little sense that children of bad parents could be anything but bad.

Thus, Spencer’s science was unlikely to stand the test of time. What of his politics and ethics? Here the largest barrier lay not with Spencer’s ideas, but with their applicability to changing American conditions. Even if the effect was more spiritual than

---

real, the closing of the American frontier meant less scope for rugged individualism and personal enterprise. The new environment to which Americans had to adjust was increasingly urban, and the “American race” was becoming more polyglot. Corporatization, too, reduced the attractiveness of a doctrine of individualism. As companies began to oversee marketing and distribution of their products as well as production, more and more Americans who were once independent businessmen became managers at large companies. The growth of corporate bureaucracy made individual communities less autonomous and the social order more homogenous. Widespread loss of faith in the powers of individual communities to solve the large social problems led to large, national reform movements. Populism, despite its calls for nationalization of railroads, telegraphs and telephones maintained some individualist elements, such as the call for the resolution of problems through voluntary cooperation among producers. Progressivism, with its “search for order” through centralized, government reform, was something different. For the Progressives, human improvement came through regulation and management, not competition and struggle. For those who concerned themselves with the biological improvement of the human

---

44 The classic statement on the effect of the frontier on American character is Frederick Jackson Turner’s essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” reprinted in Frederick Jackson Turner, The Frontier in American History (New York: Henry Holt, 1921), 1-38. Turner speaks of a process of “evolution” repeated as the frontier moved, including the division of labor and “the differentiation of simple colonial governments into complex organs . . .” Turner, 2. Signs of Spencer’s influence are difficult to escape.


46 Robert H. Wiebe, The Search for Order, 1877-1920
race, concern about the heritability of poverty and inferiority was expressed in eugenic rather than Darwinistic terms. To eugenicists, letting nature run its course was not effective; the state must interfere to control the breeding of undesirables.

Hofstadter’s portrayal of Spencer as an arch-conservative social Darwinist resurrected him. *Social Darwinism in American Thought* ensured Spencer’s place in the history books, but only as a reactionary ghoul haunting a Gilded Age now seen as an era of unrestricted *laissez-faire* capitalism. This has made it difficult for scholars to take him seriously as an intellectual. Historians tempted to examine Spencer’s work directly are likely to balk at the length and density of his books. Furthermore, no single volume of Spencer’s encapsulates all of his thought or even provides a good starting place. *First Principles* comes closest to performing this function, but also happens to be the book of Spencer’s that has aged the least well. The theological issues it raised are no longer pertinent, and its version of science is too *a priori* and dogmatic to interest the modern reader. Spencer’s sociology that has attracted the most modern commentary, and this is spread out over three volumes of the *Synthetic Philosophy* and *The Study of Sociology*. It is no wonder that so few historians have any knowledge of Spencer beyond “the survival of the fittest.”

The winds may be shifting, however. A growing number of books on Spencer have appeared since the turn of the twenty-first century. Major studies by Mark Francis, Alberto Mingardi, John Offer, and Michael Taylor offer new insights into Spencer’s life and thought, while a recent collection of essays discusses Spencer’s legacy in a number
of academic fields. I hope to add a new, American perspective to this body of work. Though I do not argue Spencer’s relevance to the thought of today, unlike some of the sociologists who have studied him, I believe he had a great historical impact, especially in America. As I have argued, this significance had little to do with any appeal his Darwinistic social views might have had to strivers in an individualistic, competitive social environment. His influence was, instead, theological, evolutionary, and inspirational.

Spencer’s impact on theology is ironic because it was, at least initially, unintentional. His section on the Unknowable was supposed to save him from charges of materialism. Spencer conceived it as a mere prologue to the rest of the *Synthetic Philosophy* whose purpose was to delimit the field of investigation. However, the fact that Spencer responded to accusations of materialism, sometimes vociferously, shows that he cared about religious issues. His essay “Religion: Retrospect and Prospect” and the debate it ignited returned Spencer to the center of theological controversy, to the extent he had ever left in the first place. A large portion of the ink that was spilled over Spencer’s ideas fueled the pens of churchmen. While a few tried to find accommodate with Spencer’s doctrines, most took an opposing position, resulting in a long series of rejoinders, none of which quite seemed enough to slay the Spencerian beast. Religious writers did not so much defeat Spencer as gradually lose interest in the type of abstract,

---

scholastic theology that made unconditioned, absolute infinity God’s most important attribute. The rise of fundamentalism, with its emphasis on the concrete lessons of the Bible, had a large hand in this change.

Spencer’s effect on the evolutionary debate is hard to understate. Biologists might focus primarily on Darwin, but to the public at large “evolution” was often understood in its Spencerian sense as a universal process, whose consequences were not just confined to the origin of life, but included ideas about the mind, society, and morality. This expansion of the evolutionary theory had a paradoxical effect. On the one hand, it raised the stakes, for the truth of evolution now impacted ideas about human volition and purpose. On the other hand, because Spencer left some room for theism, his theories sometimes seemed less dangerous than Darwin’s. Natural selection was, at heart, a theory that random chance governed the universe. Spencer’s universe, on the other hand, moved in a positive direction, as animals, including man, continually adjusted to more perfectly fit their environments, in the process gradually eliminating pain, disease, and death.

It was this inspirational side of Spencer’s work, more than any other, which attracted Americans to his system. They were more interested in the optimistic, progressive, ethically oriented aspects of social evolution than in the pessimism of laissez-faire and the survival of the fittest. Spencer was popular with Americans because he proposed a new basis for social and ethical development that rested on the rationality of scientific knowledge and promised a grand and glorious future. For those
who had lost faith in traditional Christian religion, Spencer offered a new belief system that stressed both personal freedom and personal responsibility, and that offered ideals of conduct based on natural law. His modern ideas about education, his willingness to allot a bailiwick to the spiritual realm, and his belief in ultimate progress gained him more followers than a dour and heartless view of life as a struggle for existence ever could have.
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Included are all of the books and many of the articles cited in the text. I have omitted all primary source articles that discuss Spencer and his works in order to keep the bibliography a reasonable size. Full publication information for these can be found in the notes. Where there are several editions of a book, only the one I used most frequently is given, unless there are substantial differences between editions (such as with the 2nd editions of First Principles and The Principles of Psychology). I have only listed those articles of Spencer’s that are not found in an essay collection, or that were significantly modified before inclusion in one.

Spencer’s Works

Articles


“Crystallization.” Bath and West of England Magazine 1, no. 2 (Feb., 1836): 37.


“Tu Quoque.” *Standard of Freedom* 1, no. 20 (Nov. 11, 1848): 3.


Books


*Social Statics; Or, the Conditions Essential to Human Happiness Specified, and the First of them Developed*. London: John Chapman, 1850.


**Other Primary Sources**


Lewes, G. H. *A Biographical History of Philosophy.* London: George Routledge and Sons, 1892.


McCosh, James. *Christianity and Positivism: A Series of Lectures to the Times on Natural Theology and Apologetics.* New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1871.


**Secondary Sources**


VITA

Joel Yoder was born in Ohio, grew up in Kansas, and attended high school in northern Indiana. He returned to Kansas to attend Bethel College, where he graduated summa cum laude with a Bachelor of Arts in History and English. While at Bethel he earned several distinguished service awards for his work on the student newspaper, and won the Thresher Award for best undergraduate thesis.

Yoder earned a Master of Arts in history at Northwestern University. His area of interest was French intellectual history. Subsequently, he changed his focus to American history and entered Loyola University’s history program. Yoder won the Robert McCluggage award for best research paper in the History Department in 2009.

Currently, Yoder is revising his dissertation for publication and doing research for an article on male/female intellectual collaboration in the 19th century.