

## Herbert Spencer Dead

In the death of Mr. Herbert Spencer, England has to deplore the loss of one of the two or three most influential thinkers whom she has given to our generation. Influences can be measured in either of two ways, by their wide and immediate, or by their deep and remote effects. For wide and immediate influence, Spencer must come before even Darwin. Darwin's influence was primarily over technical circles, and the students whom he directly touched perhaps owed as much to his methods and theoretic temper as to his results. On the "Public" his influence has been remote. Of twenty educated men who think they know all "about" Darwinism, hardly one has read of it in the original. Spencer's influence, contrariwise, is not only wide but direct. Thousands of readers who are not technical students know him in the original; and to such readers he has given (what they care about far more than either method or theoretic temper) a simple, sublime, and novel system of the world, in which things fall into easy perspective relations, whose explanatory formula applies to every conceivable phenomenon, and whose practical outcome is the somewhat vague optimism which is so important a tendency in modern life. In this enormous popular success of Spencer's works the incomparable superiority of constructive over critical methods is shown. Half the battle is won already by the man who has a positive system to propound. *He* need not waste time in clearing away old views; his view sim-



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ply makes others obsolete by the fact that it is there. And in awarding "points" to the various candidates for immortality in the "Pantheon of Philosophy," few are entitled to a higher mark than Mr. Spencer on this score of positive and systematic form. Whatever greatness this quality imports—and surely it is as rare and great as any—belongs to Mr. Spencer in the fullest measure. Who, since he wrote, is not vividly able to conceive of the world as a thing evolved from a primitive fire mist, by progressive integrations and differentiations, and increases in heterogeneity and coherence of texture and organization? Who can fail to think of life, both bodily and mental, as a set of ever-changing ways of meeting the "environment"? Who has not at some time suddenly grown grave at the thought that the parents' sinful or virtuous habits are inherited by the children, and destined to accumulate from generation to generation whilst the race endures?

When one tries, however, to give a nearer account of Herbert Spencer's genius, and a more exact appraisal of his importance in the history of thought, one finds the task a hard one, so unique and idiosyncratic was the temperament of the man; and, with all the breadth of ground which his work covered, so narrow and angular was the outline which he personally showed. A pen like Carlyle's might convey a living impression of all the pluses and minuses which Mr. Spencer's character embodied, but a writer like the present critic must surely fail. Carlyle himself, indeed, had he ever tried the task, would have failed. With his so different temperament, the littlenesses of the personage would have tempted his descriptive powers exclusively, and the elements of greatness would have got scant justice from his pen. As a rule, all people in whom a genius like Carlyle's raises a responsive thrill find something strangely exasperating in the atmosphere of Spencer's mind: it seems to them so fatally lacking in geniality, humor, picturesqueness, and poetry, and so explicit, so mechanical, so flat in the panorama which it gives of life. "The 'Arry of Philosophy" is a name which we have seen applied to Spencer by one critic of this sort. Another has likened him to a kind of philosophic sawmill, delivering, year in and out, with unvarying rectilinear precision, paragraph after paragraph, chapter after chapter, and book after book, as similar one to another as if they were so many wooden planks. Another still says that "his contact is enough to take the flavor out of every truth."



How inexhaustible are the varieties of human character! Every reader of Spencer can recognize the quality in him which provokes reactions such as these. Yet the fact remains that long before any of his contemporaries had seized its universal import, he grasped a great, light-giving truth—the truth of evolution; grasped it so that it became bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh, and with a pertinacity of which the history of successful thought gives few examples, had applied it to the whole of life, down to the minutest details of the most various sciences. And how, one may well ask, is profundity and the genuine “spirit of prophecy” ever to be shown in a man, if not by fruits like these? Moreover, although Spencer’s intellect is essentially of the deductive and *à priori* order, starting from universal abstract principles and thence proceeding down to facts, what strikes one more than anything else in his writings is the enormous number of facts from every conceivable quarter which he brings to his support, and the unceasing study of minutest particulars which he is able to keep up. No “Baconian” philosopher, denying himself the use of *à priori* principles, has ever filled his pages with half as many facts as this strange species of *à priorist* can show. This unflagging and profuse command of facts is what gives such peculiar weightiness to Mr. Spencer’s manner of presenting even the smallest topics. Some of his *Essays* have a really monumental character from this cause. ‘Manners and Fashion,’ ‘The Origin of Laughter,’ ‘Illogical Geology,’ and the reviews of ‘Bain’s Emotions and Will’ and ‘Owen’s Archetype of the Vertebrate Skeleton,’ immediately occur to the mind as examples. In all his writings on social morals, from *Social Statics* to *The Man versus the State*, the same quality is most impressively shown. Yet with this matchless knowledge of certain sets of facts, one may hear it plausibly argued that Spencer is not a “widely informed” man in the vulgar acceptation of the term. He shows, that is, small signs of *desultory* curiosity. His command, *e.g.*, of foreign languages is small, and in the history of philosophy he is obviously unversed. His facts, in short, seem all collected for a purpose; those which help the purpose are never forgotten, those which are alien to it have never caught his eye.

Mr. Spencer’s attitude towards religion, again, is slightly paradoxical. Few men have paid it more sincere explicit respect; and the part called ‘The Unknowable’ of his *First Principles* celebrates the ultimate mysteriousness of things, and the existence of a Su-



preme Reality behind the veil, in terms whose emphatic character it is hard elsewhere to match. Yet on the whole he passes, and we imagine passes rightly, for an irreligious philosopher. His metaphysical "Absolute" is too ineffable to become active in the system; and an absolute Physics forthwith takes its place. The mystery of things, instead of being "omnipresent," is all neatly swept together into this one chapter, and then dismissed with an affectionate good-by; while all the particular mysteries which later present themselves are quickly explained away, Life being but complicated mechanism, and Consciousness only physical force "transformed," etc., etc. In Mr. Spencer's heroic defence of individualism against socialism and the general encroachment of the state there is a similar seeming incoherence, so marked that one cannot help suspecting his thought to have started from two independent foci, and to be faithful to two ideals. The first one was the old English ideal of individual liberty, culminating in the doctrine of *laissez faire*, for which the book *Social Statics*, published in 1851, was so striking a plea. The second was the theory of universal evolution, which seems to have taken possession of Mr. Spencer in the decade which ensued. The Spencerian law of evolution is essentially statistical. Its "integrations," "differentiations," etc., are names for describing results manifested in collections of units, and the laws of the latter's individual action are, in the main and speaking broadly, hardly considered at all. The fate of the individual fact is swallowed up in that of the aggregate total. And this is the impression (unless our memory betrays us) which Mr. Spencer's dealings with the individual man in society always gives us, so long as the general description of the process of evolution is what he has in hand. He denies free-will, as a matter of course; he despises hero-worship and the tendency to ascribe social changes to individual initiative rather than to "general conditions," and in every way tends to minimize the particular concrete man. Society drags the unit along in its fatal tow. Yet in the political writings of Mr. Spencer, with their intense and absolute reliance on individuals, we find the very opposite of this. Deeper students than we are may see the point in his system where these two streams of tendency unite. To us they seem, not perhaps incompatible, but at least detached.

To the present critic, the ethical and political part of Mr. Spencer's writings seems the most impressive and likely to endure. The



*Biology*, the *Psychology*, the *Sociology*, even were they abler than they are, must soon become obsolete books; but the antique spirit of English individualism is a factor in human life less changeable than the face of the sciences, and such expressions of it as Spencer has given will probably long deserve to be read. The *Data of Ethics* is unquestionably the most valuable single part of the *Synthetic Philosophy*, not for the reason that it makes ethics for the first time "scientific" (although this was probably its chief merit in its author's eyes), but because it gives voice with singular energy to one man's ideals concerning human life. Ideals as manly, as humane, as broadly inclusive and as forcibly expressed are always a force in the world's destinies. The *Data of Ethics* will therefore long continue to be read.

The *Principles of Biology* and of *Psychology* are already somewhat out of date. Spencer's heroic attempts mechanically to explain the genesis of living forms are altogether too coarsely carried out in the former book; and the problems of reproduction and heredity are complicated to-day with elements of which he could know nothing when he wrote.

Of the *Psychology*, too, it may be said that not much remains that is of value beyond the general conception, supported by many applications, that the mind grew up in relation to its environment, and that the two cannot be studied apart—a conception that sounded decidedly more original in the '50s and '60s than it does now. The *Sociology* has probably a larger lease of life. It is more recent, and must long be valued as a vast collection of well-arranged anthropological facts. As a chapter in the *System of Philosophy*, its value is almost evanescent, for the author's habit of periodically pointing out how well the phenomena illustrate his law of evolution seems quite perfunctory and formal when applied to social facts, so strained and unnatural is it to conceive of these as mechanical changes in which matter is integrated and motion dispersed. It is probable—strange irony of fate!—that the book called *First Principles*, although from a strict point of view it is far more vulnerable than anything its author ever wrote, is the work by which the *Synthetic Philosophy* will remain best known to the reading world.

This, however, is very likely as it should be. A man like Spencer can afford to be judged, not by his infallibility in details, but by the bravery of his attempt. He sought to see truth as a whole. He

brought us back to the old ideal of philosophy, which since Locke's time had well nigh taken flight, the ideal, namely, of a "completely unified knowledge," into which the physical and mental worlds should enter on equal terms. This was the original Greek ideal of philosophy, to which men surely must return. Spencer has been likened to Aristotle. But he presents far more analogies to Descartes, whose mechanical theory of evolution swept over his age as Spencer's sweeps over ours. And although Spencer can show no such triumphs of detail as Descartes's discoveries of analytical geometry, of dioptrics, of reflex action, and of perception by the eye, his moral character inspires an infinitely greater sympathy than that of the earlier philosopher. Descartes's life was absolutely egotistic, and he was basely servile to the powers that be. Mr. Spencer's faculties were all devoted to the service of mankind, and few men can have lived whose personal conduct unremittingly trod so close upon the heels of their ideal.