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"Herbert Spencer's Philosophy. Is it Unscientific and Unsound?
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--Its Pretensions Attacked and a Demonstration
Called For."

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HERBERT SPENCER'S PHILOSOPHY.

IS IT UNSCIENTIFIC AND UNSOUND?--
ITS PRETENSIONS ATTACKED AND
A DEMONSTRATION CALLED FOR.

Herbert Spencer's philosophy has been before the public now for some thirty years; it seems time that some one should tell the truth about it, and inform the public what value has been accorded to it by men competent to judge it. We know well enough that Hegelians and such like scorn it, and also that the "general reader" reveres it. But what we would like to have told is whether the pretensions of Mr. Spencer are acknowledged to be well founded; whether, for example, since his doctrine partly rests upon mathematical considerations, he ranks high as a mathematician among mathematicians; whether biologists have awarded him those tokens of respect (such as medals and foreign memberships of academies) which usually mark their recognition of a leader; whether the modern school of psychology reckons him as one of its chiefs, and whether anthropologists hold that his sociological tables have been drawn up in a truly scientific and critical method; or whether, on the other hand, each of these specialists is accustomed to think of Mr. Spencer as eminent in every branch but his own.

Are his methods of reasoning in each of the sciences in which he professes to instruct the world such as its adepts will pronounce the most powerful and unexceptionable at their command? An outsider is often tempted to doubt this. For example, in laying down his first principles, he makes the following statement:

"This method is to compare all opinions of the same genus; to set aside, as more or less discrediting one another, those various special and concrete elements in which such opinions disagree, to observe what remains after the discordant constituents have been eliminated, and to find for this remaining constituent that abstract expression which holds true throughout its divergent modifications."

Is it possible, then, to deduce truth from a mere opinion, or from any number of opinions, these having sprung, it may be,

from temperamental hopes or superstitious fears acting in a field of utter ignorance? Would not the result of this method, had it, for instance, been applied before the rise of modern science to the different systems of astrology, have been that the stars in some way influence the destinies of men; and would this have been a conclusion to "rank next in certainty to the postulates of exact science"? Are thinkers ever really obliged to give all opinions equal votes without educational qualification, and shall not the doubts which must instantly spring up when any proposition is found to rest on no better ground than that be allowed their vote, too?

It is one of Mr. Spencer's first principles which he is content to establish in this fashion, and particularly important is it that a thinker of the mold in which he is cast should set out with premises true beyond all manner of doubt. For he is not one of those philosophers who launch upon a voyage of discovery, supported by the pressure of a fluid experience renewed at every step, subject to incessant change, a thing to be vigilantly watched, through which (advancing most when almost overwhelmed) they are propelled toward their goal by skillful adaptations of the force of elemental and cosmical thought, the breath of the universe; but he is one of those who build Babel systems to scale the heights of knowledge; structures standing upon hard, unchangeable foundations of "first principles," so that no stage of their erection can be more secure than their cornerstones--cornerstones too often resting on quaggy ground, which gives way beneath them more and more with time.

Next, readers would like to be informed whether Mr. Spencer's system is logically put together. Does he fully understand his own theory; does he accurately distinguish all the different elements of it; does he recognize precisely what part each has to play; does he justly assign them their relative ranks, and does he use this knowledge of his own theory to form with it a consistent and thoroughgoing philosophy? These are the respects in which English thinkers have generally been at fault. The oft-signalized inconsistency of Berkeley in admitting the substantial soul while denying corporeal matter is only a specimen of the common patchwork of English philosophers, who would one and all dread to carry even the all-salutary multiplication table too far. It is true that the English have gone to great extremes in philosophy, witness Ockham, Hobbes, Mandeville, Hume, Jonathan Edwards, James Mill, Bentham. They are extreme without being thoroughgoing; it is a part of their inconsistency. Indeed, the extreme character of their thought is itself due to their omission to reflect upon the precise sorts of effect which the different general elements of their hypotheses are fitted to account for. John Mill, for example, pronounces the mind to be a succession of feelings. This proposition is the garland that crowns him a philosopher. But if he had ever sat down to consider as a general question what continuity was, and how the occurrence of it could be accounted for, perhaps he might not have taken up that extreme position. Such being the deformity to which English thought is liable, we naturally inquire whether or not Mr. Spencer has been

able to escape it. Since his is a philosophy of evolution, has he sought to apply this principle to the explanation of everything capable of being explained and presenting those characters which belong to phenomena such as may be developed by evolution?

There are philosophies of evolution which undertake to explain everything, or rather to render everything explicable. Hegel's, for example, accepts nothing as primordial but blank immediacy itself. But Mr. Spencer's is not one of these. There are certain things which his somewhat clumsy conception of evolution has left him no room to explain in any evolutionary sense. It is not, perhaps, a fault that he leaves Matter one of these; for blank indeterminate matter, the mere germ of existence, presents no order, no relationship, no characters at all that call for explanation; and it is posited as primordial by the great father of metaphysical evolutionism, Aristotle himself. Nor would it be fair to complain that Time remains behind the starting point of Spencer's evolution, although time is a system of relationship in most intimate analogy with the consecution of thought; for great analytic power would undoubtedly be required to detach the idea of evolution from that of time. But Space, does not space call for some explanation? Is not that a half-way philosophy which in these our days does not explain, or at least hold out some promise of explaining, why space is continuous, why it has such a wonderful uniformity in all its parts, why there are neither more nor less than three dimensions everywhere, why every closed curve can, by a continuous change of position, size, and form, be brought into coincidence with every other, and why the three angles of a triangle make exactly one hundred and eighty degrees, or at least so very closely so that we cannot tell whether they make more or less? The study of philosophy seems to exist only by virtue of a presumption that all the regularities of the universe are to be explained upon some one principle; and we might expect that, were this principle once grasped, these regularities of space, so intelligible as they are, so universal, so fundamental, would, among the first and easiest of things, get explained with mathematical precision and clearness. The general laws of mechanics are of much the same character. There, however, we have to thank Mr. Spencer for an easy but important generalization, namely, that each of these laws is a statement that in every motion a certain quantity definitely related to that motion, remains unchanged. It follows from this, according to Spencer, that these laws are themselves immutable, and consequently not to be explained by evolution. But one cannot help asking whether, if so, it is not so much the worse for evolution, and whether, in fact, this would not show at once that evolution is not that El Dorado of which philosophy is in quest. But then Mr. Spencer says that these inexplicables spring directly from the Unknowable, and this seems to be at any rate a somewhat imposing substitute for an explanation. But is it not something like the doctrine of Special Creations; is this resort to the Unknowable thoroughgoing evolutionism? One would like to hear, too, about this Unknowable, or is it not merely this Unknown of Mr. Spencer's; is it the good, authentic, practical, working God of religion, or is it a poor,

decayed divinity, exercising no functions in this evolutionary world, but retained on half pay for the sake of auld lang syne?

The most remarkable feature of Spencer's evolutionism would seem to some readers to be that for him evolution is only a secondary result of another principle, namely, that of the conservation of energy, which he holds to be primordial. He belongs, in short, to that generation who, after they have opened such eyes as they have been blessed with, and have looked upon the world, teeming and bursting with life all over, having asked themselves whether the principle of growth would seem to be something primary and sui generis or something secondary and a special variety of something else, have been able to reply, "It is undoubtedly an incidental result of mechanical principles." Of course, it would require quite an intricate combination of lifeless elements to make a living, growing thing; and consequently the definition of life is decidedly complicated, and as life is a special kind of mechanism, so consciousness is an aspect of a special kind of life. Now, do those who know all about it really tell us to believe that feeling is merely an aspect of a special mechanical contrivance? It must be a remarkably clever trick. Do mathematicians consider the demonstrations of that chapter to be perfectly rigid and perspicuous in which Spencer professes to show, from mathematical considerations, that evolution is a necessary result of the principle of living forces? We have heard that this last was equivalent to saying, that if the directions of motion of all the bodies in the world were at one instant all to be reversed while the velocities remained the same, the universe would pass back through all the configurations by which its parts had arrived where they were when their velocities were reversed, and, in short, it would go through all its motions backward; the man that had been knocked down would fly up to meet the fist, at contact of which his pain would disappear, he would walk home backward, and would grow to be a boy and a baby again, and back we should go to the primeval nebula. This, at least, is the dictum of the conservation of energy. But this would not be evolution, but counter-evolution--not growth, but ungrowth, one would think. That which prevents anything like this from generally happening would seem to be something different from the conservation of energy, and yet something that has to do with the law of development.

Enough of these questions. Herbert Spencer claims to have produced, not a philosophy comparable with former systems, but a great scientific theory, a philosophy worthy to form the crown of modern science; and, indeed, a less pretension would be simply a confession of nility. Now, the recognized touchstone of a scientific theory is successful prediction. A theory which brings forth bad fruit is rejected, and one that brings forth none at all is brushed aside. Spencer's theory, therefore, having been before the world now these thirty years, no doubt can point to considerable discoveries directly resulting from its predictions--not, be it understood, from the general doctrine of evolution, or from the

Darwinian theory, but from the seventeen articles of the Spencerian confession. No doubt other even greater additions to our knowledge have been brought about by it indirectly. For the doctrine of Spencer, if worth anything at all, is a far greater thing than that of Sir Isaac Newton. Now, we know what Newtonianism accomplished for the world. It began by staking its entire credit without reservation upon a formal prediction that the earth would be found flattened at the poles. Geodesists set themselves to work to ascertain whether this was so in fact. The early results were doubtful; then for a time it seemed to have been shown that the globe was prolate, or elongated. But the Newtonians never flinched, hedged, straddled the question, or shifted their ground, but simply awaited the final issue.

That final decision about the flattening of the earth made the Newtonian philosophy king and master of speculation. So much for its direct predictions; as for its indirect achievements, we may reckon among them the molecular philosophy, modern physics, and a great part of modern mathematics. We wish some competent persons would give a condensed résumé, in not over fifty pages, of all the similar discoveries which the synthetic philosophy of Spencer, as drawn up by him in those seventeen propositions, has thus far given to the world.

OUTSIDER.