

## CHAPTER VI

### GEORGE AND HERBERT SPENCER

THE crusading zeal with which George approached the realm of philosophy is nowhere better illustrated than in his attack upon what he considered the apostasy of Herbert Spencer. Here in Spencer's change of opinion on the land question was a deliberate attempt, George felt, to compromise with a truth that had been recognized and accepted, and, in almost the spirit of a holy war, he brought all his controversial powers and all the keenness of his logic to bear against this great figure in English thought. The attack upon Spencer included not only an analysis of his views on the land question, but extended also to the vast structure of the synthetic philosophy, and to the philosopher's personal character. It may seem somewhat strange, this furious onslaught upon an ideational process, and even a little unwarranted and in bad taste, but it must be remembered that the nineteenth century took its polemics, as it did everything else, a bit more seriously than is the custom at present. And it must also be remembered that this attack of George—it was not a controversy since Spencer never directly answered it—was not something merely contentious. It was based rather on what, for George, was the most vital of human efforts, that of holding fast to truth, after it had been obtained, and repelling every attempt made against it. The great truth was to be found in the solution of the land problem and in the implications that it suggested, and when once that had been grasped, as George felt Spencer had grasped it, and then abandoned for the flimsiest of motives, such re-

nunciation demanded an answer, especially since so great a thinker as Herbert Spencer was concerned; the vehemence of George's attack was but evidence of the strength and sincerity of his faith in the power of truth.

There will be no attempt made here to present any final summary or estimation of the charges that George made against Spencer, and the only new material offered will be some letters and autobiographical opinion which may throw light on the philosopher's attitude toward George's attack. The work of Spencer on the land question is treated in some detail in order to indicate the importance that the problem had for him at one stage of his thought, for, in spite of his later beliefs, Spencer remains as one of the most remarkable and eloquent anticipators of Henry George's conceptions.<sup>1</sup>

Spencer's first book, *Social Statics* ("Or the Conditions Essential to Human Happiness Specified, and the First of Them Developed"), appeared in 1850. It was largely an elaboration of a series of letters that had been written some eight years previous for the *Nonconformist*, in which Spencer's pronounced views on individualism were first presented. *Social Statics* was an attempt to discover the "proper sphere of government," and to trace the development of society, not from any principles of expediency or hedonism, but from the existence of an individual moral sense correlated with the law that "every man has freedom to do all that he wills, provided he infringes not the equal freedom of any other man."<sup>2</sup> In

<sup>1</sup> Spencer was one of the few land reform theorists with whose work George was acquainted before he had completely formulated his own thought. In fact, Spencer may be considered as almost an inspirer of George, for *Social Statics*, George stated, "was the only work of the kind I knew of when writing *Progress and Poverty*" (*The Science of Political Economy*, p. 189), and mention of Spencer appears in several places throughout *Progress and Poverty*. In reference to the anticipators of the work of George, see *supra*, Chap. IV.

<sup>2</sup> Part II, Chap. VI, on the "First Principle." The edition used here of *Social Statics* is that printed in New York, D. Appleton & Co., 1883.

Spencer was, of course, aware that this earliest sociological effort of his

the application of this first principle, Spencer deduced the same corollaries of natural rights that have always been joined to the doctrine of individualism, the inference that men had rights to life, to personal liberty, to the use of the earth, and to all those other activities that may be found in any bill of rights. "The Right to the Use of the Earth" constitutes Chapter IX<sup>3</sup> (Part II) of *Social Statics*, and it may be of advantage to quote it at some length, for here indeed is Spencer the fervent land reformer, even if it might have been only the passing fervor of youth:

Given a race of beings having like claims to pursue the objects of their desires—given a world adapted to the gratification of those desires—a world into which such beings are similarly born, and it unavoidably follows that they have equal rights to the use of this world. For if each of them "has freedom to do all that he wills provided he infringes not the equal freedom of any other," then each of them is free to use the earth for the satisfaction of his wants, provided he allows all others the same liberty. And conversely, it is manifest that no one, or part of them, may use the earth in such a way as to prevent the rest from similarly using it; seeing that to do this is to assume greater freedom than the rest, and consequently to break the law.

Equity, therefore, does not permit property in land. For if *one* portion of the earth's surface may justly become the possession of an individual, and may be held by him for his sole use and benefit, as a thing to which he has an exclusive right, then *other* portions

was crude and not always exact. In 1864, when the first American edition was printed, he prefaced a note that the book "must not be taken as a literal expression of his present views," that "the general theory which it enunciates has undergone, in his mind, considerable further development and some accompanying modifications," and that in "the closing volumes of this System [of philosophy] . . . he proposes to set forth in them the developed conclusions of which *Social Statics* must be regarded as a rough sketch." In 1877 he made this explanation more specific, prompted, as he stated in the preface to the American edition of that year, by a criticism that had appeared in the *British Quarterly Review* of January, 1875.

<sup>3</sup> Chap. IX includes pages 131 to 144. The vigor of this chapter on the right to the use of the earth made it an effective piece of propaganda for single taxers, and it has appeared in pamphlet form throughout England and the United States.

of the earth's surface may be so held; and eventually the *whole* of the earth's surface may be so held; and our planet may thus lapse altogether into private hands. Observe now the dilemma to which this leads. Supposing the entire habitable globe to be so enclosed, it follows that if the landowners have a valid right to its surface, all who are not landowners have no right at all to its surface. Hence, such can exist on the earth by sufferance only. They are all trespassers. Save by the permission of the lords of the soil, they can have no room for the soles of their feet. Nay, should the others think fit to deny them a resting-place, these landless men might equitably be expelled from the earth altogether. If, then, the assumption that land can be held as property, involves that the whole globe may become the private domain of a part of its inhabitants; and if, by consequence, the rest of its inhabitants can then exercise their faculties—can then exist even—only by consent of the landowners; it is manifest, that an exclusive possession of the soil necessitates an infringement of the law of equal freedom. For, men who cannot "live and move and have their being" without the leave of others, cannot be equally free with those others. (Pp. 131-132.)

Spencer goes on to state that the titles of land ownership can be traced back only to force, fraud and superior cunning, all of them—in a system of equitable distribution—invalid claims to property, and he asks:

. . . What becomes of the pretensions of all subsequent holders of estates so obtained? Does sale or bequest generate a right where it did not previously exist? Would the original claimants be nonsuited at the bar of reason, because the thing stolen from them had changed hands? Certainly not. And if one act of transfer can give no title, can many? No: though *nothing* be multiplied forever, it will not produce *one*. . . . (P. 133.)

And then there is the eloquent passage, in the language of some fiery eighteenth century pamphleteer, in which Time is held not to be the "great legalizer":

. . . How long does it take for what was originally a *wrong* to grow into a *right*? At what rate per annum do invalid claims

become valid? If a title gets perfect in a thousand years, how much more than perfect will it be in two thousand years? . . . For the solution of which they will require a new calculus. . . . (Pp. 133-134.)

And this for the doctrine of expediency:

Whether it may be expedient to admit claims of a certain standing is not the point. We have here nothing to do with considerations of conventional privilege or legislative convenience. We have simply to inquire what is the verdict given by pure equity in the matter. And this verdict enjoins a protest against every existing pretension to the individual possession of the soil; and dictates the assertion, that the right of mankind at large to the earth's surface is still valid; all deeds, customs, and laws notwithstanding. (P. 134.)

Spencer recognized the difficulties that arose from these premises, difficulties in the specific means of providing a condition of equity in the disposal of the surface of the earth, and in the separation of the land itself from the improvements which were the result of labor (George felt that his system effectually made an end to such difficulties), but he declared that they were no insurmountable obstacles in the attaining of justice; he ridiculed instead the shallow thinkers who sought to compromise with truth because of petty obstacles:

. . . There are people who hate anything in the shape of exact conclusions. . . . According to such, the right is never in either extreme, but always half way between the extremes. They are continually trying to reconcile *Yes* and *No*. *Ifs* and *buts* and *excepts* are their delight. They have so great a faith in the "judicious mean" that they would scarcely believe an oracle, if it uttered a full-length principle. Were you to inquire of them whether the earth turns on its axis from east to west, or from west to east, you might almost expect the reply—"A little of both," or "Not exactly either." It is doubtful whether they would assent to the axiom that the whole is greater than its part, without making some qualifications. They have a passion for compromises. To meet

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their taste, Truth must always be spiced with a little Error. They cannot conceive of a pure, definite, entire, and unlimited law. And hence, in discussions like the present, they are constantly petitioning for limitations—always wishing to abate, and modify, and moderate—ever protesting against doctrines being pursued to their ultimate consequences. (Pp. 138–139.)

These sentences were later, and perhaps rightfully, turned with telling effect against their author, especially since Spencer followed this paragraph with:

But it behooves such to recollect, that ethical truth is as exact and peremptory as physical truth; and that in this matter of land tenure, the verdict of morality must be distinctly *yea* or *nay*. Either men *have* a right to make the soil private property or they *have not*. There is no medium. We must choose one of the positions. There can be no half-and-half opinion. In the nature of things the fact must be either one way or the other. (*Ibid.*)

And in another place, he declares, in no indifferent language, that:

. . . The world is God's bequest to mankind. All men are joint heirs to it; you amongst the number. And because you have taken up your residence on a certain spot of it, and have subdued, cultivated, beautified that part—improved it as you say, you are not therefore warranted in appropriating it as entirely private property. At least if you do so, you may at any moment be justly expelled by the lawful owner—Society. (P. 136.)

Spencer concludes his chapter on the right to the use of the Earth with this summary:

Briefly reviewing the argument, we see that the right of each man to the use of the earth, limited only by the like rights of his fellow men, is immediately deducible from the law of equal freedom. We see that the maintenance of this right necessarily forbids private property in land. On examination all existing titles to such property turn out to be invalid; those founded on reclamation inclusive. It appears that not even an equal apportionment of the earth amongst its inhabitants could generate a

legitimate proprietorship. We find that if pushed to its ultimate consequences, a claim to exclusive possession of the soil involves a landowning despotism. We further find that such a claim is constantly denied by the enactments of our legislature. And we find lastly, that the theory of the co-heirship of all men to the soil, is consistent with the highest civilization; and that, however difficult it may be to embody that theory in fact, Equity sternly commands it to be done. (Pp. 143-144.)

In the next chapter on the right of property there is an amplification of the one suggestion that Spencer had made for the administration of land, the proposal that the State lease out the land to individual proprietors, who were to act as tenants to society. In Chapter IX he had stated that to secure a condition of equity in landed property the only "change required would simply be a change of landlords":

Separate ownerships would merge into the joint-stock ownership of the public. Instead of being in the possession of individuals, the country would be held by the great corporate body—Society. Instead of leasing his acres from an isolated proprietor, the farmer would lease them from the nation. Instead of paying his rent to the agent of Sir John or his Grace, he would pay it to an agent or deputy agent of the community. Stewards would be public officials instead of private ones; and tenancy the only land tenure. A state of things so ordered would be in perfect harmony with the moral law. Under it all men would be equally landlords; all men would be alike free to become tenants. (P. 141.)

In Chapter X this is further elaborated and is made to coincide with Locke's doctrine that the only justification for landed property is that of labor.<sup>4</sup>

. . . We have seen that, without any infraction of the law of equal freedom, an individual may lease from society a given surface of soil, by agreeing to pay in return a stated amount of the

<sup>4</sup>Spencer, however, did not accept Locke's explanation of the origin of private property, and he ranks him as one of those thinkers who "have commonly fallen into the error of referring back to an imaginary state of savage wildness, instead of referring forward to an ideal civilization."

produce he obtains from that soil. We found that, in doing this, he does no more than what every other man is equally free with himself to do—that each has the same power with himself to become the tenant—and that the rent he pays accrues alike to all. Having thus hired a tract of land from his fellow men, for a given period, for understood purposes, and on specified terms—having thus obtained, for a time, the exclusive use of that land by a definite agreement with its owners, it is manifest that an individual may, without any infringement of the rights of others, appropriate to himself that portion of produce which remains after he has paid to mankind the promised rent. He has now, to use Locke's expression, "mixed his labour with" certain products of the earth; . . . and having fulfilled the condition which society imposed in giving that consent—the payment of rent—society, to fulfill its part of the agreement, must acknowledge his title to that surplus which remains after the rent has been paid. (P. 147.)

That this proposal is not to be confounded with strictly socialistic suggestions, Spencer directly refutes what he considers to be the fallacies of "Socialism and Communism"—the first attack of his long warfare against the doctrines of paternalism—and also critically analyzes the "awkward dilemma" which is presented by the "property is robbery" belief of Proudhon.<sup>5</sup>

These were Spencer's earliest thoughts on the land question, thoughts which, while not always exact, were nothing if not unequivocal. To the later matured judgment of the philosopher-laureate they may have appeared rash and hastily formed, but for the young seeker after the "proper sphere of government," they had all the incisive logical vigor that comes of enthusiasm. And it was thirty-three years before Spencer discovered that his youthful conceptions had been—just youthful.

<sup>5</sup> Proudhon, it may be remembered, epitomized the land problem thus: "Quai a fait la terre? Dieu, sans doute! En ce cas, propriétaire, retire-toi!" (*Qu'est-ce la Propriété*, p. 74.)



His change of opinion on the question of the administration of landed property was first expressed early in 1883<sup>6</sup> at a time when the work of George was beginning to rouse all England. George had just completed his first lecture tour

<sup>6</sup> As late as March of 1882, when Spencer published Part V of the *Principles of Sociology*, on *Political Institutions*, he appeared to hold much the same opinion that he had indicated in *Social Statics* concerning the question of property in land. In Chapter XV, on "Property," after discussing the basically communal character of the lands of primitive tribes, he asks: "Induction and deduction uniting to show, as they do, that at first land is common property, there presents itself the question: How did possession of it become individualized? There can be little doubt as to the general nature of the answer. Force, in one form or other, is the sole cause adequate to make the members of a society yield up their joint claim to the area they inhabit. Such force may be that of an external aggressor or an internal aggressor; but in either case it implies militant activity." (Sec. 539, p. 546; 1899 edition, printed in New York by Appleton; Vol. II of *Principles of Sociology*.)

Again, after showing that private property, especially in land, is the result of a developing society, he continues: "At first sight it seems fairly inferable that the absolute ownership of land by private persons must be the ultimate state which industrialism brings about. But though industrialism has thus far tended to individualize possession of land, while individualizing all other possessions, it may be doubted whether the final stage is at present reached. . . . At a stage still more advanced it may be that private ownership of land will disappear. As that primitive freedom of the individual which existed before war established coercive institutions and personal slavery, comes to be reestablished as militancy declines; so it seems possible that the primitive ownership of land by the community, which, with the development of coercive institutions, lapsed in large measure or wholly into private ownership, will be revived as industrialism further develops. . . . In legal theory landowners are directly or indirectly tenants of the Crown (which in our day is equivalent to the State, or, in other words, the Community); and the Community from time to time resumes possession after making due compensation. Perhaps the right of the Community to the land, thus tacitly asserted, will in time come to be overtly asserted; and acted upon after making full allowance for the accumulated value artificially given." (Sec. 540, pp. 553-554.)

Spencer concludes the chapter on "Property" with this: "Complete individualization of ownership is an accompaniment of industrial progress. . . . The individualization of ownership . . . eventually affects the ownership of land. Bought and sold by measure and for money, land is assimilated in this respect to the personal property produced by labour; and thus becomes, in the general apprehension, confounded with it. But there is reason to suspect that while private possession of things produced by labour will grow even more definite and sacred than at present, the inhabited area, which cannot be produced by labour, will eventually be distinguished as something which may not be privately possessed, as the individual, primitively owner of himself, partially or wholly loses ownership of himself during the militant régime, but gradually resumes it as the industrial régime develops; so, possibly, the communal proprietorship of land, partially or wholly merged in the ownership of dominant men during evolution of the militant type, will be resumed as the industrial type becomes fully evolved." (Sec. 541, p. 556.)

of Ireland, had spoken before great crowds in London, and had even met Spencer at the home of Hyndman, the socialist. A renewed and popular interest in the land problem had been developed, and now it was that Spencer's earlier work was coupled with the proposals of George. A discussion of *Progress and Poverty* in the *Edinburgh Review* of January, 1883, was the first comprehensive attempt to link together, for purpose of joint condemnation, the suggestions of Spencer and of this new American economist. After analyzing Chapter IX of *Social Statics* in connection with the doctrines expressed in *Progress and Poverty*, the *Edinburgh* reviewer concluded:

Writers like Mr. George and Mr. Herbert Spencer are at war, not only with the first principles of political economy and of law, of social order and domestic life, but with the elements of human nature. . . . To attack the rights of private property in land is to attack property in its most concrete form. If landed property is not secure, no property can be protected by law, and the transmission of wealth, be it large or small, is extinguished. With it expires the perpetuity of family life, and that future which cheers and ennobles the labour of the present with the hopes of the future. These are doctrines of communism, fatal alike to the welfare of society and to the moral character of man.

An article of much the same tenor had appeared previous to this (October 27, 1882, while Spencer was in the United States) in the staunchly Conservative *St. James's Gazette* of London. It was a consideration of "Mr. Spencer's Political Theories" and, on the subject of the land problem, it stated that Spencer's views in *Social Statics* had been again expounded, "not so fully, but with as much confidence as ever" in *Political Institutions*. Upon his return to England, Spencer wrote a letter to the *Gazette* and attempted to explain his position. As George later stated,<sup>7</sup> this provided him an op-

<sup>7</sup> *A Perplexed Philosopher; Works, Vol. V, p. 57.*

portunity to take a definite stand on the question of private property in land: "If he wished to defend himself against the charge of attacking property rights and upholding the doctrines of communism, there was an opportunity for him to show, for all of us as well as for himself, that the denial of the justice of private property in land involves no denial of true property rights. Or if he chose to do so, here was a chance for him straightforwardly to recant, to apologize to landowners, and to plead that he was young and foolish when he asserted . . . that 'equity does not permit property in land, and that the right of mankind to the earth's surface is still valid, all deeds, customs, and laws notwithstanding.'"

Instead, Spencer appeared to content himself with that defense upon which he had poured his scorn in *Social Statics*, the defense of those who are "constantly petitioning for limitations—always wishing to abate, and modify, and moderate—ever protesting against doctrines being pursued to their ultimate consequences." After stating that the work of George was one "which I closed after a few minutes on finding how visionary were its ideas," he continued:

. . . The writer of the article in the *St. James's Gazette* does not represent the facts correctly when he says that the view concerning ownership of land in *Social Statics* is again expounded in *Political Institutions*, "not so fully, but with as much confidence as ever." In this last work I have said that, "though industrialism has thus far tended to individualize possession of land while individualizing all other possessions, *it may be doubted* [italics Spencer's] whether the final stage is at present reached." Further on I have said that "at a stage still more advanced *it may be* that private ownership of land will disappear" and that "*it seems possible* that the primitive ownership of land by the community . . . will be revived." And yet again I have said that "*perhaps* the right of the community to the land, thus tacitly asserted, will, in time to come, be overtly asserted." Now it seems to me that the words I have italicized imply no great confidence. Contrariwise,

I think they show quite clearly that the opinion conveyed is a tentative one.

Spencer then made the distinction between the "purely ethical view of the matter" and the "political-economical view" and stated that they apparently did not harmonize. This contrast between "ethics" and "economics" is one that appears in all of his later explanations of the real meaning of *Social Statics*, a distinction that seems to merit George's later satirical differentiation between "transcendental" and "sublunary" ethics. The letter to the *Gazette* concludes with: "All which I wish to point out is that my opinion is by no means a positive one; and, further, that I regard the question as one to be dealt with in the future rather than at present."

*Social Statics* was still further to plague Spencer before he finally gave it the *coup de grâce* with the "abridged and revised" edition of 1892, and with the publication of *Justice*. The most troublesome episode was launched by an account in the London *Times* of November 5, 1889 (p. 10), of a political debate in which Spencer had been quoted by an enthusiastic bricklayer as an authority for the justification of land nationalization. Spencer's letter of explanation to the *Times*, which appeared two days later, was of the same nature as his letter to the *St. James's Gazette* in 1883. There was the question of "absolute ethics" again: "The work referred to—*Social Statics*—was intended to be a system of political ethics—absolute political ethics, or that which ought to be, as distinguished from relative political ethics, or that which is at present the nearest practicable approach to it."<sup>8</sup> Then, a long

<sup>8</sup> In Spencer's *The Man Versus the State* there is again a mention of actions being theoretically and abstractly equitable: "There is the movement for land nationalization which, aiming at a system of land tenure equitable in the abstract, is . . . etc." (In "The Coming Slavery" in *The Man Versus the State*, p. 319; the edition used is that of 1892, in which this work was published together with the revised *Social Statics*. *The Man Versus the State* first appeared in 1884. It was a collection of four articles that had

quotation from *Political Institutions* followed by this passage: "The use of the words 'possible,' 'possibly,' and 'perhaps,' in the above extracts shows that I have no positive opinion as to what may hereafter take place. The reason for this state of hesitancy is that I cannot see my way toward a reconciliation of the ethical requirements with the politico-economic requirements." Finally, as to the urgency of a solution of the land problem, Spencer states: "All this [in *Social Statics*] was said in the belief that the questions raised were not likely to come to the front in our time or for many generations," and "what the remote future may bring forth there is no saying; but with a humanity anything like what we now know, the implied reorganization would be disastrous." In the letter<sup>9</sup> Spencer also repeated the demand that he had made in *Social Statics* that, if any change in the administration of landed property were inaugurated, the

been written for the *Contemporary Review* and published in February, April, May, June and July of 1884. They were on "The New Toryism," "The Coming Slavery," "The Sins of Legislators," and "The Great Political Superstition.")

This whole matter of abstract ethics, however, is nowhere better answered than by Spencer himself—as was unfortunately so often the case—in one of those forceful passages in *Social Statics*. Speaking of the supremacy of moral requirements, he wrote: "But why all this laboured examination into the propriety, or impropriety, of making exceptions to an ascertained ethical law? The very question is absurd. For what does a man really mean by saying of a thing that it is 'theoretically just' or 'true in principle' or 'abstractly right'? Simply that it accords with what he, in some way or other, perceives to be the established arrangements of Divine rule. When he admits that an act is 'theoretically just' he admits it to be that which, in strict duty, should be done. By 'true in principle' he means in harmony with the conduct decreed for us. The course which he calls 'abstractly right' he believes to be the appointed way to human happiness. There is no escape. The expressions mean this, or they mean nothing." (Introduction, Sec. 6, p. 64.)

<sup>9</sup> In this letter Spencer also declared that "for the last twelve or fifteen years I have refrained from issuing new editions of that work [*Social Statics*] and have interdicted translations." It will not be necessary here to go into detail regarding this statement, yet if it was supposed to mean that publication of the book had ceased, then it was just not true. In the United States, where *Social Statics* enjoyed a much larger circulation than in England, Appleton & Co. continued to publish the first edition of the book, with the prefaces mentioned previously, until 1892. If the sentence is to be taken literally, then the first edition was recognized to be still in circulation. (For further details, see *A Perplexed Philosopher*, pp. 86 ff.)

present landowners be compensated for their property losses.<sup>10</sup>

Such a Pickwickian explanation could hardly have satisfied any one. The *Times*, on the 9th, said editorially—and wisely—that “Were we asked to point a moral for philosophers, we should bid them beware of meddling with the absolute. Forty years ago Mr. Spencer set forth in search of ‘absolute political ethics’ and constructed his system to his own satisfaction. But it turns out to have been the most relative of things after all. . . . He does not seem, however, to have abandoned his original quest, for he gives us his revised conclusions as to the absolute ethics of land tenure, which appear to us to contain some of the original flaws which

<sup>10</sup> The following paragraph regarding compensation of landowners appeared in *Social Statics*, Chap. IX, Sec. 9, p. 142. The italicized words are those so emphasized by George (in *A Perplexed Philosopher*, pp. 15-16) for the purpose of showing that this incongruous passage, as George calls it, proved that the thought of compensation was not at all clear in the mind of Spencer, and that apparently he had reference to compensation for “improvements” rather than for the land itself. “No doubt great difficulties must attend the resumption, by mankind at large, of their rights to the soil. The question of compensation to existing proprietors for their improvements is a complicated one—one that perhaps cannot be settled in a strictly equitable manner. Had we to deal with the parties who originally robbed the human race of its heritage, we might make short work of the matter, for their improvements we should be under no obligation to regard. But unfortunately, most of our present landowners are men who have, either mediately or immediately—either by their own acts, or by the acts of their ancestors—given for their estates, which include many inseparable improvements, equivalents of honestly earned wealth, believing that they were investing their savings in a legitimate manner. To justly estimate and liquidate the claims of such for these improvements, is one of the most intricate problems society will one day have to solve.”

This passage, then, can be readily interpreted as a plea for the compensation for improvements, a plea that would have been readily admitted by George, since improvements on land, which are really capital, would be exempted from his “single tax.” However, Spencer need not be forced into too strict a rendering of his language. Probably, as was the case with all English land reformers from Locke to Mill, there was always the idea of compensation in Spencer’s mind, and if his reasoning led him to deduce that compensation could be justified only by doctrines of “expediency” and that it was not equitable, since, in his own words, an original wrong could never be transmuted into a right, then its abjuring could easily be placed in that vague and nebulous realm of “abstract political ethics.”

were to be found in the older version." The editorial then attempted to point out the flaws that had reappeared in *Political Institutions*, particularly Spencer's statement that property in land had originated in force and fraud, and that land tenure had never been recognized as absolute by the State. There were several letters to the *Times* attacking Spencer's explanation, the most unkind being one from his friend Huxley. Huxley stated (in the *Times* of Nov. 12, p. 8) that he was one of those "to whom absolute political ethics and *a priori* politics were alike stumbling-blocks," and that he wished to know definitely whether a piece of land bought "like a cabbage" by an individual A. B. a score of years ago was really his property despite all "antiquarian contingencies." Did A. B. according to "absolute political ethics" have "a moral right to the land or not? If he has not, how does 'absolute political ethics' deduce the State's right to disturb him?" Huxley was of the opinion that "absolute political ethics" should be independent of time and space and that "it should tell us whether A. B., if he continued to hold his land under the circumstances supposed, is an honest man or a receiver of stolen goods." He concluded: "In England . . . the theorems of 'absolute political ethics' are in danger of being employed to make this generation of land-owners responsible for the misdeeds of William the Conqueror and his followers."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Huxley, of course, was bitterly opposed to the work of George, for the dismay with which he viewed his concepts was no different from his impatience with any attempt to resurrect a doctrine founded upon "natural rights." George, for him, was but another benighted Rousseau, engaged in a mischievous effort to disrupt the "natural inequality of man." He wrote to his friend Knowles (Dec. 14, 1889): "Did you ever read Henry George's book *Progress and Poverty*? It is more damnable nonsense than poor Rousseau's blether. And to think of the popularity of the book!" (Quoted in *Life and Letters* by Leonard H. Huxley; New York, Appleton, 1906; Vol. II, p. 261.)

Huxley's essentially biologic conception of society, a conception that led him to justify methods of force and might in social activity, not only as necessary processes in evolution, but as the legitimate foundation for

It will not be necessary to examine the replies and counter-replies that this typically London *Times* letter-to-the-editor

ownership and property rights, was one that in no way could be reconciled with any system that sought to approach the problems of political economy with ideas of justice and equality. (For this defense of force in social processes, see especially "On the Natural Inequality of Men," written in 1890, and later appearing in the collection of essays, *Method and Results*—New York, Appleton, 1898.) Huxley's specific criticism of George appeared in the essay "Natural Rights and Political Rights," written for the *Nineteenth Century* of London, February, 1890. This also is in *Method and Results*, Chap. VIII. See also "Capital—the Mother of Labour," *Nineteenth Century*, March, 1890.

Huxley, as did all of George's critics, recognized the popularity and vigorous sincerity of his work. He wrote in "Natural Rights and Political Rights": "No better evidence of the fact need be adduced than the avidity with which the writings of political teachers of this school [that of Rousseau and natural rights] have been and are being read, especially among the more intelligent of the working classes; and I doubt if any book published during the last ten years has obtained a larger circulation among them, not only in this country, but in the United States, than *Progress and Poverty*. . . . In some respects, the work undoubtedly deserves the success which it has won. Clearly and vigorously written, though sometimes weakened by superfluous rhetorical confectionery, *Progress and Poverty* leaves the reader in no doubt as to Mr. George's meaning, and thus fulfills the primary condition of honest literature. Nor will any one question the author's intense conviction that the adoption of his panacea will cure the ills under which the modern State groans." (*Method and Results*, pp. 377-378.)

He continues: "Mr. George's political philosophy is, in principle, though by no means in all its details, identical with Rousseauism. It exhibits, in perfection, the same *a priori* method, starting from highly questionable axioms which are assumed to represent the absolute truth, and asking us to upset the existing arrangements of society on the faith of the deductions from those axioms. The doctrine of 'natural rights' is the fulcrum upon which he, like a good many other political philosophers during the last 130 years, rests the lever wherewith the social world is to be lifted away from its present foundations and deposited upon others. In this respect, he is at one, not only with Rousseau and his conscious or unconscious followers in France and in England, but, I regret to say, may claim the countenance of a far more scientifically minded and practical school of political thinkers—that of the French *Physiocrats* of the eighteenth century." (*Ibid.*, p. 338.)

Huxley sums up *Progress and Poverty* in these propositions, each of which he attempts, with indifferent success, to show to be utterly fallacious: "I. All men have equal rights. II. There is no foundation for any rightful title to ownership except this: That a man has a right to himself; to the use of his own powers; to the enjoyment of the fruit of his own exertions; therefore, to whatsoever he makes or produces. III. The right to that which is produced is 'vested' in the producer by natural law. It is also a fundamental law of Nature that her enjoyment by man shall be consequent upon his exertion. IV. Land is a gratuitous offering of Nature, not a thing produced by labour; all men therefore have equal right to it. These rights are inalienable, as existing men cannot contract away the rights of their successors. . . ." (*Ibid.*, pp. 360-361.)

The most bitter of Huxley's criticisms was that directed against those



warfare called out.<sup>12</sup> Spencer's answer to Huxley, however, which appeared on November 15, was a very ingenious and perhaps successful justification of the function of "absolute political ethics." Such a system of ethics was to be a model upon which existing institutions could be re-formed. ". . . We may fairly assume that, in these modern days at least, all legislation aims at a better; and the conception of a better is not possible without a conception of the best. . . . However much a politician may pooh-pooh social ideals, he cannot take steps toward bettering the social state without tacitly entertaining them." This is quite a legitimate and pragmatically acceptable conception of the use of a social ideal, but first it must prove itself of service in an active attempt to realize the "best." It must not be, as ideals and final ends so often are, something discrete and insulated and nicely cut off from the very aim it seeks to achieve. That this vague and essentially transcendental concept of the province of an ideal was in Spencer's mind is all too readily recognized in his own words, for was not this matter of absolute political ethics proffered only "in the belief that the questions raised

"brave 'ords" of natural equality. It was as if George's eloquence was an attempt to overthrow the biologic "natural inequality" of men, that human heritage of the survival of the fittest. "Big-sounding but empty phrases," he wrote, "may be the making of a stump-orator; but what is to be said of them in the mouth of a professed thinker? . . . Who would not be proud to be able to orate in this fashion? Whose heart would not beat high at the tempest of cheers which would follow stirring words like these addressed to needy and ignorant men? How should the impassioned speaker's ear be able to catch a tone as of the howl of hungry wolves among the cheers?" (P. 379.) The "needy and ignorant" men, of course, were needy and ignorant because of the working of evolution in political economy, and nothing could very well be done about it.

George made no attempt directly to answer Huxley, although he wrote to Dr. Taylor (September 16, 1890): "I suppose you read Huxley's *Nineteenth Century* articles. What do you think of him as a philosopher? I am itching to get at him and will as soon as I can get a little leisure." He could not, however, reply to all of his critics; their number was legion. And Huxley, for George, was not in the same position as Spencer, for he had never espoused any doctrines on the land question which were later to be repudiated. Indeed, Huxley himself was often impatient with Spencer's reasoning.

<sup>12</sup> Frederick Greenwood, the journalist, and Sir Louis Mallet were others who wrote to the *Times* attacking Spencer; Auberon Herbert undertook his defense.

were not like to come to the front in our times or for many generations"? And was there not "no saying as to what the remote future may bring forth"? The same arm's-length interest in the actual effectuation of his ideal system is even more apparent in his last letter to the *Times*:<sup>13</sup> "I cannot allow the late controversy to pass without disclaiming the absurd ideas ascribed to me. The ascription of these ideas has been made possible only by ignoring the distinction pointed out in my first letter between absolute ethics and relative ethics, or the ethics of immediate practice—a distinction inadequately recognized in my early work, long since withdrawn [sic], but insisted on in a later work. Ill-health has kept me silent while seeing myself debited with the ludicrous results which arise when the one is substituted for the other. The suggestion that an ideal must be kept in view, so that our movement may be toward it and not away from it, has been regarded as a proposal forthwith to realize the ideal."<sup>14</sup> If then, "a proposal forthwith to realize the ideal"

<sup>13</sup> November 27, 1889, p. 10. In the previous letter (of the 15th) appeared a passage in which Spencer and George would have found themselves in complete agreement. It was: "It appears to me somewhat anomalous that Professor Huxley, who is not simply a biologist but is familiar with science at large, and who must recognize the reign of law on every hand, should tacitly assume that there exists one group of lawless phenomena—social phenomena. For if they are not lawless—if there are any natural laws traceable throughout them—then our aim should be to ascertain these and conform to them."

<sup>14</sup> It is not easy to understand how this letter could have so thoroughly satisfied Huxley as to lead him to write: "From Mr. Herbert Spencer's letter in the *Times* of the 27th of November, 1889, I gather that he altogether repudiates the doctrines which I am about to criticize. I rejoice to hear it; in the first place, because they thus lose the shelter of his high authority; secondly, because, after this repudiation, anything I may say in the course of the following pages against Rousseauiism cannot be disagreeable to him; and thirdly, because I desire to express my great regret that, in however good company, I should have lacked the intelligence to perceive that Mr. Spencer had previously repudiated the views attributed to him by the land socialists." (*Method and Results*, p. 197, n.) This surely seems sarcastic, although it may have been in the nature of an attempt to exert a little added pressure upon Spencer. Certainly Huxley would have required a peculiar type of intelligence, or intuition, to have perceived that Spencer "had previously repudiated the views attributed to him."

is something absurd and ludicrous, just what is the genuine significance of a system of absolute political ethics? Does the word "forthwith" make so great a difference, or were Spencer's ideals mere noumena, inhabitants of the world of his Unknowable? Certainly to merit consideration a system of absolute political ethics must be something more than an airy vision, something more immediate than a contemplation of a far-off future. To be of use in any philosophic enterprise that seeks to deal with the stuff of tangible and relevant experience, a final end cannot be placed in some distant realm where it will remain remotely superior to the means through which it can be reached. There must be some contact between the ideal and the real. Perhaps Spencer's "absolute" ethics was just too characteristically and traditionally "philosophic."<sup>15</sup>

The fate of *Social Statics* was as inevitable as it was tragic. It was not murdered; it was mutilated, and for any self-respecting book that is by far the more deplorable calamity. In 1892, Spencer "abridged and revised" the earlier edition and published it together with *The Man Versus the State*. He wrote in the preface to this edition that he had "relinquished some of the conclusions drawn from the first principle laid down," and also that he had been unable to "prevent misinterpretation of my later beliefs." The "relinquished conclusions" were, of course, man's right to the use of the earth, and in this new edition there was no mention of the land problem. There now could be no possible "misinterpretation" of his beliefs. Chapter IX, "The Right to the Use of the Earth," was omitted entirely and the sections in Chapter X, "The Right of Property," which dealt with his suggestion for a communal administration of the soil, were removed, al-

<sup>15</sup> For a final summary of Spencer's distinction between absolute and relative ethics, see the chapter of that name (Chap. XV) in Vol. I of the *Principles of Ethics* (New York, Appleton, 1898). It comprises pages 258 to 280 of Part I, the "Data of Ethics."

though there was still retained the discussion of Locke's justification of property in land. The policy of deletion was likewise ruthlessly applied to all the miscellaneous passages on land that had appeared in the 1850 edition, and many eloquent pages, like those in Chapter XXV on "Poor Laws," yielded to the author's censorship.

The "cleansing" of *Social Statics*, however, was essentially a negative gesture, a necessary rectification of what might well have been enthusiastic, youthful inaccuracies; something more positive was needed, and in *Justice*, which was the first of Spencer's constructive summaries of "the ethics of social life,"<sup>16</sup> he definitely excluded from the program of his synthetic philosophy any attempt to discover a solution of the land problem. *Justice*, he wrote in his preface to the revised *Social Statics*, would endeavor to preserve in "permanently accessible form" the fundamental ideas of his earlier work, and to elaborate those deductions which had "survived" from the days of his more reckless thought. The same first principle, for example, that he had deduced from purely moral reasoning in *Social Statics* was one of the "survivals," although now in *Justice* it was reached after a fairly intricate anthropological argument; it is the principle that "every man is free to do that which he wills, provided he infringes not the equal freedom of any other man." This is Spencer's formula of justice.<sup>17</sup> The corollaries following, however, from this first principle are quite different from those that had appeared almost axiomatic to the mind of youth as expressed in *Social Statics*. The deduction of man's "right to the use of the earth" obviously had not survived. Instead there is a chapter (Chap. IX) on "the right to the

<sup>16</sup> The publication of *Justice* preceded by a year the revision of *Social Statics*. It comprises Part IV of Spencer's *Principles of Ethics*, Vol. II.

<sup>17</sup> Spencer's argument traces justice through "animal ethics," subhuman and human justice, and the sentiment and idea of justice. The "formula of Justice" is found in Chap. VI.

use of natural media" in which Spencer, almost as if further to muddle the consideration of the land question, makes the highly questionable distinction between the right to light and air, and the right to the soil itself. Such a distinction would be more apposite for legal tangles concerning real property nuisances and injunctions; it certainly seems out of place in philosophical or economic discussion. Yet, while Spencer admits the natural right to light and to air, he in no place specifically denies man's right to the earth itself; his argument instead is based on the same differentiation between absolute and relative ethics that had occupied him in his earlier correspondence wrangles. A developed system of ethics must admit, Spencer declares, that human beings have a right to land:

If, while possessing those ethical sentiments which social discipline has now produced, men stood in possession of a territory not yet individually portioned out, they would no more hesitate to assert equality of their claims to the land than they would hesitate to assert equality of their claims to light and air.<sup>18</sup>

Then comes the restraining gesture of relative ethics, or the ethics of "immediate practice" (or, in other words, the only system of ethical conduct in which we can really make our actions count).

But now that long-standing appropriation, continued culture, as well as sales and purchases, have complicated matters, the *dictum* of absolute ethics, incongruous with the state of things produced, is apt to be denied altogether. . . . The proposition that men have

<sup>18</sup> *Principles of Ethics* (Part IV, *Justice*), Vol. II, p. 85. "Those ethical sentiments which social discipline has now produced" do not appear to recommend the final "absolute ethics" to which sociological evolution, according to Spencer, is approaching. Certainly he is mistaken when he believes that early man acted in a predatory manner in dividing land simply because his "ethical sentiments" had not yet reached nineteenth century development. In fact, as anthropologists demonstrate, the only semicomunal treatment of land was among primitive peoples—and Spencer had himself declared that such was the case. "Social discipline," if anything, has intensified the status of land as private property.

equal claims to the use of that remaining portion of the environment—hardly to be called a medium—on which all stand and by the products of which all live, is antagonized by ideas and arrangements descending to us from the past . . . They now make acceptance of the position difficult.<sup>19</sup>

Relative ethics, according to Spencer, demands the compensation of landowners, and it is precisely in this necessity for compensation that he finds the right to the use of the earth to be “traversed by established arrangements to so great an extent as to be practically suspended.”<sup>20</sup> His argument is, in short, a warning that if mankind attempted to win back its “birthright” the cost would be prohibitive, for it would mean the wholesale purchase of all the land from its present owners. It is not necessary here to enter into a discussion of the question of compensation and purchase; it may be sufficient, for the purpose of illustrating Spencer’s distinction between man’s right to the use of the earth as countenanced by absolute ethics and the loss of that right as a practical result of relative ethics, to quote George’s paraphrase of what would have been Spencer’s revised opening of a new volume on *Social Statics*:

Given a race of beings having like claims to pursue the objects of their desires—given a world adapted to the gratification of those desires—a world into which such beings are similarly born, and it unavoidably follows that they have the right to use this world as soon as they have paid the full value of it to those of their number who call themselves its owners.<sup>21</sup>

Spencer’s reasoning in this chapter appears a strange mixture of doctrines that seemed almost repetitions of the rash ideas of his first book, and notions that bore unmistakably the appearance of conscious restraint. It was as if his mind were deliberately but not always successfully suppressing his

<sup>19</sup> *Principles of Ethics*, Vol. II, p. 85.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 92-93.

<sup>21</sup> *A Perplexed Philosopher*, p. 181.

recalcitrant thoughts. For example, he still declared that primitive communal landownership gave way to the conception of individual property in land only as the result of force and violence,<sup>22</sup> but as if to counteract the significance of such a statement he declares:

If, during the many transactions which have brought about existing landownership, there have been much violence and much fraud, these have been small compared with the violence and the fraud which the community would be guilty of did it take possession, without payment for it, of that artificial value which the labour of nearly two thousand years has given to the land.<sup>23</sup>

The same line of argument is followed in Spencer's final summary of the land question in Appendix B of the *Principles of Ethics*.<sup>24</sup> Admitting that private landownership is a heritage from the predatory course of nature "red in tooth and claw," he definitely states that nothing, surely not in the realm of those relative ethics of practice, can be done to re-inherit the nineteen-twentieths of the population for whom he had once been concerned in *Social Statics*. Nothing could be done because "we could not, if we tried, trace back the acts of unscrupulous violence committed during these thousands of years; and could we trace them back we could not rectify their evil results. . . . If the genesis of landownership was full of iniquities, they were iniquities committed not by the ancestors of any one class of existing men."<sup>25</sup> The original evildoers were Scandinavian pirates and Norman robber-barons, and while "the wish now expressed by many that

<sup>22</sup> In a typically Spencerian manner the rôle of force in changing the ideas of primitive land tenure is traced, in the course of four pages, through the institutions of the Don Cossacks, the Sumatrans, the Suanetians, the Dahomeans, the Danes and the Normans. (Pp. 85-89.) "How was this relation [of landed property] changed? How only could it be changed? Certainly not by unforced consent. It cannot be supposed that all, or some, of the members of the community willingly surrendered their respective claims." (P. 87.)

<sup>23</sup> P. 92.

<sup>24</sup> Pp. 440-444.

<sup>25</sup> P. 440.

landownership should be conformed to the requirements of pure equity, is in itself commendable, and is in some men prompted by conscientious feeling,"<sup>26</sup> yet we can do nothing; how possibly can we find the Celts and the Frisians and the Danes and the followers of the great William who first seized upon the land and made it theirs! The rest of the appendix is of a piece with this specious argument, and concerns itself with showing that even through the names and titles of the present landowners the original landlords could not be traced; and with estimating the amount of indebtedness to which the present landlords would have a legitimate claim.<sup>27</sup> It was these mature reflections that had vitiated the deductions of the youth:

When in *Social Statics*, published in 1850, I drew from the law of equal freedom the corollary that the land could not equitably be alienated from the community, and argued that, after compensating its existing holders, it should be reappropriated by the community, I overlooked the foregoing considerations.<sup>28</sup>

Here ended Spencer's thoughts on the land question, and so was explained, at least for his own and perhaps Huxley's satisfaction, his one-time belief that "equity does not permit property in land."

If George's attack upon this recanting of Spencer were merely anger at a modification of opinion, then it could in no sense have been justified. Certainly there still is recognized at least that one "natural right," the right to change one's

<sup>26</sup> P. 441.

<sup>27</sup> One of the items with which Spencer credits the landlords is the payment of the poor-law reliefs. Also, his estimate of the value of the land of England "in its primitive, unsubdued state, furnishing nothing but wild animals and wild fruits" was five hundred million pounds—which might be considered a trifle extravagant when it is considered that without the presence of population, all the wild animals and wild fruits to the contrary notwithstanding, land is worth precisely nothing.

<sup>28</sup> Pp. 443-444.



mind, and George never questioned Spencer's specific act of repudiation. It was rather the reasons given for such an about-face that drew down upon Spencer the truly bitter, almost libelous, onslaught of *A Perplexed Philosopher*.<sup>29</sup> Had Spencer ever openly declared that his early thoughts on the land question were essentially wrong, that they were based on a mistaken premise and had been hastily deduced, that they were nothing more than the reasoning of a young philosopher who had not yet approached the more comprehensive conceptions of a synthetic system, then neither George nor any honest critic could have objected to so frank an explanation. Had Spencer still further elaborated his argument, and had he gone on to demonstrate that such doctrines as he had espoused in 1850 were inherently unethical, and that, whether they were proposed by the mind of youth or that of mellowed wisdom, they had no foundation in fact or logic, he could well have been challenged as to the truth and soundness of his statement, but he could not have been accused of shallow compromising. Finally, had he found himself indeed confronted with a logical distinction between absolute and relative ethics, and had he then admitted that his own solution of the land problem, with its policy of purchase and nationalization, was hardly feasible in any system of practical ethics, but that possibly some other plan might have squared with the demands of equity and of expediency, he could not have made the ludicrous, perhaps insincere, attempts to straddle his absolute and relative ethics, and then to invalidate the one through the fortuities of the other.

That Spencer did fail to justify his completely reversed opinion on the land question with sufficiently cogent arguments, and that, in his attempt to defend landed property by an exposition of the history of land tenure and by an account-

<sup>29</sup> Written in 1892; *Works*, Vol. V.

ing statement that showed the soil was too valuable to be subjected to the meddling of absolute ethics, he appeared to rely upon a superficial consideration of the problem,<sup>30</sup> are, however, no indications that his change of heart was the result, directly or indirectly, of any pressure brought to bear upon him. George assumed that it was, and the meagre arguments of Spencer he explained, not as the result of loose thinking or of indifferent interest, but as the scanty shreds that were used to cover a bald and enforced apostasy. Those verses of Browning, "Just for a handful of silver he left us . . ." open *A Perplexed Philosopher*, and almost its concluding words brand Spencer "as a philosopher ridiculous, as a man contemptible—a fawning Vicar of Bray, clothing in pompous phraseology and arrogant assumption logical confusions so absurd as to be comical." George felt that the growing interest in the land problem, which in the early '80s appeared as if it might sweep England, and which for him had all the glad tidings of a gospel of salvation, had intimidated Spencer and had alienated his support:

Believing in Mr. Spencer's good faith, deeming him not a mere prater about justice, but one who ardently desired to carry it into practice, we who sought to promote what he himself had said that equity sternly commanded naturally looked for some word of sympathy and aid from him, the more so as the years had brought him position and influence, the ability to command attention, and the power to affect a large body of admirers who regard him as their intellectual leader. But we looked in vain. When the Justice that in the academic cloister he had so boldly invoked came forth into the streets and market-places, to raise her standard and call her lovers, Mr. Spencer, instead of hastening to greet her, did

<sup>30</sup> It may be that the unintentionally garbled fragments of Spencer's repudiation which have appeared in this chapter are not completely representative of his thought on the land question, although they have attempted to give a fair summary of his changing beliefs. George, however, in his *A Perplexed Philosopher*, has quoted almost every line of Spencer that applied to the land problem, and while the book may be a bitter attack upon the English philosopher, yet it contains in exact quotation the only unabridged review of Spencer's ideas on this one topic.

his best to get out of her way. . . . When, in 1850, Mr. Spencer had said that the rent of land could be collected by an agent or deputy agent of the community, quite as well as by an agent of Sir John or his Grace, he must have known that if ever his proposition attracted the attention of the interests he thus personified he would be denounced in all the established organs of opinion, and in "polite society" regarded as a robber. *Then*, I am inclined to think he would have hailed with joy such indications of the progress of thought. But in 1882, he no sooner found that Sir John and his Grace had been aroused by such a proposition and were likely to hear that he had made it, than he hastened to get the evidence out of their sight, and as far as he could to deny it.<sup>31</sup>

George's own passionate, even intolerant, sincerity had led him to view any suspicious gesture, any hint of infidelity to principle, as the very act of a Judas. By this token Spencer proved himself "alike a traitor to all that he had once held and to all that he now holds—a conscious and deliberate traitor, who assumes the place of the philosopher, the office of the judge, only to darken truth and to deny justice; to sell out the right of the wronged and to prostitute his powers in the defense of the wronger."<sup>32</sup> For George, Spencer had deliberately and ruthlessly sacrificed his own convictions solely because of the opposition that land reform discussion had aroused among the propertied classes of England, and the faintest suggestion of such a renunciation was enough to loose all the bounds of his scorn:

But as hypocrisy is the homage vice pays to virtue, so the very crookedness of this letter [to the *St. James's Gazette*] indicates Mr. Spencer's reluctance flatly to deny the truth to which he had borne witness. He no more wanted to deny it than Simon Peter to deny his Lord. But the times had changed since he wrote *Social Statics*. From an unknown man, printing with difficulty an unsaleable book, he had become a popular philosopher, to whom all gratifications of sense, as of intellect, were open. He had tasted the sweets of London society, and in the United States, from which he

<sup>31</sup> *A Perplexed Philosopher*, pp. 53-54, 56.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191.

had just returned, had been hailed as a thinker beside whom Newton and Aristotle were to be mentioned only to point his superiority. And, while the fire in the hall of the High Priest was warm and pleasant, "society" had become suddenly aroused to rage against those who questioned private property in land. So when the *St. James's*, and the *Edinburgh*, both of them chosen organs of Sir John and his Grace, accused Herbert Spencer of being one of these, it was to him like the voices of the accusing damsels to Peter. Fearing, too, that he might be thrust out in the cold, he, too, sought refuge in an alibi.<sup>33</sup>

Such unbridled criticism seems hardly justified and surely out of place in a discussion of ideas.<sup>34</sup> It was not that an attack upon personal character was in bad taste, for to George's fierce and indiscriminating resentment against insincerity, questions of good form and taste were irrelevant, but rather that it was the product of an unsubstantiated conjecture.

<sup>33</sup> *A Perplexed Philosopher*, pp. 63-64. Perhaps the most bitter section of this book is the last chapter on "Principal Brown," in which George tells the strange story of a great Yankee "authority on moral philosophy" who in pre-Civil War days in Vicksburg becomes convinced that his former abolitionist sentiments should be confined to the realm of "transcendental ethics"; he is persuaded that they have no place in the "sublunary ethics" of the South. George refrains from making any comparison between Spencer and the Principal, for "since he was under fear of tar and feathers, that would be unjust to Principal Brown."

<sup>34</sup> It must not be thought, however, that this personal element played more than a secondary rôle in *A Perplexed Philosopher*. The book is, for the most part, a dispassionate and detailed examination of Spencer's arguments, and, in addition, contains several chapters of constructive criticism, such as those on the right of property and the right of taxation, and on compensation. And George does attempt to explain his concern with the question of motive; in the Introduction to *A Perplexed Philosopher* (p. xvii) he states: ". . . A change from a clearly reasoned opinion to its opposite carries the implication of fair and full consideration. And if the reasons for such a change be sufficient and there be no suspicion of ulterior motive, the fact that a man now condemns opinion he once held adds to the admiration that previously we may have entertained for him, the additional admiration we must feel for one who has shown that he would rather be right than consistent. What gives additional interest to the matter is that Mr. Spencer makes no change in his premises, but only in his conclusions, and now, in sustaining private property in land, asserts the same principle of equal liberty from which he originally deduced his condemnation. How he has been led to this change becomes, therefore, a most interesting inquiry, not merely from the great importance of the subject itself, but from the light it must throw on the logical processes of so eminent a philosopher."

George's interpretation of Spencer's change of opinion was based merely upon a feeling of outraged confidence, upon an emotional reaction that led him to attribute to Spencer nothing but the crassest of motives. The philosopher had turned aside from a line of reasoning which, for George, had become the way to the ultimate truth, and the loss of this great figure in English thought, through considerations which had appeared the flimsiest, seemed to him almost as the violation of some sacred trust. Of course, the very nature of his charges prevented any attempt at verification, and George never offered specific corroboration of his indictment except to intimate that Spencer had become affiliated with the reactionary Liberty and Property Defense League, a statement which was later shown to have been groundless.

Unless George's almost fanatical devotion to reform be understood, it is not easy to realize how he could have sincerely believed that a man like Spencer had been swayed by that vague and indeterminate power of a society which "had been suddenly aroused against those who questioned private property in land." His overzealousness prevented him from entertaining a sober consideration of Spencer's position, and the interpretation of the philosopher's final view on the land question as anything but a change resulting from the most unworthy of motives would certainly have appeared to George as a gratuitous bit of charity. Such an interpretation, however, seems perhaps more rational than an explanation that is based solely upon the action of social pressure and of wavering courage. It is much easier to believe that Spencer had turned aside quite naturally from the warm sympathy that once had led him to espouse enthusiastically the reform cause, in order to devote himself to work which he regarded as of more strictly a philosophical and scientific character, than that he had been intimidated by "Sir John and his Grace." It is more plausible that the older man had just lost interest in

the vexing and confused problems that had attracted the more ardent mind of youth to the application of absolute ethics, than that he had been awed by Tory newspapers and polite society. To a thinker concerned with the expansive stretches of the synthetic philosophy and with the data of psychological, sociological, biological, and ethical evolutionary systems, the land question might not, as it did with George, have held a commanding position. And there is also the possibility that Spencer may have been sincerely convinced that any attempted solution of the land problem would have infringed his cherished doctrine of individualism, and, while that objection could not have applied to George's proposals,<sup>85</sup> it may have made Spencer suspicious of any proposed administrative remedy.

These possible approaches to Spencer's recanting, it is true, may not make his attitude any the more logically commendable, but they should suggest the unreasonableness of branding him as a frightened apostate. They may not explain the insufficiency of his arguments, but that may well be attributed to carelessness or lack of interest; surely every poor piece of reasoning is not the product of intimidation or faithlessness to principle. It is certainly the more charitable as well the more indicative of common sense to interpret

<sup>85</sup> Perhaps the most striking illustration of this lack of understanding of George's fundamental ideas appeared in *The Man Versus the State*, in which Spencer groups George, together with the socialist, Hyndman, as an advocate of communistic theories and as a supporter of the doctrine that society should have complete control of all individual property. He states: ". . . Mr. George and his friends, Mr. Hyndman and his supporters, are pushing the theory to its logical issue. They have been instructed by examples, yearly increasing in number, that the individual has no right but what the community may equitably override; and they are now saying: 'It shall go hard, but we will better the instruction, and abolish individual rights altogether.'" (In the chapter on "The Sins of Legislators," p. 371.) To designate George as one who was endeavoring to "abolish individual rights" would be ideationally tragic were it not so ludicrous. As George well declared: "Charity requires the assumption that when Mr. Spencer wrote these passages he had not read anything I had written; and that up to the present time when he has again reprinted them he has not done so." (*A Perplexed Philosopher*, pp. 69-70.)

Spencer's "conversion" as evidence of a natural change in his outlook upon social problems rather than as proof of a deliberate backsliding. His reversal of judgment may have arisen from that state of mind peculiar to advancing age, or from his loss of sympathy for those misfits cast out by sociological evolution, or from any other more strictly personal source—at least, let it become a psychological rather than an ethical matter.

Unfortunately, Spencer's reaction to George's attack, as expressed particularly in a series of letters written to an American friend,<sup>36</sup> was as petulant as *A Perplexed Philosopher* was bitter. His attitude was one of childish, almost plaintive, reprisal, and demonstrated again that old men, especially old philosophers, are not effective absorbers of criticism. Spencer's only constructive explanation of his final position on the land question appeared in his first letter,<sup>37</sup> and it was largely a repetition of the argument in *Justice*:

I have read the introduction to Mr. George's *A Perplexed Philosopher*, and my secretary, Mr. Troughton, having gone through the book, has read to me sundry of the calumnious and vituperative passages. . . . In the first place, irrespective of numerous utterly false insinuations, there are two direct falsehoods which it may be well to name and to flatly contradict. The first of them is contained in the Introduction, page 9, where he says I have placed myself "definitely on the side of those who contend that the treatment of land as private property cannot equitably be interfered with." I have said nothing of the kind. I have continued to maintain that the right of the whole community to the land survives and can never be destroyed, but I have said . . . that the community cannot equitably resume possession of the land without making compensation for all the value given to it by the labour of successive generations. . . . The sole difference

<sup>36</sup> The letters were written, during the years 1893 to 1895, to James A. Skilton, of Brooklyn. They appeared in *The Independent* of New York, under the title of "Spencer's Unpublished Letters," in the issues of May 26, 1904 (Vol. LVI, No. 2895), and of June 30, 1904 (Vol. LVI, No. 2900).

<sup>37</sup> January 6, 1893.

between my position in *Social Statics* and my more recent position is this: In *Social Statics* I have contended that the resumption of the land by the community cannot equitably be made without compensation, but I have there tacitly assumed that such compensation, if made, would leave a balance of benefit to the community. Contrariwise, on more carefully considering the matter in recent years I have reached the conclusion that to make anything like equitable compensation the amount required would be such as to make the transaction a losing one; more interest would have to be paid for the capital required than would be received for the land. And beyond the conclusion that the transaction, pecuniarily considered, would be a mischief rather than a benefit, I reached the conclusion that the system of public administration, full of the vices of officialism, would involve more evil than the present system of private administration. No change has occurred in my view of the principle of the matter, but only in my view of policy.

This hopeless confusion between the land and the improvements upon land, which are capital, and the unfair emphasis upon the matter of compensation which, in fact, played but a minor part in *Social Statics*, are of a piece with Spencer's naive assertion that, while the soil assuredly does belong to the community, the intruders would drive too sharp a bargain to make it profitable for society to reclaim its own property.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>38</sup>The same line of reasoning is presented in Spencer's *Autobiography* (New York, Appleton, 1904). He wrote: "In my first work, *Social Statics*, it was contended that alienation of the land from the people at large is inequitable; and that there should be a restoration of it to the State, or incorporated community, after making due compensation to existing land-owners. In later years I concluded that the resumption on such terms would be a losing transaction, and that individual ownership under State-suzerainty ought to continue." (Vol. II, p. 536.) Certainly, if we had to place George's system under one of these two categories, "restoration of it [land] to the State" and "individual ownership [of land] under State-suzerainty," it would be under the latter—another indication that Spencer never understood, or perhaps never conscientiously examined, George's work.

There is always implicit in the protestations of Spencer the thought that what he was attacking was the bureaucracy of land nationalization. If he were referring unconsciously to his own earlier views on the solution of the land problem, then such a criticism might have been justified, but in no way could it have been applied to the suggestions of George, and the fact that



To charge George with the fabrication of a "direct falsehood" because he interpreted this attitude as one which placed Spencer "on the side of those who contend that the treatment of land as private property cannot equitably be interfered with" is perhaps a bit captious, although George might well have amended his statement. He might have explained that Spencer did not contend that the treatment of land as private property could not "equitably" be interfered with, but rather that his intent was one which concerned the "profitable" interference with land as private property!

The second falsehood with which Spencer charged George was one which indeed showed George to have been inaccurate. He had intimated that Spencer had become associated with the Liberty and Property Defense League, and had then suggested from this supposed connection with a reactionary organization of that type, the source of Spencer's prevailing sympathies.<sup>39</sup> Spencer, in this letter of January 6 and also more specifically in another letter of the 10th, gave evidence to show that he had never been affiliated with the League, and that his only connection with any political organization was his membership in the innocuous London Ratepayers' Defense League.<sup>40</sup> George, undoubtedly, had been a bit confused in his choice of Leagues.

Spencer declared that he had closed George's book "after a few minutes on finding how visionary were its ideas" may help to explain the persistent confusion with which he approached a consideration of George's proposals.

<sup>39</sup> See especially *A Perplexed Philosopher*, pp. 65, 72, and 74.

<sup>40</sup> This explanation also appears in his *Autobiography*: "I am a member of but one political body. This body, which I was in part instrumental in establishing, was subsequently joined by sundry men of title, and among them two dukes!" (Vol. II, p. 537.) That body was the London Ratepayers' Defense League.

Spencer concludes his discussion of George in the autobiography with this complaint: "Here, then, are lessons for one who, dealing with theological, political or social subjects, says candidly what he believes. If his career leads him to set forth views exciting class animosities, or individual animosities, he may count upon greater evils than are entailed by the stupidities and misrepresentations of critical journals; and must take into account the possibility, if not the probability, that he will be injured by utterly false interpretations of his motives and by consequent vilification." (*Ibid.*, p. 538.)

Perhaps the most amusing part of Spencer's justification of the sincerity of his motives was his reaction to George's quoting of Browning's "handful of silver" and "ribbon to stick in his coat." With an almost pathetic indignation, and one that demonstrated his sense of humor to have been woefully underdeveloped, he seriously went on to show that he had never received a bribe, nor had he ever been granted a title! Not satisfied with this, Spencer then carefully explained that he had always been antagonistic to the landed and titled classes, and that he had opposed also the clergy, the military group, the professions, and, in his capacity as scientist, even the general populace. His baiting of the government and the political class he demonstrated by page references to his *Principles of Sociology* and *Principles of Ethics* in which he had definitely criticized Lord Salisbury and Gladstone! "There is, in fact," he wrote, "no class which I have shown the slightest desire to please, but have rather in all cases done the reverse."<sup>41</sup> His final refutation of the charge that he had attempted to ingratiate himself into the favor of the propertied interests was indicative of the really sad preciseness with which he received George's attack; he showed that he could not have enjoyed the pleasures of polite society since for a number of years he had been a semi-invalid.

All this was true enough, but to introduce such evidence as formal proof of his sincerity was to betray too punctilious a concern with the question of personal justification, and like-

<sup>41</sup> For these explanations of his position see particularly the letters of January 6 and March 1, 1893. George's reaction to Spencer's interpretation of Browning's lines was his amazement at the "wooden literalness, so comically shown in Mr. Spencer's treatment of the 'religious ideas'" with which "these lines are taken to mean that he has actually received or sought a pension and a title, and I am 'refuted' by being told that Mr. Spencer has within twenty years spoken disrespectfully of two Prime Ministers!" (In *Herbert Spencer Versus Henry George*, a pamphlet-collection of a group of newspaper articles on the controversy, printed by the Sterling Publishing Company of New York, November 26, 1894.)

wise a lack of a sense of proportion. He might well have ignored the challenging of his motives in order to have concentrated more upon the logical explanation of his changed doctrines. It is evident, however, from his direct statements in these letters, as well as from his suggested methods of retaliation, that Spencer regarded *A Perplexed Philosopher* as simply an attack upon his personal character. He wrote, for example, that, "There is only one short word—not used in polite society—which fully describes Mr. George."<sup>42</sup> Two days later, as if fearful of what the word "liar" might lead to, he stated: "On second thought it occurs to me that it will be best not to use strong language in dealing with Mr. George. He is so unscrupulous and venomous that it is undesirable to give him a handle. A simple statement of fact and inferences will be best." In another letter he wrote: "The 'Synthetic Philosophy' can take care of itself, and I don't care a straw if it is attacked by Mr. Henry George or half a dozen Henry Georges with as many papers to back them. . . . Similarly about the land question. I have never dreamed of entering into controversy with Mr. Henry George about that or anything else, and I should be sorry to see any one take up the land question on my behalf. The only thing about which I am concerned is the personal question—the vile calumny which the man propagates."<sup>43</sup> Certainly this personal question was not the only thing about which George was concerned, and, while his overzealous efforts may have led him to an ill-advised attack upon Spencer's good faith, his interest was always centered upon the logical antinomy that permitted Spencer to retain his belief in the premise of natural rights and yet deny one of its recognized deductions.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Letter of January 8, 1893.

<sup>43</sup> March 1, 1893.

<sup>44</sup> While George may have indeed regarded his questioning of Spencer's motives as incidental, yet his own explanation for introducing the personal question seems a bit too charitable to himself: "I have nowhere spoken of Mr. Spencer except as an exponent of ideas. I have nowhere asked his

Spencer never considered George's attack worthy of a direct reply, but he did believe that it was necessary to attempt to invalidate his charges, and for this service he relied upon his American friends. In fact his series of letters to Skilton was intended to outline a method of refutation, a method which seems suspiciously indirect and needlessly dissembled. There were to be articles, for example, incorporating Spencer's views, but written by his friends in this country, and with no mention of his instigation; they were to be in the form of letters and Spencer's opinions were to be presented in the "third person," as he directed. Regarding one of these articles, Spencer suggested: "Of course, such a letter, if you wrote it, would be written quite independently by you as being based upon my published views—a letter such as, in

motives, except when made necessary to explain facts by the fundamental law of the human mind which beneath expression seeks for cause. If I have been unable to restrain the mingled pity and indignation which all men of true impulses must feel on seeing a great truth repudiated and finally denied, and what might have been a lasting reputation wrecked, yet this is not the essence of my book. *A Perplexed Philosopher* is not an attempt to point out the frailties of a man. It is a careful and conscientious examination, not only of all the pressing social issues of our day, but incidentally of a philosophy which assumes to explain the deepest problems that vex the mind and soul of man." (In the pamphlet *Herbert Spencer Versus Henry George*. This pamphlet was a reprint of a series of letters which had appeared in the *New York Tribune*. G. W. Smalley, London correspondent of the *Tribune*, had started this newspaper controversy by a letter violently attacking George's book; this letter was printed in the *Tribune* on September 23, 1894. George answered with a letter which was published on the 30th. The next attack was an article by a group of American Spencerians, among whom were John Fiske, Professor Youmans, Daniel Greenleaf Thompson, Lewis G. Janes, and James A. Skilton, which appeared on November 12th. The letter was largely a review of Spencer's correspondence with Skilton, which was then unpublished, and it brought in evidence to prove that Spencer was indeed an invalid, that he had never been a member of the Liberty and Property Defense League, that he had never sought a title, and it concluded with a bitter condemnation of George's methods. George's answer, five days later, included the above statement. The articles were then collected and printed in pamphlet form, November 26, 1894.)

The opinion that George expressed above he had likewise held before he had written *A Perplexed Philosopher*; in a letter to Dr. Taylor (April 18, 1892) he stated: "But while I will trim down or rather alter in places my harsher references to Spencer . . . I think they must appear somewhere. . . . In turning his back on all he has said before Mr. Spencer has not argued, and no explanation is possible that does not impute motives."

fact, might be written by anybody, even a stranger." <sup>46</sup> Another suggestion of Spencer illustrates one of his most ungenerous attitudes:

It has occurred to me since writing to you that your flank attack might be usefully extended so as to bring into question Mr. Henry George's motives for his agitation. There are plenty of facts showing that he has been pushing it for his own personal advantage. Clearly that last move of his in issuing a pamphlet <sup>46</sup> is with a view to regain his notoriety, to sell his books and to get money. Probably the raising of such questions would form an effective diversion. <sup>47</sup>

The fact that Spencer could have so grossly or perhaps deliberately misconceived George's purposes in conducting his "agitation" is indicative of the sad and futile results that are generated by any questioning of personal motives. Apparently neither George nor Spencer ever realized that the other could have been sincere. George's introduction of an attack upon character unfortunately nullified the very aims which should have been striven for, a sober discussion of Spencer's change of opinion and of the precise points at issue. The only effect of such an attack was to lead Spencer to ignore everything but the onslaught upon his personal reputation. Historians are assuredly correct when they warn against any probing of motives; that should be left for psychologists—if they could fare any better.

It would be tedious and unprofitable to follow any further the vagaries of this dismal dispute. Nothing came of it but bitterness and fruitless misunderstanding. George himself realized that his book had not accomplished anything, <sup>48</sup> and

<sup>45</sup> Letter (to Skilton) of January 23, 1895.

<sup>46</sup> Referring to the pamphlet mentioned above.

<sup>47</sup> Letter of December 29, 1894.

<sup>48</sup> George wrote to James E. Mills of California (September 27, 1893): "*A Perplexed Philosopher* does not seem to have attracted the attention that I had hoped for—I do not say that I expected, for I had a good deal of doubt as to what would be its reception. Spencer's reputation is very strong in the organs of public opinion, but I think the book will do some good at least." Before leaving Spencer's letters to Skilton, it may be interesting to

for Spencer the affair was perhaps no more than a vicious episode. No epilogue need be attached to the controversy except to suggest that George's ardent sincerity and militant enthusiasm robbed him of good judgment, while Spencer's cautiousness and the smallness of his personal resentment clouded his view of the fundamental issue in question. Nothing deranges discussion so much as the questioning of good faith.

But George also attacked the doctrines of the synthetic philosophy. Spencer the philosopher as well as Spencer the man drew down his disfavor.

George's criticism of the synthetic philosophy was suggested by his belief that the change from *Social Statics*, which was written before Spencer entered upon his ambitious task, to *Justice*, which was almost the culmination—at least, in point of order and time—of his evolutionary system, might be partially explained by an examination of Spencer's "materialistic doctrines."<sup>49</sup> Materialism, for George, was simply an attempt to account "for the world and all it contains, including the human ego, by the interactions of matter and motion, without reference to any such thing as intelligence, purpose or will, except as derived from them,"<sup>50</sup> and Spencer's omnipotent and omnipresent law of evolution he under-

point out that, just as in his *Principles of Sociology*, there is in them no evidence of his concern with a system of "absolute ethics" such as occupied him in his first book, that is, a concern with an attempt to apply such a system. He wrote, for instance: "... But to anything larger, such as you adumbrate—a general conception of the relations of men to the soil based on general sociological principles—I have got nothing to say. If, as it would seem, you think that I have got a scheme for future society in my head, you are altogether mistaken." (Jan. 12, 1895.)

<sup>49</sup> George was undoubtedly persuaded to attempt only a brief review of Spencer's technical philosophy because of the warning of several of his more cautious friends, especially Dr. Taylor, who felt that he was leaving his chosen field for a subject which he was hardly equipped to discuss. (See *supra*, p. 74.) His treatment of the synthetic philosophy, therefore, was confined to some twenty-four pages, Chapter III of Part III of *A Perplexed Philosopher*.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

stood to be just such a suggestion of a fortuitous "interaction of matter and motion." This conception, he felt, was directly opposed to the central idea of *Social Statics*, the idea, in George's words, that "the universe bespeaks to us its origin in an intelligence of which justice must be an attribute; that there is in human affairs a divinely appointed order to which, if it would prosper, society must conform; that there is an eternal rule of right, by which, despite all perturbations of the intellect, social institutions may be safely measured."<sup>51</sup> Whether or not that had been Spencer's conviction in *Social Statics*, certainly it was George's own outlook upon the ordered arrangement of the world, and it was this essentially theological approach to the problems of philosophy that led him to condemn the most fundamental tenets of Spencer's synthesis.

In the earliest work of Spencer, George thought that he had discovered the ideas "of a living God,"<sup>52</sup> of a divinely appointed order, and of an eternal distinction between right and wrong, just and unjust"; in the completed Spencerian system there was an Unknowable but no God, and instead of preordained harmonies and eternally valid mandates, there was the insistence upon the relativity and increasing generalization of knowledge, and the demonstration of an ever-changing dynamic universe. Philosophy had become "completely unified knowledge"; it was no longer a mystical or even rational intuition of already established relationships. Spencer had become for George the "Pope of the Agnostics,"<sup>53</sup> while in *Social Statics* George believed that he had recognized a kindred spirit. Spencer had developed—or descended, George thought—from the embryonic social reformer to the

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>52</sup> The difference between Spencer's earlier conceptions of deity and his later more mature considerations would, of course, be quite striking to a thinker with a pronounced teleological outlook such as George.

<sup>53</sup> In a letter to Father Dawson, November 24, 1892.

speculative thinker, from the young enthusiast to the less sensitive system-maker, and such a change appeared to George obviously to coincide with his alteration of opinion on the land question. He had left a task where there would have been "work enough to have engaged the greatest powers for the longest lifetime; but work that would have involved a constant and bitter contest with the strongest forces—forces that have at their disposal not only the material things that make life pleasant, but present honor as well."<sup>54</sup> And he had entered "philosophy," where there were reputation and authority to be won, but none of the hardship and battle and bitterly won accomplishments which George found in his own holy crusade.

George suggested that such a comprehensive shift of interest coincided with Spencer's change of heart on the land question, and he implied that therefore the same unworthy motives could be seen in this transformation of the social reformer to the synthetic philosopher<sup>55</sup>—an implication that demonstrated an impetuous short-sightedness in George's criticism. Spencer's philosophy, of course, did undergo an essential development from the teleological approach to morals, politics and religion that characterized his early work, to the evolutionary approach of his later volumes; there was obviously a process of maturing in his thought, a growing away from the earlier eighteenth century political and ethical concepts. And, while it must be admitted that in attempting to apply this change of emphasis to the land question Spencer found himself in logical difficulties that he never did overcome, yet the causal connection between his philosophic development from "teleology" to "evolutionism"—or "materialism," as George designated it—and his amended opinion as to property in land, must have been the reverse of that suggested by George, which was the bald hint that the pos-

<sup>54</sup> *A Perplexed Philosopher*, p. 114.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 114, 135-136.



sible cause of Spencer's "materialism" was to be found in his lack of sympathy with land reform movements.<sup>56</sup>

The arguments which George brought against Spencer's "materialism" were centered in the familiar line of reasoning that has greeted any philosophical system suspected of agnosticism—the objection that such a philosophy fails to account for an original purpose and fundamental will behind the manifestations of "matter in motion." It is essentially the argument from design, the teleological conception that was so integral a part of George's philosophic outlook. George's world was a living proof of some infinite spiritual force, a force which was not merely an eternally persistent reality, but one that indicated a will and a purpose, and that manifested the working of the "highest of spiritual beings—the Great Spirit, or God." God was perhaps unknown, but not the Unknowable, not a noumenon that forever was cut off from the conceptions of man. He was rather the last link in the chain of causation by which man sought to reach back to the ultimate source of causation; the human mind indeed was so constructed that it could not legitimately halt in its retracing of cause and effect until it discovered a first cause, which, for George, was the divine will. George's deism made the world an orderly creation obeying the laws, natural laws, that had been laid down by its designer. To explain life merely as the integration of matter and motion was, to use George's examples, as futile as an attempt to explain the genesis of a locomotive by a demonstration of the materials

<sup>56</sup> George himself, however, realized the extreme thinness of this assumed cause (*ibid.*, p. 136). It might perhaps be suggested by some that George's opposition to the synthetic philosophy was a by-product of his own absorbing interest in the land question rather than a legitimate philosophic objection; but such a suggestion can be dispelled by the fact that as early as 1879, before Spencer had repudiated his opinions on the land question, George had indicated his opposition to his philosophy of "materialism" (*Progress and Poverty*, pp. 478-479, 485). Also, he wrote to a friend (Dec. 21, 1879): ". . . There are two books I should like to write . . . and the other a dissection of this materialistic philosophy which, with its false assumption of science, passes current with so many."

assuming form in a foundry without the assistance of human effort, or to understand a Madonna of Raphael through an exposition of the self-feeding presses by which the printed reproductions are manufactured. The integrating of matter without the guidance of some cosmic superintendent was for George inconceivable.

It was in Spencer's insistence upon the universal jurisdiction of the evolutionary process that George, together with the others of that host of nineteenth century theists, discovered the perils of "materialism." There was no place here for a God. Evolution made no mention of any primal spirit—nothing but a blind persistence of force, seemingly without original intent, and a mysterious development of some vague cycle of homogeneity and heterogeneity. What was to become of religion, of immortality, of the individual human soul, of moral codes?—and nineteenth century, not to mention twentieth century, homiletics found a new delight.

It must be admitted, of course, that George was some decades behind the advanced if not the popular thought of his time in the matter of evolution, but his blind spot was not so large as to obscure a theological interpretation of the admitted significance of an evolutionary hypothesis. George confidently believed that he could distinguish between evolution as a method of development, and evolution as a cause of development—the distinction that has always been made by those desirous of "reconciling" science and religion. George's position is explained in this passage:

But if the Spencerian philosophy is thus indefinite as to what precedes or underlies matter and motion, it certainly shows no lack of definiteness from the appearance of matter and motion onward. With matter and motion begins its knowable, and from thereforward, without pause or break, it builds up the whole universe by the integration of the one, and the dissipation of the other, in the mode described as evolution, without recourse to any other element.

In this elimination of any spiritual element lies, it seems to

me, the essential characteristic of the Spencerian philosophy. It is not, as is largely supposed, *the* evolution philosophy, but *an* evolution philosophy; that is to say, its rejection of any spiritual element in its account of the genesis of things does not follow from its acceptance of the principle of evolution; but the peculiarity of its teachings as to evolution arises from its ignoring of the spiritual element, from its assumption that, matter and motion given, their interactions will account for all that we see, feel or know.

In reality the Spencerian idea of evolution differs as widely from that held by such evolutionists as Alfred Russel Wallace,<sup>57</sup> St. George Mivart, or Joseph Le Conte,<sup>58</sup> as it differs from the idea of special and direct creation. It is only when this is recognized that the real point of issue raised by or perhaps around the doctrine of evolution is seen. We all see that the oak is evolved from the acorn, the man from the child. And that it is intended for the evolution of something is the only intelligible account that we can make for ourselves of the universe. Thus in some sense we all believe in evolution, and in some sense the vast majority of men always have. And even the evolution of man from the animal kingdom offers no real difficulty so long as this is understood as only the form or external of his genesis. To me, for instance, who, possibly from my ignorance of such branches, am unable to see the

<sup>57</sup> Wallace also was a pronounced land reformer, his views being directly influenced by Spencer's *Social Statics*. He was convinced of the inequity of private property in land, as were so many others, by his reading of the chapter on "The Right to the Use of the Earth," and when George published his *Progress and Poverty*, Wallace regarded it as "the most remarkable and important book of the present century." In 1881 he became the first president of the newly formed Land Nationalisation Society. Wallace, while a believer in the single tax, was essentially a land nationalist and a socialist. (See particularly his *The Nationalisation of Land*.)

<sup>58</sup> Professor Le Conte of the University of California, who had known George during his early days in the West, was one of the leaders in the attempt to harmonize evolution with Christianity. The thesis of his *Evolution*, written in 1887, was to show that this biologic phenomenon was an illustration of divine agency working through natural processes. (See especially Part III on the "Relation of Evolution to Religious Thought.") Regarding Le Conte, George wrote to Dr. Taylor (April 18, 1892): "Professor Le Conte . . . holds that which I would call the external of evolution, with which I do not quarrel, for though I do not see the weight of the evidence with which it is asserted it seems to me most reasonable. What I do quarrel with is the essential materialism of the Spencerian ideas, and this seems to me to inhere in them in spite of all of Spencer's denials." He adds: "John Fiske does not truly represent Spencerianism, but has grafted his own ideas on it."

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weight of the evidence of man's descent from other animals, which many specialists in natural science deem conclusive, it yet appears antecedently probable that externally such might have been his descent. For it seems better to accord with the economy manifested through nature, to think that when the soul of man first took incasement in physical body on this earth it should have taken the form nearest to its needs, rather than that inorganic matter should be built up. And while I cannot conceive how, even in illimitable time, the animal could of itself turn into the man, it is easy for me to think that if the spirit of man passed into the body of a brute the animal body would soon assume human shape.<sup>59</sup>

If this indicates that George's conception of biologic evolution was far from clear, it also illustrates the religious attitude with which he approached the possible absorption of the evolutionary principle into some reconstructed theological system. The same attempt to distinguish between evolutionary concepts is made in *The Science of Political Economy*:

As vegetable life is built, so to speak, upon inorganic existence, and the animal may be considered as a self-moving plant, plus perhaps an animal soul; so man is an animal plus a human soul, or reasoning power. And while, for reasons I have touched on, we are driven when we think of ultimate origins to consider the highest element of which we know as the originating element, yet we are irresistibly compelled to think of it as having first laid the foundation before raising the superstructure. This is the profound truth of that idea of evolution which all theories of creation have recognized and must recognize, but which is not to be confounded with the materialistic notion of evolution which has of late years been popularized among superficial thinkers. The wildest imagination never dreamed that first of all man came into being; then the animals; afterwards the plants; then the earth; and finally the elementary forces. In the hierarchy of life, as we know it, the higher is built upon the lower, order on order, and is as summit to base.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>59</sup> *A Perplexed Philosopher*, pp. 118-120.

<sup>60</sup> P. 85.

In *Progress and Poverty* George's attitude toward Spencer was hostile but apparently more appreciative. For example, he wrote: "That civilization is an evolution—that it is, in the language of Herbert Spencer, a progress from an indefinite, incoherent homogeneity to a definite, coherent heterogeneity—there is no doubt; but to say this is not to explain or identify the causes which forward or retard it."<sup>61</sup> His chief doubt was whether "the sweeping generalizations of Spencer, which seek to account for all phenomena under terms of matter and force" could explain the obvious checks to the growth of human civilization.

Nevertheless George's interpretation of evolution cannot possibly be stretched into any sympathetic appreciation of Darwin's work. Perhaps his temper of mind, with its entire absence of any purely scientific interest, prevented his realization of the immense significance involved in the hypothesis that he attacked or disregarded without real comprehension. Any degree of critical evaluation concerning biological problems would never have allowed him to write (to Dr. Taylor, April 29, 1892): "I simply 'don't see' evolution from the animal as the form in which man has come. I don't deny it . . . I attach no importance to the question." While in some passages George did indicate, as has been shown, a vague awareness of some process of organic development, other of his more thoughtless and controversial statements almost cancel that impression. For example, after attacking some of Spencer's admittedly weak arguments on the land question, George declared: "I commend the study of such logical processes to those who on authority of Herbert Spencer's philosophy believe that man is an evolved monkey, who got the idea of God from observing his own shadow."<sup>62</sup> Again, in discussing Spencer's conception of prehistoric man,

<sup>61</sup> P. 476.

<sup>62</sup> *A Perplexed Philosopher*, p. 188.

a conception which, it is true, was drawn from biological rather than anthropological data, George wrote:

How this sorry monster, this big-bellied, short-legged, bad lot of an ancestor of ours managed to avoid the fate of the Kilkenny cats, and keep in existence, we are not definitely informed; but it seems from the Synthetic Philosophy that he did, and went on evolving.<sup>63</sup>

Here is another attack upon Spencer which, while its prediction concerning Spencer's reputation was partially substantiated, unfortunately also attempted to include Darwin's future status:

I have no respect for Spencer as a philosopher. He was perplexed even in *Social Statics* and he got worse and worse when he went into the philosophy business. Nor have I respect for any of the authorities quoted except for Mill, and he often went wrong. I think from the very first Spencer as a philosopher is ridiculous, and his descriptive sociology is on a level with his dog stories. And I regard his great reputation as a bladder which will collapse in a few years if not pricked (also Darwin to some extent). Of course I would never touch him but for his attitude on the land question, but some one ought to write a comic description of the evolution philosophy—of course, I don't include Darwin and Wallace in that; they confined themselves, so to speak, to their muttons.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>63</sup> *A Perplexed Philosopher*, p. 131.

<sup>64</sup> In a letter to Dr. Taylor, April 19, 1892.

Before leaving George's criticism of Spencerian evolution, it may be interesting to note that he had a profound respect for Schopenhauer's conception of the biologic method. He wrote: "Schopenhauer's explanation of the origin of species is in interesting contrast to that of the evolutionary hypothesis, and to my mind comes closer to the truth. According to him the numberless forms and adaptations of animated nature, instead of proceeding from slow modifications, by which various creatures have been adapted to their conditions, are the expression of the desire or collective volition of the animal." (*A Perplexed Philosopher*, p. 125, n.) He then quotes a long passage from the well-known chapter on "Comparative Anatomy" in *On the Will in Nature*, in which Schopenhauer declares that modifications of animal shapes and organs are the result of the particular strivings of the will.

Schopenhauer, incidentally, was the only philosopher—Spencer, of course, excepted—with whose work George was completely acquainted. He was

If, however, George's arguments against Spencer's "agnosticism" and "materialism" and conception of evolution were hardly adequate, there was another and more valid objection to the synthetic philosophy, an objection that was suggested in *Progress and Poverty* and mentioned again in *A Perplexed Philosopher*. George asked whether the doctrines of a philosophy which was grounded solely upon a belief in a universally functioning evolutionary process would not lead to a passive fatalism. Would not a conviction that all existence was an inevitable and necessary development—and a development from an Unknowable—result in a sense of resignation, and a vague faith in some happy future when evolution shall have transformed things as they are now into some ultimate ideal heterogeneity? George sensed the possible quietistic influence of such a creed, and in *Progress and Poverty* he wrote: <sup>65</sup>

The view which now dominates the world of thought is this: That the struggle for existence, just in proportion as it becomes intense, impels men to new efforts and inventions. That this improvement and capacity for improvement is fixed by hereditary transmission, and extended by the tendency of the best adapted individual, or most improved individual, to survive and propagate among individuals, and of the best adapted, or most improved tribe, nation, or race to survive in the struggle between social aggregates. On this theory the differences between man and the animals, and the differences in the relative progress of men, are

introduced to the work of the German pessimist by a friend, August Lewis, who was interested in Continental speculation. While George revolted from the picture of despair which Schopenhauer presented, yet he was fascinated by his brilliance and acuteness. George, undoubtedly considering his own position, was particularly pleased by Schopenhauer's attack upon the professors—although he was not aware of the strictly personal origin or the specifically anti-Hegelian character of those bitter attacks. In *The Science of Political Economy* (p. 209) George quotes, in connection with a discussion of the ponderosities of the Austrian school of political economy, that passage from the *Parerga and Paralipomena*, in which Schopenhauer ridicules the "monstrous piecings together of words," that senseless "logomachy" of Hegel.

<sup>65</sup> Pp. 477-479.

now explained as confidently, and all but as generally, as a little while ago they were explained upon the theory of special creation and divine interposition.

The practical outcome of this theory is in a sort of hopeful fatalism, of which current literature is full. . . . The individual is the result of changes thus impressed upon and perpetuated through a long series of past individuals, and the social organization takes its form from the individuals of which it is composed. Thus while this theory is, as Herbert Spencer says, "radical to a degree beyond anything which current radicalism conceives," inasmuch as it looks for changes in the very nature of man; it is at the same time "conservative to a degree beyond anything conceived by current conservatism," inasmuch as it holds that no change can avail save these slow changes in men's natures. Philosophers may teach that this does not lessen the duty of endeavoring to reform abuses, just as the theologians who taught predestinarianism insisted on the duty of all to struggle for salvation; but, as generally apprehended, the result is fatalism—"do what we may, the mills of the gods grind on regardless either of our aid or our hindrance."

It would be interesting, although perhaps not profitable, to trace what have been the effects of Spencerianism in this connection. George presents a striking example of such an attitude of fatalism in the person of one of the most important of the American popularizers of Spencer's doctrines, Professor Youmans:

Talking one day with the late E. L. Youmans . . . he fell into speaking with much warmth of the political corruption of New York, of the utter carelessness and selfishness of the rich, and of their readiness to submit to it, or to promote it wherever it served their money-getting purposes to do so. He became so indignant as he went on that he raised his voice till he almost shouted. Alluding to a conversation some time before, in which I had affirmed and he had denied the duty of taking part in politics, I said to him, "What do you propose to do about it?" Of a sudden his manner and tone were completely changed, as, remembering his Spencerianism, he threw himself back, and replied, with something like a sigh: "Nothing! You and I can do nothing at all. It's all a matter of evolution. We can only wait for evolution."



Perhaps in four or five thousand years evolution may have carried men beyond this state of things. But we can do nothing."<sup>66</sup>

Whether Spencer in his immediate political thought was so influenced by such a conception of evolution is difficult to estimate, although it would afford an easy, perhaps too easy, explanation of the change in his position on social reform. Not that Spencer became in any sense a convinced Tory or reactionary, but his later outlook upon social problems was quite different, for example, from that of a man like John Stuart Mill, and his transformation from the youthful violent radicalism of 1850 was certainly complete. His distinction between the relative ethics of present experience—(which, it must again be insisted, is the only system of ethics which we, as active agents, can control)—and the absolute ethics of an evolved future social state, seems to be based upon just such a conviction of some happy and inevitable process of development. The same conception might explain his unwillingness to develop the implications involved in the land question, since "the questions raised were not likely to come to the front in our time or for many generations." In the *Principles of Ethics*<sup>67</sup> there is an evident illustration of this hopeful equanimity in evolution's solution of the labor question:

The pleasures men gain by labouring in their vocations and receiving in one form or other returns for their services, usually have the drawback that the labours are in a considerable degree displeasurable. Cases, however, do occur where the energies are so abundant that inaction is irksome; and where the daily work, not too great in duration, is of a kind appropriate to the nature; and whereas, as a consequence, pleasure rather than pain is a concomitant. . . . Bearing in mind the form of nature which social discipline is producing, as shown in the contrast between savage and civilized, the implication is that ultimately men's activities at large will assume this character. Remembering that

<sup>66</sup> *A Perplexed Philosopher*, p. 136, n.

<sup>67</sup> Vol. I, pp. 262-263 (Appleton edition).

in the course of organic evolution, the means to enjoyment themselves eventually become sources of enjoyment; and that there is no form of action which may not through the development of appropriate structures become pleasurable; the inference must be that industrial activities carried on through voluntary coöperation will in time acquire the character of absolute rightness as here conceived.

The British Labour Party, it appears, is too sceptical or impatient; Spencerian evolution, in time, will make labor a pleasure and not a problem.

Whatever may have been Spencer's optimism as to the "absolute rightness" which all institutions were approaching, or his perhaps consequent inertia in endeavoring to realize such a condition, George's attitude was always one of militant activity. His optimism was one that needed the support of all the fervor and power of a crusading army, support for a divine order that had been twisted and deformed by ignorance. For George "absolute rightness" could never be attained by the gratuitous functioning of a persistent evolutionary force unless "relative" rightness could be established right here in the New York and London of 1892. The manifest attacks upon justice and a sound social order needed more positive and more real resistance than faith in an undirected developmental process. George's impatience with any suggestion of a passive acceptance of social disease was shown even to his most intimate friend, Dr. Taylor. He asked him: "Why, when the great struggle is on, and history is being made, will you go into the woods and play the flute? I would rather see you put your lips to the trumpet."<sup>68</sup> At another time he wrote: "Your life and habits are those of a student. Would it not be well to try something more, to 'pitch in' more. There is, it seems to me, an undertone of sadness in life which engulfs a man, at least a thoughtful man, who does not keep

<sup>68</sup> In a letter of June 1, 1892.

moving. Pleasure is in action, and the highest pleasure in action directed to large and generous social objects. I believe you will feel the stronger and happier if . . . you will strike some blow for what you believe to be the right."<sup>69</sup>

It might be possible to find all the power and sincerity and inspiration of George's philosophy right in these words.

This essentially active and practical outlook of George, with its questioning of the "life and habits of the student" and its scoffing at Spencer's desertion of social reform for "speculative philosophy," may well have been the source of much of the bitterness in his criticism of Spencer. Perhaps it was a temperamental difference between the two men, rather than the unworthy motives and blind stupidity with which each charged the other, that accounted for their divergent interests. That type of explanation, at least, is always a safe and innocuous disposition of personal controversy. And maybe it would be best to conclude the dreary record of the attacks and counterattacks of George and Spencer with just such a recourse to differing intellectual interests—to a distinction between the student and the reformer, both, strangely enough, philosophers.

<sup>69</sup> Letter of August 12, 1883.