

## INTRODUCTION

### The reason for this examination

No consecrated absurdity would have stood its ground in this world if the man had not silenced the objection of the child.

Michelet

ALTHOUGH he stands for much that is yet in dispute, there can be no question that at the present time 1892—Herbert Spencer, of all his contemporaries, holds the foremost place in the intellectual world, and through a wider circle than any man now living, and perhaps than any man of our century, is regarded as a profound, original and authoritative thinker—by many indeed as the greatest thinker the world has ever yet seen.

So large is the field over which Mr. Spencer's writings have ranged, so many are the special branches of knowledge he has laid under contribution, so difficult to the ordinary mind are the abstractions in which he has dealt and the terminology in which they are couched, that this great reputation is with the large majority of the intelligent men who accept it more a matter of faith than of reason. But this rather adds to than detracts from the popular estimate; for what to us is vague often seems on that account the greater, and what we have no means of measuring, all the more profound. Nor does Mr. Spencer's standing as one of the greatest, to many the very greatest, of philosophers, lack substantial basis in the opinions of those deemed competent to gauge intellectual power.

John Stuart Mill styled him "one of the acutest metaphysicians of recent times, one of the most vigorous as well as the boldest thinker that English speculation has yet produced." Professor Ray Lankester spoke of him as "an acute observer and experimentalist versed in physics and chemistry, but above all, thoroughly instructed in scientific methods." Richard A. Proctor characterized him as the "clearest of thinkers." G. H. Lewes said "it is questionable whether any thinker of finer caliber has appeared in our century," and that "he alone of all British thinkers has organized a philosophy." Professor David Masson deemed him "the one of all our thinkers who has founded for himself the largest new scheme of a systematic philosophy." Dr. McCosh, who fundamentally differed from him, said "his bold generalizations are always instructive, and some of them may in the end be

established as the profoundest laws of the knowable universe." St. George Mivart, who as a Catholic is also at variance in important matters, says "we cannot deny the title of philosopher to such a thinker as Mr. Spencer, who does genuinely bind together different and hitherto alien subjects, and that by a clear and wide though neither an all-comprehensive nor a spiritual hypothesis, the principle of evolution." Professor Tyndall calls him "the apostle of the understanding." His "profound and vigorous writings" have been likened by Professor Huxley to "the embodiment of the spirit of Descartes in the knowledge of our own day." Darwin spoke of him as "our great philosopher," greeted him as "the great expounder of the principle of evolution," and wrote to him that "every one with eyes to see and ears to hear ought to bow their knee to you." Professor Stanley Jevons ranked his work with the "Principia" of Newton. John Fiske, representing unquestionably the opinion of large numbers of intelligent and influential men, declares it to be of the calibre of that of Aristotle and Newton, but "as far surpassing their work in its vastness of performance as the railway surpasses the sedan-chair or as the telegraph surpasses the carrier pigeon." President Barnard in the same strain said, "his philosophy is the only philosophy that satisfies an earnestly inquiring mind," adding that "we have in Herbert Spencer not only the profoundest thinker of our time, but the most capacious and powerful intellect of all time. Aristotle and his master were not more beyond the pygmies who preceded them than he is beyond Aristotle. Kant, Hegel, Fichte and Schelling are gropers in the dark by the side of him."

Such estimates are not unquestioned, and opinions of a different kind might be cited from men of high standing. But the current of general thought, swelled by the wonderful scientific achievements of our time, has run powerfully, almost irresistibly, in favor of ideas with which Mr. Spencer is identified, absorbing, intimidating and driving back opposition even where it seemed most firmly entrenched, until to question them has come largely to be looked upon as evidence not merely of unscientific beliefs, but of ignorance and superstition. Whatever may be the verdict of the future, the man who is regarded as the great philosopher of evolution has within his own time won an acceptance and renown such as no preceding philosopher ever personally enjoyed. Thus, these estimates represent the

view that has had the largest currency and produced the greatest effect, and that gives the weight of high authority to any declaration of Mr. Spencer's on a subject that has engaged his attention. Such a declaration, made with the utmost deliberation, in his latest, and as he and his admirers deem, his ripest and most important work, I propose in what follows to examine.

I do not propose to discuss Mr. Spencer's philosophy or review his writings, except as embraced in or related to his teachings on one subject. That, while a subject of the first practical importance, is one where no special knowledge, no familiarity with metaphysical terminology, no wrestling with abstractions, is needed, and one where the validity of the reasoning may be judged for himself by anyone of ordinary powers and acquirements.

My primary object is to defend and advance a principle in which I see the only possible relief from much that enthralls and degrades and distorts, turning light to darkness and good to evil, rather than to gauge a philosopher or weigh a philosophy. Yet the examination I propose must lead to a decisive judgment upon both. As Mr. Spencer's treatment of this principle began with his first book and ends with his last, we have in it a cross section of his teachings, traversing the open plain of obvious facts and common perceptions, in which we who have no more than ordinary knowledge and powers may test for ourselves his intellectual ability, and, what is even more important, his intellectual honesty. For to whatever extent we may elsewhere separate ability and honesty, respecting the talent while distrusting the man, such separation cannot be made in the field of philosophy. Since philosophy is the search for truth, the philosopher who in his teachings is swerved by favor or by fear forfeits all esteem as a philosopher.

Nor is the connection between the practical problems that are forcing themselves on our civilization and the deepest questions with which speculative philosophy deals, merely personal or accidental. It belongs to the nature of the human mind, to our relations to the universe in which we awake to consciousness. And just as in *Progress and Poverty* the connection that developed as I went along carried me from an inquiry into economic phenomena to considerations that traversed Mr. Spencer's theory of social evolution and raised such supreme questions as the existence of God and the immortality of

man, so now I find a similar connection asserting itself between Mr. Spencer's utterances on the most important of social questions and the views on wider and subjects that have given him such a great reputation.

It is this—that a question of the utmost practical importance thus leads to questions beside which in our deeper moments the practical sinks into insignificance; that the philosopher whose authority is now invoked to deny to the any right to the physical basis of life in this world is also the philosopher whose authority darkens to many all hope of life hereafter—that has made it seem to me worth while to enter into an examination which in its form must be personal, and that will lead me to treat at greater length than I would otherwise be inclined to those utterances of Mr. Spencer which I propose to discuss.

I shall not ask the reader to accept anything from me. All I ask of him is to judge for himself Mr. Spencer's own public declarations. The respect for authority, the presumption in favor of those who have won intellectual reputation, is within reasonable limits, both prudent and becoming. But it should not be carried too far, and there are some things especially as to which it behooves us all to use our own judgment and maintain free minds. For not only does the history of the world show that undue deference to authority has been the potent agency through which errors have been enthroned and superstitions perpetuated, but there are regions of thought in which the largest powers and the greatest acquirements cannot guard against aberrations or assure deeper insight. One may stand on a box and look over the head of his fellows, but he no better sees the stars. The telescope and the microscope reveal depths which to the unassisted vision are closed. Yet not merely do they bring us no nearer to the cause of suns and animalcula, but in looking through them the observer must shut his eyes to what lies about him. That intension is at the expense of extension is seen in the mental as in the physical sphere. A man of special learning may be a fool as to common relations. And that he who passes for an intellectual prince may be a moral pauper there are examples enough to show.

As we must go to the shoemaker if we would be well shod and to the tailor if we would be well clad, so as to special branches of knowledge must we rely on those who have studied them. But while

yielding to reputation the presumption in its favor, and to authority the respect that is its due, let us not too much underrate our own powers in what is concerned with common facts and general relations. While we may not be scientists or philosophers, we too are men. Let us remember that there is no religious superstition that has not been taught by professed teachers of religious truth; that there is no vulgar economic fallacy that may not be found in the writings of professors; no social vagary current among "the ignorant" whose roots may not be discovered among "the educated and cultured." The power to reason correctly on general subjects is not to be learned in schools, nor does it come with special knowledge. It results from care in separating, from caution in combining, from the habit of asking ourselves the meaning of the words we use and making sure of one step before building another on it—and above all, from loyalty to truth.

Giving to Mr. Spencer, therefore, the presumption that is due to his great reputation, but at the same time using his own reason, let the reader consider the matter I shall lay before him.

Herbert Spencer's last volume, *Justice*, contains his latest word on the land question—the question in which, as I believe, lies the only solution of all the vexed and threatening social and political problems of our time. Accompanied, as it has been, by the withdrawal of earlier utterances, it places him definitely on the side of those who contend that the treatment of land as private property cannot equitably be interfered with, a position the reverse of that he once ably asserted.

While the opinions of a man of such wide reputation and large influence, on a question already passing into the domain of practical politics and soon to become the burning question of the time, are most worthy of attention, they derive additional importance from the fact of this change. For a change from a clearly reasoned opinion to its opposite carries the implication of fair and full consideration. And if the reasons the reason for such a change be sufficient and there be no suspicion of ulterior motive, the fact that a man now condemns opinions 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 be inconsistent.

What gives additional interest to the matter is that Mr. Spencer makes no change in his premises, but only in his premises but only in his conclusion, and now, in sustaining private property in land, asserts the same principle of equal liberty from which he originally deduced its 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 the light it must throw on the logical processes of so a philosopher.

Since no one else has attempted it, it seems incumbent on me to examine this change and its grounds. For not only do I hold the opinions which Mr. Spencer now controverts, but I have been directly and indirectly instrumental in giving to his earlier conclusions a much greater circulation than his own books would have given them. It is due, therefore, that I should make his rejection of these conclusions as widely known as I can, and thus correct the mistake of those who couple us together as holding views he now opposes.

To fairly weigh Mr. Spencer's present opinion on the land question, and to comprehend his reasons for the change, it is necessary to understand his previous position. Beginning, therefore, with his first declaration, I propose to trace his public expressions on this subject to the present time, and, that no injustice may be done him, to print them in full. In what follows the reader will find what Mr. Spencer has published on the land question from 1850 to 1892, and, by the difference in type, may readily distinguish his utterances from my comments.