

Chapter V—  
Second Letter To *The Times*.

In his letter to *The Times* Mr. Spencer had surely abased himself enough to have been let alone by those whose favor he had so dearly sought. But even those who profit by apostasy often like to show their contempt for the apostate. Though *The Times* itself accepted his apology, it added some contemptuous reproof, and gave place to letters from Mr. Greenwood, Professor Huxley and Sir Louis Mallet that must have been extremely galling to a renowned philosopher.

Here is the pertinent part of what *The Times* said.

So, without denying that he did once say something of the sort, he explains that it was forty years ago, that for the last fifteen years he has been doing all he can to suppress the book in which he said it, and that he never meant his words to have any bearing upon practical questions. He was in fact engaged in constructing a system of "absolute political ethics, or that which ought to be," and he feels distinctly aggrieved by the transfer of his opinions from that transcendental sphere to the very different one in which Mr. Laidler and his friends are accustomed to dwell. ... What Mr. Spencer said in his youth and inexperience he has unsaid in his maturer years and with more deliberate judgment ...

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, since for the last fifteen years it has ceased to be absolute even to the mind that conceived it ... Mr. Spencer settled that which ought to be, as regards landownership, but a quarter of a century later we find him endeavoring, much to the credit of his modesty and candor, to suppress his own version of the absolute. He does not seem, however, to have abandoned the 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 identical flaws which were to be found in the older version.

The communication from Mr. Frederick Greenwood, an able high-Tory journalist, was published by *The Times* on the 9th, under the heading "A Caution to Social Philosophers." Characterizing Mr. Spencer's letter to *The Times* as "a heavy lesson to political philosophers," Mr. Greenwood points out that "no matter how sorry Mr. Spencer may be for having misled so many poor men who habitually

hang on the authority of great men like himself," yet the very quotation he makes from his *Political Institutions* contains the same seeds of error in its admission that "ownership established by force does not stand on the same footing as ownership established by contract," and in its admission that "the assimilation of the two ownerships may eventually be denied."

Sir Louis Mallet's letter, published on November 11 was to similar effect. He pointed out that Mr. Spencer still admitted an analogy between private property in land and slavery, which, of course, to Sir Louis seemed dangerous and wicked.

Professor Huxley came at the philosopher in a bullheaded way that must have seemed very unkind. Speaking in the name of those "to whom absolute political ethics and a priori politics are alike stumbling-blocks," and expressing the certainty that his friend, Mr. Spencer, would be the last person willingly to abet the tendency to sanction popular acts of injustice by antiquarian or speculative arguments, he asked him for a categorical answer to the question whether according to "absolute political ethics" A. B., who has bought a piece of land in England, as he might buy a cabbage, has a moral as well as a legal right to his land or not?

And he follows with these pertinent questions:

If he does not, how does "absolute political ethics" deduce his right to compensation?

If he does, how does "absolute political ethics" deduce the state's right to disturb him?

By this time Mr. Spencer must have wished he had not written to *The Times*, though it is a striking evidence of the little knowledge of *Social Statics* in England (a fact on which Mr. Spencer had evidently calculated), that in none of these letters, or in those that followed, do any of the "hecklers," with the one exception of Mr. Laidler, seem to have any knowledge of what Mr. Spencer had really said in that book—a knowledge that would have roused their ire to a far higher pitch, and enabled them to ask still harder questions.

The reader may wonder why in an attempt to deny his utterances in *Social Statics*, Mr. Spencer should have printed the passage from *Political Institutions*, which is in reality a reaffirmation of them. The only explanation I can offer is that he felt that he must print something, and had absolutely nothing else to print. For there is no word

in all his works up to this time (*Justice* being yet to come) that gives the slightest evidence of any modification of the views set forth in *Social Statics*. And since he had six years before successfully referred to this passage, as though it indicated a modification of his views, he probably felt safe in so using it a second time. Thinking that it would suffice to settle Mr. Laidler, he evidently did not calculate on its provoking a "fire in the rear," from his own friends, the adherents of landlordism, when he was giving up everything real, and only striving to save a semblance of consistency.

Mr. Spencer conveniently ignored the letters of Mr. Greenwood and Sir Louis Mallet, but he did make a pretense of answering Professor Huxley, in a letter published in *The Times*, November 15.

Here is the letter, which, although the first paragraph only is pertinent to the task I have in mind, I give in full, in order to guard against Mr. Spencer's controversial habit of saying that his utterances have been garbled:

To the Editor of *The Times*.

SIR: As Professor Huxley admits that his friend A. B.'s title to his plot of land is qualified by the right of the state to dispossess him if it sees well—as, by implication, he admits that all landowners hold their land subject to the supreme ownership of the state, that is, the community—as he contends that any force or fraud by which land was taken in early days does not affect the titles of existing owners, and a fortiori does not affect the superior title of the community—and as, consequently, he admits that the community, as supreme owner with a still valid title, may resume possession if it thinks well, he seems to me to leave the question standing very much where it stood; and since he, as I suppose, agrees with me that any such resumption, should a misjudgment lead to it, ought to be accompanied by due compensation for all artificial value given to land, I do not see in what respect we disagree on the land question. I pass, therefore, to his comments on absolute political ethics.

"Your treatment is quite at variance with physiological principles" would probably be the criticism passed by a modern practitioner on the doings of a Sangrado, if we suppose one to have survived. "Oh, bother your physiological principles," might be the reply. "I have got to cure this disease, and my experience tells me that bleeding and frequent draughts of hot water are needed." "Well," would be the rejoinder, "if you do not kill your patient, you will at any rate greatly retard his recovery, as you would probably be aware had you read Professor Huxley's *Lessons on Elementary*

*Physiology*, and the more elaborate books on the subject which medical students have to master."

This imaginary conversation will sufficiently suggest that, before there can be rational treatment of a disordered state of the bodily functions, there must be a conception of what constitutes their ordered state: knowing what is abnormal implies knowing what is normal. That Professor Huxley recognizes this truth is, I suppose, proved by the inclusion of physiology in that course of medical education which he advocates. If he says that abandonment of the Sangrado treatment was due, not to the teachings of physiology, but to knowledge empirically gained, then I reply that if he expands this statement so as to cover all improvements in medical treatment he suicidally rejects the teaching of physiological principles as useless.

Without insisting upon that analogy between a society and an organism which results from the interdependence of parts performing different functions—though I believe he recognizes this—I think he will admit that conception of a social state as disordered implies conception of an ordered social state. 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 conception of a best. If there is rejoicing because certain diseases have been diminished by precautions enforced, the implied ideal is a state in which these diseases have been extinguished. If particular measures are applauded because they have decreased criminality, the implication is that the absence of all crime is a desideratum. Hence, however much a politician may poohpoo social ideals, he cannot take steps toward bettering the social state without tacitly entertaining them. And though he may regard absolute political ethics as an airy vision, he makes bit by bit reference to it in everything he does. I simply differ from him in contending for a consistent and avowed reference, instead of an inconsistent and unacknowledged reference.

Even without any such strain on the imagination as may be required to conceive a community consisting entirely of honest and honorable men—even without asking whether there is riot a set of definite limits to individual actions which such men would severally insist upon and respect—even without asserting that these limits must, in the nature of things, result when men have severally to carry on their lives in proximity with one another, I should have thought it sufficiently clear that our system of justice, by interdicting, murder, assault, theft, libel, etc., recognizes the existence of such limits and the necessity for maintaining them; and I should have thought it manifest enough that there must exist an elaborate system of limits or restraints on conduct, by conformity to which citizens may cooperate without dissension. Such a system, deduced as it may be from the primary conditions to be fulfilled, is what I mean by absolute political ethics. The complaint of Professor Huxley that absolute political ethics does not show us

what to do in each concrete case seems to be much like the complaint of a medical practitioner who should speak slightly of physiological generalizations, because they did not tell him the right dressing for a wound or how best to deal with varicose veins. I cannot here explain further, but any one who does not understand me may find the matter discussed at length in a chapter on *Absolute and Relative Ethics* contained in *The Data of Ethics*.

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, well knowing that nonconformity will inevitably bring penalties. Not taking this view, however, it would seem as though Professor Huxley agrees with the mass of "practical" politicians, who think that every legislative measure is to be decided by estimation of probabilities unguided by a priori conclusions. Well, had they habitually succeeded, one might not wonder that they should habitually ridicule abstract principles; but the astounding accumulation of failures might have been expected to cause less confidence in empirical methods. Of the 18,110 public Acts passed between 20 Henry III. and the end of 1872, Mr. Janson, Vice-President of the Law Society, estimates that four-fifths have been wholly or partially repealed, and that in the years 1870-72 there were repealed 3532 Acts, of which 2759 were totally repealed. Further, I myself found, on examining the books for 1881-83, that in those years there had been repealed 650 Acts belonging to the present reign, besides many of preceding reigns. Remembering that Acts which are repealed have been doing mischief, which means loss, trouble, pain to great numbers—remembering, thus, the enormous amount of suffering which this helter-skelter legislation has inflicted for generations and for centuries, I think it would not be amiss to ask whether better guidance may not be had, even though it should come from absolute political ethics.

I regret that neither space nor health will permit me to discuss any of the questions raised by Sir Louis Mallet. And here, indeed, I find myself compelled to desist altogether. In so far as I am concerned, the controversy must end with this letter. I am, etc.,

HERBERT SPENCER.

ATHENÆUM CLUB, Nov. 13.

Really, this "Answer to Professor Huxley" is no answer at all. What Mr. Spencer virtually says is. "I admit all that the landowners may want me to admit. Let us change the subject."

Yet even in thus changing the subject, he is obliged to give up the distinction he had made between absolute political ethics and relative political ethics, for his longdrawn explanation to Professor Huxley means, if it means anything at all, that absolute political ethics do have a bearing on practical political conduct.