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by

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THE AGNOSTICISM OF HERBERT SPENCER

Mr. Herbert Spencer easily takes the first place among agnostics. The extent to which he has become a leader of the more skeptical scientific thought justifies this statement. But his superiority consists in his wide range of influence as a scientist, rather than in the strength of his philosophical position.

There is little choice among agnostic theories. They all involve intellectual suicide. Their arguments prove too much. When pushed to their legitimate conclusion, they destroy not religion alone, but all knowledge. They are therefore impractical. They teach us to distrust our intellectual powers. When applied to religion only, sceptics may be satisfied to live as though knowledge were impossible; but in secular affairs there is an ever present necessity of decision and action. There is no danger of agnosticism being applied to science and industry. It is for the sake of morals and religion that this false and pernicious system of philosophy ought to be answered, destroyed and banished from the earth.

Professor Huxley, the originator of the term agnosticism, based his sceptical conclusion on the so called "rigor and vigor" method of logic. The principle of this method is that whatever cannot be demonstrated by reason alone cannot be known as true. According to Huxley's own conclusion his study of the deeper

questions of religion and philosophy, by this method, led him into a "wild and tangled forest". Still he thought it his duty to continue the method until he should reach the other side, or find that there was no other side. Hence his conclusion that these problems have no solution. His mistake was in supposing that reason is the only true voice of intelligence. There are other voices that must be heard, and when reason fails we may and ought to follow the leadings of our higher sensibilities.

Mr. Spencer comes at it in a different way. He holds that the nature of intelligence is such that the mind can grasp only ~~the~~ relative truths, and that absolute realities are themselves of such a nature as to preclude expression in terms of human thought. His arguments are based on an untrue psychology, on the ~~one~~ ^{one} hand, and on an untrue metaphysics on the other.

It will be the main purpose of this paper to show the untenability of Mr. Spencer's position. First let us see to what extent agnosticism is a part of his system of philosophy. Mr. Spencer lays out a program of ten volumes in which he proposes to publish his principles of philosophy and science. The Part I, comprising about one fourth of the first volume is devoted to the "Unknowable". In this part he attempts to show that the ultimate ideas of both religion and science represent realities that are utterly unscrutable.

According to him, the absolute, the infinite, consciousness, space, time, matter, motion and force are all realities in which we must and do believe, and yet of which the very conception is impossible. He claims that theologians have no warrant for the affirmations which they make concerning the absolute and infinite.

Having thus defined the limits of intelligence, Mr. Spencer proceeds, in Part 2, to construct his system of philosophy, which he elaborates in subsequent scientific works. He fails however to keep within his own bounds. On the part of science he reinstates every one of the scientific notions, which in Part I he ruled out as inconceivable and involving contradictions. Consciousness, matter, force, motion and so on, are here made actual objective facts the laws of which are to be discovered and formulated, and are to become the foundation of all science. Here is a fatal inconsistency. Mr. Spencer thinks that volumes could be written about the "infinity of the pious" who assumes to know something about God; but, if that is true, on the basis of the doctrine of the unknowable, volumes could also be written on the unscience of the scientists who presume to elaborate on these ultimate scientific ideas. The doctrine applies as well to the natural science as it does to the science of theology. If Mr. Spencer were to be checked, as he would check the theologians, his entire works with the exception of the 106 pages embraced in Part I would be thrown out. If he can be allowed to build up a system of philosophy and science on these so called "inconceiv-

and "impossible" scientific ideas, theologians must, in all fairness, be allowed a like privilege. Surely no system of theology ever did greater violence to Spencer's doctrine of the unknowable than does his own system of philosophy and science. Spencer's subsequent works, therefore, remove all the force his doctrine of the unknowable would have against the validity of religious ideas, if it stood alone.

Part I (The Unknowable) of Spencer's First Principles purports to be a reconciliation of science and religion. The reconciliation consists in ^ereducing them both to the common terms of the unknowable. In this they are alike. The ultimate ideas of each represent the unknowable. One soon sees, however, that the reconciliation is all on one side; for Mr. Spencer at once proceeds to raise science into the realm of the knowable while religion is left to grope about in the dark. This leaves the impression on the uncritical reader that religion is without foundation, and science only is secure; while in fact religion and science must stand or fall together. To the critic it appears that Mr. Spencer is not so much interested in bringing about a reconciliation in religion and science, as he is in displaying his own metaphysical notions. This he does at the expense of religion, and covers his crime by calling it a reconciliation.

Mr. Spencer's arguments for his doctrine of the ~~of the~~ unknowable will ^{have} weight with those only, who are already inclined to his views, or who yield themselves passively to the influence

of his rhetoric. The critical reader will find his arguments not only inconclusive, but inconsistent with one another, and faulty in many ways. They are likely to move to various emotions, from that of simple amusement to that of pity mingled with disgust. It would hardly be worth while to refute them if it were not that his agnostic conclusions are appealed to by those who wish to discredit the truths of religion. A few examples of the kind of arguments used will suffice to convince any thoughtful and candid reader of the weakness of his position.

The idea of the creation of the universe is set aside by Mr. Spencer because it involves the idea of a first cause, and the idea of a first cause, he claims, is impossible. A first cause must be self-existent; but the assumption of self-existence anywhere, Mr. Spencer affirms, is vicious and unthinkable. The trouble with self-existence is that it involves the notion of "unlimited duration through past time"; and this Mr. Spencer, claims, is "inconceivable". Then the possibility of there being a creator depends upon the ability to conceive of infinite past time; and this is impossible. Hence it is impossible to think of a creator. Now Mr. Spencer's difficulty here is one not ordinarily experienced by others, and it seems to me a very artificial one. We readily admit that no one can comprehend infinite past time in thought; for if the mind should undertake to trace time to its infinite extent, the task would be found to be impossible. But that is wholly unnecessary to the conception of infinite past

time. All that is necessary to the conception of infinite past time is the thought that time has no limit. this is perfectly possible for any one. Mr. Spencer has confused the conception of infinite past time with its comprehension. The conception is possible, though the comprehension is not. This error is very common with Mr. Spencer. Whatever notions can not be pictured in the imagination are rejected as impossible in existence. The argument further applied is, that because we can not comprehend God in thought or picture him to the imagination, the idea of God is unthinkable. But every one knows that we can think of God as existing and being absolute and infinite.

Mr. Spencer has another difficulty with the idea of a first cause. The first cause "must be uncaused". "But", he says, "if we admit that there can be something uncaused, there is no reason to assume a cause for anything". This looks very plausible. But if we stop to inquire why it is that we "assume a cause for anything" the difficulty vanishes at once. If the universe had always existed exactly as it is at the present time, without change, there would be no need of assuming a cause for anything. The fact to be explained is a universe made up of constantly changing elements. It is not mere existence that demands the hypothesis of a cause, but changing existence. The first cause must be changeless and, therefore, needs no cause. These are fair examples of the difficulties and contradictions encountered by Mr. Spencer. they exist in his arguments, but not in clear thinking or in reality.

The underlying principle of Mr. Spencer's philosophy is, that whatever is known is but an appearance; but the reality lying back of the appearance, is essentially unknowable. It seems on the face of it like a very strange doctrine, and one that would tax our credulity to believe. If this principle is strictly true we can really know nothing at all. All that we seem to know is really illusion; and what is really true lies forever beyond our ken. Mr. Spencer admits, however, that our knowledge has a relative validity. This principle he terms "the relativity of all knowledge". He arrives at this principle through his theory of the nature of thought. All thought according to him, consists in establishing relations. "Thinking is relationing" and "no thought can express more than relations". Establishing relations amounts simply to the discovery of likenesses and differences in things and bringing together in thought things that are alike. It is a process of classifying. By a long argument Mr. Spencer attempts to show that all mental activity comes under this description. We know a thing by being able to classify it. Facts are explained by referring them to the class to which they belong. The class represents a deeper and more general fact. This process goes on until a class is reached including all other facts of our experience. This must be the deepest and truest fact of all. But since it can not be referred to any more general fact, it can not be explained. It is evident that the more comprehensive a fact is the more difficult it is to be comprehended.

Therefore it is in the nature of thought that ultimate ideas are unknowable. The application of this principle leads to the affirmation that the "absolute reality", or God, is essentially unknowable.

This argument is based on a very insufficient theory of thought and knowledge. Mr. Spencer fails to give a complete description of mental activity. He makes no account whatever of the originative and volitional powers of the mind. Thought would not get very far if all it could do were to establish relations. He is, however, quite sure of his position and insists that there can be no initial knowledge. "A true cognition he says, "is possible only through an accompanying recognition". To the objection that if true cognition implies recognition, there can be no first cognition, he replies that cognition arises gradually in childhood. But this is unsatisfactory. It still remains that cognition must precede re-cognition, and if cognition depends upon recognition neither can ever exist. "Mr. Spencer's answer to this objection", says Professor Bowne, "is a good specimen of a favorite method with associational psychologists. Whenever one of their fundamental assumptions is contradicted by the experience of manhood, it is easy to say that in infancy—a period of which anything can be affirmed, since nothing can be remembered—it was strictly true. This is certainly making the most of the early years. The small child is put into the associational mill, and after a little brisk grinding is brought out with a complete set of mental furni-

ture. When the critic reaches the spot, he is blandly told that the work is done, and the machinery put away. He is further warned that any search on his part will be useless; as the traces of manufacture have been entirely obliterated." Mr. Spencer is wrong. It is not necessary to our knowledge of an object that we should be able to class it with other objects. Many items of knowledge are wholly unique having no counterpart in our experience. The fact that God is supreme is, therefore, no barrier to our knowledge of him.

It is to be noted, further, that the argument proves not an unknowable but an unexplainable. It may be admitted that, when classification has been carried to its limit, the ultimate fact must remain unclassified; and, in so far as explanation depends upon classification, it is unexplainable. But it is not ^{or} that account unknowable. A fact does not need to be explained in order to be known as a fact. Nothing is more mysterious than our own existence; and yet nothing is more certain as a fact. No one claims that the infinite can be comprehended; and yet no item of objective knowledge is more certain than the existence of the infinite.

Mr. Spencer really admits this knowledge. He says, "the demonstration that a definite consciousness of the absolute is impossible to us, unavoidably presupposes an indefinite consciousness of it." Now this indefinite consciousness of the absolute according to his theory, is the deepest fact of our experience. That which underlies all, and is the most certain of all is the

unknowable. This appears to me very much like a contradiction. Mr. Spencer dwells much upon contradictions, fondly invented by himself; but seem to have overlooked this one, which must be fatal to his system.

Mr. Spencer carries forward the argument by showing that, since the absolute is unrelated, it cannot be known. For knowledge implies the establishing of a relation and, if a relation were established with the absolute, its character as absolute would be lost, and it would be no longer absolute but related. Hence in the very nature of the case, the absolute is unknowable. Mr. Spencer defines the ~~unknowable~~ absolute as a being out of all relation. It would be neither possible nor desirable to know such an absolute. The absolute on which religion and science depend, however, is not one out of all relation, but one absolutely independent and self-existent. Such a being we are happy to believe is knowable.

In a similar manner, Mr. Spencer contends that the infinite cannot be an object of consciousness without being limited. Here also he has provided, for the sake of the argument, an artificial infinite, in which no one believes. Professor Bowne suggests how easy it would be to turn the argument the other way around, and show that the infinite must be able to reveal himself to consciousness, or else that very inability would be a limitation, and he would be finite rather than infinite.

Christianity has no object in insisting that we know

very much about God. We cheerfully admit that we know comparatively little about him. But to admit that we know nothing at all about him would be to destroy the foundations of religion. Mr. Spencer does not himself hold strictly to the idea that the absolute is unknowable. He makes certain affirmations about it himself. He says, "Its positive existence is a necessary datum of consciousness" and "the belief which this datum constitutes has a higher warrant than any other whatever." In summing up the "data of philosophy he says, "In brief our postulates are; an unknowable power; the existence of knowable likenesses and differences among the manifestations of that power; and the resulting segregation of the manifestations into those of subject and object". The unknowable is then a power, and has manifestations. This power and its manifestations make possible the data of philosophy. In other words Mr. Spencer's scientific knowledge is but an elaboration of what he knows about the unknowable. It would seem that this knowledge amounts to a good deal. We can not refrain from asking why it is that Mr. Spencer is allowed to know so much about the unknowable and other people are allowed to know so little? If the unknowable can manifest itself in science, why not in religion?

Mr. Spencer forbids even to think of God as a person. This, he thinks, is degrading God by thinking him to be like man. He illustrates this by the simile of a watch. "If for a moment we made the grotesque supposition that the tickings

and other movements of a watch constituted a kind of consciousness, and that a watch possessed of such consciousness insisted upon regarding the watchmaker's actions as determined, like its own, by springs and escapements, we should only complete ^a the parallel of which religious teachers think much." This argument is well answered by Professor Bowne in the following language.

"This is extremely ^{severe} no doubt; and if theologians taught that God has legs and arms, parts and passions, the satire might have some point; but since they expressly forbid such an assumption, it is difficult to tell where the force of the 'grotesque' supposition lies. for if that 'grotesque' watch should argue not to 'springs and escapements' but to intelligence in its maker it would not be very far astray". Whether thinking of God as a person degrades him or not depends on what is ^a meant by personality. If personality means bodily form, it certainly would degrade God to think of him as personal. It is not in form, however, but in intelligence, that the personality of God consists. The question is, Is God intelligent or is he not? To say that he is unintelligent is to degrade him below man. He certainly is intelligent whatever else he may or may not be. We believe that he is much more. But if he is intelligent, he is a person.

Spencer leaves room for belief in the existence of God. He tolerates all sorts of creeds. He believes them all to be in error and that each man's belief is necessary to himself, and has its place in the development of society. Huxley is less tolerable to religion in this respect. His position, as is pointed out

by Professor Rishell, would be more properly designated as apistic than agnostic. That is, he substituted, "I do not believe" for "I do not know" this is usually the case. The agnostic is also a disbeliever in religion.

It is religion that is imperriled by agnosticism. Should agnosticism become the prevalent form of philosophy it would not be applied to secular life. As Professor Bowne remarks, "The most thorough going know-nothing would as eager to get bread as the realist. He would be as careful to keep out of a relative fire, or a relative river, as out of an absolute one". But in morals and religion men are looking for excuses for inaction, and many are glad to find one in the agnostic theory