



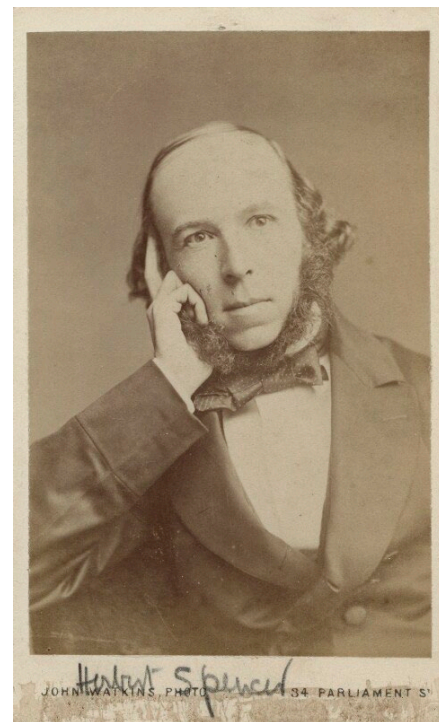
HERBERT SPENCER'S SOCIOLOGY OF THE STATE

The English sociologist and individualist political philosopher Herbert Spencer has been either completely neglected or badly misinterpreted by scholars for over one hundred years. In this discussion George Smith explores an important aspect of Spencer's thinking, namely his "sociology of the state". Although Smith considers Spencer to be "one of the most fascinating and complex figures in the history of classical liberalism" he is concerned that there is a tension in his thought between Spencer the radical individualist moral and political philosopher and Spencer "the sociologist." In other words, perhaps we have "Das Herbert Spencer Problem" which needs to be resolved. On the one hand, Spencer believes in "absolute ethics" in his political and moral theory (that violence and coercion is morally wrong), and yet on the other hand seems to give the state a free pass ("relative ethics") when it comes to the emergence of the state and the role war and violence played in this process. He is joined in this discussion by David M. Levy, Professor of Economics at George Mason University; Roderick T. Long, Professor of Philosophy at Auburn University; and Alberto Mingardi, the founder and General Director of the Istituto Bruno Leoni.

HERBERT SPENCER'S SOCIOLOGY OF THE STATE

by George H. Smith

I have written this essay in the hope that I may learn some things from my commentators. Roderick Long has written some excellent articles on Spencer, and they are invariably on point. Alberto Mingardi's book *Herbert Spencer*^[1] is, in my judgment, the finest overview of Spencer's political ideas ever published in book form; I cannot recommend it too highly. Unfortunately, I am not familiar with the work of David Levy, but a little background research on the Internet leads me to believe that he, like the other two commentators and me, has been concerned with portraying Spencer in a fair light.



Herbert Spencer

Although I have studied Herbert Spencer for decades and written quite a bit on his life and theories,^[2] I am still puzzled by some of his ideas, especially the tension that exists between Spencer qua libertarian moral/political philosopher and Spencer qua sociologist. And despite my

substantive disagreements, I regard him as one of the most fascinating and complex figures in the history of classical liberalism. My respect for Spencer, both as an intellectual and as a man, runs deep, so I am inclined to interpret him sympathetically. There can be no doubt that Spencer invested considerable intellectual labor in his writings, as illustrated by his many revisions of manuscripts and later editions of articles and books.^[3] So when I encounter an idea that seems exceedingly odd or inconsistent with his other ideas, I usually assume, as a working and defeasible hypothesis, that the fault lies in me, not in Spencer. More than once I have been puzzled by a remark by Spencer only to discover subsequently that he provided a more complete explanation elsewhere in his extensive writings. Attempting to understand the mind of Herbert Spencer is like engaging in a research project that never ends.

Nevertheless, there are clearly problems in Spencer's sociological writings, including his ideas about the sociology of the state. I have focused on three topics that I find especially troublesome. Perhaps these problems will prove intractable, but if anyone will be able to help iron out the theoretical wrinkles or correct any mistakes I may have made, it is surely one or more of the three distinguished commentators.^[4]

1) Any discussion of Herbert Spencer's theory of the state must confront the problem that the state, according to Spencer, has no fixed nature. On the contrary, "[the State has, in different places and times, essentially different natures.](#)"^[5] This remark flowed from Spencer's refusal to draw a bright line between state and society—a position that set him apart from many of his liberal predecessors. The state is "[society in its corporate capacity](#)";^[6] and just as societies have existed with fundamentally different natures, so their corresponding states have existed with fundamentally different natures. We see this in Spencer's celebrated distinction between two ideal types: the "militant" form of social organization (a "society of status" dominated by "compulsory cooperation" and a hierarchical system of command) versus the "industrial" form of social organization (a "society of contract" in

which individuals with equal rights deal with one another through "voluntary cooperation.")^[7]

It bears mentioning that Spencer distinguished between the meanings of "state" and "government." Spencer used the term "government" to denote any kind of regulative agency, as we see in his discussions of "political and ecclesiastical governments," and even "[industrial governments](#)," such as guilds and unions.^[8] Government is simply "a form of control," and the specifically *political* form of government "is neither the earliest nor the most general." Although we find no political mechanisms of control in some small societies, "there are none without that control which is exercised by established modes of behavior between man and man." There are "[peremptory rules](#)" of social intercourse even in the most primitive societies.^[9]

I think it is safe, given this information, to infer that the state, for Spencer, is the *institutional form of political control*. Although this *formal* similarity may not permit us to assign a specific nature, or essence, to the "state," the family resemblance (as a follower of Wittgenstein might say) among various states does permit us to *identify* them in specific cases.

In his first major work, *The Proper Sphere of Government* (1842), a young Spencer described a limited government devoted to the protection of individual rights as "[a government springing naturally out of the requirements of the community.](#)"^[10] In his later sociological writings, however, Spencer came to view all governments as natural insofar as they are manifestations of "public sentiments."

[\[E\]ven now, there is no clear apprehension of the fact](#) that governments are not themselves powerful, but are the instrumentalities of a power [public sentiments]. This power existed before governments arose; governments were themselves produced by it, and it ever continues to be that which, disguised more or less completely, works through them.^[11]

In primitive communities "[political power is the feeling of the community](#), acting through an agency which it has

either informally or formally established.” This governing sentiment is mainly from the past, however, as manifested in customs that even political heads may not violate. This “control by inherited usages”—a kind of “invisible framework” for social order—is often more effective in controlling behavior than formal laws.^[12] Thus the function of the primitive ruler “is mainly that of [enforcing the inherited rules of conduct](#) which embody ancestral sentiments and ideas.” And when law replaces custom, “the political head becomes still more clearly an agent through whom the feelings of the dead control the actions of the living.”^[13]

According to Spencer, “the properties of the aggregate are determined by the properties of its units.” Thus “so long as the characters of citizens remain substantially unchanged, there can be no substantial changes in the political organization which has slowly been evolved by them.” Although human nature is not fixed, although it is “indefinitely modifiable”—here we need to keep Spencer’s Lamarckism in mind—it “can be modified but very slowly,” so attempts to bring about radical political changes in a short time “will inevitably fail.” Spencer therefore cautioned that “[we must be on our guard against the two opposite prevailing errors](#) respecting Man, and against the sociological errors flowing from them: we have to get rid of the two beliefs that human nature is unchangeable, and that it is easily changed; and we have, instead, to become familiar with the conception of human nature that is changed in the slow succession of generations by social discipline.”^[14]

This conception of the state, according to which even the most despotic state reflects the average emotional characteristics of its citizens, again sets Spencer apart from those libertarian thinkers who viewed the state as a foreign element, in effect, that coercively imposes itself on society. There is another problem as well. Even savage states, Spencer maintained, are “ethically warranted” to some degree, because they arise *necessarily* from the social conditions at a given stage of social evolution and served a useful purpose of some kind. Here is one of Spencer’s many statements on this matter.

[In the first stage, death and injury of its members by external foes](#) is that which the incorporated society has chiefly, though not wholly, to prevent; and it is ethically warranted in coercing its members to the extent required for this. In the last stage, death and injury of its members by internal trespasses is that which it has chiefly if not wholly to prevent; and the ethical warrant for coercion does not manifestly go beyond what is needful for preventing them.^[15]

The problem of passing relative moral judgments that apply to the past but not to the present, while simultaneously upholding an objective theory of ethics, led to Spencer’s dichotomy between “[absolute](#)” and “relative” ethics.^[16] This troublesome distinction served as a bridge that enabled Spencer to cross back and forth between his role as a value-free sociologist and his role as a value-laden moral philosopher. In my opinion, Spencer’s distinction between absolute and relative ethics caused more problems than it solved, but I cannot explore the matter here. Perhaps the commentators will shed some sympathetic light on this issue, for this is one area where my sympathetic inclinations toward Spencer are overridden by skepticism tinged with cynicism.

2) I am scarcely the first to complain about Spencer’s many references to a “social organism,” but I wish to discuss some features of this term. In referring to society as an “organism,” Spencer meant this only as a useful analogy. It is “[a scaffolding to help in building up a coherent body of sociological inductions](#),” and if we take away this scaffolding, “the inductions will stand by themselves.”^[17] A literal organism “is a physical aggregate forming an individual,” whereas the metaphorical social organism is “[a physically incoherent aggregate of individuals](#) distributed over a wide area.” The analogies involved here “cannot be analogies of a visible or sensible kind; but can only be analogies between the systems, or methods, of organization.” In both cases there is “a mutual dependence of parts. This is the origin of all organization; and determines what similarities there are between an individual organism and a social organism.” There are also essential differences. Most

significantly, there is only one center of consciousness in an individual organism, whereas society consists of a multitude of conscious individuals—and this difference “entirely changes the ends to be pursued.”[18] In a living being the parts serve to sustain the life of the whole organism, whereas society exists to serve the ends of its individual parts.

The organismic analogy was useful to Spencer because it reinforced his point that “[society is a growth and not a manufacture.](#)” The insight that “societies are not artificially put together, is a truth so manifest, that it seems wonderful men should ever have overlooked it.”[19] This spontaneous development of society is especially evident in the division of labor.

[It is not by “the hero as king,” any more than by “collective wisdom,”](#) that men have been segregated into producers, wholesale distributors, and retail distributors. Our industrial organization, from its main outlines down to its minutest details, has become what it is, not simply without legislative guidance, but, to a considerable extent, in spite of legislative hindrances. It has arisen under the pressure of human wants and resulting activities. While each citizen has been pursuing his individual welfare, and none taking thought about division of labour, or conscious of the need of it, division of labour has yet been ever becoming more complete. It has been doing this slowly and silently: few having observed it until quite modern times. By steps so small, that year after year the industrial arrangements have seemed just what they were before—by changes as insensible as those through which a seed passes into a tree; society has become the complex body of mutually-dependent workers which we now see.[20]

Given this perspective, it is understandable why Spencer used the organismic analogy. But analogies should serve to clarify the point one wishes to make, and Spencer’s innumerable “parallelisms” between organisms and societies rarely serve this purpose. Consider one of

Spencer’s many discussions of the “community of structure” between physical organisms and society.

[Differing from one another as the viscera of a living creature](#) do in many respects, they have several traits in common. Each viscus contains appliances for conveying nutriment to its parts, for bringing it materials on which to operate, for carrying away the product, for draining off waste matter; as also for regulating its activity. Though liver and kidneys are unlike in their general appearances and minute structures, as well as in the offices they fulfill, the one as much as the other has a system of arteries, a system of veins, a system of lymphatics—has branched channels through which its excretions escape, and nerves for exciting and checking it....[21]

After elaborating along the same line, Spencer continued: “It is the same in a society”; and he concluded by emphasizing how similar an organism and a society truly are, given the “mutual dependence” found in each. But surely the point about the interdependence of individuals in a commercial society—a common theme in classical liberalism—could have been made without the paraphernalia of the organismic analogy. Indeed, in an effort to make his structural analogy more compelling, Spencer referred to a manufacturing district that “[secretes certain goods](#)” and to a seaport town that “*absorbs*” commodities (my italics).[22] Unfortunately, this kind of misleading biological language is strewn throughout Spencer’s writings on sociology, and it often detracts from his important ideas about social structures and functions.

Biology was a popular subject during the 19th century (many books for a general audience were published on the topic), and Spencer’s two-volume work *The Principles of Biology* was highly regarded by many “naturalists” of his era. It is therefore understandable if some contemporaries of Spencer reacted favorably to his seemingly endless organismic analogies. But the same is not generally true of modern readers, especially since many of Spencer’s biological details have become dated. This problem illustrates the danger of linking one’s

philosophy, including social philosophy, to the latest trends in science. As science advances, and as older theories become revised or discarded, the philosophy associated with a given scientific theory may be regarded as outdated as well—even though the philosophic reasoning might stand on its own, without the scientific prop.[23]

3) Another problem with Spencer is one that has annoyed me since I began reading him in the mid-1970s. This concerns Spencer's views about the indispensable role of war in furthering social progress. This was an odd position for a man who vigorously protested against the evils of war during his entire career, and who warned that the brutal, imperialistic adventures of his time were causing Britain and other countries to retrogress into the militant form of society—a process that was leading to the “re-barbarization” of Europe and that would inevitably end in disaster. Spencer's forebodings about the immediate future caused the depression and pessimism that scarred his later years. Yet the same man who despised war as much as is humanly possible wrote many passages like the following:

We must recognize the truth that the struggles for existence between societies have been instrumental in their evolution.... Social cooperation is initiated by joint defence and offence; and from the cooperation thus initiated, all kinds of cooperations have arisen. Inconceivable as have been the horrors caused by this universal antagonism which, beginning with the chronic hostilities of small hordes tens of thousands of years ago, has ended in the occasional vast battles of immense nations, we must nevertheless admit that without it the world would still have been inhabited only by men of feeble types, sheltering in caves and living on wild food.[24]

Although Spencer would have agreed with Randolph Bourne that “war is the health of the state,” he would not have been troubled by this insight in all cases, especially as it applies to earlier stages of social evolution. “Everywhere the wars between societies originated

governmental structures, and are causes of all such improvements in those structures as increase the efficiency of corporate action against environing societies.”[25] Although Spencer, strictly speaking, would not have agreed with the thesis of Franz Oppenheimer that states always originated in conquest, he did agree that “where there neither is, nor has been, any war there is no government.”[26] But Spencer did not regard this as necessarily a bad thing. On the contrary, earlier wars and conquests were a necessary and valuable stage in social evolution. Indeed, even “[a]mong existing uncivilized and semi-civilized races, we everywhere find that union of small societies by a conquering society is a step in civilization.”[27] The social scientist, in his quest for objectivity, must put aside his hatred of war and understand that its social benefits were the unintended consequences of what we may personally regard as barbaric acts. And, once again, Spencer appealed to his distinction between relative and absolute ethics when dealing with the moral implications of his position.

If any thesis defended by Spencer deserves extended consideration, this one is surely it. But space considerations demand that I mention only the *major* reason why Spencer defended his thesis about war. He wrote: “Hence, unquestionably, that integration effected by war, has been a needful preliminary to industrial development, and consequently to developments of other kinds—Science, the Fine Arts, &c.”[28] Working from the premise that the extensive division of labor needed for economic productivity and most cultural achievements requires a large population, Spencer insisted that societies would never have attained the requisite size if not for conquests that merged small societies into greater societies through the subordination and assimilation of conquered peoples. This is a complex subject, granted, but I would very much like to know what the commentators think about this claim.

Endnotes

[1.] Alberto Mingardi, *Herbert Spencer* (New York: Continuum, 2011).

[2.] My first article, “Will the Real Herbert Spencer Please Stand Up?” (*Libertarian Review*, Dec. 1978), attempts to

correct some common misunderstandings about Spencer, especially in regard to his “survival of the fittest” doctrine. My second and most technical article, ["Herbert Spencer's Theory of Causation"](#) (*Journal of Libertarian Studies*, Spring 1981), covers a broad range of topics, from Spencer's epistemology to his metaethics. More recently, I published five series of articles about Spencer as part of my “Excursions into Libertarian Thought” for [Libertarianism.org](#). See: ["Barack Obama, Social Darwinism, and Survival of the Fittest"](#) (3 parts); ["From Optimism to Pessimism: The Case of Herbert Spencer"](#) (7 parts); ["Herbert Spencer, Henry George, and the Land Question"](#) (6 parts); ["Thomas Hodgskin Versus Herbert Spencer"](#) (3 parts); and ["A Gossipy Interlude: George Eliot, Herbert Spencer, and John Chapman"](#) (3 parts). I also discuss Spencer in my latest book, *The System of Liberty: Themes in the History of Classical Liberalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[\[3.\]](#) Spencer wrote: “[S]o far from disliking the process of polishing, I had a partiality for it; and cannot let any piece of work pass so long as it seems to me possible to improve it.” Regarding *The Study of Sociology* in its various forms, both published and in proofs, Spencer said that “every sentence in the work had passed under my eye for correction five times; and each time there was rarely a page which did not bear some erasures and marginal marks.” *An Autobiography* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1904), II:423.

[\[4.\]](#) Of course, apparent inconsistencies in Spencer may be nothing of the kind; they may merely reflect his change of views as he got older. In other cases, the problem may lie in Spencer's peculiar approach to some matters, as when he insists, in *Social Statics* (1850), that ethics, including the Law of Equal Freedom, applies only to the “ideal man,” i.e., to a future society populated by people with highly evolved moral sentiments. On these issues see my series, linked above, “From Optimism to Pessimism: The Case of Herbert Spencer.” (A note about the publication year of *Social Statics*: Although the first edition published by John Chapman says 1851, Spencer repeatedly stated that it was actually published in

December 1850. This accounts for the discrepancy sometimes found in secondary sources that cite the book.)

[\[5.\]](#) *The Principles of Ethics* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1898), II:182 (§346). This two-volume work, like *The Principles of Sociology* and other titles in *The Synthetic Philosophy*, contains section numbers that run consecutively through all volumes of the same title. Since page numbers may vary in different editions of the same book, I have included section numbers, where appropriate, in parentheses to facilitate locating quoted passages.

[\[6.\]](#) *Principles of Ethics*, II:186 (§347).

[\[7.\]](#) Spencer invoked his ideal types in many essays and books. For his most thorough discussions, see the following chapters in *The Principles of Sociology*: “Social Types and Constitutions” (Chapter X of the first volume), “The Militant Type of Society” (Chapter XVII of the second volume), and “The Industrial Type of Society” (Chapter XVIII of the second volume).

[\[8.\]](#) *The Principles of Sociology* (New York: D. Appleton and Company), I:440 (§210).

[\[9.\]](#) *An Autobiography*, II:355.

[\[10.\]](#) Reprinted in *The Man Versus the State: With Six Essays on Government Society, and Freedom*, ed. Eric Mack (Indianapolis, Ind.: Liberty Classics, 1981), 185. *The Proper Sphere of Government* originally appeared as a series of eleven letters in the *Nonconformist* (1842), a dissenting periodical edited by Edward Miall, a major figure in the campaign to disestablish the Church of England. In August 1843, the 23-year-old Spencer revised his letters and published them as a booklet at his own expense. “Perhaps a hundred copies were sold and less than a tenth of the cost repaid.” Many were distributed “to friends and to men of note.” Later, in 1848, Spencer gave a copy to James Wilson, founder and proprietor of *The Economist*, and that complimentary copy helped to land Spencer a job as sub-editor. See Herbert Spencer, *An Autobiography* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1904), I:264, 380. The reprint in the Liberty Classics anthology is from the pamphlet version.

- [11.] *The Principles of Sociology*, II:318 (§466).
- [12.] *Ibid.*, II:321-22 (§467).
- [13.] *Ibid.*, II:323 (§468).
- [14.] *The Study of Sociology* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1896), 111, 109, 132.
- [15.] *Principles of Ethics*, I (§347)
- [16.] See “Absolute Political Ethics,” in *Essays: Scientific, Political, and Speculative* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1899), III:217-28.
- [17.] *Principles of Sociology*, II:592-93 (§270).
- [18.] “Specialized Administration,” in *Essays*, III:411.
- [19.] “The Social Organism,” in *ibid.*, I:269, 266.
- [20.] *Ibid.*, 266-67.
- [21.] *Principles of Sociology*, I:477-78 (§231).
- [22.] *Ibid.*, 478.
- [23.] It should be noted that Spencer, in his three-volume *The Principles of Sociology* (and elsewhere), clearly segregated his analyses of organisms from his sociological reasoning, so the reader can easily and safely skip over the former without missing anything. I daresay that I am not the only modern reader who usually does this. And I heartily recommend this selective procedure to people who are beginning to become interested in Spencer’s sociology, lest they get mired down in boring and irrelevant biological details and give up, believing that the game is not worth the candle.
- [24.] *Principles of Sociology*, II:241 (§438).
- [25.] *Ibid.*, I:520. (§250).
- [26.] *Principles of Ethics*, II:202 (§356).
- [27.] *Study of Sociology*, 176.
- [28.] *Ibid.*, 177.

WHY DO CLASSICAL LIBERALS NEGLECT HERBERT SPENCER

by Alberto Mingardi

Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) was a tremendously successful author in life, and a much forgotten one since his death. I think George H. Smith’s truly illuminating essay on Spencer’s “Sociology of the State” will help even the reader who is most alien to Spencer’s works to understand why.

Smith suggests that Spencer may be one of the most “complex figures in the history of classical liberalism.” Yet Spencer is ritually caricatured as a rather simple, linear, and almost naive proponent of *laissez faire*. Much irony has been made of the following episode, told by Spencer: His friend George Eliot (1819-1880) told him once that

considering how much thinking I must have done, she was surprised to see no lines on my forehead. “I suppose it is because I am never puzzled,” I said. [*Autobiography*, vol. 1, p. 462.]

Spencer meant that his thoughts matured more by means of accumulating data than by delving into the answer to any specific question.^[29] But many thought Spencer was never puzzled because he had the solution to any problem: reliance on the forces of progress and, in political matters, strict adherence to the principle of *laissez-faire*.



John Stuart Mill

If you compare him with his contemporary John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), for example, Spencer stands out clearly as an adamant proponent of libertarianism. For Albert J. Nock (1870-1945), Spencer's *Social Statics* was "[to the philosophy of individualism](#) what the work of the German idealist philosophers is to the doctrine of Statism, what *Das Kapital* is to Statist economic theory, or what the Pauline Epistles are to the theology of Protestantism" [Nock, "Introduction", to Spencer, *The Man versus the State*.]

Of course, this might be a bit of an exaggeration. But it is indeed surprising that Nock is basically alone, among 20th-century classical liberals, in holding such a view. Take Spencer's best known contributions, at least today - - the essays included in [The Man Versus the State](#). They are prophetic, having anticipated some of the major problems classical liberals would have to wrestle with in the following century: welfare dependency, unintended consequences in law-making, the fact that one state intervention leads to another. He also exhibited classical liberalism's skepticism over the idea that popular government per se legitimizes any government intervention.

Why, then, did 20th-century classical liberals not pick up on Spencer? "Hayek's philosophy has many affinities with Spencer's," John Gray wrote,[\[30\]](#) but there is no

evidence Hayek ever dug deep into Spencer's essays. Neither have many Hayekians.

I suggest there might be two reasons for Spencer's eclipse in 20th-century classical liberalism.

One I'll trace back to the influence of Walter Lippmann's (1889-1974) *The Good Society*.[\[31\]](#) Lippman read Spencer and borrowed some of his arguments. However, he considered him one of those "latter-day liberals" who "became the apologists for miseries and injustices that were intolerable to the conscience."[\[32\]](#) Spencer was supposedly exposed as heartless,[\[33\]](#) whereas 20th-century liberals wanted to prove they were not. It is understandable: government intervention in, say, education is perhaps so embedded in the contemporary mind that calling for a little bit of competition (vouchers), instead of outright repeal of compulsory education, sounds revolutionary enough.

The second reason is what George Smith points out in his essay. Spencer's thought is more complex than people commonly acknowledge. He was a remarkably consistent political thinker, but he evolved (pardon the pun) in constructing a global view of society that he hoped to be value-free and objective, in the positivist fashion. Spencer's works are swamped with data collected from different sources: history, anthropology, and reports of geographical explorations and of encounters with "primitive" cultures. From all that, without being puzzled but building layer after layer of knowledge, he tried to deduce regularities and trends.

I am afraid this is the only meaningful comment I may add specifically on the important question George Smith raises—and it is hardly an original one. Spencer incurred in many ways a fate similar to that of Vilfredo Pareto (1848-1923). In his younger years, Pareto was the staunchest of classical liberals and, as a matter of fact, a great admirer of Spencer. But in later years, Pareto's positivism grew over his libertarianism, and the latter was at least partially laid aside. (Pareto's humanitarian pacifism certainly was.)

Now, what may be indeed puzzling in Spencer is that he did not sacrifice his youthful ideas to the altar of his

science. I think his skepticism over state intervention is remarkably expressed in the following passage of his *Autobiography*:

[Again,] [why should we hope so much from State-agency in new fields](#), when in the old fields it has bungled so miserably? Why, if the organisations for national defence and administration of justice work so ill that loud complaints are daily made, should we be anxious for other organisations of kindred type?

Similar words you may find in many of his works, regardless of the age at which he wrote them. His essay “[Over-Legislation](#)” (1853) is perhaps one of the most eloquent libertarian perorations ever written, besides being the singular article to read to acquire, in Robert Nisbet’s words, “an accurate and full appreciation of Spencer’s liberalism.”^[34]



Robert Nisbet

Indeed, sometimes Spencer considered that in *The Proper Sphere of Government* “[the youthful enthusiasm of two-and-twenty](#) naturally carried me too far”, for example, in arguing for the possibility of a [stateless citizens’ self-organization](#) in the event of a foreign aggression. However, as George Smith reminds us, Spencer “vigorously protested against the evils of war during his entire career.”

And yet he considered war as instrumental in consolidating social organization at *some stage of society’s evolution*. The development of organization in society was in itself instrumental for the advent of industrialism (e.g.,

factories relied on principles of organization first developed and tested with armies). Societies that grow complex and decentralized began as simple and hierarchical.

This tension within Spencer’s thought is not necessarily an inconsistency, but I think it reflects his struggle to develop a dispassionate view of societal development. His distinction between relative and absolute ethics was for me the source of several headaches. But I find it indeed admirable that Spencer succeeded, somehow, in securing an equilibrium between value-free sociologist and the classical-liberal theorist.

Of course, this doesn’t help the world to accept the truths of Spencer’s writings, even if now it has indeed “traveled a certain number of times [from Bismarckism to communism, and back from communism to Bismarckism](#).”^[35] Nor does it help us either to single out those very truths. But I consider it a testimony to the intellectual honesty and depth of thought of the man who was never puzzled.

Endnotes

^[29.] As Spencer himself described it this way: “[\[My\] mode of thinking did not involve that concentrated effort](#) which is commonly accompanied by wrinkling of the brows. It has never been my way to set before myself a problem and puzzle out an answer. The conclusion at which I have from time to time arrived, have not been arrived at as solutions of questions raised; but have been arrived at unawares—each as the ultimate outcome of a body of thoughts which slowly grew from a germ” *Autobiography*, vol. 1, p. 463.

^[30.] John Gray, *Hayek on Liberty* (London: Routledge, [1986] 1998), p. 103.

^[31.] Walter Lippmann, *The Good Society* (New Brunswick: Transaction, [1937] 2004), p. 182.

^[32.] Often liberals complained of Spencer’s alleged “drift to conservatism,” particularly because he revised some of the ideas expressed in his 1851 edition of *Social Statics*. But the very page on which Lippmann refers to Spencer as an apologist for the status quo, he

footnotes *Social Statics*. Lippmann was convinced that laissez faire was useful for removing old restrictions in the 18th century, but it became “grotesque” as it evolved into a dogma that some area of human life should be preserved from government regulation.

[33.] Spencer, as a matter of fact, wasn’t so heartless, as he maintained there was a role for charity in human affairs. (See Roderick Long’s admirable defense, “Herbert Spencer: The Defamation Continues” <<https://www.lewrockwell.com/2003/08/roderick-t-long/herbert-spencer/>>). But indeed sometimes, for example when he spoke of welfare dependence, he may sound awkward to the contemporary reader.

[34.] "Over Legislation" first appeared in *The Westminster Review* in July, 1853 and was reprinted in vol. 3 of Spencer’s *Essays: Scientific, Political and Speculative* (London and New York, 1892, in three volumes) </titles/337#lf0620-03 head 007>. It can also be found in the Liberty Fund edition of *The Man versus the State, with Six Essays on Government, Society and Freedom*, ed. Eric Mack, introduction by Albert Jay Nock (Indianapolis: LibertyClassics, 1981) </titles/330>. Robert Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress*, New Brunswick: Transaction, 1980), p. 231.

[35.] Auberon Herbert (1838-1906) wished the world could accept the truths of Spencer’s writings once it had traveled a certain number of times from Bismarckism to communism and back from communism to Bismarckism. See, "Essay Two: State Education: A Help or Hindrance?" (1880) in Auberon Herbert, *The Right and Wrong of Compulsion by the State, and Other Essays*, ed. Eric Mack (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1978). </titles/591#Herbert 0146 60>.

HERBERT SPENCER: HOMO NON-ÆCONOMICUS

by Roderick T. Long

Herbert Spencer was not an economist.

This is not to say that he was uninterested in, or ignorant of, economics. On the contrary, he had a keen understanding of economic principles and often invoked them in his writings. Nevertheless, economics was not one of the *primary* lenses through which he viewed social phenomena. His massive series of *Synthetic Philosophy* contains volumes on the principles of biology, of psychology, of sociology, and of ethics – but no *Principles of Economics*.

This fact, I suggest, is what ties together the aspects of Spencer’s thought that George Smith points to as puzzling in his lead essay.

1. Spencer and the State

One way of bringing the issue into focus is to ask: why isn’t Spencer an anarchist? Given Spencer’s hostility to authority, his enthusiasm for spontaneous order and laissez faire, and his commitment to the law of equal freedom, why doesn’t he favor the abolition of the state’s monopoly on security? What, in George’s words, “sets Spencer apart from those libertarian thinkers who viewed the state as a foreign element, in effect, that coercively imposes itself on society”?



*Herbert Spencer
When 38*

Herbert Spencer

Now this may seem an odd question; for after all, in one important sense Spencer *is* an anarchist, albeit of the long-run sort. I refer not to his famous “[right to ignore the state](#)”, since this is only a right to withdraw affiliation from the monopoly provider of security, not a right to affiliate with a competing provider operating in the same territory.^[36] Rather, I have in mind a less well-known remark toward the beginning of *Social Statics*:

[It is a mistake to assume that government must necessarily last for ever.](#) The institution marks a certain stage of civilization – is natural to a particular phase of human development. It is not essential but incidental. As amongst the Bushmen we find a state antecedent to government; so may there be one in which it shall have become extinct.²^[37]

In his later writings Spencer is less explicit in treating anarchy as the natural endpoint of social evolution, but the eventual non-necessity of government still seems to be implied by his doctrine that as human nature becomes progressively more adapted to social cooperation, “[eventually sympathetic pleasures will be spontaneously pursued](#) to the fullest extent advantageous to each and all,” and altruistic sentiment will “attain a level ... such that

ministration to others’ happiness will become a daily need.”^[38] What need would there be for coercive institutions of social order in circumstances like these?

But if anarchy is the desideratum, it is a distant one; Spencer insists that it will take a very long time for human nature to evolve to the point at which egoistic conflicts can be absorbed into universal benevolence. Spencer assumes that, absent government interference, benevolent motives are required to secure beneficent action – whereas economists are more likely to bear in mind Adam Smith’s dictum that it is “[not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest.](#)”^[39]

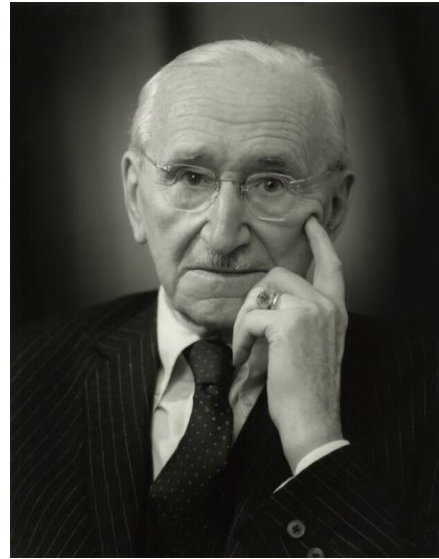
Several of Spencer’s libertarian contemporaries – writers like Gustave de Molinari,^[40] Benjamin Tucker,^[41] and Francis Tandy^[42] – were defending the free-market anarchist model of security providers competing on an open market. This would not be the absence of government in Spencer’s sense of “government,” since institutions of social control would still exist; but it would mean the end of the asymmetry of rights involved in the state’s monopoly of the security industry – an asymmetry that a proponent of Spencer’s law of equal freedom might be expected to condemn. Crucially, the free-market anarchist model does not require a transformation of human nature; it was not from the benevolence of the anarchist society’s inhabitants, but from their regard to their own interests – interests channeled by supply and demand – that Molinari, Tucker, and Tandy expected the provision of security. Why was Spencer not among their ranks?

The clue, I think, lies in a line that George quotes from Spencer’s *The Study of Sociology*: “[so long as the characters of citizens remain substantially unchanged](#), there can be no substantial changes in the political organization.”^[43] By contrast, it would be natural for an economist to think that the same people with the same characters might behave very differently when confronted with different incentives – with those found in competitive rather than monopolistic systems, for example.

Now Spencer is certainly capable in many contexts of noticing and pointing out how people respond to incentives. And of course it's also true that the social system that provides the better incentives will be stable only so long as it enjoys popular acquiescence; Immanuel Kant's insistence that a good constitution will work even for a "race of devils"[\[44\]](#) surely puts too much emphasis on institutions and not enough on the culture that makes those institutions viable. But Spencer seems to err in the opposite direction in implicitly denying that any significant alteration of political institutions and their attendant incentives can be achieved without a fundamental change in people's basic motivations. My suggestion is that this relative overemphasis of the dependence of institutions on character both *explains* Spencer's failure to regard anarchism as practicable for people as they are now and *is explained by* the fact that while the economic lens is one he knows how to use, and indeed uses quite well when he chooses to, it is not among the tools he reaches for first.

2. Society as Organism

Spencer's organismic characterization of society can be off-putting to libertarians. As Friedrich Hayek notes, "The interpretation of society as an organism has almost invariably been used in support of hierarchic and authoritarian views."[\[45\]](#) Spencer largely vindicates his organismic analogy by stressing the bottom-up, nonhierarchical character of an organism's self-maintenance; according to Spencer, within an organism as within a society the "[spontaneous activities of these vital organs](#) subserve the wants of the body at large without direction from its higher governing centres"; and when these organs "follow their respective 'interests'" the "general welfare will be tolerably well secured."[\[46\]](#)



Friedrich von Hayek

And other libertarian thinkers who could hardly be accused of lacking an economic turn of mind have followed Spencer in seeing the organismic analogy as reinforcing rather than undermining the case for laissez faire. Ludwig von Mises, for example, embraces the organismic model of society, writing:

[Organism and organization are as different from each other as life is from a machine](#), as a flower which is natural from one which is artificial. In the natural plant each cell lives its own life for itself while functioning reciprocally with the others.... In the artificial plant the separate parts are members of the whole only as far as the will of him, who united them, has been effective.... Each part occupies only the place given to it, and leaves that place, so to speak, only on instructions.... Organization is an association based on authority, organism is mutuality.[\[47\]](#)

And likewise, while anthills, beehives, and termite colonies are often seen as symbols of authoritarian collectivism, economist Don Lavoie makes a case for regarding them as bottom-up instances of spontaneous order as well:

The popular conception of an insect society is one of a centrally directed allocation of obedient insects to given tasks.... In fact, however, modern research has shown that insect societies are

neither rigidly structured nor centrally directed.... [T]here is no need to postulate a central decision-maker – perhaps some kind of master termite issuing decrees to his followers – in order to explain the remarkably well-ordered functioning of a termite colony. The complex activities achievable by these lowly insects are made possible by what [Edward O.] Wilson calls “mass communication,” which he defines as “the transfer among groups of information that a single individual could not pass to another.” Some of the many examples Wilson provides of such ordered behavior attained through mass communication are the complex flanking maneuvers of ant swarms, the regulation of numbers of workers pursuing odor trails, and the precise thermoregulation of nests. In these tasks the action of each individual is never strictly controlled by any mechanism but “results from the competing stimuli impinging on it, including those produced by other members of the colony.” In other words we have a primitive form of mutual coordination in which the actions of each participant both contribute a kind of pressure to the actions of other participants while simultaneously being guided in its own actions by similar pressures contributed by others....If one observes insects at the level of the individual, one finds what Marx calls an “anarchy of production,” an ongoing rivalrous struggle among apparently uncoordinated insects, some feverishly attempting to achieve one purpose while others busily work at a contradictory goal.... “Although these various antagonistic actions seem chaotic when viewed at close range, [Wilson continued,] their final result is almost invariably a well-constructed nest that closely conforms to the plan exhibited throughout the species....”[48]

So the organismic model of society has its legitimate libertarian uses.[49] All the same, when Spencer begins talking, as he does in the passages George cites, about towns “secreting” or “absorbing” commodities and so on,

we rightly feel that something important is missing – namely, the fact that economic actors are driven by *beliefs* and *preferences* in a way that cells and organs are not, so that to understand their behavior we must *take up their perspective* (while cells and organs have no perspective to take up – and ants and termites a perspective only in a very limited sense). This *methodological subjectivism* is the approach of economics (well, of economics done properly); as Hayek observes:

Take such things as tools, food, medicine, weapons, words, sentences, communications, and acts of production.... I believe these to be fair samples of the kind of objects of human activity which constantly occur in the social sciences. It is easily seen that all these concepts ... refer not to some objective properties possessed by the things, or which the observer can find out about them, but to views which some other person holds about the things. These objects cannot even be defined in physical terms, because there is no single physical property which any one member of a class must possess.... They are all instances of what are sometimes called “teleological concepts,” that is, they can be defined only by indicating relations between three terms: a purpose, somebody who holds that purpose, and an object which that person thinks to be a suitable means for that purpose. If we wish, we could say that all these objects are defined not in terms of their “real” properties but in terms of opinions people hold about them. In short, in the social sciences the things are what people think they are. Money is money, a word is a word, a cosmetic is a cosmetic, if and because somebody thinks they are.[50]

This economic perspective is the dimension that Spencer is missing when he views social phenomena through the lens of biology. Circulation of the blood is circulation of the blood regardless of what anyone believes or wants, but trade is only trade because of the subjective perspective of the traders.

I don't mean to deny that there are plenty of passages in which Spencer explains social phenomena by appealing to the beliefs, desires, and plans of the participants. Of course there are. I'm not saying he never uses his economic lens; I'm saying he sometimes forgets to use it.

3. War – What Is It Good For?

George's third puzzle concerns Spencer's conviction that warfare, while destined to wither away at the end of history (so to speak), is necessary and valuable in earlier eras. Now the idea of necessary stages of history, with unavoidable periods of conflict and domination preparing the way for a future of freedom and harmony, was extraordinarily common and influential in the 19th century; Charles Dunoyer, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Gustave de Molinari, and Karl Marx, for example, each held some version of this theory.^[51] And they were all in some sense economists, so I can't place all the blame on an insufficiently frequent resort to the economic lens.

All the same, I can't help thinking that Spencer's (admittedly intermittent) economic blind spot might play *some* role here. From an economic standpoint, the nature of trade as a positive-sum game, and war as a zero-sum or negative-sum game, seems like a universal principle that should remain constant across eras; hence an economist would be likely to see wars as socially suboptimal whenever they occur. But if one's vision of historical development is based on the analogy of the growth of an organism, the idea of different principles applying at different stages will seem much more natural; after all, one wouldn't try to hang a tire swing on a young sapling, or enter a newborn greyhound pup in a race.

An organismic model of society tends to make suboptimal stages *look natural*. Perhaps one root of Spencer's distinction between relative and absolute ethics lies here?

Endnotes

[36.] Herbert Spencer, "The Right to Ignore the State"; in *Social Statics: or, The Conditions Essential to Happiness Specified, and the First of Them Developed* (London: John Chapman 1850), pp. 206-216. It is incidentally difficult to see how this right is to be reconciled with the right of

the community, asserted by Spencer, to charge individuals for the use of land. ("The Right to the Use of the Earth," *Social Statics*, pp. 114-25.) If each individual is free to refuse all association with the state, what agency is to collect the land-use fees?

[37.] *Social Statics*, p. 13.

[38.] Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Ethics* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1978). Vol. 1, I.14, §§ 92-95.

[39.] Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (London: Methuen & Co., 1904), Vol. 1, I, § 2.

[40.] Gustave de Molinari, "De la production de la sécurité," *Journal des Économistes* (Feb. 1849), pp. 277-90; translation online: <https://mises.org/books/production_of_security.pdf>. See also Molinari, *Les Soirées de la rue Saint-Lazare: entretiens sur les lois économiques et défense de la propriété* (Paris: Guillaumin, 1849); translation online: <</pages/molinari-s-evenings-on-saint-lazarus-street-1849>>.

[41.] Benjamin R. Tucker, *Instead Of A Book, By A Man Too Busy To Write One: A Fragmentary Exposition of Philosophical Anarchism* (Boston: self-published, 1893); online: <<http://fair-use.org/benjamin-tucker/instead-of-a-book>>.

[42.] Francis Dashwood Tandy, *Voluntary Socialism: A Sketch* (Denver: self-published, 1896); online: <<https://praxeology.net/FDT-VS.htm>>.

[43.] Herbert Spencer, *The Study of Sociology* (London: Henry S. King & Co., 1873), p. 121.

[44.] Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Essay*, trans. M. Campbell Smith (London: Allen and Unwin, [1795] 1917), pp. 153-54; online: <</titles/357>>.

[45.] Friedrich A. Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty: A New Statement of the Liberal Principles of Justice and Political Economy* (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 51.

[46.] Herbert Spencer, "Specialized Administration," pp. 458-59, in *The Man versus the State, with Six Essays on*

Government, Society and Freedom, ed. Eric Mack (Indianapolis, Ind.: Liberty Fund, 1981), pp. 435-86.

[47.] Ludwig von Mises, *Socialism: An Economic and Sociological Analysis*, trans. J. Kahane (Indianapolis, Ind.: Liberty Fund, 1981), p. 191.

[48.] Don Lavoie, *National Economic Planning: What Is Left?* (Washington, D.C.: Cato Institute, 1985), pp. 67-69; online: <<http://store.cato.org/free-ebooks/national-economic-planning-what-left>>.

[49.] There's a reason the Center for a Stateless Society's blog <<https://c4ss.org/content/category/stigmergy-c4ss-blog>> is called *Stigmergy* <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stigmergy>>.

[50.] Friedrich A. Hayek, "The Facts of the Social Sciences," in *Individualism and Economic Order* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1948), pp. 57-76; online: <<https://mises.org/document/4015/Individualism-and-Economic-Order>>.

[51.] Marx's views are, I take it, well known. For the others, see, e.g., Charles Dunoyer, *L'Industrie et la morale considérées dans leurs rapports avec la liberté* (Paris: A. Sautet, 1825). Online: <http://davidmhart.com/liberty/FrenchClassicalLiberals/Dunoyer/Books/Dunoyer_1825IndustrieMorale.pdf>; Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *La Guerre et la Paix: recherches sur le principe et la constitution du droit des gens* (Paris: E. Dentu, 1861); and Gustave de Molinari, *Grandeur et Décadence de la Guerre* (Paris, 1898). Online: <http://davidmhart.com/liberty/FrenchClassicalLiberals/Molinari/Books/Molinari_1898GrandeurDecadenceGuerre.pdf>. An interesting exception is Frédéric Bastiat, who chides Proudhon for supposing that what is harmful today could be salutary in earlier eras; for discussion, see Roderick T. Long, "The Bastiat-Proudhon Debate on Interest: Commentary" (2008), online: <<https://praxeology.net/FB-PJP-DOI-Appx.htm>>.

IT'S ALL THERE IN SOCIAL STATICS

by David M. Levy

George Smith challenges us to help solve, to use David Hart's lovely phrase, *Das Herbert Spencer Problem*. Coming from an authority of his stature, how could anyone resist! I will urge that before we make Spencer coherent, we need to make his texts more complicated. By this I mean only that we ought to think of how his texts fit into the contemporary discussions of political economy and utilitarianism. To make the argument, I'll give some evidence that what Smith sees as a puzzle in Spencer's life's work, the relationship between sociology and morality, is all there in *Social Statics* but expressed in terms of utilitarianism and what we now see as collective-action problems.

Political economy. If there is one thing that the ordinary reader "knows," it is Spencer's role in the foundation of eugenics. This is, of course, only another illustration of Josh Billings's dictum (often cited by Frank Knight) that it isn't so much what we don't know that gets us into trouble, but what we know that isn't so. In fact, Spencer did seem to have an important role to play in that *Social Statics* was credited by A. R. Wallace as influencing his 1864 paper at the Anthropological Society that human sympathy for the less able turns off natural selection. As natural selection had attained a normative status, the response to Wallace's argument was to deaden sympathy to allow natural selection to work its progressive magic on humanity. Hence, the "science" of eugenics.[52]



Frank Knight

Spencer? Here's what Wallace wrote in the final footnote on the 1864 paper:

The general idea and argument in this paper I believe to be new. It was, however, the perusal of Mr. Herbert Spencer's works, especially *Social Statics*, that suggested it to me....[53]

Earlier that year (January 2, 1864) Wallace had written to Charles Darwin urging him to look into Spencer's work on political economy:

I am utterly astonished that so few people seem to read Spencer, & the utter ignorance there seems to be among politicians & political economists of the grand views & logical stability of his works. He appears to me as far ahead of John Stuart Mill as J.S.M. is of the rest of the world, and I may add as Darwin is of Agassiz.[54]

So if we are looking for the foundations of evolutionary political economy, *Social Statics* needs to be considered.

Utilitarianism. Here's is where we can directly address the question of the stability of Spencer's philosophy. Did Spencer's 1852 glance at natural selection or Darwin's full-dress exposition in 1859 lead Spencer to abandon all his teachings in *Social Statics*? Spencer's argument in *Social Statics* is enormously important because it raises the question whether utilitarians haven't implicitly assumed that all men have an equal right to happiness.[55]

But it is amusing when, after all, it turns out that the ground on which these philosophers have

taken their stand, and from which with such self-complacency they shower their sarcasms, is nothing but an adversary's mine, destined to blow the vast fabric of conclusions they have based on it into nonentity. This so solid-looking principle of "the greatest happiness to the greatest number," needs but to have a light brought near it, and lo! it explodes into the astounding assertion, that all men have equal rights to happiness—an assertion far more sweeping and revolutionary than any of those which are assailed with so much scorn.

This drew a note in J.S. Mill's 1861 *Utilitarianism*, which I quote from the Toronto – Liberty Fund edition that notes the changes in the 1863 printing:

This implication, in the first principle of the utilitarian scheme, of perfect impartiality between persons, is regarded by Mr. Herbert Spencer (in his *Social Statics* as a disproof of the pretensions of utility to be a sufficient guide to [61 be the foundation of] right; since (he says) the principle of utility presupposes the anterior principle, that everybody has an equal right to happiness. It may be more correctly described as supposing that equal amounts of happiness are equally desirable, whether felt by the same or by different persons. This, however, is not a presupposition [61, 63, 64 *presupposition*]; not a premise needful to support the principle of utility, but the very principle itself; for what is the principle of utility, if it be not that "happiness" and "desirable" are synonymous terms? If there is any anterior principle implied, it can be no other than this, that the truths [61 rules] of arithmetic are applicable to the valuation of happiness, as of all other measurable quantities

This prompted a letter to Mill from Spencer that is acknowledged in the 1863 printing of *Utilitarianism*. I quote the first part of the note:

[63] Mr. Herbert Spencer, in a private communication on the subject of the preceding Note, objects to being considered an opponent

of Utilitarianism, and states that he regards happiness as the ultimate end of morality; but deems that end only partially attainable by empirical generalizations from the observed results of conduct, and completely attainable only by deducing, from the laws of life and the conditions of existence, what kinds of action necessarily tend to produce happiness, and what kinds to produce unhappiness. With the exception of the word “necessarily,” I have no dissent to express from this doctrine; and (omitting that word) I am not aware that any modern advocate of utilitarianism is of a different opinion.

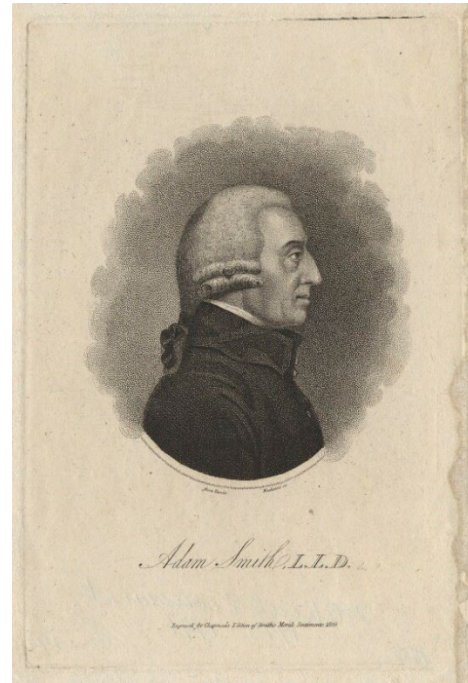
The Toronto Liberty Fund edition gives Spencer’s 1904 *Autobiography* as source of Spencer’s letter, but it doesn’t tell the reader what Spencer said about the letter. Spencer seems not to have realized that Mill responded by taking back the substantial criticism!

[Mr. J. S. Mill had just published his book](#) on *Utilitarianism*. In it, to my surprise, I found myself classed as an Anti-utilitarian. Not liking to let pass a characterization which I regarded as erroneous, I wrote to him explaining my position—showing in what I agreed with the existing school of Utilitarians, and in what I differed from them. The essential part of this letter was published by Professor Bain in one of the closing chapters of his *Mental and Moral Science*; but it is not to be found anywhere in my own works. As it seems unfit that this anomalous distribution should be permanent, I decide to reprint it here; omitting the opening and closing paragraphs:— ...

If nothing else this shows that memory needs to be controlled by manuscript even if the manuscript in question in the 1863 printing of *Utilitarianism*.

From this episode is it I think safe to read Spencer from *Social Statics* onward as a utilitarian. If he’d changed his mind, then why wouldn’t he tell this to Mill? Or mention the change in *Autobiography*?

Of course we are to deal with the “necessary” move, but that I consider in due course. [Spencer described utilitarianism](#), seeking for the greatest happiness of an empirical basis, as a philosophy of expediency.



Adam Smith

Das Adam Smith Problem. Spencer’s *Social Statics* ought to be famous in the Adam Smith literature as emphasizing the importance of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and the sympathetic principle.^[56] I quote the beginning of a long argument:

[Seeing, however, that this instinct of personal rights is a purely selfish instinct](#), leading each man to assert and defend his own liberty of action, there remains the question—Whence comes our perception of the rights of others? The way to a solution of this difficulty has been opened by Adam Smith in his “Theory of Moral Sentiments.” It is the aim of that work to show that the proper regulation of our conduct to one another, is secured by means of a faculty whose function it is to excite in each being the emotions displayed by surrounding ones—a faculty which awakens a like state of sentiment, or, as he terms it, “a fellow feeling with the passions of others”—the faculty, in short, which we

commonly call Sympathy. As illustrations of the mode in which this agent acts, he quotes cases like these:—...

There is an argument in *Social Statics* that speaks to Spencer's disagreement with Mill over the role of necessary truths. He cites as one necessary truth the proposition that humans are mortal and argues for another:[\[57\]](#)

[Thus the ultimate development of the ideal man](#) is logically certain—as certain as any conclusion in which we place the most implicit faith; for instance, that all men will die. For why do we infer that all men will die? Simply because, in an immense number of past experiences, death has uniformly occurred. Similarly then as the experiences of all people in all times—experiences that are embodied in maxims, proverbs, and moral precepts, and that are illustrated in biographies and histories, go to prove that organs, faculties, powers, capacities, or whatever else we call them, grow by use and diminish from disuse, it is inferred that they will continue to do so. And if this inference is unquestionable, then is the one above deduced from it—that humanity must in the end become completely adapted to its conditions—unquestionable also.

Spencer writes in *Social Statics* a good deal about the perfect man. The “straight man” about whom George Smith expresses reservations seems to be simply one in whom consideration of the rights of others has been fully internalized. “Right,” Spencer defines in terms of “[straight](#).”

I quote a passage in which the “absolute” is laid out in terms of geometry. Supposing that Spencer was thinking of geometry in terms of necessary truths, then his moral argument concerning the “straight man” is an exercise in modal logic. Spencer's “absolute” might be helpfully read as “necessary”

[No conclusions can lay claim to absolute truth](#), but such as depend upon truths that are

themselves absolute. Before there can be exactness in an inference, there must be exactness in the antecedent propositions. A geometrician requires that the straight lines with which he deals shall be veritably straight; and that his circles, and ellipses, and parabolas shall agree with precise definitions—shall perfectly and invariably answer to specified equations. If you put to him a question in which these conditions are not complied with, he tells you that it cannot be answered. So likewise is it with the philosophical moralist. He treats solely of the *straight* man. He determines the properties of the straight man; describes how the straight man comports himself; shows in what relationship he stands to other straight men; shows how a community of straight men is constituted. Any deviation from strict rectitude he is obliged wholly to ignore. It cannot be admitted into his premises without vitiating all his conclusions. A problem in which a *crooked* man forms one of the elements is insoluble by him. He may state what he thinks about it—may give an approximate solution; but anything more is impossible. His decision is no longer scientific and authoritative, but is now merely an *opinion*.

A real world problem. Where does utilitarianism fit into Spencer's theme in *Social Statics*? It gives us a guide to government *before* we have (fully) adapted to the social state:

[Although the adaptation of man to the social state](#) has already made considerable progress—although the need for external restraint is less—and although consequently that reverence for authority which makes restraint possible, has greatly diminished—diminished to such an extent that the holders of power are daily caricatured, and men begin to listen to the National Anthem with their hats on—still the change is far from complete. The attributes of the aboriginal man have not yet died out. We still trench upon each other's claims—still pursue

happiness at each other's expense. Our savage selfishness is seen in commerce, in legislation, in social arrangements, in amusements. The shopkeeper imposes on his lady customer; his lady customer beats down the shopkeeper. Classes quarrel about their respective—interests;—and corruption is defended by those who profit from it. The spirit of caste morally tortures its victims with as much coolness as the Indian tortures his enemy. Gamblers pocket their gains with unconcern: and your share-speculator cares not who loses, so that he gets his premium. No matter what their rank, no matter in what they are engaged—whether in enacting a Corn Law, or in struggling with each other at the doors of a theatre—men show themselves as yet, little else than barbarians in broadcloth. Hence we still require shackles; rulers to impose them; and power-worship to make those rulers obeyed. Just as much as the love of God's law is deficient, must the fear of man's law be called in to supply its place. And to the extent that man's law is needful there must be reverence for it to ensure the necessary allegiance. Hence, as men are still under the influence of this sentiment, we must expect their customs, creeds, and philosophies to testify of its presence. Here, then, we have a rationale of the expediency-idea of government.

Later in the text, he expands upon the theater-door reference:

[And yet, whilst in some cases](#) it is scarcely possible to trace the secret channels through which our misbehaviour to others returns upon us, there are other cases in which the reaction is palpable. An audience rushing out of a theatre on fire, and in their eagerness to get before each other jamming up the doorway so that no one can get through, offers a good example of unjust selfishness defeating itself.

Collective-action problems plague the aboriginal man. As we develop regard for other's rights, the chains of

government fall away. This seems a perfectly coherent argument in an economic utilitarian setup. But that is all there in *Social Statics*.

Endnotes

[52.] The first round of work on eugenics that Sandra Peart and I completed is brought together and published in *The "Vanity of the Philosopher"* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005). Over the next decade, we've published some specialized studies. "Charles Kingsley and the Theological Interpretation of Natural Selection," *Journal of Bioeconomics* 8 (2006): 197-218; "Darwin's Unpublished Letter at the Bradlaugh-Besant Trial: A Question of Divided Expert Judgment," *European Journal of Political Economy* 24 (2008): 343-53; and "Sympathy, Evolution and The Economist," *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* 71 (June 2009): 29-36. We've drawn out the critical role of sympathy in a chapter, "Sympathy Caught between Darwin and Eugenics," in the 2015 *Sympathy* volume edited by Eric Schliesser for the Oxford Philosophical Concepts series.

[53.] Alfred Russel Wallace, "The Origin of Human Races and the Antiquity of Man Deduced from the Theory of 'Natural Selection,'" *Journal of the Anthropological Society of London* 2 (1864): clxx. As Peart and I point out in "Sympathy Caught," the acknowledgement is removed in later reprints.

[54.] *The Correspondence of Charles Darwin: 1870*, ed. Frederick Burkhardt, James A. Secord, Sheila Ann Dean, Samantha Evans, Shelley Innes, Alison M. Pearn, Paul White (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 5. As we note in "Sympathy Caught" this letter is helpfully discussed in the Darwin literature.

[55.] Peart and I discuss this episode in *Vanity* at some length because speaks to many themes in our book.

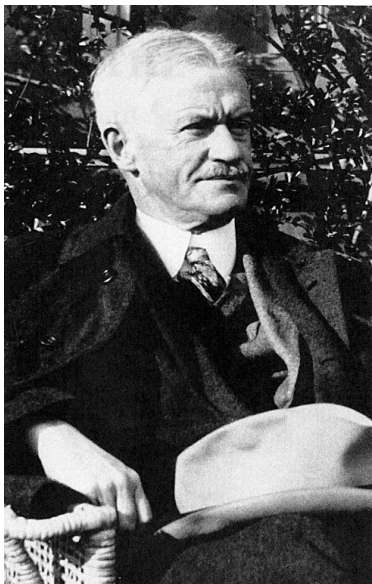
[56.] As it isn't famous, Peart and I have stressed this both in "*Vanity*" and "Sympathy Caught." Wallace's enthusiasm for *Social Statics* speaks to the question of how the evolutionary biologists at mid-century were so well versed on *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

[57.] Sandra Peart and I have explored how this necessary truth of the finiteness of life fits into Adam Smith's argument as well as those from whom Adam Smith learnt modal logic, in "Adam Smith and the State: Language and Reform," *Oxford Handbook on Adam Smith*. Ed. Chris Berry, Craig Smith, and Maria Paganelli (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 372-92.

A PRELIMINARY REPLY TO ALBERTO MINGARDI, RODERICK LONG, AND DAVID LEVY

by George H. Smith

My thanks to the three commentators for their thoughtful remarks. They raise different issues about Spencer's ideas, most of which deserve careful consideration. Unfortunately, it will take me a little time to cover the topics adequately, so rather than delay the discussion, I am posting this brief preview to get things started. I will state my points in the briefest possible terms and will include no citations. All of that will come later in separate posts, beginning in a few days, as I discuss some of the more important topics one by one.



Albert Jay Nock

Alberto Mingardi asks: "Why, then, did 20th-century classical-liberals not pick up on Spencer?" Although Mingardi cites Albert Jay Nock as an exception, he wonders why Spencer's influence was not more widespread among modern classical liberals, and he presents a couple of possible answers. My short reply is this: Spencer's influence on the revival of classical liberalism was fairly extensive. This was especially true among Georgists, such as Frank Chodorov, but it also extended to non-Georgists, such as Murray Rothbard, who often cited Spencer's Law of Equal Freedom. Of course it may be said that, apart from the Land Question and the Law of Equal Freedom, Spencer's influence did not run very deep, philosophically speaking, but I will postpone discussing this issue. Unfortunately perhaps, Spencer exerted far more influence on later sociological thinking than he did in the realm of political philosophy.

I agree with most of Roderick Long's points, and whatever disagreements I may have are quite minor, amounting perhaps to nothing more than a different emphasis here and there. I will, however, mention two points. First, the problems with Spencer's organismic analogies run deeper than Long may think. Second, I understand that classical liberals other than Spencer discussed the unintended benefits of war, but I don't think that Spencer's views on this matter follow necessarily from his broader sociological and moral principles. In fact, I might go so far as to say that his claims about the unintended benefits of war during earlier stages of social evolution are *inconsistent* with key features of his overall approach to social and moral progress. More, much more, on this later.

David Levy begins his paper with what, in my view, is a peculiar claim. He says that "Spencer did seem to have an important role to play" in the development of eugenics because A.R. Wallace mentioned some ideas he had picked up from Spencer's writings, especially *Social Statics*. Well, if Wallace's "perusal" of *Social Statics* gave him some ideas about eugenics, then that was *his* doing, not Spencer's. People frequently get ideas from reading books that were never put forward or defended by the authors. Indeed, I don't believe that Spencer ever

mentioned eugenics (or the ideas associated with it) anywhere in his writings. Moreover, Spencer repeatedly made the point that human intervention in social progress may retard that progress, but it can never speed it up beyond its normal evolutionary rate. (Here as elsewhere, I shall provide some citations later on.) As for the suggestion that we should “deaden sympathy to allow natural selection to work its progressive magic”—this was the exact opposite of what Spencer had to say about sympathy in all of his writings on the subject, both early and late.

Much of the remainder of Levy’s essay discusses Spencer’s utilitarianism. Levy claims that it is “safe to read Spencer from *Social Statics* onward as a utilitarian.” I agree with this remark, provided we keep in mind the substantial differences between Spencer’s own “rational utilitarianism” and his understanding of Benthamite utilitarianism, or “the doctrine of Utility as commonly understood,” which he dubbed “empirical utilitarianism.”

Levy also mentions a conflict between Spencer and Mill “over the role of necessary truths.” I don’t think Levy quite understands Spencer’s rather peculiar conception of necessary truths, but that will take me a while to explain.

HERBERT SPENCER: STILL UNAPPRECIATED AFTER ALL THESE YEARS

by Alberto Mingardi

Was Herbert Spencer’s influence in the revival of classical liberalism in the 20th century an extensive one? I guess it depends to what we deem to be extensive. George Smith rightly reminds me that Murray Rothbard frequently mentioned and praised Spencer. Rothbard read and understood him, and I would say he even sympathized with him. There are certain affinities, I would say, between them. For one, they have both come to be identified with the doctrine they held dear and tried to perfect. But can we really trace a strong Spencerian

influence over the development of Rothbard’s thought? I am not particularly sure.



Murray N. Rothbard

I take Smith’s point that the great Frank Chodorov was influenced by Spencer. Indeed, the “Old Right” may be the link between Spencer and Rothbard, explaining how the second was influenced by the first.

I would thus rephrase my point as follows. On the revival of classical liberalism that developed in the second half of the 20th century, Spencer’s influence was negligible. In particular, the elaboration of F.A. Hayek’s thought could have been a perfect occasion to go back to Spencer and read him with a freer mind. But that didn’t happen.

In Hayek we can find several insights that might recall Spencer. But we have no grounds to say that reading Spencer helped Hayek fine-tune his own ideas, and in fact we have the impression he looked to 19th-century British liberalism with some disdain. In “Individualism: True and False,” Hayek came close to indicting Spencer with what he considered the unhealthy confusion between continental and British liberalism:

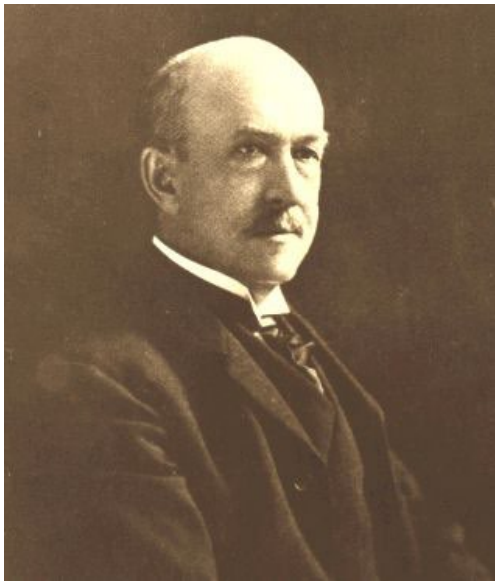
Partly because the classical economists of the nineteenth century, and particularly John Stuart Mill and Herbert Spencer, were almost as much influenced by the French as by the English tradition, all sorts of conceptions and

assumptions completely alien to true individualism have come to be regarded as essential parts of its doctrine. [58]

Thus Hayek not only considered Spencer “a classical economist,” but he conflated him with John Stuart Mill (whom he studied deeply) and regarded him as smuggling “assumptions completely alien to true individualism” into the classical-liberal doctrine.

Perhaps the only major 20th-century classical-liberal work in which explicit homage to Spencer can be found is Robert Nozick’s *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, which grabs Spencer’s “fable of the slave” from “[The Coming Slavery \(1884\)](#)”. [59]

Regarding the Social Darwinism stigma, it has held strong. Rothbard was indeed one of the very few who did look at Social Darwinism with a free mind (see his “[Social Darwinism Reconsidered](#)” (1971), [60] and he came to appreciate both Spencer and William Graham Sumner. I think Rothbard deserves great credit for that (among many other things).



William Graham Sumner

David Levy raised the issue of Spencer’s “utilitarianism,” and George Smith responded that we may consider Spencer a utilitarian, but nevertheless a utilitarian of a different sort. *Social Statics* begins with a powerful refutation of Bentham’s “expediency philosophy.” Spencer thought moral principles should be derived from

the general laws of life, rather than from narrower pain-pleasure considerations. Anti-Benthamite Thomas Hodgskin rejoiced at reading *Social Statics*. In his excellent *The System of Liberty*, the same George Smith considers Spencer one of the most important “liberal critics of Bentham.” Bruno Leoni thought Spencer was the holder of a “new doctrine of natural rights” in which they take “the sociological form of an assessment.” [61] Spencer’s utilitarianism has been quite debated. (John Gray, David Weinstein, Tim Gray, among others, have written on the subject.)

Certainly Spencer thought of himself as an utilitarian, but he maintained utility should be “not empirically estimated but rationally determined” and thus it “[enjoins this maintenance of individual rights](#); and, by implication, negatives any course which traverses them”. This doesn’t mean he was “rationalistic” in the sense of “constructivist,” since he considered emotions and character crucial factors in the evolution of moral sentiments and in the progress of human beings. He didn’t believe in one-size-fits-all “rational” political arrangements.

Another much debated subject over time has been Spencer’s “drift to conservatism.” His hopes for political evolution from militancy to industrialism became frustrated with time. Spencer labeled the “new” liberalism the “[New Toryism](#),” which got him the reputation of a grumpy old man. But I would highly recommend a careful reading of *The Man Versus the State*. If you read it with a sympathetic mind and go to the essence of the text without being distracted by many examples that may look rather odd to the contemporary reader, you’ll see that it is all there -- all the problems that frustrated and challenged classical liberals in the 20th century: the unintended consequences of regulation, welfare dependency, the fact that one government intervention often calls for another, and democracy as a political formula that tends to legitimize all and every decision of political rulers. You may find that Spencer was better at identifying problems than at offering solutions. And yet it was a rather prescient book. I hope one day it will be better appreciated as such.

Endnotes

[58.] Hayek, *Individualism and Economic Order* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), p. 11.

[59.] Nozick discusses "The Tale of the Slave" in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, pp. pp. 290-92. This is based upon [Spencer's similar discussion](#) in "The Coming Slavery", in *The Man Versus the State: With Six Essays on Government, Society, and Freedom* (Indianapolis, Ind.: LibertyClassics, 1981, pp. 55-57.

[60.] Rothbard, "[Social Darwinism Reconsidered](#)" *The Libertarian Forum*, January 1971.

[61.] Bruno Leoni, "Il pensiero politico e sociale dell'Ottocento e del Novecento" (1953), in *Il pensiero politico moderno e contemporaneo, a cura di Antonio Masala* (Macerata: Liberilibri, 2008), p. 99.

DID HERBERT SPENCER MISREPRESENT BENTHAMITE UTILITARIANISM?

by George H. Smith

At the time he wrote *Social Statics*, Herbert Spencer had read virtually nothing in the fields of ethics and political philosophy. As he recalled late in life:

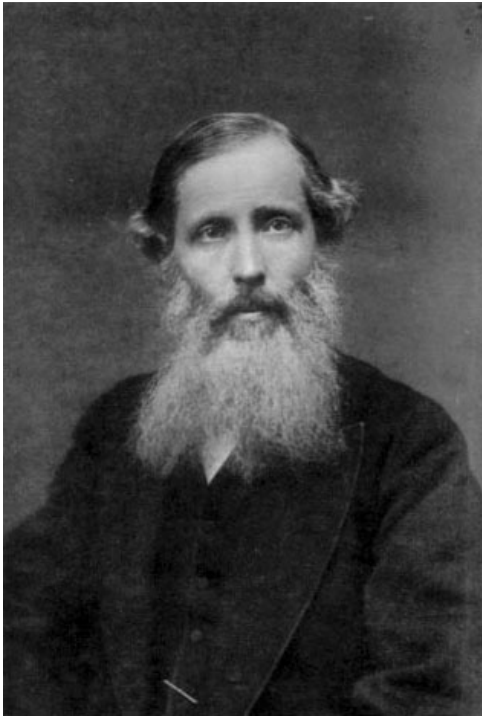
At the time *Social Statics* was written I knew of Paley nothing more than that he enunciated the doctrine of expediency; and of Bentham I knew only that he was the promulgator of the Greatest Happiness principle. The doctrines of other ethical writers referred to were known by me only through references to them here and there met with. I never then looked into any of their books; and, moreover, I have never since looked into any of their books.[62]

Shortly after *Social Statics* was published in December 1850, Spencer became friends with George Lewes and read his *Biographical History of Philosophy*, a popular work

originally published in four volumes (1845-46). This became the major source for Spencer's knowledge of the history of philosophy. In 1852, Spencer read J.S. Mill's *Logic*, after George Eliot (Marian Evans) gave him a copy as a gift. "Since those days I have done nothing worth mentioning to fill up the deficiencies." He tried several times to read Plato's *Dialogues* but "quickly put them down with more or less irritation. And of Aristotle I knew even less than of Plato." [63] As Spencer explained to Leslie Stephen:

If you ask how there comes such an amount of incorporated fact as is found in *Social Statics*, my reply is that when preparing to write it I read up in those directions in which I expected to find materials for generalization. I did not trouble myself with the generalizations of others. And that indeed indicates my general attitude. All along I have looked at things through my own eyes and not through the eyes of others.[64]

In *The Data of Ethics* (1879), which would become Part I of *The Principles of Ethics*, Spencer quoted from [Bentham's Constitutional Code](#), as well as from [Plato's Republic and Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics](#). [65] In view of Spencer's disinterest in reading these and other quoted sources first-hand, it seems likely that the passages were located by Spencer's research assistants, who also played an indispensable role in locating the thousands of examples and sources given in *The Principles of Sociology*.



Henry Sidgwick

Henry Sidgwick—Spencer’s most formidable critic, who wrote *Outlines of the History of Ethics*, *The Methods of Ethics*, and other important works—repeatedly accused Spencer of misrepresenting the views of Bentham and other utilitarians. For example, Sidgwick called Spencer’s attempt (in *The Principles of Ethics*) to link Jeremy Bentham to unqualified altruism “the most grotesque man of straw that a philosopher ever set up in order to knock it down.”^[66] And in “Mr. Spencer’s Ethical System” (1880), Sidgwick considered Spencer’s conclusion that (in Spencer’s words) “general happiness is to be achieved mainly through the adequate pursuit of self-interest by individuals.” Sidgwick protested that this “was precisely Bentham’s conclusion. I think therefore that Mr. Spencer’s apparent antagonism to the Utilitarian school, so far as the ultimate end and standard of morality is concerned, depends on a mere misunderstanding.”^[67]

Was Sidgwick correct? Did Spencer misrepresent Bentham in his attack on “empirical utilitarianism”? If so, may we attribute Spencer’s lack of understanding to his refusal to read original sources with any care?

I do not propose to address these questions here, except to note that I think Sidgwick overplayed his hand. Rather,

I raise these questions as possible topics that the commentators may wish to address.

Endnotes

^[62.] Letter to Leslie Stephen (2 July 1899), in David Duncan, *Life and Letters of Herbert Spencer* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1908), II:146.

^[63.] *Ibid.*, II:147.

^[64.] *Ibid.*

^[65.] See *The Principles of Ethics* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1895), I:163

^[66.] Henry Sidgwick, *Lectures on the Ethics of T.H. Green, Mr. Herbert Spencer, and J. Martineau* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1902), 184-85.

^[67.] Henry Sidgwick, “Mr. Spencer’s Ethical System,” *Mind*, vol. 5 (1880), 221. A facsimile reprint of this article is contained in *Herbert Spencer: Contemporary Assessments*, ed. Michael W. Taylor. This is part of the 12-volume edition of *Herbert Spencer: Collected Writings*, ed. Michael W. Taylor (London: Routledge/Thoemmes Press, 1996). For [Spencer’s criticisms of Sidgwick](#), see *Principles of Ethics*, I:150 ff.; and “[Appendix E](#),” II:461 ff.

SPENCER AND NECESSARY TRUTHS

by David M. Levy

Let me jump back in with a large interpretative puzzle. I think we all would agree that Spencer has been terribly misread. I hope I did not contribute to the misreading by linking Spencer with eugenics. A. R. Wallace’s linkage to Spencer is to the Adam Smith-influenced *Social Statics*. If what Sandra Peart and I have argued is correct, Spencer’s on the other side of the eugenics debate. Sympathy turning off “natural selection” is a good thing. W. R. Greg’s response to Wallace’s argument was that sympathy allowed the “unfit” to survive and “thus” we ought to deaden sympathy. That’s one of the starting points of eugenics.



George Stigler

We have a series of discussions over whether Spencer is an economist, a utilitarian, an informal modal logician. For me the first two are easy because he is recognized as such by others. In his time Wallace read him as a political economist. In our time George Stigler listed Spencer on the very short list of “Important English [Language] Economists 1766-1915.”^[68] With the Mill-Spencer discussion, I think the utilitarianism is easy too. But the necessary-truth move is hard.

Where does this come from? I thought I had a way into this with the passage in *Autobiography* in which he writes about the Mill-Whewell disagreement:

It was when reading the *System of Logic* of Mr. J. S. Mill, that I was led to take, partly in opposition to him, the view I proposed to set forth. In passages controverting the doctrine enunciated by Dr. Whewell, he had, as it seemed to me, ignored that criterion of belief to which we all appeal in the last resort; and further, he had not recognized the need for any criterion.

But this is dated in *Autobiography* as 1853 and, of course, I need to have an explanation for *Social Statics*. Spencer doesn’t exactly say that he read *Logic* in 1853, but that would certainly be an obvious way to read that paragraph.

Why would Whewell be interesting? The part of the exchange between Mill and Whewell that might be relevant is the expansion of necessary truths.^[69] What’s

necessary changes over time, so what’s necessary is not necessarily necessary. Oh. That’s suggestive. But, again, I need something he knew when he wrote *Social Statics*.

I welcome guidance! Everyone knows about the large overlap between political economists and moral philosophers in the 18th and 19th centuries. There is another overlap between the political economists and the logicians, but I find this intersection much neglected.

Endnotes

^[68.] George J. Stigler, *Essays in the History of Economics*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1965, pp. 34-6.

^[69.] Sandra Peart and I write about Whewell and Mill in our “Gordon Tullock on Motivated Inquiry,” *Public Choice* 152 (2012): 163-80; < <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs11127-011-9858-z#page-1>>.

SPENCER ON
UTILITARIANISM

by George H. Smith

In *The Principles of Ethics* Herbert Spencer called attention to the “ultimate purpose, lying behind all proximate purposes” of his life’s work. His ultimate purpose was to establish “for the principles of right and wrong in conduct at large, a scientific basis.”^[70] An authentic science, according to Spencer, is created when we are able to move beyond inductive generalizations (based on many empirical observations) to the formulation of *fundamental causal laws*—laws that will enable us to explain how present phenomena came about and to make reasonably accurate predictions about phenomena that do not yet exist. As Spencer explained:

[T]he method I contend for [in ethics] is that of deducing from the laws under given conditions, results which follow from them in the same necessary way as does the trajectory of a

cannon-shot from the laws of motion and atmospheric resistance.[71]

Spencer was commonly accused of being an apriorist in matters of science. He replied that his apriorism applied only *after* the causal premises of a science have been “positively ascertained by induction.” All “developed” sciences may be called a priori in this sense, since none can rely solely on inductive generalizations if it wishes to make predictions.[72] In other words, a science is a priori only in the sense that its premises, having *already* been corroborated by many experiences and/or experiments, do not require *additional* empirical confirmation before being used as a reliable foundation for deduction and “prevision.”

The foregoing background is essential if we are to understand Spencer’s basic objection to what he called “empirical utilitarianism,” or utilitarianism as it is “commonly understood.” Although the utilitarianism of Bentham and his followers relied on causation to some extent, their empirical method was based on an “[inadequate consciousness of natural causation.](#)”[73]

The empirical utilitarian, according to Spencer, frames generalizations by observing that certain kinds of actions are regularly followed by certain kinds of results. He then assumes that the observed patterns between conduct and consequence will also apply to future actions.

[But acceptance of these generalizations](#) and the inferences from them, does not amount to causation in the full sense of the word. So long as only *some* relation between cause and effect in conduct is recognized, and not *the* relation, a completely-scientific form of knowledge has not been reached. At present, utilitarians pay no attention to this distinction. Even when it is pointed out to them they disregard the fact that empirical utilitarianism is but a transitional form to be passed through on the way to rational utilitarianism.

On at least two occasions[74], Spencer reprinted lengthy extracts from a letter he had written to J.S. Mill on the

difference between the empirical utilitarianism of the Benthamites and his own version of *rational* utilitarianism. Spencer, having read Mill’s recently published “book on *Utilitarianism*,” was surprised to find himself “classed as an Anti-Utilitarian,”[75] so he wrote a letter explaining his position to Mill. Here is part of what Spencer had to say:

[I have never regarded myself as Anti-utilitarian.](#) My dissent from the doctrine of Utility as commonly understood, concerns not the object to be reached by men, but the method of reaching it. While I admit that happiness is the ultimate end to be contemplated, I do not admit that it should be the proximate end. The Expediency-Philosophy having concluded that happiness is the thing to be achieved, assumes that morality has no other business than empirically to generalize the result of conduct, and to supply for the guidance of conduct nothing more than its empirical generalizations. But the view for which I contend is, that Morality properly so-called—the science of right conduct—has for its object to determine *how* and *why* certain modes of conduct are detrimental, and certain other modes beneficial. These good and bad results cannot be accidental, but must be necessary consequences of the constitution of things; and I conceive it to be the business of moral science to deduce, from the laws of life and the conditions of existence, what kinds of action necessarily tend to produce happiness, and what kinds to produce unhappiness. Having done this, its deductions are to be recognized as laws of conduct; and are to be conformed to irrespective of a direct estimation of happiness or misery.[76]

I have only summarized the framework of Spencer’s objections to empirical utilitarianism. More needs to be said, especially about Spencer’s brand of rational utilitarianism, and I hope to do precisely that in a subsequent comment.

Endnotes

[70.] *The Principles of Ethics* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1895), I:xiii.,

[71.] *Ibid.*, II:467.

[72.] *Ibid.*

[73.] “The Great Political Superstition,” in *The Man Versus the State*,” ed. Eric Mack (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1981), 162.

[74.] See *Principles of Ethics, I:57-8*. A [longer excerpt](#) appears in *An Autobiography* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1904), II:100-103.

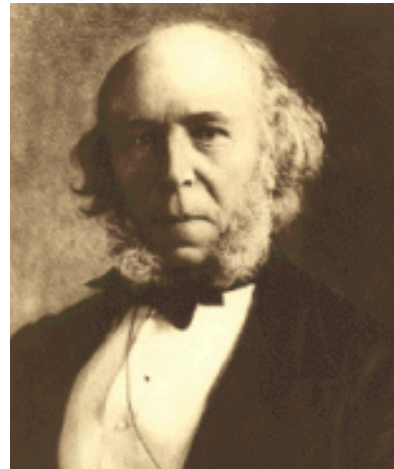
[75.] In his letter, Spencer said that he had been “implicitly” placed by Mill among “the Anti-utilitarians.” (See *An Autobiography*, II:100.) So far as I know, Spencer is never mentioned by name in *Utilitarianism*, and I cannot locate the ‘note in question’ (as Spencer called it) in which Mill suggested, if only implicitly, that Spencer was in the Anti-utilitarian camp. I hope another participant in this discussion will be able to locate the elusive passage, and then post it. [OLL Editor's Note: See [the letter JSM wrote to Spencer](#) on Feb. 25, 1863 and the [Editor's note](#) on this, which states "MS draft and MS copy at Northwestern. Published, except for last sentence, in Duncan, I, 141-42. In reply to a protest from Spencer (letter of Feb. 24, MS at Northwestern) at being classed as an Anti-utilitarian in JSM's *Utilitarianism*; Spencer prints most of his own letter in his *Autobiography* (2 vols., New York, 1904), II, 100-102, and Alexander Bain printed the same passages in his *Mental and Moral Science* (3rd ed., London, 1872), pp. 721-22."]

[76.] *Ibid.*, II:100-101.

SPENCER AND THE EVOLUTION OF MORALITY

by Alberto Mingardi

One recent Liberty Matters discussion opened with an essay by Don Boudreaux on “[Deirdre McCloskey and Economists’ Ideas about Ideas](#)”. Deirdre McCloskey has argued powerfully that at the very roots of what she calls “the great enrichment,” the period of unprecedented growth which started with the Industrial Revolution, are ideas people formed about one another, rather than in some peculiar institutions, capital accumulation, or political stability. To provide a figurative explanation of McCloskey’s thesis that “mass flourishing was sparked by a change in ideas about the dignity of commercial pursuits,” Don Boudreaux speaks of a dishonor tax, traditionally levied on merchants, that was at a certain point eventually repealed in England. For the great enrichment to take off, we needed all efforts variously related to the creation of wealth to become socially appreciated and admired.



Herbert Spencer

Our conversation on Spencer sprang from a profound essay by George H. Smith on Spencer’s sociology of the state. In his comment, Roderick Long has emphasized a quote Smith provided from Spencer’s magnificent *The Study of Sociology*: “[So long as the characters of citizens remain substantially unchanged, there can be no substantial changes in the political organization](#)” (footnote #43). Referencing some of Spencer’s

contemporaries who took the anarchist route, Long emphasized that “the free-market anarchist model does not require a transformation of human nature.”

Indeed, Spencer held that an evolution of character, manners, and mores is a crucial part of human evolution. This is perhaps a crucial point that differentiates Spencer from what he called “empirical utilitarianism.”

The following passage from “The Great Political Superstition”, the concluding essay of *The Man Versus the State*, on the common law, is worth quoting at length:

[Bentham and his followers seem to have forgotten](#) that our own common law is mainly an embodiment of “the customs of the realm.” It did not give definite shape to that which it found existing. Thus, the fact and the fiction are exactly opposite to what they allege. The fact is that property was well recognized before law existed; the fiction is that “property is the creation of law.” These writers and statesmen who with so much scorn undertake to instruct the ignorant herd, themselves stand in need of instruction. Considerations of another class might alone have led them to pause. Were it true, as alleged by Bentham, that Government fulfils its office “by creating rights which it confers on individuals”; then, the implication would be, that there should be nothing approaching to uniformity in the rights conferred by different governments. In the absence of a determining cause over-ruling their decisions, the probabilities would be many to one against considerable correspondence among their decisions. But there is very great correspondence. Look where we may, we find that governments interdict the same kinds of aggressions; and, by implication, recognize the same kinds of claims. They habitually forbid homicide, theft, adultery: thus asserting that citizens may not be trespassed against in certain ways. And as society advances, minor individual claims are protected by giving remedies for breach of contract, libel, false witness, etc. In a word, comparisons show that

though codes of law differ in their details as they become elaborated, they agree in their fundamentals. What does this prove? It cannot be by chance that they thus agree. They agree because the alleged creating of rights was nothing else than giving formal sanction and better definition to those assertions of claims and recognitions of claims which naturally originate from the individual desires of men who have to live in presence of one another.^[77]

Here we see Spencer challenging Bentham as a jurist and, more generally, the legal enterprise Bentham and his followers started. This passage also clarifies Bruno Leoni’s statement that Spencer was the holder of a “new doctrine of natural rights” in which they take “the sociological form of an assessment.” (See note 61 above.)

Spencer clearly gave priority to the spontaneous self-adjustment of cooperation over law, and it thought unlikely that unilateral political action could work for the better. Famously, Spencer read very few books cover to cover—and so George Smith is right: we shouldn’t read Spencer as a careful scholar of his contemporaries. And yet we may find in him a perceptive and thoughtful critic of what we may deem as the “Utilitarian ethos.”

Roderick Long has pointed out that Spencer was no economist. I have quoted Hayek mistakenly considering him a “classical economist.” David Levy mentioned that “George Stigler listed Spencer on the very short list of ‘important English [Language] Economists 1766-1915.’”^[78]

Certainly, Spencer took the division of labor seriously. Perhaps it is in the instance of the division of labor that his theory of progress as a movement from the homogenous to the heterogeneous, from the simple to the complex, can appear clearer to the contemporary reader. Let’s read the following beautiful, assessment of an ever more complex division of labor from “Progress and Its Laws”:

[It has been an evolution which](#), beginning with a tribe whose members severally perform the same actions each for himself, ends with a civilized community whose members severally perform different actions for each other; and an evolution which has transformed the solitary producer of any one commodity into a combination of producers who, united under a master, take separate parts in the manufacture of such commodity. But there are yet other and higher phases of this advance from the homogeneous to the heterogeneous in the industrial organization of society. Long after considerable progress has been made in the division of labour among different classes of workers, there is still little or no division of labour among the widely separated parts of the community: the nation continues comparatively homogeneous in the respect that in each district the same occupations are pursued. But when roads and other means of transit become numerous and good, the different districts begin to assume different functions, and to become mutually dependent. The calico manufacture locates itself in this county, the woollen-cloth manufacture in that; silks are produced here, lace there; stockings in one place, shoes in another; pottery, hardware, cutlery, come to have their special towns; and ultimately every locality becomes more or less distinguished from the rest by the leading occupation carried on in it. This subdivision of functions shows itself not only among the different parts of the same nation, but among different nations. That exchange of commodities which free-trade is increasing so largely, will ultimately have the effect of specializing, in a greater or less degree, the industry of each people. So that, beginning with a barbarous tribe, almost if not quite homogeneous in the functions of its members, the progress has been, and still is, towards an economic aggregation of the whole human race;

growing ever more heterogeneous in respect of the separate functions assumed by separate nations, the separate functions assumed by the local sections of each nation, the separate functions assumed by the many kinds of makers and traders in each town, and the separate functions assumed by the workers united in producing each commodity.[\[79\]](#)

[Another passage](#) from the same essay stresses the role of the steam-engined locomotive in promoting heterogeneity, that is a furthering of the division of labour. Spencer appreciated the different dimensions of progress and how they were strongly intertwined.

Take this other passage from *The Study of Sociology*:

[All this development of mechanical appliances](#)—this growth of the iron-manufacture, this extensive use of machinery made from iron, this production of so many machines for making machines—has had for one of its causes the abundance of the raw materials, coal and iron; has had for another of its causes the insular position which has favoured peace and the increase of industrial activity. There have been moral causes at work too. Without that readiness to sacrifice present ease to future benefit, which is implied by enterprise, there would never have arisen the machine in question,—nay, there would never have arisen the multitudinous improved instruments and processes that have made it possible. And beyond the moral traits which enterprise pre-supposes, there are those pre-supposed by efficient co-operation. Without mechanical engineers who fulfilled their contracts tolerably well, by executing work accurately, neither this machine itself nor the machines that made it, could have been produced; and without artizans having considerable conscientiousness, no master could insure accurate work. Try to get such products out of an inferior race, and you will find defective character an insuperable obstacle.

So, too, will you find defective intelligence an insuperable obstacle. The skilled artizan is not an accidental product, either morally or intellectually. The intelligence needed for making a new thing is not everywhere to be found; nor is there everywhere to be found the accuracy of perception and nicety of execution without which no complex machine can be so made that it will act. Exactness of finish in machines has developed *pari passu* with exactness of perception in artizans. Inspect some mechanical appliance made a century ago, and you may see that, even had all other requisite conditions been fulfilled, want of the requisite skill in workmen would have been a fatal obstacle to the production of an engine requiring so many delicate adjustments. So that there are implied in this mechanical achievement, not only our slowly-generated industrial state, with its innumerable products and processes, but also the slowly-moulded moral and intellectual natures of masters and workmen. Has nothing now been forgotten? Yes, we have left out a whole division of all-important social phenomena—those which we group as the progress of knowledge. Along with the many other developments that have been necessary antecedents to this machine, there has been the development of Science. The growing and improving arts of all kinds, have been helped up, step after step, by those generalized experiences, becoming ever wider, more complete, more exact, which make up what we call Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, &c.^[80]

Spencer's view of how complexity unfolds in society is, then, greatly nuanced and complex itself. He saw moral forces at play in the very development of the Industrial Revolution, which, with the newer appliances and manufactures it brought about, represented a great illustration of his own principle. In this sense, I think Spencer may be an author worth examining for McCloskey and Boudreaux. After all, Spencer envisioned precisely the movement from a society that

coalesced around aristocratic and military virtues to one where commerce and voluntary contracts take center stage. In a way this echoes the venerable thesis of *doux commerce*.

Growing older, he became increasingly disappointed with social progress that did not match the ideal of an Industrial society, pointing out the resilience of aggressive, military-like habits in society, politics, and education. That “re-barbarization”^[81] he saw also as a phenomenon that bestowed unduly moral praise (“honor”) on aggressiveness. Such atavism, longing for organization and hierarchy, was instrumental in Spencer's exploration of the rise of socialist ideas.

I do not want to make extravagant comparisons or to unfairly juxtapose thinkers that belong to different epochs and traditions of thinking. But if we are looking back for authors that saw a change in morality as one of the factors behind the “great enrichment,” I think Spencer can be considered worth exploring.

Endnotes

^[77.] Herbert Spencer, *The Man versus the State, with Six Essays on Government, Society, and Freedom*, ed. Eric Mack, (Indianapolis, Ind.: LibertyClassics, 1981). </titles/330>.

^[78.] For [Spencer's opinion](#) of those who held political economy in contempt, see his *The Study of Sociology* (London: Henry S. King, 1873) .

^[79.] Herbert Spencer, *Essays: Scientific, Political, and Speculative*. Library Edition, containing Seven Essays not before republished, and various other Additions (London: Williams and Norgate, 1891). Vol. 1, "Progress: its Law and Cause" (*The Westminster Review*, April, 1857). </titles/335#lf0620-01_head_003>.

^[80.] Herbert Spencer, *The Study of Sociology* (London: Henry S. King, 1873)., "Chapter VI. Subjective difficulties—intellectual." </titles/1335#Spencer_0623_244>.

^[81.] Herbert Spencer, "Re-Barbarization," in *Facts and Comments* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1902), pp. 172-88. Online at Roderick Long's website

"praxeology.net" < <https://praxeology.net/HS-FC-25.htm> >.

SPENCER: A PATERSON-RAND CONNECTION?

by Roderick T. Long

On the question of Spencer's influence on 20th-century libertarianism, Alberto mentions Albert J. Nock, and George adds Frank Chodorov and Murray Rothbard. Rothbard is an interesting nexus here, since he was influenced not only by Spencer but also by those whom Spencer influenced – including the radical English Spencerians Auberon Herbert^[82] and Wordsworth Donisthorpe;^[83] the Belgian economist and free-market anarchist Gustave de Molinari;^[84] the American sociologist William Graham Sumner;^[85] and a great many of the American individualist anarchists.^[86]



Wordsworth Donisthorpe

But another intriguing possibility of influence, not running through Rothbard, concerns Isabel Paterson, whose 1943 book, *God of the Machine*, played an important role in the birth of the modern libertarian movement. Paterson was familiar enough with Spencer to have read his relatively obscure essay “Re-Barbarization,”^[87] which she refers to in noting: “Ninety years ago Herbert Spencer perceived the political trend; he said: ‘We are being rebarbarized.’”^[88] Paterson also devotes a chapter of

the book to the distinction between the society of status and the society of contract;^[89] she cites Henry Sumner Maine^[90] for the terms, but the echo of Spencer's opposition between militancy and contract is clear throughout Paterson's discussion. Given Paterson's enormous influence on Ayn Rand, and Rand's enormous influence in turn on modern libertarianism, we have here a possible indirect Spencerian influence.

Did Rand herself read Spencer? It's difficult to know. But there are some interesting parallels between Rand's defense of rights and the one Spencer offers in his essay “The Great Political Superstition.” Spencer, for example, writes:

Those who hold that life is valuable, hold, by implication, that men ought not to be prevented from carrying on life-sustaining activities. In other words, if it is said to be “right” that they should carry them on, then, by permutation, we get the assertion that they “have a right” to carry them on. Clearly the conception of “natural rights” originates in recognition of the truth that if life is justifiable, there must be a justification for the performance of acts essential to its preservation; and, therefore, a justification for those liberties and claims which make such acts possible.^[91]

It's not hard to see a similarity between that passage and the following one from Rand:

If man is to live on earth, it is *right* for him to use his mind, it is *right* to act on his own free judgment, it is *right* to work for his values and to keep the product of his work. If life on earth is his purpose, he has a *right* to live as a rational being; nature forbids him the irrational.^[92]

Herbert Spencer actually makes an appearance, of sorts, in Rand's novel *The Fountainhead*; her character Gail Wynand steals one of Spencer's books.^[93] As Wynand is a semi-virtuous figure whose tragic flaw is his failure to distinguish individualist self-expression from the struggle to dominate others, Rand's connecting him with Spencer may be a veiled criticism of Spencer's evolutionary views.

Endnotes

[82.] See, e.g., Auberon Herbert, *The Right and Wrong of Compulsion by the State, and Other Essays*, ed. Eric Mack (Indianapolis, Ind.: Liberty Fund, 1978); <[/titles/591](#)> Herbert, *Taxation and Anarchism: A Discussion between the Hon. Auberon Herbert and J.H. Levy* (London: The Personal Rights Association, 1912). <[/titles/2257](#)>.

[83.] See, e.g., Wordsworth Donisthorpe, *Principles of Plutology* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1876); <[https://books.google.com/books?id=FogBAAAAQA&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false](#)> Donisthorpe, *Law in a Free State* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1895); <[/titles/290](#)> Donisthorpe, *Individualism: A System of Politics* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1889). <[/titles/291](#)>.

[84.] See, e.g., Gustave de Molinari, *L'Évolution Politique et la Révolution* (Paris: C. Reinwald, 1884); <[http://davidmhart.com/liberty/FrenchClassicalLiberals/Molinari/Books/Molinari_1884EvolutionPolitique.pdf](#)> Molinari, *Grandeur et Décadence de la Guerre* (Paris: Guillaumin, 1898). <[http://davidmhart.com/liberty/FrenchClassicalLiberals/Molinari/Books/Molinari_1898GrandeurDecadenceGuerre.pdf](#)>.

[85.] William Graham Sumner, *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1911); <[/titles/346](#)> Sumner, *War and Other Essays*, ed. Albert Galloway Keller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1919). <[/titles/345](#)>

[86.] Spencerian terminology, including the law of equal freedom and the distinction between militant and industrial societies, permeates the individualist anarchist writings. See, e.g., Dyer D. Lum, *The Economics of Anarchy: A Study of the Industrial Type* (New York: Twentieth Century Publishing Co., 1890); <[https://praxeology.net/DL-EA.htm](#)> Clara Dixon Davidson, “Relations Between Parents and Children,” *Liberty*, September 3, 1892; <[http://fair-use.org/benjamin-tucker/instead-of-a-book/relations-between-parents-and-children](#)> Francis Dashwood Tandy, *Voluntary Socialism: A Sketch* (Denver: self-

published, 1896). <[https://praxeology.net/FDT-VS.htm](#)>.

[87.] Herbert Spencer, “Re-Barbarization,” in *Facts and Comments* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1902), ch. 25, pp. 172-88. <[https://praxeology.net/HS-FC-25.htm](#)>

[88.] Isabel Paterson, *The God of the Machine* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1943), p. 232. <[https://mises.org/sites/default/files/God%20of%20the%20Machine_2.pdf](#)>.

[89.] *Ibid.*, ch. 5.

[90.] Sir Henry Sumner Maine, *Ancient Law, its connection with the early history of society and its relation to modern ideas*, with an introduction and notes by Sir Frederick Pollock, 4th American from the 10th London edition (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1906). <[/titles/2001](#)>

[91.] Herbert Spencer, “The Great Political Superstition,” in *The Man versus the State, with Six Essays on Government, Society and Freedom*, ed. Eric Mack (Indianapolis, Ind.: Liberty Fund, 1981). <[/titles/330](#)>

[92.] Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged* (New York: Signet, 1996), p. 1061.

[93.] Ayn Rand, *The Fountainhead* (New York: Plume, 1994), p. 419.

PUZZLES ASIDE, SPENCER IS WORTH READING

by Alberto Mingardi

Spencer’s philosophy is a vast, interesting, and puzzling matter. While writing my monograph, which George H. Smith was so kind to mention in his essay (*Herbert Spencer*, Continuum, 2011), I was glad I could concentrate exclusively on his political thought. That book was conceived as an introductory text and is far from satisfying for a refined reader. I should take this opportunity to apologize for the mistakes I have certainly made, grammar included, and to thank the four readers who succeeded in finishing the book—

including, and this pleases my ego enormously, George himself.

I'd just like to stress a couple of points now that this conversation is coming to an end.



Sir James Mackintosh

The first is that the discussion over Spencer's sometimes puzzling organicism shouldn't lead readers to infer the existence of a soft spot on the part of Spencer for *some* kind of interventionism. On the contrary, one of the main arguments Spencer uses against interventionism is precisely that, because the social organism evolves and lives in way that human beings do not understand, they should not interfere with it. Spencer's "The Social Organism" begins with one of his favorite quotations from Sir James Mackintosh, on [constitutions that are not made but grow](#).

In that very essay, Spencer explains that:

[It is well that the lives of all parts of an animal should be merged in the life of the whole](#), because the whole has a corporate consciousness capable of happiness or misery. But it is not so with a society; since its living units do not and cannot lose individual consciousness, and since the community as a whole has no corporate

consciousness. This is an everlasting reason why the welfares of citizens cannot rightly be sacrificed to some supposed benefit of the State, and why, on the other hand, the State is to be maintained solely for the benefit of citizens. The corporate life must here be subservient to the lives of the parts, instead of the lives of the parts being subservient to the corporate life.[\[94\]](#)

I do certainly agree with George Smith that "analogies should serve to clarify the point one wishes to make, and Spencer's innumerable "'parallelisms' between organisms and societies rarely serve this purpose." I just wanted to make clear, for readers for whom this online discussion may be the first encounter with Spencer, that his social-organism analogy reflects his concern with what he sees as the ever-growing complexities of society.

Spencer views this complexity as the main argument against interventionism. This is from *The Study of Sociology*:

[In a society living, growing, changing](#), every new factor becomes a permanent force; modifying more or less the direction of movement determined by the aggregate of forces. Never simple and direct, but, by the co-operation of so many causes, made irregular, involved, and always rhythmical, the course of social change cannot be judged of its general direction by inspecting any small portion of it. Each action will be inevitably be followed, by some direct or indirect reaction, and this again by a re-reaction; and until the successive effects have shown themselves, no one can say how the total motion will be modified.[\[95\]](#)

The Study of Sociology is a plea for humility and patience in reading social phenomena: people's biases and uncertain data can embolden grand and yet mistaken claims. This work of Spencer presents caveats that could be used by social scientists today too. Likewise, *The Man Versus the State* is perhaps the most powerful book ever devoted, by and the large, to the subject of the unintended consequences and perverse effects of the tinkering in society's workings.

Writes Spencer in “The Sins of Legislators”:

[A druggist's assistant who](#), after listening to the description of pains which he mistakes for those of colic, but which are really caused by inflammation of the caecum, prescribes a sharp purgative and kills the patient, is found guilty of manslaughter. He is not allowed to excuse himself on the ground that he did not intend harm but hoped for good. The plea that he simply made a mistake in his diagnosis is not entertained. He is told that he had no right to risk disastrous consequences by meddling in a matter concerning which his knowledge was so inadequate. The fact that he was ignorant how great was his ignorance is not accepted in bar of judgement. It is tacitly assumed that the experience common to all should have taught him that even the skilled, and much more the unskilled, make mistakes in the identification of disorders and in the appropriate treatment; and that having disregarded the warning derivable from common experience, he was answerable for the consequences. We measure the responsibilities of legislators for mischiefs they may do, in a much more lenient fashion. In most cases, so far from thinking of them as deserving punishment for causing disasters by laws ignorantly enacted, we scarcely think of them as deserving reprobation. It is held that common experience should have taught the druggist's assistant, untrained as he is, not to interfere; but it is not held that common experience should have taught the legislator not to interfere till he has trained himself.[\[96\]](#)

Legislators are ignorant, and yet they are amazingly bold in meddling with complex social phenomena they cannot possibly understand. As a consequence, their interventions may produce consequences that are frequently the opposite of the ones they wanted to achieve. Political interventions are conceived as though Policy A can produce Outcome B, but a complex order

has many dimensions and is continuously changing and unfolding; this makes intervention particularly pernicious.

In a famous essay, Robert Merton argued that “in some one of its numerous forms, the problem of the unanticipated consequences of purposive action has been treated by virtually every substantial contributor to the long history of social thought.”[\[97\]](#) Yet I think there is room to argue that Spencer made that argument particularly consistent and conspicuous.

The other point I wanted to stress concerns Spencer's antimilitarism. As George has emphasized, Spencer's appreciation for war as conducive to the development of social cooperation is puzzling precisely because of his strenuous antimilitarism. But the latter shouldn't be overlooked.

Spencer has been one of the most admirably consistent classical liberals in his continuous advocacy of peace and opposition to war. I would like to point the reader to this wonderful little piece from *Facts and Comments* (1902) that Roderick Long has put online on his website. The subject is “[Patriotism](#).” It is a short read of great profundity. Indeed, there are good reasons to read Spencer today.

Endnotes

[\[94.\]](#) Herbert Spencer, *The Man Versus the State, with Six Essays on Government, Society and Freedom*, ed. Eric Mack, (Indianapolis, Ind.: LibertyClassics, 1981). [Editor: Possibly a reference to the conclusion of Mackintosh's "A Discourse on the Law of Nature and Nations" (1799) where he states "Such a body of political laws must in all countries arise out of the character and situation of a people; they must grow with its progress, be adapted to its peculiarities, change with its changes, and be incorporated with its habits. Human wisdom cannot form such a constitution by one act, for human wisdom cannot create the materials of which it is composed." See, Sir James Mackintosh, *The Miscellaneous Works. Three Volumes, complete in One*. (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1871) <[/titles/2266#Mackintosh_1446_59](#)>.]

[\[95.\]](#) Herbert Spencer, *The Study of Sociology* (London: Henry S. King, 1873).

[96] Herbert Spencer, *The Man versus the State, with Six Essays on Government, Society and Freedom*, ed. Eric Mack, (Indianapolis, Ind.: LibertyClassics, 1981).

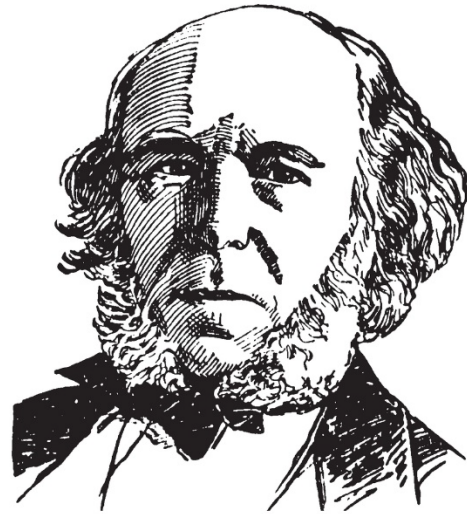
[97] Robert K. Merton, “The Unanticipated Consequences of Purposive Social Action,” *American Sociological Review*, I, 6, 1936, p. 894.

SPENCER ON POVERTY: WHEAT AND CHAFF

by Roderick T. Long

The popular image of Spencer is that of a crude eugenicist who favoured letting the poor and weak die off to improve the species. The four of us participating in this conversation know that this characterisation is untrue. But it’s only fair to recognize that this perception is *partly* Spencer’s fault.

The two passages most frequently cited against Spencer in this regard both come from *Social Statics* – specifically from chapters 25 and 28, on “Poor-Laws” and “Sanitary Supervision” respectively. In the first, Spencer praises the process by which “[society is constantly excreting its unhealthy, imbecile, slow, vacillating, faithless members](#),” and chides “spurious philanthropists” for encouraging “the multiplication of the reckless and incompetent by offering them an unflinching provision.”[98] In the second, Spencer picks up the same theme, explaining that “[the whole effort of nature is to get rid of such](#)” (*viz.*, the unfit), to “clear the world of them, and make room for better,” and pronounces the stern verdict: “If they are not sufficiently complete to live, they die, and it is best they should die.”[99] Certainly the tone of these remarks seems calculated to confirm the traditional stereotype.



Herbert Spencer

Of course Spencer quickly follows up each of these passages by insisting that it would be a *mistake* to infer from them the undesirability of voluntary charity. After the first passage, he notes that while “[\[a\]t first sight these considerations seem conclusive](#) against *all* relief to the poor – voluntary as well as compulsory,” in fact his argument condemns only “whatever private charity enables the recipients to elude the necessities of our social existence,” but “makes no objection” to “that charity which may be described as helping men to help themselves,” but on the contrary “countenances it.” Such charity is to be extended not only to those who are in need through no fault of their own – the victims of “[a]ccidents,” “unforeseen events,” “want of knowledge,” and “the dishonesty of others” – but also to “the prodigal,” though only “after severe hardship has branded his memory with the unbending conditions of social life to which he must submit.” While it is true, Spencer explains, that “by these ameliorations the process of adaptation must be remotely interfered with,” he considers that “in the majority of cases, it will not be so much retarded in one direction as it will be advanced in another.”[100]

The second passage is followed by similar remarks:

[Of course, in so far as the severity of this process is mitigated](#) by the spontaneous sympathy of men for each other, it is proper that it should be

mitigated: albeit there is unquestionably harm done when sympathy is shown, without any regard to ultimate results. But the drawbacks hence arising are nothing like commensurate with the benefits otherwise conferred. Only when this sympathy prompts to a breach of equity – only when it originates an interference forbidden by the law of equal freedom ... does it work pure evil.^[101]

The fact that the two passages most often cited as evidence of Spencer’s opposition to charity are immediately followed by attempts to forestall any anti-charity inferences shows that Spencer’s bad reputation is certainly not *solely* his fault. The readiness with which Spencer’s critics rip these passages from their context with no acknowledgement of the directly following disclaimers is suggestive of either dishonesty or inexcusable sloppiness.

All the same, the apparent coldness and grudgingness of these passages does not make Spencer seem endearing. And later passages are similarly problematic – as for example this one from “The Coming Slavery”:

[\[W\]hen the miseries of the poor are dilated upon](#), they are thought of as the miseries of the deserving poor, instead of being thought of as the miseries of the undeserving poor, which in large measure they should be....^[102]

The plain implication of these lines is that those who are in need through their own fault are the rule, while the innocently needy are the exception. And this from the man who had once denounced the English political system as a contrivance for diverting “[the resources of the poor, starved, overburdened people](#)” into the coffers of the “landowners of England” and “rich owners of colonial property”!^[103] Alberto’s observation that “when he spoke of welfare dependence, he may sound awkward to the contemporary reader” seems like an understatement.

There’s a brighter side, though, which I’ll talk about in my next post.

Endnotes

^[98.] Herbert Spencer, *Social Statics: or, The Conditions essential to Happiness specified, and the First of them Developed* (London: John Chapman, 1850), ch. 25, § 6. <[/titles/273#Spencer_0331_636](#)>

^[99.] *Social Statics*, ch. 28, § 4. <[/titles/273#Spencer_0331_729](#)>

^[100.] *Social Statics*, ch. 25, § 6.

^[101.] *Social Statics*, ch. 28, § 4.

^[102.] Herbert Spencer, “The Coming Slavery,” in *The Man versus the State, with Six Essays on Government, Society and Freedom*, ed. Eric Mack (Indianapolis, Ind.: Liberty Fund, 1981). <[/titles/330#Spencer_0020_97](#)>

^[103.] Herbert Spencer, “The Proper Sphere of Government,” Letter 6, in *The Man versus the State, with Six Essays*. <[/titles/330#Spencer_0020_382](#)>

SPENCER’S DEFENSE OF THE POOR

by Roderick T. Long

In my last comment I noted that Spencer’s remarks on charity in *Social Statics*, while not saying what his critics represent them as saying, do come across as harsh and unsympathetic. To judge Spencer’s attitude toward the needy by these passages alone, however, would be unfair. For in the very same book we find the following spirited censure of those who lack empathy of the struggles of the poor:

[It is very easy for you, O respectable citizen](#), seated in your easy chair, with your feet on the fender, to hold forth on the misconduct of the people; – very easy for you to censure their extravagant and vicious habits; – very easy for you to be a pattern of frugality, of rectitude, of sobriety. What else should you be? Here are you surrounded by comforts, possessing multiplied sources of lawful happiness, with a reputation to maintain, an ambition to fulfil, and the prospect of a competency for your old age. A

shame indeed would it be if with these advantages you were not well regulated in your behaviour. You have a cheerful home, are warmly and cleanly clad, and fare, if not sumptuously every day, at any rate abundantly. For your hours of relaxation there are amusements. A newspaper arrives regularly to satisfy your curiosity; if your tastes are literary, books may be had in plenty: and there is a piano if you like music. You can afford to entertain your friends, and are entertained in return. There are lectures, and concerts, and exhibitions, accessible if you incline to them. You may have a holiday when you choose to take one, and can spare money for an annual trip to the sea-side. And enjoying all these privileges you take credit to yourself for being a well-conducted man! Small praise to you for it! If *you* do not contract dissipated habits where is the merit? you have few incentives to do so. It is no honour to *you* that you do not spend your savings in sensual gratification; you have pleasures enough without. But what would you do if placed in the position of the labourer? How would these virtues of yours stand the wear and tear of poverty? Where would your prudence and self-denial be if you were deprived of all the hopes that now stimulate you; if you had no better prospect than that of the Dorsetshire farm-servant with his 7*s.* a week, or that of the perpetually-straitened stocking-weaver, or that of the mill-hand with his periodical suspensions of work? Let us see you tied to an irksome employment from dawn till dusk; fed on meagre food, and scarcely enough of that; married to a factory girl ignorant of domestic management; deprived of the enjoyments which education opens up; with no place of recreation but the pot-house, and then let us see whether you would be as steady as you are. Suppose your savings had to be made, not, as now, out of surplus income, but out of wages already insufficient for necessities;

and then consider whether to be provident would be as easy as you at present find it. Conceive yourself one of a despised class contemptuously termed “the great unwashed;” stigmatized as brutish, stolid, vicious; suspected of harbouring wicked designs; excluded from the dignity of citizenship; and then say whether the desire to be respectable would be as practically operative on you as now. Lastly, imagine that seeing your capacities were but ordinary, your education next to nothing, and your competitors innumerable, you despaired of ever attaining to a higher station; and then think whether the incentives to perseverance and forethought would be as strong as your existing ones. Realize these circumstances, O comfortable citizen, and then answer whether the reckless, disorderly habits of the people are so inexcusable. How offensive is it to hear some pert, self-approving personage, who thanks God that he is not as other men are, passing harsh sentence on his poor hard-worked heavily-burdened fellow-countrymen; including them all in one sweeping condemnation, because in their struggles for existence they do not maintain the same prim respectability as himself. Of all stupidities there are few greater, and yet few in which we more doggedly persist, than this of estimating other men’s conduct by the standard of our own feelings. There is no more mischievous absurdity than this judging of actions from the *outside* as they look to us, instead of from the *inside* as they look to the actors; nothing more irrational than to criticize deeds as though the doers of them had the same desires, hopes, fears, and restraints with ourselves. We cannot understand another’s character except by abandoning our own identity, and realizing to ourselves his frame of mind, his want of knowledge, his hardships, temptations, and discouragements. And if the wealthier classes would do this before forming their opinions of the working man, their

verdicts would savour somewhat more of that charity which covereth a multitude of sins.[\[104\]](#)

This passage (which, needless to say, is studiously ignored by Spencer’s critics) appears to *excoriate* precisely the unfeeling attitude that the previously cited passages appear to *express*. Yet Spencer wrote both. The unavoidable conclusion is that Spencer is a complex thinker whose ideas contain both sympathetic and unsympathetic strands; to judge him solely by either without the other would be to distort him.

Endnotes

[\[104.\]](#) *Social Statics*, ch. 20, § 6. <[/titles/273#Spencer_0331_486](#)>

WHEN READING SPENCER, REMEMBER SMITH

by David M. Levy

Let me follow up the thought that we need to pay attention to the evolution of human character. While I am more comfortable with endogeneity than with evolution, the point is exactly right. Drawing on a paper I’m writing with Sandra Peart for background,[\[105\]](#) I think it important to remember that *Social Statics* is so heavily influenced by Adam Smith’s work. And before Smith, there is David Hume’s short but enormously difficult essay “[Of National Characters.](#)”[\[106\]](#)



Adam Smith and David Hume

Hume makes the pregnant distinction between the physical causes of character differences—wind, water and sunlight—and the “moral” causes provided by motivating incentives.[\[107\]](#) Hume makes a remarkable claim that the link between occupation-linked incentives and character is a necessary one, overwhelming the physical environment:

[A soldier and a priest are different characters](#), in all nations, and all ages; and this difference is founded on circumstances, whose operation is eternal and unalterable. ([1777] 1987, p. 198)[\[108\]](#)

We find a kindred claim of necessary truth in Smith’s link in *The Wealth of Nations* between occupation and character.[\[109\]](#)

[The habit of sauntering and of indolent careless application](#), which is *naturally, or rather necessarily* acquired by every country workman who is obliged to change his work and his tools every half hour, and to apply his hand in twenty different ways almost every day of his life; renders him almost always slothful and lazy, and incapable of any vigorous application even on the most pressing occasion. [I.i.8; 19; emphasis added]

As occupations change in the course of the extension of the division of labor, character changes. Here’s what Smith told his students a decade before the celebrated philosopher–porter comparison saw print:

It is not the difference of naturall parts and genius (which if there be any is but very small), as is generally supposed, that occasions this separation of trades, as this separation of trades by the different views it gives one that occasions the diversity of genius. No two persons can be more different in their genius as a philosopher and a porter, but there does not seem to have been [any?] original difference betwixt them. For the 5 or 6 first years of their lives there was hardly any apparent difference; their companions looked upon them as persons of pretty much the same stamp. No wisdom and

ingenuity appeared in the one superior to that of the other. From about that time a difference was thought to be perceived in them. Their manner of life began then to affect them, and without doubt had it not been for this they would have continued the same. The difference of employment occasions the difference of genius; and we see accordingly that amongst savages, where there is very little diversity of employment, there is hardly any diversity of temper or genius. [*Lectures on Jurisprudence* vi. 46; p. 348] [Editor: [A different version](#) of the story of the philosopher and the porter can be found in Cannan's edition of the 1763 lectures.]

Perhaps one reason Spencer's thoughts have been so mangled is that we've lost the Smithian background against which he writes. And without Smith we are unlikely to see Hume in the shadows.

Endnotes

[105.] "From national character to statistical discrimination," to be presented at the Allied Social Sciences Conference in Boston in January 2015.

[106.] My late friend, Gene Miller, the editor of the critical 20th-century edition of Hume's *Essays* in which "Of National Characters" appears, suggests why we need specialist help, Miller ([1985] 1987, p. xxii): "[One finds abundant evidence of his reading](#) in the Greek and Latin classics as well as of his familiarity with the literary works of the important English, French, Italian, and Spanish authors.... He knew the important treatises on natural science, and he investigated the modern writings on political economy." Popkin ([1977-78] 1980, pp. 257-58) helpfully reads Hume in opposition to Montesquieu.

[107.] Smith is completely clear in crediting Hume with opening one vital part of the discussion. "[Thirdly, and lastly](#), commerce and manufactures gradually introduced order and good government, and with them, the liberty and security of individuals, among the inhabitants of the country, who had before lived almost in a continual state of war with their neighbours, and of servile dependency upon their superiors. This, though it has been the least

observed is by far the most important of all their effects. Mr. Hume is the only writer who, so far as I know, has hitherto taken notice of it." *The Wealth of Nations* III.iv.4; p. 412. The modern reader might ask: where's Montesquieu? Mizuta (2000, pp. 174-5) collects Smith's comments on some empirical claims made in the *De L'esprit des Loix*. This is suggestive of Smith's attitude: "The two facts above mentioned on which Montesquieu ground this argument are not all well ascertained" (174). The questioned "fact" claimed to "explain" polygamy was a sex ratio of 10 females born to each male. The impact of musical education on Greek morals is treated more gently since here Montesquieu has the authority of Plato and Aristotle to cite (175).

[108.] There is a marvelous geometrical image offered in the commentary on Aristotle's *Prior Analytics* by Alexander of Aphrodisias that will help explain this: "the necessary is like a line which has been stretched from eternity to eternity, and contingent comes into being from this line when it is cut. For if this line is cut into unequal segments, the result is the contingent as the natural and what is for the most part, and also the contingent as the infrequent, which includes chance and spontaneity. But if the line is cut into equal segment there results the 'who can tell'...." (163.19-23; 102-3).

[109.] We have argued against the temptation to read modal language in Smith—both "natural" and "necessary" are modal—as stylistic tics of no great interest (Levy and Peart 2013).

SPENCER'S CONSERVATIVE TURN?

by Roderick T. Long

It has often been suggested that Spencer grows more conservative over time; and I think there is *some* truth to this. One sign of a conservative turn is the increasing moderation (though never abandonment) of his feminist commitments: contrast the radical character of his [chapter on women's rights](#) in his 1850 *Social Statics* [110] with the [more watered-down account](#) in the

1897 *Principles of Ethics*,^[111] or his ludicrous 1891 assertion that “[throughout our social arrangements the claims of women are always put first](#)”;^[112] consider also his [radically feminist view of marriage](#) in an 1845 letter to Edward Lott,^[113] together with [his repudiation](#) of it in his *Autobiography*, in a passage written around 1894.^[114]



Benjamin Tucker

On the question of a conservative turn on issues of class politics, the 19th-century individualist anarchist Benjamin Tucker, wrote in his journal, *Liberty*:

[Liberty welcomes and criticises in the same breath the series of papers by Herbert Spencer on The New Toryism](#), The Coming Slavery, The Sins of Legislators, etc., now running in the *Popular Science Monthly* and the *English Contemporary Review*. They are very true, very important, and very misleading. They are true for the most part in what they say, and false and misleading in what they fail to say. Mr. Spencer convicts legislators of undeniable and enormous sins in meddling with and curtailing and destroying the people’s rights. Their sins are sins of commission. But Mr. Spencer’s sin of

omission is quite as grave. He is one of those persons who are making a wholesale onslaught on Socialism as the incarnation of the doctrine of State omnipotence carried to its highest power. And I am not sure that he is quite honest in this. I begin to be a little suspicious of him. It seems as if he had forgotten the teachings of his earlier writings, and had become a champion of the capitalistic class. It will be noticed that in these later articles, amid his multitudinous illustrations (of which he is as prodigal as ever) of the evils of legislation, he in every instance cites some law passed, ostensibly at least, to protect labor, alleviate suffering, or promote the people’s welfare. He demonstrates beyond dispute the lamentable failure in this direction. But never once does he call attention to the far more deadly and deep-seated evils growing out of the innumerable laws creating privilege and sustaining monopoly. You must not protect the weak against the strong, he seems to say, but freely supply all the weapons needed by the strong to oppress the weak. He is greatly shocked that the rich should be directly taxed to support the poor, but that the poor should be indirectly taxed and bled to make the rich richer does not outrage his delicate sensibilities in the least. Poverty is increased by the poor laws, says Mr. Spencer. Granted; but what about the *rich* laws that caused and still cause the poverty to which the poor laws add? That is by far the more important question; yet Mr. Spencer tries to blink it out of sight.^[115]

Tucker is essentially accusing Spencer of what I’ve elsewhere called “[right-conflationism](#)”^[116] and Kevin Carson calls “vulgar libertarianism” – namely, the tendency of many libertarians to “have trouble remembering, from one moment to the next, whether they’re defending actually existing capitalism or free market principles,” and thus to “grudgingly admit that the present system is not a free market, and that it includes a lot of state intervention on behalf of the rich,” only to “go right back to defending the wealth of existing

corporations on the basis of ‘free market principles.’”^[117]

At the same time, one can find quite unconservative viewpoints, including viewpoints favorable to the poor over the rich, in writings close to the end of Spencer’s life. Consider Spencer’s discussion of labour unions in his 1896 *Principles of Sociology*. After some boilerplate right-libertarian criticism of unions,^[118] Spencer turns toward their defense:

Judging from their harsh and cruel conduct in the past, it is tolerably certain that employers are now prevented from doing unfair things which they would else do. Conscious that trade-unions are ever ready to act, they are more prompt to raise wages when trade is flourishing than they would otherwise be; and when there come times of depression, they lower wages only when they cannot otherwise carry on their businesses. Knowing the power which unions can exert, masters are led to treat the individual members of them with more respect than they would otherwise do: the status of the workman is almost necessarily raised. Moreover, having a strong motive for keeping on good terms with the union, a master is more likely than he would else be to study the general convenience of his men, and to carry on his works in ways conducive to their health.^[119]

Spencer goes still farther. Noting that “the regulation of labour becomes less coercive as society assumes a higher type,” Spencer affirms that the “transition from the compulsory cooperation of militancy to the voluntary cooperation of industrialism” will not be complete until the wage system is replaced by “self-governing combinations of workers.”

A wage-earner, while he voluntarily agrees to give so many hours work for so much pay, does not, during performance of his work, act in a purely voluntary way: he is coerced by the consciousness that discharge will follow if he idles, and is sometimes more manifestly coerced by an overlooker. ... So long as the worker

remains a wage-earner, the marks of status do not wholly disappear. For so many hours daily he makes over his faculties to a master, or to a cooperative group, and is for the time owned by him or it. He is temporarily in the position of a slave, and his overlooker stands in the position of a slave-driver. Further, a remnant of the régime of status is seen in the fact that he and other workers are placed in ranks, receiving different rates of pay.^[120]

Spencer predicts that the “master-and-workmen type of industrial organization” will inevitably be outcompeted by the “cooperative type, so much more productive and costing so much less in superintendence.” This is very close to the position that John Stuart Mill eventually embraced under the possibly misleading label of “socialism.”^[121] Throughout his career, then, we find passages that seem to confirm Tucker’s indictment mingled with passages that seem to contradict it.

Endnotes

^[110.] *Social Statics*, ch. 16. <[/titles/273#lf0331_label_180](#)>.

^[111.] Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Ethics*, introduction by Tibor R. Machan (Indianapolis, Ind.: Liberty Fund, 1978), vol. 2, IV.20. <[/titles/334#lf0155-02_label_077](#)>

^[112.] Herbert Spencer, “From Freedom to Bondage,” *The Man Versus the State, with Six Essays*. <[/titles/330#Spencer_0020_691](#)>

^[113.] Letter to Edward Lott, 18 March 1845. <<https://praxeology.net/HS-LM.htm>>

^[114.] Herbert Spencer, *An Autobiography by Herbert Spencer, Illustrated in Two Volumes*, Vol. I (New York: D. Appleton and Company 1904), ch. 26. <[/titles/2321#Spencer_1500-01_795](#)>

^[115.] Benjamin R. Tucker, “The Sin of Herbert Spencer,” *Liberty*, May 17, 1884. <<http://fair-use.org/benjamin-tucker/instead-of-a-book/the-sin-of-herbert-spencer>>

[116.] Roderick T. Long, "The Conflation Trap," *Bleeding Heart Libertarians*, 7 November 2012. <<https://bleedingheartlibertarians.com/2012/11/the-conflation-trap>>

[117.] Kevin A. Carson, *Studies in Mutualist Political Economy* (Booksurge, 2007), p. 142. <<http://www.mutualist.org/sitebuildercontent/sitebuilderfiles/MPE.pdf>>

[118.] On left-libertarian vs. right-libertarian views of unions, see Kevin A. Carson, *Labor Struggle: A Free Market Model*, Center for a Stateless Society Paper No. 10 (Third Quarter 2010). <<https://c4ss.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/C4SS-Labor.pdf>>

[119.] Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Sociology, in Three Volumes* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1898), Vol. 3, Bk. VIII, ch. 20. </titles/2633#Spencer_1650-03_1979>

[120.] *Principles of Sociology*, Vol. 3, Bk. VIII, ch. 21. </titles/2633#Spencer_1650-03_2041>

[121.] John Stuart Mill, *Chapters on Socialism*, in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, Volume V: Essays on Economics and Society*, Part II, ed. John M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967). </titles/232#Mill_0223-05_1239>

HERBERT SPENCER'S TWO GREATEST CONTRIBUTIONS TO SOCIOLOGY

by George H. Smith

1) Alberto Mingardi has rightfully stressed Spencer's significant contributions to the theory of spontaneous order. This theme is interwoven throughout Spencer's writings and may be viewed as the thread that connects his many social observations and analyses. But with the exception of some of Spencer's libertarian commentators, this valuable feature of Spencer's

writings has been largely overlooked in secondary sources. As I wrote in a 1981 article:

Herbert Spencer, in my judgment, is a major theorist in the spontaneous order school of social theory. The similarities, for example, between Spencer and F.A. Hayek are remarkable, yet Hayek pays little attention to Spencer's contributions. And it should be noted that Spencer did more than simply repeat the principles of spontaneous order defended by Adam Ferguson, Adam Smith, and others. In a sense, Spencer's entire social theory may be seen as an elaboration of the spontaneous order model. Spencer explicated this model in far more detail than his predecessors.^[122]

2) Perhaps Spencer's greatest contribution to the sociology of the state was his formulation and extensive treatments of two ideal types: the militant and industrial forms of social organization. This distinction would influence later sociologists, as we see in the 1928 discussion by Pitirim A. Sorokin, who wrote: "In its essentials, Spencer's generalization appears to me to be valid."^[123] Sorokin gave an excellent summary of Spencer's ideal types and their respective relationships to war and peace. Here is the first part of that summary:

Probably the most important generalization in this field [of the relationship between war and social types] was set forth by H. Spencer, in his theory of the militant and the industrial type of society. The essentials of Spencer's theory are: first, that war and militarism lead to an expansion of governmental control; second, to its centralization; third, to its despotism; fourth, to an increase in social stratification; and fifth, to a decrease of autonomy and self-government of the people. In this way, war and militarism tend to transform a nation into an army, and an army into a nation. Peace tends to call forth the opposite results: a decrease of governmental interference, an increase of the people's liberty

and self-government, a weakening of social and political stratification, and decentralization.^[124]

Sorokin, following Spencer, noted that the militant type of society is not limited to one kind of government or ideology.

[War and militarism] may assume various “dresses”—especially in the form of “ideologies” and “speech-reactions—according to the circumstances. Sometimes they have the appearance of a despotism of military leaders, kings, and aristocratic dictators. But sometimes they assume the forms of “socialism” and “communism,” “dictatorship of the proletariat” or “nationalization.” In spite of the difference in such “dresses,” this difference is quite superficial. Both types of “dresses” wrap objective social processes of an identical nature. Both tend to realize an expansion of governmental control (in the form of a “communist,” “generals’ or king’s despotic control). Both tend to make it unlimited (in the form of an emperor’s autocracy or of a despotic “dictatorship” of communist leaders) through the universal control of “nationalized” industry and wealth; through the limitation of private ownership, property, and initiative; through the control and regulation of the behavior and relationships of the people; both restrain the liberty of individuals up to the limit, and turn the nation into the status of an army entirely controlled by the authorities. The names are different in the two cases; the essence is the same. Thus, according to Spencer, militarism, “communism,” and “socialism” are brothers.^[125]

Sorokin (again, writing in 1928) noted Spencer’s considerable influence on other sociologists.

Spencer even predicted a coming temporary rise of socialism as a contemporary “dress” for the expansion of governmental control due to militarism. Spencer’s theory, with some modifications, has been further developed by

W.G. Sumner in his *War and Other Essays*, New Haven, 1911. It was brilliantly corroborated by R. Pöhlmann, in his *Geschichte d. Antiken Kommunismus und Socialismus*; by V. Pareto in his excellent *Les systèmes socialistes*, and by a great many other investigators of the problems of socialism, militarism, despotism, and étatism.^[126]

Spencer remains a respected figure in sociology, as evidenced by the prominence given to Spencer’s ideas by Robert L. Carneiro in *Evolutionism in Cultural Anthropology*, a book that I highly recommend to anyone with a serious interest in Spencer. ^[127]

Endnotes

^[122.] George H. Smith, “Herbert Spencer’s Theory of Causation,” *The Journal of Libertarian Studies*, Vol. V. No. 2 (Spring 1981): 151, note 89.
<https://mises.org/sites/default/files/5_2_1_0.pdf>.

^[123.] Pitirim A. Sorokin, *Contemporary Sociological Theories* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1964), p. 344.

^[124.] *Ibid.*, 344.

^[125.] *Ibid.*, 345.

^[126.] *Ibid.*, 345, note 77.

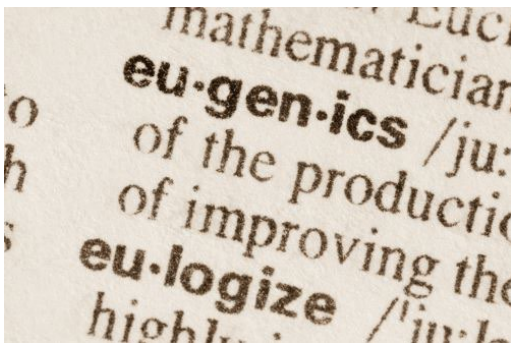
^[127.] Robert L. Carneiro, *Evolutionism in Cultural Anthropology* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2003). See also, Robert L. Carneiro, "Herbert Spencer as an Anthropologist," *The Journal of Libertarian Studies*, Volume 5, Number 2 (1981)
<https://mises.org/sites/default/files/5_2_2_0.pdf>.

SPENCER AND EUGENIC LEGISLATION

by Roderick T. Long

David and George raise the question of Spencer’s role in eugenics. While eugenicists certainly tried to make use of Spencerian ideas in ways that Spencer would not have approved, I don’t think he can be regarded as

completely innocent. In an 1892 letter to a Japanese official, for example, Spencer advises that the “[inter-marriage of foreigners and Japanese](#)” should be “positively forbidden” in order to prevent the “chaotic constitution” that an “incalculable mixture of traits” would naturally produce.^[128] That such a policy would violate the law of equal freedom Spencer was well aware; but pursuant to the historical relativism of which George rightly complains, Spencer regards Japan as a less developed culture than Britain and so less ready for the implementation of libertarian ideals. Spencer was thus prepared in certain contexts to countenance eugenicist legislation.



Hence we should not whitewash Spencer’s eugenicist leanings. But we should not exaggerate them either. As I’ve written elsewhere:

[Spencer’s assumption that the application of libertarian principle must be qualified](#) in the case of societies with no tradition of self-governance is shared by John Stuart Mill.... Mill is generally forgiven for saying things like this, whereas when Spencer says similar things he is consigned to outer darkness. Yet on this point Mill is surely *worse* than Spencer, since from the alleged “nonage” of non-European peoples Mill inferred the legitimacy of British colonial rule, in India for example ... whereas Spencer remained a lifelong opponent of imperialism and Britain’s India policy. From the assumption (be it true or false) that Japan was not ready for freedom, Mill would have been ready to infer that Japan should be subjected to British rule; Spencer on the contrary infers that Japan

should do everything in its power to prevent being so subjected.^[129]

Considering that such thinkers as Aristotle, Hume, Voltaire, and Kant continue to be respected despite the appalling racism of which they were capable, it seems a bit hypocritical to hold Spencer to a higher standard. But that is no reason to ignore or excuse Spencer’s racism either.

Endnotes

^[128.] Letter to Kaneko Kentaro, 26 August 1892. <<https://praxeology.net/HS-LKK.htm>>

^[129.] Roderick T. Long, “Big in Japan,” *Austro-Athenian Empire*, 1 September 2005. <<https://praxeology.net/unblog09-05.htm#01>>.

FOLD YOUR FLAPPING WINGS SOARING LEGISLATURE

by Sheldon Richman

The editor of Liberty Matters, Sheldon Richman, was struck by the similarity of the views expressed by Spencer concerning the situation of the poor and those of the protagonist of Gilbert and Sullivan's satire of the British political system the operetta *Iolanthe* (1882). Strephon is a half human, half fairy, Arcadian shepherd who gets elected to Parliament and proposes a bill to reform the House of Lords. The MP sings the following recitative and aria which Gilbert cut from the operetta early in its run after critics thought it too dark. It can be found on some recordings of modern performances. ^[130]

Recitative:

My bill has now been read a second time: His ready vote no member now refuses; In verity I wield a pow'r sublime, And one that I can turn to mighty uses! What joy to carry, in the very teeth Of ministry, cross-bench and opposition, Some rather urgent measures quite beneath The ken of Patriot and Politician!

Aria:

Fold your flapping wings, Soaring legislature! Stoop to little things, Stoop to human nature! Never need to roam, Members patriotic, Let's begin at home Crime is no exotic! Bitter is your bane Terrible your trials, Dingy Drury Lane! Soapless Seven Dials!

Take a tipsy lout, Gathered from the gutter. Hustle him about, Strap him to a shutter. What am I but he, Washed at hours stated, Fed on filagree, Clothed and educated? He's a mark of scorn, I might be another, If I had been born Of a tipsy mother.

Take a wretched thief, Through the city sneaking. Pocket handkerchief Ever, ever seeking. What is he but I Robbed of all my chances, Picking pockets by Force of circumstances? I might be as bad, As unlucky, rather, If I'd only had Fagin for a father!

Endnotes

[130.] *The Complete Annotated Gilbert and Sullivan. Introduced and Edited by Ian Bradley* (Oxford University Press, 1996, 2001), pp. 434-6.

SPENCER ON BANKING

by Roderick T. Long

Since in my initial essay I cast aspersions on Spencer's capacities as an economic thinker, I want to do him justice by briefly discussing an excellent and little-known 1858 economic essay of his on "[State Tamperings With Money and Banks](#)." (Thanks to Jeff Tucker for recently reminding me of this piece.)

In the essay, Spencer places the blame for recessions and depressions on an "[excessive issue of notes](#)" by the central bank, since when "actual payments" are replaced by "an immense number of promises-to-pay," the result is that "[part of the claims cannot be liquidated](#)." [131] Spencer's account can be seen as a partial anticipation of the Austrian theory of the business cycle.

In lieu of the Rothbardian-style 100-percent-gold-reserve standard, Spencer favours a free-banking approach, counting on competition and contract enforcement to place a check on the overissue of notes.



Friedrich A. Hayek

Alberto mentions the oddity of Hayek's calling Spencer an economist. But Spencer's proposals are parallel in some respects to Hayek's own suggestions for monetary reform in *Denationalisation of Money*. [132] In any case, Hayek was fairly free with the term "economist," since he called Ayn Rand an economist too – even "one of three outstanding woman economists." [133]

Endnotes

[131.] Herbert Spencer, "State Tamperings With Money and Banks," in *Essays: Scientific, Political, and Speculative: Library Edition, containing Seven Essays not before republished, and various other Additions* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1891), Vol. 3. <[/titles/337#Spencer_0620-03_433](#)>

[132.] Friedrich A. Hayek, *Denationalisation of Money – The Argument Refined: An Analysis of the Theory and Practice of Concurrent Currencies* (London: Institute of Economic Affairs, 1990). <https://mises.org/sites/default/files/Denationalisation%20of%20Money%20The%20Argument%20Refined_5.pdf>

[133.] Quoted in Alan Ebenstein, *Friedrich Hayek: A Biography* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), p. 275.

SPENCER'S COSMOLOGY

by Roderick T. Long

Spencer's theory of social evolution is grounded not just in biological evolution but in an even broader physical theory according to which the inherent "[instability of the homogeneous](#)"^[134] drives a universal tendency of "[transformation of the homogeneous into the heterogeneous](#)."^[135] This approach, which might seem to defy the second law of thermodynamics, can easily make Spencer look like a crackpot.

It's worth noting, then, that Harvard astrophysicist David Layzer has defended a strikingly similar approach.^[136] Noting the apparent conflict between the second law of thermodynamics, with its prediction of increasing disorder, and our observation of an apparent increase of order in the formation of galaxies, solar systems, and biological species, Layzer suggests that rather than assuming that this growth of order is being compensated for by a greater increase in entropy elsewhere, we can reconcile the predicted growth of disorder with the observed growth of order by taking into account the expansion of the universe.



Since the growth of entropy in a system involves matter distributing itself ever more evenly among the possible states of that system, it follows that if the system is expanding (as the universe is), the number of possible states can increase faster than the rate at which matter is filling them, so that while entropy is increasing, the gap between states filled and states fillable – i.e., order – may increase still faster. In other words, all that the second law predicts is that in the contest between entropy and

order, the *amount* of territory conquered by the forces of entropy will always increase – not that the *percentage* of territory will necessarily do so. Of course, given a fixed territory, an increase in amount means an increase in percentage (and a corresponding loss for the forces of order); but in an expanding territory we no longer have a zero-sum game, and it is possible for entropy's domain to increase even as its share of total territory available decreases. And this, Layzer suggests, explains the growth of order in the universe: the universe expands more quickly than its matter can spread out, so we get "clumps," i.e., stars, and the ongoing temperature disequilibrium between stars and nonstars allows energy to keep flowing from the former to the latter, generating work.

I have no idea whether Layzer is right about any of that; such questions lie far beyond my area of competence. My point is simply that an approach broadly like Spencer's has been defended comparatively recently by someone widely regarded as reputable.

Endnotes

^[134.] Herbert Spencer, *First Principles*, 2d ed. (London: Williams and Norgate, 1867), ch. 19. "The Instability of the Homogeneous" <[/titles/1390#Spencer_0624_620](#)>

^[135.] *First Principles* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1867), ch. 15. "The Law of Evolution continued" <[/titles/1390#Spencer_0624_549](#)>

^[136.] See, e.g., David Layzer, "The Arrow of Time," *Scientific American* (December 1975), pp. 56-69; <http://www.scientificamerican.com/media/pdf/2008-05-21_1975-carroll-story.pdf>; Layzer, *Cosmogonesis: The Growth of Order in the Universe* (Oxford University Press, 1991). See also Bob Doyle, "David Layzer," *The Information Philosopher* (2009) <<https://www.informationphilosopher.com/solutions/scientists/layzer>> and, relatedly, Doyle, "Ilya Prigogine," *The Information Philosopher* (2013) <<https://www.informationphilosopher.com/solutions/scientists/prigogine>>.

SPENCER AND MILL

by Roderick T. Long

Herbert Spencer and John Stuart Mill have a great deal in common. Both tried to base a self-realizationist ethics and a secular, rights-based classical-liberal political theory on indirect-utilitarian moral theory, classical economics, and associationist psychology; and both accepted a historical theory of progressive human socialization. Yet their reputations are vastly different.

In the academic mainstream, Mill is honored while Spencer is vilified. Crane Brinton famously said that Mill humanized utilitarianism while Spencer barbarized it^[137] – a rather ironic choice of words given Spencer’s hostility to rebarbarization. In right-wing circles, it is often Mill who is vilified as an alleged totalitarian^[138] while Spencer is largely ignored. And among libertarians, Spencer is often praised as the consistent libertarian while Mill is dismissed as a confused middle-of-the-roader whose views represent the beginning of the slide from classical liberalism to welfare liberalism.



Ludwig von Mises

Ludwig von Mises, for example, writes:

John Stuart Mill is an epigone of classical liberalism and, especially in his later years, under the influence of his wife, full of feeble compromises. He slips slowly into socialism and is the originator of the thoughtless confounding of liberal and socialist ideas that led to the decline of English liberalism and to the undermining of the living standards of the English people.^[139]

Murray Rothbard, for his part, calls Mill a “woolly minded man of mush” and “flabby and soggy ‘moderation’” whose “graceful and lucid style ... served to mask the vast muddle of his intellectual furniture.”^[140] Bryan Caplan agrees that Mill’s thought is “shockingly muddled.”^[141] And even Alberto writes, earlier in the conversation, that when we “compare him with his contemporary John Stuart Mill,” Spencer “stands out clearly as an adamant proponent of libertarianism.”

While there are certainly important differences between Spencer and Mill, I’m inclined to think that the extreme contrast between them is overstated. The mainstream academic narrative of a humanitarian Mill and a callous, brutal Spencer fails to account for issues, such as colonialism, on which Spencer was more humanitarian than Mill. On the other hand, the libertarian narrative of a private-property purist Spencer and a socialist-leaning Mill faces several difficulties. On some issues (such as land-ownership), Mill is a greater defender of private property than Spencer is; most of Mill’s “socialism” amounts to a defense of workers’ cooperatives rather than state control, and is very similar to Spencer’s views on the same topic; and Spencer’s strong libertarian principles are moderated in their present application by his historical relativism. On issues where the two broadly agree, sometimes it is Mill who is more insightful and nuanced (as on feminism), though by no means always. (Also, what Rothbard and Caplan see as Mill’s muddle-headedness I’m inclined to see as mere complexity.) We would do better to learn from both Mill and Spencer than to try to cast one as angel and the other as demon.

Endnotes

[137.] Quoted in Dante Germino, *Machiavelli to Marx: Modern Western Political Thought* (University of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 256.

[138.] See, e.g., Joseph Hamburger, *John Stuart Mill on Liberty and Control* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001) and Linda C. Raeder, *John Stuart Mill and the Religion of Humanity* (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 2002).

[139.] Ludwig von Mises, *Liberalism: The Classical Tradition*, trans. Ralph Raico, ed. Bettina Bien Greaves (Indianapolis, Ind.: Liberty Fund, 2005), Appendix 1. <[/titles/1463#Mises_0842_502](#)>

[140.] Murray N. Rothbard, *Classical Economics: An Austrian Perspective on the History of Economic Thought, Volume II* (Auburn, Ala.: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2006), pp. 277-

78. <https://mises.org/sites/default/files/Austrian%20Perspective%20on%20the%20History%20of%20Economic%20Thought_Vol_2_2.pdf>

[141.] Bryan Caplan, “The Awful Mill,” *EconLog*, March 23, 2012. <https://www.econlib.org/econlog/archives/2012/03/the_awesome_mill.html>.

SPENCER AND THE TRUTHS OF POLITICAL ECONOMY

by Alberto Mingardi

Roderick Long came back to Spencer and economics. Both Hayek and Stigler—as I learnt in this conversation from David Levy—considered Spencer an economist. Roderick mentions Spencer’s free-banking credentials, as exemplified by his article “[State Tampering with Money and Banks.](#)”[142]

That is a great essay. Spencer argues that “[the State can, and sometimes does, produce commercial disasters.](#) As we shall also show, it can, and sometimes does, exacerbate the commercial disasters otherwise

produced. But while it can create and can make worse, it cannot prevent.”[143]



Vera Smith

Vera Smith, later Vera Lutz, [mentioned that work](#) among the very few relevant contributions to the banking debate in England in the 1850s.[144] Smith wrote her dissertation under the supervision of Hayek: but I doubt that she succeeded in having him pay attention to Spencer’s essay. On these issues, Spencer sided with Thomas Hodgskin, his colleague at *The Economist* for a brief season, who in his *Popular Political Economy* put forward some powerful arguments on banking and the system of free enterprise.[145]

If Spencer won’t be considered an “economist” strictly speaking, it is true that he held dear the truths of political economy—very much in the spirit of Adam Smith, as David Levy suggests.

For a forceful defence of political economy from Spencer, it is worth quoting, once again, *The Study of Sociology*:

[Knowing that his theory of government and plans for social reformation are discountenanced by it,](#) Mr. Carlyle manifests his annoyance by calling Political Economy “the dismal science.”...That the generalizations of political economists are not all true, and that some, which are true in the main, need qualification, is very likely. But to admit this, is not in the least to admit that there are no true generalizations of this order to be made. Those who see, or fancy

they see, flaws in politico-economical conclusions, and thereupon sneer at Political Economy, remind me of the theologians who lately rejoiced so much over the discovery of an error in the estimation of the Sun's distance; and thought the occasion so admirable a one for ridiculing men of science. It is characteristic of theologians to find a solace in whatever shows human imperfection; and in this case they were elated because astronomers discovered that, while their delineation of the Solar System remained exactly right in all its proportions, the absolute dimensions assigned were too great by about one-thirtieth. In one respect, however, the comparison fails; for though the theologians taunted the astronomers, they did not venture to include Astronomy within the scope of their contempt—did not do as those to whom they are here compared, who show contempt, not for political economists only, but for Political Economy itself. Were they calm, these opponents of the political economists would see that as, out of certain physical properties of things there inevitably arise certain modes of action, which, as generalized, constitute physical science; so out of the properties of men, intellectual and emotional, there inevitably arise certain laws of social processes, including, among others, those through which mutual aid in satisfying wants is made possible. They would see that, but for these processes, the laws of which Political Economy seeks to generalize, men would have continued in the lowest stage of barbarism to the present hour.^[146]

Endnotes

^[142.] Herbert Spencer, "State Tampering with Money and Bank." in *Essays: Scientific, Political, and Speculative*, Library Edition, containing Seven Essays not before republished, and various other Additions (London: Williams and Norgate, 1891). Vol. 3.

^[143.] Ibid.; [/titles/337#Spencer_0620-03_438](#)

^[144.] Vera C. Smith, *The Rationale of Central Banking and the Free Banking Alternative*, Foreword by Leland Yeager (Indianapolis, Ind.: Liberty Fund, 1990). <[/titles/1413](#)>.

^[145.] For Hodgskin, "[Banking, however, let us never forget, with the issuing of bank notes, is altogether a private business](#), and no more needs to be regulated by meddling statesmen, than the business of paper making." Thomas Hodgskin, *Popular Political Economy: Four lectures delivered at the London Mechanics Institution* (London: Charles and William Tait, 1827); <[/titles/320](#)>.

^[146.] Herbert Spencer, *The Study of Sociology* (London: Henry S. King, 1873); <[/titles/1335](#)>.

SOME IMPLICATIONS OF SPENCER'S RELATIVE ETHICS

by George H. Smith

In my lead essay I called attention to my dissatisfaction with Spencer's distinction between absolute and relative ethics. In this comment I shall mention some of the unsavory implications (from a libertarian perspective) of that distinction.

Throughout *The Principles of Ethics* we find statements like the following: "[\[S\]ocial self-preservation takes precedence of individual self-preservation](#)"; "the needs for social self-preservation must override the claims of individuals"; "[the preservation of the species](#), or that variety of it constituting a society, is an end which must take precedence of the preservation of the individual."^[147]

The priority given by Spencer to society over the individual in these passages may seem flatly to contradict his other statements that society exists for the benefit of individuals, not vice versa, but Spencer would concede no such inconsistency. The absolute sovereignty of the individual, he argued, is a principle of *absolute ethics* that applies *only* to the perfect society—a consistent "society of contract" in a condition of *complete* peace, a society in

which no remnants of the militant system remain. During transition periods, however, when the threat of war renders national self-defense necessary, we must follow the dictates of *relative ethics*, which tell us that the individual and his property may—indeed, must—be sacrificed for the good of society. Thus “[the right to individual liberty like the right to individual life](#), must be asserted subject to qualifications entailed by the measures needful for national safety.”^[148] Spencer, in this defense of military conscription, continued:

[Such trespass on liberty as is required to preserve liberty](#), has a quasi-ethical warrant. Subject only to the condition that all capable members of the community shall be equally liable to it, that restraint on the rights of free motion and locomotion necessitated by military organization and discipline, is legitimate, provided always that the end in view is defensive war and not offensive war.^[149]

This was not the only place in *The Principles of Ethics* in which Spencer defended conscription. Here is another instance.

[It remains only to say that while](#), in a system of absolute ethics, the corollary here drawn from the formula of justice [the Law of Equal Freedom] is unqualified, in a system of relative ethics it has to be qualified by the necessities of social self-preservation. Although we have seen that the primary law that each individual shall receive and suffer the benefits and evils of his own nature, following from conduct carried on with due regard to socially-imposed limits, must, where the group is endangered by external enemies, be modified by the secondary law, which requires that there shall be such sacrifice of individuals as is required to preserve, for the aggregate of individuals, the ability thus to act and to receive the results of actions. Hence, for the purposes of defensive war, there is justified such contingent loss of physical integrity as effectual defence of the society requires: supposing always that effectual defence is

possible. For it would seem to be an implication that where the invading force is overwhelming, such sacrifice of individuals is not justified.^[150]

Spencer used the same reasoning to justify not only conscription but also taxation and confiscation by the state of a certain percentage of inherited property.^[151] He even went so far as to defend the suppression of free speech, if “[the beliefs openly entertained](#) are such as tend directly to diminish the power of the society to defend itself against hostile societies.”^[152]

Spencer summarized the upshot of his dichotomy between absolute and relative ethics as follows: “[Only, indeed, as we pass gradually from that system of status](#) which chronic hostilities produce, to that system of contract which replaces it as fast as industrial life becomes predominant, does the assertion of rights in general become more and more practicable and appropriate....”

It is not my purpose to criticize Spencer’s perverse notion of relative ethics. Suffice it to say (to paraphrase Antony Flew) that under Spencer’s system of relative ethics individual freedom dies the death of a thousand qualifications.

Endnotes

^[147.] *The Principles of Ethics* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1898), II:125, 139, 79. Cf. *ibid.*, 71, 101.

^[148.] *Ibid.*, II:79.

^[149.] *Ibid.*

^[150.] *Ibid.*, II:71.

^[151.] *Ibid.*, II:125-26

^[152.] *Ibid.*, II:139.

THE SPENCERIAN GILBERT, PART 2

by Sheldon Richman

In a follow up to my previous email about W.S. Gilbert, *Iolanthe* packs more satire about the British government than any other Gilbert & Sullivan opera. Here's a particularly good example, sung by a sentry outside the Parliament building in London, opening Act II. I should note that Pvt. Willis pronounces conservative "conservatyve":[\[153\]](#)

When all night long a chap remains
On sentry-go, to chase monotony
He exercises of his brains: That is,
assuming that he's got any. Though never
nurtured in the lap Of luxury, yet, I
admonish you, I am an intellectual chap.
And think of things that would astonish
you. I often think it's comical (fa la la la;
fa la la la!) How Nature always does
contrive (fa la la la!) That every boy and
every gal That's born into the world alive
Is either a little Liberal Or else a little
Conservative. Is either a little Liberal Or
else a little Conservative. Fa la la

Endnotes

[\[153.\]](#) *The Complete Annotated Gilbert and Sullivan. Introduced and Edited by Ian Bradley* (Oxford University Press, 1996, 2001), p. 413.

ALBERT JAY NOCK AND THE SPENCER-HAYEK CONNECTION

by David M. Levy

Let me add a mite to the nice point that Spencer was of enormous influence in the free-market period of American thought before the ascent of the Mont Pelerin Society. Sandra Peart and I have been spending time looking into the publications associated with Merwin K. Hart in part to understand his influence on the American economics education in the early Keynesian era and in part to understand the status quo from which we might

evaluate the impact of the scholars associated with the Mont Pelerin Society.[\[154\]](#) The review of *The Road to Serfdom* by Albert J. Nock in the Hart-linked *Economic Council Review of Books* opens with a link to Spencer:

Out of the books now accumulated on my desk there are four which I especially wish my readers would go through carefully, word by word. The first of these is Mr. Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom*. The title is reminiscent of Herbert Spencer's essay on *The Coming Slavery*, published in 1884 and indeed Mr. Hayek's work is essentially little more than an ex post facto pointing-up of Spencer's treatise. Any one who forty-odd years ago had set his mind at work on Spencer's reasoning could see the impending fate of Western society as clear as daylight. I can vouch for this, for I was one who did it, and not by any means the only one; and now Mr. Hayek comes along to show how far we have got on our way to the goal of our destiny, and to show how and why we have got there. Spencer showed where the road we were on would take us and must take us; Mr. Hayek shows that it has taken us (that is, Western society as a whole) exactly there.[\[155\]](#)

Endnotes

[\[154.\]](#) David Levy and Sandra Peart, "Soviet Growth and American Textbooks: An Endogenous Past," *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* 78 (2011): 110-25; David Levy, Sandra J. Peart and Margaret Albert, "Economic Liberals as Quasi-Public Intellectuals: The Democratic Dimension." *Research in the History of Economic Thought and Methodology* 30 (2012): 1-116.

[\[155.\]](#) Albert J. Nock, Review of F. A. Hayek. *Road to Serfdom*. *Economic Council Review of Books* II (October 1944), [1-2]. Peart and I discuss the larger context in "F. A. Hayek and the 'Individualists'" in *Hayek and the Modern Economy*, ed. Sandra Peart and David Levy (New York Palgrave, 2013).

SPENCER ON CHARITY: A PERSONAL NOTE

by George H. Smith

After Herbert Spencer's writings achieved international fame, he became the Victorian equivalent of a rock star. Indeed, a letter from overseas addressed to "Herbert Spencer, England," was delivered to him in London with no problem. Innumerable contemporary stories were written about Spencer, many of them with no foundation in fact, and some of those false accounts found their way into later biographies. Spencer's fans eagerly devoured anecdotes about his character and personal eccentricities, however inaccurate they might have been.

Spencer's reserved demeanor, when coupled with his oft-distorted views on charity, generated stories that portrayed him as a Scrooge-like character, an unfeeling miser who would prefer to see a person go hungry rather than offer charitable assistance. But this was far from accurate; on the contrary, Spencer's colleagues and close friends observed that he was an unusually generous man who often helped people in need. As William Henry Hudson, a friend for many years, wrote:

No man could be more simple, more modest, more absolutely unassuming, and affectations of any kind were wholly alien to the complete clarity of his nature. But somehow the feeling was there, all the same. He was by temperament exceedingly reserved in ordinary intercourse—I might almost say shy; this lent his manner a certain suggestion of restraint; and I can well understand that those who met him only casually must have thought him rather chilly and unsympathetic.... But you had only to get thoroughly accustomed to these peculiarities, and you realized that they were simply upon the surface. The seeming aloofness of the man disappeared, and you found beneath the reticence and coldness which first troubled you a large, simple, and eminently sympathetic nature.[\[156\]](#)

Of Spencer's many charitable contributions to people in need, Hudson wrote:

It was perhaps the principle of justice which was the ultimate rule of conduct with him. But though he believed and taught that justice should take precedence of generosity, and that reckless generosity is an unmixed evil, the claims of generosity were by no means overlooked by him. This was shown again and again in my knowledge of him by acts of practical sympathy with deserving people and worthy causes.[\[157\]](#)

James Collier, Spencer's secretary and amanuensis for many years, made the same point:

He was animated by nothing less than a passion of justice.... But he was also generous and charitable and gave almost beyond his means where giving was needed. Where aid of a practical kind was required, he was unweariable; and a hundred anecdotes of his helpfulness could be related.[\[158\]](#)

In 1906, a fascinating book, *Home Life with Herbert Spencer*, was published by "Two." The "Two" were two sisters who lived with Spencer and, for eight years, provided him with companionship and assistance during his later life. The sisters—whom Spencer called his "keepers"—wrote their memoirs as an antidote to the many anecdotes about Spencer that were published after his death. They did not want the "man we learned to know and admire and reverence go down to posterity tarnished with the suspicion of meanness, pettiness, and vulgarity that most of the stories told about him suggest." The "popular opinion" of Spencer was "so grotesque that we have felt constrained to write down for those who care the impression we had of him before it is too late."[\[159\]](#)

Like many of Spencer's close friends, the two sisters commented on Spencer's charitable disposition and practices. After noting his "approval of private charity to deserving cases of genuine distress," they continued:

His principles are so well known, that it unnecessary to dwell on the fact of his disapproval of compulsory charity or the

distribution of private money by public bodies.^[160] This has led many to believe that he was hard. Whatever he was in theory, we can emphatically deny that he was so in practice. “Worthy people should be helped,” we have continually heard him remark, when he was about to suit the action to the words. Carrying out his individualism, he again and again relieved cases that were brought before him, but not until he had taken some trouble—far more difficult to him than the easy method of putting his hand in his pocket—to prove the case was genuine.^[161]

The sisters illustrated their account with the story of a man who showed up one day at their home. Spencer was too ill to see anyone, so he asked his companions to talk to the stranger. The man said he had been an editor in America but had fallen on hard times in England. “He asked for work of some kind—copying, anything, in fact, which would bring in a few schillings until he obtained regular employment.” After the story was relayed to Spencer, he suspected that the man might be lying, hoping his hard-luck story would inspire Spencer to fork over some money, so the man was sent away empty handed. That evening, however, Spencer thought further about the matter and decided that the man might be telling the truth. The sisters had kept the man’s address, so Spencer decided to “give him the benefit of the doubt, and with only such slender proof of the man’s honesty, he sent him [money the] next day to tide over immediate necessities.”

Endnotes

^[156.] William Henry Hudson, “Herbert Spencer: A Character Study,” *The Fortnightly Review*, vol. LXXV (Jan.-June, 1904): 19.

^[157.] *Ibid.*, 20.

^[158.] James Collier, “Reminiscences of Herbert Spencer,” in [Josiah Royce], *Herbert Spencer: An Estimate and Review* (New York: Fox, Duffield, and Company, 1904), 233.

^[159.] “Two,” *Home Life with Herbert Spencer* (Bristol: J.W. Arrowsmith, 1906), 9, 233.

^[160.] In addition to his opposition to state charity, Spencer also viewed private charitable organizations with suspicion. The best kind of charity, he argued, was that given directly by the donor to the recipient, without an intermediary. The reasons for Spencer’s skepticism about “privately-established and voluntary organizations,” in contrast to one-on-one charity, are quite interesting. See the chapter “Relief of the Poor,” in *The Principles of Ethics* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1898), II:376ff. < /titles/334#lf0155-02_label_114>.

^[161.] *Home Life with Herbert Spencer*, 211-12.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

George H. Smith is an independent scholar and a weekly columnist at the Cato Institute’s Libertarianism.org <<https://www.libertarianism.org/people/george-h-smith>>. He is the author of *Atheism: The Case Against God* (1974), *Atheism, Ayn Rand, and Other Heresies* (1991), *Why Atheism* (2000). He is also the author of the audio series on “Great Political Thinkers,” “The Meaning of the Constitution,” and “The Ideas of Liberty.” He has articles and book reviews published in the *New York Times*, *Newsday*, *Reason*, *Liberty*, *The Journal of Libertarian Studies*, *Free Inquiry*, and *The Humanist*. He wrote [the lead essay](#) for an earlier Liberty Matters discussion in September 2013 on his most recent book *The System of Liberty: Themes in the History of Classical Liberalism* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

David M. Levy is Professor of Economics at George Mason University. Levy’s publications include four scholarly books, ninety journal articles, dozens of book reviews and chapters in academic books. The 2005 *Vanity of the Philosopher*, written with Sandra J. Peart, was awarded a Choice Academic Honors. The 1991 *Economic Ideas of Ordinary People* was republished twenty years after the first publication. His long association with James Buchanan and Gordon Tullock helped with the Peart-Levy view of analytical egalitarianism as a claim in model space. His service on the American Statistical Association’s Professional Ethics Committee helped to develop the Levy-Peart model of sympathetic bias in estimation. Levy

and Peart have co-directed the Summer Institute for the Preservation of the History of Economics for thirteen years. In 2012 Levy was made a Distinguished Fellow of the History of Economics Society.

[Roderick T. Long](#) is Professor of Philosophy at Auburn University, President of the Molinari Institute and Molinari Society, and a Senior Scholar of the Ludwig von Mises Institute. He received his philosophical training at Harvard (A.B. 1985) and Cornell (Ph.D. 1992) and has taught at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the University of Michigan. Among his books are, *Reason and Value: Aristotle versus Rand* (2000) and *Wittgenstein, Austrian Economics, and the Logic of Action* (forthcoming from Routledge); he is the editor of *The Industrial Radical*, co-editor of the *Journal of Ayn Rand Studies*, and *Anarchism/Minarchism: Is a Government Part of a Free Country?*. Roderick describes himself as an Aristotelean/Wittgensteinian in philosophy and a left-libertarian market anarchist in social theory. He blogs at Austro-Athenian Empire <<https://aeblog.com/>> and Bleeding Heart Libertarians <<https://bleedingheartlibertarians.com/>> amongst others. He wrote [the lead essay](#) for an earlier Liberty Matters discussion in May 2013) on “Gustave de Molinari’s Legacy for Liberty”.

[Alberto Mingardi](#) founded the Istituto Bruno Leoni <<https://www.brunoleoni.it>>, of which he is Director General. He is also an Adjunct Scholar with the Cato Institute and a Guest Blogger on EconLog <<https://www.econlib.org/econlog/authoramingardi.html>>. He writes frequently for newspapers, such as *The Wall Street Journal Europe* and the Sunday supplement of the Italian *Il Sole 24 Ore*. His main area of interest is the history of political thought. He has authored a monograph on *Herbert Spencer* (Continuum, 2011) and translated Antonio Rosmini’s *The Constitution Under Social Justice* (Lexington Books, 2006). He recently published a primer on libertarianism (*L'intelligenza del denaro*, 2013) and the first Italian translation of a couple of lectures by Thomas Hodgskin (*Crimine e potere*, 2014). He is currently working on a monograph on Hodgskin's thought. He

holds a PhD in Political Science from the University of Pavia.

COPYRIGHT & FAIR USE STATEMENT

"Liberty Matters" is the copyright of [Liberty Fund, Inc.](#) This material is put online to further the educational goals of Liberty Fund, Inc. These essays and responses may be quoted and otherwise used under "fair use" provisions for educational and academic purposes. To reprint these essays in course booklets requires the prior permission of Liberty Fund, Inc. Please contact submissions@libertyfund.org if you have any questions.