

W. H. B.  
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A PHILOSOPHICAL CRITIC.

HE GOES PRETTY DEEPLY INTO THE  
SUBJECTS OF MATTER, SPACE,  
AND THE UNKNOWNABLE.

To the Editor of the New-York Times:

If life and thought are the flowers of matter, any definition of matter which excludes life and thought must be inadequate if not untrue.--  
Tyndall.

I have not seen the communication of "Outsider," but I infer from the three replies to him in your issue of this date (March 30, 1890,) that we are indebted to him as a pioneer, and that he has pointed to certain phases of the Spencerian philosophy around which it seems probable that future discussion will cluster.

The theory of evolution as formulated by Mr. Spencer, when restricted in its application to proximate experiences, not only explains all facts hitherto established, but seems to rest upon a foundation so sure that each new discovery is a new confirmation of its probable truth. If Mr. Spencer had followed Mr. Darwin's example and stopped right here, there would have been little room for criticism.

Mr. Darwin found the problem of the origin of the diversity of living things unsettled. He subordinated all his researches to its solution, reached it in his theory of natural selection, and stopped. He did not say, Given natural selection, therefore the unknowable. Mr. Spencer reaches the conclusion that there is an ultimate unknowable power from which all things proceed. He reaches this power by the following method: The ultimate fact of consciousness (meaning conception, which includes so much of consciousness as may be the subject of knowledge, however indefinite that knowledge may be,) is the fact that force (power) is persistent. He takes infinite pains to prove this fact by showing that all inductions lead up to it and all legitimate deductions must start from it. These he regards simply as proofs of the fact of knowable persistent power. Here he should have stopped, but he goes further and says that, notwithstanding those proofs, we should still be unable to grasp the idea of this persisting knowable power as a whole, unless at the same time we postulate as its correlative a persisting unknowable power. His reason for this is that he believes that we are unable to think except in relations, and that we cannot

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think of a knowable power except as related to an unknowable power.

Mr. Spencer has himself furnished the material to demonstrate the fallacy of this argument, and it will be pointed out later on—but this is the place to anticipate so far as to ask, (after granting for the sake of the argument, his premises and his conclusions,) where are the facts, and where is the logic to support the rest of his conclusion that the knowable proceeds from the unknowable?

This idea of procession ultimates in the idea of cause, and cause ultimates in final cause which furnishes the unknowable power with the ability to make the knowable proceed from it. And if the unknowable detaches from itself the knowable, then it would seem to be an improvement upon the Scotch metaphysical method which would require the unknowable to make the knowable out of nothing. But all we know of cause is antecedence --that one thing precedes another thing in time, and the first does not make the last out of itself or out of nothing.

The supposed necessity for postulating a final cause lies at the root of all historical religions and philosophies, and all of them reach a conclusion of the same order as the one which Mr. Spencer reaches.

Now let us ask Mr. Spencer to answer himself. He says that our idea of matter reduced to its simplest shape is that of coexistent positions which offer resistance. If they offer resistance, they have something more than position. He says that space is the abstract of all coexistencies. It seems impossible to broaden that definition or to think outside of it; and so of time, which he defines as the abstract of all sequences. He says that our idea of motion includes our ideas of matter, space, and time, and that matter and motion as we know them are differently conditioned manifestations, derivatives of force, which is the underived ultimate of ultimates, the persistence of which is the ultimate fact of consciousness. He means knowable consciousness, so to speak--conception. Conception, or definite consciousness, is the highest generalization of psychology as a science, science of mind. Psychology deals with all mental facts and unifies them in conception. Here its functions cease, and conception now becomes a factor of philosophy.

In the unification of this factor with all other factors of like generality, furnished by all other sciences, is found the function of philosophy, and the last word of philosophy is not the unknowable from which all things proceed. Notwithstanding the encyclopaedic sweep of Mr. Spencer's mind and his masterly exposition of evolution, it seems to me that in his doctrine of the Unknowable he has ignored the most important of his definitions and has regarded space sometimes as the matrix of matter, sometimes as a sea of nothing in which matter as something floats, instead of as indefinitely extended matter--an all inclusive everything--in which room is made for extended thought and extended power as well as for an extended wooden yard stick. What is the antithesis of space? Not more space nor no space. Where is the thinkable point beyond which there is no space?

But definite and indefinite, knowable and unknowable, extensions of matter do not fill space, but are space, and material space includes and is everything and everything is indestructible. All ideas of cause and antecedence, including creative power, find no place in any theory which regards matter as indestructible, whether matter is regarded as everything

or limited as Mr. Spencer defines it. If matter is indestructible, then power could not have caused it, antedated it, or created it. If power is indestructible, then it could not have proceeded from matter, and is only another kind of matter. If motion includes matter, and power includes motion, then one of power's constituents is indestructible, and the indestructibility of the rest of power depends upon its materiality. If space is all existences, their co-existence prevents procession and throws out all ideas of cause and antecedence.

Instead of making matter revolve around force the need of the times is for some copernicus to recentre Mr. Spencer's system and call matter the sun and place him on the throne of the intellectual heavens. He cannot do it within the limits of a newspaper communication, and as I have already overstepped those limits, it only remains for me to thank THE TIMES for the hospitality extended to the critics of Spencer, and to remain,

W. H. B.