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 correlate 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
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 progression 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 de-
taches from itself the knowable, then it would seem to be an improvement
upon the Scotch metaphysical method which would require them 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 con-
clusion 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 reduces to its simplest shape is that of consistent positions
which offer resistance. If they offer resistance, they have something
more than position. He says that space is the abstract of all consistent-
ness. 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 condi-
tioned manifestations, derivatives of force, which is the undeveloped ulti-
mate of ultimates, the persistence of which is the ultimate fact of con-
sciousness. 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 con-
ception 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 encyclopedic 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 ex-
tended wooden yard stick. What is the antithesis of space? Not more space
now no space. There 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 in-
destructibility 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 recount Mr. Spencer’s system and call matter
the sun and place him on the throne of the intellectual heavens. He can-
not do it unknowable, it only remains for me to thank THE

W. R. B.