Mr. Spencer’s Rank as a Philosopher.


The Editor of The New York Times:

It appears from his second letter, printed in THE TIMES of April 13, that your correspondent, "Outsider," is in need of more light on the subject of Herbert Spencer’s standing as a philosopher. I therefore ask space for certain facts which, it is hoped, will meet his want, and which seem to me decisive regarding the principal point of the discussion. To make the bearing of these facts more evident, it will be needful to repeat the question in "Outsider’s" first letter, to which they are offered as a reply. In the opening paragraph, he says:

"But what we would like to have told is whether the pretensions of Mr. Spencer are acknowledged to be well founded; whether, for example, since his doctrine partly rests upon mathematical considerations, he ranks high as a mathematician among mathematicians; whether biologists have awarded him those tokens of respect (such as medals and foreign memberships of academies) which usually mark their recognition of a leader; whether the modern school of psychology recons him as one of its chiefs, and whether anthropologists hold that his sociological theories have been drawn up in a truly scientific and critical method, or whether, on the other hand, each of these specialists is accustomed to think of Mr. Spencer as eminent in every branch but his own."

It is amusing to see the self-confidence with which "Outsider" asks "whether the pretensions of Mr. Spencer are acknowledged to be well founded," the tacit assertion being that they are not so acknowledged. And it is curious also to observe how in respect of each division of science he asks so confidently whether the experts have given him their admission; the implication, which the reader is expected to accept as unquestionable, being that they have not done this. To dispose fully of his implied assertion that those who are the most competent in each department are those who have not indorsed Mr. Spencer’s views, we will take these respective departments serially, and perhaps surprise "Outsider" by the proofs that his airs of
superior knowledge simply cover his want of knowledge. For though Mr.
Spencer has made it a point never to append laudatory opinions to his
books, or to quote them in advertisements, yet his brother, the late Prof.
Young, had collected a number of such opinions and appended them at the
front of the earlier American editions of his books, thus putting them within
the reach of "outsiders" among others. Here they are, with sundry additions:
Take first the testimonials respecting philosophy at large. In the
title-page of his "History of Philosophy," Vol. II., p. 653, Mr. G.
K. Lewis writes: "It is questionable whether any thinker of finer caliber
has comparable in importance with Mr. Spencer in our country. * * * We
alone of all Britons, have organized a philosophy." In the Quarterly
Review (English) for October, 1873, Prof. S. G. Hivart (Roman Catholic)
writes: "The two deepest and most fundamental principles of all these
beliefs are the law of evolution and the law of development. * * * We
cannot deny the title of philosopher to such a thinker as Mr. Herbert
Spencer who does genuinely bind together different and hitherto alien
subjects of thought, with a clear and wide, though neither an all-comprehensive
nor a spiritual, hypothesis, the principle of evolution." Prof. David
Masson, in "Recent British Philosophy," says: "Of all our thinkers, he is the
one who, as it appears to me, has formed for himself the largest scheme
of a systematic philosophy, and in relation to some of the greatest
questions of philosophy in their most recent forms, as set or reset by the last
speculations and revelations of science, has already shot his thoughts
forth." In his "Intuitions of Mind" Dr. McCoey says: "His bold gene-
ralizations are always instructive, and some of them may be in the end be
established as the profoundest laws of the knowable universe." Mr. John
Scott Mill, in his "Examination of Mr William Hamilton's Philosophy,"
says, regarding the relativity of knowledge: "The same doctrine is very
impressively taught by one of the acutest metaphysicians of recent times,
Mr. Herbert Spencer." (Third edition, page 13.) And then in Darwin's
"Descent of Man," page 123, we read: "Our Great Philosopher, Herbert
Spencer.

Taking logic next in order, there comes the opinion of the inventor
of the Logic machine, Mr. Stanley Jevons, Professor of Logic in Queen's
College, who, in "The Principles of Science," says: "I question whether any
scientific works which have appeared since the 'Principia' of Newton
have comparable in importance with those of Darwin and Spencer, revolution-
izing as they do all our views of the origin of bodily, mental, moral, and
social phenomena." Though in this extract there is no opinion expressed
concerning Mr. Spencer's contributions to logic, yet Jevons, in his logical
work, "The Substitution of Similars for the True Principle of Reasoning"
is but an abstract form of the logic set forth in "The Principles of Psychology,"
the endorsement is clear enough. To quote Jevons himself: "The 'Theory
of Logic' by Mr. Carveth Read is awfully written from a new point of view.
In the light of certain passages in the works of Mr. H. Spencer, particularly
"Principles of Psychology," Part VII., Chapter 8.

Mr. Spencer has not written on mathematics, nor does the synthetic
philosophy involve mathematical investigation to a further extent than is
implied by certain general deductions from the primary truths of mathemat-
ces, as shown in "First Principles." Nevertheless, in this department,
too, he has not been without lodoherence. An attack made upon his views
concerning certain ultimate mechanical principles by a senior wrangler, in
October, 1873, led to a controversy which lasted through the early part of
the next year. As will be found by reference to his "Replies to Criticisms,
included in the last series of his "Essays," he had the expressed agreement
of the Mathematical Society of London, Dr. Hirst, and also of the two highest authorities on mathematics, Prof. Cayley and Sylvester.

Though, had it been possible everywhere to fill up the outline of the
Synthetic Philosophy, a volume on astronomy would have been requisite, Mr.
Spencer has done nothing in this department beyond an essay on "The Nebular
Hypothesis," published in 1858. At that time the nebular hypothesis was
discountenanced among astronomers that the nebulae are remote galaxies like our own. Mr. Spencer undertook to defend the ne-
bular hypothesis as previously entertained and to point out the invalidity
of the conclusions which had been supposed to show that the nebulae are
immeasurably distant sidereal systems. Concerning his arguments, Mr. Fowler
says, in "Essays," June 15, 1883: "Yet, as I showed sixteen years ago,
(though Mr. Herbert Spencer, clearest of thinkers, had been beforehand with
me by many years), there are reasons, &c. &c. &c. Mr. Herbert Spencer has ad-
nimarily shown the inherent absurdity of the notion to which many (especially
many professional astronomers, who appear to imagine that measuring star
places must give them an insight into astronomical truth) clung as if it
were a demonstrated truth." To which it needs only to add that the doctrine
Mr. Spencer contested when it was popular is since both abandoned and the
discredited nebular hypothesis has been reinstated. Three other signif-
cient facts concerning this essay should be mentioned. The French astronomer,
M. Fayet, has abandoned the theory of the solar spots which he had emu-
licated and has adopted which Mr. Spencer propounded in opposition to it. (See
"Comptes Rendus" for 1872, Vol. LXXV., page 1,664.) The belief expressed
in the said essay in 1858 that the sun's photosphere consists of metallic
evapor was in 1859 verified by the discoveries of Kirchoff. And then the discovery
made since the essay was written that Mars has two satellites yields strong
support to the theory concerning the genesis of satellites which Mr. Spencer
had enunciated in pursuance of the nebular hypothesis.

Passing now to biology, the first quotation may be made from the essay
on "Comparative Longevity" by Prof. Ray Lankester, to the which the University
of Oxford awarded the prize it had offered. After remarking that "the corre-
spondences of organisms to their environment, so ably set forth in Mr.
Spencer's grand work, are all clearly seen and the duration of individuals,
"he adds, "is but another form of the theory set forth in "The Principles of Psychology,"
the endorsement is clear enough. To quote Read himself: "The 'Theory
of Logic' by Mr. Carveth Read is awfully written from a new point of view.
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on the writings of Spencer: "My acknowledgments are due in the first and greatest degree to Mr. Herbert Spencer, and more especially to his "Principles of Psychology" and his "Essays." Similarly in the preface to his "Science of Ethics," Mr. Leslie Stephen, describing how the change in his previous views originated, says: "I believe that this conviction came to me from the study of some of Mr. Herbert Spencer's works, and he has emphasized the probability that will question whether his book has not been made superficial by the discussion of the same topics under the same assumptions by the leading exponent of the philosophy of evolution in Mr. Herbert Spencer's "Data of Ethics."

To the ironic inquiry concerning the "Descriptive Sociology" two answers will suffice. One is the opinion of the leading English anthropologist, Mr. E. B. Tylor, who says: His tables are a sufficiently answer to all disbelief in the possibility of a science of history. So much information has been accumulated with so little grubish, has never been brought to bear on the development of English Institutions. The other is the joint opinion, published by Prof. Youmans, of a number of American authorities, who write me: "We are in full accordance with the British "Descriptive Sociology," and consider the carrying out of this undertaking will constitute an epoch in the science of comparative sociology."—an opinion to which are appended among others the names of Draper, Bryant, Darte, Secker, Chapin, Ripley, and five heads of colleges and universities.

If "outside" wants further evidence it is furnished by the various European nations. Translations of philosophical books can never result from a popular demand, but must necessarily result from a demand by the elite, whom alone can know the originals. As early as 1875 all Mr. Spencer's works had been translated into Russian, the last translation being that of the "Descriptive Sociology" by the professors of Kiev University. Many have been translated into Italian—"First Principles" by Prof. G. Cattaneo, and the preface to others being by Prof. Sergi. With the exception of Social Statics, all the translations into German they are all by Prof. Cohen, professor in Dresden. They are all translated into French with the exception of "Social Statics," the translation of which Mr. Spencer interdicted, and among the French authors are Dr. Cassou and several others. Other evidence of French appreciation may be named. In 1879, by advice of a commission, the Minister of Public Instruction ordered that Mr. Spencer's works should be placed at the disposal of pupils in lyceums and might be given to them in prizes. In 1880, by request of the same authority, a cheap edition of the "Education" was published for the use of State teachers; and further, in 1884, the French Government purchased 100 copies of the "Data of Ethics" for the lyceum libraries. There may be added a still more significant fact. "La Psychologie de l'Association," by Louis Ferri, professor in the University of Rome, was pronounced by the French Academy; and the Academician, M. Boullier, who reported to the Academy upon the work, writes: "Voilà maintenant le dernier, comme le plus illustre des représentants de cette science, Herbert Spencer. On peut dire il est comme Stuart Mill le logicien et le psychologue. L'auteur rend un juste hommage à l'étendue de ses connaissances, à la hauteur de ses vues et à celui qui sait, plus que quiconque, il résume l'ensemble de ses prédécesseurs, en la rattachant à une philosophie universelle des choses, à la loi suprême de l'évolution." [Then there is the title also the most illustrious representatives of that school, Herbert Spencer. One might
say of him that he is its metaphysician, as Stuart Mill is its logician and psychologist. The author renders a just tribute to the extent of his knowledge, to the loftiness of his views, and to that vast and powerful synthesis with which he summarizes all the work of his predecessors connecting it with a universal philosophy of things, with the supreme law of evolution.

"But where are Mr. Spencer's academic honors?" tacitly asks "Outsider"; "the title pages of his books bear none." Here there is some excuse for the implied conclusion, for it is so rare a thing for an author to refuse distinctions accorded by learned bodies, that every one naturally supposes the absence of them to imply the absence of offers. In this case, however, it happens we be otherwise. Mr. Spencer's American friends have long known that he disapproves of honorary degrees, and the like and never accepts them. I learn from Mr. Spencer that in 1871 he was offered the degree of LL.D., which he declined for the assigned reason that such honors habitually come when they are not wanted and are withheld at the times when they would be encouragements. While he was President of the Royal Society, Sir Joseph Hooker pressed Mr. Spencer to become a Fellow of it, but he did not accede. When the Royal Academy of Rome, founded by Galileo, and long existing in a state of suspended animation, was revived after the political power of the Pope had been abolished, Mr. Spencer was among those foreigners first affiliated to it; he is now a member only because it was urged upon him that withdrawal might be injuriously misconstrued. In 1880 he was elected by the Royal Academy of Turin, in 1882 by the Royal Society of Naples, and in 1883 by the American Philosophical Society, but in each case declined, as before. In 1883 he was almost unanimously elected by the French Academy, there being three dissentients only. Nevertheless, as the daily papers of the period might have told "Outsider," he did not accept. Lastly, in 1888, on the celebration of the eight hundredth anniversary of the oldest university existing, that of Bologna, the degree of Doctor was conferred on Mr. Spencer, notwithstanding his inclination that he could make no use of it.

The foregoing statement, made so long by the numerous facts to be set down, has been in great measure rendered compulsory by the reiterated demand of "Outsider" for information, backed by the expressed editorial wish of THE TIMES "to see his position thoroughly discussed." Being in possession of the particulars called for, to withhold them would be apparently to admit the truth of "Outsider's" insinuations. As the facts are diametrically opposed to what he tacitly affirms, it has appeared imperative, in justice to Mr. Spencer and to prevent the diffusion of wholly erroneous beliefs, to set the facts forth. "Outsider" said he would like to be told what the facts are, and now he has been told. Whether he "likes" the information may reasonably be doubted. His obvious purpose was to discredit Mr. Spencer's teachings and to shame his American friends. Unhappily for him he has succeeded in doing the reverse.

When Macaulay's "History of England" was criticized in the Quarterly Review it was said of Croker, the editor who wrote the article, that he intended to commit murder, but instead committed suicide. May not the same thing be said of "Outsider?"

W. J. [FROMANS.

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