

ON HERBERT SPENCER

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Herbert Spencer was a British philosopher and liberal theorist. He was born in Derby in 1820 to George and Harriet Spencer. He died at the age of 83, in 1903.



His magnum opus was *The Synthetic Philosophy* (1896).

Spencer wrote many other works, including:

- *The Proper Sphere of Government* (1842).
- *Social Statistics* (1851).
- *The Principles of Psychology* (1855).
- *First Principles* (1862).
- *Descriptive Sociology* (1873).
- *The Principles of Sociology* (1876).
- *The Man Versus the State* (1884).

His biggest influence in political theory was the concept of “social Darwinism¹”, which applies the concepts of evolution, such as natural selection, to human society, social class, and to individuals.

Social Darwinism was used to justify laissez-faire² economics and the minimal state, as these were believed to promote the improve society through the concept of *survival of the fittest*, a term introduced by Spencer.

Spencer’s key quotes:

- “Every man³ is free to do that which he wills, provided he infringes not on the equal freedom of any other man.”
 - Essentially, the freedom of one person ends where the another’s begins.
- “No one can be perfectly free till all are free; no one can be perfectly moral till all are moral; no one can be perfectly happy till all are happy.”
 - Essentially, true equality is the only way to achieve freedom, morality and happiness.
- “The function of liberalism in the past was that of putting a limit to the powers of kings. The function of true liberalism in the future will be that of putting a limit to the powers of parliaments.”
 - Essentially, limitations of power must be in place no matter whose hands the power is in, democratic legitimacy does not justify absolute power.

Notes:

1. Darwinism, a theory of evolution named after Charles Darwin, who proposed it in *On the Origin of Species* (1859).
2. “Laissez-faire” is a French phrase meaning to let things take their own course, i.e. the government abstains from interfering with the economy.
3. It should be considered, when contemplating the meaning of this quote, that in this context “man” is used to refer to all of man-kind, not just male humans.

Supporting materials:

- Encyclopaedia Britannica – <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Herbert-Spencer>.
- Wikipedia article – https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herbert_Spencer.