Herbert Spencer's Autobiography[1]

THIS book will probably produce in the reader a variety of conflicting impressions, unless his prejudices prevent him from appreciating the different aspects of its author's character. The admirers of Mr. Spencer can find in it abundant material for admiration; the critics of Mr. Spencer can find in it abundant material for criticism; he who can read it with as little prejudice as the author manifests in writing it will find in it abundant material for reflection.

What strikes us first of all is the fact that Mr. Spencer has thought himself of sufficient importance to the world to be worth writing about to the extent of twelve hundred pages. There are lives full of adventure, like that of General Grant, whose autobiography is wholly unegoistic, being really the story of a great drama as viewed by one of its chief actors. There are other lives which are spent in such social activities that the autobiography becomes a series of moving pictures, a kind of cinematograph, of which the autobiographer is only the operator. Such is the autobiography of Senator Hoar, which is almost absolutely unegotistic. But Mr. Spencer's life was wholly unadventurous and generally unsocial. He had a very moderate educational equipment as a civil engineer; left this vocation for journalism; passed by an easy transition from journalism to periodical writing, and from that into philosophical writing, which was at first published in quasi-periodical form; lived as a recluse; and in his autobiography devotes himself almost exclusively to describing himself, his life, his writings, the difficulties under which they were written, the greater difficulties under which they were published, the manner of their reception, and their true interpretation. The narrator is himself the central subject, one might almost say the sole subject, of his narration.

And yet he can hardly be called egotistical; certainly he cannot be truly accused of being self-conceited. For with his very serious estimate of himself as a central figure in the nineteenth-century world of thought, there is a curious capacity for regarding himself as he regards every one else, almost wholly without either prejudice or passion. His enmities and his friendships are alike very moderate. Warmth can rarely be predicated of him, heat never. One can easily conceive of him as being irritable at times—his ill health might have produced irritability; but one cannot conceive of him as ever splendidly angry or enthusiastically admiring or tenderly affectionate. He says of himself very truly, "The critical tendency dominant in me, because perpetually exercised by father and grandfather, has . . . partially debarred me from the pleasures of admiration, by making me too much awake to mistakes and shortcomings." Yet this is not, as he calls it, "the fault-finding spirit;" it is rather the critical spirit, that is, the passion to examine, to analyze, to dissect, to judge. It is impossible simultaneously to admire the beauty and fragrance of a flower and pick it to pieces for the purpose of ascertaining its component parts; one may be both an artist and a botanist, but not at the same time and in the same mental operation. Herbert Spencer always picked the flowers to pieces. Neither animosity nor admiration, nor even love, could keep him from indulging in the process of mental dissection. He analyzes his dearest friends as coolly as though they were objects in natural history. This is not because he had no affection for them, but because his passion for analysis was his dominant passion, from the tyranny of which he never could and perhaps never really desired to escape.

This analytical passion gives to his occasional portraits great piquancy. The dissection of characters constitutes a common social entertainment, and is popularly supposed to be the especial delight of old ladies in tea-table circles;

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but our observation leads us to believe that it has no less fascination for the masculine than for the feminine mind. It is generally very clumsily done in the club and the tea-party. It is done by Herbert Spencer with consummate genius; had he possessed a dramatic faculty equal to his analytical faculty, he would have made a great novelist. It is true that there are some characters whom he cannot comprehend and for whom he has only condemnation—the men who are not analytical nor even discriminating, but only æsthetic or emotional, such as Ruskin and Carlyle. But, in general, his exposition of character is alike passionless and lucid. Striking illustrations of this are afforded by his critical sketches of his father, his mother, his grandfather, his uncles, George Eliot, Mr. Huxley, and Mr. Tyndall.

But the most pre-eminent illustration is afforded by his curiously impersonal analysis of himself. He has, beyond any writer we recall, the power to set himself over against himself and sit in judgment on himself. One cannot imagine his uttering the prayer, "Search me, O God." He feels himself quite competent to search himself; there is in his life and character no mystery which he cannot understand; and if love does not prevent a dispassionately scientific analysis of his mother, neither does self-love interfere with an equally dispassionately scientific analysis of his own motives. We do not remember ever to have read anything in literature quite comparable to the "Reflections" with which this autobiography is brought to a close. In these analyses of his motives—for they recur from time to time in these volumes, though nowhere so comprehensively and fully as in the last and supplementary chapter—modesty does not prevent his full appreciation of his own virtues, nor does any fear of self-humiliation prevent an equally frank recognition of his defects. The reader's first and quite accurate impression that he has no particular sorrow for his faults and failures is balanced by perceiving that neither has he any joy in his virtues and his achievements. He is simply intellectually interested to find out what kind of a creature this man Herbert Spencer is; the relative ethical values of the qualities concern him as little as the relative commercial values in the plants when he puts them under the microscope to study their circulatory system.

We shall not attempt here to report his self-analysis: to do so fully would be impossible; to do so partially would be unjust. Nor shall we attempt any analysis of our own; for it would be based on his analysis and would be far less satisfactory. We only point out two defects in his character which we think partly explain the defects in his philosophy, and at least partially explain the reason why Spencerianism has proved to be but a passing though a popular phase of philosophic thought.

The first defect is the non-catholicity of his mind—a quality which prevented him from ever becoming a scholar. To be catholic-minded is to be modest-minded; it is to recognize, on the one hand, that no man can by any possibility see and comprehend all truth, and, on the other, that any sincere seeker after truth has seen some aspect of it which is worth his own reporting and other men's seeing. Herbert Spencer believed neither one of these things; he believed that he could formulate a universology which would constitute a comprehensive scheme of all truth, and consequently that no man's teaching was worth his considering unless it would fit in with and help to illustrate this comprehensive scheme. It was not by accident, it was by choice and by temperament, that he wrote his philosophy without any considerable study of the works of previous philosophers. Until his thirty-first year questions in philosophy had not attracted his attention. "On my father's shelves," he writes, "during the years of my youth and early manhood, there had been a copy of Locke's Essays, which I had never looked into; and as I had not utilized a book constantly at hand, it may naturally be inferred that I had not troubled myself to obtain other books dealing with the same and kindred topics." He had barely glanced at Mill's Logic; had read a few pages in Kant's Critique, but he rejected its first statements, and so went no further; was

never able to worry through more than a few pages of Plato; we do not think that he mentions Aristotle; there is nothing to indicate that he had ever acquainted himself with the Scotch philosophers. He declares of himself that he was "always an impatient reader." "It has always," he says, "been out of the question for me to go on reading a book the fundamental principles of which I entirely dissent from. . . . I, without thinking much about the matter, take it for granted that if the fundamental principles are wrong the rest cannot be right; and thereupon cease reading—being, I suspect, rather glad of an excuse for doing so." That this was rather the excuse than the reason for laying the book down is indicated by the fact that he read but very little of any kind of serious literature. Other excuses served as well to furnish escape from the fancied obligation of reading Homer and Dante.

This absence of scholarship, or at least of "book-learning," is characteristic of him. His scholastic education never carried him much if at all beyond what a high school would give the American boy. He was never in college, nor did he by subsequent reading supply the deficiencies of his earlier education. "I paid little attention," he says, "to what had been written upon either ethics or politics. Partly this was due to my impatience of reading in general (excepting of course light reading), which has always made getting through a grave book a difficulty." In another connection he explains this lack of reading by the sentence, "Thinking was always more pleasurable than either reading or doing." His philosophy has been evolved out of his own consciousness. It has not been mentally studied out; it has been hatched out by brooding. He gives an interesting and suggestive account of this meditative process, but too long to be quoted and difficult to condense. In all this is a certain merit, a mark, if the reader please, of a kind of genius; and yet the man who up to his thirty-first year had never studied philosophy and scarcely ever read a philosophical book, and nevertheless could begin, without any appearance of hesitation, in his thirty-second year to write a system of universal philosophy, by which he proposed to solve the problems of the universe and set the world right in its philosophical thinking, might naturally be expected to show in the product more audacity of conviction than breadth of view.

The other defect in Herbert Spencer's character is that dominating passion for analysis of which we have spoken above, and of which he frequently speaks in his autobiography. He truly says that "intellectual analysis is at variance with æsthetic appreciation." But it is equally at variance with ethical appreciation. The religious life, like the æsthetic life, transcends analysis. It cannot be understood by one who has deprived himself of simple admiration. And that Herbert Spencer was without the power of simple admiration is abundantly illustrated, indeed is frankly, though without regret, acknowledged. The truths of goodness, like the truths of beauty—for Huxley is surely right in saying that "goodness is a kind of beauty"—do not yield themselves up to simple intellectual analysis; they cannot be discovered by a microscope, nor their nature revealed in a laboratory; and he who sees truth only through the critical faculty, and no truth which the critical faculty cannot disclose, must probably always reach the conclusion of Herbert Spencer: "I hold that we are as utterly incompetent to understand the ultimate nature of things, or origin of them, as the deaf man is to understand sounds or the blind man light." Escape from this silent darkness will never be found by the exercise of the critical faculty. It would perhaps be too much to say that to this conclusion Herbert Spencer came at last; but it is certainly both interesting and significant that the last words he addressed to the reading public constitute an indirect affirmation of this truth. The words with which he closes his autobiography, and so takes leave of the world, are as follows:

Thus religious creeds, which in one way or other occupy the sphere that rational interpretation seeks to occupy and fails, and fails the more the more it seeks, I have come to regard with a sympathy based on need: feeling that dissent from them results from

inability to accept the solutions offered, joined with the wish that solutions could be found.

What is this but saying with Hamlet, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in our philosophy," and with Pascal, "The heart has reasons of its own that the reason knows not of"? What is it but recognizing that truth which is the basis of all religious creeds of every description, as it is formulated by Professor William James—"They [the mystical states] break down the authority of the non-mystical or rationalistic consciousness, based upon the understanding and the senses alone. They show it to be only one kind of consciousness. They open out the possibility of other orders of truth, in which, so far as anything in us vitally responds to them, we may freely continue to have faith"? It is to this faith in a sphere of truth which transcends the rationalistic consciousness that Herbert Spencer points in his last message to mankind.