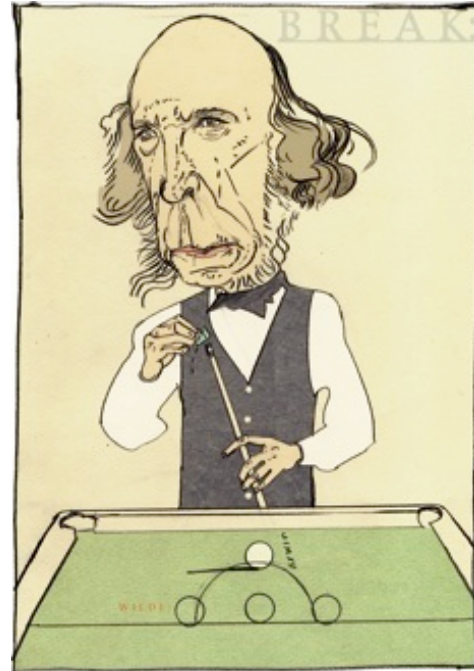


Man with a Plan

Herbert Spencer's theory of everything.

by Steven Shapin
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The great event of the New York cultural season of 1882 was the visit of the sixty-two-year-old English philosopher and social commentator Herbert Spencer. Nowhere did Spencer have a larger or more enthusiastic following than in the United States, where such works as “Social Statics” and “The Data of Ethics” were celebrated as powerful justifications for laissez-faire capitalism.



Competition was preordained; its result was progress; and any institution that stood in the way of individual liberties was violating the natural order. “Survival of the fittest”—a phrase that Charles Darwin took from Spencer—made free competition a social as well as a natural law. Andrew Carnegie admired Spencer enormously and attributed to him the decisive metaphysical epiphany of his life: “I remember that light came as in a flood and all was clear. . . . I had found the truth of evolution. ‘All is well since all grows better’ became my motto, my true source of comfort.” Thanks to Spencer, Victorian capitalists knew that nature was on their side.

Spencer had not come to America to give lectures or to boost his book sales. He detested public speaking, and he no longer needed money, thanks to the immense popularity of his books. A lifelong hypochondriac, he had come for his health, to reinvigorate his “greatly disordered nervous system,” and he withstood all inducements to what he called “social excitement.” But the press of distinguished American Spencerians was too great to resist, and he agreed to a farewell banquet at Delmonico’s on November 9th.

Senators, captains of industry, and professors were there in force, vying with each other in the fulsomeness of their praise. The former Secretary of State William Evarts said that Spencer was the smartest man in the world: “We recognize in the breadth of your knowledge, such knowledge as is useful to your race, a greater comprehension than any living man has presented to our generation.” The Union Army general Carl Schurz declared that there would have been no Civil War if the South had been adequately instructed in Spencer’s principles of individual liberty. And the president of Columbia, Frederick Barnard, announced that Herbert Spencer was “not only the

profoundest thinker of our time, but the most capacious and most powerful intellect of all time.”

The Delmonico’s dinner, however, ended in disaster. Instead of graciously bathing in the torrents of tribute, Spencer told his admirers that they had got him seriously wrong. He did *not* approve of the culture of American capitalism, and, while he admired its material achievements, he was concerned that, for Americans, work had become a pathological obsession. Americans were endangering their mental and physical health through overwork, and many were turning gray before their time—ten years earlier than the British, Spencer believed. America needed “a revised ideal of life,” he said, and it was time to “preach the gospel of relaxation.” He went on, “Life is not for learning, nor is life for working, but learning and working are for life.” Having administered that slap to the face of national virtue, Spencer steamed off back to England.

Spencer was, arguably, the single most influential systematic thinker of the nineteenth century, but his influence, compared with that of Darwin, Marx, or Mill, was short-lived. In 1937, the Harvard sociologist Talcott Parsons asked, “Who now reads Spencer?” Seventy years later, the question remains pertinent, even if no one now reads Talcott Parsons, either. In his day, Spencer was the greatest of philosophical hedgehogs: his popularity stemmed from the fact that he had one big, easily grasped idea and a mass of more particular ideas that supposedly flowed from the big one. The big idea was evolution, but, while Darwin applied it to species change, speculating about society and culture only with reluctance, Spencer saw evolution working everywhere. “This law of organic progress is the law of all progress,” he wrote, “whether it be in the development of the Earth, in the development of Life upon its surface, in the development of Society, of Government, of Manufactures, of Commerce, of Language, Literature, Science, [or] Art.” Spencer has been tagged as a social Darwinist, but it would be more correct to think of Darwin as a biological Spencerian. Spencer was very well known as an evolutionist long before Darwin’s “On the Origin of Species” was published, in 1859, and people who had limited interest in the finches of the Galápagos had a great interest in whether the state should provide for the poor or whether it was right to colonize India.

William James once ungenerously remarked that Spencer was “the philosopher whom those who have no other philosopher can appreciate.” He was appropriated by a wide variety of readers, often with conflicting agendas—free marketeers, positivists, Indian and Japanese nationalists. They all had their understandings of Spencer and they all differed. Mark Francis, in “Herbert Spencer and the Invention of Modern Life” (Cornell; \$45)—the first full-scale intellectual biography of Spencer since J. D. Y. Peel’s fine “Herbert Spencer: The Evolution of a Sociologist” (1971)—is determined to put an end to the confusion. He thinks that he has discovered the philosophical grounds of Spencer’s true coherence, and he hands out academic demerits to the commentators who have missed the underlying unities of Spencer’s scientific,

philosophical, ethical, psychological, sociological, and political writings. Still, for the most part the misreaders should be forgiven. Over almost half a century of furious writing, Spencer continually reworked and reconfigured his views, copying and pasting chunks of text from the eighteen-fifties into volumes published in the eighteen-seventies and eighties.

How, then, to get Spencer right? One suggestion comes from Spencer himself: if you want to understand the origin and lineage of his ideas, you should understand where he came from and how he was formed. He put his immense talent and energy into his philosophical and political works but his genius into his “Autobiography,” a work more than a thousand pages long, on which he labored intermittently during the last two decades of his life. This is where Spencer wished people to go when they wanted to grasp how his philosophical system came to be and how its parts related to one another.

Spencer was born in Derby in 1820, the only surviving child in a dissenting, politically radical family. “Individuality was pronounced in all members of the family,” he wrote, “and pronounced individuality is necessarily more or less at variance with authority.” His father, George Spencer, a philosophical materialist with Quaker sympathies and violently anti-clerical attitudes, was a reformist schoolteacher, a not very successful lace manufacturer, and a sometime inventor. It was from his father that Herbert picked up his passion for science and engineering, and also the value he placed on the forms and manners of individuality. “My father would never take off his hat to anyone, no matter of what rank,” Herbert proudly explained, and would never address anyone as “Esquire” or “Reverend,” but only as “Mr.”

Like son, like father: George Spencer was emotionally brittle. Shortly after Herbert was born, George suffered a breakdown. He became unable to control his anger, which erupted at the slightest provocation. Spencer’s “Autobiography” gives an appalling account of his parents’ miserable marriage—his mother’s passivity, his father’s rages and sullen coldness. Not bred to domestic affection, he intermittently craved company and even took a quasi-paternal interest in the children of friends, but, throughout his life, he found emotional intimacy extremely difficult and physical intimacy, apparently, impossible.

When he was thirteen, Herbert was sent to be educated by his uncle Thomas Spencer, a clergyman living near Bath who shared George’s mixture of idealism and irascibility. Herbert recalled, “The daily acts of domestic life did not exhibit that power of self-sacrifice which was called out on important occasions.” (He very soon decided to run away, covering a hundred and fifteen miles in three days, but was returned to his uncle immediately.) Herbert’s stay with Thomas Spencer, during which he was taught some mathematics, physics, and Latin, constituted his last years of formal education. Through the rest of his life, he was an insatiable autodidact. This was a background

that made it hard for him to launch a career. Initially, he worked as a railway engineer and wrote on political and technical topics for a variety of small journals.

In 1848, at twenty-eight, Spencer surveyed his life and found it “unprofitable.” (He meant it literally; he thought that his talents had yielded far too little money.) But that year he received an offer to work as a subeditor on *The Economist*, founded five years before to expound the principles of free trade. The job meant a move to London, and that brought him into contact with a wide range of radical thinkers, and in 1851 he produced his first major book, “Social Statics.” This work, which sought to establish the rights of individuals and the duties of the state and their limits, was an attempt to find a natural basis for proper political action. Spencer was certain that “nature will be obeyed”: ill-advised governments and other social institutions could hamper the operation of natural law—and thus stand in the way of inevitable progress—but they could do almost nothing to assist evolution and hence make things better. Spencer here was offering scientific justifications for individualism and for a minimalist state. Governments, for example, had no obligation, or even right, to protect the health of their subjects. Any effort at licensing and regulating medical practitioners would, he said, “violate the moral law”: “The invalid is at liberty to buy medicine and advice from whomsoever he pleases; the unlicensed practitioner is at liberty to sell these to whomsoever will buy.” No government should compel vaccination, require children to be educated, keep small boys from sweeping chimneys, mandate the construction of sewers, set standards for telegraph systems, or, of course, relieve poverty.

The logic of the position was that anyone could opt out of the state, and Spencer was at ease with that logic: people had the right of “voluntary outlawry”; they were “free to drop connection with the state—to relinquish its protection, and to refuse paying toward its support.” Provided you didn’t call on the state to defend you, you didn’t have to pay taxes; you had, in fact, a moral and natural “right to ignore the state.” Individual charity might have a refining effect on the character of the donor, but poor relief from the state engendered irresponsibility in recipients while embittering those whose resources went to fund it: “There could hardly be found a more efficient device for estranging men from each other, and decreasing their fellow-feeling, than this system of state-almshousing. Being kind by proxy!—could anything be more blighting to the finer instincts?” He went on, “The ultimate result of shielding men from the effects of folly, is to fill the world with fools.” A keen reader of Thomas Malthus, Spencer knew that recipients of poor relief would show their gratitude by becoming even more irresponsible, and that “idiots, imbeciles, drunkards, lunatics, paupers, and prostitutes” would multiply to absorb the resources made available, becoming “an increasing curse” to the society that meant to help them. In his late work “The Man Versus the State” (1884), he asserted that social welfare corrupted morals as well as fitness:

When, in war-time, “food for powder” was to be provided by encouraging population—when Mr. Pitt said, “Let us make relief in cases where there are a number of children a matter of right and honour, instead of a ground for opprobrium and contempt”; it was not expected that the poor-rates would be quadrupled in fifty years, that women with many bastards would be preferred as wives to modest women, because of their incomes from the parish.

Spencer became so closely associated with this wholesale rejection of state intervention in social welfare that, in 1905, Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, defending New York State’s regulation of working hours, declared that “the Fourteenth Amendment does not enact Mr. Herbert Spencer’s ‘Social Statics.’ ” Given Spencer’s unabashed hard-heartedness, it may come as a surprise that he was an enthusiast for theoretical selflessness and one of the earliest users of the word “altruism,” though his version of altruism prominently included the cruel-to-be-kind variety.

For Spencer, the “fundamental law” governing social life could not be more obvious: “Every man has freedom to do all that he wills, provided he infringes not the equal freedom of any other man.” Yet if the fundamental law was clear and coherent, its applications to the contingencies of social life were not, and this gap in Spencer’s scheme between principle and practice proved a fertile source of misunderstanding. For example, natural and moral law required that all people should compete on a level playing field, but in practice land and other property were inequitably distributed, as the result of ancient crimes. And so this supposedly laissez-faire writer advocated both a progressive death tax and the nationalization of land, projects that put him on the side of the socialists he so vigorously attacked. The role of the state was, ideally, supposed to be minimal, but the fundamental law also meant, for Spencer, that equal justice ought to be guaranteed, and this, in turn, underwrote proposals for a vast extension of systems of free legal aid, far in excess of anything we have today.

Spencer the libertarian and Spencer the socialist both derived from Spencer the philosopher, and nowhere is Spencer’s political inconsistency more apparent than in his views on women. He held that “the rights of women are equal with those of men,” that the political disenfranchisement of women was, therefore, unnatural and immoral, and that “a people’s condition may be judged by the treatment which women receive under it.” But, over time, his position on women changed, and he dissociated himself from the movement for universal suffrage and what he called “the screaming sisterhood.” In some indefinite future, the time might be right, but, as matters currently stood, women manifested “a worship of power under all its forms; and hence a relative conservatism.” Enfranchised women would tend to vote for authoritarian figures, and so obstruct the natural law of progress toward an egalitarian society. Similarly, although free access to higher education seems to flow logically from his position on women’s rights, Spencer thought that women were, in the main, more impulsive, more kindly to the undeserving, less capable of abstract thinking. The scientific doctrine of the conservation of vital forces meant that all energies

expended on mental activity drained those available for animal functions. Cerebral activity makes enormous demands on vital energy, and “if expenditure is excessive it cannot be met without deduction from that reserve power which should go to race-maintenance.” Reading interfered with breeding.

“Social Statics” was well received, and Spencer suddenly found himself an established figure. He came to know the most important progressive thinkers in England, including John Stuart Mill, who had a strong influence on his thought; George Eliot, who introduced him to the positivism of Auguste Comte; and George Henry Lewes, who published his work in *The Leader*. It was with George Eliot that Spencer acted out the one love affair of his life. He was never comfortable with the idea that the relationship might go anywhere, however, and Francis and other commentators seem satisfied that he died a virgin. Eliot herself was infatuated, but complained of the “tremendous glacier” within him. When, apparently, he made clear to her the limits of his commitment, she tried her best to fit in: “I can promise you such companionship as there is in me, untroubled by painful emotions.” But the glacier remained unmelted, and Spencer introduced Eliot to Lewes, who succeeded him as her partner. The connection between Spencer and Eliot was well known, but he was coy about it in the otherwise frank “Autobiography.” When, in later life, Spencer was asked about the relationship, he reportedly explained that he broke it off because he thought that her nose was too long. The explanation seems to hide more than it gives away, but it’s true that in Spencer’s scheme of values the superficial was profound. In an 1854 essay on aesthetics, he declared, “The saying that beauty is but skin-deep, is but a skin-deep saying.”

Spencer took a similar view of other apparently superficial things, such as coats, hats, and the manners of everyday life. For him, these were visible signals of who one was and how one stood vis-à-vis social authority. Just as his father had refused to address men as anything other than “Mr.,” Spencer balked at wearing the insignia of aristocratic or bourgeois supremacy. Francis notes that “he saw top hats as the black cylinders that symbolized tyranny, and in deposing the one you toppled the other.” (This aversion to top hats was famous, although a caricature of Spencer in *Vanity Fair* in 1879 mischievously depicted him wearing one.) He disliked formal wear and declined public invitations that involved putting on the garments of oppression. At first, Spencer showed up at dinners in a frock coat, only reluctantly making the transition to a swallowtail, but, as an amanuensis recorded, “he always refused to wear a white necktie”: “Those who had invited him, he said, must take him as he chose to come.” In 1874, Spencer turned down an invitation from the Foreign Secretary to a reception for Emperor Alexander II of Russia, excusing himself from the sartorial formality in the formal third person: “The necessity of wearing a levee dress, to which Mr. Spencer has an insuperable objection, compels him to decline the offered pleasure.” (The Countess of Derby, the wife of his host, said that he could come dressed as he liked, but then Spencer begged off on the ground that he would stand out.)

Spencer became famous for this kind of behavior. When travelling by train, he would arrive with whatever manuscript he was currently working on tethered to his waist by two or three yards of thick string issuing from beneath his coat. Visible eccentricity was a sign of individuality; individuality was a core value, and Spencer happily drew attention to how he lived his philosophy. It was probably his studied intention to be an eccentric, yet, at the same time, there was a fine line between his antic behavior and the neuroses, panic attacks, and depressions to which he was prey. In 1856, soon after the publication of "The Principles of Psychology," he suffered a nervous breakdown, some of whose effects remained with him for the rest of his life. Even decades later, there seem to have been long periods when depression made work impossible, and he endured recurrent bouts of insomnia. Spencer saw his problem as one of "cerebral circulation," and he adopted various remedies to deal with the problem: diet (he experimented briefly with vegetarianism); smoking (which he considered good for his condition); taking opiates (in moderation); and a curious nighttime ritual in which he soaked his head in brine and then put two layers of headgear over the wet hair. In the nineteen-thirties, Dame Edith Sitwell placed Spencer in the pantheon of English eccentrics:

The taking of Mr Spencer's pulse was one of the great ceremonies of the day, and often, when out driving in his victoria, a cry of "Stop" would be heard by the coachman, and then, no matter where the equipage might find itself, in the middle of busiest traffic, in Piccadilly, or in Regent Street, the carriage would stop dead, disrupting the traffic in question; and silence would reign for some seconds, whilst Mr Spencer consulted the dictates of his pulse. If the oracle proved favourable, the drive was continued; if not, Mr Spencer was driven home.

Spencer's "Autobiography" dwelt expansively on his poor nervous health, and also on the lessons supposedly learned from the breakdown, among them a number of scientific arguments in favor of amusement. Throughout his life, Spencer enjoyed relaxations ranging from salmon fishing to billiards, from tennis to concerts. He was aware that people thought philosophers shouldn't do things like play billiards or give picnics, and professed himself delighted to confound expectations. Commending billiards as a form of relaxation to Lewes and Eliot, Spencer shared with them "the maxim on which I have acted, and the maxim which I have often commended to my friends": "Be a boy as long as you can." But it was all more than a bit labored. Gaiety did not come easily to him, and he urged judicious relaxation on others not as something spontaneous one just did but as a theoretically justified discipline.

Similarly, despite the enjoyment he got from paying attention to superficial matters, there wasn't much place for irony in the Spencerian universe. Sincerity was the virtue that Spencer set greatest store by: "Let every one insist on reality and sincerity, and refrain as much as he can from complimentary usages which involve untruths. If each resolves to tell as few tacit lies as possible, social intercourse will be much healthier." The fact that he lived his philosophy so thoroughly was itself a show of sincerity, as was his account of himself in the "Autobiography." Even though its confessional

mode often went against the Victorian grain, its underlying seriousness was quintessentially Victorian. For Spencer, the importance of being earnest could not be underestimated; the truth was all that mattered. Science, and a scientific approach to all the problems of social life, was another mode of sincerity, and the more science there was, the more moral people would be:

What knowledge is of most worth?—the uniform reply is—Science. This is the verdict on all the counts. . . . Alike for the most perfect production and highest enjoyment of art in all its forms, the needful preparation is still—Science. And for purposes of discipline—intellectual, moral, religious—the most efficient study is, once more—Science.

Science could not only allow one to understand, predict, and control; it was all one needed to do the right thing, to be a good person.

It was Spencer's misfortune to outlive his reputation. His hypochondria notwithstanding, he lived to eighty-three. In the eighteen-nineties, his longtime friend Beatrice Webb formed the opinion that Spencer was quite vigorous for a man in his seventies. In 1903, the year of Spencer's death, the moral philosopher G. E. Moore identified what he called "the naturalistic fallacy"—the logical impossibility of inferring that something is good from a proposition about its natural properties. Spencer had spent most of his career doing precisely this, and Moore wrote, "There can be no doubt that Mr. Spencer has committed the naturalistic fallacy." Spencer might have argued that since the moral domain was itself a natural phenomenon there was no fallacy at all. Still, Moore had identified a crucial difference between the concept of evolution propounded by Spencer and that proposed by Darwin. For Darwin, evolution was directionless and morally neutral, but for Spencer evolution was going somewhere; natural change was progressive, and it was good. Progress, Spencer wrote (eight years before Darwin published "On the Origin of Species"), was "not an accident, but a necessity. Instead of civilization being artificial, it is a part of nature; all of a piece with the development of the embryo or the unfolding of a flower." Darwin's evolutionary writings had immense scientific authority, and they sought to be morally and politically neutral. By contrast, Spencer delivered the moral and political goods to people who believed, or wanted to believe, that they were nature's fittest and would be the survivors—not through the exercise of naked power but through the inevitable workings of natural law. However, the big idea that gave Spencer's philosophy its coherence was just too big to yield coherence or pertinence at more mundane levels. Watching Spencer derive concrete social policies from his theory of evolution is like trying to deduce whether to send the kids to private school from a theory of justice. The sledgehammer cracks the nut, but it makes a mess.

In November of 1882, two British literary lions were prowling New York. One was Spencer, and the other was the twenty-eight-year-old Oscar Wilde, who was then at the end of a year-long speaking tour of America, having been invited by Richard D'Oyly Carte to promote the new Aesthetic Movement. There is no evidence that they met, but Spencer knew who Wilde was and recognized a rival in the coming

culture wars between science and art. American newspapers reported that Spencer called Wilde “an outlandish person who attempts to reconcile idiocy with art.” Spencer subsequently denied saying it, but Wilde bided his time. In 1891, he published “The Decay of Lying,” a celebration of insincerity in a culture that was becoming less convinced that truth really did settle matters of morals or of beauty. Science told the truth about the world; art made its own worlds. Who would you prefer, Wilde asked—the truth-telling scientific philosopher or the delight-giving liar? Go for the liar every time:

Nor will he be welcomed by society alone. Art, breaking from the prisonhouse of realism, will run to greet him, and will kiss his false, beautiful lips, knowing that he alone is in possession of the great secret of all her manifestations, the secret that Truth is entirely and absolutely a matter of style; while Life—poor, probable, uninteresting human life—tired of repeating herself for the benefit of Mr. Herbert Spencer, scientific historians, and the compilers of statistics in general, will follow meekly after him, and try to reproduce, in her own simple and untutored way, some of the marvels of which he talks. ◆