

THE ANNOTATED WORKS OF HENRY GEORGE BOOK LAUNCH AND CELEBRATION PART II

JOSEPH MILNE: EDITOR OF VOLUME VI *A PERPLEXED PHILOSOPHER*

There are many good reasons for reading Henry George's *A Perplexed Philosopher*. One good reason is that it gives us a direct insight into the social and economic thinking of the nineteenth century which pulled in two opposite directions. On the one hand, there was a desire among the ordinary people for improved economic conditions and for a just and equitable society. This was a noble impulse, as we see in the novels of Charles Dickens. On the other hand, there was a wholly mechanistic conception of society in which everything occurred simply by necessity. This highly materialist view had no concern for an ethics of justice. Nature was just blind force. But this view got taken up in a new way with the discovery of biological evolution, in particular the theory of Charles Darwin. Here was a view which not only explained the mechanisms of nature, but also the development of higher species.

Herbert Spencer, the leading social philosopher of the time, took the notions of blind necessity and Darwinian evolution and mixed them together to form his social theory of ethics or justice. For this theory he coined the expression 'survival of the fittest' which is usually wrongly attributed to Darwin but who adopted it from Spencer. Here is a short sample from Spencer's final work on social justice:

... from the evolution point of view, human life must be regarded as a further development of sub-human life, it follows that from this same point of view, human justice must be a further development of sub-human justice.

Of man, as of all inferior creatures, the law by conformity to which the species is preserved, is that among adults the individuals best adapted to the conditions of their existence shall prosper most, and that individuals least adapted to the conditions of their existence shall prosper least—a law which, if uninterfered with, entails survival of the fittest, and spread of the most adapted varieties. And as before so here, we see that, ethically considered, this law implies that each individual ought to receive the benefits and the evils of his own nature and consequent conduct: neither being prevented from having whatever good his actions normally bring to him, nor allowed to shoulder off on to other persons whatever ill is brought to him by his actions. (Herbert Spencer, *Justice* p. 17)

Even though Spencer was usually a writer who says very little in very many words, here he has summed up the whole of his thought on human evolution and ethics. Evolution is nothing else than adaptation of individuals for survival, with the strong prospering and the weak falling away, and this process of natural selection is simultaneously justice, each getting their just deserts through biological necessity. The strong deserve whatever they acquire, the weak whatever they acquire. Ethics is automatic, requiring no judgement of conscience or measure of goodness above individual advantage. Individual advantage is the full expression of the law of evolution. Needless to say, this is a distortion of

Darwin's evolutionary theory which is about the adaptation of species, not of individuals or society. These ideas are simply elaborated to the point of absurdity in the rest of Spencer's work entitled *Justice*. (*The Ethics of Social Life: Justice* 1891)

Anyone familiar with the ideas of Henry George on social and economic justice will easily see why he was so appalled by Spencer's social theory. But what, in fact, most appalled George was how Spencer had in his early work, *Social Statics* (1851), clearly expressed the very opposite view – of justice expressing human equality and the equal right of all to the gifts of nature. In other words, Spencer originally argued that the 'land' or 'the earth' was the common right of all, and that one of the primary causes of poverty was the monopoly of land by a select few who had either arbitrarily claimed it or seized it by force. Poverty, simple material poverty, was caused by the legalisation of the misappropriation of land. In *Progress and Poverty*, George had quoted Spencer's *Social Statics* in which Spencer had eloquently argued for this view – that all had equal right to the land and none the right of private property in land. The later work, *Justice*, from which I just quoted, was Spencer's *revision of Social Statics*, from which his earlier view on the land question was entirely expunged.

The question for George was: Why had Spencer changed his mind on the land question and arrived at the entirely opposite view that only the strongest and fittest deserve nature's gifts and power over her resources? Had his friendship with Darwin and his theory of evolution given him a just intellectual revision of thought? Had he become confused and contradictory? Or was there some other more questionable reason, a reason rooted in a lack of moral integrity? In *A Perplexed Philosopher* George asks these questions, and is prepared to hear Spencer's arguments for his change of position. He finds, on examining Spencer's *Justice*, not only contradictions in his arguments, but an obvious sophistic deviousness. In plain language, blatant dishonesty. It is clear to George that Spencer had sold out on the quest for truth in exchange for acceptance in Victorian high society – the society of the landed class and rich merchants and industrialists. These people were, in Spencer's evolutionary terms, the highest and fittest. Spencer had himself declared that the modern captains of industry were superior to the greatest philosophers of antiquity, not only materially but morally. One senses that Spencer never read much ancient philosophy. His notion of determinist evolution necessarily relegated all ancient philosophy to the infancy of society.

It was George's perception of Spencer's lack of both moral and intellectual integrity that prompted him to write *A Perplexed Philosopher*. Having once admired his early work, which he had quoted in *Progress and Poverty*, he was now appalled by the compromise with truth and honesty in his latest work. His mind was finally made up when he met Spencer in London. George asked him his views on the Irish question. Spencer had responded

book launch

that the English landlords had every right to their rents from their Irish tenants. George, shocked and speechless, made no reply and simply turned from him, recording the incident in a letter to his son. And here we are now, more than a hundred and fifty years later, still embroiled in the consequences of the 'Irish question'.

In *A Perplexed Philosopher* George shows deeper philosophical insights that are not so evident in his other works. He shows how the philosophical premises of Spencer's arguments do not stand up to examination, and how Spencer is compelled to make spurious arguments to conceal their unsoundness. But the essential error at the root of Spencer's social theory is that he places the biological and the ethical on the same plane. That is the assumption of the passage I just quoted from Spencer's *Justice*, where each individual receives the benefits or disadvantages of his biologically determined actions automatically by the law of evolution. Spencer uses this notion of evolutionary 'just deserts' as an argument against all forms of governmental intervention or social reform. Charity or any kind of mitigation of poverty, he argues, *prevents* natural evolution from taking its proper course. Benevolence shows weakness of character.

How could such outrageous ideas win public currency? Well, they did, and widely. They chimed with the *zeitgeist* of the age. Herbert Spencer was by far the most famous and influential social philosopher of the Victorian era, hailed by some as the greatest philosopher of all time. The nineteenth century culture was ruled by mechanistic explanations of everything. A dreadful scientism prevailed, and the great engineering feats of the Victorians – the bridges, railways, electricity, mass production, and the commercial exploitation of the colonies – all demonstrated to the Victorian mind the power and advances of the mechanical sciences. So why not apply the same mechanical laws of physics to the social realm? The same mode of thinking gave birth to the logical positivism of August Comte and the historical materialism of Karl Marx. Each view shared in a conception of social development which naturally led from one stage to the next. Along with Herbert Spencer, all agree, despite other major differences, that society has evolved from a state of primitive ignorance and religious superstition to a higher state that must inevitably lead to some form of utopia. Thus history itself is ruled by a mechanical law of determinism, a law which could explain, if not entirely justify, the tragedies and sufferings of mankind down the ages. What matters is not the past but the possible future. And here we might note that the extraordinary French philosopher, Simone Veil, has called this projection of a utopian future, present in Marx and Spencer, a form of idolatry. Indeed, mechanistic materialism and scientism are each modern variants of idolatry. It is a mode of thinking about time and history that Aldous Huxley portrayed in his novel *Brave New World*.

There is a point at which scientific discovery can be transformed or distorted into ideology. Spencer does precisely that with Darwin's evolutionary theory of species and natural selection by applying it to the social, cultural and ethical spheres, where Darwin himself had said it could not be applied. The evolutionary biologist Alfred Russel Wallace, a friend of Darwin, had even more vigorously opposed such an application, arguing that the primitive tribes he had explored far more exhaustively in his travels than Darwin, lived by higher moral standards than English Victorian society which was degenerate by comparison, with its slums

and poverty. Industrial development and moral development were entirely independent. Indeed, Wallace campaigned for social reform against the proposals of Herbert Spencer, and in 1882 formed The Land Nationalisation Society. That was prior to reading George's *Progress and Poverty*. And when in England, George spoke at Wallace's invitation at the newly formed Society. The anthropological and social insights of Wallace are far superior to Darwin's and Spencer's and are undergoing a revival.

Nor were these the only movements of social and land reform at that time. Robert Owen (1771-1858) had founded communities of common ownership which thrived for some time. He is the father of the Cooperative Society and of the Cooperative Party still with us today. There were also many Quaker companies who likewise sought to elevate the working people through providing good homes and free education. Many of these companies survive to this day, such as Cadburys, Rowntree, Clark's shoes, Barclays and Lloyds Banks, though not all of them have retained their Quaker principles. I must admit I have greater admiration for these practical reformers, who actually did improve the conditions of the poor, than I do for the abstract idealists of the time of whatever type. Action from benevolence is more productive in nature than self-interest.

There was a tide of social conscience actively seeking social and economic reform in the nineteenth century. Yet all such reform, whether from government, socialist movements or religious inspiration, were fiercely resisted by the great industrialists and land proprietors. Indeed, they sought to portray all such reforms as anti-liberal and opposed to the freedom of the individual and freedom of contract. The competitive struggle for survival was the driving force of industry and the spur of labour against its natural tendency to idleness and sloth. Even Sunday sermons preached this antichristian philosophy where the Church itself was largely caught in serving the status quo, and even preached the same theory of deserts that Spencer had formulated. Poverty was a sign of moral weakness and biological inferiority. There were even some who claimed that Spencer's theory was the realisation of the teaching of the Gospels. Thus the present can be sacrificed to the future when the weak and feeble will be naturally eliminated. Through such ideas, in expectation of some distant utopia, the industrialists, the speculators and the land proprietors could ease their conscience over the appalling working conditions of their factories and the purpose-built slums.

Thus, through the device of biological evolution, morality was deferred into an unknown future time through what Spencer regarded as the 'evolution of justice'. That is to say, justice is nothing else than each getting their earned deserts, and as such could not be fully applied to the present age which was still developing towards justice. Spencer's sophistic trick for this deferment of justice into an unknown but inevitable future was through drawing a distinction between what he called 'absolute ethics' and 'relative ethics'. In the present stage of social evolution 'absolute ethics' cannot be applied, only 'relative ethics'. Absolute ethics will be realised only when the biological condition of perfection is attained. It was therefore inappropriate to use justice or 'absolute ethics' as a measure of present society. George attacks Spencer's distinction between 'absolute' and 'relative' ethics as a piece of sophistry. Justice can no more evolve than a triangle can evolve. Nor does society necessarily progress towards justice



by some law of evolution. Nor is *injustice* or 'relative ethics' a necessary stage of evolution. These are doctrines unsupported by any empirical evidence. They are likewise philosophically unsound.

From these ideas arose what was later called Social Darwinism, to which many industrialists and land owners enthusiastically subscribed, either through sheer ignorance or selfish advantage. Few adherents thought to ask why past history had to be sacrificed for a yet unknown future. But this only shows the cultural poverty of an age which can find meaning only through negating past history and expecting meaning to arise in the future. Here the extreme individualists and extreme communists met in full agreement that the future would see the dissolution of the state and the liberation of all people from any external authority. Progress and freedom were equated, yet only in terms of potential, and thus both are infinitely deferred. The present was merely a time of transition for ideologies to build dreams on.

It is easy to see why Simone Veil saw this transference of human responsibility to a utopian future as idolatry. It has the trappings of a religious superstition. Even more so since it originates in blind chance, or what Spencer calls the original 'matter and motion' out of which the universe has arisen and which had no inherent principle of order or direction. As George points out: How can order and direction arise out of mere matter and motion? He refers to Schopenhauer's notion that some sort of 'will' must be inherent in things for them to take the forms they have (*A Perplexed Philosopher*, p. 167). But for Spencer this would open the door to the working of some kind of intelligence in the unfolding order of the universe – something which cannot be attributed to mere matter and motion. But conceding any kind of organising intelligence to the origin of the universe would require a complete inversion of his principle of evolution. It would also change our relation to the present by making us responsible to the world and the society we now live in. Yet Alfred Russel Wallace argued, from a purely scientific point of view and in support of evolution, that blind chance could not account for the origin of the universe or for the present order of things which express an inherent intelligence. Both motion and matter must themselves derive from some prior ordering principle.

Here a presupposition of materialism is exposed with roots going right back in the birth of the modern sciences. They begin by eliminating any kind of teleology or intelligence in the explanation of things, especially through the application of mathematics to physics. That is fine if all one wishes to do is measure things or outline their morphology. But it does not apply when brought to higher realms of reality, such as the living biosphere, human society, culture, politics or ethics. Any attempt to apply it to these spheres must distort what is present or conceptually eliminate essentials from them in advance of observation. So one ends up with such absurd questions as, how, if all is matter and motion, can human beings have consciousness? Such a question ignores that consciousness has been eliminated in advance of posing the question.

In his examination of Spencer's social theory, George is keenly aware of these kinds of absurdities. He sees the awkward contradictions Spencer falls into in seeking to maintain such an unsustainable position.

One of the most absurd notions Spencer comes up with is drawing a distinction between the 'surface of land' and the elements of light and air, which he calls 'Natural Media', suggesting there were distinct rights to each of one these. By supposing that light and air can be distinguished from land, Spencer asserts that "light and air cannot be monopolized", to which George responds:

But they are monopolized in the monopolization of land, and this as effectually as any monopolizer could wish. It is true that air and sunlight are not formally bought, sold and rented. But why? Not that they could not be measured off and determined by metes and bounds, but simply because they are to our physical constitutions inseparable from land, so that whoever owns the land owns also the air it is bathed in and the light that falls on it. Light and air are monopolized whenever land is monopolized; and the exclusive use to them is bought and sold whenever land is bought and sold (A Perplexed Philosopher, p. 199).

George quotes the jurist William Blackstone who says "The word 'land' includes not only the face of the earth, but everything under it or over it. . . . By the name of land everything terrestrial will pass."

But Spencer, seeking to complicate the question of land-ownership, attempts to make light and air separate 'natural media' to which we have distinct rights. Either he is tying himself up in knots, or else this is a piece of sophistry aimed at making the natural right of every man to the earth qualified by several other distinct rights.

An even greater absurdity that Spencer proposes is that, should the land be nationalised or become common we could never calculate the compensation owed to the landowners. Not only could we not calculate the value of all the past improvements upon the land over generations – which somehow legitimise the present owner's right to the land – but also there is the question of compensation for his *future* losses of income from the land. After all, his claim upon the land rests upon future expectation, not only for himself but for his descendants. Thus Spencer argues that the compensation owed would be incalculable or unaffordable if it could be calculated. George demolishes this absurd argument with exceptional brilliance in Chapter XI in Part Three. I especially recommend this chapter. The same question of compensation for their future losses had been made for slave-owners.

I could cite many other absurdities of Spencer's which George demolishes with the clearest and most incisive reasoning. However, what makes George's critique of Spencer so valuable is his ability to bring to light the true relationships between the rational and the ethical. It is precisely in Spencer's arbitrary confusions of these that his theory of society, human nature, evolution and justice falls apart. On reading Spencer one gets the impression that he will force his evolutionary social theory to make sense no matter what contradictions or absurd distinctions it leads him into.

I daresay some readers have never even heard of Herbert Spencer. That may well be a blessing straight from heaven! The fact that he has fallen from being hailed the greatest philosopher of all time to almost complete oblivion proves, at least, that his theory did not survive as one the fittest! Nevertheless, and despite him being practically forgotten, his mode of thinking is still with us. Not only that, it is a mode of thinking that has a long history and into which a culture is liable to fall at any time if its eyes are closed.

What I mean here is the kind of reductive thinking that seeks to build from the least intelligible. Plato, for example, warns in Book X of his last dialogue, the *Laws*, of the dangers of supposing that matter and blind chance are the origin of the universe. Such a theory, he argues, will lead to the moral decline of a society. It is a recurring theory and not new with Herbert Spencer.

However, the most obvious example of such reductive thinking in our own times, already emerging in George's time, is the reduction of economics to mathematical models, which is to say, to mere quantitative exchanges. Even to the extent that such measurements may be accurate, they actually tell us nothing about either the nature of civil society or economic justice. The reductive approach separates the ethical and purposive aspects of human work and exchange from analysis, while in fact they are the *humanly meaningful* aspects. They are primary. At least in classical political economy ethics remained a key, as in Adam Smith, although Smith's ethics of self-interest is already a distortion and reduction of actual economic exchange. But somehow the ethical slips into the background while the notion of 'legal competition' slips into the foreground and ethics is reduced to merely legal rules. But 'legal competition' is just a variant of Spencer's 'survival of the fittest'. From this way of thinking arises the entity of the international corporation which takes on the legal rights and status of a human person. There is an interesting history in jurisprudence of the 'legal fiction' of the corporate person which can operate with an apparent will of its own.

My point here is that if the mechanics of human work and the ethics of society are conceptually separated from each other, not only do we get a 'fictional economy', we also get a complete dislocation of economics from community and from the natural environment or nature. Persons become mere instruments of production and consumption, skilfully directed through advertising, replaceable by a kind of economic population control. If that sounds too farfetched, then we should remember that precisely such a theory was developed from the social theory of Herbert Spencer. It was already latent in it. The present dispersion of indigenous peoples from the forests by absentee investors is an obvious example. Here we see the status and integrity of George's analysis of Spencer's mode of thinking. The question of justice cannot be deferred to some imaginary future. Neither can it be sought through instant revolution – through 'changing the system' which is just another variant of mechanical reduction. The simple truth that Spencer sought with all his strength to evade was that we are already morally responsible beings. As Thomas Aquinas observed, every human action of ethical. The dignity of human nature lies in its ethical status, where we are each answerable before the court of nature for all our actions. This is the simple truth that always guided the thought and work of Henry George, and the reason he inspired so many in his times. For him, ideologies are evasions of our direct responsibility to the present.

But such responsibility, although our dignity lies in it, is also our burden as human beings. That is the perception writ large in the Greek tragedies. We are at once responsible to truth and to the good. And this means we are by nature called to seek the truth of existence as a whole, and also to live as the social and political species in cooperation with our neighbour – who is all mankind. In other words, as the ethical being we are called to live and act for the common good. Every natural institution of society exists for the common good, and the economic sphere is especially a part of this since it will manifest directly the ethical condition of the culture. If there is economic injustice, then there is faulty thinking embedded in the higher institutions of the culture. And

those condemned to live in poverty are deprived of the dignity of their human responsibility.

Those of us familiar with George's proposal of a land tax may wonder why such philosophical speculations are important. Is it not enough to campaign for the implementation of a land tax? Well, George himself saw very clearly why the mechanistic theory of Spencer had to be challenged if there is to be a real understanding of our true relation with the land, not merely as an economic resource, which itself is a false reduction, but as our dwelling place within the greater order of nature. We should not be surprised that the most ancient primitive peoples worshipped the Earth Mother as the source of all life, the goddess to be honoured before all others. While to Spencer such worship was mere superstition, in truth it is rooted in a real relation with nature and our dependence on its abundance. It is a higher ethic than survival of the fittest which is base and crude by comparison. This is the essence of the land question, reaching far beyond economics which has come to see the earth in a purely utilitarian way – as private property or capital to be exploited. Yet, the manner in which we regard the earth will correspond precisely with the manner in which we regard humanity. There is an exact correlation. Act unjustly with one and inevitably we act unjustly with the other. Thus land monopoly is synonymous with human monopoly. Or, to put it the other way round, the way to gain human monopoly is through land monopoly, or what George calls 'wage slavery'. George also observes in history that the decline of any society occurs through the erosion of civil ethics resulting in monopoly. History bears testimony to this truth.

What *A Perplexed Philosopher* shows us with the greatest clarity is that the idea of private property in land has a tenacious hold over the western mind. So much so that all its destructive consequences can be evaded through alternative explanations. Spencer came up with a mechanistic social theory that justified the Victorian industrial outlook and colonialism. His argument is that if each individual seeks his own advantage through industrial society it will inevitably bring about a peaceful society. It is rooted in an extreme individualism which takes no account of community. Or, for him community is nothing else than the arena where each follows their own self-interests. It stands in direct opposition to the state which Spencer believes restrains individual freedom and the survival of the fittest.

To George this was plain delusion. His studies of history showed him that human society is distinguished from that of other species through cooperation and mutual exchange. Alfred Russell Wallace came to the same view in his studies of evolution. This is apparent at every level of society, not just in economics. Yet cooperation and mutual exchange is thwarted at every level if there is land monopoly. Our relation with the earth is fundamental and determinative. Just as the great philosophical and religious questions are always with us, so is the great question of our relation to the earth. No automatic law of evolution will answer it, nor can any defence of the *status quo* evade it. The question belongs solely to our responsibility as human beings. It is a question in which reason and ethics converge. It is therefore significant that George felt compelled to brake off work on *The Science of Political Economy* in order to write *A Perplexed Philosopher*. 



HGF BRIEFING NOTES

HGF OPEN DAY 2024

Again this year the Henry George Foundation of Great Britain opens its doors in September for The Open Day event.

This usually popular event will be held at Mandeville Place in central London on the 14th of September.

This year's theme and title will be:

Henry George and The Crises of Contemporary Capitalism

The programme including a list of speakers can be found on the Henry George Foundation's website. Here is an outline:

9.30 AM:	Doors open
10.00 - 11.00 AM:	Martin Jacobson presents
11.00 - 11.30 AM:	Coffee
11.30 - 12.30 PM:	Joseph Milne presents
12.30 - 2.00 PM:	Lunch
2.00 - 3.00 PM:	David Triggs presents
3.00 - 3.30 PM:	Tea
3.30 - 4.30 PM:	Beth Stratford presents
4.45 - 5.30/6.00 PM:	Panel discussion

The Open Day will close with drinks and tributes to Peter Bowman, Tommas Graves, Anthony Werner, John Cormack and Mark Wadsworth who each contributed to the work of the Henry George Foundation over many years. 