Mr. Spencer's Ethical System
Author(s): Henry Sidgwick
Source: *Mind*, Vol. 5, No. 18 (Apr., 1880), pp. 216-226
Published by: Oxford University Press on behalf of the Mind Association
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/2246581
Accessed: 16/09/2009 11:40

ful nor hurtful, and therefore the organism does not, so to speak, take any special trouble to dispense with them. In short, pains in internal organs are due, not to a special provision of nerves for the purpose, but to the general sensibility of all afferent cerebro-spinal fibres to disintegrative action.

These stray notes, being really a bundle of after-thoughts, are necessarily somewhat discursive and lacking in form; but I trust the reader will forgive that defect, if they contain anything that is new or suggestive in matter.

GRANT ALLEN.

IV.—MR. SPENCER'S ETHICAL SYSTEM.

THE aim of Mr. Herbert Spencer's recently published book on the *Data of Ethics* is, as the author tells us in his preface, "the establishment of rules of right conduct on a scientific basis". And though the volume itself is not a complete treatise on the subject to which it relates—being, in fact, only the first division of such a treatise—it claims to imply the specific conclusions to be set forth in the entire work "in such wise that definitely to formulate them requires nothing beyond logical deduction". We may take it therefore as containing in outline Mr. Spencer's ethical system; and it has all the more interest, as the exposition of this system is regarded by the author as the culmination of his Synthetic Philosophy, the "part of his task to which all preceding parts are subsidiary". The influence of a book, so prefaced, on the numerous disciples of this Synthetic Philosophy will undoubtedly be great; and as it is to be hoped that Mr. Spencer will find time to complete the work of which this is an instalment, it seems opportune to examine one or two fundamental points in his system, on which, as it appears to me, some further explanation or justification is required. In performing this examination, I shall find it most convenient not to follow closely the order of Mr. Spencer's exposition; but rather to ask, in what seems to me their natural sequence, the chief questions to which every ethical system has to supply an answer, and then to ascertain—by a comparison, if necessary, of different chapters—how these questions are answered by Mr. Spencer.

In the first place, we have to notice a certain ambiguity in the general notion of "establishing rules of conduct on a scientific basis"? Writers who discuss moral rules either from what Mr. Spencer calls "the evolution point of view," or in the earlier manner of the Associationist school, frequently mean by a "scientific" treatment of morality merely an investigation of

the laws according to which the ethical beliefs and sentiments of our own or any other society have come into existence. Such an investigation is obviously a legitimate branch of Sociology or Psychology; and those chapters (cc. vii. and viii.) of Mr. Spencer's book which treat of the "Psychological View" and the "Sociological View" seem to be largely concerned with speculations of this kind. So far as this is the case, I do not propose to criticise either the method or the conclusions of these chapters; what I wish to point out is that this species of inquiry, however successfully conducted, has not necessarily any tendency to "establish" the *authority* of the morality of which it explains the existence. More often, I think, it has an effect of the opposite kind; the "law so analysed," as Bishop Blongram says, is felt after the analysis not to "coerce us much". A scientific explanation of current morality which shall also be an "establishment" of it, must do more than exhibit the causes of existing ethical beliefs; it must show that these causes have operated in such a way as to make these beliefs true. Now this Mr. Spencer certainly does not attempt; for the sufficient reason that he does not admit the final authority of existing ethical beliefs. In the chapters which contain (*inter alia*) his account of the origin of current moral conceptions he is continually criticising them as "defective," "one-sided," "vitiated," destined to give way to a "truer ethics". In short it is this "truer ethics"—Mr. Spencer's morality, not the current morality —which it is his ultimate aim to "establish".

In what way then does Science—that is, Biology, Psychology, and Sociology—provide a basis for this "truer ethics". Mr. Spencer's answer seems to be that these sciences show us, in the first place, a supreme or ultimate end, to the realisation of which human actions are universally or normally directed; and that they enable us, in the second place, to determine the kind of conduct by which this end may be attained in the highest possible degree. Let us begin with the establishment of the end. Mr. Spencer seems to be leading us to this in his two first chapters; in which he considers the conduct to which ethics relates, that is, the voluntary actions of human beings, commonly judged to be right and wrong, as a portion of "universal conduct—conduct as exhibited by all living creatures". He defines conduct, in this wider sense, as the "adjustment of acts to ends"; acts being more precisely defined as external motions of animate beings. He points out how, the conduct of the lower animals as compared with the higher, in a scale ascending up to civilised man, "mainly differs in this, that the adjustment of acts to ends are relatively simple and relatively incomplete". What, then, in the case of these lower forms of life, are we to

regard as the ultimate end, to which the special ends of catching food, avoiding foes, &c., are subordinate? Mr. Spencer unhesitatingly says that the "general" or "supreme" end of the adjustments which constitute life is the continuance and further development of these adjustments themselves. Life, in short, is for life's sake; only we are instructed not to measure life merely by its length, but by what is called its "breadth" also; that is, we must take into account the different "quantities of change" that different living beings pass through in the same period of time. We have also, of course, to bear in mind that the actions of any individual may be partly adjusted to the initiation, prolongation and enlargement of other lives besides its own; and we observe that this is to a continually greater extent the case, as we ascend in the scale of living beings. Still, notwithstanding this doubleness of measurement and this complexity of adjustment, "quantity of life" none the less remains the ultimate end of "universal conduct"; and we naturally expect that, when we pass to consider the particular part of this conduct to which ethics relates, this same end will be taken as the final standard for judging actions as right and wrong: especially since, even in speaking of the lower animals, Mr. Spencer does not hesitate to describe actions that fail to sustain life as "conduct falling short of its ideal".[1] And in fact, when he comes to treat of human actions, Mr. Spencer does argue that we commonly regard conduct as good in proportion as it conduces to "the greatest totality of life in self, in offspring, and in fellow-men". But he does not accept this view as final; on the contrary, he is concerned to point out that it involves "an assumption of extreme significance". It is assumed that life "brings a surplus of agreeable feeling"; and this he emphatically declares to be the only possible justification for maintaining it, or for judging conduct to be good that conduces to its preservation. The Ethical End, therefore, in relation to which moral rules are to be established, turns out to be not merely quantity of life, "estimated by multiplying its length into its breadth," but quantity of agreeable feeling, pleasure or happiness.[2]

Now, after all that has been said of the importance of considering human conduct in connexion with the "universal

[1] The frankly teleological point of view from which, in this book, Mr. Spencer contemplates the phenomena of Life generally, seems worthy of notice; since in his *Principles of Biology* he seems to have taken some pains to avoid "teleological implications". *Cf. Pr. of Bi.* c. v. p. 27.

[2] Mr. Spencer seems to use "pleasure" and "happiness"—or at least "quantity of pleasure" and "quantity of happiness"—as convertible terms. I should concur in this: but I think he is rather hasty in condemning Aristotle—who could not foresee how he would be translated into English—for not taking a precisely similar view of the relation of εὐδαιμονία to ἡδονή.

conduct" of which it is a part, I think that this transition from "quantity of life" which was stated to be the end of the latter to "quantity of pleasure" is too rapidly and lightly made. Pessimism, as Mr. Spencer himself says, stands in the way, declaring that life does not bring with it a surplus of agreeable feeling. We expect therefore a scientific confutation of Pessimism; and I am unable to perceive that this expectation is ever adequately realised. Indeed I am unable to find any passage in which Mr. Spencer expressly undertakes such a confutation. And yet he can hardly think that pessimism is sufficiently confuted by demonstrating that the common moral judgments of mankind imply the assumption that life, on the average, yields a surplus of pleasure over pain. This is not establishing morality on a scientific basis; such an appeal to common sense merely indicates the *pis aller*, the provisional support, with which moralists have to content themselves when they cannot provide a scientific basis for their doctrines.

From a comparison of different passages[1] I am inclined to think that, in Mr. Spencer's view, pessimism is indirectly confuted by the argument—given as an "inevitable deduction from the hypothesis of evolution"—which shows that "necessarily throughout the animate world at large, pains are the correlatives of actions injurious to the organism, while pleasures are the correlatives of actions conducive to its welfare". But, granting this connexion to be established, I do not see how we can strictly infer from it that life on the whole is pleasurable rather than painful. It seems to me that we can only infer that actions preservative of the individual or the race will be generally speaking less painful than those which have an opposite tendency; and that the pains normally endured will not be sufficiently intense to destroy life. The connexion, in fact, leaves nature a choice of alternative methods in her business of adjusting the actions of living beings to the preservation and continuance of life; she may either attract them in the required direction by pleasure, or deter them from divergent courses by pain: it is undeniable that, hitherto at least, her plan of management has combined the two modes of guidance, and I do not see how the proportion in which the two methods are actually mixed can be ascertained by *a priori* inference. Still less do I see how Mr. Spencer is justified in assuming that conduct tending to make "the lives of each and all the greatest possible, alike in length and breadth" is simply identical with conduct of which the "ultimate moral aim" is "gratification, enjoyment, happiness". I think that we may fairly ask him, in any future

[1] *Cf.* pp. 33, 56, 63, 67 among others.

instalment of the present treatise, to give us something more like a proof of the Optimism which is so essential a feature in his ethical construction.

Meanwhile, let us suppose that Pleasure or Happiness has been established—scientifically or otherwise—as the ethical end. Before we come to consider the appropriate means for the realisation of this end, one fundamentally important point remains to be settled, *viz.*, *whose* pleasure we have in view. Is the ultimate aim of Mr. Spencer's Ethics to make pleasure of happiness in general a maximum? or is it rather to advise the individual human being how to gain the greatest possible amount of happiness for himself? Of course these two ends will be to a great extent attained by the same means; and many utilitarians have held that this is altogether the case, and that it is impossible for any individual to attain his own happiness in the greatest possible degree by any conduct other than that which is most conducive to the aggregate happiness of all whom his conduct affects. But in any case the extent to which Egoistic Hedonism and Universalistic Hedonism[1] practically coincide will have to be carefully investigated in a scientific exposition of either system: we have first to settle whether we take the happiness of the individual or happiness generally as the *ultimate* end; and then when our choice is made, there arises a second and quite distinct question in either case—*viz.*, how far this ultimate end will be best attained indirectly by taking the other end as the direct object of pursuit. Now I cannot but think that Mr. Spencer has somewhat confounded these two questions in the chapters (cc. xi.-xiv.) in which he first discusses the claims of "Egoism" and "Altruism," and then proposes a "Compromise" between the two, and an ultimate "Conciliation". For instance, in arguing the case of "Egoism *versus* Altruism," he appears to assume general happiness as an ultimate end, a final criterion by the application of which we are to determine the limits of Egoism as a subordinate practical principle; his contention seems to be merely (to use his own words) that the "pursuit of individual happiness within those limits prescribed by social conditions is the final requisite to the attainment of the greatest general happiness," and that in various ways "diminutions of general happiness are produced by inadequate egoism". On the other hand, in c. xiii., he expressly attacks Bentham and his followers for holding that general happiness should be the ultimate end and final standard of right conduct; and refuses to admit "that from the stand-point of pure reason, the happiness

[1] I venture to adopt my own nomenclature—to which Mr. Spencer does not seem to have any objection.

of others has no less a claim as an object of pursuit for each than personal happiness". But he seems to treat this position as identical with the "theory which makes general happiness the sole [or almost the sole] *immediate* object of pursuit"; a theory very remote from Bentham's—whose practical view was characteristically expressed in the sentence that "self-regard alone will serve for diet, though sympathy is very good for dessert"—and not maintained, so far as I am aware, by any of his leading disciples. And it is only against this latter doctrine, which he more frequently and more properly designates as "pure altruism," that Mr. Spencer's arguments are in any way effective; the issue (as he himself states it) is whether "equitable egoism" or "pure altruism" will produce the "greatest sum of happiness" on the whole; and his conclusion is that "general happiness is to be achieved mainly through the adequate pursuit of their own happiness by individuals"—which, as I have just said, was precisely Bentham's conclusion. I think therefore that Mr. Spencer's apparent antagonism to the Utilitarian school, so far as the ultimate end and standard of morality is concerned, depends on a mere misunderstanding; and that in all this part of his treatise his quarrel is not really with the very sober and guarded "altruism" of Bentham and the Benthamites, but with certain hard sayings of the prophet of the Positivist religion, from whom the term Altruism is taken.

Provisionally, then, I shall conclude that in Mr. Spencer's Ethics the ultimate criterion used in establishing rules of Conduct is Happiness or Pleasure, taken generally.[1] Let us now

[1] I do not wish here to put prominently forward the difficulties that I find in working with the notion of a "sum of pleasures"—difficulties which I have explained at sufficient length in my *Methods of Ethics* (Book II. c. iii). But since Mr. Spencer has referred (in c. ix.) to this part of my treatise, I may perhaps observe that he has not altogether apprehended the scope of my argument. I did not merely urge that in many cases when we try to compare two different pleasures (or pains) we are unable to ascertain which of the two is the greatest. The answer, that we ought to choose the greatest surplus of pleasure *so far as we can ascertain it*, is sufficiently obvious, and if I had meant no more than what can be thus answered, I should not have dwelt so long on the point. But I thought it important to point out further that the very notion of a 'sum of pleasures' implies that the pleasures spoken of are capable of being summed; that is, that they are things quantitatively determinate in respect of their quality as pleasures; and that this assumption, however natural and even irresistible it may be, certainly lacks empirical verification.

I must just add that Mr. Spencer's argument on this point suggests that I am not aware that the objections urged by me against the Hedonistic method apply with even greater force to Universalistic, than they do to Egoistic Hedonism. I certainly thought that I had stated this in the clearest possible language. (*Cf. Meth. of Eth.* B. IV., c. iv., § 1.)

pass to consider his method of scientifically determining the rules themselves.

The apprehension of this method is rendered, I think, more difficult for the reader by the fact that a definite statement of it is given for the first time in the two concluding chapters of the treatise. It is true that the general nature of it has been gradually elucidated in various earlier passages. For instance, its scientific claims are plainly declared in chapter v., on "Ways of judging Conduct"; from which we learn that Mr. Spencer's way of judging it is to be a high priori road. He will not rely on mere generalisation from observation of the actual consequences of different kinds of conduct; it is the defect of current utilitarianism that it does not get beyond these merely empirical generalisations; Mr. Spencer, on the other hand, proposes to "ascertain necessary relations" between actions and their consequences, and so to "deduce from fundamental principles what conduct *must* be detrimental and what conduct *must* be beneficial". Those are brave words, and they will perhaps raise the reader's hopes to the pitch of expecting to find this demonstrated morality in the four chapters that follow, giving respectively the Physical, Biological, Psychological, and Sociological views of conduct. If so, I fear he will be disappointed to learn (c. vi., § 31) that he is to "avoid the tendency" to judge Mr. Spencer's conclusions "by their applicability to humanity as now existing"; and he will be perplexed as to the extent to which he is to avoid this tendency; since a good deal of the discussions in this and the two following chapters plainly relate to human beings that actually exist or have existed. I certainly think that Mr. Spencer ought to draw a clearer line between the actual and the ideal in this part of his treatise; until this is done, it seems to me difficult to criticise these reasonings closely, though they contain much that suggests criticism.

In the concluding chapters, however, these perplexities are cleared away. It is there made quite plain that the rules of conduct, of which Mr. Spencer undertakes to provide a deductive science, are rules that "formulate normal conduct in an ideal society": a society so ideal that in it such conduct will "produce pure pleasure—pleasure unalloyed with pain anywhere". Indeed, in his view, it is only conduct of which the effects are thus unmixed that can be called "absolutely right"; "conduct that has any concomitant of pain, or any painful consequence, is partially wrong". Ethical science, then, is primarily "a system of ideal truths expressing the absolutely right"; and we are to note that it is only this "Absolute Ethics" of which the method rises above the merely empirical procedure, previously condemned as defective; for "Relative Ethics," which has to deal

with all practical questions as to what we ought to do here and now, is "necessarily empirical" in its judgments—at least in all cases that present any difficulty.

The questions then arise (1) How far are we able to form a sufficiently definite conception of the constitution of Mr. Spencer's ideal society to enable us to frame a system of rules for it? and (2) How much guidance would such a system give us in solving the problems of conduct presented by our actual conditions of social life? I have argued against Mr. Spencer's view on these points, in a brief and general way, in my book on the *Methods of Ethics* (B. I., c. ii., § 2). I refer to this passage because Mr. Spencer has replied to me at some length in the present work (c. xv., § 105); but has unfortunately omitted to answer my arguments, owing to a misapprehension which I must now explain. My reasoning was not addressed directly to such a statement of the relation of Absolute and Relative Ethics as I have above endeavoured to abridge from the two last chapters of the treatise before us; what I tried to combat was the far more paradoxical doctrine on the same subject which I found in Mr. Spencer's *Social Statics*. It was there maintained not merely that Absolute Ethics ought to "take precedence of Relative Ethics"; but that Absolute Ethics was the only kind of Ethics with which a philosophical moralist could possibly concern himself. To quote Mr. Spencer's words:—

> "The moral law must be the law of the perfect man . . . any proposed system of morals which recognises existing defects, and countenances acts made needful by them, stands self-condemned. . . . Moral law . . . requires as its postulate that human beings be perfect. The philosophical moralist treats solely of the *straight* man. . . . a problem in which a *crooked* man forms one of the elements, is insoluble by him" (c. i.).

Still more definitely is Relative Ethics excluded in the concluding chapter of the same treatise:—

> "It will very likely be urged that, whereas the perfect moral code is confessedly beyond the fulfilment of imperfect men, some other code is needful for our present guidance . . . to say that the imperfect man requires a moral code which recognises his imperfection and allows for it, *seems at first sight reasonable. But it is not really so*[2] . . . a system of morals which shall recognise man's present imperfections and allow for them *cannot be devised; and would be useless if it could be devised.*"

I observe that Mr. Spencer, in replying to me, refers to his *Social Statics*, as though he still held the opinions there expressed; but I must confess that I cannot reconcile these passages, and others that might be quoted from the same context, with the view of Relative Ethics given in the concluding chapters of the present treatise. At any rate, it was in opposition to this earlier view and not to the later one that I thought

[2] The italics are mine.

it fair to adduce the analogy of astronomy, and to suggest the absurdity of a 'philosophical astronomer' declining to deal with any planets that did not move in perfect ellipses. Mr. Spencer, in his rejoinder, takes the suggested analogy to relate to the question whether the study of Absolute Ethics should precede that of Relative Ethics. Had this been my meaning, the reference to astronomy would have been manifestly inappropriate. But in fact it was only in the paragraph succeeding that to which Mr. Spencer has replied that I began to discuss this latter question, as is evident from the following sentences with which my second paragraph opens:—

> This inquiry into the morality of an ideal society can therefore be at best but a preliminary investigation, after which the step from the ideal to the actual remains to be taken. We have to ask, then, how far such a preliminary construction seems desirable.

After which I proceed to state my objections to that more moderate view of the claims of Absolute Ethics which is expounded in the treatise before us. These objections Mr. Spencer has not noticed: in fact his interest in my argument seems to have ceased exactly at the point at which it began to be really relevant to his present position. My criticisms, no doubt were tolerably obvious; but as they still appear to me substantially valid, I have nothing to do but to re-state them briefly, with such variations as his present treatise suggests.

In the first place, granting—a large grant—that Mr. Spencer's ideal society, in which the voluntary actions of all the members cause "pleasure unalloyed by pain anywhere" to all who are affected by them, is one which we can conceive as possible, it seems to me quite impossible to ascertain *a priori* the nature of the human beings comprising such a society with sufficient definiteness and certainty to enable us to determine their code of conduct. It has not come within Mr. Spencer's plan to delineate this code in the present treatise, otherwise than in the scantiest and most general way; but among the meagre generalities that he has given us, I can find nothing that is in any degree important which is not also in a high degree disputable. The most important is undoubtedly the formula of Absolute Justice as the fundamental principle for regulating social co-operation. Of this Mr. Spencer, in the concluding chapter, gives the following statement:—

> "Individual life is possible only on condition that each organ is paid for its action by an equivalent of blood, while the organism as a whole obtains from the environment assimilable matters that compensate for its efforts; and the mutual dependence of parts in the social organism necessitates that, alike for its total life and the lives of its units, there similarly shall be maintained a due proportion between returns and labours: the natural relation between work and welfare shall be preserved intact . . .

That principle of equivalence which meets us when we seek its roots in the laws of individual life, involves the idea of *measure;* and on passing to social life, the same principle introduces us to the conception of equity or *equalness,* in the relation of citizens to one another; the elements of the questions arising are *quantitative,* and hence the solutions assume a more scientific form."

Here, in speaking of a "due proportion between returns and labours," Mr. Spencer does not mean merely—as the analogy of the individual organism might lead us to suppose—that each labourer will receive the means of carrying on his labour in the most efficient manner; his meaning is, as several other passages show, that he will receive a share of wealth proportioned to the value of his labour. But so far as this share is more than our ideal labourer needs for labouring efficiently, I see no ground for affirming *a priori* that he will receive it, since it is quite conceivable that the surplus would produce more happiness if distributed among other ideal persons. To this Mr. Spencer would probably answer (*Cf.* c. xi., § 69) that unless "superiority profits by the rewards of superiority" the struggle for existence, to which "the progress of organisation and the reaching of a higher life" have hitherto been due, can no longer continue. This is doubtless a weighty consideration in dealing with the practical problems of existing societies; but I cannot admit its relevancy in "Absolute Ethics," until it is shown how we are to get the advantages of the struggle for existence without their attendant disadvantages, that is, without some pain to those who are defeated in the struggle; for all such pain is *ex hypothesi* excluded from Mr. Spencer's ideal society, in which all voluntary actions produce unalloyed pleasure. Again, I cannot see any validity in the conception of "equalness," as governing the relations of ideal citizens, except so far as it means merely that similar persons will be treated similarly; for we cannot know *a priori* how far our ideal citizens will be dissimilar, and therefore reasonably subjected to dissimilar treatment. The progress of Evolution, Mr. Spencer elsewhere tells us, is to increase heterogeneity; though he nowhere attempts to define the degree of heterogeneity which the ideal society will exhibit. This point is very important in reference to a further question that Mr. Spencer indicates—as to the legitimate ends and limits of government authority. I cannot conceive how this question is to be definitely answered, unless we know in what varying degrees political wisdom is distributed among our more or less heterogeneous ideal citizens; and how can we precisely know this *a priori?*

In short, it seems to me that the imagination which Mr. Spencer has exercised in constructing his ideal society has none of the characteristics of a really scientific imagination; he has

not succeeded in leading us logically to a precise and consistent conception of the mutual relations of the members of this society.

But, secondly, even if it were otherwise—even if we could construct scientifically Mr. Spencer's ideal code, I do not think such a code would be of much avail in solving the practical problems of actual humanity. For a society in which—to take one point only—there is no such thing as punishment, is necessarily a society with its essential structure so unlike our own, that it would be idle to attempt any close imitation of its rules of behaviour. It might possibly be best for us to conform approximately to some of these rules; but this we could only know by examining each particular rule in detail; we could not know it generally and *a priori*. We cannot even affirm that it would be best for us to approximate to it as far as is practicable. For even supposing that this ideal society is ultimately to be realised, it must at any rate be separated from us by a considerable interval of evolution; hence it is not unlikely that the best way of progressing towards it is some other than the apparently directest way, and that we shall reach it more easily if we begin by moving away from it. Whether this is so or not, and to what extent, can only be known by carefully examining the effects of conduct on actual human beings, and inferring their probable effects on the human beings whom we may expect to exist in the proximate future; that is, by the humble and imperfect empirical method which Mr. Spencer may be right in despising, but for which he has not yet provided an efficient substitute.

HENRY SIDGWICK.

V.—DR. WARD ON FREE-WILL.[1]

THERE are in philosophy two well-defined modes or currents of thinking, which give their colour to every doctrine which may be propounded, and mark it with an opposite stamp. One is the striving after analysis, which, applied to subjective phenomena—as it must be applied in philosophy—issues in *meta-*

[1] Articles from the *Dublin Review:* I. April, 1874, "Mr. Mill's Denial of Free-will"; II. July, 1874, "Appendix to Article on Free-will;" III. July, 1876, "Mr. Mill on Causation"; IV. April, 1879, "Free-will." [This article, which could not appear earlier, was written about the same time as Prof. Bain's Note on the subject printed in the last number of MIND. Dr. Ward, though aware that Mr. Hodgson's article was to follow, preferred to reply separately to Prof. Bain—in the Note to be found on some later pages of the present number.—ED.]