

## Herbert Spencer's Liberalism

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'Herbert Spencer's Evolutionary Liberalism and the End of History'

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### Introduction

Francis Fukuyama proclaimed in 1989 the 'end of history', in the sense that liberal democracy had finally triumphed over all rival ideologies, and as an ideal, universal and stable political system, it could not be superseded (F.Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, p.xi). Fukuyama's thesis depended heavily on a Hegelian explanation of political development as a 'struggle for recognition' by oppressed people, the end point of which was reached by the granting of rights on a universal basis to all. While Hegel thought this universal recognition had largely occurred in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, for Fukuyama the final triumph of liberal democracy had to wait nearly another 200 years, with the fall of communism in Eastern Europe.

What I want to argue is that there was an alternative grand theory that proclaimed the end of history in the achievement of liberal democracy – that produced by Herbert Spencer. Spencer claimed that the ultimate triumph of liberal democracy was certain, because of the operation of evolutionary forces which brought national character and ideal social conditions gradually into harmony until 'complete equilibrium' was reached with the establishment of the 'perfect society' – which was liberal democracy.

In what follows, I examine Spencer's early theory of social evolution, with a view to establishing what was the causal mechanism of social change that led inexorably to the eventual establishment of liberal democracy, and how satisfactory was Spencer's analysis of it. My conclusion will be that of the four alternative (or complementary) explanations given by Spencer to account for social change, the most convincing was the moral sense explanation, which bore some resemblance to Hegel's struggle-for-recognition explanation. This is a somewhat surprising conclusion to reach, since Spencer distanced himself from Hegelian idealism by his insistence that moral rights could not be justified a priori, but only in relation to the beneficial ends which they served.<sup>1</sup>

### Spencer's Explanations of the Causal Mechanism that Made Liberal Democracy Inevitable

Spencer distinguished between 'social statics' and 'social dynamics'. 'Social statics' was the study of 'the equilibrium of a perfect society', to 'determine what laws we must obey for the obtainment of complete happiness'. 'Social dynamics' was the study of 'the forces by which society is advanced towards perfection', to 'analyze the influences which are making us competent to obey these laws' (SS, p.409). This paper is mainly concerned with social dynamics – ie with Spencer's

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<sup>1</sup>I have confined my attention to Spencer's early work – principally *The Proper Sphere of Government* (henceforth *PSG*, p.) and *Social Statics* (henceforth *SS*) – since this paper is the first part of a wider study which will cover the whole of Spencer's writings.

theory of history, or what he termed 'a philosophy of civilization'. This theory 'shows how evil disappears ... it explains why conduct is becoming what it should be, and why the process through which humanity has passed was necessary' (SS, pp. 460-11). But I must begin with a word about social statics, since this set out the ultimate goal of social evolution – the 'end of history', to use Fukuyama's words.

For Spencer, the 'end of history' would occur when people were completely adapted to the social state; 'the complete man is the self-sufficing man – the man who is in every point fitted to his circumstances' (SS, p.280). In such a situation, everyone's legitimate desires and aspirations would be met without prejudice to everyone else's legitimate desires and aspirations; 'this modification will continue until our desires are brought into perfect conformity with our circumstances'. The 'ultimate state' was one in which 'every impulse coincides with the dictates of the moral law' (SS, pp.187-8). There would no longer be any disjunction between conduct and consequence; between the national character and the social condition; or between the moral sense and the political regime. In short, there would be harmony or equilibrium between the hitherto antagonistic forces whose conflict was the cause of social change, and as a result there would be neither the possibility of, nor the need for, further social change. The transition from the militant type of society (authoritarianism) to the industrial type of society (liberal democracy) marked the 'end of history', both domestically, in that fundamental social conflict would be eliminated, and internationally, in that war between states would come to an end. States, like individuals, would find their interests best prosecuted not by force but by peaceful cooperation, and therefore the need for coercion was at an end. Indeed, Spencer sometimes implied that the need for government itself would disappear with the appearance of the perfect society, though this seemed to be merely rhetorical anarchism (SS, pp. 215-6).

This idea of the 'end of history' did not sit, however, very comfortably with Spencer's oft-repeated remark that everything in the world was in a permanent condition of change.

'It is a trite enough remark that change is the law of all things; true equally of a single object, and of the universe. Nature in its infinite complexity is ever growing to a new development. Each successive result becomes the parent of an additional influence, destined in some degree to modify all future results ... Strange indeed would it be, if, in the midst of this universal mutation, man alone were constant, unchangeable. But it is not so. He also obeys the law of indefinite variation. His circumstances are ever altering; and he is ever adapting himself to them.' (SS, pp. 32-3)

It seems incongruous for Spencer to argue so strenuously that humans could not escape the universal tendency to change, only to claim that this tendency ended when a certain stage of historical development was reached. However, setting this incongruity to one side, Spencer evidently shared the vision of Hegel and Fukuyama of the ultimate victory of liberal democracy. But his explanations of how that victory would be brought about, differed markedly from theirs. For one thing, for Spencer the victory was not yet achieved: the most advanced nations were still in a state of 'transition' between the militant and the industrial type of

society. For another thing, the theory offered by Spencer to explain how this process of transition was taking place, and why it would eventually result in the universal establishment of liberal democracy, appeared to be very different from the explanatory theory offered by Hegel and Fukuyama. In Spencer's theory there was no explicit reference to a Hegelian idea of a struggle for recognition: instead Spencer's explanation of the mechanism of social evolution was cast in terms of four alternative hypotheses; (1) natural selection (2) social conditioning (3) national character (4) moral sense.

### (1) Natural selection

There were several strands in Spencer's natural selection explanation of progress. The most graphic strand was his notorious notion of nature, red in tooth and claw, applied to social life. In non-human animal evolution, there was a 'purifying process' at work, whereby the 'inferior samples' were constantly being weeded out, and as a result, 'the maintenance of a constitution completely adapted to surrounding conditions ... is ensured' (SS, p.322). Similarly, in human social evolution, 'ultimate perfection' was 'secured by that same beneficent, though severe discipline ... which is pitiless in the working out of good'. In this natural process, the unfit – including 'widows and orphans', the 'sick', the 'weak', the 'incapable', the 'imprudent', the 'idle', and the 'unskilful – go to the wall. But 'when regarded not separately, but in connection with the interests of universal humanity, these harsh fatalities are seen to be full of the highest beneficence' (SS322-3).

'Partly by weeding out those of lowest development, and partly by subjecting those who remain to the never-ceasing discipline of experience, nature secures the growth of a race who shall both understand the conditions of existence and be able to act up to them. It is impossible in any degree to suspend this discipline by stepping in between ignorance and its consequences, without, to a corresponding degree, suspending the progress.' (SS, p.378)

The 'whole effort of nature is to get rid of' the inferior, 'to clear the world of them, and make room for better'. According to Spencer, 'Nature demands that every being shall be self-sufficing. All that are not so, nature is perpetually withdrawing by death .... If they are sufficiently complete to live, they do live, and it is well they should live. If they are not sufficiently complete to live, they die, and it is best they should die' (SS, pp.379-380).

There are, of course, many ethical issues raised by these naturalistic ideas of Spencer – such as how could Spencer justify the death of the weak simply in order to promote the self-sufficiency of the strong? However, our central concern here is not with ethical issues but with causal mechanisms. What was the causal mechanism whereby nature was constantly weeding out the 'inferior' and progressing towards a perfect society? Aside from occasional metaphysical references to a 'power' at work in the world – which 'before men are yet conscious of the fact, has wrought a revolution in all things, and filled the world with a higher life. Always towards perfection is the mighty movement – towards a complete development and a more unmixed good' (SS, p.293) – Spencer provided a quasi-Darwinian answer to this question: that the population improved as a result of the random effects of natural selection. 'The seeds of civilization existing in the aboriginal man ... were

certain in the lapse of time to fall here and there into circumstances fit for their development; and ... to originate a civilization which should outlive all disasters and arrive at perfection' (SS, pp.415-6). He also hinted at a Lamarckian answer – that the population improved as a result of being subjected to the 'never ceasing discipline of experience' – implying that succeeding generations modified their behaviour in the light of their ancestors' experience.

However, these biological answers were unsatisfactory. They did not explain what were the 'circumstances' which were 'fit for human development', nor how these circumstances themselves arose. There was an unargued assumption that the circumstances required were those in which individuals experienced the full consequences of their conduct, and that this in turn implied the enforcement of the law of equal freedom. But there was no indication of how such circumstances came to exist. Moreover, there was an element of circularity in Spencer's position, in that the enforcement of the law of equal freedom served both as the means to the perfect society, and the criterion of a perfect society. In other words, humans had to be subjected to the law of equal freedom before they could reach a condition in which that law could be successfully enforced on them.

## (2) Social conditioning

Perhaps the second of Spencer's four accounts of the mechanism of social evolution – the social conditioning explanation – throws light on the question of how the required circumstances could arise? This account was based on the theory that human beings were moulded by social conditions. 'Whoso is placed among the savage will in process of time get savage too ... surround him with the kind-hearted and he will soften ... the same influences ensure ... the general uniformity of a national character' (SS, p.229).

Accordingly, under social conditions which were conducive to peace rather than to conflict, human beings would improve in character, and begin to approach the perfect state by moving from the militant towards the industrial type of society. This social conditioning explanation was based on Spencer's law of adaptation – that everything tended to adapt to its conditions, and that this process of adaptation was what comprised progress.

'All evil results from the non-adaptation of constitution to conditions. This is true of everything that lives ... Equally true is it that evil perpetually tends to disappear ... this non-adaptation of an organism to its conditions is ever being rectified; and modification of one or both, continues until the adaptation is complete ... Man exhibits just the same adaptability ... towards fitness for surrounding circumstances.' (SS, pp.59-60)

Spencer argued this case deductively. Since all 'imperfection is unfitness to the conditions of existence', this entailed that some human faculties were either 'in excess' (because the conditions of existence did not allow them full exercise) or 'deficient' (because the conditions of existence demanded more from them than they could perform). But faculties in excess naturally diminished, and deficient faculties naturally increased, so that eventually 'all excess and all deficiency must disappear; that is, all unfitness must disappear: that is, all imperfection must disappear. Thus the ultimate development of the ideal man is logically certain ... hu-

manity must in the end become completely adapted to its conditions ... Progress, therefore, is not an accident, but a necessity' (*SS*, pp.64-5).

The difficulty with this argument is that it did not show why the social conditions to which human nature adapted itself were necessarily good conditions. The law of adaptation only demonstrated how humans adapted to their conditions, whatever those conditions were. If the conditions were to deteriorate back towards conflict, in adapting to such conditions, humans would 'retrograde' – as Spencer himself admitted (*SS*, p.412). How did Spencer, therefore, explain why social conditions would not be retrogressive? He did so in the following way.

The most important progressive element in social conditions was the absence or at least minimisation of warfare. 'Where warfare against man and beast has ceased to be continuous, or where it has become the employment of but a portion of the people ... progress has resulted' (*SS*, p.415). In attempting to explain how the absence or minimisation of warfare came about, Spencer provided a hypothetical explanation consisting of a series of speculative scenarios about the originating cause of more peaceful conditions. These scenarios included the development of agriculture, which made it possible to support a larger and therefore less vulnerable population; or 'distance from other tribes may have rendered war less frequent ... or accidental superiority over neighbouring tribes may have led to the final subjugation ... of these: in any of which cases the comparatively peaceful condition resulting, must have allowed progress to commence' (*SS*, p.416).

While this speculation certainly addressed the question of how favourable circumstances for human progress could have arisen, it was far from satisfactory as a general explanation. For one thing, it was purely hypothetical, lacking any evidence to substantiate its three scenarios. For another thing, like the natural selection explanation, the social conditioning explanation took little or no account of human volition in producing social change. In order to see how Spencer treated the question of human volition in his account of the mechanisms of social evolution, we must turn to his third explanation – that of national character.

### (3) National character

Spencer often dismissed as mistaken the notion that individual character could bring about social change. 'These changes are brought about by a power far above individual wills. Men who seem the prime movers, are merely the tools with which it works; and were they absent, it would quickly find others' (SS, p.433). Nevertheless, he saw 'national character' as an important source of social change – for two reasons. First, no social institution could originate and survive unless it had a foundation in the character of the nation (SS, pp.261-2). 'The law of social forms is that they shall be expressive of national character; they come into existence bearing its impress; and they live only so long as it supplies them with vitality ... a general dissatisfaction with old arrangements is a sign that the national character requires better ones' (SS, p.247). Second, there was an inherent potential for development in the character of humanity. 'The aboriginal man must have a constitution adapted to the work he has to perform, joined with a dormant capability of developing into the ultimate man when the conditions of existence permit' (SS, pp.410-11). Accordingly, national character came first, social institutions came second. 'Justice can be well administered only in proportion as men become just' (SS, p.262). Changes in a society were dependent upon prior changes in the character of those living in that society. Moreover, the very form that any social change took (eg whether peaceful or violent) was also dependent on the character of the people.

In answer to the question, precisely how did character produce change in social institutions? Spencer replied – through the force of opinion – 'opinion is the agency through which character adapts external arrangements to itself'. Each person's opinion 'rightly forms part of this agency – is a unit of force, constituting, with other such units, the general power which works out social changes' (SS, p.474).

However, Spencer did not imply that this signified that individuals who exerted this influence on social institutions were entirely free agents endowed with free will. On the contrary, as was implied in the quotation at the beginning of this section, he did not believe in free will: people who influenced institutions were reflecting prior influences on themselves. 'He, with all his capacities, and desires, and beliefs, is not an accident, but a product of the time. Influences that have acted upon preceding generations; influences that have been brought to bear upon him; the education that disciplined his childhood; together with the circumstances in which he has since lived; have conspired to make him what he is' (SS, p.475). Indeed, there was even a suggestion by Spencer that human beliefs merely served the purposes of nature. 'He, like every other man, may properly consider himself as an agent through whom nature works; and when nature gives birth in him to a certain belief, she thereby authorizes him to profess and act out that belief' (SS, p.475).

Thus, in reply to the further question, 'what determined human character?', Spencer's answer was that it was something outside the individual – something that was either socio-environmental or metaphysical; either nurture or nature. Either way, Spencer appeared to remove from humans any autonomous role in shaping their own character. We must now turn to the fourth and final causal explanation of social evolution offered by the early Spencer – that of the moral sense – to see how Spencer restored at least some element of initiative to individuals in

determining their own character and thereby influencing social progress.

#### (4) Moral sense

Spencer's fourth and final explanation identified the cause of social change not in natural or social force, nor in the force of national character, but in moral force. As we shall see, however, there is a close connection between national character and moral sense: indeed the moral sense could be interpreted as the active and volitional part of national character. Spencer argued that the force of moral conviction – the 'moral sense' – was the key to progress. Changes in moral sentiments came first; changes in institutions followed. 'It is not trial by jury that produces justice, but it is the sentiment of justice that produces trial by jury' (*SS*, p.262). When the people's moral sense was outraged by some maladministration, that was a sign that change was likely; 'it is probable that we are ripe for something better than we have. The universal disgust with which law is regarded, may be taken as evidence ... that a change is at hand' (*SS*, p.264).

The more active the moral sense was, the more progress there was towards the goal of liberal democracy (*SS*, p.239). For example, Spencer pointed out that in the past, since there was no demand for democratic rights, so there was no democracy. By contrast, since nowadays there was a demand for democracy, so there were steps being taken to establish democratic institutions – 'illustrating the efforts of the moral sense to realize the democratic state' (*SS*, p.240). Hence, 'democracy is of necessity identified, both in origin and practicability, with a dominant moral sense' (*SS*, pp.239-40). Indeed, democracy could only arise when the people felt that democratic principles were right. 'Political freedom ... is ... an external result of an internal sentiment' (*SS*, p.243).

Spencer argued that the moral sense took a leading role in undermining the militant type of regime. 'As soon as there arises a perception that these subjugations and tyrannies are not right – as soon as the sentiment to which they are repugnant becomes sufficiently powerful to suppress them, it is time for them to cease' (*SS*, pp.417-8). He referred to that 'moral sense whose supremacy will make society harmonious and government unnecessary' (*SS*, pp.215-6). Similarly at the international level, Spencer expressed optimism about the prospect of the establishment of a 'federation of peoples – a universal society, [or] ... a brotherhood of nations', because of the moral convictions of those who were proposing it.

'its possibility is a question of time ... That the time for this is now drawing nigh seems probable. We may gather as much from the favour with which such an arrangement is regarded. The recognition of its desirableness foreshadows its realization ... Though hitherto impracticable ... a brotherhood of nations is being made practicable by the very effort used to bring it about. These philanthropic enthusiasms, which the worldly-wise think so ridiculous, are essential parts of the process by which the desideratum is being wrought out.' (*SS*, pp.272-3)

Elsewhere, Spencer characterized progress as the resultant of the 'perpetual antagonism' between two political sentiments – the sentiment of 'hero worship' or 'power-worship' (which underpinned the militant type of society) and the sentiment of justice or the moral sense (which underpinned the industrial type of soci-

ety) (*SS*, pp.425-8). Gradually the sentiment of justice was gaining the upper hand, and it would eventually triumph over the sentiment of hero-worship, and make the militant type of society both needless and impossible. ‘The same sentiment which fits us for freedom, itself makes us free’ (*SS*, p.428).

Spencer’s analysis of the causal power of the moral sense rested on two assumptions. First, he assumed that holding a sentiment led to action. ‘Recognition of the moral law, and an impulse to act up to it, going hand in hand as we have seen that they must do’ (*SS*, p.167). Second, he assumed that such action would have a successful outcome; ‘an instinct of our own freedom, and a sympathy which makes us respect the like freedom of our fellows, compose a mechanism capable of establishing this state of things’ (*SS*, p.239). However, neither of these assumptions was self-evident. The first ignored the fact that moral sentiments were often held in a purely passive way. The second overestimated the political power of ‘instincts’ and ‘sympathies’. What Spencer’s moral sense explanation lacked was a convincing bridge between sentiments and successful action.

Perhaps, however, he provided that bridge in the form of education? Spencer certainly acknowledged the power of education to bring about change; ‘education, properly so called, is closely associated with change – is its pioneer – is the never-sleeping agent of revolution – is always fitting men for higher things, and unfitting them for things as they are’ (*SS*, p.341). What Spencer meant by education was not the intellectual training that took place in the classroom; he dismissed that as useless. ‘Mere culture of the intellect (and education as usually conducted amounts to little more) is hardly at all operative upon conduct’ (*SS*, p.349). The only education that was effective was public or political education, such as that conducted by the Anti Corn Law League. ‘all the anti-Corn-Law League did, with its lectures, its newspapers, its bazaars, its monster meetings, and its tons of tracts, was to teach people – what should have been very clear to them without any such teaching – that no good can come out of violating men’s rights. By bitter experience and a world of talk we have at length been made partially to believe as much’ (*SS*, p.304).

Public education tapped into the roots of people’s moral consciousness, reinforced their experiences, and mobilised the force of their moral sense to demand the reform of unjust practices. The sense of justice that was thereby generated was connected by Spencer to the fundamental human faculty of ‘sympathy’. Sympathy, for Spencer, meant recognition by people of the rights of others on the same conditions as their own rights, and it is the ‘faculty of whose growth civilization is a history – on whose increased strength the future ameliorations of man’s state mainly depend – and by whose ultimate supremacy, human morality, freedom and happiness will be secured’ (*SS*, p.321).

But developing this faculty took a long time, and this was why progress towards the perfect state was inevitably a slow process; ‘we shall eventually arrive at it ... not by any sudden revolution, but by a continued moral and intellectual progression’ (*PSG*, p.17). We could not expect to improve things overnight; ‘the great changes taking place in this world of ours are uniformly slow ... Has it not required the whole Christian era to abolish slavery in Europe?’ (*SS*, p.346). And we certainly could not use force to achieve progress; ‘freedom achieved by the sword is uniformly lost again; but ... it is lasting when gained by peaceful agitation’ (*SS*, p.244). Any resort to physical force to establish liberal democracy was virtually a

confession of failure. 'Free institutions obtained by violence are of necessity premature' (*SS*, p.246). Only a patient, peaceful campaign of public persuasion could succeed. 'After men's minds have been for many years thus exercised and stimulated, a sufficiently intense manifestation of feeling is produced, and then comes the reform'. Agitation is a kind of apprenticeship to the liberties obtained by it. The power to get freedom becomes the measure of the power to use it'. When 'the accumulated force of opinion has become irresistible ... the change brought about is really in harmony with the wants of the age. The new institutions do not now express an exceptional state of the popular mind, but express its habitual state, and hence are certain to be fitted to it ... when equitable institutions are equitably obtained, they must necessarily prosper' (*SS*, pp.246-8).

But the key factor in all this was human aspiration. 'Almost all men of enlightened views agree that man is essentially a progressive being – that he was intended to be so by the Creator – and that there are implanted in him desires for improvement, and aspirations after perfection, ultimately tending to produce a higher moral and intellectual condition of the world ... the grand and irresistible law of human existence, is progressive improvement' (*PSG*, p.24).

How satisfactory was Spencer's moral sense explanation? It was certainly more effective than the natural selection, social conditioning and national character explanations, in providing for an authentic role for individuals and groups in promoting social change – a role that mirrored a basic substratum of morality: the sentiment of justice. Unexpectedly, however, both the modus operandi and the content of that sentiment – peaceful agitation for the recognition of the universal right of everyone to equal freedom – bore more than a passing resemblance to the Hegelian idea of a struggle for recognition of everyone as a bearer of rights, and it is to this resemblance that I now turn, in conclusion.

## Conclusion

My conclusion is that of Spencer's four explanations of the causal mechanism which made liberal democracy inevitable as the end point of historical development, the one that was most convincing was the last – the moral sense explanation. This was because the moral sense explanation alone gave due weight to the contribution to social progress made by the concerted actions of would-be reformers and the general power of moral sentiments. Interestingly, however, in these respects Spencer shared at least some common ground with Hegel. Spencer's conception of the moral sense held by individuals was deep and rich, bearing the evolutionary impress of countless generations of people, each contributing to the mature and critical unfolding of the essence of justice. This conception served a purpose not dissimilar to the function performed by Hegel's concept of spirit (*Geist*) or reason – that of articulating, informing and driving on the rational development of society. For Hegel, spirit had to bring into existence a moral community in order to realize itself. For Spencer, the moral sense was the evolutionary lodestar which inexorably worked through human consciousness to create a just society. In both cases there was an external imperative (providence), combined with an internal volitional agency (humanity), culminating in the achievement of a liberal democratic state.

Moreover, both writers depicted this process in terms of the working out of con-

traditions or discrepancies between the ideal and the actual. In Hegel's case this process took a dialectical form, whereby each historical stage collapsed as a result of an inner contradiction, out of which a new stage arose, which in turn succumbed to dissolution, until the final stage was reached which exemplified the ideal. In Spencer's case a more simplified dynamic process was presented, whereby the discrepancy between national character and social condition was resolved in a 'moving equilibrium' until fresh demands and/or changed circumstances destabilised that temporary equilibrium, and a new order emerged, reconciling humanity's aspirations with its circumstances in a final stage of 'complete equilibrium' For each theorist, however, the critical factor was the guiding light which illuminated the path of progress towards a liberal democratic society; Hegel's Geist, and Spencer's moral sense.

This is not to deny two important differences between Spencer and Hegel over the nature of this guiding light. First, for Spencer the guiding light was feeling, not, as for Hegel, reason (though Hegel's idea of the 'cunning of reason', whereby reason used the instincts of people to fulfil her purposes, moved him closer to Spencer's moral sense theory). Second, for Spencer the game plan was less overtly written by God than it was in Hegel's theory: it was more a matter of evolutionary than theological determinism.

Nevertheless, it is interesting to note the common ground that did exist between the early Spencer and Hegel, despite their very different philosophical premises. In my forthcoming study of Spencer's later works, however, I expect these links with Hegel to diminish in significance, since Spencer's attachment to biological evolutionary processes deepened as he developed his synthetic philosophy.

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