**Herbert Spencer 1820 – 1903**

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herbert_Spencer>

   

**Herbert Spencer** (27 April 1820 – 8 December 1903) was an [English](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/England) [philosopher](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philosopher), prominent [classical liberal](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Classical_liberalism) [political theorist](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Political_theorist), and sociological theorist of the [Victorian era](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Victorian_era).

Spencer developed an all-embracing conception of [evolution](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evolutionism) as the progressive development of the physical world, biological organisms, the human mind, and human culture and societies. As a [polymath](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polymath), he contributed to a wide range of subjects, including [ethics](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethics), [religion](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion), [economics](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economics), [politics](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politics), [philosophy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philosophy), [biology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biology), [sociology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sociology), and [psychology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psychology). During his lifetime he achieved tremendous authority, mainly in English Speaking circles. Indeed in Britain and the United States at "one time Spencer's disciples had not blushed to compare him with Aristotle!"[[1]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herbert_Spencer#cite_note-0)

He is best known for coining the [phrase](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phrase) "[survival of the fittest](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Survival_of_the_fittest)," which he did in *Principles of Biology* (1864), after reading [Charles Darwin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Darwin)'s [*On the Origin of Species*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/On_the_Origin_of_Species).[[2]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herbert_Spencer#cite_note-sotf-1) This term strongly suggests [natural selection](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Natural_selection), yet as Spencer extended evolution into realms of sociology and ethics, he made use of [Lamarckism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lamarckism) rather than natural selection.

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## Life

Herbert Spencer was born in [Derby](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Derby), [England](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/England), on [April 27](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/April_27), [1820](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1820), the son of William George Spencer (generally called George). Spencer’s father was a religious dissenter who drifted from [Methodism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Methodism) to [Quakerism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quaker), and who seems to have transmitted to his son an opposition to all forms of authority. He ran a school founded on the progressive teaching methods of [Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johann_Heinrich_Pestalozzi) and also served as Secretary of the [Derby Philosophical Society](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Derby_Philosophical_Society), a scientific society which had been founded in the 1790s by [Erasmus Darwin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erasmus_Darwin), the grandfather of Charles.

Spencer was educated in empirical science by his father, while the members of the Derby Philosophical Society introduced him to pre-Darwinian concepts of biological evolution, particularly those of Erasmus Darwin and Jean Baptiste Lamarck. His uncle, the Reverend Thomas Spencer, vicar of Hinton Charterhouse near [Bath](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bath%2C_England), completed Spencer’s limited formal education by teaching him some mathematics and physics, and enough [Latin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Latin) to enable him to translate some easy texts. Thomas Spencer also imprinted on his nephew his own firmly free-trade and anti-statist political views. Otherwise, Spencer was an autodidact who acquired most of his knowledge from narrowly focused readings and conversations with his friends and acquaintances.[[3]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herbert_Spencer#cite_note-2)

As both an adolescent and a young man Spencer found it difficult to settle to any intellectual or professional discipline. He worked as a civil engineer during the railway boom of the late 1830s, while also devoting much of his time to writing for provincial journals that were nonconformist in their religion and radical in their politics. From 1848 to 1853 he served as sub-editor on the free-trade journal [*The Economist*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Economist), during which time he published his first book, [*Social Statics*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_Statics) (1851), which predicted that humanity would shortly become completely adapted to the requirements of living in society with the consequential withering away of the state.

Its publisher, [John Chapman](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Chapman_%28publisher%29), introduced him to his salon which was attended by many of the leading radical and progressive thinkers of the capital, including [John Stuart Mill](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Stuart_Mill), [Harriet Martineau](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harriet_Martineau), [George Henry Lewes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Henry_Lewes) and Mary Ann Evans ([George Eliot](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Eliot)), with whom he was briefly romantically linked. Spencer himself introduced the biologist [Thomas Henry Huxley](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Henry_Huxley), who would later win fame as 'Darwin’s Bulldog' and who remained his lifelong friend. However it was the friendship of Evans and Lewes that acquainted him with John Stuart Mill’s *A System of Logic* and with [Auguste Comte](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Auguste_Comte)’s [Positivism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Positivism) and which set him on the road to his life’s work; he strongly disagreed with Comte.[[4]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herbert_Spencer#cite_note-3)

The first fruit of his friendship with Evans and Lewes was Spencer's second book, *Principles of Psychology*, published in 1855, which explored a physiological basis for psychology. The book was founded on the fundamental assumption that the human mind was subject to natural laws and that these could be discovered within the framework of general biology. This permitted the adoption of a developmental perspective not merely in terms of the individual (as in traditional psychology), but also of the species and the race. Through this paradigm, Spencer aimed to reconcile the [associationist psychology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Associationist_psychology) of Mill’s *Logic*, the notion that human mind was constructed from atomic sensations held together by the laws of the association of ideas, with the apparently more 'scientific' theory of [phrenology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phrenology), which located specific mental functions in specific parts of the brain.

Spencer argued that both these theories were partial accounts of the truth: repeated associations of ideas were embodied in the formation of specific strands of brain tissue, and these could be passed from one generation to the next by means of the [Lamarckian](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lamarckism) mechanism of use-inheritance. The *Psychology*, he modestly believed, would do for the human mind what [Isaac Newton](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isaac_Newton) had done for matter.[[5]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herbert_Spencer#cite_note-4) However, the book was not initially successful and the last of the 251 copies of its first edition was not sold until June 1861.

Spencer's interest in psychology derived from a more fundamental concern which was to establish the universality of natural law[[6]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herbert_Spencer%22%20%5Cl%20%22cite_note-5%22%20%5Co%20%22). In common with others of his generation, including the members of Chapman's salon, he was possessed with the idea of demonstrating that it was possible to show that everything in the universe—including human culture, language, and morality—could be explained by laws of universal validity. This was in contrast to the views of many theologians of the time who insisted that some parts of creation, in particular the human soul, were beyond the realm of scientific investigation. Comte's *Systeme de Philosophie Positive* had been written with the ambition of demonstrating the universality of natural law, and Spencer was to follow Comte in the scale of his ambition. However, Spencer differed from Comte in believing it was possible to discover a single law of universal application which he identified with progressive development and was to call the principle of [evolution](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evolutionism).



Spencer at age 38



Grave of Herbert Spencer in [Highgate Cemetery](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Highgate_Cemetery). It is a coincidence that his grave is near that of Karl Marx.

In 1858 Spencer produced an outline of what was to become the System of Synthetic Philosophy. This immense undertaking, which has few parallels in the English language, aimed to demonstrate that the principle of evolution applied in biology, psychology, sociology (Spencer appropriated Comte's term for the new discipline) and morality. Spencer envisaged that this work of ten volumes would take twenty years to complete; in the event it took him twice as long and consumed almost all the rest of his long life.

Despite Spencer's early struggles to establish himself as a writer, by the 1870s he had become the most famous philosopher of the age[[7]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herbert_Spencer%22%20%5Cl%20%22cite_note-6%22%20%5Co%20%22). His works were widely read during his lifetime, and by 1869 he was able to support himself solely on the profit of book sales and on income from his regular contributions to Victorian periodicals which were collected as three volumes of *Essays*. His works were translated into German, Italian, Spanish, French, Russian, Japanese and Chinese, and into many other languages and he was offered honors and awards all over Europe and North America. He also became a member of the [Athenaeum](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Athenaeum), an exclusive Gentleman's Club in London open only to those distinguished in the arts and sciences, and the [X Club](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/X_Club), a dining club of nine founded by [T.H. Huxley](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Henry_Huxley) that met every month and included some of the most prominent thinkers of the Victorian age (three of whom would become presidents of the [Royal Society](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Royal_Society)).

Members included physicist-philosopher [John Tyndall](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Tyndall) and Darwin's cousin, the banker and biologist [Sir John Lubbock](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sir_John_Lubbock). There were also some quite significant satellites such as liberal clergyman [Arthur Stanley](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arthur_Stanley), the Dean of Westminster; and guests such as [Charles Darwin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Darwin) and [Hermann von Helmholtz](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hermann_von_Helmholtz) were entertained from time to time. Through such associations, Spencer had a strong presence in the heart of the scientific community and was able to secure an influential audience for his views. Despite his growing wealth and fame he never owned a house of his own.

The last decades of Spencer's life were characterized by growing disillusionment and loneliness. He never married, and after 1855 was a perpetual hypochondriac who complained endlessly of pains and maladies that no physician could diagnose. By the 1890s his readership had begun to desert him while many of his closest friends died and he had come to doubt the confident faith in progress that he had made the center-piece of his philosophical system. His later years were also ones in which his political views became increasingly conservative. Whereas *Social Statics* had been the work of a radical democrat who believed in votes for women (and even for children) and in the nationalization of the land to break the power of the aristocracy, by the 1880s he had become a staunch opponent of female suffrage and made common cause with the landowners of the [Liberty and Property Defence League](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberty_and_Property_Defence_League) against what they saw as the 'socialism' of the administration of [William Ewart Gladstone](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Ewart_Gladstone). Spencer's political views from this period were expressed in what has become his most famous work, *The Man versus the State.*

The exception to Spencer's growing conservativism was that he remained throughout his life an ardent [opponent of imperialism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-imperialism) and [militarism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-militarism). His critique of the [Boer War](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boer_War) was especially scathing, and it contributed to his declining popularity in Britain.[[8]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herbert_Spencer#cite_note-7)

In 1902, shortly before his death, Spencer was nominated for the [Nobel Prize for literature](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nobel_Prize_for_literature). He continued writing all his life, in later years often by dictation, until he succumbed to poor health at the age of 83. His ashes are interred in the eastern side of London's [Highgate Cemetery](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Highgate_Cemetery) facing [Karl Marx](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karl_Marx)'s grave. At Spencer's [funeral](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Funeral) the Indian nationalist leader [Shyamji Krishnavarma](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shyamji_Krishnavarma) announced a donation of £1,000 to establish a lectureship at [Oxford University](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/University_of_Oxford) in tribute to Spencer and his work.[[9]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herbert_Spencer#cite_note-8)

## The System of Synthetic Philosophy

The basis for Spencer's appeal to many of his generation was that he appeared to offer a ready-made system of belief which could substitute for conventional religious faith at a time when orthodox creeds were crumbling under the advances of modern science. Spencer's philosophical system seemed to demonstrate that it was possible to believe in the ultimate perfection of humanity on the basis of advanced scientific conceptions such as the [first law of thermodynamics](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_law_of_thermodynamics) and [biological evolution](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biological_evolution).

In essence Spencer's philosophical vision was formed by a combination of [Deism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deism) and [Positivism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Positivism). On the one hand, he had imbibed something of eighteenth century Deism from his father and other members of the Derby Philosophical Society and from books like [George Combe](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Combe)'s immensely popular *The Constitution of Man* (1828). This treated the world as a cosmos of benevolent design, and the laws of nature as the decrees of a 'Being transcendentally kind.' Natural laws were thus the statutes of a well governed universe that had been decreed by the Creator with the intention of promoting human happiness. Although Spencer lost his Christian faith as a teenager and later rejected any 'anthropomorphic' conception of the Deity, he nonetheless held fast to this conception at an almost sub-conscious level. At the same time, however, he owed far more than he would ever acknowledge to Positivism, in particular in its conception of a philosophical system as the unification of the various branches of scientific knowledge. He also followed Positivism in his insistence that it was only possible to have genuine knowledge of phenomena and hence that it was idle to speculate about the nature of the ultimate reality. The tension between Positivism and his residual Deism ran through the entire System of Synthetic Philosophy.

Spencer followed Comte in aiming for the unification of scientific truth; it was in this sense that his philosophy aimed to be 'synthetic.' Like Comte, he was committed to the universality of natural law, the idea that the laws of nature applied without exception, to the organic realm as much as to the inorganic, and to the human mind as much as to the rest of creation. The first objective of the Synthetic Philosophy was thus to demonstrate that there were no exceptions to being able to discover scientific explanations, in the form of natural laws, of all the phenomena of the universe. Spencer’s volumes on biology, psychology, and sociology were all intended to demonstrate the existence of natural laws in these specific disciplines. Even in his writings on ethics, he held that it was possible to discover ‘laws’ of morality that had the status of laws of nature while still having normative content, a conception which can be traced to Combe’s *Constitution of Man*.

The second objective of the Synthetic Philosophy was to show that these same laws led inexorably to Progress. In contrast to Comte, who stressed only the unity of scientific method, Spencer sought the unification of scientific knowledge in the form of the reduction of all natural laws to one fundamental law, the law of evolution. In this respect, he followed the model laid down by the Edinburgh publisher [Robert Chambers](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Chambers) in his anonymous [*Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vestiges_of_the_Natural_History_of_Creation) (1844). Although often dismissed as a lightweight forerunner of [Charles Darwin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Darwin)’s [*The Origin of Species*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Origin_of_Species), Chambers’ book was in reality a programme for the unification of science which aimed to show that [Laplace](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laplace)’s [Nebular Hypothesis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nebular_Hypothesis) for the origin of the solar system and Lamarck’s theory of species transformation were both instances (in Lewes' phrase) of 'one magnificent generalization of progressive development.' Chambers was associated with Chapman’s salon and his work served as the unacknowledged template for the Synthetic Philosophy.

## Concept of evolution

The first clear articulation of Spencer’s [evolutionary](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evolutionism) perspective occurred in his essay 'Progress: Its Law and Cause' published in Chapman's [*Westminster Review*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Westminster_Review) in 1857, and which later formed the basis of the *First Principles of a New System of Philosophy* (1862). In it he expounded a theory of evolution which combined insights from [Samuel Taylor Coleridge](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel_Taylor_Coleridge)'s essay 'The Theory of Life'—itself derivative from [Friedrich von Schelling](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Friedrich_von_Schelling)'s [Naturphilosophie](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naturphilosophie)—with a generalization of [von Baer](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karl_Ernst_von_Baer)’s law of embryological development. Spencer posited that all structures in the universe develop from a simple, undifferentiated, homogeneity to a complex, differentiated, heterogeneity, while being accompanied by a process of greater integration of the differentiated parts. This evolutionary process could be found at work, Spencer believed, throughout the cosmos. It was a universal law, applying to the stars and the galaxies as much as to biological organisms, and to human social organization as much as to the human mind. It differed from other scientific laws only by its greater generality, and the laws of the special sciences could be shown to be illustrations of this principle.

This attempt to explain the [evolution of complexity](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evolution_of_complexity) was radically different to that to be found in Darwin’s [*Origin of Species*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Origin_of_Species) which was published two years later. Spencer is often, quite erroneously, believed to have merely appropriated and generalized Darwin’s work on [natural selection](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Natural_selection). But although after reading Darwin's work he coined the phrase '[survival of the fittest](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Survival_of_the_fittest)' as his own term for Darwin's concept,[[2]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herbert_Spencer%22%20%5Cl%20%22cite_note-sotf-1%22%20%5Co%20%22) and is often misrepresented as a thinker who merely applied the Darwinian theory to society, he only grudgingly incorporated natural selection into his preexisting overall system. The primary mechanism of species transformation that he recognized was [Lamarckian](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lamarckism) use-inheritance which posited that organs are developed or are diminished by use or disuse and that the resulting changes may be transmitted to future generations. Spencer believed that this evolutionary mechanism was also necessary to explain 'higher' evolution, especially the social development of humanity. Moreover, in contrast to Darwin, he held that evolution had a direction and an end-point, the attainment of a final state of 'equilibrium."

## Sociology

The evolutionary progression from simple, undifferentiated homogeneity to complex, differentiated, heterogeneity was exemplified, Spencer argued, by the development of society. He developed a theory of two types of society, the militant and the industrial, which corresponded to this evolutionary progression. Militant society, structured around relationships of hierarchy and obedience, was simple and undifferentiated; industrial society, based on voluntary, contractually assumed social obligations, was complex and differentiated. Society, which Spencer conceptualized as a 'social organism' evolved from the simpler state to the more complex according to the universal law of evolution. Moreover, industrial society was the direct descendant of the ideal society developed in *Social Statics*, although Spencer now equivocated over whether the evolution of society would result in anarchism (as he had first believed) or whether it pointed to a continued role for the state, albeit one reduced to the minimal functions of the enforcement of contracts and external defence.

## Ethics

The end point of the evolutionary process would be the creation of 'the perfect man in the perfect society' with human beings becoming completely adapted to social life, as predicted in Spencer’s first book. The chief difference between Spencer’s earlier and later conceptions of this process was the evolutionary timescale involved. The psychological—and hence also the moral—constitution which had been bequeathed to the present generation by our ancestors, and which we in turn would hand on to future generations, was in the process of gradual adaptation to the requirements of living in society. For example, aggression was a survival instinct which had been necessary in the primitive conditions of life, but was maladaptive in advanced societies. Because human instincts had a specific location in strands of brain tissue, they were subject to the Lamarckian mechanism of use-inheritance so that gradual modifications could be transmitted to future generations. Over the course of many generations the evolutionary process would ensure that human beings would become less aggressive and increasingly altruistic, leading eventually to a perfect society in which no one would cause another person pain.

However, for evolution to produce the perfect individual it was necessary for present and future generations to experience the 'natural' consequences of their conduct. Only in this way would individuals have the incentives required to work on self-improvement and thus to hand an improved moral constitution to their descendants. Hence anything that interfered with the 'natural' relationship of conduct and consequence was to be resisted and this included the use of the coercive power of the state to relieve poverty, to provide public education, or to require compulsory vaccination. Although charitable giving was to be encouraged even it had to be limited by the consideration that suffering was frequently the result of individuals receiving the consequences of their actions. Hence too much individual benevolence directed to the 'undeserving poor' would break the link between conduct and consequence that Spencer considered fundamental to ensuring that humanity continued to evolve to a higher level of development.

Spencer adopted a [utilitarian](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Utilitarian) standard of ultimate value—the greatest happiness of the greatest number—and the culmination of the evolutionary process would be the maximization of utility. In the perfect society individuals would not only derive pleasure from the exercise of altruism ('positive beneficence') but would aim to avoid inflicting pain on others ('negative beneficence'). They would also instinctively respect the rights of others, leading to the universal observance of the principle of justice – each person had the right to a maximum amount of liberty that was compatible with a like liberty in others. 'Liberty' was interpreted to mean the absence of coercion, and was closely connected to the right to private property. Spencer termed this code of conduct 'Absolute Ethics' which provided a scientifically-grounded moral system that could substitute for the supernaturally-based ethical systems of the past. However, he recognized that our inherited moral constitution does not currently permit us to behave in full compliance with the code of Absolute Ethics, and for this reason we need a code of 'Relative Ethics' which takes into account the distorting factors of our present imperfections.Spencer's last years were characterized by a collapse of his initial optimism, replaced instead by a pessimism regarding the future of mankind. Nevertheless, he devoted much of his efforts in reinforcing his arguments and preventing the mis-interpretation of his monumental theory of non-interference.

## Agnosticism

Spencer's reputation among the Victorians owed a great deal to his [agnosticism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agnosticism), the claim that it is impossible for us to have certain knowledge of God. He rejected [theology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theology) as representing the 'impiety of the pious.' He was to gain much notoriety from his repudiation of traditional religion, and was frequently condemned by religious thinkers for allegedly advocating atheism and materialism. Nonetheless, unlike Huxley, whose agnosticism was a militant creed directed at ‘the unpardonable sin of faith’ (in Adrian Desmond’s phrase), Spencer insisted that he was not concerned to undermine religion in the name of science, but to bring about a reconciliation of the two.

Starting either from religious belief or from science, Spencer argued, we are ultimately driven to accept certain indispensable but literally inconceivable notions. Whether we are concerned with a Creator or the substratum which underlies our experience of phenomena, we can frame no conception of it. Therefore, Spencer concluded, religion and science agree in the supreme truth that the human understanding is only capable of 'relative' knowledge. This is the case since, owing to the inherent limitations of the human mind, it is only possible to obtain knowledge of phenomena, not of the reality ('the absolute') underlying phenomena. Hence both science and religion must come to recognize as the 'most certain of all facts that the Power which the Universe manifests to us is utterly inscrutable.' He called this awareness of 'the Unknowable' and he presented worship of the Unknowable as capable of being a positive faith which could substitute for conventional religion. Indeed, he thought that the Unknowable represented the ultimate stage in the evolution of religion, the final elimination of its last anthropomorphic vestiges.

## Political views

Spencerian views in 21st century circulation derive from his political theories and memorable attacks on the reform movements of the late 19th century. He has been claimed as a precursor by [libertarians](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Libertarianism) and [philosophical anarchists](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philosophical_anarchists). Spencer argued that the state was not an "essential" institution and that it would "decay" as voluntary market organization would replace the coercive aspects of the state.[[10]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herbert_Spencer#cite_note-9) He also argued that the individual had a "right to ignore the state."[[11]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herbert_Spencer#cite_note-10)

Politics in late Victorian Britain moved in directions that Spencer disliked, and his arguments provided so much ammunition for conservatives and individualists in Europe and America that they still are in use in the 21st century.

By the 1880s he was denouncing "the new Toryism" (that is, the social reformist wing of Prime Minister [William E. Gladstone](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_E._Gladstone)). In *The Man versus the State* (1884), he attacked Gladstone and the Liberal party for losing its proper mission (they should be defending personal liberty, he said) and instead promoting paternalist social legislation. Spencer denounced Irish land reform, compulsory education, laws to regulate safety at work, prohibition and temperance laws, free libraries, and welfare reforms. His main objections were threefold: the use of the coercive powers of the government, the discouragement given to voluntary self-improvement, and the disregard of the "laws of life." The reforms, he said, were tantamount to "socialism", which he said was about the same as "slavery" in terms of limiting human freedom. Spencer vehemently attacked the widespread enthusiasm for annexation of colonies and imperial expansion, which subverted all he had predicted about evolutionary progress from ‘militant’ to ‘industrial’ societies and states.[[12]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herbert_Spencer#cite_note-11)

Spencer anticipated many of the analytical standpoints of later libertarian theorists such as [Friedrich Hayek](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Friedrich_Hayek), especially in his "law of equal liberty", his insistence on the limits to predictive knowledge, his model of a spontaneous social order, and his warnings about the "unintended consequences" of collectivist social reforms.[[13]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herbert_Spencer#cite_note-12)

### Social Darwinism

Spencer created the [Social Darwinist](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_Darwinist) model that applied the law of the survival of the fittest to society. Humanitarian impulses had to be resisted as nothing should be allowed to interfere with nature's laws, including the social struggle for existence. This interpretation has its primary source in [Richard Hofstadter](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Hofstadter)'s *Social Darwinism in American Thought*, which is frequently cited in the secondary literature as an authoritative account of the Synthetic Philosophy. Through constant repetition Hofstadter's Spencer has taken on a life of its own, his views and arguments represented by the same few passages, usually cited not directly from the source but from Hofstadter's rather selective quotations.

However, to regard Spencer as any kind of Darwinian, even of the 'Social' variety, is a gross distortion. He could never bring himself to abandon the idea that evolution equated to progress, that it involved the unfolding of a pre-existent pattern, and that there would be a final resting point—'equilibrium'—in which an ultimate state of perfection was attained. Darwinian natural selection, with its open-ended process of change based on random variations that prospered or failed depending on their adaptation to environmental conditions, was thus far removed from Spencer’s vision of progressive development, and he struggled hard to find a place for it within his overall system. Against this background, his use of the theory of natural selection could never be more than window dressing as it threatened the idea of universal evolutionary progress and thus the scientific foundation for morality that he hoped to establish. In contrast to the harsh and unforgiving imperative that the weak must be made to go to the wall, his main political message was essentially an anti-political one about the efficacy of self-improvement rather than collective action in bringing about the promised future state of human perfection.

## General influence

While most philosophers fail to achieve much of a following outside the academy or their professional peers, by the 1870s and 1880s Spencer had achieved an unparalleled popularity, as the sheer volume of his sales indicate. He was probably the first, and possibly the only, philosopher in history to sell over a million copies of his works during his own lifetime. In the United States, where pirated editions were still commonplace, his authorized publisher, Appleton, sold 368,755 copies between 1860 and 1903. This figure did not differ much from his sales in his native Britain, and once editions in the rest of the world are added in the figure of a million copies seems like a conservative estimate. As [William James](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_James) remarked, Spencer "enlarged the imagination, and set free the speculative mind of countless doctors, engineers, and lawyers, of many physicists and chemists, and of thoughtful laymen generally."[[14]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herbert_Spencer#cite_note-13) The aspect of his thought that emphasized individual self-improvement found a ready audience in the skilled working class.

Spencer's influence among the leaders of thought was also immense, although it was most often expressed in terms of their reaction to, and repudiation of, his ideas. As his American follower [John Fiske](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Fiske) observed, Spencer's ideas were to be found "running like the weft through all the warp" of Victorian thought.[[15]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herbert_Spencer#cite_note-14) Such varied thinkers as [Henry Sidgwick](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Sidgwick), [T.H. Green](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/T.H._Green), [G.E. Moore](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/G.E._Moore), William James, [Henri Bergson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henri_Bergson), and [Emile Durkheim](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emile_Durkheim) defined their ideas in relation to his. Durkheim’s *Division of Labour in Society* is to a very large extent an extended debate with Spencer from whose sociology, many commentators now agree, Durkheim borrowed extensively.[[16]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herbert_Spencer#cite_note-15) In post-[1863-Uprising](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/January_Uprising) [Poland](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poland), many of Spencer's ideas became integral to the dominant [ideology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ideology), "[Polish Positivism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Positivism_in_Poland)." The leading Polish writer of the period, [Bolesław Prus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boles%C5%82aw_Prus), adopted Spencer's [metaphor](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metaphor) of society-as-organism, giving it a striking poetic presentation in his 1884 story, "[Mold of the Earth](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mold_of_the_Earth)," and highlighting the concept in the introduction to his most universal novel, [*Pharaoh*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pharaoh_%28novel%29) (1895).

The early 20th century was hostile to Spencer. Soon after his death his philosophical reputation went into a sharp decline. Half a century after his death his work was dismissed as a "parody of philosophy",[[17]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herbert_Spencer%22%20%5Cl%20%22cite_note-16%22%20%5Co%20%22) and the historian [Richard Hofstadter](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Hofstadter) called him "the metaphysician of the homemade intellectual, and the prophet of the cracker-barrel agnostic."[[18]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herbert_Spencer#cite_note-17) Nonetheless, Spencer’s thought had penetrated so deeply into the Victorian age that his influence did not disappear entirely. In the late 20th century, however, much more positive estimates have appeared.[[19]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herbert_Spencer#cite_note-18)

### [[edit](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Herbert_Spencer&action=edit&section=10)] Political influence

Despite his reputation as a Social Darwinist, Spencer's political thought has been open to multiple interpretations. His political philosophy could both provide inspiration to those who believed that individuals were masters of their fate, who should brook no interference from a meddling state, and those who believed that social development required a strong central authority. In [*Lochner v. New York*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lochner_v._New_York), conservative justices of the [United States Supreme Court](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_Supreme_Court) could find inspiration in Spencer's writings for striking down a New York law limiting the number of hours a baker could work during the week, on the ground that this law restricted [liberty](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberty) of [contract](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Contract). Arguing against the majority's holding that a "right to free contract" is implicit in the [due process clause](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Due_process_clause) of the [Fourteenth Amendment](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fourteenth_Amendment_to_the_United_States_Constitution), [Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr.](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oliver_Wendell_Holmes_Jr.) wrote: "The Fourteenth Amendment does not enact Mr. Herbert Spencer's Social Statics." On the other hand, Spencer has also been described as a quasi-[anarchist](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anarchism), as well as an outright anarchist. [Georgi Plekhanov](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Georgi_Plekhanov), in his 1909 [*Anarchism and Socialism*](http://www.marxists.org/archive/plekhanov/1895/anarch/index.htm), labeled Spencer a "conservative Anarchist."[[20]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herbert_Spencer#cite_note-19)

Spencer's ideas became very influential in [China](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/China) and [Japan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Japan) largely because he appealed to the reformers' desire to establish a strong nation-state with which to compete with the Western powers. He was translated by the Chinese scholar [Yen Fu](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yen_Fu), who saw his writings as a prescription for the reform of the [Qing](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qing) [state](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/State).[[21]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herbert_Spencer#cite_note-20) Spencer also influenced the Japanese Westernizer [Tokutomi Soho](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tokutomi_Soho), who believed that Japan was on the verge of transitioning from a "militant society" to an "industrial society," and needed to quickly jettison all things Japanese and take up Western ethics and learning.[[22]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herbert_Spencer#cite_note-21) He also corresponded with [Kaneko Kentaro](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kaneko_Kentaro), warning him of the dangers of imperialism.[[23]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herbert_Spencer#cite_note-22)

### [[edit](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Herbert_Spencer&action=edit&section=11)] Influence on literature

Spencer also exerted a great influence on [literature](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Literature) and [rhetoric](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rhetoric). His 1852 essay, “The Philosophy of Style,” explored a growing trend of [formalist](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Formalism_%28literature%29) approaches to [writing](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Writing). Highly focused on the proper placement and ordering of the parts of an English sentence, he created a guide for effective [composition](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Composition_%28language%29). Spencer’s aim was to free [prose](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prose) [writing](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Writing) from as much "[friction](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Friction) and [inertia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inertia)" as possible, so that the reader would not be slowed by strenuous deliberations concerning the proper context and meaning of a sentence. Spencer argued that it is the writer's ideal "To so present ideas that they may be apprehended with the least possible [mental](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mind) [effort](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Effort)" by the reader.

He argued that by making the meaning as readily accessible as possible, the writer would achieve the greatest possible [communicative](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communication) [efficiency](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Efficiency). This was accomplished, according to Spencer, by placing all the subordinate clauses, objects and phrases before the subject of a sentence so that, when readers reached the subject, they had all the information they needed to completely perceive its significance. While the overall influence that “The Philosophy of Style” had on the field of rhetoric was not as far-reaching as his contribution to other fields, Spencer’s voice lent authoritative support to [formalist](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Formalism_%28literature%29) views of [rhetoric](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rhetoric).

Spencer also had an influence on [literature](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Literature), as many [novelists](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Novelist) came to address his ideas in their work. [George Eliot](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Eliot), [Leo Tolstoy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leo_Tolstoy), [Thomas Hardy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Hardy), [Bolesław Prus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boles%C5%82aw_Prus), [Abraham Cahan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham_Cahan) and [D. H. Lawrence](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/D._H._Lawrence) all referenced Spencer. [Arnold Bennett](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arnold_Bennett) greatly praised [*First Principles*](http://praxeology.net/HS-SP.htm#firstprinciples), and the influence it had on Bennett may be seen in his many novels. [Jack London](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jack_London) went so far as to create a character, [*Martin Eden*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Eden), a staunch Spencerian. [H.G. Wells](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/H.G._Wells) used Spencer's ideas as a theme in his [novella](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Novella), [*The Time Machine*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Time_Machine), employing them to explain the [evolution](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evolution) of [man](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Man) into two [species](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Species). It is perhaps the best testimony to the [influence](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Influence) of Spencer’s beliefs and writings that his reach was so diverse. He influenced not only the administrators who shaped their societies’ inner workings, but also the artists who helped shape those societies' ideals and beliefs.

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## See also

* [Auberon Herbert](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Auberon_Herbert)
* [Classical liberalism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Classical_liberalism)
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* [Scientism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scientism) and [positivism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Positivism_%28philosophy%29)

## Notes

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## External links

**Biographical**

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* [Modern History Sourcebook: Herbert Spencer: Social Darwinism, 1857](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/spencer-darwin.html)
* ["Herbert Spencer: The Defamation Continues"](http://www.lewrockwell.com/orig3/long3.html) - a vindication by [Roderick T. Long](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roderick_T._Long)