



Full Length Research

The synthetic cum scientific philosophy of Herbert Spencer

G.N. Sharma

S.B. College of Science, Aurangabad, India. Email: gnsarma1951@rediffmail.com. Tel: +91 9850141001

Received May; Accepted May, 2020

Living to see a decline career wise is a misfortune by itself. Facing challenges on the physical plane is yet another bane programmed by the fate. It is exceedingly difficult to accept and also sustain. Spencer had multiple problems with various shades in them. Struggling to live without a support system of belief in any religion and God, could be a tragedy by itself particularly when there is no other available area to invest emotions. Spencer failed in his youthful days to settle emotionally and prepare self wisely for the old age. This made him not easily to gel with the few acquaintances he had but on the other hand got deserted by all and so he felt like an invalid. In brief he could not understand the techniques of living with a pragmatic approach to gain comfort and psychological cum social security. He was upset on many occasions for which he was not prepared and the shattered health always put him into isolation. However, deep down the heart he had the desire to place before the world his findings and reality, as cognized by him. To him the society suffers much owing to ignorance which was deliberately dispersed by certain institutions or agencies. Getting engrossed into the ritualistic mode of religion so as to claim religiosity and as extension spirituality was in no way agreeable to him. Permitting a driver's seat to religion and purposefully ignoring or even subordinating the proven empirical facts was the sad situation witnessed by him. He was very keen on developing an Objective Theory which could be the result of the genuine sociological principles in the interest of human beings clutched with Science. This paper would attempt to show the psychological protests of Spencer were justified and his uncompromising temperament, solely for the sake of the society, had a potent reason.

Key words: Physical plane, religiosity, scientific temper, psychological outlook.

INTRODUCTION

The English philosopher who was greatly influenced by Comte's Socialism, Positivism, John Stuart Mill's Utilitarianism, Charles Darwin's Evolution theory, Huxley's Science fiction, non-fiction and thoroughly by Aristotle was himself a giant figure in revolutionizing philosophical outlook. It was in the nineteenth century that he felt there has to be sociological barricades with scientific temper for controlling the multidimensional growth of philosophy which otherwise might get engrossed into religiosity completely. He was the oldest of the seven children in the family. The others suffered and succumbed to death at an early age. He was very fortunate enough to have a direct guidance from his father and uncle who were in the academic line. He was easily drawn to different languages but at the same time was keen on studying pure sciences also. It has been commented that with so many subjects to handle and that too simultaneously with same zeal and precision, he was not having a proper grounding in his mother tongue. But then he hardly bothered about this

shortcoming. In fact he would openly confess this fact. He tried a couple of jobs but was not temperamentally consistent. With this he could often manage to devote his time for the study of his choice subjects. He was especially interested in the study of shape and protuberances of the skull based on the now discredited belief that they reveal character and mental capacity. It was at this stage that he came in contact with luminaries in the fields of Science and Literature. However deep down in the heart he was not in the least complacent and so decided to move to New Zealand which was practically far more beneficial on many counts. Somehow again he became a little shaky in making a decision to migrate and so the plans did not materialize. Settling down in London was his destiny and so he began concentrating on his ardent desire of writing on varied subjects like Psychology, Sociology and subjects related to Science, especially Biology. He lost his uncle who left for him sufficient fortune that took care of many of his nurtured aims. Probably much because of this specially endowed art of

handling various subjects and that too which were poles apart, he developed interest in blending the scientific temper with the sociological problems and facts. This was a unique tendency during nineteenth century but it did contribute immensely to the different shades of the subject and removed the damaging excesses. It was only at the far end of his life that he felt it is time for him to jot down unabashedly the facts of all phases of his life before the world which had grossly misconstrued. Being a prolific writer it was no way difficult for him to pen down his experiences which had overtly frankness and also a dim bordering line of agony. In his autobiography he wrote, "I have never shown the unfailing diligence that was common to them (his ancestors), yet there has not been displayed by me as great an amount of altruistic feeling." (Thomas and Thomas, 1993).

As it happened in the lives of many great intellects, their body did not match the intensity, urge and energy of their sharp mind. Failing that too miserably on the physical plane is a tragedy by itself and with advancement in life if the weakness of the vital parts of the body persisted, then any one would change his views of life and so the philosophy. But then Spencer was not a common man at all. He was deeply concerned about common man and the sociological factors. He wanted like his father, to induce scientific principles into the visibly dominating rigid sociological facts. This tendency created a sort of urgency on his part to present his deeply studied findings before the world. His major works are *The Proper Sphere of Government*, *Social Statistics*, *Education: Intellectual, Moral and Physical* were published in the mid of the nineteenth century. The most acclaimed however had been *The Synthetic Philosophy* which was a multivolume and strenuous work. It covers many subjects right from Psychology, Morality/Ethics, Sociology and Biology.

SPENCER'S PHILOSOPHY

Although there had been many personalities from varied fields who influenced Spencer, it is apt to note that the foremost and most effective had been from home itself. His father and uncle were so close to him that much of his character was constituted at an early age suiting his own temperament because of their viewpoints. Abandoning the common route to silence the sensitive mind and its queries, he strictly pruned the religious loud claims meekly accepted by the society. In the early phase of life he even felt atheistic attitude as a sane and better choice to grasp the Truth than lazily sticking like a parasite to the age old beliefs which never underwent a revision.

From psychological point of view God or some profitable agency is a practical necessity to humanity in general. Furthermore, there is always an avidity to accept without practically inferring the very capacity of the textual promises made by the religions having a loud tone. Spencer's attempts to delve into the details to know either the capacity of the religious principles or the severe limitations almost drove him to find a sort of comfort on the platform of Agnosticism. Therefore, he decided to openly dismiss the claims of the

religions especially Christianity to provide a genuine guidance to the society. According to him at that stage of life the society was groping in darkness and the tragedy was, yet remained composed with some nurtured hopes for the future. To understand Spencer's total outlook it is necessary to refer to the general outline of Charles Darwin's scientific doctrine of Evolution. The concept of God which was prevalent from centuries indicated God stationed outside the world and there could be only an intermittent influence over the society. The God as imagined and further trusted for functioning by the common mass in the society was always beyond the arena of natural laws. For the working of all the organisms it was firmly believed that only God or an external agency is the root cause. Therefore the working of every act was credited to an intelligent cause-God. It was Charles Darwin who totally on the strict parameter of scientific temper refused to give the credit to the much portrayed miraculous agency. This is because every organism developing from the preceding one cannot be an exact reproduction. There would be always variations though not all would be profitable in general. Since there is always a struggle for the survival for example in the animal kingdom, it can be observed that only the stronger will be able to adapt easily to the circumstances and naturally would emerge out victorious. Whatever applies to the animal kingdom same holds good for human beings also.

In this context it is also said that, "The theory of evolution was left by Darwin still incomplete. The importance of natural selection as an agency is now indeed generally admitted, but also it is widely believed that it does not explain all the facts...selection can only take place on the basis of an advance already made; and so we have to ask the further question: What is the cause and nature of the original variations that are afterwards selected out, as well as the factor of heredity which Darwin also took for granted. Evolution is therefore not necessarily identical with Darwinism." (Roger, 1984).

SYNTHETIC PHILOSOPHY

It was need of the hour that Spencer who was deeply impressed by Darwin's scientific approach had to extend the same with a philosophical base. To begin with it was the inborn quest to root out the genuine cause of a phenomenon in the natural course and present before the world in the simplified native form. Many times, Truth is fragmented and never revealed by Nature in toto and with continuity. Therefore clubbing of these bits to create a whole was his strong desire and aim. Therefore all his efforts were properly directed. Well, this approach cannot be treated as a rare one or novel because many scientists had been engaged in the same pursuit. Then comes the question, what was so special about Spencer's endeavour? He was exerting to pick up the right reason to show that in Nature there is always an entropic character which is ever growing but when it comes to evolution it is quite opposite because of the special reversible character. To him, "Even before Darwin's theory had convinced scientists that, as a scientific explanation, evolution furnishes the most satisfactory account of the origin

of species, Spencer had accordingly accepted the idea in its broader form as...self-evident way... This evolution of the Law of Evolution was a gradual and somewhat laborious affair, which finally took shape in the famous Spenserian formula: Evolution is a continuous change from indefinite, incoherent homogeneity to definite, coherent heterogeneity of structure and function, through successive differentiations and integrations.” (Ibid, p. 453)

Therefore development would lead to specific purpose, aim and direction which in turn can promote a sort of unity or a well-defined apparatus for proper functioning. Of course, this approach may not settle all the problems but then can at least provide a pathway philosophically. It sounds like generalizations with every positive change human mind becomes optimistic and hopeful but Spencer thinks that is not the end. This is because for philosophy with a reorientation yet new problems may arise. Having explored many subjects with purely scientific temperament, Spencer seems to have settled with partly Science, Arts and Moral Science. In Psychology he learnt that it is important to read the psychological background during the progress of life. This is where he felt that a channel is provided by Nature for a growth. Instead of stamping someone's character with a behavioural science or pattern it is ever wise to study the background, the influencing factors-personal as well as social-before passing concluding remarks. The genetic point of view will always help us to properly estimate. There are innate ideas in everybody and without its knowledge; it is not at all fair to draw inference in a hurried manner. Rather it is the demand of the propensity growing within.

There are many factors and uncertainties in life which always wrestle with each other within any personality which is subjected to growth. The settlement would come only when these mutually opposing forces reconcile for betterment. There is a partial Truth on all sides of the warring forces. Therefore from Biology to Sociology, Spencer supports the possible merging of these forces and evolving out of the same by synthesizing to a hybridized form. Therefore every person must be provided enough liberty so that the growth would acquire a meaningful paradigm. This according to him, a sociological right of every person. But at the same time Spencer avidly hints at the possible excesses that might prove to be detrimental. Therefore Spencer feels the need of strictly drawing a line of demarcation so that as a result no one would encroach others' rights. Herein he is concerned about the Morality and Ethics for the proper growth of the society.

This viewpoint provides a stable Government and it would become a route to the formation of effective Government as the law of Evolution functions. Steadily it would annihilate the possible clash between the opposing forces, failing which it can become exceedingly aggressive and uncontrollable. Generally it is a common outlook of Philosophers to bring forth a theory which can promise happiness and comfort to the society. Much owing to this Utilitarianism earned a special applause. Spencer always appreciated the intentions of Utilitarianism to provide pleasure and watchfully terminate the sources of unhappiness. However, he had expressed his doubts regarding its capacity to

lay down concretely rules which can have a scientific backing or proof. Regarding Ethics, Spencer wants everything objective while deducing the results. This he thinks possible only when we rely on natural laws than ever interfering and mending to personal convenience. The more we get tuned to Nature whose functioning has periodicity and rhythm, easier it would be to draw pleasure from life. This has to be our priority based choice.

CONCLUSION

To follow Spencer it is necessary to know in brief Charles Darwin's contention. “Darwin tried to show how the origin of living species could be fully explained by the purely mechanical, unplanned action of natural forces. By the process he called “natural selection,” all the higher, complex forms of life gradually evolved from more primitive and rudimentary ones. In a given animal population, for example, some individuals will have traits that make them adapt better to their environment; these more fit individuals will survive to pass on their favourable traits to their offspring. The unfit will gradually be weeded out naturally...the species will then gradually evolve in that direction.”(Prabhupada, 1999).

Herbert Spencer is known as the father of Social Darwinism. In fact by taking into consideration all the shades of his personality and major Works he could qualify to be a Philosopher, Psychologist, Sociologist and Natural Law expert. His main intention was always to combine Social Darwinism and Comte's Positivism so that the resulting theory could be used for his time. What disturbed him most was the existing inequality between the different rungs of the society and within each rung. He envisaged a social collapse if that trend traditionally continued. Therefore he practically applied the theory of evolution to Philosophy in general and Society in particular. However, as time passed no doubt he gained popularity but many looked at him as a controversial personality. This was mainly because not all his contemporaries could honestly appreciate his efforts always directed towards the mixing of subjects. Surprisingly though he was not a very bright student at the school level, he completed Engineering and so with such a background looked into the dominating social fibres to create a better design. For him development of mind would always go with the adapting capacity to the environmental conditions. It is also said that in his own writings he always signalled at the need of the synthesis between Imperialism and Racism for his theory. It was partly an Aristocratic outlook which was relentlessly but indirectly defended. One may also get the impression that his thoughts resemble that of Nietzsche's Superman. Spencer remained mostly an uncompromising personality strictly adhering to own convictions though for the sake of humanity in general. The unfortunate part was the physical plane which troubled and finally defeated him. Never ever he had fate smiling to save the possible physical collapse. Although he was quite popular, none remained with him in his last phase of life. His popularity also declined with age, yet he managed

to remain mentally strong and firm to his principles, philosophical outlook of life etc. Only a few years of cheers had occupied his eventful life when he was in the company of Mary Ann Evans, more popularly known as George Eliot, an English novelist, poet, journalist, translator and a recognized writer of her era. The scientists would not accept his status nor the religious leaders his suggestions or interpretations because they thought it is all under irreligious activities. He tried his best to bring a perfect rapport between individuals and State, indicating truly a mutual necessity for both so that there could be a proper evolution in the society. Suffering from chronic insomnia, the body accompanied by pain he was all the time challenged by life at every stage. It is indeed an open fact which psychologists have also accepted that usually there is a sort of compensation in nurturing two personalities within ourselves. Sometimes they may clash or prove to be complementary. Spencer by himself was a very lovable personality with compassion as the foremost quality always enduring to present a theory in the interest of the society or humanity as such. His main tenet in philosophy related to the theory of evolution was that Matter with entropic character is always struggling to achieve homogeneity and once it is done the same again rewinding to restlessness. In other words Universe is doomed to go from a visible disorder to creation and again from creation to chaos.

A general remark is expressed through the quite famous adage, "When might is right, Why should we fight?" to suggest indirectly Social Darwinism. It emerged forcefully in the nineteenth century and the repercussions could be felt even by the turn of the century. Inspired by Charles Darwin's Theory of Evolution by natural selection, the theory could wield its influence in the areas of Politics, Socialism and Economics. Now everyone is used to believe in the survival of the fittest, owing to which in any society there have been factions based on strength and quality or characteristics. Though there is truth in it, unfortunately it was and is so widely spread that there is a clear support to Racism and Social inequality.

This has been a matter of great concern. In fact the theory as presented by Charles Darwin was merely meant for plant and animal kingdom. The main intention was to show how adaptation to the environment could give strength to survive and further on produce by way of transfer, genes to the next generation. It was a scientific theory wherein Darwin had focused only on his observation about the biological diversity. That indeed explained the birth of varied species. Generally it is considered that Darwin was highly influenced by both Spencer and Malthus. Darwin did not bother about the social structure evolving thereof. Somehow the followers took a different route bringing out an admixture and purposefully made it applicable to our society. Spencer even suggested the application of the scientific principles to the theories in Economics. He, unlike Darwin, thought our innate qualities too pass on to the next generation and therefore even the vices and virtues would be handed over from one generation to the next generation. Well, with an over elongation of the theory and deliberately introducing it into the fields which are concerned exclusively to human beings there could be an ardent desire to

vote for Imperialism, Aristocracy and Eugenics. This may be a problematic situation.

Conflict of interest

The author has none to declare.

REFERENCES

- Thomas H, Thomas DL (1993). Living biographies of Great Philosophers, Bhartiya, Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, p.221
 Roger AK (1984). A Student's History of Philosophy, The Macmillan Co., New York, III ed., p.451.
 Ibid .p. 453.
 Prabhupada S (1999). Beyond Illusion & Doubt, Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, Mumbai, pp.101,102.

Suggested Readings:

BY SPENCER :

- 1) Synthetic Philosophy
- 2) Autobiography
- 3) Principles of Ethics
- 4) Principles of Psychology
- 5) Principles of Sociology
- 6) Education : Intellectual, Moral, Physical

ON SPENCER:

- 1) Hudson, The Philosophy of Herbert Spencer
- 2) Royce, Herbert Spencer
- 3) McPherson, Spencer and Spencerism
- 4) Browne, Philosophy of Herbert Spencer
- 5) Collins, Epitome of the Synthetic Philosophy