

HERBERT SPENCER, BERTRAND RUSSELL, AND THE SHAPE OF EARLY ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY

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The development of Bertrand Russell's philosophy is routinely described within the framework of Russell's rejection of British Idealism. And that is as it should be. Both Russell and G. E. Moore made much of their turn-of-the-century opposition to Idealism. However, little attention has been paid to the significance of Russell's attitude toward the philosophy of Herbert Spencer. Certain characteristic traits of Russell's analytic philosophy were, I shall argue, shaped as much by his opposition to Spencer as they were by anything else.¹

I

When Russell went to Cambridge University in the 1890s, the tremendous popularity that Herbert Spencer enjoyed only a decade earlier had begun to fade. In the view of one commentator, it was not so much that Spencer's views had been shown to be false; rather, he was an "institutional outsider", with no universities or specially interested institutions to keep his work in the public eye.² He was indeed an

¹ In what follows, I shall make reference primarily to those works by Spencer for which there is some evidence that Russell read them. These include *First Principles*, *The Study of Sociology*, portions of *The Principles of Ethics*, and *The Man versus the State*.

² See J. D. Y. Peel, *Herbert Spencer* (New York: Basic Books, 1971), p. 1.

institutional outsider, but he had also been the subject of fairly scathing criticism both by the Idealists and by men like Henry Sidgwick. Russell and Moore were, of course, familiar with these criticisms.

Still, when Russell and Moore rejected Idealism toward the end of the century, it would not have been unthinkable for them to turn to Spencer's work as an alternative. Given the Idealists' opposition to Spencer, a reconsideration of his views might have been a plausible facet of their repudiation of Idealism.

In fact, in his early years Russell was in sympathy with some of Spencer's views. He had read *Man versus the State* in 1891 and commented many years later, in his *Autobiography*:

Throughout my time at Southgate [he went there "just before my sixteenth birthday"] I was very much concerned with politics and economics. I read Mill's *Political Economy*, which I was inclined to accept completely; also Herbert Spencer, who seemed to me too doctrinaire in *The Man versus the State*, although I was in broad agreement with his bias. (*Auto.* 1: 46)

Spencer's "bias" in the book appears in the claim that individual freedom must be preserved from undue interference by the State. The primary positive task of the State, he argued, is to insure that individuals do not interfere with one another's freedom. Given Russell's "broad agreement with his bias" one might expect that when he was looking for a new philosophic framework just a few years later, Spencer's might have suggested itself.³ Clearly it did not.

In fact, more than half a century later, when asked why he did not mention Herbert Spencer in his *History of Western Philosophy*, Russell replied: "... I have not written about Herbert Spencer because I do not believe him to be of any importance. What he thought and wrote were Darwin, misapplied to areas in which the work had no relevance."⁴

³ Although Russell expressed reservations about Spencer's views when given practical application or when applied rigidly, he clearly favoured some version of the view over socialistic alternatives during his early years. The editors of *Papers 1* note that two early essays, "Evolution as Affecting Modern Political Science" and "State-Socialism", "... exhibit Spencer's general influence, though Russell rejects some of his harsher conclusions" (*Papers 1*: 377).

⁴ Letter to Satyagopas Bhattacharyya in Konnagar, Hooghly, India, 8 October 1962 (RA1 720).

What factors motivated Russell to alter his attitude toward Spencer—from mild agreement with his "bias", in 1891, to complete dismissal of his views by 1945? Why was it that Spencer's philosophic views did not appeal to Russell as a positive alternative to Idealism? The issues that came to separate them were many and complex. They range from disagreements about politics, religion, science, and ethics, to dramatically opposed views on the nature of philosophy and its relation to evolution theory. I shall consider each of these areas, with a view to showing (in section III) that Russell's attitude toward Spencer's views played a significant role in shaping certain aspects of Russell's version of analytic philosophy.

II

Ironically, Russell and Spencer were alike in some telling ways. Both men were concerned with the values inherent in the British Liberal tradition—most especially with the importance of individual freedom. "Authority had no meaning for him. He was wholly uninfluenced by the power of the past, by the weight of creed and social opinion, by the prestige of established doctrines and great names."⁶ Those lines could easily have been written about Russell; in fact, they refer to Spencer.

Both men were interested in education, and both favoured an educational system that would maximize independent thinking in young people.

"Anything like passive receptivity", he elsewhere remarks, was always "foreign to my nature." Neither then, nor at any other time, did he pay the smallest respect to dogma or tradition. A chief ground of his quarrel with ordinary methods of education was that "they encourage submissive receptivity instead of independent activity." (*Ibid.*, pp. 3-4)

Again, the comments might have been made about Russell, but they

⁵ A small piece of irony emerges here. W. R. Sorley's *A History of English Philosophy*, first published in 1920 and reprinted in 1937, has a section on Herbert Spencer (and Huxley, Bradley, Green *et al.*) but not a word on either Moore or Russell. It was published by Cambridge University Press.

⁶ William Henry Hudson, *Herbert Spencer* (London: Constable, 1908), p. 10.

refer to Spencer.

More striking still is the fact that Russell planned a series of philosophical works that could have been inspired by Spencer's Synthetic Philosophy. The latter included volumes on the principles of biology, psychology, sociology, and ethics. For his part, Russell recalls his own plan in his *Autobiography*:

I remember a cold, bright day in early spring [1895] when I walked by myself in the Tiergarten, and made projects of future work. I thought that I would write one series of books on the philosophy of the sciences from pure mathematics to physiology, and another series of books on social questions. I hoped that the two series might ultimately meet in a synthesis at once scientific and practical. My scheme was largely inspired by Hegelian ideas. Nevertheless, I have to some extent followed it in later years, as much at any rate as could have been expected. The moment was an important and formative one as regards my purposes. (*Auto.* 1: 125)

To philosophers familiar with Russell's theory of descriptions, his logical atomism, and *Principia Mathematica*, Russell's claim that he has to some extent followed his plan is startling. In retrospect it is difficult to imagine anyone—let alone Russell himself—characterizing Russell's philosophic work in terms of a *synthesis* inspired by *Hegelian* ideas. That, however, is precisely what Spencer's philosophy was.

There were, then, at least a few telling commonalities between the views of Russell and Spencer. Nonetheless, the dramatic differences between them became decisive.

Perhaps one of the earliest of the differences that developed lay in their respective approaches to *ethics*. At Cambridge Russell had attended Henry Sidgwick's lectures on ethics, and these included a detailed critique of Spencer's evolutionary ethics. Given the content of some of the papers that Russell wrote for Sidgwick, it seems apparent that Sidgwick's lectures had an impact not only on Russell's views on ethics but also on his evaluation of Spencer.⁷

⁷ By 1894, very likely under the influence of Sidgwick, Russell began to offer a critical evaluation of Spencer's ethics. In "The Ethical Bearings of Psychogony", after acknowledging some of the evolutionary advantages conferred by certain behaviours that are now considered morally good, he goes on to offer two objections to an evolutionary account of ethics. First, "... it by no means follows that morality has been

On Spencer's account, ethics must be understood within the context of the natural evolution of human conduct. Anything, human conduct included, is good if it is well adapted to achieve its goal. And the goal of human conduct is to maximize a pleasurable life both for oneself and for others. Closely related to this is the goal of maximizing one's liberty without infringing on the liberty of any other individual. Spencer believed that human beings are gradually evolving toward an ideal society where these goals will be achieved. His ethics, then, was naturalistic, and it included both an evolutionary and a utilitarian dimension.

Russell opposed not only the naturalism in Spencer's ethics, but also his evolutionism and his belief in the inevitability of human progress. Toward the end of the 1890s, under the influence of a series of lectures by G. E. Moore ("Elements of Ethics"), Russell temporarily adopted a platonic account of moral values—squarely in opposition to naturalist and evolutionary views like Spencer's. Russell's position was reinforced by Moore's publication of *Principia Ethica* in 1903. Russell, in fact, published an essay, entitled "The Elements of Ethics",⁸ intended as a summary of Moore's ethical views, but carrying his own name. This was clearly meant as public support for the non-naturalist account of ethics that Moore had proposed.

In later years, when Russell rejected the notion of objective ethical values, he did not amend his evaluation of Spencer's ethics. This was likely a result of Russell's decision that ethics, lacking an objective basis, could not constitute a part of genuine philosophy. So disputes about differing theories of ethics were of no particular concern to him. But Russell's failure to reconsider his attack on Spencer's ethics was also a consequence of his determination to exclude evolutionary considerations from the new view of philosophy that he was forging. He argued against the inclusion of both ethics and evolution in his 1914

developed precisely in the way most adapted to its original evolutionary purpose...." And second, "... even if we were to admit that all our moral sentiments are such as tend to the maximising of Life (in Herbert Spencer's phrase), or if we construct or could construct a morality which should serve this end, what warrant have we for accepting it as ethically valid? ... Nothing compels us to regard life in itself as valuable and alone valuable ..." (*Papers* 1: 223-4).

⁸ He published it in segments between 1908 and 1910 and together in *Philosophical Essays* (1910).

book, *Our Knowledge of the External World*, as well as in his two 1914 essays, "Mysticism and Logic" and "Scientific Method in Philosophy"—both of which borrow heavily from the book. I shall return to the issue of Russell's attitude toward evolution shortly.

Politics was a second issue on which Russell and Spencer were at odds. A repeated refrain in Spencer's work is the importance of individual freedom from unnecessary State interference. He opposed any version of the Poor Laws;⁹ he objected to the nationalization of land, to the State's interference in the education and care of children, to the establishment of services like public lending libraries or even subsidized scientific research.¹⁰ More generally, he opposed the imposition of taxes intended to provide services for people unable to provide them for themselves. Spencer was not opposed to philanthropy, but he objected strenuously to the *requirement* that hard-working folk surrender part of their income to care for the needs of what he often referred to as the "good-for-nothings".¹¹

For his part, Russell was sympathetic to government support for the less fortunate members of society. Although in his pre-Cambridge days he had expressed grave misgivings about socialism, he had by the mid-1890s become more favourably disposed toward it.¹² In fact, in 1897

⁹ Russell, too, in the early years objected to the Poor Laws. In an essay written at Southgate in 1889 he uses them as an example of "immense harm" that can be done by some socialistic institutions. See "State-Socialism" in *Papers* 1: 29.

¹⁰ See, for example, Spencer's *Study of Sociology* (New York: Appleton, 1910), p. 260.

¹¹ In the Postscript to the *Study of Sociology* Spencer notes that his view has been misunderstood. He does not advocate the abandonment or suppression of the poor; he has argued that *enforced public* support of the weaker members of a society is detrimental to the society as a whole. He approves of individual, private, voluntary altruism, and says that it may indeed be beneficial for society. In *The Man versus the State* (New York: Appleton, 1910; 1st ed., 1884), at the end of essay 2, "The Coming Slavery", he says in reply to an article that was written against the views in that essay: "The gentleman who ... reproaches me with having receded from that sympathetic defence of the labouring-classes which he finds in *Social Statics*; but I am quite unconscious of any such change as he alleges. Looking with a lenient eye upon the irregularities of those whose lives are hard, by no means involves tolerance of good-for-nothings" (p. 333). He closes the 1892 edition of *The Man versus the State* by objecting to the interpretations of that work that suggest that he denies the value of private philanthropy.

¹² "From his correspondence with Alys, it is clear that Russell viewed himself as a

he joined the Fabians—precursors of the British Labour Party. Russell was not, however, wholly given over to the Socialist ideal.¹³ He urged the Fabians and the New Liberals to work together, combining concerns for collective action with attention to individual liberty (*Papers* 1: 310). In later years as his disillusionment with Marxism grew, he argued that Socialism must be combined with a concern, not simply for economic issues, but for individual power and concomitant freedom.¹⁴ This later emphasis on the importance of individual freedom moved him considerably closer to Spencer than he was in his early Fabian years, but he never gave in completely to the radical form of Individualism that Spencer had advocated.

Russell's scepticism about Spencer's politics may well have been nourished during his Fabian days by the negative attitude of Sidney and Beatrice Webb toward Spencer's Individualism.¹⁵ The Webbs were among the leading lights in the Fabians and were friends of Russell's for a number of years. And although Beatrice had been a close personal friend of Herbert Spencer from her childhood days,¹⁶ she eventually decided that Spencer's political views—particularly his strenuous support for Individualism and laissez-faire—were profoundly mistaken.¹⁷ The influence of the Webbs on Russell's assessment of

Socialist (12 and 21 Sept. 1894) ..." (*Papers* 1: 307).

¹³ Even in 1897 he could write, "I am quite indifferent to the mass of human creatures; though I wish, as a purely intellectual problem, to discover some way in which they might all be happy. I wouldn't sacrifice myself to them.... I believe in several definite measures (e.g. Infanticide) by which society could be improved.... I feel a duty to society, but chiefly negatively, i.e. I couldn't do anything I thought harmful to it, such as living too expensively" ("Self-Appreciation", in *Papers* 1: 73).

¹⁴ In 1938 Russell published *Power, a New Social Analysis*, which he intended "as a refutation both of Marx and of the Classical economists.... I argued that power, rather than wealth, should be the basic concept in social theory, and that social justice should consist in equalisation of power ..." (*Auto.* 2: 193).

¹⁵ "Writing in the *Fabian Essays in Socialism* [ed. by G. B. Shaw], Sidney Webb saw fit to berate 'Mr Herbert Spencer and those who agree in his worship of Individualism' for wanting to 'bring back the legal position which made possible the "white slavery" of which the "sins of legislators" have deprived us"' (M. W. Taylor, *Men versus the State: Herbert Spencer and Late Victorian Individualism* [Oxford: Clarendon P., 1992], p. 1).

¹⁶ Beatrice Webb's father was a disciple of Herbert Spencer, and she was "the most notable product of that philosopher's theories of education" (*Auto.* 1: 77).

¹⁷ Beatrice Webb recalls: "It was after Mother's death ... that I read the *First*

Spencer's views was probably considerable in the late 1890s.

One of the areas in which Russell disagreed with Spencer about the value of State interference concerned the education and care of children.¹⁸ Russell's primary qualification on granting a comprehensive role to the State in the upbringing of children was not that it was unfair to tax the wealthy in order to care for the poor (Spencer's concern), but rather that the State might inculcate too much patriotism in the children and might as a consequence make them too ready to go to war for their nation. This issue of war might well have generated some misunderstanding between Russell and Spencer.

Spencer's views on war have lent themselves to some misinterpretation. It is true that he claims that in the early stages of human development, wars had some positive consequences. Among other things, they led to the consolidation of small groups into larger and more cohesive societies. He also saw war as contributing to some of the important advancements in civilization. He says:

Warfare among men, like warfare among animals, has had a large share in raising their organizations to a higher stage.... [It] has had the effect of continually extirpating races which, for some reason or other, were least fitted to cope with the conditions of existence they were subject to. The killing-off of relatively-feeble tribes, or tribes relatively wanting in endurance, or courage, or sagacity, or power of co-operation, must have tended ever to maintain,

Principles and followed his generalizations through Biology, Psychology and Sociology. This generalization illuminated my mind; the importance of functional adaptation was, for instance, at the basis of a good deal of the faith in collective regulation that I afterwards developed. Once engaged in the application of the scientific method to the facts of social organization, in my observations of East End life, of co-operation, of Factory Acts, of Trade Unionism, I shook myself completely free from *laissez faire* bias—in fact I suffered from a somewhat violent reaction from it.... My case, I think, is typical of the rise and fall of Herbert Spencer's influence over the men and women of my own generation" (*My Apprenticeship* [New York: Longmans Green, 1926], pp. 37–8). She later details what she takes to be a deep fallacy in Spencer's thinking, namely, his assumption that interference on the part of government was somehow not part of the "work of nature" and was therefore to be condemned. See *My Apprenticeship*, pp. 329–31.

¹⁸ As late as 1929 Russell, in *Marriage and Morals* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1929), supported the general notion of State interference in the education and care of children.

and occasionally to increase, the amounts of life-preserving powers possessed by men. (*Study of Sociology*, pp. 174–5)

A further effect of war, on Spencer's account:

In responding to the imperative demands of war, industry made important advances and gained much of its skill. Indeed, it may be questioned whether, in the absence of that exercise of manipulative faculty which the making of weapons originally gave, there would ever have been produced the tools required for developed industry.... Hence, unquestionably, that integration of societies effected by war, has been a needful preliminary to industrial development, and consequently to developments of other kinds—Science, the Fine Arts, etc. (*Ibid.*, pp. 175–7)

Some commentators have read this as a blanket endorsement of war and of the value of military force. There are passages in both Moore and Russell that could be interpreted as reading Spencer this way.¹⁹ And Russell, particularly in 1914 when his most detailed criticisms of Spencer appeared, was vehemently opposed to any efforts to justify the war that was beginning. He might have found particularly offensive Spencer's account of the positive effects of earlier wars.

There is no reason, however, to believe that Russell and Spencer actually differed in their views of *modern* war. Russell was not, after all, a universal pacifist; on his view, some wars were justifiable. And Spencer was not simply a supporter of all war.²⁰ He argued that war

¹⁹ Russell in particular may have been encouraged in this reading of Spencer by his familiarity with the work of Walter Bagehot. He read a number of Bagehot's works, including *Physics and Politics*, a work subtitled, "Or Thoughts on the Application of the Principles of Natural Selection and Inheritance to Political Society". In that work Bagehot says, "There has been a constant acquisition of military strength by man since we know anything of him, either by the documents he has composed or the indications he has left. The cause of this military growth is very plain. The strongest nation has always been conquering the weaker; sometimes even subduing it, but always prevailing over it. Every intellectual gain, so to speak, that a nation possessed was in the earliest times made use of—was *invested* and taken out—in war; all else perished" (*Physics and Politics*, in N. St. John Stevas, ed., *The Collected Works of Walter Bagehot* [London: Economist, 1974], 7: 45).

And a bit later, "But the first elements of civilisation are great military advantages, and, roughly, it is a rule of the first times that you can infer merit from conquest, and that progress is promoted by the competitive examination of constant war" (p. 64).

²⁰ In *The Study of Sociology* Spencer says that war indirectly aids the development

could play a constructive role in the *early* development of societies, but he also argued that genuine social progress entailed an evolution from military-based societies toward industrial-based societies, from societies in which cooperation was compulsory to societies in which it was voluntary.²¹ On Spencer's view, nineteenth-century Britain was in the transition between the two stages. In fact, he opposed the Boer War two years earlier than Russell did.²² But in 1914, Russell may have felt an exaggerated opposition to any view that could countenance war as a possible source of anything good, as Spencer's theory clearly did.

One rather surprising difference between Russell and Spencer on socio-political theory emerges in connection with *eugenics*. One might expect that Spencer's emphasis on the importance of progressive evolution would lead him to promote eugenic practices. In fact, it did not. One reason for his hesitation was very likely his general abhorrence of State interference with individual liberty. And according to one commentator, Spencer's Lamarckism (especially in his earlier years) also suggested to him a great degree of malleability in human beings in relation to their environmental conditions.²³ Thus, hereditary endow-

of industry, but it directly represses it. It drains off the energy, attention, resources, etc., that might be put into industrial development. He notes that an "absolutely military" society like Sparta compares unfavourably with a "partially military" society like Athens in its culture. "[W]e cannot fail to see that persistent war is at variance not only with industrial development, but also with the higher intellectual developments that aid industry and are aided by it" (p. 178–9). A further difficulty that war brings is that it cultivates anti-social attitudes that are needed for war but are unfortunately brought home after the war (p. 179).

²¹ See, for example, Spencer's *Principles of Sociology* (New York: Appleton, 1910), p. 569; *The Study of Sociology*, p. 32.

²² There is a letter from Spencer to James Sully, dated 10 December 1899, in which he castigates Britain for its behaviour toward the Boers (David Duncan, *Life and Letters of Herbert Spencer*, Vol. 2 [New York: Appleton, 1908], pp. 151–2; see also Spencer's *The Man versus the State*, pp. 366–7). Also, as one commentator put it, "His [Spencer's] final public action was to denounce the evils of jingoism, imperialism, and the Boer War, a stand which probably made a significant contribution to his already declining popularity" (Taylor, *Men versus the State*, p. 22).

Russell, by contrast, says in his *Autobiography* that when the Boer War broke out in 1899 he was a "Liberal Imperialist" and "by no means a pro-Boer. British defeats caused me much anxiety, and I could think of nothing else but the war news.... When the Boers began to be defeated, my interest grew less, and early in 1901 I became a pro-Boer" (p. 136).

²³ See Peel, *Herbert Spencer*, pp. 237, 296.

ment ought not to be given overriding importance in evaluating people. For a Lamarckian, individuals were capable of developing habits that were adaptive to a particular environment, habits that would literally alter the individual physiologically. And those alterations were heritable.²⁴ Eugenics appeared to disallow the likelihood of such favourable adaptations.

Russell, on the other hand, favoured certain principles of eugenics.²⁵ One of his views that encouraged his support for Francis Galton's theories was his belief that the intellectually gifted were more desirable members of society than the less gifted.

I am convinced that in such cases [i.e., great men like Einstein and Napoleon], and to a lesser degree in all cases of ability, there is a native aptitude which causes education to produce better results than it does with average material. There are, indeed, obvious facts which point to this conclusion, such as that one can generally tell whether a man is a clever man or a fool by the shape of his head, which can hardly be regarded as a characteristic conferred by education....

He continues,

I shall therefore assume without more ado that human beings differ in regard to congenital mental capacity. I shall assume also, what is perhaps more dubious, that clever people are preferable to their opposite. These two points being conceded, the foundations are laid for the eugenicists' case. We must not, therefore, pooh-pooh the whole position, whatever we may think of some of the details in certain of its advocates. (*Marriage and Morals*, pp. 201–2)

Russell goes on to distinguish between "positive" eugenics, in which one encourages the development of desirable offspring, and "negative" eugenics, in which one tries to discourage the breeding of less desirable ones. He believes that forms of negative eugenics are more practicable than positive forms.

²⁴ Modifications in humans, "like those of every other creature, are ultimately determined by surrounding conditions—and ... surrounding conditions are in part constituted by social arrangements; ..." (Spencer, *Study of Sociology*, p. 307). See also *The Man versus the State*, pp. 356–7.

²⁵ See "Eugenics", Chap. 18 of *Marriage and Morals*.

The objections to such a measure which one naturally feels are, I believe, not justified. Feeble-minded women, as everyone knows, are apt to have enormous numbers of illegitimate children, all, as a rule, wholly worthless to the community.... There are, it is true, grave dangers in the system, since the authorities may easily come to consider any unusual opinion or any opposition to themselves as a mark of feeble-mindedness. These dangers, however, are probably worth incurring, since it is quite clear that the number of idiots, imbeciles, and feeble-minded could, by such measures, be enormously diminished. (*Ibid.*, p. 203)

In this particular instance, Spencer's commitment to freedom from government interference appears to have been stronger than was Russell's. Spencer did not favour government measures to preserve the unfit (however they might be designated), but he stopped short of supporting eugenic measures to eliminate the unfit. Spencer, unlike Russell, had unbounded confidence that the forces of Nature would see to the evolutionary progress of mankind.

Religion offered yet another point of contrast between Russell and Spencer. Spencer's general metaphysical framework included a place for the Unknowable Absolute. The world of our ordinary experience, he claimed, is simply the manifestation of that Absolute, the latter remaining hidden from our view. This apparently encouraged Spencer to defend a place for what transcends our experience, and this became the space of religion.²⁶ Spencer was not interested in defending any particular organized religion. On the contrary, he was suspicious of most institutions, religious or otherwise. But he believed that various forms of religion had played a positive role in the evolution of civilization, by cementing social bonds and sometimes preventing wars. And for Spencer, the fundamental religious intuition of a Transcendent Being remains valid. There is, he says, "a fundamental verity under all forms of religion, however degraded" (*First Principles*, p. 110). We must, he continues, "recognize them [various religious beliefs] as elements in that great evolution of which the beginning and end are beyond our knowledge or conception—as modes of manifestation of

²⁶ See, for example, Spencer's *First Principles*, 4th ed. (Chicago: Rand, McNally, 1880; 1st ed., 1862), pp. 19–20.

The Unknowable, and as having this for their warrant" (p. III).²⁷

Russell's scepticism about religion, on the other hand, is well documented. Long before he began his university studies he had decided that there was insufficient warrant for religious belief. For a brief period (around 1912–14), during his affair with Lady Ottoline Morrell, Russell tried to make some concessions to religious belief because of Ottoline's religious convictions. But he was never able, even during this period, to subscribe to a transcendent reality that would form the basis of religion in the conventional sense. His effort at a compromise appears in his fictional work, "The Perplexities of John Forstice" (1912), as well as in his later and better-known "Mysticism and Logic" (1914). In the same year, in his essay "The Scientific Method in Philosophy", Russell explicitly notes the religious dimension in Spencer's thought as a weakness. Paradoxically, Russell believes that it is Spencer's religious sense, along with his ethical concerns, that "make him value the conception of evolution."²⁸

In addition to ethics, politics, and religion, Russell was at odds with Spencer over *scientific* issues as well. There were a number of differences here. One was the relative importance to be accorded the organic over the inorganic, Russell insisting on a preference for physics over biology. Another and related issue was the relevance of evolutionary theory to philosophy. A third was the significance of the principle of the conservation of energy.

With respect to the first of these, although Spencer's Synthetic Philosophy was intended as an account of the development of the whole of the physical world, from the nebulae to living organisms to social institutions, he did not write a volume on the Principles of Physics. In the Preface to the first edition of his *First Principles*, Spencer outlines the larger series that he proposes to publish—*Principles of Biology, Psychology, Sociology, and Ethics*. He notes that he will pass over consideration of *inorganic* nature and move directly to organic nature in the *Principles of Biology*, partly because of the latter's "imme-

²⁷ [Russell briefly sketches this view as part of the beliefs of this father, Viscount Amberley. See Stefan Andersson, "Religion in the Russell Family", *Russell*, n.s. 13 (1993): 143–4, quoting *The Amberley Papers*, 1: 35.—Ed.]

²⁸ Russell, "On Scientific Method in Philosophy", in *Mysticism and Logic* (London: Unwin, 1986; 1st ed., 1918), p. 96; *Papers* 8: 57.

diate importance" (p. vi). Clearly, the organic world had pride of place in his scheme of things.

By contrast, Russell argued explicitly against the philosophical relevance of biological considerations. He was insistent that physics, not biology, is the relevant science for philosophy because of its generality. Biology, he says, concerns only a tiny portion of what exists, and philosophy by its very nature must be absolutely general.²⁹

One casualty of this dismissal of biology will be the theory of evolution. On Russell's view evolution belongs to the organic world and as such is of no particular interest to philosophy. As a consequence, any attempt to integrate evolutionary considerations into philosophy will be misguided. Russell's most extended and explicit comments about Spencer centre on this issue. He sees "Evolutionism" (the effort to couple philosophy with evolution) as proceeding from an entirely anthropocentric point of view—concerned with human origins, the satisfaction of human desires, and the commitment to progress in human affairs. Russell characterizes this viewpoint as pre-Copernican. I shall not pursue the details of Russell's critique of Evolutionism here.

One final, and possibly decisive, disagreement between Russell and Spencer centres on the principle of the conservation of energy. Spencer's entire philosophic system is constructed around this principle, or, as he calls it, the "Persistence of Force". What he means by it is

... the persistence of some Cause which transcends our knowledge and conception. In asserting it we assert an Unconditioned Reality, without beginning or end....

The sole truth which transcends experience by underlying it, is thus the Persistence of Force. This being the basis of experience, must be the basis of any scientific organization of experiences. To this an ultimate analysis brings us down; and on this a rational synthesis must build up. (*First Principles*, pp. 172–3)

This Persistence of Force necessitates the movement of "the homogeneous" to "the heterogeneous". Arguments supporting this claim are not of particular concern for our purposes, but it is important to note

²⁹ See his comments in *Our Knowledge of the External World* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1926; 1st ed., 1914), p. 26.

that this movement from homogeneous to heterogeneous is the basic principle that Spencer uses to account for evolution of all sorts.

And thus the continued changes which characterize Evolution [social as well as biological], in so far as they are constituted by the lapse of the homogeneous into the heterogeneous, and of the less heterogeneous into the more heterogeneous, are necessary consequences of the persistence of force. (*Ibid.*, p. 376)

Spencer's account of the principles that govern biology, psychology, sociology, and even ethics—and thus his entire philosophy—rests on this combination of the principle of the Persistence of Force and the consequent evolution of all things toward heterogeneity.

Russell took aim at the fundamental principle itself. In a letter to Beatrice Webb, he says:

I don't know whether he [Spencer] was ever made to realize the implications of the second law of thermodynamics; if so, he might well be upset. The law says that everything tends to uniformity and a dead level, diminishing (not increasing) heterogeneity. Energy is only useful when unevenly concentrated, and the law says that it tends to become evenly diffused. This law used to worry optimists about the time when Spencer was old. On the other hand, his optimism was always groundless, so his pessimism may have been equally so; perhaps the cause of both was physiological.³⁰

Russell's dismissal of Spencer's philosophy clearly issued from a number of areas of disagreement. But the issue of the principle of the conservation of energy may have been the most decisive reason for comprehensive verdict in 1945 that Spencer's work was of no philosophical importance at all.

So much for the commonalities and differences in the two views. What can be said now about the effect of all this on the shape that Russell gave to his own philosophy?

³⁰ Russell to Webb, 4 June 1923, in B. Webb, *My Apprenticeship*, pp. 87–8.

III

Russell's disagreements with Spencer in the areas of ethics, politics, and religion do not play any role in the development of Russell's analytic philosophy simply because he believed that none of these areas belongs to genuine philosophy. Science and methodology, on the other hand, were a different matter. There were, I believe, at least four ways in which Russell's reactions to Spencer contributed to the special character of Russell's own analytic philosophy. The first three of these involve Russell's rejection of three related notions—biology, the theory of evolution, and the importance of temporal development—as each irrelevant to philosophy. The fourth grew out of Russell's reaction against Spencer's contextualism and his synthetic approach to philosophy. Consider first the issue of biology.

As I noted earlier, Spencer proposed an account of the development of all reality, from nebulae to human societies. But in actually working out his Synthetic Philosophy, he omitted any volumes on the principles of physics and began rather with the organic world. On some accounts, this was merely in the interest of saving time; his overall project was, after all, immense. But Spencer himself makes some comments that might suggest a rather different motivation:

The daily practice of dealing with single factors of phenomena [as those do who work in the physical sciences like chemistry and physics], and with factors complicated by but few others, and with factors ideally separated from their combinations, inevitably gives to the thoughts about surrounding things an analytic rather than a synthetic character. It promotes the contemplation of simple causes apart from the entangled *plexus* of co-operating causes which all the higher natural phenomena show us; and begets a tendency to suppose that when the results of such simple causes have been exactly determined, nothing remains to be asked. . . . All the Concrete Sciences [including biology] familiarize the mind with certain cardinal conceptions which the Abstract [e.g. mathematics] and Abstract-Concrete Sciences [e.g. physics] do not yield—the conceptions of *continuity*, *complexity*, and *contingency* [of causation].³¹

³¹ *Study of Sociology*, pp. 292–3. And in relation to mathematics Spencer has equally revealing things to say: “But while mathematical discipline, and especially discipline in Geometry, is extremely useful, if not indispensable, as a means of preparing the mind

So Spencer's preference for biology appears to stem from its incorporation of important contextual considerations that the more abstract sciences like mathematics and physics tend to omit.

Spencer's emphasis on context, on relations, leads him quite naturally to value a *synthetic* rather than *analytic* approach to philosophy. On his view, one needs to understand a thing in its relations with other things. This is not the Idealists' doctrine of internal relations, but it is a view that relies heavily on the importance of “continuity and complexity”.

Russell had quite a different assessment of the differences between physics and biology. And it contributed, I suggest, to his emphasis on analysis rather than synthesis as a philosophic method. On his view, biology is irrelevant to philosophy because it concerns only a small portion of reality, and philosophy must concern itself indiscriminately with all that exists. What happens to a minute portion of reality, living organisms, is too limited in scope to be of genuinely philosophic interest. As he put it,

Philosophy is general, and takes an impartial interest in all that exists. The changes suffered by minute portions of matter on the earth's surface are very important to us as active sentient beings; but to us as philosophers they have no greater interest than other changes in portions of matter elsewhere. (Russell, *Our Knowledge of the External World*, p. 26)

Biology, then, lacks the requisite generality.

What is particularly revealing in this quotation is the distinction

to recognize throughout Nature the absoluteness of uniformities; it is, if exclusively or too-habitually pursued, apt to produce perversions of general thought. Inevitably it establishes a special bent of mind; and inevitably this special bent affects all the intellectual actions—causes a tendency to look in a mathematical way at matters beyond the range of Mathematics. The mathematician is ever dealing with phenomena of which the elements are relatively few and definite. His most involved problem is immeasurably less involved than are the problems of the Concrete Sciences. But, when considering these, he cannot help thinking after his habitual way: in dealing with questions which the Concrete Sciences present, he recognizes some few only of the factors, tacitly ascribes to these a definiteness which they have not, and proceeds after the mathematical manner to draw positive conclusions from these data, as though they were specific and adequate” (*The Study of Sociology*, pp. 289–90). He uses De Morgan as an example.

Russell makes between us as active sentient beings and as philosophers. And he maintains that distinction in most of his subsequent philosophy. The fact that we are living organisms, active in our relations with the world, plays a minimal role in Russell's philosophy. Even his epistemology is carried out with virtually no reference to these dimensions of human knowing. On the theories of knowledge he proposes, we could just as well be disembodied spirits. And this is not by accident. Russell was quite serious in his claim that philosophy ought to be absolutely general. Unfortunately, such a philosophy minimizes or altogether omits some of the most salient factors involved in human knowledge.

Physics not only provides the requisite generality for Russell's philosophy, it also provides its methodological model. Here Russell was looking for formal structures rather than scientific content. He wanted to give philosophy a base that would not be subject to revision as science progressed. The *content* of any particular science clearly would be so subject; the mathematical method of physics would not. In his Herbert Spencer Lecture of 1914, "On Scientific Method in Philosophy", Russell says:

But there are two different ways in which a philosophy may seek to base itself upon science. It may emphasise the most general *results* of science, and seek to give even greater generality and unity to these results. [As Spencer did.] Or it may study the *methods* of science, and seek to apply these methods, with the necessary adaptations, to its own peculiar province. Much philosophy inspired by science has gone astray through preoccupation with the *results* momentarily supposed to have been achieved. It is not results, but *methods*, that can be transferred with profit from the sphere of the special sciences to the sphere of philosophy. (*Mysticism and Logic*, p. 97; *Papers* 8: 57)

He wanted a method that was independent of any contingent facts about the world. Physics, he believed, has the requisite independence, while biology does not.

It seems likely that Russell's preference for the method of physics over the content of biology is taken up explicitly in opposition to Spencer. The Idealists had not championed biology, so it is improbable that Russell's views here bore any relation to his quarrel with them. And it can hardly be coincidental that Russell's discussion of the philosophical inadequacies of biology occurs in the context of his

criticisms of Evolutionist philosophy, including the philosophy of Spencer. I suggest that not only Russell's emphasis on physics over biology, but also his preference for analysis rather than synthesis as a philosophic method, was motivated to a considerable extent by his opposition to Spencer's philosophy.

Closely related to Russell's attitude toward biology was his rejection of the theory of evolution as irrelevant to philosophy. No biological theory, including evolution, could be sufficiently general to be relevant. This refusal to incorporate any insights about human evolution had significant implications for Russell's theory of knowledge. But there was another dimension to evolution that motivated Russell to put it aside. Spencer's philosophy was not built simply on a *biological* theory of evolution. It was concerned, rather, with the historical development of everything—from the nebulae to social institutions. Biology was an important part of the story, but it was only a part. Historical development was the central focus. And this, of course, put temporal considerations at centre stage.

For Russell, however, the framework of temporal development was *not* the appropriate framework for philosophy. Russell had, near the turn of the century, opted for a version of platonism. Timeless truths and immutable values were the ideals to be sought. Evolution, whether biological or social or moral, challenged assumptions about timeless categories. Russell, eager to protect the status of logical and mathematical truth, was unwilling to admit any evolutionary considerations into philosophy. Although by 1913 he had given up his commitment to timeless objective moral values, neither logic nor mathematics was yet to be surrendered to the possibility of alteration. Russell did not deny the possible truth of evolutionary theory (although he had grave suspicions about Darwin's version of it); he simply excluded it from the province of philosophy.

So Russell's new analytic philosophy assumed a framework of timeless, ahistorical truths. Again, this characteristic of his philosophy can hardly be due to his quarrel with the Idealists. Some of them had, after all, denied the very reality of time. Russell's position here was, I believe, the outcome of his opposition to the Evolutionists, Spencer prominent among them.³²

³² In his book on Spencer, Josiah Royce makes some revealing comments about the

One final aspect of Russell's philosophy remains to be mentioned: his atomistic approach to analytic philosophy. There can be little doubt that the explanation for this lies at least partly with Russell's revolt against Idealism, with its doctrine of internal relations. But there is an interesting difference between the direction that Moore took as a result of his reaction against Idealism and the direction that Russell took. As Russell put it, "I think that Moore was most concerned with the rejection of Idealism, while I was most interested in the rejection of monism" (*MPD*, p. 42). So Moore, for example, was greatly exercised by questions of perceptual realism. Russell, by contrast, was determined to atomize reality into a plurality of independent bits. He was determined to undo all philosophic talk about "the Whole", whatever its source. In his Herbert Spencer Lecture, Russell offers an extended critique of Spencer's philosophy,³³ including its claims about the Whole.

Russell begins by distinguishing two sets of motives that have guided philosophers—one derived from science, the other derived from religion and ethics. Spencer, he says, appears to have been motivated by *both*.³⁴ Russell says that the religious and ethical dimension of a philosopher's work, including that of Spencer, has been "on the

traditional attitude toward evolution on the part of philosophers committed to eternal truths: "[D]uring not only the seventeenth, but the early part of the eighteenth century, there was illustrated the notable truth, so much overlooked by modern evolutionists of the Spencerian type,—the truth that the great historical enemy of the evolutionary interest in philosophy has been, not 'supernaturalism,' nor yet the doctrine of 'special creation,' but the tendency to conceive the universe as an eternal, and so, temporally viewed, as an essentially permanent order, whose laws may be studied, and whose events often include what we call growth, but whose main outlines, classifications, processes, forms, are the same yesterday, to-day, and forever; so that the story of the origins of things, even when true, is of secondary import. Astronomy, mechanical science, mathematics, logic, ethics, all furnish motives which, justly or unjustly, have led men to emphasize this view of things. Accordingly, whenever these motives are predominant in special science and in philosophy, evolution is likely to be subordinated, overlooked, or denied" (*Herbert Spencer* [New York: Fox, Duffield, 1904], pp. 35–6).

³³ This dimension of the essay is rarely mentioned. Even one commentator on Spencer, listing the various lectures in the series, notes that "Few of them have any connection with Spencer's work, except very indirectly" (Hugh Elliot, *Herbert Spencer* [New York: Holt, 1917], p. 319).

³⁴ "On Scientific Method in Philosophy", *Mysticism and Logic*, pp. 96–7; *Papers* 8: 57.

whole a hindrance to the progress of philosophy". And one of the mistaken notions that this motivation has engendered in philosophers (including Spencer) is the belief that they should say something "about the nature of the universe as a whole".³⁵ Russell argues that the very notion of a "universe" is pre-Copernican. Following William James, he offers some arguments against claims about the universe as a whole, but then he goes on to give a more positive characterization of the generality that he believes is appropriate to philosophy:

... a philosophical proposition must be general. It must not deal specially with things on the surface of the earth, or with the solar system, or with any other portion of space and time. It is this need of generality which has led to the belief that philosophy deals with the universe as a whole. I do not believe that this belief is justified, but I do believe that a philosophical proposition must be applicable to everything that exists or may exist. (*Ibid.*, pp. 107–8; *Papers* 8: 64)

Philosophical propositions, then, must be absolutely general, but what Russell means by this is that such propositions must be concerned with each individual thing that exists but not with some alleged "whole" to which they are thought to belong. That is, philosophical propositions apply distributively, not collectively.

Spencer, by contrast, sees philosophy as unifying all the knowledge gathered by the particular sciences.

So long as ... truths are known only apart and regarded as independent, even the most general of them cannot without laxity of speech be called philosophical. But when, having been severally reduced to a simple mechanical axiom, a principle of molecular physics, and a law of social action, they are contemplated together as corollaries of some ultimate truth, then we rise to the kind of knowledge that constitutes Philosophy proper.... As each widest generalization of Science comprehends and consolidates the narrower generalizations of its own division, so the generalizations of philosophy comprehend and consolidate the widest generalizations of Science.... It is the final product of that process which begins with a mere colligation of crude observations, goes on establishing propositions that are broader and more separated from particular cases, and ends in universal propositions.... Science is *partially*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 97; *Papers* 8: 57.

unified knowledge; Philosophy is *completely unified* knowledge. (*First Principles*, pp. 118–19)

Spencer's conception of philosophy moves toward the very sort of all-inclusive propositions that Russell's disclaims. After discussing at length such items as "the indestructibility of matter", "the continuity of motion", "the persistence of force", Spencer concludes: "Thus these truths have the character which constitutes them parts of philosophy, properly so called. They are truths which unify concrete phenomena belonging to all divisions of Nature; and so must be components of that complete, coherent conception of things which Philosophy seeks."³⁶

This is the sort of claim about "the whole" that Russell wants to exclude from philosophy. His attack on monism is not simply an attack on British Idealism. It also takes aim at the comprehensive synthesis that Spencer proposed for philosophy. Where Spencer wanted philosophy to sift out from the individual sciences the most general truths about the world, Russell insisted that philosophy was to be more like logic—taking note of formal structures and formal relations that might be applicable to any sort of individual thing. Where Spencer claimed that cognition required "not only a parting of the unlike, but also a bonding together of the like", a recognition of "relation, difference, likeness" (*First Principles*, pp. 73–5), Russell argued that a sense-datum, for example, could be known in complete isolation from everything else. In strong contrast to Spencer's contextualism and holism, Russell asserts his own atomism—logical, epistemological, and psychological.

³⁶ Spencer, *First Principles*, p. 242. As one commentator on Spencer put it: "Each science seeks the widest generalisations possible within its own limits. By such generalisations its special phenomena are summed up, correlated, unified. But these widest generalisations reached, the bounds of each separate science are reached also. Here the work of philosophy begins. It carries the process of generalisation and unification a stage further. It seeks such most general statements as shall 'comprehend and consolidate the widest generalisations of science.' Its purpose is to find those universal truths under which all the truths of the sciences may be subsumed; to formulate the ultimate laws of which the highest laws of the sciences are merely corollaries. Philosophy, therefore, is the complete unification of knowledge—knowledge reduced to a coherent whole" (Hudson, *Herbert Spencer*, pp. 17–18).

Russell's version of analytic philosophy was undoubtedly shaped by his repudiation of British Idealism. It was also, I suggest, given some of its most characteristic features by its opposition to certain of the views espoused by Herbert Spencer.