was perfect, nor that there is no room for improvement in American life. It is clear in his memoir that he has found life better here than anywhere else he has been. But he also warns that this life can only be kept so by vigilance against all forms of tyranny over mind, body, and spirit.

Reviewed by WALTER TROHAN

Spencer's Tragedy

The Principles of Ethics, by Herbert Spencer, *Indianapolis, Ind.: Liberty Press, 1978. Volume 1, 613 pp.; Volume 2, 521 pp. $18.00 for the set.*

AT DINNER WITH Huxley, Spencer mentioned that he had once written a tragedy. Huxley immediately replied that he knew what the plot must be: a beautiful theory gets murdered by a nasty fact. Spencer himself delighted in retelling Huxley's barb, displaying thereby both his good-humor and self-awareness. What he was probably not aware of was that he actually *did* write a tragedy with Huxley's plot. In *The Principles of Ethics* the beautiful theory is that an individual's conduct is to be judged by how well it furthers the individual's survival. The nasty fact is that much conduct that furthers survival is morally repugnant both to Spencer and to most civilized people. Like many a good doctor, Spencer operated on the theory in order to save it from the attack of the fact. After the operation, the theory was so disfigured by qualifications and inconsistencies that few people paid attention to it, preferring to remember it as it was in its original pure simplicity.

If fairness to an author means remembering what he actually wrote, with all the qualifications and inconsistencies, then posterity has not been fair to Spencer. The best way to redress the wrong is to give a critical account of what is actually there, beginning with Spencer's aims, proceeding through his means and ending with his casuistical claims. Spencer set himself two aims in writing *The Principles of Ethics*. Providing a scientific basis for ethics was the first. The second was to point out where the concrete injunctions of traditional morality were incomplete or in error. Ethics can be "scientific" in several senses. To fulfill his first aim, Spencer wanted to derive an ethics that was "scientific" in two. The supernatural basis of ethics had, Spencer thought, irretrievably lost its authority. If society was to avoid the disaster of lacking a code of ethics, a new code would have to be developed on a non-supernatural basis. Thus ethics was first to be "scientific" in the sense of having its source in nature rather than the supernatural. Secondarily, ethics was also to be "scientific" in that the method for justifying injunctions in ethics should parallel that for justifying laws in natural science.

According to Spencer's conception of scientific method, science proceeded first from inductions that yielded "vague but partially true notions," then to generalizations derived by abstract reasoning that omits "qualifying circumstances," and finally to a full system that takes account of the previously omitted qualifying circumstances. Though this may be the order for discovering scientific rules of conduct, it is not the order he uses in the presentation of those rules in his *Principles*. The book is divided into six parts: the first devoted to fairly abstract reasoning about the criteria for judging conduct; the second devoted to anthropological inductions concerning various ethical issues; and the last four returning again to abstract reasoning, but here directed toward establishing more concrete ethical injunctions. The divergence between the order of discovery and the order in presentation is probably due to Spencer's fear that he would not live to finish the whole work. What Spencer wrote first and what appears as the first part of the *Principles* is what Spencer considered most important—the

abstract derivation of the general criteria for evaluating conduct.

To evaluate Spencer's success at giving a scientific basis to ethics it is easier to consider the parts of the work in the order he prescribed as scientific rather than the actual order of presentation. Begin, then, with the part of the book called "The Inductions of Ethics." Here Spencer attempts to learn what ethical conduct is in regard to broad topics, such as aggression, generosity, and temperance, by comparing the conduct of primitive societies with that of advanced societies. Any conduct that is absent in primitive societies but present in advanced is good, while the opposite is bad. As noted earlier, Spencer claimed that induction in science yields only vague notions. Whether or not Spencer's claim is true in general, it certainly is true of his own inductions in the *Principles*. For the most part each of the chapters consists of many pages devoted to summaries of the practices of diverse cultures, followed by a page or two devoted to the moral of the story. The ethnographic material is fascinating in its own right, but often has little relevance to the morals which are instead briefly defended by abstract reasoning about what sort of conduct would promote a developed society. No matter what conduct Spencer's reasoning approves, he finds support in the ethnographic data. If bad conduct, such as cannibalism, is performed by primitives, then this confirms that the conduct is bad. If good conduct is performed, such as restraint in childbearing among the Figians and the Motu-Motu, then this confirms that the conduct is good since "even they" do it. Either way, the ethnographic data "supports" what Spencer believes for other reasons. The weakness of the method of the inductions is nowhere clearer than when Spencer loses patience with the imperialism of England. Looking around him he saw "...a state of the world in which naked barbarians and barbarians in skins are being overrun by barbarians in broadcloth."

Spencer himself recognized to some extent the weakness of the inductions. The portion of the *Principles* that he preferred was the more abstract part in which he derived and defended his criteria for evaluating conduct. He begins by discussing a criterion that is commonly associated with his name: that conduct is to be judged by how far it lengthens or shortens the lifespan of the agent. This criterion, however, is quickly rejected by Spencer because it would have required him to judge as more advanced, creatures he believed clearly to be more primitive. For instance, "an oyster, adapted by its structure to the diffused food contained in the water it draws in, and shielded by its shell from nearly all dangers, may live longer than a cuttlefish, which has such superior powers of dealing with numerous contingencies..." In deference to the cuttlefish, Spencer concludes that conduct is to be judged according to its impact on both the length and breadth of life, where "breadth" means the number of different activities the organism can perform.

As the first and most fundamental of Spencer's three criteria, the "length and breadth of life" criterion merits special attention. Even assuming that it is possible to obtain some measure of the number of activities an individual can perform, there still remain a couple of fundamental problems with the criterion. The most crucial problem is that nothing in nature implies that a variety of activities is better or more advanced than the lack of such variety. As Spencer himself notes, simple creatures often survive longer than the more complex. A person may prefer simplicity to variety without being incoherent and there is nothing in evolution (at least nothing noted by Spencer) that implies that such a person is wrong. Like the magician pulling the rabbit from a hat, Spencer only gets from evolution what he has first put into it.

Part of the appeal of the "length and breadth" criterion for Spencer was his implicit belief that the criterion directly implies the superiority of advanced society. The implication, however, is not direct. It requires the missing assumption that in an advanced society each individual performs

a greater variety of activities than in a primitive society. The assumption may be true, but it is by no means obvious. It would be false, for instance, if specialization resulted in each individual performing fewer different activities even though in the society as a whole, more different activities were being performed. Oster and Wilson in their recent *Caste and Ecology in Social Insects* claim that, for many individual non-social insects, the variety of activities performed is equal to that of an entire colony of social insects. As a result each individual colony member performs a smaller variety of activities than does the individual non-social insect. Thus, even assuming the soundness of the "length and breadth" criterion, Spencer still needed to defend, not just assume, the superiority of modern specialized societies.

On the sole basis of the length and breadth of life criterion, Spencer would have been unable to praise much conduct that he thought good and blame much conduct that he thought bad. The expedient, of course, is to add two more criteria. Thus his second criterion is that good conduct furthers the survival of the species through the procreation and nurture of healthy, able offspring, while the third criterion is that good conduct involves "mutual help." If the first criterion might be thought to follow from nature, the latter two are more transparently ad hoc. In any ethical dilemma that people seriously worry about, these criteria can be used to justify either course of conduct. A once beautiful theory has been qualified into vacuousness.

The ambiguity of the inductions from ethnology and the ad hocness of the deductions from nature doom Spencer's attempt to give ethics a new authority in science. Failure in this first aim implies that only limited success could be had in achieving the second: without securely grounded criteria for judging conduct Spencer could not with moral force show where the concrete injunctions of traditional morality were incomplete or in error. What he could and did do was to lay out with remarkable perceptiveness the consequences of various modes of conduct. Entertaining, as well as edifying, are the discussions in praise of variety in food and travel and the discussions in blame of excess fiction reading and overcultured women. Also engrossing are the frequent references to the exotic both in people and in animals. Of more serious value are the frequently incisive critiques of the positions of the positions of others. Outstanding in this regard is his discussion of the incoherence of pure altruism. On a more rhetorical level, he is also effective in arguing against the hypocrisy of the Christians who advocated imperialism and war.

This new edition of the*Principles* follows the text of the 1897 edition published by D. Appleton and Company. As is usual with the products of Liberty Press, the quality of the paper and binding is high, the price low. Tibor Machan's brief introduction is useful, though he may confuse the casual reader when he describes as "egoism" Spencer's avowed compromise between egoism and altruism. Even if the *Principles* is properly described as a failure it would be wrong to be too critical of its author. Spencer did not fail because he was stupid, ill-informed, or malign. On the contrary, the pages of the *Principles* display a lively intelligence, a wealth of empirical knowledge, and a good-natured humanity. Rather Spencer failed because his task was so difficult. The *Principles* should thus be of interest not just to historians of thought but also to all those who would themselves take up Spencer's task.

Reviewed by ARTHUR M. DIAMOND, JR.