

**KANT AND SPENCER. A
STUDY OF THE FALLACIES
OF AGNOSTICISM**

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Kant and Spencer. A Study of the Fallacies of Agnosticism by Paul Carus

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PAUL CARUS

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A STUDY OF THE

FALLACIES OF AGNOSTICISM

BY

DR. PAUL CARUS

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PREFACE.

MODERN philosophy begins with Kant because Kant broke with the traditional Dogmatism and supplanted it by Criticism. He proposed the new plan of building doctrines upon the firm ground of experience. Kant was the first positivist in the sense that all philosophy must be based upon facts. How strange that in France and England his views were misunderstood by those who endeavored to progress along the same lines! Auguste Comte denounced Kant as an antiquated metaphysician and Herbert Spencer looks upon him as the champion of mediævalism and dogmatism. The truth is that neither the former nor the latter knew anything of Kant and so wasted their powder without demolishing their enemy but they did a great deal of harm by leading the public astray and perverting the real issues. They themselves failed in their main aspirations; neither Comte nor Spencer succeeded in proposing a scientific philosophy; both ended in agnosticism, which is practically a declaration of philosophical bankruptcy.*

The merits of both Comte and Spencer cannot be underrated; both did good work in collecting and systematising material,—the former, a mathematical genius, in a truly scientific manner, the latter as a populariser. Comte became better acquainted with Kant in his advanced age and regretted deeply that he had misunderstood the trend of his thought, because he thus missed the benefit of his wholesome influence.

I do not say that it is necessary to be a Kantist in any sense; but to be a leader of thought, a leader that leads onward and forward, it is indispensable to understand Kant. Mr. Spencer's attitude toward Kant has remained disdainful and even hostile. This

* For a discussion of French positivism as represented by Auguste Comte and his most illustrious disciple Emile Littré see *Monist*, Vol. II, pp. 403-417

is the more to be regretted as Mr. Spencer possesses many rare accomplishments that would naturally have fitted him to become an apostle of progress. He is regarded so by many of his adherents and enemies, but only by those who are superficially acquainted with philosophical problems. I do not hesitate to say that Mr. Spencer is a reactionary spirit. He seems progressive because he objects to the religious dogmas that have been established by tradition, but he is reactionary because he boldly sets up nescience as a philosophical principle, and the time is near at hand when his very enemies will take refuge in his doctrines.

We have a high respect for Mr. Spencer as a man and a thinker, but it is a great pity that with all his brilliant talents, with all his ambition and energy, he has been deficient in thoroughness and earnestness. As a philosopher, he is a dilettante. Dilettantism is a marked feature not only of his entire system but also of the way in which he has worked it out. Kant was too heavy reading for him and the labor of studying his works did not seem promising. Mr. Spencer, as a thinker, follows the principle of Hedonism; he shirks the toil of research and engages in such subjects only as can easily be woven into fenilletonistic essays.

For those who think that this opinion is too severe, the articles on *Kant and Spencer*, including a discussion of *Spencerian Agnosticism*, all of which appeared some time ago in *The Open Court* and *The Monist*, are here republished in book form. The present little volume contains also Mr. Spencer's reply in full and his letter in which he declines further to enter into the subject.

In fine we have to add that these articles are not purely controversial. While they are a criticism of Mr. Spencer's flagrant mistakes they are intended to serve the higher purpose of promoting the comprehension of philosophy. They are a contribution to the history of philosophy; but the historical and literary questions here treated are after all merely the background upon which problems of basic significance are elucidated.

LA SALLE, ILL., U. S. A.

THE AUTHOR.

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THE ETHICS OF KANT.

MR. Herbert Spencer published in *The Popular Science Monthly* for August 1888 an essay on the Ethics of Kant; a translation of this article previously appeared in the *Revue Philosophique*, and it cannot fail to have been widely noticed. It is to be regretted that unfamiliarity with the German language and perhaps also with Kant's terminology has led Mr. Spencer into errors to which attention is called in the following discussion.*

Mr. Spencer says:

"If, before Kant uttered his often-quoted saying in which, "with the stars of Heaven he coupled the conscience of Man, as "being the two things that excited his awe, he had known more of "Man than he did, he would probably have expressed himself "somewhat otherwise."

Kant, in his famous dictum that two things excited his admiration, the starry heaven above him and the conscience within him, contrasted two kinds of sublimity.† The grandeur of the Universe is that of size and extension, while the conscience of man commands respect for its moral dignity. The universe is wonderful in its expanse and in its order of mechanical

*Quotations from Mr. Spencer's essay will be distinguished by quotation-marks, while those from Kant will appear in hanging indentation.

† Kant distinguishes two kinds of sublimity: (1) the mathematical, and (2) the dynamical. His definitions are: (1) sublime is that in comparison with which everything else is small; and (2) sublime is that the mere ability to conceive which shows a power of emotion (Gemüth), the latter transcending any measurement by the senses.—[(1) Erhaben ist, mit welchem im Vergleich alles andere klein ist. (2) Erhaben ist, was auch nur denken zu können ein Vermögen des Gemüths beweist, das jeden Maasstab der Sinne übertrifft. Editio Hartenstein, Vol. V., pp. 257, 258.]

regularity; the conscience of man is grand, being intelligent volition that aspires to be in harmony with universal laws.

Mr. Spencer continues:

"Not, indeed, that the conscience of Man is not wonderful enough, whatever be its supposed genesis; but the wonderfulness of it is of a different kind according as we assume it to have been supernaturally given or infer that it has been naturally evolved. The knowledge of Man in that large sense which Anthropology expresses, had made, in Kant's day, but small advances. The books of travel were relatively few, and the facts which they contained concerning the human mind as existing in different races, had not been gathered together and generalized. In our days, the conscience of Man as inductively known has none of that universality of presence and unity of nature which Kant's saying tacitly assumes."

Mr. Spencer apparently supposes that Kant believed in a supernatural origin of the human conscience. This, however, is erroneous.

Mr. Spencer's error is excusable in consideration of the fact that some disciples of Kant have fallen into a similar error. Professor Adler, of New York, who attempts in the Societies for Ethical Culture to carry into effect the ethics of Pure Reason, maintains that the commandments of the *ought* and "the light that shines through them come from beyond, but its beams are broken as they pass through our terrestrial medium, and the full light in all its glory we can never see."

Ethics based on an unknowable power, is mysticism; and mysticism does not essentially differ from dualism and supernaturalism.

Kant's reasoning is far from mysticism and from supernaturalism. He was fully convinced that civilized man with his moral and intellectual abilities