

**AN EXAMINATION OF THE
PHILOSOPHY OF THE
UNKNOWNABLE AS EXPOUNDED
BY HERBERT SPENCER**

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An Examination of the Philosophy of the Unknowable as Expounded by Herbert Spencer by
William M. Lacy & Herbert Spencer

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WILLIAM M. LACY & HERBERT SPENCER

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PREFATORY NOTE

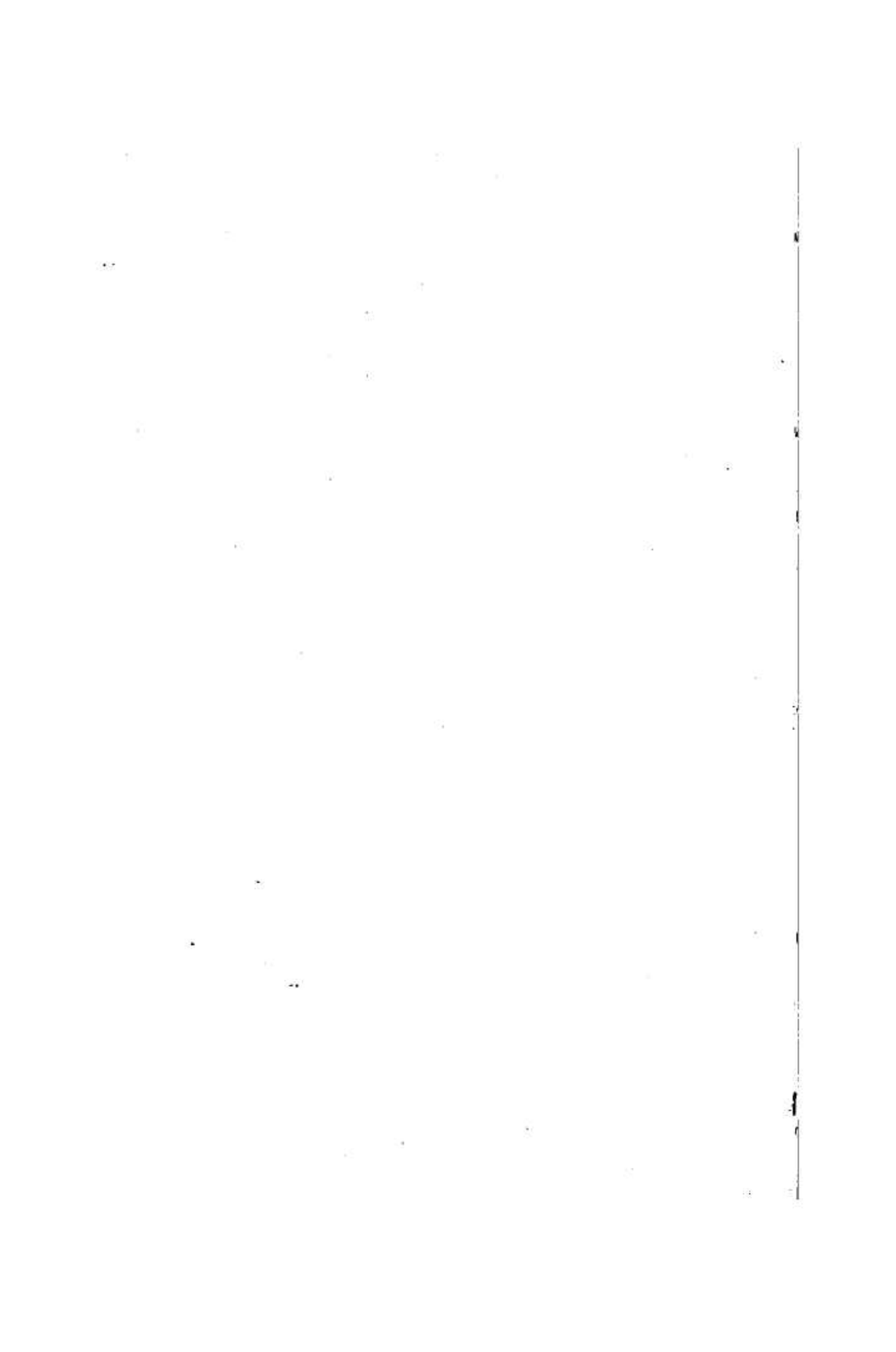
This book was published first in 1883. It may prove of interest to the reader to learn that all of the arguments herein contained—except the explanation of continued motion—were written on slates while the author was a student at Hastings' West Philadelphia Academy. During the year following graduation, these arguments appeared in a lengthy essay, which finally developed into the present work. Failing to secure a publisher, the author was obliged to set the type himself. This edition is printed from the original plates without a change.

Other facts to which I wish to draw the reader's attention are that "The Conception of the Infinite," by George S. Fullerton, was published in 1887; that the pivotal idea of that treatise—the idea that conception of the infinite is qualitative, not quantitative—will be found herein (pp. 33-36); and that Fullerton was a subscriber to this "Examination."

Twenty-one years ago William M. Lacy died, according to Dr. James E. Garretson, from a fever brought on by overwork, and is buried I know not where. And that is the end of the story till I write in full the tragedy of this book.

ERNEST LACY.

JANUARY 21, 1912.



OPINIONS OF THE PRESS

[LETTERS EXPRESSING APPRECIATION OF THIS WORK IN THE HIGHEST TERMS WERE RECEIVED FROM ALEXANDER BAIN, NOAH PORTER, AND OTHER PROMINENT THINKERS.]

The Christian Union (N. Y.).

Were we called upon to select a specimen nearly approaching the ideal of a philosophical polemic, we incline to think that we should take this book. It is certainly one of the cleanest, finest, most thorough pieces of metaphysical work which recent years have given us. It covers but one department of Mr. Spencer's vast system—his theory of the Unknowable—but it covers this perfectly. No position which he takes, scarcely any of importance which his views conceivably involve, on this theme, is neglected in the analysis. His exposition is followed everywhere; his thought is tracked into every elaborate labyrinth, advertised at every step, pointed to its logically inevitable lines of retrocession or advance, bidden to take its choice, and as the result of whatever choice, crowded out of its obscurity into open light, or reduced from its ingenious complexity into its simple self. Considered in the light of mere reasoning, it is a case of philosophical persecution. The whole movement is of such easy force as almost to excite sympathy for Mr. Spencer's agnosticism, to which no argumentative refuge seems open. Many, not familiar with this notorious system, might cry, "Is this hapless, unshapen thing the great dragon we have feared?"

We have spoken of this work as clean metaphysics. When we say that in this respect it matches Mr. Spencer's calmness, courtesy, guarded movement, and unswerving poise, we have likened it to one of the accepted models of recent literary art. In these respects we can give it no higher praise. There is no glow other than purely intellectual; rhetoric is excluded; appeals to prejudice or to fear are not even suggested; the religious bias is not indicated; it is a typical philosophic contest—struggle, we had first written; but the attack is too steady in its unhesitating, unpausing advance to be called by that term. . . . The criticism searches out both the thought and its terms, bringing to light in this so vaunted philosophy incongruity upon incongruity, and showing agnosticism to be nothing but an entanglement of fallacies presented with a wonderful semblance of system.

This remarkable work, though too analytic and profound for the reader not in some degree versed in metaphysical studies, is singularly clear and direct in its style. The style, indeed, is perfectly adapted to the thought and to the object of the work. As a treatise devoted to a single department, this may be pronounced well-nigh faultless.

Science.

There is a self-confidence in his manner, but there is no merely pretentious display of knowledge in his book. His style is Spencerian—Spencerian with a bit more of vigor, and without a bit less accuracy in form. The work is that of a mature thinker who has considered long and well.

The London Quarterly Review.

The writer of this able work subjects Mr. Spencer's philosophy to a searching and, in our view, destructive criticism. The criticism gains in effectiveness by its thoroughly courteous tone—a tone which Mr. Spencer might often imitate with advantage. . . . The second chapter, in which Mr. Lacy deals with Mr. Spencer's "fundamental fallacy," and shows "the impossibility of establishing unknowableness," is a fair specimen of the whole work. It is evident at once that Spencer's doctrine of the unknowable implies that the unknowable exists, and that it is known to be unknowable. How do we know so much? What is the sign of unknowableness? The only other predicate which the doctrine allows is that "the something exists." Here is a minor premise. What is the major? "The only possible major is, whatever exists is unknowable." We need not pursue the argument. Curiously enough, Mr. Spencer also calls the unknowable by other names, such as "the Real, as distinguished from the Phenomenal, the First Cause, the Infinite, the Absolute, the Creating, the Uncaused, the Actual, the Unconditioned." If all this is known about "the unknowable," Mr. Lacy may well call in question the appropriateness of the designation. The whole of this chapter is full of acute reasoning. Again, in arguing for the unthinkable of space, Mr. Spencer says, "Extension and space are convertible terms." On this Mr. Lacy says: "There needs no vocabulary to tell us that they are not. We never speak of matter as having space; we never speak of matter as occupying the quality extension. By extension, as we ascribe it to surrounding objects, we do not mean occupancy of space, although these two qualities are almost always found together." Occupancy of space involves ideas of coextensiveness and exclusiveness, which are not contained in the notion of extension. "Occupancy of space thus proving to be far more than extension, it becomes evident that we can attribute extension to space, without ascribing to it occupancy of itself. Consequently, extension may be claimed as one of the attributes of space." Under the head of "The Inductive Argument," Mr. Lacy criticises Spencer's teaching on causation, space, time, matter, motion, force, self-knowledge, extent of

consciousness and mental substance; under "The Deductive Argument" he analyses Spencer's views on the process of comprehension, the unconditioned, the nature of life, the power of thought to transcend consciousness. A chapter on the proposed reconciliation between science and religion concludes a volume which is one of the ablest replies and best antidotes to "First Principles" that we have met with. Mr. Spencer's reconciliation consists, of course, in the abolition of religion. He makes a solitude and calls it peace. "The reconciliation proposed by Mr. Spencer would be no reconciliation at all. No sooner would it become the accepted doctrine that the cause of all things is unknowable, than each thinker would frame a conception of it to suit himself." Materialist, Spiritualist, Realist, would each maintain his own position, and with equal right—because of the unknowable all hypotheses are equally admissible. The prophet of the unknowable must bring us better solutions than unknowables and ghost stories.

The Popular Science Monthly.

This volume is a metaphysical onslaught on Herbert Spencer's metaphysics, and may be recommended to all interested in the subject as acute, subtle, ingenious, and very well stated.

New York Observer.

The author of this work confines himself strictly to the subject mentioned on the title page, leaving entirely aside the doctrine of Evolution, with which, as he justly says, unknowableness has no necessary connection. To the theory that we can know nothing of the external world or of mental substance but their bare existence, he opposes an argument of very great force. This is what he justly styles the fundamental fallacy, for he declares and shows that Mr. Spencer's affirmations of nescience do in fact overthrow his own theory by assuming a certain degree of knowledge of the unknowable.

This book is written in good temper and in direct and simple style. It makes no digressions and utters not a single personal reflection. It seems to us that the author has accomplished what he set out to perform, and so has rendered a good service.

The Atlantic Monthly.

Mr. Lacy opposes to Mr. Spencer's scheme of nescience the doctrine "that we are capable of realizing something of the nature of things occupying the region outside of consciousness." He treats Mr. Spencer with great courtesy, but attacks his positions with great vigor. His book is one worth consideration.