

The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Editor: DR. PAUL CARUS.

Associates: } E. C. HEGELER.
 } MARY CARUS.

VOL. XVIII. (NO. 1) JANUARY, 1904.

NO. 572

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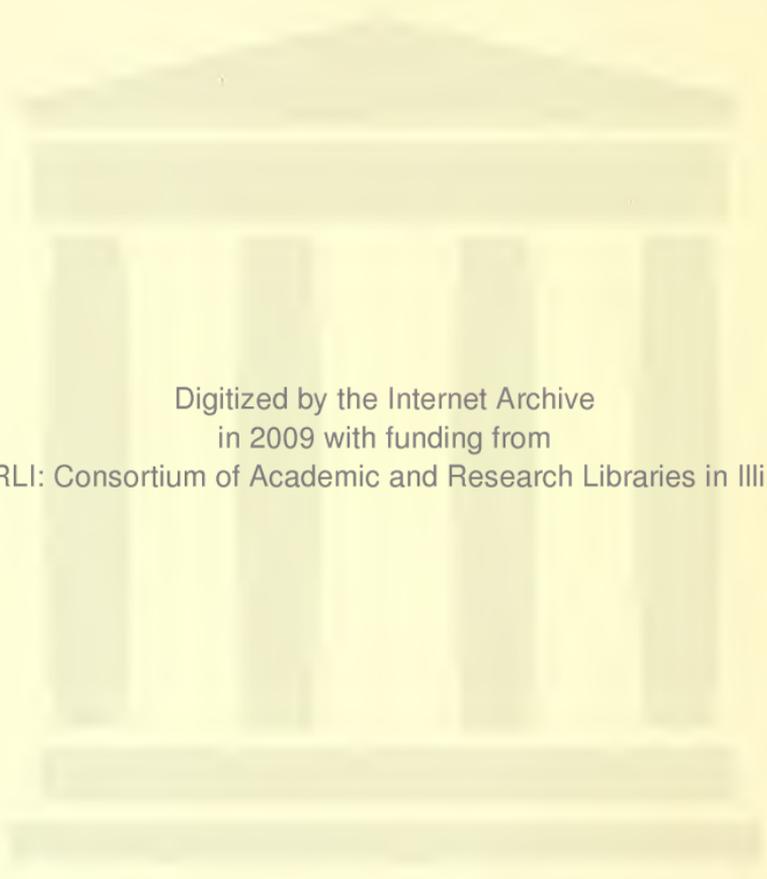
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CHICAGO

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HERBERT SPENCER.

1820-1903.

Frontispiece to The Open Court.

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HERBERT SPENCER.

Born April 27, 1820, died December 8, 1903.

BY THE EDITOR.

MR. Herbert Spencer's life is concluded. He died during the last month at the advanced age of eighty-three years. And how happy was his fate! He was permitted to work out his philosophy in all its details and he witnessed its gradual spread over the whole civilised world. Not the least part of his success is due to the interest that was taken in his labors by American thinkers, for he attained fame in his own country only after having found recognition abroad.

In his private life Mr. Spencer was simple and unostentatious. He did not marry and lived solely for his literary work, the furtherance and completion of which was his highest ambition.

Mr. Spencer was a most ardent advocate of evolution, and some of his disciples even declare that he was the inventor and first champion of this doctrine,—a claim which, however, cannot be maintained.

Mr. Spencer is the classical exponent of agnosticism, the philosophy of nescience which characterises the period of transition from blind faith in authority to a world-conception based upon science. He propounded his theory of the Unknowable as a means to deny the assertions of the established religion, but became scarcely himself aware of the fact that he dug the grave for any kind of affirmation, untrue and true, wrong and legitimate, irrational and scientific, leaving nothing but negations. He cut off not only the pretensions of superstition, but also the life of all genuine knowledge. While his philosophy did not fulfil the expectation which progressive thinkers expected from it, it served the needs of

the time and created a demand for something better and higher than the self-satisfied dogmatism of tradition.

Mr. Spencer's great merit consists in having for the first time worked out for the English speaking world the comprehensive system of a synthetic philosophy. The enthusiasm with which he devoted himself to this task, the personal sacrifices which he brought for it, and the diligence and energy which he showed in its completion, are worthy of our highest admiration.

The ideas which Mr. Spencer set forth were so novel in his English surroundings that they were felt to be revolutionary in almost all the walks of life, and his pen was trenchant whether he wrote on ceremonial institutions, on education, on ethics, on first principles and kindred questions of abstract thought, or on topics suggested by the natural sciences. If the propositions which he suggested did not always find ready acceptance, they certainly set the world to thinking and in this respect his influence was wholesome, because stimulating. In his younger days he was quite iconoclastic, but with the advance of years he grew more conservative. His disciples and admirers, of whom he has many, recruit themselves from the ranks of liberals and radicals, and mainly from the multitudes of unprofessional thinkers.

The time has not yet come for the historian of philosophy to pronounce a final verdict on Mr. Spencer's system and adjudge its place in the evolution of human thought. He belongs too much to the present generation, and it is difficult to form an impartial opinion while the battle is raging. But that much will be granted, that most assuredly, Mr. Spencer has become a factor in the history of philosophy which none, be he his friend or antagonist, can afford to pass by unnoticed.

¹Our frontispiece, the portrait of Mr. Herbert Spencer, is reproduced from the "Philosophical and Psychological Portrait Series" published by The Open Court Publishing Company.