

Chapter 1

Herbert Spencer (1820–1903): Philosopher of Evolution and Society

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Herbert Spencer was a British philosopher, sociologist, and political theorist best known for applying evolutionary theory to social and political thought. Born on April 27, 1820, in Derby, England, Spencer grew up in a nonconformist household that valued individualism and self-education. Largely self-taught, Spencer initially trained as a civil engineer but soon turned to writing and intellectual pursuits, ultimately becoming one of the most influential thinkers of the 19th century.

Spencer's work spanned multiple disciplines, including biology, ethics, psychology, and sociology.



His central idea was that **everything in the universe evolves**, including **human society**. Influenced by Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection (though Spencer published on evolution before Darwin), he coined the term "**survival of the fittest**." However, unlike Darwin, who focused on biological evolution, Spencer applied this principle to economics, politics, and social structures.

In his major work, *The Synthetic Philosophy*—a series of volumes written between 1862 and 1893—Spencer laid out a unified theory of knowledge and evolution. He argued that all forms of development, from cosmic systems to human institutions, followed a natural progression from simplicity to complexity. In this view, society was seen as a kind of "social organism" that evolves over time.

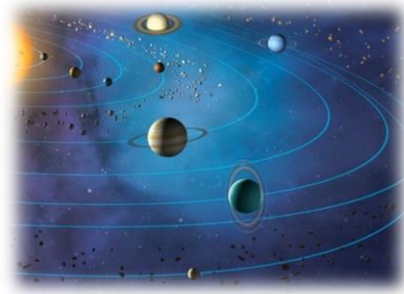
Spencer was also a key figure in the

Development of **social Darwinism**, a controversial ideology that extended evolutionary logic to justify class divisions, imperialism, and laissez-faire capitalism. He believed that government intervention in economic and social life was misguided because it interfered with natural social evolution. This led him to oppose welfare systems, trade unions, and public education, claiming that such measures hindered progress and allowed the “unfit” to survive at the expense of the “fit.”

Despite his strong individualist beliefs, Spencer was not entirely conservative. Early in his life, he supported women’s rights, freedom of expression, and the separation of church and state. However, his rigid application of evolutionary logic to human affairs often overshadowed these more progressive views.

Spencer's influence was immense in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He was admired by intellectuals, politicians, and industrialists alike, including figures like

Andrew Carnegie and William Graham



Sumner. His ideas shaped debates about capitalism, education, and governance across both Europe and the United States. However, as the 20th century advanced, his popularity declined. Critics argued that his theories oversimplified human behavior and ignored the complexities of culture, ethics, and social justice.

Herbert Spencer died on December 8, 1903. Though much of his work is now considered outdated or overly deterministic, his attempts to create a comprehensive philosophy of evolution left a lasting mark on sociology and political theory. He remains a key historical figure for understanding the intersection of science, philosophy, and society in the Victorian era.