Chapter Three: Herbert Spencer and the Worship of the Unknowable

Published by

Lightman, Bernard.
The Origins of Agnosticism: Victorian Unbelief and the Limits of Knowledge.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/69480
Chapter Three

HERBERT SPENCER AND THE WORSHIP OF THE UNKNOWABLE

... who could hold it against the agnostics if, as votaries of the unknown and mysterious as such, they now worship the question mark itself as God?

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

The appearance of Mansel's Bampton Lectures in print in 1858 led to a controversy that lasted well into the sixties. Major participants included the Tractarian James B. Mozley (1813–1878), Broad Churchmen Frederick Denison Maurice (1805–1872) and Goldwin Smith (1823–1910), Scottish philosopher James McCosh (1811–1894), and unbelievers Herbert Spencer and John Stuart Mill.¹ The Mansel controversy was immensely important for the development of Victorian thought even though it is often overshadowed by the contemporary debates surrounding Darwin's *Origin of Species* and *Essays and Reviews*. Maurice referred to the publication of Mansel's book as "a critical event in the history of the English Church," while in 1859 the High Church journal *Literary Churchman* labeled the Mansel controversy "the great literary event of the year."²

The Mansel Controversy

The controversy involving Mansel's Bampton Lectures increased the interest of the public in the questions discussed and ultimately accustomed the English mind to thinking in terms drawn from German modes of thought. "The doctrine of religious nescience," James Martineau remarked in 1862, "has been rendered so familiar by Mr. Mansel, as to belong to the common stock of contemporary thought, and to make any full exposition of its grounds unnecessary."³ It was now possible for the issue of the capacity of human beings to possess knowledge of God to become the subject of intense examination and discussion. By crystallizing complex epistemological arguments into
this one question Mansel molded public debate among Christians and unbelievers for years to come. In 1884 one Christian apologist drew upon Mansel in order to investigate “the grounds on which God is said to be unknowable, and the grounds on which Christians assert that they may know Him. The question is one of much importance in these days: in fact, it may be said to be the question of the day.” Mansel was still setting the parameters of discussion as late as the eighties.

Mansel’s manner of presenting the situation as a stark either/or led a number of important Christian thinkers to reconsider the virtues of the old fideist tradition. Although he was hailed as a champion of orthodoxy for a time, Mansel’s position was slowly perceived as being far too extreme.

In an unsigned article in the Rambler in 1858, the liberal Catholic Richard Simpson insisted that in his Bampton Lectures Mansel had merely repeated the theme of John Henry Newman’s Parochial Sermons without acknowledging his debt. Mansel apparently read this review, for he privately wrote Simpson and replied publicly in the preface to the third edition of The Limits of Religious Thought. Simpson wrote to Lord Acton on 6 April 1859 that “there has been an affectionate correspondence between Mansel and me; he has made a handsome speech about Newman in the 3rd edition of his Bampton Lectures.” Mansel announced that he had never come into contact with Newman’s book, but magnanimously admitted that a better acquaintance with Newman’s works might have taught him “a better mode of expressing many arguments.”

Yet Newman, who had been following the Simpson-Mansel exchange with interest, felt uneasy that his earlier thought resembled this High Churchmen’s controversial set of lectures. In December, 1859, he recorded his fears. “Mr. Mansell’s doctrine has met with sufficient opposition among Protestant divines,” Newman wrote, “to make me look narrowly to what I have myself before now said upon the subject which he treats.” In this same letter, Newman went on to assert that, despite Mansel’s claims, knowledge of God is “more than mere relative knowledge.” Newman denied that our knowledge of God through revelation is regulative; rather, he asserted that it is speculatively true as well as practically true. In turning away from the fideist strain of his earlier Protestant days Newman was moving closer to the position of the Roman Catholic Church in the nineteenth century. The capacity of human reason to prove with certainty central Christian beliefs, including the existence of God, was upheld by Pius IX in his encyclical Qui pluribus (1846), by Vatican Council I (1869-70), and by Leo XIII in the encyclical Aeterni Patris (1879).
Mansel's fellow High Churchmen also drew back from the blunt conclusions of the Bampton Lectures. To Mozley they seemed "to put forward the absolute unintelligibility of the Divine nature—even Divine moral character—too nakedly." In his review of The Limits of Religious Thought, though anxious to find points of agreement between his position and Mansel's, Mozley insisted that human beings possess more than regulative knowledge of God because God has revealed himself "to His creatures, if at all, in a mode which is speculatively true." 8

Liberal Anglicans such as Maurice, however, attacked Mansel most forcefully. The Mansel-Maurice controversy has been extensively examined, and Mansel's primary historical significance is generally located by scholars in his opposition to Maurice. 9 Since Maurice's faith was grounded on the belief that God constantly revealed himself in people's everyday lives, he perceived Mansel's denial of knowledge of God as a direct attack on the heart of his position. It was Maurice who pointed out the dangerous implications of Mansel's Bampton Lectures. "The confirmed, self-satisfied atheist is the one person who could receive such tidings without a protest, with perfect complacency," Maurice declared. 10

The attacks on The Limits of Religious Thought bewildered Mansel. He was unable to comprehend how the idea of the unknowability of God, a central strand in past Christian theology, could be viewed as harmful to the cause of religion. In the fifth edition of The Limits of Religious Thought, published in 1867, he included a list of authorities, ancient and modern, whose testimony could be cited in support of his principal doctrines. Quoted were Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Cyprian, Arnobius, Athanasius, Cyril of Jerusalem, Basil, Gregory of Nyssen, Gregory Nazianzen, Chrysostom, Augustine, Aquinas, Hooker, Boyle, Stillingfleet, Leslie, Butler, Coleridge, and Bishop Browne, among others. 11

During the last term of 1868 Mansel delivered a course of lectures on gnosticism in his capacity as Regius Professor of Ecclesiastical History. The gist of his argument centered on his claim that gnosticism was viewed by the early Christian Church as a heresy and that it was opposed by eminent theologians such as Irenaeus and Tertullian on the grounds that the genuine Christian believed in the "unsearchableness of God and the ignorance of man." 12 The lectures were published posthumously in 1875, and they represent Mansel's last attempt to convince his contemporaries, through a historical study, that his position in the Bampton Lectures was the true orthodox standpoint. Ironically, the year after the lectures were presented Huxley also pointed to the significance of gnosticism when he coined the term agnosticism.
The 1850s and 1860s saw the development of a new form of unbelief based on what was originally an important element in traditional Christian theology. The idea of God's unknowability became the fuel for a type of scepticism which was hostile toward Victorian Christianity, though not actually antireligious. Mansel unintentionally helped to found the Victorian agnostic school of thought by contributing to a resurgence of interest in epistemological topics in England.

Mansel's Unwanted Disciple

The appearance of Herbert Spencer's *First Principles* (1862) prompted Goldwin Smith to charge Mansel with encouraging the development of atheism:

To prove that I am not guilty of calumny or the victim of hallucination in saying that the tendency of Mr. Mansel's doctrine is atheistical, I appeal to Mr. Herbert Spencer's work on "First Principles." Mr. Mansel will there find his own doctrines adopted in his own words as the foundation stone of a great system of philosophy, which he and I should agree in calling atheistical, by a very acute and honest writer.13

Mansel denied that Spencer's *First Principles* was a legitimate application of the Bampton Lectures. "I have not read Mr. Spencer's book on First Principles," Mansel asserted, "which I believe is only printed for his own subscribers; but from what I know of it indirectly, and from what I know directly of the author's other writings, I believe his teaching to be the contradictory, not complement, of mine."14

Despite Mansel's fervent desire to preserve a respectable distance from a thinker whose work he rightly considered as subversive of Christian orthodoxy, a number of contemporaries and scholars have viewed Spencer's *First Principles* as the logical next step to The Limits of Religious Thought.15 Others, though agreeing with Mansel that Spencer's position was not the inevitable conclusion to be drawn from the premises of the Bampton Lectures, still view Mansel's *Limits* as the chief source of Spencer's agnosticism.16 However, past treatments of the Mansel-Spencer connection, and Spencer's whole approach to epistemological questions, have been all too brief.

Today Spencer’s work seems pompous, monotonous, and without interest, particularly since it was informed by scientific theories that are no longer considered valid. But recently, historians have emphasized Spencer’s immense influence and importance in Victorian intellectual life as a corrective to the rather rapid decline his reputation suffered at the turn of the century.
There were a number of reasons for Spencer’s popularity. His ten-volume System of Synthetic Philosophy (1860–96) marked him as the last in a long line of English polymaths like Herschel and Whewell. Spencer’s magnum opus consisted of restatements, in systematic form, of recent theory and knowledge in all of the important areas of study, including volumes on biology, sociology, ethics, psychology, and religion. Furthermore, Spencer was endowed with great powers of synthesis, and he could gather the huge mass of information he was presenting into an integrated whole. Clearly, a new synthesis of all knowledge was attractive to those concerned with the fragmentation of the intellect into separate, specialized disciplines. The whole key to Spencer’s ability to unify knowledge into a totally comprehensive philosophical system was his insistence that all phenomena be interpreted according to the law of evolution. This provided his work with an aura of scientific respectability. Although we distinguish between the evolutionary theories of Darwin and Spencer, the Victorian public routinely conflated their views. Spencer’s Lamarckianism, ultimately in opposition to Darwin’s stress on natural selection and his careful restriction of evolution to the biological realm, nevertheless gained scientific plausibility when it was linked with the Origin of Species.17

But above all, in addition to offering a synthesis blessed by science, Spencer built into the worldview that informed his whole system the social, political, and religious ideas that were familiar to the Victorians. Rarely has an intellectual read so little and produced so many volumes. The sources of Spencer’s thought were the occasional book he did read (such as Mansel’s Bampton Lectures), a fertile imagination, conversations with friends, and newspaper articles, all of which helped him to breathe the intellectual air of his times. Lauwerys has observed that “he acquired unconsciously a knowledge of what was being said and thought; and what he thus picked up, he gave back again in sonorous language and much amplified—swelled out, so to speak, to cosmic proportions.”18 The ideas he found “in the air” of mid-nineteenth-century England were those of the great Nonconformist middle class, who were transforming the country. Indeed, Wiltshire has argued that Spencer’s scientific theory was merely the rationale for previously formed socio-political principles.19 The scientific principle that the universe is evolving toward differentiation and individualization meant to Spencer not only that the principles of laissez-faire liberalism were embedded into the very laws of nature, but also that the harsh turmoil of rapidly developing industrial capitalism was an unavoidable side effect of an inevitable process. Spencer offered reassurance that this was the path to progress.
Spencer's system was also susceptible to a religious interpretation because of its affinities with certain Protestant theological creeds, and it proved an attractive alternative for those who repudiated Paley's brand of natural theology, the doctrines of depravity and perdition, and the belief in scriptural infallibility. Spencer retained in his universe an eternally transcendent and boundless power whose existence guaranteed the ultimate purpose and justice underlying the vale of tears of capitalist society.\(^{20}\)

**The Martyr of Science**

The optimistic spirit of Spencer's philosophy is sadly at odds with the unhappy story of his life. Born in 1820 at Derby, Spencer was the only surviving child of William George Spencer, a schoolmaster of progressive educational views and a property owner. Herbert had a lonely and joyless childhood with no brothers or sisters and no schoolfellows until he was ten. Surrounded by the austere atmosphere of English middle-class dissent, with its emphasis on individualism and moralism, he grew introverted and intensely reflective.\(^{21}\) Later, Spencer worked in a variety of jobs, first as a railway engineer (1837–46), then as subeditor of *The Economist* (1848–53), and finally as a freelance journalist in 1853. Overwork, financial insecurity, and a feeling of indecision took its toll in 1854 when Spencer suffered a nervous breakdown. For the rest of his life Spencer could only work in short spurts and frequently complained of both physical and mental illness. But in 1858, when he was correcting essays for republication, Spencer suddenly recognized the universality of their underlying assumptions. It was nothing short of a revelation for him. He decided to devote the remainder of his life to the systematic dissemination of his grand insight into the workings of the universe.\(^{22}\)

Spencer totally absorbed himself in writing the *Synthetic Philosophy* for thirty-six years. All social intercourse was restricted to a bare minimum in order to avoid excessive excitement so disturbing to Spencer's concentration. Even his close friends had to work hard to convince him to join them for social occasions, and when he did indicate a willingness to attend he often only tentatively accepted an invitation. Spencer imagined himself to be of delicate constitution, and he kept a close watch over his condition on a daily basis.

Beatrice Webb, who became the prop of Spencer's declining years, and who was acknowledged by him to possess a unique insight into his character, made the following entry into her diary in 1884. "There is something pathetic in the isolation of his mind, a sort of spider-like
existence; sitting alone in the centre of his theoretical web, catching facts, and weaving them again into theory. It is sorrowful when the individual is lost in the work.” \(^{23}\) Spencer’s single-minded cultivation of the intellect in order to complete his task stunted the development of his emotional and aesthetic faculties, which in turn limited his insight into the human condition. \(^{24}\) John Fiske, an American evolutionist who greatly admired Spencer, complained that Spencer “never seems to warm up to anything but ideas. He has got so infernally critical that not even the finest work of God—a perfect day—is quite fine enough for him. So he picked flaws with the grey-blue sky and the peculiar Turner-like light, and everything.” \(^{25}\) In 1896, after years of hoarding energy, of emotional deprivation, personal isolation, and sacrificing everything to his work, Spencer completed his System of Synthetic Philosophy. But by this time his achievements were already obsolete. Scientific knowledge had increased and specialized at a tremendous pace, leaving Spencer behind, and the England of middle-class dissent,
which Spencer knew from the mid-Victorian period, and whose values were enshrined in his system, had been transformed into a world not to his liking.

"Well, we always have one consolation, such as it is," Spencer wrote to Huxley in 1888, when the latter was ill, "that we have made our lives of some service in the world, and that, in fact we are suffering from doing too much for our fellows" (ICST-HP 7:217). Spencer embraced his hermit-like existence and adhered to a life of asceticism not only for the sake of humanity but also in the name of a higher being. The laws of nature, and specifically the law of evolution, symbolized to Spencer the revelation of an immutable moral order. The theological element in Spencer's system can be understood in light of his Calvinist background, which left the indelible traces of Christian ideas on his thought. Like so many other agnostics, Spencer came from a family of earnest evangelicals. His parents were Wesleyan Methodists. However, in his Autobiography. Spencer asserts that he turned away from his parents' faith toward the end of the thirties when he was in his late teens. "My father's letters," Spencer recalled, "written during this period from time to time called my attention to religious questions and appealed to religious feelings—seeking for some response. So far as I can remember they met with none, simply from inability to say anything which would be satisfactory to him, without being insincere" (1:170).

There seem to have been a number of reasons for Spencer's early loss of faith. He reveals a feeling of resentment for the "foolish pertinacity with which, as a child, I was weekly surfeited with religious teachings and observances." This dislike of the oppressive atmosphere of his evangelical home led, he admitted, to a "certain disagreeable feeling" whenever he heard scriptural expressions in his later life and a repugnance for religious worship. Also, Spencer indicates that he later felt moral objections to the Christian doctrines of original sin and hell. Spencer felt no need for traditional religion and claimed that Christianity was "evidently alien to my nature, both emotional and intellectual." He did not experience a violent crisis of faith like so many of his contemporaries but, rather, he slowly and imperceptibly discarded Christianity during the late thirties and early forties. Spencer explained that "the current creed became more and more alien to the set of convictions formed in me, and slowly dropped away unawares. When the change took place it is impossible to say, for it was a change having no marked stages."

In the middle fifties, before Mansel delivered his lectures, Spencer was sure "that the existence of a Deity can neither be proved nor disproved" (LLHS, 81). All of the evidence points to the conclusion that Spencer was well on his way toward becoming what we now call an
agnostic before the late fifties brought Mansel or even Darwin to prominence. Spencer confirms this in a letter to F. Howard Collins of 1897: "My change from Theism to Agnosticism . . . took place long before the evolutionary philosophy was commenced, and long before I ever thought of writing it, and the change had nothing whatever to do with the doctrine of evolution. There has been no change whatever in that respect since 1860, when the writing of the philosophy was commenced" [LLHS, 398]. Mansel's lectures were important for Spencer's intellectual development, but they did not cause him to plunge into a religious crisis.

**Epistemology and Science before 1858**

Prior to 1858, Spencer had already developed an elaborate epistemology. During the early and middle Victorian era, there were basically two prevalent philosophies of science founded on differing theories of knowledge. An empiricist epistemological standpoint was often found in conjunction with a philosophy of science which stressed the role of experience in the accumulation of scientific knowledge, while an intuitionist theory of knowledge was frequently linked with a philosophy of science which emphasized the importance of innate conceptions and German Naturphilosophie for knowledge of the physical world. Sir John Herschel summed up the situation well in 1841 in a review of Whewell's *Philosophy of the Inductive Sciences*:

> we are thus, at the very outset of the subject, presented with two Schools of such Philosophy—that which refers all our knowledge to experience, reserving to the mind only a high degree of activity and excursiveness in collecting, grouping, and systematizing its suggestions—and that which assumes the presence of innate conceptions and truths antecedent to experience, intertwined and ingra...
for being an a priori philosopher, and Huxley took great pleasure in teasing Spencer that his "idea of tragedy is a deduction killed by a fact." In other words, Huxley believed that Spencer's love of theory often led him to ignore empirical fact. Spencer lent credence to this view when he attacked pure empiricism for failing to recognize that any primary assumptions required to build a philosophical system were in fact necessary, a priori truths. However, although Spencer tended to treat empirical data as a means to illustrate, rather than test, his theory, he still belongs in the empiricist tradition. Spencer did borrow from the German thinkers, but he was not vitally interested in the Germano-Coleridgean mode of thought. He had a low opinion of Coleridge and referred to him as a mere plagiarist of Schelling's ideas (PP, 353).

Spencer took an equally dim view of Kant's so-called idealistic theory of knowledge. In his Autobiography, Spencer described how, in 1844, he first came into contact with a copy of a translation of Kant's Critique of Pure Reason. "This I commenced reading, but did not go far. The doctrine that Time and Space are 'nothing but' subjective forms, pertain exclusively to consciousness and have nothing beyond consciousness answering to them,—I rejected at once and absolutely; and, having done so, went no further." Admitting that he was an impatient reader, Spencer made it a general rule never to continue reading a book if he dissented from its fundamental principles. Spencer then went on to criticize Kant for perversely contradicting "an immediate intuition of a simple and direct kind, which survives every effort to suppress it" (1:289).

This condemnation of Kant was repeated in Spencer's Principles of Psychology (1855). "That Space and Time are 'forms of sensibility' or 'subjective conditions of thought' that have no objective basis," Spencer remarked, "is as repugnant to common sense as any proposition that can be framed." Spencer held that our intuition of space as external is so clear and strong that the logical inference cannot be doubted. After his first encounter with Kant in 1844, Spencer asserted that "whenever, in later years, I have taken up Kant's Critique of Pure Reason, I have similarly stopped short after rejecting its primary proposition." Mansel fared no better than Kant, and was, in fact, dismissed by Spencer as a "Kantist" in The Principles of Psychology (56). It was through Mansel, as well as his friend G. H. Lewes, that Spencer acquired at least superficial knowledge of Kant. Although Spencer came into contact with Kant indirectly, scholars have linked his agnosticism to the critical philosophy.

Spencer's emphasis on humanity's direct perception of the external world seems to point to a similarity between his epistemological position and that of Hamilton's school of common sense. However,
Spencer insisted that Hamilton was wrong to assert that consciousness testifies to both the subject and object. In his eagerness to reject idealism, Spencer maintained that the consciousness of the object is much stronger than a consciousness of the subject. "Thus there is good ground for the belief that the cognition of the non-ego does not involve a simultaneous cognition of the ego-ground," Spencer declared, "which is strengthened by the remembrance that we can express cognition of objective being in words that involve no assertion of subjective being (the book exists), which we could not do did the one conception involve the other—and ground yet further strengthened by the consideration that we can perfectly well conceive an object to remain in existence after our own annihilation, which it would be impossible to do if the cognition of the subject and object were simultaneous, and consequently inseparable." Spencer declined to accept Hamilton's natural realism and espoused a position he referred to as realism, or the belief "in objects as external independent entities" (PP, 47, 58).

It should be recalled that Kant referred to the transcendental realist as one who asserts that time and space are given in themselves independently of human sensibility, and that nature is a thing-in-itself or an entity existing independently of human beings. This would seem to be Spencer's viewpoint, for he asserts that objects "remain in existence after our own annihilation," which affirms that nature (appearances) is not related to us and that it would subsist even if we no longer existed. Spencer does not even indicate that he is aware of the crucial difference between maintaining that objects remain in existence after the individual's annihilation, and affirming that objects would remain in existence after the extinction of the human race. Kant would contend that one must hold to the former declaration while rejecting the latter statement in order to maintain the transcendental idealist position. Spencer blurs the distinction between these two statements because of his transcendental realism. Clearly, in Kantian terms, Spencer's "realism" is but another form of Kant's transcendental realism since Spencer sees time, space, and nature as independent, self-existing entities.

It is not surprising that Spencer the empiricist should turn out to be a transcendental realist. Most Victorian thinkers were implicit transcendental realists. Herschel conceived of space as "a substantive reality independent of our minds" and contrasted this to Whewell's Kantian notion of space as a condition or form. Yet it can be argued that even Whewell misunderstood Kant's notion of nature as relation, for, although the former held that experience is not produced by a passive reception of sensations but rather by an interpretative act of perception, he did not believe that nature is transformed by our knowing it. Dingle claims that Whewell, like any other Victorian thinker of the 1850s, as-
sumed that the task of scientists was to study the world of material objects lying before them by "direct observation, by the use of instruments, and by experimental arrangement of conditions so as to facilitate observation and measurement" and that "none of these processes was conceived to change the world in any way." The prevailing philosophy conceived of correct Newtonian scientific method as a search for the universal causal laws that determine the course of events in a real external world. The situation was beautifully precise and clear-cut in its Cartesian duality. On the one side lay the world to be known and examined, the material or natural world, which stood off from the scientist and preserved an unalterable reality independent of the mind that observed it. On the other side were those minds that discovered what the material world contained and how it was ordered through the use of observation, experiment, and rational deduction. The Victorian scientist viewed nature as a self-existing, independent entity unrelated to human beings.35

Spencer did not believe that it was necessary to resort to Kant’s transcendental idealism in order to understand why we are unable to banish the ideas of space and time from our minds. "Our powerlessness to conceive the non-existence of Space," Spencer claimed, "requires no such hypothesis as that of Kant for its explanation" because the “experience-hypothesis explains all that the Kantian hypothesis is intended to explain." To Spencer, space was not a form of thought but rather a form or quality of nature revealed to us through experience. "If space be an universal form of the non-ego," Spencer declared, "it must produce some corresponding universal form in the ego—a form which, as being the constant element of all impressions presented in experience, and therefore of all impressions represented in thought, is independent of every particular impression; and consequently remains when every particular impression is banished" (PP, 54, 230).

During the early fifties, when Spencer wrote The Principles of Psychology, he was working on a Lamarckian evolutionary theory that depended on adaptation to changing circumstances and the inheritance of acquired characteristics.36 He explicitly admits his adherence to the "development hypothesis" in The Principles of Psychology and defines it as "the belief that Life under all its forms has arisen by a progressive, unbroken evolution; and through the immediate instrumentality of what we call natural causes." Spencer attempted to use the "development hypothesis" as further evidence that space and time were derived from human experience. The "development hypothesis," he claimed, "furnishes a solution of the controversy between the disciples of Locke and those of Kant" for "joined with this hypothesis, the simple universal law that the cohesion of psychical states is proportionate to the fre-
quency with which they have followed one another in experience, requires but to be supplemented by the law that habitual psychical successions entail some hereditary tendency to such successions, which, under persistent conditions, will become cumulative in generation after generation, to supply an explanation of all psychological phenomena; and, among others, of the so-called ‘forms of thought.’” In order to justify his rejection of Kant’s transcendental idealism, Spencer conceived of time and space as real qualities inhering in “external” natural objects, and he combined this notion with his stress on evolutionary progress as people’s ability to adjust continuously their internal relations (mind) to external relations (nature). “The manifestations of intelligence,” Spencer submitted, “are universally found to consist in the establishment of correspondences between relations in the organism and relations in the environment; and the entire development of intelligence is seen to be nothing else than the progress of such correspondences in Space, in Time, in Speciality, in Generality, in Complexity” \(PP, 482, 578\).

Spencer differed from the other empiricists like Mill because he seriously attempted to understand the origin of elements of knowledge considered by intuitionists to be a priori. Through his use of the “development hypothesis,” he was able to conceive of these a priori forms of thought as the product of race experiences that are a priori for the individual in the sense that they are given to him or her, but a posteriori for the entire series of individuals. \(^{37}\) However, Spencer still considers these a priori elements of knowledge to be the product of experience and the law of association \(PP, 526\). Spencer’s conception of a priori forms of thought is actually more physiological than epistemological, and this once again underlies the vast difference between Spencer and Kant. “In the sense, then, that there exist in the nervous system certain pre-established relations answering to relations in the environment,” Spencer asserted, “there is truth in the doctrine of ‘forms of thought’—not the truth for which its advocates contend, but a parallel truth. Corresponding to absolute external relations, there are developed in the nervous system absolute internal relations—relations that are developed before birth; that are antecedent to, and independent of, individual experiences; and that are automatically established along with the very first cognitions” \(PP, 583\).

Spencer often made attacks on the pure empiricist standpoint, as he denied that knowledge is derived wholly from the experiences of the individual. He saw himself as reconciling the theories of the pure empiricists and the transcendentalists, “neither of which is tenable by itself” \(PP, 580\). It is not difficult to misconstrue Spencer’s position and
see him as an a priori philosopher. Mill actually made the mistake of grouping Spencer with other a priori philosophers such as Hamilton, Whewell, and Kant in his *Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*. "I am taken aback at finding myself classed as in the above paragraph," Spencer protested, "considering that I have endeavored to show how all our conceptions, even down to those of Space and Time, are 'acquired'—considering that I have sought to interpret forms of thought (and by implication all intuitions) as products of organized and inherited experiences."38

**Launching the Synthetic Philosophy**

By 1858, when Mansel delivered his Bampton Lectures, Spencer had already lost his faith and developed an empiricist philosophy of science. However, he had not yet elaborated the connection between his epistemology and his philosophy of religion. His first statement on this issue was unveiled in Part One of *First Principles* (1862), "The Unknowable." *First Principles of a New System of Philosophy* was intended as the initial volume of Spencer's whole system of philosophy, and he encountered a great deal of difficulty getting his project off the ground. A multi-volume scientific synthesis was not considered commercially promising, and Spencer searched in vain for a job that would support him as he wrote. Then Spencer thought of a scheme whereby he would publish the work in installments appended to each number of the *Westminster Review* for which he would be paid regularly, but the plan fell through.39 In the autumn of 1859 Spencer hit upon the idea of issuing the system in a serial form to subscribers who would each pay 10s. yearly.40 From the income thereby received Spencer could establish an independent financial base from which to begin his ambitious project.

On 29 March 1860 Spencer issued a comprehensive program for his proposed system of philosophy. "The prospectus contained a general sketch of the scheme," Spencer reports, "the successive volumes being described; their divisions into parts; and the natures of the contents of these parts. The conception had at that time been so far developed in its general outlines that no deviation from the prospectus has been found needful in the course of execution—the divisions and subdivisions have been successively published in the order and form originally specified."41 Spencer's pride in the fact that the outline and conceptions of his entire program were never altered from their original statement has been viewed by others as a defect in his philosophy. It is a striking irony that a system whose content is evolution should be pre-
sent in a static form. But Spencer did base his whole system on the idea of evolution while simultaneously preventing his system from ever evolving.  

First Principles was begun in 1860, the first installment being issued in October. Thereafter, successive numbers appeared until June 1862, when the book was finished and published as a volume, despite Spencer's bouts of nervous exhaustion and insomnia.  

Spencer's First Principles was both the first major statement of agnosticism and the most comprehensive account of its basic tenets. Although Huxley had not yet coined the term agnosticism when First Principles was published, Spencer later accepted the term as an appropriate designation for his convictions, and Victorian thinkers regarded First Principles as the agnostic Bible. Despite Spencer's earlier antipathy toward Kant and Mansel, he found The Limits of Religious Thought quite useful for his work in First Principles. If it can be demonstrated that Spencer's work in this volume was significantly influenced by Mansel, then we are at least halfway to validating the thesis that the Kantian tradition is important for our understanding of agnosticism.

Spencer's avowed purpose in "The Unknowable" was to reconcile science and religion. He begins by pointing out that there is usually something held in common even between opposite beliefs. Spencer proposed to use this observation as a method for determining truth. "This method is to compare all opinions of the same genus," he stated, "to set aside as more or less discrediting one another those various special and concrete elements in which such opinions disagree; to observe what remains after the discordant constituents have been eliminated; and to find for this remaining constituent that abstract expression which holds true throughout its divergent modifications" (11). Spencer concluded that we must use this principle in searching for a common element that can reconcile science and religion: "Since these two great realities are constituents of the same mind, and respond to different aspects of the same Universe, there must be a fundamental harmony between them" [24]. He warned, however, that the common element of unity would be an abstract principle, for science could not be expected to recognize special religious doctrines such as the Trinity, while religion could take no cognizance of special scientific doctrines.

The Contradiction of Ultimate Ideas

The second chapter of "The Unknowable" was taken up with an analysis of "Ultimate Religious Ideas." Spencer began by discussing "the formation of symbolic conceptions, which inevitably arises as we pass
from small and concrete objects to large and to discrete ones,” and is “mostly a very useful, and indeed necessary, process” (27). This process of symbolization is the only way we can deal with heterogeneous objects or things that possess a vast number of attributes. We flatten them out, select a symbol that omits some attributes and, therefore, are left with an inadequate representation of such objects. Spencer points out that the process of symbolization is dangerous, for we can “habitually mistake our symbolic conceptions for real ones” (27).

Spencer then moved on to a discussion of the three different suppositions respecting the origin of the universe—atheism, pantheism, and theism. Mansel had examined each of these positions and found that reason was unable to justify any of them; Spencer’s argument is almost identical. Atheism or the self-existence of the universe, implies to Spencer a notion of that which has no beginning. Spencer dismisses this as inconceivable, unintelligible, and irrational. Pantheism, or self-creation, is as inconceivable as atheism for “to conceive self-creation, is to conceive potential existence passing into actual existence by some inherent necessity” (32). Finally, theism, or creation by an external agency, cannot be justified by reason, because to account for it “only the same three hypotheses are possible—self-existence, self-creation, and creation by external agency” (35). Spencer asserts that the three hypotheses do not stand for real thought but merely suggest vague symbols, and he thus links his comments on the formation of symbols to atheism, pantheism, and theism. All three “involve symbolic conceptions of the illegitimate and illusive kind” (36).

The contradictions in each hypothesis illustrate, for both Mansel and Spencer, reason’s inability to deal with the problem. “Thus these three different suppositions respecting the origin of things,” Spencer wrote, “verbally intelligible though they are, and severally seeming to their respective adherents quite rational, turn out, when critically examined, to be literally unthinkable” (35). Spencer was able to utilize Mansel’s argument in The Limits of Religious Thought as support for his chapter on “Ultimate Religious Ideas.” He not only modeled his strategy on Mansel’s position, but also lifted pages of quotes from the Bampton Lectures dealing with the contradictions inherent in viewing the absolute, the infinite, and the first cause in conjunction as attributes of the same being to prove his contention that the concept of an absolute and infinite first cause was an illegitimate symbol. “Here I cannot do better than avail myself of the demonstration which Mr. Mansel,” Spencer announced, “carrying out in detail the doctrine of Sir William Hamilton, has given in his ‘Limits of Religious Thought.’ And I gladly do this, not only because his mode of presentation cannot be
improved, but also because, writing as he does in defence of the current Theology, his reasoning will be the more acceptable to the majority of readers" (39).

The Bampton Lectures created an intellectual atmosphere quite advantageous to the aims of budding agnostics. Any fears that they would shock the Victorian public were dispelled by the fact that they espoused an epistemological position already discussed by a member of the establishment. The chapter on "Ultimate Religious Ideas" is concluded by the assertion that all religions share the ultimate religious truth that there is a mystery to be solved. Spencer rejected the different solutions to this mystery (such as atheism, pantheism, and theism) and went on to find the most basic level of agreement between them.

The next chapter of "The Unknowable" contains a discussion of "Ultimate Scientific Ideas." Since Spencer's aim is to reconcile science and religion, he finds that ultimate scientific ideas, like ultimate religious ideas, are all "representative of realities that cannot be comprehended" (66). In rapid succession, Spencer demonstrates the contradictions inherent in ultimate scientific ideas of space, time, matter, motion, and force. This was an extension of Mansel's attack on rational theology into the realm of scientific thought. In the case of time and space, Spencer asserted that they cannot be conceived as either entities, the attributes of entities, or nonentities. He continued on this theme by repeating his rejection of Kant as expressed in the earlier Principles of Psychology [49]. Spencer reiterated his transcendental realism but admitted, for the sake of his argument, that though we have an "insurmountable" belief in the objective reality of time and space due to our immediate knowledge of them, "we are unable to give any rational account of it" (50). Equally incomprehensible is the ultimate nature of matter. Spencer reached this conclusion after discussing our inability to conceive of matter as either infinitely divisible or finitely divisible, absolutely solid, or composed of atoms.

The fourth chapter of "The Unknowable" is entitled "The Relativity of All Knowledge." Whereas Spencer's earlier chapters resemble Mansel's rejection of the ontological approach to a philosophy of religion, this section parallels Mansel's view of the psychological method. "The demonstration of the necessarily relative character of our knowledge," Spencer claimed, "as deduced from the nature of intelligence, has been brought to its most definite shape by Sir William Hamilton" (74). Spencer therefore supported his contention that absolute knowledge is beyond us by quoting from Hamilton's "Philosophy of the Unconditioned." However, Spencer's argument developed into a rehash and quotation of Mansel's theory in The Limits of Religious Thought that every complete act of consciousness implies distinction and rela-
tion (82). Just as Mansel had pointed to the psychological approach as an explanation for the failure of the ontological approach, Spencer stated that "we not only learn by the frustration of all our efforts, that the reality underlying appearances is totally forever inconceivable by us; but we also learn why, from the very nature of our intelligence, it must be so" (98).

The final chapter of "The Unknowable" discussed the reconciliation between science and religion. Although the burden of the previous chapter concerned the unknowable nature of the thing-in-itself, Spencer insisted that we retain a consciousness of the actuality lying behind appearances, which in turn explains our indestructible belief in that actuality. "At the same time that by the laws of thought we are rigorously prevented from forming a conception of absolute existence," Spencer asserted, "we are by the laws of thought equally prevented from ridding ourselves of the consciousness of absolute existence" (96). This consciousness of the absolute was described by Spencer as indefinite, yet positive. He maintained that, though it was impossible "to give this consciousness any qualitative or quantitative expression whatever, it is not the less certain that it remains with us as a positive and indestructible element of thought" (91).

Spencer's agnosticism may strike us as being peculiar because he agreed with Mansel that an intellectual limit implied the existence of something beyond. Mansel asserted that "the existence of a limit to our powers of thought is manifested by the consciousness of contradiction, which implies at the same time an attempt to think and an inability to accomplish that attempt." If we stop here, the position articulated is pure neutral agnosticism. But Mansel continued by adding that "a limit is necessarily conceived as a relation between something within and something without itself; and thus the consciousness of a limit of thought implies, though it does not directly present to us, the existence of something of which we do not and cannot think" [LRT, 62]. This positive view of the significance of intellectual limitation is also part of Spencer's standpoint.

In fact, Spencer took Mansel to task for not stressing strongly enough that human beings possess a positive consciousness of the absolute. During a later controversy with the Positivist Frederic Harrison, Spencer reiterated the point. "For whereas," Spencer declared, "in common with his teacher Sir William Hamilton, Dean Mansel alleged that our consciousness of the Absolute is merely 'a negation of conceivability'; I have, over a space of ten pages, contended that our consciousness of the Absolute is not negative but positive, and is the one indestructible element of consciousness 'which persists at all times, under all circumstances, and cannot cease until consciousness ceases.'"
Spencer went on to distinguish between "Comtean Agnosticism which says that 'Theology and ontology alike end in the Everlasting No with which science confronts all their assertions,'" and his brand of agnosticism "set forth in First Principles, which, along with its denials, emphatically utters an Everlasting Yes."  

It is this positive quality of Spencer’s agnosticism which, to him, is the basis of the reconciliation between science and religion, for both pointed to a mysterious power underlying phenomena. "Common sense asserts the existence of a reality," Spencer affirmed, "Objective Science proves that this reality cannot be what we think it; Subjective Science shows why we cannot think of it as it is, and yet are compelled to think of it as existing; and in this assertion of a Reality utterly inscrutable in nature, Religion finds an assertion essentially coinciding with her own" ([FPNSP, 99]). This, then, is the abstract element that both science and religion hold in common and for which Spencer has been searching throughout "The Unknowable."

Religion and the Unknowable

If we compare First Principles with Principles of Psychology, both of them epistemological works, we can perceive the debt Spencer owed to Mansel. There is no notion in The Principles of Psychology that ultimate scientific ideas are plagued by contradictions. Space and time seem to be completely intelligible on the experience hypothesis. There is nothing in the earlier book vaguely resembling the stress on Hamilton’s "philosophy of the conditioned" in First Principles. All of this points to the conclusion that Spencer saw in Mansel’s Limits of Religious Thought a number of arguments that he could easily adapt for his own use. Spencer undoubtedly borrowed from Mansel the strategy of building antinomies in order to demonstrate the impotence of reason in religious affairs and the emphasis on relation and distinction as conditions of thought. Although it would be an exaggeration to claim that Spencer’s personal values were profoundly transformed by the Bampton Lectures, Mansel did supply him with the tools for building an elaborate agnostic epistemology that was meant to be the foundation stone for the whole Synthetic Philosophy.

Spencer’s use of Manselian epistemology to ground his reconciliation of science and religion has been criticized for a number of reasons. The major complaint has been that, in placing science in the realm of the knowable and religion in the world of the unknowable, Spencer’s reconciliation was false, unsuccessful, and inconsistent. Science suffers in that ultimate scientific ideas cannot be rationally established or even established as rational. Indeed, Spencer’s position appears to be
unusually self-destructive in that *First Principles* proposes to base a whole system of knowledge on inconceivable ideas.

More common is the charge that Spencer’s reconciliation is brought about at the cost of the power of religion. Spencer believed that his reconciliation protected both science and religion by restricting them to their proper spheres of influence:

Gradually as the limits of possible cognition are established, the causes of conflict will diminish. And a permanent peace will be reached when Science becomes fully convinced that its explanations are proximate and relative; while Religion becomes fully convinced that the mystery it contemplates is ultimate and absolute. Religion and Science are therefore necessary correlative. As already hinted, they stand respectively for those two antithetical modes of consciousness which cannot exist asunder. A known cannot be thought of apart from an unknown. (FPNSP, 107)

However, though safe from attack by science, religion had lost much in Spencer’s scheme of things. Revelation, which Mansel used to build a new philosophy of religion when he reached the limits of thought and knowledge, had no place in Spencer’s thought. Neither did Mansel’s stress on personal communion with God. In fact, Spencer would not allow for any type of theology, be it derived from a revised psychological approach or not. Furthermore, Spencer protested Mansel’s jump from the unknowableness of God to God as person (FPNSP, 108). Sheldon charged that Spencer’s plan achieved a reconciliation only because “if the program should be strictly carried out, there would not be enough of religion left to seriously antagonize science or anything else.”

While religion lost the personality of God and revelation in Spencer’s reconciliation, science had everything to gain. Although science had to admit to the existence of the Unknowable, it was now free to explain the world purely in terms of matter and motion. Religion was relegated to the sphere of the Unknowable, Cockshut maintains, so that the study of the knowable might proceed unhampered.

Spencer’s resolution of the conflict between science and religion seems so one-sided in setting such favorable terms for science that a number of scholars have seriously doubted the sincerity of Spencer’s avowed religious sentiments. Copleston denies that Spencer’s Unknowable represents “a genuinely religious element” and declares that it is a mistake to compare it “with the Christian doctrine of God’s incomprehensibility.” Metz echoes Copleston’s point in his declaration that Spencer’s Unknowable is in reality “only a decoration of the façade, intended to give to the structure an appearance less repellent to
religious minds.” Sheldon views Spencer’s system as materialist and “antitheistic in tenor.” Furthermore, many have seen Spencer’s affirmation of the existence of the Unknowable to be a blatant contradiction of the very premises of his thought, and they therefore feel justified in questioning the validity of Spencer’s theism. Spencer’s inconsistency stems from a scepticism that is so destructive that he cannot affirm anything positive about God, including his existence. Even fellow unbelievers were somewhat leery of Spencer’s theism. J. A. Froude, upon receiving the prospectus for the whole project, which included a description of *First Principles*, was puzzled by Spencer’s aim. “Mansel says the absolute is the unknowable,” Froude wrote to Spencer in 1860. “How by following all his reasonings you are to establish a belief in it, I am curious to see” (*LLHS*, 97).

But despite Spencer’s attempt to remove from religion a great deal of Christian doctrine, and despite his apparent inconsistency in affirming the existence of a supreme being, both Spencer’s genuine religiousness and his reverence for the Unknowable must be recognized. It is close to impossible to prove the religious sincerity of any thinker, particularly in the case of a cerebral and unemotional figure like Spencer, who had a reputation for heterodoxy. However, there seems to be no good reason for doubting his public statements on his religious sentiment and belief in the existence of the Unknowable, since they are confirmed by private letters to friends and are important components of his whole system.

In his *Autobiography* Spencer recalled his determination to begin his grand project with a preface that would set forth his views on ultimate metaphysical and theological questions and would thereby remove any suspicions that he was presenting a materialist philosophy. “My expectation,” Spencer wrote, “was that having duly recognized this repudiation of materialism, joined with the assertion that any explanation which may be reached of the order of phenomena as manifested to us throughout the Universe, must leave the Ultimate Mystery unsolved, readers, and by implication critics, would go on to consider the explanation proposed.” Spencer hoped that critics would accept his sincere claim that conceiving of God as the Unknowable was not a disguise for his materialism or atheism but in fact represented a sophisticated version of theism. To Spencer, the choice was not between a notion of personality (whether regulative or not) and something lower, but rather “between personality and something higher,” for he believed that it was possible for there to be a mode of existence that entirely transcended what he considered the anthropomorphic conception of being. Assigning attributes to God that are derived from human nature, such as personality, in reality degrades God in Spencer’s eyes. Religion
is barred from possessing any knowledge of God, and Spencer calls any attempt to know God impious [FPNSP, 109–10]. Spencer’s God is thus a completely abstract, impersonal, unknowable entity that gives life and reality to appearances. He was usually very careful about how he talked about God, because to make any assertions regarding God’s nature conflicts with Spencer’s anti-anthropomorphic agnosticism. However, he sometimes used terms drawn from nature, such as “Infinite and Eternal Energy” to describe his deity. 51

On 9 November 1882 John Fiske spoke on “Evolution and Religion” at the farewell dinner held in New York in honor of Herbert Spencer’s trip to the United States. Fiske became one of Spencer’s chief spokesmen on the theological left wing of American Protestantism in the sixties when he turned against the Calvinist theology of his youth and embraced the new Spencerian philosophy. In his speech Fiske declared that “Mr. Spencer’s work on the side of religion will be seen to be no less important than his work on the side of science, when once its religious implications shall have been fully and consistently unfolded.” For Fiske, Spencer’s evolutionary system asserted, “as the widest and deepest truth which the study of nature can disclose to us, that there exists a Power to which no limit in time or space is conceivable, whether they be what we call material or what we call spiritual phenomena, are manifestations of this infinite and eternal Power. Now, this assertion, which Mr. Spencer has so elaborately set forth as a scientific truth,—nay, as the ultimate truth of science, as the truth upon which the whole structure of human knowledge philosophically rests,—this assertion is identical with the assertion of an eternal Power, not ourselves, that forms the speculative basis of all religions.” 52

Spencer was delighted with Fiske’s speech, and when he returned to England he wrote a letter, dated 24 November 1882, which emphasized the significance of Fiske’s theme. “I wanted to say how successful and how important I thought was your presentation of the dual aspect, theological and ethical, of the Evolution doctrine,” Spencer declared. “It is above all things needful that the people should be impressed with the truth that the philosophy offered to them does not necessitate a divorce from their inherited conceptions concerning religion and morality, but merely a purification and exaltation of them.” 53

The religious and theological dimension was absolutely essential to Spencer’s whole evolutionary scheme. It was the existence of the Unknowable which guaranteed that beneath the seeming waste of the evolutionary process lay an economy, order, purpose, and harmony. Spencer’s life was devoted to the attempt to prove scientifically that his faith in the benevolence of natural processes was not misplaced.
Beatrice Webb reported that by the time she came to know Spencer his "first principles" had become "a highly developed dogmatic creed with regard to the evolution of life. What remained to be done was to prove by innumerable illustrations how these principles or 'laws' explained the whole of the processes of nature, from the formation of a crystal to the working of the party system within a democratic state."\(^{54}\) Spencer's enterprise was as much religious as scientific, and in his system Mansel's epistemology became the basis of a brand of agnosticism raised to the position of a theistic concept.

Spencer's *First Principles* appeared at a critical point in the intellectual development of Huxley, Tyndall, Stephen, and Clifford. By effectively using Mansel for his own ends, Spencer showed the others how the notion of the limits of knowledge could be turned against Christian orthodoxy. Mansel's approach to epistemology became enshrined into the very heart of agnostic thought.