

*SPENCER'S PHILOSOPHY OF THE
UNKNOWABLE.*

An examination of the philosophy of the unknowable, as expounded by Herbert Spencer. By WILLIAM W. LACY. Philadelphia, Benjamin F. Lacy, 1883. 4+235 p. 8°.

THIS is a work that will interest the student of our American civilization more than the student of philosophy. A man of extraordinary keenness and vigor of thought, plainly a born speculator, but utterly ignorant concerning some of the most elementary matters of physical science, devotes more than two hundred pages of close and ingenious argument to the task of refuting Mr. Spencer's well-known doctrine of the unknowable. The dead horse is flogged with a persistence that astonishes the reader, who has so often, ere this, seen the hopeless task tried without success. For the unknowable is once for all beyond the reach of harm, in the unapproachable regions of the unmeaning; and nothing that we can do or say has any sort of effect on its blessed repose. One might as well hunt snarks as to refute this portion of the Spencerian philosophy. If any refutations had or could have any value for the purpose, we could find enough of them in Mr. Spencer's own writings to content anybody. Quite recently, for example, at the close of an essay on the future of religion, Mr. Spencer has assured us that the 'scientific man' is possessed of an "analysis of knowledge, which, while forcing him to agnosticism, yet continually prompts him to imagine some solution of the great enigma which he knows cannot be solved;" and that this same man, "though suspecting that 'explanation' is a word without meaning when applied to this ultimate reality, yet feels compelled to think there must be an explanation." So that, to turn Mr. Spencer's confession into Saxon, his knowledge makes him feel pretty sure that he is talking nonsense about the unknowable, and yet forces him to keep on talking this nonsense. And this state of soul it is which the doctrine of the unknowable expresses; and the said doctrine is for Mr. Spencer not only very deeply religious, but also the last word of philosophy. Of course, when a man can put all this into print, over his own name, he has really done as much as any living creature can do in the way of refuting his own doctrine of the unknowable; and we can only thank him for his trouble. But surely we are absolved from writing books about this aspect of Mr. Spencer's views, at all events, however much his other views may be worth study or acceptance or refutation. Such passages being

no new thing in Mr. Spencer's books, we therefore look with very languid interest on lengthy refutations like the present one, for we are convinced that some doctrines can well take care of themselves. Moreover, in its form, this refutation belongs to the past age of controversy, the age that culminated in Mill's 'Examination of Sir William Hamilton's philosophy,' — a time of far narrower range in philosophic study than our own, — a time whose problems were fewer and less fruitful, — a time, in short, when to read one or two books, and to show great ingenuity in close logical fighting, might have made any one a match in certain questions for even a great scholar and thinker like Mill. Such discussions we no longer desire. We read more in philosophy, we go to school to more teachers, we think of more problems; or else we have to be content to rank as mere amateurs in philosophy. Our author, like many other students of Spencer in this country, must, for all that we here see, be classed among the amateurs. Philosophy seems to mean to him a very few problems and lines of thought. If it were not so, how could he be content with such a form and range as this for his book? — a mere disputation, close, generally logical in form (save in the portions that touch upon physical science), abstract, dry, ingenious, laborious, but in outcome almost utterly fruitless.

Yet we said that the book ought to interest the student of our American civilization; and so it ought. Here is a man of no small native power, of no small application: he goes to the trouble, and doubtless to the expense, of printing this elaborate disputation of a purely theoretical question; he appeals, and can expect to appeal, only to a few, viz., to the special students of philosophy; he appeals to them with all the quiet assurance of a man who knows what he is about. 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 of accuracy in form. The work is that of a mature thinker who has considered long and well. Now, however, this man has occasion to talk of the first law of motion. This law puzzles him. If a boy, he tells us, sets a ball going by hitting it with a bat, he himself is quite able to see why the ball is pushed by the bat so long as the bat is in contact with it, but thereafter he is perplexed. Why does the ball keep on moving? "Motion, in the absence of propulsion, is inconceivable;" that is, when the ball ceases to be pushed, it ought

to stop. But since, in fact, it keeps on, there must be a cause for this mysterious behavior. The cause the author thus describes: "Little as is known of the action of air and the ethereal substance, . . . and novel as is the thought of them as continuers of motion, no violence is done to the current understanding of their nature by imagining them as in the act of urging forward an object enveloped in them. The object cannot be made to move without causing much that is before it to move in the same direction, and much also to be dissipated laterally. Thus by opening a path is resistance lessened. . . . Now consider what must simultaneously take place in the rear. A space must be vacated by the object, and as quickly filled up by an in-rushing from all directions except that of the object. To the confluence of forces so formed, there is no outlet except in the direction of the object: consequently this direction they take, impelling the object forward" (pp. 59, 60). Thus it is that the ball moves: the air pushes it. It follows, of course, that no body would follow the first law of motion in a vacuum, and that air not only resists a body's motion, but also helps it to move; and so, in company with the various 'less stable substances' that exist in space, and of which, as we learn, 'there must be many besides heat and light,' the air or some other gas forms the necessary condition for the continuance of any motion. Much more talk of a similar sort follows, about inertia and gravity and like traditional conceptions, for which our author has new explanations, quite as clear and satisfactory as the foregoing.

Now, such passages illustrate the truth that the possibility of Keeley-motor investors also illustrates, a truth painful but indubitable; viz., that high intelligence, coupled with considerable learning, does as yet, in our enlightened land, neither prevent a man from having the wildest notions about the simplest matters of elementary physical science, nor enable him prudently to conceal his ignorance. There are shrewd and educated men to be found, who will invest money in impossible motors; and there are ingenious and not unlearned men to be found, who, like our author, will talk in such confused and ignorant fashion about the simplest matters of science, which ought to have been made clear to them in their school-boy days: yet about other matters they do speak like men of sense. Their defect is not lack of mental power, but simply gross ignorance. Such speech at this time of day is disheartening. But possibly students of science, and more especially teachers of science, may

do well to consider occasionally, in view of such ingenious rubbish as this, what a work they have yet to do, before the public mind is so well trained in elementary conceptions that nonsense like the foregoing shall be not merely nonsense, but impossible to men of our author's intelligence. Good elementary instruction in physical science is certainly very much needed; and here is an illustration of the need, — an extraordinary mind, condemned to seemingly hopeless error on important questions of the most elementary sort, all for the lack of a few hours of sensible teaching in boyhood or since. Meanwhile let the case serve as a warning to those who imagine that our American public is to receive useful instruction in elementary physical science from the now popular works of the great teacher of the evolution-philosophy. Here is a very good student indeed, diligent, logical, and ingenious. What philosopher could hope for a better? He has carefully studied Mr. Spencer's works, and this is what he has got out of them. If, he tells us, an object were pushed into an absolute vacuum with any velocity whatever, we are obliged by the necessities of our thought to suppose that this object "would therefore be stopped by the withdrawal of external influence." Such, Mr. Spencer may notice, is the effect of a use of the 'universal postulate' by a very devout student, who seems to accept so much of the Spencerian system without reserve. The effect of further doses of the 'universal postulate' upon our popular thought in America can only be conjectured. Deliver us from it, merciful powers!

It is only just to add, that Mr. Lacy, while rejecting the doctrine of the unknowable, is not opposed to the philosophic foundation of the positive Spencerian doctrines viewed generally, and finds his objections "not incompatible with estimation of the 'Synthetic philosophy' as perhaps the noblest speculative product of a single mind." We cannot do better than to leave the product and the worshipper in this happy attitude towards each other.

GEOLOGICAL SURVEY OF ALABAMA.

Geological survey of Alabama. Report for the years 1881 and 1882, embracing an account of the agricultural features of the state. By EUGENE ALLEN SMITH, Ph.D., state geologist. Montgomery, W. D. Brown & Co., pr., 1883. 615 p. 8°.

THE law organizing the geological survey of Alabama requires from the state geologist, among other things, a report upon the agricultural resources of the state; and the present