

## Positivism

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### Introduction

Positivism means the doctrine and movement founded by the French philosopher Auguste Comte in the nineteenth century and also the general philosophical view of knowledge proposed by Francis Bacon, John Locke, Isaac Newton and contemporary thinkers like Moritz Schlick, Ernst Mach, Rudolf Carnap and others which assert that genuine knowledge should be based on observation and advanced by experiment. In the social sciences positivism is associated with three assumptions; first that knowledge should be founded on experience alone; secondly the belief that the methods of natural sciences are directly applicable to the social world and on the basis of its laws about social phenomena can be established; and thirdly the axiological principle that normative statements do not have the status of knowledge and maintains a rigid separation between facts and values. Bacon believed that philosophers should not attempt to wander beyond the 'limits of nature'. He held that there are ultimate facts that should be accepted on the basis of experience, and he applied the adjective 'positive' to these inexplicable facts and to the doctrine based on them. Gradually the method of natural sciences which relied on observation and experience came to be termed positive. Saint-Simon applied the term positive in his *Essay on the Science of Man* to the sciences which were based on facts which have been observed and

analyzed. Comte believed that the function of theories in science is to co-ordinate observed facts rather than to explain them in terms of causes and to emphasize this view he used the term positive. His Positive Philosophy later came to be called Positivism. In the following sections we shall concentrate on the positivism of Comte

### **Life and Works of Auguste Comte**

Isidore Auguste Marie Francois Xavier Comte, the founder of Positivism was born at Montpellier, France in 1798 to a devout Catholic family with royalist sympathies. However, when he was fourteen he had ceased to believe in God and also abandoned the royalist sympathies of the family. He studied in the Ecole Polytechnique of Paris and later became a teacher there. In 1817 Comte became secretary to the French utopian socialist Saint-Simon, from whom Comte got certain radical ideas of social reform which animated his entire life. In April 1826, Comte began teaching a Course of Positive Philosophy. About this time he had a temporary mental breakdown. After recovering, he was appointed instructor and examiner in mathematics at the Ecole polytechnique. He resumed the Course of Positive Philosophy in 1829. Comte also published an Elementary Treatise on Analytic Geometry (1843), the Philosophical Treatise on Popular Astronomy (1844) and The Discourse on the Positive Spirit. In 1845, Comte met Clothilde de Vaux and fell madly in love with her and married her, but within a short time she died. Following Clothilde's death, an event which brought him close to insanity, Comte began to idolize her. The next year, Comte chose the Evolution of Humanity as the new topic for his public discourse; this was an occasion to lay down the premises of what would become the new Religion of Humanity. In 1848 he founded the Positivist Society, and published the General View of Positivism, as well as the Positivist Calendar. In

1849, he founded the Religion of Humanity. Between the years 1851 and 1854 he published the four-volume *System of Positive Polity*, and the *Catechism of Positive Religion*. On Sept 5, 1857, worn out from his intellectual labors and personal tragedies Comte died surrounded by his followers. He was buried in the Père-Lachaise cemetery, where his Brazilian followers erected a statue of Humanity in 1983. The inscription on his tombstone reads '*Love as the Principle, Order as the Means, Progress as the Goal*'.

### **Comte's Concern and Aim**

The point of departure for Comte's thought was the experience of the internal contradictions of the society of his age. The French revolution had fractured the unity that existed in the French Society. So Comte's main concern throughout his life was resolving the political social and moral problems caused by the French Revolution. He believed that many of the contradictions were because of the transition that was taking place from the theological-military past in its Catholic feudal form towards an inevitable scientific-industrial type of society. So far the scientific mode of thought has not completely triumphed over its main rivals and so there was intellectual anarchy, which in turn produces social anarchy. Comte believed that the only way to put an end to the crisis was to bring together the 'positive ideas' of the time that are scientific, free from the bonds of traditional theology and metaphysics. He believed that a system of scientific ideas should govern the new social order which will provide unity and cohesion to modern society just as the system of theological ideas governed the social order of the past.

Comte's ambition was to found a naturalistic science of society capable of explaining the past of humankind and

to predict its future by applying the same methods of enquiry which had proved successful in the study of nature, namely observation, experimentation and comparison. Comte coined the term 'sociology' to designate the science which would synthesize all positive knowledge, explain the dynamics of society, and guide the formation of the positivist society.

### **Philosophy of Comte**

According to Comte in order to understand the true value and character of the positive philosophy, we must take a general view of the progress that human history has made so far. This development has followed a definite pattern and a fundamental law. The law is that each branch of knowledge progresses successively through three different theoretical conditions: the theological, or fictitious; the metaphysical or abstract; and the scientific or positive. These three methods of philosophizing, that is making reality comprehensible are incompatible<sup>1</sup>.

The necessary starting-point of the development of human understanding is the theological stage. It searches for first and final causes and absolute knowledge. Phenomena are explained by reference to the acts of supernatural agencies. The highest point of development of the theological stage is reached when all phenomena are conceived as the effect of a single deity. Comte divides the theological stage into three:

- a) Animism- in which everyday objects were turned into items of religious purpose and worship, with godlike qualities.
- b) Polytheism - Explanation of things through the use of many gods.
- c) Monotheism - Attributing all to a single, supreme deity.

This period started with the beginning of human history and was dominated by priests and the military and the dominant social unit was the family.

In the metaphysical stage the supernatural beings are replaced by abstract forces and underlying entities to which all phenomena are referred. The highest form of development of this stage was when all phenomena were referred to one single entity: Nature. It is a speculative doctrine on the 'essences' and 'causes' of phenomena. The middle ages were predominantly metaphysical; the basic social unit was the state and was dominated by churchmen and lawyers.

At the third stage, the positive stage, the human mind recognizes the impossibility of acquiring absolute knowledge concerning the origin and purpose of the universe, and applies itself to the study of the laws of the invariable relations of succession and resemblance of phenomena. This science takes reasoning and observation as the means of knowledge. What is now meant by an explanation of facts is simply the establishment of a connection. This is the modern industrial society and the social unit is the whole of humanity and should be guided by industrial administrators and scientists.

### **The Classification of the Sciences and Philosophy of Science**

In *The Positive Philosophy* Comte examines the different sciences and their logical relations to one another. His position is that the most general and inclusive sciences were required first, as the logically necessary preparation for the more particular ones. Mathematics, as the abstract or fundamental study of the forms of existence common to all things, is presupposed for the successful study of

astronomy and physics, and physics is needed for the development of chemistry. Biology, in like manner, depends upon chemistry for its emergence as a lawful science. Biology, though logically depending upon chemistry, has laws of its own because living beings behave very differently from nonliving chemical entities. In the same way, human society is far less general than the biological realm as a whole, though society clearly presupposes and depends on the biological laws. Thus Comte rejected methodological reductionism of higher sciences to the lower, despite the fact that the former presuppose the latter. This means that despite the complete grounding of sociology in biology, the laws of human society will inevitably have their own autonomy. The positive scientific study of society is what he calls "sociology," which he believed would be the "final science." Each higher level science adds to the knowledge content of the science or sciences on the levels below, thus enriching this content by successive specialization. This ordering provides first of all for the unity of the sciences, as successive branches from a common stem, and secondly for the recognition of the historical emergence of the distinctive methods of different empirical subjects. According to Comte's classification of the sciences sociology had to wait for the maturing of all prior disciplines to emerge as an independent science. The crowning science, the most complex and consequently the last to emerge as an empirical domain of invariant lawfulness, is sociology. Sociology and positive philosophy finally will provide the much needed reorganization of politics, ethics, and religion.

Comte, because of the classification of sciences he makes, could also be considered the founder of philosophy of science in the modern sense. Comte's philosophy of science is based on a systematic difference between method and doctrine. Method is superior to doctrine:

scientific doctrines change but the value of science lies in its methods. The positive method of different sciences depends on the nature of the sciences to which it is applied: in astronomy it is observation, in physics experimentation, in biology comparison. Finally, his classification also holds the key to a theory of technology. According to Comte there is a systematic connection between complexity and modifiability: the more complex a phenomenon is, the more modifiable it is. The order of nature is a modifiable order. Human action takes place within the limits fixed by nature and consists in replacing the natural order by an artificial one. Comte's education as an engineer had made him quite aware of the links between science and its applications, which he summarized in an oft-quoted slogan: 'From science comes prevision, from prevision comes action'.

"There will be few students of the social sciences now who have even read Comte or know much about him. But the number of those who have absorbed most of the important elements of his system through the intermediation of a few very influential representatives of his tradition is very high indeed."<sup>2</sup>

### **Sociology of Comte**

The goal of Comte's intellectual endeavor was to develop a science of society that could explain the past, organize the present and predict the future. Initially, he called this new science social physics, and later, 'sociology.' Comte stressed the necessity of separating facts from values during the course of scientific inquiry and dreamed about the ideal society ruled by scientists with decisions made on the basis of scientific evidence. Comte wanted his new science, sociology, not only be of academic interest, but also something that should benefit society and contribute to the improvement of the quality of life.

Comte saw unity of humanity as the fundamental necessity of the time. And the first condition for this unity is the subordination of the intellect to the heart. The desired and required unity requires an objective basis, existing independently in the external world. This basis consists according to him is in the laws or order of the phenomena by which humanity is regulated. As soon as the human intellect is capable of grasping these laws, it becomes possible for the feeling of love to exercise a controlling influence over our discordant tendencies. The order existing in the external world is objective in that it is not an order we can choose; it exists independently of ourselves. In short, realizing the existence of this order as a pre-condition is what enables us to overcome our "discordant tendencies". A purely subjective unity, without any objective basis, would be simply impossible. Self-love is deeply implanted in our nature, and when left to itself is far stronger than feeling for fellow human beings. The social instincts can gain mastery over selfishness only by the factors that exist independently of us in the external world. They exert an influence which at the same time checks the power of the selfish instincts.

Comte wanted sociology to be the integrating science of all other sciences that deal with the external nature of human life in society. The possibility of moral unity of individuals and society depends upon the necessity of recognizing our subjection to an external power which can discipline our instincts. The recognition of an external power that limits our possibilities is what makes a society possible. Absolute freedom is anarchy, and it is unworkable. The true path of human progress lies in diminishing the vacillation, inconsistency, and discordance of our designs by furnishing external motives for our intellectual, moral and practical powers. An important function of philosophy is to criticize nature in



a positive spirit which would help in our struggle to become more perfect.

### **The Religion of Humanity**

At the heart of Auguste Comte's program for resolving the 'crisis' of industrial society was a project for 'positivising' religion by instituting a religion of humanity. There was an urgent need for a fundamental consensus in the post revolutionary industrial society for a new form of spiritual power with a new ideal as an object of devotion to bind the society together. In other words there was a need for a new religion. Comte believed that the positive religion would provide the scientific-humanist equivalent to the systematic theology of the Middle Ages and could serve as the intellectually unifying basis of the new industrial order.

During what he termed as his second career Comte the historian and philosopher of positivism became the high priest of the 'Religion of Humanity'. His passionate love for Clothilde de Vaux and her death had profound influence on his life and gave an insight into the true source of happiness and changed his whole conception of life. The change in his personal life manifested in his desire to transform his philosophy into a new religion. The function of religion is to gather up and organize human life. So it must deal equally with all parts of human nature; namely, thought activity and feeling. Thus religion requires first of all a scheme or synthesis as a basis of belief, i.e. a creed, secondly a set of institutions and principles to discipline and guide one's action, a code of conduct; and thirdly a set of habits to cultivate the emotions and educate the heart, a cult. A creed is a set of beliefs dealing with the meaning, purpose and destiny of human life. The code of conduct obligates the believers to behave in a certain manner because of what

they believe. There must be an object of devotion and duty capable of being invoked and worshiped, which can bring forth in the believer feelings of security and providence. The human race itself, real and ideal at the same time, including the past, present and future was Comte's object of worship and devotion. This grand existence, "*Grand Etre*" as he termed it is capable of invoking devotion. Now if the object of one's worship is humanity itself, Comte believes that this ideal can impel the believer to love and sacrifice for the sake of humanity. Humanity as the great ideal and object of worship needs our help unlike the ideal beings/Being of traditional religions which are omnipotent and thus does not need human beings.

We in the present live in close proximity with the great minds of the dead who served humanity and in the company of the great human beings to come whom we shall never meet. When we honor those who have served humankind in extraordinary ways in the past, we realize that we too are working for the same ideals for which they devoted and gave their lives. The grand conception, that the whole of humanity lives in communion with all the great human beings who have died and yet to come, has great ennobling power. Comte regards the *Grand Etre*, Humanity or Mankind as composed solely of those who, in every age and in variety of position have played their part worthily in life. The *Grand Etre* in its completeness includes not only great human beings but also all sentient beings which have helped and contributed to humanity.

For Comte the good of human race is the ultimate standard of right and wrong and moral discipline consists in avoiding all conduct injurious to the general good. In every religion there must be cult, prayer and ritual. Comte advocates 'prayer' as a mere outpouring of feeling; it is

not addressed to the *Grand Etre* or collective humanity. The honor to collective Humanity is reserved for the public celebrations. The objects of private adoration are the mother the wife and the daughter, representing the past, the present and the future and calling to exercise the social sentiments, veneration, attachment, and kindness. The public cult that Comte advocates is meant to honor and glorify Humanity itself; to celebrate the various ties among human beings, and the various stages in the evolution of humankind. He named the months in his calendar after the great benefactors of humanity like Moses, Homer, Aristotle, Archimedes, and Caesar. He also prescribes nine sacraments to mark the different transitions in life like Presentation, initiation, admission, destination, marriage, transformation and incorporation. Death he considers to be a transformation a passage from objective existence on this earth to living in the memory of our fellow humans. The last incorporation into the *Grand Etre* would come after death following a favorable judgment for those worthy of remembrance. He also envisaged a clergy for the positivist religion who will exercise spiritual power in the positive society.

All philosophy and science, all human activity in general should help human beings to live in harmony with the true nature and real conditions of humanity. Hence Religion simply means development on the true lines of the real facts; in other words, Progress on the basis of Order. This is the meaning of Auguste Comte's profound aphorism: "Man grows more and more religious."

### **Later Developments of Positivism**

Historically speaking Comte's philosophy failed to reform society the way he envisaged because it was too idealistic, and his dream of merging science, morality and government was unrealistic. However positivist ideas

continued to influence thinking. The later development of positivism in France is best exemplified in the sociology of Emile Durkheim. Durkheim which extended scientific rationalism to human conduct and proposed a set of methodological principles encapsulated by the famous injunction to 'treat social facts as things'; reject common preconceptions in favor of objective definitions, explain a social fact by another social fact only another social fact, distinguish efficient cause from function and normal from pathological social states, etc.

John Stuart Mill, the 19th-century English philosopher could be considered as one of the outstanding Positivists of his century. In his *System of Logic* he developed a thoroughly empiricist theory of knowledge and of scientific reasoning. British philosopher and sociologist Herbert Spencer is considered the systematizer of Positivism according to the principles of evolution.

### **Logical Positivism**

Positivism later made its reappearance under the title 'logical positivism', which arose during the 1920's mainly in the universities of Vienna in Austria in a group called the Vienna Circle. The Vienna Circle consisted of philosophers, mathematicians and scientists like Mortiz Schlick, Ernst Mach, Rudolf Carnap, Carl Hempel and Otto Neurath. The Logical positivists and Logical Empiricists tried a synthesis of Humean empiricism, Comtean positivism and logical analysis in an effort to get rid of metaphysics for ever. The logical positivists wanted to unify all science under a framework of physical laws and scientific method for analyzing the world and gaining knowledge. They incorporated David Hume's argument that there are only two types of meaningful propositions which are either about "relations of ideas" or "matters of fact". This along with Ludwig Wittgenstein's

claim in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* that a proposition is a picture of reality gave rise to the verifiability principle. According to Positivists the verifiability test would determine whether statements were meaningful or not by judging whether they were factual.

The dominance of positivism met with oppositions of two kinds, antipositivist and post-positivist. Anti-positivists argue that the natural and the human sciences are ontologically and logically incompatible and so the very idea of an explanatory science of society is impossible. Proponents of hermeneutics, interpretative sociology, postmodernism, deconstruction and Feminism maintain that human practices, institutions and belief are inherently meaningful, meanings constituted by the understandings that participants have of them so causal accounts social behavior cannot be constructed. The task of human studies therefore cannot be to specify universal laws of human behavior but to make the behavior intelligible by interpreting in relation to subjective intentions.

## Conclusion

Today there are not many proponents of the positivism of Comte or who share in his belief that society can be improved through positive science or that all sciences can be unified under the umbrella of what he called sociology. However the methodology of positivism, its reliance on facts and the attempt to explain the *how* rather than the *why* are still the guiding principles of contemporary science. In spite of the drawbacks his ideal of the well being of humanity and commitment to altruism is worth preserving today when people seem to be forgetting human solidarity because of sectarian manipulations and private agenda. According to Isaiah Berlin Comte is worthy of commemoration and praise

because of the fact that ...he has done his work too well. For Comte's views have affected the categories of our thought more deeply than is commonly supposed. Our view of the natural sciences, of the material basis of cultural evolution, of all that we call progressive, rational, enlightened, Western; our view of the relationship of intuitions and of public symbolism and ceremonial to the emotional life of the individual and societies are consequently our views of history itself, owes a good deal to his teaching and his influence.

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