

“Positive Philosophy” by August Comte



August Comte, Thoenmes

About the author. . . . August Comte (1798-1857), a founder of sociology, believes aspects of our world can be known solely through observation and reason. Although he rejects the existence of theoretical entities, he believes all explanation and prediction are based on lawful succession—not causality, for he thought causality was not reducible to observation. In his view, each of the individual sciences has unique features and, just like social processes, pass through three stages: the theological based on supernatural powers, the metaphysical based on abstract ideas, and the positive (or scientific) based on relationships among empirical facts. His development of positivism not only interested J. S. Mill but also influenced the development of twentieth century logical positivism.

About the work. . . . In his *Cours de Philosophie Positive*,¹ Comte explains how societies evolve in accordance with natural law. The three stages discussed here, the theological-military, the metaphysical-transitional, and the scientific-industrial, he argues, progress according to a law of social development. Furthermore, he advocates a historical method of study for social science based on empirical methods.

1. August Comte. *Cours de Philosophie Positive*. Trans. Paul Descours and H. G. Jones, 1905.

From the reading...

“... each branch of our knowledge, passes in succession through three different theoretical states”

Ideas of Interest from *Cours de Philosophie Positive*

1. Explain Comte’s three laws of development.
2. According to the law of the three stages, how does the metaphysical state differ from the religious state of understanding? Is it possible for a person to understand the world two different ways?
3. Clarify as precisely as possible Comte’s description of the third stage of knowledge. Do you think Comte would endorse “the quest for certainty”?

The Reading Selection *Cours de Philosophie Positive*

In order to explain properly the true nature and peculiar character of the Positive Philosophy, it is indispensable that we should first take a brief survey of the progressive growth of the human mind, viewed as a whole; for no idea can be properly understood apart from its history.

From the reading...

“[T]he human mind... makes use... of three methods of philosophizing, whose characters are essentially different, and even radically opposed to each other...”

[Fundamental Law of Development]

In thus studying the total development of human intelligence in its different spheres of activity, from its first and simplest beginning up to our own time, I believe that I have discovered a great fundamental Law, to which the mind is subjected by an invariable necessity. The truth of this Law can, I think be demonstrated both by reasoned proofs furnished by a knowledge of our mental organization, and by historical verification due to an attentive study of the past. This Law consists in the fact that each of our principal conceptions, each branch of our knowledge, passes in succession through three different theoretical states: the Theological or fictitious state, the Metaphysical or abstract state, and the Scientific or positive state. In other words, the human mind—by its very nature—makes use successively in each of its researches of three methods of philosophizing, whose characters are essentially different, and even radically opposed to each other. We have first the Theological method, then the Metaphysical method, and finally the Positive method. Hence there are three kinds of philosophy or general systems of conceptions on the aggregate of phenomena, which are mutually exclusive of each other. The first is the necessary starting point of human intelligence: the third represents its fixed and definite state; the second is only destined to serve as a transitional method.

[The Theological State]

In the Theological state, the human mind directs its researches mainly toward the inner nature of beings, and toward the first and final causes of all the phenomena which it observes—in a word, toward Absolute knowledge. It therefore represents these phenomena as being produced by the direct and continuous action of more or less numerous supernatural agents, whose arbitrary intervention explains all the apparent anomalies of the universe.

[The Metaphysical State]

In the Metaphysical state, which is in reality only a simple general modification of the first state, the supernatural agents are replaced by abstract forces, real entities or personified abstractions, inherent in the different beings of the world. These entities are looked upon as capable of giving rise

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by themselves to all the phenomena observed, each phenomenon being explained by assigning it to its corresponding entity.

From the reading...

“... the human mind, recognizing the impossibility of obtaining absolute truth, gives up the search after the origin and destination of the universe and a knowledge of the final causes of phenomena.”

[The Positive State]

Finally, in the Positive state, the human mind, recognizing the impossibility of obtaining absolute truth, gives up the search after the origin and destination of the universe and a knowledge of the final causes of phenomena. It only endeavors now to discover, by a well-combined use of reasoning and observation, the actual *laws* of phenomena—that is to say, their invariable relations of succession and likeness. The explanation of facts, thus reduced to its real terms, consists henceforth only in the connection established between different particular phenomena and some general facts, the number of which the progress of science tends more and more to diminish.

Related Ideas

Comte, August (<http://48.1911encyclopedia.org/C/CO/COMTE.htm>). *The 1911 Encyclopædia*. Discussion of Comte’s life and work from the classic edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*.



The Madeleine and Rue Royale, Paris, France, Library of Congress

Topics Worth Investigating

1. Comte notes that “[n]o idea can be properly understood apart from its history.” Evaluate whether or not Comte’s description of the laws of development commits the genetic fallacy.²
2. Consider some of the concepts used in some of our reading selections: the “Idea of the Good” of Plato, the monism of Spinoza, and the “science” of Mill. Relate each of these ideas to a stage of development and state your reasoning. What does the claim mean that “science has become God in the contemporary world”?
3. Recognizing that there is no absolute truth, Comte notes that in the third stage of *knowledge*, reason and observation discover “invariable relations of succession and likeness.” Are scientific laws, according to Comte, the same thing as necessary connections in nature? Explain Comte’s view on the possibility of scientific knowledge.

2. In brief, the genetic fallacy is an error in reasoning committed by basing or supporting the truth of a conclusion on an account of its history or origin.

4. Briefly discuss how the discipline of ethics is viewed under each of the three states of knowledge Comte explains.
5. If all three stages of understanding, the theological, the metaphysical, and the scientific, are all systems of conceiving phenomena, even though as Comte remarks they are mutually inconsistent, might not the terms used in each system be functionally structured much like terms in the other systems? For example, are the notions of “God,” “the Absolute Idea,” and “Nature” functionally equivalent? Do other ideas serve similar purposes in the different states of knowledge? Interestingly enough, Comte, for example, sought a religion of humanity for his own time.

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