

A Philosophical Appraisal of Auguste Comte's Scientific Positivism

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Abstract

This essay is a critical engagement with Auguste Comte's theory of positivism. Comte laid the foundations of scientific positivism with "the law of three stages" which is both a logical and a historical law. According to him, the human mind evolves historically through the theological via the metaphysical to the positive stage which correspond to the infant, adolescent, and adult stages of human development. The positive stage ushers in the scientific outlook as the mental maturity of mankind. Later, Comte's positivism assumed the garb of a positive religion with social humanity as its deity. Applying the analytical and critical method, this essay demonstrates that Comte's scientific positivism is not only empiricist and historicist, but also atheist and that Comte's atheism is not the conclusion of a rational argument about the question of the existence of God, but a postulate that underlies his law of "the three stages."

Keywords: Atheism, God, Humanity, Law of Three Stages, Metaphysics, Positivism, Positive Philosophy, Scientific Positivism, Positive Religion, Theology

Introduction

Auguste Comte was born in 1798, in the sixth year of the First French Republic which was proclaimed in 1792. It was a time of socio-political upheavals in France in the chaotic aftermath of the French Revolution which began in 1789 and ended in 1799. He was a precocious but also a problem child. As a child of his time, he revolted against all authority and conformity. At fourteen, he claimed he was already an atheist. In 1817, Comte travelled to Paris and found a position there as secretary to Comte de

Saint-Simon, royal title of the famous French philosopher and economist Claude-Henri de Rouvroy (1760-1825), who influenced the young Comte with his ideas and aspirations. In a letter to a friend, quoted by the French sociologist and anthropologist Émile Durkheim (1858-1917), Comte wrote:

I certainly owe a great deal intellectually to Saint-Simon, that is to say, he contributed powerfully to launching me in the philosophic direction that I have

clearly created for myself today and that I will follow without hesitation all my life.

When Comte de Saint-Simon died in 1825, his philosophic project was inherited by his fervent disciple Auguste Comte. In elaborating the fundamental principles of positivism in his monumental work *Cours de philosophie positive/Course in Positive Philosophy* (1830-1842), he set out on a vast adventure which, in its threefold thrust into Theology, Philosophy and Physics, aimed at the immediate orderly reorganization of the French society and the world at large.

This appraisal of Comte's scientific positivism is divided into two main parts circumscribed by introduction, evaluation and conclusion. Whereas part one elaborates Comte's "law of three stages" as a logical and historical law, part two elucidates Comte's social positivism as the new religion of humanity.

1. Comte's Law of Three Stages

Auguste Comte was only twenty-seven when he developed *the law of three stages* which he regarded as "the fundamental law of intellectual evolution." According to Comte, a study of the development of human intelligence throughout history reveals that the human mind, in every branch of its knowledge, necessarily progresses through three successive stages, namely,

the theological or fictitious, the metaphysical or abstract, and the positive or scientific stage. In the theological stage, human being seeks the ultimate causes of things and finds them in the will of the gods or God. It develops from fetishism *via* polytheism to monotheism, in which the world is viewed as a unified product of one Deity. The transition from the theological to the metaphysical stage takes place when the concept of a supernatural and personal Deity is succeeded by the concept of all-inclusive nature and when explanations are sought in terms of abstract entities of one kind or another. The third stage is the positive which ushers in the scientific outlook as the mental maturity of humanity. The positive stage supersedes the theological and metaphysical stages with the scientific method of investigating reality. The human mind concerns itself with observed facts, which it subsumes under general laws that make prediction possible. In fact, the hallmark of scientific knowledge is precisely the ability to predict and to control. Hence Comte regards positive science as the only valid form of knowledge.

According to Comte, the theologically fictitious stage of human knowledge is a necessary point of departure, representing humankind's mental infancy. The metaphysically abstract stage is merely transitional, representing humankind's mental adolescence. But the scientifically positive stage is

definitive, representing humankind's mental maturity.

The theological and metaphysical stages are propaedeutic to the positive or scientific stage. Just as the theologian had to vanish that the metaphysician could arrive, so also the metaphysician must die that the physicist might be born. In this stage of positive science, the scientist will gradually, but inevitably, take possession of all the territories successively lost by theologians and metaphysicians. In this phase of his adulthood, human being will no longer search for transcendent or immanent causes but simply desires to discover and explain the laws of nature empirically. In fact, scientific positivism is an offspring of Empiricism. In positive philosophy, physical nature replaces a personal God or an abstract *prima causa* (first cause) as the source of order in the whole universe. The human mind now investigates and concludes solely through the criterion of experience. The sole means to valid knowledge now becomes the findings of sense-experience. This knowledge is gathered and collated through observational reports, the accumulation of particular data and the formulation of general hypotheses and theories which realistically connect these facts with other facts to form scientific and systematic knowledge of reality. Such scientific knowledge of the world establishes propositions about the regular

connections among phenomena. Such propositions can be proven only by experiment. Thus all human knowledge is the product of the world as human beings experience it. But since the world and human being are in constant evolution, all human knowledge is limited, never absolute. Hence the principle of relativity of knowledge is the driving force of positive philosophy. The positive mind knows no essences of things nor even their modes of production. There are no eternal truths or principles of human conduct. All that can be known is the relations between facts in the mode of succession or similarity. We know that relations existing under the same circumstances are constant. This constancy of interlinking resemblances among phenomena constitutes the law of the universe and of society.

Comte claims that though positivity had, through its secret action from the very beginning of the evolution of human intelligence, attacked the theological and metaphysical addictions of the human mind, yet it had failed to lay claim to all realms of phenomena. Its universal rule had not yet been established. There're still some areas in human affairs to which the positive philosophy had not yet applied its empirical method. And Comte claimed to know precisely what was needed most and that he was the scientific genius destined to bring about the maturation of society by the

discovery and application of what he called “social physics” which later became *sociology*. Comte claims that his *social physics* introduces the last stage of the development of human society. This positive science is to study the moral phenomenon existing in all societies. With the emergence of Auguste Comte on the stage of history, the hour of the positive stage has finally struck. From the beginning of humankind’s quest for maturity, the movements of theology and metaphysics propelled humanity out of primitive anarchy toward social fulfilment in science. Along this arduous, historical ascent anyone who had made a real contribution to science was a forerunner of positive wisdom. In the modern era, however, men of great genius like Nicolaus Copernicus, Francis Bacon, Galileo Galilei, Pierre Gassendi, Isaac Newton, and so forth, had accelerated the advent of the positive millennium. Since then, only the positive mind will develop valid knowledge because it alone is gifted with the power of logical coherence. And there is no fear that the character of positive philosophy will undergo any substantial change. It will develop merely by accretion, for it will advance by applying itself to all phases of social life, thereby creating and disciplining new social sciences. Once it has acquired the character of universality, positive philosophy will forever exclude and replace what was once the superiority of theology and

metaphysics. Future generations will examine the two discarded methods as interesting relics of intellectual history. Theology and metaphysics must wane and disappear as physics waxes and advances. Ascending the throne of knowledge, positive philosophy will not so much deny and reject God as dismiss and forget Him. Thus, positive philosophy is aware that God is only a myth that exists in human imagination. But having passed far beyond that infantile state of being human, positive progress views the idea of God as the key idea in a cultural system that has long ago been swept into oblivion by the winds of intellectual and historical evolution. In his study of the British philosopher of science John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), French historian and philosopher Hippolyte-Adolphe Taine (1828-1893) summarized the positivist position as follows:

We believe that there are no substances, but only systems of facts. We regard the idea of substances as a psychological illusion. We consider substances, forces and all the metaphysical beings of the moderns as a relic of scholastic realities. We think that there is nothing in the world but facts and laws, that is to say events and their relations; and like you we recognize that all knowledge consists in the first

instance in linking or in adding facts.

Classical positivism continued in the twentieth century in the form of logical positivism, otherwise known as neo-positivism. It began in Vienna Austria under the leadership of Moritz Schlick (1882-1936). The logical positivists were mostly scientists turned philosophers. Like the classical positivists, they maintain that genuine knowledge about the world can only be attained by means of the scientific method. To be genuine, knowledge must be based on sense-experience and it must be about phenomena or observed facts. Religious beliefs and metaphysical speculations do not qualify as knowledge, nor do they in any way increase human being's knowledge of the world. Their propositions are meaningless since they cannot be verified and shown to be true or false. Only scientific propositions can be empirically verified. Hence, only scientific propositions are meaningful and useful. Like Comte and his disciples, the logical positivists were also anti-religious and anti-metaphysical since religion and metaphysics deal with realities that transcend the empirical.

French Jesuit theologian Henri De Lubac (1896-1991) highlights the atheism of classical positivism as follows:

Positivism was not born solely of a renunciation of the 'lower forms of explanation.' The law of the

three states may well be simply the appearance in an intellectual disguise of a deeper spiritual choice – the decision to do without God.

Consequently, classical positivism and by extension logical positivism reflects the will to atheism which is the distinctive mark of the spirit of modernity and post-modernity.

Having rejected the Christian religion and its God, Comte proposes *social humanity* as the new god of the positive religion.

2. Comte's Positive Religion

Though Auguste Comte excluded the question of God in his encyclopedic project, *Cours de philosophie positive/Course in Positive Philosophy* (1830-1842)), nevertheless he was disturbed over the possibility that the religious and metaphysical vacuum which his positive philosophy had created might prove disastrous. Some new religion and reality must fill the place vacated by God and play the role formerly exercised by Christianity. As he had himself complained often enough, pure atheism was sterile because it left utterly frustrated the human needs satisfied by God and Christianity. There was the real danger that if this vacuum were not filled by positive doctrines and a positive religion, a new transcendent Deity and supernatural religion would seize the soul of humanity and its last

state of imbecility would be worse than its primitive or godless state. The opportunity to fill the religious vacuum finally came in April 1844 through his encounter in Paris with a *femme fatale* Madame Clotilde de Vaux. Under the influence of this ravishing beauty, human sentiment and love began to displace intellect as the Lord of Comte's being. Under the spell of this passionate agony, Comte plunged into the work of his second career, the revision of his philosophic system with the system of love. When Madame de Vaux died a year after their meeting, Comte who was at first inconsolable, vowed to immortalize her before the whole world. Comte wanted all human beings to love and worship the human race, as he loved and worshipped Clotilde. In her honour, he would transform his positive philosophy into a positive religion with himself as the high priest.

Though he expanded his philosophy into a religion, Comte did not bring back either the God of the Christians or their theology. However, he drew his ideas of moral, hierarchical and sacramental discipline from the Catholic Church for which he had great admiration, considering it the immediate and necessary precursor of the religion of humanity. In fact, Comte attempted to forge an alliance between Catholicism and positivism so as to graft its "social genius" unto the tree of scientific positivism. Comte masterfully

appropriated the doctrine of the Incarnation, the cult of saints and above all the cult of the Virgin Mary in constructing his new religion of humanity. In a more sublime degree than any previous polytheistic mystery, the mystery of the Incarnation unites humankind with God and thus manifests "our growing tendency towards a real homogeneity between worshippers and worshipped." A formerly isolated Trinity now dwells in humanity. This communal homogeneity is further advanced through participation in the Eucharistic mystery in which each participant takes the body of the Deity into his own body. Thus, the God of Catholicism is gradually being assimilated into social humanity as the new god of positivism. The cult of the saints, too, contributes to the replacement of the one God with the worship of the many great humans as the new saints of the positive religion. But it was above all the cult of the Virgin that introduced a radical break with Western monotheism. For here it is a case of real worship. If the cult of the saints reintroduced polytheism, the cult of the Virgin Mary reintroduced fetishism, thereby predisposing souls for positive worship. The Virgin-Mother, not the Eucharist, serves as a transition from Catholicism to positivism. The image of the Virgin-Mother is the prototype of humanity as the goddess of positivism. Instead of worshipping an illusion in the name of God, human being can now

satisfy his religious appetite by directing his thoughts, feelings and actions toward his own humanity.

Like the German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach, Comte dethroned the Christian God with humanity. But whereas Feuerbach divinized the abstract species of humanity, Comte idolized *social humanity as the Great Being* for worship. Positive worship begins with the worship of humanity and proceeds to develop into a positivist trinity by means of the principle of fetishism. In the words of Comte “A trinity which admits of no change guides our conceptions and adoration, both always relative, first to the Great Being, then to the Great Fetish and lastly to the Great Environment.” Whereas the Great Being and the Great Fetish correspond to humanity and earth respectively, the Great Environment corresponds to space. Positive religion obliges human beings to adore all three members of the positive trinity. Commenting on Comte's doctrines and fetish-worship, French Catholic philosopher and political thinker Jacques Maritain (1882-1973) wrote:

The spectacle of the high priest of humanity warming up his sympathetic instincts, and those of his disciples, at the fire of his own laboriously combined fables, and offering his and their hearts to imaginary, deliberately invented beings, is a remarkable indication of

the degeneration to which the intellect could be exposed in the nineteenth century.

In similar vein, American Jesuit philosopher and theologian Vincent P. Miceli (1915-1991), appraises Comte's positive religion as follows:

The spectacle of the Pontiff of Positivism, on his knees before the armchair and bouquet of flowers – a relic of the happy, Wednesday visits of Clotilde – reviving with intense concentration her radiant figure and then rekindling his emotions to exalted degrees of elation, is one of the most tragic examples in all history of a genius's (sic) loss of mental health, clearly traceable to his rejection of the God of revelation and reason.

In fact, the doctrines and rites of the religion of humanity are full of words and actions that are not only fanatic, fantastic, and phantasmagoric but also ridiculous.

Evaluation

In 1842 Auguste Comte completed the publication of his six-volume encyclopedic project titled *Cours de philosophie positive/Course in Positive Philosophy* (1830-1842). A year before, the German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach published his *opus magnum*

titled *Das Wesen des Christentums/The Essence of Christianity* (1841). Both philosophers presented the world with a new god. Commenting on the coincidence of both publications Émile Saisset wrote: “Herr Feuerbach in Berlin, like Monsieur Comte in Paris, offers Christian Europe a new god to worship – the human race.” But neither the *Cours de philosophie positive* nor Comte’s later writings won their author the enthusiastic adherence of the intellectual youth of the day. At the time of his death in 1857, the religion of humanity he had founded of which he was the first high priest numbered but a handful of believers, already threatened with division. Yet at the end of the 19th century, it could be said that the *positive spirit*, which he had done more than anyone else before to delineate and define, was “so closely interfused with the general thought of the age that it had become almost unnoticeable like the air one breathes.” Like Marxism, scientific positivism is one of the ways in which modern man seeks to escape from any kind of transcendence and shake off what it regards as the yoke of faith in God. “To discover a man with no trace of God in him” is how Henri Gouhier defines Auguste Comte’s self-appointed task. But what kind of atheism did Comte expound? Comte’s atheism was certainly not a mere continuation of the negative atheism of the 18th century. According to Comte, the problem with 18th century

atheists is that they argued their way merely to a denial of God. They did not establish any positive program to keep God banished from human society. Comte himself provided that positive program through his system of empirical and social sciences. His positive program for the reconstruction of society calls for the liquidation of reactionary beliefs and anarchic dogmas, a preliminary necessity for the regeneration of human society. In a spirit of detestation, Comte let loose a stream of sarcastic ridicule against theological figments and the reign of an effete God. His plan was to bring about the dethronement of this decrepit God who ruled despotically over the long minority of mankind through the instrumentality of organized religions. The positivism of Comte was aimed at shocking atheists forward into becoming anti-theists. But once God has been excluded, his place must be taken by something else, otherwise he will stage a comeback. In obedience to the maxim “only what is replaced is destroyed”, Comte sought to replace Catholicism with his new religion of humanity. Comte believed that scientific positivism can satisfy all the tendencies of human nature. Above all, it supplies an object for that urge to worship which is at the heart of human nature. It concentrates “our feelings, our thoughts and our actions around Humanity.” Thus, by its efforts, humanity is finally substituted for God, and, if its cult cannot be really

systematized until God has been eliminated, his elimination will at last become a complete certainty thanks to that systematization. Positivism is essentially a “religion of humanity.” That is the deity, the true Great Being that acts as Providence, the “new Supreme Being” that is to make human being forget the absolute God – the God of Abraham, the God of metaphysicians – not only left behind but driven out.

However, Comte was an inconsistent and incoherent thinker. In spite of his doctrine that everything is relative, Comte was intolerant of anything he did not approve. The Comtian city was destined to become a fortress for all human beings who would be ruled by *sociocracy* under the tutelage of *sociolatry*. The idol of humanity imposed upon its citizens a thoroughly arrogant intellectual, moral and spiritual dictatorship through the positive priesthood. Comte as the high priest of the religion of humanity selected one hundred volumes of science, philosophy, poetry, history and general knowledge for the citizens to read and proscribed all other books, newspapers and periodicals. With respect to this, English philosopher of science John Stuart Mill observed that:

Mankind have not yet been under the rule of one who assumes that he knows all there is to be known, and that when he has put himself

at the head of humanity, the book of human knowledge may be closed... He does not imagine that he actually possesses all knowledge, but only that he is an infallible judge of what knowledge is worth possessing.

By rejecting the Christian God and any form of transcendence, Comte enthroned the idol of humanity like a modern Moloch that devours its worshippers. For every idol is a total tyrant which demands everything of its victim to the extent of self-immolation. At this juncture, a question arises: is the menace of Comte's scientific positivism still with us today? French Jesuit theologian Henri De Lubach certainly thinks so, and here it is worth quoting him at length:

To my mind it is, ...one of the most dangerous menaces that beset us. At any moment the failure of other nostrums, with greater outward attractions, may suddenly set its stock up. Many of the present campaigns against individualism already derive their inspiration from the ideas of Comte and his disciples, too often at the cost of the human person... Positivism is gaining ground, as its founder repeatedly predicted, far less by any conquest over former ‘metaphysicians’ and ‘revolutionaries’ than by a slow and imperceptible

dechristianization of a large number of Catholic souls. The 'accommodations' and 'alliances' favored by Comte have already borne fruit. They were followed by a period of spontaneous assimilation, and the faith that used to be a living adherence to the Mystery of Christ then came to be no more than attachment to a social program, itself twisted and diverted from its purpose. Without any apparent crisis, under a surface which sometimes seemed the reverse of apostasy, that faith has slowly been drained of its substance.

Summing up his general evaluation of Comte's scientific positivism, Henri De Lubac rightly pointed out that:

His gravest weakness came from the fact that he never allowed any room in his mind for 'those great critical questionings that challenge all purely human interpretations, those great questionings from the beyond', which alone reveal man to himself. He thought he had exorcised them forever. Never, perhaps, has their voice been so strong and insistent as it is today.

Consequently, contemporary society is confronted more than ever with the ultimate questions of life which stand

and fall with the perennial question of God

Conclusion

In light of the foregoing investigation, this study reiterates that Comte's theory of scientific positivism is not only empiricist but also historicist. Comte believed that history itself will usher in the new age of science and the religion of humanity, terminating and replacing the theological and metaphysical stages. But does Comte's third stage signal the end of history? Certainly not! The history of science continues to evolve beyond what Comte could have imagined and predicted.

Moreover, this study opens a new vista into Comte's scientific positivism by highlighting its cryptic underpinnings. As a philosophical appraisal, it underlines the necessity of critique in academic research because of the perennial incursion of myths, prejudices, ideologies, fantasies, and fallacies in the Academy.

In fine, this paper concludes without fear of error that Comte's scientific positivism is not only naturalist and reductionist but also atheist and that Comte's atheism, like most modern theories of atheism, is not the outcome of a philosophical argument about the question of the existence of God, but a postulate for his scientific positivism. It is an offshoot of *the will to atheism*

which is the distinctive mark of the secular age.

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