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COMTE, AUGUSTE [ISIDORE AUGUSTE MARIE FRANÇOIS XAVIER] (1798–1857), French Positive philosopher, was born on the 19th of January 1798 at Montpellier, where his father was a receiver-general of taxes for the district. He was sent for his earliest instruction to the school of the town, and in 1814 was admitted to the École Polytechnique. His youth was marked by a constant willingness to rebel against merely official authority; to genuine excellence, whether moral or intellectual, he was always ready to pay unbounded deference. That strenuous application which was one of his most remarkable gifts in manhood showed itself in his youth, and his application was backed or inspired by superior intelligence and aptness. After he had been two years at the École Polytechnique he took a foremost part in a mutinous demonstration against one of the masters; the school was broken up, and Comte like the other scholars was sent home. To the great dissatisfaction of his parents, he resolved to return to Paris (1816), and to earn his living there by giving lessons in mathematics. Benjamin Franklin was the youth's idol at this moment. "I seek to imitate the modern Socrates," he wrote to a school friend, "not in talents, but in way of living. You know that at five-and-twenty he formed the design of becoming perfectly wise and that he fulfilled his design. I have dared to undertake the same thing, though I am not yet twenty." Though Comte's character and aims were as far removed as possible from Franklin's type, neither Franklin nor any man that ever lived could surpass him in the heroic

tenacity with which, in the face of a thousand obstacles, he pursued his own ideal of a vocation.

For a moment circumstances led him to think of seeking a career in America, but a friend who preceded him thither warned him of the purely practical spirit that prevailed in the new country. "If Lagrange were to come to the United States, he could only earn his livelihood by turning land surveyor." So Comte remained in Paris, living as he best could on something less than £80 a year, and hoping, when he took the trouble to break his meditations upon greater things by hopes about himself, that he might by and by obtain an appointment as mathematical master in a school. A friend procured him a situation as tutor in the house of Casimir Périer. The salary was good, but the duties were too miscellaneous, and what was still worse, there was an end of the delicious liberty of the garret. After a short experience of three weeks Comte returned to neediness and contentment. He was not altogether without the young man's appetite for pleasure; yet when he was only nineteen we find him wondering, amid the gaieties of the carnival of 1817, how a gavotte or a minuet could make people forget that thirty thousand human beings around them had barely a morsel to eat.

Towards 1818 Comte became associated as friend and disciple with Saint-Simon, who was destined to exercise a very decisive influence upon the turn of his speculation. In after years he so far forgot himself as to write of Saint-

Simon as a depraved quack, and to deplore his connexion with him as purely mischievous. While the connexion lasted he thought very differently. Saint-Simon is described as the most estimable and lovable of men, and the most delightful in his relations; he is the worthiest of philosophers. Even at the very moment when Comte was congratulating himself on having thrown off the yoke, he honestly admits that Saint-Simon's influence has been of powerful service in his philosophic education. "I certainly," he writes to his most intimate friend, "am under great personal obligations to Saint-Simon; that is to say, he helped in a powerful degree to launch me in the philosophical direction that I have now definitely marked out for myself, and that I shall follow without looking back for the rest of my life." Even if there were no such unmistakable expressions as these, the most cursory glance into Saint-Simon's writings is enough to reveal the thread of connexion between the ingenious visionary and the systematic thinker. We see the debt, and we also see that when it is stated at the highest possible, nothing has really been taken either from Comte's claims as a powerful original thinker, or from his immeasurable pre-eminence over Saint-Simon in intellectual grasp and vigour and coherence. As high a degree of originality may be shown in transformation as in invention, as Molière and Shakespeare have proved in the region of dramatic art. In philosophy the conditions are not different. *Il faut prendre son bien où on le trouve.*

It is no detriment to Comte's fame that some of the ideas which he recombined and incorporated in a great philosophic structure had their origin in ideas that were produced almost at random in the incessant fermentation of Saint-Simon's brain. Comte is in no true sense a follower of Saint-Simon, but it was undoubtedly Saint-Simon who launched him, to take Comte's own word, by suggesting the two starting-points of what grew into the Comtist system—first, that political phenomena are as capable of being grouped under laws as other phenomena; and second, that the true destination of philosophy must be social, and the true object of the thinker must be the reorganization of the moral, religious and political systems. We can readily see what an impulse these far-reaching conceptions would give to Comte's meditations. There were conceptions of less importance than these, in which it is impossible not to feel that it was Saint-Simon's wrong or imperfect idea that put his young admirer on the track to a right and perfected idea. The subject is not worthy of further discussion. That Comte would have performed some great intellectual achievement, if Saint-Simon had never been born, is certain. It is hardly less certain that the great achievement which he did actually perform was originally set in motion by Saint-Simon's conversation, though it was afterwards directly filiated with the fertile speculations of A. R. J. Turgot and Condorcet. Comte thought almost as meanly of Plato as he did of Saint-Simon, and he considered Aristotle the prince of all true thinkers; yet their vital difference about Ideas did not prevent Aristotle from calling Plato master.

After six years the differences between the old and the young philosopher grew too marked for friendship. Comte began to fret under Saint-Simon's pretensions to be his director. Saint-Simon, on the other hand, perhaps began to feel uncomfortably conscious of the superiority of his disciple. The occasion of the breach between them (1824) was an attempt on Saint-Simon's part to print a production of Comte's as if it were in some sort connected with Saint-Simon's schemes of social reorganization. Not only was the breach not repaired, but long afterwards Comte, as we have said, with painful ungraciousness took to calling the encourager of his youth by very hard names.

In 1825 Comte married a Mdlle Caroline Massin. His marriage was one of those of which "magnanimity owes no account to prudence," and it did not turn out prosperously. His family were strongly Catholic and royalist, and they *Marriage.* were outraged by his refusal to have the marriage performed other than civilly. They consented, however, to receive his wife, and the pair went on a visit to Montpellier. Madame Comte conceived a dislike to the circle she found there, and this was the too early beginning of disputes which lasted for the remainder of their union. In the year of his marriage we find Comte writing to the most intimate of his correspondents:—"I have nothing left but to concentrate my whole moral existence in my intellectual work, a precious but inadequate compensation; and so I must give up, if not the most dazzling, still the sweetest part of my happiness." He tried

to find pupils to board with him, but only one pupil came, and he was soon sent away for lack of companions. "I would rather spend an evening," wrote the needy enthusiast, "in solving a difficult question, than in running after some empty-headed and consequential millionaire in search of a pupil." A little money was earned by an occasional article in *Le Producteur*, in which he began to expound the philosophic ideas that were now maturing in his mind. He announced a course of lectures (1826), which it was hoped would bring money as well as fame, and which were to be the first dogmatic exposition of the Positive Philosophy. A friend had said to him, "You talk too freely, your ideas are getting abroad, and other people use them without giving you the credit; put your ownership on record." The lectures attracted hearers so eminent as Humboldt the cosmologist, Poinsoot the geometer and Blainville the physiologist.

Unhappily, after the third lecture of the course, Comte had a severe attack of cerebral derangement, brought on by intense and prolonged meditation, acting on a system that was already irritated by the chagrin of domestic discomfort. He did not recover his health for more than a year, and as soon as convalescence set in he was seized by so profound a melancholy at the disaster which had thus overtaken him, that he threw himself into the Seine. Fortunately he was rescued, and the shock did not stay his return to mental soundness. One incident of this painful episode is worth mentioning. Lamennais, then in the height of his Catholic exaltation,

*Serious
Illness.*

persuaded Comte's mother to insist on her son being married with the religious ceremony, and as the younger Madame Comte apparently did not resist, the rite was duly performed, in spite of the fact that Comte was at the time raving mad. Philosophic assailants of Comtism have not always resisted the temptation to recall the circumstance that its founder was once out of his mind. As has been justly said, if Newton once suffered a cerebral attack without forfeiting our veneration for the *Principia*, Comte may have suffered in the same way, and still not have forfeited our respect for Positive Philosophy and Positive Polity.

In 1828 the lectures were renewed, and in 1830 was published the first volume of the *Course of Positive Philosophy*. The sketch and ground plan of this great undertaking had appeared in 1826. The sixth and last *Official work* volume was published in 1842. The twelve years covering the publication of the first of Comte's two elaborate works were years of indefatigable toil, and they were the only portion of his life in which he enjoyed a certain measure, and that a very modest measure, of material prosperity. In 1833 he was appointed examiner of the boys who in the various provincial schools aspired to enter the *École Polytechnique* at Paris. This and two other engagements as a teacher of mathematics secured him an income of some £400 a year. He made M. Guizot, then Louis Philippe's minister, the important proposal to establish a chair of general history of the sciences. If there are four chairs, he argued, devoted to

the history of philosophy, that is to say, the minute study of all sorts of dreams and aberrations through the ages, surely there ought to be at least one to explain the formation and progress of our real knowledge? This wise suggestion, still unfulfilled, was at first welcomed, according to Comte's own account, by Guizot's philosophic instinct, and then repulsed by his "metaphysical rancour."

Meanwhile Comte did his official work conscientiously, sorely as he grudged the time which it took from the execution of the great object of his thoughts. "I hardly know if even to you," he writes to his wife, "I dare disclose the sweet and softened feeling that comes over me when I find a young man whose examination is thoroughly satisfactory. Yes, though you may smile, the emotion would easily stir me to tears if I were not carefully on my guard." Such sympathy with youthful hope, in union with industry and intelligence, shows that Comte's dry and austere manner veiled the fires of a generous social emotion. It was this which made him add to his labours the burden of delivering every year from 1831 to 1848 a course of gratuitous lectures on astronomy for a popular audience. The social feeling that inspired this disinterested act showed itself in other ways. He suffered imprisonment rather than serve in the national guard; his position was that though he would not take arms against the new monarchy of July, yet being a republican he would take no oath to defend it. The only amusement that Comte permitted himself was a visit to the opera. In his youth he had been a playgoer, but he shortly

came to the conclusion that tragedy is a stilted and bombastic art, and after a time comedy interested him no more than tragedy. For the opera he had a genuine passion, which he gratified as often as he could, until his means became too narrow to afford even that single relaxation.

Of his manner and personal appearance we have the following account from one who was his pupil:—"Daily as the clock struck eight on the horologe of the Luxembourg, while the ringing hammer on the bell was yet audible, the door of my room opened, and there entered a man, short, rather stout, almost what one might call sleek, freshly shaven, without vestige of whisker or moustache. He was invariably dressed in a suit of the most spotless black, as if going to a dinner party; his white neck-cloth was fresh from the laundress's hands, and his hat shining like a racer's coat. He advanced to the arm-chair prepared for him in the centre of the writing-table, laid his hat on the left-hand corner; his snuff-box was deposited on the same side beside the quire of paper placed in readiness for his use, and dipping the pen twice into the ink-bottle, then bringing it to within an inch of his nose to make sure it was properly filled, he broke silence: 'We have said that the chord AB,' &c. For three-quarters of an hour he continued his demonstration, making short notes as he went on, to guide the listener in repeating the problem alone; then, taking up another cahier which lay beside him, he went over the written repetition of the former lesson. He explained, corrected or commented till the clock struck nine; then, with the little finger of the right

hand brushing from his coat and waistcoat the shower of superfluous snuff which had fallen on them, he pocketed his snuff-box, and resuming his hat, he as silently as when he came in made his exit by the door which I rushed to open for him.”

In 1842, as we have said, the last volume of the *Positive Philosophy* was given to the public. Instead of that contentment which we like to picture as the reward of twelve years of meritorious toil devoted to the erection of a high philosophic edifice, Comte found himself in the midst of a very sea of small troubles, of that uncompensated kind that harass without elevating, and waste a man’s spirit without softening or enlarging it. First, the jar of temperament between Comte and his wife had become so unbearable that they separated (1842). We know too little of the facts to allot blame to either of them. In spite of one or two disadvantageous facts in her career, Madame Comte seems to have uniformly comported herself towards her husband with an honourable solicitude for his well-being. Comte made her an annual allowance, and for some years after the separation they corresponded on friendly terms. Next in the list of the vexations was a lawsuit with his publisher. The publisher had inserted in the sixth volume a protest against a certain footnote, in which Comte had used some hard words about Arago. Comte threw himself into the suit with an energy worthy of Voltaire and won it. Third, and worst of all, he had prefixed a preface to the sixth volume, in

which he went out of his way to rouse the enmity of the men on whom depended his annual re-election to the post of examiner for the Polytechnic school. The result was that he lost the appointment, and with it one-half of his very modest income. This was the occasion of an episode, which is of more than merely personal interest.

Before 1842 Comte had been in correspondence with J. S. Mill, who had been greatly impressed by Comte's philosophic ideas; Mill admits that his own *System of Logic* owes many valuable thoughts to Comte, and that, in the *J. S. Mill.* portion of that work which treats of the logic of the moral sciences, a radical improvement in the conceptions of logical method was derived from the *Positive Philosophy*. Their correspondence, which was full and copious, turned principally upon the two great questions of the equality between men and women, and of the expediency and constitution of a sacerdotal or spiritual order. When Comte found himself straitened, he confided the entire circumstances to Mill. As might be supposed by those who know the affectionate anxiety with which Mill regarded the welfare of any one whom he believed to be doing good work in the world, he at once took pains to have Comte's loss of income made up to him, until Comte should have had time to repair that loss by his own endeavour. Mill persuaded Grote, Molesworth, and Raikes Currie to advance the sum of £240. At the end of the year (1845) Comte had taken no steps to enable himself to dispense with the aid of the three Englishmen. Mill applied to them

again, but with the exception of Grote, who sent a small sum, they gave Comte to understand that they expected him to earn his own living. Mill had suggested to Comte that he should write articles for the English periodicals, and expressed his own willingness to translate any such articles from the French. Comte at first fell in with the plan, but he speedily surprised and disconcerted Mill by boldly taking up the position of "high moral magistrate," and accusing the three defaulting contributors of a scandalous falling away from righteousness and a high mind. Mill was chilled by these pretensions; and the correspondence came to an end. There is something to be said for both sides. Comte, regarding himself as the promoter of a great scheme for the benefit of humanity, might reasonably look for the support of his friends in the fulfilment of his designs. But Mill and the others were fully justified in not aiding the propagation of a doctrine in which they might not wholly concur. Comte's subsequent attitude of censorious condemnation put him entirely in the wrong.

From 1845 to 1848 Comte lived as best he could, as well as made his wife her allowance, on an income of £200 a year. His little account books of income and outlay, with every item entered down to a few hours before his death, are accurate and neat enough to have satisfied an ancient Roman householder. In 1848, through no fault of his own, his salary was reduced to £80. Littré and others, with Comte's approval, published an appeal for subscriptions, and on the money thus contributed Comte subsisted for the

remaining nine years of his life. By 1852 the subsidy produced as much as £200 a year. It is worth noticing that Mill was one of the subscribers, and that Littré continued his assistance after he had been driven from Comte's society by his high pontifical airs. We are sorry not to be able to record any similar trait of magnanimity on Comte's part. His character, admirable as it is for firmness, for intensity, for inexorable will, for iron devotion to what he thought the service of mankind, yet offers few of those softening qualities that make us love good men and pity bad ones.

It is best to think of him only as the intellectual worker, pursuing in uncomforted obscurity the laborious and absorbing task to which he had given up his whole life. His singularly conscientious fashion of elaborating his ideas *Literary method.* made the mental strain more intense than even so exhausting a work as the abstract exposition of the principles of positive science need have been. He did not write down a word until he had first composed the whole matter in his mind. When he had thoroughly meditated every sentence, he sat down to write, and then, such was the grip of his memory, the exact order of his thoughts came back to him as if without an effort, and he wrote down precisely what he had intended to write, without the aid of a note or a memorandum, and without check or pause. For example, he began and completed in about six weeks a chapter in the *Positive Philosophy* (vol. v. ch. 55) which would fill forty pages of

this Encyclopaedia. When we reflect that the chapter is not narrative, but an abstract exposition of the guiding principles of the movements of several centuries, with many threads of complex thought running along side by side all through the speculation, then the circumstances under which it was reduced to literary form are really astonishing. It is hardly possible, however, to share the admiration expressed by some of Comte's disciples for his style. We are not so unreasonable as to blame him for failing to make his pages picturesque or thrilling; we do not want sunsets and stars and roses and ecstasy; but there is a certain standard for the most serious and abstract subjects. When compared with such philosophic writing as Hume's, Diderot's, Berkeley's, then Comte's manner is heavy, laboured, monotonous, without relief and without light. There is now and then an energetic phrase, but as a whole the vocabulary is jejune; the sentences are overloaded; the pitch is flat. A scrupulous insistence on making his meaning clear led to an iteration of certain adjectives and adverbs, which at length deadened the effect beyond the endurance of all but the most resolute students. Only the interest of the matter prevents one from thinking of Rivarol's ill-natured remark upon Condorcet, that he wrote with opium on a page of lead. The general effect is impressive, not by any virtues of style, for we do not discern one, but by reason of the magnitude and importance of the undertaking, and the visible conscientiousness and the grasp with which it is executed. It is by sheer strength of thought, by the vigorous perspicacity with which he strikes the lines of cleavage of

his subject, that he makes his way into the mind of the reader; in the presence of gifts of this power we need not quarrel with an ungainly style.

Comte pursued one practice which ought to be mentioned in connexion with his personal history, the practice of what he style *hygiène cérébrale*. After he had acquired what he considered to be a sufficient stock of material, and this happened before he had completed the *Hygiène cérébrale*. *Positive Philosophy*, he abstained from reading newspapers, reviews, scientific transactions and everything else, except two or three poets (notably Dante) and the *Imitatio Christi*. It is true that his friends kept him informed of what was going on in the scientific world. Still this partial divorce of himself from the record of the social and scientific activity of his time, though it may save a thinker from the deplorable evils of dispersion, moral and intellectual, accounts in no small measure for the exaggerated egoism, and the absence of all feeling for reality, which marked Comte's later days.

In 1845 Comte made the acquaintance of Madame Clotilde de Vaux, a lady whose husband had been sent to the galleys for life. Very little is known about her qualities. She wrote a little piece which Comte rated so preposterously as to talk about George Sand in the same sentence; it is in truth a flimsy performance, though it contains one or two gracious thoughts. There is true beauty in the saying—"It is unworthy of a noble

nature to diffuse its pain.” Madame de Vaux’s letters speak well for her good sense and good feeling, and it would have been better for Comte’s later work if she had survived to exert a wholesome restraint on his exaltation. Their friendship had only lasted a year when she died (1846), but the period was long enough to give her memory a supreme ascendancy in Comte’s mind. Condillac, Joubert, Mill and other eminent men have shown what the intellectual ascendancy of a woman can be. Comte was as inconsolable after Madame de Vaux’s death as D’Alembert after the death of Mademoiselle L’Espinasse. Every Wednesday afternoon he made a reverential pilgrimage to her tomb, and three times every day he invoked her memory in words of passionate expansion. His disciples believe that in time the world will reverence Comte’s sentiment about Clotilde de Vaux, as it reveres Dante’s adoration of Beatrice—a parallel that Comte himself was the first to hit upon. Yet we cannot help feeling that it is a grotesque and unseemly anachronism to apply in grave prose, addressed to the whole world, those terms of saint and angel which are touching and in their place amid the trouble and passion of the great mystic poet. Whatever other gifts Comte may have had—and he had many of the rarest kind,—poetic imagination was not among them, any more than poetic or emotional expression was among them. His was one of those natures whose faculty of deep feeling is unhappily doomed to be inarticulate, and to pass away without the magic power of transmitting itself.

Comte lost no time, after the completion of his *Course of Positive Philosophy*, in proceeding with the *System of Positive Polity*, for which the earlier work was designed to be a foundation. The first volume was published in 1851, *Positive Polity*. and the fourth and last in 1854. In 1848, when the political air was charged with stimulating elements, he founded the Positive Society, with the expectation that it might grow into a reunion as powerful over the new revolution as the Jacobin Club had been in the revolution of 1789. The hope was not fulfilled, but a certain number of philosophic disciples gathered round Comte, and eventually formed themselves, under the guidance of the new ideas of the latter half of his life, into a kind of church, for whose use was drawn up the *Positivist Calendar* (1849), in which the names of those who had advanced civilization replaced the titles of the saints. Gutenberg and Shakespeare were among the patrons of the thirteen months in this calendar. In the years 1849, 1850 and 1851 Comte gave three courses of lectures at the Palais Royal. They were gratuitous and popular, and in them he boldly advanced the whole of his doctrine, as well as the direct and immediate pretensions of himself and his system. The third course ended in the following uncompromising terms—"In the name of the Past and of the Future, the servants of Humanity—both its philosophical and its practical servants—come forward to claim as their due the general direction of this world. Their object is to constitute at length a real Providence in all departments,—moral, intellectual and material. Consequently they exclude

once for all from political supremacy all the different servants of God—Catholic, Protestant or Deist—as being at once behindhand and a cause of disturbance.” A few weeks after this invitation, a very different person stepped forward to constitute himself a real Providence.

In 1852 Comte published the *Catechism of Positivism*. In the preface to it he took occasion to express his approval of Louis Napoleon’s *coup d’état* of the 2nd of December,—“a fortunate crisis which has set aside the parliamentary system and instituted a dictatorial republic.” Whatever we may think of the political sagacity of such a judgment, it is due to Comte to say that he did not expect to see his dictatorial republic transformed into a dynastic empire, and, next, that he did expect from the Man of December freedom of the press and of public meeting. His later hero was the emperor Nicholas, “the only statesman in Christendom,”—as unlucky a judgment as that which placed Dr Francia in the Comtist Calendar.

In 1857 he was attacked by cancer, and died peaceably on the 5th of September of that year. The anniversary is celebrated by ceremonial gatherings of his French and English followers, who then commemorate the name and

Death. the services of the founder of their religion.

By his will he appointed thirteen executors who were to preserve his rooms at 10 rue Monsieur-le-Prince as the headquarters of the new religion of Humanity.

In proceeding to give an Outline of Comte's system, we shall consider the *Positive Polity* as the more or less legitimate sequel of the *Positive Philosophy*, notwithstanding the deep gulf which so eminent a critic as J. S. Mill insisted upon fixing between the earlier and the later work. There may be, as we think there is, the greatest difference in their value, and the temper is not the same, nor the method. But the two are quite capable of being regarded, and for the purposes of an account of Comte's career ought to be regarded, as an integral whole. His letters when he was a young man of one-and-twenty, and before he had published a word, show how strongly present the social motive was in his mind, and in what little account he should hold his scientific works, if he did not perpetually think of their utility for the species. "I feel," he wrote, "that such scientific reputation as I might acquire would give more value, more weight, more useful influence to my political sermons." In 1822 he published a *Plan of the Scientific Works necessary to reorganize Society*. In this he points out that modern society is passing through a great crisis, due to the conflict of two opposing movements,—the first, a disorganizing movement owing to the break-up of old institutions and beliefs; the second, a movement towards a definite social state, in which all means of human prosperity will receive their most complete development and most direct application. How is this crisis to be dealt with? What are the undertakings necessary in order to pass successfully through it towards

an organic state? The answer to this is that there are two series of works. The first is theoretic or spiritual, aiming at the development of a new principle of co-ordinating social relations, and the formation of the system of general ideas which are destined to guide society. The second work is practical or temporal; it settles the distribution of power, and the institutions that are most conformable to the spirit of the system which has previously been thought out in the course of the theoretic work. As the practical work depends on the conclusions of the theoretical, the latter must obviously come first in order of execution.

In 1826 this was pushed farther in a most remarkable piece called *Considerations on the Spiritual Power*—the main object of which is to demonstrate the necessity of instituting a spiritual power, distinct from the temporal power and independent of it. In examining the conditions of a spiritual power proper for modern times, he indicates in so many terms the presence in his mind of a direct analogy between his proposed spiritual power and the functions of the Catholic clergy at the time of its greatest vigour and most complete independence,—that is to say, from about the middle of the 11th century until towards the end of the 13th. He refers to de Maistre's memorable book, *Du Pape*, as the most profound, accurate and methodical account of the old spiritual organization, and starts from that as the model to be adapted to the changed intellectual and social conditions of the modern time. In the *Positive Philosophy*, again (vol. v. p. 344), he distinctly says that Catholicism, reconstituted

as a system on new intellectual foundations, would finally preside over the spiritual reorganization of modern society. Much else could be quoted to the same effect. If unity of career, then, means that Comte, from the beginning designed the institution of a spiritual power, and the systematic reorganization of life, it is difficult to deny him whatever credit that unity may be worth, and the credit is perhaps not particularly great. Even the readaptation of the Catholic system to a scientific doctrine was plainly in his mind thirty years before the final execution of the *Positive Polity*, though it is difficult to believe that he foresaw the religious mysticism in which the task was to land him. A great analysis was to precede a great synthesis, but it was the synthesis on which Comte's vision was centred from the first. Let us first sketch the nature of the analysis. Society is to be reorganized on the base of knowledge. What is the sum and significance of knowledge? That is the question which Comte's first master-work professes to answer.

The *Positive Philosophy* opens with the statement of a certain law of which Comte was the discoverer, and which has always been treated both by disciples and dissidents as the key to his system. This is the Law of the Three States. It is as follows. Each of our leading conceptions, each branch of our knowledge, passes successively through three different phases; there are three different ways in which the human mind explains phenomena, each way following the other in order. These three stages are the Theological, the

Metaphysical and the Positive. Knowledge, or a branch of knowledge, is in the Theological state, when it supposes the phenomena under consideration to be due to immediate volition, either in the object or in some supernatural being. In the Metaphysical state, for volition is substituted abstract force residing in the object, yet existing independently of the object; the phenomena are viewed as if apart from the bodies manifesting them; and the properties of each substance have attributed to them an existence distinct from that substance. In the Positive state, inherent volition or external volition and inherent force or abstraction personified have both disappeared from men's minds, and the explanation of a phenomenon means a reference of it, by way of succession or resemblance, to some other phenomenon,—means the establishment of a relation between the given fact and some more general fact. In the Theological and Metaphysical state men seek a cause or an essence; in the Positive they are content with a law. To borrow an illustration from an able English disciple of Comte:—"Take the phenomenon of the sleep produced by opium. The Arabs are content to attribute it to the 'will of God.' Molière's medical student accounts for it by a *soporific principle* contained in the opium. The modern physiologist knows that he cannot account for it at all. He can simply observe, analyse and experiment upon the phenomena attending the action of the drug, and classify it with other agents analogous in character."—(*Dr Bridges.*)

The first and greatest aim of the Positive Philosophy is to advance the study of society into the third of the three stages,—to remove social phenomena from the sphere of theological and metaphysical conceptions, and to introduce among them the same scientific observation of their laws which has given us physics, chemistry, physiology. Social physics will consist of the conditions and relations of the facts of society, and will have two departments,—one, statical, containing the laws of order; the other dynamical, containing the laws of progress. While men's minds were in the theological state, political events, for example, were explained by the will of the gods, and political authority based on divine right. In the metaphysical state of mind, then, to retain our instance, political authority was based on the sovereignty of the people, and social facts were explained by the figment of a falling away from a state of nature. When the positive method has been finally extended to society, as it has been to chemistry and physiology, these social facts will be resolved, as their ultimate analysis, into relations with one another, and instead of seeking causes in the old sense of the word, men will only examine the conditions of social existence. When that stage has been reached, not merely the greater part, but the whole, of our knowledge will be impressed with one character, the character, namely, of positivity or scientificity; and all our conceptions in every part of knowledge will be thoroughly homogeneous. The gains of such a change are enormous. The new philosophical unity will now in its turn regenerate all the elements that went to its own formation.

The mind will pursue knowledge without the wasteful jar and friction of conflicting methods and mutually hostile conceptions; education will be regenerated; and society will reorganize itself on the only possible solid base—a homogeneous philosophy.

The *Positive Philosophy* has another object besides the demonstration of the necessity and propriety of a science of society. This object is to show the sciences as branches from a single trunk,—is to give to science the ensemble or *Classification of sciences* spirit or generality hitherto confined to philosophy, and to give to philosophy the rigour and solidity of science. Comte's special object is a study of social physics, a science that before his advent was still to be formed; his second object is a review of the methods and leading generalities of all the positive sciences already formed, so that we may know both what system of inquiry to follow in our new science, and also where the new science will stand in relation to other knowledge.

The first step in this direction is to arrange scientific method and positive knowledge in order, and this brings us to another cardinal element in the Comtist system, the classification of the sciences. In the front of the inquiry lies one main division, that, namely, between speculative and practical knowledge. With the latter we have no concern. Speculative or theoretic knowledge is divided into abstract and concrete. The former is concerned with the laws that

regulate phenomena in all conceivable cases: the latter is concerned with the application of these laws. Concrete science relates to objects or beings; abstract science to events. The former is particular or descriptive; the latter is general. Thus, physiology is an abstract science; but zoology is concrete. Chemistry is abstract; mineralogy is concrete. It is the method and knowledge of the abstract sciences that the Positive Philosophy has to reorganize in a great whole.

Comte's principle of classification is that the dependence and order of scientific study follows the dependence of the phenomena. Thus, as has been said, it represents both the objective dependence of the phenomena and the subjective dependence of our means of knowing them. The more particular and complex phenomena depend upon the simpler and more general. The latter are the more easy to study. Therefore science will begin with those attributes of objects which are most general, and pass on gradually to other attributes that are combined in greater complexity. Thus, too, each science rests on the truths of the sciences that precede it, while it adds to them the truths by which it is itself constituted. Comte's series or hierarchy is arranged as follows:— (1) Mathematics (that is, number, geometry, and mechanics), (2) Astronomy, (3) Physics, (4) Chemistry, (5) Biology, (6) Sociology. Each of the members of this series is one degree more special than the member before it, and depends upon the facts of all the members preceding it, and cannot be fully understood without them. It follows that

the crowning science of the hierarchy, dealing with the phenomena of human society, will remain longest under the influence of theological dogmas and abstract figments, and will be the last to pass into the positive stage. You cannot discover the relations of the facts of human society without reference to the conditions of animal life; you cannot understand the conditions of animal life without the laws of chemistry; and so with the rest.

This arrangement of the sciences, and the Law of the Three States, are together explanatory of the course of human thought and knowledge. They are thus the double key of Comte's systematization of the philosophy of all the sciences from mathematics to physiology, and his analysis of social evolution, which is the base of sociology. Each science contributes its philosophy. The co-ordination of all these partial philosophies produces the general Positive Philosophy. "Thousands had cultivated science, and with splendid success; not one had conceived the philosophy which the sciences when organized would naturally evolve. A few had seen the necessity of extending the scientific method to all inquiries, but no one had seen how this was to be effected. . . The Positive Philosophy is novel as a philosophy, not as a collection of truths never before suspected. Its novelty is the organization of existing elements. Its very principle implies the absorption of all that great thinkers had achieved; while incorporating their results it extended their methods. . . . What tradition

brought was the results; what Comte brought was the organization of these results. He always claimed to be the founder of the Positive Philosophy. That he had every right to such a title is demonstrable to all who distinguish between the positive sciences and the philosophy which coordinated the truths and methods of these sciences into a doctrine.”—*G. H. Lewes*.

Comte’s classification of the sciences has been subjected to a vigorous criticism by Herbert Spencer. Spencer’s two chief points are these:—(1) He denies that the principle of the development of the sciences is the principle of *Criticism on decreasing generality*; he asserts that there are as many examples of the advent of a science being determined by increasing generality as by increasing speciality. (2) He holds that any grouping of the sciences in a succession gives a radically wrong idea of their genesis and their interdependence; no true filiation exists; no science develops itself in isolation; no one is independent, either logically or historically. Littré, by far the most eminent of the scientific followers of Comte, concedes a certain force to Spencer’s objections, and makes certain secondary modifications in the hierarchy in consequence, while still cherishing his faith in the Comtist theory of the sciences. J. S. Mill, while admitting the objections as good, if Comte’s arrangement pretended to be the only one possible, still holds the arrangement as tenable for the purpose with which it was devised. G. H. Lewes asserts against Spencer that the arrangement in a

series is necessary, on grounds similar to those which require that the various truths constituting a science should be systematically co-ordinated although in nature the phenomena are intermingled.

The first three volumes of the *Positive Philosophy* contain an exposition of the partial philosophies of the five sciences that precede sociology in the hierarchy. Their value has usually been placed very low by the special followers of the sciences concerned; they say that the knowledge is second-hand, is not coherent, and is too confidently taken for final. The Comtist replies that the task is philosophic; and is not to be judged by the minute accuracies of science. In these three volumes Comte took the sciences roughly as he found them. His eminence as a man of science must be measured by his only original work in that department,—the construction, namely, of the new science of society. This work is accomplished in the last three volumes of the *Positive Philosophy*, and the second and third volumes of the *Positive Polity*. The Comtist maintains that even if these five volumes together fail in laying down correctly and finally the lines of the new science, still they are the first solution of a great problem hitherto unattempted. “Modern biology has got beyond [Aristotle](#)’s conception; but in the construction of the biological science, not even the most unphilosophical biologist would fail to recognize the value of Aristotle’s attempt. So for sociology. Subsequent sociologists may have conceivably to remodel the whole

science, yet not the less will they recognize the merit of the first work which has facilitated their labours.”—*Congreve*.

We shall now briefly describe Comte’s principal conceptions in sociology, his position in respect to which is held by himself, and by others, to raise him to the level of Descartes or Leibnitz. Of course the first step was to approach the phenomena of human character and social existence with the expectation of finding them as reducible to general laws as the other phenomena of the universe, and with the hope of exploring these laws by the same instruments of observation and verification as had done such triumphant work in the case of the latter. Comte separates the collective facts of society and history from the individual phenomena of biology; then he withdraws these collective facts from the region of external volition, and places them in the region of law. The facts of history must be explained, not by providential interventions, but by referring them to conditions inherent in the successive stages of social existence. This conception makes a science of society possible. What is the method? It comprises, besides observation and experiment (which is, in fact, only the observation of abnormal social states), a certain peculiarity of verification. We begin by deducing every well-known historical situation from the series of its antecedents. Thus we acquire a body of empirical generalizations as to social phenomena, and then we connect the generalizations with the positive theory of

human nature. A sociological demonstration lies in the establishment of an accordance between the conclusions of historical analysis and the preparatory conceptions of biological theory. As Mill puts it:—"If a sociological theory, collected from historical evidence, contradicts the established general laws of human nature; if (to use M. Comte's instances) it implies, in the mass of mankind, any very decided natural bent, either in a good or in a bad direction; if it supposes that the reason, in average human beings, predominates over the desires, or the disinterested desires over the personal,—we may know that history has been misinterpreted, and that the theory is false. On the other hand, if laws of social phenomena, empirically generalized from history, can, when once suggested, be affiliated to the known laws of human nature; if the direction actually taken by the developments and changes of human society, can be seen to be such as the properties of man and of his dwelling-place made antecedently probable, the empirical generalizations are raised into positive laws, and sociology becomes a science." The result of this method, is an exhibition of the events of human experience in co-ordinated series that manifest their own graduated connexion.

Next, as all investigation proceeds from that which is known best to that which is unknown or less well known, and as, in social states, it is the collective phenomenon that is more easy of access to the observer than its parts, therefore we must consider and pursue all the elements of a

given social state together and in common. The social organization must be viewed and explored as a whole. There is a nexus between each leading group of social phenomena and other leading groups; if there is a change in one of them, that change is accompanied by a corresponding modification of all the rest. “Not only must political institutions and social manners, on the one hand, and manners and ideas, on the other, be always mutually connected; but further, this consolidated whole must be always connected by its nature with the corresponding state of the integral development of humanity, considered in all its aspects of intellectual, moral and physical activity.”—*Comte*.

Is there any one element which communicates the decisive impulse to all the rest,—any predominating agency in the course of social evolution? The answer is that all the other parts of social existence are associated with, and drawn *Decisive* along by, the contemporary condition of *Importance of* intellectual development. The Reason is the *Intellectual* superior and preponderant element which *development.* settles the direction in which all the other faculties shall expand. “It is only through the more and more marked influence of the reason over the general conduct of man and of society, that the gradual march of our race has attained that regularity and persevering continuity which distinguish it so radically from the desultory and barren expansion of even the highest animal orders, which share, and with enhanced strength, the

appetites, the passions, and even the primary sentiments of man.” The history of intellectual development, therefore, is the key to social evolution, and the key to the history of intellectual development is the Law of the Three States.

Among other central thoughts in Comte’s explanation of history are these:—The displacement of theological by positive conceptions has been accompanied by a gradual rise of an industrial régime out of the military régime;—the great permanent contribution of Catholicism was the separation which it set up between the temporal and the spiritual powers;—the progress of the race consists in the increasing preponderance of the distinctively human elements over the animal elements;—the absolute tendency of ordinary social theories will be replaced by an unfailing adherence to the relative point of view, and from this it follows that the social state, regarded as a whole, has been as perfect in each period as the co-existing condition of humanity and its environment would allow.

The elaboration of these ideas in relation to the history of the civilization of the most advanced portion of the human race occupies two of the volumes of the *Positive Philosophy*, and has been accepted by very different schools as a masterpiece of rich, luminous, and far-reaching suggestion. Whatever additions it may receive, and whatever corrections it may require, this analysis of social evolution will continue to be regarded as one of the great achievements of human intellect.

The third volume of the *Positive Polity* treats of social dynamics, and takes us again over the ground of historic evolution. It abounds with remarks of extraordinary fertility *Social dynamics* and comprehensiveness; but it is often *in the Positive Polity* arbitrary; and its views of the past are strained into coherence with the statical views of the preceding volume. As it was composed in rather less than six months, and as the author honestly warns us that he has given all his attention to a more profound co-ordination, instead of working out the special explanations more fully, as he had promised, we need not be surprised if the result is disappointing to those who had mastered the corresponding portion of the *Positive Philosophy*. Comte explains the difference between his two works. In the first his “chief object was to discover and demonstrate the laws of progress, and to exhibit in one unbroken sequence the collective destinies of mankind, till then invariably regarded as a series of events wholly beyond the reach of explanation, and almost depending on arbitrary will. The present work, on the contrary, is addressed to those who are already sufficiently convinced of the certain existence of social laws, and desire only to have them reduced to a true and conclusive system.”

The main principles of the Comtian system are derived from the *Positive Polity* and from two other works,—the *Positivist Catechism: a Summary Exposition of the Universal Religion, in Twelve Dialogues between a Woman and a Priest of Humanity*; and, second, *The Subjective*

The Positivist system.

Synthesis (1856), which is the first and only volume of a work upon mathematics announced at the end of the *Positive Philosophy*. The system for which the *Positive Philosophy* is alleged to have been the scientific preparation contains a Polity and a Religion; a complete arrangement of life in all its aspects, giving a wider sphere to Intellect, Energy and Feeling than could be found in any of the previous organic types,—Greek, Roman or Catholic-feudal. Comte's immense superiority over such prae-Revolutionary utopians as the Abbé Saint Pierre, no less than over the group of post-revolutionary Utopians, is especially visible in this firm grasp of the cardinal truth that the improvement of the social organism can only be effected by a moral development, and never by any changes in mere political mechanism, or any violences in the way of an artificial redistribution of wealth. A moral transformation must precede any real advance. The aim, both in public and private life, is to secure to the utmost possible extent the victory of the social feeling over self-love, or Altruism over Egoism.^[1] This is the key to the regeneration of social existence, as it is the key to that unity of individual life which makes all our energies converge freely and without wasteful friction towards a common end. What are the instruments for securing the preponderance of Altruism? Clearly they must work from the strongest element in human nature, and this element is Feeling or the Heart. Under the Catholic system the supremacy of Feeling was abused, and the Intellect was made its slave. Then followed

a revolt of Intellect against Sentiment. The business of the new system will be to bring back the Intellect into a condition, not of slavery, but of willing ministry to the Feelings. The subordination never was, and never will be, effected except by means of a religion, and a religion, to be *The Religion of final, must include a harmonious synthesis of humanity.* all our conceptions of the external order of the universe. The characteristic basis of a religion is the existence of a Power without us, so superior to ourselves as to command the complete submission of our whole life. This basis is to be found in the Positive stage, in Humanity, past, present and to come, conceived as the Great Being.

“A deeper study of the great universal order reveals to us at length the ruling power within it of the true Great Being, whose destiny it is to bring that order continually to perfection by constantly conforming to its laws, and which thus best represents to us that system as a whole. This undeniable Providence, the supreme dispenser of our destinies, becomes in the natural course the common centre of our affections, our thoughts, and our actions. Although this Great Being evidently exceeds the utmost strength of any, even of any collective, human force, its necessary constitution and its peculiar function endow it with the truest sympathy towards all its servants. The least amongst us can and ought constantly to aspire to maintain and even to improve this Being. This natural object of all our activity, both public and private, determines the true general character of the rest of our existence, whether in feeling or in thought; which must be devoted to love, and to know, in order rightly to serve, our Providence, by a wise use of all the means which it furnishes to us. Reciprocally this continued service, whilst strengthening our true unity, renders us at once both happier and better.”

The exaltation of Humanity into the throne occupied by the Supreme Being under monotheistic systems made all the rest of Comte's construction easy enough. Utility remains the test of every institution, impulse, act; his fabric becomes substantially an arch of utilitarian propositions, with an artificial Great Being inserted at the top to keep them in their place. The Comtist system is utilitarianism crowned by a fantastic decoration. Translated into the plainest English, the position is as follows: "Society can only be regenerated by the greater subordination of politics to morals, by the moralization of capital, by the renovation of the family, by a higher conception of marriage and so on. These ends can only be reached by a heartier development of the sympathetic instincts. The sympathetic instincts can only be developed by the Religion of Humanity." Looking at the problem in this way, even a moralist who does not expect theology to be the instrument of social revival, might still ask whether the sympathetic instincts will not necessarily be already developed to their highest point, before people will be persuaded to accept the religion, which is at the bottom hardly more than sympathy under a more imposing name. However that may be, the whole battle—into which we shall not enter—as to the legitimacy of Comtism as a religion turns upon this erection of Humanity into a Being. The various hypotheses, dogmas, proposals, as to the family, to capital, &c., are merely propositions measurable by considerations of utility and a balance of expediencies. Many of these proposals are of the highest interest, and

many of them are actually available; but there does not seem to be one of them of an available kind, which could not equally well be approached from other sides, and even incorporated in some radically antagonistic system. Adoption, for example, as a practice for improving the happiness of families and the welfare of society, is capable of being weighed, and can in truth only be weighed, by utilitarian considerations, and has been commended by men to whom the Comtist religion is naught. The singularity of Comte's construction, and the test by which it must be tried, is the transfer of the worship and discipline of Catholicism to a system in which "the conception of God is superseded" by the abstract idea of Humanity, conceived as a kind of Personality.

And when all is said, the invention does not help us. We have still to settle what *is* for the good of Humanity, and we can only do that in the old-fashioned way. There is no guidance in the conception. No effective unity can follow from it, because you can only find out the right and wrong of a given course by summing up the advantages and disadvantages, and striking a balance, and there is nothing in the Religion of Humanity to force two men to find the balance on the same side. The Comtists are no better off than other utilitarians in judging policy, events, conduct.

The particularities of the worship, its minute and truly ingenious re-adaptations of sacraments, prayers, reverent signs, down even to the invocation of a New Trinity, need

not detain us. They are said, though it is not easy to believe, *The worship and discipline.* to have been elaborated by way of Utopia. If so, no Utopia has ever yet been presented in a style so little calculated to stir the imagination, to warm the feelings, to soothe the insurgency of the reason. It is a mistake to present a great body of hypotheses—if Comte meant them for hypotheses—in the most dogmatic and peremptory form to which language can lend itself. And there is no more extraordinary thing in the history of opinion than the perversity with which Comte has succeeded in clothing a philosophic doctrine, so intrinsically conciliatory as his, in a shape that excites so little sympathy and gives so much provocation. An enemy defined Comtism as Catholicism *minus* Christianity, to which an able champion retorted by calling it Catholicism *plus* Science. Comte's Utopia has pleased the followers of the Catholic, just as little as those of the scientific, spirit.

The elaborate and minute systematization of life, proper to the religion of Humanity, is to be directed by a priesthood. The priests are to possess neither wealth nor material power; they are not to command, but to counsel; their *The priesthood.* authority is to rest on persuasion, not on force. When religion has become positive, and society industrial, then the influence of the church upon the state becomes really free and independent, which was not the case in the middle ages. The power of the priesthood rests upon special knowledge of man and nature; but to this intellectual eminence must also be added moral power and a

certain greatness of character, without which force of intellect and completeness of attainment will not receive the confidence they ought to inspire. The functions of the priesthood are of this kind:—To exercise a systematic direction over education; to hold a consultative influence over all the important acts of actual life, public and private; to arbitrate in cases of practical conflict; to preach sermons recalling those principles of generality and universal harmony which our special activities dispose us to ignore; to order the due classification of society; to perform the various ceremonies appointed by the founder of the religion. The authority of the priesthood is to rest wholly on voluntary adhesion, and there is to be perfect freedom of speech and discussion. This provision hardly consists with Comte's congratulations to the tsar Nicholas on the "wise vigilance" with which he kept watch over the importation of Western books.

From his earliest manhood Comte had been powerfully impressed by the necessity of elevating the condition of women. (See remarkable passage in his letters to M. Valat, pp. 84-87.) His friendship with Madame de Vaux had deepened the impression, and in the reconstructed society

Women. women are to play a highly important part.

They are to be carefully excluded from public action, but they are to do many more important things than things political. To fit them for their functions, they are to be raised above material cares, and they are to be thoroughly educated. The family, which is so important an

element of the Comtist scheme of things, exists to carry the influence of woman over man to the highest point of cultivation. Through affection she purifies the activity of man. "Superior in power of affection, more able to keep both the intellectual and the active powers in continual subordination to feeling, women are formed as the natural intermediaries between Humanity and man. The Great Being confides specially to them its moral Providence, maintaining through them the direct and constant cultivation of universal affection, in the midst of all the distractions of thought or action, which are for ever withdrawing men from its influence ... Beside the uniform influence of every woman on every man, to attach him to Humanity, such is the importance and the difficulty of this ministry that each of us should be placed under the special guidance of one of these angels, to answer for him, as it were, to the Great Being. This moral guardianship may assume. three types,—the mother, the wife and the daughter; each having several modifications, as shown in the concluding volume. Together they form the three simple modes of solidarity, or unity with contemporaries,—obedience, union and protection as well as the three degrees of continuity between ages, by uniting us with the past, the present and the future. In accordance with my theory of the brain, each corresponds with one of our three altruistic instincts—veneration, attachment and benevolence."

How the positive method of observation and verification of real facts has landed us in this, and much else of the same

kind, is extremely hard to guess. Seriously to examine slam an encyclopaedic system, that touches life, society and *Conclusion.* knowledge at every point, is evidently beyond the compass of such an article as this. There is in every chapter a whole group of speculative suggestions, each of which would need a long chapter to itself to elaborate or to discuss. There is at least one biological speculation of astounding audacity, that could be examined in nothing less than a treatise. Perhaps we have said enough to show that after performing a great and claims to real service to thought Comte almost sacrificed his gratitude by the invention of a system that, as such, and independently of detached suggestions, is markedly retrograde. But the world will take what is available in Comte, while forgetting that in his work which is as irrational in one way as Hegel is in another.

See also the article [POSITIVISM](#).

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1. [↑](#) For Comte's place in the history of ethical theory see [ETHICS](#).

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