

BRIEF EXPOSÉ
OF
M. AUGUSTE COMTE'S
THREE STAGES OF THOUGHT,

BEING

A PAPER READ BEFORE THE STUDENTS' LITERARY
AND SCIENTIFIC SOCIETY AT BOMBAY
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BY

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PRELIMINARY NOTE.

No pretension is made in the following Paper to approach the Law of the historical analysis of thought from a new or original view-point. But I have attempted, as best I humbly could, so to collate and summarise the statement of the Law, its main characteristics, examples, and objections to it, as to present it in a sufficiently organic shape, though freed of, and distinct from, its technical bearings on Comte's general system. I have based the Paper entirely on the materials, not excepting even the illustrations, supplied by two of the most leading living expounders of the Law, namely, Mr. John Stuart Mill in his work on *Auguste Comte and Positivism*, and Mr. George Henry Lewes in his *History of Philosophy*, Vol. 2, and also his volume on *Comte's Philosophy of the Sciences* in Bohn's Scientific Library. Incidentally, I have consulted M. E. Littré's lucid account of *Auguste Comte et la Philosophie Positive*,

Miss Harriet Martineau's *Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte*, Bain's *Mental and Moral Science*, and Dr. William Whewell's chapter in his *Philosophy of Discovery* on the furthest advance of the sensational school. If the Paper will tend to set the Law in the "dry light," so to speak, of the great mind which originally discovered it, unaffected with the "moist humours" of my own discoloured and distorted interpretations of it, it will have fulfilled its intended purpose.

Bombay, March 1873.

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CONTENTS.

	PAGE
SUBJECT DEFINED	9
INTRODUCTORY TERMS REFERRED TO	10
STATEMENT OF THE LAW	12
THE THEOLOGICAL STAGE	14
THE METAPHYSICAL STAGE	17
THE POSITIVE STAGE	19
EXAMPLES	21
OBJECTIONS.....	22
CONCLUSION	26

COMTE'S

THREE STAGES OF THOUGHT.

NEXT to the two great legacies,—viz., the formation of a philosophy of science and the creation of sociology,—the most valuable inheritance which M. Auguste Comte has left to the existing generation of European thinkers, is his theory of the evolution of thought, or as it is better known under the name of the *loi des trois états*. This theory, in which he was not forestalled by any preceding philosopher whether ancient or modern, forms a radical part of his general system of "philosophie positive," and is the basis on which the science of sociology, and more especially that part of it called "social dynamics," is made to rest. What the law of gravitation is to astronomy, what the law of the general property of tissues is to physiology, the law of the three stages is to social science. Before therefore proceeding to state what

the three stages are, it is *in limine* necessary to refer to, if not to explain, what Comte meant by the terms "philosophie positive" and what by "social dynamics," so far as they throw light on the law of evolution.

"PHILOSOPHIE positive" is altogether a name of Comte's invention, but he was by no means the originator of the idea which that expression technically connotes. Sir William Hamilton in his doctrine of the Relativity of Knowledge, James Mill and Jeremy Bentham in their philosophical works, anticipate Comte in his conception of what constitutes "philosophie positive." The more remote sources of filiation are the incipient philosophies of Hume, Bacon and DesCartes. But the thinker who in this respect is supposed to be the closest forerunner of Comte is Dr. Thomas Brown whose lectures in their earlier portions are said to form the fittest introduction to the study of the positive system. The fundamental doctrine of that system, as Comte has laid it down, is that the whole of our knowledge, to borrow an expression of Greek philosophy, is not noumenal but phenomenal; and of the phenomena, the only knowledge accessible to our limited capacities is the laws of their sequence, that is to say, the laws of co-existence and succession. The systematisation of those laws constitutes "philosophie positive"; but they should be so grouped and codified as to induce

a foreknowledge of future phenomena of the same class as the laws provide for. Observation and experience are the means, prevision the end of positivism, so that no philosophy, *i.e.*, knowledge, can pretend to be positive unless it has been obtained by induction. So far for the term "philosophie positive." M. Comte maintains that the phenomena of society are capable of being studied in the same light as the phenomena of nature; in other words, there are social laws determining the volitions of men just as there are cosmical laws governing the particles of matter; and that human conduct can in a certain course of history be foreseen with as great exactness and precision as the *momentum* of a falling body, or the happening of a solar eclipse. Sociology is thus nothing more than the extended application of the processes of observation and abstraction to the phenomena of conduct with a view to fix the laws of their invariable occurrence; and the histories written among others by Buckle, Draper, Curtius, and Lecky show how far the attempt to make a science of history is possible. Society may be viewed either in its three-fold aspect of the individual, the family, and the whole of the human species as a fixed and stationary agglomeration, or in its connexion with history as a progressive and improving community. The results of generalization in the former state when grouped together form what is termed *social statics*. Social dynamics on the other hand is the *connexus* of the laws of human progress. The history of opinion

and the survey of the various changes in men's thoughts whether they be scientific, moral or religious, (for it must be noted that Comte draws no distinction whatsoever between them, but reduces them all to the same law of progression), belongs to the domain of social dynamics. Its leading principle is the law of the three periods.

THAT law is, that every class of conceptions, every idea and every opinion with reference to things lying out of our scope of self-consciousness, whether that conception, idea or opinion relate to the mental, moral, religious, physical or political worlds, advances in its progress towards perfection through the three states or conditions known in Comte's nomenclature as the theological, the metaphysical, and the positive states. Exception has not unjustly been taken to the use of these terms by the English followers of positivism on the ground that they are equivocal terms, and that they tend in consequence to create a confusion in their accepted or ordinary import in the English tongue. Two new sets of terms, personal, abstractional and experiential, or volitional, ontological and phenomenal, have been suggested as connoting without ambiguity the character of, and the difference between, the respective stages they indicate. Though such may to some extent be the case, the terms made use of by Comte have of late become so far classical in philosophy that it is no longer safe to attempt a variance

in them. The theological stage is the initial or primitive condition of thought. The metaphysical is the *permissio intellectûs* or the state of transition. The positive is the final or perfected phase of conceptions. The first and the second are merely provisional to, or preparative for, the third phase of the mind; and the distinction between the first two on the one hand and the third on the other may be considered to be the same as that subsisting in inductive logic between a hypothesis and a law of science. But it seems that the distinction cannot be more incisively stated than by the use of illustrations; and a thorough Comtist of the English school—Mr. George Henry Lewes—suggests among others the following analogy which to all intents best illustrates the difference. The analogy is derived from the science of embryology. In the development of the embryo, three successive forms of circulation have been observed to manifest themselves. Each of these forms is marked by the appearance of new vascular systems and the destruction or atrophy of those preceding them. The primitive form, for instance, is characterised by the formation, among other organs, of the umbilical vesicle; the transitory form by that of the placenta; and the third or permanent form by the development of the lungs and intestines. When the permanent form has established itself in the system, the primitive and transitory forms completely disappear. More familiar, though rough, analogies may be cited from the growth of the permanent teeth of which the milk-

teeth are but temporary substitutes; or from the growth of hair which are the ultimate development of the downs on the human skin; or from the growth of intelligence from infancy to age in the individual man. "Does not each of us," says Comte, "in contemplating his own history, recollect that he has been successively a theologian in his infancy, a metaphysician in his youth, and a physicist in his ripe age?" (quoted by Dr. Whewell in his *Philosophy of Discovery*, Ed. 1860, c. xxi., s. 1.) So, every phenomenon is conceived by the mind from the view-point at first of theology, then of metaphysics, and lastly of physics or science proper.

To explain these stages in their order. The theological spirit is possible only in the infantile condition of the mind, when reason has but just awakened itself to the phenomena surrounding it. Its peculiar character is to regard the world as an *ensemble* of supernatural effects. Extraneous agents are held to move all the objects and events which constitute the universe. The wills of superior spirits are the powers that produce life, impart intelligence, and superintend the destinies of men and things, in the same manner as human volitions influence the actions of men. "All the world's a stage" says Shakespeare. Comte seems to maintain that the "theological" view agrees with the dramatic, only with this exception, that instead of men playing their

varied rôles on the boards, superior powers are the actors under the influence of arbitrary and momentary caprices or subject to fixed laws of order and uniformity. This view of phenomena is the most ulterior which historical analysis has yet discovered, but Comte goes a shade further in asserting it to be spontaneous and natural to the mind inasmuch as it is founded on the analogy of consciousness, that is, the necessity for it lies in the original tendency of man "to transfer the sense of his own nature to the radical "explanation" of the world. The attempts made by the mind at this period of its growth to classify phenomena vary in their degrees of generality from bare enumeration to the most comprehensive theory of nature. Just as there are three steps of thought in its general evolution, so there are three sub-steps, so to speak, which the mind undergoes before it emerges out of the theological period. In the first epoch it is at work only with the process of observation. But it does not note up the individual instances so observed into a body of connected experience. Classification, as such, does not exist at all. Each subject, especially when it is marked with a strong individuality of its own, is believed to be bodily animated. This is the period of fetichism. The Greek worship, for instance, of the earth under the name of Tellus or Pales, the Hindu worship of particular mountains and rivers as divinities *per se*, the Egyptian worship of the sun-god and moon-goddess, and the whole astrolatry of primitive savages, are all systems of fetichistic thought.

When however the mind advances from mere observation to generalisation, the first traces of classification begin to appear. Objects and events are grouped together as effects of the same or similar causes. Particular invisible beings rule or superintend phenomena. This is the polytheistic period. The whole of the mythology and religious legends of the ancients supply an infinite and interesting series of polytheistic opinion. Among the most conspicuous of the series may be mentioned by way of example the beautiful myths of the Dryads, Nymphs, and Satyrs, and the fiction of the Nine Muses in Greek mythology, or the terrible story of Chandra and Rahu in Hindu astrology accounting for the cause of lunar eclipses. The last phase of theological conceptions is monotheism, in which the plurality of divinities is merged as it were in a single godhead. Monotheism is thus the highest sublimity to which the mind has carried its power of abstraction in the theological phase. Instead of the multiplicity of supernatural causes, it believes in the existence of one *causa causans* or the "Great First Cause". The great historical creeds of the world, *viz.*, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Moslemism, are not, on the positivist theory, mere modifications of man's spiritual longing after his Creator, but are so many systems of classification by which phenomena, known or knowable, are bound together under the universal hypothesis of a God.

THE metaphysical stage of the intellect does not necessarily presuppose a higher power of generalisation in the mind than that it possessed in the theological epoch. But it does presuppose *that* power to be more confirmed and matured, and capable of being exercised more frequently and systematically, than before.

The Metaphysical Stage. [The essential incident of this phase is to seek for the causes of phenomena within the phenomena themselves and not beyond them.] There is no change effected in the objects of research but simply in the direction of it, the sphere of observation being merely shifted from without to within the phenomena with the same want as before of sufficient proofs to test the classifications based upon it. The supernatural agents which in the theological state governed the world have now been converted into natural causes, and their location is changed from being extrinsic or extraneous into intrinsic or inherent in their effects. With new classifications there arises a new nomenclature. The agents, as said above, become causes. The whole literature of personification and poetry (which is the expression of the theological form of thought) is replaced by such figments as inherent powers, latent forces, occult qualities, hidden virtues, essences, quiddities, &c. The history of thought is replete with instances in every department of science, morals and politics, in which the metaphysical spirit is uppermost. The doctrine of *non habet saltem* or that nature knows no breaks in its operations, the

doctrine of *vis medicatrix* or that nature has a curative force in diseases, the doctrines of *vis inertiae* and that of nature's "horror" of a vacuum, the theories of a "vegetative soul," a "plastic force," a "vital principle," the tendency of nature towards the "best," the fall of heavy bodies and the ascent of lighter gases in order to get at their "natural" place, are a few of the examples. But the most important by far of all the varieties of metaphysical thought which have largely influenced the history, at least the speculative history of mankind are Plato's doctrine of ideas and the scholastic struggle between nominalism and realism. Plato divided the knowledge of phenomena into *Entia* and *Fientia*, the former being real, objective and self-existent, the latter being shadowy, subjective and transient. The former are universal ideas or *cogitabilia* residing in the Divine Mind only, the latter are particular sensations or *precepta* of sense cognisable by finite minds in this sublunary state of existence. The ideas are types or models, of which the sensations are mere copy or impress. Modern psychology does not admit the objective reality of ideas, but regards them as simple "concepts" or abstractions disembodied out of concrete existences. In the same way the mediæval philosophers of the realistic school contended, and for some time with great success, that universal substances were real entities, and that such general names as man, tree, animal, &c., were denotative of concrete objects corresponding to their connotation. It is scarcely worth stating that the

modern spirit is in favour of nominalism, denying the objective existence of abstractions altogether, or, in other words, upholding that the names of classes are bare records in language of the two psychological processes of observation and generalisation.

To come now to the positive period of thought.

The Positive Stage. Both the theological and metaphysical forms sought for the explanations of things in the assumed existence of causes, the former as extrinsic, the latter as intrinsic to the phenomena. (Positivism on the other hand regards the search as transcendental to the human mind, and limits its activity solely to the observation of the *laws*, or the constant relations subsisting between events of resemblance and succession. It aims to explain the *how*, and not the *why*, as it is called, of phenomena.) It regards the world "as a vast *consensus* of forces, an infinite whirl "and rush of phenomena, of which we can learn by "observation the uniform co-existences and sequences, "but know not, nor need to know, whence they flashed "into being, what power sustains them, or what their "mighty movements mean. What appears, we may "and should investigate; to what is, we have no access, "no ascertainable relation." (George Brimley's *Essays*, 2nd Ed., pp. 312-313.) In fact the existence of causes is neither asserted nor denied, but it is denied that they form legitimate objects of human investigation. The inductive sciences are perhaps the only

systems of thought which have attained a more or less positive form. The laws of which they are constituted have acquired such an unerring certainty that they fulfil the great test of positive perfection, namely, prescience or foreknowledge. All general propositions which form the major premiss of syllogisms have acquired such a prophetic import that they may be taken to be the highest expression of positive thought. Such for example are the known laws of astronomy which foretell to a nicety every possible phenomenon in that science. This refined degree of prescience is the product of what is familiarly known in the discovery of science as the inductive method, but which Comte in an expression fitting-in with the rest of his phraseology styles, the objective mode of thought, that is to say, a mode in which the conceptions of things accord with the natural conditions under which they exist, rather than with the mental conditions under which the subject or mind conceives them. The science of physiology is partly in a metaphysical and partly in a positive stage. Sociology is almost wholly abandoned to the theological and metaphysical spirit; and Comte is perhaps the first thinker who with a system of well-digested rules extends the inductive method to facts of history and disallows any speciality in the mode of study to social, as distinguished from cosmical, phenomena.

IN order to obtain an idea at one view of the successive periods of evolution, it may be well to cite a few representative cases from the history of science. The ancients had a belief in the existence of certain fabulous serpents called basilisks. They used to be kept shut-up underground, and such fatal influences were ascribed to them that all those whom they breathed or looked upon died of the breath or look. Cellarity long pent-up is inimical to life. Gases which collect in low spots are injurious to health unless driven away by fresh air. Here, there are three distinct explanations attempted of the same phenomenon according as the search is limited to agents, causes or laws. The theological agent is the imaginary basilisk, the metaphysical cause is cellarity, and the positive law is the injurious properties of certain gases. Another illustration may be obtained from the science of electricity. A certain church in Sienna had often been damaged by lightning; at last a lightning-rod was put up, notwithstanding the imprecations of ecclesiastics who denounced it as the "heretical stake." A storm once occurred. The lightning struck the church. Men from all parts crowded to see if the house of God was spared or destroyed, when "lo!" says Lewes, "the very spiders' webs upon it were unbroken." The theological conception in this instance was the ecclesiastical bias as to the influence of the devil. The properties of the lightning-conductor were the positive law of the

phenomenon. The production of monsters was in the infancy of the science of human embryology ascribed to God's anger, or that the devil had seduced or violated the mother. Then the doctrine of primitive or pre-existent germs potentially containing the monstrosity came into vogue. Finally the doctrine of epigenesis or gradual organic development in accordance with conditions, regarded monsters as either organic aberrations or cases of arrested growth. In these different accounts God's anger or the devil's lust represented the theological, potential or pre-existent germs the metaphysical, and the arrest of growth the positive spirit.

Two considerable objections have been made to the law of evolution which may well be noticed here, together with the refutation of them suggested by positivists. It is urged in the first place that Comte's theory is atheistic or rather favours a disbelief in a Creator of the universe. In proof of this objection passages from Comte's own writings are cited tending to countenance infidelity. But it seems that it amounts only to an *argumentum ad hominem*; for counter-passages strongly condemnatory of theism are in the same works also to be found. Both are alike predicated by Comte to be inaccessible to the human understanding. An opponent of positivism thus expressively states the atheistic objection: Comte, says he, "treats our hope of a life beyond the grave as a

"childish chimera; he scouts as a metaphysical entity
 "on a level with the occult causes of the school-
 "men Him whom other men worship as the source
 "and sustainer of their own lives and of all the
 "powers at work around them; (Him) he treats as
 "a poor old dethroned Fetish, a *roi fainéant*, kept
 "up like the descendant of the Great Mogul, from
 "unmeaning habit of accustomed vengeance or the
 "idle prejudices and selfish interests of metaphy-
 "sicians and theologians—a useless ceremonial, from
 "which all power has been transferred to positive laws
 "and all glory to their discoverers." (George Brim-
 ley's *Essays*, 2nd Ed. p. 312.) Whatever may be
 Comte's personal faith and whatever amount of contra-
 diction there may be between his earlier and later
 speculations,—and it is notorious that there is no end
 of such instances,—the logical consequence, however,
 which follows from the law as above stated is not re-
 pugnant to a faith in the Creator. The law simply
 enunciates the inductive basis of all knowledge what-
 soever, without disturbing the foundations of our
 faith. Faith is not knowledge in the sense in which
 Comte understood it. It is not evolved out of other
 faiths, and as soon as a historical development is
 imputed to it, it loses all its value as the effect of
 inspiration or revelation. "Give to faith what is
 "faith's" says Bacon, thereby distinguishing faith
 from knowledge which is the subject-matter of reason
 and is derived by observation and experience. Locke
 does also in a similar strain inculcate contented

ignorance of transcendental topics among which faith is included. Mill seems to go even a step further in advance of these grounds, and in express terms asserts that belief in a Supreme Intelligence is consistent with positivism, the proviso thereto only being that the Intelligence should be believed to be subject to fixed laws of order and not to deviate from them either "capriciously or providentially." For the complete acceptance of the positive mode of thought, what is essential is simply the theory that all "events are parts of a constant order." It is immaterial whether one accepts or not at the same time "an universal antecedent on which the "whole system of nature was originally consequent, "and whether that universal antecedent is conceived "as an Intelligence or not." (*Auguste Comte and Positivism*, by J. S. Mill, 1865, p. 15.) Though such a faith may not be quite incompatible with positivism, it may still be urged with some show of reason that a disbelieving "metaphysician" is intellectually preferable, from the positivist's stand-point, to a monotheistic "theologian" in the same degree that metaphysics, in the Comtist-sense of the term, is superior to theology. The second objection is that the historical analysis is not so complete and well-defined as Comte lays it down. The different stages have often been observed in history to overlap each other. Unquestionably it is so. But the fact is not ignored by the law of evolution. That law does not go to state more than this: that the

three phases do not co-exist in respect of the same identical conception or phenomenon unless they do so in different intellects or in the same intellect at different times. One part of a science may as a fact be positive, another may be metaphysical, and a third theological. But in no case can the same mind at the same time be theological, metaphysical, and positive in its view of the same identical phenomenon. The law indeed admits of such an anomaly as the fusion of the three stages into one, and in some instances it is essential to the progress of a science. But it is an exception and not a rule. Then again it is a familiar fact in the history of civilization that primitive nations spontaneously adopt the life at first of hunters, then of nomads, and finally of agriculturists. But one and the same tribe cannot be at the same time and in the same pursuits a hunting, a nomadic, and a cultivating race. Jural ideas have likewise passed through the three phases of the Themistes or revealed law, of customary law, and of the codes; but it is historically impossible that the same jural conception should originally exist in any legal community in more than one of these phases at the same time. Similarly, it may be that the transmission of thought from generation to generation may take place at different stages of its development, some conceptions being transmitted in the positive, some in the metaphysical, and some in the theological condition. It may also be that the most refined generation occupying the vanguard of posi-

tivism in physical science may still linger in respect of its moral and political existence in the thickest rear of theological darkness. But that in any one of these instances it should be in all the three states at once, is a psychological and historical impossibility.

SUCH is a brief abstract of the law, denuded
 Conclusion. of its surrounding bearings,
 of the historical development
 of thought, discovered by Comte and elucidated by his followers after him. It only remains before concluding the sketch to refer to the fact that the change in mental and moral science is not unaccompanied by a parallel change in the department of practical life. The progress of material civilisation keeps pace with the progress of ideas, either exercising a reflex influence on the advance of the other. When the world was still in its theological condition advancing step by step from the lowest state of fetishistic to the supremest state of monotheistic *culte*, its practical civilization, although not based on any revealed faith, gradually evolved itself out of its primitive elements until it reached its acme of vigour in the age of the Antonines. The Middle Ages which have become a bye-word in history for the stagnation and immobility of thought were, as compared to the theological age which preceded them, pregnant in their own way with tokens of mechanical and material progress. The close of the two epochs closes as it were the military mode of the world's life. The advent of the

positive era is, notwithstanding abnormal developments of the warlike spirit in some countries, likewise synchronous with the general dawn of an industrial and pacific *régime*. The vast economic results which our age is daily achieving, added to the advance of "positive" ideas, is destined soon or late to carry the evolution of humanity in the spheres of thought and action as further and further towards perfection as the capacities of reason and the enlargement of experience will admit of.