

## Introduction

Comte was a French philosopher and writer who formulated the doctrine of [positivism](#). He is often regarded as the first [philosopher of science](#) in the modern sense of the term. Comte is also seen as the founder of the academic discipline of [sociology](#).

Influenced by the [utopian socialist Henri de Saint-Simon](#), Comte developed positive philosophy in an attempt to remedy the social malaise of the [French Revolution](#), calling for a new social doctrine based on [science](#). He had a major impact on 19th-century thought, influencing the work of social thinkers such as [Karl Marx](#), [John Stuart Mill](#) and [George Eliot](#). His concept of *sociologie* and [social evolutionism](#) set the tone for early [social theorists](#) and [anthropologists](#) such as [Harriet Martineau](#) and [Herbert Spencer](#), evolving into modern academic sociology presented by [Émile Durkheim](#) as practical and objective [social research](#).

Comte first described the [epistemological](#) perspective of positivism in [The Course in Positive Philosophy](#), a series of texts published between 1830 and 1842. These texts were followed by the 1848 work, [A General View of Positivism](#) (published in English in 1865). The first three volumes of the *Course* dealt chiefly with the physical sciences already in existence ([mathematics](#), [astronomy](#), [physics](#), [chemistry](#), [biology](#)), whereas the latter two emphasised the inevitable coming of [social science](#). Observing the circular dependence of theory and observation in science, and classifying the sciences in this way, Comte may be regarded as the first [philosopher of science](#) in the modern sense of the term. Comte was also the first to distinguish natural philosophy from science explicitly. For him, the physical sciences had necessarily to arrive first, before humanity could adequately channel its efforts into the most challenging and complex "Queen science" of human society itself. His work *View of Positivism* would therefore set out to define, in more detail, the empirical goals of sociological method.

Comte offered an [account of social evolution](#), proposing that society undergoes three phases in its quest for the truth according to a general 'law of three stages'.

Comte's stages were (1) the [theological](#) stage, (2) the [metaphysical](#) stage, and (3) the *positive* stage.

(1) The Theological stage was seen from the perspective of 19th century France as preceding the [Age of Enlightenment](#), in which man's place in society and society's restrictions upon man were referenced to God. Man blindly believed in whatever he was taught by his ancestors. He believed in a supernatural power. [Fetishism](#) played a significant role during this time.

(2) By the "Metaphysical" stage, Comte referred not to the Metaphysics of [Aristotle](#) or other ancient Greek philosophers. Rather, the idea was rooted in the problems of French society subsequent to the [French Revolution](#) of 1789. This Metaphysical stage involved the justification of *universal rights* as being on a vauntedly higher plane than the authority of any human ruler to countermand, although said rights were not referenced to the sacred beyond mere metaphor. This stage is known as the stage of investigation, because people started reasoning and questioning, although no solid evidence was laid. The stage of investigation was the beginning of a world that questioned authority and religion.

(3) In the Scientific stage, which came into being after the failure of the revolution and of [Napoleon](#), people could find solutions to social problems and bring them into force despite the proclamations of *human rights* or prophecy of *the will of God*. Science started to answer questions in full stretch. In this regard he was similar to [Karl Marx](#) and [Jeremy Bentham](#). For its time, this idea of a Scientific stage was considered up-to-date, although from a later standpoint, it is too derivative of [classical physics](#) and [academic history](#). Comte's [law of three stages](#) was one of the first theories of [social evolutionism](#).

The religion of humanity[[edit](#)]

In later years, Comte developed the '[religion of humanity](#)' for positivist societies in order to fulfil the cohesive function once held by traditional worship. In 1849, he proposed a [calendar reform](#) called the '[positivist calendar](#)'. For close associate [John Stuart Mill](#), it was possible to distinguish between a "good Comte" (the author of the *Course in Positive Philosophy*) and a "bad Comte" (the author of the secular-religious system).<sup>[10]</sup> The system was unsuccessful but met with the publication of [Darwin's \*On the Origin of Species\*](#) (1859) to influence the proliferation of various [Secular Humanist](#) organizations in the 19th century, especially through the work of secularists such as [George Holyoake](#) and [Richard Congreve](#). Although Comte's English followers, including [George Eliot](#) and Harriet Martineau, for the most part rejected the full gloomy panoply of his system, they liked the idea of a religion of humanity and his injunction to "vivre pour autrui" ("live for others"), from which comes the word "[altruism](#)".

Law of three stages[[edit](#)]

*Main article:* [Law of three stages](#)

Comte was agitated by the fact that no one had synthesized physics, chemistry, and biology into a coherent system of ideas, so he began an attempt to reasonably deduce facts about the social world from the use of the sciences. Through his studies, he concluded that the growth of the human mind progresses in stages, and so must societies. He claimed the history of society could be divided into three different stages: theological, metaphysical, and positive. The Law of three Stages, an evolutionary theory, describes how history of societies is split into three sections due to new thoughts on philosophy. Comte believed that evolution was the growth of the human mind, splitting into stages and evolving through these stages. Comte concluded that society acts similarly to the mind.

The law is this: that each of our leading conceptions – each branch of our knowledge – passes successively through three different

theoretical conditions: the Theological, or fictitious; the Metaphysical, or abstract; and the Scientific, or positive.

— A. Comte

The Law of Three Stages is the evolution of society in which the stages have already occurred or are currently developing. The reason why there are newly developed stages after a certain time period is that the system "has lost its power" and is preventing the progression of civilization, causing complicated situations in society. 10. The only way to escape the situation is for people within the civilized nations to turn towards an "organic" new social system. Comte refers to kings to show the complications of re-establishment on society. Kings feel the need to reorganize their kingdom, but many fail to succeed because they do not consider that the progress of civilization needs reform, not perceiving that there is nothing more perfect than inserting a new, more harmonious system. Kings fail to see the effectiveness of abandoning old systems because they do not understand the nature of the present crisis. But in order to progress, there needs to be the necessary consequences that come with it, which is caused by a "series of modifications, independent of the human will, to which all classes of society contributed, and of which kings themselves have often been the first agents and most eager promoters". The people themselves have the ability to produce a new system. This pattern is shown through the theological stage, metaphysical stage, and positive stage. The Law of Three Stages is split into stages, much like how the human mind changes from stage to stage. The three stages are the theological stage, the metaphysical stage, and the positive stage, also known as the Law of Three Stages. The theological stage happened before the 1300s, in which all societies lived a life that was completely theocentric. The metaphysical stage was when the society seeks universal rights and freedom. With the third and final stage, the positive stage, Comte takes a stand on the question, "how should the relations among philosophy of science, history of science, and sociology of science be seen." He says that sociology and history are not mutually exclusive, but that history is the method of sociology, thus

he calls sociology the “final science.” This positive stage was to solve social problems and forcing these social problems to be fixed without care for “the will of God” or “human rights.” Comte finds that these stages can be seen across different societies across all of history.

#### 1. Theological Stage

The first stage, the theological stage, relies on supernatural or religious explanations of the phenomena of human behavior because "the human mind, in its search for the primary and final causes of phenomena, explains the apparent anomalies in the universe as interventions of supernatural agents". The Theological Stage is the "necessary starting point of human intelligence", when humans turn to supernatural agents as the cause of all phenomena. In this stage, humans focus on discovering absolute knowledge. Comte disapproved this stage because it turned to simple explanation humans created in their minds that all phenomena was caused by supernatural agents, rather than human reason and experience. Comte refers to Bacon's philosophy that "there can be no real knowledge except that which rests upon observed facts", but he observes that the primitive mind could not have thought that way because it would have only created a vicious circle between observations and theories. "For if, on the one hand, every positive theory must necessarily be founded upon observations, it is, on the other hand, no less true that, in order to observe, our mind has need of some theory or other". Because the human mind could not have thought in that way in the origin of human knowledge, Comte claims that humans would have been "incapable of remembering facts", and would not have escaped the circle if it were not for theological conceptions, which were less complicated explanations to human life. Although Comte disliked this stage, he explains that theology was necessary in the beginning of the developing primitive mind.

The first theological state is the necessary starting point of human intelligence. The human mind primarily focuses its attention to the “inner nature of beings and to the first and final causes of all phenomena it observes.” (Ferre 2) This means that the mind is looking

for the cause and effect of an action that will govern the social world. Therefore, it “represents these phenomena as being produced by a direct and continuous action of more or less numerous supernatural agents, who’s arbitrary interventions explain all the apparent anomalies of the universe.” (Ferre 2) This primary subset of the theological state is known as fetishism, where the phenomena must be caused and created by a theological supernatural being such as God, making humans view every event in the universe as a direct will from these supernatural agents. Some people believed in souls or spirits that possessed inanimate objects and practiced Animism. These natural spiritual beings who possessed souls and may exist apart from the material bodies were capable of interaction with humans, therefore requiring sacrifices and worship to please the agents. With all these new reasons behind phenomena, numerous fetishisms occur, needing several gods to continue to explain events. People begin to believe that every object or event has a unique god attached to it. This belief is called polytheism. The mind “substituted the providential action of a single being for the varied play of numerous independent gods which have been imagined by the primitive mind.” These Gods often took on both human and animal resemblance. In Egypt, there were multiple gods with animal body parts such as Ra, who had the head of a hawk and had sun associations with the Egyptians. The polytheistic Greeks had several gods such as Poseidon who controlled the sea and Demeter who was the goddess of fertility. However, with all these new gods governing the phenomena of society, the brain can get a confused with the numerous gods it needs to remember. The human mind eliminates this problem by believing in a sub-stage called monotheism. Rather than having multiple gods, there is simply one all-knowing and omnipotent God who is the center of power controlling the world. This creates harmony with the universe because everything is under one ruler. This leaves no confusion of how to act or who is the superior ruler out of the several gods seen in polytheism.

Comte believed the theological stage was necessary because of the foundational belief that man’s earliest philosophy of explanation is the act of connecting phenomena around him to his own actions; that man

may “apply the study of external nature to his own”. This first stage is necessary to remove mankind from the “vicious circle in which it was confined by the two necessities of observing first, in order to form conceptions, and of forming theories first, in order to observe”. Additionally, the theological stage is able to organize society by directing “the first social organization, as it first forms a system of common opinions, and by forming such a system”. Though, according to Comte, it could not last, this stage was able to establish an intellectual unity that made an impressive political system. The theological state was also necessary for human progress on account that it creative a class in society dedicated to “speculative activity”. It is in this way that Comte sees the theological stage continue to exist into the Enlightenment. Comte momentarily admires the theological stage for its remarkable ability to enact this activity amidst a time when it was argued to be impractical. It is to this stage that the human mind owes “the first effectual separation between theory and practice, which could take place in no other manner” other than through the institution provided by the theological stage.

## **Theological stage**

The Theological Stage is the stage that was seen primarily among the civilizations in the distant past. Having been used before the 1300s, this is a very basic view of the world with little to no involvement in the world of science, and a world of illusions and delusions, as Freud would put it. In order to seek the nature of all beings, mankind puts their focus on sentiments, feelings, and emotions. This turned mankind towards theology and the creation of gods to answer all their questions.

### **1. Fetishism**

The Theological Stage is broken into three sections, Fetishism, Polytheism, and Monotheism. Fetishism is the philosophy in which mankind puts the power of a god into an inanimate object. Every object could hold this power of a god, so it started to confuse those

who believed in Fetishism and created multiple gods and formed Polytheism.

### 1. Polytheism

The basic meaning of polytheism is the belief in an order of multiple gods who rule over the universe. Within polytheism, each god is assigned a specific thing in which they are the god of. Examples of this would be the Greek god, Zeus, the god of the sky/lightning, or Ra, the sun god, in Egyptian mythology. A group of priests were often assigned to these gods to offer sacrifices and receive blessing from those gods, but once again, because of the innumerable number of gods, it got confusing, so civilization turned to Monotheism.

### 1. Monotheism

Monotheism is the belief in one, all powerful god who rules over every aspect of the universe. The removal of emotional and imaginational aspect of both Fetishism and Polytheism resulted in intellectual awakening. This removal allowed for the Enlightenment to occur as well as the expansion of the scientific world. With the Enlightenment came many famous philosophers who brought about a great change in the world. This is the reason why "Monotheism is the climax of the theological stage of thinking."

### 1. Metaphysical or Abstract Stage

The second stage, the metaphysical stage, is merely a modification of the first because a supernatural cause is replaced by an "abstract entity"; it is meant to be a transitional stage, where there is the belief that abstract forces control the behavior of human beings. Because it is a transitional stage between the theological stage and the positive stage, Comte deemed it the least important of the three stages and was only necessary because the human mind cannot make the jump from the theological to the positive stage on its own.



The metaphysical stage is the transitional stage. Because "Theology and physics are so profoundly incompatible", and their "conceptions are so radically opposed in character", human intelligence must have a gradual transition. Other than this, Comte says that there is no other use for this stage. Although it is the least important stage, it is necessary because humans could not handle the significant change in thought from theological to positivity. The metaphysical stage is just a slight modification of the previous stage, when people believed in the abstract forces rather than the supernatural. The mind begins to notice the facts themselves, caused by the emptiness of the metaphysical agents through "over subtle qualification that all right-minded persons considered them to be only the abstract names of the phenomena in question". The mind becomes familiar with concepts, wanting to seek more, and therefore is prepared to move into the positive stage.

In understanding Comte's argument, it is important to note that Comte explains the theological and positive stages first and only then returns to explain the metaphysical stage. His rationale in this decision is that "any intermediate state can be judged only after a precise analysis of two extremes". Only upon arrival to the rational positive state can the metaphysical state be analyzed, serving only a purpose of aiding in transition from the theological to positive state. Furthermore, this state "reconciles, for a time, the radical opposition of the other two, adapting itself to the gradual decline of the one and the preparatory rise of the other". Therefore, the transition between the two states is almost unperceivable. Unlike its predecessor and successor, the metaphysical state does not have strong intellectual foundation nor social power for a political organization. Rather it simply serves to guide man until the transition from imaginative theological state to rational positive state is complete.

### **3. Positive stage**

The last stage – the positive stage – is when the mind stops searching for the cause of phenomena and realizes that laws exist to govern human behavior, and that this stage can be explained rationally with

the use of reason and observation, both of which are used to study the social world. This stage relies on science, rational thought, and empirical laws. Comte believed that this study of sociology he created was "the science that [came] after all the others; and as the final science, it must assume the task of coordinating the development of the whole of knowledge"because it organized all of human behavior.

The final, most evolved stage is the positivist stage, the stage when humans give up on discovering absolute truth, and turn towards discovering, through reasoning and observation, actual laws of phenomena. Humans realize that laws exist, and that the world can be rationally explained through science, rational thought, laws, and observation. Comte was a positivist, believing in the natural rather than the supernatural, and so he claimed that his time period, the 1800s, was in the positivist stage. He believed that within this stage, there is a hierarchy of sciences: mathematics, astronomy, terrestrial physics, chemistry, and physiology. Mathematics, the "science that relates to the measurement of magnitudes", is the most perfect science of all, and is applied to the most important laws of the universe. Astronomy is the most simple science, and is the first "to be subjected to positive theories".Physics is less satisfactory than astronomy, because it is more complex, having less pure and systemized theories. Physics, as well as chemistry, are the "general laws of the inorganic world", and are harder to distinguish. Physiology completes the system of natural sciences, and is the most important of all sciences because it is the "only solid basis of the social reorganization that must terminate the crisis in which the most civilized nations have found themselves". This stage will fix the problems in current nations, allowing progression and peace.