

## CHAPTER V.

### POSITIVISM.

“POSITIVISM,” says *M. Guizot*, in his *Meditations*, “is a word—in language a barbarism; in philosophy a presumption.” Its genius is sufficiently indicated in its chosen name, in which it denominates itself, not like other sciences, by its object, but by a boast. The votaries of physical studies often disclose a materialistic tendency, depreciating moral and spiritual truths. The egotism and feebleness of the human understanding ever incline it to exaggerations and partial conclusions. Man’s sensuous nature concurs with the fascination of the empirical method applied to sensible objects, to make him overlook the spiritual. Physicists become so elated with their brilliant success in detecting and explaining the laws of second causes, that they come to think practically, as though the mind needed no higher cause. Thus they overlook the first cause, which constantly presents itself to the reason in all the others. This tendency to an exclusive or anti-theistic Naturalism, which is but an infirmity and vice of the fallen mind of man, no one has avowed so defiantly in our age as *M. Auguste Comte*, the pretended founder of the “Positive Philosophy.” His attempt is nothing less than to establish this Naturalism in its most absolute sense, to accept all its tremendous results, and to repudiate as worthless all human beliefs which cannot be established by exact experimental and physical methods.

Although it is not just to confound the man and his

opinions, we always feel a justifiable curiosity touching the character of one who claims to lead our beliefs. He appeared before *Guizot*, when member of the Cabinet of *Louis Phillipe*, with the modest demand that he should found for him a professorship of the *History of Physical and Mathematical Science* in the College of France. That statesman relates: "He explained to me drearily and confusedly his views upon man, society, civilization, religion, philosophy, history. He was a man single-minded, honest, of profound convictions, devoted to his own ideas, in appearance modest, although at heart prodigiously vain; he sincerely believed that it was his calling to open a new era for the mind of man and for human society. Whilst listening to him, I could scarcely refrain from expressing my astonishment that a mind so vigorous should, at the same time, be so narrow as not even to perceive the nature and bearing of the facts with which he was dealing, and the questions he was authoritatively deciding; that a character so disinterested should not be warned by his own proper sentiments—which were moral in spite of his system—of its falsity and its negation of morality. I did not even make any attempt at discussion with *M. Comte*; his sincerity, his enthusiasm, and the delusion which blinded him, inspired me with that sad esteem which takes refuge in silence. Had I even judged it fitting to create the chair which he demanded, I should not for a moment have dreamed of assigning it to him.

"I should have been as silent and still more sad if I had then known the trials through which *M. Auguste Comte* had already passed. He had been, in 1823, a prey to a violent attack of mental alienation, and in 1827, during a paroxysm of gloomy melancholy, he had thrown himself from the *Pont des Arts* into the Seine, but had been rescued by one of the King's guard. More than once, in the course of his subsequent life,

this mental trouble seemed on the point of recurring."

The reader, allowing for the courteous euphemism of *M. Guisot*, can surmise from the above what manner of man *Comte* was. His admiring votary and biographer, *M. Littré*, reveals in his master an arrogance and tyranny which claimed every man who expressed interest in his speculations as an intellectual serf, and which resented all subsequent mental independence as a rebellion and treachery to be visited with the most vindictive anger. That his mental conceit was, beyond the "intoxication" which *M. Guisot* terms it, a positive insanity, is manifest from his own language. On hearing of the adherence of a Parisian editor to his creed, he writes to his wife: "To speak plainly and in general terms, I believe that, at the point at which I have now arrived, I have no occasion to do more than to continue to exist; the kind of preponderance which I covet cannot fail to devolve upon me." . . . "*Manest* no longer feels any repugnance in admitting the indispensable fact of my intellectual superiority." And to John Stuart Mill, at one time his supporter, he wrote of "a common movement of philosophical regeneration everywhere, when once Positivism shall have planted its standard—that is, its light-house, I should term it—in the midst of the disorder and confusion that reigns; and I hope that this will be the natural result of the publication of my work in its completed state." (This is his *Course of Positive Philosophy*, finished in 1842.) This is the man, half-fanatic and half-crazed with conceit, who is authority with certain of the Sensualistic philosophers of our day!

"Positivism" takes its pretext from the seeming certainty of the exact sciences, and the diversity of view and uncertainty which appear to attend metaphysics. It points to the solid and brilliant results of the former, and to the asserted vagueness and barrenness of the

latter. It reminds us that none of the efforts of philosophy have compelled men to agree touching absolute truth and theology; but the mathematical and physical sciences are asserted to carry perfect assurance and complete agreement to all minds which comprehend their proof. In these, then, we have a satisfying and fruitful quality, "positivism;" in those, only delusion and disappointment. Now, adds the "Positivist," when we see the human mind thus mocked by futile efforts of the reason, we must conclude either that it has adopted a wrong *organon* for its search, or that it directs that search towards objects which are, in fact, inaccessible to it. Both these suppositions Positivism holds true, as to philosophy and theology. Of those questions usually treated by philosophy and theology, the only ones which admit of any solution, are problems of sociology, and they must receive their solution from "Positivism." The rest are illusory. It claims that history also shows that this new science is the only true teacher. For when the course of human opinion is reviewed, they say it is always found to move through three stages. In its first stage, the human mind tends to assign a theological solution for every natural problem which exercises it: it resolves everything into an effort of supernatural power. In its second stage, having outgrown this simple view, and becomes metaphysical, it searches in philosophy for primary and universal truths, and ascribes natural effects to *à priori* ideas. But in its third, or adult stage, it learns that the only road to truth is the empirical method of exact science, and comes to rely exclusively upon that. Thus, argue they, the history of human opinion points to "Positivism" as the only teacher of man.

But *Comte*, while he denies the possibility of any science of psychology, save as a result of his "Positivism," no less begins with a psychology of his

own. And this is the blankest sensualistic. He who declares that science cannot have any *à priori* truths, virtually adopts as his *à priori* truth the ground-maxim of that psychology; he holds that the mind has, and can have, no ideas save those given it by sensitive perceptions, and those combined therefrom. *The only possible object of science, therefore, is the phenomena of sensible objects and their laws.* It can recognize no cause or power whatever, but such as metaphysicians call second causes. It has no species of evidence whatever, except sensations and experimental proof. Hear the science define itself:

“Positive philosophy is the whole body of human knowledge. Human knowledge is the result of the forces belonging to matter, and of the conditions or laws governing those forces.”

“The fundamental character of the positive philosophy is, that it regards all *phenomena* as subjected to invariable natural laws, and considers as absolutely inaccessible to us, and as having no sense for us, every inquiry into what are called either primary or final causes.”

“The scientific path in which I have walked ever since I began the labors that I obstinately pursue to elevate social theories to the rank of physical science, are evidently, absolutely, and radically opposed to everything that has a religious or metaphysical tendency.” “My positive philosophy is incompatible with every theological or metaphysical philosophy.” “Religiosity is not only a weakness, but an avowal of want of power.” “The ‘positive state’ is that state of the mind in which it conceives that *phenomena* are governed by constant laws, from which prayer and adoration can demand nothing.”

Such are some of the declarations of his chief principles made by *Comte* himself. They are perspicuous and candid enough to remove all doubt as to his

meaning. He also distributes human science under the following classes. It begins with mathematics, the science of all that which has number for its measure; for here the objects are most exact, and the laws most rigorous and general. From mathematics the mind naturally passes to physics, which is the science of material forces, or dynamics. In this second class, the first sub-division, and nearest to mathematics in the exactness of its laws, is astronomy, or the *mécanique céleste*. Next come mechanics, then statics, and last, chemistry, or the science of molecular dynamics. This brings us to the verge of the third grand division, the science of organisms; for the wonders of chemistry approach near to the results of vitality. This science of organisms, then, is biology, the science of life, whether vegetable, insect, animal, or human. The fourth and last sphere of scientific knowledge is sociology, or the science of man's relations to his fellows in society, including history, politics, and whatever of ethics may exist for the Positivist. Above sociology there can be nothing; because beyond this sensation and experimental proof do not go; and where they are not, is no real cognition. *Comte* considers that the fields of physics and mathematics have been pretty thoroughly occupied by Positivism; and hence the solid and brilliant results which these departments have yielded under the hands of modern science. Biology has also been partly brought under his method, with some striking results. But sociology remains very much in chaos, and unfruitful of safe conclusions, because Positivism has not yet digested it. All the principles of society founded on psychology and theology are, according to him, worthless; and nothing can be established, to any purpose, until sociology is studied solely as a science of physical facts, and regular physical laws, without concerning ourselves with the vain dreams of laws of mind, free agency and divine providence.

Such, in outline, are the principles of Positivism. Let us consider a few of its corollaries. One of these, which many do not deign to conceal, is a stark materialism. They know no such substance as spirit, and no such laws as the laws of mind. For, say they, man can know nothing but perceptions of the senses, and the reflex ideas formed from them. "Positive Philosophy," which, they say, includes all human knowledge, is "the science of material forces and their regular laws." Since spirit and the actings of spirit can never be *phenomena* (*i. e.*, changes known by sense-perception), it is impossible that science can recognize them. This demonstration is, of course, as rigid against the admission of an infinite Spirit as any other, and more so, as Positivism repudiates all infinite ideas. Nor does this system avail itself of the plea that there may possibly be a God who is corporeal. Its necessarily atheistic character is disclosed in the assertion that true science cannot admit any supernatural agency or existence, or even the possibility of the mind's becoming cognizant thereof. Since our only possible knowledge is that of sensible *phenomena* and their natural laws, which are absolutely invariable, material nature must, of course, bound our knowledge. Her sphere is the all. If there could be a supernatural event (to suppose an impossibility), the realizing of it would destroy our intelligence, instead of informing it. For it would subvert the uniformity of the natural, which is the only basis of our general ideas, the norm of our beliefs. Positivism is, therefore, perfectly consistent in denying every supernatural fact. Hence the criticism of its sympathizers, when, like *Renan*, they attempt to discuss the facts of the Christian religion and the life of Jesus Christ. Their own literary acquirements and the force of intelligent opinion deter them from the coarse and reckless expedient of the school of Tom Paine, who rid themselves of every difficult fact in the Christian history by

a flat and ignorant denial, in the face of all historical evidence. These recent unbelievers admit the established facts; but, having approached them with the foregone conclusion that there can be no supernatural cause, they are reduced, for a pretended explanation, to a set of unproved hypotheses and fantastic guesses, which they offer us for verities, in most ludicrous contradiction to the very spirit of their "positive philosophy."

What can be more distinctly miraculous than a creation? That which brings nature out of *nihil* must, of course, be supernatural. Positivism must, therefore, deny creation as a fact of which the human intelligence cannot possibly have evidence. As the universe did not begin, it must, of course, be from eternity, and, therefore, self-existent. But, being self-existent, it will, of course, never end. Thus, matter is clothed with the attributes of God.

The perspicuous reader doubtless perceives that these deductions, when stripped of the verbal forms of philosophy, are identical with the vulgar logic which one hears occasionally from atheistic tailors and shoemakers: "How do you know there is a God? Did you ever see Him? Did you ever handle Him? Did you ever hear Him actually talking?" Those who have heard the philosophy of tap-rooms, redolent of the fumes of bad whiskey and tobacco, recognize it as precisely that of Positivism, adorned with more sounding phrase.

Once more: Positivism is manifestly a system of rigid fatalism; and this also its advocates scarcely trouble themselves to veil. According to them, human knowledge contains nothing but *phenomena* and their natural laws. "The positive state is that state of mind in which it conceives that *phenomena* are governed by constant laws, from which prayer and adoration can demand nothing." "The fundamental character of positive

philosophy is, that it regards all *phenomena* as subject to invariable laws." Such are *Comte's dicta*. The only causation he knows is that of physical second causes. These, of course, operate blindly and necessarily. This tremendous conclusion is confirmed by the doctrine of the eternity and self-existence of nature; for a substance which has these attributes, and is also material, must be what it is, and do what it does, by an immanent and immutable necessity. Positivism must teach us, therefore, if it is consistent, that all the events which befall us are directed by a physical fate, and that the actions which we perform are also directed by similar causes; that, in short, we are between the jaws of a physical machine, with all that is dear to us, and that our own free agency is illusory.

*Comte* avows that his classification of the simpler sciences—mathematics, mechanics, chemistry, biology—was elaborated chiefly for the purpose of bringing the more complicated one of sociology under the positive method. The two banes of human thought, metaphysics and theology, had so perverted sociology, that he found it in a greater state of confusion than any other. Hence, his most important mission is to reconstruct or regenerate this part upon the Positivist method. Let us see the result. Sociology must, of course, be studied exclusively upon the phenomenal method. Hence, the only trustworthy sources of its data are biology (as this school barbarously calls zoology) and history. Whatever man can learn primarily about the laws of mind and its faculties, he must gather from phrenology! Later in his studies, *Comte*, becoming dissatisfied with the phrenological map of Gall and Spurzheim, which pretended to a basis of observed facts, constructed one which he deemed more correct, upon purely hypothetical grounds dictated by a purely subjective distribution of the mental faculties. Here we have precisely such consistency as we expect

from a crazy man ! This is the philosopher who ostracised all *à priori*, subjective truth, all spirit, and all psychology, beginning by a psychology both subjective and hypothetical ! But let us see the practical conclusions of a sociology thus founded. Europe and America were to be broken up into little States of a few million people each. Every such State was to be governed by an oligarchy of three wealthy bankers, who were to appoint their successors by their own *fiat*, and govern absolutely, without parliaments, elections, or any restrictions. The fashionable French doctrines of liberty, fraternity, and equality, he utterly flouted. All the wealth of the State was to be centered in a few hereditary hands ; and all the rest of the people were to be operatives for these capitalists. Such was to be the social structure, all sustained and operated symmetrically by the potent but gentle influence of the positive philosophy. But, alongside of this secular oligarchy, there was to be a "spiritual order," composed of the positive philosophers and educators. As all theological systems and gods were exploded, of course there could be no church nor priesthood, in the ecclesiastical sense ; the spiritual order is simply the scientific caste in this oligarchical state. To them was to be committed all education of youth, all of whom were to be advanced to a certain degree in "positive science." The spiritual order was also to pronounce upon the wisdom and justice of the measures of the oligarchs ; the advisers were to have no power of enforcing their decisions, except reason ; but that, among rulers and people enlightened by "Positivism," would always be sufficient. At the head of this spiritual caste of all the commonwealths of the whole world was to be one supreme philosopher, the embodiment of infallible "Positive" truth, whose title was to be "Pontiff of Humanity." From his scientific *dicta* there would be no appeal whatever ; and after his dominion was erected, there was to be no

liberty of dissent whatever for any one, learned or unlearned. Positivism, as established by *Comte*, was thenceforward to reign unquestioned, with all the majestic sway of infallibility, and liberty of thought would be a crime. The first "Pontiff of Humanity" was, of course, to be *Comte* himself; and he was to appoint his successor by his sole authority. The philosophic pope predicted also when this great revolution would take place—in precisely thirty-three years from the date of the publication of his *evangelion*.

Although Positivism knew no God, "neither angel nor spirit," for all this it was to have a splendid religion. A religion without a God did not strike *Comte* as at all a solecism; nor does it strike Mr. J. S. Mill as such. An object, however, it was to have; and this was to be *aggregate humanity*; the whole mass of men, dead, living, and to live hereafter. This aggregate, *Comte* called the "Great Being." He devised a system of worship for it, with eighty-four holy days each year, and nine sacraments. As the Positivist believes in the annihilation of all the dead, and as the future generations are not yet in existence, it may seem difficult to imagine how the Great Being is to be made up. But that the people who find a spiritual and unchangeable God too shadowy to have a place in their positive philosophy, should make a deity of a non-entity in large part, is only in character with the contradictions of their system. We are assured that the "Pontiff of Humanity" proposed the whole plan in perfect gravity.

To the sober mind it seems perfectly obvious that *Comte* was a learned man crazed, either by constitutional disease, or by maniacal conceit. His speculations should occupy rather the place of morbid specimens, the monstrosities of mental disease, than of a system of philosophy. But they manifestly influence the science of this generation to a surprising degree. We are continually told that in France, in Germany, and especially in

Great Britain, they are avowed by multitudes, and boast of prominent names. This is to be accounted for, not by any plausible consistency in "Positivism," or special ability; but by the sympathy between it and the Sensualistic philosophy. The two systems foreshadow in common the darling results of infidelity, materialism, the denial of the supernatural, the denial of man's immortality, and atheism. If it be asked, how many Positivists we have, the question will receive two answers, according to the strictness or width with which the term is used. Those who follow *Comte* in everything, are few; for such were his arrogance, dogmatism, intolerance, and inconsistencies, that few could cleave to him through his whole career. J. S. Mill, while introducing his works to Englishmen through the *Westminster Review*, is heard dissenting from *Comte's* scornful depreciation of logic and psychology, as ever destined to be un-positive and no sciences. For, the reviewer had himself written a large work on Logic, and his father one on Psychology. But the essential features of the system, Mill warmly applauds. So, Dr. Thomas Huxley, Prof. Tyndal, and Mr. Spencer may be heard declaring that they are no Positivists; that is to say, they do not hold some of *Comte's* ideas touching the distribution of the sciences. But they also advance, with confidence, the essential features of his system, in connection with the evolution theory. Another of these evil portents on the literary horizon is Henry Thomas Buckle, in his "*History of Civilisation in England.*" His theory of man and society is essentially that of the Positivist. He regards all religion as the outgrowth of civilization, instead of its root; and is willing to compliment Christianity with being the best religious effect of the British mind and character; (provided Christianity can be suggested without its ministers, whose supposed bigotry, ecclesiastical and theological, never fails to inflame his philosophic bigotry to a red

heat). But he anticipates that English civilization will, under Positivist teachings, ultimately create for itself a religion much finer than Christianity. He disdains psychology; he does not believe man's consciousness a trustworthy witness; and he regards those general facts which are disclosed by statistics, for instance, concerning human action, the only materials for a science of man and society. He commends intellectual scepticism as the most advantageous state of mind. He is an outspoken fatalist, and regards the hope of modifying immutable sequences of events by prayer, as puerile and absurd. He regards "positive science" as a much more hopeful fountain of well-being and progress, than virtue or holiness.

It is significant, also, to hear so distinguished a naturalist as Dr. Hooker, a few years ago president of the British Association, in his inaugural address, terming natural theology, "that most dangerous of two-edged weapons;" discarding Metaphysics as "availing him nothing," and condemning all who believe any of its truths as "beyond the pale of scientific criticism;" and declaring roundly that no theological or metaphysical proposition rests on positive truth.

As Americans are always prompt to imitate Europeans, especially in their follies, it is scarcely necessary to add, that positivist dogmas are rife in our current literature. The tendencies of physicists are, as has been noted, towards an anti-theistic Naturalism; the boldness with which the school of *Comte* lift up their standard, has encouraged many to gather around it. Its most deplorable result is the impulse which it gives to irreligion and open atheism. Thousands of shallow persons, who have no understanding of any connected philosophy, and are too indolent and inattentive to acquire it, are emboldened to babble materialism and impiety, by hearing it said that the "positive philosophy" has exploded the supernatural.

“Positivism,” in its broader acceptation, may be said, then, to have become the prevalent type of the Sensualistic philosophy in our day. Its more reckless and daring mode of dispensing with psychological and theological truths appears to be superseding, with most thinkers of a sensualistic tendency, the milder methods of the *Condillacs* and Jas. Mill. He would not commit a great practical error, who, wishing to defend his fellow-men from the mischiefs of that system, should aim his attacks at the dogmas of *Comte*.