Auguste Comte and Positivism

by Sophia Tutorial

☰ WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the origins of sociology through the exploration of:

1. Auguste Comte
2. Positivism

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1. AUGUSTE COMTE

You may be wondering about the origins of sociology. How did sociology come to be a coherent discipline with methodologies, research questions, etc.? How did we get out of the fog and get focused?

Auguste Comte, a French philosopher who lived in the late 1700s to the mid-1800s, was instrumental in advancing the discipline of sociology. He had this idea that society passed through stages on its way towards an evolution.

For Comte, the first stage was the theological stage, where everything was God's will. Even society was an expression of God's will. So, if you were rich, it was because God wanted you to be. If you were poor, it was because God bestowed that fate upon you. Nothing was questioned; everything was answered by God.

⤳ EXAMPLE You've likely heard of the bubonic plague. During the plague, people thought that if they got the plague, they were struck down by God. This is an example of theological knowledge-making.

Comte's next stage was the metaphysical stage, where society was seen as nature. During this stage, God as an explanation for everything begins to drop out of the picture, with the onset of the Copernican Revolution. People like Newton and Galileo were promoting a new way to know the world and to understand things. This period was called the Enlightenment--and it's during this period that we have the metaphysical stage, according to Comte.

Finally, we have the scientific, or positive, stage, where we know things based on scientific facts. These facts are based upon our observations--literally, going out and observing things.

👤 PEOPLE TO KNOW

Auguste Comte
French philosopher who founded sociology and looked for laws of society.

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2. POSITIVISM

This last stage--the scientific, or positive stage--is what Comte called **positivism**, which is a scientific approach to knowledge based on observable facts, as opposed to speculation. Everything has to be observable, a concept which is called empirical. You can go out, you can observe it, you can document it, and know it; it's all sensory experience, and includes anything you can see, hear, smell, and touch.

⚙ **THINK ABOUT IT**

How do you know the grass grows? Well, you will likely go out and watch the grass grow, and to take a measurement. The next day, you'll go back and take another measurement. This is what we call observable empirical knowledge, and it is this kind of knowledge-making that Comte called positivism.

Often with positive thinking, our intuition and our gut feelings are essentially rejected. You can't base knowledge simply off of intuition and gut feelings. In order for knowledge to really occur, we have to go out and test, and catalog, so that we can understand in that manner.

What Comte did was to take this positivist way of knowing--the same way of knowing that the natural sciences had developed and were using--and he gave it to sociology. He actually coined the term sociology in 1838.

⭐ **BIG IDEA**

According to Comte, we study society in the same way as a chemist would study the cell. Society is law-bound and rule-bound in the same way that there are laws of physics, or just like chemistry has laws when you combine two elements. This is the way Comte looked at society.

What the sociologists then wanted to do was to go out and look for these laws of society. Society always happens a certain way because of cause and effect, just like the law of gravity. This way of thinking was hugely influential in sociology.

📄 **TERM TO KNOW**

Positivism
A scientific approach to knowledge based on observable facts.

📋 **SUMMARY**

In this lesson, you learned about **Auguste Comte**, the founder of sociology, who lived from 1798 to 1857. He gave us **positivism**, which is a way of looking at the world and a way of 'knowing' which consists of knowledge based on empirical observation.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Zach Lamb.

📄 **TERMS TO KNOW**

Positivism

A scientific approach to knowledge based on observable facts.

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