

COMTE AFTER POSITIVISM

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INTRODUCTION: COMTE FOR A POST-POSITIVIST WORLD

As hard as it is nowadays to get agreement on what analytic philosophers could still possibly have in common, at least it seems safe to say that there is something they are universally against, namely, positivism.¹ I start with the fact of this anti-positivism, because it may appear to cast a shadow over the present study. My purpose in what follows is to urge a revival of interest – contemporary and substantive, not just historical and scholarly interest – in the first and most famous of all the positivists, Auguste Comte. I therefore use this Introduction not only to outline my plans but also to counter the suspicion that Comte is not worth the trouble.

1 On the elusiveness of acceptable positive characterizations see, e.g., A. J. Mandt, “The Inevitability of Pluralism: Philosophical Practice and Philosophical Excellence,” in *IOP*, 87–98. For a more orthodox account, one that expresses much greater confidence in its view of both the nature and future of analytic pluralism, see Nicholas Rescher, “American Philosophy Today,” *Review of Metaphysics* 46 (1993), 717–45. Rescher, who describes his essay as a “descriptive survey” of the current situation (738), asserts that it is “Europe, after all, [that] is the home of ideologies” (727), whereas “much of American philosophy – like much of American politics – is refreshingly free of ideological involvements.” In this refreshing atmosphere, Rescher explains, almost any issue can become part of the overall analytic “problem agenda” and receive treatment in a “genuinely collective effort that is best characterized in statistical terms” (728). As for those “pseudo-pragmatists,” neo-Marxists, and followers of “writers such as Heidegger, Derrida, and their epigones” who do not participate in this happy collective effort, Rescher calls their refusal to do so an “assault by a disaffected avant-garde against the discipline as normally practiced” (737), and (citing Cohen and Dascal’s book as evidence) he concludes that such displays of “postmodern disdain for reason” are not taken seriously by us nonideological Americans who know that “metaphilosophy is part of philosophy” (738). As I shall argue, neither Comte, on the one hand, nor post-positivists as diverse as Rorty, Taylor, and Putnam, on the other, would accept Rescher’s forced option between normal (newly pluralized, “metaphilosophically” sensitive) and disdainful (postmodern, reason-disrespecting, probably ideological) thinking as “descriptive.”

1. Today's anti-positivism

In the English-speaking world, of course, positivism is now inherited through its last and most sophisticated version, namely, Logical Empiricism; and one generalization to be made about Logical Empiricism is that it embodies a sort of ultimate crystallization of two of positivism's core features – namely, the promotion of a rigorously “scientific” epistemology and a supreme self-confidence about its own objective, systematic, ahistorical outlook. Given the current anti-positivist atmosphere, one might suppose that these two features would be especially favored targets of criticism. Certainly this is true of the first feature. Scientific and, by implication, all other single-model accounts of rationality have been under general attack for some time. Regarding the second feature, however, matters are quite different. To be sure, Logical Empiricism's own imperious presumption of objectivity is now rejected with virtual unanimity. A philosophy that dreams of “reconstructing” what “the” conditions of rationality must be is obviously hostage to some inherited dogma.

Yet at the same time, criticisms of this particular logico-reconstructive dream have done little to weaken the ahistorical imperative that lies behind it. The threat of historicism still routinely discourages aspiring post-positivists from questioning whether, as a matter of principle, any philosophy might ever understand itself so well that it could legitimately claim possession of a Completely Objective orientation. Even among those who have long since ceased to regard themselves as scientific thinkers, who have lost the old taste for mathematical rigor and the old hostility toward everything traditional, the ideal of a truly inheritance-free philosophizing often prevails. It continues to seem obvious that in order to protect philosophy against the charge of (vicious) relativism, we presently practicing epistemologists must make it entirely and exclusively *our* job – uninfluenced by the flounderings and partial successes of our forbears – to decide what knowing the true and the reasonable actually involves.

Current anti-positivism, then, tends to be a very unevenly critical and revisionist affair. Everyone wants to leave the scientific monomania of Logical Analysis and Rational Reconstruction behind; but only a small (and “obviously” historicist) minority are willing to question, *as a model for their own thinking*, positivism's ahistorical conception of philosophy's proper outlook. As one recent writer revealingly puts it, in contemporary analytic philosophy all sorts of topical and methodological pluralisms may be tolerated and quarreled over – so long as the philosophical handling of the whole debate takes place *sub specie aeternitatis*.² For the mainstream majority, only Continental thinkers (e.g., Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault) and their corrupted American followers (e.g., Feyerabend, Rorty, Taylor) would have the gall to “reduce” philosophical analysis as such to a historically contextualized activity. In life, so goes the objection, there may indeed be

2 See Hector-Neri Castañeda, “Philosophy as a Science and as a Worldview,” IOP, 35–60 (specific reference to *sub specie*, 41).

subjectivist and relativist alternatives to the View from Nowhere, but not in philosophy.

Someone might wish to argue that the foregoing description is dated. Perhaps it is true that until about ten years ago the epithet "historicism" could make a tyranny of the majority position; but are circumstances not different now? The answer is, I think, yes, but not tellingly so. Granted, the epithet itself has lost some of its name-calling punch because it is no longer entirely clear just what one is supposed to be against. Granted also that historical studies are less suspect and that the idea of taking Continental sources seriously no longer seems so terrible. A few mainstream radicals even seem to have gone some considerable distance toward embracing historicism.³ Yet in fact, none of these developments have produced anything like a sea change on the basic issue of proper philosophical orientation. The specter of Analysis Itself being inescapably tainted by historical conditioning continues to haunt the debate over what comes after positivism. In Rorty's provocative image,

Reichenbach *redivivus* would presumably be appalled by . . . the proliferation of problems and programs in contemporary American philosophy. But he would admire the style, the insistence on argument, the dialectical acuity. He would approve of the widespread distrust among philosophers of those who . . . were "trained in literature and history. . . ."⁴

Under these circumstances, one seems to be driven to the conclusion that there are only three possible philosophical orientations – namely, scientific objectivity, epistemically pluralistic objectivity, and historicism – and one understands that for "stylistic" reasons, only the second option can legitimately replace the first.

I intend, of course, to describe here an intellectual tendency, not an explicitly affirmed faith; and I take it that, like any such tendency, this one is undoubtedly more influential than many who remain influenced by it are happy about. Hence, it seems clear to me that making serious philosophical trouble for the

3 Two of the best known are Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor. MacIntyre maintains that "although arguments of the kind favored by analytic philosophy do possess an indispensable power, it is only within the context of a particular genre of historical inquiry that such arguments can support the type of claim to truth and rationality which philosophers characteristically aspire to justify" [*After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 265; see also "The Relationship of Philosophy to Its Past," *PIH*, 31–48]. To Taylor, "it is essential to an adequate understanding of certain problems, questions, and issues, that one understand them genetically . . . and this fact about philosophy, that it is inherently historical, is a manifestation of a more general truth about human life and society" ("Philosophy and Its History," *PIH*, 17). The most thoroughly historicist transformation of analytic philosophy to date is probably that of Margolis, from whose position one would have to argue that MacIntyre and Taylor are among those post-positivist revisionists who are unwilling to acknowledge the full implications of the very outlook they help create. See Joseph Margolis, *The Flux of History and the Flux of Science* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), esp. Ch. 5, "The Redefinition of Historicism," 110–39, and his "Epilogue," 194–206.

4 Richard Rorty, "Philosophy in America Today," in *COP*, 223–24. As we shall see later, Rorty's own rejection of this attitude does not make him quite the historicist he thinks he is.

ahistorical imperative under the current partially anti-positivist circumstances will take more than promoting post-Hegelian sources, clarifying what “historicism” means, pluralizing analysis, or embracing the historicist enemy. One must find a way to ask – and really mean it – *What sort of philosophizing could lie beyond both historicism and its (still basically positivist) opposite?* As a start, consider Putnam’s observation that

a certain oscillation between historicism and positivism has been a central feature of late nineteenth-century and twentieth-century thought. Whether it is Nietzsche versus Mill, or Kuhn and Feyerabend versus Carnap and Popper, or Foucault and Rorty versus Quine, the theme has been history versus science. . . . The debate has . . . become boring; yet we seem doomed to repeat it (like a neurotic symptom) unless, perhaps, we can step back and offer a better (and deeper) diagnosis of the situation than the competing diagnoses of historicism and positivism.⁵

Putnam is certainly neither the first nor the only analytic philosopher to make such remarks, though for reasons to be given later, I think his way of posing the issue has (if perhaps only for his readers) an especially radicalizing potential. What would a genuinely post-positivist outlook be? How might our “situation” be reflectively reunderstood so that analysis – if, indeed, philosophical activity would then still be rightly called by this name – no longer appeared to occur somewhere between what is Positivist and what is Historically Relative?

Among those who engage in it, such questioning is not casual. In Putnam’s case, it is accompanied by strong appeals for a “moratorium” on all speculation about the Really Real and the Correct Method, and for the production instead of epistemically localized and “internally realistic” accounts of what is reasonable and what is not. The sober and deeply reformist spirit of these appeals tells us that Putnam’s characterization of the circumstances that necessitate them is also serious. When he says that the ground rules in current debates over philosophy’s aim are “boring,” this is no flippant remark. Like a growing number of other aspiring post-positivists, he really does regard the present situation – with its lingering inheritance of an anti-positivist and anti-relativist mood – as tiresome, stuck, and fostering a contentment to replay worn-out variations on two basic orientational themes. And on this score, I think, he is right. It is not scientism and single-model epistemologies but a sort of pervasive, unreflective complacency about the forced option between objective and historicist philosophical orientations that has turned out to be the most durable aspect of the positivist legacy. I take Putnam to be pressing this point in claiming that we need to “step back and offer a *better (and deeper) diagnosis* of the situation” than those now available.

Putnam is correct also, I think, in observing that this diagnostic stepping back must lead us, as he says he was himself led,

to think about questions which are thought to be more the province of “continental

5 Hilary Putnam, “Beyond Historicism,” RR, 288.

philosophy" than of "analytical philosophy," for instance, to think about the fact that our notions of rationality evolve in history . . . and about the fact that one's own philosophical tradition has both a past and a future.⁶

Whether Putnam's own internal realism is the right response to these considerations is not my concern here. What interests me is the fact that, as Putnam himself clearly recognizes, *any* response that takes these considerations seriously is very likely to be widely opposed for displaying the wrong philosophical attitude. It is easy to imagine the deflationary critique: If Putnam thinks his inquiries give him kinship with continental philosophers, this simply means that he has joined them in succumbing to historicism. If he says that his position is historically contextualized rather than objective, the burden is on him to show how this differs from thinking of it reductively as historically conditioned. And if he thinks that conducting localized analyses in an internally realistic spirit is better than doing Ontology and Epistemology, what makes him think so in the first place – and must he not treat *that* reason as historically *unconditioned*?

In the present context, the most important fact to note about objections like these is that they come too easily. They simply take up the currently more acceptable side in the very debate whose tiresomeness post-positivists like Putnam would have us reconsider. Hence, rather than immediately responding to these objections, I want to suggest that one might better consider first – as Putnam himself does not – just what a "stepping back to diagnose our situation" that is neither ahistorical nor historicist could be. To give it a label, what sort of *historico-critical reflectiveness* is it that Putnam wants to enact but does not actually speak about? Of what kind of diagnosis might such reflectiveness be capable, such that we could understand our philosophical situation, its past, and its future in non-boring ways?

It is in light of this question that I want to revive interest in Comte. For what is unique to this thinker is that he both aspires to be the kind of positivist who later came to know only Putnam's tiresome options and also inevitably fails, for strikingly Putnam-like reasons, to become one. Like his successors, Comte thinks scientific philosophy is the final stage of intellectual development. At the same time, unlike his successors but very much like someone interested in historico-critically stepping back, Comte's diagnosis of his situation makes philosophy's past essentially relevant to its future practice. Science, he argues, transforms rather than supersedes theology and metaphysics, just as metaphysics did earlier to theology. Hence, unlike later positivists, who assume that real philosophy begins when pre-scientific ways are abandoned, Comte insists that he cannot even be clear about what he is doing without a conscious and critical appropriation of his theologico-metaphysical legacy.

For reasons to be explained later, Comte himself never sees the tension in his

6 RR, vii–viii. Cf. RHF, ix–xi.

position. In the end his positivism is left facing Janus-like, both in the familiar direction of dogmatic and ahistorical scientism and yet also toward a never fully appreciated, and now long forgotten, historically minded reflectiveness about scientific practice. But if this double orientation is, for Comte, just an unacknowledged problem, our own recognition of it can, I think, help further the interest of aspiring post-positivists in rethinking the current philosophical situation in less tiresome terms. Reading Comte's writings today, we are witness to our own inheritance in the making – but before it solidified into the position everyone now wants to reject, and while there is still left open, even in the arguments of this science-obsessed thinker, another (yet also nonhistoricist) philosophical option. My thesis, then, is that by recovering Comte's forgotten idea of a historico-critical defense of science, we can place ourselves in the strange position of receiving help from the first positivist in clarifying the possibility of a philosophical stepping back that succeeds in being more thoroughly “after” positivism than anything the current spirit of anti-positivism allows.

2. Comte's historico-critical defense of positivism

For reasons already apparent in Mill's enormously influential *Auguste Comte and Positivism* (1865), Comte's claim that positivism needs a historico-critical defense ceased almost immediately to be taken seriously.

Even during Comte's lifetime, positivism did not remain a unified movement. The two uneven parts of Mill's book convey nicely a sense of the two main positivist factions, of the issues dividing them, and even of the eventual winner. The longer, complimentary part of the book represents the first faction – including most famously Mill himself in England and Littré in France – which embraced the scientific epistemology of Comte's earlier *Cours de philosophie positive* but rejected his later moral and political writings as sentimental and authoritarian regressions.⁷ The shorter, strongly critical part of Mill's book represents the other faction, which, citing Comte himself, denounced their rivals as “abortive positivists” and argued that the *Cours* is only an “indispensable preamble” to the grand plan of “social reorganization” set forth in Comte's *Système de politique positive*.⁸ It was

7 In addition to the two introductory Lessons of CPP1(1–2) and Mill's ACP, 265/4–5, 328–32/125–32, see Émile Littré, *Auguste Comte et la philosophie positive* (Paris: L. Hachette, 1863), i–xi, 518–19, 662–68; and “Comte et Mill,” *Revue des Deux Mondes* 36 (1866), 829–66. See also W. M. Simon, *European Positivism in the Nineteenth Century: An Essay in Intellectual History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1963), 14–24.

8 SPP1, 1–10/ix–xvii; SPP4, 546–49/473–75; and SPP4a, i–ii/i–ii. See also J. H. Bridges, *The Unity of Comte's Life and Doctrine: A Reply to Strictures on Comte's Later Writings Addressed to J. S. Mill* (London: Trübner, 1866); and T. R. Wright, *The Religion of Humanity: The Impact of Comtean Positivism on Victorian Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). As a matter of historical scholarship, the unity view is now generally accepted. See, e.g., Maurice Mandelbaum, *History, Man, and Reason: A Study in Nineteenth-Century Thought* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), 10–13. Only very recently, however, has this view been documented in a systematic way. See esp. Pickering, PIC, 3–5, 691–98.

the first faction, of course, whose image of positivism ultimately prevailed; but on one thing, both factions agreed. The success of the sciences demonstrated that a post-metaphysical era was already here; hence, Comte's retrospective defense of positivism appeared to be unnecessary. What comes before science was deemed safely left to the historians; as Mill put it, for philosophers to bother with such matters now would be like trying to relive a battle as if we did not already know who won.

As a representative of the ultimately prevailing faction, however, Mill had further reason to press his criticisms of Comte. In a scientific era, he argued, philosophy's main job must be to analyze the rational conditions of scientific success and produce an "Organon of Proof"; yet this is precisely the task that Comte, in his preoccupation with positivism's intellectual origins and sociopolitical destiny, sadly neglects. Mill's criticism stuck. Later positivists turned to organon production as their real task; and in the end, even as the first advocate of scientific epistemology, Comte is not especially honored. Today, if he is remembered at all, it is for somehow imperfectly anticipating Logical Positivism; and the Logical Positivists themselves preferred the title "Logical Empiricist" precisely so that they could distance themselves from earlier positivism and claim Humean ancestry instead.⁹

In short, even among his own kind, Comte's historico-critical defense of positivism was never much appreciated. From Mill to the Logical Empiricists, the position simply appeared to need no defense. What Carnap wrote in 1928 Mill could have written in 1865. Whenever "our orientation" faces religious and metaphysical opposition, Carnap asks, what gives us

our confidence that our call for . . . a science that is free from metaphysics will be heard? It stems from the knowledge, or to put it somewhat more carefully, *from the belief that those opposing powers belong to the past*. We feel that there is an inner kinship between the attitude on which our philosophical work is founded and the intellectual attitude which presently manifests itself in entirely different walks of life. . . . We feel all around us the same basic orientation, the same style of thinking and doing. It is an orientation which demands clarity everywhere. . . .¹⁰

Having such a "belief" and sharing such "feelings" does indeed separate the pos-

9 See, e.g., "Editor's Introduction," *Logical Positivism*, ed. A. J. Ayer (New York: Free Press, 1959), 3–28; and Herbert Feigl, "The Origin and Spirit of Logical Positivism," *The Legacy of Logical Positivism*, ed. Peter Achinstein and Stephen F. Barker (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1969), 3–24. Logical Empiricists typically show little interest in questions of intellectual inheritance generally or their individual forebears specifically. Feigl and Ayer merely mention Hume a few times, never Comte, and less remote figures like Avenarius, Mach, and Helmholtz a few times more. Historians of the movement have usually followed their subjects' lead and focused primarily on the formation of the Vienna Circle itself. See, e.g., Victor Kraft, *The Vienna Circle: The Origin of Neo-Positivism*, trans. Arthur Pap (New York: Philosophical Library, 1953), 3–11; and Barry Smith, "Austrian Origins of Logical Positivism," in *Logical Positivism in Perspective: Essays on 'Language, Truth, and Logic'*, ed. Barry Gower (London: Croom Helm, 1987), 35–68. But cf. also fn. 11.

10 Rudolf Carnap, *The Logical Structure of the World*, trans. Rolf A. George (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), xvii–xviii, my emphasis.

itivists we know from the Comte we barely remember. Certainly there is at least symbolic significance, if not conscious purpose, in the editor's decision to commission a historian, not a philosopher, to write the Comte entry for the 1967 *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.¹¹

In recovering Comte, then, the first feature of his outlook we should note is that, unlike subsequent positivists, he most emphatically does not understand himself to be philosophizing in a "post-"metaphysical world. Rather, he thinks of himself as living in a time of transition, when metaphysics is ending, when the sciences are becoming conscious of themselves as sciences, and thus when their epistemic superiority is still an unsettled issue. All of this he takes with professional seriousness. Positive philosophy is going to be practiced *under these transitional circumstances*; hence, a major part of its job must be to explain both the nature of the transition to a scientific era and the importance of completing it. In the meantime, all the fundamental ideas of positivism – namely, that science is destined to replace theology and metaphysics, that genuine knowledge is of facts discovered by observation, that knowledge of ultimate things is impossible – all these ideas remain controversial, not entirely fixed even in the best of minds, and therefore susceptible to the lingering appeal of prescientific modes of thinking.

Comte's understanding of these transitional circumstances is informed, above all, by his famous law of three stages, according to which human intelligence generally and each of the sciences specifically progress through three successive stages, from a necessarily theological beginning, through a metaphysical transition, to a scientific climax. Just how Comte makes philosophical use of this law without either becoming a historicist or (in Habermas' image) doing public relations for a positivism already dogmatically embraced, we shall have to see. One major misconception, however, should be cleared up here.

Contrary to widespread legend and much sloppy history, Comte does not – indeed, could not – employ his three-stage law to promote the idea that scientific minds should think of the Western tradition's theological and metaphysical periods as times of mere superstition and intellectual nonsense. In his historically minded view, science is simply the last and finally successful expression of humanity's long struggle to explain and control nature; hence, what theology and metaphysics tried to do, and even the ways in which they tried to do it, remain perfectly intelligible. Comte argues, for example, that when primitive peoples spontaneously produced animistic-theological explanations for the awe-inspiring events they experienced in their surroundings, they successfully solved, in the

11 Bruce Mazlish, "Comte, Auguste," *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967), II, 173–77. Cf. the recent study by Michael Dummett, *Origins of Analytical Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), which argues in detail that we ought to see Frege and Husserl (and, by extension, analysis and phenomenology) as philosophical collaborators both intent on coming to grips with the larger modern tradition – but has nothing to say about Comte.

only way possible for human beings, the “vicious circle” of being initially without either informed theories to guide observation or reliable observations to develop theories. Not only is such animistic theorizing therefore still fully understandable; contemporary scientific practice gains clarity about itself by understanding it. For example, in animism’s struggle to produce the first explanations of natural events, we find illuminated the epistemic principle of the essential interrelatedness of reason and observation. Moreover, since these primitive explanations are the basis for prayers and rituals designed to move the world’s spirits, they also reveal the ultimately praxis-motivated character of all theory and are thus the earliest exemplification of what, in later Baconian form, will be expressed as the principle that “from science comes prevision; from prevision comes action.”¹²

The purpose of Comte’s historically minded defense of science, then, is to encourage in current philosophers a sense of their kinship with, and not just superiority to, prescientific practice. At every stage, what we have most deeply wanted is “a conceptual system concerning the totality of phenomena” that permits us to know our surroundings well enough to order our lives effectively. At every stage, this goal is pursued by whatever method seems maximally surpassing of earlier ones. What science finally does is to fulfill our deepest aim by transforming the ineffective methods of theology and metaphysics. We humans are thus not fundamentally either theological or metaphysical, but neither are we fundamentally scientific. At bottom, we are practical; hence, for a Comtean positivist, it would be just as misleading to say that a mature mind must be antireligious and antimetaphysical as it once was to say that all philosophy originates either in mystical feeling or in awe. It is true that at specific stages of development, the imaginative response to feelings of mystery and the intellectual response to experiences of wonder are each indispensable stimulants to “speculation” (not a bad word for Comte) – the former response in order to overcome the initial dilemma of being without either theories or data, the latter to effect a subsequent liberation of reason from feeling and imagination. Both responses, however, are driven just as much by the desire for prevision and for satisfaction of natural and interpersonal needs as are the observation-based speculations of science. Thus, science is to modern technology what theology and metaphysics are, respectively, to worship and contemplation – namely, a comprehensive theoretical foundation for a universal form of praxis – only this time, we are really getting our long-desired control over external and social surroundings.

Questions concerning the empirical accuracy of Comte’s three-stage law should not be allowed to obscure the philosophical distinctiveness of the approach he marks out in using it. Certainly it is refreshing, if a bit strange, for us to

12 CPP1(2), 63 [F, 38]. Comte’s epistemology of science is not a primary topic in this study; but I will have occasion in what follows to note some of his remarkably post-positivist positions – as here, e.g., in his idea of the praxis-driven character of all scientific knowledge and in his claim that theory and observation cannot be subjected to separate analyses.

hear a positivist express interest in prescientific history and actually proclaim the technologico-social agenda shared by so many later positivists who are silent about it. My central point, however, is that no later positivist could ever have tolerated Comte's *reflective use* of his law. To everyone from Mill to Reichenbach, the very idea that current decisions about how philosophy should do its job ought to be influenced by historical considerations contradicts in principle the presumption that philosophy must have an objective orientation. Comte, however, not only suggests this idea, he argues for it. In his view no philosophy, not even positivism, will ever succeed in situating itself outside of events; and no analysis of scientific rationality will ever reduce to Logical Reconstruction. The urge to substitute a purely formal and systematic ("*dogmatique*") account for a historical one is, Comte concedes, a constant and even admirable "tendency" of the human mind; but in the end, it remains the case that "an idea cannot be properly understood except through its history."¹³

For Comte, moreover, this is no merely offhand remark; nor is it intended to make work for historians. It is addressed primarily to currently practicing positive philosophers, and even then, not just in general. Above all, Comte means the remark to announce *the dominant theme of his own philosophizing*. His scientism, his sense of social mission, even his specific ideas on logic and methodology – all of these are developed by Comte in what he conceives as a lifelong struggle to transform a still partially prescientific inheritance into a fully "positive" orientation under the stimulus provided to him by the emerging sciences. As in life generally so also in scientific epistemology, "we always labor for our descendants," says Comte, "but under the impetus of our ancestors, from whom we derive both the materials with which and the processes by which we work."¹⁴

Once recognized, the Comtean strategy of historico-critically defending positivism is fairly easy to describe. More difficult to explain is the fact that Comte advocates this strategy much more consistently than he actually pursues it. The main problem is that he never explores in any detail the question of what kind of philosophical move a historico-critical defense actually is. In fact, I have perhaps already said more about this issue than he does. As a result, one finds in Comte's writings a philosopher who often behaves, we might say, like a historico-critical defender of his orientation but who never considers as such the question of what sort of *reflective self-understanding* is required of one who wishes to mount such a defense. It is clear, moreover, that were we to put this objection to Comte he would rebuke us. He would reply, as twentieth-century positivists often do, that there is something dangerously subjective or "psychological" about this line of questioning – that is, about philosophers trying to understand the way they operate by "looking inward" upon their own case. Yet appearances here are deceiving. The

13 CPP1(1), 3 [F, I].

14 SPP4, 34/31, trans. altered.

similarity of his response hides a radically dissimilar sense of why he thinks the response must be made. Comte's reasons for backing away from the reflection/self-understanding issue are in fact very different from those of the later positivists. To understand this difference is to begin to realize why rethinking Comte is worth the trouble.

3. Comte (and Mill et al.) on interior observation

Comte's silence on the question of philosophical reflection is a function of his opposition to what he calls "interior observation." As far as I have been able to determine, however, this crucial point has never been understood – apparently because Comte's treatment of the idea of interior observation is usually discussed in terms of Mill's famous criticism of it, and the fact that Mill fundamentally misinterprets Comte's position has gone unnoticed. According to today's conventional wisdom, backed up by virtually all the intervening reports, Mill's quarrel with Comte prefigures the later debates among structuralists, functionalists, and behaviorists over the value of introspection as a scientific method. Superficially, this interpretation seems plausible. Comte does in fact say that psychology will never be a genuine science because the so-called interior observation on which it is supposedly based is demonstrably impossible. And Mill does in fact reply that Comte's proof is flawed, that we obviously do engage in interior observation, and therefore, that a science relying on this operation is possible. But these facts are misleading, and the conventional interpretation is wrong. Mill and Comte are speaking past each other, not to each other, for the simple reason that they do not mean – and in spite of their extensive correspondence fail to recognize that they do not mean – the same thing by either interior observation or psychology.

On the one hand, what Comte opposes is not Mill's "introspection" – that is, an *empirical* operation yielding first-person reports about inner states or private experiences – but rather a spurious *metaphysical* procedure that Comte traces back to the influence of Descartes and medieval theology. And what Comte means by psychology is not Mill's British-style associationism, but rather a specious enterprise (promoted in Comte's time, above all, by the now nearly forgotten Victor Cousin) that wraps its unscientific speculations about Mind (really, Soul) in the mantle of science by claiming to draw on an "inwardly" focused version of the external observation that grounds the sciences of nature. On the other hand, Mill assumes that Comte is thinking of (associationist) psychology and is rejecting both it and the introspection on which it depends; hence, he thinks Comte's argument is "destroyed" by the "simple fact" that we are all directly aware of our own intellectual activities, and "whatever we are directly aware of, we can directly observe."

Mill's misreading itself, however, is not as important here as what explains it. His mistake lies in assuming that his quarrel with Comte is a methodological one,