

Comte After Positivism. Robert C. Scharff. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1995, 227 + xvi pages, \$54.95 hard.

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The French philosopher Auguste Comte is known to most of us as a somewhat obscure figure of modest historical significance. We are likely to know that he was the founder of positivism, that he propounded the influential doctrine of the hierarchy of the sciences, and that he held some peculiar views about humanity passing through stages of theological, metaphysical, and scientific thought. The more historically informed among us might also be aware that he founded a secular alternative to the Catholic Church (designating himself as its high priest, to the embarrassment of later positivists), and that he clashed with his younger and better-known contemporary John Stuart Mill over the feasibility of a science of psychology. An interesting life, one thinks, but surely Comte is not a philosopher to warrant renewed interest during a postmodern era when the positivist tradition has finally been laid to rest as a failed venture.

So why would a philosopher aware of all this devote a book to resuscitating Comte's legacy? A clue to the answer lies in the book's title — *Comte After Positivism* — a title that is sure to evoke double-takes even as it hints at the novelty of the author's thesis. Through a series of carefully developed arguments, Robert Scharff makes a persuasive case that Comte holds more philosophical significance now that positivism is dead than he did during its 150-year historical career. There are, at root, two reasons for this, according to Scharff. First, Comte was not a typical positivist — a fact obscured by the subsequent appropriation of positivism by a sequence of scientific philosophers from Mill to Reichenbach and Carnap. Second, positivism has not yet been laid to rest to the extent that we are prone to think, even in this supposedly postpositivist era. The two parts of Scharff's book are devoted to demonstrating these two theses.

Despite his own prolific outpouring of writings, Comte became known to the English-speaking world — and hence to much of the subsequent positivist tradition — through Mill's commentaries. Although in many respects an admirer of Comte, Mill had a number of marked disagreements with him, ranging from minor matters of opinion to larger doctrinal divergences. Under Scharff's discerning eye, three such points of contention emerge as signals that something is deeply amiss between

the two, for Mill becomes strangely dismissive of Comte on these points, resorting to *ad hominem* arguments in place of the usual thoughtful arguments he presented to philosophical adversaries. In the first case, Mill chastises Comte for his refusal to accept introspection as the basis of a scientific psychology, even though Comte's opposition was in fact directed against the "interior observation" of Victor Cousin, whose aim of reestablishing the transcendental ego threatened to draw the scientific study of humans back into the era of metaphysical thought. In the second case, Mill criticizes Comte for his rejection of causes in science in favor of interpreting its laws as the regular concomitance and succession of phenomena; for his part, Comte viewed talk of causes as needlessly risking a return to the prescientific practice of attributing phenomena to hidden metaphysical or theological forces. In the third case, Mill attacks Comte for not providing a logic of scientific proof, a formal method for science abstracted from its ongoing practice. Here the divergence between Mill and Comte is especially telling, for Comte — anticipating some characteristic postpositivist complaints against logical positivism — held that method can be learned only by doing science, that science has no general context-independent methods, that any such rules (if they existed) would only straightjacket scientific practice, and that the logic of science cannot be separated from the history of science.

As Scharff concludes, what bothered Mill about these cases — although he never grasped the reasons for it — was that Comte was simply failing to behave as a good positivist, by Mill's lights. Mill and Comte both assumed — based on the ever-dangerous (and typically positivist) assumption that straight-thinking objectivism forces consensus on matters of import — that there was one true way to be a science-minded philosopher.

Indeed, what set Comte apart from positivists from Mill on down was that he had a keen sense of his own historical situatedness, one that would not permit him to declare science's (or his own) disengagement from the past. Comte's three-stage law, far from justifying the dismissal of prescientific modes of thought as worthless, credited the theological and metaphysical stages with being natural steps in humanity's efforts to understand events that disrupted its practical commerce with the world, first by attributing them to supernatural causes then by invoking metaphysical abstractions. For Comte, both stages provided the necessary background, in almost Piagetian fashion, to the eventual emergence of mature scientific thought. Scharff explains that because science transforms rather than supersedes theology and metaphysics,

Comte does not regard scientific thinking as a leap beyond tradition. Science does not leave theology and metaphysics behind, any more than metaphysics leaves theology behind; science is what develops from them. Hence, understanding the superiority of the positive stage is inseparable from understanding its continuing indebtedness to the previous two stages. (pp. 89–90)

Unlike later positivists, for whom real philosophy begins when prescientific ways are abandoned, Comte's philosophizing about science gave a central place to its inherent historicity. Moreover, because he understood that no positivist, himself included, could be free of history and hence exempt from the risk of unwitting regression to prescientific modes of thought, Comte continually invoked the three-stage law in reflective self-criticism. To succeed in the philosophical task of easing society's transition into the positive stage of history would require attention to

science's past and future needs, as well as a constant self-critical awareness of where the process stood.

Alone among the positivists (but intriguingly like some postpositivists), Comte saw that to dismiss one's historical inheritance is to remain tacitly in its grip. For this reason, according to Scharff, Comte

now begins to look more interesting than Mill. The post-metaphysical posture characteristic of Logical Empiricism as well as Mill has fallen out of favor. Two of its basic features — namely, its resolutely ahistorical outlook and its lack of self-criticism — have come to be suspected of naiveté. By contrast, neither of these features figures prominently in Comte's "older" positivism. (p. 72)

As a result, Comte's "historico-critical" approach to philosophy merits scrutiny for its clues as to how a genuinely postpositivist philosophy might proceed. If Mill and his positivist successors allowed themselves to view science as needing no defense, neither Comte in his time nor today's postpositivists could afford to be so complacent.

Scharff's revealing contrast of Comte and Mill thus sets the stage for his critique of postpositivist philosophy in the second half of the book. It does so by establishing the book's topic as a certain kind of denial — specifically, the denial of being influenced by the past, especially a past that one believes oneself to have rejected. There is a general hypothesis here awaiting further test, namely that the subterranean grip of history is proportional in its strength to the shallowness and abruptness with which history's relevance is rejected and its influence denied. In its standard manifestation, the denial of historicity takes the form of declaring whatever new "turn" in philosophy that one is defending to represent a clean and dramatic break from the past. Its characteristic symptoms include hubris, "self-possessed imperiousness," disdain for intellectual roots, the illusion that turns are chosen rather than conditioned by historical processes, and the ever-attractive (but historically indefensible) tendency to promulgate one's own turn as the *final* turn. Ever since Comte, alas, this sort of denial has been standard operating procedure for scientists and philosophers who find themselves in the position of promoting yet another "new" viewpoint.

Scharff thus succeeds in identifying a pervasive flaw in the received philosophical practice of the West, a flaw that can be traced back through the whole epistemological tradition to Descartes's seminal fiction of the detached observer of the world, supposedly free of ideological contamination from the past and thus capable of achieving the God's-Eye objectivity that "new" thinkers have claimed for themselves ever since the Scientific Revolution. Although not framed by Scharff in such terms, this flaw — the delusion of freedom from history and its inherited biases — amounts to something like a philosophical disease (much in Wittgenstein's sense) or what Sigmund Koch (1981) called an "epistemopathy." It is not unlike the illusion that psychotherapists attempt to dispel by showing the psychologically afflicted that their personal pasts cannot be outgrown until that history is faced squarely, understood, worked through, and eventually reframed, all the while realizing that it can never be entirely escaped. Scharff's book can be viewed as an effort to show by example what a philosophical therapy in the spirit of Comtean historico-criticism would entail.

In his diagnosis of the current philosophical situation, Scharff begins by endorsing Hilary Putnam's view that philosophy has fallen into the rut of endlessly cycling

between the “boring” old alternatives of objectivism (positivism, scientism) and historicism (relativism). Each turn of the wheel is accompanied by proclamations that the latest turn is the last word — a new final perspective that will liberate us from tradition — with the result that the two alternatives become like each other in their dogmatic self-satisfaction. From this perspective, postpositivism runs the risk of becoming just one more turn of the wheel, a mere historicist–relativist reaction against the objectivist excesses of logical positivism.

Scharff’s assessment of current philosophizing takes off from recent debates on the fate of philosophy in a post-epistemic world, proceeding from criticism of the mildly revisionist postpositivists to an analysis of the more radical “root-questioning” leaders of postpositivist philosophy — Richard Rorty, Charles Taylor, and Hilary Putnam. In the camp of postpositivist “moderates,” Scharff places those philosophers who would continue to apply analytic philosophy to piecemeal problems of clarification — a philosophy now grudgingly pluralized to historically situated contexts, but remaining as essentially unreflective about its own philosophical stance as the analytic philosophy of the 1930s (Scharff wisely winds up questioning his own designation of “moderate” for what is basically a reactionary camp). Perhaps surprisingly, Rorty fares little better. Despite all of Rorty’s (e.g., 1979) talk about our getting over Epistemology, he in fact proposes yet another final turn of the philosophical wheel, one more perspective from which the preceding history becomes largely irrelevant. In Rorty’s vision for postpositivist philosophy, the Western cultural conversation serves as the new foundation for knowledge, the task of philosophy becomes that of judging how well it all hangs together (a feebly sociologized version of the traditional God’s-Eye stance), and the “solidarity” of liberal democratic societies becomes the new substitute for the logical positivists’ Unity of Science. Rorty’s extreme historicist relativism thus unwittingly recapitulates the finality and smugness of the positivist mentality it professes to repudiate, and in doing so represents what Scharff describes as a typical failure to “think *beyond* rather than just *against* the old ideal” (pp. 206–207).

Taylor is more promising. He understands that neither revising nor opposing the old tradition will free philosophy from its grip, pointing instead to the need to transform tradition through the sort of “creative redescription” of the past that historical study affords. All the same, Taylor tends at times to depict the transition from old to new philosophy as a transformation that can be monitored and judged on the quasi-neutral basis of a Habermasian critical reason — thus conveniently forgetting his own warnings that there is no disembedded vantage point, outside the process of transformation itself, from which the supposed criteria of critical reason could be applied.

Putnam too strikes Scharff as being very nearly on the right track, having passed beyond the temptation to declare a new turn in philosophy and possessing the insight to self-critically review his own evolution from positivist to historically situated thinker. But Putnam’s recent writings still betray occasional lapses of nostalgia for the objectivism of yore, and despite his forays into historical self-reflection, he is not yet able to articulate the truly postpositivist philosophical orientation from which he practices that self-reflection. It is Putnam’s failure to complete the mission of self-reflection, more than anything else, that reveals in his case the lingering shackles of unreflective positivism, and he thus remains stalled (like the others) in the status of “aspiring postpositivist.” By this point, it has become apparent that Scharff’s neo-Comtean brand of philosophical therapy is a feat of Socratic midwifery, designed to assist philosophy in realizing what it already is by virtue of its

intellectual inheritance (namely, postpositivist philosophy) in an effort to help it become something else (postpositivist philosophy). And this is a process that entails, not the application of a philosophical "method," but rather the ongoing self-discovery that historical reflection makes possible.

In sum, *Comte After Positivism* provides telling intellectual history, incisive diagnosis of our present philosophical impasse, and a coherent vision of what postpositivist philosophy could become. Being a lucid exemplification of the very philosophical practice that it advocates, Scharff's book could of course do no less than all three. As an exposé of the intellectual vanity involved in the pretense that history can merely be turned aside, it is a work that deserves wide readership. In the first lesson of his masterwork, the *Cours de philosophie positive*, Comte declared that "an idea cannot be properly understood except through its history." Scharff spells out a deep reading of this Comtean insight and shows us that, today as in Comte's time, the pretense to escape history is never more than a bluff waiting to be called.

References

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