

Law of Three Stages by Auguste Comte

Auguste Comte, known as the “**Founder of sociology**,” was a French philosopher, born in Montpellier, France, 19 January 1798, (just after the French Revolution), died in Paris, France, 5 September 1857. Comte's parents had supported the royal family during the revolution, but as Comte came of age, he began to see the value of the revolution and the ideals that had led to it. Specifically, he became very interested in the way that society molded itself and the laws that it followed. He framed the ‘law of three stages’, the law that governed the social world. The law of three stages is an idea developed by Auguste Comte in his work “The Course in Positive Philosophy”. Comte used a progressive sequence accounting for new forms in his ‘Law of the Three Stages’. He felt that the human mind, all knowledge, human beings and the entire world history developed through these three stages. A brief description of these three states is as follows:

The Theological or fictitious stage(Upto 1300 A.D.)

The Metaphysical or abstract stage (1300 A.D-1800 A.D)

The Scientific or positive stage(after 1800 A.D)

1. **The Theological or fictitious stage**(Upto 1300 A.D.): According to **Comte** in this stage, “*all theoretical conceptions, whether general or special bear a supernatural impress*”. Unable to discover the natural causes of the various happenings, the primitive men attributed them to imaginary or divine forces. The Theological stage refers to the appeal to personified deities. During the earlier stages, people believed that all the phenomena of nature are the creation of the divine or supernatural. Adults and children failed to discover the natural causes of various phenomena and hence attributed them to a supernatural or divine power. Comte broke this stage into 3 sub-stages:
 - **Fetishism**: Fetishism was the primary stage of the theological stage of thinking. Throughout this stage, primitive people believe that inanimate objects have living spirit in them, also known as animism. People worship inanimate objects like trees, stones, a piece of wood, volcanic eruptions, etc. Through this practice, people believe that all things root from a supernatural source. During this sub-stage, man accepts the existence of the spirit or the soul. It did not admit priesthood.
 - **Polytheism**: At one point, Fetishism began to bring about doubt in the minds of its believers. As a result, people turned towards polytheism: the explanation of things through the use of many Gods. Primitive people believe that all natural forces are controlled by different Gods; a few examples would be God of water, God of rain, God of fire, God of air, God of earth, etc. During this sub-stage, man begins to believe in magic and allied activities. He then transplants or imposes special god in every object. Thus they believed in several gods and created the class of priests to get the goodwill and the blessings of these gods.
 - **Monotheism**: Monotheism means believing in one God or God in one; attributing all to a single, supreme deity. Primitive people believe a single theistic entity is responsible for

- the existence of the universe. During this sub-stage of the theological stage man believes that there is only one centre of power which guides and controls all the activities of the world. Thus man believed in the superhuman power of only one god.
2. **The Metaphysical or abstract stage (1300 A.D-1800 A.D):** The Metaphysical stage is an extension of the theological stage. It refers to explanation by impersonal abstract concepts. People often try to characterize God as an abstract being. They believe that an abstract power or force guides and determines events in the world. Metaphysical thinking discards belief in a concrete God. For example: In Classical Hindu Indian society, the principle of the transmigration of the soul, the conception of rebirth, notions of pursuit were largely governed by metaphysical uphill. This stage being an improvement upon the earlier stage, it was believed that the abstract power or force guides and determines the events in the world. Metaphysical thinking discards belief in concrete god.
 3. **The Scientific or positive stage(after 1800 A.D):** The dawn of the nineteenth century marked the beginning of the positive stage in which "*observation predominates over imagination*" and all theoretical concepts have become positive. In this final stage, dominated by industrial administrators and scientists, the nature of human mind has given up its childish and vain search for Absolute notions, origins and destinations of the universe and its causes but seeks to establish scientific *principles* governing phenomena. The Positivity stage, also known as the scientific stage, refers to scientific explanation based on observation, experiment, and comparison. Positive explanations rely upon a distinct method, the scientific method, for their justification. Today people attempt to establish cause and effect relationships. Positivism is a purely intellectual way of looking at the world; as well, it emphasizes observation and classification of data and facts. This is the highest, most evolved behavior according to Comte

Auguste Comte maintained that each stage of the development of human thoughts necessarily grew out of the preceding one. Only when the previous stage exhausts itself does the new stage develop. He also correlated the three stages of human thought with the development of social organization, types of social order, the types of social units and material conditions found in society. He believes that each successive stage grew out of the preceding one. The constitution of a new system cannot take place until and unless the destruction of the earlier one happens. Comte, however, was conscious of the fact that the three stages of thinking may or do coexist in the same society or in the same mind and may not always be successive. To Comte, the law of three stages made development of sociology inevitable and necessary. In Comte's eyes, the positive stage was not only the most evolved stage, but also the stage best for mankind. Comte believed that eventually man would be able to measure empirically and explain conclusively all forms of social behavior in the latter stage. Another aspect of his idea of social change is that some aspects remain constant which he termed as 'social statics' and some change which he described through 'social dynamics'.