

## POSITIVISM

The term was used for the first time by Saint-Simon to designate the exact method of the sciences and its extension to philosophy (*De la religion Saint-Simonienne*, 1830, p.3). It was taken over by Auguste Comte for his philosophy and through his effort became the designation of a great philosophical tendency, which, in the second half of the nineteenth century, had very numerous and varied manifestations in all the countries of the west. The characteristic of positivism is the romanticization of science: the elevation of it to the sole guide of the individual and social life of man, that is, to the one possible form of knowledge, of morality and of religion. As the romanticism of science, positivism accompanied and simulated the birth and the affirmation of the technico-industrial organization of modern society and expressed the optimistic exaltation which accompanied the origin of industrialism. Two fundamental historical forms of positivism can be distinguished: the social positivism of Saint –Simon, Comte and John Stuart Mill, born of the need to establish science as the basis of a new order on the once social and religious; and the evolutionary positivism of Spencer, who extends the concept of progress to the entire universe and tried to make it prevail in all the branches of science (for evolutionary positivism v. Evolutionism). The fundamental theses of positivism are the followings:

1. Science is the one form of knowledge possible and the method of science the only valid one; wherefore recourse to causes of principles which are not accessible to the scientific method does not arise to knowledge; and metaphysics which has recourse to precisely this kind of cause and principle is without any value whatsoever.
2. The method of science is purely descriptive in the sense that it describes the facts and shows the constant relations among facts which are expressed by laws and which make possible the prevision of the facts themselves (Comte); or in the sense that it shows the evolutionary genesis of more complex facts from simpler facts (Spencer).
3. The method of science, since it is the only valid method, is to be extended to all fields of investigation and of human activity; and the whole of human life, whether individual or associative, ought to be guided by it.

Positivism presided over the first active participation of modern science in social organization and still constitutes a concept of philosophy which remains one of the fundamental alternatives of that discipline: and this is true even after the totalitarian illusions of romantic positivism have been abandoned, that is, its pretension of absorbing every manifestation of man into science.

Nicola Abbagnano