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MARKS OF POSITIVISM IN RENOUVIER'S NEOCRITICISM

ABSTRACT

Charles Renouvier would not have accepted the thesis – that I want to defend and that I will support with quotations extracted from his major texts – without reservation.

To be considered as one of the founders of the French philosophy of science would not have displeased him. But he would also have added that a philosophy of science has to be necessarily subordinated to a philosophy of knowledge, which is his real contribution.

To be considered as a neopositivist would not have had his immediate approval either. On the contrary, he considered himself as an opponent of Auguste Comte, whose arguments have been mainly refuted by him.

Of course, Renouvier cannot be reduced to these two characteristics. His work was not limited to epistemology and he left a much more important mark on the French history of ideas. However, the work he did in this direction is undeniable.

Renouvier was regularly on the side of positivism, but he often differentiated himself from it and he frequently marked its limit too.

In a way, his phenomenalism and his neocriticism validate and reinforce some founding principles of positivism. Even the principle of relativity, which is one of the pillars of neo-criticism, was taken from Comte – Renouvier was very well aware of it.

Renouvier was no more a neo-Comtean than he was a neo-Kantian. But he was nearly as much a neo-positivist as he was a neocriticist.

ADVENT

COMTE AND RENOUVIER WERE TWO GREAT FRENCH PHILOSOPHERS OF 19TH CENTURY

Charles Renouvier was born 17 years after Auguste Comte¹, in 1815, and he died 46 years after Comte died, in 1903. Comparing these two philosophers has already been done before, first by Renouvier himself on various occasions, and then by his disciples and opponents. So did Laurent Fedi, a leading contemporary specialist in these two philosophical currents, in a 2002 article entitled "Renouvier critique de Comte". So what's the point to do it again 17 years later? Because, if the two thinkers seemed to have very opposed views on many points, as it has already been shown in considerable detail before, we also have to take into account that they were are very close to each other as well. Yet, the similarity of their ideas has scarcely been discussed.

These two philosophers² were both born in Montpellier and they attended "Ecole polytechnique", one of the greatest Parisian schools. Renouvier studied there and heard Comte, who was a tutor at that time. The fact that he attended that school did have an effect on Renouvier, but this is just a historical detail, considering the many common points they have, some of which are at the founding principles of the philosophical reflection of the two thinkers.

Note that the summary of the course given by Gaston Milhaud in 1905 on the work of Renouvier at the University of Montpellier began with a parallel between Comte and Renouvier. In this passage, Milhaud noted that they both "inseparably united philosophical speculation with the cult of science, pursuing relentlessly, aside from mysteries and confessional dogmas, a truth that could become the truth of all" (Milhaud 1927, 7).

FOR RENOUVIER, COMTE WAS ONE OF THE SMARTEST MEN OF THE TIME, BUT NOT THE NEO-POSITIVISTS

In *Les Derniers entretiens*, Louis Prat wrote down the last discussions he had with Renouvier. He revealed that Renouvier considered Comte as a "genius", as "one of the most intelligent men of his time" (Renouvier 1904, 80-81).

In the same discussion between Prat and Renouvier, the latter stated that Comte built a doctrine, whereas, he said, "the neo-positivists have not established anything: I don't know what they want nor where they are aiming at: I don't understand". This distinction between Comte and the positivists is essential for us, because, with his numerous critiques, it is the neo-positivists³ that are targeted by Renouvier most of the time. But they only copy their master, parody his work, try to reproduce his work by distorting it, focus on details without understanding the essential... They do not build a doctrine. They only mimic the attitude of the philosopher. They only rewrite passages of the words of the master, of which they are only the servants.

These are precisely the things that Renouvier didn't want to do himself, of course. He wanted to be well-known as a major philosopher, not as a minor or as a continuator. He wanted to show how original his ideas were and refused to consider that he was only repeating or interpreting what someone else had said 17 years earlier. Therefore, He could not put himself in the footsteps of Comte.

RENOUVIER'S TRUE MASTER IS PERHAPS PLATO, BUT LABELS ARE MISLEADING AND SIMPLIFYING

In addition, Renouvier was wary of the labels we give ourselves or we are given. He said that "we are vaguely connected to a vague system; one calls oneself Nietzschean, or neo-positivist, or psychophysicologist, or sociologist". He also added that he did not understand much about what all these people wrote.

Renouvier is not one of those modern philosophers who would rely on a current in fashion. On the contrary, he is a philosopher who knows the history of philosophy, who discusses it, who does not hesitate to return to the ancient sources of philosophy, to the questions that have mobilized it for centuries. Xavier Moisant considers that Renouvier is "neither a disciple of Kant, nor an apostle of Protestant Christianity, nor a philosopher of Loges or Parliament, but a ghost of the ancient cities [...] a disciple of Plato, an emulator and sometimes a determined opponent of Aristotle [...] who wakes up in the country and in the time of Louis-Philippe, who still looks for the pale olive trees in the shade of which an ideal of politics and philosophy was elaborated together." (Moisant 1908, 274-275)

Labels are very convenient, but they are also misleading. Interpretations are always subject to criticism, because any appropriation of the thought of a master is, in a sense, an expropriation of the master, the former owner of the thought: the pupil who wants to translate often betrays the original meaning by its rewriting. Yet, philosophers have essentially done this since antiquity - to repeat, reinterpret and reclaim - haven't they?

IN FACT, RENOUVIER'S NEOCRITICISM IS A CRITICISM OF KANT'S SYSTEM

We also have to distinguish between attachment to a man and adherence to an idea. Being a neo-Kantian is not at all the same as being a neo-critic. Renouvier chooses this second label of "neo-criticism"⁴, because that is the method he adopts. He belongs to the traditional line of Immanuel Kant by writing a "general critique" of knowledge, but he does not refrain from criticizing many aspects of the work of the German philosopher⁵.

In his article, Fedi wrote: "Just as Kant's system transgresses the spirit of criticism⁶[...], so does Comte system subvert the spirit of positivism" (Fedi 2002, 182-183). Thus, just as neo-criticism is a critique of Kant's system, Renouvier's thought can also be seen as a neopositivism that corrects-Comte system.

But to admit that, for Renouvier, would have been reducing himself to being no more than a continuator of Comte. It may partly be the reason why he has sought to always show his differences with Comte. Warren Schmaus also suggested this point in the book he published last year: "Renouvier may have exaggerated his criticisms of Comte for rhetorical effect" (Schmaus 2018, 50)⁷. For it is not only a matter of some similarity or vague resemblance, the two doctrines indisputably have important common points.

We want to show them here. We are going to examine the points of agreement and the oppositions that the two philosophers maintain in three domains, first concerning the philosophy of knowledge and mathematics, then on the limits of science and progress, and finally in the light of the notion of law and the relativity of phenomena.

As a first step, we will show that Comte's philosophy of science is not opposed to Renouvier's philosophy of knowledge, although Renouvier denies it the status of science, first of all because it lacks foundations and a general logic. Renouvier also considers Comte's science ranking, but does not consider it to be relevant and suggests another one. He admires Comte's philosophy of mathematics, although it does not go beyond the ambiguity of the notion of infinity, although it does not accept the interest that probabilities represent and although it does not oppose determinism.

This idea will lead us to the second step, in which we will report Renouvier's disagreement on the exclusion of non-scientific assumptions, as well as his rejection of the theory of progress and the law of the three-states, which he sees as a simplifying representation. We will also present his rejection of the positive religion, but we will note that the two men share an interest in finding a religious refoundation and that an interesting parallel was made between going beyond the metaphysical state and the rejecting substantialism. We will also see that Renouvier's opposition to the idea of collective thinking independent of the individuals that make up the society does not mean that it makes him hostile to the recognition of the role that society can play.

This will bring us to the third step, which will be an opportunity to study the similarity between the two intellectuals from the point of view of the reduction of knowledge to the law of phenomena. For both of them want to reduce knowledge to phenomena, because both feel that everything is relative and that this is the only absolute principle, and again due to the fact that their definitions of the law are very similar.

1. FOR OR AGAINST COMTE CONCERNING PHILOSOPHY OF KNOWLEDGE AND OF MATHEMATICS

COMTE'S PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCES IS NOT OPPOSED TO RENOUVIER'S PHILOSOPHY OF KNOWLEDGE

Renouvier asks Comte for a philosophy of knowledge. This, however, does not prevent Renouvier from thinking of a philosophy of science and even from considering it as "the true philosophy", "philosophy itself". He wrote it for example in an article in his review, *La Critique philosophique*, in these terms: if Science "exists only in tendency and in ideal, ideal surely unattainable [...], don't we have, in the meantime, a philosophy of science, which would be even the true philosophy?" (Renouvier 1873, 234-235) And two years later, he wrote that: "It would be a mistake if one believed that these observations were intended to discourage the philosophy of science, which tends more and more precisely to be virtually one with the same philosophy" (Renouvier 1875, 404).

Renouvier supports this argument because the critical method is, for him, "comparable to the scientific method" (Renouvier 1878, 371). His philosophy of science studies the "methods of the different sciences, the nature and legitimacy of their postulates, [...] their processes of research and discovery" (Renouvier 1854/1912, t.2 40). It is also a "study of method in general, and of logic and psychology, which are prerequisites for any inquiry into the principles of knowledge" (Renouvier 1873, 235), which was not the case for the positivist philosophy of science.

BUT THE POSITIVE PHILOSOPHY OF COMTE IS NOT A SCIENCE FOR RENOUVIER, IT LACKS-FOUNDATION IN A GENERAL LOGIC

That's the reason why Renouvier considered that Comte had committed a methodological defect by not basing his philosophical enterprise of systematization of sciences, because "sciences can only hold their particular philosophies from philosophy itself" (Renouvier 1897, 663).

Comte mistook his positive philosophy for a science. And it is a "major and antipositive error to think that the entire system of knowledge of all kinds can form

a positive science similar to the particular positive sciences, constituted and delimited" (Renouvier 1878, 52). The use of the term "antipositive" by Renouvier in this context shows that he seeks to put positivism back on the positive path.

Comtean philosophy, therefore, lacks a critique of reason, a study of the mind, a general logic, in other words, a general criticism of knowledge. Comte should have been interested in the laws that govern experience, in what distinguishes the certain from the uncertain, the true from the false, the knowledge from the belief: he should have tried "to penetrate the conditions of knowing and believing [... For as soon as we want to go beyond the boundaries of a particular knowledge [, we have to go through] the analysis of the conditions required to know, believe or doubt" (Renouvier 1878, 50). The distinction between these notions is not as simple as one might think at first sight, which is what causes Renouvier to say that Comte should have been concerned with "the general conditions of knowledge" (Renouvier 1854/1912, 266).

DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION ON COMTE'S RANKING OF SCIENCES

Renouvier even considers that "no division is absolute, that everything lies in knowledge, that observation and categories, facts and logic are basically inseparable" (Renouvier 1859, 520). Thus, even if it seems perfect and definitive, a division or classification of sciences remains "always a more or less clear specification" (Renouvier 1854/1912, vol.2 293). Renouvier thus simply determines "the principal groups" of sciences, and he criticizes Comte for wanting to establish "insurmountable lines of demarcation" between sciences. That's the reason why he calls him "the legislator of sciences" (Renouvier 1877, 2-3).

This first argument invites us to consider inappropriate a classification of sciences by their degree of certainty. Renouvier adds a second argument, that the possibility of error is inherent in the exercise of "sensitive, intellectual and voluntary functions" (Renouvier 1859, 492). It is also for this reason that we must refrain from pushing the classification "down to the last details, and pretending to establish, even if we keep to the principal divisions, an encyclopedia, a hierarchy, a synthesis of sciences. A chart with systematic aims like Comte's chart [goes too far

and constitutes] a new dogmatism, a pretention to chain the human spirit" (Hamelin 1927, 275).

Comtean argument of the growing complexity is also rejected by Renouvier for two reasons. First, there is no more simplicity in physical actions than in chemical actions, and secondly, it is as a method, not as a subject, that science uses mathematics. And in fact, Renouvier criticizes Comte for basing his classification neither on the methods those of mathematics, those of the experiment or even of the social sciences nor on the objects of sciences, which invite to regroup for example astronomy, physics and chemistry. He keeps a division of science "by the nature of the data, [...] which is at the same time a division by the nature of the methods" (Renouvier 1864/1912, XLIII). Thus the classification adopted by Renouvier takes up the classical division between logical sciences, where everything is law, analysis and synthesis, and physical sciences, where the laws are hidden behind the facts.

COMTE'S MATHEMATICAL PHILOSOPHY IS REMARKABLE EVEN IF THE INFINITESIMAL METHOD AND THE PROBABILITIES WENT UNHEEDED

In his first *Essai de Critique générale*, Renouvier wrote, about Comte's mathematical philosophy, that "there, at least, the works of the creator of positive philosophy are irreproachable and profound" (Renouvier 1854/1912, 265-266). And in the highly critical article entitled "*Le cours de philosophie positive est-il encore au courant de la science*", Renouvier wrote that Comte "has succeeded in formulating a true mathematical philosophy." (Renouvier 1877, 328) This is true even if the infinitesimal method went unspoken like the calculation of probabilities. These nuances explain that it is elsewhere more severe in estimating that the work of Comte in mathematics remains "remarkable in some points" (Renouvier 1897, 228), but "remarkable" all the same.

Like Comte, in his *Cours de philosophie positive*, Renouvier was amazed by the notion of infinity. Both see the illogical nature. But Renouvier goes beyond Comte because he intends to refute the real existence of the infinite quantity. This doesn't cause to question the possibility of an infinite quality (perfect, completed, adequacy of the real and the ideal). This refutation of the infinite quantity, which Renouvier

replaces with the indefinite, is of great importance in his work. Renouvier even goes so far as to consider it as the object and the problem of his work.

Renouvier rejects Comtism, like Hegelianism, because they are deterministic philosophies that leave no room for the indefinite, for which "chaining is everything" (Renouvier 1881, 368). Comte indeed considers the notion of probability evaluated as irrational and sophisticated⁸.

More moderate than Comte here, Renouvier suggests, to study, to lay down the principles, to try to mark the just limits, rather than to condemn and to reprove. For it is the task that every philosopher should feel compelled to assume because of his function: to analyze and clarify "the notions of cause, chance, necessity and luck" (Renouvier 1877, 335-336).

Renouvier criticizes Comte for this rejection of the calculation of probabilities. He also criticizes him for not admitting that a scientific theory always has a degree of uncertainty and that chance has something to do with its constitution. Even though it is very probable, "no truth that is not directly observable cannot be achieved otherwise" (Renouvier 1873, 230-231). Renouvier wrote in "*Le cours de philosophie positive est-il encore au courant de la science*", that on "this important subject Comte was late on the science of his time; he has less than ever been aware of ours, since the work of statisticians has brought so valuable elements for the investigation of social relations and for the very knowledge of human nature" (Renouvier 1877, 335).

Beyond the calculation of probabilities, it is therefore the sovereign judgments made by Comte "on the different sciences, their definitions, their methods, their assumptions" (Renouvier 1854/1912, 265-266) that lead Renouvier to consider this aspect of Comte's work as outdated. He criticized him for laying down "sacred boundaries" (Renouvier 1877, 7) to science, and for motivating "his judgments on general principles which he professes without justifying them" (Renouvier 1878, 52).

2. FOR OR AGAINST COMTE ABOUT THE LIMITS OF SCIENCE AND PROGRESS

THE MISTAKE OF EXCLUDING NON-SCIENTIFIC ASSUMPTIONS

Renouvier objects to Comte's philosophy of science, "his false views of the reduction of philosophy to the subject of science" (Renouvier 1897, 678). For everything does not belong with "the truth and the scientific methods by which it is acquired and propagated: politics, art, the moral life of men as well as their industry and their everyday life [...], truth, like life, infinitely goes beyond] science. The truths that govern life are not achieved or spread by scientific methods" (Renouvier 1897, 719).

Comte was therefore wrong to exclude extra scientific assumptions, moral inductions and postulates, rational beliefs and conjectures, the unprovable, the unverifiable. All these areas are not systematically and necessarily false. Even if they are excluded by positive science, criticism must go beyond the demonstrative reason and include moral inductions. Rather than an exclusion, Renouvier invites to an analysis of these areas. He proceeds, for example, to a necessary and luminous distinction between the incomprehensible and the irrational.

For him, it is really "a moral enormity, an absolutely vain enterprise too, and a destruction of science itself [to make this exclusion...]; for there is nothing in knowledge that is not hypothetical whichever way you look at it apart from the facts recognized as such" (Renouvier 1897, 227-228). And what is positive science, if not the "constituted, particular sciences on which has been established a sufficient agreement of premises, reasoning, and methods between special scientists"? (Renouvier 1877, 293)

REFUSAL OF THE THEORY OF FATAL PROGRESS AND ITS SIMPLISTIC REPRESENTATION BY THE LAW OF THREE-STATES

In his book *Esquisse d'une classification systématique des doctrines philosophiques*, Renouvier denounced Comte's theory of progress, while balancing it with Comte's mathematical views and his visions of the object of positive sciences: "The theory of progress did not come from the same source as his views on mathematics and the true purpose of positive sciences" (Renouvier 1886, 235).

He also wrote in the *Essai de Critique générale*, that the laws of Comte "on the development of the mind in general, or of science [...], among which the famous law of the three-states holds the highest rank, [...] will not easily survive criticism" (Renouvier 1854/1912, 265-266).

The idea of continuous progress supported by Comte, as well as the gradual development of progress theorized by the law of the three-states⁹ are indeed clearly rejected by Renouvier, who positioned himself here as "essentially opposed to positivism" (Renouvier 1901, 439). He denounces this three-states law as anti-scientific, too simplistic and fanciful. He believes that it is only based on the myth of progress, dear to many thinkers of the time, from Saint-Simon to Proudhon, or even to Victor Hugo.

With this law, Comte did not establish a scientific theory, which would prove that progress is necessary and continuous through three states or levels of evolutions. At the basis of this theory, it is the very march of civilization towards progress which is a problem for Renouvier. Comte only makes the supposition; he does not demonstrate it in any way. This is not surprising since he regards human evolution as indisputable evidence, which must even become the "rational basis of positive morality". That is why Comte only built a philosophy of history.

According to Renouvier, his philosophy of history is only "a fatalistic doctrine deduced from the so-called law of history" (Renouvier 1901, 439), because it starts with an ambiguous or even false idea of progress. Renouvier spoke of a moral progress, which values human freedom, he remained on the idea of progress that was still present in the eighteenth century, a progress that proceeds from a moral elevation of consciousness. Whereas Saint-Simonians and Comte reason on more palpable progress, on technical advances, on the daily improvement of the quality of material life. This is why they believe that order and science are the engines of progress. And that's why they see freedom as a brake on the progress of societies.

Does history really show a systematic progress of institutions and societies? Renouvier did not believe it, because the "progress of human institutions and societies [as much as] the applications of these theories to modern history [...] have received events of cruel denial" (Renouvier 1854/1912, 265-266). Fedi points out

in his new book that several intellectuals, including Jean Grenier, hailed Renouvier's lucidity in the matter (Fedi 2018, 269).

And if progress was still emerging with the evolution of societies, if it were to be really inevitable and the acts and wishes of individuals could not change anything. This would be a difficulty in the place of moral life for someone who wants to base morality on an ideal and to believe in the impact of the will of actors on the evolution of things. But in reality, Comte is wrong here, because with this law he thinks that "the march of positive sciences is the march of the human spirit itself" (Renouvier 1897, 229).

This is what Renouvier wants to show by explaining that the fetishist state is not original, but it exists in all religions. Renouvier considers that the real problem is more to understand how and why religions are adorned with fetishism. In the same way, metaphysics exists in theology and vice versa, the two corresponding states are therefore not distinct. Renouvier is not convinced either by an irreversible evolution of polytheism towards monotheism. He finds rather a phenomenon of swinging between these beliefs. In general, he thinks that the evolution of humanity is more complex than what Comte wants us to believe¹⁰.

Fedi draws a parallel between substantialism and metaphysical state in his article. He writes that the "realistic process", as Renouvier describes it, corresponds to the metaphysical state of Comte, understood as an intermediate and transitory state dominated by a mode of explanation based on abstractions and entities. But Renouvier, not without provocation, recommends rather Turgot, who seems to him to have proposed a more nuanced approach to realism." (Fedi 2002, 172-173)

Renouvier also discusses Comtean origin of this law of the three-states, stating that Comte borrowed it from Saint-Simon, and before him from Burdin and Turgot. Is it really an attack on Auguste Comte, as for example Eugène Sémerie thinks so? This is possible, but it does not detract from the other arguments that seek to make more positive a theory that claims positive law.

Globally, this law composes postulates in a beautiful ternary theory, in the Hegelian way, but does not prove his claim. Renouvier thus opposes to the systematicity of Comte's method, a historical criticism based on analysis,

comparison and induction, which examines religions, ideas and systems. In particular, he conducts this work of analysis almost scientifically in his *Philosophie analytique de l'histoire*. Milhaud writes, moreover, in a letter addressed to Prat, that Renouvier and Comte "came to the truly fruitful philosophical reflection, relying first of all on scientific thought".

ABOUT ROLES OF RELIGION AND SOCIETY

It is true that one could perhaps qualify Milhaud's statement by saying that the two thinkers have ended their career by paying more attention to religious questions.

Renouvier blames Comte somehow, when he writes, for example, that Comte had "a knack for veneration" (Renouvier 1877, 118), he "was keen on creating idols", when he sees "the objects of worship positivist" as "creations of a mind that came back from reason to fetishism"¹¹. Renouvier denigrates the help of idols and he also rejects Catholicism partly because it involves the mediation of the priest. But like Comte, Renouvier doesn't limit himself to analyzing, categorizing, understanding sciences, he tackles existential questions.

It must be recognized, therefore, that at the end of their lives at least, both are in search of meaning and are heading for their last philosophy rather than on the divine questions. Comte does so through his positive religion and Renouvier initiates him into his fight for Protestantism and make it concrete through Personalism. Thus, if Renouvier rejects the positive religion, the two philosophers express the same desire to reform the religious question.

Renouvier does not agree with Comte's religion, nor does he adopt the whole principles of sociology, it is true. He particularly rejects the idea of a collective thought¹².

Renouvier is rather focused on the individual and his psychology. His monadology is an illustration of it. It does not, however, atomize the society, and he considers the existence of social facts and the existence of a reciprocal influence between society and individuals, but without the social being anything else than the existence of social reality, in *La Nouvelle Monadologie* a "function of individual

actions" (Renouvier 1899/2004, 435) and without the consciousness being at a different level than an individual (no collective consciousness possible).

Fedi believes that Neocriticism advocates for "social psychology" on issues such as custom, conformism, gambling, alcoholism and even suicide, based on imitation, invention and mental vertigo. He writes in his new book that "even though science exists only in the consciousness of scientists, social facts are extensions of psychic facts, and social conditions can only lean on individuals. As Fouillée said it, who likes arguing with Renouvier but who also often agrees with him in theory, "the society does not exist, neither does the physical environment, independently of the psychic individualities of which it is composed: it only exists and acts in and through these individualities"" (Fedi 2018, 272).

3. FOR OR AGAINST COMTE REGARDING LAW AND RELATIVITY OF PHENOMENA

COMTE, LIKE RENOUVIER, REDUCES THE KNOWLEDGE AT THE LAW OF PHENOMENON

For Milhaud, Renouvier "keeps on placing himself in a positive perspective. He observes, he notes the data of thought, he describes, but he does not explain. The object of his analyses and descriptions is, moreover, only representation" (Milhaud, 73). For, as John Alexander Gunn wrote it, for "New Criticism, phenomena and only phenomena exist" (Gunn 1932, 189).

Renouvier borrowed from Comte the formula "the reduction of knowledge to the laws of phenomena" (Renouvier 1854, XVI). He concedes that Comte has been able to "exactly summarize the method applied and increasingly clarified by modern scholars, and the idea of this method, such as one should have in mind after Kant's criticist work, when he defined science by the study of phenomena and by the search for their laws, excluding essences and causes" (Renouvier 1884, 135). This is why Roger Verneaux allows himself to write that the Phenomenism of Renouvier "comes from Comte" (Verneaux 1945, 20).

Milhaud even found a clear resemblance between the first pages of the *Cours de philosophie positive* and the beginning of the Essays, where he considered Renouvier's position as "in his own way, positively positivistic" (Milhaud 1927, 69). Renouvier did not hide from this borrowing: "I accept", he wrote, "a fundamental formula of the positivist school: the reduction of knowledge to the laws of phenomena. This principle, which I must constantly make use of, most of this first essay is devoted to establish it by the analysis of knowledge itself; and I believe him to be consistent with Kant's method, though this philosopher, embarrassed by the metaphysical tradition, did not bring it out clearly enough and follow it" (Renouvier 1854, XVI). But he also stated that : "If, moreover, I cannot confess a school, and some of its trends that I appreciate, it is because the absence or even the disdain of the first principles seems obvious to me, so that the first notions of phenomenon and law are not the object of an exact analysis; it is because it professes, with regard to the possibilities left to free belief, an excessive dogmatic negation which I do not believe justified; it is, finally, because that it has retained

of the spirit of Saint-Simon, from which it was first inspired, such pretensions to the scientific and religious organization of humanity, chimerical in my opinion, and not very liberal". We have discussed these arguments above, but, while they partly explain the refusal of filiation, they probably do not prohibit Renouvier from being neo-positivist.

Renouvier recognizes the borrowing of Comte's formula, he also admits the proximity of his phenomenalism and Comte's phenomenalism. He notes that, for both of them, "intelligence has only "food for knowledge" with phenomena and laws of phenomena [... that both reject] any fiction of essences or qualities in themselves explain the properties of bodies" (Renouvier 1901, 439).

SHARING THEORY OF RELATIVITY: "EVERYTHING IS RELATIVE, THAT'S THE ONLY ABSOLUTE PRINCIPLE"

Renouvier even wrote that positivism "has the great merit of recognizing the principle of relativity and of placing a limit on human knowledge" (Renouvier 1859, vol.2 186). And in *Histoire et solution des problèmes métaphysiques*, he still recalls that it was Comte's refutations of the entities of physics-chemistry theories in the *Cours de philosophie positive* that were his "first initiation into the relativistic method" (Renouvier 1901, 460).

This idea is important because, as Verneaux wrote, Renouvier "has incorporated" the concept of Kantian relativity into the "framework" (Verneaux 1945, 26) of his philosophy¹³. Renouvier made the relation play the role of category of the categories. Indeed, "what can be more than links, in the quantities or qualities determined, in the modal notions?" (Renouvier 1954/1912, 139)

This first principle of Renouvier, relativity, is an idea previously expressed by Comte, especially in a pamphlet of 1817 where he was said to have written "Everything is relative, this is the only absolute principle". Renouvier here acknowledges his debt to Comte, he only regrets that Comte has expressed the idea without seeking to argue his proposal. Renouvier therefore seeks to prove this statement through four main arguments already noticed by Hamelin¹⁴.

However, we should not exaggerate filiation at this level. Janssens had already noted that "this criteriological theory is common to many modern thinkers" (Janssens 1904, 52)¹⁵. And Renouvier indicates he had found it in Hobbes, in Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature*, he admits he also has in mind the Philosophy of the conditioned of Hamilton, as well as the dependence between the objects of knowledge, knowledge itself and its laws in Kant. But the formula of Félix Ravaisson, in *La Philosophie en France au XIX^e siècle*, is interesting in order to clarify our position. He points out that in this respect Renouvier's ideas "are the same as stated in slightly different terms [...] by Hamilton, and especially by Auguste Comte" (Ravaisson 1867, 104): please note "and especially by Auguste Comte".

Comte has already claimed that in fact everything is relative, but this conclusion of his philosophy of science was not founded according to Renouvier. He does not content himself with saying that "the absolute [...] is only the correlative of the relative" (Renouvier 1854/1912, 71), or that "all our ideas express relations" (Renouvier 1897, 329), he supports his assertion on natural observation, on the observation and the evolution of sciences, and he extends this idea by "the assertive application" of the "principles of contradiction and relativity" (Renouvier 1897, 444) which are essential elements of Neocriticism.

SIMILAR DEFINITIONS OF THE LAW

In his *Cours de philosophie positive*, Comte states that he is attached to laws and not to causes. It has become the meaning of the critical method: to focus on "subjecting the facts to an exact and rigorous control [...] and] once the definition of the fact is acquired, to focus on finding out if known laws are enough to account for them, before resorting either to new and hypothetical laws, or to allegations unrelated to every conceivable law" (Renouvier 1876, 4)¹⁶.

Hamelin has noted this analogy. Renouvier himself had found this: he recognizes a "community of views of great importance" (Renouvier 1889, 402) with Comte about "the way of considering causality in the order of natural phenomena". Renouvier has written that Comte even has "a good theory of physical laws by taking their admirable and striking type into the functions of analytic geometry".

Renouvier defines law in general as "a compound phenomenon, produced or reproduced in a constant manner, and represented as a common linkage of the linages of various other phenomena" (Renouvier 1854/1912, 78-79) and he states "that there is no phenomenon without a definite relation, nor a definite relation without law that expresses it by generalizing it" (Renouvier 1872, 389). The laws thus defined are static, stable, invariable; then, to describe the "assemblages of phenomena" (Renouvier 1876, 49) which "depend on each other, and where the variations of one depend on the variations of the others", Renouvier borrows the term function from the mathematical language.

Comte and Renouvier bring to light the general character of the linkage which constitutes a law. They rely on mathematics to do so. But Renouvier, by deploying the concept of function, rejects the idea of necessity, especially because, as Gunn wrote, "A law is a law, but the guarantee of its permanence is not a law." (Gunn 1932, 198)

CONCLUSION: WITH OR WITHOUT COMTE

REJECT OF THE MIND OF COMTISM

Is it necessary to follow Verneaux, who justifies the necessity of criticism by the refutation he carries out on the positivism whose place he takes? It is clear that, according to Renouvier, the absence of criticism is indeed a fault of Comtism. That is why, if Renouvier would have probably accepted to be considered as one of the founders of the French philosophy of science, the idea would probably not have displeased him, he would have added however that a philosophy of science must necessarily be subordinate to a philosophy of knowledge, and that it is its true contribution here. For example, he wrote in his *Essai de Critique générale*: "a philosophy of science calls for a philosophy of mind and methods, and Auguste Comte did not put anything in his positive Philosophy." (Renouvier 1854/1912, 73)

In his article, Fedi feels that all of Renouvier's critics, "considered in their coherence, touch the soul of Comtean positivism [...] The different objections converge towards a recurring explanation: the absence of "psychology", the negation of belief, the distortion of history [...] That is the reason why positivism is never recognized as a model, even if it is credited, with Hume, Mill and some others, of a brilliant introduction of philosophy to the principle of relativity" (Fedi 2002, 182). Renouvier places himself as an adversary of Auguste Comte, whose arguments he has, above all, disassembled. He does not consider himself as a neo-positivist¹⁷.

Renouvier is not a worshiper of Comte, he is not neo-Comtean, but is he neo-positivist¹⁸? Let us remember that the labels are deceptive and that Renouvier, the founder of French Neocriticism, was far from not criticizing Kantian positions.

DISCUSSION OF COMTEAN ARGUMENTS

We sought to summarize and highlight the common points, without diminishing the differences.

First of all, with regard to the relation between the philosophy of knowledge and Comte's philosophy of science, it is clear that Renouvier reproaches Comte for having dispensed with the indispensable prerequisite of a study of the method in

general, of the logic and psychology. He is not, however, opposed to the idea of a philosophy of science, which he even sees as the true philosophy in an article of 1873. And in another article of 1878, it is even his Anti-positivism that he reproaches Comte, when he considers his philosophy of science itself as a science. Similarly, if he criticizes Comte for a too arbitrary and detailed classification of the sciences to be acceptable, he allows himself, however, to suggest another one, based more on tradition. Here as elsewhere, Comte does not leave enough space for freedom and thinks he is a "legislator of science". In philosophy of mathematics, this attitude leads him to reject the calculation of probabilities, the part of indeterminacy that is hidden even in scientific theories. Don't these reproaches, which seek to correct Comte for his excesses, tend to make Renouvier a more positivist philosopher than Comte himself?

The exclusion of that part of indeterminism which is at the origin of science, like that of extrascientific hypotheses, is not acceptable to Renouvier. On the contrary, it invites reflection that goes beyond the field of established sciences, because they were built only from premises, reasoning and methods proposed, discussed and validated between scientists. This is why, rather than excluding these areas, Renouvier decides to analyze them before considering them as definitely false¹⁹. Neither does he accept the theory of continuous and gradual progress, which Comte formalizes by the law of the three-states. This theory is not based scientifically, it is only a beautiful synthetic, ternary and fatalistic philosophy of history that starts from an idea of progress limited to certain material aspects restricted in space and time. Renouvier is not fooled by this total faith in science and does not confuse scientific advances with the progress of the human spirit. That is why he refuses this theory, of which he discusses the stages and the origin. And it is once again with the desire to be more scientific, more rigorous, closer to the historical truth, that he writes an analytical Philosophy of history. This attachment to scientific thought is the starting point of the philosophical reflections of Comte and Renouvier, but that does not prevent certain divergences obviously, for example where Comte develops a sociology, Renouvier prefers a social psychology. Just as this attachment to science does not prevent their desire from rebuilding religion, Comte responds to it by constituting a positive religion, Renouvier responds to it by

first orienting himself towards Protestantism and then by constituting Personalism and a New Monadology.

In the footsteps of Comte, Renouvier also reduces the knowledge to the laws of phenomena. Neocriticism is a phenomenalism and Renouvier acknowledges that Kant had not clearly made out the principle formulated by Comte. Similarly Renouvier concedes that Comte recognized the principle of relativity and put a limit on human knowledge, other elements very important for Neocriticism. Their way of understanding causality is also very similar. They attach themselves to physical laws rather than to imprecise causes and they rely on the mathematical model to define physical laws. Renouvier even borrows the idea of function from mathematics, which allows him to reintroduce freedom.

ISN'T HE AS NEO-POSITIVIST AS NEOCRITICIST IN THE END?

Evidently Renouvier cannot be reduced to being a philosopher of science and a neo-positivist. His work is not limited to epistemology and its mark on the French history of ideas is much more important. However, the work he has done in this direction is indisputable. It is regularly positioned in relation to Positivism, it often stands out and it often limits it.

His Phenomenism and his Neocriticism validate and reinforce, in a certain way, certain foundations of positivism. Even the principle of relativity, which is one of the pillars of Neocriticism, is borrowed from Comte, and Renouvier does not hide it.

Renouvier is probably no more neo-Comtean than he is neo-Kantian, but he is a Neo-positivist perhaps as much as a neocriticist in the end...

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NOTES

¹ Auguste Comte was born in 1798 and died in 1857.

² In 1903, Gabriel Séailles opined that Renouvier was "one of the masters of French thought in the nineteenth century, certainly the greatest with Auguste Comte".

³ Renouvier usually talks about positivists not neo-positivists. It is one of the rare occurrences of this word in the corpus. Prat does not tell who these neo-positivists are. Renouvier may be thinking of Paul Bourget or Félix Le Dantec or Charles Maurras or other emerging thinkers in 1903. In his books and in his journal, Renouvier also discusses the texts of Herbert Spencer, Ernest Renan, Hippolyte Taine... Here, I use the term neo-positivist to simply refer to a doctrine that is similar to positivism by adding new trends.

⁴ "Criticism derives its name from what it judges, chooses, pronounces, decides (*χρῖνω*: *discerno, judico*; *χρῖσις*: *examen, iudicium*)" (Renouvier 1872, 1). Renouvier's neocriticism seeks to perfect Kant's critical doctrine. Lionel Dauriac synthesized its essential characteristics at a conference of the French Philosophical Society in 1903.

⁵ He objects that he allows a substantialism to survive by identifying real and thing in itself, by pushing freedom in noumenon, while trying to separate sensibility and understanding, not seeing that the relation is a category which envelops all the others, trying to justify categories rather than letting everyone check them for oneself, by not distinguishing the theses as incomprehensible and the antitheses as contradictory in the system of antinomies, etc.

⁶ "with the affirmation of the thing in itself in particular".

⁷ Warren Schmaus, the American specialist of Renouvier, covers some of the same territory in his book on Renouvier, *Liberty and pursuit of Knowledge*. The reader will consult chapter 2, where Schmaus perfectly explains the divergences on several aspects that we are discussing here: the law of the three-states, the classification of sciences and in particular the continuous progress.

⁸ "*Je la regarde comme essentiellement impropre à régler notre conduite en aucun cas, si ce n'est tout au plus dans les jeux de hasard. Elle nous amènerait habituellement dans la pratique à rejeter comme numériquement invraisemblables des événements qui vont pourtant s'accomplir*".

⁹ Theological, metaphysical and positive.

¹⁰ His criticism of the law of the three-states echoes the one that was published by Charles Pellarin in 1864 in his *Essai critique sur la philosophie positive*, in which Pellarin explains that the human mind has been and is always theological, metaphysical and positive at the same time.

¹¹ This formula is a snub to the law of the three-states.

¹² Idea of a collective thought that Comte exposes for example in this formula: "*Une société n'est pas plus décomposable en individus qu'une surface géométrique ne l'est en lignes ou une ligne en points*".

¹³ Kant limited the relation to three modes of a single category (inherence, dependence, community or reciprocity).

¹⁴ (1) The simple observation of nature reveals to us that all "things exist and are known only because of something else"; (2) the scientific discourse, likewise, is limited to reporting a phenomenon to other phenomena; (3) the history of science has also shown a tendency to abandon studies on essences in order to concentrate research on the links between phenomena; (4) the relativity of phenomena corresponds to an abandonment of the realism of space and time, itself linked to the rejection of the infinite, so dear to Renouvier. (Hamelin 1927, 70-72)

¹⁵ Locke, Hume, Hegel, Comte, Spencer, Bain and others.

¹⁶ Gaston Bachelard expresses a rather similar idea when he writes that "the facts are linked together all the more solidly because they are involved in a network of reasons. It is through rationally designed linking that heterogeneous facts are given their status as scientific facts" (Bachelard 1966, 123).

¹⁷ And he does not recognize himself in that term attributed to him by the servants of Comte, who are content to mimic the attitude of the master without creating their own doctrine.

¹⁸ What Fedi notes in his new book (passage quoted above), about the controversy that Fouillée has with Renouvier, doesn't it apply to the polemics that Renouvier has with Comte too? Do we have to retain exclusively the objections which distinguish them or consider the points on which they agree too?

¹⁹ It does so for example through the distinction between the ideas of incomprehensible and irrational.