

POSITIVISM

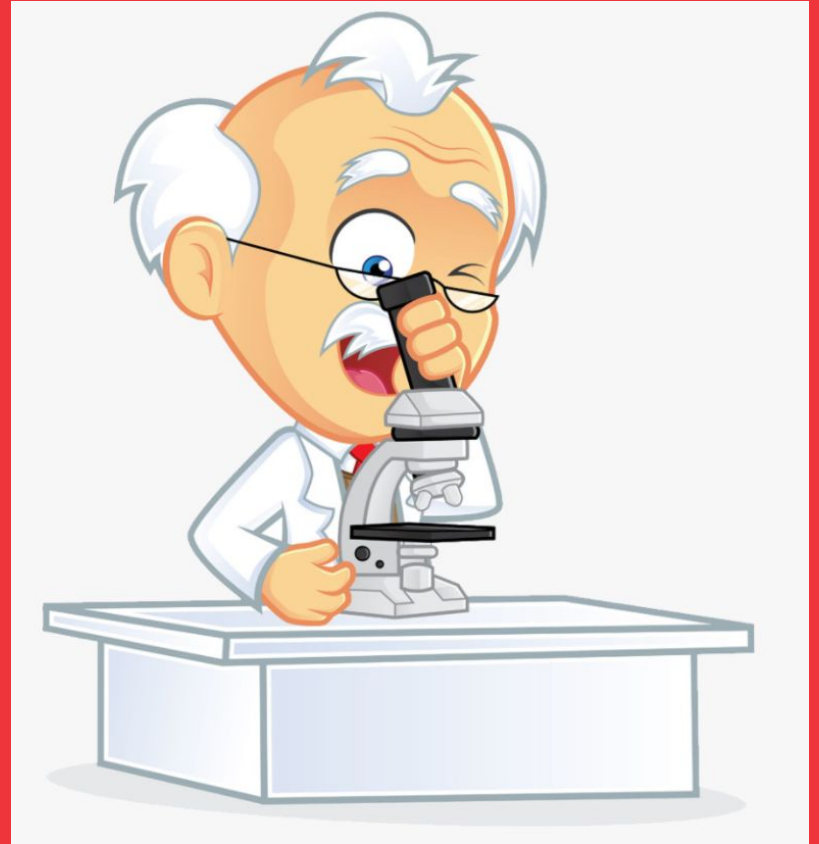
90L52609

Philosophy of Social Science

Karelia, Ronja, Emilia, Martta, Outi
Oct 6, 2021



Aalto-yliopisto
Aalto-universitetet
Aalto University



AGENDA

Introduction to positivism

Group work

Limitations and criticism

Quiz

Joint discussion

“The sacred formula of positivism: love as a principle, the order as a foundation, and progress as a goal.”

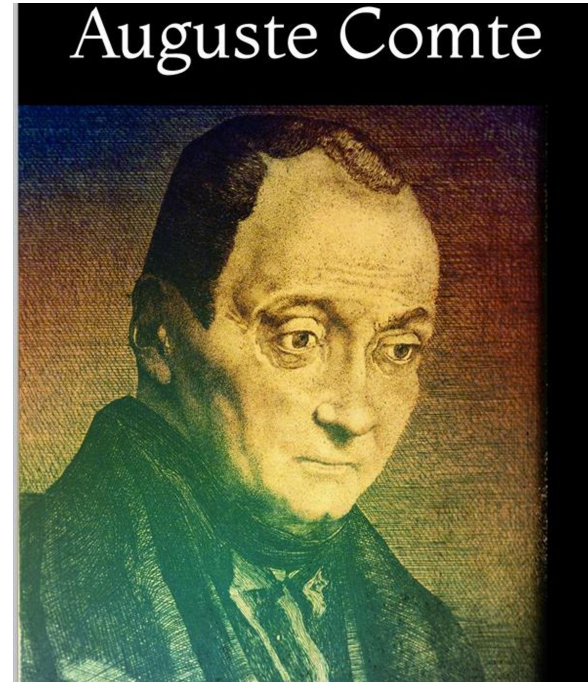


Aalto-yliopisto
Aalto-universitetet
Aalto University

Auguste Comte

History of Positivism

- A philosophical theory that (at modern times) was invented in the early decades of 1800's.
- Key thinkers:
 - Auguste Comte (1798–1857)
 - Henri de Saint-Simon (1760–1825),
 - Pierre-Simon Laplace (1749–1827)
- The core idea: metaphysics has to be replaced with a scientific method with is based on dependency between observations and



History – Comte's core concepts

On social sciences

- Are the ultimate peak of the sciences after theology and metaphysics
- Are the key vehicle for overcoming the problems in society
- Should follow the examples natural sciences

On positivism

- Combination of observations and reasoning in appropriate portions
- Characteristics
 - Constructive
 - Relative
 - Accurate
 - Secure
 - Real
 - Useful
 - Organic



Classical Positivism – Elements

- Only knowledge that can be obtained following a strict scientific methods is true knowledge
- Science can achieve knowledge and understanding only by making observations
- Focus on direct observation, minimizing conceptual assumptions
- Phenomena that can not be observed are eventually irrelevant

Modern Positivism – The debate is still ongoing

- Science is cumulative
- Science has common methods and principles and in principle different fields share the same view of the real world
- Science creates products – numbers, arguments etc.
- Science is not dependent on who is conducting it and crosses the cultural boundaries
- But the core idea remains: arguments have to be verified by empirical observations; to at least some extent

Variation and internal competition

Post-positivism (neopositivism)

- **positivism doesn't acknowledge cultural, political & psychological factors in between the observer & the subject of study → we are *biased***
- **positivist claims are *self-defeating* - example:**

- a. Positivism claims what is true can be verified by science and logical proof.
- b. Positivism also claims everything else is either false or meaningless.

The argument:

1. Claim “a” cannot be verified by science or logical proof.
2. Therefore claim “a” is either false or meaningless.

→ If positivism is true, then positivism is false!

- **Post-positivists highlight flaws of positivism, but keep important aspects:**
 - Goal of philosophy still is to *aim* at objective truth even though cannot be attained
 - There *is* an *objective reality* out there albeit major complications in the process of knowing or understanding it - scientific reasoning is incomplete & imperfect

→ **since no *objective* basis for uncovering objective truth, we should triangulate across multiple (fallible) perspectives**

e.g. critical realism, constructivism

Group work

Group work

How well does positivism fit with the following research topics?

Example: finding the optimal temperature for algae to grow

- Analysing the effects of economic crisis on firms post-pandemic
- Studying the non-human agency of algorithms in organisations
- Theorizing on cross-sector partnerships in relation to the UN SDGs

10 min discussion in breakout rooms, after which 10 min joint discussion

Limitations & criticism

The pursuit of positivism



"Its goal is to formulate abstract and universal laws on the operative dynamics of the social universe."

- J.H. Turner, in International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences, 2001



How can we arrive to (*factual and rational*) truth based on the world (*observable experience*) around us?
(cf. Theology & metaphysics)

A: Positivism.

What is truth?

Thomas Kuhn, 1962

Science is not just an accumulation of objective facts, but

“a shared commitment among scientists to a **paradigm** wherein they refine and apply their theories”

Truth is relative

Truth is “a social construct built on the outlook of a community at a specific point in history”

= truth is depended on the current paradigm

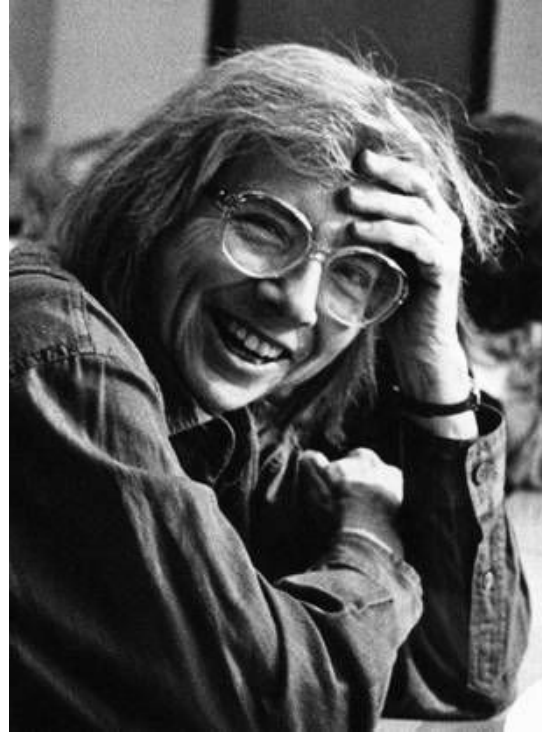
The New Atlantis, 2012

Subjectivity of the researcher

“.. science is not the neutral, dispassionate, value-free pursuit of Truth; that scientists are not objective, disinterested or culturally disengaged from the questions they ask..”

Ruth Bleier (1984, p. 193)

Neurophysiologist and feminist scholar



QUIZ!



Aalto-yliopisto
Aalto-universitetet
Aalto University

1. Positivism is based on a strong confidence in...

- a) positive thinking
- b) science
- c) religion
- d) all of the above

2. For positivists, all statements are either true, false, or...

- a) both true and false
- b) uncertain
- c) meaningless
- d) semi-true

3. A contemporary variant of the positivist philosophy is:

- a) interpretivism
- b) optimism
- c) constructivism
- d) postmodernism

Joint discussion & concluding remarks