

5.3: Pre-Classical Theory

Comte (1851) was interested in epistemology, or in other words, how humans obtain valid knowledge. He claimed human beings progression of knowledge went through three separate stages – theological, metaphysical, and scientific.^[1] The theological stage used supernatural or otherworldly powers to explain behaviors, the metaphysical used rational and logical arguments, and the scientific used positivism and scientific inquiry. During the middle ages, spiritual explanations assumed human beings broke laws or did not conform to conventional norms of society because he or she possessed by demons, the devil, or he or she was a wizard or witch. These explanations assumed God-given “natural law”; thus, crime was equivalent to sin. Governments had the moral authority to punish criminals/sinners and the state was acting on behalf of God. As a result, the accused person could “prove” their innocence by a trial by battle (only the victor is innocent) or trial by ordeal (innocent party would be unharmed while the guilty party would feel pain). As you can imagine, punishments and justice were arbitrary and severe, especially when feudal lords, with God’s permission, determined guilt. A person’s rank, status, and or wealth determined their punishment, rather than the merits of the case at hand.

1. Comte, A. (1877). System of positive polity (4th vol.). New York: Burt Franklin. ↩

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