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Auguste Comte

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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978-1-108-00119-9 - The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte, Volume 1

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

# The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte

VOLUME 1

AUGUSTE COMTE



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Auguste Comte

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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978-1-108-00119-9 - The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte, Volume 1

Auguste Comte

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

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978-1-108-00119-9 - The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte, Volume 1

Auguste Comte

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

THE  
POSITIVE PHILOSOPHY

OF

AUGUSTE COMTE.

FREELY TRANSLATED AND CONDENSED

BY

HARRIET MARTINEAU.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOLUME I.

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Auguste Comte

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## PREFACE.



IT may appear strange that, in these days, when the French language is almost as familiar to English readers as their own, I should have spent many months in rendering into English a work which presents no difficulties of language, and which is undoubtedly known to all philosophical students. Seldom as Comte's name is mentioned in England, there is no doubt in the minds of students of his great work that most or all of those who have added substantially to our knowledge for many years past are fully acquainted with it, and are under obligations to it which they would have thankfully acknowledged, but for the fear of offending the prejudices of the society in which they live. Whichever way we look over the whole field of science, we see the truths and ideas presented by Comte cropping out from the surface, and tacitly recognized as the foundation of all that is systematic in our knowledge. This being the case, it may appear to be a needless labour to render into our own tongue what is clearly existing in so many of the minds which are guiding and forming popular views. But it was not without reason that I undertook so serious a labour, while so much work was waiting to be done which might seem to be more urgent.

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Auguste Comte

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

One reason, though not the chief, was that it seems to me unfair, through fear or indolence, to use the benefits conferred on us by M. Comte without acknowledgment. His fame is no doubt safe. Such a work as this is sure of receiving due honour, sooner or later. Before the end of the century, society at large will have become aware that this work is one of the chief honours of the century, and that its author's name will rank with those of the worthies who have illustrated former ages: but it does not seem to me right to assist in delaying the recognition till the author of so noble a service is beyond the reach of our gratitude and honour: and that it is demoralizing to ourselves to accept and use such a boon as he has given us in a silence which is in fact ingratitude. His honours we cannot share: they are his own and incommunicable. His trials we may share, and, by sharing, lighten; and he has the strongest claim upon us for sympathy and fellowship in any popular disrepute which, in this case, as in all cases of signal social service, attends upon a first movement. Such sympathy and fellowship will, I trust, be awakened and extended in proportion to the spread among us of a popular knowledge of what M. Comte has done: and this hope was one reason, though, as I have said, not the chief, for my undertaking to reproduce his work in England in a form as popular as its nature admits.

A stronger reason was that M. Comte's work, in its original form, does no justice to its importance, even in France; and much less in England. It is in the form of lectures, the delivery of which was spread over a long course of years; and this extension of time necessitated an amount of recapitulation very injurious to its interest and philosophical aspect. M. Comte's style is singular. It is at the same time rich and diffuse. Every sentence is full fraught with meaning; yet it is overloaded with words. His scrupulous honesty leads him to guard his enunciations with epithets so constantly repeated, that though, to his own mind, they are necessary in

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00119-9 - The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte, Volume 1

Auguste Comte

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## PREFACE.

vii

each individual instance, they become wearisome, especially towards the end of his work, and lose their effect by constant repetition. This practice, which might be strength in a series of instructions spread over twenty years, becomes weakness when those instructions are presented as a whole; and it appeared to me worth while to condense his work, if I undertook nothing more, in order to divest it of the disadvantages arising from redundancy alone. My belief is that thus, if nothing more were done, it might be brought before the minds of many who would be deterred from the study of it by its bulk. What I have given in these two volumes occupies in the original six volumes averaging nearly eight hundred pages: and yet I believe it will be found that nothing essential to either statement or illustration is omitted.

My strongest inducement to this enterprise was my deep conviction of our need of this book in my own country, in a form which renders it accessible to the largest number of intelligent readers. We are living in a remarkable time, when the conflict of opinions renders a firm foundation of knowledge indispensable, not only to our intellectual, moral, and social progress, but to our holding such ground as we have gained from former ages. While our science is split up into arbitrary divisions; while abstract and concrete science are confounded together, and even mixed up with their application to the arts, and with natural history; and while the researches of the scientific world are presented as mere accretions to a heterogeneous mass of facts, there can be no hope of a scientific progress which shall satisfy and benefit those large classes of students whose business it is, not to explore, but to receive. The growth of a scientific taste among the working classes of this country is one of the most striking of the signs of the times. I believe no one can inquire into the mode of life of young men of the middle and operative classes without being struck with the desire that is shown, and the sacrifices that are made, to obtain the means of scientific study. That

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Auguste Comte

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

viii

## PREFACE.

such a disposition should be baffled, and such study rendered almost ineffectual, by the desultory character of scientific exposition in England, while such a work as Comte's was in existence, was not to be borne, if a year or two of humble toil could help, more or less, to supply the need.

In close connection with this was another of my reasons. The supreme dread of every one who cares for the good of nation or race is that men should be adrift for want of an anchorage for their convictions. I believe that no one questions that a very large proportion of our people are now so adrift. With pain and fear, we see that a multitude, who might and should be among the wisest and best of our citizens, are alienated for ever from the kind of faith which sufficed for all in an organic period which has passed away, while no one has presented to them, and they cannot obtain for themselves, any ground of conviction as firm and clear as that which sufficed for our fathers in their day. The moral dangers of such a state of fluctuation as has thus arisen are fearful in the extreme, whether the transition stage from one order of convictions to another be long or short. The work of M. Comte is unquestionably the greatest single effort that has been made to obviate this kind of danger; and my deep persuasion is that it will be found to retrieve a vast amount of wandering, of unsound speculation, of listless or reckless doubt, and of moral uncertainty and depression. Whatever else may be thought of the work, it will not be denied that it ascertains with singular sagacity and soundness the foundations of human knowledge, and its true object and scope; and that it establishes the true filiation of the sciences within the boundaries of its own principle. Some may wish to interpolate this or that; some to amplify, and perhaps, here and there, in the most obscure recesses of the great edifice, to transpose, more or less: but any who question the general soundness of the exposition, or of the relations of its parts, are of another school, and will simply neglect the book, and

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Auguste Comte

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## PREFACE.

ix

occupy themselves as if it had never existed. It is not for such that I have been working, but for students who are not schoolmen ; who need conviction, and must best know when their need is satisfied. When this exposition of Positive Philosophy unfolds itself in order before their eyes, they will, I am persuaded, find there at least a resting-place for their thought,—a rallying-point of their scattered speculations,—and possibly an immoveable basis for their intellectual and moral convictions. The time will come when the book itself will, for a while, be most discussed on account of the deficiencies which M. Comte himself presses on our notice ; and when his philosophy will sustain amplifications of which he himself does not dream. It must be so, in the inevitable growth of knowledge and evolution of philosophy ; and it is the fate which the philosopher himself should covet, because it is only a true book that could survive to be so treated : but, in the meantime, it gives us the basis that we demand, and the principle of action that we want, and as much instruction in the procedure, and information as to what has been already achieved, as could be given in our time ;—perhaps more than could have been given by any other mind of our time. Even Mathematics is here first constituted a science, venerable and unquestionable as mathematical truths have been for ages past : and we are led on, tracing as we go the clear genealogy of the sciences, till we find ourselves among the elements of Social science, as yet too crude and confused to be established, like the others, by a review of what had before been achieved ; but now, by the hand of our master, discriminated, arranged, and consolidated, so as to be ready to fulfil the conditions of true science as future generations bring their contributions of knowledge and experience to build upon the foundation here laid. A thorough familiarity with the work in which all this is done would avail more to extinguish the anarchy of popular and sectional opi-

a 3

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978-1-108-00119-9 - The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte, Volume 1

Auguste Comte

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## X

## PREFACE.

nion in this country than any other influence that has yet been exerted, or, I believe, proposed.

It was under such convictions as these that I began, in the spring of 1851, the analysis of this work, in preparation for a translation. A few months afterwards, an unexpected aid presented itself. My purpose was related to the late Mr. Lombe, who was then residing at Florence. He was a perfect stranger to me. He told me, in a subsequent letter, that he had wished, for many years, to do what I was then attempting, and had been prevented only by ill health. My estimate of M. Comte's work, and my expectations from its introduction into England in the form of a condensed translation, were fully shared by him; and, to my utter amazement, he sent me, as the first act of our correspondence, an order on his bankers for £500. There was time, before his lamented death, for me to communicate to him my views as to the disposal of this money, and to obtain the assurance of his approbation. We planned that the larger proportion of it should be expended in getting out the work, and promoting its circulation. The last words of his last letter were an entreaty that I would let him know if more money would, in any way, improve the quality of my version, or aid the promulgation of the book. It was a matter of deep concern to me that he died before I could obtain his opinion as to the manner in which I was doing my work. All that remained was to carry out his wishes as far as possible; and to do this, no pains have been spared by myself, or by Mr. Chapman, who gave him the information that called forth his bounty.

As to the method I have pursued with my work,—there will be different opinions about it, of course. Some will wish that there had been no omissions, while others would have complained of length and heaviness, if I had offered a complete translation. Some will ask why it is not a close version as far as it goes; and others, I have reason to believe,

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978-1-108-00119-9 - The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte, Volume 1

Auguste Comte

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## PREFACE.

xi

would have preferred a brief account, out of my own mind, of what Comte's philosophy is, accompanied by illustrations of my own devising. A wider expectation seems to be that I should record my own dissent, and that of some critics of much more weight, from certain of M. Comte's views. I thought long and anxiously of this; and I was not insensible to the temptation of entering my protest, here and there, against a statement, a conclusion, or a method of treatment. I should have been better satisfied still to have adduced some critical opinions of much higher value than any of mine can be. But my deliberate conclusion was that this was not the place nor the occasion for any such controversy. What I engaged to do was to present M. Comte's first great work in a useful form for English study: and it appears to me that it would be presumptuous to thrust in my own criticisms, and out of place to insert those of others. Those others can speak for themselves, and the readers of the book can criticize it for themselves. No doubt, they may be trusted not to mistake my silence for assent, nor to charge me with neglect of such criticism as the work has already evoked in this country. While I have omitted some pages of the Author's comments on French affairs, I have not attempted to alter his French view of European politics. In short, I have endeavoured to bring M. Comte and his English readers face to face, with as little drawback as possible from intervention.

This by no means implies that the translation is a close one. It is a very free translation. It is more a condensation than an abridgment: but it is an abridgment too. My object was to convey the meaning of the original in the clearest way I could; and to this all other considerations were made to yield. The serious view that I have taken of my enterprise is proved by the amount of labour and of pecuniary sacrifice that I have devoted to my task. Where I have erred, it is from want of ability; for I have taken all the pains I could.

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978-1-108-00119-9 - The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte, Volume 1

Auguste Comte

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

One suggestion that I made to Mr. Lombe, and that he approved, was that the three sections—Mathematics, Astronomy, and Physics—should be revised by a qualified man of science. My personal friend Professor Nichol, of Glasgow, was kind enough to undertake this service. After two careful readings, he suggested nothing material in the way of alteration, in the case of the first two sections, except the omission of Comte's speculation on the possible mathematical verification of Laplace's Cosmogony. But more had to be done with regard to the treatment of Physics. Every reader will see that that section is the weakest part of the book, in regard both to the organization and the details of the subject. In regard to the first, the author explains the fact, from the nature of the case,—that Physics is rather a repository of somewhat fragmentary portions of physical science, the correlation of which is not yet clear, than a single circumscribed science. And we must say for him, in regard to the other kind of imperfection, that such advances have been made in almost every department of Physics since his second volume was published, that it would be unfair to present what he wrote under that head in 1835 as what he would have to say now. The choice lay therefore between almost re-writing this portion of M. Comte's work, or so largely abridging it that only a skeleton presentment of general principles should remain. But as the system of Positive Philosophy is much less an Expository than a Critical work, the latter alternative alone seemed open, under due consideration of justice to the Author. I have adopted therefore the plan of extensive omissions, and have retained the few short memoranda in which Professor Nichol suggested these, as notes. Although this gentleman has sanctioned my presentment of Comte's chapters on Mathematics and Physics, it must not be inferred that he agrees with his Method in Mental Philosophy, or assents to other conclusions held of main importance by the disciples of the Positive Philosophy. The contrary, indeed, is so apparent in the tenour of

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978-1-108-00119-9 - The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte, Volume 1

Auguste Comte

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## PREFACE.

xiii

his own writings, that so far as his numerous readers are concerned, this remark need not have been offered. With the reservation I have made, I am bound to take the entire responsibility,—the Work being absolutely and wholly my own.

It will be observed that M. Comte's later works are not referred to in any part of this book. It appears to me that they, like our English criticisms on the present Work, had better be treated of separately. Here his analytical genius has full scope; and what there is of synthesis is, in regard to social science, merely what is necessary to render his analysis possible and available. For various reasons, I think it best to stop here, feeling assured that if this Work fulfils its function, all else with which M. Comte has thought fit to follow it up will be obtained as it is demanded.

During the whole course of my long task, it has appeared to me that Comte's work is the strongest embodied rebuke ever given to that form of theological intolerance which censures Positive Philosophy for pride of reason and lowness of morals. The imputation will not be dropped, and the enmity of the religious world to the book will not slacken for its appearing among us in an English version. It cannot be otherwise. The theological world cannot but hate a book which treats of theological belief as a transient state of the human mind. And again, the preachers and teachers, of all sects and schools, who keep to the ancient practice, once inevitable, of contemplating and judging of the universe from the point of view of their own minds, instead of having learned to take their stand out of themselves, investigating from the universe inwards, and not from within outwards, must necessarily think ill of a work which exposes the futility of their method, and the worthlessness of the results to which it leads. As M. Comte treats of theology and metaphysics as destined to pass away, theologians and metaphysicians must necessarily abhor, dread, and despise his work. They merely express their own natural feelings on behalf of the

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978-1-108-00119-9 - The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte, Volume 1

Auguste Comte

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

objects of their reverence and the purpose of their lives, when they charge Positive Philosophy with irreverence, lack of aspiration, hardness, deficiency of grace and beauty, and so on. They are no judges of the case. Those who are—those who have passed through theology and metaphysics, and, finding what they are now worth, have risen above them—will pronounce a very different judgment on the contents of this book, though no appeal for such a judgment is made in it, and this kind of discussion is nowhere expressly provided for. To those who have learned the difficult task of postponing dreams to realities till the beauty of reality is seen in its full disclosure, while that of dreams melts into darkness, the moral charm of this work will be as impressive as its intellectual satisfactions. The aspect in which it presents Man is as favourable to his moral discipline, as it is fresh and stimulating to his intellectual taste. We find ourselves suddenly living and moving in the midst of the universe,—as a part of it, and not as its aim and object. We find ourselves living, not under capricious and arbitrary conditions, unconnected with the constitution and movements of the whole, but under great, general, invariable laws, which operate on us as a part of the whole. Certainly, I can conceive of no instruction so favourable to aspiration as that which shows us how great are our faculties, how small our knowledge, how sublime the heights which we may hope to attain, and how boundless an infinity may be assumed to spread out beyond. We find here indications in passing of the evils we suffer from our low aims, our selfish passions, and our proud ignorance; and in contrast with them, animating displays of the beauty and glory of the everlasting laws, and of the sweet serenity, lofty courage, and noble resignation that are the natural consequence of pursuits so pure, and aims so true, as those of Positive Philosophy. Pride of intellect surely abides with those who insist on belief without evidence and on a philosophy derived from their own intellectual action, without material and corroboration from

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978-1-108-00119-9 - The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte, Volume 1

Auguste Comte

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## PREFACE.

xv

without, and not with those who are too scrupulous and too humble to transcend evidence, and to add, out of their own imaginations, to that which is, and may be, referred to other judgments. If it be desired to extinguish presumption, to draw away from low aims, to fill life with worthy occupations and elevating pleasures, and to raise human hope and human effort to the highest attainable point, it seems to me that the best resource is the pursuit of Positive Philosophy, with its train of noble truths and irresistible inducements. The prospects it opens are boundless; for among the laws it establishes that of human progress is conspicuous. The virtues it fosters are all those of which Man is capable; and the noblest are those which are more eminently fostered. The habit of truth-seeking and truth-speaking, and of true dealing with self and with all things, is evidently a primary requisite; and this habit once perfected, the natural conscience, thus disciplined, will train up all other moral attributes to some equality with it. To all who know what the study of philosophy really is,—which means the study of Positive Philosophy,—its effect on human aspiration and human discipline is so plain that any doubt can be explained only on the supposition that accusers do not know what it is that they are calling in question. My hope is that this book may achieve, besides the purposes entertained by its author, the one more that he did not intend, of conveying a sufficient rebuke to those who, in theological selfishness or metaphysical pride, speak evil of a philosophy which is too lofty and too simple, too humble and too generous, for the habit of their minds. The case is clear. The law of progress is conspicuously at work throughout human history. The only field of progress is now that of Positive Philosophy, under whatever name it may be known to the real students of every sect; and therefore must that philosophy be favourable to those virtues whose repression would be incompatible with progress.

CONTENTS.



INTRODUCTION.

CHAPTER I.

ACCOUNT OF THE AIM OF THIS WORK.—VIEW OF THE NATURE  
AND IMPORTANCE OF THE POSITIVE PHILOSOPHY.

	Page
Preliminary survey . . . . .	1
Law of human development . . . . .	1
First stage . . . . .	2
Second stage . . . . .	2
Third stage . . . . .	2
Ultimate point of each . . . . .	2
Evidences of the Law . . . . .	3
Actual . . . . .	3
Theoretical . . . . .	3
Character of the Positive Philosophy . . . . .	5
History of the Positive Philosophy . . . . .	6
New department of Positive Philosophy . . . . .	7
Social Physics . . . . .	7
Secondary aim of this work . . . . .	8
To review the philosophy of the sciences . . . . .	8
Glance at speciality . . . . .	9
Proposed new class of students . . . . .	10
Advantages of the Positive Philosophy . . . . .	10
1. Illustrates Intellectual function . . . . .	10
2. Must regenerate Education . . . . .	12
3. Advances Sciences by combining them . . . . .	13
4. Must reorganize Society . . . . .	14
No hope of reduction to a single Law . . . . .	16

CHAPTER II.

VIEW OF THE HIERARCHY OF THE POSITIVE SCIENCES.

	Page
Failure of proposed classifications . . . . .	18
True principle of classification . . . . .	19
Boundaries of our field . . . . .	19
Theoretical Inquiry . . . . .	19
Abstract science . . . . .	21
Concrete science . . . . .	21
Difficulty of classification . . . . .	22
Historical and Dogmatic Methods . . . . .	22
True principle of classification . . . . .	25
Characters . . . . .	25
1. Generality . . . . .	25
2. Independence . . . . .	25
Inorganic and Organic phenomena . . . . .	26
I. INORGANIC . . . . .	26
1. Astronomy . . . . .	26
2. Physics . . . . .	27
3. Chemistry . . . . .	27
II. ORGANIC . . . . .	27
1. Physiology . . . . .	27
2. Sociology . . . . .	27
Five Natural Sciences: their filiation . . . . .	28
Filiation of their parts . . . . .	28
Corroborations . . . . .	28
1. This classification follows the order of disclosure of sciences . . . . .	28
2. Solves heterogeneousness . . . . .	29
3. Marks relative perfection of sciences . . . . .	29
4. Effect on Education . . . . .	30
Effect on Method . . . . .	30
Orderly study of sciences . . . . .	31
MATHEMATICS . . . . .	32
A department . . . . .	32
A basis . . . . .	32
An instrument . . . . .	32
A double science . . . . .	32
Abstract Mathematics, an instrument . . . . .	33
Concrete Mathematics, a science . . . . .	33
Mathematics pre-eminent in the scale . . . . .	33

CONTENTS. xix

BOOK I.  
MATHEMATICS.

CHAPTER I.

MATHEMATICS, ABSTRACT AND CONCRETE.

	Page
Description of Mathematics . . . . .	35
Object of Mathematics . . . . .	35
General Method . . . . .	36
Examples . . . . .	36
True Definition of Mathematics . . . . .	38
ITS TWO PARTS . . . . .	39
Their different objects . . . . .	39
Their different natures . . . . .	40
Concrete Mathematics . . . . .	41
Abstract Mathematics . . . . .	41
Extent of its domain . . . . .	42
Its Universality . . . . .	42
Its limitations . . . . .	43

CHAPTER II.

GENERAL VIEW OF MATHEMATICAL ANALYSIS.

ANALYSIS . . . . .	47
True idea of an equation . . . . .	47
Abstract functions . . . . .	48
Concrete functions . . . . .	48
Two parts of the Calculus . . . . .	49
Algebra . . . . .	49
Arithmetic . . . . .	50
Its extent . . . . .	50
Its nature . . . . .	51
Algebra . . . . .	52
Creation of new functions . . . . .	52
Finding equations between auxiliary quantities . . . . .	52
Division of the Calculus of functions . . . . .	53
SECTION 1. <i>Ordinary Analysis</i> , or Calculus of Direct Functions	54
Its object . . . . .	54
Classification of Equations . . . . .	54

xx	CONTENTS.	
		Page
Algebraic equations . . . . .		55
Algebraic resolution of equations . . . . .		55
Our existing knowledge . . . . .		56
Numerical resolution of equations . . . . .		57
The Theory of equations . . . . .		58
Method of indeterminate coefficients . . . . .		58
SECTION 2. <i>Transcendental Analysis</i> , or Calculus of Indirect		
Functions . . . . .		59
Three principal views . . . . .		59
History . . . . .		59
METHOD OF LEIBNITZ . . . . .		60
Generality of the formulas . . . . .		62
Justification of the Method . . . . .		62
NEWTON'S METHOD . . . . .		63
Method of Limits . . . . .		64
Fluxions and fluents . . . . .		64
LAGRANGE'S METHOD . . . . .		65
Identity of the three methods . . . . .		66
Their comparative value . . . . .		67
THE DIFFERENTIAL AND INTEGRAL CALCULUS . . . . .		69
Its two parts . . . . .		69
Their mutual relations . . . . .		70
Cases of union of the two . . . . .		71
Cases of the Differential calculus alone . . . . .		71
Cases of the Integral calculus alone . . . . .		72
<i>The Differential Calculus</i> . . . . .		72
Two portions . . . . .		72
Subdivisions . . . . .		72
Reduction to the elements . . . . .		73
Transformation of derived functions for new variables . . . . .		74
Analytical applications . . . . .		74
<i>The Integral Calculus</i> . . . . .		75
Its divisions . . . . .		75
Subdivisions . . . . .		76
One variable or several . . . . .		76
Orders of differentiation . . . . .		76
Quadratures . . . . .		77
Algebraic functions . . . . .		77
Transcendental functions . . . . .		78
Singular Solutions . . . . .		78
Definite integrals . . . . .		78
Prospects of the Integral Calculus . . . . .		79

CONTENTS. xxi

	Page
<i>Calculus of Variations</i> . . . . .	80
Problems giving rise to this calculus . . . . .	81
Other applications . . . . .	83
Relation to the ordinary calculus . . . . .	84

CHAPTER III.

GENERAL VIEW OF GEOMETRY.

Its Nature . . . . .	86
Definition . . . . .	86
Idea of Space . . . . .	86
Kinds of extension . . . . .	87
Geometrical measurement . . . . .	87
Measurement of surfaces and volumes . . . . .	88
Of curved lines . . . . .	88
Its illimitable field . . . . .	89
Properties of lines and surfaces . . . . .	89
Two general Methods . . . . .	90
Special or ancient, and general or modern geometry . . . . .	90
Geometry of the ancients . . . . .	91
Geometry of the right line . . . . .	92
Graphical solutions . . . . .	92
Descriptive Geometry . . . . .	93
Algebraic solutions . . . . .	94
Trigonometry . . . . .	94
<i>Modern, or Analytical Geometry</i> . . . . .	96
Analytical representation of figures . . . . .	96
Position . . . . .	97
Position of a point . . . . .	97
Plane curves . . . . .	98
Expression of lines by equations . . . . .	98
Expression of equations by lines . . . . .	99
Change in the line changes the equation . . . . .	99
Every definition of a line is an equation . . . . .	99
Choice of co-ordinates . . . . .	101
Determination of a point in space . . . . .	102
Determination of Surfaces by Equations, and of Equations by Surfaces . . . . .	103
Curves of double curvature . . . . .	104
Imperfections of Analytical Geometry . . . . .	104
Imperfections of Analysis . . . . .	105

CHAPTER IV.

RATIONAL MECHANICS.

	Page
Its nature . . . . .	106
Its characters . . . . .	107
Its object . . . . .	107
Matter not inert in Physics . . . . .	108
Supposed inert in Mechanics . . . . .	109
Field of Rational Mechanics . . . . .	109
Three Laws of Motion . . . . .	110
Law of inertia . . . . .	110
Law of equality of action and re-action . . . . .	110
Law of co-existence of motions . . . . .	110
Two Primary divisions . . . . .	113
STATICS and DYNAMICS . . . . .	113
Secondary divisions . . . . .	114
Solids and Fluids . . . . .	114
SECTION 1. <i>Statics</i> . . . . .	115
Converse methods of treatment . . . . .	115
First method . . . . .	115
Statics by itself . . . . .	115
Second method . . . . .	116
Statics through Dynamics . . . . .	116
Moments . . . . .	116
Want of unity in the method . . . . .	117
Virtual Velocities . . . . .	117
Theory of Couples . . . . .	120
Share of equations in producing equilibrium . . . . .	120
Connection of the concrete with the abstract question . . . . .	122
Equilibrium of fluids . . . . .	124
Hydrostatics . . . . .	124
Liquids . . . . .	125
Gases . . . . .	125
SECTION 2. <i>Dynamics</i> . . . . .	126
Object . . . . .	126
Theory of rectilinear motion . . . . .	126
Motion of a point . . . . .	128
Motion of a system . . . . .	128
D'Alembert's principle . . . . .	129
Results . . . . .	131
Statistical theorems . . . . .	132
Law of repose . . . . .	132

CONTENTS. xxiii

	Page
Stability and instability of equilibrium . . . . .	132
Dynamical theorems . . . . .	132
Conservation of the motion of the centre of gravity . . . . .	133
Principle of areas . . . . .	133
The invariable plane . . . . .	134
Moment of inertia . . . . .	134
Principal axes . . . . .	134
Conclusion . . . . .	135

BOOK II.  
ASTRONOMY.

CHAPTER I.

GENERAL VIEW.

Its Nature . . . . .	137
Definition . . . . .	138
Restriction . . . . .	138
Means of exploration . . . . .	139
Its rank . . . . .	140
When it became a science . . . . .	141
Reduction to a single law . . . . .	141
Relation to other sciences . . . . .	142
Divisions of the science . . . . .	144
Celestial Geometry . . . . .	144
Celestial Mechanics . . . . .	144

CHAPTER II.

METHODS OF STUDY OF ASTRONOMY.

SECTION 1. <i>Instruments</i> . . . . .	146
Observation . . . . .	146
Shadows . . . . .	146
Artificial methods . . . . .	147
The pendulum . . . . .	147
Measurement of angles . . . . .	148
Requisite corrections . . . . .	149
SECTION 2. <i>Refraction</i> . . . . .	150

xxiv	CONTENTS.	
		Page
SECTION 3. <i>Parallax</i>	. . . . .	151
SECTION 4. <i>Catalogue of stars</i>	. . . . .	153

CHAPTER III.

GEOMETRICAL PHENOMENA OF THE HEAVENLY BODIES.

SECTION 1. <i>Statical Phenomena</i>	. . . . .	155
Two classes of phenomena	. . . . .	155
Planetary distances	. . . . .	155
Form and size	. . . . .	157
Planetary atmospheres	. . . . .	158
Earth's form and size	. . . . .	159
Means of discovery	. . . . .	159
Planetary motions	. . . . .	161
Rotation	. . . . .	161
Translation	. . . . .	162
Sidereal revolution	. . . . .	163
<i>Motion of the Earth</i>	. . . . .	164
Evidences of the Earth's motion	. . . . .	164
Ancient conceptions	. . . . .	164
How they gave way	. . . . .	165
Earth's rotation	. . . . .	165
Influence of centrifugal force upon gravity	. . . . .	166
Earth's translation	. . . . .	167
Precession of the equinoxes	. . . . .	167
Retrogradations and stations of the planets	. . . . .	168
Aberration of light	. . . . .	168
Influence of scientific fact upon opinion	. . . . .	169
<i>Kepler's Laws</i>	. . . . .	171
Annual parallax	. . . . .	171
Circles	. . . . .	171
KEPLER	. . . . .	172
His three laws	. . . . .	172
First law	. . . . .	172
Second law	. . . . .	173
Third law	. . . . .	173
Three problems	. . . . .	174
Prediction of Eclipses	. . . . .	174
Transit of Venus	. . . . .	175
Foundation of Celestial Mechanics	. . . . .	176
SECTION 2. <i>Dynamical Phenomena</i>	. . . . .	176

CONTENTS. XXV

	Page
Gravitation . . . . .	176
Character of laws of Motion . . . . .	176
Their history . . . . .	177
Newton's demonstration . . . . .	179
Old difficulty explained . . . . .	180
Term <i>Attraction</i> inadmissible . . . . .	180
Extent of the demonstration . . . . .	181
Term <i>Gravitation</i> unobjectionable . . . . .	182
Gravitation is that of Molecules . . . . .	183
Secondary gravitation . . . . .	183
Domain of the law . . . . .	184

CHAPTER IV.

CELESTIAL STATICS.

Consummation by Newton . . . . .	186
Statical considerations . . . . .	186
First method of inquiry into masses . . . . .	186
Second method . . . . .	187
Third method . . . . .	187
SECTION 1. <i>Weight of the earth</i> . . . . .	188
SECTION 2. <i>Form of the planets</i> . . . . .	189
Difficulty of the inquiry . . . . .	190
Geometrical estimate . . . . .	190
Estimate from perturbations . . . . .	190
Indirect estimate of the earth's form . . . . .	191
Hydrostatic theory of planetary forms . . . . .	191
SECTION 3. <i>The Tides</i> . . . . .	191
Question of the tides . . . . .	191
Theory of the tides . . . . .	192
Influence of the Sun . . . . .	193
Of the moon . . . . .	193
Composite influence . . . . .	193
Requisites for exactitude . . . . .	194

CHAPTER V.

CELESTIAL DYNAMICS.

Perturbations . . . . .	196
Instantaneous . . . . .	196

	Page
Gradual perturbations . . . . .	198
Perturbations of translation . . . . .	198
Problem of three bodies . . . . .	198
Centre of the Solar System . . . . .	199
Problem of the Planets . . . . .	200
Of the Satellites . . . . .	200
Of the Comets . . . . .	201
Perturbations of rotation . . . . .	202
The Planets . . . . .	202
The Satellites . . . . .	203
Device of an Invariable Plane . . . . .	204
Stability of our system . . . . .	204
Resistance of a Medium . . . . .	205
Independence of the solar system . . . . .	206
Achievements of celestial dynamics . . . . .	207

CHAPTER VI.

SIDEREAL ASTRONOMY AND COSMOGONY.

Multiple Stars . . . . .	208
Our Cosmogony . . . . .	210
Origin of Positive Cosmogony . . . . .	210
Cosmogony of Laplace . . . . .	211
Recapitulation . . . . .	213

BOOK III.

PHYSICS.

CHAPTER I.

GENERAL VIEW.

Imperfect condition of the Science . . . . .	215
Its domain . . . . .	216
Compared with Chemistry . . . . .	216
Its generality . . . . .	216
Dealing with masses or molecules . . . . .	217
Changes of arrangement or composition of molecules . . . . .	217
Description of Physics . . . . .	218

CONTENTS. xxvii

	Page
Instruments . . . . .	218
Methods of inquiry . . . . .	219
Observation . . . . .	219
Experiment . . . . .	219
Application of Mathematical analysis . . . . .	219
Encyclopædic rank of Physics . . . . .	220
Relation to Astronomy . . . . .	221
To Mathematics . . . . .	221
To the other sciences . . . . .	222
To human progress . . . . .	222
Human power of modifying phenomena . . . . .	223
Prevision imperfect . . . . .	223
Characteristics of each science . . . . .	224
Philosophy of hypothesis . . . . .	224
Necessary condition . . . . .	225
Two classes of hypothesis . . . . .	226
First class indispensable . . . . .	226
Second class chimerical . . . . .	226
History of the second class . . . . .	228
In Astronomy . . . . .	229
In Physics . . . . .	230
Rule of arrangement in Physics . . . . .	230
Order . . . . .	231

CHAPTER II.

BAROLOGY.

Divisions . . . . .	232
SECTION 1. <i>Statics</i> . . . . .	232
History . . . . .	232
Cases of liquids . . . . .	233
First case . . . . .	234
Second case . . . . .	235
Case of gases . . . . .	235
History . . . . .	235
Condition of the problem . . . . .	237
SECTION 2. <i>Dynamics</i> . . . . .	237
History . . . . .	237
Fluids . . . . .	239
Case of liquids . . . . .	239
Existing state of Barology . . . . .	240

CHAPTER III.

THERMOLOGY.

	Page
Its nature . . . . .	241
History . . . . .	241
Relation to Mathematics . . . . .	242
SECTION 1. <i>Mutual thermological influence</i> . . . . .	242
Two parts . . . . .	242
Mutual influence . . . . .	242
Radiation of Heat . . . . .	243
Propagation by contact . . . . .	244
Conductibility . . . . .	245
Permeability . . . . .	245
Penetrability . . . . .	245
Specific Heat . . . . .	246
SECTION 2. <i>Constituent changes by heat</i> . . . . .	247
Latent Heat . . . . .	247
Change of volume . . . . .	247
Change in state of aggregation . . . . .	248
Law of engagement and disengagement of heat . . . . .	249
Vapours . . . . .	249
Temperatures of ebullition . . . . .	250
Hygrometrical equilibrium . . . . .	251
SECTION 3. <i>Thermology connected with analysis</i> . . . . .	251
SECTION 4. <i>Terrestrial temperatures</i> . . . . .	252
Interior heat . . . . .	253
Temperature of the planetary intervals . . . . .	253
Conditions of the problem . . . . .	254

CHAPTER IV.

ACOUSTICS.

Its nature . . . . .	255
Relation to the study of Inorganic bodies . . . . .	255
Relation to Physiology . . . . .	256
To Mathematics . . . . .	256
Divisions . . . . .	259
SECTION 1. <i>Propagation of sound</i> . . . . .	259
Effect of atmospheric agitation . . . . .	260
SECTION 2. <i>Intensity of sounds</i> . . . . .	260

CONTENTS. xxix

	Page
SECTION 3. <i>Theory of tones</i> . . . . .	262
Composition of sounds . . . . .	263
Recapitulation . . . . .	264

CHAPTER V.

OPTICS.

Hypotheses on the nature of Light . . . . .	265
Excessive tendency to systematize . . . . .	268
Divisions of Optics . . . . .	269
Irrelevant matters . . . . .	270
Theory of Vision . . . . .	270
Specific Colour of bodies . . . . .	271
SECTION 1. <i>Study of direct light</i> . . . . .	271
Optics proper . . . . .	271
Imperfections . . . . .	272
Photometry . . . . .	272
SECTION 2. <i>Catoptrics</i> . . . . .	273
Great law of reflection . . . . .	273
Law of absorption not found . . . . .	274
SECTION 3. <i>Dioptrics</i> . . . . .	274
Great law of refraction . . . . .	275
Newton's discoveries on elementary colours . . . . .	276
SECTION 4. <i>Diffraction</i> . . . . .	277

CHAPTER VI.

ELECTROLOGY.

History . . . . .	278
Condition . . . . .	278
Arbitrary hypotheses . . . . .	278
Relation to Mathematics . . . . .	279
Unsound application . . . . .	279
Sound application . . . . .	280
Limits . . . . .	280
Divisions . . . . .	280
SECTION 1. <i>Electric production</i> . . . . .	280
Causes of electrization . . . . .	280
Chemical action . . . . .	281