

Primitive Fetishism from Antiquity to 1860

*F*e^tishism exists today in multiple senses. In psychiatry, it is one of the Paraphilic disorders, a group of sexual conditions that also includes exhibitionism, voyeurism, frotteurism (touching nonconsenting people), pedophilia, masochism, sadism, and transvestic fetishism (cross-dressing). The principle diagnostic criteria for sexual fetishism is that the subject has “recurrent, intense sexually arousing fantasies, sexual urges, or behaviors involving the use of nonliving objects (e.g., female undergarments).”¹ It circulates in a more abstract sense in current psychoanalytic theory and criticism derived from Freud, who saw it as an eroticization of objects that served to protect the subject against an unacceptable psychological reality.² In analyses of culture and economics, the term continues to signify the way that capitalism fosters the illusion of an independent value in commodities, as Marx theorized in his analysis of commodity fetishism.³ From this same base, it also appears in postmodern theory and criticism, as the fetishization of commodity objects: a “car fetish,” for example.⁴ The term has become general enough to refer to any unreasonable fixation on an object or idea, as when a student editorial complains, “It’s as if the entire male population at the University has a cap fetish,” or the president of a prominent academic organization editorializes against “the elitism of the Best-Student Fetish” in college admissions.⁵ These closely related usages all developed from the earlier ethnographic accounts of religious fetishism. In this older form, the primitive mind was considered limited in its ability to think abstractly; instead, it projected its own fears and hopes unaware onto the objects and events of the material world, so that they appeared to possess supernatural qualities. Broadly speaking, while fetishism today refers to commodification, sexual attraction, or mental fixation, in the nineteenth century it more familiarly conjured up images of primitives worshipping material deities, and in this sense it was used metaphorically to describe Victorian beliefs as irrational.

The central writer in considering Victorian beliefs about fetishism is Auguste Comte, the French philosopher of positivism. When Comte wrote about primitive fetishism in *Cours de philosophie positive*, he was entering into an existing debate within philosophy, history, and theology over the condition of the first humans, a discussion that stretched back at least to classical antiquity. By viewing Comte's ideas in their historical context, we can begin examining the commonplace associations that defined Victorian fetishism and can thereby establish the cultural terms which Victorian writers on the topic took for granted. While this earlier fetishism had a different meaning than today's erotic, economic, and popular versions, it operated in a related fashion, and so the specificity of Victorian fetishism does not leave us on entirely unfamiliar ground.



The Portuguese traders to West Africa applied the term *feitiço* to objects they thought the Africans treated as magical.⁶ This usage was subsequently adopted by the French, where it became *fétiche*, and the English, who spelled it either *fetich* or *fetish*. The term derived from the Latin *factitius*, “made by artifice,” and it already existed in both languages, with slightly different senses. Old French had *faitis*, “well made, beautiful.” Middle English had *fetis*, which Chaucer used regularly for people (“well made, graceful, pretty, handsome”), things (“well made, elegant”), and actions (*fetisly*: “skillfully, handsomely, elegantly”).⁷ Thus, in *The Romaunt of the Rose*, Chaucer writes of “[f]ul fetys damyseles two,” and calls a solid door “fetys and so lite.”⁸ Chaucer’s usage derived from the Anglo-Norman *fetiz*, but even in these few examples from his writing it is clear that the term was associated in England from a very early date with an exceptionally positive qualitative assessment of something or someone. This sense was subsequently extended from passive states—an object’s beauty, for example—to a sense of active power in the object, such as its ability to attract one’s notice or captivate. As philosophers of aesthetics know, it can be a maddeningly fluid line between these two states, one that hinges on the question of whether beauty is imminent in the object or is a product of perception. And in its history, the term *fetishism* straddled both sides of the line, referring to an assessment of the (passive) object as “fetis,” or the (active) effect produced by the object in the perceiver.⁹ It is this second form that dominates post-Renaissance usage, in which fetishes are thought of as objects with supernatural powers.

The assumed fetishism of the West Africans was only one episode in the long history of western ideas about how humans first arrived at the idea of supernaturalism. In particular, it illustrated one of the most enduring elements of this debate: the argument that primitive humans anthropomorphized the world

around them by engaging in a fetish-like act of self-projection. Speculation on the topic began as early as classical antiquity, in the materialist school of Epicurus. This philosophy flatly denied the existence of an afterlife and thus was uniquely interested in explaining how such a false belief could become virtually universal. The same aspect of Epicureanism later led Christian theologians to hold it in particularly low esteem, if they deigned to mention it at all. This orthodoxy explains why Dante included Epicurus in *The Inferno* only to consign the pagan materialist to the sixth circle of hell.¹⁰

The dominant account of primitive life during the Middle Ages was supplied by the narrative of Genesis, which held that the true nature of God was revealed to the first humans, and this revealed truth was passed down to each subsequent generation, even as they populated new lands. This view was still espoused in major anthropological texts of the early nineteenth century, when it found its ultimate expression in James Cowles Prichard's *Researches into the Physical History of Man*, first published in 1813 and revised until his death in 1847. A renewed interest in Epicureanism began early in the Renaissance, when the philosophy was promoted by Erasmus and Michel de Montaigne, among others.¹¹ The late-Renaissance French philosopher Pierre Gassendi (1592–1655) played a prominent role in completing the philosopher's resurrection. His *Eight Books on the Life and Manners of Epicurus* (1647) influenced Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, after which the materialist strand of thought on the ancient past took on a new and vital role in Enlightenment thinking. As Nichols has explained, the emerging rationalism "understood itself to be a new departure in philosophy and very consciously defined itself in opposition to the orthodox school that descended from Aristotle and Plato. In antiquity, Epicureanism had been the most powerful and radical opponent of Platonism and Aristotelianism, in most of its fundamental teachings. For this reason, Epicurus and Lucretius were widely read in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and were a source of inspiration in many ways for the new philosophic-scientific enterprise."¹² Thus the philosophy of Epicureanism found a new home in the seventeenth-century reaction against established modes of knowledge. At this point, the materialist view of primitive life resurfaced within the mainstream of western philosophical and scientific writing.

The reemergence of Greek and Roman mythology itself further challenged the dominant status of primitive monotheism in orthodox teaching. Here was testimony from the earliest of all known societies that showed a flourishing polytheism. According to orthodox dogma, they clearly should have been either monotheistic or in a state of primitive degeneration, yet they were neither. Combined with the record of Egyptian antiquities, the historical evidence told

strongly against the orthodox thesis, and by the later seventeenth century, there was a vigorous debate over the nature of primitive religion and the historical validity of scripture's account of it.



Epicureanism was based on the materialist philosophy of the pre-Socratic thinker Democritus (460–370 BCE). He argued that the universe and everything within it was composed of physical atoms moving in a vacuum. As Epicurus (341–270 BCE) recognized, if everything consisted of material atoms, then where did that leave the soul? He claimed that the soul did in fact exist, though not in immaterial form. Instead, it had to be a material entity that consisted of atoms in a vacuum, like every other object in the universe. While more ethereal than the body, it was also part of the body and when the body died, so too did this corporeal soul. Since the soul was mortal, there could be no possibility of an afterlife. Nonetheless, Epicureanism was not a philosophy of atheism. “Gods exist,” Epicurus said, but they reside in a remote and tranquil state of “blessedness,” and such a state precluded any involvement in the stress and unpredictability (*ataraxia*) of human affairs.¹³ In other words, the human world was on its own. No one watched over or kept track of men’s deeds, nor were there any rewards and punishments in the hereafter. Epicurus questioned the reasons for the prevalent and apparently universal belief in the soul’s existence after death. It was without question an illusion, but what psychological process could account for the widespread belief in the shade’s descent into the underworld? In this attempt to imagine a primitive psychology, the Epicureans formulated the earliest known link between a primitive mind and fetishistic thinking. The first element of that connection was the assumption that primitives had to be immersed in the concrete facts of their own material existence. Their intimacy with nature gave them a heightened comprehension of the physical world, in all of its particularity. At the same time, the primitive mind lacked any capacity for abstraction. It was locked into the world of sensual experience and unable to comprehend objects in any manner except through their immediacy as distinct, present singularities.

In book 5 of *De Rerum Natura*, the Epicurean poet Lucretius (99–55 BCE)—the source for much of our understanding of Epicureanism—narrates the story of the first humans.¹⁴ The primal earth was turbulent and extraordinarily fertile; from this womb emerged all of the different forms of life, including humans. They were larger and stronger than their modern descendants, and each lived a solitary existence scavenging in the woods and feeding on whatever came to hand. Sporadically, male and female giants encountered one another, and through force or consent mated before returning to their separate existences. Because they were intimately familiar with nature, these isolated giants had no

need of superstitions to explain natural phenomena. At the sun's daily disappearance, "They did not try to trail him across the fields / With loud lament and panic," because they had seen this "from their earliest childhood," and so took for granted the sun's return, "with no wondering, no dread."¹⁵

Later, isolated giants began to form lasting relationships with one another, perhaps traveling in small groups before finally residing together, making fires and creating dwellings. Their life became more sheltered from the extremes of nature, and, as a result, they began to lose their former strength and stature, developing a more recognizably modern form. The new communalism constituted the first society and so marked the transition from no culture to culture. Such a turning point entailed mental transformations as dramatic as the physical ones. Fostered by the social need to communicate among themselves, language emerged as the most important of these changes, and it marked a departure from the absolute concreteness of the giants' psychology. The use of language implied an ability to think about and refer to objects that were not immediately present to the senses. It demonstrated a new capacity, however rudimentary, for abstract thinking, including the ability to see similarities between particular objects and to make generalities about them. Where the lonely giant saw two unique trees, the linguistic primitive would see two versions of the same type of tree. As primitive societies developed, this ability grew and eventually led to systems of laws, forms of wealth, and the first rulers.

The early capacity for abstraction had other consequences as well. It led to the birth of superstition.¹⁶ Belief in the existence of supernatural beings followed from the rudimentary ability to imagine something that was not tangibly present. The first gods were conceived as explanations for the events of nature, such as the change of seasons, storms, lightning, and celestial events. "What sorry creatures!" Lucretius laments,

Unhappy race of men, to grant the gods
Such feats, and add bitter vindictiveness.
What sighs and groans they gave themselves, what wounds
For us today, what tears for our descendants! (193)

The belief that supernatural beings controlled nature was a fundamental mistake, Lucretius insisted, but he thought that, for primitive humans, the new superstitions served an important function. As they were elaborated over time, they eventually turned into the belief, familiar in Epicurus's time as well as that of Lucretius, that humans lived in a world of providential rewards and punishments: "the assertions of the many concerning the gods," Epicurus writes, "are conceptions grounded not in experience but in false assumptions, according to which the

greatest misfortunes are brought upon the evil by the gods and greatest benefits upon the good" (62). Humans anthropomorphized natural events in the attempt to explain nature to themselves. "Men being always at home with their own virtues, they embrace those like themselves and regard everything unlike themselves as alien" (62–63). Thus, as early as Epicurus, the second key ingredient of primitive fetishism had been spelled out: psychological projection.

In *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius questions "the state in which all men / Must dwell forever and ever after death," concluding that death is followed by nothingness, and so "[d]eath / is nothing to us," and need not be feared.¹⁷ More explicitly than Epicurus, he analyzes beliefs about the afterlife as psychological projections of lived experience. He illustrates this premise in book 3 with a rich poetic catalog of characters from Roman mythology who were punished for their sins in the afterlife; he then explains each one as the reified expression of everyday anxieties.

The story says that Tantalus, the wretch,
 Frozen in terror, fears the massive rock
 Balanced in air above him. It's not true.
 What happens is that in our lives the fear,
 The silly, vain, ridiculous fear of gods,
 Causes our panic dread of accident. (114)

Similarly, there is no Tityos, eternally pecked at by vultures, but

We do have
 A Tityos in ourselves, and lie, in love,
 Torn and consumed by our anxieties,
 Our fickle passions. . . . (115)

The Danaids vainly filling leaking vessels with water, Cerberus, the Furies, and

Tartarus, belching blasts of heat—all these
 Do not exist at all, and never could.
 But here on earth we do fear punishment
 For wickedness, and in proportion dread
 Our dreadful deeds (115)

Thus the answer to the basic question of how the belief in an afterlife became universal was a psychological one: the Romans explained death in terms of themselves.

Lucretius told the story of a human mind that began in global concreteness and gradually developed a capacity for abstract thinking, as the state before culture receded into the distance and culture progressed towards his own time, the first century BCE. Even as he described the process by which abstractions led to a mental imprisonment in an oppressive supernaturalism, he also continued the narrative to a further stage in which abstract thinking would become the means of liberation from such fantastic illusions. This future stage represented the triumph of his own philosophy. *De Rerum Natura* exemplified the ultimate ability of rational thought to critique the false belief in deities and the afterlife, identifying both as projections of human fears. Ultimately, in the story Lucretius told, the human mind began in primitive concreteness, moved to supernaturalism, and finally entered the utopia of Epicurean rationalism.



Medieval theologians resolved the problem of Greco-Roman polytheism along very different lines from the pagan Lucretius.¹⁸ While viewing the ancient myths as heretical, they reconciled them to the orthodoxy of primitive monotheism by reading them allegorically as prefigurations of Christianity. They used a similar logic to account for Egyptian polytheism, though in the latter case they had to overcome the difficult stumbling block posed by animal worship. The practice of deifying brutes was antithetical to the belief in the Chain of Being, and interpreters could not easily accept the heresy that God created humans who worshipped beings below themselves. In *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* (1652–54), the German Jesuit Athanasius Kircher (1601–80) produced the interpretation that reconciled the evidence from antiquity with seventeenth-century Christian orthodoxy. He argues that the Egyptians had learned the basic truth through direct revelation, and through an elaborate and contrived system of analogy, those masked truths could be revealed. Each figure has a “concrete scientific or theological significance.”¹⁹ Thus, for example, the Egyptian gods Isis, Osiris, and Horus prefigured the Holy Trinity. By redefining the animal images as figurative, he was able to maintain that they were not literal representations of brute worship but had instead symbolically affirmed Christian truths.²⁰

French philosopher Pierre Bayle (1647–1706) was one of the earliest to make the case for what might be called a “Genesis-free” account of primitive society. He took the then unusual step of comparing the classical texts with Renaissance travel literature on African “savages,” and so was able to suggest correlations between primitives, then and now. In *Réponse aux questions d'un provincial* (1704–7) he draws heavily on William Bosman’s newly published *Voyage de Guinée* (1705) to compare the African fetishist with the Greek temple priest. He

echoes the arguments of the Epicureans by characterizing primitive thought as a “pristine materialism.”²¹ Bayle also extends the primitive net beyond social groups that were literally primitive, using it to encompass modern peasants and the lower class as well, there finding more evidence for the prevalence of superstition among the less developed classes.

Bayle’s compatriot Bernard le Bovier de Fontanelle (1657–1757), a nephew of the dramatist Corneille, made a similar argument, but where Bayle conceptualized the relationship between primitive and advanced states as fixed and ahistorical, Fontanelle added the principle of gradual cultural development. In *Digression sur les anciens et les modernes* (1715) and *Discours sur l’origine des fables* (1724), he describes a distinct primitive mind that characterized the original stage of all human society, including his own. He further identifies the primitive mind with the Greeks, contemporary savages, the vulgar mass, and children. With the addition of this last category, the primitive mind could account for the first stage of development within the individual as well as society. Its leading characteristic was psychological: the primitive mind perceived the world differently from that of developed human beings, like Fontanelle and his contemporaries, because it projected its own experiences outward, transforming them into imaginary independent divinities, and this led inevitably to the initial stage of polytheism found in the evidence from classical antiquity. As the human’s ability to synthesize specifics into generalities improved, the diverse gods combined with one another, and this eventually led to the most advanced stage of all, Christian monotheism. Fontanelle’s argument constituted heresy because it described an original polytheism, but this was finessed by beginning his narrative after the Biblical flood; this allowed for a discontinuous, antediluvian state that may have been monotheistic. Thus he could describe a progression that began with polytheism without overtly contradicting Genesis. The same window-dressing strategy was adopted by later philosophers in Catholic countries.²² A second principle to appear in subsequent writing concerned the origination of the supernatural. In an argument similar to the late-Victorian debate between the evolutionists and diffusionists, he insisted that the universal belief in supernatural beings did not spread by historical contact between societies. He held the primitive mind to develop its religious ideas naturally; the original mental impulse toward spiritual belief was an autonomous development caused by an inborn quality, and so was innate rather than acquired.²³

For Bayle and Fontanelle, the defining feature of primitive religion was its polytheism, in contrast to the orthodox assumption of original monotheism. All forms of polytheism were included in this concept, including idol worship, the belief in oracles, and the particular fetishism that remained linked with African object worship. Thus at this time fetishism proper was only one among many

superstitious practices. However, in a more general sense, fetishism already underlay all the other manifestations of primitive religion. First, all of the variations took for granted a consciousness that was immersed in the concreteness of its own experience, much like the early humans of Lucretius. Second, that consciousness unwittingly projected its own psychological state outward, investing the material world with anthropomorphic meanings that it then took for real, as Lucretius had also claimed. Even though primitive religion was most often termed idolatry or polytheism in the Enlightenment, it contained the two basic elements of primitive fetishism within these other terms. This assumption of a fundamental fetishism would soon be made explicit in the work of Charles de Brosses.

Giambattista Vico, de Brosses, and David Hume all belonged to a group of mid-eighteenth-century writers on primitive religion and mythography that stressed the effect that the physical condition of the early earth had on the psychological state of its first inhabitants.²⁴ And it is in the work of this group that the association between the primitive and the concrete became foremost. Like Fontanelle, they accepted the concept of a distinct primitive mind, but, unlike him, that mind's original religious impulse was not innate. Instead, the universal appearance of religious ideas resulted from the primitive mind's interaction with the material environment. All three writers worked within the sensationalist tradition of Locke, who rejected the theory of innate ideas in favor of the impact of experience. And so it remained to these mid-century mythographers to explain how the earliest human societies all arrived independently at the concept of supernatural beings, without inheriting the concept. They accomplished this by proposing an environmental cause, arguing that the physical characteristics of the primitive earth were both unique and radically different from those of the modern world. These conditions gave rise to religious beliefs among all primitive societies. The young earth was volatile, prone to quakes, eruptions, and catastrophic storms, and the interaction between this dramatic geography and the blank slate of the primitive mind led to the emergence of the first beliefs in the supernatural.²⁵

In the third and last edition of *Scienzia Nuova*, or *New Science*, published in 1744, Giambattista Vico (1668–1744) tells a particularly dramatic story of the young earth. He produces a detailed timeline of earth's history in which he allows a century for the earth to dry out after the biblical flood. During that time, the descendants of Noah scattered and "wandered like brutes," living a Hobbesian existence and growing to enormous stature, similar to Lucretius's lonely giants.²⁶ Vico's giants were "stupid, insensate, and horrid beasts," with no capacity for thought (144). "Their minds were in no way abstract, refined, or intellectualized; rather, they were completely sunk in their senses, numbed by their passions, and buried in their bodies" (147). The concreteness of their mental process made it scarcely possible for the modern person to comprehend them, since "countless

abstract expressions”—language, writing, counting—distanced moderns from their sense experiences (146). In the interaction between this concrete imagination and the unstable environment lay the birth of mythology, marking the second phase of primitive existence. As the earth dried out from the flood, alterations in weather produced the first thunder and lightning, and these new phenomena terrified the giants. They “imagined its cause as a god. And at the same time, whatever aroused their wonder they endowed with a substantial being based on their own ideas. This is the nature of children, whom we see picking up inanimate objects in play and talking with them as if they were living persons . . .” (145). Over time, the giants came to imagine the entire heavens as having passions and emotions like their own, and they named this great being “Jupiter.” Ultimately, “they endowed all the universe and its parts with the being of an animate substance” (147). The significance he gives to the act of anthropomorphism cannot be overestimated. In his list of 141 axioms, it stands at number one: “By its nature, the human mind is indeterminate; hence, when man is sunk in ignorance, he makes himself the measure of the universe” (75).

Vico viewed myth as the first poetry, and the oracles and sibyls of antiquity who transformed natural events into mythology were the first poets. As he explains, “the proper subject of poetry is a believable impossibility. Thus, while it is impossible that physical objects have intelligence, people believed that the thundering heavens were Jupiter” (149). This view of mythology led Vico to a new insight: because they were psychological projections, ancient myths constituted a historical record of early human perceptions. It reflected experience as it was shaped by the volatile earth. This concrete analysis of myth put Vico profoundly at odds with the older, orthodox view that had found Christian mystical truths allegorically represented in Greek myths and Egyptian hieroglyphics. He was certainly blunt in his dismissal of this older scholarship, calling it “absurd,” and specifically labeling Kircher’s allegories “madness” (149, 269).

His examination of the “poetic wisdom” in pagan mythology was only the beginning of his broader narrative of cultural development (148). Like the later evolutionists, he saw cultural changes as occurring in an invariable, universal sequence, such that all nations “begin, develop, and end in the same stages” (154). That sequence had three stages: the Age of Gods, Age of Heroes, and Age of Men.²⁷ Each was defined by the particulars of its sign system, with each reflecting a different capacity for abstraction. He associated the first, the language of the gods, with hieroglyphs, “gestures or objects naturally related to their ideas.”²⁸ In the second stage, Heroes spoke using symbols, or “heroic emblems like those *mute similes*” of Homer (177). Finally, the Age of Men employed “epistolary” language, which “distant persons used to discuss the common needs of everyday life” (178).

Although relatively ignored in his own day, there was renewed interest in *New Science* after 1770, first by German historians and then by French historian Jules Michelet, who published a popular series of abridgments and translations of Vico, beginning in 1827 with his *Discours sur le système et la vie de Vico*. As a result, the early-eighteenth-century Italian became a more well-known figure in the nineteenth century than he had been while alive. Indeed, both Comte and Marx read and admired the *New Science*, and their subsequent theories of evolutionary periodization owed much to Vico's three stages.²⁹

Scottish philosopher David Hume took a different, ahistorical approach to the birth of religion, in *The Natural History of Religion* (1777). He also expanded the concept of the primitive mind to include not only children and peasants but the entire female sex. "What age or period of life is the most addicted to superstition? The weakest and most timid. What sex? The same answer must be given."³⁰ Like the earlier Bayle (and the later Matthew Arnold), Hume imagined society as alternating between two states, rather than developing linearly. "It is remarkable, that the principles of religion have a kind of flux and reflux in the human mind, and that men have a natural tendency to rise from idolatry to theism, and to sink again from theism to idolatry" (46–47). Hume's principal argument was against the orthodoxy of primitive monotheism and specifically against natural theology. Spelled out by the English theologian John Ray (1628–1705) in *The Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of the Creation* (1691), natural theology was based on the logical belief that humans, when contemplating the infinite complexity of nature's interlocking design, would have understood that a design must have a designer and so inferred a single creative intelligence behind it. Nonsense, says Hume: "The savage tribes of America, Africa, and Asia are all idolaters. Not a single exception to this rule" (23). Repeating the anthropomorphic trope seen in writing from Lucretius to Vico, he argues that, far from a rational contemplation of nature, "the first ideas of religion arose . . . from a concern with regard to the events of life, and from the incessant hopes and fears, which actuate the human mind" (27). The primitive mind began in the rudest state of immersion in its own concrete experience, but it eventually developed a capacity for abstraction, and with it came illusions of deities. "The mind rises gradually, from inferior to superior: By abstracting from what is imperfect, it forms an idea of perfection: And slowly distinguishing the nobler parts of its own frame from the grosser, it learns to transfer only the former, much elevated and refined, to its divinity" (24). In this early state, the concept of "an invisible spiritual intelligence is an object too refined" for apprehension, and so "men naturally affix it to some sensible representation" (40). The polytheist, he writes, "deifies every part of the universe, and conceives all the conspicuous productions of nature, to be themselves so many real divinities. The

sun, moon, and stars, are all gods according to his system: Fountains are inhabited by nymphs, and trees by hamadryads: Even monkeys, dogs, cats, and other animals often become sacred in his eyes, and strike him with a religious veneration" (38). This description could have been written by Comte. The similarity between the two writers is particularly noticeable when Hume says: "There is an universal tendency among mankind to conceive all beings like themselves, and to transfer to every object, those qualities, with which they are familiarly acquainted, and of which they are intimately conscious" (29). Already, in Hume, Vico, and Fontanelle, we see the basic concepts emerging that later define the nineteenth-century European theory of the primitive: an immersion in the concrete, combined with anthropomorphic projection.

These two attributes finally became labeled "fetishism" in 1760, when the minor philosophé and French magistrate Charles de Brosses (1709–77) published *Du culte des dieux fétiches*. Later uses of the term derive from this book: a young Karl Marx read it in German translation as a student in 1842–43, and Comte knew it, directly or indirectly, as well.³¹ *Dieux fétiches* was an interpretation of ancient Egyptian figures found on mummies, papyri, and obelisks. Writers who interpreted these objects allegorically or symbolically were wrong, he argued. In fact the objects were fetishes, objects whose supernatural quality coincided with their material quality. Like Bayle and Fontanelle, de Brosses employed an early version of the comparative method. He drew analogies between the ancient objects and observations of existing "primitive" societies, again using firsthand reports of African fetish worship in travelers' accounts. He was certainly well prepared to do so. While his colleagues in the Academy were poring over the evidence from classical antiquity, he read the accounts of travelers in the Southern Hemisphere, which he gathered together and published in his *Histoire des navigations aux terres australes* (1756). He knew the major accounts of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century explorers to Western Africa, including Bosman's *Voyage de Guinée*, and knew they described primitive cults that worshipped objects and animals as gods, and so he was able to argue that the Egyptian figures of animal worship represented exactly what they appeared to depict.³²

De Brosses committed heresy by positing an initial stage of fetishism, contradicting the orthodoxy of primitive monotheism, but he preserved himself from prosecution by employing a version of Fontanelle's window-dressing strategy and proposing an early stage of monotheistic star-worship.³³ Nonetheless, as in the case of Fontanelle, his fundamental progression began with fetishism. While vague on the stages themselves, he proposed a uniform universal sequence so that all religion went through a process of historical development, which might take longer in one place than another but was ultimately inevitable. Since fetishism

was universal in the earliest stage, it had to stem from some quality inherent to human beings, and he argued that it reflected their primordial psychology. As a “natural” element of human psychology, fetishism was evident in the early development of the individual as well as that of society. He compared children to primitives and asked why anyone should be surprised to see fetishism in savages when all children imagine their dolls to be alive. In the same vein, he drew parallels between religious development and the evolution of languages, a field he discusses further in *Traité de la formation mécanique des langues et des principes physiques de l'étymologie* (1765).³⁴ Children and primitives alike, he reasoned, have only rudimentary language abilities because they lack a capacity for abstract concepts, and this linguistic deficiency contributes to their fetishistic mode of thought. Through de Brosses, the two crucial psychological elements of concreteness and projection, which had been firmly linked throughout eighteenth-century writing on the primitive, became jointly signified as fetishism. At the same time, fetishism was now understood as a universal attribute of primitive life, rather than a localized practice of the West Africans.

De Brosses was a member of the *Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres*, but his doctrine of an original fetishism was controversial enough that *Culte des dieux fétiches* was rejected when he proposed it to the *Académie* in 1760. He had to have it printed secretly, which may explain why his book received so little notice at the time. It was mentioned in *Mercure de France* and was reviewed in *Monde primitif*, but by and large his idea of primitive fetishism “created no great stir,” according to Manuel.³⁵ It was not until the end of the eighteenth century that the doctrine of fetishism as the earliest state of religion became a more established part of European intellectual culture. At the turn of the century, two German historians of religion, Christoph Meiners and Philipp Christian Reinhard, wrote at length about a primitive state of fetishism, as did the French writers J. A. Dulaure and Charles Dupuis.³⁶ Even then, it was not until 1835 that de Brosses’s neologism, *fétichisme*, was accepted by the French Academy, fully three-quarters of a century after he first published *Culte des dieux fétiches*.

In England early in the nineteenth century, de Brosses’s name was notable in its absence from the most influential ethnological work of the time, Prichard’s *Researches into the Physical History of Man*.³⁷ Relying on linguistic as well as physical evidence, Prichard defended the historical accuracy of Genesis at a time when the literality of the Bible was subject to intense scientific skepticism. By marshalling an impressive array of evidence to support his claim that the human race was no more than six thousand years old, Prichard gave a new lease on life to biblical anthropology in Britain. But in an omission of “critical diagnostic importance,” he ignored studies by anyone that could be connected to the French

Revolution, leaving out all references to the philosophes, encyclopédistes, and idéologues, including de Brosses.³⁸

The theory of the primitive fetish achieved its greatest prominence in the mid-nineteenth century, largely due to the work of Auguste Comte. More well known in Britain than France, his doctrine of primitive fetishism is definitively explained in *Cours de philosophie positive*, published 1830–42. His relationship to subsequent thinking within British ethnology and post-Darwinian anthropology was of a broad, ideological kind; he was known as a philosopher of social science, not an anthropologist. As the philosopher of positivism, he articulated the model of accumulated knowledge that Victorian science and social science took as axiomatic, and he contributed to a new emphasis on the role of hypothesis and verification, a point that differentiated him from the earlier inductive method of Bacon and Descartes. His case is one of singular significance to the understanding of Victorian anthropology because his work served as an important bridge between the nineteenth century and the earlier developmentalism of Fontanelle, Vico, and de Brosses, and in this respect it contributed to the eclipse of Prichard's biblical anthropology. The path from the Enlightenment to Victorian anthropology was through Comte. As Stocking notes, "it was the successive volumes of Comte's *Positive Philosophy* . . . that offered the most systematic and influential model for an ostensibly *scientific* study of human progress in civilization."³⁹ In *Cours*, primitive fetishism was the first moment in the universal pattern through which societies developed from infancy to adulthood; it was the opening sentence in Comte's developmental narrative, which was subsequently absorbed into British ethnology. "The Comtian framework was widely adopted," notes Ellen, and more than any other writer Comte established the scientific framework within which a professional Victorian anthropology could emerge from the gentleman's hobby of amateur ethnology.⁴⁰

Comte's objective in *Cours* was to establish a new science of society founded on the history of large-scale social transformations arranged into stages. The changing human brain, with its concomitant psychological growth, was the engine powering social development. The mind came to comprehend the world in radically different terms over time, evolving from the subjective explanations of primitives to the scientific explanations of the present. The promise of positivism was that the social scientist "could understand the changes that had occurred and would occur in the human mind and thus in the social system."⁴¹ The law of three stages explained those changes. He argued that all humanity was subject to the same law of continuous development. This was a scientific law of human nature reflecting both subjective and social factors, and so he saw himself as a sci-

entist engaged in the discovery of natural laws and not a metaphysician. The law of three stages was as fundamental to social phenomena as Newton's law of gravity was to physics. Of the many fields of human knowledge, several had eliminated the conjectural imprecision that plagued medicine, history, and physics before Newton. Mathematics (and physics after Newton) yielded results that were definite and verifiable, rather than speculative or dogmatic. Comte, his older contemporary Henri de Saint-Simon, and others at the time called these the "positive" sciences because their results were certain, and this distinguished them from fields that relied on *a priori* concepts or guesswork. Positive science relied solely on established facts and was thereby able to establish explanations for other facts that could be tested and verified. Comte's title, *Positive Philosophy*, meant "scientific philosophy." That philosophy was based on the history of the sciences he detailed in his narrative of social development. The law of three stages was the established fact on which the most complex of all sciences, that of society itself, was to be based.

He first outlined his three stages in 1824, in his fundamental opuscule, *Plan des travaux scientifiques nécessaires pour réorganiser la société*.⁴² The "theological," "metaphysical," and "positive" stages existed in a progressive sequence. The first and last represented completely distinct modes of comprehending the external world, while the middle was transitional; the metaphysical stage combined elements from both the theological and the positive.

In the theological stage, people were ill equipped to understand the world scientifically. They engaged in magical thinking, similar to the primitives and poets in Lucretius and Vico. Plagues, storms, bad harvests—all were explained through supernatural agency as responses to human actions or otherwise products of supernatural events. Such accounts explained the vagaries of the environment through projection, using internal feelings to account for external events. The theological stage itself had three subdivisions, and Comte associated each with a specific historical period. The first, primitive fetishism, typified the period of pre-history. It was followed by the second phase, polytheism, in classical antiquity. Monotheism defined the third phase and dominated the medieval centuries, particularly 1000–1300 CE.

The metaphysical stage was transitional in that the supernatural explanations of the theological era were replaced by fantastic secular ideas. Like so many George Eliot-style Casaubons, metaphysicians imagined they had discovered the key to unlocking the mysteries of nature. Abstract principles came first, facts second, so deductive reasoning from assumed truth was the characteristic feature. For Comte, the shift from the theological to the metaphysical was largely a transposition of historical causation from one kind of abstraction to another, and the power previously attributed to the gods was reassigned to *a priori* concepts. But

the metaphysical stage also had elements of the positive. It included an increased emphasis on empirical observation, and with that came the first glimmer of interest in the possibility of scientific verification. While the substitution of abstract themes onto different concepts was a backward-looking remnant of the theological, the developing interest in observation was a revolutionary trait leading forward to positivism.

The positive stage was the grand finale of the sequence and was yet to be fully realized. It was characterized by inductive thinking, in which the observer began with facts and then constructed a theory to account for them, rather than the other way around. Thus a familiar way of distinguishing between the three stages was by focusing on the basic method people use to explain historical causation, or why things happen. The English positivist George Henry Lewes summarizes the difference in his description of the three stages:

In the first, man explains phenomena by some fanciful conception suggested by the analogies of his own consciousness.

In the second, he explains phenomena by some à priori conception of inherent or superadded entities, suggested by the constancy observable in phenomena, which constancy leads him to suspect that they are not produced by any intervention on the part of an external being, but are owing to the nature of the things themselves.

In the third, he explains phenomena by adhering solely to these constancies of succession and co-existence ascertained inductively, and recognised as the laws of nature.⁴³

The positive stage could not be reduced to induction alone. Comte himself argued against this, placing more emphasis on verification than induction, and this was part of the novelty of Comte's definition of the scientific method.⁴⁴ Science previously had been defined as certainty of knowledge, but Comte rejected this view. Instead, he thought it impossible ever to know anything with finality, and thus the degree of knowledge was relative to what had been known before and what would be known in future. Rather than certainty, he defined science as having a predictive power that was capable of being tested. Hypotheses should be tested through both inductive and deductive processes before they become scientific theories. He argues in *Cours* that "science is essentially destined to dispense with all direct observation—as much as the diverse phenomena allow—by making it possible to deduce from the smallest possible number of immediate data the greatest possible number of results."⁴⁵ By placing more emphasis on hypothe-

sis than observation, Comte dramatically increased the role of imagination in the scientific process. In volume 3, he discusses the art of hypotheses, or “scientific fictions,” and likens them to poetic invention.⁴⁶

The stages transitioned gradually from one to the next and elements from all three mingled in each. Thus Comte argued that the positive revolution was initiated in the metaphysical stage, by Bacon, Descartes, and Galileo. He also argued that positivism had in fact existed since the theological stage, first appearing in the philosophy of Aristotle.⁴⁷ Rather than sharp, absolute distinctions, the three stages were composites of competing forces, and Comte, like Marx, differentiated those tending toward the future and those harking back to the past.

While many of his fundamental ideas were entirely original, others were borrowed from writers with whom he had collaborated, especially Saint-Simon, or writers whom he had read. From Baron de Montesquieu (1689–1755), whom he first studied in 1816, he seems to have absorbed the basic idea that human society could be studied scientifically, as a sequence of three stages.⁴⁸ But his most important early influence was the ideologue Marquis de Condorcet (1743–94), whom he read in the following year of 1817.⁴⁹ Condorcet viewed the progress of history as more dynamic than did Montesquieu. For Condorcet, progress centered on the gradually growing power of human reason, accompanied by a related growth of political freedom. History was the continuous story of social evolution through a sequence of ten historical epochs, each with distinct changes in the arts, economics, and sciences. Changes in any one field inevitably had repercussions in the others, and so he defined social progress as both continuous and organic, two qualities that reappeared in Comte's philosophy.⁵⁰



The writing of *Cours* was a drawn-out process, to say the least. Its central concepts were earlier articulated in six opuscules, smaller works he published between 1819 and 1828 in journals associated with Saint-Simon, his mentor and employer from August 1817 until March 1824. In the late 1820s, he needed to supplement a meager income, and he designed a series of lectures on positive philosophy that could be taught by subscription. The scheme had the added benefits of promoting his philosophy and attracting potential followers. His course was first taught in 1828–29, consisting of seventy-two lessons in all. No records survive of its contents, but the following year he taught it again in an abbreviated format of fifty lectures. That course attracted two hundred students and met twice weekly at the Athénée, from December 1829 to November 1830. While teaching this second course he negotiated a contract with Roen Brothers to publish the original seventy-two lessons. Paired lessons were to be issued in weekly numbers, bound into volumes as they went along. The original plan called for

four volumes completed in two years. Unable to keep up with the weekly deadlines, he nonetheless completed the first volume quickly, and it was published in July 1830 with a total of eighteen lessons.

The aim of *Cours* was to establish a new science of “social physics,” the positive science for the study of society. A topic of interest throughout the nineteenth century, social science culminated in the establishment of sociology as a discipline, using the term Comte later coined as an improvement on “social physics.” Volume 1 begins with two introductory lessons outlining these ideas and explaining how the sciences related to one another. All sciences can be arranged hierarchically, from the more fundamental bodies of knowledge to the most advanced. The simpler sciences, like mathematics, generate the essential tools on which other sciences depend; for example, mathematics is an essential component of all the other sciences, while it depends on none of them for its own practice, and thus it comes first in the arrangement. Next come the inorganic sciences—astronomy, physics, and chemistry—followed by the organic sciences—physiology (a term that at first included biology) and social physics. This sequence was also a historical progression: the history of science, and indeed of society, was the stepwise development of new forms of knowledge, beginning with the most fundamental and advancing as each new science successfully built on the established older ones. Thus Comte’s law of the three stages was essentially a succession of steps in the evolution of scientific knowledge. Because it was the most advanced of the natural sciences, social physics was therefore the latest to develop. However, it could not be understood properly without grasping each of the earlier sciences on which it depended, from mathematics to biology. Consistent to a fault, he therefore planned the four volumes to begin with an explanation of all the sciences, beginning with the simplest and concluding with social physics. In volume 1, then, apart from the two introductory lessons on positivism and the classification of the sciences, he explains the principles of mathematics.

Historical developments intervened when the July Revolution that same year put Roen out of business, leaving Comte without a publisher for volumes 2, 3, and 4. To make matters worse, the first volume had not sold well, and other publishers were not rushing forward. In the meantime, he taught his course again at the Athénée the following year, 1831. It was two more years before he successfully negotiated a deal with a new publisher, but finally on 3 March 1833 he signed a contract for the last three volumes with Bachelier, a publisher of scientific literature. It took two more years to finish the second volume, which continues the study of the inorganic sciences, with sections on astronomy and physics. After a hiatus of nearly five years, volume 2 appeared in April 1835. Writing for the third volume went more smoothly, and it was published 2 January 1838. Divided into two parts, the first covers chemistry, the last of the inorganic sci-

ences. The second part initiates the review of organic science with an explanation of biology, which contains his theory of milieu, the concept that organisms must be understood in the context of their environment.⁵¹

He waited until the end of 1838 to begin writing the fourth volume, in which he planned to cover social physics. Replacing the term with a neologism of his own, “sociology,” he subdivided the volume into two parts. Social statics focused on the complex structure of the social body and how it was organized. Social dynamics studied the growth and development of society and so examined historical changes structured around the law of three stages. The volume grew to an unmanageable length and, to avoid another long delay between volumes, he issued volume 4, “Part 1,” on 26 July 1839. Devoted almost entirely to social statics, it includes an introduction to social dynamics as the last lesson. The topic of social dynamics also grew in size; it occupied all of the new volume 5 and most of an additional volume 6, which proved to be the final volume. The fifth volume was penned quickly, and when it was published in May 1841, less than two years had passed since the previous installment. It contains a comprehensive description of the first two stages, the theological and metaphysical. The three phases of the theological (fetishism, polytheism, and monotheism) are discussed first, and the last and longest chapter covers the metaphysical stage. The writing for volume 6 was soon completed, on 6 July 1842, and the volume was published five weeks later, fourteen months after volume 5. It contains the progress of positivism from the fourteenth century to 1838. In the final three lessons, he reviews the positive method, the positive doctrine, and discusses the future.

With those lessons *Cours* was at last finished. Expected to take two years and fill four volumes, it had ultimately taken Comte thirteen and one-half years to complete and had grown in size by half.



On the nature of earliest society, Comte is straightforward. “The theological period of humanity could begin no otherwise than by a complete and usually very durable state of pure Fetishism” (*PP*, 545). While Fontanelle, Vico, and de Brosses had left open the possibility of an earlier monotheism, Comte, who had grown up in the changed environment of post-Revolutionary France, made no such concession. In *Cours*, fetishism was the beginning of the beginning: the first phase of the first stage in the immutable development of human culture and was thus the seed from which civilization grew.

In describing fetishism, he focuses on psychological projection. When humans encounter inexplicable events, he argues, they “conceive of the production of unknown effects according to the passions and affections of the corresponding being regarded as alive; and this is the philosophical principle of

fetichism" (*PP*, 547). In a state of "gross fetichism," humans imagined everything as "animated by passion and will" (*PP*, 546). The primitive perspective was dominated by this global fetishizing activity, which populated the material world with magical life in every tree, every animal, every storm, every rock, and every twig, as the primitive passively yielded "to his propensity to transfer to outward objects the sense of existence which served him for an explanation of his own phenomena, and therefore for an absolute explanation of all out of himself" (*PP*, 547). Thus the external world for Comte's primitive consisted entirely of fetishes, and this global fetishism made the chaos of daily experience meaningful.

Society under fetishism lacked any real cohesion because its members were necessarily isolated within their separate psychological experiences. Primitive individualism was the order of the day, accompanied by social disunity and an absence of moral or political leadership. In the state of pure fetishism, "gods were individual," making centralized authority neither possible nor desirable (*PP*, 549). The result was a leaderless state resembling anarchy. "The worship . . . when every act of a man's life had its religious aspect, was of a kind that required every man to be his own priest" (*PP*, 550). For the same reason, knowledge was in a similar condition. "The fetich gods had little power to unite men, or to govern them. Though there were certainly fetiches of the tribe, and even of the nation, the greater number were domestic, or even personal; and such deities could afford little assistance to the development of common ideas" (*PP*, 550).

In a world where "every object is a divinity with a will of its own," unifying abstractions about natural laws are not just unnecessary; they would contradict the view of each object as unique (*PP*, 551). Instead, "[i]maginary facts wholly overwhelm real ones," and the world becomes transformed by the primitive mind into "a kind of permanent hallucination" (*PP*, 551). This stunted condition of knowledge was accompanied by a flourishing of artistic activity. "It is evident that a philosophy which endowed the whole universe with life must favour the expansion of imagination, which was then supreme among the faculties. Thus, it is certain that the origin of all the fine arts, not excepting poetry, is to be referred to the fetich period" (*PP*, 551). Vico had arrived at a similar conclusion, and his logic also reemerged in Comte's juxtaposition of art and science as inversely related.

The three stages were each subdivided so that they contained smooth, logical steps through which one stage gradually blended into the next. Like Condorcet, Comte described development as the consequence of organic processes, rather than external forces. Gone were the cataclysms of the young earth that figured largely in the account of Vico. In their place, Comte substituted the psychological maturation of the primitive mind. The engine driving social change was a new capacity for abstract thinking. As primitives began to abstract, the multitude of