Comte, Auguste (1798–1857), French philosopher, founder of the school of philosophy known as positivism, educated in Paris. From 1818 to 1824 he contributed to the publications of Saint-Simon, and the direction of much of Comte's future work may be attributed to this association. Comte was primarily a social reformer. His goal was a society in which individuals and nations could live in harmony and comfort. His system for achieving such a society is presented in his Cours de philosophie positive (1830–42; tr. The Course of Positive Philosophy, 1896 ed.). In this work Comte analyzes the relation of social evolution and the stages of science. He sees the intellectual development of man covered by what is called the Law of the Three Stages—theological, in which events were largely attributed to supernatural forces; metaphysical, in which natural phenomena are thought to result from fundamental energies or ideas; and positive, in which phenomena are explained by observation, hypotheses, and experimentation. The sciences themselves are classified on the basis of increasing complexity and decreasing generality of application in the ascending order: mathematics, astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology, and sociology. Each science depends at least in part on the science preceding it; hence all contribute to sociology (a term that Comte himself originated). A sociology developed by the methods of positivism could achieve the ends of harmony and well-being which Comte desired. Another work, Le Système de politique positive (1851–54; tr. System of Positive Polity, 1875–77), placed religion above sociology as the highest science; it was, however, a religion shorn of metaphysical implications, with humanity as the object of worship. For a modern edition of part of this work see A General View of Positivism (1957).

Important among his other writings are Catechisme positiviste (1852, tr. 1858) and Synthèse subjective (1856). Published posthumously were his Testament (1884) and his letters (1902–05).

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