Auguste Comte
(1798-1857)
French positivist philosopher, who was a founder of sociology. Comte was born in Montpellier on January 19, 1798. Very early he rejected his family's Roman Catholicism and royalist political views. He attended the École Polytechnique in Paris from 1814 to 1816, when he was expelled for participating in a student rebellion. For several years he was secretary to the noted socialist Claude Henri de Rouvroy, comte de Saint-Simon, whose influence is reflected in much of Comte's work. His last years were marked by periods of mental illness. He died in Paris on September 5, 1857.

In response to the scientific, political, and industrial revolutions of his day, Comte was fundamentally concerned with an intellectual, moral, and political reorganization of the social order. Adoption of the scientific attitude was the key, he thought, to such a reconstruction.

Comte argued that an empirical study of historical processes, particularly of the progress of the various interrelated sciences, reveals a law of three stages that govern human development. He analyzed these stages in his major work, the six-volume Course of Positive Philosophy (1830-42; trans. 1853). Because of the nature of the human mind, each science or branch of knowledge passes through “three different theoretical states: the theological or fictitious state; the metaphysical or abstract state; and, lastly, the scientific or positive state.” At the theological stage, events are immaturely explained by appealing to the will of the gods or of God. At the metaphysical stage phenomena are explained by appealing to abstract philosophical categories. The final evolutionary stage, the scientific, involves relinquishing any quest for absolute explanations of causes. Attention is focused altogether on how phenomena are related, with the aim of arriving at generalizations subject to observational verification. Comte's work is considered the classical expression of the positivist attitude—namely, that the empirical sciences are the only adequate source of knowledge.

Each of the stages, Comte believed, is correlated with certain political developments. The theological stage is reflected in such notions as the divine right of kings. The metaphysical stage involves such concepts as the social contract, the equality of persons, and popular sovereignty. The positivist stage entails a scientific or “sociological” (a term coined by Comte) approach to political organization. Quite critical of democratic procedures, Comte envisioned a stable society governed by a scientific elite who would use the methods of science to solve human problems and improve social conditions.

Although he rejected belief in a transcendent being, Comte recognized the value of religion in contributing to social stability. In his four-volume System of Positive Polity (1851-54; trans. 1875-77), he proposed his religion of humanity, aimed at
encouraging socially beneficial behavior. Comte's chief significance, however, derives from his role in the historical development of positivism.