ABSTRACT. Auguste Comte (1798–1857) is the founder of a French school of thought that became famous for its encyclopaedic account of the sciences as well as for its exposition of what was designed as a way out of a state of intellectual and moral crisis. This essay demonstrates that there is a linkage between the diagnosis of crisis and the pursuit of happiness in Comte’s foundation of positivism. It begins by distinguishing Comte’s notion of positivism from that of a value-free science. In analysing Comte’s peculiar usage of the term happiness, the essay shows that happiness is understood as the result of the convergence (consensus) of three components: a scientific conception of the world, the feelings of love and veneration, and a wisely ordered activity. The essay then demonstrates that the first of these components is of primary importance inasmuch as it is to frame a new horizon within which man is expected to return to a healthy state of mind, to reshape both his hopes and activities, and to discover his own participation in a supreme order acting through the laws of nature as well as through those of the civilization in which he lives. Conveying this new horizon to citizens of a lasting Republic is the ‘sacred’ mission of sociology. The essay concludes by pointing out that Comte’s conception of happiness can be assessed as unifying some main qualities of life as they are classified in Ruut Veenhoven’s fourfold matrix.

KEY WORDS: Comte, dignity, happiness, mental health, natural order, new faith, positivism, progress, scientific certainty, this-worldly religion, wisdom.

Auguste Comte (1798–1857) was born in Montpellier, France. After attending the École Polytechnique in Paris from 1814 to 1816, he went on to work as Secretary for Henry Saint-Simon, where he conceived the idea to attempt an encyclopaedic work. This project developed into the famous Cours de philosophie positive, a system of scientific knowledge in six volumes which aimed to provide the foundations for a new and lasting political order in the aftermath of the French Revolution. In pursuing his intellectual career, Comte earned his living first as a mathematics tutor at the École Polytechnique, then as admissions examiner at the same school, a school designed for the instruction of civil and military engineering. From the outset of his teaching he advocated the use of scientific procedures in the study of politics; he held that the practice of such a science would inevitably lead to social regeneration and progress. However, he never succeeded in being appointed a tenured professor. Between 1831 and 1848, he gave public courses aimed at highly skilled workers; at the same time he not only finished
the *Cours de philosophie positive* (1830–1842) prefiguring the reign of scientific knowledge, but he also wrote the *Discours sur l’esprit positif* (1844) as a foundation for the political and social organization of modern industrial society. In 1848 he completed the *Discours sur l’ensemble du positivisme*, which was intended to present the workmen with a synthesized vision of positivist philosophy. In these works, Comte gave an encyclopaedic account of the sciences, ending with an exposition of what he regarded as the most important: social physics or ‘sociology’. The sociologist’s task was to discover the laws that govern social institutions, and the ways in which human beings relate themselves to the natural world as well as to their civilization. Comte envisaged a future where positive morality could determine the discipline of existence. For Comte, such a morality is a specific intellectual and mental state; it is capable of generating harmony between the knowledge of the environment that surrounds us and our reaction to this environment. After 1848, thanks to financial support from his followers, Comte was able to concentrate on studying the permanence of affectivity in man’s relatedness to his environment. He went on to assert the ultimate importance of affectivity, in this way inaugurating the second part of his main work, the *Système de politique positive* (1851–1854). It was meant to attain a harmony between the affective life and scientific knowledge. Comte conceived of this harmony as a force governing both thought and emotion, and bringing them together; that is, a religion which he thought destined to bind the interior and to link it to the outside. Comte’s teaching was received in two ways. Many people adhered to its central theme of the importance of scientific method in resolving social issues, without sharing Comte’s religious aspirations; others were inspired by the vision of a new religion. In France, the former were led by Émile Littré and Charles Robin, two distinguished medical scholars who became senators in the Third Republic in 1875 and then founded the first French Institute of Sociology. The latter were led by Pierre Laffitte, who became Professor of History of Science at the *Collège de France* in 1892.  

1. POSITIVISM

Certainly it is true that most of the recent accounts of positivism suggest that the term ‘positivism’ hardly lends itself to the detection of any