"Properly Speaking Man Is Imbecile": Nietzschean Skepticism in the Political Thought of French Conservative Hippolyte Taine

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Abstract

This paper argues that a careful examination of Hippolyte Taine's intellectual development in the area of epistemology reveals a conceptual linkage with Nietzschean skepticism. The author shows that both Nietzsche and Taine drew from the same procession and touchstones of French history when developing their epistemologies. The result was a similar view of reason with a similar application to the political realm. Taking the Revolution as formative for both thinkers, the author shows how and why Taine's notions of "une forme aveugle de la raison" and "hereditary prejudice" correspond to Nietzsche's view of tradition and its necessity for healthy social and political structures. Further, with the evidence presented, the short correspondence between Taine and Nietzsche appears in a different light, one that allows the reader to take Nietzsche's words at face value and that reveals a mutual admiration between Taine and Nietzsche. The result of this work is to clear another path connecting Nietzsche's thought with the French right of the Third Republic.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate commonalities between Nietzsche's philosophy and the intellectual content of right-wing thought during the French Third Republic. While scholars have documented the compatibility between Nietzsche's elitism and authoritarian ideologies of the twentieth century, this work follows a different path and focuses on epistemology. Vigorous skepticism regarding human rationality is almost synonymous with Nietzsche. But this quality of skepticism was not his sole possession. Hippolyte Taine, one of the most influential thinkers of the right during the Third Republic, advocated a similar skepticism, one that informed his particular distrust of democracy and kept him on the right side of

French politics.[1] This paper argues that Taine's skepticism is similar enough to Nietzsche's to assert a conceptual linkage between the two. The result is to clear another path connecting Nietzsche's thought with the French right of the Third Republic.

Shaping the Debate

The parameters of debate for nineteenth-century French approaches to reason and rationality were established in the eighteenth century, and one can point to the publication of Voltaire's *Philosophical Letters* in 1734 as the starting point. Published first in England, the French edition contained an extra chapter entitled *On the Pensées of Pascal*. While the reason for inclusion is not readily apparent, its presence makes sense if one understands what Voltaire was proposing to France. Voltaire was challenging Pascal's theologically directed view of humanity, one that took a negative view of human ability, action, and motivation.[2] While Pascal maintained that nothing good could ever come from self-interested behavior, Voltaire asserted that self-interested behavior was actually the basis of all commerce and therefore of all good things. Ultimately behind Voltaire's praise of individualism was the necessary replacement of a human reason submitted to revelation with a human reason that acted on its own—that is, of Pascal with Locke.[3]

As the Lockean-inspired part of the French Enlightenment, in all its diversity, was reaching maturity with the likes of Condorcet and d'Holbach, the French Revolution entered its destructive phase, one that would see thousands executed and the appearance of immoral leaders and a murderous and irrational crowd. French anti-Enlightenment conservatives were able to capitalize on this outcome and assert the soundness of their positions. In 1797, Joseph de Maistre, probably the most well known of the French conservatives of this time, published his most famous work, *Considerations on France*, to condemn the Revolution and with a desire to push France back into the arms of throne and altar. In this work, he sought to explain the horrors of the Revolution by demonstrating that the basic assumptions of the Enlightenment

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1 Micheal Biddiss, "Hippolyte Taine and the Making of History," in *The Right in France: 1789-1997*, ed. Nicholas Atking and Frank Tallett (New York: I.B.Tauris Publishers, 1998), 81-82. See also René Rémond, *The Right Wing in France: From 1815 to de Gaulle*, trans. James Laux (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1969), 241, 244.

2 Voltaire, *Letters on England*, trans. Leonard Tancock (London: Penguin Books, 1980), 128.

3 Everything that Voltaire was advocating concerning politics and philosophy required a transvaluation of Pascalian values. Pascal had based his social philosophy on church dogma and revelation. Voltaire discussed human activity done for the sake of personal gain and happiness without regard for tradition. He also justified the morality of his position based on its utility to human development.

had caused it all. In his arguments, he rejected Enlightenment empiricism and asserted an epistemology that championed inner sentiments and the lessons provided by history over pure human observation. [4] For de Maistre, history revealed several things that helped one understand the Revolution. One was that humans are social beings. The importance of this revelation was that there could have been no social contract introduced by pre-social and rational creatures, since outside of society, individuals ceased to be human. In other words, starting from the individual when conceptualizing society, as many Enlightenment thinkers tended to do, was philosophically wrong and a poor conception of humanness. Further, developing a society based on individuals could never hold together. For de Maistre, social orders were already precarious and could not countenance the championing of individual wills.[5] Ultimately, history showed that humans were unable to produce a political system on their own. Therefore, as the Enlightenment and Revolution played out, the use of human reason in this area could only be destructive.[6]

But de Maistre got more specific. For him, the Revolution was punishment from God for the intellectual sins committed by France, and at the root of this sin, coming from a spirit of rebellion against God, were Bacon and Locke, whose immoral thinking produced empiricism, individualism, and ultimately social-contract theory.[7] De Maistre's picture of a proper political organization was a centralized authority holding society together and protecting it from the enemy of individualism. For de Maistre, this centralized authority could only exist in the Church, and deviations from it were clearly in defiance of history and revelation.[8] In de Maistre's narrative, the Reformation was the first significant rebellion against proper authority, but the most disastrous step was Locke, whose sensationalism encouraged the tearing down of traditional authority and the atomization of society.[9] In short, de Maistre believed that divergence from true, centralized authority, which Lockean epistemology unleashed, explained the Revolution and its horrors.

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4 Joseph de Maistre, *The Works of Joseph de Maistre*, trans. and ed. Jack Lively (New York: Macmillan; London: Collier-Macmillan, 1965), 17. See also Richard Lebrun, "Joseph Maistre Cassandra of Science," *French Historical Studies* 6 (1969): 229. See also Lebrun, "Maistre," 229. See also Jean-Yves Pranchère, *L'autorité Contre les Lumières : la Philosophie de Joseph de Maistre* (Genève : Droz, 2004), 150. "History…is 'experimental politics,' from which facts about man and politics can be deduced through disinterested observation, a method he opposed to the abstract, a priori speculations of modern philosophy": from Graeme Garrard, "Joseph Maistre's Civilization and its Discontents," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 57 (1996): 434-435. See also Maistre, *Works*, 31.

5 Maistre, *Works*, 279.

6 "This is why the world's greatest scourge has always been, in every age, what is called philosophy, for philosophy is nothing but the human reason acting alone, and the human reason reduced to its own resource is nothing but a brute whose power is restricted to destroying…" Ibid., 39.

7 Ibid., 236.

8 Jean-Yves Pranchère, "The Social Bond According to the Catholic Counter-Revolution: Maistre and Bonald" in *Joseph de Maistre's Life, Thought and Influence: Selected Studies*, ed. Richard A. Lebrun (Montreal; Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 140-141.

9 Maistre, *Works*, 105.

For de Maistre, Lockean sensationalism, which materialized the origin of ideas, was absurd, detestable, and "deadly for the human spirit."[10] More importantly, sensationalism destroyed the moral sciences. De Maistre placed these words in the mouth of one of his characters in his *St. Petersburg Dialogues*:

> The day will come, and perhaps is not far off, when Locke will be unanimously placed among those writers who have done the most harm to men.… This philosophy is the death of all religion, of all delicate feelings, of all sublime enthusiasm; every father of a family especially must be clearly warned that in receiving it under his roof, he is really doing all that he could do to chase out life.[11]

After lambasting Locke and his philosophy, de Maistre had nothing better to say about Voltaire, whom he considered part of the general movement and popularization of Lockean sensationalism. For de Maistre, Voltaire's works "are not dead. They are alive, and they are killing us. It seems to me that my hate is sufficiently justified."[12] He further derided Voltaire for asserting that "Locke is the English Pascal." The admiration for Pascal by de Maistre went deep, and the fact that Voltaire had referred to his *Philosophical Letters* as "Anti-Pascal" made the work a clear *oeuvre de combat*. De Maistre's response to Voltaire's work and his dichotomy between Locke and Pascal, helped rehabilitate Pascal, making him a hero to the Romantic movement and a permanent fixture in French social thinking.[13] The dichotomies that Voltaire's seminal work and life helped create clearly left their mark on French social thinking.

This narrative provides insight into the French discourse on reason and its formative relationship to the Revolution, a discourse that Taine would enter in his political and philosophical work. It also seeks to situate Nietzsche. Although German, Nietzsche was preoccupied with French culture, history, and intellectual achievement. For Nietzsche, the French were present-day Greeks, a culture and intellectual tradition he saw as presenting formative qualities of thought.[14] Most importantly, the French moralists informed Nietzsche's mature thought, especially

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10 Joseph de Maistre, *St. Petersburg Dialogues*, trans. Richard Lebrun (London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), XV. See also ibid., 59.

11 Ibid., 191, 193.

12 Ibid., 109.

13 J.J. Demorest, "Pascal et les Premiers Romantiques, " *The French Review* 22 (1949), 436. "Voltaire, lui, la prononce, puis la crie de toute sa colère pour mieux convaincre son siècle qu'en est fait de Pascal et de la déraison": in ibid., 438. According to Demorest, the Romantic epoch rehabilitated Pascal from the attacks made by the eighteenth century. See ibid., 436.

14 W.D. Williams, *Nietzsche and the French* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1952), xiv, xix.

Pascal, who argued for the subjectivity of perception and the need to transcend it.[15] According to Brendan Donnellan, Pascal's influence on Nietzsche came through Schopenhauer, for whom Pascal played a large role. The influence was great enough that Nietzsche considered Schopenhauer and Pascal two sides of one pessimistic coin, that is, a negation of the world from an atheistic point of view and a religious one.[16] Donnellan states:

> Nietzsche must have felt especial affinity to the caustic skepticism with which the Frenchman [Pascal] demolished the pretention of reason as the sole arbiter of truth. Despite the inevitable differences [Christian vs. atheist; two-hundred years apart] there is an underlying similarity in their awareness of the reservation which must be made about the intellect as an agent in its own right…. Pascal was convinced that the conclusions of logic and science were only useful on one plane."[17]

Like de Maistre, Nietzsche relied on Pascal's skepticism and idealized the French seventeenth century. He also believed like de Maistre that the eighteenth century was the countermand to the seventeenth, and that the mistake of the eighteenth century was its, "unshakable belief that reason can penetrate the deepest abysses of existence and not only apprehend the nature of existence but also correct it."[18] While Nietzsche's condemnation of the Revolution was more complicated than de Maistre's, Nietzsche ascribed to the same narrative regarding the role of the Enlightenment in bringing about the Revolution and its destruction.[19]

    The upshot here is to suggest Nietzsche's familiarity with the intricacies of French thinking; that Nietzsche's discussions on epistemology contain a French imprint born from an awareness of its character, dichotomies, and history. This

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15 "For both Nietzsche and for Pascal…subjectivity of perception is a fact to be accepted, and if knowledge is to be conceived as possible, some principle of cognition has been found which is protected against the deception of the senses." See Williams, *Nietzsche*, 82.

16 For Nietzsche, Schopenhauer's Will was Pascal's amour-propre in the explanation of human motivation and the rejection of reason's ability to apprehend the thing-in-itself. See Brendan Donnellan, "Nietzsche and Pascal," *Germanic Review* 54 (1979): 89.

17 Ibid., 92.

18 Nicholas Martin, "'Aufklärung und Kein Ende': The Place of Enlightenment in Frederick Nietzsche's Thought," *German Life and Letters* 61 (2008): 87.

19 Nietzsche's relationship to the Enlightenment is far more complex than de Maistre's. But Nicholas Martin's scholarship seems persuasive when he writes: "Underlying all of Nietzsche's discussion of the benefits and dangers of 'Aufklärung' is his rejection of three defining characteristics of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. First, he rejects the notion that critical, moral or political principles can be universalized. Second, he dismisses the concept of the 'rational subject.'…Finally, and perhaps fatally, Nietzsche rejects Enlightenment's faith in truth." This was an attitude toward truth no different from a Christian attitude toward God. See the above in Martin, "Aufklärung,"95-96. See also Graeme Garrard, "Nietzsche For and Against the Enlightenment," *The Review of Politics* 70 (2008): 596-608.

background helps bridge the inevitable conceptual gap that would exist between two thinkers immersed in their respective cultures and the intellectual traditions that define them. The formative influence of Nietzsche's and Taine's thought belongs to the same procession and touchstones of French history, which stretches from the seventeenth to the beginning of the nineteenth century.

The Third Republic and the French Right

The Revolution helped determine the contours of French politics for the rest of the nineteenth century. The Revolution dominated discourse so thoroughly that political blocs formed out of the various meanings and interpretations given to it. Like de Maistre, many saw the Revolution as a violent mistake and desired a return to a renewed *ancien régime*. Royalism coalesced from this interpretation and the Legitimist party, fully in support of a Bourbon restoration, formed out of it. Others viewed the first part of the Revolution as genuine reform and favored continuing its political and economic prescriptions, which included checks on king and church and the flourishing of a meritorious elite. This position was associated with Louis-Philip from the Orléans branch of the Bourbons, and its adherents became the Orleanists.[20] A third position came from the example of Napoleon, who, according his followers, had superseded the Bourbon line. Bonapartists wanted some revolutionary reforms, including a smaller role for the church, mixed with elements of absolutism, empire, and hereditary rule.

By the 1830s, a developing economy and an increasingly self-aware working class forced the French political purview beyond issues of restoration and stability. In this milieu, Republicanism returned and added complexity to the mainline discourse. Republicans defined themselves in relation to the Revolution as well. For them the radical stage was the true and only proper revolution, and they sought to bring it to perfection. As republicans brought with them the spirit of radical change and of 1793, they took their place on the left side of French politics. While the other three shared a mutual rejection of Republicanism along with monarchical convictions, their traditionalism placed them in various places on the right. Legitimism, Orleanism, and Bonapartism all made their way into the Third Republic as enemies of Republicanism.

In the dark shadow of the Commune, the Third Republic was born weak, and Republicanism struggled for the hearts of Frenchmen. A rightist coalition emerged to

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20 The result was a fairly rational or enlightened monarchy that served the interest of the notables in society—the managerial classes and the aristocracies of birth, wealth, and intelligence. See Rémond, *The Right Wing in France*, 117, 123.

oppose the republican direction of France, and the negative connotations of the Commune were hard to overcome for the left. In this situation, republicans attempted to co-opt the conservative label by claiming themselves the true conservatives. They argued that since the Revolution was the origin of modern France, those who wanted to continue or complete the Revolution were therefore the real conservatives.[21] While the meaning of the Revolution was always somewhere in the politics of nineteenth-century France, this republican claim elevated the Revolution and its interpretation in Third Republic discourse.

Taine and his work on the Revolution belong to this context. Seeing Bonapartism and Republicanism as the enemy, and distrusting Legitimism, Taine worked from a center-right perspective, having the most sympathy for Orleanism. While favoring some parliamentary and economic liberalism, he believed that "the wealthy and enlightened classes should lead the ignorant and those who live from hand to mouth."[22] Unlike his Orleanist predecessors, he rejected the Revolution completely and the liberal rationalism that guided it. He saw 1789 and 1793 as a product the same forces, of which the Commune was essentially a replay. In his polemical treatment of the Revolution, he joined the generations-old debate on the Revolution and its causes, the one initiated by de Maistre in 1797.

Taine, Revolution, and Reason

Like de Maistre, Taine's treatment of the *ancien régime* and the causes of the Revolution described the fomenting of an improper philosophical outlook, one that centered on epistemological concerns. In his treatment, Taine discussed three types of reason. The first of the three was that which produces scientific discovery and fact. He included here the logic of pure mathematics and the accumulation of facts through observation and experimentation over time, which in turn established the various sciences developing in his day—e.g., physiology, zoology, biology. For Taine, this reasoning was sound and was to be encouraged for its utility. The problem occurred when this reasoning planted itself on French soil. France had, according to Taine, a "classical spirit," which for him was the understanding in the France of the seventeenth century that an "honest man," without the need of specialists, had an "inner light" that could lead to sound conclusions in the search for truth.[23] The pretenses of science coupled with this intellectual populism left the moral

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21 Mike Hawkins, "What's in a Name: Republicanism and Conservatism in France 1871-1879," *History of Political Thought* 26 (2005): 132.

22 Hippolyte Taine, *Life and Letters of H. Taine: 1871-1892*, trans. and ed. E. Sparvel-Bayly (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1908), 77.

23 Hippolyte Taine, *Ancient Regime*, trans. John Durand (New York: Peter Smith, 1931), 185.

and political world open to non-experts. All one now needed was a salon to legitimately pontificate on the loftiest of topics, including and especially politics. Condorcet, who declared that the moral sciences were no different from the natural sciences, was the highest expression of this poisonous combination of attitude and reason.

Taine referred to this synthesis as *la raison raisonnante,* which was the second type of reason he articulated in his work. It was a common reason, which ignored complexity and lacked vigorousness. As a result, it was "powerless to fully portray or to record the infinite and varied details of experience."[24] Yet the *philosophes* of the eighteenth century gave it a totalizing quality and application. When commenting on the Ideologues, who tried to renew and perfect this approach, Taine said that while believing themselves descendants of Bacon, they were actually "always in the air, in the empty space of pure generalities."[25] Taine likened the rigidity and intolerance of the Enlightenment to seventeenth-century Puritanism. After all, it simply replaced the authority of God and the influence to compel with reason. And once this reason applied itself to traditional moral and social authorities, it would usurp them to never have them return. With this notion, France marched into the Revolution with the incoherent doctrines of social contract and natural rights, catalyzed by the notion of radical Jacobin equality. Uprooted, the French were now people without history, and everything built on tradition was set aside by the dictates of reason.

Taine wrote most about *la raison raisonnante*. In his work on the *ancien régime*, he explained in detail why this common reason was unable to accomplish what the eighteenth-century *philosophes* wanted it to. For one, it is not able to establish legitimate universal concepts that correspond to reality. Taine believed that the process of cognition is so complex and involves so many mechanisms that it is a miracle it even functions at all, and concluded that even in the best brains, the possibility that ideas correspond to "outward things," is small.[26] By extension, then, generalizations from different bits of information have no validity. Secondly, the average person is unable to assent and coordinate with others around a notion of natural rights. For Taine, "Man is imbecile.… The health of [his] mind… is simply a happy accident."[27] Also, reason is neither natural nor universal in human beings, and with regard to conduct, the influence is certainly quite small,[28] especially in comparison to the brutish and animal nature of humans with their "irresistible

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24 Taine, *Ancient*, 191.
25 Ibid., 201- 202.
26 Ibid., 239.
27 Ibid., 239.
28 Ibid., 240.

impulses, anger, appetites, agreed; all [of which are] blind."[29] For Leo Weinstein, Taine's view of human reason placed men precariously near insanity, which helped Taine explain the rioting and mob behavior that occurred during the later stages of the Revolution.

These were not always Taine's convictions in epistemology. In fact, he began his intellectual life with a very high view of reason. The change occurred when he decided to take on Kantian skepticism in a comprehensive manner, a philosophical labor that ended up as the book, *On Intelligence*, a work he considered his most important. Starting from a relatively optimistic position, instead of shoring up reason in the face of the Kantian critique, he finished the work having retreated into a skepticism that, when spurred on by the Paris Commune, caused him to walk away from previous work and pay more attention to concrete political solutions.[30] With the increasingly problematic correspondence between subject and object shown by two generations of scientific investigation, and rejecting all *a priori* categories necessary for cognition and perception, Taine made his move toward skepticism.[31]

A Reasonable Nietzsche

It is possible to partition Nietzsche's epistemology along the lines Taine laid down in his commentary on the Revolution. As stated, Taine's first type of reason is essentially empiricism: the ability through observation to collect useful data and build up knowledge about the material world. Nietzsche clearly had no problem with this kind of reason. In fact, this ability to get useful knowledge from the world was central to Nietzsche's fuller philosophy. As Victor Grimm points out: if everything is a will to power, and life is the accumulation of power, there has to be some way of ordering and interpreting the world that allows for this process.[32] But Nietzsche's understanding of how this came about put severe restrictions on what could be known and what the potentials were for this faculty. Nietzsche's attitude concerning an ability to produce the universal principles that the eighteenth century believed it could is where his famous and devastating scorn enters, a scorn similar to

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29 Leo Weinstein, *Hippolyte Taine* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1972), 48. See also Hippolyte Taine, "On Intelligence," in *Significant Contributions to the History of Psychology*, Book II, ed. Daniel Robinson (Washington, D. C.: University Publications of America, Inc., 1977), 120.

30 Hilary Nias, *The Artificial Self: The Psychology of Hippolyte Taine* (Oxford, Information Press, 1999), 185.

31 Like de Maistre and Nietzsche, Pascal influenced Taine in limiting the ability of reason to grasp all of reality. Victor Giraud, biographer of both Pascal and Taine, suggests that Pascal's esprit de finesse (intuitive mind) helped shaped Taine's thinking. See Nias, *Artificial*, 196.

32 Ruediger Hermann Grimm, *Nietzsche's Theory of Knowledge* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1977), 70.

what Taine had for *la raison raisonnante.*

Like Taine, Nietzsche formulated his epistemology through a Kantian paradigm, attacking Kant's essential distinction between appearance and reality.[33] According to Nietzsche, if one perceives objects according to the mind's given categories, there is a problematic and ultimately skeptical barrier between subject and object. Nietzsche's solution was to put subject and object together on the same plane and make the understanding of an object part of the subject's participation in reality.[34] In this formula, there is potential for actual knowledge of the material world. However, the reality is not so neat. Replacing Kant's "knowledge apparatus" with a "lived experience" has big implications for the potentials of knowledge. Most important is that universality is impossible. If individuals "work out" their truth rather than perceive it, this "truth" is restricted to that individual and his or her particular experience. This can only produce a perspective which also takes away the possibility of objectivity. It further eliminates the possibility of dogmatism. Richardson explains the process both inward and out:

> This new knower's truth is… hypothetical, not certain. It lacks the… sureness often claimed by metaphysicians.… Because he has reached it empirically, it must lack the apodicticity associated with the a priori.… Its truth lies in its synthesis of viewpoints; this truth is incomplete insofar as there are always viewpoints it fails to take in.[35]

For science to function requires the constant collection of perspectives. So, for example, science can build up useful knowledge about the world, and as Nietzsche championed the scientist in helping to overthrow superstition and religion, one can by this method amass evidence and proof against old prejudices. In this common sense alternative to Kant, Nietzsche allowed for knowledge without transcendent assumptions. And like Taine, moral or universal knowledge, anything with a metaphysical property, was unknowable.

Another factor exists in joining Taine and Nietzsche along these epistemological lines. As the debate around reason had progressed during the nineteenth century, so did science. Most important was the revolution in understanding that occurred with Darwin, and both Taine and Nietzsche took into account the mechanism of natural selection in their epistemologies. This not only helped shape the process of knowledge acquisition for them, it helped define and explain its restrictions.

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33 Tsarina Doyle, *Nietzsche on Epistemology and Metaphysics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd, 2009), 6.

34 Ibid., 6.

35 John Richardson, *Nietzsche's System* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 285-286.

Biology and Darwin demanded a new relationship to the material world. As for the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, theology could shape an epistemology, in which the idea of a fallen nature, or the need for knowledge of God could define and present the limits and potentials of human reason. While the seventeenth-century French moralists could present a healthy skepticism propped up by the possibility that individuals had the capacity to know God and be sure of the transcendent, Darwin would eliminate this safety net. What Darwinism suggested, and what Taine and Nietzsche embraced, was that reason and the ability for humans to understand the world was limited to the practical needs of survival.[36] As Nietzsche stated: "It is improbable that our 'knowledge' should extend further than is strictly necessary for the preservation of life."[37] As humans evolved along with their environments, there would be no mechanism or need for human reason to go beyond its needs for survival, or at another level, the acquisition of power.[38] Further, according to the Darwinian model, as organisms adapt and evolve, those most suited to their environment survive. In like manner, epistemology for both Taine and Nietzsche was a sort of trial and error of understanding, a selection of sensory input that continued until something that worked was accepted. It was a pragmatic process, in which those ideas closest to what is real will eventually win out.[39]

To put it in Tainian language, the mind creates "illusions" from its sensory input. However, new information constantly challenges these illusions. The subject, therefore, continually modifies the original illusions until something that works is finally accepted. Further, like natural selection, "serendipity" guides this process. Hilary Nias characterizes Taine's epistemology in this light: "It… is of a knowledge gained accidentally, limited to the most mundane sphere and generated at some unconscious and uncontrolled level, [which] scarcely qualifies as the step on the path to a comprehensive vision of the universe."[40] Nietzsche's take is similar. As he states in *The Joyful Wisdom*:

> Throughout immense stretches of time the intellect produced nothing but errors; some of them proved to be useful and preservative of the species: he who fell in with them, or inherited them, waged the battle for himself and his offspring with better success.[41]

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36 Frederick Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 266 (Aph. 480).

37 Ibid., 272 (Aph. 494).

38 Ibid., 275 (Aph. 505), 313 (Aph. 583).

39 Nias, *Artificial*, 167-168.

40 Ibid., 177.

41 Frederick Nietzsche, "The Joyful Wisdom," in *The Complete Works of Frederick Nietzsche* Vol. 10, ed. Oscar Levy (New York: MacMillan, 1911), 153 (Aph. 110).

Although this synthesis over time of perspectives, and the modification of illusions, may provide the subject with useful knowledge for survival, and on a larger scale be combined to provide the world with science, the content of knowledge is still ultimately a book open to many interpretations.[42]

Tradition in Taine and Nietzsche

With these assertions concerning Nietzsche's and Taine's compatibility, it is possible to present something persuasive regarding Taine's third type of reason. As Taine's concern was with establishing and stabilizing French politics and society, his response to the irrational world was to posit a type of reason that would replace the epistemological legacy of the eighteenth century and bring some kind of rational foundation to politics. As Nietzsche's concern was with personal culture, his response to an irrational world came in the form of a new personal morality. Will to power, of course, has implications for politics, and historians have duly catalogued its anti-collective and anti-democratic properties. But while the characteristics of Nietzsche's politics flow directly from his moral system, there is a sense in which some of his politics may come, like Taine, more directly from his epistemology. In which case, a stronger argument for the thesis may be presented.

Taine referred to his third type of reasoning as "*une sorte de raison qui s'ignore*"(a sort of reason operating unconsciously).[43] Elsewhere he labeled it "*l'instinct*" and "*une forme aveugle de la raison*" (a blind form of reason).[44] It is blind and unconscious because it does not come from formal or transparent logic, nor is there a process that is rigorous and falsifiable. But for Taine, it is no less reason and works the same way psychologically as formal reason. As he argues, for ideas to make a difference, they must begin in the mind and work their way down into practice, eventually becoming part of society. Such is the same process in which experience through trial and error forms human character and thus practice, which then deposits itself in a society perfectly coherent to those living in it, but not amenable necessarily to formal reason or reasonable to those in another society. This process is simply the collective application of Taine's understanding of individual human reason. As humans collectively combine their experiences with the natural environment, they build up the best possible world for themselves. The result of this natural selection of useful knowledge and practice manifests itself as a particular collective psychology, which then goes on to create a particular national character

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42 Nias, *Artificial*, 181.
43 Taine, *Ancient*, 207.
44 Ibid., 211.

and consciousness. This kind of reason forms what he called *hereditary prejudice*, that is, an awareness of the validity of the present form of things—in other words, the regard for tradition.[45]

While Nietzsche's attitudes toward tradition are understood mostly to be negative, he does say a few favorable things about tradition that seem to fit with his larger system of thought and that complement Taine. As one thrust of Nietzsche is overcoming the restrictions of the past, he also viewed tradition as a more ancient and superior form of morality in comparison to the dichotomy of ego and non-ego, which, for him, was the product of *ressentiment* and the certainty of truth. For Nietzsche, there was a time in which "good" meant obeying established law and custom, a morality much closer to a will to power.[46] In a section that articulates European nihilism and the disintegration of European society, and with language similar to Taine, he writes:

> What is attacked deep down today is the instinct and will of tradition: all institutions that owe their origins to this instinct violate the taste of the modern spirit. —At bottom, nothing is thought and done without the purpose of eradication this sense for tradition. One considers tradition a fatality; one studies it, recognizes it ("as heredity"), but one does not want it.[47]

Understanding that Nietzsche saw the process of acquiring knowledge as a natural selection over a long period of time of information that maximized will and preservation, the attachment of instinct and will to tradition makes sense. As he continues in this section:

> The tensing of a will over long temporal distances, the selection of the states and valuations that allows one to dispose of future centuries—precisely this is antimodern in the highest degree. Which goes to show that it is the disorganizing principles that give our age its character.[48]

For Nietzsche, then, there is a sense in which tradition is a product of will "over long temporal distances," giving tradition a legitimate status requiring deference. To its condemnation, the modern period wanted, with the force of human reason as shown in the Enlightenment and Revolution, to dehistoricize societies and states, which was another impulse away from will and toward nihilism.

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45 Ibid., 210-211.
46 Frederick Nietzsche, "Human All-Too-Human," in *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, ed. and trans., Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, Inc., 1967), 196 (Aph. 96).
47 Nietzsche, *Will*, 43 (Aph. 65).
48 Ibid.

This application to epistemology of a natural selection mechanism gives Nietzsche and Taine similar solutions to social and political organization in the face of irrationality. Both Taine and Nietzsche, here, borrow from the same source to make up for the political and social chaos brought about by a misuse of reason in the eighteenth century, a source justified by their similar epistemologies.

The Possibility of Cross Pollination

In 1887, Nietzsche wrote a letter to Taine to thank him for two things. One was Taine's praise for Nietzsche's fellow Schopenhauerian, Jacob Burckhardt; the other was for his article on Napoleon.[49] A week later, Taine wrote back to thank and assure him that this understanding of Napoleon matched the words Nietzsche used to describe him in his latest work, that is, *Unmensch* and *Übermensch*.[50] While Napoleon meant very different things to each, Taine and Nietzsche seem to describe him in similar ways. For both, Napoleon was an exceptional type of individual.[51] He was an artist, one "sheathed in the political scabbard," a posthumous brother of Dante and Michelangelo who belonged to the Italian Renaissance, and whose medium was humanity.[52] They both compare the intellect of Napoleon with Caesar, and marvel at his energy.[53] Finally, in Taine's description, Napoleon was an ego that produced a dominating passion and will, an "egoism served by genius"—descriptions not foreign to Nietzsche's own terminology and emphasis.[54]

Taine and Nietzsche corresponded a few more times, and it is clear that Taine was an admirer of Nietzsche's work. For example, Taine was trying to set Nietzsche up with a French translator and publisher, and spoke of recommending pieces of *Beyond Good and Evil* to fellow philosophers.[55] While the exchange did not last long, the letters tell the historian a few things. One is that Taine had read and respected *Beyond Good and Evil*, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, and *The Twilight of the Idols*, books that contain mature and detailed treatments of Nietzsche's epistemology. Further, the letters have Taine telling Nietzsche that he will recommend certain sections of

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49 Frederick Nietzsche, *Selected Letters of Frederick Nietzsche*, ed., Oscar Levy, trans. Anthony Ludovici (New York: Double Day, 1921), 294.
50 Frederick Nietzsche, "Genealogy of Morals," in *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, ed. and trans., Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, Inc., 1967), 54. See also Nietzsche, *Letters*, 296-297.
51 Paul Glenn, "Nietzsche's Napoleon: The Higher Man as Political Actor," *The Review of Politics* 63 (2000): 138-139.
52 Hippolyte Taine, *The Modern Regime,* trans. John Durand (New York: Peter Smith, 1931), 37. Nietzsche quotes Taine in Nietzsche, *Will*, 526 (Aph. 1018). See also Taine, *Modern*, 37-38.
53 Taine, *Modern*, 30 and Glenn, "Napoleon," 140.
54 Taine, *Modern*, 47-48, 90.
55 Nietzsche, *Letters,* 293-294.

Beyond Good and Evil to his fellow philosophers and historians, which are noteworthy in revealing what ideas possibly appealed to both and spoke to their intellectual milieu. For example, in one section, Nietzsche mocks Kant and his categories, something that Taine's position would welcome. Nietzsche writes:

> "How are synthetic judgments *a priori possible*?" Kant asks himself—and what is really his answer? "*By means of a means* (faculty)"—but unfortunately not in five words.… It is high time to replace the Kantian question, "How are synthetic judgments *a priori* possible?" by another question, "Why is belief in such judgments *necessary*?"[56]

In another, Nietzsche defines his take on Darwinian teleology, clarifying the relationship between self-preservation and will to power as primary.[57] A third is an assertion about the inability to find "immediate certainty," with a reference to the problem of language, something Taine would also articulate on his own.[58] Taine also mentions things he thinks will give historians "a rich reward of new ideas." Taine even points out an essay he considers "extremely suggestive," which he promises to read again. This last essay articulates the idea of national character, something, as seen above, that Taine relied heavily on in his third type of reason.[59]

Just as interesting is Nietzsche's defense of France's part in the eighteenth century. He maintains, in sentiments that would sit well with de Maistre's defense of Pascal against Locke, that "modern ideas" are of English origin, of which the French fell victim.[60] In the next aphorism, Nietzsche cites Taine as the "first of living historians."[61] And in a letter to friend, he calls Taine the "most substantial thinker in the present-day France."[62] Since the majority of Taine's works had been published by the time Nietzsche and Taine began exchanging letters, it is reasonable to consider

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56 Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Helen Zimmern (NewYork: Modern Library Publishers, 1917), 11-12 (Aph. 11).
57 Ibid., 14-15 (Aph. 13).
58 Ibid., 17 (Aph. 16) see also Nias, *Artificial*, 205.
59 Taine, *Ancient*, 210-211.
60 "What is called 'modern ideas,' or 'the ideas of the eighteenth century,' or 'French ideas'—that, consequently, against which the German mind rose up with profound disgust—is of English origin, there is no doubt about it. The French were only the apes and actors of these ideas, their best soldiers, and likewise, alas! their first and profoundest VICTIMS; for owing to the diabolical Anglomania of 'modern ideas,' the âme français has in the end become so thin and emaciated, that at present one recalls its sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, its profound, passionate strength, its inventive excellency, almost with disbelief. One must, however, maintain this verdict of historical justice in a determined manner, and defend it against present prejudices and appearances: the European Noblesse—of sentiment, taste, and manners, taking the word in every high sense—is the work and invention of France; the European ignobleness, the plebeianism of modern ideas—is England's work and invention." In Nietzsche, *Beyond*, 188-189 (Aph. 253).
61 Ibid., 190 (Aph. 254).
62 Nietzsche, *Letters,* 200.

that Nietzsche was familiar with his work and thought. The value here is that Nietzsche also calls Taine a "brave pessimist" and considers him, along with himself and Jacob Burckhardt, "fundamental nihilists."[63] Investigating these terms and their application to Taine is important for the thesis of this work.

Of course the origin and point of reference for Nietzsche's pessimism is Schopenhauer. Paul Gottfried's scholarship indicates that while the Second Empire did not acknowledge Schopenhauer in any significant way, Taine had planned a book on him after he recognized the similarities between himself and Schopenhauer in 1870 during the production of his work, *On Intelligence*.[64] This indicates a familiarity with Schopenhauer early enough to show up in the first publication of Taine's *Ancient Regime*. However, it might be reasonable to push Taine's familiarity with Schopenhauer back further. According to Gottfried, in the 1850s, *Le Journal des Débats* and *La Revue des Deux Mondes* had published critical work on German pessimisms.[65] Considering that Taine knew the editor, and himself had published in these journals, it is reasonable that Taine had known of Schopenhauerian pessimism earlier than 1870. In either case, it is possible that Nietzsche called him a brave pessimist because of the presence of Schopenhauerian language or concepts in his work.[66]

The other possibility is that Nietzsche simply saw the quality of Taine's work and life as sufficiently pessimist to include him in the club. In contrast to Schopenhauer, whose pessimism ended in a depressing denial of the world, Nietzsche demanded a forceful embrace of that world. The problem with Schopenhauer, according to Nietzsche, was his retreat into morality.[67] For Nietzsche, pessimism must be strong in that it accepts the reality of the world. As Dienstag summarizes it, "All pessimisms conclude that the universe has no order and human history no progress; the Dionysian [brave] variety is the only one that can find something to like about this situation."[68] While Taine was not happy about his skepticism, and probably would not have embraced Nietzsche's championing of the ego, he seems to have accepted the reality of it. Therefore, what Nietzsche perceived in Taine was the experience he expressed while writing *On Intelligence,* and Nietzsche most likely based his label of brave pessimism on the quality and acceptance of Taine's conclusions about human knowledge.

Regarding Nietzsche's second description of Taine, one should understand

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63 Ibid., 201, 202.
64 Paul Gottfried, "Arthur Schopenhauer and the Heritage of Pessimism," *Studies in Modern European History and Culture* 1 (1975): 51.
65 Gottfried, "Schopenhauer," 10.
66 Nias detects Schopenhauerian language in Taine's 1870 work. See Nias, *Artificial*, 221.
67 Joshua Dienstage, "Nietzsche's Dionysian Pessimism," *The American Political Science Review* 95 (2001): 930.
68 Dienstage, "Dionysian," 933.

"fundamental nihilist" along the lines of Nietzsche's definition of pessimism. In character with Nietzsche's style, Nietzsche refers to himself as both nihilist and anti-nihilist. Unlike other doctrines, this seeming contradiction is easy to understand. In the light of his own philosophy, he was anti-nihilist. For Nietzsche, Europe was descending toward nihilism, and his project was to save it by providing a new morality. In the light of how non-adherents of his philosophy viewed it, he was certainly a nihilist, in that he was trying to undermine the basis of morality and the mechanisms that produced it. In this latter sense, Taine fits well, and Nietzsche is clearly claiming that Taine agrees with him about the nature of reality and of humankind's relation to it. The upshot of this correspondence is that Taine and Nietzsche knew each other's work, and that Nietzsche believed Taine a fellow skeptic. Given Nietzsche's tendency to overstate and overestimate his importance, these correspondences would be weak on their own. However, by making certain philosophical and historical comparisons, they seem to support both lines of evidence for the thesis.

Taine and Nietzsche Together in History

Hippolyte Taine's influence on the Third Republic and the French right began almost immediately after the crushing of the Commune. The summer following the violence, Taine began raising funds for a new school dreamed up during the *semaine sanglante* by journalist and historian, Emile Boutmy. The École Libre des Sciences Politiques was to be private, and, consistent with Boutmy and Taine's shared political convictions, was to train up a new generation of elites to run France. In line with the implications of Taine's epistemological convictions, the school consciously moved away from politics as a contemplation of abstractions. Instead, they set out to supply students with a practical, concrete, and scientific education.

Getting support from Orleanists, aristocrats, and Protestant bankers, the student body was restricted to elites of the upper bourgeoisie, a core value that remained intact until the First World War.[69] Its curriculum promoted doctrines in line with center-right ideology. Robert Smith's careful analysis of student examinations reveals a social conservatism and a paternalistic economic liberalism that often portrayed workers as children unable to function economically without the guidance of superiors.[70] The type of history given to its students emphasized continuity with

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69 Robert Smith, "Ideology at Sciences Po: Students' Examinations, 1879-1945," *Proceedings of the Western Society for French History* 15 (1988): 313. See also Thomas R. Osborne, "Social Science at the Sciences Po: Training the Bureaucratic Elite in the Early Third Republic," *Historical Reflections* 8 (1981): 52, 75.

70 Smith, "Ideology," 315, 318.

the past.[71] There was also an emphasis on the English model, which deferred to precedent and tradition rather than codification and abstraction in its legal system. By the end of the decade, the *Ecole* dominated the training of France's elites.[72]

While the school fit fairly well with Taine's politics, it was by no means a pure product of his philosophical outlook. Taine's condemnation of the Revolution *in toto* was too extreme for the ideology of the school. Tocqueville and Guizot's historical works dominated the school, which presented a rational liberal view of the Revolution. This view placed the Revolution in the natural flow of French history and supported the motivations and activities of the revolutionaries of 1789.[73] Although Taine's politics were center-right, the implications of his epistemology in the flow of French history were more radical, and Taine was philosophically out of place amongst his political peers.

While Taine's legacy in the Third Republic certainly includes the École Libre des Sciences Politiques, his epistemology produced a more distinctly Tainian one. The implication of his work for the interpretation of the Revolution profoundly affected the development of the right.[74] McClelland writes:

> The right in France attacked rationality, universality and democracy and in so doing worked out an opposing position of great coherence and force.… It was Taine's attack on the Revolution and the revolutionary tradition which turned the flank of the pro-revolutionary positions of Michelet and Lamartine, the high priest of Republican orthodoxy.… Taine supplied the hard basis of fact and scholarship for anti-revolutionary opinion.[75]

Although Alan Pitt suggests that "Taine's profound irrationalism" could have been the basis for the Third Republic's ultimately cynical take on democracy, the greater and more lasting accomplishment would be in supplying the scholarship that inspired new trajectories for the French right.[76] The defenders of anti-democratic and authoritarian ideologies discovered new formulas in Taine's work, allowing them to find legitimacy in a France much different from that of de Maistre's. Charles Maurras, one of the leading apologists of the right-wing political movement, *Action*

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71 Osborne, "Social Science," 57.
72 Ibid., 54.
73 Thomas R. Osborne and James Friguglietti, "The 'Haute Bourgeoisie' and the Legacy of the French Early Third Republic," *Consortium on Revolutionary Europe 1750-1850: Selected Papers* (1995): 202.
74 Muret reports that Louis Dimier dated the intellectual counter-revolution by the publication of Taine's Origins. See Charlotte Muret, *French Royalist Doctrines Since the Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1933), 246.
75 J. S. McClelland, *The French Right: From de Maistre to Maurras*, ed., J. S. McClelland (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 20-21.
76 Alan Pitt, "The Irrationalist Liberalism of Hippolyte Taine," *The Historical Journal* 41(1998): 1038.

Française, credited Taine with revitalizing royalism and developing nationalism.[77] According to Gasparini, both Maurice Barres and Charles Maurras "*se posent en héritiers de l'historien des 'Origines.'*"[78] Another leading light of the *Action Française*, Louis Dimier, believed that the *Action Française* was a product of Taine's work.[79] Founded after his death in 1893, Taine was never part of this movement, but his anti-Enlightenment and counter-Revolutionary writings had helped shape it.

By 1893, both Taine and Nietzsche were gone—Nietzsche suffered a breakdown and Taine died. During the first several years of the 1890s, Nietzsche's writings became influential among the French literary avant-garde.[80] Drawing political implications from literary theory, Nietzsche's work came to inform several left-wing groups in Paris. By the turn of the century, however, the right had discovered the usefulness of Nietzsche and had given him a conservative makeover. In particular, Nietzsche became associated with the *Action Française* through several of their members. As Nietzsche's writings had always been controversial, it soon became problematic to have him associated with the political movement, especially when trying to win over Catholic support in the light of Nietzsche's views on Christianity.

As the place of Nietzsche in French nationalist thought became a difficult issue for the *Action Française,* more treatments of Nietzsche's philosophy came out. In this reflective period, some on the right acknowledged and exploited similarities between Taine and Nietzsche. According to Reino Vertanen's scholarship, there was a tendency among some of the apologists of the *Action Française* to downplay Nietzsche by either suggesting he was derivative of Taine or similar enough not to need him.[81] Vertanes cites Francis de Miomandre's assertion that Nietzsche caught on in France only because the French had neglected Taine.[82] Charles Maurras wrote that the use of Nietzsche by the *Action Française* had been extremely selective and included only those things found in "the French moralists and Taine that was in him."[83] Maurras' position was simple: "*Nous devrions brûler une moitié de Nietzsche*

77 Eric Gasparini, *La Pensée Politique D'Hippolyte Taine : Entre Traditionalisme et Libéralisme* (Presses universitaires d'Aix-Marseille, 1993), 364-365.
78 Ibid., 356.
79 Muret, *French Royalist Doctrines*, 246.
80 By 1898, all of Nietzsche's works had French editions. See Christopher Forth, *Zarathustra in Paris: The Nietzsche Vogue in France, 1891-1918* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2001), 86.
81 Reino Vertanen, "Nietzsche and the Action Française: Nietzsche's Significance for French Rightist Thought," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 11(1950): 206.
82 Jules de Gaultier, *Nietzsche et La Réforme Philosophique* (Société du Mercure de France, 1904), 253. He writes: "M. de Miomandre voit en Taine et en Friedrich Nietzsche des représentants d'une même doctrine, le déterminisme." Gaultier was responding to an article written in the *Revue Bleue* (Oct. 10, 1903), 507-512.
83 Reino Vertanen, "Nietzsche and the Action Française," 206.

comme inutile et son autre moitié comme dangereuse."[84] Only a decade or so since their exit from intellectual life some were already taking seriously the notion that Taine and Nietzsche were compatible. In line with the implications of the thesis, Taine's and Nietzsche's legacies had almost immediately crossed paths.[85]

Conclusions

In general, Nietzsche hated Socrates. He hated him because Socrates tried to subject all of reality, including morality, to a certain kind of rationality. The immediate effect of this subjection was the destruction of what Nietzsche believed was the true high point of the Greek world, that is, the period before the Golden Age when the Dionysian spirit reigned and art flourished. Socrates was also, according to Nietzsche, responsible for putting the Western world on this same course.[86] Twenty-two centuries later, thinkers saw a similar trend within French history beginning with the seventeenth century and leading into the nineteenth. To explain the destruction of France's Golden Age, where discoveries of science were interspersed between the works of Racine, Molière, and Corneille, and the ultimate and violent ending of France's *ancien régime*, conservative Joseph de Maistre would cite an impious use of reason as well, one that also aimed to put all of reality under a particular kind of reason.

Nietzsche and Taine, writing two generations after de Maistre, agreed in essence with most of his diagnosis. However, many changes had occurred in the time between them. While all three thinkers read this portion of French history in a similar way, and were in some way informed in their epistemological skepticism by Pascal, the critiques of Kant and the world-shifting insights of Darwin sequestered Taine and Nietzsche from de Maistre. As Kant's critique put epistemology on a course toward radical skepticism, the safety net of religious revelation that would make up for any epistemological weakness was also no longer available. Shaped by, and struggling with, the same narrative of French history as de Maistre, the realities of the later nineteenth century advanced the debate, requiring Taine and Nietzsche to reformulate epistemology and produce responses coherent and persuasive to their similar situations. Although slightly different in their concerns, the intellectual

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84 Charles Maurras, *Quand les Français Ne s'Aimaient Pas: Chronique d'une Renaissance*, 1895-1905 (Paris: Nouvelle Librairie Nationale, 1916), 131-132.

85 Pierre Lasserre, *La Morale de Nietzsche* (Société du Mercure de France, 1902), 131. Lasserre cites Taine as one of the first French admirers of Nietzsche.

86 According to Nietzsche, while Socrates was awaiting his execution, he was visited by an apparition, which told him to play music. In deference to the deity, Socrates played. For Nietzsche, this was proof that Socrates finally understood that life needed more than logic. See Robert Solomon and Kathleen Higgins, *What Nietzsche Really Said* (New York: Schocken Books, 2000), 153.

substructure of natural selection gave their ideas a similar quality. As Taine was concerned with political systems, he reconstituted the right. While Nietzsche was concerned with personal culture, he reconstructed morality. Holding them together was their irrationality, their belief that the humanistic and optimistic part of the Enlightenment was incorrect, along with every society built on its assumptions.

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