

# Early French Psychology: Breaking Free from the Metaphysical

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In no small measure because of the conservatism of the reign of Louis Napoléon (president, 1848-1852; emperor as "Napoléon III", 1852-1870), academic philosophy in France through the middle part of the 19th century was controlled by members of the eclectic and spiritualist schools, led by figures such as Victor Cousin (1792-1867), Théodore Jouffroy (1796-1842), and Paul Janet (1823-1899). These were traditional metaphysical schools, opposed to regarding psychology as a natural science. With the ouster of Napoléon III after the débacle of the Franco-Prussian war, new paths, both political and intellectual, became possible. From the 1870 forward, a steadily increasing interest in positivist, materialist, evolutionary, and deterministic approaches to psychology developed, influenced by, among others, the work of Hyppolyte Taine (1828-1893) (e.g., *De L'Intelligence*, 1870) and Théodule Ribot (1839-1916) (e.g., *La Psychologie Anglaise Contemporaine*, 1870).

In 1876, Ribot founded *Revue Philosophique* (the same year as *Mind* was founded in Britain), which for the next generation would be virtually the only French outlet for the "new" psychology (Plas, 1997). Although not a working experimentalist himself, Ribot's many books were to have profound influence on the next generation of psychologists. These included especially his *L'Hérédité Psychologique* (1873) and *La Psychologie Allemande Contemporaine* (1879). In the 1880s, Ribot's interests turned to psychopathology, writing books on disorders of memory (1881), will (1883), and personality (1885), and where he attempted to bring to these topics the insights of general psychology. Although in 1881 he lost a Sorbonne professorship in the History of Psychological Doctrines to traditionalist Jules Soury (1842-1915), from 1885 to 1889 he taught experimental psychology at the Sorbonne. In 1889 he was awarded a chair at the Collège de France in Experimental and Comparative Psychology, which he held until 1896 (Nicolas, 2002).

France's primary psychological strength lay in the field of psychopathology. The chief neurologist at the Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris, Jean-Martin Charcot (1825-1893), had been using the recently revived and renamed (see above) practice of hypnosis to "experimentally" produce hysterical symptoms in some of his patients. Two of his students, Alfred Binet (1857-1911) and Pierre Janet (1859-1947), adopted and expanded this practice in their own work.

In 1889, Binet and his colleague Henri Beaunis (1830-1921) co-founded, at the Sorbonne, the first experimental psychology laboratory in France. Just five years later, in 1894, Beaunis, Binet, and a third colleague, Victor Henri (1872-1940), co-founded the first French journal dedicated to experimental psychology, *L'Année Psychologique*. In the first years of the 20th century, Binet was requested by the French government to develop a method for the newly founded universal public education system to identify students who would require extra assistance to master the standardized curriculum. In response, with his collaborator Théodore Simon (1873-1961), he developed the Binet-Simon Intelligence Test, first published in 1905 (revised in 1908 and 1911). Although the test was used to effect in France, it would find its greatest success (and controversy) in the United States, where it was translated in by Henry H. Goddard (1866-1957), the director of

the Training School for the Feebleminded in Vineland, New Jersey, and his assistant, Elizabeth Kite (a translation of the 1905 edition appeared in the Vineland Bulletin in 1908, but much better known was Kite's 1916 translation of the 1908 edition, which appeared in book form). The translated test was used by Goddard to advance his eugenics agenda with respect to those he deemed congenitally feeble-minded, especially immigrants from non-Western European countries. Binet's test was revised by Stanford professor Lewis M. Terman (1877-1956) into the Stanford-Binet IQ test in 1916. With Binet's death in 1911, the Sorbonne laboratory and L'Année Psychologique fell to Henri Piéron (1881-1964). Piéron's orientation was more physiological than Binet's had been.

Pierre Janet became the leading psychiatrist in France, being appointed to the Salpêtrière (1890-1894), the Sorbonne (1895-1920), and the Collège de France (1902-1936). In 1904, he co-founded the *Journal de Psychologie Normale et Pathologique* with fellow Sorbonne professor Georges Dumas (1866-1946), a student and faithful follower of Ribot. Whereas Janet's teacher, Charcot, had focused on the neurological bases of hysteria, Janet was concerned to develop a scientific approach to psychopathology as a mental disorder. His theory that mental pathology results from conflict between unconscious and conscious parts of the mind, and that unconscious mental contents may emerge as symptoms with symbolic meanings led to a public priority dispute with Sigmund Freud.