

“Letter to Teachers”

by Liliane Maury
Honorary research fellow, CNRS
Lecturer, EHESS

In November 1883, schoolteachers across France received a copy of the letter analysed in this article. It was from the Minister of Public Instruction, Jules Ferry. According to a later account by Ferry’s brother, the letter was written entirely by Ferry himself.¹

It was also a farewell letter and, in a sense, a will. For, a few days after writing it, Ferry left the Ministry of Public Instruction for good to take up the position of Minister of Foreign Affairs. He had spent four successive years at the ministry, except for a period of two months between December 1881 and January 1882 when he was replaced by Paul Bert under the Gambetta ministry.



Figure 1: Two French stamps in homage to Jules Ferry (1832–1893). The first, on the left, dates from March 1951, and the second from September 1981, the centenary year of the school laws.

The issue at stake is quite clear. The letter aims to explain to teachers the provisions of the latest school law, voted on 28 March 1882. This law made not only schooling, but also moral education, mandatory, and therein lay the rub:

The law of 28 March 1882 is marked by two tendencies that complement without contradicting each other: on the one hand, the law excludes the

1. *Discours et Opinions de Jules Ferry*, published with comments and notes by Paul Robiquet, Paris, Armand Colin, 1893, Volume IV, p. 259–67.

teaching of any particular dogma from the required curriculum; on the other, it accords moral and civic education the highest rank.

By dispensing you from religious instruction, we have no thoughts of freeing you from the teaching of morals. That would be removing the dignity of your profession.

This is a question of secular morality and therefore a morality that may be instilled in all children in France, regardless of their background and, above all, the religion in which they are brought up by their family.

That is why Ferdinand Buisson – whom we will come across again later on – restricts the “Morality” entry in his *Nouveau Dictionnaire de Pédagogie et d’instruction primaire*² – to that which is taught “at school”, while also reproducing much of Ferry’s “Letter to Teachers” by way of conclusion.³

@@@@@@

The letter marks the end of a long era that had been revived by the Falloux Law⁴ in 1850. It also heralds the start of a new era, that of the republican school. To modern eyes, the letter appears old-fashioned, not only in its Third-Republic written style but also in its content: mandatory schooling is now universally accepted and morality lessons are long gone from school curricula, at least in the explicit form that the minister recommends.

This at once raises a question: why did Ferry judge it necessary to draw a connection between the two principles? Is it mandatory schooling that implies secularism, or is it secular morality that makes obligation effective?

It seems to us that secular morality gives meaning to mandatory schooling. If all children must go to school, this is not by virtue of a bogus order, but rather by virtue of obligation, or a moral code. And a moral code that refers to no external dogma is, as a result, secular. Through this law, Jules Ferry thus achieved the aim that he had set for himself long before, in 1870: achieving “equality of education”.

@@@@@@

2. The *Nouveau Dictionnaire de Pédagogie et d’Instruction primaire*, ed. F. Buisson, Paris, Hachette, 1911.
3. The *Nouveau Dictionnaire de Pédagogie et d’Instruction primaire* was first published in 1880. It is divided into two parts. The first is a kind of treaty of “theoretical pedagogy”. The second is “a complete course in primary instruction, not for pupils, but for schoolteachers”.
4. From December 1848 to October 1849 Alfred de Falloux (1811–1886) was Minister of Public Instruction and Worship under Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte’s Second Republic. The Law of March 1850, which was named after him, is above all known for its provisions in favour of a pedagogical liberty that left ample room for religious teaching.

Before turning to this, it is perhaps useful to briefly recall the – extremely heated – debates that accompanied the enactment of this law. Not all these debates concerned the principle of obligation itself, but rather the very notion of morality as Ferry conceived it.

This overview gives an insight into the philosophical background of the time, and it is this background that gives the debate its meaning and purpose. It also allows us to understand why the moral education of yesteryear has now disappeared – though we will leave readers to pursue this reflection on their own. Moral instruction played its part at a moment in the history of school in France, and that moment has now passed.

Is the debate on secular morality a thing of the past or – and we would err towards this hypothesis – has it continued, but in such wholly different terms and with such different protagonists that we struggle to see its connection with the previous debate from the late 19th century?

Schools under the Third Republic are not just objects of historical interest. They can be a springboard for thinking about current issues in schooling and secularism in France, two subjects that are certainly not consigned to the past.

MORALITY PLAIN AND SIMPLE

Morality will simply be enfeebled and compromised if it ceases to be what it is: morality plain and simple.

It was while the law was being discussed at the Senate, during the session of 2 July 1881, that Jules Ferry, then Minister of Public Instruction and President of the Council, pronounced this famous phrase.

Ferry argued against an amendment put forward by the senator Jean Delsol.⁵ The amendment concerned the first article of the Law on Primary Education, and proposed replacing the words “Moral and civic instruction” with the words “Religious morality and civic instruction”.

One can of course sense the impatience behind Ferry’s slogan. (Impatience is in fact an understatement.) But the tautology is not due to error or oversight. He does not say “[morality] ceases to be what it must or should be”, but rather “what it is”. Above all, as Jules Ferry often repeats, this morality is nothing new; it has always existed and we have simply inherited it:

5. Jean Delsol (1827–1896), deputy for the Aveyron department from 1871 to 1876, and then senator for the Aveyron from 1876 to 1894 (source: National Assembly website).

It will be a matter of the old precepts that we all learned from our mothers and fathers when we were children. It will be a matter of respect for parents, of obedience to parents; it will be a matter of the numerous applications of this precept which fully sums up the eternal morality: "Do not do unto others as you would not have them do unto you." [Ferry, July 1881, Senate]⁶

Why, then, did it take so many arguments and so many days to convince the gentlemen of the Senate? Because, in and around 1881, the question of morality was subject to fundamental philosophical reflections. And these reflections had been aroused and embittered by the difficult acceptance of a new vision of the origin of humankind.

@@@@@@

Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* was published, as we all know, in 1859. Although the publication initially aroused little reaction, within no time at all it was the object of intense polemic. What is also curious is that, in 1844, well before beginning work on his book, Darwin had confided in his friend Hooker about the dismay he felt vis-à-vis his ideas: "I am almost convinced (quite contrary to the opinion I started with) that species are not (it is like confessing a murder) immutable".⁷

In 1871, a more self-assured Darwin published another work whose decidedly ambiguous title, *The Descent of Man*,⁸ pursued his reflections and extended them to humankind, and thus in a certain respect to morality and religion. From hereon in, moral theories in both England and France would be developed and debated on this middle ground between philosophy and the nature sciences.

For Jules Ferry, who was a minister and not a philosopher, what counted was avoiding and even transcending these debates. That is why the morality he advocates, as we have just seen, is not simply that which is handed down "from our mothers and fathers", but one that unifies all forms of morality recommended by philosophers. After one of the many interruptions to his speech, he replies:

I am not here to hold a dialogue ... No, sirs! What is profoundly reassuring – and this is not the first time I have raised this idea at this platform, but it

6. Cited in J. Stephen Hazlitt, *Conceptions of Democratic Education in the Founding of the French Third Republic (1870–c. 1890)*, p. 75, <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED097264.pdf>.--Trans.

7. The full text of the letter is available here.--Trans.

8. Étienne Gilson suggests replacing the French translation of the title, *La Descendance de l'homme*, with *La Descente de l'homme*, while apologizing for the inelegance of the expression in French. He notes: "In English, the first meaning of *descent* is the act or fact of 'descending from'; its second meaning is extraction, origin, and finally, lineage. In French, *descendance* primarily denotes filiation and posterity: *his numerous progeny*. In this sense, the *descendance de l'homme* would be Nietzsche's Superman or Jules Romains' Unanimism" (p. 82). [This footnote is a reference to Étienne Gilson's work, *D'Aristote à Darwin et retour*, Paris, Vrin, 1971.--Trans.]

is one that can never be repeated or reproduced too often – what is profoundly reassuring is that all these moralities that you call evolutionary, utilitarian, positivist, are the same morality.

He goes on to add:

M. Spencer's book, which has as its starting point the satisfaction, interest and morality of pleasure, and what have you, arrives through a logical and admirable evolution at conclusions that are absolutely identical to those of the morality of Kant, identical to those of the morality of the honourable M. Jules Simon.

In short, “morality plain and simple”, or “morality without an epithet”, unifies all epithetical moralities, regardless of what they are. This morality “is the very basis of humanity, of human conscience ...”.

We will leave aside Spencer, even though he authored a book – *The Data of Ethics*⁹ – ardently recommended by Jules Ferry in the closing speech of the Pedagogical Congress¹⁰ of 2 April 1880, which brought together the directors of primary teaching colleges (*écoles normales*) as well as primary school inspectors. We will skip over the names associated with the different moralities, and which Ferry cavalierly brushes aside.

@@@@@@

But let's pause a moment on the last name mentioned in Ferry's remark, Jules Simon. Simon's relationship with Ferry was a direct one, and Simon played a very active role in the debate on the law. Indeed, on 4 July 1881, Jules Simon took to the rostrum to put forward the following amendment:

Schoolmasters will instruct their pupils in their duties towards God and the Fatherland.

The slogan is certainly adroit. It explicitly avoids everything Ferry had just argued against, namely attributing an epithet to morality – and above all, the epithet “religious” – which the minister judged “obscure” and “equivocal”. As we know, some philosophies have turned into religions, particularly in France. The positivist philosophy of Auguste Comte is one example. Incidentally, this phenomenon has swiftly led to quarrels and ideological rifts, in particular the ones pitting Auguste Comte against Littré, author of the *Dictionnaire*.

9. H. Spencer, *The Data of Ethics*, 1879.

10. *Discours et Opinions*, Volume III, p. 511–28.

But Jules Ferry did not fall for the semantic subtleties of Jules Simon. Even though he had not read it, he knew that Simon had published a short essay entitled *Le devoir* [Duty],¹¹ followed, in 1856, by another, more philosophical piece with the inescapably Rousseauian title *La Religion naturelle*.¹²

Ferry recognises that he is in the spotlight. Taking advantage of the honourable senators' ignorance, he is able to tell them:

I know that some among us propose this novelty ... and that the author of the amendment in particular, M. Jules Simon, harbours the hope of finding, among fifty or sixty thousand schoolmasters, fifty or sixty Savoy curates. I can understand a philosopher like M. Jules Simon having this dream in mind; I cannot understand it among the majority of the honourable members who sit on this side of the Assembly, and who, I suppose, do not exactly wish for the Savoy curate's profession of faith to supplant the profession of the Catholic faith, to which they are so firmly attached.

Jules Simon, philosopher and politician



Like other philosophers of the day, such as Paul Janet (1823–1899) – whom Ferry appointed to supervise the curriculum of moral education – Jules Simon (1814–1896) was one of the cohort of secretaries to Victor Cousin. Both men, indeed, wrote a book about him.

These philosophers continued the work of Cousin. The latter was a philosopher *à la française*, in the words of Pierre Macherey,¹³ who then reigned supreme both at the Sorbonne and the *École normale supérieure*, which was the alma mater of all the men.

This “spiritualist” philosophy combined theory, teaching and politics. Yet the latter is changeable, sometimes brutally and unexpectedly so. This, as we know, was the case in 1851.

11. J. Simon, *Le Devoir*, Paris, Hachette, 1855 (5th ed.).

12. J. Simon, *La Religion naturelle*, Paris, Hachette, 1856.

13. P. Macherey, “Les débuts philosophiques de Victor Cousin”, *Corpus* no. 18–19, *Sur Victor Cousin*, p. 29–49, <http://stl.recherche.univ-lille3.fr/sitespersonnels/macherey/machereybiblio41.html>.

A few days after the coup d'État of 2 December 1851, Jules Simon, who was then already a republican deputy, pronounced the following words during his lecture at the Sorbonne:

Gentlemen, it is my duty here to give you a lesson in morality. Today, I owe you not a lesson, but an example. France is to be convoked tomorrow to approve or disapprove of what has just taken place. If there is going to be recorded one vote of disapproval, I wish to say to you now, openly, that it will be mine.

Like others – for example, Ferdinand Buisson, who went into exile in Switzerland – Jules Simon refused to swear an oath of allegiance to the emperor, and his lectures were suspended. In 1870, after the fall of the empire, he became Minister of Public Instruction. It's therefore plain to see that his relationship with Jules Ferry was, let's say, ambivalent.

Though we have just seen the reason for the disagreement between the two men, in reality the discord ran deeper than it might appear. For while Jules Simon rejected the morality upheld by Ferry, he no more accepted the concept of mandatory schooling: making education obligatory seemed sufficient to him. Indeed, it was obligatory *education* that he himself had tried to establish – in vain – in 1871, when he was Minister of Public Instruction.

This is what he had written some years before, in 1864, in a text that is paradoxically entitled *L'École*:

Is liberty deprived of its legitimate guarantees by the law making instruction obligatory? That would be a grave matter, even in the absence of any danger. But this is not so. No one is considering making school attendance mandatory; what is demanded is simply that a child can read, or that his father provide proof that the means to teach him were lacking. Does this school alarm you? It is not the only one. Choose one that you find reassuring. Are there none nearby? Be the schoolmaster yourself: the law requires only reading and writing; teaching these subjects does not require a great deal of time. Are you completely illiterate? Among your acquaintances there will surely be a friend, patron of childhood, priest or some other person who will give your child lessons.

This is not simply a quarrel of words, as it might appear – especially nowadays, when obligatory education and obligatory schooling amount to the same thing. School has become “normal”, even “natural” in some respects.

For Jules Ferry, what was most important was not restricting primary education (for ordinary people) to “the fundamental and traditional teaching of how to *read, write and count*”. And, for that, education had to be delivered in a place that was both closed and open – in other words, school.

At the close of the first teachers' congress, which was held on 24 April 1881 at the Sorbonne,¹⁴ Ferry insisted:

... the lessons of things, the teaching of drawing, notions of natural history, school museums, gymnastics, school walks, the manual work of the workshop placed alongside school, singing and choral music which will gradually win their place in turn, everything that we wish to introduce into schools. Why all these accessories? Because in our eyes they are the essential, because it is in them that educational virtue lies, because these accessories will make primary school, the school in the smallest hamlet, in the humblest village, a school of liberal education.

In 1883, Jules Simon – who had plainly been defeated – published a book whose title perfectly summed up his curriculum: *Dieu, Patrie, Liberté* [God, Fatherland, Liberty].¹⁵ This motto, for that's what it is, is engraved in stone, for it adorns the pediment of the Collège Jules Simon in Vannes.

Simon's book concludes with an appraisal, which reads:

We the philosophers, we the calm, moderate liberals who are independent of parties, we who seek neither applause nor scandal, and who wish for peace in the souls of our children and on our streets, do not intend for schools to be neutral, as those who have recently created them do: we believe that a school is neutral enough if it allows an atheist, who, on finding himself by fate among a hundred believers, is permitted to leave the classroom when their faith is explained to the other ninety-nine pupils.

"Neutrality" or "secularism": clearly these two terms are not synonymous. This is how Ferdinand Buisson defines the second of the two in the *Nouveau Dictionnaire de pédagogie*:

The lay population is the people, it is the masses at large, it is everyone except the clergy. The secular spirit is all the aspirations of the people, the laos; it is the democratic and popular spirit.

In other words, as Macherey underlines in an article on the "secular philosophers", secularism was first presented "as a political ideology whose orientation is national and republican".¹⁶

14. *Discours et Opinions*, Volume IV, p. 245–59.

15. *Dieu, Patrie, Liberté*, Paris, Calman Lévy, 1883.

16. P. Macherey, "Philosophies laïques", *Mots* no. 27 *Laïc, laïque, laïcité*, June 1991, p. 5-21, <http://stl.recherche.univ-lille3.fr/sitespersonnels/macherey/machereybiblio37.html>



Figure 2: A moral teaching at the top of the blackboard. In the daily curriculum at this primary school, before calculation and spelling, a moral teaching would be read: "Respect for others and politeness are the most important qualities of a good pupil." Moral teachings, whether dispensed daily or less frequently, were common in primary schools until the 1960s. (Photo: Edith Blaind's blog, taken at the Ferme-Musée de la Forêt in Saint Trivier de Courtes, Ain).

LEARNING MORALITY

*Can you tell me, Socrates, whether virtue is acquired by teaching or by practice; or if neither by teaching nor practice, then whether it comes to man by nature, or in what other way?*¹⁷

Socrates is careful not to give a definitive response to this question posed by the young Meno at the outset of the eponymous Socratic dialogue. For this question, like most of those posed by philosophy, has no answer, and that is why it is always relevant.

But Jules Ferry, as a man of politics and a man of action, has no difficulty in responding. In his letter he peremptorily declares and writes:

Children have a moral apprenticeship to serve just as they have an apprenticeship in reading and arithmetic. The child who knows how to recognise and put letters together does not yet know how to read; the one who knows how to trace letters one after another does not know how to

17. Plato, *Meno*, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1643/1643-h/1643-h.htm>.

write. What do they both need? Practice, habit, facility, rapidity, and sureness of execution. In the same way a child who repeats the first principles of morality does not yet know how to conduct himself; he must be trained to apply these principles readily, naturally, almost instinctively.

This opinion, however, is not shared by all those who have tried and even succeeded in teaching morality at school. The primary schools inspector Félix Pécaut (1828–1898), founder of the *École normale supérieure de Fontenay-aux-Roses* – where he trained the first future directors of women’s teacher training colleges [*écoles normales de jeunes filles*] – was a man who, according to his students, excelled in the teaching of morality. Yet he had strong doubts about the matter.



Figure 3: Félix Pécaut, a French educationalist and the first director of the *École normale supérieure de Fontenay-aux-Roses* (1880–1896).

In a short posthumous book entitled *Quinze ans d’Éducation*,¹⁸ which is presented as notes written one day at a time, Pécaut returns to this subject on several occasions. After his rounds in the classrooms, he wonders perplexedly:

Why, of all primary school lessons, is morality the most difficult to deliver, and the one that until now has delivered the least?

For Pécaut, this is partly explained by what he judges to be “essential and permanent” reasons. Unlike other lessons, the teaching of morality, he argues, requires “the soul to be fully engaged”. The other reasons seem to him to be temporary in nature. He observes that religious belief has markedly declined in the

18. F. Pécaut, *Quinze ans d’Éducation*, Paris, Delagrave, 1921.

19th century. He was not the only one: Spencer, for example, labours this point in the preface to his *The Data of Ethics*.

Pécaut himself had experienced this retreat of religious belief, for he had resigned as a pastor and devoted his career to secular education. Ferdinand Buisson, too, had followed a similar path from liberal Protestantism to secularism.

But this – decidedly real – difficulty can be analysed in other terms. The teaching of morality, unlike reading or calculation, falls within two domains: education and instruction. Though related, these domains are different and sometimes even opposed. Yet education goes well beyond the school environment; indeed, one could even say it essentially concerns the family, at least in our culture.

This sentiment, too, is there in Ferry's letter: the schoolteacher must under no circumstances venture onto this territory without first asking himself if he risks offending "a father". Indeed, Ferry stresses this point: "I say a father."¹⁹ In this sense, the schoolteacher is

*the **auxiliary** and, in some respects, the substitute for the father of the family.*

*In history there will be a particular honour for our teaching corps: to have inspired in the French Chambers the opinion that there is in each schoolmaster, in each schoolmistress, a natural **auxiliary** of moral and social progress, a person whose influence cannot fail, in some respects, to raise the level of morals around him or her.*

But the edges of this substitution are evidently hazy. Under these conditions, the schoolteacher invariably finds him or herself in an uncomfortable position.

Instruction is a matter for schools. Schools preside over the acquisition of objectively accurate and truthful knowledge, and do not bring to bear any personal opinion whatsoever. Yet, here, what teachers are supposed to deliver is the teaching of morality, that is to say education.

One can also consider the effects of morality teaching in schools. Not only can these effects be felt "outside school" – as Ferry indeed wrote – but moreover, they can be said to be somewhat invisible. They seem to belong to the subject and form part of his or her personality or character. In other words, they constitute a "second nature". A concrete example can guide us here.

Ferdinand Buisson was Jules Ferry's right-hand man and for many years director of primary education in France. From 1890 onwards, he assumed the chair of pedagogy at the Sorbonne, as part of which he delivered a course entitled

19. In other words, in the singular.--Trans.

L'éducation de la volonté ("The education of will") in 1898/99. On the request of his students, he agreed to publish the closing lecture of this course in the *Revue pédagogique*. Here one can read:

Morality without effort is twice virtue, precisely because it raises us to a point where we are no longer tempted to admire ourselves for having merely done our duty. We are nearer the ultimate truth of things, the just evaluation of real merit and the real dignity of humanity when we can say in all sincerity after a good action, "What I have done is the most natural thing in the world", than when we say, "I have just done a very fine thing." The proof of this position is that if I was to congratulate one of you for returning an overpayment in change at a shop, he would feel very much injured and could never pardon me for doubting him.

Ferdinand Buisson (1841–1932)
Philosopher, senior official, politician, free mason,
winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1927



(Image: French National Assembly)

Ferdinand Buisson is now a slightly forgotten figure. A Protestant and *agrégé* in philosophy, he refused to swear allegiance to the Second Empire and, after completing his studies, went into exile in Switzerland from 1866 to 1870.

Jules Simon (cf. previous panel), who thought highly of Buisson, appointed him director of schools for Paris in 1871. As minister, Jules Ferry appointed him head of school teaching in 1879, a post he would retain until 1896. From 1880 to 1883 he helped Ferry to draft the laws on teaching, and was in charge of implementing them.

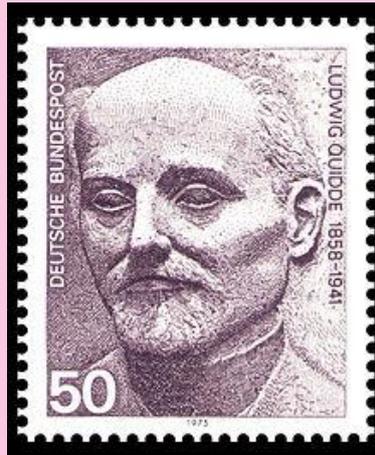
He was the lead editor of the monumental *Dictionnaire de pédagogie et d'instruction primaire*, published by Hachette between 1882 and 1887.

A free mason of the Grand Orient de France (source: *Encyclopédie de la Franc-maçonnerie*, La Pochothèque, 2005) and a Dreyfusard, in 1898 he participated in the creation of the French Humans Rights League, which

he would preside from 1913 to 1926. He was president of the League of Education from 1902 to 1906.

Elected as deputy for the Seine in 1902, he was president of the parliamentary commission responsible for producing the legislative text that enacted the separation of the Church and the State (1905).

After the war, he was a fervent advocate for the creation of the League of Nations (the future UN) and Franco-German rapprochement. It was for this reason in particular that he was jointly awarded the Noble Peace Prize in 1927, alongside the German writer and politician Ludwig Quidde (1858–1941).



Stamp bearing an effigy of Quidde (German Federal Republic, 1975)

That is why, in defining “morality” in the eponymous entry that he wrote for the *Nouveau Dictionnaire de pédagogie*, he drew on the title of a philosophical work published in 1884: J. M. Guyau’s *l’Esquisse d’une morale sans obligation ni sanction* [*Sketch of a Morality with neither Obligation nor Sanction*].²⁰

In the entry, Ferdinand Buisson provides the broad outline of a moral curriculum developed by the spiritualist philosopher Paul Janet. Four educational stages can be made out, from infant school to higher education via elementary and middle school. And it is only for the latter two groups that is pupils from 11 to 13 years, that Janet directs “the natural culmination of moral instruction ... knowledge of God”.

Ferry clearly turns a blind eye to this sentence. Is this – as some have claimed – a climb-down on his part? Or did he, like us, judge that this knowledge presented no danger, and that it even had its own *raison d’être*?

This did not stop the Vatican from putting four morality and civil instruction manuals on its Index in January 1883. The manuals were by Paul Bert, Gabriel

20. J. M. Guyau, *Esquisse d’une morale sans obligation, ni sanction*, Paris, Alcan, 1884, 3rd ed. 1893.

Compayré, Jules Steeg and Mme Gréville, and the morality contained therein, it must be said, seems irreproachable. The “Letter to Teachers” was undeniably connected to this event, and a way to guard against it in future.

EQUALITY OF EDUCATION

On 10 April 1870, that is to say a few months before the declaration of war, the defeat at Sedan and the proclamation of the Republic, Jules Ferry – who was then only a deputy for Paris, this being nine years before he became Minister of Public Instruction – made a speech in the Salle Molière.²¹ He very proudly announced that he had chosen the title himself. It is the same as the subtitle introducing this section.

From the outset he warns the audience that he is going to venture onto a terrain that falls outside his remit – he later stresses that he is a lawyer by profession. He is to speak of philosophy. And, turning towards Jules Simon, who was no doubt present and seated in one of the front rows, he affirms:

Philosophy is necessary in all affairs, and especially in the affair we are concerned with today.

The philosopher that Jules Ferry explicitly refers to is Condorcet. Indeed, he refers to a specific and emblematic work by this philosopher: *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* (translated into English as *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*).²²

Today this text is widely known and has been the object of many commentaries. It was less so at the time, and that was why Ferdinand Buisson produced a new, more accessible edition in 1929.

Condorcet had written this *Sketch* in 1793, when an arrest warrant had been issued against him and he was in hiding in a house on rue Servandoni. Unfortunately, after leaving this hiding place he met his death two days later, in a prison cell. The text was thus published after the author's death. Given the theme and optimism it displays, this ending partly accounts for the text's poignancy.

Condorcet's *Sketch* takes ten stages in history, from a rather mythical antiquity where “men met together in tribes” to the “future progress of the human mind”. In other words, an imaginary future, but one which, according to Condorcet,

21. *Discours et Opinions*, Volume I, p. 284–305.

22. Condorcet, *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain*, Paris, Flammarion, 1988.

is a logical extrapolation from the real progress that was accomplished in the previous stages. In particular, the eighth stage, which stretches from “the invention of printing to the period when the sciences and philosophy threw off the yoke of authority”.

But even before this, in 1790, Condorcet had reflected on the issue of instruction. And in 1792 he had presented his *Rapport et projet de décret sur l'organisation générale de l'instruction publique* [*Report and Project of a Decree on the General Organisation of Public Instruction*] to the National Assembly.²³ Whether this is a rhetorical flourish or sincere, Ferry describes having been “confounded” when he saw, written before him, “an education system suitable for modern society”.

@@@@@@

Jules Ferry’s speech is very long. At the time, politics was conducted through speechifying, discourse and eloquence and not through the television screen. And Ferry excelled at this type of exercise. He was able to keep his audience’s attention even on serious themes, as here on the “equality of education”. Yet the orator knew that, towards the end of his lecture, he would have to adopt a more light-hearted tone. And that is why, turning towards the ladies, who were probably less numerous than his male listeners, he recommends a text:

At least read the book by Stuart Mill on the subjection of women; all of you ladies must read it. It is the beginning of wisdom: it will teach you that you have the same faculties as men.

This text²⁴ had been published in 1869, but it had been written by Stuart Mill in 1861, i.e. at the same time as the publication of *Utilitarianism*, in which he expounds one of those epithetical morals Ferry alluded to at the Senate.

Stuart Mill was an English philosopher, and an admirer, friend and even patron of Auguste Comte. But, on the subject of women, he parted company with the father of positivism in no uncertain terms. According to Auguste Comte, women’s intelligence is greatly inferior to that of men, and, in his eyes, this inferiority was proven by biology!²⁵

A comment can be made here. Much emphasis has been placed on the influence of positivism on Ferry’s school interventions. That is true, and at the

23. Condorcet, *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain*, Paris, Flammarion, 1988.

24. John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, 1869.

25. See Auguste Comte, *Cours de philosophie positive* (50^e leçon), or *Système de politique positive*.

time, it could not have been otherwise. This is underlined by the title of a lecture on Ferry given by Claude Nicolet at the conference marking the centenary of the secular school, organised by the *École des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Humaines*:²⁶ *Jules Ferry et la tradition positiviste*.

Positivism is a philosophy which cannot be associated with one name only. Moreover, positivism was a locus for struggle even among those who subscribed to its philosophy, like Stuart Mill for example. But the most spectacular conflict – and the one that more directly concerns Ferry – was the conflict between Comte and Littré mentioned above.

Littré reproached Auguste Comte for having transformed his philosophy into a religion. Indeed, his last publication in 1857 – the same year of his death – was entitled *Catéchisme positiviste*.²⁷ Comte himself intervenes in this text as a priest.

Yet Ferry's sympathies were with Littré. Not only had he joined the free masons in 1875²⁸ – at the same time and at the same lodge as the latter – he also seems to have studied his work. Indeed, Alfred Rambaud – Ferry's cabinet director – recounts the following anecdote in the obituary he wrote for Ferry in 1893, in the *Revue politique et littéraire*:

One time I was telling him about a lecture I had to give on Littré: he immediately gave me not only new points of view, but a complete reading list. He had a taste for positivist philosophy.

The upshot of this is that the positivist morality evoked by Ferry before the Senate is composite, even contradictory, in nature. It could just as easily stem from the work of Comte as of Littré, or indeed from one of the many other disciples of positivism – who, what's more, were in disagreement with one another.

But secular morality, too, is composite and contradictory, as is clearly shown by the title of Ferdinand Buisson's main work,²⁹ a collection of texts, lectures, speeches and articles dating from different periods, which was published in 1912 under the title *La Foi laïque [Secular Faith]*.

@@@@@@@

26. *Jules Ferry, fondateur de la République*, proceedings of the conference organised by the EHESS, and introduced by F. Furet, Paris, Éditions de l'EHESS, 1982, p. 23–47.

27. A. Comte, *Catéchisme positiviste*, Paris, Garnier-Flammarion, 1966.

28. J. M. Gaillard, *Jules Ferry*, Paris, Fayard, 1989, p. 150.

29. F. Buisson, *La foi laïque*, Paris, Hachette, 1912.

In his lecture in 1870, Ferry defines the purpose of the 19th century, which is to “remove the last, and most formidable, inequalities of birth: the inequality of education”. That is why he himself makes the following pledge:

... of all the problems, I will choose the one to which I can dedicate all the intelligence I possess, the entirety of my soul, all of my heart and my physical and moral powers, and that problem is the education of the people.

This is an ambitious endeavour, a political endeavour. And through it a new society was to emerge. Such a step change could not be achieved without struggle and the active participation of all well-intentioned citizens, particularly women. Ferry’s lecture on the equality of education concludes on this note:

There is going on today a silent but persistent struggle between the society of the past ... with its edifice of regrets, beliefs, and institutions, which does not accept modern democracy, and the society that emerged from the French Revolution ... Women cannot be neutral in this combat; optimists, who do not want to see the heart of the issue, can imagine that woman’s role is negligible, that she does not take part in the battle, but they do not perceive the secret and persistent support she offers to this society of the past and that we wish to banish forever ...

*That is why the Church wants to keep woman where she is, and that is why democracy must have her. Democracy must choose on pain of death; citizens must choose; woman must belong to science or to the church.*³⁰



(May 2011)

(Translated by Helen Tomlinson, published April 2015)

³⁰ Translation taken from Rebecca Rogers, *From the Salon to the Schoolroom: Educating Bourgeois Girls in Nineteenth-Century France*, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005, p. 201.--Trans.