

Ferdinand Buisson and *La foi laïque*

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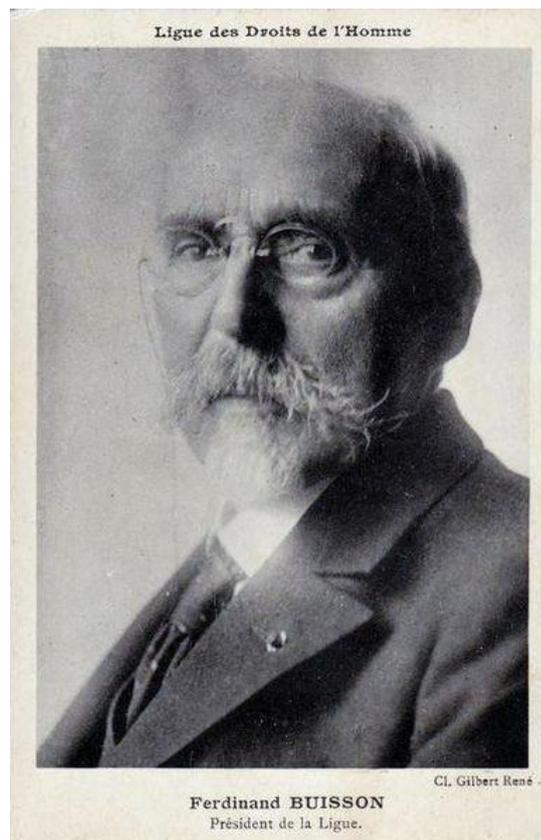


Figure 1: Ferdinand Buisson (1841–1932). Buisson was director of school teaching from 1879 to 1897 and helped formulate the Ferry Laws. A Dreyfusard, in 1898 he became one of the founders of the French Human Rights League, of which he was president from 1913 to 1926. After the First World War, he fervently advocated the creation of the League of Nations and Franco-German rapprochement. It was for this reason, notably, that he was jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1927, alongside the German writer and politician Ludwig Quidde (1858–1941).

This article analyses the following text by Ferdinand Buisson: *La religion, la morale et la science, leur conflit dans l'éducation contemporaine* (*Religion, morality and science: Their conflict in contemporary education*). It is a collection of extracts from four lectures delivered in April 1900 in the ceremonial hall (*aula*) of the University of Geneva, and published in book form the same year (Paris, Librairie Fischbacher): the first paragraph of the first lecture, which offers

an overview of the subject – namely the causes and the history of the conflict – and the second part of the third lecture.

In the second lecture, Ferdinand Buisson examines the various potential solutions to the conflict between religion, morality and science. The lecture ends with a critique of Kant's philosophy, which had begun to circulate in France not long before, and for which Buisson clearly has a high respect. This does not prevent his ending the lecture on the following note:

... Kantianism appears as a kind of neo-Christian stoicism that offers no reason for its sublime rigidity other than its rigidity itself. With its scholastic forms expressing the abrupt aspects of heroism, it reminds one of those early masterpieces of primitive, Egyptian or Dorian art, which show the human figure, yet still frozen in the motionless pose of its hierarchic mould, and which express life, yet still enclosed and constricted within its heavy robe of stone from which only classical genius will one day make it spring forth, free, supple and mobile. Who will be the Phidias or Praxiteles called upon to animate the immortal but rigid statute that is Kant's moral man?

The fourth and final lecture applies the solution that Buisson himself recommends in the third part. This is in fact a homage of sorts to Félix Pécaut (1828–1898), who had been the director of the new *École normale d'institutrices* (women's teacher training college) at Fontenay-aux-Roses, established in 1880. This is where the first directors of women's teacher training colleges were trained, and was therefore the birthplace of all France's future women primary teachers. Pécaut left an unforgettable impression, as the letters of the young women attest. All remembered, with some emotion, how he would chat with them about morality every morning.

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Buisson's most important book is entitled *La foi laïque (Secular Faith)*. It was published in 1912, and in the words of the author himself, it is a "case file" (*dossier*). It is an anthology of all sorts of texts (speeches, lectures, articles and extracts from classes), dating from different periods and aimed at equally diverse audiences.

We borrowed this title for our article because it perfectly sums up Buisson's work, in which the religious and the profane collide, confront one another and are reconciled. This shifting, living contradiction gave birth to a particular, specifically French kind of secularism, which we have inherited today.

The contradiction running through secularism is not a purely semantic one. It entails a kind of blurring of boundaries between various authorities: between religious truth and the experimental, rational truth of science, between theory and practice, and between institutional schooling and that which is exterior to it, namely society. It is the latter that concerns us most directly here.

Yet while the contours of the debate have changed since Ferdinand Buisson's day, the contradictions remain – though they may sometimes have shifted elsewhere – and continue to shape the notion of secularism. As Pierre Macherey has shown, secularism is an "ideology of compromise".¹

Reconsidering the origins of "secular faith" can perhaps help us better grasp the meaning of these changes.



Buisson was a philosopher by training. It is therefore important to first examine how "secular faith" reflects the philosophy of the day, in other words the philosophy that predominated in France at the cusp of the 19th and 20th centuries. This was a particularly significant moment because it was at this time that philosophy first encountered, and grappled with, the natural sciences. This encounter would give birth to a new, more or less heterogeneous – and now omnipresent – field of enquiry: the humanities.

Secondly, we will consider the concrete result of this conception of secularism, namely the status and role of primary schools in the Third Republic.

Lastly, it goes without saying that these schools, where pupils were not only taught secular morality but also the "human and civil rights" brought about by the Revolution, conferred a special role and status upon schoolteachers. Our analysis here therefore ties in with our reading of Jules Ferry's letter to France's primary schoolteachers, sent on 17 November 1883.²

A MORAL AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

If one looks back on the history of philosophy in France, one notices that a whole swathe of that history seems to have sunk into oblivion, namely the period running from the Revolution to the close of the 19th century, when Bergsonism emerged and established itself. The early decades of this period

1. Pierre Macherey, "Philosophies laïques", in *Mots*, no. 27, "Laïc, Laïque, Laïcité", June 1991, Presses de la fondation des sciences politiques, 5-21 ([online here](#)).
2. Liliane Maury, "Jules Ferry, lettre aux instituteurs", *BibNum*, May 2011.

were those of the *Idéologues* – most famously Condorcet – to whom Jules Ferry paid homage in his “Discours sur l’égalité d’éducation” (1870). They were followed by a new – and this time academic – philosophy founded by Victor Cousin (1792–1867): the French spiritualist school. All those who drew a connection between philosophy, morality and politics – including, of course, Ferdinand Buisson – belonged to this school.

Let’s return to the problem that Buisson invokes in his text, namely resolving the conflict between “religion, morality and science”:

Thus we begin ... to make out an entirely new role for religion.

If one had to choose between [religion] and science, between [religion] and morality, the choice would be clear. We are not entitled to subordinate the certain to the uncertain, evidence to twilight, reason to tradition, our own conscience to that of others. Rather than condemning the adult human mind to bend before the idols it carved out for itself as a child, we will unwaveringly move towards that which we have proudly named “the irreligion of the future” ... We know with what reflective power and eloquence a thinker of genius, J. M. Guyau ... made the words “irreligion of the future” the title and summa of one of the most penetrating, loyal and profound studies that the turn of the century has seen.

Despite his short life, Jean-Marie Guyau (1854–1888) wrote many books. Guyau was a poet and philosopher, and his style is slapdash, casual, brazen but also lyrical, and therefore very unfashionable. Buisson owed him a great deal. For example, in the “Morality” entry in the *Nouveau Dictionnaire de pédagogie et d’instruction primaire* (1911), he borrowed the title of one of Guyau’s works, *Esquisse d’une morale sans obligation ni sanction* (1885), to define his subject. Here, however, Ferdinand Buisson alters Guyau’s title and talks of the “religion of the future”.

Irréligion de l’avenir was published in 1886, and its subtitle states that it is a “Sociological Study”. Yet, at the time, sociology was not yet viewed as a science in its own right, independent of philosophy: for that, it would have to wait for Émile Durkheim (1858–1917). Indeed, in 1902, when Durkheim succeeded Buisson as chair of education sciences at the Sorbonne, he transformed it into a chair of sociology.

But the word “sociology” – or “social physics” – had been coined before by Auguste Comte (1798–1857). Moreover, this science was the crowning element and culmination of the scientific scale that Comte had envisaged and set out in

the first lesson of his *Cours de philosophie positive*. It is worth noting that Auguste Comte excluded the psychological sciences from this scale. Henceforth psychology remained part of philosophy; indeed, Victor Cousin even accentuated this role by describing it as “the vestibule of philosophy”.

As we will see, though Ferdinand Buisson followed in Cousin’s intellectual footsteps, he was also influenced – like all his contemporaries, including Jules Ferry – by the positivism of Auguste Comte.

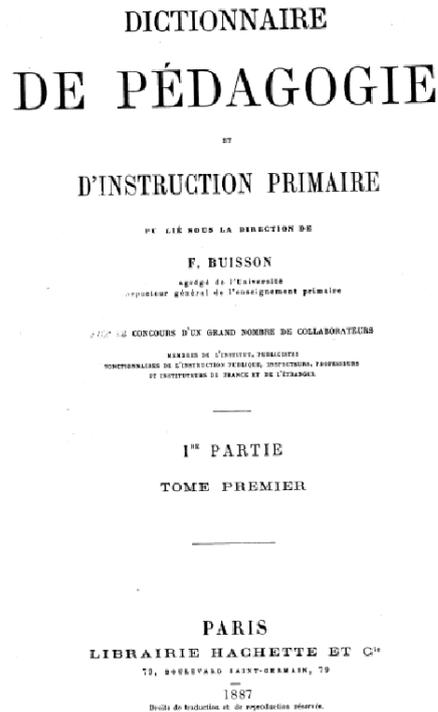


Figure 2: Dictionnaire de Pédagogie et d’instruction primaire by Ferdinand Buisson (4 vols., 1881–1887). Pierre Nora describes this dictionary as a “site of memory” in France’s history.³

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An experienced pedagogue, Buisson gives his audience a warning before he even announces his ideas:

And here, I ask for your pardon in advance, and once and for all, if, in these insights, I always position myself from a point of view from which the educator has difficulty freeing himself. For me, Pascal’s phrase is true to the letter: humanity is a man who is always learning. For him, the childhood of an individual more or less reproduces all the phases in the childhood of humanity; the little world reflects the big world. There is therefore, in the studies I submit to you, a constant rapprochement, a

3. Pierre Nora, “Le Dictionnaire de pédagogie de Ferdinand Buisson, cathédrale de l’école primaire”, in Pierre Nora (ed.), *Les Lieux de mémoire*, Paris, Gallimard, 1984, vol. 1.

parallelism that you may perhaps find wearying, between the psychology of the child and the psychology of societies in the state of childhood.

This image is found in the preface to Pascal's *Traité du vide*, which dates from 1651. At that time, and for Pascal, it bespoke the quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns:

The whole succession of human beings throughout the course of the ages must be regarded as a single man, continually living and learning; and this shows how unwarranted is the deference we yield to the philosophers of antiquity; for, as old age is the most distant age from childhood, who cannot see that old age in the universal man must be sought, not in the times nearest his birth, but in the times most distant from it? Those whom we call the ancients really lived in the youth of the world, and the infancy of mankind; and as we have added to their knowledge the experience of the succeeding centuries, it is in ourselves that is to be found the antiquity we venerate in them.⁴

Buisson seizes on this image and projects it onto an entirely different context – psychology – which in 1990 was now a science independent of philosophy.

From this perspective, the image takes on a different status. The child's development summarises, in accelerated, visible form, the stages in humanity's evolution. This hypothesis, which of course is unverifiable – we cannot access the origins of humanity – aroused, and continues to arouse, numerous debates. It provided the foundations of child psychology.

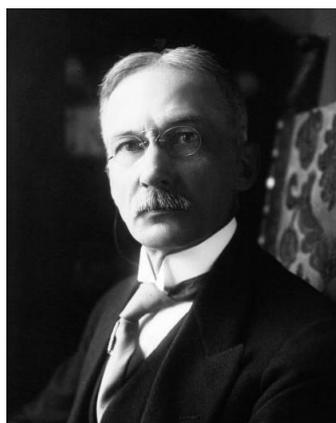


Figure 3: James Baldwin (1861–1934), the American philosopher and psychologist.

4. Translation from David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 89. --Trans.

For example, in 1895 the American philosopher and psychologist James Mark Baldwin (1834–1919) published the very explicitly titled *Mental Development in the Child and the Race*. This book marked the beginnings of experimental child psychology. But the image of the child put forward by psychoanalysis and most of all by Freud – though opposed to that proposed by psychology – is also dependent on this recapitulatory conception. In *Totem and Taboo* (1912), for example, Freud uses this vision to draw parallels between neurotics, children and primitive peoples.

Indeed, this evolutionary and progressive perspective is the overarching theme here, underpinning Ferdinand Buisson's account and giving it its meaning. That is why, at the beginning of his speech, he affirms:

If the philosophical spirit and the scientific spirit contest with the religious spirit for the government of souls and indirectly that of societies, in our eyes this is not accident, or, if you prefer, it is a necessary accident, a normal occurrence. We see in it a phenomenon of growth. It needed to happen, else humanity would have stopped growing.

This progressive vision of the human mind has its roots in the previous century, that is to say the Enlightenment. In the 19th century, however, this progress would be theorised more precisely. In greatly simplified terms, two points of view and two authors stand out.

On one hand, one can detect the influence of Auguste Comte in Buisson's text. The former had described the progressive evolution of the human mind as a passage through three states: first theological, seeking – and contenting itself with – explanations in religion; then metaphysical; and finally, positive and scientific.

On the other hand, intermingled with Comte's influence, one can detect the influence of the English philosopher Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), whose writings left a deep impression, not just on his own country but also in France, throughout the second half of the 19th century. This influence was explicitly acknowledged by the authors themselves, including Émile Durkheim, Théodule Ribot (1839–1916) – Spencer's first translator and the leading authority on experimental psychology in France – and, of course, Henri Bergson (1859–1941).

What Ferdinand Buisson takes from Spencer in his lecture is the idea that scientific knowledge is limited. It leaves space for an infinitely vast territory, to which it bows:

We do not experience that which is greater than experience, but we sense that experience itself supposes something greater than itself. "The affirmation that all knowledge is relative", says Herbert Spencer, "implies the affirmation that the non-relative exists."

It is in this space that the conflict arises. It is claimed by religion, but also by morality and science. The terms are recognisable in the title of Victor Cousin's principal work: *Du vrai, du beau, du bien (Lectures on the true, the beautiful and the good)* (1836). In his lecture, Buisson offers the following solution:

Morality, art and science: that is the very substance of the religion of the future. It can no longer nourish itself on anything else, and nor does it wish to. Instead of perpetuating the childish error that led it to seek supernatural knowledge so as to be more savant than science, more artistic than art and more moral than morality, the religion of the future will know that, from these three points of view, it is worth nothing more than what art, science and morality make it, and of which it will be the collective name, much as the name philosophy designates psychic studies as a whole.

If, as we have already pointed out, Ferdinand Buisson prefers the term "religion" to Guyau's "irreligion", that is because for him, unlike Guyau, the terms are not equivalent. For Buisson, the term "religion", as we have just seen, is a means to *connect* the good (morality), the beautiful (art) and the true (science), while recognising that they are different domains. The "religion of the future", that is to say "secular faith", thus resolves the conflict between three domains battling over education. That is also why Vincent Peillon sees Buisson's secular faith as "a religion for the Republic".⁵

In this sense, the word *religion* recovers its etymological meaning (from the Latin *religare*, to bind or tie). Yet this is not a material link, but an ideal, intellectual and spiritual one. It is understandable that this hybrid, ambivalent vision is as fragile as it is rich. Experience also shows that, due to this original contradiction and depending on the historical period and political circumstances, this vision can actually transform itself, while always remaining very much alive.

5. Vincent Peillon, *Une religion pour la République, La foi laïque de Ferdinand Buisson* (Seuil, 2010).

Archaeology of secular faith

In his book on Buisson, the philosopher Vincent Peillon first carries out an “archaeology of secularism”, stressing that the latter did not replace religion overnight: the notion of secular faith had been very important, and could become so once again. He recalls the Rousseauist project of civil religion at the end of the *Social Contract* (1762), the Revolutionary Cult of the Supreme Being, and *The New Christianity* of Saint-Simon (1825), which allied “the divine in the Christian religion” with the fraternity of men.

The notion of progress is bound up with religion as it is viewed by Buisson: in his lectures of 1900, he states that “the history of religion is the history of the progress of the human conscience” and that “any religion that lasts only does so provided it morally perfects itself”.⁶



Figure 4: Tympanum of Clermont-Ferrand Cathedral. Restoration works revealed this text under the paintwork: “The French people recognise the Supreme Being and the immortality of the soul” (WikiCommons image; author: Romary).

Peillon emphasises that for Buisson – and this is consistent with his spiritualist philosophy – the humanity of a person cannot be reduced to the exercise of reason: the presence of the divine in each and every one of us is the very foundation of human nature and dignity, and republican politics therefore has a religious foundation.⁷

Peillon also recalls that, within his own radical and freemasonic camp, Buisson came into conflict with those who conceived secularism or free thinking as a “backward orthodoxy”. What Buisson feared most of all was a republican catechism, secular orthodoxy and “the backward Catholic who makes atheism a *credo*”.⁸

6. Buisson, quoted by V. Peillon, *op. cit.*, p. 242.

7. V. Peillon, *op. cit.*, p. 274–277.

8. F. Buisson, *La Foi laïque, extraits de discours et d'écrits* (1878–1911), Paris, 1912, quoted by V. Peillon, *op. cit.*, p. 273.

THE REPUBLICAN SCHOOL

I am a simple schoolman: primary school has filled twenty-five years of my life, and I am finishing my career as I began it – not far from here – in a chair of pedagogy.

Before he has even begun his lecture, that is to say the general overview of the question he is going to discuss, Ferdinand Buisson has introduced himself to his listeners. He is neither orator nor theologian, and it is as a humble “schoolman” that he intends to speak.

If one thinker influenced Ferdinand Buisson – and who was not a philosopher but a litterateur and historian – it was Edgar Quinet (1803–1875). Buisson met Quinet in Switzerland, where both men, fleeing the Empire and the politics of Napoleon III, were in exile. Both also had a religious connection with this Calvinist country. Quinet belonged to its religion through his mother, while through his father he belonged to Catholicism. Buisson, for his part, had received a Protestant education at the Reformed Church. Though in his youth, and in particularly during his stay in Switzerland, he firmly debated the theses of this church, he left it in 1866 to teach philosophy and literature at the University of Neuchâtel.



Figure 5: Edgar Quinet (1803–1875), the French writer and historian
(sketched in 1873 by the caricaturist André Gil, in Touchatout's Le Trombinoscope).

Yet Buisson clearly maintained a deep and special connection with this religion. Thirty years after conducting a study on Sébastien Castellion – a brave theologian who had opposed Calvin in the name of tolerance – Buisson

completed his doctoral thesis on the same subject at the Sorbonne. For Buisson, as the text analysed here confirms, religion is a sentiment, a state of mind and a manner of thinking, and that is why it does not need rituals nor church to express itself.

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But let's return to the subject of school and the difference between Buisson and his mentor, Quinet. The book by Quinet that Buisson very frequently refers to is entitled *L'Enseignement du peuple (The Teaching of the People)*. It was published in 1850 and one of the chapters is entitled: "What is the *raison d'être* of secular teaching?" Indeed, the aim of the book is to provide an answer to that question.

For us, a further question should be asked. What is the difference between "the teaching of the people" and "the school of the people", which is undeniably what Buisson and Ferry established in France?

School is an institution and place that is both closed in on itself and separate from the exterior – family and society, that is to say the world of work – but also open to the external world. School protects the child from the world of work, but, inevitably, it also prepares him or her to enter it. The ambivalent position of schools, at least in France, confers great importance upon them and makes schooling the subject of recurrent, and often heated, debates.

Let's return to the lecture of 1900. After defining religion as "an eternal need of the human soul, a need that seeks satisfaction in chimerical conceptions destined to collapse on top of one another", Buisson continues:

If we take this point of view, we will find in religion, at whatever age and stage we consider it, two constituent elements: for the sake of convenience, let us call them the soul and the body of religion.

Its body, which serves to make it visible, manifests itself in institutions; it is an ensemble of facts, some intellectual, others aesthetic, others still ethical and practical, which constitute dogma, beliefs, myths, sacred traditions, holy books and the priesthood. There is no religion without established worship, persistent doctrines, revered traditions, accomplished mysteries and conveyed beliefs. These are the garments, the charnel envelopes that make religion something other than a vague and fleeting state of mind, that make it a human force, a social power, an agent of civilisation. But these forms in which religion is incorporated: follow their course from one century to the next, in any given religious society. We see that they undergo profound transformations, though

[religion] makes the greatest effort to preserve the appearance of immutability ... The soul of religion is that which is eternal and indestructible within it, that which reappears in each stage of culture, deep within all men, identical and permanent beneath the variety of exteriors.

This rather Cartesian separation consists in setting dogma and rituals, and “the sentiment of the divine”, on two different planes: the former are specific to each religion, visible and changing, while the latter is common to all religions, immutable and eternal. But once this rather artificial separation is acknowledged, it is also important to reconnect the two, so as to avoid conflict between them. That is the role of education, and, as a consequence, of school.

In concrete terms, then, dogma and rituals are not taught or practised at school, yet their existence is not denied. That is why secular morality is taught in the schools of the Republic. In this respect, Buisson’s position is similar to that of Jules Ferry. The latter, in his letter to primary schoolteachers, states firmly: “Children have a moral apprenticeship to serve just as they have an apprenticeship in reading and arithmetic.”⁹

And the place where this apprenticeship is carried out, where knowledge and science are taught, is school. That is where children learn, very precisely – as Buisson recommends – the separation between the latter and that which is extraneous to it. As a result, this is where the conflict, which Buisson attempts to resolve, may arise.

This point of view raises a tricky question: what difference is there between the “secularism” and the “neutrality” of schools? Neutrality is clearly not enough, because morality is not simply engaged in the matter of scientific truth. It is also engaged in a more slippery form of truth, one concerned with politics. From this perspective, the schoolteacher has a particularly delicate role, as Ferry’s letter shows.¹⁰

9. Liliane Maury, “Jules Ferry, lettre aux instituteurs”, *BibNum*, May 2011.

10. Liliane Maury, *op. cit.*

THE SCHOOLTEACHER AND THE REPUBLIC

This is the title of a long article that Ferdinand Buisson published in 1909 in *La grande revue*. The article reminds young people, who did not witness the events first hand, about the early combats of institutionalised schooling in the Third Republic. Buisson goes on:

However, one must not lose sight of one consequence of this method. This was to attribute great importance to the personal value, the personal influence, of the schoolteacher. The fewer written prescriptions he was given, the more he had to draw on his own resources. The teaching was a measure of the man.

In the lecture of 1900, Buisson identifies three “phenomena” that constitute “secular faith”. The first is emotional: it is the “sense of the divine”, or – and for Buisson this is one and the same thing – “the sentiment of the infinite”. The second concerns reason and establishes the boundary between nature and the supernatural. The third, more slippery phenomenon is:

An active and volitional phenomenon that will ultimately produce religious morality and worship, but which of course begins with the wretched practices of witchcraft and primitive magic; over time, man learns to act on his God other than through spells; he elevates himself to the notion of a contract with God, then to that of the sacrament and, finally, to the pure and evangelical notion of prayer.

What does this unexpected mention of prayer signify?

It is not, of course, the form of prayer recommended by the Catholic Church. Buisson had a very personal notion of prayer, which he clearly set out in his article in the *Dictionnaire de pédagogie*. Freed from “dogmatic prayer, scholastic prayer and mystical prayer,” Buisson writes, “what will remain, for ourselves and our children, is human prayer ... without priest or altar, dogma or miracle, ... where conscience is refined and will reinforced”.

The notion of will is a psychological one. For example, in 1882, Théodule Ribot published a work entitled *Les Maladies de la volonté (Diseases of the Will)*, which Ferdinand Buisson without doubt read. In 1899, the last pedagogy class he delivered at the Sorbonne was devoted to “The education of the will”. It reads as follows:

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 were 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.



Figure 6: Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), one of the founders of modern sociology.

Is this lyrical vision of morality an effective one? Some had their doubts, Durkheim in particular. In 1902, as we have already mentioned, he succeeded Ferdinand Buisson as chair of pedagogy at the Sorbonne, where he delivered a class on moral education. This class was published in book form as *L'éducation morale* (Paris, PUF, 1963) (*Moral Education*, The Free Press, 1961).¹¹ The first chapter examines "Secular morality", and reads:

Gratified as we may be with what has been achieved, we ought to realize that advances would have been more pronounced and coherent had people not begun by believing that everything was going to be all too simple and easy. Above all, the task was conceived as a purely negative operation. It seemed that to secularize education all that was needed was to take out of it every supernatural element. A simple stripping operation was supposed to have the effect of disengaging rational morality from adventitious and parasitical elements that cloaked it and prevented it from realizing itself ... We must seek, in the very heart of religious conceptions, those moral realities that are, as it were, lost and

11. The opening lecture from the class is not included in the book. It can be found in another work entitled *Education and Sociology*. The lecture is titled: "Pedagogy and Sociology". This anthology also contains two contributions by Durkheim to the *Nouveau Dictionnaire de pédagogie* (1911), one on "education" and the other on "pedagogy". Durkheim and Buisson also co-wrote the article on "Childhood" in this dictionary.

*dissimulated in it. We must disengage them, find out what they consist of, determine their proper nature, and express them in rational language. In a word, we must discover the rational substitutes for these religious notions that for a long time have served as the vehicle for the most essential moral ideas.*¹²

For Durkheim, morality is not a subject to be taught. It is conveyed through school discipline, which demands that children learn to obey collective rules, which regulate both school life and the teaching of various disciplines, notably the sciences. This is how “attachment to social groups” is established: the individual that is the child cedes his or her place to a social, and therefore complete, being.

Can morality be purely rational, as Durkheim advocates? We’ll leave the question open. One thing is certain, though: secular morality continues to arouse debates where passion often prevails over reason.



(June 2012)

(Translated by Helen Tomlinson, published July 2015)

¹²? Translation available online [here](#) (*Moral Education*, trans. Everett K. Wilson and Herman Schnurer, p. 8–9). --Trans.