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# ALAIN

(1868-1951)  
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Alain, whose real name was Emile Chartier, was born in Normandy, France, on 3 March 1868. There is not much that can be said about his life; Alain himself did not think it would contribute to a better understanding of his philosophy. From 1893 to 1933, Alain taught philosophy in secondary schools. According to his pupils he was an outstanding teacher, combining his own highly personal philosophy with a thorough knowledge of the great works of Western philosophy, from Plato to Hegel. He fought in the First World War and was demobilized in 1917. After the war ended he went back to teaching while at the same time working as a journalist, a sideline he had started about ten years earlier with his regular contributions to the newspaper 'La Dépêche de Rouen'. Most of Alain's considerable output has come down to us in the form of journalistic comment, but many books have also been published separately, including the eighty-one chapters of *L'Esprit et les Passions* (1917), *Le Système des beaux-arts* (1920), *Mars ou la guerre jugée* (1921), and commentaries on philosophical or literary works. Alain died in Le Vésinet on 2 June 1951.

It is worth noting that his interest in education was that of a philosopher, for he was not what is usually called an educator: someone of whose work history retains mainly the practical aspects. His *Propos sur l'éducation*, first published in 1932, is a philosophical work, and it is that philosophy which we intend to present in this article.

## **Alain's work in its historical context**

As his journalistic work might indicate, Alain's books are easier to understand when they are set in their historical context. His lifespan coincides almost exactly with that of the Third Republic, that period of French history that—apart from the Vichy interlude during the Second World War—saw the introduction of a lasting republican and democratic system. This period also saw the development of workers' movements and trade unions. Alain always expressed sympathy for such movements. Like them, he was determined to work for human emancipation. But, whereas the trade union movements were calling for social and political emancipation, Alain believed that the only real freedom for human beings was freedom of the mind. That was why he never subscribed to socialism and also why he taught in working-class universities. It is also clear that, from an educational point of view, Alain lived at a turning point in the history of the school in France. Whatever approach one may adopt, the contribution made to education by the Third Republic was enormous. Whereas the church and the monarchist parties thought the goal of education was mainly religious, simply part of a father's moral duty towards his children (in other words, it could only be a private matter), the Third Republic introduced State schools, regarding education as a human right to which all citizens were entitled, and not as a favour granted on a private basis. The State had an inescapable duty to provide education. On an even more fundamental level, public schools had to be independent of religion because the republican State was secular by definition. This meant that the Third Republic's contribution to education mainly involved the creation of

institutions. The laws of 16 June 1881 and 28 March 1882 established free, secular and compulsory primary education. Alain had a ringside view of the founding of State education and the debates that went with it, and it is against this background that we should try to set his philosophy of education.

Although his *Propos sur l'éducation* had more than one thing in common with the educational philosophy of the Third Republic, it would be wrong to see the book merely as a sort of official philosophy of republican education. Alain's philosophy is a very personal one, challenging established views. In this article, we intend to clarify the links between Alain's philosophy and the educational doctrine of the republic. Generally speaking, this will show that, while the consequences of *Propos sur l'éducation* converge with those of this doctrine, different principles are involved.

## **The concept of necessity**

All educational philosophies raise and resolve at least three questions: the goal of education, the nature of the person to be educated, and the means by which this goal should be achieved. Using *Propos sur l'éducation*<sup>2</sup> as a base, we can formulate principles that give Alain's answers to these three questions: the principle of the freedom of the mind; the principle of the individuality of each human being; the principle of education as instruction. It should be noted that these answers only concern that part of education that is provided by schools.

There is one idea that stands above all these principles and encompasses them all: the idea of necessity. Alain wrote: 'The most important of these lessons by far is that we cannot outwit necessity. The person who learns the meaning of the word "must" has already learned a great deal' (X, 20). There is first of all an external necessity, that of the material and social environment. If educating oneself means learning about the world, then it also means learning about necessity. Admittedly, education for Alain also means learning about freedom, but the two are not mutually exclusive. There is no freedom that does not take account of external necessity and that does not, as Spinoza is thought to have said, 'understand necessity'. One consequence of the necessity of the world is the necessity of education: the necessity of its role, the necessity of its agents (family, school, working life) and of their sequence, the necessity of the means enabling each of them to perform its function. The theme of necessity will be evoked in connection with each of the three basic issues of educational philosophy.

## **The goal of education**

As regards the goal of education, Alain is heir to the long-established tradition of Western rationalism, and especially that of Condorcet, whom Alain says in his diary he has read attentively. Of course, Alain was aware that education has a role to play in social reproduction, which must include enabling every individual to find a professional niche in the society in which he or she lives. But Alain was also well aware that social inequality—and he was doubtful that a really egalitarian society would ever be possible—meant that schools could only be inegalitarian if they were devoted solely to reproducing a given social order: 'The goal of education is to identify a limited number of outstanding individuals [...] for there are not enough senior positions in society for everyone' (XXXVII, 95). So when he discusses the goals of education, he emphasizes a completely different aspect - that of the individual freedom which education, and especially schools, should enable people to develop in themselves, whatever their position in society. This freedom is obviously an ideal to which we should aspire, but at the same time Alain felt it was an ideal that could only be aspired to because it was not completely divorced from reality: 'Obviously, there is no man of whom I can say that he will never concern himself with anything but his own work. Even if he were a

slave like Aesop, he would still think. But he won't be a slave. Not only will he think about things human and divine, in a kind of way, as everyone does, but he will have to decide between war and peace, justice and injustice, the noble and the contemptible—in short he will have to make decisions on all kinds of matters, and these decisions, even if erratic, will carry his full weight as an individual' (XX, 54). In this specifically humanist sense, the inequality hitherto acknowledged in respect of professional ability and social status is no longer acceptable. The humanist goal of education, according to Alain, implies espousing wholeheartedly the principle of equality for all in education. This is conveyed most accurately in a disparate type of education that battles against the current of social inequalities: 'If children show no aptitude for mathematics, this means that we should be particularly persistent and ingenious in our way of teaching them the subject. [...] Obviously the simplest response is the summary judgement that we still hear too often: "He's not very bright". But we cannot leave it at that. We would be committing a cardinal sin towards the future adult. [...] The ones we should be helping are precisely those who are always getting stuck and getting everything wrong, those who are liable to give up hope and have no confidence in their own mental capacities' (XX, 53). Putting a premium on efficiency and productivity increases social inequality; setting a humanist goal for education on the other hand, reinstates the principle of equality that is flouted in practice. This is not just a change in formulation: the whole approach to teaching practice should be affected by it.

In making the development and cultivation of a free mind the goal of education, Alain was returning to a central tenet of the republican philosophy of education: that the State cannot be truly republican unless it is made up of free individuals. None the less, there is one fundamental difference between Alain's philosophy and republican philosophy: Alain does not regard the State as the sum of institutions which people establish to take control of its destiny and organize collective decision-making. He never believed that political organization would contribute to the freedom of the individual. In fact, his political philosophy is not a philosophy of the State but a philosophy of power, in other words it concerns the sum total of the phenomena that govern relationships between individuals and are not controlled by reason. For Alain, power is inevitable once individuals live in society, and he believes a society cannot exist without rules and regulations, and therefore without power. But this power is not justified simply because the State is a good thing in itself. On the contrary, the State is only one of the forms through which political power is exercised. The State has no value in itself; it is only useful as a way of making it possible for people to live together. Power has only one goal: to perpetuate and extend itself and any person who wields power tends inevitably to be corrupted by it. Similarly, the idea of specifically political freedom has no meaning for Alain: the only freedom possible is the freedom of the mind to make its own judgements, and that is at the same time the only political freedom. This leads us to Alain's view of civic education, which includes the question of the purpose of education in general. This view can be reduced to two concepts: physical obedience and intellectual resistance. 'I teach obedience', Alain wrote (LXXXIII, 208) and that is necessary because power is necessary. But obeying power does not necessarily mean respecting it; power does not need love, but constant reassessment. That is the citizen's job. If the subservience inspired by power comes largely from the aura of irrationality with which people invested, then the process of ongoing demystification in which Alain urges citizens to engage may offer some hope of reducing power to what it should be: a consubstantial corollary of human societies. Alain's policy is basically one of refusal. Its aim is to enable authority to coexist with freedom, and the exercise of power by the State to coexist with citizens' rights to monitor and criticize. So when Alain says that the supreme goal of education is developing the freedom of the mind, he means something very different from what republican political philosophers meant when they put forward the same idea. Alain wanted to give citizens the power to judge the State, not force them to support it.

This same goal explains Alain's persistent refusal to take account of one of the complaints made about the school: its failure to satisfy the demands of the labour market. He pointed out that this complaint always came from those in power, and that was because it was not in their interest to be confronted with free individuals: 'They ask, with a rather superior air, what use is a mind if it does not manufacture, sell or invent weapons; and technology rises up against wisdom [...] So there is no judge, nor anyone to judge the judge, but soon there will be furious insects with a wonderful talent for piercing holes in rocks and in one another'.<sup>3</sup> However, Alain is far from being against the idea of vocational education. He calls it the time of the workshop or of apprenticeship, and sees it as a necessary stage in the progression towards adulthood: 'The person who has never been an apprentice is only a big child' (XXIX, 77). But he obviously feels that the time children spend in the classroom should not be overshadowed by the time they spend in the workshop, where they only acquire specifically technical skills (XXVI, 68) and where the mind, whose development is the goal of education, is not engaged. What distinguishes the tasks performed by an accountant from those performed by a pupil is that the accountant performs the tasks mechanically and the pupil performs them intelligently (XXIX, 68). Obviously the accountant needs mechanical skills, but they are harmful for the pupil, who needs to develop mental abilities. The workshop aims for success; the classroom aims for the exercise of judgement; this is why in the workshop time is always counted, whereas the classroom is the place for 'thinking that takes its time' (XXVI, 69). Or again, in the workshop mistakes are criticized as professional errors, whereas in the classroom they should be allowed because they enable pupils to correct themselves. Moreover, it is in the classroom, and not in the workshop, where pupils acquire an ability that is extremely useful in the world of work: the ability to innovate. 'Children who earn their living are not acquiring useful experience', Alain wrote, 'because they are learning too soon to watch their step: they are learning to stop taking risks' (XXIX, 76). The lesson to be drawn is the importance of keeping what might be called the different levels of education separate. The first stage for children is play within their families; their working life will come much later. School comes between these two stages. 'School is similar to work in that it has to be taken seriously, but, on the other hand, it is not subject to the strict rules of work; anyone who makes a mistake can start again' (XXIX, 77). One obviously understands that now certain economic imperatives urge taking the demands of working life into account in schools at an earlier stage. But for Alain this would be betraying the school's educational function; it would mean giving it a purely social role and sacrificing the cultivation of the mind, without which, Alain believes, no freedom is possible.

## **The nature of the beneficiary**

The second question, concerning the pupils as recipients of education, brings us face to face with the principle of the individuality of each person. As we have seen, Alain makes development of the individual the goal of all social and political organization, and therefore of all education. Nothing was more alien to him than the sociological theories emerging at the time, and particularly that of Durkheim, who regarded education as a sort of production process aimed at turning out individuals in accordance with a set of social norms. 'Anyone who observes individual personalities soon comes to the conclusion that each develops according to its own internal rules' (Foreword, 1). Let us dwell a little on this point. Firstly, to stress human individuality does not mean to stress inequality of ability but rather the variety of styles of living and understanding; all are capable of acquiring knowledge, but each person will have a different way of doing this, just as we all have different handwriting. Secondly, human individuality defies psychological expertise; for Alain it cannot be reduced to any more general categorization, and this is why teachers cannot take previously acquired scientific knowledge

of human behaviour as a point of departure for their work: ‘You say that one has to know children in order to teach them, but that is not true; I would say that one has to teach them in order to know them’ (XVI, 45). Individuality is not an ideal to be achieved, it is an educational principle only because it is a fact of life. So if education is to respect this individuality, if it is not to set itself the goal of ‘making one individual have the same feelings as another’ (ibid.), it is not because such an educational policy would be reprehensible, but because it is impossible: ‘You cannot change a personality’ (ibid.). Alain probably knew that many influences can be exerted through education, but he wanted to point out that these influences cannot be imposed on malleable material as the teacher sees fit. For him, the reverse is the case. Instead of thinking that social norms shape individuals on a single model, we should realize that it is the personality of each child that determines to what extent any given norm will affect them. ‘The contradiction that you say you see between ideal human feelings and strictly individual personality exists inside, not outside, the human being, and that is where it is constantly being resolved. In every individual the nature shared by all human beings is developed using the individual’s own resources’ (ibid.). Each individual will therefore learn the same values or the same universal or simply general knowledge, but this universality will only be what each individual makes of it.

In Alain’s philosophy, the theme of individuality coexists with a second theme which is equally basic: although each child who goes to school is an individual, there is a natural state of childhood which is necessarily the same for all and which can be summed up in two points.

The first is that, unlike pedagogues who were influenced by the sensationalist view, Alain asserts that children’s initial contacts are not with things, but with people, and that it is only through human intermediaries that they encounter things (XXXI, 81). This point is crucial, because it means that the first thing children learn is language. Children’s knowledge of the world around them is as extensive as their means of expression allow. This view can form the basis for a critique of all educational methods that assume that knowledge comes from contact with things. For Alain the reverse is true: it is not seeing the objects around us that teaches us about them; rather it is only when we have learned about them that we will finally be capable of seeing them.

The second point is that because children are first aware of their human environment their first experience is one of power. The fact that those around them are looking after them without their realizing it or knowing why this is happening inevitably gives rise to misapprehensions. Children’s first experience is ‘the experience of government, and they feel the power of passion before having any inkling of the existence of the rules of work: their first way of thinking is that of a king’ (XXXI, 81-82). Children’s first experience is of power, and their second will be disillusion, as soon as those around them stop responding to their requests. Children’s first impression of their human environment is one of instability and arbitrariness, because they misunderstand adults’ motivations. The world of things is initially perceived on the model of their experience of the world of adults. Hence children’s spontaneous animism and anthropocentrism, and a basic precept for the educationist: if, ‘all efforts at conceptualization, without exception, bear the dual stamp of the human order and preliminary abstraction’, this means that, always, ‘mistakes [...] have to come first’ (XXXI, 82). In this sense, education is only a form of development because each individual is unique and must educate him or herself - no one else can be made responsible. It is still true that the specific task of education is to correct children’s spontaneous interpretation of their physical and social environment. In the next section, we will see how Alain defines the content of schoolwork to meet this requirement.

## **Creativity and culture**

Before we tackle this point, what conclusions can we draw from the preceding analysis concerning creativity and the status of culture? It is obvious that, for Alain, there is no question of the individual being subservient to cultural education. For one thing, the principle of individuality makes it clear enough that the idea of cultural conditioning by the school is based on the inappropriate view of education as a production process for the individual. If individuality always resists such conditioning, we should deduce from this that what people think at any given moment is what they personally have made of what they learned at school. Moreover, the natural state of childhood that we have just described enables us to understand how essential cultural education is. If children's level of perception of the world is basically dependent on their mastery of language, then their creativity depends on it also. So when the school is reproached for restricting children's creativity by imposing cultural norms, Alain regards this as a form of educational naïvety. Those who take the view that 'children's individuality must be safeguarded at all costs, that we must take care not to dictate thoughts to them, but let them muse over a blank page so that what they write will be spontaneous and will come from within themselves, not from the teacher', are taking the risk that 'what they write when left to themselves will be precisely the hackneyed commonplace, like the pupil who, when asked to describe an ancient tower, referred to "stones darkened by time" when one glance would have made it clear that the tower in question was noticeably lighter in tone than the buildings around it' (LIV, 137). Alain adds: 'This shows that we see the world through the distorting prism of the ideas we already have, in other words that our means of expression exert a tyrannical influence over our opinions' (ibid.). If human beings start their lives in a situation of dependence, crammed with received ideas, then originality of thought is a victory to be won, not a domain to be preserved. For Alain, what characterizes culture is the example it can offer of using language that has managed to rise above received ideas to achieve its own originality. Culture is not a set of impersonal norms, but a cluster of free thoughts. This is why he sees a close connection between culture and individuality. When he writes: 'there is only one way of learning to think clearly, and that is to carry some tried and tested thought a little further' (LIV, 136), or 'a shared culture brings out the differences' (XXII, 59), he implies that the more we know, the more we strengthen our individuality, and conversely that it is always those who know the least who share the same opinion. Learning about one's culture is therefore considered by Alain as the best training for creativity, because it should not teach us what we ought to think but help us to discover a model for freedom.

## **The means to an end**

The third question, concerning the means by which the school should accomplish its educational mission, brings us to the idea of teaching, of the school as a place of enlightenment, but a specific place, one that should not be confused with life itself. The principle underlying the various movements for educational renewal in Europe in the twentieth century—education for life and through life—is foreign to Alain's philosophy, although he might have sympathized with some aspects of their criticism of schools. For example, Alain does not accept Freinet's distinction between abstract knowledge taught in school, which is cut off from life, and practical knowledge, which is rooted in life. His criticism of the school never led him to suggest reforms aimed at opening the school up further to life. The reason for this intransigence is obvious: the educational approach predicated on 'life' is invalidated by the naïvety of mistaking the idea for the thing itself. Indeed, this is inevitable because life—in the cultural rather than the biological sense—can never be more than an idea, and 'there is no idea equal to the true nature of things' (XXX, 78). Neither educationists nor anyone else have the

privilege of defining 'life'. This is why, faced with the human impossibility of avoiding a 'point of view', Alain opts for the view that to him seems least subjective, the choice of knowledge, endorsed by history and society.

In his defence of teaching, Alain is probably closer to the philosophy of the republican school than to the educational renewal movements. But here too, he only agrees with the conclusions drawn by republican philosophers, because as far as principles are concerned Alain never believed that knowledge was *a good thing in itself*. He is much closer in this respect to pragmatism, which in many ways underlies the philosophy of the educational renewal movements, because he only regards knowledge as a *means* towards the end of understanding the world and taking action in it. He rejects the idea of learning through things, which because it is always incomplete is unparadoxically the most abstract form of learning possible: at best the acquisition of technical skills, never freedom of judgement. This is why he defends teaching. But it is worth repeating that this teaching is not an end but a means, the most effective means the human mind has of understanding the world from which it has been, because of its nature, turned away.

Several conclusions can be drawn from this statement of principle.

To assert that there is no idea equal to the true nature of things is to say that any knowledge can be more easily defined by its relationship to other knowledge than to the reality it represents. Knowledge is organized independently and follows its own logic, moving 'from idea to idea' (XVIII, 48-49). This movement is the subject of education, much more than any unattainable meshing with a reality that is constantly moving further away. This is why the knowledge learned at school must be elementary. The element is the point of departure, both complete in itself and enabling pupils to continue the learning process. On the other hand, the most recent forms of knowledge do not educate pupils; this kind of knowledge can only educate those who are already highly educated, because it assumes that the elementary knowledge has already been acquired. There is 'knowledge and knowledge' (XVIII, 47). For those who are beginning their education, only these basic elements constitute true knowledge. And while the knowledge they acquire later may be true knowledge for some, for pupils it can only be opinions and information, in other words purely factual knowledge whose principles they have not mastered. The school's mission is not to inform, but to educate.

To assert the autonomous organization of knowledge is to say that it is made up of separate disciplines, and that it is in this form that it should be taught in school. In one sense, Alain is returning here to the encyclopaedic ideal of the Age of Enlightenment, an ideal that was taken over by republican education. At the same time, Alain sticks to his essential point which, as we have seen, is that children attending school are in contact with two worlds: the world of people and the world of things. This is why, in Alain's view, there are theoretically only two basic disciplines: scientific knowledge, for the world of things, and literature, for the world of people.

We should first of all state the objective of scientific education, which is not to accumulate knowledge but to develop a person's ability to observe the world. Bearing in mind the spontaneous interpretation children make of the world on the basis of their natural condition, this means developing the basics of a scientific approach: learning to look at the world of things without superstition; purging perception of animism and anthropomorphism, which are naturally dominant in children; understanding that the material world is not governed by the whims of the gods but by 'necessity', in other words a specific mechanism devoid of mystery. It is not a question of 'teaching all nature [...] but of setting the mind according to the object and in accordance with a clearly perceived necessity' (XIX, 50). The natural sciences would obviously be appropriate for achieving this goal. However, the ordering of knowledge means that as the natural sciences are not comprehensible 'without mathematical preparation' (XXV, 67), then apart from the fact that they provide the always

useful rudiments of scientific education (PE, 9, 261), it is chiefly mathematics that enables us to achieve the objective allocated to scientific education. Mathematics has two advantages, the first of which is that it avoids the arbitrary human element. In drawing geometric figures or making arithmetical calculations certain requirements become apparent which, while conventional, are in no way arbitrary. Secondly, mathematics has the advantage of being completely intelligible to the child: 'In geometry and arithmetic, there are no misleading appearances and no mystery. When I add five to seven to make twelve, the process is clear for all to see; there is no hidden mechanism' (LXII, 157). In mathematics, elementary knowledge is also definite knowledge. A child who has learned to add up knows as much on that particular point as a professional mathematician. Each has the same rational knowledge.

Even more basic than scientific education is the knowledge of humanity that we acquire through reading literary works. Here too we must start from the nature of childhood, which is such that a child's experience of the world is one of arbitrariness and instability. This is why 'the first priority is to give ourselves room to breathe and to place the people surrounding us back far enough to have a clear view of them' (XXV, 66). At the same time, we obviously cannot shut ourselves away. We must therefore find a way of living together that enables us both to pacify and to understand human beings. This is exactly what reading can help us to do. Children must read because books will stabilize their experience of the world. The words on the page never change. The characters in a fairy tale are clear-cut, either entirely good or entirely bad, never ambivalent like people in the real world. The characters are also kept at a distance in books. The reader's relationships with them are not based on power, which makes it possible to learn from them about the world and the rules that govern it.

Three further points should be clarified here. Firstly, reading does not mean spelling out words. It is well known that Alain was against this method of reading because parroting it does not allow the text to be kept at a distance. Like the real world, the book masters the child more than the child masters the book. Reading silently, with your eyes, on the other hand, means ordering your thoughts around a subject without being its slave. You can master the book and think for yourself while following the thoughts of the author. 'Knowing how to read', Alain wrote, is 'applauding your own thoughts in another person' (LXXIX, 200). It is worth pointing out that in defending 'reading with the eyes', Alain is not taking a stand on a particular method of learning to read, which did not interest him. What he is concerned with is the end, not the means.

The second clarification is this: to the question 'What should we read?', Alain's reply is unequivocal: 'I see no restrictions at all [...] I cannot imagine a person whose prime requirement is not being surrounded by humanity as it is found on the pages of great books' (XXV, 66-67). Here, the humanist goal of education finds a direct application, meaning that there is no such thing as reading-matter to be used in schools, nor reading-matter for the élite. Everybody should read, and they should read everything. Here Alain does not see himself as imposing the literary norms of a bench-mark culture but as stating his conviction that the content of such books is both sufficiently distant from and sufficiently close to readers to offer them the possibility of liberation, through knowledge, from all the forms of servitude inherent in immersion in the world of people.

In defending teaching as instruction, Alain exposes himself to one of the objections traditionally made about the school: that it has no heart, in other words it overlooks a fundamental aspect of education - the child's emotional development. He has two replies to this objection. Firstly, he removes from the idea of affection its intrinsic naïvety. Education based on feelings can easily be presented as education based on love, but it can just as easily be education based on spite. 'Feelings soon become tyrannical', Alain wrote, and the teacher can make a sudden shift from positive to negative feelings. All it takes is annoyance with some unruliness or some learning difficulty, which is bound to happen. Secondly, Alain cannot help

suspecting that a desire to influence and condition the child may underlie these fine feelings. In other words, there is a way of loving children which actually denies their individuality. Conversely, there is a way of seeming not to love them which is actually a way of respecting and trusting them. We can easily see that behind these two objections lies the distinction made between legality and virtue in Kantian philosophy. For Alain, as for other rationalists, morality concerns only one's private life. Any attempt to organize a group structure such as a school on a model based on moral values runs the risk of degenerating into a reign of terror, or even what we now call totalitarianism. Education is not a matter of morals but a matter of law. The relationship between teachers and pupils cannot be governed by moral feelings; it must have its basis in a legal concept such as a contract rather than in emotional attachment. For Alain, teachers should indeed be heartless—not out of indifference to the children but, on the contrary, because they see the liberation of the child as the main task of education.

## **Pupil failure and educational method**

If the disciplines taught at school are determined by the educational necessity of establishing the relationship between individuals and their environment (both physical and human) on a sound basis, then it is self-evident that this education must be obligatory for all. 'I find it ridiculous that the decision to learn one thing rather than another should be left to children and their families', Alain wrote. 'It is also ridiculous to accuse the State of trying to impose this or that subject. Nobody should choose and that way the choice is made' (XIX, 49-50). We can see that Alain's ideas tally in this respect with those of the republican educators: schooling should be compulsory and should not be left to the discretion of the head of the family. The fact remains that this knowledge is not readily accessible, which raises the problem of learning difficulties and how they should be overcome, in other words the issue of pupil failure as well as that of educational methods. It is probably on these two issues that Alain's philosophy is most influenced by the educational circumstances of his time.

## **Learning difficulties**

Alain's first response to learning difficulties is to try to identify their causes. He was one of the first to denounce the explanation of learning difficulties in terms of differences in intelligence: 'I am sick and tired of hearing that that person is intelligent and that one is not' (XXIV, 62). As far as simple intelligence is concerned, he believes there is no difficulty that cannot be overcome: 'What person, however mediocre in the eyes of others, cannot master geometry, tackling the difficulties in the right order and not being discouraged? To progress from geometry to the most advanced and arduous research is like progressing from day dreaming to geometry. The difficulties are the same: for the impatient, insurmountable; for the patient, who will deal with them one at a time, non-existent' (ibid.). So when he discusses learning difficulties, Alain thinks in terms of 'patience' and 'impatience' rather than of intellectual ability. In other words, he shifts the emphasis of the problem from intelligence to character: for him, succeeding at school is a matter of willpower. The scope of this argument will be easier to understand if we relate it once again to the nature of childhood. Although we can distinguish between desire and willpower by saying that desire is the demand for instant gratification while willpower takes account of all the constraints and means that will enable it to achieve its goal, we must admit that it is desire that prevails in childhood rather than willpower. Children are naturally led to shun willpower by the illusion of power, to which they succumb. 'The idiot is like a donkey which shakes its ears and refuses to budge' (XXIV, 64). It is this rejection of willpower, the will to have no willpower, a legacy of the natural condition of childhood, which in Alain's view explains learning difficulties that initially must be the same

for everyone. This view also provides the solution, which is to strengthen willpower: 'The work that pupils are given to do tests their character rather than their intelligence. Whether in spelling, translation or arithmetic, the challenge is to overcome moods, to learn to stick at it' (XXIV, 65). Although Alain writes that 'there is no better human value than willpower' (II, 8), that value is only a means and not an end in itself. The only objective of the school is to cultivate the mind; one learns to persevere only in order to make this possible.

Alain's explanation of pupil failure in moral terms (lack of willpower) might be thought to limit its field of application, especially when one considers the subsequent development of the phenomenon. Alain looks at failure as an individual phenomenon, whose consequences only marginally affect the individual's later life (XX, 52). But it could be said that the nature of the phenomenon changes radically when it becomes so widespread that it causes a public outcry and when statistical analysis shows that it is no longer an exclusively individual, but a social phenomenon. When the connection between the parents' socio-professional category and the child's success at school can be incontrovertibly demonstrated, failure can no longer be explained by factors that only concern the individual. What is needed is a comparative analysis of the specific demands of the school and the educational expectations of children from the socio-professional categories worst affected. Admittedly, Alain's *Propos* would be only marginally useful in carrying out such an analysis, for although his refusal to accept inequality of intellectual ability is important, the problem still calls for another sort of analysis.

## Teaching methods

We shall be forced to reach a similar conclusion on the issue of teaching methods. First of all, Alain must be given credit for criticizing lecture-type lessons and supporting active educational methods. His criticism of the lecturing style of teaching can only be properly understood by reference, once again, to the nature of childhood. If children learn nothing from listening to a teacher talking, it is because this approach reinforces their subjection to speechifying and abstraction. The lecture is typical of that magic use of language from which the world of things is excluded, where anything is possible but nothing is real. In other words, it never provides children with anything that can fix their experience of the world as a written text can. It does not enable them to leave behind them the make-believe world of childhood.

Two conclusions can be drawn from this analysis. Firstly, Alain advocates active learning: 'Hearing and seeing will not make progress possible for any pupil anywhere in the world, only doing' (VI, 20). This view makes the primary school class a workshop for the mind: 'A place where the teacher works very little and the children work a lot. No lessons falling like rain which the children listen to with their arms folded; instead children reading, writing, calculating, drawing, reciting, copying and recopying. Many exercises are given on the blackboard but they are always repeated on the pupils' slates, slowly and frequently, and always taking up long periods of time [...] Many hours are spent making clean copies in exercise books [...] And the writing, recitation, reading, drawing and calculating continues; building knowledge' (XXXIII, 86-87). This view also defines the teacher's role, not as preparing and giving lessons but as organizing study and 'grading the tasks' (II, 9). In this respect, the teacher is no more than a transmitter of knowledge, an auxiliary to books, which brings us to the second conclusion to be drawn from Alain's analysis, the overriding importance of reading in school work: 'Let them learn to read and then to read some more. Let them be educated by poets, orators and storytellers. There would be plenty of time if we were not trying to do everything at once. The primary school offers the ridiculous spectacle of an adult giving lectures. I hate these little *Sorbonnes*. I could test them by ear, just by listening through an open window. If the teacher is not talking and the children are reading, then all is well' (XXV, 67).

However, to say that Alain was in favour of active learning is not to tell the whole story. The term ‘active learning’ is in itself vague and requires clarification. It is vital here to note that, for Alain, schoolwork only contributes to freedom of the mind if it first lays great stress on discipline of the body. This assertion has the force of a statement of principle that goes far beyond education: generally speaking, it is only by taking the world as its point of departure that the mind can liberate itself. Freedom is never effective if it is too far removed from the world of things or of people. The mind is only real if it manages to give itself a body. This is why, at school, ‘the body must first of all be favourably disposed’ (XXII, 58). So ‘copying is an act that encourages thought’ (XXXIII, 87) because it ‘focuses the body on the thoughts you want to follow’ (XXXIV, 89). Similarly, this is why learning language by reciting poetry fleshes out the child’s wandering thoughts (XIX, 51). And this is also why Alain argues against school reformers, who, ignoring the need for bodily discipline, seek first to ‘develop intelligence instead of awakening and disciplining emotions’ (PE, 31, 347). Deep down, Alain, who in this respect observes republican teaching methods, relies on mechanical responses and repetition to help develop the mind. He does not believe that prior understanding is essential for learning, but he does think that the reverse is true: learning is a pre-condition for understanding. He defends an educational theory based on habit which is very different from plain routine and prepares the body to become ‘fluid, in other words able to convey thought exactly’ (PE, 18, 301-302). In fact, the body is only the antechamber to the mind.

In this context one could perhaps note a second limitation of *Propos sur l’éducation*, similar to the one we noted earlier. It concerns what has been called the ‘question of support’.<sup>4</sup> Discussing the motivation of learning, Alain vehemently criticized education based on play or interest which purports to motivate the pupil with the promise of pleasure or interest either immediate or imminent. This criticism is certainly relevant in so far as such methods are only aimed at the desire for gratification and do nothing to strengthen the determination to learn (II, 10). It is also unhelpful in that the pleasure the mind is capable of feeling is foreign to the spontaneous interests of the child (IV, 14). In other words, there is an inevitable element of constraint in learning at school that cannot be completely eliminated by short-term motivation. A great deal of work is required to cultivate the mind, and this can only be achieved through consistent determination and willpower and never by the ephemeral impulses of desire. Unfortunately, the constraint inherent in learning school subjects is such that they can only be assimilated successfully if pupils accept requirements made by the school. In other words, the pupils must be prepared to trust their teachers to provide intellectual satisfaction that they will only obtain later. We may assume that there will be no argument about this as long as attendance at school is taken for granted by society, and therefore by pupils, and there is no need to question its existence, methods or content. What the family expects from the school coincides with what the school demands from its pupils and it is not difficult to reach a consensus on the objectives of schooling. But this consensus unravels when society as a whole, or just particular social categories, lose confidence in the school. The will to learn may then evaporate, and with it the school’s implicit authorization to set pupils tasks whose value is not immediately apparent. Maybe there has always been a deep-rooted misunderstanding between education and society, at least in France. Whereas society requires that the school meet a utilitarian demand, what the school is offering is basically general education. Society expects the school to fulfil a social function first and foremost, while the school’s main concern is to cultivate the mind. This discrepancy goes unnoticed as long as the school satisfies these social expectations while following its own bent. This was indeed the situation at the time when Alain was writing about a type of education whose principles were unchallenged. In such a situation willpower could be postulated as the main condition for success. But when the school is explicitly allocated as its basic task the preparation of pupils

for the world of work, a different situation obtains. The school's provision of general education is then perceived as not satisfying the utilitarian requirements of society. We can then point out, in connection with the postulation of willpower as the sole condition for a pupil's success at school, that willpower itself is dependent on this more fundamental agreement between the pupil and the school—agreement on the school's aims and methods. In today's industrial societies it seems quite likely that for a section of the school population this agreement has been undermined if not broken, and the school's requirements are basically open to question. So the school can no longer count from the start on the support of all its pupils, which used to mean that its working methods were accepted without conflict. We are not saying that the school should change, merely pointing out a problem that Alain could not have been expected to recognize and which probably cannot be solved on the basis of his advice alone.

Following this account of Alain's reflections on education we could draw two conclusions. Firstly, his specifically educational philosophy is no doubt historically dated, as we have seen in respect of pupil failure and teaching methods. We feel that Alain's suggestions belong to their own time and have only marginal relevance for education nowadays, given the emergence of new phenomena such as the social dimension of school failure and the collapse of the implicit agreement binding pupil to school, which Alain was bound to discount. But while the methods he recommends may be outdated, we believe that his philosophy of education, that is his commitment to the principles of education, is still relevant. At a time when increasing demands are being made on State education by society, especially in economic circles, his *Propos sur l'éducation* advocate a philosophy of critical vigilance that we would do well to heed. Alain reminds reformers who are in too much of a hurry to turn the school into an industrial enterprise, that there is a sequence to be followed in education and that we must take care not to destroy the school in our eagerness to open it up to the world of work, because without a cultivated mind there is no genuine humanity, and probably no truly effective vocational training either. Alain also reminds us that people in general, and therefore children too, are never raw material that can be shaped to comply with external norms. There is an invincible resilience in individual human beings which means that education can in no way be compared to a technical process which produces individuals through external intervention; it is more of a practical process through which individuals develop themselves.

That said, it is obvious that this philosophy of education is in no way revolutionary. Alain explicitly denied any such intention, since he believed that any form of revolution was much more likely to strengthen external authority over the individual than to free the individual from it. In this sense, Alain can be said to be an educational realist, meaning that he distrusts any educational plans that involve too much interference. For him, the main concern of education was not to invent a new type of person or a new world but to come to terms with reality. This does not mean that Alain was a conservative, only that he did not rely on teachers to change human beings but on human beings themselves.

## Notes

1. *Philippe Foray (France)*. Educated as a philosopher. Teaches at the Institut Universitaire de Formation des Maîtres of the Académie de Lyon. The author of several essays on Kant, on whom he has also written a thesis, and on Alain and education.
2. Alain, *Propos sur l'éducation*, Paris, PUF, 1986. (Collection: 'Quadrige'.) This book also contains the lessons of *Pédagogie infantine*. In this article, *Propos de l'éducation* is quoted with the chapter number in roman numerals, followed by the page number. References to *Pédagogie infantine* are given with the letters *PE*.
3. Alain, *Politique*, Paris, PUF, 1951, p. 270.
4. J.S. Bruner, *Le développement de l'enfant : savoir faire, savoir dire*, Paris, PUF, 1983, p. 78.

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