

The following text was originally published in *Prospects: the quarterly review of comparative education* (Paris, UNESCO: International Bureau of Education), vol. XXIII, no. 1/2, 1993, p. 373–401.

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ADOLPHE FERRIERE

(1879–1960)

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Of all figures who enjoyed an indisputable international reputation between the wars, Adolphe Ferrière is probably one of those who has suffered most from the ‘ravages of time’, and the current neglect of his books is not the worst of these. When Ferrière’s name happens to come up in a quotation or reference, it is often apparent that those aspects of him that people remember nowadays make him look like a caricature.

The first image that has remained of Ferrière is, on the face of it, positive and attractive: he is praised as a tireless promoter of the noble ideal of active childhood. But some writers can on occasions give a somewhat offensive overtone to their praise. They hail the gallant idealistic activist, the fervent apostle, as more prone to flights of lyricism than to serious thinking.

The second image is more obviously negative, and it is still with us today. It portrays Ferrière as someone who, beneath a veneer of modernism, was the epitome of the ‘spiritually-minded’ educational psychologist, and therefore reactionary and shortsighted. During the 1960s Marxist-inspired sociologists and educationists launched a vehement indictment of the psychology or educational psychology of the activity school. Its detractors criticized it for hiding a bourgeois, élitist and individualistic ideology beneath a pseudo-scientific cover. Ferrière was one of the favourite targets for this criticism (see, for example, Charlot, 1976; Vial, 1990).

This two-sided image of the ‘apostle’ and the ‘reactionary’ does not do justice to what Ferrière actually wrote, and even less to what sort of man he really was. Getting to know him by reading his private diary (*Petit journal*, 43 volumes, 1918–1960) and going back to his work and books, we learn to see him as someone who still has a message for us today, a message that comes through most clearly in his contradictions

Thus, Ferrière appears both fragile and self-confident, so vain as to be funny and yet generous enough to arouse admiration. He himself said he was ‘an introvert by necessity’ because he was totally deaf from the age of 20, whereas he was in fact ‘an extrovert by nature’. He felt he had a genuine vocation for public life and sincerely wished to devote himself first and foremost to teaching, but he had to abandon this vocation because of his disability and become an ‘educationist’ against his will. Although he was a disinterested man of principle, the need to earn a living condemned him to the duties of a pen-pusher in progressive education. It is true that he adopted the prejudices of his social background, but at the same time his political writings show him to be a shrewd and objective observer of the period between the wars. This élitist ‘liberal’ who defended the social order published a ‘socialist’ profession of faith in 1919. He supported central planning and argued in favour of State-led economic recovery that did not cut the purchasing power of ordinary people. Although always quick to engage in polemics, he was a middle-of-the-road thinker who argued in favour of the marriage of ‘science and common sense’. He could be moving, but he could also be funny. When we take a good look at Ferrière, we find that he cannot be pigeonholed, and this is what makes him fascinating, much more so than his conventional image.

Adolphe Ferrière's work

On 23 January 1944, Ferrière wrote in his main diary, *Mon grand journal*,² that he could split his intellectual life into five decades, each of them dominated by a different discipline:

From 1900 to 1910 metaphysics was my main interest. From 1910 to 1920 I moved on to psychology. From 1920 to 1930 it was educational theory that had pride of place, and from 1930 to 1940, sociology. And since 1940, I have been steeped in philosophy, up to my neck in it, not to mention mind and soul.

Obviously this division into decades is purely arbitrary, but comparing Ferrière's view with the bibliography compiled by Gerber in 1989 does enable us to draw one direct lesson.

This affects the usual view of this leading educationist's relationship with educational theory. Although he acknowledges that it once occupied 'pride of place' in his intellectual life, this was only for a brief and well-defined period: 1920–1930. After 1930 his main interests lay elsewhere. This assertion, which knocks the habitual view of Ferrière on the head, fits in with the image he had of himself, and does not seem to be too far from the truth.

Ferrière, who was both a thinker and a man of action, was always repelled by the label of 'educationist', which he found restrictive and petty. He crossly claimed in 1924 (*La pratique de l'école active*, p. 39) that he had not 'read a single book on educational theory' and in 1931 (*L'école sur mesure à la mesure du maître*, p. 155) that he 'knew nothing about educational theory'.³

In fact, Ferrière was loath to be termed an educationist for two reasons. The first was that from an early age he thought that his place was primarily in the European political, economic and social arena, where indeed he was soon to play his part. From 1918 to 1923 he was editor of the Christian socialist journal *L'Essor*, for which he continued to write political editorials until he retired from public life in 1953. It should be pointed out that, in terms of the volume of material published, this constitutes as important a part of his work as his books on education. For Ferrière, his interest in education was just one aspect of his work as a free citizen.

Moreover—and this is what gives an original and poignant touch to his role as a teacher—Ferrière always praised the intuition of the man of action and he always claimed to be a 'practitioner' (cf. Hameline, 1982). When his physical disability forced him to give up the work that had enabled him to have direct contact with children, he regarded his career in publishing as an extension of his 'vocation' as a teacher. He became an educationist only because he was unable to do otherwise. We cannot understand Ferrière unless we constantly bear in mind the terrible handicap that his early deafness represented for him. It was an astounding achievement to have been able none the less to play such an active role in society.

The man who so much wanted to be a teacher

There is no doubt that if he had not been prevented by his deafness, Ferrière's first venture would have been to start the new school on which he had published a brochure, *Projet d'école nouvelle*, in 1909.

Gerber (1982) has described how Ferrière's teaching vocation emerged. Reading the *Journal reconstitué*,⁴ the young Ferrière's correspondence with his parents and finding out more about his family and social background enables us to confirm three facts: Ferrière continued in adult life to show the same aptitude for leadership as he had displayed in his youth; he had the 'individualistic' stamp typical of educational innovators; and he grew up in a philanthropic upper middle class family in Geneva, with the 'new schools' of that city forming part of his everyday surroundings.

In praise of the leader

First of all, the *Journal reconstitué* (the diary he reconstructed after all his early work was destroyed in a fire) dates the beginning of the adolescent Ferrière's role as a leader in his family group from 1893. Later, as a young man, he was also a leading figure among the young people he knew in Geneva.

Let us look more closely at this point. Ferrière always stressed the 'psychological' factor in his wish to look after children and adolescents. Referring to himself as a 'teacher by profession', he at the same time described himself as a 'child psychologist' (*L'éducation dans la famille*, 1921; cf. 1935, p. 3). In a private assessment of his career written in 1953 (*Un destin en marge des autres*, p. 13), he insists with hindsight on his psychologist's 'curiosity', which he seems to have employed with regard to group phenomena from an early age. Here the educationist and the political analyst join forces with the psychologist, and it is in this triple role that Ferrière can be described as following in the footsteps of Gustave Le Bon, the first exponent of crowd psychology (1895). Thus in his 1921 book *L'autonomie des écoliers*—which he describes (p. 68) as a 'study of social psychology'—Ferrière ends a chapter about child gangs 'by reproducing the main passages from a document given [to him] by a teacher' who as an adolescent had been 'leader of a few such gangs' (p. 57).

If we compare this account with two biographical notes devoted to Ferrière and written under his supervision (Peeters, 1911; Meyhoffer & Gunning, 1929), it becomes clear that Ferrière is describing *his own experiences* under cover of anonymity. The same gang of cousins appears and the same 'mountaineering club' is formed, followed by a literary society which performs his plays. Even the style is recognizably similar.

Is this modesty or ingenuity? Probably both. It is a device that allows Ferrière to talk about himself in the third person while avoiding the danger of being criticized for hogging the limelight. The trouble here is that Ferrière the social psychologist is giving a description of Ferrière the leader that Ferrière the teacher cannot thoroughly endorse. Because what type of leader is he praising? The answer is an autocrat, perfectly capable of fostering rivalries within his group the better to assert his authority; a manipulator 'who dispenses others from any effort while giving them the illusion that the success of the group is due to their efforts', thereby making himself indispensable; a pocket-size Machiavelli who admits that he encouraged the group to elect another leader in order to make them want him back as leader (p. 61).

The young leader thus described shows himself to be an astute 'psychologist' who makes a virtue out of manipulating people. This anthological pearl is one of the first examples of a psycho-managerial literature on the psychology of leadership that blossomed from the 1920s onwards. Ferrière the teacher drew a psycho-moralistic conclusion from it for the control of groups of children by adults: the children should be allowed to progress (meaning, in fact, that they should be led) from anarchy to order by making them want the latter. The constraints resulting from a lack of order would be more decisive in helping them to achieve autonomy than the adoption by teachers of premature and authoritarian measures to organize the group.

The importance the author of *L'autonomie des écoliers* attaches to this account starring himself shows the extent to which Ferrière regarded this youthful experience as an initial test of his talent for observation and for manipulating his peers. And it was a test which he obviously found convincing.

The non-conformist

In the second place, Ferrière told his first biographer E. Peeters in 1911 that he had 'suffered a great deal at secondary school'. By the time he wrote his 1953 review of his career this memory

had taken a turn for the worse: ‘Secondary school nearly killed me.’ This is a conventional, even banal, comment on the part of a supporter of ‘the new education’, but in his personal account of those schooldays Ferrière does not acrimoniously attack his teachers and the way they conducted their classes, apart from complaining about the wall which his inexorably worsening deafness was putting up between him and them. On the other hand, he is much harder on his schoolmates. It was not just his deafness that set him apart, but also his rather arrogant wish not to conform to the conventions in use among the ‘leading families’, and which also affected relations among pupils. Typically, for someone with a mission as an educational innovator, Ferrière was, in his way, a non-conformist.⁵ Although ‘sociable and accommodating’, as he himself wrote in his secret autobiography in 1921, he behaved as an individualist, or to put it more precisely, as ‘unattached’, to use the sporting term.

One characteristic common to the founders of the new schools in the countryside who wanted to break with the existing school order⁶ was that they had strong, charismatic personalities. The history of the new schools is often the history of stormy collaboration followed by break-ups between individuals with strongly contrasting characters, although obviously there is more to it than that. Despite his deafness, Ferrière was in many people’s eyes a man of dialogue with a deep wish to listen to and help others. But this openness was not incompatible with an awareness of his own worth, and his highly individual manner is evident in his *Projet d’école nouvelle*, published in 1909. Ferrière was then aged 30 and described himself as a man of initiative, sure of the merits of his venture and the approach he had adopted and anxious to make his mark on the educational landscape. At the same time, however, his proposals reflect his support for the ideals shared by the new schools in the countryside. To quote his own words, he wanted to be acknowledged as ‘a pioneer among pioneers’ (1924, p. 36–37).

Ferrière’s family and the new school

A third factor in helping us to understand Ferrière’s ‘vocation’ is that he came into contact with the new schools in the countryside at an early stage in their development. The movement began in 1889, when Cecil Reddie established the New School in Abbotsholme, England. Adolphe was not the first Ferrière to discover the new schools; he learned about them through his family. From 1899 two of his first cousins were attending two schools regarded as flagships of the movement: one was at the *Landerziehungsheim* at Ilsenburg, Germany, whose headteacher was Hermann Lietz, and the other at the New School in Bedales whose head was J.H. Badley, a former colleague of Cecil Reddie at Abbotsholme. His uncle, the Reverend Louis Ferrière, visited the *Deutschen Landerziehungsheime* before Adolphe and published a report on them in 1901.

Ferrière relates that in 1899 he made a visit, accompanied by his father, to French sociologist Edmond Demolins at the *École des Roches* in Verneuil-sur-Avre, France.⁷ He had read Demolins’ best-selling *A quoi tient la supériorité des anglo-saxons?* (1897), as well as his manifesto for parents, *L’éducation nouvelle* (1898). As Ferrière has often recalled, it was Demolins who suggested that the young man should take on a job in which his worsening deafness would not be too much of a handicap: setting up an International Office of New Schools. Ferrière could carry out a comparative evaluation for the innovators that in the long term could also benefit State schools. At this point, however, Ferrière had not yet given up his plans to teach and he discussed the issue at great length with his parents,⁸ for whom he had great respect.⁹

Ferrière’s teaching experience

The most important period in Ferrière’s early career were the two years (1900–02) he spent with Hermann Lietz, who was a true source of inspiration to him.¹⁰ He went to Lietz’ school in

Germany as a 'volunteer teacher' and, if the family's letters are anything to go by, he spent a lot of time organizing and supervising the studies of his younger brothers, who were pupils at the school. But he won Lietz' trust, took his side during a teachers' revolt and became for a few months the assiduous and fascinated direct assistant of this charismatic figure.

Grunder (1987), working from unpublished documents, has attempted to reconstruct what Ferrière actually did during this period that he always described as 'exhilarating', referring to the 'great life of Haubinda'. Was he overestimating in retrospect the scope of his brief experience as a teacher? The school curricula and timetables analyzed by Grunder seem conventional enough. But it was during this period that Ferrière says that he tried for the first time to give lessons based on the 'spontaneous interests' of pupils (1931, p. °73), which enabled him to claim that he had anticipated 'the two attempts that followed, in 1907 and 1908, those of Mrs Montessori and Dr Decroly', and which, unlike his own, were discussed all over the world.

Ferrière's insistence that he had been a forerunner of the great innovators can be explained by the 'strategic' choice he had to make when he 'went into educational theory' in 1921: describing himself as someone with teaching experience and thus setting himself apart from those who pioneered new education only in their books. In 1936 (p. 219) he distinguished himself from the other teachers at the Jean-Jacques Rousseau Institute (Claparède, Bovet, Piaget): they had all written profusely, he said with a hint of sarcasm, 'only the undersigned has actually taught'.

Apart from his initial experience with Hermann Lietz in 1900–02, Ferrière describes the three months he spent in Glarisseg in 1902 helping W. Frei and W. Zuberbuhler, two Swiss colleagues of Lietz who had established the first Swiss *Landerziehungsheim*. He also mentions the six years during which he worked from time to time at the Les Pléiades boarding school (1914–20) (cf. Hameline, 1982; Gerber et al., 1990).

The Bex new school: the activity school method

It was during his year at the new school in Bex (1920–21) that Ferrière experimented with the ideas to be applied to 'the activity school in practice', as he called his book published in 1924. *La pratique de l'école active* was based on the unpublished *Journal de notre petite classe*, of which it contains long extracts. The manuscript of this diary has been located and a study by Hameline and Gerber (1986–89) for the Swiss National Fund for Scientific Research offers a synoptic comparison of the published extracts with the unpublished text.

The comparison confirms and underlines the insubstantial, not to say insignificant, nature of the experience itself. Ferrière was honest enough to make this quite clear in his book. One extract from the diary reads: 'I am beginning to understand many things. They can all be summed up in one sentence: you don't do what you want to do' (1924, p. °61). Further on he remarks: 'I came to Bex to find out how the activity school works and to confirm my convictions. I have only acquired a sketchy idea of the technique but the overall experience, however incomplete, has only strengthened my convictions' (p. 82). We shall return to this last point later.

None the less, reading the *Journal de notre petite classe* reveals several things that Ferrière did not make public. For instance, he only published extracts from his own notes whereas the diary comprises three viewpoints: Ferrière's, that of his wife Isabelle and that of their colleague and friend Elisabeth Huguenin.¹¹ This three-sided debate that goes on throughout the diary is extremely informative. Ferrière's companions frankly express their doubts about the convictions underpinning the type of educational action engaged in: no, the two women wrote, these pupils do not learn of their own accord; yes, they enjoy 'schoolbook' exercises which do not apparently correspond to any 'spontaneous' interest; if these children are passive or confused, it is obviously because they have been conditioned by their earlier schooling, but it is also because the activity class syllabus is too ambitious and complex and they do not understand what it is aiming at. It was probably

Ferrière's militant idealism that prevented him from reporting the reservations of his colleagues, who were less convinced than he.

AN UNHEEDED ADVISER

Ferrière's final attempt to put his theories into practice was to end in disappointment. In 1924 he was asked to take part in setting up an international school in Geneva. Initially reticent, he quickly became almost impatiently enthusiastic and threw himself into the project, imposing his opinions on Paul Meyhoffer, the prospective headmaster, who was particularly devoted to him. Ferrière even offered to house the school which it was starting up in a chalet owned by his family. He was made 'general manager' with the task of drawing up the school's educational charter—a mission which he regarded as the last chance he might have to put his ideas into practice. But the founding committee did not really share Ferrière's innovative designs; what they wanted was a modern school that would inspire the confidence of international civil servants and thus ensure a good reputation, not a laboratory for testing educational theories.

Although Ferrière must have sensed the opposition and reservations of his colleagues, he none the less forged ahead, leaving himself without any way out and personally assuming all the risks. The early days were difficult: Ferrière wanted to finish with curricula imposed from on high and counted on the teacher's ingenuity to encourage spontaneous activity on the part of the pupils and to lead them, as he himself had tried to do at Bex, to develop their own curriculum. But neither teachers nor pupils—and parents less—were ready for such an adventure that, moreover, gave all the appearances of chaos. During the first few weeks, Ferrière wrote in his diary about his fears. In 1925 he tried to make the school self-managing, with the same disappointing result. From 1926 onwards, he could see that the school would not be the laboratory that he had hoped would point the way to a reform of the education system. Although he remained as an adviser to the international school until about 1929, psychologically he started drifting away from it at the end of 1926.

FERRIÈRE'S 'HOME'

In 1929 Ferrière found the compensation he had been seeking for his thwarted dreams of teaching. He was still nostalgic for the model school that he had not been able to establish personally and which he had expected to confirm his ideas. Moreover, he found it hard to get over the fact that his wife could not give him the large family he would have loved to raise. In his diary he tells of the pain he felt as the father of an only child, an engaging boy with a strong but difficult personality. The educational haven he sought was known by the English name, 'Home'. In his end-of-the-year review for 1929 he wrote:

I need children around me. At the Home, I have found children hungry for affection, an atmosphere of purity, sincerity, mutual help, manageresses who say they need my support, who follow my advice on teaching and had already been following it on general education, even before I had given it. I feel 'at home'."

In exchange for this warm reception, Ferrière became the Home's self-appointed publicist, elevating this humble orphanage to the rank of ideal activity school. He became its adviser, exerting his influence over the manageresses, setting himself up as a father-figure for the children (who called him 'Uncle Adolphe'), a role played by ear, and taking a concerned interest in their education. He expended boundless energy on behalf of the Home, whose financial problems were endemic. It so happened that in 1933 he came to live close by and became chairman of the governors' association, a position he held until 1947 (cf. Coquoz, 1989).

The promoter of ideas

So whereas Ferrière tried to project an image of himself as an experienced teacher, he had only sporadically been directly responsible for education and he had not been satisfied with the outcome. What he lacked was not intuition, but length of experience. The former enabled him to pinpoint what was wrong with the education system, but only the second would have enabled him to put his own convictions to the test. But was he capable of calling his convictions into question? This seems unlikely, judging by the statement referred to earlier: at Bex, in 1920–21, Ferrière the man of conviction, who ‘believed’ in the activity school, came face to face with Ferrière the technician, who was trying to devise ways of putting it into practice. Even though Ferrière the technician was unable to bring his efforts to a successful conclusion, Ferrière the activist remained convinced of the merits of his cause. The reason was that Ferrière’s beliefs rested on two premises: he thought that they were supported by ‘scientific’ argument, and secondly he felt that they were capable of ushering in a real change in mentalities, and indeed a ‘new era’.

Ferrière the thinker described himself as a man of experience for strategic reasons: he had noticed that theorists were immediately challenged in educational circles, where there was little tolerance for lessons other than practical lessons. But in the end he decided to make actively promoting ideas his principal task, and became a propagandist. In fact, his deafness left him no other option.

The teacher of Bex was also the author of the incisive pamphlet *Transformons l'école* (1920), in the introduction to which he portrays the traditional education system as the very embodiment of evil.¹³ He was also a speaker at the Calais Conference in 1921, was elected vice-chairman of the newly formed New Education Fellowship and became editor in January 1922 of *Pour l'ère nouvelle*, the French-language version of its journal. Ferrière was completely taken up by his role as an activist. He published thousands of pages during the 1920s when, as he says, pedagogy ‘had pride of place’ in his intellectual life. A huge amount of correspondence remains from this period and demonstrates the prestige he enjoyed; he noted the ‘volume’ in his diary with a mixture of pride and despondency. The fact was that he had truly become a public figure.

Condemned to fame

The year 1921 was a critical one for Ferrière who was then, so to speak, *forced to become famous* just to survive. He was no longer a man of private means who could devote himself to education as to a freely chosen leisure activity. Ferrière had become a low wage earner. Married in 1910, father of a child in 1916, he had become by 1921 a man with serious financial problems. When his house burned down in 1918, destroying twenty years’ writing, he felt badly shaken,¹⁴ and in 1919 the collapse of the German and Austrian currencies put paid to the fortune he had inherited from his mother. Ferrière found himself obliged to earn a living, just as he was having to face the fact that his plans to establish his own school were not viable. His unsuccessful experiment with the girls of the ‘lower class’ at the new school in Bex, also in 1921, provided further proof that because of his deafness he was now unfit for educational work that brought him into direct and permanent contact with children.

He had mixed feelings about fame. He pursued it with a sometimes touchy persistence and a feverish level of promotional activity which he himself said was like the ‘superficiality of a butterfly’. But he was sincere when he wrote in his diary in 1922 that his dream would have been to ‘make his place’ like a cricket and to lead a quiet life as a teacher in direct contact with a group of children whom he would guide according to how he saw the principles of the new school. Giving up this dream was an inner tragedy that often left him defeated and depressed.

We next find him courageously going off at a tangent, caught up in a whirlwind of public relations, while asserting in a letter dated 9 December 1925 that his deafness made his personal relationships ‘extremely awkward, tiring, even exhausting’ and that he had been trying without success to gain some small pecuniary advantage out of all these commitments. The same complaint crops up time and time again in his diary: ‘with my deafness, financial problems are particularly tormenting’, he wrote in 1925.

From 1921 onwards, he played an active part in the gradual and laborious process of planning and setting up the International Bureau of Education (IBE). He was appointed deputy director when it was founded in 1925 and his position was confirmed when the IBE became an international organization in 1929.¹⁵ But he had no illusions about the appointment: he had himself turned down the job of secretary-general from which he was debarred by his deafness. He had attempted in vain to ‘find a paid slot’ within the IBE for his International Bureau of New Schools, of which he had from the beginning been the only employee—unpaid. Not having a salary got him down. Although he drew some comfort from the prestige he enjoyed, he was too honest to be totally taken in by it.

During the 1920s he regularly spoke at conferences of the Fellowship (Montreux in 1923; Heidelberg, 1925; Locarno, 1927; Elsinore, 1929). *Pour l’ère nouvelle* took up a considerable amount of his time. He spoke of it as *his* journal and turned it into a platform for his ideas, but it only brought in a very small amount of money.

His ‘decade in the service of education’ was also one in which Ferrière travelled extensively abroad, giving many lectures which were in fact arguments in favour of the activity school or genetic psychology as he understood it. Belgium and the Netherlands (1924), France, the United Kingdom, Yugoslavia (1925), Italy (1926), France, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Hungary, Romania, Austria (1928), Germany, Czechoslovakia, Poland (1929), Spain, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, Chile, Argentina, Paraguay, Portugal (1930). And he felt that his work had been recognized when he was officially asked to evaluate the education system of the Smyrna district in Turkey in 1928.

The political writer and the philosopher

Ferrière also had to establish himself in his field through his intellectual output. Very early on, he started work on a massive intellectual undertaking of which his ideas on education were only one aspect. He puts the date of his first ideas on ‘genetic psychology’ in 1905, then in 1909, when he gave his first public lectures at the University of Geneva.

However, his fervent activism, coupled with the need to earn a living from his writings, were partly to prevail over this intellectual project. Ferrière the thinker had to make way for Ferrière the political writer, but the two encroached upon each other. The thinker needed to take his time and meditate on what he was to write; the political writer had to work quickly, find an audience and pull in his meagre royalties. Not counting the hundreds of articles he was to turn out for all kinds of newspapers and journals, Ferrière wrote books aimed at the general public which were extremely successful and often translated (*Transformons l’école*, 1920; *L’éducation dans la famille*, 1921; *L’activité spontanée chez l’enfant*, 1922; *La coéducation des sexes*, 1926; *Le grand coeur maternel de Pestalozzi*, 1927; *Trois pionniers de l’éducation nouvelle*, 1928; *Nos enfants et l’avenir du pays, appel aux parents et aux éducateurs*, 1942). Indeed, Ferrière had real talent as a journalist—he could write rapidly and effortlessly—but he could not resist the temptation of including in these minor works references to his masterwork which were sometimes so obscure as to appear difficult, despite his lively, flowing style.

Moreover, when he decided to address a ‘specialized’ readership of education professionals, he was as concerned with meeting deadlines as with producing properly completed pieces of work. So despite the thickness of the two volumes of *L’Ecole active* (1922b), it is a book

that was hastily turned out, even cobbled together, and owed its existence to Ferrière's facility for writing, his talent for piecing together existing material and re-using bits of his previous work. He began writing it on 18 September 1921; at 12.30 p.m. on 23 October he completed the 425th and final page.

Such haste could not fail to give his detractors the arguments they had been looking for. Ferrière was particularly hurt by one attack launched soon after the book came out. Without warning, his 'deaf friend and colleague' from Geneva, Edouard Claparède, published an analysis of the book in February 1923, ridiculing Ferrière and accusing him of producing a ragbag of ideas in which the concept of the activity school—a very simple one in Claparède's view—was bogged down in an impossible hotch-potch of philosophical dogma. It is true that there were political motives behind this scathing criticism: Claparède was irritated by Ferrière's tendency to play at his own game and to claim the idea of the activity school as his own. But with this reservation, we have to agree that Claparède was not completely wrong from an intellectual point of view. If Ferrière had taken his time he would undoubtedly have completely recast his book. In any case, his 1946 book bearing the same title of *L'école active*—a much smaller work—was actually a patchwork composed of a few chapters taken from *L'autonomie des écoliers* (1921), *La pratique de l'école active* (1924) and *L'école active* (1922): in short, there was not much left of the book published in 1922. Nowadays we would say that despite its campaigning nature, it was a book that had not correctly identified its target readership.

An unfinished work

All the same, Ferrière thought there was an audience for his intellectual masterwork. When he brought out *Le Progrès spirituel* in 1927, this substantial 364-page book was supposed to herald an ambitious series entitled 'L'éducation constructive' in which Ferrière planned to set out the educational ideas at the basis of his analyses of the previous decades. But the book was a flop and the follow-up was never published. Here again, Ferrière had not managed to find an audience able to read his work without being put off: 'L'éducation constructive' was presented as a series of 'discussions about genetic psychology for parents and teachers', but *Le Progrès spirituel*, which quotes more than 300 authors, was actually an overview of doctrine aimed more at intellectuals. However, in this general survey Ferrière touched on too many subjects to which separate disciplines laid claim and in which he was not acknowledged as an expert in academic circles. His outlook was still focused too sharply on education. Anxious to put forward a philosophy that was both comprehensive and to the point, Ferrière offered an approach that went off at a tangent and ran the risk of not being understood.

There were, however, other reasons why Ferrière's work had fallen out of favour. In the late 1920s, many of those who had been campaigning in the name of idealism or psychologism fell prey to disillusion.¹⁶ During this period experimental pedagogy was being turned into an academic discipline in contrast with the 'experiential' pedagogy of 'born teachers', as favoured by Ferrière.¹⁷ Meanwhile those working in the field were reducing the 'activity school'—that sustaining utopia—to the status of 'activity methods'—a mere collection of useful tactics. The late 1920s also saw the emergence of socialist and communist tendencies within the ranks of the *Groupe français d'éducation nouvelle* (GFEN) set up by Ferrière, and at the Fellowship conference in Nice in 1932 these were instrumental in replacing the 'spiritualistic' principles inspired by Ferrière in 1921¹⁸ with principles determined more by concern for social equality and democratization.

By the end of the decade Ferrière noted, not without bitterness, that although his books had been widely translated he was intellectually isolated. Underestimating the influence he had on many people through his writing for the general public, he wrote in his diary on 16 February 1929:

My disappointments [underlined in the text]. I note with some bitterness that I have apparently devoted my life to the new schools and that they seem unaware of my efforts and my books. [...] Many headteachers to whom I have written have forgotten that I exist. Most of their colleagues have never known that I exist. The books I have written for them have fallen by the wayside. [...] There are no publishers for my books, or when I do find any they manage to corner all the profits; no money, therefore no secretary, therefore no way to write my books. I believe I have some basic good qualities, and I am wasting my life rendering small services for which nobody is grateful [...].

Ferrière had no disciples.¹⁹ There was no ‘Ferrière movement’ in the sense that we speak of a ‘Montessori movement’ or a ‘Freinet movement’ (cf. Hameline, 1992).²⁰ In Geneva, both at the Jean-Jacques Rousseau Institute and at the IBE, Ferrière remained a solitary figure. Among the rare individuals who remained faithful to him we should mention Célestin Freinet who until the end—even if it entailed rearranging history a little (cf. Hameline, 1991)—maintained that reading *L'école active* and meeting Ferrière at the Fellowship conference in Territet-Montreux in 1923 was what sparked his vocation as an innovator.

Ferrière's philosophy

It is impossible to understand Adolphe Ferrière's philosophy on education unless we bear in mind that his intellectual output *is not primarily educational*. It is, in a sense, *an anthropology*, underpinned by a *social philosophy*, of which his comments on education form one of the logical components. By this I mean that what concerned the young Ferrière above all, during the period he himself describes as ‘metaphysical’ (1900–10), was to put the phenomenon of human existence in a context that would give it meaning, and this context was created by the contribution of both the biological sciences and the social sciences, against a backdrop of evolutionism.

AN APPARENT ECLECTICISM

He began his studies at the University of Geneva by first embarking simultaneously (1892–1900) on courses in zoology and comparative anatomy at the Faculty of Science and in ‘social economy and political systems’ at the Faculty of Arts. Then in 1902 he followed philosophy classes and took courses in history, psychology and the history of religions. In 1905 he was awarded a degree in social science.

This apparent eclecticism is typical of Ferrière. As a student, he was obsessed with the idea of building up a major consolidated theory. He felt he was intellectually capable of this and that his background allowed it: he came from a family in which it was self-evident that a prominent young intellectual with his talents could very quickly, indeed almost automatically, become somebody whom important people would want to talk to. He mixed with these sort of people quite naturally: they were his acquaintances as well as his masters. So at an early stage Adolphe Ferrière acquired a confident manner, along with the certainty of his own worth and an awareness of a legitimate ambition. But at the same time he was a hard worker. He organized his material methodically, read profusely and rapidly, and wrote in the same way. His 1915 thesis, acclaimed by the University of Geneva, was the fruit of ten years' effort. But two articles published in 1910, *La Loi biogénétique et l'éducation* and *La Science et la foi*, had already shown clearly how his thinking would develop. The first appeared in *Archives de psychologie*, the ‘scientific’ journal edited by Claparède. It reflected the ‘all-rounder’s’ desire to choose one of the specialist schools in which to carry on his work and establish his reputation in the exclusive world of ‘scholars’: in the event, he chose psychology. The second was written for an international competition organized by *Coenobium*, of which he was one of the winners, and he was delighted to feel his work was appreciated by Henri Bergson, who sat on the jury, and by Théodore Flournoy, who wrote a preface for the winning articles.

Ferrière's saw his two-faceted approach as a continuation of the work of these two thinkers, but he also felt indebted to 'my philosophical mentor in Geneva, Jean-Jacques Gourd' (1922, p. 104).

JEAN JACQUES GOURD'S PUPIL

Ferrière's philosophy, as it appears in the two 1910 articles, can be interpreted as the mapping out of an impossible tension. Three constellations of ideas had to be fitted into the same construct. The human universe described by Ferrière is first and foremost based on *necessity* (the 'laws'), and is determined, indeed pre-determined, by the natural order of things—his master Jean-Jacques Gourd called this 'material co-ordinateness'. But it is also based on *obligation* ('the' law) from which, in Ferrière's own words, all 'creative spontaneity' just as naturally springs to serve 'the progress of the spirit' and to liberate the higher self through the *free* acceptance of the order of things—which Gourd called 'practical co-ordinateness'. But there is a third dimension to the human universe, which Ferrière also derives from Gourd, the sacred dimension of that which is '*outside the law*', 'that which cannot be co-ordinated', wherein lies the mysterious possibility of human affairs going well or badly. How is it possible to speak at the same time of *science*, that is of submitting to the 'co-ordinateness' of facts, and of *faith*, meaning the urge to believe in a fundamental 'inco-ordinateness' which cannot be avoided by those who seek to lend legitimacy to an undertaking that is truly human and therefore, in Ferrière's eyes, truly divine?

In a way, Ferrière had the conviction of a scientist. He believed he could find in science the resources needed to build up a rational understanding of human beings and thus deduce two lines of action. He would first put forward a tightly argued conception of the education of the future and, secondly, provide a 'modern' and 'progressive' interpretation of the religious heritage.²¹

This 'biogenetic' approach may be described as one of the intellectual off-shoots of evolutionism which by the start of the century had become the standard way of tackling the life sciences. Ferrière applied it to the development of human beings. His early attempts to develop his view of genetic psychology and psychological types²² were to be pursued in his works until his unfinished book *L'Orthogénèse humaine ou l'ascension vers l'Esprit* (1959) and to be summed up almost definitively in *Notice sur les problèmes de la psychologie génétique et sur les applications de cette science à l'éducation et à l'économie sociale*, which he submitted in 1923 as his contribution to the planning of a genetics institute in Geneva.

A BIOGENETICIST

It is true that he vehemently refused to allow his method to be called 'deductive philosophy' (1930, p. 10). On this point, Ferrière would have been offended if he had been regarded as a scholastic and dogmatic metaphysician, like another thinker to whom he was very close. Jean-Marie Guyau (*Esquisse d'une morale sans obligation ni sanction*, 1903; *L'irréligion de l'avenir*, 1909). In what sense can his approach be said to have a metaphysical objective? In the final analysis, he is trying to explain why this 'energism' common to all living creatures is transformed in humans into an increase in the power of the mind.²³ Why indeed should life be 'a spontaneous attempt at self-creation' in all living creatures (1931, p. 11)?

The central idea here is *biogenesis*. In Ferrière's view, this serves merely to give explicit expression to that which is implicated in the most positive form of experience. He believes in a universal dynamism wherein the human psyche finds both momentum and direction. 'The task of education is to facilitate this movement and to achieve harmony between the human microcosm and the macrocosm' (*ibid.*, p. 10). Ferrière suggests a symbolic reinterpretation of the images offered by established religions—images that he regards as puerile. For him, God is first and foremost that

active immanence at the origin of the inward aspiration towards what is most true, beautiful and good and makes it coincide, at its culminating point, with the very order of the universe:

My belief and my science are one and the same, for I have no metaphysical beliefs and my view of science goes beyond physical matter. Biology teaches me that the movement of life is upwards in the seed and in the mind. Such is my belief. The rest is conjecture and hope'. (Reply to the *Coenobium* questionnaire, published in 1912 and reprinted in the second edition of *La Science et la foi*, 1912, p. 58).

Ferrière wrote his thesis in sociology, but this was because he thought he would find the same laws at work—and in particular the one governing progress—in the organization of societies as in the organization of living creatures, especially human beings. An anonymous biographical entry in 1940, which we may presume Ferrière himself to have written, points out: 'He chose sociology for his doctorate, keeping psychology, particularly the psychology of the unconscious, for his much more advanced personal studies.'

THE UNCONSCIOUS

Ferrière did not really use this term in the Freudian sense. Like many others, Ferrière came into contact with psychoanalysis and noticed the extraordinary stir that discussions about the unconscious were causing in his intellectual circle. The *Journal reconstitué* says that he underwent psychoanalysis with Dr de Montet in November-December 1911. It was only a short experience, but brevity was the rule at that time. Could what he experienced in the guise of psychoanalysis be termed Freudian? Ferrière had serious reservations about Freudianism. The 'pansexual' aspect of Freud's theory of libido shocked him: was this what Freud would have called 'resistance'? To what extent did Ferrière 'analyse' his own emotions? In a 1926 article devoted to 'the psychological types revealed by dreams' he does speak of 'our work as psychoanalysts', but he also quotes Jean-Marie Guyau's statement: 'Analysis kills feeling' and he is apprehensive about the way analysis can destabilize 'good feelings'. It should be directed only at 'bad feelings', in Ferrière's view.

These moral categories of 'good' and 'bad' show that Ferrière the teacher was looking over the shoulder of Ferrière the psychologist. He thought that education, like therapy, should be predicated on the superiority of the conscious over the unconscious, the pre-eminence of mind over the basic mechanisms of behaviour. Ferrière was not inclined to confuse psychoanalysis with the glorification of basic human urges. He did not share the libertarian messianism of some of his contemporaries, such as Reich or Neill.²⁴ Ferrière claimed to be a moderate; Neill's view was that he was 'quite a puritan'.

Ferrière's anthropology

Ferrière based his 'psychological' investigations on *four major lines of inquiry* which he had arrived at through the application of biogenesis as early as 1910 (1922b, p. 215; 1923, p. 8; 1931, p. 9). These were: (a) *energism*: like all living creatures, human beings are actuated from within by an 'élan vital' (an expression taken explicitly from Bergson) which is the source of self-preservation and advancement; (b) *the law of progress* (the subject of his 1915 thesis): this advancement takes place through two complementary phenomena which balance each other out—'functional differentiation and functional concentration'; (c) *heredity*: the species survives by neutralizing divergent characteristics and achieves variety through the dispersal of divergence; and (d) *recapitulation* (which Ferrière calls the *biogenetic law*): the development of the individual goes through stages comparable to those undergone in the process of evolution by the species in general.

These four 'theoretical' lines of inquiry are applied to four problems which call for 'practical' research and which Ferrière believed psychology should set about solving. These give

rise to new educational principles based on human nature and reason, which are none other than the principles of new education and the activity school:

1. The law of biogenetic recapitulation must be matched by a *new form of education* based on vital interests which will take account of the fact that children progress from a 'primitive' to a 'civilized' phase.²⁵ This change takes place through a number of stages, the description and number of which vary throughout Ferrière's published work. Twelve distinct periods are given in the table published in 1922 and reprinted in 1946. They are grouped into threes, corresponding to four ages: the sensory phase (early childhood); imitation (later childhood); intuition (adolescence); reason (youth and maturity).
2. Heredity should lead to an *inventory of psychological types* whose names are provided by the biogenetic law: sensory, conventional, intuitive and rational types, combinations of which will give the twelve periods (thus there will be a sensory conventional type, a pure conventional type, an intuitive conventional type, and so on).
3. In combination with this inventory, and taking account of each pupil's ability to progress, the psychologist will provide an *individual diagnosis* that will be both a prognosis and a set of guidelines.
4. Finally, since the life force in human beings is largely governed by the unconscious and its potentialities, helping the pupil to move *from the unconscious to the conscious level* is one of the tasks of psychology, if it is to be truly 'genetic'.²⁶

In 1930, Ferrière once again summed up his theories in a privately published pamphlet entitled *L'Avenir de la psychologie génétique et l'éducation*. Two things are striking given the date: firstly, that more than twenty years after his earliest tentative writings on the subject Ferrière was still using the word 'future' in the title, as if he were still setting out a programme to be followed, and secondly, that the 1930 pamphlet did indeed only repeat statements he had made in 1909, barring a few details. Between these two dates, Ferrière had written several thousand pages about these four aspects of genetic psychology. But his empirical attempts to verify, and *a fortiori* to invalidate, his hypotheses as they demanded had been indecisive and fruitless. He was aware of this, and in 1922, when he made this four-point theory the psychological basis of the activity school, he warned his readers, 'counting on their intuition' to make himself understood:

The fundamental truths set out in this chapter are intermingled with and, so to speak, wrapped up in hypotheses. But even if these hypotheses are less well founded than experimental scientific data, even if they are *not yet* [Ferrière's emphasis] all backed up by statistics or any other objective method of verification that can be expressed in figures, they are definitely much more and something other than mere suppositions. In fact they are rooted in experience, in life, and they are built on experience and life with the prudence and objectivity of a conscious scientific method in the full knowledge of both of its power and its limitations' (1922, p. 215).

In 1946, when he was putting together the new version of *L'Ecole active*, Ferrière reproduced this warning word-for-word (p. 29) and the same words ('not yet') were emphasized. The empirical confirmation remained in abeyance. It was up to the readers to trust the author's method when he showed no reluctance to describe it as 'scientific'.²⁷

TYPOCOSMOLOGY

Paradoxically, it was in the field of astrology that Ferrière attempted the work of verification-invalidation required by this typology, and this was in 1923 and particularly from 1924 when he met K.E. Kraft. In his end-of-the-year review for 1923 he wrote: 'Here is a lead I want to follow up: failure and success attract me equally; what I enjoy is research and verification [...]'. This ambivalence, which it must be acknowledged augurs rather well for a scientific attitude, was in evidence throughout a particularly tenacious investigation that lasted thirty years, becoming

tantamount to a regular routine. Ferrière collated and compared thousands of ‘birth charts’ using a complex statistical system drawn up during his sometimes stormy partnership with Kraft. Whole pages of his diaries are covered with graphic symbols that enabled him to list the attitudes, behaviour and tendencies of people he met or authors whose books he read. All this information was fed into his typology.

A large amount of published material resulted from this research: *Caractérologie typocosmique*, 1932; *Symboles graphiques de la typocosmie*, 1940; *Vers une classification naturelle des types psychologiques*, 1943; and especially the four-volume *Typocosmie*, 1946-55. These books have always been politely ignored or referred to in a fleeting, mocking, outraged or, at the very least, puzzled, way. We may indeed wonder why Ferrière chose this field for the research expected of him when it was apparently liable to destroy his credibility among the intelligentsia. But he believed that human history was recapitulated in the life of each individual, and that human events were a reflection of the cosmic order. Besides, he did not mind standing out from the crowd, even if it meant increasing his intellectual isolation.

Education according to Ferrière

On the other hand, Ferrière’s ideas on education were not those of an isolated figure. Deaf he may have been, but he kept his ears open to how children felt and made himself their spokesman. His books aimed at a general readership provided one of the main ways through which the basic themes of new education became known. They certainly contributed to making its premise of everyday contact with children seem normal, trying as it did to set up a climate of trust and sincerity and having nothing in common with the permissive, non-interventionist school of educational thought.

The film Ferrière devoted to the Home in 1929²⁸ provides a useful summary of this view of schooling for happy, responsible children. It centres on a group of children who take complete responsibility for themselves, from getting up to going to bed. It is a point of honour for even the smallest children to ‘manage by themselves’, and the older ones are concerned to help the younger ones without actually doing things for them. Harmony rules in this miniature republic based on the healthy principles of the outdoor life: the children fetch firewood from a nearby forest, work in the garden, climb trees and bathe naked without false modesty. They learn by focusing on topics drawn from daily life, which is the best way of learning about life in general: the words they learn to read are those of everyday objects; the plants they draw and dissect are those they have picked from a meadow nearby; arithmetic is studied by playing at shops or stringing beads to make necklaces. Each of the older children keeps a ‘book of life’, a catalogue lovingly put together and decorated with the simplest materials where the children file in an orderly fashion various bits of information found by chance. Obviously, the teacher can take a hand in supplying or encouraging this ‘chance’, but the initiative remains with the children. Individual activity alternates with working together and group explanations. There are no classes or lessons. The emphasis is on the joy of learning, providing one’s own discipline and helping others. When energy serves what is good, which is a quality latent in all ‘healthy’ youngsters, it can be given free rein. Children experience and make the most of their individual talents, allowing the community to benefit from them without restraint. There is no violence, no guilt, no punishment, but this does not mean anarchy. Everything remains ‘shipshape and Bristol fashion’, to use a nautical expression.

A doctrinal interpretation

Perhaps we should complain that Ferrière uses this idyllic and necessarily imaginary day to illustrate one by one the thirty points listed in his evaluation of the new schools, published for the first time in 1915 and which he subsequently used to draw up a ‘new schools hit-parade’, topped from 1929

onwards by the Home. But because the points listed also constitute a charter based on the biogenetic view of active childhood, Ferrière wondered about the ‘contagious joy’ and ‘glowing spontaneity’ of the Home children (1933b, p. 79): ‘Should we consider their enthusiasm for work to be the result of the principles of the activity school, that is of adults respecting their individual personalities, vital interests and capacity for self-education (an extension of the specific self-moulding energy of human morphology, in biology and physiology)?’

At the risk of repeating himself, he concludes his praise of the Home in 1933 by recalling his own theories: ‘Life is a vital energy force. The life of the spirit is a vital spiritual force.’ He continues with a statement that he made many times:²⁹ ‘Creative energy develops from within.’ All Ferrière’s ‘educational theory’ is summed up in that phrase. Even if the ‘inside’ takes precedence over the ‘outside’, the negative education advocated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau—not interfering prematurely—is still relevant. And the gardening metaphor is more appropriate than the pottery one: education means letting a plant grow, not modelling clay (cf. Hameline, 1986; Charbonnel, 1991). But this respect for the individual’s ‘self-moulding capacity’ does not mean the teacher should abdicate all responsibility because freedom of the spirit means ‘freedom to make free’ (1928). Children, drawn towards the good by their ‘natural’ inclinations,³⁰ need to be helped, if only to acquire good habits. ‘In order to be considered good, a habit must have the effect of liberating the spirit. The idea is to mechanize the lower self in order to free the higher self’ (1921; cf. 1935, p. 20).³¹

The activity school, a school of efficiency

This concern with mechanization reveals Ferrière’s interest in the modern notion of efficiency. He would not be the last educationist to repeat the well-known statement by Washburne, one of the American advocates of personalized work: ‘We must Taylorize teaching in order to maximize education.’ It is only an apparent paradox that the champion of a happy, spontaneous childhood should also be an open supporter of scientific work organization.

Ferrière’s admiration for Taylor was genuine and he made no bones about it. He shared three of Taylor’s principles. The first appeared in Ferrière’s work as a slogan for rationalizing costs which he had made a golden rule of the activity school: ‘the most useful effects for the least wasted effort’ (cf. 1922b, p. 286; and Hameline, 1987). The second is based on the idea both men had of scientific work organization: only an outside expert could recommend the most efficient methods, through methodically observing and interpreting what workers did. However, for Ferrière such experts were not technocrats blindly applying methodologies; they had to use intuition and reasoning, ‘science and common sense’. Ferrière had no doubt that this outside observation would reflect the natural inner tendencies that impelled individuals to make their efforts efficient, because efficiency could not be contrary to harmony and fulfilment. Taylor said he wanted to serve the interests of workers, going against their usual routines if necessary to replace them with more rational working methods.

Similarly, Ferrière fervently desired what was good for pupils, wishing to combat the habits inherited from the ‘old school’ if necessary, but not without replacing them with other habits more liable to ‘liberate’ the spirit for its higher tasks.

There was one more point on which Ferrière’s philosophy converged with Taylor’s. Ferrière did not believe that any individual could occupy any place in society. Neither mobility nor the capacity for learning could do away with the ‘natural’ order of precedence among individuals. The cultivation of pupils’ abilities should enable a solution to be found to ‘a problem of political economy [...] always putting people in the area where they can be most useful’ (1922b, p. 285). Ferrière took this quotation from Marc-Antoine Jullien who in 1812 brought out *L’esprit de la méthode d’éducation de Pestalozzi*. Ferrière, who in 1927 praised Pestalozzi’s ‘great motherly heart’, had then already referred to that emblematic precursor of activity education to legitimize his

concern to put ‘the right man in the right place’ (printed in English in 1922b, p. 285).

A rational theory of social organization

And whether or not some are born to lead and others to obey, the young group leader described by Ferrière in his unavowed self-portrait could hardly fail to uphold this view of economic and social relations. The democrat was also an élitist, but the élitist was sincere in his belief in democracy. Ferrière’s work on economic planning (*Pour un plan suisse du travail au-dessus des partis*, 1935) should be looked at in the light of his views on education. He warned against both State control and unbridled capitalism. To combat the law of survival of the fittest which results from capitalism, he suggested a counterbalancing force of co-operatives of producers and consumers, of which he was a fervent supporter. But he made it clear that while political action should henceforth be ‘by and for the masses’, they should ‘not be exasperated, but enlightened and satisfied’ (1935, p. 225). And only ‘scientific sociology’, in the hands of skilled and trained experts, could enable the will of the State to coincide with the fulfilment of the will of the people (1935, p. 144) through a dirigisme combining the same mixture of ‘science and common sense’ that Ferrière recommended in education.

The legacy of Adolphe Ferrière

Science and common sense: here we have the hallmark of a moderate mind. Politically speaking, Ferrière would be described nowadays as a man of the centre; some might say right of centre, others left of centre. His educational views were equally moderate. If he was virulent in his criticism of the ‘traditional school’, it was because ‘conventional’ people eager to submit to the rules of their group and adopt its prejudices seemed to him as dangerous as insurrectionists. Neither could be true agents for progress.

And Ferrière was a believer in progress. The ‘law of progress’ was a benchmark for him throughout his intellectual career. It can be found in his last books, such as *L’essentiel*, published in 1952. Ferrière’s thinking is not conservative, and his lack of interest in the past is striking. The word ‘future’ is the one that comes up time and again in his writing, like a leitmotif. Although intellectually drawn to meditate on historical processes, he did so only as a philosopher pondering the phenomenon of human existence, disinclined to look at actual events with their own particular patterns and, especially, their circumstantial and random nature.

By assigning a law to progress, Ferrière made it part of the nature of things, seeing it metaphorically as a progression all the more harmonious for being implacable. He made a necessity out of an objective. The reason was that his thinking, while *cosmic* in scope, remained based on *naturalism*.

FOLLOWING NATURE

Two views of human nature are superimposed in Ferrière’s thinking. The first is not unconnected with the image of ‘statics’ as opposed to ‘dynamics’. It includes human beings as part of an organized whole, both social and cosmic, in which people receive rather than take their place (1952, p. 215). All belong to a type, and it is by conforming to this type which distinguishes them from others that they can make their personal contribution to constructing the whole. But as a result of this distinction, some occupy a higher and others a lower rung on the ladder that is itself ‘progressive’, meaning hierarchical and divided into types, and all types are not equal. And ultimately this psychological hierarchy was the reproduction of an *anthropological and social hierarchy*.

The stages of progress described by Ferrière are also the stopping points where *some people come to rest by nature*. There is a limit to how far people can be educated. ‘Ordinary’ children are fated to remain ‘ordinary’ and will develop the potentialities of their type, happy and persevering in their category.

This type-based naturalism and its biogenetic interpretation are probably the most arguable legacy of Ferrière’s thinking. Not that there is no regularity in the differences between types, but the network he builds up of these regularities—despite the qualifications he provides—may well give the impression that individual traits are set into a sort of paradoxical inertia. His father warned him against this in a letter dated 24 February 1902: ‘You are abstract, imaginative, a creator of ideas, and there is a risk that you may become a visionary in the realm of the unfathomable.’ Perhaps Ferrière’s greatest mistake was keeping the comparative table of the ‘predominant functions of the various ages of childhood and humanity’ in the 1946 condensed edition of *L’école active*, a table originally prepared for the 1922 edition. Giving in to his talent for classification, Ferrière forced his philosophy into a mould to such an extent that he laid it open to caricature.

The second view of ‘nature’ in Ferrière’s work corresponds in his mind to the image of ‘dynamics’. All living things can go to the limits of their own potential for progress, that is, fulfil their true nature and therefore fit in with the whole. One of his sayings is the Pindaric maxim beloved of the Stoics of antiquity: ‘Become what you are.’ In his personal copy of *La liberté de l’enfant à l’école active* (1927), Ferrière corrected this in his own hand to ‘Become *who* you are’. The biogenetic law, according to which the development of the individual goes through stages comparable to those undergone by the species during evolution, explains both versions by seeing them as part of the natural order of things. Thus freedom is the crowning glory of the progress achieved through evolution. It is basically ‘liberation’: free individuals are those who have managed dynamically to rid themselves of everything that prevents them from coinciding with what is best in them, as nature made them—because, barring accidents, nature cannot have made them badly.³²

Starting from ‘instincts, which are fundamentally normal and healthy’ (1952), the spirit must increase its power. This is what constitutes progress. But when it has increased its power, it will be observed that it has only done what came naturally. Yet nothing is decided in advance, because it is possible for the spirit *not* to increase its power.

MODERN NEO-STOICISM

There is an indisputable grandeur in this modern neo-Stoicism, in which the enigma of human freedom is set out in terms that are both strict and generous. Ferrière’s ‘spiritualism’ is a plea for energy (cf. *Cultiver l’énergie*, 1933a) far removed from pious sentimentality. He constructed an anthropological system that was admittedly assembled in haste and shaped more by imagination than by empirical investigation, but he does see human existence in terms of a bold and bright progression. The metaphor of the ‘rise’ to greater power of the spirit might well prove a source of inspiration today, now that historical materialism is foundering and ordinary materialism is taking over our daily lives, despite the cynicism fed by the shortcomings of an excessively naive view of progress.

Ferrière was not a cynic by any means, but he was not naive either. If his faith in the possibility of the triumph of spiritual energy over entropy and the forces of dissociation remained intact after two world wars, it was not a blind faith. Ferrière was a man who had hope, and not just a vague longing, but the hope that things would change for the better. If necessary, he was even willing to ‘hope against hope’, because he believed that hope was the driving force behind education. He wrote the last lines of *L’essentiel* on 15 May 1951. On the same day he suffered a stroke which prevented him from continuing his intellectual masterwork. So in the conclusion to *L’essentiel*

Ferrière was, in a way, leaving us his last words when he wrote: ‘It is not a question of being optimistic, but of seeing clearly and taking action. On the scale of millennia, human awareness of the power of the spirit is only just beginning.’

Notes

1. Daniel Hameline (France). Professor of educational sciences at the University of Geneva and president of the archives of the Institut Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Geneva). He was formerly a teacher at the Institut Catholique de Paris and at the Université de Paris-Dauphine. He is the author of numerous articles and books, among which we may mention: *La liberté d’apprendre* [Freedom to learn] (with others, 1967 and 1977); *Le domestique et l’affranchi: essai sur la tutelle scolaire* [The servant and the freeman: an essay on tutoring] (1977); *Les objectifs pédagogiques en formation initiale et en formation continue* [Educational objectives in initial training and recurrent training] (10th ed., 1992); *Courants et contre-courants dans la pédagogie contemporaine* [Trends and counter-trends in modern teaching] (1986); *L’éducation, ses images et son propos* [Education:its images and intents](1986). He is also the author of articles on ‘Education’, ‘The philosophy of education’, ‘The history of education’, ‘Evaluation’, ‘Pedagogy: contemporary problems’ in the *Encyclopaedia Universalis*, 1985 edition, and forty-six articles in *Dictionnaire de psychologie* (Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1991).
2. *Mon grand journal* (1930–60) is a record of his thoughts and reading. It is made up of fourteen volumes, each of 300 to 400 pages.
3. Entries in his *Petit journal* at the time when he was writing *L’Ecole active* (1921) show that at the age of 40 Ferrière had not yet read systematically either Rousseau or Pestalozzi, and he was not afraid to admit it. In fact, he was rather proud of it. During his university studies Ferrière devoted very little time to educational theory, in the sense of the official teachings about education. It is true that he followed Paul Duproix’s course at the Faculty of Arts during the summer semester of 1902, but this only lasted a few weeks and does not seem to have had any noticeable effect on the young Ferrière.
4. From his early youth, Adolphe Ferrière started to keep a daily record of his life. When his house burned down in 1918 all his notebooks up to that date were destroyed. Ferrière was so attached to this record that he reconstituted as far as possible the lost notebooks from his childhood and young adulthood with the help of correspondence and accounts by his family.
5. It may seem amusing nowadays that in the official photographs of the Fellowship’s conferences, Ferrière is often seen with his shirt collar wide open whereas all the other gentlemen, both officials and participants, are wearing ties.
6. Grunder (1992; in press 1993) has made a survey of the heads of the new schools in Switzerland and shown that, overall, they were good managers with open-minded attitudes, but were far from sharing the militant zeal of the Fellowship’s members.
7. Gerber (1982) notes that in the *Journal reconstitué* Ferrière asserts that the visit to Demolins probably took place in January 1900. But subsequently he always maintained that his International Office of New Schools was founded in 1899.
8. His father, Dr Frédéric Ferrière, an important figure in the International Red Cross, went as far as imagining that he might head a school for delicate children at the Leysin health resort, but Adolphe was not enthusiastic.
9. In a collection of sonnets published under the pseudonym of Dr Frédéric Emmanuel in 1926, Ferrière speaks to his mother and father in *Parentibus meis*:

*Mother, you gave me the muse of poetry,
The imagination that can breathe life into all things;
You gave me love and a burning dream,
Broad visions and the gift of prophecy.
Father, you gave me a scientific mind,
An upright character capable of self-control.
Father, it was you who taught me to teach myself:
What stoicism there is in my soul I owe to you.*
10. At 2.30 a.m. during the night of 23 to 24 March 1902, he wrote to his parents: ‘I have just spent one of the finest moments of my life. From half past ten until just now I was chatting continuously with the headmaster [...] this evening I had a real glimpse of the scale of his genius, and I feel crushed by it. I will talk to you about it. It is as if a veil had been rent apart in the sky and I could see a second sky behind; I have the feeling that a

- prophet has come down from heaven and spoken to me [...].’
11. Isabelle Bugnon, a teacher of natural science, niece of the great naturalist and thinker Auguste Forel, met Adolphe Ferrière in 1908. They became engaged in 1909 and were married in 1910. Isabelle Ferrière was her husband’s tireless assistant and his regular interpreter because of his hearing problems. Elisabeth Huguenin (1885–1963), who came from Locle, had been Paul Geheeb’s assistant at the School of Humanity and then had a short, inconclusive spell (1919–20) as head of the Vinet School in Lausanne. Out of work, she accepted Adolphe Ferrière’s offer to take part in the Bex experiment. Later she taught at the Ecole des Roches, in France, and wrote several books about the education of women (cf. Käppeli, 1992; Chaponnière, 1992).
 12. Several poems from his two collections (*Dieu dans l’homme*, 1926; *La Forge de l’Esprit*, 1936) tell of his almost carnal desire to be surrounded by children:

*My happiness can be summed up in few words
I only live because of your kisses,
Sweet little children who smile so easily,
And because of the gentle singsong of your voices [...].’
‘My sadness can be summed up in few words:
I will no longer hear your singing and laughter [...]
And the hardest blow of my awful fate,
Is that your kisses have been taken from me too.*

In a three-part poem written in 1936, Ferrière makes a discreet but heart-rending reference to his wife’s accident which deprived him of the little girl he had dreamed of. He writes of ‘that other love’ he had felt for one of the orphans at the Home:

*Clutching her in your arms dissipates your sadness,
You are born again when she returns your kisses [...].*

13. It was because of this sharp and ironic criticism of State schools that many people saw Ferrière as a belittler of teachers. In the new edition of 1947, he felt obliged to make it clear that he had great respect for the profession.
14. This fire, in which a servant died and all his intellectual output disappeared, affected Ferrière so deeply that he wrote an account of it which he read to the children at the Home more than ten years later. In his 1926 collection of poems, he devoted no fewer than six sonnets to the incident. On 26 September 1946 he wrote to Roger Cousinet: ‘30,000 files of information and observations, a huge library of books scrupulously annotated by myself: more than twenty years of relentless efforts, all gone up in smoke in one night (with four manuscripts ready for printing)’ (cf. Cousinet, 1960). A profile of Roger Cousinet was published in *Prospects*, 1987, vol. XVII, no. 4, and is reprinted in this volume.
15. For Ferrière’s part in the creation of IBE, see Stock, 1979.
16. J. Moll (1989) has traced the history of the psychoanalytical movement of the 1920s and its decline following a period of intense activity.
17. Raymond Buyse, founder of the Laboratory of Experimental Pedagogy in Louvain, wrote in *L’Expérimentation en pédagogie* (1935, p. 49): ‘We have suggested describing as ‘experiential’ this tendency, so fashionable in advanced circles, to become intensely and generously involved in the work of education, which is seen as the great ‘social adventure’. [...] The theoretical side of this movement purports, immodestly, to be scientific; but we should understand by this that it takes its inspiration chiefly from the bold conclusions and rash hypotheses of the sciences related to educational theory: biology (law of recapitulation), child psychology (laws of interest), sociology (interpreting children’s minds in relation to primitive mentalities).[...] It is not just a question of making vague analogies or inconsistent approximations. What we observe most often is dreadful confusion between experimental science and a sort of philosophy which is said to be scientific but which in fact is not science at all.’ Ferrière was obviously the target of this harsh warning.
18. A moving document is kept in the archives of the Jean-Jacques Rousseau Institute: a note Ferrière wrote to Béatrice Ensor, the Fellowship’s chairwoman, during the meeting at the Nice conference in 1932 at which the organization’s principles were being revised: ‘Let us at least save the first article’. This was the ‘spiritualist’ article written by Ferrière in Calais in 1921, giving education the role of ‘increasing the supremacy of the spirit in each human being’.
19. In 1929 a group of friends decided to set up an ‘Adolphe Ferrière fund’ to finance the publication of his books, but response was very poor. In 1959 the Association of Friends of Adolphe Ferrière brought out a three-monthly photocopied newsletter called *L’Essentiel*, with the aim of studying and publicizing his work and taking it as a basis for further research. However, the ‘research centre’ did not survive its founder, Roger Munsch.
20. A profile of Maria Montessori was published in *Prospects*, 1982, vol. XII, no. 4, and will be reprinted in the

- third volume of this series, and one of Célestin Freinet in *Prospects*, 1980, vol. X, no. 3, appears in the present volume.
21. This was typical of a mood that was extremely common in French-speaking Switzerland in intellectual Protestant circles (Berchtold, 1964). In a recent thesis (1989), Fernando Vidal showed the extent to which Jean Piaget was steeped in this atmosphere as a young man. From 1915 to 1919, Piaget actively championed this new interpretation of the religious heritage and Ferrière (in *L'Essor*, 1919) regarded this very young man as the person who would bring about the prophetic reconciliation of science and faith that would be the hallmark of the twentieth century.
 22. In 1922 (p. 247) he referred enthusiastically to Jung's classification. But with his usual spark of rivalry, he was at pains to point out that his own typology had been devised first.
 23. This expression had already been used by the philosopher Jean-Jacques Gourd (*Le Phénomène*, 1888), whom Ferrière considered as his master.
 24. A profile of Alexander Neill was published in *Prospects*, 1988, vol. XVIII, no. 2.
 25. Ferrière liked to repeat a witticism which he attributed to Stanley Hall: 'In order to become a good civilized person, you first have to be a good savage'.
 26. It is interesting to compare the meanings Ferrière and Piaget gave to the adjective 'genetic'. On the surface the two Genevans had nothing in common. Piaget was completely scornful of Ferrière's theoretical work; he had broken with the philosophical-religious speculation of his activist youth for which Ferrière had admired him. Ferrière's open cosmo-vitalism and spiritualism, the vibrant, oratory twist to his writing, the lack of empiricism and the constant confusion between observation and prescription could not help but irritate Piaget, especially since they reminded him of everything he wanted to get away from. In *Biologie et connaissance* (1967; cf. 1992), Piaget showed how little epistemological interest he had in the teleological notion of 'progress', overlaid as it was with value-judgements. 'That said', he adds, 'the problem is therefore to find objective criteria for a hierarchy of types of organization, in other words, an evolutive set of vectors' (1992, p. 123). He then borrowed from Rensch the idea of increasing 'openness', 'in the sense of increasing the number of possibilities acquired by the body in the course of evolution', with knowledge elevated to the status of 'necessary culmination' of this 'progress', because 'it multiplies the range of possibilities'. Here we are both very close to and very far from Ferrière's ideas, especially as, in the same book (p. 92), Piaget refers the reader to Baldwin's 'recapitulative' theories that are also mentioned by Ferrière. In this respect, Piaget describes experiments carried out with Genevan schoolchildren aged 7 to 9, whose interpretation of some physical phenomena 'corresponded' to those of the adult 'common sense' of Aristotle's contemporaries. The transmission of knowledge, on the level of the human species, was then thought indeed to pass through stages whose equivalent could be seen in children's cognitive development.
 27. In 1941, Piaget spoke of the temptation to 'consider reality as an irreversible flow and the spirit as the power to free oneself from time and space [...]'. But in order to show how much he had changed from the metaphysical position he had held in his youth and which Ferrière still maintained, he added: 'But why should we set up improvised subjective systems on an individual basis when we can contribute, in however small a way, to the joint effort of scientific research?' This quotation was brought to my notice by Fernando Vidal, whom I wish to thank for his friendly assistance.
 28. Apart from the milkman, Ferrière is the only adult to appear in the film. This self-promotion may be interpreted as propaganda on the part of one who was to have his film shown to tens of thousands of people (it was certainly one of the most widely shown educational films between 1930 and 1940). It may also be seen as a symbolic compensation—and indeed a rather touching one—for not being able to achieve in real life what was captured by the camera, especially when we recall how painful and frustrating this was for Ferrière. The manageresses do not appear either.
 29. This was originally Pestalozzi's idea. Ferrière made it the basis of the activity school.
 30. 'All that is good, healthy and harmonious in human beings is the legacy of millions of ancestors who adapted their inner being to the immutable laws of nature' (1921; cf. 1935, p. 26). One of the sonnets in the collection of poems *Dieu dans l'homme* (1926) is entitled 'The child is born good'. It takes the form of a dialogue with Rousseau, who is shown to be right.
 31. Ferrière takes from William James the distinction between the 'higher self' and the 'lower self' (1928, p. 24).
 32. In an article in *L'essor* in June 1919, 'Le problème de la philosophie nouvelle', Ferrière wrote: 'In sum, statically speaking, we are what we are capable of being, what we cannot fail to be. We are predetermined. Dynamically speaking, on the other hand, we are a force, a cosmic energy, a spark of spirit, a fragment of that great light of which we have an intimation and which we call Spirit.' Ferrière added that while statically a life might be worthless, 'from the point of view of spiritual dynamism' it might be called upon to be 'a force that may, by example alone, engender other forces'. In this way the dynamism of the spirit could correct the

unavoidably static part of the individual's heredity, social standing or circumstances. Ferrière knew that, 'statically speaking', by 1919 he was handicapped by his deafness, by the previous year's fire and by his financial ruin. How, with all those disadvantages, could he be anything but 'worthless'? This was the challenge that made him choose the dynamic 'jolt' through which his true worth would be revealed, without changing his static 'worthlessness'. However, when others made all values dependent on the 'static' aspect of things and places, they stigmatized in Ferrière the champion of a spiritualism which involved submitting to the social order as if it were a fatalistic *diktat* of 'nature'. And the detractors of his spiritualism did not fail to do this.

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