“Alain” is the pseudonym of the philosopher and writer Émile-Auguste Chartier, who was born in 1868 and died in 1951, thus being a man of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Chartier was born and grew up in Normandy. He was a tall man of robust stature, but was, in his later years, confined to a wheelchair. His father was a veterinarian, and it may well be that the practical attitude in Alain’s writing and teaching and the emphasis on the physiological aspects of moods, emotions and human activities – especially the artistic – stems from this background. In any case, Alain stands in the tradition of thinkers like Descartes and Spinoza or Plato and Aristotle, who were pointing at the physiological roots of our emotional life, and who were inspired by a practical, therapeutic aim.\(^1\)

The problems of our emotions, of our “passions,” how to control them, how to deal with them, how to transform them, is one of the main subjects of Alain’s writings and especially of his Propos. Alain has written hundreds of them – short essays about the most varied of subjects, but mostly located in the field of the humanities. These essays – one and a half pages long – have a classical character, being composed of long, flowing, rhythmically-organized phrases that culminate in short statements that can assume a laconic proverb-like quality. Indeed, many of his Propos on Happiness, On education, On Politics and The Arts seem to be an elaboration of those proverbial statements – such as “Everything is hard at the beginning” – which appear trivial, but are much more meaningful than people usually think. Those short texts remind us of the essays of Montaigne and Gracian, of the réflexions of the French Moralists La Rochefoucauld, Vauvenargues, and Chamfort, and last but not least of the Memoirs of the Duke of St. Simon and his art of observing and characterizing people.

Yet, while Alain is part of this tradition, the character of his writings differs from those of the moralists, who mainly adopted a negative attitude towards human beings, tending to destroy illusions of human morality and trying to show that behind the masks of morals and bienséance (fashionable manners) reign selfishness, vanity, recklessness, jealousy, fear and laziness. In some sense, Nietzsche is an heir to this tradition of unmasking current morality as a kind of ideology.

Alain’s *Propos* concerning human conduct and happiness are different in tone and content to the moralists. On the one hand, he fosters no illusions concerning the problematic nature of human beings. He is fully aware of the dark side of human existence, especially where it concerns the use and abuse of power.\(^2\) As we shall see, he emphasizes the instability and vulnerability of humans in many respects. On the other hand, this realistic view of human beings is free from dramatic exaggerations. It is combined with an almost serene attitude. Insight into the mechanisms of human nature should not lead to somber resignation, or to a cynical view of man and the world, but should be used as a means to free people from the constraints of those mechanisms. It should be used to lighten the burden of human existence in a spirit reminiscent of Spinoza.\(^3\)

It is important in this context to realize that Alain was not only a philosopher, a more or less neutral observer of men and world, but a teacher as well — a school teacher moreover, not an university professor. For decades he taught philosophy at various institutions in France, first in Rouen and later at the famous *Collège Henri Quatre*, and the *Lycée Sévigné* in Paris (Canguilhem, Simone Weil, Raymond Aron were, it is said, among his pupils). As a pedagogue he could not restrict himself to theory alone, but found himself confronted with practical issues and had to look for practical solutions. He was reportedly a beloved teacher for two reasons. First, because of his pedagogical “principles”: take your pupils seriously, treat them as equals; encourage them, never humiliate them; help them to rely upon themselves in thought and in action; do not regard mistakes as something to be banished or even punished for, but as something helpful or necessary to find your own way to truth. His pedagogical views may be widely accepted nowadays, though perhaps more in theory than in practice, but in his time they were not common at all; they may have even been revolutionary.\(^4\)

Second, Alain was also esteemed by his pupils, by his readers, and by people who attended his famous public lectures for his direct approach to philosophical issues. He certainly was not a scholarly historian of philosophy. He

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\(^2\) Alain was a resolute critic of the dictatorial tendencies, especially of the fascist movements in Europe after the First World War. See also Walter Benjamin, “Zum gegenwärtigen gesellschaftlichen Standort des französischen Schriftstellers,” *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, 3 (1934), also in Walter Benjamin, *Angelus Novus* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1966), pp. 267-69. His war experiences had made it perfectly clear to him that the ancient relationship between master and slaves persisted unchanged in modern societies, especially in the relationship between common soldiers and officers who in the French Army were very often from noble offspring.

\(^3\) See Spinoza’s *Ethica*, the introductory remarks to Part III. Here Spinoza stresses the importance of understanding [intellegere] our passions (instead of only criticizing them) as an instance of the general “laws of nature.” Insight into those natural mechanisms is for Spinoza a precondition of controlling our passions.