

This is a mildly revised edition of the introductory chapter (pp. 19-36) in J. A. Michon, V. Pouthas and J. L. Jackson (Eds.), *Guyau and the idea of time*. Amsterdam: North-Holland/Elsevier, 1988.

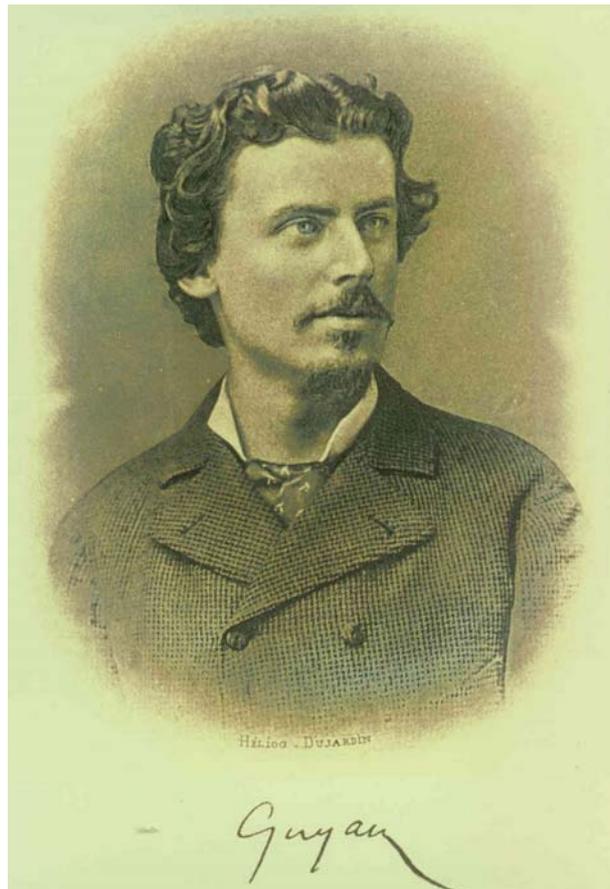
This 2008 version has been prepared by the senior author to commemorate the death of Jean-Marie Guyau 120 years ago.

## **Jean-Marie Guyau (1854-1888)**

### **Life and Ideas**

John A. Michon

with Viviane Pouthas and Janet L. Jackson



## Guyau's Life<sup>1</sup>

JEAN-MARIE GUYAU<sup>2</sup> was born in the late afternoon of October 28, 1854, as a citizen of Laval, some 300 kilometres to the south-west of Paris. Laval, a medium-sized manufacturing town, is located on the Mayenne, the river that gives its name to the Département of which Laval is the prefecture. The city's history dates back to the early Middle Ages when it became the residence of Count Guy II, first Seigneur of Laval, who played a highly visible role in the France of his days.

At the time Jean-Marie was born the Guyaus had been residents of Laval for several generations (see family tree on next page). The name Guyau – perhaps referring to the early Seigneurs—suggests a firm rooting. Jean Guyau, manufacturer in a family of manufacturers, was born in 1817. As was quite usual then, he married relatively late. His bride, Augustine Tuillerie, was a full sixteen years younger than her husband. Jean and Augustine were married in 1853. Ten month later Jean-Marie, their only child, was born.

Augustine may have entertained no clear ideas about hell before she married, but she was to find out very soon. Jean Guyau was an extremely violent man who maltreated his wife and even made a deliberate attempt to kill her. The quiet community of Laval was shocked, but Augustine found the courage to leave her husband.<sup>3</sup> With little Jean-Marie she set up home with her cousin Alfred Fouillée in 1857. Fouillée<sup>4</sup>, while five years younger than Augustine, had been in love with her for some time, and he solemnly vowed that he would devote his life to restoring Augustine's happiness, a promise he kept in an admirable, moving way. Much later, a visitor described the marriage as “a poem of intimate and beautiful life, of joint efforts to achieve the good and the ideal.”<sup>5</sup> For the outside world Alfred and Augustine were married: French laws in these days did not permit divorce. Only thirty years later, in 1885, when divorce had become legally possible they were married.

Jean-Marie received his primary education from his mother. School was not obligatory in these days but the fact is that the boy could not possibly have found a better teacher. Augustine was an accomplished pedagogue, author, under the pseudonym G. Bruno, of one of the most successful educational texts of all times. Her *Le tour de la France par deux enfants* was first published in 1877 (Ozouf & Ozouf, 1984). Ten years later three million copies had been sold,

---

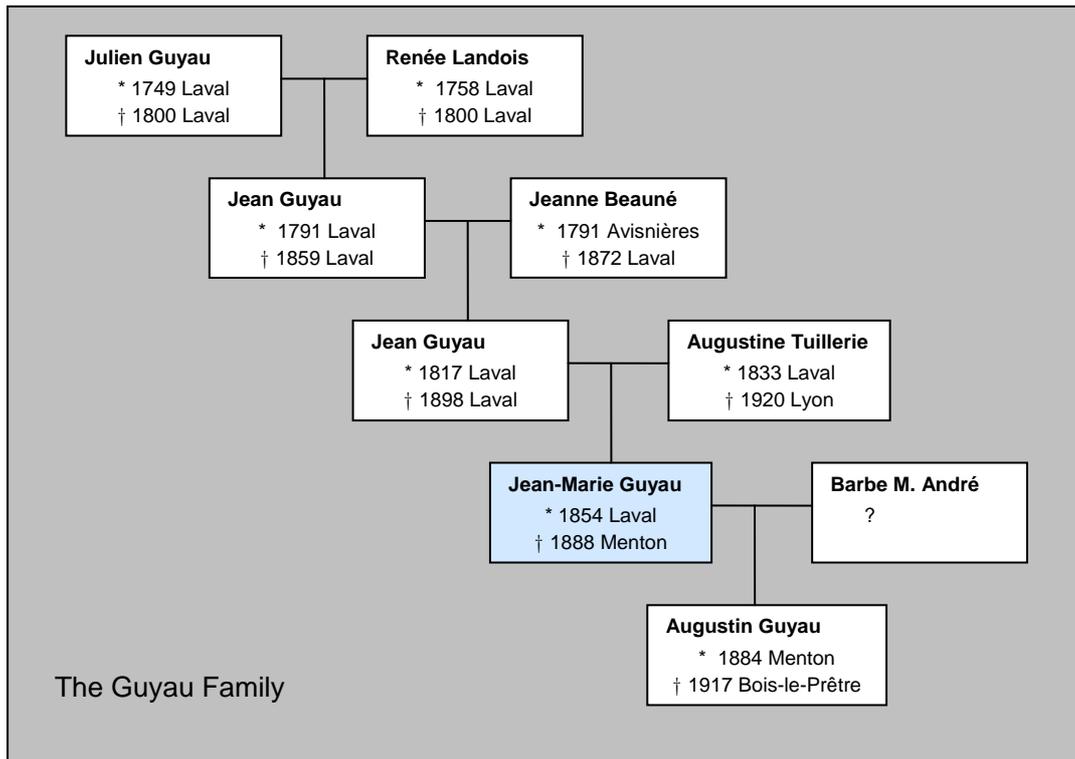
<sup>1</sup> Most details about Jean-Marie Guyau's life have come to us through Fouillée (1889/1913, 1895). Substantial information was obtained from Bergmann (1912), Pfeil (1928), and from Ozouf and Ozouf (1984). Additional facts were derived from a variety of additional sources but used only when they were consistent with the major references.

<sup>2</sup> There is some confusion about Guyau's given names. The birth certificate from Laval shows Jean Marie, but later sources usually give the hyphenated form Jean-Marie. Guyau's own signature has the initials J.-M. Later, in books and journal articles, one will frequently find M. Guyau which, however, conventionally stands for *Monsieur* Guyau (e.g., Dauriac, 1890). Any reference to Marie-Jean—as, for example, in the catalogue of the New York Public Library, in the *Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* and in Copleston (1974, vol. ix, p. 174)—is definitely incorrect. We shall follow Guyau's own habit and use the hyphenated form Jean-Marie throughout.

<sup>3</sup> The conventional account was as follows: Guyau's father Jean died at an early age, upon which his mother decided to remarry with her cousin Alfred (see e.g. Pfeil, 1928, p.3). Actually Jean lived until 1898.

<sup>4</sup> Alfred Fouillée, one of the most prominent philosophers of his time and eventually a member of the *Institut de France*, was born in La Pouèze on 18 October 1838. He died in Lyon on 16 July 1912.

<sup>5</sup> G. Calderòn (1907) in a work entitled *Profesores de idealismo*. Quoted by Ozouf and Ozouf (1984, p. 307).



and before the century was out, sales had hit the six million mark. When the book finally went out of print in 1976, almost nine million copies had found a destination. Even as a bestselling author Augustine remained hidden behind her pseudonym. As late as 1910, when the secret had long been disclosed, Fouillée was occasionally still believed to be the author (Ozouf & Ozouf, 1984, p.300). In her private life Augustine was hiding too: in France the position of women who left their husbands—for whatever reason—was very difficult at the time. But Alfred and Augustine kept their secret until after their official marriage, and Augustine passed successfully for Mme Fouillée in the busy social life that Fouillée’s academic career imposed on them.<sup>6</sup>

When it is time for Jean-Marie’s secondary education Fouillée takes over. Like the mother, he considers the task of teaching the brilliant boy a very serious matter. Fouillée adores his stepson “this other self, this child of my thought that I cherished, perhaps more than if he had been my own.”<sup>7</sup> In Jean-Marie he recognizes his beloved Augustine “with her great intelligence and even greater heart.”<sup>8</sup>

Reading Plato and Kant at a very tender age was not uncommon for children in 19th century France, and it was certainly the natural thing to do in the family of a professional philosopher. The exercise pays off. When Jean-Marie is 15 years of age, Fouillée, who is then writing his major works on Plato<sup>9</sup> and Socrates,<sup>10</sup> seriously overworks himself, in the end being

<sup>6</sup> Additional historical details in : J.-P. Bardos’ *Postface* to the 1977 centenary edition of *Le tour de France par deux enfants* (G. Bruno, 1877, pp. 311-331).

<sup>7</sup> ‘Cet autre moi même, cet enfant de ma pensée que je chérissais plus, peut-être, que s’il eût été mon propre fils.’ (Fouillée, 1889, p. 193).

<sup>8</sup> ‘Une grande intelligence, une cœur plus grande encore.’ (Fouillée, 1889, p. 194).

<sup>9</sup> This was Fouillée’s *La philosophie de Platon*. Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1869 (2 vols.). It received an award from the *Académie française* in 1871.

totally unable to read or write. Jean-Marie takes on the task of reading to his stepfather, taking notes, editing and even adding to the text (Fouillée, 1913, p. vii).<sup>11</sup>

Altogether young Guyau displayed a remarkable precociousness in his scholarly achievements. Fouillée informs us that Jean-Marie showed a deep and genuine intellectual interest in poetry, especially in the work of Corneille and that of contemporary poets like Victor Hugo and Alfred de Musset. He studied Plato and Kant in considerable depth, and of his own initiative he became engrossed in the Stoic philosophers, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius in particular. The Stoa made such a lasting impression on the boy's mind that for the rest of his days he would remain strongly oriented towards its way of life, trying to incorporate its fundamental views in his own philosophical system.



Alfred Fouillée

Fouillée had been a teacher of philosophy at the lycée in Douai, and then in Montpellier, after which he became a professor at the University of Bordeaux. Later, in 1872, the family moved to Paris when Alfred was offered a position as *maître de conférences* (lecturer) in philosophy at the prestigious *École normale supérieure*, to become professor of philosophy in 1876. This appointment emphasizes Fouillée's calibre, for, never having been a student at the *École*<sup>12</sup>, he lacked what was almost a *conditio sine qua non* for a professorship.

Jean-Marie enters the university at an extremely young age: he becomes *licencié ès lettres*<sup>13</sup> when he is only seventeen. His major achievement in this early period is his annotated translation of the *Encheiridion*, the Manual of Epictetus, the classic summary of Stoic thought.<sup>14</sup>

In 1873 he takes part in an American competition with a brief essay on *Education and Morality* under the pseudonym Theophile Redon. He is not very pleased with it and suspecting that his stepfather would not be pleased either, Jean-Marie forgets to tell him (Bergmann, 1912, p. 4) until he gets the award. One year later, in

1874, he wins an important prize from the *Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques*<sup>15</sup> with a very substantial treatise on the utilitarian views of morality from Epicurus to the contemporary philosophers, altogether more than one thousand pages long. The work has a considerable impact and it is praised by many of the leading philosophers of the time. It establishes Guyau's fame as a thinker and a writer. Later it would expand into two substantial volumes which saw

---

<sup>10</sup> A. Fouillée, *La philosophie de Socrate*. Paris: Félix Alcan, 1870.

<sup>11</sup> In several respects this reminds us of the tasks young John Stuart Mill performed for his father, the big difference being that James Mill was an inordinately strict teacher, whilst Fouillée apparently was a much kinder tutor to his nephew and stepson. Cf. J. S. Mill, *Autobiography* (1873). London: Penguin, 1989.

<sup>12</sup> The reason was the untimely death of Fouillée's father. It left the family with insufficient financial means to pay Alfred's fee for the *École*.

<sup>13</sup> In those days the *licencié ès lettres* was equivalent to the present 'Master of Arts' degree.

<sup>14</sup> The *Encheiridion* (Manual) is a synopsis of the views of Epictetus (ca. 50-130 AD), compiled by his pupil Flavius Arrianus.

<sup>15</sup> Like the *Académie française* one of the altogether five divisions of the *Institut de France*.

the light in 1878 and 1879 respectively.<sup>16</sup> In 1874 Guyau is called to teach philosophy at the celebrated *Lycée Condorcet* in Paris. Among his pupils there is Henri Bergson, four years Guyau's junior (Copleston, 1974, p. 174). And so, barely twenty years of age, Jean-Marie Guyau seems on his way to a splendid career as a philosopher.

But then, "as if crushed by his excessive workload" (Fouillée, 1895, p. iii) he becomes ill, the first manifestation of the tuberculosis that will take him to his early grave. So serious already were the consequences of this first attack that he decided to abandon his newly found position and to seek more clement atmospheric conditions near the coast. From then on he spends the winter periods at the seaside. In the fall of 1875 Guyau moves from Paris to Pau and later to Biarritz searching, and initially finding, relief for his symptoms. However, the vicissitudes of the weather in the land of Gascogne force him, the next year, to decide in favour of Nice on the Mediterranean coast with its warmer and more reliable climate.

In 1879 when his failing health forces Fouillée to resign from his position at the *École normale supérieure* he and Augustine move to the Provence too, where they are joined by Jean-Marie, and—a little later—by the young Mme Barbe Marguerite Guyau *née* André, the bride carefully chosen for Jean-Marie by the parents. The four of them settle permanently in the hills outside Menton in 1879. Here Guyau will live and work until his death in 1888.

Despite Guyau's fragile health, the Mediterranean period is marked by considerable activity. All his major works are published in these ten years and all meet with considerable success; most of them will eventually go through at least a dozen editions. Most have been translated into German and Russian, some also into Spanish, English and Italian, and several in various other languages. But not only does he write high level philosophical treatises. Like his mother he has ideas about education which he puts to work in a number of texts for schools, although he cannot match his mother's talent for this task.<sup>17</sup>

Actually the Fouillée residence has been compared to a pedagogical beehive: all four members of the household are involved in the composition of school texts, while Fouillée and Guyau supplement these efforts with voluminous philosophical works to support their views on man, morals, society and education.<sup>18</sup>

There is, altogether, a great deal of interaction between the faculty members of this tiny Open University. Particularly interesting for our present purposes is a pedagogical principle that lies at the root of Augustine's exceptional *Le tour de la France*



Augustine Fouillée-Tuillerie  
(G. Bruno)

<sup>16</sup> *La morale d'Épicure* and *La morale Anglaise contemporaine*. The reception of these two books can be judged from two reviews by G. Boirac (1878, 1879) in the *Revue philosophique*.

<sup>17</sup> Among Guyau's more successful efforts were two readers: *Première année de lecture courante* (1875) and *Année préparatoire de lecture* (1884). Mme Fouillée adapted some of the materials of the first book for her *Le Tour de la France par deux enfants*. She understood better than Guyau the value of presenting educational materials in the context of a continuing story.

<sup>18</sup> For more details see Ozouf and Ozouf (1984).

*par deux enfants*. It appears to be based on an explicit view on the art of memory, specifically as an art of spatial rather than temporal memory. The long journey of the two children, victims of the French-German war of 1870 in search of their lost family, is meant to establish in the reader a symbolic representation of the newly established Third Republic.<sup>19</sup> It is a spatial representation, so faithful to topography that it seems as if the author did actually match the lengths of paragraphs to the distances travelled or at least to the effort invested in travelling. In contrast the historical and other temporal relations appear to be derived, incidental, and much less under textual control; they are “like the ornaments in a Christmas tree; sparkling but disposable, with no other relation between them than the creation of an effect.” (Ozouf & Ozouf, 1984, p. 298).

In *La genèse de l'idée de temps* we find a theoretical justification of this very practical, and apparently effective educational strategy, leaving us with the question of what came first, the mother's strategy or the son's theory. Altogether the evidence seems to favour the strategy!

Not only is Jean-Marie successful in his work, he is also happily married. His wife, we mentioned this already, writes educational books too. She too uses a *nom de plume*: Pierre Ulric.<sup>20</sup> The Guyaus enjoy parenthood—their son Augustin is born in 1884.<sup>21</sup>

But then, early in 1888, an earthquake shakes the Mediterranean basin causing considerable damage in nearby Italy. The French coast is less badly affected, but Guyau is forced to stay in a damp garden shed for several nights. There he catches a cold which quickly deteriorates and confines him to a sickbed from which he will not rise again. In the course of three months what physical strength remains gradually fails him, although he tries to hide this from his relatives. Towards the end there seems to be a slight remission; for a brief while Guyau feels better. Then his condition takes a rapid turn for the worst. He dies, on March 31, 1888, thirty-three years of age.

Alfred Fouillée, as his stepson's chronicler, has described Guyau's last hours in some detail (Fouillée, 1889, pp. 193/4). Guyau did not retire from his work until the very last. On the evening before his death he even dictated a few pages. But the effort had exhausted him, and he knew and accepted that the end was near. To be spiritually and physically close to his mother, as he had been throughout his life, he asked her to hold his hand. And then, smiling at the three who were with him—his mother, his stepfather, his wife—he passed away, quietly and peacefully. His son Augustin, four years old at the time, was soundly asleep, unaware of the tragic events in the adjacent room. Augustin would remain unaware of his father's death for a long time: his mother and grandparents sustained the fiction that his father had only departed on a long journey (Ozouf & Ozouf 1984, p. 310).

Jean-Marie Guyau died on the eve of Good Friday, and was buried on the morning of Easter Sunday 1888. This coincidence seemed to Fouillée to underscore the philosophical tension which had been the inspiration for one of Guyau's major works, *L'irréligion de l'avenir*, in which he had expressed his conviction that eventually religion will free itself from dogma and no longer depend on unfounded beliefs in a transcendent power. Alfred Fouillée, shocked

---

<sup>19</sup> The Second Empire (1852-1870) collapsed when France lost the battle of Sedan during the French-German war of 1870. The Third Republic was established in 1870 and anchored in the constitution of 1875. It came to an end in 1940.

<sup>20</sup> See A. Guyau (1913, p. 15). Among the books by Pierre Ulric are *Aux domaines incertains* (1906) and *Parmi les jeunes* (1911).

<sup>21</sup> Augustin Guyau was admitted to the *École supérieure d'électricité* in Paris in 1907. He earned the degree of *Ingénieur* and later obtained a doctorate under Paul Janet. He was killed during the first World War (1917).

by the loss of his beloved stepchild and nephew, bestowed metaphysical significance upon the event when he wrote:

The tragedy of the Passion is the ultimate human tragedy, the symbol for the tormented mind possessed by a transcendental idea to which humanity shall say, like Christ to His Father: "Why hast Thou forsaken me?"<sup>22</sup>

### Guyau's Ideas

Fouillée felt he had captured the essence of Guyau's philosophy in one sentence:

How to reconcile the Platonic and Christian ideas of the good, the Kantian idea of the categorical imperative, with the analyses of experimental psychology and the immutable laws of evolution.<sup>23</sup>

For Guyau the fundamental question of philosophy is how to derive a moral principle from natural, empirically observable processes, rather than from some rationalistic or idealistic and transcendental process. This brings him close to contemporary empirical psychology. Taking his point of departure in the theory of evolution and fashioning it in an essentially Stoic mould, the pivotal idea in Guyau's philosophy became that of life as the guiding principle of all human values—moral, artistic, and religious.

#### *Vital force*

Life as such embodies a natural, expansive force. It provides the driving force of human existence. Humans are not directly moved by conscious considerations, as rationalism would have it, but by a deep and initially hidden vital force. Reflective thought, once it develops, can only gradually and by careful reflection dissolve the primordial confusion of everything we inherit genetically from our ancestors.<sup>24</sup> The vital force is morally indifferent, a blind force. However, the thinkers with whom Guyau became involved early in his life—notably Plato, the Stoics, and Kant—had installed the strong belief in the fundamental good will and the social nature of human consciousness that is so characteristic for his later work (Fouillée, 1889, p. 1). Consequently the vital force, despite its moral indifference, is characterized by an expansive benevolence towards others (*o.c.*, p. 4), rather than being, as it was for Nietzsche, a blind will to power.

As a philosopher Guyau was first and foremost a moralist. Morality, for him, has as its function to re-establish the harmony between reflection and spontaneity. Our vital force is the measure of our obligations, the fundamental rule of conduct being: We must because we can!

---

<sup>22</sup> 'Le drame de la passion est le drame humain par excellence, l'emblème des tourments de la pensée, éprise d'un idéal auquel l'humanité peut dire, comme le Christ à son père, «Pourquoi m'avez-vous abandonné?» (Fouillée, 1889, p. 194).

<sup>23</sup> 'Comment concilier l'idée platonicienne et chrétienne du bien, l'idée kantienne de l'impératif catégorique, avec les analyses de la psychologie expérimentale et avec les lois inflexibles de l'évolution.' (Fouillée, 1889, p. 5).

<sup>24</sup> See Guyau's *Esquisse d'une morale sans obligation ni sanction* (1885, p. 245). This aspect is one of the pivots on which Guyau's theory of the origin of the idea of time is turning. In this theory the young child is a 'victim' of a primordial state of confusion in which it has to bring order by gradually constructing space and time. It is what distinguishes his position from the transcendentalism of Kant.

## *Stoicism*

We have seen that Guyau became interested in Stoicism at a very early point in his career as a philosopher. Throughout his life, he remained faithful to his own interpretation of Stoic thought, one that was, according to Fouillée (1889, p. 4), “tempered with a smiling tenderness, and an expansive benevolence towards others rather than being of the original egoistic sort.”

Fouillée’s characterization betrays a rather disapproving view of Stoic thought that was widespread at the time and that Fouillée apparently shared. More recently, however, it has become clear that at least Epictetus himself entertained views that were much more compatible with Guyau’s perceptions. But Epictetus’ ideas have come to us mostly through the *Encheiridion*, the Manual that Guyau translated when he was 17. Although the Manual offers a brilliant summary of the views of the founder of the Stoa, and although it has exercised a great influence on Western thinking, it is heavily biased: much of what makes the Stoic way of life humane has been neglected. Thus the *Encheiridion* distorts the image of Epictetus, leaving out his explicit emphasis on the humanly love towards others, poor and rich, ruler and slave, a humanistic, cosmopolitan expansiveness, and a warm, personal relation to the Godhead.<sup>25</sup>

Even though we realize that Guyau did instil some of this more complete, more humane version of Stoic philosophy in his own way of life, we should distinguish between his ontological and his epistemological position. One may certainly view Guyau as a methodological Stoic in the traditional sense. As such he deliberately adopted the attitude of “a cold eye and an indifferent mind” as the only adequate method for his philosophical research. Guyau’s poetry reflects this same attitude: although his poems have a remarkably personal accent, they deal with impersonal thoughts.<sup>26</sup> He attempted, in other words, to fathom the consequences of a completely value-free approach to the intellectual endeavour of Western thought. In this sense Guyau did anticipate the methodological behaviourism that would become a standard for psychological research several decades later.

But this strict methodological position does not at all reflect his ontological perspective. There Guyau sided with Rousseau in giving priority to emotion over intelligence, involvement over indifference. In this respect he also resembles Schopenhauer, although he resolutely rejected the latter’s fashionable pessimism. Instead he was convinced that the driving, non-reflective vital force possesses a fecundity and generosity which will ultimately eliminate the need for any sort of enforcement.<sup>27</sup> For Guyau life is, in the best (i.e. non-idealistic) vitalist tradition, an intrinsically positive, benevolent force that will ultimately lead to universal love. It acts likewise on art and religion: life attempts to expand and to coincide with universal life, and art supports these efforts.<sup>28</sup> Just as value and beauty do not perish in the absence of a transcendent principle of life, religious feelings will not perish in the absence of dogma, the latter ultimately being no more than an unjustified feeling of dependence.<sup>29</sup>

It does not surprise us that Guyau was an atheist. Fouillée (1889, p. 1) even claims that “his first and only faith was the idealism of Plato and Kant.” But that seems too limited a characterization of his stepson’s position or perhaps even a genuine misunderstanding

---

<sup>25</sup> See the entry ‘Encheiridion’ in *Kindlers Literaturlexikon*, Vol. 8. München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1974, pp. 3091/92.

<sup>26</sup> Guyau published only one volume of poetry, the *Vers d'un philosophe* (1881).

<sup>27</sup> *Esquisse*, 1885, p. 193.

<sup>28</sup> *L'art au point de vue sociologique* (1888).

<sup>29</sup> *L'irréligion de l'avenir* (1887).

(Walther-Dulk, 1965, p. 155). Guyau does more: he connects the atheistic and rationalistic thinking of the Enlightenment with elements of the new theory of evolution, and he does it in an original and unmistakably French way.

### *The impact of the theory of evolution*

The philosophy of Guyau must be considered against the background of the theory of evolution which was just then making its first major impact on European science. Guyau was strongly influenced by Darwin, but even more so by Herbert Spencer, as a result of his analysis of the British utilitarians. Spencer had launched his own version of the theory of evolution in 1850 and had, since 1862, begun work on a series of monographs dealing with its ramifications for a number of disciplines, including biology, psychology, and sociology. Especially in the latter domain Spencer had a deep and lasting influence which was to become known as social Darwinism. Guyau was the first in France to fully recognize the impact that Spencer and his school would eventually have on the development of social science and, as a result, on the evolution of future society. Although in Germany Wilhelm Wundt adopted a similar perspective in his *Völkerpsychologie*, Guyau was recognized as one of the principal continental defenders of this point of view. On the basis of Spencer's ideas Guyau developed an evolutionistic ethics. Spencer who, at this time had not yet developed a coherent conception of ethics<sup>30</sup> was apparently quite pleased to accept the outcome of Guyau's analysis.

The significance of that analysis has remained. Walch (1939), for instance, has recognized Guyau as the philosopher who introduced the theory of evolution into French thinking in an original way, and who extended both Darwin's and Spencer's ideas to moral, aesthetic and religious issues. In his celebrated multivolume history of philosophy Copleston (1974, pp. 174-179) has reached a similar conclusion.

This then seems to have been Guyau's major personal contribution to philosophy. Without it French philosophy would not have participated in the discussion about evolution the way it would later through, for instance, the work of Bergson. What made it a unique contribution is that Guyau succeeded in connecting the Stoic way of thinking with evolutionary thought, all imbedded in a deep concern for human values which, for him, were first and foremost social values.

### *Optimism, pessimism and indifference*

What is there at the root of morality, art, religion? In other words, what is the metaphysical attitude, the irreducible principle? Guyau emphatically argued that the concept of evolution is the only primitive force that could possibly provide the basis for a rigorously founded morality. But what if it would become clear that natural indifference is not the bedrock basis for metaphysics of good and evil? What will become of ethics in this case? And what will become of art and religion? How can one then find one's way among the facts of science and the presumptions of metaphysics? (Fouillée, 1889, p. 15). Guyau, who had to cope with an intellectual climate dominated by Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, pointed out that both optimism and pessimism are likely to exaggerate their claims. In the end neither optimism, nor pessimism, nor indifference for that matter, can be proven to be a proper foundation for

---

<sup>30</sup> See Guyau's (1879) article in the *Revue philosophique*. Spencer's own Ethics would appear only later in 1879.

metaphysics. Although natural indifference, as it is seen to operate in evolution, is likely to gain more support from science than the other two principles, Guyau ultimately denied that this evidence might ever become decisive. Yet the most plausible, if flawed, candidate remains in the last analysis the indifference of nature with respect to good and bad, pleasure and pain. This is the conclusion Guyau reached in the *Esquisse d'une morale sans obligation ni sanction* (1885), his most important and original work.

### *Death*

Guyau's interest in life and in the intensity of the vital force as the fundament of morality is tragic if seen in the light of the philosopher's delicate health. The vital strength that is required if ethics, art, and religion are all to be animated by what Bergson would soon call the *élan vital*, is tremendous and of course Guyau realized how much he lacked in this respect.

We understand why death has been one of Guyau's preoccupations. He went even so far as to judge the strength of a moral principle by the strength it gives us to face death. His own principle, the Stoic maxim "Do not resign!" does readily pass this test. But Guyau went further by claiming that humans must transcend their own death. We possess continuity towards the future (Fouillée, 1889, p. 187) and what one has been will never be lost.

It seems appropriate to describe Guyau's conception of immortality as oceanic. Fouillée has repeatedly pointed out how important the sea, as a source of strength and inspiration, was for Guyau and how fascinated he was by its unbounded energy:

There is this inexhaustible source of unrestrained force; how acutely I felt the impotence of the human being to cope with the power of this entire ocean on the move.<sup>31</sup>

Human beings must face death, and with the progress of medical knowledge they will increasingly know in advance when their time will come. Our religions and other superstitions that deal with immortality and afterlife are no longer of any help to us. Human beings must guard their own fate and dare to face the unknown! If death happens to come slowly, there is a comforting aspect that is inherent in the vital force, and in nature. The gradual loss of vitality leads to a natural evaporation of the will to live: "Just breathing already causes pain."<sup>32</sup> The observation applies in fact to all kinds of physical activity: lack of exercise kills the appetite for such exercise.

But even death has its positive side. For the philosopher it has a particularly interesting aspect: it remains forever his last, unanswered, question.<sup>33</sup>

### *A positive morality*

Indifference as the basic principle for morality implies that ultimately no external source of obligation or sanction should be required to govern human behaviour. The expansive force of life, which is the tendency of life to live or unfold at its most intense, is the basis for morality, art, and religion. The fecund and generous character of the vital force eliminates the need for enforcement. In other words, life itself supplies the basis for a positive morality, free from

---

<sup>31</sup> 'Il y a là un réservoir de forces infini, inépuisable; comme je sentais bien l'impuissance de l'homme à arrêter l'effort de tout cet océan en marche?' (*Esquisse*, p. 105).

<sup>32</sup> 'Respirer seulement devient douloureux.' (Quoted by Fouillée, 1889, p. 188).

<sup>33</sup> 'Notre dernière douleur reste aussi notre dernière curiosité.' (*Irréligion*, p. 479).

prejudice and pressures from outside. The expansive nature of life, oriented towards others, is the source for morality that human beings find within themselves: the vital force that can impose structure on culture and its prominent values. This leads Guyau to his Copernican revolution, the inversion of Kant's categorical imperative. We must because we can, he claims, hence there is no need for obligations or sanctions. Violations of natural morality carry their own punishment: egocentrism is paid for with loneliness and emptiness. This is the message of the *Esquisse d'une morale sans obligation ni sanction* (1885).

Several authors have pointed out that Guyau's position is essentially immoralistic; in this respect he resembles Nietzsche (Brehier, 1932). Nietzsche was indeed aware of Guyau's claims but evidently could not agree with him. In his copy of the *Esquisse* Nietzsche made numerous other marginal remarks, including the following one that appears scribbled on the title page:

This book contains a *comical* error: in his effort to prove that the moral instincts have their root in life itself, Guyau has overlooked the fact that he has actually proved the opposite—namely that all fundamental instincts are *immoral*, including the so-called moral ones. The greatest intensity is indeed necessarily related to life's *greatest expansion* but that is actually the opposite of everything altruistic—this expansion expresses itself as unrestrained *will to power*.<sup>34</sup>

The most dramatic consequence of his position, formulated by Guyau in his last major work, *L'irréligion de l'avenir* (1887), is that religion requires no dogma because there is ultimately no need for a transcendent principle, a Godhead.

Part of his arguments to defend this radical position derived from Guyau's interest in the neo-platonic idea of process, and his own interpretation of this idea was consistent with modern thoughts about possible worlds (Fouillée, 1889, p. 3). All possibilities of which we dream, he argued, are already realized in an infinite series of worlds. We can therefore not conceive of any degree of being, moral good, or evil, that is not already a part of universal existence.

Ultimately we can do without religious dogma and rely on an ideal of universal love. This belief rests on the strong and—in our opinion not very well-supported—metaphysical assumption that life cannot in principle produce negative outcomes, harmful to itself. Here lies the interesting contrast with Nietzsche's will to power.

### La genèse de l'idée de temps

In this section we shall outline a few of the basic aspects of Guyau's philosophical position with respect to time. Strongly empirical and psychological in outlook, his theory seems nevertheless to be philosophically based, directly and indirectly, on Leibniz in its relational aspect, on Locke in its genetic aspect and on Kant in its idealistic aspect.

*La genèse de l'idée de temps* was edited by Fouillée and published posthumously in 1890. It is based on two earlier articles that had appeared in *Revue philosophique* in 1880 (La mémoire et le phonographe) and 1885 (L'évolution de l'idée de temps dans la conscience).

---

<sup>34</sup> 'Dies Buch hat einen *komischen* Fehler: in dem Bemühen, zu beweisen, dass die moralischen Instinkte ihren Sitz im Leben selbst haben, hat Guyau übersehen, dass er das Gegenteil bewiesen hat—nämlich, dass alle Grundinstinkte des Lebens *unmoralisch* sind, eingerechnet die sogenannten moralischen. Die höchste Intensität des Lebens steht in der That in nothwendigen Zusammenhang zu *sa plus large expansion*: nur ist diese der Gegensatz aller 'altruistischen' Tatsachen—diese Expansion drückt sich als unbändiger *Wille zur Macht* aus.' For an analysis of this and other comments by Nietzsche see Walther-Dulk, 1965, pp. 158-169.

As a psychological study on the human sense of time *La genèse de l'idée de temps* had its competitors. Some of them should be considered more impressive and influential than Guyau's text, especially the chapters on the stream of consciousness, on the perception of time, and on memory in William James' *Principles of Psychology* (1890), and Henri Bergson's dissertation *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (1889). Although in his vitalist outlook Guyau is very close to Bergson's views, he is psychologically much closer to William James' ideas.

As we have seen, Guyau put himself in direct opposition to Kant with respect to the categorical imperative. He did likewise in his analysis of time. Instead of conceiving of time as a determining factor of consciousness, Guyau claims that "time is not a condition, but (instead) simply a product of consciousness." (*o.c.*, p. 117; see Michon, Pouthas, & Jackson, 1988, p. 145). Time is not an intuition in Kant's sense, but a set of relations which experience establishes between events. A chapter by Ricoeur (1988) highlights the intricate connections between Guyau and Kant with respect to this issue.

We already stipulated the influence Spencer had on Guyau's position, but we also saw that Guyau did not accept Spencer's views without considerable criticism and revision. With respect to the development of the idea of time this was again the case. While Spencer claimed the primacy of time over space, by assuming that the experience of sequence or succession is the ultimate basis of experience, Guyau argued instead that the notion of time derives from, and depends on the initial reaching out in space that is required to interact with the world. Guyau also took issue with Maine de Biran, for whom the experience of transitions in sensation (or change, in other words), is in fact what we call time or duration. According to Guyau the experience of these properties of the world provide at best the streambed of time, its form of structure. Time, however, is what streams in consciousness, in this bedding.

We find in Guyau's position a clear case of a fundamental difficulty we still encounter in modern ideas about the mental representation of events in time. It is presently known in cognitive science as the frame problem (McCarthy & Hayes, 1969). For Leibniz time was simply the succession of events in nature. But, as Locke had pointed out, the succession of events, or even the succession of ideas does not necessarily lead to the idea of succession. And thus, how can one ever get from a static representation to a 'truly' dynamic one? This issue has collared the debate about the nature of time since Clarke first posited it in its modern form in his correspondence with Leibniz. It plays, for instance, an important role in the work of both William James (1890) and Bergson (1889) and also in the later phenomenological perspective outlined by Husserl (1928).

Time, in Guyau's sense, is a strategy of coping with the world: our awareness of time is the by-product of goal-directed activity. Without goals, without desires, there would be no time. Time is a notion that is achieved by experimenting with the world through the dynamics of needs and their satisfaction. The measurement of time, therefore, is based on the number and the variability of events, their syntax, and their cognitive and emotional significance, rather than on their actual duration. With this Guyau seems quite far removed from the views of some of his contemporaries, in particular Bergson. Bergson's ideas, first brought to light in the *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (1889), had a tremendous impact. The contents of this book resemble Guyau's work in several respects. Bergson was undoubtedly aware of his one time teacher's analysis of the notion of time and he may have used some of its results. Some authors, on the other hand, suggest that Fouillée used certain of Bergson's views to carry Guyau's book to completion (Copleston, 1974, p. 177). However, as we have seen, Guyau had already published the essential parts of *La genèse* in 1885, in his contributions to the *Revue philosophique*. Altogether it seems therefore more likely that the two authors developed their thoughts along more or less parallel but basically independent lines. As a further distinction

Guyau's position may be characterized as psychological and empiricist, whereas Bergson gradually drifted towards a more and more metaphysical, idealistic, position. While we may consider Bergson's view as the doctrine of time as consciousness, that of Guyau is better qualified as the defence of time as a product of consciousness. The review by Bergson in *Revue philosophique*, devoted to Guyau's position, clearly brings out the differences between the two thinkers (Bergson, 1891; see also Michon, 1988, pp. 165-168). One of the surprising things about this review is that Fouillée has never mentioned it. Yet Bergson's opinion was fair and quite favourable, and Fouillée was usually very quick to pay public attention to any positive reference to Guyau.

A different and perhaps somewhat unexpected angle on the impact of *La genèse* may be found in Pierre Janet's celebrated lectures on the evolution of memory and of the notion of time (Janet, 1928). Janet, psychologist more than philosopher, largely accepted Guyau's position, which he qualified as "opening up a new era in the psychology of time" and he refers to *La genèse de l'idée de temps* as one of these extremely valuable and fundamental books that everyone reads simply because they make psychology interesting (*o.c.*, p. 47). Janet specifically adopted Guyau's dynamic view of time and memory (*o.c.*, p. 297). He extended Guyau's views on temporal perspective as the construction of a coherent personal history, but he also went a considerable distance towards a theory of time and narrativity as it would be developed in great detail only much later (e.g. Ricoeur, 1983/1985; Fawcner, 1983). Through Pierre Janet a different light again is thrown on the fundamental significance of Guyau's essay.<sup>35</sup>

### Guyau's Significance

In several respects Guyau was very much an exponent of his time: he had a strong, positivistic interest in science and society, and he considered himself a harbinger of the twentieth century. In his opinion, philosophers must first analyze in depth whatever science might have to say about a problem and then should attempt to interpret these findings in the context of evolutionism.

In particular he saw it as the aim of 19th century philosophy to uncover the social side of the human individual, the side that the egoism of an earlier, 18th-century materialism had hidden. The mechanistic metaphor of La Mettrie<sup>36</sup> is in Guyau's opinion fundamentally inadequate as an account of human nature. Even something as local and individual as the nervous system cannot be studied in isolation. Mind and brain can be understood only if we take into account the external, social influences: "solidarity dominates individuality." (Fouillée, 1895, p. viii). It is equally difficult to describe the actual functioning of the brain mechanisms and to account for mental phenomena, such as happiness, sympathy, etc. They are equally complex and interpenetrating, and they require essentially a holistic approach. This is a rather radical form of philosophical contextualism which, as a reading of *La genèse de l'idée de temps* will show, has determined Guyau's psychological views as well.

---

<sup>35</sup> An interesting monograph by Kern (1983) deals with the culture of time and space in the period between 1880 and 1918. The author explicitly recognizes the importance of Guyau's views on the cultural developments of this era. A recent monograph by Ilse Walther-Dulk (2005/2007) specifically traces the connection between Guyau's ideas about time and those of Marcel Proust.

<sup>36</sup> J.O. de la Mettrie, *L'homme machine*. First published anonymously in Leyden, The Netherlands, in 1748.

In line with the trends of late 19th century science, Guyau expected that the 20th century, in turn, would witness discoveries in the world of value that would be as fundamental as those of Newton and Laplace in the world of facts. At last there would be a scientific psychology and—especially important in Guyau’s eyes—a scientific sociology.

Guyau’s speculative approach to psychology was buried under the weight of experimental psychology as it originated in Germany around 1880.<sup>37</sup> Yet his outlook on scientific psychology was very much in accord with this development. As we saw before, his position was essentially that philosophers (or at least theorists) should review and analyse the results of empirical science and then interpret these results in terms of evolutionary theory. In this Guyau remains faithful to Spencer’s ideas.

*La genèse de l’idée de temps* is in fact his only work that we may qualify as psychological in the modern sense. It is one of his last projects, and perhaps Guyau would have moved towards an even more outspoken psychological position had he lived longer.



Statue of Alfred Fouillée and Jean-Marie Guyau  
Lyon, unveiled in 1918 and removed in 1954

Even during his lifetime Guyau’s importance as an innovative thinker was not undisputed. As a matter of fact he was not even entirely convinced of himself. Struck by the vastness and overwhelming energy of the ocean, important source of inspiration to both the philosopher and the poet Guyau, he contemplates his smallness and weakness: “What role does thought play in this Grand Totality?”<sup>38</sup> This emphasis is understandable if we realize, once more, how heavily Guyau’s interest in life and in the intensity of the vital force as the fundament of morality was determined by his delicate health. And so, perhaps, the predicament in which he found himself added to his modesty: the philosopher, he said, echoing Socrates, should be the first to realize how little he knows and understands.

---

<sup>37</sup> In 1879 Wilhelm Wundt established the first laboratory for experimental psychology at the University of Leipzig. This is conventionally considered the birth of scientific psychology.

<sup>38</sup> ‘Que’est-ce que la pensée dans le grand Tout?’ (Quoted by Fouillée, 1889, p. 12).

Guyau did nothing to hide his doubts and his inability to encompass this vast enigma. Indeed, if one is to qualify his philosophical work, one of its outstanding characteristics is its sincerity. Guyau carries his investigations to their consequence without stepping out of the way for conceptual or ideological difficulties. Because sincerity is also the hallmark of sublime art, Guyau may, if we are to agree with Fouillée, be remembered as “one of these rare authors who, in their best moments, as if liberated from themselves, touch naturally and delicately upon the feeling of the sublime.”<sup>39</sup> Perhaps one would expect that this characterization of his admired stepson is another of Fouillée’s overly emphatic statements. But even Guyau’s most explicit and severe critic, Archambault (1911), who qualified Guyau as a mediocre and not very original thinker, recognized him for the open-minded and brilliant writer he was:

Guyau’s work remains to be done all over—but let us hope that whoever will undertake this task shall have the same spiritual flexibility, the same vivid imagination, the same cordiality, the same ability to bring his ideas to life, to dress them in sublime form, to prolong their echo and finally, to give them, by virtue of an often brilliant expression, their utmost force and effect. For even if Guyau, mediocre inventor, ultimately had only a few ideas, he knew how to give them exceptional relief and liveliness.<sup>40</sup>

Archambault, we think, was unreasonable. In a period of fifteen years, out of a total of not quite thirty-four, Guyau did actually produce a wealth of ideas and, had he had an opportunity to consolidate his views, his achievement might have reached towering proportions. A letter written by his wife to a friend in Berlin puts it simply: “His life was so short that he had no chance to express more than one quarter of his ideas.”<sup>41</sup>

At least some of the doubts about the originality of Guyau’s philosophical ideas expressed by Archambault and others may derive from precisely that lucid and parsimonious style of writing that helps to make complicated issues look simpler than they really are. This was correctly pointed out by Dauriac (1891) who warns us how easy it is to be moved by Guyau’s writing at the risk of being seduced by his “incomparable talent for thinking and wording, his almost magic power to persuade rather than convince and to win over the mind after having assured himself of the sympathy of the soul.”<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> ‘Il aura le rare honneur de compter parmi les écrivains qui, en leurs meilleurs moments, comme soulevés au-dessus d’eux-mêmes, excitent naturellement et sans effort le sentiment du sublime.’ (Fouillée, 1895, p. ix).

<sup>40</sup> ‘L’œuvre de Guyau reste donc à refaire—souhaitons à celui qui l’entreprendra à nouveau d’y apporter même souplesse d’esprit, même vivacité d’imagination, même chaleur de cœur, même habileté surtout à animer ses idées, à les parer de grandes images, à prolonger leur écho, à leur donner enfin, par la vertu d’une expression souvent magnifique, le maximum de force et d’éclat. Car si Guyau, médiocre inventeur, n’eut en somme que peu d’idées, il sut du moins leur donner un relief et une vie extraordinaires.’ (Archambault, 1911, p. 62).

<sup>41</sup> ‘Sa vie fut si courte qu’il n’a pu exprimer le quart de ses pensées.’ In a letter to Elisabeth Schwarz in Berlin (Quoted by Pfeil, 1928); Elisabeth Schwartz translated the *Esquisse d’une morale sans obligation ni sanction* into German (1910).

<sup>42</sup> ‘Cet incomparable talent de penser et d’écrire, cet art presque magique de persuader avant que de convaincre et de gagner à soi les intelligences après s’être tout d’abord assuré de la sympathie des âmes.’ (Dauriac, 1890). Similar views can be found in more recent evaluations of Guyau’s work. Thus, for instance about the *Esquisse*: ‘Er legt mit diesem Werk ein glühendes Glaubensbekenntnis ab, dessen sprachliche Schönheiten die mangelnden Fundierung der Gedankengänge weithin vergessen lassen.’ (Kindlers Literaturlexikon, 1974; p. 3250).

## Epilogue

The reading or re-reading *La genèse de l'idée de temps* will not fail to confirm these impressions. We trust that the oft praised elegance, warmth, and sincerity of the original text are strong enough to have survived in this, its first, English translation by John A. Michon, Viviane Pouthas and Constance Greenbaum, as it appeared in *Guyau and the idea of time* a commemorative volume published by the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) in 1988, on the occasion of the centenary of Guyau's death (Michon, Pouthas & Jackson 1988).

## References

- Archambault, P. (1911). *Guyau*. Paris: Librairie Bloud & Cie.
- Bergmann, E. (1912). *Die Philosophie Guyaus*. Leipzig: Verlag Dr. W. Klinkhardt.
- Bergson, H. (1889). *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*. Paris: Félix Alcan (English translation under the title *Time and free will*. New York: Macmillan).
- Bergson, H. (1891). Analyse de l'ouvrage de Guyau « La genèse de l'idée de temps avec une introduction par Albert [sic] Fouillée. Paris: Alcan, 1890. » *Revue philosophique*, 31, 185-190.
- Boirac, E. (1878). Analyse de l'ouvrage « La morale d'Épicure et ses rapports avec les doctrines contemporaines, par M. Guyau. » *Revue philosophique*, 6, 513-522 and 646-648.
- Boirac, E. (1879). Analyse de l'ouvrage « La morale anglaise contemporaine: Morale de l'utilité et de l'évolution, par M. Guyau. » *Revue philosophique*, 8, 411-425.
- Brehier, E. (1932). *Histoire de la philosophie, III: XIX-XX siècles*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France. (Nouvelle édition, 1981).
- Bruno, G. (1877). *Le tour de la France par deux enfants*. Paris : Eugène Belin (Édition centenaire, Librairie classique Eugène Belin, 1977)
- Copleston, F. (1974). *A history of philosophy. Vol. IX: Maine de Biran to Sartre*. London: The Newman Press.
- Dauriac, L. (1890). Philosophes contemporains: M. Guyau. *Année philosophique*, 1, 222 ff.
- Fawcner, H.W. (1983). *The timescapes of John Fowles*. London: Associated University Press.
- Fouillée, A. (1889). *La morale, l'art et la religion d'après Guyau*. Paris: Félix Alcan.
- Fouillée, A. (1895). *Pages choisies des grand écrivains: J.-M. Guyau*. Paris: Armand Colin & Cie.
- Fouillée, A. (1913). *La morale, l'art et la religion d'après Guyau*. Paris: Félix Alcan (8me édition).
- Guyau, A. (1913). *La philosophie et la sociologie d'Alfred Fouillée*. Paris: Félix Alcan.
- Husserl, E. (1928). Vorlesungen zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewusstseins. *Jahrbuch für Philosophie und phänomenologische Forschung*, 9, 367-496. (Engl. transl.: *The phenomenology of internal time consciousness*. The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1964).
- James, W. (1890). *Principles of psychology*. New York: Henry Holt & Co.
- Janet, P[ierre] (1928). *L'évolution de la mémoire et de la notion de temps*. Paris: A. Chahin.

- Kern, S. (1983). *The culture of time and space 1880-1918*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- McCarthy, J. & Hayes, P. (1969). Some philosophical problems from the standpoint of artificial intelligence. *Machine Intelligence*, 4, 463-502.
- Michon, J. A., Pouthas, V., & Jackson, J. L. (Eds.). (1988). *Guyau and the idea of time*. Amsterdam: North-Holland//Edita KNAW.
- Ozouf, J., & Ozouf, M. (1984). Le tour de la France par deux enfants: Le petit livre rouge de la république. In P. Nora (Ed.), *Les lieux de mémoire I: La république*. Paris: Gallimard; pp. 292-321.
- Pfeil, H. (1928). *Jean-Marie Guyau und die Philosophie des Lebens*. Augsburg: Dr. Benno Filser Verlag.
- Ricoeur, P. (1983/1985). *Temps et récit. Trois tomes*. Paris: L'Édition du Seuil. (English translation: *Time and narrative. Three volumes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984/1987).
- Ricoeur, P. (1988). From Kant to Guyau. In J. A. Michon, V. Pouthas & J. L. Jackson (Eds.), *Guyau and the idea of time* (pp. 149-159). Amsterdam: North-Holland/Edita KNAW.
- Schwarz, E[mil] (1909). *Jean-Marie Guyaus Moral*. Dissertation University of Heidelberg. Strassbourg: Dumont Schauberg.
- Walch, G. (1939). *Anthologie des poètes français contemporains*. Paris: Delagrave.
- Walther-Dulk, I. (1965). *Materialien zur Philosophie und Ästhetik Jean-Marie Guyaus*. Hamburg: Verlag Die Brigantine.
- Walther-Dulk, I. (2005/revised edition 2007). *Proust, Guyau und die Poesie der Zeit: Ein Spurensuche*. Weimar: VDG-Verlag.

### **J.-M. Guyau's major published works**

- 1875: *Etude sur la Philosophie d'Épictète et traduction du Manuel d'Épictète*. Paris: Delagrave.  
(Original title *Manuel d'Épictète: Traduction nouvelle suivie d'extraits des Entretiens d'Épictète et des Pensées de Marc-Aurèle avec une étude sur la philosophie d'Épictète*.)
- 1878: *La morale d'Épicure et ses rapports avec les doctrines contemporaines*. Paris: Germer Baillière et Cie.
- 1879: *La morale anglaise contemporaine*. Paris: Germer Baillière et Cie.
- 1881: *Vers d'un philosophe*. Paris: Germer Baillière et Cie.
- 1884: *Les problèmes de l'esthétique contemporaine*. Paris: Félix Alcan.
- 1885: *Esquisse d'une morale sans obligation ni sanction*. Paris Félix Alcan.
- 1887: *L'irréligion de l'avenir: Etude sociologique*. Paris: Félix Alcan.
- 1888: *L'art au point de vue sociologique*. Paris: Félix Alcan.
- 1889: *Éducation et hérédité: Etude sociologique*. Paris: Félix Alcan. (Op. posth.; Editor : A. Fouillée)
- 1890: *La genèse de l'idée de temps*. Paris: Félix Alcan. (Op. posth. ; Editor: A. Fouillée)