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Childhood and Eternity: On Unamuno's Tragic Pedagogy[1]

Infancia y eternidad: sobre la pedagogía trágica de Miguel de Unamuno

RESUMEN

En el presente artículo se pretende describir las líneas básicas de lo que Unamuno consideró como una pedagogía adecuada para que el niño disfrute de una infancia genuina y larga, lo cual facilitará que se convierta en un hombre de intensa vida interior y gran valor histórico siempre y cuando dicha infancia siga próxima a su corazón. Para mostrar más claramente en qué consiste una pedagogía adecuada para Unamuno, se explicará también por qué consideró una excesiva sumisión a la pedagogía científica como perniciosa para el desarrollo de los niños.

Palabras clave: Unamuno, pedagogía, inmortalidad, eternidad, amor, muerte, tragedia

INTRODUCTION

A first approach to Miguel de Unamuno's work may be sufficient to convince the reader that this Basque philosopher, playwright and poet did not write about children but about adults and for adults. Furthermore, the addressee of Unamuno's work seems to be not a simple adult but a reader sensitive to the painful existential conflicts which Unamuno reflects in his writings. Of course, there is occasion for discussing if religious faith inspires Unamuno's work − as Alvar [1961], Marías [1971] and Ferrater [1985] among others maintain – or if he tries to cover up his atheism with a disconcerting confusion of ideas and words – as some authors like Manyá [1960], Cancela [1972] and above all Sánchez Barbudo [1968] pointed out.

[1] This paper has been written within the research project "Normativity and Praxis: The Current Debate After Wittgenstein" (FFI2010-15975).

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Yet leaving this debate aside, it is clear that if existential conflicts are considered as lacking in philosophical relevance, as is proper of current analytic philosophy, the interest that Unamuno's work may awaken will be reduced to the field of literature. Precisely because Unamuno is dealing with existential conflicts, he addresses to the actual person, the flesh-and-blood person who is already suffering from the craving for personal immortality, but also to the individual who still has not experienced such craving even though he is expected to feel it because of his age and his alleged maturity. As we will see later, Unamuno excludes the child "from the issue of death and immortality" [RNM, p. 54][2], for he still does not understand what death is although he hears a lot about it. Since children are not yet aware that they will die, they cannot experience existential conflicts related to the craving for immortality. However, this does not mean at all that there is no room in Unamuno's work for the child, the childhood and even the childishness. Far from it, Unamuno regards his book *Recuerdos de niñez y de mocedad* as the sweetest and the most loving of his works: and curiously enough, he says about this "poor little Cinderella" that it became "a kind of essay on child psychology and pedagogy" [APJ, p. 88]. It is noteworthy that Unamuno describes in this way a work so important to him. Indeed, Unamuno recalls in this autobiographical account some events of his childhood not only to evoke the serenity and the purity characteristic of children's intuition through which true freedom can be reached [cfr. RNM, p. 129], but also to illustrate which feelings and experiences should be provided by families and pedagogues responsible for children's education and development. The pedagogy Unamuno recommends is shown in his *Recuerdos de niñez y de mocedad* only through examples, yet it is more clearly illustrated in two other works. On the one hand, it is negatively characterized in *Amor y pedagogía*, a novel which sourly caricatures the deficiencies of scientific and positivist pedagogy; on the other hand, it is positively characterized in a series of articles in which Unamuno analyzes the advantages for the child of having a long childhood which, besides being gladdened with spontaneous games − although they might perhaps seem pointless – is free of attempts to turn the child at an early stage into a faithful servant of logic and rational thinking.

My aim in producing this work is to show which defects Unamuno attributes to scientific pedagogy and, at the same time, to show which conditions must be fulfilled for the child to enjoy an appropriate childhood. To better understand in which an 'appropriate' childhood within the context of Unamuno's work consists on, I will explain the main lines of the pedagogy Unamuno recommended as well as of the pedagogy he criticized, as a result of which it will be easier to better understand the role and relevance of the child, and by extension of childhood itself, in Unamuno's work.

[2] Quotations from Unamuno's work have been translated into English by José María Ariso.

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TRAGIC PEDAGOGY OR THE TRAGEDY OF PEDAGOGY

Whenever Unamuno turns his gaze on his own childhood, he shows a nostalgic attitude proper to one who thinks longingly of a lost paradise. Yet this thought goes far beyond the fond memory of distant times: what Unamuno misses is the life of the child who "appropriates the world by losing himself in it" [RNM, p. 126]. At first sight, Unamuno might appear to refer here to a precocious child who even from an early age fantasizes that his own reasoning allows him to apprehend the essence of things and of the world itself. Yet that is just the opposite of what he actually means. To be precise, he praises the child who puts heart and soul into playing spontaneously without trying to reveal any truth:

> And maybe there is no deeper conception of life than kid's intuition, who, by fixing his eyes in the clothes of things without trying to strip them, sees everything that is hidden by things, for things conceal nothing at all; then he feels the total and eternal mystery, which is the clearest light. [RNM, p. 128]

Unamuno also recalls fondly those days of his childhood in which he and his playmates returned home sweaty and covered with bruises, but with their eyes full of life: "By opening our eyesight to the beauty of the bark of things, and closing the soul to the sadness of their core, we went to sleep as only saints and kids can sleep" [RNM, p. 26].

In this vein, his friend José Ortega y Gasset (2008) stated some years later that, while it is true that nearly all great philosophies assumed that things conceal a hidden essence which must be revealed by man, there is no reason why man has to carry out such a task. Yet whilst Ortega added that it is man who must invent a being for things, Unamuno concentrates on the issue of eternity, for example when he points out that "only by preserving an eternal childhood […] can one reach true freedom and look at the mystery of life face to face" [RNM, p. 129]. Indeed, Unamuno admits that, when he evokes his childhood, realizes that he and his playmates felt then "confusingly in the depth of their souls the interrelatedness of everything" [RNM, p. 35]. Just as the adult is sure not only that the prairie in which he is at a given moment is only one among the many prairies that exist, but also that those prairies are countless and different from one another, for the young Unamuno and his playmates the prairie was only and exclusively that in which they ran [RNM, p. 35]. The whole world was condensed for them in each instant of frenzy, in each instant they were in the grip of the hubbub of the game. At this stage it may be objected that adults can also enjoy such feeling if the right circumstances occur; yet what Unamuno wishes to highlight, however, is that this pleasure will be often experienced by the adult if he had a long childhood full of games and illusions. That is why Unamuno states that the man of intense interior life and great historical value is characterized because his childhood is still very

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close to his heart [cf. SN, p. 120]. Since this man did not seek to be reflected in other people but joined them together in his own spirit, he could then join them in his life [cf. AJ, p. 27]. As we can see, the eternal being is the one of childhood's holy solitude, for "childhood's day does not have a tomorrow" [SN, p. 119]. The feeling of eternity which Unamuno associates with childhood is particularly evident when he explains why he and his playmates did not feel significantly affected by the threat of death:

> The child feels himself to be immortal; or rather, he is excluded from the issue of death and immortality: he feels himself to be eternal. He feels himself to be eternal because he lives entirely for the present moment. He hears a lot about death, perhaps sees people dying and kills animals, but he does not understand death. [RNM, p. 54−55]

With these words, Unamuno indicates that the child cannot form an idea of immortality until he is really able to reflect upon the extinction of consciousness that death brings with it. Therefore, consciousness is ilimited for the child, with no memory of its beginning and with no suspicion for its end. And if we bear in mind that children's consciousness has no limits, the concept of 'consciousness' becomes meaningless because it embraces everything and does not contrast with anything. Yet this situation varies dramatically as soon as the child is aware that he will sooner or later cease to exist, for the consciousness of oneself emerges when the individual realizes that his consciousness is limited [cf. STV, p. 167]. Indeed, Unamuno remarks that there is not any character as tragic as the child who cries in despair because he will inexorably grow old; but then he adds that it is even more tragic the situation of the child who is not aware that the will cease to exist, so that he can neither feel nor cry the tragedy of time: that child "cannot discover that he was born to die, because he is already dead" [ON, p. 169]. From this follows that, according to Unamuno, one can only feel really alive if he is aware that he will cease to exist; hence, if it is tragic to be aware of one's own finitude, it is even more tragic to live indefinitely unaware of our mortal condition. It should not be forgotten that Unamuno commends the state of the child who feels himself to be eternal and is alien to the consequences of death, for childhood is the age of innocence; but there comes a time when the child is aware that he as well as all his loved ones will die. Thus, Unamuno warns that the smiles of children should necessarily be followed by the tears of teens who become aware of their inevitable destiny. This means that, even though Unamuno praises and commends highly children's state, he seems to regard the indefinite extension of this state not as a gift of God, but as the biggest tragedy.

An important aspect to take into account about the transition from kid's age of innocence to the awareness of one's own finitude is the role of logic. Unamuno perhaps exaggerates when he states that "what the child enjoys most is

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breaking the rules of logic" [RNM, p. 46], yet such a statement constitutes a clear declaration of intentions. From his point of view, the child prodigy lacks childhood because he does his utmost to imitate adult behaviour, which makes his life a "monstrosity" [ON, p. 169]. After all, the child prodigy would not feel himself to be eternal, but would imitate among other things the solemnity shown by adults when someone dies, although this child knows nothing about death and, by extension, he does not even know what he is feigning. Unamuno regards "game as the child's life" [RNM, p. 44], above all when it consists in breaking the rules of logic, for example when the child is delighted with the incongruousness of a song. In his opinion, those songs children recreate in their games constitute "the real tradition", for they are passed on from generation to generation without interference from adults and even before children learn to read and write, so that this tradition is felt more deeply and passed on more accurately than the written one [RNM, p. 45]. Whereas the pedagogue – understood as a pedantic educator strongly attached to formal logic – fails to drive the child from the realm of aesthetics to the one of logic by substituting his nursery rhymes for "one of those things expressly written by adults and directed at children" including a moral at the end [APJ, p. 89], Unamuno boasts that no pedagogue might have entertained and drawn the attention of children like he did in his childhood when he improvised stories that did not make any sense [cf. RNM, p. 24−25]. In addition to the virgin words and with no sense which are used by children in their songs, Unamuno highlights that kids take delight in repeating the name of a thing in front of it: according to his own explanation, kids find these repetitions very pleasurable because in this way they seem to spiritually appropriate the thing named [cf. RNM, p. 34]. Furthermore, I add, the child spiritually appropriates the whole world: because when the child focuses his entire attention on that thing, he is also concentrating on *all* that constitutes the world for him at that particular moment. This is one of the many pleasures which can only be understood when childhood is still very close to one's heart [cf. ON, p. 167]. Indeed, Unamuno presents the pedagogue as the stupid adult *par excellence*, for he is "unable to appreciate the merit and value of original silliness, whilst he has respect for stupid repetitions" [ON, p. 169]. Of course, these 'stupid repetitions' are the requirements placed on the kid to imitate as soon as possible the way in which adults reason and behave, even though this kind of imitation is as useless to measure creativity as the sterile series which must be completed in many intelligence tests.

From Unamuno's standpoint, the genuine child who enjoys a long and innocent childhood feels repulsion for logic due to his spirituality. In his own words, flies have often been regarded as sillier than bees, yet "bees are more logic − that is, more stupid – than flies, while flies are more aesthetic – that is, more spiritual – than bees" [RNM, p. 38]. In this vein, Baltasar Gracián [1996] had already contrasted fly's bad taste with bee's good taste, for the fly seeks the pestilent odor

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whilst the bee seeks fragrance in the very same garden. Unlike logical or rational character, the aesthetic and spiritual character contributes greatly to the development of good taste. Indeed, Unamuno points out that the child is an artist from birth and ceases to be this when he becomes an adult; but if he is an adult artist, it is because he is still a child [cf. RNM, p. 44]. From here arises the question of which pedagogy Unamuno recommends to develop that "spirit's childhood" he regards as the true "genius" [ON, p. 169]. Although Unamuno does not tackle this question in a systematic way, there are two remarks which may help us to answer it. On the one hand, he emphasizes that there is nothing more educational than "the truth for the sake of truth" [EI, p. 109], with which he places in the foreground the acceptance of things as they are, without external ornaments and without hidden essences. On the other hand, and to achieve such a thing, Unamuno [APJ, p. 90] proposes "to defend the autonomy of games" in the face of pedagogues like Eugeni d'Ors, who argue for contemplating schools as the first place in which children must begin to be acquainted with work environments and individual virtue. As we can see, Unamuno does not make it sufficiently clear what a 'suitable pedagogy' would consist of, but he shows in much more detail what pedagogy should n o t consist of. He accomplishes this task, above all, by showing how Avito Carrascal, the protagonist of his novel *Amor y pedagogía*, adheres strictly to the principles and theories of scientific pedagogy, to the extent that he says this in an absurd mealtime conversation: "Take any child, I mean, take it from its embryonic stage, apply sociological pedagogy to it, and the result will be a genius" [AP, p. 24].

Avito's exorbitant narcissism leads him to make a peculiar use of science in order to find a wife, conceive a child with her, and educate him not from birth but from the very conception of the baby. Whenever Avito is ruled by his instincts, he repeats to himself that "love and pedagogy are incompatible" [AP, p. 44–45], for he is completely convinced that instincts and feelings must be kept at bay by reason and science. Bearing this in mind, it is no surprise that Avito gets desperate when he sees how his son Apolodoro creates words that do not make any sense, and it is also no wonder that Avito loses his temper when his master Don Fulgencio replies to him:

> Don't you remember when you were a child? Don't you carry a child in your soul? Do you want to be a pedagogue without having been a child? A pedagogue who doesn't remember his childhood! A pedagogue whose childhood isn't close to his heart! Pedagogue! We can approach children only with our childhood. [AP, p. 60]

It is difficult for Avito to listen from his master that he should allow his son to play what he pleases, for "the terrible hour of logic will come sooner or later" [AP, p. 60]. Avito cannot assimilate that his son loves the absurd, and that all those

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who tried to compose songs for children by following the cannons of logic and reason failed in the end; but he goes on with his task even though he recognizes the difficulty of solving all problems through pedagogy when Apolodoro admits not to know "how to want" [AP, p. 69]. Once Apolodoro becomes an adult, he suffers the consequences of his father's pedagogy. After having published with great enthusiasm a short novel, Apolodoro listens how Don Fulgencio tells him that art is despicable and that good taste is even more despicable [cf. AP, p. 103]. Furthermore, Apolodoro asks his father whether it would be possible to develop pedagogy from love itself [cf. AP, p. 117]; yet despite Apolodoro ends up committing suicide straight after he laments over his father's pedagogy, Avito then plans to educate his maid's son "in accordance with the most strict pedagogy", without admitting interference of love, masters or the company of other children [AP, p. 133], for Avito is sure that it was these very factors that altered the effects of sociological pedagogy to the extreme of causing his son's suicide. This is how Unamuno illustrates the inflexibility of the pedagogue blinded by the absolute and unconditional priority he gives to scientific knowledge over any evidence.

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that Unamuno exaggerates when he caricatures the excesses of the pedagogue obsessed with being faithful to scientific knowledge, cost what it may. As París [1989, p. 276] rightly says, Unamuno idealizes childhood by contrasting it with scenarios in which prevail anguish and disappointment. This idealization, however, helps to show more clearly his conception of what pedagogy should be and what it should not be. The suitable pedagogy does not hinder parental love and decidedly encourages spontaneous games, with which it helps the child to appropriate the whole world by inviting him to lose himself in the world and to blend with it. If childhood is still close to the adult's heart, the only thing he can do in order to revitalize and to renew himself is to evoke that child he carries in his soul. Not in vain, Unamuno [ON, p. 169] points out that "the noblest task is to search into oneself one's own childhood and to lament having left it". Therefore, the adult who had a genuine childhood – that is, a long childhood full of spontaneous games and illusions – will be in a better position to perceive the difference between his adult state and his childhood than the individual who did not enjoy a genuine childhood. But if we bear in mind that this pedagogy makes it easier for the adult to perceive more clearly what he is and what he has ceased to be, it can be concluded that such pedagogy is tragic. Whereas the world appears to blend with the child, the adult perceives the world as something that is somewhat distant because he has much clearer the difference between what he is and what he is not. At first sight, this contrast appears to give rise to nothing more than extreme

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disquiet, so that it seems neither advisable nor necessary. Nevertheless, the mere fact of having a clearer consciousness of what one is now and of what one has ceased to be makes it easier for the individual to feel, so to say, more alive than the subject who has always let himself be guided by inertia and without hardly having experienced the contrast between the extremes Unamuno opposes to each other: to blend with the world and to realize the impact of the loss of such blend. And the more alive one feels, the more deeply he can cry the tragedy of necessarily ceasing to exist. As regards the unsuitable pedagogy illustrated by Avito's excesses, it also encourages tragedy, but in a different way. This pedagogy becomes tragic because the desire that children become reasonable and logical adults as soon as posible reaches such an extreme that it receives total priority over their emotional and affective development. According to Blanco [1994, p. 136], every action is imbued with tragedy because whenever one acts, he is choosing one option and discarding definitively other possibilities; in the future, of course, new possibilities will arise, but they will no longer be the previous ones. Keeping this in mind, it is evident that the unsuitable pedagogy is tragic because it does not allow the child to enjoy a genuine childhood by creating songs which make no sense and playing what he pleases, absurd though it might seem. Later, the adult may pretend that he composes songs with no sense and that he accompanies children's games; yet if he neither created nor played spontaneously in his childhood, as an adult he might at most pretend to be doing it. The adult who devoted his childhood above all to imitate, will hardly have experienced just what he now wants to recreate: he can simply imitate it once again. Worst of all, he cannot carry out the most heroic act that can be expected: "to know how to make oneself ridiculous without flinching" [STV, p. 309].

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SUMMARY

The present article seeks to describe the main lines of what Unamuno regarded as an adequate pedagogy for the child to enjoy a genuine and long childhood, which makes it easier for him to become a man of intense interior life and great historical value, provided that such childhood remains close to his heart. To show more clearly what a suitable pedagogy for Unamuno would consist of, it will also be explained why he considered an excessive submission to scientific pedagogy as pernicious for children's development.

Keywords: Unamuno, pedagogy, immortality, eternity, love, death, tragedy