

Comenius
A new philosophy of education (2/2)

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At each of these stages, the mind of the child understands the world in a different way. Since, at each of these stages, the way the mind works is different, «at each age, the child must be made to do things it is capable of doing» (Pampe-dia). Consequently, Comenius divides education into four levels:

1. «The school of the Mother's lap» to encourage the sensory and manipulative activities of the child. (At the beginning of the 20th century, Maria Montessori will implement his ideas so well...).
2. At a higher level (between 6 and 12 years old), the child will be given all the practical knowledge he will need in life.
3. The secondary school (Gymnasium, Lycée) will provide the adolescent with scientific knowledge in an abstract form.
4. This work will be completed in the Academy.

Some clarifications might be useful at this point. There are many ways of teaching science. There are object-lessons (advocated, in fact, by Comenius), during which the child is trained to observe plants and animals, and to classify them. In this kind of teaching, the teacher limits himself to responding to the need of the child for practical knowledge (the child is always asking: «What's that for?»). The teacher uses this opportunity also to teach the child to use various tools and pieces of equipment he will use in later life. At a higher level (that of adolescence), the teacher explains the principles on which these same pieces of equipment are based, by describing the scientific laws according to which they function. The mathematical basis for this is given together with the general theory which explains them. In the period under consideration, all these pedagogical distinctions were totally unknown. It is precisely for this reason that Piaget considers Comenius «as the founder of a teaching approach which is progressive and differentiated according to levels of attainment» (15).

Moreover, the composition of classes is no longer based simply on the subject taught, with no reference to the age of the pupils. This put an end to situations where a young man sporting a moustache and beard could be following a lesson in rhetoric or dialectics in the same class as a young boy. Instead, teaching is given on a succession of levels, each level preparing the pupil for the next. In this way, all the levels are coordinated and form a homogeneous whole. Finally, in the words of V. Isambert Jamati, there had come into existence «the first complete system of education» (16).

For the first time also in the history of human thought, childhood acquired a status. It stopped being something negative «the age of weakness and imperfection» (La Vigue-rie), «the lowest and most abject state of human nature apart from death» (Bérulle). Childhood is the time allowed by nature for a human being to develop his potential qualities, in accordance with «the law to which all created things are subject, that is, to start from nothing, to grow gradually, and

to achieve perfection slowly» (17).

And to think that Clarapède (and everyone else after him) attributed this Copernican revolution to...Rousseau!

3. «The parallelism between words and things».

Schools are always a reflection of the society of which they are the product. Their function is to transmit to future generations the values this society has created. Inevitably, however, society evolves, and history shows that schools are usually slow to integrate into their programmes the innovations which take place, and to share the new values which are created.

In the period under consideration, humanism had created a new type of school, namely, the Latin college, which reflected the ideal of humanism to achieve perfection in verbal expression by the imitation of Classical authors. The stated purpose of colleges was the cultivation of eloquence, which became «the basis of all its education» (18). Colleges were so organised that the programme of studies reached its culmination in the rhetoric class.

Humanists, however, constituted only a small part of society: it has been calculated that they numbered between 3,500 and 4,000. From the 16th century onwards, many new types of activities had been created which had nothing to do with fine speech: gradually, there was born «a new race, that of the technicians» (J.M. Aurias), that of «the engineers of the Renaissance» (19). They included Ambroise Paré, Bernard Palissy, Gilbert William and Agricola with his famous «De re metallica» (On metallurgy). In medicine, Vésale advocated an experimental approach which, instead of relying on ancient treatises for information, observed the human body itself and practised dissection.

A new kind of link with the world was being created. Usefulness became a value. Francis Bacon, Campanella (27 years in prison!) represented the new trend. For them, and for others like them, «the brilliant language exercises» of the Humanists were merely «trifles», as Budé called them. But, and this should give educators food for thought, the Latin colleges were not affected by these new ideas and were quite impervious to these new values.

This was only partly surprising. The Jesuits set the tone, but the colleges were controlled by the **Ratio studiorum**, a code which regulated in the minutest detail the life of the college, ensured daily that it functioned well, and that scholastic success was achieved. But this code did not reflect any specific concept of man, of society or of the child. By which criteria could the value of this academic success be measured? (It has to be said that in the very narrow context of eloquence, and in that of morality and religious practice, this success was very real). As a crowning misfortune, the Jesuit regent of the college was required to remain faithful to the original inspiration and to apply all the prescriptions of the **Ratio**, without allowing himself to be seduced by novelties. It is not possible to practise eloquence for a long time with such exclusivism without falling into verbalism. There came a point when it was realised that students «perfect themselves in the art of speaking without knowing what they are saying» (20). But there is worse. «The first and, one can say, the only concern of Curion is to teach the children by heart, and word for word, texts of which they do not understand a single syllable» (21). There was criticism very early on. In 1599, it was said:

«We speak without understanding,
...just words..

In our adolescence, they fills our heads
With Greek and Latin, but with no knowledge" (22).

And so, in the period between 1630 and 1650, Comenius proposed an alternative to the humanist colleges. The form of school he chose was «pansophic», which included in its aims to teach about things and prepare the pupil for active life. This was made possible by adding to **RATIO** and **ORA-**

TIO (reason and language) OPERATIO. Comenius believed that man was created (among other things) «in order to dominate all other creatures...This means that he must know how to transform everything, so that everything can serve for his advantage and his benefit» (D.M.IV, 1,2 and 4). The instrument of this operative faculty is the hand «the perfect instrument, capable of performing an infinity of tasks, an image of the right hand of God which created everything» (Pampedia XI). «The hand must be exercised together with the other external members through activities which make things, because everything in man must bear the human imprint» (O.D.O. II, p.3).

This great teacher, in harmony with the «great technicians» and «the engineers of the Renaissance» gives his «pansophic school» the aim of «developing the aptitude to action» (O.D.O. III, col.1047). He wants «his pupils to be able to do increasingly better everything they have to do» (23), because «the knowledge of things must be accompanied by the capacity to execute a piece of work» (24).

What he said was heard by only a small proportion of society, especially in France, where technical education would «suffer for a long time yet from unfavourable prejudice» (25), and where «the very name of technical education (even at tertiary level) was branded with the seal of cultural inferiority» (26). Be that as it may, the ideas of Comenius contained a whole philosophy which could serve as a «doctrinal basis» (Léon A.) for the development of technical education. The rehabilitation of technical work came much later in France, with the *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des arts et des métiers* (between 1751 and 1772), a century after Comenius. (England had produced its *Encyclopaedia*, that of Ephraim Chambers, in 1728).

The verbalism of the colleges was condemned for another reason also. This reason can be found in the analysis of language undertaken by Comenius in his *Methodus linguarum novissima* (1648-1657). Words are only signs. Their value lies only by reference to the reality they describe (RES). If this reality is not known, then the word is no longer really a sign: it is simply a «flatus vocis», «sonus sine mente». Comenius insists on this point: «Things (the reality described) are the grain or the almond, words are the husk or the shell» (D.M.XVI, 15). «Words without the things are a shell without a nut, a scabbard without a sword...a body without a soul» (27).

He also reverses the aims of education: to the «Verba prior» of the humanists, he opposes «RES potius quam Verba» (M.L.N., preface, 26). It is necessary «to learn to know things well before speaking about them» (28). In more precise terms, he takes as the basis and the distinctive characteristic of his method «the parallelism of words and things». At the same time as a teacher makes a pupil understand some thing or some notion, he must give him its name so that he can learn how to describe it: «Words must be taught and learnt only in association with things, and things described by the words must be shown to the pupils» (D.M.XIX, 45). In this way, a word is really a sign, transmitting a meaning.

This concept of education leads Comenius to write his *Janua linguarum reserata* (Open door to languages and all knowledge) (1631), which gives information about things and reality and teaches how to speak about them. This first language manual is also an encyclopedia, an object-lesson. It was a real revolution in education.

Because it responded to a need of the time, the *Janua* spread to all other countries with astonishing speed, much to the surprise of the author, and was translated into all the European languages (including Icelandic). It produced a great stir in cultural circles.

Later, the *Janua* was complemented by the *Orbis sensuallium pictus*, in which the text is accompanied by pictures. It was the first work in which pictures were not simply illustra-

tions but an integral part of the text, which they helped make clearer for the pupil. The *Orbis* also had enormous success and was used for many years in schools. Even Goethe (1749-1832) loved to recall the pleasure he experienced when reading this book which was «unique of its kind».

And so, as we now see, all pedagogical activity of any value is permeated with philosophy. This is obvious in the case of a philosophy of education, because education is closely related to the notion one has of man.

But if Comenius was able to conceive a homogeneous system of teaching and education for the whole period of a child's formation, it was thanks to his philosophy of development, which enabled him to see that the growth which takes a new-born child to adulthood, passes through stages each of which has its own specific characteristics. It enabled him also to indicate the most appropriate pedagogical method for each stage. This was possible only because Comenius was able to integrate time and duration as factors governing intelligibility in phenomena concerning man, creating in this way an original philosophy, a philosophy which was opposed to the dominant trend of the times, which was Cartesian mechanism.

On the other hand, if by composing the *Janua linguarum* and the *Orbis pictus*, he was able to provide an effective remedy for the problems of his times, it was because he was able to make a correct diagnosis of the shortcomings of the schools of his day. This diagnosis became possible only after an analysis of the language, and was based on his notion of man, which included characteristics which were hardly taken into consideration in the thinking of the period.

In a period characterised by great changes in society, changes which inevitably have repercussions on schools, reflection on the work of Comenius can be very stimulating and very useful for all teachers. •

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- (1) *Methodus linguarum novissima*; XXVIII, 4 (in future: M.L.N)
- (2) Jean Amos Comenius. *Pages Choiesies* - Introduction by Jean Piaget. (UNESCO, 1957, p.15)
- (3) *De rerum humanarum emendatione consultatio catholica*, 1 (in future: Consultatio)
- (4) *La grande didactique*; (in future: D.M - Didactica magna: VI,4
- (5) Cf. *Ibid*, VI,6
- (6) *E scholasticis labyrinthis exitus in planum*, 21
- (7) Gabriel Codina Mir, SJ, *Aux sources de la pédagogie des jésuites*, Rome, 1968
- (8) Fr. de Dainville, *La naissance de l'humanisme moderne*, p.157
- (9) *D.M. X,2*
- (10) *Panegersie*, VII,15
- (11) *Pampédie*, I,II
- (12) *Ibid*, II,12
- (13) Plenary session of UNESCO in Delhi, Nov. 5th - dec. 5th 1956.
- (14) Kurdybacha L (in Polish)
- (15) *op.cit.* p.17 (see note 2)
- (16) in *Encycl. Univers.* Vth «Education»
- (17) *Opera didactica omnia* (in future: O.D.O.) III, col.78
- (18) Meynard, *Les grands pédagogues*, 1965, p.74
- (19) Bertrand Gille also has a work with this title
- (20) Sicard A., *Les études classiques avant la Révolution*, Paris, 1887, p.224
- (21) Porteau P., *Montaigne et la vie pédagogique de son temps*, Paris, 1953, p.219-220
- (22) Perrot de La Salle, *Le mystères des asnes*, 1599; quoted by Paolo Rossi in *Les philosophes et les machines*, 1400 - 1700, Paris, 1996, p.74
- (23) *L'école pansophique* - 60
- (24) *Ibid.*, - 8
- (25) Léon A., *Histoire de l'éducation technique*. Que sais-je N° 938 (1968) p.31
- (26) Gilbert R., *Les idées actuelles en pédagogie*, p.59
- (27) O.D.O. I, col.350
- (28) *Ibid.*, col. 384