

## In Memoriam: Memories of My Friendship With Alejandro Llano

Although I'm no extrovert, a life that has already spanned many years has brought me some memorable friendships, cut short by the fragility of existence sooner than I've wanted or needed. That of Alejandro has been among those with the greatest impact, so much so that moments I had with him keep coming to mind, sayings of his that ingrained in me, teachings I owe to him and that help me in moments like this, in the trance of feeling his departure as an emptiness that cannot be filled. He would also recall phrases he'd heard from his friend and teacher Florentino Pérez Embid, one of which comes to mind now: 'Face it, dear Alejandro: at this point all we have left is the *desecho de tienta*...' For those who aren't into bullfighting, this is what they call rejected bulls that breeders deem unfit for bullfighting after having been enticed and tested. We also feel quite like the '*desecho de tienta*' in comparison to the great personalities we meet, with their 'great feats' and likewise all their 'small gestures', like that cordiality, that joy, those witticisms, those conversations which, at the time, may have seemed trivial, but which later become precious experiences that are lost... forever? Our memory clings to them, but our recollection is also fallible, and is gradually torn to shreds, as Alejandro himself had to suffer in his own spirit—a pain that he was able to bear with admirable fortitude.

There are some experiences that can't be swept away by even the strongest winds. Such was that morning in Madrid, more than ten years ago, outside the door to where we were about to have one of our seminars, when out of nowhere he said to me: 'Juan, I've been diagnosed with Alzheimer's.' I was so stunned that I didn't know what to say or do, except give him a fierce hug, probably the first and last we ever shared in all our years of companionship. That was actually a very strange thing about this relationship: we always kept our distance, we weren't the type to divulge our deepest secrets, and we never completely opened our hearts to one another. That was surely somewhat down to our nature, but mostly it was because we never really needed to. All our lives we'd been close, but without actually touching: I went from the University of Navarra to the University of Seville right when he moved to Navarra from Valencia. We both wrote our thesis on Kant; but he gave special (and original) attention to *Opus Postumum*, while I stuck to his pre-critical period. We were both interested in the problem of knowledge, but he took the metaphysics approach; I, however, took the natural philosophy route. We converged in many areas, but we never overlapped. While he was my superior in 'age, dignity and authority', I was his complement as opposed to his disciple: he knew a lot of things and possessed skills I'd like to have known and had. Meanwhile, he wouldn't have minded being a little more familiar with mathematics and natural science, as he rather liberally saw as my forte. I was undoubtedly luckier than he was in certain academic endeavours, and above all much more willing to devote myself to what I liked rather than to what I 'had to' do. His generosity was such that instead of feeling wounded, he was delighted to see that a friend had achieved noble ambitions that he himself had been denied, both in my case and in that of others. In short, his personality sometimes reminds me of James Stewart in the film *It's A Wonderful Life*.

Alejandro Llano viewed existence first and foremost as a commitment, and set his priorities on this basis. In this sense he had a fundamentally ethical personality, although he still had a hedonic side to him, which was in any case focused on the intellectual: he enjoyed studying and devoted himself to it with the passion of someone who could conceive of no greater pleasure than discovering the truth. In other words, he was a philosopher from head to toe. An entire day reading challenging texts, taking notes, getting ahead of research—for him, that was the limit of earthly happiness, a foretaste of another more complete happiness towards which his serene religiosity pointed. I remember around 1983 we spent the summer working together in the old humanities library in Pamplona. Our desks were close to each other: I was toiling away with a translation of Kant's *Living Forces* while he was engrossed in writing *Metaphysics and Language*. It was scorching hot and there was no air conditioning. My enthusiasm began to wane and I often thought of packing up all my things and escaping to the nearest swimming pool. But there he was, unyielding, undeterred by discomfort, diving into a sea of ideas, cooling off in the breeze blown by the great thinkers and seasoning the lulls with hints of the finest humour. Other considerations were unnecessary: I dismissed the idea of throwing in the towel, and at the end of August I returned home having completed my translation.

What's more, beyond his scholarly side, his pure intellect, Alejandro possessed immense leadership skills. He was a man who didn't drag people along by giving them orders or instructions, but by example; a sort of infectious enthusiasm. His leadership style made me think of those infantry officers who're the first to jump out of the trench, without needing to look back to make sure their soldiers are following as one man. I suppose—although I didn't know him at the time—that the years he spent as the head of a residential college in Valencia were the ones most in keeping with his charisma, because he knew, without being verbose, how to convey passion for a job well done, for effort taken on as a joyful challenge. He managed to make you forget the obligation behind a task you needed to do; rather, he framed it as an exciting opportunity, through a change of perspective that gave you the key to a successful life.

Youthful leadership and a passion for work: with these footholds, Alejandro made it his life's work to confront Christian truth with the thinking of late modernity and confused contemporaneity. The latest derivations of Kantianism, attempts to reconstruct a realist metaphysics, a linguistic shift, analytic philosophy, the philosophy of action, new developments in the philosophy of religion, and post-metaphysical thought were just some of the most important milestones in this journey, each of which left a wealth of publications, doctoral theses and research projects carried out by his own hand or by his disciples and friends. This is how one of the most important chapters of recent Spanish and Latin American philosophy has been written. I was involved in some of these ventures along with Lourdes Flamarique, José María Torralba, Marcela García, Amalia Quevedo, Rafael Llano and so many other collaborators of the undisputed leader of the group. My role was subordinate, since I'd never been good at being part of a team, not even one as *sui generis* and decentralised as the one inspired by our friend. The main nuanced difference, however, is that in Alejandro's case, a Christian worldview was somehow the starting point and a sure reference, whereas in my case it was more a target of pursuit, a port I hoped to reach. Neither of us were very explicit on this cardinal issue, until one day—as if in passing—I told him that, after a 'short lapse' of 40 years, I had returned to the sacramental practice of the faith my parents had passed on to me. With similar discretion, he'd told me that, although he was older, he felt the drive to try and get a doctorate in theology, without excluding that this might end up altering his devotion from the outside, because inside it would no entail any serious alteration.

As I've already suggested in passing, the personal and the institutional formed a very solid unity in Alejandro's person and life. Professionally, the dual vocation of teaching and research was more than enough to fulfil a devotion that met the highest standards and pursued the most ambitious goals. This didn't stop him from joining the faculty of the University of Navarra, a new battleground with increasing demands: the duties of head of department, division manager, dean and, finally, *honourable president!* Without a doubt he had more than enough

management capacity to take on all those tasks. In fact, his execution brought the bodies he governed to the zenith of their careers. And those were not easy times for him, due to the growing hostility of the external environment and the internal turmoil of those he managed. Universities are highly sensitive indicators of the changing signs of the times, and Spanish society suffered a general crisis of beliefs, values and loyalties while Llano was in charge at Navarra.

The fact is, just as Cincinnatus was frequently torn from his rural estates to assume the highest magistracies, Llano had to take on the leadership of the institution he served, while also resolving the serious questions that time and again were submitted to him as a consultant. The difference between the Roman patrician and Alejandro is that while the former took a break from his farming tools while he was busy saving the homeland, the latter continued with his work, his books, his doctoral students, even his classes as much as possible... This time I had a front row seat to the show of this philosopher called to govern the *polis*—as Plato recommended. He got down to work with the fierceness and ease with which we were already familiar. I remember visiting him during the first few days in his brand new office. I began nosing around like a child who gets caught up in grown-ups' things. On one of the shelves I found a thick, luxuriously bound volume, on the cover of which was written: 'The secret behind the University of Navarra' or something like that. Amused by my indiscretion, he said: 'I don't know what that is. Open it...' I opened it. It turned out to be a box, and inside we found... a *big crucifix*! Alejandro exclaimed: 'What a relief! I thought we were about to find a bottle of cognac or something similar...' This must've been Alfonso Nieto's bright idea...' Nieto had been the former university president.

The new captain at the helm immediately went into overdrive. Some say he ended up being more like the president of bricks rather than the president of ideas, given the quantity (and quality) of buildings he constructed. But he didn't neglect the other side at all; the thing is, the wind easily carries away not so much the words we utter as the words we should hear, since they enter through one ear and go out the other. That's the tragic fate of philosophers, but we're just about used to it... and resigned to it. At the end of the day, we're not here to change the world, but to study it and explain it as best we possibly can. Around that time there were even videos of speeches by President Llano shown in the waiting rooms in the University Clinic. I remember once when José Antonio Millán and I attended a lecture he gave on educational ideals or whatever. The idea he was circling around was that there are universities that *inform* students, but his, at least, was also committed to *forming* students. At the end, after the ensuing applause, José Antonio, whose fine scepticism is as frightening as it is healthy, went up to him and asked, in a pseudo-innocent tone: 'Alejandro, do you really think this university "forms" people?' To this challenge he responded without losing his nerve or allowing himself to be intimidated: 'Of course I do, #&%@! Don't be a Little Johnny!' I don't have a great deal of expertise when it comes to how university presidents ought to behave, but naturally, in Llano's case, there was 100% commitment and 0% vanity or conceit. In fact, he put so much of his heart and soul into it that he gambled his health away.

His enthusiasm and work ethic rested on delicate physical foundations. The pace of the work was clearly too much, but what really made him suffer was his concern for the people who were distancing themselves from him and everything he stood for, without him being able to really do anything about it. This is pure speculation on my part, as he was always very discreet in the conversations we had. When I visited Pamplona, he'd often invite me to lunch to discuss projects rather than problems, and also—I believe—to have a bit of a break from the strict diet he was put on due to his heart problems. He hated the vegetables in his diet and almost always ordered *cabrito* (goat; also used as an insult meaning 'scoundrel'), a choice he would endorse with the following footnote: 'That way, there'll be one less...'

His management was bounteous in terms of results, but also in terms of intimate suffering. Finally came his long-awaited freedom. Years later, he showed me a photo of him at the main door of the central building, greeting the Chancellor, who was leaning towards him to say something. He said: 'In that very moment he confirmed that I was to be relieved of my duties. It

was one of the happiest moments of my life.' Thus, without any regrets he left his post, official car, chauffeur and security guard (those were harsh times of terrorism). The first day he took the Villavesa again (the city bus service in Pamplona) he bumped into his predecessor, who instantly recited those well-known verses by the poet Zorrilla: 'I went up to the palaces... / I came down to the huts...'

Despite the scars that all the years and work had left on him, producing after-effects whose severity would gradually be revealed, Alejandro did not let us down and immediately resumed his life as a scholar, writer and university teacher. Beyond his numerous works of philosophical substance, he gifted us those fascinating memoirs in two volumes and a gripping book of conversations with his selected disciples. These are precious jewels that, in a way, represent the swan song of a great philosopher, and an even better person. All the talents God has given us, we must be ready to return them with the consequent yields, and for an intellectual like Alexander, no surrender could be more painful or meritorious than that of seeing his memory and capacity for reasoning decay without remedy. He saw this loss coming from afar, with full awareness and acceptance, manifesting once again the spirit of his Christianity. Gradually, he returned to his early innocence. I visited him from time to time, thanks to the great services of Lourdes Flamarique. Many colleagues and friends asked me afterwards: 'Did he recognise you?' My answer would be: 'I didn't have the poor taste to ask him, but he undoubtedly still has all the kindness and warmth he's always had. Lourdes and I carried the conversation, and he took part as naturally as ever. We reflected on old times and looked to the future with optimism.'

One of the greatest benefits of being a Christian is being sure that, effectively, the best is yet to come. Anything the past gave us that was truly worthwhile shall survive as living history. Not that I myself have much hope of still being read when I am gone. I even believe that, in the little time I have left, I will outlive my own work. It would weigh more heavily on my mind that so many good times, so many happy moments, so many examples of dignity and kindness could irretrievably vanish into oblivion, such as those enjoyed between Alejandro and the people who, at one time or another, were close to him. Moments like when he re-enacted the story that Elizabeth Anscombe told him about Wittgenstein's ultimate conversion; or when he wore a beret down to his eyebrows and—using a guitar as a tam-tam—chanted a telluric Asturian song about cheeses that went to and from his *hórreo* (storehouse); or when he got into an argument with Rafa Alvira on some point of political philosophy; or when, in the middle of an academic lecture, he took the plunge and said once and for all what he thought about the subject... Was that really all just a dream? Christian hope, which I have partly regained thanks to him, gives me the confidence that I will see God. Will this whole life story then dissolve into nothingness? I conjecture that whoever has the good fortune to stand before Him will also have access, in one way or another, to His Memory. And, as attested by those inspired verses from a supposed agnostic, Jorge Luis Borges:

'There is only one thing that there is not. That is oblivion.  
God, who saves the metal, saves the dross  
And encapsulates in His prophetic memory  
The moons that shall be and those that have been'

There are life stories which, like the one we're celebrating, constitute true works of art, with all their lights and shadows. The prospect that not even the tiniest detail of them will be lost forever is a blissful one. Much too blissful *not* to be true.

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