



Miguel de Unamuno; His Life and Philosophy

LIFE

Miguel de Unamuno was born in 1864 in Bilbao, Spain. Bilbao is a medieval port city on the Bay of Biscay in Basque Country near the northern border with France. The Basque people are known for being hard-working, practical and fiercely independent. The word 'basque' may have come from Celtic etymology meaning 'summit' or 'point', with the Basque people known as "the mountain people", "the tall ones", or "the proud ones". Unamuno certainly fits this description not only for his strong, proud personality, but for his physical appearance with his long pointed nose, his sharp pointed beard and his intense pointed eyes which led to his caricature nickname in later years as "The Owl".

Spain has had many opposing cross-cultural-currents at odds with one another over the centuries. Like in Russia, the world-views of East and West intersect and intertwine in Spain. Politically the history of Spain has been one of constant strife and war and ideologically one of juxtaposing contradictions. It is interesting that Unamuno's very earliest memory is of a Spain in conflict, when at the age of four a bomb landed on the roof of his next door neighbor's house during the Second Carlist War. Miguel's father died when he was 6 and he was raised by his mother, who was devoutly Catholic, and his liberal and formidable grandmother who was the predominate head of the family. At the early age of 11, inspired by a Jesuit priest who taught him classes on Psychology, Logic and Ethics Miguel aspired to sainthood. But this spiritual aspiration conflicted with the more earthly love he felt towards his childhood sweetheart, Concepcion, who later became his wife. When Don Carlos' army was defeated in 1876, the Basques were punished for supporting his cause with the 'Law of 1876' which took

away many of their rights. At the ripe age of twelve, angered by the injustice of this law, little Unamuno wrote an anonymous letter of protest to King Alfonso XII which was the first defiant political act of one who was later to be known as “the arouser of Spain.” As he was preparing to leave for Madrid University to study philosophy and literature, shortly before his 16th birthday, his grandmother died. He was present at her death and found the concept of mortality now took on a whole new existential reality.

As he left for Madrid, his heart, filled with piety and religious zeal was already in conflict with his head which had an insatiable thirst for knowledge. Soon after he started attending the University of Madrid, in 1880, he stopped attending Mass and became a voracious reader of positivistic philosophy, physiological psychology, and Italian and British poetry. He taught himself German in order to read Hegel and English in order to read Spencer and Carlyle (both of whom he translated into Spanish), just as two decades later he taught himself Danish in order to read Kierkegaard, before just about anyone outside of Denmark had even heard of the solitary philosopher. He soon became part of an intellectual circle of students and writers that one of his teachers referred to as “the little blasphemy shop on Montera Street.” He also met many of the leading political thinkers of the time, which had formed into a group known as the “Generation of 1868” dedicated to the renewal of Spain after the fall of the monarchy. In 1884 Unamuno finished his studies in Madrid and presented his doctoral thesis on the problem of the origin and history of the Basque people applying a structured scientific method to his research. By the age of 20, Unamuno knew 11 languages (and ultimately 14)—Castilian, Basque, Greek, Sanskrit, Latin, Hebrew, Arabic, German, French, Italian and English.

Unamuno’s college experience converted him from religion to science. As he wrote at this time, “Seek the kingdom of science and its righteousness, and all the rest will be added unto you.” After graduating Unamuno moved back to Bilbao and spent the next 6 years barely eking out a living in his childhood city tutoring and writing newspaper articles. He became engaged to marry Concepcion as soon as he had a solid career and wrote to her once about a disturbing, but life-affecting dream he had:

One night there lowered into my mind one of those dark, sad, and mournful dreams which I cannot banish from my thoughts, even during moments of happiness during the day. I dreamed that I was married, that I had a child, that this child died, and that over its body, which seemed to be made of wax, I said to my wife: “Behold our love! Shortly it will decay: this is the way everything ends.”

For Unamuno, committed to positivistic science as the way of progress and salvation, this dream of love and loss left all kinds of unsettling questions about purpose and meaning that empirical science had no language for.

In 1891, Miguel de Unamuno obtained a professorship in Greek at the University of Salamanca and married his childhood sweetheart, Concepcion. The marriage was long and happy, as he wrote: “the beginning of living life,” and Salamanca was to be his home (from which he almost never left) for the rest of his life. He and Concha, as he fondly called her, had 8 children. Their third child, Raimundo, contracted meningitis at birth and was physically and mentally disabled, but much loved for the few short years of his life. Helpless before his son’s condition, Miguel de Unamuno fell into a deep depression until one night in 1897 when his wife awoke to find him weeping and uttered two words—“**My Child!**” which somehow in the inner alembic of his heart had a radical life-changing effect on him. Writing about this episode many years later he said that Concha was:

my own true mother as well. In a moment of supreme, of abysmal anguish, wracked with superhuman weeping, when she saw me in the claws of the Angel of Nothingness, she cried out to me from the depths of her maternal being, superhuman and divine: “My child!” I discovered then all that God had done for me in this woman, the mother of my children, my own virgin mother...my mirror of holy, divine unconsciousness and eternity.

He also wrote to a friend, “I will never forget the tone with which on hearing me weep, she exclaimed, “My Child!” One can only imagine that the tone of those two words was quietly and tenderly soothing, empathetic and compassionate and perhaps most importantly intimate and personal. (This cathartic experience could have later led Unamuno to the realization that for a man to have an authentic relationship with the Divine it can’t come through an intermediary but must be intimate and personal).

Recovering from this radical spiritual crisis, Unamuno’s first impulse was to renounce scientific rationalism and return by force to the faith of his childhood. He wrote the rector of his church in Bilbao for spiritual guidance and then went to spend Easter Holy Week in his presence trying through all the rituals and devotional meditations on Christ and the Virgin Mary to reinsert himself into the faith of his childhood. But his effort to work out his salvation within the structure of the Roman Catholic Church in Spain did not succeed. Lamenting his dryness of spirit, he returned to Salamanca, where he continued to pour his inner turmoil into his diary, struggling at great lengths with life’s fundamental questions. References to death (*muerte*) become so frequent that at last he comes to write the word simply as **M**. Speculating, it is

probably at this time in his development as a philosopher that he would have wholeheartedly agreed with Socrates' statement in 'The Phaedo', that "philosophy is the preparation for death.

Unamuno was a man adrift: science and rationalistic philosophy did not have answers for the questions of his heart and the dogmatic belief structure of the Church was too unsatisfying and superficial for his mind. Reason and faith were powerful opponents pitted against each other in Unamuno's breast. As one writer puts it:

Unamuno lived, as few men and writers have lived, in conflict and contradiction, and it is precisely this living in inner strife which constitutes the core of his thought, of his literary work, of his significance.

Unamuno was appointed by royal decree to be the rector of the University at Salamanca at the turn of the century, but this did not prevent him from being outspoken about the failings of the monarchy in their ruling of Spain. On one occasion he was censured by the King of Spain for something he had written and was not allowed to leave the city. Then the King decided to pardon him, and when the royal telegram arrived he was seated in the Plaza Mayor surrounded by his disciples. When he read it out everyone present cheered, but Unamuno was furious, for he had ceased to be a victim. The pardon had taken away the conflict. On another occasion His Majesty awarded him the Cross of Alfonso XII, and Unamuno went to Madrid to receive the decoration. When he was ushered into the king's royal presence, he said, in his blunt way: "I present myself before Your Majesty because you have conferred upon me the cross of Alfonso XII, which I deserve." "It is strange," replied the King, "that the other recipients of the cross all assured me that they did not deserve it." "And they were right," replied Unamuno.

Even with this honor Unamuno's bitter hostility to Alfonso XIII and the new regime of Primo de Rivera did not cease, and his attacks culminated in his exile to Fuerteventura, one of the Canary Islands. As the police escorted him to the train station a crowd of students followed. And as he stepped on the train he said to the crowd, "I shall be back, not with my freedom, which counts for nothing, but with yours." His exile to this desolate and arid island made him famous in Europe and America as a champion of human rights and liberties. He continued to write scathingly of the king as "the whiskey and roulette senorito" and Primo de Rivera and his officials as "lads from a military casino". He was proclaimed at this time by the French writer and activist, Jean Cassou as a modern Don Quixote who cries out in the wilderness.

Such is the agony of Miguel de Unamuno, a wrestler, wrestling with himself, with the people and against his people; a man of war, hostile, fratricidal, tribune without a party, solitary exile, preaching in the desert, provocative, vain, pessimistic, paradoxical, torn to bits between life and death, invincible and yet always vanquished.

A group of French intellectuals master-minded his escape and he lived in France for the next 6 years waiting for Primo de Rivera to fall from power, which he did in 1930. Unamuno was reinstated to full professorship at the University of Salamanca. He began his first lecture with the words, "As we were saying yesterday..." honoring a brave monk, Fray Luis de Leon who said the same words four centuries earlier during the Spanish Inquisition.

For the next 6 years Spain embarked on its second Republic until the country fell into civil war and Franco came to power as a fascist dictator using brutality and bloodshed to secure his rule. Unamuno initially supported Franco but now despised him; yet bravely requested a meeting with Franco to plead for clemency for many of his colleagues. Franco heard him yet made no promises, but asked Unamuno to preside over a large-scale celebration of Columbus' discovery of America to be held in Salamanca. Unamuno agreed vowing to himself that he would remain silent-- knowing his propensity to speak the unfiltered truth in his heart.

After a number of patriotic speeches about a better future for Spain, one of Franco's top generals—Millan Astray—rose, as the writer, Luis Portillo, described:

with ostentatious humility, preferring to speak from his own place. His appearance was impressive. The General is thin, of an emaciation which pretends to slimness. He has lost one eye and one arm. His face and his body bear the indelible tattoo of horrible scars. These savage mutilations and gashes evoke a sinister personality; his angry and rancorous bearing kills any compassion his mutilations might have inspired.

General Astray began by saying that half of all Spaniards were criminals and especially derided the Basque and Catalans as two cancers in the body of the nation and fascism as Spain's health-bringer. He whipped the audience into a fervor with his signature battle-cry, "Viva La Muerte"—Long live Death and at the end had the public rise and chant parrot-like: "Franco! Franco! Franco!" Luis Portillo vividly paints the scene:

But Franco's large portrait in the back of the hall did not stir. Neither did the Rector in the front.

Don Miguel did not rise to his feet. And the public fell silent and sat down again.

All eyes were fastened in tense anxiety on the noble head, on the pale, serene brow framed by snow-white hair. The uncertain expression of his eyes was hidden by the glitter of his spectacles.

Between the fine curve of his nose and the silver of his Quixote-like beard, his mouth was twisted in a bitter grimace of undisguised contempt. People began to grow uneasy. A few suddenly felt a recrudescence of their old rancorous abhorrence. Some admired the serene fearlessness of the Master and feared for his safety. The majority were gripped by the voluptuous thrill of imminent tragedy.

At last, Don Miguel rose slowly. The silence was an enormous void. Into this void, Don Miguel began to pour the stream of his speech, as though savoring each measured word.

“All of you are hanging on my words. You all know me, and are aware that I am unable to remain silent. I have not learnt to do so in seventy-three years of my life. And now I do not wish to learn it any more. At times, to be silent is to lie. For silence can be interpreted as acquiescence. I could not survive a divorce between my conscience and my word, always well-mated partners.

“I want to comment on the speech—to give it that name—of General Millan Astray, who is here among us.

The General stiffened provocatively.

“Let us waive the personal affront implied by the sudden outburst of vituperation against Basques and Catalans in general. I was born in Bilbao, in the midst of the bombardments of the Second Carlist War. Later, I wedded myself to this city of Salamanca, which I love deeply, yet never forgetting my native town.

He made a pause. Faces had grown pale. The short silence was tense and dramatic. Expectation neared its peak.

“Just now, I have heard a necrophilous and senseless cry: ‘Viva la Muerte!’ To me it sounds the equivalent of ‘Muera la Vida!’—To Death with Life!’ And I, who have spent my life shaping paradoxes which aroused the

uncomprehending anger of others, I must tell you, as an expert authority, that this outlandish paradox is repellent to me. Proclaimed by the last speaker, I can only explain it as a self-testimonial to his being himself a symbol of death.

“And now, another matter. General Millan Astray is a cripple. Let it be said without any slighting undertone. He is a war invalid. So was Cervantes. Unfortunately, there are all too many cripples in Spain now. And soon, there will be even more of them if God does not come to our aid. But General Millan Astray is a cripple who lacks the spiritual greatness of Cervantes—a man, not a superman, virile and complete, in spite of his mutilations. On the other hand, this cripple lacks that loftiness of mind and is wont to seek ominous relief in seeing mutilations around him.

His words rang out crystal clear. The heavy silence gave them resonance.

“General Millan Astray would like to create Spain anew—a negative creation—in his own image and likeness. And for that reason he wishes to see Spain crippled, as he unwittingly made clear.

At this point General Millan Astray could stand it no longer and shouted wildly:

“Muera la Inteligencia!”—‘To death with Intelligence!’

And by this time some Blue Shirts had cocked their rifles and Unamuno’s life hung in the balance. Standing erect, his arms folded and his gaze fixed straight ahead he looked like the statue of a stoic. Once more his word dominated the hall.

“This is the temple of intellect. And I am its high priest. It is you who are profaning its sacred precincts. I have always been a prophet in my own land. You will win, but you will not convince. You will win, because you possess more than enough brute force, but you will not convince, because to convince means to persuade. And in order to persuade, you would need what you lack—reason and right in the struggle. I consider it futile to exhort you to think of Spain. I have finished.

The Blue Shirts and General Millan Astray were temporarily stunned by the moral courage of the old man who stood up to them, otherwise Unamuno could have been lynched on the spot. Seizing the moment, Franco’s wife, Dona Carmen Polo de Franco,

who was attending the ceremony, took Unamuno by the arm and led him down a side street to a waiting car, pursued by the general, who continued hurling insults at him from the running board as he drove away. When news of Unamuno's defiance got back to Franco, the self-proclaimed "*Caudillo de Espana, por la gracia de Dios*" (Leader of Spain, by the grace of God) issued an immediate order of execution. But, cooler-headed local authorities of the Junta, however, stayed the execution realizing that putting Unamuno to death would only create a martyr against the nascent "Movement of Salvation". Instead Unamuno was for the third time stripped of his rectorship at the University of Salamanca and confined to house arrest. Shortly thereafter, on the last day 1936, he was visited by a young law lecturer, Bartolome Aragon, who was an ardent Falangist, which was the fascist party supporting Franco. As was often the case with Unamuno, their discussion turned to debate and then to argument when Aragon ventured that perhaps God had turned his back on Spain, to which Unamuno replied angrily, "That cannot be, Aragon! God cannot turn his back on Spain! Spain will be saved because Spain has to be saved." At this Unamuno closed his eyes and appeared to be resting. Aragon then noticed a smell of burning and on looking under the table found one of Unamuno's slippers on fire from the coal burner he kept there to warm the room. "The Conscience of Spain" was dead, having suffered a blood clot to the brain.

Ortega y Gasset, his contemporary, wrote a few days after his death: "The voice of Unamuno sounded ceaselessly throughout the whole of Spain....Now that it has ceased forever, I fear our country will suffer an era of frightful silence." And *The Times* obituary called him,

one of the great intellectual forces of modern Spain who had acted as a kind of poker to two generations of Spaniards, stirring up their minds and naturally stirring up animosities as well. Keenly interested in all the questions of the day, he never became a specialist in any one discipline. His ultimate concern was the individual soul, and, seeing the universe in the individual soul.

The day after his death he was buried in the municipal cemetery of Salamanca with full academic ceremony. "My painful duty," Unamuno once said, "is to irritate people. We must sow in men the seeds of doubt, of distrust, of disquiet, and even of despair." Four lines from one of his poems were carved on his tomb:

***Place me, eternal Father in your breast,
Mysterious dwelling;***

*I shall sleep there, as I come worn out
From harsh contending.*

PHILOSOPHY

There are three great human questions that we all face: Who am I? Why am I here? And, Where am I going? The last seminar I offered at the Institute was on the Indian Sage, Ramana Maharshi who challenged his disciples to penetrate the depths of their own consciousness with the first question: Who am I? His was a philosophy of Self-Realization through introspection. Ramana's contemporary, M.K. Gandhi, with his moral philosophy focuses more on the ever-broadening question: Why am I here? His was a philosophy of Self-Transformation through ethical action. Miguel de Unamuno was also a contemporary of these two towering members of the human family. His thought and being is solely focused on the third of these three great questions: Where am I going? The Wherefore of life. The question of survival. The question of whether man is mortal or immortal. We could say that Unamuno's was a philosophy of Self-Transcendence through a life of constantly wrestling with the Grim Reaper.

Like a Spanish bullfighter, Unamuno unflinchingly challenges Death to a square-on, no-holds barred battle without retreat, truce or surrender. The question of whether man has an immortal soul is not an abstract question for Unamuno. For him, immortality is not an idea. As one writer puts it:

It is a want, a need, a hunger, an urge, an obsession. It does not generate in his mind but in the recesses of his being. What would you expect? Philosophy? An abstract, objective, 'horizontal', concatenated study of the problem of life after death, and of the existence of God: Not from Unamuno. The issue is not one between perceptions and logic, but one between Unamuno and non-Unamuno.

Imagine a condemned man standing on the gallows with the noose around his neck and with his executioner's hand upon the lever. It is in this anguishingly frozen moment in time that Unamuno lived. For Unamuno, immortality was an imminent necessity. Reflecting deeply on his own inner, more than outer, experiences, Unamuno realized that to be authentically human means to live in the presence of death, to understand that mortality is the root of our condition, and that we are beings of contingency. As Jim Morrison said, "the future is uncertain, and the end is always near." Unamuno saw human self-consciousness as a kind of disease. As he says in the handout, "consciousness of oneself is simply consciousness of one's own limitation." Unlike the

other creatures upon the planet, human beings carried a nasty little secret in their hearts. There was a worm at the core of human nature. To use Martin Heidegger's definition, who was influenced by Unamuno, Man is being-towards-death. To paraphrase Thoreau, we are living lives of quiet desperation; and Ernest Becker, "there is a rumble of panic underneath everything." It is this full-being, guttural awareness that led Miguel de Unamuno to write "The Tragic Sense of Life", which one writer describes as "a passionate autobiography of a soul in anguish."



Unamuno initiates the treatise with a Latin affirmation that could be a motto for all trying to help in the emergence of a universal world culture: *Nullum hominem a me alienum puto*: 'I am a man; no other man do I deem a stranger.' He makes clear from the outset that the focus of his book is man, but not the legendary featherless biped of Aristotle, or the social contractor of Rousseau, or the *homo economicus* of the Manchester School, or the *homo sapien* of Linnaeus. This so-called man, already the subject of not a few lucubrations, more or less scientific, is to say, a no-man. The man Unamuno is about to write about is the concrete man who should be, as he says, "the supreme object of all philosophy, whether certain self-styled philosophers like it or not."

**The man of flesh and bone; the man who is born, suffers and dies—
above all, who dies; the man who eats and drinks and plays and sleeps and
thinks and wills; the man who is seen and heard; the brother, the real
brother.**

First Unamuno turns to Immanuel Kant and he points out that while the professor of philosophy at Konigsberg was able to pulverize with his head all the traditional proofs of the existence of God in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the man, Immanuel Kant does a somersault in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, and reconstructs with a leap of his heart, using the moral postulates of the categorical imperative, the immortality of the soul. And from the immortality of the soul, and not the other way around, he deduces the existence of God.

Next, Unamuno turns to another man, "the man Benedict Spinoza", and focuses on three propositions of Part 3 of his *Ethics*:

- The 6th which says that everything endeavors to persist in its own being.
- The 7th that this endeavor is the actual essence of the thing itself. (Which Unamuno points out for a man is not to die).

- & the 8th that this endeavor for each individual thing to persist involves no finite time but indefinite time. Which Unamuno interprets, “that is to say that you, I, and Spinoza wish never to die and that this longing of ours never to die is our actual essence.”

Unamuno goes on to say that what makes a man himself and not another is a principle of unity and a principle of continuity. “In a certain sense,” says Unamuno, “a man is so much the more a man the more unitary his action.” And he points out that memory is the working of the principle of continuity in man. Further he argues,

That the breaking of the unity and continuity of my life, is to cease to be he who I am—that is to say, it is simply to cease to be. And that—no! Anything rather than that!

He goes on to connect these principles of unity and continuity to consciousness stating, “The world is made for consciousness, for each consciousness.” “And it happens that the less a man believes in the soul {that is in the unity and continuity of his consciousness}—that is to say in his conscious immortality, personal and concrete—the more he will exaggerate the worth of this poor transitory life.” But unfortunately, “man, by the very fact of being man, of possessing consciousness, is, in comparison with the ass or the crab, a diseased animal. “Consciousness”, he sums up, “is a disease.” He concludes the first chapter by listing a number of men of flesh and bone who had a bad case of this disease, this tragic sense of life. “Marcus Aurelius, St. Augustine, Pascal, Rousseau, Rene, Obermann, Thomson, Leopardi, Vigny, Lenau, Kleist, Amiel, Quental, Kierkegaard—men burdened with wisdom rather than with knowledge.”



The next chapter, Unamuno calls ‘The Starting Point’. Concerned that some may think his earlier reflections might “possess a certain morbid character” he argues that disease doesn’t always have to be thought of as a bad thing. Certain diseases can progress the health of the body, as in “what doesn’t kill me makes me stronger.” And looking to the mythical tragedy in Genesis, Adam and Eve wouldn’t have gained knowledge of good and evil without also becoming subject to disease and death by eating the apple.

Next Unamuno launches into a whole discussion of knowledge: basically saying there are two types of knowledge. The first type of knowing of the objective world is out of necessity in order to live; for self-preservation. Only after this first type is satisfied will the second innate desire of knowing out of inner subjective curiosity [a longing to know for its own sake] be awakened.

There is a world, the sensible world, that is the child of hunger, and there is another world, the ideal world, that is the child of love. And just as there are senses employed in the service of the knowledge of the sensible world, so there are also senses, at present for the most part dormant, for social consciousness has scarcely awakened, employed in the service of the knowledge of the ideal world.

This second kind of knowing, which Unamuno calls practical philosophy will determine our spiritual attitude towards life and the universe conformably with it. For Unamuno the starting gate of all practical philosophy is a wherefore. As he says:

Whence do I come and whence comes the world in which and by which I live? Whither do I go and whither goes everything that environs me? What does it all mean? Such are the questions that man asks as soon as he frees himself from the brutalizing necessity of laboring for his material sustenance. And if we look closely, we shall see that beneath these questions lies the wish to know not so much the “why” as the “wherefore”, not the cause but the end....The “why” interests us only in view of the “wherefore.” We wish to know whence we came only in order the better to be able to ascertain whither we are going.

So while the first type of knowledge of the objective world is rational, the second type of knowledge is what Unamuno calls vital knowledge. It is almost as if we use completely different faculties in the pursuit of each of these different types of knowledge, and as he says, “there is such an opposition between the two that we may say that everything vital is anti-rational, not merely irrational, and that everything rational is anti-vital. And this is the basis of the tragic sense of life.”

His conclusion thus of this chapter is that the aim and heart of all vital knowledge is the longing for immortality. To quote,

...the longing for immortality, is it not perhaps the primal and fundamental condition of all reflective or human knowledge? And is it not therefore the true base, the real starting-point, of all philosophy, although philosophers, perverted by intellectualism, may not recognize it? For the present let us remain keenly suspecting that the longing not to die, the hunger for personal immortality, the effort whereby we tend to persist indefinitely in our own being, which is, according to Spinoza, our very essence, that this the affective basis of all knowledge is the personal inward starting-point of all human philosophy, wrought by a man and for all men. And we shall see

how the solution of this inward affective problem, a solution which may be but the despairing renunciation of the attempt at a solution, is that which colours all the rest of philosophy. And this personal and affective starting-point of all philosophy and all religion is the tragic sense of life.



Unamuno says intellectuals may find this next chapter, “The Hunger of Immortality” more rhetoric than philosophy. And indeed the tone is more one of a musing confessional than an argumentative debate. He starts by asking us to try and imagine the condition of our soul when we are in a deep sleep. In other words, as he says:

...try to fill your consciousness with the representation of no-consciousness, and you will see the impossibility of it. The effort to comprehend it causes the most tormenting dizziness. We cannot conceive ourselves as not existing.

This exercise is just a launching pad for Unamuno because deep down he contends, we don't just want to exist, we want to exist universally.

The visible universe, the universe that is created by the instinct of self-preservation, becomes all too narrow for me. It is like a cramped cell, against the bars of which my soul beats its wings in vain. Its lack of air stifles me. More, more, and always more! I want to be myself, and yet without ceasing to be myself to be others as well, to merge myself into the totality of things visible and invisible, to extend myself into the illimitable of space and to prolong myself into the infinite of time. Not to be all and forever is as if not to be...And to be the whole of myself is to be everybody else. Either all or nothing!

And yet this longing for universal life, this insatiable hunger for immortality is brought back down to earth and thwarted by the knowledge of our mortality as Unamuno continues to write:

When I contemplate the green serenity of the fields or look into the depths of clear eyes through which shines a fellow-soul, my consciousness dilates, I feel the diastole of the soul and am bathed in the flood of the life that flows about me, and I believe in my future; but instantly the voice of mystery whispers to me, “Thou shalt cease to be!” the angel of Death

touches me with his wing, and the systole of the soul floods the depths of my spirit with the blood of divinity.

If we cease to be at the death of the body then what's the point. As Unamuno writes:

If at the death of the body which sustains me, and which I call mine to distinguish it from the self that is I, my consciousness returns to the absolute unconsciousness from which it sprang, and if a like fate befalls all my brothers of humanity, then is our toil-worn human race nothing but a procession of phantoms, going from nothingness to nothingness, and humanitarianism the most inhuman thing known.

No! As he says, "I believe in the immortal origin of this yearning for immortality." Unamuno believes there has got to be a way to solve this Rubik's Cube. The remedy, he concludes,

...is to consider our mortal destiny without flinching, to fasten our gaze upon the gaze of the Sphinx, for it is thus that the malevolence of its spell is discharmed.

If we all die utterly, wherefore does everything exist? Wherefore? It is the Wherefore of the Sphinx; it is the Wherefore that corrodes the marrow of the soul; it is the begetter of that anguish which gives us the love of hope.

Only the feeble resign themselves to final death and substitute some other desire for the longing for personal immortality. In the strong the zeal for perpetuity overrides the doubt of realizing it, and their superabundance of life overflows upon the other side of death.

We aim at being all because in that we see the only means of escaping from being nothing.



The next chapter looks at the Catholic solution to this dilemma. In this chapter Unamuno has a lot of interesting things to say about the development of all the Christian faiths and in particular Catholicism which has played such a predominate part in Unamuno's formative years and in Spanish culture over the centuries. Take the whole long story behind the establishment of a Spanish Catholic mission in Santa Barbara for example. In the end Unamuno says Catholicism oscillates between mysticism and rationalism; between religionized science and scientificized religion.

“The Trinity”, he says, “was a kind of pact between monotheism and polytheism, and humanity and divinity sealed a peace in Christ, nature covenanted with grace, grace with free will, free will with the Divine prescience, and so on. But at what a cost?” Ultimately the dogmatic belief structure of Catholicism just doesn’t pass the litmus test of reasonableness. As Unamuno concludes the chapter:

The Catholic solution of our problem, of our unique vital problem, the problem of the immortality and eternal salvation of the individual soul, satisfies the will, and therefore satisfies life; but the attempt to rationalize it by means of dogmatic theology fails to satisfy the reason. And reason has its exigencies as imperious as those of life. It is no use seeking to force ourselves to consider as super-rational what clearly appears to us to be contra-rational, neither is it any good wishing to become coal-heavers when we are not coal-heavers.



This next chapter Unamuno entitles “The Rationalist Dissolution”. As you’ll remember Unamuno left for college with his heart filled with unquestioning Catholic piety and within a very short time was an avid proponent of positivistic philosophy and scientific empiricism. Eventually though, Unamuno realized that rationalism provided no answers to the burning questions in his heart, but only left one abandoned in a desert of dead ideas. Unamuno claimed to have a ‘medieval soul’ and saw the movement of modern rationalism as a virus infecting the whole intellectual community of Europe. He saw himself as a modern day Don Quixote tilting against the windmill of materialism. As he says,

The truth is –it is necessary to be perfectly explicit in this matter—that what we call materialism means for us nothing else but the doctrine which denies the immortality of the individual soul, the persistence of personal consciousness after death.

In fact there is often very little difference in tone between the fervent fundamentalist and the avid atheist. They are opposing polar belief structures, like a Janus-head with the personal God-idea on one side and the anti-God idea on the other. Atheism, materialism, rationalism are all reductionist and want only to deal with and explain the outer objective universe. The term ‘soul’ is only used to denote the epiphenomenon of individual consciousness that is dependent upon the housing of a physical organism for existence and survival. As Unamuno goes on,

In fact, and as regards our problem—the most vital, the only really vital problem—it is all the same to say that everything is matter as to say that everything is idea, or that everything is energy, or whatever you please. Every monist system will always seem to us materialist. The immortality of the soul is saved only by the dualist systems—those which teach that human consciousness is something substantially distinct and different from the other manifestations of phenomena.

In the end reason can never prove that the soul is immortal or, as Unamuno says, “that the human consciousness shall preserve its indestructibility through the tracts of time to come,” but very interestingly says Unamuno, “it proves rather—within its limits, I repeat—that the individual consciousness cannot persist after the death of the physical organism upon which it depends.” If one follows through and carries this line of reasoning all the way to the end of the road, as Unamuno writes,

The rational dissolution ends in dissolving reason itself; it ends in the most absolute skepticism....The supreme triumph of reason, the analytical—that is, the destructive and dissolvent—faculty, is to cast doubt upon its own validity. The stomach that contains an ulcer ends by digesting itself; and reason ends by destroying...its concepts of truth.

Into this bleak picture of despair Unamuno sends a single ray of hope.

But reason going beyond truth itself, beyond the concept of reality itself, succeeds in plunging itself into the depths of skepticism. And in this abyss the skepticism of the reason encounters the despair of the heart, and this encounter leads to the discovery of a basis—a terrible basis!—for consolation to build on.



Now we have completed our descent and Unamuno takes us on a walk through the ‘Valley of the Shadow of Death’ in a chapter he lovingly titles ‘In the Depths of the Abyss’. Here he says,

... in the depths of the abyss, the despair of the heart and of the will and the skepticism of reason meet face to face and embrace like brothers. And we shall see it is from this embrace, a tragic—that is to say, an intimately loving —embrace, that the wellspring of life will flow, a life serious and terrible. Skepticism, uncertainty—the position to which reason, by

practicing its analysis upon itself, upon its own validity, at last arrives—is the foundation upon which the heart’s despair must build up its hope.

This vital skepticism as to whether our sense of self-consciousness survives death is produced by the clash between reason and desire; and eventually this clash can result in an embrace between despair and skepticism out of which is born what Unamuno calls “that holy, that sweet, that saving incertitude, which is our supreme consolation.” Unamuno contends that even for the most die-hard rationalist, or hedonistic Budweiser man, there is in the most secret chamber of the spirit a voice that murmurs, “Who knows!” And likewise for the most ardent believer in a future life there is similar muffled voice, a voice of uncertainty, which whispers in the ear of his spirit, “Who knows!” This uncertainty itself and the suffering that accompanies it and the fruitless struggle to escape from it, Unamuno claims, “may be and is a basis for action and morals.”

As Unamuno wraps up this chapter he warns us, his readers, that if in following him further we meet “with arbitrary apothegms. Brusque transitions, inconsecutive statements, veritable somersaults of thought, do not cry out that you have been deceived.’

The reader who follows me further is now aware that I am about to carry him into the region of the imagination, of imagination and of imagination founded on feeling.



The next chapter, “Love, Suffering, Pity & Personality” is where the poetically beautiful, but perplexingly enigmatic passages in the flyer come from. He almost sounds like a Buddhist sometimes reminding us of the first truth that suffering is the fundamental and universal nature of embodied existence. To quote, “Suffering is universal, suffering is that which unites all us living beings together; it is the universal or divine blood that flows through us all.” The suffering Unamuno focuses on is mostly internal preferring to use the word ‘anguish’ or ‘agony’ to describe this inner suffering, because the Greek root for these words means ‘to struggle’. In effect, Unamuno contends, all this struggling is ultimately each being’s effort to increase and ultimately universalize its consciousness. As he says,

Suffering is the path of consciousness, and by it living beings arrive at the possession of self-consciousness.

With self-consciousness comes the ability to feel pity for others in the same plight as oneself, to feel compassion. And this feeling of pity and compassion is an extension of oneself—what Unamuno calls personalizing. As he writes,

And when love is so great and so vital, so strong and so overflowing, that it loves everything, then it personalizes everything and discovers that the total ALL, that the Universe, is also a Person possessing a Consciousness...Consciousness taken captive by matter and struggling to free himself from it.

Unamuno imagines all of humanity as a single person and the work of Man, both universal and particular, is “to super-naturalize Nature—that is to say, to make it divine by making it human, to help it to become conscious of itself.” And further,

May we not perhaps live and love—that is, suffer and pity—in this all-enveloping Supreme Person—we, all the persons who suffer and pity and all the beings that strive to achieve personality, to acquire consciousness of their suffering and their limitation? And are we not, perhaps, ideas of this total Grand Consciousness, which by thinking of us as existing confers existence upon us?

As we travel through life, according to Unamuno, we eventually reach a fork in the road and must choose between love and happiness like in the matrix when Nio had to choose between the red and the blue pill. At the end of the happiness road according to Unamuno is the inertia of matter or sloth—the mother of all the other vices. If we choose love then the path is suffering; and as he says, “Man is the more man—that is, the more divine—the greater his capacity for suffering, or, rather, for anguish.” We should not at all costs try to avoid suffering but rather draw it close and embrace it. “The cure for suffering”, contends Unamuno,

...Is not to be submerged in unconsciousness, but to be raised to consciousness and to suffer more. The evil of suffering is cured by more suffering, by higher suffering. Do not take opium, but put salt and vinegar in the soul’s wound, for when you sleep and no longer feel the suffering you are not. And to be, that is imperative. Do not then close your eyes to the agonizing Sphinx, but look her in the face and let her seize you in her mouth and crunch you with her hundred thousand poisonous teeth and swallow you. And when she has swallowed you, you will know the sweetness of the taste of suffering.

Only out of suffering this complete can real faith, real hope and real charity arise. As Unamuno explains:

Faith is our longing for the eternal, for God; and hope is God's longing, the longing of the eternal, of the divine in us, which advances to meet our faith and uplifts us. Man aspires to God by faith and cries to Him: "I believe—give me, Lord, wherein to believe!" And God, the divinity in man, sends him hope in another life in order that he may believe in it. Hope is the reward of faith. Only he who believes truly hopes; and only he who truly hopes believes. We only believe what we hope, and we only hope what we believe.

God for Unamuno is not anthropomorphic but is intimately personal. As he says, "God is simply the Love that springs from universal suffering and becomes consciousness." And, "each consciousness seeks to be itself and to be all other consciousnesses without ceasing to be itself: it seeks to be God."



So then at this juncture, before we conclude with what Unamuno calls "The Practical Problem" of what to do with all with all this turmoil, these contractions and this struggle; let me ask, so what does Unamuno mean, when he says, "To achieve the impossible, attempt the absurd?"



The solution for Unamuno in this world of doubt and uncertainty and perpetually wrestling with the mystery of our final destiny is with the fullness of our being to try and merit eternity. As he says, "and if it is nothingness that awaits us, let us so act that it shall be an unjust fate". This he says is the firmest basis for action for the man who cannot or will not be a dogmatist. This he calls the quixotic fight.

To act in such a way as to make our annihilation an injustice, in such a way as to make our brothers, our sons, and our brother's sons, and their sons' sons, feel we ought not to have died, is something that is within the reach of all.

All of us, each one of us, can and ought to determine to give as much of himself as he possibly can—nay, to give more than he can, to exceed himself, to go beyond himself, to make himself irreplaceable, to himself to

others in order that he may receive himself back again from them. And each one in his own civil calling or office. We ought not so much to try to seek that particular calling which we think most fitting and suitable for ourselves, as to make a calling of that employment in which chance, Providence, or our own will has placed us.

In other words rather than restlessly trying to find that perfect job or social/political realm where one can really be of service and benefit—establish one's place and purpose in the arena one finds oneself. As one writer put it, "The work at hand has the abstract claim of duty."

This question of the proper vocation is possibly the gravest and most deep-seated of social problems, that which is at the root of all the others. For there are many who, while they go about looking out for I know not what idea—that is to say, fictitious duties and responsibilities—neglect the duty of putting their whole soul into the immediate and concrete business which furnishes them with a living; and the rest, the immense majority, perform their task perfunctorily, merely for the sake of nominally complying with their duty to qualify for their wages without earning them.

As a means of example he gives us the shoemaker, possibly thinking of Shakespeare's shoemaker who was a mender of souls, or of the great German mystic Jacob Boehme who was a lowly shoemaker. As he says,

Here you have a shoemaker who lives by making shoes, and makes them with just enough care and attention to keep his clientele together without losing custom. Another shoemaker lives on a somewhat higher spiritual plane, for he has a proper love for his work, and out of pride or a sense of honor strives for the reputation of being the best shoemaker in the town or in the kingdom, even though this reputation brings him no increase of custom or profit, but only renown and prestige. But there is a still higher degree of moral perfection in this business of shoemaking, and that is for the shoemaker to aspire to become for his fellow-townsmen the one and only shoemaker, indispensable and irreplaceable, the shoemaker who looks after their footgear so well that they will feel a definite loss when he dies—when he is "dead to them" not merely "dead"—and they will feel that he ought not to have died. And this will result from the fact that in working for them he was anxious to spare them any discomfort and to make sure that it should not be any preoccupation with their feet that should prevent them from being at leisure to contemplate the higher truths;

he shod them for the love of them and for the love of God in them—he shod them religiously.

Quotes by Unamuno

A lot of good arguments are spoiled by some fool who knows what he is talking about.

A man does not die of love or his liver or even of old age; he dies of being a man.

Anyone who in discussion relies upon authority uses, not his understanding, but rather his memory.

Cure yourself of the affliction of caring how you appear to others. Concern yourself only with how you appear before God, concern yourself only with the idea that God may have of you.

Faith which does not doubt is dead faith.

If a person never contradicts himself, it must be that he says nothing.

It is sad not to love, but it is much sadder not to be able to love.

It is truer to say that martyrs create faith more than faith creates martyrs.

Life is doubt, and faith without doubt is nothing but death.

Man dies of cold, not of darkness.

Only in solitude do we find ourselves; and in finding ourselves, we find in ourselves all our brothers in solitude.

Science is a cemetery of dead ideas.

Some people will believe anything if you whisper it to them.

Suffering is the substance of life and the root of personality, for it is only suffering that makes us persons.

The greatest height of heroism to which an individual, like a people, can attain is to know how to face ridicule.

To fall into a habit is to begin to cease to be.

To love with the spirit is to pity, and he who pities most loves most.

True science teaches, above all, to doubt and to be ignorant.

We need God, not in order to understand the why, but in order to feel and sustain the ultimate wherefore, to give a meaning to the universe.

We never know, believe me, when we have succeeded best.

What we believe to be the motives of our conduct are usually but the pretexts for it.

Your neighbor's vision is as true for him as your own vision is true for you.

Those who believe that they believe in God, but without passion in their hearts, without anguish in mind, without uncertainty, without doubt, without an element of despair even in their consolation, believe only in the God idea, not God Himself"

It is important to our friends to believe that we are unreservedly frank with them, and important to friendship that we are not."

Science says: "We must live," and seeks the means of prolonging, increasing, facilitating and amplifying life, of making it tolerable and acceptable, wisdom says: "We must die," and seeks how to make us die well."

To awaken the sleeping and rouse the loitering is a work of supreme mercy, and to seek the truth in everything and everywhere, reveal fraud, foolishness and ineptitude is a work of supreme religious piety.

To believe in God is to yearn for His existence, and furthermore, it is to act as if He did exist.

Fear is the start of wisdom.

While men believe themselves to be seeking truth for its own sake, they are in fact seeking life in truth.

We should try to be the parents of our future rather than the offspring of our past.

My aim is to agitate and disturb people. I'm not selling bread; I'm selling yeast.