

Theophanic Experience as Recognition: Unamuno's Recovery of the Person

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Introduction

Miguel de Unamuno was a Spanish thinker, public intellectual, playwright, poet, and novelist of the late 19th and early 20th century, and few thinkers have been as aware as he was that at heart of the modern world and all its perils is a reductionism of the person and a fundamental transformation of reason, an ideology driven forward by the tendency to have total control of reality and inevitably bound for destruction. He referred to this problem as the “dissolution of reason,” and spent most of his life warning of its incoherence and political dangers—all of which became a reality during his lifetime and in the decade after his death on the last day of 1936—three years after Hitler had been appointed chancellor of Germany and just months after the first “purge trials” of Stalin and the beginning of the Spanish Civil War.

But Unamuno also offered a way to understand the world, a positive vision for moving beyond the march of modernity towards disaster founded upon the fundamental recognition of our tensional condition and the path that this recognition opens up. Once we destroy all the false veils of reductionism, Unamuno argued, we arrive to the “depth of the abyss,” a place of terror and fecundity from which life can reemerge as a spring of light. Unfortunately, most readers have read his work in the context of existentialism and have interpreted this fundamental

insight as a moment of irrational and subjectivist self-assertion. But once we try to understand him on his own terms, we can see that Unamuno's work is tirelessly striving to articulate the recovery the Person in a world that seems relentlessly bent on its elimination.

I. Descent

One of the best commentators of the work of Unamuno and an important Spanish philosopher in his own right, José Ferrater Mora, explains, "A 'point of departure' as clear and sweeping as Unamuno's implies first the elimination of all idols—particularly the ideological ones" (Ferrater Mora, José, *Three Spanish Philosophers*, Pp. 33). Thus, it is essential to begin by trying to understand the depth and purpose of his critique. The most dangerous force of the era, Unamuno knew, was that of blind, ideological, scientific progress. It is a materialist and violent denial of transcendence that seeks to eliminate the person as such, to reduce persons to the utility of a larger scientific, technological and political project.

The spiritual source of these tendencies is in what Unamuno called the vital problem—i.e. the tension between our innate desire to live forever and the certainty of our death. Much like the concept of the *metaxy* for Eric Voegelin, this is an understanding of existence as an in-between, as a tension between two poles that pull the person towards either transcendence or immanence. This vital tension, however, is our fundamental condition. It is what defines life as such, and any attempt at undoing that tension destroys life. It collapses existence into one of its extremes. It results, quite literally, in death.

Like Voegelin, Unamuno saw the source of this polarization in the Gnostic impulses that seek to simplify the inherent tension of reality into one of its poles:

“In this society, composed of *camarillas* who abhor one another without knowing one another, it is saddening to watch savage atomism from which there is no scape other than iron, disciplinary organization of committees, commissions, subcommissions, graphed programs, and similar trivia. And as in earlier ages, this atomism is accompanied by faith in the above and beyond, in external law, in the government, which is seen either as God or the Devil, the two persons of the divinity in which our ‘intra-official’ Manicheanism believes.

Beside the great external liberty that we think we enjoy because no one denies it to us, the lack of internal freedom stands out in sharper contrast. Enormous monotony spreads throughout all contemporary Spanish society and dissolves in numbness, the dull uniformity of all-pervasive vulgarity.”¹

The flight from the tension of existence, from the *metaxy*, Unamuno knew, leads to absolute radicalization and to the loss of freedom. Society is divided into the two opposing, extrinsic political categories that have the false pretense of representing metaphysical absolutes. Unlike Voegelin, Unamuno did not develop this insight in any organized fashion, but he often insisted on this point, which shows that he understood the connection between Gnosticism, ideology and violence.

The kinship with Voegelin’s intuition is most evident in the conviction that ideological reductionism of reality is the fundamental threat to the very tension that constitutes human life. The political problem of the Gnostic impulse is that, regardless of its content, it always demands a flight away from the condition of life—i.e. the fundamental tension of reality—in favor of a conceptual construction that ought to be actualized at all costs in order to be able to hold sway over reality.

¹ Quoted in “Unamuno’s Politics” by Stanley Paine. *Unamuno: Creator and Creation*, edited by José Rubia Barcia and M.A. Zeitlin, University of California Press: Berkeley, 1967. Pp, 207.

In other words, ideology, fueled by the *libido dominandi* develops conceptual designs that simplify reality (either with an immanent or transcendent tendency) with the sole objective of controlling it.

In a political sense, this tendency leads to the implementation of totalitarian regimes, to censure first, then to camps and war, and then to the total control of human life in the service of the cause. As the history of the Spanish Civil War and of the totalitarian history of the 20th century showed, the cause, always altruistic on the surface is full of hatred and violence:

“The rationalist behaves rationally, that is, performs his role as long as he limits himself to denying that reason satisfies our hunger for immortality; but soon, possessed by anger of not being able to believe, he falls for the *odium antitheologicum*, and with the Pharisees, says: ‘Cursed be these, who do not know the law.’

The anti-theological hatred, the scientific wrath—I do not say scientific—against faith in the next life, is evident. Take not the serene scientific researchers, who know how to doubt, but the fanatics of rationalism, and see with what grotesque brutality they speak of faith.” (Unamuno, M.D., *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida en los hombres y en los pueblos*, STV, Pp. 112)²

In a personal sense, this leads to suicide, as Unamuno showed in his 1902 novel, *Love and Pedagogy*, where the young Apolodoro Carrascal is brought up between the scientific obsession of the father, Avito Carrascal, to create the ultimate genius, and the natural, pre-conceptual love of the mother, Marina.

² All translations mine, unless otherwise noted. “El racionalista se conduce racionalmente, esto es, está en su papel mientras se limita a negar que la razón satisfaga a nuestra hambre vital de inmortalidad; pero pronto, poseído de la rabia de no poder creer, cae en la irritación del *odium antitheologicum*, y dice con los fariseos: ‘Estos vulgares que no saben la ley, son malditos.’ (...)

El odio anti-teológico, la rabia cientifista—no digo científica—contra la fe en la otra vida, es evidente. Tomad no los más serenos investigadores científicos, los que saben dudar, sino a los fanáticos del racionalismo, y ved con qué grosera brutalidad hablan de la fe.”

Apolodoro's struggle between the poles of scientific rationalism and love has a parallel in his mentor, the philosopher Don Fulgencio Entreambosmares, whose last name literally means "between-two-seas." But the novel is the tragic story of the failure of young Apolodoro to live in the in-between, in the *metaxy*, of his mentor, and of how his father's scientific obsession leads him to suicide. Much like Dostoevsky had shown in the example of Ivan Karamazov, rationalism and scientism, the ideology of reason, where man tries to completely understand and control the world, always implodes, leading to death and destruction. In Unamuno's words, "The vital consequence of rationalism would be suicide" (Unamuno, *STV*, 132).³

Thus, Unamuno's critique serves to destroy the rationalist, self-agrandizing conceits of modernity, and the reader is led back to the fundamental reality in which they live, the most immediate experience of tension, to the vital problem, the opposition between immanence and transcendence. But without ideology and reductionism to come to our aid, we arrive to the "depth of the abyss." After showing how reason implodes under its own weight, Unamuno finds not only desperation, but also "the holy, the sweet, the salvific uncertainty, our supreme consolation" (Unamuno, *STV*, 134). And it is in this uncertainty, from the heart of mystery, that he encounters the fundamental condition that rescues life from the annihilation of reason.

II. Ascent

³ "La consecuencia vital del racionalismo sería el suicidio"

With his critique, with his tearing down of the ideological idols, Unamuno leads the reader to the *metaxy*, to the “depth of the abyss,” to the inevitable confrontation with the terrible existential tension that constitutes human life. The first effect of the confrontation of the tensional nature of our condition is terror and existential angst, from which emerges the realization that all our powers are insufficient, that we belong rather than control, that far from being the masters of reality, we are shrouded by mystery. This is the great existential humbling of what Unamuno called *the tragic sense of life*.

Thus Unamuno describes how, after this existential humbling, there is an opening, the encounter of a path towards ascent out of the depths:

“As you turn inwards and penetrate into the depths of yourself, you begin discovering your own emptiness, that you are not all that you are, that you are not what you would wish to be, that you are, only, a nonentity. And in touching your own nothingness, and in not feeling your permanent base, in not reaching your own infinity, much less your own eternity, you feel compassion for yourself and you burn with a painful love for yourself, which is nothing but a kind of sensual self-relishing, a self-enjoyment of the flesh of your own soul.” (Unamuno, *STV*, 153)

This is, without a doubt, a perplexing passage for many reasons. It could, and has been, read as the words of an existentialist that upon discovering the absence of the substance of the self, raises from a sense of self-determination to recreate the world under his own will. But that interpretation misses the mark.

If one pays close attention to the way in which Unamuno describes the experience, we realize that beneath the often equivocal and provocative style, there is a pristine and fertile account of a transcendent encounter. In this passage, located crucial middle chapter of his *Tragic Sense of Life*, a chapter titled “Pain, Compassion and Personality,” after he has spent most of the first half of the book descending into

the depths of the abyss, he explains how the experience of suffering in the depth of the abyss, the terror of our own insufficiency, results not in despondence and alienation, but in *compassion*. Compassion, very importantly, is not a term of isolation. It does not denote or signify an individual suffering alone, but explicitly refers to a suffering with others, a *com-passion*. And indeed, that is how Unamuno describes it and why, in this middle chapter, he traces the path from pain to compassion to personality.

Unamuno explains that upon encountering compassion for oneself, for one's "nothingness" or insufficiency, one realizes that we have compassion for all others around us, which is, he says, the same as loving others, "you move on to having compassion, that is, to love all your fellow men and brothers in likeness, those miserable specters that parade from their nothingness to their nothingness, brief sparks of conscience that glimmer for just a moment in the infinite and eternal darkness" (Unamuno, *STV*, 154).⁴

And further, that this leads to a compassion, that is, to a love, of all of reality, "And from other men, from your fellow men, moving from those who are the closest to you, from those who live with you, you begin to have compassion for all those who live, and even for that which does not live, but exists. That distant star that shines up there during the night will one day die and turn to dust, and will cease to shine and to exist" (Unamuno, *STV*, 154).⁵

⁴ "pasas a compadecer, esto es, a amar a todos tus semejantes y hermanos en aparcialidad, miserables sombras que desfilan de su nada a su nada, chispas de conciencia que brillan un momento en las infinitas y eternas tinieblas."

⁵ "Y de los demás hombres, tus semejantes, pasando por los que más semejantes te son, por tus convivientes, vas a compadecer a todos los que viven, y hasta a lo que acaso no

And even further, he explains that “Love personalizes all that it loves. One can only love an idea by personalizing it. And when love is so great and alive, so strong and overpowering that it loves everything, it personalizes everything and discovers that the total Totality, that the Universe, is also a Person and that it also has a Consciousness, a Consciousness that suffers, that has compassion, that is, it loves, it is conscious. And this Conscience of the Universe, which love discovers by personalizing all that it loves, is what we call God” (Unamuno, *STV*, 154).⁶

The great insight here is not that the self reaches into its own subjectivity and upon finding nothing takes the route of self-determination. It is not that the world is recreated in our measure from the vacuity of our being, but exactly the opposite. The “self” discovers that it is not a self at all, that once the veils of ideology have been torn down, we encounter, in the deepest place, a compassion, a love that sustains us, a personal reality that is the ground of all that is. This preeminent reality as the condition of possibility of all experiencing is essential to understand.

In the words of David Walsh:

“We do not even experience God for it is our knowledge of him that makes such experiences possible. We know that which is *not* before we know that which *is* because we are ourselves persons who are not what we are. The inwardness by which we glimpse the transcendence of God, *quod Deus dicitur*, is not the subjective perspective within us. It is the shattering of all subjectivity within transcendence itself.” (Walsh, D., *The Politics of the Person as the Politics of Being*, Pp. 11)

vive, pero existe. Aquella lejana estrella que brilla allí arriba durante la noche, se apagará algún día y se hará polvo, y dejará de brillar de existir.”

⁶ El amor personaliza cuando ama. Sólo cabe enamorarse de una idea personalizándola. Y cuando el amor es tan grande y tan vivo, y tan fuerte y desbordante que lo ama todo, entonces lo personaliza todo y descubre que el total Todo, que el Universo, es Persona también que tiene una Conciencia, Conciencia que a su vez sufre, compadece, ama es decir, es conciencia. Y esta Conciencia del Universo, que el amor descubre personalizando cuanto ama, es a lo que llamamos Dios.”

Inwardness is experienced as transcendent. The “emptiness” of the depth is experienced as ground. In the depths of ourselves we find the Universe. We do not create love, but encounter it as the source upon which we exist and the horizon towards which we can go. We encounter, not ourselves in isolation, but shrouded in a mystery that we recognize, a mystery like us. We encounter a Person.

This is Unamuno’s *imago Dei*. The suffering love, the compassion that has revealed itself as the source and horizon of existence in the depths of the abyss, has done just that: it has *revealed itself*. We have encountered it as a relationship in which we are already bound up before the question of existence emerges. The theophanic experience, far from being an experience of the alien or other, is an experience of recognition. We stare into the face of transcendence and find indeed a face, a person:

“That in which you believe, reader, that is your God, the one who has lived with you, who was born with you and that was a child when you were a child, and began becoming a man as you became a man and that dwindles when you dwindle, and that is your principle of continuity in spiritual life, because it is the principle of solidarity amongst all people and in each man, and of men and the Universe and that it is like you, a person” (Unamuno, *STV*, 192-193).⁷

The fundamental insight of the revelation of the Person is that we too are persons and that the reality that sustains us is our relation to the Person and other persons. Persons don’t have a social or spiritual dimension, but the social and the spiritual,

⁷ “Ese en que crees, lector, ése es tu Dios, el que ha vivido contigo en ti, y nació contigo y fue niño cuando tú eras niño, y fue haciéndose hombre según tú te hacías hombre y que se te disipa cuando te disipas, y que es tu principio de continuidad en la vida espiritual, porque es el principio de solidaridad entre los hombres todos y en cada hombre, y de los hombres con el Universo y que es como tú, persona.”

the personal, is what constitutes reality. Being a person is unfolding in the irreducible tension of immanence and transcendence. It is living an existence defined by compassion, love and responsibility. It is a mystery.

Conclusion

What has been here explored is perhaps the least understood part of Unamuno's work, yet it is the deepest and most central of them. Unfortunately, a misunderstanding of this point leads to a misunderstanding of most of his insights, and it misses that which is the most valuable in his work. This is the reason why so many commentators have thought Unamuno's work is contradictory and confusing. Without the common thread of the person, the deepest well, the source of all his convictions, his work becomes, at best, simply provocative, and at worst, equivocal and outright disconcerting. This is in part due to the fact that although Unamuno went a long way towards revealing the person as that which transcends everything, as the reality in which life unfolds, he did not center his insight on this language.

But in light of this fundamental insight, his understanding of history, action, freedom, and the liberal society become quite coherent, though always provocative, as it is in the end, according to Unamuno, disquiet that leads to authentic moral action. Since the person is always beyond definition, one must always be on the way to its discovery. The theophanic encounter cannot be summoned at will and we cannot point to the definite concept of who we are. The *metaxy* or the depth of the abyss are not a place that we can go to, but a process, a reality in which we unfold through time. The clarity of this condition is often obscured by ideological veils that

desperately fight to undermine the fundamental tension of personal existence, the condition of our *metaxic* reality, which is why the reader has to always cultivate the habit of disquiet and why Unamuno's work always aims to be the gadfly of modernity that wakes each reader from their existential stupor into the realization that each of us is a person that cannot escape from the mysterious reality of our tensional condition.

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