

Miguel de Unamuno

An introduction to the philosophy of religion of Unamuno

Fabio Massimo ZENNARO

University of Oxford

Philosophy of Religion Graduate Seminar

May 15th, 2012

Outline of the presentation

This presentation is structured in two parts:

Introductory part: briefly explaining the figure of Unamuno, his life, his historical context and his main works;

Main part: discussing the philosophy of religion of Unamuno, focusing in particular on his ideas about *reason*, *will* or *faith*, *God* and *religion* as they are explained in his work *The Tragic Sense of Life*.

This is not an introduction to the whole philosophy of Unamuno, but only to a limited set of ideas.

Miguel de Unamuno

Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936) was a Spanish philosopher and writer.

He spent most of his life in Spain, a country politically (royalist vs republicans, republicans vs franquist) and intellectually (catholics vs positivist) torn.

He devoted most of his life reflecting on the problem of *religion* within human beings, a dilemma he lived personally and passionately.

Life of Unamuno (I)

1864	Born in Bilbao, Basque Country, Spain;	
1872-74		Third Carlist War
1880-84	He studied Philosophy and Literature at the University of Madrid.	
1884-91	He moved back to Bilbao and traveled to Italy and France. He embraced positivism and socialism.	
1891-00	Professor at the University of Madrid.	
1897	Death of his son and spiritual crisis.	
1898		Spain-US War Generation of '98
1900	Rector of the University of Salamanca.	
1914	Professor at the University of Salamanca.	
1914-18		First World War

Life of Unamuno (II)

1923-30

Primo De Rivera's
Dictatorship

1924

Exile to Fuerteventura.
Escape to Paris.

1930-31

Restoration

1930

Return to Spain.
Rector of the University of Salamanca.

1931-39

Spanish Second
Republic

1936

He joined the Alzamiento Nacional.
Removed from the University.
He died in Salamanca.

Works

Unamuno's main works:

Niebla (1904) - *Mist* - novel;

La Esfinge (1909) - *The Sphinx* - play;

Del Sentimiento Tragico de la Vida en los Hombres y en los Pueblos
(1912) - *The Tragic Sense of Life in Men and People*
- philosophical work;

Vida de Don Quijote y Sancho (1914) - *Our Lord Don Quixote* -
philosophical work;

El Cristo de Velazquez (1920) - *The Christ of Velazquez* - poetry;

Como se hace una novela (1927) - *How to Make a Novel* - essay;

San Manuel Bueno, Martir (1930) - novel;

La Agonia del Cristianismo (1931) - *The Agony of Christianity* -
philosophical work.

Features of his thoughts (I)

Features of Unamuno's philosophy:

Versatile Writer: he wrote novels, tragedies, essays, poems and philosophical treatises;

Innovative: he broke with the Spanish tradition and defined his own original position;

Existentialist Approach: he dealt with the problems of reason and faith from the point of view of the individual and tried to oppose to the academic philosophy that he considered too detached from the man;

Personal Style: his reflection centers on his personal experience and his style often resembles the style of Montaigne (Essays), Pascal (Pensees) or Kierkegaard (Diaries);

Features of his thoughts (II)

Features of Unamuno's philosophy:

Non Systematic: his philosophical works often lack an overall systematic approach, which he considered a distinctive feature of the academic tradition;

Paradoxical: he often challenges the reader with paradoxes and contradictions;

In what follows you meet with arbitrary apothegms, brusque transitions, inconsequent solutions, with veritable somersaults of thought. [...] We are about to enter [...] into a field of contradictions, contradictions between feeling and reasoning. (The Tragic Sense of Life)

Language and Logic

The intellectual environment in which Unamuno philosophized was polemically divided into two main schools of thought: the *catholic* one (Suarez, Balmes, Zeferino Gonzalez, Mendive, Orti y Lara) and the *positivist* one (followers of Comte and Spencer).

Unamuno distanced himself from both the schools, considering the first one too anchored to the past and unable to communicate with the people and the second one deprived of roots in the Spanish philosophical tradition and unable to satisfy the questions of the men.

Moreover, the clash between these two schools appeared to him meaningless: the two traditions were playing *two different logic-games*, whose concepts and ideas were simply incommensurable.

Anthropology (I)

Unamuno decided then to start his reflection from the *man*.

Not the ζῷον πολιτικόν¹, not the *homo oeconomicus*, not the *homo sapiens*, but the *man of flesh and blood* is the true *fons et origo* of his philosophy.

Man, the man of flesh and blood, the man who is born, suffers and dies - above all, who dies. (The Tragic Sense of Life)

This specific man, this flesh-and-blood man is both the subject and the supreme object of all philosophy. (The Tragic Sense of Life)

¹Social animal. (Aristotle)

Anthropology (II)

This man of flesh and blood is both a:

Reasoning animal: a being endowed with reason, searching for causal explanations, asking himself why;
this is the being who states *cogito ergo sum*;
this is the Kant of the Critique of the Pure Reason.

Feeling animal: a being endowed with feelings, searching for finalistic explanations, asking himself wherefore;
this is the being who states *sentio ergo sum* or *volo ergo sum*;
this is the Kant of the Critique of the Practical Reason.

Anthropology (III)

Yo (I) is the unifying principle of the man of flesh and blood.

It is not an idealistic I (Fichte), but a concrete, personal, *conscious I* determining a man.

It is the complete being who states *sum ergo cogito* and *sum ergo volo*.

This I entails a principle of unity in space (through the body, the action and the intention) and continuity in time (through memory and hope).

When a man affirms his I, his personal consciousness, he affirms man, concrete and real man, affirms the true humanism. (The Tragic Sense of Life)

Anthropology (IV)

Though unified by the I, every man experience an *inner dichotomy* between:

Brain (or head or reason) striving to satisfy the intellectual needs of the I;

Heart: (or will or feeling) striving to satisfy the sentimental needs of the I.

A man in flesh and blood must constantly deal with this irreconcilable dichotomy.

[This] is something which, for want of a better name, we shall call the tragic sense of life. (The Tragic Sense of Life)

Reason and Will

Reason is a faculty aimed at solving the problem of *self-preservation*, that is the survival of the self.

Reason operates in the *perceptible world*, a world sparked by the senses.

Thanks to language, by which reason is made communicable, reason acquires a *social dimension*.

Will is a faculty aimed at solving the problem of *self-perpetuation*, that is the immortality of the consciousness.

Will operates in the *ideal world*, a world sparked by the imagination.

Will lives in a strictly *personal dimension*.

Reason (I)

Reason tries to explain the world and in this effort it does not need to assume the existence of the objects of the imagination (e.g. soul or God).

Rationalism implies *monism* (i.e. it assumes the existence of one reality only, in this case the one revealed by the senses) and *materialism* (i.e. it negates the soul and its immortality).

Every attempt to convert an object of the imagination (noumenon) into a substance (phenomenon) is inconsistent (St. Thomas, Balmes, Descartes, Berkeley).

Along with Hume and Kant, we are led to conclude that reason can not prove the existence or the immortality of the soul.

Reason (II)

But moving beyond Hume and Kant, reason do more than not satisfying our longing for immortality.

Reason categorizes, identifies and tends toward stability, that is death. What lives, escapes reason.

Reason is *anti-vital*, it negates and frustrates the hunger of immortality of the will.

Intelligence is a dreadful matter. It tends toward death in the way that memory tends to stability. [...] Identity, which is death, is precisely what the intellect seeks. The mind seeks what is dead, for the living escapes it. (The Tragic Sense of Life)

Will (I)

Will tries to find an answer to the *hunger for immortality* of the I, the longing to perpetuate oneself.

*Unaquaeque res, quatenus in se est, in suo esse perseverare conatur*¹ and *conatus, quo unaquaeque res in suo esse perseverare conatur, nullum tempus finitum, sed indefinitum involvit*²: as Spinoza stated, the hunger for immortality is a defining and undeniable trait of the human consciousness.

The I wants to persevere itself, its I, its identity and its personality.

¹Everything, in so far as it is in itself, strives to persevere in its own being. (Spinoza, Ethics)

²The effort with which everything strives to persevere in its own being does not involve finite time, but indefinite time. (Spinoza, Ethics)

Will (II)

Faced with the narrowness of its life, the will creates *poetry* (spawned by the feelings of love and vanity) and *art* (spawned by the desire for glory). But these solutions are illusory, in that they do not persevere the I, but just its name.

Religion, born out from the cult of the dead, which is itself a cult of immortality, is the answer to the hunger for immortality.

Will is *vital*, it asserts the immortality of the soul.

To be, to be forever, to be without end! Thirst to be, thirst to be more! Hunger for God! Thirst for eternal and eternalizing love! To be forever! To be God! (The Tragic Sense of Life)

The War between Reason and Will (I)

Any peace between these two powers is impossible, and we must live from their warfare. (The Tragic Sense of Life)

There can be *no compromise* between reason and will, as they have disjoint domains and different aims.

The problem of individual conscience and its immortality is beyond the limits of human rationality, it belongs to the realm of *contra-rational*, as said by Tertullian.

Nor can reason turn its truth into consolation, nor can will turn its consolation into truth.

The War between Reason and Will (II)

Still, reason and will are *associate* as they need each other.

Reason needs will to live to carry on its quest, will requires reason and language to be made communicable.

Human life is a *perpetual struggle (agon)* of reason and will, the reason forcing the will to submit to mortality, the will forcing the reason to serve its vital desire.

Analogously, the history of thought is a perpetual struggle between philosophy and religion.

Doubt and Faith (I)

No rational system (rationalism, empiricism, scientific fideism, theory of eternal recurrence) can satisfy the hunger for immortality. Reason is then led to *rational scepticism*.

No assertion of the will (immortality of the soul, existence of God) can be proven by rational arguments. Will is then led to *despair*.

Rational scepticism and despair provide the basis upon which human life must be built.

From this embrace [of rational scepticism and despair], this tragic embrace, that is, this intimately loving embrace, will surge a wellspring of life, a life both true and terrible. (The Tragic Sense of Life)

Doubt and Faith (II)

The offspring of this war is *doubt*.

A Hamletian *passional* doubt, different from the cold Cartesian methodical doubt.

Uncertainty is the natural condition of our inner life and our *supreme consolation*.

Both the truest rationalist and the truest believer hear, in the most secret recesses of their spirit, the whisperings of doubt.

The foundations of our inner life are formed by these very questions: "And suppose there is...?" "Suppose there is not...?" (The Tragic Sense of Life)

Doubt and Faith (III)

Over the doubt, over the awareness of scepticism and despair, *faith* is founded.

Πιστεύω, βοήθει μοῦ τῆ ἀπιστία¹ (*The Tragic Sense of Life*)

Human faith is a faith based upon the *will to believe* and *uncertainty*.

The I believes because it wants to believe in order to satisfy its hunger for immortality.

To believe without doubts (the faith of the charcoal burner) or not to believe without doubts (the non-faith of the raging anti-theologian) are equivalent ways not to think about faith.

¹Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief! (Mark, 9:24)

Doubt and Faith (IV)

In the tradition starting with Plato and leading to Pascal, faith is then a *risk*, καλὸς γὰρ ὁ κίνδυνος.¹

Faith is first of all a passionate *pistis*, not a justifiable *gnosis*.

Therefore the desire for immortality is similar to a *sickness* to which the reason opposes itself; reason reacts to the desire of immortality as the Greeks reacted to Paul of Tarsus in the Areopagus.

¹A beautiful risk. (Plato, Phaedo)

Religion (I)

Only religion, that is the human sense of the divine, can really quench the thirst for eternal life, for the endless perseveration of the soul.

Religion must guarantee the *identity of the I*: systems founded on metempsychosis, eternal return of the identical (Nietzsche) or dissolution of the self into a universal being (pantheism, oriental doctrines of liberation) can not really satisfy the hunger for immortality.

God is the guarantor of personal immortality.

Religion (II)

Modern western religion, that is *monotheism*, derived from the encounter between:

Greek religion, that is a religion with traits of *polytheism* and *pantheism*;

Jewish religion, that is a religion with traits of *monocultism* and *monotheism*;

From this blending, and from the needs of reason and will, two conceptions of God are originated.

God-Idea (I)

The first conception of God is *God-Idea*:

- It is the *ens summum*, *primum movens* of theological philosophy;
- It is a logical and rational God;
- It is a being whose existence is derived from its essence;
- It is an unthinkable, unconceivable, evanescent ordainer;
- It is the projection of reason to infinity;
- It is a theoretical and meditative God;
- It is the maximum of individuality, lacking personality.
- It leaves reason in front of rational paradoxes (God's will vs principle of non-contradiction; God's will vs necessity; God's will vs prescience).

God-Idea (II)

The classical proofs *can not prove the existence* of this God, but just the existence of the idea of God:

The traditional and much debated proofs of His existence are, basically, no more than a vain attempt to determine his essence: as Vinet very well noted, existence derived from essence, and to say that God exists, without saying what God is and what His nature is, is as good as saying nothing at all. (The Tragic Sense of Life)

More importantly, the God-Idea is *unable to satisfy the longing* of the will and it evaporates in nothingness:

The God thus deduced, a God who is no more than reason hypostatized and projected into infinity, cannot possibly be taken and felt as something alive and real, nor even be imagined except as a mere idea which will die with us. (The Tragic Sense of Life)

God-Man (I)

The second conception of God is *God-Man*:

- It is the living, subjective God;
- It is a biotic and anthropomorphic God;
- It is subjectivity objectified, personality universalized;
- It is projection of our will;
- It is the endowing of the Universe with meaning and finality;
- It is an active God;
- It is eternalizing and personalizing love and will;
- It is the maximum of personality, lacking individuality.

God-Man (II)

This is the God we know through *love* and *suffering*.

We attain to the living God, the human God, not through reason, but only through love and suffering. Reason rather separates us from Him. [...] The knowledge of God proceeds from the love of God, and this knowledge has little or nothing of the rational in it. (The Tragic Sense of Life)

It is the God whom man longs to for immortality, the God whom man *truly prays and desires*:

"If of two men," says Kierkegaard, "one prays to the true God without sincerity of heart, and the other prays to an idol with all the passion of an infinite yearning, it is the first who really prays an idol, while the second really prays to God." (The Tragic Sense of Life)

Faith in God

To believe in the God-Man means that we believe in the existence of God because *we want Him to exist*.

He exists by virtue of our hunger for immortality and our longing for God.

Man creates (and is created by) God in order to *give finality to the Universe* and preserve the Universe from Nothingness.

"It is the furious longing to assign finality to the Universe, to make it conscious and personal, which has led us to believe in God, to want God to be - in a word which has led us to create God. [...] For to believe in God is, in a certain sense, to create Him, even though He creates us beforehand." (The Tragic Sense of Life)

Existence of God (I)

The problem of the existence of God, that is the problem of its *ex-sistentia*, its existence outside ourselves and our mind, is rationally insoluble.

It is analogous to the problem of consciousness, whose *in-sistentia* is assumed but whose *ex-sistentia* is troublesome.

Indeed it is equivalent to the *problem of the consciousness*, since believing in God, in a living and personal God, means believing in an eternal and universal consciousness and believing that the Universe exists *for man*.

God does not exist, but rather super-exists, and He is sustaining our existence by existing in us, making us exist. (The Tragic Sense of Life)

Existence of God (II)

Man is driven to believe in God not by rational necessity, but by *vital anguish*.

Reason can lead man to negate the existence of God, but can not suppress its intimate hunger for divinity:

"The wicked man hath said in his heart, There is no God." And it is because he speaks from the heart that he is wicked. For the just man may say in his head "God does not exist!" But it is only the wicked man who can say so in his heart. Not to believe that there is a God or to believe that there is not a God, is one thing; to resign oneself to there not being a God is still another matter, albeit a terrible and inhuman position; but not to want a God to exist is to exceed any other moral monstrosity whatsoever. (The Tragic Sense of Life)

Christianity

The main religion of the Western tradition, *Christianity*, has its root in two cultures:

Judaic culture, a culture that introduced the idea of worshipping a single God, a personal God;

Greek culture, a culture that struggled with the problem of death and immortality of the soul;

But the original discovery of Christianity, forwarded passionately by Paul of Tarsus, a Hellenized Jew, is the *discovery of immortality*.

Through the *resurrection* of Jesus, a resurrection which is against the natural order and then against reason, Christianity attained the discovery of immortality.

Catholicism (I)

Catholicism is then founded on a *vital principle* and the history of the Church can be analyzed as a dialectic relationship between this vital principle and reason, in which reason vainly struggles against or in support of the vital principle. Just few examples:

Paul of Tarsus (c5-c67) stated the primacy of the vital principle, underlining that the faith in Christ is faith in his resurrection, which saves every man not from sin, but from death;

Tertullian (c160-c225) *credo quia absurdum*¹; *certum est, quia impossibile est*²;

¹I believe because it is absurd.

²It is certain because it is impossible.

Catholicism (II)

Athanasius (c296-373) defended the idea of an eternalizing Christ, a God-Man, against the idea of an ethical Christ, a God-Logos;

Council of Niceae (325) defined contra-rational truth (dogmas).

Augustine of Hippo (354-430) *fides praecedit rationem*¹; *per fidem ad intellectum*²; *credo ut intelligam*³.

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) scholastic theology and thomism tried to give a rational foundation to faith.

Duns Scoto (1265-1308) proof of existence of God.

¹Faith precedes reason.

²Through faith to understanding.

³I believe in order to understand.

Catholicism (III)

Catholicism constantly *oscillates* between (apocalyptic) mysticism and (gnostic) rationalism.

Reason attacks faith, and faith, which is insecure without reason, looks for reason to justify itself.

However, the *essence of Catholicism*, that is the belief in the immortality of the soul, is able to satisfy the will but cannot satisfy the reason.

Every attempt to give a rational or ethical interpretation to Catholicism is an attack to the essence of Catholicism.

It is useless to define as super-rational what strikes us as contra-rational: Catholicism can not be believed with one's reason but with one's life.

Further Topics

Other important topics not dealt in this presentation:

Ideas on love, pain, compassion and personality : how love of oneself, love for others (compassion), personal pain and awareness of others' pain leads to the discovery of personality and the discovery God;

Ideas on faith, hope and charity : how faith relates with hope and how charity springs from them;

Identification of God with the Universe : how through suffering, love and faith God can be identified with the whole universe;

Eschatology : problem of personal fate and apocatastasis;

Ethics : a moral based on the principle: live so that in your own judgment and in the judgment of others you may deserve eternity, act so that you may be irreplaceable, act so that you do not deserve death.

Bibliography I



Mario Ciudad, Ricardo Jose Morales, Fernando Uriarte, Alfredo Lefebvre, Roberto Torretti, Eleazar Huerta, Cedomil Goic, and Ricardo Benavides Lillo.

Unamuno.

Departemento de Extension Universitaria Universidad de Chile,
1964.



Jos Ferrater Mora.

Unamuno - A Philosophy of Tragedy.

University of California Press, 1962.



Allen Lacy.

Miguel De Unamuno - The Rhetoric of Existence.

Mounton & Co., 1967.

Bibliography II



Martin Nozick.

Miguel De Unamuno - The Agony of Belief.
Princeton University Press, 1971.



M. Romera-Navarro.

Miguel De Unamuno.
Sociedad General Espanola de Libreria, 1928.



Miguel de Unamuno.

The Tragic Sense of Life in Men and Nations.
Princeton University Press, 1972.



Miguel de Unamuno.

The Agony of Christianity.
Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974.

Bibliography III



Miguel de Unamuno.
San Manuel Bueno, Martir.
Biblioteca Didactica Anaya, 1988.