

AN INSIGHT INTO UNAMUNO'S EXISTENTIALISM AND THE TRAGEDY OF HUMAN EXISTENCE

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ความคิดของมิเกล เด อุนามูโน (1864-1936) นักปรัชญาศตวรรษที่ 20 ชาวสเปนจัดอยู่ในกลุ่มปรัชญา อรรถิภาวนิยมในประวัติปรัชญาตะวันตก คำว่า “อรรถิภาวนิยม” มีคำจำกัดความหรือการตีความที่หลากหลายแต่ก็ประนีประนอมกัน ได้จนกระทั่งอาจกล่าวได้กว้าง ๆ ว่า หมายถึงปรัชญาแห่งการดำรงอยู่ของมนุษย์นั่นเอง ปรัชญาแนวนี้เกี่ยวข้องกับการตีความและการบรรยายถึงปัญหาเชิงอรรถิภาวะและปัญหาของการดำรงอยู่ของมนุษย์ที่เป็นรูปธรรม ทัศนะของ อุนามูโนที่มีต่อธรรมชาติที่อ่อนแอของมนุษย์และการดำรงอยู่ซึ่งก็คือประสบการณ์ทั้งหลายบนโลกนี้นั้นจะปรากฏในหนังสือของเขาที่ชื่อว่า “ความหมายของชีวิตที่รันทด” ในหนังสือดังกล่าวอุนามูโนตีความว่า มนุษย์นั้นประกอบด้วยคู่สุดโต่ง หรือคู่ตรงข้ามของความเชื่อและความสงสัย คำอธิบายความคิดของอุนามูโนแสดงให้เห็นว่า มนุษย์คือหน่วยที่ประกอบด้วยสสารและจิตหัวใจและพุทธิปัญญา ดังนั้นมนุษย์จึงเป็นหน่วยของความเชื่อและความสงสัยที่แบ่งแยกไม่ได้ บทความนี้วิพากษ์ความคิดของอุนามูโน เพื่อแสดงให้เห็นว่าแนวคิดดังกล่าวแนบแน่นกับความคิดเรื่อง โศกนาฏกรรมของมนุษย์อย่างไร

Abstract

The thought of Miguel De Unamuno (1864-1936), a twentieth century Spanish philosopher, belongs to the genre of existentialism in the history of Western philosophy. The term ‘existentialism’ has diverse but reconcilable definitions or interpretations such that it can be broadly accepted to mean the philosophy of human existence. It is concerned with

the interpretation and description of existential issues and problems of human existence that are concrete. Unamuno's views on the contingent nature of man and his existence – earthly experiences – are mainly contained in *The Tragic sense of Life*. In the book, Unamuno construes man as a composite of two oscillating extremes or opposites of faith and doubt. An account of Unamuno's thought shows that "just as man is a concrete matter-and-spirit, heart-and-intellect unit, so is he an indivisible unit of faith and doubt". This paper is a critical engagement with Unamuno's thought with a view to showing how it grapples with the notion of (human) tragedy.

UNAMUNO'S EXISTENTIALISM IN GENERAL

The characterization of philosophic existentialism as that which addresses itself substantially to the "personal" or "concrete" rather than the "impersonal" or "abstract" is true of Unamuno's philosophy to the extent that his primary philosophical interest is the value of the individual person. By this, we mean that Unamuno's philosophical object and subject of inquiry is the man of "flesh and bone"⁴ and not the abstract man of Plato, for example. This is how Unamuno describes the object and subject of his philosophical concern:

The man of flesh and blood; the one who is born, suffers and above all, who dies; the man who eats and drinks and plays and sleeps and thinks and wills; the man who is seen and is heard; the brother, the real brother.⁵

This view accounts for why Ferrater Mora argues that Unamuno is not concerned with abstractions but people of flesh and blood, complex and concrete people.⁶ It is for a reason such as this that Unamuno denies the appellation of "a philosopher", given the traditional belief that philosophers are generally people who are obsessed with abstractions. It is for the reason of excessive indulgence in abstract rationalization that Unamuno seeks to dismiss classical philosophies, especially on the strength of having paid little attention to human attitudes that are invariably concrete.

According to Unamuno, the human person is the subject and supreme object of all philosophy. The reason is that man is the end of all things. In other words, “man is an end, not a means. All civilization addresses itself to man, to each man to each I”.⁷ As a matter of fact, Unamuno’s existentialist philosophy is literally a philosophical inquiry into what constitutes a human person in terms of both his inward attitude and outward action. According to Unamuno,

In most of the histories of philosophy that I know, philosophic systems are presented to us as if growing out of one another spontaneously, and their authors, the philosophers, appear only as mere pretexts. The biography of the philosophers of the men who philosophized occupies a secondary place. And yet it is precisely this inner biography that explains for us most things.⁸

By this view, Unamuno introduces a radical dimension to existential philosophizing to the extent that he does not only concern himself with concrete human situations and existence (which are the traditional domains of existentialist philosophers) but what lies within man. The inner composition of man which Unamuno is so much interested in shall be made clear as we progress in the exposition of his philosophy. At this point, it becomes important to note that a significant philosophical tradition which Unamuno’s thought is often contrasted with is rationalism, the philosophical doctrine which views the cognitive power of human person as the most significant aid to him. In a rationalist tradition, “reason” is held supreme as the best attribute of man. This is, for example, exemplified in the philosophy of Aristotle which construes man to be a rational animal.

To be sure, the thesis which all rationalist philosophers seek to defend is that “man is a natural creation in a natural world of cause and effect: and that with the aid of reason we can master nature, manipulate society, change culture and indeed shape ourselves.”⁹

Unamuno’s thought is not only a substantial negation and rebuttal of rationalism but also an affirmation of emotional virtues of man. He argues that,

man is said to be a reasoning animal. I do not know why he has not been defined as an affective or feeling animal. Perhaps, that which differentiates him from other animals is feeling rather than reason. More often, I have seen a cat reason then laugh or weep.¹⁰

Unamuno thus views emotion rather than reason as a distinguishing feature between man and other animals. He says the merely and exclusively rational man, is an aberration and nothing but an aberration.¹¹ Closely related to this is Unamuno's idea that philosophizing is not wholly a rational exercise, given the argument that the will or heart is more active in every philosophic exercise.

According to him,

Philosophy is a product of the humanity of each philosopher, and each philosopher is a man of flesh and bone who addresses himself to other man of flesh and bone like himself. And let him do what he will, he philosophizes not with reason only but with the will, with the feelings, with the flesh and with the bones with the whole bone and whole body. It is the man that philosophizes.¹²

Unamuno further argues,

Philosophical answers to our need of forming a complete world and of life, and as a result of this conception, a feeling which gives birth to an inward attitude and even to outward action. But the fact is that this feeling, instead of being a consequence of this conception is the cause of it. Our philosophy – that is our mode of understanding the world and life – sprang from our feeling towards life itself. And life like every thing affective has roots in subconsciousness perhaps in unconsciousness.¹³

Unamuno thus believes that the depths, range and complexities of human existence are such that reason by itself is insufficient to grapple

with them. Or in the words of Bernard E. Melcard, “We live more deeply than we can think”.¹⁴

These views capture embodied ideas or facts about irrationalism, the existentialist temper which “draws our attention, in a dramatic way, to the fact that human reason is limited”.¹⁵ In this context, Hegel’s philosophy which makes reason an “utmost stuff of all things” and other related philosophies are regarded as a foil to be destroyed in Unamuno’s philosophy. According to Unamuno, the doctrine of rationalism which abides solely by reason or objective truth is necessarily materialist. He thus views rationalism and materialism as one and the same, since they both mean nothing else than the doctrine which “denies the immortality of the individual soul, the persistence of personal consciousness after death”.¹⁶ For example, Unamuno argues that while Hegel made famous his aphorism that all the rational is real and the real rational, there are many of us who, unconvinced by Hegel, continue to believe the real, the really real is irrational, that reason builds upon irrationalities.¹⁷ Arthur Schopenhauer shares a similar irrationalist viewpoint.¹⁸ Like Unamuno, he argues that the “real” or “ultimate reality” is the irrational. Upon this philosophical mindset, it is inevitable for Unamuno to hold a low opinion for knowledge that does not promote emotional feelings and desires of man.

In fact, an account of Unamuno’s epistemology shows that he discriminated among a hierarchy of knowledge in favour of spiritual knowledge. By spiritual knowledge, he means knowledge at the service of emotion, passion, faith and that which helps to nurture the belief in immortality. As Unamuno poignantly puts it,

All knowledge has an ultimate object. Knowledge for the sake of knowledge is, say what you will, nothing but a dismal begging of the question. We learn something either for an immediate practical end or in order to complete the rest of our knowledge. Even the knowledge that appears to us to be most theoretical – that is to say of least immediate application to the non-intellectual necessities of life – answers to a necessity which is less real because it is intellectual to a reason of economy in thinking, to a principle of unity and continuity of consciousness. But just as

a scientific fact has its finality in the rest of knowledge, so the philosophy that we would make our own has also its extrinsic object it refers to our whole destiny, to our attitude in face of life and the universe.¹⁹

By this rendering, Unamuno is particularly critical of science and knowledge based on reason. He explores a series of argument to protest the usefulness of scientific knowledge. For example, he argues that “science exists only in personal consciousness just as astronomy, mathematics have no other reality than that which they possess as knowledge in the minds of those who study and cultivate them”.²⁰ Explicit in Unamuno’s rejection of science is the explanation that it cannot satisfy man’s highest or deepest desire for immortality. This is how Unamuno puts it,

I do not know why some people were scandalized, or pretended to be scandalized, when Brunetiere proclaimed again the bankruptcy of science. For science as a substitute for relation and reason as substitute for faith have always fallen to pieces. Science will be able to satisfy and in fact does satisfy, in an increasing measure, our logical or intellectual needs, our desire to know and understand the truth; but science does not satisfy the needs of our heart and our will, and far from satisfying our hunger for immortality, it contradicts it.²¹

The reason Unamuno gives for the inability of science to meet the supreme desire of man is well brought out when he says,

any knowledge that cannot or does not prove that the soul is immortal or that the human consciousness shall preserve its indestructibility through the tracts of time to come or cannot or does not prove that individual consciousness can persist after the death of the physical organism upon which it depends should be committed to flames to use the words of Hume.²²

Unamuno's denigration of science and other related knowledge claims is thus predicated generally on the strength of the argument that they only promote human understanding of reality. Yet, to Unamuno, "the end of life is living and not understanding".²³ C. Robert and K.M Higgins argue that Unamuno bemoaned the failure of objective science and reason to answer life's questions and defended a version of subjective truth.²⁴

Having explored the poverty of science for not being able to solve the ultimate questions of life, Unamuno is faced with the question about what life's questions are. According to Unamuno, life's questions are issues about man's ultimate end – immortality. He argues that science or reason teaches that immortality is highly problematic and absurd. Or to be more exact, "reason teaches us nothing in this connection and thus leaves us in a state of perplexity".²⁵

A further scrutiny of Unamuno's rejection of objective science and reason shows that his epistemology is anchored on a foremost theme of his philosophy, namely, "the longing not to die, the hunger for personal immortality".²⁶ Jose Mora views the theme of immortality as the most insistent in Unamuno's thought. The desire for immortality is such a central phenomenon in Unamuno's thought that Mora argues that,

Faced with the question, what is the most important problem for man? Unamuno would have declared in all likelihood that it was the question of the soul's ultimate destiny, that is, whether or not the soul is immortal.²⁷

As we have seen, this view is perfectly or wholly true of Unamuno's philosophy of human existence, given that there is no desire that is as fundamental to man as that of self-preservation and self-perpetuation. Unamuno is definite in asserting this supreme desire when he says,

Eternity, eternity! – this is the supreme desire! The thirst of eternity is what is called among men, and whosoever loves another wishes to eternalize himself in him. Nothing is real that is not eternal.²⁸

In Unamuno's thought the term "eternity" is often interchanged

with immortality since both depict or satisfy man's instinct of self-perpetuation, that is, "to be forever, to be without ending".²⁹ Unamuno's ethics is man-centered to the extent that "goodness" is measured according to the extent to which it guarantees the preservation and perpetuation of man on earth. Given this, Unamuno argues that,

... What end is goodness? Is it perhaps an end in itself? Good is simply that which contributes to the preservation, perpetuation and enrichment of consciousness. Goodness addresses itself to man, to the maintenance and perfection of human society which is composed of men. And to what end is this? "So act that your action may be pattern to all men" Kant tells us.³⁰

It is clear from the formulation of his ethics that Unamuno is emphatic that for the actions of men in human society to be adjudged as good and moral, they must be tailored towards the realization of human perpetuity or immortality. However our brief mention of Unamuno's ethics here is to justify a fundamental conclusion. It is that the theme of immortality is the single thread that ties together other themes in Unamuno's philosophy.

Unamuno's use of immortality in this context is ambiguous. It is not so clear whether by the term he means a spiritual phenomenon only. In its most straight forward form, the term "immortality" refers to a belief which expresses that the soul survives the biological death of the body. This form of immortality is expressed by most, if not all religions or religious people like the Christians, Moslems and Hinduists. C. Agulanna argues that the belief in immortality is not only held by religious people alone, given that philosophers such as Plato, Descartes, Kant as well as most human cultures including African culture,³¹ have all held views that can be readily used to justify belief in the immortality of the soul. However, what is common in the various notions of immortality and which is the defining idea of immortality, is the treatment of the soul as a separate entity different from the (physical) concrete man.

From his numerous examples, it is clear that Unamuno adopts a position regarding the idea of immortality that is quite different from the one which is found, for example, in the tradition of Judea-Christian mono-

theism. For example, Unamuno argues that,

When doubts invade us and cloud our faith in the immortality of the soul, a vigorous and painful impulse is given to the anxiety to perpetuate our name and fame, to grasp at least a shadow of immortality. And hence this tremendous struggle to singularize ourselves, to survive in some way in the memory of others and posterity. It is this struggle, a thousand times more terrible, than the struggle for life that gives its tone, colour and character to our society, in which the medieval faith in the immortal soul is passing away. Each one seeks to affirm himself, if only in appearance.³²

J. Mora succinctly captures such a distinction in the analysis of Unamuno's idea of immortality in the following words,

Although . . . he often used the vocabulary of the Platonic – Christian tradition, his purpose was not the same. In fact, it is misleading to speak of Unamuno's idea of the soul in any terms that suggest an entity separate or separable from the body. Even though we shall be obliged to use this same terminology, as Unamuno was - the "soul" "immortality" and immortality of the soul – it must be remembered that the real problem that concerned Unamuno was that of the individual human death.³³

Implied in Unamuno's notion of immortality, therefore, is the fact that it is not exclusively a metaphysical phenomenon. To be sure, Unamuno agrees that the term "immortality" embodies more than the immaterial to include all other concrete material things that man does on earth to keep his name or memory in perpetuity, since to keep one's name in perpetual remembrance is not to die. Consequently, Unamuno tied his notion of immortality to all worldly endeavours because as he argues, every worldly endeavour is shaped by man's desire to perpetuate himself. Unamuno insists that,

If a man who tells you that he writes, paints, sculptures or sings for his own amusement, gives his work to the public, he lies; he lies if he puts his name to his writing, painting, status or song. He wishes, at the least, to leave behind a shadow of his spirit, some – thing that may survive him.³⁴

This, again, shows concretely that immortality, as a concept is used by Unamuno to describe not only a metaphysical phenomenon but such concrete actions of man which are aimed to perpetuate himself, his memory, his name even after death. It is the same thing as saying that for life to be meaningful, we need to have a sense that we are contributing to something beyond ourselves. Or as Amalia Elguera puts it, if logically pressed, Unamuno's desire for immortality can be considered as a desire to be in history forever.³⁵

This position of Unamuno, however, raises the question as to whether man can really live forever by a landmark of material achievements. Our scepticism derives from the fact of history that a time will be or come when the so-called (material) achievements will disappear into oblivion. Leslie Muray has rightly argued in this vein when he said that “contributing to posterity, to future generations, to the on-goingness of history and so on are, however, all insufficient and inadequate; they are all transient, subject to perpetual perishing”.³⁶ Unamuno is, perhaps, aware of this, hence he avers that there is no guarantee that man will realize his basic desire for personal survival after death. Such scepticism can be found in Unamuno's argument that it may be that “it is extinction that awaits us at death, that this fundamental human desire will be frustrated”.³⁷ By this scepticism, Unamuno introduces a veil of uncertainty about man's ultimate destiny. It is such a theatre of uncertainty that defines the tragic nature of man and his existence.

UNAMUNO AND THE TRAGIC NATURE OF HUMAN EXISTENCE

At the heart of Unamuno's philosophical thought is the idea that

human existence typifies tragedy. It is his characterization of human existence as tragic that earned Unamuno the appellation “the philosopher of tragedy”.³⁸ The germane question that follows from the above is: What does it mean to exist tragically since tragedy has assumed a signification for human existence? The dominant notion of tragedy is one which has defining features of grief, horror and sadness. It is for this reason that some scholars like Nietzsche and Aristotle have employed the word “tragic” or “tragedy” to depict an extreme human grief, horror, suffering and so on. But, again, as we earlier showed, Unamuno is one philosopher who used the word “tragic” or “tragedy” from a different perspective. Far from identifying the word with its popular connotation, Unamuno uses the word to describe a number of human attributes and experiences that are invariably concrete, for example, the instinct of self-preservation, that of self-perpetuation, the experience of ambiguity, the inextricable mixture of desperation and hope and so on.³⁹

From this clarification, it becomes clear that our initial question, as to what it means to exist tragically, can best be explained within the purview of Unamuno’s ontological account of man as an indivisible unit of “faith” and “hope”, “reason” and “feeling”. Unamuno implies that the human person is not wholly rational; neither is he purely an irrational being. He is at the same time rational and irrational. In any case, it is the warring coexistence of “reason” and “feeling”, according to Unamuno, that defines his true contingent nature. Unamuno argues,

Neither the one nor the other of these positions satisfied us. The one is at variance with our reason, the other with our feeling. These powers can never conclude peace and we must needs live by their war. We must make this war, of war itself, the very condition of our spiritual life.⁴⁰

From the above clarification of what the nature of man entails, it would appear that a genuine human existence is a composite of ceaseless warring coexistence of opposites, for instance, of “reason” and “faith”. This is the case because in this struggle, neither reason nor faith is less important, given that “the struggle between opposites and each opposite with itself is not the result of logical contradiction but the very core of the tragic dyna-

mism of life”.⁴¹ In this context, it is axiomatic that though “reason” and “faith” are construed as “enemies”, none can maintain itself without the other. By this, Unamuno means, that the irrational demands to be rationalized and reason only can operate on the irrational”.⁴² This suggests that both reason and faith or the opposites are compelled to seek mutual support and association.

Thus to say that human existence is tragic, according to Unamuno’s lexicon, is to hold that existence is “continually torn by the enmity – which acts through the coexistence of warring provocations: the will to be and the suspicion that one can cease to be, feeling and thought, faith and doubt, certainty and uncertainty, hope and desperation”.⁴³

As highlighted previously, man’s strongest desire, according to Unamuno, is the hunger for immortality. It is the desire for immortality that causes each man to “cry out in anguish: I will not die”.⁴⁴ Indeed, Unamuno argues that the most profound and shattering of all human experiences is death, including our awareness and anticipation of it. According to him, if we do not live forever nothing has value and everything is absurd. But Unamuno does not accept absurdity or meaninglessness of human existence in its entirety, given his hope for immortality.

The search for immortality is linked to Unamuno’s understanding of God. To be sure, Unamuno finds solution to the insolubly linked problems of immortality and meaning of life in the existence of God without which man’s existence is absurd, void and meaningless. According to Leslie Muray, Unamuno finds the solution to the insolubly linked problems of immortality and meaning of life in an image and concept of God that is quite suggestive of panentheism.⁴⁵ For one, Unamuno takes a swipe at the doctrine of pantheism as typified by Benedict Spinoza’s philosophy because, according to him, it harbors atheistic tendencies. He argues that:

If the belief in the immortality of the soul has been unable to find vindication in rational empiricism, neither is it satisfied with Pantheism. To say that everything is God, and that when we die we return to God, or more accurately, continue in him, avails our longing nothing; for if this indeed be so, then we were in God before we were born, and if when we die we return to where we were

before being born then the human soul, the individual consciousness is perishable.⁴⁶

He further says,

And since we know very well that God, the personal and conscious God of Christian monotheism is simply the provider and above all the guarantor of our immortality, Pantheism is said, and rightly said to be merely atheism disguised: and in my opinion, undisguised.⁴⁷

This view clearly puts Unamuno on the camp or divide of Christian monotheism. However, a cursory look at his concept of God reveals, in a significant way, that Unamuno's idea of God contrasts with the doctrine of Christian monotheism. The reason is that Unamuno desires God not as Creator, Judge or Redeemer, but only as Guarantor of immortality. He thus denies the creative power of God as the Creator of Heaven and Earth and everything thereof. To be sure, he believes that the knowledge of God as Creator cannot aid man to understand the world and human existence. In his words,

In no way whatever does the idea of God help us to understand better the existence, the essence and the finality of the universe. That there is a supreme being infinite, absolute and eternal, whose existence is unknown to us, and who has created the universe is no more conceivable than that the material basis of the universe itself, its matter is eternal and infinite and absolute. We do not understand the existence of the world . . . better by telling ourselves that God created it. It is a begging of the question, or a merely verbal solution, intended to cover up our ignorance. In strict truth, we deduce the existence of the creator from the fact that the things created exists, a process which does not justify rationally his existence.⁴⁸

This is why even though he is classified among Christian existen-

tialist philosophers; it remains a subject of intense debate whether or not Unamuno believes in the Christian God. But some scholars like Amalia Elguera wondered why this should be debated at all since according to him,

It may surprise the reader of the *Tragic Sense* that the question should arise at all for the book states that God is man's creation and as such a divinity, even if it were real, could not possibly be Christian. Moreover, Unamuno envisages a deity not only anthropomorphic but hermaphroditic: the notion of replacement of the trinity by a quaternity through the assumption of the Virgin Mary into the godhead is put forward both in the commented life of *Don Quixote* and *The Tragic Sense*.⁴⁹

A view such as this accounts for why, though classified among Christian existentialist philosophers, it remains a subject of intense debate whether or not Unamuno believed in the Christian God. In any case, this doubt, as we have earlier indicated, issued from Unamuno's unique conception or idea of God. To participate in that debate as to whether or not Unamuno believed in the Christian God, is beyond the scope of this work. Suffice it to say that Unamuno situates his understanding of God and the meaning of immortality in the experience of death. He believes that it is the encounter with death that leads us to the quest for immortality and the search for meaning which "culminates in the sense that our lives matter to God, that our experiences in their ambiguity are preserved in the divine memory"⁵⁰ This is what gives us, according to Unamuno, a sense that our lives are worthwhile, significant and meaningful in an ultimate and abiding sense.

Paradoxically, Unamuno argues that there are no absolute guarantees and certainties about such a faith, given that the search for immortality is full of its own paradoxes. Put differently, there is a perpetual contradiction in man's desire for self-perpetuation. By this, Unamuno means that man hovers in a vague mean between "immortality" and "mortality", "life" and "death", "faith" and "doubt", "being" and "nothingness". In this dual attitudinal setup, Unamuno believes that a complete scepticism in

favour of one out of the two extremes would amount to a denial of the essential nature of man. In Unamuno's words, 'the tragic history of human thought is simply the history of a struggle between reason and life – reason bent on rationalizing life and forcing it to submit to the inevitable, to morality; life bent on vitalizing reason and forcing it to serve as a support for its own vital desires'.⁵¹ J. Mora explicitly crystallized this idea of Unamuno when he says,

when experience and common sense join forces with reason, the conclusion is inescapable: human death is a certainty, and immortality at best an illusion. The denial of immortality or impossibility of proving it is, therefore, the virtual equivalent of the affirmation of death. But as Unamuno says the "yes" lives on the "no". Or more accurately man's life swings between the "yes" and the "no". This oscillation of judgment does not however, lead us to a sceptical suspension of all judgment; but rather leads us to permanent restlessness. It is another manifestation of the perpetual struggle of opposites which touches off the cosmic "civil war" in the midst of which all things live.⁵²

By this rendering, it is true that Unamuno seeks to exalt the virtues of "war" and permanent struggle, given his insistence that there is no possible solution to the conflict that characterize human existence. In other words, Unamuno believes that the motif of human existence is "a permanent struggle". Buttressing this point, Mary Giles argues that in Unamuno's philosophical scheme, a human being is human "insofar as he is conscious of himself as being doomed to physical death and yet, in the anxiety of this awareness, struggling not to die".⁵³ This is better explained by J. Mora when he argues,

There is no reconciliation and peace in Unamuno's truly dynamic universe, whether it concludes only the minds of men or also that of God. Here war plays the part of the Heraclitean "father of all things". But although Heraclitus admitted the existence of a certain cosmic rhythm – the

rhythmic alternation according to which the Universe travels an upward and Down- way - Unamuno dissociates existence from any thing that might for so much as an instant diminish its unbending “furring”. What we term “peace” is found only in war. Thus unity and identity are both present in Unamuno’s universe. But they exist as much as any thing does, within the framework of an unending battle. They struggle to hold their ground and they push forward – through unsuccessful – toward ultimate domination.⁵⁴

It is clear from the foregoing that Unamuno’s philosophical thought is suggestive of the fact that a genuine human being is one who knows no peace. Man is simply a bundle of tension, since human existence in all ramifications must necessarily be dogged by ceaseless tension of contradictions. In this sense, a human person or existence portrays a battle ground for eternal conflict such that to live as a human being is to live in “agony, in permanent tension between opposed elements within ourselves and particularly between, on one hand, reason’s commands and on the other, the force of those irrational elements within ourselves that are so important for our lives”.⁵⁵ Unamuno is thus inclined to extol the virtues of war. He says war has always been the most effective factor of progress, even more than commerce. According to him, it is through war that the conqueror and conquered learn to know each other and in consequence to love each other.⁵⁶ Unamuno employs this same element of war to describe and interpret human existence. So far, what obviously stands out from our analysis of Unamuno’s thought is that human existence is devoid of “peace”. Consequently, if human existence is characteristically devoid of “peace”, so to speak, a negative interpretation of Unamuno’s philosophy as that which views human existence as tragic and meaningless holds. There is, however, a dynamic characteristic feature of Unamuno’s existentialist philosophy. It is its dialectical flavour, given its emphasis on opposition, tension and contradiction. This raises the question about the value of dialectics in Unamuno’s existentialism. Is dialectics in Unamuno’s thought the same as that found in philosophies like Hegelianism and Marxism? Examining the dialectical aspect of Unamuno’s existentialist thought would further illuminate his idea of human person and existence.

DIALECTICS IN UNAMUNO'S THOUGHT

The term “dialectic” which derives from the Greek word *dialelik* means “the art of examining the truth or validity of theory or opinion, especially by question and answer”.⁵⁷ The lexicographic meaning of dialectic is thus suggestive of the fact that it is a method that places emphasis on disagreement or conflict, given that the art or exchange of opposition (question) and counter-proposition (counter-question) connotes disagreement or contradiction. Broadly perceived as a method, therefore, dialectic functions as an argumentative framework through which disagreement, conflict or contradiction may be resolved.

In philosophy, the term “dialectic” is significantly traceable to Socrates. As a logical method of philosophy, it originated from the Socratic method of cross-examination; that is, cross-examining one’s assertion in order to draw out inherent contradictions or falsities within his position. This is clearly demonstrated in Plato’s dialogues, where, for example, Socrates is reported to have engaged Euthyphro in a discussion about the meaning of “piety” thus:

Euthyphro replies that the pious is that which is loved by the gods. But Socrates points out, the gods are quarrelsome and their quarrels, like human quarrels, concern objects of love or hatred. Euthyphro consents that this is the case. Therefore, Socrates reasons at least one thing exists which certain gods love but other gods hate. Again Euthyphro consents. Socrates concludes that if Euthyphro’s definition of piety is true then there must exist at least one thing, which is both pious and impious, which Euthyphro admits is absurd.⁵⁸

This summarizes the Socratic dialectical method, which is also known as Socratic irony. It is all about leading one to first accept and confess ignorance and then discover the truth by himself.

Since Socrates, however, the term “dialectic” has assumed a wide variety of uses in philosophy. Its most technical forms are expressed in the philosophies of Immanuel Kant, G.W.F. Hegel and Karl Marx (1818-

1833). For example, Kant uses the term to describe “the contradictions and errors in which reason gets entangled when it attempts to operate beyond the limits of possible experience”.⁵⁹ An examination of Hegel’s philosophy shows that his dialectical philosophy is directly a response to the Kantian view. He construes dialectic simply as a logical pattern of thought; the overall pattern being thesis, antithesis and synthesis.⁶⁰ By this, Hegel implies that thought (the object of analysis) proceeds by contradiction (thesis/antithesis) and is in turn reconciled by a fusion of the contradictory ideas or opposites (synthesis). Marx on his part agrees with Hegel on the main features or nature of a dialectical approach to the extent that it is a process by which one element (the thesis) is contradicted by an opposing element (the antithesis) and both dissolving into a form of synthesis; a reconciliation of the thesis and antithesis. The detail examination of Kant or Marx’s or Hegel’s dialectical philosophy is not our main concern here. Suffice to note that Marx’s dialectic differ from Hegel’s ontologically in that Marx’s dialectic represents a materialist interpretation of reality while Hegel is idealistic and spiritual. In any case, they both express a common temper or tendency that there is a unity or reconciliation to the tension of opposing ideal, conflicts or contradictions within a dynamic dialectical framework.

In contrast, there is a significant variation in Unamuno’s dialectical thought even though the foregoing understanding of the word also significantly permeates his philosophy. This is so because of Unamuno’s loyalty to opposition, contradiction, tension and conflict. In fact, Unamuno perceives almost everything mainly from the perspective of tension, opposition and struggle. For example, Unamuno argues that a human person or existence is concretely a bundle of contradictions. He further says,

Some may espy a fundamental contradiction in every thing that I am saying now expressing a longing for unending life, now affirming that this earthly life does not possess the value that is given to it. Contradiction? To be sure! The contradiction of my heart that says No! Of course there is contradiction. Who does not recollect these words of the Gospel, “Lord I believe, help thou my unbelief?” Contradiction! Of course! Since we only live in and by

contradictions, since life is tragedy and the tragedy is perpetual struggle without victory or the hope of victory life is contradiction.⁶⁰

A significant understanding which derives from this turns on the fact that Unamuno appropriates the term “dialectic” as a descriptive category in that dialectic in his lexicon depicts a human theatre of conflictual opposites or attributes in relation to an oscillating warring coexistence, for example, between faith and doubt or, simply say, between thesis and antithesis. But unlike the dynamic dialectical worlds of Hegel and Marx, there is no reconciliation (synthesis) of opposing elements or ideals in Unamuno’s truly dynamic dialectical nature of man and his existence. Unamuno rightly underscores this when he says “we have arrived at the bottom of the abyss at the irreconcilable conflict between reason and vital feeling. And having arrived here, I have told you that it is necessary to accept the conflict as such and to live by it”.⁶²

The denial of a synthesis or final harmony thus sets Unamuno’s dialectical system significantly apart from the conventional dialectical systems. J Mora poignantly expresses the inherent distinction of Unamuno’s dialectic when he argues that while conventional dialectical systems attempt to describe and explain the attributes of the cosmos as an impersonal being, Unamuno’s dialectic is an entirely personal nature, that is, it is exclusively about human existence and experience. Mora further says,

All the philosophers who have tried to describe reality as a dialectical process of some sort --- Nicholas of Cusa and Giordano Bruno no less than Hegel - have built conceptual systems in which the opposites end in reunification in the bosom of some ultimate and all embracing principle. The war between particulars finds peace in the absolute generality of the essential One, so that the principle of identity overcomes in the end, all contradictions. . . . But in Unamuno’s world animated by the principle of perpetual civil war and unending strife, there is no place for any final harmony and still less any identity- which would be in his opinion, the equivalent of death.⁶³

From the foregoing, we can summarize two important differences between Unamuno's dialectic and traditional dialectical systems. First, Unamuno's dialectic is personal rather than impersonal as in the case of Hegel. Secondly, underlying Unamuno's dialectical understanding is a principle of irreconcilability in contrast to that of reconciliation or unification in other forms of dialectic.

Upon this dialectical mindset, it is not surprising that Unamuno perceives the authentic human person, human existence or life as one characterized by struggles, contradictions and tension. According to Unamuno,

the battle goes on forever; reason and faith, doubt and belief, thought and feeling, fact and desire, head and heart are united by an association in war, the only opposition in which they can survive since "each lives on the other" and feeds on the other there being no third party to rejoice in or benefit from the struggle, no absolute unity or supreme harmony to lay peace between the antagonists. The only attainable peace lies in the eye of this powerful hurricane but the eye subsists only because the hurricane moves on.⁶⁴

By the instrumentality of dialectic, Unamuno presents thus a frightening testimony of a human person and existence, such that the human person who ordinarily looks simple, plain and peaceful is interpreted in his philosophy as a most complex entity seething with confusion and contradiction. It can, therefore, be said that the dialectical method functions in Unamuno's philosophy to bring out concretely the tragic nature of a human person and his existence.

CRITIQUE OF UNAMUNO'S EXISTENTIALIST THOUGHT

It is glaring from Unamuno's truly dynamic world that nothing can be taken for certain since he argues that life without uncertainty is plainly unbearable and with absolute certainty there can be no room for faith or hope.⁶⁵

This implies that in Unamuno's world nothing can be taken for absolute certainty and absolute doubt are both alike forbidden to us. In fact, Unamuno perceives a tragic sense in human life arising from the certainty of death and scepticism surrounding man's immortality. Such a view or position about human existence smacks of great tepidity, scepticism, despair and pessimism. It is bad enough not to be sure of oneself. Neither is it good to be in a permanent struggle or war.

Besides, Unamuno's underestimation of reason in the scheme of things is contestable. His philosophy, in this regard, is diametrically opposed to a very common and popular affirmation of reason, and that man should be judged on a high scale of rationality. In this vein, Godwin Sogolo argues that the conception of man as a rational being connotes a basic quality which all human beings are thought to share in common.⁶⁶ This portrays "reason" as a superior entity and thus the most important aspect among the (inner) parts of man including emotion, passion, desire and feeling. In view of this, traditional philosophers have tended to warn against the danger of being controlled by one's passions and desires. For example, Plato and the Stoics are unanimous and unambiguous on their underestimation of the emotional aspect of man. In his *Ethics*, Plato describes the moral man as man whose life is always controlled by reason and is always keeping his passions in check.⁶⁷ J. Omoregbe argues that the Stoics went beyond Plato in their mistrust of the passion and advocated complete suppression or even complete eradication of the passion.⁶⁸ Similarly, and as we underscored in the preceding chapter, Hegel's conception of philosophy is affirmative and rationalist. He argues in support of a rationalist philosophy which is capable of giving a priori knowledge of the ultimate structure of reality.⁶⁹ Baruch Spinoza (1632 - 1677) and Rene Descartes, are also among a motley of rationalist philosophers who taught that reason was the ultimate source and standard for determining the truth and certainty of human knowledge.⁷⁰

As we sum up the critical exposition of Unamuno's philosophical thought, it is necessary to raise objections, particularly to the central thesis upon which his philosophy is based: The concept of immortality. First, it is necessary to observe that there is a high level of inconsistency in Unamuno's thought in respect of immortality. Though he (Unamuno) may see it as part of contradictions that define the "tragic sense of life", the impression one

gets at the beginning of his philosophical voyage is about a philosopher who has nothing to do with metaphysical disquisitions. His initial emphasis on what is concrete suggests that he is a man of “it-is-what-I-see, touch or hear” that matters. What this implies is that the power of Unamuno’s philosophy is weakened by his clinging to religious rationalizations. As he consistently argues, “nothing is real that is not eternal”.⁷¹ This is essentially a statement of the absurdity of life without immortality.

Yet, Unamuno’s understanding of immortality, as already underscored, is ambiguous and unsatisfactory. Besides, Unamuno thinks that his notion of immortality strikes every one with equal interest and appreciation. In this context, scholars and philosophers like David Hume, John Stuart Mill, Kai Nielsen and Clarence Darrow would not take Unamuno seriously because they all reject the immortality thesis. Based on the difficulty involved in proving it, empirically or scientifically, they regard a belief in immortality as a mere wishful thinking. Or what Sigmund Freud would call “a figment of imagination”. For example, Darrow argued that ‘there is perhaps no more striking example of the widespread belief in immortality. Perhaps evidence can be found to support a positive conviction that immortality is a delusion’.⁷²

On his part, Kai Nielsen described the belief in immortality as both incoherent and unreasonable. He further says,

Conceptions of the afterlife are so problematic that it is unreasonable for a philosophical and scientifically sophisticated person living in the . . . twentieth century to believe in life eternal, to believe that we shall survive the rotting or the burning or the mummification of our present bodies⁷³

Closely related to this is Unamuno’s emphasis on the existential Self, to the extent that he argues not only for a search for immortality but also the need to fight to keep its existence. Francis Wyers regards this aspect of Unamuno’s thought as “ontological greed”, given the refusal to let go of the Self even after death. According to Wyers, “why such an emphasis on the self... the largest part of this ontological greed comes from Unamuno’s unresolved passion for his own immortality; *which he took quite literally* as meaning that he would never experience the cold

hands of death nor would he be reabsorbed into God but rather that he would forever suffer and celebrate the knowledge of his own existence”⁷⁴

The fear that B.E. Stone expresses in this regard is that a mixture of ontological greed and the impossibility of being able to imagine the world without us would lead to a great suspicion of life itself.⁷⁵ After all, Unamuno says, “if we die utterly, wherefore does everything exist? Wherefore?”⁷⁶

Finally, it is important to note that a great of suspicion of life itself has been given existential import by Unamuno’s mystification of a human person and his existence. From the exposition of his philosophical thought, it is clear that Unamuno has a very fearful and dreadful picture of man which culminates in viewing man as a bundle of unending confusion, tension and contradiction. J.F Mora says that the only “formal principle” which permeates Unamuno’s thought may be stated as follows “to be is to be against one self”⁷⁷

Note and references

¹Unamuno, M. 1921 *The Tragic Sense of Life*. London: Macmillan.

²This description can be found in Gerald Brannan’s commentary on the back cover of *The Tragic Sense of Life*.

³See Amalia Elguera, “Introduction” to *The Tragic Sense of Life*. 2.

⁴The phrase “flesh and bone” is used by Unamuno to describe a concrete human person in contrast to abstract conception of man; for example, in Platonism and Hegelianism.

⁵Unamuno, M. *The Tragic Sense*. 21.

⁶Mora, J.F. 2003 *Three Spanish Philosophers Unamuno, Ortega and Ferrater Mora*. New York: State University of New York Press. 34.

⁷Unamuno, M. *The Tragic Sense*. 30

⁸Unamuno, M. *The Tragic Sense*. 21 - 22.

⁹Masolo, D. 1994 *African Philosophy in Search of Identity*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd. 126.

¹⁰Unamuno, M. *The Tragic Sense*. 22--23.

¹¹Unamuno, M. *The Tragic Sense*. 111.

¹²Unamuno, M. *The Tragic Sense*. 54.

¹³Unamuno, M. *The Tragic Sense*. 54.

¹⁴Murray, L.A. 2003 God, Immortality and lived Experience in Unamuno, see this at <http://www.findarticles.com/p/articulos/mi-Qa4044/is200310/ai93/9200/pg.2>.

- ¹⁵Omogbe, J. 1991 *A Simplified History of Western Philosophy* Vol. Three. Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers Ltd. 42.
- ¹⁶Unamuno, M. *The Tragic Sense*. 92.
- ¹⁷Unamuno, M. *The Tragic Sense*. 24-25.
- ¹⁸For detail of Arthur Schopenhauer's Irrationalism, see Michael Rosen, *op. cit.*, p. 679.
- ¹⁹Unamuno, M. *The Tragic Sense*. 33-34.
- ²⁰Unamuno, M. *The Tragic Sense*. 47.
- ²¹Unamuno, M. *The Tragic Sense*. 113.
- ²²Unamuno, M. *The Tragic Sense*. 113.
- ²³Unamuno, M. *The Tragic Sense*. 124.
- ²⁴Solomon, R.C and Higgins, K.M. 1996 *History of Philosophy*. New York: Oxford University Press. 268.
- ²⁵Mora, J.F. *Three Spanish Philosophers*. 48.
- ²⁶Unamuno, M. *The Tragic Sense*. 52.
- ²⁷Mora, J.F. *The Three Spanish Philosophers*. 47.
- ²⁸Unamuno, M. *The Tragic Sense*. 55.
- ²⁹Unamuno, M. *The Tragic Sense*. 55.
- ³⁰Unamuno, M. *The Tragic Sense*. 46.
- ³¹Agulanna, C. 2001 An African Perspective on Death and The Crisis of Existence. A Ph. D Thesis in the Department of Philosophy, University of Ibadan - Nigeria. 21.
- ³²Unamuno, M. *The Tragic Sense*. 67.
- ³³Mora, J.F. *The Three Spanish Philosophers*. 47-48.
- ³⁴Unamuno, M. *The Tragic Sense*. 66.
- ³⁵Elguera, A. Introduction, Unamuno, M. *The Tragic Sense*. 15.
- ³⁶Murray, L.A. God, Immortality and Lived Experience.
- ³⁷Unamuno, M. *The Tragic Sense*. 51.
- ³⁸Among scholars who describe Unamuno, M. as "a Philosopher of Tragedy" is Mora, J.F who is sufficiently known for his commentaries on the works of Major Spanish Philosophers.
- ³⁹Mora, J.F. *The Three Spanish Philosophers*. 34.
- ⁴⁰Unamuno, M. *The Tragic Sense*. 115.
- ⁴¹Mora, J.F. *The Three Spanish Philosophers*. 37.
- ⁴²Unamuno, M. *The Tragic Sense*. 120.
- ⁴³Mora, J.F. *The Three Spanish Philosophers*. 37.
- ⁴⁴Mora, J.F. *The Three Spanish Philosophers*. 54.
- ⁴⁵Murray, L.A. God, Immortality and Lived Experience.
- ⁴⁶Unamuno, M. *The Tragic Sense*. 99-100.
- ⁴⁷Unamuno, M. *The Tragic Sense*. 100.
- ⁴⁸Unamuno, M. *The Tragic Sense*. 164-165.
- ⁴⁹Unamuno, M. *The Tragic Sense*. 16-17.
- ⁵⁰Murray, L.A. God, Immortality and Lived Experience.

- ⁵¹Unamuno, M. *The Tragic Sense*. 123.
- ⁵²Mora, J.F. *The Three Spanish Philosophers*. 54.
- ⁵³Giles, M.E. 1992 "Miguel De Unamuno". in *Great Thinkers of the Western World*. McGreal, Ian ed. New York: Harper Collins Publishing. 458.
- ⁵⁴Mora, J.F. *The Three Spanish Philosophers*. 44.
- ⁵⁵Unamuno, M. *The Tragic Sense*. 120.
- ⁵⁶Unamuno, M. *The Tragic Sense*. 120.
- ⁵⁷Watson, O. 1968 (ed) *Longman Modern English Dictionary*. London: Longman Group Limited. 290.
- ⁵⁸For this, visit <http://www.factbits.com/topics/dialectic>.
- ⁵⁹Immanuel, K. as cited by Sayers, S. 1993 review of *Ian Hunt's Analytical and Dialectical Marxism*. Aidershot and Brook fold VT. Avebury. www.kentiac.UK/secy/philosophy/ss/hunt-pdf.
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- ⁶¹Unamuno, M. *The Tragic Sense*. 32.
- ⁶²Unamuno, M. *The Tragic Sense*. 131-132.
- ⁶³Mora, J.F. *The Three Spanish Philosophers*. 39.
- ⁶⁴Mora, J.F. *The Three Spanish Philosophers*. 40.
- ⁶⁵Miguel De Unamuno, *op. cit.*, p.125.
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- ⁶⁸Omogbe, J. *Comparative Philosophy*. 39.
- ⁶⁹Michael Rosen, *op. cit.*, p. 677.
- ⁷⁰Jones, W.T. 1969 *A History of Western Philosophy: The Classical Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, Inc; See Rationalism Under Glossary. 372.
- ⁷¹Unamuno, M. *The Tragic Sense*. 55.
- ⁷²Darrow, C. 1973 *The Myth of Immortality A Modern Introduction to Philosophy* Edwards, P. and Pap, A. eds New York: Free Press. 261-253.
- ⁷³Nielsen, K. 1989 *The Faces of Immortality Death and Afterlife* Davis, S.T. ed London: Macmillan Press Ltd. 1.
- ⁷⁴Wyers, F. as cited by Stone, B. E. 1999 *God and Post-Modernity: Unamuno and Westphal* http://members.tripod.com/on_soficiphile/unawest.htm.
- ⁷⁵Stone, B.E. *God and Post-Modernity*.
- ⁷⁶Unamuno, M. *The Tragic Sense*. 43.
- ⁷⁷Mora, J.F. *The Three Spanish Philosophers*. 39.