



# THE DISEASE OF HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS

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*by Seán Farrell Moran*

In *The Tragic Sense of Life in Man and in Nature* (1913) the Spanish writer Miguel de Unamuno leads his reader to an inevitable and disturbing conclusion: human consciousness is a disease. Its pathology closely resembles a soreness surrounding a pustule, a pain which intensifies tactile, motile and proprioceptive sensitivity. Because the locus of this disease is man's brain, this sickness is a kind of encephelitic hydrocephaly, the very disease that retarded and ultimately killed, Miguel de Unamuno's son.

Pandemic and chronic consciousness produces an exquisite suffering unique to humankind as man becomes aware of his/her own death. Even though death has no, and can have no, concrete representation in reflective self-consciousness nor in the unconscious, all men know intuitively that they must die. Life is but a shadow, and our notions of permanence are merely projections of our hopes at best or delusions based upon lies at worst. Death's universality has led to its denial as we formulate ways to deny our illness and its inevitable prognosis. For Unamuno philosophy (in both its broadest and narrowest sense) is a symptom of this disease, as it were a kind of scar tissue on the lesions consciousness has left in its wake. Like Sigmund Freud's consideration of his own neurosis in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901) Unamuno's account is a highly personal document and a case history of his own disease

and its effects. While it is a profoundly philosophical work, it is an unsystematic one and so deeply personal that the only appropriate critical approach must be perforce biographical.

Ultimately, *The Tragic Sense of Life* is an account of the spiritual journey of Miguel de Unamuno y Jugo (1864-1936) and is the memoir of a poet, writer, and philosopher who knows that man fashions himself, creates the world he lives in and creates God. He also knows that when his creation dissolves, as it must for everyone but began to dissolve for Unamuno when his son died, he is left with nothing, neither a son nor a spirit, nor the world, nor God, and certainly not himself.

Unamuno's life began as a Basque, then as a poet and polemicist, a great classical philologist, a Professor of Greek, a Rector of the University of Salamanca, one of the luminaries of the Generation of '98, a rebel against positivism and modernity, a precursor of existentialism and absurdism, and the Hispanicizer of Kierkegaardian *Angst* and Nietzschean *Wille*. As a biographical work this book distorts the man and his life even while it is factually correct, but *The Tragic Sense of Life* is an autobiography in the sense that it considers as its subject a man of flesh and bone and intense feelings. Because of this Unamuno's work is an anti-philosophical work written more along the lines of Romantic poetry with its spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings. It expresses the poet's awareness that it is death that defines and informs every life. Every life tragedy like bereavement, loss, rejection, failure, guilt, shame and anguish is a *momento mori*, an intimation of one's own eventual oblivion and the burden of this recognition has been with man since the beginning of civilization, but it was the Greeks who discovered death in its full finality and promptly attempted to deny it with concepts such as the immortality of the soul.

Although Unamuno employs the term "immortality" he rejects it as a philosophical doctrine to embrace instead the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the dead. He does this through what appears to be a purposive semantical confusion in order to ridicule the direction of western philosophy in

his lifetime as well as to mock the blockheadedness and ignorance of the age.

For Unamuno the tragedy of modernity is its educated classes who were increasingly affected with religious aphasia, apraxia, and agnosis. It is commonplace today that even the well-educated are muddled when it comes to simple religious doctrines such as the resurrection (which is not the immortality of the soul), the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary (which is not the Virgin birth of the Saviour), and Papal Infallibility (which only pertains to matters of faith and morals and obtains only when the pontiff speaks *ex cathedra*). Only a couple of generations ago any truly educated person knew what these doctrines meant even when one did not believe in them.

For historical reasons the vast majority of modern thinkers and academics have incapacitated themselves intellectually by not comprehending basic religious doctrines and ideas and congratulate themselves on their supposedly clear thinking and triumph over superstition. Of course, the modern statistical method is as superstitious and even more crass than was alchemy (which yielded enormous reams of scientific information even while it failed and played no small part in the development of the “scientific method”), economic prediction is as dignified, if maybe less so, than was astrology, and the modern hubris has accomplished something unimaginable in pre-modern western civilization, that is, the means and the will to use it, of our own annihilation (created mind you, in the service of the good).

In order to understand this work aright, the reader must be able to make two critical distinctions, one between the philosophical concept of the immortality of the soul (*in-mortalitas*) and the Christian conception of the bodily resurrection of the dead, and the other between human intellection and belief. One need not believe in these ideas in order to get them right. Similarly, not only secular philosophy muddles but now even modern Christians muddle immortality and faith. The clearest explanation of these matters can be seen in the work

of the Protestant theologian Oscar Cullmann. In his *Immortality of the Soul or the Resurrection of the Dead?* (1958) Cullmann contrasted the serenity of Socrates in the hour of his death when he joked with Crito about sacrificing a rooster for Asclepias **against** the anguish of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsamene. Jesus sweats blood (stress of the moment the probable cause of this extravasation) and then later wails from the Cross about his God-forsakenness (Psalm XXII). Cullman points out, and Unamuno already knew that it was the Hellenes who developed the concept of the immortality of the soul, an idea which denies the reality of death, and it has served to contaminate and muddle the Christian hope of resurrection. However, these concepts operate on two very different levels. Whereas the immortality of the soul is an idea produced through intellection, one must have faith and believe in the resurrection.

Similarly, modernists have emptied the concept of faith of most of its meaning by promiscuously abusing the verb “to believe.” In its religious sense belief is tied to faith, but modernity has used “belief” in ways which have dissolved faith into a puddle of beliefs from which one is free or not to choose. Thus, modernity has created a host of “isms” to serve as new belief systems: we can now believe in democracy or science or both, believe in capitalism, feminism, socialism, conservatism, and/or the Red Sox (surely the most pathetic of beliefs). Now, it should be patently obvious that trivial matters, or matters which are elective, self-evident, or even tautological come not into the area of faith at all. These are things of whim, knowledge, or discretion. Only matters of moment that are absurd and impossible, supernatural, or contrary to reason and phenomenal reality, are truly proper matters of faith. It is nonsensical to believe in reflective self-consciousness, or the superiority of Coke over Pepsi, or an idea created by human beings. At this point Unamuno follows the lead of Quintus Septimus Florens Tertullian (ca. 160–240 A.D.). Tertullian was one of the early Church fathers and his rule of belief was simple: any matter that is self-evidently true is known by intellection, but a matter that is absurd and impossible has to be believed or not.

Although Unamuno purposefully presents himself to be a heretic, a madman, and of course the quintessentially passionate Spaniard, he was ultimately yet another in the line of Christian humanists in the mold of Petrarch, Erasmus, Thomas More, John Donne, John Henry Newman, and Juan Luis Vives, all of whom delighted in frequent paradoxes of faith. In this tradition these paradoxes strengthened rather than weakened one's ability to believe. Paradox made faith deeper and more profound, and in the mind of the believer, proved the faith to be even more likely to be true.

In the twentieth century it was the existentialists who focused on paradox as a central issue in human nature. Critical to that was the question of action, when all around us lay paradox and absurdity. But a thinker anticipating the flowering of existentialism Unamuno, like all existentialists, must ultimately be measured by how well he acted, in accord with his faith, when presented with a critical situation: by this standard Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre were failures, Karl Jaspers and Albert Camus passed, but it was Unamuno who walked off with first class honors. Shortly before his death in 1936, Unamuno, as Rector of the University of Salamanca, had to preside over something called "The Festival of the Race" during the Spanish Civil War when Salamanca was held by the Fascists fighting against the Spanish Republic. All of the speakers were fanatical clerics, militarists, and fascists. Unamuno was already particularly despised by the Falangists because they misread his works and had once believed him to be one of their own. But Unamuno was not shy about his opinions and he had already embarrassed them publicly by pointing out their blunders and now they regarded him, the greatest Spanish intellectual of his day, as a traitor to his homeland.

At the height of the festival armed Falangists and Spanish legionnaires crowded the auditorium to see the legendary honored guest, General Jose Millan Astray y Terreros (1879-1954). Unamuno despised Millan Astray whose likeness was later to be captured in the pugnacious, mutilated, and crazed guardian knight in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. The

Python's knight loses all his limbs in the course of an imagined and needless confrontation but continues fighting to the end holding his sword between his teeth. Millan Astray's body, mind, and soul had been blown away in a lifetime of war, more of it than what presented itself on the auditorium stage. But the fascists adored Millan Astray and held him up as the paradigm of the Spain that was to come and had been always meant to be. They shouted his favorite slogans like *Viva la muerte!* "Long live death!" and *Mueran los intelectuales!* "Death to intellectuals!" and the newest slogan he had coined just for that occasion *Abajo la inteligencia!* "Down with intelligence!"

As these morbid slogans were being shouted, the fascists aimed automatic weapons at Unamuno who also sat on stage, yelling further obscenities, growled, and grunted. Unamuno stood up and addressed the crowd in the following words which were repeatedly being interrupted by the crowd's boos and jeers.

All of you are hanging on my words. You all know me and are aware that I am unable to remain silent. **At times to be silent is to lie!** For silence can be interpreted as acquiescence. . . . Just now I heard a necrophilistic and senseless cry: 'Long live death'. And I, who have spent my life shaping paradoxes which have aroused the uncomprehending anger of others, I must tell you, as an expert authority that this outlandish paradox is repellent to me. General Millan Astray is a cripple. Let it be said without any slighting undertone. He is a war invalid. So was Cervantes. Unfortunately there are all too many cripples in Spain just now. And soon there will be even more of them, if God does not come to our aid. It pains me to think that General Millan Astray should dictate the pattern of mass psychology. A cripple who lacks the spiritual greatness of Cervantes is wont to seek ominous relief in causing mutilation all around him. . . .

This is the temple of the intellect. And I am its high priest. **It is you who profane its sacred precincts!** You will win, because you have more than enough brute force. But you will not convince. For to convince, you need to per-

suade. And in order to persuade you would need what you lack: reason and right in the struggle. I consider futile to exhort you to think of Spain. I have done.

In an amazing moment, Unamuno's life was saved by Franco's wife who nobly took his arm and escorted him out of the auditorium, but the Fascists took little time in putting the Rector under house arrest, and menaced and abused him so that in only a few weeks Unamuno was dead.

The Salamanca "Festival of the Race" was mankind at its worst and had been the limit-situation to beat all limit-situations, and despite the danger Unamuno behaved with authenticity, integrity, and veracity. His courage came from his unyielding commitment to first live and then philosophize, or better yet philosophize by living authentically. Unfortunately there are few too many moments when human beings make one proud to be human and there are many that make one ashamed, but Unamuno in 1936 joined a distinguished list such as Socrates in 399 B.C., Martin Luther in 1521, Giordano Bruno in 1600, Joseph Damien de Veuster of Molokai in 1885, Simone Weil and Dietrich Bonhoeffer in World War II, and perhaps a few others who have found the illusions of immortality intolerable before the authentic prospect of dying for truth.

Miguel de Unamuno was a great man at a critical moment in the history of western civilization at what was the most critical time of the last century. His great book, read widely by previous generations is little mentioned today except perhaps in Spain, where he remains a hero. Unamuno was able to live such an authentic life because he refused to avoid the tragic implications of consciousness. He refused to surrender himself to an ideological solution that promised somehow to overcome death. He refused to become one of those ignorantly chose, and still choose today, to identify themselves as an "ist" of some kind. As much as anyone, Unamuno understood that all ideologies were modern attempts at constructing something to hope for and at their heart, all ideologies are belief systems,

secular substitutes for faith that promise the eternal life of progress. They are also easy to embrace because the reality of human existence is tragic.

There are few people in the modern era who have subjected themselves to so deep a self-analysis that they could acknowledge death and not seek some set of ideas which promise immortal life. Unamuno turned to the resurrection of the body, to what has been the foundational hope of western civilization, in a day where the idea had become even more scandalous than it was to the Greeks when they heard of it from the apostle Paul. It gave him his authority as an artist and as an intellectual, and dare we say it, as an academic responsible for maintaining the humanist tradition. It also made it possible for him to subvert falsehood with truth and real courage.

Western society is now full of people who proudly identify themselves as believers in one "ism" or another as if these are real and worthy of belief. Ultimately all ideologies are ideas constructed human beings and promise to overcome the tragic limitations of life and make the world and human beings better in the process. Unamuno concluded that ideological self-definitions were the products of consciousness, no less than was the idea of the immortality of the soul, and as such can never be anything more than rather pitiful attempts to deny the suffering that comes from the awareness of our finitude. They are in fact lies and delusions and are products of disease, the most terrible legacies of consciousness.