



**Karl Jaspers and Miguel de Unamuno
On Reason in an Age of Irrationality**

Rolando Pérez

Hunter College – City University of New York
rperez@hunter.cuny.edu

Abstract: In *The Tragic Sense of Life*, Miguel de Unamuno writes that one way for humans to respond to the tragedy of death was through the will to personal, carnal immortality, however irrational that could seem. This essay proposes that Karl Jaspers' post-Kantian notions of reason, of transcendence versus Unamuno's sense of tragedy, and of the way he articulates the Encompassing in terms of what human beings are as antinomical existents, presents one with a positive alternative view to Unamuno's dogmatic irrationality, in an age where the tragic forces of irrationalism surface once again.

Keywords: Jaspers, Karl; Unamuno, Miguel de; *Existenz*; reason; irrationalism; immortality; death; tragedy; transcendence; the Encompassing.

In *The Tragic Sense of Life in Men and Nations*, Miguel de Unamuno writes that the one thing that is a horizon for all humans is the reality of death.¹ Faced with the inescapability of death which makes life meaningless and absurd, one way for humans to respond to death is by raging against it through what he calls the personal "hunger for immortality" (*TSL* 43-64). This response entails an affirmation of what he calls the human of "flesh and blood" (*carne y hueso*): a human being who desires against all reason to "persevere" in being his own particular consciousness (*TSL* 9). Since the philosophers of reason such as, for example, René Descartes, G. F. W. Leibniz, David Hume, Gottlieb Fichte, and especially Immanuel Kant had no palliative answers to the anguish of death as a boundary situation as Karl Jaspers understands it,

Unamuno advocated a turn to philosophers such as Kierkegaard and to the mystics, for whom death was not merely a rationally unexplainable antinomy, but an existential point of departure; namely, a tragic sense of life—tragedy understood here as a conflict between one's desire to escape death and the negation of that desire by destiny.²

Nowadays Unamuno is hardly studied anymore, perhaps this is due to the hyperbolic style of his pathos. Nonetheless, the irrationalism that he advocated is still present in society. That is why I believe that Jaspers' post-Kantian notions of reason,

¹ Miguel de Unamuno, *The Tragic Sense of Life in Men and Nations*, transl. Anthony Kerrigan, eds. Anthony Kerrigan and Martin Nozick, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1972. [Henceforth cited as *TSL*]

² William Barrett suggestively points out that Unamuno's "tragic Dasein" bears some similarities to Heidegger's Being-toward-death. William Barrett, "Unamuno and the Contest with Death" in *TSL* 361-74, here p. 369. [Henceforth cited as *UCD*] However, while Heidegger's Dasein stoically recognizes its "thrownness" (*Geworfenheit*), Unamuno rages against it even in the face of its futility.

of transcendence versus tragedy, and of the way he articulates the Encompassing of what human beings are as antinomical existents, presents one with a positive alternative view to Unamuno's dogmatic irrationality.

For Jaspers, death is one of the boundary situations that call for an existential response without thereby advocating the abandonment of philosophy as a rational project. Instead, his connecting of reason and *Existenz* offers a way out of Unamuno's impasse and points the way to the kind of existentialist philosophy that postmodern nihilism sought to negate. Jaspers writes:

The great poles of our being, which encounter one another in every mode of the Encompassing, are thus reason and Existenz.

Existenz only becomes clear through reason; reason only has content through Existenz.³

In a way this reminds one of Kant's famous quip about the necessary interrelatedness of thoughts, concepts, and intuitions. As such, then, for Jaspers unlike for Unamuno, death as boundary situation is an individual cipher and a starting point of Transcendence.

Miguel de Unamuno's Irrationalism

For Barrett, *The Tragic Sense of Life in Men and Nations* "is to be read as a great philosophical lyric" (UCD 374). This is certainly the way popularizers of existentialism such as Barrett read Unamuno in the 1950s and 1960s; in other words, not so much appreciating him as being a philosopher, but rather seeing him along with Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus as an existentialist writer. Even until very recently it would have been quite easy to dismiss his philosophical work, if it were not for the fact that Western societies have reached a moment of cultural crisis, and his ideas, as chaotic as they appear to be, reflect where they are at. From the very beginning of *The Tragic Sense of Life in Men and Nations*, he sets out in "The Man of Flesh and Blood," to criticize, if not attack, conceptual thinking. A Catholic materialist of sorts, a writer who saw his *Weltanschauung* as one in line with Kierkegaard's anti-Hegelianism, Unamuno declares in the first person: "I am a man; no other man do I deem a stranger" (TSL 3). Thus, from the

outset, the central focus of his project is the material flesh-and-bone I (*carne y hueso*) that ontologically constitutes him. This I is not the I of consciousness or self-reflexivity that somehow correlates with existence as in Descartes (TSL 39), and it is not the transcendental I of Fichte as Unamuno writes:

To ask a man about his I is like asking him about his body. And note that in speaking of the I, I speak of the concrete and personal I, not the I of Fichte. [TSL 11]

And later in "Point of Departure" he reiterates that his usage of "I" is bodily and concrete, and that

he would not want this I confused with that other "I," the contraband I, the theoretical I which Fichte smuggled into philosophy, nor confused even with the Unique, also theoretical, of Max Stirner. [TSL 33]

In fact, Unamuno cares not for conceptual, rational thought. He writes:

in my eyes the adjective *humanus* is no less suspect than its abstract substantive *humanitas*, humanity. I would choose neither "the human" nor "humanity," neither the simple adjective nor the substantivized adjective, but the concrete substantive: man, the man of flesh and blood, the man who is born, suffers, and dies—above all, who dies. [TSL 3]

Philosophy, he argues, is closer to poetry than it is to science. And in a passage where he recalls Nietzsche, he states:

Our philosophy, that is, our mode of understanding or not understanding the world and life, springs from our impulse to life itself. And life, like everything affective, has roots in our subconscious, perhaps in our unconscious. [TSL 5]

Unamuno continues his argumentation by pointing out that it is said that humans are rational animals, yet he is asking thereupon why should one not postulate that humans are affective or feeling animals as, in his words, what differentiates humans "from other animals is perhaps feeling rather than reason" (TSL 5). In this way Unamuno arbitrarily discerned between Kant, the philosopher of pure reason, and Kant, the man. The latter, he argued, was a man concerned with his own mortality for whom the perfectibility of the soul could only be achieved in the afterlife. According to Unamuno, Kant was just as concerned with his own immortality as he himself was. And Hegel, as a post-Kantian philosopher, so wrote Unamuno,

³ Karl Jaspers, *Reason and Existenz: Five Lectures*, transl. William Earle, New York, NY: The Noonday Press 1955, p. 67. [Henceforth cited as RE]

made famous his aphorism that all the rational is real and all the real is rational; but there are many of us who, unconvinced by Hegel, continue to believe that the real, the really real, is irrational, that reason builds upon irrationalities. [TSL 7-8]

What, then, is to be understood by "really real"? For Unamuno it means to suffer, to eat, to drink, play, see, hear, love, and to know, but not for its own sake.

Knowledge for the sake of knowledge! Truth for truth's sake! That is inhuman! [TSL 33]

Later in a passage where Unamuno reverses Hegel's "aphorism" by way of Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem, "The Ancient Sage," he writes:

For to live is one thing and to know is another, and, as we shall see, there may be such an opposition between the two that we may say that everything vital is, not only irrational, but anti-rational, and everything rational is anti-vital. And herein lies the basis for the tragic sense of life. [TSL 39]

The tragedy whereof he speaks is what Jaspers called a "boundary situation," and for Unamuno the epitome of such a boundary situation is the inevitability of death and the hunger for immortality. If one briefly considers this aspect in the ancient Greeks, tragedy was conceived by them as the irresolvable clash between the will and Fate;⁴ and further, they upheld the view that regardless of agency, Fate would always be the final determinant, as in the case of Oedipus. It is in this manner that Unamuno, too, sees death and the will to immortality.⁵ Clearly, however, the anti-Cartesian,

⁴ For Tze-Wan Kwan the difference between the Greeks' and Unamuno's conception of tragedy is that "whereas the Greeks never expect the gods to do them any real favour, Unamuno turns to God, at least subconsciously, for salvation, although not quite through piety and submissiveness, but through passionate wish and vital desire. The most tragic thing for Unamuno is that he keeps asking for explanations from the divine domain, which is not only unexplainable by reason, but also theologically difficult to deal with." Tze-Wan Kwan, "Unamuno as 'Pathological' Phenomenologist: Tragic Sense and Beyond," *Analecta Husserliana* 103 (2009), 231-252, here p. 242. [Henceforth cited as UPP]

⁵ Just as for Nietzsche, also for Unamuno, Schopenhauer's will to live, was being regarded as pathetically insufficient in contrast to the will to power, for Unamuno, the will to live, anthropologically

anti-Kantian Unamuno emphasizes the body over the mind; for although the word "will" (*voluntad*) does come up once in a while, the desire to be immortal is not intellectual, or even spiritual, but carnal or bodily; therefore, such a desire is articulated as a hunger (*hambre*). Unamuno is not satisfied with achieving spiritual immortality: To be one with the Universe posthumously, as the cliché goes, was not sufficient for him, nor was the eternal contemplation of God. He writes:

A beatific vision, a loving contemplation in which the soul is absorbed in God and, as it were, lost in Him, appears to our inherent sensibilities, either as an annihilation of self or as a prolonged tedium. [TSL 249]

In the Chapter "The Hunger for Immortality" he makes this patently clear:

Neither my matter nor my energy causes me any disquiet, for neither of them is mine as long as I myself am not altogether mine, that is, as long as I am not eternal. No, I do not long to be submerged in the great ALL, in infinite and eternal Matter or Energy, or in God. I long to possess God, not be possessed by Him, to become myself God without ceasing to be the I who now speaks to you. Monist tricks are of no use to us. We want the substance, not the shadow of eternity!

Is this materialism? Doubtless: but either our soul is also some species of matter, or it is nothing. [TSL 52-3]

Several things here need unpacking, for it is easy to think that he could not possibly be saying what he is indeed saying. That is to say, that for him immortality means materially, carnally, and consciously continuing to be the Miguel de Unamuno who was born in 1864 in Bilbao, died in 1936 in Salamanca, and was the author of *The Tragic Sense of Life*. But that is exactly what he means when he repeatedly quotes Spinoza's proposition from the *Ethics*: "unaquaque res, quatenus in se est, in suo esse preserverare conatur" that reads in English "everything, in so far as it is in itself, strives to persevere in its own being" (TSL 9). For Unamuno this means not only persevering or persisting in his own being, but more importantly persevering as the particular bodily consciousness that constitutes Miguel de Unamuno, author of *The Tragic Sense of Life*, and no other Unamuno, or even the spirit of Unamuno. Moreover, when he admits to taking a materialist position with respect to immortality, it

located, was also not enough when compared to the will to live forever, or the hunger for immortality.

is clear that his materialism is not the materialism of the atomists, but rather a naïve form of materialism. Unamuno even opposes Nietzsche's "eternal return" on grounds that it is the metaphysical and scientific concept of a rationalist who has a disembodied notion of immortality. Unamuno writes:

Nietzsche...mathematically (!!!) invented that counterfeit of the immortality of the soul called "the eternal recurrence," a most formidable tragi-comedy or comi-tragedy. Since the number of atoms or irreducible elements is finite, he presumes that, in an eternal universe, a combination identical with the present must occur, and that what happens now must be repeated an endless number of times...And so, just as I will again live the life I am now living, I have already lived it an infinite number of times. [TSL 111]

However, he objects to this:

What we really long for after death is to go on living this life, this same mortal life, but without its evils, without its tedium – and without death. [TSL 252]

What seems not to escape Unamuno here is the existential import of Nietzsche's life-affirming imperative that says Yes to life, even despite its eternal evils and tedium. Lacking in Unamuno's philosophy, however, is any notion of transcendence; for while Jaspers too questions the scientifically mechanistic aspect of the eternal return, he nevertheless argues that for Nietzsche "transcending continues to be the philosophically moving force underlying his ideas."⁶ And later Jaspers writes:

To Nietzsche the highest affirmation of life which the thought of eternal recurrence calls forth (when it does not destroy instead) has a liberating and redeeming character: In obedience to the imperative that I live so that I must wish to live again, the love of life first provides the authentic courage that "even slays death" when it commands: "This was life? All right! Once again!" [KJN 361]

However, it is not life in general that Unamuno affirms, but rather his own personal life. Either he continues to be the drinking, eating, desiring Unamuno that he is, in all eternity, or immortality means nothing. The tragic sense of life, he readily admits, is reconciling

such a belief with logic or reason. Unamuno writes:

The question of the immortality of the soul, of the persistence of individual consciousness, is not a rational concern, it falls outside the scope of reason, As a problem – whatever solution is assumed – it is irrational. [TSL 121]

In this manner, Unamuno answers the existential problem of death. He responds to death as a boundary situation (between reason and *Existenz*) by preemptively equating, as he does above, life with irrationality. And this, unfortunately, leads one down a dangerous path where reason as a fundamental aspect of human life, is degraded, excluded, or worse even associated with death. These, I believe, are precisely the pitfalls that Jaspers' philosophy of *Existenz* avoids. While for Jaspers the disjunction of immortality and logic is not reconcilable either, their irreconcilability is not viewed as being tragic. For example, Jaspers writes:

Courage in the face of death as the end of every reality I can see and remember will be reduced to a minimum when sensory conceptions of a beyond deprive death of its boundary character, making it a mere transition between forms of existence. The horror of not being is then lost. True dying ceases.⁷

Karl Jaspers' Reason

In *The Tragic Sense of Life* Unamuno cites a long passage from Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, and it is important to reference at least part of it here, for it demonstrates how Unamuno and Jaspers differed in their response to Kierkegaard. The quoted passage ends with Kierkegaard's critique of Hegelian abstraction:

When you read in his writings that thought and being are one, it is impossible not to think, in view of his own life and mode of existence, that the being which is thus identical with thought can scarcely be the being of a man. [TSL 122]

Unamuno responds to this:

What intense passion, that is, what truth, lies in the bitter invective directed against Hegel, the prototype of the rationalist, who relieves us of our fever by relieving us of our life. [TSL 122]

⁶ Karl Jaspers, *Nietzsche: An Introduction to the Understanding of His Philosophical Activity*, transl. Charles F. Wallraff and Frederick J. Schmitz, Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press 1965, p. 357. [Henceforth cited as KJN]

⁷ Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy, Volume 2*, transl. E. B. Ashton, Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press 1970, p. 197. [Henceforth cited as P2]

One problem here, among many, is that Unamuno seeks to relegate Kierkegaard's anti-rationalism to that of the mystical experience, devoid of any kind of psychology. For him, to be fully alive means to experience the hunger for immortality, but not to reflect upon it. Unlike Jaspers, he leaves little room for empirical existence and self-reflexivity. In contradistinction to Unamuno, Jaspers writes:

The ancient philosophical problem, which appears in the relation of the rational to the non-rational, must be seen in a new light through an appropriation of the tradition with our eyes upon Kierkegaard and Nietzsche.

We formulate this fundamental problem as that of reason and Existenz. This abbreviated formula signifies no antithesis: rather a connection which at the same time points beyond itself.

The words "reason" and "Existenz" are chosen because for us they express in the most penetrating and pure form the problem of the clarification of the dark, the grasping of the bases out of which we live, presupposing no transparency, but demanding the maximum of rationality.

The word "reason" has here its Kantian scope, clarity and truth. The word "Existenz" through Kierkegaard has taken on a sense through which we look into infinite depths at what defies all determinate knowledge. [RE 49]

Such a conciliatory approach is what is missing in Unamuno, and it is missing for several extra- or non-philosophical reasons. One, because Unamuno wanted, for political and nationalist reasons, to differentiate Spanish culture from modern European culture—the culture of science and technology, and two because in order to do so he felt he had to return to the Spanish mystical tradition of Ignatius of Loyola, Juan de la Cruz, and Teresa de Ávila. Significantly, missing in his mystical worldview was a notion such as that of the Jaspers' Encompassing. Unamuno's dark night of the soul swallows up reason, spirit, idea, being, and the Other. I am not saying that there is no place in Jaspers for mysticism. There is, but Jaspers' notion of mysticism, unlike Unamuno's, allows for both, a form of speculative mysticism, and for what Alan Olson terms "immediate experience."⁸ In that respect *The Tragic Sense of Life* is indeed tragic, for it negates itself. Whereas Unamuno's solipsistic I suffers alone for it cannot communicate his or her suffering

neither through words nor concepts, Jaspers' *Reason and Existenz* negotiate the extremes of positivism and mysticism. I thus endorse Jonna Bornemark when she states:

The extremes that Jaspers criticizes are thus the positivism of pure object knowledge, which transforms the world into dead mechanics, and mysticism without communication, concepts or speculative thinking, which is a kind of suicide, a complete erasure of empirical being. Pure mysticism betrays the world while pure positivism makes the living world impossible.⁹

In my view, Jaspers eludes the agonistic and tragic extremes through the Encompassing, which is and is not a determinate concept. Jaspers writes:

Whether we call the Encompassing which we are our empirical existence, consciousness as such, or spirit, in no case can it be grasped as though it were something in the world which appeared before us... This is confirmed when we abandon the determinate, clear—because objective—knowledge which is directed to particular things distinguishable from other things. [RE 54]

Try as I may to see the world from the outside—that is, objectively, as a biologist for whom life is *bios*—I am always a situated empirical existent; and as such, determined by the world.

Empirical existence, as the overpowering Other which determines me, is the world, [RE 55]

Through communication one escapes what Octavio Paz called the "labyrinth of solitude." That is why I said above that in that respect *The Tragic Sense of Life* refutes itself, for even if I cannot communicate my experience of the hunger for immortality, I can at the very least communicate what it means to me as an empirical, rational *Existenz*.

The Encompassing which we are is, in every form, communication; the Encompassing which is Being itself exists for us only insofar as it achieves communicability by becoming speech or becoming utterable... Truth therefore cannot be separated from communication. It only appears in time as a reality-through-communication. Abstracted from communication, truth hardens into an unreality. [RE 79]

But what about the truth of death; how can such a truth

⁸ Alan M. Olson, "Jaspers's Critique of Mysticism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 51/2 (June 1983), 251-266, here p. 262.

⁹ Jonna Bornemark, "Limit-situation: Antinomies and Transcendence in Karl Jaspers' Philosophy," *Sats: Nordic Journal of Philosophy* 7/2 (January 2006), 63-85, here p. 81.

be communicated if it cannot be experienced? I cannot experience my death, objectively. In fact, I cannot experience it at all, as Epicurus and Lucretius pointed out. And yet, while my own death can never be a boundary situation, I can experience and communicate my anguish subsequent the death of a loved one.¹⁰

The death of a dear one is total in character and comes to be a boundary situation if he or she has been my one and only love...Death is an occurrence only in the case of other people. [P2 195]

Through his hunger for immortality Unamuno rages against death, desires that the irrational become real, that he and his loved ones continue to live phenomenally while dead and simultaneously alive, zombie-like, in flesh and blood. Jaspers succinctly captures Unamuno's histrionic tragedy when he writes:

Truth is neither the death wish nor the fear of death; it is the presence of *Existenz* as appearance disappears. I lose my *Existenz* when I absolutize existence as if it were being-in-itself, when I get so involved in it that I remain nothing but existence and start alternating between obliviousness and fear. [P2 193]

And almost, as though he were addressing Unamuno himself, Jaspers writes:

I lose myself in appearance when I cling to duration as such, to particulars as lasting endlessly, as if they were absolutes. [P2 195]

And here is where the Spanish philosopher goes astray: in his hunger to absolutize the particulars, namely his body and his consciousness, and by wanting them to be eternal he loses himself. In contrast, Jaspers argues:

I do the same when I am ruled by fear, when I worry about finite ends instead of merely regarding them as the necessary media for uplifting myself in existence. And I do it again when I submit to imprisonment in existence by a hunger for life, by jealousy, pride, or ambition – phenomena to which, as a creature of the senses, I am bound to succumb for moments –

¹⁰ Although Tze-Wan Kwan suggests that the death of Unamuno's young son Raimundo, must have played a significant part in "setting the key tone of his philosophy" (*UPP* 235), in much the same way that Jaspers was deeply affected by the death of his beloved wife (*UPP* 238), I do not totally agree with his conjecture. For whereas for Jaspers the only experience of death anyone could have was that of others (who are dear to oneself), for Unamuno, his own mortality seems to eclipse that of others.

without finding in those phenomena the way back to myself. [P2 196]

For Jaspers, the way back to *Existenz*, and not merely to biological existence, is through his concept of the cipher. The cipher is a hovering over the flesh and the spirit, nature and consciousness; determinism and freedom, the noumenal and the phenomenal; in short over the antinomies. And insofar as that is the case, Oswald Schrag writes:

Man in his totality is a multi-cipher because man is nature, empirical existence, consciousness-as-such, and *Existenz* all in one.¹¹

The human being qua *Existenz* is antinomical. One can either ascend or descend to the cipher-script depending on one's holistic or narrow interpretation of Being. A positivist reading of the cipher script will reduce Being to empirical existence, to bare life: the human heartbeat to the number on an EKG machine, and strip of it of its metaphorical and spiritual dimension. Incidentally, something similar occurs with respect to the conceptualization of dogmatic metaphysics. Jaspers elaborates here,

Being is thought of as something cognizably real, as though it were an object of research, like things in the world...This dogmatic metaphysics is the descent from cypher-reading to presumed knowledge, by means of the intellect, of a Being which is inaccessible to the intellect.¹²

This, obviously, is in line with Kant's critique of dogmatic metaphysics, and not far either from the same objection directed against it by Unamuno. Yet where Unamuno and Jaspers significantly part ways, is in their respective notions of reason. If for Unamuno philosophy has no existential therapeutic value, for Jaspers' philosophizing constitutes an "ascent to the reading of the Cypher-Script" (*TS* 65). Again, in *Truth and Symbol*, Jaspers states:

I am aware of Being by not having become bound or grounded anywhere. In this state the knowledge of reflection is unrestricted. I know that every stage

¹¹ Oswald O. Schrag, *Existence, Existenz, and Transcendence: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Karl Jaspers*, Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press 1971, p. 222.

¹² Karl Jaspers, *Truth and Symbol*, transl. Jean T. Wilde, William Kluback, and William Kimmel, New York, NY: Twayne Publishers, 1959, p. 59. [Henceforth cited as *TS*]

or mode of Being, that the sensual present, and that deception and appearance are requisites for life; but I am able to recognize them as such, as that which they are. Knowledge does not overcome life but it has transformed it. [TS 66]

Philosophizing that stays at the level of phenomena, that merely desires the knowledge of "technical recipes for everything *instead* of an Existenz based on the whole of all the modes of the encompassing,"¹³ says Jaspers, will leave us in the lurch. Here, moreover, Jaspers following Kant, distinguishes between reason and the understanding. He writes:

Philosophy through the millennia is like one great hymn to reason – though it continually misunderstands itself as finished knowledge, and declines continually into reasonless understanding. As a result, it is always falling into a false contempt of the understanding, and has always been despised as an overbearing demand upon men that permits them no peace. [PE 60]

This is why for Unamuno, who failed to distinguish between reason and the understanding, rational consciousness makes human beings sick. In a pathologically pessimist manner Unamuno declares,

man, because he is man, because he possesses consciousness, is already, in comparison to the jackass or the crab, a sick animal. Consciousness is a disease. [TSL 22]

Against this needs to be said that the latter's pessimism derives from his conception of reason as being undifferentiated from the understanding: its categories, and its logically irresolvable antinomies. Yet reason, or what Jaspers calls the higher sense of reason,

destroys the narrowness of pseudo-truth, dissolves fanaticism, and permits no comfortable assurance based upon either feeling or the understanding. Reason is "mysticism for the understanding." Yet it develops all the possibilities of the understanding in order to make itself, reason, communicable. [PE 60]

Johann Gottlieb Fichte observed that through rational consciousness human beings express their ontological un-determinability, and communicate their freedom, which means that if rational consciousness is a disease, as Unamuno contends, then, freedom,

by extension, is also a disease. But Unamuno who affirms the freedom of his corporeal I, rails against reason argumentatively, in defense of non-reason—doubtlessly a logical and existential contradiction, for, as Jaspers notes,

nothing which lacks reason or which is contrary to reason can raise up argumentative claims out of itself, for precisely in this process it enters into the medium of rationality. [RE 119]

Such a self-negating discourse becomes a mouse trap, which culminates in the kind of desperate irrationalism that occurs time and again throughout history in order to justify political dominance, violence, or genocide. Jaspers writes,

Irrational Existenz which rests upon feeling, experiencing, unquestioned impulse, instinct, or whim, ends up as blind violence, and therefore falls under the empirical laws which govern these actual forces. [RE 68]

In Unamuno's case, irrational *Existenz* found expression in the Spanish Civil War and Francisco Franco's fascist dictatorship that lasted thirty-nine years. Unamuno died in 1936, the year the Civil War began.

Conclusion: Transcendence versus Tragedy

The case in favor of *Reason and Existenz* is the case against Unamuno's tragic sense of life, or what Jaspers called "tragic knowledge." It may surprise Jaspers' scholars that Jaspers was directly aware of Unamuno's concept of tragedy, after all, Unamuno's name rarely comes up in Jaspers' writing, except in the small volume that bears the title *Tragedy is not Enough*, wherein he writes:

As a concept of aesthetics, too, the tragic has acquired a coloring which corresponds to this misleading type of tragic philosophy, as when [Julius] Bahnsen speaks of tragedy as the universal law, or Unamuno of the tragic sense of life. The most sublime aberration of a tragic world view occurs when the truly tragic is turned into an absolute and made to appear as if it constituted the essence and value of man.¹⁴

Obviously, it is not that tragedy does not exist, says Jaspers, but absolutizing it can turn it into an aberrant and distorted view of the human condition. He writes,

¹³ Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy of Existence*, transl. Richard F. Grabau, Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press 1972, p. 61. [Henceforth cited as PE]

¹⁴ Karl Jaspers, *Tragedy is not Enough*, transl. Harald A. T. Reiche, Harry T. Moore, and Karl W. Deutsch, Boston, MA: Beacon Press 1952, p. 98. [Henceforth cited as TNE]

Tragic knowledge is open knowledge, well aware of its own ignorance. To freeze it into a pan-tragism of whatever kind is to distort it. [TNE 98]

Moreover, he says, tragedy often becomes a pose, a position assumed out of arrogance, where the sufferer becomes a hero of his own tragedy, and everyone else is a player of secondary importance, out of touch with the grandeur of suffering and death. In this way, Jaspers declares:

Tragedy becomes the privilege of the exalted few – all others must be content to be wiped out indifferently in disaster. Tragedy then becomes a characteristic not of man, but of a human aristocracy. As the code of privilege, this philosophy becomes arrogant and unloving... Tragic knowledge thus has its limits: it achieves no comprehensive interpretation of the world. It fails to master universal suffering; it fails to grasp the whole terror and insolubility in men's existence. [TNE 99]

In the case of Unamuno, his own personal and tragic suffering is so great that though he tells the reader in the very title that his sense of tragedy pertains not only to himself but also to other "men and nations," one never sees it reflected in anything he says. It is known that Unamuno has no love for humanity for he declares so on the very first page of *The Tragic Sense of Life*. Humanity, for him, is a concept, a disembodied notion, and one can understand his stance against such an abstraction, but on the flip side it needs to be said that since his tragedy is wholly personal, it is nearly impossible to find any reference to the Other in any form. Unamuno suffers because he cannot reconcile his hunger for immortality with reason; those who "lack the glamour of tragedy" do not count (TNE 100). And since reason and the emotions are not reconcilable, there is no truth either. Jaspers concludes:

Such perversion of tragic philosophy then sets free the turmoil of dark impulses: the delight in meaningless activity, in torturing and being tortured, in destruction for its own sake, in the raging hatred against the world and man coupled with the raging hatred against one's own despised existence. [TNE 101]

Kwan refers to Unamuno as being a pathological phenomenologist, in the sense of someone for whom the emotions are the basis of his philosophy. But then

Kwan is more than generous with Unamuno. For Kwan there is a beyond the tragic sense in Unamuno, whereas for me, I cannot locate it, as I see no way out of the impasse Unamuno sets for himself. *Existenz* is tragic for Unamuno as he is faithless with regards to the possibility of Transcendence. In comparison to this, Jaspers responds to the finitude/infinity antinomy by way of his notion of Transcendence. Jaspers writes:

What relates to transcendence is not understood in accord with its infinite character if I call it finite, and if I call it infinite I miss its essential discontent. *Existenz* cannot say of itself that it is finite, or infinite, or both. It is the infinite and therefore insurmountable discontent that is as one with the search for transcendence. *Existenz* is either in relation to transcendence or not at all. In this relation lies its discontent or else, with temporal existence voided, its chance of satisfaction.¹⁵

Unlike Jaspers, Unamuno is trapped in a black box of unreason from which there is no escape.

Failure to take into account a way out of the impasse, be it as in the case of Jürgen Habermas through communicative reason, or through Transcendence as with Jaspers, can only lead to either a philosophy of instrumental reason that leaves no room for the *pathos*, or to an anti-philosophy that surrenders to the worst, irrational forces of which humans are capable. When Gianni Vattimo bids "farewell to Truth," he does so out of laziness.¹⁶ Tired of being a philosopher, such as Unamuno before him, he paints all the manifestations of reason the same color, fails to differentiate between reason and the understanding, and gives up the never-ending search of knowing the whole of the Encompassing. And so perhaps what is needed more than anything else today, in this dangerous age of unreason, terrorism, and a politically motivated discourse that is dismissive of scientific evidence, is a remedy similar to the one that Jaspers has to offer, rather than Unamuno's equation of reason with anti-life, and life with irrationality. *Existenz* and existence are antinomical. In this antinomy may rest human salvation.

¹⁵ Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy, Volume 3*, transl. E. B. Ashton, Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press 1971, p. 7.

¹⁶ Gianni Vattimo, *A Farewell to Truth*, transl. William McCuaig, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2011.